Artur Kafarski

Husbandry

Three drops.

Four.

The glass dropper hovered over the porcelain cup. Arthur held his breath. The cobalt-blue apothecary bottle felt slick with his own nervous sweat as the ribbed edges dug a pattern into his palm. Fowler's Solution. A true triumph of modern chemistry used as a medicine had another great use. And Arthur knew that too well.

He stirred the steaming Earl Grey with a slender silver spoon. A thick curl of bergamot vapor twisted upward, carrying the sweet-metallic smell of arsenic. Just as he planned. Undetectable, unless you worked in a medical field.

Arthur picked up the tray. He caught his reflection in the curve of the teapot and frowned. The metal distorted his harp jaw and the straight bridge of his nose. He looked sallow. The normally piercing green of his eyes appeared dull. He ran a hand through his short, brown hair, attempting to slick the hair back against his sweating scalp. A deep shiver rattled in his shoulders and spine. He suddenly felt dizzy. He even had to brace his hip against the mahogany sideboard. Exhaustion. Caretaking was a grueling endeavor, and the gloomy corridors of this monstrosity of a house were enough to sap the vitality from any man. He rubbed the side of his neck, pressing right over the now faintly pulsing jugular where two tiny, irritating insect bites had swelled over the weekend. Spiders, undoubtedly. The estate was full of them. He felt like he wouldn't be able to count them all. And he was a man of intellect, after all.

He stepped out of the kitchen and into the hall. The thick, worn-out wool runner rug beneath his leather shoes absorbed the sound of his footsteps completely. The walls here were lined with heavily varnished, dark oak paneling that drank the meager light from the flickering gas scones. These were designed to swallow the sounds. The walls were so thick that you couldn't hear the slightest murmur from the room next door. It was all designed so the man of the house would have an absolute peace of mind. Or so thought Arthur.

He thought of his own family home far in Boston. The Ashfords maintained a grand, chaotic estate, bursting with the gossiping aunts, uncles who never hid their opinions, and generations of oil portraits hung above the fireplaces. They possessed a richly documented family history. They also possessed a huge, generational debt. His medical practice had failed to stem the bleeding of the Ashford accounts. Then came Cordelia.

It was like she never existed. A woman unburdened any family ties. She held the deed to this isolated manor and a fortune that appeared entirely liquid, like she came from an old-money family. Yet, no cousins ever visited. No letters from distant relatives. Every time during their abbreviated courtships, when he inquired about her lineage

even in the slightest way, she just offered a polite smile that never exposed her teeth, smoothed the fabric of her skirt, and led the conversation toward his medical career. He never pushed. An heiress with no living relatives to contest the will was a strike of luck.

He reached the master bedroom at the far end of the eastern wing. He turned the heavy brass handle. A wave of heat washed over his face. The fire roared in the marble hearth, consuming the coal so swiftly it bordered on wasteful. Arthur hated the temperature in this room. He hated the whole house but staying in this chamber made his skin feel sunburned after literal minutes. His cotton undershirt began to stick to his ribs. But Geneveve was freezing.

Oxblood red velvet draperies sealed the tall windows against the autumn rain. The air hung thick with the scent of lavender pomanders and the sulfurous bite of coal smoke. Their shadows danced like passionate lovers on the plaster ceiling.

Cordelia lay propped against a legion of lace-trimmed pillows on the massive four-poster bed. Her white, high-collared nightgown contrasted the gloom of the fabrics around her. A cascade of black hair spilled across the linens. The dark, glossy strands appeared to be untouched by the illness that ravaged her body. She looked fragile. Her skin was so pale it was almost transparent, revealing every detail of her blood system in the form of delicate blue veins.

“Arthur,” she murmured. Her throat appeared dry, hoarse.

“Your tea, my darling.” He approached the bed, forcing a gentle and clearly practiced smile to his lips. The same smile he gave to every patient, regardless of their state. The typical smile of devoted physician.

He handed her the cup and a saucer. Her long, slender fingers curled around the porcelain. Their knuckles brushed. Arthur flinched internally. Cold. Like ice. He would think she’s dead if he didn’t know better. If she was truly dead, he would already have guests coming to celebrate. But even in this infernal oven of a room, even when touching her reminded him of the winters when he was a child and pressed his hand to a winter-frozen windowpane, she was very much alive. For now. She brought the porcelain to her lips and inhaled the steam. Her eyes, large and dark like the feather of a raven that cawed on a nearby tree, fixed on his face. She took a slow sip.

“You spoil me,” she exhaled softly. “Most men would weary of such endless caretaking. You tarry here in the dark when you could be at the clubs in the city.” *Tarry.* She slipped into those antique cadences sometimes. Arthur thought of it as a harmless, eccentric quirk that only proved that she came from wealth.

“Where else would I be?” He sat on the edge of the soft mattress. The springs creaked under his weight. “My place is here, next to my soon-to-be-wife, monitoring her condition.”

Cordelia took another sip, draining half of the cup. A shy, rosy blush began to appear on her high cheekbones. The arsenic. It was already entering her bloodstream, irritating the capillaries, mimicking the health. Arthur felt a surge of pride. The dosage was flawless. Just another month. Two, if her organism resists.

“The tea has a lovely bite tonight,” she said. Her head rested back against the pillows as she closed her eyes in a portrait of pure equanimity. “It helps my weary bones, my dear. I feel as though you are pouring your very life into my veins.” Arthur patted her knee through the thick wool blankets.

“Rest now, my love. Let the medicine do its work.”

He stood up to leave, and another wave of dizziness washed through his skull, turning the edges of his vision gray. He gripped the bedpost until the room stopped spinning. He really needed to prescribe himself some iron in the morning.

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A fortnight has passed. Fourteen. Fourteen days dissolved into repetition of a measured drops and unbearable exhaustion. The relentless October rains gave way in favor of falling leaves. The sleet pelted the manor’s leaded windows as did the gravel carried by the wind. Within the walls of Cordelia’s property, the situation hadn’t changed. And if it did, it surely only worsened Arthur’s situation.

In the vast dining room, the crystal chandelier cast a jaundiced light over the heavy, mahogany table. Arthur gripped the carving knife. His knuckles jutted white against his now translucent skin. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the elbows, revealing the forearms that had lost their sturdy muscle. They simply looked frail. A massive, rare roast of beef sat on the silver platter between him and his wife. He tried to press the blade into the meat. But his wrist gave way.

The silver handle slipped from his damp palm, clattering against the fine bone china. He gripped the edge of the table when a high, shrieking sound pierced his ears. Black spots limited his peripheral vision. He stared down at the red juices of the roast. Feral hunger seized him. His mouth watered as he imagined the metallic taste of the marrow. A civilized man of science, controlled by the urge to sink his teeth directly into the raw muscle. The coming realization sickened him. He swallowed, pushing the revulsion down his throat.

Across the expanse of polished wood, Cordelia chewed. She didn’t appear as sick as fourteen days ago. Her bites appeared rhythmic and overly silent. She should have been bedridden. Her organs were supposed to slowly fail from the cumulative arsenic. Instead, the only symptom she had was that vivid carmine flush painted on her high cheekbones. She sat upright in the corseted gown. The dark hair was now pinned up in a twist that only accentuated the angle of her jawline. Her void black eyes shone as she sliced the meat.

“You neglect your repast, my love,” she observed. Her voice, even though it still had that dry rasp, felt much stronger than before. “The victuals will turn cold.”

Arthur pressed a linen napkin to his sweating forehead. The cloth did little to soothe his feverish skin. His usually neat brown locks were a mess. The wet strands hung over his brow.

“Just a minor fatigue, my dear. I must check my blood,” he said and abandoned the dining room right after. He fled to the place he sacrificed entirely for his studies. He locked the heavy door. Safety. Logic. Reason. Three words he furiously repeated in his head. He ignited the gas lamp above the desk and pulled the brass microscope from its case. His hands shook so violently he dropped the steel lancet thrice before managing to pierce his index finger. A bead of blood welled up. It was wrong. The color itself was wrong. Not the rich, healthy, dark crimson hue. It looked pathetic. Watery, pink. He smeared it across the glass slide, slipped it beneath the lens and adjusted the focus knob.

It looked like a wasteland. Where a dense cluster of red cells should have been, there were only ghostly fragments floating in empty plasma. He must have been hemorrhaging. Profoundly. Yet, his skin bore no bruises. He showed no signs of internal bleeding. Pints of blood simply vanished.

Then, the scent of bergamot and bitter coal smoke flooded his nostrils. Arthur spun around in his leather chair. His fiancée stood in the open doorway. He stared at the lock. He had turned the key. He was sure he had. Or had he?

Beyond the open door, the warped floorboards of the corridor stretched into the gloom. Those planks groaned in agony beneath the slightest weight. Even a stray cat could’ve made them squeak. Yet, she had made no sound. Not a single creak.

“Darling,” he gasped, frantically tossing a cloth over the microscope. “You should be resting.”

She glided into the room. Her movements lacked the stutter or an uneven tempo of an invalid. She almost flew over the Turkish rug, stopping just inches from his chair. The chill as her skirt brushed his skin seeped into his aching joints.

“I heard a clatter.” Her black, dilated eyes flicked from his pale face to the covered microscope. “You push yourself too hard, Arthur. You are depleted.” She said, as she reached out.

Arthur froze. He felt like the Medusa herself was staring at him; that’s how trapped he felt by nothing else but her gaze. Her ice-cold fingers brushed the fabric of his collar. She traced the line of his jaw, slowly sliding down to the side of his neck. Long fingernails scraped against his flesh. Her thumb found the two swollen scabs directly over his jugular. And she pressed.

It was the opposite of a gentle caress. She applied a firm, agonizing pressure right into the inflamed tissue. Arthur winced and hissed. He tried to pull back, but her hand remained clamped to his neck.

“A severe chill,” Cordelia whispered as her lips curved into a closed-mouth smile. “Perhaps the damp foundation is breeding a miasma. You must root out the rot, my love. Before it kills you.” She dropped her hand. And, without another word, she turned and disappeared into the dark hallway, leaving him alone with his discovery and the need to see the rot in the cellar.

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Arthur dragged his shoulder along the peeling wallpaper of what used to be, as Cordelia stated, the servants’ corridor. His chest heaved. A wheeze rattled behind his ribs with every breath. He was still losing strength. Sharing the bed with his fiancée these past weeks had entirely drained his vitality. It all—the bedbugs, the heat, and the smell of coal—was too much. He had believed that staying close was a necessity to monitor the poison’s effects, but tonight his legs had betrayed him. He felt useless. Yet, he couldn’t stop. Removing the rot from the basement was crucial if he wanted to sell the house after Cordelia’s passing. And only by doing that would he be able to pay off the family debts. The kerosene lantern hung from his left hand. The glass base swung erratically against his thigh, casting frantic, elongated shadows that danced and stretched across the warped floorboards. He reached the end of the hall. The door.

A massive iron padlock hung from the latch. It had clearly seen some better times. The metal was heavily blistered with decades of orange rust. Arthur wedged the flat edge of a crowbar into the hasp, leaning his entire weight onto the lever. He prayed that his frail wrists would not snap before the iron gave way.

Crack.

The lock fractured. Rusted shrapnel clattered against the wood. A wave of utterly dead air washed over his sweaty face. The scent was suffocating. He thought of it as a mixture of dry parchment and that specific tang of coins on the tongue when you lick them. He raised the lantern.

The first couple of steps. The Victorian stairs groaned under his weight. Ten steps down, the architecture violently shifted. The wood gave way to rough Tudor brick encrusted with white, crystalline blooms of saltpeter that crumbled under his leather boots. A sharp, physical cold pierced his skin, ignoring the wool waistcoat. It settled in his aching joints. Twenty-three steps later, the brick shifted into uneven, medieval-like cobblestone. He felt drained. The exhaustion caused a misstep. He slipped on the stone. Last moment, he caught the balance against the freezing wall, scraping the skin from his knuckles. The damp, narrow stairwell finally opened into an expanse.

Arthur lowered the lantern. The floor beneath his feet was made of massive, seamless slabs of white Roman marble. It looked different than the whole rest of the house.

Maintained, as if someone took care of it. It reminded him of the basilica he had seen when visiting Rome. Except this was an English countryside. The modern manor above was merely the latest shell built upon an ancient foundation.

His lantern illuminated what looked like a meticulously categorized museum. Rows of glass cabinets lined the marble walls. Dust motes danced lazily in the amber light of his lantern. Arthur dragged his feet forward, peering through the clear glass panes.

Dozens of men's belongings rested on velvet cushions. An ornate silver snuff box engraved with a boar's head. Powdered wigs resting on faceless wooden blocks. Silver shoe buckles that started to tarnish black. He moved to the next shelf. A tray held a dozen gold signet rings. Each piece had a different family crest. Pocket watches hung suspended from tiny hooks. He even recognized his own. The one that he had lost months ago.

In the center of the room sat a massive reading desk. A stack of ledgers lay in the middle. Arthur collapsed into the wooden chair. His knees buckled. His trembling fingers reached for the top ledger. He pulled it into the light. The paper felt brittle in touch. What used to be the ink was now a faded sepia. The date read December 8th, 1842. He read the sweeping cursive:

"Cordelia grows paler by the fortnight. My addition of antimony to her evening broth yield excellent results. She suspects nothing of my design. Yet, a strange lethargy plagues my own limbs. I must prescribe myself a tonic of iron. Her fortune shall soon clear my railroad debts."

Arthur's heart seized. He shoved the ledger aside, reaching for the next volume. The leather crumbled into red dust beneath his weak grip. September 15th, 1780.

"Lady Cordelia is afflicted by a most stubborn melancholy. I have laced her wine with Foxglove, trusting the apothecary's promise of a quiet cessation of her heart. I do confess a terrible weakness in my own constitution of late. The physician bled me yesterday, yet I remain stricken with a confounding fatigue. The estate shall be mine ere Winter breaks."

He whimpered. He reached the bottom of the stack. He took a heavy volume. The cover was made of pigskin. The handwriting looked jagged. It came from a nobleman, written on fibrous vellum. 1655.

"My Wyfe sleepeth, yet she is cold as the grave. I gaveth her the Hemlocke draught againe this morn. She drank deeply, yet her cheeks onely blossom with unholie colour. Lord forgive me, for I dwindle. I waste away in the nyght whilst she doth thrive. She watches me in the dark. She knoweth."

He stared into the writing until his eyes gave way, turning the letters into meaningless, flowing shapes. The lantern sputtered as the flame ran low. He pressed a shaking hand to the punctures on his neck. The arsenic, all the careful planning, the arrogant assumption of his omnipotence and medical superiority. She had played this game a

dozen times. She made the men act like they were puppets across the centuries. He was not a man of her heart. He was pathetic livestock. And now he understood.

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He ran. He ran like his life depended on it, because he knew it did. The lantern slipped from his sweating fingers. It shattered on the marble floor, but it didn't make him stop. He scrambled up the medieval stones so quickly that his shoes fell off. He fell to his knees. The rough cobblestone shredded his pants along with his skin. He dragged himself upward. His lungs burned. Acid reached his throat as the air thinned. The Victorian oak stairs groaned under his weight again. He came through the basement door.

The wall of heat slammed into his face again. He had almost forgotten about it all—the coal smoke, the reek of lavender pomanders. But the worst was the bergamot. It meant she was nearby. That was the only non-visual sign of her existence. He sprinted down the Persian runner of the servants' corridor. His heart almost refused to pump the depleted blood. He had managed to grab the bag with his medical equipment along the way. Then, he crashed into the front doors. His shoulder bruised against the oak. He clawed at the brass deadbolts. Locked. He tore the drapes covering the sidelight windows. He was met with the reflection of his own terrified, bloodless face. His once bright green eyes were wide now; completely consumed by the panic. The outside was pitch-black already. The night had fully fallen.

"Thou art dripping sweat on the parquet, Arthur." The raspy voice came from the stairs. He spun around and pressed his spine against the door.

Cordelia stood at the top of the grand staircase. The sickly, coughing invalid had disappeared. Her posture was rigidly erect. It was almost like her spine had elongated. She looked like a snake shedding its skin. Her raven-black hair cascaded around her shoulders, contrasting to her unblemished skin. He remembered the dress she wore. She had worn it the night they met. She looked even more beautiful now. Beautiful in a way that made his bones ache.

She began her descent. Her bare feet made absolutely no sound. She stopped halfway and raised a hand to tear a loose thread from the lace cuff.

"I do despise the chasing," she sighed. Her tone appeared bored. "It is terribly gauche. Lord Harrington, the industrialist from Manchester. Perhaps you saw his signet ring in my collection. He ran, too. He panicked, screamed like a little child. Eighteen-and-four. Set fire to the east wing in a fit of pique. Let me tell you, a dreadful mess. It took the carpenters a decade to restore the wainscoting exactly as it was. He tried to beat me with a table leg as the house burned around us. Although it was quite a frolic, it was messy. And let me tell you, I prefer quiet endings."

She reached the wooden panels of the foyer. Her black, now-dilated eyes locked onto his trembling body. “But thou, Arthur. Thou art a man of modern science. I expected dignity.”

The man of science disappeared. The logic evaporated. The adrenaline took over his body. Primal terror seized control over him. He scrambled backward, barefoot, trying to retreat. But there was nowhere to retreat. His spine was already glued to the heavy, oak door. He reached onto the cabinet, where the heavy, antique crucifix lay next to the dusty Bible. He had put it there the moment he moved in. The metal felt freezing against his damp palms. Intricate filigree dug deep into his flesh. He thrust the cross forward. He held it out like it was a shield. His knuckles were the exact white color of the marble he had seen on the floor in the basement. He prayed aloud, babbling Latin syllables. And Cordelia stopped.

She tilted her head. Her face expressed profound pity on its sharp features. She reached out. Her hand closed firmly over the silver. No smoke, no blisters. It had no effect under her inhuman grip. She leaned in close and inhaled as the scent of blood came to her nostrils. She licked her lips subconsciously.

“Oh, Arthur,” she whispered. Her lips brushed his earlobe. “Dost thou really think that will stop me? I walked this earth long before they ever thought to put a man on a cross.” She plucked the crucifix from his fingers. Then she dropped it. The ringing clatter of silver striking the floorboards echoed through the manor. Just before the silence.



Oliwia Dawidowska_Husbandry