

The Auction

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“Must be redone! Everything will have to be redone!”

Silence and order, proclaimed the red sign. Glossy white letters demanded discipline. The signs were everywhere: on the front door (both inside and outside) in the common workspace, above every desk, by the whiteboard, two on the boarded-up windows, and a blown-up version by the water cooler. Varlam forbade his assistants to click their keyboards too loudly, chat too enthusiastically, or--worst offense of all-- slurp their tea too noisily. Four times a day, the tea was delivered to the second floor by the head of the soul canteen, Ida Danish herself. Ida had no children; instead, she had the Auction House staff, so she exercised her maternal instincts by loading the tea cart with a porcelain teapot and a whole bunch of cups and pushing back and forth, busily humming “here-there.” The tea was well-steeped, all linden flowers and boiling water, and all the assistants slurped it, and Varlam hated them all: the assistants, the linden tea, and Ida Danish. During the tea-less stretches, everyone tried to be quiet, allowing nothing but the warm buzzing of the computers to break the silence. Varlam came up with his own algorithm of surprises, jumping out of his office into the common area, and so the assistants willy-nilly maintained the silence and discipline at all times.

Varlam was firmly convinced that every one of his subordinates aimed to break the rules, and that conviction resulted in all these aggressive signs all over the office. In reality, the only person breaking the rules was Varlam himself: his tantrums were frequent and explosive. According to the regulations, the inventory at the Soul Bank was to be conducted once every two months. However, Varlam regularly smashed keyboards over his staff’s heads and over their computers, turned their desks upside down, and crushed enough vials and test tubes for a whole art installation project in the corner of the lab--a sparkling and scratching pile of glass shards. As a result, the actual inventory had to be conducted every three weeks.

The staff of the Soul Bank didn’t know how Varlam’s surprise algorithm worked, but they did learn the schedule of his mood swings. Every time a new donor delivery was coming up,

Varlam would stop taking his meds. He said the meds made him feel dim, and he *decidedly* (Varlam accompanied nearly every action with the harsh, slashing “decidedly”) could not work in this condition. A few days of meds-free sobriety made him neurotic and jumpy. Eventually, Varlam would start examining the donors, preparing for the soul extraction, and checking the refrigerator, and all the other equipment. He would pick fights with Clever Girl-616, whom on his good days he loved and respected more than any living creature. The metal construction kept silent, as it was supposed to, full of silent reproach.

“I decidedly can’t understand how you can be such a hopeless moron!” he’d say. Clever Girl-616’s silence infuriated Varlam even more.

When it came to his staff, Varlam found many things unforgivable, including lunch breaks, delays, and “obviously suspicious facial expressions.” It was impossible to please Varlam on those days, those painfully slow months preceding the Auction. Surgery prep followed, then inventory and warehousing of the samples, then soul production, then trading and the actual surgeries, and then the iron curtain of prolonged depression descended upon Varlam. Medications were reintroduced into his schedule, an empty sensation gnawed at him, and everything was repeated over and over again. Here was someone with a goal, who worked toward it, struggled to achieve it, and finally grasped it-- and the goal turned out less spectacular than expected. After trading and surgeries, Varlam was forced to take time off, and he’d always come back docile and amorphous, and everything at the Soul Bank would return to a more or less normal course until the date for the new Auction was announced.

Once again, Varlam burst into the common area, dressed in a too-big, too-loose purple suit over which he wore a too-tight white coat. Varlam waved a heavy binder in the air and slammed it on the desk in front of Number Two. He had assigned numbers to all assistants, hiding behind a surprisingly delicate theory of confidential personal data; the numbering system made him calmer. A bunch of pages fell out of the binder; Varlam grabbed onto Number Two and pushed his nose into spelling mistakes like a kitten into a puddle of pee. It was clear: the next Auction had been scheduled.

Varlam rolled his eyes, which seemed twice as big thanks to the extremely thick lenses and three times as crazy. He rolled his chair between Number Two’s desk to the workstation covered with papers, his tantrum in full swing. Tik-tuk-tuk.

One. Mouseclick: click-click on the screen. Two. The wheels of the chair skidded across the floor. Three. Varlam pulled himself closer to the workstation, all the better to see the columns of numbers in the binders, a whole pile of binders. He chewed on his lips in an unappetizing gesture, repeating the same sentence:

“Must be redone! Everything will have to be redone!”

The assistants sat in a strict numerical order, waiting for Varlam to explain what had gone wrong this time, but he simply sucked his teeth and giggled, unabashedly violating the rules of the red signs. Tik-tuk-tuk. The common area had no windows. All the windows had been boarded up many years ago when the Scientific Progress Center building was handed over to the Auction House. Since then a row of boarded-up shutters adorned the building.

Artificial light on the second floor was tinted blue, making Varlam’s already pale face appear as dead as the recycled casings.

“I’m decidedly stumped over what to do with this! Number Two, tell me why you thought it would be a good idea to write, quote, “presumably peanuts, dust, and cat fur” in the Allergic Reactions field. I simply gave you a bunch of data I collected myself.” Varlam repeated the last words, making them longer than necessary. “I collllllllllected myseeeeeeelf. That means the data is perfectly valid. All you had to do was to enter the data into the table. The rest is the computer’s business. It has a bigger brain! Best brains of the City! Best brains! It’s hilarious, I’m decidedly dying of laughter here.”

Tik-tuk-tuk. Varlam rolled around in his chair, in turn spinning and accelerating toward Number Two, making him shrink. Varlam spread his long legs like a stretching *guara*, pushed off, and threw himself forward. He bullied all his assistants because, to him, all of them--the top graduates of the City University--were nothing but mediocrity. The entire staff of the Soul Bank knew just enough about the transplant surgeries to do their jobs adequately when working with the source material. Some time ago, N.Ch., the soul pioneer and the founder of the Auction House, chose Varlam to lead the Soul Bank and initiated him into the spiritual subtleties and operating principles of Clever Girl-616. Before Varlam, the machine was referred to as Machine-616, according to its technical specifications. Varlam was naturally suspicious to the degree of paranoia, and so his small staff, Numbers One, Two, Three, and Four, knew even less than was allowed by the Charter. The responsibilities were simple, especially considering the qualification level of the resources; they mostly included the systematization of the information provided by

the head of the Bank, as well as researching the background of the participants of the upcoming auction. Anyone could have done this; that was probably the reason behind Varlam's fury, both rampant and righteous. Despite his extraordinary, nearly genius-level intellect, simple concepts eluded Varlam. He had no idea that, locked inside the airless, sterile blue confines of the common area, his staff remained human. On occasion, they would prank their dictator boss, and take small, petty revenge on him for the neverending humiliation; they tried to liven up their routine days filled with tasks very much beneath their abilities. Sometimes they would play cards. The previous week was unlucky for Number Two. Beyond the walls of the Soul Bank, his name was Irman. On the Day of the City, he would participate in the preparation of the parade floats; he was the best in the office at making coffee, he never read the news and was about to propose to his girlfriend. But here he'd shrink, grow pale, turn into Number Two, and press himself into his chair, staring dimly into the corner, just above the water cooler.

"I'm not hearing any disapproval! What's all this clusterfuck of idiocy in the allergy fields?" Varlam poked his finger at the three remaining Numbers. He thought he saw his assistants' faces flinch lightly, as if from a spasm or a nervous tick. He narrowed his eyes. "Are you laughing at me? This is sabotage, it's a rebellion doomed to fail!" Varlam laughed, pleased by his witty comment that no one else appreciated. The silence in the office surpassed the regulations; it was tangible and had a distinctive odor of fear. The fear, in turn, smelled of the staff's sweat. Varlam stopped laughing, stretched, and said casually: "Number Two, my office."

Varlam always wore shoes with zippers, absolutely no shoelaces, no thin soles, no colors other than black. All his shoes were a size and a half bigger than necessary: when shoes hugged his feet tightly, Varlam felt as if he was squeezed by a steel vice, making him want to break free. Slapping his too-big shoes on the floor, Varlam walked with a spring in his step, energetically rising on tip-toes. Number Two followed, still shrinking into himself.

"Smile, Number Two! And have a seat. Today's your lucky day." Varlam vaguely pointed in the direction of either the desk or the chair; he crossed his arms, giving himself a hug, and began to measure the perimeter of his office, step by step. Tik-tuk-tuk.

Varlam's office was quite different from the common area. It was about one-third in size, with green walls and yellow lighting fixtures, and furniture of dark wood. The combination of green and brown shades along with warm, muted lights resembled a forest: Varlam had read somewhere that walks in the woods had a calming effect on the nerves. He had no time for actual walks; instead, he paced around the office. It smelled like the forest, too; it practically

reeked of pine because Varlam stuffed each corner with incense sticks. Just like in the common area, there were no windows. Number Two's eyes immediately teared up and his nose started running; he tried not to sniffle.

"Are you aware of why we assess souls?"

A nod.

"Correct, we must establish a given soul's main characteristics to make it easier to test it for compatibility with a potential recipient. Right?"

Another nod. Number Two began to huff, struggling to breathe; snot filled his nostrils, and he could feel sticky rivulets crawl down towards his upper lip.

"An allergic reaction is a sign of incompatibility of the donor soul and the recipient's organism. What do you think this has to do with nuts?"

Number Two shook his head. A string of snot almost reached his mouth; if he stuck out his tongue, he would taste it, slimy and salty.

"Exactly. Nothing. This has nothing to do with nuts." Varlam sighed with disappointment. "I'm going to tell you something. It's a secret, got it?"

Number Two trembled. The snot passed the first obstacle, slowly flowing between his lips. He didn't need any secrets, anything but secrets! However, Varlam continued speaking.

"We have no clue why allergic reactions occur."

Number Two had no clue about the peculiarities of allergic reactions during soul transplants either, but he knew exactly what was happening, and he was terrified.

"Can you imagine? Estimates, assessments, prognosis--all this is used to calculate the highest probability, but it's not a guarantee. That's why rapid absorption happens. Unique. Unpredictable." Varlam lowered himself to the edge of the chair and leaned back. One pant leg pulled up, revealing red socks with a kitten pattern. Varlam opened the top drawer and started rummaging through. "Where is it, where... Ah, here it is! Incredible, isn't it? We're so helpless in the face of common allergies."

Number Two stared at Varlam, aghast. He tasted his own snot, chewing it with numb lips. It is quite tragic that awareness of the current moment is the most useless knowledge gifted to human beings in a hopeless situation.

Varlam fired.

Don't mumble, speak loudly and clearly! Speak confidently. That was how his dad taught him. It sounded logical. But if you speak loudly and clearly when you're sitting by yourself, you get called a weirdo. And if you talk like this to someone, you usually get beat up. Varlam didn't like this kind of cause and effect. As a result, he tended to whisper something barely audible, and his own breath was a stream of hot air under his constantly stuffed-up nose. Only stealthily, on the sly. Adrian hated when Varlam was being a "weirdo;" Adrian's father had given him a set of brass knuckles. It was heavy, gilded. It was something that could have belonged to the Court. Varlam still had a couple of purplish-brown marks on his ribs.

"It's grub time, hooligans, get your asses over there!" The teacher, Tatyana, had a thunderous voice like a whale's howl.

The loudest of whales is the blue whale. Blue whales can emit sound with an intensity of approximately 188 dB.

Tatyana the teacher was not blue, she was more burgundy than blue, but her howling was similar to a whale's. From the tone of her voice, Varlam deduced it was time for lunch.

When he got up, his bookbag attempted to pull his weight back to the ground. Varlam ran in the same direction as everyone else: to the large wooden table by the school entrance. After rats gnawed through the wiring in the brick three-story building, the cafeteria was moved out to the yard. Varlam climbed up to his seat at the end of the long bench, placed his backpack on his lap, and took out his lunch pail. The other children piled their foodstuffs onto the table, demonstratively and defiantly, especially those who had something to boast about. Free food (paste porridge and frozen cat meat cutlets) had been provided to low-income students, and being a low-income student was not cool. Low-income students were beaten up more often than the others. Despite the widespread devastation and decay, poverty was not popular in the Quarters. Varlam was beaten up as much as the low-income kids, even though he knew for sure that he was not low-income, but in his case, it didn't matter.

Adrian and his buddies sat across the table. Adrian was very tall and skinny, with sharp bony knees and elbows; he possessed narrow predatory teeth and ate greedily and with abandon. He brought his lunch in a large bamboo container--that thing reeked of the City. Varlam stared at Adrian and his container. He had no idea how it happened.

“Bamboo can grow more than twenty centimeters in twenty-four hours.”

“What d’ya say, punk?”

Varlam froze, commanding his eyes to look at the backpack, his hands, and his lunch pail.

Adrian pulled his legs together, about to climb over the table. The brass knuckles slammed into the wood, and Varlam flinched. Next to Adrian, Vlad raised his blonde head and frowned, glancing at Varlam. Vlad looked disappointed: he had already figured out what would transpire during the one meal break they got in the entire day.

“Hush, Adrian!” Tatyana the teacher did not get up from her seat at the head of the table. Instead, she simply swayed toward Adrian, her inflated body with varicose-painted calves and heavy breasts undulating, and Adrian immediately hid his knees under the table. “No need to fight on an empty belly. Leave the kid alone.”

Vlad chuckled approvingly, which earned him a sharp poke in the ribs. Usually, Varlam was not a fan of Tatyana the teacher. She smelled of cafeteria and local cigarettes, Rakovka, her palms were sweaty and her thick fingers left moist, malodorous spots on the pages of notebooks. She always wrote “Excellent” on Varlam’s homework assignments, even though he was convinced she couldn’t read half of his writing. However, now Varlam gazed at her with warm gratitude, understandable for someone who’d just been saved from serving as a punching bag yet again.

Varlam turned his attention back to his lunch pail. His tummy clenched in anticipation. They hadn’t eaten all day, and finally!

A crumpled piece of paper on top. Broken, crooked letters.

you are my clever boy. love, mom

This time his lunch pail contained a stapler and a pair of sneaker shoelaces. Varlam took out the stapler and turned it this way and that. It was heavy and definitely inedible.

“Has your mother lost her marbles again?”

Varlam knew he glanced at Adrian too quickly and too indignantly. He couldn’t afford any such excess. Adrian narrowed his eyes; he looked like a nasty rabid dog who was considering

whether to attack you or not (and would most likely attack because such was its nature, nasty bitch).

All eyes turned to Tatyana the teacher. Her menacing presence still held the situation under control. Varlam remained silent.

“Go ahead, bite into it. Or can’t you even eat if your Mommy’s not around?”

“...”

“Hey, cut it out.”

“Get lost, Vlad. Varlam Hard-Bum. Squeak something.”

“That’s not my name.”

“What d’you say?”

“Not my name! Not my name! That’s not my name!”

Varlam jumped up as if lifted from the bench by his own shrieking.

The voices around him immediately died down. Even rats who’d been running back and forth on their rat business stopped and sniffed the air. Varlam continued shrieking:

“Not my name! Not my name! That’s not my name!”

This terrible sound tore into his lungs, yet he continued screaming without tears. He shrieked in anger, and resentment, hurt by other people’s stupidity. Adrian froze; however, his shock paralyzed him only for a second.

“Get over here, you fucking idiot!” Adrian threw himself forward so quickly that even the teacher’s meaty arm didn’t have a chance to grab him.

Adrian rammed into Varlam, and both rolled off the bench. Varlam tried to curl into a ball. He’d still be beaten up, it would still hurt. He could at least try to cover his glasses and his head. Around them, the other children jumped and shouted off the top of their lungs, encouraging the fight. More than anything, they wanted Adrian to break Varlam’s neck. Only Vlad remained seated; he didn’t love the idea of yet another brawl, but Vlad never tried to stop Adrian when he lost his temper. Tatyana the teacher picked Adrian up by the scruff of his neck--that’s how mighty she was--and carried him back to the school building like a flopping fish. Aggravated,

Vlad rolled his eyes, jumped off the bench, and followed the teacher, stuffing his cheeks with his sandwich. The gilded brass knuckles were left on the ground. The wind would toss dust all over it, but no one would touch it, because it was gilded; because it belonged to those from the Court.

The gates at the Northern post closed, and the City spat Varlam back. That was it. It worked. Varlam had spent so many years scurrying around the Quarters without any chance of escape. Escape to a vast space, where one could breathe easily, where the oppressive despair of unrealized ambitions would finally stop sucking his blood and twirl his nerves around its fingers. Varlam knew that the meaningless existence had ended, and real life had begun.

The space in front of the Palace was nearly empty. No one was supposed to stand around the Palace Square, but the only way from the Northern Post to the residential area where they lived lay directly through the Square. People with guns stood near the Royal residence, same at the Auction House. All sorts of people, a motley crew of thugs from the Court: bare bellies and bare arms, chains and leather jackets. No one in the Quarters wore helmets or bullet-proof vests: absolutely no body armor was allowed. Body armor was a sign of weakness. People weren't afraid of dying, but they were certainly afraid of being branded as pussies.

The majority of the Court were called *hounds*; all of them had dog nicknames, which earned them respect from the locals. The Palace Guard were not part of the hounds, but they still looked pretty terrifying. Varlam saw a young couple, a guy and a girl, and a woman in a bathrobe next to them.

She screamed hysterically in a hoarse, unnatural voice.

"Let me in, let me see the King!"

The young guards sniggered, and the woman puffed up and furiously waved her arms. Tik-tuk-tuk. Varlam swallowed the lump in his throat, nearly choking on his saliva.

"Let me in! I have a petition!"

The more they mocked her, the louder the woman shouted.

Varlam felt a chill. He recognized Mom's voice right away, but remained still, afraid to believe it was happening to him. He realized that earlier that morning, he forgot to lock the door. He'd laced up his shoes, put a book about whales into his bag along with the identification, and stepped over the threshold; he closed the door but never locked it. Varlam did this every day: inserted the key into the keyhole, a fat rusty key, and turned it twice clockwise. Today he forgot-

- he was in a rush. The gray, overcast sky of the Quarters collapsed onto Varlam's head. Tik-tuk-tuk.

"Mom, move, Mom!" Varlam grabbed his mother by the elbow and tried to pull her away.

She jerked her arm free, giving him a passing glance. Her unfocused eyes slid over her son without recognition. She had no idea who he was.

This sometimes happened on bad days. It upset Varlam, and Dad explained that Mom was getting worse, and the bad days were stretching out. She always recognized Dad, but she'd known him longer, and she'd been herself longer with him. She didn't always recognize Varlam. It wasn't her fault, but this unfocused stare right through him made Varlam feel nauseated.

"Yo, Varlam Hard-Bum! Calm your crazy bitch down! Get your mother to shut up."

Varlam turned around. In his confusion, he didn't immediately recognize Adrian. Adrian was just as angular and pale; he had more tattoos that snaked up his arms in dark patterns, disappearing under his clothes and popping back out on his clavicles. Adrian now wore his hair slicked back; he narrowed his green eyes even more, which made him look even more possessed.

Varlam turned away, pretending that none of it was happening to him and that Adrian wasn't there. Anyone but Adrian!

"Mom, come on, let's go!"

"A petition! A petition for the King!"

Tik-tuk-tuk. Mom threw herself forward, grabbing Adrian's jacket with both hands, twisted from cramping. Adrian shook her off roughly.

"Get off me, bitch!"

Adrian stretched his lips in a vicious smile. His teeth looked predatory. Adrian easily adapted anything remotely predatory, both in his looks and his mannerisms.

Varlam's mom thrashed around, further agitated by the laughter that had yet to quiet down.

“We’re leaving, right now. Mom, they will pass on your petition. I’ll make sure to pass it on.”

His attempts to persuade her shattered against Mom’s mental fog. She couldn’t hear him, but he continued to speak clearly and distinctly, out of habit: it was hard but necessary.

“Dude, take her and get the fuck out,” the girl said.

“Really, Sasha?” Adrian stretched his shoulders, clearly enjoying the growing conflict.

Sasha winced but chose not to interfere. For as long as Varlam had known Adrian, no one in Adrian’s entourage had ever chosen to interfere.

Feeling helpless made him want to yell louder than Mom. Tik-tuk-tuk. At that moment, the Palace door opened, and a man in a coat came out onto the porch. From his straight posture and a delicate tilt of his head, Varlam felt more than recognized Dante. Dante ignored the commotion; however, all the guards immediately stood up straight as if on command. Dante lit a cigarette, smoothed out his beard, and finally glanced in their direction. They all got distracted, they got so stupidly distracted. Taking advantage of the temporary lull, Mom threw herself forward, pushing Adrian out of the way. She ran toward Dante standing on top of the stairs.

“A petition! A petition for the King!”

Adrian was the first one to react. He aimed and shot; Mom fell and was still. The shot rang out like a short flash but then lingered in the air. The dust over the body settled quickly, there wasn’t much of it--Mom hadn’t been eating and weighed very little.

“Adrian, for fuck’s sake!” Sasha slammed her fist into Adrian’s back. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she said, clutching her head with her hands.

Varlam hesitated a few moments, looking from the body on the ground to Dante and back to the body. Finally, he rushed toward his mother.

no-no-no

He flipped her onto her back. Mom’s face looked peaceful. Human muscles relax post-mortem. Varlam hadn’t seen her this relaxed in a long time. His glasses fell onto the ground, and the world was blurry--from myopia or from stinging tears. She would have died sooner or

later. The illness had been slowly devouring his mom from the inside, and they didn't have enough money for medication. Either way, this medication couldn't be found in the Quarters, and the pills themselves didn't make that much of a difference. The pills Varlam's dad was able to procure on occasion did not help. Varlam started preparing for his mother's death a while ago, but this wasn't how it was supposed to happen. It was supposed to be different.

"I'm sorry," Dante said. Varlam did not respond, just shook his head. He squeezed Mom's hand. There was a sound of shoes on the ground, and Dante's voice came from further away:

"Adrian, what the hell?"

"We have orders."

"What fucking orders?"

"In case of a threat..." Adrian answered promptly, but Dante shut him up, raising his hand in a warning gesture.

"What threat? Have you lost your fucking mind?"

Dante picked up Varlam's bag and the book that fell out of it. He ran his hand over the cover; the whale on it had turned white. "Are you the head referee's son?"

Varlam raised his head and nodded, struggling to put on his dusty glasses. Dante opened the book and gazed at the inside cover. It was the kind of gaze that flows through the object and turns to something in the distant past. Dante sighed and put the book back into Varlam's bag.

"Take care of this. The way you're supposed to."

Dante handed Varlam's bag to the lead guard, stepped toward Adrian, and poked him in the chest:

"You and I are going to have a talk when I get back. You're going to pay for this."

Varlam expected Adrian to attack him. Adrian frowned, chewed on his lips, but did not move. He didn't even look in the direction of the body. Varlam didn't either, even though he felt the blood on his fingers.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this.

The construction site was shaped like an open circle, with additional buildings attached in three spots like the blades of a concrete mixer. The roof sagged and collapsed in several places, and a few windows were missing, but overall the site looked solid despite making the occasional groaning sounds. Concrete crunched under Adrian's feet, making it seem as if the sound of his steps carried beyond the Wall, in the City, as if all of the noise of the Quarters concentrated on that thin crunch. It didn't smell of trash or shit, only of neglect. Adrian moved in spurts--a few steps forward, then freeze. He concentrated, holding a lighter in front of him, the faint flame illuminating the space around him. Adrian saw just enough for the next step; beyond that, the darkness thickened again.

"I'm here."

Adrian expected to hear that whisper, but it still made him flinch. Vlad crouched by the pile of scattered beams-- fragments of the collapsed ceiling. If the moon in the Quarters ever peeked from behind the clouds, Vlad would definitely glow. His blond bangs stuck out from underneath his hood. Adrian sat down by his side, and for a while, they did not speak. Adrian listened to Vlad's breathing, heavy sighs settling in his lungs. Vlad emanated heat--he just came back from the ring. Vlad was always "just back from the ring," always overheating, salty from the sweat stuck to his skin.

Adrian was used to this silence. They had spent many years like this, with their ears red from shame, their palms moist from fear. They sat facing away from each other until both had a chance to calm down in the stillness of the construction site. The awkwardness dissipated slowly, but Adrian worried about making the first move; he always worried about doing something wrong and ruining everything.

To "be," they needed to close their eyes and forget who they were and why they were hiding at the construction site. When they did, the world disappeared with them, the Court, and the Palace, and all their restless existence in the Quarters would seem distant and out of reach. Adrian liked to imagine that it wasn't them at the construction site, it was someone else, because if you're someone else, you don't feel shame. But even if he couldn't completely escape his own hide, Adrian wasn't sorry--it was definitely worth the effort. Even for a few moments.

"Was he mad?" Vlad never called Dante by his name, he didn't like him.

Vlad didn't like that Dante was revered as a fighter even though Vlad was already stepping on his toes. He didn't like Dante's influence on Adrian. Dante involved Adrian in all sorts of intrigue and all those Court games. Dante took up too much space.

Their hands rested on the ground. Vlad's narrow wrist next to Adrian's tattoo-scarred skin.

Fear as a concept had no place at the Quarters. Everyone preferred to ignore it, because fear is somewhat synonymous with death--it makes its inevitability more tangible. Before they were afraid of nothing. Vlad and Adrian had been together all their lives; many years of friendship transformed into not just trust but also absolute courage, and the rest of the world turned into either a punching bag or a battleground. Now they feared each other most of all.

"Not more than usual," Adrian said. Exhausted, he sighed and leaned the back of his head against the wall.

The wall felt cold, making the heat of Vlad's body all the more palpable. Their positions mirrored each other: knees pulled up to the chests, elbows sticking out--like gargoyles on the Palace's front. Adrian wanted to turn into stone.

to shrink as much as possible until their bodies grow a granite crust and sink entirely into the walls, until both of them become integrated into the cardiovascular system of pipes and beams. that's when the heat will become theirs, a shared heat walled up in eternity

"...I still don't think that you should..."

"Let's not!" Adrian barked, a tad too quickly.

He tended to avoid these conversations because they always quarreled and fought after, and also because Adrian desperately hoped that one day Vlad wouldn't make him choose between their friendship, their everyday existence, and the Crown. Adrian would not be able to choose, he wouldn't have made the choice. Vlad stepped on Adrian's hand with his shoe. It was an abrupt gesture, made in anger. Made in fear.

Or perhaps, they weren't afraid of anything as long as they were together? That wasn't the case. Together, they were even more afraid.

"I'm the King. I will become the King. You know this."

Vlad fell silent. He didn't understand why Adrian tried so hard to jump over his head, why he was constantly trying to prove something. Why he got so angry when people around him didn't react the way he expected, didn't provide the right answers, when they did everything wrong. Perhaps, because he knew that if anyone found out about the depravity, they would be disassembled and used for spare parts. Inside the Quarters, people fed on all sorts of abominations and used it on the city people as well, but depravities were not an option here. This paradox of local existence proved to be more viable than any others. The weekly reports to the King always included a couple of lines that made Adrian's spine twist in horror. These reports were read in the assembly hall in the presence of all members of the Court with no exceptions. Vlad and Adrian would sit next to each other, afraid to move. Sometimes Adrian thought that this was one of the reasons he wanted to be King: to ensure that these assholes wouldn't dare to despise him-- just let them try.

"Fucking King!" Vlad rolled his eyes. "Why do you give a crap about this swamp?"

Adrian breathed heavily and shoved Vlad with his elbow. They began to tussle. The construction site hid them from view. They became one with the popping plaster and construction debris. Finally, their breathing was restored. Adrian continued to lightly punch Vlad. Instinctively, Vlad bent Adrian's arm--the one he'd stepped on--and the sharp pain twisted into a rope and shot all the way up the bone to his elbow. The construction site transformed into a cocoon, a dense, shrinking silk shell. They fell back onto the ripped bags, and dust covered Adrian's entire body.

"We're almost the same color!" Vlad said, laughing. His laughter made Adrian's insides contract.

Vlad rarely laughed like this. He laughed like this in their childhood, when they spilled motor oil inside the Palace. The Palace would immediately begin to stink, and the nannies would fall on the floor like frogs. If the boys were lucky, the nannies would roll around with their skirts bunched up, then try to chase the boys, but inevitably fail and slip on the marble floor. Sometimes Vlad would laugh when Adrian drank too much "Coma-Tose" and burp out the shanties of the Quarters.

no glory for the court

under working girl's skirt

Vlad giggled when Adrian teased him at the ring, when they burned the tails of the roasted rats at the “Squeak-easy,” when he tickled Vlad’s armpits--and he was also laughing now. The construction site felt warmer, or perhaps it was the heat of his skin.

“Seriously, I’m sorry,” Adrian let the words fall as he exhaled, even though his tongue felt clumsy and his thoughts, on the contrary, frantically moved their insect legs all over his skull.

Deep inside, he agreed with himself: he did it to spite Vlad, to make him angry. But everything else ceased to be important in moments like this--when they belonged to the construction site.

The bags shrieked under them, trying to escape, to free up, but otherwise, the construction site pitied them and took care of them. Adrian didn’t care that it scratched his arms and tore at his back, leaving unsightly scars. He didn’t care that later, when the construction site would hatch from the cocoon and turn back into the deserted monster, stretch out its frontispiece wings, and spit them back out into the Quarters, they would have to press into the walls and avoid thinking of what had just transpired, not even alone, not even inside their heads. Adrian had seen Bulldog personally torture those caught in the act. Depravities were unacceptable, and the hounds were particularly attentive in that respect.

Already badly beaten, the men were dragged to the Palace square on the rope tied around their feet. They clung to each other to minimize the bumps on the road. Adrian and Vlad found a spot on the stairs. Vlad leaned against the column, and Adrian stretched out on his stomach a step above him. Upon seeing Bulldog and Fang, the boys brightened up: they were of the age when spilling out intestines was considered great entertainment.

“Dad, what’s going on there? Da-ad!” Adrian bleated. He was too lazy to get up, but the scent of blood made him rise on his elbows.

“Get lost, Adrian! Don’t you see, we got depravity here, don’t interfere!”

Bulldog spat on the ground and turned away from his son, pulling out a wide blade from its holster.

Adrian and Vlad exchanged glances, feeling a chill. Adrian rubbed his lips. He could still taste blood and his side ached, because Vlad had punched him only a couple of hours ago.

Bulldog cut open the belly of one of the men while the other wailed; the sound resembled a tearing dense fabric; there was a lot of blood. The other man got his head bludgeoned. The boys remained still. Vlad rubbed his own head making sure it was still intact. Adrian was not afraid of murders, but he did think back then:

why for this

Later he and Vlad didn't speak for several days. They felt that even one single word would make them turn inside out. But even that feeling passed eventually, everything passed, and they pushed it off until later. Blood pounded in their temples if they thought about it too much.

But not necessarily.

Until there was a sliver of hope of growing into the walls, Adrian kept digging himself into the dust, trying to become one with the construction site. To make the two of them into one of everything.

