

To His Majesty the King, Shota Rustaveli,

Enclosed you will find the letter entrusted to me for inspection. The seven wanderers of the night sky smile upon you, my lord. This letter is none other than the missing piece of our century's greatest love story: between Avt'handil and T'hinat'hin, matched in passion only by that of their friends, the panther-clad Tariel and the sun-faced one, Nestan-Daredjan. You would recall these lovers were I to mention that they ruled Arabia and India not long ago, with a munificence worthy of He who created the firmament, the one true God.

You are rightly occupied, protecting our northern border from the Cossack invasion, and yet you have sent me, your trusted vizier, this invaluable letter without so much as tearing the seal, or discovering its hidden gift. They are worth your time, I believe.

Until the butchering of our people is stopped, and our enemy toppled, I beseech you, O highest and noblest of kings: save this letter and the gift, pocket them deep within your breast, and never let them go. When the war ends, we must share these lines with our poets, who will in turn share it with our Georgians. To heal from this dreadful war we will need a great tonic. And this, I believe, is it: the love between Avt'handil and T'hinat'hin.

Sincerely,

Your faithful subject,

Ioane Shabash

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My light, my moon, T'hinat'hin, my beloved,

Who am I that should praise thee? One needs the myriad tongues of Athenian bards to praise thee fitly. Behold my heart upon the ink, behold mine eyes between the lines. It was for thee that I ventured in search of that knight in the panther skin who so disrupted thy father's health. Thou knowest of my journey past, and thou hast heard from me about this new one yesterday. Yet thou wert unsatisfied with my ramble, I feel, so I am pulled to leave thee with more than just spoken words. Let these written words, then, remain; these are not sweet-nothings whispered; they mark thee like a nibble on thy earlobe.

The road ahead is long; it is arduous. I must hasten east to end the woe of that panther-clad knight. He is my friend; we are bound by friendship. He was shot in the chest by his own lover, a slayer armed with the long bow of distance, and an arrow of misunderstanding. Only I have his balm, wouldst thou agree? Thou hast given to me more than once that same remedy to a love-wrecked heart.

Thou art queen of all Arabia, and by far its most caring ruler. I have seen the way thou exhaust thy strength and treasury to put bread in the hands of those in need, even against sensible counsel: "Once a beggar, always a beggar," they cried in the forum; thou answered, "Were that true, then to thee I say, 'Once a nag, always a nag'; yet 'tis not the case; but a man who eats today, can work tomorrow; while a man who starves today, might die tomorrow." I have been there to witness thy pardons of the most heinous of criminals. "That evil-doer is not capable of regret!" they shouted in the court. "One who

shows no regret is an evil man,” thou conceded. “But one who shows no forgiveness is just as evil. To balance the scale of justice sometimes evil must be met with benevolence.” And who opened one hundred new schools in her short regency? Who founded countless more libraries? Who irrigated the northern deserts, and united the barbarous clans? O, though I worship thee, I mean not with this letter to pacify an insecurity, or praise vacantly.

Remember: with a sword in my hand, I am thy defender. With a pen, thy poet-lover-scribe. These words I write to stamp thy deeds in history, despite thy blind sorrow, eyeless to fact.

“But without thee in sight,” thou hast told me, “then I am as well as blind. Thou art my light, and too my air; when thy breath feels faraway, my lungs care not to breathe.”

O my cloud, my rain, O my queen, my everything. I am the walking receipt of thy tenderness. Every breath I take away from thee, no matter how far apart, is made bearable only by the knowledge that our mouths touch the one air under this dome we call world. Deny thyself nevermore my breath; breathe, and I breathe with thee. On light, however, I must agree: On restless nights, my sight’s thirst for thy presence leads me nearly to blind myself—the thought being, at least gouged of eyes, my mind might imagine thee better. Yet, will we not reunite erelong? Dost thou not believe in fate? A heart that does not completely mend or completely break at the thought of one’s lover is not cursed with true love. Our love, then—deep as it is, cursed as it is, blest as it is—must either fill us with pleasure, or lead us to ruin. And I? I am filled with love for thee. Thy body, thy words, thy wiggle of a finger spin me into delirium. Thy jet-colored eyelashes crack a whip upon my neck, only then feel I so free to be mad. Mad, enslaved I am, but not destroyed. Hunched, crippled, broken-hearted I am, but not destroyed! What else could that mean, but that my body, and every atom in it, believes we will come together again, some day.

Yet, I must help my friend. I must leave thee lonely, must, O wretched souls we are! I smell thee on the collar of my suit of amour and feel defenseless. Yet, who could stab a heart like mine, filled with...about to burst...knowing....feeling...any day now as I promised, to return, yet only after I have cured my friend, and helped him return to his own lover. Broken hearts must console one another. Thee and me are bound, as he and she are bound, not unlike the orbs in heaven, by a certain kind of love. Though, Taniel and I through another kind, friendship. The difference betwixt these loves is thin, so thin that one needs to understand duty, a third form of love, the way thy father taught it to me in my youth.

At the age of six, I was like a young cypress replanted after a flood, loose roots and cast-about branches in all directions. Hark, those were anchorless years before knowing of thy existence. Shall I write to thee of how I live to tell the tale?

The Fates had sown my name among the luckless ones the winter they allowed the infamous Kadji magician to shapeshift into a lion and enter my bedchamber. The guards entered my room after hearing an uproar: they found my parents mangled to pieces, the magician still in the form of a lion, but with its eyes gouged out and its neck snapped, and my body bathed in hot blood and tears, standing above them. Had my father not first blinded the dark magician, nor my mother protected her only son from the assailant's surprise lunge, I would have never survived. The world over insists to learn how a child, I, wrestled the demon; but, I remember not. I wasn't old enough to write my parents' names, much less wield a sword, less yet to grapple with a dark magic beast.

My nerves had not yet settled, before thy father, Rostevan, king of kings, stole me away—at the tender age of six—from my palace, once the house of my parents' pride, forthwith the site of their demise. I became thy father's ward. He raised me as a son. By fifteen I could wrestle giants. An armored elephant was no match for me. A hundred spear-armed men could not stop me. This was the training I received, and always in a hard, dutiful love.

It was thy father's affection that trained me, but also kept me from jumping off the western tower from grief; pray the lord has forgiven my obsession with suicide; though my life is as much due to his kindness as it was to his craft: he had servants barricade my chamber's oriel. From my window ledge, I would observe thy father's nation, observe the villagers below. There was also a tower opposite mine, with a mysterious blurred figure behind its own oriel. Unfortunately, grief kept mine eyes ruby-red and near-sighted. Ten years went by. And in those ten years never once did I catch a glimpse of the figure closely, though rumor had told me who it was (thou, princess), while something inside of me grew, a yet unrealized sort of love.

Ten years later, my sixteenth birthday. After supper that evening, thy father asked me to retire with him to his garden. I had one wish back then, etched on every secret piece of parchment, and I hoped that night to ask him for my one wish. Would I?

Thy father's garden looked fairer than all renditions of Eden. The song of nightingales above was sweeter than the call of sirens. There were fountains of jasmine-water for baths. Over the doors hung curtains of silk laced with silver. There was little illumination, I recall. The moon hid its shine on its backside. Thus, the ends of incense sticks glowed as brightly as the stars above, and with as much intensity as Rostevan's eyes.

I sat by his side the way a boy does with his own father. He spoke of inconsequential things, however, not of my birthday, as his palm brushed the air above the sapling aloe plants juttied out around us. So, I interrupted our conversation, impatient-me, to ask of him one gift, one wish: to allow me to return home. It was not nostalgia for a missed childhood, I explained, but the understanding that my city needed its ruler. He praised my precocity, yet shook his head.

“My sprout, my young Avt’handil: though many years separate you from adulthood, thine eyes today are as wide as the Tigris and Euphrates, the water-bearers of my people. I have no doubt one day thou too shalt support us.” Then, inhaling a breath as if his chest were oak, he continued: “I had another honor in mind for thy sixteenth birthday: to knight thee as my army’s youngest general.”

A general, at sixteen! I knew the honor went far beyond his love for me as a son. I was flattered, and a glimmer of vanity washed over me as a salty wave. But quickly after, I remembered my home, the threat of never returning to my old castle marking the sands of my soul like foam left from a riptide. I felt that if I fought his wars, I might perish before ever visiting my parents’ grave, which was all I really wanted at that moment. I fell into a depression, a true adolescent angst then and there, just as a light from that opposite tower of mine kindled, though I paid it little heed. My eyes turned downcast.

“Trust thy king,” he said, pulling my chin up with his words. “What keeps a man’s spirit floating above despair is not the heaviness of sorrow, lo, but the lightness of hope. Cast thine eyes about this garden. Heed its symmetry. Notice that nature has but three modes: wilt, let go, or grow.”

With one hand, the king untied a dagger from his hip belt, and handed it to me. He let the handle's embedded gems glimmer in the twilight garden. He continued: "Take this, a token; today marks the tenth anniversary of thy parents' passing. Enough. Beat not thy soul now, but thy chest. Thou art not at fault for the bitter dish that the Fates serve all men. What will unburden thee is faith and concentration. As our sages profess: 'Focus in a young boy's spirit is like clarity to the diamond.' Therefore, I shall continue to train thee like a son."

I cursed him right there. I cast the priceless gift he had handed me into a nearby fountain, and tried to break away. But his iron grip around my wrist proved tighter than a lion's jaws. So I ducked as children do, and made a ball of myself on the dirt floor of the aloe garden, but Rostevan hurled me into the air. After a swirl, I landed on my feet, dizzy yet obedient, and still in his grasp: as he led me through the exit.

Before leaving the garden, the darkness around us settling again into place, I turned, and stole a proper glance at the kindled light from the opposite tower's oriel. Over my shoulder, I saw thee in thy chamber; a lance pierced my mind and heart; a stone subjected to a hundred floods would not have eroded as I did in that instant. If the king's words had reopened the wound in my heart with truth, the sight of his daughter washed its infection with love. That night onward I would stare up at that hole in the tower as if Polaris itself were shining inside. No one but God knows the number of nights I prayed for the light to rekindle; sometimes it did, sometimes it not, though in either case, thou wert hard to see from afar. But who needs eyes? Not I. Knowing was enough. And yet ever since love's lightning strike, I have been burning in eternal flames...

...Please forgive the tears that blot the letter's ink. Thou canst call them thine, for it seems my body has no need for them anymore...

...O, thou layest hidden in unharrowed ground! I could not find thee; not in the tower, nor in the castle, not during holidays or before foreign audiences. Only then did I realize I had never met thee, only heard of thee through rumor. The king did well to hide his most precious treasure. Aye, I wilted like a rose bereft of sun. Although thy father's wisdom soothed the sadness that once ran rampant in my heart, it was not the goal to become the greatest commander-in-chief of his nation that motivated me; it was the hope that one day the love, or relation, between myself and thy father would one day bring me closer to thee, his pearl at the bottom of the ocean. Inly I knew, I would hold my breath and dive deep into my training, stay in Rostevan's court, or in his barracks, until destiny brought us together. Which they did, the day we found all our joy in gazing at one another, the day thou became ruler of Arabia.

Thou must be wondering, "How hast thee never told me of those days?" Alas, let us believe, there are times when a lover's touch reveals more truth than an Oracle's polished words, but also agree, there are things that can only be painted upon the canvas stretched by a great distance between separated lovers; only far away from thy warmth, and aching for thy embrace, do those isolated nights of my youth return to haunt me in this still hour. Blame the candles around me, curse the smell of wet wood around me too, and blast the tallest minaret: only honesty can pour forth from my hand now. I write to thee from inside a mosque—were my other hand on a Koran, I couldn't pen truer words than these—and I know not if this letter be a letter or a prayer. Either way, I ask that it heal us, and leave my love on thee.

Like a Georgian poet once wrote: “What thou givest away is thine; what thou keepst is lost.” Thus I leave two kisses, and the breath between, inside this letter, as well as a gift to match the pearl thou gavest me before we parted. I pray it pleases thee till my return.

მომავალ შეხვედრამდე,

Thy cypress, thy lover, a commander of thousands, but beholden to one,

Avt'handil