

Oh, the hands that will hold you home

by meiri/Creatorial

24890 words

posted on AO3 at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/35066155> on the 11th of November 2021.

Rating:

Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings:

N/A

Category:

M/M

Fandom:

Мор. Утопия | Pathologic

Relationship:

Artemy Burakh/Daniil Dankovsky

Character:

Artemy Burakh, Daniil Dankovsky, a bit of Lara for the soul :)

Additional Tags:

Post-Canon, Post-Diurnal Ending (Pathologic)

The Relationship Is Not Established Per Say But Pretend For Me That They've Bantered Off-Screen

Fanfiction Where I Ask Of You To Make Up Their Relationship In Your Head

I'm Just Picking Up Where I Mentally Left Off

Men Sending Each Other Letters

Men Going To Each Other's Houses

Developing Relationship

Grief/Mourning

First Kiss

Budding Love

Tasteful Fade-to-Black

Cello Player Dankovsky

i've also given him a mama if you must know

Astronomy

i spent time in my astrology app to make sure i wasn't bullshitting. i'm COMMITTED to this thing

I Have Very Specific Ideas On How The Earth Manifests Herself And You Will Read Them With Your Eyes

*video game: (offers me endings where sacrifice is mandatory and a crucial part of the narrative)
me: but it makes me sad :-((proceeds to spend months on making stuff up so it hurts less)
am NOT coping and crying i am NOT coping and crying i am NOT coping
Ignoring Meta-Narrative Because I Like To Think About Towns That Are Just Like That: Fucked Up
you cannot separate pathologic from its meta elements. but here? i'm doing it and i'll do it again.
putting lotsa kisses in here. they deserve it. trust me i'm a professional (repressed romantic)
omg i'm SO sorry for making them tender towards each other (does it again) omg i'm SO sorry
(does it*

Summary

And when all is said and done, when there's no more blood to wash your hands of, who do you still need to look in the eye? Who will look at you?

When you've taken the flame of magic and put it out with your own fingers, whose home can you walk into, head tall?

Diurnal ending (a choice of love, like any other) and what's in the silence that follows.

Chapters : 4

Notes

ok. listen to me. the short story is that I really, really wanted to (re)write an end, mostly. i have so many more thoughts about them that i wish to write (and i will, and i am) but i wanted to get this out as fast as i could before it ate me inside. it stands on its own, and if (when [fingers crossed]) i ever truly really fully write everything i hold behind this finale in a fic, i will make sure they're bonded. but for now... i really wanted to focus on this. can you imagine they've had some back and forth. they've had some macabre banter and jokes. they've stitched each other up maybe once each. they've come really close to touching noses but were interrupted by gunshots outside. they've watched over each other as they slept in the Stillwater bed. they've come close to acknowledging the Something Else before... events cut them off. can you do that for me... are you receiving the vibes... (taps your ankle with my very shiny gentleman shoe). if you are here, if you clicked on this, i know you have it in your heart to imagine it all, for me.

i try to keep the events and phrases Pathologic 2-exclusive but, as I see Pathologic Classid HD and Pathologic 2 as a whole, as a holistic animal, as sides of a twin coin which i like to play head and tail with, it is very possible sentences and actions have seeped from P1 into it. just hold tight and go with the vibes.

thank you for your heart, and enjoy.

Cliff

The bullet went straight through the flank — the shell, spat from the metal beak of the army's cannon, tore through the Tower with the deafening breaking of its spine and its ribs. The

Architect let out a sharp, salient scream as if the projectile had gone through his own. He contorted horribly, as if possessed, and his legs buckled under him. The brother took a hold of him before he hit the ground, trying to keep him upright. The Architect let himself go limp and heavy with the weight of a dead man and he started to sob. He flailed his arms to try to climb out of the grip — failed. He squirmed and jerked and spun around like a restless animal and a shoulder hit his brother square in the nose; he felt three drops of blood prick him in the neck and he went still, agitated by whimpers and howls. The Haruspex stood as the Tower crumbled on her stem, bending and arching like her skeleton was nothing but a paper garland. Blood bubbled and poured out. The Architect wailed and cried, and said “*thank you*”, and cried again, and said “*thank you*” once more. The spear rose from the ground like the pinhole of the sun climbs above the horizon, and the Tower went tumbling down. She collapsed and lost herself in the river that ran red as if her legs had given out under her, and the Architect’s gave out under him.

The Haruspex stood, then stepped forward. He cradled in his palm a pool of blood that he brought to his lips, then took an audible sip, as if drinking hot tea. He brought forward an empty bottle, then another, then another. He filled them. He filled them all and some more.

The snakeskin coat appeared in the dim light of the doorway, the sun was setting. The brewery chimed sweetly.

“Your panacea,” a voice asked, “will you have enough hands to distribute it to everyone?” And then, without waiting for a reply: “Do you want the help of mine?”

The Architect’s shoulder dug frankly into his flank as they rounded a corner not far from his loft.

“Burakh.”

The Haruspex heard the unmistakable crinkle of papers and found them, rolled and wrapped, being shoved in his arms.

“What are...?”

“Blueprints. The blueprints. Of... doesn’t matter anymore. You know.” His voice was thick and wooly. His lips moved in bizarre ways as he stumbled through his sentences, bumping into his words like against walls. “The Bachelor... leaves with the train. Give those to him. Give them to him.”

“What can he... do with those?”

“Nothing. It’s nothing but a keepsake.”

“Are you sure? You must’ve spent so much time on those.”

“Useless now. They’re useless now. I’m not— we’re not rebuilding her. No way.”

The Architect shoved his papers into Burakh’s hands a bit more forcefully.

“Give them to him. I don’t trust myself with them. I don’t know... no— I *do* know what I am capable of if they stay with me. He can frame them and put them on his walls if he so wishes. Anything he does... is better than anything I could do in this town.”

With one last insistent push against him, the Haruspex took hold of the blueprints. He tucked them under his arm and, as he began his way home to put them somewhere safe, he could see the Architect stumble on his feet, hold himself against the walls. Burakh thought he would see him phase through one. Maybe merge with the red bricks, maybe be swallowed whole. The youngest Stamatin disappeared from his view. Burakh thought he heard a distinct, harrowing cry, and hurried home.

He slipped the papers under his pillows — as far from his alambic and his brewery as he could, as if the charcoal and the ink could... somehow... poison the waters. Taint the blessed herbs, blacken the leaves and the roots, turn the water red.

If the miracles of the Earth truly had sunk beneath the mud at the bottom of the Gorkhon, buried alongside the corpse of the tower, surely these papers would only be papers now. Ink and charcoal laid flat on pages peppered by fingerprints and nothing more.



The Broken Heart was silent but not still, night was heavy over its roof. It was crawling with barflies — and a few reptiles. The Bachelor barely lifted his gaze to meet him when he approached their table. Yulia was kicking her leg draped over her other knee. She seemed to be growing impatient. The oldest Stamatin... looked five years older. He watched the Haruspex approach with an insectoid side-glance, head unnaturally tilted to the side. The little brother had stopped caring. He was lying down on the worn couch, knees brought to his chest. His hair was wet, the barest hint of red. He had tried to swim in the Gorkhon. The Haruspex could smell it on him.

“Can I... talk to him?” the Haruspex asked Andrey, who kept his snide stare on him. Any more animosity and he thought the Stamatina would bite him.

“Ask him yourself.”

Burakh crouched, a hand on the arm of the couch.

“Architect,” he called. “Peter.” The man’s head rose from the couch, marked deeply by sorrow — and by the creases and bumps of the leather. “I’m sorry. The choice has been made.” (He marked a pause.) “I’m sorry.”

“It had to be done.” His voice was strained, deep, rough, grating his grief thinly against the rock of a boiling, burning anger. “It had to be done, didn’t it? It’s what you said, isn’t it? *Miracles are incompatible with life?*”

The Haruspex didn’t remember saying such a thing.

“She... should have never existed in the first place. I know this. And I’m never forgiving you.”

The Haruspex breathed deeply.

“I’m not asking for forgiveness.”

“Good. I don’t think I have any for you.”

“I understand.”

“You’ve... killed my daughter. You’ve taken her from me... then again... you’ve given me another... This is what this is about, isn’t it? Balance...”

“How is she? Grace, I mean,” The Haruspex hurried himself to hop on the subject. “Where is she?”

“Home,” the Architect replied in a breath, and his interlocutor felt a wave of comfort wash over him at the word. *Home*. Little Grace had a home... “She insisted she wanted to draw... something.”

His voice drifted off, and the Haruspex took it as his clue to let him sober up. Standing on his heels, he heard the Architect throw up an ugly sob that had the small attendance lean in, worried, a split second before he seemed to fall asleep. The Bachelor gestured to the brother to turn him on his side, were he to be so drunk that he risked throwing up.

The Haruspex walked to his colleague, who finally raised eyes to him.

“Emshen.” he spoke. His voice was thick and heavy with liquor, and yet Burakh felt... a twinge of pride, almost, hearing him try. Quite a first. He weighed his reply in his mouth.

“Erdem.” Then, immediately: “Oynon.”

“Did I say it right? *Emshen*?”

Burakh considered telling him that it was actually pronounced as if one swallowed his vowels, or couldn't open his mouth; then, seeing how the Bachelor swallowed his vowels and struggled to open his mouth, alcohol having wiped his usual smirk off his face, Burakh realized that he was doing just what *mechanically* worked, but wouldn't be able to put any more heart or thought in it.

“Well,” the Bachelor spilled out, word half-bitten into with how twyrine loosened his jaw, “this is it, I guess.”

“It's just the beginning, oynon.”

And they spoke. And Burakh thought about crouching again, but decided against it, instead putting a hand on the back of the chair and leaning in. Yulia had walked up to the barkeeper, the Architect fallen asleep.

“What are you going to do now?”

The Haruspex felt another sentence brew under his tongue, a bit bitter: “*Who will you look in the face?*”—but he then saw the Bachelor was looking at *him*. Pricking two holes through his face with the pins of his eyes. In a surprising, almost shocking overpour of honesty, Dankovsky replied:

“I'm going to pack all that grief in my suitcase and take the train back home.” His mouth was wooden, his tongue fleece. Burakh could see how his head rolled from shoulder to shoulder as he struggled to keep it straight. “Home to... nothing much. Thanatica...” His voice tore up with a saddened croak. Burakh wasn't going to push for more information on it, and promptly kept going:

“You could stay. Empty houses are not rare here. We could get you all set up.”

The Bachelor's mouth contorted as his throat closed up in the attempt at a laugh. Each part of his face seemed to move in its own direction, his expression unraveling in many threads he could not grasp.

“I appreciate the invitation, Burakh, but I think this town would drive me mad.”

“Your loss!” Burakh joked, hoping to lighten up the mood — but his voice fell flat and his mouth didn’t quirk quite right and he understood. He did understand.

The “ *... and it may already have* ” was not said, but thought so loud Burakh felt like he could hear it.

The Haruspex left the Broken Heart.

He walked to the cemetery and sat by his father’s grave. The soil was dry, packed, uncomfortable under him.

Facing the past, just like facing the future, was a way of love, he had been told. He couldn’t make a bad choice, he had been told. Any choice he would make *would be* a way of love, he had been told. Well, it felt more like plain murder now.

Not a bell tolled in the cemetery. Quiescence and death reigned, mirroring off each other like lovers he had brought together. Here’s a connection he could still make, he bitterly laughed. *Worry not that the bell rings*, he had once been told, *worry that it falls silent*. He didn’t have it in him to worry anymore. He bore the guilt on shoulders that hurt. On a spine bent and stretched thin like a rope.

He got back to the lair.

The blueprints were still here, hadn’t budged, hadn’t moved back to the Architect’s loft to haunt him. The water of the last batch of panacea, still brewing, was clear. The papers were just papers. The miracles were gone.



The train kept still on its tracks, patient like a faithful mule. Burakh stayed back as he watched the red hive of the departing army, disappearing dot after dot into wagons like ewes settling into the sheepfold. Eventually, a few more shadows congregated around the rusty snake of the

slithering train. He could discern the Inquisitor, head low and heavy as if hanged already; the General, stride stern and strong as if he wished to leave even more of his mark on the Earth still. Then, just as they, too, slipped through the open wagon doors: a snakeskin coat by the tracks. Burakh kicked himself into a run and approached the railway.

“Oynon!” he called, and Dankovsky turned to him promptly.

They stood face to face, the Bachelor towering him from the wagon step, in a nervous silence. Burakh found himself suddenly embarrassed.

“The Stamatins... Peter,” he began, “he wanted me to give you this.” The blueprints left his hold to find Dankovsky’s, who almost reverently pulled them to his chest. “He says he doesn’t trust himself with them. Says whatever you do with them is better than anything he could do in this town.”

Burakh watched as Dankovsky folded them carefully, putting them away in his bag after having thoroughly rearranged his possessions to make room. His eyes darted to Burakh’s hand when he started rummaging through his pocket.

The Haruspex’s wrist felt stiff, unnaturally tense as he brought out a cotton pouch that fit in his palm. Was it that weird? That goddamn intense? It truly wasn’t, Burakh kept chastising himself, and he lodged his offering in the hollow of the palm that Dankovsky cautiously brought forward. Dankovsky weighted it in his palm. Curled his gloved fingers around the white muslin with an apparent delicacy, a tactful restraint.

“... I remember you saying you couldn’t sleep, you had headaches. I had these herbs around,” Burakh said, and that was a lie: he had picked them in the morning. “You need to let them dry and then steep in hot water until fragrant. They act as a relaxant. Help with migraines, headaches... neck strain. With sleeplessness.” He shifted on his heels, balancing his discomfort on restless legs. “It’s not much, but... Hopefully it’ll help until you sleep better on your own.”

And at that, Dankovsky closed his fist on the pouch and slowly drew his arm to his chest, slipping the herbs in the pocket closest to his heart — Burakh noticed that, noticed it like that. Dankovsky found the look on Burakh’s face and held it firmly.

“Would you care to visit me?” he asked, taking Burakh by great surprise. “At the Capital.” Burakh’s mouth fell open and closed like a baffled fish before he spoke: “It would be my pleasure.”

“I’ll find a place for you to stay,” Dankovsky continued, pulling from a pocket a folded piece of yellowed paper. “If needed, I’ll make some room at my place.”

With that, he handed Burakh the note. Working out the pleats, Artemy found an address, spelled in pristine, if slightly leaning-to-the-left in a hurry, cursive.

“You had plans to give this to me before you even asked,” Burakh both inquired and stated, voice barely above a breath.

He thought of meeting the Bachelor’s gaze but could only reach his mouth, that he saw twitch. It struggled to put on the hint of a smile. The corners pushed against exhaustion and grief, making a crooked grimace bent with the forbearing of Atlas resigned to hold the weight of the world.

Burakh looked away.

Still, his voice sounded just a hint of merry under its thick coat of sorrow as he replied:

“Of course I had.”

Eyes finding Dankovsky’s, Burakh slipped the paper in his pocket with care. He found the Bachelor’s offered hand. He shook it.

“Goodbye, Oynon.”

“Goodbye, Burakh. Live well.”

They stayed still. Eyes on each other, hand in each other’s. The locomotive spat out her familiar, dreaded whistle, and voices rose from the station.

“Goodbye,” they both mouthed again, and Burakh felt himself be sharply pulled forward. Then, he felt a hurried, bold kiss be lodged dead-set in the middle of his cheek, where it was slightly hollowed.

Dankovsky pulled back as quickly as he had pulled Burakh in, their handshake dissolved; the train pulled itself forward with the might and force of an ox.

Daniil waved goodbye and Artemy waved back.

“Come see me,” he could read on the Bachelor’s lips as the roar of metal and steam dragged the wagons southbound.

“I will,” he spoke back, before promptly putting a hand on his cheek.

It burned. It didn’t hurt, it *burned*. The same starved, ravenous burn he’d gotten so used to in the pit of his stomach. It ate at his face, carving him in then out.

He let himself lean into this hunger. He let it swallow him — for a brief, thoughtless instant. He promptly snapped out of it, shaking his head as if it could chase the craving out. It didn’t, really, but the cold wind that followed after the train that disappeared already into the evening fog brushed his face with an almost tender hand, and he felt better.

He went home — a home empty. He hadn't pushed the door open in days. The building shook and sighed, heavily and almost with relief, when he walked in. Murky followed on his heels, looking for a corner, a nook, a cranny to try to pry open with her little hands. Burakh stood by

the door that led to his father's bedroom — once led? still led? He couldn't tell, he couldn't decide. What was he to do? To light candles by the threshold, to forever keep the door shut in silent remembrance? To bring herbs, to bring offerings? He had never grieved — never grieved like a man, always grieved like a boy, with the infantile lightness in the chest of seeing the dead everywhere. Now, grief sunk him down. He didn't feel more anchored to the earth by the way sorrow weighted his lungs, he just felt like he bent, slowly, a branch carrying fruits too heavy, to the unbearable point of almost-breaking. Isidor was to be reborn as clay, as blades of herbs—and if even these miraculous processes had vanished, he was to feed all the insects and creatures of the soil that would survive the catastrophe. He was. That didn't make him any less dead. That didn't make Artemy any less sad.

The sorrow came in a wave when night set. A groundswell that swallowed the house in its cold, dark mouth. Burakh had cleaned some sheets and pillows for the kids, had set them in their beds — they shared a room tonight, maybe they wouldn't soon. They were all going to have to learn. To learn and to live.

Sorrow came in a wave and broke down the walls of Burakh's throat and lungs, bursting through him, drowning him swiftly. He choked, he tried to choke it out. He was nothing but water. Nothing but tears. The streetlights followed his stumbling silhouette as he ran outside, so as to not add the weight of his anguish to the house he felt was already sinking into the mud. He was back at dawn. The pink of the shy morning sun kissed the sky above the fires of Shekhen, lit in the distance.

(This, Burakh didn't know, but the waning smell of herbs that followed the train west did, and as such, it should be written: the Bachelor had traveled in silence, his feet together, his head the pale statue carried by the plinth of his spine, his hands growing cold. When he arrived, the grey underbelly of the sky split itself on the spires of the churches, the steeples and the roofs, on the peaks of the tallest trees, and it rained. He walked home with foggy eyes, with soundless steps, and didn't lock the door behind him. He put down the bag. He shrugged off his coat. He sat in the great silence and dark of the building breathing around him, deaf to his mourning. He waited a day for Death to scythe him. It didn't.

It didn't, and so: he made sure the stove was put out, he cut off the water supply, he opened the curtains. He made again his already-made bed, he adjusted his notes and letters on his desk, he put atop his pen flat (made sure it didn't roll off before looking away). He put in a bag undergarments, a shirt and a pair of pants, and he left. He did lock the door, this time.

This, Burakh didn't know, but the eyes of the leaves that Dankovsky still carried near his heart saw it all, if they could still see: he weaved path, by foot, by tram, by horsecar (on the lower deck), like a black-cloaked ghost through the streets, and he knocked on his mother's door. She came running from downstairs and she stood, a full head smaller, in front of him. She brought her hands to his face, she recognized his traits under his wuthering gaze; she touched his cheeks and his neck gently, she adjusted the cravat on his throat. He felt himself fall gracelessly but he didn't

hit the ground: his spine bent like wheat under the weight of the wind and his head found her shoulder. He didn't utter a word, his knees buckled only once and he thought she couldn't have noticed that. She ushered him in.

He climbed the stairs, he found the bed he had long overgrown, and he laid himself down. His mother walked in. She covered him with the heaviest blanket that was in the house, and she shut the door behind her.

This, Burakh didn't know, but the herbs that didn't wilt for as long as the Bachelor slept did: he waited. He waited for a day, for two, for three, for a week. He didn't move. His mom walked past the door, never opening it. She laid by the threshold nazuk and milk and, finding them untouched, laid halva and tea. Her steps filled the rooms and climbed the walls. They didn't wake him up.

His first words were "*mom, I think I have failed*". She rushed to him, her bad leg beating the floors like the *trois coups*. He wasn't sure she understood (he wasn't sure he even spoke), but she reached out a tiny hand to hold one of his — he wasn't feverish at all — and her first words were "*did you?*" And then, squeezing his palm: "*I don't think you did.*"

He waited eight, nine, ten days. When on the twelfth, Death hadn't knocked on his mother's door in the way he had, he got up. He walked to the kitchen and ate the *lahmajun* laid out like offerings, drank the black tea poured as libation. He washed his face and washed his hair and didn't sob but came quite close. He hugged his mother tight and slipped through the door with his bag under an arm.

He started the woodstove first thing when he got home, he pulled the curtains to keep the warmth, and he scurried to his desk for pen and paper.

This, Burakh didn't know, but you do now.)

September went. October came. Burakh picked herbs; he dried petals here, plucked leaves there. The workshop was alit with fierce, swirling fragrances. The herbs that Burakh hadn't picked wilted and died. The heady scent of September twyre was swept off the earth by the biting autumn winds, and soon he steppe smelled only of cold.

The train brought a letter.

"Esteemed colleague,

The last flowers of the Capital's parks having wilted, I was reminded of the pungent herbs of your town. I regret having never taken the time, in the few days I spent by your side, to learn about their intricate

properties. I do remember you hung them in bouquets in your workshop and home, and I have found myself daydreaming about their scent.

I wish you could tell me more about them over a cup of tea.

*May your days be simple and uneventful,
your friend,*

Bachelor Daniil Dankovsky.”

Burakh didn't recall ever giving the Bachelor an address to write to: in an almost feverish second, he grabbed the envelope. Ah... Well, he could guess the couriers, picking up letters and packages from the coming trains, would find where to reach “*Artemy Isidorovich Burakh, Burakh's Home, Town-on-Gorkhon*”. Burakh's home, that was his.

Burakh read the lines — read and re-read again. They were not as slanted as they were when they spelled out the Bachelor's address; he knew because he kept the note folded by the books at his bedside, and he re-read that too.

He was not enough of an idiot to miss the bold invitation the letter offered, but he was enough of a coward to never go. He pulled out quill, ink and paper, and he tried to write back. He stared, still and silent, at the blank page. And stared again, and again, and again, everytime he came back to it. He read the words, never his own. Observed the curves, curls, the hills and cliffs of the Bachelor's handwriting as if they would tell him something new. All they told him for sure was that he was a bit of a coward, and a bit obsessive.

Burakh had tried the candles at the door, the herbs and the libations. His father's room was silent and still. He... didn't know what he was expecting. Maybe he still had in him the gut-pulling feeling of Grace's miracle. Maybe he expected to hear his voice again. To guess his shape in the doorway, his phantom walking the halls. He was nowhere, ever, to be seen.

Burakh cleaned the threshold. He swept the floors clean of the kernels and spikes of brown twyrine and white whip, of the leaves that had dried and buried themselves in the scars of the wood. A pang of guilt bit him sharply: all these herbs he could have used for medicine... His father wouldn't be too proud.

But then again, his father wouldn't be many things besides dead. And even if he was reborn as clay, as blades of herbs, if he was feeding the insects and creatures of the soil, he wasn't any less dead. Grace could talk to the dead. Burakh could only talk to the living — and that was enough work.

Come on, Burakh. Grow some heart in your guts. Or... vice-versa.

October went and November came. The cold slithered beneath the grass and ate the soil from the inside, hardening it from within. Burakh offered Lara to help with fetching firewood and she told him she had already gotten ready while he was busy. In return, she offered sticks and logs for his alambic. He accepted, thanking her for her grace.

“You look distracted.”

“... I do?”

“Yes. Like you are waiting for something. Like you are waiting to find it within you to do something.”

“Do we have telepaths in this town on top of mistresses and prophetesses?” he joked — he tried to joke, shifting nervously as she seemed to peer into and straight through him.

“I do not need special abilities to see how you look around, Cub,” she retorted, “how you watch out for something beyond the hill.”

“Nothing you need to worry about.”

“You still haven’t replied to your letter,” she noted, picking up just the right rock under which Burakh had tried to hide. “Are you waiting for another one? Are you waiting to see if they will be mad that you didn’t reply?”

Burakh didn’t speak. He collected himself. He tried to pull out of Lara’s grasp the pieces she had torn out of his shielding coat, his stubborn silence. She didn’t give them back easily and her intense blue stare bore through him. “Hey, I’m the one who’s authorized to get people to ‘open up’ out here,” he wanted to joke. He didn’t. He balanced his weight from one foot to the other, and she understood — or at least, understood something.

“Whoever that is,” she spoke, “they could at least use a ‘I’m sorry for leaving you in silence, I just didn’t find my way with words. I hope you’re doing well.’ Something simple. Something short.”

“I know, Gravel. I do know. I’m just afraid I won’t... be able to keep it short.”

Lara observed him. She seemed pleased with this honesty, as she adjusted her skirt to be able to make a step forward.

“Afraid you won’t be able to stay succinct? Afraid you’ll spill?”

“Afraid I won’t be capable of shutting the hell up,” Burakh acquiesced. “Afraid I’ll say some... really, really stupid things.”

He didn’t tell her what kind of stupid things.

The train brought a letter.

“Dear Burakh,

The cold has at last bitten into the Capital with hungry sharp teeth. I am starting to miss my walks through the steppe and the dry yellow grass.

I hope you can stay warm as the winter comes. I haven’t seen a fireplace in your workshop, but I’d imagine your brewery and alambic suffice to bring you at least a little warmth. This sweater Ms. Ravel knitted for you looks pretty snug as well.

The University of Medicine has accepted me as a professor — a miracle, dear Burakh, as I was certain my past ventures would have gotten me blacklisted from such a position. I think my most recent published writings have brought upon me the attention of people who had before thought of me as a mad savant and a necromancer. (oh, this I have forgotten to mention. I have written a book, dear Burakh, something short but important to me. I started to understand the Architect as I stayed awake until the lights of dawn had engulfed the entire city, writing page after page until I couldn't re-read my own writing. I felt almost possessed as I related these twelve faithful days. It wasn't a glamorous fight to partake in, but it does make for a fantastic, and quite instructive, tale. I have two copies that haven't left my apartment.)

The amphitheatre from which I am to give my lectures is quite cold, but it does bring back fond memories of my own years as a student. I am forever saddened that yours were cut so short by this senseless war, and I wish you would have gotten the chance to drink and laugh with fellow classmates rather than fear for your life, out there, under the rains of bullets. What a strange feeling it is, to be standing under all these eyes, so hungry for knowledge.

*May your days be warm,
your friend,
Daniil Dankovsky.”*

*The Bachelor has made himself verbose, Burakh thought, and suddenly felt embarrassed and ashamed he hadn't answered him by fear of being this way himself. This restrained overflow, contained through composed lines and perfectly-shaped letters, made Burakh feel he could just... reach out. He liked reading Dankovsky, he realized, he really did. There was *something* in the way the Bachelor shepherded the wild sheep of his running thoughts, guiding them in the page, which put in Burakh's mind the idea that he, too, could let his own run amok.*

And yet. And yet. He read, re-read, let himself glide across the page like a leaf in the wind — and didn't write back.

Guilt ate him from the inside out, starting with the tight knot of his intestines, as he thought about Dankovsky waiting, waiting, waiting. Fear struck him in the chest as he imagined the Bachelor giving up on writing. Maybe thinking the letters never got to him. Maybe thinking he never read them. Thinking his words were forever sealed in paper, lost. Burakh tried to make himself write and failed every time.

Burakh felt like he had mourned. He went outside where the wind blew, blew him almost off his feet. He laid in the grass. The blades bent under his weight. The cold hard ground suffered barely a dent when his head fell, heavy.

“Can you talk to me?” he asked.

There was not a whisper. There was not a rumble, not a murmur. His heart sank. It sank through him, it hit the earth where his spine met it. It beat, hopeful and growing worried, and was not replied. Burakh stood up. A great hole in the shape of him scarred the grass and seemed to stare

back. He walked away under the bite of the cold. Walked, then ran. The winds seemed after him like hellhounds.

November went and December came.

The train dragged its wheels against the frost-bitten rails and, pushing forward against the mordant winds like a brave horse, brought a letter.

“My dear Burakh,

By the present letter, I wish to invite you to the Capital. I am to give a lecture at the University of Medicine, the subject of which is dear to my heart — as dear, perhaps, as your presence in the crowd.

Would you meet me in the Grand Amphitheatre at seven in the evening on Friday, February the Fifth? I cannot leave the school this day as I must prepare my speech, and as such I will not be able to meet you at the train station (I have insisted my lecture be on a Friday. I have heard, from the Kains, feverish to invite me again, that Vlad the Younger has set a new train schedule; with one departing for the Capital in the early hours of Friday, and one arriving to town quite late just the day after. They have told me this allows for the children to have at least a basic education, boarding in schools here for a week before going home for another. I think I have seen a few near the galleries marchandes. I was told some of the townsfolk also take part in these trips to see what the city has to offer, if only for seven days at a time. You must pardon me, my dear Burakh, but I am less excited to see them than I am to see the children. You have seen... what they think of me in the scars they’ve left on my shoulder and flank. I do not blame them, I truly do not, but you must understand I would still tense at their sight.)

Oh Burakh, I have lost the thread of my thoughts... It is getting late. I would run out of ink trying to re-write myself. Allow me to continue:

I will not be able to meet you at the train station but I have slipped a map in this envelope. Moreover, most adults of this city will be able to point you to the University were you to get lost — it has its reputation. I know many inns and hostels where you could spend your night, and will pay for your stay. However, if you... do not mind the mess... you are equally welcome to stay at my place. I will accompany you to the train station on Saturday and arrange your departure.

I hope this letter finds you in time. If you are certain you cannot come, I implore you to tell me as soon as you know. I will move the lecture date. It is important to me that you be here.

I wish to see your face among my students — I wish to see your face.

*May your winter be mild,
your friend,
Daniil.”*

Oh, how he re-read this. How he did. He read and re-read these last few lines until he almost forgot about the map; prying in the envelope, he found a formal invitation.

It had been printed on textured, eggshell-colored paper — the Bachelor liked his solemnities. The

plan was straightforward, with named roads and numbered buildings. The text, printed in a few different fonts, announced “UNIVERSITY OF MEDICINE”; then city, day, year. “*Bachelor Dankovsky, Esteemed Professor of Anatomy, Thanatology, and General Medicine, has the honor of inviting...*” There, in Dankovsky’s writing — a formal, punctilious cursive: *Burakh, Artemy*. He was proper and precise with the curves and the lines; ceremonial, almost. He took... great care in spelling the menkhu’s name. The realization sent something up Burakh’s spine; not a shiver: he wasn’t cold, he wasn’t afraid. A chill, rather. A thrill. Oh, he shouldn’t think about this. “... *to his lecture at Seven in the Evening on Friday, February the Fifth, in the Grand Amphitheatre.*” Burakh skimmed the rest: acknowledgements to professors, students, advice and requests. He spotted, small, graphite having been smudged, in the corner of the page: “*please, be there.*” Burakh folded the letter and the invitation — he was meticulous and careful, more than usual. This was secret. This was personal. This was... precious.

December went and January came. The train brought nothing. Twenty kilometers of the railway had been chewed and gnawed by mean frostbite, the bolts and joints contorted and bent by the temperatures. When the snow started to melt, the town’s men were sent to mend. They met the cityfolk midway and worked shoulder to shoulder.

Burakh walked through the melting snow that clung to him like an insistent child. The fires of Shekhen burned still, golden dots below the grey coat of the sky that hung low. He stood alone and cold where the steppe met him in the same way. He heard nothing, not even the caress of the wind against what was left of the frost.

He brought a blade to his palm and slit the meaty mound of the pad of his thumb in a straight, swift line. Pain ran through his arm and he inhaled sharply before pressing his fingertips to the lips of the wound. The cold almost cauterized the cut right away, but he managed to squeeze out of the flesh four drops that splattered one atop the other on the silver glaze covering the earth. He thought — he thought he heard a whisper. He listened keenly. Nothing. Not even the song of the frost or the distant whispers of embers. The earth didn’t drink him, kept its lips sealed shut—like a cut stitched tight. He didn’t dare to speak. He didn’t dare and kept his mouth closed as his entrails twisted meanly — he was not going to be replied to. The wind rose from the snow and climbed up his spine like a snake. A sudden chill gnawed harshly at his wound and he brought it to his mouth. Even his own blood tasted cold. He tasted like a sour pomegranate, like a blade having been buried in the clay. He hurried home, where Murky insisted on picking the specks of frost from the lips of the cut.

January went and February came. The morning was biting and bright when Burakh hopped on the Friday dawn train, a messenger bag at the flank, wishing to look more... like he fit. He had left his usual tunic, with its belts and buckles, with the kids at Lara’s home (promising he wouldn’t be long and wouldn’t be mad if they got stains on it as he left them in her care); opting for a long

brown coat over his blue sweater. He couldn't button the thing at the front, having forgotten to sew a few things in place, and was starting to regret having dressed himself up like this. The cold weaved through the holes of the meshing, burying itself even under his undershirt. He decided he had to bear it: he buried his mind in the leather-bound botany tome he had brought and didn't get bored for the ten hours of the trip.

It was dark when he stepped foot in the Capital — dark, but not night yet. The crowd seemed to carry his weight out of the train then out of the station as hundreds moved in one singular organism, a centipede in its hurry to get a move on, borrowing his legs for a few steps. He found himself standing, the colossal beast of the train station, crowned by a clock the size of a house, behind him, in the middle of the street. He dodged a carriage, then two, felt the brush of a horse's muzzle at his nape both times.

The city was slowly donning its celestial blue coat, cobalt sweeping through the streets like the cold late-winter air. Then, a golden dot here, a golden dot there: Burakh followed the silhouette of the lamplighter as they weaved from street to street. He opened his bag and, with care, with attention, pulled out the invitation. He had learned, reading and re-reading it evening after evening, the intricacies of the plan, didn't even need to *see* it to remember — and thankfully so, as it was too dark to read where he stood. He folded the paper, adjusted bag on shoulder, and was on his way, hands buried deep in the pockets of his coat.

Chalk

Burakh found himself face to face with the University of Medicine: its facade rose, like a fortress, from the road. It was pierced of an immeasurable number of windows like so many small, peering eyes and opened, in its middle, in a gigantic rounded arch: an open mouth that caught bystanders and students alike. Burakh found himself swallowed, stuck between two groups that converged through the massive door, and was led into the central court. Lost, he followed. The attendance, waiting by the stairs to the main building, had gathered in groups. Each dot of the crowd was haloed golden, swept by the oil lights sprouting out of the white brick like strange mushrooms. Burakh's head spun with the number of people he could see. He saw students twenty, maybe twenty-two years of age, who had gathered. He could see how the boys, some wearing canotiers, some wearing felt hats, donned in large flowing capes and cinched black coats, tried to show through dress an educated and informed status despite their young age. He spotted one fiddling with his cigarette, tapping it rhythmically on his cigarette case. The girls, some of their youthful heads covered, some adorned with long, intricate braids, wore here long dark skirts with flowy blouses covered with a short cape, there vests and shirts similar to their male counterparts'. One was fidgeting with her pocket watch, another digging through her bag for a notebook and a pen. Burakh could also see men and women his age or barely a few years apart,

likely doctors, surgeons, nurses and midwives who had come with pen, paper, and their suitcases. A few meters away, more men, older, graying beards and brows, stood in a tight pack and discussed back and forth. They were finely dressed, proper in stature, and all had a little suitcase as well.

Burakh felt... underdressed, certainly, and underprepared even more. He approached the young student he had caught rummaging through her baggage for pen and paper, leaned in, poking his head between two friends she was surrounded by, and lied:

“I’m really sorry to bother... I came all the way here by train and I realized I forgot my things in the car. Could I borrow some paper from you? I would also be so grateful if you—if any of you had a pen or pencil too...”

She seemed to light up, overly excited at the idea of lending a hand.

“Sure! How many sheets do you need? Five, six?” she asked, as she started to pull apart pages of her notebook.

“Five—five will be fine. Thank you.”

“Here, have my pen too. I have another one—never used it though so I sure hope it works, but even if it doesn’t you can keep that one.”

“Thank you. I won’t forget to give it back to you.”

And with that, he slipped his new acquisitions in his messenger bag, wondering just *how weird* it would look to say he “forgot his things” and have this on him. No one around cared. The young ladies were sorting through books they had brought — medicine and surgery tomes that Burakh could see were annotated. Time felt like it had stretched since he arrived, and the wait started to make him feel uneasy.

The crowd had stopped growing. Burakh had seen bigger in his student days, of course, but he still wondered if everyone would have a seat in the theatre. He was completely perplexed at how the contemptible, loathsome prick of a doctor whose bordering-on-unethical experiments had drawn the ire of overseers Burakh had once met could draw such a congregation. He had talked about being blacklisted, about his laboratory being burned down. It couldn’t... Or was it his book? Had it been that much of a success? Burakh hadn’t read it, of course he hadn’t. He guessed he could stop by a bookstore tomorrow morning...

A head erupted from the hall and called out firmly:

“The lecture is happening in ten minutes. Please proceed to the theatre. Calmly, I kindly ask of you. Do not be too noisy, as some students here are still around, preparing for tests.”

At that, a murmur of acknowledgement ran through the crowd that spoke in a single voice. In a same motion, the amorphous cloud of the congregation made its way past the doors and into the

hallway, following with an almost ceremonial obedience the hailer who led them all to the theatre.

The theatre was, as expected, a half-moon that rose in row after row of tiers. On the opposite wall, an imposing blackboard overtopped the central point of a stage, upon which was a chair, a table — and upon that, a glass of water and a familiar bag, as well as an even more familiar coat. Burakh weaved through the audience to find a seat in the tiers; he didn't want to be too far, nor too close. In a brief second of almost-clarity, he thought he was over-scrutinizing his own self way too much for what he was doing. He was attending this lecture, like the rest. Like the three women who sat at his right, and the two young men who sat at his left. One of them adjusted his silver-framed glasses on his nose and busied himself putting down date and place in his notebook. Studious. Burakh half-heartedly scribbled the same in a corner of his paper. He found himself fidgeting with the pen he borrowed and had to hold himself back from accidentally breaking it in a nervous trance.

Then, Dankovsky was on stage.

He walked with a piece of chalk in his hand and the theatre fell in a reverent silence. Burakh realized he was holding his breath trying to honor this quiet stillness.

“Ladies, gentlemen, esteemed colleagues and revered members of the Academy of Sciences, I would first like to thank you all for attending tonight's lecture.” He took a deep, measured breath. He was searching for his words, Burakh could see it. “This talk wouldn't have been possible without the work and dedication of... dearest colleagues and friends of mine. Without their incredible tenacity in the face of unprecedented adversity.” Another pause, prolonged. Burakh saw the way Dankovsky seemed to swallow back his tongue as he opened his mouth again to speak. “If... they are in attendance, they will recognize themselves. If they are not... please keep them in your thoughts, as neither this lecture nor the book upon which I was able to base myself to articulate it would exist without them. Thank you.”

A low, rumbling murmur of acknowledgement and acquiescence ran through the tiers. It washed over Burakh, crashing against his shoulder like wave against cliff as it tore through his row from one end to the other. He... thought the Bachelor found his fixated gaze for a second, but their eyes didn't meet. Dankovsky was surveying the seats yet seeing no one. Burakh was lost in the sea — Burakh was the intended audience. Spoken directly to—never addressed. Tonight's professor turned his back on his audience (a theatre faux-pas) and, of an elaborated and noble cursive, struck the blackboard of the words: *“To heal in the face of the unknowledgeable, or when science fails us: what must be learned from folk medicine, traditional remedies, and old women's tales”*.

Burakh... saw how Dankovsky's hand shook as he laid the chalk down. How Daniil closed and opened his fist as a self-soothing, nervous tic. He sat down, adjusted his papers in front of him.

“We are blessed,” he began, voice steady, climbing the tiers like growing storm clouds, “to live in an age of formidable medical advancement and constant breakthroughs. There's never been a

better time to be a doctor than now,” his voice rose, almost playful, “now that we can have a patient be knocked out with morphine before doing the smallest of stitches.”

This drew a wave of sophisticated, acquainted amusement from the rows. An older gentleman, who Burakh had spotted outside with his pack, barked out a laugh as his assumed colleagues chuckled heartily. Relatable to them, was this, then.

“We’ve discarded folk medicine as unscientific, proofless methods of a bygone era. Undeserving of being carried in our doctor’s suitcases alongside our needles and stethoscopes.”

Dankovsky pinched the pad of his thumb with his other hand. Burakh couldn’t decipher if that was a way to compose himself and manage stress, or if — and this was funnier to think about! — it hurt the good Bachelor to push himself to say those things... Remnants, perhaps, of his seemingly bygone overt arrogance. He had to still have bits and pieces of that cockiness, even if... well... even if he spoke low, and slow, and Burakh could see he had lost some of that poise and that bold aplomb he had seen him have. He had to still have bits and pieces. Burakh found himself thinking how disheartening it was to see how exhaustion (and fear, and fear) had eaten at him, had dug through him like worm in apple flesh. He still stood, but Burakh could see he flinched. Maybe he’d been stared into so much that Death had bore wells through him too.

Burakh promptly shook his head. No. No, the Bachelor twitched on his seat because it hurt him to admit he had been wrong — but not out of despair, not because of memories viciously coiling inside of him, but because he was cocky and not used to be wrong. Maybe stage fright too. Yeah. That was that. That must be that.

“I am not asking you to suddenly turn to witches’ brews and herbology,” Dankovsky spoke right through Burakh’s darkening thoughts, snatching him awake, “I will however, tonight with me, to... think about connections.”

Burakh’s spine straightened.

“If a remedy works, or if the people who take it think it works, I will ask you to ask yourself... How. Why.”

Dankovsky stood up. Walked to the blackboard.

“What is there, in the mind, in the body, in the spiritual self — because all illnesses, all diseases deal with death and the fear of it, and everything that deals with death deals with the spiritual self — that binds health, or the belief of health, to these unscientific, unsubstantiated remedies?”

He was starting to pace. He was starting to be passionate. Moving around too suddenly, his cravat got a quirk — and Burakh couldn’t tear his eyes away.

Again, he thought their gazes met. He had no idea if they did — still he felt seen, he felt *seen*, he felt seen right into.

When Dankovsky had invited him to join the tiers, he had invited him to join the stage. He saw how the Bachelor pulled out the chair only to *not* sit on it; pulled it for someone else.

Dankovsky threw his arm across the blackboard and left a perfect circle of chalk. He turned to his audience and the shape haloed his head.

“I am going to start vague, I am going to start wide, dispersed, barely reachable. I am going to start—”

Dankovsky drew an herb. Drew its leaves and flowers.

“— with this plant here.”

He wrote beneath: *active agents - toxins - pharmacopeia*. Burakh couldn't recognize the plant, he couldn't recognize it for the life of him. This sent a thrill down his spine. His wrist tingled with the almost-forgotten but so intimately familiar desire to write. He almost sighed in relief as his body fell into its intricate mechanical memory.

“... if there are no other questions, ladies, gentlemen, esteemed colleagues and revered members of the Academy of Sciences, this clatures tonight's lecture. I thank you all for coming and for the attention you've given me tonight. Any questions you would like to ask privately, I will stay for a while to be able to answer. Thank you again. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight!”

The audience got out of the seats as a single body, rising from the woods of the tiers and cascading down the stairs in a muffled, extracorporeal voice, and headed for the door.

“Your pen,” Burakh jumped out of his seat to reach his earlier benefactor. “Thank you.”

“No problem!” She stilled for a singular second. She was looking at his hands. He almost sought to hide them when he noticed the ink stains. “I see you got some use out of it.”

“I did,” Burakh replied as his interlocutor let out a light-hearted chuckle, “thank you again.”

The young woman pranced down the stairs and slipped through as the winter air slithered in despite the crowd in the doorway.

Artemy was in no hurry — no hurry to get down, and no hurry to leave. By the time he had reached the stage, the theatre had bled out its congregation; save for the few that stood in line by the desk.

A girl was holding her books against her chest, trying to pry out of her pocket a piece of paper. A boy had a smaller tome under his arm, definitely not a schoolbook of any sort... Burakh struggled

to read the author's name. Another was flipping through his notes, the woman behind was rehearsing her question in a half-voice. Another student shifted nervously, anticipating his turn. The one at his side seemed confident and twirled her dress thoughtless as a distraction while she waited.

Burakh was offered to go.

"Do you...?"

"Oh," he promptly cut off, "no, no, go first. I'm afraid I'll be long."

That was a lie — both parts of it. He knew he wasn't going to be long, and he wasn't afraid. Well... *afraid* wasn't the right word. He was *something*, certainly.

It was his turn.

They stood face to face.

Artemy waited for the creak of the door on its hinges behind the last student as she left before he began to speak. The coat of silence and cold had wrapped the room.

"Good evening," he said.

"I'm glad you could come. I'm glad you came at all."

He nodded as if the words had hit him across the chest.

"Big audience tonight," Burakh immediately added, as if he couldn't let himself think too much lest silence were to become heavy and thick.

"It surprised even me. I'd have thought some people would have recognized my name from that time I did necromancy and refused to show up. Or show up with a weapon."

Burakh heard a single, sharp spark of laughter escape him. They fell silent again.

"I hope I wasn't too boring," the Bachelor continued, and Burakh could hear he was sincere, with a hint of... shame? How peculiar.

"You weren't. I... didn't know you had it in you to be this much of an orator, in fact."

"You think so?" Dankovsky asked, eager in ways that confounded Burakh for a thoughtless second. He collected his papers, his pens he had dispersed on the table, and started to sort out his bag. "I've been told I was too cold and distant, then too theatrical... You could say I'm trying to find a balance."

"I think you've found it," Burakh said.

Dankovsky fastened the buckles of his bag.

"And I think you're biased," he replied.

The quirk of a smile toyed with the corners of his mouth. It looked... yes, it looked like the tight-lipped, conceited, confident smirk Burakh had gotten used to — until Dankovsky’s lips parted, until his face lit up with a frank flash of teeth, with a hearty wrinkle at the corner of the eye. It almost didn’t take Burakh by surprise: he had felt it coming; and it was demented for him to think that. He had wanted it to come. The thought of this scratched an itch. He shifted, not quite nervous and not quite anything else, on his feet.

“Would you walk me home?” Daniil asked.

“Would you let me carry your bags?” Artemy asked in return. The words spilled out of him like water overflowing. He didn’t even try to swallow them back: he had felt those coming too.

With that, the Bachelor jovially handed him the suitcase, arm comically straight and stretched. The Haruspex took it, laughing once more, and they made their way out. Dankovsky carefully closed the heavy doors behind him and, slipping out of the courtyard and onto the street, they walked shoulder-to-shoulder against the cold wind.

He was not going to say it, but Burakh was growing a little tired of carrying the Bachelor’s bag — by Boddho, what *did* he carry in here that made it so heavy? He was not going to say it, a weird, perhaps misplaced sense of pride guiding his steps.

“Here,” Dankovsky said as he detached himself from Burakh’s shoulder. Burakh’s eyes followed him eagerly, impatient to put the baggage down. The Bachelor walked to the imposing door of a sizable building of pale stone, its windows framed in white, and let himself through, ushering Burakh after him.

They walked by the concierge, a short old lady who peeked out from her lodge when she heard footsteps. Elated to see her usually lonesome tenant bring a friend, she inquired about his line of work. She seemed delighted to learn he was a rural doctor, retelling her youth working alongside her village’s babki, before the two men promptly excused themselves and the Bachelor led his guest to the elevator that stood, all black iron and solemn decorative arabesques, further down the hall.

“What a... massive thing,” Burakh spoke, voice drowned in the noise of its steam-powered force sending them climbing. “Massive building, too...”

“Yes. Pretty old as well.” He seemed struck by a pang of embarrassment, his voice suddenly rough and low, as he added: “Don’t expect anything fancy of my apartment. I’m... lucky to have it. Couldn’t really... find anything else after I became infamous.”

“I understand.”

Burakh did. In the slow ascension, overpowered by the sound of iron and gears, his thoughts wandered the place. He tried to picture the Bachelor's apartment, to capture it by piecing him together. How was the light? How were the windows? Did he live beneath the beams of the roof frame, cold and wet in the winters as the wind slithered through holes in the roof? Had he made it cosy? Well... did he *know* how to make cosy? Would he be cold? Would he accept Burakh's coat if he was?

The elevator stalled and Burakh was promptly pulled out of his speculations — thank god, he thought, he was starting to envision strange things.

“There is one flight of stairs before my floor,” Dankovsky said as he led Burakh out and up a few steps, and his guest could find in his voice, were he to listen well, a muffled apology. “This level is... too small to accomodate the elevator.”

“I'm following you.”

Burakh brought a hand, fingers curled, to his mouth, and blew hotly on it. His nails were turning purple from the biting February air. He heard the characteristic rattle of keys in a lock, and had he barely seen Dankovsky push the door open before him that a curtain of heat struck him across the face and chest, knocking him between the lungs, making him stumble on his feet. The warmth rose to his face, embraced him sweetly.

“I can see that you're cold,” Burakh heard his host's voice over the sound of him shedding his coat. “Come in. Come near the stove, it's always on. You can pull a chair. You can leave my bag wherever you find some room.”

It took him barely a step into the apartment that the Haruspex mouthed “*I'm fine, I don't need to sit*”. And fine he was. He thoughtlessly put down the bag on a chair that flanked the entryway and closed the door behind him. He watched the Bachelor pull on the ends of his scarf and shed that too, revealing pale neck above the red tie Burakh had gotten accustomed to. Daniil's home wrapped itself around him, surrounded him with velvet and wood. Suddenly, his head was full, dense. Filled with the smell of sap from wood piled roughly by the stove, with the sweet, almost tart, sylvan odor of tea leaves he could tell were *somewhere*, with the persistent trace of honey, berries and cardamom from a sbiten the Bachelor hadn't fully drank; with the scent of varnish and veneer that caught humbly the low, golden light of a tall lamp Dankovsky had just turned on. Burakh's head spun as he took in every detail of the abode.

Facing the small kitchen, tucked in a nook left of the entrance, a wallpaper of big, bold, abstract patterns met his eyes; in the main part of the room, a more subtle, more delicate motif of interlaced branches, flowers and birds; on the floor, a once-luxurious Kazakh rug, heavily worn but still loved, overflowing with details; on one of the two armchairs facing each other in the middle of the room (one a humble blue and the other an unpretentious green), an embroidered throw blanket bearing flowers and fruits. The hardwood floors, damaged in places but kept almost obsessively clean, squeaked under his heavy step. All noises seemed to be swallowed by the

curtains that stretched, floor to ceiling, adorned with abundant designs of flowers and vines, at the two windows that pierced the one main room of Dankovsky's dwelling.

Burakh could spot, everywhere his eyes landed, a little something that betrayed the apparent luxury: the sofa, third piece to the conversation ensemble of the two armchairs, was missing a leg — and supported by a book. Wallpaper was peeling behind the imposing — and full to topple over — bookcase that flanked a messy desk in an unlit corner of the room. Books that hadn't fit behind the glass lined the walls in sturdy piles. Furniture was obviously second-, third-, maybe fourth-hand, the wood scarred, the cushions not as young as they once were. Everything had been curated with interest, with warmth, with a shocking affection for the fine things just out of reach. Burakh felt so damn at home that Dankovsky didn't even have to ask him to make himself. The room was so incredibly warm.

"A tea?"

"Huh?"

"To warm yourself up."

"Oh. That would be nice. Thank you."

"You can take a seat."

"I'm fine. Thank you."

And Burakh continued his tour. In the precarious shelves of the small kitchen, he spotted kettles, lovingly used; silverware that had obviously had a life before him; tins and cans and herbs... *his* herbs in fact, dried and shriveled like dates, crushed thinly in a little ornate bowl. He could see, from what was left, that the Bachelor had made quite a few infusions with them. A twinge of pride and a twinge of pain fought for ground in his chest as he imagined the Bachelor turning to the precious stems and leaves for some rest at last — the stems and leaves *he* had picked, with his own two scarred hands.

Slipping between Dankovsky, who had sat by his stove to put a kettle on, and the kitchen wall, he brought eyes to the wallpaper. Above eye level, a part of the Polyhedron's blueprints. He recognized the tower, all angles like knives, haloed by the frantic writing of the Architect. The sheet had been folded to fit a rectangular, dusty gold frame. Below, a round portrait in a square frame of... he was sure it was the Bachelor. The Bachelor, not older than six years of age, with two black pits for huge, curious eyes, in the arms of a woman who shared his smirk — and his eyebrows. She held him with tenderness and Burakh's heart felt a pinch. Below again, a photograph, half of the people on it blurry to some degree. He recognized his host, maybe eight years younger, who had interrupted his studying to pose for the camera. On his right side, a familiar face.

"Hey, that's..."

"Andrey. Yes. Andrey Stamatina."

"You two went to uni together? He never... struck me as a man of medicine."

"That is because he isn't."

The Bachelor rummaged through a small set of cabinets to pull two teacups and saucers that he carefully set aside.

“He left... first or second year? He was always more interested in the post-exam soirées and the liquors some of our classmates hoarded than learning about health science.”

“Color me absolutely not surprised,” Burakh felt emboldened enough to reply, and he followed the Bachelor’s lead when he barked out a laugh.

His host insisted, firmly this time, that he sat, which he did. Turning his back to the window that pierced the right-side wall of the room upon entrance, Burakh made sure his seat was far enough from the piles of books lining the wall behind. From where he was, he could see throning on a console table the skeleton of a snake preserved under a glass dome — it seemed to be missing ribs, had a coil in its spine, and Burakh assumed this is why its previous owners discarded it; a cello leaning precariously by the settee, and the single bed, buried under—of course!—a patterned quilt, by which stood the decorated nightstand that served as a rest for the flank of the instrument.

Dankovsky sat; he had an air of restraint and decorum that Burakh barely had gotten to grasp before he—before they both slowly unraveled under pressure and fear. He sat with legs parted his shoulders’ width, an arm cocked on the armrest, hand closed in a perfectly placid fist. His head was tilted to the side, barely enough to be noticeable. His eyes bore an ineffable grief.

“... You are sad. About the Tower, I mean.”

“Inconsolable.”

Burakh heard the whistling, bitter chuckle Dankovsky let out. He mocked himself, worrying thoughtlessly the inside of his cheek.

“But I see now why you did it. Why it had to be done.”

And those two were the same things, weren’t they? It had to be done because Burakh did it, because he willed it; and he did it because he willed it, as it had to be done. Actions bit the tail of thoughts, and thoughts bit the tail of actions; just like this, venom was spilled. Burakh stayed silent as he observed thoughts brew in the pits of the Bachelor’s eyes.

“The Library of Alexandria burned down. The Gardens of Babylon are no more. The Colossus of Rhodes fell. And it fell so I could stand there. So we could all stand here, as it is.” He pondered his next few words. “... So you could come into my home and we could sit face to face on a Friday evening of February.” He laughed, and his voice was tense and torn at the seams, but he still pushed through. For a second, he almost sounded truly joyful. “It is an incredible loss that they are no more, but... The world spins on. The world has spun on so far. I... expect it will spin for a while.”

In that instant, Burakh truly thought that it didn't. That they stood taut and tall on the tightrope of time, unmoving, restlessly still. That Daniil's home stood atop the tower of the world like the head on a pin, frozen, so far from the sun.

"I understand why you destroyed it, Burakh. It brings me grief, but I understand. I will not say '*were I at your place, I would have done the same thing*' because that'd be a lie. I... had my chance to be at your place. To will the choice. And I failed! You pulled that from under me." He took a second before correcting himself: "you pulled that *out of me*." He tapped his heel nervously, as if suddenly keenly aware of how... horrifically honest he was being, Burakh thought he could read on him. "But I will say... *Had I been you*, I may have done the same."

His lips were thin like threads—not that Burakh was looking—and wove sorrow in stitches of a smile. God, did he look tired. Burakh saw him roll his head from one side to the other, sending a few thoughts running before his guest could see in his eyes that he wanted him to talk for once. That he had told enough (too much) and wanted this silence to be shared. Burakh didn't think he needed that implicit permission, but his mouth took it and ran, and leaped, and spat out words that burned his throat with a hurried relief:

"I'm afraid I've killed the magic, erdem." The sentence wrecked everything from his chest up before its weight fell on him. "I've killed the magic. I was warned that the Tower kept alive all the miracles of the Earth, the illness merely proof that the Earth was alive. The illness was a shelter. A testament. Where it could thrive, so could all miracles. I've made the Heart bleed. I was supposed to protect them, and I doomed them, I doomed them all."

He leaned forward, the knife of guilt hitting him in the spleen from between the shoulder blades. He almost toppled over, held himself back simply because Dankovsky was looking. Oh, shit, he was really looking. He was looking for something, too, on Burakh's face. He was pensive. His mouth quirked to one side, then the other, as if he was tasting his next sentence.

"I'm not a spiritual man, Burakh, but I do not believe magic—"true" magic, the one that outlives childhood fantasies—if it exists, can be so easily killed. Can it?"

Burakh sought his answer. In the frown of Dankovsky's brows, he could see he did as well.

"I do not know how right it would be to compare it to *the divine*," he continued, "but I would assume..." He interrupted himself, grimaced: "I consider myself an atheist, whether my mother likes this or not, but—" and continued, unabated: "— I would imagine it'd be... lost and found. Perhaps lost again... Found once more."

Burakh kept silent. He waited. He listened. Dankovsky smiled—a *real smile!*—as he found his next words, amusement chipping the stone mask of his sorrow to unearth the lines at the corners of his mouth, at the corners of his eyes. Burakh felt hit across the chest, right below the throat.

“Far from me... *to call myself a man of mystical inclinations*, but I do believe... Magic could live on. Magic *would* live on. If only through faith... if only through will.”

Burakh took his own hand, pulled on his fingers without making a sound, fidgeted with his knuckles like he tried to keep them from coming loose. He saw Dankovsky look at his hands, then his face, before looking away, as if to give him privacy.

“... I hadn’t thought about it that much.”

“You just wanted to save your town.”

“To save the kids...”

They both nodded, one after the other.

Then, Dankovsky said the unthinkable: “I understand.” Then, even more inconceivable to Burakh, whose words failed him: “The grief for this Tower is what I have to put in the... great cosmic balance, or whatever holds us; the other side evening out with the lives that will be saved... thanks to you.”

The Bachelor’s eyes grew grey (which Burakh saw, because this time, he was looking). He was sincere and, more than anything, he was thankful. His smile still bittered, the wrinkle between his brows soured as he let his thoughts steep in the silence that followed. Burakh opened his mouth to say thank you, Dankovsky opened his mouth to say sorry, and the whistle of the kettle interrupted them both.

“A tea, Burakh?”

“Yes. Thank you, erdem,” Burakh said, and he meant for the tea and for the words.

“It’s only natural,” Dankovsky replied, and he meant it for both too.

“The...” Burakh pointed at the cello with a finger, others holding firmly the saucer in his hands. He had to look for his words even though he knew them; they seemed to run from him, almost playful. *It’s the warmth*, he thought, it’s the warmth of the stove, of the steam that rose from his teacup and kissed his chin fervently. “Cello. I’ve seen you play some at Yulia’s... Do you still play?”

“Sometimes. I’ve gotten back into it. It’s not as much as I used to, but... sometimes. Busies me in the evenings when I need to clear my head.”

Burakh said something he never thought he would:

“Could you... play now?”

And Dankovsky replied something Burakh never believed he could:

“For you?”

He was jovial, playful, his smile was frank, crooked to the side, and he flashed a cuspid. Burakh felt his teacup rock worryingly in the saucer. He didn't have the time to say “*nevermind, forget it*” that Dankovsky had already put down his cup on the side table flanking his armchair and walked to the instrument, sitting back down and balancing it between his knees.

He took off his left glove swiftly and brought fingers to the strings. Burakh observed how he pulled his hand back a few times, letting it disappear between his body and the cello's. His guest didn't quite know what this was about, but he looked away. He tried to land eyes on the Bachelor's face, they took off again as quickly. Dankovsky brought the bow to the strings, and the hair curved subtly, like lips meeting in a kiss (Burakh tried to not think about it that way; he really, really did). Daniil started to play.

Artemy wasn't musically-inclined beyond what he thought sounded beautiful, which was enough. Still, he held his breath. He once heard you were supposed to feel music with your core, your lungs, with all that's close to your heart, and he was, no denying it—but his eyes and his cheeks and his jaw felt alight by the vibrating voice that rose from the wood. His eyes couldn't tear themselves from the hands: surgically precise on the strings, *fast*—he could barely get glimpses of what he realized his host was trying to hide earlier: a few nervous, red scratches, obviously self-inflicted—otherworldingly delicate. More delicate, perhaps, than Artemy's “gentle hands of a surgeon” (he tried to not think about it), lost in an art that Artemy could understand, but not grasp. The wrists balanced suppleness and strength, sometimes grew taut with a hint of stage fright. Burakh's cheeks were warm. His jaw was tense. His head felt full to overflow.

Artemy didn't hear himself ask: “How does it feel. The strings, how do they feel.”

And he *felt* more than heard, washing over him with the same softness as the warmth emanating from his cup, Daniil answering him: “Like nerves. Like thick hair strands, cleaved not-all-the-way in the middle. Like sewing threads.”

Burakh looked—*looked at* Dankovsky's hands, fingers, wrists, at the skin that appeared in the open eye of the space between his sleeve and arm. At his face—Burakh looked away immediately. At his heel that rose from the floor so his leg gently nudged the cello from one thigh to the other, leading a waltz that Burakh could only sit there and watch. And god, did he watch. He thought he could almost feel the knees touch gently the sides of his thighs. When he brought his teacup to his lips, the amber drink tasted plummy, sylvan, distinctively woody with an aftertaste of honeyed sap. Tasted like the gorgeous, polished brown of the cello, only sweeter.

Burakh stayed silent when the caress of the bow slowly died out in a deep, long note that stayed suspended in his throat like a word he couldn't swallow nor say. Silent when Dankovsky flashed him a smile, satisfied, almost flattered of Burakh's eyes on him; silent when he put the cello away and sat back. Burakh watched (and it felt almost insolent) as Dankovsky used his naked hand to bring fingertips to his teacup, checking the temperature on the outside of the porcelain, and put his glove back on. He adjusted his legs apart, put his elbows on the knees, and leaned forward. Sorrow still lingered somewhere on his face like morning fog clinging to the treetops sunkissed last, but something else was here, pulling back the curtain of clouds to reveal itself through a tilt of the head and a smile. Burakh mirrored his hands, putting his own on his lap after setting his cup down, mirrored his legs, leaned forward too. That *something* was inviting words in. Burakh didn't know *what* that something was, or maybe he knew damn well and couldn't name it, *wouldn't* name it, didn't have it in him to, lest it burn him so thoroughly. When the words leaped out of him, falling dumbly on his chest, he had seen them coming — he had tasted them on his tongue, so tart in their desire to escape him, to spill out and open themselves up, not unlike bodies to Dankovsky's eyes for knives like he could do haruspicy. Artemy said:

“Since you've kissed me, my face aches.”

The Bachelor lost his smile, but his eyes widened. They glistened strongly, catching a flick of gold. Artemy saw it and drank it in, heard the breath Daniil had to take before he spoke:

“What type of ache?”

“The type of ache that wants more.” was punched out of Artemy's chest. He didn't even try to hold it back: it'd have carved its way out of him anyway.

His words had pulled on the threads of time and it all unraveled. If one of them even exhaled, this moment, where they sat and stared, gazes holding each other firmly, locked like hands, would come crashing down. If they exhaled, their breaths would meet, feather-light, and the instant would be no more. The meter-and-half that separated them felt so thin that Artemy could cut through it like young green grass—but he didn't.

He didn't, until Daniil leaned in some more — a hair's width, an almost invisible bow, with a tilt of the head forward, and Artemy's heart pulled him out of his chair with the strength of an uprooting storm. His living, beating heart leaped out of him, sent him forward, put his own legs in his path so he almost tripped, and threw itself onto Daniil's lap. Artemy fell without grace on his knees and his body crashed against Daniil's chest. His arms bent, slithered between waistcoat and back of chair until he felt Daniil's warm skin lick the hollows of his palms as he closed his embrace. Artemy realized that arms were looped around his shoulders, holding him crushingly tight, when he was boldly pulled closer. He had no idea if his fall had pushed the armchair so it was balancing on two legs, it could have, he didn't know, he couldn't care; he was clung to as his face dug into the hollow of Daniil's shoulder that oversaw his heart. He didn't have the time to take a breath when an ugly, croaky gasp hit him in the ribs, right where his body fit against Daniil's. His head was pulled away from the chest, held firmly by hands terrifyingly strong and yet

not a hint violent, and a kiss was sealed in the hollow of his cheek — where it, *oh*, where it burned when he wasn't careful to keep his mind off of it. He leaned against the lips with more force than he thought he had and felt how Daniil's hands adjusted their hold on him. When he broke the kiss, Artemy opened his mouth to speak, and was shut up by another on the other cheek. He could feel Daniil's nose pressing against him, his lips parting before he pulled away, as if to whisper something.

The kiss broke abruptly. Burakh was sure Dankosvky was going to look away, to bashfully turn his head; but there was a heartbeat-second, loud as if two pulses collided (which they very much did) where their eyes met. Burakh saw the instant in the swallowing depths of Dankovsky's stare and it unraveled as such: Artemy didn't see Daniil close his eyes, didn't realize he followed suit, and instead of a gaze he found Daniil's lips — he dove right to them, they met him so warmly. Their ribs could entwine, not unlike fingers, were they to embrace any tighter. Daniil's lips parted, his mouth giving way not unlike a fresh citrus under hungry fingers, deeply similar in taste when Artemy bit into it — perhaps a flavor in the tea that he hadn't noticed before. Daniil held his head firmly, almost painfully so, as if afraid he would leave; and, as if to tell him he never could, Artemy pushed himself into the kiss deeper. He adjusted his arms around Daniil's waist as he arched off the chair, into the hold, into Artemy's chest like he wanted to bury himself right there, next to his loud, loud heart. The delicately wet sounds of the kisses filled Artemy's head until he heard nothing but those and his own heart, knocking against his tongue. He was sure Daniil could taste the red of it, and if he did, he didn't mind, he welcomed it, swallowed it whole, blissfully. Burakh eventually realized his weight *did* push the chair to balance on two legs. He slowly pulled back on his knees. The kiss was broken — Artemy didn't need one more second to bury his head against Daniil's chest, in the hollow of his neck that his cravat kept so warm, against his chest again, holding tighter when he felt Dankovsky's legs frame his flanks, then his thighs. Daniil's heart wanted nothing but to be heard, and Artemy listened. He held his breath so two pulses could echo wildly in the silence left hanging from their lips. When he exhaled, Dankovsky tried to pull him closer again, smothering his face in his blonde hair. He pressed many kisses here, almost worried, his lips still wet. Burakh saw how Dankovsky took off a glove, then the other, before touching his neck, his cheeks, the topmost part of Burakh's back that he could reach from the neckline of his sweater. His palms were very warm, fingertips still alight with musical mastery, touching Artemy with the very same skillful delicateness they had found on the strings, thrilling him just the same.

Because he thought the moment was right, because it felt like the thing to do — and because he wanted it, more than anything, Burakh brought a hand to the front of Dankovsky's waistcoat, and worried one of the red buttons with an almost-shy thumb. He sought permission, perhaps reassurance, and it was offered right away.

“Hey,” Dankovsky said against his hair; then, when he looked up, against his lips. Burakh felt the wide smile that met his mouth, and almost wanted to pull away to see it whole. He offered the warm, wet tip of his tongue, and Dankovsky leaned into him to savor it better — and to shrug off the waistcoat that he had parted open.

Artemy didn't even have the time to start worrying that nervousness was knocked out of him with a gut-punch. With Daniil's hands on his shoulders, fingers pulling at the knitted wool. With one that flew to his side, to his waist, that reached for the fabric tucked here. With Daniil's eyes that guided his own hands. He reached for the cravat, undid it slowly. He didn't expect for the cloth to be this soft — a silk, thinly woven of burgundy, pomegranate, copper threads. Daniil's heart, worn right at his throat, that Artemy took slowly; and Daniil let him.

He kissed right where Daniil's pulse called him the loudest; right where he felt like he could taste it, in the comfortable hollow of his neck and jaw. Daniil took his hands, palms warm. He guided them into his open collar — that Burakh didn't remember any of them touching.

He undid buttons, and his fingers shook, and it was fine: Dankovsky's eyes were on him, amused, not a hint mocking, soft, eager yet patient. This wasn't surgery. He could be as unsure, as trembling as he wanted — not that he wanted it — and all Dankovsky did was make his job easier. Was help with a button, two, maybe. Was exhale strongly when Artemy's hands caressed his sternum, then lower, his stomach.

Burakh was not sure when they got up, or who got up first. He thought they likely stood in one motion, meeting halfway. There was a waltz — a bad one, truly, but god was it fun — to the side of the bed, and a few steps more until the back of the Bachelor's knees hit the mattress, upon which they fell gracelessly.

Dankovsky patted the quilt with the back of a hand.

"You'll... have to excuse the dimensions of this bed," he said, breathless, and the wink of shame he felt at his living arrangements was heavily eclipsed by something else entirely. He took a shoe off by levering one of the metal bedposts against his heel.

"I'm sure we'll find a way," Burakh replied. Daniil kissed every finger he found near his face as Artemy's arms framed his chest and head.

"I'm sure we will."

Daniil's smile was... something else. Not quite *new*, Burakh had seen him smile a bunch this evening, but different. Impish in such a genuine, unfiltered way. Digging so frankly into his cheeks, sharpening the deep lines that ran at the corners of his mouth. Artemy wanted to kiss those; not to kiss them *off of him* like he once wanted a smirk, just to kiss those. So he did. Daniil threw arms around his shoulders to pull him closer, asked for one more avid, craving kiss to be satiated. Artemy didn't need to be asked twice. He fed him purses of his lips, offered his open mouth to unabashed hunger.

At some point, Dankovsky managed to kick his other shoe off. His leg framed half of Burakh's body. Burakh was shocked to find him — and himself — so ravenous still. A delightful, blissful hunger. Earthy in all manners of the divine.



Sometime in the night, Burakh was awake, and Dankovsky was too; and Dankovsky had draped himself in a robe of a red darker than what Burakh had seen him wear, paling some more his pearly skin. Head tilted frankly to one side, sitting by a pile of books, Dankovsky ran fingers down the spines.

“I know it’s in there. I know my piles look messy but I assure you, I know exactly what’s in them.”

“I believe you,” Burakh replied, a hearty laugh on the lips.

Dankovsky pulled a tome with dextrous, fast fingers. He just short of trotted back to the bed and hopped on in a ruffle of thick burgundy silk. He fawned over the book with a “*here it is!*” that Burakh welcomed in open arms, pulling him in an embrace.

They settled back under the quilt, under the warm, heavy blanket. They intertwined legs so they could both fit on Dankovsky’s narrow bed, and they did. Burakh tucked his head in the hot hollow of his neck — that he kissed a few more times for good measure. He looped arms around Dankovsky’s waist and Dankovsky looped an arm around his shoulders. He read: his voice was low, soft, for Artemy’s ears only. Burakh mindlessly let his hands wander between skin and silk until he had denuded Daniil of half of his robe — hey, he was laughing about it. Then, Daniil’s fingers in his hair lulled him to sleep.

At some point, Burakh cracked an eye open. He found Dankovsky’s face very close.

“Thought you were asleep,” Burakh slurred.

“I’m not. I’m counting your freckles. I’ve been counting your freckles.”

“Arduous task”, Burakh tried to laugh, mouth woolen.

“But so rewarding.”

Dankovsky was awake enough to chuckle for real. They both at the same time sought a mindless kiss. They missed each other’s mouths by a sleepy margin.

This, Burakh didn’t know, because he was asleep: sometime in the night, they were lying next to each other, having found a way to fit with Burakh sleeping on his flank. He had at some point managed to disrobe Dankovsky completely and thrown an arm over him. He slept soundly. Dankovsky’s book laid open on the blanket, held in place by a loose hand. His other one found Burakh’s shoulder from beneath the heavy limb on him, found his elbow, his arm, his wrist. Found the place where it fit perfectly right over the back of his hand, slipping fingers between Burakh’s like he had done between pages.

This, Burakh didn’t know, because he was asleep: Daniil looked at him fondly. His chest rose and

fell with deep, content breaths. He leaned in, and kissed Artemy on the forehead. On the forehead first, then on the tip of his nose, then on his chin. Then, he went back to his book.

(Oh, and — this, Dankovsky didn't know, because he was asleep: Artemy woke up just to adjust the blanket on both of them, then to press soft kisses at his hairline, then between his brows right where they brushed against each other, then on his collarbone, where a beauty spot just called for gentle lips. He closed his eyes and drifted off immediately.)

The night felt stretched thin, and Burakh's sleep became rocky and shallow. Guilt and grief had galloped back into the silence left as Dankovsky slept, and trampled him, trampled him furiously. He crawled out of bed and limped to the bathroom where he bent over the sink, wrecked in half. He looked at his hands as they clung to the edges, looked at them meanly. The ligaments protruded like writhing snakes with the force, seemed to pulsate under his skin. He was *alive* with so much violence, with something callous and wicked that poisoned his touch. Skin alight with the images of his dream, he could only see those when he closed his eyes: all he was good for was pull and pluck and tear and shred. Was strangling the miracles right in the cradle, was burrow a dagger in the heart of wonders not unlike the knife-legs of the Tower were burrowed in the earth. All his dream was about, was guilt. He had regretted many murders, but this one hung over him like a blade at his throat. His spit turned bitter until he thought he could throw up — the miracles were *alive enough* to haunt him. The beating, living Heart pulsated erratically under the floorboards, loud with pleas and lamentations. And what else? The dream had turned cold Dankovsky's skin under his touch. Well, he had turned it cold himself. That's all he could do. That's all he did. Fear tore at his stomach, trying to dig all of his guts out. In front of the mirror he didn't give a glance to, he fell to his knees and whimpered; this woke Dankovsky up.

“Burakh? ... Tyoma?”

His lips quivered, a bittersweet smile trying to claw its way out.

“Still here,” he managed to spit out. “Bathroom. The sink.”

“Nightmare?”

Burakh stilled, as if stunned.

“... D'you read minds, now?” he tried to joke, and his playful tone died on his lips.

“... Do you think I don't know what it's like?” *Point taken.* “Come back. Let me see you.”

And Burakh staggered back to the bed, head low, like a wounded dog. Dankovsky was trying to open his eyes and failing. Instead, he moved closer (a bit too close) to the edge of the bed, opening

an arm for Burakh to settle under, which he did. Dankovsky let out a half-asleep sigh. Burakh joined his hands, thumbs pressed together, fingers and palms open like wings, on Dankovsky's chest. He traced the concave path of his sternum down to the hollow of his diaphragm, then followed the coastal arch with careful, almost afraid fingertips.

"Dreamed of a lot," he said, voice heavy with exhaustion and sorrow. "... Dreamed I cut you open."

He expected a disgusted gulp, a hitch of breath, a putting-his-hands-away from Dankovsky. He didn't get any of that. The chest he was touching rose and fell slowly, and took his words in with a hum.

"Isn't that what you do?" Daniil asked, and Artemy's head lifted towards his face sharply. "Isn't it, for you... an expression of love?" He continued, words growing fuzzy with sleep: "Of trying to understand. Of trying to heal. Of trying to soothe whoever stays."

"... It is. I just hate dreaming about you getting hurt."

"Oh, do you dream about me *that* often that this has become a concern of yours?" Dankovsky laughed faintly, and it almost drew a laugh out of Burakh too. He sobered right as he continued: "Did you seem to hurt me? Did I seem like I was in pain?"

Burakh weighed his words in his mouth, his nightmare behind his eyes, and his actions in his hands. They felt heavy, they felt wetly red.

"... I was very careful." was all he could say.

"Then I'm sure I didn't feel a thing. You're a good doctor, Artemy."

Burakh's eyes found his face and saw the smile that lingered here, brushing lightly against the highest hills of his cheeks, weaving between his closed lids. The "*... and an even better lover*" was not *said*, but hung from Dankovsky's lips between them like a ripe fruit from a tree. When Burakh laughed, he swallowed the words — they tasted sweet.

He settled back on the pillow. He kissed Daniil's shoulder, found it warm, found it shivering under his lips. Oh, he's whole. They're whole. The scent of tea leaves and dried berries idled on him. Burakh could almost taste it. He felt his body grow heavy, grow pulled, slowly, to the ground. He let sleep wash over him as Dankovsky ran the same, lingering hand up and down his arm. He caught him opening his eyes right as Burakh closed his.

"...Hmm?"

Dankovsky's voice pulled his head right out of the waters of sleep as he started to drift off at sea.

"... Huh?" came out of him.

He found the Bachelor's eyes on him, inquisitive even through the thick veil of sleep, their sharpness peering through. He was brushing a firm, analytical thumb against the rounded part of Burakh's shoulder, tracing... *something*. Burakh pushed himself on his arms and let his own eyes examine him. He stared at his chest — nothing. His hands, nothing. Wrists, forearms, arms... This was new. This was different. This scared the shit out of him. He bolted upwards, sitting down on his heels, pulling a startled gasp out of Dankovsky, who immediately called out to him:

“Hey! Wait, wait, let me see.”

Burakh let him, and discovered under his touch what had ended up pulling both of them awake. Lines. Over his shoulders, on his arms, his thighs where Daniil was careful to touch. Lines that appeared a faint reddish-brown, two-fingers thick, drawn seamlessly on his skin. He recognized, following the warmth of Dankovsky's fingertips, *nejel-wa* here, right over his artery, right over the woven blood path that went straight to his heart — and here, right here, on the other side, mirroring it, *samn*—the sigil hugged the hollow of his elbow, its four legs framing the vein that ran below and pulsated with something akin to fear and awe.

Burakh stayed so perfectly still. A breath, a hitch, a blink of his eye could break the moment, could make everything vanish. His mouth hung agape, his lungs were drained. He didn't make a sound — well, just one: the thin, throaty thread of a broken croak that Dankovsky tried to reassure and hush. His back arched; the weight of the lines, the weight of the night on them, the weight of the sweetness of the touch on him bent him violently.

“Tyoma? Do you know what those are? I have seen them before...”

And so had he.

On the wrists-arms-thighs of the Brides. On his father's back, rising above his collar when he looked away, on his ankles when he took his boots off to step in the wetlands. Carved in the flesh, sometimes. Drawn with clay, with clay and blood, with clay and milk, often.

“I do,” he spoke, and his voice tore through him. “They're words. They're songs. They're caresses of the Earth.”

His guts twisted fiercely, he felt as if cut open. A whimper escaped him.

He was so scared. He was so mad. He was so incredibly sad.

When he would wake up — because of course, he was going to wake up, this was a dream, this could only be a dream — everything would dawn on him like the pale sun over the dead steppe, everything bleak, real, everything strangled by his own hands. The lines would vanish with the rest. He'd have nothing but his skin to lay flat, flayed, bare and pale. He'd have just that to make into leather to keep warm the dying miracles still left in the cold. The dying miracles *he* left in the cold.

“Can you come to the window? I’d like to see these by moonlight. I’d like to look at you.”

Dankovsky had gotten up, one of Burakh’s hands in his. He tugged gently. Burakh’s body unfolded painfully, his face rotten by anguish, his traits distorted by a marrow-deep malady. He held onto Dankovsky’s hand with force until he became afraid he’d hurt him — held onto him like he held the dream together. Burakh walked into his strides, as if any misstep could cut the fabric of this fantasy in half and he’d be left stranded.

At the window, Dankovsky pulled the curtains open, and a faint, pink light washed over them, over their bodies as they stood, so close to each other. He continued his curious, stupefied inquiry. Burakh let him.

In the glow, Burakh could see the lines better. They seemed to shine very soberly, which Dankovsky noted:

“I can see very, very small sparkles. Not unlike... dots of mica in a rock.”

He was slow, almost meticulous as he traced the marks on Burakh. Whatever they were, they didn’t distort or rub out under his fingers. They were anchored, as if inked. He caressed what Burakh could read as *nejel-wa*, as *samn*, as snippets and smatterings of stories and songs over his ribs and on the undersides of his arms. He didn’t look. He didn’t dare to look. Time was suspended sideways in his throat and he was scared, so scared to swallow. Outside, the day was not even an hour old, timid and cautious over the horizon in the ways Daniil’s fingers were on his skin. Slowly, he leaned in. Daniil stopped his investigation and brought his hands to the back of his head, embracing him back as he embraced first.

“Let’s get back to bed,” he said. “You still have time before the train. Let’s get back to sleep.”

He walked in his steps again, holding his hand. In the bed, Burakh looked at his wrists, his arms, his thighs and flanks. He read the lines, the runes, he read himself one more time. One last time. He saw in Dankovsky’s eyes that he was still intrigued, and that he wanted to kiss them, but didn’t, showing a characteristic restraint. Burakh wanted to ask him to allow himself, to press his lips to the sigils before they disappeared — because they were going to disappear. But he didn’t ask. They were his problem. Instead, Daniil kissed his cheek. They embraced. Daniil kissed his hair. He felt himself sink through the bedframe and was asleep before his body hit the ground.

They were still there when they woke up.

They were still there, and Daniil had pulled himself awake with an eagerness that surprised even Artemy. He saw how Dankovsky took his hand as if to give him a baisemain, kissing the rune that marked the hollow of his wrist instead. Then, he slipped his robe back on and trotted to the stove.

“A tea, Artemy?”

The day was clear, very bright, very cold. They walked to the train station shoulder to shoulder. They both had their hands buried in their pockets, but kept bumping elbows. Stepping on the platform, ticket in hand, Burakh could see the travelers Dankovsky had mentioned in his letters: children of the town, excited to go home; some townspeople whose faces he recognized, eagerly showing each other boxes of chocolates or new clothes they were bringing home. No one in the crowd that hurried to the tracks had eyes for him, had eyes on him — no one, except the Bachelor. He had his chin buried in a scarf — a red scarf wrapped *over* his red cravat, thank you very much — but Burakh could see the thin lines of his lips digging into his cheeks. The corners of his mouth rose subtly in the smirk Burakh knew well, but which bore a new, breathtaking fondness. Burakh stared shamelessly, which Dankovsky didn't seem to mind.

The onyx-black iron ox of the locomotive pulled all of its wagons alongside the platform. As the rain halted, the two men slipped away. They walked to the alcove between a column and a wall, hidden enough from the travelers who raced for warmth and boarded the train to talk privately, yet not hidden enough to look suspicious.

“You can come back whenever,” Dankovsky said, muffled into his scarf. “There'll always be room for you at my place,” he added, and the mischievousness in his voice — a day-old discovery for Burakh, who had doubted this man could do as much as chuckle the first time they met — was nothing short of thrilling.

“Aah... I'll have to find an excuse to shirk my doctor's duties,” Burakh replied, as playful.

“I'll make sure to put together many more lectures to invite you to. Surely, they won't mind you attending medical lessons of such importance!”

“I'm sure they'll be delighted to know I dedicate myself to my work so thoroughly.”

They shared a laugh that embraced them in clouds of warm breath steam. Burakh balanced on one leg, then the other, as if his mind was already going for the stride that would bring them together — but Dankovsky took it first. He pulled his scarf down and made the step that brought his lips to Artemy's, cold nose against cold, red cheek. He kept his gloved hands soberly on Burakh's chest, sparing him the touch of frigid leather. Artemy looped arms around him, midway between his waist and shoulders, closer to a clumsy hug than a goodbye kiss. But it was fine, it was quite fine. A few people hurried to the train, almost bumping into them without a look thrown in their direction, tossing about their luggage as they jumped on. Daniil put his scarf back right as

they parted, and they both walked to the train tracks.

Burakh, last one to hop on, lingered by the door. Dankovsky took a glove off and offered his hand to shake. Burakh took it, feeling how hot his palm was.

“Goodbye, Burakh,” he spoke. The Haruspex could hear how his lips toyed with words already said, enveloping them in a new, fond, almost silly tongue. Their own private joke. “Live well.”

“Goodbye, oynon. I will.”

Not breaking the handshake, Dankovsky pulled out of his coat, his face betraying the fact that he had almost forgotten about it, a cloth-cover book, and offered it to Burakh. When he took it, Dankovsky let go of his hand to cover the other of his warm palm.

As the station agent announced departure, travelers at the windows waved their goodbyes to those staying on the platform, blew kisses and waved some more.

“Write me,” mouthed Daniil.

“I will,” mouthed Artemy back.

With that done, he stepped into the train car, and the Bachelor stepped away. They threw each other one last glance through the round window of the door, where Burakh could see the corners of Dankovsky’s mouth pulled in that familiar, everlasting grin. They both raised one last hand to wave goodbye, and the train moved onward.

Burakh took a seat. He finally looked at the book: the cloth cover was a deep, rich burgundy, the lettering burned black into the fabric. He chuckled when he saw the author’s name: of course the Bachelor would have gone with this red. He could read on it “Our dear friends the Orderlies”. Then, smaller, as subtitle: “Chronicles of a Twelve-Days Epidemic”. He could, but didn’t: his eyes started skirting around, his heartbeat growing loud in his throat. He started to sweat. Seeing the words threatened to pull everything out of the depths like a carcass dragged out of peat — he promptly opened the book and flipped through until he was a few pages in. Here, he could read:

“Acknowledgements, thanks and dedication:

All of my most sincere words of gratitude go to the dedicated people of this town who have done their best, following my word perhaps against their better judgement, to slow or stop the illness this book is about. To the dedicated volunteers who tended to the sick alongside us. To the actors who accepted to separate from their costumes so they could be used as protection. Finally, to my colleagues — one, in particular, who will recognize himself if he ever has this publication between his hands; who has worked alongside, and with me, and allowed me to do the same. Despite our many differences and the multiple disagreements we’ve found ourselves in, I like to think I have grown as a doctor and learned from him. While I cannot say if the inverse is true,” (Burakh laughed to himself) *“my survival, and the survival of many people you will encounter in his book, hinged on his knowledge and aptitudes.*

Thank you to those, alive and dead, who have allowed us to walk home.”

Burakh worried the corner of the page with a restless thumb. He wasn't sure if he wanted to read yet, if he could. His eyes ran over and over upon the lines. He could imagine Dankovsky writing them, slanted, frantic, before even his first page. Or maybe he wrote them last, drained, relieved, his wrist painful to an unbearable degree. Well, mostly, he could imagine Dankovsky. He put the book on his thigh, hand covering the cover, and settled in his seat. He slept for the whole trip. He had nice dreams.

Him, of clay

At home, he walked to his room after bringing the kids back. He stood in front of his small, oval mirror, with its gold coat peeling off. The lines, the runes... They were all still here. Still alight with Dankovsky's touch. They seemed to be dimming, like a waning moon, slowly melting into his skin. But they were still here. He dropped to his knees. His head hit the wall. A wounded cry was punched out of him. He felt lost. He felt haunted. He felt teased and played with from beyond the grave like nothing more than a feather found by stray cats and torn to shreds. Chewed and spat out by what he had promised to protect and then killed, its teeth poisoned and sharp even in death.

He got up, exited the room. Murky ran to him and grabbed onto his leg, asking to be walked around with her feet on his boot. He stayed clear from mirrors. He fixed dinner (having two children under his wings had forced him to keep consistent meal schedules after years of absolutely abhorrent habits as a student). He ushered the little ones to their bedrooms; Murky wanted a story and Sticky wanted to stay up late. Fine, he said. Murky got her story. Sticky got a third informal lesson on herbs preservation, which he listened to keenly, perched on the edge of his bed.

Burakh went outside under the bright round moon. The steppe was ablaze with its crisp, searing white light, stretching ivory hills and frozen grass to the horizon, where the pitch black sky bit it off from the rest of the world. Flames still danced, in the distance, in the hearths of Shekhen. Cowbells rang lightly. Burakh sat, then lay down. His long coat couldn't keep the frost from biting at his hair, shoulders, back, thighs, but he didn't care.

He... told himself he didn't think the miracles could have survived, because they couldn't have, because he killed them with his own hands, because he bled them dry and then drank from them. He told himself the lines were a visitation, a haunting. Still, he lay down. He spoke into the cold: *"Could you speak to me? Could you tell me anything?"* He added: *"please..."*

The night didn't speak back. The earth stayed cold in the frost, frozen silent. He heard the bells, somewhere over the hill. He heard laments and dirges, all drowned, all devoured, by the winter: the voices of Brides that still danced as no grass grew. He stood up and brushed his coat dry. He walked home skirting the cemetery; not a bell was heard.

Burakh went to bed late. He sat by his father's bedroom's door, bringing his hands together — he didn't pray, because he didn't know how, and he didn't *tell him* anything, because *not knowing* whether or not he could hear was more painful than any of the two choices. Burakh spoke for himself, low, slow, the words coming from his lips and not his throat or chest. He spoke for the floorboards, for the walls, for the beams of the roof. For the whole house, that still felt haunted. He had vague memories of the Architect's drunk ramblings, about buildings that were alive. *Well*, Burakh thought, *maybe he could give them life, or maybe they already had it*. He spoke a bit more loudly so the house could hear him. He realized he believed more in *it* listening than his own father. It would have made him sad if he wasn't so drained. He got up. He kissed the door at eye level and walked away.

He undressed and tucked himself into bed. He folded the blanket so he could hold it in his arms — he missed, oh, he missed fingers gently combing through his hair, he missed legs intertwining with his, he missed a breath he could base his own on to lull him to sleep. The house was silent. He slept like a brick.

In the morning, he went in front of the mirror again. The lines had paled some more, leaving little but the sparks Dankovsky had noticed — like mica, he had said. They vaguely reminded Burakh of the freckles on his shoulders that disappeared every autumn. A bitter smile tugged at his lips: he wasn't quite sure these lines would reappear come the spring. The thought hammered at his heart, making his ribs ache; he promptly looked away.

Come on, Burakh! Grow some guts in your heart!

Someone came in with a cough. Someone came in with the sniffles. He washed his hands thoroughly, thought he spotted blood under his nails, but he shook the vision off and they were clean. Sticky sat atop a tall chair like an inquisitive bird.

In the evening, he went outside, lay down on the cold bright earth again. He asked for a word, got none. He begged for one, got silence some more. He stood up with his heart out of his chest, and carried it, heavy and dark, home.

Burakh needed a few days. Once the lines and the sigils had fully vanished, not even the trace of sparks left on his skin, he sighed, sighed loudly. He was torn. It meant, at last, that the haunting on his skin had molted off of him like a lizard's skin. It meant, at last, that the very last instance of a potential miracle had finally wilted. He, for a second, wondered where it could have gone, and

thought maybe, it had gone under his flesh. Maybe, it had seeped into him like blood through cloth, like ink through too-thin paper. A bitter laugh tore its way into his mouth, ramming into his gritted teeth.

On this day, he made infusions from herbs: he crushed thinly stems and leaves, and cut steppe berries in very small pieces, which he then put into thinly-woven silk bags, and fastened these closed with sewing thread. He made a few bags and, braving the cold, brought some to Lara. Feeling courageous, he brought some to the Architect and his brother — he had no idea if they'd even drink something else than twyrine, but it was worth a shot. It was his peace offering. It was a griever's present to other mourners. It was a connection, the last thing he could still do.

On this evening, for once, he did write. It started like this:

“Dear Bachelor, (or oynon, or erdem, or Daniil, or whichever name you've liked me to call you the most)

I was, I will admit, scared to write back. For months, I was. I cannot even explain why. I am not eloquent as you are, so perhaps I kept myself from writing out of fear that my written word would fail me to embarrassing extents. I was also scared I'd just spill open. Write too much, too bold, too (again) embarrassing. We're well past that, now. What I was so scared to accidentally pour out on paper, I have already told you. Shown you... I can't wait to write any longer, but I do hope you'll forgive my less-than-formal language.”

He stopped, but he hadn't run out of ideas. No, he... had quite a few. He rose from his chair and peeked outside of his room. He walked, velvet-footed, in the hallway, and made sure the two little ones were asleep. He went downstairs, checked that no one had invited themselves over, and rushed back to his room. He put a cowbell right by the door as he shut it swiftly, just so anyone entering would make as much noise as possible. He sat back down. He twirled the pencil in his hands. He brought it to the paper; his hand was shaking.

He sent the letter at dawn.

It didn't take much to live without magic, he thought. It took discipline. It took the strength to wake up in the mornings. It took many people: the kids—his or otherwise, the Kains and the Crucible already buzzing with new ideas, the twins whom he spotted many times, especially the Architect who, flanked by the ghostly gravekeeper girl, put his easel wherever he pleased. It took knowing he was needed. It took having wounds and ailments to treat—the most benign, the most simple, the most human of ills. It took the Bachelor's letters which, after his own missives, came

to him frequently. It took being bothered by Lara who liked to walk in and try to read what the two men exchanged in these messages, prompting Burakh to hold the paper against his heart and covering the back with his hand to make sure she shouldn't see a single word — and it took knowing he wasn't bothered at all, and had missed them playing like such. Like kids. (He still made sure she couldn't read any part of the letters. There was no way he could let her.) Eventually, it took the snow and, later, the morning frost, rising from the ground every morning, embracing the steppe in a low, ghostly fog that dissipated with the first lights of the sun. It took the grass, growing small, perky, green, piercing the hoar under his boots.

February went and March came.

The steppe was waking up lazily. The snow and ice hadn't quite melted, and the wetlands took their time replenishing, swallowing the early spring rainfalls and the water-soaked arteries that ran from below the pavement of the town, then south. Tall grass rose to mid-calf where the white cover slowly seeped into the ground, Burakh noticed when he walked to the cemetery and back; its color walked the crest between green and yellow.

March went and April came.

The snow had melted and, walking to Shekhen, Burakh found right by his left foot, a single blade of swevery.

April went and May came.

The day was surprisingly dry, high and tall winds galloping restlessly across the neverending hills, tearing out of the trees and back across the hills again the scent of small, budding apple blossoms. White and yellow flowers already climbed out of the ground. Pasque flowers, tulips and irises were timid under the heavy sky, but they still yielded to Burakh as he wandered around. Even without its miracles, without its creatures, its clay-fleshed children and their bone-pale hands, the earth breathed. The earth sighed out a spring wet and vivid out west, a spring that carried itself in places where even the earth had never been alive, that extended beyond the horizon, beyond the rising and the setting sun, beyond the eastern grasslands and the Capital. No miracles here except the dance of the stars.

The Capital... Burakh put it in his mind to ask Dankovsky about what bloomed here. (He did later in the evening and received, a few weeks later, a detailed report, with a flower pressed between two folds of the paper. Its smell was buried beneath the scent of the teas, the scent of cedar and bergamot of the Bachelor's soap. Burakh couldn't care. He observed the blossom and the stem, carefully preserved. He could see where Dankovsky's fingers had gently adjusted it against the paper.)

Walking home through the cemetery, the bells were ringing. They were ringing fast, loud, erratic, almost elated. Burakh's entire spine tensed. *The wind*, he told himself, it could be only the wind. The bells chimed and sang and chimed some more as he hurried his steps. They followed him home and still trilled to his ears when he shut the door, pressing his back to it as if it could keep the noises out. His eyes were wide. His breath was hiccuped. Sticky stood in the hallway, an eyebrow quirked. Burakh raised a hand in front of him, a "*don't come closer*", a "*don't worry about me*" that shook violently. He wanted to say "*I'm being haunted again*" but didn't. His heartbeat was so loud he felt like the whole house could hear it. He didn't want *hope*. He didn't want the same hope that had him slice his hand and bleed himself into the ground, the hope that received not even a sigh of acknowledgement. Burakh rushed to the kitchen, diving head-first into a cookbook to distract himself.

It was not June yet, but the days had started to stretch themselves over the horizon, the sunrise waking Burakh earlier and earlier with each passing dawn. Well, this time, it was not quite dawn yet. He jumped out of bed, got dressed, and slipped through the door without a sound. He walked eastward into the steppe. He walked eastward and stumbled in tall grass, he walked eastward and the bells were chiming, he walked eastward under not a breath of wind. His chest started to hurt. His heart pounded. He walked eastward and east of Shekhen, and—they didn't yield to him! they didn't make a sound! but he still found them: a blade of swevery, then another. They stood like two needles in the pincushion of the soil. And he stood, too. He leaned forward. His mouth fell agape, and a choked, wordless hiccup leaped out of him. He brought a hand to the leaves: they were silky, a bit wet, his own hands shook; he brought fingers to the blossoms. They mostly were still buds: small, round, timid buds, but they still seemed to turn to him when he touched them. Like eyes landing on his face. Seeking his traits like heliotropes seek the sun. The image of this punched him in the chest and he stepped backwards, almost tripping, and ran. The fires of Shekhen scared him like an animal as his whole body bent under the weight of a guilty, thoughtless, grieving, bewildered and completely-fucking-lost mind.

The swevery and the bells. The swevery and the bells. He refused to let himself think, to let himself think about it, and he threw himself to the ground where the impact sent a shockwave of pain into his arm, his flank, down his hip and leg.

He rolled on his stomach, he rolled on his back, he stilled himself lying down, arms and legs parted wide like the sky could crush him. He wanted nothing more. He wanted nothing more than suffocation to make his thoughts, galloping like wild horses, shut up. He wanted to smother them like he had smothered the divine uniqueness of the living earth with his choice—"way of love" or not.

He could barely breathe himself, his throat tight and knotted, wringing out of him whimpers and whispers of terrified incomprehension.

He had killed. He had killed. He heard himself speak it more than he was aware he did:
"*If you hear me... Can you speak to me?*"

He tensed. He held his breath.
Not a word.

Not a breath of wind over his face.
Not a rumble, not a moan.

He didn't know what he was expecting.

He could cut the earth open, he could stitch it back, but he couldn't speak to it.

He couldn't speak to her. Or rather, now, she couldn't speak to him. *Whose fucking fault, Burakh?*

He asked. Lower this time. He asked again. Again. Again. The bells grew muffled. The wind picked up. The grass swirled, bent, (danced, almost) caressed his cheek as they brushed on each side of his face.

Then, he heard; he didn't *hear* a voice, not with his ears, his brain, his head: he heard it with his chest, through his spine, directly digging into his heart. It came crashing against him. It burst through him, tearing his lungs out of him; he'd never been to the seaside but could imagine this was what it felt to be a chalk cliff shattered by the restless sea; he heard:

I
WAS
ASLEEP.

His mouth fell open.

He didn't move. He didn't move a fucking inch. The gasp he took seared through his throat like branding iron.

"You..." he muttered.

I
AM
AWAKE.

"But..."

DO YOU THINK
YOU CAN EAT
ME
WHOLE
LIKE A HUMAN
HEART?

“I don’t, it was never my intention. I wanted to save you. I had a choice to make,” he pleaded; he couldn’t hear its—her, the earth, the alive Earth—tone and was terrified. “I had a choice, and...”

AND
YOU MADE IT.

“And I did,” he spoke, unbelievably low, just enough for his own heart to hear.

YOU WERE TORN
BY LOVE.

He didn’t answer (he was).

I
LOVE
YOU.

His face twisted. His lips quivered and convulsed, sorrow nailing him to the ground straight through the chest like he was nothing but a pinned butterfly.

“Even after what I’ve done?”

I LOVE YOU
BECAUSE
YOU DID WHAT YOU HAD TO
BECAUSE
YOU DID WHAT YOU’VE DONE

“Killed—” he stood up on his elbows, coughed out a sob that threatened to choke him “—you? Do you love me because I killed you?”

He fell back. There was a lull, a silent heartbeat. Everything stood still. *Oh no. Oh no, no, no...*

Then, thundering, striking through him, resonating through each one of his limbs:

DO I LOOK DEAD TO YOU?

“Shouldn’t you be? I k—”

I AM EVER-GROWING.
I AM EVER-FLOWING.
I AM AT THE CORE OF CONSTANT DEATH AND REGENERATION.
I BIRTH DEATH AND I BIRTH CREATION.

**I BIRTH KILLERS AND I BIRTH HEALERS,
IT'S ONLY NATURAL — I BIRTHED YOU, MY SON.**

Burakh honored the incredibly loud, busy, buzzing silence. He breathed slowly. His mouth stayed agape, an open door where words hurried, never quite making it past the threshold. His eyes stung.

**YOU CAN'T NOT
KEEP ME ALIVE.
YOU CAN'T NOT
KEEP ME AWAKE.
I SLUMBER.
I RISE.
SO DO YOU,
EVERY DAY YOU GIVE ME,
EVERY DAY I GIVE YOU.**

“The miracles,” Burakh stuttered, dazed and lost and stunned still, “how could they have... I killed... The great Aurochs... They don't wander the earth...”

DON'T THEY? LOOK AROUND.

The words jolted him up, as if pulled awake, and he did look around. He saw the penned bulls of Shekhen—he didn't realize he was so close, he had gotten so close, he had walked so far—that grazed; one had a brown coat, one had a black coat, one had a crooked leg, one had a chipped horn. They ate peacefully, holding in their strong necks a grace never seen. He looked into the brown eye of one and saw glimpses of the infinite. He opened his mouth to speak and was cut off:

**BULLS STAND WHERE THE GREAT AUROCHS ONCE DID.
YOUR KIND, YOUR KIN, STANDS WHERE THEIR GUARDIANS ONCE DID.
I HAVE GIVEN BULLS TO YOUR MOTHERS,
YOUR MOTHERS HAVE GIVEN ME
DAUGHTERS AND SONS TO CARE FOR THEM.
THEY STAND BY YOUR SIDE,
AND YOU STAND BY THEIRS.
THE GREAT AUROCHS SHRUNK THEMSELVES SO THEY COULD BE HELD BY YOU.
SO YOU COULD TOUCH THEM.
SO YOU COULD WRAP YOUR ARMS AROUND THEIR NECKS,
SO YOU COULD PUT YOUR CHILDREN AND SIBLINGS ON THEIR BACKS,
AND WANDER FOREVERMORE.**

Burakh kept silent. Then, spoke:

“Why... did they tell me the miracles would vanish? Why did they tell me... you’d die?”

WHY DID THEY TELL YOU?
LIKELY BECAUSE THEY WERE TOLD.
I BIRTH LIARS ALONGSIDE KEEPERS OF TRUTH.
DIDN'T THESE LIARS WANT TO LIVE TOO?
DIDN'T THEY WANT TO THRIVE?
WHAT IS A LIVING ILL IF NOT A JUDAS,
IF NOT A TRAITOR, TURNING YOUR BODY
AGAINST YOURSELF,
IF NOT A PEEPHOLE
LOOKING THROUGH YOUR HEART
INTO YOUR FEARS.

A silence kept. Her voice, deep, low, pulling him in like an enchanted well, pounded against his chest.

LIARS SPEAK MY TONGUE BECAUSE I SPEAK OF LOVE
AND THEY LOVE
THEMSELVES
AND THEY LOVE
EACH OTHER.
AND LOVE
AT ITS MOST POISONOUS
IS WANTING EVERYONE
TO GO DOWN INTO THE GRAVE
WITH YOU.

A silence kept, again. Burakh's lips joined, pulled thinly into a line. His chin dipped as his face contorted. He closed his eyes, heard himself breathe heavily. He held the poison right where it was, in the middle of his throat, he didn't swallow nor spit. It was expelled like a bloodletting when a single sharp, raw, hoarse sob punched him in the lungs, and he curled on himself.

YOU ARE OF LOVE.
THAT'S WHAT MADE YOU SO SAD.
IF YOU WEREN'T OF LOVE
YOU WOULDN'T HAVE CHOSEN
YOU WOULDN'T GRIEVE
YOU WOULDN'T STRUGGLE
YOU WOULDN'T DRINK THE BLOOD OF MY WOUNDS

**AND YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TOLD YOUR LOVE
TO ANYBODY.**

Burakh felt himself grow red. He felt hit by a teenaged embarrassment of having parents go through his stuff. He sure hoped the Earth couldn't read his exchanges with Dankovsky, he sure fucking hoped so. It didn't make sense if she could, but it didn't make more sense if she couldn't. When the Earth didn't insist about any kind of letters, he lay back down. Spoke once more: "How could I have done this to you?"

**HAVEN'T YOU PULLED A THORN OUT OF ME?
HAVEN'T YOU PULLED A RIB OUT OF ME?
OF THIS BONE BROKEN OFF,
OF THIS BRANCH SNAPPED FROM MY SPINE,
FLOWERS WILL GROW.
MY SON, NOURISH AND WATER ME.
THE SALT OF YOUR SWEAT, OF YOUR TEARS, FLOWS PLENTILY.
MY SON, MY SON...
I'M UNDER YOUR FEET.
I AM AT YOUR FEET.
I AM IN YOUR CALVES, YOUR KNEES.
I FLOW IN YOUR ARTERIES.
ARE YOU ALIVE, MY ONE?
BECAUSE THEN, I AM.
GET UP! AND RUN!**

And the wind slapped Burakh across the face with unspeakable violence. He jumped on his feet and missed tumbling right over. The bulls shook their heads fiercely, hooped the ground with ardor, and bellowed until their chanting voices grew hoarse. Burakh ducked his head into the breeze and ran, the air pushing him fervently, gnawing at his calves, at the back of his thighs, shoving the grass and herbs and flowers into his steps, they seemed to cling to him, to kiss his stride fervently.

Dashing through Shekhen, he found a Bride, her brown eyes wide, bewildered.

"Khayaala," she spoke, and her voice was high-pitched, helplessly astonished, "the Earth is moving."

"She is," Burakh replied, struggling to contain his elation.

"Khayaala, she's speaking."

"She is, basaghan, she is, and I've heard her myself."

The Bride's traits contorted wildly, followed by her body, which bent sharply, like nothing but a twig, at the stomach. She threw her hands to the ground, her legs buckling under her, and pulled herself up faster than she had fallen, stretching backwards as her arms reached for the sky. Her

neck extended as she reached behind and her voice thundered through her entire chest: she screamed, she wailed, she sobbed until her throat was raw, then she laughed, and laughed, and brought her hands to her mouth to kiss them before pushing them against the soil. She dropped to her knees, she lay flat on the ground, her arms extended as if she was embracing it whole; she sprung on her feet again and did it again, and again, and soon Burakh heard one more, then one more, then one more voice alongside hers.

Bayar! Bi khareeb! Bite kharaan! A Bride ran into the settlement, screaming just that: *Bite kharaan! Bite kharaan!* She dropped on the ground, contorted and twisted, rose on her legs and kept running again, fingertips grazing the crowns of the tall grasses that met her step. Burakh ran again, ran back home.

The house was silent (it didn't speak) the rooms were silent (there was no ghost) and he felt his chest full to burst, and a laugh tore through him, and a sob tore through right after, and he held the front of his sweater as if it was bloodstained. Murky was in the hallway, and she ran to hold him. He lifted her up, overflowing with it—with love, right in the ways he was made—and while she wasn't usually very fond of it, she let him this time. Sticky's head poked out, and before he had the time to ask what the hell was going on, he was pulled in the hug too.

"You smell like herbs, doc," he said into Burakh's arms.

"And twyre's not even in bloom yet. Just so you wait a few months. You'll have the worst headache you've ever had."

It was a light-hearted, playful threat. It was a promise.

Burakh picked grass kernels off his pants and boots. His palms were red with clay dust.

Look up, here it rises...

It was high June, a week from July. The steppe was hot to the touch like a stray cat warmed in the sun. The ground was starting to dry and the wetlands settled in the fingers of the Gorkhon that slithered south of the warehouses.

The train came, roaring and snorting like a racehorse. It came to a loud halt and bled out on the yellow grass its flock of passengers. Sticky, wandering by the station with Murky on his heels, immediately spotted in the crowd a familiar coat. He ran back home and barged into the kitchen. Here, Lara had invited herself over, bringing a lukewarm Grief who looked like he would rather be somewhere else but still went along to try to mend the bonds, insisting Burakh hold a get-together. (Rubin had politely declined Lara's invitation and walked into the steppe, head high,

eyes closed, an uncharacteristic smile on his face.) The three of them stared at Sticky's freckled face as he tried to catch his breath:

"The dandy—*huff*—the doctor—*huff*—the Bachelor, he's here, just arrived by the train. I saw him. He had his snake coat under his arm."

Burakh bolted upright. He turned to his guests, then to Lara in particular.

"Gravel, would you be the bestest of friends and have the kids over tonight?"

"I would. Are we not drinking my tea?"

"We are. Just give me a minute."

And with that, Burakh ran into the hallway and donned his boots, half-heartedly tying the laces before Lara bumped into his shoulder.

"If I had remembered he was coming today, I'd have shaved," Burakh mumbled and ran scratching fingers through the more-than-stubble he sported on this day.

"Oh yeah," Lara chimed in, her voice mischievous as it escaped her quirked lips, "I'm sure you would have."

"Mind your business and don't you dare insinuate anything," Burakh interrupted with a stern pointed finger, and Lara burst out laughing as she sent him through the door, drumming on his back, between his shoulder blades.

Grief watched him leave.

"I don't get it," he told Lara.

"What is there to not get? Don't you know?"

"Know what?"

"Well... I'll tell you when he's far enough."

And eventually, Burakh was far enough.

He met Dankovsky halfway, where he was offered his hand to shake. He took it warmly. The Bachelor's coat was folded and tucked between his elbow and his waist, his suitcase held firm by the same arm.

Burakh could see he had trimmed his hair, at the front and around the ears, perhaps the back too — he couldn't see, not yet. He was looking a bit tired, eyes cradled in a purple hue, but the smile that played with the corners of his lips was sincere, placid, fittingly tranquil like a summer afternoon.

“Hello, Burakh,” he said. “The beard suits you.”

“Hello, oynon. Thank you. You look well.” He wasn’t going to tell him he had forgotten to shave it for his arrival. Maybe he’d get the occasion, were it to be brought up again later in the night.

“I am. I feel well.”

“That’s good.”

There lingered an awkward pause, and Dankovsky’s hand lingered in his. They kept a formal distance as they walked to Burakh’s house, shoulders only brushing in turns. Burakh observed him still, and he knew he was observed in return. The black lakes of Dankovsky’s eyes twinkled on the surface with specks of the sun, golden dots dancing in his gaze as he watched his step. Burakh would have liked to kiss him there, to taste the warmth of June against his cheek, or into his hair, but he kept himself in check and led him home.

Lara welcomed them with a wide grin eating into her cheeks. She had chosen Rubin’s cup to be Dankovsky’s and already poured them all a drink. The new guest was delighted.



Sticky tip-toed into the kitchen, only to find lights on still. He knocked against a side-table and brought attention to him.

“... Sorry. Didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” interrupted Burakh. “Does Lara know you’re out at this hour?”

“She is. Murky forgot her doll. I just came to retrieve it.”

“Ah... It must be upstairs. I put it back on her bed this morning.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

And then Sticky didn’t move. He stood awkwardly on the other side of the table where Burakh and Dankovsky had laid out wine glasses. Burakh looked at him looking at Dankovsky, then at him. The Bachelor was surprisingly relaxed.

Burakh shrugged out a “well?” and Sticky shook his head a “well, huh...” and Dankovsky interrupted them both when he reached for his bag and pulled out a book.

“Oh,” he said. “For you.” With that, he put the tome in Sticky’s curious hands.

“For me...?” His eyes were gleaming

“The Treatise On Modern Medicine. Thought you might like it.”

Proving him right on the spot, Sticky already held the book open. It looked huge in his arms.

“Don’t you... need it?” he asked, worried.

“They print it again every few years,” Dankovsky brushed off with a hand. “This one is not that old. Few things have changed since then. It’s perfect for a first look into the practice.”

Sticky, in awe, had brought the book on the table and started flipping through.

“Don’t you have a doll to retrieve? Your sister is going to get worried,” Burakh shooed him away, and after he stuck his tongue out at him, Sticky trotted upstairs, treatise under the arm, and trotted back down as fast. The two men at the table listened to his steps as he went up, down, then out the door.

Burakh got up, locked the door, then leaned through the window to hide the key on the sill, where Sticky was used to fetching it.

Dankovsky was already right behind him, standing in the hallway, when he turned around. He walked to him like he was owed a kiss — and he was, and Burakh paid his due, then paid some more.

Upstairs, the bed was fit for two people, and Burakh was thrilled to show it, but they still landed atop each other. *Oh well!*

“What else did she say?”

“... Said she loved me. Despite... what I’ve done.”

“Mmmh. A thing she and I agree on.”

With Dankovsky’s words muffled in his hair and his own cheek pressed against his chest, Burakh allowed himself to laugh.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever get rid of the feeling of blood on my hands,” Burakh said, and Dankovsky took his wrist to bring his fingers to his lips, kissing gently. “Even after what she said. I’m... not even sure I believe I heard her right. Or heard her at all, for that matter.” He rubbed his head into Daniil’s shoulder like an affectionate cat. “... I wish you could hear her, too.”

“I’m not sure she’d be too keen on speaking to me.”

“She’s of love. I’m sure she would speak to you.”

Dankovsky stayed silent. He ran distracted fingers on Burakh’s shoulder, down his side, to his naked hip.

“Even if she spoke,” he finally said, “I don’t think I would listen. No — I don’t think I *could* listen. I don’t think I could hear. We... don’t speak the same language.”

He brought his hand back up to ruffle through Artemy’s already-messy hair.

“I hear her through you,” he then spoke. “I don’t doubt a lot of it is lost in translation, but I hear her through your mouth. Through your tongue — the speaking one.” (The clarification made Burakh laugh, and he rose on his elbows to give his guest a noisy, wet kiss.) “I feel her through your hands. That’s your trade, isn’t it? Healing her whole through healing the living parts of her that walk with us. Sewing her to completion by weaving your thread into connections.”

Artemy laid his head on Daniil’s chest again. He listened to him talk. Dankovsky’s voice echoed and rang in the depths of his ribcage, right where Burakh had felt the Earth’s words tear through. Right where was his (living, beating) heart.

“I don’t doubt you’re made of her,” Dankovsky said. His voice was very low. Burakh could barely hear it over their breaths. Still, it washed over him. “Your hair is the color of sand, color of the tall grass later in the year. There’s hints of red clay on your cheeks when you blush — yes, exactly like that, like now. My mother took me to lake Sevan earlier this year, I see its depths in your eyes, when you look at me.” Burakh did look at him. “Like now. Like just now.”

He lost his train of thought. He lost restraint of his hands, he ran them over Artemy’s cheeks, against his neck, his shoulders, his back. They realized, together, the presence of lines and runes on Artemy’s skin — they were already faded, or just appearing. They laughed about the implications of them appearing only when they met (they *didn’t* only appear when the two met, but Daniil had more eyes for Artemy’s shoulders, for his back, for his flanks, his thighs, his strong legs than Artemy had for himself.)

Burakh didn’t dare to sleep with an open window, not yet; the image of the breath of the Plague slithering into the thin opening of the curtains haunted him, he thought he heard its voice when he didn’t close the blinds tight enough. The room was toasty, stuffy enough that, at some point, they just kicked the covers off altogether. A stripe of moonlight landed, crooked, across Dankovsky’s back, and Burakh looked at it for a long while. His skin was pale, color of bone, color of milk, color of the reflection of the moon in the ponds. It was warmer than bone, warmer than milk, warmer than the moon, licking Artemy’s palm hotly when he brought it to his shoulders. Daniil had brought his characteristic scent of cedar and bergamot all over the sheets, the blankets, the pillowcases. Artemy liked the way it joined with his own, a bit more crude, not unlike clay, not unlike tart spices and herbs, earthily heady. He liked how they met. He liked how and where they joined, intertwining like fingers — and, almost as if he had spoken it out loud, Daniil reached for his hand, and did just that.

Maybe Artemy doesn't mind feeling like a pinned butterfly. It's how he feels laying down on the warm ground, held in place by the needle of the sunlight piercing through him. Wings spread out are an expression of vulnerability.

There is a spot on his chest that, he found, if Daniil touches with an index and middle finger, makes him draw a sharp, sounding gasp; not unlike the breath one takes before diving into the sea. Daniil doesn't have a surgeon's hands, because he's not a surgeon. He doesn't have a butcher's hands, because he's not a butcher. He doesn't know the Lines. But he's gentle. He's a doctor. He's a thanatologist: even when he carries corpses around, even when he cuts them open, he carries himself with deference, moving slowly as if he was facing a scared, small animal. The bodies do not open themselves up to him, unraveling spilling secrets across his palms, but he looks diligently still. He speaks low, for himself and for the spirits that still wander; he's watchful. His hands are delicate, even more delicate under the gloves (that's how he touches Artemy). They're not corpses. They like to lay down by each other like such, still, silent, eyes wide open. But then they kiss, and kissing is noisy, and Dankovsky is of the loud type. He's easy to ignite, like a beautiful, impatient, hungry matchstick.

Daniil has long preferred the company of the dead, and he still does, but Artemy falls asleep and wakes by his side with the knowledge that he's the living Daniil loves the most. He touches warm, shivering skin with a restrained reverence. Maybe he's a bit scared, Artemy thinks, of the enormity of it all. He's not used to handling beating, living hearts. Artemy lets him cradle his, because he knows he will be careful (he's seen what the Bachelor's hands can do, and he's not afraid, not when they're on him).

Artemy once brought blood to his mouth. Daniil brings heart to his lips — or rather, brings his lips to it. He leans in slowly, like he's bowing low for water. He kisses with a carnal, earthly piety. Even trimmed, his hair still brushes against Burakh's skin. Feather-light, not unlike his touch.



They're outside. The air is this lukewarm embrace around them, a few hours past the cold midnight, and Burakh leads him by the hand across the wetlands south of the Crude Sprawl.

"Can you hear them?"

"Not at all..."

"I'm not surprised. But, trust me on this. If you follow the sound of swishing... like a whisper through the grass... maybe the fluttering of the wings of a moth..."

"I trust you."

"Ah, *here you are!*" says Burakh when they eventually stumble across swevery. It is right where he had first seen it. It had grown, extending its bifurcating stems towards the sky, bowing lightly under the night breeze. Burakh crouches to it and Dankovsky follows suit.

“What you would do then — which I am not going to do now, because it can still grow, see? Some of its buds have not bloomed yet. You want many flowers on a blade like that, that’s when it has matured. You can cut or crush the petals into thin stripes or powders. Very versatile herb.” Burakh pinches the stem gently. “So what you would do is, with your fingernail, go through it as close to the ground as possible. You never want to uproot it, of course. You want your nail to go through in one motion, as fast as you can. This way, they don’t hurt for long. Swift.”

“Mh-hmm.”

“You’re not quite listening, are you,” Burakh asks, and he’s not mad, not even a little. Herbs are his trade, not Dankovsky’s. He catches Daniil’s eyes on him, heavy-lidded, still a bit sleepy, catching in small pins of white light the face of the moon. They look overflowing with it— overflowing with love.

They’re sitting against the flank of a minuscule hill, nestled like calves resting against their mother. Dankovsky doesn’t have his gloves, he doesn’t have his coat or cravat, his shirt collar is not fastened all the way and his sleeves are rolled to his elbows. He looks airy, he smiles with a welcomed fatigue. Their eyes are northwest-bound, watching the hollow left in the Tower’s silhouette.

“... It feels weird to not see it,” Dankovsky says.

“It does. It did for a while. You never get quite used to it.” He scratches his beard thoughtlessly. “I can’t quite shake the thought that it went down for nothing.”

“It went down so you could stand,” Dankovsky interrupts. His voice is thin, wispy, it gets lost in the breeze, but he doesn’t sound sad. “You cannot know what this town would look like if it still stood.”

“Maybe the Aurochs would wander the Earth...”

“They do,” Dankovsky says, and when Burakh looks at him with wide, confused eyes, he points out a silhouette in the distance. Burakh turns to it promptly. A loose bull stands, trying to involve itself in the conversation.

“Well. If they could wander a bit further,” Burakh says, and shoos it with the back of his hand. When the beast walks away and dips down to graze, Dankovsky laughs frankly.

They sit in silence as cowbells ring in the distance. Chants from the Brides barely reach them across the steppe, into the warming night.

“Burakh... See what stands in its place,” Dankovsky says and, as Burakh leans in, he points to the night filling the Tower’s place.

“... Stars?”

“Precisely.”

Dankovsky draws them across the sky with a long, pale finger.

“If the Tower still stood, we wouldn’t see those. Look here — Arctophylax, with Arcturus, a bit red, right where the stem once was. Muphrid is hidden right behind the Cathedral.”

Burakh drinks his words, looks at him more than the stars. Seeing him entranced in the constellations, he eventually looks at them too.

“... Do you know what stars we’d have in September, oynon?”

“Here, at this time? Hmm. Cygnus, if I were to guess. Its wings would span the width of the Tower. We would see Lyra just below, maybe hidden behind the Cathedral as well. Lacerta would be above.”

Burakh hums an impressed, acquiescing noise, then adds, laughing:

“I should invite you in autumn to point out all the stars for me!”

“You sure should!” Dankovsky replies, as jovial.

“Where did you learn all of that?”

“My mom told me.”

“Your mom?”

“Yes. I was just too calm and level-headed as a child to demand supervision, so she had to fill her time however she could,” Dankovsky relates, and his smile, however playful, is wide with fondness. “So she took on astronomy. She did, then told me, so I could tell you.”

Burakh lies on his side, arm bent under his head, eyes on Dankovsky. The night wind plays with his white shirt collar, swaying it like a ghost right below his mouth. (Burakh also looks at Dankovsky’s mouth.)

For a minute, they hear nothing but distant bells and chants, crickets far and close, and the silent gears of the stars above slowly moving west.

“Ah... Since we’re watching the stars... Look, Tyoma,” Dankovsky calls into the silence, low enough that Burakh barely hears it, as if he didn’t want to cut the stillness too sharply. “Look east.”

“I’m looking.”

“See the triangle poking out over the horizon, just ahead of the sunrise? Right below the Pleiades?”

“I do.”

“That’s Taurus.” Then, lower: “That’s the great celestial bull.”

Quiescence hooks itself to Daniil’s words and grows, swelling, heavy with the weight of the sky. The calm whistling through the grass, snaking through flowers and herbs, is warm. It breathes hotly against Dankovsky’s neck, into his shirt, where goosebumpy skin catches Burakh’s eyes. Burakh stays silent. He watches the five stars, two of them sticking to each other like twins,

brushing like lips against the horizon line upon which stands the Abattoir.
Dankovsky's train is in the morning, when Taurus will have risen, walking to the heart of the firmament before the sun, its crown of the Pleiades waning into the pale blue of the sky.
But for now, the astral bull of summer dawns rises over them as a warm breeze sails across the steppe from beneath the golden clouds of daybreak.
