

L'Inconnu au Brûle-Gueule

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8180 words

posted on AO3 at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/36941260> on the 6th of February 2022.

Rating:

Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings:

N/A

Category:

M/M

Fandom:

Мор. Утопия | Pathologic

Relationship:

Stanislav Rubin/Peter Stamatina

Character:

Peter Stamatina, Stanislav Rubin

Additional Tags:

Men Going To Each Other's House

twyrine drinking between homies

Canon Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism

peter stamatina gives "worst kiss ever" is asked to... wait... do that again...

blink-and-you'll-miss-em mentions that Peter has self-harm scars. zero bearings but just in case.

not-really-anatomical not-really-gore not-really-dreams states

the vibes in this loft are DELETERIOUS

still full of love i promise

flimsy excuses to put two characters in the same room my beloved ❤️

Summary

When Rubin walks in, the Loft smells of ink, marble, graphite, stale bread, bitten wood.

It grows around him with curious eyes.

His host meets him with quite the same.

Notes

ok. see this with me: I'm serving you an "el classico" of a mix of P1 and P2 concepts and characterizations right. so see this with me: their p1 designs. peter's p1 house. use of p2 nicknames/generally burakh and rubin would be more like their p2 counterparts. p1 lore of rubin having gone to war. peter's loft has fucked up bed and fucked up sofa of p2 bit other than that it serves p1 energy.

frankly i call this one the "hear me out guys".

ok. have fun babes.

« Will you?

— I'm not a home nurse.

— I know this. And he's not a patient. Look at it more like... checking in on a sick neighbor.

— Neighbor? He lives on the other side of town. Have you *seen* his place?

— I've spotted the scaffolding from afar. Hey, at least you know where to go.

— You owe me for that, Cub.

— I sure do. Go. »

The Loft is a pulling place. Spotted from blocks away, it stretches to the sky like it wants to pierce its belly with the rusty blade of abandoned, split scaffolding. It seems to reach for the diving sun with long arms of metal bones. Rubin knocks. Not a sound is heard. The tenant is probably not on this floor, he thinks, spotting dancing candle flames through gaps in the boarded-up windows. He walks in and drops, the ground floor bearing an unexpected step. It feels like diving into an open mouth.

Rubin climbs the stairs without a noise. Each stride of his is swallowed promptly by the unwieldy quietude.

In the attic, the ceiling is strangely high, heavy and dark like a cloak muffling the noise and the tenuous candlelight. The transversal beams are an ash-grey, their girth the width of two men side-by-side. The gods seemed to have pulled them, like rectangular parallelepipedic puzzle pieces, out of great black trees the size of castle towers. The smells of ink, of paper, of graphite, of stale bread and bitten wood meet Rubin's arrival with a very much *alive* resistance. He stops, stills, tenses.

The Architect emerges from candlelight in the ways of ghosts. His face is pale, his cheeks blood-red. The two pins of black in the depths of his marble eyes encase Rubin in their casket-gaze.

Rubin swallows loudly.

« I was asked to check on you.

— It is very kind of whoever sent you, but I'm fine. »

But Rubin can see he doesn't look quite like it.

The Architect's head twists to the side repeatedly with swift hooks in the neck so he is looking at Rubin sideways, from the corner of a wild horse's eye. His upper body down to the heart level is elusive, shifty, turning away from him and trying to blend with the decaying walls, but his gaze holds Rubin's firmly, almost defiantly, bright and blue and icy in the sick yellow glow of the studio.

The Architect's coat frames his shoulders squarely, sharp, menacing. Coffin-shape where his sleeves follow his sides. What a sinister ghost. Rubin can see he's boiling inside, thoughts eddying, swirling, writhing with combustion-force beneath his ghostly skin. His legs bend and twist under the concrete casket of his black clothes like squirming lizard tails trying to escape him.

The loft, this big-small-big-small-big again elongated centipede of a room, crushes Rubin under a heavy, grey-matter weight. Silence is sharp, unstable, dangerous within these walls. Trying to cut through the growing stillness, Rubin attempts conversation.

« Let me guess », Rubin finally says, eyes drawn almost anxiously to a canvas leaning, discarded, against a wall, « you can trap people's souls in your paintings? »

He is joking, of course, but the silence that his host keeps hits him with an uneasiness that creeps up his spine. He frantically seeks a hint of playfulness on the architect's face and doesn't find any.

« Even if I could », the Architect then begins, and Rubin hears his own throat make an almost-comical gulping sound, « I wouldn't trap yours. I wouldn't want to trap yours. You seem to enjoy your freedom.

— I do, Rubin replies after a cold, heavy pause. I... very much do. » He almost says *thank you*.

The Architect is elongated, pale, stork-like in the way he stands and observes with prying eyes the newcomer.

« ... You've come all the way from the Warehouses, haven't you?

— I have. How could you tell?

— The dirt on your feet. You also smell of rust and herbs.

— ... Herbs?

— Dully. Softly, almost—if you'll allow me the word. (“Why wouldn't I...?” Rubin thinks, but does not say.) Like their scent does not dare to cling to you. »

Rubin stays silent. He watches as the Architect's eyes scratch an itch of his, climbing to his face, clawing at his covered arms and legs with an almost offensive, bold curiosity.

Rubin is not sure about how he feels about that look. About that gaze. About that unabashed attention.

In what feels like an atom-small lightning strike, the Architect's face seems to soften.

« May I offer a drink for your troubles? » He eventually asks.

Rubin hesitates longly. « Well... It was implied to me that I was to come here to make sure you *didn't* drink. Well—I cannot stop you either way, can I. »

The Architect's pale visage splits with a sharp smile. He's of the stubborn breed, Rubin can see it on the reddened canvas of his face. Still, a drowned playfulness tickles the pits of his eyes.

« I will not keep you here if you'd rather leave, he eventually says. But I must warn you: I'm poor company when I'm sober. Well, drunk too. (He stills himself for a second. Rubin watches how his face falters and falls. His smile crinkles as the words sour his mouth.) Ah, I'm poor company either way. »

Rubin hesitates on his heels. He's unwelcome, and the loft seems alight with a nervous, skinned energy. It feels sensitive. It feels on edge at the intrusion. It feels like it's trying to push Rubin out — and Rubin feels like its tenant is trying to keep him in.

Oh, he's lonely. He lets the loft speak for him, for his burrowing reflex, for his evasion habits.

Just his luck. Rubin is lonely too.

As he doesn't make an attempt to leave, Rubin sees his host's face lighting up before slipping out of his sight — walking back to him with a glass in one hand and a bottle in the other.

The green glass is tall, its short stem ribbed like the planes of the hands, bulging in the middle of his bowl like if Saturn's rings had merged with its body. Its rim bends upwards like an open lily flower. The Architect unceremoniously shoves it in Rubin's hand and pours twyrine. Its aniseed, biting smell jumps to Rubin's face and he almost coughs at its pungency.

« Thank you, Architect, Rubin manages to say between two whiffs of the sharp alcohol vapours.

— Peter.

— Hm?

— You'll call me Peter. »

Rubin catches the Architect's eyes trying to spy through him.

« Yes, he continues. Peter, and nothing else.

— I wasn't going to call you anything else.

— Good. Thank you. »

Peter brings the bottle to his lips — an automatism that pinch harshly at Rubin's heart, pity threatening to slip off of his face before he contains it back in — and guides his guest to a red sofa, tucked, as if it was seeking privacy, in a corner of the room. He almost comically lets himself fall on it, and Rubin follows, keeping a private distance between them.

« How long does he expect you to be here?

— Who?

— The man who sent you. »

Baffled by his host's unexpected knowledge, Rubin opens his mouth to speak, immediately interrupted:

« The leather-skinned—not like you, sharp-eyed man. Pupils wide enough to swallow the sun... not unlike my brother's. »

Rubin needs a second. Reconstructing his memory of Burakh's face in the way aggressive, restless graphite has built houses and bodies on white sheets discarded on the walls and floors, the details hit him.

« How did you—

— Eyes everywhere— not mine, not always. Twyrine's. The green fairy is fond of your friend, she clings to him. So. How long does he expect you to be here?

— He hasn't told me. I suppose I'll stay until someone comes looking for me... or until you kick me out. »

That's a lie. Well, not quite, not either.

Rubin isn't sure if he enjoys the Architect's company either — but there is something... almost *peaceful* in the decrepit loft. It seems to have calmed, settled down. Rubin feels its many eyes on him in the way he feels Peter's. The walls, the stretched canvases, the candlelight(s) seem to gravitate to him, insect-like, volatile, fleeting in the ways of moths, crawling in the manner of glow worms. The twirling, peppery fog of twyrine vapours is a welcome change from the clay and rust of the Warehouses and south, from the dull smell of blood that rises from the arms and fingers of the Guzzle. ~~The Architect~~—Peter looks at him with gargoylish eyes, his shoulders and arms stiff as rock. Nervous, reddened ridges mark his skin through the ghost of his shirt if Rubin takes the time to look (not that he is taking the time to look). He's stranger company than the workers roaming near Rubin's decrepit prosectorium or the Olgimsky son Rubin found conversation to be had with. Rubin can't quite say if he is *better* company. He takes a sip and twyrine smashes against his head like a hammer against a gong. Peter watches the drink rise to his cheeks and forehead, taking cautious sips at the neck of the bottle. His careful witnessing is owlish. Rubin feels like a petri dish.

At some point, Peter extricates himself from the sofa and walks to the empty tub, laying himself down with ritualistic reverence.

« There's no water in it, is there? Rubin asks.

— Not now. There is, sometimes, quite often: I like its coolness, I like its stillness, its matter-of-factly way to move and embody itself... Water takes the shape of the cup in which it is poured... It's a foreign feeling to me.

— To take the shape of the cup in which you are poured? Rubin repeats, starting to lose the plot.

— Yes. I... protrude. Like my stairs... like my Tower. »

He curls up into the porcelain cradle, and Rubin crosses his legs as he sits just by it. He... didn't expect the bed-tub element of having to check on this guy.

Does he even have a bed? He checks. *He has a bed.*

« This cannot be that comfortable... is it?

— It's not about comfort. (The Architect shrugs off his coat and folds it, tucking it under his head. Half of his shirt slips off his shoulder—*Oh fuck, I shouldn't be seeing that.* Rubin fights the urge to pick the fabric between finger and thumb and put it back in its place. He figures it would be more indiscreet than not doing so.) It's... cold. It's cold, and it's good. Twyrine... sets you ablaze. » Rubin anxiously eyes his drink. « She's a... devouring, passionate force... not unlike the angels of Doubt or Creativity, surely.

It's not like the warmth of the sun, it is closer to... hellfires. Not that I'd know! » Peter interrupts himself, mouth one of these distorted, sinuous smiles. When his face falls back, Rubin can read on him *not yet. One day I will...*

His arm rising out of the tub, Peter seeks Rubin's glass with the almost-empty bottle for a cheer. Rubin vaguely recalls being asked to make sure he's okay.

Rubin comes back the next day.

Peter's pale face meets his, paler.

« You're back, he says.

— Yes.

— It is getting quite scary outside.

— Yes. I assume you know why.

— The news travels fast around here.

— Especially with the ears and eyes of twyrine around the place, eh? Rubin tries to joke, to lighten up the mood.

— No need. My brother told me.

— Was he there? Did I just miss him?

— He wasn't. You didn't. »

Rubin doesn't quite understand. He isn't going to ask. Peter's voice is calm, almost soft (—if he'll allow the word.), as if trying to reassure Rubin of the thankfully-missed encounter.

« Have you come to drink?

— No. I've come to check on you.

— You weren't asked, were you? » Rubin doesn't answer. « I haven't left this place. » Then, with his characteristic, crooked, pulled smile that seems to escape his control: « Are you going to come here everyday? »

Rubin feels his own mouth being pinched like a cello string in a line. « Not if I don't need to.

— You didn't need to today. »

Rubin's stubborn silence meets the already-poured cup Peter places in his hand like a glass rose.

« If you can't think of your own liver, can you at least think of mine? He tries to tease.

— This is not about your liver. This is about your head. About your lips.

— ... What about my lips...?

— You need at least a glass to pry the words out of them. To distill essences of anything else other than your cold, stubborn sullenness out of you. I know how it goes: you want me to do all the talking. » He insistently pushes Rubin's hand into his own chest so the effluves of peppery twyrine climbs up his chin. « You're still and silent as a corpse, and I do not enjoy the dead's company.

— Do they come to hang out often? » Rubin jokes. When Peter stills and looks at him, the agitated seas of his eyes battering the chalk-white cliffs of Rubin's face, Rubin tenses.

« Drink, Stanislav. Drink, and you'll see. »

Rubin doesn't really want to see. Peter's voice commands him. It lacks any of the bark, the bite, the edge of his superiors at the army, yet it curls around his neck with a power unwordable. Peter is not asking him to get his legs blown off by artillery, Peter is asking him to drink. So he does.

Peter paces. Rubin sits, slouched against the cold porcelain of the bathtub. He watched Peter's steps, the crane-like blades of his legs articulated in strange places as he walks, careful, heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe — stiff, nervous. Plucking at the floorboard like piano keys, pulling sighs and creaks out of them like a doctor pulls illness out of flesh.

« ... Do you hear him?

— ... No.

— Then you are not awake enough. Drink, Stanislav. I want you to hear. »

Peter tears the bottle from his lips and pours Rubin's glass. A lightning-thought strikes Rubin's mind, something about transmission-contagion-spread-contamination, and yet he brings the edge to his mouth.

Twyrine tickles the loft awake. It/she goes through it like a fire spark up an explosive fuse, making it crackle and sing in its wake. She makes Rubin's head heavy, she brings it down, close to the floorboards. When Rubin succumbs, laying down, twyrine moves around Peter's voice so it can reach him:

« Do you hear him?

— What am I trying to catch, exactly? Asks Rubin, mouth woolen, words slipping out of him slurred and mushed. Do you want me to hear a heartbeat? Is this a... *Tell-Tale Heart* situation? »

Rubin pushes himself on his elbows, and Peter's vulture-eye is gnawing at him. He's impatient. He's... scared.

That can't be good, Rubin's mind manages to string together, he's probably delirious... He has drunk with me. Has it? He must've drunk with me. He must be delirious. I should be more mindful... I shouldn't drink so I can take care of him. Care for him. Whatever Burakh wanted me to do. That.

Rubin doesn't hear no heart, doesn't... *hear* much, except Peter's breathing. Twyrine seems to climb the walls, weave herself into the fabric of the curtains, the pillows, the throws. She cups the sounds of Peter's breaths and pulse into her open palms and carries them to Rubin, pouring them over him.

The loft reaches for him as a curtain caresses his overheating face. Peter is nervous. He recoils when the curtains brush against his guest's cheek as if he had felt the touch.

Eventually, Peter walks to, and kneels by him. Rubin can see how his cubic patellae push against the fabric of his pants. They look like two boarded-up dormant windows right by his face.

Huh? No they don't.

Peter picks the glass from his hand.

« What do you hear? »

Rubin tries to think about it hard.

He hears breath(s) (his and Peter's) he hears pulse(s) (his and Peter's (and... ?)) he hears winds, snaking through the holes the gaps the filled and emptied interstices of the brick. The pulling, drowning, loud, dull, mute, heavy current of the Gorkhon like a neverending artillery thunder. The pin-sharp stab of blade into flesh—but not just any blade and not just any flesh: the fine, salient dance of a ballerina balancing on knives-feet, digging into the supple wood of the stage; of an angel balancing on a needle piercing a finger... What could it be...? It sounded west, a hint south...

« Do you know about the Polyhedron?

— Tower?

— Yes.

— Big. Crooked. (At the word, Peter's throat wrings out a not-really laugh. A croak of acknowledgement. Maybe a word of acceptance of Rubin's unspoken apology.) Flanked by the Cathedral like a mother cow her calf... »

Peter's mouth contorted. Bitter guy, Rubin thinks. He won't mention the Cathedral again. « Yes. Her.

— Yours?

— Yes. No. (His voice suddenly becomes veiled, thundering in the ways of crumbling walls. Very low. So low, Rubin is not sure he even spoke. He spoke twice/not at all.) It depends in which angle you view it.

— Oh. Hum... I view it from the bridge. From the Kains' house... »

The curtain reaches for Rubin's face again. The curtain, maybe, or the evasive ghost of the untucked side of Peter's shirt. Fingers, maybe. Something for sure. Peter didn't make a noise and still sounded amused.

« Will you come tomorrow too?

— Will you get me drunk again?

— Not if I don't need to. »

Rubin comes back the next day.

« May I paint you? »

Rubin is not even done climbing the stairs.

« Not even offering me a drink, today? He jokes.

— I did tell you I wouldn't, didn't I?

— Not if you didn't need to.

— Well, Peter continues, I'm assessing if I do need to or not. »

Rubin weighs the words. Carrying them, they make the floorboards creak.

« Do you want me to... pose?

— Yes. » Then in front of Rubin's visible hesitation, Peter finds the worried quirk in his brows and laughs (or, well, attempts to laugh. It feels like a chisel hit against a bursting rock. His face struggles to move in natural ways under the hold of alcohol.) : « Not nude, if that is what scares you.

— Oh. »

Seeing forsaken canvases and papers where anonymous male backs, legs, arms and hands were interlaced like pits of snakes, Rubin had assumed. Not his business, he thinks.

Peter's unused bed is shockingly comfortable as Rubin settles on it.

Rubin comes back the next day.

He can pace the loft up and down without feeling the canvas upon which Peter lays his face pulling him to it. Rubin checks for distortions in his traits, for paint smears on his cheeks or neck, and finds none.

A normal painting. A painting that isn't eating him alive.

He can't quite say the same for Peter's gaze, this weird, drilling pale thing. The two marbles that oversee the coral plains of his alcohol-flushed cheeks feel like they could roll out of him at any moment. Like they're a push away from becoming waves washing ashore Rubin's legs as he poses.

Rubin is still not sure about that look. His heart stings. He's being seen. He's being witnessed. He grows so bitter he could puke.

« What's on your mind?

— Huh?

— Your face just distorted like crumpled paper.

— It's nothing.

— Not with these eyes, it isn't. »

Rubin frankly turns to Peter. He expects him to tell him to *stay put!* and *don't mess up the pose!*, but he doesn't. He's leaning over his easel. He's waiting for Stanislav to talk.

Rubin's mouth sours.

« ... Just getting mad at my own self for enjoying the... attention. That's all.

— How come? »

Rubin shrugs. « My whole life, that is all I ever wanted. When I assisted old Burakh, that's all I wanted. When I went into the army, that's all I wanted. I got nothing for it. Nothing for both. Got the knowledge that Burakh—Artemy, the son, the blonde, the one who sent me, the Ripper—was deemed more worthy of the name, of the inheritance, even after years away, doing nothing, doing stuff that does not have its place here — and a scar that almost took my head off. That's all I got. »

He stops himself promptly and grows mightily red. It's anger more than shame. He skirts around the painter's gaze in the hopes he won't catch him—he does, and Peter's eyes are a horrifying clarity of genuineness.

« Afraid of oblivion, are you?

— ... Yes. Yes, you could say that. »

Peter's eyes almost-soften with a shared grief. It hits Rubin in the jaw.

« I can't say I do medicine in the way you do... (Rubin gestures at the painting, the discarded canvases, the sketches and drafts climbing the walls like vine, the boarded-up window he guesses would overlook the weird, crooked-in-the-ways-of-Peter's-smile t/Tower.) Whatever it is you do. » (Rubin means a/Art, he means a/Architecture, he means the weird poetic ways his alive house curls around people, inhabited by an energy—mostly likely his, Rubin assumes—he means the contortion of his hands, of his twin-peak-lipped mouth, the weird, crude, crass ways he meets steps and glances like a mirror. Rubin is not going to tell him any of this because he's known the man for four days.)

He wants to go on about the hollow he inhabits, between the Kin's followed soul of Burakh, and the Kains' trusted doctor of Dankovsky. Of the place he has to push with his shoulders for. Of how his fingers smell of brass and iron from fiddling with that fucking microscope all day—but he doesn't. He thinks Peter reads it on him. He's sure of it.

Peter nods.

« You want to do something good.

— I do.

— Something great.

— ... That may be out of my league.

— Something to be remembered for.

— I can't paint.

— Not what I'm talking about.

— ... Have you changed your mind about *not* trapping me in a painting?

— Also not what I'm talking about. (Peter had barked out a I-think-it's-a-laugh before replying.)

— Then what...?

— I'm not *offering* anything, Stanislav, Peter says. I cannot give you solutions. »

He incites Rubin to get off the bed, and walks to his damn tub. Rubin follows, and sits by it.

« I do not give solutions. I give... more problems... to everyone. » He sounds bitter and sad. Rubin's heart hammers against his teeth with an agitated pity—an agitated... something, he's sure. « And I give you a place to air your grievances. »

Rubin laughs. (Laughs! With his voice! With his mouth a hilltop curve and his teeth bared.)

Rubin comes back the next day.

Peter is intoxicated. Nervous, *fuyant*. His eyes hawk-circle Rubin's face in the hopes of finding something of substance—in the hopes of finding substance.

When he lets his guard down, the Architect seems to unravel. Seems to falter, like a candlelight standing as too much melted wax, and not enough fire.

His steps gain a nonchalant swing, missing his footing more often—never falling, still.

His constricted, tight features seem to slip off his face, to loosen — his tongue, too.

« What do you think of patricide? »

The question slices the silence with a sharpness Rubin once thought only his scalpels were capable of. The answer brews in his mouth. The answer brews in his throat, chest, macerates meanly in his stomach. It crawls out of his mouth as if prying him open. He attempts to trap it back then forgoes it. The Architect watches the words pry Rubin's mouth open.

« Had I done it earlier... No, this sounds wrong. Had I done it *at all*, early, I may have had inherited my rightful place.

— Do you kill to advance your point?

— Do you? »

Peter's face is a red curtain. His mouth is tense. His jaw creaks like an ajar door as he works it open and close like an oyster shell. He's haunted behind the eyes — and in front of them, too. Rubin recognizes the twyre blades whose scent traps him in long, sharp arms. They're trying to tear each other apart.

« Do you want me to get someone? Your brother?

— Do you think he'd be happy?

— About?

— You know whose twyrine I drink, don't you?

— ...

— He knows. He knows it. He drinks it too. Hey. He takes the beatings and I take the liver pains. »

Peter contorts sharply as if stabbed in the flank.

Peter is reaching for the back of Rubin's neck. When he recoils, he takes his hand back.

« ... You're not going to ask about it? Rubin eventually wonders, voice low, and Peter's eyes are still locked on him.

— No.

— Why?

— You got it at war. I do not need to know more. (He thinks about it a little harder.) You didn't ask about mine, so I won't ask about yours. Secret keepers keep secrets, don't they?

— ... Are you making a legally binding offer? Rubin tries to joke.

— If I wanted to bind you in any way, I wouldn't have let you leave the first time you came here. You would inhabit my canvas. You'd be safe inside. »

Point taken.

Migraine pounds Peter's face in, Rubin can see it. His head is low, hanging from his strained neck like an overripe fruit on a too-weak branch. He struggles to keep his eyes open, and has to sit very close. He's drawing Rubin's hands. His sketches are ink-black with smeared graphite. His hold is heavy, crushing. His other grip is shockingly light as he cups Stanislav's wrist in his palm, weighing it, gaze crawling the ribbed plains of the back of his hands like inquisitive insects. Rubin can see he still has blood under his fingernails. Trying to scrape it off with a nail, Peter hisses a " *tch!* " that orders him still.

Peter traces the two hills overseeing his wrist — mount of Venus and mount of Moon; draws the calluses on each side of the row of his fingers.

« Beautiful hands, he finally speaks. Deft hands. »

Rubin laughs. It sounds closer to the distant rumbling of a brewing storm.

« Sure. Not quite like yours, though. Not quite... an artist's hands. »

Peter interrupts his following of the lines in the hollow of his palm.

« Why not? We just have... different kinds of artistry. »

Rubin would have closed his hand in a fist, but he'd have found and held Peter's fingers.

Rubin comes back. It's another day, or another night. It's all starting to blur. The Loft crackles-cackles-croaks-creaks with the exhaustion he brings. It feeds off of him—somehow. Rubin lays very still when Peter paints him. He has since then lost the top, and tucks the blanket under his hands as they rest by his thighs. He feels like a corpse. He is still like a corpse. The ceiling bends to him like an ash-grey, bone-white, graphite-black fairy over his cradle. It looks at him with the eyes of the wooden

beams. With all its gaps-mouths its hole-ears, its inconsiderate pushiness that bumps elbows with Peter, he a shocking, stoic, stunned calm as he paints.

The voice comes from somewhere. From everywhere. From the pillows under Rubin's head, maybe.

You're exhausted.

... I am.

I see it. It's so potent I could almost paint it.

Well, Are you.

Yes. It's written all over your face. Carved... Dug like a grave.

Mmh.

You have a grave face. A grave-face.

Peter, I'm really tired.

You can sleep.

I don't want to fall asleep. This place scares me.

... You're blunt.

It's the exhaustion.

Never said it was a bad thing.

I'm cold.

I see. Hang on just a second.

Rubin hears Peter's steps. They're coming towards him. He's coming.

Peter gently plucks Rubin's hands off of the blanket, and pulls it over his chest to his chin. His touch lingers. It's over Rubin's head. It's on his forehead, on his cheeks.

Your hands're cold.

Yes. Expected anything else?

Yes. For them to be colder.

You're of completely average temperature.

Ah... So, no fever then. At least I have that going for me.

Yes.

...

Will you fall asleep now?

Your place has eyes on the ceiling. Walls. Everywhere.

Yes.

...

We'll look away.

Will you sleep too?

I never do.

(He's said that a lot, in the days they've spent together, but Rubin is not sure if it is the truth. He has spoken about the Loft coming awake—which Rubin believes, dear god, the thing is everything but inanimate—about the angels of d/Doubt crawling to him, over him, on/in/within him, using the open door of his subconscious to slither in, leaving it open, agape, wide like a mouth or a wound, pulling out of him through it the threads of his knowledge, ideas, mind. Using the holes left in him to unravel him, to undo him like a poorly-knit sweater. It's hard enough keeping it at bay, the Architect had said: twyrine is corrosive. It bites and scrapes like the meanest of rust. You're left so easy to pierce, like a thinned sheet of iron... Rubin actually thinks that, maybe, he likes to watch him sleep and does not want to miss an opportunity. He's never going to tell him that.)

Wake me up if anything happens.

Nothing will happen.

Peter's hands are on Rubin's forehead, on the top of his head, on the sides of his neck. Not all at the same time, but pretty close. Rubin is... sure Peter could be everywhere at the same time. Like twyrine's eyes...

Wake me up if anything happens...

And nothing happened.

Rubin wakes up when a pin of sunrise slithers between two boards and hits him right in the eye. Peter is in his corner, tall, pale, statuesque, marble with blood for cheeks.

Rubin comes back—day—night—duskdawn. His coat is heavy with blood. His shoulders and spine bend until he feels himself ready to break — the body of his matchstickself catching flames that his head does not graze.

« I think Clara... Well... Let's say I am rotten enough to not regret laying my body down to make her throne.

— Rotten?

— Quite.

— From the inside or the outside? »

Rubin's face falls in dumbfoundedness. He needs a heartbeat to think about it. « ... Inside. From the inside out. And those that touch me... rot too.

— I'm touching you. (And he is. His hands are on Rubin's wrists. Then, on the roots of his forearms, just above. Rubin lets him.) I don't feel more rotten than I was before.

— ...

— Your gaze says that you do not think you could corrupt me any more than I already am.

— My gaze does not speak.

— Does not speak the same tongue as you, maybe. It speaks to me.

— ...

— I think it speaks to me because I listen.

— Right. and I don't.

— If you listened, you wouldn't be in my house. You wouldn't be near my bed. You wouldn't seek my ghoulish and unfortunate company. »

Peter's hands come to, come at him with an uncharacteristic, violent softness. They go for his arm first, for the meaty part of his shoulder. Rubin twitches and flinches under the touch like a hit dog. It is piercing like a biting cold. It is unspeakably delicate in ways Rubin is unthinkably afraid of, in painfully poetic manners, in rawish, ravishing natures.

Rubin shakes. Peter searches for rot with his crude, silver-beetle hands, everywhere and everything. He goes for the neck which is tender/throat which is tense, worries the organ pipes of Rubin's ligaments, pulling out of him a gasp punched straight out.

« Hey », Rubin calls, « Hey. » He has no idea what he wants to say. Peter loops arms around his shoulders.

His long-cold-white arms. His limbs-web. He weaves it around Stakh. He pulls him in a pathetic, bony hug. It lasts a split-second. Stakh pushes himself into the hug, wrecked, hungry, alit with an eagerness he thought the war had bled out of him. Peter presses his mouth to the back of Stakh's neck, wrapping himself snake-like algae-like wool- and hook- and fishing-line-like. He dips his tongue into the furrow of the scar — doesn't lick, doesn't linger: pokes it out almost playfully, as if just to see how it fits into the groove, how the sunken skin feels in his mouth, tastes. It tastes like salt as sweat beads on Rubin's neck, tense and taut and hardened like a trunk with the restraint needed to not let fear show through. Peter jumps, stumbles, reaches almost instinctively for Rubin's arm (it is offered to him). He squirms into the hold, a creature of milk-ink-blood shaping itself to Stakh's hands, unsure if it wants to rise-dip-flow-flee.

Rubin looks at him. Looks well. Holds his long, pale face in his ungloved hands like it could give him time to shape himself, to be structure-strong, to withstand the touch or harden against it. Looks at him. His astroid-Adam's apple his pentagon-palms his rhumb-ribs his lune-legs. He's stacked together, on top of himself, a half-haphazardly-stitched tower of shapes run through by tides electrifying, animal, nervure-like, root-like. His eyes carry lighting. His hair is thunderstorm-black. Rubin is dealing with a feu-follet. His cheeks are red. The hooked bridge of his nose is red. The triangle of his chest in the partition of his open shirt collar is red. Rubin cannot stop looking at him as if he'd vanish into the air like ink in water, smothering the whole room in the marble-red color of the shells of his blushing ears.

« How would you qualify your tolerance to alcohol? Rubin asks, as if he needed to fend off the weight of the moment as to not end up crushed underneath it.

— I don't tolerate it. It tolerates me. »

Rubin watches as Peter's Adam apple attempts to escape him like a blood clot, as his eyes scratch him, itch him, claw for recognition like a saprophagous bird rabid for carrion. His jaw is clenched with enough force to be a beartrap.

« Can you kiss me », Peter eventually asks, croaky, flat. His voice quivers low, like the rumble of a wall crumbling from the inside. « Can you put your heart into it.

— Not sure about my heart, Rubin says, but I can put my tongue. »

It's not very funny. He's not sure if he wanted it to be funny. Peter laughs, a sharp striking bout closer to the scream of a crow or a magpie. Then, he throws himself to Rubin's chest and steals the offered kiss right out of him. He holds his shoulders, the sides of his neck, his face and cheeks with binding, crushing hands, seemingly everywhere, arachnid, tentacular. He dives into Rubin's mouth like he could tumble into his throat, like he would, like he is going to. He is crawling-clawing-sprawling-invasive in the ways of climbing vine, of knotweed.

There is not an inch of him that is not tense. Touching him feels like attempting to disarm dynamite, like trying to pop an unexploded cartridge out of a rifle. He offers no resistance when Rubin pushes against him, parting his mouth, offering—not without a hint of anxiety, feeling like he could eat him, eat the red, shivering organ like a beating heart—a tongue that Peter welcomes hungrily, objectively a better kisser, but the bar was pretty damn low.

In Rubin's arms, he is too soft, not in a good way—too ductile, too amorphous; he's too sharp, too stiff, too concrete-cold. There is a middle, somewhere, that Rubin cannot manage to find, cannot manage to grasp. He's not even that thin, and yet he's bony, he's acute, aciculate, bones erected where they seemingly shouldn't be, trying to jut out of him like defensive arrows. Rubin covers him with hands, still. He can't seem to sprawl, can't seem to seep, can't seem to reach the draping strangle of Peter's spiderish limbs. He feels too simple. He feels cornered—quartered—everexpansive. How terrifying. How exhilarating. Peter's entire body feels clammy with an aniseed, liqueurish skin-film. This seems to cling to Rubin's fingers, to allow him ways through Peter, from one side of his lungs to the other, as if he molded himself around the given embrace.

Peter seeks him. He kisses with his eyes open — his forget-me-not-eyes his sky-eyes his ice-eyes. His fogged mirrors-eyes his red-cradled eyes his haunted-house eyes. He kisses with his eyes open like he wishes Rubin would tip and fall into them. He does. Peter's anacoluthic touch traps him, cradles him, interrupts itself over and over to wander him like he keeps getting lost for fun (he is).

Rubin is on his back — somehow.

Peter crawls up — from somewhere.

The crescent-moons of his fingernails draw the midsagittal line of Rubin's thorax from the notch of his collarbones down, clothes parting under the cut with the strong smell of burnt leather. Skin parting under fingers with the smell of—nothing, not much, the barest hints of twyrine (sharp high-pitched blade-thin strung wrung) and twyre (low blunt fog-like sprawling crawling). Rubin watches Peter's Adam apple making a grotesque jump in his throat before dipping down, as if the stuck piece of fruit had tried to climb out of him. Hesitating? He's parted him open. Rubin doesn't look down. He assumes it would be grotesque — yes, this is what he assumes, before the thought that this could be a twyrine-induced dream hits him; then follows the thought that they could have never kissed at all and

they just both passed out after talking, and he is imagining all of this, and this is mightily embarrassing, and this is mildly inappropriate, and in the unlikely case that Peter cannot read his mind it will take a lot from him to pretend he didn't dream of this when they wake up — but he doesn't look down. In a way, maybe, he trusts Peter. In many ways, he thinks, he shouldn't. The Architect is going to get into so much trouble for cutting a body open—not that it has to get out of this room, does it...? surely this can stay between them. like the kiss. if they even kissed.

The Architect is going to get in trouble for cutting a body open. Rubin is going to get into trouble for being a cut-up body. Peter puts his mouth to his, his hands conservatively placed right below the juts of his collarbones.

He's tart, he's bitter-biting, sharp on the tongue with the claws of twyre.

Herbs don't yield to Peter — herbs don't yield to Rubin either, the ashen-second, the missed opportunist, the should-have-been, the knife-in-the-ribs mishap. Rubin thinks something about that. He yields to Peter and to his wet touch, tongue, to the careful prying. Rubin thinks that mouths must be involved in twyrine production. Somehow-somewhere-probably. In the kisses of the Brides upon the warming soil, he assumes. In however the jaws of the earth split open to spit out grass. Peter's no Bride. Peter's no earth. Peter has a powerful jaw. It feels like a sentient bear trap. It holds its teeth back carefully. It's shy, for a blade. Rubin feels the need to be careful around it, for its sake more than his. Peter settles into his arms like water in the splitting arms of the Gorkhon that snake down south of the town — he's cold like it too.

« I don't see it », Peter's voice rings to his ears. He's very close. He's above. He has arms below. He has legs between. His birch-tree face is spattered with eyes all over, all for Rubin.

— Huh?

— The rot. I don't see it.

— ... Do you think you know what rot looks like? Inside, I mean. Rot when it is inside. You're not a doctor. »

Peter's mouth fits into his face, he adjusts the corners as he observes Rubin. He thinks about smiling. He thinks about holding Rubin's restless, shaking hands. Words cut through the lune of his pearl smile: « I'm not. You get blood on your hands, I get everything else. Rot, yes. Ink. Fungi. Ash. Embers. I don't see rot. You're not rotten.

— ... But you see something else. »

Rubin feels Peter's hands under—the skin of—his chest, below his throat and chin. « Well, yes. I see bitter pools of twyrine and bile. » A smile slices through his aspen mouth. « That's what you get for hanging out with me. ... I see my own face. That's what I get for looking.

— Don't be like this. Of course you'd be here. » Then, begrudgingly, and with a softness in his voice that he HAD to blame on the drinks: « You knocked. I let you in.

— You started it. You climbed the stairs to this crumbling house. To this weird ghost.

— I don't see any ghosts. I see you. I feel your hands on me. They feel pretty real. They're just gargoyle-cold. »

Rubin watches as the ligaments on the back of Peter's hands slither and squirm as he touches around, probes like a curious, blind animal. He watches his hands and is very careful not to look at what's beneath them.

« I don't think I am too cold, Peter eventually says. You're just scorching. You could burn my fingertips off.

— ... Why do you keep them here, then?

— Because I enjoy the warmth. » His face is, once again, split with a crooked, squinting, sincere smile. « My roof has holes. My doors do not close. My windows keep being stripped of their curtains and boards. It gets cold here. Cold, cold. You're delightful company, Stakh Rubin. »

And with that, he presses his forehead to his guest's. Rubin catches a glimpse of his ice-eyes looking at his chin-cheek-mouth before closing, as if growing restraint. Rubin loops his arms around his frame, around the linen pupa of his shoulder-baring shirt, and pulls Peter onto-into-in-somewhere within him. Rubin can feel the flailing bird of his ghost/host's heart against the raw meat of his raw chest and/or lungs. It slows down softly. Rubin feels how his breathing clings to the waning pulse. It feels like one of these breathing exercises they did in the army to learn to sleep under enemy fire.

« Hey, he calls before feeling sleep swallow him, hey... Will you stitch me back up? »

Peter levers his forehead against him to look down. He rises on his elbows. « ... I haven't thought that far. I haven't thought about it... I do not know how to do it.

— You didn't seem like the impulsive type, Rubin sort-of-laugh, seeing how he seems to fall asleep already.

— I am when I shouldn't, Peter croaks back, seemingly amused. Or when I should? I am. I just keep it well hidden... like an agitated crow I'd keep in my coat.

— I will do it. Do you have any needles?

— I have only my eyes.

— Do you have any thread?

— I can give you locks of my hair.

— It will do. I will do it. »

And with that, Rubin brings each of the two lips of his open sagittal wound together, bound by black string; and Peter brings his to Rubin's chin, cheek, temple, bound by the fact that he likes it. That it feels nice. He crawls out of his shirt, extricating himself from the pale, water-translucent pupa of the linen, and curls himself up next to Rubin, against Rubin, half-on and still half-in. He seems to fall asleep instantly, struck by... his own, platonic version of post-coital bliss, apparently. Rubin doesn't mind. He adjusts his coat over the both of them. The Loft seems to fall on him like a dismantled statue, and he doesn't have time to blink before it has knocked him unconscious.

He extricates himself forcefully out of sleep, slow and dense, thick like a simmered soup. Peter clings to him like a long, pale bat to a branch.

« I need to go, Rubin manages to wring out of his mouth. I wasn't expected to stay that long. Burakh is going to wonder where I am.

— You were where he sent you. »

A dazed laugh punches its way out of Rubin's mouth. He sure was!

« Don't do anything stupid while I'm away. Stay safe. Put your shirt back on, you will get cold. »

Peter barks out a sharpened-graphite laugh and, right as he gets ready to trot down the stairs, catches Rubin's hand to offer him a chaste baisemain.

« Mind the low door frame downstairs, he adds.

— I've gotten used to it. »

Peter sends him downstairs with a push of his head against his hip.

Rubin weaves through the streets. The scaffolding crowning the Architect's loft seems to bend and twirl, waving him goodbye, as he walks away.

It is late.

For a lot of things, it is *too late* .

Rubin doesn't sleep well. Rubin hasn't slept well in days. He's hiding. He's *in* hiding in the same way Peter's hands were somewhere in-on-inside-within in at some point — not that he can elaborate on the feeling. It simply feels the same amount of unspoken-blessed-disgusting-partitioning. The furthest and closest to Earth he's ever been. He sleeps on his left side like his weight could keep his heart silent and still.

The curtains move. The windows shiver. Ghoulish arms hug the walls and cross the room, slipping out of his sight. Rubin jumps up and frantically turns his oil lamp on. The flame licks the silhouette that sprawls, tucked in a corner.

Of course it's Peter. His elongated shadow slices the silence in half, then his voice does:

« Hello.

— You've come all the way here?

— Yes.

— Undetected.

— Yes.

— Are you sure.

— I am. I've slithered from pothole to pothole and from broken window to broken window.

— Sneaky like the Plague, huh? Rubin nervously chuckles.

— I'd say even sneakier, Peter replies, taking the offered hand of lightness. Like a lizard through cracked rocks...

— Why have you come? »

Peter's face falls. He doesn't look... sad, per say. Pensive, maybe. Torn. Avoiding the question like thread avoids the hole of a pin.

« ... I missed your light. »

Rubin eyes at the oil lamp at his bedside. Its flame dances, falters, thrives and dances again. It contorts in body-shapes. It contorts on Peter's body. He steps out of the shadow. He stays still at a threshold Rubin can almost see between them.

« You have a crazed gaze, Rubin says. Your eyes look sharp like silver hooks. You look like you want to eat me. »

Coffin-shut silence tightened around them, crushing Rubin's shoulders and throat in its ruinous embrace. Peter breathed deeply, loudly, his gust-exhales pushing open wide the mouth-doors of his hungry eyes.

« I guess I do. You could see it that way. »

Something ignites inside Rubin. His lungs feel struck like a burning match.

He feels how his capricious mouth tries to shirk his control, and quirks in coiled, contained smiles.

« ... Well, what are you waiting for? Are you afraid I'll give you a prion disease? »

He could give him worse.

Yet, Peter defies the plague with a lighting strike, crossing the room in one sharp, bright-white-ablaze stride, and seeks him. He seems to tear himself as he climbs-clings-claws the whole room, pulls the curtains with his black hair like a cocoon to hold them both in. Here he is, the Arachnid, Architect, the web-weaver who uses his hands for knots and nooses. He uses his many hands for crushing hugs. He's a storm Rubin can withstand. His two eyes are the pins of lighthouses in the rising fog. Rubin smothers the lamp and lets Peter crawl in the too-small bed.

« Are you hunted? He asks.

— Are you? » Rubin replies.

Peter weighs his answer in his mouth. His hands walk around. They wander the wall, they wander Rubin's stern face. « I may be. It'll take them a lot to get me. I do not leave footprints.

— Lucky you.

— You'll leave bloodstains. Your hands are red. »

And with that, he takes them in his own, and settles them on the sides of his neck, under his open shirt collar. He lies atop Rubin's chest, having slithered under the covers.

« ... Whose heartbeat is that?

— Huh?

— I hear another one. I hear yours. I never hear mine. Whose is this second one? »

Rubin listens intently.

It seems to come from deep, down below. It seems to come from right above, where their bodies meet. It wanders. It's somewhere. Something. Someone. He tucks Peter's head in the hollow of his neck and it grows louder. It could be the dance of the stars crossing the expansive plains of the sky. It could be the hammering breaths of the e/Earth. It could be...

Peter is sound asleep.

Roar the growing fires, roar the coming thunder. Roar the bending/splitting/rusting Warehouses and roars, too, the Polyhedron, in her mother tongue Stakh is not sure he understands (but he's willing to try).

Roars the agitated animal of Peter's heart trying to leap out of its cage (in the most absolute of silences, in a stillness only offered to stars).

Roars the squirming beast of Stakh's soul, sought and witnessed, terrified and bare.

Yes, roar. Until Rubin is rocked asleep too.