

meter and melody

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by [viviano](#)

Summary

Ilya feels like he knows everything and nothing about Shane at once. He's a child of Nike, his team always wins Capture-the-flag, he's still in touch with his biological father, and he's obscenely lucky.

What he doesn't know, is if Shane is the best or the worst person to quest with.

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Aristotle's qualifications for a Greek tragedy include dianoa (thought and introspection) and opsis (spectacle and performance). Shane and Ilya bring both to the table.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1: i would shun the light

Shane has seen a lot of things during his time at Camp Half Blood. He's been here longer than most: every summer since he was maybe eight or nine years old spent in the lush forest and high rolling fields of Camp. His father drops him off here every July 1st, without fail.

He's seen godly claimings, grizzly capture-the-flags, centaur migrations, every solstice, prank, attempted invasion by cyclopes and harpies. He saw campers leave on quests, and saw less of them return. Saw the Oracle give more prophecies than he could count, and saw how Chiron's beard slowly got grayer and grayer.

He's fifteen and he's pretty sure he's seen it all.

That is, of course, until Ilya Rozanov falls out of the sky.

He's just finished his morning run when he sees a crowd gathering — a shock of orange shirts — around the high climbing walls on the edge of the forest clearing. Shane, realising that the group is mainly younger campers, breaks away from his well-worn cool-down path and jogs down the slope towards them.

“What's everyone looking at?” he calls, and the crowd swivel to look at him. They part wordlessly to let Shane through.

“Some kid just fell from the sky,” pipes one girl.

“Was he tree climbing?” Shane frowns.

She shakes her head.

“Get Chiron,” he instructs, and she takes off in a sprint back towards the cabins.

Shane finally makes it through and looks down at the body on the ground. An Apollo kid crouches beside him, and checks his pulse-point and limbs for breaks. He looks like a star, Shane notes. He's pale with a nest of brilliant golden curls. A narrow arrowhead face, broad back, long lean limbs. Darkly washed blue jeans and a black shirt.

His eyes are revealed as glacial blue when the Apollo kid tries to pry open his lids to shine a flashlight in them, illuminating them paler than the sky.

He groans, and the whole group jumps back, spooked.

It is a soft sound, more breath than voice, but it cuts through the murmuring crowd like a snapped bowstring.

“He's alive,” someone says unnecessarily.

Shane exhales, slow and measured, the way Chiron taught them to when panic was useless. He crouches as well, planting his weight on the balls of his feet, eyes scanning clues. There doesn't appear to be any: just dust on denim, grass crushed flat beneath him, and the unsettling fact that no one should be able to fall from the sky and look this intact.

The boy's eyes flutter. Shane crouches beside him and gives his cheek a daring pat. "Hey, hey, you. You okay?"

That's when the fallen star boy's hand snaps out. He grabs hold of Shane's wrist with startling speed, and grips so hard that the fine bones in Shane's wrist grind together uncomfortably. The star boy's eyes open to slits, irises seen through pale lashes.

"Don't touch," he says, lilting over the syllables and flattening the vowels in an unmistakable slavic accent. Russian, maybe.

Shane twists his arm out of the hold and studies him, even as his eyes slip closed again.

"He has a head injury," the Apollo kid — Shane thinks his name is Carter — announces, his voice clinical despite the flicker of nervousness in his eyes. "Possible concussion. Don't let him sleep yet."

But the boy seems determined to do the opposite. His eyelids are heavy, the brilliant blue of his irises now just a sliver beneath pale gold lashes. The grip on Shane's wrist is gone, but the ghost of the pressure remains, a phantom bracelet of force.

"Don't... touch," Ilya slurs again, the accent thickening the words, but they're rendered completely unthreatening by the abject state of him. His hand, now limp on the grass, twitches.

"Yeah, got it. No touching," Shane mutters, though he doesn't move from his crouch. His mind is racing, slotting this new variable into the known catalogue of Camp Half-Blood weirdness. No wings. No broken chariot wheel. No shimmer of godly teleportation. Just... a boy and gravity.

The distant, rhythmic thud of hooves on packed earth signals Chiron's arrival. The centaur's form parts the crowd of campers, his expression one of deep concern that doesn't quite mask a profound curiosity. He takes in the scene with a single, sweeping glance: the anxious campers, Carter with his medical kit, Shane crouching like a sentinel, and the golden-haired boy lying in the crushed grass as if he'd been placed there by a careless god.

"A fall from the sky, you say?" Chiron's voice is calm, a bedrock for their frayed nerves.

"Straight down," says another girl, "like a meteor."

Chiron kneels, a complex and graceful maneuver of his equine body, and places a gentle hand on the star boy's forehead. He doesn't flinch this time; he seems to be sinking deeper into himself. "His temperature is normal. No sign of divine fever." He looks at Carter. "Help me get him to the infirmary. Gently."

As Chiron and Carter maneuver the star boy onto a makeshift stretcher formed from two spears and a camp banner, Shane finally stands, his knees popping. He watches the strange boy's head loll to the side, those golden curls stark against the orange fabric.

The next time that Shane sees the fallen star boy at Camp, he's awake.

He's tall, taller than most at their age, and not in the gangly, long-limbed and sharp-elbowed way that Shane is tall after his growth spurt. He's stockier, packed with muscle down lean arms. He's standing with Chiron at the end of the pavilion, arms crossed and eyes mullish as he seems to take in the scene.

Chiron has his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Everyone, if I could have your attention, please," his voice is a low base, as patient and tempered as ever. It seems the room's rowdy chatter dies down quicker than usual, Shane notes. They're all interested in the sky boy, it seems.

"I'm sure by now you're all aware of the incident that took place at the training grounds this morning. I'd like to shed some light on that incident now, to avoid unnecessarily worrying any of you. This young man," Chiron clapped the boy gently on the shoulder, "is Ilya Rozanov. Ilya will be staying here with us at camp, so please do your best to welcome him and show him the ropes. He's one of us now."

Shane, leaning against a stone pillar with his breakfast plate, studies the new boy with a practiced eye. In the harsh light of the pavilion, Ilya looks less like a fallen star and more like a cornered animal. The mullish set of his jaw is at odds with the faint, shadowed circles under his eyes. He's wearing standard-issue camp clothes—an orange t-shirt that strains slightly across his shoulders and jeans that are a little too short — but he wears them like a costume, uncomfortable and foreign. His arms are still crossed, a defensive barricade against the dozens of curious stares.

Hayden, the head counsellor of the Hermes cabin, pipes up, "you want him to stay with us, Chiron?"

Chiron's smile strained, his eyes flickered down to the boy next to him. Shane, who may have been watching the boy a little too closely, noticed the suddenly rigid set to his shoulders. The defiant tilt of his chin. The lick of fire in his blue eyes.

Chiron shuffles, hooves scratching against the bamboo lacquered flooring. "Well, that's a good question, Mr Pike. As it turns out, Ilya has somewhat of a, a rather unique—"

"I know who my dad is," Ilya interrupts Chiron boldly. He still has that accent, melodic and drawling. Definitely Russian. "Met him. He brought me here."

Dropped him from the sky, Shane corrects. He immediately starts running through all the possible male gods. It is unlike them to have such a starkly involved decision in their children's lives. An immediate claiming is one thing — a private escort to Camp Half-Blood is another entirely.

“Hold on,” Svetlana stands from the Aphrodite table, a hand planted on her hip, wolfish eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You met him? Your godly parent?”

Ilya doesn’t bristle, doesn’t even blink. “Yes.”

“And we’re just supposed to take your word for it, then?”

“You do not have to take my word,” Ilya said, his voice cutting through the quiet. His accent made the statement sound like a fact of physics, immutable and unarguable. “I know what is true.”

“Yeah, well, truth’s got a funny way of working around here,” Hayden called from the Hermes table, a smirk playing on his lips. “Lots of kids think they know. Until a flaming hammer or a glowing lyre shows up over their head. That’s how it works.”

“It is how it works for you,” Ilya shoots back, his eyes narrowing. “Not for me.”

A few campers gasped at the audacity. Shane felt a strange twinge of sympathy, quickly buried under a wave of pragmatic suspicion. The kid had guts, he’d give him that. But guts didn’t make you a son of a god.

Chiron raised a placating hand. “Now, now. Ilya’s situation is—”

“Who is he, then?” Svetlana interrupted, ignoring Chiron’s frown. She takes a step forward, her Aphrodite cabin siblings watching with keen interest, buzzing around her as though feeding on the energy from the conflict. “If you’re so sure, name him. Let’s see if the camp agrees.”

All eyes swing back to Ilya. He stands perfectly still in the storm of their attention. For a moment, Shane thinks he saw a flicker of something else — not uncertainty, but a deep, weary frustration, as if he’s tired of having to prove the sky was blue.

Ilya takes a slow breath, not looking at Svetlana, nor at the sneering Hayden, but at the open sky beyond the pavilion’s roof, as if seeking confirmation, or perhaps strength. “I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he mutters, and then descends into the crowd. With the introduction quickly and abruptly ended, Chiron tries to get the Campers to return to breakfast, but is difficult. Everyone keeps sending wayward glances to him as he finds an isolated spot at the end of the Apollo table and keeps his head low.

Shane turns back to the long stretch of table and whistles. “Well.”

Rose stares back at him from across the table, stirring a glass of orange juice with a straw — a thoughtful pinch to her eyes. “He’s either completely irrelevant or the child of the big three.”

Shane casts another glance at him, the rigid hunch of his shoulders. “You think?”

One of her Athenian siblings leans over and makes a snarky comment, to chatter down the table. Shane studies his eggs-on-toast. He sits with the Athenians for meals because Rose is

his best friend, and since he's the only child of his mother, he doesn't really feel like sitting by himself.

Shane chews, swallows, and finally says, "If he's irrelevant, he doesn't need to fall out of the sky."

Rose snorts quietly. "Fair."

Across the pavilion, Ilya sits alone like a landmine no one wants to step on. A child of Demeter tries — briefly — to offer him a roll. Ilya stares at it as if it might explode, then shakes his head once without saying anything. The kid tactfully retreats but at least he tries.

"You're staring," Rose says without looking up.

"Observing," Shane corrects. "There's a difference."

She gives him a sideways look. "You're terrible at not being obvious."

Maybe. But Shane can't help it. He's been around long enough to know patterns. Unclaimed kids hover, hopeful. Claimed kids glow — sometimes literally — on the day it happens. This is something else. There's an aura about Ilya that threatens trouble, static in the air like the threat of lightning in gathering stormclouds.

Shane should've known better than to think that would be the end of things. That night he sits around the campfire and watches the flames. He's still caked with dust from hand-to-hand wrestling earlier but he doesn't much mind — not when the drinks (all both sugar and alcohol free, of course) are flowing and someone's trying to wrangle toasted marshmallows over the open flame.

The fire flickers, its tips like golden fingers reaching into the sky, where the night spins clear and frosty overhead, visible through the overhanging canopy.

At some point Hayden pushes a ginger ale into his hand and then goes to cheer on an Ares-kid arm wrestle, which ends with Scott's opponent on the ground. The usual. Shane smiles into the glass rim of his bottle.

A roar of cheers go up as Scott preens, followed by a set of diverted groans as Svetlana's marshmallow goes up in smoke.

"Move."

Shane looks up and backwards at the figure standing over him. Mr. D stands behind them, constantly-full glass of cola and-something-else in one hand, the other gesturing vaguely at the log Shane is sitting on. His expression suggests he has already lost patience with everyone present, including himself.

“Make room,” he says again. “Stormcloud. Sit.” He points to Shane’s right, where Ilya stands just beyond the logs, half in shadow, half caught in the firelight. He hasn’t joined the circle. His arms are folded tight across his chest, posture rigid, like he’s bracing against an impact that’s not coming. The light skims over him and fractures, throwing sharp-edged shadows that don’t quite line up with his movements.

Ilya stiffens. “I’m fine standing.”

Mr D shoots him an unimpressed glare. Ilya rolls his eyes but slinks reluctantly forwards until he’s perched on the moss-covered edge of the log Shane occupies. Shane dutifully shuffles over to make room and Ilya stares at him like he’s grown another head as he creeps further onto the log like a wild animal tempted in with food.

“See?” Mr. D says, satisfied. “Solved.” He wanders off toward the drinks table, muttering something about babysitting Olympian messes.

For a moment, neither of them speaks.

Shane takes another sip of his ginger ale. Up close, Ilya smells faintly like ozone and pine sap, like he’s been outside too long. He’s sitting rigidly, hands clasped between his knees, eyes fixed on the fire with the intensity of someone afraid it might judge him. The fire casts a harsh light over the grim line of his jaw, the jut of his nose.

“So...” Shane begins, because someone has to. “How’s the Hermes cabin?”

Ilya sniffs disdainfully. “Noisy.”

“That tracks.” He tips his bottle back again, eyes on the fire so he doesn’t look like he’s interrogating him. The flames spit and settle. Someone further down the log whoops as a marshmallow goes up in flames.

“They mean well,” Shane adds after a moment. “Mostly. The Hermes kids, I mean. They’re just kind of... like that.”

“I noticed,” Ilya says. His shoulders remain stiff, but his grip on his own hands loosens by a fraction. “They tried to make me play cards. For money I don’t have.”

Shane snorts. “Did you win?”

Ilya hums agreement.

Another beat of silence. It’s a cautious kind of quiet, teetering on the verge of uncomfortable.

“You don’t have to stay long,” Shane reminds him gently. “Once your dad claims you, you can move out.”

“I’m well aware.”

“It’s not all that, moving out.” Shane says breezily, ignoring the snark in Ilya’s tone. “Cabin’s all well and good, but if you’re by yourself, it can get a bit draughty. Cold at night with less

bodies.”

Ilya finally glances sideways at him. The look is sharp, appraising, but there’s less edge to it now. “You have no siblings?” he probes.

Shane offers him a lazy smile, and sticks out his hand. “Shane Hollander,” he says, because he never actually introduced himself. “Son of Nike. Victory, endurance, athletics. But I don’t have any siblings, so I can’t participate in a lot of the Camp Games.” He smiles sheepishly. “I tend to throw the matches, anyway. Quite unfair for everyone else.”

“Nike is a Charioteer,” notes Ilya. “You cannot even race the chariots?”

“Need two people for a chariot,” says Shane, rueful.

Ilya crosses his arms. “That is dumb.”

Shane lets out a genuine laugh, a short, surprised sound that seems to startle them both. “Yeah,” he agrees, the admission feeling lighter somehow. “It is kind of dumb. But rules are rules. Chiron says it’s about teamwork. And well,” he shrugs, quirks his lips, “no team.”

Ilya studies him, that intense, analytical focus returning. He looks from Shane to the distant outline of the chariot shed, just visible past the pegasus stables. “So you watch. Every time.”

“Mostly, yeah.” Shane tries to keep his tone casual, but the truth of it sits between them. Seven summers of cheering from the sidelines, of being the veteran who couldn’t compete in the event his own mother was literally the goddess of. “I look after the pegasi, though.”

That gets Ilya’s attention. “You do?” he keeps his tone deceptively light, but Shane knows he’s peeked his interest.

“You want to see them?” Ilya doesn’t reply; he just shoots him a long, deliberate look. Shane grins. “Tomorrow, after lunch. You can meet them.”

The large, low wing of the stables runs along the east side of the great yard where the gladiators rehearse. The smell of horse and straw is powerful, especially in the heat of the summer sun, but Shane does not mind it so much.

Shane passes stall after stall where pegasi doze or eat or defecate or whatever else pegasi do in their free time. They have room for two dozen pegasi here, although not all the stalls are now filled. They’re beautiful creatures — gleaming coats that ripple, and braided mains, and huge folded wings that need near-constant grooming.

His favourite pegasus, Bronte, looks up as he approaches. There is a window at the end of the hall that lets in the hot sun, where she pokes out her head and nickers at him. It is that bright sunlight that sparkles on her gleaming snowy coat, catches on their brilliant oak-coloured forelocks and manes. They do not actually shine like the blessed pegasi that pull Heloi's chariot, but they get pretty damn close in Shane's eyes.

Bronte's great velvet nose presses against his hand and nickers a greeting, then presses her massive, regal head against his cheek in pleasure. She is a massive creature, dwarfing him even more so than regular horses. Still, she is gentle. She would pull his chariot so marvelously.

Shane fills her feedbag with oats and then fishes an apple from the stack and holds it for her. She takes it very gently with clever lips.

"Does it have name?" asks a voice from behind him. Shane draws his hand back and finds Ilya standing a few yards away, regarding Shane with wary calm, like a rabbit prepared to flee should the predator come too near. Like he's expecting Shane to chase him away.

Shane straightens, one hand still resting against Bronte's warm neck.

"Yeah," he says easily. "Bronte." The pegasus flicks an ear toward Ilya, assessing. Her wings rustle, a low, papery sound that fills the stall for a moment before she settles again. Shane scratches the soft hollow just behind her jaw, where she likes it best.

"She doesn't bite," he adds, glancing over his shoulder. "Unless you're rude."

Ilya's gaze tracks the movement of Bronte's wings with open fascination he doesn't quite bother to hide. Up close, the wary stillness remains, but curiosity is winning ground.

"She's... enormous," he says, as if that requires commentary.

"Yeah," Shane agrees fondly. "She knows." Bronte lifts her head, apple finished, and snorts like she's been complimented.

Ilya edges a fraction closer, stopping just outside the stall. "She lets you touch her."

Shane shrugs. "Most animals do. I don't push."

He fishes another apple from the stack and rolls it once between his palms.

"You can give her this," he says, holding it out — not to Bronte, but to Ilya. "Flat hand. Let her come to you."

Ilya hesitates. The rabbit-poised-to-flee look sharpens, instinct overriding curiosity. Then, carefully, he steps forward and takes the apple. Their fingers brush. Shane notices the faint static, the hum under the skin — but he doesn't comment.

Ilya holds his hand out, palm flat, stiff as a board.

Bronte leans forward, nostrils flaring. Her breath ghosts over Ilya's knuckles. He freezes.

“She’s not judging you,” Shane murmurs. “She’s just checking.” Bronte takes the apple, gentle as ever, crunches it wetly.

Ilya exhales, surprised, and something unknots in his shoulders. He looks strangely pleased with himself as he pets her, and gets slobber all over his hand.

“...You have shown me a good thing,” he says quietly.

Shane glances at him, then back at Bronte. “This place isn’t exactly a secret,” he says. “And Bronte likes company.”

As if on cue, the pegasus gives a low, contented nicker and leans her massive head toward Ilya again. He doesn’t step away this time, reaching to carefully run his fingers along the side of her jaw, careful to choreograph his motions. It is far softer than Shane had seen from him before. And that's that.

Chapter 2: share in evening's cool and quiet

Chapter Notes

chap 2!! enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

In the mornings, Ilya likes to get up before the rest of Camp is awake. He loves his rituals, loves a steadfast routine. At Camp Half-Blood, this routine includes staring at the bunk bed above his whilst the other kids in the Hermes cabin, claimed and unclaimed, snore away until the sounds get to be too much and he escapes.

Wanders down to the lake, where the water is still and glass-like in the early pre-dawn. Pastel colours stain the sky a myriad of pinks and purples, and here Ilya sits on the wooden-planked dock, legs over the edge, and thinks.

He thinks about a lot of things. His mother, his father, his step-father and his subsequent step-mother. The only one he misses— the only one he truly knew — is his mother. She died a long time ago, but even the memory of her causes his heart to clench with an old wound. She married his step-father, who Ilya loathes, but will admit was merciful enough to keep custody of, even when he remarried.

He misses the quiet of their Moscow apartment, misses the old-worn softness of the sheets on his bed at home, misses the walk to school and the way the sun would catch on the dew-drenched grass in the mornings.

It's warmer here, even without the sun. It is different, but it is safe. That's what his father told him. Well, safe as he can be. Safe as things get.

He is alone as the sun steadily crests the horizon, and the light turns from that of cool blues and greys to a warmer orange that catches on the lake like bottled starlight, clearing the lingering mist over the water. He's alone until he hears the heavy, persistent snap of jogging footsteps on the trail behind him.

Ilya looks behind him and sees Hollander emerge from the bushes, slowing from a run to a walk, and then pausing like a deer in the headlights when he spots Ilya out on the deck. He's been running for a while — red tee-shirt pressed slick to his chest, hair sweat-slicked and his face gleaming with perspiration. He pulls out a wired headphone and reaches the edge of the dock. But, mercifully, does not walk on it.

Ilya gives him a lazy wave. "Do not stop on my behalf."

"Too late." He tugs the other earbud free and lets the wire dangle loose around his neck. Up close, he smells like sweat and crushed grass and that indefinable ozone-adjacent tang Ilya

has started to associate with Shane.

He wipes the back of his wrist across his brow and squints out over the lake. “Didn’t think anyone else was up,” he says. “Figured this place was mine before six.”

“It is quieter before people wake,” Ilya says. He turns his attention back to the water, toes skimming the surface. The lake ripples faintly, disturbed. “Everything here is so noisy.”

Shane hums, thoughtful. He stretches one calf, then the other, eyes still on the horizon. The sun has climbed just enough now to set the water alight, gold on glass. It catches in Shane’s eyes, turning them honeyed. “Yeah,” he says. “That tracks.”

They sit in a companionable silence for a few moments — Ilya on the dock, Shane at its edge. The world feels paused here, like the camp itself is asleep. “You always run this early?” Ilya asks at last, not looking at him.

“Every day,” Shane replies easily. “Helps me get out of my head. Or into it. Depends on the day.” He glances sideways. “Like you said, camp gets noisy.”

Ilya scowls. “You do not have to share cabin with twenty other people,” he grumbles. Shane laughs.

“True,” Shane concedes, still smiling. “I get the luxury experience. One bed. One desk. Zero snoring.”

Ilya makes a sound low in his throat, unimpressed. “Unfair.”

“Hey, you’ll move out eventually,” Shane says, light, though he keeps his eyes on the water. “Once your dad—” He cuts himself off smoothly. “—once things settle.”

“They will not,” Ilya says flatly.

Shane studies him. “Alright.”

“You don’t know that,” Shane says finally, his voice softer now. It’s not a challenge. It sounds almost like an offer.

“I do,” Ilya insists, but the edge is gone from his voice. It’s just a fact, worn smooth from being turned over in his mind so many times. “Things do not ‘settle.’ They change. They get worse, or different. Not settled.”

Shane straightens up. He takes a careful step onto the dock. The old wood groans a faint protest under his weight. He walks to the edge and lowers himself to sit beside Ilya, leaving a careful foot of space between them. His legs dangle over the side, longer than Ilya’s. Up close, the scent of him is stronger — warm skin, clean sweat, that sharp, electric undercurrent.

“Different isn’t always worse,” Shane says, watching his own sneakers hover above the water’s mirrored surface.

Ilya glances at him. Shane's profile is sharp in the angled morning light, his breathing now even and deep. He looks solid, grounded, in a way that feels foreign to Ilya, whose own insides often feel like a startled flock of birds.

"It is not better," Ilya counters.

"Didn't say it was." Shane leans back on his palms, tilting his face to the sky, now bleeding from orange into a clear, pale blue. "Just... different. You get used to it."

"What if I don't want to," Ilya says sharply.

Shane looks away. "I get that," he says. "I miss my dad."

Ilya does not want to touch this subject. Instead, he clears his throat and gets to his feet. "Your run is finished?"

"Yeah. This is a good place to stop." Shane closes his eyes, letting the sun fall on his face. The sweat is drying on his temples, his hair half-dry in frizzy curls around his ears. "Did I interrupt you?"

The solitude that Ilya had been searching for is well and truly broken, but he'd spent long enough alone that he feels confident he can exist in Camp without falling apart for now. The pristine silence is now filled with the sound of Shane's breathing, the faint creak of the dock, the distant cry of a bird over the forest. Yet, the overwhelming noise of the cabin, of the crowded world, hasn't returned. This is a different category of sound. A quieter one.

"No. Do what you want." Ilya turns on his heel and marches back up the dock towards the treeline. To his quiet pleasure, Shane hurries to catch up and falls into step beside him.

They walk together along the narrow trail, dew darkening the hems of Ilya's trousers, the forest still cool and shadowed. Shane keeps an easy pace beside him, not crowding, not asking questions. It is, Ilya realises with faint surprise, a skill.

There are voices up ahead. The dusty trail veers right, taking them past the archery station, where a group of Apollo kids — the only others that could stand being awake this early — are gathered, suiting up with bows and arrows. When they pass, someone sticks their hand up and calls, "hey, Shane!" Shane raises his hand to wave back, and is beckoned over with an excited call of: "Come and have a go!"

Some of them look a little put-off to see Ilya beside him, but Shane doesn't seem to realise as he skids down the slope, kicking up dust behind him, to join them in the clearing.

The Apollo kids' greeting is a clear, bright line, drawn around their own group. Shane had been invited across it; Ilya had not. He watches as Shane is handed a bow — a beautiful recurve of polished maple — by a girl with sun-bleached braids. Her laughter is as clear as the morning. Shane says something, and the group erupts in chuckles.

He fits here, Ilya realizes, with a dull flicker of envy. He moves through Camp Half-Blood's social geography with the same unthinking ease as he does its trails. He belongs to its map.

He catalogues the details: the way Shane's shoulders relax into a practiced stance, the fluid draw of the bowstring, the focused squint of his eyes as he sights down the arrow.

Shane loses the arrow. It thwips through the air and buries itself in the target's centre with a thud. Bullseye. The Apollo kids cheer good-naturedly, as though nothing less was expected. One claps him on the back.

He has seen skilled fighters before, competent hunters, fast reflexes, but this is different. Shane seems to command the world, bending the probabilities just enough to make it obey without forcing it. Even in a game of aim, Shane radiates control, a quiet power that isn't loud but impossible to ignore. He wonders how much of Shane's ability is talent, and how much of it is the world bending to his mother's will. To his will, by proxy.

Then Shane turns, his eyes scanning the edge of the clearing. They find Ilya immediately, as if he'd known exactly where he'd be. He smiles, a quick, sun-warmed thing, and raises the bow slightly in his direction. A question.

The Apollo kids follow his gaze and their chatter dips. The girl with the braids leans over to say something to the boy next to her, her voice a low murmur lost in the distance.

Ilya knows what the offer is. Come and have a go. He could walk down there, Shane would hand him the bow, defend his presence with a simple, "He's with me," and the moment would pass in a blur of awkwardness and poorly hidden scrutiny. He's never held a bow before; he would fumble and the arrow would likely miss the target entirely. They would all watch.

He gives a single, slight shake of his head.

Shane holds his gaze for a second longer, and Ilya sees the understanding there. Shane doesn't look disappointed, just... acknowledging. He gives a small nod, then turns back to the group, handing the bow back with a word of thanks. He starts to make his way back up the slope, leaving the laughter and camaraderie behind.

"Not an archer?" Shane asks as he reaches Ilya, brushing dust from his shorts.

"Not a performer," Ilya corrects quietly, his voice barely carrying over the new round of arrows being loosed behind them.

A corner of Shane's mouth ticks up. "Fair." He falls into step beside Ilya as they continue down the main path, the sounds of the archery range fading into the background hum of the waking camp. The brief foray into sunlight and society is over. They walk in silence again, but the space between them feels different now. A line had been drawn, and Shane had chosen, momentarily, to cross back over to Ilya's side of it. He doesn't know why.

Their swords clang together with enough might to send a shivering ache up Ilya's arm. He pushes forwards but Svetlana twists her blade at an angle, and manages to wrench his sword free from his grip. It clatters to the ground.

Ilya turns to glare at her, and Svetlana tilts her head back and laughs openly at him. “Strength isn’t everything, you brute,” she teases.

Ilya snatches his sword up, cheeks flushed. “And cunning is?”

“Exactly,” she replies, eyes glinting, and Ilya reminds himself that whilst Aphrodite’s domain centres around beauty and love, she’s also considered a minor war goddess. They’ve gotten closer over the past week that Ilya has been at camp.

To be honest, she reminds him of home. He hadn’t known how to feel when he found out she was Russian, but when she approached him with the familiar clipped drawl of a Moscow accent, speaking Russian easy and fluently, Ilya had been overcome with a punch of homesickness. It’s nice, though, to speak in his mother tongue, which comes so naturally and easily compared to the stodge and awkwardness of English. They talk about what they miss about Russia — the food, mostly. Reminiscing about Moscow.

“*Don’t frown*,” she says in Russian, and gestures with her free hand to the space between her finely manicured eyebrows. “*You will get lines*.” The sound of it is a balm, even when she mocks him.

Ilya scoffs, but the frown eases. He settles back into a defensive stance, the familiar weight of the practice sword a comfort in his hand. “Worry about your own face,” he retorts, but there’s no heat in it.

“Don’t need to,” she taunts.

They circle each other on the packed earth of the training arena, the morning sun now fully above the trees, casting sharp shadows. Dust motes dance in the slanted light.

Svetlana says, “you fight like a bear,” and then she’s moving again. This time, her attack is a flurry of quick, probing jabs meant to test his defenses, not break them. He parries, the *clang-clang-clang* of metal a rapid-fire rhythm like gunfire in the quiet grove.

He finds himself smiling, a tight, focused grin. It’s the first real challenge he’s enjoyed since arriving. The Ares kids just want to brawl; the Athena kids lecture. Svetlana just *fights*, simple and uncomplicated.

He sees an opening — a slight overextension on her lunge — and twists, using her own momentum to try and disarm her. But she’s ready for it. She rolls with the motion, into the space where he just swung, her free hand coming up to shove against his shoulder, breaking his balance. He staggers back a step, and the tip of her practice sword comes to rest lightly against the leather armor over his ribs.

“Dead,” she announces cheerfully, in English this time.

“Would you come to the funeral?” he deadpans.

Svetlana lowers her sword but doesn’t move it far, like a cat that hasn’t decided whether the game is over. “I would,” she replies solemnly, then grins. “Very dramatic funeral. Lots of

flowers.”

Around them, the camp is alive now — voices drifting from the cabins, the distant thud of someone missing a target, the smell of strawberries carried on the breeze. None of it feels quite real, not with Svetlana standing across from him, sunlight catching in her hair like she’s stepped straight out of a painting.

“Again,” he says.

Her eyebrows lift. “You fight like a bear..”

“I learn,” he mumbles, and this time when she comes at him, he waits.

He lets her close the distance, counts the rhythm of her strikes instead of reacting to them. One, two — feint. He doesn’t bite. When she shifts her weight for the third, he pivots, bringing his sword up not to block but to redirect, guiding her blade past him. It’s clumsy, not clean, but it works well enough that she has to adjust. It’s as natural as breathing.

Svetlana’s laugh bursts out of her, bright and pleased. “Ah. There you are.”

Her heel clips his ankle as she spins away, deliberately light, and he nearly goes down anyway. He swears under his breath in Russian, catches himself on instinct alone, and feels something crackle low in his chest—familiar, restless. The air prickles, raising goosebumps along his arms.

Svetlana feels it too. Her smile sharpens, eyes narrowing with interest. Ilya takes a breath, dampens the feeling. No lightning. Especially not here.

The ground under his boots is faintly warm. He ignores it.

“I think that is enough killing for one morning.” Svetlana says easily like she hasn’t noticed anything at all.

Relief loosens something in his chest. He mirrors the bow, rougher, less graceful. “You’re afraid I’ll win next time.”

“Of course,” she says without missing a beat. “And then I would have to pretend I let you.” He snorts.

Ilya finds Shane the next day down by the stables. He looks utterly in his element, hair swept back and sweatshirt rolled up to his elbows, revealing the stretch of his lovely golden forearms. He’s brushing down the coat of another pegasi, who is tied up in the yard by the stables, chewing on a handful of oats whilst Shane works.

For a moment, Ilya just watches.

The stables smell like hay and sun-warmed wood, undercut by the sharp, clean tang of magic that always seems to cling to the pegasi. Feathers rustle as the creature shifts its wings, silver-grey plumes catching the light. Shane murmurs something low and affectionate, nonsense words really, and the pegasi flicks an ear in clear approval.

“Is this Bronte Two?” Ilya clears his throat, suddenly very aware of the dust on his boots and the fact that he has no idea what to do with his hands.

Shane looks up and his face lights up. “This is Aeneas.”

“Subtle.”

“Right. Did you draw the short straw for stable duty, or..?”

Ilya quirks his eyebrows. “Just watching. You seem busy.”

“Preparing the horses for the race tomorrow,” says Shane, and his face flickers. “The chariot race? Big thing between the cabins.”

Ilya sniffs. “Well, I won’t compete.” He throws his hands up sarcastically, “unclaimed, remember?”

“They’ll still find a way to rope you in. It’s a big thing for Camp, they love a spectacle,” Shane pauses, shoots him a look through his eyelashes. “And you’re ...kind of hard to miss.”

He stares more openly when he meets Ilya’s gaze. Two dark wells of his eyes that make Ilya’s ears warm as though beneath the sun.

Ilya holds his gaze. “But you will not be racing.”

Shane deflates. “Can’t ride a single person chariot. Someone’s got to steer, someone’s got to defend. I only have so many hands.”

Ilya hums, thoughtful, eyes drifting back to the pegasi. Aeneas stamps a hoof, feathers rustling, as if impatient with the conversation.

“So,” Ilya says slowly, “you need a second body.”

Shane’s mouth twitches. “When you put it like that...”

“I am unclaimed. No allegiance,” says Ilya. “I could be a child of Nike. Don’t know.”

Shane snorts, but when Ilya doesn’t laugh with him, he turns to look. “You’re not kidding.”

Ilya sets his feet against the ground, feeling strangely vulnerable. The back of his neck prickles. “I am not.”

“Is that in the rules?”

“I don’t care,” Ilya says bluntly. “My father has not claimed me, so I could substitute for your mother.” He raises a clenched fist in a mock salute of recognition. “Triumph to Nike.”

“Triumph to Nike,” echoes Shane, consideringly. “Unclaimed kids don’t race. But I don’t think anyone’s ever asked one to.” He looks up and squints scrutinisingly at Ilya. “How good is your throwing arm?”

Ilya tenses. “Strong. You have feel.” He flexes his bicep and Shane goes unexpectedly pink. Ilya is weirdly pleased with eliciting that reaction. “Is like steel.”

Aeneas snorts and brushes his nose against Shane’s shoulder. Shane scratches his chin absentmindedly and the pegasus snorts, pleased. The cogs are beginning to churn in that maverick mind of his. Ilya wishes he could catch a glimpse inside. “I will ask Chiron if it’s alright.”

Ilya holds up his hand, nose wrinkling. “No, no. There is no asking. We will just do.”

Shane’s eyebrows shoot up. He stops scratching Aeneas’s chin. The pegasus nudges him, annoyed at the cessation of service. “Just do? Ilya, this isn’t sneaking extra dessert. This is the biggest event of the summer. There are rules. Chiron has to approve the teams.”

“Rules are for people who plan to lose,” Ilya counters, stepping fully into the yard. Aeneas turns a scrutinising eye on him. The dust from his boots puffs around his ankles. “We ask, he says no. It is over. We do not ask, we win. Then, what can he say? *‘You are disqualified for being too clever’?*”

“He could say, ‘You’re on stable-mucking duty for a month,’” Shane points out, but there’s a spark in his eyes now, a reluctant fascination with Ilya’s reckless logic. The thrill of the race, the promise of victory, it’s creeping on him. “Or banish us from competing next year.”

“Next year,” Ilya scoffs, as if the concept is absurd. “I am not thinking about next year. I am thinking about tomorrow. About winning.” He meets Shane’s gaze, unwavering. “You want to win, yes?”

“Of course I do,” Shane says, his voice dropping. It’s not a boast; it’s a simple, fierce fact.

“Then you need the best fighter you can find. Not just an extra body. Someone with no ties. Someone they will not see coming.” Ilya gestures to himself, a sharp, defiant motion. “Me.”

The silence stretches, filled only by Aeneas’s contented chewing and the distant sounds of the camp. Shane studies Ilya — the set of his jaw, the unblinking intensity of his stare. He’s calculating odds, weighing rebellion against glory.

Finally, a slow, mischievous smile breaks across Shane’s face. It’s different from his usual easy grins. This one is all teeth and daring. “You’re insane.”

“I am Russian,” Ilya replies, as if that explains everything. “Is similar condition.”

Shane laughs, a short, surprised burst of sound, like chimes. He runs a hand through his hair, making it stand up in dusty spikes. “Okay. Okay. We ‘just do.’” He says the words like he’s

trying them on, finding they fit better than he expected. “But if we get caught before the starting line—”

“We will not get caught.” Ilya’s confidence is absolute. He nods toward the stables. “What do we need to do? To prepare me.”

The shift is immediate. Shane’s demeanor changes from conspirator back to strategist. “Right. You said your arm is strong. Good. You’ll need to throw weighted nets to tangle opponents’ wheels, and javelins for longer range. But most of it is close-quarters. Swords and clubs, it’s the individual’s choice.” His eyes flash. “It’s not like sparring with Svetlana.”

Ilya stares. “You have been watching.”

“I make it my business to know the competition,” Shane says, a faint flush creeping back up his neck. He clears his throat. “Your footwork is good. But you still favor overpowering. In a chariot, at speed, a missed heavy swing will pull you right over the side. It has to be fast.”

“I am fast,” says Ilya. “Very fast.”

“We will see about that,” says Shane, smirking.

Chapter End Notes

comments and kudos are ALWAYS appreciated!!

Chapter 3: who would trade that hum of night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“How are you getting on?” Shane asks. “Not missing me too much, are you?”

His dad laughs. The sound is distorted down the phone-line, tinny and garbled, but Shane can still make out the signature snort-laugh that he does. It rubs against his ribs. *“I don’t miss your mess, kiddo.”*

“The mess is one bad thing,” says Shane, but he’s grinning, leaning against the wall in the Big House where the only working phone is. “I bring a hundred other good things to the table.”

“Oh yeah, like what?” his dad asks.

“Like my mac-and-cheese,” says Shane. “I know you miss my mac-and-cheese.”

“Okay, yeah,” his dad concedes. *“I miss your mac-and-cheese. But I would give it up forever to know you’re safe and having fun. How are things with you?”*

“Good. Camp is good,” Shane tells him.

There’s a pause on the line. Not a worried one — just the kind that comes when someone knows their kid well enough to hear what isn’t being said. *“Camp-good, or actually good?”* his dad asks.

Shane shifts his weight, sneaker scuffing against the floor. He watches the afternoon light slant through the Big House window, dust motes drifting like they don’t have anywhere better to be. “Camp-good,” he admits. “You know. Same old. Training, games, Mr. D complaining about children existing.”

His dad hums. *“Anyone new?”*

He’s always got half-an-ear out, ready to find out if Shane has another sibling, if Nike has been busy with anyone else over the past decade and a half. She hasn’t, Shane doesn’t think. Nike doesn’t sire children too often. Shane doesn’t know if that pleases his dad or makes him mournful of Shane’s chances to socialise.

Shane hesitates for half a beat too long. “Yeah,” he says finally. “One.”

“Is he trouble?”

Shane laughs softly. “Something like that. Complicated, for sure.”

“What’s he like? Friendly?”

Shane considers it. The way Ilya watches before he moves. The way he holds himself like the world might shove him without warning. The quiet competence, the distance. Shane says. "He's decent. I think."

Another pause, this one warmer.

"Well," his dad says, "*you always did attract complicated.*"

"Hey," Shane protests, smiling despite himself. "I'm a delight."

"Debatable," his dad says fondly. "*Just—*" His voice softens. "*You still being careful?*"

Shane's grin fades, just a little. "Always."

"Good." A beat. "*And Shane?*"

"Yeah?"

"*Winning's great,*" his dad says. "*But you don't have to prove anything to anyone. You know that, right?*"

Shane closes his eyes briefly, the words settling somewhere deep and steady. "Yeah," he says. "I know."

They say their goodbyes not long after. When the line goes dead, Shane lowers the phone and lets his forehead rest against the cool wall for a moment. Then he straightens, shoulders squared, and heads back out into Camp — where winning is expected, and things are already getting complicated.

Ilya looks magnetic in a fine suit of armour. The gleaming purple cuirass is carved with swirling stormclouds — what must be an homage to his father. The gauntlets and greaves are flexible but harder than steel, and the crested helmet is topped with a grey plume.

He is the very image of Achilles, thinks Shane, and then, without conscious choice thinks, he could be a child of Aphrodite, he's so handsome. And immediately chases the thought away.

Shane himself is buzzing. They hardly speak when Shane emerges from his cabin dressed in the golden armour his mother bestowed on him after the first birthday of his claiming. It is the one and only gift he's ever received from her. Long, glinting bronze forearm plates clamp from his elbows to his wrists. A slim breastplate and shoulder braces. His golden helmet tucked under one arm.

They reach the racing area: the wide floor is a swamp of jostling campers and horses and equipment, but even in the chaos his Bronte stands out as though on a spotlight. They'd stashed them round the back, out of sight. Joined by his other pegasi, Giatas, they shine pure

white, curried to a gloss, muscles rippling beneath their coats. There's enough movement, however, that Shane can slip by unnoticed.

The chariot is light and agile, with curved platinum accents along the sides that look like wings in flight. The wheels are massive — diameter by a half wider than a normal chariot. Shane traded his deserts for the next six months in order to bribe a Hephaestus kid to polish it. It'd been in storage, right at the back of the garage where the other chariots are stored. It was in better condition than Shane had been expecting. He assumes that's his mother's meddling.

A part of him is glad to have her blessing. The other part wants to do this by his own merit, alone.

Standing beside the chariot, Ilya is crouched, inspecting something by the wheels. He's braided his hair back in tight plaits against his head, looking like spun gold. There's tension in the sharp line of his jaw that makes Shane's heart quail, even beneath the sun-soaked view of the rest of Camp.

"How are the horses?"

Ilya looks back over his shoulder. His eyes are bright and burning, like coals that someone has breathed on, lighting the embers. "Strong."

Standing on a wide unshaded platform wearing five kilos of armor under the blistering sun in the mid-afternoon is not a pleasant experience. Shane can feel a bead of sweat run down the back of his neck, beneath the collar of his armor, and down his spine. Ilya, who is more heavily clad to take the brunt of the fights they're expecting, is also suffering; there's a flush on his pale skin that doesn't look like it's merely from excitement.

"Where'd you get that?" Shane flicks Ilya's chestplate.

"Found it in Cabin One," says Ilya vaguely. Shane narrows his eyes at his audacity, but doesn't comment further. It suits him, matches him. It makes him look both handsome and fierce, like a true warrior of old.

They mount the chariot. Shane takes hold of the reins and Ilya stands behind him, sword in one hand and small shield, his *pelte*, strapped to his other forearm.

Excitement is not quite the right word for this situation. The arena, packed to bursting since early morning, seems now on the point of riot. The crowds are hot and buzzing and eager for drama and racing.

Some Apollo kid sounds a trumpet. Chiron quietens the crowd, holds up the golden laurel crown — the prize. His mother's symbol. Shane wants it.

He sees Ilya glancing down the startline. They're still hiding by the garage, not yet at the startline and still unnoticed. A huge stocky Ares kid, clad in black armor carved to look like a wolf — armor that is scarred and nicked from use — stands tall with his head thrown back. His gold hair spills down his back, unbound. Ilya sizes everyone up.

“You’re ready?” Shane turns back to look at him.

Ilya’s eyes are narrowed and fierce, shadowed by his helmet. “For this and what comes after,” he says.

The pegasi shake their massive heads. Shane eases them into a slow trot towards the starting line. The saccharine, ridiculous horns swell. The white flag waves and Shane’s clever hands choke up on the reins. The sun is a wicked thing — they’re nearly blinded by it. The pegasi explode into motion, sprinting out ahead towards the startline.

Gasps of surprise and yells of outrage hit Shane’s ears but the race has already started and they’re moving too quickly to be stopped. They have about fifty yards to gain on the rest of the competitors — yards that Shane makes up quickly.

“Don’t stop,” calls Ilya firmly, and Shane wasn’t planning on it.

He leans low, urges, “go Bronte, go, go!” as their chariot surges forwards. Hanging in air for just a moment as though suspended mid-flight, the pegasi spread their wings to take flight, and the world is thrown on its head.

The drop steals the breath clean out of Shane’s lungs.

For one suspended heartbeat, there is nothing — no ground, no horizon, just sun and wind and the violent certainty of falling. Then Bronte’s wings snap wide with a sound like thunderclaps tearing silk, and the chariot lurches as the pegasi catches the air. The crowd screams its delight — or its anger. He doesn’t know and he doesn’t care.

Shane laughs, sharp and wild, the sound ripped from him by speed alone. The reins hum under his hands as though alive. The chariot surges forward, the wind clawing at his armor, tearing sweat cold against his spine.

Behind him, Ilya braces like he was born to this. One hand anchors to the rail, the other lifts his shield as a rival chariot streaks past below them — Ares colors, black and red, their wolves’ heads snapping in the slipstream. An arrow whistles close enough that Shane feels it tug at his helmet plume.

“Left,” Ilya says, calm as a blade.

Shane doesn’t question it. He leans, shifts his weight, murmurs to Bronte — and she answers, banking hard. The world tilts and the sun flares. Somewhere below, metal screams as another chariot clips a wing and spins out of formation.

They surge ahead. Nike sings in Shane’s blood now, that familiar electric certainty. Every decision feels inevitable, preordained. He threads them between two opposing teams, skims the boundary line so close he could reach out and touch the shimmer of magic. He’s never felt more like himself than in this moment — at the reins of the fastest chariot in the race with a warrior behind him, ready to defend him as they climb fast and brutal into the sky.

It is like nothing Shane has ever known. Those practice runs he and Ilya did in the dead of night were disorienting, but they had not gone at full speed. Now they charge forward along a river suspended in the sky, half a chariot-length back on the Athenian team, but gaining. He sees the flap of Rose's braid like a banner calling to him, and grins.

It is like running through a hurricane. He can think of no other way to explain it. It is like running through a tidal wave. The track is wide, but not so wide that when the Ares chariot reaches them, their black horses are guided to attempt to run Bronte and Giatas off the right side of the track,

There is only one path forward here, barreling along a course suspended in mid-air. The only path to victory is straight ahead, straight ahead along the path Shane chose long ago. Their chariots are side by side now, and Ilya *moves*.

He steps up behind Shane, boots planted, and he snaps his spear through the air like lightning, thrown straight into the wheels of the chariot beside them. He brings it down in a clean, merciless arc. It splinters in the race of the wheels but it does its job, causing the chariot to veer violently towards them as the wood buckles inwards — but Shane has already accounted for it and pulls away to avoid the collision. He could tell what Ilya was going to do before he even lifted his spear.

They are out and away, into the clear air. Shane exhales something like a laugh, breathless and incredulous, heart battering his ribs. "Warn me next time," he shouts back, though there is no real heat in it.

"I assumed you would see," Ilya replies, utterly infuriatingly calm.

Now when Shane sneaks a look over his shoulder, he sees the furious panting mouths and flashing eyes a bare meter back, and he sees the Ares' chariot's leering faces, and he sees the flash of a spear twisting in the air.

The fighter, Patrice, the back is quick, but Ilya is just as fast.. His sword — Shane's sword, actually— meets the son of Ares'. Metal rings against metal, sharp as the pealing of bells. Ilya meets each blow, but Patrice has climbed up to brace himself against the wall of his chariot, and he has the advantage of height and reach.

He sweeps low, a blow that would cut Ilya in half at the navel, but Ilya brings his arm around in a backhanded sweep to block it. Patrice recoils.

Shane can feel the heat of the horses again, hear the great bellows of their breathing. Ilya sends his razor dancing towards Patrice, away from the horses, but Patrice is ready for him and parries.

"I'm going to take you apart," the massive Gold growls, seemingly overtaken by the wild madness of the chase. His eyes shine, bloodshot. "Hail Ares!"

"It's better form to save the speech for after you win," Ilya calls to Patrice, grinning as well as he can manage when he feels like his stomach is in a centrifuge. He darts forward with his

razor, jabbing for the unarmored spot under Patrice's left arm, but Patrice roars like a wounded beast and fends him off just in time.

"Can we get a little more distance here?" Ilya calls over his shoulder.

"Working on it!" snaps Shane as he works the reins. Ilya turns back.

The crowd explodes with noise, like a roar of an explosion, as they steer around for the third lap, and Ilya whips around, wiping his sodden curls out of his face. He catches Patrice off guard, driving him back and off balance until he slams against the far wall of the chariot and causes the chariot to bank out of the way. Ilya whoops a wild sound like music to Shane's ears as they pull away.

He laughs and Ilya laughs and he lets out a wild little *whoop*. Until he looks up and suddenly the sun is blocked out. Heavy, black storm clouds are rolling straight towards them. Blooming like spilt ink over the blue sky. Shane gapes at the ludicrousity of it.

"Hold on!" he calls to Ilya, who curses something graphic in Russian. The wind changes, going sharp and cold, slicing through the summer heat like a knife. Bronte screams, disturbed at the sudden change, and Giatas beats his wings harder in response, desperate to keep them on the shimmering track.

Ilya braces over him, his chest to Shane's back, ducked low and braced against the chariot's sides. Thunder cracks overhead — vast and divine.

Another bolt tears through the sky, closer still, and the pegasi veer instinctively. Shane fights the reins, muscles screaming as Bronte tries to climb, to flee upward where the storm is densest and most dangerous.

"Ilya!" Shane shouts. "You're doing this, aren't you?"

"I am not," Ilya snarls, and for once the calm is gone, stripped bare, he stares up as rain starts to muzzle his face in a wet sheet. "But it knows me."

A bolt slams down ahead of them, striking the track with a sound like the world breaking. The clouds around them flash dangerously white for a split second. The air ripples. The magical path fractures for a split second before snapping back into place, but the shockwave tosses the chariot sideways.

Shane barely keeps them upright.

Behind them, chaos erupts. One of the Athena chariots swerves too late, pegasi shrieking as they lose altitude. Campers scream. Chiron's voice booms, distorted by thunder, trying to regain control. It's quiet from the ground, lost in a clap of thunder.

"Should we call it?" he yells over the noise. Wind roars in his ears. Ilya is a hot wall above him, anchored to the chariot, making sure it doesn't go anywhere.

"*Not yet!*" Ilya snarls.

Shane's blood sings at the words, Nike flaring bright and dangerous in his chest. Every instinct screams victory, screams now, screams *take it*. It's a tightening, a narrowing, the brutal certainty that there is still a path forward if he takes it now and only now.

"Keep going!" Ilya says and then — disturbingly — he stands *straight upright*.

"Rozanov!" Shane screams. He's lost his damned mind. The pegasi beat their wings so hard the air feels solid, but the chariot still lurches forwards under Shane's careful steering.

Static builds and Ilya raises his pelt. Shane thinks he's going to do the moronic thing, going to try and shield from the lightning, but he doesn't. He *catches* it.

For a fraction of a second, the world ceases to exist. There is only light and sound and unbearable force. The impact slams through the chariot, through Shane's bones, through his teeth. He tastes metal. The reins burn his palms. Behind him, Ilya shouts a raw sound.

The lightning bends.

He really is the son of Zeus.

It arcs along the shield, pours down Ilya's arm, floods through the storm-carved armor like it was made for this exact moment. The plume of his helmet ignites, blazing silver-white, and the clouds roar their approval in answer.

The chariot rockets forward but the heat of the electricity has burnt through the reins. There's an awful snapping sound as Shane is thrown backwards, into Ilya's legs.

"Rozanov!" Shane *screams* as Bronte and Gaitas come free of their restraints and zip away from the chariot in a disoriented panic. The chariot pulls them forward for a moment and then begins to lurch traitorously towards the ground.

The weightlessness hits first.

The chariot tips, nose dipping, the sky sliding sickeningly sideways as the magic of the track slips out from under them. Shane's stomach claws up into his throat. He grabs for something — wood, armor, Ilya — and his fingers close on the edge of the cuirass, hot enough to burn.

"Roza—!" he gasps.

Ilya turns. His eyes are blown wide, white-rimmed, like he's staring straight into the heart of the storm and daring it to blink first. "Hold on to me," he growls, voice cutting clean through the roar.

The chariot falls a completely and utterly ungraceful fall — an ugly, pitching plunge, wheels screaming as they shear against the air. The ground rushes up in a blur of banners and bodies and screaming campers.

Shane's scream tears out of him, half terror, half fury. He twists and grabs hold of Rozanov. His stupid desire to win is about to get them both killed. The sky peels open in another blinding fracture. Shane hugs his arms around Ilya's neck and squeezes for dear life as the

chariot falls out from under them. Ilya's arms come around him, firm and strong, and together they spin through the sky locked in embrace.

There's a moment where Shane realises they're not falling — they're actually jumping upwards. Ilya must have propelled them upwards from the chariot's flooring.

Are we flying?

They hover in the sky for a moment. Ilya cannot keep them levitating for long, but it's long enough for Shane to come to his senses as the axis of his world tilts again and they begin to fall once more.

He splays out a hand and roars, "Bronte!"

He watches her small figure twist in the air, wheeling back driven only by purely loyalty. Her wings snap furiously in the rain as she dives towards them. The water weighs down her wings but she tucks them tight and drops like a stone.

"Rozanov— let go of me," Shane gasps, the wind tearing the words from his mouth as gravity reasserts itself with a vengeance. "She can't take both—"

"No," Ilya growls, and tightens his grip instead, iron-strong. Lightning crawls faintly over his armor, guttering like a dying flame. His breath is ragged now. Whatever he did to launch them upward has taken its toll. "I will not drop you."

"Let go!" Shane commands, and they've spun just the right way that Ilya can catch a glimpse of the pegasus, and they peel away from each other at the last moment.

Bronte slams into him. The impact is brutal, it winds him — the metric tonne of divine horse ploughing into him at breakneck speed. Shane's ribs contract and pain momentarily whites out his vision, an arc of pain lancing down his spine.

He barely has time to hook an arm around the pegasi's neck before the collision spins him sideways, bodies tangling, wings beating wildly. Bronte shrieks again, fighting to stabilise as Shane hauls himself onto her back. Her wings snap out again and Shane guides her down in a low glide, his hands tangled a mess in her wet mane.

Shane doesn't land so much as crash. Bronte's hooves skid through the churned mud at the edge of the track, sending up great, filthy sprays of earth. The momentum carries them forward, stumbling, until Shane pitches sideways and hits the ground with a jolt that rattles his teeth. He rolls, comes up on his knees, gasping. Bronte lands much neater without a demigod clinging to her back. She stamps and kicks the ground and gasps for breath, obviously just as shocked as Shane that they are still alive.

His first thought isn't for the race, or the cheering that has died into a stunned, rain-hushed silence. It isn't for his own screaming muscles or the fiery pain in his side where Bronte collided with him.

It's for Ilya. He scrambles to his feet, vision swimming, and staggers toward the wreckage of their chariot. It lies thirty yards away, a shattered mess of wood and mangled bronze, one wheel still spinning lazily in the downpour.

"Ilya!" His voice is a raw scrape.

A figure moves in the muck beside the wreck. Ilya pushes himself up onto his hands and knees, head hanging low. The rain streams off the dark fall of his hair — helmet lost in the crash. His shoulders heave, and mud and blood streak his face, a thin trickle from his hairline mixing with the rain. He stumbles upright, something wild glinting in his eyes.

Above Ilya Rozanov's head, the storm gathers itself into shape: a vast, luminous thunderbolt, crackling white and grey and gold, carved sharp enough to hurt the eyes of any onlooker. Wind howls outward in a perfect circle, snapping banners, flattening grass, driving every camper back a step.

Shane skids to a halt in the mud, chest heaving, rain slicking his lashes together as he stares. The thunderbolt hangs there mockingly. *Claimed, finally.*

"I did not mean to," Ilya says hoarsely, his accent thickening under the strain. The thunder answers him with a distant, rolling growl. "I did not call him."

Chiron and the crowd finally reach the wreckage. He commands everyone to stand back, but Shane is frozen to the spot. There's anguish in Ilya's eyes, a pained pinch to his eyebrows, and his hands are clenched with this kind of desperate guilt. He didn't cause this — that much is obvious.

"Zeus, lightning-bringer, storm-maker, father of law," booms Chiron. The words are like physical blows. Can anyone else see how they make Ilya splinter? "Hail, Ilya Rozanov, son of the King God."

Son of the King God, thinks Shane deliriously. *Maybe his dad was right: maybe he is trouble indeed.* And then, promptly, Shane passes out.

Chapter End Notes

wow that got crazy

Chapter 4: who's heart would not take flight?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya comes to consciousness slowly — in incremental layers of awareness. First, pain, throbbing through his shoulders, bone-weary and sore. The echo of the burn of lightning still singing under his skin. Next, sound: the low murmur of voices, the clink of glass somewhere in the room, the whistle of birdsong. Is he by a window? Lastly, warm light comes trickling in, staining the backs of his eyelids in starbursts of colour.

He opens his eyes to a gauzy canopy overhead.

The infirmary. He swallows. The sound makes his throat click audibly, his tongue like swollen sandpaper, and he manages to tilt his head to the side, even if the movement causes strain in his neck to smart.

Hollander is lying on the bed beside him. Curled on his side, one arm flung protectively over his chest. It's wrapped in neat bandages. There's another blooming, furious bruise that sneaks up his collarbone, visible peeking out from beneath his shirt, and climbs up his neck. He's frowning in his sleep, but his breathing is deep and steady.

For a long moment, Ilya just watches him. The frantic energy of the race, the screaming wind and the crack of lightning, has condensed into this: a quiet room, the smell of antiseptic and nectar, and the detailed map of injuries on Shane's sleeping form. The bruise is spectacular, a storm of purple and yellow blooming across his skin. Ilya's own aches resonate in sympathy.

He should feel guilt. He was the variable, the unclaimed chaos that turned a calculated risk into a near-disaster. It was his father's test — winning was not good enough for him. Ilya had to prove himself in a thousand different ways, and is still proving himself. And now he's been claimed. A true son of Zeus.

But staring at the bandages, at the frown etching Shane's brow even in sleep, what rises is something else. A fierce, possessive pride in their survival. The thought is a stark, bright line in the fog of his pain.

And then there's the sound of footsteps, and someone ducks their head in. They must clock that Ilya is awake, as they disappear again and Ilya's next cognizant thought is: *we are so fucked*.

"It is my fault," he's blurting as soon as Chiron enters the room. He must duck to get through the doorway, angling his great equine body through the threshold until he's standing a little ways away from Ilya, as non-threatening as possible with his body language.

Ilya sits up, fighting the way his body protests every little twitch as he gets his arms under him and leans back against the headrest. "I talked Hollander into teaming up. I told him to ride into storm. Do not punish him: punish me."

Chiron stops beside the foot of the bed, his expression unreadable in that infuriatingly calm, immortal way of his. Rain still clings to the hem of his robes; the storm has only just been dismissed. He studies Ilya for a long moment, his amber eyes sharp but not unkind.

“Ilya,” he says evenly. “No one here is being punished.”

Ilya drags a hand down his face as though he can physically scrape away his frustration with his nails.

He steps closer, lowering his voice so it does not carry. “You have been claimed under extreme circumstances. That is not uncommon for children of Zeus. Storms follow you, Ilya. I can take a guess that they always have.”

“There have been other children?” Ilya asks.

Chiron falters. “There have been a few over the years, though they are hard to come by now. Children of Zeus, or Hades or Poseidon for that matter, rarely make it to teenagehood, or beyond that. You walk the earth with massive targets painted on your backs.”

Ilya looks down and fists the blanket that pools around his lap.

“So you can imagine how worried I was when you decided to fly directly into that storm,” continues Chiron. “Nike and Zeus are a dangerous mix.” The words hang in the air. Outside the infirmary window, the sky is a pale, exhausted blue, scrubbed clean after violence.

Ilya sucks on his teeth. He feels like a petulant child, feels like he’s on the verge of a tantrum, in the face of Chiron’s ever-flowing, ever-infinite river of patience. “Is not fair on him.”

“Sometimes, no,” concedes Chiron, “and I will attempt to rectify this in the future.”

Ilya grunts.

Chiron sighs. “We are lucky that no one was truly hurt. I wish I could say your claiming was nothing but positive, Ilya, but to be the son of the King of Kings is a dangerous thing. There is responsibility in that power, and there are people who will seek that power. To extinguish it.”

“I’ve faced monsters before,” Ilya says snippishly. “I have faced worse than monster under bed.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Chiron says gently. He trots forward until he’s standing beside Ilya’s bed. He places a parental hand around the frame at the foot of the bed. “You’ve been named now. That makes you visible. But you are not alone here, Ilya. That’s what I want to get across to you. There are people here at Camp that want to help you, want to protect you, if you will let them.”

Ilya risks a glance at Shane. His eyes are drawn again to the bruise on Shane’s neck, a violent splash of colour against his skin. That mark was earned for him. The cracked ribs were suffered because of him. A strange alchemy happens in his chest — the guilt and the pride and the fierce, new-born sense of responsibility melding into a single, unshakeable resolve.

“Protection is useless,” Ilya says, his voice low. He looks back at Chiron, defiance hardening his gaze despite the weariness that clings to him like fog. “I spent my life in a cage of my step-father’s making. I will not trade for another.”

Chiron’s face creases with this kind of ancient sadness. “I am not suggesting a cage, Ilya. I’m suggesting a sword and a shield, and the knowledge on how to use them. How to master the powers that will reveal themselves to you.”

“The ones that make me human lightning rod,” snaps Ilya.

“Something of the sort,” Chiron inclines his head. He turns, ducks out of the room. Leaves Ilya alone with a sleeping Shane and the broiling mess of thoughts inside his head.

Shane stirs later that day. Someone had come in and left Ilya some soup and a bread roll for dinner, but he doesn’t feel like eating and it sits at his bedside, stinking the room like tomato as it slowly cools.

The son of Nike makes a vague noise of dissent and twitches, curling tighter in on himself. The movement must make his body protest as he grits his teeth and lets out another, more persistent noise of complaint.

Ilya leans over. “Wakey wakey, sleeping beauty.”

Shane cracks open his eyes and doesn’t seem fazed at all to have Ilya standing over his bed like the grim reaper. He just stares, and then lets his eyes flutter shut again. “Rozanov.” He croaks, “what happened?”

“You fell 400 feet and got run over by a horse,” Ilya replies cheerfully.

He shuts his eyes, tilting his head so his face is hidden in the pillow. The next word comes out muffled, “pegasus.”

“Huh?”

“She has wings. Pegasus, not horse.”

Ilya sits back against his bed, the mattress coils squeaking under the sudden shift. He crosses his arms. “Well, yes — but you know, she did break your ribs. Naughty. She’s been demoted to horse.”

“*You’ve* been demoted to horse.” He cracks open a beady eye and pins Ilya with it. “You look like one.”

Ilya fights to school his face. “Unnecessary.”

Shane lifts his head and drinks in the room, his eyes still coated with that glossy sleepiness. “How long was I out?”

“Just over a day. Snoring away.”

“Huh,” Shane says dumbly, and fights to sit upright. He scrubs at his eyes. “Did we win?”

“Yes,” says Ilya solemnly. “But Chiron is going to expel us.” At Shane’s horrified look, and the way all the blood drains from his face, Ilya shoots him a shit-eating grin. “I joke. We are fine.”

Shane slumps back, hand on his chest. “Thank the stars.”

When someone comes in to check up on Shane — making him sit up so they can listen to his heartbeat and breathing, ask about his levels of pain, all those boring things — Ilya slips out. They’ve been told they must spend another night under observation at the infirmary, but that doesn’t stop Ilya from wandering around during the daytime.

He wanders down from the infirmary towards the line-up of cabins on the edge of the forest. The Zeus Cabin is a wide and imposing piece of architecture, crafted from white marble, stretching elaborately into the canopy. White, narrow windows and pillars framing either side of the door. It is embossed with magnificence, and it is cold.

Ilya was here last night, having a dig around. That’s when he found the armour. He’s back now though, with a more legitimate claim to be in the building. Although he knew Zeus was his father from the moment he was whisked away from Moscow during the hurricane.

He should’ve known something was up the moment it was announced there was a hurricane moving across eastern Europe and towards the Russian capital: hurricanes never make it that far inland. Ilya was suspicious — but he had not been expecting a hand made of wind to reach through his window and whisk him up into the air.

Literally.

Spinning toreentially through the wind before he was carried up into the clouds to meet Zeus — however briefly — and then being dropped in the middle of the United States and waking up with what he thought was an angel over him. That angel turned out to be a particularly gorgeous demi-god son of Nike, but Ilya stands by his original assumption.

Someone’s done him the favour — or the slight, he can’t quite tell yet — to move his bag from the Hermes cabin to the porch of the Zeus one. He slings it over his shoulder and pushes open the door.

The interior of the Zeus cabin is as cold and imposing as the exterior promised. It smells of ozone, marble dust, and polish. There’s a deep, encroaching silence. Unlike the cramped, chaotic warmth of the Hermes cabin, this space is vast, echoing, and meticulously ordered. Rows of empty bunks line the walls, their sheets crisp and untouched. At the far end, on a raised dais, sits a single, massive bed framed by columns — a bed fit for a king, or at least his favorite son.

It has never been slept in.

Ilya lets the door hang open behind him. His footsteps are loud on the polished floor as he walks further in, his bag a familiar weight on his shoulder. This is his birthright. This cavernous, lonely monument: a trophy room for Zeus' children.

His eyes go immediately to the far wall, where an ornate display of armor gleams under a shaft of sunlight from a high window. Last night, under the cover of darkness and a conveniently conjured mist, he'd taken it. Not all of it. Just the chest plate—a beautifully crafted piece of celestial bronze, embossed with subtle, swirling patterns of storm clouds. It had called to him with a magnetic hum he felt in his teeth. He'd needed to know if it would fit, if it would feel like his. It had and it did.

He wasn't here for the armor today, though. Instead he was here to claim the rest.

Dropping his bag by the nearest bunk — not the one on the dais, he's not that arrogant — Ilya moves to the center of the room. He lifts his face to the high, vaulted ceiling.

He wants to say *fuck you*, but something in him holds him back.

His brief, terrifying audience with his father in the howling eye of the manufactured hurricane had been less a conversation and more a divine decree. *You are my blood. You are too loud. They will find you. Go here. Be safe.* Blah, blah.

Shane Hollander, the son of Victory incarnate, with his easy smile and his sidelined talent, is a different kind of sanctuary entirely.

He goes to the window. He can see the roof of the infirmary, the length of the lake sparkling through the treeline in the distance, and bright orange spots of campers moving between activities like ants.

"*Privyet*," a voice calls from the threshold. Ilya spins sharply on his heel and finds Svetlana in the doorway, leaning against the post and grinning something bold and sharp.

"Privyet," Ilya replies warily.

"*Good to see you're alive and well*," Svetlana continues in Russian. She does him a once-over, her eyes trawling over his form, lingering on the cut on his cheek. "*Most of you.*"

"*Are you allowed in here?*"

She gestures vaguely at the stark, empty bunks. "*This place needs a rug. Some curtains. It is like a museum for very boring, very dead Greek heroes.*" Ilya doesn't smile. He tracks her as she wanders, her fingers trailing along the footboard of a bunk. "*But here you are. Alive, even when that stormed tried to smite you.*"

"*He wasn't trying to smite me*," Ilya dismisses her with a huff, and then pauses, suspicious. "*How much did you see?*" *How much did they all see?*"

"*From what we could see from the ground? Gods, Rozanov. That was quite the spectacle.*"

"We won," grunts Ilya.

Svetlana grins like she was waiting for him to say that, baiting a mouse with cheese. *"Technically, you never officially entered. So you could not officially win,."*

Ilya finds the closest object to throw at her. The pillow sails over her head as she ducks. It lands with a thud by the window. The motion makes pain light up in his elbow joint. She cackles.

"You and Hollander broke rules, Ilya. The others won't forget that so lightly." She snatches the pillow up, makes the show of fluffing it, and props it up on the nearest bed.

Let go of me, Shane had hissed at him, and Ilya had finally overridden the urge to hold on tight, and had let Shane wiggle out of his grip to reach for his horse. Letting go of him had been harder than Ilya wanted to admit. In that roaring storm the only thought he had was to hold on tight and endure it.

Svetlana's grin softens into something more appraising as she straightens. "They will call it clever," she amends. "Eventually. After they finish being angry."

"I don't want to be clever," says Ilya mullishly. "I don't want to be known."

"Too late, son of Zeus," snaps Svetlana sardonically. "Far too late for that." She spins on her heel and walks to the door, only for her hand to snag on the marble carved above the doorway as she turns and twists to look behind at him. "Oh, and, by the way, you should be careful. People want to know if you've got any bite. Or, should I say, any lightning." She laughs at her own joke and disappears down the steps.

Night creeps in, but Ilya can't sleep. He stares up at the looping fabric canopy above his head as his mind whirls. Every time he closes his eyes he feels like he's back in that chariot — warm rain lashing his face, static growing under his skin, Shane pressed against him, guiding their procession through the storm. Ever steady-fast, ever reliable.

There is a thin, fragile quiet in the infirmary. They're the only people in here. Ilya is forced to chase sleep that constantly alludes him and listen to Shane's steady breathing — the way it hitches slightly when he breathes too deep due to his broken ribs.

It starts small. A twitch of his fingers. A crease deepening between his brows. His breathing stutters, shallow and uneven, like he's forgotten the rhythm of it. Ilya notices immediately. He has been half-awake himself, propped against the headboard with a book he hasn't read a single word of, attention tuned too finely to the rise and fall of Shane's chest.

"Hollander," he murmurs, cautionary.

Shane's lovely face scrunches up like he's eaten something sour. He looks pale in the half-light streaming in from the window, the moon washing his face in a sterile glow. He writhes

against the mattress, fighting his quilt as though he believes it full of phantom limbs clawing at him rather than soft, innocuous stitchings of fabric. He kicks out and makes a frightened, mangled noise at the back of his throat.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, more insistently as he sits upright. He turns and flicks on the lamp on the bedside between them.

“No— no, wait—” Shane gasps, words tumbling over each other. His voice catches in a sob, and the desperation in his voice disturbs Ilya. “*Wait— Wait— Wait—*”

Ilya is out of his bed in an instant, ignoring the protest of his shoulders as he crosses the small gap between them. The cold of the wooden floor bites into his knees as he crouches at Shane’s bedside. He takes hold of his wrist, anchoring him. His skin feels waxy and tepid.

“Hollander,” Ilya says again, voice low and steady and more insistent this time, more urgent, “wake up.”

Shane thrashes once, sharp and panicked, like he’s fighting to get free. Ilya tightens his grip on his wrist, and then his eyes fly open. He bolts upright in bed, sweaty and disoriented. He snatches his wrist out of Ilya’s grasp and heaves for breath like he’s been underwater for a very long time. His chest heaves with it, something bordering on a sob, his eyes wide and unseeing as he stares around the room.

For a moment he stares at Ilya and looks right through him — still somewhere else, still being chased around his own head. “I—” he gasps, and his chin wobbles.

“Hey,” Ilya says, more urgently now. He brings his other hand up, cups the side of Shane’s face without even thinking about it, his thumb pressing just below his cheekbone. “You’re here. In infirmary. You are safe.”

It is silent for a moment as Shane catches his breath. Ilya feels bile at the back of his mouth, can hear blood roaring in his ears.

Shane’s focus snaps back like a struck match. His gaze locks onto Ilya’s, desperate and searching. “Rozanov,” he croaks.

"Yes." Ilya's thumb moves, a slow, deliberate stroke against Shane's skin. It's an unfamiliar gesture, one that feels both awkward and utterly necessary. He can feel the frantic pulse at Shane's jaw beginning to slow under his fingertips. “You have bad dream?”

Shane swallows hard. His eyes shine, overbright in the low infirmary light, glossy with tears he refuses to shed. He nods once, sharp and jerky, like admitting it costs him something. “Yeah,” he breathes. “Yeah. I—I couldn’t get to him.”

Ilya doesn’t pull his hand away. If anything, he steadies it, thumb still warm against Shane’s cheek, anchoring him to something solid and real. “Slow,” he murmurs. “You are shaking.”

Shane drags in a breath that stutters halfway through. He leans a little into Ilya’s warm hand. His fingers curl in the blanket, knuckles pale. “It was my dad. He was—” He breaks off, jaw

tightening, hunching further over. He looks lost. "It was dark, like a heavy dark. Like everything was pressing in on him. He was calling my name, and I couldn't move. I just kept running and never getting closer." The words come faster now, tripping over each other, like if he stops talking the image will crash back in on him. "I know dreams," Shane adds, defensive even in panic. "I get them sometimes. Premonitions when something very good or something very bad is about to happen. Big wins or big—" he cuts himself off swallowing, looking nauseous, "big losses."

Ilya exhales through his nose, slow and controlled, even as something unpleasant coils low in his gut at the words, like old milk gone sour. Warnings, Gods loved warnings. They loved dread and half-truths and letting mortals twist themselves into knots to search for an answer out of reach.

He leans closer, until Shane has no choice but to really look at him. "Listen to me," Ilya says quietly. "You just survived a fall that would've killed anybody else. Your body is injured. Your mind is looking for threats because it thinks you are still falling."

Shane shakes his head weakly. "You don't know that." He wets his cracked lip. "What if— What if something bad happened to my dad? I need to know, I need to go and help him."

"Nothing will be solved tonight." Ilya says plainly, a rock in the shifting sea of Shane's nightmare. He doesn't know how to offer soft comfort, or untangle the mystery, but he can offer certainty. "See? I am here. Being annoying."

That earns him a real, if faint, smile. Shane's eyes slip closed for a second, the long, dark lashes fanning against his pale skin. When he opens them, he looks more present, more weary than terrified. "Sorry I woke you."

"You did not. I was not sleeping."

They stay like that for a long moment. Shane sitting up in bed, Ilya kneeling on the cold floor beside him, their hands connected against the side of Shane's face, before Ilya slowly moves his hands down to rub small circles against Shane's shoulders, and then down again, slipping under his shirt to press against the warm lines of bandages wrapped soft and careful over his chest.

Finally, Ilya shifts. The floor is unforgiving, and his own injuries are beginning to protest. "You should lie down. You will hurt your ribs more."

"Stay," Shane says, the word quick and quiet, before Ilya can fully pull away. He looks almost embarrassed by his own request, but his gaze holds Ilya's. "Just... until I can breathe right again."

Ilya hesitates. This is uncharted territory for him, but Shane's face is still too pale, his eyes still haunted, for him to say no. The part of Ilya that calculates politics and doesn't want anyone close fights, but the part that gripped a chariot rein alongside this boy, that feels responsible for the fear in his eyes now, wins.

"Move over," Ilya grunts. Shane shifts carefully, wincing, making space on the narrow infirmary cot. It's a tight fit. Ilya sits on the edge, his back against the headboard, his leg brushing Shane's side. He doesn't touch him again, but his presence is a solid line of heat in the cool room.

"Better?" Ilya asks, staring straight ahead at the opposite wall.

"Yeah," Shane murmurs, already sounding more distant as he sinks back into the pillows, his head by the stretch of Ilya's thigh. His breathing deepens, slowly evening out. "Thanks," he mumbles, too tired to be embarrassed. He stays perfectly still, long after Shane's breathing deepens and he slips back into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

plot heating up...

Chapter 5: betray the moon as acolyte

Chapter Notes

merry christmas!!

Shane wakes up slowly, like his body is negotiating with consciousness instead of surrendering to it outright. First comes the ache — a deep, grinding soreness that makes his ribs feel like they've been individually offended. Breathing registers as a conscious act. He tests it, shallow at first, then a little deeper, and pays for it with a sharp flare of pain that makes his jaw clench. Right. Infirmary. He blinks his eyes open, stares up at a white ceiling. Gauze curtains stirring faintly in a breeze from the window. Morning light slants in, clean and fresh and unassuming, like nothing catastrophic has ever happened under this sky.

Shane lets himself drift a moment in sleepy disorientation, until last night's events come crashing down around him. He doesn't even give himself a single look at Ilya as he throws himself out of the bed. His legs almost give out immediately and he catches himself on the bed one over from his, before he rightens and limps to the doorway. He gets down the hall to the main entryway, where the phone sits innocuously on the wall.

When the phone rings through and reaches the answerphone the first time Shane calls his father, he almost has a brain injury from how hard the stress hits him. He doesn't bother leaving a voicemail, just hangs up and redials. He struggles to punch in the numbers with how much his hands are shaking. He grips the plastic phone shell tight as he holds it up to his ear and prays.

This time, thankfully, it only rings twice before the line clicks and he hears his father's voice, "Shane? Everything alright?"

His knees almost buckle with relief at his dad's voice. Shane slumps further into the wall, readjusts his sweaty grip. "Hi dad. Yes— Yes, I'm fine. How are— How are things with you?"

"Things are just fine. Sorry I couldn't reach you the first time, I was in the kitchen and you know how my knees get. I'm doing a jigsaw."

It's such an innocent answer it's almost comical. "Oh?"

"It's of Big Ben, four thousand pieces," says his father proudly. "You know I went to London last week with my new gig at work."

Oh, right. His father's a civil servant, a treasurer. He's taken to supporting a politician running for Prime Minister in the Canadian elections in a few weeks. The consolation comes at him like a warm hug. Shane closes his eyes.

The image won't leave. Not the bridge, not the puzzle pieces neatly stacked by colour and shape — the way his dad always meticulously sorts his jigsaws. His dream had started fine, too, but had spiralled the way all dreams spiral: blood pooling between white tiles, the sound of something heavy hitting the ground, his father's voice cutting off mid-sentence.

"Four thousand pieces," Shane repeats, because if he doesn't anchor himself to something normal, the panic will tear straight through him.

"Mm," his dad says fondly. "Keeps the mind sharp. You eating properly?"

There it is. The usual familiar dad-questions.

"Yeah. Camp food's... camp food. Listen, have you— have you heard from mom?"

"Your mother?" his dad pauses. It's not particularly suspicious — just the natural lag of a man shifting his weight, maybe easing those knees he just complained about, or thinking about the question. Shane's grip tightens anyway.

"No. You know how she is. Haven't seen her since your birthday, you know, when she left you that hockey stick."

A ghost of smile plays on his lips. They hadn't seen her, just had seen the hockey stick in the living room of their Ottawa apartment. It was a gleaming Warrior QR6 Pro, state of the art and top of the market. She'd been impressed with his sweep of the junior hockey leagues, clearly. Shane had just been pleased to know she knew he existed, after she'd claimed him as hers all those years ago.

"Why? Has she reached out?"

"No..." Shane presses his forehead to the cool cinderblock wall. His pulse is loud in his ears, a rushing roar that doesn't belong to him. "I just..."

"Hey," his dad says gently. "Bud, tell me what's up? You don't usually call on the weekdays."

"I'm fine," he lies again, softer this time. "Just — bad dream."

"Oh." His dad's voice wanes. "About what?"

Shane twiddles with the string on the phone. The dream presses suffocatingly closer the longer he doesn't say it out loud. Ilya had helped. But speaking it feels like writing it into existence.

He remembers the first time he had a dream like this one. The night before the final game in the junior ice hockey leagues — he'd been chased through the night with premonitions of winning. Of group hugs and the scrape of ice and bitter collisions but threading all of it — the thrill of triumph. He'd thought it a mere dream, but the feeling had been the same. That flood rush of victory, of adrenaline and excitement that had drowned out his sore spots from collisions, and tired muscles.

The second time had been a dream of great loss, of pain on the ice, of colliding with the barrier and having his knee twist painfully, cracking against the ice as he went down. That came true, too. A tear of his MCL. He has them sometimes. These predictions of great success, of triumph and achievement... but also of great loss.

“You were hurt,” he says softly. “In the dream.”

His dad goes silent. “Oh, Shane,” he hums. “I’m okay, I promise. Nothing bad is going to happen.” He shuffles, and his voice slows like he’s settling for a long conversation. Shane can picture it: sitting at the table in the kitchen, his puzzle box pushed aside, a coffee steaming in his free hand. An ache goes through him.

“Dad,” he says quietly. “If something was wrong... you’d tell me, right?”

His dad doesn’t answer immediately. When he does, his voice is steady, reassuring in the way it’s always been. “Of course I would. You don’t have to worry about me, okay? I’m boring. Predictably boring.”

“Good,” Shane says, though the word tastes off. He presses his forehead harder to the wall, grounding himself in the cold. “That’s... good.”

“Try to get some sleep,” his dad adds. “Dreams only have power if you let them run the show.”

“Yeah,” Shane echoes. “Thanks, dad.”

“Love you, bud. Call me whenever you need me, okay? Work has kicked up but I’m always available.” They exchange a few more pleasantries and then the line clicks dead.

Shane stands there for a long moment after the line goes dead, the plastic receiver still warm against his palm.

Predictably boring, his dad had said. As if predictably boring had won the attention and favour of Nike.

Shane exhales, slow and careful, until the tightness in his chest eases enough that he can breathe without wincing. The panic recedes — not gone, never gone, but folded back into something manageable. A familiar trick. He’s been doing this since before he had words for prophecy and omens and divine bloodlines. Before Camp. Before gods.

He replaces the phone with deliberate care and leans his head back against the wall.

Bad dream, he tells himself again. Just a bad dream. The problem is that he knows better than to fully believe that.

When he limps back down the corridor, the infirmary feels different — emptier, somehow. Sunlight has crept farther across the floor, the morning settling into routine. Someone passes him with a tray of bandages and barely spares him a glance. Life goes on with infuriating efficiency.

And Rozanov's bed is empty. The blankets are neatly folded, the pillow squared like no one has ever slept there at all. Whatever trace of Ilya there was — the quiet certainty of him sitting guard through the night — has been scrubbed away by daylight.

Shane swallows. He knows that it shouldn't bother him. People come and go from the infirmary all the time. Ilya is fine — more than that, he's practically indestructible, apparently. There is no reason for this hollow, unsettled feeling in his gut.

And yet. He eases himself down onto his own bed, sitting carefully, ribs protesting. His hand drifts to his chest, fingers pressing lightly over his sternum like he can still feel where Ilya's grip had been, solid and unyielding, holding him in place while the world tried to tear them apart.

Hold on to me, Ilya had said.

The dream tugs at him again, insistent now that he's awake. Blood on white tile. His father's voice cutting off mid-sentence. The way certainty had settled in his bones like an omen. Nike's gift is a cruel one. Victory is easy to recognise but loss? Loss comes sometimes in disguise.

Hayden finds him in the armoury, where he's polishing his forearm braces. The celestial bronze survived the fall off the chariot with minimal damage, but Shane is a perfectionist and he cannot stand even a slight scratch across the gleaming metal. He's hunched over with a cloth, meticulously scrubbing in the grooves along the vambraces, and trying to also scrub the dark thoughts from his mind.

"Hey," Hayden calls from the door.

Shane looks up at him and smiles, sits up on his stool. "Hey."

"You're out of the infirmary," Hayden notes, and there's something quietly judgemental in his tone, static where it should be fluid, bumping into Shane and rubbing him the wrong way.

"Can't do much about broken ribs apart from letting them heal," Shane replies, trying to keep the tempo light. "How's camp been without me?"

Hayden shrugs. "Fine."

He goes back to the vambrace, dragging the cloth along the bronze in slow, careful circles. "So," he says slowly, "how'd you find the race?"

Hayden's mouth twitches. "You and Rozanov were hard to miss. Quite the team you had going."

Shane thinks he deserves that tone. "Yeah. The loophole with the unclaimed kids? Rozanov's idea. I just wanted to race."

Hayden pauses. “You scared the hell out of everyone, you know? Rose, Chiron, and me.”

That lands harder than Shane expects. He looks up again, properly this time. Hayden’s arms are crossed, his weight leaned back against the doorframe, eyes sharp and searching in that way they get when he’s trying to solve a problem he doesn’t like the answer to.

“I had it under control,” Shane says automatically. He pauses, grimaces, reworks it. “Mostly.”

“Rozanov made you both fall out of the sky.”

Shane frowns and squints. “It wasn’t like he summoned the storm.”

Hayden pushes off the doorframe and takes a few steps into the armory. The clatter of other campers outside seems to fade, muffled by the shelves of weapons and the weight of his words. “Wasn’t he?”

Shane stops polishing. The cloth goes still on the bronze. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying that I don’t think you should throw in your lot with Rozanov yet,” Hayden implores. Shane fights the urge to bristle. “Big Three kids are dangerous, Shane.”

For a moment they just look at each other. Hayden’s expression isn’t angry—if anything, it’s worried in a way that has edges, like it’s been sharpened by too many near misses. Shane recognizes that look. It’s the same one his dad gets when he watches the news a little too closely.

“We don’t know him.” Hayden shrugs haphazardly. “He could’ve summoned that storm to —”

Shane stands up. “Do not say he cheated. We did not cheat,” he hisses.

Hayden throws his hands up, alert suddenly like he’s just realised how inflammatory his statement is, “hey, I wasn’t saying that. Sorry, man, I know you wouldn’t cheat. I just...” he sighs. “You got hurt, Shane. Really hurt. And he walked away with bruises. Doesn’t that — I don’t know — strike you as uneven?”

Shane’s jaw works. He wants to argue, to defend Ilya’s strength, his resilience, the way he’d taken the brunt of the initial impact. But Hayden isn’t entirely wrong; the math of their injuries was lopsided.

“It was a chaotic landing,” Shane says, his voice tighter now. “It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Maybe not.” Hayden finally drops his hands, shoving them into his pockets. He looks away, scanning the racks of spears and shields as if they might hold a better answer. “Look, forget I said anything. Just... be smart, okay? You’re our guy, Shane. We really like having you around — all of us. Even Scott. It’d suck if that changed because you got blindsided by some arrogant son of Zeus.” It sounds like all the frustration leaves him at the end, and all that is left is a tired concern. The sound of it makes Shane’s argument that Ilya isn’t a narcissist die on his tongue.

“I’ll be careful,” Shane says finally, because it’s the only concession he can make.

Hayden nods, accepting it for what it is. “Good.” He takes a step back toward the door. “And for the record? You two were kind of awesome out there. Before the sky tried to murder you. Scary as hell, but awesome.”

A small, grudging smile touches Shane’s lips. “Thanks.”

That night, the dream comes back even sharper. It doesn’t even give him the luxury of buildup this time. Shane is dropped straight into it: the familiar white tiles of their apartment’s kitchen floor are slick with blood, the sharp antiseptic sting of a place that is not quite a hospital and not quite anywhere he’s been before. His ribs don’t hurt in the dream. Nothing hurts. That’s how he knows it’s wrong.

His dad is there, standing too close to the edge of something Shane can’t see – maybe a platform or some kind of bridge. He’s talking — about nothing, about everything — his voice steady and warm and unbearably normal. Shane can’t place any of the words, though. Where he should usually be able to decipher vowels and plosives and the soft drawl of his father’s Quebecan accent, there’s soft garbled static.

Then the ground gives.

Shane wakes with a sharp gasp, body jerking hard enough that pain detonates across his ribs. He curls instinctively, breath coming fast and shallow, teeth clenched against a groan. His heart is going so hard it feels like it might punch clean through his sternum.

Dark. Cabin-dark, this time — not the unnatural density of the dream, or the half-lit gauze of the infirmary. Just the low murmur of wind through trees and the distant, restless sounds of camp sleep and quiet.

“Dammit,” he mutters to no one, mutters to the empty cabin, scrubbing a hand down his face.

He knows the routine by now. Sitting still won’t help. Lying down definitely won’t. If he stays here, the images will loop and sharpen until they feel inevitable. So he eases himself upright, slow and careful, waits for the worst of the pain to ebb, and then swings his legs over the side of the bunk.

The walk to the phone feels longer at night. The cool summer air prickles with humidity. It causes his neck to ripple into gooseflesh as he sneaks out, past the other cabins, some with lights off, others with lights they’re pretending to be off. He snakes up the path to the Big House. There, the corridors are dim, shadows pooling in corners, every sound magnified by the quiet. Shane keeps one hand pressed lightly to his ribs as he limps along, jaw set, eyes fixed ahead.

He opens the door and prays he won't wake Chiron. He rounds the last corner — and stops short.

Ilya is already there. He stands with his back half-turned, the corded phone cradled against his shoulder, one hand braced on the wall like he's holding himself upright by force of will alone. He's barefoot, golden hair loose and still damp and frizzing as it curls as if he's come straight from the showers.

His posture is rigid in a way Shane has only ever seen in the moments before violence, like he's bracing for a fight. Ilya is saying something in Russian, soft and somewhat desperate, but the line emits a dull dialtone. No one has picked up. Shane catches the slant on his tone, it sounds a little like he's begging. Or praying. But his father, or anyone else, aren't listening, and no one answers his call.

Ilya doesn't move. He stays there, listening to nothing, jaw tightening incrementally with each second that passes, a tendon bulging in his neck. After a moment, he exhales through his nose and drops the phone, letting it hang uselessly from its cord, knocking the wall as it swings.

He doesn't notice Shane until Shane shifts his weight, the floor creaking softly beneath him.

Ilya startles — actually startles — head snapping up, shoulders squaring like he's bracing for a fight, settling his posture low, primed with economy, like a panther.

His eyes flick over Shane in a quick, assessing sweep, taking in the pale face, the guarded posture.

"Sorry," Shane says reflexively. "I— I needed the phone."

Ilya studies him for a beat longer, something unreadable passing behind his eyes. Then he nods once and steps aside, offering the space with stiff politeness. "Go ahead."

Shane hesitates, then reaches for the receiver. He awkwardly slips past Ilya, who has not moved that far out of the way. He's a wall of warmth to Shane's left. His hands are steadier than last time, but only just. He dials from memory, presses the plastic tight to his ear, and waits.

It rings. Once, twice.

Behind him, Ilya remains still. He doesn't leave. He doesn't pretend not to listen, either. He simply leans back against the wall, arms folded, gaze fixed somewhere over Shane's shoulder, like he's guarding the hallway. Shane can see the pale column of his neck and the shell of his ear.

"Shane?" His dad's voice comes through, sleepy but alert. "Everything okay?"

Relief crashes through him so hard it nearly buckles his knees. Shane closes his eyes, forehead tipping briefly toward the wall. "Yeah. Yeah, sorry— I didn't mean to wake you."

“It’s fine,” his dad says immediately. “I was up anyway. Watching a rerun of Die Hard on cable.”

That’s a lie. Shane swallows. “How are you feeling?”

A pause, then a soft chuckle. “Like a man who should get to sleep earlier. I’m alright, bud. Really.”

The dream presses in at the edges of his thoughts. The blood and the falling and the silence, all threatening to consume him, but Shane holds fast to the sound of his dad’s voice, to the mundane details anchoring him in the present.

He glances at Ilya. Thinks about switching to French, but decides against it. “I just... had another bad one,” he admits quietly. From the corner of his eye, he sees Ilya’s head tilt slightly, attention sharpening.

“Oh,” his dad says, concern threading his tone. “Same kind?”

“Yeah.” Shane exhales. “You were in it again.”

Another pause, longer this time. “I’m still here,” his dad says gently. “See? Still breathing. Still stubborn. I’m not going anywhere, bud.”

Shane huffs a weak laugh. “That you are.”

They talk for a few minutes more — about nothing, deliberately. Weather. Camp activities. His dad’s work. The jigsaw, which is apparently now missing a corner piece and driving his dad insane. Slowly, the tight coil in Shane’s chest loosens enough that he can breathe without counting each inhale.

“I should let you sleep,” Shane says eventually.

“Anytime you need me,” his dad replies without hesitation. “Day or night. You hear me?”

“I hear you,” Shane says. “Love you.”

“Love you too, bud.”

The line clicks dead. The sound is grating. Shane lowers the receiver carefully, sets it back in its cradle, and just stands there for a second, eyes closed, forehead resting against the cool stone wall.

When he opens his eyes again, Ilya is watching him. Not with the sharp, guarded intensity Shane has grown used to, but something quieter, watchful.

“You have bad dreams often,” Ilya says. It’s not a question.

Shane looks away, pink around the ears. He remembers the state of abject panic Ilya found him in yesterday, and his stomach turns a little. “Yeah, well. Comes with the territory.”

Ilya's mouth tightens. His face is all tight, actually. Drawn sharp and grim in the halflight, in the emergency neon green exit sign over the entryway. He glances at the phone, then away. "They come true?"

Shane hesitates. Then, because something about the empty hallway and the late hour makes lying feel pointless, he shrugs. "Sometimes."

Ilya nods once, slow. "Mine do too."

They stand in silence for a moment before Shane begins, "you... whoever you were calling ___"

"Do not," Ilya says flatly.

Shane studies him. "You okay?"

Ilya considers the question, as though flipping it over and inside-out in his head, like he's trying to figure out if Shane is trustworthy enough to know the truth. "I will be," he says at last.

Shane nods, accepting it for what it is. "Yeah. Me too."

They turn back toward the cabins, footsteps falling into an easy, unspoken rhythm as they head back toward their respective cabins, the night pressing in around them — but holding, for now. Ilya walks him to the steps of the Nike Cabin, and Shane watches from the window as Ilya walks towards the shadowy, empty Zeus Cabin, like it's door is an open mouth ready to swallow him whole.

Chapter 6: on first and fierce affirming light

Chapter Notes

quest! quest! quest!

“Can you summon storms?”

“Don’t know.”

“Can you generate lightning?”

“Don’t know.”

“Can you fly?”

“...Somewhat.”

Rose hums appreciatively at that, reaching down to scribble a note at the bottom of her paper pad. Ilya sits across from her, wedged between the Athenian and Hephestasian kids that make up his team in capture-the-flag, chin propped up by his hand.

The room has been divided into two groups, drawn in a stark line by the dining hall tables, pushed into two large flat tables for each team to strategise at.

Rose Landry is spearheading the campaign. She’s already flushed with the promise of battle — that old age rivalry between Ares and Athena fueled by their fortnightly capture the flag battles. And it seems no matter how many times they play the game, it always gets a rise out of them.

Ilya could not care less about capture-the-flag. He thinks it a weak and inferior child’s version of actual warfare, with none of the talent or thrill of other camp-wide competitions — like pegasus chariot racing. He’s got more important things to worry about.

They’ve separated him and Hollander, too. Ilya isn’t stupid enough to think it a simple coincidence. After what happened last time, they’re on damage control, Ilya supposed.

His eyes trail over Landry’s shoulder to the Ares team, where Shane is shoulder-to-shoulder with the Ares Cabin. They’ve got a map out, and Shane is listening as someone points to the map, explaining some kind of movement strategy as her finger traces the paper. Shane is nodding, and to onlookers he seems an attentive participant. But he’s tired around the eyes, his gaze trawling and distant, and every nod of his head is a mechanacious reminder of his exhaustion.

Landry taps her pen against the pad, glancing up at him through her eyebrows. “Somewhat?” she echoes.

Ilya leans back and bats a hand through the air. “If there is something to work with. Wind or pressure current. I do not sprout wings.”

“So,” says the Hephaestus kid to his left — Ilya thinks his name is Kip — as he struggles to contain his amusement, “controlled falling.”

Ilya gives him a flat look. Landry scribbles something down. “Good enough. We’ll place you on interception. High ground, eastern tree line. If Ares tries an aerial push—”

Ilya can’t help but tune her out. Across the room, Shane shifts, hand coming unconsciously to his ribs as the Ares counselor finishes explaining their flanking maneuver. He says something — probably smart, probably tactical — and the cabin nods along. He’s good at this. He’s always good at this. Even half-broken, even running on fumes, Shane knows how to be what people need him to be.

The meeting dissolves into smaller conversations—Athena kids refining angles, Hephaestus campers muttering about trip mechanisms and weighted nets. Ilya stops listening. His attention keeps drifting back to the opposite table.

Shane finally looks up.

For half a second, their eyes meet across the hall. It’s brief and surprisingly unguarded. Something in Shane’s expression softens, like tension easing by a degree or two, less sharp.

Then someone claps Shane on the shoulder — too hard, Ilya thinks, with a prickle of disdain. The moment breaks. Shane’s attention snaps back to the map. The machine whirs back into motion. The son of Victory, forever running on empty to meet everyone else’s definition of the word.

A cold, quiet anger settles in Ilya’s chest, different from the explosive fury that summoned the frost. This is a deliberate, crystallizing thing. They’re using him up.

“—so you’ll signal with a mirrored flash if you see movement from the western ridge,” Landry is saying, tapping the map in front of her.

“Yes,” Ilya says, though he hasn’t processed a word of her plan. His agreement is automatic, a means to an end just to get her team to leave him alone.

“Good.” She seems satisfied, turning to debate the merits of a frontal assault versus a feint with one of her siblings. Ilya leans forward, elbows on the table, and lets his gaze drift back. The Ares team is breaking up, their meeting concluded with a loud, collective rallying cry that makes Ilya snort. As the others disperse, Shane remains for a moment, studying the map alone, his finger tracing a path along the river boundary. His brow is furrowed: perhaps strategic thought, perhaps in exhaustion.

Ilya stands up, the legs of his chair scraping against the floor. The sound cuts through the din. Rose looks up, startled. "Rozanov? We're not finished."

"I am," he says, his voice leaving no room for argument. He doesn't look at her. He is already walking, weaving through the clusters of campers, his path a straight, unerring line to the exit.

That night Ilya leaves the porch of the Aphrodite Cabin smelling like smoke. Svetlana is the only person at camp with cigarettes — he has no idea how she smuggled them in, nor how her supply has not yet run out. They sat around the back of the Cabin trading puffs from the little rolled paper. The smoke in his lungs helps to cool some of the itch under his skin.

"You excited for capture-the-flag?" Svetlana had asked him. She was leant on her back, her legs thrown over his lap, staring up at the stars through the canopy above them. She takes a drag of the cigarette and passes it to him.

"No." Ilya had taken a long breath in, holds the smoke in his lungs for a moment too long before exhaling a short burst of smoke into the cold night air. It floats away and he taps the cigarette to rid it off the clinging ash at the end. "Not at all."

"You and Hollander, that'll be quite the fight." Svetlana lifts her head to catch his eye, and grins. "My bet's on Hollander."

Ilya handed the cigarette back, his expression unreadable in the dim light. "Your bet is safe," he said, his voice a low rumble. "He will not be fighting."

Svetlana raised an eyebrow, propping herself up on her elbows. "Oh? Did you finally scare him off?"

"He is injured," Ilya stated, a finality in his tone that discouraged further jest. "It is stupid to make him compete. Broken ribs. More stupid to think I would fight against him in that condition."

Svetlana watched him, her playful grin softening into something more contemplative. She took a final drag and stubbed the cigarette out on the porch railing, vanishing the butt with a flick of her wrist. "You're protecting him."

"I am being logical."

"Same thing, with you." She swung her legs off his lap and sat up, facing him. The moonlight caught the clever glint in her eyes.

Ilya stood up abruptly, the movement causing the wooden boards of the porch to creak. The cool night air felt sharp against his skin, chasing away the last tendrils of smoke and Svetlana's probing gaze. "It is not about him. It is about fair fight. There is no victory in beating someone who is broken."

"Spoken like a true athlete," Svetlana mused, but there was no mockery in it now. She leaned back, looking up at him. "Just be careful, *mily*."

Ilya didn't answer. He gave her a curt nod, a silent thanks for the smoke and the company, and stepped off the porch into the night. The itch under his skin was quieter now, banked like the embers of their cigarette, but Svetlana's words lingered, mixing with the scent of pine and night-blooming flowers that clung to the Aphrodite cabin.

He walked not toward his own empty, imposing cabin, but on a path that circled the periphery of the woods, his feet carrying him on a familiar, unspoken route. He stopped on a small ridge overlooking the canoe lake. From here, he could see the light still on in Nike's cabin.

The light spills warm and gold through the windows, cutting a bright, stubborn shape into the dark. It is too late for most cabins to still be awake. The lake below is glassy and black, reflecting stars and the occasional flicker of torchlight from campers sneaking out after curfew.

Ilya should leave. But the minutes stretch.

He's changed since dinner — no armor, no braces, just a dark hoodie pulled on over his T-shirt. His posture is careful, guarded, the way it's been since the race, like his body is something he's negotiating with instead of trusting. He pauses on the porch, one hand braced against the railing, head tipped back to look at the sky.

For a second, he just stands there, then he exhales, sharp and shaky, and turns away from the cabin. Toward the path that leads to the Big House. To the camp's phone. Ilya doesn't think, his body moving before his mind has a chance to catch up.

He keeps to the trees, silent where others would snap twigs or crunch gravel. Shane walks faster than he should, long strides that pull at his ribs. Panic lengthens his gait to something halfway to a run. He doesn't look back, shoulders tight with panic.

The path curves, gravel giving way to packed earth. Shane cuts across it rather than following the lantern-lit trail, shaving distance at the cost of pain. He hisses under his breath when his foot catches a root, recovers without stopping. His hand comes up to brace his ribs again, fingers digging in like he can hold himself together by force alone.

Idiot, Ilya thinks, without heat. Stubborn. Stupidly brave.

The Big House looms ahead, its white columns pale in the moonlight. The camp phone is mounted in the entryway by the lamp, old and unreliable. Shane reaches it and stops so abruptly that Ilya nearly does the same. He stands on the porch steps. The door is hanging halfway ajar, but Ilya hands back by the porch railings.

Shane looks like he might be sick. He takes the receiver off the hook, and in the silence, the dial cone cuts clean through. Ilya stills completely. He hates this part: he cannot fight a ringing phone. He's attempted to call his brother and his step-father just once. Just once, each. A single chance for them to straighten themselves out, at a time he knows would fit their schedule, their time-zone.

Shane dials from memory, without hesitation. He must be calling his father. The phone rings once, twice. Artificially innocent as it buzzes away. Shane's shoulders climb toward his ears. His jaw locks, muscle jumping beneath the skin. It rings on and on, Ilya counts with the rhythm of it, each ring a small, contained blow.

There's no answer.

The answering machine clicks on. Shane flinches like he's been struck. "—Dad," he says, too late, the word spilling into the void before the recorded voice can drown it out. He cuts the call off abruptly, slamming the receiver back into its cradle with more force than necessary.

For a heartbeat, Ilya thinks that will be it — that Shane will stand there, swallow whatever this is, and turn back toward the cabin. Instead, he lifts the receiver again and redials. It is painful to watch but Ilya cannot look away. It is like watching a train come off the rails in real time.

This time he doesn't pace or fidget. He stands very still, eyes fixed somewhere beyond the phone, as if staring hard enough might bend the distance between here and wherever his father is. The phone rings again. Over and over — six times, ten times, fourteen times.

Ilya's chest tightens. There is no response, no cheerful reply from his father or apologies for not picking up sooner. Not like last time.

Shane doesn't speak. He doesn't move. He simply listens, frozen, to the sound of recorded reassurance: "*you've reached— ...leave a message—... call back soon—*" like it might change if he gives it enough time.

He lowers the receiver slowly and carefully, like if he moves too aggressively he might break something that already has a hairline fracture. Shane's hand, still resting on the phone cradle, begins to tremble. It's a fine, almost invisible shake, but Ilya sees it. He sees the way Shane's other arm wraps tighter around his ribs, not just bracing against pain, but as if he's physically holding himself in one piece.

Ilya steps through the door and knocks against the wooden frame.

Shane spins, bristling, but cools when he sees it's Ilya. His eyes flick back to the phone like he's still fighting the urge to redial the phone. Or, miraculously, his father will call him back. His eyes are too bright. Fight-or-flight still humming under his skin.

He doesn't need to ask how much Ilya had seen. He gestures weakly at the phone. "False alarm. Probably. He's— he's just asleep, or— busy, or—"

"He always answers," Ilya says again, closer now.

Shane's jaw tightens. "You don't know that."

"I know enough," huffs Ilya. He crosses his arms over his chest, aware that he smells like smoke. Silence stretches between them, thick with cicada hum and the distant lap of water against the canoe lake.

“He’s in Ottawa,” Shane says finally, the words brittle. “We’re in Long Island. Do you have any idea how stupid it sounds to freak out over *one missed call*?”

“One missed call is nothing,” Ilya agrees. “Two is coincidence. But this—” He inclines his head toward the phone, the still-trembling receiver in Shane’s grip. “These dreams are divine. They are not often wrong, no?”

Shane shakes his head, wrings his hands. “He shouldn’t be in danger. My father is completely ordinary.”

“Nike chose him,” notes Ilya. “He can’t be too ordinary.”

Shane gnaws on his lip. The inevitability of all of this is beginning to dawn on him — Ilya can see it in his eyes, this slow encroaching melancholy. He closes his eyes. “Camp is *safe*,” Shane implores. “If I go out there...”

Ilya takes him by the shoulders. “If you stay, and something happens, you will never forgive yourself.”

He loosens his grip slightly, thumbs pressing into the seams of Shane’s hoodie as if to anchor him. He can feel the tension thrumming through Shane’s frame, coiled and desperate, like a bow pulled too tight.

“What if I’m wrong?” he asks. “What if this is just— I don’t know, mom testing me, or someone pulling some divine strings, or my brain inventing worst-case scenarios because that’s what it does best?”

“Then you go,” Ilya says evenly, “and you see your father alive, and then you come back knowing everything is fine.”

Shane looks up, his brown eyes searching. He swallows audibly. “I don’t even know how I’d get there,” he manages finally. “Ottawa’s— it’s not exactly on the standard demigod quest route.”

Ilya inclines his head. “There are ways.”

“Chiron wouldn’t allow it. It won’t be an officially sanctioned quest.”

“Who cares?”

Shane squints at him. “Why are you so confident?”

Ilya sighs. “Every night I have seen you wake up and all panic, all stress. Every night you come down here and call your dad, make sure he is still breathing. It is...—” he snaps his fingers. “The word, for when things cannot go on?”

“Unsustainable,” whispers Shane. Ilya doesn’t think that’s quite the word, but Shane has given him his true feelings anyway.

“Yes,” Ilya says quietly. “That.”

Shane lets out a thin, humourless laugh. “I’m really bad at knowing when to stop.”

“I have noticed,” Ilya says, not unkindly.

For a moment, Shane looks like he might argue again, might reach for logistics or rules or Chiron’s disappointment or the long list of reasons he should stay put and be sensible. Instead, his shoulders sag. The tension drains out of him all at once, leaving something raw and unguarded behind.

“I’m scared,” Shane admits. It sounds like a confession. Like something he’s been holding in his mouth for days, afraid to let it exist. “If I leave, something will follow me. And if I stay —” His voice breaks, just slightly. “I don’t know how to live with that.”

Ilya’s hands are still on his shoulders. He hadn’t noticed putting them there. Shane is warm under his palms, solid and trembling all at once, like a thing under too much strain.

“You cannot live like that. This—” He gestures vaguely between them, the phone, the whole of camp. “This will eat you alive.”

Shane closes his eyes. His forehead tips forward until it rests, lightly, against the bony frame of Ilya’s shoulder. The contact is tentative, like he’s giving Ilya time to pull away. Ilya does not.

He exhales slowly, feeling Shane’s breath ghost against his collarbone, counting the rise and fall of his shoulders until it evens out. This close, he can feel the hitch in Shane’s breathing.

“I don’t want to do this alone,” Shane says, barely audible.

The words land harder than anything else tonight. Ilya’s thumb shifts, almost unconsciously, brushing against Shane’s shoulder through the fabric of his hoodie. A grounding touch. A promise, even if he hasn’t spoken it yet.

“You won’t,” he says. Shane lifts his head then. His eyes are glassy, rimmed red, searching Ilya’s face like he’s looking for something specific — a crack, a doubt, an excuse. Whatever he’s hoping to find, he doesn’t.

The space between them narrows without either of them stepping forward. It happens slowly, the way gravity works. Shane’s hand comes up, hesitates, then curls into the front of Ilya’s shirt, fingers gripping tight like he needs something to hold onto. “Okay,” Shane breathes.

It’s not clear what he’s agreeing to. “You’re definitely not helping me be rational.”

Ilya huffs a faint, humourless breath. “You were never being rational.”

“Rude.”

“True.”

Shane’s smile flickers, fragile but real. He sobers again almost immediately, the weight of the decision pressing back in. “If I do this,” he says, “I can’t half-commit. If I go, I go.”

Ilya straightens slightly, hands still firm on Shane's shoulders. "Then you go," he says again, just as evenly as before. But now there is something else under it. Certainty. "And you do not look back."

Shane studies him for a long moment. "You make it sound so simple."

"It is not simple," Ilya says. "It is clear."

Shane nods once. Then again. Resolve settles over him like armour clicking into place.

"Okay," he says again, steadier this time. "Okay. I'll go."

Ilya feels something uncoil in his chest, sharp and bright and dangerous. "Good," he says.

He does not tell Shane that he is already calculating routes, threats, contingencies. He does not tell him that storms follow him, yes — but so do monsters, and he will not let Shane face them alone.

But when Ilya does not move, Shane steps back and frowns. "You mean now?"

Ilya shrugs. "Why not? If father is in danger, we need to move."

"We?"

"You think I let you go out there and be eaten?" He scoffs, "Hollander."

But Shane is already shaking his head. "Absolutely not," he's saying, throwing his arms out.

"You cannot come. It's obscenely dangerous. To even think about asking you to do this with me—"

"You did not ask," Ilya says like it's the simplest thing in the world. "I am telling you. We go. You are not changing my mind. If you leave without me, I tell Chiron."

"It's my father! My problem!" Shane's voice cracks. "I won't let you get hurt because of my family drama."

"It is not your choice," Ilya fires back. The air around them grows perceptibly colder, a sharp, clean chill that has nothing to do with the night. "You think I am asking for permission? I am telling you how it is. We leave tonight. Now. Before Chiron posts guards or your fear talks you out of it."

"You're insane," Shane whispers, but there's no heat in it. It's a statement of fact, tinged with a desperate, begrudging hope. The part of him that is terrified of being alone in this, the part that has been screaming into a silent phone for nights, is clinging to Ilya's absolute certainty like a lifeline. That he's been waiting for someone like Ilya to come along his entire life.

"Maybe," Ilya concedes, a ghost of that sharp, fleeting smirk touching his lips. "But I am also right. You need someone who is not afraid of a little storm." His gaze flicks meaningfully toward the sky.

Shane's resistance is crumbling. He can feel it. The practical part of his brain is listing the countless reasons this is a catastrophe: no prophecy, no supplies, no plan beyond going north. But under Ilya's unwavering stare, those reasons sound like whispers next to the roaring truth in his gut — the truth that his father is in danger, and that Ilya Rozanov, who fell from the sky and challenged the very elements, is offering to stand between him and the dark.

"If you get killed," Shane says hoarsely, "I will never forgive myself."

"And if you get killed because you were too proud to take help?" Ilya counters, "I would be too dead to care. And it will still be your fault. So. Better we both live." He says it so matter-of-factly, as if the logic is irrefutable. And in a twisted way, that's the way it is.

He's hardly struggling with the choice. Would he rather adventure, quest for glory, and go out in a blaze of infamy? Or would he rather live out his natural lifespan, grey haired and drooling, fading into irrelevance and consumed by regret?

Had Achilles not chosen to die in battle? Had not all of the Greek heroes died young, died fantastically? Ilya has seen demi-gods that have not been claimed, that have never triumphed. Those poor aphasiac people. He did not think old age an attractive prospect, nor one that was up and coming in his future.

This choice would horrify his *mama*, but she is not here. She could not possibly understand.

He's boxed Shane in and they both know it. Shane runs a hand through his hair, his fingers trembling only slightly now. He looks from Ilya to the dark path leading out of camp, to the phone that had been his tether to a normal, safe world. That tether is broken.

"Okay," he says for the third time, and this time it's a surrender. A pact. Ilya is thrilled. "We go. Together."

Ilya nods, a single, sharp dip of his chin. The air seems to crackle with the decision being made. "Get your things. The real things. Armour and weapons and money. Meet me at the north tree line in twenty minutes. Do not take the main path."

"Where are you going?" Shane calls, his voice reedy with stress, as Ilya turns.

"Leaving a message for Svetlana," he tells Shane. There is fear between them, a shared terror. "If we are not back in three days, she will know who to blame for stealing her contraband."

Chapter 7: i had been lost to you

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In his backpack Shane has: a change of clothes, his small collection of drachmas, his passport, the stash of American dollars he has saved. His collection also includes a toothbrush and toothpaste, a flashlight, a packet of barbecue flavoured peanuts, and his prized celestial bronze sword, *Tiebreaker*, which is concealed as a key in the back pocket of his bag. It was a gift from his mother after his first capture-the-flag win, all those years ago.

He'd been small and thrilled, sent to scout ahead by the beefy Ares kids who led the charge. They'd sent him shooting through the underground, tiny and fast, managing to flank and then outrun the counterstrike by the other team. He'd found the standard stashed in a tree. Had scaled it whilst someone lobbed a spear at him, climbing with tiny furious hands.

It's the knowledge of his mother's pride, of the support of a team, that drives him forwards and kicks his heels into gear. Between he and Ilya lies an open moonlit field, the grass washed in a soft sterile light in the darkness. Shane slinks across like a lynx, light on his feet, and spots Ilya's head of golden curls in the treelike opposite.

When he makes it to him, like a soldier running to the trench, Ilya just raises his eyebrows appraisingly. "You made it."

Shane scowls at him. "You expected me to flake?"

Ilya shrugs. "Is hard time," he says. "Big emotions."

Shane curls his fists. "I'm here. Are we going or what?"

Ilya's gaze drops briefly, cataloguing him with that unsettling thoroughness of his—the set of his shoulders, the tension in his jaw, the way he's standing a touch too carefully to protect his ribs. Then he nods once, decision locked in. "We are going," he says.

He turns and gestures with two fingers, a sharp, economical motion. Shane follows without thinking, falling into step as they skirt the edge of the field. The moonlight gives way to shadow as they reach the tree line, the woods swallowing sound and distance the way they always do. Crickets hush as they pass. The air feels thicker here, watchful.

They move fast but quiet. Shane keeps his weight forward — similar to how he plays in Hockey away from camp — always leaning into motion, if he stops he might never start again. Ilya sets the pace just ahead of him, long strides measured and unhurried, like he's on a midnight stroll instead of escaping from camp. .

"You did not tell anyone," Ilya says quietly, not looking back.

“No,” Shane answers. “Rose would’ve tried to stop me. Hayden would’ve made it a whole thing.” He feels a bit guilty about it, if he’s honest. Hayden was his first friend at Camp, they’d bonded in the Hermes cabin through late-night conspiracies and sword fighting together when Shane was still unclaimed. Rose was special, too. One glance from her was like she could look right through him. She could see all of him, and she hung around even so.

Ilya hums, low in his throat. “Smart.”

They reach the boundary stone without ceremony. It sits half-buried among roots and moss, ancient and unassuming, the invisible line humming faintly beneath Shane’s skin. Camp Half-Blood inhales danger and exhales safety. Beyond it, the world sharpens.

Shane hesitates despite himself. The sense of a starting pistol raised but not yet fired. “You’re sure about this?” he asks, hating the way his voice dips.

Ilya finally turns. Up close, his expression is unreadable, all hard planes and quiet intensity. But his eyes soften, just barely. “No,” he says honestly. “But I am sure about you.”

That lands somewhere deep and unarmored, stirring him in the depths. Shane swallows. “You don’t have to come.”

A corner of Ilya’s mouth twitches. “I know.”

He maintains eye-contact with Shane as he takes a decisive slow backwards step over the boundary, oozing confidence. He pauses, extends his hand. Shane slaps it away, then feels bad because maybe Ilya was asking Shane to hold his hand, not the other way. Shane follows a heartbeat later, the world lurching as the ward peels away from his skin. The air changes immediately — pressure snapping tight, like a held breath finally released. The forest beyond is darker, less forgiving. Somewhere far off, something howls, low and hungry.

Ilya rolls his shoulders once, like a fighter loosening up before the bell. “From here on,” he says, “we do not stay in one place too long. Creatures will smell you first.”

“Me?” Shane snorts. “What, I’m bait?”

“You are loud,” Ilya says flatly. “And smelly.”

Shane huffs despite himself, adrenaline buzzing through his veins. He reaches back and grips the strap of his pack, feeling the solid reassurance of weight and purpose. Tiebreaker rests cold and patient against his spine. “Canada, then,” he says. “Ottawa.”

Ilya nods, eyes already scanning the dark. “North,” he agrees. Then, quieter: “And fast. We find bus stop, get to New York. Train to Montreal, then to Ottawa.” They set off together, the camp’s lights dwindling behind them until there’s nothing left but trees, moonlight, and the long, dangerous road ahead.

They keep to the lesser paths, dirt and pine needles soft beneath their boots, angling away from the main road until the woods thin and the hum of distant traffic bleeds back into the

night. Shane's ribs protest with every jolt and turn, a dull ache he files away and ignores.

An hour later the ground begins to slope upwards. They'd been following an empty, winding road through the woods away from the camp — a camp Shane was starting to regret was so far out in the wilderness. Then the road veers left and downwards until they're in the centre of a valley, framed on either side by dense, lush Long Island forests.

The bus stop squats at the edge of the road like an afterthought — one bent metal pole, a faded sign, a sat, low-squatting roof on an old beechwood-plank hut. A bench scarred with names and dates and declarations of love that have almost certainly not survived the years. Sodium coloured lights in the dark, washing everything in a jaundiced orange glow. Civilization, thin and brittle.

Shane slows, scanning instinctively. Nothing moves beyond the lazy drift of insects around the light. No eyes in the dark. No wrongness pressing in at the back of his skull. He pushes his way inside and squints at the old notice-board in the corner, the bus schedule faded and scratched. Checks his watch: 3:46am.

The sun will be coming up in a few hours, and then camp will notice they're gone. By then, they'll be long gone. Shane spots a bus headed towards Manhattan at four am. Just their luck. He nods to Ilya and they sit in the far corner of the bus shelter.

Shane keeps his bag on his lap, Ilya keeps his bag between his legs like a lioness with a cub. There's only one other man in the shelter. He's old, with a broomstick mustache and a Brooklyn Scouts hat wedged low over his eyes. Ilya is sitting between Shane and the man, and Shane can see him keep shooting the man suspicious glances.

He leans in low and hisses, "what is it? You think he's...?" A monster, he wants to say, but can't find the words.

Ilya shakes his head minutely. "No," he says, but his voice drips with disdain. "Just man." A kind of cold, territorial contempt. Shane gets it. After the raw openness of the woods, this mundane human presence feels like an intrusion, a loose variable in their already perilous equation.

The man doesn't seem to notice. He's humming tunelessly, tapping a crooked finger against his knee in time to some silent rhythm. His bag, a stained canvas duffel, sits at his feet like a shapeless dog.

"Just a guy waiting for a bus," Shane murmurs, more to convince himself than Ilya. Nothing weird about that. Shane and Ilya probably look weirder. Look like runaways, maybe. Out in the middle of the Long Island woods, deep in New York state.

At 3:58, a set of headlights appears down the long, dark road. The bus. A sigh of relief threatens to escape Shane's lungs, but he locks it down. Not safe yet.

The old man stirs, groaning as he stands. He shuffles forward, peering down the road. As he passes in front of the flickering light, Shane catches a clearer glimpse of his face under the hat brim. A strange, metallic taste coats Shane's tongue for a second — not a warning of

immediate danger, but of old and suffocating sorrow of a life well lived and well worn. A demigod's sense, picking up on the echoes of a broken mortal life.

The bus grinds to a halt with a hydraulic sigh, expelling a huff of steam through its underbelly. The doors wheeze open.

The old man climbs on first, his movements slow and pained. Ilya waits, holding Shane back with a barely perceptible shift of his shoulder. He makes the driver — a bored-looking woman chewing gum — wait until the old man has fumbled for his pass and shuffled down the aisle before he moves.

He mounts the steps, pays for them both with a handful of crumpled dollar bills from his pocket, and waits silently for change. With Ilya a few steps above him, Shane can admire just how intimidating he is. Six foot one, maybe two, broad-shouldered, and very Russian. He jerks his head, a command for Shane to follow, and strides down the aisle, past the old man who has taken a seat near the front, to the very last row.

Shane slides in by the window. Ilya takes the aisle seat, his bag again a barrier on the floor between his legs. He doesn't look at the old man. He stares out the front windshield, watching the road ahead as the bus doors close and they pull away from the yellow-bathed light of the stop.

The bus is nearly empty. A woman dozes a few rows ahead. The old man up front resumes his quiet humming, the sound just audible over the engine's rumble.

"See?" Shane whispers, the tension in his shoulders beginning to unknot as streetlights start to blur past the window. "Just a guy."

Ilya finally looks at him. In the intermittent flash of passing lights, his face is all stark shadows and unyielding lines. "There is no 'just' anything anymore, Hollander," he says, his voice low. "Only things that are problem, and things that are not problem.." He lets his gaze flick once, meaningfully, toward the front of the bus. "Yet."

The bus becomes a world of its own. A capsule of stale air, vibrating plastic, and the green glow of the emergency exit signs. The woman a few rows ahead snores softly. The old man up front has stopped humming — mercifully — and now seems to be asleep, his chin dipped to his chest, the Brooklyn Scouts hat tilted forward.

"American buses stink," grumbles Ilya.

Shane shoots him a look. "Is there that much of a difference between American and Russian buses?"

"Mm, cleanliness," Ilya grumbles. "The stink will drown us out, though." A flash of emotion over his face, something almost guilty. "You're travelling with me, though. I am... noticeable."

He sure is, Shane thinks, and finds himself inexplicably admiring Ilya's side profile. The jut of his jaw and his roman nose, the tight circles in which he grinds his teeth. Long lashes

flutter every time he blinks.

“You’ve done this before?” prompts Shane, “quested?”

“Not in so many words,” Ilya replies. “But I’ve always known things were weird. When you are... me,” he does not want to say it aloud, “there are always things trying to kill you.”

Shane frowns. “That sounds difficult. Growing up like that.”

Ilya pulls a face. Shane thinks he’s aiming for unaffected. But he doesn’t quite stick the landing. “Yes, well. My father intervened a few times. It was least he could do. His mess.”

You’re not a mess, Shane wants to say, but then the bus driver hacks a lung-peeling cough and they both snap to attention. Ilya leans over Shane and pulls the curtain of the coach shut, hiding them from view of the window with the dusty red fabric.

Ilya doesn’t sleep. Shane watches his profile against the flashing backdrop of suburban houses and late-night fast-food joints. His eyes track everything: the sudden flare of headlights from a passing car, the sway of the bus, the driver’s bored reflection in the large rearview mirror.

Shane’s own exhaustion is like a lead blanket, but the adrenaline and the aches and the fear keep him from tipping over into sleep. He focused on the mundane to stay grounded. The sticky feel of the vinyl seat, the faint smell of diesel and lemon-scented disinfectant, the weight of Tiebreaker.

An hour in, the old man stirred.

He doesn’t get up. He simply turns his head, slowly, and looked down the length of the bus. The milky, unfocused eyes seemed to drift over the sleeping woman, over the empty rows, and land on the back where Shane and Ilya sat. There was simply curiosity in his gaze, as it sweeps like a beam from a lighthouse.

Ilya goes preternaturally still beside him.

The old man’s lips move. No sound comes out that Shane can hear over the engine, but he’s unmistakably forming words, talking to himself or to the night. Then, just as slowly, he turns back to face the front and becomes a statue once more.

“What was that?” Shane breathes, the words lost under the road noise.

Ilya’s jaw tightens but he doesn’t respond.

As the first grim grey of dawn smudges the horizon, the landscape begins to change. The trees and houses thicken, crowded together. Billboards rise like giants. The traffic, even at this hour, becomes a steady stream. The bus merges onto a highway, a river of concrete and steel carrying them into the heart of something vast and roaring.

They merge through lanes until Shane feels like just another particle in the stream of cars. He’s glad the curtain is closed. His foot bounces nervously. Beside him, when he thinks

Shane isn't looking, Ilya chews on the skin on the tip of his thumb. When he catches Shane's attention, his hand drops.

The bus pulls off the highway and into a maze of surface streets. The buildings crowd closer, hemming them in. Shane's skin prickles, that familiar wrongness crawling up the back of his neck. The Mist here is thick — he can feel it, like humidity before a storm, coating everything in a disoriented sheen. Everything slightly blurred at the edges, sounds overlapping, time slipping just enough to make you doubt your own senses.

They won't be noticed, here. Not with the noise and the lights and the smells. They should be able to slip simply in, and back out again. Nothing to see, no trouble to be made. Ilya is experienced, Shane knows, but he's also the son of Zeus. His blood will bring additional troubles.

The old man stands again as the bus slows. This time, he turns fully, bracing himself on the pole, and looks straight at them. "End of the line," he says, his voice perfectly clear now. Brooklyn-flat, unremarkable. Human. Shane exhales a breath he didn't realize he was holding. Just a weird old guy.

The bus hisses to a stop. There's a pause where Shane worries they won't, but then the doors open. The hot stink of Manhattan air floods through the bus, but it does help loosen the claustrophobic rope which had tightened over Shane's chest. The bus-driver announces in a droll tone that this is Port Authority Bus Terminal. The woman a few rows up shuffles off first, then the old man, who's gone abruptly, is swallowed by the sidewalk and the morning crowd.

Shane stares after him. "I hate this city."

Ilya snorts under his breath. "You have not even met it yet."

They disembark into noise and movement and too many people for this hour. Penn Station is a few subway stops away — close enough to taste, far enough to require going under. Shane adjusts his pack, fingers brushing the familiar outline of Tiebreaker, and follows Ilya down the stairs as the warm light in the bus gives way to fluorescent glare, and the haze of dawn.

They have to fight through the crowd. Ilya leads them, and people seem to flow around him as though he is a rock in the water and they are the babbling brook. Shane falls into step behind him, but he keeps getting jostled and nudged as he tries to follow Ilya's spearheaded campaign towards the subway. In the end, when Shane is almost knocked over by a shoulder-check, he reaches out and clasps his hand around Ilya's wrist. Feels his pulse through his papery skin, uses it to keep them together as they make their way underground.

The subway smells like iron and old water and something faintly electrical. Trains scream through tunnels with teeth-rattling force. Shane keeps his eyes up, scanning faces, reflections, shadows for anything that could jump out at them.

They swipe through the turnstiles without incident. The Mist smooths their edges; to anyone watching, they're just two tired guys with backpacks, heading somewhere early and important.

The platform is crowded now. Office workers, tourists clutching coffee, a street performer setting up far too early for an audience. The noise is relentless, pressing in. After so long in the open, fresh air of Camp Half-Blood, the shock of urban living is enough to cripple. Shane squints as another train roars past. The sights and sounds are overstimulating. They make it to the platform, heading towards Central Station. Ilya guides them towards a wall, tactical, so they don't have to watch their backs.

He hasn't let go of Ilya's hand. The back of his neck prickles.

Shane leans closer to Ilya, voice low. "Do you feel that?" Something is wrong.

"Yes," Ilya says. He readjusts his grip so they're holding hands rather than Shane holding onto Ilya, more reciprocal. "Do not run."

The train roars into the station, wind whipping hair and loose clothing. For a moment, everything seems fine. Then Shane catches it: a shape in the dark behind the train, stretched too long, limbs bending at the wrong angles as it moves along the tunnel wall instead of the tracks.

His chest tightens. It hasn't spotted them, but it slows with the train and skitters out of view behind the stainless steel subway car that rolls to a stop.

The doors slide open. People surge forward, jostling against them.

"Hollander," Ilya says sharply.

Shane swallows, "I see it." But it hasn't seen them. Not yet. If they don't get on here, they'll be the only people on the platform. The best thing they can do is stay with the crowd, meld their smells and their looks to the unassuming humans around them, keep their heads low. Shane hasn't quite figured out what the creature is, but it cannot be good.

They board with the crowd. Ilya chooses a spot by the door, one hand gripping the overhead handle, the other finally letting go of Shane to fiddle with his necklace. The car lurches forward, metal screaming. Shane grabs a pole, heart hammering, and risks a glance through the window at the rear of the car.

The thing is there.

It peels itself off the tunnel wall and drops onto the roof of the train with a sound like wet canvas snapping taut. The lights flicker again, longer this time. A ripple of unease passes through the car — people shifting, frowning, looking around without knowing why. The mist hides it. Shane quickly averts his eyes before it catches him staring.

"What is it?" Ilya whispers through his teeth.

"Something old," Shane murmurs. Someone squeezes past and they're forced up close to one another, almost chest to chest. He looks at Ilya for a moment. He can feel Ilya's breath against the shell of his ear. Their bodies sway in time to the movement of the subway car.

The train accelerates. So does the thing above them. It scrapes along the roof, claws shrieking against metal. The sound sets Shane's teeth on edge. A child starts to cry. Someone laughs nervously, says something about rats. Shane has never seen the Mist so effective. He's managed to fly under the radar whilst away from Camp Half-Blood. When something comes up, it's minor. A monster wandering by, a misplaced spirit. Not this. Ilya turns his head too far around. The thing has clambered around the side of the carriage and peers in through the window. He thinks it might be a Keres — a death-spirit. Half-human, half-vulture, praying on violent deaths to befall mortals.

Its buggy eyes are embedded in its sallow, grey face. Scraggly hair falls around its ears. And Ilya looks at it, dead-on.

Fuck.

The thing recoils and then presses its face against the glass, bearing alabaster-white teeth that shine, slick with drool. The lights flicker in and out. It goes dark for a moment, and the thing is gone.

And then the train veers violently as though it is about to topple. Shane flinches backwards, stumbles, ribs flaring with pain. Ilya catches him without looking, one arm braced like iron across his chest, holding him upright.

"Next stop," Ilya says, jaw set. "We get off."

Shane peers up at him. "What if it follows?"

"It will," Ilya says calmly. "But not into the open."

The scraping grows louder. The lights go out entirely for a heartbeat, plunging the car into darkness. In that instant, Shane feels it — hot breath through the metal, a pressure like fingers testing a lock, then the lights snap back on.

The thing slams against the side of the car. It screams at them like a whining predator, a baby throwing a tantrum. But the subway ride cannot last forever. Shane wonders if Ilya can feel how sweaty he is, how fast his heart is pounding.

The train screeches into the station, brakes screaming in protest. The doors aren't even fully open before Ilya is moving, elbowing and shoving people out of the way and spitting Russian insults at people who call after him in outrage. He's dragging Shane with him into the flood of bodies surging for the platform.

They burst into open air and noise and movement. The wet smell of the underground, people swarming like bugs. They need to get it away from the humans.

"This way," Ilya barks, pulling Shane into a hard right turn. He doesn't head for the stairs to the street. Instead, he ducks into a narrower, tiled corridor leading to a different line's platform. The move is disorienting, a sharp cut against the current of commuters. His breath comes sharp and fast, his lungs burn.

It lopes after them, its gait an unnatural, scuttling sprint. People unconsciously edged away, their minds weaving the Mist into a narrative of a large, off-leash dog or a street performer in a grotesque costume. But the fear is real, a tangible chill in its wake. A fear that Shane feels in full-force, without Mist to smother him or smooth him.

They burst out onto a nearly empty platform for a shuttle line. At the far end, a gate was propped open, a handwritten "Out of Service" sign taped to it. Beyond it, daylight streamed down a maintenance stairwell.

Ilya makes for it without hesitation. They crash through the gate, their footsteps echoing on metal steps. The shriek echoes in the concrete tube behind them, closer now. The Keres spirit is faster in the enclosed spaces. Shane risks a glance behind and sees it scuttling across the roof of the subway after them like a spider, its leathery wings hanging down after it.

Jesus fuck, that's terrifying, Shane thinks.

"Shane, now!" Ilya barked, trying to haul him up the spiralling stairs into the light.

But Shane twisted out of his grip. He couldn't explain it, this sudden, cold clarity. Running away from the platform, into the open, feels inexplicably wrong.

The wheel of fortune begins to turn, illuminating the thin path forward. He's suddenly aware of the chance of victory spinning beneath him. He feels it sometimes, the sharp momentum of wins and losses, probabilities and luck and skill beneath his fingers. It's a tepid, calm thing during camp activities. Controlled and restrained, and safe.

But this — a death-omened monster chasing after him with whetted talons to tear him to shreds — it kicks up a sense of victory into full-blown adrenaline, and Shane finds himself scrambling desperately after it.

He pushes Ilya back — who makes a noise of outrage behind him, a noise Shane purposefully ignores. He drops his bag, his hand closing around the celestial bronze key in his pocket. He doesn't transform it, not yet.

The Keres tilts its head, a horrifyingly human gesture. Its mouth, full of needle teeth, twists into something like an animalistic smile. Or maybe a bearing of teeth. "Little victory-child," it hisses, its voice the sound of dry bones rattling in a hollow place. He tries not to shiver. "You smell like fear."

"You talk too much, vulture," Shane snarls.

Before he could process it, Ilya was no longer trying to pull him away. He stepped up beside him, shoulder-to-shoulder, his own body angled between Shane and the creature. His expression is dark, calculating. The plan had changed.

The Keres let out a wet, gurgling laugh. "Puppies barking."

Shane summons Tiebreaker and *lunges*.

Chapter End Notes

i have christmas break off from my job so this is basically my whole occupancy rn, especially since the show ended yesterday so time for fan works to kick in and keep us going!!

also: apologies if i get anything wrong geographically on their quest,, i've been to nyc and montreal but i've not tried to get from one to the other, nor have i crossed the american-canadian border. if there are any inconsistencies, sweep them under the rug. thank you! as for greek mythology, i have a degree in classics, so hopefully i can keep to accuracy as much as possible whilst keeping things fresh and exciting (looking at you rick riordan)

sorry for the long note! i want to thank all my regular commenters, who i see at the end of every chapter. i eagerly await you guys' comments. ty for the support as this fic grows in size :)

Chapter 8: drawn like a moth to you

Chapter Notes

mentions of canon suicide (ilya's mom) very vaguely at the end but just watch out for it!!

See the end of the chapter for [more notes](#)

Shane moves first. He sweeps a brilliant bronze sword into his hand, catching in the ugly, flickering station lights and spinning them a beautiful gold. The sword is long and razor-sharp, and Shane lunges like he's grown wings towards it, moving low and fast across the ground.

Ilya had pivoted back towards him, heart seizing, but Shane had been too fast, and Ilya's fingers had caught in the threads of his navy hoodie. Ilya tracks every movement with ruthless precision.

Shane's sword must be godly, divine-made. It is a gorgeous work of blacksmithery. From his mother, Ilya thinks, with a dull spike of envy. His father has never blessed him with anything so beautiful: has never given him so much as a gift. How much was Nike in Shane's life growing up? Certainly more than Zeus was. And his father is still here, still warm and alive and loving, which is more than Ilya can say about his *mama*.

Shane sprints towards it, sword flashing in the dark, and the Keres opens its mouth to scream at him — raw and greedy. At the last moment, when Ilya thinks he will slice the Keres open, Shane diverts left, skids and jumps up onto a bench by the wall and jumps off it.

He moves so very fast. Expertly so. A life spent at Camp Half-Blood, Ilya supposes.

He arcs his sword over his head as though to cleave the creature cleanly in two. The Keres snaps its wings forward, trying to buffet him back as it drops from the ceiling, but Shane ducks under, and his blade swings down in a clean, vicious cut. It snags across its velvety wing, the sword going through as clean as a knife through butter.

Black ichor, cold and foul, sprayed across the tiles. The Keres let out a shriek that was pure, undiluted rage, the sound scraping against the station's very foundations. It wasn't a mortal wound — you can't kill a spirit of violent death that easily — but it was a profound insult.

It whirls, its good wing flapping erratically, the other hanging ragged. Its buggy black eyes blaze with malice, fixed solely on Shane. "You dare—"

Shane lands in a crouch, already pivoting for another strike, his breath coming in sharp gasps that must pull at his ribs — Ilya can see the pain etched onto his face, but it is not seen at all in his fight. His sword gleams with defiance.

Thank god we did not play capture-the-flag, Ilya thinks vaguely, I might have actually lost.

The creature comes at him thick and fast., Ilya takes a jerking step forward even though he knows he wouldn't make it in time. The Keres' talons rake the air where Shane's throat had been a moment earlier. Shit.

Shane is holding his own, his movements a beautiful, painful economy of motion, but Ilya can see the strain in the tight line of his jaw, the slight favouring of his injured side. The Keres is relentless, driven by a malice that feels older than the city itself.

Ilya doesn't have the luxury of a god-forged weapon. He has his knowledge of the world away from demigods and monsters. He has a stormy understanding of how things move and flow.

Ilya turns desperately to the platform, staring at the abandoned, derelict state of the tunnel like it might reveal some secrets. He spots something he can use. Ilya rushes to the wall and grabs both hands around a pipe that snakes down the wall. He braces one foot against the dingy, wet brick and *yanks*. An old section of pipe comes free, groaning a sharp and protesting shriek, but it's enough.

He gets as close as he dares, whilst Shane and the creature are still locked into battle. He hefts the pipe onto his shoulder. Rusty flakes come away, coating his sweatshirt in orange, but he cares not.

The electricity comes fluid and violent, sizzling under his skin and buzzing between his fingertips. He tightens his hold on the old pipe, and sees the crackle of blue lightning arcing down the metal. A conductor. Nice. It will do.

Ilya takes aim. He's Russian, he attended a Russian private school as a child. If there's one thing Ilya is good at, it's pure athleticism. He hoists the pipe and bellows, "Hollander!"

Shane's gaze darts towards him mid-parry as Ilya takes a few bracing steps and then launches the pipe like a javelin down the platform. Shane ducks and rolls out of the way.

Metal meets corrupted flesh with a wet, ringing crack, the force of the throw driving the pipe clean through the Keres's wing and pinning it to the concrete. Blue-white electricity spiders outward on contact, crawling across the creature's body in frantic, stuttering arcs. The smell is immediate and awful — burnt feathers, ozone, the tangy copper that Ilya guesses must be old burnt blood.

The Keres screams.

Shane drives Tiebreaker down. The celestial bronze slides home beneath the Keres's sternum, exactly where the lightning has left it vulnerable — the soft place beneath and between its ribs. For a heartbeat the creature arches, electricity flaring one last time along the pipe and into the blade.

There's black blood coating Shane's sword as he pulls it out, thick and glinting. Ilya closes the distance between them in a few bold strides. "Now we run," he says, grabbing Shane's

bag and shoving it into his arms. He doesn't wait for agreement. He shoots a last, contemptuous look at the choking, thrashing Keres. *"We are not on menu!"*

They turn and sprint, not for the street-level exit, but for a service door marked 'Authorized Personnel Only' that Ilya had spotted earlier. He kicks it open, and they plunge into a concrete stairwell, the sounds of the station and the dying shrieks of the Keres swallowed by the slam of the heavy door behind them.

They don't stop running — well, for Ilya it is a run, for Shane it is a half-run half-drag as Ilya hauls him forwards, feet skidding over the steps — until they emerge, blinking, into a different street altogether, the sound of their own ragged breaths loud in the sudden, ordinary quiet of the city morning.

Shane leans against a wall, clutching his side, the key gripped tight in his bleeding hand. Ilya smothers a flicker of jealousy at the sight of it. Despite his father's guiding hand, he's never shown Ilya any favours. No gifts, no weapons or blessings. He'd stolen that armour to ride the chariot on. And that chariot race feels so far away now.

"You think we lost it?" Shane gasps out.

Ilya glances down the alleyway. They're half-shielded by a large industrial-sized garbage bin, that stinks something rotten. Steam rises from a grate, but through, the flow of people down the street continues as normal.

"Well, you skewered it," says Ilya, "so I think it will leave us alone."

Shane closes his eyes, gulping down air. With one hand he transforms his sword back into a key and tucks it into the pocket of his jeans. His other comes to rest on his chest, with the rise and fall of his breaths.

Ilya kicks off the wall. "You fight well," he offers, somewhat begrudgingly, then tacks on, "for idiot."

"Thanks." Shane's eyes track him as he bends down to fish a water bottle out of his bag, a ghost of a smug smile on his lip. Ilya unscrews the lid and takes a gulp of water before offering it up to Shane.

Shane takes the bottle with shaking fingers and drinks too fast, water spilling down his chin and darkening the collar of his hoodie. He coughs, winces immediately, and clamps his lips together like he's personally offended by his own ribs.

"Easy," Ilya says, reaching out before he thinks better of it. His hand lands warm and steady between Shane's shoulder blades, anchoring him. He keeps it there. "You do not win prize for choking."

Shane huffs a breath of laughter around the bottle. "I win prizes for everything."

Ilya snorts despite himself. He glances back toward the mouth of the alley again, scanning for movement that doesn't fit, for anything that lingers a little too long. The city feels awake now

— too awake. The sun peeks out through the clouds and catches on the shining glass exteriors of the skyscrapers erect around them. It feels as though the buildings are leaning inwards, suffocating. Humans everywhere, blissfully ignorant, carrying coffee cups and briefcases and conversations about weather and meetings. The normality of it grates against Ilya.

“Mm,” Ilya says noncommittally. He crouches in front of him, close enough that Shane has to look down at him to meet his eyes. “You did not tell me you were that good.”

Shane’s brows knit, surprised. “At fighting?”

“At not dying,” Ilya corrects. “We go back now, we still make it in time for capute-the-flag.”

Shane doesn’t miss a beat, “fuck off.”

Ilya grins, straightening and capping the water bottle again. He shoulders his bag, then reaches down and tugs Shane to his feet with a firm grip on his wrist.

Shane stumbles, catches himself against Ilya’s chest. For half a heartbeat they’re too close — Shane’s breath warm against Ilya’s collarbone, his fingers curling reflexively into the fabric of Ilya’s shirt. Ilya freezes, every sense lighting up, acutely aware of how easily he could keep him there.

Shane pulls back first, flustered. “Right,” he says hoarsely. “Grand Central. Before something else decides we look tasty.”

“Yes,” Ilya agrees. His voice is steady, but his pulse isn’t. He hopes Shane’s senses aren’t refined enough to note the way it thrums, rabbit-quick, in his throat. “Stay on my left. Your ribs.”

Shane nods, then pauses. He looks at Ilya sideways, that familiar spark of reckless humor cutting through the exhaustion. “Hey. For what it’s worth?”

Ilya arches a brow.

“You throw a mean javelin.”

“I know. Big biceps.” He flecks them for emphasis. Shane snorts a short amused breath through his nose, and looks away. “Less effective with pipe than with spear.”

Shane nods to himself. “We’ll try and get you one. In the mean time,” he reaches into his bag and pulls out a short, curved blade latched with a leather-bound hilt. Another celestial bronze weapon that Shane pushes into Ilya’s open hand. “Take it.”

“Hollander...”

Shane shakes his head, “I can’t protect you the whole way.”

Ilya’s eyebrows shoot up. “You *protecting* me?” he laughs incredulously.

“Seems that way, doesn’t it? You’re the damsel and I’m the knight.”

Ilya’s laughter cuts off short. He looks down at the blade in his palm. It’s well-balanced. Shane wouldn’t give him something useless. The bronze gleams dully even in the city’s washed-out morning light, warm in a way mortal metal never is. A real weapon. A gift. Shane trusts him with it, and Ilya wants to be worthy of it.

He closes his fingers around it before he can think too hard about what that means.

“You are delusional,” Ilya says, but there’s no heat in it. “If anyone is knight, it is me. You are —” He searches for the word, scowling. “—princess.”

It’s Shane’s turn to gape at him. “Princess?” He knocks Ilya’s shoulder with his palm, open-mouthed with offense.

Ilya grins. “Yes, Princess. Princess in tower. I have to save you.”

“I just saved you!”

They slip out of the alley and back into the flow of the city, two more figures swallowed by the morning flow of people. 41st street in the middle of midtown Manhattan is the perfect place to bend the rules of reality, and they do. The crowded sidewalks become their camouflage.

Ilya keeps Shane on his left, acting as his buffer against the jostling throngs. The curved blade, now tucked into his belt under his hoodie, feels like both a secret and a promise.

Grand Central Terminal looms ahead, its majestic facade a stark contrast to the grimy alley they just escaped, the tunnel they crawled out of. They ascend the shallow marble steps around the throng of people coming and going. The massive entryway looms ahead of them as they enter the main concourse. Sunlight streams through the high windows, painting the dusty air gold, glinting off the celestial mural on the vaulted ceiling. The sheer scale of it — the echoing announcements, the swirl of thousands of people — is momentarily overwhelming. But Ilya used to live in Moscow, and the New York rudeness has nothing on Moscow natives.

“This way,” Ilya murmurs, steering them away from the bustling center, through a passageway down toward a slightly quieter corridor lined with boutique shops and cafes. He finds a recessed nook near a closed newsstand, partially hidden by a large ornate pillar. “Sit. Five minutes.”

Shane doesn’t argue this time. He slides down the wall until he’s sitting on the polished floor, head tipped back against the cool marble. He looks pale. The adrenaline is clearly wearing off, leaving the raw reality of their situation to sink in. Ilya hasn’t arrived at that point mentally: he does not think exhaustion can hit a moving target.

Ilya watches the patterns of movement, looking for anything that breaks the flow—a gaze that holds too long, a figure moving against the current. He sees tourists gawking at the

ceiling, commuters speed-walking with purpose, a group of schoolchildren clustered around a teacher dressed in bright high-vis jackets. All normal. All impossibly, dangerously normal.

“We need tickets,” Shane says, his voice strained. “The train to Montreal.”

“I know.” Ilya’s hand goes to the inner pocket of his jacket, where his cash is stored. “I will get them. You stay. Be small. Be nothing.” For once, Shane actually listens to him. He closes his eyes, one hand pressed flat to his ribs, counting breaths. Ilya pauses, loitering above him until Shane’s breathing evens out. Only then does he dare to step away.

He ducks down the concourse towards the ticket hall: it’s a different kind of chaos. Lines folding back on themselves, the static hum of the departure boards, the burnt smell of coffee and hot stinking metal and impatient people bustling. Ilya does what he does best — disappears into the crowd. He becomes just another commuter: shoulders loose, expression bored, eyes drolly half-lidded. Monsters look for urgency, for panic and stress. Down here, in the stinking throng, they’ll look past another bored traveller, even if he might smell a little sharper than the rest of the humans.

Whilst he waits for the queue to sluggishly trickle forwards, he keeps shooting glances at the waiting area behind him. He spots Shane easily at first — the thicket of dark hair, the slump of his posture and his knees tucked up to his chin as he waits. But as the minutes pass, and Ilya gets further to the front of the line and further from Shane, the crowd flows and reshapes and Shane becomes harder and harder to identify through the people.

Ilya buys two tickets north — New York to Montreal, earliest possible departure — with cash and a clipped efficiency that discourages conversation. The clerk doesn’t even look at him twice. Perfect. When he turns back, his gaze snaps immediately to the nook by the pillar.

Shane is still there. He’s scratching at a bit of the tiled floor beneath him. Ilya can’t explain the relief that hits him when he spots Hollander still scrunched up in the corner. Once he’s got the tickets, he ducks into the nearest store and grabs aspirin and a blue gatorade and a flat, sad-looking soggy cheese sandwich.

He tucks them into the pockets of his coat, but just as he’s exiting the store, a man shoulder checks him and makes him almost drop the gatorade. Ilya stumbles, taken off-guard. His gaze had been firmly latched on the crowd, waiting for Shane to come back into view.

He’d been so taken by the process that he hadn’t even noticed the man. The only reason he doesn’t go sprawling is his experience in contact sports. Especially ice-hockey, which helps him set his feet and stand his ground.

He turns. The guy that checked him is tall and bald, with angry, deep-set eyes. He’s a little taller than Ilya. “Problem?” Ilya asks, polite and cold.

The man doesn’t answer straight away. He stands too close, inside Ilya’s space, close enough that Ilya can smell stale coffee and something sour underneath it. His jacket is unremarkable — commuter-neutral — but the way he’s planted, squared off, is anything but accidental.

His eyes flick, quick and sharp, past Ilya's shoulder, checking behind him. Looking for Shane? "No problem," the man says finally. His voice is flat, faintly amused. "Just clumsy."

"Mm," Ilya hums. He doesn't move aside or apologise. He shifts his weight instead, centering himself the way his coach used to bark at him from the boards. Stable and difficult to move. "Then perhaps watch where you walk."

The man's mouth twitches. It could've been a smile if Ilya didn't know better. "People rush," he says. "They forget where they are."

That's cryptic as fuck. "I know exactly where I am," Ilya snaps, uneasy. He doesn't want to look back to check on Hollander — that would give him away, but the impulse to find him in the crowd is nearly overwhelming. That earns him a longer look. The man's gaze tracks down, catches on the bulge of the coat pockets — the Lucozade bottle, the boxy outline of the sandwich.

Behind the man, the crowd keeps flowing. No one slows. No one notices the way the air feels subtly... thinner here, stretched taut like plastic wrap.

"You're heading north," the man says casually, and Ilya's pulse kicks. "Be careful up there."

His fingers curl around the neck of the gatorade bottle inside his pocket, grounding himself in the ordinary weight of it. "Excuse me," he says, curtly.

The man steps back just one pace. "Safe travels," he says, and there's something off in it — not a threat exactly, but it's not kind either. He melts back into the current, gone so smoothly that Ilya has to track him by instinct alone to be sure he's really disappearing. He turns the corner and is gone.

Only when he's out of sight does Ilya shake out the tension in his shoulders. Weird people or divine intervention? He doesn't know. Either way, they should keep moving. He keeps himself controlled as he exhales, and then goes to find Shane.

The nook by the pillar comes back into view. Shane is still sitting where Ilya left him, head tipped back, eyes closed now. His fingers have stilled against the tile.

"Get up," Ilya tells him. Shane opens one analytical eye and surveys him. He pulls Shane to his feet. Shane sways, then steadies, fingers digging into Ilya's sleeve like he's anchoring himself to solid ground. He doesn't ask what Ilya has seen, or who he has spoken to, but Shane can tell he's been unbalanced. They don't look back.

They stop beneath the departure board, little orange letters flipping mechanically overhead. Montreal. On time. Platform announced in ten minutes, train in thirty. Good. He hands Shane the tickets. Their fingers brush, brief and electric.

"Next leg," he says quietly. "We stay together."

Shane nods. "Wasn't planning on wandering off."

Ilya's mouth twitches. "Good. Because if you do, I will find you."

Shane looks up at him, something warm and fierce sparking behind the exhaustion. “Yeah,” he says softly. “I know you will.”

They hide in a disabled toilet with the door locked and firmly wedged. They take turns washing their faces in the sink, and then split the sandwich and practically inhale it. It doesn’t do much to calm the broiling in Ilya’s gut — half from hunger and half from something he’s too prideful to label as nervousness. Shane crouches on the toilet seat.

There’s a carefulness in Shane, a way of measuring everything even while he’s exhausted. Ilya leans his head back against the wall. “Your mom teach you to fight like that?”

Shane’s mouth pauses halfway to his half of the sandwich. He raises his eyebrows. “Hm? Oh, no. Not really. Learnt most of it at camp, but a lot of it comes from sports. I did a lot of sports as a kid. They both made sure of that.”

It’s Ilya’s turn to frown. “Nike was... present?”

“Until I was ...I don’t know, ten? Yeah, she was.” His expression softens. “That was the best. She had a human name and we lived a human life. But it was dangerous for her, for all of us. And you can’t contain Victory to the Ottawa suburbs.” His face twists, the little smile that had grown there suddenly washed with a melancholy nostalgia. “Saw her less and less over the years.”

Ilya shifts and tilts his head. “And your dad?” His voice is quieter now, hesitant.

Shane swallows the last bite of sandwich, chewing slowly, thinking. “He really tries. And I can tell he really cares. He loves me so much, you know?” Ilya doesn’t know, but he inclines his head so Shane keeps talking. “Most of the time, he’s busy being David Hollander — big government job, philanthropist, a thousand other things. I think sometimes he was relieved when I went off to camp. Not because he didn’t love me, but...” His shoulders slump a fraction. “It’s complicated.”

“He felt... uh, guilty?” Ilya guesses. Shane curls his hands over the edge of the toilet seat, fingers white with grip, jaw tight. There’s something fragile there, something raw that he doesn’t usually let anyone see.

Shane’s eyes snap up. “Yeah. Like he wishes I was fully human. If only so I didn’t have to deal with all this shit.”

Ilya knows the feeling. He thinks that’s one of the twisting threads of despair that his *mama* fell into.

Ilya says nothing for a long moment. He studies the water stains on the ceiling tiles, as if they contain a map, a method of getting out of this conversation. He understands the shape of that longing — the mortal parent’s wish for a simpler, safer child, the loathing at themselves for damning their child to a dangerous life.

He’d seen it in his mama’s eyes, too, in the years before the end. She would make these big, heavy meals, *pelmeni*, *blini*, *draniki*. As if she could tie him to the earth with food; as if Ilya

could eat his way back to being normal.

He wonders how much that guilt played a part, in the end. Not a wish for him to be different, but a helpless terror at the strangeness growing under her own roof, a strangeness she could neither protect nor understand, and the following, looming guilt in the fact that he was different. That he would be constantly hunted down for what had happened to her, what she had done.

But he can't say any of that to Hollander. Even if he wanted to (which he doesn't), he cannot find the words in English. But Shane is looking through his lashes at him, those earnest doe-like eyes, and Ilya thinks he doesn't have to say it outloud anyway. Shane gets it, like no one has gotten it before.

Chapter End Notes

this fic has consumed me i wrote 12k of it yesterday LOL

Chapter 9: sunlight, oh sunlight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Ilya is far more comfortable when they actually get on the train. It's a long, heavy-duty thing with maybe thirty carriages stretching around the long winding platform. They pick a safe cart somewhere in the middle, bag a two by two seat place with a table. Ilya throws his bag down and collapses across the two chairs, sprawling his long limbs like a lazy cat soaking in sunlight. Shane wedges into the chairs opposite and drums his fingers nervously against the table.

Ilya watches a moment, head upside down and tipped back against the window, where people are slowly filtering onto the train. Shane spies a mother and two children at the far end of the carriage, a pair of businessmen close by, and a handful of women behind them.

"Are you alright?" Shane asks Ilya.

"Mm." Ilya doesn't sound bothered. He hooks an ankle over the armrest and sighs, a long exhale that reads like relief more than fatigue. "Train is good. Train go forward. No surprises."

That's when Shane realises that Ilya hasn't slept in two days. He'd mentioned being awake with Svetlana when he'd spotted Shane. At least Shane had managed a few shallow handfuls of sleep before he'd been woken by more dreams, but Ilya was running on empty, on fumes.

The train lurches suddenly, jolting into motion. The carriage shudders a deeply metallic sound as it starts to roll out of the platform. It starts chugging along in earnest, shadows blurring as they shoot down the tunnel.

"You should sleep," Shane says, and Ilya cracks open one scrutinous eye. "It's an eleven hour ride. We can take turns."

Ilya's eyes flick over Shane's face, then to the window, and then back again. The train emerges from a tunnel, its iron lungs heaving as it goes, and they're suddenly lit up by the grey sprawl of New York, blurring past them as they slice through it like a knife through flesh. With every judder, they're pulled further from camp and further towards his father.

He checks his watch. It's eight o'clock now, and camp is probably shaking off the dregs of sleep to go about their days. How long will it be until their absence is noticed? A few hours, at most? Will it be Hayden who sounds the alarm, or JJ, or Max or Ross? He doesn't know, but the question plays around and around in his head like a spinning top gone wild.

"I am light sleeper," Ilya says finally, drawing Shane out of his musings. "If something happens—"

"I'll wake you," Shane finishes.

That seems to do it. Ilya's shoulders loosen, tension draining out of him in a way Shane hadn't even realised was there.

"Well, okay," Ilya says, half to himself. He shifts, curling slightly onto his side, boots braced against the seatback, jacket bunched under his head like a makeshift pillow. He's like a kitten, curled up tight with his arms tucked around himself — trying to fold himself up into an invisible ball.

There's a bruise just visible at his temple, yellowing at the edges. A faint cut on his knuckle Shane doesn't remember seeing cleaned. He looks younger like this, lashes dark against his cheeks, arrogance softened into something almost gentle.

The legend says that Nike sided with Zeus during the Titanomachy, driving his chariot as he turned on his father and wrought victory to the Olympians, alongside Kratos and Bia. Shane, for as long as he can remember, never understood that choice. It places his mother in the epicentre of the vengeance of the Titans, of Kronos. If anything were to go wrong, she'd be seen as the trigger which caused the swing of the tide of victory into Zeus' favour. He'd never understood that decision. Until now. Because he does not understand Zeus, but he thinks he might be beginning to understand Ilya Rozanov.

Nike must have known what siding with Zeus would cost her — the enemies it would earn, the attention it would draw, the way it would put a target on everyone she loved. She must have known that victory is never clean. That it always demands a witness, and often a sacrifice. And still she chose him.

The city gives way to suburbs gives way to countryside. The train ploughs its way through the Hudson Valley. Shane's content to sit and stare out of the window as the train rolls through the lush green country. His reflection hovers in the window.

The river keeps him company, a long silver ribbon unfurling beside the tracks. Every so often it flashes between the trees—sunlight glancing off its surface like a signal he can't quite decipher. The hills rise and fall in slow, deliberate breaths, their slopes dotted with farmhouses. Cows graze in lazy clusters. A lone tractor crawls across a distant field, patient as a beetle.

He feels the tension of the city loosening in increments, unwinding from his shoulders with each mile. Out here, the air looks cleaner even through the glass. The colours are softer, the greens deeper, the sky a wide unbroken blue that makes him realise how long it's been since he last looked up without bracing for something. The train will take them all the way up through New York, past Albany and into Canada.

The hours churn on. Ilya must've been more tired than he was letting on, as once his breath evens out and the pinch between his eyebrows finally releases, he's out cold, not stirring even once over the next few hours, apart from the occasional twitch.

It feels faintly illicit, like catching something private that wasn't meant to be seen. Ilya asleep is softer in ways he never is awake — the hard lines of vigilance eased, the perpetual readiness slackened just enough to look human. His head has tipped toward the window,

lashes golden and spanning against his cheek, mouth parted on a slow, steady rhythm of breath. He hugs his backpack close like a teddybear.

Shane lets the countryside roll past and half the time looks at Ilya and the other half at the countryside.

Nike must have known what it meant to choose Zeus. To understand that standing beside someone at the center of the storm meant you would never again be untouched by it.

Shane presses his forehead briefly to the cool glass. The river has widened now, the Hudson spreading into something broad and powerful, carrying silt southward without apology.

The train hums. The rhythm is hypnotic. He lets himself rest his eyes. When he opens them again, the light has changed.

The sky has dulled from blue to a washed-out grey, clouds sliding in thick and low, pressing down on the hills. The river is harder to see now, its silver sheen muted, swallowed by shadow and distance.

Shane slips out of his seat with practiced quiet, careful not to jostle the man asleep across the aisle or brush too close to Ilya's knees. The train hums steadily beneath him, a low, reassuring vibration that feels almost domestic after everything they've survived to get here. Outside the window, the countryside slides by in grey, blurred bands — fields, tree lines, the occasional farmhouse light blinking like a lone watchful eye. It must be late afternoon by now.

He tells himself it'll be quick. In and out. One call, just to check if his father will pick up this time. He has to slip through maybe eight or nine carriages to get to the phone, shuffling down aisles of people with his hood up and his eyes down.

The carriage phone is at the far end, mounted near the vestibule between cars. It's somewhat of an anachronism, really — dull grey plastic, curled cord, the kind of thing no one uses anymore. That's why it feels safe. He reaches it and fishes into his pocket, feeding some dimes into the machine and punching in his father's number. He sends a quick prayer up for his father to answer.

Ring, ring, ring. It's taunting. He waits for the whole duration of the dial, hoping against hope that his father will pick up. But there's no reply, as ever. Shane huffs and remounts the phone. Nerves have gathered in his fingers, making them tingle. He fights the urge to redial.

That's when he hears it: "Shane Hollander!" A friendly call down the carriage, loud in the low droning white noise of conversation and the clack-clack of the wheels. He turns, heart leaping to his throat. Only to slump, relieved, when he spots a familiar face.

He squints. "Ryan? Is that you?" Ryan Price shuffles his way down the aisle towards him. He's tall, even taller than Shane, maybe even Ilya, with a wild thicket of auburn hair upon his head. Ah, shit. He's one of Shane's classmates from school — they play hockey together in the Junior Leagues.

“What are you doing here?” Shane splutters, but allows himself to be taken into a one-sided hug.

“What am I doing here? What are *you* doing here? Why are you in New York?”

Shane laughs, a little too loud, riding the relief while it lasts. “Visiting,” he says automatically. “Family stuff.” The words come easy; they always do. Half his life has been explanations like that.

Ryan pulls back, squinting at him with the sharp, curious gaze of someone who’s spent years reading bodies on the ice. “You look like hell,” he says frankly. “You sick or something?”

“Pulled a muscle,” Shane lies, without missing a beat. “Game last week.”

Ryan snorts. “Figures. You always play like you’re trying to die gloriously.”

Shane grins, but it feels brittle. “I’ll take that as a compliment. It scores us goals.”

Ryan crosses his arms, nodding, “that it does, man. Hey, listen, do you wanna come sit with us? You’ve met my mom and my little sister? She went a bit wild in the cafe carriage so now we have, like, way too much trail mix to eat alone. Are you travelling by yourself?”

And Shane likes the idea. He likes the idea *a lot*. To sit down with Ryan Price, certified normal guy, with his certified normal family and eat their normal snacks. To take a momentary break from this whole ordeal of madness that’s become the fragile construction of his life, and just pretend for a moment. But he can’t. He’s already left Ilya by himself for too long.

Shane hesitates. For half a heartbeat, he lets himself picture it: slouched in a booth with Ryan’s family, passing a bag of trail mix back and forth, complaining about coaches and ice time and homework like nothing in the world is wrong. Like monsters don’t exist. Like his ribs don’t ache and the fate of his father isn’t a live wire humming under his skin.

“I…” it pains him to say it. “I can’t. I’m travelling with a friend of mine.” He can’t bring Ilya here, either. His cheeks burn at the mere thought. Ilya is something magnificent, right out of a Greek Epic. To squish him in a conversation with mundane humans and force him into the box of normalcy feels heretical.

He’s acutely aware of the space behind him now — the long stretch of carriages he needs to retrace to get back to Ilya. He glances over Ryan’s shoulder, orienting himself by habit. If Shane doesn’t get back, Ilya will hunt him down.

Ryan tilts his head. “Someone?” He peers past Shane, as if he might spot Ilya immediately. “Your brother or something?”

“Something like that,” Shane says lightly. He shifts his weight, already angling his body toward the aisle. “Tell your sister I said hi, yeah? And—uh—enjoy the trail mix.”

Ryan laughs. “Your loss.”

Shane nods, forces a little smile even if it feels so very artificial on his cheeks. “Yeah. I know.”

He steps away before Ryan can say anything else, before the normalcy can dig its hooks in any deeper. The train has slowed — not enough to alarm, but enough that Shane notices the difference in the cadence of the wheels. A soft vibration runs through the carriage.

He tries the button to let him pass through the carriage— but nothing happens. He presses it again. Harder this time. The little red indicator above the door flickers, then goes dark. “Come on,” Shane mutters under his breath.

The train lurches a long, dragging deceleration that pulls at his balance and sends a murmur rippling through the carriage behind him. Someone laughs nervously. Someone else sighs, already annoyed, like this is just another delay to be endured.

The door stays shut. Shane glances at the window beside it and feels his stomach drop.

Outside, fog has begun to gather. Pockets of it, pale veils swirling low across the ground, lazily across the trees. It climbs, slow and steady, smearing the landscape until the world behind the glass blurs, dissolving into layers of white like they’ve just ridden into a cloud.

Shane curses, a slow rolling dread creeping up his spine. He fishes Tiebreaker out of his pocket but does not brandish it. Instead, he uses the tip of the key and wedges it into the slim slit that runs between the sliding door and the frame. His wrist aches with the force of it, but he finally manages to get the door to relent a little, allowing him to slip his fingers into the gap and force the door open.

Cold air spills in at once, damp and sharp, raising gooseflesh along Shane’s arms. The fog breathes against him, thicker here, curling through the narrow opening like something curious about being invited inside.

“Shit,” he mutters, but he doesn’t hesitate. He shoulders through the gap and into the narrow vestibule between carriages. The floor vibrates faintly beneath his feet, the train no longer gliding so much as crawling, metal complaining softly as if reluctant to go any farther. He traces his way back through the carriages, windows as though they’ve been painted an opaque white. Humans mutter complaints about the standstill and the weather and the possible correlation between the two, but they don’t see the threat, they don’t see the risk.

Shane presses his palm to it. He basically kicks in the door to their carriage and rushes towards Ilya. The carriage is quiet but well-preserved. Ilya is sitting where Shane left him, and Shane is upon him a moment later, hands furiously shaking him awake.

“Rozanov. Rozanov, wake up,” Shane jostles his shoulder. Ilya draws in a deep sharp breath, his nose scrunching as though the mere concept of consciousness disgusts him. For a moment he squints innocently up at Shane, clouded with sleep, and smiles dopily. His smile fades when he realises that Shane isn’t smiling back at him, like a put-out child. Shane pokes him again and points to the window.

Ilya turns — slow at first, then when he sees the fog, a full body jolt. He presses his hand to the condensation-slick glass and tries to peer through it. He curses in Russian, then, as if to translate for Shane: “What the fuck?”

“A monster?” Shane feels a static charge in the damp air, a sense of being watched by the blank whiteness itself. He squints out, half expecting to see eyes through the cloud. He doesn’t.

"Maybe." Ilya turns from the window, his gaze sweeping their carriage. The other passengers are irritated, bored, tapping on phones with fading signals. A child asks her mother why they've stopped. No one else feels the deep, silent wrongness. "We cannot stay here. Sitting goose."

“Sitting ducks,” Shane corrects. He splints to Ilya. "The train's stopped. We're in the middle of nowhere.”

"Exactly. Better than a tunnel. Or a bridge." Ilya is already shrugging into his jacket and slinging his pack over one shoulder like he wasn’t dead asleep a few moments ago. He hands Shane's bag to him. "We get off. Move away from tracks. Find high ground, wait for it to pass."

"And if it doesn't pass? If it's looking for us?"

"Then we are not in a metal box when it finds us." Shane cannot argue with his brutal logic. Ilya glances toward the end of the carriage. "You came from that way. The door worked?"

"Barely. I had to force it."

"Then we go to the other way. To last car. There’ll be less people and more exits." He moves into the aisle, but not before his eyes land on the curved blade at his hip. He touches the hilt once, a silent check, then nods to Shane. "We are just two kids stretching our legs."

They move quickly down the aisle, drawing a few curious glances from passengers lost in their own delays. Ilya’s presence, however, seems to discourage questions. He has a way of making their movement seem inevitable and authorized. He could be the train conductor for the way he carries himself, confident and draconian.

The fog presses thicker against the windows as they move through each carriage, the world beyond dissolving into pure, soundless white. The air inside grows colder, the dampness seeping through the joints in the metal, and Shane’s joints too.

When they finally reach the last carriage, they survey it through the window and find it's nearly empty, just an elderly couple dozing at the far end. The rear door has an emergency release handle. They dash over to it. Ilya doesn't hesitate. He looks at Shane, a question in his eyes. *Ready?*

Shane grips the strap of his pack, his other hand finding the key in his pocket. He thinks of his father, of the silent phone, of the Keres's taunts. His favourite picture book as a child was *we're going on a bear hunt*. He used to get his mother to read it to him before bed. This fog,

whatever it is, is part of the path. They cannot go over, under, or around it. Instead, through it.

He nods.

Ilya yanks the handle. A loud, shocking alarm blares. It's a harsh, electronic shriek that makes Shane cringe back and glance over their shoulder anxiously — but the door unlocks. Ilya shoves it open, and a wall of cold, wet fog billows into the carriage, carrying the smell of damp earth and something else... something metallic and old, like rusting armor.

"Go!" Ilya barks.

Shane jumps down onto the gravel shoulder beside the tracks, the impact jolting up his legs and ribs. Ilya lands beside him a second later, already turning, scanning the white void that has swallowed the world.

Behind them, the train alarm continues to wail, a desperate sound muffled by the fog. Figures appear in the doorway, shouting questions that are too far away to make sense. Ilya grabs Shane's arm and pulls him away from the tracks, off the gravel, and into the field that borders the railway.

They're swallowed by the fog immediately, visibility dropping to less than ten feet. The sounds of the train become faint, then vanish, as if they've stepped through a curtain into another world. They trek through the grass.

They're moving down into the valley, a steep downhill that they have to skid carefully down lest they trip. The rushing, bubbling sounds of the river grow louder. Aside from that gargling white noise, all is silent, damp, and cold. Dew soaks through their trousers. It smells like brine.

They slow to a stop and fall into, somewhat automatically, a back-to-back formation Ilya is listening and watching, his head cocked. He's like a meerkat, constantly twitching and scanning. He must be feeling the air, Shane realises, the pressure, the subtle currents in the fog.

"It's not just fog," Ilya whispers, his breath a pale plume in the white. "It's too still."

As if summoned, a shape, dark and tall and impossibly slender, moves through the mist to their left. It is serpentine and languid and disappears when Shane tries to look harder, like a mere thought of solidity.

They move downslope, angling away from the river's immediate edge. The ground turns treacherous — mud slick beneath wet grass — and Shane nearly goes down when his boot skids. Ilya catches him without looking, hand iron-hard on his sleeve. "Careful."

"I'm fine," Shane shakes him off.

The shape returns, closer now: not tall this time, but vast, a suggestion of bulk moving parallel to the river's course and sliding through the reeds. Some kind of water creature, a

river snake. A long, pale curve ghosts through the mist, ribbed and ancient, etched with scars worn smooth by centuries. An eye opens somewhere out there, vast and lidless, reflecting nothing.

“Scylla?” murmurs Shane.

Ilya’s eyes reflect the fog, making them look almost milky, blank. “No,” he murmurs. The creature croons low and wailing — a haunting, purring sound, and Ilya stills. “Cetus.” Sea-monster.

The fog parts violently as a vast shadow looms. Shane barely has time to register the Cetus’s tail — a fluke the size of a small car — smashing down atop them. The impact punches into the earth, sending spray of mud and water like shrapnel in every direction. Ilya stumbles back, caught off guard, and Shane dives forward, landing flat on his stomach to avoid the crushing force.

“Ilya!” he cries, scrambling upright, but he’s lost him to the fog. He goes still, listening, scanning the air around him for movement as he stumbles blind through the fog.

Shane feels the earth tremble beneath him. The tail lifts again, slower this time, almost contemplative, as if the creature is amused by its own power. He glances around: trees, loose branches, the shallow riverbed nearby... nothing is enough to match it head-on. He breaks into a sprint away from the creature, ducking low and fast.

He pulls Tiebreaker free and transforms it mid-stride. The blade hums, a clean, bright sound that cuts through the muffled world. He doesn’t aim for the creature — he can’t — but for the fog itself, slashing a line through the air. The mist recoils, briefly, as if offended, but then curls back in.

Cold water sprays up from the riverbank, soaking him to the knees. Shane’s lungs burn; his injured side screams. He must find Ilya.

His hands are shaking now, betraying him. He thinks he might be going in circles, prowling the fog in a slow anxious pace. He can’t call for Ilya, that would give his position away. The fog hides them from the Cetus, too, but the moment he makes too much noise, it will hound him.

A low, guttural sound, like boulders grinding together, vibrates through the ground. The Cetus is moving again, not with a predatory rush, but with a terrible, patient certainty. It’s terrifying. Shane is all turned around, relying on the sound of the river to orient himself. The rushing wooshing of the water helps muffle the sound of his footsteps.

Then his eyes fall on the trackside telegraph poles, the thin metal wires strung between them, thin and barely visible through the whiteness. Is there a way to knock one of those down? He heads closer, mud sucking at his trainers. Then he sees him. A figure clambering up the side of the telegraph pole.

Ilya.

He gasps, and it's too much noise. The mist curls, momentarily shifting, revealing a silhouette of the tail as it arcs back toward him. He ducks, barely avoiding the impact, and rolls sideways, mud coating his arms and face. It's cold. He crawls away on his belly like a lizard, staying low even as the mud soaks through to his skin, chilling him to the bone.

He watches, breath baited, as Ilya climbs to the top of the pole. There, he makes a back-and-forth movement with his arm, and Shane realises he's trying to cut through the cable. When he thinks it's thin enough, Ilya leaps like an acrobat onto the wire, yanking it down at the exact moment the Cetus lashes towards the water's edge.

A crack like thunder splits the air. The wire snaps, sending a shower of sparks through the air and across the wet mud. The Cetus lets out a banshee howl as white-hot lightning arcs through the water, striking its scaled flank. It thrashes wildly. Shane scrambles backwards, out of range. The cable falls, and so does Ilya, disappearing into the frothy depths of the water.

Then his body moves before his mind can catch up.

"Roza—" The scream tears from his throat, raw and desperate. He scrambles to his feet, ignoring the fiery protest in his side, and plunges toward the riverbank. The mud tries to claim him, sucking at his legs, but he fights through, his eyes fixed on the turbulent water.

The Cetus is wounded, its movements becoming sluggish and uncoordinated, a great, scaled mass shuddering in the shallows. But it's still there, still dangerous. Shane doesn't care. He wades into the icy water, gasping as it soaks through his clothes, reaching his waist.

"Ilya!"

His hands slash through the murky water, opaque from upchurned mud and the thrashing of the creature. He's feeling for fabric, for limbs, for anything. The current tugs at him. Panic, cold and sharp, lances through his veins. He can't swim like this, not with his ribs, not in this cold—

His fingers brush something. Skin. He grabs and pulls with all his might.

Ilya breaks the surface with a ragged, choking gasp, his eyes wide and blind with shock, hair plastered to his face. He's dead weight, his body limp. Shane hooks an arm under his shoulders, clamping him against his own chest, and begins a clumsy, agonizing backwards stumble toward the bank.

Every step is a battle against the water, the mud, and the sheer, leaden weight of the boy in his arms. With a final grunt and a heave, Shane collapses onto the muddy shore, Ilya half on top of him. He immediately rolls Ilya onto his side. Water streams from Ilya's mouth and nose in a continuous cough. His skin is pale as marble, lips tinged blue.

"Ilya, come on, look at me," Shane orders, his voice trembling. He slaps Ilya's cheek, not hard, but sharp. "Breathe, you stubborn asshole, breathe."

Ilya's body convulses with another round of violent coughs, but his eyes flutter open. They're unfocused, the glacial blue clouded with pain and disorientation. They land on Shane's face and narrow slightly. "...*zoloste?*" he slurs. It must be Russian. It's hardly even comprehensible as such, his voice thick and waterlogged.

"Yeah, it's me," Shane says, the relief so potent it feels like a punch. He brushes sodden, muddy hair back from Ilya's forehead. His fingers come away smeared with blood from his temple wound, now washed pale by the river. "Don't you ever do that again."

Ilya tries to sit up, fails, and collapses back against Shane with a pained grunt. His right arm hangs at an awkward angle. "Shoulder," he grits out. "Dislocated."

Behind them, the Cetus gives one last, shuddering heave before sinking beneath the surface, leaving only a spreading oil-slick of disturbance on the water. The fog, its purpose spent or its creator wounded, is unraveling rapidly, retreating into the woods and the sky as if it had never been.

The world comes back into focus. A grey sky, the train chugging away from them now — something Shane hardly even has time to process — the stark, muddy field. How exposed they are down in the centre of the valley by the river.

Shane helps Ilya sit up properly, supporting his weight. "Can you walk?"

Ilya tests his legs, his face tightening. "Yes."

"Don't be lying." Shane gets an arm around Ilya's waist, ignoring the screaming pain in his own ribs. Ilya leans into him, his good arm slung over Shane's shoulders. They are a three-legged, shambling mess, leaving a trail of mud and water.

They find a cluster of large rocks a few hundred yards from the river, a feeble excuse for cover. Shane lowers Ilya to sit against the largest one. Ilya's head lolls back, his breathing shallow. "We have to walk to Canada now," slurs Ilya. Shane's so relieved to hear a comprehensible sentence out of him that he doesn't even care what he said.

Chapter End Notes

the image of Ilya swinging like Tarzan from a electricity pole keeps making me giggle. ty for reading!

Chapter 10: all the tales the same

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

From a distance, the motel looks like a soggy shoe box, only getting worse as Ilya and Shane trek closer. It's a run down building below an overpass. It has taken them the better part of four hours to hike to the nearest town, and then hunt down a motel to hunker down for the night.

The only name it gives is a flickering neon sign above the entrance. Dirty red light reflected off motorcycles, garbage lids and broken glass. It'll work to hide them.

Ilya doesn't complain, but he is freezing. The river had been a shock to his system, and even the electricity he'd rerouted from the pylon had not warmed him up. He can still taste muddy riverwater caked behind his teeth. His shoes are soaked through, as well as his jeans and his coat, and if he wasn't so exhausted he'd be shivering. Shane threw his coat atop Ilya's for additional warmth, but it hasn't done much good. He doesn't think that's a good sign. Shane has taken to helping him along, a hand around his waist to keep him upright.

The blast of warm air from the AC unit is a lovely surprise as they reach the door. It helps bring Ilya back to his body enough to pull some cash from his bag and slap it on the table. Shane does the rest of the talking. There's a map on the wall behind the teenage receptionist: Albany. They're in Albany.

Ilya's eyes don't want to open as Shane takes the keys, thanks the receptionist, and pulls him down the corridor. He feels sluggish and slow in a way that would be frightening if he wasn't so tired. Shane drags him to the correct room.

They find out that the room actually looks like the inside of a shoebox. It's missing some things too. At least it's warmer than the night pressing in against the windows: offered a moldy bathroom, a small rusty fridge and even a shelf containing nothing but a few cheap bowls and plates, probably meant for take-out. Ilya puts down his bag next to the fridge.

Shane turns on the lamp and draws the curtains tightly shut. Then he manovres Ilya into the room, from his position swaying in the hallway. He pushes Ilya down onto the mattress and his warm hands cup Ilya's face.

"You're still soaked," he mutters, and Ilya cracks open an eye to watch his narrowed eyes and tight lip. Then Shane's fingers start moving, unbuttoning the front of Ilya's coat and pulling his arms through the wet, heavy fabric. Shane then helps him out of his shirt. Ilya just raises his hands over his head and makes Shane do the hard work, secretly revelling in the curve of Shane's hands over his cold chest as he works. Then he kicks the shirt aside and moves away.

"There are nicer ways to ask me to sleep with you," Ilya calls deliriously after him.

Shane snorts. "As if," he says, then comes back a moment later and swaddles a thick, fluffy towel around Ilya. It must've been resting by a radiator, as it's still warm. "Use this," Shane instructs, no-nonsense, and Ilya feebly wipes the residue cold moisture from his skin and wrings out his hair as Shane works to wiggle his jeans from his legs.

When it's all off, Ilya is left shivering wrapped in his towel and underwear. He's too tired to care, even if he's confused, as Shane pulls off his clothes too and then guides Ilya back until he flops against the sheet, and crawls in after him.

Ilya shivers in little spasms against the pillow, like his body doesn't know what to do with the sudden onslaught of warmth. All he knows is that he wants more of it. With that in mind, he presses closer to Shane, tucking against his warm body and pressing his freezing toes against Shane's shins

His curse this time is French, but instead of withdrawing, he wraps his warm arms around Ilya and draws him in even closer until they're pressed flush, chest-to-chest. Ilya's skin tingles. It's been a while since someone touched him, this tenderly, this personally.

Maybe I've died, he thinks deliriously, staring across the pillow at Shane's face, scrunched with discomfort at the chill that radiates off of Ilya. *I've died and this is Heaven. Or Elysium, or whatever.*

Shane doesn't pull away from his icy toes. He just shifts, tangling their legs together more securely, creating a pocket of shared heat under the scratchy motel blanket. One hand comes up to cup the back of Ilya's head, fingers threading through his damp, golden curls, holding him close. The other rubs slow, firm circles against the cold skin of Ilya's back, trying to generate friction to chase the deep-seated chill from his bones.

"Just breathe," Shane murmurs, his voice a low vibration against Ilya's forehead. "Just get warm."

Ilya can't do much but obey, focusing on the solid, steady beat of Shane's heart against his own slowing, shivering pulse. The frantic, animal need to fight or flee, which had been humming in his veins since the sky spat him out over Camp Half-Blood, begins to quiet. Here, in this dingy, anonymous room, pressed against the son of Nike, there is no storm to weather, no monster to outrun. There is only the scratch of cheap polyester sheets, the distant hum of the highway, and the overwhelming, undeniable reality of being vulnerable in the care of another.

The weight of his father's distant, demanding presence. The ghost of his mama's love. The constant, buzzing awareness of his own unnatural power, a live wire no one else could touch. It had all settled into a permanent, lonely ache in his joints. Hollander did not have to be so cruel when he set Ilya's shoulder. It hurt like a bitch when he snapped it back into the socket.

Now, with Shane's warmth seeping into him, the ache begins to thaw. It's terrifying.

He creeps forwards, slowly, and Shane doesn't protest as Ilya clings, his face half-buried in Shane's neck. The words are slurred with exhaustion, barely audible, "we shouldn't..."

Shane goes still in all manners but the slow circles he rubs into the nape of Ilya's neck. "Shouldn't what?"

"This. I'm... dangerous."

Shane's hand stills for a moment on his back. Then the rubbing resumes, even more deliberate. "Right now, you're a popsicle. The most dangerous thing about you is your elbows. Don't jab me with them."

A weak, shuddering laugh escapes Ilya. It hurts his chest, but in a good way. "I am serious. This might have been... bad idea. The things that are after me, they are not after you. Not really."

"Then they're stupid," Shane says, his tone leaving no room for argument. "And they don't know how we work."

We. The word hangs in the air between them. Ilya wants to argue but the words won't come. His eyelids are too heavy. The shivers are subsiding, replaced by a deep, bone-melting lethargy. The warmth is creeping over him.

He feels Shane shift, reaching for something on the nightstand. There's the rustle of a wrapper, then the sweet, faint scent of ambrosia — a square of it, broken in half. Shane presses a piece to Ilya's lips.

"Eat. Small bites."

Ilya complies, the divine food dissolving on his tongue with the flavor of pech — his grandmother's wood-fired stove in the dacha outside Moscow, the smell of pine resin and snow, a fleeting sense of sanctuary from a lifetime ago. A tear, hot and completely unexpected, tracks from the corner of his eye into the pillow, absorbed there.

Shane does not catch it, he just finishes his own piece and settles back, pulling Ilya in again, tucking the blanket more securely around them. His breathing slows, deepens.

In the half-light from the lamp across the room, Ilya finally opens his eyes. He can just make out the curve of Shane's cheek, the fan of his dark lashes, the relaxed line of his mouth. He's close — too close for polite conversation, close enough that Ilya can count his freckles. A delirious part of him wants to. The son of Victory, sleeping beside a stolen son of a stolen king. Ilya finds himself drifting.

Time stretches or compresses. It's hard to tell.

At some point, there's a sound outside that snaps Ilya awake. Footsteps crunch on gravel, then the rumble of an engine idling too long. Headlights sweep briefly through the thin strip of window where the curtain doesn't quite meet the wall. Shane stills against him, every muscle going taut as his arm tightens around Ilya's shoulders.

Voices drift past the door. They sound like men, laughing boisterously. Time has passed, it's fully dark outside. Someone rattles a doorknob two rooms down, followed by a slurred curse

and more laughter.

Ilya's eyes crack open. "Company?" he murmurs.

"Just people," Shane whispers back. "Drunks."

That doesn't make them less dangerous. Not really. The footsteps pause outside their door. A shadow lingers beneath the crack. Ilya's heart stutters, sluggish and heavy in his chest. Shane doesn't move. He doesn't reach for his key. He just breathes, slow and controlled, keeping Ilya pinned safely against him, like he can shield him with his body alone. Ilya wants to flip them around, wants to get between Shane and the door, but doesn't dare make noise.

After a moment too long, the footsteps recede, the shadow vanishes, and they move on. Only then does Shane exhale. "See?" he murmurs, softer than Ilya has ever heard from him. "Nothing supernatural. Just assholes."

Ilya swallows. His throat feels raw. "Sometimes I prefer the monsters," he says faintly.

Shane snorts under his breath, the sound vibrating through Ilya's chest. "Yeah. Me too." Then sleep grabs Ilya in its grip and yanks him back under.

When he next comes to, Ilya reaches across the bed, fighting the honeyed dregs of sleep, only to frown when his hand does not reach another person, and instead drifts along a cold sheet. Realisation grips him and Ilya jerks his head up, croaking, "Hollander?"

Then he hears it — the pipes gurgling through the wall, the sound of running water in the bathroom. Shane has left the door ajar, too. Pale light spills into the room through the crack in the bathroom door, and steam gently wafts out. It reminds him a little too much of the Cetus' fog.

They've slept for a long time. Ilya hasn't slept that deeply in a long time — he must have been tired. Dawn light is beginning to trickle through the curtains on the far side of the room. Shane's left him what's left of the gatorade, flat and warm, but Ilya gulps it eagerly. Then he burps, groans, and rolls over, burrowing his face in the pillow.

With Shane in the shower, Ilya sits upright, the sheets pooling around him. His hair has gone nuts after going to bed wet with it rubbing against a scratchy pillow, so he combs his fingers through it to try and tame some of the wildness, and assesses the room.

At some point Shane neatly hung out Ilya's clothes on the radiator beneath the window, where they must've been drying overnight. Huh. Ilya slips out of bed to inspect them, when his foot nudges against something on the carpet. He looks down. Nestled between tufts of gummy carpet, there's the low glint of something silver.

A bracelet, he realises, as he bends down to pick it up. A silver ropey thing with a large clasp. Ilya considers it in his hand for a moment. It definitely isn't his, and it's not the type of place where a piece of jewellery this fine would be left out in a room without being stolen. He tilts it, rubs his thumb over the silver engraving.

When Shane comes out of the shower, Ilya gestures with the bracelet. “This yours?”

Shane’s skin is flushed rosy from the steam. His towel is slung casually over his shoulder, but he’s wearing his jeans. His hair is wet, and he smells faintly of orange-scented shower gel. He pauses and frowns. “No, uh. I think that fell out of your pocket.”

Ilya doesn’t remember it, but he’s spared from thinking on it further when he looks back over and lets his eyes slide greedily over Shane’s exposed upper body. He’s very well chiselled. Skin tan, shoulders broad, his abs well-defined. He’s also spotted with small scars, both old and new, the skin abridged and bumpy and shiningly new.

Shane goes red. “Sorry,” he mumbles, and reaches for the shirt he’d slung over the back of the chair. Ilya doesn’t know why he’s apologising — there’s no harm in looking, and he wasn’t being critical at all. Ilya himself is only in his boxers. Shane ripped the rest of his clothes off of him last night, and the thought has him smothering his smile.

“You feeling better?” Shane asks.

Ilya nods, and looks down at the bracelet. The metal is warm now from his skin. There’s a subtle heft to it that doesn’t quite match its size, a sense of density, like it contains more than it should. He slips it around his wrist experimentally. The clasp clicks shut with a soft, decisive sound.

A faint heat creeps up Ilya’s neck. “Is fine,” he says, then dares to ask, “all from Camp?”

“Most of them,” Shane replies, then tilts his head up to show off the lean, smooth stretch of skin just below his chin. He runs his finger along a scar that Ilya had noticed a few times, pink and bumpy, running along the track of his jaw. “Got this one playing ice hockey.”

Ilya goes utterly still.

Shane drops his hand, suddenly nervous, asking a defensive, “what?”

“You play ice hockey.”

“...Yes?”

Ilya presses a dramatic hand to his chest and says emphatically, “*I* play ice hockey.”

Then Shane blinks. “You— wait. You’re serious?”

“Deadly,” Ilya says. His mouth twitches, betraying him. “Since I was six. Centre forward. Moscow youth leagues.”

Shane’s face does something startled and bright all at once, like someone’s just handed him a secret key. “No way.”

Ilya nods eagerly, giddy suddenly, a child let loose in a candy store. “Yes way.”

“That explains so much,” Shane says, pointing at him, delighted despite himself. “Why you’re—” makes a vague slicing gesture with his hand. “I play centre forward too.” Shane laughs, a real one, warm and surprised, and the sound loosens something tight in Ilya’s chest. “Since I was four. Junior Leagues,” Shane offers, “in Ottawa. I was fast and annoying and nobody liked playing against me.”

“That checks out.”

“Hey!” Shane protests, but they’re both trying to hide their smiles, and they’re too pleased with each other to be actually annoyed.

Ilya grins openly now, unabashed. “Fast and annoying is best kind of player,” he says. “Coach always says: if other team hates you, you are doing something right.”

Shane’s shoulders loosen, like that sentence slots into a place already carved out in him. “Yeah. Yeah, exactly.” He pauses, then adds, quieter, “My coach used to bench anyone who’d mouth off. Strict no-chirping rule.”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “Mine encouraged it.”

“Of course he did.”

They lapse into an easy quiet, the kind that feels earned. Then Shane snaps out of it. He ducks his head, embarrassed in a way that Ilya thinks has nothing to do with naked torsos or shared beds. He grabs his bag, slinging it over one shoulder. “Okay. Hockey revelations aside — we need a plan. We’re a couple miles out from Schenectady,” Shane notes. “We could catch another train from there?”

“I am not getting on another train, Hollander,” Ilya grumbles.

Shane doesn’t miss a beat. “Not a train, then. There’s a highway north. A car. We could rent a car?”

Ilya purses his lips. “This is acceptable. We get Porsche.”

Shane snorts. “You are not getting a Porsche.”

Ilya’s eyes light, wicked and hopeful all at once. “You do not know this.”

“I know this,” Shane says firmly. “We’re two teenagers, one of us looks half-dead, and neither of us has a credit card.”

Ilya clicks his tongue, conceding the point with visible reluctance. “Fine. Some other car. Still fast.” He perks up, “and breakfast first.”

They shoulder their bags and step out into the brittle morning air. The motel lot is already stirring: a delivery truck idling, a woman smoking beside a minivan, the hum of traffic bleeding in from the overpass. Ordinary and boring — just what they need.

The rain is so weak it shies away from touching them; gathering in shallow puddles and reflecting all of the light it could grasp. Ilya pulls his coat hood up and tries not to be miserable. It's difficult with the sun bleeding out behind the clouds, and the rain coming down in silver ropes. They walk down into the main Schenectady down-town, away from the motel. Blurred shapes pass them on narrow streets. With their hats down and their collars up, they look like faceless ghosts.

They dodge between the light of passing cars until they reach a tiny diner; crammed into a niche between buildings twice as high. Warm light shines through the windows and the red filtered blinds. Ilya goes in first and picks a spot at the back of the diner. It smells like burnt coffee and hot oil. The menus are laminated and sticky beneath his fingers as he pulls one towards him and inspects it and the vinyl cover on the booth tugs at his jeans as he sits.

Ilya traces his finger down the menu with faux inspection. "I want... one of everything."

Shane glances over his menu at him and scowls. "Our budget is fifteen dollars."

"I'm hungry."

A waitress appears at their table with a coffee pot already in hand, like she's been summoned by the word budget. She looks tired, her name etched into a plastic badge pinned crookedly to her apron. "What can I get you boys?"

"Two coffees," Shane says immediately. "Black. And—" He glances at Ilya, warning clear in his eyes.

Ilya doesn't even look back. "Pancakes," he says. "With bacon. And eggs."

Marlene raises an eyebrow. "All of that?"

"Yes," Ilya says solemnly. "For my recovery."

Shane pinches the bridge of his nose. "Just— just the pancakes. Please. Two lots."

Marlene smiles like she's seen this exact dynamic a hundred times. "Pancakes it is." She pours coffee into their mugs, the liquid sloshing dark and steaming, and moves on.

They sit in companionable silence for a moment. Rain ticks against the windows. Somewhere near the counter, a radio murmurs low and tinny.

Ilya wraps both hands around his mug and sighs. The warmth seeps into his fingers, into his wrists. Only then does he notice it again — the bracelet, heavy and warm against his skin. He frowns down at it, thumb rubbing over the engraved surface. For a second, he could swear the metal pulses, faint as a heartbeat.

Shane notices the look. "You okay?"

Ilya hesitates. "Did you—" He stops himself, shakes his head. "Nothing."

Shane narrows his eyes but lets it go. He leans back, gaze drifting toward the front of the diner. “After this, we will find a rental place,” he says quietly. “Get north and stick to highways. No trains. No rivers if we can help it.”

“I will handle car,” Ilya says.

“You’re not going to steal one, are you?”

Ilya waves him off. “Of course not,” he says, with full intention of stealing a car. “I will find rental that does not ask for license. Or insurance. Or money.”

Shane gives him a flat look, but he must be aware of the fact that they don’t have any other choice. Ilya has never stolen a car before, but he’s seen many cars being stolen, so how hard can it be?

Their breakfast comes shortly done — hastily put together, with a drizzling of syrup and dolloped whip cream atop the stack. Ilya’s stomach churns. He hasn’t had anything since last morning’s breakfast, which was that sandwich from the train-station. Shane stares at him unimpressed as Ilya begins to shovel pancake into his mouth, far too much at a time.

Shane kicks his shin under the table. “Slow down,” he mutters. “You’re going to make yourself sick.” Ilya ignores him, cheeks puffed, syrup already on his fingers. He grins as a dribble of cream makes itself known at the edge of his mouth. He swallows hard and reaches for more.

That’s when the bell over the diner door rings.

It’s a small sound, almost lost under the hiss of the griddle and the low murmur of conversation — but Ilya feels it anyway. A pressure shift. The air seems to thicken, like the room has suddenly remembered gravity exists. His grip tightens on his fork.

The woman who steps inside does not look remarkable at first glance. Dark hair pulled back into a severe knot. A long coat, rain-beaded but immaculate. Heavy boots that strike the linoleum with a decisive thud. She takes in the diner in one sweep of her eyes, as if cataloguing structural weak points.

Then her gaze lands on Shane. Her mouth curves upwards. On anyone else, it would look like a smile. “Well,” she says, voice low and carrying across to them without effort. “There you are.”

Shane freezes. The colour drains from his face so fast Ilya actually notices mid-chew. Shane’s shoulders tense, every muscle pulling inward like he’s bracing for impact. She walks toward their booth. Each step feels heavier than the last, like the floor itself is yielding to her weight. A couple at the counter glance over, frown faintly, then return to their food, already forgetting why they looked.

She pauses at the end and plants her hand on the table. Ilya’s already reached for the dagger at his waistband, hand closed around the hilt.

“...Aunt Bia,” Shane says finally, ducking his head

Bia, Goddess of Force, compulsion and momentum, takes off her sunglasses and smiles down at him. “Shane. You’re a long way from home.”

Chapter End Notes

no idea if yuna has any siblings in canon but there we go. a more fluffy chapter this time to give yall a little break, but still lots of whump >:)

Chapter 11: told before and told again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane's only met Bia a few times. She'd jokingly introduced herself as his aunt on one of the first occasions, and the name stuck. Alongside her siblings, Nike and Kratos, Bia aligned with Zeus during the Titanochamy.

He'd felt empowered to tease her with it when his mom was beside him, to tack on the name and hear his mother laugh, prideful at his confidence. But his mother isn't here now. He's in a town he doesn't know, surrounded by risk, with a volatile Goddess appearing out of the blue.

She scares him. Not in the way monsters do, all teeth and fog and violence you can brace against. Bia frightens him because she doesn't threaten him, she never once has. She doesn't posture. She simply arrives, and things move whether you want them to or not.

Shane hadn't expected her to find them here. In a diner with sticky tables and over-sweet coffee, pancakes going cold between them. He'd almost convinced himself they were slipping through the cracks. That Schenectady was small enough, ordinary enough, to hide in.

He curls his fists beneath the table.

Ilya is the one who breaks the silence. He swallows a big mouthful of half-chewed pancake, his eyes wary and assessing. "Can we help you?" he asks, clipped.

Bia's gaze slides to Ilya with a measured slowness, as though she's taking his weight and balance into calculation, figuring out how much force it would take to move him. Shane bristles at the thought. "No," she says simply, and turns her gaze back to Shane.

"You are far from home," she says again, "and you're not far enough."

Does she mean Camp Half-Blood, or his father? "Did mother send you?"

"Your mother?" she snorts, "She'll have my head if she finds out I'm here. She doesn't want you involved," Bia crosses her arms. "But she knows she cannot stop any of this from coming."

Shane exchanges a glance with Ilya, who's tight jawed and glowering out from behind his eyebrows. Knife held in a blanch-knuckled grip. Shane sits up tighter. "Is my father in trouble?"

Bia inclines her head. "That's complicated. Your mom doesn't want you involved, little sprout, but I think she's underestimating you. And your stupidity."

Shane seizes. "Is he hurt? Is he alright?"

It seems Ilya hasn't got the message that he's currently glaring down the Goddess of Might. Shane kicks him again under the table but Ilya doesn't react. He's like a panther, perfectly still, lying in wait and watching the apex towering above him.

"The lines around you both are tangled," she says vaguely. "You think you understand the ocean because you've sailed a pond, Hollander. You do not."

Ilya mutters something in Russian and Bia snaps at him, suddenly hostile, in Russian too. It catches Ilya so off guard that he stares up at her with huge eyes.

Shane swallows, throat tight. "Then why tell me anything at all?"

"Because you will see. You will act," she says, voice low, smooth. She says it like it is a complete, objective fact. "And when you do, be aware: nothing is as it seems. Some invitations are to be ignored. Your mom should've told you victory isn't clean."

Traps dressed in light?

Ilya shifts beside him, fingers tightening around the bracelet, sensing the tension. Shane glances at him, then back at Bia. "So... we keep going?"

Bia tilts her head, letting the diner light catch in her dark eyes. "You will go." She pushes off the booth, straightening her shoulders, the weight of her presence lingering. "Always nice to see you, nephew."

Bia leaves without another word, the bell over the diner door chiming faintly as she disappears into the morning drizzle. Shane looks out across the street, on edge.

"Intensity runs in the family," mutters Ilya, bringing the mug of coffee to his lip to quell some of his tension.

Shane thinks of his mother — of Nike's smile when she used to lovingly lace his skates, all warmth and pride and something fierce under it. *Victory isn't clean*, Bia had reminded him. What had she meant?

"She's not here for my mom," Shane says slowly, working it out loud. "And she's not here to stop us. She's here to, I don't know, adjust our course. Make us think."

"Think about what?" Ilya prods, impatient, but he's listening intently.

Do you think... —Do you think she was warning me off because my mom doesn't think I can handle it?"

He hates the smallness in his own voice. Ilya hears it. He sets his mug down with a definitive clink. "Your mother is Goddess of Victory. You are her son. You have handled everything so far." Ilya's statement is simple and assessing. Shane can't find anything complementary in his tone, just clinical logic. "Bia is force. She sees tangled line and maybe she wants to cut it, not unravel it. We do not take advice from cow in china shop." He's staring at Shane so earnestly, so off-guardedly committed, that it causes some of the tension to leave Shane's shoulders. He's right. Bia's perspective is singular. She overpowers any problem in her path rather than

attempting to solve it. Her warning might just be her version of concern. She highlights that this looks messy, and they might get dirty.

So we get dirty. The resolve hardens, familiar and stubborn. It made it real in a new, divine way. Shane pushes his own plate away, but when he does, he notices something left on the edge of the table. It's a key. His heart jolts, thinking he'd been foolish enough to leave Tiebreaker out in the open like that. But when he carefully takes it into his hand, he realises it's an uncut key. It trembles under his fingers, buzzes against his skin, filled with divine energy. A gift?

He doesn't say anything, just holds it out to Ilya, letting the metal catch in the dull fluorescent light. Ilya's gaze locks into it. His guarded stillness, the rigidness of his shoulders that had been present since Bia had walked in, dissolves. His eyes grow to the size of dinner plates. "Bozhe moi," he breathes, and reaches for it. Shane drops it into his palm.

Ilya turns it over, the cogs in his mind beginning to churn. "No cuts or teeth. It is a blank. A universal blank." He looks up at Shane, and for the first time since the Cetus and the river, a genuine, unguarded light sparks in his eyes. Pure delight. "Your aunt got us a car."

"For any car we like?" Shane muses, watching the hypnotic movement of Ilya's thumb stroking down the uncut edge. No more greyhound schedules, no more exposed stations. They can choose their own vehicle, their own route to Canada, at their own pace.

"A good one," Ilya says, the words urgent with possibility. He's already scanning the parking lot through the window, assessing the rain-slicked vehicles like a soldier with his troops. "Something nice and shiny and fast."

Shane snatches the key back and Ilya whirls on him, betrayed. "We need something unremarkable," says Shane, "with heating. No porsches, or we'll stand out too much."

Ilya tuts. "You are so boring," he grumbles, crossing his arms.

Shane grins despite himself, the tension finally loosening enough to let something like excitement through. He thumbs through and puts down some bills on the table for their food. "I am alive because I am boring," he says, sliding out of the booth. "Come on. Let's find something beige."

Outside, the rain has settled into a steady, needling drizzle. The parking lot glistens under a weak overcast sky. Asphalt reflects headlights and neon diner light in smeared streaks. Even though it's only mid-morning, it could be evening by the dim light. Shane tucks the key safely back into his pocket, fingers lingering for a moment as the faint vibration hums against his thigh, like it knows it's close to being used.

Ilya steps out beside him and immediately starts cataloguing vehicles with ruthless efficiency. "Too ugly," he mutters at a lifted pickup. "Too old. Too stolen already. Definitely cursed." He pauses at a sensible-looking grey sedan and grimaces. "Dear Gods."

They drift further down the lot. He stops in front of a dark blue station wagon. Nothing special, no shine or flash. A faint coffee cup ring on the roof. The kind of car no one

remembers seeing twice.

“This,” Shane says.

Ilya eyes it skeptically. “So ugly.”

Shane snorts. “That’s the point.”

Ilya takes his arm. “No, Hollander, please.” His tone is whining, desperate. He tugs on him and points across the rows of cars, where a silver Mercedes rests by the end of the lot. “That one. She’s calling to me.” She’s also the single most memorable car for fifty miles.

“Absolutely not,” Shane says, his voice flat.

“Why?” Ilya demands, his eyes wide with genuine, wounded appeal. “It is perfect! Fast. Warm. Good sound system, probably. We have a magic key, why not a magic car?”

“Because it’s a beacon!” Shane hisses, keeping his voice low. “Every cop between here and Ottawa will have that license plate number in their head after one glance. It’s the opposite of hiding. We need to be ghosts, Ilya. Not a rolling lightning bolt.”

“It is not a lightning bolt,” Ilya argues, but his shoulders slump slightly. He looks back at the Mercedes with naked longing. “It is just... comfortable. And it has good tires. You can see they are new.”

“The wagon has tires too. Four of them.” Shane grabs his sleeve and pulls him firmly back toward the dark blue station wagon. “This is the one. It’s forgettable. It’s the car your math teacher drives. No one will look twice.”

Ilya lets out a long, pained sigh, dragging his feet. He shoots one last, mournful look at the silver Mercedes as they pass. “You have no soul, Hollander. No poetry.”

“I have a desire to not get arrested or eaten before lunch,” Shane retorts. He stops by the driver’s side door of the wagon. “Well? Do the honors.”

Grumbling in Russian, Ilya takes the uncut key from his pocket. He holds it up to the wagon’s door lock like it’s a piece of fine art he’s being forced to deface. With a final, put-upon sigh, he inserts it. The familiar, subtle vibration. The liquid shift of metal. The solid clunk of the lock disengaging.

Ilya pulls the door open. The interior smells faintly of dog and pine air freshener. It’s meticulously clean, but worn. “See?” Shane says, as Ilya sticks his head inside the driver’s seat. “It’s perfect. Lots of room for our stuff.”

Ilya starts to climb in.

“What are you doing?”

“Driving.”

“Oh no, you don’t.” Shane juts his chin. “My aunt, my gift, ergo, my car.”

Ilya turns puppy dog eyes on him. “You kick me while I am down. You even know how to drive?”

“Yes,” says Shane. “I’m sixteen. I have a probationary license.”

Ilya waits, then proposes, “we arm wrestle for it.”

“Alright, fine.”

A few moments later, Ilya mutters, “it is a box on wheels,” as he drops into the driver’s seat.

He runs his hands over the plain plastic steering wheel with a look of profound disdain. “It does not even have leather.” He pats the roof before snapping the door shut. “We call her *unyniye*. The Gloom.”

“We’re not calling her *The Gloom*,” snaps Shane as he gets into the passenger seat, trying not to pout as he throws his bag into the backseat. He points to the dials. “She has heat and probably great gas mileage. Now start it up, let’s go.”

Ilya obeys with a few more graphic complaints as they pull out of the lot and hit the road. It only takes a few turns and a junction for them to hit a merge lane and join the long stretch of highway that rolls out for miles in front of them. Rain drums against the windscreen. Ilya moves through driving as though it’s instinctual as breathing, sliding through gears, his fingers flexing over the steering wheel. They drive in companionable silence for another few miles. The rain thickens, drumming harder, the wipers squeaking as they sweep back and forth.

“Who taught you to drive?” Shane asks, just for something to say.

Ilya’s glance splits sideways at him. “Stepfather.” He clicks his tongue. “He was no good. How do you say— road rage?”

Shane lets out a short, surprised laugh. “Road rage? Really?”

“Da,” Ilya says, his eyes fixed on the highway, the grey landscape blurring past. A faint, grim smile touches his lips. “Very much so. He would shout at other cars, at snow, at potholes. Once, he got out at a red light to yell at a man who did not signal.” He shrugs, as if this were a normal driving lesson. “He said it was good for me. To learn that the road is a war.”

“That’s... a philosophy,” Shane says carefully, trying to picture a younger Ilya, all sharp edges and silent fury, trapped in a car with a raging stepfather. It’s not a difficult picture to paint. He gets the sudden, melancholy feeling that the car was not the only place his stepfather was angry.

“It is a stupid philosophy,” Ilya corrects, his voice flat. “But I learned to drive in Moscow traffic. In blizzards. This is easier than that.” He downshifts smoothly to pass a sluggish truck, the wagon’s engine humming obediently beneath his careful fingers. “He was not a good man. But he was a good driver. So. I learned.”

There's a finality in his tone that closes the subject. Shane doesn't push. He watches the wipers beat their rhythm, the world outside reduced to a smear of wet greys and greens. "Well," Shane says after a few more miles of rain-drummed silence. "You're good at it. Driving, I mean. Not the road rage part."

Ilya glances at him again, the defensive grimace softening just a fraction. "It is control. You point the car where you want it to go. It goes. Simpler than... other things." Simpler than controlling the weather. Simpler than being a son of Zeus. The unspoken words hang in the warm, dog-scented air of the car.

"Yeah," Shane agrees softly. "Easier than a pegasus."

For a while, the only sounds are the engine, the rain, and the squeak of the wipers. The mundane act of highway driving becomes a kind of peace, a temporary truce with the universe. They are two boys in a slightly sad, very practical car, moving steadily north. Shane reaches into the glove box, and to their luck, finds a map of the New York highways there, that he immediately sets to trying to navigate.

The dangers are ahead and behind, but for this stretch of asphalt, there is only the road, the rhythm, and the shared, quiet understanding of complicated fathers and the things they leave you with — whether it's a tendency for road rage, or a desperate need to win, or a key that can start any engine in the world. The road keeps unspooling.

Ilya reaches out and fiddles with the radio, flipping through static and snatches of talk shows until he finds a classic rock station playing something with a strong, steady bassline. He doesn't say anything, just leaves it on, his fingers tapping once against the steering wheel in time.

The sadness, Shane thinks, looking at the determined set of Ilya's profile against the rainy window, isn't so sad after all.

Eventually a song Ilya recognises comes up and he lights up, whistling along to it. Then he turns to Shane and asks, "when was your first monster encounter?"

Shane looks up from the map. "First time I saw one, or first time I fought one?"

Ilya blows air through his lip. "Either, both."

He takes a moment to think about it. "First encounter was in the backyard. My parents used to own this cottage out in the countryside. A harpy. I was by myself — maybe four years old? — and I thought it was going to snatch me up." He considers it. "Mom smited it pretty damn badly." Ilya whistles, low and encouraging, and Shane shoots him a look before continuing. "First actual fight was on the way to camp. I was — eight or nine? A satyr was escorting me, and there was this cyclops. Almost scooped me right up, if we weren't at the camp border. Scott Hunter chased it off."

It's silent for a moment and then Ilya says drily, "no way it was Scott Hunter. The Scott Hunter who tries to arm-wrestle trees? That Scott Hunter?"

"Hey, show some respect," Shane says, but he's smiling. "That's Scott Hunter, veteran of the Battle of the Labyrinth, slayer of the Bronze Giant, defender of—"

"Yes, yes, very mighty," Ilya interrupts, waving a dismissive hand. "But when you were nine, he was what? Fourteen? And he chased off a cyclops? Alone?"

"More like he distracted it with a lot of very loud yelling and a poorly-thrown rock until it got agitated and gave up," Shane admits, the memory warming him. "But the point is, he did it. He was the first senior camper I ever met. Seemed like a giant himself. Scarier than the cyclops, honestly."

Ilya hums, considering this. His fingers tap the wheel. "My first fight was not so... heroic."

Shane stays quiet, giving him space. The wipers swish.

"I was thirteen," Ilya begins, his voice dropping into a flatter, more factual tone as though to separate himself from the experience. "In the mountains near Sochi. Skiing trip with school. A vetala — corpse spirit, you know — rose from a snowdrift near the chairlift. It was drawn to... strong life force. Bad luck."

He pauses, and Shane can almost see it: a younger Ilya, surrounded by oblivious classmates, facing a creature of death in the brilliant, frozen sunlight. He almost does not want to ask: "What did you do?"

"I did not know what I was," Ilya says, almost to himself. "I just knew it was coming for me. I was cold and angry. And then... the wind on the mountain listened." He shrugs, a tight, mechanical movement. "There was no fight. There was— snow running down? What is the word? Like flood?"

"Avalanche," Shane says softly.

"Yes. It was avalanche. A small one. Just enough to bury the thing and... three trees. And part of ski hut."

Shane stares at him. "Gods, Ilya. Were you—?"

"No one was hurt. Just property damage." Ilya's jaw works. "They blamed wind. Global warming. But my stepfather... he knew. He saw my face after. That was the last trip like that I ever went on."

The silence that follows is heavy with the unsaid: that was the beginning of the end for his mortal life. A monster hadn't almost gotten him; he had been the natural disaster. "Scott Hunter threw a rock," Shane says finally, his voice soft. "You summoned an avalanche. No wonder you think Capture the Flag is for children."

A startled laugh punches out of Ilya — rough and real. "It is! But your story is better. A satyr and a border and a hero throwing rocks." He shakes his head, a genuine, if weary, smile touching his lips. "Very clean."

"Clean?" Shane asks.

“You know. Monster appears, you run, you fight.” He blows another raspberry. “Simple. No natural disasters.”

Victory isn’t clean, Bia had said.

Shane looks at Ilya's profile, the set of his shoulders holding a lifetime’s worth of running and hiding and blame. How even so, he is here with Shane, putting himself back in harm’s way in order to reach a man he doesn’t know with a boy he’s only known for the better part of two weeks.

"Well," he says, leaning back in his seat. "Next monster we meet, we'll do it properly. You can drop a tree on it, and I'll throw a rock at its head for tradition's sake."

Chapter End Notes

another slightly slower chapter before it kicks up in intensity . see yall tomorrow!

also:: with the whole ember and ice thing with hudson williams and connor storrie,, i think i know my next au with them will be a fae au >:) let me know if there's anything specific you want to see in it!!! (mayb some smut involved this time, too. didn't write any for this because it's so action-oriented and they're also sixteen in this lol)

Chapter 12: a soul that's born in cold and rain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane dispatches a stymphalian bird with a frankly arousing level of efficiency whilst they stop at a gas station. Ilya stays with the car whilst Shane ducks into the small store, a pockmark in the middle of nowhere, maybe half an hour from the Canadian border just outside of Plattsburgh.

Ilya sends him in with strict orders to get him a mixed slushy containing every colour of sweetened ice available (Shane doesn't think ice can taste 'red' and Ilya is eager to prove him wrong), and ten packets of roasted peanuts.

It's only when he's coming out of the store with two slushies and maybe twenty plastic packs of food in his arms that Ilya spots the shadowed carrion circling above him. Which is odd, because this isn't the right climate or area for scavenger birds.

Ilya sees it the moment Shane steps back into the weak afternoon light, arms laden with garish plastic cups and crinkling bags. A dark, angular shape cuts across the grey sky, too large for a crow, its flight path a tight, hungry circle directly above the gas station's roof.

His blood goes cold, then hot.

He's out of the car in an instant, the door left hanging open. "Hollander!" he barks, his voice cutting through the empty lot's silence.

Shane looks up, following Ilya's pointed finger. His expression shifts from mild annoyance to focused readiness in a heartbeat. He doesn't drop the slushies. He simply sets the entire armload down with careful speed on the hood of a nearby pump and yanks Tiebreaker from his pocket. The key lengthens into a sword in the space between one breath and the next.

The Stymphalian bird peels off its circular holding pattern and dives. Its metallic feathers rattle like a bag of knives, bronze wings whetted to the edges of razor blades. Its beak, forged for piercing armor, aims straight for Shane's exposed head.

Shane doesn't flinch. He doesn't even adopt a dramatic stance. He takes a single, precise step to the side, like a matador avoiding a bull, and when the bird stops short, he ducks into the current of its left wing. He brings Tiebreaker up in a short, brutal arc. Celestial bronze meets cursed feather-metal with a deafening screech and a shower of sparks.

The bird's dive becomes a crash. It hits the asphalt with a thud and a splatter of black ichor, one wing sheared clean off, its horrible shrieking cut short. It twitches once and begins to dissolve into shadow and the smell of tarnished copper.

Shane stands over it, barely winded, Tiebreaker already shrinking back into a key. He flicks a speck of dark fluid from his wrist with a look of mild distaste. He looks around to check if

anyone saw the brief encounter, then turns and retrieves the slushies and snacks from the pump hood as if he'd just swatted a particularly persistent fly. Maybe a wasp at best.

Ilya stares. The whole encounter lasted eight seconds.

Shane walks back to the car, handing the grotesque, rainbow-swirled slushy through the open driver's window. "They were out of the blue kind. You get purple-red." He shuts the door, sealing them into the warm hum of the car. The heater rattles obligingly. The world outside goes back to being aggressively normal: a faded gas price sign, a bored-looking pickup at the far pump, wind bending the weeds along the edge of the lot.

"We should go before more turn up. They hunt in packs."

Ilya expels a long breath. He jams the straw through the slushy lid and takes an aggressive pull. It tastes like sugar, cold and red. Deep, artificial cherry-red. His mouth twitches despite himself.

This reminds him of the fundamental conflict that exists between him and Hollander. Whilst Ilya knows about being hunted, about survival, about when to hide and when to run, about the types of monsters, both human and other, that will be chasing them on their trip — it is Shane that has the celestial weapon, and knows how to use it.

Where Ilya buys them time, Shane ends the threats. It's an imbalance that grates at him, not because he doubts Shane, but because he hates asymmetry — hates needing something he cannot manufacture himself. Hates having to rely on it. Shane's been at camp longer. He's better with a sword. And, probably the most glaring difference: his godly parent actually cares about him.

He glances sideways. Shane is already half-turned in his seat, one arm draped loose over the door, looking out at the road as if nothing remarkable has happened at all. Like dispatching a Stymphalian bird in a gas station forecourt is barely worth filing away as memory. It unsettles Ilya more than the monsters do, because if it comes down to it — if the fog thickens again, if the world narrows to teeth and wings — Shane will step forward. And Ilya will be the one calculating how to keep him alive.

It's only another hour until they reach the Canadian border, at Champlain, through the winding tracks of Vermont's high mountains and rolling green fields.

The border crossing facility is a low, utilitarian building of concrete and tinted glass, squatting under the immense grey sky. The queue crawls, little cars boxed in like sardines that funnel into narrow lane-mouths waiting to be swallowed up. Ilya drums his fingers against the wheel.

"Do you think they'll ask for your license?" Shane mumbles, squinting through the road-grime windscreen.

"Hopefully not," says Ilya. That will not be their priority. The slowness of it grates on him — it requires a patience they do not have. By the time they roll The Gloom (Shane still protests the name) up to the booth, the rain has lightened to a dreary, melancholy drizzle.

“Hey, it’ll be alright.” Shane reaches across and clasps his shoulder, giving him a little squeeze.

The border agent, a woman with a pinched face and eyes that reflect wrong in the lights, leans out, knocks on the passenger window. Shane has to draw the window down with a mechanic winder. “Purpose of your visit to Canada?”

“Visiting family,” Shane says, the not-quite-lie smooth and practised. He hands over his passport.

“Where are you headed?” The agent asks as she flips through Shane’s navy Canadian passport. She doesn’t offer it a second glance aside from checking that it’s Shane’s identification photo.

“Montreal,” Shane says.

She looks over at Ilya, “and you?” She opens her hand and Ilya pulls his passport out of the pocket in the car door and hands it to Shane to pass to her. Its contrast against Shane’s passport — dark red and vivid — is glaringly obvious.

He keeps his face neutral, his posture loose, the way you’re meant to when you have nothing to hide. The officer’s eyes pause for just a fraction too long. She looks down again. Flips a page. Checks the photo. Looks back up at Ilya’s face, and he meets her stare with a challenging neutrality.

“Do you have a visa?” she asks.

Ilya frowns. It’s actually something that Chiron helped him forge when he landed at Camp. It’s tucked into the back of his passport. He leans over Shane and points to it. “Right there.”

She doesn’t look impressed, doesn’t even look at it properly. “Please pull forward to the secondary inspection area and come inside,” she says, her voice devoid of inflection. She points a stiff finger to a parking bay beside the building.

A cold knot, different from the weather, tightens in Ilya’s gut.

Shane sits up. “Is there a problem?”

“Pull forward, please.”

Ilya does as instructed, his jaw set. The agent follows them, her cap low over her eyes to protect her against the rain. “This is about passport,” Ilya mutters as he pulls into an open parking space. “Always this.” At least when Zeus carried him over to Camp Half-Blood he did not have to worry about stupid things like *visas* and *border security*.

Ilya cuts the engine. Before the agent has a chance to pester them again, Shane shoots him a long, level look. He doesn’t say anything, but compacted into his dark brown eyes is a mixture of anger, apology, and warning. Then they get out of the car. Ilya locks it behind them. Bia’s gift now feels like a challenge.

“Is there a problem?” Shane asks again, his arms crossed as he attempts to square up to the officer.

She just shrugs. “Routine,” she says, already stepping back. “You can wait here, sir.”

Ilya tenses and Shane catches his eye over the roof of The Gloom. “No, I’ll come inside and wait with him.”

They hurry across the asphalt and towards the heavy glass doors. Shane falls into step just behind Ilya — a warm constant at his shoulder.

The hallway is too long — that is Ilya’s first thought as they follow the officer down it. The grey linoleum stretches, the ceiling lights repeating in a dizzying, fluorescent infinity. The agent’s heels click, but the sound is off. Each click followed by a faint, wet echo, like a stone dropped in a deep well. Ilya is uncomfortable.

The interior is aggressively bright, smelling of industrial cleaner and stale coffee. A few other weary-looking travelers sit on plastic chairs. A clock on the wall ticks with a loud, deliberate sound.

The officer drops them off at the desk, where an old woman clacks away at an obnoxiously loud keyboard and smacks her gum and stares at them with swollen eyes through a pair of narrow metal-framed glasses. All through a bulletproof screen. Ilya gives his name — Shane gives his too, even though it’s glaringly unnecessary — and they’re directed to take seats in the waiting room. Ilya wonders if their car is being searched, if they will be searched. He had the foresight to tuck Shane’s dagger beneath the driver’s seat in the car. That weapon won’t make anything easier.

Shane’s knee bounces once before he stills it with visible effort. Ilya plants his feet flat, hands folded loosely in his lap, posture schooled into something that reads cooperative rather than defensive. He has done this before. Not here, not like this, but the shape of it is familiar.

Time stretches. The clock ticks. Each second feels fractionally too long, like it’s being pulled apart before it lands, like something gummy or something elastic. The old woman types. Somewhere down the hall, a door opens and closes with a hollow thud.

Ilya becomes acutely aware of his own body. The residual chill in his bones from the river. The faint ache in his shoulder where the Cetus’ tail had clipped him. The bracelet at his wrist, warm and inert and deceptively ordinary beneath the cuff of his sleeve. He resists the urge to touch it.

Shane leans slightly closer, their shoulders almost brushing. “This is taking a while,” Shane murmurs, barely moving his lips.

“It is designed to,” Ilya replies just as quietly. He leans in and his breath ghosts the shell of Shane’s ear. “Waiting makes people sloppy.”

Shane hums under his breath, unconvinced. His gaze tracks the room: the exits, the cameras, the bored travelers slumped in their seats. Ilya recognizes the look. He hates that Shane has

learned to look like that — he should be using his assessing, tactical skills for stupid camp activities like capture-the-flag or the chariot racing, it's a skill he should be using to pick the best angle for a slapshot, or to spot the weak point in an opponent's defense on the climbing wall. Not this. Never this.

Ilya bites the inside of his cheek until he tastes copper. Look what happened to Shane during the chariot racing. Look what's happened to Shane now.

A man in a uniform calls their names. The sound is distorted, stretching. Shane stands immediately, tense and rigid. Ilya rises more slowly, the copper taste still on his tongue as he falls into a stance of easy cooperation.

She scans the room, eyes sliding past the others before landing squarely on Ilya. She smiles but it doesn't reach her eyes.

"Mr. Rozanov," she says. "Come with me."

Shane jumps, "I'm staying with him."

The officer tilts her head. "Only the passport holder."

"No," Shane says again, firmer. "He's with me."

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Mr Hollander. This is a private assessment. Visa and passport holder, only." Then she says something in French, rapid and drawling, and Shane frowns, glances at Ilya. And it's bad enough when Ilya loses his grip on English, but he's been completely shut out of their conversation, and he knows it's on purpose.

"Il est avec moi," Shane says slowly, still scowling. *"Je comprends pas. Qu'est-ce que le problème?"*

The woman nods to Ilya. *"C'est juste lui."*

Shane opens his mouth to protest again, but Ilya clasps his hand around his wrist. "Hollander, is okay. Stay here." To demonstrate, he pushes on Shane's shoulder slightly, to get him to sit back down. Shane gives him another assessing look, glances darkly at the officer, but relents, quietly sitting back down.

Ilya shakes out his hands and follows her down the corridor. The agent stops at an unmarked door, identical to all the others except for the number *thirteen*. A number most buildings skip. She turns the handle — a slow, deliberate rotation that seems to take a full minute — and pushes it open. The room beyond is dark.

"In here, please. A supervisor will be with you shortly to review your visa." Her voice is crisp, professional, and utterly hollow. Her eyes, when they meet his, are the same pale, flat grey as the agent in the booth, like tarnished coin. "Take a seat."

The hum beneath the fluorescents drops in pitch. Ilya feels it in his teeth first, a faint pressure behind his eyes. But although he wants to run, he takes a breath and dips into the room. It's not totally black — the fluorescent light is dim and flickering, and there's a neon green 'exit'

sign that sits above the door, taunting. The walls are an institutional off-white, stained where notices might've hung.

Ilya pulls out a chair, a slow and deliberate drag of the legs against the steel floor. He drops into it and rests his elbows on the table, hunching low against the metal, assessing and careful.

A woman sits opposite him.

He would swear she hadn't been there a moment ago.

She looks ordinary at first glance. Mid-forties, maybe. Pale hair pulled back too tightly. A sensible jacket, a neat blouse. The kind of face you forget immediately after passing in a corridor. But her eyes are wrong — too still, too bright, reflecting the EXIT sign's green glow like glass.

She smiles, not unkindly.

"Ilya Rozanov," she says, her voice as dry and soothing as the turning of a page. "Son of Zeus. What a long, cold road you have walked to my door."

Ilya says nothing, swallowing and sitting upright. He lets the cold inside him rise, to wash out the hazy disorientation that had been growing up his spine, to try and clarify. Son of Zeus, she'd said.

The chill sharpens his mind, focuses his senses. He can feel the confines of the room, the one door behind him, the false exit ahead. He can feel the immense, crushing weight of the bureaucracy above and around them — a maze of rules and concrete designed to stifle will.

"You are far from your storms here," the woman smiles, leaning forward until he gets a whiff of the tang of her perfume. "This is a place of quiet. Of waiting. You can wait here for a very long time, and no one will ever check the file."

"Where is Shane?" Ilya's voice cuts through the sweet, thick air, flat and hard.

"The son of Nike? He is being processed." Her thin tongue flicks out. She reaches across the table as though to take his hand. Ilya yanks it back, disturbed. "Let's not worry about him, though, shall we? Let's worry about you, Mr Rozanov." Her voice is warm, syrupy, like she's reaching from a warm pot of honey to pull him down.

"I'd rather not," Ilya grinds out.

She tilts her head, sympathetic. The air pressure in the room feels light. "You've had a hard life, haven't you, *Ilyusha*?"

Something jumps in his throat. That's the nickname his mother used to call him. She used to coo it as she wiped his tears, pressed it into his hair when she hugged him, when she helped tie his laces or put a bandaid on one of his knee scrapes.

Ilya tries to snap at her, tries to form words, but it all slips away from him with a terrifying ease. Instead he just bears his teeth at her in a wordless snarl.

She hums. “You miss your mama. You miss her a lot. You miss your stepfather, too, but not in the same way, hm? He’s a real piece of work, that Grigori, but at least he was there. At least he was constant. The most constant thing in your life was his rage.”

“Stop it,” Ilya grits out. It feels like she’s got her fingers in his memories, sweeping through them, peeling them apart and holding things up to the light that should never see the light.

“She left you with Grigori,” the woman — although she’s not a human, only Ilya can’t piece together what she actually is — continues, her tone conversational, almost gossipy. “A man who understood force, discipline. He taught you to drive, yes? To shoot? He was making you a weapon, because that is all he knew how to make. A sharp, useful thing. Not a son. A tool.”

Ilya’s hands are clenched so tightly on the table that the cheap laminate creaks. The cold inside him is a whirlpool now, spinning uselessly in this sealed room. He can’t direct it. He can only feel it eating him from the inside.

“And then,” she whispers, drawing out the pause until the silence itself aches, her voice high-strung and mocking, “*Papa* arrived. Not with a hug or a gift or anything. He plucked you up and dropped you in a new world and said, ‘be hidden.’ Another set of instructions. Another demand to be something you are not. To make the storm small and quiet.” She leans back, spreading her hands. “So much disappointment. So many people who found you... inconvenient.”

The word *inconvenient* hangs in the air, a verdict. It slots into a hidden chamber of his heart, a fear he has never named.

“Now you have this Hollander boy,” she muses, tapping a fingernail—long, curved, and too sharp—against the table. “Who looks at you and sees... what? A project? A mystery? A way to finally race his chariot? He is patient. But when does his patience run out? When he finally sees the full cost of knowing you — when he understands the danger that follows you — what will he do then? Will he stay with you?”

She’s right. When Ilya loves it means devastation. It means damage. It’s never intentional, but it still happens. He can’t help it. When he loves it’s too much. It’s all consuming. It leaves him with nothing but it, nothing but that feeling in his chest. Making its way to his mind, until it’s the only thing he can think about. Forgetting about all else. Until he ruins it.

“*Fuck you,*” Ilya says, in Russian, but even that is creeping away from him, “stop it, *stop it.*”

“You learned to take it,” she continues.

Ilya’s jaw locks. His pulse thunders in his ears. He feels thirteen again, shoulders hunched, counting breaths, waiting for the noise in the apartment to die down. Waiting for it to be over.

She stands, circling the table slowly. Each step lands with too much certainty, the sound of her heels echoing wrong again, delayed and wet. “You run across an ocean. You run into gods

and monsters and think that if you are useful enough, fast enough, sharp enough—”

She stops behind him.

“—no one would ever put their hands on you again.” Her fingers brush his shoulder. The contact is light and gentle and maternal. It feels like a hand closing around his throat. “But here we are.”

The room dips. His vision tunnels. The hum beneath the fluorescents deepens, vibrating through bone and tooth. The *exit* sign flickers, green light stuttering like a failing heartbeat.

“You are very far from your storms,” she reminds him, voice velvet-smooth. “Very far from anyone who would break you, or break rules for you.”

Ilya’s knees threaten to buckle. He digs his nails into his palm until he tastes blood. The bracelet burns against his wrist, grounding but not enough, not—

Shane.

The brush of their shoulders, Ilya’s hand on his wrist, Shane’s palm in the small of his back. The reminder of his touch, of his presence, is sharp and sudden, a spike driven into fog.

Her grip tightens, sensing resistance. “Stay,” she commands softly, and Ilya feels all of the energy drain out of him. Like a marionette with cut strings, he topples to the floor. His head smacks against the metal and almost whites out as black spots eat away at the edges and stars crowd in.

She kneels beside him, her form blurring at the edges, bleeding into the shadows of the room. Her hand comes to rest on his head, a grotesque parody of comfort. She pats his curls, swipes them from his eyes, which struggle to remain open. “There now, Ilyushenka. It’s easier, isn’t it? To just... stop.”

It would be. The pull to *let go*, to sink into the numb silence she offers, is a profound, physical weight. It whispers that this is what he has always been: an inconvenience. A problem to be contained. First in an apartment in Moscow, now in a storage room at the edge of a foreign country.

His fingers scrape along the floor. *Shane*, he thinks, before that’s gone too.

Chapter End Notes

ilya my pookie im sorry

happy new years!

Chapter 13: and at last can grant a name

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The plastic chair had long since molded to the shape of Shane's body. He'd counted the ceiling tiles three times. Forty-eight. He'd traced the pattern in the industrial carpet — a dizzying swirl of grey and blue that seemed to move if he stared too long. The clock on the wall was his enemy.

The air is thick, not with humidity or heat, but this kind of sound-absorbing quality that makes everything feel muzzy, as though Shane has sunk to the bottom of himself and is staring up through the cracks.

Shane comes back to himself in fragments — the taste of copper at the back of his mouth, the ache in his ribs flaring hot and mean, the sticky press of a floor against his palms. Tile. Cheap, institutional tile, scuffed grey and beige, the kind designed to survive decades of foot traffic and spilled coffee. Fluorescent lights hum overhead with an insectile persistence.

Border control.

The realization arrives fully formed, absurdly calm. A waiting area. Rows of plastic chairs bolted to the floor. A digital departures board that flickers but never updates. The smell of stale air and disinfectant and sweaty nervousness layered over itself until it's chokingly thick.

Shane blinks. People are everywhere. Slumped in chairs. Standing in lines that go nowhere. Sitting cross-legged on the floor with suitcases at their feet, clutching passports with white-knuckled devotion. A woman rocks back and forth, whispering apologies to no one. A man in a business suit stares at his phone, swiping the same dead screen again and again as if repetition might resurrect it.

How had he forgotten? And then, more insistently, where's Ilya?

His head lolls. And yet— nothing hurts. The pain is dimming and being replaced with overwhelming relief. He feels a great tension disappearing from his skull: a great weight whose presence he had lived with for so long, he did not realise it was there until it was gone.

Belatedly, he thinks he might be in trouble. He rifled through his thoughts. The details fizzle away from him, blur at the edges.

My name is Shane Hollander, he tells himself, I am on a quest to find my father. I am the son of Nike. Ilya Rozanov is with me. And then he really starts to panic, because please Gods, don't let him loose Ilya.

Those narrow, seeing hazel eyes. His loose, ready smile. Shane remembers the hunch of his shoulders and the sprawl of his hair, the way he pinches Shane's wrist when he's bored and

stretches out like a cat in the sun when he has a moment to rest. The sound of his laughter, the crackling electricity of his thoughts.

He puts all those remembrances into a little box and keeps it locked and held at the forefront of his mind, as if he could keep it there by sheer force of will. *Please give me Ilya. Let me keep him.* But his mind is fracturing now, and he cannot stop his thoughts from sliding sideways. The locked box slides from his grasp, tumbling down and down and down.

His eyelids feel so heavy. It takes too much effort to remain upright — it takes too much effort to panic — so instead he lets himself go limp. His chin dips to his chest and it feels like his whole body locks up.

Ilya. He says it until the word loses meaning, until it's just loose vowels and liquid consonants tumbling around in his head. *Ilya. Ilya. Ih-lee-yah.*

...Who's Ilya?

Someone important. I was waiting for him. I was...

A hand closes around his upper arm. The grip is firm, impersonal. "Sir. You can't sleep here."

Shane's head lolls back. A border agent — or someone dressed like one — stands over him. The badge is shiny, the face blandly forgettable. But the eyes... the eyes are a flat, uniform grey, like polished stone. He doesn't have any pupils, Shane notes sluggishly.

"Waiting," Shane slurs. The word is thick in his mouth.

"Your documents," the agent says, not a request but a statement of fact. His other hand is outstretched.

Shane pats his pockets. Empty. He had things. A passport, his sword, a sack of drachmas. The panic tries to rise again, but it's a weak, diluted thing, smothered by the overwhelming fog.

"I... lost them."

"This way, please." The agent pulls him to his feet. Shane's legs buckle, but the grip on his arm is unyielding, holding him upright with no apparent effort. He's steered away from the waiting area, down a narrow, brightly lit corridor with no windows. The hum of the fluorescents grows louder, vibrating in his teeth.

Ilya. Ilya was here. We were together.

But when? Where? The memory is a photograph left in the rain, the ink bleeding, the image dissolving into meaningless blots of color. A flash of gold hair. A scoffing sound. A feeling of cold air and solid presence at his side. Gone.

They stop at a plain metal door. The agent opens it, nudges Shane inside. It's a small, windowless room. A table. Two chairs. A mirrored wall where Shane can look at his own reflection but doesn't want to.

"Sit."

Shane sits. The vinyl chair is cold. He stares at his own hands on the scuffed tabletop. There's a faint, silvery scar across his right knuckles. He doesn't remember how he got it. A practice sword? A fall from a chariot? The thought skitters away. When has he ever been on a chariot, when has he ever held a sword?

The agent takes the seat opposite. He places a blank piece of paper and a pen on the table between them. "State your name and purpose for entry."

"Shane... Hollander." The surname feels strange, like a coat that doesn't quite fit. "I'm looking for my..." He doesn't know who, but the guard seems to know. That's nice.

"Full name of your father."

"David Hollander." It comes out automatically. It feels like a lie by omission. There's another name, a title, a feeling of wings and laurel wreaths and triumphant shouts... it's gone.

"Reason for entry?"

"He's in trouble. I had a..." *Dream, a vision, a divine premonition.* The words won't come. "...a feeling."

The agent's stone-grey eyes seem to drink in the light. He makes no note on the paper. "You arrived alone?"

Yes. The answer is right there, simple and clean. *I came alone.*

But his mouth won't form the word. A pressure builds behind his eyes, a sharp, specific ache. He sees, for a split second, not this grey room, but the dark canopy of trees at the edge of Camp Half-Blood. Warm moonlight dappled on the ground. A figure standing there, a duffel bag at their feet, breath fogging in the cold air. Impatient. Waiting for him.

Ilya.

The name is a spike of pure, undiluted clarity in the fog.

"No," Shane whispers, the word tearing from a place the fog hasn't quite reached. "Not alone."

The agent's head tilts, a minute, mechanical motion. "Who accompanied you?"

Shane opens his mouth. He tries to summon the face, the name, the feeling of the storm that seemed to orbit him. It's like clutching smoke. The fog rushes back in, thick and sweet, carrying the hum of the lights, the smell of disinfectant. The memory of the tree line dissolves.

"I..." Shane's voice falters. He looks down at the blank paper. "I don't remember."

The agent leans forward slightly. "It is easier if you do not fight it. The crossing is difficult for those who are... entangled. You will see your father soon. Just let go."

Let go. The words are a sedative. It would be so easy. To stop fighting the heaviness. To forget the panic, the quest, the lingering ghost of a boy with winter in his eyes. He looks up at the false mirror, and for a wild, defiant moment, he doesn't see his own hazy reflection. He sees a flash of pale, furious blue. A storm contained in a glance.

Shane's fingers curl against the tabletop. He doesn't have the memories. He doesn't have the facts. But he has the echo of something that used to be with him, something that's still reverberating inside him even if the noise-maker itself is gone. The stubborn, unyielding certainty that he did not come here alone.

Victory through movement, the words bubble up, suddenly sharp and searing in his mind, as though placed there by someone else. *Victory through momentum.*

Mom? He thinks deliriously.

Shane. It's a woman's voice, he's heard it before, the way a baby recognises its mother's voice after hearing it in the womb. It's not a gentle voice: far from it, but it's grounding enough to yank Shane fully back into his body. *You have to move.*

He meets the agent's empty grey gaze. The fog is in his mind, but a new, fragile resolve hardens in his chest, a sliver of celestial bronze amidst the ruin. "I didn't come alone," he repeats, his voice gaining a shred of strength.

"Oh, that's unfortunate." The guard hums.

His head throbs. *Move*, his mother says, and it's not a comfort but a command. The barked order of a coach thrown out over the ice, pushing Shane onwards. He's filled with the sudden momentum, this all-encompassing desire to complete the challenge, to cross the finish line, to score the goal. You can't win sitting down. He stands up, the chair clattering over behind him.

He and the officer stare at each other for a long moment and then Shane bursts for the door. He grabs hold of the handle, metal burning, and wrenches himself out into the corridor. Cool air hits him, helping to chase the molasses-thick confusion from his mind.

Shane stumbles across the threshold, trying every room's doorhandle. None of them budge as he scrambles down the corridor. "Ilya! Ilya!"

He needs Tiebreaker. *Tiebreaker.* How could he forget Tiebreaker? What happened to his bag? Where did it go? Shane spins and runs back to the front desk, where the old lady is still *clack-clack-clacking* on her keyboard. "Where's Ilya?" he snarls.

The woman doesn't look up. Clack. Clack. Clack. "All processing is confidential."

"He's not being processed, he's being eaten!" Shane's voice cracks. "Tell me which room!"

Finally, her hands go still. She looks up, and her eyes are kind — warm, even. It's worse than the grey-eyed agent's emptiness. "Oh, dear. You're still worried about him. After everything?"

Shane freezes. "What do you mean?"

She sighs, a gentle, sorrowful sound. She reaches below the desk and places Shane's backpack on the counter. It's unopened. "You left this in the waiting area. We kept it safe for you." She pushes it toward him. "Your journey has been so hard. You've been so brave. Carrying that poor, dangerous boy all this way." The words are like syrup, coating his brain. *Poor, dangerous boy.*

"Where is he?" Shane grinds out each word.

"You came here to find your father, didn't you?" she asks, her head tilting. "A noble quest. A son's love. But that boy... he's a complication, isn't he? The attention he draws. You felt it, didn't you? When the sky tried to burn you both out of the chariot? That was for him. Not for you."

Each sentence is a carefully placed needle, finding the exact doubts he's been fighting since the race.

"You can go to your father now," she whispers, leaning forward conspiratorially. "The path is clear. All the... entanglements have been sorted. You can have a clean victory. Just walk out that door." She points to the main entrance. Beyond the glass, the rainy afternoon looks normal and quiet. "Take your bag. Go north. Be the hero."

The offer is so seductive it makes his knees weak. A clean victory. No more monsters. No more terrifying, beautiful chaos shivering beside him in a motel bed. Just him and the road and his dad. He looks at his backpack.

Tiebreaker is in there. His passport. Everything he needs.

He looks back at her kind, crinkled eyes. And he sees it — the faintest shimmer, like heat haze, around her pupils. A tiny, hungry flicker of gold deep within the brown.

She wasn't just a bureaucrat. She was the source. The *Lamia*, or another of its kind, wearing the face of gentle authority, offering him the easiest win of his life.

Everything he needs, but none of it too.

He takes the bag with faux security, confident slowness. The *Lamia* nods, grin widening, her guard flattening a little as Shane fakes that settled, pliant glaze. And then, in one fluid motion, he pulls Tiebreaker from the front pocket of his bag, summons it in a brilliant rush of sweeping gold, and drives it through the open hatch, right into the *Lamia's* throat.

Heat flares up Shane's arm, the familiar answering thrum of Tiebreaker singing as it drinks deep.

She staggers back, hands flying to her throat. Black blood spills between her fingers, thick and molten, dripping down the sensible cardigan and pooling on the linoleum. The room

ripples. The desk shudders, its edges blurring, the polite little bell skittering away as if fleeing a sinking ship.

“You—” she tries, voice splitting into harmonics, layered and wrong. The warmth drains from her face, skin sagging, eyes blazing now with naked hunger and fury. “You could have won.”

“I am,” Shane snarls, and twists the blade.

Shane yanks Tiebreaker free and turns, already running. “Ilya!” His voice echoes now, cracking with desperation. Adrenaline roars in his ears. He reaches a door and brings the blood-wet Tiebreaker down against the handle. It shatters and he kicks the door down. No Ilya. He moves to the next one. A guard bursts out at him and Shane drives Tiebreaker in a brutal arc, cutting the officer in half at the waist. He explodes in a furious explosion of dust.

“Rozanov!”

The next room he tries, there’s a body on the floor beyond the table. He’s splayed out and pale, limp against the metal flooring. Shane sees golden curls and a familiar maroon sweatshirt and his heart seizes like a thunderclap. *Ilya.*

Shane stumbles into the room like he’s been shot “Ilya—”

He drops to his knees beside him, peers over him. Ilya’s head is lolled at an unnatural angle, curls plastered to his forehead with sweat, lashes too still against his cheeks. His chest — Shane’s breath freezes in his own ribs as he looks — rises, but shallowly, uneven, like it might forget how at any second.

“No, no, no,” Shane whispers, hands hovering uselessly for a heartbeat before he presses them down, grounding himself. He grabs Ilya’s shoulders, gentle and frantic all at once. “Hey. Hey, hey. You don’t get to do this. You don’t get stop.”

Ilya’s head jostles as Shane shakes him frantically. Nothing. Ilya’s skin is cold. Not corpse-cold, but wrong, leached of warmth like the room has been drinking it from him. There’s a dark smear at his temple, already tacky, and when Shane brushes his thumb there it comes away red.

Adrenaline roars louder, drowning out thought. Shane shakes him, once, twice. “Ilya! Look at me. You hear me? You don’t get to check out now, you stubborn—”

His voice breaks hard, jagged. He swallows it down and leans closer, forehead nearly touching Ilya’s. He can feel it then, faint but there — the pull, that strange pressure behind his eyes, slack and unfocused.

Unconscious and slipping. “No,” Shane breathes. “Stay with me.”

He cups Ilya’s face, thumbs warm against his chilled cheeks. This close, he can see the bruising blooming along his jaw, the way his mouth hangs just barely open, his lip bitten-through.

Shane presses his ear to Ilya's chest. The heartbeat is there. Fast and jackrabbity like the pound of a hare's paws against the ground.

"Okay," Shane says, voice shaking but firming as he talks, like he's giving orders to himself. "Okay. I've got you. I'm here. You're not alone." Still nothing.

The room hums around them, the circle on the floor dimming and flaring like a dying star. Shane doesn't look at it. He looks at Ilya. Always Ilya.

Shane bends closer without thinking. His lips brush Ilya's.

He's kissing him like he's pouring breath into him because he doesn't know what else to do. A promise without words. Stay. Please, stay. I held on for you. Now you have to hold on for me.

For one awful second, nothing happens. He's grasping at straws, this isn't a movie, there's no magic kiss that can save the day... Then—

Ilya sucks in a sharp, broken breath. His body jerks, a full-body shudder like he's been dragged back from deep water. Shane barely has time to pull back before Ilya coughs and jerks, choking, eyes flying open wild and unfocused.

"There you are," Shane says hoarsely, one hand immediately sliding to the back of Ilya's neck, holding him steady. "Hey. Hey. Easy. I've got you."

Ilya blinks, pupils blown wide. He looks at Shane like he's trying to assemble the world from fragments. "Sh—" His voice cracks. He swallows, grimacing. "Shane?"

"Yeah," Shane says, breath coming fast now, relief hitting so hard it's almost pain. "Yeah. You're okay. You scared the hell out of me, but you're okay."

Ilya lets out a weak, disbelieving huff of air. His head tips forward until it rests against Shane's shoulder, all the tension bleeding out of him at once. He clutches weakly at Shane's jacket like it's the only solid thing left in the universe.

"It was a Lamia," Shane murmurs. "Mind-breaker. Come on, let's take the back door."

Ilya nods faintly. His fingers curl tightly into Shane's jacket, like if he lets go, he'll slip into the dark again. Shane isn't going to let that happen. He snakes his hand around Ilya's back and helps him to his feet. Together, they stumble out of the room and down the corridor. At the other end in the waiting room, people are beginning to wake up.

He shoulders the back door open with a grunt. Cold air knives in, clean and brutal and real. The pressure clogging this whole damn facility collapses the instant they cross the threshold, snapping like an overstretched wire. Shane exhales hard. He hadn't realized how much it was weighing on him until it's gone.

Outside, the world is grey and ordinary again — parking lot, chain-link fence, a line of idling cars inching toward customs like nothing apocalyptic just happened inside.

Shane carries Ilya a few steps more before setting him down against the concrete wall. He crouches in front of him immediately, hands framing Ilya's face, checking pupils, bruises, the cut at his temple.

"You with me?" Shane asks, softer now.

Ilya blinks, slower this time, then nods. "Yes. I think... yes." He swallows, throat working. "She tried to... eat me?"

Shane's jaw tightens. "Yeah. She's real big on that."

The Gloom is parked crooked near the edge of the lot, rain-spattered and innocent-looking. Shane has never been more grateful to see such a useless, ugly car. An alarm starts to wail behind them and Shane hauls them forwards.

They reach the car just as the building doors burst open. Shapes spill out under the fluorescents, silhouettes wrong at the edges, drifting rather than running forwards. Shane tries to shove Ilya into the passenger seat but he resists, "no," he says, and it's almost a whine, "I drive,

"Right now you're about two seconds from face-planting," Shane tells him. "Humour me." Ilya grumbles but lets Shane maneuver him into the passenger seat. He rounds the hood in one fluid motion. The engine turns over on the first try.

As the car fishtails onto the road, Shane risks a glance sideways. Ilya is pale, shaking, but alive. He still has one hand clenched in Shane's jacket, knuckles slowly loosening as the distance grows.

"We're across," Shane says, breathless. "Montreal's two hours. No stops unless the car's on fire."

Ilya tilts his head back against the headrest. "I'll agree with you there, Hollander."

Chapter End Notes

go shane go go go!

i've twisted the lamia a little. she's a child-eating gorgon but she's also known to craft illusions from some accounts around people and focus on 'mind breaking' from what i've read? let me know if i'm wrong. my confession is that my knowledge of classical greek is actually very little. my classics degree focused on sanskrit LOL just shut up and take the angst

ty for reading!

Chapter 14: to a buried and a burning flame

Chapter Notes

i wanted to add another monster before we reached the final climax but i lowkey think the boys have been through enough. also, there's like a 2 hour drive between the border up to montreal, and ottawa, so there's not actually much stopping or interruption they could have. i also ran out of brain power.

good news! i've finished writing my next fic, so when this pjo one finishes expect a brand new one the next day! never say i don't feed you

ty for reading!

The world is a muffled, distant thing. A gray, pulsing void where the only constants are the echo of a hated nickname — *Ilyushenka* — and a cold so deep it feels like the absence of being. He's dissolving, his edges blurring into the sterile nothingness of the room. It would be so easy to let the cold have him. To be quiet. To be no one.

Then, a new sensation punches through the void. Hands on him, or ghosts of hands on him, because he's so far away from his body that he can't feel much of anything. Someone is here with him, though. Hands on his shoulders, on his face.

Warmth.

It is a foreign pressure against the winter that roars inside him. A warmth against his lips, steady and sure, tasting desperate and hungry. A touch that demanded a response from a body he had almost forgotten he owned. She had promised him no more storms but these lips are familiar, he would know the way they breathed, the way they smiled, the brush of them against his chin in a desperate, wordless plea — and the storm *roars* inside him.

His senses rush back in a dizzying flood. The smell of rain and cheap detergent. The taste of salt — blood, his own, and something else, something alive. The sound of his own ragged gasp as the warmth pull back just enough to let him breathe. He jerks upwards, feeling as though the world had tilted off its axis and come spinning out from beneath him.

The feel of calloused hands gripping his face, thumbs pressed hard against his cheekbones, holding his skull together.

His eyes fly open.

Shane's face is inches from his, blotting out the fluorescent hell. His expression isn't soft or romantic, but instead etched with a fierceness he's only seen before on marble statues. His

brows are drawn together, his lips parted, breath coming in short puffs that warm Ilya's frozen skin. There's a wild, victorious glint in his eyes.

"There you are. Hey. Hey. Easy. I've got you." Shane murmurs, his voice a raw scrape. Ilya, feeble and undone, clings to him like if he lets go, the whole world will collapse, and Ilya will collapse with it.

Ilya tries to speak, but his throat is sewn shut with threads of grief. He can only stare, his mind scrambling to reconcile echoing lies with the solid, warm, worried boy in front of him. "Sh—Shane?" he croaks.

"Yeah, Yeah, it's me." Shane gives him a watery smile and Ilya tightens his hold. Like he's the one that needs reassuring when Shane is the one that found him half-dead on the floor. He wants to say sorry but his mouth won't let him.

A shudder of pure relief goes through Shane. He rests his forehead hard against Ilya's, their breaths mingling. "You're okay. You scared the hell out of me, but you're okay."

Ilya doesn't know what to do, what to say. His head is still pounding, he's still weak and fevered.

"It was a Lamia," says Shane. "Mind-breaker. Come on, let's take the back door."

Shane's words land like a command, but Ilya's body refuses to obey. His limbs are leaden, his thoughts sluggish syrup. The warmth of Shane's touch is a lifeline, but the cold has seeped into his marrow, a paralyzing anchor. It doesn't seem like that is going to stop Hollander. He gets a shoulder under Ilya's arm and hauls him upright with a grunt of effort, taking most of his weight

Shane doesn't let go of his hand. He leads them down the service corridor, moving with purpose now, following the drafts of cold, outside air. Ilya follows, his steps growing steadier with each one, the rhythm of their movement — of escape — sealing the cracks the Lamia had opened.

They burst out through a heavy metal door into a loading dock at the back of the border complex. The rain hits them, a cold, cleansing shock. The Gloom is parked just fifty yards away, across a slick parking lot.

Getting to the car is a blur. As they peel onto the access road, leaving the nightmare border crossing behind, Ilya watches Shane's profile. The fierce determination is still there, but the edges are softening into exhausted relief.

He doesn't say thank you. The words are too small, too human for what just happened. Instead, he reaches over and places his hand, still cold, over Shane's where it rests on the gear shift.

Shane flips his hand palm-up and laces their fingers together. His grip is warm and sure.

They don't stop in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu or even in Montreal. They just keep driving.

The highway becomes a gray, hypnotic river. The wipers beat a steady rhythm against the rain, and the hum of The Gloom's engine is the only sound between them for long stretches. The adrenaline of the border has burned away, leaving behind a hollowed-out, shivering quiet.

Shane drives, his eyes fixed on the unspooling asphalt, his knuckles white on the wheel. Ilya sits curled against the passenger door, forehead pressed to the cool glass, watching the blurred pines and anonymous exits bleed past. The Lamia's fingerprints are still on him, a greasy feeling in the corners of his mind. He can feel Shane glancing over every few minutes, a silent check-in.

They don't speak. There's too much to say, and no language for it yet.

An hour in, Shane finally pulls off at a rest stop that's little more than a concrete slab with vending machines under a flickering awning. He kills the engine and the sudden silence is louder than the road noise.

Ilya stirs from his half-sleep, his shallow doze.

"We need to clean you up," Shane says, his voice rough. It's not a suggestion.

Ilya looks down at himself. His clothes are damp and stained with blood and mud. There's dried blood from his temple, a long scratch down his arm he doesn't remember getting. He feels... ruined.

Shane pops the trunk and comes back with their meager first-aid kit and a bottle of water. He doesn't ask permission, just opens the passenger door and crouches beside it. The cold wind helps to rouse Ilya. It's cold, he thought North American summers were warm. Shane reaches over, his fingers gentle as they brush Ilya's hair back from the cut on his temple. The touch is clinical, but Ilya closes his eyes, leaning into it. It's a real touch. An honest one.

A damp cloth, cold and shocking, dabs at the wound. Ilya bites back a hiss.

"Sorry," Shane murmurs, but doesn't stop. He works with a focused efficiency, cleaning the cut, applying a butterfly bandage from the kit. His breath is warm against Ilya's skin.

"Your turn," Ilya says hoarsely, when Shane is done.

Shane looks at him, then down at his own raw knuckles. He shrugs. "They're fine."

Ilya just holds out his hand, waiting. After a moment, Shane closes the door, ducks around the bonnet, and slips back into the driver's seat. He looks at Ilya again, eyes brimming, and places his own in it.

Ilya copies Shane's motions, careful and deliberate, cleaning the dirt and blood from the split skin. He doesn't have a bandage the right size, so he uses a clean corner of the cloth to wrap it loosely. His hands are still colder than they should be.

"Thanks," Shane says, his voice barely a whisper.

Ilya doesn't let go of his hand immediately. He just holds it, their joined hands resting on the center console, a point of contact in the vast, darkening afternoon. The rain patters on the roof. "Will we speak on it?"

Shane looks over at him. "On what?"

"You..." Ilya gestures to his lips, and Shane drops a few shades of colour in mortification. Shane's blush is a stark, human splash of colour in the gray car, brighter than any celestial bronze. He looks away, out at the rain-smeared parking lot, his throat working. "Right. That."

Ilya waits. He is good at waiting. He holds the silence, the warmth of Shane's hand still in his, a question in its own right.

"It was the fastest way," Shane finally says, the words rushed, defensive in a way he usually isn't. "To snap you out of it. I didn't... I mean, it was a tactical thing. Like CPR. Or a really invasive pep talk."

Ilya hums, a low, non-committal sound. He has seen Shane in tactical mode. The ruthless efficiency with the Stymphalian bird. This was not that. That had been desperation. That had been fear. "A tactical thing," he repeats, his accent making the words sound dubious.

"Yes." Shane's jaw is tight. He won't look at him.

"You have used this 'tactic' before? On other soldiers?" Ilya prods, knowing the answer.

"Gods, no." Shane scrubs his free hand over his face. "Look, it just... happened. You were gone. I couldn't reach you. I tried shouting, I tried shaking you. You were just... cold. And far away." His voice drops. "I panicked."

The admission hangs in the air. *I panicked*. For the son of Nike, the embodiment of cool-headed victory, it is a confession of profound vulnerability. Ilya turns his hand over, tracing the line of Shane's life with his thumb. A simple, grounding touch. "It worked."

Shane finally risks a glance at him. The defensiveness is fading, replaced by a wary uncertainty. "Yeah. It did."

Ilya glances up at him through his pale eyelashes, looking feline. "And if I told you I wanted you to do it again?"

Silence reigns. Shane's dark eyes flick down in a miniscule shift to his lip, and then back up. He swallows, "would that be okay?" His other hand tightens in a grip on his pants. "This is so wrong," he mumbles, as though to himself. When Ilya makes a noise at the back of his throat, Shane adds, "not— not you. Not this. Just— my father could be dying, or missing, or lost, or whatever, and I'm here, thinking about kissing you again. It's not fair."

Ilya absorbs this without interruption or argument. His thumb pauses, presses lightly into the center of Shane's palm, a steadying point. "You are allowed to be more than one thing at once. You are allowed to want."

And the idea that Shane Hollander, certified golden boy, wants Ilya is a thrilling thing. Maybe the best thing he's ever heard.

Shane's jaw works. "I don't want to take advantage of— of a moment. Or of you."

"You are not," Ilya says at once. There is steel under the softness of his voice now, an insistence that he needs to get across to Shane. "I am choosing now. If anything, you are the one holding back."

That earns him a quiet, breathless sound from Shane that might be a laugh or might be something closer to surrender. "I'm trying to be responsible."

"Mm," Ilya hums. "You are very good at that."

Rainwater slides down the windshield in slow, crooked paths. Shane's gaze drops again, this time not just to Ilya's mouth but to the way his own fingers are still curled around Ilya's hand, as if afraid to let go. The back of his hand is freckled, his knuckles splotchy around his bruises. "If I did," he says, barely above a whisper, "it wouldn't be because you needed waking up. It would be because I wanted to."

Ilya's eyes soften, something warm and intent settles there. "Good," he says. "I would not want you to confuse the two."

Another pause. Then Shane exhales, long and unsteady, and finally looks at him properly. "Just—" he starts, then stops, shakes his head. "Slow. Okay?"

Ilya nods. "I am excellent at slow."

He lifts their joined hands, guiding rather than pulling, until Shane's knuckles brush his collarbone. Close enough now that Shane can feel the ghost of his breath. Ilya does not close the distance. He waits, patient as a held breath, as a victory delayed but inevitable. This close he can see little golden flecks in Shane's eyes.

Then Shane closes the gap between them, and it's everything Ilya has ever wanted.

Eventually they break away. Eventually they get back on the road. But for now, for this little pocket universe that Ilya has constructed around them, all there is is this moment, all there is is Shane's lip's on his, his hand on his shirt, his fingers clawing Ilya's curls to pull him closer — and everything else can wait a little longer.

It takes two hours to get from the border to Montreal, then another two and a half to get from Montreal to Ottawa. Back on the road, the tension eases into something quieter. Words come and go — logistics, weather, nothing important. Sometimes not even that. The sky lightens almost imperceptibly as they cross into the city, street signs flashing bilingual and familiar to Shane but foreign to Ilya.

By the time Ottawa rises around them, low and steady and rain-damp, the earlier intensity has settled into resolve. The rain has let off and there are slivers of blue sky through spottings of

clouds. Whatever this is between them, it has survived the distance. The car slows, turns, and the city receives them without comment.

Shane drives them downtown, where he pulls up on the street next to a skyscraper apartment block, shining back the sky down the glinting glass walls. Shane cuts the engine and stares up through the door window, squinting. Ilya watches him. “Are you nervous?”

Shane yanks the key out of the engine and pockets it. “I just need to see my dad.”

He exhales through his nose and finally looks away from it, fingers drumming once against the steering wheel before stilling.

Ilya studies him in profile. The set of his shoulders. The way his mouth has gone flat, all the softness from the drive leached out of him. “Well, come on then,” he says. Shane huffs a humourless laugh but gets out of the car, slamming the door shut behind him.

Ilya follows, shutting the door with more care than he feels. The street noise rushes in around them — the roar traffic, voices, a siren wailing in the distance. It’s a city going about its business, oblivious. He pauses, scanning the building’s entrances, the cameras, the reflections in the glass. Is this where Shane grew up?

He’s taken too long staring at the building because Shane is watching him over the roof of the car. Ilya clucks his tongue and gestures forwards with his head. The automatic glass doors open for them, and shut behind them. Shane guides him to the elevator — a clean, impeccably furnished thing with veneer floors and a glass wall overlooking the street. It jolts and zooms them all the way up to the twelfth floor. The numbers climb too fast.

The door dings open and then Shane leads him to the door. He tests the lock and the handle pops open.

Ilya looks at Shane, who’s face is drawn in the half-light of the windowless hallway. The gummy ceiling that seems to swallow sound. Ilya gives him a nod. Shane turns back and opens the door.

The hallway is dark, almost black. It’s only the promise of his father somewhere inside and Ilya at his back that gives Shane the courage to draw in a big breath and step through the doorway. The silence is oppressive. A clock ticks dully in the kitchen. The narrow corridor stretches out, bathed in light from the street through a window sprung ajar, but the curtains shut. Wafting gently.

“...Dad?” calls Shane warily. The word is like thunder in the grand canyon in the quiet.

Ilya takes a step forward, and pauses when something crunches underfoot. He looks down. The vase that usually sits primly on the window sill to his left is cracked across the floorboards, covering the floor in snowy shards of porcelain. Cold water pools, and the remnant, crumpled petals of breaths of white dahlias are scattered.

Ilya crouches beside him and touches one of the shards experimentally. When he brings his fingers up, they’re coated in dust. His eyes catch Shane’s. His father hasn’t been through here

in a few days.

Shane straightens slowly, his expression unreadable, but his body has gone taut in a way Ilya recognizes — like a wire pulled too tight, a bowstring drawn back before the arrow is released. He feels it himself, too.

“Stay behind me,” Ilya murmurs.

Shane swallows and nods, though his feet look rooted to the floor. His gaze keeps snagging on the water, the broken petals crushed into the grain of the wood. This wasn’t an accident, the thought lands heavy and cold in his chest. Why hasn’t he cleared this up?

They move carefully after that, each step deliberate, measured against the hush of the apartment. Ilya advances first, body angled to shield Shane without quite blocking his line of sight. The corridor opens into the living space — large and tasteful and homely, with an open brick wall and a fireplace. Ilya can’t spot any signs of a fight — nothing broken or overturned. Just that single, broken note in the hall behind them, discordant and unresolved.

“Dad?” Shane tries again, quieter this time, as if volume itself might provoke something.

No answer. They split the space without speaking, an old rhythm settling in. Shane checks the kitchen first. The clock on the wall ticks steadily, obscene in its normalcy. The sink is dry. No dishes. The fridge hums when he opens it — stocked, recent enough to be unsettling. He closes it harder than necessary.

“Ilya,” he calls under his breath.

“Nothing here,” Ilya replies from the living room. Curtains drawn tight against the windows despite the daylight outside. He pulls one back just enough to scan the street below. No waiting cars, no suspicious persons.

They check the bathroom. Nothing there, either.

The study is next. Campaign paraphernalia stacked with obsessive neatness. Papers lined and no sign of his laptop. Shane pauses there longest, fingers hovering over the desk, as if expecting it to bite. He exhales and turns away, which leaves the bedrooms.

“I’ll take his,” Shane says automatically, already moving.

Ilya nods. “I will look at yours.”

Shane hesitates — just a fraction — but doesn’t argue. He disappears down the hall, footsteps soft, controlled. Ilya waits until the door closes behind him before turning to the other room.

Shane’s bedroom is not what Ilya expects.

It is smaller than the rest of the apartment, less curated. The bed is unmade, sheets tangled in a way that speaks to real sleep rather than decorative rest. A hockey stick leans in the corner, scarred and taped within an inch of its life. Posters line one wall — one of the Montreal Metros, one of a Jurassic Park movie advertisement, and one he must’ve taken from a Pink

Floyd concert. A younger Shane beams out from a photo stuck beside them, helmet crooked, all gummy smile and freckles.

Ilya stands very still.

On the dresser are photos. Shane at various ages, always grinning, always mid-motion — on ice, on a podium, arm slung around his father's shoulders. There's a woman in one of them, dark haired and grinning as she spins Shane in her arms. Is that Nike?

Either her or David's hand is always there: steady on Shane's back, slung over his shoulder, helping him heft a trophy. The photos are glossy with pride. Ilya swallows.

This room is loved. *Shane* is loved. He's known it all this time, but seeing the room is kind of awe-inspiring. Ilya's room back in Moscow had been nothing more than a room — four walls and a ceiling meant to protect him from the cold. Nothing in it was truly loved, nothing in it was truly his.

But Shane's is. Shane's room speaks of quiet comfort, of family, and Ilya feels like an outsider in it. He curls his fists, feeling the lick of envy in his chest drowned out by a melancholy *want*. He wants this. He wants this so badly, and he wants it with Shane.

Whatever has happened to David Hollander did not erase that. He checks the closet, the ensuite, the space under the bed — habit, not hope. Nothing. No sign of struggle. No sign of David at all.

When he steps back into the hall, Shane is already there, pale and tight-lipped. He doesn't have to ask. "He's not here," Shane says flatly.

"No," Ilya agrees. "But he did not leave without purpose. His laptop is gone, but nothing else. Not a robbery."

Shane's jaw clenches. His eyes flick once, helplessly, back toward the hallway with the broken vase. "Then where is he?"

Ilya shrugs. "Somewhere he was meant to go."

Shane closes his eyes for a moment, drawing in a breath that trembles despite his control.

"Hey, hey." Ilya clamps his hand on the back of Shane's neck, giving the waxy skin there a comforting squeeze. He draws Shane into his bubble, leans in close so Shane's breath blooms on his jaw. "We'll find him, okay? We just need to think."

Shane squeezes his eyes tight shut, but releases a breath. "Okay," he says, "okay."

Chapter 15: as love and its decisive pain

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

They step back out onto the sidewalk into late-afternoon light, the city loud and indifferent after the oppressive quiet upstairs. The glass doors slide shut behind them, sealing the apartment — and the absence inside it — away.

Shane itches to hold onto Ilya. He feels like a lifeboat bobbing on the ocean, untethered, threatening to go under. He pauses just outside the entrance, shoulders squared, staring at nothing for a beat too long.

“Sir — take this!”

The voice cuts in from his left. A young volunteer, earnest and rain-jacketed, presses a glossy flyer into Shane’s hand before he can refuse. The paper is warm from the volunteer’s grip. They manage to trap Shane in their eyeline and push a flyer into his hand. Shane cringes but thanks them and keeps walking, Ilya a loyal shadow behind him. He’s about to look down and discard the paper when something in it catches his eye.

For change: vote for working people

Vote for the new party on July 26th.

Now Shane thinks he might know where his father will be. He spins around. “Excuse me, is there something happening today?”

The person handing out fliers nods vigorously. “There’s a rally happening at four at Parliament Hill. You should attend! Alex Thorne is set to speak!”

Alex Thorne. That’s one of the heads of parties currently running in the national election. That’s the man his dad is supporting in his campaign. David Hollander is one of his policy advisors. They went to London together, where his father got that puzzle. It hurts his heart to think about.

Shane almost drops the flier. Why hadn’t he thought of it before? If anyone would know where and when his father was last seen — it would be people at work. It would be someone like Alex Thorne.

Shane shows Ilya the flyer. Ilya pulls a face, which is not the reaction Shane had been hoping for, and some of his hope flickers like a spitting flame in the face of his doubt. Ilya takes the flyer and scrutinises it. “A rally. Out in the open, lots of people.” He squints at Shane. “This is not a place to find a missing person.”

Shane’s shaking his head before Ilya even finishes. “It’s the best connection we have,” he argues, “if my dad was working with Thorne, someone there must know something.” In the

face of Ilya's doubt, he presses, "it's public, and crowded. What's the worst that could happen in front of thousands of people and hundreds of news cameras?"

As they walk up the hill, Shane fights the urge to take Ilya's hand. He feels somewhat giddy. He's about to find his dad, he's kissed the Son of Zeus, and they haven't been killed by monsters. All in all, a great success.

Parliament Hill rises ahead of them, green lawns rolling upward toward a large, broad building of stone and spire, already thick with people. The crowd spills across the pathways in loose, restless clusters — families with signs tucked under arms, students draped in flags, volunteers in matching jackets weaving through with clipboards and practiced smiles. Banners ripple in the breeze. Somewhere near the stage, speakers crackle and pop as technicians test microphones. The air hums with noise, with too many people in one place, too much anticipation. Shane feels it like pressure behind his eyes.

Ilya slows almost imperceptibly as they merge with the crowd. His posture shifts — spine straightening, shoulders squaring — alert, somewhere between tense and relaxed. His gaze never settles. It skims over faces, hands, sightlines, the gaps between bodies

"I do not like this," Ilya murmurs, close enough that only Shane can hear him. "There are too many people."

"I know," Shane says. His voice comes out steadier than he feels. The hill seems steeper now, the distance to the stage longer. Somewhere up there, behind the lights and the slogans and the choreography, might be his father — or someone who knows where he's gone. The thought tightens his chest until it's hard to draw a full breath.

A chant starts up near the front, swelling and echoing off the stone buildings. The sound rolls over them like surf. Shane sways slightly, disoriented, and that's when Ilya's hand finds his. At first their fingers are just brushing, then lacing together with quiet certainty. Shane exhales shakily and squeezes back. The contact steadies him, grounds him in the here and now — the warmth of Ilya's palm, the strength in his grip. He hadn't even realized how badly he needed it until it's there.

Ilya leans in, his voice low and firm. "Stay with me. If anything changes, tell me."

"I will," Shane promises. He tilts his head, just enough to catch Ilya's eye. "Thank you."

Ilya's thumb presses once against the back of his hand, reassuring and maybe a little possessive. They continue up the hill together, weaving through people as they're swallowed by the crowd. Their hands remain linked as the noise rises around them and the stage comes into view: bright lights, bold slogans, and so many damn people.

They are nearly level with the stage when Ilya's grip tightens. "There," he says quietly. Shane follows his line of sight. Set off to one side of the main lawn, just beyond the densest press cluster, stands a large white marquee—the kind used for weddings or fundraisers, pristine and temporary. *Liaison* is printed discreetly on a sign near the entrance, along with smaller text identifying it as staff and employee access only. Security personnel stand nearby, relaxed but watchful, earpieces glinting in the light.

Shane's pulse spikes. "That's it," he says, certainty slamming into place. "That's where they'd be coordinating things. Where my dad would have been working."

Ilya studies the tent with open suspicion. Shane watches his hazel eyes map it quickly: entry points, sightlines, the way people drift in and out without being checked too closely. Shane can guess what he's thinking: it's too easy.

Shane swallows. The chant from the crowd surges again, momentarily drowning out his thoughts. "If he was last seen with campaign staff," he says, "someone in there knows what happened. Or where he went."

Ilya does not argue this time. His unease has sharpened into something colder, more focused. "We do not separate."

Shane nods. He tightens his hold on Ilya's hand once more before letting go, forcing himself to stand straight as they angle toward the marquee. The white canvas gleams against the green lawn, spotless and innocent-looking.

At the lawn's edge, the roar of the rally is hushed, muted to a dull thrum. Folding tables are lined with brochures and laptops. The tarpaulin overhead flaps gently in the summer breeze. Shane squeezes through a couple of people, scanning for someone who'd look important enough to tell him where his father has gone.

And there, standing near the back, talking calmly with another staffer with his back turned, is David Hollander.

Shane stops dead. "Dad?" he croaks.

He looks — ...*fine*.

A crisp white shirt, no tie, his salt-and-pepper hair neatly shaved and combed, with one of those Thorne jackets thrown over his shoulders. Shane doesn't know what he'd been expecting. These past forty-eight hours have been hellish. He'd been bracing for kidnapping, or ransoms, or hostages, or even worse— blood and bruises and broken bones. But here he is, standing in the flesh. He catches Shane's eyeline and his face lights up. "Shane! What are you doing here?"

"Dad," Shane chokes. He breaks away from Ilya and narrows the gap between them in a run. He crashes into his father's hug and buries his face in his father's neck. His dad chuckles, hands coming down around him to squeeze him tightly. He smells like his usual aftershave, and coffee, and something minty. For a glorious second, all of Shane's fear evaporates.

"Dad, thank the gods. Are you alright? Your phone— I've been calling— I got worried—"

David pulls back, hands on Shane's shoulders, his expression one of gentle, paternal concern. "I'm so sorry, kiddo. It's been chaotic. The campaign... we had to go dark for a bit. Security thing. I tried to get a message to you." He looks over Shane's shoulder at Ilya, who has followed, standing rigidly in the tent entrance. "And who's this?"

“This is Ilya. A... A friend from camp. He... helped me get here.”

David extends a hand, his face warm and inviting. Shane stays close to him, still rather unable to believe that it is his dad, here and alive and all well and good. He feels like he's five years old, having wandered away in a grocery store and losing his parents to the aisles and aisles of fluorescent lights and symmetrical lines of food packaging. Only to squeal round the corner and hurtle into his arms.

“Any friend of Shane's. Thank you for looking after him.”

Ilya takes the hand, his own grip tense. He says nothing. His eyes are narrowed. The way he's staring at Shane's dad is keenly uncomfortable. Ilya takes the hand, his own grip tense. He says nothing. His eyes are narrowed, sharp and assessing in a way that makes Shane's shoulders tighten on instinct.

“Thank you,” David repeats, still smiling when Ilya does not immediately respond. His tone does not shift. It is steady and pleasant and smooth. No trace of his usual Quebecan drawl.

“You're welcome,” Ilya says at last. His accent is clipped, his posture rigid, like a man braced for impact. He releases David's hand a fraction too quickly and steps back, reclaiming distance. His gaze never quite settles; it keeps sliding past David's face, to the tent walls, the exits, the other staffers moving in quiet, efficient loops.

Shane feels the irritation spark, hot and unwelcome. “Ilya,” he says, low and pointed, without looking at him. *Behave.*

If Ilya hears the warning, he ignores it. His attention is fixed on David again, his expression unreadable. “You were unreachable,” he says, plainly. It's too blank to be an accusation, but it's not quite a simple statement, either. “For five days.”

“Yes, well,” David says easily, waving it off. “Campaign life. You know how it is.” He does not know how it is. His dad has never told him the half of it. “Sometimes you have to trust the process.”

The words land wrong. Shane frowns, twisting to look at his dad. Something uneasy rears its head in his gut, before he smothers it brutally. “Trust the—? Dad, that's not—” He cuts himself off, forcing a breath. He is here. He is fine. Do not start inventing problems. “You scared me.”

He fights the urge to pull away, suddenly anxious. *Is he mad I'm here? Am I ruining the rally for him? Am I in the way?*

Work has kicked up but I'm always available, his dad had told him, what feels like a lifetime ago back at Camp Half-Blood. *I'm not going anywhere, bud.*

David's smile softens. He brushes his hand over Shane's face. “I know. And I'm sorry.” He squeezes Shane's arm, firm and reassuring. “But look at me. I'm alright. Everything's under control. And I'm not best pleased you decided to trek across the country by yourself, but it's good to see you, son. Your mother would be proud.”

The reference to his mother helps balm some of Shane's nervousness. He tells himself he's getting worked up over nothing.

"We need to go, Dad," Shane says, the urgency returning. "Something's wrong. I had these dreams... there's someone after us, after me. It's not safe."

David's smile becomes placating. "Dreams, huh? You've always had an active imagination. But you're safe now. You're with me. And Mr. Thorne has the best private security in the country." He gestures around the tent as if it were a fortress.

"It's not that kind of *safe*—" Shane begins.

And then, almost sickeningly predictable, Shane feels the wheel of victory begin to spin.

He frowns at the feeling, and the woosh of competitiveness, of probability, that goes through him. *There's no winning here*, he thinks, *I've already won. It's over.*

"Shane," David cuts in, his voice still kind, but with an undercurrent of firmness that leaves no room for argument. "You're here now. That's what matters. Alexei is about to give a pivotal speech. I want you to hear it. He's... he's a remarkable man. He has a vision for this country that could really... cleanse things. Make things strong." There's a zealous glint in his eye that Shane has never seen before when discussing politics, or anything.

"Alexei?" Ilya wonders.

David hums without looking at him. "That's his name. Alexei Thorne."

Ilya's staring at him, jaw working in tense, tight circles. "That is a Russian name."

"Huh, I suppose it is." He turns back to Shane. "Listen, bud. Alex is about to speak. You have to hear him. He has a vision that can really... settle things. For everyone."

Settle things. Another oddly passive, final phrase. Like things were dust being patted down.

He doesn't care about this politician. All he wants is his dad, *safe*. They did not trek seven hundred kilometers to listen to a pep rally.

Shane's gaze flicks to Ilya, seeking confirmation of his own creeping disquiet. Ilya's jaw is clenched so tight a muscle jumps. He gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head. No.

"Dad," Shane tries again, stepping back slightly, creating space. "The dreams I had... they were bad. Really bad. Something's after us. We can't stay here in the open."

For the first time, David's smooth expression fractures with a flash of something like impatience. "Shane. The dreams are over. You're here now. You're safe." He says it with absolute certainty. "You haven't had one since you left camp, right? Alexei has everything under control. He wants to meet you. He's been looking forward to it."

The staffer by the entrance shifts her weight. The one near the back exit takes a small, quiet step forward. The movement is coordinated and snags on Shane's attention.

Ilya sees it too. He moves, not toward Shane, but to place himself subtly between Shane and the rear exit, his body a barrier. “Shane’s father,” he says, the formal address deliberately cold. “We must go. Now.”

David’s eyes meet Ilya’s. The pleasant mask slips fully, revealing a chilling, empty calm beneath. “There’s no need for that tone, young man.” He turns back to Shane, his voice softening into a plea that feels like a command. “Shane, please. Just come with me. Just meet Alexei. Hear him out. For me. After everything, don’t you trust me?”

It’s the cruelest blow. The direct appeal to a son’s love and trust, wielded like a blunt instrument. Shane feels his resolve, his hard-won certainty, begin to splinter. His father is asking him. His father, who is safe, is here, is *fine*. Maybe the dreams were just dreams?

He looks at Ilya, who is staring at him with a desperate, furious intensity, trying to communicate something without words. He remembers the feeling of Ilya’s lips on him in the car. On his mouth, his jaw, his chest. Hands roaming possessively under his shirt.

His dad’s hand lands on his shoulder again. The tremor is gone and his grip is so steady it could be iron-forged. “Come on, kiddo.”

Shane makes his choice. He doesn’t pull away. He lets his father turn him toward the rear exit, where the open door of a sleek, black SUV yawns like a dark mouth. He takes a step, feeling Ilya’s horrified stare on his back.

Then, in the same motion, he drives his elbow sharply backwards, not at his father, but into the gut of the staffer who had silently closed in behind him. The man grunts, doubling over.

“Ilya, *run!*” Shane shouts, twisting out of his father’s now-startled grasp.

But it’s too late. The tent flaps fall shut as more staffers converge. None of them are violent, but there’s enough of them to create this terrible physical presence that all but mobs Shane, overwhelming him, blocking him and herding him backwards towards the car.

Shane wrestles against them as he’s dragged back. “Ilya!” he shouts, “*Ilya!*”

He reaches for Tiebreaker but his dad is already there, taking his hand with almost loving care and squeezing the key out of his fingers before he could transform it. It lands on the ground and Shane wrestles to grab it. His fingers skim the grass before he’s wrenched backwards.

He sees Ilya lunge for him, only to be caught in the implacable grip of three huge men. Ilya’s face contorts with fury as he’s pulled back, hands yanked behind him before he can have a chance to pull his dagger. “Shane!” He reaches for him with this feral desperation.

Then David gets between them, his face profoundly and tragically disappointed. He’s never looked at Shane like that before and it catches him so off-guard that Shane momentarily stills at the sight of it, something in his heart squeezing.

“Oh, Shane,” David sighs, as strong hands close around Shane’s biceps to push him backwards. “Why did you have to make it difficult?”

“Get your hands off me,” Shane snarls, twisting hard, planting his boots, trying to drop his weight the way he was taught. Someone catches his wrist and someone else clamps an arm around his chest. They move like a unit, efficient and coordinated, guiding him rather than dragging him, as if this has all been rehearsed. The thought chills him.

The SUV looms closer.

“I said stop!” Shane bucks, lashes out blindly with his heel. Panic is setting in now, making him lash out like a cornered wolf. His foot connects with a shin; there’s a hiss of pain, but no one lets go. They tighten instead, bodies closing in, cutting off space, air, options. That somehow makes it worse.

“Ilya!” he yells again, his voice cracking now despite himself. It comes out all mangled.

“I am here!” Ilya shouts back, raw and furious. Shane hears the strain in it — the sound of a man being held just barely enough. “Shane, fight them— do not listen to him—”

David turns his head slightly, as if irritated by a noise in the distance. “Restrain the other one,” he says calmly, not even raising his voice. “He’s agitated.” Agitated. Like a misbehaving child. Like an inconvenience.

Anger and fear lick up Shane’s spine.

The rear door of the SUV opens fully. Dark leather interior. Hands shift, regrip, preparing to load him in like cargo.

“Dad,” Shane says, breathless now, desperate. “Dad, *look at me.*”

For a moment — for just a fraction of a heartbeat — David hesitates. Something real strains at the surface, like a reflection under water. Then it smooths away. “This is for the best,” David says gently. “You’re tired. You’re scared. Let us take care of it.”

“No,” Shane spits. He surges forward with everything he has, slamming his shoulder back, throwing his head, fighting ugly and desperate. His forehead collides with his dad’s face. A cartilage in David’s nose snaps, wet and ugly, and he rears back with a cry, and the image of blood streaking down his father’s nose, the pained sound that comes out of him, makes Shane hesitate again. It’s weakness, weakness exploited enough for another arm to lock around his throat. Shane gags.

Across the tent, Ilya roars his name — nothing articulate, just sound and pure fury — his eyes wild, and then Shane is bent, forced, pushed down into the waiting dark. The door slams shut behind him.

The hands don’t loosen once the door shuts. If anything, they tighten.

Shane slams forward with the sudden stop, his shoulder cracking into the interior wall of the SUV hard enough to knock the breath out of him. Pain blooms hot and bright, radiating down

his arm. He gasps, tries to suck air back into lungs that won't cooperate.

"Easy," someone says, close to his ear. Far too close.

"Go to hell," Shane wheezes. He kicks out blindly, heel connecting with something solid. There's a sharp grunt, a curse — but still they don't retaliate. They never do. They just reposition, pinning him more effectively. A knee wedges between his legs. An arm hooks across his chest, crushing his sternum until each breath comes shallow and panicked.

Fear claws up his throat, and despite his training, he's frozen. He never freezes. He's never frozen until now. The SUV accelerates. The motion makes his head swim.

"Dad!" Shane shouts again, hoarse now, more plea than anything else. "Dad, please—"

A hand clamps over his mouth, firm and unyielding, cutting the word off mid-syllable. He thrashes, teeth scraping uselessly against gloved knuckles. His pulse is pounding so hard it feels like it might burst through his skin, a heady throb in his eardrums.

"Restrain his head," another voice says. "He's concussed already."

"I'm not—" Shane tries to protest, but the hand presses harder, thumb digging into his cheek, forcing his jaw shut. Fingers tangle in his hair, yanking his head back at an awkward angle that sends a spike of pain down his neck.

The world tilts.

Something cold presses briefly against the side of his throat. He feels it before he understands it — a sharp, invasive pressure just below his jawline. A sharp scratch. A *needle*.

"No—" He bucks hard, a surge of desperate strength. His vision flickers at the edges, static creeping in. "*Don't—!*"

"There," the voice says. "Got it."

The pain is sudden and precise, like a wasp sting buried deep under his skin. Shane jerks violently, breath tearing out of him in a raw, broken sound. His muscles seize, then go weak all at once. His heart races, then stumbles.

The ceiling blurs. The faces above him smear into indistinct shapes, voices stretching and warping as though underwater. "Dad—" he tries to say, or maybe it's Ilya's name again. He can't tell. His tongue feels thick and heavy, like swollen fabric lodged in his mouth.

Darkness surges in, mercilessly fast.

The last thing he feels is hands easing him down, careful now, arranging his limp body against the seat. The last thing he hears is his father's voice from somewhere close, smooth and heartbreakingly gentle. "Make sure he's comfortable," David says. "He'll wake up soon enough."

Chapter End Notes

omg its happening people stay calm stay fucking calm

alexei u bitch!!! yes, this is the og alexei as in ilya's brother who's a dickhead. i actually find it difficult to label a villain in these aus because no one in heated rivalry can be blown out of proportion in their villainy. aside from alexei, and maybe crowell. fuck you crowell.

alexei's power over influence is in the pjo wiki dubbed 'kingly aura' LOL. i didn't read past the original 5 books so idk if it ever comes up or if its just fanon. either way, i'm using it here. its somewhere between mind control and hypnosis idk how it works

ty for reading! please comment! they are so motivating and rewarding for all the time i put into this!

Chapter 16: all that was shown to me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He sees Shane turn away, sees David's hand in his back, they're a natural pair, father and son, and they're turning away from Ilya. Leaving him here.

Ilya's feet are sinking into the mud, grounding him here. He feels like a stray dog, lurking on the outside of something warm, waiting to be let in. Something about this is all wrong but Shane isn't listening to him, Shane doesn't care anymore because he's got his father and maybe that's all any of this was about.

This wasn't supposed to happen like this. He can feel it in his bones, the same way he feels a storm hours before it breaks. The wrongness hums under his skin, electric and unresolved. Shane was supposed to look back. Shane was supposed to hesitate. To argue. To say *wait*.

But then— then Shane *jerks*. He slams his shoulder back and twists out of his father's grip. His wild eyes catch Ilya's.

"Ilya! Run!"

And Ilya should've never doubted him. *"Nyet,"* he breathes, already moving.

He lunges forward, shoulder down, aiming for the narrow gap between bodies. He hits the first man hard enough to drive the air from his lungs, feels his arm give under his fist. Another hand catches his jacket, yanking him back. He twists, vicious and economical, slamming his elbow into a throat, then driving his heel down onto an instep.

"Ilya!" he hears Shane cry, *"Ilya!"*

"Shane!" The name tears out of him, raw and feral. He is dimly aware of shouting — of his own voice sounding unrecognizable, animal. He fights like it, too, clawing and snarling, throwing his body forward to try and get to Shane. Someone grabs his wrist.

Ilya lets the dagger slide into his palm. Steel flashes. It won't be lethal — never lethal unless he has to — but precise. He delivers a clean slash across the arm of the man holding him. A puncture through a meaty shoulder. Enough to make them recoil, swear, bleed. It's not enough. He surges forward again, eyes locked on Shane, who is being folded into the black mouth of the SUV.

Too many hands. They come in all at once — three, four men converging, bodies slamming into his from all sides. He feels a fist crack against his ribs, another against his jaw. Pain registers distantly, irrelevant. He tries to break free, to get one more step closer.

Something inside Ilya fractures. *"No!"* he bellows, straining so hard his vision whites out at the edges. *"Fuck! Fuck! Shane!"* He bucks violently, dragging two men with him before a

third locks his arms behind his back in a brutal hold. A knee slams into his spine. Another fist catches him in the temple, ringing his skull like a bell.

He barely feels it. Stares through the people at Shane, who's head lolls. His eyes roll back. His mouth falls open, boneless. The door slams shut.

Ilya howls.

It is not a word. It is grief and fury and promise all at once, ripped straight from his chest. He fights harder then, thrashing with suicidal abandon, dagger gone now, knocked from his hand at some point he cannot remember. He tries to draw electricity up but he's too wild for it, too uncontained to focus. He headbutts someone behind him, feels the crunch of a nose. Teeth sink into flesh at his shoulder. He does not care whose.

"Hold him!" someone shouts.

Ilya stops thrashing, goes terrifyingly still. He inhales and a crackle crawls over his skin, fingering through him like liquid fire. Electricity has always answered him best when he frames it not as a want but a *need*. And he *needs* Shane.

He lets it explode out of him. A violent pulse of current. Hands fly off him as if burned. Someone is thrown bodily backward, slamming into the SUV hard enough to dent the metal. Another collapses to the ground, muscles locking, teeth clacking as the current seizes him.

Ilya wrenches free, stumbles forward on shaking legs. A glint in the grass. Tiebreaker. Ilya scoops it up and stuffs it in his pocket. Sparks dance across the wet asphalt, snapping and popping like angry insects.

The SUV peels out with a shriek of tires, taillights smearing red across the muddy road. When he fights through the marquee the roar of the crowd comes back into sound, hitting him like a bubble burst.

"Shane—" he gasps, the name breaking apart in his throat. The world tilts. He stumbles down the road, covered in mud, disoriented and angry and confused, hidden by the marquee from the crowds. He's hit with the urge to go into the crowd and start yelling, but knows better. That'll just draw attention to himself. He needs to stop — take stock. He's in a country he doesn't know, in a city he doesn't know, and he's just lost Shane.

He turns in a slow, disoriented circle, half-expecting to see the SUV somehow still there, Shane's hand reaching for him, this all revealed as a hallucination born of panic. But he's not there. All that is, is just tire marks gouged into wet earth and a dent in black metal already being fussed over by a security team that pointedly does not look at him.

Ilya presses his fist into his sternum hard enough to hurt, rubbing his knuckles against his solar plexus through his muddied shirt. Ground yourself. Inventory.

He is injured — minor contusions, a split lip, blood at his face where someone hit his head, blood in his mouth. His — *Shane's* — dagger is gone. He's walking. Good. He's not restrained. Better. He is not dead. Shane would hate that.

Shane. The thought threatens to unmoor him again. He clamps down on it with ruthless discipline, the way he was taught. Panic later. Now, survival.

He is halfway along the perimeter fencing when the air changes.

Ilya feels it first as pressure — an abrupt, vertiginous drop, like the moment before a storm breaks. The hairs on his arms rise. His skin prickles, nerves flaring in warning. He looks up. The harpy drops out of the sky like a thrown weapon at him, a spear hurtling for his throat. Wings beat above him, vast and violent.

Talons scythe towards him. Ilya drops and rolls, barely making it as claws rake the ground his head had been. The harpy — a human woman's face with a huge eaglian body — wheels on him, knocking him onto the ground. Breath is driven from his lungs as he skids across wet grass and gravel.

He rolls on instinct, coming up on one knee, electricity already clawing up his spine— but the harpy is on him again.

Talons rake across his chest, tearing fabric. Her wings buffet his head, disorienting, shrill laughter splitting the air as she drives him back down. He grits his teeth and swings, fist crackling, the blow catching her wing joint with a thunderous snap of current.

She screams. The sound is piercing, supernatural, loud enough that several people nearby stagger — but the rally noise swallows it, disguises it as feedback or fireworks or enthusiasm. The mist is strong. No one would see if Ilya was torn open here.

They crash together again, grappling, rolling. Ilya's wrist slams hard against the ground.

There is a sharp metallic click.

His bracelet splits open with a hiss. Plates unfold in a smooth, practiced bloom. Metal flows outward, locking into place with a resonant clang as the shield manifests in his grip — broad, old, etched with sigils that hum faintly against his skin. A gorgon's face sneering from the metal surface, etched with fury and a swirling head of snakes. The harpy slams into it.

An *Aegis*.

The impact knocks Ilya flat on his back, breath bursting from his lungs in a choked sound. The shield holds. Talons screech against divine metal, sparks flying. The creature rears back, wings buffeting the air violently as it prepares to strike again—

And then it stops.

The harpy hovers, wings beating slower now. Its head tilts, beak opening slightly as it fixes on Ilya's face — then on the shield, then on the faint crackle of electricity still lingering around him. Recognition flickers there. Somewhere, in its predatory face, Ilya sees intelligence.

It lets out a lower sound, something like a confused croak, and pulls back another pace. The aggression drains from its posture, replaced by wary calculation. It circles once, twice, never

taking its eyes off him, then lands heavily a few metres away.

Ilya lies there, chest heaving, shield braced uselessly against his arm. He's bleeding. He gestures with the aegis. "...Zeus," he pants.

The harpy does not attack.

Slowly, carefully, Ilya pushes himself upright, mud streaking his clothes, blood warm on his skin, his temple. The creature watches him with the same uneasy attention one gives a loaded weapon. Lightning snaps sharply across the aegis in response, a warning pulse that makes the ground hum. "Yeah, that's right," he grunts. "Fuck you."

The harpy bows — actually *bows* — then snaps her great wings and explodes into the air. With a flap of mighty chestnut wings, she's gone as quickly as she arrived.

Ilya is left panting.

Ilya stands very still, rain cooling the heat still crawling under his skin. His gaze drops to his wrist. To the bracelet — closed now, innocuous again, dull metal masquerading as ornament. He turns it slightly, thumb brushing the seam where it split open so easily.

An Aegis. A Zeusian Aegis. The realization lands slowly, like pressure building before a storm breaks. He's had his father's blessing this entire time. A secret mode of protection, only snapping out when he needed it most. He'd tricked Ilya, diverted his assumptions. Maybe Zeus did not lace up Ilya's skates or kiss him on the head at night, but this was a sign of favour.

He swallows, and finds he does not care much. It is useful to have an Aegis, and a small part of him is pleased to have his father's blessing, and the backing of Olympus' king on this quest, but the larger, more tender part of him does not want Zeus' input, his support. He's never cared about Ilya, not really. Only ever cared about keeping him alive. So why now?

Harpies do not defer to power lightly. They are not impressed by strength alone. They answer to Zeus alone. And she had recognized his Aegis, his claim, without hesitation — had folded instantly, instinctively, as though some ancient rule had snapped into place. As though she'd realised he is stormborn.

Ilya exhales, sharp and unsteady. Whoever sent her had believed she would work. Had believed she would be obeyed. Which means the order came from someone with the right to give it. Another child of Zeus.

Chiron had mentioned it once, when he'd been describing the kinds of powers that Ilya might want to look out for now that he had properly claimed. There'd been atmokenesis, electrokinesis, powers over flight and wind. One Chiron had warned him about, however, was certain... mental influence that may occur when Ilya speaks with other people. Especially humans. It makes sense — his father is the God of Kingship, so others would ... bend towards him.

At the time, Ilya had dismissed it as theoretical. An echo of Zeus's domain rather than a practical concern. He had power enough already; the idea that his voice could be a weapon seemed almost redundant.

Now, standing in the rain with lightning still humming faintly under his skin, it clicks into place.

David Hollander's smile. The way staffers had moved in synchrony, unquestioning. The phrasing — *trust the process, this is for the best* — spoken with the serene certainty of someone who did not believe disobedience was possible.

It's sickening.

A son of Zeus would not need brute force to move pieces on a board like this. He would need compliance, calm, and the illusion of choice. Ilya swallows, throat tight.

If another of Zeus's children is involved, then this is some kind of dominion. The same subtle pressure that makes crowds hush when Zeus clears his throat, the same instinct that makes lesser beings yield before they understand why. And if that influence has been turned on Shane's father—?

The thought is cold and precise, slotting into place with sickening elegance. Not a random divine asset or a hired help. A sibling. Or something close enough to count. Someone who thought they outranked him.

Someone who took Shane. Ilya's fingers curl slowly into a fist as the pieces click together.

Alexei is a Russian name, isn't it? And then — the second realization, quieter but far more destabilizing. *Alexei Thorne has Shane.*

Ilya doubles back on himself, heading away from Parliament Hill, back down the road towards Ottawa's uptown. If this is a battle between Ilya and his sibling — it is now a contest. And Ilya knows just who to call upon.

Ilya doesn't bother cleaning up. The mist can't hide all his blood and his mud — he's aware he looks like a wreck and he doesn't care. No one stops him. Maybe it's the blood, maybe it's the look in his face. He heads down the hill.

Ilya arrives at the Canadian War Museum just as the late-afternoon light begins to thin, the building's angular concrete planes catching the sky like a half-submerged ship. Families drift toward the main entrance, their voices soft against the wind coming off the Ottawa River, but he hesitates at the edge of the walkway. Something about the place — the weight of it, the way it seemed to lean into the earth — emboldens his footsteps.

So he slipped along the side path, the one partly hidden by a rise in the landscape. A narrow strip of gravel that curves behind the museum's slanted façade. The city noise fades. The air

smells faintly of cold metal and river water.

As he rounds the corner, the external exhibits come into view: the hulking silhouettes of tanks, artillery pieces, and weather-worn vehicles arranged on the open grounds like dormant animals. Up close, they felt strangely intimate — massive, yes, but quiet now, their histories folded into steel and rivets. He walked slowly, feeling each one, before he spots a large battered tank, faded now with time and battle, and crouches beside it.

The concrete is cold through his jeans. He welcomes it, lets the chill anchor him. He shrugs out of his jacket and folds it neatly, sets it aside. From his pockets, he empties what he has: a bronze drachma coin polished by finger handling; a strip of cloth torn from his sleeve, still dark with drying blood; the cracked remains of a campaign flyer, folded until the creases have nearly torn through the paper. Victory always costs something and offerings should reflect that.

He arranges them carefully on the tank's edge, then stills.

Ilya removes the bracelet. The aegis does not blaze or pop open in a protective shield. It hums quietly against his palm, heavy with promise. He places it at the center of the makeshift altar and bows his head, sweat prickling faintly along his spine.

"Nike," he says, without titles or flattery.

"I am not asking to win." His voice is low, steady, carrying easily in the open air. "I know I will win. I am asking to win *cleanly* when I take back what has been taken from me, as is just and fair, as is your domain."

The wind shifts, tugging at his hair, at the flags above. Water ripples more sharply in its channel.

English isn't failing him, so he swaps to Russian. The words come easier with this language, rolling and melodic and laced with a firm undertone of *outrage*. She will understand him no matter the language. Russian just gives him more poetry. "*They have made your partner a bargaining piece,*" Ilya says measuredly. "*They have your son. They believe victory is decided. I intend to thoroughly disabuse them of this notion. I will destroy him for it.*" He presses his palm flat to the stone, feeling the chill bite back. "*If there is a moment where the field will tilt — show me. If there is a choice that will decide this — steady my hand. Allow me to get him back without hurting him further. And your husband, too, I guess.*" He tacks on as an afterthought.

There's a moment of silence, where the wind whistles through the still metal artillery. Then a voice: "You claim victory that you have not yet won, storm-child."

It is a woman's voice, layered like a battlefield — the roar of a stadium, the clash of shields, the clean snap of a finish-line tape. There is no warmth in it, only assessment.

A shape coalesces from the refraction of light on wet stone and the shadow of a flagpole — tall, winged, not quite solid. Nike stands before him. She has thin, deepset eyes and dark billowing hair pulled tight into a ponytail at the nape of her neck. She's not in flowing robes,

but in the semblance of modern athletic gear, a dark long-sleeved shirt and billowing black pants.

“You speak of my husband and son as afterthoughts,” she says, and the words are a chiding whip-crack. “And yet... you,” she pauses, and Ilya would think it a sigh if she actually had lungs, “understand the core of it. They have taken my own. A contest has been declared, and I intend for you to be my instrument in answering it.” She steps closer, her gaze falling to the offerings. A finger, shimmering and indistinct, traces the air above the glowing cloth. “The cost is already being paid. Your blood, your fear, your rage. These are the currencies of war.”

Ilya looks up at her. “You let them *take your son*,” he snaps.

Her lips thin. “So did you.” It's scathing. He can't quite conceal his flinch. “I cannot prevent a contest from happening. I can only govern how they are played. I cannot prevent a trap, or else there will be no victory at all.” She steps closer, just enough that the scent of iron and ozone reaches him. “You came to me after he was taken,” she says. “Now the wheel is beginning to churn. That is why I can answer you now.”

Ilya works his jaw. It was an ambush, a trap. They could've never won.

Her eyes lock onto his. “You ask for a clean victory. For the field to tilt. I do not tilt fields, Ilya, son of Zeus. I recognize the moment they are already tilting and I place my foot upon them.”

A sensation, sudden and shocking, blooms in Ilya's mind — not a vision, but a knowing. The crisp, tactile memory of the feel of that pipe in his grip before he'd thrown it. The specific angle of the javelin, determining that it will slide precisely where he wants it. The unshakeable, physical certainty of a winning play a second before he makes it.

It is the essence of victory, a pure kinetic instinct.

“That is what I give you,” Nike's voice echoes in the vault of his skull. “Confidence.” She looks toward the direction of the river, the docks, and her expression is one of cold, predatory anticipation. “Your brother, Alexei, believes victory is a possession to be stored, that luck can be wrung dry and probabilities swung ever-constantly in his favour. He is wrong.”

“Yes,” Ilya says softly, “he is, Goddess. Uh, ma'am.” And the fire inside him comes alive again.

Approval flickers across Nike's face, quick as the flash of a blade in the sun. “Do not be so formal, Demigod,” she says, and tilts her head. When she smiles next, there's something softer about it, something bordering on humane. “Call me Yuna. As is my mortal name. Rise now.”

Ilya shakily rises. She's far taller than he, bordering on maybe seven feet tall. Up close, with warm papery dollars in his hand, Ilya thinks he sees a glimpse of what Shane was talking about whenever he mentions his childhood. She isn't motherly, certainly not to anyone but Shane, but there's something in her, this golden core, he supposes. She feels narrower. More

human-shaped. Or at least human-outlined, even if the stuff in the middle is much less easy to define.

She must detect his thoughts. She reaches out and, rather bafflingly, straightens out the zipper on his coat. “My boy was loved,” she says simply. “He still is.”

Ilya nods. He believes her. He thinks of hockey posters and carefully preserved bedrooms, of a man who smelled like aftershave and coffee and mint. Of hands steady on shoulders. Something tightens in his chest.

She reaches into the fold of her mantle and produces a few crisp bills, entirely mundane and wildly out of place in her hand. She presses them into his palm.

“Eat,” she says. “You fight poorly when you’re starving.”

Ilya blinks down at the money, sees twenty Canadian dollars. Then up at her. “Is this...?”

“Shawarma,” Nike says briskly. “There’s a place two streets over. You walked past it on your way here. I used to take Shane there after matches. You noticed it.”

He did. Gods help him, he did. He stares at her, somewhat incredulous, then bows his head quickly before she takes his incredulousness as offensive. He murmurs, “thank you...” — What does he call her? Mrs Hollander seems offensive, and Nike seems way too abrasive— “...Yuna.”

Yuna steps back, already half-unmooring from the space. “Eat,” she repeats. “Then move. You will not find him by force alone. Not yet.”

“And when I do?” Ilya asks.

Her eyes flash like golden medals. “Then you will finish what they started.” She pauses, considering him one last time. “Do not mistake my restraint for indifference,” she adds. “I did not warn you because I could not. I help you now because you chose to stand.”

Her voice fades to a final, echoing whisper on the wind that suddenly rips across the square, scattering like the echoing ring that resounds after the blow of a trumpet, after the firing of a start-line gun. “*Win.*”

When Ilya blinks, she is gone without any kind of spectacle. Just the echo of her voice and the faint sense of having been seen, assessed, and found... sufficient. He picks up the Aegis bracelet and fastens it back on his wrist. It feels different. Not just a shield. Not just a father’s cryptic blessing. It is a piece of the board. A tool for the contest.

He stands, pulling on his jacket. The chill is gone from his bones, replaced by the steady, warming heat of a runner on the blocks, a fighter who has seen the opening. He’ll get his Nike-blessed shawarma, and then he will tear down Alexei Thorne, brick by brick.

shane is kidnapped. and you're worried about a schwarma. she'll make sure he orders extra pento beans to load up for the calorie burn ilya is about to enact. that's my queen.

(side note, i'm not sure if other gods can take champions the way that hera poached jason from zeus in pjo, but if possible because zeus is deadbeat, nika is defo poaching ilya to be her champion. especially with the generational run that he and shane are about to commit (they're on nika peds))

guys :(we're finally nearing the end. it's only been 2 weeks but i'm so attached to posting this fic. it's part of my routine to load up the next chapter and post it in the mornings and check comments throughout the day. thankfully, my next fic is fully written and i am halfway through the one after that haha, so i can keep posting consistently for a little bit more! the hollanov grind never stops.

things will slow down after that as life kicks in again but i want to keep writing as much as possible! i haven't felt this motivated in ages i love hollanov

Chapter 17: was something foreknown to me

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

There's a deep, sore ache in Shane's neck. That's the first thing he notices. He'd been stretching it all the way back without rest. So when he blinks open his eyes, all he sees is the white stretch of the ceiling. He forces it up, little cramping needles shooting down his spine as he blinks once, twice, and attempts to assess the room.

The room is bright in a clinical, intentional way — white walls, polished concrete floor, a single chair bolted to the ground opposite him. It feels as though Shane has sugar lodged behind his eyes: every blink is grainy and sore. He's strapped into another, thick bands across his chest and thighs, his boots removed. His shoulders scream where he'd been hauled, twisted, forced down.

A figure steps into his line of sight.

Alexei Thorne looks exactly like he does on television. Impeccably tailored suit, dark hair swept back, the sort of face that cameras love because it radiates competence and reassurance. He smiles when he sees Shane's eyes focus. "Good," Alexei says mildly. "Welcome back, Shane."

Shane swallows. His throat is dry, raw, like he'd been shouting. "Where's my father?"

Alexei's smile softens, sympathetic in a way that makes Shane's skin crawl. "Safe," he says. "Calm. Exactly where he needs to be."

Shane tests the restraints again, harder this time. The bands flare with dull heat in warning, sending a shock of pain up his arms. He hisses through his teeth but doesn't give Alexei the satisfaction of a sound beyond that.

"You kidnapped me," Shane says. "In public."

Alexei chuckles quietly. "No. I redirected you. You ran, you resisted, you were sedated for your own safety." He tilts his head. "Your friend made that... regrettably more dramatic than necessary."

At the word friend, something tightens in Shane's chest. Ilya. Is he alive? Is he safe?

Alexei watches his face with interest. "Ah. There it is." He takes a step closer, voice lowering, smoothing out. There's a pressured undertone to it that presses against Shane like gravity. "You've been through a lot," Alexei says, his voice almost a coo. "You're exhausted. Hurt. Confused. It would be *easier to stop fighting*."

Shane feels it then. The brush of something against his mind. A suggestion, a command. An invitation to rest. To comply or let go. It slides off him like water off stone.

Shane laughs. It comes out hoarse, sharp-edged. “You’re doing the thing,” he says. “The voice.”

Alexei’s eyes narrow a fraction. “Most people don’t notice.”

“Yeah, well.” Shane shifts in the chair, ignoring the way his ribs protest. “Doesn’t work on Demigods. Must be the divine blood.”

The pressure increases, subtle but unmistakable now. Alexei’s words carry weight, each syllable landing against Shane’s chest and yet — falling away. “You *don’t need to be afraid*,” Thorne says. “This is bigger than you. Bigger than your friend. Bigger than petty loyalties.”

Still nothing. The influence scrapes uselessly along Shane’s consciousness, finding no purchase. He can feel it probing against him, but there’s nothing there for it to latch onto. Nike’s blood runs hot and stubborn in his veins. Victory does not yield.

Understanding flickers across Alexei’s face, accompanied by some mild annoyance. As though Shane is a burr he’s found clinging to his coat, or a tacked gum glued to the sole of his shoe. “Hm,” he murmurs. “So you said. Influence-resistant.”

Shane’s jaw tightens. His shoulders ache viciously where the restraints hold him upright. His hands have gone numb, then burning again, pins and needles radiating up his arms. He focuses on the pain, lets it anchor him. “You can’t make me help you,” Shane says. “You can’t make me agree.”

Alexei straightens. The warmth drains from his expression, replaced by something cool and appraising. “No,” he agrees. “But I don’t need you compliant.” He steps back, tapping a finger against his watch. “I only need you here. Compliance is for mortals,” he continues, pacing a slow circle around Shane’s chair. The click of his expensive shoes on the concrete is almost metronomic. “For those who need to be convinced. You, Shane Hollander, you’re different. Your mother’s luck runs in you. It’s just what I need.”

He stops behind Shane, just outside his line of sight. Shane strains against the straps, trying to turn his head, but the movement is futile and sends a fresh bolt of agony through his neck.

“Your father,” Alexei’s voice comes from over his shoulder, “believes he is orchestrating a new era of mortal stability, guided by wise, divine hands. My hands. He is useful. Not as useful as you are, though, hm?”

“You want me to win you votes?” Shane barks a laugh, but panic kicks up in his throat, and he strains against his bindings again. “It doesn’t work like that.”

Alexei’s smile returns, thinner this time. “No,” he says. “Not votes.” He moves back into Shane’s view, crouching slightly so they’re eye level. Up close, the man smells faintly of citrus, like bleach,, like a hospital executive suite. “I don’t need you to sway crowds or whisper outcomes into the ears of senators,” Alexei continues. “Those systems are too inefficient.” He gestures vaguely, as if brushing aside whole institutions. “I need leverage over probability itself. Over inflection points.”

Shane's stomach drops. "You can't—"

"—force you?" Alexei finishes pleasantly. "Correct. I wouldn't try." He straightens, smoothing an invisible crease in his sleeve. "Your mother's domain isn't obedient to me. It's more momentous, right? Winning streaks. The way events tilt toward success once they start going right." His gaze sharpens. "All I require is proximity. Presence. You existing in the right places at the right times."

A chill creeps under Shane's skin. He thinks of near-misses that turned into victories, of impossible scrambles that somehow broke his way.

And then— And then Alexei pulls out a blade. It's a dainty, short thing. If someone pulled that out in a fight with Shane he might've laughed at it. But he's tied to a chair, and Alexei considers the knife and says, "let me show you."

With his other hand he pulls out his phone. He tilts the screen towards Shane. It's some kind of infographic lined up to be posted on a social media site — something about tackling rising homeless rates in Canada. He clicks post, and almost immediately a flurry of like and comments sweep the page. The like-count climbs to just over three hundred interactions in the span of thirty seconds.

Then, the blade flashes into Alexei's hand.

Fear blanches in Shane's stomach. He tugs on his restraints, pulling away as far as he can: "Stop—"

He doesn't dig deep into Shane's forearm, just a shallow nick, but it still hurts. He cuts a short line in Shane's arm like a clinical surgeon with a scalpel. Shane hisses. It's deep enough to draw blood, a hot drag of it over his skin, and rivulet beads and trails down his wrist.

Alexei doesn't react. He calmly wipes the now-bloodied knife on a handkerchief before tucking both into the pocket of his blazer. "I'd like to turn your attention again to my campaign," he says.

Shane bears his teeth at him, heart pounding in his ears. "Go fuck yourself."

Alexei ignores him. He stands and walks from the chair, and loads up another infographic to post. This time he doesn't turn it towards Shane, but stares intently down at it — some wayward glimmer in his eye. He lets out a low, accomplished sound. "And look at that. Your loss becomes my gain. My win." He finally tilts the phone towards Shane. "The numbers on this one have tripled."

The silence in the concrete room is suddenly deafening, broken only by the faint, frantic buzz of the phone in Alexei's hand. Shane stares at the screen, at the skyrocketing engagement numbers. He doesn't understand the infographic, but he understands multiplication. Tripled. Because of a cut. Because in the eyes of the logic of the universe, Shane just 'lost'. And Shane never loses. Look at what happens when he does. It's dizzying.

The hot trickle of blood down his arm feels like a condemnation. It's a transaction. His mother's luck and her strength — that subtle, pervasive force that bent the world gently in his favour — has just been syphoned, distilled through his blood and turned into pure, quantifiable social capital for this man.

"You see?" Alexei's voice is a study in calm triumph. "It's about... redirection. A catalyst." He pockets the phone, his gaze lingering on the thin red line on Shane's forearm. "I don't want to hurt you, Shane, but needs must. You're too valuable not to use, you know?"

Shane's defiance curdles into a sick, cold horror. It's worse than any threat of violence. Violence he could understand, could resist. This is violation on a metaphysical level. A living, luck-bringing battery.

"I'll never help you," Shane grinds out, but the words sound hollow, even to him. He is helping. By merely being here, bleeding here, he's helping.

Alexei's smile is a thin, satisfied line. "You already are. And you will continue to do so. Compliance, as I said, is for mortals. We are building a new era. I simply require the right... conditions to ensure it's my era. And you, Shane, are now a permanent part of the conditions."

"Are you a demigod?" Shane rasps.

Alexei pauses. It is a small thing — barely a hitch in his movement as he turns back — but Shane catches it. The man's eyes sharpen, weighing the question rather than dismissing it. He tilts his head in a nod. "My father's only son." He turns and walks toward the door, the metronomic click of his shoes echoing again. He pauses at the threshold, not looking back, talking to someone outside. "Get that cleaned and bandaged. We can't have it getting infected. You need to be in perfect health for tomorrow's tests."

The door shuts with a soft, final click, leaving Shane alone with the scent of citrus-bleach, the coppery smell of his own blood, and the devastating understanding dawning between his ribs.

True enough, someone does come shuffling in after a few minutes with a first aid kit. She looks as out of it as the rest of them, shutting the door behind her as she crouches beside Shane. She's got this hazy, permanent smile slapped across her face. Shane doesn't remember her from the car.

He breathes heavily as she crouches next to him and opens up an antiseptic wipe.

"What's your name?" he asks quietly.

She startles, just a little. Her hand pauses over the wipe, the smile wavering at the edges like a bad signal. Then it settles back into place, practiced and empty. "Marisol," she says, after a beat. The word sounds rehearsed, like it's been pulled from a shelf and dusted off. "I'm here to help you."

"I know," Shane says. He keeps his voice low, careful. The storm inside him is coiled tight, barely stirring. He doesn't want to scare her. "You don't have to rush."

Marisol nods immediately, a little too quickly. She presses the antiseptic to the cut on his arm.

Shane sucks in a sharp breath but doesn't pull away. He watches her face instead. Her eyes don't track his reaction. They don't really track anything. Just unfocused, compliant. "Does it hurt?" she asks, smiling.

"Yeah," he says honestly. "But I'll live." A pause. "How long have you worked here, Marisol?"

She hesitates again. The wipe stills against his skin. "Long enough," she says, finally.

That answer settles something cold in Shane's stomach.

"Do you know where we are?" he asks.

Another pause. Her brow furrows, just barely, like the question is pressing against something padded and numb. "Thorne tower," she says. "It's safe here."

Shane ducks his head to try and get her to look at him. "Do you know who I am?"

Her eyes flick to his face this time. For half a second, something like uncertainty cracks through the haze. "You're important," she says. "Mr. Thorne said so."

Shane exhales slowly. "Did he tell you anything else?"

Marisol's smile tightens. Her fingers resume their work, careful, efficient. "He said to take care of you," she replies. "That you get... upset."

"To take care of me?" Shane asks, and then a plan starts to swirl. "Marisol. I have some broken ribs. They really, really hurt." He sucks in a breath and winces, only half for show. "You have to take care of me, right?"

Marisol nods immediately. "Yes," she says. "I have to take care of you."

"Okay," Shane whispers. He lets his breathing hitch, shallow and uneven now, lets a tremor run through him. Pain is easy to fake when there's already so much of it. "Then you need to check them. I think one might be punctured. My chest feels... wrong."

Her smile falters.

"I—I wasn't told about broken ribs," she says, uncertainty creeping in around the edges of the words. She glances at the thick restraint banding his torso, the way it pins him upright. "I can't examine you like this."

Shane swallows, deliberately loud. "If my lung collapses," he says quietly, "that would be bad for tomorrow's tests."

The words land. Marisol's pupils dilate. Fear — real and sharp in her dark blue eyes — cuts through the haze. "No," she says quickly. "No, you need to be healthy."

“That’s what he said,” Shane agrees. He meets her eyes, steady and intent. “Perfect health.”

She hesitates, hands hovering over the restraint at his chest. For a moment, Shane can almost see the command grinding against the simple directive she’s clinging to. Take care of him.

“I’ll just—” she murmurs. “Just loosen it. A little.”

The band disengages with a soft mechanical whine, retracting enough that Shane can finally draw a full breath. Relief nearly buckles him. He lets it show — just enough to reinforce the choice she’s made. Then he leans forwards, and lets her listen to his breathing.

“There,” Marisol says, relieved. “Is that better?”

“Yeah,” Shane breathes. “Thank you.” He shifts carefully, rolling his shoulders as if testing pain. “My arm’s gone numb too. I think the circulation’s off.”

She frowns at his wrist restraint now. “That’s not good.”

“It’s not,” Shane agrees. “And if there’s nerve damage—”

“I can’t let that happen,” she says, almost fiercely. Her fingers are already working at the clasp. “Mr. Thorne would—” The restraint unlocks.

Shane keeps his face slack, compliant, even as elation sings under his skin at the sudden freedom. He flexes his fingers once, slowly, as if checking sensation.

“It’s coming back,” he says. “Pins and needles.” Marisol nods, reassured, and backs up to check on her first aid kit for a bandage. Whilst her back is turned, Shane scrambles to undo the buckle that’s keeping his other arm restrained. The buckle gives way with a soft, definitive click. The strap falls away, and Shane’s left arm is free. He doesn’t move it, not yet. He lets it hang limply, playing the part of a man still mostly bound, waiting as Marisol turns back with a roll of gauze.

She kneels again, her movements methodical, and begins wrapping his right forearm where Alexei cut him. She’s focused on the task, her hazy smile back in place.

As she secures the bandage with a piece of medical tape, Shane moves.

His left hand, now unobserved, snakes up behind her head. He doesn’t strike. Instead, his fingers find the pressure point at the base of her skull, just below the occipital ridge. He applies firm, precise pressure. It’s a trick his mother taught him during a self-defense phase — non-violent, temporarily incapacitating.

Marisol goes limp. The roll of gauze slips from her fingers and bounces on the concrete. Her eyes flutter, the artificial smile finally, completely gone, replaced by blank surprise. Guilt bubbles as she tips over. She’ll be out for, at most, five minutes. Shane reaches down and undoes the restraints on his legs. Then he’s up, up and moving.

He ignores the dizziness, the throbbing in his neck and ribs. He quickly undoes the remaining ankle restraint, then stands over Marisol for a heartbeat. He takes the first aid kit, pocketing

the small pair of blunt-tipped scissors. Then, on impulse, he gently removes her key card from the lanyard around her neck.

The door. He presses his ear against it. Silence. He risks a glance through the narrow wire-reinforced window. An empty, grey hallway lit by harsh fluorescent tubes overhead. Where did Marisol say they were? Thorne Tower? The tallest fucking building in Ottawa?

He swipes Marisol's card. The lock light blinks green. The door opens with a sigh.

Shane steps into the sterile, silent hallway, pulling the door closed behind him. The click of the latch is the loudest sound he's ever heard.

The end of the hallway is a window, and Shane makes a break towards it, his feet the only sound in the quiet aside from the pneumatic hum of the overhead lights.

The height makes his stomach drop. The building is unmistakable now — one of Thorne Global's flagship towers, the kind that makes architectural magazines. He can see the river. The park. A news chopper drifting lazily past at a distance.

He can't break out of a view. He supposes that Alexei has him in the penthouse.

The elevators will be keyed, monitored, opening directly into Alexei's domain or a secured lobby. Stairs. There have to be stairs for fire code, but they'll be discreet, likely behind a plain door marked as a utility or maintenance closet. Shane turns from the dizzying view, his mind racing through a map he doesn't have. He knows this building's type. The opulent, power-projecting kind his father might have taken him to for a charity luncheon once. The service areas are always to the rear, away from the views.

He moves, his footsteps soundless on the thick commercial carpet. He passes several identical, unmarked doors. Offices? Storage? He doesn't try them. He's looking for the plain one. The one that doesn't belong.

At the end of a short offshoot hallway, near a cart laden with clean linens and discreet cleaning supplies. A grey door with a simple push-bar and a keycard slot. Bingo.

He stumbles into the concrete stairwell, the air cooler, smelling of dust and industrial cleaner. The void stretches above and plunges below, a spiral of grated metal steps. He has no idea what floor he's on. It smells musty and damp. Fifty? Sixty? Going up is a trap. Down is the only option.

He starts descending, taking the steps two at a time, ignoring the fire in his side. The sound of his own breathing, ragged and loud, echoes in the hollow shaft. Every flight he passes, every door marked with a floor number in the fifties, then the forties, is a small victory.

Then, from several stories below, the sharp, unmistakable sound of a stairwell door swinging open. Voices, clipped and professional, float up.

A barked voice: "—breach on the penthouse service stair. Check every level."

Shane freezes, clinging to the railing. He's on the landing for the 38th floor. The footsteps are coming up, fast and purposeful. He swipes Marisol's card but it remains an accusatory red. He then turns to the service elevator and starts furiously punching the button. It opens in the nick of time and Shane all but throws himself into the metal box. When the doors snap shut behind him, he lets out a breath. It's a risky gamble, but he punches the button for the twentieth floor, to get him far out of the reach of the people searching for him.

Then the elevator starts churning, and starts to move.

But it doesn't go down. It goes *up*.

No, no, no. Shane starts furiously pushing buttons as the numbers begin to tick back up. Thirty nine, forty six, until it finishes on fifty nine. Shane presses back to the far corner of the metal tomb, dread broiling.

The doors finally part, not on a lobby or a parking garage, but on another private foyer. A huge fluffy rug underfoot. Plush, soundproofed, dominated by a vast desk in front of which, hands clasped loosely behind his back, gazing out at the cityscape as if admiring a painting, is Alexei Thorne.

He doesn't turn. "The stairwell was a good instinct, Shane. But the service elevator was a mistake. Too predictable." He finally glances over his shoulder, his expression one of mild disappointment. "Shame."

Shane launches himself forward. Not at Alexei, but at the hallway he can see past the foyer — a corridor leading to what might be a bank of public elevators. He makes it three steps.

But Alexei is faster than he looks. He doesn't tackle Shane, just extends his foot and catches his shin. Shane goes down hard, winding himself in a grunt. Alexei plants a knee in his back, pinning him to a rug that stinks of ozone.

"You see? I need you present, not fighting."

"Go to hell," Shane gasps into the fibers.

"I'm trying to build a heaven, actually. A stable, fortunate one." Alexei stands and yanks Shane to his feet with shocking strength. A demigod, he reminds himself grimly.

He's dragged through a set of double doors into an expansive, opulent office with a wall of glass, leather chairs, another monolithic desk. And standing by the desk, is David Hollander. He's standing straight, jacket buttoned, hair neat, hands folded calmly in front of him like he's waiting for a photo to be taken. His eyes lift when Shane is hauled inside, and they land on him without recognition.

"Dad," Shane breathes. He knows this is going to hurt.

Alexei's hand tightens painfully on his arm, fingers digging in just above the elbow. "Easy," he murmurs. "Let him look."

David's gaze tracks Shane clinically, head tilting a fraction. "He appears injured," he says. His voice is steady, reasonable. Concern without warmth. "That wasn't part of the schedule."

Alexei exhales, amused. "Unscheduled variables happen. He's resilient."

Shane twists, ignoring the pain. "Dad. Look at me." His voice cracks despite his effort. "It's me. Shane."

David's brow creases, faintly. "I know who you are, son." He says, then smiles, "I'm glad you've met Alexei."

A sound tears out of Shane that's halfway to a sob.

"We've met" Alexei repeats approvingly. "See? He understands the situation."

"You did this to him," Shane snarls, straining forward. Alexei doesn't restrain him this time. He doesn't need to.

David looks between them, puzzled but not alarmed. "Alexei has been very helpful," he says. "He's shown me projections. The world is more precarious than I realized." A small, practiced smile. "It's reassuring, having someone so... capable involved. A demigod that my boy can grow to be just like."

Shane shakes his head violently. "That's not you talking. You hate this. You hate him."

Alexei scoffs and lets go of Shane. Shane stumbles, eyes darting for the exits, but he's preoccupied with the leisurely stroll that Alexei takes towards his father.

His voice drops, layered now, carrying that same invisible pressure Shane recognizes and hates. "David," he says gently. "Tell him why this is necessary."

Behind Shane, the lights flicker.

"Alexei is going to help us, Shane," he says, and doesn't flinch when Alexei leans into his desk and pulls out a letter-opener. Shane *freezes*. Alexei considers the blade in his hand, leans up towards David's neck, as though considering.

"*Don't*—" the word comes out mangled.

Alexei doesn't look at him. His attention is entirely on David now, on the clean line of his throat, the steady pulse there. The letter-opener glints dully in the office light as Alexei weighs it, testing its balance like a thought experiment.

David doesn't move.

"I know you're a good boy, Shane," Alexei murmurs. His tone is almost affectionate. "A good son. You wouldn't want your father getting hurt for your actions, would you?"

Shane shakes his head, ears ringing. He's rooted to the ground. "No, no, of course not." The words are thick in his throat. "Please don't."

Alexei's face flattens. "Then do not do anything that may make my hand... slip." The blade rises another inch, the point hovering just beneath David's jaw.

The lights flicker violently this time. The glass wall hums. Somewhere in the distance, thunder answers, low and displeased.

"Don't! Don't!" Shane begs, voice catching in a traitorous sob, "I'll do whatever you want, just please— please don't hurt him. Please."

Alexei exhales, slow and deliberate, as though savoring the moment. "There," he says softly. "That's all I needed."

Over his shoulder, Shane can see dark clouds beginning to churn in the sky, darkening the room. Huh. Even so, the pressure in the room eases just a fraction but enough that Shane can draw a shaking breath. Alexei lowers the letter-opener, rests it lightly against the desk.

"You see, Shane," Alexei continues, finally turning to face him fully, "this isn't about cruelty. I just need you to listen to me, the way others do. Hm?" Shane bows his head and gives a wet, shaky nod. Alexei comes around the desk and stands in front of him. "Will you go back to the penthouse now, Shane?"

This time, Shane looks up through his lashes at Alexei. He inclines his head as though to nod. Then he drives his head forward, a brutal, snapping headbutt directly into the bridge of Alexei's nose.

There's a wet snapping sound as cartilage crunches. Alexei staggers back with a choked cry of surprise and pain, blood immediately streaming down his lips and chin. Shane whirls, driving an elbow into his sternum. He's tough, but the blow makes her grunt and falter. He tears free.

Alexei, one hand clapped to his face, blood seeping between his fingers, lets out a wet, furious laugh. "You see? Volatility! Just what I need!"

Shane charges. This is no longer about escape. It's about smashing the smug control off Alexei's face. He tackles the older man around the waist, driving him back into the desk. A monitor crashes to the floor. They go down in a tangle of limbs.

Shane is younger, fuelled by rage and sharpened by love, but he's injured, and Alexei is terrifyingly strong beneath the elegant suit. He rolls them, pinning Shane, his blood dripping onto Shane's face.

"You fight fate, boy," Alexei snarls, his composure utterly gone, replaced by something primal and vicious. He grabs for the fallen letter opener from the desk. "I am fate!" Alexei's fingers close around the letter-opener.

Shane reacts on instinct. He slams his forehead up again, sloppier this time but fuelled by pure panic, then wrenches his hips sideways. The blade skids across the rug instead of plunging down. Alexei roars. He sounds furious, terrifying, and he backhands Shane hard enough that his vision whites out. Copper on his tongue.

He claws, kicks, bucks like an animal caught in a trap. His heel catches Alexei's knee. Something pops. Alexei howls and loses balance just long enough for Shane to twist free and roll away.

They scramble to their feet at the same time.

Alexei's face is ruined now — nose broken, blood everywhere, suit smeared and torn. Whatever careful veneer he wore is gone entirely. What's left is disturbing. Then it's his turn to lunge. He takes hold of Shane by the collar of his shirt and the pair of them go through the glass wall.

The world disintegrates shattering glass. The safety film holds for a split second, webbing into a million opaque strands before surrendering with a final, explosive groan. Then there is nothing but a deafening roar as they tumble through the glass.

They fall tangled — Alexei's grip an iron clamp on Shane's collar, Shane's own hands locked on Alexei's wrist as they land heavily on the carpet. Little shards of glass dig into Shane's back as he claws at Alexei's grip. Alexei is stronger than him, manages to get on top of him, and wraps two bloodied hands around Shane's neck.

Then he starts *squeezing*.

Shane's vision tunnels to just the pressure on his neck, the tightening on his airways that makes every breath a struggle. He rakes his nails on Alexei's hands, sinks his nails in and gorges deep and kicks fruitlessly with his legs. His lungs are screaming at him to take a breath but he can't: Alexei's hold is unrelenting.

And then, suddenly, his grip slackens.

Shane blinks through stars and sees Alexei's attention drawn elsewhere: to the floor-to-ceiling window that covered the entire western side of the room. Then Alexei pauses. His head tilts, attention caught by movement like a panther peering through leaves.

Through the glass, hovering just feet away, is a shape. A person. The wind tearing at his hair, the thunder rumbling above him. He looks god-made, god-forged. He's wild-eyed and furious — every inch of him etched with this cold, incapacitating fury.

Ilya. *Ilya*.

His blond celestial curls billow, the cityscape is a blur behind him, and his eyes locked on the scene inside. An *Aegis* gleams, braced along his forearm. Alexei's confidence falters.

“What—” he breathes, tightening his grip on Shane one last time before realization cuts through him.

Ilya hurls the *Aegis* with a roar that drowns out everything else. It spins through the air, a disc of shining metal, and strikes the glass with a *deafening* explosion.

Shards explode outward. The blast of wind yanks Alexei violently from Shane's back. The pressure lifts from Shane's throat as Alexei is slammed against the jagged remnants of the

window frame, tumbling backward across the floor. He grunts, stunned, blood running freely from his nose and lips.

Shane rolls over, gasping, lungs burning, hands trembling. His hands fly to his throat as he gulps in precious air. He takes in the impossible sight: Ilya descends like a storm incarnate, eyes blazing, Aegis in hand, wings of wind and power tearing the air around him.

The penthouse is chaos. Glass litters the floor, alarms screaming, wind whipping papers, curtains, and loose objects like confetti. Shane hauls himself onto his hands and knees, still spluttering.

Alexei pushes himself up, fury etched in every line of his face, blood dripping down his suit. “You!” he snarls at Ilya. “I thought you were—”

Alexei’s words die in a wet choke. The furious snarl freezes, then twists into something else. This dawning, horrific comprehension of a miscalculation so vast it starts to unravel everything. And Shane is pulling the first thread free.

“You,” he breathes again, the word shredded by the wind screaming through the shattered wall. “You’re—”

Ilya doesn’t land. He touches down, the wind around him settling like a loyal beast. His boots crunch on the carpet of glass. The Aegis is back on his arm, not gleaming now, but matte with intent. His eyes, that shocking, furious blue, don’t leave Alexei’s face.

“Me,” he says lowly, almost a murmur. And then he *moves*.

Chapter End Notes

i'm holding everybody's hands in the comments gang

also, [come follow my tumblr if you want to](#) , come and say hi pspsp I won't bite

Chapter 18: your love is sunlight

Chapter Summary

Ilya yanks Alexei forward, their faces inches apart. “You have father’s blessing? His armour?” Ilya’s whisper is venomous. His face is dark. “I have his temper.”

And he proves it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Alexei has had everything before Ilya has, Ilya is beginning to realise.

He had Camp Half-Blood, he had that plated armour that Ilya had found in the Zeus Cabin. He had their father’s blessing, he had powers of influence that Ilya could not harness, he is older and stronger. Not many demigods survive til adulthood. Alexei is a force to be reckoned with.

And none of these things did Ilya care about. He could not give less of a damn if there’s another Zeusian child running around the world. Why should he care? It’s not his business, nor his problem. Alexei could blow himself up for all Ilya cares.

But Alexei has one more thing that Ilya will not — cannot — allow. He has Shane.

With Nike’s blessing numbing his pains and suppressing his exhaustion, it doesn’t take long for Ilya to track his way to Alexei’s skyscraper.

The office, high above the city, is near the clouds. Its glass walls gleam. A lighting rod reaching up into the sky like a conductor. Like he's not a natural conduit, not like Ilya is. Nike’s hands guide him as he jumps up into the air, the wind buffeting and billowing around him. She wraps invisibility around him, guides him higher and higher.

That’s when Ilya sees it, all of it.

Shane is pinned beneath Alexei’s grip, hands clawing uselessly at bloodied wrists. His lovely face turning red, eyes wide and bugging with terror. He’s smaller than Alexei, lither than him, kicking out against the glass-fragment carpet. Ilya's gotten to the fight late. Shane's already put up one hell of a fight, like he's been clutched by the divine spirit of Ares himself.

Shane's hand scrapes across the carpet, desperate for reprieve. He seizes.

Rage, rage like nothing else he's ever experienced. *No.*

The Aegis materializes in his hand, an extension of his limbs now, fuelled by confidence he's never felt before. It's a blur of silver, light and weight perfect in his grip, moulding to his forearm like it always belonged there. The invisible currents of his god-blood unfurl instinctively, wind tearing around him as he drops from the sky, slicing through the air toward the penthouse.

Alexei's iron grip on Shane's throat doesn't waver. The older son of Zeus is a predator, all precise control and lethal intent, utterly confident. But Ilya sees something Alexei does not: Shane's storm. Small, jagged, pulsing with Nike-blooded fury, but barely controlled, ready to explode.

Ilya's eyes flare. "Don't touch him," he hisses under his breath.

Alexei leans close to Shane's ear, whispering something cruel and low. Shane's fingers claw at his throat, eyes wide, gasping, helpless. Rage surges through Ilya. White-hot and absolute. His movement must catch Alexei's attention, as he tilts his head to peer through the glass.

He sees the moment that Alexei sees Ilya, truly sees him for the first time, the extent of how fucked he is must be hitting him like a freight train as his eyes go wide—

Ilya clenches his teeth and hurls the Aegis.

The shield spins in the air, catching the light of the city and reflecting it in a thousand jagged shards. Alexei moves but it's too late. The shield crashes into the glass wall between them. The panes shatter in a deafening roar, spiderwebbing and breaking through.

Wind blasts into the room. He's upon Alexei a moment later, grabbing hold of him by the collar and *wrenching* him up and off of Shane. Alexei goes flying, skidding over the carpet.

Shane sucks in a haggard breath like he's just breached water, panicked hands clutching his throat. He's coughing and shaking, on his knees, shards of glass embedding themselves into the skin of his hands and forearms, spilling in thin red ribbons. Ilya sees red.

Alexei hauls himself up onto his knees, outraged, like no one's ever sent him flying before. No one has ever met his power with power. Ilya down grins at him, mirthless.

"You!" he spits. Ilya revels in the blood on his face, the crooked jank of his nose, the smear of crimson down his chin. Shane's cleaved out a hefty bit of damage. "I thought you were—"

Dead? Somebody else?

The realisation crawls over his face as Alexei cuts himself off. Ilya watches with vicious satisfaction as he puts the pieces together. "You," he snarls, "You're—"

Ilya's boots crunch on shards of broken glass. Wind buffets and brackets around them, whistling through the high up office. Ilya wants to throw him out of the window. He summons the Aegis back, zeroing in on Alexei as he hauls himself up.

“Me,” Ilya snarls.

He dives, faster than thought, cutting across the room like a streak of storm. Every muscle coiled, every godly sense alert. He is Zeus’ son. That makes him faster and stronger and more lethal than possibly any other mortal on the planet.

Alexei’s eyes, wide with the shock of recognition, now narrow with recalculation. He sees the Aegis, the command of the storm, the divine fury that mirrors their father’s own temper. He sees a rival, a complication, a wrinkle in his plan.

Ilya sees only the man who wrapped his hands around Shane’s throat.

“Another stray,” Alexei spits, pushing himself fully upright. Blood from his broken nose paints his chin. “Brother, I guess. Another one of Father’s forgotten tantrums. Do you have any idea what you’re interfering with? This isn’t a camp game. This is the real world.”

“The real world,” Ilya echoes, his voice a low roll of thunder. He takes a step forward. The wind answers, howling through the shattered wall, whipping Alexei’s hair. “You mean your little game of numbers?” He scoffs, a harsh, dismissive sound. “There is nothing noble about this. Nothing glorious.”

Alexei’s face contorts. The insult to his power, his meticulously built empire, lands deeper than any physical blow. “I have built something lasting! Something meaningful! What are you? What have you done? Only in my way because of him.” He jabs a finger toward Shane, who is struggling to his feet, “how does that make you any better?”

For once, Ilya doesn’t look at Shane. He can’t. If he does, he’ll lose track. His entire being is focused on Alexei, a predator zeroing in. “You shouldn’t have touched him.”

With a snarl, Alexei moves. He doesn’t have a weapon, so he relies on what he has in the environment. A gesture, sharp and commanding, toward the massive desk. The heavy oak desk shudders, then slides with terrifying speed directly toward Ilya, aiming to crush him against the wall.

Ilya doesn’t dodge. He braces. The Aegis on his arm flashes with a deep, thunderhead grey. The desk impacts the shield with a sound like a mountain cracking. Wood splinters. The desk stops dead, shatters around the unyielding divine metal. Ilya doesn’t even stagger.

Alexei’s confidence wavers. His unstoppable force has met an unmovable object. If he was ever unstoppable, to begin with.

“You fight like pussy.” Ilya kicks aside the wreckage of the desk. “Where is your lightning now?”

He closes the distance. Alexei throws a punch, enhanced by godly strength. If flung at a mortal, it would break their jaw. Ilya catches the fist in his own hand. The sound of the impact is a sickening crunch of bone against his grip. Alexei cries out — more from shock than pain.

Ilya yanks him forward, their faces inches apart. “You have father’s blessing? His armour?” Ilya’s whisper is venomous. His face is dark. “I have his temper.”

And he proves it.

It is not a fight of skill or strategy, but a raw, untethered thing. Demigod to demigod, flesh to flesh. A demigod who has survived on cunning and influence is dismantled by one forged in pure, unrestrained divine wrath. Ilya is a force of nature in a confined space. Every blow is the crash of thunder. Every movement is the whip-crack of a hurricane gale.

He undoes Alexei, hit by hit.

Alexei tries to summon a defense, a gust of wind, a crackle of static. But his power is polite, parliamentary, compared to the primal storm Ilya embodies. Ilya feeds on rage, like an avenging angel, feeds on his already existing bruises, feeds on how far he has come, from Moscow, from Long Island, feeds on Shane behind him, scrambling through the wreckage into the next room, wise enough to get out of the way.

Ilya’s winds tear Alexei’s attempts to shreds. His lightning, when it sparks at his knuckles, is blue-white and vicious and arching. He pushes Alexei back and back again, until Alexei’s wild eyes finally widen as he realises there is no winning this fight. Alexei snarls and throws his hand out, not at Ilya — but past him. The air bucks.

Shane is ripped off his feet and hurled across the ruined office. He crashes through drifting debris and hits the floor hard, rolling, skidding, coming to rest near the far wall. Ilya hears the sound he makes on impact — a sharp, involuntary grunt of pain — and it cuts through him like a blade.

“*Shane—*” Ilya starts, already turning—

—but that half-second is all Alexei needs.

When Ilya snaps his head back, the corridor door is already swinging open. Alexei throws himself through it, vanishing into the hall in a snarl of torn fabric and retreating thunder.

Shane groans, then forces himself upright, one hand braced on the floor, teeth clenched. “Don’t stop!” Shane shouts, voice hoarse but fierce. “Go!”

Ilya hesitates for exactly one heartbeat.

Then his hand is in his pocket. He fishes out Tiebreaker and flicks his wrist. The key flashes through the air, catching the light, spinning once before Shane’s hand snaps up and closes around it with instinctive precision.

Ilya hits the corridor at a dead sprint.

The hallway is chaos as he explodes into it. Alarms are beginning to wail, emergency lights stuttering to life, glass and debris crunching underfoot. Alexei is already halfway down it, coat discarded, blood streaking the wall where he’s braced himself around a corner. He throws a glance over his shoulder and snarls when he sees Ilya gaining ground.

Security pours in from side corridors — men and women in tailored black, eyes glazed with that same too-smooth compliance. One of them steps directly into Ilya's path, baton snapping open. The wind hits them like a freight train.

Ilya doesn't slow. He doesn't even look at them. The air slams forward, hurling bodies into walls, ripping weapons from hands, sending papers and shattered light fixtures spinning. Another pair rush him from the side, by sheer force of flesh Ilya staggers. But then the hands are stopped cold as a voice cuts through the din.

"Get away from them!"

David Hollander barrels out of the ruined office, face pale but eyes finally clear. The haze is gone, burned off like fog in sunlight. He grabs a nearby security guard by the shoulder and shoves, hard. The man stumbles, colliding with another, the two of them crashing into a display case.

"Stand down!" David shouts, raw authority flooding his voice. "All of you— stand down!"

They hesitate. It's just a flicker, but it's enough. Ilya's momentarily taken aback. This is Shane's father. Not that insipid, creepy mirage of him earlier. This is the man Shane was raised by, courageous and leading — this is the man Nike had a child with.

Shane stumbles out behind him, breathing hard, blood on his face, but upright. He brings Tiebreaker up and slams it down into the lock of the nearest service door as another guard lunges for Ilya's back.

David intercepts them, slamming the door shut on grasping hands, planting himself in the narrow gap like a human barricade.

"Go!" David barks, shoving Shane forward. "Go, both of you! *Go!*"

Ilya doesn't argue. He surges ahead, wind roaring, Shane pounding along behind him despite the pain, teeth clenched, refusal written into every step. Ahead, Alexei vaults a railing and disappears down another stairwell, his laughter echoing up the shaft — ragged now, fraying.

Ilya hits the railing and launches himself after him without breaking stride. Behind them, David slams the door and braces it with his shoulder, buying seconds with nothing but stubbornness.

Seconds are all they need. The chase plunges downward, into concrete and shadow, lightning flaring blue-white as Ilya follows Alexei into the depths of the tower.

The air grows thinner as they descend. The concrete walls sweat. Emergency lights flash red, bathing everything off and on and off again like a pulsing heartbeat.

Ilya thinks, *fuck this*, and hurdles over the edge of the stairwell. He hears Shane's noise of alarm disappear behind him as he hurtles down through the gap between the winding stairs. He catches up to Alexei, grabs hold of the railing and catches himself. Using his momentum,

he swings himself around and over, planting his boots firm in Alexei's stomach and sending him flying.

Alexei bursts through the door and onto a lower level and, where he skids into a wide, unfinished space — a mechanical floor, all exposed beams and humming machinery. The doors behind him slam shut as Ilya hits them with a gust of wind, metal shrieking in protest.

Alexei whirls on his hands and knees, scrambling back as he heaves for breath. For the first time, there is no performance left.

"You don't understand what you're throwing away," Alexei snarls, backing toward the far end of the floor. Beyond him, the structure drops away into a yawning maintenance shaft, open and unguarded, plunging straight down into darkness. The wind howls up from it, cold and relentless. "Come on. Brother. *Brother.*" he says it more emphatically the second time, more pleading. "I did this for *us*. You're my kin. I did this for you, for father. You're my brother."

Ilya advances slowly, lightning crawling over his arms, illuminating the rage carved into his face. "You did not know I existed. You tried *to kill me*. You don't get to decide what's necessary."

Alexei laughs, breathless and cracked. "You think this is about power?" His eyes flick past Ilya — to Shane, limping into view behind him. "I was trying to fix what our father broke."

The words land hard.

"This world is ruined," he croaks, "halfbloods are ruined. We spend all of our time hiding and running and being hurt. For what? We should rule this world. Claim it as our own, rule it the way father rules Olympus. I could've made it *safe*."

"You used people," Shane says, voice raw but steady. He plants his feet despite the pain screaming through his ribs. Tiebreaker catches on the light and gleams, bathing Shane's face in gold. "You used my dad. You used me."

Alexei spreads his hands, blood dripping from his fingers. "And it worked."

Lightning snaps from Ilya's hand, slamming into the machinery at Alexei's side. Metal explodes in sparks. The floor shudders. Alexei stumbles back another step, then another, until the edge of the shaft is right behind his heels.

Finally, Ilya has Alexei on his knees again, one hand fisted in his blood-soaked shirt, the other pulled back, crackling with raw power. He felt the air leaving Shane, felt the dull current of his wheeze, and he wants to make Alexei suffer for it.

Even so, this is not for Shane. Ilya has trekked across the country for him, fought death spirits for him, almost died of hypothermia and had his consciousness consumed. All for him.

But this? Having Alexei spluttering blood, nose clogged and eyes swollen on his knees in front of him? This is not for Shane. This is for *Ilya*. Because nothing in his life has never

been just for Ilya. It's been for the good of his mother, his father, his stepfather, for Camp Half-Blood, for Shane. Sacrifice after sacrifice, he's given and given. All he's ever wanted is to *be wanted*, for someone to put him first, to be powerful enough that no one will ever hurt him ever again. To be like his father, and his stepfather, incorrigible and distant, and merciless to anyone who would ever raise hand against him.

He has his brother before him, at his mercy, but Ilya cannot deliver the final blow.

He wants more, now. Wants more than distance and solitude and peace. He wants to be more than Ilya, now. He wants to be Ilya, with Shane. Shane's gentle life, his gentle home, his gentle love.

Most people fall in love multiple times in their life, they can love over and over. But Ilya knows that this is it for him, just Shane. Shane is all it will ever be. He will never love like he loves him. He can travel the oceans, search the deepest parts of the jungle, and never find anyone he loves as he loves him. He can go to other universes and it will still only ever be him. It is Shane. And it will only ever be Shane. He'll never have something like this again with anyone else.

"Do you see now?" Ilya growls. "You have nothing I want. Nothing I envy. You might be like father, but at what cost? He won't stop me from doing this." He raises his fist and strikes Alexei again. His head snaps back, the sound sickening.

The lightning at his fist sputters and dies. The wild wind stills to a grieving moan. He shoves Alexei away in disgust, letting him collapse in a heap of broken pride and broken bones.

The sounds of the world rush back in — the sirens, the distant shouts from the building's interior, the rush of the wind through the broken window.

Ilya turns his back on his broken half-brother. He walks to Shane, the terrifying god of moments ago gone, leaving only a young man whose eyes are wide with a fear not for himself, but for Ilya.

He stands there, struck dumb for a moment. "That's new," he says, pointing at Ilya's aegis. Ilya drops it, lets it fall to the ground with a resounding *clang*.

He reaches out, hesitantly, and his fingers, still buzzing with residual energy, cups Shane's cheek, wiping away a streak of blood and glass dust. "Are you hurt? *Are you hurt?*"

"No, no, I'm fine, Ilya, I'm fine." Shane leans into his touch, whispers with his voice thick, "you came."

Ilya curves his thumb beneath Shane's eye. "I'm sorry I doubted you, zoloste."

The words are a soft, broken thing against the roar of the wind and the fading echo of violence. Zoloste. My gold. The endearment, spoken in the language of his childhood, hangs between them, like a benediction, like an apology, all at once. Shane takes hold of his wrist and clings there.

“Boys! Boys!” There’s a yell. They both tense. Ilya immediately steps between Shane and the doorway, aegis up. But the person that explodes through the door is not a threat. It’s David Hollander, his hair and eyes wild, darting around and gasping for breath. The door slams on the far wall.

“Dad!” Shane dives around Ilya and catapults towards him.

David Hollander’s face splits open into something raw and uncomprehending as he opens his arms and Shane ploughs into him.

“Shane, Shane, oh sweet— are you alright? Are you hurt? What happened?”

Shane pulls back from him as David cups his face, eyes searching. Shane turns to Ilya and beckons him over, and Ilya freezes. It takes active effort for him to unroot his feet from the floor and close the distance between them.

“Mr Hollander. Nice to see you awake,” Ilya says stiffly.

He’s expecting anger, something hot or something cold, braces for a sharp retort or worse, but David’s face only splinters, crumples with something like guilt. “Yeah. With a thumping headache now, too. Ilya, right?” Before he can reply, David Hollander turns to Ilya and sweeps him into a crushing hug. “Thank you, my boy. Thank you.”

Ilya’s hands hover. He catches Shane’s eye over David’s shoulder as his hands come up to hover awkwardly over David’s back before giving him a reluctant pat between his shoulderblades. “Is okay,” Ilya says as David pulls back, eyes assessing. “Was not you. Was not any of you.”

David closes his eyes briefly. “I can’t remember much, but I know... I know it was wrong.” He looks disdainfully over at Alexei, and Ilya doesn’t think he’s ever seen so much potent hatred channelled into one singular glance before. “We all know what he has done now. He will be dealt with.”

Ilya exhales for what feels like the first time in hours. The electricity bleeds out of him, dissipating into the air. He looks down at Shane, really looks, and something tight in his chest finally loosens.

“You were very brave,” Ilya says quietly.

Shane turns from where he’d also been glaring at Alexei, and he huffs a weak laugh, forehead tipping forward to rest against Ilya’s shoulder. “I was terrified.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, tightening his arm just slightly. “That still counts.”

Sirens begin to wail in the distance now: real ones, mortal ones. Footsteps echo from far off, disorganized, uncertain.

David straightens, squaring his shoulders. “We should go. Before someone decides they’re still taking orders.”

Ilya nods. “He will not try again.” He says simply, and snakes his arm around Shane’s waist, pulling them tight to each other. “We will kill him if he does.”

Shane bumps their hips. “I have a feeling your dad will have a few choice words for him.”

“Your dad?” David echoes, frowning.

It’s Shane’s turn to be smug, pride peeling off of him. “Ilya is the son of Zeus, dad.”

Ilya rolls his eyes at Shane’s glee, and shifts so he is half in front of Shane, half beside him, a living shield without making it feel like a cage. As they limp toward the exit together, Shane glances back once at the empty shaft, the ruin, the place where he was almost broken. Then he turns forward.

Victory, Nike whispers somewhere deep and quiet, contently settling between Ilya’s ribs like a bird coming to roost. Sometimes it is simply walking away together.

The apartment smells like garlic and onions, oil warming in a pan. It is such a normal smell that it almost hurts. A cramp in Ilya’s ribs.

Shane sits at the kitchen table with an ice pack balanced against his ribs and a mug of tea gone lukewarm between his hands. There is a faint bruise blooming along his jaw, yellowing at the edges already, and a thin line of healing skin where glass had kissed his cheek. He’s still grinning, though. Grinning like he’s a cat with a bird between his paws. Grinning like he’s won something huge.

Ilya sits beside him, close enough that their knees touch, close enough that the contact feels intentional.

David moves around the kitchen with quiet purpose, sleeves rolled up, hair still a mess from the last two days. He hums under his breath as he cooks, something tuneless and absent-minded, pausing now and then to stir or taste. The sound of it settles something in the room. Ilya watches absently as he works.

“So,” David says, without turning, reaching to grab the soy sauce. “You’re going to have to tell me at least a little of what happened.”

Shane glances at Ilya. Ilya gives the smallest nod. “Well,” Shane begins, carefully. “There was... a lot of running.”

David snorts. “I believe that.”

“And some fighting,” Shane continues, choosing his words. “Nothing too dramatic. Mostly just trying not to get thrown off things.”

Ilya exhales a laugh through his nose before he can stop himself, sounding traitorously like a snort. Shane bumps their feet under the table, shooting him a look that says: *shut your mouth*. Ilya grins at him.

David turns at that, wooden spoon in hand, eyebrow raised. He looks at Ilya, who tries to school his face to betray nothing. He doesn't know if it works. "That bad, huh?"

Shane shrugs, wincing slightly. "Worse for the furniture than for us."

He leaves out the Keres almost ripping him apart, Ilya electrocuting himself in the water, the way they both almost got eaten alive at the broder. The moment where he'd thought this was how it ended. He leaves out the terror, the helplessness, the sound his own voice made when he begged. Instead, he talks about stairwells and wrong turns, about Ilya showing up "right on time," about small moments of success in the trip, about his aunt making an appearance.

David listens without interrupting. When Shane finishes, there's a long pause. "I'm sorry," David says quietly, finally. "For all of it. For not seeing. For not protecting you when I should have."

Shane swallows. "I know," he says.

The pan hisses as David adds something fragrant. He sets three plates on the counter, real plates, not takeout containers or rationed snacks. Pasta. Vegetables. Actual food. Ilya watches it all with something like reverence, his jaw working.

This— This is the victory he hadn't known to want. Not lightning or dominance or proving himself stronger than another son of Zeus. Just a table and warm home-cooked food. A father who stands at the stove and feeds them because he can, because he wants to, because no invisible hand is guiding him anymore.

David sets a plate in front of Ilya, then another in front of Shane. "Eat," he says, gently bossy. "Doctor's orders. Or... father's." He rests a hand on both of their shoulders, and gives a warm, paternal squeeze.

Ilya's throat tightens. He nods, unable to trust his voice just yet. They eat in comfortable silence for a while. The clink of forks. The low hum of the refrigerator. The city outside, distant and unconcerned. Ilya feels Shane lean into him, just slightly, shoulder to shoulder. He does not move away.

That is when the front door opens. All three of them go rigid. Shane's hand flashes to Tiebreaker, Ilya reaches for his aegis. David closes his hand around the pepper shaker. They all turn in unison, only to see Nike stepping through the door, shutting it behind her with a particularly sharp gust of wind.

She walks inside like she's returning from work.

Her coat is still on her shoulders, hair slightly wind-tossed, expression composed and unreadable. She toes off her shoes, crosses the living room, and slings her coat over the back of the couch without ceremony.

She does not look startled. She does not ask questions. But Ilya hadn't been expecting her to. She just takes in the scene in a single glance, Shane's wrapped bruises, Ilya's posture, David at the stove, and cocks her hands on her hips like this is the most natural scene in the world. "I'm starving," she says mildly. "Is there a plate?"

David doesn't hesitate. He crosses the kitchen in two strides, leans down, and kisses her — quick, familiar, relief-filled, a peppered kiss against her lips, full of devotion — and then turns back to the stove to serve another portion.

"Hi mom," Shane croaks.

It is almost insane to watch the cold, brisk exterior of the Goddess of Victory slip off in real time like she's taking off her armour, plate by plate. She turns her attention towards her son and her expression just *melts*, her eyes like sunbeams of pure pride, of maternal love. She reaches out, fingers cool and steady, and cups his cheek with her palm. Her thumb brushes the edge of a deep wine-coloured bruise with clinical gentleness.

They'll have to return to Camp Half-Blood eventually. Ilya knows there will be retributions to face, consequences for uprooting and running across the country without any warning aside from a note to Svetlana, written haphazardly. And in Russian, so she could lie about what it said if she so wished. But with Nike's backing, and Shane by his side, and sitting at David's table, Ilya thinks he'll be able to face it.

"You won," she says. "And you came home." The last word is spoken with such softness it makes something hot press against the backs of Ilya's eyes: "*Shane.*"

Shane leans into her hand like he's been holding himself upright by will alone and has finally been allowed to stop. His voice is thick. "I missed you."

Her lip quirks up. "I missed you too."

Nike's gaze drifts to Ilya. For a heartbeat, the air changes with the shift of her attention as it swings towards him, measured and appraising.

"You fought well," she says simply.

Ilya blinks. He nods once, throat tight, something prideful and warm stirring in his chest. Nike withdraws her hand and reaches for her fork as David sets her plate down with another kiss to her cheek that she takes like she's basking in the sun. The four of them eat together.

No storms. No gods. No fate pressing in. Just a table, a meal, and the quiet, hard-earned peace of survival.

Chapter End Notes

ilya throwing around his aegis like captain america... bro IS aura

i hope this ending satisfies! it's a little rushed, and leaves a little bit to the imagination, but i am tired and i cba to fiddle with it anymore. this fic has been a wild ride - the longest fic i've written (and so fast!). i want to thank my loyal commenters, my day 1s i see you gang and the people have joined more recently, you are all treasured. thank you so much for taking time out of your day to support my niche crossover fic, it means the world to me.

i really really treasure comments, they're like crack to ao3 authors, so i'll try and take some time to answer any that are left under this chapter specifically. you heated rivalry fans have been so kind and so supportive, and i hope you enjoy the fics that i come out with after this one !!

(a mer au, a magic au, and an ancient greek au, to name a few! the first of which i will post the first chap of tomorrow.)

hope to see you there! thank you for reaching the end w me!
- viv

End Notes

more to come! pls comment and bookmark, it means the world to me!! :)

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!