# miniMAG

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# The New Normal

Matthew McAyeal

Long, long ago, in days when heroes of the Trojan War still walked this earth, terror came to the island of Crete. It came in the form of mysterious sea peoples who attacked and raided the coastal cities. After their beloved city of Malia was sacked for a second time, a desperate group of Minoan refugees began heading to higher ground.

"Where are we going?" asked a small boy named Kikeru.

"To the peak sanctuary of Karfi," explained Idaea, his mother. "We'll be safe from the sea peoples there."

"But where did the sea peoples come from in the first place?" he wanted to know.

"No one knows. Some say they became marauders after they were displaced by earthquakes."

"I heard it was a great drought in Anatolia," said Kikeru's father, a merchant named Yishharu.

"I heard it was plague," said Didikase, another merchant.

"I heard that a god with no name struck Egypt with ten plagues," said a third merchant, Nashuja.

Kikeru was puzzled by the notion of a god with no name. In whose name did the worshippers of that god pray? Of course, the Minoans had no such issues with their gods.

"We shall pray and sacrifice to Britomartis," said Ariadne, Malia's head priestess, after they reached Karfi. "As goddess of mountains and

sailors, she is certain to protect us up here and deliver us from this scourge of sea peoples!"

"Will—will we be up here for long?" asked a little girl named Europa, nervously remembering the terrifying sea peoples who had attacked and burned her home the previous night.

"Of course not, dear," replied Kitane, her mother. "The Greek fleet will wipe out these pirates soon enough. You should just think of this as a little adventure."

And so, they settled into what they all assumed would be a temporary shelter, living more roughly than they had in their grand city with its palaces and frescoes.

As days turned into weeks, Malia's merchants gradually and reluctantly took up new careers as farmers and shepherds. It was especially difficult work when they could only occasionally venture into the lowlands and valleys to tend to crops and livestock. Some refused to take up such work, sure that life would be returned to normal before harvesting time anyway.

Then weeks became months, bringing a winter that was especially cold and windy up in the mountains. And yet, there was still no Greek fleet.

"I don't understand why the Greeks have forsaken us," said Nashuja. "Is this how they repay us after our King Idomeneus fought for them at Troy?"

"Forget the Greeks!" said Yishharu. "Where are the Egyptian and Hittite fleets? They rely on us for their wine and olive oil, but we never see them anymore either. What's going on?"

Whatever was going on, the Minoan refugees at Karfi never learned what it was for their coast continued to be dominated by pillaging sea peoples and no one else. As months became years, young Kikeru entered manhood. He became engaged to Europa.

"I've been thinking about our old lives," he said to her one day. "If we ever do go back, I can't wait to watch bull-leaping again. What are you planning to do when we return?"

Europa sighed. "I would like for us to be married in Malia."

"Are you sure you want to wait that long?" asked Kikeru. "Many couples our age are getting married now."

"I know," she said, "but I want to get married properly in a real temple. Couldn't we wait just a few more years? I'm sure the sea peoples will be gone by then."

"They were supposed to be gone years ago," he pointed out.

"Yes, but surely, it'll be soon by now!"

Kikeru turned to look out at the sea, the sea from which their maritime civilization had retreated. "I always thought that I would grow up

to be a merchant like my father," he said finally, "but now I wonder if that will even happen."

"I know what you mean," said Europa. "As a child, I wanted to become a priestess, but I certainly don't anymore."

The reason she certainly didn't anymore was that the people were increasingly turning against the priestesses. Their rituals did not seem to be working. Not only did the sea peoples persist, harvests were poor and getting poorer, and the priestesses sacrificed animals that could have been used to feed starving people. One dark, overcast day, the people's frustration with the priestesses came to a head.

"Why does Britomartis fail us?" Yishharu demanded to know.

"I—I don't know," said Ariadne. "We pray and sacrifice to her every day, but it doesn't seem to be enough. I think she must be very angry at us. Perhaps she requires a human sacrifice."

"Yes…" said Didikase, drawing a sword, "…yours!"

"You—you can't sacrifice *me*! I am your head priestess, y-your link to our beloved patron goddess!"

"You don't seem to be doing a very good job of linking to her," said Didikase. "It almost makes me wonder if Britomartis even exists."

"That's blasphemy!" Ariadne gasped. "You mustn't speak that way or all the gods will make life very difficult for us!"

"Well, that would make for a change!" Didikase retorted.

For a moment, Ariadne seemed to consider raising her ceremonial labrys in defense, but then she cast it aside. "Strike down a holy priestess, and you will never see the end of the gods' wrath!"

Didikase only hesitated for a moment before he did strike her down. The other priestesses were less martyrly-inclined and tried to fend off the angry mob with their ceremonial labryses, but they were killed just as easily.

With the death of the priestesses, it became impossible to conduct formal weddings at all. Kikeru and Europa simply moved in together without any ceremony. They labored as farmers, using primitive tools for there was no more imported tin and copper with which to make bronze. They gave birth to a new generation, who would be raised knowing only life at Karfi. As more and more years passed by, the last scribes and merchants died off. Their skills no longer needed or taught, their deaths also marked the death of the written word.

Kikeru and Europa never did live to see their people leave Karfi. Instead, the people were still holed up in the mountains when Kikeru and Europa died of old age. Their children and their children's children did not live to see it either. The generation that did leave the mountains didn't even remember why the lowlands and valleys were supposed to be so dangerous. Slowly and cautiously, they reclaimed them, surprised to discover no apparent danger.

By that time, they were, of course, no longer a sophisticated civilization of seafaring merchants. They had become simple, illiterate farmers and shepherds for whom the world that existed before their exile was but an oral myth. Their old cities were now unfamiliar, mysterious ruins. It would still be centuries more before advanced civilization returned to the island of Crete.

## Cultural Appropriation

Justin Chun

After I speak broken English
and tell the delivery guy
his English is well, eyes roll
with the eggroll and extra
duck sauce I ordered with
my chicken chow fun.
And I wai, bow and scrape
to the drycleaners, as I
pick up primly pressed
shirts and laundry, thinking
these people are some
of the good ones. The hard-
working Korean lady squints,
spares a smile for me, she's
clearly grateful for my patronage.


## swallow

airport

I should have helped, i wanted to protect my time, my peace, I waited until you left, empty-handed, smugly I opened a window, a swallow flew in, i wanted time to myself, now occupied by a panicked mother swallow, lost the nest, in a world she did not know, my heart fluttering, her heart may explode, the guilt of not helping, the panic of doing the wrong thing, the surprise of closing a door; opening a window, circles, chaotic circles of wing beating, around the room, round-round the room, perching on the whiteboard, the chalkboard, the bulletin board, the American flag, the map, the ancient CRT TV set, the panic, the guilt, the hour wasted, not alone, unpeacefully, the liberation, the oppression of protecting time

# Bergmann's Friends

Ilya Ganpantsura

## Chapter I. The Monocle That Slew Sorrow

In the year 2012, in Kyiv, there lived and studied Alexander Bergmann.
He possessed charisma, yet had no friends.
He loved philosophy, yet had no one with whom to share philosophical conversations.
His home was splendidly adorned, yet, alas, without guests.

Alexander never worried about this. But in the golden autumn days, his soul would grow numb with loneliness. It brought him not only the poverty of philosophical thought, but also stripped all color from the rest of his life—be it his oil pastel sketches or the hours spent playing the Spanish guitar. The best time of life was slipping away into a sorrowful mystery.

Although, from the author's subjective view, the best time of life is all that part of it which leaves behind memories. And moments spent with friends, or simply with pleasant people, are priceless—for they make us, if only for a while, forget the heavy thought that for most of his life, man is alone. And just as our beloved planet is our only home, so is each person his own guardian angel—adrift in the boundless cosmic emptiness of a dark and silent world, which, without us, it truly is.

Alexander studied philology at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy. He was the best in his class. He was fascinated by the study of ancient personal belongings from different cultures and eras. Yet it was not only scholarly passion that drew him deeper into his studies—it was also loneliness and the dull calm of his home.

After his parents' death, his apartment was arranged entirely to his taste. Still, that sticky domestic coziness only lulled him into himself, leaving him face to face with utter solitude.

One day, as part of his coursework, he was assigned to research the cultural features of a village in Bukovina, near the borders of Romania and Moldova. During his study, he became intrigued by an abandoned village close to the Romanian frontier. Yet the university refused to finance the exploration of that area—the institute needed general data on all western regions of Ukraine to submit for an international academic competition and win funds for modernization.

Thus, Alexander had to act on his own. As an exemplary student, he was granted some equipment and excused from the main project. Alone, with a shovel, an axe, and a crowbar, our young philologist set out to explore the mysterious village. His professional intuition drew him there—whispering that the true treasure, not only of Bukovina but of all philological study, awaited him in that place.

Entering one of the better-preserved houses early in the morning, Alexander found a few old coins, a wrapped bundle, and photographed the interior. It was, by all appearances, the main house of the village — a wooden home with a stone stove, three rooms, and an attic. The interior was unremarkable: one table, a few chairs, and something resembling a sofa. Yet Alexander photographed every inch of the ancient dwelling!

After exploring several more cottages, finding a few artifacts and making detailed notes, Alexander began his return to the inn. But on the way back, something unusual occurred. A light rain began to fall, and with the brisk October winds overtaking the stillness of September, there was a real risk of catching cold. Quickening his pace, Alexander startled at a sudden peal of thunder—and at that very moment, something struck him in the eye.

The object was a monocle.
The surprised philologist caught the impudent lens deftly and hurried back to his inn.

In the cozy room, seated at his table, Alexander examined the artifacts from the village using special optical instruments. The coins seemed familiar—as a future specialist, he inferred that the village was likely

more than two centuries old. Then he turned his attention to the strange bundle. It contained a crumpled manuscript—one previously unknown to him. It seemed almost foreign, not of Bukovina at all.

Yet any suspicion of an Asian or Near Eastern origin vanished the moment he noticed, on the back of the paper, a hand-drawn map—showing the houses of the same village and the river Suceava near the Romanian border. The mystery deepened, drawing the young researcher further in.

At last, he turned his attention to the object that had quite literally struck him on his journey—the monocle. It had a silver frame and was inlaid with a small dark stone. At first, Alexander did not notice the gem and therefore postponed studying the trinket until after lunch.

Rising from his chair, he accidentally dropped the monocle to the floor. The absent-minded scholar would likely not have noticed it at all had a cat not suddenly darted into the room. The sight of the cat brought back memories of the morning's exploration—he recalled the large number of animals he had seen in the village. Indeed, the very same cat seemed to appear in several of his photographs.

As he tied a string to the monocle for convenience, Alexander watched the unexpected guest. When he finished, he smiled—and, for no particular reason, looked at the cat through the monocle.

What he saw made him stumble backward and fall onto his chair.
He had only briefly lifted the monocle from his eye, but through it his face was bathed in shifting colors, and the sounds around him echoed strangely. Within a minute, the colored clouds within the lens began to gather into the silhouette of a man.

When the figure took form in place of the cat, it broke the stunned silence:

“For more than three hundred years no human eyes have looked upon me. No longer have I known what men now look like. Tell me, wanderer—why have you dared touch the realm of curses and nature’s ancient gods?”

“I seek to learn the secret of the old village that withers nearby,”
replied Alexander Bergmann, undaunted.

The divine being continued:

“I may help you solve your riddle—
but afterward, you must help free my soul.”

Alexander agreed. And the deity, visible only through the monocle, began its tale.

## Chapter II. The Decision — To Flee

More than three hundred years ago, there existed a modest village of craftsmen and traders. They fished, grew vegetables and fruit, and lived their uneventful lives. Their village was known for nothing at all. It had no songs, no folklore, no poetry. From the point of view of any educated man, they lived in dull, petty philistinism—perhaps the worst fate imaginable.

It seemed they had never known what friendship, creativity, or philosophical thought were. They were a deaf, dim, faceless crowd.
And among that crowd—before he became the enchanted being of the monocle—lived Maxim. He remembered well the story that partly unfolded through his own fault.

As a young man, Maxim had always been puzzled by the indifference and hostility of his fellow villagers. They seemed detached from life itself. Their minds were clouded by some cursed, dense veil. Maxim

struggled against it, yet it pushed him away—toward the world of fields, rivers, and roads. He loved to walk in the forest, near the ruins of an old church; in the fields, where freedom echoed with loneliness; by the rivers, with which he could speak of everything and nothing.

One day, while walking by the river, Maxim accidentally struck a large stone and overturned it. Beneath, he found a bundle—the very same bundle that Alexander would one day discover in the village. Back then, the papers inside were not encrypted into a manuscript. They simply bore a strange message:

"Befriend the animals—and you will befriend mankind."

The mysterious bundle fascinated Maxim, as did the idea of befriending the villagers. After brief thought, he found a way to bring the message to life. He decided to write kind, friendly letters to his neighbors, tie them to his dog Antoshka, and send the loyal messenger to deliver them. That very evening, Maxim wrote a few letters. And in the morning, he secretly dispatched Antoshka to deliver them to Taras and Katya.

Thus their friendship began.
Maxim's new friends were inspired by the idea and joined his endeavor. Katya had a cat named Bonya, and Taras a bird called Vishnya. They wrote poems, stories, and songs to one another—never forgetting their main mission: to spread Maxim's idea of friendship throughout the village. Soon, everyone wanted to take part. Some used horses to deliver letters, others—nimble hens or sluggish pigs. The local idler, Uncle Vitya, even trained a squirrel for the task.

And so, the once dreary village became cheerful and kind.

Among the animals, unlike among humans, friendship had always been strong—until the day Maxim's idea grew into a village-wide movement. The animals now carried tons of letters each day. They hoped that soon the people would speak to one another directly, without relying on them. But weeks passed, and the animals grew weary.

They began discarding letters, meeting secretly on the outskirts to discuss what to do. The swift horses proposed leaving the village before anyone noticed the missing letters. The bird Vishnya suggested flying away. The cat Bonya proposed slipping away gracefully. Only the clumsy pig wanted to stay, but her voice was ignored. And so, the great escape was set for early Monday morning.

At dawn, the rooster crowed a powerful ultrasonic signal to begin the flight. The cows, with their sheer weight, knocked down the fence, while the horses raised a cloud of dust under which all the others slipped away. Last of all ran the dog Antoshka, ensuring the village was free of animals. The mission of freedom was accomplished—the escape a success!

Strangely, none of the human villagers awoke during the thunderous exodus.
Perhaps they had stayed up too late writing letters of love, passion, and sorrow.

Maxim, meanwhile, had conceived a new idea. He would write anonymous letters to every villager and invite them to a great gathering. He prepared the letters and, as always, planned to entrust their delivery to Antoshka. But when he could not find his beloved dog—not in the room, nor the yard, nor the garden path—he realized his misfortune. Yet his sadness was selfish: he thought only of being unable to continue the correspondence. The thought that he might have wronged Antoshka, or that his friends had forgotten the animals who carried their messages, did not occur to anyone.

After several gloomy days, some villagers began to emerge from their houses.
At first, they came out to say in person what they had failed to express in letters. But soon, the intoxication of newfound friendship faded, and quarrels began. For they were, at heart, vain and selfish people. Only as an afterthought did they go in search of the escaped animals—and even then, they could not work together. Maxim quarreled with Katya, Taras with Uncle Vitya. It became clear why they had never been friends before.

Maxim's villagers simply did not know how to be friends.

Meanwhile, the friendship among the animals only grew stronger—nourished by hatred and a desire for revenge. Their thoughts darkened, sprouting like poisonous mushrooms: thoughts of looting, arson, and destruction. One day, the squirrel remembered that before Uncle Vitya had caught her, she had lived with a forest witch named Kunigunda, who loved animals—especially the furry ones—and despised humans.

The animals decided to visit her. They hoped she would curse the village and become their new mistress, feeding and serving them. Long they traveled thorny paths—past a field of dead corn, which had withered because the people, absorbed in writing "foolish" letters, had

ceased to water it. They passed an abandoned mill, left to ruin for the same reason. They even climbed high hills to cross the river, since no one had repaired the bridge. At last they reached the thick, cursed forest.

The witch greeted them warmly, with sweet promises of care—and sweeter delicacies. Kunigunda conjured piles of acorns, pears, and apples; even accidentally summoned roasted chickens, which she quickly

whisked away so as not to frighten the birds. The animals feasted and fell asleep in the corners. Only the pig remained where she was—too full to move, lying content on a bed the witch had kindly prepared.

When all were asleep, the witch began preparing her spell. And at last she revealed her true plans—to rid the world of the villagers so they could never find their animals, and then to enslave and devour the very beasts she had taken in.

Her charms took effect immediately.
In the morning, the animals awoke on warm frying pans. The witch's one mistake!
They leapt up and fought for their lives and friendship once again.

At that same hour, the village began to suffer the witch's curse. Half of the villagers fell ill with an unknown sickness. Yet the other half, for the first time, showed compassion—caring for the sick and comforting them. For the first time, the village knew selfless love for one's neighbor.

Meanwhile, chaos raged in the witch's house. The birds pecked at her hair and eyes; the cows knocked her down; the horses trampled her into a bloody mess. The pig tried to leap upon her belly but misjudged the distance, landing on the boiling cauldron instead. Scalded, she sprang onto the table, scattering the witch's tools and vials. When the battle was done, the animals hurled the witch's body—now resembling a giant cutlet—into a vat of acid, and thus she vanished forever from history and their cruel world.

Having finished with the witch, the animals cleaned their new home—once a hut of dark sorcery. They poured the acid under a withered tree, threw away most of the witch's belongings, and gathered all the spilled potions into one large cauldron. Into that cauldron also fell the monocle—the very one the squirrel had once found for Kunigunda.

As the potions mixed, they began to react. The witch's dark energy fused with all the curses and evil that had unfolded in this tale. A storm arose, swallowing everything nearby—the animals and their new home among them. The magical hurricane of curses swept westward toward the river, where the villagers had gathered in search of their lost beasts. Their fates became one.

And then all fell silent.
Only the monocle remained—falling, centuries later, from the height of the vanished storm onto the head of a young philologist named Alexander Bergmann.

Thus ended Maxim's story—the tale of his cursed village.
By a mad twist of fate, every inhabitant had been trapped in a transcendental realm of spirits and phantoms, bound to the soul of an animal whose well-being they must serve.

The only way to lift the curse was through friendship—to reconcile humans and beasts.
But this could be done only by someone from the outside world, for the cursed themselves were forbidden to love or even speak.

## Chapter III. Peace with Everyone, Everywhere

Upon hearing the story, our hero began to act. His first attempt was to reconcile dogs and cats. He knew that their enmity was merely the echo of an ancient quarrel between two people who had once been their masters in the village—guardians who could never agree. Their conflict had been passed down to their animals, leaving behind two furious, untamed forces, ready to tear each other apart.
The dog growled, the cat hissed—the situation seemed hopeless. But Alexander knew that he was the one who could, and must, intervene. He approached them carefully, step by step, not wanting to frighten or provoke another surge of aggression. His words were simple, yet filled with quiet meaning:

"I know you hate each other. But think—what matters more, this hatred, or what once united you? This is only the beginning, and I won't allow you to destroy everything before we find a common language. We must become allies."

Alexander spoke calmly, his gaze holding the attention of both animals. The dog and the cat, though not immediately, began to quiet down. Little by little, they seemed to understand that he was not their enemy. Soon, our hero took from his pocket a small toy—soft and furry. It had once belonged to his sister. Now it was his only memory of her. And here, in this tense space between good and evil, it became something greater—a symbol that one could remain gentle, kind, and whole even when surrounded by the thick fog of hatred.

The toy ceased to be just an object—it became a gesture, where patience, understanding, and the will to bring peace merged into one. The dog stopped growling, the cat stopped hissing. Time passed, and soon the three of them sat side by side, barely noticing the closeness that had formed between them.

But this was not enough. He knew that peace was not only harmony among creatures, but also the restoration of balance in the entire circle of life. Resting a little after his first victory, he set out to the farm. New challenges awaited him there. The farm was full of life, yet divided. A cow and a rooster—two titans of strength—had become prisoners of their own bitterness, wrapped in a dark veil that refused to lift. Their cries echoed across the fields. The cow could not forgive the rooster's constant complaints, and the rooster could not bear that the cow always considered herself above the rest.

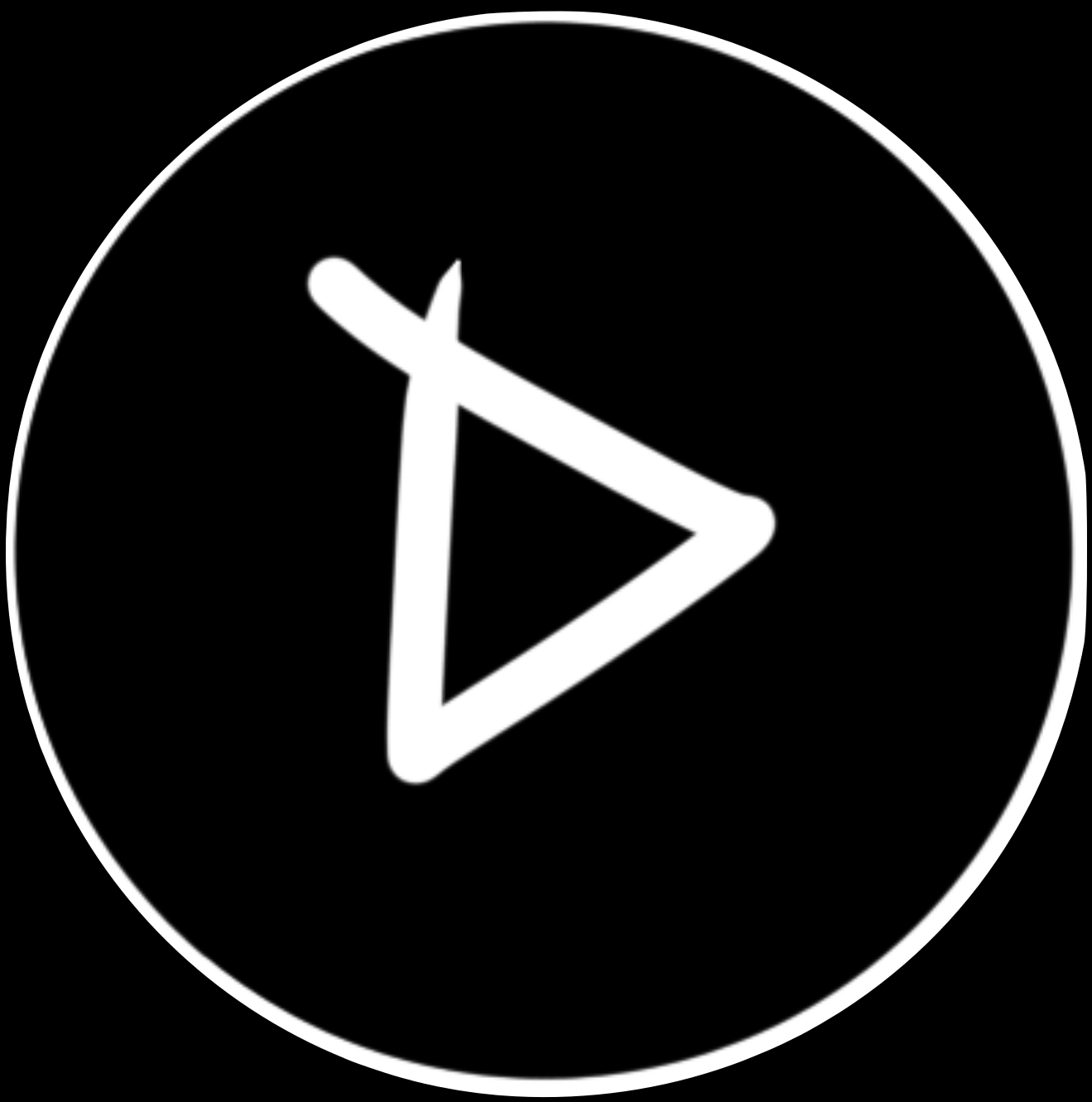
Our hero approached them. Once again, he knew that neither force nor fear would help—only wisdom and patience. Looking at them, he saw not mere anger, but the despair of their long-gone masters—people who had never learned to be friends. His voice, soft yet steady, sounded like gentle consolation, peeling away the layers of wrath and pain.

"You are not enemies. You are part of this land, as we all are. If you keep fighting, you will lose yourselves. I came here to remind you: we all live in the same universe. Seek not enemies, but friends."

Slowly but surely, they began to calm down. Their cries grew less frequent; their eyes regained clarity. Yet one problem remained. Alexander knew that despite his success with the animals, his true friends awaited him at the edge of the farm. Together, they would have to reconcile many more proud and shadowed souls—human and otherwise. Or rather, not reconcile, but teach them friendship—as the villagers once showed compassion to their distant pen friends, those who, though far away, were still close in spirit.

He went to them—to his new companions—quietly, confidently, as though he knew that this step would bring new discoveries. He found them at the edge of the field. They were as lonely as he once was. Yet both they and Alexander were ready to take great steps toward change. He approached and, without a word, simply sat beside them.

All understood: nothing needed to be said. Here, as always, silence was the deepest and truest answer. Even if the world had been broken—it was beginning to heal once more. And with every heartbeat, the monocle reflected less of the curse, and more of reality itself…

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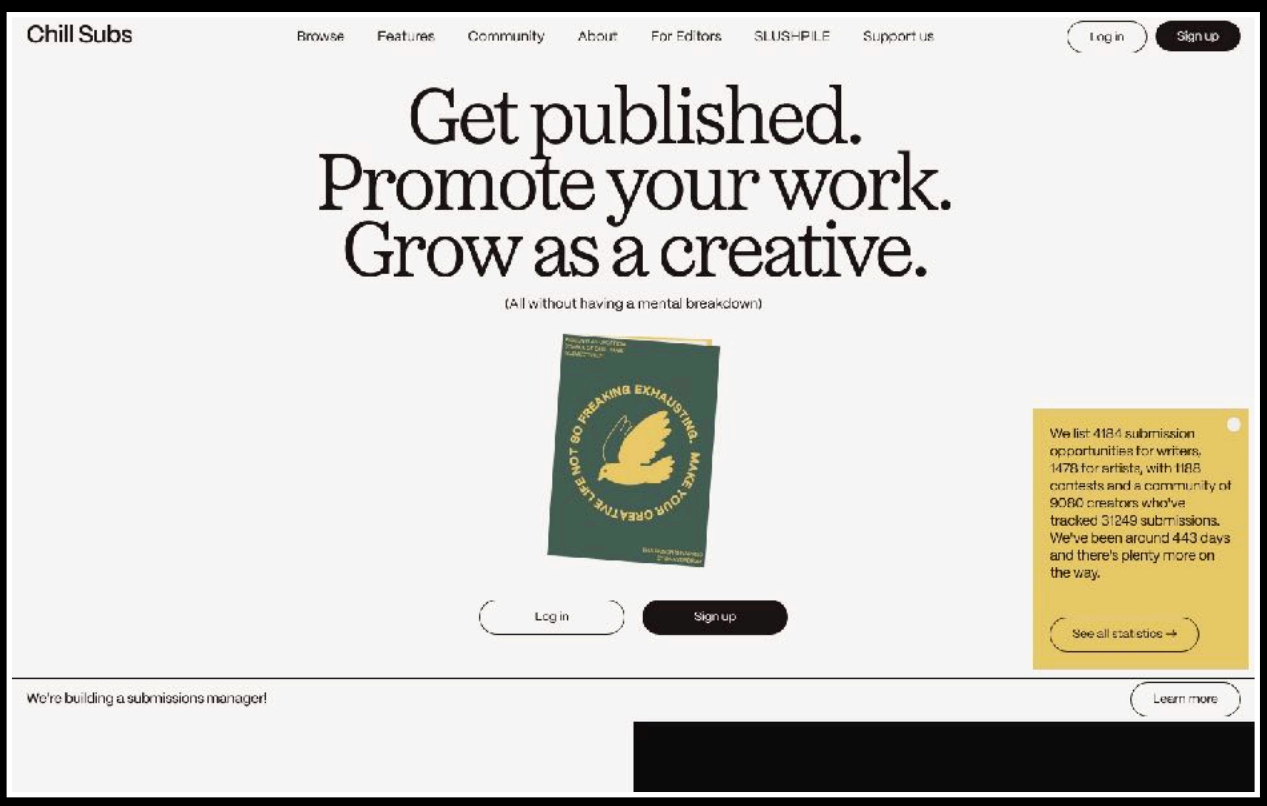


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