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About 11866 words

BROTHERHOOD OF THE DEAD

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Based on characters and situations created by Dmitry Glukhovsky, in the Metro 2033 series.

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[Blood and Senses]

The soldiers slurped their vodka, rivulets of overrun slipping from the corners of their mouths and trailing into their beards, and glistening like silvery snail trails. Finishing first, Bourbon belched loudly from his belly. The three soldiers standing around him sputtered laughter in the glow from their bin-fire, but Artyom shook his head.

Bourbon turned his wily gaze on him.

“What’s wrong, Tyoma?” he said, with the taunting pitilessness of an older brother.

Artyom had no brothers, of course, but having grown up in the Metro tunnels under old Moscow, sharing living space, food, and often clothes with boys around his age, he was familiar with the sort; he’d spent three-quarters of his twenty years being the suffering little brother to many in the Metro. He’d been the overbearing big brother to just as many, too. But Bourbon pressed his role a bit too much, sometimes.

“Can’t handle the sounds of men?” He needled Artyom in the ribs, causing Artyom to cringe, and the trio of mercenaries laughed again.

Artyom bristled. “It’s just rude. You’re perpetuating a stereotype.”

Bourbon joined in the laughter. “Listen to this one! Perpetuating stereotypes.” He spat a quick, disgusted *pfah* from between the distended gap in his two front teeth. “Just because you prefer books over booze doesn’t make you any better than the rest of us, you know.”

“I never said that.”

“Squishy pussy willow,” Bourbon went on. “We’ll make a man of you, yet.”

Artyom hefted his Kalashnikov. “I’m a man!” The loose bits of the well-worn rifle clattered against his shoulder, but he managed to keep his face stoic.

Bourbon wasn’t fooled. “You’re soft as a baby’s ass.” He grabbed his belt and, before Artyom could stop him, he dropped his trousers and turned around in a show-off bend. “This is manly!” he said, slapping one hairy cheek just as he let fly a noisy fart.

All three mercenaries jostled into a guffawing huddle. One of them – a burly bruiser with a crooked septum – sobered and curled his lip when he saw Artyom roll his eyes.

“Why don’t you move to Polis,” the mercenary whistled through his nose, “with the rest of the faggots?”

The muscles in Artyom’s back clenched tight. He’d never been to Polis, but his stepfather, Sukhoi, had told him such stories of the cultural center of the Metro: where one could wander for hours through long, towering hallways filled with books and prizes from the old Moscow that existed before the war; where the lights glowed bright, illuminating the contrast of colors on people’s clothes, and the shape of each clean, individual face; where generals and historians and other learned men discussed literature and philosophy at clean, polished tables, over sips of sweet mushroom wine. Not at trash bins lit with fires that smelled of kerosene and rags, over gulps of gritty vodka.

Artyom rattled his Kalashnikov when Bourbon waved him down with a hum meant to mollify.

“No need for any of that. I was just teasing.”

Hustling his pants up around his waist again, Bourbon shifted a step, close enough to put a comradely arm around Artyom’s shoulders, and bent his head. “This life is hard enough. You know that. Between the rads, and the Reds, and the tuber, and fascists...all that if the fucking mutants don’t get you first!” He pushed his flask of vodka under Artyom’s nose; the heady liquor itched at his nostril hairs.

“That’s why we drink,” Bourbon said, with a sloshy shake of the metal container. “Dulls the despair.”

This time, Artyom’s mouth twitched in a lenient, sympathetic smile. Bourbon didn’t miss that, either.

“Ah-ha!” He needled again, once more jocular. “I knew you were one of us. Drink up!”

Artyom accepted the angling of the flask, being careful not to let the vodka dribble. He'd managed to grow only an uneven smattering of whiskers, even after three weeks spent hustling for escort jobs in these tunnels around Riga Station, but he hated the way liquor residue felt among them.

They hadn't had a job in three days, which meant they hadn't had anything substantial to eat in two, so the vodka took a fast track to Artyom's blood and senses. He coughed; his eyes watered; the delicate skin of his throat burned. But the drink warmed him, too, and he smiled around another light swig.

"That's a boy," Bourbon commended him. He flung out his arms. "Soon, you'll be dancing."

"No." Artyom stopped him with a hand.

Bourbon spat another *pfah*. Undeterred, he broke into a squat and kicked out one leg, then another. "Then I'll dance by myself! I'm the best of you, anyway." He gave a sharp yell in time to two more kicks, when he unbalanced himself and landed on his ass against the hard metal rail, prompting a harsher yelp.

The mercenaries howled as they tumbled over themselves. Even Artyom started to laugh.

"Come on," Artyom said, offering Bourbon his hand.

The other man brushed it away and got to his feet again. "That's a Cossack dance, anyway."

"Shitting Cossacks!" one of the mercenaries said, and his mates doubled over in more drunken hitching.

Bourbon spread his arms again. "Tchaikovsky would have adored me," he said, and turned on his toes in a surprisingly talented spin.

Artyom clapped for his success. Bourbon didn't stop for the applause. He kept turning, one after the other, while the soldiers hooted. Faster and faster, round and round.

Artyom felt sick.

"Stop," he said, trying to look away. His eyes wouldn't let him do it, though. Or his head. They forced him to watch Bourbon's blurring whirl of arms and legs as he danced in ceaseless spins, to the jackal-like merriment of the mercenaries. They devolved into a heap, formless and black, and Artyom's heart began to pound.

"Stop," he tried again. "Bourbon! Stop spinning!"

Bourbon chuckled in a faraway voice, and looked at Artyom. His head stayed still, but his body kept spinning, and he said, "Silly Tyoma. I'm not spinning. I've died, and there is no more me." Abruptly, he crumpled, like a marionette cut from its strings, just a flail of deadweight arms and legs.

His head was still turned backwards.

#

Artyom woke from the dream. Not with a start, but with a weary sigh.

No matter how exhausted his body, no matter how punch-drunk his mind, no matter how many miles he put between himself and the tunnels under Moscow, when he lay back in his seat or along the cushion in the rear and fell to sleep, he always dreamed. Dreamed of the dead.

He glanced to the seat reclined next to his. Anya still slept. Her eyes were still closed, anyway, and her chest rose and fell in steady, quiet rhythm. She never seemed to dream. Or, if she did, he couldn't tell. He envied her that.

He turned his gaze out the streaked windshield, his focus stuttering over the line of tape down the center that marked where they'd smashed into one of the giant, dog-like mutants during

a supply run's hasty escape. Daylight streamed down around them, unbroken save for the occasional drifting shadow of a winged creature searching for food. They would stay safe in the car, though: just another mechanical heap resting among queues of the same. When night fell, they'd move, leaving their rusting cousins behind.

His throat itched, and he shifted onto his right hip, to fish his carry-flask from his pocket. The seat squealed under him as he shifted back and unscrewed the top. There wasn't much liquor left in the canister, so he sipped carefully, letting the whisky only tickle his tongue before swallowing it down. The sharp taste of fermented mushrooms reminded him of living in the Metro. And of Bourbon.

Artyom had been only twenty, fresh-faced and full of ideas about adventure, when he'd left his home station of VDNKh on a mission to save it from the Dark Ones, those strange, almost-human mutants from the surface. He'd met Bourbon along the way, in Alekseyevskaya, where the drunk mercenary had offered Artyom a valuable rifle and supplies to accompany him through the dark tunnels that some men called cursed. Artyom hadn't exactly trusted Bourbon, but any journey through the Metro on foot was a long one, and safer with someone watching his back. Bourbon never made it even so far as the next station, though. He'd died in the dark tunnels outside Sukharevskaya, just like in the dream: with his head twisted round and those cryptic words on his lips – “there is no more me.”

But what if they'd met under different circumstances? Would Artyom have stayed with him, become a mercenary and a drunkard like Bourbon? He doubted it...but who knew what could have happened, in another version of his life?

“Drinking already?”

Anya's murmur stirred him from his thoughts, and he looked at her: eyes still closed but thin lips pulled tight.

"I thought you were asleep," he said.

She let out a short sigh. "My father used to hide his drinking, too."

"I'm not hiding."

Now, she turned her head, her black hair curling under her cheek, and looked at him with a smirk. "Then give me some."

He held the flask close. "Is that a good idea?"

"Oh. So, you can drink, but I can't?"

"What if you're pregnant?"

She snorted, a gruff, guttural sound that made her sound like her old man. "I'm not pregnant."

"How do you know?"

"I know." She put out her hand for the flask. Artyom held his ground, until she told him in a low voice, "I'm still bleeding."

He passed her the metal container. She took it, tipped it to her mouth, and muttered:

"And, we haven't had sex in forever."

Artyom pursed his lips into a frown. "Not forever."

Anya drank, hissed, and shrugged. "It's just as well, I guess." She didn't seem to want to argue about the topic right now, either. "Wouldn't want to have a baby out here, in this car."

"It won't take that long to get to Vladivostok—"

“Long enough.” She turned to look out her window and sighed again. “Maybe we should have gone to St. Petersburg. Looked for more comm towers, to spread the truth, like you wanted.”

His chest felt heavy of a sudden. The truth was a dead thing, just like Bourbon.

“The overseers are probably in power there, too. East is better,” he muttered, leaving the rest unspoken; she knew as well as he did that the farther they got from Moscow, the more likely their chances for survival. There were still mutants to contend with, and possibly bandits, but at least they’d left behind the high radiation levels that necessitated rubber suits and gas masks. This wasteland was even kind of pretty, in its way. “You said you’ve always wanted to see the sea.”

Anya’s voice became almost lilting. “And the Tsesarevich’s Arch.” She turned his way, shooting him a look from beneath her lush, dark lashes. “I read books, too.”

Artyom cracked a smile for her cheek. “The colonel’s only, lonely, learned daughter,” he teased. “The Rose of the Ranger Order. You could have had anyone, but you picked me.” He knew the answer but asked anyway: “Why?”

She smiled thinly, too. “I liked your stupid hair,” she said, gazing at him as if he were once more that youth with the floppy black fringe trying to stand out from and look cool next to his stalker friends.

Artyom snickered, of a moment forgetting who and where they were. Until he rubbed his head, and no strands tickled his fingers; the doctors had successfully pulled his body back from the dead, but his hair would likely remain a permanent casualty of too many radiation doses.

“Yet, you’re still here,” he said, in mild amazement of both her and him. “Lucky me.” He reached for her hand, but she gave him the flask.

“You think it’s luck?” she said, holding her smile.

He didn’t answer, preferring to keep their interaction light. She didn’t talk any more than that, either. But she did extend her hand across the gearshift, and laid it on his leg.

Artyom decided to stay where they were a while longer. When twilight fell, they would start up the car again and press on, to Vladivostok and the sea. Maybe there, he could finally leave the Metro and its ghosts behind him. At least until he dreamed again.

[Wishing for Daylight]

“Tell us a story, granddad.”

Mikhail glanced across the table and smiled, accentuating the lines in his long, kind face. Beside him, Vanechka swung his chin, his heavy lower lip dangling open. Mikhail wiped the boy’s face and returned his focus to Artyom.

“I’d have thought you’d have had enough of my stories, by now,” he said, but Artyom shook his head.

Mikhail Porfirevich was an old man, and he needed help caring for big, simple Vanechka. But that wasn’t the main reason Artyom had stayed with him since they’d found each other outside the tunnels beyond Kitai-gorod. Each day, Mikhail lightened their steps with some story from his seemingly boundless stash: stories of the old world as it used to be, and rumors of the world as it might have become. Artyom would never tire of it. Mikhail’s tales, tall or no, always made the Metro seem...greater than it was, full of more possibilities. Men could be heroes, change the world, make a difference. Artyom wanted to live in a world like that.

Vanechka uttered a slack-jawed grunt and clutched a mushroom stalk in his fist. He shoved it into his mouth, making a happy noise as he chewed.

Mikhail smiled again, wiped again, and said, “What kind of story would you like to hear?”

“A new one of the old world,” Artyom said, smirking for his wit, when a pair of soldiers dressed in the colors of the Fuehrer strode by. One of them shot a sniff at Vanechka, who was thankfully still busy chewing his meaty mushroom stalk, before moving on.

Artyom's belly contracted in wary dread. He was about to suggest to Mikhail that they move on, when the old man began.

“There once was an old dedka, who had a grand garden. And in that grand garden there grew a great repka, one with leaves as tall as trees! The dedka tried to pull it up, but no matter how hard he struggled, he couldn't do it. So, he called to his wife. ‘Help me pull up this repka!’ he cried, and she came over, dusting her hands on her apron. But no matter how hard they struggled, dedka and babka couldn't do it. So, babka called for their young vnuchka. ‘Help us pull up this repka!’” Mikhail mock-cried, in imitation of an old woman's voice. “And the vnuchka came over, hiking up her skirts. But no matter how hard they struggled, dedka, babka, and vnuchka couldn't do it, either. As she tried to think of a better way, the vnuchka spied the zhuchka of the house. ‘Help us pull up this repka!’ she cried, and the zhuchka came over, wagging her tail. But no matter how hard they struggled, dedka, babka, vnuchka, and zhuchka still couldn't pull up the giant repka!”

The colorful rhyming pattern caused Vanechka to laugh softly under his breath, like a kid waiting for a familiar joke's punchline. Artyom smirked but kept his attention on Mikhail, who went on without pause, peppering his fable with more comical voices.

“Suddenly, the zhuchka saw her rival, the koshka. ‘Help us pull up this repka!’ she growled, and the koshka slid over with a swing of her paws. But no matter how hard they struggled, dedka, babka, vnuchka, zhuchka, and koshka still could not pull up that bloody repka!” Mikhail blew a dramatic sigh. “Well, it was starting to look hopeless,” he said, and narrowed his eyes. “...when the koshka spied the tiny myshka she'd been hunting all day. ‘Help us pull up this repka!’ she yowled, and the myshka came over, twitching her whiskers. And, together, dedka, babka, vnuchka, zhuchka, koshka, and myshka pulled, and pulled, and pulled,

and – finally! – the repka came free!” He slapped his hand on the table. “And *that* is how you harvest a giant repka as big as a tree,” he said, and laughed.

Vanechka laughed, too, clapping his hands flat together and swinging forward and back on his seat with delight.

Artyom just put his cheek on his fist and asked, “What’s a repka?”

Mikhail’s face fell. “That’s all you got from that story?” He shook his head and let out a short groan of lament. “The point is—”

“I understand the point,” Artyom said; typical old-world, simplified socialism. “But a moral based on a reward is insignificant without knowing the value of that reward.”

Mikhail narrowed his greenish-gray eyes, for a studying look across the table that revealed the old man’s shrewd intellect. “It’s good to know the Metro hasn’t dulled a young man’s propensity for being a smart-ass,” he said, and this time, Artyom laughed with them.

They took up from their table and walked deeper into the station. Temporary tents lined the walls, with two merchants calling prices and accepting fares. Mikhail passed some clips into the palm of one of them, and the merchant directed them to a flat-topped tent large enough for three near the end of the line. Vanechka settled down in the middle space while Artyom and Mikhail took the sides, the best arrangement to accommodate Vanechka’s towering frame, as well as his habit of needing to relieve himself in the middle of the night.

They lay in the musty shelter of the tent, with the muffled sounds of rustling and rutting coming from outside, unable to sleep. Instead, Artyom yearned abruptly for the battered guitar he’d left behind at VDNKh. For Sukhoi’s stories, too; his stepfather used to bring him news from the faraway stations when Artyom had trouble calming his mind enough to rest. The news rarely calmed him, of course. It made him excited to think of all the different stations to see in the

Metro, all of the different people to meet. And, it would always take his mind off of the troubles closing in on VDNKh: sickness, starvation, the Dark Ones....

“Any more stories, granddad?” he whispered. “About anything you like.”

“I’ve been eating up the air since Kitai-gorod,” Mikhail replied. “Surely, you have your own stories to share? The adventures of the young prince of VDNKh?” A chuckle wafted over, across Vanechka’s massive chest. “Artyom the Fair and the Gray Rat, perhaps.”

“Artyom the Dark, more like.”

“That has a ring to it, too.” Mikhail dragged a breath through his nose and expelled it as half-sigh, half-groan. After a moment, he said, “This world is done with me. Time for you to take over.”

“I’d rather have the world above,” Artyom admitted into the gloom. “Do you think we’ll ever get back there?”

“Maybe in your lifetime,” Mikhail said with a touch of hope. “Definitely not in mine.”

Thoughts of armored stalkers with their gas masks and guns came to mind for Artyom. “Do you wish you could go?” he asked, because he did. But Mikhail hummed and said:

“Everything I loved about the surface is gone.” His voice took on a sad and soulful swing. “The main building at Lomonosov lit up during the winter. The Motherland Calls standing watch above Volgograd. The Kola Peninsula in springtime. Daylight...!”

An excitement like the swelling crescendo of an anthem filled his chest, and Artyom promised, “We’ll see it again. All of us.”

Mikhail’s chuckle reached him once more. “You know, I believe you. God help me,” he said, and Artyom smiled at the ceiling of the tent.

Vanechka gave an inarticulate mewl and sat up. Mikhail did, too, with another sigh.

“It goes through you like water, doesn’t it?”

Artyom started up. “I can go with him,” he began, but the old man waved him off.

“No, no. I need to drain mine, too. You rest, Artyom the Dark.” He rose with a hand on Vanechka’s shoulder, and turned to look back at Artyom with a smile visible even against his silhouette. “You’ll need it for your great adventures.” And with a flap of the tent opening they were gone, their shadows growing into wavering giants as they moved toward the lights on the platform.

Artyom drifted back, his hands cupped behind his head. Most of the names that Mikhail mentioned were but names to him, many gleaned only from books, and lots of those without pictures. But he could *imagine*: Moscow University shining like a multicolored beacon amid a slow, dappling snowfall. The Homeland-Mother statue standing tall and strong on a grassy hilltop, with her sword stretched high and her hand beckoning the children of Russia to come forward and be brave. A forested shoreline set aglow by the sun, its trees greener than a freshly-washed uniform and its waters bluer than the paint of an intact subway car.

He closed his eyes and breathed deep, trying to put himself there, when a bellow of complaint sounded above the normal babble of a station trying to sleep. Artyom sat up. The yowl came again, sharper, this time, followed by Mikhail’s voice:

“He doesn’t understand!”

Artyom was on his feet and out the tent in a heartbeat, his guts already churning. Those soldiers from before, who’d sneered suspiciously at Vanechka—

The controlled *krak* of a pistol shot pierced his ears, and Mikhail again:

“Leave him be!”

The line of tents became the platform. Vanechka's big body was already fallen on the concrete, the little hole in his forehead magnified ten times out the back of his skull. Mikhail scrambled to reach him, but one of the soldiers cracked him in the cheek with the butt of his rifle. The other stood above Vanechka with his death-dealing pistol still drawn. He turned to Mikhail, holding the grip like a bludgeon.

A tide of horror rose in Artyom's belly. But his feet stayed planted, refusing to let him repeat history. There would be no retaliatory justice this time, only the sound of that pistol meeting Mikhail's face in a terrible crunch.

Artyom shut his eyes tight and wished for daylight. When he opened them again, he was back on the surface, in the car, with Anya asleep in the back seat. And Vanechka and old Mikhail Porfirevich were, once more, only memories.

#

“Do you trust me?”

Artyom paused, feet spread in the busted roadway, and half-glanced over his shoulder.

“I trust you not to let me get eaten while I'm taking a piss.”

The sound of Anya clicking her tongue at his back, and the shift of the Kalashnikov in her hands. He started a stream against the big, deflated tyre of an old carrier truck, being careful not to hit his boots, when she said:

“You have dreams. But you don't tell me.”

He couldn't stop but lowered his chin to his chest and muttered, “My dream was to get out of the Metro, out of Moscow. To find the survivors that were kept hidden from us.”

“That's a goal.” Her tone remained cool, neither in reproach of him nor in defence of the actions of men like her father, who'd believed that the people of the Metro weren't meant to

know the truth, weren't meant to be free. He was about to remind her of that blistering truth, when she went on, along a different route.

"You dream when you sleep," she said. "Sometimes, you smile in them. But more often, you shake."

He finished but stayed in that position, just staring at his boots. "Do I?"

"Yes."

"I don't remember."

Anya's voice came out flat, as if sensitive to his lying. "You don't remember."

"No." He bent his knees for a quick shake and tucked himself back into his pants. He turned around, willing his face blank. "Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Remember your dreams."

"Most of them," she answered with unhesitating openness, and he found something else to envy her for. A subtle shift of the light in her eyes smoothed her expression from stony to forlorn. "I dream of my father, the way he used to be, when I was a little girl. And about having a little girl of my own. Or sometimes a little boy." The corners of her mouth formed tiny creases in her cheeks that otherwise would have been invisible, except that he'd spent so much time with only her, he'd learned to see even the slightest change in her face. "He's always like you."

Artyom couldn't help snickering. "With the stupid hair?"

Anya blinked. "No. He doesn't *look* like you. But, he *feels* like you."

"And, what is that like?"

"Thoughtful. A dreamer." He started to smile, when she added: "But, sad."

Artyom pushed his shoulders back. A sad dreamer. She may as well have called him an addled fool. What if she knew about the visions he had? About the dead men in his dreams, and the lives that could have been? Would she see him differently then? Or, would she think him simply hopeless? Why didn't she ask him why he smiled, or why he shook? Why didn't she hold him when he did? She'd married him; she'd followed him. But for what? For his sperm for a baby that would probably be born with two heads anyway, given all the doses he'd taken over the years?

These thoughts rattled inside his head like a speeding trolley cart, but he didn't let any of them loose.

"Do you need to go?" he asked, pulling his pistol from its holster and nodding to his impromptu latrine. "Or, can we move out?"

"I'm fine," she said, leaving the subject of dreams to drop as she raised the Kalashnikov to a ready position.

He picked up his petrol can and moved forward, keeping his pistol and his body low for their stealth-walk along the queue of abandoned cars.

They found four vehicles in close succession whose gas tanks were still intact and carrying some slosh. Siphoning was dirty, dangerous work, but Anya kept watch on his vulnerable back as he sucked from the length of hose. While every mouthful of gas made him gag and spit, they had a mostly-full can of mostly-okay fuel within an hour's time.

Artyom carried the can close to his chest for the return to their car; keeping quiet was always better than going loud, especially on the surface. Anya stayed quiet, too. He couldn't tell if that was because she was angry, frustrated, concerned, or indifferent. Every time he glanced her way, her focus swung, either to scan their surroundings or just to avoid his gaze. They made

it back to the car in the same silence, topping off the gas tank and securing the rest of the can in the boot between two piles of dwindling supplies.

He moved behind the wheel, still mute; Anya didn't talk, either, as she took her seat next to him. He looked to her, as a prompting confession scratched its way to the top of his throat. That he dreamt of the men who should have lived, who would have lived, if only they hadn't gotten stuck in the fateful web of terrors and conspiracies that was Artyom's own life.

None of that came, though, as Anya looked back at him and said, "What?"

"Nothing," he said, facing front.

She'd probably never ask. He'd probably never tell her. It was strange, to feel so attached to someone and yet not be able to understand them.

He started the car to send them running again, together. For what that was worth.

#

[Heart in Hand]

The mutants' howls echoed against the walls, almost palpable as they hurtled along the stretch of road behind him. They pushed Artyom faster, his breath coming in ragged bursts behind his gas mask. His faceplate clouded into fog but even in the growing white around his vision, he could see Letyaga, with one of his long, strong arms held out from the top of the wall, waiting for the clap of Artyom's hand.

"Keep running!" Letyaga cried; next to him, Timur crouched with his rifle.

Artyom felt the snag of a hand – a claw – on the back of his jacket. A clap of noise, and a shot whizzed over his head. The shredding grip fell away, but he didn't look behind, just raced for the wall.

"Jump!"

Artyom leapt at Letyaga's shout, trusting the other man's gauge of distance. He landed against the wall with a clatter, and Letyaga snatched at his arm, past his scraping fingers to his wrist. Artyom's boots scabbled against the disintegrating wall, and Timur blasted another clapping shot. More mutant yowling, a mix of pain and frustration, but Letyaga's bear-like arm had already hauled Artyom over the lip of the wall.

A glance to the ground below showed one mutant dog felled less than twenty paces back, its head exploded into an open red maw, while a second stumbled for a lost front leg. A third stalked the empty ground at the base of the wall, snarling fruitlessly.

Artyom blew a woof of relief when Letyaga slapped him in the back of his helmet.

“What were you thinking?” he said, the exasperation in his voice coming clear even through his mask’s mechanical filters.

“My Kalash jammed,” Artyom complained with a shake of his aged rifle.

“That’s not what I meant.” Letyaga’s eyes were like daggers behind his faceplate. “You can’t just go waltzing into a shop like some pre-war civilian! And for what?”

Artyom fumbled his gloved hand into the inside pocket of his jacket – which felt a lot less tight, now, with the tear between the shoulders – and pulled out the half-size, softbound flipbook. He knew he should have been watching for mutated dogs or winged demons, but this little gem with the stylized DNA helix on the cover and the words *Botanical Magazine* had stolen his eye through the shop window. He hadn’t considered that a mutant pack would be right inside, in the middle of a feast. And when his Kalashnikov had made that sickeningly impotent *kuh-lack*, he’d had no choice but to bolt for the cover of his colleagues.

Despite his misstep, Artyom grinned with pride for his find. Letyaga, though, grimaced, swiped the book from his hand, and hit him on top of his helmet with it.

“Idiot.”

Timur snatched the book from Letyaga and hit him the same way; the book made a floppy *fump* against his helmet.

“Hey,” the older Ranger scolded, and wagged the book. “This is why we fight.” He handed the book back to Artyom but frowned at Letyaga, adding his own, “Idiot.”

Letyaga ducked his head. “Sorry,” he said to Artyom. “But, you should have told me you what you were doing. It’s dangerous out here, and we can’t lose even one of us.”

Artyom bowed his head between his shoulders, too. “It won’t happen again.” He lifted his face for a smile he hoped Letyaga could see through the murky plastic of his mask. “Thanks for saving my carcass.”

Letyaga rose, hustling Artyom up at the same time. “If not we, then who?” he said, repeating the Rangers’ motto with a wide-armed shrug that showed there were no hard feelings between them.

The two recruits grabbed the heavy sacks of scrap wood and metal for the trek back to the station. Artyom’s knees bent a little bit deeper than Letyaga’s for the weight – his fellow Ranger-in-training was bigger than him by a full head in height and at least three hands’ worth in width – but Artyom kept determined pace all the way to the station’s hermetic doors. There, Letyaga gave the flat-handed, two-one-three knock to signal their return. The doors grumbled open, and they walked through: Letyaga, Artyom, and Timur bringing up their rear. Two older Rangers took their supplies, and the entry guards gave them the all-clear. The heavy hermetic doors groaned back into sealing place, cutting off the cold, dark surface world from the warm, bright underground of the Polis stations.

“Drink?” Letyaga suggested once they were through decontamination. He showed his teeth in a fraternal smile. “For a mission well done.”

“Not that well done,” Timur muttered, and Letyaga bumped his shoulders up.

“Any mission you walk away from...!”

Artyom still declined. “I have something more important to take care of.”

Letyaga shook his head, but he didn’t lose his smile. “You and your books.”

“I like books.” Artyom smiled back, to appease. “Next time.”

“You’ll buy,” Letyaga agreed. He waved and headed in the direction of Arbatskaya, to the Ranger barracks. Timur followed after him, but Artyom went the opposite way, toward Borovitskaya.

While he’d grown up at VDNKh surrounded by prized childhood charms, of all the stations across the Metro, Artyom loved Borovitskaya best. He loved its bright, buzzing chandeliers and wide, white floors; its cosy living cells and spacious social halls; its tall, pristine arches and, between those, the towering shelves stuffed with culture valuables rescued from the surface, like instruments, curios, and books. Oh, the books...! Artyom favored history and philosophy, and Borovitskaya boasted that and more, on these shelves and in its station collection, which older Brahmin knowledge-keepers said was modeled after the Great Library above. Perhaps the little book of science tucked into his jacket had been part of that, once, touched by the Library’s magic. Probably not, though that wouldn’t stop its readers from dreaming.

He paused three-quarters of the way down the row of Brahmin living cells, at a particular and familiar door. It gave a screech of swollen wood over concrete, which Artyom cut short with a quick push as he snuck himself inside.

The floor of the tiny cell was laid with threadbare rugs that, in the old world, would have been mismatched, but in the Metro gave the impression of a puzzle to be solved. On the largest rug lay a gas lamp flickering wavy shadows over the walls, a heavy tome with slightly rotting pages, a second heavy book half-filled with meticulously-copied notes, and Danila stretched out between them, one lanky arm tucked under his head and his opposite long-fingered hand still holding a pen, which flagged in his dozing grip.

Artyom shoved the door closed again and went down to his hands and knees. He crawled over to Danila, perching over him for a stage whisper near his ear. “Good morning.”

Danila pulled a startled breath through his nose, blinked open his bleary blue eyes, and rolled flat. “You’re back.”

“And you should be in bed.”

Danila sniffed, still sleepy. “I thought you might be tired, after being out all night.”

“I am,” Artyom admitted, and smiled. “But that doesn’t mean you had to sleep on the floor.”

“There’s more room down here,” Danila said, glancing to the books next to him.

Artyom followed his look. His friend possessed a talented hand, which made him a fine choice for transcription. The assignment lacked purpose, though, a fact that nagged at Danila’s mind.

“Tell me about your day,” he said, smiling up at Artyom. “Did you go very far?”

“Just to get firewood.”

“What was it like?”

“The same as it was last time.” Artyom broke into a low chuckle, preferring to keep secret his brush with the mutants’ claws. “And the time after that!”

“Tell me anyway,” Danila said, and Artyom shook his head.

“I don’t know why you’re so anxious to get out of here.”

Danila pulled a frown. “You grew up in VDNKh, at the edge of the Metro—”

“Where it was dark, and dumb, and... well, not poor, but...” Artyom pulled a face of his own. “Dirty. Polis is the heart of the Metro,” he went on with emphasis. “We’re going to take back the surface from here.”

Danila snorted out his nose. “You will. I’ll be transcribing antiquated political philosophies.”

Artyom reached into his jacket. “Maybe this will help,” he said, and pulled out the book tucked under his jacket with a show-off flap.

Danila jolted up, nearly clunking their heads together. “Where did you get that?”

“I found it, in one of the old shops on the surface.”

Artyom passed it to him, and Danila immediately opened it up, his eyes sparking with intense interest as he scanned the first few pages. His dexterous fingers caressed the words on the paper as if they were scripture writ by some divine hand, instead of phrases like “sub-irrigation” and “growing substrates”.

“Amazing,” Danila murmured, still tracing the pages. “I’ve never seen this one before.”

Artyom chuckled. “A book you haven’t read? That *is* amazing!”

Danila looked up, beaming a boyish grin. “My father used to talk about all of these things to me.” His focus drifted into a middle distance. “For his work, at the university.”

Artyom let him float among his memories in unbroken silence for a long moment. Then: “Do you remember much of him?”

“I remember him walking me through this long room, with hundreds of shelves of green plants growing in tiny bottles. He gave me a little plastic lab coat to put on over my clothes. And, a respirator.” Danila’s expression turned grim, and he blew a disgusted snort. “I thought it was cool.”

Of course, that seemed foolish and short-sighted, now. But children would always be children. Even in the Metro, little boys and little girls squealed over the macabre novelty of shiny bullets and cracked mutant skulls scavenged from the surface.

Artyom forgave his friend the lapse of his childhood judgment: he'd have probably thought the same, as a boy living in the old Moscow of shining sun and chirping birds. "You didn't know what was coming." He reached out, slipped his hand behind Danila's neck, and chuckled. "And, I bet you were cute, running around in plastic coveralls. Tripping over your own shoelaces, like you do now."

"I'm not that bad!" Danila protested with a lightly-laughing smile.

"You're pretty bad," Artyom said, continuing the tease. "I'm going to have to keep my eyes on you when they finally let you up to the Great Library."

"My own personal stalker bodyguard?"

Artyom grinned. "If not me, then who?" he said, and tilted his head and kissed him before his friend could reply.

Danila drew him close so their chests came together, their pulses finding a common rhythm for a dozen beats. Then Artyom unclasped their mouths, just enough to whisper:

"Do you want to go to the bed, now?"

Danila smiled again. "There's more room down here," he said, and both of them closed their eyes for another kiss as they drifted to the floor, tugging and shrugging off their clothes.

It seemed only a blink's worth of time before Artyom opened his eyes again. When he did, he found Danila stretched beside him, his attention focused on the little botany book. He was still naked, his skin nearly luminous in the gaslight as Artyom traced its curves from Danila's backside, up his back, to the round of his shoulder. In the pit of his arm, a patch of coarse, dark blond hairs tempted a touch. Artyom flicked them with his fingers, causing Danila to snicker.

"That tickles."

Artyom shimmied close and stuck out his tongue, stroking the pit with a lick. That caused a cringe, a bark of freer laughter, and a shift of focus so their gazes met.

Artyom relaxed on his side and pulled a smirk. “You need a shower.”

Danila bumped him with his elbow. “Not as much as you do.”

“I had one when I came back.”

“Decontamination doesn’t count.”

“It’s still a shower.” Artyom glanced down to the book still in Danila’s hands. “Is that any good?”

His friend’s face lit up. “It has instructions for a rudimentary hydroponics system! Do you know what that means?”

“No,” Artyom said merrily. “But I’m sure you will tell me.”

“It’s a process of growing plants in mineral solutions,” Danila supplied, true to form. “Without soil.” He scooted close and flipped open the book, pointing out a double-page diagram labeled with arrows and paragraphs. “See? This is an example of a system they made in London, in their subway system.”

Artyom started to understand the book’s greater significance. “Like the Metro?”

Danila nodded. “Exactly like the Metro. Thirty-three meters underground, and they grew pea shoots, radish, tatsoi, broccoli...! Can you imagine? Being able to grow more than just mushrooms down here?”

“More than mushrooms?” Artyom grinned. “You’d be the Hero of Russia!”

They laughed, with more glee than scorn, and Artyom continued:

“They’ll send us up to find a Gold Star, to pin on your robes for all to see, so everyone will know: here before you stands Danila Evgenyevich Romanov, the great horticulturist, savior of our stomachs!”

As their laughter faded, Danila shook his head. “I don’t want any silly medal.”

Artyom quieted, too, and slipped his arms around him. “Then, what do you want?”

A lifetime of togetherness swirled in his clear blue eyes, but Danila snickered and said, “For you to wash.”

Artyom spit a tsk through his teeth and gave his friend a playful shove. He climbed to his feet and picked up just enough of his clothes to be decent for the shower queue. “Can I come back here after?” he asked as he pulled on his trousers.

“You can come back.” Danila rose, too, reaching for his shirt, first. “I’m going to go to the collection, though.”

“More hydroponics books?” Artyom guessed with a smile, and Danila grinned back.

“There’s nothing that says I can’t do research in my own time.”

“I’ll find you when I’m done? We can get something to eat.”

“If you don’t get lost in the stacks, yourself,” Danila said, and they both chuckled.

Artyom left first, humming an indistinct tune he wandered through the station toward the communal showers. He was under the water and out again in what seemed no time at all, when the clipped clatter of machine-gun fire shattered the calm of the station.

Civilians screamed from all directions. Human forms rushed past him. A shout – “Librarian!” – pierced his ears, and Artyom’s stomach plummeted. It was unreal that the guards would have let one of those little bastard mutants past the gates. But this wasn’t reality. This was Artyom’s hell.

A gun appeared in his hands – a grayish-black, battle-worn Nagant. It shouldn't have been there, but he didn't question it. He just ran. Ran for the book collection in the heart of the station, dreading to find what he knew he would, but unable to stop himself all the same.

The old stacks fell dim and silent around him. He moved alone through them. Always alone, here. Until he turned a corner, and there was Danila, slumped on the floor. His belly was torn open, with his guts spilling into his lap. White fingers peeked through the maze of innards, and an equally ghostly face, gaunt and hairless, with pale, blinded eyes, peered over Danila's shoulder. It blinked up at him, and a fierce sorrow crushed Artyom's chest.

“No...!”

Danila looked up, too. “Artyom,” he gurgled through burbling blood.

The sound of his pain constricted Artyom's heart, and squeezed out tears. “I'm sorry.”

Danila's bloody lips trembled. This time, there was no “Shoot me,” but a weak and wheezing, “It's all right.”

Artyom inched forward, one hand out to comfort him, to let his friend feel one last time a caring human touch. But before Artyom could reach him, the pale fingers made a fist in the red of Danila's belly, and the Brahmin pulled a tortured gasp.

“Danya!” Artyom shouted, when that fist moved again, forcing more words from Danila's lips.

“Let me go.”

Artyom gripped the Nagant. All he could say again through his tears was, “Danya...!”

“Let him go,” whispered another voice, and Artyom looked to the creature. It wasn't a pale, blank-eyed librarian anymore, but black and slender, with a bulbous head and silken face, and shining onyx eyes without whites or pupils, full of both ruin and promise.

Artyom gasped. It was a Dark One crouched behind Danila, now, and it and Danila pleaded in one voice:

“Artyom...!”

Without warning, the Nagant clapped in his hand, and Artyom woke up.

#

He was still crying when Anya found him.

“Is this about another dream you don’t remember?”

Artyom didn’t turn around, but he could sense her arms crossed over her chest, and the dour, disapproving purse of her lips. It was too much effort to hide or stifle his tears, so he let them come, even when Anya blew a long, tired sigh behind him.

“Please, stop crying. It’s so un-manly.”

“I left to spare you the sight,” he said on a respite for breath, and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. “You didn’t have to come looking.”

“I woke up, and you were gone. What else was I supposed to do? Wait like a dumb damsel for you to return?”

He hugged an arm around his chest and sniffed. “I didn’t ask you to come with me. You could have stayed with your father, been his good girl, married some other soldier—”

“Oh, stop that.” She came to him, now, at the edge of this cluster of trees that had broken through the boundaries of the concrete road, and knelt down next to him.

“I had no more love for my father than you did, by the end,” she said, her arm close to his. “You know that. I came with you because I believe in you.” She drew and exhaled a heavy breath, like the Ranger doctors used to tell him to do during every physical. “But I can’t be the

only one holding us together. There's nowhere to go back to anymore, no home base. I need you to be strong—”

“Then give me a minute!” he snapped, still teary-eyed as he spun on her.

She pulled back, her face pale where it wasn't smudged with dirt, and her dark eyes wide and deep as the night sky. It wasn't the first time he'd seen such tenderness in her gaze, but it felt like ages since the last time it had made itself known.

Her voice went soft, too, as she murmured his name, and, “What is it?”

Artyom looked out over the world in front of him: wild, overgrown green clashing against manmade gray, the same as it had been for hundreds of kilometers. How many times had he dreamed from Moscow to here?

“The dead,” he said. “I see them, when I dream.”

Anya sat silent a moment. “You see ghosts?”

“Not ghosts. They're alive, in my dreams. They laugh,” he said, thinking first of Bourbon, then of Mikhail. “And tell stories. And—!” He rubbed his knuckles against his brow, and stifled a sob at thought of Danila. In life, he'd been friends with the young Brahmin no more than a day, but in his dreams....

His voice turned croaking. “It's supposed to be different. But even in my dreams, I can't... I can't save them.” He squeezed his eyes shut, but his body was done making tears, at least for now.

Anya broke the second silence.

“I don't know what you want me to say.”

Under the weight of her returned detachment, Artyom slumped, and put his hands over his face.

“Just let me sit here a minute,” he mumbled into his palms.

It wasn't her fault. This was his burden, his penance for failing his people. If only he hadn't accepted that mission to destroy the Dark Ones. If only he'd believed from the beginning in the visions they'd shared with him, of a better world, a world where man and mutant could live with and learn from each other. Maybe Anya's father wouldn't have betrayed them then, and maybe the dead men of his dreams would still be alive.

Anya's voice nudged him:

“We should get back to the car. You can try to sleep.”

Despite his exhaustion, sleep was the last thing he wanted. The dead came to him when he slept, guilty reminders of his failures: Bourbon, Vanechka, Mikhail, Danila. And one more.

Artyom didn't want to see that one. But he got up and went with Anya anyway. This was his destiny. This was his punishment. The dead deserved no less.

#

[Homo Novus]

Morning at VDNKh station meant the changing of the guard, the rousing of the pig handlers, and all manner of busy folk moving to their day's work. Except for Anya, who was in bed dead asleep, and Artyom, who carried in his arms the little one who'd kept her awake all night. Dmitri lay quiet as a doll, now, though that miracle had occurred only in the last half-hour.

Artyom had known children at the station, but he'd somehow blocked out all memories of just how much they could scream when they were unhappy. And, his baby seemed to be unhappy a lot. Anya said it was because he was teething, while Sukhoi said it was because he was gassy. All Artyom knew was that no one seemed to be able to control how long or how loudly Dmitri would howl.

At least he seemed to have tired himself out, for the moment, his head settled quite tenderly in the crook of Artyom's arm, and his downy black hair tickling the inside of Artyom's elbow enough to bring out a smile.

"That's a good boy," Artyom whispered to him, as he stroked that feathery lock near the top of Dmitri's head. "My good, calm boy."

He carried him in the direction of the hermetic doors. Not for any purpose that involved the exit to the surface, but because it was quiet there, too, without the bustle of a station at work. Only a pair of guards stood on-duty, and even they usually just played cards or read beat-up pulp novels scavenged from the irradiated over-world of old Moscow. That was what Artyom expected, anyway. Today, he walked up to the doors just as they were in the process of closing, and two tall silhouettes in armored and rubberized stalker gear stomped with muddied boots into

the station. As they pulled off their outside gear Artyom saw that one of them was as straight up-and-down lean as a train rail, while the other was as broad as a car, by comparison. The pair looked up and saw him, and the big one threw open his arms in greeting.

“Artyom!” he shouted, his thunderous call reverberating against the walls like a double-barreled gunshot. To spite its warmth, Artyom flinched, and either that or the shout itself jolted Dmitri. His tiny face screwed up, in preparation of his own yell.

Artyom pulled a pained face at his friend. “Letyaga...!” he groaned, and grimaced as Dmitri began to shriek.

Letyaga pressed his mitts to his face like a mask. “Sorry!” He danced in comical tiptoe toward them, his big, bearish form moving with surprising light-footedness. “I’m sorry, little one.” He rose to his full height above Artyom and beamed his broad, friendly grin. “But I haven’t seen your papa in too long!” He offered the grin to Dmitri, and wiggled the baby’s hand. “What strong lungs you have!”

“You have no idea,” Artyom told him around a weary smile.

Lanky Timur came up, too, and shot Letyaga a parental look Artyom knew well from his Ranger recruit days.

“You’re frightening him,” he said, though Dmitri’s cries faltered when Timur bent his face close, with its long nose and kind, dark eyes. Those eyes flashed Artyom’s way. “It is a him, yes?”

Artyom nodded. “His pee can hit me in the face,” he informed them, and Letyaga laughed.

“A little sniper in the making!” He rustled his finger against Dmitri’s wraparound, and Dmitri stared, opened his mouth, and started to whine once more.

Before he could fully wail, Timur clicked his tongue and beckoned with both hands.

“Give him here.”

Artyom passed him over to the older man, who cradled Dmitri to his chest. In Timur’s arms, Dmitri’s complaint swung into a curious coo; he reached out with one tiny hand, to try and grasp the graying whiskers on Timur’s chin.

Both Artyom and Letyaga stood dumbstruck a moment, and Artyom asked:

“How did you do that?”

Timur inclined his head to Letyaga. “I’ve been taking care of big babies like that one for years,” he muttered, to which Letyaga sneered.

“Oh, it’s so funny.”

Timur just nodded at Dmitri. “What’s his name?”

“Dmitri Artyomovich Chyornyj,” Artyom said, and Timur smirked while Letyaga shot Artyom an uneven look with his slightly-crossed eye.

“What did your father say about you using that name?”

“Sukhoi is a fine name,” Artyom replied, with the same mix of offhandedness and authority he’d used with his stepfather. “But, it’s not mine.”

Letyaga bent in to Dmitri for a mock-hushed croon. “Hear that, little Dimochka? Your papa stands down for no-one.”

Artyom let out a short grunt. “Not no-one.”

Letyaga came up straight and tall again. “Ah, right,” he said in understanding. “Anechka. Where is the old man’s pride and joy, anyway?”

“Resting,” Artyom told them, and broke into a confused smile. “What are you doing here? And, why did you come from the surface?”

The two Rangers shared a furtive look, and Letyaga broke their silence.

“The Order doesn’t know we’re here.”

Artyom pulled back. “Has something happened?”

“Can we talk?” Letyaga said, already starting the way away from the doors.

Artyom followed him, pausing only a moment to glance at Timur, who ushered him forward.

“Miller needs a successor,” Letyaga said without preamble. “The old man can’t lead the Rangers from his chair, half-stuck in a bottle of whisky. It’s time for a new leader. Someone strong, and with vision.” He stopped and turned, a shadowy goliath rimmed by the far light of the guards’ lanterns. The image tickled a strange sensation of familiarity at the base of Artyom’s brain, but he couldn’t quite grasp it. His shake prompted a new press from his friend, one Artyom hadn’t expected:

“I know you miss it.”

A glob of spit caught in his throat, and Artyom coughed. “You don’t mean me?”

Letyaga and Timur shared another look between them, and the bigger Ranger shrugged.

“Why not?”

“I have a family!” Artyom said, swinging his hand toward Dmitri. “Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t just leave them behind, while I run off to Polis.”

“Who said anything about leaving them behind? You always said Polis was the most enlightened place in the whole Metro. Raise your family there.”

“You’re crazy.”

“What crazy? Anya can look after your little one and her old man, and you can look after us.”

“Letyaga...!”

“We need you, brother,” Letyaga pressed. “The war between the Reds and the Reich is encroaching on our boundaries. Soon, VDNKh will be cut off, and Polis will be standing alone.” He hunched his shoulders low over Artyom, like a giant tree bending to the wind. “You gave me your blood, once. I trust you with mine. There aren’t many men I would say that about, but you are one of them.”

Artyom frowned up at him. “What about Timur?”

Letyaga waved off that idea. “Timur is too old.”

“I’m forty-five!” Timur protested.

“That’s old,” Letyaga repeated. “It’s practically Miller’s age.”

“Miller was a good leader,” Timur began, but Letyaga cut him off.

“Was,” he said sharply, before continuing with deeper fervor. “He can’t protect anyone, anymore, not in his state. And the Order was conceived for one thing: to protect the Metro. Not to bow to Hansa for bullets, or make deals of passage with the Reds. We are the shield that holds the monsters at bay.” He jabbed his finger toward the floor in emphasis. “And we will fight off the rising of the sun, if need be, for the sake of our people.”

As he looked into his friend’s face, with its one dead eye and its slightly-crossed mate, and its vein-like scar running from temple to jawline, Artyom saw the loyalty, fearlessness, and conviction for the Ranger cause of which Letyaga so passionately spoke, believed in, and lived.

“Brother,” Artyom said in a hushed voice, and put his hand on Letyaga’s brawny arm.

“You want a leader? Then look no further.”

Letyaga’s fair brows bounced in exhilaration. “You’ll do it?”

“No.” Artyom smiled. “You will.”

Letyaga almost choked. “What? I can’t lead the Rangers!”

“Of course, you can.”

“Idiot! I have only one eye!”

“A soldier with three eyes couldn’t lead the Rangers better than you. Remember that time at Okhotny Ryad, when the Reich had us pinned down in that tunnel?” Artyom chuckled, as he recalled the feeling of cold desperation seeping into his trousers in that dank tunnel, as the walls had fallen silent. “They told us to surrender because we’d run out of bullets. And you stood up and shouted back that they didn’t have any bullets, either, so why didn’t they surrender to us, instead?”

Timur began to laugh for the memory, and Letyaga cracked an embarrassed smile.

“That was a crazy day,” the big Ranger said, and Artyom nodded.

“Do you remember what you did then?” he asked, and grinned. “You started singing.”

“Badly!” Timur chortled.

“But it filled that tunnel,” Artyom said. “And hearing those words moved us to grab our knives and bayonets, and rush that Nazi camp and win! ‘Our loyalty to our motherland gives us strength,’” he quoted, half in song, as he proudly recalled the boom of Letyaga’s voice in that dim passageway, and how his own heart had swelled enough to join his fellow Ranger in boisterously off-key bellowing. They didn’t reach for any weapons this time, but his friends joined in with him for the next, all three of them singing just like they did on that day:

“‘Thus it was, thus it is and always will be.’”

Dmitri added his own sharp, happy scream, and the men laughed together a minute before Artyom shifted into a more serious look.

“You are the strongest, straightest arrow in the Order,” he said, squeezing his fingers over Letyaga’s hard bicep. “I have always been proud to call you my brother. This is your destiny, not mine.”

A shadowy veil passed across Letyaga’s features; Artyom’s words seemed to make him sad, though such sorrow was quickly replaced by his lively smile.

“You can always change your mind.”

“I could,” Artyom agreed, and chuckled again as they passed beneath a dirty-white marble arch with accents of peeling green paint, onto the platform that had begun to mill with talkative workers. “But I won’t.” He beckoned for Dmitri, whom Timur passed over without protest. “The two of you can lead the fight. I look forward to becoming an old, ordinary man down here.”

Timur moved next to Letyaga. Standing beneath the gaslight chandelier, both their faces fell into the same kind of obscuring shadow as before. And, as before, a tingle of familiar feeling scratched at the back of Artyom’s brain.

Letyaga spoke...but it wasn’t in his friendly voice. It was airy, like an unfelt breeze, almost in Artyom’s head. “That is not your decision to make.”

A bang exploded on the platform, and Letyaga’s head snapped back behind a spray of blood.

Artyom stiffened, clutching Dmitri to his chest.

Timur spoke in that same strange voice – “You cannot stay,”– when a second controlled bang made him topple to the floor, too.

Artyom staggered back, shaking his head. He hugged Dmitri, whose tiny hand grazed his cheek.

“You cannot stay,” the voice said again, but not from Timur’s mouth. It came from next to his ear.

Artyom turned his head. Dmitri’s face was glistening ebony, his eyes shimmering onyx.

Artyom choked on a scream, afraid to hold on but unable to let go.

Wake up, he told himself. It’s only a dream you can wake up you have to *wake up*–

He opened his eyes to daylight. While his pulse still thundered in his ears, one, two, three drags of air calmed the pounding in his chest. He turned for Anya – he wouldn’t run, this time; he’d tell her everything about his dream – and a fresh horror seized his heart.

Anya was gone. In her place sat a Dark One.

Artyom scabbled over his shoulder for the door handle, keeping his eyes on the Dark One. It made no move to him, but its whistling voice blew across the fringes of his mind, like it had done in his dreams, and a long time ago.

“I am not here to hurt you.”

“Why are you here at all?” Artyom shouted back at it. “What have you done with Anya?”

The Dark One stayed still in the passenger seat. “I have done nothing with the other; she is still with you. This is merely a moment between moments. As for why....” The black, pupil-less eyes seemed to narrow, in something like consternation. “You were not listening.”

Artyom’s initial spike of panic diminished to an edgy wariness.

Maybe he was still dreaming – though, he doubted it. His breath was too ragged, his hands too clammy. And, his flask was digging into his hip.

Maybe this Dark One was trying to trick him. Though, he doubted that, too. The Dark Ones had always communicated truth to him, albeit through questionable methods.

“Not listening to what?” he muttered at last.

“Your destiny.”

Artyom shook his head. He’d destroyed the Dark Ones. He’d left Miller and his cronies to smother the Metro with their greed. He’d failed his friends.

“I’ve already fulfilled my destiny.”

“We do not get to decide that on our own,” the Dark One said with a subtle shake of its head. “You are the first, Artyom Chyornyj. Or have you forgotten?”

Artyom steeled himself against his own confession. “I killed you. I transmitted the signal to launch the missiles on the Botanical Gardens—”

“The missiles did kill many of us. But not all.” The black eyes shimmered at him. “We evolved from you. We learned from you. Like you, we fled.”

A circuit closed in Artyom’s mind, as he saw behind his eyes a shuddering arch, falling plaster, and the sparking of collapsing metal against train tracks.

“Underground,” Artyom murmured in amazement. “You fled into the Metro! Where...?”

The image of a concrete rotunda, with metal letters attached to its façade, popped into Artyom’s head.

“Vladykino,” he said, thinking about the Metro maps he’d had to memorize for his Ranger training. He saw the name beside an X-ed-out portion of the map, just north of the main circle, past the abandoned stations of Dmitrovskaya and Timiryazevskaya. A place where the denizens of the Metro wouldn’t go. A place to hide, and heal, and plan.

“It is not so insidious.”

Artyom stared into those slate-like eyes but gave no answer, in his brain or through his lips.

“We hid, yes,” the Dark One continued. “And healed, and planned. But our plan was only to contact you again. That has not been easy.”

Artyom couldn't be certain, but he thought he heard some faint amusement in its words.

“Are you still at Vladykino?” he asked, and the Dark One hummed through its fold of mouth.

“We are making our way back to the surface. But you have traveled far. It takes much effort to reach you.”

Another circuit clicked closed.

“You are why I dream of the dead.”

The large, black head bobbed in acknowledgment. “Your subconscious is open when you dream. We could talk to you there—”

“Why did you use them?” Artyom hissed, as the horror and sadness and shock of his comrades' deaths flooded through him once more, as fresh as when they'd happened the first time. “Why did you make me see them? Why did I have to go through that, again?!”

The Dark One's feature-less eyes glistened, as if sad. “You would not answer us as we are. So, we sought...a mask.”

Artyom choked on a fresh onslaught of tears. “You made me dream new lives...!”

“You needed to listen. And to listen, you needed to trust.”

Artyom rubbed his hands over his face, breathing hot air against his palms; understanding came with its own pain. The closer the man, the deeper the bond, from acquaintance, to cohort, to comrade, to blood-brother. “They were my friends.”

“You are more than the sum of your guilt,” the Dark One said, and Artyom looked over the steeple of his fingers, to peer into its strange but – somehow – kind countenance. “You are the first. Embracing that will set you free. And us, as well.”

Between them passed the ghosts of familiar faces, leaving Artyom to shiver. “What about them?”

The Dark One extended its glossy hand. Artyom skittered backward, but the door kept him in place.

The fingers stroked his brow, and the Dark One said, “Let them go.”

Artyom shuddered with a sob. “I can’t do that.”

The Dark One hummed in its reedy mind-voice. “Then you will fall with them, and lose the world for us all.”

“No.” Artyom shook his head. Not after they’d lived through so much, come so far...! He started to cry, moaning, “No...!”

The hand held his cheek more firmly.

“Artyom. Do you hear me? Artyom? Artyom!”

He gasped a new breath, and snapped his eyes open.

Anya perched over him, her face shining with worry. She took him in her arms silently, and he wrapped her in an embrace, burying his own face in her neck.

#

[Unwritten]

They sat together in the back of the car, where Artyom told her everything. About Bourbon's carefree dance, and Mikhail's reverent stories, and his concern for simple Vanechka. About Danila's hope for a brighter future, and Letyaga's dedication to the truth. And Artyom's vision of the Dark One, and its message from Moscow. Beside him, Anya listened to it all in composed silence, until finally her dark eyes narrowed in thoughtful contemplation.

"My father told me the Dark Ones were all destroyed," she mused, "by the missile strike on the Botanical Gardens."

"It wasn't true," Artyom told her, and she raised her brows with a sniff.

"So, he lied about that, too."

"I don't think he knew," Artyom corrected himself, and shrugged. "I didn't think the Dark Ones survived, either. But, it must be," he said, finding more assurance in the thought than not. He snickered ahead of the anticipated recrimination. "Or else, I'm just crazy."

"I do not think you're crazy." Her hand grazed his cheek, like the Dark One had done, only more softly, and with tender warmth. "The Metro taught us to expect death, but you were the first person I'd ever met who didn't accept that. At every turn, you fought for something better: the surface, the truth. That is why I chose you." Her gaze glistened. "I think that is why the Dark Ones chose you, as well."

Something light fluttered in his chest. "You believe me."

She half-smiled. "You are my husband, Artyom Aleksandreevich Chyornyj." The faint curve of her lips faded. "But you carry such weight in your heart. Whether you dreamed that

Dark One or not, it was right: you need to let go of the past, or your guilt will drag you down. And me with you.”

His chest felt heavy beneath the weight of that remorse. He closed his eyes against it, and muttered, “They were my friends. And they died bad deaths. I cannot simply forget them.”

“No.” He thought he heard regret in her voice, too. For Letyaga and Timur, maybe, whom she’d known, or for someone else entirely. Like the father she’d left behind, who may as well be dead to them both.

“But you can see them off to the other world,” she said then, with a new hint of optimism. “Put their ghosts to rest. Or it won’t matter how far from the Metro or Moscow we go, they will always haunt you.” Her touch became a caress. “Don’t they deserve to be free, too?”

Artyom opened his eyes. Only Anya looked back at him; for a moment, he saw only himself reflected in her gaze. But then, a shimmer of something else: a newly-rekindled care that set his pulse to quickening again.

“Will you help me?” he said.

She smiled, nodded, and kissed him.

There was no wild passion in it, no gasping heat, but when her lips touched his, a deep desire swelled inside of him, and Artyom pulled her into his arms. Anya undressed them just enough to be intimate, but Artyom took off the rest of his clothes and hers, as well, to feel the whole of them together. The back seat of the cramped car poked and bounced in uncomfortable ways that caused Anya to break into fitful laughter amid their huffing. Artyom laughed, too, lapsing only for the brief moment of his coming. But he resumed right after. Anya rewarded such giddy foolishness with a light slap of his face, then squeezed down next to him on the narrow seat.

They lay there for a long while. By the slow, even rhythm of her breathing, he thought she'd fallen to sleep, when she asked:

“Do you still have some whisky?”

Artyom craned his head. “You want to drink now?”

She clucked. “Not for me. We'll find a quiet spot and drink to them,” she said in a gentler murmur. “Letyaga, Timur, and the others.”

“I like that plan.” He tightened his embrace around her. “After that, we'll fill up the tank and get to Vladivostok, and put all this shit behind us forever.”

“I like *that* plan,” she said, and hugged him back.

They could have gotten up, but Artyom pulled a rough blanket over them instead. As he closed his eyes, he thought of Bourbon's hearty laugh, of Mikhail's soothing voice, of Danila's clever gaze, and of Letyaga's exuberant grin. He thought of gentle Vanechka, and of shrewd Timur, too, and wondered if any of them would come to him again, his brotherhood of the dead. If they did, he would tell them he was sorry. He would lay them to rest, and honor them with a drink, a prayer, and a promise to be the best man that their lives and hopes and sacrifices allowed him to be.

He pulled a deep breath of Anya's hair, held her close, and soon fell to sleep.

He did dream, but not of the Metro. Not of the Dark Ones, either, or of the familiar shades of his past. He dreamed of an endless sea, and a great, wide open sky, and a laughing little boy with sparkling, inquisitive eyes, who ran barefoot through the surf and grinned back over his shoulder when Artyom called, “Dmitri.”

End