

Thaumaturgic Arborescence & the Architect's Traumaturgy

by meiri/Creatorial

19862 words

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Rating:

Mature

Warnings:

Graphic Descriptions of Violence

Category:

Gen

Fandom:

Мор. Утопия | Pathologic

Relationship:

Farkhad & Peter Stamatina, Farkhad & Andrey Stamatina

Character:

Farkhad, Peter Stamatina, Andrey Stamatina

Additional Tags:

the didactics of being colleagues; "messyyyyy ☹️" edition

Pre-Canon

Canon-convergence

Character of... Ambiguous Status in general

Spiraling Over Art

Artistic Differences

Canonical Character Death

Murder

Hauntings

Recreational Drug Use

in the context of the Broken Heart being canonically a hashish and opium den

living in these little skulls of theirs rent-free

triangulations of desire(s) gone as bad as it could have possibly gone

coping and seething about another man's artistic creation as poorly as you possibly could

Gen category but i know what kind of herbs i put in that soup between that one guy and the others.

if you'd be inclined to get what i'm sayin'.

well until. y'know. [makes "krkh" sound; sticking tongue out and ducking head on the same side]

Summary

This one didn't quite feel like them, like the rest. Andrey almost felt agitated by a shiver of excitement — newness, again, finally at once, for once. He kept himself from rejoicing too much, too early — the man still had chances to be disappointing, as most men, even the most charming, were. He sat opposite the twins, themselves in separate chairs. His coat was a striking, startling red against the vert-de-gris stripes of the settee, so painfully carmine it looked like its damask had been woven in blood itself [...].

As they sat, the Kain men, each at their turn, introduced their guests to each other in superlatives, in almost-religious exaltation. [...] As their lungs swelled with pride for the stranger's works, something coiled around the brothers' necks, unnervingly taunting, something akin to mistrust, to incredulity, tinted by the black ink of jealousy — something they wouldn't have admitted so early, if at all. All the man did was nod conservatively, humbly; as if observing instead of listening.

Know thy friend well, thine enemy better, and he who walks the tightrope between the two more than the sum of that threefold.

Notes

For the anecdote, the two working titles for this were "Hard As Bone Be Thy Flesh", leaning more into the "consumption" part of the consumption (twofold) — annihilation deal of the twins' defense/survival mechanism; and the other was "I Have Seen Men Provoked", a line from Laura Marling's "Hope In The Air" which I've listened to 44 times (45 as I edit this) since discovering it a week ago. [It's pretty good!](#)

I am as usual mixing and messing with p1 and p2 designs and concepts for fun. the p1 timeline is confusing (which can be explained with the metanarrative structure), with Nina having been dead, by the events of the game, for 11 years, but the twins also having been invited by her 10 years ago, and both of them talking about her as if they had known her when she was alive, so I'm working with that. Also i wike her and never got to write even a line of her so i take the opportunities I have. Also Farkhad, as I've made him the fuck up, is heartily and fully homosexual, which anyone who's seen my previous depictions of him already knows. Knowing this already heading into the story changes little, if anything at all, but I prefer to preface it so as to not. BOO! you know. As for the other two, not homosexuals, but you know. I'm writing it. So they are what I think they are. I'm the captain now. bonne lecture~

The table was square, instead of round. The other guest sat opposite of Andrey and Peter. At his right, Georgiy and Simon, both pale-faced, white hair almost pearlescent in the dim light. At his left, Victor and Maria, hands solemnly flat on the table before their cups, as if conjuring spirits. The son had gone, or maybe had never come.

The window, tall and dark and rectangular like it rose from the guest's very shoulders, framed his head in silver arabesques. The tilt of his head, as he leaned to listen, offset the symmetry of the decorated panes behind; his silhouette cast a shadow upon the grilles and seemed to pull them to

its shape, to bend and move them as he rocked in his seat. He smelled of ink, charcoal and turpentine; not keenly, aggressively so, but subduedly, almost sweetly, as if it had mixed with some syrupy herb or spice clinging to his skin like a film of sweat.

He stood out amongst the pale faces of his tablemates, the dark peach pits of his eyes flowing and ebbing over the table, looking at the cups left half-full, or half-empty. He seemed disinterested in the conversation, but not in the people having it. He was looking, watching, walking the tightrope between the two — and in turn, was watched and looked at. In the low lights, his hair was painted the depth and range of colors of dark plums or figs. Curls fluttered over his cheeks and his ears like loose leaves, or vine-tendrils. Andrey and Peter watched as the red wine, through the crystal of his glass, marbled the tan skin of his long hands like the light filtering through stained glass windows. The burgundy seeped into the lines of his palm like water in dry riverbeds, walked over the ropes of the ligaments and tendons extending from his knuckles to his wrist like animals wandered hills. The brush of a smile painted the corner of his lips; in the penumbra, its shadow seemed to dig into his skin in a full smirk, and in the light, he seemed perfectly neutral.

Nobody had given him a name yet, nobody had bothered to name him. Out of the corner of his eye, Andrey could see Peter had stopped eating, even as his plate remained half-full (and his glass, half-empty. Or was it the opposite?). They waited for Georgiy or Victor to let the name slip, to forget to hold onto it. That didn't happen — as if the man didn't have a name at all.

They moved into the salon soon after — obviously Georgiy's, hints of Simon coming through: the bleeding of soft, milky blues; of mint greens; of orphreys on the sofa throws; of silk brocades in spiral patterns on the cushions. The guest was slow after the rest of them as they walked, and the twins had started wondering what his deal was, having barely heard him talk. He moved like a flick of ember, inexplicably regal, meticulous in the swings of his legs.

« Who does he think he is? Andrey whispered.

— Who do you think he thinks he is? Peter replied.

— Let's wait and see. »

They had dealt with the arrogant, the pretentious, the unworthily conceited; had had to deal with them, and then did, in their own, many ways. But this one didn't quite feel like them, like the rest. Andrey almost felt agitated by a shiver of excitement — newness, again, finally at once, for once. He kept himself from rejoicing too much, too early — the man still had chances to be disappointing, as most men, even the most charming, were.

He sat opposite the twins, themselves in separate chairs, flanked just like at dinner of Maria and Victor to his left. His coat was a striking, startling red against the vert-de-gris stripes of the settee, so painfully carmine it looked like its damask had been woven in blood itself, looked almost damp as it flowed down his legs, crossed at the ankles straight before him.

As they sat, the Kain men, each at their turn, introduced their guests to each other in superlatives, in almost-religious exaltation. Praise for art, for the art(s) of art(s) cascaded out of Georgiy's mouth, his voice thunderous, booming, exultant. As their lungs swelled with pride for the stranger's works, something coiled around the brothers' necks, unnervingly taunting,

something akin to mistrust, to incredulity, tinted by the black ink of jealousy — something they wouldn't have admitted so early, if at all. All the man did was nod conservatively, humbly; as if observing instead of listening.

He looked out of place among the stark contrasts of diaphanous pink skins with dark cobalt and purple garments — not out of place like an intruder, but like a stranger to whom the world had not yet shaped itself to. His silhouette grew hazy in the rising smoke of cigars and cigarettes, and his colors seemed to bleed out through the room, carried by that tobacco-mist: around him, the blues appeared to redden, the greens to rust, the pearlescent greys to blush. An air of complete and utterly placid sovereignty seemed to emanate from him like fragrance from a lilac bush. Neither Andrey nor Peter knew why he had been invited, what he had been invited to do, or how much of him the Kains knew beyond what they had praised — perhaps by morning he would have changed shape entirely, but for now he seemed quite peculiar. By a singular phenomenon of artistic atavism, his face, ageless and eloquent, appeared foreign yet familiar, in the ways of antique portraiture ideals. It bore an air of keen insight without judgment, and his Perennial features, etched in the charcoal of dark eyes and darker brows on the tawny canvas of his skin, subtly moved and shifted as the conversation began anew.

Victor came around with digestifs, skipping his daughter who, barely out of adolescence, refused herself liquor, and Simon, who refused to relent the grip on his body and soul in the face of spirits —the drinkable kind.

« Visitor! Peter hailed the guest; we do not even know what to call you. Can we have your name? — Of course you can't, it's mine! » he grinned, and the crystal of his voice clinked against that of his glass of wine. Peter blinked and lowered his, as if in front of his mouth it was shielding his eyes. « But I'll let you lend me one. Surprise me — I've been told that it is something you do well. — We have known him as Nazim, Dariush or Vahid, Georgiy inputted. — That is true. — Maria had taken to calling him Parvīz. — Among other things. — Must we never know, then? asked Andrey. — The unknown must remain unknown, or else the story ends », the man answered. The rolling hills of his lips parted over pearlescent teeth, one of which, at the front, bore a small chip in the corner against its twin. A thin serpent of purple smoke slithered out of this peephole into his mouth as he smiled and exhaled. « I see, hummed Peter in turn. We shall think about it, then. »

A full-toothed grin gleamed up to the visitor's eyes, cleaving his face in twain like an open maw. The thin smile that lingered in its wake clung to the edge of the glass upon which balanced a red drop. Peter exchanged a look with Andrey, and Andrey with Peter. They decided they would, later. Could the man still be surprised? An air of polite curiosity mixed with privy amusement was painting his features, and his gaze sketched the looks on each of his

hosts' and fellow guests' faces — fast and skittering, with the etching dryness of chalk across the plains of foreheads and cheeks.

Victor offered the last drops of the bottle to the table around, then Georgiy called in the desserts, more spirits, and an infusion for their peculiar dining companion.

Alcohol had climbed to his chiseled-bronze cheeks. He laughed and waved his hands, his sculpture-stern features seemed to blur and blush in the wake of the wave of wine. The tight twine around Andrey and Peter's necks loosened, but didn't unravel completely. Peter raised an eyebrow, and leaned towards Andrey, who nodded subtly; he thought he had caught a glimpse of the type of man the stranger was; the twine loosened some more, if only because there was the chance that kind was face to face with kind.

..*..

The soiree had faltered, waned, then gone. Maria had vanished into the night, then into another aisle of the Kain house. Before that she had offered her hand, stern and sharp but fantastically elegant, for all three men to kiss; which they had done, one after the other. Peter had started biting his nails sometime after the digestifs, and Andrey had accompanied him on the porch to smoke.

« What do you think of him? he began, leaning all of his weight against the balustrade.

— He seems intelligent », replied Peter. He grimaced and picked tobacco off his tongue. « Well-spoken and well-read... But that is just a first impression, and what we were told of him. Whatever his craft reveals itself to be, I doubt he will be of match against us.

— What are the odds he will become an opponent?

— What are the odds he won't? I believe I can see the shape of things to come.

— You are already strangely combative. Does he scare you?

— I am not scared, huffed Peter.

— This is not quite what I asked. »

Instead of replying, Peter turned to the house, and pinned his eyes to the floor above. He sought a light behind one of the windows.

« He's taken the stairs, hasn't he?

— I have seen him do so. He is likely staying upstairs.

— Let us talk with him privately.

— Let us not go empty-handed, Andrey held his brother back. Come, and let's fetch some of the wine I have brought. »

They slipped away and slithered through the descending night fog, to the apartment Peter had been lent — where Andrey kept his things in the meantime. They made their way back to the Crucible in the same fashion.

They directly entered Georgiy's wing — strode through the salon, the dining room, the empty study, and hardily made their way upstairs through a wide, vertiginous set of dark walnut-wood steps.

The water, in the pipes, was running; mice in the walls, whisper in the hall, insistent evidence of the guest's presence. As they walked by Georgiy's workshop, which he had enthusiastically shown them upon their arrival in the morning, the door opened and the grey-bearded Kain exited.

« The Architect's in his quarters, he pointed as the two men approached.

— Above? asked Peter, pointing as well — with his hand.

— No. Through that door, on the right. When we offered, he took that over the mansard.

— Afraid of heights? Andrey mused—amused.

— Are you going to see him?

— Yes.

— Extend him my good-night wishes before you leave, then. I will retire to my study myself and shan't see him before morning.

— Very well. »

Retreating, the old man bowed, and the twins imitated him out of formality. They made their way down the hall, surrounded by heavy-framed paintings, the ornate arabesques of which felt like they could climb the walls like insects.

Outside, the colors had faded wearily out of things; the moonlight had bled dry the trees of their reds and oranges. They knocked four times, and the door was immediately opened — inside, the guest had lit candles.

He stood quite straight, tall, almost frighteningly so, barely short of half a head taller than the both of them, and they were already quite tall — with a big head crowned of curls, the roots of them slicked back with water, black and sleek as oil.

Underneath the completely-and-utterly-red coat that hung off his shoulders, he wore some kind of patterned undercoat of Persian, Ottoman, or re-fashioned Byzantine mode, ambiguously none of them and all at once — it greatly bothered the twins to not be able to tell: they couldn't quite grasp if the fault was on them due to unculture, or on the peculiar, seemingly shape-shifting garment itself. It was almost charmingly out-of-fashion, last-century, or enigmatically even the-century-before.

Without the haze of smoke or of flickering candlelight, they finally could see all of his bare face. Roman-arches of brows met in a springline of black bristles above his aquiline nose, which cast a Rembrandt shadow on his cheek. His eyes, big, dark, almond-shaped, heavy-lidded, and singularly even, were pinned to his visitors' faces expectantly. He was smiling, or at least they thought he was — then, they realized that was not quite a smirk that waned on and off his lips with the shadows, it was just the shape of his mouth. Oh well, was it? Maybe he was smiling. *For some reason*, the brothers figured.

« So you are back, he spoke then.

— You saw us leave? Andrey asked.

— I did. We did — Victor waved you good-bye.

— We didn't see him then, replied Peter in turn.

— Did you see him again?

- No. Only Georgiy.
- He wanted us to wish you good-night.
- I appreciate the gesture. 'Tis not the sole reason you've come up, though, is it?
- Let us through, Architect », Andrey answered loudly, livelily— « and let us discuss! I brought wine », he added as if it could help force a way through.

The guest cocked his head to the side and observed the bottle intently.

- « Armenian, he stated over the label. How refined.
- You like? Peter queried.
- They have splendid vineyards, even though I prefer the grapes to the wine.
- You seemed to quite like it at dinner, Andrey barked as a tease — just once, just to see how the man would take it.
- I said I *preferred* it, didn't I? he replied with a twinkle in the eye. Come on in. Push what you need, and find a seat. »

He closed the door behind them. The room was an old guest bedroom, the walls lined with enigmatic paintings, the bed and settee decorated of orphreys, the sidings a sandy yellow carved of intricate designs. The man claiming the place for his stay had unpacked leather and wicker cases, strewn his clothes on the furniture like downed flags — royal vermillions, saffrons and marigolds swam through the thickness of the characteristic wheat-beiges, purples, blues and greys of Georgiy's taste in interiors.

All of black, white, beige and grey, like a magpie at the shoulder of a mourning dove, the two visitors felt quite dull in comparison — on this point, at least.

On the desk and the scattered side tables, rolls of papers stretched, expansive, invading like a tide, parchemin-shell with sepia ink and makeshift tea pigment.

- « You'll allow us to sit, then.
- Surely. Let me fetch our glasses. »

The stranger was affable — sober in tone and dignified. He walked slowly; the copper-rings-bearing fingers of his left hand (and only his left hand) twitched—no, seemed more to flutter, as the gesture had looked controlled and intended. Andrey felt the urge to fiddle with his own rings; thin gold and silver bands between his knuckles, he twisted them around clockwise, subconsciously a spell.

Their host carefully undid the leather straps of a rattan case, pulling from the silver buckles between thumb and index meticulously. He pushed it open with his fingers, and not his palm. From the box, he took three glasses; red, green, red, in that order, the stems of which he trapped in the hollows between his fingers and lifted all at once. The three round bowls clinked against each other softly, like three heads of the Cerberus trying to fit on one hand-body.

- « You travel with those? » Peter asked, watching him draw closer, glasses in hand.
- Always.
- Always looking to offer your guests wine? Andrey asked in turn.
- I don't offer. » He placed the cups on the low table between them. « But I know my way around

getting some. » With that, he smiled. Andrey cawed out a laugh.

« Tell us when! he said as he began to pour.

— ... »

The man liked his glass more than half-full! Andrey decided they could quite understand one another(s).

« What bringeth? asked—he'd be Vahid for tonight, the twins decided, as per Georgiy's suggestion (they'd find something more suitable, more personal later)—[Vahid].

— Let us talk art!

— This late? You two are relentless! » There was a spring in his voice, a spike that, almost teasing, jumped to the two men's faces, bold and sociable, as if they had known each other for long.

— Have you tired since dinner?

— I have traveled, the-man-who-tonight-was-Vahid sighed, smiling nonetheless.

— How long?

— Days! » he theatrically cried out, waving the flag of a red sleeve, and taking a sip of the wine. « Oh, I used to cross continents only a few years back. But now... Yes, I tire.

— A well-traveled man you are, I take it », Andrey pried, hoping to see him unfold.

« Quite.

— Where have you been? (*Peter, grabbing his glass.*)

— In most places a well-learned man ought to have gone at least once. Before our hosts invited me, I had come back from a voyage to London, then Paris.

— Tell us.

— Oh, I've had to wade through soiree after soiree of horrid little London fellows », he huffed as he took another sip. Andrey composed himself at his seat, eyes on him, waiting to see in what ways he could unravel — ways that he could, if needed, exploit... not that he believed he would need too... not yet. (This was something he did reflexively, but he could see Peter's face was hard—yet not unkind; focused and keen, quite just like his.) « Not unlike the Parisians, as it were, it makes you wonder why they so dislike each other, being so comically similar — but the Parisians do have a flair for art, and for a little dramaturgy. »

He crossed the room for the window, which he closed, and came to sit on a sofa opposite the twins — again. Both of them watched as the sharpness of his features morphed into soft clay as he spoke, acutely observed all the ways in which he seemed to lack, he could lack, he couldn't hold himself quite still. He continued:

« This, and the English are profoundly hypocritical about the sodomites and the collection of inverters within their circles. » He clicked his tongue reproachingly, as if taking great offense to this — the candles seemed to flicker with the shiver that coursed through Andrey's back. He sat up. Peter uncrossed his legs and pressed both feet to the herringbone floors. The air itself felt to lend an ear. « Trying to distance themselves from... them like the plague, mind you, their host continued; while having them subtly invited to the suppers, for conversation's sake, at war with their embarrassed liking of them. In Paris, you find them amongst each other in artists' circles. Oh, they move and wade and swim and blend into each other, into one another. Oh, these two —

lovers — poets. One of them took the shot. His lover lived. Ah, shame! He should have aimed better.

— Do you not like the man? Andrey interrupted him, feeling his blood pumping, alive, excited to not be pinned into a frozen, almost shocked state under the solid bedrock of the man's nebulous—hazy enigmatic facade, to be picking and pricking at his words and finding a complete lack of resistance.

— Oh, I didn't get to meet him, their host replied. I am perfectly ambivalent towards him. I respect his *œuvre*... some good, some bad. Some meaningless — like all artists.

— Don't you think the loss of him would have been a great loss for art, then?

— I think his death would have made up for it. An artist with a pleasant and uneventful life is painfully boring. Death of old age is a sin amongst geniuses. The whisper is sprawling, expansive. The word is a house, into which one can enter through many doors and windows, and that one can come to inhabit. A death makes a legend. A poem... makes a poem. The lines of itself.

— If even that, Peter interrupted. For sometimes it is not even good enough to be one.

— Do you write? » asked the-man-who-tonight-was-Vahid with a tilt of the head. There was no challenge in his voice, no confrontation, no threat — Peter tensed still. They had come to pick *him* apart, and not let him do otherwise to them.

« Sometimes. But most of these, it is not good enough to be *writing*. »

Their interlocutor nodded deeply, thoughtfully. Something grated Andrey at the base of his neck, taunting and annoying; the feeling of being unveiled, piece by piece, in places he didn't even know he covered, or should have covered. He tried to tell himself he was imagining the worst through sheer force of habit — the man had come from far away, and his conversations with the Kains were limited; how much could there be to fear? Andrey still saw that Peter, too, had tensed. Worrying an already-bitten nail with his index finger.

« Come on, then, the-man-who-tonight-was-Vahid waved at them. You came to talk about art, didn't you?

— I consider we did, Andrey pulled his face in a smile.

— Cheers, if it is so, I shall drink to that, their host responded, and raised his glass before emptying it.

— We feel ourselves getting tired », he continued, and Peter, whose eyes were quite wide open, threw him a glance, « and we assume you must be quite spent too. We should get on our way now.

— We'll have many other occasions to talk.

— We will.

— Good night, then, gentlemen.

— Good night to you too. »

The two men put down their glasses and gathered themselves to their feet. They crept to the door, then out of it. In its frame, they bowed conservatively, less as a gesture of earnest respect than a tentative gauge of the man's reaction. He bowed in return, deeply, sitting still, and his living head of hair seemed to wave a goodbye that his hand, full of his glass, couldn't. Andrey and Peter made their ways down, seeing no-one else as they walked the hallway, the stairs, the rooms

on the ground floor, or even outside. They didn't hurry back to the building that Peter had been assigned as his quarters, but didn't speak during the walk either.

..*..

For the time being, the third and last guest lived and worked at the Crucible. Georgiy's workshop had been cleaved down its middle: the Architect had brought a drafting table and pushed it in the furthest corner, turning his back to the wall, with every other glance ready to find the door.

This was where they met the next time, called in by Georgiy. Andrey and Peter flanked the door and waited for him as he exited, followed by the fourth and last man who carried sketchbooks and rolls under his arm. Georgiy ushered everyone to Simon's quarters, where he and Victor were waiting, and locked the door behind them.

The wallpaper had been torn, leaving behind the claw marks of its ghosts in glue stains and paper t(r)ails, and the chalk-painted sidings bore in places gaps through which could be peeked the bone-white rock of the wall behind. The room had been stripped bare, empty, hollow and resonant, barring a long table of pitch-black wood as well as its assorted three chairs, and a painting, or maybe just a canvas, turned to face the wall. The fabric was pinned to the frame with silver nails.

A first proposal is a first draft, a living and sometimes lying draft, and it is different from any other draft, in that it is inherently humiliating. It's exhibitionistic in nature, name and behavior — and Peter has always been more modest than Andrey, which is not really hard to do. It's a bid for attention. The twins are bidding and buying their time.

Yesterday's Vahid, who would be today's Dariush, sat with his hands conservatively folded on his lap as he sloped against the back of his chair. Sitting down, he looked... not *weak*, but maybe... meeker. Tame, tamer, tamed. Andrey walked behind him to get a better look at his sketches. The stranger looked softer around the edges of his shoulders and jaw, vulnerable with an exposed throat. His black eyes were lidded with a sort of reserved, pensive expression, the gaze that seeped from beneath his lashes crept and crawled over the sprawled designs, the opened books. From time to time, a hand of his tugged on the corner of one of his papers to flatten it, as if to insist it be seen. From where he sat, shoulders forward, hands resting flatly on his thighs, a weight felt just between his shoulder-blades, Peter saw he was worrying the corner of chipped enamel with his tongue, as if to push it through, as if to thread the red yarn of it through the eye of a needle. Peter stared as if he expected him to succeed.

Nervous, then, was he? Andrey watched askance the clay cliff of his face, and Peter the mechanics at work of his pensive jaw.

A click of the tongue, a tease of it to the tooth. It disrupted Peter's staring—he jolted. Andrey dragged the third chair between the two men and sat.

The Kains eventually exited — formally, all at once, as if exiting stage left through the locked, unlocked, locked-again door. All three architects followed them of their gazes, and in their empty wakes, the air seemed to come undone — not worryingly so, but as if they all let out a breath.

« Well, then, Andrey leaned over to [Dariush], we ought to carry on without them. This is what they want us to do.

— It is.

— We know there are many things to be discussed that our patrons could only brush understanding of.

— There are.

— You've brought quite a lot to the table. One could think you're a whole workshop by yourself.

— I've been told », [Dariush] laughed lightly, his previous meekness apparently having followed the Kains out of the door. « With how consistent were the works that our patrons had shown me, I had expected you to be one man, if a very prolific one, he complimented (was this it?) in return.

— We've been told », replied Andrey, and he smiled of all his teeth.

Came then a knock. Their eyes darted to the door that one of Victor's hands unlocked, as the other ushered in a silhouette clad of black, of martagon-purple, of a blue of ink-sea, sharp-angled as a coffin and tall as a tree.

Peter and Andrey bounced to their feet, the other man following suit. All three walked to her at once as she barely stepped forward, pulled, torn out of their seats by her presence.

« Madam », Andrey greeted her first, promptly, reflexively, almost mellow as if she had struck all vigor out of him with a gaze.

She extended her arm to shake his hand and it unwound like a fantastically long snake, sleeves-scales slick and soft as silk. Her eyes were heavy-lidded with fatigue, with a silent judgment, with a disinterest in earthly things tinted of the fact that she seemed to be still lost in dreams. She was taller, taller than Victor, something like a centimeter short of being Andrey's height, but the mass of hair that crowned her head and threw itself down her shoulders and back in cascades of umber waves made her look taller even, a giant with a willowy frame.

« I am glad to finally meet you », she spoke slowly, low but not soft, a thunderous and far rumble in her voice as if a sea battered her lungs from the inside. « I apologize for not having been able to join you the other day. *(She didn't mention which day, as if she had forgotten, as if she didn't know, as if she didn't know what day today or any day was, as if it was of no importance to her.)* You know me. I summoned you.

— We do. And—yes, yes you did.

— I trust you. *(She looked around.)* However many of you there are. I trust you to build what must be built.

— We shan't disappoint you.

— There would be no punishment for doing otherwise. »

There'd be way worse. She retired slowly, ebbing away like a black wave. Victor's hand closed the door after her, and the three architects took their seats again as silence flooded back into the room. [Dariush] leaned over to Peter, and spoke over his shoulder:

« You're quite quiet.

— I'm observing, Peter replied—straightening his back and arms. I'm the one who sketches and draws, I must observe.

— Do you think you'll be able to shape of your gaze the fantastical structure they want of you?

— No, looking is but a step.

— Not the first one, you make it sound.

— How do you think you'll be able to shape it, colleague? » Andrey interrupted, leaning forward with an elbow on his knee.

That seemed to provoke, ignite or galvanize him, and he bounced up on his heels, sprawling his long arms across the table to gather his designs. Andrey and Peter imitated him, if for nothing else, at least to not let him stand half of their heights above.

He looked different, alit in this way. Or maybe *different* was not quite right — he looked better, really, truer, more genuine, more natural; like whatever this role of coyness in the Kains' presence was, it could be shrugged off at any time, revealing the man underneath. Andrey could see Peter and himself in his gestures, his pacing, his suddenly impassioned voice and demeanor.

In any other time, any other place, maybe they could have been good friends. But this was no time, and this was no place; this was a realm removed entirely.

His long hands ran across his papers like clay-colored spiders, the pomegranate-arils of the jewels crowning his bulky rings like their eyes walking all over.

« It ought to be horizontal, he began, evidently.

— Evidently, eh? How come? asked Andrey, following the waved-flag of his coat across the room.

— Horizontality is a constant in life. The sprawling earth, roots... The lying of a corpse in the ground. This is all we know for certain is true, in the end. The soul needs a mirror. Great art reflects.

— I sure hope not », sparked in Peter like a struck match.

[Dariush] turned to him — no *pardon?*, he had just bounced on his heels and faced him.

« Great art ought to move, Peter continued. Great art moves — as in, it shapes and morphs. Man doesn't need art static in its being. Man doesn't need art to be a mere portrait of himself. Man needs art to change, and be changed.

— I never spoke of portraits », his interlocutor didn't-reply, something like and unlike-at-once a smile on his lips.

« Do you think the horizontality of the corpse is an inevitability? added Andrey. Do you think the corpse is an inevitability? »

To both of the twins, the man smiled of all his teeth and the chip too.

« Let us find out. »

Andrey stared, trying to find a part of him that rang hollow where his prying gaze landed. Looking closer, the damask of his coat was woven ornately of the ferruginous variations of many threads. Variegated strata and boundaries of blood and pomegranate-reds swirled and snaked across the cloth in declensions of vermillions. The pattern seemed alive, pulsating. Andrey felt his molars scrape the back of his mouth — some kind of primal, atavistic reflex of teeth-baring

« Let us, Andrey repeated.

— Do you have another idea? [Dariush] asked.

— I do. I always do. A better one, maybe. A truer one.

— Tempest thou fate, Architect? »

Andrey saw how Peter almost flinched, and wondered if they had both heard a ghost. There was, or they had thought there had been. The man's voice had shrouded itself in mist. In darkness—or what Andrey perceived as such. He never lied to himself — he was aware he saw darkness in places it barely was shadows. He saw it where it suited him, where it rationalized his desire to smear his fists of it — where he wanted to see it because he itched, he itched, he hungered. *But still*, he thought. *Still*. He tensed — muscles wound together like a pit of snakes.

« I've tempted more dangerous, colleague. »

The tempest itself. [Dariush] stared at him. Two black pits in charcoal-brown mesocarp were set on Andrey's face, gauging the dense flesh of his chewed-and-spat words. Then, he laughed widely, openly, so loud that this alone could have chipped his front tooth, and without a hint of malice. Andrey reined his prying gaze back like a too-impetuous horse and breathed slowly.

« You laugh, pellar? he hissed—he couldn't help it, even as he tried to infuse lightness into his words.

— Pellar...! exclaimed [Dariush], laughing again. I shall, he eventually replied. You amuse me.

— Do I?

— Quite.

— How so.

— I find your approach quite emotional... passionate, let's say. Almost naive... In an endearing way. »

Andrey squinted.

« ... Emotional, eh? » The man nodded, and fiddled with his bulky ring—it struck Andrey that he knew this type. The type of which you could lift the bezel. A poison ring. A shiver electrified him —fear, which he would never admit, realization, or excitement, or frenzy, or the pure glee of having found darkness where he had looked for it, ripe and ready for the picking. He saw Peter realized it too. His eyes had widened, bezels of his irises ready to pop up in kind. « I shall give you *passionate*. I will let you be right on that part.

— Give the pellar the truth of his words... How generous », the other man chuckled softly, and Peter's head spun with how much he felt his footing give out under him.

Poison on the finger, sweet pomegranate syrup in the laughter. Neither Peter nor Andrey could figure out what kind of elixir was brewing in the man's mouth. Instinctively, Andrey reached for

his brother's elbow, as if to keep him from stumbling, and Peter for his brother's shoulder, as if to keep himself.

Andrey made sure to open the door for the third guest as he followed Peter out, and to close the march after him — just in case he was to shapeshift out of the room like he had out of his tone.

..*..

In the afternoon of the following day, the three of them got to meet other guests of the Kains — or rather, strangers who once in town they had decided to turn into guests. They exchanged very few words, as they were not to step on each other's shoes. Amongst them was a pallid, nervous, obvious invert of a woman, who clung to her cigarette and her cane like to climbing ropes. She fiddled with the bat-wings lapel of her green coat, bounced her leg reflexively as the Kains spoke for her, of her, of the plan for the town. She didn't nod nor shake her head. She listened. When she spoke, which was rarely, an almost painful pragmatism wisped past her lips, and wove intricately, maddeningly, with spiritual observances threaded through the eye of logical principles, in a sprawling design that seemed to draw the shape of the town in a spider's web. Andrey somewhat disliked that pragmatism of hers, as he disliked any other artist's, this pull and anchor to the ground, and only the ground; to the soil, and only the soil; this mathematical sectioning of the virgin town. But he couldn't make himself really mind. They were not *at odds*. He was—they were to do his—their work, and her do hers; they were wrangling vastly different beasts, different concepts of beasts. They were not competing. The same could not be said of the man living next to Georgiy's workshop. The Kains had taken a liking—no, not a liking, maybe more a curiosity, or a hope—to one of his proposals. Construction was to begin in three days, at dawn.

For the time being, Andrey could distract himself, or try to distract himself, with a building the Kains allowed him stewardship over. He had spotted the place walking the spiderwebbed streets, feeling the dent its colossal weight imprinted into the hard-packed soil. The walls were hard and dense, the ceiling low. He descended the stairs, Peter on his heels, his palms brushing against the cold, black brass of the railings.

« What do you plan on doing with the place?

— Not sure yet. »

Peter's eyes gauged the heavily-patterned walls, the room dividers of varnished chestnut wood upon which had been stretched virgin black linen canvas.

« How far underground are we?

— I can give an estimate from the stairs, but I am not quite sure. Enough, I would say. Everything is... quieter here, without the noises of the street, of the sky and the wind.

— I hear something still.

— Tell.

- A thumping of sorts.
- Mmmh. Footsteps above?
- I do not think so. It seems to come from the sides... »

Andrey perked an ear. Yes, he could hear it too. Soft and rhythmical beyond the packed earth behind the walls.

« Shan't you worry about it.

— Fine...

— Let me arrange the space. I can feel warmth rising from the floorboards.

— I'll leave you to it.

— Where'll you go?

— Back to my attic. I need to get back to my designs. (*His mouth moved as if he was swishing the words around like bitter liquor.*) Our designs. »

He made his way back to the surface on heavy feet, on leaden steps. Andrey stood by the wallpaper, its trees and flowers swaying in the heat of the space. He could almost visualize the volutes of smoke through these painted leaves, petals and stems like a hot wind.

He could see Peter was growing nervous, angry, agitated. Having to defend their designs felt crass, vulnerable, dogly. Exhibitionistic in that it revealed the iron coils of intestines twisted in knots, grey with ink and acid. Andrey had no scruple about baring teeth and barking, but Peter was softer-spoken — which didn't mean he was less of a hound. Let him do the barking, then. Let him gnaw at the white beams of the buildings that would grow from the soil like unearthed skeletons. Let him do the barking, the biting, and the burying of the bones.

..*..

The Stillwater is a failure. The Stillwater is a failure, right? Andrey and Peter paced it up, down, under its architect's, Simon's, and Georgiy's gazes. They didn't say it, of course — a wicked kind of ecstasy crawled up their spine in a slither-snake shiver of pride and pleasure. Simon didn't say anything, but the two men thought they could see in his gaze something akin to disappointment.

The Architect had put back on his cloak of meekness, of prudent solemnity. He folded his hands by his thighs and mindlessly fiddled with the golden bands of some of his rings and the bulky shanks of his others. He didn't look sad, ashamed or even particularly moved. He seemed to withstand failure with dignity and reflection. Peter was impressed and envious, and Andrey could see he was impressed and envious. Himself was more aggravated at their colleague's lack of reaction; like the man was seeing something, seeing something else, *looking at* something else, something beyond, just out of reach. Andrey didn't like to pace a place blind without at least a blade. As he groped around the tortuous stairway, the tangled web of passageway, he felt quite lost, but didn't feel much else. Which was good. Emptiness filled the Stillwater like a dulling, dazing opium smoke. It was still like black night waters.

Andrey and Peter made their way through Georgiy's salon, dining room, study, up the stairs, dashed through the hallway to the workshop's door. They couldn't hear the old man inside, the distinctive sounds of his mallets and chisels, or of his tinkering with clocks. Lending a careful ear, they could, however, hear the gliding of a charcoal stick across soft paper. He who-had-been-Vahid/Dariush was inside, sketching away. Had the failure of his project they had come to witness earlier in the day emboldened him for the following proposals? The twins entered without knocking.

He had moved his desk, at some point; pulled it away from the wall and rotated it so it was facing the tall windows. He, in return, turned his head over his shoulder to catch the intruders' eyes when they peered in. He'd kept the red damask cloak, but discarded the dark coat underneath; a corner of his white shirt hung over the belt like a broken wing; all of which Andrey could see, and both borthers could notice.

« I didn't expect to see you two so soon again.

— And we didn't expect you to be back to work so quickly », Andrey pointed. Over the man's shoulder, he could see more designs; quite in the same vein as his previous proposals, they were flanked of rules, guidelines, of calculations, and the work, whatever it was, was not even sketched yet. Barely an idea within its own shell, it was already structured by the Architect's pragmatism; a scaffolded versification, a — beautiful, yes, moving, sure, but — mathematical, stubborn prosaic metric.

« Why not? I was only getting started. »

His voice scattered across the workshop like a shiver.

(Don't say anything. Do not entertain the threat.)

(It's not a threat. It's not a threat, it cannot be — because it is true. He has only started; Andrey knew what Peter meant when he said he could see the shape of things to come — there will be another discussion tomorrow, and the day after that.)

« Would you come with us? Peter asked before Andrey had the time to say anything.

— Where would you lead me? »

(Why does he speak like this?)

« We were thinking we could go to my studio. You could come here. You've received us in your quarters already... It's only time we returned the favor.

— Let us drink, Andrey followed suit eagerly before their interlocutor had time to speak, if not to your success, at least to your work's completion. »

The man stared at them for a little while, as if to try to find threat, despite, or derision on their faces — it didn't escape the twins that they had done quite the same many times. Returning the favor, then, was it...

Eventually, he laid down his charcoal stick, and wiped his hand on a colorful, dirty cloth.

« ... Ah, I suppose it can't hurt to get my mind out of these things for once. » He got up. « Where is that studio of yours?

— In the Skinners district. By the river.
— Lead the way, then. I'll follow. »

It was not by some miracle that he did. The three men, some more wise than the other(s), walked past the Guzzle, into the Marrow, the Flank, the Chine, through the fat of the town which, slowly, was being beaten into marbled meat. Peter was at the head of the cortege and, behind him, could feel the Stillwater-maker's silhouette flicker and wave like a candlelight in the waning day; the red of his coat thrashed by the wind like a bullfighter's cape, catching Peter's eyes like the blade of an *estoque*. (He had no business thinking this, thinking something like this. [In a far corner of his vision, the Stillwater sprung out of the ground and sprawled bedragglingly, indolently.] He had no business thinking like this.)

Peter was already fiddling with his brushes and inks when Andrey finally closed the procession as it reached the attic.

« Would you let me draw you? Peter asked as—they hadn't chosen him a name for today... let him be Nazim for the evening, the night, maybe the following day too—Nazim had started a slow pacing in the still-in-need-of-tidying studio.

— Is that why you brought me here? [Nazim] laughed, low and almost soft, and Peter wondered if he had misread the threat, misdrawn the shapes of the shadow of the threat. To draw me? You better not try to trap my soul in a painting, now, old boy... I would haunt you 'til the bitter end! »

And he laughed again, like he had before, loud, clear, voice like a chime, like a mourning bell. The floorboards felt to move, to shift, so subtly tectonic. (What now? What then?)

They talked for just a little — mindlessly, as Peter was gathering supplies, and the guest was busy trying to find a comfortable place to pose; about art, and not much else. Andrey scraped the melted, misshapen mounds of wax off some of the candles that dotted the place with the blade of a knife. It was maybe a little superfluous — the dagger was sharpened thin enough to go through paper, its edge slimmer than a nail; its wooden handle had been hand-carved. Andrey liked the theatricality.

If he didn't want to get his soul trapped, at least he sat still for the portrait. Same folded hands as the brothers had come to expect — devoid of meekness or reservedness, this time; elegant, dignified, pensive still. He bounced his foot as his leg was crossed over his other knee; playful, or maybe to the rhythm of a little tune.

Peter couldn't say he wasn't tempted, couldn't say he didn't think about it a little. He had done it before — trapping a soul, that is. This was why he had been invited to the town. This is why he had been called. Ah, there still was a chance the Kains didn't know about it in detail, but... this was something you could smell on a man. A lingering scent of sweetened turpentine and charred painted linen.

It didn't always work, and when it did, it didn't always work well, but... temptation gnawed at Peter, ran alongside the man's clear, airy laugh down the winding paths of his veins, of the long

strands of his hair. Of sanguine chalk he traced on cardboard the man's profile — the aquiline nose, its strong, hard bump stretching thinly the layer of smooth skin, a cognac-brown like the cedar wood that had built the temple in Jerusalem in the low lights; the squared jaw that he had managed to still at last; the crown of blackberry thorns—sorry, of dark shiny curls, swirls of liquorice-brown sweetgrass; the very arched, yew-bush-brows, the thick hairs of which ebbed into the darkness cast under his brownbone, from which were crawled down the long, spidery shadows of his lashes on his cheeks.

Peter could try. Maybe he even would. He'd keep his face, vessel for the soul behind those black eyes, in this loft — it was a beautiful one, he wouldn't even need to cover it. For what felt like ten years ten times over, nothing seemed to move; the floorboards stayed put, the roads didn't snake up the stairs; the coiling spine of the Stillwater hallways stayed whist, and haunted nobody, and was haunted by nobody. There was stillness in the air, stillness in the water, stillness even for the ~~two~~ three of them, awake at this hour.

« Word hath gone around that you have created yourself a den », [Nazim] spoke, addressing Andrey; and before Peter had the time to reprimand him, he found he hadn't moved at all. (Maybe Peter cared less about him moving than making the instant shift ever-so-slightly on its long, leaden legs.)

« Ah... for now, it's only my home.

— So I've heard. Word hath followed that you have invited people to be painted there. They adorn the walls, now, male and female models alike. » Still not moving, the sitter pinned his eyes to Andrey's face. They indeed had something of apples — big and round, their surface marvelously reflective. « Truly, you each follow in the other's steps, don't you?

— They've told you this? asked Andrey, not considering the latter part of his sentence.

— Can't they speak to me?

— I'm more curious about you speaking to them.

— I speak little. I listen.

— Unless it is with us, I take it.

— I listen to you, and you listen to me. Isn't it fair?

— Do you see us on equal footings, Architect?

— Do you? I need not ask for you two. But you and I... do you? »

Peter held the charcoal stick above the board. Its dust was strewn across his fingers, his wrists, the wood of his easel like red ash, or snow.

« Yes », answered Andrey.

(Andrey never lied to himself. But the man was not himself. Blissfully, he was someone different, extraneous entirely. Andrey had almost forgotten what that felt like.)

« May I smoke? [Nazim] asked.

— Only if you do not move too much », Peter replied after a glance thrown over his easel.

His model fished out of his red coat a small copper case. Its lid was decorated with ornate designs, raised from the smooth metal like a collection of spines, of scars, of filled trenches. Both brothers

kept an eye on the matchstick case Peter had used to light his candles, just in case he'd need it, but the man had his own lighter.

He stretched his legs, long and black-clad, ravenlike, in front of him, which Peter didn't mind, because he hadn't drawn below his shoulders. With an elbow tucked against his flank, cigarette in a loose, meditative hand, Peter could see that some of his rings were made of the same, smooth copper as the case, as if having been carved from the same lode.

Should the cigarette be part of the portrait? Should Peter trap him with this little flame, this speck of gold that bled into his palm as he smoked? He could use it to burn his way out of the frame, but if they could mellow him enough, maybe the idea wouldn't even come to his mind.

« So you've heard, then? » Andrey began, catching his fleeting attention. They had to keep it, to keep an eye on it like a wayward bird, lest it slipped away from them, and lest it circled all the way back to the nervous root of their neck and picked at it like a carrion bird. « About the den, and the paintings.

— Sure have.

— Mingling with the locals, are you? he chuckled.

— They mingle with me, I'm rather solitary. »

Even in good company, he seemed to look beyond.

« You barely ticked », said Andrey.

Eyes can be pomegranates. Nazim's sclerae were the pale, pearlescent beige of pith, irises reflective as warm brown peel, the arils of his pupils, wide and black, ready to overflow. The calyxes of lashes crowned a stare that went right through them, both of them, both at once like a single spear.

« Thinkest thou not I knowe of thy kind? (*Nobody spoke. The candles shushed each other.*)

— How do you make the air shiver like this? (How do you make words shiver like cello c[h]ords?)

— Rarely am I wrong about these things », he didn't-respond, leaping wild-horse over the question—his secret to keep.

Andrey's face, slowly, split into a grin. He bared teeth; the canines he knew hung at their peak low like mountains turned on their head; the smile asymmetrical from incisor agenesis. Peter had the same, just turned-over, just upside-down, dextrocardic of everything but heart, so when Andrey smiled, he smiled for two.

« And rarely are we. »

After a suspended second, Nazim's face unfolded into a smirk, moving first subtly then all at once like the tearing of a fault line. He opened his mouth wide as if to burst out laughing, but stuck his teeth together for a composed, if relishing, chuckle, low and thunderous like a tempestuous sea. As he stuck the cigarette back between his lips after flicking ash off with a nail, the chip in his tooth creased the paper unevenly. (This, both men could see, because he was smiling, and they, looking.) He tilted his head all the way back to exhale smoke, and Peter didn't even reprimand

him for moving.

Peter was in sanguine charcoal to the wrists; its red tint diluted the sweat on his clammy hands a dusty pink. He got up slowly, almost sluggishly, and made his way downstairs, throwing over his shoulder that the building only had running water downstairs, and he had forgotten his rag, and... something else that neither Andrey nor [Nazim] heard.

The sitter sat still, or still sat. He swayed his foot around to a tune, or maybe to nothing at all; he raised his gaze to the ceiling, to the beams of the ceiling, to the ash-grey joists and beams and bones of the roofing; to the black eyes in the grain of the wood, not unlike his. Andrey crawled out of the darkness he had tucked himself into and took Peter's seat.

« Your Stillwater didn't quite turn out how you planned, he began, and he couldn't wash the suave jubilation on his tongue.

— Quite. (*He smiled.*) The Kains still seem to be pleased with it in some way. I am grateful.

— What do you plan on doing now?

— ... In your voice I hear you don't want me to respond.

— Go on. I'd love to hear it.

— I shan't. You want me to hear you out.

— I don't, he shrugged. I'm guarding this little secret.

— Keeping secrets from the pellar, old boy? he smiled again from under the veil of cast shadows. It'll be revealed eventually, now won't it.

— If the fates are in my favor, right under your nose. (*Andrey's lip twitched.*)

— So it is a competition. Worse — a battle. Of wits, then?

— Of more.

— Guard thine heart, you fool. What's in it for you?

— More than you could beastly imagine.

— Am I talking to a beast, or to a man?

— I'd let you know.

— You would if you even could, that is, isn't it.

— *Guard thy back*, Architect, Andrey spat, baring teeth. And loosen up your hands. They make you dull.

— Pray tell, how come.

— You are deeply pragmatic, colleague. I'm afraid it'll be the end of you. It stops you from dreaming.

— Is pragmatism antithetical to greatness, to you?

— Pragmatism is the mind-killer. It kills the soul as well, robs it of its extravagances and its heartfelt, spirit-full pull towards reverie, towards boundless fantasy. A great artist bends pragmatism to the whims of his art, not the other way around.

— Maybe it kills yours. Pragmatism is the matchstick upon which the fires of greatness ignite themselves, art's very kindling. When one dies, so does the other; into ash or smoke.

- A matchstick is fragile.
- A fire without firewood is even more, and dangerous in its hunger. »

Crackedst that very firewood that their words could have set ablaze — walkedst back up Peter, hands clean, or as clean as the man he was could have them. He shooed Andre out of his seat with a glance.

« It's getting late », interrupted his sitter. Peter could hear how his voice had shapeshifted once more, and his glare on Andrey grew darker. « I'll walk myself home. Goodnight, gentlemen.

- Allow me to accompany you, cut Peter, his gaze shifting harshly.
- Allow us. »

The man, at the edge if the stairway, waited on his heels, his eyes thrown over his shoulder like a black rope to pull, or be pulled by. He let Peter go in front, again, and Andrey closed the march, as it had been. Peter felt followed by a ghost, and didn't turn around when a small gap formed between the two of them.

Andrey had caught up, and spoke, low and deceptively soft, just under [Nazim's] shoulder.

« Your pragmatism is a quest for harmony, he declared simply. But you mistake safety for it. You refuse to indulge in the grotesque lest it escapes you, escapes the cup of your hands. You close yourself off to the depths of human and spiritual experience alike.

- It makes me laugh that you pit the human and the spiritual against one another, and that you speak to separate harmony and grotesque.
- Speak, do you believe the grotesque can ever be truly beautiful?
- You appear like the type to believe only the grotesque truly can be.
- What makes you say that?
- My eyes first, your actions second, and your words last.
- You seem perspicacious. Have you ever investigated a man? »

Andrey marked a pause, stared at the cliff of his face, at the unmoving cape of his brownbone.

« *Opened him up*, so to speak? »

That got him an askance stare.

« Have you?

- You ask a lot of questions.
- You offer me a lot of answers. »

Andrey closed his mouth as to not give any more, but knew well that he was, by doing just that. The Architect waited for him to pass the gates of the Crucible to step behind him.

« You worship thyself quite much », he whispered.

Andrey tensed, but did not still.

« Surely, he scoffed. I do not believe in the concept of blasphemy, or sin.

- Never was I to imply you did. You try to put words in my mouth, for your desire to walk before

me, always. » Andrey stopped where he walked — just at the edge of the stairs into Georgiy's wing, towering above the other man behind him. « Go forth, then. Lead the way. »

He opened his long hand full of rings, full of poison rings, and showed Andrey the door that was just in front of him; that had never been anywhere else than in front of him. Peter was inside already, and held it ajar. The Architect could see Peter's face in the opening, his eye pinned to him, pitted and iced.

They had followed him upstairs. He walked to the dressing table, a thin-topped mahogany piece with long, thin, tapered legs, and poured water from the white jug into the white basin. The twins watched as he took off his rings one by one, setting them on the wooden surface in the subconscious arrangement of a spiral pattern. Then, he lowered his hands into the basin, palms flat down, like one would test the cold of a stream. Lifted them, flipped them, and lowered them again — without using the soap, he looked like he was washing blood off him.

Andrey stared like the weight of his gaze could pin him in place, but he moved still, paced slowly, meaninglessly, as if to prove he could move, he could still move, and neither of them could hold him down. Andrey found himself having to hold back the bark of a hound the bark of a tree something hard and peeling and knee-skinning something ridiculously childish and hard. He bit onto his thumb and worried a hangnail with his teeth, pulled, thought of nails, the nailing kind, the hanging kind, the steel and rusty kind.

He walked to them — his eyes dug between Andrey and Peter, ripping the black fabric of air in the space that separated them, pierced a light-well where their shoulders would have been meeting had they stood closer, as if by his stare he was trying to tear in two(s)/in hal(f/ves) the unit the men formed.

« You madden me, Andrey spat through gritted teeth, cruelly low, as if to make it so Peter didn't hear.

— Oh, spare. Do not let me linger in your mind, you won't like what I'll do with the place.

— I already do not like what you're doing with the place. (*The Stillwater sprung across the street, but sprung straight through the topsoil of his spirit, too. The red water feeding the roots was bleeding out.*)

— Brace yoursel(f/ves), then. It is only the beginning. »

He pinned his head high and straight and strong and deceitful and haughty on top of his shoulders.

(How did he do that...? How could he do that? That slash that cut that so cleanly cleaved the air in twain, a syntactic tightrope for the word[s] to balance upon, bicephalic and chimeral.)

« Goodnight, colleague(s). Rest your weary head(s). »

And he closed the door(s).

..*..

Balance, maybe, had been struck. No—not quite balance, but something brushing it of its patient, taunting fingers.

The Kains couldn't decide.

They couldn't decide — it maddened them and the twins alike. And so, they had chosen both, as if they were compl(i/e)mentary, as if they were intertwined, integral to one another's existence; it made Andrey sick. He could see in his colleague's proposal the same inescapable, infuriating formality he had gotten so used to seeing. And in Peter's — in Peter's, he saw something he had never seen. It was — it was not good.

Andrey couldn't understand it. Peter had gotten feverish the night before; Andrey had thought he could feel his clammy skin, his strained hands and fingers, his racing thoughts like his very own. In the morning, right before they had to trek back to the Crucible, Peter had met him with wound, winded wrists, weak from restless re-writing, and shown him his newest idea — a bunch of ruins. He couldn't understand it.

He couldn't understand that this pleased the Kains; maybe, maybe they liked the promise of it, the formal possibilities, the hint of poetic greatness under those... wrecks. But Peter could do better. He had done better, Andrey had seen him do better, had helped him to better.

Maybe he felt they were running out of time. Yes, that must've been it. They were running out of time. The Kains approved construction of Peter's Stairways, and of the nameless' Cathedral.

..*..

Andrey could hear Peter climb down the flights of stairs into the den, stopping at each landing. His steps were bedraggled and heavy, lightened only by the thinness of the leather of his shoes and the litheness of his weak legs. Andrey peeked from behind a curtain, catching Peter as he descended. His nostrils flared — not like an angry bull, more like a curious dog.

« What is it that you are brewing? » Peter asked. He moved his head around, trying to catch in its flight the swirl of whatever scent that could be.

« Local recipe, Andrey replied. Twyrine.

— Pungent. » Peter crinkled his nose at the aniseed, bitter smell of the gathered herbs. Of those that he hadn't used for distillation, Andrey had made small bundles, plaited them like he had seen the restless dancers outside do with grass and hair, and let them to burn in brass cups — good for getting rid of a place's ghosts, he had been told, and of the lingering crawl of darkness herself... whatever that could mean.

« Yes. I am changing the ingredients ever so slightly. *(Peter looked skeptical, but approached the bottle racks nonetheless.)* Are you staying?

— No. I need to head back. I need to... *(He reflexively clicked his tongue, as if disapproving of his own thought.)* Refine my designs.

— Are you sure?

— It cannot wait anymore.

— Very well.

— Can I take a bottle of yours? I'll need it to embolden me.

— Take. »

Peter did. Looking around, his eyes adjusted to the changes of the place. The wallpaper had been brushed meticulously, making it so the soft spines of the embroidered designs could be felt to the touch. Furniture had been brought in, the wooden top of a bar had been uncovered, polished and lacquered. Curtains had been hung to separate the building into intimate nooks, and Andrey had started to sketch on the blank canvas stapled to the room dividers.

« And those? » Peter noticed a few smaller, unopened crates.

Andrey smiled.

« Opium — he declared, smacking one of the boxes — and hashish, he added, smacking the other. Tobacco in both, too. »

Peter raised an eyebrow, but smirked nonetheless.

« What do you plan on turning this place into?

— For now, it's just my home. » He gleefully flashed teeth. « I might have found someone to bartend, if things change.

— Mingling with the locals, are we?

— I can't keep secrets from you — you've known this already. »

He had. He'd seen the portraits his own model had previously mentioned — not quite tucked out of view, not in the spotlight yet, like dancers standing breathless in wait behind the curtains.

« Do the Kains know you have brought this in town?

— Look at mistress Nina in her eyes and tell me you do not see in them the subterranean, twilight whirlpools of warm opioid volutes — the flights and flames of the poppies' burning salutes...

— I do not look at mistress Nina in the eyes. I think the weight of her gaze could tear me asunder.

— Aye, that is fair. »

He pushed the lid of one of the boxes — with his full palm, and not his fingers; offering its content to Peter.

« Not before I sleep, he refused. It gives me nightmares. »

Andrey didn't remember anything of the sort, and a cold bead of sweat crawled down his nape to his shoulder blades.

..*..

Rome wasn't built in a day, neither was the town, neither were the Stairways or the Cathedral.

Still, the latter sprouted up, spring seedling in the middle of autumn, from the ground first; formalistic, formaldehydeistic, black as ash, as soot, as charred bones. Sprawling and symmetrical and spiderlike and spiderweblike. Andrey watched it grow like a tumor, like a putrid, grey flower. Gorging itself of ink until it permeated its stone; swallowing the waning light and letting it bleed through its stained windows; eaten through by intricate designs like moths did cold, dirty cloth. Andrey struggled to look at the faces nested in its clerestory: they, too, seemed to change after

each blink. The stone seemed variegated, marbled like meat. The visages were familiar and foreign at once. They could have been the Kains', the Architect's, the architects' — none of those felt right, but none felt wrong either.

It was not loved.

It was not hated either — it was feared. And fear, nesting under the wing of love, is more powerful than a knife in its breast.

It was not loved — it was powerful; which was dangerous. And from being powerful, it was desired, which was worse fourfold.

..*..

The Stillwater became inhabited. All three architects were invited to paint its downstairs — the new tenant, in her adoration of the otherworldly, asked for the walls to be adorned with scenes of Eden. Nothing changed at all; everything changed at once. She realized quickly her liking of the Kains' third guest would go nowhere (rarely was Andrey wrong about these things, he was once again proven right), but came to frequent Andrey's den, having heard of its hidden riches.

..*..

Andrey noticed some of his bottles were going missing. He had assumed some of the dancing girls had crept in and taken back what of Earth was their due, but could only assume so far before anything involving Peter reached his ears and his eyes. He'd go to bed healthy and calm, and wake up feverish and achy.

Whatever black, elusive night mare Peter was running after, she was faster than him. If he could only tame the beast, he wouldn't have to fight a wrangling struggle he was losing—and had no business losing, for their colleague was, obviously, plainly, evidently, below their league.

There was a bartender in the den, now — but not a soul around the bar to tend. The man had approached Andrey first, saying he was looking for a new job, maybe a place to stay, and had given his name as Evgeniy. Andrey could see in his eyes that the last part was not true. Ah, well — he had a soft spot for liars, as long as the reason they lied was wicked enough, in an amusingly sinister, sensual way. He liked people who played by their own rules, as long as his own prevailed, should rule prevail at all. With his buggy blue eyes and patchworked, black and burgundy coat, the liar blended with the wallpapers like blood in wine. He looked like he was constantly eavesdropping, and Andrey knew he was, but even under his prying gaze, Evgeniy kept his mouth shut. Andrey didn't have to wave the thinly-veiled threat of his knife — he dusted the bar he was to tend and, as if rehearsing a play, cleaned over and over glasses that had yet to be used.

..*..

They would meet with the Kains again — they would have to meet, to sit in a same room, so Andrey had to take a deep breath and decide he would make it so he could, in fact, rest his weary head. He minded not staying awake, feeling his heartbeat grow thready and high-pitched, ribs-trapped tinnitus, eager with exhaustion, but he didn't want this for Peter. Peter, who couldn't rest his weary head.

In his den, the bartender looked more like a croupier, and the home-brewed drinks were a gamble in themselves; but Andrey had set tables, benches, cushions and curtains, had adorned the walls of witnesses, had meticulously cleaned the floors of dirt and old dried blood; the place was fit for visitors.

« Not your home anymore, then, is it? [Parvīz] enquired as all three passed the threshold.

— I've fitted one of the rooms, out back, to be my quarters.

— Isn't it a bit small for an expansive man like you?

— I've torn down a few walls. »

Andrey bowed, inviting the two other men to make their way down the stairs.

Even against the ostensibly red wallpapers, the Architect's overcoat flashed with an almost unnatural vigor, the reddest apple on the twisted Arcadian tree. Even as he ducked his head past the door, it was the walls that seemed to bend out of his way. Of his ringed hand, he brushed the railing. The intricate designs chiseled in its baluster, swirls and snakes and salamanders, accompanied his slow, pointed descent.

Andrey sat them behind a curtain of heavy velvet, thick as a finger and heavy as a corpse, patterns of ornate veining and waves racing down its length to the carpeted floor that muffled their footsteps. He had found and arranged settees around a low table of mahogany wood, its legs misshapen like those of a satyr, or whatever devil was said to run the steppe, in an informed and sensible parody of triclinium. He'd taken from Peter's loft sheets and pillows he didn't use, covering the makeshift klinai in orphreys of woven plum, wine and jade threads, in throws of ochre and copper damask, in small pillows lined of intricate ruffles embroidered with motifs of vines, ivy and rose bushes. Wreaths of steppe flowers and herbs hung on the walls, and their pungent, heady smells waned as they dried.

In the middle of the table, Andrey had placed on a Zhostovo tray glasses and bottle, a cloisonné opium lamp, its nacre base re-painted of Kaszuby flowers; a two-headed stick of brass and bone, opium-needle on one side and scraper on the other; and a small bone vessel for the tarry, balmy chandul, carved by his hands from a bull's horn. Spotting this arrangement, their guest laughed low and deep.

« How charmingly last-century, he somewhat-teased.

— You won't make us believe you don't like to indulge in a few outdated pleasures », Andrey replied of quite same tone.

He had never been able to explain the feeling of it, to reason the foreign familiarity of the man's face; neither had Peter, who had drawn him once, and found the woven threads of the weft of his face snaking, as if alone coming alive, across the skin of the board to meet him out of time.

« Oh, won't I? » [Parvīz] interrupted their shared divagations, amused as he was the first to kick off his shoes, toes-to-heel, then heel-to-toes. « You know me little but you know me well, old boy. — Calling me old, are you? Andrey hissed, frisky and light, mirroring the man's banter. — I shan't call you young! »

At that, he took his place on the settee. He didn't lie on his side as one would in a triclinium, and didn't recline like in a den — he leaned against cushions tucked in a corner, head framed of steppe-herbs garlands, and stretched his long legs before him. The twins would have to sit each on a side of him. From where he was, his gaze could embrace the whole of the room, small and stuffy, and even peek into the rest of the building through where the curtains didn't-quite-meet. Peter imitated him: he sloped against a pillow, shoulder to the wall, but let his legs drag across the rug. Andrey took longer to decide, watching them; then kicked off his shoes and reclined properly, nonchalantly.

How amusing it was for their guest to call them "old boy"...! He didn't look out of place here, nor would he have in a triclinium, in the mosaic-laden reception rooms of eastern palaces, or opium dens of last-century's foggy London's shallows. Eyes and hair seeped into the rich dark wood, into the darkness itself before Andrey lit the lamp, and voiced his reflections. He watched how the white of their guest's teeth gleamed with a thin layer of spit.

« How old thinkest thou I am?
— Will you be offended if I get ahead of myself? asked Peter, who had shared the same thought as Andrey since they had met him.
— Go forth. I hold no grudges.
— Thirty-five. »

They both watched as he smiled, then laughed. The flame of the opium light flickered at the sound.

« You flatter me!
— Do I?
— Indeed.
— Well, won't you give us your age?
— Give it to you? he smiled wider. What for? Don't you have your own? »

'The unknown must remain unknown, or else the story ends', is it?

Andrey picked the pipe from a table — of bone, ivory, of carved cherry wood, jade and ruby. He stuffed it of chandul scraped with the brass needle and held it over the flame until it mellowed — and watched diligently as their guest seemed to mellow with it. He offered it to [Parvīz]. [Parvīz] took it. Everything felt felt, maybe because everything was, down to their limbs that they kept close to their bodies — as he inhaled, exhaled; quite in the same way they had already seen him do, through the chipped-off corner of his front tooth. The volutes of smoke crawled slowly out of

his mouth, like living things, like waters from a small mountain spring, woven like a thread through the eye of a needle. Pensive pareidolia fell upon Andrey and Peter like a blanket of snow, or some kind of malady; they watched as amorphous apparitions, spectral sparrows and the mirages of galloping mares crystallized in the careless, hazing fumes.

Eventually, he offered the pipe to Peter, who took it. Andrey searched for discomfort, for regret on his face, and found nothing of the sort but something else entirely. But he had said...

It bothered Andrey, it itched at the back of his skull that [Parvīz] hadn't offered it to him, who was sitting closer. He would have refused it, for now, as he wanted to be the last to unravel, if it came to unraveling — but the man didn't know that. The man couldn't have known that. The itch subdued as the smoke rose in its pungent, fragrant phantasmal forms, a prehnite-green with the lingering ghost of twyrine.

And eventually, Andrey remembered why they had invited him, which was not just so *the memory of old sins could be destroyed by sins that were new*, as it were...

« I'm sorry for my words, earlier », Andrey said with a bow of the head, trying to mean it, and maybe meaning it truly.

« And I am for mine. Hey, let's put this behind us, alright? It's only natural that you ^[masculine, plural or singular — Ed.] be protective of your ^[masculine as referring to the subject(s) or neutral as referring to the object, plural or singular as referring to the subject(s) or singular as referring to the object — Ed.] work. No bad blood here. No blood at all, really. »

Despite this olive branch, Peter tensed all the way up his body. He swallowed smoke, it hung low over the pools of liquor in his stomach like dark grey fog over a winter pond. He heard that, he was sure he had heard that. Or saw, maybe — it had teased the edges of his senses like a brush of light, or the prick of a feather. Saw or heard or felt — it had appeared above their table like a halo, like another guest, like an angel shaped in flight. He threw a glance at Andrey, who held it back; his jaw was hard and jutting. The fumes had changed shape, scurrying and twisting away like frightened birds. Andrey could hear his ^[Peter's — Ed.] heartbeat drum under the thin skin of his temples; and Peter reciprocally the same.

« Do you not mind that it dulls the senses? [Parvīz] asked Peter of the opium that he hadn't separated from yet.

— He feels too much, most of the time, answered Andrey in his place.

— The artist's plight, eh.

— Among other things, added Peter as hiss and bitter, self-deprecating laugh oozed out of his numb mouth at once.

— Does the drink help or hinder? »

Peter waited before replying. « Depends on the drink.

— This one? »

Peter followed the shadow of his pointed finger as it brushed the glasses on the table, and the pearlescent green of their absinthian contents.

« ... Too early to tell. » At that, he heard [Parvīz] laugh softly, as if agreeably.

« Do you mind? asked Andrey.

— It closes the mind to the worldly and opens it to the other-worldly, doesn't it? the Architect shrugged. Or maybe it sharpens the worldly senses until they can cut freely through the thick of it. Hone them enough to be walked on like a tightrope, and lend a hand in the balancing act. Narcotics have made legendary the works of some... and have sunk others to the dark cold depths.
»

Peter's hand twitched, but he didn't offer anyone else the pipe.

« The soul needs its senses for survival, survival is the root of art... Now, whatever shape it takes.

— What makes you think I create through the soul? Peter asked, teeth grinding slowly, as if trying to tear the smoke apart. (It was not that he was wrong, really. It was that Peter had the atavistic reflex of resisting the slow, peeling-back of skin.)

— What makes you think you don't? »

Peter exhaled and offered him the pipe back.

« Your — you two, the two of you — dislike of critique does not mean your work is soulless... I would say, it is the tell-tale of it having one.

— What do you think makes us so uninclined to critique? — Andrey, then, chipping in as he saw that Peter worked his jaw in a tight lock, his hands gripping the excess fabric over his bony knees.

— Your pride, obviously. » He smiled widely — devoid of venom or enmity. It struck Andrey across the face like a blade. « You are not used to not getting your way. Your ways, really. Nothing has opposed your resistance — because you have created so far beyond the bounds of resistance. But it was bound to happen. The adventurer fears not the mountains passed, but those still unscaled.

— Do you consider yourself impassable? »

It seemed to last a lifetime — the Architect set his eyes on Andrey. They emerged out of the fumes like the depths of wells. Andrey thought he could see the pupils dilate, shrink, scrape every pore off his face; the Architect's mouth was straight as a spear. Then it wasn't: he laughed. What was worse was there was lightness in it; he shook the smoke out of his hair, he didn't even seem a little bit mad. (Andrey wished he was enraged, defensive, threatened. [Andrey liked mirrors.]

« You bring it back to me, again! It is like you cannot stop thinking about me. Or my work, I would rather hope! »

As Andrey opened his mouth to retort, [Parvīz] offered him the pipe. The truce was a sharpened blade to be walked like a tightrope. It felt like they were walking on a chessboard. Waltzing past and around pawns, knights and rooks. (What does a rook look like? See: it's a castle. It's a tower.)

They walked him home; flanking him, magpie and mourning dove. The red wings of his coat

swayed against their legs as they walked.

South of the Spleen, construction was underway. Peter's works were slowly coming to life; crawling out of the ground on unsteady arms. Andrey flinched at the sight of it, but their guest waved to a bench, just across the gravel street.

« Let us sit and smoke, he said.

— We just did, Peter interjected.

— Tobacco helps repel the buzz of opium. »

As the twins wondered if that was true, he sat. He fished out his pocket his copper case, pried it open with his nail, and offered it to Andrey.

« Thank you, I will refuse. I am trying to quit.

— You smell of opium, [Parvīz] teased.

— My views on tobacco and opium differ. »

A light-hearted chuckle rang in the biting night air like faraway cathedral bells, and the thin edge of the truce felt to grow into a plaited rope. Still hard to balance on, but for an instant, Andrey and Peter felt they could reach for each other's arm for balance, and even for the Architect's too. When the case was offered to him, Peter picked a cigarette from it. He didn't sit on the bench, but crouched next to it; Andrey stayed standing, just off of right behind him, before making his way to the other side of the bench. The Architect began patting his coat, looking for a light fruitlessly — no, Andrey realized: feigning to look for one. Bait. It worked. Instinctively, Andrey reached into his pockets that he, subconsciously, knew were empty; Peter had dug into his and pulled out a box of matchsticks. He sparked one with shaking hands, and lit both the man's cigarette and his of a same flame. He waited until it died on its own, reveling in the barest hint of warmth it brought.

« If they can coexist at night, they can coexist by day », the Architect finally said, a mellow, wistful tone wisping past his lips. As he received confused glances, he waved at the rocks that stacked, preliminary to solid existence, over the background shadow of the Cathedral.

Precariously-balanced grey rose before solid, sturdy black — both of stone nonetheless. « So could we. (*He smiled.*) In the same way soul has to coexist with everything else, they should coexist as vessels for it to wander into as it pleases, as it needs... as soft, malleable shells for a wandering hermit crab. » (The image did make Peter chuckle.)

— You're set in your ways in the same way we're set in ours, Andrey spoke in the cold air.

— Well, I believe in the shape of the soul. (*He shrugged.*) *I believe*, I do not see it, I haven't seen it. I have met no-one able to wrangle it like a wild filly... but I think I'd know what I want the vessel for my soul to be. Our visions differ vastly.

— Thinking differently from us is not quite hard.

— I know you pride yourselves in innovation. »

Andrey perked his ear again for mockery or sneer. Nothing. Voice as smooth and still as the night sea. He moved closer, and the Architect offered him again — a tobacco paper-wrapped olive branch.

« What do you think is the shape of a soul?
— The crown-like calyx of a pomegranate. »

Fitting for the man.

« Do you believe it can be torn apart to reveal seeds?
— All a soul is, is seeds. A collection of them that the living person strews across the ground as they walk. Watered and fed by the soil and by those who tend to it.
— Should the vessel match this shape?
— The shape of the soul and the shape of the vessel are messages. A shape is a message. A message exists in as many shapes as it can be interpreted. It is endlessly replicable from the moment it becomes intangible.
— Do you think the soul is tangible?
— Have you tried to grab it?
— Do you think the soul is edible like a pomegranate?
— You ask so many questions. »

A laugh again. The Architect didn't answer. He smoked, leaned back. Intangible smoke wove out of his mouth through the needle-eye of that enamel-chip. Andrey and Peer thought about whether or not the soul was edible, and how it would taste.

..*..

A stairway was built.

Then a second, a third, one more even.

It looked like ruins, because it was, but it was good, Andrey thought — but not good enough, held Peter.

They coiled on themselves like wounded animals; articulated roughly, unnervingly similar to the spider-buttresses of the Cathedral; hard somata bound together by rigid stone axons. But they stood — they balanced on invisible tightropes, laddersteps to the skies. They were sturdy and strong, almost inflexible to a fault. The stone of each step sent a shock of brute force up the climber's leg, as if reciprocating the blow of the stride threefold. Simon was interested, but not impressed. It was getting there, however — there was a flick of silver in his blue eye like the flash of steel of a blade.

The third architect was... enigmatically silent as he walked around, and under the stairway. He tilted his head back and caught the copper pin of the sun through the helices of the stairs like from between rib-bones, through the path of the steps that yielded to the star like parting curtains.

« Quite the mirror, colleague, he hummed over Peter's shoulder after having done his rounds.
— How come? Peter asked, his upper lip defensively baring his upper row of teeth.
— Foundationless, his colleague smiled, not unkindly. Unfinished, but with the hint of greatness to come. And... » He gestured at the spiral of the stairs, those spinelike volutes of stone. « Walking in circles.

— You think I'm tortuous? » Peter squinted.

The man smiled again, with no hint of mockery or malice, and his black eyes twinkled with a sort of affable mischief. « I think you're *convoluted*. »

Peter took his bitter gaze back like one draws back a shield — or an arrow.

« Is it convolution or is it depth? he queried, a due hint of self-deprecation bleeding through, buoyant in his wet words.

— It can be both. It is for most men.

— Are you calling me *most men*? Peter huffed, falsely and jokingly piqued.

— I'm not calling you anything else than a man », was the pragmatic, soft-spoken response. « Not yet. You are mortal, as far as I can see. » There was no threat in his voice, not even the hint of one, but Peter felt the hair on his nape, under his long ponytail, rise nonetheless. « Maybe you'll be a god, one day, but I pray I don't live to see it! »

And he laughed, three etching of sepia voice across the canvas of Peter's white face.

The third architect threw a glance upon the stairs that washed up the first steps like black sea-foam, then he began to climb. His coat followed after him like a tide, waving before Peter's eyes like the red *capote* before a bull's.

He stood at the top for a while, where he paced around, twice clockwise and thrice opposite.

« Beautiful view of the Cathedral from above », he said as he walked down, and Peter felt his knuckles turn white over the fists he had shoved in his pockets. « And of the empty space next to it. » He smiled again, widely, white of enamel-ivory, disrupted by the black hollow of his chipped incisor through which Peter thought he could see his tongue — forked thing that it was. « This is what we're competing for now, isn't it?

— Among others.

— I like the sound of it.

— Glad you do.

— Let us surprise each other then, fellows. Let us rejoice, we who were asked to make a bridge to the sky! »

And he left.

« How tall is it? Peter leaned towards Andrey.

— Twenty-nine meters at its apex.

— High.

— High enough.

— I see. »

They left after him, walking at a distance. Victor and Georgiy, who had neither interrupted nor listened in on the conversation, followed. Mistress Nina walked behind, sparing a last glance at the structure. Simon closed the procession, and they made their way back to the Crucible.

..*..

Andrey doesn't jump to violence. No matter what is said of him, no matter what he says of himself. He... crawls to it. Walks, slowly, on marble feet. With careful movements of the hands, of the shoulders, poisedly. Predatorily. Hunger lurks, bloodlust boils just beneath the surface of his calm grey face — but he doesn't jump to, or into violence. And even if it did, sometimes... oh, it was always deserved. He never started it. Ah, he only started it when it needed to be started. But this time, he hadn't. He had been baited, pushed... his hand had been forced. Yes, his callused, stained, elegant hand. He clicks his tongue like a metronome. He walks slowly — poisedly; on marble feet...

..*..

« I see clouds on his face », Peter spat. He was neurotically cleaning the paintbrushes in the attic, dusting the sanguine portrait that had been staring askance in a corner for weeks. The color lifted; the model's spruce-fir brows and berry-eyes smeared. « It's all I see — thunderstorms cleaving themselves in halves for a brief flash of light. It could be light—or it could be lightning. I can't trust him. We can't trust him. I think he knows he cannot trust us either. » He paced. He paced. His palms were clammy; Andrey could feel it on his own. His heartbeat was loud, heavy, scurrying like a mad horse. « But I want to. I'd like to. I've been seeing ghosts. I don't want to believe I'm seeing them on his face too. I'm—no. Something else is going on. I'm not... seeing this right.

— What makes you think you're not seeing exactly what his face is under its covers? What makes you think he isn't playing with us for his own sake?

— What makes you think he is?

— I prefer to see the ugliness in people so as to not be taken aback.

— Except in yourself, no matter how much you try to tell yourself otherwise. You're blind.

— Not blind. *Hypocritical*. I value our survival above everything else, you know that.

— Whose is *our*? »

Andrey's face fell like the words had taken a hammer to his marble face. The blood drained from it until it was the color of chalk, and its friability too.

« Peter—

— Let us go to the meeting. (*He stuffed his designs under his arm like a bag of severed limbs.*) Let us go. Go! Walk in front! »

They hurried to the workshop as if they feared he'd have vanished into thin air. But here he was, hard at work. He'd moved his drafting table again. It was now facing the wall, and his back, the two intruders. Damn coat was still red. Plain red. Stark red. Starlight-red. Dying-star-red, boiling, hot to the touch, if they tried to touch. They saw of him nothing but his wide shoulders, the thorn-crown of curls on his head and the shells of his ears. (Amusingly enough, he looked flat, as if painted, as if a painted scene brought upon a theatre stage. Peter wondered how long of a blade he'd need to go through him from back to chest. If the wood under his paint would be hard or supple, alder or juniper. He smelled of yew.)

They waited for the Kains. They were late. Since the Cathedral had been built, this happened often. Peter borrowed some of this time to add a last few brushstrokes of ink. (Time borrowed, bought, bet on, bid on, buried. Being buried.)

The Architect was keeping time. Tongue clicking, dryly, metronome. Marking tempo, directing — he could be nervous, Andrey thought, he could just be nervous — clicketh that tongue-keeper-of-time. Marcheth time backwards, the Kains feeling further and further from the room as it passed.

« What bringest thou? spoke Andrey through the thickening of air. (*Hearing this seemed to make their colleague smile.*)

— You will see, in the same way I shall see you.

— Shouldn't we share without our patrons' gazes? You've said it yourself — there are many things to be discussed that our patrons could only brush understanding of.

— I said naught of the sort. »

(It was true. Andrey's shapes were starting to blur. His borders smudged at the brush of a hand.)

« What is there to discuss? the man continued.

— What *isn't* there? »

Time stopped. No—time ran forward. Leaped like a wild horse charged like bull. Try wrangle it—it'd tear the rope around its neck right out of your hands, and the skin with it. No—time ticked. Time—was running out. Flung themselves the thunderclouds over the Architect's face like a veil through which tore his black stare. So that what it was, then. That shapeshifting; pragmatic to meek to soft to sociable to dark and bitter like a poisonous fruit — a mask not for protection, but for trickery.

« You cannot seem to stop asking questions. It's soon coming to an end, and how many of your lines were you questioning me? Inquiring of my existence, and the existence of yourself within me? Trying to pry me open so you could see your reflection where you were so sure I kept it selfishly hidden to look at when you were not around? You shape thyself around me. »

Peter's eye twitched.

« What kind of omen is it for the lives of our works side-by-side, as they outlive us? What kind of harbinger is this for the things to come? »

He looked sad. Genuinely, profoundly, painfully sad. Andrey would have sworn it so, were it not for the thunder in his eyes. Deceit. (Deceit, right?) Trickery. Which Andrey was only fine with when it was his own.

Andrey watched as Peter buried a growing thumb-nail into the wood of his brush and, just below the crimp, snapped it in half. It had made no sound, as if going through butter. Andrey picked up the decapitated ferrule, heel and bristles as the broken part rolled on the floorboards to his feet.

..*..

Wait. Maddening wait, deliberations. The attic gorged with black fluid, its walls warped with the wet, drowning anger that splattered the wood. Bitter absinthe-like bark and bite and swallowed bile filled the air, brewed and grew and overspilled. The knots of the beams and floors tightened around the brothers' wrists and necks. The whole loft was a stomach churning with acid, with an anger as corrosive as it. Andrey ran there after an infructuous meeting with the Kains — Peter had drunk.

« He mocks us. (*Spitting. Twyrine-wet, violently commanded and clear-minded. A horrifying combination. Andrey's heart sped up seeing it, as if he was for the first time in weeks seeing his own reflection.*) He's mocking us, isn't he. He is so painfully below our league, and I struggle to see why the Kains would even invite him. His art is stern, drab, dull, and it's dulling out everything it touches. Its shallowness spreads like rot. »

He said this hammering, stammering, short strong gusts of breath flaring his nostrils, hard and loud and resolute, ~~which might have been because he was trying to convince himself.~~

« The only reason I am not putting a hand on him is because blood would soil my precious designs. »

You need not spill blood; you could just strangle him, Andrey thought, and knew Peter heard. He watched as his brother's hand tightened around the neck of the bottle, slowly at first, slowly after still, inexorable; until his knuckles paled to white and the ligaments in his long fingers rose to the surface of the skin with the strain of the effort, like the roots of oak trees, raised scars under the soil. The bottle under his grip shattered

It was good glass, it was sturdy glass, it didn't crack so easily. Peter shouldn't have been able to break it — but Peter could do anything he put his mind to, even if he didn't put his mind to much, if he just got a little help.

Most of the shards fell on the floorboards, chiming together like silver bullets. The rest was lodged in Peter's sinewy, clammy palm, where blood pooled between the broken edges and the skin, in the roadmap of the papillary ridges. Andrey watched as he walked to the window, picking the pieces with long nails in bitten skin-beds and strewing them across the floor, scattering them like poppy seeds. He leaned over the sill and Andrey reflexively tensed, before the shiver waned as Peter observed the wounds in the light of the moon.

Outside, the Cathedral's soot-grey facade on its charred bones peeked over the roofs. It pried into the mansard, its mocking faces pretending they were not.

Peter brought his palm to his mouth. He licked the blood off. A wayward drop snaked down his wrist to his elbow and a red pin-prick seeped through the white linen of his shirt. He stared at the Cathedral, staring at him. Eventually, he licked thumb, index, middle-ring-pinkie finger in that order, like one licks off the juice of tender red meat.

..*..

Wait and deliberations, this time all around the same table. Peter has spilled ink on it. Sun's waning. Air's icing. Night and cold and bitterness creep on arachnid legs. They're outside,

withstanding. Maybe he wanted to smoke. Gusts of wind nail Andrey's jaw shut as they batter the side of his face; they need not nail Peter's, who doesn't speak.

That brain, in that little skull... no, that big skull, inside of that big head, under that berberis-bush of wild curl-thorns, trapping beautiful birds and poisonous berries inside. The damned thing. What's it so fucking full of? (Selfishly hidden inside, is...) Andrey wants to extract the image of himself from it, to bleed it dry so as to make sure it doesn't exist outside of his reach, beyond his reach, outside of his grasp, inside of another man's curls-crowned head. Pensive head. Pensive, dark, prying eyes. Praying-mantis-hungry eyes. Andrey, you're imagining things. Long arms like an insect too. Clasp hands, rings around the knuckles like the misplaced joints of a spider. Andrey, you're imagining things. There's an Andrey and a Peter inside of that berberis-bush of almost-black hair, a magpie and a mourning dove trapped in his whorls of brambles and thorns. Of spikes and swords. Of spires. Spires and buttresses and severies. Andrey... There are two birds in the church of his red wet skull and the stained windows of his eyes are slowly bleeding on them, painting their feathers all the hues of that fantastically-everythingelse pitch-black. There are three birds in the cathedral and one has black wings a whole head taller than them. Whole head wider than them. When stretched horizontally.

It's going to end soon. Andrey knows it's going to end soon, because he doesn't start the violence, but he brings it to its end. He's violence's executioner, he's the grave-digger. He clicks his tongue — this time like a clock.

The clock is ticking.

Curtains — curtains!

They're red here. And red here too. Close them. Close them!

He watches — askance — Farkhad is cold, a little cold, he holds his coat closed against his chest.

He huffs out volutes of purple mist from the peephole of his tooth. Forked tongue spies from within.

Judas-thrown wet glance. Farkhad clicks his tongue, then teeth.

Andrey offers him his coat like anyone else would have offered peeled skin, the layer of muscle, warm from the meat beneath, from the violence of the flaying. Farkhad takes, puts it on. The sleeves are ridiculously short on his arms—that can't happen—that couldn't happen, it's not possible that it happens. He wasn't that tall before. They see eye to eye, still. But his wrists, veins and bones and sinews and arris and bulging with oaken roots, trespass beyond the edge of the cuff of Andrey's coat. The cloth runs up on him, bares him. Peels him raw softly from the inside-out. Tawny and honeyed and fawn-colored, -eyed, -hooved.

Faun. Comically decorous Satyr, that doesn't let himself get caught, get pinned. Pan-flute-player.

Bacchus—it should be him, be Andrey. Janus—it should be them. (Andrey. And...) What is left? Apollo. Mercury. Mars. Sisyphus, having crossed over, beyond. No. No. Prometheus... Carrion birds follow the stench. Caw. Caw. (What says the mourning dove? What does it mourn, and what mourns it?)

Farkhad—this shall be—walks away almost softly, as if afraid to tread lightly—no, it is not about being afraid. It is about not needing to tread, to tread any harder. Or any longer.

..*..

Andrey had managed to make him follow him — walking in front. Andrey trailed close, but not too close. He was careful to keep his strides within Farkhad's, nesting-doll of a path within a path. The man's footsteps were just a big bigger than his own.

Andrey had offered him to come see the den. See the new portraits in the den, and decide if he wanted to be on these walls too. This wasn't not untrue. They walked down the flights of stairs, bird after bird. Andrey insisted Farkhad go first, Eurydice walking in front, forbidden to look back — he hadn't said why he was not to look back.

Andrey didn't lie to himself. But Andrey lied to others freely, heartily, wildly thoroughly beautifully, for fun, for pleasure, for survival. Whatever this was, he had done it. And if the story was to be told again, he'd do it once more. ~~He told himself this, and he didn't lie to himself.~~

« Look at me, will you? »

Farkhad turned on his heels, slowly, softly. Not out of fear. He was stretching time. He was stretching everything around him, as if the tall tower of his body could bend the steel of the building-scaffolding. He was eating at the wallpapers like a moth. He was eating at the story line after line as if to delay something. (As if to delay something. Andrey couldn't delay anything anymore.)

They faced each other. He was beautiful. It was a shame. Peter could always look back at the portrait.

Andrey took out his knife and lunged forth. Fear blew wide Farkhad's black eyes, deer-like, onyx pebbles in worried white pits. His arms rose. The blade hit his left forearm. Blunt and hard and straight and skipping across the flesh like a wind gust. Skin parted wide—screaming overflowing mouth filled with rusty red pomegranate syrup. Blood coursed down to the elbow like a stallion unbridled. Farkhad shoved Andrey to the side — weakly, quite, the pain was sharp—biting—pungent, but it threw him off-balance nonetheless, and the cut sharply hooked down.

« You—! »

Andrey wrangled himself back on his feet and struck. Failed. Farkhad grabbed his arm, both hands. His right grip tightened around Andrey's wrist, fingertips pushing hotly and harshly and wildly into the weft of sinews and tendons and skin, crushing the flesh like warm clay. His left grabbed onto the palm. His thumb dug into the clammy hollow between thenar and hypothenar, as is to pierce through the tight threads of tense muscles underneath and cleave the concave cup

of the cutting hand in half. His fingers slithered in the grip, nails scraping the skin, the wood of the knife's handle. Sharp and horrifically long, like claws. Like wanting to burrow under the thin and fragile layer of flesh. Canvas-eaters. Moths and maws. Prying beetles. Farkhad pushed them in sharply and Andrey's grip gave out — gave open and the knife tumbled out of it like a wayward bird and its silver wing struck across Andrey's forehead. Surface wound. A nick. A kiss. Hot as the pain spread. It bled. It was bleeding. The red streak slithered down his nose, into the corner of his eye, where as he blinked it was squeezed and rolled to his mouth.

Andrey pinned from underneath the red wet curtains his gaze to Farkhad's face and his eyes were so black he couldn't pick pupil from iris, he couldn't before, he never did. There was something in them, swarming and sprawling and boiling below their surface — fear, finally, as it should, as it should be. Andrey tore himself from Farkhad's grasp when he felt him falter felt him fail saw him shiver, adrenaline nothing of the dull of opium but all of its skull-crushing leaden weight — he lunged across the bar and grabbed — a bottle still heavy and capricious with liquor — it sloshed and thrashed inside like a roaring storm smelling pungently of aniseed.

Andrey struck. Grossly, amorphously. Throwing himself into the jaws of the darkness where Farkhad had retreated, and finding him. Wave against a rock. No — rock against a wave. Weapon of Cain. Only one giving out.

Striking only once because that was all that was needed—a slash from the hairline that ricoched across the neck, the cheek. Under the weight of the glass—thick, dense, green like envy, like the devil's eyes—Farkhad's supraorbital ridge caved in. With a sharp, horrible crackle, dragging in the wet whisper of the mushing of bone into flesh. Keystone of that arch came undone dirtily; under the blow the intricate architecture of the springline failed at once, tearing out the abacus of his nose; the black stained glass of the windows(of-the-soul) beneath flooded with red-tinted light; Farkhad spun on his heels from the blow and Andrey heard the crack of his spine, then of his elbow as he fell. Blood and twyrine threw each other into one another's jaws and mixed in variegated volutes, coiling around each other in a liquid like a pit of snakes, its smell rusty and aniseed and bitter and sharp and broken off at the trail like a blunted blade broken off at the tail like a lizard autotomous, tearing at Andrey's throat with an aroma potent and poignant, a stench horrifically appetizing. Striking twice for good measure, and as if pulled by strings, Farkhad's arms jerked up before his face, maybe to protect it. The fissured glass gave in quite in the same way bone had, and shards strewed themselves into the flesh, from his elbows to his wrists, and across the floor where slick blood and liquor swallowed them. Striking thrice for—for pleasure. Glass broke the clavicle and broke into the taut skin over the chest struck-stuck mid-heave. Let the shards pierce the lungs, the heart, the shapely spleen. Andrey panted harshly. A whistling noise came out of his throat—wait, not his, or maybe yes, his. A fourth time for completion. The bottle came apart as it finally struck the ground and the remaining twyrine spilled over, overflowed, stained him from the stomach down. He shivered the whole, whole way down. His hands paled then grew red again; his pupils contracted to pins then expanded like a set of lungs engorging with poison relief and wet-sobbed-air.

From where he was, crouched over Farkhad's corpse like a carrion bird, like a nightmare crawled over the exposed bosom, the lungs the pryable-open chest, hands on both sides of his stiff, bent legs, he could see the color draining from his face, barely curtained by an open, defensive hand. Between spread fingers, a dark eye was growing foggy, dry, and grey. Long, thick, beautiful lashes clumped with blood. Andrey gathered himself on his knees and pushed himself up on ~~four~~ two arms. Might he—mighty he had been rock rending the red-waved devouring sea, now a wave — different — new — final — it the wave washed over him. Hot as blood and as shadow. Burning as relief release as realization. He tilted his head back, and two shivers at once breathed through him.

He ought to bury Farkhad before morning crept. Such ugly things were for the cover of night, not the day. Such ugly things... (Ugly thing that he was not quite.)

One of Farkhad's hand had fallen on his chest, as if he had tried to protect his heart. The skin over the carpal bones had been ridged of glass edges.

« You've always been too much of a romantic, Andrey whispered. *Ça te perdra.* »

On it, the rings gleamed a soft pink copper, catching Andrey's raven eyes. He grabbed the hand gently at the wrist and picked the pomegranate-aril of the ring, the poison ring, off the bloody mesocarp of his finger. He put it on, on his last bare finger. It fit. Andrey patted around Farkhad's coat over his chest, his hips; he found the cigarette case. He found in it a lighter. Took the cigarette; put it between his lips; lit it. Tasted rusty of blood, sweet of sweat, smelled of yew, pine, spruce, ink, turpentine, berries, cold, cologne. Then, as he inhaled, of nothing.

He exhaled through a gap between his teeth, through a purposeful gap between his upper and lower row of teeth, pushing the swirls of white smoke with his tongue.

He crawled back. He pushed himself up with a hand on Farkhad's shin, and the other on his thigh. He gathered himself on his feet.

Something was knocked over. Caught Andrey's eye like a spark. Broken bottle. A silhouette that cowered in a corner. Evgeniy.

« Hello. »

Evgeniy didn't respond. Andrey walked to him. Feet be slow. Steps be measured. Evgeniy backed himself in a corner, crawling on his hands, kicking of his heels. Andrey crouched. Andrey kneeled. Andrey crawled on his hands, forward. Leaned in. Predatorial. Evgeniy's neck tensed as his head tilted back. He was trying to crush himself between these walls, but all he did was expose more of his neck.

Fear in his eyes. Fear so deep and dark it drilled a bottomless, widening well in his blue eyes. Not a killer, then! What else could it be that brought him here? His big wet eyes childishly welled with tears.

« Zhenia.

— I just came here to make sure I turned the lights off. I didn't want to risk a fire. I didn't follow you—I promise I didn't follow you. I was there when you walked in. I was there when you—you came in. Alone. This is what I saw, you came in alone. »

He'd lied once. He could lie again. Andrey liked that, because Andrey didn't like to ask, but liked to be obeyed.

« I didn't see anything. And even if I did, I wouldn't tell anyone.
— You can keep a secret, can't you, old boy? »

Evgeniy furiously nodded. Nodded so hard tears were flung everywhere.

« Good. » Evgeniy closed his eyes very hard, as if this could crush the memories behind them. « Good. » Andrey stood back up. « Leave, now. I'm taking care of this. »

He was not the kind of man to make anyone else bury his corpses. But this one was not just his.

Outside, it was raining. The smell of petrichor permeated the soil, clung to the slow-moving air thickly, sensually, swathing, surrounding Andrey. The storm didn't wash the blood off him — it diluted it a soft, pearlescent pink, and drenched his entire body in it as it crawled down him. It bled through his clothes like it would a bandage, cold pins against his skin, pricking it everywhere they could reach, like Saint Sebastian's arrows.

Andrey tilted his head back as he walked and exhaled fully, longly, feeling all the air swirl and curl inside of him as it surfaced behind his teeth. It was not cold enough for it to fog up the night, but he thought he could still see his breath rise, ripple and ring in volutes and wreaths, in unfolding, dancing sirens, their smoke t(a)inted rose with the satiation of a carnivorous hunger.

He walked to the attic.

Peter was at the lip of the stairway when he peeked through.

« Come, Peter. Bury him with me. »

All of red, black, white, beige and grey, like a magpie at the shoulder of a mourning dove, they crept back to the den where, as the blood pooled, Farkhad looked like he had died of a broken heart.

If the story was to be told and retold again, they'd bury him in the same place, in the same way, with the same four hands. [This is what they tell themselves — Ed.]

..*..

You don't ask an artist if they've killed. It is self-evident, even if they haven't.
The Polyhedron began construction at the dawn of spring, after a winter of preparations.

..*..

« There's someone in the Stillwater », Eva said.

Andrey tensed — his whole body sharpened itself to the edge of a blade.

« Can you see them?
— Yes.

— What do they look like?

— Red. »

Andrey walked in. Not a soul to be found — for him to find.

He found no soul — but he found that the walls were closing on him. Closing on him askance, blurrily, as if through the eyes of a drunken man. A thin veil of red before them.

..*..

From the Stillwater, from a man's height, the Cathedral is taller than the Tower. When one walks onward, the Tower becomes bigger, of course. But from the Stillwater, the Cathedral is taller than the Tower.

It's a question of perspective, Andrey tells himself, as he paces between the dead man's creation and the Crucible. It's a question of *perspective*, it has always been. From anywhere else, the Rose climbs to the heavens from the thorny dry bush of the town sprawled at her stem. From the train station, she stands as a behemoth magpie over a sea of pebbles and dirt.

Still.

From the Stillwater,
the Cathedral is t/Taller than the T/tower.

(This shouldn't be possible, Andrey tells himself. Even with perspective in mind. He tears a page off one of his notebooks. Horizontal line, perspective point. Cathedral height; straight line. Tower height; straight line. Line. Line. Line. Line. Shadow here. An illusion? Straight line. From here, the cathedral should reach just below the second row of petals.

But it doesn't.

This is not possible.

This shouldn't be possible.

Still.

From the Still Waters,
The Cathedral Is Taller than the tower.)

(Andrey hears the surface of the pond shiver, brew, and the soft clapping sound of the waves crawls up his back, to his neck.)

..*..

Peter had spat out the Tower; or rather, she had carved her way out of him like Athena did out of Zeus: tearing through everything she could touch — then, nothing. Winter came. In the gaping hollow that was left once he had bled her out of him, he developed a horrible migraine. It blanketed the bottom of that dug-out, bitter well where once swam ideas, silver fish of inspiration — living, alive things. It impermeabilized the once-fertile soil of his brain and, when twyrine poured, it pooled. It soon was big enough to wade in. And god, did he wade in.

As he (they) towered over the body, tense and taut as if already rigor mortis had settled in, green of the bottle pressed against the red-smattered coppergold of skin, it dawned upon him (them). He died with his eyes open, mouth slightly agape as if he wanted to speak.

As if he would speak.

The last thing they had seen in his eyes, they weren't sure

it

had

been

fear.

..*..

Teeth loose.

Words looser.

Sore loser.

At the bottom of the abyss is the head of the sky. At the bottom of the sky is the cliff upon which Andrey balances. At the bottom of the bottle is a whirlpool shaped like a face. Everything is shaped like a face when you're a portraitist. Everything is shaped like a soul when you're a vessel with holes in it. Bleeding out. And Janus' other face: everything is a shaped like a vessel, when you're a soul.

..*..

Playing chess. Playing chess like they once did.

There's the white square.

White square for a black rook.

There's the white square.

Its corner is chipped.

Son of a bitch.

The son of a bitch.

The witch-familiar the poisoned dagger lingering by the wound.

He's downstairs.

Peter can hear him downstairs.

And if Peter can hear him, that means Andrey can too.

Farkhad is downstairs.

..*.*.*..