behind enemy lines

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by Anonymous

Summary

Shane and Ilya had mutually agreed to keep their *whatever-they're-doing* out of Sochi. It was an easy decision to make: this was bigger than any MLH rivalry and definitely bigger than a few hotel hook-ups. There was no room for distractions, not with Olympic gold on the line.

So it'd be really fucking great if their daemons could get on the same page and stop trying to cause an international fucking incident.

Notes

i am no longer allowed to do writing warm-ups; it turns out i misunderstand them on a fundamental level. i was working on chapter 3 of my soulmate fic (where ilya lies about shane being his soulmate) and i was like haha wouldn't it be just like torture for these guys if they had physical manifestations of their souls that existed externally to themselves that other people could see. like daemons from his dark materials. and then i was like oh yeah lemme just write a little something with that, as a writing warm up. 7k later,,,,,

this is an adapted understanding of daemons to fit the fic plot i came up with! i think it's all eventually explained in the fic, but all you need to know lore-wise is:

a) everyone's born with an animal manifestation of their soul (a daemon) that can change forms into any animal up until puberty (?) where the daemon settles into its final, permanent form
b) you and your daemon are attached by a sort of soul bond, and you can't go very far away from each other
c) other people really aren't supposed to touch your daemon cause it feels like a gross violation - like fingers on your soul sorta thing
d) all these rules are tossed out of the window for soulmates*

*that's a this fic only thing, not a his dark materials thing. so i wonder who the soulmates could be.....

See the end of the work for more notes

Chapter 1

Shane checks his phone again. There's nothing, which isn't a surprise exactly, but it's still annoying. Like, come on. He's not looking for much here. Just a sign of life.

He'd seen the post-game interviews after the Russian team lost to Latvia. Rozanov appeared washed-out and drained, nothing in his eyes at all as he looked just to the right of the camera the entire time. They hadn't even let him get dressed after the game, which means they hadn't even let him take a moment and—and *grieve,* which is what's really bothering Shane if he has to name just one thing. The way Ilya had looked like he hadn't been able to catch his breath. The way he'd looked so defeated, and the way it was just all on camera for everyone to see like that was their right.

Over breakfast today, Fletcher, one of Canada's D-men, had shown him an interview Rozanov had done in the locker room with a Russian media crew, English subtitles scrolling over the bottom half of the video. The entire time, Fleet's Gila monster daemon had been draped over his shoulder and flicking out its tongue to match the guy's every huff of laughter.

It just seemed rude as hell, in Shane's opinion.

No one expected Russia to bomb out like that, but that didn't mean they were allowed to *laugh.*

Rozanov's twenty-three. Now everyone's saying he's too young for the honor of the C, or—or whatever the letter is in Cyrllic—but *no one* was saying that when he was chosen. Then it was all *yeah, of course, who else was it going to be?*

And, yeah, of course—who else was it going to be if it wasn't Rozanov? Shane can't think of a better player to lead the Russian Olympic team. Not that he'd ever admit that outside of his own head, but at least he's not fucking *laughing.*

His phone buzzes in his hand, and Shane jolts forward suddenly enough that his knee bumps the bottom of the cafe table.

From the floor beside him, Ren flashes her teeth at him, but she doesn't bother raising her head off her paws. She's on edge as well, she just wears it differently.

It's not Rozanov. It's his mom, something about Reeboks because she's great at knowing exactly when Shane's stepping a toe out of line, even when he's a handful of countries and continents and timezones away.

He feels like a little kid, petulant and angry, when he kicks at the table leg with the toe of his Nikes.

"You could just text him first," Ren points out. It's quiet enough that no one else can hear, but it still feels too loud.

“Shut up,” Shane mutters. “I’m not going to do that.”

“Okay,” she says and begins licking her paw.

Shane taps his fingers on the laminate surface of the table. “I mean,” he says, voice pitched just above a whisper, “If it was Canada, it’s not like I would wanna—right? I wouldn’t want to hear from anyone. Especially not someone still in the game. Like if we were switched, I’d be so mad if he texted me.”

“Right,” Ren says, rubbing her paw behind one of her ears before licking at it again. Shane knows a whole lot about snow leopards, obviously, like the facts and figures because it’d be stupid not to learn after Ren settled into her form when Shane was fourteen. But he doesn’t know if any of the actual animals are as fastidious as she is about grooming, or if that’s just a *her* thing.

Which would sort of make it a *Shane* thing, maybe, technically, he thinks. But the science and implications behind daemons and humans and the bonds they share are complicated, much harder to wrap his head around than snow leopard facts or hockey drills.

Whether or not he should text Ilya Rozanov to see how he’s feeling after his Olympic loss, despite the fact that both of them had agreed not to bring whatever they’re doing into the Village, that’s proving to be the sort of hard to wrap his head around never before encountered.

“Look, and I texted last,” he says, showing his phone screen to Ren even though she was there when he was texting Rozanov last. “So I can’t—like, it’d be weird to double text.”

“You sent him an emoji when he was on his way to ours after the game,” Ren says, and she doesn’t even have the decency to raise her head away from her paw. “And then between then and now, you had sex. It was sort of gross.”

Shane almost drops his phone, fingers numb. *“Evren,”* he snaps because who the fuck knows who’s listening? No one’s looking at him, but maybe the barista at the counter is too interested? Is her daemon a bat or a mouse, Shane can’t remember. Do mice have good hearing?

Ren’s ears flick back, and she raises her chin to throw him a scathing look. “It *was,”* she says, unrepentant. “At least his daemon was nice, or I would have been sick on the rug.”

“Please stop,” Shane says, closing his eyes against the image of Ren throwing up a hairball or something while Rozanov was—was with him. In him. Fuck. “I should text him,” he decides. “If it was me, you know, if it were Canada, I wouldn’t be reaching out to let people know I was okay.”

“If it were you and Canada, your mother would have you on twenty-four hour intensive observation,” Ren replies.

Shane pauses, fingers hovering on the keys. “His family is here,” he remembers out loud. “That’s better, right? That he’s not alone. He’s probably with his father. And he said his

brother might come. And his mom, probably, right? He didn't say his mom, but—"

"If I could still shift into a bird, I'd have dropped your phone into the Black Sea ages ago," Ren tells him before yawning. "Text him or I will."

"You don't have thumbs," Shane says, but it's the weakest protest yet. He already has the *hey, you doing ok?* typed up on the phone screen.

Theoretically, it's easy to send it.

"Shane," Ren says, but this time she sits up on her haunches and presses her big, fluffy head against his thigh. He digs his fingers through the fur of her scruff absent-mindedly, seeking and taking comfort from his daemon the way he's done since he was a kid. A baby, even.

"Ugh," he says, and he sends the text before putting his phone facedown on the table. "This is stupid."

"It's not," Ren tells him, but she's his daemon, so she's sort of contractually or molecularly obligated to say that. Anyway, she's nervous too, has been all morning. They watched the Russia and Latvia face-off last night with half of the Canadian team, and she'd spent the entire third period pacing the circumference of the room and showing her teeth when other players' daemons got in her way.

Neither of them have really settled down since.

"It's a distraction," Shane says, like it's a sin and a confession all at once.

She doesn't say anything. Probably because he's right.

And then Scott Hunter and Vaughn Perrill shoulder their way inside the coffee shop wearing matching USA jackets and already calling out *Hollander, my man*, and *how's it going,* and Ren sits back.

"There's my favorite snow leopard," the dingo at Hunter's heels says, pacing forward til she's toe to toe with Ren. Her ears are flexed up, tongue lolling out in a friendly sort of greeting.

"That's high praise," Hunter tells Shane, slapping him on the back in a friendly hug. He doesn't say it to Ren directly, but there are norms about that sort of stuff. It's sort of rude to talk to someone's daemon directly. Hunter and Shane are friendly, sure, but that stuff's reserved for, like. Family and best friends and soul mates and veterans on the teams, the guys who have been playing with each other for decades.

"Can't be too high praise," Vaughn says, and his meerkat daemon chitters out an agreement from where it's curled in a bag hanging off his arm. "The only other snow leopard daemon in the Village is Rozy's, yeah? Can't imagine she's feeling nice and polite right now."

Shane can see the way Ren's ears flick down, backwards over her skull for a moment before she gets ahold of herself. He can still feel it in his chest though, the edges of her bristling offense on behalf of Rozanov's daemon.

It's just hard to focus on that when he's trying to will his face not to give *him* away.

It's not, like, a *thing.* Everyone likes to make it a thing, but it's not.

Yes, Ilya Rozanov also has a snow leopard for a daemon. Yes, he and Rozanov are hockey rivals. Yes, let's talk about what that means about their souls. Let's gossip about that, if they're the same, if they're a matched pair, if their rivalry stems from being too different or too similar. Yeah, that's great, let's talk about that instead of their hockey. Even though they're professional hockey players. And the only reason they're being talked about at all is because of their fucking hockey.

Their daemons don't even look alike, not really. Not if you're looking closely. Ren's way bigger than Rozanov's daemon, broader in the shoulders with a squarer head. Her tail is a bit longer too, Shane thinks. And she's fluffier, like, on the whole. Rozanov's snow leopard is lean, lithe. Not starved, but she sort of looks like she's spent her whole life *hungry.* Like she's on the hunt, even if all she's doing is watching a hockey game from up in the daemon suites of the rink, close enough that the bonds aren't tugging at the players' souls, but far enough away that they're not really a distraction either.

"Ha," Shane says weakly, feeling sort of like everyone in the cafe is looking at him. "Yeah, I guess that's right."

It doesn't mean anything even if everyone likes to make it a thing.

It just–-well, now they've gone and slept together. Or, yeah, okay, they've been hooking up pretty much since they met, for four years now, but now Shane knows what it feels like to really, actually—you know. Fuck Rozanov.

And it doesn't mean anything, their daemons being the same animal, and Shane knows that the way he knew that before he invited Rozanov over after the Montreal game.

It's just now—something means something that it didn't before. Or it feels like it does, anyway. Shane's head feels screwed on wrong, and the phone that he slipped into his pocket hasn't buzzed once yet, even though he knows he sent the message.

Scott Hunter's daemon cocks her head as she looks between Ren and Shane. It's a perfect mirror to Hunter's own expression, half-curiosity and half-appraisal. "Let's be nice, Vaughny," he tells his teammate, cuffing him on the back of his head. "You'd be fucked up if you got knocked out of contention too."

"Yeah, but I won't be," Vaughny trills, bumping Hunter's shoulder, then Shane's. "Cause it'll be Team USA all the way, baby!"

"That's not gonna happen," Shane says once his chest has loosened enough for him to say it. This is good. This is easy, this is shop talk, and Shane's grown up doing this.

He ducks his head and pulls his phone out of his pocket just far enough to see if there's any notification he's missed. Ren nudges at his hand with the tip of her muzzle, but she doesn't have to bother: there's no new text to get caught up in.

Ren settled when Shane was fourteen years old, which isn't really that late but definitely isn't early either.

It'd been a whole thing, mostly Shane's thing, because he started worrying that he'd be passed over in hockey because his daemon was still unfixed. No coach of a serious team, U16 and up, wanted to take on kids with shifting daemons, no matter how good they were on the ice. Everyone's heard the horror stories. Everyone's got a friend who's got a brother who's got an old buddy from peewee who knew a guy who had a bunch of promise, but then his daemon settled into an elephant, or a giraffe, or a bear, and he'd had to kiss his hockey dreams goodbye because there was no way you're getting that daemon onto a team bus.

So most coaches, serious coaches of serious teams, wanted players whose daemons were known quantities to plan around. Preferably very small known quantities, but the acknowledged unspoken limit was the same as the limits imposed by most airlines around the world. A lion? Fine, but pushing it. A wolf, good to go. A moose? Fuck off, quit hockey, try your hand at being a Mounty or a park ranger or something.

Shane'd been worried about Ren settling since he was nine years old. He likes to think he would have still loved her the way he's loved her all their lives if she settled as a rhinoceros or something, but he doesn't know. He's given up so much for hockey; he's never really, seriously had to consider what he'd give hockey up for.

He thinks maybe it makes him a terrible person, to not know. It wouldn't have been her fault or anything, she's a physical manifestation of *his* soul. He just would have been…angry. At himself. Or scared, probably, about what it would mean for the rest of his life, for who he was if he wasn't a player. Yeah, scared. *Scared* is the truer word, the heart of it; it's just easier to nestle it inside of *angry*.

But Ren had settled when he was fourteen years old. One night she was flitting around his bedroom as a hummingbird and the next she was curled into his arms as a snow leopard, and she couldn't change again.

She'd been worried. That's what Shane remembers most from his Settling Day. That she'd woken him up with a paw to the face, gentle still, claws sheathed. And she'd been worried. She'd wanted him to measure her, to make sure she'd be within regulation even if he knew just by looking at her that she would. Snow leopards are big cats technically, but they're no lions or tigers.

But she had needed the proof of it, the hard numbers, and something about it—extending the tape measure, writing down the results, wrestling control away from something out of both their hands—had soothed a part of Shane's anxiety as well.

They'd spent that whole morning trading *it's okay*'s and *we're alright*'s, his forehead pressed into her fur, and Shane had told himself he'd only ever been worried that Evren would settle into something too big for him to play ice hockey, all the way up until Ilya Rozanov kissed him for the first time in that hotel room in Toronto.

And then he'd realized there was another part of himself he never wanted the world to see, a secret he hadn't even known to be afraid of exposing back when he was a kid.

At least there isn't really a daemon form that conveys *I like to kiss boys, even though I am a boy, and I like to kiss Ilya Rozanov most.*

Probably, at least. Shane hadn't looked it up.

The moment Shane catches sight of Ilya Rozanov tucked away at the top deck of the skating rink, he thinks: *oh, that's why.* Like, *oh that's why my daemon's been on edge next to me this entire time.* And *oh, that's why my skin's felt too tight since we got here.* And, *oh that's why my heart's been racing watching this guy skate like it's my Gold medal on the line. Right, of course. There's Rozanov. Of course he's here. This makes perfect sense.*

Except it doesn't, not really, but at least he doesn't have to explain himself to anyone. Ren already knows, ears furling back against her head the moment she feels him go still.

"I'm just gonna—uh, go find the restroom," he tells Hunter and Vaughny, and then he's out of his seat.

A woman makes an offended sound that her parakeet daemon mimics as Shane brushes past her, but it's an overreaction because the walking room between the rows of seats is big enough to fit most mid-sized daemons, which is the international standard. And Shane barely stepped on her shoe anyway.

"You are being stupid," Ren hisses at him as he looks around for a door that looks like it could lead to a flight of stairs. Everything's gray and concrete. Every sign is written in Russian.

"Yeah, well," Shane huffs and shoves his hands into the pockets of his fleece. He *is* being stupid. And the worst part is, there's still time to go back to Hunter and Vaughn, pretend that he really did just need to go to the restroom. But he won't. Rozanov's in the same building as him and he never responded to his text, and he just wants to know he's alright, so sue him.

If it was *Shane*—

But that's a useless thought exercise, because it's not Shane. It's Rozanov. And Shane just wants—he'll figure that part out later, alright. The wanting is enough to justify the reaching. It always has been so far.

"Through here," Ren says, nosing at a half-opened door next to a shuttered concession stand of some kind. And maybe he's stupid, fine, but she keeps pace with him every step of the way even though she could have stayed in his seat and they wouldn't have felt any jab of pain or uncomfortable tightening of the bond at all.

Professional athletes are good at that, have trained since they were kids to stretch and lengthen the tether tying their daemons to their souls. Sure, no athlete Shane's ever heard of

could leave the building without his daemon—soulmated pairs aside, of course—but most of them could separate the length of a football pitch out of sheer necessity.

So Ren doesn't have to be here, is all Shane's saying. Obviously he wants her with him, generally all the time, because that's his daemon, but she could have stayed behind if she wanted. But she wants to see Rozanov as much as Shane does, he knows it.

She's keeping pace with his every step, after all, and when they're through the door at the top of the stairs, she's darting through it in a flash.

"Ren," Shane snaps out, instinctive and panicked because she's hurtling through the air towards Rozanov as if she's going to *touch him,* which is just not—no. Not allowed. Not something they do. Not something anyone does, unless you're, like, married or family.

But she curves at the last second and barrels into the prowling form of Ilya's daemon instead, which. Alright, it's still embarrassing, but it's not terrible. At least Ilya's daemon likes Ren. Honestly, Shane thinks they have a better rapport going than he and Rozanov do, which makes him feel sort of weird.

"Uh, hey," Shane says, stopping a safe distance away from Rozanov's hunched figure. Even from the side, he can tell how angry Rozanov is, muscle jumping in his jaw like a soldier loading bullets into a gun.

Between them, Evren and Rozanov's daemon are wrestling, climbing over each other and flashing their fangs, but it's friendly. Shane thinks. Shane thinks it's friendly, at least. They don't use words, which is weird because daemons generally talk to each other in whatever language their humans speak. But Ren and Rozanov's daemon never speak to each other, at least not that Shane's heard.

Maybe they're communicating the way snow leopards do? Shane doesn't know. He knows a lot about snow leopards, but he's been stubbornly refusing to look up things about daemons for years now. Especially things about matching daemons.

It's not, like. A thing, okay?

He glances up at Rozanov just in time to see Rozanov look away, back out over the ice. "Not here," he says, curt and final. As if Shane's gotten on his knees, opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue or something right here in the Sochi ice rink.

"I just said *hi,"* he protests, and between them, Ren rears back and hisses with her ears flat to her skull. Shane lowers his voice, as if that can make up for his loud-ass daemon. "I *know* not here, alright, I just—wanted to see if you were okay. Nothing else."

"Okay?" Rozanov's eyes pierce him, bright and fiery and everything they weren't during the interview Fletcher showed him this morning. It eases something in Shane's chest. Better. That's better. "Yes, Hollander, I am so fucking okay. Go now, thank you."

"You didn't answer my text," Shane blurts and then he feels like an idiot. But it's just like. Rozanov's lying to him, and Shane doesn't know why he cares so much, but he *does,* so if

Rozanov's gonna try to lie to him then he's going to have to do a better fucking job of it.

"What text," Rozanov says, but his eyes are back on the ice, and when Shane glances down there, no one's even fucking performing.

He moves closer. Just a few steps, because he can't help it. It's enough to have Rozanov's daemon perk up though, amber eyes fixing onto Shane with just as much heart-stopping intensity as her human's. "Rozanov, come on," he says. "We—"

"We are not anything, Hollander," Rozanov snaps, and he's looking at Shane again but it's like a stranger's wearing his face. Rozanov has never once looked at him like that. Not even at the beginning, not even during the last World Juniors when they took that last face-off against each other when Canada had three goals on Russia, and two of them were off Shane's stick.

This is different.

"No, I know—" Shane says quickly. Heaven forbid Rozanov thinks Shane's here because he got—clingy or something. Rozanov probably has no shortage of girls and guys he fucks once and then tries to avoid afterwards even when they don't get the hint. Shane's not one of them. Shane knows what this is, and he doesn't want anything else from Rozanov than what they already are. He's not here, like, gagging for it or anything.

He's sorry for being a decent fucking person; obviously he's not going to be trying that again where Ilya Rozanov is concerned.

"Good," Rozanov says, short and sharp, like he can hear Shane's thoughts or something. He's being cruel with his brutality. Did Shane expect anything less? He can't remember now.

Maybe it's good he never decided what he wanted out of this—what he thought would happen when he texted Rozanov. That means that the sinking, gaping feeling opening up in his stomach isn't disappointment. He never pinned down his expectations, so there's nothing to be disappointed about.

There's just this. Just Rozanov's clenched jaw and his burning eyes and the way he holds himself frozen still, like he's poised to strike at any soft piece of underbelly Shane's stupid enough to show him.

It's so far away from the way he'd been in the stairwell of Shane's Montreal apartment that Shane isn't actually sure if that Ilya Rozanov ever existed at all. Maybe Shane's eyes were just playing tricks on him. Maybe Ilya'd gotten him all cum-dumb and stupid with it, and he'd just made up a version of Rozanov he'd wanted to see, someone he'd wanted to be that soft with.

Maybe that's the fake Rozanov and this is the real one. Shane doesn't know.

He shouldn't have sent that text. He shouldn't have asked. He shouldn't have *cared.*

Why had he cared?

“Good,” Shane repeats, and even he can hear the way his voice sounds off; too high, too stretched thin across the one syllable. Ren nudges up against his hand once in comfort before padding back to Rozanov’s daemon and flopping against her side. She gets a lick between the ears for her efforts. Funny; Shane feels like he's being kicked in the kidneys for his own.

And Rozanov’s back to watching the zamboni trundle over the ice beneath them, like he’s already checked out of the conversation, like he’s given Shane his marching orders and so that’s that. Go now, thank you.

Something about that feels like claws raking down Shane’s spine. Rozanov doesn’t even care enough to look at him anymore. He’s only a few meters away at most, but he looks so—untouchable. Distant. Unfamiliar, and that tugs at something in Shane’s gut, makes him feel sort of sick to his stomach.

He doesn’t like the weight of the feeling. Doesn’t like the way it sits inside of him, like he’s swallowed a mountain’s worth of stones. He thinks, alright. This is officially a distraction, which is sort of mortifying because Rozanov doesn’t look like he’s thought about him at all since he got into his cab a block away from Shane’s place in Montreal.

“Fuck you, Rozanov,” he snarls, digging his fingers into the pockets of his fleece so he can’t give into the temptation to run them through his hair or wrap them around Rozanov’s shoulders and shake him. “I don’t know why I even….” he cuts himself off because it’s not like that sentence is going to end anywhere that matters.

Rozanov’s shoulder raises and falls in a sharp, jerky movement. His arms are crossed over his chest; he glances at Shane again and then away. “I do not know why either,” he drawls, his lip pulling up into a sneer that hits Shane like a punch to the gut.

“Fuck you,” Shane says again, sort of breathless, and he means it. He’s startled by how much he means it, actually. He blinks at Rozanov, the side of his face, the curl of hair around his ear, the mole on his cheek, the jut of his furrowed brow, and he wants—

Shane doesn’t know.

He wants the other Rozanov back, but he isn’t even sure if that guy exists. He wants to go back in time and just—not send that text, not reach out, not want to know how Rozanov’s feeling, which really means he just wants to root out the part of him that cares about Rozanov’s emotions like it’s a stubborn weed he can dig out of himself if he tries hard enough.

More than anything, he sort of wants to reach into Rozanov’s mind and claw out the memories of that night in Montreal. He doesn’t like thinking about this version of Rozanov remembering that version of Shane. It makes him feel exposed and ugly, twisted and tied down and unable to protect himself from the sharp knife of Rozanov’s attention.

It’s all very dramatic and overly emotional, which Shane hates, so he swallows down all the wounded pride that’s welling up in his chest like a bruise, and hisses out, “I’ll leave you to brood then, Rozanov.”

Rozanov's hands clench at his sides, and his daemon pauses in the middle of licking along Ren's scruff, like they can both feel the approaching storm in the air. "Thank you," Rozanov says stiffly. "Is what we agreed, no?"

"Yeah," Shane replies, because it is. He's right. They'd *said.* They'd said they wouldn't approach each other in Sochi, that they wouldn't even be rivals, just strangers. Shane broke the rules he'd laid out. And now Shane's dealing with the consequences. He just didn't think they'd be so bitter to swallow. "Yeah, it is."

Rozanov flicks his eyes to him and then away. "I will see you on the ice, Hollander. You will be in Boston in March."

It feels like being tossed a bone, table scraps given to a dog out of pity. It makes Shane feel wild and mean and starved. Hungry to see Rozanov as hurt and reeling as Shane feels. "You'll see me on the fucking podium wearing gold if you can bear to stick around for closing ceremonies. But hey, don't worry. We'll beat Latvia for you. I know you couldn't get it done."

Rozanov flinches. It's small, barely anything, but it's there.

Shane waits for the warm tide of satisfaction to flood through him at the sight, but there's nothing.

"Go now," Rozanov says, turning his body away from him completely. His chin juts out, proud. His shoulders are stiff and straight. Maybe his words should sound like a warning, but they don't. They just sound the way Shane feels: tired, maybe. Empty.

Shane goes. He wants it to feel like a kindness he's giving himself, but it's probably more like a tactical retreat. His heart is hammering in his chest and the sinking feeling in his gut increases with every step he takes away from Rozanov. The embarrassment is acidic; it's going to burn through him if he lets it.

"Fuck him," Shane mutters to Ren, pushing through the door to the stairwell with a bang and taking the stairs two at a time. She's a half-step behind him, but her presence is a comfort all the same. "No, seriously. *Fuck him.* I just asked if he was *alright,* why'd he have to—like, it was just a *question.* He acted like it was an *attack,* who *does* that?"

Ren lets out an agreeing sort of noise, half-purr and half-chirp. Shane doesn't even look at her as he leaves the rink. He knows, like, logically, he should go back to his seat because Hunter and Vaughn are still sitting there, probably wondering if he's drowned in the toilet or something.

But he has too much energy for sitting. Or maybe he just wants to put as much distance between him and Rozanov as possible. "I hope he *doesn't* stay for closing ceremonies," he snaps. The cold Russian air greets him in a rush the moment he steps outside; it makes his eyes sting reflexively.

Ren is quiet at his feet, and Shane doesn't want to see the way she's probably looking at him in disapproval, so he speeds up. It's not Shane's fault she likes Rozanov's daemon so fucking

much. It's not *his* fault Rozanov's daemon's apparently leagues better than Rozanov himself.

He strikes out in a random direction, fingers clenching around nothing in the pockets of his fleece. He can feel his phone in his pocket like it's a dead weight. Rozanov's not going to text him back. Shane's never going to text him again. It's just—embarrassing, is what it is.

"God, I'm such an idiot," he whispers, reaching up and raking a hand through his hair. Ren bumps against the back of his legs with a small, rusty-souding purr. "You know what, I wish you could have dropped my phone in the ocean. Still might do that."

Even though that wouldn't help anything. Even though it wouldn't take away the sinking feeling in his chest, like he's lost something he's been too afraid to name.

"Fuck," he mutters with feeling as he turns a random corner. He barely avoids clipping shoulders with a group of German skiers walking the other way. "Shit, sorry," he says, automatic. One of them waves him off with a smile, taking a polite step to the side to allow Ren to follow in Shane's steps without brushing against her.

Except it's not Evren on his heels when Shane's eyes fall to her instinctively.

It's a snow leopard daemon, yeah, sure, but it's not *his.*

Shane jerks to a stop so suddenly that another athlete almost runs into him this time, a young girl with the French flag splashed across her jacket.

"Oh," she says, "Excusez-moi!" Her daemon, a snake longer than she is tall and draped over her shoulders like a fashion statement, flicks its tongue out at Shane and turns its head to watch him as she skitters by.

Ilya's daemon blinks back at him with those intense amber eyes of hers. "You should move, Hollander," she purrs, voice a rusty rumble and just as accented as Rozanov's. "You are in the middle of the street."

Shane blinks and then pulls himself together through sheer stubbornness alone. It's the first time he's ever heard Rozanov's daemon speak. He doesn't even know her name. "What the fuck," he says faintly, but he moves out of the middle of the street, into the mouth of a small alleyway. To get out of the way. To get his bearings. He cranes his neck to look around him for a familiar flash of golden curls or the gray-white blur of his own daemon.

There's nothing.

"Where the fuck is Rozanov," he demands, shoulders tense. "What the *fuck,"* he adds, in case that wasn't clear or she didn't hear him the first time. Then, most importantly, "Where the *fuck* is *Ren?"*

Rozanov's daemon tilts her head and blinks at him. "I don't know," she says, and Shane thinks maybe he's losing his mind.

"What do you mean you don't know," he snaps, looking around the street like Rozanov will appear if only he wants him hard enough. He thinks about calling out for him, demanding

that he come out from wherever he's hiding and—and, like, bring Ren, because obviously she's been daemon-napped or something—

But the fear of discovery makes him hold his tongue. What would someone think if they heard him calling out for Rozanov in the middle of the day in Sochi? They're not even supposed to be *friends.*

"Shane," Rozanov's daemon says, padding forward until she can sit right in front of him, long tail curled around her paws. "You know he is not here, and you know she is with him."

"I don't know anything at all," Shane tells her, voice high and thready. He needs to sit down. Like, now. He can feel a soul-deep panic creeping into his peripherals. Ren isn't here? Ren is *always* here. She's his daemon, she's his *soul.* She can't just—be *gone.*

Rozanov's daemon nudges at his knees, insistently, and that's all it takes for him to fold down onto the cement sidewalk. Thank God no one else seems to be around. Thank God it's just Rozanov's daemon watching him have a breakdown or whatever. It feels right; he embarrasses himself in front of Rozanov, so now he gets to embarrass himself separately in front of his daemon too. Two for fucking two.

But even that mortifying concern feels distant and muted, because—because—

"Where is he?" He tries again, desperate. It's the only thing that makes sense: Rozanov has followed him out of the rink, and Ren, for whatever reason, has stuck close to his heels instead of dogging Shane's like she's done for the past twenty-three years. Variety, maybe. Spice of life and all that.

"Shane," Rozanov's daemon says, and then that's all she says. And she says it like it's an explanation and an apology all in one.

"No," Shane refuses, and a part of him wants to scramble to his feet and run back to the rink. Track Ilya down and shake answers out of him. Find Evren and wrap her up in his arms. He doesn't want to sit here, leaning up against the concrete wall of some sports complex. He doesn't want to look at Rozanov's daemon.

He doesn't want to know what it means.

But fuck--of course he knows what it means.

What it always means, when you can leave your daemon behind and not feel their absence like it's tearing your soul in two.

"Don't," Shane says, when Rozanov's daemon settles into his side, watching him like he's something to be studied. Her fur is longer than Ren's; it looks soft, but he can't feel it through the fabric of his pants. He doesn't want to feel it. Touching someone else's daemon—that's soulmate-level shit.

"She is okay," Rozanov's daemon tells him, resting her cheek against his knee. She pronounces the word the same way that Rozanov does, two separate syllables married in one

breath. “Ilyusha will not let anything happen to her.”

“Ilyusha,” Shane repeats, edging from *panic* into *hysterical* territory. “My daemon is with *Ilyusha.”*

Rozanov’s daemon blinks at him, slow and languid. “Of course,” she says, almost reproachfully. “He would be in pain otherwise, if both of us were with you. That is how it works.”

The words make Shane close his eyes and exhale roughly. He wants to shake his head in denial, like that would dislodge the images that his eyes are sending to his brain. “I don’t even know your name,” he tries, but it’s pointless and it’s fruitless and it’s far, far too late.

Shane’s been training for years to stretch the distance he can walk away from Evren without feeling the heart-piercing pain of a fraying bond. They’ve never gotten further than roughly the length of an ice rink, which is pretty average. Any further, and his body feels like it’s being set on fire, like his soul is trying to force its way out of his chest to reconnect with his daemon, like he’s going to pass out.

It’s damning, the fact that he’d walked from the rink all the way here without feeling more than a heavy leadenness in his stomach. That he didn’t even *notice* it wasn’t Ren shadowing him. That Rozanov’s daemon felt *familiar* to him, down past his skin, further than his bones, to his very soul.

“You do not need my name,” Rozanov’s daemon says, probably just to be contrary. She’s Rozanov’s daemon, after all. She settles more of her weight against his leg. They’re not touching, skin to fur, but it’s still—it’s inappropriate. It’s—it’s *soulmate shit,* touching another person’s daemon like this. This is Ilya Rozanov’s soul, pressing up into him.

The thought makes him laugh, strained and hysterical. “I think I should probably know the name of my soulmate’s daemon,” he gets out, and the snow leopard purrs like a reward.

It’s soulmate shit, to swap your daemon with someone else’s and not even notice yours is gone. It’s rare. It’s special.

It’s not something that’s supposed to happen in Sochi. During the Olympics. And it’s definitely not supposed to be Ilya Rozanov’s daemon that Shane’s soul recognizes as his own.

“Fuck,” Shane says and puts his forehead down on his knees. He just—needs a moment. The cold concrete against his ass and the wind stinging at his cheeks are good, harsh sensations that remind him that this is real. They don’t do much to ground him, but he thinks probably very little would right now.

Ren would. Ren would know how to help him. Usually, she just sticks her face into Shane’s and butts her head up against his until all he can feel is her fur and all he can smell is her scent and all he can hear is the rumble of her purr.

But Ren isn’t here. Ren is with Rozanov.

Shane wonders distantly if Rozanov has realized yet. Then he wonders how far Shane would have gotten without noticing. He's almost to the bus stop that most of the athletes use to hitch rides from the main sports campus back to the Olympic Village where the athletes are staying. If he hadn't run into those Germans, maybe he would have gotten all the way back to his room before he properly looked at Ren and found her missing. Found another person's soul in her place.

"Hollander," Rozanov's daemon says carefully, "you are having panic attack."

"Yeah," he agrees, breathless. "Yeah, I think—probably am, yeah."

There's a beat of silence, like she doesn't know what to do with this information. It makes him want to laugh again, if he had the oxygen for it. God, he's making Rozanov uncomfortable down to the guy's *soul.*

And then—everything stops.

Rozanov's daemon begins to purr, a sound that comes deep and guttural from her chest like a growl; then she shoves her way closer to him, batting at the side of his head until he moves it. And then she slinks into his arms, halfway off his lap but snuggled between his chest and the tops of his curved thighs.

And then—everything turns golden. It's like he's swallowed a star, feeling Rozanov's daemon beneath his fingertips, skin to fur. No, it's better than that. Smaller, too. It's like—when he was little, his parents would take him out of the city and up to a rental cottage on a lake for two weeks at the beginning of each summer. When the sun was close to setting, when the fireflies were flickering over the water and dancing in between the trees, Shane's father would light a fire in the stone pit and the sun would slip beneath the horizon, out of sight, and Shane wouldn't even notice its absence because he'd be too busy staring at the flames instead, both his parents sat next to him and his daemon curled up in his lap.

Touching Rozanov's daemon feels like that: like that kind of fire, that kind of warm, golden glow, inside him. Through his chest and down to his toes, certainty flowing through every cell of his body that there may be an oppressive darkness circling him, but he's not been left alone within it. That he'll never be left alone within it again.

He has a soulmate. This is his soulmate's daemon, and it feels right. Something clicks shut somewhere deep inside of him, a puzzle piece or a lock or a gear he hadn't even realized was out of alignment.

"Oh," Rozanov's daemon says. She sounds surprised, like maybe she's feeling something similar.

"Oh," Shane agrees. Her fur is soft. The panic recedes; it's easier to breathe now. Sudden shocks help with anxiety episodes, and maybe touching your soulmate's daemon counts as one. He wonders if Rozanov's daemon knew that or if she took a gamble and got lucky. Maybe she just wanted to help him and she couldn't figure out how. Maybe Evren told her at some point or another. Apparently they've been talking a lot more than Shane ever realized, if they plotted this whole thing up.

Rozanov's daemon is still purring, on and off, like it's a muscle she's not quite used to using. Her eyes are half-lidded but no less intense as she tilts his head to examine Shane's face. "Serafima," she tells him like it's a secret. It takes him a moment to realize that it *is*.

It's her name.

"Sima," she adds, butting her head up against his fingers when he stops petting her. "Ilyusha calls me Sima."

Shane blinks, and it's not like the golden feeling inside of his chest fades entirely, but it's like the darkness gets heavier.

He'd sort of forgotten for a moment is all. In the rush of amazement that was realizing he had a soulmate, that this was his soulmate's *daemon* in front of him, he'd forgotten. And now he remembers.

Ilyusha is Ilya is Rozanov. Rozanov of the *we are not anything, Hollander* variety. Rozanov of the *go now, thank you* variety. Rozanov of the cruel sneer and the tensed jaw and the cold eyes that made Shane feel picked over and discarded, like the Russian had already experienced everything worthwhile Shane could offer him and he didn't care to stick around to examine the rest.

And that Rozanov is his soulmate.

"Fuck," Shane says out loud. Mostly to himself. Then, to the snow leopard in his lap, he says, "I think this definitely counts as a distraction."

He'd think it were sabotage or something, a plan set up to throw him off his game before Canada faces off against the US, but he can't imagine Evren actually going along with anything like that, and he can admit, just to himself, that she's definitely in on whatever little switching scheme the two daemons concocted.

"Is funny," Serafima tells him. Rozanov's daemon. Because Rozanov is his--his.

"I'm not laughing," Shane replies automatically. He's not. His ass is numb and his head hurts and he feels like he's just gone five rounds against a team of enforcers, all of whom had taken turns knocking him against the boards.

Serafima hums like he has not spoken at all, which is perhaps the most Rozanov thing she's done so far. "Is funny that you call it a distraction," she says. "As if it is a bad thing."

"It *is* a bad thing," Shane says. "We're playing against the US tomorrow, I can't be thinking about--about Rozanov, about *this*. I'm going to be facing down the most defensively capable US men's team in the past two decades, alright? This is important."

Serafima--Sima? It feels weird to call her that. Like it's a coat he's borrowing that fits too tightly around his arms--slips out of his lap and back to his side, relaxing onto her hind legs and licking at her paw in practiced nonchalance. "And who do you think Ilyusha will be facing down tomorrow?"

Shane blinks. He doesn't know what to do with that question, what answer Rozanov's daemon is looking for, what she wants to hear. He doesn't know what Ilya has left to fight, except shitty media interviews and upset Russian fans.

But he doesn't think it's necessarily a *fair* question either. "We both agreed to no distractions," he says stiffly, scrubbing a hand over his face like it'll relieve the tension building up in his lungs. "That the games were more important than anything. You don't get to make me feel bad about that just because I'm the only one still competing."

Serafima tilts her head the same way Ren does. Maybe that's a snow leopard thing. Maybe that's a soulmate thing. Her eyes really are unnaturally bright; they hold all the fire to complement Ilya's forest. "Is not about making you feel bad, Hollander. It is about making you feel *wide."*

"Pretty sure I'm not the narrow-minded one between me and Rozanov," Shane reminds her, *we are not anything, Hollander* echoing around his brain like a really annoying gnat. "So maybe let's go find him and Ren, and you can give him this lecture and I can get *my* daemon back."

Serafima's lips curl back into a snarl; Shane doesn't feel the threat of it at all. Maybe the cold from the concrete beneath him has seeped up into his chest and numbed him all over, or maybe he just knows, bone-deep, that she'd never actually hurt him. She's Rozanov's daemon. And Rozanov is his soulmate.

"You two deserve each other," she snaps, all teeth. Her tail lashes when she gets up onto four paws. "You are both so stupid. But yes, okay. Let's go. We must solve the problem of your *distraction."*

Shane stands as well, feeling a bit light-headed as he does. He wants the golden glow back. He wants it to be easier. He wants it to be anyone else, anyone but Rozanov. He wants getting Evren back by his side to mean that he won't be playing the rest of his games distracted, that he won't be caught up and twisted into knots by the fact that Rozanov is his soulmate.

But he was fucked up and turned around by Ilya Rozanov way before Team Canada called to ask him to join their roster. He's been distracted by Ilya Rozanov for years now; if there were a cure, he thinks he'd have found it at this point. He's just started assuming this shit is terminal.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Ilya never wanted a soulmate.

Chapter Notes

this chapter is dedicated to isimo by the bleachers which i listened to. mayn times. while writing. it's my top ilya song i think and it fits this fic very well and i have seen no one talking about it (i'm not on twitter so maybe everyone is talking about it and ive missed this memo)

also peep the new chapter count (i'm sorry) - i guess if anyone's out there keeping track, just start assuming im lying when i think that a fic is going to be 2 chapters long. im not lying intentionally but this is like. the third time this has happened. thats a pattern babyyy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ilya’s heart finally calms around the time the Italian skater has completed his routine. Down on the ice, he bows with a flourish. His daemon, a brightly colored yellow bird, flits across the ice to land on his shoulder. He’s coordinated his outfit to the colors of her feathers. Cute.

He feels Sima brush up against his leg, an unspoken question.

They’ve been silent since Hollander stormed off, and that was two routines ago. Ilya can feel Sima’s low-level concern humming through their bond, but it’s hard to pinpoint it amidst the sinking of his stomach and the tightening of his chest.

It’s getting worse, each time. Harder to bear. He’d thought, maybe, it’d feel different pushing Hollander away instead of always being the one to leave, to get dressed first, to put space back in between them. And he’s right, on a technicality. It is different; it’s just not necessarily better.

“I think it is time to stop this,” Ilya murmurs. Another Italian has taken the ice now. His outfit is a gradient of gray, lightest around his shoulders where his daemon rests. Another little bird, this one a bright red that looks like an open wound or a blood stain. She flits away from him to hover above the ice the moment the music begins.

Hollander hasn't returned to his seat yet; Ilya has been keeping an eye out on the doors of the arena leading to the audience sections. It makes him feel on edge, at risk of ambush. It's what makes him linger here, overlooking the unfamiliar ice rink—so similar to a hockey one but so diffferent too.

If he can't see Hollander, then Hollander could be anywhere. Behind every fucking corner of this goddamn Village, and that's dangerous. Ilya isn't sure he has it in him to be so cruel again. Not when Hollander had looked so struck by it the first time.

So fucking—disappointed. Like he expected Ilya to do better and instead he'd been made to watch Ilya fall short of his expectations.

Ilya's hands tighten and then relax on the beam in front of him. "I think it is time to stop this," he says again, English this time, as if Hollander is still beside him, there to hear and there to argue back. Hollander always argues back. He likes the last word. He likes a parting blow. Sometimes, when Ilya lets himself think about it and he's feeling particularly unkind, he thinks this is probably because Hollander is unused to violence. Much as he wants to pretend otherwise, he doesn't have the stomach for it. He likes to strike out and then not have to be there to watch the hit land and the bruises form.

We'll beat Latvia for you. I know you couldn't get it done.

Ilya doesn't know how it can still surprise him, the way Shane can give as good as he gets. It shouldn't catch him off guard; after all, as soft and tame as his daemon has always looked in comparison to Sima, she is a snow leopard too. They have fangs tough enough to break skin and snap bone. They have claws.

As if she can hear his thoughts, Sima pushes forward and butts her head up against his leg. Ilya can't stand to look at her. Either she'll be pitying or judgemental. She usually is, in the wake of Hollander.

The Italian finishes his routine with a flourish, down on his knees on the ice. His daemon lands on his outstretched fingers, choreographed down to the very last moment.

Ice skating is a beautiful sport. It is nothing Ilya can understand.

In hockey, you can practice your plays and your passes and your turns and your changes until your feet bleed in the confines of your skates. You can be good; you can be great; you can be solid and *know it.* But then the game starts and it's not just you out there, it's six people who want to see you break apart on the ice and five guys you have to rely on to not let that happen.

In ice skating, you perfect your routine and hope you can do it under the pressure of the cameras and the lights and the judges. In hockey, miracles can happen on the ice. And they can not happen, just as easily.

Latvia came out of fucking nowhere, and Ilya is still—reeling. He'd thought, maybe, it'd feel better to be here instead of watching the Sweden v. Denmark game in the rink where he'd led

the Russian team straight into the fucking ground. After all, ice skating ice is different from hockey ice. It's a stage, not a rink. You take to it alone.

Sima nudges at his leg again, tilting her head and pressing it up against him in an uncharacteristically affectionate gesture. It has been years since she tried to comfort him so overtly; it's been years since he let her.

He lets her now though. He curls his fingers around the bannister so she can't see their slight tremble, and he pushes his knee back against her. Just for a second.

He'd thought—it's stupid, in hindsight. He'd just thought, when he was leaving the Russia quarters of the Village with his duffle slung over his shoulder: *anywhere else. Anywhere where they won't find me. Anywhere safe.*

Of course he'd gone to an ice rink. Not the hockey one, God fucking forbid, but close enough. The smell is the same, mostly. The temperature is familiar. The sounds are similar.

He's been running towards the safety of an ice rink for most of his life. He'd hoped it would help him now, too, but watching the ice skaters leap about below him is like salt in the fucking wound. Maybe it would have been alright, but then Hollander had to find him. Hollander, all doe eyes and pretty freckles and incautious concern. Heart on his fucking sleeve.

hey you doing ok?

Ilya should have responded. Not a single fucking bone in his body had wanted to, but that was before he found out that apparently Hollander would take his lack of a response as invitation to seek him out. Now that Ilya understands that texting Hollander back had been the lesser of two evils, he really wishes he'd just forced himself to bite the bullet and say something like, *yes.* Like, *of course.* Like, *who wouldn't be after playing like shit on home ice?* Like, *a reporter told me that the team I captained played like shit on home ice and it made me realize that this isn't home ice for me, not anymore. What do I do with that? Where do I go now? Who will have me? Who will take me in?*

And now—now he's feeling more unsettled than ever, and he has only *minutes* before a car comes to collect him and bring him to his father. He supposes he is lucky in that regard, but only the kind of lucky that people who survive shipwrecks are: fortunate but ruined all the same.

If the Olympics had happened two years ago, if he'd been old enough to play and lose in the last Olympics, if the disease eating away at his father's brain were a bit less starving, a bit slower in its course, then there is little doubt that his father would have been in the audience instead of watching from a television in Sochi proper. He'd be in the car that is almost certainly at the gates of the Village now. He'd give Ilya no distance, no moment to grapple himself together.

But Ilya is lucky because his father is sick and trapped half in his own mind and half in the house of the Sochi mayor on the far side of the city. There will be no one in the car except for

him and the driver, which means Ilya will have at least an extra thirty minutes before he must face the consequences of his disappointment.

Sima nudges against him. Hard this time, hard enough that his mind snaps back to the present, to the sound of the audience clapping as the Italian's score is read aloud and then broadcasted across the ice.

"What, Sima?" Ilya says, glancing down at his daemon.

Sima butts her head up against his leg again and then sits down at his feet before turning her head up to stare at him.

"What," Ilya says. He thinks he says. Distantly, he thinks he hears his own voice, but it's hard to know for sure because it's suddenly impossible to hear anything over the ringing in his ears.

Hollander's daemon tilts her head and blinks up at him. She looks self-satisfied. Of course Hollander's fucking daemon would figure out a way to look somehow both innocent and *smug* at the same fucking time.

Her eyes are wider than Sima's. Her fur is lighter, spots of gray and black darker on such a bright canvas. She's fluffier too, but he doesn't think she's necessarily bigger outside of the density of her fur.

It's just—there's no mistaking her for Sima. Or Sima for her. Not for Ilya. Not when he knows his soul so well, every snarled tooth and ragged claw of it.

"What," Ilya says again. His mind is nothing but blank static. Sima is not here. Hollander's daemon is in her place.

This means many things. None of which he can survive naming.

"I think you should sit down," Hollander's daemon suggests, tail settling over her paws. Now she looks fucking *polite.* "You look very pale, Ilya."

Ilya isn't even on first-name basis with *Hollander.* It feels wrong to hear his name out of the mouth of Hollander's daemon. It *is* wrong to speak to her directly. It's an offense. An insult. Too personal. This is a reflection of Hollander's soul gazing up at him with her ears flicked forward and her eyes wide and concerned.

Just like Hollander's had been.

hey you doing ok?

No, he doesn't think he is.

"No," he says nonsensically. Uselessly. Denial is stupid; it's his knee-jerk reaction to being confronted with a daemon that isn't his where his daemon always was. Sima isn't here. Hollander's daemon has taken her place, which means—which means—

Ilya never wanted a soulmate.

It's an even stupider thing to think than the *no* was to say, but it's the truth and it's the only thought in his head as he blinks down into Hollander's daemon's amber eyes.

He didn't want a soulmate. It was always something he thought he could avoid. You have to test it to find out. You have to leave your daemon with someone else, you have to take theirs with you and if you can get far enough away without any pain, then you know.

Ilya was never going to test it. Not with anyone. Every time he did the math, tallied it up, the risks always outnumbered the benefits. Better to not know. Better to keep Sima close and safe by his side, always. He couldn't imagine ever loving someone enough to leave her with them, even for a second. Even just for a test. Even after he left Russia, when he settled into Boston and the Raiders, ran the numbers again from the safety of the couch he owned in a house that was his alone, he still couldn't imagine it. He wanted love, the way everyone wants to be loved, but he still could never imagine it—trusting someone else with the very soul of him.

He just hadn't remembered to factor in the truth of what it means to have a soul that's capable of roaming around on its own four legs and making stupid decisions without Ilya's fucking input.

"You should really sit down," Hollander's daemon insists, batting at his leg with one paw. She sounds just like Hollander. Holier-than-thou. Pushy. Stubborn.

It reminds him, strangely, of Sima.

Sima, who is with Hollander somewhere out there in the Village. It's impossible to know the distance between them. For the first time in Ilya's life, he doesn't know where she is. In the end, eventually, Hollander had left quickly, but who knows what pace he kept when he was out of Ilya's eyesight? They could be across the Village by now. They could be back in the dormitories, a bus ride away.

Fuck. Hollander. Does Hollander know? Surely not yet, or he'd be back already. He'd be blowing up Ilya's phone with texts and calls and recriminations. This is most definitely a distraction, and Hollander has games left to play in. Ilya doesn't, and still he feels like this is too much. Too sudden.

He has not even started processing the fact that the daemon in front of him is not his own, which means he has found his soulmate. He is hours and days and maybe months away from being able to confront the Hollander of it all.

And so he can't imagine how Hollander is feeling himself, if he's realized that the daemon at his feet belongs to Ilya. He doubts he'll be pleased. Did Hollander want a soulmate? Most people do, as far as Ilya is aware. Everyone wants to be loved. Soulmates are like a promise that you will be, if you take *love* and boil it down to its very base component which is, of course, recognition.

The better question would probably be: does Hollander want Ilya for a soulmate?

It is a stupid question, too. Ilya already knows the answer.

He gets a split second of warning in the form of Hollander's daemon letting out a frustrated growl, before she's rearing up on her hind legs and colliding into his side with enough force to knock him off his feet.

It's instinct, then, as he falls. One hand braces out behind him the way you're only ever supposed to fall if you want to break your wrist. The other hand flies up, automatic, protect his chest. Even then, even when he's running on fight or flight, some part of him can't curl his fingers into a fist and shove her away. That's his soulmate's daemon, he'd never risk hurting her, even just on instinct. Even just by accident.

He has just enough time to think, *yes, this, this is why I never wanted to know,* and then his fingers brush against the snow leopard's fur and Ilya can't think of anything else.

He doesn't even feel himself hitting the floor. He could have really, honestly, broken his wrist and he isn't sure he'd be able to feel the pain. Not around the new sensation bursting straight from his chest or his head or wherever souls are kept in the body because he feels—

Light. Cold and breathless and full of energy. Touching her feels like taking his first step onto ice ice. Real, uneven, uncomplicated ice, a frozen-over pond that's been shaped and pockmarked by the Russian wind. That same wind, crisp and cold and electrifying, rushes through his lungs and it's like skating downhill and picking up speed. It's like flying. It's like trying to outrun an avalanche. It's like he's been breathing through half his lungs for all his life and here and now he's taking his very first deep breath.

Hollander's daemon pushes herself into his arms now that he's on the ground, nuzzling up along his cheek and then against his neck. She's purring, smooth and constant and like she means to comfort him, as if she didn't push him down in the first place. Maybe she's forgotten; Ilya wonders how it feels for her, to be touched by her human's soulmate.

She shifts up again until she can balance on his chest with both forepaws and all of her not-inconsiderable weight.

"I told you you should sit down," she tells him, peering down at him. Her ears have flicked back in annoyance but her eyes are wide and hesitant, and Ilya hears himself laugh.

And then he can't stop laughing because he has lost all chances of medaling for Russia and he was its Captain and it doesn't matter except it does but not nearly as much as it matters that Ilya can stand on Russian soil and not feel as if he is in his home country and that doesn't matter nearly as much as it matters that this is not his daemon perched on top of him, but his soul doesn't seem to recognize the difference because how could it? This is his soulmate's daemon. This is Hollander's daemon.

Things like hockey matches and medals and homes still matter because they will always matter to men like Ilya, but they can never matter as much as that. As much as soulmates matter; as much as daemons do.

“Stop that,” Hollander’s daemon demands, and her tail lashes. Her paws are kneading along the fabric of Ilya’s shirt. It’s the same way Hollander fiddles with his fingers, cracking his knuckles and tugging at the skin around his nails before he shoves his hands in his pockets.

The sight of his daemon doing something so similar, so *familiar,* makes Ilya laugh again, but even he cannot tell if it’s truly a laugh or more like a sob. Shit. Fuck.

Fuck.

He blinks up at the ceiling until his eyes stop watering. “You have a name,” he tells the edges of the banners hung up in the Sochi ice rink. “What is it?”

The daemon’s paws keep moving. Her claws have slipped free, and he can feel them snag in the lines of his shirt. It’s a nice shirt. Ruined now though.

It’s very hard to care.

“Evren,” she whispers finally, and Ilya is helpless against the urge to press his fingers against the tuft of fur behind one of her perfectly triangular ears.

“Evren,” he says just as quietly. Hollander’s daemon’s name is Evren, and this is a secret. This is something to be protected at all costs. This is something no one else should know, no one but Hollander’s closest friends and his family and his soulmate.

Who is Ilya.

Ilya is Hollander’s soulmate; Hollander is Ilya’s.

There are too many emotions swirling around his head for him to name, but they all feel—distant. Muted. The fear, the reflexive anger, the worry—they are very far away because *Evren’s* fur is soft beneath his fingers and she is purring again and Ilya’s chest is light and filled with an icy cold breeze that reminds him of the very first time he ever pushed his feet into a pair of skates.

That first time and for many years afterwards, his mother had tied them for him. She only ever tied her own laces once, from what Ilya can remember, but she’d always triple-knotted his before tucking the laces into the tops of his boots.

She’d done that for years, every time he put them on until it became part of his ritual too, until he carried the quirk with him across oceans and country lines and then back again. When he sat in the locker room and undressed after the loss against Latvia, it’d taken his shaking fingers five minutes to unknot his thrice-tied laces. He’d been late for post-media; no one had asked why.

But the point is: Ilya has spent years chasing that same feeling of security and now he’s found it again. Of course everything else feels so far away.

He hadn’t wanted a soulmate; it’s very hard to remember why.

“This is going to be very difficult,” he tells Evren, nudging at her until she lets him sit up fully. She doesn’t go far, but then Ilya’s hand is tangled into her fur. Maybe she stays close to him out of kindness or instinct or necessity.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Evren mutters back, but she leans into his touch. “That’s the whole fucking point. That’s what we wanted to *show you.”*

“We. You and Hollander?”

“Me and Sima,” Evren says, as if she says Ilya’s daemon’s name all the time. Maybe she does. Maybe Hollander knows it. Maybe Hollander knows more than he’s ever let on. “Because we talk. To each other.”

“You talk to each other,” Ilya repeats. “I did not know this.”

He has never seen them talk using actual words. They greet each other with deep purrs, bats of their paws and friendly sounding chirps, all a part of some instinctual language that Ilya will never be able to learn. It’s always seemed so embarrassingly transparent, the way their daemons communicate so eagerly and freely. Ilya has never been able to look at them for long.

Now Evren rolls her eyes, and she reminds him so much of Hollander that he has to take a second to breathe through it. “Sima says that’s because you’re incapable of focusing on anything other than Shane when you’re together.”

Ilya is going to get Sima a muzzle, he thinks. As an early birthday present for himself.

“I think it’s because you’re soulmates,” Evren adds, licking at the back of her paw. “Sima says it’s because you’re idiots.”

“I think you should not be listening to Sima,” Ilya tells the ceiling, tipping his head back to rest against the banister. “She is very mean. And biased.”

“She is my favorite,” Evren says, like these are very easy words to say, a simple emotion to express. Maybe it is for daemons. It is not for Ilya.

Fuck. He will have to look Hollander in the eye again. Soon. They will have to fix this. Soon, as in within the next hour. Within the next handful of minutes, really. He is expected to spend the night somewhere else. He is expecting a car to collect him. He is expecting a phone call to tell him the driver is outside.

Ilya’s fingers tighten in Evren’s fur. What is worse? Seeing Hollander again or his father? He does not feel prepared for either, but at least he knows where he stands with his father. What to expect. With Shane, it is…nothing is simple. Even Ilya doesn’t know what he wants from Shane Hollander, except for more time to figure it out.

Oh, and his daemon back.

But when has time ever cared for his wants? It moves forward as it always has. He has a soulmate, who is Hollander. Maybe Ilya should feel something regarding this. Something he can name and quantify. But Evren's fur is soft between his fingers and the pinched, concerned furrow between Hollander's eyebrows is all he sees when he closes his eyes.

"This is very bad timing," Ilya tells Evren. He's still sitting on the floor, but he shifts a little to lean fully back against the railing. Evren follows him easily, naturally. She's purring again, or maybe she hasn't stopped yet. "No, I am serious, *koshechka*. Hollander is going to lose his mind. The semi-finals are tomorrow."

This counts as a distraction, he is fairly certain.

"There was never going to be a good time," Evren says, but her ears flick down like she knows Ilya has a point. "We weren't *sure,"* she adds. Her eyes are especially wide and soft when she looks up at him. "We just wanted to test it. We *thought* maybe, it felt *right,* but we weren't *sure."*

Ilya closes his eyes for a moment. Technically, of course, there'd be no way for them to know without testing the connection. It's not as if daemons understand all the shadows of their person's soul just because they're fashioned from the same cloth.

"If we *were* wrong, it'd just hurt a little bit," Evren says, like she's practicing her defense in front of a skeptical jury. "We thought it was worth it. If we were right."

"Yes, yes, okay," Ilya says, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. He's not—he's not angry with her. He's not even angry with Serafima, even though out of all of them, she *knew* he never wanted this. She *knew* he wanted no part of soulmates. Never in a thousand years. He'd told her that. She *knew.*

Okay. Maybe he is a little angry with Serafima. He didn't want this. It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter that he didn't want this, that he never wanted to leave his soul alone with someone else. His soul has taken the choice out of his hands completely. She's somewhere in the Village right now, with Hollander, because Evren is here. With him.

And now they know.

"You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don't take," Evren tells him primly.

"Don't start," Ilya mutters, because the last thing he needs right now is his soulmate's daemon chirping hockey platitudes at him.

Evren flops down into his lap, going boneless and heavy. It's novel, the way she seeks out his touch. It has been a very long time since he's let himself have anything similar. He has always been careful with Sima. The risks of acting otherwise have always outweighed the benefits, but now he has a snow leopard daemon purring in his lap and he can't quite remember what they were. The risks. She is very soft beneath his fingertips. She is so very trusting, too.

“There was never going to be a good time,” Evren repeats, stubborn now as she tilts her head to look up at him. When she pulls her lips back, her teeth are snarled. “You’d never want to know.”

And—well. Yes, that’s true. But out of a long list of *bad times,* it is hard to imagine one worse than during the Sochi Olympics. In Russia. After the two soulmates in question had just had a fight. Ilya opens his mouth to try and tell her this, but before he can, the phone in his pocket begins to buzz.

Jane calling.

For a moment, Ilya thinks about not picking up. But he does anyway, maybe because they’re soulmates and they both must know it now, or maybe because he recognizes that there’s no use running away from something that’s faster and more determined than he is.

And technically, both of them have the other’s daemon hostage. So it’s probably a good time to answer Hollander’s call.

“Hello,” he says, and he casts around for a joke or a chirp or a snide remark or something to tack onto it, to dilute the weight of the realizations sitting between them.

There’s nothing.

“Hey,” Hollander says over the phone. His breathing sounds harsh, like he’s just been pulled off the ice after a double-shift. *“Um. Fuck.”*

Yes, Ilya thinks. That is a good summary of current events.

“Look, can you—can you come to the Team Canada rooms? We need to fix this.”

Hollander’s voice is tight and angry, but low too. Quick. Ilya feels as if he’s just been tuned back into an argument they haven’t stopped having.

He wonders how many other things Hollander thought about before he forced himself to come up with a plan. It is so very *Hollander* to encounter a problem and then deliver a solution. And then demand Ilya’s compliance with his solution.

“Come back here,” Ilya counters, scratching his fingers behind Evren’s ear. “I am still at the rink. Easier than going to your boring Canadian barracks. Stop being lazy, Hollander. Give me back my daemon, yours is annoying.”

In his lap, Evren blinks up at him with her very soft and wet-looking eyes, so he shakes his head to let her know he is not being serious. She purrs.

“I can’t,” Hollander hisses, and he sounds frustrated now but also like he’s close to tears. He doesn’t even defend his country or his daemon. *“JJ’s got me on, like, a watch. I can’t go back there. He’d follow me.”*

“What?” Ilya blinks down at Evren. “Hollander, make sense please.”

Hollander blows out a long, staticky breath. *"I was, like—panicking, alright. About The Situation."*

The Situatuon. Cute.

"And JJ found me and now he wants to take me back to the dorms, cause he promised Hayds he'd, like, look after me or something, and he's not going to let me just go back to watch more events—and even if he did, *he'd definitely follow me if I tried to run into you, so—"*

"Hollander, Hollander," Ilya cuts him off, pinching at the bridge of his nose even if it means lifting his hand away from Evren's flat head. "Does your team know that you are a twenty-four year old man? Why are they holding your hand. Just leave Boiziau."

"It's not that fucking easy, Rozanov," Hollander snaps, still quietly. Boiziau must be closeby.

"Easier than finding a way for me to sneak into Canada's dorms," Ilya points out, keeping his tone steady, even though he can feel frustration bubbling up inside of him. "Hollander, I am not going back to the Village tonight, I do not have *time."*

A pause. Long. *"What do you mean?"* Hollander demands. *"This is where everyone sleeps. Just come to the Canadian building."*

"Is not where everyone sleeps if you are Russian," Ilya tells him. "And you have other duties and no more games to play." He shifts and checks his watch. It is later than he thought. They have no time for anything except Ilya speaking very plainly and Hollander complying very quickly. One sounds much more likely than the other. So he says, slowly, "Hollander, there is a car coming to pick me up any minute. I must be here. So *you* must come here. Okay?"

"I can't," Hollander says, and Ilya would be irritated at the knee-jerk refusal if he couldn't so clearly hear the thread of panic through his words. *"Fuck, JJ's standing at the corner, he's not gonna—yeah, dude, I'm fine. Just my mom. "* His voice goes distant for a second. Boiziau must have stuck his head into wherever Hollander is. Asked him something. *"Just a second, alright?"*

How badly was Hollander looking when Boiziau found him to warrant this level of baby-sitting? Ilya can imagine it, even though it makes his chest hurt slightly, thinking about it. Hollander, on a bench or in an alleyway or one of those unused parks they'd scattered through the Olympic campus. Alone except for the daemon that isn't his. Panicking to the point that his Metros teammate is insistent on staying by his side.

Good teammate. Also, incredibly fucking annoying.

"Hollander."

"I have a game tomorrow," Hollander tells him in an undertone, but he's not angry anymore. Or if he is, it's lost amongst the panic. There's the noise of a handful of steps. Hollander must be getting a bit of distance from Boiziau. *"Ilya, I can't—I need Evren there. Please."*

Ilya closes his eyes. He can feel the same desperation beginning to tighten his own chest at the thought of going any longer without his daemon by his side. He needs Sima, the same way Hollander needs Evren. And Ilya cannot—he *cannot* take Evren into that car, the house, the dinner that awaits him. He can't. There are too many risks. No benefits.

Fuck.

Evren isn't purring anymore, but she is watching him. Head tilted. Can she hear Hollander's side of the conversation? Can Sima hear Ilya?

"I *can't,"* Ilya responds, feeling a pang of helplessness well up inside his lungs. He nudges Evren off his lap and stands anyway, mind running through a dozen different ways he can get to Hollander. If Hollander is still on campus, if he hasn't caught the bus back to the Village where the dorms are, then maybe Ilya can bump into him. Something quick. Something deniable.

He can be late to meet the car his father will send. If he runs, he can—

"Jage, alright, yeah. I'm coming," Hollander says to someone else, to Boiziau. *"That's the bus, Mom,"* he tells Ilya.

"Well, don't fucking get on it," Ilya snaps, but he can hear the hissing of the doors opening. More steps as Shane and Boiziau board it. *"Shane,* I can't fucking come to the dorms tonight."

"I understand," Hollander says, and his voice wobbles. Like he's trying to shove everything he doesn't want to feel away from him and focus on something else. Ilya doesn't like this tone. He doesn't like this version of Hollander. He doesn't even know how Hollander feels about having Ilya as his soulmate, but fuck if he can't hear how Hollander feels about having his daemon far away from him.

"When do you think then, Mom?" Hollander asks him. Boiziau must have taken the seat beside him on the bus too. Fucking annoying. Fucking--Hayden Pike. Asking someone to keep an eye on Hollander. Fucking Boiziau for *listening.*

"I don't—" Ilya turns, runs his fingers through his hair and glances down at the ice. Someone's just finished their routine. The rink is full of applause. He runs through what he knows of the next forty-eight hours in his mind. Tonight, he is to meet with a few friends of his father's. Tomorrow night is the banquet dinner. The day afterwards, though. Nothing. He thinks he has a plane ticket to Boston already booked, but he can cancel the reservation.

If Canada advances to the finals after tomorrow's match, Ilya can meet him back in the Village the day after, which would be the day before the Gold Medal match. So Hollander would have to play one of the most important games of his life without his daemon up in the suite where she's always been watching him, but he wouldn't have to play for the gold without her. Ilya can give him that.

It is not—it is nowhere close to what both of them would probably prefer. But it is all Ilya can give him.

“Day after tomorrow,” he tells Hollander. “Is soonest I can come back to the Village.”

He can hear the shuddering breath Hollander releases. What expression is he making? What is he holding himself back from saying? *“Okay,”* Hollander finally responds. *“Fuck. Okay.”*

Ilya grinds his teeth together and looks down at Evren, who’s sitting at his feet with her tail neatly curled around her paws. Watching him with a new kind of hesitance in her eyes. Maybe she’s realized that some things are easier to break than they are to fix. Maybe she’s regretting this whole scheme now that she’s seeing the costs of it. Maybe next time, she’ll fucking hesitate for a second and calculate the risks and benefits of her actions before she takes a step forward.

He sighs. It is as much her fault as it is Sima’s as it is Hollander’s as it is Ilya’s. Blame is sticky like that. Fucking useless, too. “Do you want to talk to her?” he asks.

There’s a long pause, but not like Hollander is debating his answer. More like Ilya’s surprised him by the offer. *“Yeah,”* he says like the word’s been punched out of him. *“Uh, please.”*

“Of course,” Ilya says. He crouches down and holds his phone out to Evren, who looks between it and Ilya curiously.

Hollander must say something on the other end because Ilya watches the way her ears perk up and she presses closer to the phone.

“I’m *sorry,* Shane,” she whispers, tail lashing to the side with her distress. “I didn’t mean—we didn’t think—”

She cuts herself off, eyes jumping back to Ilya and ears folding down. Ilya wonders what Shane’s saying. It can’t be anything especially interesting. He and Sima must still be on the bus with JJ Boiziau and his daemon and his stupid fucking caretaker complex. Shane must still be pretending to talk to his mother.

“I know,” Evren says, and her ears droop with such palpable distress that Ilya is petting over the scruff of her neck instinctively. She presses closer to him. “It’ll just be a little bit,” she says. “It’ll be okay. You have Sima with you.”

Hollander must argue back, because Evren rolls her eyes.

“Oh fuck off, you've never been a superstitious player, don't start talking about *routine* now. You’ll be fine without me. And I’ll be with Ilya the whole time, he’ll look after me. Of course he will.”

Ilya tenses his jaw and tries to swallow around the tight knot in his throat. The reality of the situation is setting in with unforgiving swiftness.

His soulmate is Shane Hollander. Okay. Hollander has his daemon with him. Okay. They cannot meet each other to trade their daemons back, not today, not tomorrow. Okay.

Ilya will have to take Evren to meet his father. He will have to keep her safe. Keep her protected. Okay. Okay. Fuck.

A difficult task even if he were returning to his father's circle a Russian hero with a gold medal around his neck. It will be nearly impossible in these circumstances. But what other choice does he have? He has spent his whole life convinced he does not want a soulmate because he could not imagine trusting anyone with the care and keeping of Serafima—and now he has been entrusted with looking after Shane Hollander's soul and keeping it safe. All of that agonizing over a soulmate, and it is Ilya who may not be up for the task. Who should not be trusted.

"Ilya," Evren says, nudging against his hand and knocking him from the spiral of his thoughts. "You have a call."

Ilya blinks down at her and then at the phone in his hand. The screen is taken up by a text box. *Unknown calling,* Russian number.

"Hollander, we have to go," Ilya tells the both of them. He stands up on auto-pilot, raising the phone back to his ear. "Is not a good idea to call later. Or tomorrow."

That borders on paranoid, if Ilya's being honest. It will almost certainly be safe to make a call to Hollander later in the night or tomorrow, even if he is staying in the mayor's house. No one but his father will really, actually care about who Ilya is talking to, and his father's mind is not what it once was. But—it is *almost* certainly safe. It is not *completely* safe, and so it cannot be a good idea to call Hollander later.

Ilya never wanted a soulmate; with that dream broken into irretrievable pieces, all he can do now is protect the soulmate he *does* have. To the very edge of reason, to the cliff edge of paranoia and beyond.

"Yeah, okay," Hollander says, and he sounds shaky. Unstable still, maybe even more so. Maybe it was not a kindness to let him speak to Evren. Or maybe the line between kindness and cruelty is thinner than Ilya's ever thought.

"But—when I am back in the Village. I will call. Early in the morning."

"Okay," Hollander says again. Then, *"I'll, um. I'm looking out for Evren here. Promise. We're doing fine."*

Ilya closes his eyes. "She will try to sleep on your chest. It is always very hard to breathe when she does this. You don't have to let her."

Maybe with Hollander, she won't. Hollander will have to treat her as he treats Evren, and they've always been quicker to touch in public. Ilya doesn't know how many pictures he's seen across social media of Hollander with his daemon curled up in his lap on a bus or next to him on the bench during practice. Ilya though has spent the last twelve years insisting on distance between himself and his daemon in public. Nothing harmful, nothing even that noticeable. But they don't often touch outside of moments they have to. He is not a child and she is not a kitten. They orbit each other. They don't do more than brush against each other when someone else can see.

But at night, when it is just them, Serafima sleeps across his chest, like eight hours of contact can make up for what he denies both of them in public.

But with Hollander, maybe she will not do that. Because Hollander will need her next to him, in his lap and in his arms, constantly over the next two days. She will not have to wait for the cover of darkness.

"Okay," Hollander says. *"I'll let her."*

"You say this now, but she is very heavy," Ilya says even though he shouldn't. He has already missed one call from his father's man. He should not risk another one. He should hang up. He should let Hollander go. "She will break one of your ribs, I think."

Hollander's laugh sounds like it takes him by surprise. *"I think we'll be okay,"* he says. Fond now. If Ilya strains his ears, he thinks he can hear the sound of Sima purring in the background. But maybe that is just his own imagination running wild. *"We'll be okay,"* he says again. This sounds like it's for Ilya's benefit. It's more confident, now. *"Don't worry, Mom,"* he adds. Which must be for Boiziau's benefit.

"Huh," Ilya says, forcing lightness into the edges of his voice. He has to believe him. He just has to trust him. For other people, maybe these are simple tasks. For Ilya, it is so hard that he can't think about it. He flinches away from it like Shane's earnestness is a hot stove he has accidentally brushed against. "This is very strange, Hollander."

"What is?" Hollander asks. Against Ilya's ear, his phone vibrates with an incoming call. He will have to take this one. He will not be able to ignore it again.

"Is just that I have always thought you would call me *Daddy* before you called me *Mom,"* Ilya says with a shrug Hollander can't see. "But is, ah, what is your expression. Is whatever floats your boat, *kotenok*."

He hangs up to the sound of Hollander's high-pitched spluttering. It is beautifully familiar.

"That was mean," Evren informs him, but she doesn't look angry. "Shane's probably bright red now. And he's not going to know what to tell JJ when he asks why."

Ilya shrugs again. That sounds, wonderfully, like not his problem. "I am expanding his horizons," he tells Hollander's daemon. "And he is very pretty when he blushes. Boiziau should thank me for free show."

Before Evren can say anything else, Ilya is pressing his phone up to his ear again as he re-dials the Russian number and waits for the call to connect.

"I apologize for the delay," he tells the man on the other side stiffly, slipping into Russian now. It tastes awkward on his tongue. He thinks the last time he spoke it was in the locker room, after the game. None of his team could even look at him, but the media had not wanted to look away. "I am coming now. Please wait for me outside the figure skating rink."

It's a short call. When he ends it, Evren is peering up at him with her head tilted to the side.

“I don’t speak Russian,” she says slowly, as if she’s just realizing this.

“Is okay,” Ilya tells her, brushing his fingers over the tip of her ear. “You will not need to.”

“But how will I understand what another daemon is saying if they talk to me in Russian? What if your dad talks to me?” she asks plaintively. For a moment, Ilya thinks about pointing out that these are things she and Sima probably should have thought about before they put their little plan into action. But there’s no point in that. Not really. It wouldn’t change anything. She already knows, probably. Ilya doesn’t need to rub salt into the wound.

“You will stay by my side,” Ilya says instead, scratching along her cheek and then down beneath her jaw before he steps away to grab the duffle bag on the floor next to him. Perhaps for some people who know him well enough, it will be strange to see his daemon so close to him. Sima usually paces along the edges of every room she is stuck in, like it is a cage she can escape if only she finds the right lock to claw through.

But he has just captained the Russian team into the fucking mud. It will not be so noticeably odd in these circumstances, for him to need comfort from his daemon. Frowned upon, weak, embarrassing. But not particularly unexpected. He adds, “You will not talk to other daemons, it’s not—it will not be strange. Sima does not do this.”

“She doesn’t talk to *anyone?”* Evren asks, sounding incredulous enough that Ilya’s mouth twitches into a smile even though it is the very last thing he feels like doing.

“She does not talk to these people or their daemons,” he corrects. Then, slyly, he adds, “I understand this may be very hard for you.”

Evren puffs up for a moment in instinctive irritation, but she doesn’t disagree. “What about your father?” she says, bumping her head against his legs as he begins to walk towards the stairs leading out of the rink. Applause licks at his ankles—another skater must have just finished. He finds himself hoping they have done well.

“I will handle my father,” Ilya says. “Don’t—”

Don’t look at him, he wants to say. *Don’t risk it. Don’t show him any hint of softness, but don’t show him any fight either. There are two things my father cannot stand: a bared throat and bared teeth. You just have to exist in front of him. You just have to hold your breath until he turns away.*

And, selfishly, he wants to say: *don’t look at him. Don’t notice him. Stay out of every room he is in. I don’t want you to see. I don’t want you to know. I don’t want Hollander to know, even just circumstantially.*

“Don’t worry,” he finally settles on. Then, like a promise to her and a threat to everyone else, he adds: “You are safe with me.”

He pushes through the doors of the rink at the same moment that Evren presses her head up against his hand. His fingers slip through her fur and cold Russian winter rushes through his lungs. He feels its lightness down to his soul.

It follows him into the idling car.

Chapter End Notes

i just think ilya my guy would have a really fucked up relationship with the physical representation of his soul that is too big for him to hide away so everyone can see it at all times so he would then create intricate rules and masks to hide his own perceived vulnerabilities but he would be unable to put up the same boundaries with the physical representation of shane hollander's soul that is, and it has to be said, very good at giving him puppy dog eyes.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> “You need a haircut,” Grigori tells him, and at least his voice is the same. Sharp, abrupt. Never satisfied.

Chapter Notes

> this chapter is brought to you to by that part of nell mescal's 'lose you altogether' where she sings 'i can't read your stupid mind!!! how are you not reading mine???' because that's the kind of hollanov i love writing the most when they're in their situationship/fuck buddies phase and blundering about trying to communicate and it's sooo relevant for this part of the fic (and i just listened to it a lot writing this lol)
>
> btw: this chapter is from ilya's pov while he's with his father at the gala in episode 2!! i didn't realize i had so many thoughts about ilya and his father until i started writing, so i may have gone. a wee bit overboard. for a fic that is billed as a soulmate daemon fic....canon-typical warnings apply for that dynamic - i've written it to be a mix of the show canon and my own plot/dialogue, so no one should be caught off guard by the relationship depicted. my disclaimer is that i rewatched that part of the episode a dozen times to try and get the little details right, but then i decided fuck it i already added a whole ass snow leopard to the scene, i can add ice to the drinks grigori pours and it'll be ok
>
> next (and last) chapter is from shane's pov! no eta on that one, i'm catching my breath from this one (and, yeah alright. you got me. the things i have been putting off by writing 3 different updates/fics in 5 days can no longer be put off)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His father’s decay follows him into the room, expanding until it takes up every inch of free space. It’s there in the wrinkles of his hands. It’s there in the drooping form of his daemon, half-asleep on his shoulder with her head nestled beneath her wing. It’s there in the slump of his shoulders, too; for all Ilya’s life, his father has always had the proud and impeccable posture of a man who knows every single one of his body’s capabilities.

Now, he stands at the dresser with his back hunched over from age and rot, and he pours them both a drink that Ilya doesn’t want but knows better than to decline.

It's in his eyes too, as he turns around to face Ilya. The decay. They never used to be so blue; they never used to be so prominently set into his face either. Maybe it is not his eyes at all, maybe it is just that his skin looks tighter against his skull. Thinner, stretched.

It was August the last time he saw his father.

Ilya has spent all of last night and this morning trying to categorize the small changes in his face, his demeanor, but he can't. There are too many. The man in front of him, holding out the glass, doesn't look like Ilya's father. It's a trap children who grow up away from their parents fall into far too often, probably: they forget that they're not the only ones aging. And so when they come home, it is to an unfamiliar house. A man who has the same eyes as their father, but set into a stranger's face.

Ilya has been taller than his father since he was seventeen years old. He always forgets that though. In his mind, in his memory, which is where his father lives most of the time, Grigori Rozanov still towers above him, looking down on him like Ilya is still twelve years old and his father still exerts absolute power. *Invincible,* but in the way storybook monsters are said to be, not the heroes who vanquish them.

Ilya is twenty-three years old now. Maybe one day, while they are both still alive, he will be able to stand before his father and feel every inch of his height.

It's a foolish, childish sort of hope. And what is worse, there is a tiny part of Ilya that thinks, still, now, after everything, after all these years, that perhaps it would have been realized if Ilya had managed to make something out of the Russian team. One more victory. This victory would have been the one to earn him his father's pride. It is fact because it is impossible to prove and so the chance of it, the rotten useless carcass of the *what if* cannot be shaken off. It must be picked at, til there is nothing left but the bones.

"You need a haircut," Grigori tells him, and at least his voice is the same. Sharp, abrupt. Never satisfied.

"Yes sir," Ilya agrees. In a different life, one Ilya has already lived through and come out on the other side of, this would mean sitting still and letting someone take kitchen shears to his hair on his father's orders. Ilya wore it close to his scalp up until he was seventeen. It'd felt like he was getting away with something, when it started growing longer in Boston.

Now, in this new life he has where he allows himself to pretend he is something other than his father's son, Ilya will not cut his hair. He will be back in the States shortly. An ocean will once more separate them. An ocean and four months' worth of days before he has to return.

But for his father and for himself, he pretends to agree. If there is a distinct line between the path of least resistance and giving in, Ilya hasn't managed to find it yet. There is no standing before Grigori Rozanov; Ilya has always been knocked to his knees.

Evren bumps against his calf as she silently passes by. Her tail lashes out in agitation, clips against the leg of his pants before she's gone, back to stalk along the window's edge.

She does not like this, Ilya knows it. Ilya thinks, maybe, he can *feel* it, deep within his chest, a steady thrum of restless disquiet that doesn't belong to him or Sima. This is unnatural for Evren, the role that Ilya has forced her to play. She is not made for the shadows of the room, for staying quiet and holding herself back. Shane Hollander's soul aches to be involved. Maybe Ilya should not be so surprised by this. After all, he has played against Hollander on the ice. He knows intimately well how selfish Hollander is as soon as he gets the puck on his stick, how he demands it from his linemates, how he'll rip it from Ilya's possession if he gets the barest hint of a chance.

Of course Hollander's daemon cannot handle being relegated to the sidelines. Of course Evren keeps deviating from his instructions, padding around in tighter and tighter circles like Ilya will not notice her proximity if she moves closer by only a handful of inches at a time.

Maybe Ilya should not be surprised by this; after all, Evren belongs to the boy who sent him a message asking if he was *doing okay* after being knocked out of contention at the Olympics. The same boy who found him in the ice rink when he didn't respond.

So of course Evren would feel a similar need to be involved. To shove her head into Ilya's life and make room for herself there.

Ilya sets his jaw, teeth grinding together until they hurt, until Ilya's afraid he'll fracture them just from the pressure and that the next time he opens his mouth to speak, all he'll be able to spit out is blood and broken bone.

Evren doesn't understand. Russian, Russia. The place Ilya came from, how it shaped him, how he managed to survive it. She wants to, Ilya knows this. Can see it in the way she looks around every room they enter, wide-eyed and with ears perked up. Even when she couldn't possibly know any of what was said last night during the informal dinner with the Sochi mayor, she'd sat next to his chair the entire night, following the conversation like it'd tell her something about all of this.

But she doesn't understand. Not the setting, not the risks, not the people around them. And if she doesn't understand this, the bare truth of this life, then it is impossible to make her understand, truly comprehend, the dangers of it.

And it is impossible, also, a very small part of Ilya thinks, to try and explain to her the love. But he's never going to be able to explain that, put words to the tangled mix of emotions in his chest when he looks at his father's face, when he stands out on the balcony and looks down onto the bustle of Russian city life below him. There is no point in kidding himself, in pretending otherwise. Russia does not feel like home to him anymore, but the love is still there like an echo that hasn't yet run out of breath. His father does not look like his father anymore, but the love is still there like a stubborn toothache or a phantom limb.

Impossible to explain, impossible to defend. Pure hatred would be so much easier to swallow. It would burn going down, maybe. It would poison him from the inside out. But it would be so much simpler, to feel nothing but hatred for the remnants of his family, the gilded cage of this house and all it represents, this country and all the times it has made him afraid.

It has made him so afraid, at times. But it has also made him defiant, and there's pride in that.

What an impossible thing to try to describe to another's soul. He cannot even make sense of it himself. If Sima understands, it is because she was there every step of the way. She remembers what Ilya does, carries parallel scars and tender bruises. Tender, as in painful; tender, as in capable of great softness.

Evren does not understand, even if a very small part of Ilya had thought maybe—because she is Shane Hollander's and Shane Hollander is his soulmate—maybe she would. Maybe Hollander would, without Ilya having to tell him.

But maybe he should. Tell him, that is. It is something his soulmate should know, probably. Not—not about Russia, not about his family, not about the rot in his father's eyes. But about the love. Ilya should probably warn Hollander about the way he loves, just in case. His love is the deep, prevailing kind. Buyer beware.

Evren brushes up against his calves again, tail flicking out to wrap around his leg before she darts away, back to the edge of the room.

Grigori's attention snaps to her, sentence trailing off. Ilya hasn't been listening, too busy pushing his body through the motions. That was a mistake. He doesn't know what his father was talking about, can't rethread the needle of the conversation, can't get his father's eyes back on him.

But there is a drink in his hand, so he takes a sip from the glass, barely enough to wet his lips, and wills Evren to—to crawl under the bed. To jump from the window. Anything, anything.

The ice cubes clink together as he lowers the glass, and his father's eyes jump back to him, lip curling up in disgust.

"And you drink, now, tonight of all nights," his father sneers. He does not yell; the door to the room remains open. Too many potential lurkers, too many ears listening maybe. Or maybe he simply does not think it is worth it to scream at Ilya anymore. It has, after all, been so many years since Ilya has screamed back. He has become an expert in turning his cheek and absorbing the blow. This, too, is a disappointment to his father.

"How are you not ashamed of yourself," his father asks conversationally, and Agafya stirs on his shoulder, rustles her wings and peers with hazy eyes at Ilya, beak clicking in agreement. Her talons, the hunting kind that are made to rend the flesh of prey animals, glint in the low light of the room.

It is almost a comfort to see them. His father's fury has changed shape a thousand different times throughout Ilya's life, until the very worst part of it became trying to predict what it would look like. Agafya's talons, however, have always been consistent. Sharp like knives, the killing kind. Made to dig into the arms of unsatisfactory sons.

"I am ashamed, Father," he says, and it's the truth.

It is the easy kind of truth, the kind he can pinpoint the moment he thinks about it. He was chosen to lead the Russian Olympic team, and he'd led them to a loss against Latvia. He was entrusted with making the team work, pulling them together and converting chances into fucking points, and he couldn't and he couldn't and he couldn't.

And two weeks ago, he'd kissed Shane Hollander goodbye in the back stairwell of his apartment, something slow and soft and sweet, and when he'd pulled away to see Shane's dazed onyx eyes blinking heavy at him, he'd ignored that tiny part of him that told him he should stay. Should kiss him again. Should linger in Shane's presence, set down roots and convince something to grow there.

But he hadn't, because of course he hadn't, and then he'd been made to look at Hollander again, two days ago, before he was ready, and all he wanted to do was lash out and leave marks, hurt him. All he'd wanted to do was hurt him so he could stop thinking about the way Hollander had looked in those syrupy slow moments after that last kiss, and then he *had.* Hurt him. He had.

Of course Ilya is ashamed of himself.

Evren's shoulder knocks against his leg again, and it takes everything Ilya has not to glance down at her. To keep his eyes on his father, who is talking now about the Latvian team and all the ways that Russia should have been able to crush them into the ice. Dreimanis, his father says, is a weak goaltender.

Kirils Dreimanis was on the Latvian Olympic team roster in 2002 as one of its oldest players. If he was in Sochi this week, he was in the stands as an audience member.

His father has forgotten again.

Ilya tightens his lips and takes another small sip from his glass. The preliminary specialists that he has spoken with have told him not to challenge his father's memories in moments like this. That correcting these slippages can result in confusion, further displacement in time, distress, anger, aggressiveness, maybe an even quicker mental decline if it happens often enough.

It is important, the specialists have said, to go along with his father's version of reality when he can. When it is not hurting anyone. Do not correct. Distract. Nod along. That is the kind thing to do.

Agafya shifts on his father's shoulders, spreading a wing and raising one of her talons in a stretch before she sinks back into rest. It glints in the light.

Ilya means to nod. He means to be kind. But he opens his mouth and says, keeping his tone mild and his face blank, "It was Mednis playing in goal for Latvia this year. Nikita Mednis. Do you not remember, Father?"

It is not a purposeful decision he makes. It is something he says mostly by mistake. Mostly because something about being in Russia makes him feel colder. Makes him crueler, maybe.

Or perhaps he just has too much of his mother in him. Accident-prone, the both of them.

He watches as twin spots of red bloom high up on his father's cheeks. His eyes, too blue, too bulging out of their sockets, dart around the room as his mouth tightens. From embarrassment, maybe. Wounded ego. If the disease doesn't rot through his father first, then it will be his pride that kills him.

For a moment, a split second, Ilya wants to take the words back. He looks at his father reeling through the realization of his mind's own betrayal, and he wishes—he should have chosen kindness.

If not for himself, if not for the sake of the man before him, then for who they were, years and years and years ago. When he was a boy, still more potential than person, and his father had been proud of him.

But then the anger in his father's eyes turns outward, away from himself. This is not a surprise. If Ilya has always been too weak to hold the weight of a grudge and too quick to calculate his own shortcomings, his father has always been the opposite—too strong, too impregnable to entertain even his own self-hatred for long. He always turns it outward.

Evren is at his feet again, pressed up against his knee. She must be able to feel the way the air's shifted, become electric. Maybe she can feel the tight spiral of Ilya's emotions as if they were her own. Ilya doesn't know. The disquiet in his own chest has grown, but now he isn't sure who it belongs to. Maybe it's been his all along.

His father's gaze lands on her, and this time it does not leave so easily.

"Have you still not managed to teach your daemon control, Ilya?" he snaps, cheeks red, eyes lucid. He is always lucid when he is at his most dangerous. The decay has not managed to take that from him yet.

"It is pent-up energy from the game," Ilya tells him, shifting his weight. Not enough to take a step forward, to put himself in front of Evren—but enough to prepare for the eventuality that he may have to. "She will behave throughout the gala, I assure you."

Behave, for his father, when it comes to Sima, means absolute invisibility. Failing this, it means total subservience. He is, at least, consistent in this, will only ever demand the same thing from Ilya.

Sima knows this, knows how to act. She and Ilya sat through the same lessons. She keeps herself at a distance. Ilya's preference; Grigori's, also.

But he'd told Evren to stay by his side. Told her he would keep her safe there, and now his father is looking at her with all his capacity for violence thrumming through his eyes, and Ilya—

Grigori's fingers twitch and he moves forward. It's just a step, just a half step, but Ilya is his father's son which means he has learned his father's mind and how to read his father's intentions in the grasp of his fingers through empty air.

Grigori Rozanov has always favored efficiency over innovation; touching another's daemon, with intent, with ill will, with force, is always the surest method to cause them pain. It feels like claws, raking through your stomach. Gutting. An evisceration every time.

But this time, Ilya has told Evren that he would keep her safe. He doesn't know what he's capable of—what he'd do to keep that promise. To keep Shane Hollander's soul safe. But he thinks, probably, well. He is his father's son. Some propensity for violence must be genetic.

His hand locks around his father's wrist, just above the sleeve of his jacket. The bones shift beneath dry skin from the force of his grip. He has taken a step forward, into his father's space, and for a moment—when Grigori blinks up at him—he feels taller than the other man. Stronger. Invincible.

Agafya croaks out a warning, but that in itself is a betrayal. A decade ago, she would have slashed at him with the sharp tips of her talons, but age and rot come for daemons as well. They are consistent in this.

At his feet, Evren bristles, but she skitters away too, back curled up into a bow and teeth exposed into half a snarl as she looks between Ilya and his father. There is confusion in her eyes. She doesn't understand.

Grigori recovers first, tensing his wrist to tug it out of Ilya's grip, mouth curling up into a furious expression, because anger has always been easier for him to express than fear. Ilya hadn't realized this for years. Maybe he hadn't realized this until this exact moment, watching his father watch him in turn.

They are both still holding the drinks Grigori poured; they are both still holding their breath.

"What do you think you—" Grigori begins to say, and there are a dozen different ways for that question to end, a thousand questions he could ask that are all overdue.

But Ilya does not want to hear them, not a single one. Not today, not when he can feel Evren's fear still coiled up tight and trembling in his chest.

Perhaps that is his own though. He isn't sure it matters.

"I assure you, Father," he repeats. "She will be on her best behavior."

Grigori's eyes, narrowed, lucid, unfamiliar, rove across his face. Threat assessment. Taking his measure. Ilya sets his jaw and lets him look his full, lets his resolve spread slowly over and through him.

A beat passes, then another, discordant and loud in their utter stillness. Finally, Grigori's chin dips down, the ghost of a nod. The next second, Ilya lets his wrist go. When they think of this moment later, maybe, it will be difficult to say which came first: the acquiescence or the release.

But Ilya will know.

"Fix your necktie," his father says. "It is lopsided."

Any other day, he might have taken a step forward and fixed it himself. But Ilya can feel Evren up against the backs of his legs, and the equilibrium is still shifting in the room, order not yet restored: Grigori does not know what to do with a son who fights back; Ilya does not know what to do with a father who lets him.

So Grigori moves closer to the door instead, glancing from Ilya down to Evren and then back. He discards his drink onto the dresser and makes his excuses. On his shoulder, Agafya turns her head to keep her beady eye on him as Ilya's father slips through the open door.

"What did he say?" Evren asks the moment Ilya turns to look at her. Her ears are pressed back against her skull, back still curled up in disquiet. When Ilya puts his hand out towards her, though, she's quick to push her head back up against his fingers.

Snow and ice and relief rush through his veins instantly. How the fuck is he supposed to give this up when Hollander demands his daemon back? How is Ilya supposed to go back to breathing through only half his lungs again?

"Ilya?" Evren drags her cold nose up against the palm of his hand. "What did you say?"

So very—involved. So willing to stick her head into his life. So very Hollander-esque.

Hey, you doing ok?

"Nothing important," Ilya tells her, English feeling rough and unfamiliar in his mouth suddenly. "Is small misunderstanding."

"Was he mad about the game?" she asks, canting her head to the side as she blinks up at him.

It is endearing, in its own way. That she thinks Grigori Rozanov must be angry *about* something. That she cannot understand that some people either are born angry or choose anger every opportunity they have until it becomes the only thing that feels familiar between their fingers.

She cannot understand and Ilya cannot bear to be the one to tell her.

"Yes," he says, blowing out a breath and retracting his hand. "It is a reflection on him. When I play badly."

Evren bares her teeth immediately, tail lashing to the side. "You didn't play badly," she snaps, digging her forepaws into the fur of the rug and kneading at it. "Did you tell him that your goalie was hurt? And the lines weren't clicking, and your first defensive pair was—"

"Yes," Ilya lies, turning away to the room's corner mirror so that he can fiddle with his appearance. They will have to go soon. Galas begin earlier this time of year, last longer into the night. "That is exactly what I told him."

"Oh," Evren says. She sits back on her hindlegs, looking suspicious. "Well, good."

There is no way she believes him, of course, but he is hoping Shane Hollander's kindness extends down through his very soul. He is hoping she will not press. At least not right now.

She doesn't. It's a minor miracle.

She does say, instead, mostly to herself, "I didn't realize a language could sound so mean."

"What?" Ilya says, his hands stilling on the folds of his necktie. He glances at her reflection in the mirror.

"Russian," Evren says. "It's so—everyone sounds so…angry, all the time."

Ilya blinks and then swallows. His throat feels tight, suddenly. He doesn't know if she's including him in the *everyone,* but he isn't sure if he wants to know either. Something about being in Russia makes him colder, makes him cruel. He has realized that about himself but that does not mean he wants Evren—Shane—*Hollander* to realize it too.

"Is not true," he tells her, quietly. He can't look at her form in the mirror—so familiar and yet so alien—so he pins his gaze on the knot of his necktie instead.

It's not true. It's a beautiful language, Ilya thinks, though he's never heard it in an objective way. Russian, to him, has always been like the blood in his veins or the oxygen particles in the air around him. It's always just—been there. An invisible undercurrent, something integral but impossible to pin down.

Suddenly, viscerally, he cannot stand the idea that Evren's only exposure to Russian will be the way his father speaks it. The way it slinks through these twisted, gilded, empty halls and wraps around the tongues of the people in his father's circles. The way it sounds in Ilya's mouth when he stands next to these men and pretends not to feel how his skin crawls.

"It is beautiful, also," he finally says, letting his hands drop away from his neck. The tie is too tight around his throat, but he's old enough now to know the sensation is mostly just within his mind. Strangely, knowing doesn't make it easier to breathe.

"Okay," Evren says, amber eyes watching him as he turns back to her. She doesn't sound like she believes him, but then why would she? Hollander is stubborn as well.

"We should go now," Ilya says. "This time—stay by my side, okay? Do not move. You will draw less attention that way."

It is selfish of him, maybe. Or maybe there are just no good options. Keep her by his side, and he can keep her safe even as it puts her in the very middle of things. Keep her away, put her in the corner of a room, how will he know she is safe? Just by assuming so?

At least she doesn't argue, eyes darting back to the center of the bedroom as if Grigori is still standing there. She knows now, even if she doesn't understand it, all the threats that linger in the shadows of places like this.

“It will only be for a few hours,” he tells her, reaching out to stroke a hand over her ears and down the side of her neck. “Five at most. Then we can leave, and tomorrow you will be back with Shane.”

Evren nods, her paws digging into the rug once more as she rubs her cheek up against his wrist. “And you will leave too, won’t you?”

Ilya blinks. “I will leave when you do, *koshechka,* we are connected, remember?”

“But—tomorrow, I meant tomorrow,” Evren says. “You won’t have to come back here again. Afterwards? With Sima.”

“I—no,” Ilya says blankly. “I will fly back to Boston tomorrow evening, I think.”

He should stay for the Closing Ceremonies, arguably, can already imagine the kind of news articles that will be written about him if he does not. They will think he is a sore loser, weak-willed and a poor sport. No one will know that he has found his soulmate in Sochi. No one will think he needs time to process this, alone, in his house, facedown on his bed, and so no one will be kind.

“Good,” Evren says fiercely, and then she doesn’t say anything else. Not until they’ve left the mayor’s house, gotten into an SUV, and arrived at the house being used for the gala. A businessman’s, Ilya thinks. He’s sure he has been told; he just can’t remember. Already, the entryway of the building is thrumming with activity, men and women and daemons moving about each other in a careful dance of wealth and importance and sycophancy. Ilya lets one of the workers take his coat with a nod of thanks, tucking the ticket number into his pocket as he snags a tall champagne flute from a passing waiter. He doesn’t want to drink, but it feels wise to have something in his hands.

“Ilya,” Evren whispers, just loud enough for him to hear, and Ilya glances down at her immediately. She’s pressed close against his leg, ears angled down and eyes wide as she looks around the place. It’s loud and too bright, too much artifice and too little substance, fleshy meat so thin you can see the white bone beneath.

Evren is trembling. He can feel it where they’re connected—physically, yes, but through the soul as well.

“Five hours,” he murmurs. Promises. In his head, he does a quick calculation. He could probably have them out in four. It would be rude, dangerously so for what it would mean every summer he must return here, but for Evren, he would.

Evren presses closer, tilting her head up until Ilya can cup his hand around her skull and smooth at the tuft of hair in front of one of her ears. They’re still in the entryway, just next to the coat closet. Still distant enough from the gala that the cold air from outside makes the hairs on his arms stand on end.

“Can you tell me something beautiful in Russian?” Evren whispers, so soft that Ilya can barely understand the English words.

Ilya hesitates for a moment, but no one is close enough yet to hear her. There are eyes on him already, most likely, but this is supposed to be his daemon. His soul. He is allowed to offer her his touch. He is allowed to speak to her. It is acceptable. It is almost expected.

Perhaps it is less expected to kneel down at her side, but this is what Ilya does. He cards his fingers through her pelt, along the ridge of her spine and then down the side of her neck, the way he would touch a spooked horse or Sima, late at night in the safety of his room.

He clears his throat and says the first thing that comes to mind. It is the most beautiful thing he knows. *"You are being very brave, little one,"* he tells her softly in Russian, enunciating each word carefully like she'll be able to understand him if he just speaks slowly enough. *"Do not worry, you will make me very proud. And I will be in the stands the whole time, yes? Cheering for you."*

"What does that mean?" Evren asks. Her eyes look like Hollander's, except for all the ways they do not. Amber instead of onyx. Wider where Hollander's are narrow. But—soft when they blink at Ilya. So open that Ilya does not know what to do with it.

"Is nothing," he says, rising to his feet with one last brush of his fingers through her fur. "Is promise someone told me before."

This is not the entire truth, of course. It is *mostly* a promise someone has told him before, but it is not word-for-word.

When he said it to Evren, he'd said *koshechka.* My little cat.

When he'd heard it the first time, years and years and years ago, she'd said *synochek.* My little son.

Serafima settled when Ilya was twelve years old. He still hasn't forgiven her for it.

He'd spent most of his life up until then with her pressed into the hood of his jacket; wrapped around his neck; cradled carefully in the hollow of his collarbone, his cupped hand, his jean pocket.

She'd been a lark, a lemming, a weasel, a shrew. A mouse, a gray jay, a toad, a slip of a milk snake. Mostly, she took the form of a stoat. Dark gray fur, pink nose, small enough to be tucked up against his chest and kept there under all the layers of his clothes.

She'd been a stoat when his mother had held open the blankets and let him crawl into bed beside her. Ilya had been eleven, too old by far for that sort of thing, and Sima had been a stoat, still small enough to scamper out from under his shirt to cuddle up against the long line of his mother's sable daemon.

Agafya was the kind of eagle made to hunt stoats like Sima, and Alexei's hound liked to show off her fangs the moment Sima moved too close. But Vitalik never gave her a reason to flinch away, and she loved him for that and Ilya did too, except it was already more

complicated than that for him, because Ilya also loved a lot of things he hated too. The hound and the eagle and the father and the brother.

“Oh, *synochek,”* his mother had said when he was eleven and pressed up against her side and trying to find the words to tell her he thought maybe they should both leave the city before his father returned from his work trip. “You keep her so small.”

He’d shrugged. He remembers that. He remembers that he’d shrugged. It hadn’t sounded like such a bad thing to him. A small daemon. Plenty of people had them. Sables were not much bigger than stoats, except his mother’s daemon often walked beside her on the ground or rode her shoulder. Sima was small enough to fit under his clothes.

“You always say there’s nothing wrong with small daemons,” he’d told her because he hadn’t wanted to admit that the stoat was a compromise between himself and his daemon. If he’d had his way, Sima would settle into the form of a mouse or a very durable bug.

“And I am right,” his mother had said, stroking over his hair. “But the coat that warms one man during the winter is useless to another if it cannot stretch over his shoulders, yes?”

Ilya hadn’t said anything. He remembers that. He remembers shrugging. He remembers having nothing to say, already feeling on the defensive, already wanting to pull Sima back underneath the fabric of his sweater, which was second-best to finding a way to put her back inside of him. He thinks, now, he would have tried harder to find words to give his mother if he’d known back then that they were almost out of them. Words; time.

“You do not have a small soul, my love,” she’d told him, sounding sad, when he hadn’t said anything. And he’d said nothing then, too, but Sima hadn’t settled that year anyway. She’d been a stoat when he turned twelve.

She’d been a stoat when—

She’d been a stoat, at the funeral. And she’d been a stoat the morning afterwards. She’d been a stoat and Vitalik had been nothing but a pile of golden dust and his mother had been dead and then—

Then Ilya had woken up one morning, three days after burying his mother, and there’d been a crushing weight on his chest he’d thought was grief until it’d moved and he’d opened his eyes and he’d seen the snow leopard.

When they’d walked into the dining room for breakfast that morning, his father had looked straight at Serafima, relegated to Ilya’s feet instead of curled into the palm of his hand, and then he hadn’t looked away.

So Serafima settled when Ilya was twelve years old, and he still hasn’t forgiven her for it, for settling into a form too big to be hidden away. He loves her, of course. It’s because he loves her that he cannot forgive her for growing out of being something he could protect. Of course he loves her. But love is complicated when forgiveness is just out of reach.

Sveta's fingernails dig into his skin as she drags him away from his father's side. The moment they're out of sight, the smile on her face drops away, leaving nothing but hard lines and narrowed eyes as she whirls around to face him.

It's a goalie's expression, he thinks, worn in the middle of a shoot-out, watching a player deke a puck down center ice towards you. Good goalies watch the movement of the puck. Great goalies watch the player.

Ilya doesn't know if he's the puck or the player in this scenario, but he doesn't think it matters. Either way, he feels already caught.

"What," he says when she just stares at him, mouth a thin line and eyebrows raised. They're nowhere near private yet, tucked against the corner of a wall just next to the grand staircase. "I don't want to talk about the game."

Miko chitters at their feet, tilting his head up to stare at Ilya with the same disbelieving expression that Sveta is wearing. Ilya glances at the corsac fox and then away, firming his jaw. He can feel Evren brushing up against his calves, sticking as close to him as she can.

They'd made it four hours into the gala. They'd only had an hour left, and then Svetlana had found him, interrupted his conversation with a minister and his father and spirited them away. Any other night, this would be a fucking favor.

But not tonight. He's been trying to avoid her since he caught sight of her across the elaborate ballroom, and he'd made it four fucking hours. So fucking close.

"That's alright," Sveta says, squeezing at his wrist. "I do not want to talk about the game either."

"Good, well," Ilya says, and Sveta cuts him off, voice pitched so purposefully low that Ilya gets the feeling she'd be screaming if they were somewhere else.

"What the fuck, Ilyusha," she snaps, and Evren makes a noise behind his legs, a cut-off sort of growl that gets stuck in her throat. "What the fuck were you thinking."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ilya says, and a moment later an older couple almost runs into them as they turn the corner. The woman titters and apologizes, hand flying to steady herself on her husband's arm. She sounds drunk, but the owl daemon perched on her shoulder is watching them with unblinking eyes.

Sveta's mouth purses but she gives the couple a smile and a giggle of her own because her father was the goalie but her mother was the actress, and Sveta's always been committed to learning the arts in every form.

"Follow me," she says when the couple has moved on. Her hand moves from his wrist up his arm to loop around his elbow. It makes it look like he's escorting her as she drags him down the stairs, but Ilya can't even think about that because his mind is stuck on her words. *Follow me,* she said. In English. Like she knows she needs to give direction in a foreign language.

Like she knows there is someone listening to her who does not speak Russian. *Follow me,* she said. In English. To Ilya. To Evren, too.

She steers them towards a grandiose bathroom on the ground floor, two hallways back and isolated enough that when the doors close behind Miko, the noises from the party cut off. The next moment, Svetlana unhooks herself from Ilya's grasp and moves away to lean against the vanity counter with her arms crossed and her head tilted. Her daemon is an easy mirror of his human, settling down on his back legs and wrapping his tail around his forepaws as he stares at Ilya with the same look in his eyes.

"Ilya, congratulations!" Someone says, and Ilya blinks, startled, to see fucking *Sasha* draped across the ledge of a claw-footed tub. His legs are spread to the point of indecency, and the loose fabric of his shirt already looks wrinkled, as if someone has spent a lot of time with their hands wrapped in the sheer material.

"Sasha," Ilya says, glancing back to Sveta and then to Sasha again. His daemon, a long-haired civet covered half in stripes and half in spots, blinks at him over the rim of the bathtub. "I'm glad to see you could make it."

"Well, of course," Sasha says, waving an insouciant hand through the air. "My father practically begged me to attend. Who was I to say no?"

Ilya snorts before he can stop himself. Sasha's father, Ilya's old coach, was not a begging man, but Ilya thinks he would have been if it'd have kept Sasha in Paris for the duration of the Sochi games.

"Sasha," Sveta says cooly from her post at the vanity. "Get out."

Sasha's mouth falls open, half-surprise and half-offense. "What—"

"I was wrong," Sveta tells him, brushing her hand through the air as if to bat away his concerns. "He will not fuck you tonight. I apologize for misreading the situation. Get out now."

"And this is for you to decide now, Sveta?" Sasha asks, blinking between Ilya and her like there is a joke he has missed. Ilya crosses his arms and leans against the counter behind him. It's sweet, probably, that Sveta has apparently arranged for Ilya to get his dick wet after crashing and burning at the Olympics. A month ago, maybe, he would have even taken her—and Sasha—up on the offer, tried to fuck the noise in his head quiet, tried to focus all his energy on doing something else he's good at after performing so poorly on the ice.

But that was a month ago. Before that last game in Montreal. Before *hey, you doing ok?*

Before Evren.

Sveta rolls her eyes, and says, in English, like she's bored, "Ilya, do you want to fuck him tonight? He is willing. Obviously."

Sasha's scoff is loud and offended, but it's almost immediately drowned out by the sound of a snarl. Low and long and feral. Unmistakably a threat.

Ilya blinks down at Evren in surprise. Evren, who is growling like someone has threatened Hollander's life. Evren, who is suddenly in front of him with her ears folded back and her spine arched, tail lashing and teeth on display. Sasha's civet growls back, but it's a paltry thing in comparison. Evren is a predator, fang and claw and fury, and Kira is a quarter of her size.

"Boris and Kostya were talking about finding a bar near the Olympic Village," Sveta tells Sasha when no one moves. Russian again. Point made, apparently. "I'm sure it will be filled with athletes looking to celebrate their medals."

Sasha's mouth twists up in knee-jerk defiance. He was never someone who appreciated direction, and this is the sort of rude that any person would protest, probably. But Sveta is a hard woman to argue against, mostly because she's never been afraid to aim for the knees.

"You can do better, Sasha," she says consolingly. "He does not even have a Bronze."

"You are so sweet to me," Ilya tells her drily, and she arches an eyebrow, glances at Evren and then back up at him pointedly. She is still growling at Ilya's feet, an occasional rumble of noise every time Sasha moves like she thinks there's a real chance of him deciding to cross the room and suck Ilya's cock with Sveta and their daemons in attendance.

He did not know Shane Hollander could be so jealous. This is something to unpack later, he thinks.

"And, we are going to talk about American hockey," Sveta announces, "so unless you have suddenly started caring about off-side calls in the MLH and Boston's playoff chances, then I suggest—"

"I'm going, I'm going," Sasha says, shoulders up and jacket slung over his arm. He looks like a disgruntled cat, peeling himself up off the bath tub's edge and shooting both of them a dirty look. Svetlana holds an uncorked bottle of champagne out to him as he passes and he takes it with a wordless snarl.

Evren's head swivels as she watches him go carefully. Kira hisses at her from the safety of the doorway, and Evren's quick to growl back, tail lashing through the air. She barely gets one step forward before Kira is skittering out of the room, Sasha on her heels. He's far too old to slam the door shut, but it closes with a deafening sort of click anyway.

"Possessive little thing," Sveta comments, eyebrows raised and gaze fixed on Ilya the moment that they're alone.

"Sima has never liked Sasha," Ilya replies dismissively, waving his hand as if his heart has not taken up permanent residence in his throat.

"Don't insult me by pretending I will believe you when you lie to me, Ilyusha," Sveta says and Ilya has to turn his face away, study the walls of the bathroom around them with a

clenched jaw.

He has been trying to avoid Svetlana for the past four hours. They were so fucking close and now it does not matter.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Ilya,” Sveta demands, tone strident now. Louder, more shrill without witnesses around them. “Did you forget that my first word was *Serafima?* Do you think I do not know what your daemon looks like?”

Four fucking hours. The bittersweet irony of the situation does not escape him; he’d spent all of last night’s dinner in the company of his father, this morning and this afternoon fading in and out of a crowd of people who knew him well when they played together in the VHL. And no one so much as suspected. No one caught him. No one raised the alarm.

Four fucking hours of seeing him across the room, and Sveta knows.

Of course she will not let it lie.

“Sveta, please,” he says anyway, rubbing a hand over his jaw and turning his head to stare at her. “Not here. Not tonight.”

“What were you thinking,” Sveta asks, torn between incredulity and anger and disbelief. “Bringing your soulmate’s daemon here—bringing *Hollan—”*

“Svetlana,” Ilya snaps, as much of a growl as Evren’s was. “Not *here.”*

Sveta’s lips thin out, but she has the decency to look chagrinned for a moment before she rallies. “You are taking *risks,* Ilya,” she tells him, quieter now. “Stupid risks. *Self-destructive* risks—”

“This was not my choice,” he corrects her with a jerk of his head, crossing his arms over his chest. “I did not choose this, I assure you.”

Svetlana looks at him, face set in those familiar goalie lines. “You expect me to believe that you play a shit game and lose against Latvia on *home ice* during the *Olympics* and then you bring your soulmate’s daemon to a gala thrown at your father’s suggestion where you have been expected to be at his side every single moment, and these two things are not related?”

Ilya shakes his head, chewing through his words. It is insulting, he thinks. He should be insulted that she is so convinced that he would risk his own soulmate as some sort of—of self-inflicted punishment. That he would ever choose this willingly.

“Our daemons…had a theory,” he spits out finally, jaw working furiously. “When we met during the games, mine left with him and his stayed with me. To test that theory. We were not consulted.”

Sveta blinks, eyebrows jumping up from the force of her surprise. It is insulting, really. She should know this already. She should know that Ilya never wanted a soulmate. Never wanted to test it. Never had before, not even with her.

“You know,” he adds quietly. “You know I never wanted this.”

“Okay,” Svetlana says after a handful of seconds pass where she looks through him and tries to take his measure. Evren is looking back and forth between them, ears flicked down and tail lashing every now and then through the air, but she’s at least stopped growling.

“Okay,” Sveta says again, watching as he leans down and places his hand along the ridge of Evren’s shoulder blades. The touch works instantaneously to soothe the daemon and Ilya, if he’s being honest. Her body relaxes into his legs at the same time that familiar feeling of icy freedom rushes through his veins.

“Okay,” Sveta says. “What are you planning to do about this? Now that you have it.”

You cannot un-know, she doesn’t say because she doesn’t have to. Ilya has already thought the same.

He never wanted a soulmate; that has stopped mattering now that the choice has been taken out of his hands. Now that his soul, apparently, has decided that *it* wants its mate. Now that he knows. Now that he has one.

Still, though. He thinks—about his father’s grasping fingers, the way they’d reached out for Evren. The way he’d grabbed him, stopped him the way he’d never stopped him before when it came to Sima. He thinks about that happening again and again. It plays out in his mind a thousand different ways, over the course of a dozen years. There will always be Grigoris in the world, especially in Ilya’s world filled to the brim with hockey and Russia and hatred and resentment. He protected Evren the once, had thought in the moment that he was truly capable of great violence if it meant keeping her safe.

But there are many Grigoris in the world and Ilya—in the heart of him—is afraid that bravery is an exhaustible resource. That one day he will not step forward in time. He will not grab his father’s hand.

“Nothing,” he tells Svetlana, which is only half the story. A quarter of the story. The slimmest fraction of it.

She makes a noise, a click of her tongue that conveys a hundred different rebukes, and Ilya turns his glare up to her, rising back up onto his feet and dropping his hand away from Evren’s fur. “What would you have me do,” he demands sourly. “Ask for a trade to the Metros? Ask for his hand in marriage? It is not even legal in America, Svetlana.”

“He is Canadian, no? It has been legal there for years,” She replies archly, and Ilya scowls at her. It is not—it is irrelevant.

Hollander will not want—they will not be able to—it will not matter. It will always matter, but it will not. They will know now, the both of them. They cannot un-know, but maybe they

can pretend. Won't it be safest to pretend? It had been a risk to pursue Hollander in the first place, one Ilya had treated a bit like a game he'd blindly let himself become addicted to playing.

Now, with the consequences so fucking apparent—

With the consequences already being experienced—

With the way Ilya knows what it feels like now, to touch Shane Hollander's soul—

Nothing is the safest option. For the both of them. He thinks, probably, Hollander has already come to the same conclusion.

"He is your soulmate, Ilyusha," Svetlana says, and Ilya cuts his hand through the air. A silent plea. Don't say those words. Don't give them meaning. "And you would give him nothing?"

"He would not understand," Ilya snaps, raking his fingers through his curls until he can feel them fall from their careful order. "His daemon has been mine for two days, and even she does not *understand* after *seeing it—"*

So how will Hollander? How *could* Hollander? Evren, who has spent the last two days at his heels, seeing the monstrosities of his life from up close, doesn't understand. Not Russian, not Russia, not the love. Not his relationship with his father, not the weight of the duty, not the love. Not the memories that bite at his heels, not the hatred that tightens around his throat, not the love that glues his feet to the ground.

"Is it that he does not understand?" Svetlana asks. "Or that you will not let him try?"

Ilya can feel his teeth grind together, and he turns away, catches sight of himself in the mirror behind him and tears at the neat knot of neck tie until it loosens enough that it feels like he can breathe again.

Svetlana, though, has always had the eyes of a goaltender but an enforcer's willingness to go for the jugular. She doesn't know how to relent. "Is it that she does not understand or that you will not let her?"

"I would," he snarls, cornered enough for his own teeth to come out. Evren lashes her tail at the sound, back jumping up into a defensive posture. *"Of course* I would—"

"It is hard to believe that you would, Ilyusha," Sveta tells him, crossing her arms over her chest and looking at him coolly from her vanity. "When we are alone in this room, and yet you have not spoken in English once."

Ilya's mouth snaps closed hard enough that he almost bites his tongue. It's a victory for Svetlana; it is worrying that she does not celebrate it.

Instead, her eyes turn soft, her lips tugging down at the corners. "Do you think he would not try?" she asks quietly, which is worse than the way she yells.

Ilya blinks. *hey, you doing ok?* swims in front of his eyelids. He'd texted that before he found out they were soulmates. He had just wanted to know. And he'd—before. In the stairwell. He'd asked about Ilya's family, if they'd come to watch him at the Olympics. And before. On the rooftop in Vegas when he'd had a dozen other places to be, he'd listened to Ilya say *I go home in three days,* and said, like a question Ilya couldn't answer, *that must be nice.*

He shakes his head, not a *no* or a *yes*. He just wants to scatter the thoughts in his brain, reconstruct them in a different order. Take a second. Recalculate, rerun the numbers.

Nothing is still safest, he is sure. He is sure Hollander will agree. He will frame it in terms of hockey. The risks it poses to their games, their careers. Hollander understands hockey. He understands hockey more than anyone Ilya has ever met.

"Oh Ilyusha," Sveta sighs in a tone he'd thought his mother had invented until he'd heard Svetlana use it after he'd been drafted. "If you want to be understood, you have to let him try. Even when he will not get it right. When he tries and fails. You have to let him try again."

Ilya whips his head around to look at her, nostrils flaring. "Do you think it is so simple, Svetlana?" he spits, hands clenching into useless fits at his sides before he forces them to relax. "That it is *legal* in *Canada* and so it is easy? You know hockey as well as I do, Sveta! You know the culture, you know what it demands and what it accepts. What would happen to our careers if we were—if people found out, do you know what could happen to him? To me? Russia would never allow—"

He cuts himself off and rubs his hand over his mouth. Evren bumps up against his leg, insistent and constant, and Ilya is too stupid not to take the comfort she is offering. His fingers sink into her fur, and he can breathe again.

There is no unknowing. But there is no *having*, either.

"I think," Sveta says, slow and careful like she has found him at the edge of a river with rocks in his pockets, "that if it is true, what you said, about your daemons arranging this—little exchange, then that means Serafima has decided that she wants this. Despite the risks. She thinks it is worth it. She wants you to *have this."*

"She doesn't—"

"Ilya Rozanov, you cannot tell me your own *soul* does not understand," Sveta snaps, exasperated now, and Ilya scratches at the skin beneath his eye, shrugs back at her with a flick of his eyebrows.

He bites back his immediate defenses and stays stubbornly silent until Svetlana lets out a string of curses and pushes herself off the vanity.

Something unpleasant and deeply protective jolts awake inside of him when she kneels down in front of Evren. "Unfortunately, Ilyusha is very stubborn," she tells Shane's daemon in a gentle voice, English heavily accented but technically perfect. "And also very stupid. But I think he is a good soulmate to have, if you can look past this. I think they will match each other well, Ilyusha and your Shane."

Evren turns to blink up at Ilya with wide, scared eyes. It makes Ilya bite the inside of his cheek, makes him feel rotten, inside and out. Of course she is scared. She does not know who Svetlana is—thinks, probably, that she is a friend of Ilya's, but not the kind of friend who can be entrusted with this secret. This is Ilya's fault. Svetlana is right; he hasn't spoken in English since they'd first arrived at this house.

"Don't talk to her," he tells Sveta, throat dry. English now, in the wake of Evren's uncertainty. Her fear. "You know she is not Sima. You know it is rude."

Svetlana rolls her eyes and stands, running a hand over the bottom edge of her curls, probably to ensure their continuous perfection. "Then you do it, Ilyusha," she says breezily, as if she does not care one way or another. "Unless you can think of something your silence will accomplish."

It's a parting blow, one that he lets land squarely on his cheek. He deserves it, probably. He probably deserves worse.

Miko darts forward and rubs his muzzle up against a startled Evren's cheek before he follows Sveta out of the room, leaving them alone in the bathroom.

"Ilya?" Evren asks, hesitant. Her back is arched again, fur standing almost on end even when Ilya puts his hand on her neck. There are a hundred questions tangled up in the syllables of his name. She deserves answers to all of them, of course.

But Ilya is tired. Exhausted down to his bones. "I think it has been close enough to five hours," he says, turning to look into the mirror behind him so he can retighten his neck tie. "We can leave."

As if leaving this house will allow him to leave his thoughts behind. Of course it does not work like this. It has never worked like this. He must try anyway.

"Ilya," Evren whispers much later, curled up beside him in the bed at the mayor's house. The room is dark and warm, the door locked and the building quiet around them.

"Hm?" he murmurs, turning his gaze away from the ceiling to look at her. His hand has found its way to the scruff on her neck, completely without conscious direction from his brain.

She hesitates, and he can feel the way her paws begin to move against the bedspread, kneading at it like she can't help it. "Are you angry with me?" she asks finally, and Ilya blinks, the question knocking him off center.

He sits up. "What?"

"Did I—did I do something wrong?" Evren whispers, moving her head so she can peer up at him without unfurling herself from the tight ball she has contorted herself into. "I tried," she adds, and it breaks Ilya's heart the way she says it. "I'm sorry," she says. "I really tried."

“Oh, *koshechka,”* Ilya says, and he wants to pick her up, move her into his arms the way he’d do for Sima in a heartbeat. But Evren is not Serafima, so he makes himself ask, “Can I—can I hold you?” before he moves.

And Evren pushes herself towards him, like this has been all she was waiting for. Her forepaws hit his chest with enough force to knock him back down against the mattress. It’s impossible to care though, because the moment he wraps his arms around her, she begins to purr. It sounds high-pitched and almost desperate in a way it hasn't in the past, but it’s a purr all the same.

“I’m not,” he says, “I’m not angry, you were perfect. *Koshechka,* you were—you were so brave, Evren, I am very proud of you.”

He says it again because he isn’t sure which language he used the first time and he wants—he needs Evren to understand this. He needs Evren to know. It is not her fault. She has been so brave, so good. It is not her fault that Ilya is his father’s son. It is not her fault that his anger and his fear look so similar.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, voice steady but fingers trembling when he ghosts them over the top of her head.

It is hard like this, to remember everything he knows about fathers and sons. He has his soulmate’s daemon in his arms and his lungs feel lighter and his veins feel full to the brim with ice and freedom. Maybe bravery is an exhaustible resource, but maybe it is contagious too, because he says something his father never taught him. “I was not—I was afraid, *koshechka.* Not angry. I promise.”

Evren nuzzles into his neck, paws pushing and then relaxing against his chest.

“Of what?” she whispers. Not like she doesn’t believe him. Like she’s trying to understand.

Ilya swallows and looks back up at the ceiling. His tongue is heavy and his throat is tight and he’ll give her all the words he can spit past his teeth anyway.

Being caught, he wants to say. It’s the truth. The idea of his father—of one of the ministers, one of the aides, one of the other Russian athletes invited tonight—realizing that Evren did not belong to Ilya fills him with a sticky, corrosive fear. Sima and Evren look different in a handful of little ways; how is Ilya supposed to judge how striking those differences are to someone who has not spent the past twelve years living with one of the snow leopards in question? He’d been scared the entire first night that someone would be able to notice Sima’s absence. That they would know what that meant. That they would connect the dots.

Being cornered, he wants to say. Being made to defend himself, made to fight back. Put on the spot and interrogated. He’d been fucking terrified of it. Of being asked for answers he didn’t have, as if this wasn’t new to him as well. As if he knew what to do in this situation. As if he was *prepared,* as if he wanted this.

As if he wasn’t scared to death at the very idea of it. Having a soulmate. Being understood.

Everything, he wants to say. He wants to say, *I think I am afraid of everything, all the time. It is why I could not move my feet fast enough to chase after Hollander when I realized he left the rink with Sima, because it felt like moving would make it real and I wasn't ready for it to be real. It is why I could not answer his text. It is why I am still thinking about his text, all these days later even after everything has changed. It is why I am still thinking about that last kiss we shared in the stairwell of his apartment. My hands wouldn't stop shaking for hours, afterwards. Is that when Sima got the idea? Is that when she started to suspect?*

I am afraid of failing this, hurting you. Hurting Shane. Of learning to love him. Of needing him. What happens when I start to need him? What happens when I cannot stop loving him? You do not know anything about the way I love, Evren, but it is not always kind and it is never easy to bear. Ask Serafima, she will tell you. My love is the suffocating kind. Even my mother —

"Ilya?" Evren whispers, and there are still a hundred questions wrapped up in the name.

He thinks—probably—it is time to give her answers. As many as he can. While she is here, before the sun rises and he must make his way back to the Village and find Hollander. God, he doesn't know what will happen then, tomorrow. What Hollander has been thinking. What he wants. What Sima has told him.

But he knows this at least.

So he clears his throat and closes his eyes, presses his fingers against the edge of her ear and pets down the fur of her mane, again and again. Ice and snow and sunlight course through him until his throat loosens and his tongue begins to move.

"What you must understand is that I did not realize Serafima and I had two separate heartbeats until I was eight years old," he says, rough and shallow. Small. He starts small. It is the only way he can think to begin. "That was how close I held her."

And then he keeps talking, because there are several more hours til the dawn.

Chapter End Notes

svetlana, on her knees, tearing her hair out, just wants to see her guy happy: hey ilyusha that's a cool internal world you got there, bud. do you wanna make some of that internal world external, buddy?
ilya, thinking 7k-8k of rich internal thoughts wherein he attempts to break down his own motivations, actions, and foreseen consequences while assuming the worst about himself without conferring with anyone else about the conclusions he's drawn:
ilya, scratching his cheek with his thumb and shrugging: no

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> The hardest part to swallow is that—when he accidentally forgets about it, when he just gives himself over to the pace of the hockey or the flow of team practice or the cacophony of team dinners in the Village, when he wakes up in the morning a few minutes before his alarm with a weight of fur and lean muscle pressing down against his chest, when he's falling asleep and his thoughts have gone fuzzy and slow, each tail end of them trailing off into static—it really doesn't feel all that different.

Chapter Notes

> hello, she is here and complete! it was so fun writing out the end of this chapter (and this chapter as the end) because this has been the end i've envisioned for the past month and i'm excited to share it with you guys! it is officially shane's turn in the torment nexus woohoo!!
>
> in this chapter, shane's thoughts are written to be very twisty and unfinished and rough around the edges because i wanted it to feel confusing and unpolished because he's both thinking about this and trying to pin down his emotions while also still avoiding a lot of things and not wanting to look at them straight on. like he's trying and we love him for trying!!! he's also 23 and, like. scared. and he can't even talk to his mom about it. he can't even talk to the physical representation of his own soul about it, cut him some slack here
>
> so. in that vein there are sooooo many em dashes in this guy that even ai chatbots would be like wow missy maybe tone that down a little. so. beware of that (not that ai chatbots would ever ever ever be consulted in my writing process to be clear)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The hardest part to swallow is that—when he accidentally forgets about it, when he just gives himself over to the pace of the hockey or the flow of team practice or the cacophony of team dinners in the Village, when he wakes up in the morning a few minutes before his alarm with a weight of fur and lean muscle pressing down against his chest, when he's falling asleep and his thoughts have gone fuzzy and slow, each tail end of them trailing off into static—it really doesn't feel all that different.

Serafima, that is. Having Serafima next to him in the Canada dorms, on the bench during practice, in the daemon suite of the rink up high before the semi-final game. She feels like

Evren, when Shane lets himself forget that she's not.

It isn't what he expected, is all. He hadn't been expecting to just be able to forget. How can something that has the power to ruin his life not be at the forefront of his mind, all the fucking time?

For the most part, it is. Of course it is. He thinks about it a lot, almost every hour of the day. Ilya Rozanov is his soulmate, definitively. End of story. This category, this column of his life that Shane's never thought much about before, has suddenly been filled out in something more permanent than ink. Ilya Rozanov is his soulmate, and Shane knows this because Rozanov's daemon is by his side and Ren is somewhere out in the world, by Rozanov's.

Of course Shane thinks about it. He's fucking—agonizing over it, pretty much all the time, because it's fucking dangerous and disconcerting and a mindfuck and the biggest risk of Shane's life, every time he's out in public with Sima next to him and a camera turns and gets trained on them.

No one can know. He's pretty sure he and Rozanov are on the same page regarding this, despite the fact that they haven't talked about any of it yet. He's pretty sure Rozanov appreciates exactly what it'll do for their careers and their lives and their futures if people find out that Shane's spent the last few days with the wrong snow leopard on his heels. That Rozanov has too.

No one can know; it would be so easy for someone to find out. So easy for someone to look too closely at Sima, to hear her speak and recognize the strange lilt of her accent. To clock the way that Shane can't stop himself from hesitating before he reaches for her, every damn time. He doesn't mean to, it's just—it's new. It's dangerous. It makes him feel like a fire's been lit in his chest every time he touches her with his bare hands, and he doesn't know how to brace for that kind of impact, doesn't know how to hide the way the blow of it knocks the breath out of his lungs.

It would be so easy for someone to find out. It's only a matter of fucking time, probably, and Shane's so fucking scared about that that he forgets to be scared about Team USA's defensive line until he's halfway through the fucking game, one assist to his name and the gold medal in sight.

But what's worse is when he can forget. When he does. When he's eating breakfast in the lounge and he puts his free hand on top of Sima's head the way he would with Ren. When he's sitting on the floor at the foot of JJ's bed, shoulder to shoulder with his lineys from the team, pushing his feet out until he can push them up under Sima's side. When he's flushed from the 3-1 victory against Team USA and he holds out his arms in the locker room so Sima can jump into them so powerfully that both of them almost go careening into his stall.

It's worse when it's easy, because he'd thought it'd be hard the whole time and he doesn't know what to do with it when it's hard but he definitely doesn't know what to do with it when it feels natural. When being Ilya Rozaov's soulmate feels—natural. Easy as breathing. Easy as running his fingers through the tufts of fur behind Ren's ears. Easy, simple. World continues on. Shane hadn't been sure it would, when he'd ended the call with Ilya, Sima on the bus seat next to him.

He doesn't know what to do with that either.

"What do you think they're doing," he murmurs, so early in the morning it's probably criminal to be up at all. The room is quiet for once, Tanner and the deafening snores of his wild hog daemon having crashed with Fletcher despite all the ways that broke the curfew. Gray light seeps in through the cracks in the curtain, and it turns the edges of Sima's fur into the soft blue of deep ice.

"I do not know," she says, scratchy. She butts her head up against his shoulder. "Sleeping. Probably."

Shane blinks up at the ceiling and lets out a breath. It's not the first time he's asked her this question over the past few days, and it's not the first time she's refused to engage with the thought experiment.

What do you think they're doing right now? after he'd climbed into bed two nights ago, Tanner in the shower and his daemon asleep in the corner of the room.

I don't know, Shane. I think Evren must be telling Ilyusha your most embarrassing childhood stories, Serafima had said, like just the idea of that wasn't enough to keep him from sleep for the next handful of hours.

What do you think they're doing? quietly, on the bus back from practice the morning of the semi-finals game.

I don't know, Shane. Looking at wedding rings, Serafima had murmured before she'd let out a gravelly, choking huff of laugh at the look on his face.

What do you think they're doing? whispered into the fur of her neck late last night after the movie in JJ's room had run its course and he'd walked back to his room and laid in bed alone except for the soul in his arms that wasn't his but felt so close to it that his mind was getting confused. *Like. Right now.*

I do not know, kotik, Sima had said, curled up within the tight band of Shane's arms, tail resting across her front paws.

Guess, Shane'd said because he wasn't above pleading when it came to Ilya Rozanov, so long as Ilya Rozanov was not around to hear him. *Just—what do you think?*

And Sima had said, slow and syrupy with sleep, *I think Ilyusha is probably saying something very stupid that he thinks is the truth, and Evren is trying to decide if she believes him or not.*

Shane hadn't said anything after that; neither had Sima. But now they're both awake and the early dawn of the Sochi morning cannot be kept from the room. Sparks jump along his veins like campfire wood crackling up from every part of skin that brushes up against Sima's fur.

Today, Rozanov will be back in the Village with Ren, and Shane will meet up with him somewhere. They'll trade their daemons again and then Rozanov will fly back to the States, probably, and Shane will get ready to face down Switzerland for Olympic gold tomorrow.

Beside him, Serafima shifts and then gets to her paws, stretching out the length of her spine and turning to face Shane completely. One of her ears twitches down. The fur on the left side of her face is flattened from sleep, the way a human's face holds onto pillow cases for the first few minutes after waking up. "I think is not the right question," she says, batting her paw against Shane's chest even though he's already listening. "Is not what they are doing that matters, *kotik."*

Shane blinks at her and thinks about all the things Evren could be telling Rozanov and all the things he could be saying to her in return. "I mean, I think it matters a little bit," he says.

"No," Serafima insists, final. "What *you* will do is most important question right now, *kotik.* What you want to do. Is morning now. Is over soon."

"That's not fair," Shane says, putting his arm over his eyes so he doesn't have to look directly at her. He doesn't pretend to not know what she means though. Of course he does. "What about—Ilya? What about what he's decided to do?"

He trips over the name in his mouth as it comes out. It feels wrong to call him *Rozanov,* like, to the guy's *soul,* so he's been trying to use his first name with Serafima. He's scared shitless he's gonna slip up, accidentally say *Ilya* to Rozanov and have to, like, walk into the ocean or something, but it's whatever. Sima's right. This whole thing is over soon.

Shane's been irrevocably changed by it, of course, can't pretend his life doesn't look different, hasn't been thrown off the rails by the last few days, but. It'll be…easier. With Ren back. It'll be easier to sort through his emotions with Ren next to him, figure out what parts of the heaviness in his chest stem from his anxiety over someone realizing who Serafima belongs to, and what parts of his fear are just—his.

Permanently.

"I know what Ilyusha will want to do," Serafima tells him, with a very dramatic sigh. A beat later, he lets out a startled *oomph* as her weight lands squarely on his chest. "I am hoping you are less of idiot," she says, and Shane raises his arm so he can peek down at her form.

"What does Ilya want?" he asks with little hope of getting an actual answer from her. This is another thought experiment Serafima refuses to engage in. Every time Shane asks her about Ilya—a story from his childhood, an anecdote about Moscow, a clarification about a rumor he'd heard from Boston—she's said that same thing. *Ask him yourself.*

Fucking—useless. Shane's spent almost two days with Ilya Rozanov's soul curled up in his lap and yet he doesn't know anything more about the man than he did before the Olympics. It's frustrating as hell; it's not even that surprising.

"You are seeing him today," Serafima says like Shane knew she would. "Ask him this."

"Ugh," Shane says and lets his arm cover his eyes again. "I can't just—decide for the both of us, Sima, that's not how this works. It's not as simple as—me knowing what I want."

“Hm,” Sima rumbles, which is her version of a purr. It sounds half-like a growl and Shane thinks—when this is over, he will miss it. Her. “But deciding for yourself is first step, no?”

He opens his mouth, instinctive denial ready, but before he can say anything, the phone on the bedside begins to ring. Before he even gets his hands on it, he knows who’s calling. Who it has to be.

Incoming Call: Lily.

“Think about it,” Sima tells him, nudging the back of his hand with the tip of her nose. *I have been,* he doesn’t say because he can’t imagine the words coming out as anything other than a whine.

But seriously—what does she think he’s been doing other than thinking about it? He can’t fucking escape it. How can he focus on anything else when Ilya Rozaov’s daemon has been within eyesight for the past forty hours, minus the length of one hockey game, feeling like *his?*

The problem is. Like, the heart of the problem—deep at its center, everything else stripped away for a second, peeled back til the bone is visible—is, well.

Sometimes Shane still wonders what it would have been like if Evren settled into a form that was too big for ice hockey. He thinks about it and he isn’t—sure. Can’t decide how he would have felt with an—an elephant as a daemon. A horse. Likes to think he would have figured out how to keep loving Ren, even if it meant losing hockey, but he can taste the lie on his tongue every time he holds the words in his mouth.

Ice hockey has always been the greatest love of his life. Everything he has ever worked for, everything that he’s dreamed of, every injury his body’s sustained, every family obligation he’s missed and made his parents miss for the sake of it: it’s only worth it for as long as he can play, as long as he can hold onto hockey. Otherwise, it’s just—CTE, maybe and a knee that aches when it rains and a grandmother he wasn’t there to bury because his coach told him that there’d be MLH scouts at the tournament, watching him. Lose hockey and his entire life goes up in flames. A tailspin of destruction he isn’t sure he has the tools to survive.

He’d have given up anything for hockey, back then when Evren was still unsettled. Any part of himself he could toss overboard to lighten the load. He would have given up more, if he’s being honest with himself, and he’s already—well. He’s already given up a lot.

And it’s all been fucking worth it, hasn’t it, because he’s twenty-three now and on Team Canada, at the *Olympics,* gold medal just out of sight but his already, hopefully. He’s twenty-three and the Captain of the Montreal Metros. The Calder’s got his name on it. The Cup—one day, it’ll say *Shane Hollander* too. And beyond that, he’s playing this game he loves every day. He’s still in the locker room, still out on the rink, putting in his hours, loving ice hockey with everything he’s got.

He’d been so fucking worried. That Evren would settle into a form that would make the scouts hum amongst themselves and jot down notes on their clipboards. So worried he’d be

barred from hockey, which has always been the thing he loves most, because of something he couldn't change about himself. The one thing he didn't get a say in, the one thing he couldn't control or hide away.

He'd have changed—so much about himself. He has. For hockey. To be good enough for it. People like to joke, like to say, *oh she'll never love you back, bro,* but Shane's always thought that was stupid.

Obviously the people who said it have never been first out on the ice after the zamboni's smoothed it over. Obviously they've never drawn back and then slammed the puck past a goalie's glove, seconds before the final buzzer. Obviously they've never deked a puck around two defensemen, kept control of it on a breakaway, skated so fast and so hard that the entire game'd bent to their will.

Obviously they'd never loved hockey enough to make that joke in the first place. People who did, people like Shane, knew it didn't matter if hockey loved them back. They loved it anyway. They gave it everything they had. Compromised every line, every part of themselves someone else deemed necessary to give up, hide away, change.

So what if he—so what if he never had the college experience, the awkward moments of fumbling around with someone in the shadows of a house party that everyone's pretending to enjoy? So what if he never let himself think about—soulmates, about having one, about testing it, about *trying?* So what if—so what if he watches romantic comedies with the team and finds himself getting hung up on and aching at some of the things depicted? So what if no one's ever stroked his hair away from his forehead and cleaned him up after sex, bought him flowers just to see him smile, stolen his sweatshirt because it fit better on them than their own clothes did?

He'd never wanted—like, dating girls who could do that stuff would come later. After. After the hockey, because the hockey came first. And sure, everyone else on his team was capable of balancing women and their careers, but Shane just. Shane's just never liked the idea of a girlfriend enough to try it.

And that was the only option he had. Women. He couldn't—

Men weren't—

A relationship with another guy wasn't—

He's given things up for hockey, obviously. Everyone has. All the fanatic players, sure, but also the ones who were more easy-going about it. They all led the same lives, had the same sort of schedule. They all gave things up. They all skipped holidays with their families, they all ate their weight in chicken pesto pasta even when they were sick to the backs of their teeth of it. They all knew a guy who knew another guy who had a friend in peewee who had so much promise until there was something about himself he couldn't change, an inconvenience so big he couldn't hide it away, and then no coach past the high school level wanted him.

Shane wasn't that guy. Ren settled when he was fourteen years old, and she settled into the form of a snow leopard. Big cat, but on the small enough side that his world kept spinning

and he got to keep hockey. Keep playing. Keep getting knocked to the boards, keep getting teeth knocked out, keep getting blood on the ice. Keep slicing off pieces of himself for the sake of the game, like when a cute barista with a piercing through his lip had slid his cappuccino over the counter with his number written along the side, and Shane had thrown the cup out the second he'd left the store and then never gone back just in case he'd been—sending signals or something he hadn't known how to shut down.

When you love someone so much you're stupid with it, nothing they could ask you to do is too much. It's not just a game. Hockey's a lifestyle choice. It's all Shane knows. It's always been everything he wants.

He imagines the feeling's similar to how some sailors must have felt, back in the day, the ones who climbed aboard tall-masted ships to set sail for places they'd never even seen before. Who spent most of their life on the ocean, only ever came to port when they had to and never stayed for long. *My lady is the sea* and all that jazz. That's Shane, just with hockey. There's a whole life those sailors gave up for the one they got in return, but that's just how love works when it's bigger than yourself. When it's selfish and demanding and all-consuming.

It's just—Shane had thought he'd passed. That he was done, hurdle disappearing behind him. Evren settled and she was small enough that all the coaches and MLH staff that'd been interested in him stayed interested.

And everything else that would make them hesitate—flip shut their little notebooks—leave the stands—-that was all in Shane's control. Things he could give up. Hide away. Cut off or stuff so deeply inside he'd forget about it until years and years after his retirement.

He'd thought he was done. That hockey was his, that he'd made the cut, fooled everyone into letting him play. That if he ever had to stop early it would be because of something external. A bad blow to the head, a fucked up back, a blown out knee. Something that happened to him, not something that came from him internally.

Except.

Except now he has a soulmate and his soulmate is a guy. Another hockey player, at least, one who must know as much about giving things up as Shane does. But it's still—it's just not in his control. It's not what he wants, what he'd envisioned. He hasn't wanted to find his soulmate since the moment he admitted to himself, in the dead of night, Ren asleep on his legs and his apartment quiet around him, that his soulmate would—it'd probably be—there was a non-zero chance, that is. That his soulmate would be a man.

And he doesn't even know, still, sometimes, when he thinks about it, if he'd have forgiven Ren if she'd settled into a form that forced him to give up hockey. And she hadn't, thank Christ, but he'd thought that was the end of it, if he just kept everything else carefully managed and pruned back. And now he has a soulmate, who is a man, who is Ilya Rozanov.

Shane's never loved anything more than he loves hockey. He's never *wanted* anything more than he wants to play hockey. That hasn't changed, just because apparently he and Rozanov are soulmates.

It's just dangerous. It's a risk. It's something else to be hidden away, something *big.* If someone finds out, if the league finds out, if Shane's team finds out—Shane doesn't know what would happen.

But it feels—

Shane can't decide.

It feels a little bit like how sailors must have felt back then, when people thought there was an edge of the world they could fall off of and they'd boarded the boat anyway. Shane thinks about Rozanov, about soulmates, and his stomach feels like it's dropping away from him, off that edge, while the fear races up through his chest and threatens to consume him.

But the idea of it, of soulmates, of *Ilya* the way Serafima speaks of *Ilya,* feels—also, a little bit, in the heart of him—like how a sailor could have felt seeing the faint outline of land after months at sea. Like a—like a yearning sensation that aches so much it's almost physically painful.

It's not seeing land and recognizing it as *oh, home. That's home.* It's—more like loving the ocean with everything you have, catching sight of land off in the distance and thinking, *oh. You could have been home for me. If I were different or if you were.*

Ilya tells him to meet them on the beach, so Shane dresses up in jogging clothes and catches the first bus from the team dorms to the Olympic campus. It's almost seven in the morning now and the Village is already bustling with people. Not necessarily athletes, but all the people that surround them during events like this. The pressers, the events staff, the bushy-tailed fans. The agents, the officials, the set-up crew, the street cleaners.

The knot of people loosens the further that they walk away from the main circle of stadiums and rinks that make up the Village. It's cold outside, gray and silver, the sun making a half-hearted attempt to pierce through the blanket of clouds before seemingly deciding it's not yet worth the effort. The beach is deserted, a pale scratch of sand and stone running into a writhing mass of dark water.

Shane stops along the line of the concrete seawall, at the very edge of the steps leading down to the beach. Sima stops with him, tilting her head up to stare at him with eyes that are too knowing. The salt smell is strong. The tide is going out, Shane thinks, though it could just as easily be coming in. The line of ocean water is receding into itself or it is coming back. Distance can be measured like that sometimes, Shane knows. Not by how close or far away you are, but by the direction you choose to go next.

"Why did you do it?" he asks, looking away from Sima. He leans his arms up against the rough concrete of the low seawall and stares out over the ocean. It's not exactly windy, but there's a chill in the air that shifts against itself and cuts deep across the exposed skin of his face and his hands.

Further along the beach, at the very edge of the area the public is allowed to go, there is a figure, standing alone along the line of the surf.

Not alone. There's another figure, a four-legged silhouette that comes up to his knees, standing next to him.

"Evren wouldn't have thought of it," Shane says, almost to himself. Sima is quiet next to him. Maybe she is thinking about her answer. Maybe she is thinking about not answering at all. "She definitely wouldn't have done it. Me and her, we're not…we don't take risks like that."

They're cowards, is what he doesn't say. Shane is a coward. He has spent too many years hiding to be anything else.

"She did though," Sima points out gently. She has been so—stubborn, this whole time. But so gentle too. So overflowing with affection. "Maybe she did not think of testing your connection, but she did not need any convincing either."

Shane shakes his head, and his hands tighten around each other. He thinks, probably, Evren likes Serafima enough to do whatever she suggests. Simple as that. They're both idiots, then, when it comes to Ilya Rozanov and his soul. At least there's consistency there.

"Sima," he says. "Why?"

Sima doesn't say anything immediately, but he thinks that is just the kind of daemon she is. She weighs her options, she weighs her words.

In front of them, the surf crashes up against the rocky beach and then withdraws. The water must be freezing. Mid-February in Russia, it can't be anything else but icy cold. Shane looks out at the horizon and wonders how long it would take to reach land on the other side. He's never been much of a swimmer. Or a sailor. He'd probably drown first.

"Love for me," Sima says finally, slowly. "It has always been about protection, *kotik.* And there are some things I cannot—that he will not allow me to—" she breaks off, lets out something that is half growl, half sigh. "I thought maybe a soulmate would have more success." She pauses, huffs, and adds, "at least they would have opposable thumbs. More weight to hold him down."

Shane blinks down at the concrete beneath his hands. He feels, wildly, like crying. Or laughing. "What, you think he'd let me *protect* him? He doesn't even want me to talk to him. He doesn't even—" *stay.*

Which isn't even fair, really, because Shane's never wanted Rozanov to linger post-hookup either. That's not what they do, that's not within the bounds of what he's allowed himself when it comes to fucking Ilya Rozanov.

If hockey is the great love of his life, Rozanov is like his dirty little secret. An extramarital affair he indulges in because he knows, deep in the heart of him, that his wife will never love him back and even though he knows he shouldn't—even though he knows his entire life could come crumbling down if the wrong person looks at his text messages even just one time, he can't bring himself to stop because—it's nice. To be held.

It's just—the movie last night. It'd been a romantic comedy because Jordie was missing his soulmate even if he had her raccoon daemon curled up in his lap, and the male lead had tucked a strand of hair behind the woman's ear and Shane's heart had felt tender all over. Tenderized; pounded thin. Nothing sweet about it.

He'd thought, quick, before he could stop himself: *I will never have that. I will have hockey instead and sometimes Rozanov will fuck me in a hotel room and that will be enough. But Ilya Rozanov will never touch me like that. Neither of us is capable of it. Me, holding still. Him, being gentle.*

So it's just—it's a little funny. That Serafima wanted so badly for Rozanov's soulmate to be *Shane,* as if that would mean anything. As if Rozanov hadn't already told him to get lost, that they were nothing, only a few minutes before their daemons traded humans. Protect him? Protect *Rozanov?* Rozanov wouldn't even answer Shane's stupid fucking text.

"Shane," Serafima says, and she pushes her head up against his thigh, insistent and solid. He wants to drop his hand down and stroke along her fur, but he knows it'll make him feel warmed through, just touching her, and he can't have that. Not now. Not when he is going to have to give her back soon, in a matter of minutes, and he may never feel that warmth again.

Depending.

"I'm just saying," Shane mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face instead. "I don't think being soulmates necessarily means…" he trails off, can't figure out how to end the sentence. Truth is, he doesn't know what it means, being soulmates. What Ilya will let it mean. What Shane can survive it meaning. What hockey and secrecy and shame will whittle it down to. The great love of your life is supposed to be your soulmate, bar none. No one tells you what to do if you find your soulmate after you've already committed your life to something else that you love with everything you have, bar fucking down.

"I have spent four years watching him reach for you, Shane," Serafima says quietly. "I grew tired of pretending that meant nothing. I know him too well for this. I had to see. I wanted it to be true."

"Why?" The word bursts out of him before he can stop it, but if she wanted truth, then there's not much more he can offer her than the stretched thin and razor sharp word. *Why. Why. Why did you want it to be true. Why does he reach for me. Why do you make it sound like that's important when it's always just been sex?*

"Because," Serafima murmurs, rusty and honest and familiar. Already so familiar. "I have also spent four years watching the way you love, *kotik.* And I am a selfish daemon tied to a selfless human. I want Ilyusha to have the best, even if he does not want this also."

Shane blinks, looks down at her and then away before she can begin to pinpoint whatever emotions are splashed across his face. "You could have been wrong," he tells her weakly, and she preens, ears flicking down and eyes half-closed in the self-satisfaction of someone who is going to bring this up for the foreseeable future.

“But I was not,” she says, and she’s never sounded more like Rozanov—Ilya. She’s never sounded more like Ilya and Shane feels something in his chest ease at that, even if it doesn’t make sense.

“Guess not,” he tells her, and his eyes catch on the figure further down the beach. Rozanov. Of course it’s Rozanov. It’s always been—

“Shane,” Sima says, and she bumps her head up against his knee. Shane moves, descending down the steps to the black pebbles of the beach. *“Shane,”* Sima says, insistent now. Unhappy, maybe. Just as stubborn as Shane is. As Ilya is.

But Shane doesn’t want to do this. Do, like. Goodbyes and shit. Doesn’t want to feel that golden-fire-safety warmth rush through his veins if this is going to be the last time he gets it. And they’re—no one’s around, but they’re in public now. Someone could see. Someone could know.

“You can’t—when you see him,” Shane trips over his words, fumbles them. They’re heavy in his mouth, tied together in strange ways. “You can’t touch him or anything, you have to—I don’t know. Do something with Evren first. In case. Just in case someone’s….”

Sima lets him trail off without interrupting, lets the silence linger for a moment before she sighs and says, “I know, Shane,” like he’s disappointed her. Which is just—such a shit feeling that he can’t even focus on the way sand gets into his shoes the moment he leaves the safety of the seawall stairs.

They pick their way across the beach slowly but steadily until the moment that the figure at its end solidifies into Rozanov, recognizably. He’s wearing a long black coat that’s probably way too expensive for the fucking beach. A toque’s pulled down over his hair, gray like the ocean and the sky, but loose blond curls are sticking out around his ears and against his forehead, shifting against the wind. The collar of the coat is pulled up and his gloved hand is holding a half-finished cigarette that he lets fall to the ground and die against the sand the moment he sees Shane approaching.

Sima tenses for a second and then bounds forward with a growl, a bullet released from its chamber as she races towards Ilya and then past him, colliding with Evren and rolling the both of them over into the wet sand and sea spray.

Shane winces even as Evren yowls back. It’s a playful sound, one that’s paired with her scrambling to climb on top of Sima. Weight and size, probably, she’s bigger, but Sima’s wily and slippery. It’s not an easy fight and they tangle together in the sand in a way that would look violent if Shane couldn’t feel the joy radiating from some part of his soul. The joy that could be Ren’s but could just as easily be Sima’s.

“Hey,” he tells Rozanov when they’re within a few feet of each other. “Uh, Ilya.”

Rozanov’s mouth twitches, dimple flashing for a moment before he smoothes his face out, expressionless again. His eyes are very green today. “You sound like you’re in pain,” he says. *“Shane.”*

Ilya's tongue wraps carefully around the word. It's not as if he makes it sound easy either, saying it. Shane's name, without the *Hollander* tagged onto the end, rings out strange in Ilya's voice. Maybe he doesn't sound like he's in *pain* or anything, but he doesn't sound normal either. He sounds like—like a delivery driver, handling a package labeled FRAGILE without knowing what's inside it. Like he's exercising heretofore unknown levels of caution and there's still a fifty-fifty chance he's gonna fuck it up.

Fifty-fifty's a pretty good ratio, if you think about it for long enough. If you come out of the gate expecting worse. It's all about managing expectations.

"You can call me Rozanov," Rozanov says, sounding magnanimous. "I do not mind."

Shane purses his lips. "Don't tell me what to do, *Ilya,"* he mutters, which is the kind of stupid teenage boy shit Ilya Rozanov drags out of him sometimes, but it's not like he can just go around calling his soulmate by his last name for the rest of his life. Shane's got no idea what they're doing, where this is going, what's going to happen, but that feels like a pretty good starting point. Serafima's Ilyusha is Shane's Rozanov; but Shane can compromise. He can meet in the middle. He can call Ilya Rozanov *Ilya.*

Ilya's lips twitch again and he looks away from Shane, turning his body to face the ocean. They're standing just far enough back from the tide that the water can't reach them. Shane shoves his hands in his pockets and glances towards their daemons. Evren's chasing Serafima through the surf, fast and powerful, no holds barred, the way she can never play with other daemons.

A perfect match. When he looks at their daemons, he can believe it.

When he looks at Ilya, though—

Beside him, Ilya kicks at the pebbles beneath his feet, scuffing along the edge of his discarded cigarette. Shane frowns automatically at the litter, but it's not like there's a trash can nearby. And he figures bitching at Ilya about smoking isn't the best way to start the conversation they probably need to have.

Not that he knows a better way to start it.

Not that he knows what he wants to say either.

He said *Ilya* at least. That feels like progress.

"I am not going to hold you to it," Ilya says abruptly, eyes fixed out onto the horizon. His body is a long line of tension, back too perfectly straight, shoulders raised, jaw tight.

"What?"

"Being—what we are. I am not going to…hold you to it. If you want others. If you want time. If you don't want…."

Ilya trails off, inclines his head. His hands are tucked neatly into the pockets of his fancy coat. His expression is cold, stiff, giving away nothing.

Shane stares at the side of his face, but it's like trying to glare through a brick wall to see what's going on inside the house for how far it gets him.

"Is that what you want?" he asks, and Ilya shrugs. One shoulder, up and then down, a jerking movement like someone else is controlling his body.

Ren's managed to pin Sima down against the sandy beach, but she doesn't get further than a lick across her muzzle before Sima's up again and rolling her back onto the ground. The water rushes around them and then recedes.

The tide is coming in, Shane thinks. At least, the ocean feels like it's getting closer even though Shane hasn't moved his feet. Funny how some things can be inevitable and some things can be avoided if no one holds you to them.

He lets the words form in his head. *Ilya Rozanov is my soulmate,* he thinks. He lets them settle down on his tongue, thinks about saying them. *You are my soulmate.*

They are very far from the ice rink. If he says the words, very quietly, very quickly, maybe hockey will not hear them. Maybe they can just be for Ilya's ears alone. *You are my soulmate. I think that means something we can't ignore.*

"Are you—" Shane starts and then stops. The question is half-formed in his mind and ugly. He wants to ask Ilya if he's giving Shane an out because he thinks that's what Shane wants or if it's what Ilya wants. If he's, like, disappointed in it being Shane. If he wouldn't want to ignore the soulmate thing if anyone else had been the one he could trade daemons with.

It's too heavy of a question. Too transparent.

He thinks about Ilya sleeping with someone else, now after they know, and he feels a sickening lurch in his stomach like he's just found the edge of the world and tumbled over it, ship and all. Stupid and selfish. Ilya can sleep with whoever he wants, if he wants *others.*

He swallows, changes course.

"—okay?" he asks, and Ilya's head snaps to look at him, thick eyebrows furrowed down over his face.

"What?"

Shane shrugs and stuffs his hands further into his pockets. He looks away and then back because he can't help it. If Ilya were just a little less magnetic, Shane's life would probably be a thousand times easier. "Are you okay?" he asks again. "Sima sort of said, like. It might have been rough. These last few days?"

Ilya's jaw clenches, teeth grinding together and lips tightening into a thin white line as he digests the words. "What else did Serafima say?" he demands, eyes dark and attention fixed fully on Shane.

She said you were selfless, Shane doesn't say. *She said she wanted you to have the best. She said it like she thought that was me, even though I have no idea where she got that fucking impression. She said you were probably saying stupid things to Evren that you believed were true. Is that one of them? Saying that. About others, about time. Is that something stupid? Is that something you believe?*

"Nothing, man," Shane says. He holds his hands out, palm up when Ilya narrows his eyes at him. "Seriously, nothing. I kept asking things, but she kept telling me to just—ask you instead. She wouldn't even tell me your favorite fucking color."

Ilya grunts. He digs out a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and flips it open before he shuts it just as quickly with a frustrated curl of his mouth. The pack goes back into his coat and Ilya glares out at the sea.

"Orange," he says finally, like the word's been ripped out of him. Like it's his deepest fucking secret, his favorite color.

"Huh," Shane says.

"What," Ilya snaps, turning his glare back onto Shane, who shrugs.

"Nothing, nothing," he says. "It's just—kinda ugly, isn't it?" and he doesn't even know why he says it. Has fucking nothing against the color, it's just—they can do this. He knows how to do this, how to get under Ilya's skin and prod at him, make him look at him the way he's looking now, like Shane's the most interesting thing in the room, like he can't believe what he's seeing.

Arguing with Ilya Rozanov, that's something Shane knows how to do. Everything else—it's all murky, unclear instructions, unknowns and uncertainties. But this? They can do this. This is common ground.

"At least it is not *green,"* Ilya says, voice sharp but the tension in his shoulders unspooling because Shane's right. Shane made the right play. They can do this. They know how to do this, at least.

"Green's great," Shane tells him happily. "Color of the trees and shit. Eco friendly."

It makes Ilya scoff, which makes Shane grin harder.

"You been watching my interviews? That's sweet," Shane adds, pushing for more. Getting greedy with it. Getting hungry.

Ilya's face does something complicated. It cracks open for a second. His hand reaches for his cigarettes again, but he stops himself before he can draw out the pack.

"Know thy enemy," Ilya finally says, which—it's so fucking funny, given the context, given their daemons, given the last few days and all the revelations they've had that Shane has to bite down on his lip to stop himself from laughing.

When he huffs out a small laugh anyway, unstoppable, uncontrollable, Ilya's body relaxes. Just slightly.

Shane clears his throat, feeling strangely charitable when faced with this version of Ilya. The one who can make him laugh. "You can smoke, if you want," he hears himself say, glancing down at the way Ilya's fingers are hovering near his pocket. Shane doesn't know exactly how it works, hasn't ever gotten into the habit himself for all the obvious reasons, but he knows some people smoke in stressful situations to take the edge off them. He can give that to Ilya, he thinks, if Ilya needs it.

"No," Ilya says, voice and spine suddenly stiff again. Fucking—one step forward, five steps back sort of thing. He hesitates, and Sima's loud, playful growl fills the silence between them, mixes and blends with the sound of the waves and Evren's responding chirp. "Is bad for you," he finally adds.

Shane blinks. Bites his tongue. Waits.

Is rewarded, a handful of seconds later, when Ilya says, begrudgingly, "The smoke. Is bad for others, too. Secondhand. And you play for gold tomorrow."

Shane stares. Ilya's back to glaring out to the horizon again, hands returned in his coat pockets and shoulders raised like he never dropped them at all. The tension's back in the air between them like it never left. It's like pulling fucking teeth, trying to talk to this guy. Like trying to solve an encrypted message, but the cipher keeps changing.

It's stupid, obviously. Ilya's refusal is fucking stupid. One cigarette he isn't even smoking isn't going to kill Shane and it's not going to, like, damage his lungs before the gold medal game tomorrow either. Especially not when they're on a fucking beach in the open air like this. The risks are so low they're negligible, and that's coming from *Shane.*

Still, it's—stupid. But it's sweet, too. It's—

It reminds him of Sima, looking up at him from the seawall steps and telling him that the only kind of love she knows is the kind that's synonymous with protection. She must have had a teacher, he realizes like a punch to the gut. She must have learned that from watching someone else.

For Shane, his love has always been about honesty. Who he can share himself with. Who gets to see what parts of him and who doesn't. It's a survival thing, maybe. It's the result of so many years trying to hide bits of himself from everyone so he doesn't lose the thing he loves the most.

He has never been under any delusion about this: he knows hockey will never accept all of him. He's never spent much time thinking about if anyone else would. It never seemed important. Or, it had, but it'd always seemed like—like that sliver of land a sailor who has married the ocean sees from the crow's nest. Landfall, not homecoming. Someone else's home but not his.

You are my soulmate, he thinks. *Ilya Rozanov. You are my soulmate. I want that to mean something. That is the truth. I don't care if it doesn't have to mean anything. I want to show you every part of me, maybe. Some day. If you think you could stand to see them. I want it to mean something, being soulmates. Even though it scares me. I want you to hold me to it. I want us to keep this promise something else made for us in the first place. I know that's not fair. But if you're really as selfless as your daemon made you sound, then I can be greedy enough for the both of us. I'll hold you to this too, if you let me. I can hold you, too. If you let me.*

"Ilya," he says, and Ilya's eyes are on him again. Under the weight of his gaze, he hesitates. He should probably start—like, figuring out what he wants to say before he opens his mouth. That would probably be a good thing to start doing.

"Shane," Ilya says, arching an eyebrow and matching his tone because he's an asshole who might never give Shane anything more than exactly what Shane gives him first. Or maybe he will. Maybe he'll give Shane a lot. Inches and miles and anything he asks for.

Shane doesn't know. Shane knows what it's like to kiss Ilya Rozanov and desire him and feel his exhales, wet and hot against his skin, but he doesn't know what it's like to be Ilya Rozanov's soulmate when they both know the truth. Maybe there are no balance sheets involved, maybe no one's keeping score. Maybe it won't matter who texts who last, who forgets to text back, who breaks first and apologizes, who holds out their hand for the other to accept.

Maybe they both give and they both take, push towards and pull away, both at the same time depending on the day.

"I want it to mean something," he says, very, very quietly. So quietly the roar of the ocean almost steals his words right out of the air. "You're my soulmate."

Ilya looks at him fully. His eyes are so green that Shane thinks stupidly that if green weren't already his favorite color, it would be by now. "I am," he says. Agrees. Promises. He's not smiling, but there's—a strange, tender joy in Shane's chest that feels new. Not his, not Ren's, not even Sima's.

The tide is coming in, Shane thinks. But it could just as easily be going out. It's a simple matter of perspective, really, if you think about it. Push away, pull to. Push towards, pull away.

"Does that scare you?" Shane asks, and he thinks—if he were braver, he'd reach out across the space between them and brush his fingers over the bare skin of Ilya's neck. He wants to know how it'll feel to touch Ilya now that he knows. Now that he's touched Sima. Will it feel just as warm?

Then he thinks—hasn't it always, a little bit? Hasn't it always made him feel warm and golden, Ilya's touch? His attention?

"So much," Ilya whispers like a confession, and Shane grins at him before he can bite it back. "And you?"

“Yeah,” Shane says honestly, swallowing down a burst of laughter that bleeds into his words all the same. “Fucking—scared shitless. Fuck.”

Ilya nods and ducks his head. He’s smiling too. It makes him look five years younger. It makes him look like a different person. Still beautiful, still so fucking gorgeous. But… different. Transformed.

The happiness in Shane’s chest shifts, crests like a tidal wave. Some of it is his, he thinks. Some of it stems from this moment, from the relief of it, from just—not being left alone in this.

In front of them, Sima tackles Ren into the surf with a yowl that scares a seagull off the water with a warning screech. It takes flight, beating its wings up into the wind and letting it buffer it through the sky. At the edge of the tide, it’s impossible to tell which daemon is which as they tussle against the sand, a blurry mess of identical shades of black and gray and white, tumbling round and round again until it is like they blend into one eight-legged, two-tailed creature before Shane’s very eyes.

Beside him, Ilya shifts and brushes their shoulders together. It’s such a small movement that it could almost be an accident except for all the ways Shane knows it is not.

“Ugh,” Shane mutters as he watches Evren try to shake her fur dry again. “You know, we just needed you to switch back. You didn’t need to wrestle in the water.”

Evren tosses her head and tries to shake herself again, but her pelt isn't a dog’s pelt. It’s way too thick for such a trick to be effective. Shane’s going to have to spend either the rest of the day hearing her bitch and moan about her fur being wet or he’s going to have to spend the next two hours drying it with Fletcher’s shitty hair dryer.

“Seriously,” Shane says, grimacing down at his daemon, who rubs up against the leg of his joggers to smear the remnants of sand and salt water against him too.

The Village is bustling now, full of athletes and their minders and their fans and everyone else. It’s later in the morning, easily nine now, and Shane can feel his phone buzzing against his leg as Team Canada wakes up. The only thing they have on today is afternoon skate, something simple to keep them focused and game-ready for tomorrow. Shane has time to grab a coffee, get back to the hotel, dry Ren off if he’s feeling kind, and probably meet up with some of the guys to see another event before then.

They’d left Ilya and Serafima on the beach fifteen minutes ago, and Shane’s only glanced down at the daemon by his feet to make sure it’s the correct one a handful of times since then, which he thinks is demonstrating incredible self-control.

Fool him once, etcetera.

“You are so boring,” Ren declares and she rubs up against him again with a flick of her tail.

“Ugh,” Shane says, but he can’t stop himself from smiling. Can’t bite it back, can’t stop the way the harmless joy bubbling up in his chest spreads itself across his voice and over his face. “You’re starting to sound like him.”

Evren purrs like this is a compliment.

Maybe it is.

A line’s already forming in front of the Village’s largest coffeeshop, so Shane dutifully shuffles to the back of it and stands with his hands in his pocket as he waits.

They’d agreed on Boston, in March. They’d see each other then. Roughly a month away. That gives them time they can both use to get their heads on straight and their thoughts in order.

Being in Russia grates on Ilya, wears him down—Shane can see it now that someone’s told him what to look for. He needs to catch a flight home, recover. Sleep.

Shane doesn’t have the same reaction towards Russia, obviously, but he needs time too. Without the Olympics and all the attention that comes with being a member of Team Canada. It’s impossible to be here, in Sochi, in the Village, without thinking about hockey. And he can’t think about hockey if he wants to honestly examine this soulmate shit. They’re separate things. They need to be—separate things.

And, sure—Ilya is going to go back to Boston, but he’s still going to be Russian, with a Russian family tying him to this country. And sure, Shane is going to fly back to Montreal, but he’s still going to be thrown back into the regular hockey season. Neither of them can actually separate themselves from the things that they love, even when the things they love hurt them. Neither of them is lucky enough for that.

The best they can do is Boston, after the Raiders-Metro game in March. Shane has no idea if that’ll be enough, if their best will be worth shit when stacked up against everything else, but it’s a start. Before this morning, he hadn’t had Boston in March.

A week ago, he hadn’t even known to want it.

The line in front of him inches forward, and he moves with it. When his phone buzzes in his pocket, he pulls it out to read the messages from his team. But the very first one is not from anyone on Team Canada.

It’s from Lily.

Shane opens up the message thread with a furrowed brow, casting a sideways glance down at his daemon just to make sure it’s really, actually Evren at his feet.

Evren blinks up at him innocently.

Hi, yes. Thank you for reaching out. Ilya has sent. *I am feeling okay.*

Shane has to read the text three times before he sees his own text above it and everything clicks into place. He bites his lip so he doesn't laugh out loud at his phone screen, feeling like a giddy teenager with his very first crush when he realizes that this is Ilya answering the text he'd sent two days ago, before he'd approached him at the rink. Before the daemon swap. Before everything had changed.

Well, Shane thinks. Better late than never.

Glad to hear it, Shane types out. *I'll see you in Boston.*

This time, with this text, he doesn't hesitate to press send.

And, this time, Ilya's reply comes before he can even close his phone.

Yes, Ilya says. *But before this I hear you have gold medal game to win.*

Maybe, Shane replies, because he doesn't particularly believe in hockey superstitions but even he knows better to count his chickens before the eggs have hatched.

Good luck, Ilya sends. Then, *break their knees))))*

Shane blinks down at his phone. *You're supposed to tell me to break my leg I think.*

He waits as Ilya begins to type and then stops. Then starts again. Ren has to butt at his thigh with her head to get him to move forward with the flow of the line.

I am trying to be nice, Hollander, Ilya texts back after a few seconds. *Why would I tell you to break your leg when I am trying to be nice?*

Shane bites at the tip of his tongue and begins to type back—*it's an expression, asshole*—but Ilya has already sent another text before he can finish his own.

Lily:

I am telling you to win. Broken legs are bad for gold medal hockey.

Broken knees of Swiss players….ok for hockey

Shane lets out the bark of laughter that has been bubbling inside his chest for ages now. Evren peers up at him with her ears flicked down, confused maybe. Suspicious. He doesn't blame her. Last time they were here, in this coffeeshop, Shane had felt something completely different when looking at his phone.

But that version of him did not have a soulmate yet. At least not one he knew about. That version of him did not know Ilya Rozanov's daemon's name, didn't know how it felt to say Ilya Rozanov's given name. Didn't have Boston in March to look forward to. Didn't know it was an option at all.

"Evren," he says, sliding his phone into his pocket without answering Ilya's last message. She blinks at him, ears twitching. He rarely uses her full name. She probably thinks he's

upset or something. “Why did you do it?”

The line moves forward. They’re only three people from the counter now. The barista working the espresso machine has a bat daemon on her shoulder, head tucked beneath its wing.

Ren doesn’t pretend she doesn’t know what he’s talking about. She also doesn’t pretend to be apologetic, which Shane isn’t surprised by. They’ve never pretended with each other. Everyone else—yeah, maybe. Off and on. Situation dependent. But with each other, they’ve always tried to be honest before everything else.

She sits down and leans against his leg, front paws beginning to knead carefully at the tile of the floor beneath her feet. “I thought—” she says, then stops, considers, starts again. Hesitant but not apologetic. “Eventually," she says slowly and carefully, "you’re not going to be a hockey player anymore. Even if—even if nothing bad ever happens. You’re still…it’s not going to…you’ll get….”

Shane waits. For her to finish a sentence. For the knee-jerk defensiveness to hit, the same cornered-animal *you don’t know that* he’s felt every time someone’s tried to talk to him about the same thing. He waits and he waits.

It doesn’t come.

“I want you to know who you are when you can’t be a hockey player anymore,” Evren tells him very quietly. “I wanted you to have something. For then. I thought—it was worth a shot. And if we didn’t try, we’d never know.”

Shane nods thoughtfully. “You miss one hundred percent of the shots you don’t take,” he recites, and Evren nods quickly, eagerly, ears flopping up and then down from the force of the movement.

“Exactly,” she says plaintively, and Shane reaches down to brush his fingers over her head to let her know he isn’t mad. He should be, maybe, but he’s not. People and daemons both have probably done worse out of the same love that pushed Sima and Ren to act.

And, in the end, it was a good call. Solid play. High risk, high reward. Now he has March to look forward to, and he’s already done the math. Counting tomorrow’s game, he has seven more games to play in before Montreal meets the Raiders on ice in Boston. Seven more games to get through before he makes landfall.

That's nothing, big picture wise. Just a bit of hockey.

Chapter End Notes

trying to get in front of people saying that this is another fic that i have left too open-ended for their tastes by saying: your feelings are valid but

i am tentatively leaving the door open on making this into a series of works all set in this universe, but i consider this a complete and happy story as is. i played around with the idea of giving them a firmer, more happily-ever-after ending, but it just felt incredibly out of character for these two at this point. they could never kiss in public or even in private or say i love you so soon after the soulmate revelation because imo it's too fresh and they're both feeling too exposed and neither of them, i think at this point, actually loves each other yet (they've caught feelings, for sure, and the love will come very quickly but it hasn't arrived yet)

i think knowing that they're each other's soulmates speeds up the canon timeline a lot and changes it in both small and big ways (like, instead of shane watching boston win the cup from hayden's couch, he's in boston watching from ilya's couch with sima while evren is in the daemon suite at the rink) and they learn how to communicate with each other a lot sooner (but no less rockily) because they've both committed to the idea of this person being their soulmate and giving that weight despite feeling afraid at the same time

but all of that isn't this specific story - this story was always about exploring what would happen if shane and ilya were forced to acknowledge an obvious and unchangeable connection between them in an inopportune setting with incredibly high stakes (behind enemy lines if you will)

the 'i love you's will keep; the most important commitment they could make here and now is to not leave each other alone with their fear

(and to anyone who thinks this is not sufficiently HEA, please read the last scene one more time - i promise, getting a text back from a situationship you've become unwisely invested in is absolute euphoria. no better happily ever after out there. shane is so blissed out for the rest of the olympics people are calling for him to be drug-tested)

End Notes

ok u got me, im inherently a little bit lazy because i didn't want to come up with daemon forms for the both of them so i made up a storyline that hinged upon them having the same daemon form....its very lazy but also a lil genius maybe. maybe.

also i love writing this shane (age-wise and on the timeline wise) because i get to write 'something means something that it didn’t before' and that's not accidentally vague and bad writing, that's just a repressed twenty-three year old narrator trying to wrangle his emotions in line while also trying to avoid the mortifying ordeal of naming them. that's purposefully vague and bad writing, baby !!!

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