

do wolves mourn? (i leave that up to you.)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/80573881) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/80573881>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings , Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Irina Rozanova , Grigori Rozanov , Alexei Rozanov Andrei Rozanov , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe , Alternate Universe - Captain America: The Winter Soldier Fusion , Angst , Angst with a Happy Ending , Slow Burn , Enemies to Lovers , strangers to enemies to lovers lowkey , Memory Loss , Loss of Identity , Identity Issues , Implied/Referenced Brainwashing , Canon-Typical Violence , as in the vibe of the winter soldier/red room , Angst with a Hopeful Ending , Autistic Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , he does but it takes him a minute , Dom/sub Undertones , Obsessive Behavior , Alternate Universe - Historical , but VERY fast and loose sister i did not get too serious , Cold War , vaguely , Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug , Protective Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander Needs a Hug , bad , Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander , Assassins & Hitmen , Alternate Universe - Assassins & Hitmen , Falling In Love , Lust at First Sight , they both are lowkey a little crazy , Choking Kink , but squint and you miss it , Mental Health Issues , Depressed Ilya Rozanov , everyone is going through it but love transcends , Unhealthy Relationships , Tragic Romance , complex relationships my beloved , its near i am for me i am so sorry if there are repeated lines and shit i will revise again in the morning. , really proud of this a bit .
Language:	English
Series:	Part 4 of любовь и усилия love & effort . (hollanov .)
Stats:	Published: 2026-03-04 Words: 24,532 Chapters: 1/1

do wolves mourn? (i leave that up to you.)

by [hcneymooners \(romqntics\)](#)

Summary

“And because—” Ilya stopped. He was not a man who stopped easily, who lost words, whose tongue failed him. Shane did this to him: removed his fluency, made him reach for things that were not in their usual places.

“Because, Ilya?” Shane stepped closer, and Ilya could smell him—the scraping tang of metal and stretched leather and beneath that, something faintly sweet—and this, in combination with the use of his name, made him dizzy, weak.

“Because I would rather be known by you than survived by you,” Ilya managed. “And if I am to be killed, I would rather it be by you than by another stranger.”

Shane went very still.

“I’m still a stranger,” Shane said after a moment.

“Less now,” Ilya answered.

★

or: shane, as part of the winter soldier program, and ilya as the son of its creators.

(you do not need to know a single thing about marvel, the winter soldier, or any of its associated media to read this.)

Notes

you do not need to know a single thing about marvel, the winter soldier, or any of its associated media to read this. i used the broad architecture of the premise and rebuilt everything else from the ground up. the history here is based on my own research, and the rest is confetti.

and mostly telling the truth sideways.

thank you for giving this a chance. i love you. x

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



I: ANASTASIA.

And you are not allowed to die.

It was very strange to be mythologized in the beginning years of your life before you have done anything worth a legend. The words were said to you by your father when you were first born—natural birth, golden threads of hair floating like floss under the flow of the bathtub water, the air rushing into your newborn nose, bloodied and rosy—and then again upon his deathbed, which smelled of nothing at all, which was how you knew it was the end of something. He looked relentlessly beautiful, as if beauty were a tide that came in one final time before it went out forever. It's as if his body had rallied for a final attempt to rage against the machine, battling tirelessly against the disease before all the health bled out of him, and he could barely rise to pee. This was the indignity of dying: that it looked, from certain angles, almost like living.

Your legs were tucked beneath you; your hair was longer here, longer than he had ever seen it, nearly trailing your shoulders. You were said to look like your mother: same face shape, same eyes, same wide boxy smile. It relieved you that she would still haunt you whenever you glanced into a mirror. She had been dead for so many years, and still she found you in the glass, and you were glad of it. It helped console you, although you were watching her husband—and therefore the last of you, the very last, the last lamp in a house everyone else had already left—die.

According to your father, you were never all that bright; you had such a lazy glow. You allowed him and your brother that thought, because you knew the truth of the matter—that they would have been nothing without you—was much worse for them to swallow.

You thought your father would be more vibrant in death, given how cruel he could be. You were slightly disappointed that the fight had abated in the final moments. It seemed unlike him. The two of you were good at being cruel to one another, screaming in scraps of your native language, the words splinters of something broken that could still, if thrown correctly, draw blood. Your mother tongue stung whenever you spoke it through anger, but it was the only way he seemed to understand that he had really hurt you. He spat back and swore at you until you cried, and then he seemed to feel you were clean again, as clean as bone, scraped and white and new.

You would miss your father. This surprised you. It was perhaps the most surprising thought you had ever had, and you had had many, in this house, a house that was always full of beautiful things and people who had deluded themselves into believing that they were gods, or close enough. Or, well, it used to be full. Now it was shot into ruin, the wallpaper bubbled and blackened, the dining room open to the sky like a bird's mouth—stunted and begging its

mother for food. But your father never wanted to leave. Some men loved what destroyed them. You had known this about him for a long time.

You didn't remember much of this golden era he never stopped speaking of, this gilded *before-time* he polished in his memory until it shone with a light you were never fully able to look at. You only remembered the wail of the missile warning and then the hot white heat, which was not really a thing you could remember so much as a thing that lived in the body, in the sudden flinch upward late in the evening, in the way your fingers jerked and curled around the inanimation of your mother's phantom wrist, in the way you still could not sit with your back to a window.

It could have killed you, but it hadn't. You had lain under what used to be the ceiling of the dining room, choking through the dust that caked your six-year-old lungs, watching a square of sky appear where the ceiling had been: blue, improbably blue, the color of something that had no business being evocative in that moment.

Did you hear me? Your father asked, and you turned back to look at him. It was hard to look at him. It had always been hard to look at him—too much in his face that was familiar, too much that was gone.

Yes, you said, but you said it in the native tongue.

Да. You would try very hard to be good for your father. *Да*. You would never die. But the world would try its hardest to kill you, and it had already been trying for some time, and it was not unskilled at the work.

Your father seemed to glow, a coal at its brightest before it finally went dark, and suddenly, you had so many things you wanted to ask him. About your mother, about your shared language, your dual tongues, about what exactly they had been building in the basement of this house before the bombs fell and afterward, always afterward, about the place they rebuilt in the rubble of the place they had destroyed. You opened and closed your mouth like a fish.

You were a very dignified person, and this was an undignified image, but grief did undignified things, and you had never been grief-proof, no matter how much you had practiced. You settled.

Where were you from, you asked him, finally. It was perhaps not the most important question, but it was the only one you could force yourself to speak aloud.

You did not fully know the old language that you spoke, only that it was yours and your mother's and his, and that your family had been exiled from its country, absorbed into a larger one the way small rivers and their flows were absorbed into seas.

Nowhere, your father answered, as he always did. *It's gone. You are from me. That's all you get. Be happy with it.*

Mmm, you nodded. *I will be happy.*

He laughed because he knew you had lied. After all, you were a bad liar, and he was a man who had spent his life studying the mechanisms of the human mind and meeting the lies of his sons with a closed fist and the scent of metal. He would have known you were lying before the word had fully left your mouth. Halfway through the sound, he shuddered, and it did not take much to know that he had stopped breathing.

You sat with him for a long time after, but less than you had with your mother. You did not close his eyes. You thought he would have preferred to keep watching.

And still, he was looking you in the eye, mouth open in the same shape it took when he spoke solely to hurt you.

“ The prince fought valiantly. He slayed the dragon.

The princess cried for days.

She loved that dragon. ”

— anonymous.

BOY-SOLDIER.

The operation that surrounded him was called *Кассандра*.

Cassandra.

Get it? The soldier's handler had said, snorting a laugh. His Russian was thick and phlegmy, as if he struggled to speak any of his words without the near threat of vomit. *Because she's our vision.*

It was written in all caps like *КАССАНДРА*. It blinked in the soldier's mind in the same manner. *КАССАНДРА. КАССАНДРА. КАС—*

He had undergone many operations. He did not remember their names. He remembered only that each one had led to a well of death, the way you remembered that you had dreamed without quite remembering the dream, only the act of gasping awake. *КАССАНДРА* blinked on and on.

You were it now. You were the only one.

The soldier remembered the first time he saw you. He had stared at the black and white photograph held captive beneath the silver paper clip for days—four days, seventeen hours;

he was precise about time because he had to be—running through the simulation of what you could be if you changed the color of your hair, the color of your eyes, the shape of your teeth, the curve of your smile. He knew you in all your possible permutations. He had learned to recognize the basis of you so that you were incapable of escape. He knew the matching curves of your hips, wider than a woman's. He knew the particular angle at which your chin dropped when you were thinking, how your chest puffed when you were proud. He knew you in all the ways a hunter knew a landscape: with no inch of tenderness, but completely nonetheless.

He sketched you in the dark of the cell with charcoal, from memory, which was unreliable, but all he had. The drawings were bad—the soldier was not, before, an artist—and yet they captured something true about you, the look of vicious determination in your eyes, the slight asymmetry of your mouth. You were cruel and important. He knew that. Your father was a scientist masquerading as a god, and your mother was just like you, which was to say she was also a person who moved uneasily through the world, unsure of who she was but knowing something was coming—a mascot of a life lived unable to name exactly what.

But you made an impression, teeth bared into a box when you smiled. And you had two incisors slightly too sharp, one wisdom tooth too many, the mouth of something that evolved to bite and had not forgotten. Your face was not compelling upon first glance. This was what made it so dangerous: upon seeing it a second time, you realized that you had always wanted to see it again, that you had been waiting without knowing you were waiting. The boy-soldier was methodical in every way a human could be, so his thoughts were patterned and observant, and the pattern of his thoughts, lately, was you.

He closed his eyes. He saw the protuberance of your collarbones. The twin 𐐇 𐐇 at the junctions of your shoulders, beauty marks his ■ might have called by that name—*hokuro*—in a language his ■ spoke and he perhaps only half-understood, a language that arrived in him the way all inherited things arrived: already half-lost, already loved. He made a mental note of how odd it was that you kept them on display, shirt collar always open, fabric always sheer, as if you had nothing to hide or had made a decision to hide nothing, which was not the same thing but could look identical from a distance.

Once, when he felt more like himself—the soldier had almost no memories of feeling like himself; this one surfaced without invitation and a great deal of pain—a woman whose husband he would kill told him of how she had hidden her own beauty marks the first chance she could get. She would have carved them out of her stomach herself if she could. She thought them horribly ugly. Malignant.

Though the soldier knew that was an exaggeration. Most would have kept the marks in place out of fear of the gore. The soldier licked his lips and bent over until the cold of the floor hit his cheek. He flexed his arm, the metal one. He closed his eyes again.

Your face was waiting there, like a dog that came at a beckon. Your lips were full, and so were your eyes: so ridiculously blue; so much sadness inside of a person, so much sea, so much cold water that had been looking for somewhere to go. There was a large portion of life stored inside of you. He had to take it out. That was the mission. If he had the time, he would

have stared until he had reaped your full story from inside of you, read you the way a scientist reads a specimen.

But he had a feeling you would not give over so easily.

Your parents had raised a thing that did not give over easily.

This, at least, he understood.

Your eyes were vulpine, luminous, when you realized you were being watched. The ink of the noir print of the photographs made it seem as if the night had bled into them and stopped just shy of filling them, stopped at the last moment, unable to finish the job. Your parents had created a perfect amalgamation of themselves upon you, as if you were Achilles and they were both Thetis, holding your ankle as they dipped you into the river of their memory, their guilt, their work. You had emerged from that river not invulnerable but indelible.

The soldier was feeling—maybe *felt*—charged at the thought of seeing you in the flesh instead of print. He nearly ached for it, something he was not programmed to do, something that beamed through him like a frequency impossible to tune out. Maybe it was because you were a little older, and he had seen the photograph of you, younger than now, ornamented in a skating costume as red as blood on the ice, your first competition, face sharp with concentration, unknowing that you were a limb in the tree of your bloodline's well-planned extinction. Standing in the light, not knowing the light was already on you. Or maybe it was the sudden feeling that if he did not shoot when he saw you, you would take his throat out with your bare hands, rip it open, and dispose of him—and the prospect of this did not disturb him the way it should have.

He did not know. He never knew.

The soldier imagined you in the cell with him, in the lab, eyes watching him unreadably as he writhed against the table. Watching as his mind covered itself in dark water. In this imagination, he could not tell whether your expression was pity or something colder and more useful, and the uncertainty was—the soldier did not have a word for what the uncertainty was. His teeth clicked together. He switched his head to the other side, let the cool of the stone calm the neglected skin of his cheek. He kept his eyes closed. He imagined you with him, without him, around him. The prepositions mattered. He could not decide on the right one.

He knew you: *Ilya*.

He pictured you in your simplest form and had the thought that your mind was just as beautiful and fractured as his felt, that you were a person who had also been dipped into rivers not of your choosing, and that maybe you would understand this, if he could ask. Maybe you would extend the understanding.

The soldier tasted blood and realized he had bitten through his lip. He opened his eyes, and you were not there. Of course, you were not there. He had to focus. He closed them again and slept, and his sleep was not peaceful, but it was sleep, which was what he had instead of peace.

The cell opened. The soldier looked up into the light.

The handler tilted his head and muttered something in Russian, as if the soldier could not understand. Then, in English, he said:

Go hunt, wolf.

To kill you was the operation. Of course.

But the soldier had yet to decide whether or not you would suffer.

And he had yet to decide—this was *newer*, this was *dangerous*—whether *suffer* was the right word for what he wanted from you at all.



II: OLGA.

“*Блядь!*”

Ilya cursed as he fell. The sound tore out of him before he could stop it, ugly and ungoverned, bouncing off the high windows and concrete and coming back to him changed, smaller.

A scoff left the throat of a body just to the left of him, dark eyes rolling with a slow, practiced contempt. Her name was Ekaterina—known to him, now, as Katya—and she had known his mother for a long, long time. Long enough that his mother's death was almost the same to her as it was to him—something unbearable to endure. Her death was a seismic event neither would ever speak to, and something about neither would ever ask. She came to him, took his ankle in both hands, and rolled it, which made Ilya's entire body coil like a spring. Every muscle seized in protest, a scream leaving him that he would be embarrassed about later.

“*Извините,*” she said, short and light, in the tone of someone who is not.

Ilya glared at her. Her mouth twitched as if to smile.

She had taught him for several years now, the only constant in his life after his mother died, after the new bombs, after his childhood became a place he referred to as an event in the past tense, never to be seen again. She was what he had left of the old world, the before-world, which was not entirely a comfort since the old world had not been kind and the newer one was even crueler. Ekaterina was a lithe woman, so worn down by hardship that she seemed to rattle when she moved, as if something inside her had come loose and never been reattached. Sometimes Ilya swore he could see her bones sinking inside of her, a twisted Atlantis, her skeleton descending slowly through the murk of her body, crooning his name through her skin.

The rink was cold. It was always arctic, colder than it needed to be, definitely colder than regulation required, frigid in the way that felt undoubtedly personal. The high windows let in a grey, directionless light that landed tenderly on the ice, but did nothing to warm it. Katya liked it this way. She liked Ilya to suffer mildly and consistently, pushing him to every extreme. *The chill keeps you alert*, she told him, *keeps your muscles taut and ready*. What she meant was: *softness will slaughter you before anything else gets the chance*. She had known his mother, after all. She knew what the Rozanovs had always been moving through.

Katya loved to say that one needed to skate as though they were trying to escape something, that that was the only way to win, the only way the ice and the crowd would ever believe you. She had never been wrong. At least, not about that.

“Again,” she commanded, stepping back.

Ilya rose. It was less of a rise and more of a spiral, his body remembering what the mind ached to block out, muscle and bone recalling the metric of the motions he done time and time again, executing action before his brain could find the time to argue. He was in pain.

His ankle throbbed with an insistent, blueish-white sear of agony that radiated upward through the shin, but he pushed through it by way of how he’d learned to push through anything: by making it part of the motion, by letting the pain become the fuel of his spirit. He sailed upward, body pulling long and clean against the cold air, and caught his reflection in the mirror Katya had set along the thin membrane of the rink railing. His expression had hardened into something his brother would’ve recognized immediately, that genetic cocktail of stubbornness and grace that had been cultivated in them over generations, the Rozanov face under pressure. Behind that expression lived something else. Something that had been growing stronger for days.

Ilya was being watched; he was sure of it.

By whom was the question, yes, but the answer was nothing obvious. He could not claim Katya, because she watched him alwaysw, professionally, clinically, exactly in the way he paid for. This was different. It prickled at the base of his neck when he walked home alone at night, the hairs there rising in some ancient, animal communication. It followed him into dreams where he ran through corridors that refused to end, walls that lengthened as he moved through them like a throat swallowing, leaving residue. He had started taking different routes

home. He doubled back unexpectedly. He waited in shop doorways, studying the street, watching for the thing that did nothing else but follow, follow, follow.

He'd only ever felt this way once before. It was in his early life, when Ilya was a child. He had maybe seen only five summers, one summer shy of the Rozanov estate's total annihilation. Though he hadn't known then that the annihilation was coming, that everything behind him was already mid-collapse. He had been at the lake on the property, sitting at the edge with his feet dangling in the shallows, too afraid to dive without knowing where the bottom was or a guaranteed point of return.

It was getting dark, and he could hear his mother calling for him, her voice thin and specific with that matronly instinct designed to find him regardless of distance; he could almost smell his father somewhere behind him, violent and haunting, a malevolent presence that Ilya had learned to track the minute he first felt it, instinctively, understanding that without due vigilance he would be bludgeoned if caught.

He'd looked at the water and then turned, beginning the long march toward home. And all the while he had looked back and back and back, over and over, his neck craning with conviction. He was sure something was hunting him, that something was evaluating what it would take to put him down.

It was only when he'd reached the house's courtyard that he'd turned fast enough, with a child's artless bumbling grace, to catch what had been lurking behind him. There she was: a lone, white wolf with startling blue eyes, standing at the edge of the treeline, watching him with primal assessment. Ilya had stumbled through her cubs' nest sometime in the week and was now streaked with the scent of her womb. She thought he was either a danger or something belonging to her—and neither option meant safety. He'd been five, maybe four, and he had felt a sudden, giddy expansion in his chest, his stomach lifting with wild relief.

He'd jerked toward her, body deferential to this shiny, lurid fantasy. *I could get away from here*, he'd thought. He could follow her, could learn how to be as animal as it took to shed this family and their name, this place, this pain. And then the hope had been shot through—shredded, punctured, made into nothing—by the small, dark, obsidian wound that opened in the wolf's head. His father's gun. Ilya had watched her fall with crushing disappointment, the rifle's smoke living in his mind for years after.

This was the same feeling now, though Ilya felt less curious and more afraid, and he would never in his life admit to the fear. He thought of the proverb tattooed on his mother's wrist—*fear is pain arising from the anticipation of evil*—and he thought that his mother had always been more honest about what she was than he permitted himself to be. Ilya despised fear. He despised it, especially when it was on him, when it crawled into his body and infested his every vein without permission. But then again, who would be calm, knowing they might be hunted? It may have sounded dramatic to anyone without his history, without his name. But instinctively, in the oldest part of himself, Ilya knew: whatever watched him only aimed to kill and maim him.

He was a Rozanov. The moment they were born, there was a death pact, and Morana would always collect.

No one ever appeared, but the feeling remained.

“Focus,” Katya snapped. “Your mind is everywhere but here.”

Ilya nodded and pulled himself back into his body, forcing himself to concentrate. His edges bit into the ice cleanly as he moved: forward crossovers first, the repetitive reach-and-pull of it, the way the blade caught and released, caught and released, a conversation between steel and frozen water that required nothing from him but bodily surrender. Then combinations: a step sequence that Katya had been drilling into him for two months, his body threading through the pattern with a fluency his mind could not entirely claim credit for. The Lutz came last, the hard one; this always required him to take the outside edge and trust it, to defy every instinct that said *this will not be enough, you are too fast, the ice will not hold, damn it. But* Ilya took it, and it held, and he landed with his free leg extended behind him, arms pulling wide, the cold air rushing against his face, a sluice of rime intent on waking him up.

He was breathing hard, but he was steady.

“Better, but not good,” Katya said, her lips thin and mottled in odd places. Then, disgusted, “You skate like your mother.”

Ilya kept eye contact with her as he answered.

“She was your best. Never forget that.”

She seemed both pleased and irritated that he'd spoken back. This was their agreement, arrived at without negotiation: she would push, and he would not break, and occasionally he would remind her of his mother, and she would hate him for it, and they would continue.

Ilya didn't tell her about the watching. He didn't tell her that he rarely forgot anything that his mind catalogued every slip of light, every unexpected sound, every unfamiliar face in and out of the world, filing and cross-referencing with a compulsive thoroughness he had long since stopped trying to suppress. His father had taught him this before he died. *Trust no one completely. Not even me.* Ilya had never trusted him, not as far as he could throw him. But the lesson had taken root anyway, as the worst lessons always do, and he was glad because nothing had prepared him more than a life of learning over and over—provided by the constant murderous acts of his father and brother against him, the constant wound of forgive-and-forget provided by the way his mother left him. He could almost see his father trekking across white tundra that first time, disappearing into the white.

He was trapped in it sometimes, the memory, a fly enslaved in amber.

He packed up. He left.

He didn't tell her anything.



After practice—and what was he practicing *for*, exactly, now that national competition was closed to him, now that the name Rozanov opened no doors and shut all the others—Ilya showered in the cramped bathroom off the rink corridor. The water pressure was weak, but the heat was scalding, and he turned his face up into it and stayed there longer than necessary, letting it baptize him, the fall of the water like fire, seeping into the muscles of his back and shoulders, the persistent ache of his ankle, the deep, structural tiredness that lived below the physical. He dressed quickly afterward: dark jeans and a loose black sweater so open around the neck that it nearly tumbled off one shoulder, revealing one of his moles. He'd never hide them. He never hid them. He checked them constantly—obsessively, if he was honest, which he rarely was about the things that frightened him—terrified of finding one morning that they had changed size while he slept. It didn't matter, rationally. If they changed, he would not go to a doctor.

A doctor meant a record, and a record meant a trail, and a trail meant the people who were looking for him would find him faster. And he was partial to the life he was actively living. This was all it meant to be a Rozanov, now.

It upset him. It upset him in a low, chronic way that he carried as you carry an old injury: present always, occasionally sharp, never entirely gone. It was the most aggravating thing to know your family had done something bad, even evil, but still not be clear. Ilya only knew that he was not allowed to conduct a normal life, or else the time he was allotted would shrink in quantity.

Outside, evening was settling over the city in slurry layers: first the light going citrine, then diving into dove's tail grey, then the streetlamps coming on one by one, each a small, dim argument against the Berlin dark. The streets were busy enough that he should have felt safe, dissolved into the crowd, anonymous. He did not feel safe. The crawling sensation returned the moment he stepped outside, immediate and certain as a hand on the back of his neck.

Ilya paused, pretending to check his phone, though his eyes were really roaming through the crowd in systematic sweeps. A couple arguing intensely with the quiet cadence of people who had done this before, who had been arguing the same argument for even longer. A man ambled down the sidewalk, a leash to his side with a dog at the end that was too large for the city; the animal swung its head from side to side with a kind of bewildered joy. But then, across the street, standing in the gap between a closed shopfront and a parked car: a man in a coat too heavy for the approaching spring, face half-swallowed by a thick, robin's blue blanket scarf, standing with an absolute and unnatural stillness.

Ilya noticed him because he did not move as everyone else moved. He did not shift his weight, nor did he check his phone, nor did he glance around restlessly, devoid of the performative agitation of a person waiting for someone to arrive. He was perfectly, beautifully still. There was an odd delicacy about the way he held himself, rigid yet coiled, wound tight like a serpent that has found its angle. He was a spring compressed to its limit, simply waiting for the mechanism to release.

Their eyes met briefly across the distance. It was truly quick, less than a second, the length of a blink. But something elapsed between them that Ilya could not decipher and could not dismiss. Recognition, he was sure of, though he had never seen this man before in his life.

Danger, though he had made no threatening move, had done nothing but stand there and be still and meet his eyes. Ilya's heartbeat quickened.

Oh, this was not good.

Then: a thunderous sound. A passing bus met a semi-truck encroaching on its lane at the intersection with a force that seemed to reorganize the air, a colossal, grinding explosion of metal against metal that cast Ilya to his knees on the pavement before he came to the realization that he had moved. His ears rang. The sound kept happening inside his skull after it had stopped happening in the world. His mind split cleanly in two: one half on the cold pavement of this street, this city, this evening; the other half back in that house, in the dust, in the six-year-old dark, choking on the ceiling.

Ilya pressed his hands flat to the ground and breathed.

People were running, shouting, surging toward the wreck with the terrible magnetism disasters have, desperate to get to the accident and its mangled bodies. They swept past him like water around a stone. When they were gone—So was he. The man across the street. Gone, as if the crowd had consumed him, as if he had never been there at all.

Ilya stayed on his knees a moment longer than necessary.

Then he got up, and continued home and did not look back.

+

W.S.

The soldier watched from the rooftop as you dragged yourself up and continued down the street.

His position delivered a perfect vantage point of your route home. He watched you slink over the cobblestone, your shoulders flexing as you tried to avoid looking back at the crash. You were collecting yourself, piece by piece, trying to retrieve your dignity as you would retrieve anything else that had been dropped, methodically and without apology. He watched your shoulders settle back into their habitual line, over and over.

This was a choice, he understood. Not looking back was always a choice.

He should have stayed hidden. It was a mistake to let you see him, a miscalculation, a lapse in the soldier's discipline that he will examine later, in his rented room, in the dark, pressing on it the way a tongue presses on a loose tooth. But something had compelled him to surface, to let himself be *visible* in a way the operation did not require. He had wanted to test you, only to see if you were as aware as he suspected.

You were.

Here is what the soldier knew about himself, which was very little, but which he held like a man held the last match to a dark room: he was an executioner. He was a cautionary tale. He was the creation that had returned to dismantle its creator, only to find that the creator had died and left a child in their place; a child who was both threat and salvation and possibly neither, a child who was the last word of a sentence he was never shown the beginning of.

The soldier turned this knowledge over, examined it. It did not become clearer.

You operated as if you had nothing, as if the name you were bestowed was nothing *but* a name, as if the blood gliding through you was nothing *but* blood. He had seen the instant calculation in your eyes, the way your posture had shifted subtly into something slightly more defensive, the subtle tensing of your jaw, and bights of your limbs that warned him you were ready to run if needed. There was cunning beneath your handsome exterior, inherited, the soldier thinks, though from which parent is harder to say. He recalls that you still believe your brother only left. That you have not yet arrived at the other word for it.

You were nothing *but* your bloodline, and the files agreed. In fact, the files were very specific.

Your parents had built him. They provided the formulaic basis for what had been done to him, for what had been done to the others, and was still done now—the fracturing and the reconstruction, the long work of making a man into something that does not need to be a man anymore. Your parents had given the work its language and grammar, and then they had helped hone and hone and hone until he'd had a shred of self left, and he knew nothing but how to scream. And you were, unknowingly but undoubtedly, the last fluent speaker of it.

Hm.

Through the scope, he watched you turn down an alley you had never used before. A shortcut that was not a shortcut but a trap door; you were trying to draw out whatever followed you, to force it to show itself or lose you in the narrow dark. Clever. A sixth sense arrived in his chest like something fallen on an instrument he forgot he owned. He watched you move through the alley with the hurried gait of someone afraid for a long time, who has long learned to make the terror functional. The soldier smiled.

This hunt would be more interesting than anticipated.

His orders are clear: observe for up to three days, preferably less. Learn your patterns, then eliminate. Clean and simple. But nothing about you seemed *simple*. The soldier has understood this from the photograph, and the understanding only deepened as he watched you live. Even from this distance, even through glass and scope and cold air, your movements

were wrought with a complexity that couldn't be reduced to a file. You carried the weight of a target on your back intimately, but without any of the shame.

The soldier lowered the scope and crept silently across the rooftops, keeping pace with you below. Tonight, only watching. Tomorrow, perhaps, he would let you see him again. He was curious about what you would do, though not in an operational sense, but in another. He cannot tell yet if you will run or fight. You were very, very careful.

You were, dreadfully, so beautiful.

The thought pierced through the skull, nearly blinding the soldier with surprise. As if similarly struck, you came to a sudden stop. Carefully, you looked to the sides of you, then up. The soldier pulled back, blinked, then peered through the scope again.

You were looking directly at him.

You did not run. You reached for nothing, no shift into position that the soldier would coin as preparatory to strike. You simply peered into the night, silently, without much theater, the way one would look at something they had been expecting to see and had finally found. You considered there to be another option, he was realizing.

The soldier wondered what he looked like to you, here, crouched in the dark. Here, sent after you.

He remained very still above you, the scope between your eyes and his, and had yet another thought that arrived without invitation and which he examined with the same neutral attention he tried to provide to all of his thoughts: that things considered beautiful were so often also considered weak, and that this was the fundamental misunderstanding, the error in the equation. That beauty at full strength was another beast entirely, wildly unpredictable, ungovernable, capable of a brutality that caught you off guard precisely because you had been unwise in deciding in advance that it was merely decorative.

He watched you determine something; he watched you turn and walk away. *To kill you*, he thought, following your shape until it disappeared, *would be unimaginably difficult*.

He did not know why it was to be this way, and he was not certain this was the only reason he had not yet done it.



III: TATIANA.

Ilya could not fall asleep.

This was not new. After seeing the man on the rooftop—after letting him *know* that Ilya had seen him, after the deliberately held eye contact that was either the bravest or the most catastrophically stupid thing he had done all year (death could truly make one reckless)—sleep felt more like the job made easy than something he was required to do, a suggestion from someone who did not understand the gravity of his situation. Sleep had all the makings of an easy disaster: eyes shut, window open, throat slit into a thin jeweled line—a string of ruby.

Sleep was surrender, which was one side of the coin of trust. And trust was the one luxury he had been specifically, precisely, paternally warned against.

So instead, a seat by the window with the curtains drawn back just enough to watch the street below, a cigarette burning between his fingers with a ruddy, patient glow. He often let it dwindle to ash at the base, his fingertips smarting as his eyes filled with a saltwater tide. He watched this ember, and he watched this street, the last of the evening foot traffic thinning, the city folding itself inward. He blew smoke through his nose, the coil of chemical rising with the guide of a man who had nothing other to do than think and try, through the act of breathing in, to do something else.

His apartment was small but strategically positioned: a corner unit on the second floor, with fire escape access and two exit routes he had marked on his first day, and had nightmares about losing every night since. This was Rozanov inheritance: no money, no name, but every exit. Always knowing where your exit was, always being able to take the risk of leaving someone else to die.

The night crawled on in silence. The cigarette maintained a resolute presence, unknowingly dragging a nail across the chalkboard of Ilya's insecurities. *Even this*, he thought, *knows how to wait better than I do*. If he was still watching, this man—and wasn't that the cruelty of it, not knowing, not being able to know, the surveillance that was most effective precisely when it was invisible—he'd moved beyond Ilya's line of sight. Ilya could not decide which was worse, that he might be or that he might not.

The thought of this made Ilya feel overwhelmingly nauseous, even sicker than before. The thought of it arrived in his stomach as something swallowed wrong, and he thought of his mother, how when she had gotten pregnant, she had suffered avidly from *pica*. She had swallowed so many things: thumbtacks, small glass icons of sparrows and saints, matches. He thought he understood it now. He twitched in place, neck jerking awkwardly under the unexpected hand of grief, and pulled the cigarette to his lips again, the next exhale extended slowly.

Кролик в норе.

остановить, he told himself. *Think.*

He was good at thinking. This had always been true of him, almost embarrassingly so. His mind was the one thing that had never failed him, never slowed, never grown tired of its own relentless motion. His father liked to call him lazy, but Ilya suspected he had known that his youngest son had the capacity to outperform him in ways that he had never had to confront before.

His father had said: *Trust no one completely, not even me.* His father had not said: *and especially not yourself.* But Ilya had arrived at this conclusion independently, eventually, because his mind was the thing most capable of constructing very convincing reasons for him to do very stupid things, and he was aware of this, and he was doing one of those things now, had already decided to do it, had decided somewhere in the silver belly of his sleepless night that he would take the thread of fate into his own hands.

He would meet the man. He would sit across from him in a public place. He would look at him in daylight.

This is idiotic, one part of him said.

Yes, said the other. *And?*

There was no answer for that. Ilya was rarely interested in protecting himself.

Morning came in its grey way, the light through the grimy windows thin and reluctant as a confession extracted under duress. If he cared more about where he found himself, if he had the freedom to indulge, he would've cleaned them. But he didn't. So, he rose. He went through the motions of his routine. His hands, thankfully, weren't shaking. They rarely did. Ilya had spent years being grateful for this and somewhat suspicious of it, because what did it mean that your hands did not shake, when the rest of you was?

Today would be different. He'd spent the rest of the evening planning, considering all the variables. His head ached with the effort of it, and his wrists followed suit. The watcher had broken the pattern by allowing himself to be seen. Ilya had broken the pattern by forcing the watcher to look at him. For the watcher, this meant either carelessness—unlikely—or intention. For Ilya, it was only an intention. He wanted something more than simple surveillance. The watcher seemed willing to give.

Ilya was once again unsure. Another swoop of a sick feeling in the basest part of his stomach. Eventually, he shook himself back into awareness and began dressing carefully. This, too, was part of the act. High-waisted cream trousers falling just above the ankle. A fitted black turtleneck. His blood-red loafers, which he had shined the previous evening, buffing the leather to a shine that was slightly excessive for his current circumstances, but was the point overall. He was no longer all that interested in trying to hide. He was only attempting to look like a man who had authored his own life, which required a costume, as all fictions did.

In the bathroom cabinet, behind the aspirin and bandages, was a small metal case. The syringes were as Ilya had left them: three of them, swollen with clear liquid, capped and sealed. And suddenly he was back to his mother, his genesis and rapture, her hands around his wrists when she pressed them on him, that specific grip only used when he was very small, and she was, briefly, frightened on his behalf rather than of him. Ilya had never known

what they contained. She had said nothing. She had left him in the dark the way she left him in the dark about everything, continuously, then permanently and thoroughly, which had originated from a kind of distorted love that believed itself and its ignorance was protective, only to have been wrong about this his entire life.

Ilya took only one, slipping its thin, translucent skeleton into the dark, open mouth of his coat pocket. He told himself, *just in case*. He wondered if soldiers had thought the same as they ran their tongue over the pulpy case of the capsule sitting under the hoods of their fake teeth.

He could not ask anyone he knew; his brother had been the family's only soldier and ended a deserter.



The café was on a corner, chosen for the corner. Two walls at his back, two exits in his eyeline, a geometric comfort for Ilya who felt as open as one could get inside of an enclosed space. Anything could happen in public these days, and he did not think he would have the time to play at self-defense. He arrived early and ordered a large mug of black tea that he did not drink. He sat with his hands loose and open on the table, because he had been taught that closed hands telegraphed everything, that the hands were where fear fled when the face wouldn't take it.

He had been there forty-three minutes when his watcher walked in.

And here—here was the thing, the problem, the development Ilya had not adequately prepared for, because you could not *prepare* for certain things, because certain things arrived in the world with an unfair advantage, which was that they were beautiful.

The man was irreovably, damaginly, rupturingly beautiful. A face like an arrow to the heart, immediate and beseeching, answered in a spool of bloodflow. His beauty shied from acting as a declarative, rejecting the obvious ways of men who had always been comely and therefore wore it as their only credential. This was something else, something that crept in sideways, the way cold crept in, the way conviction crept in, simply *there*—in him like infection—mutating, rearranging things.

He was wearing an enormous coat, black and mink-bordered, floor-grazing, a coat that should by any reasonable measure have looked absurd and instead looked like the only logical conclusion; as if the coat had always existed and the man had finally arrived to wear it, and why weren't you wearing one too? Beneath it: dark sweater (green or maybe blue), black trousers, all of it selected to match that of the same quiet economy with which he moved. A man who did not waste. A man for whom every decision had been made once and would not be revisited.

His arms were swallowed by the coat's sleeves, but as he turned at the counter, Ilya caught it: the faint outline, where the right sleeve hung slightly differently, where it settled against a

shape that was not quite the shape of a shoulder, the thin seam between human and otherwise. A streak, a flash, of tight metallic grey.

Ilya felt the vibration of his heart in his teeth. *Красота*, he thinks, *Красота тебеюм жерте*.

He moved differently in daylight. Less predatory, more human. His eyes, when they found Ilya's, were hazel: amber and green in some private negotiation, a color like old light, two sharp disks of nectar. Stainless. His gaze was strong and hinted at having seen a great deal, yet being not yet entirely decided on what to do with the vision. His face was—Ilya's mind tore through it the way it moved through everything it wished to understand, which was to say quickly, which was to say greedily, which was to say with a thoroughness he found privately demeaning—but his face was—*was*: the high arch of his cheekbones, the spray of freckles sluicing across the bridge of his nose and beneath his eyes, which were the single most disarming thing about him, freckles on a face otherwise composed entirely of blankness and precision, as if his face had tried to be two different things and had not entirely resolved the argument. Olive skin flushed by the cold, still carrying the winter outside him. A scar from temple toward jaw, half-hidden by a dark swoop of hair that had fallen forward. His mouth, set in a flat neutral line that nonetheless had a quality to it that Ilya looked at for slightly longer than was strictly analytical.

It was a perfect secret toward the end of his face, pale and fuller toward the bottom, and a bright, darling pink. He looked more of Ilya's surname than he was: of rose.

This was the art of propaganda; Ilya could understand it now, how one could die for an image of a perfect face in a beautiful frame. War could be waged for the man before him, and Ilya, an enemy, would drop to his knees and sob for his touch at the base of his feet, mouth open and drooling, desperate to be chosen for the cause.

Глупый мальчик! Stupid, stupid boy! Dangerous, moaned the oldest part of him, the part that leaned toward wolves before it learned sense. *Это Морана звонит!*

Да, да, said the rest of him, swinging high and laughing, following his heart with no trepidation at leaving his head behind. *Yes, obviously. That was never the question.*

No pretense now. There was no use for it. The man crossed the café without hesitation and sat across from Ilya and the coat settled around him and the chair accepted his weight and the light came in through the window behind him and did something to the line of his jaw that Ilya found it necessary to look away from briefly, at his tea, at his own hands, at the middle distance, before he looked back.

"I thought you were smart," the man said. His voice came low and was slightly rough, the voice of a man for whom speech was a tool he refrained from using often, Russian breaking apart at the seams of his sentences, living on the same side as Ilya's stilted German, so unseemly that he reorganized himself into English without any further ceremony.

Ilya did not answer immediately. He liked that this man viewed him as someone intelligent enough to be multilingual, as someone to give full trust to their mind. He understood, in a way he could not have fully articulated, that to answer immediately would be to give

something away; some proof of the hammering in his chest, some evidence of the nervous waltz his body was doing under the skin. He held the man's gaze, then let out a breath, twisting the mug against his palms so the heat once again felt new in his hands.

"I am," Ilya finally said. "I am here."

"Smarter people would run."

"Would they?" He meant it. He had spent his life genuinely uncertain what most people would do, having been from the very beginning surrounded by people who were not most people, who had never been most people, who had burned most people's maps and drawn their own. "I have never been too certain of that."

The man's eyes narrowed, and Ilya's heart hammered, though the look was not hostile. It fell closer to calibration, the man's face loath to reveal anything, the same sense of a rifle's scope adjusting. Stillness was his every strategy. Up close, he was worse, but really so much better, his freckles more numerous than Ilya had estimated from a distance. The coat's mink border framed the lush fat of his cheeks, which made him look younger than one would expect; those eyes studied Ilya intensely, delicately, and Ilya—Ilya was having trouble breathing.

He'd never done his best under pressure or in the presence of something he wanted. The desire always arrived all at once and derailed him.

"Why are you following me?" Ilya asked.

"Do not act stupid if you are not." A pause. Then, "Orders."

He shrugged. On his human side, the motion was easy, fluid, and unconsidered. On the other it arrived a fraction of a second late, an echo of the gesture rather than the gesture itself. Ilya tilted his head, and his curls shifted as he listened to the flux of it, the metal shifting against itself like bracelets. Ilya allowed his gaze to trail downward, to where it lay hidden, and then dragged his eyes back up. He felt for a moment an emotion that played on pity but was not quite; there was another sense there, and perhaps the true thing claimed land somewhere between the two, in a territory that didn't have a clean name.

"From whom?"

Silence. But those eyes moved across Ilya's face with an attention that felt almost physical, a nectarine hunt, not looking so much as *looking for*, excavating his every feature for a specific treasure, the way a scholar would hunt through a translated text for the word its translator had decided not to carry across.

"Does it have to do with my parents?"

Ilya's press sent whatever growth had been arriving tumbling closed in the other man's expression (Ilya had found the pulse); closed and then, very carefully, reset into an emptied garden. His mouth opened slightly, and Ilya thought first that his lips appeared like a keyhole and second that he wanted his tongue to be the key that fit.

“What do you know about your parents?”

"Less than you." Ilya lifted his tea and drank very slowly, deliberately, his neck arched like a pale bird in search of a mate, and he felt a warm, ludicrous flash of pleasure rise from his awareness of the man watching his throat as he swallowed and being aware of Ilya being aware of it. "They had me and held me, and when they put me down, we were permanently disconnected. But I observed enough to understand they were not simple researchers. There is a reason people want me. There is a reason they are gone."

"Assassination is a strong implication," the man said carefully, "for two ill parents and a missing man."

The anger was surprising in its surge: spontaneous, so physical that Ilya felt the threat of a headache nudge at his temples, something like a weather event, a crusade the body experienced without any warning of the onset of violence. Ilya felt it shriek through him like a tempest, crashing through in a hot wave that he did not, entirely, attempt to suppress. His voice went very quiet, resorting to its usual shape when his fury reigned at large, and he felt himself fall back into his mother tongue the way one fell back into their first language when all other languages stopped being sufficient, when what they needed to say was archaic and vicious and too *personal* for borrowed words.

"I thought we agreed not to be stupid," Ilya spat, his body one endless, rigid line. "My mother was a healthy woman—a woman only in her forties—, and she was dead in *three* days. I was twelve years old. I know of no cancer that acts like that. My brother warned me before his deployment, before his rather long *walk* into the tundra away from his platoon, from which he did not return. And you— " he looked at the man across the table, at his impassive hazel gaze and his stupid, senseless freckles and beautiful, enormous coat— "*you* were probably going to arrange my *evident suicide* within the week."

"So, you *are* smart," the man said. That corner of his mouth moved again, the briefest, most involuntary concession, there and gone like a flame in the wind.

"And you are predictable." Ilya snapped; his face was still hot. He settled back in his chair and willed it to cool, methodically, closing his eyes so that his lashes swept across his cheek before he reopened them.

"So?" the man answered, appearing by all means to be unmoved. "Do you have what they want?"

"I do not know what *you* want," Ilya said. "That is the truth."

The man received it as such. Something deflated slightly in his posture, a flicker of defeat stole across his face, nimble and of the quality of a person who had long been at this and who had hoped for a different answer, now forced to reorganize around the one they received.

“What is your name?” Ilya asked.

The question seems to startle him. It had landed wrong, Ilya observed its landing, watched the glint, the slight upward adjustment of the chin as the man parsed the question for danger and found instead something he did not have a ready category for.

"I have a designation."

"That wasn't my question."

(You personalize, the soldier noted, privately, desperate to keep it to himself. It is all personal to you. 'My.' Not 'the'.)

"Why does that matter? To hire me?"

Ilya liked to think the man's eyes were laughing, bright and wary like a dog's.

"Curiosity," Ilya contested. His eyes were very blue. He made them wide, supplicatory. He had wielded this talent almost his entire life and thought it one of his finest achievements, and he would never balk at the chance to use it. "To even the playing field."

The man was quiet for a very long moment. The café was continuous around them: cups clanking gracelessly against saucers, the milk steamer's tepid hiss, the jarring groan of a chair being dragged across tile somewhere behind Ilya's back. And they sat inside the noise as though they were born of something noise could not reach, two bodies in a clearing the world had accidentally made for them, which would not last, which both of them knew would not last.

There was soon to be a gun gone off; bullet casings shed, blood strewn across the grass.

"I think it's Shane," the man said.

Ilya nodded once and accepted this small truth. "Is that what you choose to call yourself? Or is it cover?"

It disturbed him, the question, truly disturbed him, in a way the previous bout of conversation had not yet managed. Ilya watched it happen in real time: Shane's eyes widening by a fraction, his metal hand flexing once beneath his sleeve, involuntary, the body's own argument, the body baited and hooked while the mind decided to say nothing.

"It's—" He stopped. The stop was enormous, wide enough for Ilya to climb neatly in. "It's what I am. What I can remember."

Ilya climbed in, easy stepping.

"Is it, *тигренок*?" Ilya asked, and his voice was honest in its softness, genuinely curious, no edge in it. "If your mind is not fully your own, how can you be certain of what you remember? How do you know what is yours to hold and what is placed there?"

Shane's chair scraped back. His body came to attention with the instantaneous, total lineament of something that had been trained past thought, and for one perfectly clear moment, Ilya saw it: the killer underneath the mink and those rosaceous lips and that

reluctant, almost-smile—the manmade, *well*-made, weapon. The thing his parents had aided in unleashing. It looked back at him, wild and enraged, and Ilya could not tear his gaze from it. He could not, *would* not, *did* not look away. He thought it again: *Красота мребьейм жертв*.

“You know *nothing*,” Shane ground out, voice as lean as a wire.

“I know more than I did yesterday.” Ilya drawled, and it was true; no bluff needed. “Shane. ‘God is gracious.’ ”

Shane stared at him, conflict waging along the high plain of his cheeks. Then he stood, unfolding his full height, and all that he wore rose with him, and he was *tall* in a way that the rooftop distance had not communicated, tall and broad—yet slightly shorter than Ilya which made his stomach clench with great appetite—and his coat made him a wall of darkness and vicious intent, and he leaned down until his face was close, until his voice was barely voice at all—

"Your parents created a program," he said, the words coming quickly, searing against Ilya's cheek. "They built it inside of us. Inside of *me*. Took what I was and cast it out and filled the space with something else. And now, their—*my* employers want to ensure no one rebuilds what was lost. *Especially* not their child."

Ilya tipped his head back. Slowly. The line of his throat, again, was deliberately offered. He was aware of what he was doing. He was not entirely sure why he was doing it, and that uncertainty was interesting to him, and—in the way that the most interesting things were—slightly terrifying.

“Do you get tired of serving, *Shane*?”

For a moment, the world froze. Ilya forced the phrase out again, throat working anxiously, heart pounding, mindless.

“Tell me, *тигренок*. Do you get tired of serving?”

The ice cracked, and the weight finally fell through. Shane recoiled and straightened. He adjusted the fall of his coat with both hands—that gesture, that small, unhurried, *human* gesture, the fabric settling back into place, the hands smoothing the lapels—and something in Ilya's chest snagged on it unexpectedly, a hook finding purchase, a small and sudden pain he did not know what to do with.

"You have three days," Shane said.

He was red around the mouth, blood flooding his cheeks.

And then he was gone. Gliding away, swallowed by the morning crowd, leaving Ilya alone at a corner table with cold tea and a syringe in his pocket and the absolute ruin of whatever composure he had arrived with. Ilya waited until he was certain of Shane's disappearance. Then, he exhaled.

His hand found the syringe, and he held it. His mother's last coherent gift had not been a comfort, he understood now, but a final move across a years-long board. A final card drawn for a game she had known existed and had not told him about, because she had never told him about anything, because she had loved him in the way of people who believe that love is best expressed through the careful management of information.

And Ilya had only three days to learn how to play, or die trying. And yet, Ilya could not think past anything other than the keyhole parse of Shane's perfect mouth. When he was younger, he had had a nanny—for very briefly, for as long as his father deigned it took for his mother to get over her “womanly troubles” in those first few months after having him—and once she had caught him, carefully performing a balancing act on a kitchen chair, desperate to slide a piece of Medovik from the platter on the counter into his small, pink hand.

Medococ, she had called him. *Honeyeater*. A bird drawn to the sweet center of a flower, throat thirsting no matter the danger. And here he was again, at the beckon of something venturesome and punishing and luridly sweet.

He bit down on the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood.

He resisted the urge to scream.

+

W.S

Do you get tired of serving, Shane?

The soldier was in his cell. But no, no, he was not. He had tumbled himself into an alley, was clutching himself in agitation, unsure of how he arrived here, at this intersection with this son of his creators, at a corner table in a café, *here*: watching a pair of chameleonic blue eyes skip between docile and shrewd, deciding constantly whether to be afraid of him.

And they had decided not to be. This was the thing he cannot stop turning over.

The soldier covered his face, pressing his metal fingers into the bridge of his nose until the cartilage threatened to give, the surrounding bone flinching and failing; the pressure became its own crooked sentence: *something is wrong with me, something has always been wrong with me, something is wrong in a new way now and I am afraid to examine what is different*. He dropped his hands; he shook his head, an agitated bull.

Tell me, тугренок. Do you get tired of serving?

“You did this to me,” he hissed, then and now.

You did this to me, he'd said, and he meant *you*, specifically, the man at the table, Ilya Rozanov, with your cream trousers and blood-red shoes and the way you had tipped your

head back and offered your throat and looked—had looked at ~~Shane~~ *the solider* the way no one had *ever* looked at him before, the way people used to look at him, in the *pre-time* that was mostly gone, occasionally fragmentary, surfacing without warning like wreckage from a very old ship sunk to the bottom of the mariana trench. As though Shane was a normal person, an individual that could be valued and understood, as though understanding was something Shane deserved.

His thoughts spun, cocooning themselves as he wrenched his eyes shut, hands clamping over his mouth. It felt as though his skull was splitting. He thought: *You looked at me and wanted to know my name, my real name, and I gave it, I gave it over without deciding to, the word arrived in my mouth fully formed, ~~Shane~~, and it was true and I knew it was true and I cannot explain how I knew and that terrifies me more than any of the rest of it, that somewhere in the wreckage there is a thing that knows its own name.*

Tell me, тигренок.

Something rose in his chest. He didn't know what to call it. It was large, and it threatened to unravel him, here in this alleyway in the German dark. It was a fleet of emotion that had been waiting—patient as winter is patient, patient as dusk is patient—for a moment exactly like this one to set sail: a challenge, a question asked by a stranger's mouth that had landed in the soldier like an blade to heart, an invitation to duel with a fragile existence, aimed by someone who had taken a gamble based on what they slowly understood.

Do you get tired of serving, Shane?

He felt a sob climb, present before he had decided to permit it. It felt akin to an invasive species. He had not cried in—he did not know. He did not know if he had cried since the *pre-time*. He did not know if the mechanism still worked, if his body still knew what it was, the sequence of salt it moved through. But the body—*his* body, it turned out—remembered more than he did. This was either the mercy or the torment, he had never been able to decide which, and maybe it was both, maybe it had always been both, the recollection of muscle inside the forgetting mind, each one with a hand out to what the other lost.

Do you get tired of serving, Shane?

Maybe this was how grief found you, he thought, waiting in the dark until you thought you were safe but really had only been stupid and cold. Maybe it always waited until you were somewhere quiet, like an alleyway or a church, and vulnerable enough to carve a door open into you. Maybe it never left. Maybe it had only been standing outside this whole time, like a crow on a bannerment, beak black and curved, watchful and forbearing as the people who made you had been.

Do you get tired of serving?

Another sob bubbled through his lips, and he held the rest in his chest like children he'd been instructed to hold but did not know how, but did not want to put down.

Do you get tired of serving?

Shane?

Shane?



The storage unit was located in an industrial district, rented under a name Ilya had never once used but had recognized immediately.

His wet nurse had carried the same one. He was unsure whether it had been hers or given to her by his mother to make the remembering easier, to make her easier to find or easier to lose, depending on the need. Ilya had only ever addressed her with babbles and squeals, his mouth unable to sift through the vowels of her birth name. And knowing his mother, it was most likely the latter. His mother had been a woman who had reserved all her best qualities for the few she loved.

Medococ. For a moment, Ilya closed his eyes. *Honeyeater. Honeyeater.*

The key was where he had known it would be, hidden inside his mother's most prized possession: a heavy turquoise Fabergé egg, the last thing given to her by the version of her husband that had truly loved her, complete with a artfully designed false bottom that would have taken a more reverent person around two and a half hours to discover but took Ilya five minutes to smash. He had not felt very guilty about the smashing. Her ghost was not as strong as it used to be. She had left him a puzzle box of life instead of answers, which was the most *her* thing she had ever done—she had always liked riddles, had always pushed him to be clever and cunning—and he was past the point of being grateful for the presentation.

Inside the unit: boxes. Dozens of them, stacked to the ceiling with the totalizing ambition of a woman who had never once in her life thrown anything away, each one labeled in his mother's precise, small handwriting, sheets and scores of refined arabesquing script—the careful, exquisite cursive of someone who had soldiered on despite knowing that she would be taken from her most prized possession as soon as the world deemed it fit. Research notes. Prototypes. Personnel files. Correspondence, bound with rubber bands gone brittle and brown with age.

Ilya moved through them methodically, mind a bit numb, enlisting the aid of the mindset he brought to the ice, the same drive Katya had beaten into him over years of practice: *do not hurry; rushing is for people who have not committed*. He started with the box labeled in both Russian and English, the label so straight and bold it felt almost arrogant:

Оперативник Обсидиана; первая фаза.

Obsidian Operative; Phase One.

Inside, photographs and dossiers. Men and women with empty eyes and unnatural metal limbs, faces twisted into blankness, required of people from whom something essential had been savagely extracted and would be again, the way you'd remove a splinter: with care or tools, maybe with a little pleading, even some greated knowledge that the wound would close over its own absence and eventually forget it had ever been there at all. Modification specifications, thousands of them, trial upon trial documented in the dry, affectless language of engineering. Psychological evaluations.

Ilya moved through them page by page, looking for a specific face: nectarine, a slide of stars across the nose, skin possibly unscarred at this moment in time, in the process of being bestowed. He found the file near the bottom of the box, as if it had been placed there rather deliberately, or as if it had slunk there under its own weight and shame. His full name had been redacted, blacked out with the thick, decisive strokes originating from the hopes of total erasure, but when Ilya held the page up to the thin light coming through the unit's single high window, there it was, faint and persistent as a watermark.

Shane, it turned out, *was* his real name. Hollander, his last. *His* name, the one he had offered tentatively across that café table, handing it over with slight confusion and little possession, certain they would not once get it back.

The photograph paper-clipped to the front page showed someone younger. Hair longer, falling across a forehead that had not yet acquired the scar. Eyes clearer and far from empty, still to the brim with a lust for life, bright and like silver dollars. No metal arm, just two flesh and blood ones. A painting of a person who existed before the program had gotten to work on him, and did not exist after; who had stood in his own body without the seam, without the weight of nonconsensual modification. A person who had not yet had defined for him, over and over, what he was for.

“*Oh, мизгренюк,*” Ilya croaked, and his throat became so clogged that he could no longer look at him without the world blurring over.

Ilya set the photograph down and did not pick it up again for a long time.

The technical language of the file was dense and deliberately obscure, clearly imparted by people who had felt the necessity to write things down but had needed those same things to be unreadable by anyone who was not already inside the project. Most of it was in Russian; some of it in the cramped, slightly frantic shorthand he now recognized as his father’s, and he could almost hear the way in which he had spoken it as Ilya had grown up: in his anger and his fear and, most of all, in his mother’s sadness, and which he read now with the slow, sick reluctance of someone disarming something they know is going to go off regardless. Phrases surfaced and stayed: *neural recalibration. Memory suppression. Compliance protocols. Subject integration timeline.*

His stomach turned the way a ship turned in weather, with a horrible, grinding inevitability, the whole structure of him shifting to accommodate the brunt of what was yet to come.

And then, again, his mother's handwriting, in the margins, in ink the color of blue sky that she had set aside for her personal annotations, a shade of blue that signalled *this is mine, this is what I actually think, this is what I want and have wanted:*

Subject displays unusual resistance to compliance measures. Recommend increased cognitive recalibration combined with focused tactile stimulus.

Torture. His mother had been recommending *torture*.

She had been recommending *torture, пытка*, in the same goddamn handwriting she had used to leave him grocery lists, to sign his competition entry forms, to write him birthday cards he had kept for years because she had not been a woman who wrote birthday cards to anyone else. The same hand. The same skyblue ink. Ilya closed the file. His expression did not change.

This was not a shock; shock required surprise, and Ilya had not been surprised by any member of his family for a long time. This was merely confirmation, which was its own particular variety of terrible, because this confirmation meant that the thing he had suspected was real and had been real the entire time he had been learning to live with the suspicion. The distance between them—that special, cultivated distance she had maintained from him throughout his childhood, the way she had loved him immensely from slightly too far away to reach—suddenly made a different kind of sense. You did not get close to what you could not afford to examine. You loved your children from a distance sufficient to keep your work from feeling like what it was.

He continued through the boxes. Hours passed in the way that time often passed when one was absorbed in something hopelessly terrible: quickly and entirely, minutes folding themselves flat, every second wheedling into him like the haunt of an old house, the light through the high window shifting from afternoon grey to the rotten amber of early evening without Ilya registering the transition. He read until his eyes ached and his back ached and the floor beneath him had become a map of yellowed papers, remnants of his mother and father's life's work, arranged in haphazard order of the truth given to you all at once.

The syringes. He understood them now. Two were filled with the counteragent to the compliance serum. The antidote to what his parents had built, the key to what had been locked, pressed into his hands on her deathbed with urgent fingers and no explanation. The third was a separate gift. A coward's way out, if it came to that. His mother's final contingency, her most honest gift:

If it becomes impossible, here is the door.

So one provided a coward's way out.

Not redemption, then. Strategy. Always strategy with his lot. *Чем они это заслужили*, Ilya thought wretchedly.

Who could ever deserve this?

A noise at the door. Metal against metal, the lock turning with the slow, deliberate 'click', an entering of space that cared nothing for trying to be quiet. Ilya gathered the most crucial papers with shaky but efficient hands, folded them into his bag, and stood. He did not run. There was nowhere to run to, and besides, he already knew. The way he had known the key's location, the way he sometimes simply *knew*. It had been a long time of being followed.

The door slid open. Shane stood silhouetted against the dying daylight, still in his dark, enormous coat, a blotch against the golden light raining down outside, his face in shadow for a moment before he stepped in and the unit's thin light found him again. His eyes moved across the scattered files, the opened boxes, the web of confession Ilya had made along the floor, and his expression was so unreadable that Ilya wanted to bite him if only to summon movement, feeling. But there was nothing, only a lack that was too large, too various, a shield for whatever was happening beneath the surface, too distant to be summarized from the shore.

"You found your way," he said.

"I usually do. You know I am not stupid." Ilya straightened. He kept his voice even, his hands still, his face the Rozanov face, that cocktail his brother used to speak of. "Are you going to ask if I'm happy with what I found?"

Shane's eyes glittered with a surprising rise of petulance, before it disappeared again. *So, he could be a brat*, Ilya mused.

Ilya wanted it back.

"Are you?"

"No one is ever happy with the truth." Ilya met Shane's gaze across the high dunes of his mother's work. "The best you can hope for is to become unafraid of it. To become intimate enough with it that it stops having the advantage of surprise." He paused. "I am aware now of what they did to you. Of what they tried to make."

Shane moved closer, his footsteps highly considered, and Ilya had the sudden thought that he would be beautiful on ice. He moved closer still, navigating the papers without looking down at them, keeping his eyes on Ilya as if he were the only fixed point in a room that was tilting.

"What they *made*," he corrected wearily. "And?"

"They built you to be a weapon," Ilya said. "And I am deeply sorry that they made it their life's work to unmake you in the process."

Ilya thought Shane might kill him then, the other man tensing and relaxing repeatedly against the apology until he found a way to swallow it down. Something shifted deep inside his face: a fracture, a crack running through the surface of him, there and then controlled, there and then smoothed back over, but Ilya had seen it and could not unsee it. The first tremor of bewilderment, of unfettered hope; interest in the idea of Ilya being built of something different, not the same as what had built him. Hope in the idea that a bloodline and its sins were not always the same, that sometimes a person arrived from a source and managed, through great effort or great grief or both, to become something the source had not intended.

"And?" Shane asked. The word was very fragile, very slender. "Do you absolve yourself?"

Ilya gathered his bag. He stepped around Shane toward the door—*close*, close enough to catch the supernatural frigidity of the metal arm radiating through the coat's fabric, close enough that the coat's hem brushed coquettishly against his ankle—and as he passed, Shane repeated the first half of his question.

"*And?*"

There was irritation in it now, the annoyance of a person who had been given partial answers his entire existence and had learned to find it both familiar and intolerable. Ilya stopped at the threshold. He turned one last time, deliberately, framing himself in the arch with the evening reaching in behind him. His mother's garnet chain caught the light along his throat, mixed with this one of gold, a crooked trail of ichor and blood.

"Well," Ilya said. "*I* did not make you."

He stepped forward, ignoring the roar of his brain—*Глупый мальчик! Stupid, stupid boy!*—only obeying the wail of its hind part, and lined himself right against Shane's back, pressing in so that Shane shuddered forward with a throaty, low gasp. Ilya murmured,

"So, will you hold this against me, *тигренок?*"

He fell back, then, away. He returned to the door, to the hallway, and set back to walking. He could feel Shane's gaze branding the space between his shoulder blades like a hand pressed flat against the wound-up seize of a bird, its body set for flight, neither pushing nor pulling, but dreadfully present, the weight of force that had not decided yet what level of force it wanted to be.

He did not turn again. He did not need to, did not want any answer. A small piece of their interlock had shifted; this he could feel. But some things had stayed the same. Shane would come for him again. This, Ilya, was sure of.

The question had simply shifted from *whether* to *when*.

And from *when* to *for what*.

+

~~W.S~~

SHANE.

He wanted you.

This was the problem. This was the new problem, the one that had been added to all the old problems, the one that arrived at the fucking table in the fucking café and has not fucking left since—! The *wanting*, the *desire*, of which he was not supposed to be capable, which the program was specifically designed to excise along with everything else it excised, the ache sitting in him like a match that somehow survived the dousing, still hot, still red at its tip and at its center, inconvenient and persistent and real.

I want you, Shane finally allowed. ***I want to be wanted by you.***

This was the more specific problem, the one underneath the first, the one that came when he allowed himself to follow his desire's beckon, to crawl straight to his fantasy's source. It was a new thing, to have a separate dreams. It was as if nothing was on fire, yet fire, he found, was on everything.

Shane had held your gaze across a table and had felt you along his back, body close and insistent in *reaching* him in a way that he did not know what to do with. What did it mean to not be seen as a weapon or file? Operative or problem? What did it mean to be looked at as a self still recoverable from the wreckage? He wanted to be seen like that again. He *needed* to be. Shane thought—he thought he deserved it.

He wanted your—Ilya's hands, those large, precise, overwhelming hands, those hands that folded papers into a bag while a door was opening with a slight shake, that wrapped around a

mug of tea and turned it slowly, generating new warmth from what had already been cooling. He wanted those hands on him the way water wanted to find the lowest point, the way anything wanted what it was shaped by its nature to move toward.

He wanted to be held down by something that was not a restraint. He wanted to be looked at with reverence, like a god and their shrine, in a human way, the devastating turn of being known by someone who *chose* to know you, who arrived at the knowing through sustained pressure to the bruise of you and sheer will, a dog with its teeth and throat around a bone unwilling to let go. He wanted, underneath the garnet chain, the pale blueprint of Ilya's throat. He wanted to be the reason it flushed.

He wanted Ilya with the view of the city behind his back, legs open to his mouth, his head resting satedly on Shane's thighs as he pressed kiss after golden kiss to the soft inner bits of skin. Shane wanted Ilya above him, to be the only thing that covered him from light, writhing underneath as Ilya pleased him, took him somewhere far-off and close to Heaven as the sun rose slowly. He desired the feel of Ilya between his teeth—neck, shoulder, bicep, cheek; anything Shane could get at—only to then soothe it underneath the flat of his tongue. He desired Ilya's jugular, pumping jerkily against his lips.

Shane *wanted*.

He wanted—and this was the core of it, he could not look at directly, could only approach sideways, the way you approached what you coveted most when you had been taught that to covet is a vulnerability and vulnerabilities were how one got killed—he (possibly, definitely) wanted a different life. Possibly with the enemy, with someone who he had been sent to undo and who had undone him instead, had understood what they were undoing and chose to do it anyway, who held the knowledge of what he was and what had been done to him and who reached across that knowledge with open hands and a broken voice and begged to be let in.

He felt suspended in the air, frozen stockstill, some kind of twisted saint looking down at his most pious believer.

Yes, he wanted this.

And it was new and something he was not programmed for, but regardless, the feeling had survived—more wreckage surfaced—and Shane found that it was far more dangerous.

I want you, he thought again. *I want to be wanted by **you**.*

And to want something different was to abandon what you had desired before, and that meant a loss. An eye for an eye, in a way.

Something along the way, damningly, still had to die.



IV: MARIA.

The rink was not as Ilya remembered.

He stood in the doorway and tried to locate the difference, the process his mind fell back on when it was avoiding something larger, searching for the source of the wrongness as if identifying it would resolve it. Metal, yes, always metal, the cold-iron smell of the ice itself, and beneath that the sweat of a long practice, and beneath that something floral and expensive: White Diamond, Ekaterina's perfume, the same perfume she had worn every day for as long as Ilya had known her, which meant the difference was not the smell but him. He was the thing that had changed.

He stood at the threshold of a place that had remained constant and felt it as strangeness, which was how you knew you had been altered; it occurred not when the world looked different, but when familiar things stopped providing the comfort you felt you were owed, when the rink you had bled on for years smelled like somewhere you had never been. He could no longer remember if it had always been this cold, or if the cold had only ever been inside of him.

Ekaterina was leading a class of young girls through a combination near the boards: eight of them, maybe nine, their black leotards identical, their varying degrees of terror and determination making each of them entirely distinct. Her voice was melodic, patient, bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the voice she used on Ilya, always drilling and drilling into him, wrenching him into perfect form.

"Eyes *up*, Miriam. The ceiling holds the dream." She demonstrated: neck elongating, spine lengthening, sixty-plus years of damage and discipline resolving themselves into something that still, somehow, looked like flight. She moved behind the girl and pressed her fingers into the child's shoulders, sharp and precise, until the child winced and corrected. Ilya felt the phantom pressure in his own shoulders, the muscle memory of ten thousand such corrections, and thought: *she was always kinder to the others.*

"Pain is temporary, Masha. Poor technique is forever."

He watched her and thought of Shane. He was aware that he was always thinking of Shane now, that Shane had become the lens through which he processed everything. The cruelty of Katya's instruction refracted through the question of what Shane's body had undergone, whether somewhere beneath the compliance protocols and the neural recalibration, there was still a boy who had once laboured for love of the ice. He thought of Shane's posture in the storage unit, navigating the papers without looking down. He thought of him on a frozen pond somewhere, younger, unhelmeted, the juzu beads on his right wrist. He thought: *You would be beautiful on ice.* He thought: *stop.*

Katya noticed him then, but she did not break rhythm; she was constitutionally incapable of breaking rhythm, but her attention divided itself, and Ilya felt the portion of it that turned toward him like a searchlight finding its target. He could feel the silent thought that he was a presence she could do much without. She continued guiding her students through the end of the combination, and he remained in the stands, and the searchlight stayed on him, and he did not move, because Katya had taught him that stillness was the posture that would serve him most. *Stillness draws less attention than movement*, she had said, approximately ten thousand times. *and provides you with better information*.

When the class ended, the girls filed past him in a flutter of exhaustion and suppressed feeling, their silence threatening to simmer over. Ilya sent a silent prayer of luck to them because he knew this silence, the silence of young people who had learned that the studio was not a bowl to be filled with their emotions, which would be useful to them eventually and was damaging to them now. Ilya watched them go and felt, briefly, the ghost of himself at thirteen, that specific misery, that specific pride. In time, they would understand that she had been kind. He had understood it eventually. It had taken the particular clarifying quality of everything else that had happened to him.

Katya approached with her signature, annotated grace, a callback to her days of fame across three continents and all their stages.

"I thought perhaps you were a ghost," she said. "It has been, what, a month?"

"Three days," Ilya said, with considerably more irritation than he intended.

"Missing a day sets you back for two." She studied his face with the clinical unaffectedness she brought to technique, looking for the fault in the structure. "You look so much like her now. Around the eyes." She did not say his mother's name. She rarely said his mother's name, as if the name itself were a wound she was being careful not to reopen. She gestured toward her office. "Come. Whatever has brought you back to me must be important, and I am not discussing it in the rink."

He followed her into the cramped office that smelled of violets and old earth and faintly of rosin, a smell Ilya associated with the marrow of his childhood. The walls were cluttered with photographs: Katya in her prime, in costumes that had remained immortal under the lens, snared by photographers who had honored the notion that she was a subject who demanded full attention. Among them, small and slightly crooked in its frame as if it had been placed there without much thought and never adjusted: a photograph of Ilya at fourteen, in the spin of a combination he had been drilling for weeks, face arranged into a snarl of concentration nearly indistinguishable from ferocity. He had not known she kept it. He felt something move through his chest at the sight of it, something he did not have a neat label for, a feeling adjacent to grief and adjacent to gratitude but not quite either.

She caught the look on his face and smiled genuinely, which was rare, a soft arch that rearranged her entirely.

"Despite my nature, I *do* like you."

Ilya's throat tightened, and he had to turn away.

"Tea," she said, already filling the kettle. "I still have the blue lotus."

"Yes." Ilya sat in the single chair opposite her desk. For the first time in days, he felt his shoulders loosen slightly. Here, at least, was someone who knew him well and loved him despite. "Thank you, Katya."

She prepared the tea, measuring by eye, adding just the right amount of milk. The smell of it rose in the small room, and Ilya was suddenly and entirely elsewhere: an afternoon three years ago, muscles burning from practice, Katya's hands at his back correcting the line of his stretch, firm, uncompromising pressure.

"So," she spoke gently, placing the cup before him. "What trouble has found you, *милый*?"

The endearment arrived akin to a small blow, painless but startling. *Darling*. She used it as an accusation, as an assessment, but he still found the tenderness hidden inside. His father had made fun of his softness, his sensitivity. Ilya didn't understand what he'd wanted him to be. He stared unseeingly into his cup, gathering himself.

"I need information," he said. "About a man."

"Speak up."

"Mixed descent. Half-Japanese, possibly Nivkh," Ilya spoke louder, then hesitated, volume faltering. "He would have trained in hockey. Classical skating. There is a way to how he moves. *Настойчивость*. A purpose." He paused again. "He is in his thirties now, I think. He has a cybernetic arm. He is called Shane."

Recognition moved across Ekaterina's face before it was quickly suppressed, pressed back behind her usual expression. But Ilya had been trained by her to see through exactly this kind of thing, and so, he saw it. His heart rate increased.

"You know him."

Katya sipped her tea, eyes gone distant. "Not...directly. But I knew of him. There was talk, years ago." The cup went down against the saucer with a sharp click. "Why are you looking for this man? Is this another of your catastrophic romantic notions?"

Ilya blinked at her; he felt heat rise to his face. "I —

Katya laughed, full-bodied.

"You could never resist a strong, beautiful body." Her mouth curved into its most dangerous shape: saccharine and sickle, taunting him for an obvious mistake. "You were embarrassingly obvious about your brief attraction to me—do not look at me like that, Ilyusha, I was not unflattered—and even worse about the boy I hired as an assistant that one summer. You worried me. I thought you would get yourself killed by someone whose nature you had decided to overlook because they had good bone structure. I was afraid you would be too brash, too naive, and get swept up by some great evil."

"We will not speak of this," Ilya said, with as much dignity as he could assemble, keeping eye contact, despite the faint horror washing over him.

"Of course, *милый*."

"He is looking for *me*." Ilya met Ekaterina's gaze, then. "What my parents did to him. I need to understand it. I need to—I want to try to make it right. Whatever that means."

A shadow crossed Katya's face.

"Your parents. Yes." Her voice turned cooler. "I wondered when their work would circle back."

"You *knew*?"

Somehow, this was the worst thing. Katya shook her head, and Ilya felt his ribcage release around his heart, slouching with relief.

"I *suspected*. Your parents were many things, but humble was not one of them. Their arrogance was a strong contender for what would eventually kill them." Katya sighed. "The boy you are asking about. He was a hockey player once. Quite gifted. He made the others feel ordinary, which made him an enemy to almost all of them."

Something shifted in Ilya's chest. Here was another concrete detail of Shane before he had become a weapon.

"Where?" Ilya asked. "When?"

Katya cast him a look of annoyance, but continued.

"Sakhalin," she said. "As you know, the island was divided between Russia and Japan before the war until the Soviets took it all in 1945. The people who had made their lives there under the old arrangements found themselves suddenly asked to live differently, exist differently. So, some left, and some stayed, and they became other than what they had been. Shane's family—white, his father, but his mother's family had distant Nivkh roots, though she came from Japan. The war made them impossible. So they left. Canada, eventually, the way many of them went." She paused. "His mother, Yuna, came back, maybe fifteen years ago. Ambitious. She brought him here for a scholarship, hard-earned, and he had every reason to stay, and then—"

Katya stopped; her hands flexed.

"He disappeared," she continued. "There were rumors. Military programs, experimental, private sector."

Ilya swallowed. It burned on the way down.

"We both know better than to believe that." Katya tilted her head, and her voice came flat, a tone born of feeling so strongly so many times that it has been worn through. "The boy was preyed on. He most likely felt he had no other option, with all the pressure to be great. He

was young and talented and far from anything he knew, and those are the conditions, Ilyusha. Those are always the conditions. Easy to find, easy to convince, easy to disappear.”

"His mother," Ilya said. "What happened to her?"

Katya hesitated, hands still on the desk.

"Why do you want to know? To help him? To protect yourself? You have a great capacity for selfishness, Ilyusha, like your father, and these romantic notions of yours always carry a cost you make someone else pay—like Irochka."

The accuracy of it landed in exactly the place she'd intended, a spot of skin that was already tender. Ilya held it. He did not argue. Katya had always known how to apply pressure.

"Both," Ilya answered, his tone resigned. "Maybe neither. I just need to know."

Katya studied him, searching for something in his face. Whatever she found was enough to sate her.

"Yuna never believed any of it," Katya told him. "Not the drug addiction, not the running away, not whatever story they fed her. She was not a stupid woman, and neither was her husband, David. They searched for years. Paid for advertisements. Refused to take the name down. They prayed, which they had never particularly done before, and this is how you know a person has run out of all other options." She gestured to her wrist. "It became a kind of shackle, the hope. The refusal to stop. It wore them into something diminished."

Yuna and David. The names settled into Ilya like a stone dropping into still water.

"What happened to them, Katya?" Ilya pleaded, his voice hoarse.

Katya closed her eyes, and he knew what came next.

"If I were to believe the talk," she said quietly, "—and I do—they were eliminated. Train accident. The carriage derailed."

Ilya felt lightheaded, the taste of blood in his mouth. The room went very quiet. He felt the blood in his face, hot and raging. Shane's parents. Named and gone. The advertisements were still up somewhere, perhaps, in train stations and community centers, photographs of a boy with freckles and a spray of dark hair, a phone number no one had called with any useful information for fifteen years.

"You know so much," Ilya said, very carefully, "for someone who claims it was all just talk."

Katya's eyes flew open then, her gaze shrewd.

"Your mother developed a habit of talking to me," she said, voice gone tight as a wire. "More than she should have. More than she talked to anyone else. I think she needed somewhere to put things she couldn't carry alone, and I was convenient, and she knew it made me feel special, and she trusted me not to flinch." The old woman looked at her hands. "I should have done more with what she told me. I have thought about this."

And he had nothing to say in return to that. He understood it instinctively, the specific texture of her regret, but he was not going to perform absolution; he didn't have the standing to offer.

"Thank you," Ilya said instead.

"What will you do?"

Katya's tone had softened further, a rare concession. Ilya considered lying, offering some reassurance that would ease the concern in her eyes. Instead, he gave her the truth—a habit he was newly keen on developing.

"I don't know yet."

Katya nodded as if this were the correct answer, and the best one. She reached across the desk and gripped his wrist with a strength that still surprised him, her fingers finding the exact pressure point she had always used when she needed him to understand she was serious.

"Be careful, *милый*. Whatever your parents built was designed to consume," she said. "Everything around it and eventually itself. Don't let it consume you." The grip tightened. "I did not waste years training you to die foolishly for a cause you do not represent."

Ilya finished his tea. The warmth spread through his chest, momentarily displacing the cold dread that had been today's constant companion. When he stood to leave, Katya stood with him, a long fluid motion that she did not do for most people, and pulled him into an embrace. She smelled of violet and ice and the deep, personal smell of her; this woman who had known his mother and trained his body and kept his photograph on her wall without telling him. Her fingers dug into his shoulders with familiar sharpness.

"Your feet still remember the ice," she murmured, releasing him. "Even if your mind has forgotten the program. You can always, *always* come home."

And he knew she was extending this kindness because they both knew he would not.

He gazed at her for a long time, then buckled forward, tucking his face into her neck, the way he had when he was twelve, and his mother had died, and Ekaterina had been the only remaining person in the building he felt any affection toward. She allowed it. She allowed him this, for a moment, her *маленькая звезда*—her only star, however inconvenient, however much trouble—to pretend he was still a child.

They both understood they would not see each other again.

“ I try to build a / bridge
to my parents, but only reach my mother & it's a / bridge she's about to

jump off of. ”

— **chen chen**, from "in the city," *when i grow up i want to be a list of further possibilities*.



The library's microfiche archives were housed in a basement level that smelled thickly of dust and a decomposing past. The archivist upstairs had accepted Ilya's researcher credentials—false, of course, but produced with excellence—without significant scrutiny. He descended alone.

Hours passed. He scanned through as much as he could, searching for glimpses of Shane, cross-referential, following the thread of a name through years of records with the slightly obsessive single-minded need that had made him a good skater and a difficult person to know. His eyes burned, a tired blue sea, and his back ached fiercely, but he continued, driven by something beyond himself. He did not stop.

And then—there.

The image was grainy, black and white, but it was unmistakable. Shane, younger, suspended in the middle of a play; one leg extended behind him, stick arced forward, body forming a line so clean Katya would've praised it, the rehearsed performance of a bred winner. His face was transformed: concentration rendering him open in a way that Ilya had not yet seen, that quality of a person entirely inside something, connected to it, the face of someone who was, at this exact moment, exactly where they were supposed to be.

On his right wrist, barely visible through the grain: a simple bracelet. Brown crystal beads. Juzu.

Ilya inhaled sharply, pressed his hand flat against the desk.

He printed the image. He printed the articles: a brief interview in which Shane described hockey as *something to quiet the mind*, delivered with the slightly pained quality of a person who found interviews personally unreasonable; an announcement of his acceptance to a prestigious training program in Moscow; a final mention, a notable absence from a competition, no explanation given. After that, nothing. As if Shane simply ceased to exist, removed from the paper trail, who had been taken out of the version of events that other people could access and placed into a version that required clearance, Ilya had only acquired by smashing a Fabergé egg in a storage unit that smelled of his mother.

But Ilya knew the truth. He could not forget.

He had just read it from a box labeled *Phase One*. But knowing it in language and knowing it in image were different kinds of knowing. The photograph gave it body, the way music arrived in an otherwise dead room, bypassing the worst guests and filtering directly to the ones that held more importance. *Alive with purpose*, Ilya thought, looking at the younger Shane in the stopped moment of the image. *Connected to something that was then sawed off at the bone*.

He sat with it for a long time before he went home.



The basement apartment Ilya was renting was sparse but functional. Cash only, no questions asked. Ilya had lined the windows with surveillance film and swept for listening devices twice. Standard precautions, by now routine, habits of a man who had been running long enough that the running had become the life rather than the interruption of it.

What was not standard was what he had built on the kitchen counter: the printed photograph from the archive propped against the backsplash, a tea light candle, small and serious in its little aluminum cup; the corkboard beside it, dense with papers. The Rozanov project made undead, connected by thread and notation into something that was the child of investigation and confession, an accumulation had begun to look, Ilya was aware, less like research and more like the altar of a person who had run out of prayer and was improvising.

Ilya was of no belief. He was not a faithful man, despite his mother's chain at his neck. He had not been raised to believe in anything that could not be demonstrated, which had been his parents' particular inheritance to him, delivered alongside the other more catastrophic ones. Yet, something compelled him to create this space, to look the tragedy in the eye, a remembrance for the man who had existed before the weapon. He lit a second candle, watching the flame catch and steady. In its glow, Shane appeared almost to move, his frozen pose briefly animated.

"Shane," Ilya said aloud, testing the name with new understanding.

It felt right in his mouth. The window creaked. Ilya didn't turn, nor did he reach for the knife concealed beneath the sink. He knew exactly who it was behind him.

"Where did you get this?" Shane's voice was dangerously neutral in the way of someone exercising considerable effort to make it so,

"Library archives." Ilya glanced at him over his shoulder, allowing himself only a moment—Shane was in an olive sweater, the knit thick and chunky at the elbows, the candlelight defining a new angle of his jaw—before he turned back to the shrine. "Canadian-Russian Hockey Exchange, 2010. The first of many records I found. You were extraordinary."

Something moved through Shane's face. Confusion first, then something that lived underneath confusion, perhaps pain. His cybernetic hand opened and closed.

"Why?" he asked finally. "Why are you doing all of this?"

The question hung between them, and Ilya considered it. Why indeed? He wasn't entirely sure himself.

"You deserve to know who you were," he decided. "Before my parents told you who you needed to be."

Shane's answering laugh was short, brittle.

"Strategy. Make the asset question its focus."

"Perhaps." Ilya turned to face him fully. The candlelight between them made the space feel smaller, and in the dim light, Shane's features seemed softer, the hard edges blurred. "Do you feel it working?"

Shane didn't answer. He moved toward the shrine instead, slow and considered, and his metal hand rose toward the photograph, hovering, fingers extended, not quite touching. Ilya watched and wanted to tell him: *you are allowed. You are allowed to want things. You are allowed to touch what belongs to you. You are allowed anything you want.* He did not say this.

He understood, instinctively, that Shane needed to arrive at permission himself, that offered permission was a different thing from found permission, and that only one of them would hold.

"I remember fragments," Shane said, his voice dropping into a lower register. "The smell of jasmine oil run through my hair, my mother's hands. The sound of my blades, on the ice." His hand dropped. "Nothing useful. It won't make me whole."

"It's still yours," Ilya offered. "The memory. That life." He paused. "Those things belong to you. They were always going to belong to you. My parents could overwrite a great deal, but they couldn't overwrite the fact that those things happened."

Shane's eyes found his, solid yellow in the candlelight, penetrating.

"Why do you care?"

This time, the question felt genuine rather than accusatory. Ilya could hear the difference, had been learning to hear the difference. Yes, this time it was genuine; frail and hopeful.

"Because what happened to you was unforgivable," he began. "And because—" Ilya stopped. He was not a man who stopped easily, who lost words, whose tongue failed him. Shane did this to him: removed his fluency, made him reach for things that were not in their usual places.

“Because, Ilya?” Shane stepped closer, and Ilya could smell him—the scraping tang of metal and stretched leather and beneath that, something faintly sweet—and this, in combination with the use of his name, made him dizzy, weak.

"Because I would rather be known by you than survived by you," Ilya managed. “And if I am to be killed, I would rather it be by you than by another stranger.”

Shane went very still.

“I’m still a stranger,” Shane said after a moment.

“Less now,” Ilya answered.

Shane peered at him, searching for deception. His flesh hand rose slowly, hovering near Ilya’s face without touching. Ilya remained still, heart hammering against his ribs. The candle guttered between them, and neither moved, and the space that separated them was small enough that Ilya was aware of Shane's warmth, the specific heat of him on the human side.

"You wear your juzu on your left wrist now," Ilya said quietly. "Not the right."

Shane’s eyes widened fractionally. Beneath his sweater sleeve, barely visible: that band of brown crystal encircling his human wrist.

"What— "

"A woman who knew of you told me you never removed them. Symbol of continuity. Of promise." Ilya held his gaze. "They could not take everything from you. I think that is what frightened them the most. That there was something they could not reach."

Something broke in Shane's expression, shattered, and then was gathered back. He turned from Ilya sharply, moving toward the window.

“They're still coming for you,” he said, the words tossed over his shoulder. “I was given three days. I wasn't lying.”

“I know.” Ilya shifted in place. “But, I know that it has been longer.”

“Yes. I should complete my mission.”

“You should,” Ilya agreed.

He could taste his heart. Neither of them moved.

“Why is it that when we're so young, we're so unafraid to die?” Shane asked him.

“I grew up surrounded by people who never wanted me alive,” Ilya said. “I cannot have a life of my own because of my parents’ sins. What is left for me?”

At the admission, something flickered within Shane’s gaze, but then he stooped and dragged the glass upward from the sill.

“Shane,” Ilya said softly.

Shane didn’t turn back, but his posture was dissimilar from before, a subtle repositioning that reminded Ilya of the athlete he'd seen in that photograph.

“I’ll return,” Shane said, voice rough.

"And what will you be to me?" Ilya asked. "When you do."

A silence that was not empty.

“Whatever it is that I need to be.”

He went through the window and slipped into the night, and the night took him, and Ilya stood alone again in his tiny apartment with an ache spreading through his chest; a precondition of hope, a loosening. He blew out the candle but left the shrine intact. Whatever came next, he wanted to remember this moment: the first time he saw Shane truly see himself.

Ilya thought: *I am going to bring you back.*

He thought: *I am going to try.*

+

SOLDIER-SHANE-SOLDER.

He dreamed of ice.

The ice in the dream was different: it had a sound, a specific ringing tone that changed depending on the edge and the pressure and the speed, a conversation he had with it once and has been trying to remember the words of ever since. In the dream, his body knew what to do. His body had always known what to do.

His body was the last reliable archivist of a life his mind had been systematically prevented from accessing, and in the dream, it filed its report without being asked: *this is what your blades felt like. This is what the crowd sounded like, tigers foaming at the mouth. This is what your mother smelled like when she ran her hands through your hair and told you in the language she hadn't taught you well enough that you were going to be something.* He could feel it: the weight of a helmet in his hair. Hands directing a small dark disk, pushing toward a win with an antsy crowd behind him, their breath hot on his neck.

He woke clutching his arm, the steel warm against his palms. Something was shifting inside him; memory returning like water seeping through cracks in a dam. He should complete his mission. He was nothing but an asset; Ilya Rozanov, the target. The operation had a name, a timeline, and a defined outcome. Instead, Shane traced the curve of his juzu beads along his left wrist.

He *had* moved them. He did not remember deciding to. He had woken one morning, and they were on the left wrist, the human one, and he had understood without being able to articulate it that the moving had been correct, that the left wrist was the right place for them now, that something in him had made a decision that it had not felt the rest of him required consulting on. He traced them over and over. The crystal was smooth and slightly warm. He followed the loop of them with one finger, bead by bead, and tried to remember the name of the temple, the color of the liriopé, the slant of the light.

He thought he heard his mother laugh.

He had glimpsed her name in the documents strung along Ilya's wall. His father, too. *Yuna and David.*

Shane?

The names were both foreign and familial in his mind, as they would be for a long time after. Shane pressed his palm flat against his chest and focused on trying to breathe.

The target—you—Ilya—was *destabilizing*. Shane was being managed, manipulated, the target deploying intimacy as a tactic, every instinct he had been built with was telling him this, the program's grammar constructing its familiar sentences: *asset is compromised, asset is responding to contact, asset requires recalibration*—and yet. In the darkness, Shane whispered Ilya's name.

He wept.

Do you get tired of serving, музренок?

Do you?

He answered you.

Yes, Ilya.

I do.

Yes.



V: ALEXANDRA FEODOROVNA.

Shane entered with the labored step of someone who had already made up his mind.

He did not hesitate; he did not falter. Though the weight of the decision was a chain around his throat and visible: arduous, worn so long it had rusted into the skin.

Shane was here to finish this. This was what Ilya understood, reading him in the doorway—he thought it funny that Shane had come through the front; would he wipe his feet?—reading the set of his jaw and the drag of his body inside the apartment. He was here to close the door, to sever the thread. That was the way it had always been for him, and the way it remained.

Except.

The moment Shane's eyes found him—sitting upright on the bed, spine straight, hands loose in his lap, watching his assassin with the expression of someone who had been expecting exactly this and had hoped, foolishly, for the opposite—something snagged. There was a portion of Shane's resolve that caught, like fine fabric on the teeth of a zipper's bite, a small resistance that was not failure but wasn't insignificant either.

Ilya was not afraid, or at least not in the way he should have been; no blood expelled to the extremities, and the breath to the surface. He looked at Shane in the same manner he had gazed at him across the café table: steadily, attentively, reluctant to flee. There was something reckless in this, Ilya knew. There had always been something reckless in him, underneath all of it, an urge Ilya often had to wrangle with his bare hands, a vine that snaked toward the thing most likely to undo him. The air between them was electric, brimming with the

possibility of violence, charged; everything suspended in the instant before it found its release.

"Get up," Shane said, voice low and even.

Ilya did not move.

Shane exhaled, slow and measured, a breath that was doing double duty: respiration and self-persuasion. He stepped forward. His boots were loud in the silence of the room, dirt crunching beneath them.

"Don't make me say it again."

"And if I do?" The words are out before Ilya could stop them, brittle and reckless and entirely his own, the product of whatever it was in him that had decided, on the rooftop, to look directly at the thing looking at him. He was exhausted, but underneath that, still, that straining against the inevitability, against the ending, against the version of this story in which Shane came through the door and finished what he'd started and Ilya was simply the last of the Rozanovs, as his father had always said he would be. "Are you going to kill me?"

Ilya's voice was quiet, steady, a blade run along the strop. His body shifted forward. Toward Shane, not away. He watched Shane notice this, as expected.

Good, some part of Ilya thought, without being able to entirely account for the goodness. Shane should say yes. Ilya didn't begrudge him this; Shane should say yes, should close the distance, should execute as he'd been enlisted to do. Instead, he took a step closer, which was the opposite of his programming, which was a lifeline.

"Should I?"

Ilya's lips parted. He drew a sharp breath, and Shane's eyes moved to his throat as he swallowed. That attention, God. The attention of a man who had been tracking him for days and had not stopped, and Ilya felt it as a hand idle against the flat of his back, moments from constricting and delivering an impact. He shook his head. The motion was jerky, unconsidered. It was not a no—they both understood it was not a no—but it was not an affirmation.

"You told me," Ilya said, "that when you returned, you would already know the answer."

The heat between them was unreasonable unbearable. This was not seduction, not in the traditional sense. This was something rawer than that, as old as war. An affection for the other that tasted blisteringly like iron, like the copper of bitten cheeks. Attraction sharpened to a knife's edge, the flavor of desiring something so much that the pleasure of it became indistinguishable from pain.

If Ilya touched him, it would not be gentle. Ilya understood Shane needed this, that he did not require gentleness at the moment, had never particularly required it, but deserved it, would possibly find more truth in the ungentled thing. There was too much between them to play at tenderness in the beginning. Shane's hand twitched at his side. His fingers opened and closed

—the human hand, not the metal one—and Ilya watched this small betrayal with greed. *He doesn't know*, Ilya thought. *Whether he wants to hold me or hurt me. He is trying to decide if those are different things.*

And then Ilya said it. It spilled from him like a confession, the rawest thing he'd ever given away. He'd spent so long pretending that death was just something that came and went, guiding his every choice. And now, at the precipice, he folded.

"I don't *want* to die."

His wanting to *live* was the true secret. He wanted his life. And Shane—The space between them collapsed, the weight of inevitability boring down on both of them, crushing, suffocating. This was not mercy; it was something worse. And Shane reached for him, and Ilya —

+

W.S.

~~SOLDIER-SHANE-SOLDER.~~

SHANE.

"You want to continue to live like this?" Shane said. "Don't be stupid."

His hand settled around Ilya's throat and pressed down. Ilya was losing air, he spoke anyway, whatever had been inspired within still unextinguished, which was—Shane understood distantly, that this was the most Ilya thing about him, the refusal to look away from whatever was happening to him, the insistence on witnessing his own experience.

"When I was younger," Ilya said, his voice compressed but not gone. He had switched, now, to Russian, "I was obsessed with the Romanovs. OTMA. The four sisters: Olga, Tatiana, Maria, Anastasia. The Tsarita also. I could not explain why. I was a small boy with a large library and a mother who never explained anything, and a father who hated him inexplicably, and a brother who could not choose. So, perhaps this was the version of a fairytale I found that felt closest to true."

Shane's human hand moved to the back of Ilya's head, finding every golden curl at the edge of it—the base of his neck—and cradled it. He was not entirely sure when this happened, or why, but it felt necessary.

"Everyone wants to be Anastasia. A haunt along the narrative," Ilya continued. The compression in his voice was giving his words a throaty, guttural spirit that they had not had before, raw and unyielding under the steel of Shane's hand. "But I—I always felt most like Tatiana. Relentlessly private. Withdrawn."

Shane could feel the spasm of a trapped cough against his palm, and so his fingers loosened, and the two men looked at one another in shared surprise at the sudden infliction of kindness. Shane did not understand the point of this. He suspected, with the part of him that had been watching Ilya for days and had learned to somewhat read him, that the point was survival. Ilya was talking because talking kept him present, because as long as he was speaking, he was a person and not a target. After all, language had always been his primary instrument, he and his parents, and he was using it now the way they had wielded everything: with vigilance, pointed and aimed.

"My entire life," Ilya said, his voice fraying at the edges, "I have been Anastasia. The last of a name. Mythologized. Carrying the weight of a bloodline so vast and so catastrophic that its gravity has been bending everything around me since the day I was born." He paused. He breathed through the constraint. "I spent so *long* envying Tatiana. She died first. I know that is a terrible thing to envy. I know it exactly."

"What is the point of this?" Shane asked, his voice suddenly downsized, weary.

Ilya's eyes darkened. Something strengthened in him, some central thing that had not given out despite the hand at his throat and the days of running and the exhaustion. His face was wet; Shane registered this with a shock of feeling that nearly overtook him in its intensity, a fleeting sense that arrived in his temples and brow before his mind fully processed what his eyes were seeing: tears, making Ilya luminous in the dim light, eyes wide and mouth quivering, making him appear as a rusalka under the water, something precious and in immediate danger of being lost—and of immediate danger to you.

"This is a slow, pathetic way to end me," Ilya said, and his voice had gone quiet and clear, the voice of a man who had made a decision. "*Give me what I want.*"

The metal fingers loosened further. Shane felt himself consider the alternative—a tight restriction, maybe 10 minutes of applied force, and a face gone white to blue—and felt, simultaneously, that he could not do it. That this was the thing he could not *ever* do. Ilya Rozanov had been doing something to him for days, brick by brick, had been dismantling something that he had thought was structural and was apparently not, and that the dismantling was complete enough that when Shane tried to reach for the ending he had come here to produce, there was nothing there to reach to. No longer any desire.

He pulled his hand from Ilya's skin, reached down, and took Ilya's hand into his, drawing it back upward; a return to the throat, only now Ilya was at risk of suffocating himself. The soldier did not press down, but still, Ilya's hand gripped. The windpipe, constricted, trembling on the border of being crushed.

Shane leaned forward.

Shane kissed ~~you~~ him.



Shane was kissing him, and it was far from gentle. It was not meant to be; it was a challenge, a demand, a true concession because gentleness was made for those that could afford to be so, and neither of them could afford anything, and the kiss knew this, was built of this, was the utmost accumulation of their fantasies—shared and separate.

Ilya's mouth opened, and Shane tasted a note of metal, palladium, almost alcoholic, a vodka-brusied hit that dove straight to his spine and swooped into his stomach. Ilya's hand came up, fisted in the front of his sweater, pulling him in rather than pushing him away, and this—*this*—*did* something in Shane, the last wall inside him sent tumbling down, that had been on the verge of tumbling down for days, and he felt it go without being able to stop it, felt himself spill through into a negative that did not have any name. That was just his.

When Shane pulled back, there was blood on his lower lip. He could not have said whose.

"This isn't what I came here for," he said, but his voice had no conviction in it. The words were technically true and entirely insufficient.

"What did you come here for, then?" Ilya's voice was crude, scraped by the weight that had been on his throat, roughened into something that traveled through Shane like a frequency; he could feel it in his back teeth. "To kill me, or to save me? Or have those been two sides of the same question in your mind this whole time?"

Shane released his hand. Ilya heaved wetly—a quick, involuntary sound, air rushing back into lungs that had been rationing it—that too did something to Shane, and so he took another step backward, then another. He kept his eyes on Ilya.

"You know nothing of yourself," Ilya said, when he had recovered enough oxygen to push it out. A hard reminder snapped at Shane's side like a rubber band.

"Your parents," Shane said finally, because it was the true thing and he had been trained to use the most honest, hurtful things as artillery, but it came out incorrectly, came out without the cruelty he intended to gather behind it, came out as something else entirely—pleading, almost. "They knew *exactly* what they were doing."

Ilya flinched. It was the smallest possible flinch, barely visible. The mention of his parents—architects of nightmare, designers of an inhumane process that stripped the man before him of everything—landed like a hard slap.

"I am not them."

"Aren't you?" Shane's scoff was harsh, cutting; Ilya's lip stung. "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, isn't that the saying? You have the same reckless disregard for consequence. The same arrogance. Parts of you are— are *rotten*—are—"

"That is not true. Spoiled, maybe," Ilya corrected, "but never rotten."

"You—" Shane looked up toward the ceiling as if praying for strength, and Ilya felt a laugh play about his mouth; he wanted to do this again, to drive him crazy. Shane moved closer, because apparently he was constitutionally incapable of maintaining useful distance from this man, because the distance kept collapsing regardless of his intentions. He was close enough now to smell him, and he put every effort into not breathing in. "What do you call this? Standing here, bargaining with a man who was sent to kill you, demanding truth while everything closes in? What do you call using my — "

He stopped. The word had been there, and he had not let it out, had caught it at the last moment, had swallowed it back down. But Ilya grasped at the tail of it and seized it, tugged it, *hard*.

"Using your what?"

Shane's expression closed. "Nothing."

Ilya's eyes were very blue.

"It is not *nothing*," Ilya's voice surged with mocking, and then it quieted. He clutched at Shane's wrist. "*I* think you were going to say attraction."

Shane went completely still. Ilya went another direction.

"*I didn't* know." Ilya's voice broke along the roll of the words, mournful to the fullest extent. "I didn't *know* what they were doing."

Shane craned his neck, peering up at him through a dense, beautiful spread of dark lashes.

"Would it have mattered if you had?"

The question hung between them, unanswerable. Ilya was unsure. He'd like to think it would have, that he would have been brave enough to stand against his own blood. But the truth was, he'd spent his life in willful ignorance, basking at times in the privilege that his family name afforded him, never questioning where the money came from until later on, what built the empire he'd inhabited. Ilya had been silly and stupid and angry—but misdirected. At odds with the world around him.

Ilya thought of what he had told Shane before: *No one is ever happy with the truth.*

"I want to make it right," he said finally. "I didn't know. I want you to believe that. I need—" He stopped. His voice had gone somewhere he had not planned to send it. "*I need* to make it right. Whatever version of right is still available."

"And what if you can't, Ilya?" Shane's voice was only a whisper. "Some things simply can't be undone."

"I know." No argument. Ilya had no strength for another performance of optimism. "I know that. I am not asking to fix it. I am asking to—" He looked at Shane, and this looking was different now, neither pointed nor analytical; the other kind, the kind that Ilya did not seem to know he was doing because it did not appear to be under his control. "—to try. In whatever way possible. With you, if you'll have that."

Shane moved, crossing to where his jacket hung over his shoulders and the meat of his sweater, and he pulled it off, revealing the full extent of the arm: steel shoulder, steel seam, the network of scars radiating outward from the flesh onto the metal where human ended and the program's work began, the red star pressed into the silver like a brand; a map of his suffering.

"This is what your family did," he said, chin jutting outward in an attempt to overpower the shame. He said it as fact and nothing more. "Not only to me, but to dozens. Most didn't survive the process."

Ilya's breath caught. He reached out tentatively, and Shane went still as a corpse. Ilya managed to restrain himself, his fingers hovering over the boundary between flesh and metal. Shane nodded, a quick, sharp dip.

Ilya's fingertips made contact with the raised tissue at the seam. The scars were smooth in some places, puckered in others, topography of what had been done, what had been taken. Ilya traced them all slowly, the heat of his fingers moving between the warmth of the remaining skin and the cold of the metal, and Shane watched him do it, watched his face—watched the grief moving through it that Ilya was not managing, was not controlling, was simply feeling, openly, in front of Shane, as if he had decided that Shane deserved to be shown the real response rather than the curated one. And Ilya's mouth opened, and it rushed out:

"Oh, *мигренюк*. Does it hurt?"

"Always," Shane answered. The word was heavy with years of endurance.

Ilya withdrew his hand. He looked at it as if surprised to find it empty. "I'm sorry."

"Apologies don't undo anything."

"No." Simple agreement. "They don't. I know." Ilya looked up. "I'm saying it anyway. Because it is still something you need."

Shane put his jacket back on. He moved past Ilya, close, close enough that the coat brushed against him, and went to the window, parting the curtain with the metal hand. The city outside was doing the ordinary: lights in windows, the movement of people who did not know anything about them or that anything was happening in this room, the indifferent continuation of everything else.

"They're coming," he said. "You know that."

Back to English.

"Да, I know." Ilya's voice behind him was quiet. "It has been more than three days."

"The files you accessed will have triggered alerts." Shane let the curtain fall. The room came back, smaller than the city, warmer. "Everyone who has a stake in the program—government, private, the ones who want to restart it, and the ones who want to ensure it can never be restarted—they all want what you know."

"And you?" Ilya asked. "What do you want?"

Shane shied away.

"Pack your things," he said. His voice was flat, stripped of the secret that had almost gotten out. "We leave in five minutes."

"I'm not going anywhere until you answer."

Shane's responding laugh was high and harsh, incredulous at the audacity Ilya still managed to display.

"Oh my God. Here you are again, bargaining."

"We have been each other's bargain since the café," Ilya said. "You simply chose not to notice until now."

Shane threw up his hands in exasperation, but Ilya did not falter. He was standing in the center of the room, now, and Shane thought—as he had been thinking, without permission, for days—that he was so utterly *beautiful*, so handsome, especially when he smiled.

The ice skates were hanging on a hook by the door. Shane had noticed them on his first entry and had noted them as he noted everything else—down to the worn blade guards, the scuffed boots, the way they hung limply, no longer useful, but unable to be left behind. He crossed to them now. He touched them with his human fingers, lightly, a delicate gesture of someone handling that which they understood to be significant.

"Do you miss it?" he said. It was not quite a question.

"I was never allowed to do it properly," Ilya said. "Not the way I wanted. Not the way Katya wanted for me either." A pause. "But yes. I was very good. I would've gone far, and my body knows this; it misses what it was built for. I think you know something about that."

Shane's hand dropped from the skates, lingering at the laces before completely retreating. He turned back to Ilya, his eyes dark and almost leaking.

"Why are you still here, Shane?" Ilya asked, and his voice was soft, the voice he saved for younger students and the animals from his childhood to whom he'd shown as much love as he could find. "Do not tell me the mission. *You*. Why are you still here?"

"I—To warn you," Shane said. And then, before Ilya could accept this as sufficient: "And because I cannot make myself leave."

The admission arrived in the room with conviction and stayed there. Shane did not try to take it back. He had been trying to take things back for days, and it had not worked; the things kept being true regardless of whether he claimed them.

"An offer, then," Ilya said.

"Yes."

Ilya inclined his head. "Tell me."

Shane crossed to him, limbs extending with the natural grace of a predator, stopping just short of touching the other; just short. "They are going to take everything. The research in the files and in your head, the counteragent, the knowledge of what your parents built and how to dismantle it. They will extract it willingly or otherwise, and when they are finished with you, they will decide you are either a liability or a resource, and neither outcome is survivable."

"I know," Ilya said.

"So, come with me."

A brittle sound, one Ilya only produced when he was genuinely frightened and refused to show it. "And go where? Live on the run for the rest of my life? I am already living on the run for the rest of my life."

"Live freely," Shane said. "Differently. With someone who always knows what's coming."

Ilya was looking at him, unflinching, eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"You are still more trapped than I am," he said. "In a different kind of cell. You are worse than me. Why would you help me when you cannot help yourself?"

"Because," Shane said, and stopped.

Because you said my name. Because you built a shrine to me on your kitchen counter. Because you looked at a photograph of me before what was done to me and said oh, тигренок in such a tremulous voice that cracked at the seam, and I heard it through the window, and it went into me and has not come out.

You have gone into me; I have not come out.

"Because you are insurance, the only person left who knows how to undo what was done to me," he said instead. The choice of a partial truth. "And because — "

"You are in need of me, aching for it," Ilya said quietly. "Like I am of you."

Shane jerked in place and found himself held; Ilya's hand had subtly found his waist, and his pale fingers were rigid around the bone, like ivy. He tried to harden himself, but he knew it

didn't work as he'd wanted.

"Don't misunderstand me. This isn't forgiveness."

"Mmm," Ilya said. Then, "You truly think I can help you?"

"I know you can." There was no doubt in Shane's voice, no hesitation. "And I know you want to. Your parents might have once been at the helm, but you've spent the past few days studying it, trying to understand what they did. You've pieced together more than you realize."

Ilya wanted to deny it, but the truth was, Shane was right. Since discovering his family's role in the Winter Soldier program, he'd become obsessive, researching extensively, gathering fragments of information, trying to make sense of the barbarity that festered inside of Shane. Atonement, alongside scientific curiosity—desperate, both of them.

"And if I help you," Ilya said carefully, "what then?"

"Then we're done." Shane's voice was matter-of-fact. "You go your way, I go mine."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

Ilya searched his face for deception, then smiled.

"*Лжец.*"

Shane's expression didn't change, but something in his eyes grew colder.

"Then I leave you to them. What happens after that isn't my concern."

It was another lie, and they both knew it. If it wasn't his concern, he wouldn't have been here at all.

"*Лжец,*" Ilya said again, sounding nearly bored with the certainty.

Shane's jaw tightened. "Think what you want."

Then: "Pack your things. Or stay. I don't care which."

"You *do* care, *зайчик,*" Ilya's voice was nowhere near triumphant, nor was it particularly gentle. He was simply certain, and reveled in it. "And it drags you down. That is the problem, isn't it? For both of us."

Nothing.

"Shane," he murmured.

And Shane turned—helpless, which was the word for it, which was the only word for it, because this was what Ilya Rozanov did to him, God *damn* it—turned, and found Ilya sitting

back on the edge of the bed, watching him with those impossible eyes.

"Are you tired of serving, Shane?"

Ilya's voice was soft, almost soothing.

He waited.

Ilya watched how the phrase hit him.

That phrase, that relentless phrase. It shook Shane's teeth, boiled his blood. Ilya was putting his own code inside of him. He sat on the bed, soft and sweet. Shane wanted to carve him up, or maybe have it done the other way around.

Are you tired of serving, Shane?

Ilya crossed to the closet. He removed his packed bag—he had always been packed; this was not new, the readiness to leave had been his constant companion long before the threat of the soldier—and brought it back to the bed. He stood before Shane and held the bag in both hands, then he moved back to the bed. He sat again, slinging the duffel beside him.

It was baby blue, a skater's bag.

Shane met his gaze.

"Tell me, *тигренок*." Ilya's voice was barely above a whisper, patient and unafraid of reigning silence. "Do you get tired of serving?"

Shane felt stuck, both in and outside of himself.

"It is not," Ilya said, "*really* a question of whether I go with you. It is a question of whether you would like to go with me."

He again watched Shane's face, and for just a moment, the mask slipped. Shane seemed determined, and there was something else, something slightly sinister. It sent warmth pooling in the pit of Ilya's stomach.

"Do *I* want to come with *you*?" Shane repeated.

"Yes. We still run, but my way," Ilya said, shrugging. "Together."

The word hung suspended. *Together*. Neither as captor and captive, nor as hunter and prey. Simply undefined. Something turned over in Shane's chest. Turned over and over and settled differently than it had been before; a key finding a lock it had been looking for, the specific click of something that had been held shut for a very long time opening.

He gave in to his first instinct.

"I—Yes," Shane said.

Ilya smiled. It was the wide boxy one from the photograph, the one Shane had been carrying like a shard of glass in the pocket of his heart, since those distant days in the cell. And here, in person, in this light, it was better than he'd imagined.

This was not a fairytale. Shane understood this clearly, even now, knew with a vicious part of him that had been trained to calculate all possible aspects of an assignment. There would be no ending that erased what had come before. The ghosts of the program would follow them, were on him—in the scars at the seam of his shoulder, in the files Ilya carried in his bag—the ghosts were very real. They would be real and inescapable for an eternity.

But he followed Ilya into the hallway.

The apartment door closed behind them with a muddled drop of the latch, which was final in the way of events that did not need dramatics to be definitive. Ahead: the stairs, the street, the city, and beyond it, everything that was coming for them, which was considerable. Shane's metal hand brushed against Ilya's as they descended. Ilya did not pull away.

As they reached the landing, the city yawned ahead of them, enormous and indifferent and full of exits. The Winter Soldier and the son of his creator; an unstable alliance, a desperate gamble.

"Shane," Ilya said.

Shane looked at him. The sun caught on the garnet chain at his throat, the gold of the other, twin trails of vulnerability worn openly, the way Ilya wore every facet of himself—the beauty marks, the depthless well of his emotions, his insistence on trying his hand at what was dangerous, his pride against being seen as weak—openly, as if concealment had never interested him, as if he had decided long ago that if the world wanted to use what he showed against him, then it was the world's problem.

Ilya's eyes were so *bright*. A meteor shower, Shane thought, remembering the words from somewhere he could not locate, from the *pre-time*, in a masculine timbre he felt was special to him. Something that burned and burned and did not care that it burned.

Do you get tired of serving, Shane?

+

SHANE.

Are you tired of serving?

Who do you wish to serve, Shane?

Shane?

Shane?

Shane lunged forward, kissed him.

They bruised.

Ilya made a sound against his mouth—shock, or satisfaction, or both; they were impossible to separate—and kissed Shane back with an intensity that bordered on fatal, and he felt the blood swelling to his lower lip and did not care.

Ilya thought: *this is mine.*

He thought: *Клянусь, я не могу любить тебя больше, чем сейчас, но я знаю, что завтра буду любить тебя так же сильно.*

He thought of nothing after that for a long time.



VI. ILYA.

Тигренок: Этап первый — лечение.

Little Tiger: Phase One — Treatment.



“ ...Anya brought me from Malama, a small French bulldog (Ortino). It's a very cute little thing [...] I am so happy [...]. ”

— Letters of Grand Duchess Tatiana Romanova, Oct. 12

End Notes

thank you, thank you, thank you for reading this and making it all the way here. i love you so much. please comment to your heart's desire; i respond to every single one. see you soon. x

► a brief note

come talk to me on [tumblr](#).

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!