

Nyctinastic Martagon

by meiri/Creatorial

15213 words

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Rating:

Explicit

Warnings:

N/A

Category:

M/M

Fandom:

Мор. Утопия | Pathologic

Relationship:

Artemy Burakh/Daniil Dankovsky

Character:

Artemy Burakh, Daniil Dankovsky, and Rubin is here to third-wheel too everybody say hi to Rubin

Additional Tags:

Established Relationship

Post-Diurnal Ending (Pathologic)

Post-Ending Reunions

Men Going To Each Other's Houses

Catching Up With a Friend (GONE SEXUAL)

lecherous gazes exchanged at high-society galas and soirées

tfw his white-tie attire fitting him a lil bit TOO well if you know what I'm saying!

Sexual Content

well that's the point really.

this fic is about the animal that is a body. it's also specifically about them having sex for once.

it's also technically an add-on to a longer one but ngl. it's not needed for comprehension.

FIC HUNGRY FEED HER PARAGRAPHS OF COMBING THROUGH EACH OTHER'S HAIR

sorry for putting the delicate hand kissing in the sucking and fucking fanfiction are you mad at me before i get asked the tense change is intentional

Summary

"Burakh remembers the first time they had slept together (not like that, not yet); how they had tried to fit both of their selves side by side on Dankovsky's single bed — how they had managed, somehow. He remembers the electric feeling of skin against his; how Daniil's legs entwined with his like oaken roots, how the hairs on his arm brushed against him like hyphae. It's that, then, now, for now; it's something entirely different. They kiss now like carrion birds."

An invitation of Dankovsky's to a gala celebrating the triumphs of modern medicine (and his new work recalling the common fight against the pest) makes its way to Town-on-Gorkhon. Him and Burakh quite missed each other.

Notes

I had said this was going to come, hadn't I?

This fic technically has 95k, 25k or even 120k words of lore depending on how you count. It is lovingly nicknamed the "sex DLC" fic, and is both a direct continuation of [my latest fic \[on AO3\]](#) and a fitting part of [the one before that \[on AO3\]](#) if you chop off/move around/insert things just like I'm picturing in my mind (very easy, very doable). None of these are necessary material before this one but it won't stop me from trying to psychically influence you to read them nonetheless. Just take my words for any lore elements you might come across and vibe with me.

Historical disclaimer: I don't think the mass protests of the 1917 revolution erupted at 3 in the morning. I'm taking... we'll say "artistic liberties" here, in the gay sex fanfic. They also happened in March of our current Gregorian ("new style") calendar but February of the "old style" (Julian) calendar used at the time. I'm going with O.S. dates for the sake of historical accuracy (yes, in a sex fanfic about the purposefully-ambiguous-timeline WWII-weapons-having video game). TLDR; don't even worry about it dude.

Since he had left, the city had grown; it had greyed; it had swollen with soot, steam and gasoline. The scent of iron and steel lined its maze as streetcar rails etched the fresh asphalt like silver veins. Some roads were blocked off as were dug trenches to pour in new onyx tar, and Rubin and Burakh had to squeeze through the gap left alongside the houses on skinny sidewalks quite a few times.

How easy it would be to blend in with the buzzing, electrified millipede crowd. How easy it is to be someone, anyone, in this dense knot of human souls and bodies. (How easy it is to be a murderer and a thief.)

Above the tall roofs, the shapely clouds of pitch-black smoke rise over the outskirts' factories, dragging their weight against the underbellies of the tall skies. The relentless march of progress. The air becomes thick and heavy in the evening — almost as potent as the twyre pollen-filled air.

Burakh stopped once to witness a street's metamorphosis, the shedding of her pupa-scaffoldings as facades were painted-over, shaped and made, unmade.

"The world spins on, Cub."

Rubin elbowed him in the back, urging him on.

"God, does it spin fast."

They buried their steps deeper into the city, guided by a shockingly uncrumpled map Burakh had put in Rubin's care. Cold and bare past the ends of his fingerless woolen gloves, his fingertips brushed against the invitations in his pocket. The richness of their embossed and thick paper felt almost solemn, tucked away inside of his coat. He could recite by heart the content of the refined cards, etched with burgundy and black inks pressed into a delicate ivory background. It went as follows:

First was the name of the city, the date — the invitation had been issued three months ago, in the middle of December, Burakh had received it two months back; he had still hesitated for a whole month before deciding he'd go. Followed a thin, embellished separating line, then:

The University of Medicine, its benevolent Patrons, honorable Professors and accomplished former Students cordially request...

Here then, on a line of diamond-shaped dots, the Bachelor's handwriting; the ink was a deep black, the nib of the fountain pen had dented the paper with the punctilious, precise, slow curves detailing a name: *Artemy Burakh*.

The invitation continued:

... to attend a Formal Meeting, Cocktail and Dinner.

Will be had a Causerie from Doctor Guillaume Phillipe-Ronant from the University of Montpellier, Faculty of Pharmacy; a Speech from Doctor Friedrich Mattner from the University of Greifswald, Faculty of Medicine; and a discussion with Doctor Daniil Dankovsky, Professor of Anatomy, Thanatology, and General Medicine, about his Book The Legacy Of The Black Death: Rural Resilience Against A Plague. Copies will be for Sale on site. Appropriate Attire required. Cloakroom and Smoking Room available."

Stanislav had his own. It had been shipped in the same envelope as Burakh's, the Bachelor knowing of his whereabouts but not of Rubin's.

Dankovsky had signed the cards: his name, scribbled hurriedly and lacking the care he had taken in writing Burakh's, a seal that would let the two men in.

There was in the envelope, as well, two sheets of thin, white paper: one described in emphatic detail the route to the meeting place, the expected dress, how they would rejoin; the other traced the way from the train station to a hostel where Rubin could stay the night.

(It had not escaped any of them that nothing was mentioned for Burakh's accommodations, and they both knew what that meant. Rubin had packed cozy socks for his night in the dormitories, and he seemed pretty pumped about it.)

The hostel was this sprawling, rectangular thing, its facade flat and carved by many elongated windows. The desk clerk, a rotund young woman standing on a stool, had to tilt her head all the way back to look Rubin in the eye.

"I have a reservation here for... Rubin, Stanislav?" she began after having flipped through her ink-heavy, thin-paged book.

"Me," he acquiesced, raising a hand.

"You are not staying, sir?" she asked then, turning to Burakh.

"Oh," he blurted out, "no, I am not." He almost elaborated that he had another accommodation but kept himself from it just in time, realizing he didn't need to. Rubin threw him a sidelong glance and that grew pointier, sharper as he squinted.

The clerk stepped off her stool, pulled out of a packed wardrobe two garment bags and walked to the front of her desk.

"A doctor Dankovsky left these for you. Do you need to change now?"

When Rubin nodded for the both of them, she picked from the ring of keys at her belt and went to unlock the door to the showers.

The situation dawned upon Burakh as he walked past a mirror in the evening attire — he was to be a *guest* to one of these high-society parties he had for months imagined Dankovsky swimming through like in his most primordial element, and had observed from afar during his student years as his professors took part, shielded by their age from the war.

He flattened the lapel of his black coat, fiddled with the copper buttons-adorned cuffs of his white shirt. He was almost in awe at how well everything fitted him, and he rummaged through his memories for an instance of having caught Dankovsky measuring anything of him with tailor's tape — nothing came to mind. He thought about Dankovsky taking notes of his shape as he slept, and Rubin caught the smile on his face with hawk eyes.

"How's it fitting you?" Burakh asked away, eager to distract him.

"Bit tight," Rubin grumbled, and he moved his shoulders back and forth to gauge how far he could extend his arms.

"It doesn't look *that* bad for something he had to get tailored off a rough guess."

"You'll thank him for me."

They both stood in the mirror picking and plucking each part of the foreign-feeling attire — the buttons of the white waistcoat, the black ties, the pants legs that rode a bit too high on Rubin's ankles.

"Never felt that much like a penguin in my entire life," Burakh muttered under his breath.

"You've never even seen one," Rubin scoffed.

"That's not true! They have a zoo in this city, you know? I've lived here long enough to swing by a few times."

"Yeah? And what do they look like?" Rubin asked.

Burakh stuck out his arms at the sides like wide-set paddles.

"Like this," he said, and he took three waddling steps.

Rubin's nose crinkled as if he held in an audible, crunched laugh — like he was truly amused but refused to give Burakh the satisfaction of his joke landing.

They put Rubin's bag in the clerk's care — they didn't want to leave it in the dormitory room without supervision, as none of them knew how long he'd be gone.

They stepped outside and the air felt brisker, more biting, as if eager to test the resistance of their evening attire through the woolen coats they still had kept, taunting the fineness of the fabrics, slithering through the too-wide cuffs, the too-high pant legs. Burakh held his own bag, full of the clothes he had changed out of, against his side; it was a meager protection from the iced breeze, but better than nothing.

They hurried forth, then.

The place was built up against the University of Medicine — they shared a wall like conjoined twins. (Burakh shook the thought out.) It stretched half its width and a bit more than its height; all the lights, inside, were on. A crowd gathered by its wide doors like cobalt-and-ivory-clad moths to a flame.

A young woman in a dark, scholarly blue dress was by the entrance, checking the invitations; regardless of the crowd that pushed to get it, she still filtered in guests one by one, guiding them through a narrowing passage between a small table next to her and the other side of the wide door.

Eventually came Burakh's and Rubin's turns. She stared at them with a pin-prick gaze like she expected them to know the codes by heart. Burakh fiddled with the invitations in his pocket and handed them to her. She stacked them on the rigid, closed booklet she kept in her grasp and ran her eyes over the cards.

"I'm Burakh," Burakh said, "and that's Rubin", he added with a gesture of the thumb. The young woman trailed her gaze across the burgundy ink. "Guests of Doctor Dankovsky?"

"That's right."

She nodded then; she flicked open a flat recipient of ink displayed on the table, picked from it a wooden-handle stamp, and — thump thump — cacheted both cards swiftly.

"Cloakroom is this way, sirs," she pointed as she handed them the invitations back. "Follow the others."

"Thank you."

And others there were.

The entrance hall was stuffed with coming-and-going guests. The age range mostly swung older than the both of them, and they navigated amongst patterns of grey-hair losses.

"See how many people are bald here?" Burakh leaned towards Rubin. "You won't feel so alone."

"If it wasn't for the heartbreak I'd cause our host if I did, I'd kick you out in the cold to freeze to death then thaw."

There were a few ladies by the cloakroom, shedding their heavy fur coats and hats to the care of the three attendants. Burakh thought he recognized one of them as a classmate — her name he couldn't recall, nor recall if he ever knew.

Burakh discarded his bag and shrugged off his cloak, finally — unburdened by the weight of wool, the silk of his shirt seems to lift off his skin like fluttering moth wings. The cuffs lower and fit in the hollows of his wrists; the black, smooth linen of the coat seems to slither down his shoulders and arms like a whisper, like a graceful ink spill. The lapels of his piqué waistcoat breathe off his chest and settle back like *mirabilis jalapa* as they walk into the first room past the hallway and a subdued, golden hue takes stage, voracious and calming.

A sense of sartorial harmony washes over Burakh, and he's suddenly aware, in some way, of where the pride the Bachelor took in his dress could have come from. In the sea of silhouettes, of white-waistcoats and shiny shoes, he feels like he doesn't fit still — but feels at least handsome doing so.

They wade through, making their way to the widest reception room — there is a second where Burakh cannot breathe. Everyone is close together — everyone is clogged together. Bound at the shoulders like molecules, like particles; the air feels suddenly denser, hot, thick — deadly. Rubin catches the panic on his face as it drains of its blood, and he elbows him in the side to spur him on. Once past the bottleneck, Burakh lets out a long, wrung breath. He composes himself.

"So do we just pace around until Dankovsky finds us, hoping we don't get questioned on who we are?" Rubin asks, imitating guests around and slipping the invitation in his pocket.

Burakh imitates him. "We might find him before he finds us. Keep a lookout from up there, will you?"

Burakh feels the heel of Rubin's shoe attempt to flatten the bridge of his foot.

The room, left to expand like a loud, long breath, feels neverending. The ceilings are lower than those of the ballrooms painted in centuries past; its lights are dimmer, more intimate, maybe — candelabras and chandeliers cohabit with a low, ochre electric buzz. Its colorful wallpapers stand only in panels as it is, inch by inch, painted over, sobered. Burakh still wonders how Dankovsky, averse to obsolete and primitive mores and antiquated ways of life, accepted to find himself in such a still-old-fashioned place — and accepted with joy, Burakh knows, as he had told him in one of their correspondences.

There is no music; just the brewing hum of discussion, a swelling fluid in the stuffy room-lung. No music — and no Dankovsky. Burakh looks around, sifting through the expanse of balding grey scalps, jaw-reaching sideburns and imperial mustaches — so last century! — in the search for a clean-shaved face and black hair.

It finds him before he does; the voice catches him off-guard.

"Burakh."

No exclamation, no scolding; an almost-solemn delivery. Burakh turns on his heels. The lightness on Dankovsky's face jumps to him like the kiss of the biting cold.

Daniil looks tired, yes: his lids are heavier, his eyes cradled a blue — but there is delectation in his stare as it crawls up to Burakh's face, hooks his gaze in. A smirk toys with his lips — the one he's always had, with something tinting it just a little bit more.

"I'm glad you could come," he says before Burakh has the time to greet him back. "Thank you for tagging along too, doctor," he adds for Rubin.

"No problem. I wasn't going to let him enjoy a cocktail all alone."

Dankovsky's smile splits with a flash of teeth. Burakh looks at him as the buzzing of voices grows louder, denser around them — or maybe he is paying less and less attention to its distinct pieces as he observes Daniil, picks all the little details on him, eager and breathless to find himself in his shape again. (To find Daniil as a shape again — tangible, reachable. All the now-sharper angles of his face, shoulders and arms, he could extend his fingers to brush.)

His tie is white unlike their own; it elongates his pale neck as it carries his determined, robustly at-ease head. He wears white gloves, this evening — it is almost jarring to see. The ivory of the fabric seems to draw out the shape of his hands, and the fineness of the silk accentuates the leanness of his fingers, the bony protrusion of his middle knuckles, the prominent writer's callus.

Burakh eventually catches his breath. "You come here often?" he asks, gesturing at the once-painted ceilings, at the niches in the walls where likely used to be hung tall paintings.

Dankovsky throws him a playful glance. Rubin steps away pointedly to observe waitstaff butlering all sorts of wines on silver trays.

"Not like—I meant... Do you do these sorts of things often?"

"I used to," Dankovsky begins. "I stopped being invited when my research had me blacklisted. Then, with the publishing of the book, I've become an... esteemed guest again."

"You've managed to finish it, eh?"

"Sure have. (*He chuckles.*) You didn't think you'd see the end of it, now did you?"

"I wouldn't say that. I was surprised you finished it *so soon.*"

"Me too. I felt like a possessed man. I've told you."

He had. At that, he closed his fists a few times, as if trying to banish a persistent wrist-strain. For months, he'd sent Burakh letters — week after week he offered him glimpses into his writing. Week after week, he tucked pieces of it between the folds of his letters, passionately updating Burakh on the shape chapters were taking.

"... Where can I buy it?" Burakh asks.

"You didn't think I would make you *pay for it*, did you? I have one to gift you."

"Do I get an autograph?" he laughs.

"Evidently." (*He doesn't laugh anymore.*)

With a wave of the hand (the white-silk-gloved hand; the dove-like alive thing), he insists the two men follow him.

As the Bachelor crosses the room, guests converge to him like waves to rock — retracting swiftly all the same after being greeted. Burakh is unsure of the hierarchy; some don't-quite-bow to Dankovsky, others he doesn't-quite-bow to. A hitch of the head, up or down, is a formal signal of humbleness one way or the other. Burakh struggles to fit himself in these rituals — it strikes him that Dankovsky is carving space for him as he follows in his wake, his ink-silk-swathed shoulders like wavebreakers in the sea of strangers.

Burakh sees how much Daniil is woefully at ease in this *soirée*; he moves between people like a soft breeze between tall black cypresses. His voice is as airy, enveloping, ungraspable in persuasive, suave ways. There are talks of the war; recurring, repeating, haunting the mouths of those who speak its name like they are trying to exorcise its presence, to harden the tall walls that keep them safe from it. There are talks of a revolution; it seems to creep into the very building. It's spoken of like the same ghost the war is, and Dankovsky speaks of it back with an almost disconcerting elation. His voice swell emphatically — a choking bulge, his own heart in his throat. Oh, he awaits it, doesn't he? There is an irrepressible longing to his words — that Burakh alone notices. Some of the guests appear fazed by the swift gestures of his arms, his passionate words — yet they nod, as if charmed.

He walks the place with a subdued, elegant theatricality. His head is high, his neck straight, if a little stiff. Here he is again now: *Daniil Dankovsky, Bachelor of Medicine*. He wears the name with a poised pride, dons the mask with a disconcerting aplomb, a reassuring confidence. He

triangulates the discussion between Burakh and Rubin and other other guests, acts as a conductor, a vessel, a binding agent. Burakh notices how easily that mask slips when he talks to him, almost candidly unguarded, assured still; how with barely a hitch of the head he shields this directness from Rubin's eyes — two-faced, multimorph, fascinating. (Burakh feels his own heart swell.)

There are people the Bachelor would like them to meet, he says, and Burakh jokes that he has seen enough of his friends. (Well, he had met two — one of which he wasn't sure wouldn't kill him for the murder of his child, or whatever the Tower was to him; the other he wasn't sure wouldn't kill him for the grief he inflicted on his brother. And those two were, Burakh thought, enough.) The Bachelor laughs back — the light-heartedness lingers, and it strikes Burakh that they're bantering, now — still — again — finally; all at once somehow. He refutes: *old enemies*.

He spots them and orders the two to follow him.

They do. Rubin trails behind — for a second, Burakh feels like he's following Dankovsky all alone (like he's taking him dancing).

His eyes catch the seashell-stripe of pale neck above the white collar of his shirt, the subtle hollow right at the base of his skull, the feathergrass black hair that trickles down from it onto his nape. It takes so much out of Burakh to rein in the urge to lean in and touch it, kiss it, taste the skin and its salt, feel the brush of stipalike follicles against his cupid's bow and chin.

He refrains — Dankovsky brings them to a group of four men. They stick by each other like a tiding of magpies, their owl-like visages are etched of wrinkles and adorned with peculiar facial hairstyles. They move as one when the Bachelor approaches, closing the gap.

He introduces them with a formal gesture of the hand that seems to please his crowd deeply. They have come from *Ruperto Carola*, Medical Faculty of Heidelberg in Baden-Württemberg. A solemn nod is shared in greeting, the very name seemingly warranting ceremony — and maybe it does, for all Burakh knows; he grows pale under their unwieldy, ice-grey stares. (He nods like he knows where that is.)

"I warned them you might not come," Dankovsky adds, and the men coo a shared, guttural laugh, as if the Bachelor had said something so pleasantly silly that they only could. "They are glad you could be there," he finishes, and his small audience nods again, in tune with the Bachelor's words, all pulled on by the same strings of his composed, formalistic sentences.

"We know you, then?" one asks. "Physician? Professor?" His accent is potent, chest-deep, drawing sharp lines between syllables as inflections hover above syllables.

"I am a provincial doctor," Burakh begins quickly, as if needing to justify himself. "My father was one too. He taught me a little of the trade before sending me here to study."

"Where have you two met, doctor?" the man then asks Dankovsky.

"In the province," he replies. He has a knowing, calm smile — as if waiting for his interlocutor to figure something out.

All four men, in concert almost, pout reflectively; Burakh is in awe at how their mustaches, like fuzzy spiders, move and contort above their pinched mouths.

"You're the colleague of the novel, then!" one finally exults, and Burakh's eye twitches. He turns to Dankovsky, and his smile is wider, looser, as if relaxed. "Burakh! It's Burakh, isn't it? We know you more than you know us. Honored to finally meet you!"

Burakh feels some kind of *deja-vu* scratching at the back of his neck. "It is. Honored as well, sir. Sirs."

The conversation turns to Dankovsky's account of the plague, which Burakh grows curious of; to his feats, to their combined feats.

They mention his father, often, a lot, praise him — praise the ghost Dankovsky saw, translated, transubstantiated, wrote, which was seen and translated and transubstantiated again. Burakh's heart stings. The dissection of the still-warm linen that is his father's memories make him grow pale, his hands clammy. He casts a glance in Dankovsky's direction — he is not quite apologetic, but his lips have thinned in a sobered reserve. His audience's attention turns to Rubin, who is asked at his turn if he is *the other one* who trained under old Burakh. Stanislav seems more at ease discussing the matter — Burakh still saw how hard his jaw clenched when the name was brought up.

"It was a very empirical approach," he retales, catching the men's attentions, "based on long-established myths... There is, after all, a little bit of truth in each of these fictions."

"... And a little bit of fiction in each truth!" adds one of the crowd empathically. "I'm sure, doctor, that there are things you haven't written in your book."

"I've spared readers some of the more... melodramatic details of the personal lives of the townsfolk. For their sake, really. Ah, and a few more things I have kept to myself."

His voice lingers on, dissipating in a sibilant trail, a silken thread from his mouth — Burakh follows it and finds the smile that it wove into existence subtly, and the confiding eyes on him above.

"I have annotated copies for you gentlemen, in fact," Dankovsky says pointedly, and a shiver of curiosity seems to course through them. "Allow me to go fetch them — I stored them away so that they wouldn't get mixed up with the other ones."

"Do, colleague, do!" one replies, and it hits Burakh that it is the first time he hears any of them call him colleague. But he is, he is.

Burakh's gnawing wish to learn how the previously shunned and blacklisted Bachelor climbed up these men's esteems so fast has him after Dankovsky as he leaves. (There seems to be a line thrown here.)

"Want me to come help you?" he asks — meaningless, meaningless: the Bachelor wouldn't need his help to carry four books; this is about something else.

(There was.) "Come, then, and let us talk."

They walk away, leaving to Rubin the care to make conversation; he doesn't seem to mind. It strikes Burakh, like a dull blade in the back of the neck, where Rubin has his scar, that he likes being heard, he likes being listened to. Burakh feels less guilty leaving him with strangers. He follows Dankovsky.

The Bachelor has cut his hair, or had his hair cut; his ears are cleared and bare now, tinted pink at the outer riblike edge from the February cold or the stuffy warmth of the room. The bangs fall above his eyes, their ends merging with the bushes of his eyebrows.

Oh, Burakh is tempted, *tempted*; he's starting to understand the naked fools in the Garden of Eden — he's tempted enough for two.

"I'm surprised you'd hang out in places like this," Burakh eventually says. Dankovsky barely turns to him, Burakh sees the curtains of his lashes from a subtle angle.

"How come?"

Burakh shrugs. "Old-fashioned. Dated. Backwards"

Dankovsky seems to think about his answer longly. His steps slow. "Maybe I seek to indulge in them before they disappear."

"How so?"

"There've been talks of a revolution. Have you heard?"

"I have tonight, not much before. I've been... pretty busy"

"Me too." Dankovsky shrugs. "I guess that's what these parties are good for, then... Keeping a hermit updated."

"I wouldn't want to have them as my only source of news."

"Me neither."

"The wines must get old after a while."

Dankovsky laughs frankly at that. Burakh's eager eyes catch how his neck stretches over his collar, exposing more of his pinkish skin. He feels his galloping pulse in his throat. He could feel it thready inside of his lips, pulsating like an ever flowing tide of words.

"I'm also surprised that you'd be invited here at all," he eventually composes himself. "You've talked about being ostracized and repudiated for your work, I remember as much. Do they like you again now? Did your book put you back in their good graces?"

"Man is a fickle thing," Dankovsky begins. "Swayed so easily by barely a breath if he doesn't stand his own convictions. And in milieux like those... convictions are rare."

"... And you consider yourself a man of convictions."

"That's not what you would call me, and you know it."

(He's right. He'd call him stubborn.)

"Men like them need heresiarchs," he continues. "Every sect does. Every believer flirts with heresy closer than he'll ever dare to admit — they construct themselves as dam walls against it, keeping the people safe from its flood. Agitated waters like me are vital to their construction as sound vessels. They tolerate my presence and even my pursuits now that they can learn from them and find that the opposite is not true; soon I'll do something they'll dislike again... and I'll be shunned once more."

"You have plans to do that, don't you, erdem? You'll have them ostracize you on purpose."

Dankovsky chuckles. "I like the liveliness."

"You like the *chase*," Burakh corrects teasingly.

"It keeps me busy!"

"Right? because God forbid you have some time to yourself," he snickers in turn.

"God forbid, indeed." Dankovsky has turned serious. A hint of somberness sweeps over the plains of face like a rolling cloud. "The chase, the hunt, the research... They all keep one's spirit alive. Keep one's spirit alit..."

Burakh remembers the flames of Thanatica — the hot breath of fire hitting his face like waves a cliff.

He interrupts his thoughts (and Dankovsky's) promptly:

"I see your colleague is enjoying himself", he says, pointing at Rubin by the buffet table."

"My colleague? He's yours too."

"He's more of a... Cain to my Abel, so to speak"

"Has he tried to bash you with a rock?"

"... If I tell the truth, will you be mad at him?"

The Bachelor's mouth thins with a worry Burakh finds almost endearing (oh!). "That... would depend of the truth"

Burakh barks out a laugh — loud enough that heads turn to him.

They make it to the room tucked away — Burakh feels like they've walked for hours, but he can still see Rubin's head peeking above the crowd not that far away. It must have been a closet, a pantry, or something of the sort; the ceiling is slanted as it seems to stand under the stairs, and the wallpaper has not been torn. Its colors are vivid from the little amount of light it must have received. It is big enough to fit a dinner table, still; upon it are the prized signed copies and more empty glasses for the guests.

"Do you want me to turn the lights on?" Burakh asks.

"No," Dankovsky replies dryly. "Come closer, will you? I need you to pick up these two for me."

He doesn't *need* him to, does he? Burakh steps closer and approaches him, trying to catch a glimpse of his face as his back is turned to him.

Dankovsky is pensive. Burakh is *tempted*.

He reaches out — he pinches without pulling a strand of hair swaying above his ear like a wayward blade of grass. The lock is thick, the ends do not split. The haircut is recent. Burakh could almost feel himself blush thinking Daniil spruced himself up for him. His hand slips away and Dankovsky catches it. Face to face. Stumble-forward. Caught glimpse in Daniil's eyes; they're midnight-black in the tiny storage and swallow the golden lights of the reception room that feels so far away in copper flecks against their velvety depths. He throws himself against Burakh's chest and grabs his face with both hands; he tugs him down and smashes their faces together with a wrecked kind of want.

Daniil missed his mouth in the dark and landed closer to the corner of his nose, miscalculating the force of his own pull; he's on his tiptoes for a second and not the next; Burakh has to bend over to harness the strength of his fiery kiss — it's a delightful one, and he wraps his arms around Dankovsky's waist. The top of his head grazes the slanted ceiling; he forces them to part and kisses him back properly. His hands itch with suppressed appetite and he finds them crawling up Daniil's back, chest, to his collar to pull him up. Dankovsky tears himself away and Burakh fears he fucked something up.

"Do not touch my shirt," he says — he breaths against Burakh's mouth (and he figures he probably didn't fuck up *that* bad), "you will wrinkle it. We wouldn't want our guests to start *discussing*, would we?"

"Oh, I'm sure they're discussing already, erdem."

"Don't be foolish. Surely, two colleagues who've been through so much by each other's side must have a lot to talk about." There is a lightness in this voice that Burakh finds impish, mocking, almost; lascivious and hungry in the way he's so willing to lie to the others. (Burakh realizes he only cares *a little* about the wrinkles on his shirt.)

Dankovsky steps back, swift, theatrical. The tail of his coat fans after him like raven feathers: he seems to take flight.

"Hold these two for me," he says, and hands out two of the four books for Burakh to carry. "We wouldn't want them thinking I brought you there for no reason."

"We wouldn't, indeed," Burakh chuckles, and Dankovsky waves him out so he can follow.

He lets the Bachelor do the talking once they've rejoined the group. He leans over to Rubin.

"What have you got there?" he asks.

"Snack." Rubin replies. He takes another bite. "There's salmon and sour cream."

"Can you get me one?"

"I'm not your butler," Rubin scoffs, "you get your big legs to the buffet table and you get yourself one."

"I was going there anyway," Dankovsky interjects once he finishes distributing the books. "Gentlemen, it's been a pleasure and an honor to have these few words with you. I hope you enjoy the rest of the soirée." They greet each other back and forth, exchanging formalities like cards in a game, each trying to pull an ace of reverence or humbleness out of their black sleeve. Eventually, Dankovsky cuts it short: "Rubin, I assume you can entertain yourself?"

"I will," he says. "I might go get a smoke with these gentlemen." He didn't mean those of the Bachelor's audience, but they still acquiesce one after the other. Eventually, all four and Rubin make their way to the smoking room. Burakh watches as Stanislav pats his pockets, miming realizing he "left his cigarettes in his coat". He's offered one graciously — that was the plan.

They walk — they drag to the buffet table, so slow on purpose. Burakh catches his eyes gliding up the raventail of the Bachelor's coat, across the black feathergrassed fields of his nape, the back of his skull, the peeking coral-shapes of his ears—again. He catches Daniil looking back at him.

"How have you been holding up?"

Burakh laughs. "That's my line, erdem."

"Is that what you're going to call me all night?"

He pouts. "... It might be."

Dankovsky is pensive, then a smile involuntarily tugs at his lips. "Ah, I don't mind. I could get used to it."

"Didn't you already? I called you that a bunch."

"You did, but I didn't know what that meant. Didn't get to... *(He reflexively brushes his tongue over his lips. Burakh feels himself burning under the collar.)* savor it."

"You just thought I was calling you an asshole."

"I just thought you were calling me an asshole."

They grab canapés; Burakh can see the Bachelor doesn't want to hold his with his gloved hands, trying to avoid crumbs of brown bread or drops of eggshell-colored cream on the silk. He unceremoniously eats in two bites and attempts to elbow Burakh in the ribs when he laughs.

"I could get used to these appetizers..."

"You could, couldn't you? If you have no other reason to come to these receptions, come for the food."

"You act like I don't feed myself," Burakh replies, chuckling.

Dankovsky turns to him. Looks at him — looks at him well. His dark eyes wander the planes of his face, scraping lightness off it. His gaze pins itself to the dents in Burakh's cheeks, to the darkened skin under his eyes. Burakh runs a finger where the hunger of these twelve days had hollowed him out, where the pest had grated meat off his bones like it does the soul out of the body.

"Maybe I could use a beef stew..." he eventually concedes.

"You haven't made yourself one yet? With all the meat your town produces, I imagined you had gotten to it already."

"Didn't have the occasion." (That's not quite a lie. That's not quite the truth. There were still people to bury — some houses are still inhabited by ghosts, red, raw, skinned. The sight of meat makes Burakh's stomach churn.)

"I'll make sure to only do something that'll get me shunned *after* I've received enough royalties to treat you to a restaurant," Dankovsky says — he says low, slow, his voice travels to Burakh like a pointed arrow. Rubin didn't hear any of that.

"Oh, a Capital dinner," Burakh teases. "Tongues will wag!"

"Let them wag — these starved dogs... Maybe that'll distract them from my research."

"So?"

Burakh chews longly — longer than necessary. "Holding up better than I thought I would. Except on the days where I hold up worse." He shrugs. He tries to stay poised. "I sleep soundly until I don't. You know, the usual."

He watches as Dankovsky nods slowly. He fiddles with his gloves. Glimpses of discomposure haze his elegant face. "Do you usually dream?" he asks, and Burakh is taken by surprise. (He knows damn well the answer; he continues after a fleeting pause.) "Of what?"

Burakh has to hold himself back from saying "*you, a lot, and your fucked up friends*". "The plague. The plague, mostly. Theatre. All types of animals." (He feels it crawl up his back — the prickling spider-legs of the creeping memory of pestilence.) "What about you?"

"Death, most of the time — a lot of it." Plain. Sharp. Clear. (Cutting.) "You, often."

"You're flattering me."

"Yes, Burakh. I am."

The causerie is light, uneventful. Doctor Phillippe-Ronant is a young oak of a man, with twisted limbs and neck, all that he flails as he speaks like branches swayed in the wind. (Creepeth the War

again on her rotten legs: he speaks of French soldiers being evacuated from the Western Front to the South — when they could be, when it wasn't too late already. There's a solemn, misty silence as he recounts.) The speech is loud — someone behind Burakh jokes that the Germans are always this way. Doctor Friedrich Mattner is shaped like a cumulonimbus; wide, towering, tempestuous, topped of white. His words tear off a long, raucous cheer from the crowd — many among it are well inebriated. They toast to modern medicine, to morphine, prostheses, electrocardiography. To blood transfusion and the knowledge of contamination. Dankovsky raises his glass and his eyes wander the room emptily; absent, bitter, grieving. Burakh does too and the lips of their flutes meet. German and French doctors converse. Their faces are grey and grave, they do not look each other in the eye. They toast still.

Dankovsky speaks then. The room seems to close. The room closes and soon Burakh feels like there exists only the two of them. Bachelor Daniil Dankovsky, emphatic, confident, definite with a pride Burakh almost thought the plague would have torn from him. His voice rolls like a growing thunder. It's raining outside; Burakh thinks he could shelter him under his coat. They sit next to each other for the dinner. Burakh feels his knee against the side of his thigh.

Gathering his belongings by the cloakroom, Burakh watches as guests begin to leave, the men of Heiderberg adjusting Homburg hats on their white-feathered heads, tucking their faces into silk scarves, and waiting by the door for taxis. Dankovsky emerges from the reception room at last, and the lights dim after him. He's fiddling with his gloves.

"Almost got ink on them," he off-handedly explains, and stands in line to pick up his coat too.

Outside, the rain has stopped. The tar appears a sprawling, slick gold from the lights lining the streets. The cold has settled on the ground, drops-laden, weighted down with the thickness of humid air. The wind is high and sweeping. Dankovsky adjusts the ushanka on his head and holds the door for Burakh and Rubin who follow after him.

At the hostel where they leave Rubin, they quickly settle on a schedule and a meeting spot — train's at eight, clerk's wakin' him up at seven-fifteen, rendezvous on the platform, he'll make his way there with the hand-drawn map that Burakh gives him back. (He feels himself growing impatient.)

"Have a good night, then. We'll meet you there."

"You too, Bachelor. Excited to be able to sleep off the wine."

Dankovsky steps outside. He looks up, gauges the thickness of the mist, a strange copper color as it rolls down from the factories in the distance.

"You'll thank him for it," Rubin whispers to Burakh as he lingers inside, "but I'm still also really excited to change out of this suit. It feels like a corset for my shoulders."

"Goodnight, Stakh. Hope your feet don't dangle from the bed."

Rubin grabs him by the arm and squeezes. The blades of his stare drill into Burakh's face and an agitated nervousness bleeds out of him like water does a phreatic table dug into.

"Can I help you?" he tensely snickers.

"Do not fuck it up," Rubin replies, plain and flat and very low. "I don't want to hear you complain about having fucked it up tomorrow. Don't want to hear you complaining about not having slept enough, either."

"What's your damage? We're going back to his place and we're going to talk. We have a lot to tell each other."

(Not a lie. They do. Not the whole truth.)

"Cub, how many eyes do you think I have?"

Burakh squints. "... Is that a trick question?" Rubin's stare is keen, aggressive, carving. "... Two...?"

"Damn right. And I could have none and I could be deaf that I would still be able to catch the glances you keep slipping at each other. Do not act all shy about him in front of me, it vexes me."

He sends him out almost aggressively — eager to tuck himself into bed, and to get Burakh on the path to—whatever he's expecting to happen. Dankovsky catches the almost-apologetic smile on Burakh's face.

They don't talk much, on the way to Dankovsky's place. Burakh doesn't know if they should. Right below the edge of black fur of his ushanka, Burakh can see how his ears are red from the cold. The color spreads to his cheeks, his nose, the exposed throat. Burakh is tempted to touch. (Burakh is tempted. This is starting to become a pattern.)

As its own world abstracted from the grey, tar-smelling busy, bulging city, Dankovsky's apartment wraps itself around Burakh as he walks, with the scents of lacquered wood, of old upholstery, of teas and honey, of drying herbs. The Bachelor had taken a habit to tie in bundles shoots of mint, sage and rosemary that he hung across the small kitchen. Burakh isn't sure what he does with those, where he had gotten the idea to — he has his hunch. The little bunches, amateurish and a bit rough, are endearing to Burakh, in some ways. Imagining Dankovsky trying his hand at being a herbalist brings him a joy he does well to conceal, lest the Bachelor thinks he is mocking his efforts. (Just the sight of them makes Burakh want to kiss him madly.)

"A tea, Burakh?" Dankovsky asks, having shed off his black coat and hat.

"To wash down the salmon canapés?" he asks in reply, facetious.

"Indeed!"

The wood stove huffs, sighs, breathes softly; Burakh does not remember it ever being off. The crackle of kindling fills an air already comfortably stuffy, ringing with the clinking of teacups in

their saucers, of spoons against porcelain. The room coils itself around Burakh, appropriately reptile, as if welcoming him back. As if embracing him in ways Dankovsky is still too self-assured to.

Burakh had taken off the jacket of his tailored suit: its weight had become unwieldy around him, dense like smog. He pulls now on the collar of his shirt, beneath which he feels beads of sweat pooling. He can't look that good — yet Dankovsky watches him longly, running gloved fingers over the rim of his cup, dark eyes on him, unmistakably hungry.

"Mind if I slip into something more comfortable?" Burakh asks, pointing at his bag stuffed with the clothes he came with.

"You should," Dankovsky concedes. "What a shame," he adds, "this fits you regally."

Burakh is not immune to flattery; the words go straight through his waistcoat and shirt, and rouse warmth in the cage of his ribs.

"I'll wear it next time you visit," he chuckles.

"Careful, Burakh," Dankovsky says, and the darkness in his voice is naught but veil for something sibilant, salivating. "I might not be able to keep my hands off you when you meet me off the train."

Burakh swallows thickly, and the twitch of a smile tears right through his composed exterior.

"Before you do, though..."

Dankovsky slips off his chair and picks something from the shelf of a hutch. Burakh raises an eyebrow.

"Do you mind?"

"Do you want me to pose?" Burakh asks — pointing at the camera Dankovsky shows him. He nods, and Burakh puts the jacket back on.

The device looks like an insect of gears, angles and levers, its lens a copper-circled cyclops eye in a casing-cradle of fine, leather-clad wood. Device and man look quite alike, and three black eyes are on Burakh. He can't say he is not jealous of the way Daniil's hands are careful and delicate on the peculiar animal of the machine.

Burakh poses with his cup.

"Like that?" he asks, and is answered by the sound click of the shutter. "Like that?" he poses another way, to the same result. He looks at Dankovsky and finds him smiling.

He feels more like himself in his green pants and blue sweater, he must admit, and he feels almost *too* comfortable sitting back on the chair as he returns from the bathroom. That bone-melting relief doesn't last long — he catches Daniil's eyes on him.

The light has waned from the small room like a retreating tide. A promising immensity sprawls between their shared gaze. Burakh watches as Dankovsky's hands twitch; they put down, slowly, the teacup on the side table.

"You look happier than the last time I saw you," Burakh slices through the silence; the blade of his voice is dull, soft. "I remember there being unbearable grief in your eyes."

"And now?" Dankovsky asks.

Now, ah, there is still grief. It has shaped the Bachelor's features like wind and rain does malleable rock. There is too, not above, not below, rather woven in, snaking through like capillaries, hunger. Burakh knew it'd be there. (Burakh came here with it within.)

Old wounds sear and it feels more passionate than painful. Anger and hunger are deeply mistakable; Burakh remembers the feeling of the Bachelor's hellfires of gaze against his skin. Horrifying, exhilarating, so beautifully reciprocable; its brush biting, raw, yet tangible, unmistakably sensual. Are they not men?

They talk. They pull on threads of shared memories with the intent to unravel, and succeed. Dankovsky's eyes are tinted of something not quite (not) dark and not quite (not) dangerous — enveloping, enfolding, possessive. Something Burakh can remember hints of. (The reptile, raptly penetrating look on his face he bore on that last day — no, that second-to-last day.)

"You looked at me then like you wanted to eat me," Burakh says — he speaks, slow, low, so careful of the words that come out of him. (Lest they escape him. Lest they tear the coils inside of him out of his mouth and throw them onto Daniil's lap.)

"Not too different now, is it?" he replies.

The blackcurrant pearls of his deep dark eyes are on Burakh — engulfing, hot, covetous, carnivorous. Burakh cannot distinguish between the umber of his irises and the black of his pupils, blown wide. They are going to eat him whole. He is going to dive into them with abandon. He sees how Daniil's upper lip presses against the smooth hill of his lower one where it crushes a pearl of honey-tint tea; watches him lick it and swallow. He's torn out of his seat like Daniil dug nails into his chest and plucked his heart right out. He stands shakingly, walks to him, stumbles forward. He kneels. His bad leg bends first, it hits the ground between Daniil's planted feet. A hand crawls up the back of his neck, his head — Burakh catches it.

The gloves are thinner — the hotness of the skin goes through the silk like blood does gauze. Daniil's heartbeat flails like a moth in the glass of his wrist; bone-deep, longing to be felt through. Burakh's fingers tease the edge of the fabric, his nails grazing underneath its warmth.

"Let me," Burakh says. *Let me, let me, let me*, he thinks but does not speak — that sounds a little desperate.

Dankovsky watches the slither of his fingers into the hollow of his wrist, past the hills of bony thenar and hypothenar eminences.

He lets him.

"Fine," he says. Then: "Yes." Then, again, (hushed) lower this time: "Please."

Slowly, carefully, as if handling a wounded bird, Burakh peels the white silk of the glove from Dankovsky's warm hand. The skin is mostly dry, only the sinew-trails across its back, ribbed and pale like lightning whelks, glisten with mica-dots of sweat. Burakh shucks the silk off Dankovsky's knuckles at last, and he slowly curls his fingers in the hold; oh, not shy, not quite *shy* — modest, maybe, hesitant. His hand shakes. It's a pale, long vessel that Artemy handles delicately; it rings with a pulse; desire threatens to overspill.

Burakh leans in; Burakh bends over; (Burakh remembers the first time he did it and he missed his lips by so little) he presses a kiss to the cluster of infinitely small hills-bones of the top of his wrist.

Artemy's lips travel the ribbed plains of the back of Daniil's hand — the crests trails of his tendons as they follow the path from wrist to fingertips, which Burakh follows too, then back again. He kisses one by one the flesh pads of his phalanges, fattened bellies of the long, agile animals of Dankovsky's fingers. He appreciates and cares for the way the skin dips, makes way, sinks both shy and firm under the weight of his lips. He buries his mouth in the cup of Daniil's palm and kisses; closed-mouthed, open-mouthed, lets a languid tongue sweep across that plain — Daniil's hand twitches as if Burakh had found a fresh wound.

He kisses the prominent pisiform bone, this nervous hill at the root of the flank of Daniil's hand. He flips the hand over, meticulous and measured like one handles a precious beetle. At the root of Daniil's index finger, a raised plateau of hardened skin tickles his lips: half of the proof of his erudition. On his middle finger, the other half: Burakh kisses the callus on its side, the writer's bump, a stigma of genius and restlessness.

He takes Daniil's middle finger in his mouth — pushes it past his closed lips and into the hollow of his expectant tongue, letting his teeth graze its upper side. Daniil looks away — fiercely, furiously, wreckedly. Artemy revels, revels in that.

"Burakh—" he calls him; formal name, strained voice. He has to grit his teeth not to let something spill out.

Burakh feels how his finger curls ever-so-slightly in his mouth, involuntarily, as if seeking to dissolve in its warmth, its wetness, its divine unspokenness of melting votives.

Slowly, Burakh pulls Dankovsky's hand away — a thin silk-thread of spit connects Daniil's fingertip to his reddened lips, it disappears like melting snow. Dankovsky promptly looks away, as if it was the most obscene thing he had ever seen; then pins his eyes to it again, as if it was the most obscene thing he had ever seen and he really, really liked it.

His wet finger scratches the underside of Burakh's chin, a luring touch that guides Burakh's face to his.

As Burakh runs his fingertips down the sensitive lengths of Dankovsky's ligaments, teases over the bulges of his middle knuckles, caresses down the side of the protruding callus, and finally pushes from above his fingers in the hollows between Dankovsky's, where they fit, he keeps his lips right by Dankovsky's mouth, bothering its corner of chaste, measured pecks. It wrecks Daniil. Burakh doesn't see it—he hears it, his short, labored breaths; feels it, the warmth of wrung sighs brushing against his cheek, his ear. The good Bachelor is fighting for composure, for a shred of this unshakeable self-control he likes to think himself a master of — it's not going too well, is it His hand tenses in Artemy's, the hold of his fingers grows voracious, almost angry.

Artemy pulls his middle finger from the hold, brushes it atop Daniil's, over the hill of his articulation before he extends it; rubs it up and down the sensitive side from the knuckle to the nail. Burakh extirpates himself out of the hold then and runs his fingertip down Dankovsky's middle finger again, over the intricate landscape of his tendons-path-woven stone-hills-boned metacarpophalangeal joint, down the back of it across ribbed silky lines of faded scars to the wrist. Up again, in one swift motion — Dankovsky almost slams their heads together. He grabs Burakh's collar with his free hand, pulls his mouth to his. He swiftly takes back his own hand, and a shred of self-control with it too. Burakh feels how his legs tighten around his hips, how his feet plant themselves by his knees and, kiss still sealed as if he wanted to bite into Artemy's mouth like a red apple, he pulls himself—he pulls the two of them up until they're standing, unsteady on entwined-legs footings. They kiss in the middle of the room, stumbling gracelessly, zealously, hungrily towards the bed, waltzing to the roaring music of their meeting heartbeats.

Daniil unceremoniously tears his other glove off; it goes flying across the room and Burakh hears it hit some soft upholstery. He digs his fingers in Burakh's hair, cards through it, tugs, pulls, lets himself into Burakh's mouth and his tongue comes to languidly graze the dome of his palate like flames licking a chapel ceiling. Burakh grows febrile, his hands tremble, grab and grasp what they can find: the thin black belt in the loops of Daniil's pleated pants, the buttons of his precious shirt — and Daniil lets him. Daniil lets him and digs his fingers below the rough leather of Burakh's own belt, pulling, trapping his bare hand between their hips, flush against the other's.

It dawns on him — yes, *dawn* is the word: it comes to him like daybreak, so slowly at first, then bright and bold — that they're going to have sex. That from the moment he showed up to the soirée with the suit he had him tailored, Daniil had known they would. That from the moment Burakh had read and accepted his invitation, he had known he wanted to. He thinks about what he will do—and *he* is himself, and *he* is Dankovsky; about what they will do.

Dankovsky tugs intently on Burakh's undershirt, pulling and bunching it until Burakh breaks the kiss and raises his arms above his head just long enough for Dankovsky to discard it with no more care than his own glove.

Dankovsky is interested — *interested*, there is not quite another word. He is curious, having shed his scientific composure for a passionate, avid eagerness. He wants to see how each inch of Burakh's bare skin reacts to his touch, observe and feel the hitch of the breath, feel how his pulse filters through this skin like sunlight through leaves. He runs his fingers through the curls of

copper hair on Artemy's chest, stomach, his arms, parses between them the scars he stitched that seem to return the kiss of touch.

Despite the half-head of height he lacks to look Burakh in the eye, Artemy finds his body is *strong*, even as it had thinned, even as exhaustion and grief had bitten at the pieces of him. The muscles under his skin wind up with a reptile, eager, hungry strength. Its granitic silkiness doesn't yield to Burakh's touch — not out of hurt, but out of defiance, out of a playfulness swollen with a lively, impish pride, as if to see if Burakh's touch could tame it. Its marbleness — no, not marble, they had already gone over it; *marble, to the touch, is not unlike the dead; under fingertips, it is cold, it is hard, it doesn't dip under pressure; and Dankovsky's skin, despite its same milky color, despite the smoothness in the hills and hollows as Burakh finds it* — grows goosebumpy under Burakh's coarse fingertips. Burakh hastily pulls Dankovsky's silken shirt from underneath his pants and sweeps it off his shoulders with warm, open palms that linger on his upper arms, down to his elbows, to his wrists. He thinks about it. He thinks about it, he thinks about it, he thinks about it he thinksabout hethinksaboutit. He wants to kiss him. Kiss places on him. He wants to know how his black, slick chest hair would feel against his lips, mouth and chin. Dankovsky presses the bump of his nose to the tip of Burakh's. He kisses below then, catching Artemy's lower lip between his, pressing his wet mouth to the hollow below it, to his chin, to the stubbly skin portending the bone of his jaw, to his jaw, below his ear, into his neck. He lets Artemy's hands wander him, wander all of him, all he can touch. He doesn't hold back from indulging in it either.

The sensation is foreign, novel, delightful. Dankovsky's hair under his touch is soft yet setose, heavy, denser and darker than his own, licking his fingertips with the thickness of inkberry bushes, of moor heather. (Not that he was particularly accustomed to moor heather, but he wasn't accustomed to other men's bodies under his touch either.) He sifts through it with an open palm, through its spruce coarseness-where-it-is-coarse, softness-where-it-is-soft; its coniferous obsidian; fir foreignness kind and exhilarating; apparented to all these tall trees that Burakh barely knows and finds himself delighted to meet in this way. To come to know in this way. Burakh comes to kneel, ischia on his heels, devout, devoted, as if in trance. He hears how Daniil's breath picked up as the devotional pose made something stir inside of him.

"Burakh," he speaks; "Burakh, Burakh," fast then; "Artemy..."

Burakh leans in to kiss his diaphragm — the upper part of his thorax, nestled between the costal arches of his ribs; lets his lips follow down the midsagittal line, the path where dark hair gathers, seems electrified under the brush of his mouth; he kisses down to Daniil's stomach, belly, below his navel then. Hair caresses Burakh's chin, nose and lips as he kisses down, becomes coarser — animal-bristle, thistle — shrouding the (L/)line that Burakh follows reverently.

He has two nevi in the in the meaty part of platysma on the right side of his neck, two, further apart, on his shoulder below; one on the other side, just below his collarbone, one below his nipple, on the side of the cut that Burakh stitched once; one above the other, and then further down still, one past the oblique, in the furrow curving from hip to groin. Burakh thinks he could trace something out of them (Burakhs wants to trace something out of them), maybe Ophiuchus or Hydra.

He busies himself to kiss them; he has to get off and on his knees again, he stumbles gracelessly, pushes his head forward — Daniil has his arms around his shoulders and embraces him so tight Artemy could think he is trying to bury him in his chest cavity. He kisses the scar. He'd thought about it, back then — he'd thought about the wound about the lips of the wound about their gnarly, horrifyingly appetizing red; he presses his lips to the scar, millimeter by millimeter — it is not big. He runs his tongue along its barely-raised white-silk edge as if to soothe it with balm. Daniil's arms are shaking.

"Too much?" Burakh asks.

Dankovsky does not respond. Burakh stops; he pulls his head back, presses it to his wild heart.

"I don't even know if I wanted you to stop," Dankovsky speaks through gritted teeth.

"I saw with my eyes you didn't know if you wanted me to continue."

The matter is settled, then.

Daniil's hands on his shoulders gently nudge him away before he takes a step back; his hands go to his belt. Burakh gracelessly crawls back and sits on the bed, watches him free leather from the silver snake buckle, his fingers steady with a wavering self-control. Artemy feels his heart swell. His pulse is soaring and he isn't sure Daniil cannot hear it. *Let me*, he thinks, he thinks so hard in the hopes Dankovsky could hear him. *Let me...* Dankovsky kicks his pants off with just enough force and overspilling eagerness to betray his excitement and he brings his eyes on Burakh again. Burakh is looking at him, looking at it like a most venerated prize. Dankovsky's cock is curious, interested, impatient, hard. It's haloed by dark hair, the feeling of which Artemy cannot imagine without his fingertips tingling — alive, awake, alit with desire, almost exigently so. It seeks Artemy's gaze like a pink, languid fruit peeking through heavy foliage would seek the sun—slots as a breathtaking sight of belonging into Dankovsky's silhouette, into the stretching lines of his pale legs, the eye-catching triangle between his navel and thighs, with a purposeful, harmonious accord, as if having been given life by the deliberate, determined, loving hands of an enamored sculptor.

It wrecks Burakh, it all does — the empyreal strength of his physicality, the immensity—the imminence—the eminence of his carefree, barely-restrained bareness. His standing—there, his eyes on Artemy.

Burakh has the vague guides of classical paintings and their states of undress to lead his gaze, their coy nudity as opposed to nakedness, their pose that shows and hides, that bashfully offers enough for painter and spectator alike to be satisfied but not too much for the imaginary, imagined, dead-painted-alive figure to be ashamed.

Dankovsky is not coy — he is not bashful one fucking bit. He stands with the pitch-black fruits of desire of his eyes on Burakh, devouring him with his stare.

Dankovsky walks back to him for another kiss, and Burakh thinks about kissing lower than his navel, below again; hands on Dankovsky's bare hips, he thinks about gently pushing him one step

back so he can get off the bed, and get on his knees, and kiss him below, and—but he doesn't do that. He reaches out, brushes with care — hair sprawls to the insides of Daniil's thighs like an ink-black cover of *stipa pennata*, offering to Burakh's wandering hands and mouth a softer, rich, velvety aftertouch. He pats the side of the bed, kind of dumbly, trying to counterbalance the enormity of it all with an almost too-plain simpleness.

"Come here. Come here, please, I want to make you cum."

He didn't manage plainness. His voice was hoarse, raspy with a hunger that was eating him. Dankovsky's eyes twinkle with a sort of fond, delighted amusement.

"Oh? We say *please* now?"

"I don't know if *you* do, but I just did. Come here..."

Dankovsky strides to him and closes the gap. Animalistic, Artemy feels himself salivate — and Daniil must feel it too, because he tears through the seal of his lips with an avid, ravenous tongue. Burakh thinks about how he *wants* to make him say *please*. He has his ideas. He thinks he has his ways... His hands wander the back, the front of Daniil's thighs, strewn with the softness of down feathers; his bare, bony knees; his shins.

He doesn't even have to pretend to coax him onto the bed; he loops arms around his frame, warm palms against the hot flesh of his flanks, birdcage-chest against birdcage-chest, the heartbeat-doves inside so eager to meet they both feel they could break free. He manages to push him against the blanket — inelegant, clunky, he barely misses falling directly on top of him. His face dives directly into Dankovsky's neck and Dankovsky laughs — a loud sharp caw that Burakh feels echoes through him and rings, rings.

Burakh searches for the long twin hooks of cuts he remembers making (well, *remember* isn't quite the word, of course), for the woven silk of scar tissue following the riverbanks of Daniil's costal arches — he sees nothing. He touches nothing more than the furrow of the midsagittal line from the notch between his clavicles to his navel like this dipped riverbed where sweat clings like rainwater; his fingers find nothing else than the ridged plains over his lungs where Daniil's ribs meet his touch like tumuli as he stretches, raises his arms above his head. Artemy looks up, and Daniil's face is devoid of compliance, of submission, of meek yielding: it bears instead an intrigued look, a curious eagerness, a hunger so febrile it sets fire to his cheeks, to the upper part of his chest. It pries his mouth agape and he breathes slowly, loudly.

Seeing him now, Burakh thinks about making food for him — when he'd have swept his father's house clean from the ghosts inside, when he'd have found the strength to gather wood for the stove—Burakh would, Burakh wants to, put a pot on the fire, fill it with stock and carrots potatoes beef, to let it simmer, to offer a spoonful to Daniil — he doesn't think about it much more, he doesn't want to think about it much more. There are (L/)lines to follow, the long strokes of the Bachelor's flanks and legs, his angular obliques, his prismatic patellae that frame, as his heels dig into the bed, his obvious erection. Burakh remembers the first time they had slept together (not *like that*, not yet); how they had tried to fit both of their selves side by side on Dankovsky's single

bed — how they had managed, somehow. He remembers the electric feeling of skin against his; how Daniil's legs entwined with his like oaken roots, how the hairs on his arm brushed against him like hyphae. It's that, then, now, for now; it's something entirely different. They kiss now like carrion birds.

Burakh had never quite realized how much *leg* he had, Daniil had, than now, when they're waltzing around each other's body to try to fit into the other, to try to let the other fit into; than when Daniil's thigh graze the inside of his, brushes against the underside of his still-clothed cock, and a choked, wrung trickle of words spills past his fallen-agape mouth.

He had never quite realized how much of a precious, gorgeous thing a body was — not like this, never like this — Daniil's body was-is — and he has to come to the realization he never has either.

"Take this off," Daniil's voice cuts cleanly through the moment, through his own labored breath. "You better take it off."

He pulls intently on the tail of Burakh's belt. His agile fingers hook beneath it again, his thumb attempts to undo the buckle. Burakh sits back on his heels, and he watches as Daniil's legs make room for him between them. His knees, one of them peppered of a tiny bruise on the outer side of the bone, tease the fleshy parts of Burakh's thighs. He struggles with the silver buckle like his hands have forgotten how to work, how to act when torn from Daniil's body.

Daniil watches him with a hotly fascinated, passionately devouring gaze. His dark eyes trail all over him, pupils and irises melting into each other with desire, set ablaze by the low lights that sculpts his sprawled silhouette in the relative darkness. Burakh manages—the belt first, and he shucks it in the dim room for it to swallow; his pants then, that he inelegantly pushes down and that bundle around his knees; his underwear last, and he barely has the time to spring out of it that Dankovsky has pulled him down.

Relief, before all, comes over him — its unwieldy warmth washes over Burakh from toes to top of his head as their legs slot together. Daniil's heels brush the side of his ankles, helping him kick off the mattress what is left of his clothes. It strikes Artemy—horrifies him almost how instinctive it feels, how mindless, how animalistic, how elementary, how blissfully artless it is to cover Daniil's body with his own and find eagerly-given place between his legs and move against him until both of their weights dent the mattress to an obscene degree and—and—and. Daniil archs against him — into him — like a worked a taut a marrowed a serrated cello string an overpowering everything that he cannot do anything against but give in to. He had no intention of not giving in to. Tell, it is not giving, it is not surrendering, it is a crushing, almost belligerent, selfish embrace they both indulge in so passionately.

The black smog of the factory / the crushing air swollen with progress / the pin of blinding sun magnified by this grey denseness / the sweeping darkness of rain on newly-laid asphalt / the heady scent of the fresh iron and steel of the streetcars rails / Dankovsky's fleeting, hungry hands / the reddened head of his cock pressed intently against Burakh's thigh — this all in the crawling night appear all together all at once like a dazzling daybreak.

Burakh's not religious; he knows Dankovsky isn't either; but he can't say he does not feel in some way, in his way, in their own private, delicate (somehow) way, that he is touching sainthood — something *akin to saints*, but not martyrs: when they were alive, awake with grace, alight with the fires of sacred blessings, trembling with ecstasy under the touch of the divine. (It does not escape Burakh that Dankovsky is trembling under his fingertips.)

Daniil's thighs tighten around him, around the upper part of his, and Burakh aligns their hips together. Hands on each side of Daniil's head, he feels his grip on his wrist, and looks between their bodies to watch in awe. His eyes obsessively fixate on where their hips meet, where the black trail down the midsagittal line of Dankovsky's body meet his, lighter to the touch and lighter to the eye — one of Daniil's hands, warm, wayward, wandering, comes between them to pet it, as if curious or called. He rakes fingers through with an ease and unbridledness Burakh is in admiration he has. He rocks against him—once, twice, Dankovsky's nails dig into his skin—he continues, he meets the bucking of his hips relentlessly.

It's not about being halves — he feels almost painfully, painfully whole. It's not about being halves, halved, but he won't tell Dankovsky this, because he believes that he'd think he is, at the very least, ruining the mood. It's about his whole meeting Dankovsky's whole, alit and ablaze and shivering under the touch; about the (w)hole of his open mouth welcoming Dankovsky's tongue and the pleased, pleasant sounds born from it.

"Yes, yes, oh, Burakh—" and Artemy almost reprimands him for calling him that — *not now, oynon, not now*, not when his cock is against his, warm, hard, eager — and he has to catch himself before he calls Dankovsky oynon then.

He forces himself to balance his weight on a knee and slides a hand between their two bodies, in the hot jaws of two-made-one; he takes hold of both of their cocks in his hand. Hold(s), cradle(s), tighten(s), feel(s) a pulse in the sensitive hollow between thumb and index — Daniil's, or his, or both at once.

"You said—you did say something about your gentle hands," Daniil breathes; it's raspy, it's shaky, it's against Burakh's neck and he feels the wetness of the words caress his skin; it's meaningless, he's overcome.

"I did," meaningless as well, throaty, wrung out of his throat.

"*You did*," he's insisting — he's louder.

Working him — the both of them — in strokes — is easy, artless, profane, animal, crushingly intimate. Burakh settles in the rhythms of wrist he knows he likes and parses through them what Daniil loves, what Daniil responds to, and finds he's easily pleased. One of his arms snake around Artemy's shoulders then neck, and he presses their foreheads together.

It takes a lot from Burakh not to speak a litany of praise, of endless extol and stammered laudation. It takes too much: he speaks it, a flow of jumbled, mumbled orisons — none of which coherent enough to be written, or written down — that Daniil is at the cup of his lips to taste, to swallow. When pleasure ravages him, Burakh finds against the permeable velvet of his wet, red

words, Dankovsky presses his tongue to the back of his lower incisors, seen through his mouth hanging open, in the ways others may bite their lower lip or the inside of their cheeks. Spit threatens to spill past his lips, and Burakh brushes their corners — Dankovsky steals the offered kiss with a wrecked, extraordinary abandon.

There is an undeniable, enraging, euphoric consumption-consummation in the blissful and haunting reminder that they are *two*, wriggling and squirming and pulling each other in trying to be one. All the points of contact-connection seem to sting, angry at the state of being felt, or being at all; seared lips around a chasm they crave to seal. It only emboldens both in their effort(s) to destroy the threshold between, to merge-meld-mend, to be woven together as if bound. Burakh's hips twitch-buck-thrust restlessly against the soft skin of Dankovsky's thigh, where the knuckles of his closed fist around them both sustain the burning brush of sweat-wet hair. Daniil's hands are on him everywhere he can reach and his nails on his nape, his back, his chest, scrape him like a matchstick as if trying to create openings into which to slither. Burakh shivers with the clawing bite like this long, hot, prickling adoring kiss everywhere he lets himself feel. Warmth climbs and crawls him in the wake of Daniil's hands.

"Tyo—ma—*ah*, oh, let me..." Dankovsky says, and all the scales of composure have sloughed off him and left him bare. His voice wrung, raw, enraptured; clear and candid with a bliss Burakh's heart swells with pride hearing.

He doesn't know what Daniil is asking him to *let him*, entranced in the sight of his strained neck — red chest cheeks ears — his heavy breathing his possessive hands beneath him. He doesn't know what Daniil is asking him to let him — orgasm hits him like a lightning strike. It courses up the length of his tense spine until it punches out of a him a gasped, blurted exhale. It slicks back down to the back of his thighs where Dankovsky's fingers dig. It becomes painfully difficult to focus on something—on anything as he comes; still, he sees how Daniil's body under his tenses, tauts, is flushed and fraying.

Looking between them, he can see how Daniil's hips still seek his palm restlessly, push themselves into the tight hold for the promise of what there is through; Burakh pulls himself back and kneels on the mattress, Daniil hisses sharply at the sudden cold against his skin. Artemy climbs gracelessly out of the bed and his bad knee hits the floorboards first. He whimpers a "*yeowch*" against Daniil's hip that has him pushing himself up on his elbows, concerned. Burakh pushes him back down with a hand on his chest that Daniil takes to hold immediately. Burakh feels his inescapable grasp and their fingers intertwine; feels his other hand at the back of his head. He brushes of a kiss the curve of Daniil's lower internal oblique; the beauty spot that teased the dip right below his hip, so close to the dark triangle of his pubic hair that it was frankly obscene — more than the erect cock that caressed the hollow of Burakh's throat, really — the softened part of the groin where Burakh's lips catch the ghosts of shivers. He has to angle Daniil's hips awkwardly on the small bed and, bowing his head reverently, takes him into his mouth. He feels how Daniil's fingers tighten in his hair, how his grip tenses, whets, hears his name as it comes out of his mouth, loud and choked. Daniil holds onto that hand, his hold crushing when Burakh's tongue behaves particularly giftedly.

He does—he does it again, that thing with his tongue, pressing it to his incisors with the wet noise of it resting against the bottom of his mouth. He flicks it, again, again, pushes it against his row of pearly teeth to the bobbing Burakh's head — it doesn't last long — it flicks past his lips — Burakh holds his hips in place even as he shakes, even as he trembles, tenses. Breaks suddenly. He comes and Burakh feels the hold of his thighs tighten around him, the surprisingly not-bitter taste of him tingling on his tongue. He mellows quickly, all at once. His whole body softens gracelessly and he sighs. Burakh feels tentative fingers carding through his hair then — thankful, graceful, gracious; he feels glee and pride swelling in his chest and throat and a shaky, choked breath extirpates itself out of him.

"Danya..." Burakh manages to mutter, and a smile strikes Daniil's across the face like the word in Artemy's mouth had been a delightfully-placed caress.

"The next time you come," Dankovsky eventually breathes, his voice hot in the dim room, "you better put it in me." He pointedly tightens his hold around Burakh's hand.

"The *next time*," Burakh corrects, "*you* are coming to *my* place so I can fuck you in a big enough of a bed. (*He pauses.*) Or you can fuck me. We'll advise."

Daniil chuckles.

Eventually, Burakh puts his head against his thigh — like one would against a seashell hoping to hear the heartbeat of the sea. Artemy hears Daniil's, loud and heavy.

Dankovsky pats the topmost part of his chest.

"Get back here," he calls, and Burakh crawls back on the bed and over him. It's not any bigger than it was before he sucked him off, and he gladly regains his previous spot — lying down directly atop Daniil, between his parted legs.

It takes them a little while to convince each other to go clean up a little, but they eventually spur each other to the bathroom. Dankovsky is surprised the water warms up as quickly as it does. They embrace under the shower and Daniil runs his palms up and down Artemy's arms, brushes of gentle thanatologist fingers the scars snaking into the flesh.

Dankovsky dries his hair by the wood stove and Burakh just shakes enough of the water off so he's allowed back in the bed. Dankovsky insists he gets the mattress, this time, and then climbs on top of him. Burakh pulls the blanket over them both. His own feet peek out comically as Daniil curls into the heavy fabric and steals it for himself.

Burakh's not asleep. He doesn't know if he was — he thinks he must have been: the air, through the window, has shifted hues; it had grown ochre as the blue of early night ceded to pitch-black and opened its arms to the golden lights of street lamps. It could have been hours since he last

saw the sky. Dankovsky has left, Burakh is aware of that much. He pushes himself up on his elbows. Oh, he hasn't: he walks back from the bathroom, the blanket wrapped around him. Burakh laughs groggily and lets himself fall back.

"You're awake?" Dankovsky asks.

"Yes." He feels his lips contort in a smirk. "I was wondering why I was a little cold."

"I'm sorry," he hears as Daniil walks to the bed and settles back upon him — blanket included. "Did it wake you up?"

"I'm not sure. I don't really care either."

An amused caw escapes Daniil. "Sorry. I get used to my little comforts. You should handle the cold better, with how drafty the houses in your town are."

He looks at Burakh, and his mind wanders. Burakh looks at him looking at him — watches himself being watched in the reflective waters of his black eyes. Watches — as his brows furrow, as his mouth thins: he's focused, keen. His fingers come to caress the skin of Burakh's throat and clavicles, and they both seem to shiver. He watches again — and feels something eager, hopeful, ardently attentive coil inside and around him — as Daniil slowly kicks the blanket off, sitting back, weight on Burakh's thighs. Warm eyes on him are pinning, prying, punctilious as they crawl him, holding back ostentatious delight for a restrained, almost authoritative composure.

He looks at Dankovsky, and his hands wander. Dankovsky looks at his palms and fingers scaling the flesh of his flank, the twin ladders of his ribs, playing with the down-feathers softness strewn across his stomach and chest. Eventually, he grabs Burakh's hands: his fingers snake in the hollows of his palms and he slowly pins them above his head. Burakh watches him as he stretches to keep him down — as a wound-up strength courses through his sinewy limbs, as hunger electrifies the intricate chains of his powerful arms. He exhales slowly; there is no point in hiding his excitement but he still tries, as if it'd take away from Dankovsky's display of appetite if he moved just a little too brusquely.

"I think you've had enough with your wayward hands," Dankovsky speaks, very low, voice deep in the stomach like a rumbling storm. "You can keep them here for me, and let me have a taste for once."

"Aw," Burakh teases, "did I make you feel small pinning you under my weight?"

"You'll find out. How does that feel?"

Burakh almost laughs, then his breath hitches when he finds the potent, persuasive weight of Dankovsky over him — constrictorlike, hungry, animal. He would almost have feared this display of power if Dankovsky didn't kiss him, didn't dive right into his mouth when it parted, poorly concealing a bliss and wreckedness that made Burakh's heart swell with pride. Daniil's mouth trails down from the alcove of stubbled skin below his chin to his diaphragm; open, hungry, tongue exploring diligently. His hands leave Burakh's wrists and wander, in turn, down the stigmata of pale scar tissue down his arms, his flanks; touch creeping, vine-like, palms delicate

and scurrying in the way of beetles. Pecking lips follow then the curves of the costal arches — expansive, broadening with each of Burakh's deep, shaking breaths, and he shivers at the familiarity of the followed path.

Burakh stays still, as if waiting to be devoured — he is, he enjoys it maybe too much. He revels in the feeling of Daniil's thighs against his flanks, of the hot underside of his cock trailing down the length of his body as he slowly crawls down it, pushing himself on his hands and knees until they hit the iron frame at the end of the bed. He leans in — Burakh inhales sharply.

Dankovsky's hands on him still. Burakh doesn't know if he stalled in apprehension or anticipation; when he pushes himself upwards, he can see how Dankovsky, mouth parted, eyes shut, sighs with an unmistakable reverence. He seems to compose himself and continues; his hands are explorative, experimental; his eyes open as they sweep, eager, *interested*, over everything Burakh gives him to see.

As Daniil takes him into his mouth, Burakh thinks he'll pin him down; he doesn't. He lets him dig a heel in the mattress, brace himself as it to withstand a storm. Daniil's long pale hands snake up his hips, his sides, the flesh of his chest, everywhere they can reach. He stays there — he wants to move, to hitch his hips, to put his palm on the back of Daniil's head—he doesn't, he can't. Daniil's tongue between his thighs — limb-loosening, consuming — blades him to the mattress, as if having found the soft spot between a moth's wings through which one pricks the feathered abdomen. Daniil's breath is thready against his skin; his own is loud, wrung, choked out of him as pleasure slithers up the unraveling knots of his insides, appropriately reptile, coiling tightly around him. It crawls to his throat and he can feel his heartbeat there — Daniil doesn't really attempt to keep him still, one hand tight around him, the other fiercely holding his hip, fingers digging in. Burakh grabs the back of it, tries to force his way between his fingers to entwine them with his — slither, snake, possessive, hungry, hungry, hot from the thighs up — his breaths quicken. His ribs ache. He tilts his head back and his neck strains. All so willing to be open and eaten. At Daniil's mercy. Mercy. For an eternity-heartbeat, Daniil does not yield. Only when Burakh cums he, mercifully, maybe wrecked himself too, seeks the hold back, and squeezes like he was afraid Artemy would escape him.

When Daniil crawls back over him, his knees careful at his sides, Artemy is sure he could slowly, softly (reciprocally, at last) cut him open. He'd have loved him to — loved to bury Daniil's gifted hands in the wet warmth between his lungs. Dankovsky makes no cut; he holds then frees Burakh's hands, and presses his face to his chest. He pushes his nose, his chin, his cheek in, nudging the expansive ridge of his lower ribs as if he wanted to burrow. Burakh thinks about letting him inside of his chest; he can't, it crushes him to know so. Burakh thinks about being inside of him; he can, he could, he wants to. About Daniil being inside of him; he can, he could, he wants to. Daniil peeks at him with black eyes and he understands he thinks it too.

When Dankovsky walks back into the room, again, from the bathroom where they had both cleaned up — again, this time with cold water — he finds Burakh having moved as many pillows

and cushions as he could onto the floor. He had put as mattress the quilt that was kept folded under the bed, and pulled the blanket from it too.

"So we can both fit side by side," Burakh had said, and Dankovsky had let out a sensible chuckle.

The window has been opened: Dankovsky is smoking. The candlelike flicker of the burning tobacco waltzes on Daniil's cheeks and chin, on the red of his silk robe, on the provocative blink of shoulder skin not covered by it. Burakh is tempted, tempted again — oh, just to touch, just a caress, a brush: he is way too tired for anything else. He doesn't move from the blanket and pillows, still, and watches him.

"What is this clamor?" Dankovsky speaks.

The city swells with scattered voices, with chants and songs.

"What are those fires?"

Copper dots like golden freckles on the faces of rising clouds of smoke.

It has come — the moment-spindle, the spinning of the world. It had teased of its coming the busy and bothered guests of the night's soiree, then finally invited itself to the waltz too. It brews in the cover of newborn-dawn. It'll be something else, something new, come daybreak. Artemy walks to Daniil, behind him, presses his cheek into the soft part of his shoulder.

"It was there before, it was rumbling in the distance during the reception."

"Rumbling inside."

"All eyes on the storm."

It thunders on. Dankovsky smokes slowly.

"All the drinking and smoking of the world cannot keep it at bay too long."

"Will you go out and join?"

Dankovsky thinks. Then, he turns to him.

"Not tonight. I have a train to get you to in the morning."

"Oh, yeah," Burakh chuckles. "That."

They lie on the floor, kept from its wood by the unfolded quilt. Burakh looks at Dankovsky's legs, bare under his robe, as he sways his knee to a soundless tune, bumping it against Burakh's periodically.

Burakh's tempted — he puts a hand on his thigh, and Dankovsky hums a laugh.

"You have a bruise," Dankovsky says, and brushes his kneecap of a fingertip.

Burakh looks at it. "Hm. Yeah, I would."

Dankovsky thinks about it for a minute, then snickers. He finishes his cigarette. The wind carries the smell of smoke from the room outside to dissolve in the lazy, slow dawn; the smell of fire from the streets inside, thick, heady, familiar in a different, promised way.

Eventually, they cover each other's bodies with their own and sleep again.

Burakh feels like someone else, someone new. Nothing changed. Everything shifted. A bone, never broken, was moved ever-so-slightly, it cups his heart gently now. He and Daniil walk side by side on their way to the train station, and his shoulder fits against Burakh's upper arm; clad flesh presses into clad flesh like it remembers the other's so well.

"Looking tired, cub," Stanislav says when they find him in the crowd. He's chewing on a piece of soft bread that, chances are, he snatched from the hostel's kitchen.

"We were awake for a pretty long time," Burakh begins, and he prays he can make it quick so he doesn't have time to slip. "We had a lot of... things to tell each other."

Rubin stares at him. A long, heavy stare, that bore into him the longer it went on. Then: "Yeah. Sure."

The train comes.

Rubin jumps in as the doors open — it doesn't escape Burakh that it looks an awful lot like he wants to get away from them. (Or, ah, more likely, to give them space. That would make more sense, Burakh thinks.)

"Don't forget, oynon, you've told me you'd treat me to dinner," Burakh teases, one foot on the car steps.

"I won't", Dankovsky replies. "I'll drag you back here by force if I must."

"No need!"

"Come whenever, will you? Consider yourself a permanent guest."

"Same goes for you. You know that."

Dankovsky doesn't quite *smile*, but Burakh sees how his eyes thin, the earthy brown of them alit with a composed satisfaction.

"I won't bother you quite yet," he says. "I've come to understand you have a lot on your plate."

Burakh swallows thickly. As he nods, Dankovsky nods back.

"I do. But I won't mind having you around."

Hey, come. Come have a lot on the plate with me.

"How charitable of you to allow me back, Burakh," Dankovsky smiles. "I know more than a few that would have kicked me out had I not left."

He smiles. Burakh's lips pinch and something sour brews at the back of his throat — he knows Dankovsky would have walked out into the steppe, had he not had the will to leave(live).

"Come see the newborn calves, at least."

"You don't need to convince me."

Out of his coat he pulls then a book: it is leather-bound, burgundy-skinned, the pages are a purposeful diluted ink-grey. From between its page pokes a bookmark, a red, thin stripe of soft fabric, split at the end like a snake's tongue. It is heavy and warm in Burakh's hand. He had almost forgotten about it — about the very point of him coming here (the first excuse).

"I have the other copy of this edition," Dankovsky says. "We quickly found out it would be way too expensive to produce on a big scale."

He taps it of a gloved finger, and Burakh brings it to his chest.

"Be careful, the pages are a bit thin. Had to print it this way if we wanted this cover..."

"Something about outer appearances, oynon?"

"Calling me flimsy, Burakh?"

"Not flimsy. Rather... plain and shockingly approachable."

The smile that carves itself into Daniil's face is wide, bright, pointy of provocative cuspids. His lips are chapped from the cold, nose and cheeks red.

"Take care. We'll meet again."

They will. (If not there, somewhere else, somewhen else.)

On the front page, thickly-pressed black ink on eggshell paper:

To Artemy Isidorovich Burakh;

A dearest colleague, friend, and everything he knows himself to be.

His (yours),

Daniil Dankovsky.

The world-spindle spins on; not any faster, not any slower.

Burakh gets the photograph, eventually: it was neatly, meticulously packaged in a big envelope. He does look handsome. He could (and can) tease Dankovsky for his fashion tastes all he wants, he at least knew what to pick for him.

There's a second photograph, smaller, this one, slipped between folded paper. It's of Dankovsky, and—oh, oh, he can't *show* that! (how the hell did he get it printed? He must have connections.

Burakh *can't show* that! He slips the photograph, still between the protective wings of the paper, in his nightstand drawer.)

They find out later Burakh's double bed is, in fact, more comfortable to fit into *à deux*. They're both stubborn, still, and there is no story where they still wouldn't insist on making use of Dankovsky's bed for the better.