

# Apollo Sauroktonos Emerging from Still Waters

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## Rating:

*Mature*

## Warnings:

*Graphic Depictions of Violence*

## Category:

*Gen, M/M*

## Fandom:

*Мор. Утопия | Pathologic*

## Relationships:

*Farkhad & Peter Stamatina, Farkhad & Andrey Stamatina*

## Characters:

*Farkhad, Peter Stamatina, Andrey Stamatina*

## Additional Tags:

*the didactics of being colleagues; messier edition*

*Peter and Farkhad's Weird Gay Thing*

*Andrey and Farkhad's Weird Gay Thing*

*Pre-Canon*

*Canon-convergence*

*Artistic Differences*

*Murder*

*Canonical Character Death*

*Recreational Drug Use*

*Stillwater Character Study*

*Weird House Character Study*

*Weird House*

*Weird Building*

*Gay Male Building*

*yeah you'll just have to trust me on these ones*

*hints of french. don't be scared.*

*while rhythm and rhymes will be lost in translation I think it can still be enjoyed.*

## Summary

*His voice was chthonian and soft to the touch, rounded like the back of a beast as it rolled over his tongue.*

*Oh, the house was for him. (Or he was for the house.) Maybe it had been the plan since the beginning, or maybe this was a lucky, opportune coincidence; what other people could have called a blessing.*

*Once they would be gone — dawned upon Petr — he would never come back again, but this place, as him, as his, would stand. The Cathedral, as him, as his, would still stand. The house was not filled with music, but with voice. Felt like it regardless.*

*They needed to convince the Kains. They had no other choice.*

What choice was there even to have? We will never know. This is a story about the Oneirotect, about the house that lies still and restless, and about men who do quite the same.

## Notes

*the tenses shifts are intentional i'm playin' with dolls here. i'm also using the orthographies "Petr" and "Andrei" from Pathologic's first english translation because i like them a lot. (and it fits the theme...)*

*the general progression as well a few scenes follow my [other oneirotect fic](#) because, well, we follow this one man, it is the story of this one man again. Even if some parts overlap, they are different stories, especially on a stylistic point. But give that one a read too, if you'd like... Both dear to me.*

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House of Atreus! House swollen with blood and soot, with divine rage and spit(e), marred by the eating of man and the killing that followed, marked by the tumultuous waters of the Aegean sea, the white-pearled foams of salivation. Vessel for stories beyond your walls, you are porous with hatred, permeable with a curse that shall steep over the unattended hearth. House of Atreus, you are a wooden box, your inhabitants termites biting their way through you, out of you. You are what will still stand once the curse has claimed all, for it cannot claim you: without hands, you cannot kill. House home of malediction of great divine malady this is not a story like your own — indeed, there will be no descendants to carry the sin of the striking blow. Without forsaken sons like animals bent under the weight of it, the killers will never be let to rest.

House of waters that stay very still, under their tense, thin surface like taut skin, the illness of evil sleeps.

The foundations of the town are bone. They've always been — that's what bone is. Bone is the buttresses, bone's the rafters. Bone is hollow — bone is pink with muscle and blood, stuffed with marrow. The marrow of the town was red as clay — malleable as it is, warmed by diligent, working hands. The town is misshapen. The town is mis-happened. Those are the foundations upon which were called the three men, varying in wisdom, the clay-workers, the sculptors, the kilns. Kin(s) in their trade, who the Kains hoped would never see eye to eye — this was the interesting part.

It was raining when Petr and Andrei first presented at the Crucible — a rain thin like needles, but which did not feel to pierce the skin. They had been shown their quarters: a long-windowed, square brick house in what their hosts called the Skinners. Andrei smirked without malice at the name; *skinners*, say, two of them? He could only speak for himself. (Out of purely personal preference, he targeted more the innards than the epidermis. Flailing seemed so much more trouble than shivving. A disfiguration this meticulous and prolonged felt perverse in ways even him found distasteful. Where was the heat, the immediacy, the branding burn of the crime, where was the passion? ... Focus, fool. He was stepping aside of the story, wandering in old ones that collected dust in his memories.) Seeing how his brother paced the attic up and down, Andrei had decided he'd leave the house to him and find someplace else to bury himself and sleep. They had been offered to stay in any of the buildings of the Crucible, were they to need it: the houses, as they stood, were full of hollows in man's shape — by design. The brothers had refused, still; Andrei would have been lying if he had said he didn't catch on their hosts a certain bourgeois air that, while still closer to a thin film of sweat on the flesh-meat of the family, translucent over whatever laid beneath, still made him unenthusiastic at the prospect of sharing a home with them. He liked cutting holes in walls and curtains too much to be a decent housemate, after all. Liked peeling the sidings and crumbling the blood-red bricks with bare fingers like moths slowly unravel precious cloth. That, and he had a penchant for interior design. (Not good, mind you, but one would have to make peace with it being a matter of taste.)

Petr stepped under the awning over the porch with a quick jump as the rain grew stronger, hissing out a curse as the water weaved through the long ponytail that slithered over his shoulder and dampened his collar and chest.

“Say, how long have we ought to wait still?” he eventually called Andrei to his side.

“Enter whenever you feel like. I'll follow.”

“I was waiting on you.”

“And I on you.”

“Are you sure the designs are not wet?”

“Certain.”

“Fine, then...”

With that, Petr pushed the door open. Andrei entered first, as if clearing out the hallway of dangerous air, or noxious stares and atmosphere. Seemingly reassured, he stepped to the side and let Petr walk past him. He closed the door behind them both.

Inside was the other guest. In the low light, by a fireplace of white marble decorated of ochre medallions and sculpted cornucopias, he looked built of smooth bronze, his hair patinated with sulfur-black: slicked back, 'twas wet with the rain. The strong pier of his nose appeared to cut its shadow against the pearlescent walls behind, fitting itself in the stone like a nail. The man squeezed water out of stray waves over his nape and his wrist seemed polished by touch to a shining gold. His coat was a dark, florid, winy red, having obviously been drenched. He made no gesture to remove it, as if unbothered by the bitter cold of the downpour. Before him, and before Andrei caught up, Petr had stalled and stilled. He hadn't made a sound, as if this is what would have betrayed their arrival to the man's ears. He was half-a-face and the black curtain of his hair taller than the twins and, eyes pinned to a door further in, seemed to not have noticed them.

“So it is you!” Andrei hailed him, and he barely flinched.

“Me it is,” he replied simply turning to them, unshaken again, but neither blank nor hostile. Indeed, he even smiled, pulling shapely lips from a small mouth to a wide reveal all of his teeth, square and ivory; an incisor, on the top row, was chipped in its corner. A clean break, not unlike porcelain, or ceramic. “I didn't expect there to be two of you,” he added. “Or, perhaps *just* two of you.”

“Such contradictory stories already,” Andrei mused. “How come?”

“I would say less contradictory than *considered*. From our patrons' words, I'd have imagined you to be either a single man so prolific your hands would be marred with your work, barely recognizable as appendages, or a group of many, at the very least three. Four, more likely.”

“What about the hands then?” Andrei inquired in a hum, amusement bubbling under his tongue.

“Oh, a few scratches here and there,” replied the man in a same tone.

Then, he laughed. A short, sparkly bark, musical like a single ember crackling. Andrei imitated him, voice like a slamming door. Well, then, he thought, there wouldn't be much to fear of him. He

was alone, and they were three—or four! He seemed to have the conversing easy, and hopefully the spine as supple. Andrei hated cowards, but he hated undue competition even more. The man then leaned over to Petr, peering at his hands that clasped his suitcase on the front. He walked over to Andrei in a step like a breeze and his eyes thinned to slits.

“ ... What about the hands *now*?” Andrei asked.

“I can see which one of you draws and which one of you builds,” the man stated as he straightened.

“That is not hard to see.”

“I never said it was. I’m an artist, not a diviner.”

“We’ll get along better this way, colleague.”

The man smiled — with his mouth closed, this time. Andrei watched as Petr took a few steps until he was at his side. He hadn’t spoken since they had entered the house, and this seemed to embolden him. (The man was alone and they were two, after all.)

“Have you been here long?” Petr asked.

“No,” the man replied, “I just got here.”

“You walked?”

“Not the whole way.”

Petr peered down at his shoes; both a leather shiny and unmarred, spared any speckle of mud or dust. Lying, then, was he? Or had he truly walked onto the white page of the Kains’ desired future with the pristine black ink of his steps? A liar, an apparition, or a shape-shifter, the last two being more or less the same as the other — those were the three things the twins were now sure he could be.

At last, their patrons came forth. Three men mirroring the guests bled out of the room tucked past the fireplace, spreading forth like tributaries. A greengold candlelight heaved and waned after them, and it streaked the older men’s silver hair like capillaries.

The younger one, whose hair was still dark, apologized for having made their guests wait, and shook their hand one after the other. His older brothers stayed further back, as if waiting for confirmation through experience that the touch of the artists would not set them ablaze or poison them through the thin membrane of the skin. Not cowardly — prudent. This, Andrei could respect. At last, Andrei and Petr could put a face to the names they had read written in their

invitations. Buttresses or partition-walls, they tactically placed themselves between the twins and the third man, mediating the meeting with a presence that felt to swell, lunglike or rather spleen, scraping the ceiling with an almost aristocratic essence.

The still-unnamed guest towered over Viktor, the smallest of the Kain men, even though his spine was slightly bent in something like reverence, in wait, or maybe something sillier, like one crouches down to a child's level to look them in the eye. At the Kain's offer, he began peeling his coat off his shoulders and arms and giving it away. He wore underneath a long jacket of variegated blues, embroidered of reds, pinks, oranges, muted sunflower-yellows over a white shirt, the wide sleeves of which yawned around his strong wrists. He had been holding against his flank a cardboard folder, cover rounded like an animal's belly with the papers kept within; once without his coat, he held it in front with his two hands. At last, the twins could get a look at them. The right was bare, clean-clipped with short crescent nails, middle finger and side of the palm bearing stigmata — the calluses of the artist; the left was long of almond-shaped nails, decorated of rings of various widths that emphasized the roundness of his joints and of his knuckles. The hand that draws and the one that builds...

The older Kains had come closer. They stood by him, white of face and hair like candles of ivory wax, flame of thoughts, inside, burning.

Eventually, it was Simon who opened the procession to his brother's workshop above; they all followed. Scaling up the stairs, Viktor mentioned his daughter would not attend the meeting, and Petr and Andrei shared an interrogative look, as they hadn't even seen proof of this girl's life. Georgiy closed the march, and the door after himself.

While it was agitation, movement, and restless springing that coursed through Andrei and Petr's works, the Dancing Bridge, that they presented flat on its back and pried open in its gritty charcoal designs, being one of their most pertinent examples, the third man's creations were imbued of stillness. Immobility, aplomb, maybe anchoring. A stasis wide more than it was tall, but tall nonetheless — not unlike the man himself who, hands clasped before him, did not move. His sloped shoulders were squared by the thick fabric of his coat — a red doorway guarded by the tawny mascaroon of his face just above, by the seemingly-serene frieze of his dark brow. Him and his designs proper, sleek, foundations-borne, disgustingly formal — unmoving, a taunt, both of them, all of the tens of them (of himself) he presented on the table like die. Andrei felt his eye begin to twitch. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Petr start pushing a same lock of hair behind

his ear, over and over again. The restlessness of their creations crept upon him. Facing them was—or rather, they were facing—no stasis — it was dormancy.

Say, now, how old was the man? How long had he lay in wait until he had been unearthed by their patrons to taunt the twins so thoroughly? In the flesh, he looked to be five, maybe ten years older than them at most — except when he didn't, and the light tricked the eye to see his hair streaked of grey strands; as Petr reclined in his chair, it instead looked to be pitch black. The smiles that waked and waned over his small mouth tugged at wrinkles near the corner of his mouth, of his nose, of his eyes: he could have been fifty then — suddenly, he was solemn, and looked barely older than an ephebe, defending himself with his words and praying with his hands instead of the opposite. Beyond the skin, his features looked to have been carved, to have been brushed over reddish stone of crushed charcoal; a face older than ink itself.

One could hear the words roll out of each man's mouth like ivory die. There was a soft crackling in the air, like electricity, like distant lightning, like cards being flicked with fingernails. It was not that the twins had never known constraints: art school, after all, had them face their professors, had them defend their works like well-behaved dogs, but the freedom Andrei had awarded himself faltered in the face of this effort.

Click, tick, flick; roll, call, dice; knave, ace. Duel, waltz, face to face. *En joue; feu. On joue (avec le feu).* There was in the man's eye a disarming charm at how earnestly he seemed to fight his cause; Andrei could only respect it, even if himself was not below cheating, even in the face of bleeding-heart honesty.

In the end, the man won — not by much. By so little in fact that, had they shot each other for real, the bullet would have only so narrowly missed his heart, and gone through his lung instead.

The three architects left the workshop, leaving their hosts inside, going over the offered designs once more. Andrei walked in front, taking the steps slowly, as if it could keep the man who followed from overtaking him (them) once more. Petr followed him closely. Andrei could see his head peeking over the man's shoulder, his icy eyes darting to their colleague's oblivious face.

"I would say it is almost a shame they've chosen me, colleagues," the man began before they reached the floor below, "your projects had a fascinating intangibility I would have been most interested in seeing realized. It must take something special to complete such works... Let's say, I would have been thrilled to see with my own eyes why our patrons brought you here in the first place."

Andrei would have respected sneer, mockery, outright hatred, threats, veiled or otherwise. Petr would have respected a spit to the face, open morbidity. The man's honesty was confounding. His frank smile struck the brothers across the face like a silver blade — maybe it did the Kains as well, and this is how, this is why he was chosen. (Andrei would have been lying if he said this candor itself didn't feel like a threat — but he kept his mouth shut, for his silence protected both his brother and himself.)

“You flatter us,” he said.

“Never on the first day,” the man responded.

“You can tell them to reconsider, you know.”

“I shan't. I am glad they have chosen.”

“You love our designs, but not enough to make way for them, is it.”

“I do not love them more than I love my own, or myself. That is a good thing.” He pinned his black eyes to the back of Andrei's head and, feeling the gaze like a swift and painful pull on the reins, Andrei spun on his heels. “May it entice you to betterness until your works' greatness is so unobjectionable that they have no choice than to pick yours. Than to pick you.”

“Is this about designs, or about men?”

“There was never a time where one went without the other, I'm afraid.”

“Don't be. You have nothing to fear.”

A cloud of genuine ache and sorrow caught itself on the man's sharp features like it would have on mountain-peaks. His small mouth twisted with a tender woundedness that looked almost adolescent on his perennial features.

“Wouldst thou lie to me thusly? On the first day?”

And as such came the end of it; the end of the first day.

They walked together, still, until they made their way out of the building. Above, the moon was round as a diligent eye upon the town that shivered in the night mist, scintillating a brilliant copper from the fires of Mars.

“Where are you staying?”

“Until the building is constructed, I am living next to the workshop above.”

“Where you are going, this late at night, then?” Petr asked.



“Prospecting the plot where the house shall be built, of course.”

Of course.

He bowed slightly, and his head didn't even drop to the twins' eyes' level.

“We will see each other soon. Good evening, colleagues.”

“Good night. Don't let the sky befall your head.”

“If it does, may it strike you just as it'd do me.”

And then, he smiled. His chipped tooth caught a flicker of Mars' red, ricocheted against the flat face of the moon. He walked away, not far enough to disappear completely. He stood where his building was to be erected, and he began pacing, clockwise first.

There was a pond on this plot. The twins vaguely recalled the project's name. The sky had dropped its coin in its calm waters and the shiver over its surface multiplied this lunar gold. Steppe dancers had taken a liking to the waterhole, and only one flitted away like a bewildered doe when the man approached.

The water, indeed, was still. How fitting! It was like the plot was made for the work; the work, for the plot. A first taunt *in-situ*.

Everything is in a name; everything and nothing, if the name(d) lies. This is then that they realized they still didn't know the man's name. They did not remember the Kain speaking it, or maybe they did, for maybe they had. It was not forgetfulness or shame that kept the twins from asking, or asking to be told again: it was that the very desire to know flitted out of them, out of some carved hollow near their chest, and out of their grasps. It went out to die, impaled by the gaze the man directed at them both at once, four eyes just for this, or maybe his two were enough. It went out to die for the sake of a good story. Maybe, not even good. Maybe a deeply evil one.

What does this story tell? About who should this story be? This story is written long after the fact, after the curse has bled out thoroughly. The dust, the dirt, the blanketing dulling ash have settled. For the sake of tale, — come and walk here, into the light — this is Farkhad. For the sake of tale, — stand by him, do not still — this is Petr, and this is Andrei. (Do not look at their faces too close, reader, flute-player — or, indeed, do. Wickedness, like the Devil it is the divine ichor of, its closest friend, is in the details. In Envy's green eyes, that are blue in the end.)

.h.

It was not that the Kains... *disliked* the house per se. As they paced it, as they slithered past door after door, through the whisper of hinges and passageways, Viktor sought his brothers' eyes, and they did not answer his heeding call. Simon's knobby quills for fingers brushed across the beige linen of canvas tapestries, as if trying to unravel of his nails the silk-thread embroidery. The house seemed to resist, the skin-colored fibrils bound to the fabric like scar tissue over flesh. Still, the two brothers bent to pass an architrave, walking a threshold where stood the Architect.

The Kains were reverent as they left, but they left nonetheless. Viktor shut the door behind him as he closed the march after his brothers and daughter, not looking back to see if anyone was still inside. (Nobody was still inside.)

By the door, Andrei and Petr watched keenly as their patrons left the new creation with heavy, solemn steps. Petr pried the eldest's face for a thought he could grasp, a flitting bird of inspiration he could catch leaving it and trap. Nothing permeated the white stone of Simon's face nor the steel of his gaze, sharpened and drawn in blades, but pointed at no one. Petr's eyes darted to Andrei, who had been doing quite the same: he was usually more successful in finding the smoothed pebbles of truth in the pits of people's entrails — but in circumstances where he was forced to keep his hands clean, this dirty work was harder. Petr would almost pity him, seeing the resignation on his face. Poor him! A man forbidden his shovels, his pickaxes, his bare bloodied hands to dig a big hole in people's hearts where he would find desire pulsating. When Andrei turned to him, Petr saw he missed it, with an almost soft, disappointed melancholy. The Kains were made of a stone too tough to split with the chisel of a pick.

They watched as their colleague exited the Crucible, where he had been waiting for the Kains' return, and strode to the new house. As the man hailed them inside with a wave of the hand, Andrei leaned over Petr's shoulder, speaking softly above the ribbon that tied his long hair.

"Let's get inside and see what there is to be seen," he said.

Petr saw on his pinched mouth a mischievous, poisonous satisfaction.

(Andrei liked it when people didn't like what he didn't like either, even if he preferred it when he didn't like what other people did. He liked being right, but he liked being entertained more.) After the Kains, in the marks of their tidal retreat once they had left, the building had fallen silent. Not even the whisper of their minds still hung in the air, as if the building had brushed, washed, shed itself clean of their persistent lingering.

The soul is the vessel, the vessel is the soul, the vessel is the message, the house the messenger. Soul seeks same, but soul cannot be bared — cannot bear — to be seen as itself without having

found same first. Soul is less mirror itself than it is the reflected shiver of light that weaves-waves from seeing eye to seeing eye.

Maybe the house was too crimson-scarlet-redcurrant where the Kains were cobalt-lilac-cerulean. Maybe it was too copper, gold and green glass where the Kains were silver, titanium and brass. The twins understood why the house had not quite pleased their patrons — its presence was thick and felt around them like a beast's pelt. The house stood tall and firm, and it took effort wading through. It was not without merit, without unabashed presence, without polymorphic interest, Petr thought, and he knew Andrei thought it too: he saw as his lip twitched, his chin wrinkled with a subdued, reined-in pricking of pique.

After the Architect, who did not quite lead, the new visitors paced — the floorboards creaked and whispered under their step, the soft patting of hushed feet. Their legs were so thin across the smooth broad back of the house-beast, needlelike; the pressure of their stride shifted, helped the blood circulate. Andrei particularly closed doors loud and harsh; the hinges winced, the walls shivered. Petr observed the curtains, the upholstery, the tapestries; he'd come closer, yes, very close, the woven damask could almost feel the brush of his lashes upon it. He appraised the cloth of his flat palm, ran delicate fingertips over the embroideries — like one would over veins, like one would through hair. The velvet was a soft scalp.

Here as such stood the house: the brothers looked keenly, for it felt important. (*Important* and *worthy* are two different concepts; and the place was not *worthy* enough for Andrei to congratulate its maker on his work. Still; oh, still. The house, as it was house and nothing more spectacular, nothing else, felt to breathe into him, and he searched for the source of the wind.) Patchworks hung over the walls, muffling the sounds of the outside, of the adjacent rooms, and in equal parts trapping, fanning and nurturing the warmths of the dispersed fireplaces. *How utilitarian*, Andrei thought to himself, and a pitying fondness almost made a cord of his heart flutter. Had the man woven those? Tapestries were used as blinds over the guts of the house, the bones and capillaries: pipes through which water and heat murmured, the nerves of electricity, the long neck of the fire stove downstairs that a soft, subterranean burn permeated. Above their heads, the cornices seemed to be twice-themselves-thick, their delicate dentils casting doubled shadows that shuddered in the low light — one a deep blue, the other red. As they passed the architraves, they felt to droop, to brush like fingers the tops of their heads. A narrow doorway guarded the entrance to a set of winding stairs; at its sides, two corbels jutted out of the wall like a beast's horns.

Before it, Andrei hesitated. Petr saw him, watched him hesitate. He took the first step between the tapered walls, and Andrei, instinctively, reached out for his wrist. They walked forth as such between walls so close they could not have climbed side by side, arms distended between them, like two scared children climbing to the attic. The stairs felt to resist them like a field of thistles.

Upstairs, the walls were lime-washed a flushed beige, the baseboards sculpted. The heavy burgundy curtains were thick as flesh — which is to say, not much, and could probably yield to blade, but they surely kept something out, or something in. Here, two mascarons were carved in the dark stone frieze that ran like a browline over the parted mouth of a fireplace, both painted a slick, oily onyx that dulled their features into hazy tricks of the light, and into which Petr thought he could see his own face reflected. There, a triangle of black velvet was stitched in a quilt of golds, tans and pinks, and swayed just above a copper conduit that ran down the wall. The two brothers had been walking slowly, steps mute and ready, and they both almost leaped back when the man's face appeared out of the corner of a wall.

“Oh, my,” he gasped. “Did I scare you?” He walked out of the shadow he had encased himself in, and the twins could see he closed a door after him. (He did not phase through the wall, at least — this was only a meager consolation.)

“We thought you were downstairs.”

“I was. So were you.”

“What's back there?”

“A bathroom,” he replied, a jolly note in his voice, as if he was truly proud of this interior.

“So it is truly a house,” Andrei mused. “Just a house.”

He had so profoundly disliked the man's formalism, his adherence to structure in almost mocking ways, that this angered and worried him. Perhaps mockery was the point — but *who* was he mocking?

Farkhad looked at them — the both of them, at once. His mouth was straight and small, but not pinched; pensive, sculpted and smooth like stone by water. Like he had, with a chisel or his own fingertips, shaped it into this enigmatic, taunting, mocking idol.

Eventually, he smiled. Wide and ivory, the ivory of bone and dice.

“Yes,” Farkhad said. “Just a house.”

.h.

In order to be as soul as soul can be, the vessel must be as body as body can be — for no way was found of cleaving the two in twain... yet. This is what they were brought here for. To harness like a silver horse the lightning strike that would hollow-out the body with a blaze and tear the spirit into thunderclouds.

Stasis is death. Andrei does not fancy himself the knowing man in many things, but of this he is sure. Body long, body lying, body dead and buried... perhaps it was thanatophobia that plagued the Kains. Maybe it all felt like a clock ticking.

So it was the man's Cathedral that was built second. Not a religious edifice; Petr thought he remembered something about the man being Zoroastrian, but maybe he had lied about that too. (Or maybe he had never said anything of the sort at all.)

.h.

It was Petr who decided they should go to the construction site. They would have done so anyways — eventually, they would meet with the Kains in the Crucible again, where they'd offer their designs for consideration once more. (Petr gritted his teeth just at the thought of it. He hadn't managed to convince them — barely they swayed like treetops in a soft wind. He was chiseling away at rock with his bare fingers.) But going to the site like this, on their own, with nothing else to do but to appraise its making, emboldened them not with pride or glee, but with an almost predatory weight to each of their step. Andrei trotted in front, electricity in his step: he seemed glad, at least — man had been mingling.

Whatever it was he did when he was not by Petr's side, Petr knew little of. All he could see was the portraits he sometimes asked to store in the attic — women, sometimes men, that Petr didn't know. His brother seemed to be having a better time in the town than he was, from the looks of his paintings. Andrei felt dormant, in wait, boiling inside. There were only so many ways in which he was known to focus this volcanic rumbling, and if he was to keep his knife inside of his pants, it was a habit that he'd pull something else out of them.

They could not stop the Cathedral from being built — they approached it like they did regardless.

The Cathedral crawled out of the torn skin of the dirt. Its foundations were superficial but heavy, stretching languidly over the variegation of reds and browns that pooled at its feet. The elegant spinescences of its buttresses gave it an outwardly defensive look, but its doors were tall and wide, open and welcoming like hungry maws. As its walls were still being built, as its pinnacles

still rested on the ground below, waiting to be hauled up to scratch the underbelly of the sky, the Architect was honing the careful details of its facades. He had welded the intricate solder joints of its windows and picked the pieces of glass for its frames; now, at its very foot, he was giving it the lives of statues.

He was grounded, in this way. Well, somewhat: one foot planted on the ground, he was perched atop his paint-stained stool, working at defining the hard, dry features of telamones that he was coaxing out of the black stone. In their current state, they, too, balanced on one foot each, their narrow hips swaying with a pronounced contrapposto.

“How fare your making, colleague?” Petr hailed him from lower on the building’s steps.

“Slowly but forwardly,” Farkhad answered, blowing dust off the atlant’s straight, regal nose, and it powdered the prominent bridge of his own like a soft snow; “like a war ship on a calm flat sea.”

“Where fare you, with that belligerence of yours?” Andrei spoke in turn. Farkhad smiled, as if Andrei had unearthed in his response something he hadn’t thought of, a double-entendre that made him blush when found. “Maybe to Troy,” he said.

“Who plays Helen, in this tragedy?”

“Tragedy, tragedy...” Farkhad tempered, but didn’t answer Andrei’s question. “Can’t it be just a rehearsal, for now?”

“Don’t ask me. Our patrons pay for the masks and chitons.”

“I like my coat just fine.”

“We like your coat too. What about the masks?”

Farkhad didn’t reply. He seemed entranced in his work, but not entranced enough to not have heard. He smiled, too: he had listened just fine. Bright, bared, bare teeth a naked ivory, the enamel of incisors, including the chipped one, slightly transparent at the bottom. You could almost see inside of his mouth.

. h .

With the unnerving house built, Farkhad spent there his nights; his days, however, still had him at the Crucible, sharing a floor with Georgiy, detailing at lengths wooden pieces for delicate models.

Andrei, after crawling up the stairs with the same sickly swiftness of the idea that crept up his spine, lingered in the hallway just shy of Farkhad’s quarters’ door, like a shadow slowly catching

up on evening light. He knocked, but entered before a response. The man inside immediately turned to him. While his eyebrows were raised, he didn't seem surprised; instead, he looked to be waiting for Andrei to talk. Against the cerulean blue of the stones and the greens of embroidered fabrics that kept him company, dulling Andrei's steps and breath in the wide room, the man's coat was red as the berries splattered of Pyramos' blood.

"You fantastic fool!" Andrei hailed him. "Let us gather tonight and drink to your successes. Have us — or rather, we'll have you. We ought to celebrate what has already been built, and what is yet to come."

"Consider me flattered to hear you think my creations are cause for celebration. I believe you do not like them very much."

His voice was flat but serene, almost kind. Andrei twitched as if he had been hit.

"*C'est de bonne guerre*, is it not? Do not take it personally. We don't share the same tastes — nothing that prevents us from drinking together. Haven't we been gathered to collaborate? Come, then, come later tonight at my brother's."

Whatever they had been gathered to do, *collaborate* it was not. Andrei was being smoothed-tongue, serpent-tongued, seductive, sibilant. Just out-of-himself enough that he could still recognize that silver mouth as his own. He wanted to see how thin he could grind the man's defenses — not to strike, just to see... just to find the karstic crack, fit for a blade... metaphorically. What was there that the man *lacked*, where could he and Petr find enough of a gap to slither, and come out of it victorious in their patrons' eyes? (Maybe it was more pertinent to ask what the man *had*. But Andrei would not look at that. For if he did...)

Andrei couldn't stop himself from wondering: was this war-waging planned from the beginning? Who the hell was standing on the ramparts of this clay-reddened Troy that was slowly sinking into the rusty earth without soulful buttresses to keep her propped up? Who was it that saw the three of them battle for honor? Who the hell was it, behind the windows of the Cathedral, that watched in silence?

The man accepted the invitation — he didn't seem to be lowering his arms, for none he had raised before. None that Andrei could see.

. h .

Just as the man appeared at the top of Petr's steps, the sun outside seemed to dip off the golden plate of the steppe. It had walked him there, and 'twas night now that would cloak their meeting

of its black-seeped clouds, chiseling away at the candlelights to hollow out shadows on the attic's walls.

"Thought you wouldn't come!"

"Thou invited me, didn't you?"

He did — and he indeed had thought he would come, at least this night. The man had come unarmed, from what Andrei could see; he only had his legs, hands and eyes, perhaps finer weapons than anything Andrei bore on himself.

"Sit," Petr told him, "you've been on your feet all day. You've been working a lot, haven't you?"

"I have. These buildings ought to be finished eventually. I have to work a lot — I am only one man where you are two!" At his own words, he laughed heartily.

When lightheartedness slipped off his face, he pushed his black curls back with an open hand. A sudden exhaustion seemed to wash over his features. His smile pinched and pulled. *You wouldn't have to work yourself so much if you weren't working at all* hanged on Andrei's lips like a bitter poison drop, but he licked it back into his mouth.

"Allow me to stay up for a while, will you? I just need to get my thoughts in order."

"Physical activity as a channel for mental activity, I take it?" Andrei asked.

"Oh, I wish 'twas this meaningful," Farkhad sighed. "My thoughts run past me like wild horses and all I can do is go after them."

"I understand," said Petr. His voice had lost his defensive edge; he'd dulled out in sympathy.

"Maybe we are alike after all," the man flashed a smile again. Andrei's hand closed in a fist. The man began, as he had said he would, pacing. His steps were long and slow; his ankles, tan between the smooth black of his shoes and the dark grey corduroy of his pants, seemed to catch in the rippling of their sinews every drop of light the scattered candles threw at them. Of a pocket at his heart, he pulled a cigarette case; of it, a translucent sheet of rolling paper and a pinch of tobacco. He stopped to assemble the two, leaning into an open flame for light on his endeavors. His tongue darted out and across the length of the paper — not bifid, to Andrei's somewhat-pleasant surprise; rounded like a hide-scraper, wet with rain, to Petr's.

"Let us paint you," he belted. "For prosperity's sake — after all, one day the Kains will not need us anymore, and we will part ways."



“Let you? The both of you?” Farkhad’s eyebrow was raised, a black wave across his amused face into which the onyx of his eyes twinkled impishly.

“Let *me*,” Petr clarified, opening his arms in something like surrender. “This is my place, after all.”

The man didn’t take the offer immediately — he paced some more.

“What do you believe we will part as?” he asked eventually.

His voice had been soft — not in the meaning of kind, nor gentle, nor yielding; in the meaning of a purple, expansive contusion that dips under the touch and blooms bluer under it. Andrei’s eyes darted to Petr’s face. He found his brother’s sidelong gaze, in it the hint of directionlessness in the green ring around his left pupil.

“Hopefully not as enemies,” Andrei replied. (What was worse — he might have meant it.)

“What a tragedy this would be.”

“You think so?”

“Powerfully.” (More pacing.)

“How come?”

“I do not travel with the intent to make enemies out of other men, you know,” the man said, his voice hushed — it made the flames shudder. “Indeed, quite often the contrary.”

The air in the attic felt to shiver—to simmer coldly—to bubble and to boil. To spill over, to part under the man’s steps as he walked. Sea of ruddy wood and red rugs. Andrei stared at how he moved his hands; Petr, his softening steps. The attic pried into three souls here and found them less mirror of each other than reflected pulses of light from eye to eye. Found them each-other (*adj.*) enough for Andrei to lay down his arms — literally; he let them hang low and heavy at his sides, and spoke with his face first, for once.

“So you do not wage wars, you merely stumble into them,” he rumbled into the silence.

“Are we at war?”

Farkhad stopped and stood; he stared. The brothers stared back, stared at their face(s) reflected as pins against the velvety black of the man’s eyes. Andrei watched himself being watched as his jaw clenched, and watched as Petr was too. In the sculptor’s hand, his cigarette was still unlit. His fingers around it were tense with restraint. *So you do*, Andrei felt the thought hammer under his tongue; *so you do...*

Farkhad picked tobacco off his lip, baring his teeth; baring the chip in one of them onto which spit clung and glistened. He pulled out of his case a matchstick.

“Sit,” Petr ordered, cutting through the silence, “sit at once. My paints are ready.”

“Just a second,” Farkhad replied. He had mellowed all at once like a shot bow.

He looked around, at the floors, the tables, his own shoes, seemingly discomfited. Eventually, the drawn lance of his finger found the placid face of an unfinished statue.

“May I...?” he asked, with a sort of bruise-tender helplessness hushing down his already low voice.

A false one, obviously; some sort of play. Some sort of *didascalie* (that maybe only the twins could hear, only the twins could see). (Does a *didascalie* still exist if it is not acted upon? Is it still a tragedy if the chorus walks off the stage and embraces their reflection in the audience?) A taunt, again? This sounded worse — this sounded genuine. Disarming again. *Dis-arming* — Petr felt his wrists tingle with aches, Andrei grew sore at the shoulders.

“Go on,” Petr incited.

The target of Farkhad’s silver nail-arrow was a portrait of one of the twins, or maybe both at once. The hair still undefined, trapped into the white smooth rock, it could have been any of the two. Petr struggled with self-portraits — if this was made of his hand, it might have been Andrei instead. Farkhad struck his match across the marble cheek. The gesture had been everything but violent. The flame excitedly erupted, burned tall, bright and straight. It lit the cigarette eagerly. It fell immediately after that, bending the burning spine. It grew soft but didn’t snuff out. Farkhad blew on it gently and, finally, it went out.

“You know damn well what you’re doing,” Andrei accused, an impish lightheartedness in his voice betraying the somberness of his words.

“Most of the time,” Farkhad replied in kind.

He stuck the cigarette between his lips, then pulled them over his teeth. The thin white rod was dented under his wide, tall, chipped incisor. Bent like a spine in bowing.

Now, he had sat. He had thrown the tail of his coat behind him so it draped over the chair and crossed his legs; the furthest one bent over the other.

His eyes began to wander. They did not go far, and Petr knew what had already before caught the man’s eyes — Andrei’s paintings. Felt he then just a twinge of pain, a plucking of a small thin

string over his lung that kicked his breath right out of it — Petr would have almost been hurt that Farkhad didn't seem to look at his own works.

It was as if Andrei had felt the gaze on himself: he began to fret. As his brother lay his ruddy underpainting, he walked to discarded crates — more of what he had brought up to the attic from the place he called his quarters, somewhere. From one he picked the stems of three glasses and a bottle a jewel-green. It was full of some kind of bitter samogon he was brewing in his spare time, always either too light or too heavy on the alcohol content for the few times Petr had tried it. Andrei placed all three glasses on a table, poured their guest's, poured his own; he had carefully selected the glass that was to join the other on the cart by his Petr's easel, making sure they were different enough before pouring the liquor, so he wouldn't drink paint water in its stead. As Andrei crossed the room to give Farkhad his glass, the man still had the onyx moons of his eyes set on his shivering white pond of a face. Andrei felt the grazing of his nails across the length of his fingers. One of them had done this on purpose.

The gaze tore off of him as he walked back, and balanced between the two brothers like a breeze on a tightrope.

“Do you fuck your models?” the man eventually asked. Eyes half-lidded, he was serene; curious honestly, asking earnestly.

The tightrope tensed. Stuffy attic and candlelights walked it unsteadily.

“No.” Petr had replied. Had the man even asked *him*? (In the story as it is written, you is polymorphic, multi-face(te)d. This is the curse of the tongue — no, not this one. You see?) He pointed of his brush his twin who stood to the side. “That's more of his thing.”

“Do you?” Farkhad turned to him.

“Most.”

Shameless and swift like a green stallion. For a second, it felt like they were fighting. The man laughed a pleasant, blurred laugh. His face seemed overcome with the white haze of tracing paper. His dark features smeared under it like charcoal pools. Petr darkened the hollows of his jaw and of his throat on the canvas, and began shaping his exposed neck.

“With all due respect to my brother, the people who seek my company are not good company for him,” Andrei continued.

“Don't you share?”

“Oh, most things, we do. Not all, as it were. Our mother said we even shared a placenta. Life — or rather death — willing, we shall share a shroud as well.”

“Who shall bury each of you if you're not here to bury the other?”

His gaze lingered just longer than that of a man harmless. He dragged the thin edge of his obsidian stare up Andrei's profile like a sculptor would a chisel, appraising the untouched marble for the soul within. The atmosphere was malleable as glass, as stone in man's hands, as men in man's hands.

Andrei fell silent. It is not that Farkhad had asked a question he had never thought about and now needed to — it is that he knew the answer. In the face of his silence, Farkhad shrugged and answered himself:

“Sky burial it'll be, then. The carrion birds will pick you clean.”

“I don't wish for us to die young, but we'd make tastier meat then.”

Andrei walked between his brother and the man; between the man and his brother as neither moved. The three glasses clinked, chiming softly.

“Well, then. To your endeavors before death,” Farkhad raised his cup.

“We like that you clarified ‘before’.”

“Do you plan on doing anything after?” The lightness in his voice didn't betray the shadow of a threat. Andrei heard it still. (Andrei thought he heard it still.)

“Do you?”

Farkhad laughed.

“Isn't it why we were gathered here at the dawn of it all? To project the Kains' souls into the afterlife? If they didn't want of my Cathedral or my Stillwater, I wouldn't have minded having them for myself. (*He took a sip and licked a stray drop off his lip.*) Aren't there a few things you'd like for yourself in quite this regard?”

He had a drawl across his tongue, voice an electrifying trawl. (Whatever this was, whatever that cleaving that sharp slanted edge like a cliff that had been, they had heard it.) Petr felt himself fret in its net, but Andrei did not appear to move. And yet again, Farkhad's placid face was still — still as the waters of a pond into which a man would have been able to see his own.

No answer.

On the other side of the town, a lump grows in the stove's pipe. Thick, slightly sharp. The size of a fingernail, then a fist, then a head. Adam's apple. It bobs up and down once, swiftly — the house swallows thickly.

Ticketh somewhere a clock; timebomb; silver-footed spider that Petr felt crawl up his naked back, against which its steps echoed like against stone. The Cathedral would be finished so soon; something needed to be done. This building could not be stopped being made, but the next one had to be his, had to be theirs, something had to be done. They had to do something. To their endeavors — before death, before something even worse.

.h.

They had not been invited to the house — they went anyway. (What was this habit? Did they wage, or did they stumble into...?) Walking the town, they felt to have to push through the mist of pollens and smells with their shoulders. Their hosts had warned them about the pungency of the steppe flowers, which bloomed thin and fast in the spring and hard and long in the fall, but they were still taken aback. The scent resembled cloves, mint, thyme, lemongrass, rust, pepper, wet iron. It smelled alive in a meaty, perfumed way, which Petr didn't like very much.

As they climbed the stairs, their usual propinquity felt to have pushed the walls apart: this time, they could walk up shoulder to shoulder. Petr's eyes darted to the side of his pale face, looking for meaning, for (—at) marks on the walls. Maybe they had just gotten used to the strange place; maybe, for corridors appear endless to children and stuffy to adults, 'twas them that had changed. This would not faze them usually — stasis was death. But this was... This was the bones being pushed by crystal-cartilage. This was the ground slipping. Andrei could steady his steps, but what he feared most was Petr falling.

When they knocked on the sculpted door, they heard: "It is not locked".

They had never thought it would be. They pushed in.

The voice had come from the small bathroom built behind one of the upstairs' walls. Petr walked in front, rounding his path close to the window, then Andrei was after him. They walked in — the door, after all, was open. The Architect expected them, didn't he?

The bones of the room were the bare essentials: in the stead of a bathtub, a shallow-pooled shower was tucked against a wall of orchids, thistles and masks painted on red tiles. It was tall, indeed: it was fit for its architect rather than his commissioners, and as Andrei lingered by the door, said maker, his back turned to them, turned the water on.

Hiking the black cloth of his pants past the bony humps of his knees, he washed those and his shins of masonry dust.

Petr pried his way past his brother, shoulder scraping his side. He pulled himself the arabesque-footed chair that their colleague was using as a coat-hanger and sat, chest to its back, crossing his arm over the drape of the fabric.

“How fare thee?” Farkhad’s voice. Over the running water, it felt to echo out of the walls instead.

Petr didn’t reply. Instead he stared as the man sponged dirt off his thin ankles, sinewy and strong, tendons like bulging cords over the delicate instruments of the joints. He patted his feet and legs dry before rolling down his hems and slipping on indoor shoes. He bent to the sink and wetted his hair.

As he squeezed, the waves shivered and bounced like frightened horses. Pink snaked down his wrist from the thorny bush of his entangled locks. Had he hit his head? Had an arm of the atlantes struck him over the skull, had blood spilled? Mindlessly, Andrei could imagine as he stared, he could have pulled his unruly hair away from his eyes as he created paper models of his designs and, precision knife still in hand, nicked himself sharply. Yes, Andrei could imagine it vividly. Under that unruly thorn-bush from which emanated the sweet scent of berries, a small wound, a fingernail thick, a small crescent of red against his scalp.

The Architect stood straight. He arranged the spirals of strands placated against his temples in the mirror above the basin. His eyes lingered on their reflection which, from where he stood, Andrei could not see. (Perhaps Petr couldn’t either, he thought.) He walked over to the chair. He towered above Petr; black stone of hair and eyes; clay of damp skin; shirt of stained glass; spinescent limbs; like maker like edifice; like maker like edifice; Petr flinched as if a storm had knocked the glare off him.

“If you'll allow me.” Farkhad reached down and tugged gently at his coat, moving Petr's crossed arms.

“... Of course. It’s yours, isn't it?”

“It is. I'm not against sharing, but I need it.”

The cloth was peeled off the chair like malleable skin. As they followed the man downstairs, the walls felt to heart-beat around them; maybe ’twas naught but their own to their ears.

It was already night outside — or maybe it wasn’t, and the curtains only did their jobs well.

“Why have you come, colleagues?”

“We wanted to see how fared the house, is all.”

“Not bad, as you can see.”

As he gestured around, the red of his coat clung to his shadows. It felt obvious the house was fit for him and not for the Kains — or maybe, he fit for it in the way nobody else could. Soul seeks same, and all that.

“Watch,” he said, “see and witness.”

His hand rose, and he drew up to down a crack on a wall. Neither brother spoke.

“The ground has shifted.” As he smiled, his chipped tooth cut into his word, letting out of his mouth only the slither of glee that glazed it.

“Already?” asked Andrei, surprise thin over his pulled lips.

“*Already?* Not how I would phrase it... Think rather: *finally*, at last...”

“You expected it to?” inquired Andrei again.

“Obviously. The foundations of the house are shaky.”

(“*So are the foundations of the soul*” went unsaid. The foundation of soul is bone, and Andrei knew a thing or two about the bending, the breaking, the nerve-entrapping of man's.)

The flitting bird of Farkhad's voice pecked peeking holes in the thick veil of quiet and dark. Through them, the twins could see the house as it was slowly changing, morphing out of view.

“The ground moves under one's foot,” Farkhad continued, “it moves under one's house. The water tables below shift, are compressed, are trapped like blood by a tourniquet.”

He dashed across the room to turn a lamp off, then another, swift as if he had gotten himself shocked on one of their exposed wires. He lit candles instead.

“Too pious to make use of the electricity fairy?” Andrei teased. “Too old-school, perhaps?”

“Don't be silly, now.”

“Ambiance is it, then? Aesthetics?”

“Not quite.”

Slowly, he walked. The red of curtains crept after his steps, crawled up his clothed back. His black brow and eyes dug themselves into notches in the friezes — left empty — for what purpose — perhaps for this one. His lips parted — his head tipped back — he was listening. He raised his hands above his head and the fabrics looked to do the same. The darkness crawled up his face and trickled down the regal hump of his nose like a libation poured.

“I'm watching how the light dances and bounces across the crevices in a way no filament could show.” He pointed. “Can't, through these, slither the soul?”

“How thin of a soul must it be?”

“Why should it wispy? Can't it be a snake, or a lizard, reaching through these for the warmth of light or of reaching?”

His voice was chthonian and soft to the touch, rounded like the back of a beast as it rolled over his tongue.

Oh, the house was for him. (Or he was for the house.) Maybe it had been the plan since the beginning, or maybe this was a lucky, opportune coincidence; what other people could have called a blessing.

Once they would be gone — dawned upon Petr — he would never come back again, but this place, as him, as his, would stand. The Cathedral, as him, as his, would still stand. The house was not filled with music, but with voice. Felt like it regardless.

They needed to convince the Kains. They had no other choice.

Farkhad brought thumb and index one after the other to his mouth, striking them across the tongue. like one would a matchstick. As his hand reached for the candle, spit glistened on his fingertips like mica dots, like caught lights across a wine-dark sea. Wetness on his teeth scintillated with change and ambiguity. Of his fingers, he snuffed the flames out. The light was knocked out of Andrei's face first. He watched as the last dancing glimmer was blown off Petr's face after him.

“Goodnight, gentlemen,” Farkhad incited them out with, but made no motion to bring them to the door.

“Goodnight, ever-so-romantic colleague,” replied Andrei, as he picked Petr by the elbow and walked both of themselves out.

They hadn't made it past the threshold that the man was already shedding his coat like a layer of flesh slouched off with difficulty; blood-red as the sea.

.h.

Petr had been at his designs like Hephaistos as his forges — burning, the fires of his mind covering him in a thin film of sweat, limping from pains that the gods of creation whipped him of,



hammering, bending ideas like melting steel. He needed make a sword, he needed make a throne, he needed make a shield.

He made stairways. Made them of sturdy stone upon which even limping Hephaistos could have climbed to reach the heavens.

Maybe ideas had been bled out of Farkhad, on that previous night. Whichever Muse or Fate it was that struck the back of his head and sucked the poison out of it until it trickled through his curls, Andrei and Petr thanked her, Andrei and Petr kissed her spindly ankles. The same Muse or Fate, or maybe another force entirely, breathed life into Petr's designs: the Kains wanted them built.

. h .

Vessels and souls, vessels and souls — Petr thinks he can read something about it on Farkhad's enigmatic smile as the man walks down from the top of his Stairs. What's with his creations? (What's with his soul?) He had to tear the designs of his Stairways out of the jaws of the Muses, their crushing, burning maws. Pits of hell, those were. Knotty, knobby limbs-spirals of fights had Petr awake for what felt like months, and he'd only managed to pull himself out with these. There was a hint of goodness in the Stairs — see, here they had managed to hang the stairs at the lip of the sky, holding onto the air with misty meat-hooks. They were rising out of the earth like Petr had felt himself crawl out of his terrible slump: looking and feeling like shit, but there was hope, there was a slither of hope. (A slither like a flame across his face that he knew someone, someone he knew, could snuff out with a grasp.)

*Quite the mirror, colleague*, the man had hummed next to Petr's shoulder as he had reached the bottom of the steps. *Foundationless and unfinished*. It hadn't sounded unkind. It even had sounded tender. (Not like the bruise, this time. Petr felt his whole insides to be one giant contusion. Maybe it hurt because it was true.)

Farkhad's business was as unfinished as theirs. There were running out of time, but the war was still being waged. (Yes, let's put it that way. Who is waging it? Andrei believes Farkhad is. Petr might equally. Farkhad, well, Farkhad believes... Sources vary. The twins are wary.)

Soul seeks same, and which one would want this tortuous, foundationless, grey naked spine for vessel? As he and Andrei climbed, Petr thought it was already drooping in places, but maybe this was only the feeling of his knees weakening under him

At the bottom of the steps, the Kains were discussing between themselves. They were nodding, they acquiesced with one another. They didn't seem displeased, which was all that mattered. Farkhad joined the group — *What's he saying? What are you saying?* The Kains acquiesced with him, and Andrei made a step to run down and throw himself in the conversation — Petr held him back.

One could see the Cathedral from the top of the Stairs.

Indeed, one could see it from anywhere.

They could see Farkhad from the top of the Stairs.

Indeed, They could see him...

He tipped his head back and smiled at them. He didn't show his teeth. His eyes thinned into serpent-slits. Petr's face twitched, and he reached for Andrei's arm.

Everything looks like a house when one has houses on the mind — indeed, when the mind has been bent out of shape then into a new one; the shape of a house. A house empty, like a soul just the same, longs for guests: it'll take anything in the shape of one. Everything that inhales, exhales, and walks is fair pulling-into, is fair trapping. (This must be why Andrei and Petr hold their breaths around the man.)

Anger walks on four legs like a limping horse. Anger, and irritation, and resentment, and bitterness, and jealousy, and fear. Yes, and fear. A big black horse with big black eyes that invites itself in the house of Andrei's mind because he didn't close the door after him. And he didn't close the door because he doesn't have the key. And he doesn't have the key because...

(Where's the key? Swallowed, wallowed, buried. Hidden in another story.)

(You can keep looking. Keep looking. Keep locking the door behind you, Andrei, for soon there will be no lock.)

. h .

The house distills itself inside of (two of) its visitors. Its dust, gentle, prying, burrowing particles, infectious and tender. It drips slowly, it seeps, it penetrates through the cloth; as one sleeps, through the skin. The house recognizes its holes and hollows in other men — in (two of) its visitors. The house, as it is opened, opens in turn.

The walls are warm with a termite fever. The pipearteries pipe(-)organs conduct copper gold heat. Andrei walks; he runs his hand on the shivering epidermis of carpets and tapestries.

The pipes leak. The pipes are leaking. As Andrei visits, he lounges on the sofa downstairs, white of his bare skin, black of his hair, in the embrace of variegated reds, of cushions, of covers, of throws, of curtains that selfishly corner him away from the prying lights. A single drop falls from the chandelier — its glow snuffed out — right by his lips — spit.

. ħ .

The shadows of the low sun crept across the town like flat-backed animals, drawing the houses in purple processions through the winding streets. Whatever Andrei had planned, they still had time before it. He had just come to Petr's attic, grabbing multiple paintings he had been keeping there and a bottle of his peculiar moonshine. He had hailed his brother from the bottom of the steps, said he wanted to show him something: what he had been up to when he wasn't by his side. They had crossed quite a lot of the Skinners and weaved, like thin blades across meat, through the other cuts of the town, before Andrei came to an abrupt stop. He almost dropped one of his canvases.

“This one,” he said, gesturing at a door with a hitch of his chin. “It's not locked. Hold the door for me, will you.”

Petr would have done it without being asked. He walked down the flight of stairs in front of the entrance; hesitated at the doorknob, still, and peeked in before he made another step forward. There were more stairs inside; leaning over the railing, Petr felt a headache washing over the edges of his skull, and for a moment he thought he would flip over and fall.

“So this is your place.”

“It is.”

“*What* is it?”

“Walk down, will you?”

Whatever it was, it smelled of smoke, of fresh wallpaper paste, of floorboard-polish and ceiling-varnish. Here was a bar, and there a small stage, its wood cushioned of an ornate rug. It smelled pungently of steppe herbs, which the springy women that had stared at Petr as he walked in seemed to have braided in their hair and embroidered in what little they wore. Petr threw his brother a glance equally confused and sententious.

“Hey,” Andrei began, slow and low, as to not stir up his headache, “they’re dancers. That’s all they do. They just dance. If they did anything else, I think that other one would peel the skin right off of me.”

“*The other one?*”

“Steppe girl. Or so I’d be inclined to think. Short, with shabby clothes. *Anisocoria, chapped mouth.* Boyish cut.”

“I haven’t seen anyone like this.”

“Lucky you,” Andrei muttered. “She freaks me out.”

“A girl.”

“Or a woman! Maybe even a witch, for all I know.”

“Because *those* are not witches?” Petr rose an eyebrow, and pointed a tremoring finger at one of the dancers.

Andrei paused to think. “If they are, I feel more confident in saying I could repel their spells.”

“Good luck with that,” mumbled Petr.

The fragrant herbs did not fully dull the persistent smell of hashish, somewhere in there, perhaps in the back room, the ajar door of which Petr could see from where he stood; nor the tangy bitterness of home-brewed moonshine. Somewhere else, it smelled like warm wood: across the place, curtains closed off small, intimate sections of the already-cramped space and Petr saw, peeking between drapes, that one of these was decorated more richly than the others. He stumbled. He held his head. He breathed hard and shallow, and Andrei hurried to his side. Petr’s stare on his face had sloughed off the righteousness of before, and as his jaw clenched, Andrei put both hands on his forehead, palms just below his eyes. Petr flinched but did not back away.

“You’re burning,” Andrei stuttered. “Are you sick?”

“The thoughts inside are setting fire to my brain. I’ve done nothing but *think* since we got here, and nothing good came out of most of it.”

“You should rest. I’ll handle tonight.”

“I’ll be there. Don’t you try deal with him on your own.” Petr batted Andrei’s hands away, but not harshly enough to mean it. “Don’t you try do whatever it is you intended to do on your own.”

“I can behave,” Andrei huffed.

“I know that.” (Whatever *behaving* was for Andrei, was way different than for any other man, but Petr did not lie.) But can he?”

Andrei didn’t answer. Petr stepped away from him and took the time to walk around some more. Andrei thought he heard one of the dancers hiss at him, which was fair enough of a reaction.

. h .

Petr crawled out of the back room patting at his sides, looking increasingly confused until Andrei handed him his own comb. Putting himself together, Petr noticed the dancers were gone, and some guy was here, now. Andrei gestured to not mind him, and the man sat behind the bar, not minding them.

“What do we do?” Petr asked.

“We wait.”

Waiting was an invocation: Farkhad emerged from the dense forest of smoke, from between the carved trunks of the columns that supported the weight of the ceiling, of the sky. He carried in his longfingered hand a bottle, its round body like a fat-bellied beast’s, satiated on the amber liquid sloshing against its glass walls. Brandy, a Cognac maybe, or a spirit, or tea.

“So you’ve come!”

“You’ve invited me.”

A repeat of the previous time — or perhaps that previous time had been a rehearsal. Petr felt bare without his easel to cling onto, and pestered himself for not bringing a sketchbook, at least.

“Your home?” Farkhad asked Andrei.

“Not the whole thing: I sleep in the back. I shall make it a gathering spot.”

“How fitting for us now, then.”

“Indeed! Come, sit. Let this be the *vernissage*, consecration before desecration overruns this peaceful place.”

“Is your liquor that bad?” Farkhad teased.

“I shan’t only dabble in alcohols, my friend. I’m expansive of a man, in this way.”

Of his hand, he invited their guest into the space tucked away. Petr followed, and Andrei closed the curtains after them.

The man bent his head low to enter the velvety cubicle; almost bent a knee too. This is where Petr had smelled the warm wood coming from: on a table of dark mahogany, its wood striated by black veins, carvings were fresh as brandings, still a little damp with varnish.

Sound and breath were muffled between the fabrics that adorned the alcove. One could hear his own heartbeat, the wet click of his own tongue, the thundering of swallowing, the rumbling of an empty stomach. Andrei had nailed to the ceiling a canopy of orange damask, Petr could see where the beams split like parted lips around the iron stakes; its languid, dull-gold drapes were pushed against the papered walls by low sofas, disposed in the horseshoe-shape of a sensible parody of triclinium. The heady smell of perfumed linens and liquor was fierce and bitter, never-ending, stretching beyond one's chest and into someone else's; it could be tasted at the back of the tongue. An intarsia table of speckled browns and reds crawled across the carpeted floors, bearing on its back an open opium tray. Its crooked legs like those of a beast were draped in thick strips of velvet; they scraped at Farkhad's ankles as he sat, and at Petr's too.

"Oh my," hummed the Architect, and he dragged his fingers on the edge of the expectant tray. The mottled mother-of-pearl of its rim caught kiss of the man's tawny skin, and seemed to shift into topaz instead.

"Feel free to refuse," Andrei told him, and sat across in his turn. "I believe in a man's freedom to get high out of his mind on his own terms."

"How generous," Farkhad chuckled heartily, and the brothers heard the clicking of his breaths against his teeth in this cocoon of smothering rugs and tapestries. "Be my guest, then," the man offered Andrei container and pipe like *he wasn't his* guest instead.

Farkhad breathed deeply, the volutes of purple smoke clinging to the thorns of his hair, to his shoulders, his chin, his lips. His coat was growing a viscous, spirited, vulgar red — when he poured them the liquor he had brought, the thin beads of sweat across his exposed clavicles looked to be made of it instead.

The smoke as it slithered down parted the lungs like a staff, a scepter, a wide warm-palmed hands, like two or maybe three fingers, wetted to stick to paper. Its tall column that flowed from the mouth down was velvetbody crystalclawed millipede, was rubysapphire chiselhead.

"Are you sure this is opium...?" Petr whispered to Andrei, winds of exhailes carrying his words across the karstic plain of the table between them,

"I've procured it myself! What else could it be?"

What else indeed? In the mouth, the tart salt of brine; lower, the bitterness of bark, of cypress, cedar, pine.

The smoke permeated the soft meat of the palate, then the hard bone of maxillary. It pricked through the teeth, the sinuses, the eye sockets; it washed over the temples from the inside like the foam of raging waves batter the cliffs that cradle sea.

Farkhad's head lolled on its side, his cheek pressed against his shoulder. There was a smile on his face, devoid of mischief, of arrogance, of malice; one of a cherub of hollow cheeks, of sharp bones. Heart-striker under dark brows, darker lashes. He looked around, watched as Petr first, then Andrei, mellowed. Watched — devoid of mischief, of arrogance, of malice, devoid of the threat of the animal in hunger, in wait. Andrei would have recognized something like this, as easy as picking from an ocean the drop fashioned in his brother's face ( — soul seeks same, after all.)

Farkhad lay, stretched, elongated his legs in front of him. His pants, loose and light, rode up his ankles. Ankles then calves, calves then knees. Skin showed, bone hid. The room was ever so slightly tipping back like a ship listing. It could not have been true, but it was, simple as that. His lashes were thick and heavy as a brush's bristles. The canvas of his face bore none of the sins Andrei thought he could see everywhere else. He'd need to check Petr's portrait of him, he thought. The jewels on the man's hand were hazy with the smoke. Andrei hadn't noticed before that one of those was a poison ring.

"I don't like your creations very much," he spat out into the thickness of blood-dense air.

"Aah," Farkhad sighed, "so this is why you've brought me there." He was smiling.

"I would have told you as much in any other circumstances."

"But you didn't," Farkhad pointed.

As they spoke, or tried to, the languid tongue of the thickened atmosphere pushed past their lips, into their throats, curling around itself the snakelike silver smoke. 'Twas an intoxication duller than Andrei's moonshine, this one, with her high-pitchedness, her blade-edge, her numerous skin-cuts as she traveled down and stung all of one's open wounds, burrowing, fish-bone seventimes-stellated in the soft tissue of the throat. Duller like an aching grief, pleasant like the ebbing and flowing of a sea pink with mushed fruit. Carving its way down like water through rock over the time it took to spin and spiral the vapors against the roof of the mouth, over a year, over a century, over all the millennia this burrow had been dug into.

"You are a formalist," Andrei snickered, hoarse and malicious. "Painfully so."

“Painful for whom? My conscience and my hands both are clean. You are only hurting yourself.”

“We believe you can do so much better,” Andrei panted, not picking up Farkhad’s glances and spikes. “Your adherence to structure holds you back, and keeps you from being a worthy enemy.”

“It is not *form* you detest,” Farkhad interrupted, pushing himself on his elbows. “It is something else. You cling to form — even as you bend it.”

“You are so close to understanding. I want to make people *think*.”

“... About form. So it is an obsession, in you.” He pointed at Andrei’s cloudy face, nail almost scraping him across the throat. His eyes had darkened. His voice too.

“It is not an *obsession*,” Petr spat back, flipping himself to his knees, “it is a *motif*. It is a *statement*.”

“Tell yourself this. Keep telling yourselves this. It will only help a little when all of this is over.”

“When all of what?”

As if struck by lightning, Farkhad jumped on his feet. As if struck again, he swept the tray off the table of a heel and stood in its place.

“What are you afraid of!” he thundered, and the air crackled around his voice like an rock split open. “You think my designs formal, and me formalist. You despise my creations’ structure. I don’t want to impress you. Impress me!” he hailed with a sharp throw of the arms. “Move me! Shock me!” He grabbed Andrei by the arm and dragged him to his feet. “Prove to me that you shouldn’t fear me, for I will bend before your designs. You have this in you. I dare you. I won’t beg. You will not make me beg.”

Andrei tore his arm from Farkhad’s grip. He jumped on the table with him — Farkhad sprung back and rent his shadow from the alcove’s, stepping into the open room behind the curtains. Andrei ran after him, wrenching his arms out of the tartness of camphor woods and minty smoke. As Petr followed, the Architect climbed atop a table. His shadow dove upon them like a carrion bird. Andrei threw himself on his tail like he could wrestle him to the ground. Petr was after him after them on all fours, scaling the tipped table like a cliff, reaching for and grabbing Andrei’s leg to pull himself up. Once he stood on his own, he dipped after them.

“Bet! Bet, bet, bet!”

Farkhad’s voice bubbled with a heat hephaestian. It dripped with a royal gods-ichor, heavenly in its tone, black and poisonous to mortals. It sounded enough like *beg* that Andrei was on the fire of his trail, blood boiling with rage, face hot.



“Isn’t participation so tortuous? Isn’t it a trap by design, a maw, a fist? You say you want people to think — but I believe you want people to agree. You like it when people bend to you. Bow to you. You like it when your designs make people bend, bow, crawl, you tell yourself you want people to fall in love with your creations out of the purity of their heart, of their boundless affection, but you like it just as much when your designs seduce by force, by violence. You like it when they knot intestines with the merciless power of awe. But you’re not awing me — I like that you’re not awing me, you like that you are not awing me. It thrills you.”

“What say you?!”

“I am but the messenger!”

Hermes! Hermes! Psychopomp trickster, wings-footed Hermes! His steps were so light and he fled right out of Andrei’s grasp as he tried to grab and pull, to tug, to make him bow bend take the knee kneel, kneel. Wings-footed Farkhad bled into the darkness of the bar it covered, countered, coveted him, he coveted it, until Andrei’s heart felt to knock behind his teeth and he coveted both. Wings-footed he walked into the volutes of purple smoke, the green whirlpools, he climbed past and through a frame, which he bent and bowed into, pulling the two men in after him. Green of absinthe green of ivy of naiads-waters of wicked envy it surrounds them, thick of resins, of bound pigments, of bristles embedded in the paint like stray black lashes. Farkhad’s lashes. Lashing out like dogs biting going after him, after his legs like hounds, his cloven-hooved legs — since when? he jumps across he carries himself tall. Turpentine blood gum-arabic blood blood sweat thick with musk sweat white as saliva white as— jump across once more the twins follow. Follow hunt hound follow, one of Petr’s hind legs gives out slips from under him, hind legs yes battered by Andrei’s swishing tail, tail yes as they run gallop too close to each other. Rounded muscular flanks wet with effort-sweat grazing through the fur as they run. Go and run! Go and run omen-grey grey omen – go and run! – hoof slips on slick Martian Apollonian rock hold onto your brother for support — both at once rear and spring forward after the fawn, after the dawn, after the faun the fool the Pan-flute-player. Going through the thick greenery hands first, face second, pushing probing palpating pulsating finding nothing finding Farkhad’s back soft with hair(s) which evades once again. In the grasses, tall and black, soft like stipa, parsing through, then round hooves on wet rocks wet of spit of sweat hard rocks (vice-versa) jump after Farkhad after him jump. Pasterns battered by waves embroidered white with foam white of snow white of mother-of-pearl of saliva of milk of seed white-arctic white-seminal, cold first, hot follows, vice-versa, follow after him, old boy, he is not faster than you. He is smiling widely, not unkindly, not mockingly, he is glad this is happening, he is happy this is how things have turned out. He breathes deeply, seems to puff his chest in glee, in pride.

He slows — his cloven hooves click tick tick-tack clock on the smooth soft strong wet rock, he leads them astray. Shepherd-faun, Petr catches up to him, his swishing tail a white flag after him, he picks ivy leaves from Farkhad's horns. Petr pants, loud, heavy, all four of his legs struggle to carry all of him. Air is thick as it slithers through his teeth, into his mouth, down the tightness of his throat, penetrates the lungs with a burning pressure. Pain ebbs, dulls, grows bright and soft; breathing again is ecstatic.

“Easy, old boy,” Farkhad soothes him like one would an animal — it is appropriate now, it is appropriate.

Andrei catches up, he's strong, sturdy on his legs, round hooves hammering, round hooves drumming, Farkhad, who has forgone his flute, whistles instead, old boy let us sing.

They follow him they trail him they grab and pull on the thread that unravels at his feet — for a second they lose him — thread loops and knots thread-ropes thread ropes them in they stumble; once steady again they come to a screeching, screaming, tearing halt soil slips under unsteady legs hooves scrap against uneven rock; they are at the lip of a cliff, and Farkhad is in the jaws of the darkness below.

When Andrei attempts to grab Petr by the elbow, Petr bats his hand away.

This is how they used to hunt horses.

This is how they hunt hunted horses — corralling them to the edge of a precipice, and giving one last push.

One last push.

Farkhad's dark eyes are on them both.

One last push.

Farkhad's dark eyes are on them both.

One last push.

All good myths are cloaked in lies, all stories of metamorphosis are fundamentally about those who survive it. The winner shapes the tale. He who saw the transformation and lived gets to transform its telling, fold it upon itself once more. He who lives gets to lie. (Between live and lie, the V stands for Victory. With her wings spread wide, and her head lost — head swimming with passionate unruly wild-mare night-mare madness. The winner shapes the depth of the darkness

in another man's eyes. The winner gets to lie about its thickness, about the curse-spell it cast upon those who lived. The winner gets to live.)

Dark was behind Farkhad's eyes on them both — not in anger or malice, dark as the blackest of pits, of cherry pits, of seeds, of charcoal-bitter citrus-seeds, the candle by his shoulder had drifted off to half-sleep, and he had followed suit.

At the table, he had put his head in the cup of his hands, held it in place so it didn't fall from the weight of leaden smoke, and was pensively looking at the ceiling.

One last gasp. Coming up for air. Petr jerked aware and had to wipe his face dry.

The room had pitted around them. Had hollowed out like a torn fruit. They were at its core, surrounded by mesocarp, by sweet syrupy flesh. It pulsed around them like a beating heart — their hearts beat, pulsating under their sweet flesh. A blush of immature cherries was wiped across the twins' faces. The tawny tartness of candied figs varnished the canvas of Farkhad's skin.

“Have you ever thought of painting the ceiling?” slowly, lowly, tongue woolen, thickened, wrapped in the thread he had tripped his hosts with, Farkhad spoke.

“... Not a bad idea,” Andrei eventually croaked. “But paint it what? Of what?”

“What is the name of this place?”

“I haven't decided yet.”

“Aah... Haven't yet entrusted it of a soul...”

“Is that what a name does, to you?”

“... Is that the reason you've picked this name for me?”

What name?

“What name?”

(One last push.)

Petr's socked foot slipped on the varnished wood of the sofa's edge, and he hit Farkhad on the knee. The man only laughed, light and airy. Smoke yielded to his voice like fish in the sea. Behind Andrei, where his head had rested, the wood was slick with sweat.

The house sighs. Lowly, languidly, sighs bored, contented, contemplated. The house sighs, sees, sighs again. It observes an orthodox nyctinasty: cometh night, a tidal darkness wanders in, salty,

white-foam-laced and deep; it rises to the shins or, if one sleeps on his stomach, crawls, or gets on his knees, to the elbows. The house seizes; the house-sea ebbs, the house is house-twice-its-size again.

The house tightens. Pulsates; closes in. Stomach, intestine. The house tightens, pulsates, closes in: a heart growing smaller. Or, maybe, its visitors growing too big inside of it. Visitors grow bigger, house tightens; sheathing feeling of warmth. Stuffiness of damask, of velvet, of silken linings. The exit feels further away than it was.

Two visitors accompanied the third to his quarters. The third was no visitor here — the third might not even have been third, the third might have been quarters. *Goodnight*, it's morning. *Goodnight*, it's still night again. Time bent to opium smoke and the smell of pollen that hung in the air, hanged in the air by a thread. The door was unlocked when the visitors had come in, it was unlocked when they left. The third man was alive when they had left. Andrei retched — all the venom he had kept inside of his mouth was poured on the wildflowers. It almost had burned a hole through his palate and seeped inside of his skull; and he didn't need anymore poison inside of his skull. He didn't. It seeped through his eyes as he teared up. It slithered past his lips as cold spit snaked down his chin, his neck, over the ridges of his topmost ribs. *What a fucking moron*, he thought to himself — he had ground his own defenses so thin that he was sand. He was shifting, slipping sand, under the foundation of the miracles he and his brother still had to wrestle out of the jaws of creation. Petr's head was pounding, and he had to hold one of the columns of the house to keep himself up. His skin was white as if he had seen a ghost, and maybe he just had. When Andrei reached to grab him, his skin was cold and clammy.s

“Just opium?” Petr asked, voice strung a low, breathy huff.

“Sure of it.”

Petr held himself up with hands on his knees. His hair fell before his face, but Andrei could see his neck was damp, glistening.

“It couldn't have been tampered with, could it?” Petr whined.

“It couldn't have, no,” Andrei hammered.

A sidelong, piercing, pin-thin glare cut through the curtain of Petr's wet locks, nicking Andrei across the face with a sharper question.

“... He couldn't have tampered with it,” Andrei replied without needing to be asked.

*But it would have been nice if he had, eh, Andrei? Wouldn't it be easier? Wouldn't it be a good story, a good scapegoat, that escaped goat that faun land-scapes that scrapes tender(ly)-bruises skin like a rough stone wouldn't it make everything so much easier to tell?*

*Keep telling (yourself that). Keep telling.*

"Let's go," Andrei coaxed Petr into walking. "Let's get you to sleep."

"And you?"

"Unfinished business."

"All of us."

"It'll be over soon."

Petr's face contorted in a grimace, equal parts anger and pain.

"It'll be over soon, I'll make sure of it," Andrei insisted.

This, at last, got Petr wobbling on.

. ħ .

Freckles dot the limewashed walls, smallpox scars embroider the pale cushions. The windows struggle to open like heavy lids — weighted lids, leaden, laden with something heavier than sleep. The black lashes of the Venetian blinds never fully close, filtering light in like ushering an uninvited guest.

In the house, the curtains shudder; their rough velvet grows goosebumpy, the weave like pores opening. The stitches dissolve in the silk-skin, sugar in tea, fondness and evil alike in one's blood equally. The tiles shift ever-so-slightly like teeth, like ever-growing teeth on the red, fleecy background of the tongue, the thickened crimson air. The baseboards-gums grow pink and swollen.

The house tastes itself off (two) visitors' fingers, like the juices of soft-cooked meat, like sweat; like sperm, like blood, the persistent smell of cigarette.

. ħ .

Petr had gotten himself sick; maybe with fear, maybe with jealousy. Neither of those he would ever admit. He was not too proud, nor too principled to; it only made the disease so much more tangible he felt he could touch it — or rather, it could touch him. Its fingers, bony, cold, long-

nailed, he thought he could sense grazing the stubbly skin of his cheeks, under his chin, down his throat. His flesh he felt spinose and dry, the thorns lining the pores of his arms and shoulders turning upon him at the faintest of wind — of breath, that the attic sighed through. He struggled to eat.

The muses, some of them their long black hair braided into blood-riverbeds, had befallen their cold, vaporous hands upon his forehead, upon his eyes; his pores had vesseled the wickedness that, wet, pearled on his lips and lashes like on spiderwebs. He was losing — they were losing, he was losing for them both. There was nothing that Andrei could do without his designs, no matter how much he had done without them before. This was not like the life they used to have: this was something wrapped tied torn in red twyn or twine — so close in shape in letters to twyrine that, blind of one eye, one could feel compelled to hang himself with the latter instead. If Petr tried to unravel the thread, it was made of three, and woven as a tapestry it spelt always the same: he was losing. At least Arachnê had been able to see her own face in the polished bronze of Athena's helmet before her work was destroyed. Something needed to be done.

He needed make a sword, he needed make a shield — no, no, he needed make Pandora of paper, breath and steel; Pandora bird-beaked, sweet and bladed; he needed be her aegis.

. ħ .

[The juices of soft-cooked meat, [...] sweat; [...] sperm, [...] blood, the persistent smell of cigarette] gets under the fingernails. It gets under the skin. It gets into the muscle. It gets into the marrow.

It gets into the bone.

It gets into the bone.

The foundations are wet with [...]<sup>1</sup>.

. ħ .

Out back the pond, its crystalline skin scintillating with the face of the Mars-tinted moon, clapped softly against the rocks. Easy crowd, tonight... Easy crowd every night. Petr considered walking in through the door at the back, but he was not this much of a coward. Through the front; into the open mouth. The architrave drooped; teeth grazing the crown of his skull.

Here's the room that's the lung, here's the room that's the kidney. Here's the cobweb-*nervus abducens*. Here's the spleenroom the stomachroom, here's the long corridor of the *vas deferens*. Here's the mouth into which one trips, like a maw, like a kiss. Here's the jaw.

Here's the bedroom where Farkhad sleeps, here's the cold draft of homeostasis.

Petr hesitated at the door, his hand(s) shook. The door hesitated before him.

Here's the bed where Farkhad sleeps, here was the dog-tail-end of Petr's apsis. Here was Petr, tail between his legs, like a dog.

Moves-he-not. His hand lingered on the handle, on its copper-coldness. The corridor behind was cool as snow, cutting contrast with the heated room. The fireplace had heaved and huffed, snuffed itself asleep. The embers' lights glowed then waned again like eyes coming close.

Steady apsis — Petr resisted the gravitational pull by digging his heels on the floor — it shifted under his weight a little, the wood mellowed like candle wax.

Gravitational orbit — Io! Io! Priestess moon of Jupiter! Pulled closer to the biggest body around the sun — Tethys! Tethys! Titan's daughter, eyes black as sea depths and as the sky around Saturn! Petr called upon her as he was drawn, like she is, to the rings — to Farkhad's as they gleamed like tears on his steady, soft hand. It rested supple on his exposed thorax.

“Of course, you would come,” rose Farkhad's voice like smoke in the warm room.

“Am I that predictable?” Petr asked, and crept forward on velvet feet.

“God have mercy,” the man chuckled softly, “so far, you have been.”

Reassuring, insulting. What did mercy have to do with this? Farkhad pushed himself on his elbows and eyed Petr up and down as he approached. He sat up. Under the covers, he crossed his legs, and the duvet crept down his chest, curling on his lap like a soft-furred animal. Petr sat on the edge of the bed. Both of his feet rested on the floors, at first, feeling the knots in the wood through his thin leather soles. He observed Farkhad over his shoulder, through stray strands of the curtain of his hair as they unraveled from his braid, prying, praying, living ivy snakes that climbed down the white-stone facade of his face. Then, he turned. He leaned. Farkhad watched him as he leaned. He bent one leg and tucked it under his ass. Trapping himself, hunted hare, hunter and hare, so his foot would not try to carry him away. Opium lingered in the pools of his lungs, alive in his ears with a steady hiss not unlike that of gas lamps. Their glow crept down the winding filaments of his veins, catching the sparks of agitated cells. His lungs were light with the haze of smoke.

“Don’t do anything you might regret in your intoxicated state,” Farkhad hummed, voice thick with sleep.

Of the two options Petr had had in mind, which were fucking him (were he awake) or killing him (were he asleep) (or awake, for that matter), neither he thought he would regret. He had never regretted fucking anyone, because so far he hadn’t fucked anyone. (Just hadn’t gotten around to it. He had had his fair share of opportunities, he just hadn’t taken any. This didn’t bother him.) He had never regretted killing anyone. (*Because so far...* No, this wasn’t true. This was how his thought ended.)

Pulled forward as if by one of the Fates themselves, her spun thread wrapped around his jaw like a bridle, Petr leaned towards Farkhad some more.

Level with his eyes, two blackened cherry-pits two bottomless wells two holes in the rock where Titans dwelled, Petr caught the feeling of his gaze. It wasn’t particularly interrogative, neither warm nor repelled. It stilled in wait, watched as Petr arranged his seating position and crept forth some more his head; soon, one could only fit a flat palm between the two of them. Petr felt his nostrils flare, the tugging of the skin over the bridge of his nose as he tried and failed to steady himself. He watched as his exhales swept damp, unattended hair off Farkhad’s forehead, how his lashes shivered in the air.

“Easy, old boy,” whispered the man, and his voice crept up Petr’s face to his hairline, from which felt to trickle down sweat and rain.

“Why do you speak to me like to a beast you are trying to tame?” asked Petr in turn — he wanted his voice as steady and smooth, but it shook as if cold, as if scared.

“I am not,” smiled Farkhad. “I will not keep you from hearing me in that way, but if it is taming you want, I cannot help.”

Was it about want? Was it about want now, and was it before? Petr had the free will to want, and wants to will — why had he spoken this, then, into prehensible, (h/t)auting existence, hanging between them here where his palms began to rise and reach?

“What offer you in its stead?”

Farkhad’s pensive eyes followed Petr’s fingertips as they grazed the skin of his jaw, of his cheeks.

“I’ll change you,” he spoke simply. Petr felt how the corners of his mouth quavered and twitched — surely not a grimace, not quite a smile still.

“Say, tell. For the worse or the better?”



“Why speak in absolutes? Even better — why bestow me the power to shape you in such absolutes? Also, I do not know that.”

Farkhad fell silent. Picked himself back up immediately, as if he had only stopped to gather the pieces of his thoughts.

“If I did, I wouldn’t tell you regardless. What is the fun of knowing what the Parcae still hold over your head to strike you down with? All which would be changed, then, would be that I’d have sent you running into tomorrow like a mad horse. How easy such a revelation would make it for you to get one of your thin ankles broken in the trappings of fate... This is not the end I want for you.”

Want, again. *Want* bounced between their faces like between two marbled masks, like light from mirror to mirror.

Curses befall the forewarned. It is by being forewarned that man brings upon himself the curse. A curse, before anything, is an knowing entity. A curse is a bloodhound. ( — and the wicked house, its kennel.)

“This is not the end. Such greatness is yet to come.”

Farkhad smiled — placating, violent, bright sweetburning, rotten to the core. Petr wanted to dig his nails into his flesh — now, his hands were on his face, but they could have been anywhere else, he could move them anywhere else. Chest — flanks — thighs, or the delicate ankles Farkhad seemed so fixated on when they were his.

Oh, Petr felt could peel the man’s skin clean off. He didn’t *want* to — not in the way he wanted to peel his own. His fleeting touch rode on the back of curiosity, wandering animal across the great tawny plains of Farkhad’s face — Farkhad who let him. It was inquisitiveness that made Petr want to slowly, carefully unravel the threads that held the architect’s perennial features together, that bound pores to flesh, flesh to muscle, muscle to bone — bone, foundation of the soul, to the soul, if he even had one. (Yes, yes he did. Petr could feel it — as Farkhad exhaled into his palms like a tamed animal, he felt the flutter of its wings, grazing his skin like a flame that flitted away before it could brand flesh with the sweet, biting release of a burn. What a tease.) If Petr could just slip a finger under the canvas of his visage, feel the wet seepage of paint, smell the heady marriage of charcoal, linseed oil and turpentine, push and palpate the mellowed wood of the frame it was stretched over, maybe he’d find what the Kains saw so deeply within him, what made them think of him as so remarkable — Petr was aware he was seeing something fundamentally different. What made him special — and more than special, dangerous — and more than dangerous, ...

“... I wish I could have created a face like yours,” Petr whispered. “I wish I could have created you.”

(For you do not fear what you create. You do not — unless it escapes you. Nothing had ever escaped the twins. Their grip was stone and steel on the reins of the black filly that, all hooves forward, was galloping towards the end of the moor. Easy, you wild animal, easy. The clay cliff holding under your step shall soon enough plunge into the sea.)

“You have,” Farkhad spoke, voice dusty, hushed as if subterranean, buried. It brushed across Petr’s face like a wayward wind. He smiled. “You will.”

Petr’s white face fell — cliff into the bottomless, black waters of Farkhad’s unyielding eyes on him; disarmed, dissolved like salt in seductive poison. The words had trembled with promise, with threat. (Or maybe, under the ear-piercing veil of the wild filly’s neigh, it had been blanketed with the cloak of fear.) The blade against Petr’s flank burned his skin where Farkhad’s soul hadn’t; where he would have preferred Farkhad’s soul had. His mouth went dry like a lamb’s neck open and bled, his teeth ground together as if channeling a crushing embrace.

Farkhad cut through the thickening silence once more, slow, low, dulled as a beating heart:

“Your eyes are turning brown.” The smile, on his face, was only revealed by the flicker of a stray ember. “I am rubbing off on you.”

His hand rose like the sun over the steppe; sweeping, slow and wide. Of his short, enamel-white moons for nails, he scratched, perhaps involuntarily, Petr’s cheek-bone below his lashes. No blood was drawn — Petr thought he could feel the seismic fault splitting his dry skin like a knife blow. Farkhad’s hand drifted to his cheek, raking through the stubble. The sound of nails against bristles was eerily similar to bugs eating through rotten wood.

“Yes... Rubbing off, and leaving a stain.”

His voice had dragged. His voice had rolled and lolled, had lured and lulled Petr like a dark, crescent wave. Low and slick and seductive like a sea flat and black as oil. Promise. Threat. Io, Galilean moon, watched in wait as Petr leaned to the variegated rings of ammonia-ice, to the anticyclonic wide open eye, into the orbit of the Sun, in two different places across the sky at once. The jewel on Farkhad’s finger was red as Mars; son of Jupiter, god of war. Petr’s jaw clenched. The clack of bone-joints sounded like a slap on skin. He moved his body before he moved his face — slowly, he sat back straight.

“I like my eyes as they are,” he said, plainly.

“I shan’t doubt it.”

Petr stopped. Stopped, then gathered his legs like an animal retracting into its burrow; he stood up.

“Was that all you wanted?” Farkhad asked. There was no true interrogation in his voice — as if he was content with how things had panned out, and only wished for Petr to ask himself the question in turn.

“I changed my mind,” Petr replied, as if it made sense as an answer.

(He knew why he had come. He hadn’t made his mind when he had walked into the room, he hadn’t made his mind when he had sat on the bed. He hadn’t made his mind now — but the scales were tipping.)

“No hard feelings,” Farkhad shrugged, and he lay back down. (What did *he* think Petr had come for?) He pulled the blanket on himself to the chin until nothing but his face and the wildberries bush of his uncombed hair peeked above.

He seemed to be fast asleep, as his brows undid the inquisitive knot that had tied them upwards and fell back in sloping, settled arches. Cherub-fawn, cherub-faun, he hummed in pleased comfort, and stopped moving. Petr, slowly, walked back to the door.

Here’s the house the ribs of which trap like a cage a worried, untamed magpie. Here’s the house with the knife planted into the flank like the sword that would crown a man king.

Here was the house in which, for one more evening, a coward roamed, and did not spill the first blood that would strike upon his kin the curse that its vessel keeps.

At the steps of the entrance, Petr hesitated. He swayed on his feet. He palpated his side as if looking for a wound; looking for his knife instead. It was the burning, branding cold of the surface of Neptune through the thin linen of his shirt; he felt the piercing blow of the trident. He headed for the Tanners. As he ran, his white shirt flailed in the wind, whipping his chest like a furious sail. Charybdis as a boy was behind him, asleep; he pushed onward, the waters of night battering him still.

The building boils and blisters. The building bubbles just under the surface, sulfuric. The house’s lips spread in a smile smoke rises, the soil shivers splits spits out soft heavenly fire. Fault line between the floor-boards, unsteady under the feet like it wants to swallow. Swallow and chew, don’t spit out.

(Spit, heavenly as fire, wet as blood.)

<sup>1</sup> *the fragment was lost.*

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. ħ .

The house is a rope tightening. The house is a rope tightening. The house is a rope tightening.

. ħ .

Carpets pile and peel like burnt-off skin. The upholstery grows cuts, then scars; the damask embroideries rise above the flesh, keloid, gaping wounds are found in the soft down of pillows. The stalactites of mellowed wax in the candle-holders, chandeliers, candelabras harden like scabs; seminal-white, spiraling down the erect copper columns propping them up, spilling out of their cups. Haematidrosis stains the wallpapers, drops wet as rain and red as rust drag down the walls. They pool in shallow puddles that ooze through the floorboards. The wood grows soft with rot. A man grows hardened and sick with anger. The illness of evil lies, light as a dead bird, on the surface of the pond.

Petr was sleeping curled in the hollow of his bergère armchair like a bird in its egg. Neither of them were thoroughly light nor thoroughly heavy sleepers; it came and went with the time, with the seasons, but it surprised Andrei still that even as the floorboards creaked under his feet, as the hem of his coat brushed against unfinished sculptures strewn across the floor, Petr didn't even crack an eye open. Andrei tapped his brother's shoulder, and he was clammy and a little warm through the shirt.

“You have a bed, you know,” Andrei whispered, “I've gotten you a bed.”

Petr still didn't wake, and his face scrunched instead as an irritated groan, balancing between childish, animal and pained, rumbled through the skin of his throat.

“Alright, alright,” tempered Andrei. He began to pace around the room instead.

The designs sprawled dispersed across tables and floors like the white wings of birds stretched and pinned by a cruelty not unlike the gods' themselves. The charcoal was smeared with sweat, the ink bled out in pin-precise places — sweat again, as drops this time, or maybe tears. Andrei

noticed something else on the pages. Petr was the rambling kind, always had been: it was not peculiar to see him talking to himself in the margins of his notebooks and designs, sometimes making sense, sometimes less — but his scribbles, this time, read *votive*. Multiple tongues overlapped on the paper and he was calling, praying — a shocking thing in itself.

*Klytimestra, Klytimestra*, Petr was hailing in the margins, *and whoever else it is who kills their lovers at the end*.

“Whoever it is?” Andrei's eyebrow rose. Well, he thought, in such stories, it was everyone, wasn't it. Andrei considered coming back in the morning. He pulled from the bed one of its covers instead and walked back to the chair.

“You'll be complaining your body aches when you wake.”

Another groan. Andrei covered Petr of the blanket, tucking its excess under his brother's weight. Colorful albumen around the white and black yolk of his body. Andrei sat at the table and turned a light on.

. ħ .

They had bargained with the Kains for more time, just a little more time, so Petr could recover from whatever ailed him.

(They both knew what ailed him — many a story is written about it. Many a story written about it does not end too well.)

The Kains had only reluctantly accepted — so it was death-anxiety that plagued them. The clock was ticking.

Like maker, like edifice. Like maker, like edifice. Like edifice like curse, like curse like story. Crucible, Attic, House, Cathedral of Atreus, god-spat, blood-splattered. (Whose blood? Look at me — whose blood?)

E D I F I C E

D E I C I D E

Missing a ‘D.’ An ‘F’ to move and throw away. They knew who F. was. But who could D. be?

(D. is for another story.

A story you know well, better than this.)

“We should kill him,” Andrei spoke, hushed and secret.

No answer.

“Do you want me to kill him?” (Soft, almost tender, it’s about the bruise again, quill, pen, let me write about the bruise again.)

“I want him dead.”

Notice then: he didn’t answer the question.

. ħ .

Cover the clock. Cover the tabletop — but first, wipe it clean of the man’s footsteps, of his dirt. Spit. Wash yourself, go for a walk. Paint, fuck someone you don't quite know, drink, wash yourself again. Cover the clock — it might be the same one as before.

Lie. You know how to do it — all good men do.

That’s what Andrei did — he lied, he had lied to their colleague that he wanted them to talk just so they could get over last time, so they could start again, start anew.

It was not completely false. It was as true as the world was with a man’s hand over one of your eyes, and your hand over one of his. It didn’t matter — Andrei had two eyes like this nonetheless, for he had four at any other time.

It still smelled of opium when the man walked in; indeed, maybe ’twas he who did, maybe ’twas he who burned heavy, heady, chthonian and warm still.

“Look at me, will you?”

Breath of lead, breath of steel, breath of silver; breath of brass of gold of dusty copper. Breath of mind mind-steel mind-bitter. Mind on the blood, blood on the mind, on the hands of the other. Breath-ing in the spiced spiked earthy cologne of the man, the fragrance of earthberries of bloodberries of the red of his cheeks, the perfume of the pit of snakes of the curls of his hair. Ariadne in the darkness steady his hand steady his step, Ariadne he is no Daedalus, Ariadne this is not Poseidon-handed Theseus. The thin thread of light snuffed out, dead, buried, as the door

closed behind. Earthmother dug-into feel as they crept, they crawled, they carried their heads high as headed down. Earthmother earthmaw mawmother spied as strode upon the scene the man-killer. Steady his hand! Blasphemous blade rose silver moon.

Strike!

The blade fell thunder swift sharp. The blade struck across the shoulder. The blade caught on the blackred embroidered beads of the collar details which, like chain-mail, bounced it right back into Andrei's hand. As if conductive of lightning, the knife burned itself out of Andrei's hand. It sent a bite of fire down through his palm down his arm. His fingers twitched — he let go of the knife. Farkhad struck him across the face, back of bronze hand against marble temple and cheek sending a gunshot of sound so unlike a hit on the flesh through the bowels of the earth. Sharp earthstomach pain. A growl a groan — Andrei's, Farkhad's, the maw, the grinding of teeth of the maw. Andrei grabbed onto Farkhad's arm to keep himself on his feet — his palm was smeared red and wet as if he had crushed berries in his fist, libated blood a venous scintillation. Farkhad tore himself from his grasp with the clacking of a joint. A weapon — a weapon! He was disarmed! Chest left exposed without a blade to guard it! Farkhad retreated to curtained darkness and Andrei lunged for the bar. Andrei's hand wiped itself on his thigh as he contemplated looking for his knife in the darkness, Andrei's other hand probed over the bar for anything — for glass. (Andrei's other hand flew to his cheek where pain hammered under the skin, cold against it but not quite soothing; Andrei's other-other hand held him steady on his feet). Farkhad had not booked it for the exit. He stood on straight legs between curtains, his left side dipped and dragging from the hit, from pain. A weapon — acidic, dirty, wickedness distilled, Andrei's own creation. He grabbed onto the neck of a bottle and squeezed. The liquid inside thrashed like a violent black sea. Where's he — here, there, he hasn't moved, kicked sprung up sprung forth. Dark waters that devored the boy with burning wings, devour this suicidal fool who stands there as he bleeds. Far from the sun, under the suffocation of chthonian night. Set alight by his own shamelessness and hubris. Farkhad the pursued let himself be caught — indeed he threw himself to Andrei's face like a striking snake like a charging bull. His nose struck against Andrei's chest — bone screamed against-under-through threefold painful bone as it broke. Andrei stumbled backwards, biting shivving skinning ache radiating from the clavicles-notch up, down, to the throat. To the bitten tongue. To the lungs the heart the bars of the ribs-cage that birds and people alike so easily flitted through. He choked. The red thread of Farkhad's flight dragged him back into fight. He cornered the man just by the alcove, just against the thick curtains that felt like sheets like a shroud like clouds as he prepared to hit / he raised his arm like Zeus harnessing lightning / mawmother spy, swallow, steady the hand of the man-killer / he struck!

From the skull down, across the face. Foundation of the town is bone. Bone yields to glass – skull-bone to glass, glass to shoulder-bone when striking once more. The reciprocated force of resistance thrashed through Andrey's arm so thoroughly and for a second he thought his elbow had popped out of place. His grip on the bottle-neck almost dissolved under the shock as it burst through his fingers. Liquor pours, and pours, and pours. Liquor runs red. Farkhad who stood stumbled, his knees bent, he fell, he fell again, dead.

As everything stilled, as the air slowly came down like burning snow and Andrei could lean over him, he saw how the bone had given out. Glass embedded into cartilage, muscle and skin; mosaic of green shards into the softness of clammy topaz. The girder of the browbridge had collapsed, the arches of black hairs had drowned in liquor and blood. The cheek-bone was shattered, the so-regal nose was bent out of place, cleaved in twain across its dancing-bridge. The mouth was open. The tooth was intact. The shoulder bled. Andrei let himself fall to his knees, one on each side of the dead man's thighs, and laid his head upon it.

Earthmother earthmaw mawmother close(d) on him. There was a thumping, a soft heartbeat. Not hers (not yours), evidently, it appeared to Andrei. He felt his own – it was his own. Steadier than his blade, steady, steady. Soft, dull, dreamy. His chest heaved. Here, there, this was done.

Andrei pushed himself straight and as his wounded hand rested on the man's hip, he sighed, he sighed. He began rummaging through his pockets. Soft velvet everywhere, except there – a cigarette case of bejeweled copper. Rose from the flat metal two embossed animals, curled on themselves, maybe asleep, maybe wounded. The eyes of one were gleaming dots of blue and green stones, those of the other were of gems a red so dark it looked brown. Opening it, Andrei found a singular cigarette and a lighter, its body heavy with naphtha. Full, it rang with the sloshing of seawater inside of a conch-shell.

Andrei brought the open case to his mouth. His parted lips found in it the thin cylindrical end. He pulled back, the rod between his teeth. He flicked the lighter and set it ablaze. The smoke was thin woven ropes of milky white as they crawled out of his mouth, as they rose in the warm silence. The takes the man's hand, the man's hand that, across his heart, tried to stop the bleeding on his shoulder, but it didn't matter now. Andrei takes the hand, and takes a ring from the hand as well. *You took so much from me*, he doesn't say, because the man is too dead to hear. *C'est de bonne guerre*.



What was it, there, that crawled? What was it that shivered like an animal shot? Andrei stood and walked to the bar; oh, hey, it was the bartender, eyes wide, mouth hanging open, hands red with terror as he tried to push himself in the darkness behind.

Andrei got on his knees. The man kicked reflexively, but did not hit him, for he didn't mean to. Can man keep secret? Can man keep curse? What a silly question: this is all they do. Andrei sent him away, alive. Andrei sent himself in his footsteps after a while, dead, reborn. As he left the subterranean final scene, he thought he could hear screaming.

*Le chœur est un seul homme.*

*Le c(h)œur est un seul homme.*

*Traverse perçant le cri du c(h)œur*

*Traverse perçant crève-cœur*

*Le cœur d'un seul homme.*

The rain battered his face, whipping, hot, spinescent. The wind howled in a tongue he knew so well, it welcomed him in a crushing embrace. He heard nothing but that howling, and his own heartbeat, and his own breath, and the chatter of his teeth, and the burn of his stolen cigarette, and the squelching sounds of his steps across the wetland as he roamed, as he let his eyes wander the belly of the sky, split close to the horizon by the blade of dawn, reddened clouds clinging to the lips of the wound.

And the imagined pleas of his brother, and his steps up the stairs, and his offer to come bury him, come bury him with me. And their footsteps across the wet moor again, and the sound of shoveling, and the sound of shoveling, and the sound of shoveling.

*Creuse une tombe — érige une tour;*

*bâtis greniers et caves tour à tour.*

*Une maison naît du flanc, s'extirpe d'entre les côtes —*

*Retire-toi. Retirons-nous. Voici l'hôte —*

*voici ce qui reste de l'hôte.*

*Voici ce que vous en avez fait.*

*Creusez.*

*Creuse, mon frère.*

*Car ceci bien je sais:*

*La cave est toujours en haut de l'escalier.*

And the sound of shoveling.

. h .

“Deformed,” Petr announced plainly as he poked Andrei’s topmost ribs where they rippled under the skin, in the hollow between clavicle, humerus and acromion. “It’s not just a bruise, it’s underneath — I can feel something. Structural cracks. Here—” Andrei gasped sharply as Petr pressed the flesh in, pain answering to the touch with a strike “—I think this one's broken.”

Andrei waved his brother’s hand away to assess the fracture himself.

“The arrogant fool...” he whistled. “Couldn't aim well enough to break my heart, so he will have—he had to settle for my rib instead.”

Andrei began to laugh. It hurt as he did, as air clawed at the split bone on its way out. He was laughing when Petr got on his feet and crossed the room to the sink, filling of it a porcelain wash-basin. He laughed still as Petr walked back, sat on the sofa tucking his legs under him, and handed Andrei the full dish and a clean cloth. Andrei dipped it in the water, wrung it and pressed it to his chest. 'Twas cold and wet like a bloodied hand. It dripped over his bare chest down to the flank.

The chimney fills with soot like a pierced spleen with blood, the damper flails like a wing in the burrowing-down wind, like a heart-valve. The hearth’s fire flickers like a dying breath, groans a death rattle. The ceilings bulge and cave like breath-afflicted lungs. The rafters shift like broken ribs. The ridge above bends like a beast’s spine, like an animal’s as it bows to drink from deep dark waters; the battens below curve and cup like fibula and scapula bones, bird bones, bird-boned soft, light, and hollow. The ceilings, of wooden eyes, follow.

Here, two mascarons were carved in the dark stone frieze that ran like a broken browline over the parted mouth of the fireplace, both painted a slick, oily onyx that dulled their features into hazy tricks of the light, and in(...) which Petr thought he could see his own face (...).

Upon the chest of the house, the breathing, heaving, sighs-wrung stranglingstruck bleeding-heart-dove woundedbird chest of the house, upon the flat thorax of the house, upon its stomach, wallpaperlining torn wetred redwet sweaty with seepthrough bile, upon its hips, its sprawling, roots mycelium capillaries veins tributaries legs its legs its bent legs kneeling its hingebones knees, uponthe house's flat, still warm body, he<sup>2</sup> found his own. The linen of shirts, the cotton of pants, the thin leather of soles could not keep the hatred out. It permeated cloth. It penetrated the smallest of open wounds on the skin. It bleeds into the bones — the foundation of the soul — to the bitter, spiteful marrow.

<sup>2</sup> *Inconsolable brother(s) in arms — whichever arms these could be — P. et A. gemini*

. ħ .

Here you are. I knew you'd be found. Here you are. I knew I'd find you. Andrei, you run fast. Andrei, your brother drags you down, slow — even if he didn't, mind is faster than matter, even if (t/w)hat matter(s) is you. This is how your masterpiece was built; this is how the soul survives a killing blow. Mind over matter like a man is above another — of all of its/his weight, entwined from the core down. Of a crushing knee against the windpipe, the pinned arms flailing like broken magpie-wings.

. ħ .

Petr had crawled to the bar — ran, crawled, gasped, his face was amorphous with a horror Andrei didn't even know it could carry.

“The cathedral is changing,” he panted.

“What do you mean?”

“*Changing*,” Petr hammered. “Things that he didn't build are growing in it.”

“How can you be sure of that?” Andrei muttered — he felt his face grow cold with fear.

“Because I know damn well he wasn’t sculpting *caryatids!*”

Past the spider-legs columns, bending the head past the vaulted gate, the twins tumbled breathlessly into the wide-open maw-nave. Past the transept, creeping deeper into the chancel, they thought they could feel the roof like a dagger in their backs. They stopped in the apse, and looked.

Gone were the Adonides Farkhad had freed from the dark stone, gone were their smooth ephebic curls, their strong legs holding up the weight of the balcony above with a shift of the hips, the sisyphian strain in their shoulders and necks, the delicate pain that permeated their features. Instead, carrying the entablature — indeed, *Caryatids*. Herb Brides, unmistakably. Smaller of statures but stronger of everything else, their marble feet planted firmly with unshakable resolve, they carried the balcony with straight arms like were holding up the moon. Andrei hesitated before coming closer — he wasn’t sure one of them would not begin to move. Those were no metaphors, those were no sensual archetypes: those were living women inhabiting the black stone, down to the beads of sweat down their arms and of blood from their wounded knees.

“*He never would have,*” Andrei whispered to himself.

He never would have, indeed. The man did not care for female sensual archetypes. *They have invited themselves — he had left the door open for them to invite themselves.*

Andrei swung on his heels and walked out to the parvis, catching Petr’s wrist in his stride. He hurried them to the cemetery; Petr’s pace picked up as he realized where they were going, and at times he was running in front.

Grave was undisturbed. Well – not quite. The dirt over it, at the foot of the tall black stone, had been kicked up, imprints of bare feet, hands and bony knees in the soft malleable soil. There were not that many more Brides by the cemetery than there were anywhere; they swarmed not the man’s grave like mourners, carrion birds or scattered flowers.

“Keep an eye on your dancers,” Petr hissed, but his voice was thoroughly devoid of anger — drained of it. It’d seeped through the bottom. He was slipping through the bottom.

Andrei’s eyes, wide and wild, darted to the headstone. “He’s already doing plenty of that.”

“He’d take that from you as well, wouldn’t he.”

Andrei’s gaze jerked and stalled upon his brother’s wide face. “What else has he taken from me?”

“You know this. There is not a second *you*, deeper inside, who keeps it secret from your eyes.”

Both turned their eyes to the Brides around. Well, they were surrounding them, alright. But when and where were they not? You could see Brides from everywhere, in this town. Both turned their eyes to the Cathedral. You could see it from everywhere, in this town. Both turned their eyes to the Polyhedron. You could see it from everywhere, in this town. Both turned their eyes to the grave. Then to each other again.

. h .

In all good tales, someone swears to die of sorrow. Nobody swore, in this one; indeed nobody ever had any desire to. Therefore, the tale was wicked from the start.

. h .

*I have something to tell you, says the house. I have something to tell you.*

*You have something from me. I want something from you. You have something from me. I want something from you. You have something from me. I want something from you. You have something from me. I want something from you.*

“Take whatever you want and leave me alone, for God’s sake, for fuck’s sake, for love’s sake if that’s what you wanted me to say!” Petr screams. “Take and leave!”

But that’s not what a house does. (That’s what a man does. Andrei was a man, now he’s a murderer. One, maybe, is more dishonorable than the other. He took and left — he tried to leave. He’s back here. Why? Because something didn’t let him leave. What? Something that didn’t let him leave. Why? Because it didn’t want to let him leave. (This is what a house wants. Doors are as much for the people outside as for the people inside.))

. h .

Then *dig! Dig! Dig!*

*Dig* and *beg* are only two letters apart — two out of the three, only one stands, only one stays, still, forever still.

Dig the grave, dig, dog, panting like a dog. Dig and find the body, black and red, the body dead. The body dead, the supple hand, all of its rings adorning it. All of its rings, including the one your brother stole, the one your brother has on his hand. Such is revealed Andrei is not that good of a murderer, and he now finds out he might be worse of a thief.

The house leaves its female host alone — lets her, blessed-and-bleeding-heart dove, sleep. This is because the house wants man; wants man like man wants man; like man wants to eat his own. (Wants, and would have, if man's bones had not been carved silene-stone, if man's muscles had not been marred lime-wash, if man's eyes had not been windowpanes, if man's neck had not been roof-ridge, if mullions not his nose-bridge. If he had not been this tall, and this tough to chew.)

. h .

The house should be angry, but it is not. It is something else entirely. The house should be hungry, but it is not. It is something else entirely. Its wood grain shifts, blinks, flickers around, searchlight through the empty rooms, over its own crimson skin, bloodhound; its doors yawn, hinges working with the cracking of joints; its pipes whisper and hum, its fireplace shivers; it laughs in a distinctly wicked way. Can a house be wicked? Yes, no, it depends; a house is only as wicked as its maker was. Yes, no, it depends; a house is only as wicked as the hunger in its walls (what men afraid call its ghosts) is.

Can a house be built evil? Well, can a man be born as such? Tell me, Andrei, is the taste of blood hereditary? Is your brother a carrier as well? Does it pass down from the mother like witchery? Does it permeate the marbled vessel of one's mind like a curse bleeding down to the roots of the tree? Oh — how insulting is such a thought. You're a man of free will, of desire(s): you are (mortal) man enough to choose to befall your knife onto man of your own wants. To serve his tongue, the wet, spit-slick membrane the tender meat of the inside of his cheeks, his fingers stripped of their golden rings, at the table of the curse-wielders, in silver plates. You believe they will spare you. Without hands, a house cannot kill. You believe this will save you.

. h .

It is not that the house *wants*. It is not that the man *wants*. It is not that the man of the house, the man that is the house, the man that is the house that is the man *wants*. It is that it wants to say it

wants, and then it wants the other men to forever be wrung by want. Its want, their want(s). To wonder eternally. What it wants, what they want, what they want it to want.

*What do you want?*

A house wants everything it can take. But a man... A man wants...

A house wants everything it can take. But a murderer... A murderer wants...

The house does not take anything from him<sup>3</sup>. This is worse than if it had.

<sup>3</sup> [...]

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