

ANATHEMA-THÁNA-ATHAMÉ

by meiri/Creatorial

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Rating:

Mature

Warnings:

N/A

Category:

M/M

Fandom:

Мор. Утопия | Pathologic

Relationship:

Artemy Burakh/Daniil Dankovsky

Character:

Artemy Burakh, Daniil Dankovsky, Andrey Stamatina, Peter Stamatina, the rest of the gang really. you know the game.

Additional Tags:

Rated M for Medical Malpractice

Burakh-centric narrative

Burakh figures things out about himself (GONE WEIRD)

Canon-Typical Violence Gore and Medical Gore

Canon-Typical Feeling Like Shit About Things

Canon-Typical Weird Stuff (or weirder depending on your tolerance levels)

Graphic Depictions of Illness

Dankovsky serving some Marble Nest realness if you know what I mean

Canon-Compliant until I decide I don't want it to be anymore

there's a love story in there. there's a whole lot of other stuff but it very much is a love story.

Slow Build

Slow Burn

Falling In Love

Developing Relationship

a sprinkle of "alcohol as a disinhibitor"

Dreams and Nightmares

Dissection

*is it dissection if the person is technically dead but also speaks to you (which the dead do not do)
making a little brew of both games' events places and designs*

intentional tense changes

skipping over game meta elements so i can put my own :3

skipping over entire game events when i feel like it because BUDDY IT'S LONG ENOUGH!

in-dreams Fucking With You,

no beta readers we just explode.

Summary

"All stories are about Death, except the ones that are about Life, which by deduction are also about Death. All dreams are about devouring, except the ones that are about throwing up, which by deduction are also about devouring. Everytime Burakh would dream he would eat: he would eat voraciously, passionately. His teeth would tear through the thread binding waking world and sleeping world like he was pulling stitches. Like he was trying to pry himself open. And he was: at the threshold of that wound, between the open lips of this parted cut, laid and lived the snaking path of his ways; the rope he was to walk to the knowledge of the Earth and the knowledge of everything else."

Burakh comes home to nothing, and to something else entirely. Waking, walking dreams bear witness to him (and he bears witness to them) — a long story about strings of dreams for the dream-eater, and what he finds in that lingering hunger: death and defiance, life and love, and all of their satellites.

Chapters: 14

Notes

(marvel guy voice) well that just happened!

Sorry it took so long, I was pushing a boulder for a year/getting my liver eaten by the eagle. You know how these things go.

Disclaimers! Written for my sake as an exorcism and now it's all of you's problem too. English is not my first language, so if you see me going back and forth between British and American spelling, 50% chance it's on purpose, 50% it is not, and you won't have a way to know. A number of passages in this fic were written under the self-direction (well "direction"—let me finish!) of surrealist automatism, which is something I do for fun but here it's for A Purpose, and then re-worked so it made bare hints of sense. My tip is: get comfy, sit back (or lie down or do a handstand whatever. I don't live with you) and fuck it we ball.

Others: I like to put Pathologic Classic HD and Pathologic 2 in a little jar and shake very hard and then write from the goop that comes from this, so while this follows (mostly) the narrative and relationships if P2, some characters, places and side-events will be described according to their PCHD iterations. I mixed and matched the westmost part of the Town, so the Cape can be mentioned, but the Stillwater is set in the Atrium (I've also decided it would look A Specific Way. you'll see). My tip: fuck it we ball (x2).

Domoy

Coming-of-age rites come to those who do not come to the coming-of-age rites. When he turned twenty, Burakh started feeling this dull, blade-long pain that dug into his neck from the back of his mouth down — wisdom teeth, he realized. They felt agitated, thrashing in his gums like cornered dogs, seeking escape. *Wisdom my ass*, he thought. Then he *did* get wiser; a simple reaction to him threading classes and courses like beads on the long leather necklace of the line of his time away from home. It was tight around his neck, but not suffocating.

Coming-of-age rites come to those who do not come to the coming-of-age rites; and sometimes, the coming-of-age rites *make* those who do not come to the coming-of-age rites, come. When he turned twenty-four, Burakh was uprooted from his comfortable-in-its-eventlessness life at the Capital, where his feet had barely started to anchor, and thrown onto a battlefield. Nothing better than a good war to make a boy into a man, they joked — they used to joke, because they knew they would die as men, just men, one lanky leg still dangle awkwardly into the waters of youth. Burakh didn't complain, didn't get to complain about his dull, knife-drilled pain. In the cold, the mud, the howling winds of the battlefield, it reigned with an unwieldy weight. His aching tooth ground his words — words were there barely needed. His aching knee, awake with the twinge of a minuscule fracture that he thought had been healed a decade ago, imperiled each of his steps — he wished he could run. Tear the cloth band on his arm that marked him as a medic and run.

Men who called him savior and comrade alike came to him with bayonet blades like bull horns through the thigh. (Burakh had already seen bull horns through the thigh — he tried to not think about it, not now.) They died under the pale linen domes of the makeshift field hospitals, smothered by their shroud-white weight. Their cloth walls faltered and swayed in the wind, in the rain, in the wake of whistling bullets like fluttering angel wings. (That's what Burakh told himself. Tried to tell himself. There was nothing poetic about the way men bled out in his arms, arterial perforation severing limbs dirty off — not *clean* off; they were mangled, the epidermis, tissue, muscle and bone ground together in an almost-homogeneous paste.)

War didn't make Burakh a man — that, he was already; it just made him a sadder one. Later, he locked himself in his apartment; he spent his days crouched in a corner, and his nights sleeping poorly, so poorly.

The dreams didn't make Burakh... well, he was not quite sure what they didn't make him. He wasn't quite sure what they *made* him either. He slept poorly, and sleeps worse now. The worrying letter doesn't help.

The dreams... were different. Once upon a time, they would have him wake up with his hand to his mouth, breathing deeply, deeply through his nose. He could not open his mouth, or he

would retch in his own palm. Breathing in through the nose, still, made him nauseous. His dreams were vivid with the smell of wetted dirt clinging to gaping, cavernous wounds, crawling inside, almost, like maggots did. With the scent of rain washing off blood — the image followed him everytime he got himself in the shower. Once upon a time, these dreams were interwoven with those in which a clean, eggshell-white diploma was put into his hands, almost reverently so. *Ha*. He could dream. (He did.)

Of the crisp paper of the diploma and the wormy, squirming snake of a small intestine, only one made its way to his hands. Burakh had refused to take back to his cramped Capital apartment the rifle his commander had offered him for his medic services. A meager consolation for the weight to bear. Would he have been supposed to shoot holes in it to make it lighter? To make openings for the wind so it could carry that weight away?

I don't make openings, Burakh would think. That's my father's trade...

Burakh didn't dream on the train ride, not... shapelily. When he closed his eyes, everything was moving, slowly, evasively. Colors seemed to attempt to come together, to tease formal existence, and then didn't — as if shy themselves, as if seeing his gaze and wishing to avert it. As if they were merely rehearsing behind the heavy, swollen curtains of his exhausted eyelids.

Burakh was going home. He was going hungry. His mouth watered at the thought of white bread with jam, of hot tea with honey. If his father was sick like Burakh was afraid he was, from the tone of his letter, Burakh would make tea for him. He would sit by the bed and share the hot drink with him.

He stepped off the train, and the air closed around him like crushing jaws. Twyre had set the steppe ablaze with its oranges, browns and reds, the pollen bursting and rolling forth like Plinian clouds. The atmosphere was thick, heavy, clingy. It felt like it had missed him and sought to hold him. It felt like it was warning him, and yet it hid: from it walked three silhouettes whose steps closed the space between the tracks, or rather the lulled memory Burakh had of the tracks, and Burakh.

The air clung to him. It clawed at him, his nose, his throat, his lungs — a burning, drowning sensation he knew he once barely noticed. It was the town's way of showing her tough love. Burakh dashed through the streets followed, hunted, intoxicated by the pungent, autumnal, burning smell of the raw earth—through the town's tough love and, he wished with an almost juvenile exaltation, with a heart-sting at his own past absence, to his father's.

He knew something was off, was very off, when he spotted the tail of a crowd as he rounded the corner in front of his house; the mass of silhouettes sprawled from the porch like a dangling limb. *Mourning clothes*, he noted, *strewed like raven feathers* on the yard. Mourning clothes and leather rags, covering the shivering, hazy silhouettes of Herb Brides — hazy as, Burakh barely noticed, his vision was growing blurry.

“Basaghan,” he hushedly hailed one of them — the word, this tongue, the hop of the syllables against his palate and the taste of it made his mouth sting; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d spoken it. She, grasping at her elbows and smearing dried red clay across her arms, was wailing softly. “What is all of this about?”

She turned to him, and two other Brides at her sides imitated her.

“About a death, khybyyn. He is dead.”

The Brides disappeared in a foggy blur — as Burakh’s eyes filled with tears. His throat tightened, trachea coiling into a knot and wringing out of him a wet choke; he didn’t see how the Brides’ eyes wandered his face, widened in realization, and one had to refrain from calling his name.

“Etseg eyh is dead,” repeated another one, joining the three.

“He was alive last evening —”

“ — he was alive in the night —”

“ — and then the train came; he was gone.”

Burakh didn’t understand why they repeated it, why they so thoroughly twisted the knife into the fresh wound — his fresh wound — over and over. He had to tell himself that they, too, were trying to make sense of it; to piece everything together; to find sense; nothing made sense; nothing could make sense.

“Do we have a cause of death?” he asked. Professional tic. He was horrified at how cold he had sounded.

“He was found cut —”

“ — open —”

“ — a great blade by his side.”

“It was murder.”

The Brides’ words hammered against Burakh’s temple and his cranial cavity echoed with them as if they had cut into him, too.

“When the train came, he was gone,” a Bride repeated, slow and steady, her voice trailing. “I just came by the train,” Burakh drawled. If he spoke too loud, his voice came out a whimper.

His father's presence hung there — at the threshold, the sill, the pale limen, just out of reach. Something in Burakh still believed he could push the door and find him, offering him tea; and find him, sick; and find him, at death's door, voice raspy, dry, thin and wiry.

"We know," asserted a voice.

Burakh lifted his head and eyes were on him. Peering, boring, drilling eyes. Foggy, severe, somber — accusatory.

It dawned on him.

"Are you kidding? Are you accusing me?"

Eyes stayed on him. Gazes clawed at his face like they wanted to peel it right off, tear from him the Burakh name, a punishment ripping from him the only thing he had left.

"I need to get in," Burakh whispered.

"You can't. As long as he is still in here, the house must stay closed." (*Because he is still in there,* Burakh realized. Still in there. Cold, stiff, sunken; waiting.)

"They have locked it."

"Who's 'they'?"

"The Mayor," answered someone new, who had elbowed into the conversation — the townsfolk rarely listened to Brides, and Burakh jumped when he heard the stranger's voice.

"No, no, it was Olgimsky's men," interrupted another.

"Olgimsky himself! I saw him," someone else again.

"The son or the father?"

"Son!"

"He would never venture here!"

"Are you saying I lie?"

"Enough," Burakh interrupted, "enough. Who do I need to go to for the keys?"

Keys to my own fucking house, Burakh internally fumed.

"Saburov."

"No, Olgimsky! I saw him coming."

"Don't listen to him, he is half-blind. Go to Saburov."

"I could lend you a crowbar for a hundred rubles."

So what you're telling me is that I need to go to hell.

"I'll figure it out," Burakh eventually said, and he dashed out of the yard.

He dashed and the wind bit at his face until he was crying, the pollen climbed into his lungs and meddled with the brewing, boiling grief. He dashed and he was followed.

Pain sinks. Pain sunk. Pain sunk him, and it within him, until he wasn't sure they could be parted—until they weren't, and felt like they never were.

Burakh is no more.

The name falls on Burakh's shoulder.

There was then a daze, a labyrinthic wandering; Burakh felt like he held his breath the whole way through.

There was Grief, who looked older because he was.

There was Lara, who looked older and sadder because she was, and sorrow eats at people; ate at her, ate at Burakh. There was *sorry for your loss* and *sorry for yours*, and Burakh didn't remember being this much taller than her — but maybe she just was slouching. Surely, she was... There was Stakh—well, there *wasn't*, but there was in absence, in... bitter, seeking, stalking, red anger. The streets felt tighter because Burakh remembered being so much smaller, and because Stanislav was out there — out there, Lara told him, with the weapon he brought home from the battalion. Burakh didn't even know Stakh had gone into a battalion. He thought about the ways they could have missed each other at this bitch of a war. Missed each other by how much? (Burakh knew you don't bring back only a weapon from war. No, not only a uniform too. He knew what *he* was bringing back, but he couldn't know what Stakh was.)

There was — out of the corner of his eye, at first, and then slowly creeping on, up, above — a Behemoth, Titanic silhouette that sprung from the middle of the river. Whatever it was, whatever it *could be*, it seemed to have eyes on Burakh, to follow his steps as he traced up and down the path of the Guzzle, trying to get a better look. He felt that thing's *gaze* on him like the crawling, climbing legs of a beetle. It guarded the westernmost part of town like the Colossus of Rhodes once guarded the port before the Aegean sea (or so Burakh was told it did). It was *light*. It was *of light*. It pierced through the fog—it *pierced the fog* like a thin blade would the belly of a white whale.

Standing right under it, Burakh *still* didn't know what it was. It had something of a lighthouse, but no sea; something of a tower, but no windows; something of a telegram pole without wires, of a castle or a folded paper crane. It was guarding the tombs of the Cape, overlooking the Atrium, overseeing the Crucible; it was looming over the Cathedral like a gigantic magpie over a spider. The Cathedral was new too. He still remembered the island of steppe grass and flowers that once was in its place — where his father told him to not spend too much time, as it was right by the Kains' windows. Burakh swallowed the memory back — it was bitter and thick and he almost choked.

He threw a glance over the Kains' fence for good measure, and was taken aback: someone was here. He had caught a fleeting, raven-flight-like glimpse of a silhouette that couldn't belong to Simon, to Georgiy, to Victor or little Maria (who wouldn't be so little now, and Burakh already wasn't too keen on meeting her; he had been afraid enough of her mother when she was alive). Burakh thought he had seen black-clad shoulders, the crow-feather-flick of a gloved hand. He shrugged. None of his business. He threw one last glance at the behemoth behind and found it staring back. Stairs, Burakh noticed — five hundred of them, easily, if not more — circled around it, rising to... somewhere, maybe its top, its head, one of its many... planes. Its shape was incomprehensible from this close, just like it was from far away. It stood — teasing, taunting, peculiar and proud. It floated and, Burakh noticed too, pierced: it was bound in the earth with a spear-like anchor. A sudden, long shudder coursed through Burakh. He looked away. He left. The construction, whatever it was, whatever *it had the power to be* clawed at his back with its sharp, seeking presence.

There was a fire — he *smelled* it first. It was bitter, high-pitched, strident as it rose. Then, it grew dense, thicker, rotten with a foreign odor that cloaked its charcoal and woody scent. Burakh followed the trail of smoke — he had to throw punches to make his way.

At the Bone Stake, a pyre was lit.

Oh, a stake, a stake.

The poor witch on it was no witch at all. (A horrified murmur bled through the crowd as they realized this too.)

There was — she walked into his path from a narrow passageway, as if growing from the wall — a Herb Bride. Burakh stumbled back — for a second, he thought he was seeing a ghost. He realized soon the umber swirls on her arms and chest were different; her face was adorned with particular clay dots.

“Basaghan,” he called her, matter-of-factly.

“You are back,” she spoke. Her voice was smooth as rolling hills. (She didn't seem too shaken by her sister who had gotten burned at the stake — or maybe she had not seen her at all.) “You came back. I knew you would.”

“Do we know each other?”

She blinked slowly. Her almond eyes lidded with a torn pensiveness.

“I know you, kheerkhen.” (Burakh flinched at the word.) “... I wish you would know me.”

“Have I forgotten you?”

“Only you can tell.”

Yeah. Well, I can't. What now.

“Don't not stare at me like this. Your gaze is heavy. Your hands are too... This is not good... Not now, not yet.”

“Not yet? What do you have planned?”

“Nothing I can tell you about if you do not remember me.”

Burakh pinched his lips in a thin line. The Bride watched the thoughts overcast his face like an incoming storm.

“I’ll linger, kholboön. I’ll spring twyre in your wake. I will, until you come back to me.”

“Thank you, basaghan. May Boddho caress your steps.”

The standard greeting. He hurried out of the conversation, and paced through the street. *Kholboön, huh?*

Link. Bond. Tether. Burakh felt the web of the town close around him. He would have to mind the threads — he already had to. He had walked back in an air thick, muddy with things he had yet to understand.

There was sleep, when evening had come — at Lara’s house, on a sofa cold and hard he vaguely remembered jumping and playing on. Silence, as she hid in her room, clad in her woe; as Burakh tried to not let his overflow and spill onto the pillow. Cold, as he shivered. As he thought about Death. Black, as he sunk into sleep in the way one might sink into—there was death, all silent, all cold, all black, overflowing and spilling onto the floorboards. He shivered and shivered and shivered until consciousness was reaped from him.



White horses do not come before death, carrying it high and mighty. No beast walks the doorsill, bending its long swan neck to enter the room, hollowing its back so the Reaper on it might have to barely duck her head. Its hooves do not beat the floorboards like a ticking clock; its bony, pale, sunken face does not move towards the bedridden old or ill, and its breath does not sweep across the dying’s face, with one single exhale banishing Life from their features. Except when it does.

Burakh awoke and it was standing there, in the room. It was tall and frail, hooves flaking where they met the planks, splitting from ground to coronet. Its hips protruded sharply as if it had been starved, its eye sockets were empty. Still, its head sought Burakh’s face, moving and swaying with a reptile-like finesse and dangerousness. Its nostrils flared.

It opened its mouth and spoke — it had a human voice:

“Ah, Burakh, son of him, companion of mine. Haruspex, cutting blade into animals-like-me. Into animals.”

Burakh couldn’t move, pinned by its hollow gaze. He couldn’t speak. His thoughts were tangled, mangled, fear hammered against his chest — where his heart should have been, and was not. The beast flashed its teeth — human teeth — in a smile — human smile.

“We’re confreres, are we not? I am not done doing the rounds.”

It moved its head again, seemingly lost in thought. Its voice, sibilant, scattered in the room like a cold draft.

“Thou have not met him, have thou? Thou shalt meet him who witnesses me. Thou shalt witness me. Thou shalt see me satiate feed my neverending appetites.”

Its voice dropped.

“Burakh, it’s only just the beginning.”

It left. Its hooves, indeed, beat the floorboards like a ticking clock.

In its place came darkness.

Burakh couldn’t explain it. Couldn’t have explained it. *Pitch blackness*, overpowering, unforgiving, unspeakably loud: it whispered his own rapid, raspy breath back at him. When he extended an arm, he touched—something, something thick, something plumose and velvety. Fabric. It was draped over him. Around him. It had an incomprehensible shape — *again*. It had walls. *Room? Place? House? Home?*

Something sharp punctured through. Burakh jumped back, startled. It wasn’t a knife — a single blade of scissors, rather. It drew a single line across a few centimeters of the fabric, leaving a cut that wasn’t seen, that wasn’t seared, that wasn’t drawn; it opened still: two fingers, long, pale, thinned at the tips, slithered through, parting the fabric open like a simple pocket.

In the interstice, ghostly, livid, came forth an eye — the face behind could not be seen, and Burakh could only make out the curtain of dark hair, long on the side. The iris was a striking, painfully piercing blue, dotted in its middle of a pin-prick hole for a pupil. Blade obscuring the rest of its features, the apparition spoke:

“Ah... and who might you be?”

Burakh, dumbfounded, didn’t reply right away.

“I should be asking that.”

“Should, maybe.”

“This is my dream,” Burakh asserted.

“This is my realm.”

Burakh sat there, in the *realm*, in the cocoon of stuffy, surreal black fabric. He didn’t move — afraid he would accidentally shake the peculiar dream off, wave away the wraith like nothing but a cloud of smoke.

“I thought I’d be here alone,” spoke the specter. *“How strange. How interesting.”*

He seemed to ponder something.

“We’ll meet again. We’ll meet.”

And before Burakh could ask him his name, or pull it, or banish it, fingers and blade waned into the darkness, the cut was mended, and nothing remained — nothing but a darkness silky and suffocating. A realm of nothing, or nothingness

Burakh woke up choking, curled on himself as if beset by colics. That dream—that dream was different. Shapes had emerged; pale, hollow, blade-sharp, awfully comfortable in their polish and bite.

Do not start making me miss my war nightmares, Burakh thought as he worked to unclench his jaw. *Do not.*

He tiptoed in Lara’s bathroom as she slept and washed his face. The water ran a cloudy, milky grey; then, before he turned off the tap, a thoroughly diluted pink. He left — dawn was pink too. Clouds were low and sorrowful; it felt only right to bend the chine under their weight, under that crawling, creeping heaviness.

There was the steppe, there would be the burial.

L’Appel du Trop-Plein

Well, there was the burial.

Townpeople were at bay — white of face, of clasped hands, black of mourning clothes; magpies that coveted the ceremony with swollen, red eyes. Their voices, too, were ravenlike: low, hoarse, croaky with a pain that bulged in their throat.

Just far enough from the ceremony as to not be included, but involving themselves nonetheless, two girls observed the rite. Burakh recognized one — dull and bleary, pale and thin in her long blue dress and too-long coat; that’s the cemetery keeper’s daughter, ghostly Grace. Burakh looked around, and saw neither her mom or dad, and it struck him that she might be the only one left. His heart sank with profound sympathy — even more as she brought her eyes on him, and they were clear and wide, her gaze wan, as if bleached

“It’s you,” she spoke, and her voice matched her looks in its eidolic, fraying tone. “You’ve come back. You’ve brought people to me, and you’ve shown yourself.”

Burakh opened his mouth to reply when the other girl, eyes on the burial, spoke. She wore earth tones and dirt stains like one fed the other, unkempt brown hair peeking from her woolen hat.

“Why is the earth so unkind to him? She yielded to me when I crawled out...”

Burakh frowned.

“Oh, you did?”

“I did.” She frowned back, and her nose crinkled just above the bump on its ridge. “Didn’t you?”

“No. I came by train. What are you even for? Did you know my father?”

“I’m here as a witness,” the stranger girl declared. A hint of pride tinted her juvenile voice, but she sounded somber and solemn. “Someone has to, so they can recognize his face and usher him into heaven. So, that is your father?”

“He’s not going to *heaven*, missy,” Burakh scoffed. (Still, the words scraped his throat with a bubbling, bitter sorrow.) “That’s not what our kind believes in. He’s... going back to the earth. He’s going in the hole you left when you crawled out.” He exhaled longly. It came out faltering and shaky. “And yes. That is my father.”

“I heard he was killed by his own son,” the girl said, and her voice changed—her voice shifted shape. It grew thorns. They pricked Burakh as her eyes raked his face. “If you’re the son, ah, that means... we have found his murderer. We should turn you in.”

“I didn’t kill him,” Burakh said through gritted teeth.

He had to grind his molars against each other so as to not bark, as to not growl at her with unwavering anger.

“Look me in the eyes. You won’t usher me into heaven, but witness me well. This is not the face of a murderer.”

“How can you know?”

“I would, wouldn’t I? I would know if I had *turned my blade on my own father*,” Burakh scoffed.

“Some people’s souls can separate from their bodies,” the girl said assertively, but with great calm. “Like two yolks from a same egg. Some people in this town... can do it. Yes. I can feel it.”

“That’s very nice,” Burakh caustically replied. “Well, I can’t. Can you?”

“I don’t know. I hope I can. I hope I can be many... be multiple. I hope I can fragment myself in loving shards so everyone who needs a kind touch can have a piece...”

“How sweet,” Burakh said flatly. The girl’s emphatic, rising voice made him start to wonder what her deal was.

“You’d need a kind touch,” she continued, “but I’m scared you’ll cut my hand off.”

“Go do your proselytizing somewhere else, will you? Or I just might.”

“Do not bicker,” interrupted Grace, voice flat and thin. “Do not hurt her,” she ordered Burakh.

“Do you know her?” he asked.

“I have seen her escape the dark damp soil. Oh, she was confused and disoriented. Be nice to Clara, will you? Look how dirty her skinny legs are... Oh, how the soles of her boots threaten to come undone.”

Burakh threw another glance up and down the visitor.

“I am not disoriented anymore. *Lost*, maybe. But I can slowly draw the shapes of the magnetic poles of this town... Yes... Everything converges there and then.”

“That’s nice, girls. Well, I’m going to converge somewhere that is not as dramatic. Might go get a drink.”

He could use liquor to drown the kindling of grief that was just catching its first flames

“When this is all over, I might. Grace, will you want something?”

“No, thank you. I have been brought bread already.”

“Alright.”

“Will you go to the pub after this?”

“... We have a pub, now?”

She nodded.

“Yes... Oh, right. You had already left when the owner came into town. Oh, it’s a place of sin and debauchery. Men wear knives on their hip like nothing but casual coin pouches. Children feel comfortable enough to lie to the bartender’s face to be given liquor, and they are. The air is unhealthy with smoke.”

“Can’t be worse than out there. The pollen is making my head hurt...”

“I don’t feel anything,” interrupted Clara.

“Yeah, well, I had a hunch you’d be weird.”

At that, and as a slow, somber song grew from the gathered Herb Brides’ tight-lipped mouths, Grace waved him off, and gently, wearily directed him back to the rite. She had her job to do, and he had his.

He offered Grace a tilt of the head as a thank for her time, and threw a glance at that Clara, who threw it right back.

There was the—the... tensile distress that lingered and soared over the ceremony like a bird of prey. Burakh came forward, and the waiting, waking Kin parted to let him through. Herb Brides, standing in a semi-circle before the open grave, haloed the buried Burakh father — no, the very much *unburied* Burakh father.

Laid there open the earth like a ravenous, yet empty, mouth; teeth of clods and clumps of clay lined its trenched lips — the father laid next to it like he had washed ashore.

“What is this about?” Burakh asked a woman of the attendance.

“Unfinished business,” muttered a woman, her arms crossed at her chest like she wanted to soften a blow.

“What kind?”

“Go and look,” she replied.

And the grave seemed to say: *come and see*.

And Burakh did.

Burakh was drained. The grave was filled. The earth seemed to be coursed through by a hiccup.

Come forth, with, within, witness who you bury, croak the crows, the birds of prey, the cold omens. *Come forth, with, within, witness who you bury*, scatters in a whisper the soundless word of the attendance.

Come forth, with, within, witness who you bury, speaks in the wind a stranger, a foreign sister, a strangely amiable specter, red and earthy for one — her hands are clasped in front of her stomach, her silhouette is covered in rags as if she had climbed out of the very dirt they were lowering the father in.

Come forth, with, within, witness who you bury.

Well, it’s dad.

Burakh has never felt this much like a kid — not even, his heart stings, when he was a child. The threshold, the sill, the pale linen — all close, become curtained, then fantoms, then fade. The earth takes her due. Burakh takes the rest.

(He steals, as the weight creeps up on his back, the notice of his father’s dry skin, the clay-filled hollows under his nails.)

Oh, how he wishes he could go drink. How he wishes he could get a drink.

He walks to the stranger’s, the foreign sister’s, house — just like she asked him to. He comes in bent and crooked by sorrow; he leaves crooked and bent. What’s he to do with this? What’s he to do with that? He has to care for more names on top of his name — oh, worse, he has to care for the people beneath them (and that stands for his, too).

(Well, the people, and... *Whatever is this*. Whatever this could be. *Udurgh*. It sounded familiar on the tongue like any other word he had once spoken and forgotten. He looked at the sigil intently and the sigil didn’t offer a glance back.)

Burakh feels strung along—because he is, he is growing mad of it, with it, because of it. *Who wishes to bury the son who has buried the father who has buried the rest, rest who has buried the Town, who*

has buried the... Burakh wants to go home. He *has* to go home, he's been told something is here for him. He's strung along, house to house to house like a fish on a hook.

The kids are strewn across the town like wind-swept leaves — uncatchable and fast just like them. Burakh gets some repose once: by Olginskaya's room, an... engineer of sorts is crushing the last ashes of her cigarette. "*How are the roads treating you?*" she asks, among other things she has said. "*Can't complain about the roads,*" Burakh replies, "*but the people walking them are starting to get on my nerves.*"

She wishes him luck. She says she doesn't have anything else to offer.

He finally gets that key — that goddamned key. He has to hold back from kissing it, honestly.

(There was then the house.)

Burakh knew of dead silence — but *Death's Silence...* that was different. That was lukewarm, viscid like molasses, airy — no, draught-like, breathing down his neck. It counted his steps. He counted his breaths.

He found... soot, or ashes, or—could even be ground pigment. As he went to touch it, his hand burned — a warning, a pull. So, he didn't. He walked through the home and heard it whisper around him. (He had started to get accustomed to murmurs in his wake. As long as they didn't start throwing punches...)

The room was red — closer to beetroot than blood, rash than ruby; it was growing. It grew when he walked in like a bear rising on its hind legs, it showed teeth. Burakh broke a seal open — fitting! — shoved everything he could in his pockets and booked it for the front door. Leaning against it, his heart was pounding in his chest, and *something* was pounding on the walls — like so many hands reaching for his shoulders, his back, like they wanted to climb him, to climb inside of him to split him open. He stumbled forward, as if pushed, stunned — and directly into the statuary silhouette that anchored itself in his path like a standing stone.

He didn't apologize (that was his fucking home, he had every right to be here), and neither did the stranger (what's this guy's excuse?)

"What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same."

"But you won't."

Burakh's eye twitched. The stranger's voice was placid, almost flat; still it bore an edge of conceit that Burakh felt himself bump into. Looking down — because the stranger was small, small enough that Burakh thought he could crouch down if it came to having to stand his ground; he was taller than Lara by a palm, if that — Burakh found two prying basalt eyes, scratching at the surface of his face inquisitively. They were crowned by thick, straight brows, the meeting of which in the middle rose, fell, and curved with his increasingly impatient look.

“Well?”

“This is my house.” Burakh paused there. He didn’t lie — that didn’t feel quite truthful still. “My father’s house. I have come to retrieve... things of mine.”

The stranger pulled a folded paper from one of the deep pockets of his coat — the sleeves and flanks of which were a garish silver snake-skin. *Has he prepared a speech?* Burakh could see, by transparency, the sparse words on the page. The prying, black-head pins of his eyes looked him up and down, and Burakh was growing increasingly irritated at the stranger’s impeding, indiscreet stare. Trying to avoid it, his eyes caught themselves on the pin on his ascot: a snake-head silver swirl with red dots for eyes. *Come on, now...*

“Burakh, is it?”

“The one and only.” *The only one left.*

My name is Daniil Dankovsky, Bachelor of Medicine.” He didn’t offer Burakh a hand to shake, he noticed. (He also noticed his black gloves — *is that the Kains’ guest...? They’ve gotten worse tastes in company over the years.*) Instead, he hitched his head up and back imperceptibly, mouth pulled in a thin, dimples-flanked line, and his eyebrows rose — a haughty, patronizing stance that ran through him as he squared his shoulders, and Burakh grew just one notch irater. “I have been delegated by the ruling families of this town to conduct sanitary inspections at my own professional discretion, and your house — your father’s house — is to be closed and quarantined.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I have my mounting suspicions... which you’ll allow me to keep for myself, of course, until the scientific method has borne her fruits, so I can make a simplified synthesis of my findings.”

“I don’t need things dumbed down. I’m a surgeon.”

Should have kept his mouth shut. The stranger — the *Bachelor*, with his asymmetric, mismatched, ridiculous coat — eyed him down, up, down again. His upper lip twitched, barely a nauseated hint at the mud and blood on his boots.

“What were your graduating honors? Any recommendations from the physicians you have trained under during your internships? Name of your college?”

Oh, you prying, pretentious weirdo, what’s with the sneer?

“Capital’s Grand Faculty of Medicine and Surgery. No internships, but I have the warmest recommendations from three captains and a lieutenant of the southwestern front, if you care,” Burakh gibed.

The Bachelor’s sneer didn’t falter or fall, but Burakh saw how his brows flattened from a prideful arch into a somber wave. *Sensitive subject? ... A fellow field medic?* Burakh dared to let himself think, but not too much — this guy looked way too proper on his person to have raked guts from cots under medical tents.

“I am sorry for your loss,” the Bachelor said, and Burakh flinched again; this time at the... unforeseen genuineness he thought he could have heard in his voice.

Burakh wasn't sure which loss he was sorry for — of his father? Of his university years? Of his house? — but he didn't have the time to dwell on it: the Bachelor had walked to the door, circumventing him like a twisting breeze, and had taped off the entrance from hinges to handle, stamping the wood of a seal and a folded paper that, swaying in the wind like a white flag, read in bold “SANITATION ORDER”, and a bunch of fine print that Burakh wasn't going to bother with. Tape—seal—paper; the entryway looked like a crime scene.

“They say my father was murdered in this house,” Burakh caught the Bachelor as he made his way down the stairs. He brought his basalt, heavy-lidded eyes on him like he was inconvenienced, uninterested, almost. “Know something about it?”

There was a hesitation — which Burakh greatly, greatly disliked. The stranger was hiding something from him.

“... I do.” Burakh kept an insistent gaze on him. “And I do have my... as I've said, *mounting suspicions.*”

His stare raked up and down Burakh again, intrusive, forward, well-boring, trying to scrape the surface of him — Burakh felt anger brew in the back of his throat, where grief and sorrow already poisoned his mouth and all the words swimming inside of it. Was he suspecting him? Him *too*?

“Not towards you,” the Bachelor added plainly, evidently.

“Oh,” snickered Burakh — somehow both mad he could be suspected, and madder that someone would think him too weak to kill. (Rough homecoming, eh? It just felt like Burakh *needed to be angry* at *something*, anything — angry so grief didn't eat him whole), “you seem very sure of yourself.”

“Of course. You'd have to be a fool or an idiot to believe you could have done it,” the Bachelor replied — plainly, evidently — and Burakh breathed out short, sharp puffs through his nose: a laugh he was trying to contain. (On one hand, that was true; on the other, *Rubin* believed it, and far from Burakh to wish to call *him* an idiot. Well, not too far. He did want to, a bit.) “After all, your father was dead before your arrival, and a murderer fleeing the scene of his crime would have jumped on a departing train... not hopped off an arriving one.”

Burakh stared at him blankly, relieved, a little; drained as the events slowly dawned on him; unnerved as he remembered Rubin, with his belief of fools and idiots, still wanting his head for a crime he didn't commit. The Bachelor's lips pulled in an apologetic, thin pout; Burakh didn't quite know what to make of it.

“Burakh, if you think of yourself as any good in your surgical trade, come see me. I am staying at the Stillwater, by the Kains'. If my suspicions are correct, I'll need your hands for my cause.”

“Do you expect me to work for you?”

Shouldn't have asked that. The Bachelor raised his eyebrows, shook his head imperceptibly and blinked, as if Burakh had told him the dumbest thing he had ever heard in his life.

"I do," he said, the tone in his voice indicating it was, to him, obvious. "I sure hope you will, for your sake."

"Thing is, I'm going to be kind of busy these days," Burakh tittered. "Y'know, with my father murdered and all."

"I do know. Find your footing quickly, reflect and judge — *think*, Burakh, *find*, and maybe you'll understand why I might need you on my team."

Couldn't be more cryptic if you wanted, huh? What's with you?

The Bachelor didn't answer — because he didn't hear, because Burakh didn't speak. He sent himself down the few stairs; as his coat flew, Burakh thought he caught a glimpse of the shape of his belt — a snake, again. "*Once is happenstance, twice is a coincidence, thrice is a motif*", Burakh thought. Then, more aptly: "*Okay, weirdo.*"

His silhouette thinned and slithered through the dense autumn air and into the streets. Burakh watched him leave with a powerful quirk of disdain on his mouth. That city-slicker will not last a day here with these shoes.

He closed the thought on that. Others came: sorrowful, somber, heavy. They clung to him — like that ridiculous coat clung to that other guy's prideful shoulders. Burakh couldn't shrug them off. He weighed the key, the crumpled papers, the herbs still wet and alive... the names, the weight itself, all in his palms. He made sure the door was closed, held the tape and the seal. He offered a bow of his head — that's all he had.

He had to meet all of the children on his list; he had to, and... he had to decipher the sigil. *Udugh* — it looked like a cradle, overseen by a branch of snaking paths, and a small anchor on its left. He had to go to the Stillwater. (Burakh sneered. *Bet*. He'd make him wait.)

He had to get a clue on where would lead him to the key he had torn from the specters now lingering in his hollow house. (He got the clue.)

He—well, on this, the Bachelor had been right: he had to get to Rubin, because he was a fool and an idiot for believing Burakh could have done this. He shoved his hands in his pockets and trotted to Rubin's apartment — if he couldn't find him there, he would wait. He preferred that to running into him in the streets; he wasn't sure Stanislav wouldn't try to gore him like a bull. Inside, at least, he would be able to... hide under a table, or something.

The web of the town tightened around him as he made his way there. He tried to avoid them, he did — pursuers cornered him, and the first blade thrown was not his. Neither was the second or third — but the fourth was.

He crawled out of the pile of entwined limbs covered in blood — his own, and not.

The first thing Burakh noticed was that Rubin's head was shaved. The second, that his eyes were murderous. The brown of them tried to pin Burakh to the wall like a knife. (This didn't count as third, because Burakh didn't see her: Lara was here; she had tucked herself in a corner, not out of fear, but out of desire to see if they could talk it out.)

"You shaved your head," Burakh said, flatly, the shock still not settling in.

Rubin had had long hair — a dense, dark cascade on his shoulders that he often tied in a ponytail. Lara once had a habit of braiding it when they hung out; Burakh would have loved to try, but he didn't know how. Now, his head bore a sparse stubble; a small scar on his forehead, and a long, straight one at the back of his neck.

"You killed your father," Rubin replied.

He was shaking with unabashed rage. He lunged at Burakh — and Lara jumped, screaming at him to stop, to get between them. Rubin staggered back, as if afraid he'd have crushed her. Burakh left the building infuriated, exasperated. Now he had gone and fucked it up. Now THEY had gone and fucked it up! Stanislav's skull was so damn thick he would survive a bullet to it. Burakh pestered himself at the thought — *no bullet, no bullet, Jesus Christ, you're sick*. He was unbelievably pissed at Stanislav, and Stanislav was unbelievably pissed at him, but he thought he could hammer some sense into him. He *prayed* he could hammer some sense into him. Rubin had been more of a brother to him than anyone else the earth had put in his life.

Well, the earth and the rest.

He wasn't too keen on reliving Cain and Abel's plight.

Burakh was angry, but more than that, he was so fucking sad.

He lingered in the streets for a while, scraping gazes less and less aggressive as he kept his head low, and bartered.

He crouched out of sight and tended to his wounds — nothing major, nothing lethal, everything irritating enough to make him want to go back to the men he left for dead and kick them in the ribs for good measure. But he wasn't going to do that. (He took a deep breath.) He wasn't going to do that.

He ran his eyes down the papers he had been given by the rags-wearing soul, had found in his bloody, restless house. *Blood — black — brown. Water, fire, distill*. It almost reassured him to see the formulas be this straightforward — something, at least, which *was* . (Seeing his father's writing made his heart ache. He folded the papers back and stuffed them in his pockets.)

The light had dimmed. The air had thickened with the warm evening wind.

Fine, he'd go to the Stillwater. (He gritted his teeth.) He'd go.

What greeted him was a woman's scream. He flinched too, and hit his elbow in the doorway.

"Oh you *butcher*, why must you come here!"

Burakh took a step to the side, peeked behind a wooden room divider, and saw her — clad of golds, ocre and ivories, who he guessed was the Bachelor's hostess had curled up on a bed tucked in a corner. She was panting heavily, wide and terrified hazel eyes on him.

"No need for that, miss," Burakh tried to temper. "The Bachelor has asked me to come."

She squinted.

"No, he didn't."

Burakh squinted back. "What the hell do you mean? He did. I would know this."

"He is not here. He couldn't have told you to come," she lied.

The floor upstairs creaked. Pace-pace-pace. The wood sighed and heaved.

"Lying girl," Burakh said. "I had thought a forked tongue would be your tenant's thing."

"You reek of blood. He will find it distasteful."

"If he is truly a Bachelor of medicine, he has dealt with it before. If he hasn't, he'll have to get used to it."

He had quite understood it was the lady of the house who found the stench of it disagreeable. *Tough luck!* The whole town reeked of it — but maybe she didn't leave the house too often. She did seem like the homebody type.

Burakh scaled the stairs, and Dankovsky was immediately in his way.

The upstairs was a big circular room, a side of which was bitten off by a long, tall bookcase that seemed to stretch from the door to the next wall. Immediately by the door, a divider; it was of dark wood and crimson tapestry. As Burakh walked in, he spotted the bed behind the screen, unmade; and at its end, in a hollow between the shelves and the wall, a small door. The floorboards had been laid in patterns. Luxurious rugs had been thrown on the planks with care. The wallpaper was a beige coating upon which shadows seemed to linger. A desk, across the room from the bed, bore a pile of books, neatly placed papers, tools, and a leather handbag. It overlooked the main Atrium street through a round window.

"Burakh. I heard you come in."

"Did you, or did you hear the girl downstairs scream like she'd seen a ghost?"

The Bachelor let out a sigh — he meant the latter, regretfully.

“Wipe that frown off your face. I know you're not pleased to see me, but I'll ask you to at least not let it show too much.”

“Don't flatter yourself. I'm not frowning.”

(Burakh was very much frowning.)

“Listen, I am sorry this is how you were greeted. Your... reputation precedes you. I will talk to miss Yan—to Eva about you.”

“Oh, pray tell,” Burakh sneered, “what will you say to her?”

At the disdain in his voice, Dankovsky's eyes pinned themselves to his face with a perplexed, analytical squint.

“You think I dislike you.”

He had said it so flatly that Burakh found himself disarmed. The even tone was more bewildering than any of his contemptuous, snobbish gazes and manners. It hid — or maybe even *lacked* — intents to mock, judge or assess.

Finding composure, Burakh pouted — he felt like he did. (Or maybe he hoped he did, so he had a reason to reciprocate the feeling)

“I don't, Burakh,” Dankovsky said intently, and Burakh shuffled under the intensity of his gaze. “I have reasons to believe we will find ourselves to be inseparable from one another. As things shape themselves, I find myself haunted by the lingering thought that I will need you to be my fingertips in the hollows of this town I cannot reach.”

“... A bit blunt, aren't you, Bachelor?”

“I will not hold my tongue. Do not let... the lady downstairs discourage you. I *will* talk to her about you. I have already talked to your colleague. He has accepted to aid me — and in doing so, he came to realize he had... gotten the wrong idea about you.”

“You have...? He has? He did?”

“Yes to all.”

“How come? When?”

“Earlier today — he seemed to have been just out of a fight with you. Furious. Hurt.” Burakh flinched and swallowed thickly. “But he listened to me. He should, hopefully, stop trying to kill you any chance he gets, and when I am done explaining the situation to miss Yan, the word should spread quickly that you had nothing to do with your father's untimely death.”

“How have you managed to convince Sta—Rubin? How have you found out?”

“As I told you, I had... a suspicion.” His dark eyes thinned into slits. “And with Rubin's help, I think I've managed to truly pinpoint it.”

Burakh noted how he said *he* had managed. *Come on, come on, talk, you fop.*

“We have sustained suspicions, based on circumstantial, but solid evidence, that your father died of an infectious disease.”

First slap.

“The doyen Kain, Simon, succumbed to it too — hours before I came to town. The people who are after you for patricide have, and will continue to pile his death on your back well, until the news of the sickness spreads into town.”

Second, third slap. Burakh didn’t move. Dankovsky fell silent, and grimaced.

“... And I am afraid the disease itself will spread faster than the word of your innocence.”

Burakh eventually caught his breath. He heaved, then asked:

“Do we know what it is?”

“No. Not yet. As my aid, Rubin has accepted to do tests on any and all infected organs and organisms he can find. He is terrified, though.” He shook his head. “He speaks of a sudden outbreak five years ago — do you know of this?”

“I do not. I was away.”

“He speaks of a wicked illness that tore through the eastmost part of town. A *wildfire* of a disease that swept through town — and that your father only managed to contain through forced quarantine of the Crude Sprawl.”

Burakh stared at him. The thin smirk had shed from his face.

“Many, many people died.” the Bachelor said. His voice was unspeakably bleak.

Burakh withstood the grim look on his face. “... Who knows about this?”

“Myself. You, now. Rubin. I have discussed this with the Kains, Saburov, the OIgimskys...” He grimaced. “To various... levels of success.”

“How can they manage to work with you?”

“... I’m affable,” the Bachelor said. There was a piqued hint in his voice, and Burakh would have been lying if he said he wasn’t looking for a reaction. He held back a barking laugh and a crunched noise came through his nose (it wasn’t even that funny, Burakh just wanted to be loud — and pinch at the Bachelor’s prim and proper facade as retribution for his mocking, arrogant glances earlier). “I’m amiable,” the Bachelor added, voice rising. “I know how to compromise and to talk to people.”

Burakh curled his mouth in a restrained smirk-grimace — on purpose, exaggeratedly. Dankovsky’s eyes hardened, and Burakh found he wasn’t kidding.

“I’m your best chance at finding mercy in their eyes, Burakh. Don’t throw my offer away.”

Burakh fell silent, and his face flat.

“... Alright,” he spoke. “What is... the plan?”

Somberness shed off Dankovsky like a porcelain shard hit the ground, and he started pacing emphatically.

“If your colleague’s accounts of the illness are anything close to the truth, we will need anything we can get our hands on — serums, pills, antibiotics, painkillers. Burakh, tell me — have you come into your father’s inheritance?”

“I have.”

“Has he bequeathed you...anything that could help us?”

Burakh hesitated.

Had he?

His hand buried itself in his pocket. When it grazed the rough paper, he had never been less sure he wanted to show anything to the Bachelor.

Ah, fuck it. He’d been pretentious, then complaisant, then pretentious again; Burakh was willing to throw the coin and see on what it’d land. He pulled out the papers.

Dankovsky looked at them with a clueless look on his face — it grew stumped as he realized what he was being shown.

“... Herbal recipes?” he said, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes,” Burakh replied. “Those were... my father’s trade.”

The Bachelor's mouth pinched — the corner of his smirk turned down, and his lips thinned as they were pulled inward.

“... Well,” he eventually said, “better... than nothing, surely.”

His eyes followed line after line again. The frown on him only deepened. *Should’ve kept those to my damn self—alright, no, no.* The Bachelor had said they would need *all they could get*.

“You’ll excuse me, Burakh,” (He didn’t sound apologetic one bit.) “but this doesn’t seem *esoteric* to me, but rather... looks like unscientific folk tales. Fantastical herbalism.” He pouted, as if in thoughts. “In normal circumstances, I wouldn’t turn to them as my first choice, obviously, considering how... inconclusive they seemed to me.”

“... But?”

“But this is not, Burakh, normal circumstances.” His voice had fallen, solemn. “I do not know the extent of the damage the illness can cause, but... if I am to believe your colleague, and his recollection of the last outbreak... We have reasons to be worried. Very, very worried.”

He glanced over the loose pages again. Burakh saw how his brow furrowed and strained with the effort he put into attempting to decipher the foreign sigils.

“Burakh, would you brew some for me?”

Burakh blinked twice, perplexed. “What for? Why would I do that *for you*? You just said it was unscientific folk tales.”

“I didn’t, Burakh, I said it *looked like* unscientific folk tales.”

“Right. *Huge* difference, khonzohon,” Burakh sneered.

“Indeed,” the Bachelor retorted, refusing to entertain either of his sarcasm and aggression. “I’m glad we agree, Burakh.”

Burakh pinched his lips in turn. It took a lot from him not to try to think of other poetic names to call him while he hadn’t picked up on the language.

“So, will you?” the Bachelor insisted. “I would like, at the very least, to study them. Bring me... let’s say three. One to observe the general structure of, one to observe the action of in infected tissue, organ or blood — God, we’ll have to retrieve some... Yes, we’ll have to retrieve some too... Well, one thing at the time — and a third one for control.”

“I better be paid for this,” Burakh scoffed. “Didn’t have the best welcome wagon, and I’d like to recoup my losses.”

“I don’t have much money, or I would of course repay you, Burakh,” the Bachelor sighed — and Burakh flinched at his heartfeltness. (Well... Now he felt a little bad for having insulted him. Just... a little, though. He was still a... *grating* individual.) “I’ll do my best to talk you up to the Kains and Saburov. I’ll mention your good deeds to the lady of the house, too; and the news that you are helping me should spread fast and hopefully clear your name soon enough.”

Burakh was going to open his mouth to speak, to say he had never (well, *not yet*) agreed to being his aide — but the Bachelor cut him short:

“Besides, this attic will stay open to you. You have my permission to tell my host that you are expected. In the event that you would need a microscope, or any other material I might have in my possession, this (*he pointed at the open back on the desk, at the sprawling books and booklets, at, indeed, the microscope*) is yours to use. Just... don’t break anything.”

Burakh threw him a sidelong glance, and saw that this hint of haughtiness had returned to his half-lidded eyes. The Bachelor gestured at the bed behind him, flush against a bookcase the height of the full wall, flanked by a wooden room divider.

“And the bed back there is yours too, I suppose. Don’t get too attached to it, though — you won’t be the only one who’ll need to rest.”

“I hope someone has warned you about the pollen, this time of year.”

“I’ve been warned multiple times over, yes. Thank you,” he gritted, visibly irritated — how many people could one man heed the warnings of?

Burakh nodded then. That’s all they had, so far, wasn’t it? His father’s recipes, his... unsteady grip on the trade, and the foreboding sense that something was brewing — oh, not in a good way.

“Alright. I’ll bring you tinctures. Might need to go gather more herbs...”

“How do you find these plants?”

Burakh blinked. “Outside.”

“I could have assumed, colleague.”

“What else do you want me to say? I go outside and I look for them.” He shrugged. “They can be... a little unyielding. I don’t think they’d let themselves be found like you,” he said, the hint of a taunt in the voice.

“Which is why I need your expertise, Burakh,” Dankovsky said.

Burakh stood there. He wasn’t *stunned*, but it was pretty close. What was this guy’s deal? He shifted from earnest and shockingly poised to cavalier and dryly haughty.

Burakh saw his gaze on him didn’t falter.

“Were there... any other things, in your father’s inheritance?”

Burakh shrugged. “Herbs. I have... this list of names.”

“I don’t recognize any of those.”

“You just got here,” Burakh said dryly. “Those are children of the town. Orphans, mostly. And there’s...” He pointed at the sigil. “Whatever this is. *Udurgh*.”

Dankovsky held out a hand to grab the list, and Burakh swiped it away before he could reach it. Dankovsky frowned at him and pulled his smirk on a thin, severe line. Burakh held the paper for him to read — but no touching. Dankovsky looked at it, and his strict frown softened in something confused. Burakh felt a twinge of derision knock at his mouth, and he had to hold back a smirk.

“... Steppe matters, then?”

“Yes.” *Damn right!*

“I’m afraid I cannot help you with that.”

“I had guessed.”

To each his field, and the cows would graze peacefully.

They wished each other goodbye. The Bachelor’s voice was calm, composed, and yielding a hint of grace. Burakh left not knowing what to make of the guy.

Night had fallen on the town — sleep was refusing to fall on him.

Ah, Burakh sighed at the touch of cold evening air. He was finally going to be able to get himself a *fucking drink*.

The place had concrete stairs eating into the ground. (Burakh felt a shiver.) He went down them slowly and pushed the heavy door. The vapors, the effluvia, the drowned music all lunged at him, and he almost stumbled back like he had been hit.

Christ, he thought, Grace didn't lie... The air in that place is unhealthy with smoke. (And, as he stepped in, men *did* wear knives on their hip like coin pouches. He didn't see any children, though.) The bartender threw him a sidelong glance. Burakh saw in it that he recognized him as *the butcher*, spotted the blood on him — his eyes looked away, not out of fear, respect or shame, but a placid acknowledgment; an acknowledgment that said under its breath that *he had seen worse*. The smoke seemed to swirl, to spiral and dance with, around, because of the music — its sound hammered at the wallpapered walls, knocked against the large wood panels that delimited secretive tables, immisced itself into Burakh through his lungs.

Burakh walked, looking around for a damn table.

Unavoidable, standing in the middle of the room like the epicenter of all noises and shapes, someone Burakh had never seen — the sleeves of his long, white open coat were rolled up dry, sinewy, veinous arms; his neck, from which hung a loose, tied rope and a black nerve-like string, was straight and sturdy as a marble column; his knuckles were adorned of braided silver rings, fingertips of white gauze. His gaze shot through Burakh like an arrow.

“Don't you drag these muddied and blood-soaked boots of yours all over my pristine establishment,” the man spoke. His voice was low, deep, taut like a tightrope carrying a creeping hiss.

Burakh looked down at his shoes — muddied and blood-soaked indeed — then up at his interlocutor again, who held an icy stare on him. His eyes were wide, prying under a frank oblique scar that ran from his hairline down like the crooked finger of a fishing hook. Burakh's own wandered on the walls, across their overwhelming, hypnotic patterns which were swollen with heavy, heady smoke. Then, at the company around, that looked back at him with small, inquisitive, hard and defiant eyes. At the floor, finally — which was, indeed, pristine. Too pristine, if that could be. Scrubbed clean.

“You won't make me believe my boots are the dirtiest things here. I've heard this place was a den of sin.”

“Why'd you care? You're a christian?”

Burakh pinched his lips in a line and blinked.

“It might be,” continued the man without missing a beat, as if he'd never asked, “but I still mop the floors.”

“I haven't seen your face around.”

“And I have.”

That doesn't narrow it down much, Burakh thought. A fellow university student? He hoped not. A soldier? With the bandages around his stomach, it felt more plausible — Burakh still hoped not. He found in his interlocutor's voice and flippant stare a temperamentality and fickleness that would be no match for the battlefield. Still, they sent all sorts of fools to the ranks; so Burakh asked anyways:

“You've been to the southwestern front?”

“Hells no. I'd rather have gotten my legs blown off than go marching. And with the luck of infantrymen, it'd have happened regardless.”

“Have we met at the Capital, then?”

“We haven't *met*, fellow; but I *am* from the Capital.”

Talking to that guy felt like navigating a minefield *for no damn reason* — Burakh assumed there was a *point* to all that slithering around, his teeth-gritting, his hard, insectoid look.

“What brings you here from the Capital?”

“I'm an Architect.” His tone had changed. There was pride and poise in his voice. His shoulders tilted back, regal, cavalier; his chin hitched up — all vaguely reminiscent of the city-slicker's body language. *Oh, you two will become great friends if he... frequents such establishments.* “An engineer. My name is Andrey Stamatina; Andrey, and nothing else, and I am the second head of the Janusian duo my brother and I form.” He eyed Burakh up, down. His gaze coldened again. “And I'm the only one allowed to strew blood on these floors.” Before Burakh could ask him about that brother of his, the Architect asked first; “And you are?”

Not a trick question, but Burakh still hesitated.

“If you knew my father, Isidor Burakh... I'm the son. His son. The heir. Artemy Burakh.”

Andrey watched him — *watched*, and not *looked*.

“I did know him.”

“You don't seem the sickly type,” Burakh tried to joke.

“He knew Simon well, and Simon knew us well. I wish I could say we knew any of them well too, but that'd be a lie. And we won't be able to know more now...”

“How so?”

Andrey's eyes thinned into slits. His gaze on Burakh turned grey and curious.

“Simon is dead,” he said. “You're wanted for your father's murder, aren't you? Are you for Simon's too?”

Burakh didn't answer. He knew this, he knew that already, but *hearing* it, spoken, worded, with that *weight* in the voice, with that creeping belligerence, was a punch of its own. Stamatin stared. He was hard of eye and of jaw, tense, wound up in a tight, animal way.

Eventually, he spoke:

"I don't think you killed your father," he said. His eyes raked Burakh's silhouette — down, up, down, up again to his face. "You're too soft."

Burakh's breath was knocked out of him. He recalled his reflections — the sharpness of his face, hollowed and hungry; the stiffness of his shoulders that drew him salient and straight like a cliff's edge. Burakh recalled the swinging of his fists, but not the faces caved under their weights. *Soft?* He grew uneasy at the implications, at what violence Stamatin could be brewing.

"I don't think you killed your father," Andrey repeated. He stopped himself, held his thought still and silent like he was toying with Burakh's curiosity. His head dipped, his eyes grew sinister and teasing. "But if you did..." He brought his hands up in... a shrug, a showing of his scarred palms, a bitterly nonchalant comradery. He smiled. He *smiled*. "You wouldn't have my *sympathies*, but you'd have my understanding."

Silence waltzed in; a hot, disapproving silence, that shook the heads of patrons like a displeased breeze — but no one stood up. Glances tore themselves from Burakh like Stamatin had wiped them off.

"I have no intention of fighting you for whatever throne you think you've crawled up to," Burakh eventually said, low, grave, greatly disliking Stamatin's sudden, venomous familiarity.

"You won't," he replied. "You will not dare."

"Piss off."

"Which is a shame," he added, not ticking at Burakh's bark. "You seem like a worthy fighter. Like you like it, too. You've already got nicknames around."

"You think I *liked* being jumped the second I stepped off this train? You think I liked that homecoming party after I've spent six years away?!"

"I think much more."

And his eyes slithered down Burakh's granitic, static silhouette to gawk at the red on his hands and dried crimson stains by his sleeves.

"You won't soon," Burakh replied — hard, dry, sibilant in Andrey's ways, with a taunt in the back of his tight throat. The Architect raised an eyebrow. *Go on*, he seemed to say. "We've found the murderer. And that is not me."

Stamatin gauged the cold look on his face again.

"Oh, really? And do I know his name?"

"No," Burakh said. "You will be surprised," he snickered.

“I love surprises.”

Stamatin stepped away, then, freeing a table and chair with purpose as he swiped an empty bottle. Burakh sat down and ordered something alcoholic — anything alcoholic — from the waiter, who had kept eyes on them like a silent owl.

“Are you going to drink to your father’s memory?” Burakh didn’t answer. “To your own grief, then?” Burakh didn’t answer either; instead he cracked a painful nod, pinched his lips to hold... something, he wasn’t quite sure what, in. Andrey hummed. Andrey nodded. “Well. Stay here long enough and you might meet my brother. Stay on his better side, butcher. I won’t take kindly to you otherwise.”

“What does he look like?”

When the Architect didn’t speak, Burakh turned to him. Stamatin brought his hands to his face, curtained it with, then parted them, revealing nothing new but the self-satisfied line of a smile. “*Just like that*” was what was meant.

“Longer hair,” Andrey eventually added, like it was the only thing that truly set them apart.

And with that, he slithered between parted curtains and into an open mouth of the pub — a slender hole between two panels of wooden, wallpapered walls. Short drapes hung at the lintel, making a row of straight, patterned teeth.

The glass was brought—a tower-like thing on a long stem and small foot, ribbed on its side where Burakh’s fingers rested. He toasted with ghosts, just once; with the patterns of the walls that the smoke seemed to infuse with a reptile, crawling life; with the thick, heavy smoke. At another table, a clink toasted back. He drank, and the liquor set him ablaze on its way down, its flames biting at the wispy hay of Burakh’s vocal cords.

The prophesied brother came in and, seeing him, recalling the other Stamatin’s gestures of the hands, revealing nothing but his own face, his addition of “*longer hair*”, Burakh thought “*Jesus Christ he wasn’t fucking kidding.*” He almost frantically sought differences; finding some, he just short of sighed of relief. He thought the brother had thinner lips — he realized soon he just had them pinched; sour, angry, restrained. Guilty. Burakh couldn’t shake the feeling he himself couldn’t look that much different.

The brother waded through the thick, smoke-dense air with the heavy steps of a stone-bound ghost. He sat by Burakh and turned his eyes on him — the same astringent, biting, cold winter eyes; a piercing blue, their pupils not bigger than pinheads. (A malaise caught Burakh at the throat, and a grasp he couldn’t shake off tightened around his neck.) These wet stones were cradled in a stratum of brick-pink inebriation, then, deeper, one of charoite-purple insomnia that bled onto the highest point of the middle of his cheeks. He looked like a cursed artist. Smelled like booze, pigment and turpentine like one, too.

“There is a shocking kindness in these ireful eyes of yours,” he spoke; and his voice was strained, brittle, raking still the depths of his throat. “I haven’t seen you around. What say thou?”

“What say me...? There is not much to say.”

“Why do you drink? What do you drink for?”

“Do I need a reason to?”

“You do not *need* it. You *have* it.”

Burakh measured his words, weighted them.

“I drink to my father’s memory.”

The brother’s eyes crawled up his face like a scurrying spider.

“You’re the Burakh son, aren’t you?”

“I am.” *I am the Burakh son.* “I am Burakh’s son.”

“I am sorry for your loss.”

“What a strange name,” Burakh laughed meagerly, sourly, through a forced line of teeth.

The Stamatin looked at him out of the corner of his eye, his wet blue fish-iris caught in the corner of his trawl-sclera; not laughing one fucking bit.

“You are?” he asked, properly this time.

“Peter. Peter Stamatin.”

Peter marked a pause. A short, yet heavy, ruminative pause.

“Yes. Peter...” (He tapped his fingers on the side of his cup, his long nails clinking against it.) “And, not before I have erected the tower whose steeple will scrape the underbelly of the sky, I will be—” he raised his glass, his pinkie and middle finger lifted off the cup, “ — the second... or third Architect this town will bury.”

“Who was the first?”

Peter didn’t answer, and instead, drank. His gulps were long and silent like he was swallowing back his own spit.

“Drink, Burakh. Your kind needs twyrine more than I do. Your ears... understand her whispers. I cannot live without her, but you will find your ways through her heavy, green drapes... Weave... along the paths uncovered when her intoxicating aniseed scent recedes, and bares its secrets to you...”

Before Burakh had the chance to ask him what the fuck he was obviously-drunkenly talking about, Peter violently swung off his chair, overcome with a shiver.

“Damn it. Damned be it.”

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I’ve never been more okay. Drink, Burakh. Drink. I’ve heard you haven’t been home in a long time.”

“Who told you that?”

Peter slipped off his chair. He extirpated himself from the pub squirming, crawling out, furiously reaching for his diaphragm — *the liver...*

Burakh watched him leave. A hand—the ghostly, hazy hand of Andrey hovered over the table, and whisked Peter’s empty glass away. His face was blurred, or blurry. Burakh felt dizzy, and excused himself. He, too, crawled out. He found himself weaving, weaving indeed, along the paths uncovered by the fallen leaves that his unsteady steps would kick.

He managed to get himself to the workshop, the Lair, the—home, it was to be home, it had been his father’s. The path was lit, as if it had been for him. (He came across wandering Herb Brides on his way, and he realized it probably was.)

He managed to find light in the dingy, dim place; oil lamps had been scattered around to bear witness to sleepless nights. The golden hue of the flames caught itself on the bronze of distillation tools, upon which Burakh saw his own face dance. *Right*. He had to brew something for Dankovsky.

Twyrine almost knocked Burakh on his ass when he spotted a silhouette in a corner — a skinny, blonde, freckled thing that sat atop a stool too big for it like a swallow. Burakh almost yelped.

“What in th’Devil’s name are you? What in th’Devil’s name are you doing here?”

“Hey, be polite! And don’t speak of the Devil like that, you’re gonna get his eyes on you.”

A kid walked into the golden light.

“I’m Sticky. I used to come here often.”

“Couldn’t make yourself known earlier when I was looking for all of you, could you? I thought it had already gotten to you.”

“Not funny. I’m not laughing.”

“It’s not a joke, fellow.”

Sticky pouted. Sticky pouted like *Burakh* was the weird one here, and Burakh almost fell backwards trying to shoo him out.

(He didn’t manage to shoo him out.)

The kid rummaged through the place for scraps, and Burakh fixed the alembic he didn’t even know was broken. The tinctures would have to wait — would have to until twyrine stopped hammering at his skull like at a bell.)

He knew there was somewhere a bed; he had crept into the place many times as a kid, and many more times had his father invited him to watch him work. There was a bed — a thin, austere cot, fit for a monk (or a soldier. Burakh shook the thought out of his head). He crawled into it, cold, haunted by nothing but his own warmth. The herbs that hung, drying bouquets — were pungent, aggressive, biting, clawing. Twyrine called to its roots with a piercing chant. The drink drowned Burakh's thoughts in a pond-like darkness, thick and heavy with the grass of twyre blades and the silt of the dense liquor. Burakh — laid down — and felt even dizzier. And Burakh — felt himself sink. And Burakh — dreamed.

There is a child by a door.

There is another child by a door.

There is another child by a door.

There is another child by a door.

There is — fine, now, count them, Burakh, like heads of white sheep, or newborn calves. There is a door. The door is locked. Burakh rummages through his pockets for a key. The door is locked. Burakh cards through his hair for a clue, and twyre spikelets fall on his shoulders. The door is locked.

The black, dense velvet of the first dream he had back home inks a thick line between the rolling hills of the steppe and the flat fields of the sky. Burakh is tempted to pull and see if it unravels. Burakh kicks his feet through the dirt and unearths a sewing needle.

He looks through the hole and velvet stares back.

Isthmus—Ischaemia

The dawn air was busy, buzzing, electric — already.

The red-rags-sister's (Aspity, as was her name, as was fricative like ruffle in tall grass) house was swollen with light, with silhouettes and whispers; all bled in and out of it. Nobody budged when Burakh made his way through: he was welcomed in. What a blissful change of pace from the day before, he thought.

The day really started when he was given a coin from a man, a quest from him too, and a necklace of strung words-beads that hung heavy from his neck — its weight alone could make him stumble.

The question matters, not the answer; to the listener, not the speaker — yeah, well, he still would like his

answer to matter. He'd still like his answer to matter — he remembered Dankovsky telling him he had answered Rubin's. Burakh thought he would like to check.

He made his way to Lara.

Following the Gullet up the Hindquarters, it struck him: the town was bulging, blistering with red clots in the crevices of brick and mortar; it sprawled like blood through gauze on the soot-grey walls.

A pestilential feter rose from the soil like mephitic. It filled the air with the thickness of ash. *Pestilential* was just right.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

He started hearing them — groans of fever and ache from behind the ulcerated walls. He turned on his heels and ran for the southern Gullet bridge, dashing through the Warehouses.

She made the offer first — a reunion.

Burakh knew this could be the last day they were... *safe* enough to gather — the disease, whatever it was, had already outgrown the Crude Sprawl; and was growing some more. Its putrid breath had spread north; from the other side of the tributary, Burakh could see how the houses had reddened, as if covered in rashes. He wondered: did it hop rivers? Did it follow man, child, beast? Could the boat carry it, like Charon does the dead? (Could the dead carry it?) He promised Lara he would try his best to reunite them all.

Then for what felt like hours, he tried, he did try. From now on, he would have to wait for midnight. (He waited for midnight.)

(He waited for midnight, and *my fucking god*, he thought, he didn't have time to get bored. They threw him around from Lump to Crucible to Skinners—

the Skinners are clouded in soot.

They're swarming with red *things*, mashed berry-like blood clot-like, clay- and ruby- and spleen-slice-like.

He is given a cloak and a mask — he sees himself in the Orderly that puts the weight of them on his arms like something else to carry. "Bachelor's orders." *Ah, then.*

—to Fortress, where Notkin fights his own gaze to be hard, composed and mature in the face of fear — and fails — to Stillwater to—)

The bell tolled. Its languishing, stirring peals tore through him. The Tragedians had walked out; they were now perched on walls, on pillars, on stairs like white-faced crows, and they all pointed to the Town Hall. Clouds were rising from across the Gullet.

No one in the Town Hall was happy to see each other — especially not Rubin who, when Burakh tried to elbow him into joining them at midnight, groaned and cursed.

The Bachelor was somber. His head was high, his pacing strides measured. His voice, as he slowly, meticulously (and with a hint of authoritative arrogance) explained what was known of the

situation, was clear. It broke once in a hint of discomposure, and it struck Burakh that he was a foreigner — in this town, in this power struggle, in the face of his illness, for all he knew. (None of them fared any better. At least the Bachelor could *talk* — he hadn't lied, he did it well. Burakh wondered how much of his time he spent in the Capital just blabbering about things, and what things.

It also struck him that the Bachelor was... *knowledgeable*. As much as it hurt Burakh to yield this to him, he was. His mouth was full of details and precisions that Burakh could only blink at so he didn't look too lost. *Still*, he thought — he would keep himself from addressing him with too high of titles. For fun — as it was shaping itself to grow painfully scarce very soon.)

Burakh learned of the Fund, and his throat began to ache with hunger; with the thought of food this money could buy. (He was soon to find the prices had soared. He would find that and his stomach would turn on itself like a cornered, furious animal.)

“We will need all the common sense and help we can get.”

He threw a glance at Burakh.

Shit, the tinctures — so he meant it...

(—to the peculiar house where the now-doyen Kain sent him. Through the thick miasma the illness puked in the snaking streets, the place smelled potently of twyrine, turpentine and carraway.

Don't be weird to me, Burakh thought as he pushed the downstairs door open. He found the man—the Architect who, shoulders low and eyes bloodshot, sent him—

—to another damn house, fine, he'd go to another fucking house.

Burakh still had the time to realize how familiar his eyes were. In the darkness of his attic, they looked so distinctively bright against the black canvas of a reclusive, paint-stained corner.)

Where else then? Where else now? The town seemed to tighten around him. It swirled and billowed. As the evening breeze came on its sharp legs, the miasmas seemed to thin, to be dispersed by the bite of cold — to grow more agile, too; sifting around Burakh as he escaped the Crude Sprawl like butterflies of charcoal dust.

Burakh hurried back to his workshop. He had just enough time to focus; *blood-brown, brown-black, black-blood*. The three tinctures the Bachelor had asked for (or, *ah, crap*, had he asked three of the same? Well, Burakh thought he would have to deal with the difference. He, too, was interested in what the doctor would find).

“... It's spreading fast,” Sticky said. He wanted his voice solemn — it came out fearful and croaky.

“Yes,” Burakh said. “It is. I'll ask you to keep yourself out of trouble.”

“Who are you going to heal with these?”

“I’m not healing anybody.” Sticky squinted, almost accusatory. “I’m bringing them to the Bachelor. He wants to study them.” And, Burakh thought, he *wanted him* to. It wasn’t that Burakh didn’t... trust his father’s trade — but he thought maybe having these new, scientific eyes on it would convince him. Reassure him. (That, and he wanted the Bachelor to bite his tongue over the *steppe matters* comment. He wouldn’t lie; he wanted that too.)

“The machine is slow to distill...”

“It is. I need to... (He gave the copper of its round belly a few flicks.) repair it. I need to find something to repair it.”

And fucking fast, he thought. As if he heard that, Sticky nodded.

“This won’t be enough to fight the disease,” Burakh breathed. “Might slow it down. Might win us some time.”

Sticky nodded again.

“What’s your plan?”

“Not even sure if I have one, kid.” (That was a lie. He did. Something both so fantastical, fickle, and yet unavoidable.)

Brewing didn’t feel... particularly solemn. The alembic was this old, sturdy thing; it made a rattling sound like it had a loose tooth. Burakh distilled two tinctures and had just the time to put the last one over the embers before he was to meet Lara, Stanislav and Grief (and he was fully ready to show up at any of their houses to drag them out by the scruff if he had to. But he really hoped he wouldn’t have to.)



The air was cold; the fire was warm; sitting along the circle around it where the two met felt like being cleaved in half, and all three of them were trying to find their place in the divide. All three of them were trying to find their place.

There’s not enough space to fit. There is too much of it to fathom. Emptiness stretches palpably between each of them, and around them, pushing them together. Rubin lets out a sigh — of relief, of longing; his breath rolls over the hills of the steppe like an eastern wind. Burakh’s lungs twitch with something akin to sorrow; he wishes Rubin would let himself see the steppe how it sees him.

“So you’ve been to the front?”

“Medic,” Burakh spat like an expletive. “Were you conscripted?”

He realized quickly that was a... sore subject. Rubin’s eyes darkened, and his upper lips twitched with the itch of a sneer.

“Went to the front,” he said, and Burakh noted he didn’t stay if he was conscripted.

“Is that why you’re bald?” Burakh attempted to joke.

Rubin didn’t find it funny one bit. With a glare, he replied: “Among other things.

“Got my letter, didn’t show up, and nobody came to fetch me,” Grief answered at his turn. He pointed at the Tower, the glow of which pierced through the night like its breath. “Damn thing repels even the wickedest of conscription officials.”

“Can we talk about something else?” Lara asked.

And they did.

Grief thinks the fires of the disease will burn the things-as-they-are, and will grow from the ashes the things-that-could-be. And the things-that-could-be are not pretty. Grief thinks he will feel right at home. (Burakh wishes he could feel at home.)

Lara thinks the fires of the disease will eat the ropes of bonds. (She thinks that, and she walks closer to the fire. She’s not afraid of being burned. She seeks warmth, and Burakh sees how Stakh and Grief, instinctively, come closer too.)

They think it’s the pest, the Sand Plague, that *wildfire of a disease* Rubin had mentioned to the Bachelor. (Well, Burakh knows he mentioned it to the Bachelor). Burakh kicks the soil of his shoe and it, dry, thin, pale, rises in swirls not dissimilar to smoke.

Lara says it was not the plague that brought them together, but him. Burakh is not sure if he ought to savor these words — this perhaps last time he gets to be Cub, as the nickname slips past everyone else’s lips like they had never stopped calling him that. Cub, and not Burakh. Not Haruspex. Not whatever was in the weight of his father’s name. (He thinks about his father. It sours the mood.)

“And you don’t remember the girl *at all*?” Grief asked. The warmth of the fire had bled into them, and the conversation had grown livelier. “A cousin you met once, maybe? An illegitimate sister? A forgotten girlfriend?”

“I don’t even *know* my cousins,” Burakh replied. “And do not speak ill of my parents like that.”

“I was joking.”

“Didn’t laugh.”

“And the girlfriend hypothesis?” Grief insisted.

“He never had a girlfriend in his life,” Rubin immixed himself in the conversation.

“That’s right! I never did! Then what?”

“Boys,” Lara interrupted, “are we fourteen again?” (She didn’t *try* to sound scolding, and she wouldn’t have succeeded anyways; her voice was soft, melancholic for days past. Burakh could hear she was trying to cherish the moment but slipped, slowly, into a dulled-edge nostalgia.)

“I have intimacy issues. Who cares? Do you care?”

“Cub...”

“He’s never had a girlfriend either!” Burakh pointed at Rubin.

“... I also have intimacy issues,” he replied. (His pointed pause went right over Burakh’s head.)

“See? Who cares.”

Burakh was not losing his temper, but the emphatic rise of his voice was not completely purposeful. Drunk on the feeling of *coming together* again, at least, at last, (maybe for the last time — until the illness burned itself out, if it didn’t burn them first,) Burakh had missed the apologetic shrug Rubin had offered to Lara, and the shushing motion he had made in her and Grief’s directions — he had also missed the compliant shrug they gave back.

“Between that woman,” Burakh eventually continued as he calmed down, trying to force silence out of the group and indulge, just a little bit more, in pointless chatter, “and the kids who latched onto me like orphaned calves...”

“What now?” Rubin interrupted.

“If a cow loses her calf at birth and there is, in the herd, a calf that has lost its mother,” Burakh intently explained (the heat of the fire was starting to get to his head. If he was any more of bad faith; he’d blame the dregs of last night’s twyrine settling at the bottom of him), “you put the two together. Then, if you’re lucky, the orphaned calf will imprint on the mother cow, and the mother cow will imprint on the orphaned calf, and she will lick it dry and clean...”

“Have you gone nuts?” Grief asked from across the fire.

“I’m talking about cows. Cows.”

All but Burakh shared a glance. Tight smiles tickled the corners of their mouths, and Burakh knew they thought he couldn’t see it — and he would gladly say weirder stuff if that meant they could share a good moment, and not one torn by anxiety and sorrow.

“Your nerves are fraying,” Rubin said — as if his own were not.

“Had a bad beginning of the week,” Burakh sobered. “Won’t lie to you, I’ve had a BAD beginning of the week. I wish I could go get a drink”

“What’s stopping you?”

“I’m not going to the bar,” he scoffed, “the two... weirdos are gonna do telepathic tricks on me again.”

A rise of eyebrows coursed through the group. “Again?” Yes, *again*, and he didn’t want to elaborate.

Rubin shrugged

“If you go there often enough, they start to merge with the walls.”

“How do you know?” Burakh turned to him. “You go there often? Why?”

Stanislav frowned. A deep cleft cut through his forehead, and his mouth soured. *Should have shut my mouth*, Burakh thought. “To drown my stress and grief. Evidently. (He turned to Filin.) Not you.”

“I can swim.”

Burakh caught the pensive smile on Lara.

Like the good old days, eh?

Then, her mouth soured too.

The wind shifted, and a mist, forward smell of soot and sickness followed the hills from the north. It got cold.

Then they extinguished the fire, it felt like a funeral. (One more.

One of many.)

In the last sparks of light, they noticed something by the train tracks — something small and bipedal.

“*That’s your Shabnak*,” Grief snickered. “*Shut up, will you?*” Lara had immediately scolded him. “*I’ve heard of a child living here. Yes, a tiny orphan thing, often wandering alone.*”

(Orphan thing, eh?

Burakh wondered if people thought of him as wandering alone. Sure felt like it...)

Burakh gathered the tinctures that had brewed, and hurried to the Stillwater. He had managed his time like utter shit, and his chances of catching the Bachelor awake had thinned to nothing. He’d wake him up if needed, he thought — and then thought about the sharpness he had in his eyes and how it would feel tearing through Burakh if he kept the Bachelor from getting his beauty sleep.

Tough luck!

He shoved the vials in his pouch and pockets and hurried across the Gullet.

The air was putrid and dense as the wind had turned; it carried black specks and twyre pollen in a thick, heavy amalgamation. West of the Warehouses, it thinned, grew closer to mist. Then, it seemed to dissipate entirely, and Burakh took a long, welcome breath.

When he first spotted him, Burakh thought he was a crow. But it was — it was the Bachelor, brisk and brash and boldly cutting from a Marrow street and into the Spleen.

Where the hell was he? Where the hell had he gone?

Burakh guessed he could have just left the Theater, but he seemed agitated. He decided to follow him at a distance — going back and forth, wondering whether he should call out his name or should stay way far. The answer came to him plainly when he saw: the Bachelor was wielding a knife. *Met with the muggers already, I reckon.* The blade was long and sharp. The handle fit for a hand. Burakh could guess he had bought it from Grief, and it almost made him snicker. Burakh followed him then, trying to keep a few houses between them at all times. Balancing being far enough as to not creep him out (and be out of knife throws' reach) but close enough to make sure he didn't run into more trouble (the vials started feeling damn heavy, and Burakh would like the Bachelor *not* to get mugged so he could dispose of them at once) shaped up to be harder than he expected: *Jesus Christ*, he Bachelor was damn fast on these thin legs of his. Fast, but unsteady: he walked with a dangerous list to the left, bent from the waist up with an arm pressed against it.

A stitch in the side?

His strides got more and more unsteady as he approached the Atrium — when he finally reached the Stillwater, every two steps was missed. *This is no stitch in the side.*

Burakh waited to see a light in the attic before entering; and when he did, Eva, downstairs, didn't flinch as hard as the first time. They could even exchange a gaze that didn't make her recoil in fear.

“I think he's wounded,” she said, her voice pale and panicked.

“I think so too.” He made his way to the first few stairs.

“I'll help him!” Eva called after him.

“No, you won't. I'm a surgeon, *I will.*”

A sour pout crinkled her rouged lips.

“I could help!” she insisted.

“Stay out of my hands. I don't want to run a needle through your fingers.”

He scaled all of the stairs in brisk strides. Just before the door, he halted suddenly — he needed to appear collected, and *not* like he had chased the Bachelor from the other side of the Guzzle. He

knocked, and his hits were still a little bit too violent. He didn't hear an answer, and peeked through the door.

"Bachelor?" No reply still — he pushed in, and only the subdued light of an oil lamp on the desk greeted him. Something shifted on the bed; he heard the rustle of bedsheet and cover, and a grunt — a pained, breathless, hoarse scraping of the throat. *Shit*. "Oynon?" The word had escaped him — *shit*, again; he, in a blink, came to terms with it when he realized he had done well the job of catching the Bachelor's attention, who was now staring at him. Staring from under sweat-wet brows, his dark eyes almost black as he heaved, face grown pale, lungs swelling with labored breaths.

He saw Burakh. He looked at him for what felt like minutes, trying to inhale and exhale slowly, arm pressed against his side — Burakh noticed *something* growing red against his sleeve, darkening the burgundy of his vest. His jaw jutted as the realization set in.

"Burakh," Dankovsky greeted him, forcing a sarcastic, wide smile from which tumbled a voice he wanted detached and poised — trying to look like he still had control.

"What happened, oynon?" Burakh asked. He was starting to get an awfully clear picture in the dim attic room.

"Your townspeople dislike me," the Bachelor sneered, "and they show me."

"Muggers?"

"I *do not know*, Burakh," he huffed, "I didn't stop to ask him. Had a knife, if that matters. Lunged at me." He grimaced, and his face paled some more. "Had to kill him to save my skin."

"You did well. They're hated for wielding blades. You can steal from their corpses if you find anything worth the trouble."

"Oh, Burakh, this is sick." It didn't escape them that they were *both* wielding blades.

"They think they can get Kain money from you."

"Who the hell said anything about money?" the Bachelor barked. Burakh noticed he was letting him take steps forward. Maybe he could... "All I've gotten from them so far is errands to run and messages to relay across town. Do you people not have the *telephone* here?" he sighed, exasperated.

"Does this look like a town with the telephone?"

"Telegraph?" the Bachelor asked, to which Burakh shook his head again. "Carrier pigeons?!" he asked again, louder.

They stared at each other. Dankovsky was starting to breathe more evenly, and Burakh could spot near his bed his full bag — he could probably find compresses and disinfectant in there.

"Well, we have pigeons, but no one can train them."

Dankovsky shot him an irate gaze, a black arrow that broke swiftly as he croaked out a laugh well in spite of himself — then he grimaced again and contorted on his side, the pain stabbing him through the rib.

“Don’t make me laugh, Burakh, my guts are going to spill.”

It struck Burakh that *he was hurt, with no way around it.* “Let me see.”

The Bachelor scoffed. “I can *take care of myself.*”

Burakh saw how his hands shook. His wrist was red with the spilled blood, and his fingers struggled to open the buttons of his vest.

“Why should I?” Dankovsky asked — it felt more like he was giving Burakh a reason to convince him.

“I’m a surgeon. It’s my job to stitch people close.”

This seemed to do it. Dankovsky slowly, painstakingly, shrugged off his coat. When Burakh reached out to take it away, he waved it off swiftly. Burakh could now see how the blade had gone through the layers of cloth: the wool of the vest bore a horizontal slit, the lips of which looked damp with blood; the white shirt underneath had been cleanly cut through and threads of its interwoven cotton peeked through the vest like red cobweb. The stain was growing. Dankovsky managed to undo his vest; he chucked it off to the side with apparent difficulty. He worked at pulling the hem of his shirt out of his pants and it hit Burakh that *damn, this had taken a turn.* Both out of respect for the Bachelor’s privacy (what privacy? He had to undress to get a wound taken care of) and because the scene was awfully familiar to Burakh, searing the back of his eyes and of his throat with the persistent, haunting disgust of having had to *do that before*, he turned to the Bachelor’s bag and combed through his belongings for silk thread and suturing needle.

The oil lamp had to be brought to the bedside; in the dim light, Burakh could finally see it. The cut was sinuous and twisted, uneven as could be guessed where Dankovsky had suddenly shoved his attacker away; it followed the curve of the costal arch, where the skin was taut and thin — tauter and thinner as the Bachelor lay back, biting onto the thumb of his leather glove. The blood appeared black in the penumbra, wet, slick. Burakh cleaned it and gauged the depth of the cut — a surface wound. The Bachelor had been filthy *lucky.*

It felt unreal how composed the Bachelor was — was trying to show himself to be, even as Burakh pulled the two lips of his wound together with a curved needle. He forced himself to breathe deeply, to let his head fall on the pillow behind with an almost reprehensible amount of restraint. There was a collected elegance in the way he lay there and bit on his glove to not howl out in pain. It felt *crass* for him to have this much control on his breathing and, as twisted as it could make him, Burakh was proud when he heard him spit out a curse. Maybe the Bachelor was just a guy like the others, in the end. He had refused painkillers — which Burakh found both arrogant and... shockingly, for the type of guy he thought him to be, selfless.

“There. Well, try to not do anything too harsh that would tear those stitches open. I don’t know if I feel like redoing them.”

“I’ll make sure to tell the muggers that doctor Burakh would be really mad if his hard work was desecrated,” Dankovsky snickered. “Do you mind?”

When Burakh raised his eyebrows, Dankovsky gestured at him to turn around; he then took off his shirt. Burakh hopped on his heels and walked to the center of the room.

“Well,” Burakh eventually said, “I actually had come to bring you the tinctures you had asked for.”

He heard the Bachelor stifle what sounded *awfully* like a sigh of relief or satisfaction.

“Leave them by the microscope, then. I’m... quite awake. I’ll study them tonight. (Then, the rustling of something.) Once I’m done sewing these holes up.”

“You’ve brought a... sewing kit?”

“You *ought* to when you travel, Burakh. You ought to.” He sighed. “I had a... long trip there. The soles of my shoes could have fallen off. I could have worn through my socks.”

“But you didn’t.”

“But I didn’t. And now some maniacs have taken upon themselves to wear through my vest.”

“I’ll leave you to it.”

“Thank you, Burakh.” (Burakh met his eyes, and he realized he also meant it for the stitches.)

“Good night.”

“Good night.”

“Don’t get shanked on your way home.”

“I think they fear me more than they do you, oynon.”

Dankovsky crushed a stifled laugh against his palate, and he snorted. Burakh pointedly closed the door behind him when he left. Downstairs, Eva had been waiting nervously.

“How is he doing?”

“He’ll live.”

Her face grew pale.

“He’s *fine*,” corrected Burakh intently. “Don’t bother him too much. Stitches are fragile.”

“I didn’t intend to.”

Burakh also pointedly closed the *front* door behind him when he left.

Following the arterial road of the Atrium, he felt followed. Something, he thought, was trailing him—no, *dawning* on him, with all the weight of a sky; making him bend his spine under it. It was *touching* him; it was a graceful, delicate scratch; it was a cumbersome, aggressive caress. Its shadow walked before him, stretching even past the bridge; its light was lunar and opaline. It was the damn thing — the damn tower. Burakh picked up the pace, fearing it would take flight and land on his shoulder like the swarming crows that the sky seemed to puke on the town since early morning.

In the Warehouses, the pale glow of the tower ceded ground to the orange light of lanterns, and its ethereal lightness to the roughness of rust. Burakh sighed in relief.

He made his way to the workshop — things didn't quite look as he had left them, but he realized *the kid* had been here. Nothing to worry about. The place was still warm with the heat of distilled extracts. Burakh went to bed absolutely knackered.

(So it was your brother then.)

Burakh recognized the eyes. Sharpened, needle-heads blue things with a wide black pupil for thread hole.

Andrey came to him. His step was nonchalant. Heavy. Loud. Aggressive. He moved through the fabric like scissor blades on silk.

(Where did you come from? Burakh thought, but didn't ask. How did you come here? He thought again, but didn't ask. He wasn't even sure Andrey couldn't read these thoughts as plainly as you do. First your brother, and now you? How do you manage such things?)

How do you feel yourself thinking you fit? the Stamatina asked. His voice was cold and accusatory. *How d'you think yourself feeling you fit? Are there still hollows to squeeze yourself into like wet clay?*

Why the mean tone, buddy?

Are you welcome? Do you feel like you are welcome? Do you think you are welcome?

(He didn't answer this.)

Have you seen her? The Stamatina gestured at — at nothing, at a pitch-black, amorphous ceiling. Still, Burakh *knew* what his fingertips itched to point. *You haven't seen her. You have looked at her, with these snide gazes of yours; with that boiling coldness at her escaping you. You detest things you don't understand. Yes, you do. That is the burden of man.*

Are we not men?

(Andrey's face contorted in a wicked, amused, mocking grimace.)

You unfinished stain of ink you. You bloated blood-shape on parchment hide. I barely trust you to be a witness. The blades of your eyes could tear the moment in two — they are tearing the moment in two.

(He pushed down *something*, anything — whatever it was, it scattered into shards in a horrible racket, and Burakh jumped back to avoid getting cut.)

And if your folk is born of clay... Why do you fear me being born of stone? No man remembers his birth—yet I remember coming alive to the screams of my brother. I was awake when you were not even breathing, I pulled myself into life when you were still cradled and smothered. When your soft wailing was drunk by the earth, coursed through roots. I shan't compare myself to you. You were born out of soil and I was born out of stone. Out of fine marble. I was carved and you were molded. I was chiseled out and you were stuck together. Haphazardly, may I add. I already see you crumbling at the joints. (He moved, he moved, he was unnaturally fast, he tore through the space like a shot arrow.) Water could dissolve you, and the sun could crack you open. I could carry the roof of the Erechtheion on my head, and your spine bends under the weight of the sky. Oh, you Atlas of pebbles and dirt! I carry the weight of the temple and you can barely carry your father's name!

(He was growing erratic. His breath was echoing against the borders of the dream, bumping into them, tearing to tear through them. Burakh didn't like that. Burakh didn't like that *one fucking bit*.)

Witness. Witness, witness — I won't tell you what she is made of. What she is shaped of. Shaped with. How I—we have shaped her. No—she has shaped herself. That's what she does.

What shapes you, huh? What are your foundations? What holds your silhouette of stretched stomach-skin into the form of a man?

(He moved again. Burakh boiled — something overcame him. He swung his fist, and it hit Andrey in the chest — it hit him in the chest and pain tore through Burakh's knuckles, wrists and arm to the neck with the force he opposed to the blow.)

Bones, Burakh. Bones, always. What will you do without them? My marble holds itself like the neck of a proud horse, my spine the column—the pedestal—proudly carrying my head. Your neck bends at the seventh cervical like a dying swan's. You're going to eat dirt, walking like something is pulling your face to the soil, like you want to kiss it. You can't even look at me in the eyes. Look at your hands. What did you gain from trying to break me? Look at them. Your tools... Your precious tools. Throwing them away... Breaking them on my stomach, my entrails.

(Something escaped him; a laugh sharp and bitter like white whip.)

(He *did* look at his hands: he saw how the bruises grew on the back, reaching for his wrist from the knuckles down. The purple of the hematoma was bewitching, poisoned. His joints were kissed by a fine white dust; it was biting and cold.)

What were you trying to find? Did you want to cut me open and read me? Read my future? Do you think you're an oracle? You can't even see the present. I could gouge your eyes out, I could hold them above the sky that I've helped my brother reach and you would still be blind. I shan't lift you. I shan't tell you anything. I know who drilled the hole through my heart, and I know what passes through. I'm not even sure anyone

could weave a thread through you in the hope of stitching this town back together. You cannot fit a string. You cannot fit a stitch. You cannot fit a drop of love in that crowded ribcage of yours. Do not lie—I live by my mistruths and refuse to hear yours—you have said it yourself.

How the fuck would you know?

Everywhere there is a window there is one of my eyes. Everywhere there is a door there is one of my ears. Tread lightly. You're so loud. You're going to wake everyone up. You make even the dead restless. Here we go. Here you go. This was easy, wasn't it? You're so easy to light. Like a bale of dry hay...

(Burakh aimed for him again and missed. Andrey was growing more apathetic; more nonchalant again. He threw glances behind, and next to him. The walls were starting to close. He was fine with that.)

Do you know what they say about hooks? It is by them that the ancestors pull the souls of those who have achieved salvation towards the heavens. Imagine, will you? A hook... Do you think they get pierced like fishes? Torn upwards? The hook pressing itself against the soft palate... Where the meat is tender...

(He brought his index into his mouth, tracing a line from behind his teeth to the back of his throat.)

It would be right here... The metal would go through the skin like through the tendons of a cow... You know about this, right? Butcher...

I don't. They butcher bulls in the Abattoir — I've never stepped a foot in there. Ah, I don't think it matters... Burakh, do the dead bleed? Will the hook draw blood? Will their essence spray over the tender new grass?

(His index finger pushed against his soft palate and stabbed through it as it had become a curved blade that came through his face — like a fish. Burakh didn't see it coming through his face: the horrible piercing noise shook him awake.)

There were two options, really; either the twins had a hand in the shaping of these dreams, in which case *they had a problem with him*, or they *didn't* and *he had a problem with them*. One of these two warranted confrontation — he didn't know which one, and he didn't know which one would have him get out of the Broken Heart or the loft alive. (He had a bad feeling about these two and the whole... *staying alive* thing.)

Black velvet shreds clung at the corners of his vision as he slowly emerged, tense and heavy like he was nursing a bad hangover, and for a moment, he stilled.

The walls of the lair seemed to swallow them at once, and Burakh stepped out of bed.

“Are you awake?” Sticky called — his voice was thin and nervous.

“Yes. Why the ghost in your voice?”

“Notkin is sick.”

Burakh's eyes shut.

"Also, I know where I can get us the materials to repair the brewery."

Burakh's eyes opened.

"Well, I can get you the materials, I suppose," Sticky pouted.

Oikodómos

Sly fox of a kid, Burakh laughed to himself as he made his way back, walking behind Sticky to make sure he didn't lose him. Carrying the heavy toolkit while Sticky filled his arms with a mask, twyrine and sewing supplies, he hurried the two of them home to have the brewery repaired by full-morning.

By the door, a twitchy little silhouette lingered. Burakh halted. He was sure it was the *something small and bipedal* they had spotted the night before, the child Lara said roamed by the tracks.

It was Murky. She toed an invisible border around the Lair, pinning her little grey eyes on his face with a mean, bitter look.

"It's the first time I see you this close," Burakh said.

"I wouldn't let you approach, anyways," Murky mumbled.

"... Why so?"

"You drag evil everywhere you go." She nodded to herself. She frowned. "Yes. Evil, wickedness."

"You know some big words, little one..."

"I see you around. You roam. I see you more than the crows — and the crows are bad news enough already."

"Are you saying I am bad news?"

"Worse." She crunched her nose in something hurt and angry. "Worse. You have opened the door to evil, yes, but you also have shut it to love." Her head twitched. She looked at him sideways — Burakh thought he could decipher shyness in the rising of her bushy brows. *Did all of you have a meeting to decide to tell me I'm unlovable? I would have loved an invitation...* "You can't even pick herbs right. You hurt everything you touch, just like your dad before you."

Burakh winced. Murky saw it, and winced too. Her entire face shed its anger and she brought two wide, eager eyes on him.

"... Then you could teach me how to pick herbs right, couldn't you?"

"... Yes. Yes, I could."

“Very well. I’ll take you at your word.”

“Yes. You better. It is worth more than yours.”

I do not doubt it.

“Is there any reason you came here, Murky?”

For a moment, she didn’t speak. Her peering marble-eyes — with her frown, she looked sullen; she breathed deeply like it took a lot from her to stare. “... We wanted to see you up close.”

“Well... Know you’re always welcome inside if you need a place to stay.”

“I won’t.” Softness struck her even as she tried to hold it back: “Thank you.”

She walked away. She dragged the dirt with her like she could make the whole riverbank follow her. Burakh only registered she had said “we” as the bell tolled. He’d have to go. *Damn it.* He’d have to go.

The Theater had been decreed hospital. At the Town Hall, where they had met, the Bachelor had let out a sibilant sigh, a hiss between his gritted teeth. He had cursed under his breath, saying it was better than nothing. It would do. It would have to do. Burakh had stayed a few steps back, let Dankovsky do the talking — not moving when he had sighed again about needing people to listen to him, and mumbled something about no one having common sense in this town.

Seeing the building empty was peculiar, and drew a long shiver from Burakh’s skin. All tables and chairs had been removed and the place was instead divided into rows of makeshift beds — deathbeds, for the unluckier ones. Rags and sheets and lace curtains had been hung from metal frames to create the illusion of privacy — not that it mattered; not that it was going to matter. Pestilence roamed with heavy, loud hooves — the ticking of a clock somewhere, Burakh eventually realized. The air was stuffy, hot like a sick breath, hung low like a creeping fog. The whines and moans of the sick had no room to grow in the deleterious atmosphere, and they pushed against the shape of the illness itself, finding themselves crushed under its heel.

Burakh put on a mask, gloves, and walked, head low as this could shield him from the eyes of the noxious miasma, to Dankovsky.

“Burakh. I’m glad to see you’ve come to your senses and accepted to be my aide.”

“Hey, I’m doing that for myself too, you kn—”

“Your colleague has also accepted to come — he works with me.” Burakh’s eyes widened, and he sought Rubin in the Theater. “We will not be too much of three to tackle this damn disease — we wouldn’t be too much of thirty,” he insisted dryly. He marked a pause — “Well, we will not be too much of *four*, but...”

Burakh jumped. “The girl’s here? Helping?”

“She’s here,” the Bachelor tempered with a gesture of the hand. “*Helping*, we’ll have to see...”

“I can hear you, you know!” Clara called from across the room, and the two men grimaced — yeah, they could hear her too. She trotted to their side. She wasn’t wearing protective equipment, and her pale blue eyes twinkled with something that, in the circumstances, appeared to Burakh downright sinister.

“Where are your gloves?” Dankovsky asked dryly.

“I won’t wear any. I must never wear any. You two are foolish for covering your hands.”

“Spoken like someone who *really* likes diseases and bacteria,” Burakh scoffed.

“The townsfolk have hunted down innocent girls thinking they were death-bringers,” Dankovsky told her. “Mind your words, and mind your acts even more, or they might think you’re a plague-carrier.”

“They already do,” the girl pouted, and her eyes fell grey with a genuine sadness. The two men watched her, quite embarrassed — Burakh especially: with his list of kids to care for, that one didn’t feel too far from the others.

“How come?” he asked.

The girl hesitated. “I was sent from below,” she began. “Not hell,” she immediately corrected herself, “not the realm of the dead, but... life, and light, and all the beautiful hyphae under the soil... Pale, white, crystalline like silk thread.” Burakh slipped a sideways glance at the Bachelor, who was looking at the girl with squinting, skeptical eyes. “I come from a world of bonds and touch... I am a vessel for it, I am a conductor. My touch comes from it. And sometimes...” She opened her hands — the two men involuntarily flinched. She closed her hands. They were long, her fingers making up most of their length — those were tapered and crooked. Her nails were long, oval, brittle past the skin. Ligaments ribbed the backs of them like spiderwebs. “... The beautiful below-world chooses for me... through me.”

“... Have you killed anyone, girl?”

“I never would! I never did!”

Silence cut her voice in her throat. She shifted on her small feet, and Burakh saw Dankovsky’s eyes widen.

“I never meant to.” the girl said. Her voice croaked.

Burakh felt his jaw jut, and a shiver bit at his neck. (He remembered the Bride who screamed as the fire tore through her, how the skin of her legs melted, and the onlookers realized she was flesh and muscle too.)

“And do you not fear the stake?” he asked then, this voice aghast with a piercing hint of anger.

“They wouldn’t put me there,” Clara spat pointedly. “They won’t. I know how to heal. I heal. My hands can do *so much more* than yours. Especially *yours*,” she hissed at Dankovsky. “I can do miracles.”

“Then do them *fast*, girl,” Dankovsky hissed back (and he was way better at hissing than she was), “for if you go too long without showing people you can heal, they will see through you, and you will get their ire and their hounds.”

“You don’t believe me either, do you?”

“I’m a *scientist*, not a faith healer.”

Clara’s face distorted with anger as her pale eyes shot bitter, enraged stare-arrows through the Bachelor’s face. For a moment, Burakh was *really fucking scared* of her.

She stomped her feet then, and it struck him that she was just a girl.

“I’ll show you. I’ll show both of you.”

“Show us fast. People are dying.”

“I’ll comfort them.”

“They don’t need *comfort*, they need *healing!*”

“And is healing only violence to you? I’ve heard them calling you *butcher*. Maybe you do carry that name well.”

Before Burakh had time to protest, she scurried away like mice, and her silhouette blended with the curtains-rags.

“Wicked girl,” the Bachelor said under his breath.

“Do you think she’s dangerous?”

“Do you?”

Burakh didn’t answer.

Rubin was hard at work. His shoulders were slumped with a sensible weight. Burakh walked to his side and cleaned the bed of rags.

“Still surprised you’d accept to work for the guy,” Burakh spoke. “To work here.”

“It’s not about him. It’s not about you, either. This is my town too, and I’m a doctor. Did you think I’d leave it to die because I’m mad at you?”

“I didn’t, Stakh, come o—”

“I was to be your father’s heir,” he said. His voice was slow, evident. Hard. Granitic. “The least I can do now is not disappoint him. It’s the least *you* can do, too,” he sneered. “They’ve left us painkillers in the safe, use them. This disease tears through people like a butcher knife.”

“I’m *going to work*,” he protested, “I just... wanted to thank you for coming, is all.”

Then, Rubin didn’t speak for a while. He moved on to another patient, and Burakh didn’t follow.

He stood by a bed and did what he was told.

Sickness seemed to seep through the gloves with each touch — it was hot like a stove plate. He gave a sidelong glance to Clara across the room; with her hands hovering over the faces of the ill, she surely couldn't feel the burn of the skin. *If your "miracles" work... Lucky, lucky girl.*

Just past ten, Rubin walked to him — Burakh almost jumped seeing him approach, surprised.

"Say, even with how I have treated you since you came back, do you think you would ever cover for me?"

"I would," Burakh replied without hesitation. "Do you mean *working in your place here*, or... lying for you?"

"If I tell you mostly the latter, will you do it still?"

Burakh pondered it. Rubin was growing anxious in the silence he left; he replied: "I still would. What do you need hidden? What do you need... hiding from?"

"I need you to trust me."

"Not good enough, buddy," Burakh joked. When he saw that Stanislav was not picking up on the humor one bit, he continued: "I would. I will. And I need you to trust me that I can cover for you."

"I'm sorry to tell you, but your reputation might take a nasty hit. I need you to be ready. I know you worked so hard to gain it back..."

Burakh shrugged. "You get used to it. I didn't die then, I think I would live later."

"I might do something unspeakable," Rubin said.

His voice had been so flat, composed, devoid of solemnity, of guilt or fear, that Burakh froze in place.

"See?" Rubin said, with a mocking hint in the voice. "You're not ready."

"No, it's — listen, I will do my best if you need me. Can you tell me what you're doing?"

"No way in hell, Cub." The voice was curt and unwavering.

"It's starting to look like it," Burakh mumbled,

"Keep your poetics for someone else. So, would you? Will you?"

"I will lie and kill for you like you are my own brother. Fine?"

"Better."

Burakh hesitated then.

"Can I tell you what I'm doing?"

“Are you going to ask me to cover for you too?”

“No.” (He paused.) “Not yet, and I’ll get back to you if I do.”

“Go on, then.”

“I’m going to try to make a serum.”

Rubin lent him a sidelong glance. “... You are?”

“Yes.” He snapped a painkiller pill in half to distribute it between two patients. “I’ll... figure something you. I’ll have to.”

“Me too,” Rubin said, and he dipped his head low. Burakh wouldn’t pry anything else from him today.

They worked side by side in silence.

A girl’s—the girl’s voice could be heard over the chiming of vials and syringes, the opening and closing of pill boxes.

“... What the hell is she doing?”

“Administrating last rites, it seems,” Burakh replied dryly.

She could very much have been.



He still hadn’t found the meaning of the... sigil. It taunted him from the bottom of his pocket every time he rummaged through it. His fingers itching with the blank he was pulling on it, on that nameless Eighth, that taunting crooked shape, he used the little time he had between strides across the Town to get to Aspity.

By her shack, the Bride he had met was dancing. She was not alone; three others, entranced in their dance, pranced, stilled, stomped the ground with light feet. Their arms swayed and flailed, their heads tipped back as the curve of their backs accentuated; they grazed the tallest blades of grass with fingertips going over their heads. The Bride spotted him. She stilled. She straightened. She walked to him with her head high, her long pale arms like sails in the wind.

“Are things taking shape, yarchagin?”

Burakh swallowed. They were. *What kind of shapes* was more the question, now.

“Why do you care, Earth-betrothed? Since when do you worry about the matters of men?”

“I worry not about the matters of men, kheerkhen, I worry about the matters of the Earth — and so do you.”

“What matters of the Earth are you talking about?”

“Have you remembered me?” she didn’t reply and asked instead.

“I haven’t. And the pointers of my friends haven’t helped either.”

“What were they?”

“Cousin,” Burakh recollected. “Girlfriend I would have forgotten, but that couldn’t have happened.”

The Bride looked at him, drinking the meaning off his face. She laughed then, softly at first, then very loud — Burakh caught crows and larks taking flight at the sound.

“No,” she eventually said, “It couldn’t have happened.” She stared at him; her clove-brown eyes were infused with something enigmatic and secretive. A smile toyed with the corners of her lips. “No, not you. It couldn’t have happened.”

“Are you calling me unlovable?” Burakh asked, feigning offense. “Basaghan, you hurt me.”

“Do you consider yourself unlovable?” she said.

(And then, Burakh couldn’t say he didn’t.)

“You shouldn’t worry, then,” she said after a silence, “about remembering me. You must, but you must let things take their course. You’ll come to me. You’ll come back to me. Until then...”

She didn’t speak more. She rejoined the other Brides. One began to sing — a litany of winded sounds, of broken breaths. The chant was cadenced by the clacking note of their palms against their exposed chests, against their thighs and knees, before they threw themselves on the ground; rolled upon it embraced by the tall feather-grasses, and jumped on their feet again. When Burakh walked away and into Aspity’s shelter, he heard their voices rise emphatically, finally free of his intrusive eyes.

(From the red-rags sister, he learned *udurgh* meant “a body that contains the world” — well, *could* mean. From Rubin, he was told something else. From Vlad the Younger, something else entirely — and that he was shit out of luck: the one person who could have answered this precisely was locked in the Termitary, or so the Olgimsky son thought. Burakh didn’t know if he believed his word that the place could be free of disease; all he had was some hope, and the gnawing resolution that he needed to get inside.)

Burakh hoped the Termitary was free of disease.

He fucking hoped so.

The thing spread into the water. The thing spread into the air. The thing spread through droplets; as the sickness bit the insides of a person, their wails of pain would be wet with thick spit as if they were rabid, and all the moisture would slowly drain from their skin. The thing didn’t spread to Worms, he discovered. That helped, and that didn’t — men were no Worms (and vice-versa).

Their heavy steps, as they left, lifted sandy dirt off the ground, and Burakh almost recoiled at its miasmatic shape(s).

The pestilence made men into animals — the men lucky enough not to be made into meat (or unlucky enough? Burakh wasn't sure). They were muggers, looters, thieves, and Burakh thought to himself he was only *barely* better. A thief of thieves, a looter of looters, mugger of muggers. Whether or not they deserved to live (or to die) was of little care to him. Whether or not *he* did was of a bit more; not much still. He had legal immunity. (And also, he *wanted to eat*.) Cover of night helping, they were easily slain. He fished every single coin out of their pockets.

Lord knows he would need them to eat.

(He wondered if, in those he killed and wounded, was the Bachelor's attacker from the night before. He wondered if he'd try to get him too. *One more reason for them to not get up.*) He disliked how easy he found it, after a while; his rusty blade went through the bones like threads through the reed on a loom.

A silhouette detached itself from the fog, the pollen-sweet dirty mist. Its steps swung, devoured ground under their strides; slithered above earth, fast, animal. Burakh brought a hand to his hip and his sheathed knife, the blade of which he pulled just enough. He didn't care if that made whoever was coming believe he was ready to strike first, or for no reason — he wasn't risking it.

The silhouette parted arms — didn't raise them like it was threatened; rather opened them in an inverted V, the branches of which were open palms. A voice rose from it, bouncing off the walls:

“Ripper, hey, Ripper...”

Sonovabitch. Stamatín.

“You couldn't be more creepy if you tried, could you? You're lucky I'm not quick on the draw.” This made Andrey laugh frankly — a single, loud bark that echoed longly. (A “*oh, yeah, sure, you're not*”.) “If you keep approaching people like that, someone's going to stick a blade between your ribs.”

“Doubt it.” He smiled widely, unnaturally. “Follow me. You're picking up your colleague and you're walking him home.”

“I'm what my what and doing what?”

Stamatín gestured at him to hide his blade — but *not* to put it away, Burakh noted.

They walked to Peter's without a hitch (strange, Burakh thought. Then he thought about the shadows he believed he saw avoiding him — him, the Ripper, the patricide maybe still; and Stamatina, who bled a dangerous tenebrosity slowly, steadily, inexorably).

In the night, the Loft seemed to expand, to sprawl; taller as its scaffolding disappeared into the black of the sky — its metal arms looked like pillars holding up the dark belly of the night. With the district smelling potently of ashes and smoke, the effluvia of twyrine and turpentine had grown threefold.

Andrey picked up the pace to hold the door open for Burakh.

“Mind the lintel. It is low.”

And as he said that, Burakh smacked his forehead into it.

Christ, was the damn place cold — much colder than Burakh had found it to be in the morning the day before. Upstairs was... animated. Not loud, but lively enough that even Andrey raised an eyebrow. He climbed the claustrophobic stairs first with the ease of someone who could have built them. When Burakh followed suit, they both stumbled into a room whose dim lights bore witness to unfathomably complex discussions — or so he guessed, seeing papers upon papers pulled from god-knows-where and laid flat, or folded, or shaped into abstract geometric demonstrations, scattered across the Loft like a storm had galloped through.

In the middle of that mess, Peter and the Bachelor had entrenched themselves into the empty tub, the edge of which was covered with more goddamn papers that Peter was deep in the process of telling his guest all about.

Peter had kept his coat, which overflowed the tub like ink, and the Bachelor had discarded his. The cravat and tie still held, one of his sleeves was rolled and revealed ink stains. When the both of them spotted the newcomers, they audibly groaned — Burakh couldn't contain enough the snort that escaped him when he heard in the Bachelor's voice that he was drunk, *well* drunk. Andrey leaned towards to him:

“You're helping me get him out of the tub and you're walking him back to the Stillwater.”

“Why am *I* doing that?”

“Because *I* am not.”

It was clear in his tone he wasn't giving Burakh a choice.

“Afraid he couldn't defend himself in the big scary world outside?” Burakh asked dryly, mockingly.

“Oh, he could defend himself just fine,” Andrey shook his head. “I've seen him shoot a guy in the face.”

Burakh felt his face fall from him in complete stupefaction. His jaw unlocked itself to hang from it as he stared, discomfited, at Andrey, expecting him to elaborate *at least* a bit. He didn't.

“Coming to rob me of my company?” Peter asked, watching Andrey approach the tub like he would a wild animal.

“Coming to *discharge* you of him would be more precise. The Ripper is walking him home.”

“*Garde rapprochée*, eh?” Peter said, his eyes on the bubbling discomfort on Burakh’s face.

“Hey,” he objected, feeling like his intrusion was making the place itself uneasy — cold drafts following the line of its inhabitant’s sight, candlelights waning and shirking his silhouette — “I don’t even know why I’m here. I just came because he brought me.”

“Can’t a man enjoy some repose in this forsaken town, Andrey?” the Bachelor, who had so far stayed silent, eyes following the back-and-forth, eventually interjected.

“The wicked need their *rest*, Bachelor—”

“Oh, don’t you call me that,” he gritted.

“ — I’m just putting your friend in charge of making sure you do not stumble into the *eternal* kind when walking back.”

“My *friend*?”

“His *friend*?”

Three pairs of eyes turned to Andrey, then three to Burakh.

“Everybody here who doesn’t want to knife me wants to befriend me,” the Bachelor snickered, then sobered like a passing cloud rolled over his face.

“Didn’t take you for the partying type, oyonon,” Burakh attempted to diffuse the cold that crept.

“You call that a party?” Dankovsky raised an eyebrow high, and Burakh could see the liquor-pink in his sclerae.

“This is a *discourse*,” Peter objected, visibly vexed, and Dankovsky nodded mindfully.

Andrey pulled out what was apparently *his* chair in the Loft, having been strategically placed to help pull someone out of the bathtub. When he sat down and snatched the thread of conversation Burakh had thrown in the web of discussion like he wanted nothing more but to tell their new guest all about it, Burakh realized that *oh, I’m going to be here for hours, aren’t I...*

“When he was in uni, he was such a stuck-up... Wouldn’t smoke, wouldn’t drink, wouldn’t enjoy others’ company.”

“I’ve started smoking in my first year,” Dankovsky objected, irritation piercing through his slurred — which Burakh found amusing — voice, “and I kept the habit. I stopped drinking with crowds but I still do, see?”

In an attempt to convince no-one but himself, he swirled around his mostly-empty glass. Andrey carried on, unbothered, taking only Burakh as interlocutor as if the other two were too drunk to

matter (or maybe he really wanted to annoy the Bachelor. Burakh didn't really know which was funnier).

"He was so austere," Andrey continued playfully, voice heavy with nostalgia, "uninterested in earthy pleasures. Stuck out like a sore thumb amongst our... *revelrous* company. You would have thought he was a vampyr!"

Burakh pinched his lips, nodded, smiled tensely as he was starting to wonder what in the hell he was doing here. (The thought of the Bachelor as a vampyr *was* droll, he still thought — and kept that to himself.) *Was this before or after he "shot a guy in the face"?*

"He acts like he hasn't seen me drunk," Dankovsky objected still, again, "like he has *gotten me* drunk. He knows damn well I wasn't always *austere*."

"Such a Platonic vision of the world, isn't it?" Andrey persisted, unperturbed by Dankovsky's protests, gesturing in Burakh's direction to keep his attention. "So sober, ascetic, disengaged from the excesses of wine, parties and sex. Venerating the search for transcendence, longing for the fortitude to stay unwavering in the face of urges and desire, for the purity of Life and Love in their most refined, detached, intellectual—marble-like, almost—nature..."

"Will you stop?" That was Peter who, until then silent, slumped against the Bachelor, voiced his discomfort in his place.

"Plato said that?" That was Burakh, who saw that discomfort as well, but didn't feel like telling Andrey to shut up — he doubted it would end well.

"Among other things."

"Do you agree?"

Andrey eventually stopped, then pondered, a smirk blooming on him as he thought.

"Even if I did," he began, "it would be hypocritical of me to position myself on it."

"So I've heard..."

"What about you, Daniil?" he persisted, question pulling on its hook an audible groan out of the two men tucked in the tub, who had been until he walked in apparently blissfully unbothered. "Holding back the earthy, carnal matters for the intellectual pursuit of self-mastery and eminence of the Platonic soul? *Still?*"

"Not now. Cease." (That was Peter again, louder this time.)

"... I have no opinion on the matter."

The Bachelor had spoken at last; it threw a cloak of silence on all four of them, smothering the discussion suddenly, as if Andrey had wanted to get a reaction out of him and, now that he had gotten it, he had lost his drive to declaim on. Peter threw Dankovsky a sort of insectoid side-glance to monitor his uneasiness in case he needed to interrupt Andrey again.

“Celibate?” Burakh asked — three pairs of eyes turned to him, Andrey’s gleaming with a sort of pride that he’d managed to instigate nosiness.

“... You could call it that.”

“Mmh... The *married-to-my-work* type?” Burakh asked again — he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t taunting him at least a little bit, meeting none of the resistance he usually did from the Bachelor, he felt quite compelled.

“Maybe. Are you going to give me grief about it?”

“I couldn’t. I don’t fare particularly better.”

Ah, he probably fared worse: he had no job to blame his loneliness on.

Eventually, apparently bored of toying with Dankovsky’s drunken irritation, Andrey got up and gestured at him to do the same. When he answered him with a long groan, Peter nudged him on the flank like one would a horse. The Bachelor got up on two unsteady legs, swaying precariously. Andrey offered a hand that he promptly waved away.

“Go fetch him his coat, Burakh,” Andrey ordered. “Can’t be catching a cold in these times of plagues, not enough medicine to go around,” he added with a stifled laugh.

“I’m not your dog, buddy,” Burakh barked, and went to fetch the coat anyway. (It had been meticulously folded and laid on a bergère armchair, the dent in the seat of which told Burakh it had been occupied before they came.)

Getting a closer look at it, Burakh was not less baffled than the first time he had seen it. The leather was thick, hemmed with folded leather strips. The shape was an incomprehensible, both genius and maddening, asymmetry; but the construction was solid and proper. The *snakeskin* — Burakh hadn’t seen anything like it, hadn’t met anyone... *peculiar* enough to *want* to wear snakeskin — was ostentatious, taste-full, as in *full-of-taste*, a taste Burakh was, frankly, appalled by.

“Gaudy, eh?” asked the Bachelor from across the room.

“I wouldn’t put it that way.” (He very much would put it that way.)

Andrey nudged Dankovsky towards Burakh, his touch constantly batted away by the Bachelor who, seemingly outraged, insisted he didn’t need pushing.

“Alright, give him your arm, Bachelor,” Andrey said, “so he can slip on your sleeve.”

“I can dress myself!” Dankovsky scoffed.

“He can dress himself!” Burakh scoffed too.

He did slip the sleeve on Dankovsky’s arm, then the other as well. Dankovsky kept in the tautness of his neck a sort of inflexible pride even as he struggled to fit his hand through the cuff. Burakh

witnessed, absolutely baffled, how even the cape on his back was asymmetrical. He felt sick. He mouthed a “*what the hell is that?*” at Andrey who shrugged and stepped aside.

Dankovsky adjusted his cravat — a tic, in all likelihood, as it hadn’t budged from its usual place — and flattened the front of his vest, which had crumpled where he had leaned against the tub. He was ushered to the top of the stairs and took his first step down.

In the laborious silence, Peter suddenly got up, stumbling drunkenly out of the tub. Agitated and pale, he dashed through the room to a painted canvas, promptly turning it around so it faced the wall. He frantically pulled a curtain over it then, and stepped back as if trying to avoid a spreading fire. Burakh gave the scene an interrogating rise of the brow.

“Damned thing was moving,” Peter muttered, his stiff throat red with labored pants.

Burakh watched him try to compose himself, shaking — he wasn’t sure everything was to blame on the drinks.

“Damned place wants souls,” Peter said when he caught his puzzled gaze; heavy, hammering, as if trying to justify with the strength he had the spectacle he was unwillingly offering, “and when it bleeds one out, it tries to bring another in.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Andrey told Burakh with a wide, animal smile on his teeth when he didn’t look any more reassured.

Burakh very much worried about it.

As Dankovsky made his perilous way down the stairs, Burakh threw a glance back at the Loft. Peter stood in the background, burrowing himself in shadow, thorax tense and arms limp, eyes wild; just in front, as if to hide him (and the painting) from Burakh’s prying eyes, Andrey stretched himself tall and looming. He ushered Burakh down with the back of a hand and followed him to the front door.

The Bachelor seemed shockingly sober as all three made their way down the perilous stairs — maybe too proud to let himself be helped, or worse, carried. (The thought made Burakh smile — internally, of course — he remembered with a bitter fondness his days of pushing back home university classmates in wheelbarrows. They used to do it here, too; more often, actually: there just were more wheelbarrows.)

“Out you go,” Andrey sent them out with. “He better make it back unharmed. I’ll check in with Eva.”

“Shouldn’t she be asleep at this time?”

“She *should*, just like you and I. We’re not the only night owls in this town.” He pointed at Dankovsky. “Or vultures, for that matters. Hence...”

“Hence why the Bachelor needs a chauffeur,” interrupted Burakh, to which Dankovsky snorted in response. “I got it the first two times.”

Andrey's gaze hardened, grew sharp and chiseled; granitic.

"I mean it." He repeated himself, cool, icy. "He better make it unharmed."

"Relax," Burakh said, low, placating. "I'll walk your brother's new friend home."

Andrey eclipsed himself in the entryway, taken over by the pitch-black downstairs until barely his eyes and the tip of his nose could be guessed against the stuffy, dense ink-darkness. Burakh sent Dankovsky forward with a pat on the shoulder — he winced and groaned at the too-firm touch and started walking.

He walked straight enough. Sometimes, he'd hold the side of his head, as if trying to push the oncoming hangover back in. (Burakh found it funny, he did, he found it kind of funny.)

"Where do you know Andrey from?" he asked, seeing the streets were calm enough to warrant small talk. When he got side-eyed by a black, pink-cradled bead, he added: "If that's not too indiscreet..."

"University," the Bachelor replied — plain, frank, earnest in a way that had Burakh taken aback just a little bit. "He approached me one day."

"Just like that?"

"Indeed."

"Must have taken a liking to you."

"God, I hope not," the Bachelor slurred. He marked a pause, as if rummaging through his memories. "Nothing wrong with it if he did; I meant I just wasn't very likable as a nineteen-year-old."

Burakh held his lips pinched and himself back from telling the Bachelor he wasn't very likeable as of four days ago either.

"I had imagined you were... childhood friends, or something. Neighbors who grew up together."

"We aren't. But that's the type of relationship you know best, isn't it?"

Burakh stopped, and Dankovsky imitated him, swaying a little on his unsteady legs.

"Did anybody tell you about that?"

"I have discussed it with miss Ravel... and doctor Rubin."

Burakh looked at him. Walked forward then, as if to shirk his words.

"They were vague. Vague enough that none of your secrets were revealed, if that worries you."

Burakh snickered nervously.

"Our relationships have been... tense... since I've been back."

"You haven't been back for long."

“No. I still feel... like some uncrossable fault has torn the ground open between us. No bridge can lay on it.”

The Bachelor stopped in his tracks in his turn, swayed on his feet like the mild breeze made him rock like an ear of wheat. Burakh saw Dankovsky looked—was looking at him. The little black beads of his eyes were strung along an intoxicated, yes, but inquisitive still, stare.

“Why are you telling me all of this?” (A pause.) “Why am *I* telling you all of this?”

“You’re drunk,” Burakh shrugged (quickly, answering only the second half of this question — the only half he thought he had an answer for), “and alcohol lowers your inhibitions.”

“I’m not even drunk,” the Bachelor protested, drunkenly. “I am tipsy at most.”

“A *powerful* tipsy then,” Burakh laughed. “Well then, you’re *tipsy* and it lowers your inhibitions.” The Bachelor tried to roll his eyes and groan, only for the alcohol to pound a little too hard behind his eyelids and make him huff. “Or maybe it just makes you chatty.”

“It does. One of its biggest downsides.”

“You don’t like to talk?”

Dankovsky stopped again, harder this time, like a stubborn horse.

“I barely know you, Burakh.”

“Hey, that’s fair. I won’t push.” (That was a little bit of a lie — he quite wanted to push... get just a few more words out of him now that they seemed to flow out more freely.)

Dankovsky walked forward, stumbled, walked backward as Burakh tried to catch him with a hand the Bachelor swiftly refused.

“Haven’t drank that much since university,” he mumbled.

“The sober kind?” Burakh asked — teased, really, but the situation was enough in his favor that he dared. He had already guessed it from Andrey’s words.

“I try to be. It was hard with Andrey for company, but... Eventually, he’d do all the drinking I wouldn’t.” He clicked his tongue thoughtfully. “Well, the drinking and the...” He gestured at absolutely nothing.

“Oh, wild years, huh?” Burakh almost-laughed again. He was thoroughly enjoying getting to be this nosy.

“Not wild to me,” the Bachelor hammered. “I very much tried to keep them *not* wild. There were... (He gestured again, closer to the chest this time.) ... Instances.”

He let the word hang between them. Burakh was left to ponder on its shape, its peculiar weight, its ambiguous secrecy. Andrey’s shameless divulgence came to him again, and he assumed it was the chance to ask:

“Is it true you shot a man’s face off?” His voice was low; fitting for what he’d felt was a brash confession.

“Oh for *Heaven’s sake*,” the Bachelor grimaced and grunted, “did Andrey tell you that?”

“No, you just looked the type,” Burakh joked. When Dankovsky glared at him with a fuddled, fiercely incredulous eye, he added, lower: “I’m... kidding. Of course he told me.”

Dankovsky’s shoulders slumped, as if relieved.

“It must have been ten years now... A...” He pressed his gloved palms to his eyes, as if to keep the migraine in the back of his skull so the memories could come to the front in its place. “... student revolt broke out in the Capital, I do not even remember why it started.” He blinked a wave of headache away. “Don’t even remember who started it... It began as a riot in the bar. I remember hopping on tables. They must’ve sent the Gendarmes on us. Someone handed me a weapon... He’s just a casualty now. A footnote in the newspaper.”

There hung a... heavy, lukewarm silence, stunned on Burakh’s shoulders and light on Dankovsky’s — as if the story escaping him was a relief.

“Were you drunk?” Burakh eventually asked.

“I was stone-cold sober. Not sure if Andrey was.”

“He seems like the kind not to be.”

“His brother does the drinking he does not. And he does the... whatever else his brother doesn’t. He mostly just isn’t the kind to pass up an opportunity to fight people.”

“I noticed,” Burakh whispered.”

“Has he tried to fight you?”

“Not... physically. Every word that comes out of him just kind of... drips with a desire of escalation. Like his very voice wants me to attack him so he has an excuse to retaliate.”

“Seems like him.”

They weaved through the streets in quietude, Burakh enjoying the confidences he’d been made, and the implicit reassurance that the Stamatina was as quick on the draw as he’d felt he was. He appreciated the Bachelor being this little reserved, even if he needed the push from the bottle... Burakh preferred that to the high-headed haughtiness of when they first met, to the pinched, strained disdain he had shown to be capable of.

Burakh was nodding to himself, reflecting on Dankovsky’s confidences, when the man he was ushering back to the Stillwater stopped to hold a lamppost. Before he had time to ask, Burakh heard him grumble:

“The earth is moving.”

“Well, it spins around the sun, oynon.”

“Not like that, Burakh,” he slurred. “You know what I mean.”

Burakh did. He very professionally offered his hand, which Dankovsky waved away.

“I’m so painfully sober,” he groused, and resolutely he was not, “my thoughts are unfathomably clear and it is unbearably frustrating to slur my speech and stumble my steps.” *That* sounded incredibly plastered. “Burakh, humor me. If anyone comes, pretend I am utterly wasted. It would be less embarrassing to have them believe I am completely inebriated than for them to not trust anything I say later because I sound the same sober and drunk.”

That was the drunkest idea Burakh had ever heard in his life. He held back a croaky chortle, restrained firmly by the pitch-black-serious stare Dankovsky drilled his face with.

“Nobody’s around, oynon, and I doubt the muggers will care.”

“*Humor me,*” he repeated insistently.

Burakh raised his hands in compliance.

He was becoming less and less sure of Dankovsky’s “painful soberness” as, this time, he grabbed the arm Burakh offered — on the outer side, like one would hold onto a rocky outcropping.

“Hope you enjoyed the company, at least,” Burakh inquired in the silence — small-talk, again, as to not let the cold, eerie night make itself too loud.

“Yours?” Dankovsky chuckled.

“I meant Peter’s.”

“Ah... I did. He is a... fascinating individual. Do you know him at all?”

Burakh stumbled, stride stuttering, memories of faded dreams shifting in front of his eyes like flickering candlelights.

“I... know his brother just a bit more, which is to say he is a stranger to me.”

“He is so thoroughly dedicated to the pursuit of greatness. Of a transcendence ... even *I* am not sure I understand yet. Or will ever...”

The Bachelor let out a wistful sigh that made Burakh jump at its uncharacteristicness — not that he knew much about the Bachelor’s character... but he had a vague idea. He sounded... somber, too, almost; wishful in a hurt, disappointed way.

“He’s also,” the Bachelor interrupted his train of thought, “unfortunately, thoroughly, *deeply* nuts.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” Burakh joked. “Your diagnosis?”

“In my *medical* opinion,” Dankovsky replied in the same light-hearted tone, making Burakh huff out a minuscule sigh of relief, “he is clinically a basket case.”

They laughed, and Burakh recalled their uncomfortable, confrontational first meeting. He vastly preferred Dankovsky now than then, or when he refused his help for obviously debilitating stitches, or brushed off the potential of folk—his folk—medicine, or...

The Bachelor sobered in a blink:

“And regrettably, I’m not sure the liquor he claims helps him does anything but drive him madder.”

They walked wordlessly — crossing the bridge across the Guzzle into the Atrium, the Bachelor leaned to the water and grimaced at his reflection.

“Burakh, I have a bad feeling about Peter.”

Burakh had too — for different, crawling, invasive reasons. He doubted the man of science that the Bachelor was believed in veil-crossing dreams, so he kept his mouth shut — and hoped that if the twin crossed into his, too, he could at least shake them off at dawn.

At the Stillwater, Eva was asleep, hiding, or gone. Burakh pushed Dankovsky up the stairs like a stiff scarecrow as he opposed full-body resistance and groaned that he could walk fine — he could walk, he just had to take the stairs sideways. In the attic, Dankovsky unceremoniously threw himself on the bed, face first into the pillow, arms comically straight at his sides. *Made it*, Burakh sighed.

Dankovsky, otherwise completely still on the blanket, fiddled with his shoes as he tried to kick them off.

“Stop,” said Burakh, “stop that. You’re going to mess them up.” He felt emboldened enough: he walked to the side of the bed, barely out of range of a potential uncontrolled Bachelor kick. “Don’t move. I’m right behind you.” He undid, with one swift pull each, the Bachelor’s shoelaces. He stepped back carefully, sights on Dankovsky’s comically rigid half-asleep dent-in-the-covers silhouette.

Dankovsky then kicked his shoes off. They fell on the floorboards and, with the toe of his boots, Burakh flipped them downside-up before pushing them close to the bed.

“Goodnight, oynon. Glad you made it back safely.”

“Goodnight, Burakh. Sorry Andrey forced your hand.”

“I don’t mind.” (He didn’t, really.)

“You should get some sleep too. Don’t get gutted on your way there.”

“I won’t. Seems more like your thing.”

He heard the Bachelor's drunk chuckle, muffled almost entirely by the pillow. Burakh threw one last glance back before exiting the room, catching Dankovsky extirpating himself out of his long coat, letting slide down the side of the bed. In the stairs, Burakh heard him mumble something about his shirt being stuck in his pants as he was trying to take it off, and he picked up the pace: not his problem, not his business. Burakh was out without seeing miss Yan.

Ink-black night reigned tall and mighty. The ceiling of the sky was high, with no clouds to pull it down.

Against its dark cloak, Burakh spotted Murky, crouching, carding through the grass with her dirty fingers. He walked to her.

(He left. He wondered how such a little body could bear so much grief. His felt tacky and wispy in comparison. His moved around in his body like an eel between rocks and reefs; how was hers like? All bundled in her small lungs until her voice was strangled.)

A single streak of pale moonlight slithered into the lair before Burakh shut the door behind him. As soon as its unwieldy rust closed on him, he was overwhelmed by the scents of herbs, of flowers and of blood. He shook off the smell of twyrine off his shoulders and thighs, took off his smock to fold it on the back of a chair, took the time to unlace his boots, the memory of the Bachelor wriggling to kick off his shoes pulling a vague smirk from his mouth, and tucked himself into bed.

The damn dream walked on immediately — or rather, *he* walked immediately *in*. He ducked his head to avoid what he thought was a low wall, but was actually a curtain draped and pulled over a wide entryway. He felt the brush of it — velvety — he tensed — it was a rusty, soft red, embroidered of orange and gold. Before him stretched a wide room, the lacquered floorboards of which reflected Burakh as he walked — he saw himself and found he was five years younger. Against wallpapered walls were flush settees and divans, a few filled by foreign faces of young men who glanced at him when he strode in. Some were drinking, talking; Burakh realized he, too, had a glass in his hand, and took a sip he wanted nonchalant. The low-lit room opened on a small balcony, flanked by two ornate glass doors.

Burakh stopped in his tracks when he recognized the silhouettes leaning against the rail; Architect, Bachelor, Architect. The twins spotted him; Andrey turned his head, and Peter threw him a sidelong, insectoid eye. They were speaking; their mouths were moving, at least. Elbows to the rail, Dankovsky didn't turn to him — he didn't even seem to see him at all. He was deep in discussion with them.

He pulled a cigarette out of a shirt pocket and brought it to his lips; Andrey pulled a lighter that he offered him the flame of; and Dankovsky watched it pensively. He took the cigarette out of his mouth; brought it to the flame; and back to his mouth again. He smoked, and Burakh could see how the smoke swirled unnaturally. Slithering. *Serpentine*. Burakh let out a chuckle in poor taste.

Two fingers of a hand tapped his shoulder — well, didn't, really; he turned to the silhouette behind him and almost sighed with relief when it wasn't anyone's he could recognize. He could, lucidly, see that it was barely a face, and more an amalgamation of shapes into something that vaguely looked like a young man; he could, within the dream, understand it was a person.

“Do you dance...?” the young man asked.

Burakh found himself dumbfounded, having expected many (most) things but that. “Oh,” he stuttered, “I don't, sorry... I'm here to see a friend, actually.” (The word had slipped out of his mouth and the lucid Burakh that was set between his lungs blinked two consecutive times in sheer shock.)

“Aren't we all,” the young man smiled. “Well, thank you regardless.”

“You're, uh, welcome. Hope you find someone.”

“You too.”

(The lucid Burakh blinked *three* times then.)

He turned to the balcony and his *friend* had vanished; only *the two damn weirdos* remained. They had their eyes set on him like silver spires. *Easy now*, Burakh thought to himself like they were feral horses.

They smiled. Wicked thing. Their cuspids were long and sharpened — it knocked the wind out of him. He blinked, and they threw themselves out of view through the sides like curtains that would have been ripped open. Burakh ran to the balcony and found nothing. He *heard* — a lively waltz: it was coming from below. He leaned over the railing — he held onto it strongly. It didn't shake, but he wasn't sure it would hold still. The level below also had its own balcony, onto which one would enter through a similar set of doors. Burakh couldn't see the people dancing; he could guess the shapes of reflections on the varnished floorboards.

Peter's head poked at the window. His long white neck twisted so his eyes pinned themselves to Burakh's face. Andrey's veiny, wiry arms touched the balcony next to him.

“You know *damn well* what you're doing,” Burakh cursed under his breath. “You know damn well *how* you're doing it.”

Peter's head disappeared again and Burakh heard footsteps — two sets of them — cloaked by the instruments of the waltz, then muffled by the tapestries on the walls; Burakh barged out of the room and dashed up the stairs. He was tailing Peter's shiny shoes, close enough to *see he was following him* and yet too far to try to grab him.

They rushed up the stairs and Burakh started to get dizzy. As he panted, he realized: the damn stairs were a spiral, not unlike the one at Peter's, not unlike the one that coiled around the Tower. Soon, they were not white marble under his shoes, but a grey, harsh rock. Soon, they were not in a building, but cutting through a pitch-blackness, with nothing but their own gazes as light. Soon, all the music waned, and all that was left was a cutthroat, unwieldy, unyielding *silence*.

The stairs were cut off. Burakh watched Peter disappear into the black velvet that lined the bottom of every dream — *disappear*, as if swallowed, as if pulled into water and drowned. Burakh called his name and his voice didn't carry for more than a centimeter past his mouth. Peter disappeared and the last thing Burakh saw were his two spectral eyes on him.

Burakh wasn't pushed, didn't trip, nothing collapsed under him. His knees hit the dark floors of a scene.

For a long, long time, there was nothing but silence. Still, he couldn't leave.

(THE HARUSPEX sits downstage left. Three columns stand before him at stage center, holding two arches. The middle column is actually the JANUSI AN PILLAR GOD(S), CARVER(S) OF PASSAGEWAYS. THE HARUSPEX hasn't noticed its nature yet.)

THE HARUSPEX:

Ah, what then? You offer me a fork in the road? You offer me cleaving of paths? I don't think I shall make one more step. For all I know, they both will lead me to the grave.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Well, what path wouldn't?

THE HARUSPEX

(startled) Oh f—. ... How did you get here?

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I made the columns.

THE HARUSPEX

You're here too?

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I shoveled dirt from the path.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I drew the arches.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I dug holes for their piers...

BOTH FACES OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

... and I laid the first stone down.

THE HARUSPEX

(bitter) That's very nice. And I bet you've drawn the roads, too. So you can tell me where they lead.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I'm not a civil engineer.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Yeah, me neither.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I don't quite like the flat limbs of snaking roads, I don't quite like how they sprawl, how they expose themselves to the sky, thorax ready to be carved open by the fingers of the sky. I think that's too intimate. I don't want to be the one to carve them open: I feel like they would burst in my hands like a too-ripe fruit. I'm not good at peeling the skin off of plums.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

I don't quite feel the same, I wouldn't mind slicing the soft skin of the soil down the line of the sternum if that meant I could bridge heart to mind. I wouldn't mind... but it wouldn't feel right. *(after a hesitation)* Few things I do feel right, but this thing would feel even more wrong.

THE HARUSPEX

... Why are you telling me all of this.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Because you asked.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Because you're here to listen.

(Whispers backstage. Shiver in the curtains. The light slowly dims.)

THE HARUSPEX

... Before I leave, may I have one more thing answered?

BOTH FACES OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Speak, then.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

(with a snicker) — or forever hold your tongue!

THE HARUSPEX

Will you tell me why you're here? ... Can you tell me why you're here? I know why I am — at least I think I do. And if I don't... I'll figure it out. But I do not know why I keep running into you .

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Things were simple before you came back. Well... *simpler*.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

We knew this town in ways others didn't. Others couldn't. We explored it in ways others didn't; couldn't.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

It's not *just* about networks of streets and paths. *(growing impassioned)* It's about... lines of sight. Of sights. Lines of vision(s). Curves of perspectives, hollows of domes and cavities. Hyphae of thoughts. Mycelium of faith(s). The bark of reality as it stands, and how easy it is to peel off the trunk, to peel off the skin. The bite of intricacies of bonds and beliefs, and how it needs to be fundamentally, transcendently, irremediably changed.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Of course we'd be there. This is what needs to be dug. This is what needs to be dug into... and here we are. And here you are.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

And here you came...

THE HARUSPEX

And you're telling me all of this now? You're giving yourself away fast. Isn't it a little early?

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

We are not. We are... let's say, leveling the field.

(THE HARUSPEX remembers Andrey's words: You seem like a worthy fighter. Like you like it, too. He swallows thickly, nervously. The audience doesn't know that. The audience doesn't see that.)

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

We can't tell it later. The town is... becoming stuffed with soot and bone.

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Becoming harder and harder to tread... and lighter and lighter to carry.

CRIMSON FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Soon, there will be no more cracks in the ceiling to fit dreams like those...

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

... No more tears in the fabric.

THE HARUSPEX

You see it too?

EMERALD FACE OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

(not answering) Things will fundamentally, transcendently, irremediably change. You need to be told this now. There is no other choice.

THE HARUSPEX

Why?

BOTH FACES OF THE PILLAR GOD(S)

Because you are going to fundamentally, transcendently, irremediably change.

Estocada

Burakh was torn awake by a ruffle. No, a rustle. No — some sort of bellowing snort. He leaned out of the bed and to the ground. The packed earth beneath the concrete slab felt hot. He dressed himself and walked into the workshop.

“Hey buddy,” he hailed Sticky, who was stacking something in a corner, “you heard anything?”

“Sounded like an earthquake,” he replied. He didn’t sound too reassured. “Felt like one, too...”

“It did, huh?”

Burakh slowly scaled the steps, waiting for the bellow to be heard again. It wasn’t. In the rust-heavy foyer, a tiny silhouette was perched upon a crate, by the boiler. It threw Burakh a peach-pit, hardened glance as he approached.

“Oh, hello, you!” he greeted Murky as she kicked her feet, agitated. “Do you want to come in?”

“I’ve been inside. I was inside. Dirty, dirty place.” Burakh was going to scold her (both for having broken in, and for being plain mean), but he didn’t. He would *prefer* she stayed inside... “You run fast with these big legs of yours,” she said after eyeing him up and down.

“You could say I do,” Burakh mumbled — he felt an itch of pain in his bad knee.

“We don’t like that.”

“Who’s we?”

“My friend and I. She doesn’t like that, so I don’t like that either.”

Burakh frowned.

“... And why doesn’t your friend like that, Murky?”

“Because she likes being fast. She’s used to being fast. Faster than you.”

“Is she watching me run around?”

“... Yes. You could say that.”

Burakh felt a cold sweat down his back like a whisper.

“And who’s that friend of yours who’s trying to race me? Do I know her name? If I met her, we could have a fair contest,” he tried to coax Murky into speaking.

“She doesn’t want to meet you... not yet.” The feral girl was stubborn as a bull and closed as a clam. “She says not yet.”

“Very well. I will wait. Tell her I’m not one to go down without a fight, though!”

“She knows. Yes, she knows.”

Murky’s eyes grew dark. She pouted, visibly irritated.

The cold sweat breathed down Burakh’s neck and sank to his kidneys like a blade brushing his spine.

“I will wait,” he repeated.

Slowly, he made his way to the door. Murky didn’t move. She hummed and kicked her feet, as if deep in thoughts.

He stepped outside, and stood here the Bride. She wasn’t dancing like she had been by the fire; her shoulders were low, her head high. She had been expecting him for a while.

“Oh my god,” Burakh choked out in surprise. “It’s you again. Did you follow me here?”

“Khayaala you vex me... I did not need to, nor need to be told. Your steps are heavy with guilt and sorrow. They make the Earth shiver. I feel her tremors climb up my ankles and shins...”

“Alright, I get it, I get it. Why have you come... again?”

“We part. We part... for now. You will come back to me, but I will leave now.”

Burakh had to hold back from gritting out a “*oh, thank god*” .

“I haven’t remembered your name,” he said. “That seemed important to you. Thought you might want to know.”

“It is and isn’t. I have... many more. But know me now as Nara. Narana. Hear? That’s the sound of hooves hitting the soft autumn soil...”

“Nice to meet you,” Burakh said flatly.

“Quite the same. I know you more than you do me.”

Quite the understatement, Burakh thought.

“We will meet again. We will have to. Fear not, yargachin.”

“Don’t—don’t call me that,” Burack groaned.

“Don’t fear the name. Don’t fear the calling. Don’t fear the act... It will not hurt.

“What in Boddho’s name are you babbling on about, basaghan?”

“Farewell, khayaala. We will meet again soon.”

“... Farewell, basaghan. May mother Boddho carry your steps far and safe.”

She left. Her steps were light. Her feet were damp with dew.

In her wake — *oh, come on now...* — six or seven figures emerged from the morning fog.

“Good morning, Khatanghe,” he greeted them through tight jaw and teeth. “Were you eavesdropping?”

“Sayn baina, emshen Were you on your way?” spoke a woman as she came forth.

“Yes,” lied Burakh.

“To the Town?”

“We are in the Town.”

“Wise, emshen, wise, wise,” spoke another. “We mean deeper into the Town. In the house where all gather.”

“You could just say the Hospital,” Burakh replied, holding back a nervous chuckle. He had noticed they had all walked some more, surrounding him. He made sure not to take a step back. “And yes, I will go.” (He didn’t say he *was going*.)

“Why?”

Burakh blinked.

“Well, there’s an illness sweeping the Town clean of thousands, in case you haven’t noticed,” he replied.

“Must you fight it?”

Burakh blinked again, slower this time.

“I beg your fucking pardon? Sorry — I beg your pardon?”

“Don’t you understand?” the woman asked, tilting her head eagerly.

“No, I don’t. That’s something we’re working on, actually. What has gotten into you?”

“You have said it yourself. It is sweeping the Town *clean*.”

Burakh felt a wave of nausea hit his stomach like a brick — while it was probably due to a growing hunger, he truly felt it was timely.

“Are you out of your fucking mind? Sorry — are you out of your mind?”

“Emshen, you should know, this Pest is nothing but the breath of the Earth.”

“What in the... What makes you think that?”

The earnestness in her tone sent shivers down Burakh’s spine. *No, no*, he thought. *Superstitions. Superstitions.*

“Everything is of her. From her. Because of her... We share her joys and her sorrows. She shares with us her flowers, her fruits, her gracious feather-grass and hardy, hearty twyres when she is joyous. She also shares with us her sunken pits, her bone-legged daughters, and her spat-out diseases when she is irate.”

Burakh kept silent.

“We cannot pick and choose what we take from her, emshen, you know this. We must embrace her — embrace her just as she embraces us. And when we do, emshen, she extends mercy to us. When we do not tear ourselves from her skin, from her womb, where she feels the hollow we leave; if we nurture and give thanks to her, she will nurture and give thanks to us...”

(Burakh kept silent, louder this time. His head was starting to buzz.)

“... And this is why you must not be sad, esegher.”

“I’m sorry?”

“We said, this is why you must not be sad. Your father is now in the Earth, in her depths; he is cradled and warm. You can still see and find him wherever your eye lands — wherever Earth stretches, where she is shut in her dark, silent embrace.”

Burakh flinched then. “Don’t speak of my father, will you? Please.” Grief brewed. Grief brewed. He could taste it below his soft palate, threatening to roll forth and punch in his teeth.

“But it is true, esegher. Lay down your sorrow into the Earth, and she will take it; she is present and alive with the bones of your father, with the soul of your father, and she will be wherever you look.”

“Okay,” Burakh gritted, “that’s enough. Enough. I’m going to leave. Alright? I’ll go. I’m going.”

“To the Town?”

“Yes,” came out of him as a hiss through a clenched jaw, “*to the Town*.”

The air grew distinctively heavy. A whisper rolled through the crowd like a broken wave, torn but potent.

“Very well,” eventually spoke a man.

“... You have said *you* — ‘we’ are working on tearing the Pest from its roots,” spoke another, slipping into the silence left by Burakh to ask something he could read on other faces. “Is he going to be here too?”

“Who?” Burakh spat; he was starting to get fidgety, irritable, annoyed — on edge, too, having to have crushing control of himself not to let grief tug too hard at the ligaments of his throat.

“Your father’s false student. The bastard.”

“I’m a *bastard* too, in case you forgot,” he scoffed. He’d heard the heavy, sinister sibilance in the familiar-faced stranger, and kept himself from answering. Instead, he asked: “Why do you care?”

“He’s treading dark waters,” spoke a soul.

“Dark, dissident, deceptive,” added another. “His steps sink into the Earth with guilt. We know he is partaking in a most putrid desecration... but we have yet to find it. To find him.”

Burakh really, *really* wanted to leave. Anger bubbled in his throat and wrung words out of him.

“Worry about your damn selves! Don’t *you* have anything to worry about? I wish I didn’t! I do!”

“We do not feel like we ought to worry, emshen,” replied a member of the crowd. “This is the Earth. This is our Mother... *your* Mother. We know her spirits more than we know ourselves. And we believe you’ll come to understand... You’ll come into being someone who knows.”

“Damn right I will,” gritted Burakh.

He didn’t know who or what he would come to be. He couldn’t know who or what he would come to be. But all he had left was that bare hint of pride, and the cracked vial in his chest where bubbled up sorrow, restraint and resentment...

“Come out then onto the steppe, emshen. Come out then into the Earth. Bother not the sick, who only feel the touch of the Earth... Worry not about your father...”

... and the damn thing overflowed.

“ENOUGH!”

All those who had gathered flinched.

“ENOUGH! ENOUGH!” hammered Burakh — and his voice croaked and it sounded like a *plea*. “Keep my father’s name out of your mouth, you, all of you, keep my father’s name out of your damn mouths! Stop showering me with feel-good words about how he’s *back where he came from*, and how he isn’t in pain, and he can’t be in pain now, and he’s *everywhere if I look for him*, where I look for him. I know you believe it—and I know you want me to believe it—and I know you *think I should believe it*—and, fuck, maybe I do, but it doesn’t make *anything easier*. You understand?”

Eyes were on him. Eyes were on him, wide, shocked, surprised — eager and tense, too, as they listened carefully.

“I can never go back home and say hello to him. I can never walk the threshold of our own home—*my* own home now—and see him here brewing tea, or the disgusting coffee he tried to get me to drink once because he had... spiced it up with twyre florets or whatever that was—”

Sorrow struck him like a brick across the chest and he retched as grief tore through him from the guts up, bringing heartbroken bile to the back of his mouth.

“ — I can never have him tell me about my mother again, I can never tell him of my days at the Capital, I never got to, I can never come back to him and turn to him for comfort when I have these—” (he heaved — the sobs were tightening his throat and he struggled to breathe.) “ — horrific nightmares that *none of you* know anything about — I can never ask him to hold me again like I’m a *fucking kid* and I’m *scared shitless*. I can’t do that anymore. I can’t do that. Because he’s dead. Buried. And it brings me no fucking comfort to know I will hold him again when he is reborn as a blade of grass.”

Silence fell out of his mouth as his voice died on his lips. No one spoke, still.

“I took the train to this town as my father’s son, and I stepped foot in my own home as an orphan and an heir. This brings me no comfort,” he repeated, shaking his head slowly. It felt heavy, stuffed, hot. It was red. It rolled on the tense column of his neck like it could fall off. (He wished it would fall off.)

After a long silence Burakh wanted to cut with a knife, someone spoke: “*We* can tell you about your Mother...”

Burakh looked at them with wet, bulging eyes, mouth hanging open in what felt like shock. Anger jumped at his throat and bit into it with the force of a hound. He roared:

“*LEAVE!* Leave, all of you! Do not come to me with your words! Do not come to me to help you find *anyone!* Scatter, or I will make you!”

And they did — slowly, some walking backward, their piercing eyes still on him; still scratching the surface of his face as it unraveled. He unraveled. When all had gone, grief crushed him in half and he bent forward and fell, ground biting his open palms, and he sobbed, he sobbed. He cried horrible wails that he tried to contain because he was a grown-up, and he’d never felt less like one than now. He’d toughened at uni. He’d hardened at war. None of this mattered. The clay of his shell was breakable, red where his heart and lungs bled out slowly. The clay of his shell had been molded by his father’s hands. What was he to do with it now? He could see the cracks. He knows how to do stitches, sutures, hems and seams; he’s never repaired pottery in his life.

He cried until his face was so wet he felt he had run through a storm.

Eventually, he managed to stop. His head felt stuffed with cotton. His ears were ringing. He couldn’t breathe through his nose. In a juvenile reflex, he wiped the snot on a sleeve. *Oh, you fucking idiot.*

Eventually, he sent himself onward. Stumbling and unsteady, he made his way to the Marrow. Crossing the Gullet, he stepped down the bank to the edge of the water; leaning down to attempt to wash his sleeve of the wet spot of tears and snot, he slid and his whole arm went into the water.

OH, you FUCKING IDIOT!

The bite of the water was sharp and immediate like the maw of a hound. He stumbled back and held his wrist, as if he had gotten wounded. It had done the job of washing the stain away, but now a cold, piercing, persistent damp halo coiled itself around his arm. Burakh just prayed it'd dry fast and carried on to the Theater. (Damn thing was not drying fast.)

Burakh didn't speak at the Theater. (Well, the hospital, the morgue, the limbo.) He kept trying to clear his throat, but something still lingered, as if sorrow took a wicked pleasure in playing with his vocal cords, pinching them like strings. The feeling of the disposable glove was more uncomfortable than the wet patch on his sleeve, which was a feat of its own.

The task was simple, methodical: treating the sick with antibiotics, and collecting the blood of those who couldn't be saved. (And many couldn't be saved.)

Burakh stayed clear from bumping into Dankovsky, not particularly eager to have him comment on his wrung voice and reddened eyes; he realized soon enough Dankovsky also stayed clear of him. Busy Bachelor was nervous. Competent and poised, as he usually was, but something thin and friable was holding his nerves together, and holding it poorly.

He got a little repose when they had sorted the sick and the dead: Burakh saw him smoking outside. His free arm was tucked under his coat, wrapped around his torso. His wrist seemed to be pressed against his side — where the Haruspex had given him stitches. Burakh wondered if that was purely a reflex or if his sutures were coming undone — he should ask, he should have asked, that was the professional thing to do, but Burakh didn't trust his own throat not to tear his words into croaky, fraying shards of voice, so he didn't, and hoped the Bachelor could take care of himself if he needed to.

Dankovsky was staring intently at the low sky. Well, rather at where the low sky was pierced of edges and planes — of the geometrical limbs of the Tower. His eyes were trailing the spiraling stairs, the enamel-pale planes. His gaze followed its stinger-like base that Burakh hadn't approached to try to understand — the damn thing could try to understand itself. (Ah, well, and Dankovsky was on it, too.)

Hunger invited itself, and it was a mean, clingy guest. Burakh made the mental note to bring the collected blood to Dankovsky. He put the vials in one of the safes and went out; his head was spinning with the feeling of his empty stomach, and having sobbed earlier didn't help.

He exchanged no words with the clerk. He still believed he'd sound like shit from having cried but, at this point, he realized he might just be staying quiet for the feeling of it. It did feel good to shut up for once. *More people should try it*, he thought. An ugly snicker punched through his teeth and he received sidelong glances from kids nearby.

He spotted a crowd; well, he *heard it*, first: the characteristic hums of Herb Brides echoed in the sprawling network of the town's streets, followed by spoken words, by a chant that rose into the thin fog, by steps that grew louder but not closer. Burakh rounded a corner, and found a bull — beautiful beast, its head high, its pelt a spotted, rusty brown — and its entourage. The one Bride — Nara — was on its back. She didn't look at Burakh as he approached. The rest of the crowd turned eyes on him; he recognized among them a few he had seen this morning. He considered apologizing for his outburst; he saw in their eyes how they held his gaze like they hadn't minded it. (He also still stood by it. Speak not his father's name — and let him mourn.)

"Good afternoon, Khatanghe," Burakh said. "What is this all about?"

"Good afternoon, emshen. The booha is drinking there, see?" (And indeed, it was — taking long gulps out of a small trough. Burakh tensed remembering how the disease had seeped in the water; but then, this one looked clear.) "He is feeling the cool brush of Mother's springs into his long smooth throat. He will also feed upon her blades of feather grass."

"Your tone sounds... solemn. What are you hiding? Why is she (he gestured at Narana, who didn't pay him attention) up there?"

"My tone is solemn, emshen. She is here to thank him — we are all here to thank him. To say goodbye to him, and to let him say goodbye back."

"Why?"

"This evening, he will be brought to the Ragi Barrow. His perfect body — it will be divided... it must be divided in accordance with the rites."

Burakh felt he knew what that meant.

"He will be laid on the Ragi stone and be open, like a perfect heart. And then, yes, his perfect heart will beat to the rhythm of Boddho's breath. And *then*, yes, the sky will align itself to him, will align itself to her... Then... we will be aligned with him, and with her, and with the sky too."

"And who is to conduct that... rite? For what purpose? Is this bull getting sacrificed to stop the plague?"

Burakh knew he had misspoken immediately; he expected unkind gazes on him, but they were mostly... placid. As if they remembered his outburst, and didn't want to shake him too much. (He found he disliked that *more*. His skin itched when the feeling that he was handled with kid's gloves struck him.)

“The weight of the illness brushes us barely. We tread here lightly, and it treads lightly around us. No, no... The booha will be opened for other reasons. Oh, as we’ve said... He will be to *align*. To stitch. To thread... And you are to conduct the rite, yargachin. We need you for it. Not cut but yours is acceptable.”

Burakh knew this was coming.

“Do you even trust me for this?”

The eyes of the crowd lightened, as if this morning had already been banished from their memories. They nodded, slowly, solemnly.

“We do, yargachin. We trust your steady hands. And then, we will trust you to do what needs to be done with the booha’s blood, with the booha’s meat. His flesh is clean, his fluid is pure, he has never been ill. He cannot be. We know you need it.”

Burakh could have reached out and felt the undertone, heavy, dense, thick and mildly derisive: “*we know you want it.*”

“I’ll come. I’ll cut your bull open.”

“Not just *our* bull open, yargachin. Yours, too. The Earth’s bull. The Sky’s bull, the river’s, the hills’.” The speaking woman marked there a pause. “Which is to mean, yes, our bull. Tonight, at the Ragi Barrow. Do not make us wait, or we will send someone after you.”

“I will find you.”

He bowed to the bull — oh, he didn’t make it solemn and grave, just a little tilt of the head, but this seemed to please the crowd a lot (and maybe the bull too). The crowd shaped itself like a wall around the beast and, slowly, with no harsh movement, made it carry on its way. Burakh thought about warning them of the unsafe districts around, but they already had gone forth without a care. The group walked the town’s threadlike hyphae of streets, passages and narrows. Burakh watched them be swallowed by the thin fog, and was on his way.

He found he hadn’t walked far from the Theater and picked a bench to sit on. He ate hardened bread and dried meat in silence, welcoming the bites with an almost religious bliss. He chewed longly. A tooth in the back of his mouth protested a particularly firm bite with a twinge of pain. *Oh, tough it out.*

Burakh thought about the bull — the dying bull, the already-dead bull. Oh, was he happy? Was there bliss on being brought to the slaughter? Then, he thought: was there bliss in slaughtering? Oh, that thought landed right where his mind bore a crack; grief (this damned thing again) collided with the thorn-in-flank of a memory of war (of how a body comes overflowing), and Burakh felt himself retch; he retched and heaved and sobbed again. He felt like he could throw up

a lung. He wished he would, he found, he wished he would; one less thing to carry. One less vessel for sorrow to fill to the brim and tip into him slowly.

He crept back into the Theater to retrieve the vials, and was back out again.

“Oynon?” Burakh called in the stairs.

His voice had croaked, still wrung thin from earlier, but he was sure he could be heard. When he received no reply, he walked into the room, pushing the door slowly. Peeking in, he couldn’t see Dankovsky at his desk, or by the window.

“Oynon?” he repeated, lower.

With a sweeping gaze, he spotted the Bachelor's pants, draped over the room divider.

“Oh,” Burakh muttered.

“Burakh,” he was called from behind the screen.

“Sorry. I can come back some other time.”

“I am merely lying down. I got the hems of these pants wet.” (Burakh fiddled with his own wet sleeves, feeling the cold gnaw through. *Bad day for us both, then?*) “What is it that you want?”

“I’ve brought more samples from the hospital... the morgue... however you want to call it.”

There was a pause, in which Burakh heard the Bachelor sigh, as if struggling to keep himself awake.

“Leave them by the microscope. I’ll get to them.”

Burakh did.

“What happened?” he asked, pointing — not that Dankovsky could see — at the pants let out to dry.

“I went knee-deep in the river, Burakh. Nothing to write home about.”

“Aah,” Burakh teased, “did you get pushed?”

Dankovsky didn’t reply and silence started to swell like an uncomfortable, cumbersome parasite. Burakh lowered his arm. He... didn’t understand what *that* could be about.

“I tried to cross it, Burakh.”

“But why? The other side is barren.”

Another silence.

“Yes. So I’ve heard.”

Another, *another* pause.

“Anything else you wanted?”

“I... had also hoped I could hit the cot here — busy evening,” Burakh laughed nervously, anticipating the meeting at the Barrow, “but I can see it’s taken, so I won’t stay.”

He heard the ruffle of something heavy, the twisting of the Bachelor’s body against the mattress, and that mattress against the bed slats. Taking a few steps forward, he found Dankovsky had shoved himself on one side of the bed. His back was turned to Burakh, blanket possessively pulled on him to his shoulder.

“Oynon?”

“Keep distance between us. Lie on your side.”

“... Are you mocking me? Is this some kind of test?”

“I’ll take the whole bed back, if you don’t want it.”

It couldn’t be that weird, Burakh needed the time to think. Not weirder than when they slept, they all slept, huddled together in the field tents; huddled close enough to make sure they didn’t, somehow, spill out — like they’d seen others do.

Burakh shook the thought out of his head forcefully. That was a comfortable bed — more comfortable than his own, than the army cots, than the raw earth just under his army coat that he had to fold into a pillow.

Dankovsky’s head had moved, which Burakh wouldn’t have noticed if he didn’t catch the obsidian eye turning to him under heavy, tired eyelashes. It took Burakh a second to understand he might have been alarmed by anything from the croak in his voice to the tight, breathy coil in his throat. *Don’t mention it. Oh, please, don’t mention it..*

“... Allergies, I reckon.” spoke the Bachelor (and Burakh held back a sigh of relief. He was offering him the option to not talk about it).

“Yeah.” (He sniffled still.)

“Rough pollen around, I’ve heard.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty harsh this time of year.”

Burakh watched the onyx eye blink, and the Bachelor turned back. He pointedly shifted even closer to the wall.

“My tunic is also wet,” Burakh said.

“Then take it off. There’s probably enough room on the divider to hang it out to dry.”

Sure seemed like it.

Burakh extirpated himself from the rough cloth only to find his sweater underneath also damp. He took it off as well. The Stillwater was a little cold on his bare arms, and he regretted his undershirt being sleeveless. He laid his tunic and sweater over the room divider, flattening them so they could dry, trying to keep a few centimeters between his clothes and the Bachelor's — only proper etiquette in these situations, he thought to himself (and the thought was only as absurd as the situation itself).

He managed to pluck some of the blanket off the Bachelor's reserved, stiff silhouette; lying down on his side, he found they could in fact both fit.

“What's that cold thing?”

“The buckle of my sock garters, Burakh.”

“Your sock...?”

“If you even think of moving that blanket to get a look, I will kick you out.”

Burakh stopped thinking. He tucked his arm under his head and... waited, really, for sleep to wash over. It didn't—it was capricious, distant, as if Dankovsky kept it at bay.

Footsteps grew in the stairs—Burakh tensed; they were not those of the lady of the house.

“Doctor?”

Oh, you have to be kidding me.

Rubin stepped in the room, strides determined — and he came to an abrupt stop right in front of the divider.

“Oh.”

Burakh sank into the mattress and, in an almost juvenile attempt to hide, pulled the blanket over him. He wasn't *scared*, he wasn't sure he was even ashamed — he just knew this looked *incredibly* compromising, and that Stakh would hold this over his head until they went to their graves (and even then, Burakh was sure he'd find a way to taunt him even six feet under).

The Bachelor sat up promptly so his face could peek over the screen. Burakh dug his head into the mattress lest the damn blanket fall off the Bachelor's lap and uncover his underclothes, which Burakh had no intention of being found looking at.

“Colleague.” Dankovsky said.

“Bachelor,” Rubin replied, voice flat and thin, a hint nervous.

“What brings you here?”

“I, ah, had brought samples I thought we ought to discuss, but —”

Beyond the screen, where Burakh couldn't see, Rubin was staring at the Bachelor blankly. He then blinked once and turned his eyes on the pants, smock and sweater he could recognize beyond the shadow of a doubt, then on the Bachelor's face again.

“ — I can come back later.”

Dankovsky did the same; looked at Rubin’s face, at the clothes laid next to each other, then at Rubin’s face again.

“This is not what it looks like,” he said.

“I can come back later.” Rubin repeated pointedly.

“Don’t be foolish. Stand here, give me a minute.”

He threw himself out of bed and Burakh almost snapped his own neck trying to avoid slipping out an intrusive gaze. He heard the sound of rustling corduroy as the Bachelor grabbed then put on his pants, the clinking of the belt, the flipping of shoes, and felt Dankovsky’s entire weight on his thigh as he had nowhere to do that from but sitting right here, behind the shield of the screen. The Bachelor jumped forward and directed Rubin to his desk.

“What have you brought?” the Bachelor asked.

“This is a sample of...”

Rubin’s voice lowered, lowered, until Burakh couldn’t hear it anymore. They kept speaking, he could see their lips moving — but he wasn’t invited to join. The Bachelor had his back to the bed and leaned towards the desk, on which Rubin displayed colored vials the size of a finger and his notes. Periodically, Stanislav would throw Burakh, who hadn’t budged and stared at them from the pillow of his bent arm, sidelong glances; they didn’t feel particularly accusatory or mocking, but Burakh still found himself jittery under them.

Burakh then did something profoundly stupid — he had no idea what compelled him to, maybe wanting to make Stanislav uncomfortable in return, maybe he felt particularly emboldened now that he didn’t have the pocket of his smock to fit idiocy in — and pointedly wiggled his eyebrows. Stanislav didn’t flinch. He observed Burakh and waited for him to dig himself a little deeper — which he did: he threw a glance at Dankovsky, and wiggled his eyebrows again. When Stanislav still didn’t react, he did it again, pointedly raking his gaze down the Bachelor’s back before the eyebrow wiggle.

It hit Burakh that this was, in fact, going to make matters *potently* worse. Right as the genius idea to *stop* struck him, the Bachelor turned around swiftly and stared at him dead in the eye.

“Anything I can help you with?” he asked, his voice booming and frank.

Burakh buried himself more into the mattress and shook his head, feelin’ like a kid getting scorned. The Bachelor immediately brought his attention back to the desk. He and Rubin exchanged some more words that Burakh didn’t hear (or couldn’t hear as he tried to make his head go through the pillow) and Rubin, finally, stepped back.

“Not much else I can do,” he spoke — he sounded a hair’s width from defeated.

“I understand,” the Bachelor said. He sighed. “I know. Thank you, colleague. I’ll come to see the rest when I can.”

“Farewell, colleague.”

“Farewell. Your efforts will not be in vain, I will make sure of it.” He stopped there, and his eyes fit on Burakh’s face, sympathetic this time. “We will make sure of it.”

Rubin took his leave, and Dankovsky stood in the middle of the room until he heard the downstairs door be opened and closed. Then, he let out a gritted curse and just short of tore his pants from his legs, undoing the buckle furiously. “*It’s still so damn cold!*” he hissed, and he threw the cloth back on top of the screen. Burakh instinctively rolled to the wall-side of the bed so the Bachelor wouldn’t have to crawl over him, and they both settled back down. The Bachelor let out an almost-comical shivering sound.

“I need to leave soon,” Burakh eventually spoke. (He thought about how he didn’t really need to tell him that and could just leave. Then he thought about how he’d have to wriggle past the Bachelor as he lay to get out of that bed, and how he did well to warn him then.)

“I won’t keep you here.”

“I was offered an opportunity. Whatever the outcome, it will bring me closer to... if nothing else, a truth.”

The Bachelor turned his head to him — not his body; his tired eye landed on Burakh’s face and raked it thoroughly, nervous and interested. Burakh corrected himself:

“It will bring us closer to a truth, whatever it might be.”

“Rubin wasn’t particularly enthusiastic about what he has brought me, and I have to admit, I am not either. There’s only so much we’re able to do. I pray—well, I hope you have better luck than we’ve been dealt.” He rubbed his eye, his face with the heel of his gloved palm. “I’ll be at the Broken Heart later tonight — if your friend’s samples are any different from what we’ve managed to scrap, I’ll be there to celebrate; if not...”

An uncomfortable pause — the likes of which were starting to grow in length and swell in weight, Burakh found.

“If not, you’ll be drinking your sorrows away, I take it.”

Dankovsky didn’t answer.

“Fine, then. I’ll meet you there.”

“Be careful around these streets, Burakh.”

“Oynon, I know them better than you could.”

“It’s not about *knowing*. The townsfolk are getting... agitated.”

“They have been for a while.”

“It’s only getting worse.” (He sighed.) “It’s only going to get worse.”

The mound of the Ragi Barrow felt three steps from the sky as Burakh scaled it intently. The torches had been lit. The light blinded him, and the steppe below looked darker than it had ever been.

Flanking the granitic plinth, Brides and Worms and unfamiliar faces of his Kin came forward. The brides stood still and stiff, unnaturally so, their heads high as if pulled by strings. Their chests heaved with difficult breaths as they recovered from frantic dances, and their skins glistened with sweat.

Someone felt missing. Someone was missing. The bull was made to kneel and Burakh felt his own knees buckle under him.

“Time has come, yargachin; just like you have.”

“I have.”

The Pale Beast came forth and it bore no Death. Burakh watched it and was amazed that its flaking hooves allowed it to climb the ritual mound, and that its emaciated body had the strength to carry the Bride that rode on its back. Burakh recognized her — she was at his lair this morning, and on the bull’s back later that day. She held onto its thinning mane for balance as it scaled the barrow, her torn clothes draping its ribs and croup. Her head swayed with a composed anticipation as she intently watched Burakh be bestowed the Menkhu’s Finger — he looked at the blade in fear it would turn on him and, oh, it didn’t; it fit in his palm like a held hand.

“Oh, nay... Some times Death is not Death; but the transformation of thy whole being...

Some times cut is not cut but mouth hungry; but eye-opening.

But eye opening. But opening.”

Burakh wiped between thumb and index the blade of the tool; his sweat met the dried blood and trickled it off.

“Are all lines created equal? Are all lines made equal?

You know by thy hands the difference between murder and surgery;

are you the one to decide?

Should you be?”

Burakh brought the blade to the densely-haired, soft pelt.

“Hear, hear.
Should you be?”

The skin parted under the cut with a sickening familiarity. The epidermis split. The skin glistened with blood, the pearls of it not unlike pearls of sweat. Burakh didn't dare a glance away from the bull, but if he had, he would have seen the Brides flinch and shiver — instead, he heard the long, almost relieved hiss that coursed through them like one single voice.

He traced first the neck — *modny ish*, the tree-trunk; then the shoulder, where he cut around the rounded hill of the triceps, brachialis, and deltoid muscles — *khavirgan sar*, the moon-crescent; then the tense, fat belly — *golyn ereg*, the river bank...

“Good boy,” he said, low enough not to be heard. “Sorry.” (His father had thanked the bull, the first time Artemy saw him cut one. Artemy had apologized to it when it was his turn — then, thanked it too.)

... then the part of the flank where stomachs push the ribs outward — *tolgod*, the hill. Then, then...

The Bull's flesh yielded meat to the blade; its insides yielded blood to the hands. As it was viald, Burakh could see — it was of a red of fantastic brilliancy, heavier than man's, smoother than fine ink.

“A cut that is good aligns the sun in its sky. A cut that is good aligns the ground with her trees. A cut that is good opens the Mother along the Line where her grass and her children and children-grass and grass-children grow... A cut that is good, yargachin, will undo a knot so bound can be the threads that need be.”

“And was this a good cut, Worm?”

“Watch and see. He has thanked you generously.”

He had. (Burakh thanked him, again, in return.)

“This blood, yargachin, is precious. Special. Drink, don't spill it.”

“One of you told me the bulls do not get sick. Is this true?”

“As true as the tongue allows it. As true as the Earth bears truth. Yes...”

“Very well.”

Burakh carefully wrapped the meat so it could be transported — it was not to go to waste. He felt himself salivating. He picked and carried the vial. He picked up a jog; then a run; then he dashed past the cemetery and into the town, where he almost slammed face-first into the Broken Heart's shut door.

In the dense, suffocating air of the bar, where music hung dense and low like thunderclouds, the Bachelor was nowhere to be seen. Burakh looked around — the glances on him were less bitter than they had been, but he still felt how they clung to his skin. (He realized the bloodstain on his stomach where the meat seeped through the cloth and the vial had a leak couldn't help.) He looked between the room dividers, threw glances under curtains in the hopes of seeing the familiar black shoes — all he found were two Herb Brides, uninterested in the rites or dancing on the stage, who shared a settee with limbs intertwined, and threw his glance right back at him until his mouth cracked an embarrassed, apologetic smile and he walked on.

There was noise coming from one of the back rooms as he approached; a voice — it sounded just like the Architect's (the batty one. Well... the batty *and aggressive* one).

"You know it wouldn't be the most despicable thing this town has seen, right?"

In its wake, another; the... Bachelor? It sounded just like the Bachelor...

"I know."

As his words fell, Andrey again:

"... Not that I think it's despicable. You know my stance on that."

"I know, Andrey, I know..."

Burakh was eavesdropping: he had leaned against the door, he had held his breath. He pulled himself out of it powerfully, like the childish fear of getting caught doing something naughty whipped his head back. Childish still, he was: he walked in place, making his steps grow increasingly louder, pretending to just walk in; he pretended to hit the door in his race; he pretended to trip into the room, tumbling in. His ruse seemed to have worked: the three men, Architect, Bachelor, and paler, ghostlier Architect looked up from the table they shared, from the drinks in front of them, and pinned their eyes on him. Burakh caught Dankovsky's gloved hand absentmindedly, abstractedly running index, middle finger and thumb up and down the cylinder of his empty glass.

"Eavesdropping, are we?" rose Andrey's voice, sharp and clear in the fog of incense and smoke. Burakh shut the door behind him slowly.

"And if I was? Would you rat me out? Would you dare? We don't like snitches around here."

For a moment, the Architect's face didn't budge, and his eyes seemed to freeze over. Then, his mouth split in a wide, enamel-keyed smile, his eyes thinned; amusement and threat painted the mist-hazed features pinned on the fabric of his face. Burakh seemed to have passed some kind of unspoken test.

"Clever guy. You're starting to get it. What have you come for?"

“Not for you,” Burakh said, and he turned to the Bachelor.

Dankovsky had brought his hands together. He was waiting, but not particularly eager; Burakh could see how his usual smirk struggled to cling to his face, and his eyes had darkened with something akin to cynicism or pessimism.

“I got something,” he blurted out. “Bulls can't get infected.”

The Bachelor broke the seal of his hands and opened them, palms to Burakh, as if to have the words fall right in them.

“Burakh, if this is true, it would be an incredible and marvelous breakthrough. Is there any way we could test this?”

Burakh plucked the vial of blood from his pocket and raised it to shoulder height, as if presenting a raw gem. The Bachelor looked at it, then his eyes closed and his head tipped back as if *relief* was washing over him. *Pride*, *pride* tore through Burakh's chest; he felt his heart swell twofold.

“Come with me, then,” the Bachelor said; and he got up swiftly.

He adjusted his coat under the twins' watchful eyes; Andrey's darted to Burakh like blue-haloed pinheads. As he escorted Burakh out of the bar, he got hold of a rifle that had been tucked away.

“Where'd you get this...?” Burakh asked.

“Saburov,” Dankovsky replied plainly, and with a twinge of pride. “As compensation for the work he's given me.”

“They've truly sent you around this town ten times over by this point, eh?”

“Make it eleven, Burakh. Make it eleven.”

He checked the rifle was loaded.

“Are you armed?”

“Got my knife...”

The Bachelor grimaced. “Well, in the absence of anything else, this ought to do. *Allons-y*.”

“What?”

“Let's go.”

He swung the rifle's leather sling over his shoulder and held it at the ready. He gestured they be on their way, and they were.

“Burned district right after that corner,” the Bachelor announced.

“Seeing looters already...”

“You know our chances to go past unseen,” Dankovsky said. Burakh snickered nervously and got thrown a sidelong glance — touchy subject... “Weapon at the ready,” he ordered, and Burakh obeyed instinctively, bringing his palm to the pommel of his knife.

They were halfway through the Warehouses when Burakh realized they were hunted. A sudden shiver crawled up him like a fire ant. *I should have kept that damn rifle when the commander offered it to me.* He turned on his heels, unsheathing blade, and barely had the time to realize the Bachelor had pushed him down that a thrown knife swung overhead. The deafening sound of a gunshot tore through his jaw from joint to joint, and the bullet it tailed tore through a mugger's skull directly between the eyes. He was moving fast enough that Burakh knew *he* would have missed, and his mouth hung open from both shock and awe.

“You’re a wicked good shot, oynon” Burakh panted as Dankovsky pulled him on his feet, and the thin line of the Bachelor’s smile tugged on the sides just a little bit more. In the daze, Burakh remembered an intuition he had had when they first met, and asked: “What battalion were you in?”

“Oh, I didn’t go to war, Burakh.”

“You *didn’t*? You don’t seem the ‘too-sickly-to-fight’ type... I doubt they’d have refused on account of lunacy, either.”

Dankovsky shot him a dark glance — oh, *I’ve pissed him off* — but the anger in it vanished as fast as it had come, and he replied:

“I was lucky. I received a grant for my research just in time, and I was passed over.” He brushed dirt off Burakh’s elbow and picked up the pace.

“Then where?”

“My father,” he started, weaving through narrow streets — Burakh found he had this barely-perceptible sigh in the voice that he couldn’t quite decipher was irritation or fondness, “was an officer. He insisted on teaching me to handle weapons; I do not doubt he had the hope of making a military man out of me right until I left for university. He trained me. He made sure I could handle a weapon.”

“And trained you well. Jesus Christ,” Burakh mouthed, throwing one last glance at the man he had shot as precisely as an arrow hits a coin.

“You flatter me, Burakh,” Dankovsky protested light-heartedly — but Burakh very much heard the pride in his voice at the offered admiration.

Don’t get too excited, I’m not trying to do that too often either.

“You never struck me as the... gun-fond child type.”

“It’s because I wasn’t.” As if to contradict himself, but impressing Burakh nonetheless, Dankovsky aimed and hit a mugger directly in the hand he was readying himself to throw a knife with — the bullet went straight and frank through the palm, the knife fell blade-first into the mugger’s shoulder. “I vastly preferred collecting beetles with him.”

“Why the insistence, then?”

Before they made a dash to the train station, Burakh saw the Bachelor's thinly-stretched, lingering not-quite-smile contorted in a pensive wave.

"He had a lot to compensate for."

"He did...?"

Burakh was... well, not intrigued per say, but this was the most the Bachelor has spoken with this strange, almost foreign lightness. It was pleasant — and it didn't fit the urgency of the situation one bit, which was for the better.

"He did."

They slowed down as they skirted the station. They took a breather by the younger Vlad's shack and observed the districts ahead.

Despite the contemplative composure on the Bachelor's face which Burakh could plainly see covered a latent desire to tell some more (or, well, did it? The Bachelor's mouth fell back into his enigmatic, pinched smile), the signal was clear: that is on that. Burakh decided to not pry — even if he really wanted to. He would have loved to linger on it, but they still had to cross into the Atrium.

"Plagued district ahead," the Bachelor announced.

"I know, I've seen it on Notkin's map. It was fine yesterday..."

"Cover your nose, Burakh."

He fished a flimsy cloth mask out of his pocket, and the Bachelor did the same. *An illness of great equalizing qualities, eh?*

The Bachelor swung the rifle in his back and walked in front. Burakh was almost amazed at how long his short-legged strides were — as if to keep him on his toes about his own, his bad knee shot an arrow of pain into his patella.

Walking into the Stillwater, the Bachelor bowed to miss Yan — her smile faltered when she spotted Burakh behind him, and she tucked herself away, afraid.

"I'm never living down that damn nickname, am I," Burakh cursed under his breath.

"She'll warm up to you," Dankovsky replied, and he scaled the stairs three steps at once.

He tucked his rifle in a corner and hurried to his desk.

"Give me the vial. I'll test it right away."

"What about what Stakh... what Rubin brought you earlier?"

The Bachelor sighed.

“I wasn’t at the Broken Heart for nothing, you know. It’s... more of the same. We’re not getting anywhere. By all accounts,” he insisted, “it’s better than *nothing*, but we’re not finding anything new. We’ve run into... wall, after wall, after wall.” He sighed again, again... “The scientific method has never failed me. Never has it... before. But of the — many! — ways I’ve found to bring forth breakthroughs... none of them allow me to walk through walls.”

Burakh held back from telling him “ *you could ask the twins*” , as regardless of the genuineness of his words, he knew how the Bachelor would take it — *not well*, that is.

“You can hit the cot behind,” Dankovsky said. “I will wake you when I have results.”

“And then kick me out so you can sleep?” Burakh said, a hint of jest in the voice — he remembered too late the Bachelor telling him to stop with this question. “Or would you rather sleep downstairs,” he teased.

Dankovsky looked at him blankly. Burakh wasn’t sure if he hadn’t gotten the implication, if he *had* gotten it and didn’t want to, or didn’t know how to respond, or if this was his response. “*Forget it*”, Burakh mouthed, and tucked himself into bed — all for him, this time.

Burakh wasn’t asleep, he couldn’t really be. He heard the Bachelor tinker with the blood; the chiming sounds of glass slides being examined over and over. He realized Dankovsky knew he wasn’t asleep when his voice rose in the silent attic:

“I think you might have gotten the wrong impression about me and Eva, Burakh.” His tone was composed, placid, and a bare hint amused. Burakh didn’t answer. He watched him move around slides, vials and syringes, then stretch longly before shedding off his coat. “Don’t get me wrong, I think she is a lovely person, and she knows I am very thankful that she let me stay here, but... for all intents and purposes, my feelings for her are purely platonic.”

Burakh watched him fish a matchstick box out of his pocket and light the few candles that stuck out from his desk like stalagmites. The flickering light made his tired eyes look even more sunken.

“And I would ask you to refrain from implying otherwise,” Dankovsky said, his voice rising with an exaggeratedly piqued tone, “it makes me uncomfortable and vexes me!”

Despite his comically melodramatic inflection and the tongue-in-cheek smile he tried to pull on his face, Burakh heard loud and clear he was genuine — he saw it in the way his face fell, serious and a hint uneasy, once the words had run their course across the room.

Touchy subject... (Burakh couldn’t quite figure out if the Bachelor was peevish in general, or if he had truly overstepped then.) Burakh nodded.

“Noted.”

“Thank you. If you’ll excuse me.”

He got up and Burakh watched him disappear behind the expansive bookshelf that lined the attic wall and the small wooden door — into a small bathroom.

He heard the muffled sound of the Bachelor kicking off one shoe, then the other, the clinking of his belt being undone, the ruffle of corduroy pants being shed — he told himself it was really weird to lend that attentive of an ear and pulled the blanket over himself.

“I should have asked,” the Bachelor began first thing when he walked back in. Burakh noted his wet hair; it caught the candlelight like an oil spill. “What do your... people think of the disease?”

Burakh propped himself on his elbows. Now that was *new*, for the usually logical Bachelor.

“They say it is of Earth. That when it... she is joyous, she fills the fields with twyre. When she is irate, she makes shabnak, pits, and disease...”

“Shabnak...? Oh. Yes, right. What they mistook these poor girls for...”

“Yes...” Dankovsky’s eyes on him felt heavy, prying. He could see in their squint that he wasn’t particularly on board with that explanation, in the quirk of his mouth that he found it profoundly backward — that almost reassured Burakh. He was still his stoic self after all. “The usual. Whatever is happening, the Earth is behind it.”

“A very... religious view of things.”

“Spiritual, I would say. ... But, yes. You hear more or less the same from the mouths of those who believe a God is behind every good and evil.”

“... There might be truth to it,” Dankovsky said, and Burakh almost jumped out of the cot in surprise. “We know that, up North, some diseases have been trapped in the permafrost, and that disruptions in the natural environment might release diseases we’ve thought gone for decades, or centuries.” He fiddled with the hem of his glove. “I have... other hypotheses. More probable hypotheses. I won’t discard that one — I just want to go through the other, more... *credible* ones first.”

“My people is a... superstitious people.” (The Bachelor scoffed and mouthed: *I noticed*. Burakh tensed and frowned. He had *meant it*, but still felt hurt. He felt so close and so distant. He decided the Bachelor didn’t need to know about whatever turmoil that was.) “There is always *some* truth to what they say, but... *how much* of it is hard to quantify.”

The Bachelor nodded.

“... So? About that blood?”

The Bachelor brought his eyes on him, then on the messy desk. He sighed.

“You were right,” he said. “About the bulls not getting sick, I mean. They have a... fantastic immunodefensive response. Their antibodies proliferate incredibly fast — they... *could*, theoretically *could* be useful to us, but...”

“But?”

“Observe this sample. Compare it with this one. Notice something?” Burakh didn’t have the time to open his mouth that he continued: “The... bacteria is in constant mutation in human blood. It keeps... shifting shape, so to speak, to bypass or annihilate every natural defense. In bulls’ blood... it is stagnant. See? It doesn’t even *act*. Once inoculated, it... falters. It dies.”

“You said the bull blood *could* be useful.”

“Conditional. We could use these antibodies, but the difference of action of the Pest in human and in bovine blood makes it more interesting on a purely *theoretical* basis. An inoculation would likely result in the native and the xenogeneic antibodies turning against each other as an immune response. The body attacking itself... and we wouldn’t even know how to stop it. At least we know the Pest kills fast...”

Burakh saw how the Bachelor trailed his hands over his arms and shoulders. He watched the nervous shudder run through him — restrained, crushed by gloved hands as they gripped his shirt. He was getting angry. He was getting tired...

“I don’t understand why it behaves this way, Burakh. I don’t understand how it *can behave* this way. It’s like it... has a goal. A purpose...”

“Oynon, you are talking nonsense. You’re very tired...”

(He was. Very tired, Burakh meant. He was less sure the Bachelor was speaking nonsense. The illness playing shapeshifters was starting to unnerve him.)

“I am.” (He rubbed his closed eyes with his gloved hands.) “I am. I’m going to get some fresh air. Walk to the Tower, maybe...”

“Is that what you were talking about, at the bar? The Tower?”

Burakh knew what he had heard. It didn’t sound like it was about the Tower. The Bachelor didn’t reply for as long as he took to put on his coat.

“... Yes, Burakh. We were talking about the Tower.”

Burakh didn’t like being lied to his face. His frown deepened. The Bachelor turned his back to him as he readied to leave — Burakh found him tense and fidgety.

(Maybe he’d accept being lied to, this time. He felt there was something Dankovsky didn’t say — something subterranean and hidden. Or, maybe *subcutaneous* would be more suited; Burakh saw damn well how he fiddled with his cuffs, his gloves, his perfectly-placed cravat. It lived within.)

The Bachelor left, and his steps were slow, purposeful. Pensive.

Burakh didn't fall asleep. Burakh couldn't fall asleep. He slipped out on tiptoes; outside, the Bachelor had sat on a bench, a stone's throw away from the Cathedral. His head was dipped back. His hands were clasped almost meditatively. His eyes were on the Tower. Again, his eyes were on the Tower.

Burakh stopped to look at it. Damn thing was tall.

It was tall, and it was a little bit beautiful. Alright? Burakh could admit, if nothing else, that it was a little bit beautiful. In the night, and out of the streetlamps' halos, the coil of its stairs was pitch black, its planes a crystalline ivory that radiated light from within — and, if nothing else, it and the Bachelor, black-cloaked, black-haired, black-eyed, skin pale, didn't look too dissimilar.

Taking Shape are the Wicked Things to Come

He crossed the bridge into the Spleen and a terrible hunch overcame him. He couldn't explain it; it was as if a whisper had risen from the ground itself, carrying scurrying, menacing footsteps to his ears. He could follow the thread of it like Ariadne herself had put it in his path — and it brought him to the Warehouses, where members of the Kin, Worms and men alike, had crowded. He remembered the morning — the morning of the previous day — (what hour was this? What hour is this?) the unspoken threat. The sibilant way they talked about *putrid desecration*, about having yet to find him. The whisper grew, Burakh found they had found him.

He remembered Rubin's plea — modestly cloaked under the veil of confidence.

Burakh was cloaked by the veil of night. He was not seen.

(Is heard, stage right, the sound of hooves.
A head peeks. It sees the blood on Burakh's hands,
and it simply nods.

cutting blade into animals-like-me...

Are men beasts?

Is this man one?

This man's a blade.

Are the entrails of sheep and poultry not enough for haruspicy?

Burakh cannot read those he spills. Night tightens around its corpses like secrets to keep.)

They hadn't come with blades; no silver, no steel, not even carved bone or ceramic.

Well, that wasn't quite true. They had come with blades in their eyes, and they were all turned on Rubin. (Or was this just what he told himself to make himself feel better?)

He'd made the choice. He'd made the choice to capsize himself if that meant he could pull shipwrecked Rubin from the sharp, piercing ridges. Chances were, they could both drown. (They didn't, four men and three Worms went in the depths instead.)

Burakh limped back to the lair. He had received a kick to the knee — his bad knee; the bone hadn't broken again, he could feel that, but even knowing it didn't make him feel any better. (Knowing most things didn't make him feel any better — he had gone over that already.)

He was shaking, his arms agitated with furious shivers as if their humeral heads wanted to pop out of the glenoid hollows; his head spun; he thought he could puke.

A thought absolutely wretched came over him: they were back to the Earth now. They who had spoken so tenderly of death as her embrace, they had gone back to the Earth now. (Burakh felt like he had swallowed darkness, and he checked the door was locked behind him three times. He crawled through the workshop and hid his entire body, still clothed, under the thinning blanket. There were eyes on him. He knew there were eyes on him.)



Tippity-tippity-tippity-toes. Burakh walked fast enough — still couldn't outrun the opening of the curtains. The floor was no black velvet, no theatrical floorboards either.

This was not the usual stage, was it? A grand triptych, tall as the cathedral's windows, was anchored in the dream, its side panels moving as Burakh did, closing ever-so-slightly around him as he stood in the middle like ink-covered pages, or raven wings. The canvas stretched between the dark wooden frame was that velvety black — Burakh could imagine its lusciousness without even stretching his hand out to touch. Not a face peered into that fabric. He sighed, almost relieved.

Why was he there, then?

Tippity-tippity-tippity-toes.

Hey, those are not his footsteps. They're light, thin, treading hardly, as if bare; muffled and silky.

... Well, I haven't seen you in one of those, yet.

Saintly girl: That's right.

You're late.

Saintly girl: Not late, I'm right on time. You just didn't have room for me.

Burakh shrugged.

You're not that tall.

Saintly girl: That's not how you measure things like that, silly!

Yeah? And how do you?

Saintly girl: Why would I know? I'm not the one making these dreams. You are. Well...

Well?

Saintly girl: Forget it.

She paced around a little. Burakh could see she was skirting a border — he couldn't see the border itself.

Hey, what's with the name?

Saintly girl: Huh?

The name. Right there.

Saintly girl: I don't see what you mean.

You should be able to. It's right there. Written.

Saintly girl: Well, I should, but I can't.

You chose that for yourself, didn't you?

She shrugged in turn, and kept roaming around. There *must* have been a stage; she was walking from one end of the proscenium line to the other.

Clara: ... This is where people go, isn't it?

Witch. You could read it well.

Clara: It's where you keep people. It's where... you keep things that have to be said, and that cannot be said elsewhere. Well, that's where are kept things that cannot be said, or said elsewhere...

Why do you think they cannot be said elsewhere?

Clara: Because you're too thick in the skull to hear them, I assume.

Burakh huffed, but was cut off.

Clara: Oh, or because they're too... convoluted.

Yeah... they are pretty convoluted, aren't they.

The wandering girl pouted.

Clara: They are. They're... written that way. And if you were told them straight-on, you'd explode.

Oh, would I?

Clara: I'm sure of it. You'd be struck by them like lightning.

... Anything else about things being... *written that way?*

She shrugged again.

Clara: I think you're leaving room here so people can walk in. You're leaving room for people. Or people are leaving room for you...

Poetic...

Clara: It's all about connections. Ah, it's about the skin, that is a connection. A border — your border.

She traced, again, the line of the proscenium — the border that stood there.

Clara: That you use to touch...

She gestured at the emptiness that sprawled beyond what Burakh could fathom. What was he touching? (Oh, he knew. Oh, his fingers still felt tacky with the slick feeling of blood.)

The girl didn't elaborate.

Clara: I've always said it.

Have you? I don't remember hearing it from your mouth.

Clara: In another story. In another dream.

... That I didn't have.

Clara: You sew things together, don't you? Just sew these two side by side. Along the flank... to let the shared heart seep through.

Who do you share yours with?

Clara: Mind ya business, thick-head! Who do you yours?

Burakh didn't answer.

(Burakh couldn't answer.) (So, he didn't, and asked something else in its place.)

... Shards of you, is that it? What you share, I mean. What you want to share.

Clara: Yes. You don't really separate yourself in shards, do you?"

... I don't think I do, no. *(He hesitated.)* I feel like I'm already tough enough to handle.

Clara: Mmh. You're pretty inseparable. Ah... That's why you're taking so much space.

So much...? Sorry?

Clara: Yes.

The girl gestured

up

then she gestured

down

and Burakh had no idea what she meant.

Clara: See how you sprawl?

No. Not really...

Clara: Not really important. As long as you follow.

(He didn't really either.)

*Clara: Well, I won't bother you much longer. This is just the beginning. I will be on my way now.
The clock is ticking.*

She had said that last part in a purposeful, comically low voice, with a hint of misplaced solemnity, as if she was quoting someone. Burakh raised an eyebrow — he had no idea whose words she could be repeating.

She exited stage right — if there was a stage right, if there was a stage at all. The light went out, and the backstage (if there was a backstage) heaved and sighed with mechanical relief. Her footsteps grew muffled, and they weren't loud to begin with: tippity-tippity-tippity-toes, then silence.

A buzzing noise was heard, and the light came on — two of them, this time, dim, yellow, dusty: they shone directly on the side panels, creating tight halos. He recognized the faces in — *oh, of course.* (He sighed.) *Don't make me wish for the girl back.* He took a step back and hit something (someone? No, it was something. He breathed a sigh of relief.) — a chunk of chalk? a charcoal shard? he counted sixteen scraps of chalk and sixteen pieces of charcoal.

What kind of game is it?

He gestured at the darkness where he could guess the shapes.

They moved—he saw them move. The chalk came together, a creature of pale limestone and salt (humanoid, thank god, Burakh felt like he would have had a heart attack if it had made itself a beast); the charcoal came together in the shape of a Tragedian without her face.

Peter: Strange.

Andrey: Daring.

I can't even play chess. This is all it is, isn't it? Chess, white pawns the bones, black pawns the bile.

Peter: I can't play either. Not with these hands.

He didn't quite show them — he didn't hide them either. He brought them up, slowly, like a drinking cup. Burakh observed how different they were from his; the long, stilt-like fingers, the oblong nails, the pink scar tissue around the cuticles where it had been bitten and healed; how alike they were, too: bloodstained.

Andrey: (to both) You should learn. What a precious, precious skill... See how lives and deaths are moved across the chessboard like a battlefield.

What makes you think I could be trusted with playing with death?

The Twins: The only winning move is not to play.

... and yet I live.

There was then not a word. A long glance, pale, palpable, was exchanged; Burakh could follow it between their faces, he could have jumped on the rope it stretched between their sets of eyes. The lights dipped, ever so slightly — they shone on the twins' teeth, and Burakh saw how the spit on them made the enamel glisten.

The Twins: And yet you do.

What now?

The Twins: Take the red of the curtains and cut it into hearts... and diamonds.

I don't know how to play cards either.

The Twins: There are many games.

Andrey: What are you betting?

Peter: I'm betting a bullet.

Andrey: I'll bet three.

Peter: ... Butcher?

What could a ripper have left to lose? Burakh scraped the rust and dried blood under his nails mindlessly. What could a ripper have left to win?

I'll bet my hands.

(Then bet!)

Lights on the center panel, that *entre-deux*: it's Dankovsky. (Burakh doesn't even flinch seeing him here, then.) He is looking for a cigarette in his pockets. No coat. Crossed legs as he bounces a foot, nervous, eager. Burakh can see something silver against his ankle, above his sock — the... buckle he had mentioned? Burakh realizes he's staring up his pant leg and immediately jumps back. On the stage right panel, Peter. Burakh knows it is Peter even as his head is gone, as the dream shapes itself around his arms and hands. The light on them shows him cutting a shape along one of its edges like one guts a fish.

On the stage left panel (there is no stage. There is no stage, why is Burakh here? Where have they brought him? Where has he brought them? Let's say: on the left—no, from the seats, on the right page —), Andrey. The dream has shaped itself around his hands, too. (Or has he shaped the dream around them?) With fingers of the right, he is undoing bandaids on his left, around his fingers, where Burakh had guessed he had freshly bitten.

Dankovsky looks for a lighter, and Andrey's hand crosses the frame with one. Dankovsky takes the cigarette out of his mouth, brings it to the flame, and to his mouth then again.

The Bachelor: You have followed.

... Yes, you could say I have.

The Bachelor: You know, Burakh, I am thankful.

Burakh wishes he'd say that to his face. He does...

He's found a way. He's made a way. He's cut a way through. He's woven a way in... One of those options, surely. (He has cut a way through. Yes. That seems right...)

Peter cuts along another edge.

Andrey slowly peels the gauze off his fingertip.

The Bachelor: Everything is coming into shape, and you know how to sew.

You wouldn't say that to me... I know you wouldn't.

The Bachelor: Everything is starting to... fall off the bone. Like stewed meat.

Peter pins the open shape to the wood. It lies there like a spread moth.

Andrey slowly peels the gauze off his knuckle.

Stewed meat...

God, Burakh was hungry.

The bull ate. The bull was eaten. Man eats bull eats Earth. Earth eats man eats bull.

Does bull eat man?

Does man eat Earth?

Peter curses: the precision knife cut a single red line in his wrist; he effuses ink. He stumbles, tumbles, and scurries off-stage (off-page).

Andrey unravels. The wound dressing is pink. The wound dressing is red. He undoes its coil around his finger and it comes off his wrist, and it comes off his arm, and it comes off his

shoulder, and beneath are all the reds of a human body. His face comes off, Burakh catches the glimpse of long canine teeth.

Peter's appears on his page, ill-defined, hazy, pierced by two blue eyes. (He catches the glimpse again.)

The Bachelor: I do not want any trouble.

He smiles slowly. Burakh swallows thickly. Eyes on him. Do not fret and do not fray.

I do not want any either.

The Bachelor smiles.

The Bachelor: I'm afraid there will be.

Likely.

The Bachelor: I am impressed. A body is hard to cut to pieces. Human or otherwise... Andrey: Do you know how hard it is to break glass on someone's skull? Glass is very strong. The cylindrical shape of a bottle doesn't lend itself to breaking — the skull, almost always, caves in first.

... What does this have to do with me?

Andrey: How hard do you strike?

The Bachelor: And how many strikes are needed to down someone for good?

Don't ask me that.

Does man eat man? Does Earth eat Earth?

The smell of blood becomes overbearing. The smell of meat becomes overwhelming. Hunger overflows. Hunger that-is-not-hunger overcomes. Between all three panels of the triptych, there is a big hollow.

And where's Burakh?

Right there.

In the hollow like in an empty stomach.

Burakh wakes and the lingering taste of *meat-falling-of-the-bone* makes his mouth water.

The lingering taste of meat. The lingering image of flesh. The lingering scent of death.

Burakh is pinned to his bed as he thinks this: they all come from the same bull. They all come from the same body at the Theater. (That's where he was — or was he?)

The dreams are getting longer and longer. *More convoluted — ha!* He's afraid one day he won't be able to wake up in time. (Or wake up at all.) (He's afraid the dream will swallow him whole and not spit him back out.)

Burakh shifts around and finds his knife is not where he left it.

Dawn is a wicked, piercing thing, pale and sharpened. It struck him right in the face when he crawled out of the lair like he was a coal-mine horse being brought to the surface.

The pallor shaped itself around something little and dark: when he almost hit it, he realized it was Murky. Dew clung to the hem of her dress and her dirty feet.

“Hello, you,” he greeted her. “Do you want to come in?”

“My friend accepts to meet you,” she said, with her big prying eyes on him. “Well, she wants to meet you. She wants to play a game.”

“Oh, really?”

A game of chess of charcoal and chalk...?

“What kind of game, Murky?”

“I don't know. She won't tell me. But she thinks you'll be fun to play with.”

A small tic made her shake her head to the side, as if someone had called her from behind.

“Fun to play against,” she added (or corrected herself...?).

“Very well. I'd love to meet her.”

“Mmmh. We're not too sure about that.”

She swayed on her feet like a blade of grass. Burakh squinted, trying to find meaning on her unreadable face.

“When can I meet her?”

“Tonight.”

Burakh nodded slowly.

“She wants to meet you by the Crowstone,” Murky continued. “Over there...”

“I know where it is. I won't get lost.”

“You better not,” she says. “Tonight after sundown,” she repeated intently. “At the Crowstone.”

“I’ll be there, Murky.”

She nodded, briskly hitching her round, messy-haired head. Then, she trotted away, tiny hands gripping the sides of her dress.

Before walking to the Theater, Burakh made a point to cross the Warehouses. No corpses were left — as if the Earth swallowed them. *How lucky. They were not spat back out.*

The ground, again, shook with a murmur. It took Burakh the way to the Marrow to realize the streets were inhabited by that very whisper — a half-voice gossip, a chatter. He didn’t stop to lend an ear.

His eyes caught something ink-black and fleeting right before the Theater’s doors; when he stopped in his tracks, he could see a raven, hopping back and forth across the steps. Bad omen to ignore a bad omen; Burakh knew that well. *One for sorrow, two for mirth...*

“Hey, little buddy,” Burakh called softly.

The bird turned its head to him.

“Are you hungry? I have nothing for you... Unless you eat the dead, that is, in which case... You must eat like a king.”

The bird turned its eye on him.

“Hello,” it spoke.

Burakh flinched and froze. His heartbeat grew loud against his tongue as panic overtook him. He remembered how ravens could mimic a human voice, and mimic it well — he forced himself to breathe deeply. It was a special bird, but not *that* special.

“Hello,” he repeated after it, humoring it almost.

It did then the worst thing Burakh could have thought it could do: it spoke again.

“Things are not looking too good, eh, Haruspex?”

Burakh felt his throat tighten.

“Ah,” it croaked, cavernously, shockingly human, “I shouldn’t linge’ her’ too long, then. I know what haruspices do t’ birds like me... Not that I don’ think many things can’t be fixed wit’ a good cut, but I don’ wanna find out, y’know?”

It hopped, hopped, hopped.

“Well, ye’ll find that out soon... Ah, say, say... D’ye think the other big bird knows how t’ make a better cut?”

“The other big birds...? You mean the orderlies?”

“Don’ be silleh’, will ye’? I mean the *other* big bird... The raven-coat...”

“... Bachelor? He’s a very good scientist, but not a surgeon, if that’s what you’re asking...”

“... Oh my gullet, there’s this one too... Pest, ‘s place is crawling with beaks like me... No, I don’ mean him either.”

“Then who?”

“Ah, pest, ye’ll see.”

It hopped, hopped.

“Mind the omen, will ye? Don’ leave us withou’ an eye at leas’. G’day, Haruspex. G’bye, blade. Hope I don’ see ye again.”

It took flight in a loud rustle of feathers, cawing past Burakh’s ear. He yelped — the noise pulled the door open.

In the opening, the Bachelor’s face appeared — covered with cloth from chin to nose, pale, browbone marked with a deep line of worry.

“Burakh,” he called. “Come in, will you? Come in.”

Burakh had every intention to do that, so he did. (He wondered if Dankovsky took any satisfaction in being obeyed, but he decided it was not his problem. There were the sick, the dying, the dead...

Another day, another toll.)

Burakh covered his own face, put on gloves, and awaited today’s orders.

“I’m very sorry for what I’m about to make you do, Burakh,” Dankovsky said — and he did seem genuinely apologetic. His voice, Burakh found, was... strained. Fraying imperceptibly. “But I know you’ll do it well.”

Burakh heard the Bachelor saying, under his heavy breath, muffled by his mask, “ *better than I could*”, and he almost fell on his ass in shock.

“Go on.”

“I need these organs collected. Well, we need these organs collected. With as little damage as possible, Burakh — this is important. I trust you to do your job well.”

“I would regardless of your wishes, oynon.”

“Thank you. Leave them in the icebox up there.”

Dankovsky was unsteady on his feet as he paced the curtained, divided rows of the improvised hospital. Still pale, too pale in the face, too — Burakh saw how his dark eyes felt so much bigger as he kept them wide open, as if he was trying to keep himself awake. *Bad night, huh?*

“Place’s emptier than it has been,” Burakh spoke; he was trying to make small talk, he was trying to get a good look at Dankovsky’s face.

“We’ve already... sorted those who could be saved from those who could not.” He marked a pause. “And, as you’ve guessed, we’ve kept here those who could not.”

“‘We’? ‘Already’?”

“Clara was there earlier. She helped with the sorting.” He marked a pause, and Burakh could tell he wasn’t finished. “Your friend was here, too,” he added as he slowly, slowly snaked a cut down a dead body. Burakh felt his throat tighten. Dankovsky looked at him — his eyes, yes, were nervous and dark, bloodshot in the eggy whites of them; he still carried in them a deep and rooted acknowledgment that Burakh felt brush against his face. He almost flinched. “He told me to thank you for saving his life, by the way.”

Burakh didn’t reply.

Dankovsky was leaning against one of the Theater walls, close to the door. His head hung low. His arms were tucked behind him, flush to the wall. Even behind his mask, Burakh could see he had gotten paler. (The pace of his breath had quickened. His black-clad legs looked like burnt matchsticks-stilts that swayed under his own weight. Burakh was starting to get a wicked, nervous hunch.)

Wiping his hands clean of blood, Burakh walked to him.

“You don’t seem too well.”

“I’m worried, Burakh.”

Worried sick?

“What about?”

“They have plans of sending the Inquisition. Have you heard that?”

Burakh tensed. The long, low whisper he had heard walking here crept up his spine like a cold spider.

“... I think I’ve caught wind of it.”

Quite literally.

Dankovsky had asked orderlies to bring the organs to the Stillwater. He’d whispered to Burakh he had plans of doing more tests on them, and had thanked him generously. (Burakh didn’t know if he whispered in confidence, or because his voice was so weak. He didn’t know why the Bachelor’s voice was so weak.)

He had given instructions on how to transport the organs safely, shown how to stabilize the ice box in order to minimize damage, and he had taken his leave. His strides were long and brisk; Burakh saw how he tore off his mask, took hold of a handgun he kept against his side, and tore through the burned district ahead briskly.

Burakh left too. He skirted the Theater carefully — he saw no crow. He didn't sigh with relief, even as he could have: not seeing the bird again unnerved him more than the alternative. He ran alongside the border of the Backbone and cut, barely-noticed, into the Flank. He didn't knock on Lara's door; he let himself in.

"You smell like meat," she said when she spotted him.

"You'd be surprised what a human body is made of," he chuckled.

She grimaced. She exited the room as he took off his smock and folded it on an arm of the couch, and she walked back in with a small basin of water and a cloth.

"Water should be clean."

"You shouldn't have, Gravel."

"I'd love my home not to smell like death when you come in. It makes me a little sad."

She did, indeed, have a sad smile on her thin lips.

"Thank you for the water," Burakh said.

"How are things going?" she asked.

He didn't answer. He couldn't even shrug.

"I don't like it when you don't talk, Cub."

"You don't like me too much when I do either," he laughed.

She pursed her lips and shrugged, a "*you might be right*".

"Will you sleep?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to wake you up?"

He thought about it. "Yes. Kick me out before sundown."

"Got it."

She slithered out of the room with the steps of a ghost. *Tippity-tippity...*

Burakh cleaned his face, his hands, his wrists, his fingernails. He set the basin aside and curled up on the couch.

Oh, this dream was of the *shapely* ones. The ones that held themselves together with solid rope instead of thin sewing thread. Burakh was *somewhere* — a somewhere that lived and breathed and existed at a time and in a place, when and where he, himself, didn't. Members of the Kin, in this self-contained, sand-and-rust room, guarded a child tall like a newborn calf (and a half). As all of his senses slowly dawned back on him, Burakh heard the screams. They made the walls rattle and shake. He approached the girl — he knew she was on his list, and he thought she knew that too. The brown depths of her big almond eyes alternated between playfulness and ennui. She stood very tall as he crouched down to her level — regal, powerful in her tiny size.

“Ah, Lost-and-Found, you’ve finally found lost me!” she peeped. “Sayn baina, you’re not who I expected to see.”

“Sayn baina, my girl. You are Taya, aren’t you?”

“The One-and-Only! The Only-One. Well, that’s not quite true. Neither is it for you.”

The words made Burakh flinch. He thought he knew the implications — he *did* know the implications; but he didn’t like to be reminded. He didn’t feel too good knowing he was cleaved in twain — or halves, or... whatever.

“Who did you expect then, girl?”

“We’ve been here a while... They’ve resorted to telling me stories... Not that I mind, they are pleasant. Some make me laugh. They told me Bai Uraggha would come by... Be khara, you have no horns, you have hooves.”

Burakh grazed the top of his head with his palm — he could never be sure, not in these times.

“Bish, khukheed, I guess I don’t...”

“Shee yuunde yerebshe, why could you have come?”

“... Because I had guessed you could help me.”

The girl squeaked with a delighted voice, and clapped.

“How fun, how fun! Ask me — call me Mother Superior, tegdegh, that is my name!”

“Say, Your Highness, do you know what an Udurgh is?”

She pouted — deep in thoughts, suddenly.

“It’s a place of riddles, or maybe it’s a time of songs.”

Very helpful. Burakh tried to keep his lips pulled in a genuine smile — that made his cheeks hurt — to encourage her.

Well, he had had informations — something about an ear, a lent ear, a... wishing-well past the Barrow, in the abandoned village out south. *Just gotta, now, huh?* He just had to. He thought he could picture the hole in the ground.

(Oh, like a grave, Burakh?)

He shook his head violently to throw the thought out. Taya looked at him with peering, interrogating eyes.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Burakh eventually thanked her.

“Say, khybyyn, will you come back?”

“Say, will you come back?”

“I do not know. I do not... control this.”

“Say, is that true?”

Fuck if I know, Burakh thought — but kept himself from swearing in front of the little girl.

“Do you need me to?” he asked instead.

“It is boring here. Don’t you feel it is?”

Burakh didn’t reply — the screams had not waned. He... didn’t think *boring* was the word he would choose.

“Don’t you have company?” He realized who was missing. “Can’t your father keep you company?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him. Say, will you come back? I would like to get out... Oh, I’d like to go to the village, to see my family among the tall grasses, to whisper in the Ear too...”

The Termitary was closed. It was closed, and guards lined the doors like hounds.

Unless he could...

“I’ll do my best.”

“Will that be enough?”

Burakh could offer nothing but a slow shrug. It would have to.

He woke up with Lara’s touch on his shoulder.

The light seeping into the room was bright and yellow still.

“Gra—” he was ready to admonish her — his words were cut short when he noticed she wasn’t alone.

She wasn’t alone, and her traits were tautly pulled in an apologetic, worried, pale face. Burakh jerked up, jolting awake, and nervously tried to sit in a proper manner.

“Doctor Burakh?”

The silhouette side-stepped from behind Lara. The shape in the room drew a bright-haired woman, her russet eyes peering at Burakh from behind loose locks like a reptile from between tall grasses. Her strong-bumped nose and low gaze gave her a resolute, adamant look.

“Yes. Yes, that’s me.”

“Yulia Lyuricheva sent me. She wants to discuss some matters with you.”

“Very well. I’ll come see her.”

The woman squinted, her tawny eyes squished by reddened lids.

“I don’t think you understand,” she spoke slowly. “She wants to discuss these *now*. I am to bring you to her house. You are to follow me.”

Burakh raised his hands as a gesture of surrendering. Sure. *Fuck it*, he’d follow the girl. He put his smock back on — when the woman had walked to the door, waiting for him to join her, Lara grabbed his elbow. She mouthed “*what’s happening?*”. Burakh could only reply “*I don’t know*”. (He had a suspicion.)

Burakh closed the door behind him, and the woman walked in front. She had long, brisk steps, and kept her arms close to her sides. With her grey knitted sweater, her mittens and her sandy scarf, she was wearing a pair of men’s brown jodhpurs and tall riding boots, the top edge of which had wrinkled behind her knee. Burakh had to jog to keep up with her strides, and they made it to the Trammel like brought in by gusts of wind.

“Aysa,” said Yulia the second they both walked in, a sustained relief in her voice.

“Look who I brought,” replied the messenger — her tone was playful, but her voice flat and solemn.

“Burakh,” Yulia said as she turned to him.

“You wanted to see me.”

“I did. Close the door behind you. Don’t stay too close to the windows. Come here.”

She ushered the two newcomers to a study smelling potently of cinnamon, dust and tea. Even the warmth of the scents swirling in the house couldn’t peel the ghostly, arctic look off her very pale irises and very pale face. The worry on it didn’t help — her almost-translucent skin bore a sustained purple under her eyes, clawing some more at her intense composure.

The messenger — Aysa, was it? — leaned against the glass panels of a closed bookshelf and waited for Yulia to speak. In a corner, almost startling Burakh — AGAIN! — another woman had tucked herself away. Less confident than Aysa, she, too, was pale in the face, her eyes wide and frightened, sickly — sick with worry. She fiddled with her own hands like she didn’t trust them not to escape her.

Lastly, Burakh spotted, not far from Yulia, sitting in a wide bergère chair — Evan—miss Yan. She looked pensive — not quite *fearful* in the way the unknown woman was; she didn't look at Burakh when he came in. She readjusted her legs so her gilded dress fell more modestly — a first — on her thighs, and brought her cheek into the cup of her hand, her elbow dipping into the cushiony chair-arm. On a table by her seat were scattered boxes and adorned bowls, obviously not belonging to the host, from which overspilled delicate jewelry — Burakh realized Eva must have come here often.

“Do you know the methods of the Inquisition?” Lyuricheva began, sharp, loud, and straightforward.

“Can't say I do,” Burakh replied.

“Ah, it does not matter regardless. You have no time to familiarize yourself with them left.”

She cracked open a cigarette case and nervously shoved one of them past her thin lips. She offered the case to Burakh.

“A smoke?”

“No, thank you. I'm trying to quit,” Burakh lied.

“Succeeding?”

“Kind of,” he lied again.

“Lucky you. And good luck.”

She snapped the case shut — it made the sound of clacking teeth.

Here were the cards as they lay: Inquisition was coming tomorrow with daybreak, and Yulia knew from the grey-faced young woman — her name was Voronika, she bore an Inquisitor's last name, she was daughter of one and... messenger bird, somehow, who had found her way to the Trammel by some miracle. (Yulia was skeptical of miracles; what she knew was that roads come intertwined. That she had made them intertwined.)

As they lay: Inquisition was going to target him, and the Bachelor, and the touchy-feely girl for their own gain, for their own access into the crevices and wounded hollows of the town — Lyuricheva, grave and strained, said she feared for Rubin; when Burakh asked why, she said the roads were *chatty*. (It wasn't that Burakh didn't believe it — he did. He had heard them too. He feared knowing what they knew.)

As they lay: here was what the three women (bar Eva, who did little but worry the inside of her jaw, and listen to Yulia speak longly) said:

“They will find hollows in you. Their eyes have the bite of chisels, and their voice the strength of hammers. They will find the knots, and they will judge if they are worth undoing. They'll find

your fault lines. They will make you bend the knee if they benefit from you being closer to the ground.”

And then, too:

“They don’t touch you, never with their hands; that’s against the rules. They won’t need to, anyways. They’ll tear words from the depths of their souls and you’ll walk to the gallows on your own, you’ll tie a rope around your own neck. It’s said they wear gloves to not get their hands dirty, but they never do, they never need to.”

Burakh had looked at his own scarred palms, at the lingering red tint on his fingernails.

As they lay: Yulia came as a warning. As her own kind of omen. (*A dove*, Burakh had thought. *A fidgety dove with an empty crop.*)

Burakh learned this all in what felt like one swooping, solid slap. His ears rang; not with the worried, chilling pitch of Lyuricheva’s voice, but with the weight of the announcement. He noticed the black leather holster that lined the shoulder openings of Lyuricheva’s sage green waistcoat. He watched her take, then fit a weapon — a Nagant revolver, just like he once had been given to carry — into it, and hide it as she slipped on her long emerald coat. As if to compose herself, she flattened the wide black bat-wings of its lapel and adjusted her cravat, that mauve cloud that clung at her pale, tense neck.

“Afraid?” he asked.

“No,” she replied. “Cautious.”

“Well,” mumbled Voronika, “I am.”

When silence had fallen back and the dust metaphorically settled, the blinding haze of this information dissipating like mist swept by sun rays, Burakh noticed a lingering, languishing tune hanging in the air. He turned to it, he sought it with his whole face like one does a pleasant smell. Unmistakably, cello. He remembered Yulia mentioning she knew how to play the first time they had met.

“What is this that I hear?” Burakh asked.

The women — including Eva, this time — shared a gaze like an unspoken vision. Yulia spoke:

“*Für Elise*, arranged for cello.”

“I got that. Let me rephrase. *Who* is this that I hear?”

They didn’t speak.

Burakh followed the sound — not too dissimilar from following, in dreams, a voice; it was thin and fraying too, ariose and airy nonetheless. There was a mastery to it — it was just slowly unraveling. Burakh pulled on the melody like on Ariadne’s thread, and walked to the next room over. The four women watched him linger by the door, back straight, eyes peering.

He walked in and the music slapped him across the face like a furious breeze, like a crashing wave, and he almost stumbled. It was buzzing, pained, it had picked up a pace Burakh was sure the original melody didn't carry. The Bachelor's hands were these pale, flailing things on the instrument's neck — as if frantically seeking a pulse, and pulling it out of the pulsating strings. Burakh realized he didn't have his gloves on. He almost shut the door immediately. The music came to an abrupt, animal stop, and Burakh's mouth twitched with guilt.

“Burakh.”

His voice rang somber like death-knell.

“Oynon.”

“You've heard her.”

Burakh pinched his lips as he couldn't figure out if he meant Lyuricheva, or the melody. “I have,” he still said. “What are you doing here?”

“I have talked to her. To Voronika.” He clicked his tongue. “This might be my tolling bell.” He shook his head. “I'm at a loss. At last, I am at a loss.”

“You're scared, aren't you? I can see it in your eyes.”

Oh, not just his eyes. His wrists strained with the effort of keeping his composure to play. His brows were partitioned by a worried trench that Burakh found deeper than it was earlier. His neck was taut, ribbed by tendons as he swallowed with difficulty, tried to speak, held back. His dark eyes had darkened some more — not with the organic tint of waning sunlight, but with something overwrought and haunted.

The Bachelor pulled his hands back — as if suddenly aware of their bareness, he settled them between his chest and the instrument, shielding them with the rust-color wood.

“You've heard her,” he repeats, voice blanched and bleak. Then, he chuckled bitterly. “They've had me in their sights for a while. They've tried to meddle in my affairs, in my... research. They'll point their fingers on me. I can see it already. The accusatory... divine finger.”

Burakh pinched his lips.

“You're being arrogant, oynon,” he said, and Dankovsky hitched his eyes up his face. “You will not be their only target. Lyuricheva and the Inquisitor's daughter have said we would all be damned to try to resist them. They'll come for you as much as they'll come for me.”

“And you're being self-centered, Burakh,” Dankovsky replied, a pulled smirk on the lips. “Not just me, and not just you. The weird girl will be in their grip too. The Architects, Lyuricheva, Rubin, likely. Think beyond the two of us, will you?”

He had a mocking tone on the tongue, this sibilant, serpentine snicker. It fell from him fast, and his eyes grew hazy with sorrow — and something else that Burakh couldn't quite decipher.

“Have you ever considered angels, Burakh? How do you imagine them?”

Burakh squinted. The line sounded... foreign in Dankovsky's mouth. He felt like he had held it in for long.

“I don’t. They’re not really part of my... landscape of mythoi. Why are you asking me this? You didn’t strike me as the... religious type.”

“I am not, Burakh,” Dankovsky tempered. “This is not about religion. This is about nightmares. This is about unshakeable, inhuman forces. About powers able to twist a pin into a coil spring to make it fit better into the bigger... machine of things. *Machination* of things.”

“You’re really scared of the Inquisition, huh?” Dankovsky pinched his lips, didn’t answer. Burakh noticed how he had worried the bottom one with teeth until he had drawn blood, and how they had paled and chapped. “Well,” he asked, “how do you imagine angels?”

Dankovsky put his gloves back on, one after the other, modestly, almost.

“Like spears of thunder and light. Like pillars that stand not on ground but on javelin heads. Able to pin you down like a dead butterfly.”

Burakh watched him stand up and lean the cello against a wall — methodical, careful.

“Poetic,” Burakh said.

“Poetry will be all I have left very soon.”

He took his coat. His arms seemed weak; he struggled to move them and slip on his sleeves. Burakh made a gesture to help him, but Burakh turned away — he wasn’t rejecting him, he was just hurried, harrowed, fidgety; he had eyes for nothing but his own worry.

“I need to rest,” he mumbled. His voice sounded parched. “I have a pounding migraine.”

“You should. Twyre’s in bloom.”

“Oh, this I know.”

He gave a small tilt of the head for a goodbye, and exited the Trammel with wide strides. Burakh watched him leave. He watched him, down the road, lean against a wall, head low, legs unsteady. Burakh felt his breath hitch.

The Bachelor took his path again, and Burakh watched him disappear in the pollen mist. He told himself he needed to visit him later. If he couldn’t today, then tonight, or in the morning — even if that meant just peeking into the attic like some kind of weirdo. He promised himself he would. (He had a hunch. A creeping, crawling feeling. Something nauseating tickled the back of his throat with a cold, sickening apprehension.) (That’s all he had, these days.)

He counted the coins in his pockets and decided to try his luck at getting a piece of bread somewhere.



As sundown approached, Burakh remembered the shapely dream — he hurried to Shekhen. It was calm. Silent. (Dead — no, *dormant* .) A lone Bride saw him approach, but didn't spare him more than a spinescent glance. She dragged her feet, her wrists and knees against the loose soil below, covering her fawny skin in its umber dust. Agile and brisk as a doe, she didn't leave.

In the middle of the forsaken village, surrounded by the sound of wind in the cloth of tents and stretched leatherwork left to wither, the “ear”, a rock—the rock was rooted like an altar centerpiece. Burakh approached it.

Its twilit, coarse granitic stone was a sandy mauve sprawl in the anchor of the tall grass. In its middle like a snaking wound — blood. (Blood from an ear: torn eardrum, barotrauma, head injury... *No, no. None of this.*) Blood so dark in the dim evening it almost looked black. Burakh leaned to it, and its vapors rose to his dry face like swirls of incense—sage and ambergris. His heart began to pound.

It grew so loud, swelling in his chest and throat, that his vision seared. Something akin to the strike of divine grace hit him across the chest. *Quick* — he rummaged through what he was carrying almost recklessly, dropping dried herbs and pills to pull out bottles. One was empty — he filled it to the neck. There still was more blood — he emptied clear water on growing herbs and filled this one too.

Then, there was no more.

Burakh held up the bottles, and they almost escaped his grip with their *weight*. It strained his wrists. It wasn't a *belligerent* weight, it wasn't *fighting* him — it was reveling in its importance, it forced him to prove he could hold it up like the torches of victory.

And he did.

The warm liquid was flames, the glass bottle the vessel to harvest lightning.

He kept the bottles on him like something impish and fast could steal them from him — if it tried, it would have to kill him first. He pressed the vials against his side like a protective animal. Dusk had set. The blackcurrant sky was low and thick, the air sweet with the heady smell of twyre, hard to cut through. As he skirted the cemetery to get back to the workshop, a light by the Crowstone caught his eye. In the warmth of a small fire, he spotted, crouched all small and curled up, Murky's silhouette. He walked to her. He walked to the Stone, to Murky, and to—

You are kidding me.

You have to be kidding me.



This, Burakh hadn't seen, but someone else must have, but something else did: Dankovsky had walked — well, *staggered* would be more accurate — back to the Stillwater in mid-afternoon. He had gotten paler, since this morning; darker in the eyes, blue-er under them, greyer on the cheeks; and the hanging feeling in his throat had started to feel tight.

He was scared shitless, it would be a shameful lie to say he wasn't. The news of the Inquisition involving itself in the Town's matters didn't come as a surprise, but it came as a shock regardless.

Inquisitors and their Law, their goddamn Law — the Polyhedron would hover above it like a star-headed pin. It wouldn't yield to them, just like it didn't to the weight of the sky or the painfully, beautifully mathematical pressures of gravity. The Stamatins' creation didn't stand a chance — not with the... how-many-were-there arrest and death warrants on Andrey that he had so far outrun, but couldn't escape.

They only liked chimeras when they benefited them — and the Tower, both all- and half-bird, both all- and half-sword, both all- and half-angel, both all- and half-curse, both all- and half-miracle, would send their hard gaze back at them — and they would believe in its unfathomable cruelty.

But it isn't cruel. It is not kind, either. It is just as the Inquisitors think of themselves: righteous and forward — the Tower went forward-up, and it could so easily appear to be able to evade them

(Chances are, it was.)

They wouldn't be able to make it bend at the knee — as it has no knee to bend. This wonderful, disgraceful, tenace, taunting thing. This devouring shape that could fit into itself twice an Inquisitor's arm, no matter its reach, if they were to dare to pry it open — oh, it could fit it three times, four times, five; from his window, Dankovsky counted the planes on its shapes like so many crushing bites.

(Chimeras. People that devoured. Things that devoured. People that devoured things, things that devoured people... Yes, there was a motif there. A shared motif. Neither of them knew this, especially not Dankovsky: it wasn't his time to realize it. Not yet. Not now. Not in this play. Not on this page.

Soon, yes.

Soon he'd understand devouring.

He was starting to understand devouring.

He shed off his coat and went to bed — for a catnap, he thought; he still had a lot to do.

The fever crept on.
The fever was creeping on.
Then, the cough started.)

He knew he was ailed when sleep brushed its feathered wings against his face, and they were cold. Still, he found himself dreaming: he was by the river, back against the hot, damp bank. Shoeless, vestless, with his gloves still — too bare for his, or anyone's sake. The shadow of the Polyhedron soared above him like a new-century aeroplane.

As the sun balanced on the Tower's shoulder, blinding him, he reached out his left hand — opened it wide like lungs pinned down for dissection, strained and swollen all the same. His fingers grazed the magnetic, magnificent mirror facets of her forbidden-fruit-like, unbearably light body; brushed her formidable crystal skin with a care, a tenderness almost, that Dankovsky hadn't given anything—anyone else. His fingertips ran down her stairs with a meticulousness reserved to the most precious of things, and he tried to pick her from the ground like a priceless edelweiss flower from the snow. Her stem, sharp, thorny, unruly, escaped him — it pierced him, through his leather glove into his palm.

The pain—shot through him, violent, burning; it anchored itself in his hand and shot for his heart, overtook his whole body in an all-consuming, christic, cataleptic, Ecstasy. Her stem was the Angel's spear, her power a firey, soaring Seraphim. He choked. He panted, heaved, gleeful, overcome with Passion and Bliss — he had done it. He had captured lightning.

As the pain tore through him he held onto it, onto her, The(i)a and theomachist fighting to be the one to grasp — and he was losing. He realized he was losing. He was not mad: he was euphoric. Rapturous. He'd found an Angel on her pin to rival god. He was pulled towards the firmament. He was pinned to the ground as her stem split his palm apart, widening the wound; stuck between her formidable, unthinkable weight and the hard, hot, hollowing earth. He bled onto her and he felt her bleed onto him: an angelic, pink water spilled from her edges as if she was sobbing. And he was too: exhilaration poured from him and he couldn't contain it.

He closed his hand to hold her. She dug herself into his palm. His wrist went numb from the pain. His fingers gave out. She stood, still, like a thorn in his flesh. Like a sharp bone in his flank. Like a blade near his heart — not *in*, near, just next to it. He spoke to praise her, and his lungs filled with a red purl — a grotesque, humiliating, *human* gurgle: he was bleeding. It struck him, and struck him so hard he jerked awake: she reveled in blood.

He woke up — and where once pooled blood now blood something heavier, dense like a clot. He tore himself out of bed and his knees buckled once. He put on his coat. Its weight was unbearable. He fastened his cravat pin and felt something scrape his throat like its sharp end had grazed his skin.

He walked out.

The thick, muddy, rusty air opposed resistance. All of its weight — its unwieldy, cruel weight — pressed against him as if to shove him to the ground and crush him.

He walked into the steppe like it called him; he marched to it like soldier to grave — in another time, another life, another story, he'd have been one, red coat and all. But he wasn't.

And his fate was worse.

As the light dimmed, his vision waned. The fever overtook him like lunar eclipses swallow the sun — not to be given back.

His knees, again, buckled.

Shape-shifting, wicked witch.

She'd torn his soft palate with her rusty hooks.

Burakh thought two things before the fever took his body into its maw and ground him into thin bone-paste: first, that the burning wave that bit at him meant Murky was safe — wherever she was, wherever she (or it) had taken her. Second, there was a chance — but maybe he wanted to think that to give Clara a chance, because the poor soul hadn't gotten much of it — that the shape-shifting witch was no witch at all, but — he remembered Dankovsky's words — *the illness [that] kept shifting shape*. He remembered Dankovsky's voice, and a dreadful, formidable shiver grew inside of him like a peal of thunder before tearing through him like a lightning-blade from the top of his head to his unsteady heels.

He'd be deceived and lied to — if not by the girl-witch, then by the polymorphous sickness.

No.

No, he hadn't. The terms were clear.

The terms had been perfectly clear.

A wave of fortitude made his lungs swell — of maybe that was the blood, or maybe that was the fluid — *fine*, he thought, *we'll play*.

He felt like the weight of the blood in his pockets and bag (and on his hands. And to his ears. And beneath his tongue.) would split the earth in half as he walked it, and make it swallow him whole. Wicked girl.

Wicked thing.

De ceux qui préfèrent le feu

At the game of chess with bile and bone, Burakh found himself a massive fucking loser. He had crawled back to his lair, limping like a wounded animal. His hands flailed, trying to tear themselves out of his own grasp, burning. He had ordered Sticky to keep clear of him — or at least

he thinks he ordered, he wasn't sure if his voice had made it out of him — and watched him stumble back, walk out of the lair and into the entrance with a wild, terrified look in his curious eyes.

Burakh uncorked a bottle of blood — it was heavy like lead, a clumpy, jam-like merlot color that kissed thoroughly the sides of its vial, almost staining it through. He recklessly dumped it into the brewery; the liquid hit the already-poured tincture with a swishing, scorching sound, not unlike a hiss — or the sound of metal branding a bull's flank. Vapors rose from the machine and they clawed at Burakh's face, their violent warmth weaving into his fever haze. He almost fell to his knees. They buckled under him and he dragged himself to the bed. It was violently cold under his touch. The embrace of sheets and covers felt lacerating. He kicked his boots off and extricated himself from his smock, then his sweater; it clung to his sweat with a hungry bite. He threw the blanket over himself. Its coolness clawed at his bare, weak, shaking arms as he pulled on his undershirt, trying to tear off of him the clammy, weighted, drowning feeling of the fever. He didn't quite succeed. His head felt like it sank through his pillow and he was asleep with what felt like a hammer to the skull.



THE PALE BEAST walks to him, who's also you.

THE PALE BEAST speaks, and you understand it:

It's a long way down, Dreamer.

It's a long way beneath the skin.

(He shivers, he turns and twitches. Something beneath his skin is boiling — his blood, his blood, maybe. It whistles with a high-pitch sear like an iron brand on rib-meat. Fever coils around his throat like a gallows-rope, pouring its unbearable burn down his neck and chest.)

You're barely getting started. Do you feel how your fingers tingle with the effort of... flipping pages? Do you feel how your eyes struggle to catch

my words

drifting

across

the page?

It's a long way down, Dreamer.

Wipe your lips clean of that dried blood.

I'll tear your growing hunger apart like a ripe pomegranate, and stuff in the hollow alcoves where seeds once nestled thoughts of erratically-beating hearts. I love red things.

And you do too. That is why you're here.

And you love tearing things apart. (Butcher.)

Oh, how alike we are.

We're only getting started.

Burakh tore himself awake and, damp from a febrile sweat, legs barely holding him up, he crawled out of bed, put his smock on without bothering with his usual sweater, and limped to the brewery. *Thirty more minutes, he thought, thirty more...*

Sticky had not left the corner he had backed himself in. He kept the distance between Burakh and himself like he was holding a spear.

“Where are you going?” Sticky asked, his voice trembling — he was trying to be so, so brave.

“Outside,” Burakh croaked. “I need some fresh air.”

The night breeze felt like it could bite his skin off. The darkness felt like it was seeping through all of his fractures; through the crack of his lips as they dried, through his mouth that he could not close, through the minuscule break of bone he had, and had healed years ago, on his bad knee. The illness found any hollow to seep through like blood did through the mesh of gauze. He walked, wandered, arms limp, steps so painfully heavy he felt the earth shiver beneath them, as if wounded.

*Thank-you-me-not my elision
my salve, my salvation?
See—watch—watch over the sea
of the sick
waves
as one
depths meddled, met at once, muddled,
finally dark, damp,
in the merciful earth-womb,
cradled,
cradle all-water-as-one
all tears as one
at once!*

The headache was worsening. The noise—the voice—rang through his jaw like a wire to sew it shut.

*Forget-me-not my correption,
my ply, my rot, my corruption!
Your ache beautiful and raw
raw earth
red earth
raw-red-earth-roe
roe-worm-roe-you
your ache as part of the ache of aches
your rot as part of the rot of rots.*

Burakh passed in the shadow of the Crowstone and cursed it, cursed it twice for good measure. Forcing his thoughts into shapes felt like dislocating his temporal bone, meaning seeping into and out of the trench between it and the sphenoid, where the noise crawled in its wake.

*Fight-me-not—fight yourself for once,
why should you take,
then take from me?
Spurn the spin of my needle
my merciful blade,
rend me—it won't make you whole!
Must I be ischaemia
must you be bloodletting?
Must you pin me in your neverending hunger
hunger neverending
why can't I want too?
Mercy!
Mercy!
Mercy!
I am life, shelter me!*

Burakh didn't hear this — hey, wait, he didn't hear that.

Who did? Who could have?

He heard the characteristic sound of a weight hitting the grass, the muffled noise of earth dipping under buckling knees, elbows, chest. Burakh's hazy eyes scraped something in the distance, a moving outcropping that grew from the steppe like a tooth. Brides — four, five of them; they were agitated. They crowded, flailing weakened arms and legs like the branches of weeping willows. Surrounded, between them, lying still: a silhouette of black coat, black hair, cramped gloved hands that extended out, as if having torn themselves from the body to grasp something right out of reach.

Oh no. Oh no, no, no.

Burakh walked to the gathering, steps scuffing the soil that burst in dry clouds like disturbed silt, feet sinking under the weight of the illness as it crushed his spine. As he did so, the Brides hauled

the fallen Bachelor — it was him, it couldn't *not* be him, and he was so horribly limp, and he was so horribly *pliant*: his body, as if weightless, yielded to the Brides' hands as they carried him between all five of them, one per limb, one for his heavy, pale—*unthinkably pale* head. The Brides started walking towards the town. One of them began to sing, and the others followed.

They were not fast, but Burakh still couldn't keep up. His lungs felt like they had turned to blades and were sinking in the rotting meat below his ribs.

As the cortege marched on, one Bride, then another, then another joined — they didn't touch the sick, but they sang. They sang and danced, feet scraping the earth until they bled; they wailed and flailed as if ailed themselves. Burakh immediately realized that they slowed down as they made their way through the streets; they were, in a morbid funeral procession, showing the sick doctor to the townsfolk who brought hands on their horrified mouths, whose eyes widened in aghast realization; a few crossed themselves, and a few fell to their knees, too. Their chants rang and echoed like long eulogies of defeat. Windows and doors opened then closed, as if the houses themselves couldn't bear the sight (or so Burakh felt, or so Burakh thought).

The cortege wove through streets, paths and narrows, and the longer it went on, Burakh thought, the more it looked like carrion birds parading a dead deer. He felt his throat tighten, the grasp of the illness toying with his strength as if to see just how far he was willing to take it. When he realized the cortege was headed for the Stillwater, he decided he was willing to take it *there*.

He had time, as the Brides paraded and eulogized the Bachelor's—(it wasn't a corpse, *it is not a corpse, you must keep telling yourself it isn't a corpse*)— through emptying streets; he still, almost, didn't make it. Right as they appeared by the Stillwater steps, fever almost scythed Burakh off his feet, and he stumbled forward. A steel-heavy, crushing fog fell on him all at once, and he didn't hear himself speak:

“What happened?” As if he didn't damn well know — he didn't want to sound like a weirdo who had followed them there.

“Erdem is sick,” replied a Bride, and she wasn't sad, and she wasn't happy: her voice was a perfect, placid grey; her eyes on Burakh were too, as if just waiting for his reaction.

“We brought him here to rest,” spoke another; her voice was raspy from singing.

“Yes, rest.”

“Put him down,” Burakh ordered, and the fever wrung his voice out of him until it was nothing but a croak. “I'll carry him.”

“Do not touch him,” cautioned a Bride, “you could get sick.” Burakh shivered at how calm she sounded about it.

“It cannot get worse than this for me,” Burakh spat, and looked away as the Brides landed piercing gazes on him, then shared them between themselves, and nodded.

They brought the Bachelor to the ground, not really helping Burakh swing one of his arms around his shoulders; watching him do it with curious eyes as they stepped back.

*Ô—ô-my-stretching-suture
my-surrendering-stitch
give out—give up—give yourself in
to the straight-forward-cut
give yourself to me
let me spider-scurry
you won't be able to catch me.*

Burakh grabbed one of the Bachelor's wrists to pin his arm in place around his neck; right where glove and shirt parted to reveal a gap of skin, Burakh found he wasn't even *warm* — fever reaped them both at once, its teeth crushing Burakh's skull, until his head felt too heavy to bear, and Dankovsky's ribs to tear out of him a pathetic, breathless gasp.

*My-surrendering-stitch
my lost sinking soul
let me tear from you the itch—
let me cradle your head—
that comes with fearing the death—the dead.*

Dankovsky's legs didn't straighten beneath him. His knees raked the floorboards, and he was pulling Burakh down with him. He wasn't even heavy—this worried Burakh: he wasn't even heavy, as if the swift scythe of the illness had bled him out of all matter. Still, Burakh barely managed to keep him up as he walked with a precarious list, one misstep away from sinking, too, into the eager jaws of unconsciousness,

*Let me be the knife — for once
be meat.
Let me be the knife — for once
be me.
Let meat be the blade — at once
beat me.
Try—fail—surrender.
Surrender—sink—stretch.
Be broken and set;
be dead and buried,
be whole in the earth,
be hole in the earth,
be blade in the earth,
bleed.*

The Bachelor heaved; a grotesque, scraping cough tore through his throat, and a thin trickle of red dripped from the slit of his pinched mouth.

Burakh dragged him up the stairs; hauled him like he could, like one would a horse carcass.

Damn that beast, too, damn it to hell.

Swearing wouldn't fix anything, but it gave Burakh a last slap of strength to yank Dankovsky out of the entryway and into the bed. (Swearing wouldn't fix anything — this was no Beast. This was a whole different bird...)

When Burakh turned to run off, Rubin was in the way; his eyes were wild, baffled, pupils swollen with a tangible fear that dripped down his face.

“Cub,” he called, his voice fraying, stricken.

“Don't come near me,” Burakh choked, “don't come near him.” He used his shoulder to carve himself a way out as Rubin stood in the doorway — he recoiled at the touch, and Burakh turned to him feverishly. “Wait,” he croaked, and covered his mouth with the hollow of his elbow, “do. Do. Cover your mouth. Put on gloves. Watch over him,” he asked, “*please*. I only need a few hours.”

“What are you—”

Burakh rummaged through his smock and pulled out a jumble of pills and a single potion.

“Keep an eye on him. Just a few hours, *please* .”

“He has twenty at most,” Rubin replied, fright unraveling his voice into wispy threads.

“I'll come back.”

Burakh crawled out of the crushing, suffocating Stillwater, and threw himself into the streets — alongside Brides, townfolk had come to gawk. *Shit, shit, shit*. He tried to tell them off and all that climbed out of his throat was a breathless, torn gasp.

He didn't even notice the lady of the house who, accompanied by the Mathematician whose coat she was wearing, had come to find her place swarmed like a newly-erected tomb. Rubin almost didn't let her in.

He ran to the workshop. When he stumbled forward, Sticky, who hadn't left, jumped back and away from the brewery. Burakh fished the vial out of it, and the boiling water didn't even make him flinch. He brought it to his lips. The damn thing—the damn thing was *heavy as plumb*, or maybe he was too weak to hold even that. The smell struck him like a spear — potent, pungent, deep and dark and rotten. His arm protested with a sharp strike of pain when he pulled it up to pinch his nose and, one less sense to worry about, he drank it all.

It slid down his throat with the consistency of wet mud, or honey.

Electrical shock seemed to course through him; lightning, divine grace. He *felt* how the illness recoiled, its spidery legs curling like a grasping fist, tearing from him the lining of his stomach like it wanted to turn him into hide.

If that works, Burakh thought, *if that works*, he could heal the whole town.

He could heal Dankovsky—feverish, on his bed, away.

He crawled into bed and as a last angry, powerful, maniacal burst, the illness tore through his throat with a bout of cough, and pinned him under its weight to his bed. He sunk into sleep—he drowned in it like he had been thrown overboard.

What struck him first was the fever — no, no, not a fever; this was flames.

In the distance — well, *distance*, everything was only as relative as his thread allowed him to sew —, a silhouette stood before the blaze; someone here waiting for him.

He walked on and found:

“Oynon...?”

It was; he turned to Burakh. His eyes were sunken in with unspeakable sorrow. Burakh turned his head to the blaze and, in the erratic waltz of flecks and flames, could make out two shelves; the height of giants, full of books to overflow, they were slowly crumbling down, bleeding out pages and spines like an animal gutted. Between them, a tall door was stubbornly closed. *Thank god*, Burakh thought — he could see black velvet seep beneath it, reaching out like spider legs. He sat by the Bachelor. He found under his thighs the familiar wood of an amphitheater bench. As the thought came to him, the shelves came tumbling down like a gigantic deck of cards; the dark-stained wood howling, as if in pain, as it fell onto the pyre. Books sprawling, hanging agape like open wounds, Burakh could decipher a few things on their pages; treaties of medicine, of ethics, of platonic philosophy. Burakh was starting to have an inkling of what the scene before his eyes could be.

When he brought his eyes above the fire and the dark door, his suspicions were as close to confirmed as could be: a blazon hanging above, bound to a floating piece of wall (the last of Burakh’s worries, truly), depicted a Rod of Asclepius in the form of a pointing dagger, the black snake coiling around it turning an enamel eye to Burakh as he watched. Balancing on the pommel, a skull was flanked of wings, reminiscent of carved mementos on the graves of old.

“What good was it to collect so many books to then see them turn into nothing but kindling? What a pitiful death.” Dankovsky began; and his voice, ghostly, thin with unmistakable ache, lost itself into the flames like it couldn’t withstand not burning alongside the object of its sorrow. “They speak of witches holding their heads high as they are sent to the stakes, but I don’t think that ever was true. A burning is a most painful end. The slowest of devourments that pries pieces of you still, everywhere, all at once, never eating you fully enough until the very end, where you have left yourself behind and cannot even savour that last, merciful, crushing bite. Yes, most painful.”

Burakh brought his eyes on Dankovsky. He was unkempt, disarranged. Some of his hair was plastered to his face by sweat or spilled water; his cravat was nowhere to be seen and his shirt hung open like the mouth of a great whale, pearls of sweat in the hollow where the Bachelor's clavicles met lining its lapels like rows of teeth. His gloved hands were gripping, on his thighs, at his slacks, like he wanted to tear off him the skin beneath. His smirk — his usual smirk haunted his lips, his face moving around it like it would crack if it let it fall. His jaw was working powerfully, as if holding in a long, sharp cry.

"You wouldn't say that," Burakh eventually said. "You wouldn't say 'what good was it' as if it was just all lost... What good is it to plant a forest if it will fall prey to wildfires? (Dankovsky laughed at this, eyes on the blaze, and Burakh realized maybe it wasn't the best way to go about it.) What good is it to care for one's body if it will rot in the end?"

"You jest, Burakh, but I ask myself this quite often." The Bachelor took a long breath, filling his lungs with smoke. "Why shave, why wash your face, why wash your body, why feed it, why clothe it, if in the end it will be meaningless? I ask myself this often..."

Burakh's entire body tensed. There was a longing in the Bachelor's voice, a... self-destructive edge that Burakh had no idea how to handle. He feared he would cut his own hands on it if he attempted to offer a hand.

"I think this is all (*he gestures*) this is about. Well... Was about. If I... search and I search and I find... maybe it will be all worth it."

He dragged his polished shoe across the soil. Burakh could see it was a vibrant clay red.

"You search for it, Burakh. You wait for it. You wait for the — the strike, the lightning rod, the sudden stab of divine grace; you wait for it and it never comes."

In the silence torn asunder by the howling blaze, he asked:

"Are you religious, Burakh?"

"Jesus Christ, no. Well, Jesus Ch—you know what I mean."

"I do. I do."

He nodded. He nodded...

He weighed his words carefully.

"Divinity again, then? You've mentioned it before. You think about this a lot, don't you?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Don't mind me."

Dankovsky bit the inside of his cheek, eyes pensive (which Burakh saw, because he was looking).

“It might be one thing I envy them for,” he said, not elaborating on this ‘*them*’ — not wanting to elaborate; too wounded to elaborate. “This belief in an... inherent worthiness. In an inherent *something* after all the things that come. A promise. Something to... turn to.”

He turned to Burakh. He looked at him and saw him.

“I’ve walked to the top of the Tower, Burakh, and there was no one above. There was nothing but the immense, sprawling sky and all of its stars, many dead already — not even *them* can withstand the hold of the *end*.”

Burakh didn’t speak. He digested the Bachelor’s words slowly, and tried to not shirk his drilling, desperate gaze.

“And can’t that be enough, oynon? The stars?”

The seriousness on the Bachelor’s face flickered. A smile cracked his mouth open, and the gold of flames caught itself reflected on the spit on his teeth.

“Maybe for you, Burakh. Maybe for you. I hope so, for you.”

And he fell silent — *fell* is the word. His shoulders slumped suddenly, his arms became limp. His gaze pinned itself on the fire; it was still going strong. Burakh could make out the faint, faint smell of gasoline in the forsaken dance of embers and sparks. *This was Dankovsky’s work* was starting to dawn on him. To weight on him, crushing, miserable, inescapable. He didn’t know what he had been brought here to do — this was not something he could *mend*, surely. He wasn’t sure how he could sew it together with the Town — besides the fact that the town, too, was slowly consumed in flames.

Brought as a witness, then. (He witnessed Dankovsky when he threw him a sidelong glance: he thought he had heard him crush up a sob.)

Dankovsky slipped fingers in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette case. It was a sterling silver, catching and spitting back reflections of the fire like it, itself, was enraged, violent and mean; Dankovsky opened it and brought a white cigarette rod to his lips.

“How can you burn such a thing...?” Burakh asked, eyes on the pyre.

“Like a matchstick.” Dankovsky replied. “You start with the head.”

His words — unbearably heavy and somber, caught Burakh at the throat more than the fire did. Dankovsky got up. He leaned into the flames, and Burakh saw how they licked his face, his open collar hungrily; how he then pushed the tip of his disheartened, bitter cigarette into them and let them light it. He sat back.

“Got a smoke?” Burakh asked.

Dankovsky opened the silver case again and shook his head apologetically as he showed it, empty, to Burakh. That was his last one.

Burakh saw then — how he plucked it from his mouth and offered it to Burakh.

“Oynon—”

“It will only consume itself if you do not take it.”

Then, after a pause:

“Consume itself for nothing.”

So, Burakh took it. He fit his fingers around it and around Dankovsky’s as to not let the ash shake off, picking it from his hold like a delicate fruit. He put it in his mouth. He felt how the crease where the Bachelor’s lips had been marked the paper, and demanded he adjust his own around it. The tobacco had no taste, no smell, hitting Burakh with its oneiric quality — he had almost forgotten about that detail. When Burakh’s eyes tore themselves from the blaze, he could see how Dankovsky worried his lower lip with a mindless, nervous thumb — a gesture to fit the smoking void.

Atop the grand entrance, the enamel dagger fell from the escutcheon. Then, the enamel skull fell on the enamel dagger, and they both shattered. Dankovsky winced — restrained, reserved, pinching his lips as if to hold back a howl. He looked away. He looked away, and Burakh didn’t. He watched how the flames ate at the gate, the intricate columns; swallowed in a scorching red everything that could be swallowed — or *couldn’t* be: this was a dream, and fire wasn’t bound to its earthly rules. It ate at the ground, tearing its (burnt—ha!) sienna fabric to shreds until it was nothing but rags over a pitch-blackness that stretched to the end of the dream, the bottom of the well. The pyre was hungry.

Hungry, hungry, hungry...

Of the escutcheon fell then the snake. It impaled itself on the debris below. Dankovsky closed his eyes and dropped his head.

“Leave when you can, Burakh. I won’t be able to.”

Burakh wanted to stay; he was slammed awake by the weight of the blazon when, at last, it tumbled down.

His cheeks, forehead, chest were hot; his whole body covered in a thin layer of sweat, causing the sheets to cling to his skin, entraving his movements as he tried to sit up. He still felt the bite of the pyre, the persistent breath of that everdevoring fire, his own breath was hot; he eventually remembered he was sick. He had been sick. (He wondered if the fever had conjured the fiery dream, or the fiery dream barely felt at home within his fever.)

He dragged himself to the sink and splashed water on himself — its coolness washed the illness clean off. He rubbed the sweat and the fever off his skin. He was reborn.

“Are you feeling better?” asked Sticky, keeping the table between them, almost as a protective barrier.

“I am,” Burakh said — a sigh of relief crawled through him, agitating remnants of the disease that scraped his lungs and trachea. “I am. It worked.”

“What worked?”

Burakh shifted through his belongings and brought to his eyes the other vial he’d taken from Shekhen. It took a lot from him not to kiss it. Then, his face fell. *The only other vial.* Come the morning, the Inquisition would send someone. Come the morning, he would likely, surely be asked about it. He cradled it to his chest. Its ruby depths sang with a promise so heavy Burakh felt like dropping it to the floor — but didn’t, couldn’t let himself. His heart moved in his chest like it, too, sought the kiss of the crimson vial. His ribs felt hammered from within with a promise he had to keep.

“Sticky?”

“Yeah...?”

“You have my explicit permission to hide and run from the new visitor. Do not lie, but you won’t be tempted to if you don’t get caught.”

“Easy enough, boss.”

FÈBRE QUARTANO

She had walked to the Stillwater, that raven-black omen — just like that damned bird had prophesized; she had walked to the Stillwater. She was standing in the door, her elongated, pale visage carved on each side by concave cheeks. Her grey eyes drilled two inescapable wells under the dry bushes of her eyebrows. Her face looked like the untouched head of a match, her body the carbonated stick that still stood, stiff and strong.

“I have come to see the Kains’ guest. Bachelor Dankovsky.”

Burakh’s jaw worked painfully as he gritted his teeth.

“He cannot be seen.”

“Why not?”

The words climbed out of him like a tolling bell: “He is sick.”

Her stoic face seemed to powder and crumble. The tight-lipped line of the impassive, sardonic ersatz of her smile fell from her, and fear pooled in the wells of her eyes. She pulled herself together (an almost-invisible twitch of the eye, a slip of the mask promptly held back to the face; something that Burakh wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t spent the past days watching it on Dankovsky) and asked:

“Why isn’t this place under quarantine, then?”

“It is. And I will make sure the quarantine is followed by asking you to leave, and to stay away.”

She took a step back. She held her head high, the force of her piercing, silver-ash-thunderclouds gaze carving confidence out of Burakh’s voice and spitting it out. Worry still danced in her eyes like candle flames.

“... What are his chances?” Her voice was low.

“The same as anyone else’s.” (That was a bold, shameless lie. Burakh was going to wrestle the good doctor out of the jaws of death if that meant he had to lose a hand. Because they needed his expertise, as insufferable and unswallowable as it was.

Yes. Because they needed his expertise.)

Her lips thinned. Her mouth and eyes became sour. Burakh knew that look: *I’m too late.*

“... If he makes it, send him to the Cathedral.”

On that, she walked away, first facing the building as if she expected it to come alive and eat her whole, grinding her into black plague dust. Then, once she was far enough, she turned on her heels and disappeared.

Yeah. Well, if he even makes it, he’ll decide himself if he wants to go to the damn Cathedral.
No—no—no—no—no

, when he makes it, he’ll decide himself if he wants to go to the damn Cathedral.

Burakh climbed the stairs back up.

Something choked Dankovsky awake; Burakh was there to see it: something seemed to course through him like an electric shock and he jerked up, he was pushed upright, he curled on himself as he sat and coughed. Burakh bolted from the desk to the bedside. When he tried to approach him, Dankovsky fell back down. His neck strained as he pushed his head against the pillow. His clavicles protruded as he dug his shoulder blades and elbows into the mattress.

“Oynon?” Burakh called. “Oynon?”

Dankovsky’s arms flailed; they almost struck Burakh square in the gut. His hand — his grey, strained, wiry hand — grabbed something from somewhere Burakh didn’t focus enough to see. Then, he grabbed the hem of Burakh’s smock, and pulled. He was incredibly weak; yet, Burakh stumbled forward, gripping the iron frame of the bed for balance.

“Oy—”

Dankovsky shoved whatever-that-was he had grabbed into the leather pouch on Burakh’s thorax. He felt it slide down — something square, hard, cold, maybe steel or silver.

Silver. *The cigarette case*. When he attempted to fish it out, Dankovsky's arm flailed again; the veins on him were a flowery mauve. He pointed at something in the bag left unattended on the desk. His finger was crooked like a crow's claw.

"In the bag," he heaved — oh, he *heaved*. His voice was torn to shreds as it clawed through his lungs, throat and mouth. It was scraping, grey — so, so sick. "In the bag. The vials... Take them. To the Theater. Take them."

Burakh slowly picked Dankovsky's fist off his smock, feeling how it fell limp at the touch, and rummaged through the bag.

He found two vials; they were all labeled *serum*, followed by a few barely-decipherable lines describing what Burakh could read were comments on their effectiveness.

"... You made those?" he asked. It was starting to dawn on him — the Bachelor had been busy, too. (He had been busy even as Burakh was scrambling for *a cure*.)

"Not alone." His voice was wet now. When Burakh turned to him, he saw how he wiped something — sweat, or spit, or blood — off his face by rubbing his cheek against the pillow. The hair on his neck was placated to his nape with the wetness of his skin. "I couldn't have made them alone. But yes, I did."

He coughed, and the sound tore through him like sandpaper.

"You need them. Take them. To the Theater. Take them."

Another sudden shock ran through him. He made a dazed, low-pitched sound as if his voice was pulled out of him like a piece of wool out of an unraveling sweater. He fell back. He didn't move. (Until he did again, and Burakh was not more reassured.)

This, he will never admit to Dankovsky—*if he lives*, he thinks, and then shakes the thought out of him with a violent shiver as if he could puke bad luck out—but feels it more with every passing hour: Dankovsky feels like a test. Like each of his coughs and heaves and violent spasms are ways for Burakh to prove himself. To prove his worth. To prove his name. He is at Dankovsky's bedside and hoists him up when he chokes, turns him on his side when he threatens to throw up (he never does), wipes the blood from his mouth when it pools from the depths of his black lungs to the corner of his pale, thin, bark-dry lips. He is tempted, as Dankovsky thrashes and shakes, to check his stitches — seeing no blood seep, he never does. Burakh's face cracks up in a wrung-out, nervous bout of laughter when he imagines Dankovsky tending to his dead like Burakh tends to (not *his*, he will not phrase it like that) Dankovsky, not-quite-dead (rings in his head: *yet*.) Burakh feels tested.

Here's the exam paper: the Bachelor's paper-pale skin, easily crumpled and torn just the same, shapes cut out of him (around his sunken eyes, into his hollowed cheeks) by the silver scissors of

the evading plague; here's the ink: the blood that dries on his chin, the liquid black of his eyes that spills out of him with hacking fits; here's what has never left: time, ticking.

Burakh leaves Dankovsky's bedside only to crash headfirst into dreams, or when Rubin (who's here "*in hiding*", he said; he said — that idiot! where everybody was gathering to witness the poor doctor's fate) or the twins — those weird, amicable leeches leaning over the Bachelor's bed like fairies over a cradle, like vampires over an offered neck (Burakh dislikes the image, Burakh really dislikes the image — he had to undo the Bachelor's cravat and shirt, only the first few buttons, to allow easy exit for his lung-tearing coughing fits—the open lapel—the wound of bloodletting.), the edges of their shadows hanging over him like the beaks of meadowlarks — or sometimes even Sticky, his insistent blonde head butting against Burakh's refusal, offer to keep watch.

Burakh keeps-ticks-clicks—he paces when Dankovsky seems to be deep asleep. His thoughts swallow themselves as each passing hour swallows a bit more of the light. Burakh is inside of his mind the way his nerves are inside of his hands—right on the edge, tipping outside. Bursting out-forth-forwards, grazed by the weight of the air-time-tick-tock with an unspeakable pain. His hands are trapped birds flailing violently under the cloak of his skin. If he were to peel it, he'd reveal, he thinks, he hopes, a knowledge and confidence you find only in the bones. In thinly-ground salt-white bones.

The Bachelor's face is so fucking dry, and so fucking pale. And Burakh only touches it with his ground-bound-salt bones when nobody's looking.

He (Dankovsky, who Burakh cannot hear, and can barely see) is within illness like (in) a tangle of thorns. He is grasping with full, bloody hands at coils of brier and furze like other men grapple with hellfires. It's within reach—if he outstretched his arm he could thrust the spine-spike-shiv of the amorphous-monostichous-spiral P/plague through his bare palm, and then he would crawl out, victorious, imbrued, capital-S-like-snake-sophia/σοφία-Stigmatized, out of the earth. He would hold it against his chest, into the hollow where he's expected to have a heart. It would tear through the flesh of his hands like lightning, and yet, he would hold it still. He would bind and bend and break it. He would snap it in half like it does the soul (like it did his).

He is within illness like (in) a tangle of thorns.

His breathing swirls through his raw lungs like a scalpel-sharp maelström. It tears through him. Burakh haunts his bedside, stitch-making thread-clinging twyrine-and-clay-smelling ghost trying to mend him together. To hold it together. Something about making whole. About using (his) hands. Apologizing to Dankovsky, who cannot hear, about having to use his red cravat to wipe the blood off his lips.

He is within illness like (in) a tangle of thorns.

He had had the creeping thought that it was of those esoteric, unknowable maladies that one has to surrender to, has to let themselves be devoured by, if they sought to, if they ought to

understand it — and he was, and he would. *And he would!* He would burst from it: a splinter of hawthorn bark like a spear through its flank. *He would!*

It's his twelfth hour. He is in the crushing throat of the Pest like a hook through its palate. He is overcome with spasms and coughing fits. He tenses like a cello string and his neck strains, bulging with the nervures of his ligaments that crawl up his exerting throat. His whole body shakes, and he collapses into his pillow.

The sun was high, and curtailed by battering rain.

The Bachelor's face is still so fucking dry, and still so fucking pale, and Burakh still only touches it with his ground-bound-salt bones when nobody's looking — which is becoming more and more difficult.

Comes often that *nobody* around, more often than the rest; but, word having spread, the Stillwater gets visitors, most of which Burakh shoos away. A few linger.

The twins, who stand by the attic door, tall, taut, terribly still like they could slowly incrust themselves into the walls. They berate Burakh for sitting on the floor—no, not *berate*. They urge him to at least take a chair like these floorboards could swallow him.

The Brides, who crowd by the Stillwater entrance, never stepping in, not quite ever leaving; Burakh sees their eyes on him when he leans out of the window.

“Whaddaya want, basaghan?” Burakh says out of the window, sleeplessness making his jaw slack, his words woolen.

“Khayaala, how fares the ailing erdem?”

“He ain't dead yet.”

And the Brides all nod, scattering like raven feathers across the Atrium — only to come back soon after.

Lara, who brings food. Not much; half a slice of bread here, what is left of a bowl of soup there. She insists Burakh tries to give some to Dankovsky; he doesn't even stop shaking long enough for Burakh to try.

Stakh. When he walks in again, he has an awkward, almost nervous smile on his lips, as if he expected Burakh to curse his ass out.

“How fares he?”

“I'm running low on tinctures, Stakh.”

Rubin's gaze falls on him.

“I need to keep some for the hospital. I need to keep... pills for the hospital. I cannot go there empty-handed tomorrow.”

“Have you given him a lot?”

Burakh puts his head in his hands.

“Not too much.” A pause. “Ostensibly, not enough.”

“What could you do, then? You’ve fed him pills by the spoonful, and yet: see him then? See him there?”

Burakh sees.

“He’s writhing — less than he writhed before. There’s nothing you can do. There’s nothing *more* you can do, but let time decide of him.”

“*Time* is precisely the one thing I’m afraid I’m up against, Stakh.”

“Not the illness?”

Burakh worries a nail with nervous teeth.

“I’m afraid there is no place where illness and time split into two.”

He runs fingers through his hair like he wants to tear it off his scalp.

“I think there’s something. I think I found something — I’m sure I found something. But it is... scarce. I need to make sure there is plenty. I need to make sure there is enough. I need to make sure...”

“... that he is deserving of it over the rest?”

“It’s not about *deserving!*” Burakh barks, spits, so furiously even Stakh flinches.

It’s not about *deserving*. It’s not about judgment. It’s not about value. It’s about... balance–choice–equilibrium. Mathematical, really; statistical.

It’s about walking the tightrope on the safe side and still toeing the potential of a grave, insurmountable mistake.

It’s not about deserving, because Burakh knows what he thinks of it.

“Could you keep an eye on him while I go out and do... something potentially dangerous for my own life?”

“What else would you do outside?”

“Stakh, I’m serious. I think I know who to talk to to get... what I need. And when I do...”

“You’ll save the Bachelor’s life. I had guessed.”

“I’m *healing the sick*, Stakh. That’s what *I do*. That’s what I wake up every morning to do.”

Rubin raised his hands, non-confrontational — *for once*, and it surprised Burakh.

Dankovsky's labored, wet breaths ate away at the ceiling beams, the metal arabesques of the bedframe. Burakh knew what he had to do. Burakh knew what he wanted to do. He left.

"I'll get into the Abattoir," Burakh spoke when he got back.

He still smelled potently of the plagued Termitary: of the humming, lung-scraping, corroding breath of the illness that clung to him even after he had stopped by his workshop to rinse himself off. (It seemed to cling to him, to the *inside* of him regardless, overstaying its welcome even after it had been chased away.) Of the brush of leather and rust that lingered on Oyun, too; more faintly, as their meeting was starting to fade in the back of Burakh's mind, with only the Warden's admission of where he could *find it, finally, find it* piercing through the fog that stuffed Burakh's head like cotton.

"I'll get in. I'll get enough. It can be done."

"... You won't *be let* in."

"If I have to force my way in, I will. If I have to burrow Oyun's horns into the earth and strike him, I will. With that, I can use the blood. I can make..."

He stopped himself—realizing he had never told Rubin about it. Two wide, bug-like eyes were on him.

"What blood?"

"Hey, I don't know *what* it is more than you do. It... 'trickles' from the Abattoir. And I *need it*."

Rubin didn't push, which Burakh found strange. When he looked at him, Stanislav had a pinched, taut line for lips, gaze lost; he looked wounded. He looked like he was bitterly digesting something that had been kept from him.

Burakh didn't know if he needed to say sorry, to say *hey, I'll take you there* — he wasn't going to do that. He feared what was in it. What was below. (What was within, but that was a whole other can of worms.)

Burakh was so light—Burakh was so heavy. He hurried back to the lair swiftly, the wind behind pushing him, shoving him onto his path. He could barely stand. The moon was rising to a seven in the evening, pinned above the steppe like a golden coin.

Burakh's head spun when he walked in, the recovery from his own illness still... in progress. When he approached the alembic, Sticky got up to talk to him, and Burakh kept him away with a warning hand.

"How is... the doctor doing?" Sticky asked.

He had been coming to the Stillwater—against Burakh's advice, because of course, because evidently—where Burakh had seen him take watch/had watched him take scene, and yet his voice was thin and low from a grating, gaping worry. It took Burakh by surprise.

"Why do you ask?" Burakh managed to say, attempting a playful, ever-so-slightly mocking tone. (He failed. He didn't have the strength for it.)

Sticky shrugged. He pouted with what seemed like genuine offense at being asked. "We'd like him not dead."

"We?"

"Is that shock I hear?"

"No. I'm just asking. Earnestly."

"... Well. Me and the boys. The girls, too. (He shrugged again.) We see him a lot when we're in town, because he's in town too. He's nice to us, even when no one has for barter what he'd like."

"Oh. Ah." Burakh's mind painted a picture—a new one. "The... paternal type?"

"Absolutely not." (Sticky almost laughed.) "More like... Don't laugh at me."

"I won't."

"More like a distant uncle you rarely see, but when you do he's always nice to you."

"Ah... *Uncle oynon*, is it?"

"I told you not to laugh at me!"

"I'm not laughing! See? Not even smiling." (Burakh was smiling a little bit.)

"Whatever."

The picture... struggled to fit into Burakh's mind, he had to admit, it didn't fit. He remembered the Bachelor dismissing the kids roaming the Soul-and-a-Half, calling some urchins "mutts". Or at least, he thought he did. The haze was overtaking him, chipping at him slowly. Bachelor having gotten busy bounding with the street urchins when Burakh wasn't looking... he didn't know what to make of it. He didn't know what it was he felt, imagining him crouching to their level to barter.

Sticky shrugged, and shrugged, and shrugged again, the pout on him growing, like he wanted to justify himself.

"Whatever. We'd like him not dead because... I don't know. He started to fit into the landscape."

“I understand.” (Burakh truly did.)

“You’re still taking care of him, aren’t you?”

“I am.”

“Good.” Sticky observed a pause, fiddling with branches like he itched to make something helpful out of them.

(Burakh was not going to say that he, too, would like the Bachelor not dead, but he assumed Sticky knew that. He walked to the alembic and sat to do what he knew to do. *There’s still that blood*, Burakh told himself, that one vial, that most precious drop. He told himself that and the weight of herbs in his hands almost sunk him through the ground — even as there was so, so little of them; their florets, spikelets and seeds scurrying in his palm as he slowly processed them. Those were the last blades. He wondered if his father would think he was wasting his breath and resources. He refused to think about whether or not his father would think he was wasting his breath and resources. He started a brew and everything felt lighter, and then all of his weight was crushed into his bed. He kicked his boots off. He burrowed into the covers.)



The dream walked in. On tall, long legs, almost careful through the door. (It took Burakh a lot not to blurt out “*Oh, not him again.*”)

The pale ghost of the twin emerged from the darkness like a corpse washing ashore. Burakh sat up swiftly.

He stood, skin translucent, coated in a thick onyx black, his right hand parting the curtains of the lapel of his coat, resting against his chest as if he was holding his heart. His fingers moved subtly, not unlike kelp in the depths of the sea.

Peter: say, Burakh, when tomorrow you fall asleep and you dream of cutting Dankovsky open, please cover the eyes of the audience, please be mindful, cover his heart. When you cut him open and snakes slither out, please, let them climb your arms, let them wrap around your neck — they will not tighten around your throat. They have never felt warmth, not even the warmth of the sun, it feels too close to touch.

Artemy: How do you know about that?

The Architect’s silver eyes raked his face. Burakh had no idea what he was looking for.

Peter: ... he’s told my brother. My brother has told me. My brother and I... we are not snakes — we crawl nonetheless.

As if on cue, he offered a sigh, an exaggerated part of the lips; a flash of fangs. (Burakh still had no idea what the hell that could be about.)

Artemy: Why... would he tell you and not me?

Peter: ... because few men have snakes inside their lungs, Burakh. And some who don't, don't love them quite.

Artemy: I'll be careful.

Peter: be nice. Be gentle.

Artemy: It's my job.

Peter: it isn't for him.

(A cumbersome pause.)

Artemy: How do you know I'll have this dream, anyways?

Peter: Burakh, if I didn't walk the realm of dreams, this town would have split me open.

(A cumbersome pause, again. It was crawling with all manners of beasts that Burakh felt reach for his skin, and he shivered violently.)

Artemy: Why would I... dream of cutting him open?

The Architect's head shook very slowly, like a pale sail against the ink of his hair — the seatop sky.

Peter: why wouldn't you?

(Was implied: *this is all you do.* The Architect seemed to have something else to say.)

Peter: Dankovsky... does not... invite gentleness. He may reject it firmly. He may... he will push you away. But... he does need it.

Artemy: What does this have to do with me? Can't you offer him gentleness?

Peter: ... I can, but he will not ask it from me.

Artemy: And from me he will? Why would he? He has never asked me such things. He won't. I barely know the guy. This is not what this is about. He's sick. What is this about? What do I even have to offer him?

(The dream is fading fast. Remnants of clinging fever makes your grasp on it grow tenuous. You have to hurry.)

Peter: ... this will be for him to decide.

The Architect's gaze wandered. Burakh... looked up. He... watched it unfold.

Artemy: Why... Hey, why are you calling me by my name? My first name?

Peter: I have done no such thing. I have not called you that.

Artemy: Okay, maybe not called, but... Here. That's my name. Artemy.

Peter: well, it wouldn't be anything else, would it?

Burakh looked at him. He looked at Burakh. Burakh tried to pry out of him the words he kept in his mouth with a strange, sharp pout. Eventually, he spoke:

Peter: τόν γε σοφώτατον οὐχ ἀμαρτήσεται σύμβουλον ἀναμείνας: χρόνον.

Artemy: Right. Yeah. (He had not a fucking clue.)

The Architect (let's say Peter) bent his spine subtly. He bowed. His eyes had dampened and darkened with a growing, bubbling anxiety. His shadow embraced the darkness behind and he seeped through it like ink through cloth, until he was gone.

Burakh woke up. He had slept a bare hour and a half — just enough for a dream; just enough for the twin to cut and slither through. His body was still tense, taut as a string, eaten whole and hollow by the cresting wave of exhaustion. He wondered if the Architect could lull him into sleep like a wall-walking nixie.

He's back at the Stillwater. Rubin offers to take watch. Burakh demands one more second before Rubin takes his seat, on the other side of the folding screen. Burakh adjusts the Bachelor's collar that he had fiddled with, the pillow under his head, the weightless blanket over him to his neck to hide what peeks of his chest in the white wide V of his partially-undone shirt. Burakh walks away—closer to *crawls*, really, heavy, bent, folded, crumpled.

“I saw you two share that bed,” Rubin says; light-heartedness is heavy and hollow in his voice, but he is trying to lighten up the mood, he really is. Whether or not he succeeds is not important.

“Like hell you did,” Burakh slurs back out, words absurdly ground and wet as his bent arm digs into his cheek, holding his head above the floor where he lies.

Illness pleats them all into nothing but paper dolls. The muck of fatigue and fear makes them buckle under this crushing weight. He thinks that—and the Architect, offering to the engorged Stillwater his and his brother's company, appears as a head in the stairs. Burakh waves him off, half “*it's under control*” half “*don't you dare get into my head*”.

When sleep reaps Burakh off his feet, the Architect doesn't, in fact, get into his head.

For what feels like hours, it is pitch-black, indigo-tinted, cold, diaphanous. It is blissful. It's cold. Did Burakh realize it's cold? It's cold, wet, hollow.

It swallows him—his breath—his words in something chilled and pitted like a glazed clay cup. Like the inside of a peach pit. Bitter all the same.

The dream is red. It's so red. It's skinned all over. It's protruding violently. It goes through Burakh's throat like the horn of a deer. Like a smiting arrow. It goes as follow:

There's meat on the sacrificial slab.
There's a slab on the sacrificial meat.
There's sacrificial meat on the slab.
There's sacrificial slab on the meat.
There's a sacrificial slab on/in the town.
There's a town on (in) the sacrificial slab.
There's a sacrificial town on/in the slab.
There's a sacrificial town on/in the meat.
There's a town on the sacrificial meat.
There's a slab on the sacrificial town —
Hard grey rock grinding it thinly.
There's meat on the sacrificial meat.
There's meat on the meat.
Yes. That's what a human person is.
There's sacrificial meat on/in the town.
There's meat-town.
There's[SO FUCKING HUNGRY.]
[SO FUCKING HUNGRY — YOUR MOUTH WATERS]
There's town-meat.
There's sacrifices.
Yes.
There are sacrifices.
(There's a man on the sacrificial slab.
Oh no.)

“I need herbs,” Burakh hissed through the palms he pressed on his mouth and chin. “I need to go to the Theater, and I will have nothing left when I come back. I need to go.” He ran his hands over his face, nails scraping its exhausted surface. “I need to go gather them.”

From the corner of the Stillwater downstairs where he hid, right by the window in order to shoo away nosy passersby, Rubin watched Burakh stretch, crack his elbow joint, try to hold his own eyes open.

“There are some I need to hang out to dry. Some I need to chop across the stem. Some... well, you know. You were my father’s apprentice.”

“I know. I was.” Stress and promiscuity with the illness had not dried up the bitter waters that pooled at the back of Rubin’s throat when Isidor’s presence was invoked. “How does it feel, putting so much... time into this? Into him?”

“I’ve never felt this fucking alive, Stakh.”

Rubin nodded. Despite it all, he seemed, at the very least, considerate of Burakh’s resolution.

“When will you be done?”

“I don’t have a clue. I need to do my shift. Need to gather. To brew...”

“Every hour could be his last — and then, it never is. Impressive of him.”

“He’s stubborn.”

Burakh let out a wispy, raking chuckle that Rubin didn’t follow; watching him instead.

“I don’t think... No, I don’t *know* if it has anything to do with *him*. Could be a particularity of the disease.” Burakh collected himself. “Or, it could be him.” He didn’t know. He couldn’t know. He wouldn’t know. “Can you keep an eye while I go to the Theater?”

“Do you want me to invite his friends to keep him company?” When Burakh looked at him with a raised eyebrow, Rubin added: “The Architects.”

It took a lot from Burakh not to say “*these freaks?*”. He managed — another testament to his fortitude, he bitterly laughed — and was out of the door. In his pockets, three vials that clinked mindlessly, and two halves of pills. It was going to be about judgment, about value, about balance–choice–equilibrium; about mathematics and statistics.

And he could tell himself over and over that this was what hung over the Bachelor’s head too, plainly, measurably, indiscriminately; it felt like a lie — because it was one. Burakh wasn’t going to admit that to himself.

(There was something else. There always was something else.)

He didn't stray far from the Theater when he stepped out of it. The smell of death, this putrid ghost, clung to him recklessly, hanging from his heavy arms like bodies had started from the gallows. He kicked the bloodstained dirt by the stairs and paced like it could calm him down. He had no idea how the Bachelor fared, who was there now to keep vigil over him. Burakh felt like death *followed* him, slithering between the floorboards of the Stillwater attic to settle in his footsteps, leaving the Bachelor to sink into a deep sleep when Burakh was away — or maybe he liked to think it followed him. He liked to think... Dankovsky got a few hours of repose. (And this meant that, when Burakh walked back to watch over him, he trawled the disease behind like a cumbersome luggage of putrid, rotten fish.)

(*No, no. This isn't right.*) (Nothing was.)

As he paced, walked out of the Theater and onto the steps Immortell, joining him from stage right, announced by the beating of his cane on the stones.

"Still here?" Burakh asked.

"I can't quite leave, can I?" the Director replied, a whistle in the voice. Burakh was going to ask him about it when he continued: "Well, I have, of course; I've been to the interrogations like everyone ought to have..."

"And what did she ask you?"

"Ah, it would be my business, wouldn't it, Burakh?" Immortell said, and when Burakh turned to him he had a wide, forced smile, full of teeth and pink gums.

"Sure would be." After a marked pause in which Immortell didn't budge, he continued: "Aren't you afraid of getting sick by staying here?"

"The world is scarier outside of the Theater, Burakh. Here, a lot come in, few come out... They do not scare me. You're the most dangerous presence around... Bar, ah, one or two. Maybe three!"

"Keeping a list, are we?" Burakh chuckled nervously — and tried to figure out the other 'presences'. Besides him and the sick (and the dead), who came here? *The Bachelor*, he remembered — and remembered his wicked good shot, too. Then, Rubin, and his... desperate, overflowing displays of violent abandon.

"Not much else to do in these times of end, is there, Burakh?"

Burakh didn't answer. They looked out into the streets, into the dirt that rose in swirling grey clouds, catching the flecks of pyre fires and the ash of hastily-disposed contaminated furniture, bedding, bodies.

"And what do you think there will be at the end of the world, eh?" Burakh asked when the silence had become too hard to bear. "Singing and dancing?"

“Singing, I know for sure. Don’t you hear them?”

Burakh perked an ear, and listened. They were — the Brides, in the distance, were singing indeed. This swaying, rising and falling choir that battered the evening air like waves a shore, or a breath another’s.

“As for dancing... I don’t care for it too much, with that bad leg of mine.” As if to insist upon this, he hit his ankle with the wood of his cane — it didn’t make a sound of metal or steel, indicating the lack of a prosthetic, and Burakh flinched, wondering what the fuck the point of *that* was. “I still hope there will be, so everyone else can enjoy it.”

And then, oh, he started to hum.

Eventually, he excused himself, and walked back into the building. The doors sighed and heaved behind him, and Burakh did too — remnants of his illness taunting him with emptying lungs.

He sat on the low wall flanking the Theater stairs; at its foot could still be guessed the silhouettes of the sick and dead that had been brought, and left there to slowly soot up shadows in their shapes on the sienna soil. Sickness crawled, sibilant, and more would come, and more was to come. Burakh fished the cigarette case out of his pocket.

Yes, it was the one he had seen... It was a pale silver, slivers of sun snaking in its streaks. In the daylight, he could see: a snake was etched on its lid, surrounded by flowers — acanthus and daffodil, Burakh could guess — and Latin phrases Burakh couldn’t decipher. *The man likes his motifs*, he laughed, and a heart-pinch of appreciation escaped the cage of his ribs, surprising him with its uninvited suddenness. He pushed the lid open. He wasn’t surprised. The same cigarette he had seen — the last one, like then, lone, lonely, rolling loose in the case. This too, in the daylight he could see: the rod of white paper was obviously hand-rolled; meticulously and with great precision. *The man likes his thoroughness*.

Burakh took it. Burakh brought it to his mouth and poked it between his lips. The paper caved under them as he almost, out of stress, bit down on it. He plucked out his wet matchbox, bearing the stigmata of a seeped-through bloodstain. He cracked one alight, then the cigarette too. The tobacco was sweeter than what he was used to.

He smoked — then stopped himself. Something crossed his mind; something that, if he thought too hard about it (and he refused to think about it) rang longly and loudly like a prayer, like a plea. He scraped the ash of the cigarette, the half-smoked cigarette, against the stone of the wall. Then, he wetted his fingertips, and made sure it was put out properly. He straightened it back up — not that it mattered, it was already *half-smoked*. Then, he put it back into the case.

For later, he told himself. He told himself that and that was a lie: he was not going to touch it again.

(If the Bachelor lived, he’d give it back. If the Bachelor died, he’d... give it back too.)

He wiped tobacco off his lips and threw himself head-first into the steppe and prayed the Bachelor be given a few more hours — just a few more.

“... How long has it been?” Rubin asked.

Burakh pulled his eyes to the pocket watch, pried open like an oyster, on the desk. It was nine in the evening, and Rubin had just come back from an afternoon Theater shift. (Burakh had barely crossed his path as he had left in the morning; he had hoped for a distraction through work and got none. He had disappeared in the steppe for hours, hunting herbs with a vicious restlessness that the damn twyre blades seemed to hide from. At last, he had collected enough; at last, at last... He had hung them to dry; he had bundled and cut them across the stem; he had thrown them in the brew. And with his agitation, he feared the waters would turn sour. He feared the herbs would resent him for it.

He had thrown them into brews and gotten one — perfect, precious; the foundation of his own miracle, which he hoped to make again.)

“... Fifty hours.” He brought his hands to his face and pushed his palms against his closed eyes. “I... don’t understand. It’s like the illness refuses to let him go. Like it keeps toying with him, forbidding him from healing... or passing.”

“Or like he refuses to let go of it,” interrupted Rubin. When Burakh threw him an exhausted, dumbfounded glance, Rubin raised his hands, and curled his fingers inwards, sharply, with a subdued, ember force: the image of a clawed hand tearing fruits off a branch. “Like he’s grappling with it with all his might. Toe to toe. Like holding a bull by the horns, trying to make it bend the knee. If he downs it, he’ll understand it.”

Burakh only hummed. That seemed like something the Bachelor would do, but even then, he doubted. The bedridden Bachelor’s eyes flashed open, then close, like for a brief second he had come to the surface for air and then sunk again.

“Hey,” Burakh called (low, hushed, as if his voice itself could worsen Dankovsky’s state — but also because he lacked the strength to speak any other way). Rubin barely turned his head to him. “What were you... doing then back then they hunted you down?”

For a moment, Rubin didn’t speak.

Then:

“I was cutting up bodies.” He marked a pause. He waited for Burakh to react. (He didn’t.) “I was desecrating them for samples. So we could make... Well, try to make...”

He fell silent. He waited still.

Burakh didn't respond for a while; then a long, loud, surprising sigh of relief climbed out of him when he couldn't retain it. Rubin turned to him with a shocked, bewildered gaze.

"If it was just that... I thought you were doing something *really* heinous."

"I was Cub," Stakh almost indignantly insisted. "... I still am."

"Listen, I cannot fault you for... out of all things, *cutting a body*. Regardless of what the rites say." He carefully held his words back as he pondered their weight, stopping there. He nervously scratched the stubble on his cheek. Then, low faint, in the tone of confidence, he added: "I've killed selfishly, Stakh. Very, very selfishly."

He did not mention he killed for him. He did not mention he killed for the Bachelor, either. (He thought Rubin knew that first part, he must, he must have seen the corpses; and the second... was between the Bachelor and him.)

"Listen," he repeated, "if this whole thing's ever over... *when* this whole thing's over... Stay under my wing, yeah? You won't really be *studying*, because I have way more to learn than I can teach, but... Assist me. Y'know... like you did my father. And one day, you'll... have the right to cut bodies. I will make sure of it."

"That's a menkhu's heir's thing," Rubin said. He said bitterly — Burakh heard it, no matter how hard he was trying to hold it back. "That's *your* thing."

"Surely the Kin can make an exception for two brothers?"

Rubin brought his eyes on him — not moving his head. He took his glance back and thought.

"... Always thought I was the better son."

He was partially joking. (He was *only* partially joking.)

"Yeah," Burakh replied, and a stifled laugh made it past his teeth, "I got that."

"I'm going to Lara's," Rubin eventually said. "I take it that you won't swing by to say hi."

"... I'd like to avoid leaving him alone. I'll come see you if someone else comes to care for him."

"Right."

He lingered by the door like he was waiting for something.

"Have you started your... brew?"

"I have."

"How long does it need?"

"Give it three... four hours."

"Do you want someone to wake you up then?"

“I do. I’ve told Sticky to watch the clock and cork the vial once it is done. Then... I’ll go get it.”

Nod here.

Nod there.

Cumbersome silence

as Burakh slowly feels himself wilting.

His eyelids droop like dead leaves.

Rubin — does that too — he leaves.

Time was loud and labored. It pried minutes out of itself like one bites their nails off (Burakh was biting his nails off). Dankovsky’s breathing was shrill and sharp, hook-like coal-thick as it scraped through his throat. The pocket watch hammered each of his dry, sticky, sickly blinks—one of them was the metronome, but Burakh couldn’t quite decipher which one.

Burakh pulled the folding screen like one pulls red curtains, lining it parallelly with the bed. Not the whole way, not quite: he made sure he could still see Dankovsky’s head from the other side of the room. He sat down. He took off his smock. He folded it in four and laid his head upon it, laying down on the floor. The Bachelor’s heart could be heard through the floorboards. The Stillwater was taut-tense-taunting. It tightened its hold onto them. It mended itself in the places where Burakh had cut it, trying to pull Dankovsky out of the catacombs the haunted (haunting) house was starting to become.

The Bachelor’s breathing was too hoarse, then too wet, then he mumbled something incomprehensible. He seemed to drift. He was shockingly calm.

Burakh looked at him. He looked at him longly. His eyes, his mouth were wide open. Illness opened doors in him through which it then weaved. It took his pride in his labyrinthic, impassable fortress of a mind and picked it apart stone after stone, column after column. It took out the locks. It swallowed keys. Illness created passages like animal burrows. It poured into the communicating holes like mouth-to-mouth. Dankovsky was left ajar, missing hinges.

Burakh was approaching a door.

What’s all he was fucking doing. It was starting to become old. Find - open - close - make - open - close. Doors, mouths, stitches. Burakh was growing weary. Tired. He was tired. The door was locked. (It was locked and he could feel how a hand, on the other side, pulled on the knob to keep it that way.)

There’s a way, Burakh thought. *There’s a way. I’ve found a way.* He was too weak to feel anything about him, but just the thought grounded him.

A hand on his shoulder tore him out of the murky waters of half-sleep; he jolted awake.

“It’s me,” Rubin’s voice rang from far, far away, lost behind the layers of cloth covering his mouth and nose in the thick fog of Burakh’s exhaustion. “Lara is downstairs. She says to ask her if you need anything.”

“... Why is she here? It’s not safe.”

Through the low clouds of sleep slowly overtaking his vision, Burakh managed to see Rubin’s face sour and tighten.

“... Because she’s your friend. She has come to help you.”

Burakh stayed silent. Then:

“Tell her to stay downstairs. It’s dangerous up here.”

“She also wanted me to give you this.”

Rubin dragged out from behind him a contraption of folded wood and canvas.

“What...?”

“Her father’s cot.” A pause. “She insisted you have it. The bed downstairs... well. She says it may be cold, but at least it’s empty.”

“Where did... miss Yan go?”

“Only two other places she could have left to,” Rubin said — and he didn’t elaborate.

Burakh dragged himself onto the cot like one hauls up a carcass.

“Tell Gravel thanks when you get down. And stay safe.”

“I will. You too.” Another pause, the silence of which Burakh felt himself slither through. “At least he’s not coughing. God, I can feel his fever radiating from here.”

Burakh’s mouth jerked at Rubin’s words, but he was already faltering out, slowly slipping away. Yeah, *radiating*. He was. Like the sun, like a dying star.

Rubin’s footsteps disappeared down the stairs. Burakh disappeared through the heavy coat of night, weaving his way into sleep.

ONIRISECTION / SOMNOSSECARE

All stories are about Death, except the ones that are about Life, which by deduction are also about Death. All dreams are about devouring, except the ones that are about throwing up, which by deduction are also about devouring. Everytime Burakh would dream he would eat: he would eat voraciously, passionately. His teeth would tear through the thread binding waking world and sleeping world like he was pulling stitches. Like he was trying to pry himself open.

(It was happening more and more often — these limbos, these lingerings. Being pried open... It happened once. The illness leveled itself through him like a crowbar, like a knife through a shell.

Prying open... He shook his head then. *Modny ish, khavirgan sar, golyn ereg, tolgod...*)

And he was: at the threshold of that wound, between the open lips of this parted cut, laid and lived the snaking path of his ways; the rope he was to walk to the knowledge of the Earth and the knowledge of everything else.

The knowledge of... He thought he knew this. He knew he had dreamed this — but it was cold this time. Yes, it hadn't been cold.

He walked the threshold—against his better judgment, he thought, but then again, where else was he to go? He walked the damn threshold and everything fell, like dust settling on him, cold. He knew it was a dream: he had entered Thanatica. He had entered Thanatica, hadn't he? Without having seen its insides with his two eyes, every fiber of his tranced self was telling him *this was the place* .

The anatomical theater curled around a central stage, front of which was flanked by a table of slick, dark wood. Burakh didn't feel too out of place—he'd visited his fair share during his studies, and was more surprised that the theater didn't wrap itself all around the table; like a snake, like a reverse panopticon watching over pallor mortis. He didn't have time to be surprised much more, however: someone was here. He recognized the asymmetrical coat immediately—and was mildly ashamed of it, too, as it meant he had stared before.

Dankovsky turned on his heels to face him. He was not wearing his red tie or vest, his shirt was a pristine ivory.

“You're late,” his voice rose, strong and booming—he was expecting spectators. It bounced off the dark wood seats from which ghosts were observing the play. “I almost considered doing it at your place.”

“Doing what, erdem?”

He felt like a fool for asking. He stumbled on his lines and his voice croaked, as if suddenly timid. Dankovsky stepped aside. His coat curtained, for a brief second, what Burakh could see of the table—and when it was pulled back, he could see someone was there. Panic crawled up Burakh's spine like a cold spider when he saw the body displayed, grey and stiff and (almost modestly so) covered in an ivory sheet. He frantically looked around for Dankovsky. He found only his clothes, enigmatically standing still on their own, worn by his nonexistent silhouette as his body laid there—laid there, grey and stiff and covered, almost modestly so, to the neck.

He knew it was a dream because the tools table walked towards him—walked, its legs bending at too many knees—before settling and standing still. Burakh laid eyes on the dead man—on the Bachelor, on Dankovsky, on oynon, erdem; in and for all: a corpse.

His head was tilted back an imperceptible bit, his wide, white, open eyes seeking the heart of the dome above that capped the theater. His arms were not covered: they flanked, hard and pale, his sheeted silhouette. The veins snaked under marble-grey skin, sinuous brush strokes from the hollow of his elbows to his strained wrists. Burakh's eyes found the ribbed plains of the backs of hands and he promptly looked away. Seeing the good doctor without his gloves felt obtrusive and brash. He had never taken them off in Burakh's presence and, Burakh thought, seeing red lines striating the skin, he must've kept them on to spare everyone around those nervous scratches, the visible manifestation of a slow, scared, strenuous descent. Burakh shook his head—he didn't want to assume. It wasn't his place to assume. Below the pad of the thumb and the sharp hill of the pisiform bone, ligaments protruded, taut strings of the tuned instruments that once were the Bachelor's hands—those were curled in half-fists, as if death had struck him mid-grief.

Burakh reached for the tools. They were ornate, heavy with arabesques and carvings. He immediately thought those were, of course, not his, which reassured him only a little. He had peeked in Dankovsky's suitcase, though, and those didn't look like his either. He should probably just stop trying to make sense out of this. His hand aimed for a pair of scissors; it grew eight obsidian legs and carried its adorned silverness off the tools table and into the tiers, not before Burakh let out a startled gasp.

He found a scalpel, nested it in his hand. His fingers fit around it perfectly and his stomach churned with a rising, unsettling feeling. With his other hand, he pinched the shroud at the neck and slowly pulled it, folding it reverently as he went. He revealed the top of the chest; the slopes of the clavicles, the ladder of the upper ribs; then, down to the diaphragm, above which the Bachelor's sternum dipped firmly into his flesh; down to the stomach, denuding the row of stitches from which sprawled a fixed, frozen bruise; the navel; Burakh finally folded the shroud on the Bachelor's hips.

"Oh, you're not even going to buy me dinner first?" A voice rose—from the table.

Burakh's spine grew stiff and sharp. His jaw hurt. He looked; the corpse was looking back at him with deep dark eyes. The corpse was as corpse as any dead man can be: it still—he still was glancing at Artemy. Staring with two little black wells apparently resuscitated, and threatening to swallow Burakh whole. The eyebrows muscles and optic nerves moved, the rest of the visage an eerie, unsettling rigidity.

"You know I would if I had any money, erdem," Burakh replied. It seemed to please the corpse very much, as Dankovsky let out a jagged, amused laugh that rang through his rigor mortis-ridden body.

Burakh pressed the blade at the base of the neck, in the inviting hollow of the jugular notch. It dipped in like butter. The cut was slow, steady. Made no sound. At the diaphragm, Burakh took the blade alongside the edges of the costal arch, one side after the other—he had no trouble finding the risen hills of cartilage: the poor city doctor didn't have much meat on his frame, and the plague probably didn't help. Burakh thought he heard a hum, a few sung notes; the corpse hadn't opened its mouth, and yet Burakh was sure he recognized his voice. He followed the lines—the

Lines—of the last of the Bachelor’s ribs; delicate, almost, as the blade brushed bone. He parted the cut like curtains open. He found nothing more than himself dumbfounded—no skeleton, no lungs, no heart, no liver. He found organs, organs he didn’t know the name of. Organs a radiant blood red, some merlot, some ruby, some berry, brick and blush and garnet red—organs he didn’t know the function of. They were all pressed together, huddled almost, closer to small animals, to pups and cubs than body parts. Burakh felt guilty disturbing them. *They would have loved ribs to nestle under*, his tranced mind brought up, *but there isn’t a single bone for them to burrow beneath*. He was, for a brief second, invigorated in this dream he was sure would lead him somewhere, and dipped his fingers past the lips of the inflicted wound.

“Ah... You would think it would tickle,” Dankovsky’s voice rose from his frozen throat. “I assume it could be because...”

“You’re awfully warm for a corpse,” Burakh interrupted. “Awfully chatty, too.”

“And you’re awfully aware, for a dreaming man.”

Something in the Bachelor’s voice shut Burakh up. It wasn’t scary, low and deep, otherworldly. In fact, it was terrifyingly normal—sardonic, even cheery in ways that made Artemy’s chest hurt. If it took being a corpse for the Bachelor to express this merry, morbid amusement, well... Oh, how he deeply disliked to think about it. (He deeply disliked to think about the Bachelor jaunty and jolly; it made his lungs heavy with grief and the feeling he’d have liked to meet him in another time, another place; only followed by the knowledge that they’d have detested each other in any other circumstance.)

The sound of entrails and ichor moving around his fingers was all that was heard in the empty theater. Burakh felt his throat tighten, his mouth grow full of nauseated spit. He steadied his breathing. He saw how Dankovsky was looking at him, brows slightly furrowed, as if perhaps puzzled by his reaction. The red lumps of unnamed guts were slick with blood, slippery and bright. They met Burakh’s hands then promptly retracted. They all seemed to be coursed through by rhythms unknown. They were all detached, all conjoined, all hungry and shy at once; they all perfectly fit in place, a self-contained microcosm, and yet were the most baffling aberration, the most horrific mutation Burakh had ever seen. He couldn’t even fathom the cosmogony of this pulsating, raw, petrifying, ruby cluster. They clung to his fingers, almost avid. They coated him a crimson red. They seemed to hum. Time was stretched like a tightrope and, Christ, Burakh was starting to think he should stop walking it and hang himself (hopefully, he’d wake up).

“Your blood is... thick.”

Dankovsky didn’t blink. He kept his gaze on Burakh’s face (Burakh stubbornly refused eye contact: he felt that meeting the arrow of his stare would kill him).

“Syrupy. It’s like... honey. Crystalizing around my fingers.”

“What do you find?”

As if spoken into existence, a thin chain found Burakh's hands. The links were small, the look of those bound to pocket watches, the color indiscernible under the thick crimson coat. Burakh pulled—the red masses moved and made way. They spat out a clot, no bigger than a kopek—the abruptness of which made Burakh throw a worried glance the corpse's way; he hadn't budged, moved, lifted a brow: it hadn't hurt, he wasn't even looking at his open thorax. He was looking at Burakh. He had been looking at Burakh for a while. His lips had sheared off their usual thin, uptight and uppity half-smile and were sealed in prudent, straight pout. He blinked. Burakh took it as a sign and he brought his discovery to his eyes; his fingers, slippery and smeared, almost had it slither out of their grasp. It took a few seconds for Burakh to wipe the viscous, thick glaze of blood wine off the newfound trinket—a locket. Then, his nail found a hatch on its side and a photograph inside. The theater was dead (ha!) silent as he recognized one of the two faces staring back. Way younger, of course, but still the same unmistakable hair, the nose that had barely changed, even the half-smile tugging at the mouth: it was the Bachelor, it was Dankovsky. With those red apples for cheeks, Burakh could give him ten, twelve years of age, not more. The other person, Burakh could only make a guess: mom, most likely. The nose, the hair color were the same, she had that same not-quite smile—it didn't look as haughty on her, though he now knew where Dankovsky got his from. The corpse spoke, and Burakh realized he was probably right:

“I did well to take that with me. Bring the photographs home, too. I kept them all on my desk at Thanatica: looking at them gave me strength when I had to break waves like a battering ram. I don't know what she would have thought of me. Nevertheless, had I left them there, they'd have burned like the rest. That is... not something I'm too happy thinking about.”

“That's where we are, right? Thanatica?” Burakh knew, of course he did, he just cut (ah!) the Bachelor off to stop his voice from growing sorry and somber. *Burned?* (so this was it. They both knew... somehow.)

“Damn right we are,” Dankovsky answered, a twinge of unabashed pride rolling off his tongue.

“Is it always this empty?” Burakh teased.

Dankovsky found his eyes—by Boddho, he found them well. He stared intently, intensely, he drew Artemy in the two pits of his pupils, the usual brown of his irises swallowed by black. The room grew dead-cold.

“Is it empty? Burakh, is it empty?”

Burakh searched the tiers. They were empty—except those that weren't. Nothingness inhabited, and she was loud, heavy. She was very entertained.

Burakh carefully slipped the locket in his pocket, heard the ringing of chain. He'd give it back, of course.

He didn't know what he was looking for—he didn't know if he was looking for something at all, but he carried on. He sought passage between two organs that twitched at the touch, as if suddenly woken up. He probed around, looking for attachment tissue to section, for bones to saw. He didn't find any. It felt closer to lockpicking than autopsy, he thought, and then said it out loud.

“Do you lockpick often?” The Bachelor asked.

“... Are you going to think less of me if I said yes.”

“No, Burakh. Of course not. I do not lockpick in my free time, but... Well. I can’t say I haven’t started. There are lots of empty houses in your town, Burakh.”

“There are, oynon. There really are...”

Burakh felt something climb up his fingers, nestle in the hollow of his palm: bringing it to his eyes, he found a round, golden beetle, perfectly clean of blood and gore.

“Oh...” It rubbed its legs together, ran in a circle. “Let me put you down,” he said, and he did. The golden dot rose up the tiers, climbed between chairs, and was out of sight.

Burakh felt something climb up his arm.

It was long, a hint of wet, scraping in the ways of karstic rock. He did—didn’t—did dare to look, squinting, over his shoulder, as if whatever it was could claw his eyes out and slither in. It was long-wet-scraping it was red all over and its head black as if dipped in ink, it was a snake. It crawled, almost languid, the shaking branch of Burakh’s arm. It climbed him to the neck. It looped around like a noose. Burakh heard the snake breathe, and then model its breathing on his. Its two marbles-for-eyes reflected his face, distorted, grimacing, red in the cheeks with fear and anticipation. And the snake—did nothing else.

when-comes-tomorrow/when-you-cut-him-open

when-snakes-slither-out

Burakh’s hand — red, wet, shaking — hid the snake’s ink-black face from the audience, hid the audience’s night-black eyes from the snake’s face.

“Hey,” he—Burakh—spoke, “I’m not done yet. I need to let you go.”

The snake/Snake came apart. Slowly. It seemed almost unhurried. It unraveled from the neck down, dissolved in the loud, thick, white-cold air like sugar in tea. When only his onyx head was left, Burakh saw how he blinked, and sunk in his clothes, into, through. He could have cleaved Burakh in half, for all he knew.

Dankovsky hadn’t budged. Burakh saw how his eyes — his marbles-for-eyes — heeded the dome above. Burakh came back to his side. He didn’t budge. The empty house of his partitioned ribcage echoed and rang around Burakh’s touch.

Burakh’s fingers grazed the depths of the opened chest, brushed lightly against the spine. A horrified shiver ran through his whole body when he felt bone and his fist snapped close in disgust.

He had found something. It was red—with blood, with rust. It was coarse as if rotten. Oh, it was a key.

He took a step back, carrying it away in the cup of his palm, and looked closer. It was familiar. It had been gone. It was now found. He had no idea what it could be. When he was back at Dankovsky's dead-bedside, he had risen ten centimeters from the autopsy table.

"Oynon... Levitation is for witches. You're no witch, get down."

Burakh realized what he had just said— *utter nonsense* , that's what it was—when the corpse rose some more. Frantically, he tried to adjust the shroud that threatened to slip, the Bachelor's privacy apparently a sudden, pressing concern as he was slowly ascending towards the dome.

"Erdem... *Erdem!*"

Burakh grabbed onto a wrist, convinced he would find it stiff and cold and could pull the Bachelor down; he didn't. He got the wrist, the hand; the arm moved, supple and limp, as if Dankovsky was only sleeping, and the body continued to rise. In the seconds it took for Burakh to feel gauche about his hold on the doctor's hand, the arm had extended, meeting its limits with a muted sound of bone that made Burakh's skin crawl. He could pull it down, and he did. Slowly. He brought his other hand to the shoulder as to make sure Dankovsky didn't flip on his side. The scapula rested nicely in the hollow of his palm. It was going well. Slow.

It happened in a second: a cold, hard hand around his own wrist, sending a pang of panic through his limb—he didn't let go, though. A sharp bout of laughter from the tiers. It pierced through him like a biting wind. The Bachelor flipped on his side, hovering, celestial, over him—barely for a second. He dropped to the ground with all of his weight. Burakh braced for the horrible sound of the impact—it didn't come. His arm was tugged on with a violence he didn't expect Dankovsky to have. He saw the ground pulling him in; he closed his eyes, waiting for his nose to get busted—it didn't come either.

The two of them, hand grasping around the other's (he realized just how tight the Bachelor's hold was), plummeted towards, then through, the tiles. They didn't even break. They vanished. The freefall felt like his guts were torn out of Burakh's body and pulled on like a leash. He found the two black wells of Dankovsky's eyes, piercing through him, shining with a twisted, morbid amusement; and they sank into darkness awfully familiar—so familiar Burakh knew it had a name.

They—no, *he* found the bottom of that pit. The wooden floors met his knees, chest, missed his nose as he woke up in time for his elbows to suffer the blow.

"Cub? Everything okay?" A voice rose from the staircase.

"Just a rough morning, Lara. Don't worry."

It wasn't morning at all. Not yet.

Burakh heard her hum, then her muffled footsteps grew silent down the stairs.

A key and a locket fell out of his pocket.

There was a way, there would be a way.

VIVISECTOR, COME FORTH!
At the altar of the open chest,
Ribs parting open like fingers, like lips,
Lay the offerings:
The clay, molded,
The milk, sour,
Rainwater that has turned green,
Your own eyes — closed
Your own hands — red
Your own blood — mandatory,
sweet, not unlike
sun-kissed pomegranates.
At the altar of the open chest
Pour the Libations
Into the wound
In the Earth —
same thing! —
and watch how they are drunk
with an appetite
uncomfortably close to yours.

VIVISECTOR, COME FORTH!
Work your magic of wands of cold steel!
With hands of rusted bones!
With fingertips ecchymosed, an unsettling pink.
At the altar of the open chest,
Kneel,
Bring your hands in one hold,
Speak into your fists,
And bring the cup of your palms
to spill over
over the great open mouth
with the tongue the spine.
Kneel,
Man who doesn't believe,
Or doesn't believe yet.
Kneel, and when hands will reach for you,
crawling alive from the shrine,

*you will reach for them too,
you will know what to do —
you will kiss them fervently.*

*(Vivisector, come forth —
I say this line in a whisper,
low enough for only you to hear —
come forth, and bring alive
the dead,
who lies,
whom you know,
the dead who once did
what you do
now.)*

Burrow

Making Dankovsky drink the Panacea involved pulling open his mouth with fingers on his chin. His jaw was clenched, his teeth gritting with the horrible sound of knife-enamel blades scraping together, muffled by his heavy, wet, hoarse breathing. It felt like trying to pry a safe open with a crowbar. It felt like trying to tear the earth away from itself as it clamped itself shut like pectinidae, like a stubbornly-healing wound.

It involved holding Dankovsky's face still, as he convulsed febrily, so he wouldn't spill/spit/slobber out the most-precious serum, so it wouldn't seep out of him like blood walks the veil of bandages and cloth. It involved not looking into his eyes, the cobweb-covered wells of his dark eyes, fogged and stitched with the pale threads of death.

It involved pressing the neck of the vial to his mouth and not thinking about the dry, sick sound his limestone-lips cracked open with when the glass met them.

It involved tipping the vial into his lips.

Come on, Burakh begged. Don't make it any weirder than it has to be.

It involved watching the liquid pool at the back of his throat, tinting the oyster-pearls of his teeth an argil-red as he didn't swallow. Watching how blood and bile colored his spit like a sick, sour tea as it steeps. It involved holding his mouth close with a palm and, after a long, terrifying second, hearing him gulp loudly. The Bachelor's sandy lips wrung out a pained whine as the brew trickled past the throat and its copper-like, dirty taste—Burakh knew of it, he'd made the experience—intertwined with the saltwater pools in his lungs, spit and bile and blood and spite stagnant inside.

It involved pulling the hand back, which felt like the most painful part of it.

It involved waiting.

(The closeness was... uncomfortable. It had become uncomfortable. More uncomfortable than it had been. It was foreign, mildly unnerving as words rang through him, inside of him, invasive and alien and yet bitingly truthful in daunting, taunting ways.

Burakh wasn't even sure what flipped that switch. He wasn't even sure if there had been a switch to flip. The Architect had walked into his slumber with long, weird words — *tenderness*, out of everything! *Don't make me laugh*. (Burakh was not laughing, at all.) The Architect had steeped into his sleep like bitter, brewing herbs with his weird words and now Burakh felt worse tending to the bedridden red ghost of Dankovsky. The Haruspex had been so proud to call his hands *gentle*, out of everything; gentle, knowledgeable, and now he couldn't bear either the prospect of not being gentle enough, or being too gentle that it would make Dankovsky uneasy. Burakh knew gentleness, but not how to share it. To give it.

He thought that the Bachelor couldn't be too uneasy. Well, he couldn't be much now. Burakh thought about the Architect's words of how he'd ask for his kindness (... that wasn't the word he used, was it? Burakh's head hurt too much to recall; to want to recall (he very much recalled)), and he wasn't asking much now. (He wasn't asking anything. He wasn't squirming around, hollowed by fever — maybe that scared Burakh more.)

Burakh curled on the cot. He waited. What time is it?—Two in the morning. He had done nothing but wait. Everytime he blinked, color grew back on the Bachelor's sunken cheeks, so he blinked a lot, fast, strong, trying to tie the clapping of the clock's hand to his rhythm in the way it had once latched on the Bachelor's sickly eyes. He wished time would cling to his gaze in the way his gaze clung to Dankovsky's face.

He was winning.

He was falling asleep.

He was approaching a door.

The trinket in his chest pocket pierced through him, and his hand promptly dove to take it.

The door was locked.

He levered the key inside; it bore a powdering dried film of red blood.

The door was open.

There was a surprising, almost painfully startling moment where Dankovsky was awake—not *enough* to be *called* awake, and yet...

He rolled from one side to his other. His restlessness had morphed into a sweaty, agitated anticipation. He was slow. He hauled himself back and forth. He wouldn't lift his head off the pillow, as if it was too heavy to carry. His hands would shake. He would look at—through Burakh. Seeing nothing, yet something beyond (or within, but Burakh didn't like to think about it that way). Sometimes, his teeth would grit powerfully, holding back a whine, a cough: Burakh's heart would sink through him, horrified again—before the Bachelor would fall back into a spasmodic, bicephalic sleep—too heavy, sinking him through the mattress, and too light, leaving him restless, jerking awake with waning gasps.

Burakh went downstairs. He took Rubin by the sleeve and pulled him closer, as if the ghosts of the Stillwater would eavesdrop on them.

“Do you think you can get tea somewhere?” Burakh asked.

Rubin's brows furrowed. “You're not going to find that at the bar.”

“No, I mean—” (Burakh's eyes scratched the ceiling.) “—here. For here. Do you think Lara has some... tea leaves, somewhere in her house?”

Rubin's eyes shifted, combing through the features on Burakh's face. “Cub, you do herbalism. Surely there are herbs one can steep in hot water and drink.”

“Stakh, these things are *bitter*. They're medicinal plants, not treats.”

Rubin marked a pause. “Ah, so *this* is what this is about.”

“So, do you think she does?”

“I know she does. Should I ask her to bring you some?”

“Yes—yes, and a teacup too. With a saucer. If she still has milk left somewhere, I just need a dollop. Ideally honey too, but I could do without.”

“Having yourself a breakfast of kings, Cub? Isn't it a bit early?”

“No, it's—”

The bed shook. They both heard it. It scraped against the floorboards as the Bachelor became agitated — having fallen back asleep, Burakh assumed.

Rubin's head dipped back, seeing through him.

Rubin was back two hours later. He had the cup, the saucer, tea leaves wrapped in a tiny muslin square, milk and honey in two small bowls that one would more likely use for jewelry, the barest of barest hints of dawn trawled after him.

Burakh boiled water.

He boiled water and there was a second where he panicked, rummaging through his pockets for herbs, before he remembered what he was doing. (He was doing something he wasn't sure the Bachelor would do for him. He asked himself if he did that in the hopes of Dankovsky returning the favor, and then immediately cut himself off.)

Burakh scaled the stairs carefully, saucer in hand. The teacup balanced in it, and hot tea balanced in that too.

Dankovsky was still pale. His neck seemed thin, stork-like—Burakh realized it was because it was so strained. His hands moved erratically, flailing like hawks with a bullet in the flank. He was sweating still.

When Burakh came to him with the tea, the light in his eyes was recognizable. Weak, drowned, smothered by the darkness that had eaten him like moths eat fine fabrics from the inside — but a light. Burakh offered him the drink, and he took it. Burakh thought he worded, or attempted to word, a thank you.

The Bachelor drank slowly, unbothered by the scorching heat of the brew—Burakh kept a hand under the saucer just in case. He closed his eyes, opened them. His grasp on the teacup handle became firmer. He lightly blew on the drink, his lungs emptying scarily fast. He closed his eyes and let the warmth roll over him like unending waves.

The elixir was working. It was working well. (The tea was helping, Burakh thought, found, told himself, realized; all at the same time.)

Spoke the pale beast:

“Why did you?”

And Burakh spat it, like it would have carved its way out of him if he had tried to keep it in, like it would have torn itself from him like a sentient sharpened, crescent rib:

BECAUSE I WANT US BOTH TO LIVE SO BAD I WOULD WASTE NIGHTS ON TRYING.

I HAVE WASTED NIGHTS ON TRYING. LIKE A FUCKING FOOL.

AND I HAVE WON!

IS THAT GOOD ENOUGH FOR YOU?

And the pale beast didn't speak any more. Instead, it balanced on its legs, its bones grazing under its clay-colored skin with each move, it moved its head slowly like a sail in the wind, and it laughed. A low, almost soft kind of laugh rose from it like from the bowels of the earth. It showed its teeth. It licked its lips.

Spoke the pale beast:

"It is enough for me. Time will tell if it is enough for you."

Dankovsky had a dream, and it went as such:

he was deep in a grave, too deep, he thought, for it to have been dug by the Kin. Congregation leaned to the hole, their heads appearing against the grey of the sky, and watched him, watched over him.

"Oh," he croaked, "oh, do not let me be buried here." He swallowed thickly but his mouth stayed numb, dry; he felt like he had swallowed a pebble. "Do not let me be buried here, the earth will throw me up. The earth will spit me out like a poisonous plum pit." His voice grew weaker as his throat tightened, words wrung out of him. "The earth will reject me, see? Please... the illness will leave my body once I pass, please, could you keep me above ground, in a cold room, wherever you can keep a corpse, and send me back by train, send me back by train to the Capital once the epidemic is over... It'll be over one day, I know it, I know Burakh will succeed where I couldn't..." He was watched over and, under pitch-black eyes, he felt sorrow gnaw at what was left of his heart. "Send me back to the Capital, to my mother who is waiting for me... Send me back to her so she can bury me where my grandfather was, where my grandmother will be... please..."

He knew he was heard, but he wasn't sure he was listened to. He felt himself sink into the cold dark earth. Faces withdrew from his sight, disappearing on the sides of the grave.

Then the soil was battered with heavy steps. A four-beat gait: a beast.

A head appeared over the grave, followed by a long, thinning neck.

A Pale Horse came forth. Its coat was bone-white clay-white sky-grey, it had pitch black pits for eyes; and it opened its mouth and it had human teeth and it spoke a human tongue, and it spoke it as such:

It's time to wake up, Bachelor Dankovsky.

And Bachelor Dankovsky woke with a breathless gasp, punched out of him as if he had been held underwater for hours.

Air burned through him like lightning strikes set tree trunks ablaze from the inside and his flailing arms knocked over the — empty — bottle, vial kissed of red, that was on his bedside table. His arms were weak and they couldn't quite hold his own weight up, and his lungs felt shrunk and each breath felt like a forest fire, and his face was clammy and white in the cheeks and purple

around his eyes and red around his mouth where blood couldn't have been wiped off completely — but he was alive, restlessly, agitatedly so, the touch of the world searing on his skin. Burakh had jumped out of the cot and to the bedside to take the basin away from the sheets, to help him sit up, to feel Dankovsky's crushing, powerful, sweaty grasp when he took the offered hand to pull himself up; his touch was searing too.

Dankovsky looked at Burakh with wide, keen eyes: they swallowed the ghost of dawn inviting itself into the Stillwater like they were so incredibly hungry, ravenous, for the faint, ashen light. The Bachelor brought his hand to his own throat and, when Burakh saw his surprise at touching bare skin, he brought him his cravat (and his gloves).

“... Burakh, what is it that I hear?”

Burakh leaned into the silence and emptiness of the attic (a way it hadn't been for over two days, which had felt closer to two lifetimes) and listened. Footsteps scurried downstairs — small beasts scattering (he thought he recognized the Architect's heels on the floorboards) — but he could hear more of them, fainter, further. Their rhythm was sharp, crisp. Martial. The two men looked at each other, and they both knew — and they both knew that they both knew.

“Give me a minute, would you,” Dankovsky said as he rose on his feet, his legs just short of buckling under his weight.

“Right.”

“Is... the basin clean?”

Burakh threw it a glance. “You threw up blood in it.”

The Bachelor's face contorted/twisted/folded/he seemed to swallow something sour. He took the basin and limped, his ankles and knees and hips sore and stiff from days of lying there—lying still—lying stiff—being agitated and coursed through by shocks of illness that made him shake and turn, to the small bathroom, out of Burakh's sight.

Once Burakh heard the water run, echoing into the brass cradle of the basin, he stepped away, then back, then down, and he left without a sound but the loud, bursting sigh of relief that rang through him.

The Haruspex was called, so he went: in the Cathedral, the Inquisitor waited for him to come close before she spoke:

“How is the Bachelor?”

Burakh bit one side of the inside of his mouth after the other. “He's getting back on his feet.”

“Has he told you his lab has been destroyed?”

Her voice didn't fall and didn't rise. She wasn't sad about it, nor particularly excited. Her silver eyes raked the surface of the Haruspex's face, searching it.

"I have been made aware."

(That wasn't a lie.)

"Have you met the Commander?"

"I haven't. I had assumed he would be... here."

The Inquisitor's mouth pinched. It wasn't a smile and it wasn't a grimace. It was a placid kind of sourness that cradled interested, cynical wells of stone-grey eyes.

"He's looking for you."

Burakh read something on her face, and asked: "There's something else you are not telling me, isn't there?"

"You're in danger." Burakh thought he could hear concern poking a hole through the roof of her thin-lipped secretive mouth. It took him aback.

"In what ways?"

"The Commander is looking for you. Armed. With a squad of ten men — by him. It is logical to assume he has given order to the rest of the troops to stay on the lookout for you, too."

"Why?!"

"Because you're a dangerous man, Burakh."

Burakh wasn't sure if she meant that — even as he assumed she had every way of knowing. She read the interrogative look on his face and continued:

"He's been told you eat human hearts."

"I don't—I don't eat human hearts. Or animal, for that matter!"

"You've been seen plucking some straight from corpses, from people you've yourself killed."

"I have *only ever killed* in self-defense," Burakh barked through gritted teeth (trying to keep himself calm, keep himself composed, he didn't need one more person finding him brutish).

"He has been told you've indiscriminately killed people of your own kith to protect a friend of yours, who's committed great crimes against the purposeful order of the town."

Burakh's mouth thinned in a straight, sour line. The Inquisitor's silver-coins-for-eyes scraped the exhausted, pulled skin of his face like a plough. They seemed to squint with a sort of subdued... almost-satisfaction. *Something something... "Betrayal", is that it?* Burakh thought to himself as his interlocutor seemed to think. Was murder (*well... "murder"... It's more complicated than that...*) acceptable, *if that means I didn't let a friend down?* Burakh wasn't sure of where the Inquisitor thought were set the lines of the law (he knew she didn't *draw* them, merely follow), but he also wasn't sure he was really tempted to discover.

“Besides, it is your word against everyone else’s, isn’t it? He’s been told by the girl, who’s been told by the Mistress, that you go around with a cohort of Butchers and bloodthirsty Worms — that is, when you do not turn on them. That you stalk the streets on the prowl.”

“What girl?! What Mistress?”

“The two-faced one. (She paused, and Burakh could see how her face meticulously wrapped itself around her sentence. Deliberate, she answered the other half of his question.) Also the two-faced one.”

“You have to realize how little this narrows it down, in this town, right? It doesn’t narrow it down at all.” (Burakh still very much had an idea.) “Does he plan on killing me on sight or does he want me alive?”

“You’ll find that out.”

“Right. So, a fifty percent chance that, if I stumble across them, one of his soldiers will shoot me like a dog... out of self-defense,” he sneered through tense, straining jaws. “Does he believe everything he is told? Does he go along with lies, with rumors?”

“Your... for a lack of a better word, *bloodstained* reputation precedes you. Think of it not as being gullible, or easily persuaded by hearsay, but rather as... mental prophylaxis. The longer you avoid the Commander, the stronger this vision of you he has will be... Or, on the contrary, you could be met with bullets if you dare approach too soon, when he still thinks you’re on the prowl, ambushing his men.”

(*So what you’re telling me, Burakh thought, is that I should just go fuck myself.* (But he didn’t tell the Inquisitor that.))

“The Commander has said he wants to see the Bachelor,” the Inquisitor eventually said when Burakh didn’t speak.

“Surely, he can find him himself.”

“You were the last person he was around,” she pointed, the spindle of her eyes caught on his blank face.

“I’m not following him everywhere he goes like a dog. He’s feeling better, he’ll go find the Commander if he’s asked.” (Ah, well, will he? Burakh knew the Bachelor to be stubborn, and he could see him refusing. He’d already been more than reluctant to meet the Inquisitor. But then again, Burakh thought, if the Bachelor could redeem him in the Commander’s eyes like he did in the townfolk’s on the day they met... He should ask him. He should find and ask him.) “The town is not that big, surely you can run into him before the day is over.”

“We both know we all have a long day ahead, don’t we?”

“Goodbye, Inquisitor. The sick won’t heal themselves.”

He left the Cathedral with calm, purposeful steps. When he was sure he was out of the view of the windows, he ducked his head down and ran, weaving between souls and huddled crowds like murders of crows that he insistently dispersed for their safety.

Burakh hurried back to the Stillwater before heading out to the Theater, needing to collect his gloves, his mask, and more material that he had left there... to be used.

Upstairs, the Bachelor had taken his seat back at the desk. He was arranging papers on his desk, sorting through scribbled sheets — which ones were his, which ones were Burakh's. The ends of his hair were wet, as if he had hastily washed his face. He was sloped forward, had put his vest back on, buttoned his shirt — Burakh couldn't see if he had all the way up, and then told himself it didn't matter.

“Burakh?”

His voice was weak, still, a strained, ravenlike croak.

“Yes? (Burakh walked to him.) Oynon?”

“She wants to see me, doesn't she?” (He spun his words in his mouth like he wanted to bleed them dry.) “The scarecrow from the Inquisition. The doomsday omen...”

Burakh decided he wasn't... going to pick up on the second half of his line.

“She does. She had come the... first day you were sick, to ask me to send you to her when you would get better.”

Dankovsky turned to him. “But you didn't.”

“But I didn't.”

“Thank you, Burakh.”

The genuine relief in his voice wrung a panicked beat out of Burakh's heart. He tried to joke it out, *quickly*. “I assumed you'd go on your own, like a grownup.”

Dankovsky didn't even smirk.

“I do not... look forward to it. I have nothing to show for the seven — Burakh, what day are we...? Is it seven...? — days I have spent here. I have no vaccine, no serum... I have dubious prophylaxis recipes that I can only make on the back of the dead — a constant, uninterrupted *supply of dead*, for nothing but the *hope* to protect the living.”

He brought his hands to his face, digging the heels of his palms into his sunken eyes like he wanted to put out once and for all the pyres of images haunting him. He continued:

“I’ve failed to protect people, and I’ve failed to protect myself.” (A heavy, guilty pause.) “To protect them from myself.” (Another one.) “I have nothing to appease the emissary with. Going to the Cathedral would be going to the gallows — but for this day... this day at least... I’ll go to the gallows with my head high.”

“Oynon, what are you talking about? The Inquisitor has no reason to kill you. It would be counterproductive. We need you here.” (That was Burakh’s reasoning for having spent the past two — or three? was it three? — days at his side. Because they needed him. That was a truth.)

“This is not about her.”

“Pray tell, what then?”

“Burakh, my work here has been nothing but a catastrophic, delirious failure.”

Silence just fell into the room like an oil spill. Suffocating, pitch-black.

“I have nothing to show for my stay here, and I have nothing left to return to.” Burakh tensed, and Dankovsky noticed it. “Has she told you? Does she know? Of course she’d know. The Powers That Be have done nothing but hinder my research — and now that my life’s work has gone in flames, I might as well never go home.”

His voice, having trembled with a subdued, bleak and biting rage, had fallen back. He was calm, cold, as flat as an undisturbed sea. Burakh could see how his depths boiled.

“If I am not to go back victorious, I would rather blow my brains out with this very revolver. I’m cornered. I have nothing to fall back on to beg for good graces — because I *did*, I had to *beg* like a *dog* for the most minute of things, the... protective shell of my lab—the one thing that gave me the smallest bit of repose, of argumentative weight against those who sought to pull everything from under me.”

There is a sharp, breathless — as he was exhausted — second that hung from his mouth. Burakh saw his face distort. It was bitten by grief like linens by moths; then sorrow; then fear; then a bitter, horrifying acceptance. Eventually, a graceful gratefulness seeped into his desperate eyes, and that scared Burakh shitless.

“Burakh, I am glad we didn’t get to become enemies.”

Burakh was frozen in place.

“... I would say that’s a little *light* of a statement, oynon.”

(He didn’t elaborate. He couldn’t elaborate.)

Dankovsky laughed: a bitter viper bark that punched through him.

“I am unspeakably thankful, Burakh, I am. I owe you my life... but I am not sure it was worth saving.”

Dankovsky's words punched Burakh through the chest and he felt his ribs cave in. They caved in and they pierced the wet red bag of words he had tucked between his lungs like a bulging spleen and the pulp of his next sentence tore through him like a broken bone does flesh:

"Oh don't you fucking *dare*, asshole."

Dankovsky turned to him and looked at him with wide, wild nutshell eyes. Burakh immediately added, trying to play the banter card again (and he was starting to get a sleeve-full of it):

"Do you know how many blades of herbs heroically gave their lives for you? Do you know how much clear spring water gave itself to your cause? Come on, oynon. You have to think about them... and live."

The Bachelor's lips slithered in the sliver of a smile, taunt and tense. Burakh had managed to pull that from him, but he could see in his dark, pitted eyes that he thought about it still. He was thinking about it still.

"What did you... give me?" he eventually asked.

Burakh thought about his answer for a while.

"A medicine that worked. I've... found a blood. A blood that works."

Dankovsky's eyes were on him, peering, interested, eager.

"I needed to make sure I could find more before giving it to you."

"So it is scarce."

"I had the belief it could be," Burakh promptly corrected.

"And you gave it to me."

The pause was heavy, cumbersome. Accusatory, almost, and Burakh *detested* it.

"I did."

And he doesn't say *because I thought it was worth it*. And he doesn't say *and I'd do it again*.

"I could. I could so you would have... an opportunity to share your own discoveries." When Dankovsky sighed, he insisted: "Go see the Inquisitor... Erdem, please. Go see her. She won't bite you... She hasn't bitten me!"

A little laugh scraped through the Bachelor's teeth. He said:

"You're a way more lovable person than I am, Burakh."

Burakh was too stunned to speak.

Eventually, he did, because the silence was getting awkward:

"The uh?"

(Well. He tried to.)

“Oh, you’ve heard me,” the Bachelor almost-snapped back at him. (He was too tired to truly have bite to his hoarse bark. He sounded almost irritated with... something else that Burakh couldn’t decipher. A wordless aftertaste that lingered when Burakh wasn’t looking, avoiding him.) He turned on his chair, almost sulking. Burakh pinched the base of his thumb just in case he had fallen asleep without realizing it.

“Well... Maybe you could let her decide this, oynon?”

“So you *are* sending me to her.”

“I’m... firmly nudging you.”

The Bachelor sighed deeply, bringing pinched fingers to the bridge of his nose, and Burakh saw on him this pompous, important finickiness he had come to him with when they first met — and Burakh was overjoyed to witness it again. And Burakh was *not* to think about it (like this) again.

“I’ll go. I’ll be quick. I won’t let her try to... surround me. I’ll leave for the Hospital as soon as I can.”

“Yes,” Burakh nodded, “that’s a good excuse. She can’t keep you from it.”

“That’s not *just* an excuse, Burakh. I have... missed out on my duties quite a bit.”

“Oynon, you were sick.”

“I was. I was, and I was never supposed to be. That was a *failure* on my part.”

Burakh balanced from one foot to the other. *Think of something, quickly.*

“You were, and you’re not anymore, which is why you need me around.”

The Bachelor’s peach-pit-bitter umber eyes overflowed with a wordless, shapeless “thank you” that hit Burakh like a gust of wind does a stem of rye.

The Haruspex was promptly on his way, like he couldn’t bear any more of this amorphous weight.



Burakh met the Bachelor again, late in the afternoon — he had left the theater-hospital holding his flank, as if nursing a stitch in the side, unstable on his legs but not pale, and he had refused any help getting home. Burakh had left not long after, having taken the time to clean his tools, his hands, and discarded his gloves. The sky was low, gray, crushing, and was heavy atop the Bachelor’s lain-down, stretched out, still body. Fear almost slapped Burakh’s head right off his shoulders seeing him immobile in the grass before he noticed how he swayed one of his feet, moving it back and forth to the tune of an imaginary song. His hands were joined on his chest. The Bachelor heard Burakh approach, and turned his head to him, not making a move to get up.

“You left the hospital early,” Burakh immediately said, trying to make it look like he had come with something to say and not just because his own steps brought him here.

“I did.”

A pause, through which Burakh swam fast. “How are you holding up?” He would be lying if he said this wasn’t an excuse to look like he hadn’t just come to hang out. He’d also be lying if he said he wasn’t asking in earnest. So, after that, he kept his mouth shut.

“I’ve been better,” Dankovsky said, and Burakh caught his self-deprecating smile. He was back at looking at the sky, waving his foot, scratching his own palm with an absent thumb.

“I can imagine.”

Dankovsky scooted to the side, herbs clinging to his coat. Burakh needed a second to register the offer, and only sat down when Dankovsky gestured at the space next to him with a loose hitch of his chin. Burakh sat with knees raised, feet firmly planted in the ground as if the soft breeze could make him sway, hands joined at his shins.

“Your women,” Dankovsky eventually spoke, a hand barely rising from his chest to wave at Brides, in the distance, who sang and danced as their usual, “they’ve gotten... agitated.”

“Don’t call them that,” Burakh huffed, “they’re not *mine*. They’re no one’s. They’re... the Earth’s.” He hesitated. “... And each other’s, sometimes.”

He didn’t catch Dankovsky’s sidelong glance at him, but it was thrown nonetheless. Dankovsky nodded. (Burakh didn’t catch how his mouth thinned in something... well, Burakh wouldn’t have known.)

“But, yes, they’ve... gotten themselves busy, this past week.” Burakh nodded. “Yeah. busy.”

Burakh looked at Dankovsky (not straight on — rather with a side-eye that would have been painfully obvious, were Dankovsky not staring at the sky still, gaze scratching the dark underbellies of the clouds). His eyes were still a bit sunken, lids heavy, mouth still dry and each word struggling past cracking lips. Still, red had risen back to his cheeks, and the lower part of his face was the faint mist-shrub-blue of a pronounced five o’clock shadow. Burakh didn’t know if he looked more peaceful or drained. A bit of both, he thought. Relieved, too, not that it showed a lot. Burakh noted his loosely-knotted cravat, and the untucked folds of his shirt collar that stuck out like paper wings.

“Have you lost your—” (Burakh brought his fingers to his neck, gesturing vaguely above his throat until the word came back to him) “—your pin?”

“Not lost,” Dankovsky replied, his voice a sore, breathless, yet calm whistle. “I’ve just left it on my desk.” He turned to Burakh (just his head, almost lazily). “Do you miss it that much?”

The Bachelor’s eyes bore a heavy, weary playfulness, pushing out against the boulder of exhaustion—and the lighthearted tone punched a reflexive, nervous laugh out of Burakh’s tight-lipped mouth. *Where the hell did that come from*, Burakh asked himself. He seemed to have shed

every fang of the crushing, piercing, predatory despair he had fallen into the jaws of a few hours earlier. Had he gotten to have a conversation with the Inquisitor and had it gone way better than he had thought it would? Did surviving the Plague make someone frisky? It sure didn't make *him* .

"It's not about missing it," Burakh justified himself before following the offered lead of Dankovsky's tone, and adding: "you just look so much more unkempt without it! Naked, almost!"

He regretted the words almost immediately, even as the Bachelor barked out a throaty laugh and replied, wrapped in a numb ease: "Oh, it can't be that much of a shock to you. If I believe your colleague, you've seen me in worst states—and worst states of undress."

Burakh, through gritted teeth as the past days—the past dream—came back crawling up his spine, scaling him with wet, sharp spider legs, pushing between his eyes the memory-needle of having to take off Dankovsky's cravat as he coughed until his lungs sounded like they'd collapse, of peeling the shroud from his stiff, mist-pale corpse, replied: "I have. I sure have."

They both fell into a silence Burakh felt like he had awkwardly stumbled into. Dankovsky didn't seem to mind. His eyes were on the sky still. Burakh found him pensive, not particularly melancholic.

"Do you still have the cigarettes I gave you?" the Bachelor eventually asked. "Well, cigarette."

"I do. Do you want it back?"

Burakh didn't tell Dankovsky it was half-smoked. That he had kept it for when Dankovsky would... wake up. He wasn't sure if it was weirder to imply he had smoked the cigarettes of a man on Death-borrowed time, or if he had saved some in the hopes/in the wish/in the unspoken prayer of having him finish it.

"No," Dankovsky said. "Not yet, at least. Not with the lungs I have now." And, as if to drive his point home, he let out two dry, airy coughs—more a formality than anything else. "Maybe later." He turned to Burakh and Burakh saw a smile on his face, and his spine tensed, as if struck by lightning. "Keep it for me."

"Right." (The word escaped him swiftly and he tried to rein his voice back into light-heartedness.) "I'll think about it. Can't promise it'll survive my stress."

The Bachelor croaked out another laugh.

He disjoined his hands and let his arms frame his flanks. Burakh tensed with the eerie, creepingly familiar feeling of feeling him slip away. Let his head loll to one side, to the other. Dankovsky eventually tucked his chin against his throat as the breeze picked up — as Burakh stared.

"What?"

"Nothing. You just look funny with your head all flattened against your throat like that. Like a lizard."

Dankovsky huffed out a chuckle.

“And with a bit of luck,” he said, “I can look like one even more!” He tilted his head in some more and a cough hammered out of him. “Ah, no. Bad idea.”

“Does your throat hurt?”

“It’s pretty sore.” (He brought his hand to his neck, past the paper mouth of his flapping collar, under his loosely-tied cravat.)

“You coughed a lot. You coughed a whole lot...”

“I can feel it. I can feel it everywhere. From my lungs to my tongue.” (He sighed.) “I’d need a hot tea with milk and honey...”

His voice had slipped back into the jokingly whining grumble Burakh had only heard him use when drunk (or not-quite drunk. Or whatever his excuse was for that one time at the Architect’s). It dawned upon Burakh that the Bachelor didn’t seem to... recall the one he’d offered him in the morning. Something in his chest stung with the bitter realization that he had done it for nothing — *no*, he promptly interrupted himself. It helped. It had helped. (He wasn’t going to tell Rubin he had been sent across town for something the one concerned would never remember to thank him for.) Something else fought for ground in Burakh’s chest: a sigh of unmeasurable relief. It almost punched through him, the weight of the uncomfortable, foreign closeness washing off with the realization, and he laughed too:

“You won’t let that go, will you?”

“I won’t until I get it.” (There was a pause where silence stepped back in, breathing in the crisp, cooling air, and continuing its way over the sprawling yellow grass. Then, Dankovsky scratched one of his cheeks, the sound of stubble against leather making Burakh’s hair stand up.)

“Another thing I need to get is a good shave...”

(Burakh thought in a blink about how he let his facial hair get this way. He remembered his clammy, ghostly, agitated body sunken into the Stillwater bed. Burakh thought about what he could have done. Burakh stopped thinking immediately.) “Do you have a good razor?”

“I’ll find one, even if that means haggling every child in town for one that will not give me tetanus.”

“Can’t be too careful...”

“At this point I’m probably immune to most diseases known to man... Maybe even some unknown.”

He was joking—he was, he laughed about it, and Burakh joined in, but they both were heavy in the chest, tense in the neck up, knotted in the guts with a fear shared, anchored within, hanging over like a blade.

“Did you... see anything?” Burakh asked.

Dankovsky looked at him kind of sideways and half of his face furrowed in questioning, as if the other part was too weak to. “What do you mean?”

“You seemed to have the worst nightmares. Anything... usable from them?”

Dankovsky squinted, seemingly racking his brain. “I don’t remember anything from them.”

This, Burakh didn’t know, but that was a lie. He remembered the grave—he remembered himself in the grave. From the grave. Of the grave, with the grave. Surrounded and completely alone. Very cold. Burning hot. He remembered the feeling of the thorns going through him like blades through the throat. The... lungs-bursting, biblical feeling of holding lightning in his hands, and it going through him/him going through it—jaws to jaws. (He didn’t tell Burakh any of this.)

“All I remember was waking up.” (A plain lie.)

Here was another thing Dankovsky was not going to tell Burakh: he remembered his hands on him. Not day by day, not hour by hour—rather like a pit of snakes, every touch at once coiling around him and squeezing – like a swarm of bees flocking to his face and neck and chest and gathering each of his sweat drops like nectar – like a plain of prickly grass rising around him like meadows do once freed from the suffocating cap of winter snow. He was not going to tell Burakh. (It wasn’t trickery, it was silence.) “And before that... I remember falling down. On my knees, then face into the ground.” The Bachelor pushed himself on his elbows and, emphasizing on his point, pointed west, towards the end of the track that licked the roots of the Crowstone rocks. “There. I had wandered. I remember the feeling of the haze, of the... twisting mind maze. Couldn’t make a sentence. Couldn’t call out when I thought I saw people. Then nothing. A great big nothing...”

He lay back down, as if recalling the events had drained him. Burakh spoke, and he couldn’t quite shake the wreathing, wringing vine of sorrow and guilt that closed around his throat:

“... Then Herb Brides picked you up.” (Burakh saw how Dankovsky turned to him.) “They found you, and picked you up. Carried you. They must have come from the Crow, maybe from the cemetery or the Barrow. Maybe they followed you.” (He fidgeted—picked at his nails.) “They carried you. Five of them at least, and three that followed, singing, chanting... making a ruckus in the town. They brought you to the Stillwater, where I just was, and I helped them carry you upstairs.” (That was a lie, and you know it.)

Burakh saw how Dankovsky’s brows furrowed, slightly at first, then deeply; how his mouth pinched in a long, straight line. He was thinking of something. He was thinking of saying something.

“Did any of them... fall ill after carrying me?”

And for a second, Burakh didn’t speak. The words hung between them, growing heavy with heady twyre. It was dawning on him—or, more precisely, it had dawned for days before, and now more of the sun was tearing its way through a thick cover of daybreak clouds. (Metaphorical clouds—the steppe was, in front of their eyes, growing darker as evening came crawling like a heavy, foggy spider.)

“No,” he eventually said. “None of them have.” To Dankovsky’s prying eyes, he added: “And I’m finding out why tonight.”

Dankovsky nodded.

Burakh read on him, clear as day—as day can be—a bitterness scientifically proper; his words were greeted by the sour pinch of a mouth which wanted truths, and even more: truths for itself.

“You keep me updated, Burakh.”

“Oynon, you know that I will.”

Walking back to the lair, Burakh found his shoulders sore with effort and yet relieved, his footsteps light as if a great weight had been torn from him — and they were, and it had. He stopped in his tracks and suddenly realized that, *son of a bitch*, he had forgotten to tell Dankovsky about the Commander, forgotten to ask him to cover for him once again. He had forgotten most of their discussion, and found himself gritting his teeth when the only ghost of it still haunting him was Dankovsky’s silhouette as he laid, placid and composed for once, mindlessly fidgeting with the collar of his open shirt. It superimposed itself on that of him lying agitated and restless, fever tearing him to pieces with his burning teeth. Burakh shook his head violently — he would have let one of these two linger, and he chose the one of Dankovsky *not* on the verge of death, thank you very much.

When the air became heavy and dense with the cover of evening, Burakh lay low and walked in the shadows of walls, skirting around tightly-packed groups of soldiers. They were agitated and restless like cornered buzzards.

Lyubimyy Moy, Matador

“How are you holding up?”

“Good evening, Burakh. Is that going to become your default phrase everytime we meet?”

“Oynon, I’ve said it *twice*.”

“Hey, I’m just joking.”

(He was, and that felt so foreign still that Burakh had no idea if it hid something darker. He feared a... resolution having brewed inside of the Bachelor.)

“Do I get a reply?”

“You do. I’m doing better, Burakh. I’m...”

Well, he was pondering. That, Burakh could see. He was at his desk, papers in front of him, juggling authorizations from the families, notes, scribbles that... Burakh could *guess* were depicting people or things but... Well, the Bachelor was no Picasso, let’s put it that way.

“I’m reflecting. I’m organizing my thoughts. I’m... coming to terms with the fact that I lived.” (He marked there a pause to honor the “... *whereas many others didn’t get to*” that, even if not said, echoed loud and clear in the attic.) “Thanks to you. Again, Burakh. Thank you.”

Burakh could get used to that. It fanned the flames of inklings of pride — the first of which he had felt brewing his first panacea. The circumstances were... of vastly differing importances, objectively. But to him... *Oh, forget about it* .

“I wasn’t going to let you die on me. We need you there.” (He had said that already, hadn’t he? He thought he had.) Dankovsky’s heavy-lidded (because tired — because... (because Burakh was looking.)) black marbles of eyes were on him. The past few days seemed to have taught his gaze a sort of unwieldy, ghostly patience. “You know I don’t... necessarily *agree* with some of your *methods*, oynon, but I couldn’t let your position at the Theater stay unfilled, now could I?”

Dankovsky didn’t *quite* laugh, but came close enough to it that he scraped hints of it, peppered his voice with sprinkles of amusement. Oh, he fell back dead serious soon enough.

“How many of these.. elixirs of yours did you need to pull me out of it? Was it worth it?”

Oh, we’re noot going that route again. Nuh-uh-uh.

“I’ve weighed my options long enough, oynon. Between how many people *I* could cure with what I’ve given you, and how many people *you* could cure with your expertise—”

“Have you made calculations?”

“I’ve made my choice, and I believe it to be the right one.”

The Bachelor raised a bushy eyebrow, pouted an unconvinced pout, before shrugging and seemingly putting his... if not *trust*, at least *not-suspicion* onto Burakh.

“Are you staying?”

“I’d love to, oynon.”

“So, no.”

“You’re starting to know me well.”

“It’s only fair, after you’ve gotten a head start.”

“Try to rest, erdem. You didn’t look too good these past few days.”

“Don’t you dare flatter me, Burakh, it is highly unprofessional.”

Burakh barked out a laugh — a real one, powerful, drumming, thunderous. He caught how Dankovsky looked amused too.

“I’ve met the Commander, Burakh,” Dankovsky eventually said.

Burakh tensed. “... Well?”

“I’ve told him what I thought of you.”

“Oh,” Burakh chuckled, “that sounds like a *threat*.”

“It is not, and you know it,” Dankovsky scoffed, audibly piqued. “Still, I am not sure I could... truly change his mind. I think he needs to meet you.” He sunk deeper into his seat. “Let me mediate your first encounter, but until then... keep clear from him and his men.”

“Such is my plan.”

“It might be harder than believed, Burakh — they’ve set barricades everywhere. Most districts now have blockades; and they’ll keep making more until the illness is eradicated.”

“Shit.”

“You said it, Burakh. Shit.”

Burakh thought of the restless soldiers he had been lucky to avoid so far. He imagined they were pretty trigger-happy. (He wondered if he knew any of them — if any of them bore stitches he himself sewed.)

Dankovsky interrupted his daydreaming: “As always, Burakh...”

He gestured at the attic, at the empty bed and agape bathroom door.

“Are you offering to hide me out?” Burakh asked, a smile involuntarily toying with his chapped lips.

“Far from me to harbor a fugitive,” Dankovsky replied, theatrically magnanimous, “but I believe I’ve made a good impression on the Commander, and he would stay away from here.” He looked at Burakh, and Burakh looked at him. His cheeks were pinker than the last time he had seen him, not long ago — good; that was good. “I’ve told you already you could always come and sleep here. It still stands.”

“Thank you, oynon. I won’t forget it.”

Burakh went out the door.

He settled back at the lair, picking brews from the alembic, leaving them to cool. His eyes darted to the clock.

The hour was coming. It was crawling and slow — he crawled to the bed and waited for it to come. It didn’t, and it did. It did, and it didn’t. Time was waiting for him to sink so it could swallow him whole.

THE SERPENT:

(curled against THE HARUSPEX'S shoulders, its head in the neckline of his sweater) I shan't... I will not... tempt you. *(with a bitter, yet profoundly relieved smile)* I do not think you can be tempted.

THE HARUSPEX:

(trying to be jovial, but a core nervousness seeps through) Now, what the hell could that mean!

THE SERPENT:

The apple... doesn't quite seem your type of fruit.

THE HARUSPEX:

(after shrugging) I don't know why you'd say that. I love them, quite a lot. Do you know what we nicknamed our friend group when we were younger?

THE SERPENT:

... Do tell...

THE HARUSPEX:

The "apple basket gang". *(with a nostalgic laugh)* Quite the title!

THE SERPENT:

(hesitating) Quite... but... um... Well. I don't know how long this metaphor could go on...

THE HARUSPEX:

(chuckling) There's a metaphor?

THE SERPENT:

(a little irritated) Come on, Haruspex... of course there is... I wouldn't... discuss it openly.

THE HARUSPEX:

Do you have this much to hide?

THE SERPENT:

I do. You know I do. I wish you didn't know I do.

(THE SERPENT slowly, slowly comes into a coil. It bites its tail, but doesn't eat.)

THE HARUSPEX:

(after a small laugh devoid of all mockery) Isn't this motif a bit too on-the-nose?

THE SERPENT:

I don't want to be a motif. I want to be alive.

THE HARUSPEX:

... I am sorry I'm keeping you there.

THE SERPENT:

Ah, I don't mind too much.

THE HARUSPEX:

(with a laugh) Not in my company, huh?

(THE SERPENT does not respond. Slowly, it moves: still biting its own tail, it circles around THE HARUSPEX's neck like a necklace, or a fallen halo. It surrounds him like rings do Saturn; like moons do the Earth, like the Earth does its own core.)

It was past ten, closer to eleven maybe. Burakh had flung himself out of his lair the second he had woken up from a clammy, suffocating nap. (Sleeping in the lair again, not having to run to the Stillwater to check on the sick—the sick, the *one* sick, the one he tended to—felt foreign again. He had not slept well, he had struggled to catch *rest*; it kept escaping him, pushing him back into the anxious, jittery state of *wait*. His legs kept kicking his blanket off with the memory of running back and forth between here and the Atrium.) He followed a stretch of the Gullet first, inhaling the saline, persistently sweet scent that rose from the waters, unexplainable, plain weird—leaving a rusty aftertaste in his mouth. He went east — *ran* east, weaving through the growing games of light and shadow of burning stakes that the military used as outposts. He went east so he could go north, and so then he could make his way into the open maw — the Bulljaw. It welcomed him. He thought he felt a hot breath wash over him as he stepped in.

He had gone south (flanking the Gullet) so he could go east so he could go north, and now he would run down.

Down.

So he could go white—pale in the face, heavy in the guts (that anchored him);

so all of his blood went to his knees, and his lungs, and his hands — where it was needed.

Burakh went east so he could go north so he could make his way into the open maw so he could run down—down—down(— down).

He was in the maw/that's the jaw/that's stuffy and yet cold like a great cavernous, empty intestine.

He weaved between columns of clay and basalt like wind through cypresses.

He took stairs — like steps — like graben stripes down and into. He felt light on the earth as everything closed on him.

He weaved between clay columns like wind through cypresses.

Burakh had gone east so he could go north so he could make his way into the open maw so he could run down—down—

down

(— down).

So he would meet Nara, crowned by her heavy, dense, dark hair, the two suns on her cheeks—bleeding softly.

Come forth, vivisector. Isn't that what you do?

You are still at the altar of the open chest,

You still part ribs like fingers—you pry them open like a stubborn oyster.

There's no offerings—there's her.

There's no milk however sour

There's no rainwater however thick with mud

(with blood)

(as you always bring.)

Here are your own eyes and they're wide closed, clamped open.

Here are your hands and they're red.

(except when they're not, which is not often.)

The cut is precise and tensile. Scents of herbs rise as if from the bowels of the Earth it(her)self, swirl-smokes inhaled by Pythia.

Narana's foreign body, overflowing with boiling water (because her warm warm hot scorching heart heats her inside(s) and overspills), gives itself away under it like nothing but a paper sheet. Burakh's blade follows the borders of her spleen like those of a garden plot, and one of the Brides standing by her side contorts sharply, a whine of pain wrung out of her.

There are no libations. There's a wrongness that hangs above, sharp like your own blade. You come to the realization it's not about your hands or your guts — which you still have, for now.

She gave kidneys and lungs in the way of the earth giving herbs, giving (back) souls as blades of yellow grass. (She didn't give anything; the red lumps below her skin were shaped clay. She gave everything there was — *the red clumps of her skin were shaped clay.*) Her heart was yellow grass. Her heart was a tightly-bound bundle of herbs, her aorta the string that held it together. Flesh-earth, earth-flesh.

Eat one, eat all.

Tend to one, tend to all.

(No snake. No beetle. Nothing to crawl up Burakh's moonflower-tendrils fingers to meet him — he sinks, he falls forth.)

Be khara, she says, but she doesn't. Her eyes rolled back, slowly, as if she was doing nothing but observing the dome of basalt that hung over them, stretched like stomach leather carpeting the concave belly of a rusty church bell.

As she lay there — dead — alive — really warm even as he wasn't touching her — colder than blade (a worse, way worse predicament than Dankovsky's speaking corpse), she raised her arms over her head, drawing a halo around her intricate hair. Burakh plucked a spindle out of her like he could have relieved her flank of a pinewood splinter. When one of the Brides who had stood by reached for her hand, held it, (not in an attempt to immobilize her, to pin her down — reaching loosely in the ways of a friend, or a lover,) another, then the other followed. A deep, bellowing sound was heard, like one of gargling on blood pooling in the back of the throat, and the pathway came to be.

Khodo khara. Right through her, as if where she laid had dipped under her weight to open a well into the earth, Burakh sees his own face. Narana's hands tighten in the holds of the Brides', and her face seems to distort with some sort of... fondness. Of an almost-sour recognition. She whistles a sigh through gritted teeth.

Bi khareeb. She was. *Bodozho baynam*. She got on her feet and rose—standing, gutted, she balanced on the altar slick with her blood—that looked closer to sap.

There is no milk. There is no pitted pomegranate. Burakh is not going to kneel—he's tense like a wire, like a fraying cello string. He doesn't breathe.

She levitates in the way of witches, a sin worse than most amongst Brides, and as the three others who stayed by her flayed sides reach for her ankles and knees, trying to keep her anchored, she speaks:

“No hard feelings, yargachin... ever.” She looked at him, she seemed to think. Her traits moved and shifted subtly, like rock chiseled by a stream. She smiled and squinted at the same time, as if she had seen through him — perhaps in the ways he could see through her. ”Bite kharaan. (At this, the other Brides tightened their hold around her, humming at her words in approval, coiling together like a pit of snakes.) It is... obvious. It is more obvious now than it was before. We know this about you, and we couldn't have you any other way.”

“... Know what about me, basaghan?”

One of the Brides spoke under her breath, humming again: “ *you had her, and we’ll have you...* ”, and Burakh tensed, mildly horrified at the implications. Narana tilted her head back — in the darkness of the Abattoir, against the sooty dome of the ceiling, her pale face rose like the moon.

“Do not worry about it. You do not have to know.”

“... Be oylgono ugyb. How come you do?”

“We’re told, of course.” (Her “we” was sprawling, invasive in the way of vine, tight with ivy knots. She pulled the three other Brides into her words, and they all nodded again, their faces pressed to her knees, her thighs, her open palms.)

“By who?”

“By she who says everything, of course.”

Burakh understood. Burakh was completely fucking lost. (This is the part where he stopped being sure he wasn’t dreaming.)

“A Kindred One... Ah,” Narana sighed, her piercing eyes on him with this pale, dawnlike comfort in them, “a two-fold Kin...”

“Kindred One, yes, that’s what you call each other.” (A pause. It’s restless, bellowing.) “That’s what we call each other.”

“Oh...” She became pensive for a moment. Burakh could see thoughts rise and fall behind her gaze like a slow, composed breath. “Yes, khayaala I suppose, in that sense too...”

“*That* sense? What did you mean the first time?”

“You do not need to know. We know this for you... For you to come to soon. We’ll keep it safe... Safe in the ways we keep the Lines under our feet for you to then trace... Later, later, yargachin.”

They hummed, everything seemed to tremble and shake. To thrill like a played chord.

“What else, basaghan?”

“I have said everything, khøerkhen. I know everything. Now is your turn. Go down. Go below. Go under.

Go within.

Go in.

Go forth.

Go forward.”

“*Boleesh*, stop, I get it. I will.”

“No hard feelings,” she repeated. “We need you as you are.”

“Yeah,” he nervously replied, “I need myself too.”

“More than you know.”

Burakh went east so he could go north so he could make his way into the open maw so he could run down—down—down(— down) so he could cut a living woman (who was a dead woman (who was barely woman at all; who was a bundle of fragrant, foreign herbs he could make no sense of, yet approached with a reverence he offered to things he couldn't quite mingle with.)) so he could—

punching his way through, tripping Odonghe into crevices he himself barely avoided, he collected bottles of which the glass was cracked, the silhouettes of the splits shaped like mosquitoes trapped in amber, a fingernail (which was a coin which was an earth-disk around a bullet hole) that made his hand grow sharp with the smell of copper, a candle that made his hand fall mushy and sweet with the scent of wax—

so he could collect the blood. So he could collect enough blood to fill a human person if he wanted to give life to it (which he didn't, because he wasn't interested in giving life—simply, now, in protecting it.) Burakh went east so he could go north so he could make his way into the open maw so he could go down—down—down(— down) so he could cut a living woman (who was a dead woman (who was barely woman at all; who was a bundle of fragrant, foreign herbs he could make no sense of, yet approached with a reverence he offered to things he couldn't quite mingle with.)) so he could collect enough blood to fill a human person if he wanted to give life to it (which he didn't, because he wasn't interested in giving life—and that didn't come as a realization, as he hadn't realized, not yet—simply, now, in protecting it.) so he could be

here,

at the altar etched with the trenches of a spine and five pairs of ribs.

So he could

brew

wax and copper and thread

(milk blood and pomegranate seeds)

into a living,

beating heart,

which wasn't his own until it was.

(and he knew it was.)

Burakh wove into a tense, taut maze of caverns like a sensible needle; his thumping, erratic thoughts followed: the stitching thread. The caverns seemed to close behind him, or perhaps just tighten. To the touch, the walls were dry like bull hide; the ground however made wet, sickening sounds below each of his steps; he felt himself sink with each one of them.

He came to it. He came to see it. He came towards it.

There are walls, there's a ceiling — it is stuffy and hot like a chapel in flames.

BEATS, RESTLESS AND UNEASY, MY ERRATIC HEART UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS OF MY RIBS.

It was so loud Burakh thought it could burst out of him. It could tear through him like a lightning strike. Each thump punched his ribcage in and he thought all of his ribs would bend under the force.

If he looks too long at the heart (that is a heart) (that is something else than a heart) (something more than a heart) he feels his skin slowly dripping off of him like hot wax. He can see — the vena cava, the aortic arch, both hooked to the ceiling of this stuffy, suffocating chapel, squirming with the weight of a loud, dense blood, hammering restlessly.

the pulmonary vein and artery, sticking out of it like thorns out of a drying apple, open wide and hollow like empty eye sockets or toothless mouths.

the valves — pulmonary, aortic, mitral, tricuspid, all agitated, visible through the thin, sunset-red pericardium, flailing like birds, opening and closing and opening like they sought to speak, like they spoke to seek. Like they wanted to reach out and touch.

Trying to... comprehend it feels like pulling the achenes off a strawberry; it is long; it is daunting; it is ultimately pointless; the flesh is so red, tangy, sweet, juicy; Burakh doesn't know that; Burakh has never eaten a strawberry. (He's never eaten a heart before either.) His mouth waters with the ghost of sugariness. His spit tastes rusty and bitter. He retches violently. The unnaturally low light scratches the oil-like slick of blood with gold, shining nails. It's everything. It's everywhere. Burakh sees, Burakh sees well, the *spear* of Damocles that pierces through the epithelium of the smooth guts-walls that grow out of the chamber like roots; a finger pointing, almost accusatory, at the heart that tucks itself against the wall to avoid its touch. (For how long still?)

If he thinks too long about it — if he looks too long at it — if he lets his gaze stretch and pull and cloak the heart with teary eyes, the ekphrasis dawns on him, slowly at first, then all at once, swinging through him like a pickaxe, his canvas-skin left torn under its knife. The leaf-nervures of the veins move slowly, swayed by the pulse.

It speaks. He speaks.

It has spoken.

Burakh runs.

Burakh ran down (or up) (or north or south), breathlessly, recklessly, frantically until there was only one heart — his own—beating so incredibly loud in his throat that he felt like he could throw it up, like he was going to. He retched; he tumbled forward; he crawled on all fours. His fingernails dug into the soil and the soil threw itself at him, closing around him like a punctured lung, clinging to his shoulders and sleeves until Burakh could see green scraps shedding off of him like burnt skin. The earth held onto him, plucking bits of his smock like feathers, like flower petals. Burakh hurried forward (which was up) (which made his head spin as

if he was tumbling down) and felt himself climb. He was bared as if eaten, as if born, as if thrown out/up, naked-armed; he barely registered the limbs that flailed in front of his eye as his. He climbed and his shoulders were shot through by a powerful, biting twinge that almost made him lose his grasp—before he felt something round and hot slither down to his elbow like a pearl of melting wax. He wanted to pay it no mind but it came into his field of view: a slow, long trail of red that trickled from high on him — then lower: he saw his skin on his upper arm parting slowly, coming open a very bright burgundy, blood flowing into the open, thin, precise cut like a river coming alive. More appeared. More appeared.

A cut for a cut and the world aligns, eh? Modny ish — khavirgan sar — golyng erez — tolgod — the rest. He looked away.

He felt devoured. *See? That's what hunger is.* He felt his skin scraped off of him cleanly, like meat off of bones. His ankles felt weak like chicken legs. Felt-felt-feeling-feeling nothing but it, nothing but that, but sensations swallowing him whole and rasping his red flesh.

He clung to the dirt. *Can't eat the dirt when famine strikes,* but the dirt can eat him. He bled on it like a leaf spilling dew drops. He tore at termite-bitten wood with his fingernails and the cold, fresh wind struck him across the face like the worst slap he could have gotten as a child (but never did).

He emerged, shaking, breathless, his chest punching his diaphragm in with inhaled he couldn't control. In the sick, bile-yellow light of a lantern, the face of the Younger Vlad was staring at him, crouched in terror behind his bed.

They stared at each other, each looking more like a deer looking down the barrel of a gun than the other. The Younger Vlad's face crumpled, rippled with pain like the surface of a pond in which had been thrown a rock.

"You should have never gone in," he heaved, and backed himself into a corner. "You should have never gotten out."

Burakh didn't wait any longer; he extracted himself from the well like one hauls up a corpse, his arms buckling once under his weight, and dashed out, running through the Maw and into the Warehouses. He had to get home. He had to get "home". In front of the Soul-and-a-Half fortress, red coats clumped together like fire ants on a dead insect. The place was crawling with them, with the sound of their hammering boots and the barking of their orders — still, not louder than those of the Halves.

Burakh caught Notkin's face between two soldiers, apparently interrogating him. From where he crouched behind a stone wall, the Haruspex saw the glance the kid threw on the side, out of the soldiers' view, for him to read as: "*get the fuck out of here!*". And so, Burakh got the fuck out of here.

He wouldn't make it to Rubin's hideout, or cross the Gullet to run to his apartment, without running into military. He wouldn't make it to Lara's without quite the same, and without—(he heaved deeply as he ran, and his legs bent sharply under his step, almost sending him tumbling

down)—falling (he heaved) tripping and hitting his head. The baffling cuts on his shoulders and arms, that he could now feel on his flanks, stung along precise, drawn lines, as if he was trapped in a spiderweb. He wasn't sure if they still bled, he wasn't sure how much he had bled. His head was spinning. He had turned back and galloped through the Spleen, his own hurting with a mean stitch in his side as he struggled to breathe.

He weaved through the cobblestone streets and limped into the Atrium.

He barged into the Stillwater without knocking and shrunk himself into a corner. He crouched low enough that his head didn't peek through the window and curled in on himself as exhaustion scythed him at the gut, snapping him in half. He fell forward and when he brought his arms forward to catch him, the pain shot through his wrists to his back like he had touched the wires of electric poles. Steps flew down the stairs. In the pitch-black hold of the Stillwater, Burakh caught the silver shine of a pointed revolver.

“Don't shoot.” He tried to raise his hands up and only managed to pull out one. “Don't shoot. Oynon, it's me. Don't shoot.” His voice was wrung thin with dry gasps that punched through him.

“Burakh?!”

Burakh nodded. He flinched when Dankovsky ran towards him, before seeing him, out of the corner of his eye, pulling the curtains closed.

“What happened? Where were you?”

“Long story.” (It was.) “I can't go anywhere else. Soldiers after me.” (They were.)

“Are you wounded?” (Burakh was. When he didn't manage to respond and instead let out a low, pained whine, Dankovsky urged him up.) “Go upstairs. Go upstairs, quickly.”

Burakh needed not to be asked twice. He plunged forward and scaled the stairs; he barely had time to catch a glimpse of the bloodstain he left behind. He tumbled into the attic. He lugged his weight to the small bathroom. As his hand smacked the faucets open, he dragged his arms and upper body into the basin of the shower, and waited for the blood to be washed off of him. The water was running a blinding, sharpened red.

“Burakh? Can I come in?”

Dankovsky was standing, cautiously leaning against the wall so as to not appear in the frame, by the door.

“No,” Burakh croaked.

The needle of the cold water punctured through each of his cuts, and the sting trickled down into the drain.

“What happened?”

“I don't know.” (Technically, not a lie.)

The water was running pink. The color thinned some more. The bite of the cold of the water washed over the bite of the wounds, a dull, blunt pain that froze Burakh's arms and back solid, weighing him down, clinging to his strength and pulling it into the drain with it.

"Can I come in?" Dankovsky asked again.

This time, Burakh said yes.

The Bachelor approached him slowly — Burakh could see this out of the corner of his eye. He hesitated, then crouched next to Burakh's collapsed body.

"Jesus Christ, Burakh," he said.

Burakh made a pathetic, pained gurgle of a sound. He was shaking like a sick dog.

"Who did this to you?"

"I don't know." (A pathetic gurgle again as breath and spit fought to crawl out of him at the same time.) "I don't know. I didn't see anyone."

"They're... incredibly precise. There *had* to be someone."

"I didn't see anyone."

Burakh didn't tell him how that confirmed what he feared. Oh, they were *deliberate*. If he focused, he could draw the map of the cuts on his body — and then, the pain blinded him. They didn't want to be drawn. To be deciphered.

"Don't move."

He heard that, then the fiddling of hands with the showerhead. When the water started following the limp, heavy carcasses of his arms as they flanked his head, he understood the Bachelor had taken it and was rinsing his arms off—purposefully. He was slow, meticulous in a scared-shitless way; Burakh knew that because he heard how his breath hitched after he held it.

"Do you remember anything? Anything at all?"

Burakh remembered. Burakh didn't know shit besides the immediate, painful obvious. The water slowly turned a lighter, then lighter even, pink. Burakh's entire body shivered. He felt something dry and warm on his back, following the drawing of a wound between his shoulder blades — he realized it was one of the Bachelor's hands and shivered even more.

"We need to have a look at this," Burakh heard from far, far above. "Dry yourself off. Get out. Please, come."

And with that, Dankovsky shut off the faucet and got up. Burakh expected him to leave, but his shoes crawled back into his faltering field of view, and he felt the weight of a towel being... not-quite laid and not-quite thrown on him.

When Burakh stumbled back into the attic bedroom, Dankovsky was standing, all tall, taut and pale, by the bed. He had lined it with more towels, his gaze insistent that Burakh get on it. His sleeves were wet. He was missing a glove. Burakh wasn't sure if he was wearing his cravat when he first barged in, but it was gone now. He limped to the bed without asking one single question. He sat, one leg crossed in front of him.

He could now see—Jesus fucking Christ—the wounds. Wounds, meat red; he was red meat. Red meat in cuts. He shivered violently. He could see their purposefulness. The tight-lippedness that parted like they wanted bloody, grotesque kisses. Dankovsky touched his skin and his hand colliding with that last idea made Burakh recoil. Sigils. Sigils, all over! All over, all of them. His skin, paper, his pa—his paperskin—oh and his ink too—his thoughts spun violently and he curled in on himself, mimicking the forward-sprawl he had thrown himself in under the water.

“You have only one on your back. The... drawing is pretty simple so it won't take long to suture.”

“What does it look like?” Burakh croaked.

When Dankovsky came back from the desk with his bag, he had also taken paper and pen. He scribbled — he was hurried but still meticulously, grimacing, apparently, at his lack of artistic sensibilities.

“Like this,” he showed Burakh.

And of course it was. Of course it would be. Branded, huh? Like cattle. Burakh thought he could pass out. The one branding. The one sigil. He crumpled the paper in his fist — his weakened hold, a pathetic fit of anger.

Dankovsky sat by him, the bed dipping under his careful weight. He brought his ungloved hand to Burakh's skin — his fingers were unspeakably cold. (Burakh's skin was unthinkable hot.)

“Jesus Christ, Burakh, you're burning up. You're nursing an infection.”

He palpated Burakh's arms, the pads of his shoulders, the painful brachioradialis. His fingers pressed lightly on the edges of the wounds, gauging their depth, their unnatural curves, making them spit a wine red trickle — *venous, at least*, Burakh's dazed mind could make out of it. *You lose some, you win some...* (He hadn't won today, at all.)

“You're going to need stitches. Give me the time to disinfect the tools.”

In the silent minutes — or could have been hours for all he fucking knew — that Dankovsky was downstairs, sanitizing needle and thread with boiling water, Burakh stayed still, silent, barely daring too loud of an exhale lest it tore through him and made him feel alit with spark-piercing pain again. He wasn't sure he wasn't bleeding out; he wasn't sure of much. Pain was over him like a smothering cloak, dull and hard and sharp and mute and heavy and skirting around his shape like it toyed with him, all at the same time like it wanted to show him all of its faces and never be caught as one. The image was strong in his head, wasn't it? His body, bent and twisted

pathetically, head on the mattress, warm and limp in a pool of his own red — a pool that deepened. The image was strong.

The Bachelor's footsteps in the stairs were urgent, heavy with purpose. Out of the corner of his eye, Burakh watched him wash his hands — roll his sleeves up and wash his arms from the elbow down, plastering dark, algae-like hair to his skin; clean the back of his hands by pushing the fingers of one into the spaces between those of the other. Looking like a one-hand handhold. Burakh wanted to ask the Bachelor if he ever felt lonely; lonely enough to hold his own hand. He didn't have the time to as he walked to, and sat next to him.

Dankovsky's hands on him were warm, now. It could only mean Burakh's skin had cooled. Only one was covered, seemingly with the only reusable glove still in the Bachelor's possession; the warmth seeped through it like blood through gauze — a welcomed sensation, this time. A comfortable, comforting one, all in ways Burakh... wasn't going to *tell Dankovsky*, but told himself. He let the thought linger, because he had pushed thoughts quite the same away for long enough that it felt more natural to let it in. The touch, too, felt natural. Dankovsky had been hesitant, reserved, almost, but he had emboldened — not emboldened enough to disregard Burakh's comfort, and he was careful in his sutures. One of his hands pinched the skin lightly, loosely; it felt more like a gentle hold. Burakh thought, for a second he found funny, about the nature of the situation; and then sloppily, barely-intelligently brought it up:

“This is deeply unprofessional, wouldn't you think so, oynon?”

“Oh Burakh, don't start.” He was gritting his teeth — Burakh realized it was so he didn't let out a chuckle, the situation not quite lending itself, to him, to pleasantries. *Hey*, his lips still twitched with something more than his usual, pulled, complacent smirk. “You initiated it when you barged in.”

Fair enough. There wasn't anything in the job description that warned of, or warranted Burakh waltzing in, bare-chested and covered in blood.

Dankovsky had fallen into a delicate, deliberate rhythm. His hands were purposeful, firm without being painful. They had determined paths from Burakh's shoulders to his wrists like many small, strong steps.

Pinch-prick-pull. Pinch-prick-pull. He walked Burakh through deep breaths to ease the pain with a voice that felt distant, *distant*, growing thin like rising morning mist.

“You know what...? Good, Burakh. Good. Sleep.”

(Burakh didn't want to, Burakh really didn't want to. He wasn't sure what the Heart — mix his thoughts around, mix the letters around; e-a-r-t-h — had done to his mind, had done to his own, and the dreams that brewed felt squirming and angry.) Burakh fought against sleep for as long as he could. He twitched often, and Dankovsky had to hold him down so as to not miss a suture.

“I don't want to... philosophize anymore.”

Burakh's voice had tugged Dankovsky out of his contemplative focus and he needed a second to register what was said — it didn't help that Burakh was lying face down into rough, harsh towels.

"No one is asking you to right now."

"Oynon, I've seen something so big tonight. I wish I could think—I could talk with big words. Like you. Like you do. But I don't want to—not with big words. With big concepts. With things that are so much bigger than me."

"There is nothing in this room that is bigger than you. Well, except the room itself."

(Burakh held this for a while before he spoke again.)

"I just want to sleep..."

"You will."

"Is that an order?" (He tried to be playful and the strength needed to bring light-heartedness to his voice tore through his dressed wounds and scratched them ablaze like a match.)

"It is... friendly advice."

"... Are we friends?"

"Jesus Christ, Burakh."

Dankovsky held silence. Burakh wasn't sure if he had any plans to keep talking, if it was worth pushing him. He wanted to cling onto his voice a little longer, though — and he'd be lying if he wasn't interested in the reply.

"... Yes, I'd say we're friends. And if you don't think we are, we'll argue about it when you wake up."

"I love arguing with you. I cannot wait to argue about the nature of the Plague."

"You're tired and delirious, Burakh. Sleep."

"I will... I am."

"Try to not move too much. There's only so much I can do with the needles I have, so don't burst your stitches twisting around on the bed."

Burakh wasn't *reaped* off his feet by sleep, he was more... gently tipped into its cold waters. He felt a... patronizing pat on the shoulder. In a last spark of consciousness, he realized as if it had been obvious in the gesture itself that it was not meant to be patronizing — that was Dankovsky's default state, and the only way he had reliably shown to know to express concern. Almost instinctively, Burakh covered the Bachelor's hand with his. When he didn't take it back swiftly under his loose hold, Burakh figured they had come to understand each other. (Burakh felt like he could laugh — understanding through touch was supposed to be *his* thing. Then, the thought was out of him powerfully, as if he had chased it himself.)

He dipped into sleep like one drowns.

Burakh: *He is here with me.*
Andrey: *He is. It would be more accurate to say that you are here with him.*
Burakh: *I haven't... seen you two around a lot.*
Andrey: *Can't we keep to ourselves?*
Burakh: *You can...*
Peter: *The Tower... is swinging on her base. A flower in the wind...*
Andrey: *He loves it... her.*
Burakh: *... And yet still, he escapes you.*
Peter: *(laughing) It's like he has a soul!*
Andrey: *Everything that has no soul, I/we can take. We can make. It's all so... graspable.*
Peter: *Soul is a by-product.*
Andrey: *The soul is an excited appetite. It squirms in the vial of the chest like a restless animal. I can try to grab it. I can try to hold it down like a bull for branding.*
Burakh: *Why would you even do that?*
Andrey: *(continuing) One can live without his animalistic instincts... but should he?*
Burakh: *What are you asking of me?*
Andrey: *Of you, nothing.*
Peter: *He's... a blank page.*
Andrey: *He's an empty vial.*
Peter: *His soul wanders around and refuses to let itself settle in the hold of glass.*
Andrey: *Scared it would break.*
Peter: *Inward.*
Andrey: *Very sharp.*
Peter: *Piercing him all over.*
Andrey: *It'd leave scars.*
Peter: *It'd never be stitched shut.*
Andrey: *Mmmh... I can see that.*
Burakh: *Are you not going to let me talk? You're sprawling all over the page.*
Peter and Andrey (or vice-versa), at the same time: *Like blood that spills.*
Burakh: *Come on now...*
Peter: *I don't think his vial is broken.*
Andrey: *It will be if he stays longer.*
Peter: *Yes...*
Andrey: *It will sprawl all over.*
Peter: *His soul?*
Andrey: *Yes. Like the pestilence.*
Peter: *I can see that.*
Andrey: *It will sprawl...*
Peter: *It will reach my door...*
Andrey: *... my feet...*
Peter: *... my hands—*
Andrey: *—if I hold them like so.*

(They extended their arms upwards, tall white cold columns that carried architraves of cupped palms.)

Peter and Andrey (or vice-versa) , at the same time: This should be the vial of the souls.

Burakh: Hands?

Peter and Andrey (or vice-versa) , at the same time: Yes.

Burakh: Yours.

(There was a silence.)

(One of them laughed. Both of them laughed.)

Peter/Andrey/Peter and Andrey/vice-versa, at the same time/all alone: Why? Wish they were yours?

(It sounded more like Andrey. A little bit... derisive. Pulled in a tight, mocking smile.)

Burakh:

Peter: You cannot handle souls.

Andrey: You handle hearts.

Peter: Kidneys.

Andrey: Spleens.

Peter and Andrey (or vice-versa) , at the same time: You would crush him. You'd bleed him out of his essence.

Andrey: Like citrus fruits.

Peter: Like cicadas.

Burakh: What do the cicadas have to do with this?

Andrey: Your palms are made to handle dirt.

Peter: Clay.

Andrey: Blood, again.

Burakh: Will you let me talk?!

Peter: A Soul would stagnate in the hollow of your hands like rancid-stale water.

Andrey: It would become covered in parasites.

Peter: Your hands are made to cut.

Andrey: ... In beautiful ways. Not in ours.

Peter: Crass.

Andrey: Raw.

Burakh: This has gone on for long enough. How many more jumps and capitals do you need?

Peter: Pulling a knife from rotten meat.

Andrey: Polishing it.

Peter: Silver...

Andrey: The handle is fit to my hands.

Peter: I am not in the business of cutting people besides myself.

Andrey: Ourselves.

Peter: Ourself.

Peter and Andrey (or vice-versa) , at the same time: Same thing, except when it isn't, is it?

Oh, me, oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, mine.

This, Burakh didn't know, but as exhaustion and delirium coiled around and inside of him, he started speaking in his sleep. He was face down on a pillow that Dankovsky had had to slide under his head, between his red cheek and blood-stained towel. The words pulled the Bachelor out of his silent watch, his vaguely-there meditation; he didn't understand them.

He didn't understand, but he listened — and it was perhaps better for Burakh to be asleep then, as he would have teased him relentlessly for finally doing so.

(THE HARUSPEX lies on his side, with one arm bent under his head. [BURAKH IS VAGUELY AWARE HE SLEEPS IN THE SAME POSITION IN THIS BED, IN THE STILLWATER.] The other is over his body, hand close to his face. THE SERPENT is wrapped around this arm, from wrist to shoulder. THE SERPENT'S face rests against THE HARUSPEX'S cheek.)

THE SERPENT:

... I don't usually hold people. When I do... I tighten around them in my embrace. I crush them without even thinking about it... I suffocate them while my mind wanders... this is all I'm good at, really. Destruction. When I love, I kill.

THE HARUSPEX:

(voice a little because oh, how he is sleepy) You're doing fine. You're holding me tight, but you're not crushing me.

THE SERPENT:

... Well... usually...

THE HARUSPEX:

But usually, you don't hold people, do you? I've been told you just do not.

THE SERPENT:

...

THE HARUSPEX:

So... Do you not hold because you *know* you will crush as it has happened before, or do you not hold because you think you will crush... you feel like you will crush... you never let yourself hold because you've always been too afraid you would hurt people?

THE SERPENT:

...

THE HARUSPEX:

I take it that's the second one.

THE SERPENT:

I've always been told I would crush. That's what I do, I would do.

THE HARUSPEX:

But it's not what you're doing right now.

THE SERPENT:

That is not what I am doing right now...

(THE DREAM is SLOWLY SLIPPING, or maybe SLOWLY SPILLING, SEEPING, hey now, eyes on the play, feet on the stage, you're trying to avoid looking at it dead-on, aren't you? come on! don't speak of fear, you've crawled through—THROUGH THE PLAYWRIGHT'S HANDS to MORPH INTO into a

new one, another one, an... almost *familiar* one — and when Burakh registers the scene, he almost slaps himself awake for having thought of it as “familiar”. Dankovsky’s head is resting on Burakh’s upper arm as he sleeps on his side; his cheek, stubbly in a comfortably (*uncomfortably*, Burakh immediately corrects himself, *uncomfortably*, and he stifles a nervous laugh) domestic way, pressed into the hollow where the pad of the shoulder meets the bicep. He seems to sleep. Burakh doesn’t dare to move, but still ends up shaking him awake, and Dankovsky’s eyes on him are a very warm, stratified jaspilite brown.

“It’s pretty unusual for me to have more than one or two dreams like those per night, you know?”

“I do not know. You don’t tell me about them.”

“You’re right, I don’t.”

Burakh held his silence like he was looking for more words to come to him — they didn’t. They fell right out of his mind like fleeting leaves when he brought his eyes on Dankovsky, on Dankovsky’s, who was still looking at him, cheek and neck against Burakh’s shoulder and arm.

“I’ve seen your friends in one tonight. Well, seen them *again* .”

“My friends?”

“The Architect and the... slightly more violent architect.”

“I am not surprised. They come when they’re invited, do they not?”

Burakh really wants to say “*I’m not inviting them*”.

“What, like vampires?”

He then laughs at his own joke. Dankovsky doesn't, and Burakh feels himself pale (as if he could, as if the dream cared). The waning ghostliness of the twins' fanged, hollowed faces comes to him. He swallows thickly.

"... Alright, show me your teeth."

And to his surprise, Dankovsky does. He pulls his mouth open in a carnivorous, and yet shockingly casual display of them. Burakh's heart sinks a little with the thought that he would have liked to see them for the first time in a smile, a real smile, in real life, before telling himself that's just his dream-belief talking; and then some more when he sees how his canines, flanking already-sharp outer incisors, graze his lower lips like two proding blades.

Oh. Ah. Oh, come on...

Burakh nods. He cannot bring himself to be scared. He cannot bring himself to be... anything but weirdly, deeply comforted. Relieved. He doesn't explain it. It is a thing — the one thing — that makes sense.

Dankovsky closes his mouth and settles his cheek back on Burakh's arm. Burakh is vaguely aware of the Bachelor's arms not-quite-wrapped around him, more hazily, ambiguously flanking his sleeping body, as if to guard him. Then, Dankovsky opens his mouth again and, after having settled the tips of his fangs on Burakh's skin, he digs them into his shoulder in one sharp, puncturing motion. Burakh lets out a yelp, more surprised than anything, — he woke up.

He woke up and he was staring at Dankovsky right in the face, his own bulgy, wide confused eyes meeting the Bachelor's — following the line of his arms, then hands in the still-dark attic, he found them busy reworking a suture on his shoulder, the paleness of waning night catching itself on the needle. Seeing the blood, Burakh felt himself faint, and he let out an almost-comical moan of disgust.

"Sorry," Dankovsky said, holding his arm in place. "I told you to not move too much while you slept."

"I'm even surprised you managed to prick me without waking me up."

"You were deep asleep. I called you, shook you and you didn't budge. I'm almost finished with it, you slept through the whole thing."

"Look at that... Velvet-hands oynon who can stitch someone back up with no painkillers."

"Enough. I don't know what the hell happened to you yesterday, but it exhausted you enough that you weren't woken up by stitches. Pretty impressive if you ask me."

"Finally my chance to catch a good night of rest," Burakh cynically laughed.

"You weren't unconscious for very long. You should try to get some more sleep."

"I should, eh?"

Dankovsky ordered him to sleep with a brush of his palm over the new stitches, as if to set them down like fresh plaster. Burakh felt himself shiver. He slid his arms under the pillow and buried himself in it.

He didn't sleep yet, he didn't let himself; he wanted to prove a point, to show fortitude. Or maybe he wasn't particularly excited at the thought that yet another dream would creep up on him — he'd had enough.

He'd had enough of the cutting and sewing (and being cut and being sewn!), of piecing dreams together, or piecing all of the rest too. Enough of devouring (and, more rarely being devoured). He could use some sleep. He could use some sleep...

"I like your tongue," Dankovsky eventually said when silence had settled, and Burakh looked at him with huge eyes, suddenly awake, tearing up as held down a surprised cough (not that Dankovsky could see — he was head in his papers).

"My? Sorry?"

Dankovsky turned to him, an eyebrow raised.

"Your tongue? Your mother tongue—well, I don't know if you consider it your mother tongue. Your language. Your... Does it count as *patois*?"

"Oh. Ooh, okay. No, I mean—I guess it's more of a... disappearing language. And, um, I'm not very good at it. I grew up with it, but... I've forgotten most of it."

"Lack of practice?"

"Yeah. Yeah, that."

Dankovsky's attention lifted from him — not out of disinterest, but a... courteous offer not to bother him anymore.

His mind was on the Tower. Burakh could see his mind was on the Tower — he was writing about it, sketching it roughly on already-inked papers. He was weighing something on precarious scales in his mind, Burakh could see if in the glimpse he got of his furrowed, tense brows. His eyes darted to the window, to the Tower that witnessed him witnessing it. Burakh wished the damn window had curtains.

"I've found the source of the blood," he spoke, and his voice came out croaky, woolen.

"You have?"

"Yes."

"... May I know?"

Burakh held back; just for a second.

He had found the source of the blood — overseen by the Tower, pinned (literally, almost) by its spear, by its spine, by its colossal body. He'd found where the singular talon of that tall crystal magpie threatened it with a gaze — and with so much, too much more.

“... I need to... understand it better. I'll tell you more later.” Burakh shifted on his side so he could catch Dankovsky's gaze — it felt manipulating. It was. He understood damn well, and he knew the Bachelor would too, if he told him now. It felt like he was poisoning the waters of the disarming *eagerness* the Bachelor was offering him. Burakh's heart sank through him, outside of him when Dankovsky's eyes widened, the darkness of their depths catching flecks of the rising dawn and the lit candles as he asked: “Will you trust me to tell you more later?”

“I will, Burakh. I do.”

Burakh smiled and nodded. His lips hurt as he pinched them.

Dankovsky waved at him to go back to sleep, and Burakh didn't need to be asked.

There was no dream. Not even a dream about *nothingness*, about that suffocating black velvet that lined the bottom of nightmares like the silt of a bottomless, bedeviled pond. Burakh wouldn't get to swim, wouldn't get to drown for a third time this night.

(Dankovsky was at his bedside — reserved, restrained, leaning over as if to check his breathing. He blew out the candles and covered the window with his coat when a streak of dawn slithered through, snaking over Burakh's wounded shoulder and cheek.)



He is not dreaming (be quiet! He is not), merely thinking. Didn't get too much time for it these past few days, eh? He is thinking. It *aaall* comes back to so much, and so little still.

Burakh thinks he still smells rust on his fingers, feels on his skin the sickly leech of viscous blood. He shakes his head as if that could push the nightmare out — because this is what it is about. *This is what this is about, isn't it?*

Thanatica the Pale — Dome the Concave and Bright — Body the Concave and Pale — Eyes the Bright.

*Oh God, Burakh thinks, there's also that goddamn Tower —
that tower the Pale and Bright and Concave (or is it convex? Gibbous like a horned moon—
moon horned like a Bride—
like a Bull.)*

Burakh thinks, and it dawns on him that this is worse: he is not sure it was a nightmare.

He is, in ways; his stomach churns, his ears ring with the sound of cruor and gore, his lids are branded with the red lumps of the unfathomable depths of the Bachelor's thoracic cavity — but this is not what lingers.

What lingers are his dark eyes on him, sickeningly alive, alit, placid; are the shivering birds of his lungs-spleen-stomach that huddled together; is the snake that slithered out, and that Burakh was sure would speak.

What lingers is the warmth of an *inside*.

What remains is Dankovsky's hums as they rose to the ceiling, filling the air expansively like a sweet, tart scent.

What remains are the red little wildfowls—the red little plums—Burakh wasn't sure he hadn't been hungry—Burakh wasn't sure he wasn't hungry—that sheltered under the dome of the Bachelor's ribs and sternum.

The memory of the cut — of having discovered and known, and of knowing nothing at all.

Burakh kept that—keeps that to himself.

(This, Burakh wouldn't admit, not even to himself; but I do not need his permission to do it in his place. His thoughts were a maelstrom of “*don't think about it*”, and “*don't let yourself think about it*”. And the more he didn't let himself think about it, the more *it* punched its way out of the tangled knots of his thoughts, growing louder—bigger—sourer—sweeter—growing all sorts of things, *growing* for the sake of growing, of being witnessed. It swelled in his chest; a needy, inescapable clot in the vein Burakh stitched shut himself by fear it would burst. He *didn't let himself* think about the strained wrists, the white hands, their leaf-nervured backs, the black stipa hair that poked from apertures in the white shirt like snowpiercers in the spring. Not about the warm dry hand on his painful damp back; about the heavy, stubbly cheek against his shoulder. The inside/s he wasn't to see. Not now, not yet.

Oh, he was starting to know what he was up against.

— No, it wasn't *against*. *There would be no struggle*, he thought, he found.
Unfortunately, there wouldn't.)

Horkos and Demeter

When someone *dreams* of someone else, it is an act of devouring. The *someone else* is consumed, digested. The subconscious chews thoroughly, the *someone* is torn to shreds, slips in the bloodstream, and is spat back out a fantasy. It is not *cannibalism*, as cannibalism implies human

eating human; and the dreamer, through his dreaming, is not human anymore. He is inhabited by appetites man does not have. He is capable of consumption that no soul is. Burakh dreams and Burakh devours. Burakh realizes he has been devouring. His teeth have ground bones, flesh, dirt, herbs, flowers, clay. They spit out men and places that do not exist. It's an act torn apart between creation and destruction. It is... a lot for him. He's not in the processes of creating life, but merely to protect and save it, he has found, he has realized, it has dawned upon him. All births are painful, and dreams have sprung out of him like Athena sprung out of Zeus' skull: armed, armored, tearing through. Zeus' screams of pain tore through the skies and across the earth: Burakh has borne it, gritting teeth, panting heavily. He twisted and turned between sweat-soaked sheets.

He is the thread. He has never felt more *like the thread* than sewn shut by one; held together, at last, by one — one meticulously woven by Dankovsky's cautious, conscientious hands. He is wreathed in the fabric of the Town. He is wreathed in the fabric of the Steppe. He is wreathed in the black velvet that lines the overflowing cup, the dark waters of which they precariously tread.

(He is wreathed between Dankovsky's fingers when they are bare, for he might have to hold his hand back, for he might have to hold...)

He is the binding agent. The pigments of prophecies get lodged under his lids and they *itch*, they itch.

Every ditch is a mouth and every hill is an eye. Every cave is a stomach and every cliff is a rib. Every mat of moss is symphysis, ears are tender seashells. Every cave is a stomach unless it is a mouth, and every grave left undug is one too unless it is a womb. Isthmi are spines unless they're veins, and every spine is a vein that is a path that is also a rope that is also a rein. Every peak is a nose, busted open and bleeding, and every one of your bones is a flute waiting to be carved. Everything starts in a mouth: words, of course; silence; hunger; kisses. Everything is about devouring, except when it is about spitting out, which by deduction means it is also about devouring. Everything is about the Earth, which/who does it too.

Autumn and clay is skin and scent.

Do you get it now?

The olecranon is a burl. Muscle is meristem.

Burakh, do you?

Cometh into view the wound, come the lips of the wound; raw, parted, pink, mouthlike. All Earth is about devouring — but this isn't about Earth (*but this is, because he is*).

Stop. Stop. Wake up.

The lips of the wound; red, ready, ruby, inviting.

STOP. (He shakes his head) *Think of something else. Think of something else.*

The lips—

Enough. Enough.

His to it. His to them. His to hi—

(He wakes. He falls again.)

The lips of the wound. Biblical. Bloodpink. Blood-fig. Unlike one, copper-tasting and shapeless. Stigmata. He tends to it carefully. Washing of the hands. Of the area of the wound in preparation of

(He pries an eye open, the lid curtains it again.)

The wound / biblical / his hands tending to the stigmata of it / its lips mouthlike and inviting. This is how it is settled. The wound / biblical / his lips woundlike and hesitant / its copper taste / something that grazes against Burakh's upper lip from the inside, two sharp things flanking his row of incisors. The wound is a gateway to the heart. *Whose heart. Whose Heart?* It's worse if he thinks about it.

Make something of it. Make something of it, Burakh, because it is all there is.

When he wakes, Dankovsky gestures at him to stay put. Move not, speak not, make nary a sound. He points. *Outside, something. Shh.* Burakh pulls the blanket on himself, as if to shield himself from view.

“How do you feel?” Dankovsky asked, trying to keep his voice low as if the walls could snitch.

“Like shit,” Burakh croaked — a comical understatement.

Dankovsky laughed, a restrained, ever-so-slightly sour chuckle. Burakh realized he wasn't laughing *at him*, he was laughing at Burakh's attempt to make him laugh. (It felt weird succeeding.)

“Sticky showed up earlier. He has brought your clothes.”

“... How did he know I was here?”

“I doubt he *knew*. I think he made... an educated guess.”

“Am I that predictable?”

“Let's say that there are a few things you're very easy to foretell on.”

Burakh dragged himself upright on the bed, stretching out his arm for the clothes Dankovsky had folded and piled on a chair right by it. He tucked them under his arm and limped to the bathroom.

In front of the mirror, he could finally get a look at his stitches.

Not too bad, not too good... He carefully, with an index-thumb pinch, moved his skin around to see how it withstood the sutures.

“Can I come in?”

The Bachelor was by the door — behind it, again; standing where he did the past night, and asking the same thing too.

“Sure,” Burakh said, this time.

Dankovsky walked in. His step was hesitant, as if walking into unknown territory (— which this was). Burakh moved a bit as if it would make him feel more welcome; it did, somewhat, and the Bachelor got to his side.

“Can I take a good look at your stitches?”

“They’re your work, are they not?” Burakh laughed — hoarse and tired.

One of the Bachelor’s gloved hands cupped the underside of his upper arm. His eyes thinned into two smoky slits as his brows furrowed.

“Well,” he said, “they do look worse in daylight.”

“Hey,” Burakh protested, “they’re sturdy. They’re clean. They’ll hold; that’s all they need to do.”

Dankovsky didn’t speak, his mouth shaping itself into an unsure grimace. He took off one of his gloves. Hesitant, again — Burakh saw the restraint in his tense wrist and the way his fingers twitch with a search for composure. He brushed a thumb across the clean line of a stitched cut, careful that his nail didn’t scrape the fresh suture thread. Burakh shivered — Dankovsky took his hand away, and the cold that settled where its warmth once was made Burakh shiver some more.

“If you’re fine with them,” Dankovsky said, “I won’t try to change your mind.”

“Thank you, by the way.”

“Don't mention it. You’d have done the same for me.”

They shared a laugh then — Burakh’s half was barky and dry from the events of the past evening, and Dankovsky’s was sapped and refined, almost polite; with a real, if feeble, smile tugging at his lips. (How new. How foreign of a feeling. How strange was it to find this laughter to not be the first time.)

Burakh would — and he had already.

Eventually, Burakh grabbed his undershirt and painstakingly, painfully tried to stretch himself up to put it on.

“Do you want help?”

“I should be able to dress myself up.”

“*Should*,” Dankovsky opined, and nodded when Burakh let out a startled yelp of pain when he moved too fast.

“I’ll manage.”

The other option felt a tad too... unduly familiar, even with the events of the previous night (or maybe... *because of* the events of the previous night).

Dankovsky excused himself and left. Burakh laughed to himself, and thought about the Bachelor finding seeing him get dressed more awkward than seeing him bare-chested. (Then, he didn’t laugh at all as something foreign and febrile stirred under his ribs.)

“Bachelor, could I ask you something?”

“Surely, General.”

“Why are there only women among your... comedians?”

Dankovsky turned his gaze to the Tragedians that stood by the door — well, not quite *stood*; one was crouching, her long legs sprawled like spider limbs. Their heads moved slowly like a leaf in the breeze. The two dots of their hole-eyes were pinned on Block.

“For the same reason there are only women amongst the Brides, I imagine.”

“... The Brides?”

“Herb Brides. They’re... herbalists, of sorts. Dancers. Midwives.” He marked a pause. “Witches, if you use the word without negative connotations. Haven’t you met any of them?”

“Not that I remember.”

“You will soon, then. They roam.”

“... Dangerous?”

Dankovsky thought about it.

“... I do not think this depends on them. Leave them be, will you? Tell your men to leave them be. The townsfolk have already hunted them down thinking they were plague-carriers.”

“Well, are they?”

“*If they were*, they’d be shockingly ineffective. You have a better chance of catching the disease touching a door handle... or the back of a chair.”

The Commander lifted his hands from the seat he was holding.

“Bachelor, could I ask you something?”

“Surely, General.”

“Can I trust you? Well, more importantly: can I trust him?”

Dankovsky pondered the voice. He swished his in his mouth from one hollow of his cheek to the other.

“I don’t think trust can be forced. Whether or not you trust me is up to you — even if I hope I have made myself trustworthy enough. Similarly, I cannot make your mistrust of Burakh yield to him by pure strength of words... Even if I wish I could.”

The General’s lips twitched with the semblance of a smile. (It was working.) “If I am to listen to you, he was a precious ally.”

“Is, General. Yes. I would venture to say...” (For a moment there, he didn’t venture. The word felt amorphous, foreign — it rolled on his tongue with edges and planes he struggled to fathom, but could grasp nonetheless.) “... A friend. Yes, I would.”

Block nodded.

“It is still, Bachelor, your words against the townsfolk. Even among them, his reputation is quite... polarized.”

“I know this, General. Please, let him see you. Let me bring him here, and tell your men to lay off his trail.”

“Very well.”

Lara almost fucked this all up. Burakh knew it was grief — grief that makes one do erratic, thoughtless, desperate things, but for a split second he truly thought the bullet wouldn’t miss; well, *her* bullet wouldn’t miss, and the General’s guards’ would be fired. The gunshot tore through the Town Hall with an overpowering, deafening sound, and Burakh was almost knocked off his feet.

He begged for the guards’ weapons to be lowered — he saw then in the unfolding second how Lara would fall backward, dead. Dankovsky’s voice burst in the mayhem, and that got the General to give a no-fire order.

Then, it took Burakh having to unravel all the threads of Lara Ravel’s wounded mind for the Commander to empathize, it took Dankovsky vouching for him, it took Yulia and Aysa (who Burakh learned only now, only then, as his heartbeat hammered at his ears, knew Lara well — she

came to the Trammel often, *how come she never told us anything about it?!*) exaggerating the terrible impact of the plague on the psyches of the women of the Town — and Burakh could see how they grimaced when Block was not looking, disgusted in themselves for having to denigrate their own. It took Rubin who, having been summoned, had to speak, too, about the agony that had wrecked their friend, pushing her over the edge.

(Block seemed to recognize him — he either didn't, or didn't want to show him that he did.) It took the General himself who, in spite of it all, was good-hearted and a tad naive to women's affairs. When he said, with a smile, "*I know how women can be... You know too, I assume, Bachelor,*" Dankovsky threw him a wide, if crooked-at-the-corners smile back, and replied: "*I truly do not, General, but I will trust your judgment on it,*" Burakh's eyes instinctively scraped the side of his face.

When they were finally allowed to see Lara in jail, where she had been locked "for her own good", Stanislav scolded her immediately.

"Whose rifle is that?" he aggressively asked.

"Yours," she hissed.

"Do you even know how to use it?"

"Dad taught me to shoot." She sounded piqued.

"Okay, but did he teach you how to shoot *well?*"

"Are you saying you wish I didn't miss?"

"It would have been funn—" Burakh cut in.

"No, absolutely not, this is not what I'm saying," Rubin shut him up immediately.

Things are *thinning*. Burakh is fully awake — he thinks he is. He is walking somewhere. He is walking into something—*through* something: he carefully peers through curtains that wouldn't have yielded to him, were he anyone else. Their fabric is light — again, it *has thinned*. They almost recoil at his touch. They're closer to silk than velvet.

He walks into the open, milk-white-light and darkness-shrouded theater like he has once walked to the blazing colossus of Thanatica — uninvited, but let in.

The Inquisitor Lilich — Solid bodies drown in water; it's a Law. Life breaks into particles and is reborn again; it is a Law.

The Thistle, Mullein, and Mulberries Brides — Tell, what is Law?

The Inquisitor Lilich — It is... Equilibrium. It is Balance. The Knowable Forward.

The Thistle Bride (*to a sister*) — Kheerkhen, say, do you think the Suok-coat woman knows of equilibrium?

The Mullein Bride (*to a sister*) — Her back is straight, her shoulders are perfectly level.

The Mulberries Bride — No good dance comes from a straight line. It is the way of concrete and plumbed thread.

The Thistle Bride (*between the three of them*) — She holds herself square as a brick.

The Mullein Bride (*between the three of them*) — She is so balanced that raindrops will hit her and bounce back into the sky...

The Mulberries Bride (*between the three of them*) — ... and the soil will go thirsty.

The Thistle and Mullein Brides — Yes... dry and cracking like winter lips.

The Thistle Bride — She fits the light-eyes constellations into stiff sky-squares—

The Mullein Bride (*cutting in*) — —like matchsticks in their box.

The Thistle, Mullein, and Mulberries Brides — Yes.

The Mulberries Bride — Stars move, and they reach across the dark blue belly-hide of Suok to hold hands, to entwine fingers so they can withstand her devouring.

The Thistle and Mullein Brides — So they can be never separated.

The Thistle, Mullein, and Mulberries Brides — Yes.

The Mulberries Bride — They grow apart, then rejoin.

The Mullein Bride — Like spited lovers coming together.

The Thistle, Mullein, and Mulberries Brides — Yes. It is the way of the Wheel.

The Mulberries Bride — No good dance comes from a straight line.

The Thistle Bride (*to a sister*) — Souvilag'sh, watch her well. Her feet are so small...

The Mullein Bride (*to a sister*) — ... They are bound in corseted leather...

The Mulberries Bride — She hovers above the Earth like a September breeze.

The Thistle Bride (*to a sister*) — Watch... her stork-legs-heels dig into the earth.

The Mulberries Bride (*loudly, and moving violently*) — I am pierced!

The Mullein Bride (*loudly, and moving violently*) — I am carved through!

The Question-blade Bride (*to the Inquisitor*) — Ekhene! Say, what is Law?

The Inquisitor Lilich — It is Equilibrium.

The Question-blade Bride (*to the Inquisitor*) — The bird-tower stands perched the neck of Bos Turokh, straight like a wasp balancing on its stinger. Isn't she in equilibrium?

The Inquisitor Lilich — ...

(Something is trembling. It seems to be coming from below. A tensile, tectonic friction spreads through the scene like a whisper (like a disease).)

The Question-blade Bride (*to the Inquisitor, insisting*) — Ekhene, is she Law?

The Inquisitor Wordless — ... She is her own.

The Ropewalker Bride (*to the Inquisitor*) — If it is so, whose do you bring in?
Aglaya — ...

The Red Bride — Thorn-footsteps, say, towards which star does the river of blood flow?

Aglaya — ...
The Red, Ropewalker, and Question-blade Brides — Forsake your voice. We will love you in its wake.

(Close the curtains. Hurry. Hurry!)

The Earth comes to beg. The Plague does not.

“Why can't I take, but you can? You take. You take. You take. You take. You take. You take. You take. Then once more: you take.”

And so it took (it took, it took, it took, it took, it took, it took, it took).

It scythed all seven children like tall blades of grass; it devoured them like wildfires do the dry bark of pine.

What he did then — was crawl to the Stillwater, and ask for anything Dankovsky could have left. (It felt like a pathetic, pitiful *beg*. Burakh didn't look at him in the eyes — the pain was darting, nagging, obsessive through his shoulders and arms, dissolving into his wrists and

fingertips like poison in tea; it gnawed at his insides as he thought of the kids, *the damn kids*, and the crushing maw of the illness on their white bird-bones.)

Dankovsky hurried him upstairs. He rummaged through his bag, through the piles of papers and candlesticks.

He found painkillers, mostly — some spare pills that threatened to roll, some he had ground into powder to stretch their use, and mixed with whatever he could find to make them easier to swallow.

Then, phials.

“This,” he said, putting it flat in Burakh’s hands like a silver coin, “Rubin has compounded for me. And this (he put one more) ... I have.”

Burakh stared at the vials like they were lodes of gold. “... Would he be okay with you giving it to me?”

“Whatever I do with it is out of his hands, now. That’s part of the deal.” Dankovsky closed Burakh’s fingers on the ampoules like he was terrified he would drop them. Burakh’s knuckles thrilled at the touch. “Have this, too.”

The Bachelor put on his other hand a closed razor, three safety pins, and a beetle.

“I would have loved to keep it,” he said, pointing at the insect; his face was sober with a genuine yearning for the crawling thing. When he noted Burakh’s perplexed eyes on him, he explained: “Bartering material. Don’t waste it.”

Burakh took them — took the two vials, the four barter scraps: four leaves of this clover. Halfway to halfway to grace; stones on the path regardless.

Something stupid overcame him — the urge to squeeze the Bachelor in his arms as a thank. He didn’t do it; he managed to hold himself back from it; he wasn’t sure he wouldn’t crush him in a hug (Ha... hadn’t *he* said something like this before?). He wasn’t sure Dankovsky wasn’t going to shove him back, either. He bowed, then; an emphatic, over-reverent obeisance that Dankovsky grimaced at.

“Oh, don’t do that, Burakh,” he huffed, audibly irked, almost hurt. “Please, don’t do that.”

Burakh immediately straightened his spine as he found himself completely dumbfounded at what the fuck he had just done.

Dankovsky followed him down the stairs and to the door.

Before it, he grabbed Burakh’s elbow — he yelped, and Dankovsky’s hand flew off immediately.

“You tell me if there is anything you need, Burakh,” he *ordered* with pinning, sharp eyes. “I... don’t have much to give you, but I’m sure I would know where to take them.”

“Thank you, oynon.”

He was out in a gust. His arms were shaking from the weight of the Bachelor's offerings, and from the force he had to use to hold back his limbs from looping around Dankovsky and messing up his prim white shirt.

How fucking painful was it, then, to be told he was loved.

Over, and over, and over, each in a different way.

How fucking painful it was to hear the croaks in their voices like so-tiny crows and magpies, to watch how their little hands reached to him and then were taken back, coursed through by the instinctive knowledge of contagion. Even Notkin, even Khan, whose voices they tried to hold strong and stoic like marble giants, were friable and fearful.

How fucking painful was it to want to hold, and to want to be held, and to find nothing but a great pit between the two.

No matter *how fucking painful* it was, Burakh knew it was worse for them.

When all of this would be over, *because all of this would be over*, he knew it, he felt it, he would hug them. (He was not sure he was particularly good at it. He tried to tell himself it only mattered that he would try.)

The Earth begged. Time did not. It was slicing through him like a meat cleaver — and, swung from one side of the Town to the other, he truly did feel like meat.

A crooked smile tore through his face — almost reminded him of being cannon fodder. (He thought about it and the dregs of the disease bit at his lungs; just to make sure he didn't forget what he had been through, what the kids had been through.)

Burakh didn't know if he was sad.

Burakh didn't know if he could even be sad.

He was angry. He was so angry.

All the rage from being begged, and bent, and spun, and made to run, pooled in his empty stomach — where he kept all of his grief too.

He wanted this to end.

It had to come to an end.)

Night came. It came and everything crawled to a still.

Burakh reveled in it.

In the dense clouds of smoke rising from the pyres, upon which the army had resorted to burning the dead, the clothes of the sick, infected sheets and rags, he could almost, oh, he could almost feel peace. Swirls of infectious miasma waltzed with the spirals of this smoke, and all Burakh had to do was avoid them — simple, he didn't know how to dance, so he wouldn't.

Everything moved. Nothing moved. The world stood still like an angel on a pin — the Tower seemed to move, slowly, in the dance of a star-pin pricked in the coat of the sky.

He walked to the Stillwater, and the Bachelor let him wash his face in the sink.

At the window, Burakh tended to his wounds. The Bachelor had kept the lights off, and the few, now stubby candles didn't help Burakh distinguish between one end and the other of the roll of gauze; the streetlights, the rising moon, and the soft, ethereal glow of the Tower did.

In the silence, Dankovsky was biting at the wooden end of a matchstick — so he didn't bite his nails, Burakh could guess. He was writing. Burakh didn't know what he was writing. He kept his nose out of his affairs.

“Calm night, I take it,” Burakh said, holding gauze between his teeth as he cleaned the stitches.

“You could call it that.” Burakh heard the soft crackle of wood giving out under the Bachelor's bite. Then whispered, hushed, as if his breath could put out the last of the candles: “Enjoying the view.”

Burakh turned to him. Following his gaze, he found it going through him, and out of the window — to the Tower across the river. He took a step back to look at it better.

“I guess *it is* a pretty view,” he said.

Behind him, the Bachelor started writing again. The scratches of the nib of his fountain pen grew louder, clawing harder at the paper; they covered the sound of his voice as he mumbled something that Burakh didn't catch.

(And I will tell you what: he mumbled
“*nevermind*”.)

The light emanating from the Tower was a pulsating ochre-lilac-gold-ochre again. That pulse was slow, steady — mesmerizing.

“You like the Tower, don’t you?” Burakh asked — it took finding Dankovsky’s raised eyebrow and the puzzled look on his face to realize he had asked like one would ask about a friend, or a secretive lover.

Dankovsky brought his gaze back down, pensive, sober, wistful almost. Thankfully, he *understood* what Burakh meant, and replied appropriately.

“I do. Oh, Burakh, I do.” The mumble had left his voice, and it was growing emphatically reverent. “It is fascinating. I must have said it before. Fascinating.” He twirled his pen, aligning words in his thoughtful mouth. “A... vessel of sorts. Vessel of some kind — of *its* kind.”

He brought his gaze on Burakh’s face, and he could see how the blackcurrant pearls of his eyes shone — from the dancing candlelights, yes; from the pulse-light of the Tower, yes; and from something else entirely.

“Say, Burakh, your udurgh... Your... *body-that-contains-the-world ...*” (He pointed at the window — at what could be seen from the window.) “Is this not a body? Does this not contain a world?”

“It could be. It could.”

Where the Tower’s heart would be if it was a living bird, shadows danced, shaped around the children that ran there, shaped by them, dancing with— and alongside them.

“It could...”

A body feather-light, translucent like glass, like water, or a slice of moon.

A body plumb-heavy, dense like iridium, iridescent like an oil spill, unwieldy like a sun just born.

A body-world that stood atop a world-body like a parasite. That stood beside it like half of an offered waltz.

Burakh eventually cleaned the last of blood, set the last of gauze. He put undershirt and sweater back on. The roughness of knitted wool scraped the stitched cuts on his shoulders and arms, and a pained “*tch!*” flicked past his teeth.

“Burakh?”

“It’s nothing. Skin’s a bit... raw, that’s all.”

It was raw, and it hurt when he moved. It hurt when he pointed to the bed with a finger and asked if he could take it. It hurt when he walked to it after Dankovsky had told him to help himself. It hurt when he sat on the mattress to kick off his boots and when he lay down.

“Good night, Burakh,” Dankovsky said — and there was a low, lighthearted hint in his voice, as if he was laughing at the propinquity of the situation.

“G’night, oynon,” Burakh replied.

He replied, but he didn’t fall asleep.

He didn't want to fall asleep.

Silence had shifted shapes — he wasn't sure when. He wasn't sure why. Slowly, something somber and heavy overtook him, cloaked him with his heft. Burakh heard the tick of his pen hitting the desk. He heard the chair creak as he leaned back. He heard a sigh. Long, hushed, secretive, as if he feared it could wake Burakh up.

The opening had to be made.

(Like so.)

“... I dreamed I cut you open.”

Burakh's voice sliced clean through the heavy, stuffy silence. The cut caught Dankovsky's attention who, sitting at his desk slumped, arms heavy at his sides, turned to him.

“It's been a few nights already.” He wasn't really sure of that. He wasn't really sure of much. “I didn't tell you before; I didn't have...” He stopped. The time—the courage—the guts. (Ha. Dankovsky didn't have guts either. In the dream, Burakh means.) The strength—the grit—the heart. (The Heart. It all comes back to it, really.) Burakh decided to not finish his sentence. “I didn't tell you before.”

Dankovsky observed stillness, immobile and mute, eyes heavy-lidded as if he was squinting.

“I cut you open and you were... incomprehensible. Unfathomable. I looked in your ribcage and nothing I saw made sense. I felt mocked and so, so lost. Your organs were... not organs. They were red, wet, wounded birds, which I had no idea what to do with. I had nowhere to hide them away, to keep them safe, if I pulled them out of you. They were small enough that I could have cradled them in my hand but I was so afraid I'd crush them like too-ripe fruits.”

And this, he couldn't explain; he couldn't reason to himself or to anyone else... Dankovsky's foreignness had been gracious to him in ways unspoken (and, more than that, unspeakable). It had made itself hollow around him out of what Burakh felt was... a certain deference — and thinking of Dankovsky being deferent *towards him* was unthinkable (well, it *wasn't*, he was thinking about it this instant. Let's rather say... he wouldn't let himself think about thinking about it too much). Dankovsky's foreignness had felt... welcoming. He wasn't going to tell Dankovsky that. Like *hell* he was going to tell him that. Burakh couldn't explain. Burakh wouldn't explain. Burakh didn't want to explain. The snake that had crawled his arm, languidly—the snake that Burakh wasn't sure wasn't the Bachelor's heart, that had *slithered out*/that he had *let climb his arms/wrap around his neck*—had looked at him with a placidity he hadn't found anywhere else. Not even in the Bachelor's eyes.

(Not yet.)

Dankovsky didn't speak. His titled head dropped barely one more notch and, in the candlelight that washed over his cheek and neck, Burakh could see the two black pebbles of his eyes looking for his face.

"... You didn't even have a heart."

The words pulled a laugh out of the Bachelor—a single, cutting cough that punched through his teeth and through the lute of a smile-sliver. Then, his face fell and something clouded his eyes. Burakh could see this fog even as he didn't tear his eyes away. They both could rationalize this as exhaustion, as the fatigue Dankovsky had to power through after days in the depths of a restless, febrile sleep. They could. They tried to. They didn't manage to.

"Oh, Burakh, I do."

Almost as if to convince himself, he brought fingers to the pulse point on his throat before grimacing, looking disgusted by what he found. Burakh thought he could hear Dankovsky's heart pound against the walls, below the floorboards. Be loud and erratic like it wanted to make up for having disappeared so long. Dankovsky turned to him.

"You don't seem convinced."

There was a fleeting hint of playfulness in his voice, but it tumbled flat in his lap with his soundless words. Burakh couldn't see the look on his own face, but he could guess from the Bachelor's eyes on him that he must've looked confused. Dankovsky spoke, and Burakh thought he had dreamed it:

"... Would it soothe your mind to check?"

Burakh jolted upwards on an elbow, alert as if stabbed, and turned to Dankovsky. The Bachelor sat, collected, hands on knees; a waiting man.

Silence hung-hanged between them, balanced on the tightrope of their shared gaze, moved around them like ink in water pulled and pushed by their steady breathing. Burakh scooted closer to the wall. A split/splitted second of stillness ensued and Burakh feared he had sent the entirely wrong message, had looked like he wanted to run away — then, Dankovsky got up, dragged the chair after him and settled it by the bed. He sat down. He crossed his wrists on his lap. He leaned in—not by much, just barely, just enough, with the bend of a tree withstanding a storm. Burakh didn't move, frozen. Dankovsky hesitated, then undid his cravat. The gums-blood-heart red silk slithered around his pale, taut neck like a snake. He folded it carefully and placed it atop the books pile of his nightstand. Burakh felt his hands ready to betray him—knuckles hot, wrists straining, ready to cross the threshold of infinite/insurmountable/insignificant space left between them with the strength of a lightning strike. He watched as the pale machineries of Dankovsky's wrists, bone-gears under his skin, crawled to his collar and undid a button. His gloved hands hesitated on the one below, retracting then. That was an invitation.

Burakh sat up and leaned in. He saw how the nervous birds of his hands flapped and flailed, amateurish, dilettante. Dankovsky's heart had risen to his mouth as if he was getting ready to spit

it out, esophagus alit with the burning embers of this wayward, worrisome, raucous thing. Burakh watched as his Adam's apple climbed up and down the white-walled tower of his throat, agitated, nosy as the Bachelor gulped. Burakh's hands treaded restless grounds and Dankovsky's skin felt like it could burn his fingerprints off. That didn't happen. He undid button after button, he could see where the shirt, days before, had been mended, (his fingers grazed the white thread of the stitches,) and Dankovsky watched. He watched dutifully.

Burakh was expecting an undershirt, the familiar brush of wool or cotton — he instead found the foreign skim of hair, ink-black *stipa pennata* he felt his fingers graze through. He curled his hand in a fist like the touch had scorched him. Dankovsky hadn't even budged. Burakh almost—almost—let himself think that, maybe, he was expecting such a reaction. Burakh undid more buttons — with one hand, because it felt more nonchalant, more casual, more detached—scared to death, that's what it truly was.

Burakh brought his hand down the groove of Dankovsky's sternum, slowly, with the restraint of one approaching a wounded bird. He settled it where the pad of his thumb fit in the hollow between his diaphragm and the curve of his coastal arch, where his digits found room in the notches between his ribs like fingers intertwined. The Bachelor's (living, beating) heart rang loud and crazed against his palm, with each pulse seeking contact with abandon and promptly retracting with a terror unspoken; and then doing that again. With this hold, Burakh felt like he could nudge the Bachelor's ribcage open with the barest of pressure, like it would open to him like an ajar door — inviting him, he thought, felt, then promptly chased the idea out of his mind.

“Your heart is loud,” Burakh spoke, and he spoke so unbelievably low. “Your heart is fast.” He raised his eyes to the Bachelor's face. His gaze evaded Burakh's for the hint of a second, then held it back firmly. “Scared?”

Dankovsky didn't speak. He didn't nod nor shake his head. He exhaled slowly through the nose and Burakh heard how the breath faltered like candlelight in the wind.

Burakh adjusted his seat to lift his weight off his other hand, and brought it to skin. His fingers slipped into the partition of the open shirt, cleaving it slowly at the front like one peeks between curtains. Cloth seemed to yield to his hands, not unlike herbs.

It felt

like he barely had to pry it open.

Like the *lapel-tear* over Dankovsky's white throat and chest was of those that appear on their own.

Like the open mouth of his shirt collar offered way to his touch as do the florets of white whip. Burakh thought everything dawned on him—no, everything *did* dawn on him.

The secrecy. The pinched thin mouth — pinched thin mouth that Burakh had looked at, had *watched*. The company he kept. The overwrought touch; the reaction to the touch. (His skin

was a bit clammy and hot. A drop of sweat blossomed beneath one of his clavicles and it ran into the hollow of Burakh's hand, frenzied, boundless, warm.)

Burakh had two hands on the Bachelor's chest and his heart in the cradle of his palms. He had a heart. It hammered restlessly into the hold. Burakh was leaning in—he felt Dankovsky's breathing into his hair. Burakh was leaning over—he towered the red heart. Burakh was leaning into—he peeked through the white curtains of the Bachelor's shirt, he approached the red pulp, the dissonant dark fruit, the scattered-pomegranate-seeds of the organ and its pulse.

How terrified was the first man to lay his head on another's chest and to hear this loud, this deep, this scared/sacred, this untamed/untamable deaf drumming? How did he reconcile centuries of taboo of the flesh, of curse upon he who cuts open, of anathema of cannibalism— *because when you cut, it's to eat, isn't it? would you eat a human heart?* — with the bellowing babel of the blood, with this mystical, unspoken song? Burakh knew of the mechanisms of the heart, of its intricate, biological gearing, he had studied, he had seen, he had sliced open and held. He knew of *the superior vena cava—the pulmonary vein—the tricuspid valve—the inferior vena cava—the aorta—the pulmonary artery—the mitral valve—the aortic valve*

he knew of the chambers

right chambers—small ventricle—big atrium left chambers—small atrium—big ventricle

(good fucking god, did he know about the Chambers)

he knew of

he knew that

Dankovsky's heart was roughly the size of an orange

which itself was the size of a fist.

He knew that it was red and wet and tangy like the former

— and hardened and closed like the latter.

He knew he couldn't peel the Bachelor's heart in the hopes of finding something sweet beneath (that would kill him!), he knew he couldn't pry pieces of it apart, they wouldn't taste tart— or would they?

Burakh hitched his head up as if he had been hailed.

Dankovsky's gaze was on him. A restlessness agitated the ink-lakes of his eyes. Their axis-core-pupils traced Burakh's face fretfully. Their endocarp-irises caught fleeting follicles of bronze candlelight. Dankovsky was guarding his heart like a lame dog does his meat-covered bones. His mouth was pulled in a straight, thin furrow; a tightrope that Burakh's eyes followed.

What was this about it? what was this about him?

about... vague images of pulled wire, of silk stitch-thread, of border/ contour/ crease/
boundary/
edge.

Right, of lines.

That Burakh followed/follows.

Right.

Of those *that tear on their own*.

And the line/Line of the Bachelor's lips did just that; it parted. Burakh didn't quite realize he had pushed himself up — he had leaned in — leaned over — leaned into — he had found it, maybe he had opened it, maybe it had torn on its own. He was really close. He was really careful. They were each on a side of the depths-dent, gust/guts-silence, skin-pale clay-red stillness that kept their faces apart. Burakh found that if he stepped forward, Daniil followed. So he did. He brushed against the hollow of his mouth, he didn't let their lips meet, he wished for Daniil to bridge the gap, to make the connection (*for once/again/one more time/just like he had shown him he could when he first offered his help/when he first let him sleep here*), and he did, and he was going to, and then the downstairs erupted with foreign voices and bangs and shouts and an ash-grey voice that rose up the stairs calling Dankovsky's name.

Dankovsky tore himself from Burakh fiercely, furiously, in the way one would tear his own limb off. His face soured, mouth crumpling as if bitter venom had filled the dome below his palate.

"Just a second," he spoke loudly, a blade away from barking. "It's a mess up here, stay downstairs, I'll come meet you."

He then was on his feet. He grabbed his cravat that he fastened hurriedly, buttoned his shirt back up, and slithered into his waistcoat one arm after the other.

"Stay here," he told Burakh over his shoulder. "Do not make any noise. The General might be a little *unnerved* after your friend tried to kill him."

"I know," Burakh mumbled.

"You can take my coat to cover yourself."

"Thank you."

His steps tumble down the stairs, Burakh couldn't make out a word of what was said. The Commander spoke like he had pebbles in his mouth. Dankovsky's voice was sour and strung as he tried to wring his poison out of it and slip unnoticed. Burakh pulled on Dankovsky's coat until it fell off the folding screen. The snakeskin was heavy and stiff with blood(s). Pulling it on him, Burakh thought the sleeve threw itself on him, like a ghost alive with the memory of arms. With the memory of his

(enigmatically-standing) silhouette.

(Dankovsky walked up the stairs some time later; Burakh didn't see, Burakh didn't hear. He had fallen asleep. He had fallen asleep with the snakeskin upon him. Dankovsky, then, didn't take it away. He... adjusted it on Burakh's shoulders, tucked the collar under his chin to keep it from moving. He let himself be a little cold in the busy, full attic, so Artemy could be a little warm.) It comes to him.

It takes him, rather. It swallows the space left in his mind where, Burakh realizes, he had been brewing. He finds his hands hot with the realization, with the relief; with the memory of the graze, of grace. They come uninvited like the dream that follows.

It takes a foreign body to understand a foreign body. It takes foreign hands to understand a foreign body (— it takes a foreign body to understand foreign hands). It takes hands to understand a body — and then, they are foreign no more.

It takes Burakh to understand Dankovsky.

Burakh's. Dankovsky's. Daniil('s).

THE SERPENT

I am... afraid you will eat me.

THE HARUSPEX

(looking quite lost) I... am not going to eat you. I cannot eat you. You're more likely to eat me.

THE SERPENT

(grave) But this is a lie, isn't it? You've eaten bigger. You've eaten bitter. You've devoured entire towns, and all I've done was devour entire bulls.

THE HARUSPEX

(still dumbfounded) Bulls... ? You've eaten bulls? *(raising voice)* Serpent, what have you done?

THE SERPENT

I've done what had to be done. I've made my choice. This is what this was about, wasn't it? Making a choice. Making it willed. I've eaten bulls. Their flesh was tangy and sweet. Closer to fig or apple. Eyes like pomegranate seeds.

THE HARUSPEX

(furious) You...!

(THE HARUSPEX throws himself after THE SERPENT and falls on his knees attempting to grab him. THE SERPENT slithers effortlessly out of his grip and crawls across the stage before exiting stage right. THE HARUSPEX watches him disappear, immobile where he fell. The lights linger on him for three seconds before going off. We do not see him leaving the stage. He hadn't made a choice yet.)

Stand there, Artemy Isidorovich, son of your father, will you? Tether-body of fraying things — of nerves, thread and fabric. Things are coming to a close; you'll be able to sew them shut, or to tear them apart.

That heart. That precious, unyielding thing. That cumbersome apple of plumb. That tart, pulsating hollow.

Burakh feared he could crush it. Burakh feared he would.

Burakh swallowed for himself the resolution that he would. For this, he would have to.

(That heart, that thing that Dankovsky had (en)trusted him with. / That thing that, oh, not *just* Dankovsky had (en)trusted him with.

That heart, that thing that the Earth had (en)trusted him with. / That thing that, oh, not *just the Earth* had (en)trusted him with.

Here lay the wound bleeding.

Here lay his hands.

His? Whose?

Observe the shape of the fingernails. Observe the ribbed plains of the back and look for signs of scratches or cuts; follow the shape of the middle finger for a callus at the topmost knuckle.

Whose?

Burakh wants to hold, and all he will do is crush.)

A cut for a cut and the world aligns.

a cut
for a cut.

(like

so.)

A heart for a heart.

Worse, worse: a heart to a heart.

LA TOUR EST MORTE, VIVE LA TOUR !

He cannot stop hurting. He cannot, for there is not a world, there is not a story that exists where he is able to shed the feeling of touch — a touch that resonates and echoes in all the hollows of him, in every cavity.

Touch is bound to hurt. Touch is bound to him. He's bound to hurt. And he's bound to the rest, to everything left.

to anything left.

(He knows why he chose. And I think you do too.)

And choosing felt like splitting a ribcage in half with a letter-opener.)

“I have made my decision,” the Inquisitor said. “Have you made yours?”

“I've made a *choice*, but no decision.”

“You are careful with your words, Burakh.”

“... I am. What is your decision?”

“The Tower is coming down.”

Burakh tries to find in her face a hint of anger, of rage, of madness, of anything — she's determined. She's a silver-cold, with an edge in the voice; not sharp, not dull, pressed with purpose against the jugular.

“What is your reasoning?”

(Burakh *has* his reasoning. He *knows* his reasoning. He knows for a fact the Inquisitor's is not the same.)

“The Bachelor’s love for the Tower,” she began, “overflows when he is asked about it. He knows the most intimate details of its construction — or as intimate as its creators will allow him to know.”

“And?”

“And he has told me what I already knew. No, let’s be fair... What I already thought of, and was simply confirmed. The Polyhedron's foundation pierces many meters into the ground beneath the Town, to its very heart.”

“To its?”

Burakh’s hammer against his teeth and he thought it would fall out of his throat. His pulse grew stiff, loud, worried.

“To its heart, Burakh.” (She didn’t seem to notice how uneasy he was, and he started to think she, too, was enthralled in the Tower — in its destruction. Too enthralled to question him about his sudden pallor.) Its core, its deepest layers... Why have you turned sheet-white?”

(Nevermind, she did.)

“Nevermind. Do go on.”

“The... arrow, the spear it stands on, holds the blood of your ritual beasts all of these meters underground. Bringing the edifice to its knees would break that spine and finally allow the blood to flow. All that would be left to do would be to collect it.”

But the Heart? But the beasts? But the creatures? But the miracles?

Burakh kept that in. Kept-that-in. He locked all of these inside. There was light in the Inquisitor’s eyes, like suddenly the sky dawned upon her.

“You’re not just telling me that because you think I’ll help, are you? There’s something else.”

“There is. Tomorrow, I will die.”

Huh.

“You seem sure of it.”

“I am. In the shadow of every Inquisitor is an army man with orders to shoot them at point-blank range. It’s dirty work, so they find excuses. They *will* kill me, Burakh, but I’ll go having destroyed this forsaken thing.”

“You are dead-set on taking it down.”

“I *will* be dead once I do, yes. I’ll go free.”

Burakh is unsure of what to do with all of her honesty. It all sounds like a suicide note — in a way, he thinks it is.

“And I am telling you this because I more than appreciate the unconstrained, Burakh. You’re... special in that way. Special to me.” For a modest, almost reluctant second, she bore a real, wide smile. “Free, now.” She immediately corrected: “Well, let’s not say *free*, let’s say... *freer*. It is more accurate.”

“Am I freer,” Burakh asked, “or are the constraints of my world simply further apart than yours?”

“How far apart?” She didn’t wait for him to answer, and continued, almost hurriedly, almost as if she wanted to say this, just this, before... before the rest: “This is where my freedom ends.” (She gestured outside, up, to the sky, to crows circling like thunderclouds.) “I live in the shadows of the Powers That Be. Of this... damned tower. It makes my skin crawl...”

She was mad. No, not mad... scared. She was scared, wasn’t she? Burakh saw how her shoulders shook, as if trying to tear off strings. It was the first time he saw the flame on her face falter. Her mouth pinched like she was trying to hold something in.

What was she afraid of? What could she be afraid of? It wasn’t *just* about the Powers That Be, was it? Was there something *within* that Tower that scared her so? There must have been. (There was.) She swept that fear off her face as fast as it had overtaken it.

“You’re freer than I am, but we are pleasantly alike.”

(Burakh thought he had heard this before, from somebody else.)

“You would have made a despicable Inquisitor but... I believe our likenesses would have allowed us to be good friends. It’ll make the parting that more painful. I would have... loved to weave the threads of webs with you.”

“I appreciate the compliment,” Burakh began, (and he did,) “but, if it would help make goodbyes easier, I’ve had my thoughts on how—on where our works irreparably differ.”

He was light-hearted, of course. Taking it with a casualness he knew was not quite fit for his interlocutor’s fate. Lilich laid her Inquisitor eyes on him — silver and prying like a pair of scissors. She was giving him the opportunity to speak. (That was her departing present. That was... the first time she was interested in hearing it.)

“You work openings with words. It’s not my trade. You’re covered in graphite and ink from drawing lines. Shapes. I don’t want to be. I *will not* be. You don’t touch people, not with your hands. You move them around, you... point and you pinch and you direct crowds like pieces on a chessboard. You haven’t touched anyone — touched, with your hands.” He moved his in front of his eyes. Their shapes dawned upon him then — dawned upon him for the first time. He became aware of the delicate silk of the skin. “I don’t want to draw, neither shapes nor my weapon anymore. I don’t want to speak. I don’t want to look with piercing eyes in the ways you do. I want

to touch, do you understand? I want to feel my way around with my fingers and palms as if I was blind. As if I wandered through pitch-blackness. I want to be covered in clay and blades of grass. I stank of blood for twelve days. I want to smell of autumn leaves again — like the living sisters told me I did.”

(A marked, bulging pause between words as Lilich listened carefully.)

“Living sisters? Are those what you call your maidens?”

“Brides, Inquisitor.” The title fell past his lips before he could swallow it back. He felt like his emphatic confession had shrunk him in front of her eyes. Made him smaller and dirtier with how he bent to the soil with a reverence he wasn’t sure she’d understand—no, he *was sure* she *wouldn’t understand*. “Not maidens, Brides.”

“I would assume it would be crude and untruthful for me to assume you are staying for them... for one of them.” (There was not an inch of jealousy in her voice, and it was important to Burakh. She sounded sour nonetheless.)

“It would be. It is.”

“So are you staying because of filial piety? Because that’s where you were called, and where you feel you have to stay?”

“I’m staying because... we are kindred. Kindred.”

She gauged his face. He was red, breathless. His heart hammered restlessly, aware, awake, sprung alive with his words like a watered fruit tree. What was she — curious, bitter, sad, lost? Burakh couldn’t tell.

“... So it *is* about filial piety,” Lilich said. She almost sounded disappointed, but curiosity cradled her stare.

“It’s about so much more. So much less. I’m staying because I want to figure it out.” Lightning pulsed through him. “I could be across the world and we would still be kindred.”

He marked a diligent pause. He caught his breath again. Something light washed over him — foreign, sea-like. He felt calm.

“I want to stay because I missed the smell of autumn here. I missed the whispers of the grass, that talks even with a bare wind. I will stay. And maybe one day I’ll leave because I want to leave.” (He didn’t say: ... *and not because my father sent me away*. He didn’t say it because the word was so heavy on his tongue he felt it would puncture his throat. (He would stay to learn to speak it again.)) He wasn’t one for long, beautiful words. He didn’t know how his little speech was going to land, and he didn’t know if he would ever land. Eventually, he finished: “I will stay because the house won’t tidy itself.”

(And that was the absolute and utter truth.)

“Do you truly believe your desires merely *coincidentally* match the straight road of your fate? You showed me you *were* free,” her voice emphatically rose, buckling on a syllable like the leg of a trapped horse, “why do you... follow what is written?”

“Do you believe I am written?”

She stood there, looking at him, almost shell-shocked for a second. She swept the surprise off her face as fast as it had fallen on it, and replied: “I do. Of course I do. I... am too. Don’t you see this is what I am trying to shake off? I’m trying to find ways to escape these lines...”

The fear, again. Her voice shook like a candle in the wind, like she was already, slowly, faltering.

“... Well, was I written well?”

She looked at him — again. Her cold gaze slowly came apart; she didn’t *warm up* per se, she just... leveled.

“That, Burakh... is not for me to judge.”

The Inquisitor stood still. The blades of her shear-eyes sought to clear Burakh’s face.

As he didn’t budge, she laid her arms down. Her lids fell and she sighed.

“... You seem very resolute.”

“I have nothing left but my resolution.”

She nodded.

She looked at the ground. It was not out of modesty, timidity or reticence. She wanted to know what could anchor Burakh to it so bad. (Burakh couldn’t answer. And if he could, he wanted to keep it to himself. The Inquisition didn’t have to know, and Aglaya — the doomed omen, the dusk-and-disappearing friend — he thought, wouldn’t understand. Her maps were sprawls, and he, burrows.)

“You do know what will happen to me once that cannon goes off, Burakh.”

“I do. And you know what will happen to everything that lives on the outskirts of this town, below, inside? All the...” He couldn’t get himself to say *creatures* or *miracles*. That was bringing them to life in her eyes. She was better shielded.

“... Do I, Burakh?”

“It is better if you do not know.”

“Why? Do you think I couldn’t understand?”

(Burakh wasn't sure she could, but he didn't tell her that.) "I think it is not your burden to carry."

"... But it is yours."

"It is."

Burakh's heart ticked with the pulse of clocks as he thought about what to say next. He could say " *and mine alone* ", or " *mine and my k/Kin's* ". Would he crush his k/Kin with the weight of his choice? He would regardless, he thought. But would he word it? Would he speak it into existence? He didn't add anything. The Inquisitor — Aglaya — watched how the words came and went over his face like the silhouette of a cloud over the steppe. He didn't add anything even as her eyes pried.

"Are you betraying anyone?"

"The only choices are, I either am or I am not, really." Burakh wasn't sure if she was serious, but a small laugh escaped him nonetheless. "Why? Are you going to send me to the gallows?"

"I couldn't even if I wanted to, could I? They've taken them down."

"They have. They've made funeral pyres."

"Better than stakes."

"Indeed."

"Do not come to me tomorrow. I need to be alone. I'll send my orders by couriers. Keep them safe, will you? The tower must come down. Mind the Bachelor. His love for it will make him mad."

"I've dealt with something like it already."

The Inquisitor wouldn't get the stakes — that was the fate of the poor Brides. She'd get an interrogation; and, less painful, a bullet then.

She offered him her gloved hand to shake. (Burakh laughed to himself: of course, gloved. Ah... a protective cocoon. He quite knew the ordeal.) He did and, with a last sweep of her silver cloud-eyes through his, she donned a forlorn smile; the wistful grimace of the sorely defeated. Burakh wasn't sure what she felt she had lost against, but he was starting to get an awfully precise idea.

"And there's something else, isn't there?"

"Whatever you think that *something else* is," Burakh replied, "there probably is."

"Mmh. Can't win them all," she joked, and her words grew into mist.

"Can't indeed."

A last chess piece for the Inquisitor, before she peeled that name off of her, to handle in leather-clad fingers. A rook...

The Architect is this pale, stiff as if frozen-solid, cold curved spine — Burakh is not touching him, he’s just walking towards him; the Stamatina is radiating a biting frost like the sun does light. Burakh is approaching him and he sees the Architect is pinned to the ground — which is some type of soil, which is some type of tiles, which is pitch-black like a velvety oil spill. No light comes in, no light goes out. The sword/needle/spear/swordneedlespear that pierces the similarly black dome above like a heavenly dagger tears through his chest, holds him in place like a white moth. Algae seem to cling to his face—it takes Burakh a second to realize it is his wet hair. The Architect turns to him—but he cannot move, which means Burakh turned to him instead. He’s not sure if he’s standing. He was sure the Architect was on the ground, he is not sure anymore. His eyes are mist-pale, bulbous and wet like a beetle’s elytra. They catch Burakh and cling onto his face. He is sure the Architect is digging into his arm with his fingernails but all of his limbs are curved towards him — almost protectively, pitifully enough; reminding Burakh of a spider, dead on its back.

The Tower,

he speaks.

“I’m listening.”

The Tower. She pierces,

he says.

Burakh looks at him. At the spear that pries his ribs apart, like a blade trying to separate conjoined bodies. (He doesn’t think “conjoined twins”, because it feels too on-the-nose. And then he thinks that he just thought about it, so why bother. Peter seems to be very bothered. He’s agitated as Burakh looks at him.)

“... Yes, I would assume she would do so.”

He’s seen. He’s seen her, if that’s what Peter prefers him to say. Peter’s arms flail towards Burakh’s face like he wants to grab him, to pull his eyes down — the rest of his head is optional. Burakh flinches and Peter flinches too. Burakh moves to the side and Peter moves too.

“Doesn’t it hurt?”

Peter’s teeth are clattering powerfully. In the pitch-black bubble where he has trapped Burakh (and Burakh is not sure he isn’t trapped himself), the sound they make is akin to a mad clock. Burakh winces at the thought the enamel would break. It doesn’t. The Architect forces him to look at him — somehow; Burakh is not sure he has touched him. The spear—Burakh can see it, how it is lodged like a painful splinter right through the manubrium. It nudges the Architect open

everytime he moves. He doesn't move much. Burakh doesn't see how it opens him up, it just knows it does.

She pierces.

"I know."

The Architect grabs his collar with a maddening, maddened and unexpected force, his knuckles digging into Burakh's neck as he pulls on the wool of his sweater.

Don't you dare touch her, hear?

"..."

She has to stand.

"Pain is making you mad." (He tries to reason with him. He attempts compassion where the curled, curved, corpse-cold, crawling, cleaved plumb-heavy shape of the Architect inspires pity.) "'*She has to stand*', for what? So you can stay here, being mangled by it? Cut in half? Feel your lungs be filled with... iron and zinc and whatever else its base is made of?"

Peter's face is suddenly close to him—so close Burakh feels its cold slithering beneath his skin, the frostbite chewing at his epidermis from the core out.

Pain. What's a bit more. What's a bit less. Don't you dare. You wouldn't understand. You do not. You can lie and tell me you do all you want. Don't you dare.

"I will not lie to you. I do not understand."

The Architect's face seems to soften. Rage subdues for pain, and he grimaces, retching as his limited movements mold him into a spiral around the spear like thread around a spindle.

Don't you dare.

"I will make the choice that I will make."

You will make me sad, Ripper. Oh, yes, you will rip her out of me... You will make me so sad...

Burakh watches as he curls in on himself. He's... miserable. He's all thin, all white, he looks like a distorted paper crane. He's glistening with pondwater like he just drowned — or attempted to. Whatever it is. He's in pain. Burakh knows how to deal with pain. Peter doesn't want Burakh to do anything about his.

"Sadness... What's a bit more, what's a bit less?"

Peter laughs — so bitterly, harshly, this ground-grinding thing. It feels like skinning the back of a hand on roughcast, and Burakh shivers violently. Peter wails, a long, melancholic howl that rises up, rises high, high-pitched, pitch(ed)-black, that comes crashing down with the hoarse, pained cry of a child having scraped his knee.

Burakh can think of a few things Peter will still have if the Tower comes tumbling down, but he is not sure Peter knows he has them.

Burakh hopes Peter is asleep. Burakh hopes Peter can sleep well. He's not mad at him, not now, he can't be. He's sad. He sees how Peter seeps out of himself where the spear widens the hollow over his heart. Everything can crawl inside — everything and nothing, mostly a whole lotta nothing.

“Hey, at least you're not filled with straw eh? Not with straw, sand or herbs...”

If I was filled with herbs... Say, Burakh... If I was filled with twyre, with all the water inside and outside of my body...

Burakh notices how he doesn't seem to separate the two.

... Do you think I could make twyrine of my own? Say... I think it would be... bitter... ineffectual, with an aftertaste of hazelnut shell.

“Well... If you were filled with twyre, it would brew... It wouldn't make twyrine as you know it, but infusions.”

For the better, maybe. Twyrine as I know it... Ah, I know it too well.

“Listen, I have to go.”

Of course you do.

“Aw, would you rather I stayed?” (He tries to be playful, but the tongue-in-cheekness falls like a shot-down bird on the opaque black ground, and Peter grits his teeth like he's trying to file the enamel down.)

You're despicable. You're going to do something despicable.

“You're in pain. That's pain talking.”

No. It's me.

Burakh thinks about how neither are sure there is a clear distinction.

It's worse, Burakh. It's so much worse. (There is a hint of shame, of self-awareness, perhaps even of a threat. They all brew inside of him like twyre.) I'm not in pain, I'm so angry.

“Both of these emotions are sides of a same coin... expressions of—”

He stops himself from saying “grief”, because there is nothing to grieve. (Nothing yet. He doesn't want to word it that way, to even think about it. The inevitability is... heavy, bitter, horrifying. But there is nothing to grieve... yet.) Peter reads the thoughts on him. The inevitability, the wait, all of that. He's mad. His eyes are two holes in his face cut over a pale, frozen winter sky.

“Listen, we can talk about it later if you want, okay? You seem like you need to talk.”

He seems like he wants to rip Burakh's throat off with his stare.

I will not be there any much longer.

“Of course you won’t. You’ll be somewhere else, in another dream. I’ll have to find you.”

Oh, because you’ll search?

“I’ll manage. Also, I found you here. You called me.”

I didn’t. You walked in... which is *my* thing, Burakh.

“Hey, maybe I’m learning from you!” (Play it playful. Extend a hand... hope he doesn’t bite it off.)

Don’t. There’s nothing to learn. Not anymore...

He means: there’s nothing [...] anymore.

Burakh didn’t know if Lilich was dead already. He believed she asked him to not come on the day so they could part as friends; and they did. He wasn’t sure what he and Dankovsky parted as; and he wasn’t... nervous about it, but he would love guidance. Dankovsky’s guidance. He wasn’t sure if he knew much more, but he hoped they’d figure it out together.

Yeah.

Together, huh...

Dankovsky fucks it all up.

And of course, it’s grief again.

And his own is a fantastic pit into which are swallowed composure and poise; from which are spat the mephitises of an unbridled protective rage, a hunger so potent he thinks of nothing but tearing things to shreds, even that means he makes himself sick with it.

He makes himself sick with it.

As he sits by the ashes, his face is pale, his eyes bloodshot and black. The gaze he sustains from under the dry bushes of his brows could set his face on fire. Oh, he’ll guard his miracle like a starved dog does his bone.

Dankovsky will not yield to Burakh , and he will not yield to Dankovsky. They’re blade to blade.

“Are we not men?” Dankovsky hisses — no. He is no man. He is a crushing serpent-coil. Burakh feels how he tightens around his wrist.

Burakh thinks about how he should have embraced him before he fucked it all up.

The evening was heavy. Suffocating, tense, tall, torn open as it hung/hanged over the Town, smothering it in the smell of gunpowder. The wide-open carcass of the alit sky swallowed the head of the Tower in low guts-clouds, shades of sick greys, pinks and reds. It was so low it could bite Burakh's fingers off. It was so low it scraped the mouth of the filled barrel of the railway gun that straddled, this behemoth, rust and silver beast, the tracks from which was swept off the smell of herbs. When the shell was fired, the sky was set ablaze. The clouds parted swiftly like a shoal of fish escaping the jaws of a predator, like curtains torn wide — bowing along the way to the Tower.

The shell hit it right beneath its (her) topmost rib, avoiding a paper sail to burst her open with the fullest force. She retracted on herself like a goliathic, burning spider. Her stairway-legs curved towards her body as if to hold herself back in as she spilled, as she tumbled down, as she poured ink and spat enkindled paper shreds. Burakh heard her scream in agony, bellowing and deep, raven-like in the croak of her voice — it took him a second to realize that was the Architect's and, right by the banks of the Gorkhon, he had fallen to his knees. He had folded himself in two as the Tower folded itself (herself) in three, four, five, then seven-ten-twelve like she was nothing more than a paper garland. Then (twelve-twenty-innumerable), she was nothing but an unrecognizable carcass of paper and ink, the flames tearing at her swallowed by the icy waters of the river, her tomb. She lay still and bent like an impaled bull.

The river-Cornucopia overflowed copiously like an abscess bursting.

*“I love red things, spoke the pale beast.
And you do too. That is why you're here.
And you love tearing things apart. (Butcher.)”*

Oh, you're tearing me apart...

*(Savior.) (Yargachin.) (Emshem.) (Loser.) (Lover.)
(Artemy...)*

Burakh came forth (*vivisector, come forth — at the altar of dying embers — paper-organ-shapes torn open like eaten carcasses — riverwater has turned inkblack*) until the blood of the Earth washed into the dent of his footsteps. It ate the soles of his beaten, dirty boots, bit into it meanly. He brought his hand to it, let it flow into his palm, then brought it to his mouth. He drank loudly, as if it was hot (it was lukewarm at most, nutty and sour like smoked meat). A long, loud cry died somewhere in the streets, four to seven voices dipping into the cooling soil like clay cliffs disappearing in the

sea. Brides; melancholic, eulogizing, bewailing in the cradles of the sound of bells. Burakh swallowed the blood. It scraped him down with a fading anger, the last scratch of arms being laid down.

He walked back, taking backward steps at first, as if not wanting to let (what was left of) the tower out of his sight (as if expecting it to rise again), down the debris-punctured street. Past the Kains', past the Cathedral. The houses seemed to avert their gazes as he went by, the wide eyes of their windows clouding themselves with pulled curtains. A window in the Stillwater was shut in front of his eyes. He deciphered the Bachelor's profile in the low light, turning away. He read the twisting of his mouth, the wrinkles on his chin as his lips pinched and twitched and grew so full of sorrow. The Bachelor's face slipped out of view. Burakh managed to catch how his spine bent, how his head dipped. He had sat at his desk. He had bent under the weight of the evening-becoming-night, losing his composure in the growing darkness.

Burakh came to a halt. He stood. He turned on his heels, strode back to the river banks and, balancing on the wet grass, approached the corpse of the T/tower. Here, right at the end of his reach, he could grasp a mangled piece of her skin; the paper stuck out above the water like a single rose thorn, only slightly burned in a corner, as if eaten by rodents. With two careful hands, he tore the papyrus-like sheet alongside an as-straight-as-he-could-manage line, and took the piece with him.

He walked to the Stillwater.

When he knocked, nobody answered. He knocked again, finding himself met with the same silence, before pushing the door open. The downstairs was still, empty. Stuffy and nervous. Tense at feeling him walk in, moving away as he stepped forward. He spotted the corner into which he had nights prior backed himself in, still splattered with his own blood that the Bachelor had apparently tried to scrub off, at least a little bit. A light was on upstairs. Burakh climbed the steps slowly.

He knocked on the first wooden surface his hand could reach — a folding screen that swayed on its base even under the lightest of touch —, peering into the loft. He saw Dankovsky, and Dankovsky saw him. He had sat at the desk, he had buried his head in his arms, and his hair stuck out when he pulled himself out of them. They were bare — he had rolled his sleeves up. Burakh found him looking drawn, harried. His shoulders sloped low, as if caving down; the wells of his eyes swept clean of their rust and brass hints to drill nothing but two ink-black holes into his pale, tired face, evading the light of the lantern, of almost-discarded candles.

Burakh stood in the doorway, his hand nervously, tightly clenched around the tower paper-skin he had peeled out of the rubble.

“Have you had a look at yourself?” the Bachelor's voice sliced clean through the silence — not particularly accusatory, not acerbic nor irate; sharp, tall and clean, stripped of all pride. A pinch of sorrow fought its way past his lips regardless.

Burakh hadn't had a look at himself. For a long, particularly loud and heavy second, he slowly became aware of the tacky, drying blood across his mouth and chin that cracked when he spoke, of the soot and debris on his cheek and sleeves — of the piece of paper he held onto with a maniacal force as if it would try to escape (and he wasn't sure it *wouldn't* try to escape).

Burakh took a step forward, expecting Dankovsky to jolt, to flinch, to lean away. He didn't. He watched the newcomer come to him and hand out folded paper. The gesture was a bit crude, almost childlike.

“... Did Peter tell you to give it to me?”

“He didn't.” (Marked an unwieldy, awkward pause.) “It was my own choice.”

Dankovsky took the paper with an almost-reverence that made Burakh's heart sink. He lacked the scrupulous pickiness of deft hands and difficult mind as he did so, and Burakh realized he hadn't shown it in a while. Shown it to him, at least.

“I'm sorry, Burakh. For earlier today.” He fiddled with the paper, folding it back and forth along already-folded lines. Burakh wondered if he was going to tear pieces off cleanly.

The Bachelor's lips twitched to hold sourness in. His wrists, the cuffs and creases of his sleeves were still a sickly pink even after he had tried to wash the blood off. Burakh hadn't had a “look at himself”: he was his eyes, he was his body, so he could only look at Dankovsky. And Dankovsky — he couldn't look at himself, so he looked at Burakh; he was his body, he was his eyes—these two pensive carrion-crow-feathers marbles that Burakh wanted to borrow so he could wipe the wetness off. Burakh read on him that he was very much aware his “sorry” was light of a word. That it wouldn't bring anything, anyone back. And Burakh read within himself he'd have to live with this very same feeling, too. They'd be two halves of a single nutshell around the same putrid, foul fruit of guilt. A shell—a very breakable one.

Burakh thought about how, when the Bachelor would leave, he would take this home with him. He'd also take a piece of Burakh, that Burakh was not happy came off of him, and yet would have hated to keep. Too rotten for him — but even more for anyone else to carry.

He thinks about how, had they met in any other circumstances, they would have both kept their pieces — and, likely, torn each other to them.

“Oh,” Burakh suddenly remembered, “I never gave you your cigarette back.”

He patted around in his pockets for the tin box and, even as Dankovsky extended a hand to say “*keep it*”, he insistently offered it back.

Dankovsky took it, snapped the lid open, and poked (what was left of) the cigarette into his mouth. He didn't comment on the fact it was half-burned already; maybe he expected it. (Maybe he preferred it this way.)

His nonchalance betrayed fatigue; the looseness in his arms, exhaustion more than relaxation. Sitting on his chair, turned to Burakh, legs sprawled in an apathetic, dispassionate unraveling, he probed his own pockets for something — before he had even registered it as an unspoken request,

Burakh had pulled a matchbox and stick out of his, cracked it ablaze, and offered it to Dankovsky.

The flame danced pietersite sparks in the Bachelor's eyes on it, then on Burakh, then it again. Burakh didn't expect him to accept the offer — then, as an unbelievably loud second passed, he expected him to take the cigarette out of his mouth and, from his seat, reach his arm out for the matchstick. Instead, Dankovsky got up, balancing on his tired legs with a hand on the desk, and leaned into the flame.

Burakh moved the matchstick slowly, bringing the fire to lick up and down the already-half-consumed tobacco rod as Dankovsky's lips tightened around it to keep it still.

Oh, Burakh thought. (That didn't have anything to do with how Dankovsky's lips tightened around the cigarette. He thought...)

"I have this of yours too..."

He had felt it against his fingertips when fishing for the cigarette case, as if it had snaked to the aperture of his pocket to meet him. Dankovsky watched him pull on the chain intently; his face lit up, as much as it could light, with a dulled sort of surprised wonder. Burakh handed him the locket, and he took it.

"Well," Dankovsky spoke, "that, I won't let you keep."

"So I figured."

"Did I lose this?"

"... You gave it to me to keep."

That wasn't a lie.

"I figured I did." There was softness in his voice. Softness. It hit Burakh in the jaw like a brick.

"Thank you," Dankovsky eventually said, "for the..."

He waved the paper around like a white flag.

"No problem. I'm... going to get some rest."

"Do you want me to move my coat?"

Burakh laughed — it just escaped him, really, it just slipped out. (*Not a good time, buddy... Not a good time*, he told himself. *People are dead*. Yes, well, he laughed nonetheless.)

"Persistent, are you?"

The Bachelor grimaced but Burakh could see he was amused too. His face distorted as sorrow chipped at the smile that fought its way out, the mixture reminiscent of muddling elixir tints.

"I can't stay. I have to... collect the ingredients. Bring them back, start a brew... I'll rest there."

"I see."

Burakh wanted to invite him, to *ask* him to come, but didn't. He just hoped thinking it very hard would make him come.

(It didn't.

When Burakh approached the workshop, a crowd had gathered. The red of army coats mingled with the leathers and rags of huddled townsfolk. They held bottles in their hands; some, as many as their arms could carry. All red. They were all red. (The bottles. If he squinted, Burakh would think the people were, too.))

Burakh didn't sleep right away; it is not that he meant to lie to Dankovsky but, seeing him not come, Burakh grew increasingly irritated with the bubbling and cracking of the preparations in the brewery. They scratched at his ears and cheeks like they wanted to dig inside of him. He noted the time on a paper he shoved in his pocket and walked home.

Oh, home.

He crawled — he crawled for the first time in six years into his bed, his own bed. It was cold from a half-decade of ghosts tending to the sheets. The wood all around smelled dusty, dully of earth overtaking it (taking it back).

Burakh dreamed he was grass; a welcome change from... the rest. Burakh dreamed he was grass. His body went through the dirt-stained sheets on his bed like blood goes through a bandage, and he was filled with an expansive, tranquil breath imbued into him, with a wind so light and clung onto by waning scents of twyre and herbs.

He was grass, which meant he was nowhere and everywhere at once. His spine swayed inside of him with the barest kiss of the air and yet he was anchored so deeply, his arms, his legs, each of the notches of his vertebrae hooked into the warming soil as he was—everywhere, and nowhere at once. He traveled miles to find a soul, and yet he didn't move at all.

He found Dankovsky, lying still — closed mouth, but bare head, stretched on the grass, amidst twyre and herbs instead of gladiolas and watercress. He smiled not, and did not seem to be cold. *Maybe dead*, crossed Burakh's mind, before he shook the thought of him with a force that sent the ground shivering. *Don't think about it. Don't even think about it. Don't even think about thinking about it.*

Burakh — grass, herbs — approached him, slowly, as one would approach a sleeping snake.

Burakh — grass, herbs — bent to his face, to his chin, his exposed throat, his full-of-strings wrists. Dankovsky was not wearing his gloves, and the raised nervures of Burakh's blades, leaves and florets brushed against the scarring scratches that etched, thread-thin tributaries of a deep, dark

river, the back of the Bachelor's hands. Dankovsky sighed deeply, and Burakh was reassured he was not dead.

Dankovsky rolled on his side, and the earth dipped against his weight, hollowing itself around his protruding shoulders, his bent elbow, his bonier-than-when-they-first-met knees. He rolled on his side and Burakh tended to his silhouette, drew its shape, drew his shape, bent his blade-spine(s) to him, not out of submission or servility, not as bereavement or eulogy, simply in the way one watches over a sleeping beloved.

Burakh rummaged through his possessions for a clear razor — well, a not-too-rusty one — and shaved very close to the skin. The stubble that fell in the basin below was a rusty brown with swallowed blood. It diluted the water pink. He looked younger without it, of course he did. Face-to-face with what the mirror threw back at him, his heart sank: that was a young boy. He felt infinitely small. He felt like crawling back to dad. (He felt like crawling back to the Earth (and saying he was sorry).)

(All his thoughts were parentheses, now; suspended, verbose, heavy in-betweens and nothingnesses that filled the silence as he swam with the motions. The Earth below rang hollow (see, like this: ()). Punctuating, clearer images washed over him, sometimes, meeting a shell-shocked mutism. They meant little, except that he could still think (like, see, this).)

(He waited. He was sometimes interrupted by Sticky, having followed him home, who peeked (like so) through loose wooden doors.)

An... immeasurable, immense, deafening calm fell on Burakh. Nothing seemed to move, not even himself. He became... aware of all the aches, all the pains, all the minute needles of discomfort that stuck and tore and punctured through him. The long, snaking cuts that Dankovsky had helped him stitch up—that Dankovsky had stitched up. The gnawing, growling ache of an empty stomach. The dull burn that set his knuckles ablaze; even clean of blood, the sores of fistfighting tugged at his taut skin like they wanted to pull his flesh off. His neck was growing stiff. He looked again in the mirror and saw then: his cuspids were sharp and pointed. (He blinked, and they were not anymore.)

Oh, Burakh, hey.

You can't feel your toothaches anymore...

Night had brewed, and night had brewed well. It was the beginning.

He went back to the workshop and collected the panaceas, still warm, still ink-liquid. A crowd had gathered back to receive the elixirs, but he insisted on administering them himself — when he walked to the Theater, there stood Dankovsky. He had donned his coat again, the lapel of his shirt was sorted, his cravat folded neatly. His gaze was sustained and formal. He looked like himself again—the self Burakh had met and seen unfold.

Burakh wasn't sure if he had slept, and if he had, if he had slept well. He couldn't help but think that the guilt was probably eating the Bachelor inside — in a twisted way, maybe, he hoped it did. This hope, somehow, he wasn't sure how, didn't feel incompatible with the gratitude he felt at seeing Dankovsky here. Burakh hoped he hurt, because he hurt too. He was thankful the Bachelor had come. (*To the Theater*, he meant.) (*Who was he kidding*, something hung over his head. It was damn heavy.)

“How can I help?”

Burakh allowed him to pick four vials out of his arms without resistance.

“You need to prop them up first, if you can. It's important they swallow, and we have to be careful that they do not choke on it. It's too precious to let it go down the wrong pipe.” (He had tried to chuckle, there, tried to nudge Dankovsky with an elbow — but didn't, because he would have dropped something.)

Dankovsky was diligent. His hold on the living was shockingly gentle and Burakh felt his arms and shoulders itch.

Burakh went back to the workshop. He dropped the blood, he gathered, or had people fetch him, more water. He brewed, and brought the vials to those who needed it. Burakh went back to the damn workshop. He dropped the blood, he gathered, or had people fetch him, more fucking water until the cling of the vials and bottles rang purposefully and longly between his ears. The river of blood, cradled in bottles like precious wine, felt boundless. Burakh thought he would have drowned by now. His lungs were heavy, yet dry. The spillage, industrial in proportions, stacked on the shelves interminably.

When he started to see the end of it, Burakh began to feel dizzy. He walked home. The early afternoon sun seemed to shiver overhead, its coat of fog-clouds through which it pierced blurring its silhouette like a slowly-vanishing ghost.

Arms for Good

(*THE SERPENT* and *THE HARUSPEX* are sitting at opposite ends of the *PROSCENIUM LINE*, curtains drawn behind them, but not closed as to allow for *THE CHOIR*, *UPSTAGE CENTER*, to be seen as they sing softly. *THE*

SERPENT and THE HARUSPEX appear calm, but sorrow is read on both of their faces. THE CHOIR dances with very small steps, moving from left to right and back again as if moving with a breeze. They all sway their arms slowly and gracefully, melancholic and grieving.

THE CHOIR:

(humming) It has been a long way / a long way down / a long way woven through ribs / of the mother (of) earth / It has been a long way, dreamer, a long way down / Your eyes traveled so far / your hands so forward / thrusting like bayonets!

THE SERPENT begins to shed its skin, curling in on itself. It pulls its scales out, plucking them one by one, and emerges from its kneeling pale and bare — naked (not nude). He sits on his heels with hands on his thighs, back very straight, composed and collected. THE HARUSPEX takes his smock off. He folds it meticulously and sets it aside. He is now THE SON. THE SERPENT is now THE WELCOMED, LEAVING GUEST.

THE CHOIR:

(humming) Your hands shan't be your father's hands / Your acts shan't be (y)our Mother's acts / You've risen and crawled...

THE SON gets up and walks towards THE WELCOMED, LEAVING GUEST, but stops before crossing into STAGE CENTER. THE WELCOMED, LEAVING GUEST gets up and walks towards THE SON, but stops before crossing into STAGE CENTER. They stand in front of each other, looking at each other. Three women of THE CHOIR detach themselves from the group and walk, still dancing to DOWNSTAGE CENTER, where they let their hair down and brush the stage with it, sweep the floors with their hands and the hems of their dresses, reaching for each other's hands sometimes, pirouetting slowly, swaying arms like branches in the breeze. They step back in order to form a line in STAGE CENTER, still dancing.

THE CHOIR:

(humming) There'll be people / below you / singing!

More members of THE CHOIR, until then having stayed silent, sitting just before the APRON of the stage, stand up and join the singing, not stepping on stage, dancing in the same manner of those heard first.

THE CHOIR:

(humming) Wipe your lips clean of that dried blood / of those red things you so love / Come meet hunger like you meet everything else born in your mouth / *Yargachin!* / Spit the seeds of pomegranate / so in the wake of your bloodshed / fruit trees will grow...

Members of THE CHOIR who were in front of the stage climb on and join the three at CENTER STAGE. They dance here, humming, before all rejoining the group at UPSTAGE CENTER and continuing the dance. As both THE SON and THE WELCOMED, LEAVING GUEST walk to each other, closing the gap before turning their backs to each other, THE CHOIR disperses in a controlled chaos, equal number leaving the stage from the RIGHT and the LEFT. Even with the stage empty except for THE SON and THE WELCOMED, LEAVING GUEST, the voices of THE CHOIR are heard from backstage and the audience.

THE CHOIR:

(humming) There'll be people / all around you / singing...

Lights fade. The curtain shivers, but does not fall.)

When Burakh hauled himself out of bed, the sun was barely setting. It hung like the head of a pin over the yellow, rough fabric of the steppe, catching the tallest blades of grass and throwing blue, cold shadows in the wake of stones. He had slept the whole damn day. His heart was hit by a pang of panic as he realized people could have left (—well, *people*... Let him not kid himself. He didn't care about many who could leave).

He found Sticky in the living room, rummaging through cabinets like he had done so many times before, Murky pacing the halls with her hands on the walls.

"You're leaving?" Sticky called after him as he approached the door.

"Yes," Burakh said. "I'm going to the workshop."

"Can I come?"

Burakh saw the excitement in Sticky's eyes, but had to shut it down: "I would rather you stayed here. I... just need to take care of... stuff."

That was (mostly) the truth. He needed to look over the last batches of Panacea. To clean the alembic and the brewery. (Here, his thoughts marked a notable pause as he sought more excuses.) To find solace in the finally-silent lair. (To be alone with the weight of his father's ghost, and the weight of the rubble, the rubble of everything.)

Sticky nodded and, when Murky's head popped into the hallway, he hurried towards her to tell her Burakh was "going out for a little bit, we can pace together". As Murky seemed satisfied, Burakh slipped in the doorway.

He didn't go to the workshop yet. He didn't go to the workshop still.

He made his way to the Broken Heart. The granite stairs were as if sanded down in his path, the stone giving way to his weight, cursing how heavy he treaded. He pushed the door. The air was as heavy as ever — the more things change, the more they stay the same... — and the music was loud. Loud, dragging, hoarse; like it was in pain too.

He approached a table like one does a feral horse. Andrey, sitting on a wide leather couch, crawled his gaze up his face — it was darting, dark, obsessive. Across from him, Dankovsky didn't spare him a glance.

His face was pale. His eyes were cradled in a deep blue hue. His eyelids were heavy on his apthotic irises, like he wanted nothing more but to sleep at last. Yulia, next to him, was reserved and reclusive. She was here out of convenience, almost; seeking meaning amongst people who couldn't find it either.

Andrey hissed.

"... So, matricide, I've been told."

"By who?" Burakh snipped in the same tone. "Your dancers?"

"Watch your tongues. They're your *sisters*." Burakh held his stare, but didn't speak. *They are*. "And they're orphans, now."

Burakh held his stare. Didn't speak. The rubble sunk inside of him and settled in the coils of his entrails like the carcass of a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea.

Andrey's face shifted, *softened*, almost, and Burakh winced at the vision.

"... Hey. I wouldn't ever do it myself... but I won't tell you I do not understand at least a little."

Oh, don't even start. "You *don't* understand, not even a little. You couldn't."

"Go to the grave with that thought, if it helps you sleep."

Burakh's upper lip twitched.

"Where's your brother?"

Andrey's long, scraping finger pointed to the quilt thrown on the couch next to him — it struck Burakh that was a *coat*, and Peter was under it, curled up like a fox in a bear trap. Burakh watched him as he didn't move; as his coat barely rose and fell with his breath. His wet, strung, wrung breath.

“Two birds one stone, eh?” Andrey sneered longly, slyly. When Burakh looked at him perplexed, he continued: “*Your* mother, and *his* child.”

“Stop, will you?” Burakh said through gritted teeth.

“I will.”

“Shockingly compliant that you are.”

“Between parricides, we can see eye to eye.”

“Do not fucking call me that,” Burakh barked.

“Sorry, Burakh. Hey, it gets easier to live with”

His voice was measured, soft, almost — as if he meant it. As if he wanted to lift the weight of guilt from Burakh’s shoulders.

His voice was heavy still; heavy and dark, a hiss behind the tongue, a venom dripping slowly. He would have torn Burakh’s hands to shreds if he could. He could. He didn’t... *How merciful*. And Andrey was. Because he was hurt; he was hurt; he’d never been so hurt.

Burakh didn’t talk too much to Dankovsky.

He wanted to. He needed to. He was deathly afraid of all the words that could gallop out of his mouth and make a fool out of him in front of the twins — well, in front of Andrey; he assumed Peter could care less — and Lyuricheva,

He asked him what he was going to do now. (He thought about asking him who he would find the strength to look in the eyes.) Dankovsky offered a bleak, exhausted smile. The corners rose like two long horns. He bared his teeth — in any other circumstances, he would have looked menacing and cold. Now, oh, now there was nothing left but sorrow. His face was forlorn, empty, furious; all at once, nothing still.

Dankovsky said he was going to pack all of that grief in his suitcase and take the train back home.

Burakh left without asking him to come see him. Like the day before, he hoped he could come on his own — he wished he could come on his own. (It would make Burakh feel like he wasn’t imagining things.)

Burakh kept poking his head out and looking at the train station, nervously awaiting a train. (In the meantime, he picked seven stems from a drying bouquet. He carefully brushed their leaves and florets of dirt. They were rough, a little prickly under his calloused fingertips. He bound them together with thread. He placed the bundle in his leather pouch between two sheets of clean gauze.)

Burakh pulled himself a chair. His legs were restless, his knee bounced. He touched the empty bottles, red-kissed still, like they could contain him as well. He waited. He had never wanted to

wait more. Both prospects — the one of Dankovsky never coming, and the one of him walking through the front door — were equally daunting.

Eventually, the evening wind brought the latter. Dankovsky's silhouette pushed itself into the Lair — and the Lair didn't oppose any resistance. He had changed his heavy snakeskin coat for a lighter one, just as long, that draped him a corduroy red. Changed his shirt, too; the blood-pink sleeves would have accessorized his cloak tastefully (Burakh almost made himself laugh thinking about it), but he had put on a black one, the sleeves of which had been rolled so as to not peek past the red arms of the coat. His arms, then, were bare. He had kept the gloves — of course he had. Burakh almost felt a pinch when he noticed his cravat had been cleared of its snake-head pin; almost like he missed it.

Burakh realized he had been staring at his guest in silence for however-too-long.

"Donned your formal attire?" He eventually spoke. In the low light, he saw a smile tug frankly at Dankovsky's lips, cracking the heavy coat of exhaustion on his face.

"Does this look formal to you?"

Upon closer inspection — closer as he walked to Burakh and took an offered chair —, it didn't. He looked around the workshop, leaning over to steal glances in the corners.

"Where are the children?" he asked.

"My father's house." (He swallowed.) "My house. Home."

Dankovsky watched him weigh his words in his mouth. Heard him carefully pick them like growing herbs.

"When's the train?" Burakh asked — cutting through the silence before it had its chance to anchor.

"Nine in the evening." He pulled out of his pocket a watch and gave it a quick glance. "An hour and a half from now."

"That's late."

"They're making it a night train so it can arrive at the Capital in the daylight. I... do also think they have a few things to take care of."

Burakh thought of the body of the old Olgimsky in the Termitary, of the last panaceas in the Theater and Town Hall still to be distributed by the Orderlies; of Lilich, still to be executed.

"... Why have you come?" Burakh asked.

"Because you wanted me to."

The words hit Burakh straight across the chest like a hoof quick, and his breath hitched in his throat. And yet, that'd be a bold lie to say he didn't. (He never wanted to say he didn't.) Dankovsky spoke again, and Burakh had to contain a sigh of relief that he didn't expect an answer.

"And I wanted to talk to you," he said. Burakh looked at him. "Because you wanted to talk to me too."

Burakh nodded. (He just nodded.) He turned his gaze on Dankovsky and waited for him to speak.

"You've been... needlessly kind to me when I truly didn't deserve it."

Burakh pouted skeptically—he... vividly remembered calling him all sorts of names, including names that Dankovsky wouldn't have understood, which was the point.

"When?"

"Earlier today, for example. When I caught your eyes on my bloodied sleeves, I thought you would punch me then." He stopped himself; he weighted the words in his mouth very visibly, Burakh's eyes catching how his mouth curled and curved. He corrected himself then: "No, I didn't think you *would*. That's what shocked me. I thought... frankly, I deserved it, and expected you to believe it as well."

"Yeah," Burakh replied without a missed (heart)beat, "you would have deserved it."

Dankovsky barked out a laugh that hit Burakh head-on; a croaky, tired, genuinely amused caw.

"But you didn't," he then asked. "Why?"

Trick question.

Burakh knew the answer, what he wanted to answer, and the answer he was formulating — all vastly different.

The words crawled out of him like he did out of the earth — all red. They tasted awfully raw, like they had scraped him bare.

"... I feel... like I've shared something intimate with you." Immediate, nervous correction: "Like *we have* shared something intimate." (Oh Burakh, that's even worse!)

Who did that scare the most? Silence had fallen upon them with a dead weight. Burakh looked at Dankovsky — out of the corner of his eye, animal-like. And Dankovsky looked at Burakh, dead-on, spine stiff, strained, pulled straight.

"That's a very heavy word, Artemy."

It was. So was that one; the name; that was heavy...

"It is." A pause. A long one... "It is. I am aware. I feel the weight."

Haut les cœurs, Burakh! He dared look at Daniil straight on.

"Do you?"

No reply. A stare—a gaze; long, loud, swelling. No reply, then eventually:

"I feel more like it has been lifted."

Burakh nodded.

"Would you accompany me outside?" Dankovsky eventually asked.

"For some fresh air?"

"Yes."

"I'll follow you."

He did.

Dankovsky held the heavy door open for him. The wind rushed into the red sail of his coat as it trailed behind him.

"The air... has cleared."

"It has." (Burakh marked a pause. With a tilt of the head, he indicated a secluded spot on a steppe hillside, and Dankovsky followed him.) "On the third week of September, the twyre pollen will blanket the steppe. On the fourth, it will sink into the ground. Then, winter will come." (A pause again. The unpicked blades of herbs were bending to the ground, yielding way to him in a bow.) "Winter, if nothing else, will come."

Dankovsky nodded; a solemn, sober nod. He had found a grip back on his composure, now. Burakh looked at his pale, long neck, a little stiff with fatigue and stress; at the locks of overgrown hair that curtained his brows, his eyes, the shells of his ears as he watched dutifully the path ahead.

They sat then; it was just clear of eight in the evening. Dankovsky's knees were bent, his feet anchored in the ground; he brought his hands to the front of his knees. Burakh's legs were flat before him as the blissful feeling of not having to bear weight on his bad joint washed over. His hands supported his weight as he pushed them against grass behind him.

Aquarius had risen in the south-east. Zeta Aquarii was a bright pin of light through the thin cover of clouds. Above it, Altair of Aquila scratched the edge of the Milk Way. The colorful stripe seemed to snake along the railway, appearing above like a long, uninterrupted cloud of locomotive smoke. On the other side of it, Jupiter and Antares were like two set eyes of the black animal of the sky.

For a while, the two men didn't speak. Burakh watched Dankovsky as he didn't speak. Then, he said something Burakh felt wasn't what he had first wanted to:

"How does one... live after this."

“I don’t think... one has any other choice. One will... wake up in the morning and realize he hasn’t died. Not yet. So you’ll have to get up, and put your clothes on, and look at yourself in the mirror and find ways to not be disgusted by what you see.”

Burakh bit his tongue when he realized he had slipped — and he realized too that Dankovsky had noticed. He was looking at him with a sidelong eye. The even force of his gaze made Burakh understand he knew what he meant — and maybe even he felt the same.

“And I guess... It will take the time that it will take. But that’s all there is left, now. Time.”

Dankovsky’s eyes drew the hazy horizon line, and Burakh thought he saw him nod.

“What will you do, now? Besides ‘stuff your grief in a suitcase’...”

Dankovsky’s shoulders twitched with what barely was a shrug. “I will go back to my place. I might go see my mother... Go to the sea with her. I might write a book... Maybe there is truth to the saying that bad tragedies make good fiction,”

“Can I get a first-page dedication?” Burakh joked.

“You will,” Dankovsky replied; and even if he was laughing too, Burakh heard the bluntness of sincerity in his voice.

Silence walked the steppe for a minute, sweeping it with a warm, heavy breath. It carried lamentations.

“How is the sea?” Burakh asked.

“Have you never been?” Burakh shook his head. “The water is... clear, mostly. A bit cold, at this time of the year. The shores are lined with small grey rocks that disintegrate into dark sand along the coast. Hills of dense forest overlook the water. Their cliffs look like they’ve bowed to the water, ceding to it.”

Burakh’s head swayed a dreamy nod. “It sounds nice.”

“I could take you.”

Burakh’s words fail him, and his breath too. The voice had been low. The voice had been, almost, cautious; like Dankovsky had been afraid to fuck things up.

“Does your mother accept guests on your trips?”

“She never has, because I’ve never brought any. I’ve never loved anyone enough to want to show them the sea.”

Then, Burakh fell mute. His eyes hit the side of Dankovsky’s face; his gaze was directed at his own hands. He wasn’t ashamed. He wasn’t shy. He was somber with an unspeakable and sudden gravity.

An appetite he struggled to shape into composed words.

Burakh felt how his jaw slowly grew slack, heavy with its own. Every word he had ever known felt suddenly potently empty and weak. His mouth was hollow; a vessel in which he wanted Dankovsky to seep.

“... Is that the word you want to use?” (Dankovsky, for a minute, didn’t answer.) “That’s a very heavy word,” he said, softly (for once. At once. At last.) and with the brush of a laugh, echoing Dankovsky’s words from earlier.

Dankovsky’s eyes on him were unmovable. Burakh felt himself flinch under their weight — their horrifyingly warm, calm, unwavering, eager weight. Burakh could see into their depths all the flakes of copper and gold that fit themselves into his drilling gaze.

“Will you let me wield it over you?” Dankovsky asked.

“I — yes. I will. Yes, I will.”

He watched how Dankovsky’s jaw jutted, tight, strained, restrained, fighting to hold his words in; then slacked, lips still pinched together, as if he was chewing and swallowing them.

Burakh leaned to him. His head hitched forward, as if tugged, as if yanked; as if Dankovsky’s eyes caught him by the sides of his face. Their stares scrape against each other’s like they were trying to make a fire.

Connections overcome death. Connection implies severance. Connection implies difference. Connection implies two; not *halves*, two, two wholes. Connection implies wholes finding wholes, hollows finding hollows; wholes finding hollows, hollows finding wholes. Connection implies touch.

Marble, to it—the touch—is not unlike the dead. Rigor mortis settling in, the skin, drained of its fluids, becomes taut, stretched like hide over the hard bones. Under fingertips, it is cold. It is hard. It doesn’t dip under pressure, feeling like it pushes, almost, against the contact. Marble is not Dankovsky’s skin, despite its same milky color, despite the smoothness in the hills and hollows as Burakh finds it, finds himself allowed to touch it. The flesh — of his bared arms, of his taut neck, of his stubbly cheeks — seems to elude Burakh’s touch: it grows goosegumpy under his coarse fingertips (and he grows contrite at the thought that his touch is more painful than pleasurable), and Dankovsky takes sharp, short breaths, as if shocked.

Touching him feels like scraping a matchstick. He's afraid — no, it's not fear he feels... He's awestruck at the enormity of Dankovsky's desire. It is the unspeakable, unknowable, evading organ that Burakh is the most careful to handle. It seeks his touch and flees like once did his loud heart. It's untamable in the ways of a wounded beast, and he is not sure even Dankovsky has the smallest grasp on it. He knows he doesn't. It's like grappling with a thunderstorm. Trying to harness lightning and burning from it.

Touching him overcomes it—death and the rest.

The fragile vial of restraint is a cauldron overbrewing; bitter when it spills and then setting the floorboards on fire.

Dankovsky doesn't want that. He thinks he's had enough. He's bitten and cut all over like the world tried to tear him to pieces — and it did. The vial is full like his mouth is of words and only one those spills: he doesn't speak. Burakh sees the flight of his hands then; the raven-flight of his gloved touch, he grabs both sides of his jaw and pulls him and kisses him fiercely.

Burakh steals a glance at his mouth, at his wide, shallow, hypnotizing cupid's bow, the mesmerizing halo around his reddened lips, pale pink skin where stubble does not grow.

“Oynon...”

“Do not call me that,” Dankovsky huffs, hushed against Burakh's mouth; “not now, not right now...”

“... Danya...”

It takes him by surprise; he seems to flinch, his lips close and tighten — Burakh fears he is piqued but, angling another glance, he can see him holding back a smile.

“*you love red things,*” once spoke the beast, and Burakh cannot say he does not. He loves the long red coat he slips his arms under to put hands on Dankovsky's waist and chest, his red cravat that Artemy's mouth keeps catching when he kisses his neck. He loves the red that Daniil's pale skin swallows, finding itself tinted pink, the red, worried lips Daniil offers him, the red, shivering organ of his tongue like a beating, pulsating heart.

Gone is the image of the narrow, paper-edge *lips* of a clean-cut wound. There is only Dankovsky's. Daniil's. They aren't particularly plump, particularly plush — they are thin, a little dry where he hasn't licked them in anticipation, dipping into sharp furrows where he has worriedly bitten them until they bled. When Burakh lets the tip of his tongue wander in these grooves, he meets a lingering metallic taste; Dankovsky breaks the kiss—not the hold—and pinches his lips, discomfited. “Sorry,” Artemy says, low and cloud-warm against his mouth. “Sorry.” “I bit it too hard,” Daniil replies just the same. “I know. Sorry,” and they kiss again.

One of Daniil's hands emerges out of his pocket and Artemy feels it on his shoulder, down his flank, up the jut of his hip and lower down his thigh. As he hitches his head up, wild eyes finding Daniil's, way more placid, he catches on his mouth the words: “Don't get too excited,” followed by the crinkle of paper as something is pushed down his pocket. His hand freed, Daniil brings both of them into Artemy's hair, and kisses him again — kisses him back, and back again (and again, back).

“Walk me back,” Dankovsky eventually said. “I still need to pack my things.”

“Sure,” Burakh said, and it stung like his own blade went through him.

He walked the Bachelor back to the Stillwater. He stole glances in the low lights of the streetlamps, catching how he hadn't straightened his cravat back up, how the one button of his shirt Burakh had worried with a thumb still hung open, wide, a bit hungry — obscenely so. Burakh well and truly believed they could have had sex back then (he didn't know *how*, he had never known how, but his guess was that he'd learn, like the rest), but he wasn't going to tell Dankovsky that, so he zipped it, he stitched it shut, he buried it hurriedly. He was still thinking about it as he helped the Bachelor fold and pack, when he pleated on itself the collar of a white shirt he, nights prior, parted open with his own hand. The Bachelor's bag was lighter than when he came to the town, hollows left in the wake of pill boxes and serum bottles that the plague had swallowed whole.

It's in one of these holes that Burakh buried herbs, their smoky-mint scented leaves bunched together with red thread. He shoved between the stems a little note he had been too distracted to give Dankovsky before; a simple, scribbled piece of paper that read: “ *to slice thinly, to put in boiling water, let steep until fragrant. store in a dry place. for your nightmares and your migraines.*”

The train, Burakh had forgotten, was this herculean beast of a cast-iron coat. It pulled wagons like a black ox, the pelt of which was lit with torches on the platform and the hands of those who had gathered. The army walked in a line in a cattle wagon, not dissimilar to the one Burakh had taken to come home, like a red hurried herd. Burakh didn't see the General. (Burakh didn't want to see the General.)

By the single passenger wagon, Burakh recognized a few faces; Andrey and Peter — the latter didn't look particularly worse than Burakh was used to; his grief had been shockingly brief, then —, miss Yan, Lyuricheva, Aysa, two of the Brides that had carried Dankovsky to the Stillwater.

Burakh was even surprised to see them here.

He waited for them to disperse. As they left, Peter throw him an outraged, choleric, biting glare. (He was still grieving, then.)

Burakh walked to the platform, and greeted Dankovsky with a tilt of the head. He saw how a smirk teased the curve of his lips at seeing him pretend they hadn't just met.

“This is it, is it not?”

“It's something. Just a beginning.”

Burakh saw him pull one of his gloves off; he pulled it off and tucked it under his arm before offering his hand to shake. Burakh (Artemy) looked at Dankovsky's (Daniil's) hand, at his lean, straight fingers that tapered at the end, at the writer's bump that gave interest to a knuckle; they swayed lightly as he waited. Burakh (Artemy) took it, and Daniil covered the new hold with his other, gloved hand, empathic, thankful, beholden.

“We’ll meet again,” Dankovsky said.

Hand still in his, Burakh replied: “In better circumstances, I hope.”

And Dankovsky smiled. “Don’t just hope. We will.”

With that, he tapped the pocket at his thigh and, instinctively, Burakh’s hand flew to his. He heard the crinkle of paper.

It struck nine. Jupiter was kissing the horizon line, and Ophiuchus, clinging to the Milky Way, was lighting the path out of the town.

Burakh watched the train leave until it made it to what looked (and felt) like the edge of the earth; he stood there for hours.

Eventually, he fished the paper out of his pocket, and uncrumpled it.

In a so-proper handwriting Burakh was almost jealous of, Dankovsky had plainly written his address.

That night, Burakh wouldn’t dream. At all. Everything would be black, tranquil, still. Stiff, stuffy, nervous. Suspended. He’d wake up tense and have to shake it off.

The night after that, Burakh wouldn’t dream.

The night after that, Burakh wouldn’t dream.

The night after that, Burakh would. It would be a weird, raw dream, the kind that left him on edge, out of place.

Then Dankovsky, in that dream, would kiss the hollow of his jaw, and say: “*meet me. Do you need me to formally invite you?*” and Burakh wouldn’t be able to reply.

A few days later, he’d receive a letter that would do just that.

He’d go to the Capital in the middle of winter.

At Daniil's apartment, they would speak. Then, he would get to eat, to swallow the words right out of his mouth, to cradle the apse of the back of his head.

They didn't dance — not really. They stood in the room, and Dankovsky had his head against Burakh's neck, and Burakh had his cheek pressed into Dankovsky's hair. And Dankovsky had a hand on the small of Burakh's back, and Burakh had a hand in the hollow between Dankovsky's shoulder blades, and the hands that were left were linked with entwined fingers, oh, almost lazily, like they were not scared to lose each other anymore.

And slowly, slowly, they rocked from one foot to the other in synchronicity, moving their weights back and forth on the creaking floorboards; chest to chest, hip to hip, Burakh's bad knee against Dankovsky's thigh. They wouldn't dance — they would sway like two blades of tall grass, they would breathe; and a record of Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana*, arranged for cello, would spin on its *Intermezzo*. (And the world would spin on.)

Later, they would have sex, and Burakh would see the stigma on Daniil's flank, pale and faded where he stitched him up; and Dankovsky would trace the scarred pink skin on Artemy's shoulders, arms and back, where he knows he stitched him up too. They would have to be careful, navigating these young pains that flared up to a touch or a too-prompt twist, but they would manage. Yes, they would manage.

They would lie side by side on Daniil's too-small-for-two bed, pushed together flush from shoulder to hip, like the threads of them had been wreathed together—like they had wreathed them together.

There would be then an uneventful night — except for when Burakh would almost roll out of the bed — in which Burakh would dream about sex for once (or again, depending on how you see it).

ARTEMY

I feel anchored.

THE SERPENT

You are supposed to feel anchored.

ARTEMY

I feel safe.

THE SERPENT

You are supposed to feel safe.

And from their high place they look on — down, at Artemy who sleeps, head buried in Daniil's shoulder, arms around him, hair combed through mindlessly, at last, a still, a silent tenderness. ARTEMY watches himself sleep soundly — loudly, too, as they both snore — runs a thoughtless hand where he sees Daniil's hand lingering.

THE SERPENT

This is not a war anymore. This is not a war. It's not supposed to feel like one.

In the time ARTEMY keeps looking away, THE SERPENT hazily, slowly or maybe all at once, becomes DANIIL—JUST HIM. ARTEMY turns to him again and is surprised; DANIIL—JUST HIM is nude at least from the waist up.

ARTEMY

Oh... Hello.

DANIIL—JUST HIM

(after a soft laugh) Don't be surprised. You'd find me eventually.

(He would.)

DANIIL—JUST HIM embraces ARTEMY, wraps himself around his shoulders and neck, very reminiscent of THE SERPENT; warmer, livelier; his flesh is warm under ARTEMY/Artemy's fingers and palms, his skin just rough in the way of the skin of man. ARTEMY/Artemy returns the embrace, pulls him against his flank, then chest, and holds him here.

Again, it happens again: Burakh dreams that he is grass. Dankovsky is here too, as he expected; naked, now, curled sleeping on himself. His hands are tucked under his weight, palms to the ground — caressing Burakh of their touch. His face is against the warming soil from browbone to chin, his subtly-stubby cheek scraping the dirt. The hair on his nape brushes against the grass; the grass — alive — brushes against the hair on his nape.

(Burakh would wake up nauseous, tight-throated, tighter-lipped, folded in half under the weight of guilt – cold, slick, tacky guilt. It would haunt him for having felt goodness; for having felt good. Dankovsky’s fingers would brush through the hair of his chest and at the back of his neck, through its feather-grass feeling as it softens along the tenseness of his semispinalis capitis.)

“What is to come, then?”

“Rebuilding. Sweep the house clean. Make a list of names for the graves. The Termitary has a union, now.”

“It’s quite a shame they waited for such a catastrophe before this change.”

“Indeed. The Enterprise has way fewer workers now. The town was way less *everything*. It will... stagnate, for a while. Stagnate, then grow...”

“How do you think it will?”

“Hopefully like a honeyberry shrub and not like a tumor.”

Dankovsky nodded then.

“Have you ever had honeyberries?”

“Not that I remember.”

“Well then, I’ll put it on the list.”

“With bringing me to the sea.”

“With bringing you to the sea.”

Before the train home, Burakh would take a morning shower in Dankovsky’s bathroom, in a full bathtub, this time, and Daniil would peek through the open door like he wanted to be invited in. (He would be invited in.)

He found Lara south of the Warehouses. She was wielding something and, for a while, Burakh couldn’t quite make out what. He spotted Grief by her side, gesturing at something in the distance, and he realized she was handling a gun. Grief pointed three spots, and three gunshots tore through the silence one after the other; Burakh recoiled at the strike of sound.

“This won’t... fix anything,” he told Lara as they sat by the train station.

“I know this.” She pulled a thermos out of a leather pouch she had at the waist and took a swing; Burakh stared at her in shock before she told him it was tea. “I know it won’t, but it’s a good stress-reliever.”

“You could call it that...” Burakh mumbled.

Herb Brides, in the distance, danced still. They had shed the violence of their prancing. They treaded with a heavy foot. Their arms swayed slowly against the weight of sorrow. They weren’t throwing themselves to the ground, slapping their chests with clay-red hands anymore. Burakh listened to them, and their heartbroken songs.

There’ll be people / below you / singing...

“I don’t see you around too much,” Lara eventually said.

“Turns out my father was a busy man,” Burakh chuckled, “and many people expect me to busy myself with all of his affairs.”

“Don’t you do it?”

“I’m finding a balance.” (He paused.) “I’m trying to find a balance.” He kicked the dirt thoughtlessly. “I’m trying to be my own man and not just my father’s son.”

“Heavy burden to carry.”

“You had warned me, Gravel.”

“I had. But you’re wickedly stubborn.”

“It takes at least that to power through a story this long.” Lara raised an eyebrow at him. “I don’t know why I said that. Forget it.”

They watched the wind scrape the last of the kiss of the blue frost.

“Spring is coming,” Lara said plainly.

“Yes.”

“What is ahead?”

“Calving season,” Burakh replied, and Lara barked out a laugh. “When the weather becomes more clement, we’ll need to rebuild. Lyuricheva has plans for the reconstitution of some of the... she calls them road-webs. She wants to find a way to make the town more... resilient.” (He grimaced. He had heard it before. ... And now he would hear it again, and he would have to live with it, or without it.) “Vlad has mentioned starting works to improve the sewage and water systems.”

“... He wants to dig?”

“Likely.”

“Will you let him?”

(Burakh didn't speak. Then,) “Yes.”

The earth was dead. They could dig to the core of it.

(That was not what he truly thought.

He believed, he hoped, he would pray if he was a pious man, that the earth could grow around the pipes. Yes; heal around them like bulging tree trunks swallow road signs, like bone eats shrapnel shreds, embracing them back. Like he, and the rest of them, would heal around these twelve days. Like he, and the rest of them, would *have to* heal around these days, and choices that were made.)

He continued, so as to not let the weight of silence press itself against his throat: “It will take years. It could take decades, maybe centuries, but the town will be... repopulated.” He honored the emptiness for a few consecutive seconds. He didn't speak so the ghosts could.

Lara sipped her hot tea loudly, and that snapped him out of it. “From what I've gathered, you're participating in every effort but that last one.”

“That's right,” Burakh nervously chuckled through tight teeth.

“Thank God,” Lara said. “I have enough being an aunt to the two you already have. How old is Sticky going to be, fourteen? Wicked age. All three of you were terrible then.”

“Come on, it wasn't that bad.”

“... He'll have to live carrying something you didn't carry then, too.” Burakh nodded. “You'll have to too, now. You can't just shed it like sloughed skin.”

At her words, Burakh brought his palm to the pad of his shoulder, down his upper arm where the *sting* lingered like a restless ghost. (It was placid, today; it clung to him just to make sure he didn't forget. Burakh didn't forget. Sometimes it hurt way worse.)

“No,” he replied simply.

“It's *in* your skin now. It's stitched in.”

Quite an apt way to put it.

“... I never told you about it, did I?” Burakh turned to her. “Not even... drunk or feverish?”

“Never. But you're not particularly opaque about those things. (She blew on her drink.) I've seen whose letters have you giddy for the rest of the day.”

Burakh pinched his lips very hard until he looked like a bit of an idiot.

“I am not mad that you didn't tell me. I wasn't mad at you-know-who when I realized he hadn't told me either.”

Burakh blinked twice and turned to her dumbfounded. “Do I? Do I know who?”

“You don’t?”

“Gravel?”

She stared at him with wide dry eyes. He expected her to speak, and she didn’t. She made the gesture of zipping her mouth up and she drank some more.

They were then at the Architect’s, because bits of the scaffolding had to be taken down after having sustained frost damage, and no one trusted the drunk tenant enough to let him climb. That, and because Peter was making Burakh pay for the whole “*destruction of most accomplished and dearest creation*” thing with dusting and window-cleaning and dish-washing services.

Burakh didn’t realize *how often* they must have been at the Architect’s, because one day a courier knocked downstairs with a letter for him.

A red envelope.

“Connotated,” sibilated the younger twin, who apparently knew a lot about letters.

Burakh opened the envelope.

(His immediate correction: the younger twin who apparently knew a lot about long, bold, shameless and shamelessly erotic letters. Burakh almost dropped the missive on the spot, which would have made the situation patently worse.)

They were then skirting the fields around Shekhen. Dankovsky was visiting, and Burakh had insisted on showing him the newborn calves.

By the tents, two Herb Brides, whose mothers were mending their clothes, sat against bullhide cushions. They stared at Burakh, then Dankovsky. Dankovsky, then Burakh. Burakh gestured at them to zip it and they turned their noses up at him, like he couldn’t tell them anything. He spotted horses, in the distance, and for a second his heart skipped its beats. His eyes skipped from beast to beast. They were short, rotund, with stocky necks. Many were a sandy wheat, others were a rusty clay.

Later, at night, alone, after Burakh had convinced Lara to look over her nephew and niece until the morning, he squeezed Dankovsky against his chest will all his might. Dankovsky huffed out a laugh when he had to climb on tiptoes, and reciprocated.

He felt there a heart to a heart. Daniil’s arms embraced him back.

There was a soft prancing, outside, the light tapping of feet treading the earth, and someone was singing.
