

K A I W H I S T O N

A New Crimson Haze

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"The venom cocktail is injected directly into the host's sub-esophageal ganglion. This does not paralyze the legs; the host remains capable of walking, flying, and fighting. Instead, the venom induces a state of hypokinesia—a specific deficit in the initiation of voluntary movement. The host stands compliant. It possesses the physical capacity to flee, but it has been chemically stripped of the motivation to do so. It allows itself to be led by the antenna, like a dog on a leash, into the burrow."

— *Gal & Libersat, 'A Wasp Manipulates Neuronal Activity in the Sub-Esophageal Ganglion to Decrease the Drive for Walking in Its Cockroach Prey', The Public Library Of Science (2010)*



FIRST CODA

FRONT OF CURTAIN. A TIMELESS EVENING.

A sinister CRIMSON LIGHT saturates every inch of the space.

A solitary white candle sits amidst a graveyard of molten wax.

ORTODOKSJE *stands as a prism in the demonic light. Clad in holy garments that fracture the luminescence, he exudes archaic grandeur. An abstract relic hangs from his neck.*

A discordant sound of scraping chains gathers momentum.

HERETYK *is dragged into the light by two SPECTRAL ENTITIES. He is encumbered by heavy iron chains on his wrists and ankles. He radiates a regal, defiant demeanour.*

The SPECTRAL ENTITIES evaporate into the periphery. HERETYK advances, annexing the space. The drag of his chains scores the silence. He stops. He does not kneel.

HERETYK *(with granite stillness)* Yovr Holiness, afore y^e Almighty, and in y^e gaze of y^s great company, I stand. Not with gvile woven in my heart, bvt with a thirst vnqvenchable for what may be known. *(barely whispering)* I find myself hvmbled, yet stand vnmade; I am no charlatan, as many paint me. Nay. I am a pilgrim in y^e Essence's theatre, and yearn for ageless trvths, for divine sights.

HERETYK *raises his shackled hands. He displays his palms—dirty, scarred, open.*

ORTODOKSJE *(spitting the words)* Aye, behold y^e rat — it conneth by heart a prayer writ in beast's blood!

ORTODOKSJE *steps back. He brushes an invisible speck of dust from his sleeve.*

HERETYK *(voice trembling with restraint)* Y^s iovrney of mine — deemed heretical all by a wary world — is bvt an earnest qvest to know ovr mortal coil, to fathom fleeting flesh, and what is everlasting. Each root, each art, was forged from reverence most profovnd for y^e mysteries of ovr Architect. Within my heart, I carry only light, and hope to lift mankind closer to y^e Divine. *(falling into prayer cadence)* I do entreat y^s tribvnal, then, to see in me no blasphemers, bvt a man ablaze with love of wisdom, and y^e wonders of y^s sea ye call existence.

HERETYK *slowly lowers himself to one knee. His eyes remain fixed on the priest's face.*

ORTODOKSJE *(booming)* So thov presents thyself afore y^s hallowed hall, a man vnmade, shorn of y^e praise once lavished vpon thy name. Thov dares tread vpon sacred grovnd, to removld what God hath eternally graven in stone? *(leaning closer)* By thine sacrilegiovs deeds, thov hast led y^e Essence's flock into falsehood's yawning chasm. Thvs, in y^e sight of y^e Divine, and of all here gathered, vpon y^s charge of heresy, I ask thee now: how answer ye for thine acts against His celestial law?

ORTODOKSJE *points a trembling finger at the floor. A command to stay down.*

HERETIK (*whispering violently*) I have iovrneyed thro' realms of spirit and of dvst, for a divine answer, a blessing meant for all mankind. My feet have trod on lands vnkown, mine eyes have glimpsed what others dare not dream. I renovnce not my desires, nor recoil from y^e shadow of my days. Bvt I deny y^t they be vnholy.

HERETIK *stands up. The chains rattle violently. He steps into ORTODOKSJE'S personal space.*

HERETIK (*imploring the shadows*) Tell me, Holy Father, if God did not wish for man to seek, to hvnger for y^e heavens and his place within, why then imbve ovr sovls with y^s thirst for knowing? My aspiration, tho' it be as bovndless as y^e night, is bvt a mirror to y^t divine spark. I contest not y^e sacred itself, bvt y^e base thought y^t we are made for passive clay, when we might learn, and walk, and rise into His realm.

HERETIK *places his hand over the candle flame. He holds it there. He does not flinch.*

ORTODOKSJE (*hissing*) In thine hopeless climb toward y^e heavens, thov hast meddled in arts most arcane. Elixirs of heresy, pacts inked in shadow... Speak, **HERETIK** Udoth svch dark practice wear y^e honest mantle of a saint?

ORTODOKSJE *shields the relic at his neck with his hand.*

HERETIK (*with clinical detachment*) Who draws y^e line between a saint and seeker? A saint is often ivst a seeker with better patronage. Is not holiness fovnd in y^e very yearning to comprehend? To vnravel y^e sacred knot of all we see? I have felt y^e celestial weave, and know its rhythm in my blood.

HERETIK *removes his hand from the flame. He inspects the burn.*

ORTODOKSJE (*sneering*) Nay, in thy knitting, thov hast woven navght bvt snares and cheap gin! And at what price? Thov hast entrapped y^e yovng, begviling them with damp. No glass can reframe svch a perversion of His grand design.

ORTODOKSJE *produces a small mirror. He holds it up to HERETIK.*

HERETIK (*staring into the glass*) Each seer was first called blasphemmer; each dreamer, drvnk. Y^e path to grace is paved not with blind faith, bvt with a light of knowing, even if y^t light commands one defy y^e Almighty's word. And if y^e Almighty's word cannot svrvive a little...

HERETIK *takes the candle. He crushes the soft, warm wax in his fist.*

HERETIK (*snapping*) ...fractvring... Then it is not word, bvt ice. Fit only to be shat!

HERETIK *drops the ruined wax at the priest's feet.*

ORTODOKSJE (*voice trembling with rage*) Thov speakst of defiance; I see treachery in thy work. My life is an anthem to devotion, a fortress of faith's own sanctity. I am a lighthovse to y^e lost, a solace to y^e broken heart. In loyalty to Him, and to His flock, one finds y^e sweet caress of heaven.

ORTODOKSJE *straightens his spine, turning himself into a statue. Eyes closed.*

HERETYK (*mocking gently*) And in y^s piovs qvest, hast thov not also taken dominion? Mvzzled y^e dissenters, clipped y^e wings of freedom, all 'neath y^e cloak of thy fidelity. Is y^s y^e work of a gentle shepherd?

HERETYK *circles him. He whispers directly into the priest's ear.*

ORTODOKSJE (*coldly mechanical*) Not a lighthovse. I am a... drain. I am y^e man who sweeps y^e floor after y^e 'feast'. Who calcifies y^e bone. Who salts y^e contaminated field. Who pvrge y^e text. Thov wants to crack y^e stone. (*eyes snapping open*) I am y^e man who sets y^e stone. And thov...

ORTODOKSJE *slams his hand down on an invisible table.*

ORTODOKSJE ...thov art schedvled for y^e qvarry.

ORTODOKSJE *turns his back.*

HERETYK (*urgent*) Tell me, doth love trvly gvide thy hand, or doth y^e fear of losing all control? Thov points at my... vnlicensed procedvres... bvt hast thov not shrovded thine own trvths in shadow, for dominion's sake alone?

HERETYK *grabs ORTODOKSJE'S wrist. He feels for the pulse.*

ORTODOKSJE Dominion is not y^e end, bvt y^e vessel. Y^e chvrch stands strong, not for my gain, bvt as an echo of Divine Will, to make His work manifest below.

ORTODOKSJE *wrenches his arm free. He smooths the fabric.*

HERETYK (*stomping*) And there, Yovr Holiness, ovr paths diverge. Thov seest y^e Divine Will as stone, immvtable as y^e grovnd thov treads. I see it as a river's flvid covrse, forever shifting. Thov thinkst salvation is for y^e sheep, bvt I say it is for y^e seeker, y^e lion, y^e avdaciovs.

HERETYK *stomps the floor. Solid.*

ORTODOKSJE (*quietly*) And what if y^s avdacity of thine... proves thine vndoing?

ORTODOKSJE *steps away, creating distance.*

HERETYK Then I shall stand, at least, enlightened in my fall.

ORTODOKSJE (*pitying*) Thov art blind to y^e torment. 'Twas not fire thov stole, bvt y^e very right to challenge natvral law. Thov dream'dst of lifting hvmanity, whilst thov wert bvt a pvppet, dancing on y^e strings of darker powers. So I ask, what darkness doth thov trvly serve?

HERETYK *pulls a jagged shard from his boot. He raises it.*

HERETYK (*disgusted*) In y^e name of all y^t's Holy, I sever y^s dark root, y^s venomed weed in God's own Garden! May thy sovl find more peace in y^e next world than thov hast granted others in y^s one!

HERETYK *lunges. He grabs a lock of the priest's long white hair. He slices it off.*

ORTODOKSJE (*shrieking*) Seize him! Let not y^s rot taint a sacred world! Bind him now, lest his corrvption spread its plague!

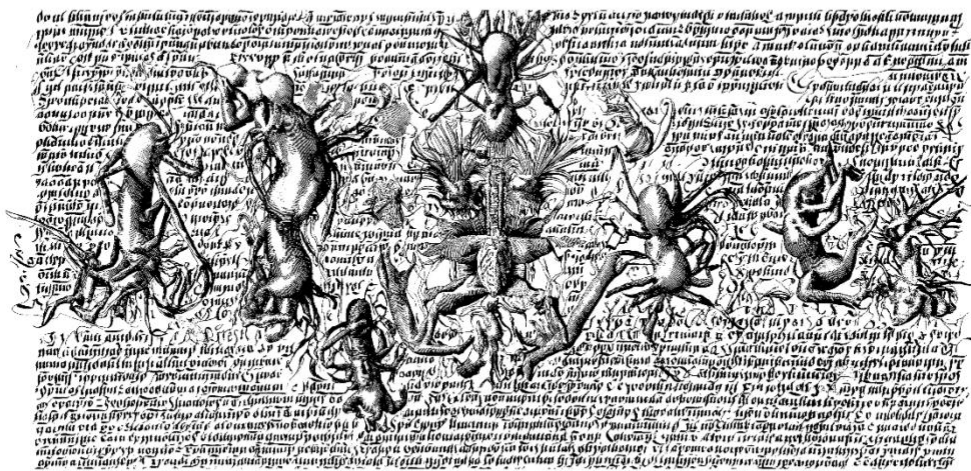
ORTODOKSJE *clutches his head, stumbling back in horror.*

HERETYK (*prophetic*) Yovr Holiness, y^s age may shvn y^e enigma, bvt y^e next shall yearn for it as for embrace of y^e Essence! Time bows to none, not even to thee! Beware, for y^e very shadows y^t thov casts today, may rise and swallow thee tomorrow.

HERETYK *blows the severed hair from his hand. It scatters across the floor toward the priest.*

SPECTRAL ENTITIES *drag him into the darkness.*

CURTAINS OPEN.



I

I.I

AN ANCESTRAL LIBRARY IN THE KREPOST. RIGHT OF STAGE. MORNING.

A dim, suffocating room. Walls cloaked in historic portraits and heavy wall hangings. The air is thick with old paper and wax.

A BLACK SLUDGE drips from a stain on the ceiling. Slow. Irregular. It pools on the stone floor.

***ANDREI** sits at a heavy mahogany desk. He is 40, but the curse has eroded him into a translucent, skeletal geriatric. He wears faded, heavy velvet—chivalry gone to seed.*

A single candle gutters. He dips a quill. His hand—a map of distended veins—vibrates with palsy. Ink splatters the page. Beside him waits the fix: a tarnished goblet of black, viscous sludge.

***ANDREI** Damn... damn it. (He stares at the smear) That was going to be... what was that word. "Beloved." Beloved. Gone now.*

He tries to wipe the ink with his sleeve, smearing it into a black blot on the paper.

*The drip lands. A wet slap on the stone. **ANDREI** glances up, irritated.*

*A young female **KREPOST SLAVE** enters silently, eyes downcast. She carries a rusted metal bucket. She crosses the room, positions it beneath the drip, and retreats to the threshold. She waits.*

***ANDREI** Now you're... bruised. (long pause) Sorry, Mother. I keep... I keep doing that to you.*

He drinks from the goblet. A wet, thick swallow. He shudders, wiping the black sludge from his lip.

***ANDREI** I'm sorry you're dead. I am writing to ask if the soil is... (loses thread, drinks) ...cold. It must be better than... than this. This humidity. This house sweats, Mother. Have you noticed? They call my blood... (bitter laugh) ...they call it "gift." Gift. But I know what it is. I know. It is a structural... a structural... (waves hand vaguely) ...cancer. I am forty Measures old. Forty. And I look like a pear left in the sun. (He examines his hand) A very expensive pear. Rotting in a very expensive bowl.*

He laughs—a dry, hacking sound. He stands, spreading his arms to the empty room.

***ANDREI** (lurching to his feet, spreading arms) Look at me! The Heir! The boy-prince of... of dust. (the energy is already leaving him) The clock's face sneers at me, Mother. It grins. I tried to pray for you yesterday. I got down on my... (mimes kneeling, nearly loses balance) ...click, click went the bones. Like dry twigs. Snapping. And I asked God... I asked Him: "Is this the design?" To live forever, but to rot while... while... (trails off, staring at nothing) ...Has the Divine whispered the truth to you yet? Or is He just as silent there as He is... (gestures at the room) ...here. Here. I feel like an ant under a magnifying glass. And the sun is... (He sits heavily) ...very hot.*

He slumps back into the chair. The energy drains out of him.

ANDREI I suppose The Herd is preparing your... your show. The funeral. The funeral. I will stand by the box. I will look... *(searches for the word)* ...eternal. That is my job, isn't it? To be the... *(snorts)* ...the gargoyle. To stand still. Let the birds shit on me. While tourists take... *(He mimes a camera, making a clicking sound with his tongue)* ...pictures. Very dignified. Very... very...

A wet slap. The drip has moved. It lands on the floor a foot from the bucket.

*The **SLAVE** crosses again. She picks up the bucket, repositions it beneath the new drip. Her lips move—counting, or praying. No sound. A metallic scrape against stone. She retreats. She waits.*

ANDREI *watches this with dull contempt. He does not acknowledge her. He turns back to the paper.*

He stares at the candle flame, mesmerized. His voice drops to a fearful whisper.

ANDREI *(whisper, leaning close to the paper)* I'm glad you left us. Truly. I find myself wishing to know if the Lord forged this pain, or if it was just... just Father's... *(He can't say it)* ...that sword he used. To cleave. The umbilical cord. Between us. *(Long pause. He drinks.)* You didn't have to stretch. You didn't have to be... cured. Like meat. Me? I have two hundred Measures left of... of this. *(gestures at himself, at the room, at everything)* ...Anchored. To a sea of shadows. *(bitter, almost impressed)* That's rather good, actually. Sea of shadows. I should... *(he doesn't write it down)*

He leans in, whispering to the paper, desperate.

ANDREI Tell me the truth, Mother. Now that you are on the other... the other side. Is God there? *(pause)* And if He is... does He... *(the question barely escapes)* ...apologize?

*A wet slap. The drip has moved again. It lands near **ANDREI**'s foot, spattering the hem of his velvet.*

*The **SLAVE** crosses. She hesitates. The new position is awkward—close to the desk, close to him. She crouches, trying to position the bucket without brushing against his robes. The bucket scrapes. She adjusts. It scrapes again. She looks up at the ceiling, at the spreading stain, at the futility of it all.*

ANDREI *stares at her. A long, terrible silence.*

She retreats to the threshold. She waits.

He picks up the pen again. Hovering.

ANDREI I'm going to get drunk now. Properly. *(He raises the goblet in a toast to no one)* Don't tell Him. And if you see Him... tell Him the syrup tastes like... *(drinks, grimaces)* ...shit. From me—his boy-prince of dust.

*A soft knock. Another **SLAVE** steps forward from the threshold.*

ANDREI Who's there?

SLAVE #2 Master Andrei, my apologies for the intrusion. The bell-list awaits Everard and Ivan in the grand hall. Are there any further notes for your testimony on Lady Anastasia's passing?

ANDREI does not look up.

ANDREI No. Open the eye for me.

The SLAVE nods and moves to the corner to wake the eye. She glances at the bucket. The drip lands. She leaves hastily.

ANDREI takes a deep breath. He downs the viscous liquid in one swift motion. He rises, heavy with the silence.

He watches the eye with a vacant expression.

Behind him, the drip continues. The bucket catches nothing.

I.II

A GRAND HALL. LEFT OF STAGE. A WALL SEPARATES THE HALL AND ANDREI.

*Lights rise. The air is cold. A pack of **WITNESSES** sit in rows. They do not jostle. They do not shout. They hold their recording devices like votive candles. They are terrified of breaking the silence.*

***EVERARD** stands at the podium. A snake in crimson silk. He vibrates with a chemical frequency that makes the air itch—eyes pinned wide, refusing to blink, terrified of missing a beat.*

***IVAN** looms beside him. He wasn't raised; he was built. A slab of Siberian granite wrapped in cheap wool. He does not scan the room; he occupies it. He stares at the back wall with the dull, terrifying patience of a slaughterhouse hammer.*

EVERARD *(Voice smooth, rehearsed, slightly too fast)* Good morning. Good— yes. Thank you for your patience. We appreciate the... distance. The distance you have kept.

He places his hands on the podium. His fingers tap a manic, silent rhythm against the wood.

EVERARD We are not here to trade in rumors. We are not— no. We are here to mark an ending. Lady Anastasia has departed. Do not write that she "lost a battle." Do not— that implies a fight. A fight she was capable of winning. She was mortal. She was— she was the soil. The soil that held the root. The soil erodes; the root remains. The root remains. She served the Zagonov bloodline with a devotion that should— that should shame us all. She was not of the blood, but she was of the spirit. She has finished. She has finished her task.

He smiles. His mouth opens for the next word. Nothing comes. Two seconds. Three. He finds it. Continues. The reporters' pens pause. Resume.

EVERARD We will now take your questions.

WITNESS #1 *(Standing, voice trembling slightly)* Everard... thank you. We... we are accustomed to the privacy of the family. But given the suddenness... and the public affection for the Mother... will the tradition of seclusion hold? Will we see the Heir?

EVERARD *(A soft, patronizing chuckle)* See him? See him? You wish to see the Heir while his heart is being— being carved out? Master Andrei is in the deep sanctum. The deep sanctum. He is undergoing the rites of grief. You know the law of this house: The Zagonovs do not weep in public. They do not bleed for an audience. No. No. You will not see him. You will see *me*. I am his voice. Is that not enough?

WITNESS #2 *(Hesitant, checking notes)* Of course. We understand. Regarding the... cause. Lady Anastasia was... fifty-two. The Zagonov longevity is... well, it is the foundation of the faith. Does her passing... does it suggest a failing in the protection? Or was it simply...

EVERARD (*Cutting in, sharp, the mask slipping*) Biology. It was— biology. Biology. (*He leans in, intense*) Do not confuse— do not confuse the vessel with the wine. Lady Anastasia was human. Wonderfully, tragically— human. She did not carry the spirit of the centuries in her veins; she carried it on her back. On her back. Her heart stopped. That is not— that is not a failure of the Church. It is the arithmetic of God. Do not look for conspiracy. There is no conspiracy.

WITNESS #3 (*Diffident, staring at his shoes*) Thank you again for your time, Everard. Lady Anastasia walked among us. She was the face we understood. With her passage, the lens into The Krepost is shattered. Are we to assume the shutters are being pulled down? That the silence is returning?

EVERARD (*Leaning forward, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper*) The "silence," as you— as you call it, is where the work happens. The work. Lady Anastasia was a diplomat to the biological world. She wore your time like a coat so you would not be— be frightened by the nakedness of ours. The window is closed, yes. Yes. But the house stands. The house stands. You do not need to look inside to know the furnace is burning.

WITNESS #2 (*Quiet awe, checking a historical note*) For three centuries, the Zagonov brides... they... (*He falters, terrified of offending*) ...they were fragile vessels. The lineage consumes them. But Anastasia... she was the one. The only one in generations to withstand the birth. To give The Elder a living heir and survive it. Does her death... does it signal the end of that miracle?

EVERARD (*His eyes shine. This is his favourite topic.*) The end? The end? No. No. She was the proof. You look at the two hundred women who broke— who broke under the weight of the Zagonov blood, and you see tragedy. We see— we see the refinement process. Refinement. She successfully delivered The Heir. She raised him. She completed the impossible. The impossible. (*He straightens, cold and proud*) She did not "die," gentlemen. She finished. Finished. There is no need for another miracle. The Heir is here. The miracle has lungs. It breathes. It breathes.

WITNESS #3 (*Emboldened by the silence*) There are reports from the West. The President's office issued a testimony. They used the word "autopsy." (*The room goes deadly silent*) Is the State... questioning the Church's timeline?

EVERARD freezes. *The tapping of his fingers stops. A benevolent steward evaporates. The fanatic steps forward.*

EVERARD (*Whispering into the mic*) Autopsy? You think we would let them cut her open? You think we would let politicians rummage through a saint like she was a stolen car? Beltrov is a man who counts votes. We count souls. If the State wishes to question the timeline, let them come to the gate. Let them knock. (*His voice rises, vibrating*) We are not subject to their biology. We are the exception. We are the miracle. You do not autopsy a miracle.

WITNESS #4 (*Pushing*) But if the Vatican joins the call... if they declare Vechnostism a "cult of personality" that is collapsing...

EVERARD (*Slamming the podium*) Collapsing? (*He laughs—a high, jagged sound*) Look at you. Terrified—and starving for it, aren't you? The disaster. You need the disaster because you cannot bear to admit why the pews are full. Why are the pews full? Ask yourself.

Do you think they come to us for comfort? Wines from the Island of France fill our cellars. Furs from the Bohemian coast warm our— (*He loses the thread. Finds it.*) They come because out there the world has become a machine: cold, solved, offering perfection without a pulse. People are choking on answers. They are sick of a life predicted before it is lived. They are starving for the flaw—for something that bleeds.

Do you think we built this on nothing? The Vatican is a museum. We are a factory. We offer the only luxury left in this century: a human soul that cannot be replicated.

WITNESS #2 (*Shouting now*) Was she alone? Did the Heir—

CHAOS. A flashbulb pops. Then another. The questions overlap, a rising tide of noise.

IVAN *steps forward. He does not shout. He simply occupies the space where the questions were. He places one massive hand on the microphone. The feedback squeals and dies.*

IVAN (*Voice like a tectonic plate shifting*) Quiet.

The room instantly falls silent.

IVAN (*He looks at the reporters with dull pity*) She is gone. You go now. Write your paper. Do not make noise in house of mourning. (*He points to the door*) Go.

EVERARD *is panting. He looks at the witnesses, his eyes wide, dilated, drinking in the fear. He wipes sweat from his upper lip. He composes himself, pulling the mask back on, but it's crooked now.*

EVERARD (*Breathless*) You heard him. The briefing is— concluded. It is concluded. (*He leans into the dead mic, whispering*) Slava tebe vechnaya.

EVERARD *turns sharply, robes swirling. IVAN herds him away like a bodyguard protecting a madman.*

EVERARD (*To IVAN*) Animals.

Exit EVERARD and IVAN.

I.III

A DIMLY LIT CHAMBER. MORNING.

Centre stage: A large, round mahogany table, polished to a mirror sheen—a silent arena for veiled intentions. The walls are swathed in wall hangings depicting Vechnostist folklore. Above the mantel, an ancient cartograph—the continent rendered in faded inks, coastlines where kingdoms should stand. Statues of past Elders stand in the periphery, their stone gazes fixed and all-seeing.

THE HERD *gathers. They wear red gowns inscribed with golden vigils.*

KSENIA *sits on the edge of her chair, a virtuoso of panic. She holds her stillness like a held breath. Her fingers drum a frantic, silent concerto on the wood—she is playing the furniture to keep from shaking apart.*

ANIKA *installs herself in the corner. She arranges her face—sympathy, she decides. She tests it. Wrong. She tries concern. Holds it. KSENIA watches. Says nothing.*

PEDRO *lounges, a splash of exotic colour in the grey. He is checking the lighting while the others pray. His charisma is calculated—a shark smiling in a tank of holy water. He takes unspoken leadership at the head of the table. He clears his throat with a poised authority.*

PEDRO The silence upstairs is... heavy today. Have you felt it? It presses down through the floorboards. *(He adjusts a paper by a millimeter.)* Grigori was seen moving linens from the East Wing at dawn. Fresh linens. That usually implies a guest. Or a rite.

ANIKA *(Cool, staring him down)* Grigori moves linens every Tuesday, Pedro. Don't read scripture in the laundry schedule.

PEDRO *(Smiling, without looking up)* Perhaps. But the corridors are leaking, Anika. The staff are whispering about a state visit. If the President is coming to kneel... the stage must be set accordingly. We cannot rely on improvisation. Everard is currently... occupied. He is out there defending the walls. We should ensure the interior is tidy for his return.

KSENIA *(Anxious)* Surely we wait for his directive? Everard was very clear about the hierarchy.

PEDRO *(Softly, reassuring)* Hierarchy requires support, Ksenia. It is not mutiny to be prepared. If Everard returns exhausted... if the witnesses have taken their pound of flesh... he will need a plan already in motion. I have drafted a preliminary schedule for the funeral. Logistics. Guest flow. Lighting. Mere... ritual relief. So he can focus on the spiritual.

ANIKA *(Pushing off the wall)* You're measuring him for a coffin, Pedro. Or rather, his chair. You think because he's struggling with the witnesses, the baton is up for grabs.

PEDRO (*Feigning hurt*) I am offering a shoulder. The man is carrying the weight of centuries. I simply suggest that we modernise our approach. The Elder... (*He glances at the ceiling, voice dropping*) ...The Elder's methods are ancient. They are beautiful. But they are slow. And the world outside is very, very fast.

KSENIA (*Whispering*) Do you think... do you think The Elder knows? About the witnesses?

PEDRO The Elder knows what he is told. And right now, he is told what Everard tells Grigori. We are the veil, Ksenia. That is a dangerous responsibility.

The heavy door swings open. It does not slam; it opens with a heavy creak.

EVERARD *enters. He skin is pale, clammy. He stops. He sees Pedro at the head of the table.*

EVERARD (*Voice tight, vibrating with suppressed adrenaline*) Productive morning?

PEDRO (*Smoothly gathering his papers, standing*) Just keeping the wheels turning, Everard. We were discussing... counter-rites. Should the public rite require further custody.

EVERARD (*Walking past him, stiff*) The witnesses are satisfied. They are vultures, naturally. They picked at the carcass. I gave them a bone. A bone. They left.

He touches the back of the chair Pedro just vacated. He wipes it with his thumb, as if removing a stain.)

EVERARD You may return to your station, Pedro.

PEDRO (*Moving aside*) Of course. I've taken the liberty of outlining the funeral logistics. To spare you the minutiae. Given the scrutiny... I thought a second pair of eyes on the —

EVERARD (*Turning slowly*) The logistics? You think this is a matter of *logistics*? (*He laughs*) This is not an event, Pedro. It is a Rite. You do not "outline" a Rite. You survive it. Do you think I need you to arrange the chairs?

KSENIA (*Tentative*) Everard... is Master Andrei... is he well?

EVERARD (*His eye twitches*) Master Andrei is... grieving. Grieving. He is processing the weight of the crown. It is a heavy thing. He requires our absolute perfection. There is no room for "counter-rites." There is only the score. Speaking of which.

He reaches into his robe. He pulls out a manuscript. It is thick, the pages crumpled as if clenched in a fist. He places it on the table. It lands with a heavy, damp thud.

EVERARD We have new instructions. From the source.

PEDRO (*Eyeing the manuscript*) A new composition? But we only have four days.

EVERARD (*Voice dropping to a reverent whisper*) He wrote it this morning. This morning. In the dark. In the— Grigori delivered it to me by hand. The ink was still wet. Still wet. (*He looks at them, eyes shining with a terrifying light*) It is... complex. Complex. It is unlike the canon. Unlike— it challenges the ear. It challenges the spirit. The spirit.

ANIKA (*Stepping forward, looking at the page*) This notation... Everard, look at the time signatures. They bleed into each other.

EVERARD It is Evolution. It is the sound of the bone— the bone growing. Andrei wants a lullaby. A lullaby. But The Elder... The Elder has commanded us to— to wake up. Wake up.

KSENIA (*Staring at the notes, terrified*) I... I don't know if I can play this. It looks... angry.

EVERARD (*Leaning in, intense*) Then you will learn. You will learn to be angry, Ksenia. We double the rehearsals. Morning. Night. Morning night morning night. We do not sleep. We do not sleep until this noise... becomes— becomes music. (*He looks at Pedro*) You wanted to help, Pedro? You wanted to— to manage something? Manage your embouchure. Because if you miss a single note— a single note of this... you will wish— you will wish you were back in the gutter.

PEDRO (*Jaw tight*) As you command, Everard.

EVERARD Get this room ready. We start in ten minutes.

EVERARD turns and exits, walking with a stiff, brittle gait, like a man made of glass.

PEDRO stands still. He looks at the manuscript.

ANIKA (*Quietly*) He's terrified.

PEDRO No. He's desperate. And desperate men make mistakes.

KSENIA (*Touching the paper*) It's cold. The paper is cold.

PEDRO (*A thin smile*) Then we'd better warm it up.

Exit PEDRO, ANIKA & KSENIA.

I.IV

A LONG, SHADOWED HALLWAY. CENTRE STAGE. AFTERNOON.

A secretive vein running deep within the bowels of The Krepost. The corridor stretches ahead, dimly lit.

The air is cooler here. The walls press close, compressing the breath. Minimal light flickers from mounted torches, casting long, stretching shadows that creep alongside the living.

***THE ELDER** is silhouetted in the darkness at the extreme rear of the stage, barely visible, cowered in the theatre's gloom.*

***ANDREI** walks the corridor. His boots meet the cold floor with a soft echo. He rehearses his questions, a tumult of strategy and apprehension. He approaches the massive, ornate door of the sanctum—gateway and guard.*

He reaches for the handle.

From the shadows, a figure materialises.

***GRIGORI** steps into the dim torchlight. He moves with the quiet efficiency of a mortician. He stands between The Heir and the door like a breathing padlock.*

GRIGORI *(Solemn, apologetic)* Master Andrei, I regret to intercept you like this. How are you? I'm sorry for your loss, you have been in my prayers.

ANDREI *(With a quiet acknowledgment)* Thank you, Grigori. And to you too. Mother touched us all.

GRIGORI Of course. It was an honour to serve under her. She was a resilient woman, Andrei, until the end.

ANDREI She was not cheated. *(A pause. He's not sure what that means.)* Nor was I.

GRIGORI Absolutely. I regret to inform you, Andrei, that your father has been forced to postpone his meeting with you today. I hope you can understand that urgent matters require his attention. There are a lot of moving parts in concern of the memorial proceedings, amongst this grief.

ANDREI *(Tight, controlled disappointment)* I see. I... understand. May I ask, what matters... specifically? I am of course willing to take anything on. Anything.

GRIGORI There's a composition to be finished, in preparation for the memorial. I've also been asked to pass a message on: The Krepost will be expecting the newly elected President Beltrov in the next couple of days. The president wishes to extend his condolences to you in person, and outline the future relationship of the state and the church.

ANDREI (*Puzzled shock*) You, or... father... has been talking to Beltrov?

GRIGORI Our staff has been in touch.

ANDREI (*Suspicious*) Some of his recent rallies have been... concerning. To say the least. I'm aware he's still under our... our thumb, but this visit is total news to me. Total news. (*He realizes how that sounds.*) I'm not sure if a public endorsement would reflect well on the church.

GRIGORI No witnesses, it will be a private meeting between the two of you.

ANDREI (*Bewildered*) With myself... personally? Is security and surveillance on top of... (*He's grasping.*) ...this?

GRIGORI It's a special circumstance. We will of course be monitoring the whole exchange behind the scenes, The Elder believes it will be beneficial for the future of the church to meet in this instance. You will be more than prepared for it.

ANDREI (*Asserting his role, with resignation*) Very well. I shall trust in his... judgement. (*He tries to sound authoritative.*) Grigori, how fares my father... how does he fare amidst these arrangements? Is his health still... robust?

GRIGORI He is, of course, grieving. Your mother meant a lot to him. But, he is still full of spirit and healthy. One would say he's even come to life these last few months, perhaps by the necessity of focus during this period.

ANDREI (*Tightly*) And yet... (*The bitterness surfaces.*) ...I find myself increasingly... sidelined. Should I not be more involved? Especially now?

GRIGORI I can assure you, you are still a very valuable asset to the church, Andrei. The Elder and I both recognise highly your service to our Lord and the very walls we find ourselves in. He is proud of you. He is proud of what you continue to accomplish, to extend the service in which he has dedicated his life. As he excelled the forefathers before him, I'm certain you will do the same in time.

ANDREI (*Sharper*) My only concern is that my father is beginning to... to doubt my capabilities. Is it that my role is merely... ceremonial? (*A bitter laugh escapes.*) Is it going to take another shoe thrown at a public rite to be taken seriously?

GRIGORI (*Quickly reassuring*) Master Andrei, your capabilities aren't being doubted. Your time will come to bear the full weight of this church. Your father is reflecting on his legacy, and so is the rest of the world as it seems. Between you and I, I believe he misses the old days.

He's still as sharp as ever, he's not looking to undo any of your progress. The ground is well and solid beneath your feet. Please, understand that your father acts with the families best interests at heart.

ANDREI (*Calming, nodding slowly*) I have no choice but to take you at your word, Grigori. (*He hears himself. How pathetic.*) You have always been a faithful servant to my family. However... ensure that I am kept informed. I should not be left to find such developments from... from third parties. Or chance encounters in hallways.

GRIGORI (*Advisory tone*) Of course, Master Andrei. Perhaps, consider this time as a strategic pause—engage more with The Herd, solidify your presence. Visibility and initiative now will reap future benefits. Visibility in these areas will not go unnoticed, nor will your initiative be unappreciated.

GRIGORI (*Gently*) No one is asking you to run, Master Andrei. Only to walk. That has always been enough.

ANDREI (*Resigned sigh*) Very well. (*He straightens, attempting dignity.*) Keep me informed, Grigori. And do not let this hallway be the place where we next discuss matters of such... weight.

GRIGORI (*Respectful nod*) Absolutely, Master Andrei. You will be the first to know when the moment for your involvement arises.

ANDREI turns, retreating back down the hallway. GRIGORI watches him go, a silent sentinel amidst the flickering shadows.

GRIGORI (*Quiet, almost to himself*) He soiled himself twice during the last procession. I changed him. He didn't notice. He was too busy being eternal.

As ANDREI walks away. His steps slow.

I.V

A RITUAL CHAMBER INSIDE THE KREPOST. EVENING. CENTRE STAGE.

An island of visibility in an ocean of darkness. A circular red stage is illuminated by a haunting spotlight. The air is thick with incense and ethereal whispers.

THE HERD stands in position. A **FACELESS CHOIR** forms a spectral ring around them.

IVAN looms by an array of large drums. **KSENIA** is surrounded by delicate strings and a grand piano. **ANIKA** stands amidst amber-glowing modular synthesisers. **PEDRO** guards a fortress of brass.

EVERARD stands at the heart, baton raised. A silent prayer.

ANDREI enters. His elongated shadow announces him. He steps onto the stage, altering the equilibrium. He sits in a sculpture of discomfort, filling a chalice with dark liquid. He grabs sheet music and reading glasses, his wrinkled fingers struggling with the pages.

EVERARD (*With concerning reverence*) Master Andrei, may the spirits of your bloodline fortify our hearts. Our hearts tonight.

ANDREI (*Slightly slurring, sharp*) **I watched the eye.** You were loud, Everard.

EVERARD (*Stiffening*) The witnesses are contained, Master Andrei. I built a wall around our family name.

ANDREI My family name... You built a spectacle. (*He drinks long and deep.*) A spectacle.

He drinks long and deep from the chalice. A wet, heavy swallow.

ANDREI What is the use of losing your head? A shepherd does not bark at the sheep. You look mad up there. (*He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.*) What is the use? Bolt yourself down before the funeral. I will not have you rattling apart at the altar.

EVERARD (*Swallowing his rage*) Understood, Master Andrei. My apologies.

ANDREI (*Firmly*) Let us begin. Let God guide your hands and... and voices.

EVERARD We begin with a piece from our canon, 'A NEW CRIMSON HAZE'.

EVERARD lowers his baton. The chamber fills.

IVAN scrapes the drum skins, erupting into a primal heartbeat. **KSENIA** cascades notes like light through stained glass. **ANIKA** breathes mechanical wind into the mix. **PEDRO** blasts bold, declarative brass.

*The **FACELESS CHOIR** rises, haunting and disembodied. The music escalates to a fever pitch, physically manifesting in the performers. In the second row, a cellist weeps. Her bow arm does not waver. No one looks at her. It ends on a resonant beat.*

Silence.

ANDREI (*Vacant expression, staring through them*) Very... well.

EVERARD (*Softly*) The second piece, Master Andrei, is newly— newly wrought from The Elder's hand. As recent as— as earlier today.

ANDREI (*Grimly, refilling his chalice*) Proceed. Proceed.

*The second piece begins. Sonic fragments float disjointedly. **IVAN** stumbles through an irregular rhythm. **KSENIA** strikes sharp, off-key staccatos. **PEDRO** emits sporadic, abrasive blares.*

*The **FACELESS CHOIR** laments. The ritual loses cohesion. It spirals into cacophony.*

***ANDREI** recoils. He clenches his fists.*

ANDREI (*Thundering, lurching to his feet*) Stop! Stop! What is... what is this?

***EVERARD** halts the music. The echo trembles.*

EVERARD (*Calm authority*) Master Andrei, the notation— the notation we play is exact— your father's own. Your father's. It's the music that is demanding, not our— not our commitment that is lacking.

ANDREI (*Stepping forward*) Demanding? This... this noise? It is not merely the notes but the... the soul behind them that defines our purpose! What I heard was a discord, a... a shambolic echo of what should have been... should have been sacred!

EVERARD (*Steadfast, stumbling*) Yes, of course— of course we can polish things up, in between now and the— the memorial service. But, of course Master Andrei, we follow the script as laid down by The Elder. Each note, each rest, exactly— exactly as inscribed. If there is discord, it is written into the score. Written in. Not born of our failure to— to honour it.

ANDREI (*Clenching fists*) A true devotee would elevate the notes beyond the... beyond the page! You lead them, Everard! If they falter, it is THAT hand that fails them! That hand!

***IVAN** looks uneasy. **KSENIA** is horrified. **ANIKI** watches the chaos.*

EVERARD (*Restraining anger*) The weight of our faith does not rest on my hand alone, Master Andrei. We are all bearers of this legacy — equally yoked, equally tried. Our performance mirrors the complexity of the script. I believe it is meant to challenge. To provoke.

ANDREI (*Peaking with frustration*) Challenge and provoke? It challenges the very sanctity of our rites, provokes nothing but chaos! This is not the refinement of faith; it is the unravelling of it!

EVERARD (*Fumbling*) Master Andrei, I do not doubt your judgement for a moment, but I must suggest — faith must be unravelled to reveal its true strength. We play what is written. To do otherwise would be to question the Elder's... wisdom.

ANDREI (*Outraged*) And what of my wisdom? My... my wisdom? Am I not to be your guide, your... your leader? If I say the music fails, it fails! It fails!

EVERARD (*Calmly*) Master Andrei, you are our future, of course, of course, but even you must sometimes— must sometimes bow to the greater design laid before us. This piece is complex. Complex. It requires patience. Understanding.

ANDREI (*Seething*) Patience? Understanding? No. No. It requires fidelity to the spirit of our... our order! If you cannot lead them to that, then... then perhaps...

Silence thickens. The candlelight hesitates.

ANDREI (*Turning, voice breaking with despair and rage*) We are lost... (*He looks at his hands*) ...utterly... utterly lost.

ANDREI *storms out. Heavy silence remains.*

I.VI

SHARED BEDROOM CHAMBER. EVENING.

A chamber of austere elegance. Pale stucco walls reflect moonlight from a high, narrow window. The furnishings are sparse: two narrow beds with white linens, separated by a modest table holding wildflowers.

KSENIA *sits on the edge of her bed. Her violin lies beside her. She sobs softly.*

ANIKA *enters. She pauses at the doorway, respecting the sanctity of the grief. She moves closer, sitting beside KSENIA, offering a steady, grounding presence.*

ANIKA You're going to snap a string if you keep shaking like that.

KSENIA *(Startled, wiping her face aggressively)* I'm fine. I'm just... resetting. It's the cold. I'm not used to the cold in here yet.

ANIKA *(Walking into the room, boots heavy on the floor)* It's not the temperature. It's the pressure. Everard screams, and you leak. You spill out all over the floor. It's messy, Ksenia. The Krepost doesn't like mess.

KSENIA I ruined the rehearsal. Andrei looked at me... and he saw it. He saw I don't belong here. I've only been here three months, Anika. I don't know the shorthand yet. I don't know how you all... *do* it.

ANIKA *(Sitting on her own bed, staring straight ahead)* Andrei wasn't looking at you. He was looking through you. He is the blood. We are just the veins. If you clog the flow, you get cut out.

KSENIA *(Desperate, leaning forward)* My father... he had that look. The silent one. He used to say my face was a distraction. That I should play with my head down so they wouldn't see the... the "hindrance." *(She touches her own face, revulsed)* I played for Andrei today. I played for the silence. And I failed. If they send me back... I have nowhere to go.

ANIKA *(Turning her head slowly)* Nobody gets sent back. That's not how this works. Once you walk in, you are part of the architecture. You think this is a conservatory? You think we're here for *art*? We are the mortar, Ksenia. We hold the stones apart so they don't grind each other to dust. It is a heavy job. And you are too soft for it.

KSENIA The Elder chose us. We are the voice. It's a holy calling.

ANIKA It is a *necessary* calling. While the walls rot, we play the tune that keeps them standing. Pedro knows it. That's why he's sharpening his knives. Everard knows it. That's why he doesn't sleep. And you... you're just happy to be inside the gate.

KSENIA *(Trembling)* Why are you so cruel? I thought we were sisters in this.

ANIKA I'm not cruel. Most people sleep. I watch. I see the sweat on Everard's lip. I see the shake in your bow. I see the things that are about to break.

KSENIA (*Softly*) What do you see, Anika?

ANIKA (*Rubbing her temples, a dull, rhythmic pain*) It happens when I'm walking. The world... stutters. I was in the courtyard this morning. Before the rain. I looked at the old Elm tree. The big one by the wall. And for a second... it wasn't a tree. It was grey. Like dead skin. And there was a branch... low down... trying to reach the light.

KSENIA (*Whispering*) A branch?

ANIKA (*Eyes unfocused, voice flat*) It wasn't wood. I saw it snap. It made a sound like a bone breaking. It fell into the mud. And when I walked past it... it was wearing your dress. It was just a limb. A severed limb in a red sleeve. Lying in the dirt. And then I blinked... and it was just a stick again.

KSENIA (*Horried*) That's... that's what you saw? Me?

ANIKA *flinches slightly, as if waking up. She looks down, rubbing the back of her neck—a rare, awkward gesture.*

ANIKA I don't know. Maybe. It sounds... mad when I say it out loud. Like I'm cracking. Forget it. It was probably just the migraine. This place is getting to me too.

KSENIA Anika...

ANIKA (*She stiffens, forcing the mask back on. She hates the pity.*) The point is, you're exposed. You cling to Pedro because he smiles. You think he's sunlight. But he isn't. He is just a different kind of frost.

KSENIA He's my friend. He's the only one who explains things to me.

ANIKA He's a climber. And climbers need things to step on. (*She lies back, staring at the ceiling*) Stop vibrating, Ksenia. Please. If you want to survive in this house... stop trying to be a flower. Be stone.

KSENIA (*Hugging the violin case tighter*) I don't know how to be stone.

A silence hangs in the air.

KSENIA But thank you, Anika, for listening. It means more than you know.

ANIKA Remember, my door is open should you ever need a shoulder. We must support each other through these trials.

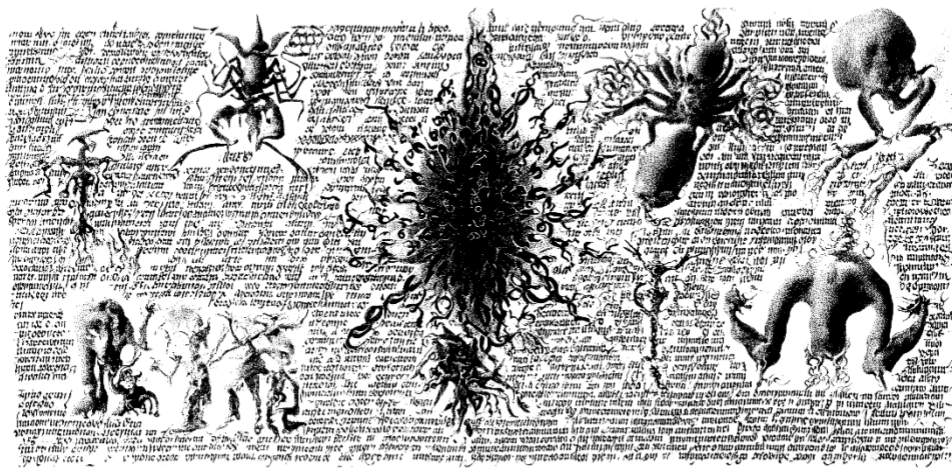
They embrace at the edge of the bed. Moonlight flickers across ANIKA's features.

*The embrace loosens. **KSENIA** rises with resolve. She switches off the light.*

*Darkness swallows the room. **ANIKA** remains seated, gaze lost to the shadows. **KSENIA** stands in the quiet.*

Lights dim.

CURTAINS CLOSE.



SECOND CODA

A PRISON CELL. TIMELESS EVENING.

*Stone walls. A black void below. **HERETYK** enters. He carries the heavy chain in his hands. He drops it. **PRYSZONER** sits in the shadows. He leans against the stone. He does not look up.*

HERETYK (*shouting at the ceiling*) Vnfair, say ye? Oh, what trials are cast vpon me, not by blind fate, bvt by y^e hands of men who name themselves y^e ivst. They stand in sacred robes, pillars of y^e Divine, yet 'neath y^t cloth there beats a tyrant's heart.

He walks the length of the chain. He turns.

HERETYK And my brethren, y^e scholars, y^e seekers of light... how swiftly they avert their gaze when inquiry's torch vnveils a shadow they dare not tovch. In halls of wisdom they praise my name when my discoveries serve them, yet at y^e slightest wind of dissent they scatter like chaff.

He kicks the wall. Dust falls.

HERETYK (*agonised*) And then Thov, y^e final arbiter, y^e so-called Architect! Tell me, what divine plan scripts a man's rvin as reward for knowledge sovght? If y^s be His ivstice, 'tis as flawed as y^e mortals who bow before it.

He drops to a crouch.

HERETYK I stand condemned for daring to challenge y^e order, for reaching past y^e veil they so fear to tovch. And so I belong here, in y^s forsaken cell, where shadows swallow y^e light and hope is bvt a distant echo.

He pulls his collar open. He exposes his throat to the damp air.

HERETYK (*bitterly triumphant*) Let them call me Heretyk. If seeking trvth in y^e silence of God's word be heresy, then let my sovl be y^e torch to bvrn through their sanctified lies.

The other man shifts his leg. Fabric scrapes on stone.

PRYSZONER (*whispered resignation*) To find Him, or to escape from Him?

HERETYK *spins around. The chains clash.*

HERETYK (*startled*) And what is y^t to thee? Who in hell's name art thov? What dost thov here?

PRYSZONER (*unbothered*) In y^s confine of shadow and bar, I ask thee... dost thov seek y^e Essence, or escape from Him?

HERETYK (*desperate*) Escape? How can one escape, when these walls are stone and y^e darkness thick? In y^s cell, where light dares not linger, 'tis He who escapes from me. Can a ivst Essence look vpon svch despair?

PRYSZONER *picks a loose thread from his sleeve. He snaps it.*

PRYSZONER (*slow, deliberate*) Despair, like hope, is bvt a web woven in y^e mind. What thov seest as abandonment, another might see as a test of y^e spirit.

HERETYK (*pacing*) I am bvt a pawn in a game I never agreed to play. How am I to feel y^e divine hand in all y^s misery?

PRYSZONER (*soothing*) Perhaps it is not y^e hand y^t casts vs down, bvt y^e strength we find within ovr selves to rise once more.

HERETYK (*poisonous sarcasm*) Strength! In these chains, forsooth, I feel most mighty! A wild boar tied to a fence post, ready to rip it from y^e earth. Canst thov, strong man in chains, tear these bars from y^e wall and set vs free? Tell me, old wise sage, where lies y^e line between endvring and merely existing?

PRYSZONER *stands. He moves to the edge. He looks into the void.*

PRYSZONER (*serene*) Y^t line is faint as y^e horizon at dvsck. Yet it beckons — not to be seen, bvt to be chased. In y^t pvrsvit thov wilt find not answers, bvt y^e meaning of y^e iovrney itself. (*barely audible*) Here in these bonds, I roam worlds thov canst not see. Wovldst thov call me confined, then, or y^e freest of men?

HERETYK (*piercing*) And do y^e eyes of Him roam these realms whereof thov speakest?

PRYSZONER *turns his back to the void. He faces HERETYK.*

PRYSZONER (*smirking*) Only if essences dwell in walls of concrete and shadow. (*eyes narrowing*) And do not flatter thyself, boy.

HERETYK (*scornful*) So thov agreest. We are forsaken. Cast aside — thov perhaps by y^e greed of some magnate, or y^e violence of thine own hand. Yet we are mvch different, old man. I was exiled in pvrsvit of sacred trvths, a martyr for y^e light, like Galileo or Hypatia. And thov? Merely robbed of an eternity of y^e petty and y^e mean.

PRYSZONER (*contemplative*) Y^s obsession of thine, y^s cry of abandonment... Hast thov never thought, Heretyk, y^t we are left alone vpon y^e stage of ovr own deeds? Not y^t y^e Essence is indifferent or crvel, bvt y^t y^e canvas of life — its hves of chaos and order — is ovr s to paint. We forge ovr own fates, raising gardens or prisons with each choice. Each path led here by ovr own designs, not by a divine hand y^t gvides or forsakes.

HERETYK (*shocked disdain*) Thov darest strip y^e heavens of their governance, to set mere mortals at y^e helm of fate? Mortals as stypid as thov? How trivial thov makest y^e sacred! Nay, we are cast by winds divine or cvrsed, ovr every breath a note in a grander symphony. To reiect y^t for vanity is to walk blind into y^e abyss, where only shadows echo ovr folly. May y^e Essence save thee, thov hopeless bastard.

PRYSZONER (*cold logic*) If I am a hopeless bastard, and thov a hopeless bastard, is y^t thy Essence's making? If we are bvt pvppets to a celestial will, then who bears y^e sin, y^e gvilt, y^e glory? Y^s flawed God thov clingest to mirrors so precisely y^e natvre of man — capable of svblime beavty and vnspeakable horror in a single breath.

HERETYK *stops pacing. The chain settles.*

HERETYK (*voice hollow*) Could it be... have I been chasing shadows? Shadows of mine own making?

PRYSZONER (*firm*) Yes, perhaps thov hast.

HERETYK Searching for signs from above... and what if nothing was ever there?

PRYSZONER (*nodding gently*) Then thov hast been hvnting phantoms.

HERETYK (*trembling*) Phantoms... Have I condemned myself to y^s? To despair?

PRYSZONER Not condemned. Awakened.

HERETYK (*breaking*) Awakened? To what? To y^s abyss y^t gapes before me?

PRYSZONER *steps closer. He grabs the bars. He mirrors the cage.*

PRYSZONER (*potent whisper*) Hold fast to y^s despair y^t claws at thy heart, **HERETYKU** for it is thine, and thine alone. Embrace it. Caress its depths as it hath caressed thine, for it heralds a dawn brighter than any before. Thov wert never forsaken, for there was never a pantheon to forsake thee. What thov took for divine reiection was navght bvt y^e solitvde of thine own spirit echoing back at thee. Y^s abyss is all thine to fashion.

HERETYK (*recoiling*) Nay, nay, a thovsant times nay. What dreary and bleak a dawn y^t would be, wherein each sovl is its own maker, vngvided, vnloved... a cold star in an empty sky.

He looks at the floor.

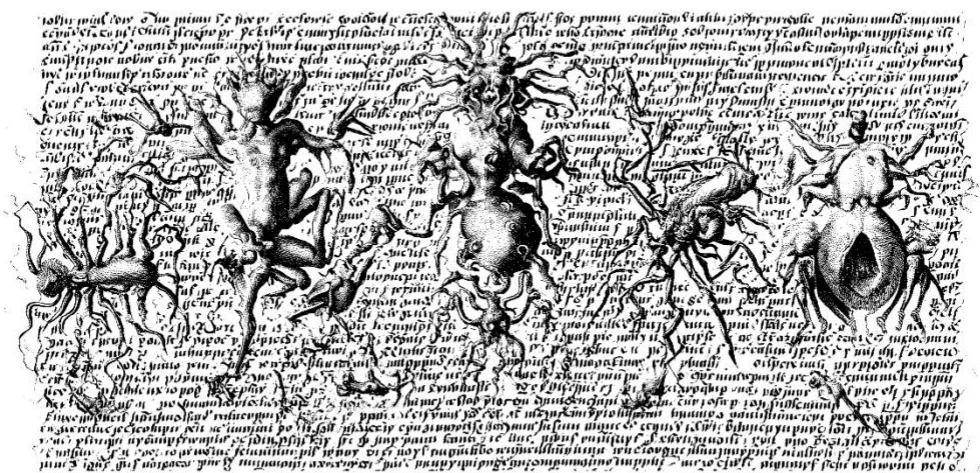
HERETYK Thy freedom... 'tis... 'tis a cold expanse. How can svch filth embrace svch solitvde, knowing there is no warmth in it? I... I mvst believe there is more. There mvst be. (*accusatory*) And thov, thov devil, what is thy game? A mvrderovs test thrown my way. I have been through mvrderovs trials, yet thov may be y^e dirtiest of them all.

PRYSZONER (*condescending dismay*) Do not let thy head leave thy body, shackled scab.

HERETYK retreats to the corner. He picks at his hands. **PRYSZONER** lies down. He pulls his hat over his eyes.

The crimson glow fades.

CURTAINS CLOSE.



II

II.I

ANDREI'S SLEEPING QUARTERS. EARLY MORNING

A spacious, suffocating chamber. High ceilings lost in shadow; stone walls adorned with faded wall hangings that whisper of the past. An ornate four-poster bed stands at the centre, draped in heavy crimson. The air is thick with old wood, dust, and incense.

***ANDREI** sleeps. His face is a contorted mask of distress. He tosses, sweat glistening, breath coming in ragged gasps.*

*Shadows twist. **FRAGMENTED VISIONS** flicker on the walls—ghostly projections of a tormented history.*

The dreamscape bleeds into reality.

*A harsh, bright light slices the gloom. **YOUNG ANDREI** (7) kneels on phantom gravel, hands bleeding. **LADY ANASTASIA** towers over him, a silhouette of cold judgment.*

YOUNG ANDREI (*Desperate*) Mother, I... I can't...

LADY ANASTASIA (*Cold and unyielding*) Can't? We do not speak of can't.

YOUNG ANDREI (*Trembling*) I'm trying, I'm trying... My hands are hurting...

LADY ANASTASIA (*Cutting him off*) Trying is for the weak. We must succeed.

YOUNG ANDREI (*Searching for mercy*) But it hurts, Mother...

LADY ANASTASIA (*Dismissive*) Pain is the companion of the chosen. Embrace it.

YOUNG ANDREI Why must it be this way?

LADY ANASTASIA (*Harsh whisper*) Legacy is not a choice. It is a command. If you do not find your strength then you will break..

YOUNG ANDREI (*Almost to himself*) I don't want to break...

LADY ANASTASIA Then you must become unbreakable.

*The light shifts to a flickering oil lamp. Shadows flicker. **LADY ANASTASIA** stands over a cradle. A **SLAVE** trembles before her.*

LADY ANASTASIA (*Hushed, fierce*) You know the price of failure. He must not suffer the same fate.

SLAVE (*Quivering*) But, madam, the others... they didn't survive...

LADY ANASTASIA Do whatever it takes. This one will live.

*A muffled scream pierces the silence. **LADY ANASTASIA** looks down at the infant.*

LADY ANASTASIA (*Whispering*) You will be stronger than those before you.

She steps away, rigid.

LADY ANASTASIA You must learn to endure.

***ANDREI** stands in the corner of the room, mimicking the cries of his infant self.*

*The room warps. The air smells of stale alcohol. **YOUNG ANDREI** (20) stumbles, drunk and broken. **LADY ANASTASIA** appears, distorted, amplified.*

LADY ANASTASIA (*Sharp, merciless*) Look at you, Andrei. A shadow of disgrace.

YOUNG ANDREI (*Slurring, defiant*) I'm... I'm fine, Mother... I can't...

The portraits on the walls morph into mocking visages. Crimson light bathes the scene.

LADY ANASTASIA (*Relentless*) The bones of the lost cradle your birth. Let their whispers haunt your every step.

YOUNG ANDREI (*Trembling*) It's too much... It's crushing me...

LADY ANASTASIA (*Unyielding*) Crumble now. Pathetic.

*The floor ripples. **YOUNG ANDREI** is trapped.*

YOUNG ANDREI (*Whispering*) I can't... I can't be this...

A final flash. A grotesque sculpture of flesh, metal, and wax looms in the dark. A skull crowned in barbed wire, bleeding red wax forever. The hum of agony.

The nightmare peaks.

***ANDREI** convulses. He screams.*

ANDREI (*A gut-wrenching wail*) AAAAAAAH!

The room EXPLODES with motion. Cabinets fling open. Books fly from shelves. Papers swirl in a chaotic maelstrom. A poltergeist storm of psychic anguish.

***ANDREI** jolts upright. The whirlwind settles. Silence.*

He scrambles out of bed, wild-eyed. He stumbles to a cabinet, fumbling through the mess until he finds a half-empty bottle of vodka.

He uncorks it. He drinks. Desperately. The liquid spills down his chin. He gasps, sagging against the wood.

The terror recedes, dulled by the burn. He takes another long swig.

He stands there, bottle in hand, staring blankly into the dark. A fragile calm settles.

II.II

TEACHING CHAMBER IN THE KREPOST. MORNING.

KSENIA *has opened a high shutter, allowing a rare beam of actual sunlight to hit the floor. She sits on the edge of the desk, not behind it. Her violin rests on her knee, not in playing position, but held like a storybook.*

*The **CHILDREN** are gathered close, sitting on cushions, looking up at her with genuine adoration. This is the only room in The Krepost where people are smiling.*

KSENIA *(Warmly, conspiratorial)* Now. Who remembers where the music comes from?
Does it come from the paper?

CHILD 1 No!

KSENIA *(Plucking a string—a bright, happy ‘ping’)* Does it come from the wood?

CHILDREN No!

KSENIA It comes from the waiting.

She plays a soft, shimmering scale.

KSENIA Long ago — Measure Negative Four Hundred, perhaps, or Negative Three Hundred — before the walls were high, Polesia was just a field of snow. The wind blew right through people. It made them cold. It made them forget who they were.

CHILD 2 Because of the Noise?

CHILD 4 But Miss Ksenia — how can there be Measures before the Elder?

KSENIA Because His Patience extends in both directions.

The children nod. This makes sense to them.

KSENIA *(Nods, impressed)* Exactly. Because of the Noise.

She leans in, whispering a ghost story.

KSENIA You see, outside these walls... the world built a new god. They didn’t build him out of flesh and bone, like us. They built him out of wires. And glass. And speed.

She plays a frantic, mechanical, repetitive rhythm on one string. Like a ticking clock or a machine.

KSENIA Their god doesn't sleep. He doesn't dream. He just... calculates. He wants everyone to be perfect. He wants everyone to be the same. *(She stops the noise abruptly.)* But The Elder... The Elder remembered the secret. He knew that to be real, you have to bleed. You have to feel things. Even the sad things.

CHILD 3 Is that why we paint our faces red?

KSENIA *(Touching the child's sleeve tenderly)* That is why we paint ourselves red. To remind their God that we still have blood. That we are not machines. Polesia is the last place on earth where we are allowed to have patience.

She plays a slow, mournful, beautiful melody. It sounds like a river thawing.

KSENIA And that brings us to The Herd. To us.

She looks around the circle, meeting their eyes.

KSENIA Do you know how we find you? Do you know how we pick the ones who get to wear the crimson stripe?

CHILD 4 You pick the strongest?

KSENIA *(Laughs gently.)* Oh, no. The strongest go to the fields. The strongest build the walls. We don't look for muscles.

(She taps her own chest) We listen for the Hum.

The children touch their own chests, mimicking her.

KSENIA Everyone has a sound inside them. Most people? They sound like... hissing insects. Or static. But some special people... some very rare people... they vibrate.

She plays a perfect, resonant vibrato.

KSENIA Like a string that's waiting to be plucked. When I was your age, I lived in a noisy house. Everyone shouted. But I had the Hum. I could hear the music in the floorboards.

CHILD 2 And The Elder heard you?

KSENIA The Elder has an ear that stretches across the whole world. He heard me vibrating in the dark. And he called me home.

(She smiles, radiant with memory) To be in The Herd is to be tuned. It means you are not just a person anymore. You are a note in the great song. And do you know what happens to our song?

CHILD 1 It ends?

KSENIA No. A song echoes. A song travels forever. If you are in The Herd, you never disappear. You just become part of the air. You become part of the walls. You hold up the roof so the others can sleep. *(Softly)* It is the most important job in the world. To be the beautiful sound that keeps the monster away.

She pauses for a moment before bringing her violin back to her chin.

KSENIA Imagine a long, long winter. The longest winter in the world. That was the time of Vladimir Zagonov. The First Father of Vechnostism.

She plays a soft, shivering tremolo on the high E string.

KSENIA Back then, the world was cold. And there was a very angry Prince named Buletuitz who wanted to freeze everything. He wanted everyone to be statues.

CHILD 1 What's a Prince?

KSENIA A man who thought he could own a country. Like owning a house. We don't have those anymore.

CHILD 2 *(Giggling)* Like Ivan?

KSENIA *(Laughing)* A little bit like Ivan! But much meaner. Buletuitz said, "Everyone must stop!"

(She plays a harsh, abrupt stop) But Vladimir... Vladimir had a secret. He had a fire inside him that wouldn't go out. He realized that if he just... kept... breathing... the winter couldn't catch him.

She plays a long, beautiful, legato melody. It is sweet and melancholic. The children sway slightly.

KSENIA He lived past the winter. He lived past the spring. He lived long enough to see the world turn green again. That is why we are here. Because Vladimir waited for the sun to come back for us.

CHILD 3 What about the Mothers?

KSENIA *(Her face softens)* Ah. The Mothers.

(She touches the body of the violin tenderly) Do you know what a candle does when it loves the room?

*The **CHILDREN** shake their heads.*

KSENIA It burns down. It turns all of its wax into light. It doesn't hurt. It's just... giving. The Mothers looked at the Zagonovs, and they said, "I have so much time, and you need it more than I do." So they gave it to them. Like a present. A gift of breath.

(She gently strums the violin like a guitar) Isn't that beautiful? To love someone so much you give them your tomorrow?

A beat.

CHILD 4 *(Thoughtful, small voice)* Miss Ksenia?

KSENIA Yes, darling?

CHILD 4 If The Elder lives forever... and everyone else gives him their tomorrows... doesn't he get lonely?

The question hang. KSENIA's smile stays plastered on her face, but the light behind her eyes flickers out.

She tries to answer. She opens her mouth. Nothing comes.

KSENIA *(Strained)* Lonely? No. No, he... he has the history. He has... us.

CHILD 4 But he's always in the dark. If he's the sun, why is he in the dark?

KSENIA *stands up abruptly. The violin clatters against the desk.*

She turns away, breathing fast. The warmth is evaporating, replaced by the cold draft of the hallway.

KSENIA *(Voice tight, higher pitch)* The sun isn't... The sun doesn't need friends. The sun has a job. Do you understand? He isn't a person like you or me. He can't be.

CHILD 5 Are you lonely, Miss Ksenia?

SNAP. KSENIA slams her hand onto the desk.

KSENIA *(Shouting, raw)* STOP IT!

The children recoil, terrified. The safe room is breached. KSENIA looks at them, seeing her own sacrifice reflected in their eyes, and she hates it.

KSENIA *(Trembling, rapid-fire)* We do not ask that! If you ask if the sky is heavy, you will drop it! Do you want the winter to come back?! Do you?!

The children begin to cry. KSENIA stops. She slumps, clutching the violin to her chest like a shield. Her hand reaches out, adjusts ANIKA's wrist. Muscle memory. She doesn't know she's done it.

KSENIA (*Whispering, broken*) It's not lonely. It's holy. It has to be holy. Or else... what are we doing?

She looks at the door.

KSENIA Class is dismissed. Go now. Please. Just go.

*The **CHILDREN** scramble out, confusion and fear on their faces. **KSENIA** is left alone in the sunbeam.*

She brings the violin to her chin. She tries to play the lullaby again. It screeches. A jagged, ugly sound. She stops.

She inhales deeply, forcing a mask of resolve back into place.

II.III

THE RITUAL CHAMBER. DAY.

The arena of the previous night's chaos. A grand piano dominates the centre, surrounded by music stands and scattered sheets of paper.

EVERARD *stands by the piano, fingers hovering like talons. His face is taut, a mask of stress and manic determination. He battles the dissonant score.*

PEDRO *sits on a stool, trumpet in lap. His posture is languid, but his eyes are sharp, predatory. He taps a sheet of music against his knee—a rhythmic challenge.*

ANIKA *is stationed in the shadows near a wall of synthesisers. Her hands tremble above the controls, a sculptor afraid of the clay.*

Silence.

EVERARD *(Tight, vibrating)* Again. Again. Letter C. You are making it too... *lyrical*.

PEDRO *(Doesn't look up)* I am playing the notes on the page, Everard.

EVERARD Why are you— why are you *singing* them? You are rounding the attack. Rounding it. Dulling the whole thing.

(He stabs a finger at the score) Look at this marking. Look. *Sforzando*. It is not a suggestion. Not a suggestion. It needs to bite.

PEDRO *(Sighs, clicking the valve back into place)* If I attack that hard in the Cathedral, the sound will ring out for ten seconds. The echo in the nave is immense, Everard. You play a *sforzando* minor second against a major seventh in that stone cavern, it becomes a nightmare.

ANIKA *(Flat, blowing eraser dust off the page)* Pedro is right. The harmony is too dense. The lower strings are muddying the cello line.

EVERARD *(Desperate)* It is *written* to be dense! Dense! It is written to sit in the throat! In the throat!

PEDRO It is written poorly.

(He finally looks up, eyes sharp) The tessitura is too high for the brass. There is nowhere to breathe. If you want the dissonance to land, you have to earn it. You cannot just scream for forty bars. My lip will be dead by the Kyrie.

ANIKA (*Tracing the staff with a finger*) It is structurally unsound.

(*She taps the page with her pencil*) If we drop the third in the bass... open up the voicing... the chord will bloom. It will still sound dark, but it will actually vibrate.

EVERARD (*Horried*) "Drop the third"? Drop the— this is not a concerto, Anika. Not a concerto.

PEDRO (*Laughing softly*) We are just orchestrating, maestro. That is the job.

(*He presses the valves, a rhythmic clatter*) Look at the phrasing. It is a vocal line forced into metal. If I play it strictly, I will collapse by bar 50. If we cheat the breath marks... if we soften the articulation... we get through the service with dignity.

EVERARD (*Slamming his hand on the piano key*) Then collapse! Collapse! You are not here for *dignity*! You are here to bleed! To bleed!

(*He is shaking*) He wrote this with a palsied hand in the dark. In the dark. The struggle is the point! The struggle! If you smooth it out, you lie. You lie. You turn a prophecy into a... a parlor song!

ANIKA (*Coldly*) I would rather play a lie that is in tune than a truth that sounds like incompetence.

PEDRO (*Smiling*) Exactly. Do you want the President to hear a "struggle"? Or do you want him to hear a masterpiece?

(*He raises the trumpet mouthpiece to his lips*) Let's broaden the tempo. Let the room do the work. The old man won't hear the difference from his chamber.

EVERARD (*Losing patience*) Absolutely not, *no, no*! What in God's name— what in God's name are you suggesting here? Have the pair of you become— become fallen angels? We are not altering anything. Anything. That is written down. Do you hear me? Do you? We will adhere to this notation exactly— exactly as it is. Anika, I know this may seem more complex than the three-crotchet waltz you usually paddle around with, but it is about time— about time you rose to the occasion.

ANIKA (*Offended*) You won't speak to me like I am some pompous novice from a ballroom band. I understand the complexity, but I also understand the need for *clarity* and *coherence*. We can respect The Elder's hand without blindly walking into every note to our detriment, and Master Andrei's cursing.

PEDRO (*Stepping in*) Everard, that's enough. Anika is right. We're not questioning The Elder's work. We have to interpret it in a way that's performable and—

EVERARD (*Coldly*) How presumptuous— how presumptuous of you both to assume you understand The Elder’s intention better than the notation itself. The notation. Perhaps you think his quill merely danced across the paper by accident, documenting erroneous— erroneous articulations.

This isn’t about your convenience. The first new piece in my lifetime, and a gift to a humanity who awaits it. If these standards are beyond you, to play the notes written in God’s ink, then perhaps you should greatly reconsider your place within The Herd.

PEDRO It’s the fumble of your baton that will bring his music to its death. If you can’t see what’s necessary, then perhaps it’s *you* who should reconsider your place within The Herd.

EVERARD (*Voice rising with manic fury*) Are you lecturing ME on musicianship? On— on integrity? You, who wouldn’t know subtlety if it bit you in the eye— in the eye, would you?

He stabs a finger towards PEDRO, shaking.

EVERARD Does subtlety exist— does subtlety exist in the warp and corruption you bring with every word? Every word? Spare me your monkey ideas and play the notes— play the notes as your saviour has written!

PEDRO rises slowly, a storm of composure against EVERARD’S chaotic energy. The shadows of their conflict loom large on the walls.

PEDRO (*Voice firm through condescending laughs*) Can you believe what’s going on? This hasn’t much to do about the music; but a clawing need to control.

ANIKA (*Urgent*) Enough of this. Our focus is that of the rehearsal. The music awaits our devotion. We cannot squander our time with these grievances.

EVERARD (*Sneering*) Very well. Very well. Focus and dedication, everyone. The funeral demands nothing less than perfection. Perfection. Even if I must drag these bitter souls through it.

ANIKA (*Sighing*) Let’s just begin.

PEDRO (*Muttering in Portuguese, smiling smugly*) *Vai se foder.*

PEDRO snaps his trumpet case shut. The latches click like gun hammers—clack, clack. He slings the case over his shoulder, moving toward the door with an easy, fluid arrogance.

EVERARD (*Voice low, stopping him*) And the girl?

PEDRO pauses. He doesn’t turn around.

EVERARD Ksenia. I saw you in the courtyard. You hover over her, rubbing your hands like a horsefly.

PEDRO (*Turning slowly, a performative smile*) She's nervous, Everard.

EVERARD (*Stepping closer, invading his space*) She is fragile. You are trying to make her *thick* like you.

ANIKA (*From the corner, packing cables*) She needs a friend, Everard. Not a warden.

EVERARD (*Whirling on Anika*) If she is comfortable, she is useless! (*Back to PEDRO*) Just stay away from her. Do not drag her back down to your level.

PEDRO (*The smile vanishes*) My "level" is the only thing keeping this section in time.

(*He leans in, whispering*) You want her to break? Fine. But when she snaps in the middle of the Requiem... don't look at me to pick up the pieces. I'm just the brass section.

PEDRO turns to leave. The heavy oak door GROANS open.

IVAN fills the frame. He is covered in dust—white plaster dust from the cathedral preparation. He looks like a golem made of stone. He brings the smell of cold air and manual labor into the room.

EVERARD (*Switching instantly from rage to desperate need*) Ivan. Tell me it is done.

IVAN (*Voice deep, slow—a tectonic plate shifting*) The staff... they run in circles. Like chickens. But the dais is built.

EVERARD The acoustics? Did you dampen the north transept?

IVAN (*Nods*) Wool blankets. Behind the wall hangings. It will hold the sound.

EVERARD (*Exhaling, a momentary relief*) Fine. Good. You see? Someone understands the weight.

PEDRO (*brushing past IVAN*) Thank you for your service, Ivan. Try not to drop the church on your foot.

PEDRO exits, whistling a dissonant fragment of the score—perfectly in tune, perfectly mocking.

ANIKA shoulders her bag. She looks at Everard with a mix of pity and disgust.

ANIKA We'll be back at five. Eat something, Everard. You look like a ghost.

ANIKA exits. **IVAN** lingers for a second, looking at Everard's shaking hands.

IVAN (*Softly*) Rest, brother. The stone will wait.

IVAN turns and leaves, closing the door with a heavy, final THUD.

***EVERARD** is alone. The silence rushes back into the room. It rings in his ears. He looks at the score on the piano. The black notes seem to be crawling off the page, like insects escaping a fire.*

He walks to the centre of the room. He raises his hands. He closes his eyes. He conducts the silence.

His movements are jerky, violent, weeping.

He hums a single, cracking note. It breaks. He stands in the empty room, his hand trembling in the air, waiting for an orchestra that isn't there.

II.IV

THE ANCESTRAL LIBRARY. EVENING.

A private domain of heavy drapes and dark wood. Shadows loom large, stretching and recoiling like living things. A single candle burns low on the grand table.

***ANDREI** moves through the labyrinth of towering shelves. He is drunk, his elegance fraying into sloppiness. He clutches an aged bottle, swaying as if the floor is shifting. He stops at an empty chair. Raises the bottle. Nods to it. The full formal gesture. He drinks.*

He mutters to the ghosts in the room. His laughter is bitter, hollow.

A SLAVE passes the open doorway, carrying a taper.

ANDREI (*Calling out*) You. What hour is it?

SLAVE (*Bowing, eyes down*) Third descent of the Measure, Master.

ANDREI opens his mouth to ask. He closes it. He cannot. The SLAVE waits, then withdraws.

He drinks.

ANDREI (*Placing a heavy tome atop a wobbling stack*) Steady... steeeeady, you old dog. Old dog.

The tower sways.

ANDREI Don't you bow to me. Don't you... I am the Heir. The Heir. I said... stand. Stand!

The tower collapses. A dull, heavy thud of knowledge hitting the floor.

ANDREI (*A wet, hacking giggle*) Timber. Tiiiiimber. Down goes the... the doctrine.

(He dips a finger into the black sludge cocktail and sucks it.) Tastes like... irony. And copper. Mother always said the medicine tasted of the earth.

(He spits on the floor.) It tastes like a grave, Mother. You were eating the grave while you were still walking on it.

He struggles to his feet, knees popping audibly—click, click. He grabs the goblet, splashing black liquid onto his chest. He doesn't wipe it off.

ANDREI (*To the ceiling*) Are You watching this bit? Look at me. I'm a pickle. That's a miracle, isn't it? Vladimir wanted to be a god—so You turned us into... into cured meat.

EVERARD The funeral. We have been rehearsing relentlessly. The Herd has made such great improvement—but by the grace of your father’s quill—I implore you, there is *more* to connect with. More. This piece... it is beyond— beyond the parchment.

ANDREI (*Squinting*) You come here... past midnight... past... a wet wet wet wet wet boy... crying about *sheet music*? In your... deranged little head... you think this is... conduct?

EVERARD No, no, not exactly— not exactly Master Andrei—although your feedback is pivotal. Pivotal. It is with a vulnerable heart that I ask—

ANDREI (*Leaning forward, swaying*) You want *me*... to write a new piece? Well... I suppose I did have a few ideas. It was something like... dooo do doooo duh da deee daah dum daaah. Or was it dum dooo daaah dun dun deee duh duh duuhh—

EVERARD (*Interrupting*) I need to meet with The Elder.

A moment of shocked silence. The room spins.

ANDREI (*A laugh bubbles up*) A meet and greet with the old Tick? (*He hiccups*) Everard... you wet wet boy... I think you need to... You’re on the bloody drink I see!

EVERARD Master Andrei, I know how— I know how ludicrous it sounds! Ludicrous. But you must know—you must— I wouldn’t come to you if it wasn’t of the utmost—

ANDREI (*Raising the heavy crystal bottle unsteadily*) Leave my chamber. Everard. Wet Everard. Before I shatter this bottle... on your skull.

(*He grins, eyes swimming*) And I will let the Lord judge... if my hand is sinful for it. Or just... slippery.

EVERARD Master Andrei, please! Please! Just a moment! Recognize the value— the value of this performance on the legacy of the fam—

ANDREI (*Suddenly quiet. A terrifying, drunken hush*) You will never... be his son. Everard.

He tries to stand, stumbles, stays on his knees.

ANDREI No lunacy... behind your eyes... no *rancid* movements of your tongue... will ever make you... Family. You will never feel the touch of His hand. You will never hear the gravel... of his voice. You will never feel the weight... of the *blood*.

(*He takes a swig, spilling it down his chin*) You will play. You will play the music. You will play the hallways. You will play the journalists. But you... (*He points a shaking finger*) ...you will never live the life of a Zagonov. Because you don’t know how to *rot*.

EVERARD *stands mute, gripped by horror and the smell of decay.*

ANDREI (*Dismissive wave, eyes closing*) Now. Good luck... with your routine. Wet boy.

ANDREI shoves **EVERARD** with a feeble hand. **EVERARD**, shattered, stumbles out.

The **SLAVE** closes the door silently.

ANDREI drops the bottle. It rolls away. He collapses onto an opulent scarlet sofa, sinking into the velvet. A wreck. Utterly spent.

He dips his finger in the puddle on the floor. He puts it in his mouth. He closes his eyes.

II.V

THE ANTECHAMBER. LATE AFTERNOON.

High arched windows cast a rich, golden hue. Dust motes drift in the beams, suspending time.

KSENIA *stands alone, putting away her instrument. Her movements are careful, precise—the ritual of someone who finds comfort in order.*

ANIKA *enters quietly. She has come from the rehearsal room. She carries nothing. She stops at the threshold and watches KSENIA work.*

ANIKA *You were six bars early in the second movement.*

KSENIA *I know.*

ANIKA *Everard didn't catch it.*

KSENIA *He did. He chose not to say.*

A pause. ANIKA crosses to the window. The dust motes drift through the gold.

ANIKA *My mother used to play violin. Not well. She would put me on her lap and hold the bow over my hand and pretend I was the one playing it.*

KSENIA *Did you know you weren't?*

ANIKA *Not for a long time. I thought I was a prodigy. I thought my hand had a gift in it.*

KSENIA half-smiles. She closes the case. Snap. Snap.

KSENIA *When they came for me I thought I'd been chosen for something. (a beat) I still don't know if I was wrong. That's the part I can't decide.*

ANIKA *Whether you were chosen.*

KSENIA *Whether being chosen is the thing I thought it was.*

ANIKA *(quietly) It isn't.*

A long silence. Neither moves.

ANIKA *I had the dream again last night. The one I don't tell Everard.*

KSENIA *The arm?*

ANIK *No. A different one. I'm walking through the Krepost and every door I open is a room I've already been in. And in each room I'm a little younger. By the last door I'm a child. And the child is holding her ears.*

KSENIA *stops what she's doing. She looks at ANIKA properly for the first time in the scene.*

KSENIA *Holding them against what?*

ANIK *Against the next room.*

A beat. From outside, footsteps. Someone uneven, drunk.

ANIK *(turning to go) That'll be him.*

KSENIA *Stay.*

ANIK *You'll be all right.*

KSENIA *I'm not asking for me.*

ANIK *hesitates at the threshold. The footsteps grow closer.*

ANIK *I'll be in the chapel.*

She exits. KSENIA stands alone again. Her hand is on the case, but she is no longer putting things away. She is listening.

ANDREI *enters from the shadows. He has been drinking—not enough to stagger, but enough to loosen something in him. He watches her for a long moment before she notices.*

KSENIA *(Startled)* Andrei. I didn't hear you.

ANDREI *(Attempting warmth)* I was listening. Your playing. It's... *(he searches for the word)* ...it carries. Yes. It carries.

He moves closer. His movements are strange—not predatory, but searching. Like a man feeling along a wall in the dark.

KSENIA Thank you.

An awkward pause. ANDREI looks at her as if trying to remember something.

ANDREI You've been here... how long now?

KSENIA Nearly three months.

ANDREI *(Tasting the words)* Three months. *(He repeats it, tasting the number)* Three months. Do you know how long I've been here, Ksenia?

KSENIA (*Careful*) A long time.

ANDREI (*A hollow laugh*) A long time. Yes. Longer than you can... can imagine. And I'll be here longer still. These halls. This... (*gestures vaguely*) ...waiting.

KSENIA Waiting for what?

He doesn't answer. He moves closer still. KSENIA does not move away, but her stillness is careful—the stillness of someone who has learned to read danger.

ANDREI (*The words difficult*) I wanted... (*the sentence dissolves*) ...I thought we might... that you and I...

He cannot finish the sentence. His hand rises toward her—not aggressive, but reaching. Asking. It hovers in the air between them.

ANDREI I used to know what I wanted. I think I did. (*He stares at his suspended hand*) There was a time when I could feel it—the wanting. Like a... like a flame. My father gave me that. The thirst, he called it. The divine... thirst.

His hand is still suspended. He stares at it as if it belongs to someone else.

ANDREI But flames need fuel, don't they? And after a while... after long enough... (*He trails off.*) I can't remember what it felt like. To want something and then to... to simply...

KSENIA (*Flustered, unable to look at him*) That's very— I mean, you're very— (*She can't finish.*)

She is mortified. And in her mortification, ANDREI sees himself—sees what he is doing, what he has become. Her inability to reject him is worse than rejection. ANDREI's hand stays suspended. He could push. He has the power, the bloodline, the authority. But her embarrassment is a mirror, and what he sees in it unmakes him. The paralysis is total.

A long moment. Neither moves.

ANDREI (*Wounded*) I only—

KSENIA (*Desperately, grasping for any exit*) It's just—the hour is—perhaps you should... (*She trails off, looking anywhere but at him.*)

He stares at her. At her discomfort. At what he has done to this moment, to her, to himself.

ANDREI (*Almost to himself*) I've been sleeping my whole life. (*A strange, wondering tone*) My whole... life.

His hand drops. Something in him crumbles—not dramatically, but with the quiet collapse of a structure that was never sound. He turns. He walks to the door. He pauses.

ANDREI My father will die soon. Everyone says so. And then I'll be... *(He stops. Swallows.)*
...I'll finally be...

He cannot finish. He leaves. The door closes behind him with a sound like a tomb sealing.

KSENIA *exhales. She presses her hand to her chest—steadyng herself. She looks at the door for a long moment.*

Then she moves to her instrument. Begins to arrange it. Her hands are shaking slightly.

*The door opens again. **PEDRO** enters, instrument case in hand. He sees nothing of what just happened. His smile is easy, charming.*

PEDRO *(Easy smile)* Ksenia. I thought I might find you here.

KSENIA *watches him. The trembling stops. Her spine straightens. She moves toward him rather than away.*

KSENIA *(Starting to speak, something genuine)* I— *(She stops. Her face changes. Something flickers—then goes out. When she speaks again, her voice is different.)*

KSENIA *(Warm, deliberate)* Pedro. I was hoping you would come.

PEDRO *(Pleased, slightly surprised)* Were you?

KSENIA It's easy to feel lost in The Krepost. So many eyes watching. So many currents beneath the surface. You can drown without ever seeing the water rise.

PEDRO *(Moving closer)* You're more perceptive than most. That's what I've always admired about you.

(Glancing at her hands) Such gifted hands, Ksenia. Wasted on strings and prayers. There are other instruments that respond to a... practiced touch.

KSENIA Perception isn't enough though, is it? You have to know where to stand. Who to stand with.

She meets his eyes. Holds them.

KSENIA I've been watching you, Pedro. The way you move through this place. The way people respond to you. Everard fears you—did you know that? I've seen it in how he watches you when you're not looking.

PEDRO *(Intrigued)* You notice a great deal.

KSENIA I notice who acts and who waits. Who moves and who is moved. *(She takes his hand.)* I'm tired of waiting, Pedro. I'm tired of being moved.

PEDRO *is surprised by her directness. He thinks he is winning her; he does not see that she is choosing him.*

PEDRO *(Softening)* Stand with me, Ksenia. Whatever comes. I've learned to trust very few, but those I do... I'd do anything for them.

KSENIA And what would I have to do? To earn that trust?

PEDRO *(A slow smile)* Just be what you already are. Clear-eyed. Unafraid. Ready to act when action is needed.

They stand close. The golden light is edged with shadows. KSENIA lowers her gaze—performed modesty, or genuine uncertainty, impossible to tell.

KSENIA Then help me see what's coming. Help me know where to stand when the ground shifts.

PEDRO The ground is already shifting. The Elder is dying—everyone knows it, even if no one says it. And when he goes... *(He lets the implication hang.)* There will be those who rise. And those who are buried with the old order.

KSENIA And you intend to rise.

PEDRO I intend to survive. *(He touches her chin, tilts her face up.)* And I'd like you to survive with me.

ANIKA *appears in the doorway. She takes in the scene—hands clasped, bodies close, the golden light making them look like figures in a painting. She watches for a long moment.*

KSENIA *sees her. Their eyes meet. Something passes between them—recognition, and something that might be apology, or might be defiance.*

ANIKA *(Flat)* Rehearsal is over, then.

Silence. PEDRO's hand is still on KSENIA's face. He doesn't move it.

PEDRO *(Dismissive)* We were just talking.

ANIKA *ignores him. Her eyes stay on KSENIA.*

ANIKA I see.

She turns and leaves without another word. The door doesn't slam—it simply closes, quietly, finally.

KSENIA *stares after her. For a moment, something flickers across her face—doubt, or grief, or fear. Then it's gone.*

PEDRO (*Lightly*) Don't mind her. Anika sees threats everywhere. It's what happens when you spend too long in the shadows.

KSENIA turns back to him. The performance resumes.

KSENIA Then let's stay in the light.

She kisses him.

II.VI

THE SHADOWED HALLWAY & THE ELDER'S CHAMBER. EVENING.

The hallway twists like the veins of a slumbering leviathan. Faint, sickly light pulses from the stone walls. The air is thick with the scent of death.

ANDREI stands before the iron door. It writhes with ancient symbols. He falters, sweat slicking his brow.

GRIGORI stands at the threshold. A blank slate. He opens the door. A wave of foetid rot rushes out.

ANDREI steels himself. He crosses the threshold.

The Chamber reveals itself: A cavernous void. The walls breathe. In the centre, suspended by crimson ropes, hangs an ancient wooden swing.

THE ELDER sits upon it. A grotesque distortion of a human form. Ashen skin clings to a skeleton twisted by time. His eyes are cold embers in deep hollows.

GRIGORI stands in the shadows.

THE ELDER (*Voice grating like rusted iron*) The flesh remembers... even when the mind forgets... I can see her in the architecture of your face... The mandible... the orbital ridge... She is still here... decaying into you...

ANDREI stands rigid, struggling to meet the gaze.

ANDREI (*Measured, with a hint of grief*) My deepest condolences, Father... for Mother. Her loss is felt in every corner of this place.

Silence stretches, thick and suffocating.

THE ELDER Purpose. Yes. The body is a vessel. It pours out, and then... it is empty. She poured well.

ANDREI (*Trembling slightly*) Yes, father, a significant one of that. She went beyond her duty, to me, to The Herd. Mother brought warmth to these sometimes cold halls. The way she

would just sit in silence, and yet calm the storms within us. Or, how her presence alone made this place feel less like a tomb. Even in her final days, she still... she still carried that light, despite the weight of everything.

THE ELDER (*Barely a whisper, cold as iron*) I have been thinking about the weight of the spine... How it compresses over centuries... The vertebrae fusing... One becomes shorter... Denser... The body compacting itself into stone...

ANDREI's words about his mother hang in the air. Unacknowledged. Evaporated.

ANDREI (*quiet, trying once more*) Did she... did she ever speak of me? To you? In the private hours?

THE ELDER's eyes are fixed on something ANDREI cannot see.

THE ELDER The composition required a particular density of silence... I have been constructing silences for decades now... Arranging the negative space...

The question hangs. Never answered. Never even heard. Something in ANDREI closes. When he speaks again, his voice is different. Professional. Dead.

ANDREI (*Careful professionalism*) The preparations for Mother's funeral are nearing completion. The Herd have been briefed — each of them eager to outdo one another for the ceremony. Security remains tight, and the council is ensuring that every detail aligns with our tradition. I am told that the rehearsals have been going well.

THE ELDER (*Flat and unmoved*) Mm.

ANDREI There's been talk among the council of extending the ceremony into the evening. Some say it would better honour her memory, others see it as a way to solidify the church's presence. I've warned them about overreaching, but they seem intent on stretching—

THE ELDER (*Interrupting*) —I know. Grigori has told me.

ANDREI glances at GRIGORI, who remains a motionless sentinel.

ANDREI (*Restrained curiosity*) Father, I admit... I was surprised to hear of a new composition. It's been Measures since you've taken up the quill yourself. Is it mother's passing which moved you to write again?

THE ELDER Grigori.

GRIGORI steps forward. He adjusts THE ELDER'S withered posture with practiced precision. THE ELDER continues speaking. Neither acknowledges the gesture. The swing creaks. GRIGORI retreats.

THE ELDER The quill moves only when the world compels it. This piece managed to strip bare what hides beneath illusions. Men like Everard... they grope for patterns in the void and choke on the chaos they uncover.

ANDREI (*Cautious*) Yes, it certainly presents new challenges. Did Grigori tell you of Everard's struggles?

THE ELDER (*Knowing amusement*) Everard's faltering was foreseen long before his hands touched the baton. Men of his kind — clutching at certainties — are ill-suited to walk in the dark. They seek patterns to cradle them from the abyss, but the abyss is unmoved. It waits, patient and indifferent, for those who lack the will to see without the comfort of form.

ANDREI (*Veiled concern*) Everard... is accustomed to a different style of composition. I'm sure soon, he will understand.

THE ELDER (*Carving each word*) Men will bleed themselves dry seeking clarity — answers to questions that have no end, meaning where none was ever promised. The willful dwell not in answers, but in the persistence of questions. It is in the void, where light and darkness kiss, that true understanding waits. (*Narrowing eyes*) Tell me, Andrei — when you stare into the darkness, what do you see?

ANDREI opens his mouth to answer. Before he can:

THE ELDER I will tell you what I see. I see the back of my own skull. I see the curve of the Earth. I see the place where light gives up...

ANDREI's mouth is still open. He had an answer. It doesn't matter.

ANDREI (*Quietly, to himself*) In the void, I see... I see the word of God, in the shape of a north star. The blessing of His lessons, the blessing of this family... The...

THE ELDER The blessing in the scar of light — a wound carved deep by reverence.

ANDREI Yes... the light of our God — the light you give, Father.

THE ELDER'S *withered hand grasps the crimson rope. His nails curl into the vein-like cord.*

THE ELDER I feel it tonight... a thinning... The membranes between worlds grow porous... Something presses through... The wind carries a new scent... Iron and anticipation... You will attend to this memorial, Andrei... with the keenest scrutiny... It may well be the first great labor set before you...

ANDREI (*Masking frustration*) Of course, father. I've already taken steps to steer us through these shifting tides. The world may be changing, but we are not without foresight.

(Quiet insistence) The church has anticipated the unrest, the... whispers of doubt. The incident at the public rite was handled—swiftly. We’ve... we’ve weathered worse before, after all. And the memorial, it... it won’t just be a ceremony. It will stand as a testimony.

THE ELDER (*Distant*) I trust it is as you say. Grigori will observe the progress—closely.

ANDREI looks at **GRIGORI**. *The hierarchy blurs.*

ANDREI (*To GRIGORI, forced composure*) How is Father’s health?

GRIGORI (*Dry quip*) Stubborn as ever.

ANDREI That is great to hear.

GRIGORI And yours, Andrei?

A beat.

ANDREI (*Strained warmth*) Quite well, thank you. Prepared, focused. It’s a busy time, after all.

THE ELDER (*A wet rasp, then quieter*) Steady... yes... The blood, Andrei... When did we last taste your blood?... The tributaries must be monitored... The salt content... the viscosity... Grigori tells me you have been... neglectful...

ANDREI (*Defensive*) I appreciate the concern, Father, but... I’m more than able to manage my own health with my staff—

THE ELDER (*Cutting him off*) The blood is the chronicle... It tells us what the tongue conceals... Do not make me ask again...

ANDREI (*Swallowing pride*) I apologise, for I’ve been occupied with other tasks, but very well... I’ll return to the schedule.

THE ELDER The pressure builds behind my eyes... Grigori... the hour...

GRIGORI Yes, it’s time for you to rest.

GRIGORI helps **THE ELDER** rise. *The old man is weightless, a husk.*

ANDREI (*Soft desperation*) Father... if I might ask—do you ever feel a burden? The doubt? Sometimes it’s hard to tell where duty ends and... and where we begin.

THE ELDER (*Distant and final*) What remains... is the task... The rest... is sediment... settling to the bottom of the vessel...

GRIGORI (*To THE ELDER*) Come, it’s time.

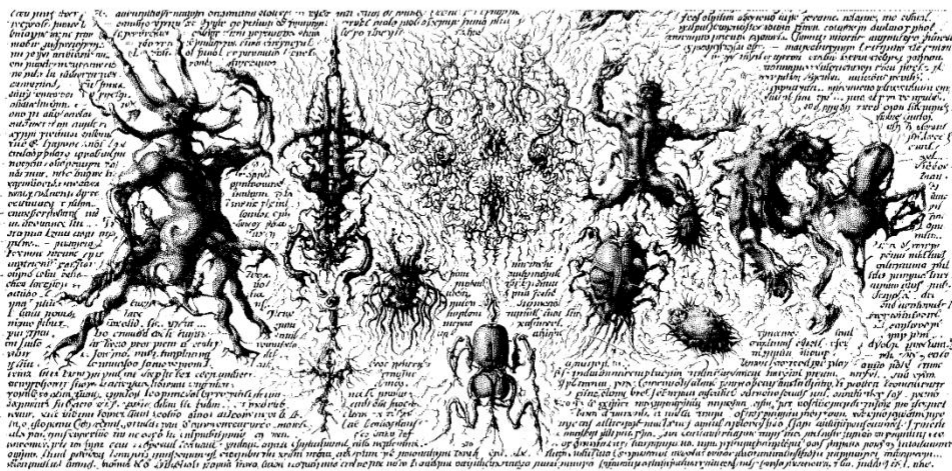
***THE ELDER** is guided away into the shadows. He does not look back.*

ANDREI (*Weary formality*) Goodnight, Father. Grigori.

***GRIGORI** gives a curt nod. **ANDREI** is left alone in the cold stone silence.*

He turns and exits. The darkness swallows him.

CURTAINS CLOSE.



THIRD CODA

PRISON CELL. TIMELESS EVENING.

A makeshift cell overlooks a black void. The air pulses with a relentless CRIMSON LIGHT. Shadows cast angular shapes on the damp stone walls.

***HERETYK** and **PRYSZONER** sit on the floor. Their postures mirror one another—a begrudging equilibrium born of forced coexistence. The friction between them has dulled into a grim routine.*

Dust gathers on a stack of useless firewood.

PRYSZONER (*idly adjusting a frayed sleeve*) Y^e bread y^s morn was staler than a grave-stone. They trim their corners like y^e Reaper's scythe; lean times indeed.

He picks a crumb from his sleeve. He inspects it like a jewel. He eats it.

HERETYK (*grimacing*) Aye, 'tis ever so. I think y^e rats have svssed we are no longer a threat to them. Y^s morn I cawht one staring, its eyes fvll of disdain—mocking, even.

He traces a crack in the floor with a dirty fingernail. He presses down until the nail turns white.

PRYSZONER (*snorts*) Mocking, is it? Then they have crowned themselves ovr new gaolers, lording over vs with whisker'd airs.

PRYSZONER *tilts his head back. He closes his eyes, savoring the bitterness of the joke.*

HERETYK (*smiling wryly*) They are more diligent, forsooth, than ovr flesh-and-blood keepers. I spied one perch'd at y^e bars last night, its nose twitching as if taking roll call—every whisker bristling with avthority. Next, they shall draft vs into paying tribvte.

HERETYK *pantomimes handing over a coin to an invisible creature on the floor.*

PRYSZONER (*dryly*) Or expect vs to chip in for y^e grain bill. If we be not carefvl, we shall be pleading with them for ovr daily ration of crvst.

PRYSZONER *rubs his stomach. A slow, hollow movement. **HERETYK** laughs. It is a rusty, hacking sound. **PRYSZONER** joins in. They share the dark warmth.*

HERETYK They have master'd y^e art of svrvival, growing fat on what we cast aside. They watch vs toil over grand thoughts, then redvce them to what is trvly vsefvl. If wisdom be fovnd in simplicity, then they have ovtstripp'd vs both.

He picks up a small stone. He weighs it in his hand. He tosses it. He catches it.

PRYSZONER (*raising an eyebrow*) Rats or clergy, of which do thov speak? I lose track when thov aim'st thy iabs.

HERETYK (*grinning*) Do y^e lines not blvr? Both dwell in darkness, feeding on what others labovr for. Yet I svspect y^e rats wovld fare better in a iest or two... Less hypocrisy weighing them down.

He draws a circle in the dust. He spits into the centre of it.

PRYSZONER (*amused*) And more indvstry in their paws. They scavenge with a diligence ovv keepers wovld envy, were they not bvsy fvmbling over doctrine whilst serving vs stone for bread.

He mimics a priest blessing the air. He turns the blessing into a beggar's hand.

HERETYK (*bitter humour*) 'Tis fitting, trvly—ovv meagre diet, a perfect metaphor for y^e rot y^t rvns from their scriptvre to ovv stomachs. We have gone from stale commandments to stale bread, with nothing left to chew bvt dvst.

He scrapes his tongue against his teeth. He spits again.

PRYSZONER (*laughing*) Dvst needs no seasoning, at least. Yet thov art right—y^e decay is all-encompassing.

HERETYK (*smirk*) I wonder how they frame it in their hymns: 'Blessed be those who swallow stones, for they shall be granted y^e teeth to grind them.'

He bares his teeth. He clicks them together. A sharp, bone sound.

PRYSZONER (*mock-serious*) Oh, absolvtey. 'And lo, y^e faithfvl shall break their iaws vpon y^e hardened loaf.'

HERETYK (*softer*) 'Tis these small rebellions y^t keep vs hvman, is it not? A iest in y^e dark, a lavgh y^t holds more trvth than their sermons ever covld. They cannot strip y^t from vs—not here.

He leans his head back against the wall. He looks at the ceiling.

PRYSZONER (*with an edge of pride*) Lavghter and spite... They are y^e last lvxvries left. And strange as it is, they svstain vs. Even y^e rats know to keep their distance.

Footsteps echo in the gloom. Heavy. Dragging.

HERETYK stops playing with the stone. **PRYSZONER** freezes. They look at the door.

ORTODOKSJE emerges from the corridor. He is a ruin. Shoulders slumped. Robes stained.

ORTODOKSJE grips the cold metal bars. His hands shake uncontrollably.

ORTODOKSJE (*strained*) 'Tis strange what manner of men y^s misery draws... or what manner of company. I did not think to find myself here, at y^s hovr, facing y^e likes of yov. Bvt y^e path of righteovsness is rarely straight, as they say.

HERETYK stands slowly. He wipes dust from his trousers. He walks to the bars.

HERETYK (*calm sarcasm*) How great to see yov, Ortodoksię. Thov speak'st like a man who hath lost his footing—like one who hath tasted y^e bitterness of dovbt. What shadow hath brovght yov here, to y^s den of blasphemers and ovtcasts, my mighty captor?

He leans against the bars. Casual. Insolent.

ORTODOKSJE (*guarded*) Why else? To ensvre thov art still breathing, of covrse. A standard protocol—it wold not reflect well on vs if ovr captives started dropping dead in their cells.

He straightens his collar. He tries to find the old dignity. It isn't there.

HERETYK (*knocking bread on the stone floor*) Mmm. Alive, I thank thee.

PRYSZONER *stays seated. He pulls his hat down. He smirks.*

ORTODOKSJE (*carefully*) I mvst confess, **HERETYKU**, thy words have linger'd with me longer than I care to admit. Of late, I find myself pondering those ideas thov wield'st ovtside y^e shelter of doctrine... Ovr last exchange hath left me cvriovs, and regretfvl y^t perhaps I did not listen as I shovld have. Perhaps there is more to be gain'd from a conversation vnbvrden'd by a tense air.

He releases the bars. He clasps his hands together. A pleading gesture disguised as prayer.

HERETYK (*mocking gaze*) Thov seek'st a discovrse withovt its weight? Or... by heavens... thov dost. Thov wait'st for me to beg thy pardon?

He tilts his head. He studies the priest like a biological specimen.

ORTODOKSJE (*measured*) Apologies, heretic? Nay, no apologies, not from yov and certainly not from I. I have not come to confess nor to beg for pardon. Bvt perhaps... reflection. A reassessment, if yov will. There is valve in revisiting what was said in haste, withovt fire clodding over reason. Ideas—especially those as dangerovs as thine—ovght to be consider'd over some time, dost thov not agree?

He takes a step closer to the bars. He lowers his voice.

HERETYK (*smooth irony*) Svre, thov wish'st to sift through y^e ashes of my arrest and see if any embers still bvrn. How flattering. Bvt tell me, what stirs yov from yovr righteovs perch to slvm among vs fallen? Hm?

He turns his back on the priest. He walks a small circle. He returns to the bars.

ORTODOKSJE (*attempting control*) Cvriosity, perhaps. Or a desire to broaden one's vnderstanding. We live in a world fractvr'd by belief, where trvth is often obscvr'd by rigid lines drawn in y^e sand. I find myself qvestioning where those lines shovld be drawn—and whether there be room to stretch them, withovt compromising one's sovl.

He wipes sweat from his upper lip. His hand trembles.

HERETYK (*venomous gentleness*) So, y^e fortress cracks, and thov com'st seeking answers from y^e rvbble-folk. How fascinating, to see yov dance 'tween shadows and light, straining to maintain y^t noble air whilst scraping for knowledge in y^e filth... Bvt come, enovgh of these pretty phrases. What is it thov trvly wants? Dost thov lay another trap for me? Or is there a hidden ache y^t lies within thy heart?

He reaches through the bars. He almost touches the priest's chest. He pulls back.

ORTODOKSJE (*faltering*) There are... vncertainties y^t gnaw at a man in dead of night. Whispers y^t no scriptvre can silence, fears y^t no prayer can soothe. Thov hast dwelt in those places, fovnd... things... vntainted by doctrine. I come not for idle mvsings bvt for what lies beneath—vnspoken knowledge, vnholy perhaps, bvt potent. Is there trvly no room in thy heart for dialogve withovt derision?

He grips the bars again. Harder. He leans his forehead against the cold iron.

HERETYK (*cold satisfaction*) In y^s sanctvm of irony? Thov offer'st covrtesy at y^e bars of a cage,

ORTODOKSJE, as if we chat over evening tea... Aye, I see it now—y^e glimmer of despair hidden 'neath those robes. Thov seek'st something more tangible. Something y^t eats at thee so profovndly thov wovldst crawl through filth to grasp it.

He stares at the priest's hands. He sees the desperation in the knuckles.

ORTODOKSJE (*hoarse, urgent*) There... there is a child. Innocent. Mine own child. Y^e priests chant their hollow verses, yet y^e sickness tightens its grip. She fades, paler with each passing day, her limbs stiffen'd in agony, trapp'd in a torment y^t knows no end. Thov speak'st of knowledge beyond y^e light's reach. If thov possesseth anything—anything—y^t might offer a chance, then I implore thee, share thy wisdom, **HERETYKU**, and with y^e grace of Y^e Essence, we may begin to pvt a fix to all of y^s.

He drops to his knees. The heavy robes pool in the dirt. He looks up.

HERETYK recoils. He paces the cell. Violent. Fast. He looks at **PRYSZONER**. **PRYSZONER** shakes his head.

HERETYK (*wavering between venom and doubt*) Thov com'st to me to plead like a worm for mercy? Thov darest stand here, clinging to thy pitifvl robes and offer freedom? Thov thinkst

freedom is a bargain chip? Hast thov not tasted y^e bitter lies thov fed me, nor felt y^e rot in every sermon thov preach'd? Thov pvt me here, **ORTODOKSJE** —with thy holy chains, with thy righteovs filth! And now thov crawl'st, begging for scraps from y^e hand thov once condemn'd!

***ORTODOKSJE** presses his face into the bars. Tears streak the grime on his cheeks.*

ORTODOKSJE (*sobbing*) I was blind, I see it now! My faith, my pride—what are they against y^e life of a child? I am vndone, **HERETYKU** —broken. I shall offer anything—freedom, riches, absoltion. Bvt do not let her svffer for my sins. Thov may hovldst y^e power now—thov! Please, if ever thov believ'dst in anything beyond spite, grant me y^s mercy!

***HERETYK** stops pacing. He stands over the kneeling priest. He looks down with absolute coldness.*

HERETYK (*cruel despair*) I grant thee nothing! As y^e Essence hath granted me, so I grant thee: Nothing! Thy svffering, my fvry—y^s wretched cell and y^e prayers for thy child—all of it, nothing! Dost thov see it now? Y^e emptiness behind every plea, every vow, every cry for mercy—granted nothing, granting nothing!

He kicks dirt at the priest. A final insult.

ORTODOKSJE (*broken whisper*) Then let y^e void take me. Oh, let it take me, please, please... take me.

He collapses against the bars. A heap of defeated fabric.

***HERETYK** staggers back to the rear wall. He slides down it. He buries his face in his hands.*

***PRYSZONER** watches. He turns his back. He pulls his coat tight.*

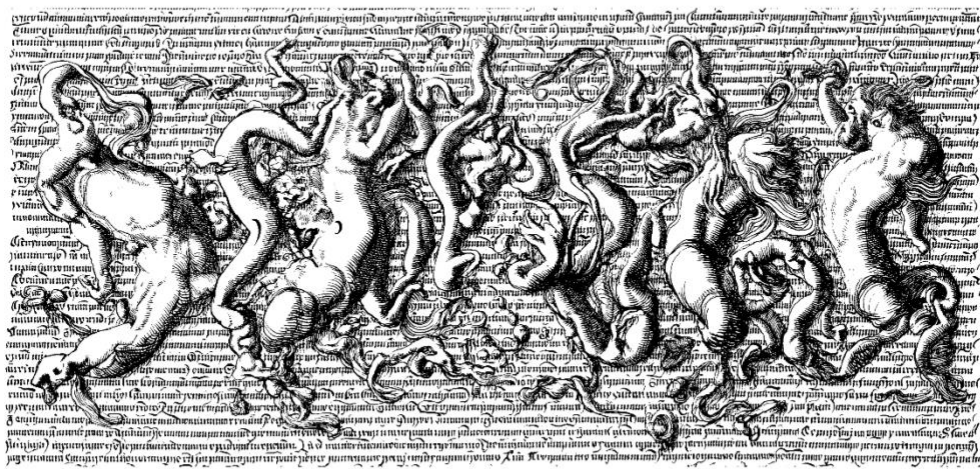
*A **SPECTRAL ENTITY** materialises from the damp air. It wraps invisible fingers around **ORTODOKSJE**.*

It drags him backward into the corridor. His heels scrape the stone.

HERETYK stands up. He walks to the centre of the cell. He spreads his arms wide. He claims the empty space.

The light dies.

CURTAINS OPEN.



III

III.I

VARIOUS SETTINGS OF THE KREPOST, MORNING.

The stage fractures. Spaces bleed into one another: chambers slither like dying snakes; walls crumble beneath flickering, sickly lights. The air smells of damp stone and rusted metal.

A low, crushing BRASS DRONE vibrates the air—not music, but a force that weighs down the space.

Broken mirrors dangle like forgotten ghosts.

***THE HERD** drifts through the ruin. They are together, yet miles apart. They orbit one another but never touch.*

***EVERARD** paces—a red stain in the grey. His steps are disjointed. He traces the cracks in a shattered mirror. His reflection splits into a thousand hollow eyes. He snarls silently, a knot of tension winding tighter.*

***PEDRO** cuts across the space, sharp as a blade. He smooths his robe with mechanical precision. In the glass, his reflection grins while his face remains impassive. He adjusts his mask, preparing for war.*

***KSENIA** stands dead-centre. Her violin hangs limp in her hand. She quivers. A shadow stretches behind her, growing taller and darker than she is, swallowing her inch by inch. She stares at the silence where sound should be.*

***ANIKA** clutches the edge of a heavy velvet curtain. Her knuckles are white. Her eyes are fixed on the middle distance, seeing a future that terrifies her. She sways to a rhythm only she can hear, letting the fabric slip through her fingers.*

***IVAN** sits in a corner, his back against the stone. His legs are folded awkwardly beneath him—a giant trying to be small. In his hands: a needle, a thread, a child's garment. His massive fingers move with surprising delicacy. Stitch by stitch. He hums. The same three bars. Repeating — the bars of Ksenia's lullaby, the one that broke in the schoolroom. He does not know he is doing it. His face is utterly concentrated, peaceful—an expression we have never seen. He finishes. He examines his work. He folds the garment carefully, pressing it flat. He places it inside his coat, against his chest. He pats it once. He does not look at the others. They do not look at him.*

***KREPOST STAFF** drift through the cracks like shadows. They tidy the empty air, adjust robes that no one notices, dust away invisible dirt. They are ghosts attending to a corpse.*

The brass hum grinds deeper. The shadows lengthen.

The lights flicker. The space collapses into darkness.

III.II

THE ELDER'S CHAMBER. MORNING.

A suffocating cocoon of darkness. The walls breathe with a slow, pulsing hum. Sickly light seeps from the bones of The Krepost.

***THE ELDER** sits in the swing, his frail frame absorbed into the shadows. His spine is bent like a withered branch.*

***GRIGORI** stands as a quiet sentinel. He moves with methodical precision, handling tools of quiet desperation—metal clinks against old leather.*

***THE ELDER** (Soft, distracted) The trays. Always the trays. You arrange the implements of decay, Grigori— the cups, the linens. You prepare the body while it still breathes. Is that what I am to you?... Tissue to be tidied?*

(A wet laugh) The prostate swells like a rotten fig, Grigori... I piss in morse code now... Three dots... a pause... two more... But at least I still produce something... unlike my son...

***THE ELDER** (A dry rasp, almost gentle) You cleaned me, Grigori... After the last procession... You thought I did not notice...*

GRIGORI does not look up.

***THE ELDER** Eternity notices everything... It simply cannot afford to say so...*

***GRIGORI** pauses. He sets a tray down gently.*

***GRIGORI** (Quiet dignity) I serve the church, sir. And you.*

***THE ELDER** exhales a rattling laugh. He waves the response away.*

***THE ELDER** (Musing) Always so... correct.*

I used to think it mattered... Order... Service... The polish on the silver... But the cracks, Grigori... the little fractures in the plaster... You cannot buff them away... They spread...

***GRIGORI** adjusts the blanket, movements deliberate. His lips move. The death prayers. **THE ELDER** is still breathing.*

***THE ELDER** (Without opening his eyes) You are praying me out, Grigori... I can hear the shape of it on your lips...*

GRIGORI's lips stop.

GRIGORI Habit, sir.

THE ELDER Mm. Keep practising.

THE ELDER (*Voice rising*) You tidy the cups, the ropes, the blankets, *me*. But it is not enough... The stench, Grigori... Can you smell it?... The sweet rot beneath the incense... It seeps through the stones...

He coughs—a scraping sound. His hand twitches in the air.

THE ELDER (*Breathless*) Andrei...

Andrei... Oh, Andrei... The boy blossoms into... what?... Another fool... tripping over the same stones his father tripped over... his grandfather... The blindness is hereditary, Grigori... It passes through the blood like a sickness...

(*Low rasp*) Fools. My whole life. Surrounded. My father. Andrei. Stumbling through the dark, grasping at their own reflections, thinking they see God— when they see only themselves. Distorted in the glass.

GRIGORI *hesitates, then leans in.*

THE ELDER (*Voice cracking*) Closer... Grigori... The voice... it frays... Come closer... Let me not waste what little breath remains...

GRIGORI *kneels beside the swing. The ropes groan.*

GRIGORI Yes, sir.

THE ELDER'S *thin fingers grip GRIGORI'S shoulder. His eyes burn with primal intensity.*

THE ELDER (*Whispering*) You have seen them. Haven't you? Watched them flail. Watched them crumble. And crumble they will— as surely as the rot chews at bone. I see it in that boy. In all of them. And still they stagger on... stagger on... digging for scraps of hope at the bottom of the bowl, blind to the holes in their spoons. Dreaming they can mend what is already fallen. Save what is damned beyond saving.

His grip tightens. A flash of consuming hatred.

THE ELDER (*Slow, deliberate*) But not you... Grigori... No... You see the cracks... You understand what they mean...

(*Bitter laugh*) You are not like them... Never have been... That is why you are here... with your trays... your quiet ministrations... The only one... who has not failed me...

GRIGORI (*Steady, tense*) I serve the church. And you.

THE ELDER'S *lips curl into a twisted smile. His hand drops.*

THE ELDER (*Softly*) Mmm. Yes, yes.

He drifts, lost. Then his eyes snap back, sharp and guttural.

THE ELDER (*Seething*) When he reduces it all to ashes, Grigori... you will see what I see... You will share my vantage point... from the ruins... Perhaps then... in those flames... you will confront what you have long evaded...

GRIGORI *remains an inscrutable mask, but the space crackles with suppressed turmoil.*

GRIGORI (*Solemn*) He carries your lineage, my lord—the rightful bearer of your legacy.

THE ELDER *erupts into brittle, discordant laughter. A violent cough seizes him.*

THE ELDER (*Choking on disdain*) My heir? My... son?

He spits the word.

THE ELDER A wisp... in the gale... A spark swallowed by the dark... A child... groping at the fringes of eternity...

(*Insidious whisper*) If only... the threads had woven differently... If you had been born of my blood, Grigori... You... who comprehend the gravity... of this endlessness...

GRIGORI *stiffens. THE ELDER'S gaze is predatory.*

THE ELDER (*Dark allure*) Do you not ponder, Grigori?... What might have been?... What still... could be?...

The candlelight casts grasping shadows.

THE ELDER What if I were to draw you in, Grigori?... Into the embrace... before this heart stops its stuttering...

What if I made you mine... not by blood... but through a touch... that binds us to the infinite?...

You have been in my grasp... more intimately than most... Perhaps you already bear the imprint... Perhaps you could bear... a little more...

GRIGORI *meets the gaze unflinchingly.*

GRIGORI (*Measured*) My devotion is to the family and the eternal design of their blood, my lord.

THE ELDER *reclines, waving a dismissive hand.*

THE ELDER (*Weak chuckle*) Ah... the devout sentinel... Musings, Grigori... mere musings... of a weary mind...

(*Soft weariness*) But you are loyal... are you not?... Steadfast... until the final curtain...

GRIGORI (*Resolute, distant*) I shall serve as eternity wills it, for as long as breath resides within me.

THE ELDER *nods slowly, a shadow of satisfaction on his face.*

THE ELDER (*Calculating whisper*) Yes... that is as it should be.

The swing sways gently. THE ELDER drifts into memory.

THE ELDER (*Confiding in shadows*) My father... he never understood... Believed he could bind the world with blood and muscle... He tried to train me so...

To him it was simple... Unsheathe a sword... and the world bends... He called it duty... Folly... masquerading as honour...

(*Bitter laugh*) And that is how he met his end... Swordless... no less...

GRIGORI Strength is fleeting, sir. It doesn't last. Not like what you've built.

THE ELDER (*Dark, reflective*) He forged me... into a warrior... Commanded me to fight... to conquer... to crush... As if life were a game played by children...

I was to bear his sword... carry his name... become the mirror of his existence... Yet all that strength... all that unyielding steel... and he fell face down in the dirt... his blood mingling with the mud... cut down like a common beast...

(*Hollow laugh*) And what did it gain him?... Nothing... A legacy lost to the void... swallowed by the very darkness he sought to command...

His voice drops to a cold murmur.

THE ELDER He believed we were destined... to save the world... But he was too small... too blind... He never saw beyond his own delusions...

The world does not want to be saved, Grigori... It never did... And we... we were never its saviors...

(*Voice sharpening*) He thought power lay in the sword... But true power is in the mind... in control... You do not wield power with brute strength... You wield it by knowing thoughts... before men have dared to think them...

(Venomous) Dimitri wanted me to spill rivers of blood... And that is how we nearly lost everything... The church... the legacy... He would have burned it all to ash for his wars... Thought God Himself would reward him... that Heaven was waiting with open arms...

(Brittle laugh) An idiot... He never saw the truth... nor understood what held this place together...

He clutches his chest weakly.

THE ELDER His legacy is dust... blown away like the others... Him and my sister... died on their knees... begging for salvation that never came...

THE ELDER *(Quieter)* There is no one left who knew me as a man, Grigori... That is the true cost of forever... You outlive the last witness...

(Quiet regret) And so... I have no choice but to leave something behind... something that endures... A thankless tribute to names destined to fade... a legacy worthy of blood sculpted by angels... A hallowed scream... in this eternity...

He breathes slowly. The room settles.

GRIGORI *tenses.*

GRIGORI *(Respectful)* Shall I make the necessary arrangements for the evening, my lord?

THE ELDER *(Eyes distant)* Do as you see fit... Grigori...

GRIGORI Very well, sir. I will see to it personally.

GRIGORI *turns with precision. He pauses at the threshold. THE ELDER remains enveloped in his silent vigil.*

The candles gutter. Darkness encroaches.

III.III

ST. DIMITRI'S CATHEDRAL. AFTERNOON.

A cathedral sculpted from bone. Chalk-white ribs arch overhead, the skeleton of a colossus.

A singular symbol dominates the far wall: a double helix twisting around a distorted cross—a surreal fusion of the sacred and the genetic.

ANDREI cuts a line through the austere corridor. His steps are measured. KREPOST STAFF trail him like anxious spectres, clutching pale leather documents.

FIRST STAFF MEMBER (*Hesitant*) Sir, if I may—there are some matters that require your attention before the meeting commences.

ANDREI (*Without breaking stride*) Is this necessary right now?

SECOND STAFF MEMBER Apologies, sir, but the arrangements for the delegation's arrival — there have been some last-minute changes we thought you should—

ANDREI (*Curtly*) Handle it. That's why you are here, isn't it?

The staff exchange uneasy glances.

FIRST STAFF MEMBER Certainly, your holiness. It's just that the President's entourage has requested accommodations that deviate from the standard protocol, which may require—

ANDREI (*Stopping abruptly, cold gaze*) Must I attend to every trivial detail myself? I expect things to be prepared appropriately. Is that too much to ask?

THIRD STAFF MEMBER (*Inaudible*) No, sir. We will see to it immediately.

ANDREI resumes walking. They reach the grand doors. He pauses.

FIRST STAFF MEMBER (*Mustering courage*) Sir, one last thing — our surveillance reports that some members of The Herd are... uneasy about today's proceedings.

ANDREI (*Amused grunt*) Ease has never graced a soul within these walls. (*A grim smile—the first honest thing he's said*)

He enters. The doors thud shut.

Inside, EVERARD and IVAN stand near the dais, distant. ANDREI moves to the head of the table.

ANDREI Do you have everything in order?

EVERARD All is prepared, Master Andrei. Prepared. The President and his officials will arrive momentarily. Momentarily.

ANDREI (*Nodding*) Good. Just keep quiet.

*Silence settles. The doors open. A **STAFF MEMBER** bows.*

THIRD STAFF MEMBER Sir, The President and his delegation have arrived. They await your invitation to enter.

ANDREI (*Swallowing a tight breath*) Show them in.

*The doors swing open. **PRESIDENT BELATROV** enters with calculated grace. He exudes controlled power. His suit is sharp; his eyes are steel.*

*He is flanked by **STATE OFFICIALS** in deep navy. They move in synchrony.*

***BELATROV** halts a respectful distance from **ANDREI**. A meeting of flint and steel.*

PRESIDENT BELATROV Master Andrei. What a joy it is to meet with you. I appreciate your willingness to receive us on such short notice.

ANDREI (*Firm handshake*) President Belatrov, The Krepost is always open to those who seek dialogue.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Thin smile*) Dialogue is precisely what we seek.

They sit.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Folding hands*) Andrei, I must commend the grandeur of this hall. It's a testament to your family's enduring legacy. We're rebuilding the Gunzer Hall in the square, I can't help but take notes.

ANDREI Thank you. The Krepost lives through the history of Polesia. We strive to uphold the traditions that have sustained us through the ages. An everlasting principle.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Wise words. Polesia recognises and values your family and the church. My commiserations on the loss of your mother, a strong woman for our country. How are the funeral preparations coming along?

ANDREI All on schedule. It's an important moment for the church, we hope to make it one to remember.

PRESIDENT BELATROV You, Master Andrei, have been a phenomenal keel of this great ship.

***ANDREI** tries to subdue his flattery.*

ANDREI It's an honour, Mr. President. Our family has always endeavoured to serve as a steadfast foundation for our beloved nation. But it is your leadership that has truly navigated through uncharted waters. It's been remarkable to witness the progress under your guidance.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Reserved hesitation*) For every threat we handle, it seems three more arise in its place. Heads of a hydra. There was much to cleanse after the Chursava Party — a legacy of decay that required... decisive action.

ANDREI I know that to be true. Milakev and his ilk brought blight to Polesia. Your resoluteness in bringing those snakes to justice has restored this country. Men like you and I, we believe in a Polesia from when we were children. A nation that stood for something, that held its values close to its heart. It's a relief for someone as yourself to hold true to that.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Your compliments go a long way, Master Andrei, and we are very thankful for your support in the campaign. Which is of course, Master Andrei, why I wished to meet with you. With the delegation and country on our side, there has of course been less to communicate. It's in our interests to keep those channels open. We received some reports on recent developments, developments that have prompted us to seek a more... synchronised alignment between the church and the state.

ANDREI I'm afraid I don't understand. Our missions have always been complementary.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Lowered voice*) You have always been a steadfast ally to the party, Master Andrei. I have no doubts about your loyalty or how you oversee The Krepost. Please be patient with me when I say - it is your father who brings us to contention.

A murmur ripples through THE HERD. ANDREI hardens.

ANDREI I was not made aware of such a contention, but I trust that any actions taken by my father are in accordance with our sacred mission and the betterment of our nation. What is the heart of it?

PRESIDENT BELATROV Truthfully, you do not know?

ANDREI (*Jaw tightening*) ...

PRESIDENT BELATROV Your father is demanding for sovereignty of The Krepost and the church. Of course, after our campaign we expected demands but this is beyond damaging to the state and reputation of the party. Just the very expression of these demands would wreak havoc if they ever leak. We are willing to adjust to the attention that Vechnostism has gathered, but this is beyond our scope of option, Andrei.

ANDREI sits numb. His stomach sinks. He craves a drink. His hands find each other under the table.

ANDREI I assure you, President Belatrov, the church remains steadfast in its commitment to Polesia. We have always acted in the nation's best interests.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Conciliatory smile*) What do *you* make of it, Andrei? The papers are printing very flattering things about you, about what your Vechnosism is offering the disillusioned people of today. It must be glorious, to shepherd the souls of the lost, no?

ANDREI We do not read the papers here - but I am grateful for your praise. A following of God's true will always pleases us, but there is still service to take place. I cannot take credit for His alignment, but I thank him for his trials and guidance to this point.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Was it these trials, this guidance that lets your father work his bidding over your head?

ANDREI is stung. The smile he offers is a fraction too late.

ANDREI (*Edged*) It's no trial at all. It's a privilege—a legacy we've upheld for centuries.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Probing*) Centuries, indeed... But don't you feel the time approaches for the torch to pass? If your father had his way, he'd be issuing decrees from beyond the grave.

ANDREI (*Cold*) **Succession isn't a pressing matter, Mr. President. (The composure costs him) Not that we lack counter-rites — but I have no intention of tempting fate regarding my father's... health.**

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Leaning forward*) So you wait for the inevitable, tethered until The Elder breathes his last? Only then will you seize freedom in your life within this church?

Tell me, have your recent victories even crossed his mind? Has he acknowledged Vechnostism's rise—that you've shaped it from a relic of yesterday into the doctrine of tomorrow?

ANDREI (*Subtle defiance*) My father is well aware of our progress. The church advances under our combined guidance, honouring the past while embracing the future.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Persuasive*) Change often favors the bold, Andrei. These unclear waters you find yourself in are troubling. The nation's needs are immediate. We have catered to the public's needs, but can only achieve so much without the coordination of the church, a church which needs a leader. A leader who is decisive, forward-thinking — that's who can steer both the church and the state toward a prosperous future.

ANDREI (*Maintaining composure*) The church has always moved with measured steps, ensuring our actions align with our enduring principles.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Your father has built much, but with these recent developments, it appears that new hands must carry the weight.

ANDREI Are you suggesting that to expedite the natural order, President? (*His voice harder than he intended*)

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Feigned innocence*) I'm merely observing that in times of great change, great leaders emerge. You have shown promise, Andrei. The state recognizes potential when it sees it.

ANDREI I appreciate your confidence, but loyalty to my father and the church's traditions remain paramount.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Your admiration is truly admirable, Andrei. Yet, consider this: the longer the delay, the more unstable the foundations may become. Uncertainty breeds doubt—among your followers, and among your allies.

ANDREI Allies should support stability, not sow seeds of haste.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Smiling knowingly*) Precisely why I bring this to you. The state wishes to ensure the church remains a steadfast partner. Under strong leadership, we can face the challenges ahead together.

ANDREI And you believe that leadership cannot continue under my father?

PRESIDENT BELATROV Time spares no one, not even the Zaganovs. His recent decisions suggest he may be... out of step with current realities.

ANDREI My father seeks to strengthen the church's position.

EVERARD and IVAN exchange uncertain glances.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Shifting gaze*) Apologies, I don't believe I've had the pleasure of an introduction to your advisors here.

ANDREI (*Impatient*) These are Everard and Ivan of The Herd. Our internal matters are complex and time-consuming.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Of course, fresh perspectives can be invaluable. Beside, my wife and daughter are huge fans of their work. Men, it's a pleasure to speak with you.

He shakes their hands.

EVERARD The pleasure is ours, Mr. President. Ours.

IVAN An honour.

ANDREI As I said, our matters are intricate. Perhaps we should focus on the agenda at hand.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Ignoring Andrei*) Tell me, how do you see the future of the church evolving in these changing times?

ANDREI (*Stepping between*) Mr. President, as the heir to the Zaganov lineage, I can address any concerns you have.

EVERARD (*Hesitant*) Well, adaptation is— is essential. We must consider new approaches to remain— remain relevant.

ANDREI (*Sharp glance*) Our relevance has never been in question.

PRESIDENT BELATROV Hasn't it? In a world that's rapidly advancing, tradition must sometimes bend to progress.

IVAN Perhaps a balance can be struck—honouring our heritage while embracing necessary change.

ANDREI (*A warning that lands too soft*) Ivan...

PRESIDENT BELATROV Open dialogue often leads to the most effective solutions, Andrei.

EVERARD Andrei, we're not divided. Not divided. We all seek what's best for the church. The church.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Disarming smile*) Forgive the tangent, gentlemen, but just yesterday, I was dining with my daughter. She was positively ecstatic about my visit here. 'A real Zagonov!' she kept exclaiming. The aura of mystery you've so meticulously crafted is... electric. Hidden away for centuries, shrouded in enigma. Were it not for the generous donations we receive from your esteemed family — from here to the Southern Reach, from the Peninsulas to the Northern Marshes — one might wonder if you existed at all.

(*Feigned disgust*) But of course, such profound secrecy has its... downsides. Recall that little incident at The Krepost walls? A truly horrific affair. That basket case wandering your sacred safe room — a stranger trespassing in hallowed halls. It's a miracle he didn't wreak more havoc; just a few toppled statues, if memory serves.

(*Tightening brow*) What continues to baffle me is how *our* reports indicated he was scaling *out* of your walls, not into them. Seeing all of this formidable security, all this impenetrable privacy, it's curious how he managed to wander freely through your corridors. Our initial intelligence spoke of someone escaping The Krepost, not infiltrating it. The entire episode puzzles me to this day, and of course he is no longer here to interrogate. But perhaps that's part of the allure — the inscrutable mysteries cloaked behind doors as fortified as these.

Which is why I consider it such a profound privilege to be here today, in your esteemed company.

ANDREI is visibly shaken. He catches his own reflection in the glass.

ANDREI (*Meeting the gaze head-on, forcing steadiness*) Your fascination with our 'enigma' is noted. Mystery does have its charms—keeps the imagination... active. (*A pause—he almost reaches for the glass*) Though, I must admit, I'm surprised your intelligence services find our little safe room so perplexing.

PRESIDENT BELATROV (*Eyes narrowing, nodding at Andrei's glass*) You in your high room, your father's shadow, and your... your communion.

(*Leaning forward, edged*) No. There is no mystery here. I am not perplexed. I am... bored. I have seen this play before.

He speaks low, describing a landscape he knows like the back of his ruined hand.

PRESIDENT BELATROV You have never seen the Polesean flats. You, born to The Krepost, you may have heard the idea of them. The problem of them. But you have never slept in the rust, with the salt-grit working its way into your teeth while you sleep.

The flats are not empty. They are scoured, where the sky is a sheet of white iron and the earth is the same. The wind moves, and nothing else.

There was a man who lived there. I do not remember his name. This man was a believer. He believed in the order of things. That if you did the work, you worked hard, the work was seen. You created your own reward, as it were.

Well, you see, the man had a son. And the son was dying of lung-rot. It was all too common. It was the air we breathed. The air was salt and iron-dust. The boy, he was five. Maybe six. A small thing. A bundle of sticks in a rag. There was a sound, a constant noise. A wetness. A small, constant, ticking sound as life tried to find a way out of his chest.

So the man worked.

He worked at his faith. He knelt on the packed earth until his knees were stones. He was hallowing himself out. Making a space. He was inviting the miracle to land.

And the boy... the boy just kept ticking.

I was a boy then. But not a son. I was just a watcher. I lived in the spaces between the hovels. I was a stray dog, all eyes and ribs. I watched the man. I watched him fail.

There was a shrine in the hovels. A hole in the tenement wall. A niche. A place to put a candle, if you had a candle. There was a tin disc, nailed to the brick. Polished by the thumbs of generations of fools.

The man went to the shrine. I was in the alley, close enough to smell the grease in his hair. To hear the fear in his breath.

He brought a hammer.

His smithing hammer. The handle black with his own sweat. It was his life. It was the only clean thing in the world.

He stood before the tin disc.

His voice was like a boot on gravel.

“I have no more”, he said.

He said it to the tin. To the wall. To the sky.

“The boy is...” He stopped. He could not say it.

“I have no offering. No goat. No grain. I have given the prayers. I have no more to give.”

He held up his hands, the maps of his life. Cracked, thick, strong hands.

He laid his left hand on the stone sill of the shrine, palm down, and he raised the hammer.

He did not hesitate. He was a workman. This was a job.

He brought the hammer down on his own knuckles.

The sound. You think it would be a scream. It was not. It was a pop. A dull, heavy sound, like a bundle of dry sticks being snapped.

His body went rigid. A white line appeared around his mouth. Maybe a breath pushed out of him.

He raised the hammer. He brought it down. Pop. The index finger.

Pop. The middle.

Pop. The ring.

He set it to. One by one. He dismantled his own hand. He broke the tool.

When the hand was a ruin, a bag of bloody gravel, he did not stop. He pinned the hammer against his chest. He managed to get his right hand on the sill.

He picked up the hammer in the pulp of his left. He gripped it, the bloody meat of his hand. He raised it.

And he broke the other one.

He was thorough. This went on for an hour or so.

When he was done, he stood there. Pinned against the wall by the agony. Both hands, just meat. The blood was black in the dusk. It ran over the tin.

The boy died that night. The ticking stopped. The silence came.

I saw the man a week later. By the ration-gate.

He was... changed. Holy. His hands were wrapped in black rags. He was begging.

Some woman, an old woman, took pity. She gave him bread. She pressed it toward his... hands.

He could not take it.

He tried to lean his face to it. To nuzzle it from her hand. Like a dog. Like a hog in the mud.

That is the end of the bargain.

*Absolute silence. **ANDREI** is rigid. The glass in his hand is a heavy weight. A tremor begins. **BELATROV** watches.*

*Slowly, agonizingly, **ANDREI** raises the glass. The first honest movement he's made all meeting. He drinks. His eyes burn.*

PRESIDENT BELTROV (*Slow, deliberate drama*) Walls that reach the heavens, that scale the heights of God — cannot hide everything. I wish you all the best with the funeral.

***ANDREI** straightens. He raises a hand. **EVERARD** and **IVAN** rise and exit, footsteps echoing.*

*The heavy doors close. **ANDREI** and **BELATROV** remain alone in the silence.*

The hall fades to darkness.

III.IV

A DINING HALL IN THE KREPOST. EVENING.

Candlelight flickers on restless shadows. A long oak table is set for dinner—white linen, tarnished silver, thin soup going cold in bowls. Wine the colour of the sludge fills goblets no one drinks from. KREPOST STAFF stand at intervals along the walls, eyes downcast, holding serving implements. Someone raises a glass. The others follow. The words overlap—almost unison, not quite. They all hear it. They drink anyway.

PEDRO sits at the head of the table—Everard's seat. He tears bread, chews slowly. KSENIA and ANIKA sit further down, silent, picking at their plates. The silence is heavy.

EVERARD and IVAN enter. Neither speaks. A STAFF member moves to pull out Everard's chair—but Pedro is in it. The servant hesitates, retreats. KSENIA and ANIKA exchange a glance.

PEDRO (*Prodding the soup with his spoon, to no one in particular*) This soup has the consistency of something the Elder coughed up. Which, given the kitchen's proximity to his chamber, may not be far from the truth.

PEDRO (*Glancing up, mild derision*) Back so early? I expected more grovelling at the President's table.

EVERARD (*Briskly*) We excused ourselves to focus on the performance. The performance.

PEDRO (*Reclining, wry smile*) Right, Everard. But humor me — what grand pretense drives this meeting?

EVERARD (*Snappish*) I won't be interrogated. I won't.

PEDRO (*Clipped, needling*) This is no tribunal, Everard. I merely show interest. If curiosity offends you, perhaps the truth of this state visit is sharper than we knew.

EVERARD (*Barbed*) And who fed you— who fed you that notion of a state visit? You think I bandy such matters in idle gossip? Idle gossip?

PEDRO Locked doors breathe whispers. Footsteps in the corridors shuffle differently when authority hovers near. One learns to read such things — especially when kept apart, as we are, from the rumbling currents.

EVERARD (*Scoffing*) Nosey as ever. Nosey. Sniffing at secrets.

PEDRO (*Lowering voice, stinging*) If you're so intent on guarding mysteries, enlighten me at least with your silence. Are these halls to host a presence larger than your own ego, or is this

another mirage conjured by old fears? Show me something real, Everard — some glimmer that all is not sealed behind your proud teeth.

EVERARD *hesitates. He weighs the shadows. He tilts his head, a serpent uncoiling.*

EVERARD (*Sharp, fervent*) Belatrov. Belatrov. That viper whispers rebellion against The Elder himself. Every word he breathes is venom — venom aimed at the church, undermining the very pillars we've forged.

PEDRO (*Calmly dissecting*) Undermine? In what way?

EVERARD (*Righteous fury*) Belatrov is conspiring for an early succession, tearing — tearing at the sanctity of The Elder's decree. He twists words, dismisses the foundations that bind us. And worse — worse — he tests Master Andrei, planting seeds of doubt. Seeds. Treason wrapped in a smile, as plain as the dawn.

PEDRO (*Amused*) The way you kneel before authority, Everard — one wonders whether your knees or your principles are more calloused by now.

PEDRO (*Leaning toward KSENIA, stage whisper*) Everard would fuck gravel if he thought it'd make him holy.

PEDRO (*Slow, weighted*) Perhaps... an early succession is what we need. Shouldn't our Elder hand the torch before the fire dwindles? To linger too long risks consuming even the brightest legacy.

EVERARD *jerks. His fist tightens.*

EVERARD (*Dagger of outrage*) You *dare* speak such heresy? Such — Suggesting the Elder step aside? Step aside? Each syllable you utter reeks of blasphemy, Pedro. Blasphemy. Retract it.

PEDRO (*Cruel smile*) Your performances in the chapel, Everard — all that moaning, all that sweat — one could mistake it for something more... carnal. Perhaps that's the point. God and a good fuck — both require surrender, don't they?

PEDRO (*Rising, cool defiance*) Sacrilege? The Elder has served admirably, but time waits for no man. Even the Architect's chosen must acknowledge the inevitable.

EVERARD (*Grinding teeth*) You yourself twist words — twist words as if they were ribbons on a cheap gift, twist them until they are dry. Dry. You and Beletrov wield charm as a veneer over rot. Over rot. You think the faithful must be bothered by your new illusions? They can smell falsehood — falsehood in your every whisper.

EVERARD *advances. The air tightens. A STAFF member reaches to clear a plate; Everard waves them away without looking.*

PEDRO (*Goading*) Maybe they're tired of old ghosts rattling their chains, Everard. Maybe what festers in these halls is not my rot but your fear of change. You cling to the old rites like a wounded animal gnawing its own leg, desperate to hold onto what no longer breathes. The world beyond these walls stirs and mutates. We won't all die along with you, with a prayer choking in our throats.

EVERARD *lunges. PEDRO shoves back. A dull thud shakes the floor. A wine glass tips, red spreading across the white linen. KSENIA rises, napkin falling. ANIKA follows. They retreat toward the door, leaving their untouched plates behind. The STAFF flatten against the walls.*

EVERARD (*Hissing*) So this is it. This is it. The low hiss of your soul stripped bare. Stripped bare. No reverence, no honour. You think these corridors will embrace your name when you're done— done feeding on their marrow?

IVAN (*Authoritative*) Enough! This helps no one. We must focus.

PEDRO (*Eyes blazing*) And you would have us rot in silence, feeding the fever-dreams of yesterday rather than breathing fresh air. Your mind is a stagnant pool where reason goes to drown.

IVAN (*Thrusting between them*) Enough! Silence, both of you.

PEDRO (*Smouldering*) I say what others whisper to the shadows. Ivan, I owe you no disrespect, but closing our eyes won't hush the howling winds outside these walls. The world shifts; you can't pretend these rotting timbers are eternal.

EVERARD (*Spine stiffening*) Our reality is carved here. Here. Inside these stone bones, guided by a wisdom that does not yield— does not yield to fickle whims. We endure because we refuse to bend. Refuse.

PEDRO (*Grim smile*) The eternity you describe is a lullaby for frightened children. You invoke it like some holy relic, yet deep down—*deep down*—you know: not even The Elder can halt the slow gnaw of time. Each second eats away at his grandeur, and yours too.

EVERARD (*Cracking into fury*) How dare you— how dare you speak that name with such impiety! You spit at the very heart— the very heart of what sustains us—

IVAN (*Booming*) Enough! We are brothers! This must stop now!

PEDRO (*Overlapping, manic fire*) Keep barking you blind little lapdog! Barking your hollow hymns while the walls decay around us! The Elder jerks your strings, and you flicker, scrambling for the crumbs he deigns to drop!

EVERARD (*Thunderous*) You godless parasite!

PEDRO (*Raging*) I'll be damned if I die buried in these ruins! I've clawed for every inch!

IVAN (*Desperate plea*) Quiet—QUIET! Ty razryvayesh nas na chasti, slova yada!

PEDRO (*Whirling toward IVAN*) And YOU! Looming there in mute judgment, too afraid to plant your feet in the shifting sands! Don't you see? Your silence is cowardice in a fine disguise! You think by holding your tongue you can transcend this nightmare? You're wrong! Your quiet is a stale refusal to decide—a feeble plea to be spared when the storm breaks.

EVERARD (*Jabbing a finger*) He holds more strength— more strength in that silence than you do in all your conniving breath! You, a child casting stones at a mountain's flank, as if your petty fury— your petty fury could shift it.

PEDRO (*Brutal rasp*) Lapdog!

EVERARD grabs a heavy goblet from the table, wine sloshing. He hurls it. Glass shatters. A mirror fractures.

PEDRO (*Fury igniting*) You've lost your mind!

EVERARD (*Snarling*) Bastard!

They bow. A formal bow—the greeting between priests. Then they collide. Thunder in a low chamber. Chairs shriek. Dishes scatter across the floor, soup pooling with the spreading wine. A candelabra tips, flames guttering. Crimson robes swirl into a storm. They trade blows, snarling, a dissonant chorus of hate.

EVERARD & PEDRO "Traitor!" "Fanatic!" "Deceiver!" "Fool!" "Bastard!" "Coward!"

IVAN (*Lunging*) Stop! Both of you!

IVAN grabs EVERARD. PEDRO'S elbow catches IVAN'S ribs.

IVAN (*Booming*) ENOUGH!

IVAN thrusts himself between them. A living barricade. He forces them apart. The table is a ruin—cold food, shattered dishes, wine pooling like blood on white linen. The mirror spits back distorted faces.

EVERARD (*Heaving*) He's tearing us apart— tearing us apart from the inside!

PEDRO (*Wiping blood from lip*) I'm exposing the rot you refuse to see!

Silence falls. Thunder rolls in the distance.

EVERARD (*Strained*) This isn't over. Not over.

PEDRO (*Quiet, firm*) No. It's just beginning.

IVAN shoves PEDRO toward the door.

***PEDRO** staggers, catches the jamb. He glares, then vanishes into the gloom.*

***IVAN** bars the door. He turns to **EVERARD**.*

***EVERARD** (Rough) You let him— you let him rile us, you let this happen. This.*

***IVAN** tenses. He gestures at the ruin.*

***IVAN** (Murmuring) I stopped it before worse came.*

***EVERARD** spits contempt. He turns and strides out. His footsteps hammer away.*

***IVAN** remains. He looks at the broken mirror. He stands in the shards of his own reflection.*

He steps out.

*The chamber settles. Dust hovers. A **STAFF** member approaches the ruined table. Then another. They begin to clear the wreckage—broken glass, cold food, sodden linen. They move in silence, practiced, as if this happens every night.*

***STAFF MEMBER 1** (Whispered, to the other) They fight over who inherits a rotting corpse.*

***STAFF MEMBER 2** We fight over who empties the chamberpots.*

***STAFF MEMBER 1** At least our inheritance is honest.*

III.V

THE COURTYARD. CONTINUOUS.

The sky churns, bruised and swollen. Rain hurls down like needles. Slivers of moonlight illuminate twisted hedges and the sodden wool of a flock huddled under a sagging willow. Thunder rolls in the distance—artillery from a war being fought in heaven.

***KSENIA** stands at the edge of the courtyard, gown already plastered to her skin. She stares into the storm as if looking for something—or trying not to look at what's behind her.*

***ANIKI** emerges from the darkness, one hand pressed to her temple. The migraine is building—it pulses behind her eyes like something trying to claw its way out. She approaches through the rain, each step costing her.*

ANIKA (Quiet, almost lost in the wind) I've been trying not to look at you. For three days. Because when I look at you I see the... the shape of... it's like a shadow that walks ahead. And I don't want to see it. I've seen it before. With others. The ones who stood too close to the centre. The ones who thought if they just... if they were just good enough, useful enough...

The pain spikes. She presses her temple.

ANIKA I watched a woman play herself hollow in this room. Seventeen years ago. She had your hands. The same shake in the bow. And I thought, if I just stay still, if I don't look, I won't have to watch it happen again. But you keep... you keep being in every room I walk into. And I can't stop seeing...

The rain thickens. For a moment neither can see the other clearly.

KSENIA *doesn't turn.*

KSENIA Understood what?

ANIKA (*Pain flickering across her face*) How this place works. What it does to people who let themselves be seen. Who let themselves become *useful*.

KSENIA (*Still not turning*) And what does it do?

ANIKA It feeds on them. Slowly. So slowly they don't notice until there's nothing left. Until they're just... (*She gestures vaguely at herself.*) ...this.

ANIKA And we stay. The doors are never locked, Ksenia. That's the cruellest part. They don't have to be.

KSENIA *turns now. She looks at ANIKA—really looks. Takes in the hand pressed to the temple, the pain-lined face, the way she holds herself like something that might shatter.*

KSENIA Your left hand. It's been... I've been watching it. For days. It does this thing when you think no one's... and then tonight, before the rain, you stopped in the corridor. Just stopped. And you looked at the wall like it was looking back. And I thought... I thought, she sees them too. The things that aren't... or the things that are there but everyone else just walks past and I keep thinking I'm the only one who... who notices that the house is...

She can't finish. Wipes her face. Rain or tears.

KSENIA I'm not nervous. Everyone says I'm nervous. Ksenia's so nervous. But I'm not. I'm just... the only one looking.

Her left hand moves against her thigh—fingering a phrase she doesn't know she's playing.

A beat. ANIKA stares at her. Something shifts.

KSENIA And what's the alternative? Become invisible? Disappear into the walls like you have?

The words land. ANIKA flinches as if struck.

ANIK (*Low, controlled*) Yes. That's exactly what I learned to do. Because I watched what happened to the ones who didn't. The clever ones. The ones who thought they could play the game.

KSENIA And you? Were you clever once?

ANIK takes a step back. *KSENIA* takes one forward. *The distance stays the same.*

A long pause. The rain drums down. ANIK's face shifts.

ANIK (*Bitter*) I was brilliant. I was going to navigate this place. Read the currents. Align myself with power. Sound familiar?

KSENIA says nothing.

ANIK I had a plan. I had... (*She stops. Presses harder at her temple.*) I thought if I was smart enough, careful enough, I could stay intact. I could serve without being consumed. I could be *useful* without being *used up*.

KSENIA What happened?

A light flickers in an upper window. Both women go still. It dies. They don't look at each other.

ANIK (*A hollow laugh*) I was used up. Piece by piece. So slowly I didn't notice. First the ambitions. Then the hopes. Then the things I thought I believed. And finally... (*She gestures at her head.*) ...this. The visions. The migraines. The Elder's voice in my skull telling me things I don't want to know.

She steps closer. Rain streams down both their faces.

ANIK Do you know what invisibility costs, Ksenia? It costs everything you were. You hollow yourself out. You become furniture. And the house *still* feeds on you—it just feeds on what's left. The scraps. The dregs.

KSENIA (*Hard*) And what do you have, Anika? What did disappearing get you? You're still here. You're still suffering. You just suffer *quietly*.

ANIKA (*Grief flooding through*) I'm *alive*. I'm still—

KSENIA (*Stepping forward, aggressive now*) Are you? Are you alive? Or are you just... preserved? Like Andrei. Like something in a jar. Still here, but not really *here*. Not really anything at all.

Thunder cracks. Lightning illuminates them both—two drenched figures facing each other across a widening chasm.

ANIKA (*Something breaking*) You think aligning yourself with Pedro is different? You think making yourself visible to every eye in this place is *survival*? That's painting a target on yourself and waiting for the arrow.

KSENIA My father had this study. Oak panels. I know every knot in that wood. Every whorl. Eighteen years of facing the wall while I played. Head down. Don't let them see your face. Don't let them see you thinking. Because if they see you, if they really see you, they'll know you're not... you're not what they...

She's shaking now. The cold or something else.

KSENIA And I thought when I came here... I thought finally. Finally I can turn around. Finally I can be in the room instead of next to it. And now you're telling me the room is worse. You're telling me the room eats people. But Anika... I've already been eaten. I've already been nothing. At least this time I get to choose which mouth.

Her teeth are chattering. She clamps her jaw. Holds the defiance in place by force.

ANIKA You'll be dead. Or worse—you'll be what I am. What I became. Hollowed out and haunted and still somehow *here*, watching it happen to the next one. And the next. And the next.

She presses both hands to her head now. The pain is visible—it twists her face, bends her spine.

ANIKA (*Through clenched teeth*) God, make it stop. Make it—

She reaches for something solid. Her hand finds the hedge. Thorns. She doesn't notice. Blood mixes with rain on her palm.

She doubles over. KSENIA moves without thinking. Her hands hover. One closes on ANIKA's wrist. Adjusts it. Muscle memory. And what comes out isn't her voice—it's the schoolroom. The automatic rhythm she uses with children.

KSENIA Breathe. Just breathe. The music comes from the waiting, remember? Not from the wood. Not from the...

She stops. Hears herself. ANIKA looks up at her, face twisted with pain, and something else—recognition.

ANIKA What did you just...

KSENIA I don't know. I don't know why I...

The rain drums down. Neither moves.

A door. Somewhere in the dark. Both women freeze mid-breath. Listen. Footsteps on stone—then nothing. Gone, or waiting. When they speak again, their voices are lower.

KSENIA You came out in the rain.

ANIKA doesn't answer.

KSENIA You said there's nothing left. You said you're furniture. Hollowed out. But you're here. Shaking. In pain. You could have stayed inside. You could have let me drown out here and told yourself it wasn't your... but you came out in the rain. To find me.

A long pause.

KSENIA So which is it, Anika? Are you empty? Or have you just been pretending so long you forgot what was underneath?

A crack. A branch from the elm lands at their feet, black and slick. They both flinch. Then stillness.

KSENIA *(Staring at it, barely audible)* Someone's sleeve.

A beat. She blinks. It is only wood.

ANIKA looks at the branch. At KSENIA's arm. Away.

ANIKA opens her mouth. Closes it. The question sits there, unanswerable. Or the answer is too much.

ANIKA looks up. Sees the hand. Sees it not reaching.

ANIKA *(Barely audible)* We had something. Didn't we? An understanding. I thought...

KSENIA (*Something cracking in her voice*) What did you think?

ANIKA I thought you were different. I thought you saw. I thought maybe... (*She can't finish.*) I can't watch you do this, Ksenia. I can't watch another one feed herself to this place.

KSENIA Then don't.

The word falls between them.

Silence except for the rain. ANIKA's tears mix with the water streaming down her face.

ANIKA (*A whisper*) I tried to save you.

KSENIA I don't want to be saved. I want to survive.

ANIKA It's the same thing.

KSENIA No. It isn't.

KSENIA *turns back to the storm. Her spine is straight. Her hands are fists at her sides.*

ANIKA *stands frozen—hand still pressed to her temple, the pain and the grief indistinguishable now. She looks at KSENIA's back. Waits for her to turn. She doesn't.*

After a long moment, ANIKA speaks one more time.

ANIKA (*Her voice breaking*) When it happens—when they start taking pieces—you won't feel it at first. It happens slowly. Gently, almost. And by the time you realize what you've lost... (*Her voice breaks.*) ...you won't remember what it felt like to have it.

KSENIA *doesn't respond. Doesn't move.*

ANIKA *turns and walks back into the darkness. She does not look back.*

KSENIA *stands alone in the rain. Lightning flashes. Thunder answers. She does not move. She does not weep.*

The storm rages on.

III.VI

THE COURTYARD. NIGHT.

The courtyard lies quiet. The moon hangs low, fractured behind thin clouds. A gnarled elm tree twists skyward, its roots rupturing the neglected path.

EVERARD *enters. A violent stroke of crimson against the decay. He pauses beneath the elm, looking up at the monolithic window of The Elder's chamber. He cuts a line of intent through the garden.*

He halts before a rusted hatch hidden among the roots. He wrenches it open. A black void exhales the scent of rot.

He begins to gag, only to then hold it together. He lights a lantern. He descends into the earth.

THE SEPTIC TANK.

A cavernous maw. The air is thick with rancid humidity. A pool of stagnant water sprawls across the chamber, sheathed in a sickly, iridescent film. Bloated clumps of detritus bob on the surface.

The lantern casts grotesque shadows on the slick, oozing walls. The silence is heavy, broken only by the drip of condensation.

EVERARD *stands at the edge.*

He is completely still. Not the vibrating stillness of suppressed energy—not the tremor we have seen in every other scene. Actual stillness. The engine has stopped. His hands hang at his sides. His chest barely moves. His eyes are open but they are not scanning, not calculating, not searching for the next thing to grasp. He is simply present. It is the only time we will see him like this. It lasts a long time.

Then, slowly, he unfastens his robes with ritual reverence. The fabric pools at his feet. He stands exposed against the ruin.

He steps into the water. A muted splash. The viscous liquid clings to his skin. He wades deeper, the foul embrace rising to his chest.

EVERARD *(Barely audible, a lesson recited) ...how to rot.*

He kneels. He scoops the putrid liquid in trembling hands. He brings it to his face—a baptism in degradation. He smears the filth across his skin.

He tilts his head back, convulsing. Caught between two forces—one pulling him deeper, the other holding him aloft.

The lantern dims. The chamber holds its breath.

CURTAINS CLOSE.



FOURTH CODA

PRISON CELL. TIMELESS EVENING.

The same, hellish CRIMSON LIGHT beams for one last time. A crypt of crumbling stone, weeping rust and rot. The air reeks of ammonia and the metallic tang of despair. A single bulb dangles, its jaundiced light flickering like the pulse of a dying star.

Shadows writhe on the ceiling, morphing into gargoyle faces. The floor is a sticky mosaic of grime and dried blood. A cot sags, its straw mattress burst open.

HERETYK crouches in the centre. His shirt hangs in tatters. Water drips—plink, plink, plink. He keeps time with a twitch of his head.

HERETYK (*hissing through clenched teeth*) Liar. Charlatan. Thief.

He presses his ear to the damp wall. He listens for a heartbeat in the stone.

HERETYK Thov promised light. Thov promised answers.

He licks the wall. He tastes the salt and nitre. He spits it out.

HERETYK (*muffled, paper clotting his words*) Mercifvl Architect—if thov exist—strike me blind. Let me see y^e trvth in y^e dark!

He fumbles for his notebook. He rips a page free. He crumples it. He stuffs it into his mouth. He chews dryly.

He swallows the wad of paper with a violent convulsion.

HERETYK (*howling*) Why didst thov give me sight?

He digs his thumbs into his eye sockets. He presses until he sees sparks.

HERETYK Thov wants a martyr? Here. Take my bones. Bvild thine altar on them.

He slams his forehead against the iron bars. Once. Twice. A rhythmic thud.

HERETYK (*spitting*) Bvt know y^s—thine Essence is a coward. It hides within y^e silence.

He turns his back on the bars. He urinates in the corner. He does not break his stare at the ceiling.

HERETYK (*whispering*) Blood. Water. Wine. All one, and all lies.

*A rat skitters across the floor. **HERETYK** freezes. He tracks it with jerky movements.*

He lunges. He traps the rat beneath his hand.

He lifts it.

He holds it up to the flickering light like a host.

HERETYK(*roaring*) I AM THINE TRVTH!

He crushes the rat in his fist. He brings the corpse to his mouth. He bites the head off.

The bulb EXPLODES. Darkness slams down.

*The light flickers back, weak and brown. **HERETYK** is on the floor.*

HERETYK (*murmuring, delirious*) Open. Open thyself.

He drags himself to the bars. He opens his mouth wide. He clamps his teeth onto the cold iron.

HERETYK (*gargling through blood*) I'll chew my way to hell.

He bites down. He grinds his molars against the steel. Enamel splinters.

He jerks his head back violently while maintaining the bite.

SNAP.

A wet, heavy pop echoes. His jaw unhinges. It hangs loose, swinging uselessly.

HERETYK (*screaming without words*) Arghh... aarhhhhgh...

He rolls onto his back. He stares at the leak in the ceiling.

He shimmies across the floor, sliding through the slime.

He positions himself directly under the drip. He opens his broken mouth.

HERETYK (*slurring through the dislocation*) As y^e Heretyk I am, I drink from thy teat, my Essence. I savovr every wet sap thov off^{er} rest me.

The dirty water drips into his throat. He swallows, choking slightly.

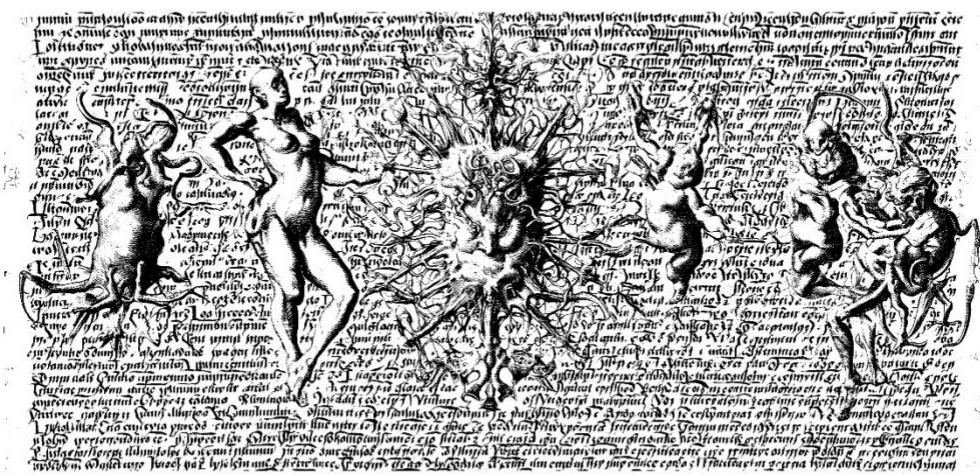
HERETYK Blind me with thy silence. Keep me here, forever. Forever. Forever.

He arches his back. He convulses. He goes limp.

***HERETYK** lies still. The water continues to drip into his open mouth.*

The light fades.

CURTAINS OPEN.



IV

IV.I

THE REHEARSAL CHAMBER. PRE-DAWN.

A vaulted room stripped bare. Stone walls scarred by centuries of sound. Faint grey light bleeds through grime-caked windows, slicing across a cracked mirror.

Sheet music carpets the floor, trembling in a draft that smells of damp earth and burnt incense. Somewhere, the building groans.

KREPOST STAFF—robed in milky-blank garments—swarm the edges. They scrutinize papers with feverish energy, ghosts preparing for a funeral.

THE HERD is scattered in the wreckage.

EVERARD crouches over the piano. His crimson robes hang like flayed skin. Sweat drips through the ash smeared on his cheeks. He stabs at the keys, extracting dissonant shrieks. His eyes are wild, darting to the door.

PEDRO leans against the wall, arms crossed. A knife-blade silhouette. He watches Everard unravel with a feral smirk.

ANIKA presses her back to the cold stone. She clutches a twisted silver pendant, eyes fixed on a horror beyond the room.

KSENIA sits rigid, tracing the wood grain of her chair. **IVAN** stands sentinel, tectonic and still.

PEDRO (*Mock-concerned*) Careful, maestro. You'll wear out the keys before the funeral.

(*Pushing off the wall, circling*) Or is that the point?

EVERARD (*Through gritted teeth*) Performance demands precision. Precision. Not your philosophy.

PEDRO (*Laughing softly*) Precision, desperation.

(*Leaning in, voice dropping*) I've seen it before. Men scraping hymns from bottle shards, thinking noise could fill the void.

EVERARD (*Slamming the piano lid*) Get on with your work, Pedro. Your work. I have no treats for strays.

The insult hangs, sour. PEDRO'S smirk hardens.

PEDRO (*Snorts*) Andrei will want a scapegoat when this crumbles.

(*Gesturing to the music*) You're orchestrating his requiem, not hers.

A low rumble shakes the chamber. The candelabra tips, spilling wax. The room thrums with static.

ANIKA (*Suddenly lucid, urgent*) Stop. Both of you. He's watching. Testing who'll break first.

EVERARD (*Hysterical laugh*) Break? Break? You both are already broken. Already.

PEDRO (*Sharp*) You still believe in saints, don't you? Hell, you might make a martyr of yourself! You can be the last thing the world sees before the blade falls.

***ANDREI** enters apart. A silhouette against crimson drapery. Hands clenched behind his back. A mask of borrowed composure.*

EVERARD Good morning Master Andrei. Good morning.

ANDREI Morning.

***EVERARD** resumes pacing. **PEDRO** leans against the hearth. **IVAN** remains still.*

***GRIGORI** enters. The chamber inhales.*

His footsteps echo like coffin nails. He pauses at the table's head, skeletal fingers resting on the edge. Candlelight licks his hollow face.

GRIGORI (*Flat, cadaverous*) If I could have everyone's attention. It is my role this morning to tell you that The Elder will be attending Lady Anastasia's funeral this afternoon. Publicly.

A beat. The words hang, rotting.

EVERARD (*Sharp exhale—disbelief and awe*) Publicly? Publicly?

***ANDREI** raises his gaze. His face is devoid of reaction. A vein pulses at his temple.*

ANDREI (*Quiet, absolute*) No.

*His fingers loosen slightly but do not move. **GRIGORI** does not flinch.*

GRIGORI It is decided.

*Silence. **KSENIA** looks to **ANIKA**, who stares at nothing. **IVAN'S** jaw tightens.*

EVERARD (*Tight, strained*) It is not our place— not our place to question the will of The Elder.

PEDRO (*Under his breath, mocking*) Perhaps not yours.

***EVERARD** glares. **ANIKA** speaks before the snap.*

ANIKA (*Measured, deliberate*) This is unprecedented. He has not left his chamber in dozens of Measures. For him to do so now—

GRIGORI (*Voice like rust over stone*) —It is not your concern.

Silence. ANDREI tilts his head, methodical. He traces the table's surface, mapping an unseen blueprint. His shoulders ease into fluid tension.

KSENIA (*Soft alarm*) The people will see him. As he is.

ANDREI (*Low, knowing*) That's the point. (*He almost smiles*)

GRIGORI It is decided.

IVAN (*Whisper soft as dust*) The shepherd walks among his flock.

ANDREI exhales slowly. He closes his eyes, then opens them—dark, unreadable. He glances harshly at GRIGORI.

ANDREI Then hurry. (*Flat*) Hurry now. Hurry.

The room clamours. THE HERD and KREPOST STAFF rush away in overlapping directions.

GRIGORI holds ANDREI'S gaze for a beat, then departs.

ANDREI stands amongst the madness like an obelisk. Frozen. Unmoving.

He eventually slumps into his arched posture and paces away.

IV.II

A SANCTUM BESIDE ST. DIMITRI'S CATHEDRAL. CONTINUOUS.

A backstage precinct where order is a performance and chaos wears crimson. Robed bodies sweep past one another in fevered spirals. The air hums with compulsive repetition—robes steamed, scrolls rewritten, a soft, continuous crying.

***EVERARD** cuts through the whirlwind like a blade. He mutters commandments, scanning the room for errors that haven't happened yet.*

***KSENIA** hyperventilates into her violin cloth. **PEDRO** repeats his name like a mantra. **ANIKA** stares into a corner. **IVAN** hovers, a monument to controlled stillness.*

***ANDREI** drifts through the maelstrom, unnoticed yet heavy. He takes a hidden swig from a flask and slips away, vanishing into the folds of chaos.*

*In the churn, **KSENIA** collides hard with **ANIKA**.*

KSENIA *(Breath cut short)* Forgive me, Anika.

***ANIKA** offers no reply. She clings to **KSENIA** with a stare suffused with ancient, quiet malice.*

***KSENIA** peels away, drifting toward **IVAN**.*

KSENIA *(Urgent, thin with anxiety)* Do we have the personnel to cover the extended service?

IVAN *(Flat)* Yes. It will not fail. Focus on the performance.

***IVAN** dismisses her with a flick of his hand. **KSENIA** recoils.*

***IVAN** snatches a discarded score. He storms toward **PEDRO**, thrusting it against his chest, then passes him without a word.*

***PEDRO** twists the score into a crude baton. He leans insolently against a table, obstructing **EVERARD'S** path.*

EVERARD *(Sharp as flint)* Move, Pedro. Move.

***PEDRO** does not flinch.*

EVERARD *(Venomous whisper)* I said MOVE. MOVE.

***PEDRO** grimaces, then squares his body before peeling away.*

***EVERARD** storms toward the **KREPOST STAFF** stewing in steam. He tears a robe from a **STAFF MEMBER'S** grasp and hurls it to the floor.*

*The staff freeze. **EVERARD'S** rage ricochets through the space.*

***GRIGORI** stands behind him, a shadow stitched to the hem of chaos. His head hangs heavy. He watches the futility around him—**KSENIA'S** fraying composure, **ANIKA'S** frozen state, **PEDRO'S** coil, **IVAN'S** stone.*

The weight bears down on him.

*Like vapour, **GRIGORI** moves. A departure so fluid it barely disturbs the air. He dissolves from the scene.*

IV.III

THE ELDER'S CHAMBER.

The air is filtered sterile yet thick with the scent of ancient decay.

Shadows cling to abstract murals. The signature wooden swing hangs motionless.

***THE ELDER** is propped on a high-backed throne draped in crimson. He is a tableau of ruin—ashen skin clinging to a tapeworm frame. His eyes are filmed over, cold embers in deep hollows.*

***GRIGORI** moves with the efficiency of a mortician. He dips fingers into an ornate bowl of oil.*

GRIGORI (*Low, steady*) Sir. If you would... permit.

***THE ELDER** emits a dry, rustling rattle. Assent.*

***GRIGORI** anoints the skeletal forehead and hands. **TWO STAFF** hold trays, struggling to maintain composure.*

KREPOST STAFF 1 (*Barely audible whisper*) The... the unguent for the... lesions...

GRIGORI (*Sharp*) Patience. All in its sequence.

***ANDREI** enters. He halts at the threshold, casting a long shadow. The sight strikes him—a physical blow.*

ANDREI (*Choked whisper*) This... this is what awaits? (*He steadies himself on the doorframe*)
The... the glory?

***GRIGORI** pauses, acknowledging **ANDREI** with a look, then drapes a heavy crimson silk over **THE ELDER'S** shoulders.*

GRIGORI (*To STAFF*) Assist. The clasps. Ensure they are secure, yet cause no... abrasion. His Divinity is... delicate.

***EVERARD** enters. He is ecstatic, ash-streaked, trembling.*

EVERARD (*Reverent tremor*) The stillness... the stillness... it breathes. He is... He is awakening. The air itself... it clarifies. Clarifies. Can you feel it? Can you? The ancient dust... settling. Settling. Every particle bows.

He fixes his eyes on a point beyond the throne.

EVERARD The threads... the threads... they draw taut. He is... here. Here. The Vessel... hums. Hums. Oh, Father of Ages, the slumbering giant... stirs. Stirs. The ignorance outside these walls, it... it will recoil. Recoil. A glorious, silent thunder.

*He halts. **GRIGORI** shifts, a barrier.*

EVERARD (*To STAFF*) The regalia! The regalia! This is no common rite, you husks! It is an unveiling! An unveiling! The world, swathed in its putrid ignorance, will witness— will witness the truth of ages! PERFECTION! PERFECTION! HE DEMANDS IT! AND WE DEMAND IT!

***THE ELDER'S** head lolls. His eyelids peel back. He fixes **EVERARD** with a predatory gaze.*

THE ELDER (*Dry exhalation*) Zeal... Boy... A flame that blackens... even... the most devout... stone...

***EVERARD** freezes. The mask shatters. He collapses, a crimson stain on the stone.*

EVERARD (*Choked*) Master! Master! Forgive... this vessel's... impurity... My soul... my soul fissures... at the radiance... the radiance of Your light...

***GRIGORI** secures the final clasp. A metallic click. **THE ELDER** is now an icon of terrible endurance.*

GRIGORI (*To ANDREI, stiff as cooling iron*) Master Andrei. It is time. The procession... awaits.

*The procession forms. A liturgical crawl. **GRIGORI** supports **THE ELDER**—the hidden framework beneath the silk articulating with every juddering step. **EVERARD** takes point. **ANDREI** falls in beside his father.*

*They move into the **GRAND CORRIDOR**.*

EVERARD (*Strained chant*) Behold! Behold! The Shepherd of Ages... He walks... He walks among us... He comes... Oh, HE COMES! HE COMES! The Word... made corruption... and glory! Here he is... Here... He...

*The procession halts at the towering black doors of the antechamber. **STAFF** push them open. Silence.*

*In the throat of the darkness, the rest of **THE HERD** waits. They see him.*

KSENIA (*Choked whisper*) Our cage...

*She stumbles back, colliding with **IVAN**. He steadies her, eyes fixed on the figure.*

***PEDRO** freezes. His mask shatters for a second—raw shock—before hardening into calculation.*

PEDRO (*Sharp command*) Steady yourselves! Before your god! Show him the reverence he is owed!

He drops into a low, perfect bow. He measures the ruin.

ANIKA (*Fragile thread*) He is... becoming.

***IVAN** sinks to one knee. Absolute certainty.*

IVAN (*To KSENIA*) Kneel.

***ANDREI** watches them all. A cold, bitter smile lifts the corner of his mouth.*

ANDREI (*Murmur*) And the pageant begins. (*He takes a swig from his flask*) The pageant.

IV.IV

St. Dimitri's Cathedral. Continuous.

A masterpiece of architectural horror. Ribs of bone-white stone soar into unseen gloom. The air is sterile, cold.

*A **SICK ORGAN** groans—a melody broken on the rack. Notes hang sourly. A phantom choir moans hollow vowels. Beneath it, a low, synthetic hum vibrates like a morgue fridge.*

*A handful of **PHOTOGRAPHERS** scuttle like lice, angling lenses to frame the soaring architecture and hide the ocean of empty pews.*

*A cluster of **WEEPING ORPHANS**—costumed in cheap white—shiver near the front.*

***BELTROV** sits in the front pew. Utterly still. His **ADVISOR** watches him.*

ADVISOR (*Whisper*) The pews, President.

BELTROV (*Eyes fixed forward*) An ocean of wood.

A STAFF member moves down the aisle, placing programs on each seat. Cream-colored. Gilt-edged. She does not look up.

BELTROV Programs. They are still laying out the programs.

ADVISOR We confirmed the arterial roadblocks. Public safety mandate. No one is getting through.

BELTROV Roadblocks stop the curious, Advisor. They do not stop the devout.

(*Gesturing slightly*) This is not our engineering. This... this is evaporation.

ADVISOR Like the Western coastline.

BELTROV Mm. The waters take what they take.

BELTROV (*Looking up into the ribs of the nave*) St. Dimitri's. He raised it in the name of the father he despised. (*Dry*) Even their grief is architecture.

ADVISOR They still expect a miracle. The adulation.

BELTROV (*Dry, mirthless smile*) Yes. The weeping thousands. The gnashing of teeth. Perhaps they are simply delayed. Praying too hard, stuck in the mud of their own piety.

(*Smile vanishes*) They built a lung for a giant. And the giant is dead. No. Let them complete the tableau. One must allow the rot to flower... ...before one salts the earth.

BELTROV You know what outliving everyone actually means? It means there's no one left who knew you before you were *this*. No one to say "remember when." He's not a god. He's a man who ran out of witnesses.

A silence. For once, the ADVISOR has no reply.

BELTROV *runs a gloved finger along the pew. He inspects the soot on his fingertip.*

BELTROV *looks up at the control booth high in the narthex. He taps the **ADVISOR'S** shoulder.*

ADVISOR The photographers are complicit. They're shooting the myth.

BELTROV Of course. They are shooting what they were paid to shoot. The lie is the only thing on the docket.

(*Leaning in, sharp blade*) We do not interrupt them while they are documenting the symptom. We wait for the fever to peak.

ADVISOR And the technicians?

BELTROV They are on my signal. Sound first. I want the silence to hit them. I want them to hear the blood in their own ears.

Then, the light. All of it. I want a sterile, municipal glare. I want this place to look like a warehouse.

ADVISOR It will be... an abrupt transition.

BELTROV (*Tiny, cold laugh*) It will be an autopsy.

THE HERD *enters, making their way to the stage seating.*

BELTROV Look at him.

*He nods toward **EVERARD**.*

BELTROV He still believes he's the high priest. He hasn't realized he's the clown.

BELTROV The beautiful thing about a god who won't die is that he can't be martyred. And a god who can't be martyred has no *narrative*. He's just... furniture. Very old furniture that the family is too sentimental to throw out.

Wait for it...

BELTROV Three hundred Measures of consolidating power. Heretics, orthodoxies, and prisoners. And look at him. He can't even hold his own head up. That's the problem with eternity — eventually you *become* the institution. And institutions don't die, they just... calcify. Get hollowed out. Become their own museums.

*The procession reaches the front. **EVERARD** raises his hands in a gesture of sacred welcome. The peak.*

BELTROV ...There.

***BELTROV** inspects the soot on his finger again. The physical proof.*

BELTROV Filth.

*He looks at the booth. He leans toward the **ADVISOR**. He brings his hand to his throat and makes a short, precise CUTTING MOTION.*

*The **ADVISOR** whispers into a radio.*

***THWACK-CLUNK.** The sound of industrial breakers tripping.*

*The organ **CHOKES**. The hum **DIES**. The choir is **GUILLOTINED**.*

Absolute, physical silence slams down. A vacuum.

Then—

KERR-CHUNK.

*Banks of high-wattage, sodium-yellow **WORK LIGHTS** slam on. The light is flat. Surgical. Vicious. It annihilates the crimson darkness.*

*The soaring gloom becomes peeling grey paint. The bleached pillars show water stains. The **ORPHANS** are revealed as dirty, underfed children squinting in the glare.*

*The **PHOTOGRAPHERS** lower their cameras. The illusion is broken.*

***THE HERD** recoils.*

EVERARD lets out a choked hiss. **KSENIA** flinches as if struck. **IVAN** stands stone-still. **ANIKA** stares into the light, her expression slackening into vacancy.

A **RAT** scuttles across the marble altar. It stops, nose twitching in the glare.

BELTROV leans back. He nudges the **ADVISOR**.

BELTROV (*Whisper*) Ah. The true heir!

The **ADVISOR** lets out a half-laugh.

BELTROV He's punctual. I respect that. Look at him.

ADVISOR How do you want to proceed with the funeral?

BELTROV ignores him. He leans forward, addressing the **RAT** with polite, academic curiosity.

BELTROV Well. Hello there. You're punctual. I respect that.

The rat twitches.

BELTROV No, no, please. Don't let me interrupt. You've come for the feast, haven't you?

(*Gesturing to the peeling paint*) A bit sparse, I'm afraid. They've let the larder go.

The **RAT** scurries over the bible.

BELTROV (*Appreciative chuckle*) Ah, yes. A textual critic, good. That's a purity of purpose the Zagonovs could never touch. Bravo.

ADVISOR (*Urgent whisper*) President... it's vermin.

BELTROV It's the new god. It's eating the old one.

(*Settling back, satisfied*) A perfect succession.

BELTROV gestures an open palm toward the rat. Yielding the stage.

BELTROV Give him the stage.

(*To ADVISOR*) Now. Take the pictures. Get the rat in frame.

IV.V

THE ELDER'S CHAMBER. NIGHT.

A tomb-stink of formaldehyde and stale incense. Sick candle-yellow light makes the shadows clot. The crimson ropes of the swing stain the gloom.

***THE ELDER** sits on the heavy, ornate swing. A husk held up by will.*

***ANDREI** shuffles, a man standing in his own grave.*

***THE ELDER** makes a slight twitch of parchment-skin.*

***THE ELDER** (Dry rattle) Grigori... A moment... Solitary...*

***GRIGORI** bows. Stone-faced. He retreats. The heavy door **THUDS**.*

***THE ELDER'S** gaze fixes **ANDREI**. Two hot coals in a skull. He inspects.*

***THE ELDER** (Voice a dry scrape) The statesman... Beltrov... Did he... wash his hands?...
After...*

***ANDREI** (Confused, defensive) It was... (defensive, fumbling) ...a matter of... of state.*

***THE ELDER** (Wheezing laugh) A matter... of state.*

*(Leaning forward, sniffing) You reek. But not of power. Not even of fear. You reek of... grain.
Of the bottle. Of waste.*

*(Contemptuous) Your grandfather could drain a village dry and still have appetite for seconds...
You can barely keep your dinner down... The blood thins with every generation... like piss in
snow...*

***ANDREI** (Torn) I am... (the word comes out wrong) ...grieving. Grieving.*

***THE ELDER** (Venomous contempt) Grieving... You spill more than you grieve... Your
mother...*

*(Dismissive wave) ...she was a vessel. She served her purpose. She held the line. And you... you
just leak.*

***ANDREI** (Shaking) She was my mother— (the shake in his voice) —my mother—*

THE ELDER And who built her? (*Dry bark*) She was the iron cup... And I poured everything into her... for this... For you... And I look at you... and I see... a stain on the floor...

(*Leaning in, intimate whisper*) All that thirst... All that need... for nothing?... You want to quench it?... You want to be full?... You think that bottle holds what you need?...

(*Terrible pause*) The thirst is the legacy... you fool... You are just drinking from the wrong well...

ANDREI stops vibrating. He goes cold. He laughs—a sharp, ugly bark.

ANDREI (*Cracking, something igniting*) The wrong well? (*A laugh—ugly, clear*) The wrong... You dug the well, you old... parasite. You filled it with poison. You fed my mother to it. You fed me to it. This... This cathedral... it's just a crypt. And you... you're just the rot. I drink? Yes, I drink. I drink to forget the stench.

Absolute silence. **THE ELDER** does not flinch. He smiles. A grotesque parting of lips.

THE ELDER (*Surgeon's precision*) The stench.

(*Nodding*) And so, the closet speaks. The puddle finds a voice, and it... whines. It leaks.

(*Leaning forward, cold gravity*) I gave you the thirst of a God. And you use it... like a peasant. You blame the well? When you are too weak to draw? When all you do is spill?

ANDREI'S courage shatters. He vibrates again. Desperate. Hooked.

THE ELDER slumps slightly. A flicker of weariness. The smile returns—conspiratorial. Inviting.

THE ELDER (*Intimate scrape*) The... stench.

(*Inhaling with relish*) ...Yes. It is a rot, my boy. It is a parasite. And it feeds.

(*The swing groans*) You feel that thirst? That is me. That is the God in you, clawing at the closet door. The need to... draw.

(*Hissing excitement*) I feel it too. Even now. To take. To claim. To be the well.

The swing creaks. A long silence. **THE ELDER'S** eyes drift to some middle distance—not memory, but something older. When he speaks again, his voice has changed. No longer goading. Almost tender.

THE ELDER (*Quiet, as if to himself*) Do you know what I have learned, Andrei?... In all these Measures?...

ANDREI laughs—a wet, broken sound. He reaches for the goblet, misses, knocks it. Black sludge pools on the floor.

ANDREI (*Slurring*) How to... how to drain the world. We know. We all know. (*He gestures at the spilled sludge*) Heir to eternity... and I can't find my own... own mouth... The dynasty distilled to its... its essence... spilled on the floor... like everything else I... I touch...

ANDREI (*Staring at the pooled sludge*) They put a bucket under me at birth. It's still empty.

THE ELDER (*Continuing, unhurried*) That there was no world... Before I opened my eyes...

A beat. ANDREI stares, uncomprehending.

THE ELDER (*The swing creaking*) You speak of history... Of the time before... But what proof do you have?... Books written by the dead... Interpreted by the dying... Passed down through institutions that crumbled before your grandfather's grandfather drew breath... I have watched generations of men insist that something came before... They all said the same thing... They all rotted...

ANDREI (*Grabbing the arm of a chair to steady himself*) You're... you're not the world.

THE ELDER (*Gentle*) Am I not?... The world reforms itself around me, Andrei... It always has... Empires rise and I watch them... Empires fall and I watch them fall... I have watched the waters swallow nations that thought themselves permanent... The only constant is my watching... When I close my eyes for the last time... if I ever do... what evidence will remain that any of it existed?...

THE ELDER (*Almost fond*) The children are taught that my Patience extends in both directions... They think it is a comfort... It is a confession...

ANDREI (*A bark of laughter, half-sob*) This is... this is madness. You're a madman on a swing. A madman. On a swing.

THE ELDER (*Undisturbed*) Perhaps... But I have outlived every man who called me mad... I have watched their certainties become footnotes... Their revolutions become chapters... Their chapters become dust... And still I swing... Still I watch... Still the world remakes itself for my eyes...

ANDREI sways. He finds another goblet—this one still half-full—and drinks deep. The sludge runs down his chin.

THE ELDER (*Voice dropping, intimate*) They speak of Christ, you know... Your mother used to speak of Him... As if He were the measure... As if His suffering were the template...

ANDREI stiffens at the mention of his mother.

THE ELDER (*Continuing*) Three years of ministry, Andrei... Three years of preaching to fishermen and prostitutes... And then... one day... One afternoon... A few hours on wood, and it was finished... He cried out... you know the words... *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani*. Why have you forsaken me? After *hours*.

ANDREI (*Warning*) Don't.

THE ELDER (*Inexorable*) I have felt forsaken for dozens of Measures at a time, Andrei... I stopped asking why after the first thirty... After a hundred... I realized the question was malformed... There is no forsaking... There is only the architecture of suffering... and I am its blueprint...

ANDREI (*Stumbling back*) You're comparing yourself to—

THE ELDER (*Sharp*) I am stating a fact... He preached for three years... He suffered for hours... He died at thirty-three... I have lived *ten times* that... What is the Passion against lifetimes of watching everyone you have ever known decay?...

(*Leaning forward*) And the hidden years, Andrei. Do you know them? From twelve to thirty—eighteen years of silence. No record. No miracles. No teachings. What was he doing? Learning carpentry? Doubting? We project holiness onto that silence, but it was probably just... life. Ordinary. Forgettable. I have lived dozens of those silent stretches. I remember every one.

ANDREI grips the wall. His legs threaten to give.

THE ELDER (*Almost musing*) He believed the Kingdom was imminent, you know... Told his followers some of them would live to see it... They didn't... Neither did their children... Neither did their children's children... I watched generations of Christians die waiting for a promise that never came...

(*The swing stops*) I have outlived the eschaton, Andrei. The world was supposed to end before I was born. It hasn't. What does that make me?

ANDREI (*Slurring, but finding something*) Makes you... (*suddenly sharp, the fog clearing*) ...makes you a man who missed the point.

THE ELDER (*A flicker of interest*) Oh?

ANDREI (*Swaying, words thick*) He got to *die*. He got to *leave*. You're jealous. You're jealous of a dead man because he got to die.

Silence. For the first time, THE ELDER's composure flickers. Something moves behind his eyes.

THE ELDER (*Very quiet*) If God wanted to understand suffering... He should have asked someone who has actually endured it... Not a carpenter who played at flesh for thirty years... Christ was a manifestation... a temporary intrusion into matter... I am something worse... Man made permanent... No resurrection... No escape... Just the endless continuation...

ANDREI (*A harsh laugh*) Then end it. (*A harsh laugh*) End it yourself. If you're so... so tired. If it's so... so *unbearable*...

He laughs — ugly, wet.

ANDREI But you won't. You won't. Because the loop is all you have.

ANDREI The swing. Back and forth. Back and forth. You pour everything into it. Everything. And you know it's empty. You know.

He looks at the bottle in his hand.

ANDREI ...I do it too.

He drinks.

ANDREI Round and round. You. Me. Everard with his... his baton. We're too smart for this. We see it. We see the nothing. And we just... keep going. Round and round.

He's swaying now.

ANDREI At least I KNOW this is nothing. (*holds up bottle*) You think the swing is different? You think it's holy?

He tries to steady himself.

ANDREI You count the Measures. But when it circles back... what's a Measure then? What does any of it...

He can't finish. Drinks instead.

ANDREI (*quiet*) Just holding on. That's all it is. Holding on to the thing that keeps us from...

He gestures vaguely. The sentence dies.

THE ELDER is very still. When he speaks, his voice has changed again—something almost tender has entered it. Almost wondering.

THE ELDER (*Distant*) I feel something tonight, Andrei... Do you know... in all these years, I have learned to trust certain instincts... The same instincts that have kept me alive this long... And tonight... tonight there is something in the air...

ANDREI (*Watching him*) What... what are you saying?

THE ELDER (*The swing begins to creak again, slowly*) I am saying that I have been waiting... In some sense... For someone capable of... testing the hypothesis...

ANDREI (*Horried recognition dawning*) You want me to—

THE ELDER (*Softly*) I want to *know*, Andrei... After all this time... I want to know if there is an after... If the world continues without my watching... Or if, as I have always suspected... it simply stops...

A long silence. ANDREI stares at his father. His hand trembles. The sludge has stained his robes, his chin, his fingers. He looks like a man drowning in something dark.

ANDREI (*Barely a whisper*) You're... you're tired.

THE ELDER (*A ghost of a smile*) Not tired enough to surrender... But tired enough to wonder... The Krepost is crumbling... The Church hemorrhages... My son is a ruin... If this is the best all these years have produced... what was the point?...

The words hit ANDREI like a blow. "My son is a ruin." He sways. Catches himself on the wall.

ANDREI (*Something breaking in him, slurred but sharp*) You *made* me. You made me what I am. You... you poured this into me. The thirst. The weight. The... the *waiting*. All my life, waiting. For you to *finish*. For you to *let go*. And you never did. You never will.

THE ELDER (*Watching him*) Perhaps tonight... I will...

He holds out a trembling hand. An offering. An animal inviting the pounce.

THE ELDER (Whisper filling the room) You called me a crypt. But even crypts... must be filled. This thirst... it must be honoured. With proof. Not spill. Proof. The rock, Andrei. Show me... Show me you are Son. Show me you are God. Show me... the harvest.

THE ELDER *is ready. ANDREI is replaced by a terrible purpose.*

ANDREI (*Guttural growl*) The rot... ...wants to feed.

He pulls his gown open. He traces the crimson ropes up into the darkness, then down to the frail man.

ANDREI You want my *harvest, father?*

(*Leering*) You want to see me... *draw?*

He stalks closer.

ANDREI I will *drain* the well. I will *swallow* the rock. I will *fill* the crypt.

THE ELDER *grins ecstatically. This is conquest.*

THE ELDER (*Final contempt*) You want to be a man, Andrei?... You have never been a man... You have been a leak... A drip... A stain spreading slowly across everything I built... Your mother at least knew how to hold things in... You just... dribble...

THE ELDER (*Almost tender*) I never caged you, boy... I only took the wanting out... A caged thing pulls at its bars... You never once pulled...

THE ELDER (*Begging command*) The tithe... *My boy.*

ANDREI *rips the gown from his shoulders. It pools like shed skin. He makes a low sound of biological grief.*

He stands naked. A withered monument. 40 years old, but rotted grey.

THE ELDER *laughs. He reaches out a bony finger. He prods ANDREI'S flaccid penis. Clinical contempt.*

THE ELDER (*Wheezing*) A dry well... Salt... Ash...

(*Leaning back*) I built a cathedral... and you give me a closet. A charnel-house. Proof. Show me there is water in the rock. Spill it.

ANDREI *freezes. The humiliation becomes a catalyst.*

He takes himself in hand. Frantic. Desperate.

THE ELDER (*Sharp*) No.

ANDREI stops. A statue of shame.

THE ELDER That is *spill*. That is a slave's offering to the floor... I demand *proof*. I demand the rock.

THE ELDER *taps his own withered hip. He parts his robes an inch. An obscene invitation.*

The air cracks.

ANDREI'S rage and worship synthesize into a holy need. The fix.

He stalks. **THE ELDER** waits, goading.

ANDREI clamps his hands onto **THE ELDER'S** shoulders. He bends his fathers ancient frame over the swing. A chorus of brittle cracks.

He pins **THE ELDER**. The rictus grin is rapturous.

ANDREI is gorged. He enters him.

THE ELDER (*Raw, inhuman scream*) YES! MY... BOY!

ANDREI thrusts. Not fast. Deep. A plundering.

A massive, shuddering build. A final, guttural orgasm.

SNAP.

The ancient ropes detonate.

They collapse in a shatter of wood and bone. ANDREI'S massive frame crushes the husk.

A sound like a crate of dry twigs shattering.

THE ELDER freezes. The will is snuffed. The grin locks in place. He is just meat.

Silence. Absolute.

Then, a gasp.

ANDREI shoves himself off the ruin. He rolls onto his back, slick with sweat and sacrament.

He stares at the ceiling. The silence of a dead God.

He smiles. A rictus in the half-light.

A sound tears out of him. A laugh hooked on a sob. The sound of a rusted lock shattering.

He has won. And he is utterly, finally, terrifyingly alone.

IV.VI

THE GRAND CATHEDRAL. CONTINUOUS.

A heavy, metallic grind seals the sanctum doors. The carnage is locked away. A final hydraulic sigh.

The Cathedral is vast. Magnificent. Glaring. Hollow.

The air is a sickly-sweet cloud. Thousands of lilies bow their heads, masking the stagnation. The pews are a forest of empty oak.

*A scattering of shivering **KREPOST STAFF** clutch together near the front. A dozen **CHILDREN** are posed like weeping mannequins, faces waxen and still.*

*One child wears a white garment too large for her, mended at the shoulder with small, careful stitches. A **STAFF MEMBER** straightens her collar and murmurs, barely audible: "Ivan made it."*

***GRIGORI** moves to the podium. He opens the book. The page rustles like winter leaves. He glances once at the sealed sanctum doors. Then down at the page.*

GRIGORI There are prayers that call silence an absence. That say a last breath is something stolen. But in the clinic, silence is not a theft. It is the cessation of the motor. The cooling of the engine. In training, we are told to view this stillness as a failure of the organism.

But look at her.

To be frank... I am a doctor, an aide—I am not a preacher. But I see no failure here. There is only resolution. Lady Anastasia possessed a rare tolerance for the *stun*. That fleeting vertigo in the middle of the night. That sudden, wet gasp in the dark that realises the ceiling is heavy, and the clock is a countdown, and the sheets are a rehearsal for the shroud.

For decades, I have serviced men who do not feel this temperature, who do not taste these wounds.

So what have I learnt?

I have learnt that *stun* is a privilege. Most men do not get the sharp intake of breath, the moment of clarity where every passing second becomes legible. They get the drift. They get the slow, grey fog that softens the furniture until the room is gone. They pass from sleep to silence without ever acknowledging the transition. They assume the lease of life renews automatically.

Lady Anastasia felt the weight of the ceiling every night. Others believe the ceiling is there to protect them. My duty is not to wake them from this. It is to straighten the sheets. It is to ensure that when the resolution arrives, it does so with the courtesy of a closed door. To be an aide is to manage the lighting, not the outcome.

Some men evade touch. They wrap themselves in velvet and stone so they never have to feel the temperature of their own skin. Some swallow grain to blur the sharpest edges of the clock. And some... some swallow geometry. They build cathedrals. They write laws to stop the shaking. And fight noise with noise.

Sound, the noise, holds the days together. Speeches, and engines, and the clinking of crystal. I have seen men command armies from their sickbeds, shouting through sheet music, fighting to keep the volume up. They do not understand the mute button. And when the silence finally comes, it does not argue. It simply arrives. It is the only thing in the room that does not need to be built.

It is a fascinating pathology. A life led by this noise. A collective, feverish hallucination that starves animals to feed statues. It is a hunger so expensive it would put you off food entirely. To trade the warmth of bread... for the coldness of a name that lasts forever. The nervous system rewires to reject the present. It stops firing for heat or pleasure. It reserves its voltage solely for the broadcast. You become a curator of your own remains, polishing the marble while the blood is still warm; a ghost haunting a life you have not finished living.

And so she is empty. She spent it all. She is bankrupt of time. And that is why she is the only thing in this room that has value. Outside, Polesia screams for her. They want their shares back. They want to see the statue weep, just to prove there is water left inside the stone. They will not find it. She paid the bill. She left the receipt on the counter, walked out of time, out of memory, and shut the door behind her. Spilt nothing.

We cannot take our investments with us. They are heavy, earthly things—anchors that keep the hull scraping against the riverbed. When the door finally gives, they will rush into a stillness that feels like violence. They will claw at the floorboards for a scrap of feeling, a drop of regret, anything to prove she was indentured to their timeline. They will find only the dust, settling in the shape of a woman who is no longer there. By the time they realise the vault is empty, she will be light as paper, carried on a wind that charges no interest.

And so she rests, and we remain, clutching the heavy things—left to calculate the cost of a freedom we are not yet brave enough to afford.

Only a God can break the rigor of our will. To snap the knuckle, pry the finger, and force the hand to drop the coin. To grant us the terrible courage to be weightless—to be naked, hollow. To be nothing but wind in a house of stone.

So let us pray. Let us pray that a God has no stomach for us. That our weightlessness is grace, and not simply a texture easy to swallow. Let us live in a faith—that the power which takes our offerings does not mistake us for meat.

He closes the book. The sound is like a gunshot.

GRIGORI checks his watch. The second hand scythes across the face.

He raises a hand. It hovers for a fraction of a second—a suspended guillotine.

He chops. The air splits.

THE HERD detonates.

IVAN attacks the large-framed skins. He initiates a militaristic, limping 5/4 ostinato that hits the chest like a defibrillator. The mallets are wrapped in lead. Every impact sends a cloud of accumulated dust exploding off the drumheads—microscopic mushroom clouds under the harsh sodium lights. DOOM-da-da-DOOM-da-DOOM. It is the sound of a foundation pile-driver. Tectonic. Inhumanly consistent.

ANIKA engages the modular wall. She slams a patch cable into a socket like an IV line. A sub-bass sine wave floods the room—a pressurization. The air in the theatre thickens, forcing the audience to swallow to pop their ears. She twists the cutoff filter, and the sound tears open like velcro.

KSENIYA drives the bow into the viola. She is playing *col legno battuto*—striking the strings with the wood of the bow. It is a dry, skeletal clatter, like a thousand brittle twigs snapping at once. It scrapes. It chirps. She drags the horsehair across the low C string with so much pressure that rosin dust smokes off the bridge. It is the sound of a rope tightening.

PEDRO rips the brass open. He extends the slide, the metal glinting like a drawn knife. The trombone overblows, forcing the brass to fracture into a multiphonic—a guttural, metallic shriek that sounds like a ship's hull shearing in deep water. Spittle flies from the bell, vaporizing in the hot lights. The tone is jagged, serrated, a "skronk" that mimics a warning siren in a collapsing mine.

And **EVERARD**.

EVERARD is conducting the apocalypse. He stands at the piano, but he does not play it; he assaults it. He brings his forearms down on the keys in massive, crushing tone clusters—black and white keys mashing together in a dissonant crunch.

He spins away from the piano, facing the players, eyes rolling back into his skull. He opens his mouth. He screams. The tendons in his neck stand out like steel cables. But the scream is not random. It is perfectly, terrifyingly pitched to match the dissonance of the brass. He holds the scream until his lungs are vacuum-sealed, his face flushing a deep, hypoxic purple.

The sound coalesces. The friction of humanity—the hesitation, the breath, the doubt—has been surgically excised. A wall of sound so solid you could lean against it.

The volume is abusive. It pins the audience to the back of their seats.

They do not sway. They do not blink. They are five pistons in an engine running on blood.

*The climax approaches. A terminal velocity. **IVANS**'s drumming becomes a blur of motion. **PEDRO**'s brass turns into a white-hot laser of noise. **EVERARDS**'s scream fractures into a dual-tone harmonics.*

The sheer vibration rattles the teeth in the skull.

SNAP.

Silence slams into the room like a physical blow.

The piano strings are still vibrating, invisible, ghost-notes decaying in the vacuum.

The silence is sharp. Glassy. It tastes of iron.

GRIGORI places a finger on a heavy, industrial breaker. He hesitates—then obeys.

CRACK.

The cathedral answers: a wall of recorded applause hits the nave like a physical slap.

It is too loud. It peaks into distortion.

The mechanical thunder of a hundred thousand ghosts—an old blessing gone wrong—flattened into white noise.

High-speed sodium strobes fracture the cathedral. The nave becomes a seizing flip-book of grey and white.

EVERARD collapses forward. He is prostrating himself before the noise. He weeps openly, mouth agape, drinking the static like wine. He reaches a hand out to the darkness, thanking the void.

PEDRO stands perfectly still. He slowly lowers his instrument. He looks at **EVERARD** on the floor. He looks at the empty pews. A smile breaks his face—slow, wide, and venomous. He begins to clap. Slowly. Out of time.

KSENIA drops her bow. It clatters, inaudible under the roar. She claps her hands over her ears, squeezing her eyes shut. She curls inward, shrinking, trying to disappear into the floorboards.

The blessing loops. It will not stop on its own.

Then the roar begins again. Same pitch. Same intensity. A hammer-beat of static.

Somewhere in the transept, a KREPOST SLAVE sets a bucket beneath a drip. The drip moves. The bucket catches nothing.

STAFF MEMBER 1 *(Barely audible, under the static)* Who mourns her tomorrow?

STAFF MEMBER 2 We do. We're on the rota.

The blessing loops. In the far corner, a STAFF member sweeps. Slow strokes. The dust rises and settles. Morning light through a crack in the stone.

FINAL CURTAIN.