

Candidate 1 evidence

Группа Крови (Blood Type)

The sun seemed to set quicker in Moscow. For all that Lev had longed to leave the village, the sunsets were something he missed. Sunsets that seemed to curl under the mountains, dripping into eventual night after having shone a dozen colours, each strip of cloud a different hue, until finally the blue darkened into black, lit up with constellations from one end to the other.

In Moscow, the colourless buildings were briefly set in gold by a sun that hadn't shown its face all day, absent until it had made up its mind to leave, peeling itself off the sky and baring the night. Nights like the beginnings of a bruise, not revealing the full extent of its colours but enough for you to expect the oncoming ache. It was here that Lev walked, in newly revealed darkness that seemed even harsher against the cold.

Sasha used to write about the sky in his letters. Afghanistan was brown, he said. The clouds, the sand, the buildings, the uniforms, the food, the water. But some nights, the sky would clear to show the stars, so many that the sky was more of a bright white than black.

Remember how the sky looked, the summer we worked in Ayuta with your uncle? You barely slept because you couldn't stop counting the stars. You wouldn't last two minutes here Levushka, you'd get shot right through because you were looking at constellations instead of Muhjahideen. Aquarius and Leo, you and me. I couldn't find them even if their names were spelled out in the sky, but it's nice to know that we're together somewhere. I sound like you, don't I? I don't spend as much time looking at them as you would though. So it's a good thing that I'm the one here, and that you're home.

The flame that crept out of Lev's lighter seemed a feeble attempt at prolonging the light, yet Lev tried all the same, sparking another cigarette as he continued his stagger down the darkened street, whose lamps had yet to realise that all daylight was now gone.

The foreman at the site where Lev worked had a son who had been killed in Kandahar when the war had first started, and often let Lev home early. Maybe he recognised something in Lev's voice as he constantly called over to Dmitri Kirillovich, the only one out of the lot of them who had a working watch. But Lev didn't go home straight away, not today.

There was relief in walking. Not like a train, where you were stuck for as long as it took to get from one station to the next, or a bus where you were packed in like matchsticks in a box, or a tram where you could go only where the tracks said you could. In walking you

could cross bridges, go up stairs and down, and there was nothing to stop you from sitting on the side of the road to smoke, or to turn into an alley and punch a wall till your knuckles bled.

Did you get the lighter I sent you? It belonged to my bunkmate, but he's home now with one eye less than when he came. I know you've lost yours by now, and gone through all the matches I left behind. When I get back we're going to quit. Never mind the cigarettes, we'll save a fortune on not replacing all your lost lighters.

When they'd first arrived in Moscow, they used to ride the Metro for hours. Lev had loved the speed and the noise, like blood pounding in his ears. The rumble of trains passing below was a heartbeat, running beneath buildings like a pulse under skin. Even the ticket halls had chandeliers and paintings on the walls. To Sasha, it showed how different Moscow was to all that they'd known, how even the most basic things here seemed worth more than both their lives put together. But Lev was never one to think of the human cost behind golden statues and marble floors.

"You need to appreciate the things around you Sashenka, instead of just seeing the bad in them."

"I appreciate plenty Levushka, but only things I find worthy of my appreciation."

Sasha would roll his eyes and follow Lev down the stairs to ride the Kalininsko line again, but Lev saw his face in the window facing them, reflections thin and hazy but Sashenka still smiling, still making Lev feel the way he always made him feel.

The memory was acid now, and so was Lev's feeling that he had spent too much time appreciating stars and painted ceilings, instead of the warm flesh and blood that had been beside him while he chased such foolish notions. So Lev walked now. Where he went never seemed to be important; he could wander right through the guards and into the Duma and still it wouldn't matter. All that Lev ever did was track the movement of his own blood. How it moved through his heart and lungs, stretching into each edge of his body.

They told me my blood type. B(III)RH(+). It's printed onto my uniform in case anything happens. Some of the boys have it tattooed across their arms, like a serial code.

It was Sashenka who had told him. How blood could spill so easily, but without it, you'd shrivel up and die. This had nearly made six year old Lev cry and run away, but Sashenka had promised that one person could make enough blood to fill the Don, so the little bit that came out when you grazed your knee wouldn't kill you.

But just to be safe, Sashenka had squeezed between the loose boards behind his Dedushka's shed, and came back holding a shard of broken glass, one they'd used to sharpen sticks into points so they could play soldiers. Lev had been afraid, but Sashenka had seemed so sure of himself that Lev knew there was nothing to be scared of. They sat down in the long grass, hidden from anyone that might've bothered them, bare arms brushing against the blades.

Sashenka went first, since he was older, and he sliced his palm open so quickly and quietly that at first Lev didn't know what he'd done. It was only when Sashenka winced that Lev noticed the blood seeping out. Now, had it been anyone else who had done this, Lev would've run as fast as he could back home to his Mama. But this was Aleksandr, and Mama liked Aleksandr. Not enough to call him Sasha but enough that Aleksandr was allowed to take Lev down to the river to catch tadpoles since he wasn't allowed to go on his own. Nothing bad could happen if Aleksandr, if Sashenka was there. Mama said that too. So Lev held out his hand, and grit his teeth so he wouldn't cry.

"It has to be your other hand," Sashenka had said.

"Why?"

"Just wait, Levushka," Sashenka had said, so Levushka did.

It hurt less than he'd expected, and when it began to sting Sasha took Lev's hand, and held it tight against his own bleeding palm.

"There," Sashenka had said, as they sat holding hands till the sun went down and the stars came out. *"Now our blood type is the same, so if you ever do run out of blood, I can give you some of mine."*

Lev knew nothing about blood so took Sashenka's word for it. Whether or not there was any truth to it he still didn't know, but what Lev did know was that their mothers had been so angry when they saw what they'd done that Lev didn't see Sashenka for a week. That had hurt far more than the cut had, more than if all of his blood had spilled and he'd shrivelled up and died.

They both had the scars to show for it, but Lev's had faded more. Sashenka could find it when he looked, holding Lev's hand in his and running his finger along the length of the palm where the skin was still raised. Sasha's own scar remained though, purple and harsh against his skin, almost as wide as it was long. Lev took this to mean Sashenka had gone easy on him when they were young, but Sasha always said it meant Lev would stay healthy for a long time, and that it was Sashenka whose blood was easily spilled.

I'll try and get you a nice set of gloves Levushka. American ones are best, but German isn't bad either. I know you'd prefer jeans or a cassette, but those aren't going to keep your hands from falling off in December.

It was fully dark by the time he reached the apartment block. The door only opened when you pushed with your whole body, and Lev rubbed his ever aching shoulders as he trudged up the stairs. The lights worked more often than not, a luxury worthy of a Hero of the Soviet Union, saving him from stubbing his toes. He fumbled in his pocket until his hand closed on the cold set of keys, tugging them out and letting the ridges dig into his palm.

By the time he reached the sixth floor his hands were shaking, and the door stood like it was daring him to keep his hands still long enough to unlock it. But after a few fumbled tries, Lev managed it.

The lights weren't on, but that was expected. He slid his shoes off, hung his jacket, and walked down the hallway, steps loud, treading on every creaky floorboard. Past the kitchen and into the bathroom, making sure to clatter against the sink and run the water to puncture any vestige of silence that hung in the apartment. Past the pictures on the walls and the medals on the mantelpiece and the curtains that had kept the rooms dark all day, into the bedroom as slowly as he could.

"Sashenka?"

I've been tracing my finger over where I've written your name, and where I've written mine. They call me Alik here, since there's too many Sasha's in our unit. I never noticed how much I loved your name until I wasn't saying it out loud. ~~But at the same time, I'd rather die than bring any part of you to a place like this.~~

At night I see blood on my hands and think that it's yours. Sometimes it makes me smile, but most of the time I cry. Perhaps it's best that I'm only Sashenka with you. Despite the Aleksandr Averkievich on my dog tags and my blood type sewn onto my sleeve, it's seeing your name on paper that reminds me of myself.

Sasha was asleep, as he had been every time Lev had come home. He used to stretch out so much that sharing a bed with him was a nightmare, but now he lay stiff, unmoving except for the shallow rise and fall of his chest. Corpse-like in all but that.

Lev sat on the edge of their bed, let his weight register and waited for Sashenka's eyes to creep open before moving under the blankets. Sashenka blinked slowly as Lev lay down next to him, and managed something that could've been identified as a smile if the identifier had never seen Sashenka smile before, and therefore didn't know that this was something far more awful.

Lev ran a hand through Sashenka's hair (so much shorter now) and then lowered it, running his cold fingers down Sashenka's constellation freckled cheeks, leaning over and fumbling before his right hand found Sasha's. Their fingers intertwined as their hands rested on Sasha's rising chest and Lev knew Sashenka's eyes (so tired now) had closed again, but Lev stayed staring at the ceiling for a moment.

When they used to hold hands he'd imagine the scars on their palms lining up, their souls bleeding into one another, until they were so intertwined that nothing could separate them. As they lay there, Lev imagined all the blood in his body moving down his arm and into his palm, seeping out of his old scar and into Sashenka's palm, going up Sashenka's arm (his only arm now) and into his heart and lungs and onwards around his whole body (so, so thin now).

But perhaps it wouldn't work anymore; the arm that held the hand that held the scar they shared was gone. Clean off. Now when their fingers intertwined, the connection was blocked on Sashenka's end. Lev knew that Sashenka would willingly scar his other palm for the sake of Lev's feelings, but he wouldn't ask that of Sasha. He wouldn't wound Sashenka any more than he already had been.

Still, everyone else managed to stay together without stupid, childish scars (although Levushka and Sashenka were never like everyone else). And in the thin light of their tiny bedroom, Lev felt Sashenka turn his sleeping head to face him, and while this small

gesture of acknowledgement would've seemed nothing more remarkable than a breath of air a few years ago, it now had every kind of feeling threading through Levushka's blood.

It was the oddest thing, to meet a stranger yet know already that you loved him. But that was how Sasha had returned. Different in so many ways, but the same in just as many. In the way he took his tea, the way he'd cling so desperately to Lev that it almost hurt, the way he frowned with every cigarette Levushka lit. His heart still beating and his blood still moving through his body. Despite their best attempts, they'd failed to take Sashenka's blood. Or at least, failed to take it all.

Enough of it still ran through Lev's veins for the both of them, through their hearts every time they beat in their chests.

2318