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## The Laurels

Emma MacKinnon  
emackinn@skidmore.edu

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# The Laurels

By Emma Skye MacKinnon

Advanced Projects in Fiction Writing

Professor Greg Hrbek

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You were eighteen when you made it big. Years of winning accumulated to a new life. You suddenly had a promise of millions of dollars, but nothing in your refrigerator and no clue how to wash your clothes. Some of you went to college, where there were hints at life beyond hockey. Parties and business degrees. Other times, you went straight from your childhood bedrooms to your very own apartments. The teams had people for this, people to hand you cards of catering services and interior decorators. That was why you could have a nice looking lasagna in your fridge and a vase full of flowers that had to be fake to survive. When you were drafted into the league, it meant suits, ties, and deodorant. It meant getting a “drafted X overall” that stuck with you for life. It meant TV close-ups and wiping your palm out of view of the cameras before shaking hands with the men who owned your life now. This was the National Hockey League.

At seven years old, any Russian-born boy could show promise for the Russian League. Whacking your knees until they didn't wobble anymore, but bent and supported. You played for your team, yes, even yourself, but mostly you played for Russia. Russian ice was bigger than the NHL standard, and it changed the game. The hockey clubs of the Soviet era had trained using the techniques of everyone from chess players to ballet dancers, and it still showed. You didn't race back and forth like the Canadians, or pass pucks in long stretches across the red line of center ice like the Americans. Shoving players behind the net wasn't your way at all. The puck moved without regard to losing or gaining distance from the goal. The five players, three forwards and two defensemen, wove it between them instead, like a game of cat's cradle.

What you shared between your leagues was superstition and drive. Charm, luck, tradition, all of these words meant the same thing to hockey players, but only if you stuck to them. You had

to line up for your goalie at the end of a game no matter what. As goalie, you had to stand there in your blue trapezoid nest—no matter *what*—and let each of the boys bring his and your helmets together, visor against cage. Most of the time, this ritual was a gesture of gratitude. Like a bow after a dance. But poor performance made it awkward. Like the Quebecois, who kissed each cheek of the people they didn't even like. Poor performance brought on the superstition like a plague. Never say Lord Stanley's name out loud until you've won the Stanley Cup—the same went for Russia's Gagarin Cup. Touch the goal posts to thank them for that *clink* when they've made a save you just couldn't reach. Knock on wood. Trace the center-ice logo, no matter whose stadium you were in. Put your left skate on first, then right. Tell the same story about some night at the bar before each game because you scored the first time you told it. Number 11 is always last out on the ice.

The go-between was as rough as a seascape. The first Russians reached the NHL in the dead of night, through get-away cars, or the need of American treatments for concocted illnesses. They climbed out of an airport bathroom window, contacted agents with barely any English. Or they stayed. They had families, people to leave behind. They wanted to be able to come home again one day. You didn't mean for the cameras to capture you *wanting* and *hoping* this badly. You did it all, knocked on wood and laced your left skate first. You thanked the posts and stood in your goal. You had worked hard, so hard that there had never been time to pick your head up and work at anything else.

And sometimes you still lost.

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Tate Beacon expected someone to be waiting for him when he got off the plane. There was a nervous jump to his heart as he looked around the run-down, quiet Magnitogorsk airport to see if anyone was looking at *him*. Artificial, bluish light hit the once polished floors in shapeless reflections. If Metallurg had put a man on him, and Tate was sure they had, he would know him on sight.

He pulled on his parka. It was his old Metallurg team coat, made of shiny red and white ripstop with the Russian eagle's spread wings across the chest, split by the zipper. He thought it might make him seem less like a stranger, *feel* less like a stranger. Magnitogorsk had been his home once, though that time felt far away now. The Metallurg team had insisted, despite polite protests, that they send a car to collect him. Tate knew it wasn't out of respect. They controlled where he went now, and when. He wondered if Metallurg would send one of his old teammates. Guys lasted longer in Russia than in the NHL and he knew that some of them were still playing, even with joints that, like Tate's, had aged prematurely and ached beneath the strain of hockey. A familiar face would at least have been less intimidating than the man who was walking towards him now.

"Tate Beacon," the man addressed him in a heavy Russian accent. He wore an out-dated suit and no hat, revealing graying hair shaved close at the sides. The muscles around his mouth were beginning to sag and he was starting to thicken out around the middle. Tate remembered him. *Leo*, his mind supplied, and his heart started up a renewed pounding.

"Hello," Tate said. "Yeah, that's me. I..." he glanced out the window at the brightening sky. He was disoriented from the time change. "Good morning."

The man introduced himself as Leo, but nothing more, no sign that he remembered Tate as a former Metallurg player. He looked over Tate's broad form, all six-foot-four of him, from his thick blond hair, a mess from sleeping on the plane, to his blue eyes, only just beginning to show crow's feet at the corners. His Metallurg teammates used to call him *Solnechno* sometimes, "Sunny" essentially, but whether that was because of his hair or their fascination with his home state of California ("You-Ess-Aye!" they'd delighted in chanting), Tate didn't know.

"Metallurg management sends you their welcome," Leo said in Russian. "Do you have all your luggage?"

"Thank you, yes," Tate replied in a shaky breath, tugging his carry-on along. He supposed that was as warm a start as he could have hoped for.

His Russian was as stiff as his worn down body. The syllables rolled off of Tate's tongue half-heartedly. He stuck to the present tense and tried to keep up with Leo's fast conversation.

"Do you play for Metallurg?" Leo asked, eyeing Tate's parka.

"No," Tate replied, though he knew Leo had not needed to ask that question. It almost felt like a challenge, to play along, and so he did. "Not for five year. I retire after I leave Russia. I am, uh, today, commentator for the Laurels. I play for the Laurels *before* Metallurg. Goaltender."

That much was true, but that was also where the truth ended. He was talking too much, Tate knew that. There was nothing that gave a lie away like spelling it out from beginning to end.

"NHL," Leo said in what Tate knew was feigned surprise. "So, why are you here? Your season is going on now, isn't it?"

“Yes,” Tate said, trying not to hesitate. He recited his cover story like he’d been doing over and over again on the plane. “I am reporting on a story. Because Nikita Morozov is on Laurels team very...fast. Uh, soon. I tell it when I go home, on TV.”

“Ah, Morozov,” Leo smiled at the road. One of his back teeth was silver. “Our best player, yes?”

“I am a friend,” Tate said. “Of Nikita.”

He’d scarcely spoken to Nikita Morozov—even back when they’d been in the same practice every day. Nikita had been barely eighteen at the time, with his talent spilling out of his cupped hands. Something in Tate had wanted to slosh it all over the ice with a smack. That part of him was quieter now, or maybe just beaten down, and tired.

“You are a thief.” Leo looked at him in the rear view mirror and laughed loudly, filling the leathery, over-heated space of the car. He hit the steering with with a meaty hand, shaking his head into his grin.

Tate cracked a smile of his own. He’d told the Laurels to send someone else. They should have listened. “Is practice today?”

“Yes.”

“Can you take me to the rink?”

“No,” Leo didn’t meet his eyes this time, just leaned forward to look both ways on the road. “I’m taking you to your hotel.”

Tate kept quiet and looked out the window, at the gridded streets and right-edged buildings. The city was like a memory, eerily familiar despite how hard he had tried to forget.

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Nikita Morozov found that he couldn't look at any part of his home city without thinking of his brother. Not the Metallurg arena, where Artemi had come to watch Nikita play, and especially not the factories, whose smokestacks took up Magnitogorsk's skyline like blooming, invasive plants. It had been two years, and Artemi's death still slammed into him each morning when he opened his eyes. It hit him all over again as he looked out the window of Dima's parked car where the winding lines of steel factory workers heading out for their early shift blocked up the main street pavement. It felt almost strange now, to know that Artemi had walked with them every morning and night for the ten years leading up to his death. Nikita wasn't joining them, and so he hid from their harder lives. Paper bag lunches and flat caps for the eyes to duck behind.

He couldn't look at any part of this city without feeling as though it was trying to hold onto him with each breath it took. He had liked being seen as a star in its eyes, as though he had the most promise, the most future. But right now, that future felt slippery, squeezing itself out of his hands. As far as the Metallurg team was concerned, they would keep his talent right here in Magnitogorsk, where the San Francisco Laurels couldn't think of touching him. Metallurg had let him dream, for a moment. Cruelly. They'd let him travel to New York City two years ago, allowed the Laurels to draft him second overall. They'd allowed him to smile for the cameras and shake hands, and then, two weeks ago, they'd shut those doors—or were trying to. The Laurels didn't feel only a few months away anymore, but as unfathomable as being the height of a man did to a little boy. As unfathomable as losing his older brother. Nikita had been close to giving up when Dima had shoved a phone into his hands and told him to call Tate Beacon.

Nikita looked up now when Dima whistled from outside the car window. He brought rain in with him as he opened the door, pushing in first the paper bag holding their breakfast and two paper-lidded cups of tea.

“Take it, take it,” Dima said quickly. “My fingers are burning off.”

Nikita obliged and Dima sent a last sour look to the factory workers still trickling past before slamming the driver-side door.

“Jesus,” he said. “Just look at them.”

Nikita didn't. “I wish there was another route to the rink.”

“Hm.” Dima seemed to agree, pale blue eyes raising to the smoke clouds. “That shit-hole can suck the life right out of you.”

Nikita flinched.

“Sorry,” Dima said off-handedly. “I just meant—you know what I meant. Our fathers have been wearing down that floor since they were seventeen, just like their fathers, and those fathers, and all of the fathers before that.”

Dima was harsh like this, quick tempered and cold with his words most of the time, just as he was when on the ice. Nikita's mother always asked him why he spent so much time with him, especially since Dima had nearly nine years over Nikita's twenty-three. A little older than Artemi had been.

“They can't be too pleased with where they ended up.” Dima was still talking, crinkling the bag to get at his pastry now. “But I guess they probably never thought any bigger.”

“My brother,” Nikita reminded Dima shortly.

“Oh, and Artemi was so happy with his life?” Dima sent him an incredulous look.

Nikita just looked back. “He was happy.”

“He was happy for *you*, when you got the Laurels. That’s different. Honestly, maybe he was only all right, maybe our fathers are only all right, because we’ll be able to take care of them.”

Nikita didn’t know why Dima sounded so disgusted. Playing for Metallurg had its benefits, it was true, and Nikita planned on pulling his father out of that damn factory the second he could. He would have done the same for Artemi. He wondered if his parents would ever dream of coming with him to California—if he even made it there himself.

Dima pointed a finger from around his take-away cup at Nikita’s phone. “Speaking of taking care. Have you heard anything?”

“Don’t you think you’d know if I had?”

The phone call to Tate had been a rushed, panicked business. He hadn’t gotten more than a few words in before he had hung up, sure that they were being watched, or listened to. *They’re going to make me stay*, he’d said in hurried Russian after Tate’s lazily drawled, American, *hello?* It had probably made no sense. He hadn’t even give Tate his name.

“Maybe they think you’re being watched,” Dima said. “We know you are. Maybe the Laurels told Beacon not to contact you until they get someone over here to help.”

“What makes you so sure they’re sending anyone at all?”

“Why wouldn’t they?”

Nikita held his tea closer to him, trying to take comfort in the familiar, strong scent. Hockey had never betrayed him before. It had only ever been solace. He didn’t know what to

want besides that green and white Laurels jersey, and he had never dreamed that it would become a threat to him instead of a thrilling future.

“I don’t really remember Tate very well,” Nikita said. He’d been a rookie at the time, nervous and amazed to be there on the ice with some of his childhood heroes.

Dima shook his head, face tightening up as he started the reluctant engine. “He always had something sad about him. Too loud, but he is American, so...”

“Are you sure he can help me?”

Dima sighed and took a sharp, annoyed turn to get away from the workers. “No, of course not.”

Nikita looked down at his untouched breakfast and pictured some sort of American lawyer barging into the locker room and demanding that Nikita come with him. *Would he go?* If it was like that, like some sort of jail-bust, would he?

“Someone will come,” Dima spoke again as the arena came into view. His voice was softer. “Okay? Because they want you.”

“So does Metallurg.”

“Aren’t you lucky, then. I guess we’ll see who wants you more.”

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Metallurg had been away on a roadtrip for the last four days, and Tate had barely left his room for the most part, in case someone came to collect him. He spent most of that time sitting, and walking from his room’s window to its small closet. Magnitogorsk was a grayscale, accented by the occasional shriek of construction or children playing pick-up games of hockey on the small rinks they created out of flooded street corners, winter grass poking through the thin sheets

of ice. He listened to the muted sounds of the city outside his window and tried to figure out how he was going to make this work.

Tate had no way to reach Nikita and tell him he had arrived. He didn't want to risk calling him back on the number that had lit up his phone in the middle of a Tuesday, two weeks ago. He'd answered to a startling jumble of panicked Russian, and his brain had barely begun to translate before the line went dead again. He'd understood enough to set off quiet alarm bells in his mind, though, enough to take it to Pat, the Laurels general manager. Something about being made to *stay*. The Russian, and the timing of it all, he supposed, gave him pause. The young voice, too, which he somehow managed to match in his mind to the loping, beautiful skating of Nikita Morozov. The Laurels had agreed, but Tate had never thought that it would lead to this.

"Look," Pat had reasoned with Tate after sliding the plane ticket to Magnitogorsk across his desk. They had been in his office, high up in the Laurels arena and looking down over the ice through an inside window. "Nikita Morozov is ours. By contract, and it looks like by his own choice, too, given the fact that he phoned *you* up."

Tate wished Nikita hadn't. Tate wished he was back in California, away from Russia. Away from his past. He should have been broadcasting the San Francisco Laurels' pre- and post-game shows with his fellow commentators. Not that it had been much of a show lately, they were at the bottom of the league standings. Pat was right about one thing. They did need Nikita Morozov. They needed his speed, and his wicked shot. The Laurels were desperate for fresh talent and it showed.

Pat had laced his thick fingers in front of him—fingers that had lifted the Stanley Cup three times. Fingers that probably gave the championship rings grief. “You’ve got the language, and they know you, you once played with them. And we’ve got the money.”

Tate had looked across the desk at Pat, then down at the plane ticket. “You think I’ll have to bribe someone.”

“Maybe multiple someones,” Pat seemed to already be moving on from him, eyes back on his computer. “These defections never go the same way twice.”

“You’re assuming that he will defect.”

“Why wouldn’t he? What’d he call you for, then? He obviously wants out.”

“Yeah, fine,” Tate replied. “But wanting out for good is different than wanting to be able to come back home again someday.”

Pat had waved this off, too, as if it was ridiculous that a player might choose his home, his family, over the NHL.

“If you need more money, just call. It’s not a problem. Not when it comes to Morozov.”

Tate had remained silent until Pat, finally, glanced up again.

“Look, man, it’s not like I’m sending you into a Soviet death-trap or something. Plus, you’ve got your cover story. What’s the problem?”

He couldn’t tell Pat the problem. He had never told a single soul and he probably never would. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he frantically listed off all of the people who knew or might know. There weren’t many, but they were exactly the people whose lives he was about to step back into.

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The team was singing, and Nikita sang with them. Victory poured into their cups and down their throats. Eight out of ten of the final regular season games won, and they were sealed into the battle for the Gagarin Cup. Nikita couldn't seem to stop laughing, the soundless, breathless laugh of being well on his way to drunk. It tumbled from him over and over again, mingling with Dima's before either of them even knew what they were laughing at. Maybe at each other. Maybe at their teammates jostling for food around the back room of the restaurant Metallurg had rented out, heavy footed tables covered with thick, starched tablecloths that Nikita kept losing his napkin in. The team raised toast after toast after toast. Sergei, their captain, even managed to wrangle a few reluctant words out of Coach down at the other end of the table. He tried with the guards, too—and they were guards, not the *assistant coaches* they called themselves. He even sloshed vodka on Leo's suit jacket while he was at it, but was unsuccessful.

Coach stood awkwardly, sternly suppressing the barest hint of a smile, and allowed Sergei to fill his slim vodka glass.

“To hard work. God knows we try,” Coach said, and the table laughed. He'd made it very clear in the locker room that he would have preferred a cleaner win that night, but he raised his glass all the same. Deep calls of appreciation went up around the table and Nikita raised his own glass again, glinting with vodka, some of it escaping in droplets out of the corners of his mouth.

“And to Russia,” Coach continued. “May we bring the Gagarin Cup home to Magnitogorsk.”

Nikita paused even as his teammates seemed to swell with volume and pride. They refilled their glasses greedily. That one wouldn't go down so easily.

Dima, beside him, reached for Nikita's glass. "Too good for us now?" He downed Nikita's share as well as his own.

"No," Nikita said quickly. "Of course not."

All Nikita worried about was that he wasn't good *enough*. It wasn't about him, though. It was only that he wasn't sure he played hockey *for Russia*. He didn't win *for Russia*. That was an old value, those were old words. Maybe not for his father, or his mother, who liked that sort of thing, those grand, insignificant gestures for the State. When Nikita played, he saw his brother. Always, *always*, there was Artemi in his mind, getting home late from the factory but waking Nikita up anyway to hear about practice. He supposed, looking back at it, that Artemi could have been painfully jealous, especially when they were young and it had been Nikita, and not him, who had shown *athletic promise*, as the handlers had put it. It had been Nikita who had been yanked into trying youth teams and training camps. But if he had been jealous, Artemi had never shown it. Nikita didn't think he would have shown it now, either. He would have shared in Nikita's joy.

Tonight, when they'd won themselves a clear shot at the Cup, Nikita had done something he had carefully been avoiding since Artemi's death. He had looked for his brother in the crowd.

Dima listed against him again. "Hey. Guess who I saw today, at the game."

Nikita didn't look over at him. He needed time to arrange his features away from the grief that seemed to hold him always in a firm grip, loosening some, only to tighten when he least expected it.

"Who?" he replied.

Dima smiled at him lazily, wide and intoxicated. "Cheer up. You'll like it."

“Who?” Nikita asked again, more firmly, and held his hand over his glass when Dima tried to pour him another drink.

Dima knocked it away and poured anyway, then pushed the glass into his hands. “Tate Beacon.”

A spark went through Nikita. He stared at Dima, who still looked pleased with himself.

“You waited until now to tell me?” Nikita asked, a smile of his own forming again.

“*Where?*”

“The rink,” Dima tilted his face away then, back and up to sip his drink. “Looked right at me.”

“Beacon,” Nikita repeated, a laugh escaping. “They sent Beacon? Why, what can he do? He’s just a—well, retired player.”

Nikita pictured again, not Tate Beacon, but the loud, American lawyer he had imagined they would send for him, smelling of new leather and hair gel. “Do you think he’ll talk to management?”

“*Drink,*” was all Dima replied, sliding his glass more insistently so that its bottom bunched up the tablecloth. “Or you’ll forget how to hold your liquor in America. How embarrassing for us.”

Nikita laughed, giddy, and tilted the glass back. He had not expected Tate Beacon, but he was sure the Laurels had a plan. They would reason with Metallurg, make them let Nikita go to San Francisco. The Laurels needed him, Nikita wasn’t afraid to admit it. He was only afraid, sometimes, that he wouldn’t live up to it all. He badly wanted to talk to Artemi.

“Hey.” Dima put an arm around his chair, unsteady and rough. “Listen.”

“You’re drunk,” Nikita laughed, reaching for the bottle. “Give me that—”

“*Listen,*” Dima said more harshly, and Nikita blinked. Dima’s blue eyes were pin-pricked pupils. His palm gripped Nikita’s shoulder. “We’re going to win this time. Promise me. We’re going to beat them.”

*This time.* Nikita knew that Dima was thinking of five years ago, when they’d lost the championship to Moscow in the final round. Predictions pointed towards the two teams facing off again.

Nikita shook his head. “I can’t promise that. No one can.”

“*Promise* you’ll stay for the Cup. Don’t go. For me?”

Dima’s voice seemed to duck beneath the chaos of the restaurant’s noise in a fast current all of its own and aimed straight at Nikita. His cheeks were flushed too bright from the alcohol beneath the white restaurant lights.

“Stay?” Nikita breathed. “Dima, what?”

“Artemi always wanted to see you win a Cup. In Russia,” Dima pressed on, and Nikita tensed beneath his hold. “Please. We’re so close.”

Nikita looked down, jaw tight. “You don’t have to tell me that.”

But, then again, Dima was wrong. Maybe Artemi had wanted to see him win a Gagarin, but he had also stayed up late with Nikita, sounding San Francisco out at his bedroom ceiling. The *Ss-Cc*. It was hard. He had to have it perfected by the time he arrived, and Artemi had always been better at English.

“Nikita,” Dima snapped, startling Nikita into a flinch. Dima’s eyes immediately looked guilty.

“Of course,” Nikita replied, but it felt automatic. He played for Artemi, but Artemi wasn’t here to tell him what to do, what to want.

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Tate had seen them. Not just Nikita, limbs like he was still growing into them and big, brown eyes, but Dima Mikailov, too. Blond hair so bright it was almost white and his missing-tooth grin. Tate hadn’t needed to prepare for Nikita. He talked about him enough on TV. Dima, however...the sight of Dima in his goaltender mask and massive padding was hard to stomach. It was one thing to think about seeing him again, but quite another entirely to watch him skate out onto the ice with Nikita like five years hadn’t passed at all. Tate tried not to think of his time here often. The most, probably, had been when he’d had nothing else to do on the plane over. It was usually just a flinch of a thought, like those before falling asleep. Now, being here made the past feel like a bad hit, ramming him into the boards chest first, neck snapping back, willing him to remember.

When he’d first come to Russia, it had been because he had begun to fail. At everything. Hockey was seeping out of him like a leaking faucet, his girlfriend had left him. The NHL no longer wanted him, even after two Stanley Cups. Once a champion...once a champion. They didn’t tolerate slack. Neither did the KHL, but with so many players making grasps at the Western leagues, the Russians were more lenient, more accepting. It was ironic. He’d only left the Laurels because he’d thought somewhere else might get him off of the bench, back into a starting goaltender slot. It had happened—briefly. For a half a season, he and Dima had competed for starts. Until Dima had won out and Tate had found himself back on the bench, hiding beneath the shadow of a baseball cap.

At least his teammates had liked him. Good natured mocking of his accent, how he couldn't hold his drink. Summer trips to various dachas that were occasionally gifted to the veteran players by the team for good service. Nikita had been new, starstruck, and eighteen, playing with puppy paws. Dima hadn't changed a bit. His jokes could cut and sting, but brought smiles all the same. He was just three years younger than Tate, close enough for it to be all the more maddening that he was still so much *better*, stronger and agile.

When they'd made it to the play-offs in his fourth year, Tate hadn't felt nearly half of the same excitement as he had in the NHL. It was a championship, but it wasn't *his*. It wasn't the silver bowl he'd been dreaming of since he was a child. The Gagarin was that dream for the Russians, though, and he had to admit that their excitement was contagious, even if he had quietly resigned himself to the bench. They had been matched against CSKA Moscow, and the year had felt all the more strange because Moscow—usually staggeringly good—had been struggling. That stroke of luck had sent the Metallurg locker room into bouts of strong superstition. No haircuts, no washing jerseys. Increasingly complicated pre-game handshakes. At least some things didn't change across leagues.

And then Dima had blown out his knee. Tate didn't remember how, but such confusion, he knew now, had probably been part of the plan all along. The doctors certainly would never question the injury, but write down any cause they were told for a little cash. *Sports-based*, rather than *blunt force*. That was the way here. Dima was suddenly out indefinitely, and Tate was *in*. He was *starting*, playing, leading the team out onto the ice. When Moscow asked him for an interview, he had been sure that was why. Audiences liked the American goalie story. The four men that had collected him hadn't been reporters, though, but rather the guards that lined both

Moscow and Metallurg's locker rooms like *no exit* signs. Leo had been one of them. They weren't KGB, not anymore, but rather the Federal Security System, the watchful eyes of a team owned by one of Russia's appointed oligarchs, made filthy with wealth off of Magnitogorsk's steel industry.

That was where Tate first knew Leo from. That dim room somewhere in the depths of Moscow's stadium. Leo had been working for the CSKA Moscow team at the time, under Moscow's head coach, Vladimir Raskalov. Once Tate had realized what was actually happening, that this was, in fact, *not* an interview, he remembered being surprised that a man such as Raskalov would show his face at such a time. Why not simply let men like Leo do the dirty work? That was what they were designed for, with their identical black suits and thick necks.

Raskalov had chosen his words carefully, letting realization dawn over Tate slowly. *Congratulations, you must be excited for this chance at the Cup, is your family back home watching... All softballs, until—Congratulations to yourself and your girlfriend, too. Danielle, yes? How far along is she? Yes...childbearing can be so unpredictable.* The language had been clinical and stark. Tate had answered questions naively for longer than he cared to admit, but in the end, Raskalov, with his guards standing behind Tate's back, had made his intentions clear.

There was only one player in ice hockey who could truly strive for a semblance of influence over the game's outcome, and that was the goaltender. They were the most superstitious. They got their own hotel rooms, even as rookies, and this was why. No one wanted to throw them off, bother them, cause them to get a restless night's sleep, because if a goaltender played poorly, his teammates couldn't always bail them out. If it was the other way around, the

goalie could save the day. Tate had always liked that. There was a strange, awe-filled fear that came to goaltenders from their peers. Tate remembered basking in it.

It had felt so unnatural, but, then again, so *easy*, to let Moscow win. *Only enough so that we win, mind you*, Raskalov had actually *smiled* at him. *We don't want your coach pulling you out and putting in someone else*. He'd had to think quickly. There were worse things he could have been asked to do. This could be a perfect crime, nearly undetectable. All it would take was one extra shot. He could make it look like a sloppy miss, take the game from 3-3 to 3-4, at the very end, and then it would be over. He remembered panting behind his mask, feeling like the effort of pulling his glove had been more strenuous than any single save. He remembered hoping Nikita wouldn't do what he always did and save them with a last minute goal. He hadn't. Tate had watched his broad shoulders heave on the bench, exhausted and disappointed.

Tate had stopped sleeping. His girlfriend of the time, Danielle, hand on her swollen belly, had taken him to the hospital days later, dehydrated and sick—the very same hospital that Dima was in with his knee, muscles and bone pinned tediously back into place. Tate had stood over Dima's unconscious form in a hospital bed, all hot tears and apologies. He wondered if Raskalov had asked Dima to throw the games, too. It just made it worse, that knowledge that Dima, in the end, may have again been stronger than he was.

Five years later, Vladimir Raskalov had moved up in life. He was no longer Moscow's head coach, but was now Metallurg Magnitogorsk's president. He had acquired Metallurg's Steel Works, appointed as oligarch by the Kremlin. Tate wondered how Dima bore it, living in the shadow of a man who would mutilate for a win. It wasn't about fairness. It wasn't about fame. It was cold, hard ambition, just adding up and up, to no peak. Raskalov had somehow picked Tate

right out of the crowd as someone they could needle into. Maybe it had been Tate's lack of ambition. He had been giving up for a long time by then. He supposed that Moscow had seen just how badly he had been dying to feel needed. And so he had betrayed Metallurg that year. It had been under duress, but betrayal all the same.

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It smelled like home. Cooking sausages and tangy pickled vegetables, so good and warm that it made Nikita smile. He couldn't count the number of times he'd stolen sips of the spiked tea that parents drank while watching their children skate. It almost made him sad now, that he didn't have to swipe the thermoses anymore, that he could have brought his own. Nikita looked up at the cathedral that towered above the small, out-door rink, its floodlights casting him and the shrieking children skating around him in a warm glow. He passed its gray stone and spiraling towers everyday. He wondered, should he make it to San Francisco, what he would see every day then, what would become as familiar to him as the bit of red spray paint on one side of the door that had been scrubbed to no avail.

One of the cathedral's garden hoses had been fed into the flat stone pavement to create the sheet of ice. It was small, barely a quarter of the size of a real rink, but the kids had still managed to squeeze at least three pick-up games on it, pucks tangling and tears being shed over broken rules. While he waited, Nikita played with the kids. He practically floated on his skates, spinning and playing keep away effortlessly. He weaved the puck out between kids' legs, teasing them, before snapping it back close to his body and circling behind them. He didn't want spiked tea. He only wanted this.

“Hey,” said a voice from behind him, and Nikita turned sharply and found Tate gliding hesitantly towards him on a pair of skates. The blades were the longer, thicker ones of a goaltender. It startled him, to find Tate so close. Until now, he’d only been a glimpse of the past, of a face that Nikita tried to make match the voice he had heard over the phone. It had been tedious work, getting Tate any sort of message at all since his cover, posing as a reporter, was a bust. He was barely allowed in the locker room save to snap a few pictures or videos that were then picked through carefully by Leo. It had been Dima’s idea to make sure that Tate overheard them talking about this night game, asking some of their teammates to come along. This bustling rink was as alone as they were going to get.

“Hey,” Nikita replied. “Um. My English isn’t so good. We can talk in Russian, right?”

Tate nodded, then laughed a little. He looked as nervous as Nikita felt, and spoke in Russian. “Yes, but...my Russian is bad. I don’t speak it for a long time. But I try.”

Nikita nodded, still adjusting. Tate was massive, as tall as Nikita, but broader. No wonder he’d become a goaltender. His face didn’t look it, though. Something about the expression in his eyes made him seem smaller, *sadder* as Dima had said that day in the car. Tate seemed to be studying him, too, eyes flicking up and down, then behind him to the cathedral and back.

“Thank you for meeting me,” Nikita said after a silence. “I know it’s been hard. This was Dima’s idea.”

Something in Tate’s posture changed. “You are friend? With Dima?”

Nikita nodded and glanced around. Dima was here somewhere, obviously, if Tate had gotten the skates from him. He wondered if he was purposely giving them time alone. “Yes. Aren’t you?”

Tate just offered a shaky smile and ducked his head, looking at his skates.

“Congratulations,” was all he said in response. “About play-offs.”

Nikita let out a breath, a pleased feeling rushing through him like wind.

“Thank you,” he smiled. If he could get Metallurg into the play-offs, he hoped the Laurels would see that he could get them there, too. He kept an eye on their low standings, but it didn't bother him that they were a failing team. Nikita liked the idea that he could be the reason they turned things around. It was a high hope. Nothing ever depended on one, single player in hockey. But he still thought about it.

“Can I ask you...” Nikita began. “Why you are here?”

Tate looked confused. “On the phone, when you call me, you say that Raskalov makes you sign. Yes?”

“Not yet,” Nikita said, and swallowed. A puck found its way near him, and he shot it off again in a random direction. “Not yet, but—no, I mean, why *you*? I don't mean to be rude, but why not, I don't know, a lawyer. A manager.”

This question seemed to make Tate uncomfortable. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, rubbed at the stubble on his jaw. “Our rules...*law* doesn't apply in Russia. We cannot, uh, give penalty to Metallurg,” he laughed a little. *Take them to court*, Nikita assumed he meant, but only remembered the language of hockey. “But we can protect you. And I am here before. The Laurels think maybe it is good I speak Russian—a little. And...and your management... Raskalov, he knows me. They think this helps. That I can get more close to you than someone else.”

“Raskalov,” Nikita repeated softly.

“Why do you say ‘not yet?’” Tate asked. “You have talked to Raskalov again?”

“No,” Nikita said. “No, it’s not that, I…”

He wanted to squeeze his eyes shut against the thought of being inside Raskalov’s office, way up high at the Metallurg arena. The memory was bathed in a bright, white light, cast from the inside window that looked down over the ice. Raskalov had sat proud and straight behind his desk, with his gaunt face and the red handkerchief always tucked into his suit pocket. Coach had been in the room, silent as a frightened mouse in the corner, as well as Leo, standing behind Nikita. Nikita had been so shaky on the drive home that he had barely been able to tell Dima about it.

“I don’t know what’s taking so long, but…” Nikita began. “Maybe it’s the play-offs. He knows that I’ll stay for now if there’s a chance at the Gagarin.”

He thought of Dima, and the desperate way he had held his arm at dinner that night. He thought of Artemi. He could stay for them. He could stay now, and then, later…

“You maybe do something now,” Tate said it like a question, mouth pressed thin. “Maybe this is best time, if Raskalov thinks you stay. If you want the Laurels, you come now. It is best.” Tate glanced behind him, Nikita wasn’t sure what for, and when he looked back at Nikita his eyes were wider. “*I cannot stay in Russia for long time. Okay? Do you want to come?*”

Nikita just stared at him, mouth open, as he realized what Tate was suggesting. His fingers tightened around his hockey stick and he jumped when a small child fell into his legs.

“I’m not—” he began harshly, but bent to scoop the child back to their feet. The little boy wobbled, but made it to his older brother, who was looking at Nikita in awe. Nikita took a stride towards Tate. “I am *not*…”

“Defect.” Tate finished the word he had not been able to say. He sounded like he had practiced it, it was smoother, more correct, and like it was obvious. Nikita was already shaking his head, and Tate furrowed his brows. “Why are you say no? Nikita...*why* am I here?”

“Not *that!*” Nikita said. “No, you have to talk to management, Raskalov, tell them I can’t sign two contracts. That’s why you’re here, not to—not for *that.*”

“I cannot *shit* in the arena and they don’t watch me,” Tate snapped. “You think I can *talk* to Raskalov?”

Nikita knew he should have expected this. Perhaps his own mind had simply not let him reach the point of thinking about leaving his family like he knew other Russian players had. Without a word. Without security. Leaping into a new life with no ladder or net.

“If I leave in the way you say I should...I can’t ever come home. *No*, Tate.” Nikita watched his stick trace the ice between the hard-capped toes of his skates. “No...”

*But if I went...*

It was a small voice, saying this, but it was there, even urgent. *Go, go, go.* Even the suggestion made him miss his mother in sharp pangs. He was surprised to find that he felt almost embarrassed. He should have realized. After all, he was the one who had set this in motion. Of *course* his phone call had sounded like a plea for rescue. He *was* embarrassed—and there was shame in there somewhere, too.

“I want to say,” Tate murmured hesitantly when he realized Nikita wasn’t going to speak again. “I am sorry about your brother.”

Nikita blinked, surprised.

“I see him on TV, when you are drafted to the Laurels. You are close?”

“Were,” Nikita managed hoarsely, because if they were going to talk about his brother, Tate’s childish, *present* Russian was going to ruin him. “Yes.”

“He looks so happy for you—”

“Yes,” Nikita cut him off, leaning on his hockey stick. *He looked.* “Yes...”

“He is happy...about Laurels?” Tate said, and he looked guilty now, like he had figured out what he was saying wrong but obviously couldn’t fix it.

“Yes,” Nikita whispered, and found that he felt like he was going to cry.

“So...” Tate prompted. “*Come.* It’s the NHL. It’s...” Tate looked down, voice suddenly raw. “It is incredible. It is perfect.”

Nikita wondered which tense that last part was really supposed to be in for Tate. He rubbed a palm over his face. Artemi had been happy. In New York, on his draft day, Nikita had slipped his jersey over Artemi’s head. Artemi had stared for a long time, neck craned to see his back in the mirror. *Morozov. II.* Clean and shiny compared to the rough uniform he wore to work. Captain Callum Holly of the Laurels wore number eleven, too. Some players didn’t care about what number they wore. Nikita had thought he wouldn’t mind giving 11 up, but, after Artemi, he wanted that jersey. He wanted the number he’d seen on his brother’s back. He wanted it in Laurel green.

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The lights that lit up the cathedral became harsher as the night grew deeper. It must have been the falling dusk giving them warmth before, because as Tate looked up, waiting for his kolbasa, they felt more like searchlights now, watching the skaters below. The old stone was streaked with spray paint in places around the base, the grass trampled down, maybe from years

of freezing it over. It looked as much of Magnitogorsk looked. Rough, like someone had purposely smeared dirt over its surfaces. Tate could see how this city had been touched, *used*. The spotlighted stone and the bright red spray paint. The watchful eyes, the protective communities. For a moment, he did miss it here, unsure what exactly he was missing. This place had never felt like home. The feeling had nothing to do with hockey, or himself, but how he had felt living in this air, filled with everyone knowing everyone.

He burrowed his hands into his pockets, rubbing the kopeks there between his thumb and forefinger nervously, then startling when the man behind the sizzling grill nudged him with the full plate to get his attention. Tate took his first bite and looked for Nikita again. He had left him on the ice, seeming shaken but pleased. Tate had remembered about his brother's death at the last second. The Laurels had only known of it because events like that could impact an athlete's play. It was a low shot, and Tate felt guilty, but something in Nikita's resistance had pushed him towards it. If he could bring Nikita Morozov to the Laurels, if he could bring Nikita something *more*, maybe he'd sleep better at night. The Laurels would be thankful. They'd finally see him as something other than a burden, and he was tired of feeling like dead weight. Nikita was the opposite, the shining star, and Tate wanted, *needed*, just a little bit of that light.

"Hello, sunshine."

Dima looked just as cold as the lights with his blond hair and pale eyes. His missing incisor showed when he smiled. Tate's heartbeat jumped. Earlier, Dima had simply slammed the skates into Tate's hands and walked away. It had felt like a warning shot. In the locker room, as Tate had tried desperately to get Leo to let him within talking distance of Nikita, Dima had kept watchfully apart. It had only served to make Tate more afraid. *Did he know?* Could he tell, five

years ago, that Tate's failings in net had been deliberate? Tate uselessly tried to read Dima, but goaltenders were known for their poker faces. He still limped on his bad knee, though, just a little, as if it hadn't healed quite right. Like a reminder. God knew how he played on it.

Dima gestured to Tate's plate. "Miss Russian food?"

Tate didn't, not really, but he nodded. He was worried he was going to give himself away somehow if he opened his mouth—about Raskalov, about Moscow five years ago, the thrown games, the *shame*, all because Tate had given in to Raskalov's threats and Dima had stood tall, leading to his knee being wrecked, getting him out of the way.

"You can speak," Dima said in English, and waved his hands at Tate then stole his second sausage. "I know everything, *speak*. Nothing is so private as a crowd."

Tate swallowed. The sausage was hot, burning his throat. *Everything*. About *what*? "You know what Nikita wants, then."

A dimple appeared at the corner of Dima's mouth as he chewed. "*Nikita* doesn't even know what Nikita wants."

"He says he'll come." The words had more or less blurted out of Tate's mouth.

The motion of Dima's jaw froze, the mush of food bulking out one cheek a bit. His blue eyes unfocused, thinking.

"Does he," Dima said faintly.

Tate looked over to where Nikita was still playing with the kids and was flooded with a sense of protectiveness all over again, the same that he had felt during their conversation. He kept looking over at Tate and Dima. *I'm scared*, is what Nikita had said, and Tate had honestly thought it was over right then, that he had flown all this way, caused himself this much regret, for

a kid who thought he had much more power than he actually did. But then Nikita had looked him in the eye and asked, *When?*

“Well.” Dima cleared his throat. He swallowed the food, and tossed the empty wrapper away. “We’ll see.”

Tate wasn’t sure what that meant, but the look on Dima’s face was enough to unsettle his appetite. “It’s a big decision. Either way, he’ll probably have some regrets.”

Dima raised his eyebrows. “Oh? Speaking from experience?”

The way Dima spoke made almost everything sound like a joke. Tate remembered that. It was irritating, but it could lighten the mood of the entire locker room if applied correctly.

“Don’t play dumb,” Dima said, then jerked his head towards the ice. “Come on.”

Tate was even more unsteady than before, trying to keep up with Dima’s quick strides around the edge of the rink. The old, well-used muscles of skating felt tired. They pulled and pushed within his legs all wrong. Food rolled in his stomach, bright-colored children’s coats blurred at the edge of his vision. The ice reflected the cathedral lights back into his eyes as he followed Dima.

“I know you visited me in the hospital,” Dima said.

“We were friends,” Tate could hear the tremble in his own voice.

“Okay,” Dima allowed. “But why cry?”

Tate stared at him, maneuvering sharply around a kid racing with a puck. “You—but you weren’t awake.”

“Why say that you’re sorry?”

If it weren't for the glide of the ice, Tate would have been stock-still. Dima had his hands clasped neatly behind his back, as though he really *did* already know everything and was simply lying in wait. *Because I am sorry*. Tate could almost say it. Almost. He woke up every day sorry about most things, but it was something else entirely to face them in person.

"Because," Tate stuttered. "Because I lost the Cup for us. Because I missed that shot."

"Oh, is that all?" Dima pushed on, voice calm. "Do *you* have regrets, Beacon?"

That was enough for Tate to be sure that Dima knew something. He knew he had thrown the game, somehow, maybe. Panic rushed through him. Tate looked up at the cathedral, casting them in their own bubble of light. He could get out ahead of Dima, take away whatever cat-and-mouse act he was playing at. Maybe this would be off of Tate's chest, and he could take Nikita and leave for good. He didn't miss this place now.

"They threatened me," Tate said, because that was something Dima would understand. That was something that didn't need to be explained, but he tried. "My girlfriend was pregnant at the time, I—Dima, the things they said..."

To Tate's surprise, Dima scoffed. "Oh, and you are the only one they have ever threatened."

Tate just bowed his head, watching his feet take small strides. Tate wasn't the only one to suffer at Raskalov's hands, but there *was* a difference between himself and Dima. Tate was American, and sometimes that was enough for the Russians. It went beyond the threats that Raskalov had designed just for him. They'd thrown athletes in prison for less. Tensions were always high.

“I don’t blame you for wanting to play,” Dima sounded like he was talking through his teeth. “But what you did is—” Dima stopped hard, rounding on the edge of his blades to stop Tate, too. “We *were* friends. How could you do that to me?”

“I knew that you had been stronger against them than I had been,” Tate pleaded. “Dima—I couldn’t say no to them. I couldn’t, please, I thought they would hurt my family and, at that point in my life, they were all I fucking had. I wasn’t a *hockey* player anymore.” Tate shook his head, at a loss. “I was barely anything at all.”

“And so you fuck my knee up and take me down with you?” Dima’s voice rose, disbelieving.

Whatever Tate had been about to say shriveled up on his tongue. “What?”

Tate’s hesitation seemed to make Dima pause, too. They stared at each other, and Tate couldn’t hear anything for a moment as he realized what Dima believed had happened five years ago. It made his stomach drop.

“Jesus Christ. I didn’t fucking hurt you, Dima.”

He watched Dima’s expression shift. Dima blinked a few times, moving his weight off of his bad knee. It wasn’t understanding, exactly, when his eyes finally cleared. It looked like defeat. Or acceptance. He ran a hand over his mouth, through his hair. He arched his neck like it ached.

“I didn’t hurt you,” Tate said again, partly for Dima, partly to hear the words himself. He may not have physically taken Dima out of the game all those years ago, but he still felt responsible.

“I said no, I wouldn’t throw the game,” Dima said in a low voice. “And so they took me out and asked you.” He didn’t even wait for Tate to nod, not that Tate felt that he could, but laughed humorlessly. “You never could take much. Not drink, not pressure, not losing... Well. Maybe losing now.”

Finally, that old list in Tate’s head didn’t seem to matter. Dima knew. Dima was looking right at him, knowing. Tate tried again to remember what Metallurg had said about Dima’s accident, what story they had given as to how it had happened. He couldn’t. For the life of him, he couldn’t remember. It was as though he had tried to erase those moments.

“I was drunk,” Dima said. “I was drunk when it happened. It was the night we won game six, I...I thought maybe you were, too, and feeling sorry for yourself like you always did, and...”

Tate had to take a moment to swallow that down. He wasn’t wrong about that, at least. “And they told you it was me.”

They stood in silence, Dima taking in his mistake. Tate could have shaken him. He watched his gaze, astounded and afraid, wander over to Nikita who was kneeling now, tying a little boy’s skate. What things would they say to him, in the end, to try and make him stay? How could Tate get ever get Nikita out of it?

“You didn’t do it,” Dima said softly.

“No,” Tate said. “I wouldn’t. Letting an extra puck in is one thing. I thought no one would ever know. But hurting you...”

Dima was still watching Nikita. “It’s hopeless. Nikita won’t be able to say no.”

“You did.”

“And look what happened.”

“Well, look what happened when I said yes.”

Dima seemed, for the first time, just as Tate was. An older player, running out of steam and willing himself not to.

“It doesn’t matter what you say,” Dima replied, then pressed his lips together, angry, and turned away from Nikita. Tate was left with no choice but to follow him.

“You know...no matter what you did or didn’t do, you still took what could be my only championship.” Dima’s mouth twisted up in a sad smile.

“Why have him call me, then?” Tate asked incredulously. “He told me it was your idea.”

“Because I thought you—” Dima cut off with a frustrated noise. “I needed you to see me. That I was still *better*. They told me it was *you*...” He seemed almost to be speaking to himself for a moment, riddled with disbelief. “God, a second ago, I could have broken your fucking leg.”

Tate maneuvered his skates away from him on instinct. He wondered how much Dima meant that. “You called me here for revenge.”

“Why did you answer?” Dima fired back. “You can’t *help* him and it looks like you realize that. *I* can’t even help him, God—” Dima ducked away, pressed his hand over his eyes. “I couldn’t say no. Not again, and not now that I know it was *them*. I don’t want them to hurt me. I don’t have *time*. I’m not a young player anymore.” He looked at Tate again, mouth pulled down, almost grieving. “I don’t have to tell you what that’s like. We don’t *choose* when to retire over here. When Raskalov says I’m done, I’ll be done. And if Nikita doesn’t *stay*, he’s promised that I *am* finished. And I’m not ready, Tate. I’m sorry, I want Nikita to have *everything* he wishes, but I’m not ready.”

A surprised flood of sadness shot through Tate. Maybe disbelief. Raskalov's threats ran deep, and he was still layering them on top of each other. This time, it looked like Dima had given in. "You're on their side."

"Am I? Were you?" Dima switched to biting Russian. "Don't look at me like that. You try listening to him go on and on about which professional league wants him more and tell me you could stand it, all the while they're telling you that you're finished. Don't *look* at me like you've never saved yourself over someone else."

"He needs you," Tate said all in a rush. He reached out, put a hand on Dima's shoulder. It was a misunderstanding. It was all a misunderstanding. Something felt lighter, despite the danger, the way it felt to lose with teammates—heavy, but a shared weight. "Maybe I can't get close, but *you* can. They think they have you but if you care about Nikita like you say—"

"You *can't* take him," Dima pushed a stride back on his skates, jaw set. "We won't let you—"

"Dima?"

They both turned to see Nikita standing there, brown eyes wide and hurt, focused on Dima's slack expression.

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*We.*

It was a word that populated hockey more than any other. *We*. A team. A two-pass. A defensemen pairing. An assist and a goal. It was never down to just one person, but sitting on the bus and feeling Dima somewhere behind him, Nikita thought about how it could have been. Dima alone would have convinced him to stay. He was sure of it. Without Artemi, Dima had

become like a brother. Nikita hadn't realized just how true that was until now. He'd stepped right into the role, as easily as he strapped on his goaltender padding each game night. He'd made his father happy, talking hockey, and his mother, giving her two hungry boys to feed again. For Nikita, he'd simply filled the silence. And it had been so quiet those first months. No late night keys in the lock. No soft opening of his bedroom door. *How was practice? How was the game? What street should we live on in San Francisco?*

Nikita stared out the Metallurg team bus window blankly. The team was clawing through the play-offs. Nikita felt like he was sleepwalking through them. He hadn't spoken to Dima for a week and a half, or heard anything more from Tate. Nikita wasn't sure he wanted to even look at either of them. Dima and Tate had both used Artemi as a bargaining chip, a way to tilt Nikita towards their side. And they both had sides now. Nikita never would have thought he'd consider Tate Beacon more in his favor than Dima. He thought of Dima begging him to stay at that celebratory dinner that felt so long ago. It should have made Nikita proud, to know that Dima didn't think they could win the Gagarin without him.

But not like this. It wasn't gratitude Dima felt towards him, or even friendship, but desperation. Nikita hadn't heard much of Tate and Dima's conversation, but he'd heard enough. He hadn't known that Dima was simply trying to *withstand* talking to him. He hadn't known he was going *on and on* about the Laurels. Dima had sounded so fed up. Had Metallurg really told him that his career would be finished if Nikita didn't stay? And so he wanted to bring Nikita down with him? *You can't take him. We won't let you.*

He wanted off of this bus. He wanted to shower and fall into bed. They would have a day off before Moscow came to town for the first game of the final round. The Gagarin Cup was as

close as ever, but the thought of it felt far away given everything that had happened. He was leaving. He would be in San Francisco soon. A bit of a thrill shot up Nikita's spine every time he saw Tate now, his ticket. Leo usually ushered him to the back of the bus, isolated, but sometimes their eyes met when Nikita walked back to use the bathroom. The last exchange they had had that night at the rink was about Nikita's passport, which Metallurg kept from all of its players—for this reason, no doubt. Tate had promised to find a way around it. He had even smiled, at the end.

"I watch you play these weeks," Tate had said, shaking his head like he was speaking of some sort of marvel. Nikita had smiled back. "The Laurels need you a lot."

Nikita caught himself smiling at the memory as the bus pulled into the dark Metallurg arena. When the doors opened and the icy night air hit them, Nikita's eyes found his father in the parking lot, motioning him to the car. Nikita sighed into the rain smelling air, turning to sleet even as he descended the bus steps, and looked briefly at the arena, glinting dewy in the streetlights. They could win a Cup here in the next few days, and it would be all his father would want to talk about on the ride home. About each shot he missed, about each play they had run. He was so tired that even the thought of talking about hockey right now made his head ache, but he'd asked his father to collect him. There was no way he was getting in Dima's car.

"This is stupid, making him come all the way here after a long day," Dima's voice said quietly from behind him in the line off the bus. "I can give you a ride, like always."

"Are you joking?" Nikita asked blandly, and started walking towards his father.

"We don't have to speak," Dima said, and Nikita walked faster when he realized Dima was following him.

“No, we don’t,” Nikita snapped over his shoulder.

Dima grabbed his arm, making Nikita stop.

“You’re making a show,” Dima hissed quietly. “They’ll know something is wrong.”

Behind Dima’s shoulder, Nikita could see Tate getting off the bus last, escorted by Leo.

Both of the men looked over at Dima and his firm hold on Nikita. Tate’s eyes widened some, and Leo’s narrowed. A few of the other players looked over, too, not used to seeing Dima and Nikita at odds, but they seemed too tired to stop.

“Something is wrong. And I don’t trust you. Let *go*,” Nikita said shortly, and shook him off. That felt strange. Like something wiped clean of fingerprints.

“You can’t even get on a plane,” Dima snapped. “Why ruin what you have here if—” Dima cut himself off when he noticed Nikita’s eyes flick to Tate again. “The Americans can’t help you. Not here, Nikita.”

“And you can? You help *yourself*.”

“So do *you*. So does everyone,” Dima said. His voice had started to raise, but ended in a near whisper, shaking with the effort.

Nikita could have shoved him. “Fuck you. I *earned* the Laurels. And Tate will help me get the rest of the way.”

Dima’s lip curled up a little. “Oh, *he’s* so selfless now? How much did you hear that night by the cathedral? Maybe ask him about the last time he was in Moscow. See how you feel, then.”

Nikita felt a flash of interest, but it was overpowered by the disgust on Dima’s face, by the fact that Nikita didn’t trust a word out of his mouth. “You’re *tricking* your way to what you want. Just like them.”

*Them.* Sometimes Russia was just a heaving mass of *them*, unknown and all-seeing.

That seemed to slap Dima into silence long enough for Nikita to turn away. Leo had disappeared with Tate. How long had Dima been talking to them, to management? How long would it take, now that Dima was revealed, for Raskalov to make his next move? Had that been what had been stopping Raskalov? He had been hoping Nikita, with Dima's influence, would come to them on his own?

His father's car was no better than Dima's. Small, more rust than paint, and with foggy headlights that streaked the road in ghostly light. Pavel Morozov was leaning against the driver's door, smoking. It was that sweet tobacco that always came to mind first when Nikita thought about his father. Not his voice, not his hands or his face, but the sweet rotting plant smell that somehow passed as not bad, like muddy, decomposing river banks, or gasoline.

"A good win," Pavel said, throwing the cigarette to the ground. Nikita watched his eyes dart back in the direction of Dima, who was still standing there, watching them. Nikita just offered a close-lipped smile and opened the passenger door.

"There's food at your feet," Pavel said more hesitantly, and took out his keys.

"Thanks," Nikita replied as his father slammed his own door. They waited for the bus to pull out and then followed, hood washed in the red tail lights.

"What was that, back there?" Pavel asked. "With Dima. Something's wrong?"

Nikita stared down at the sandwich in his lap and wondered, for a moment, what his father would do if he told him about Dima's newfound loyalties to Metallurg. His father wanted nothing more than for Nikita to sign with Metallurg again. It was the *patriot* thing to do, and *was he not happy at home? And look at all the organization has done for us, Nikita.* That much was

true. Metallurg was behind their apartment, their car, his father's position as a manager in the factories.

"Nikita?" his father questioned again.

"It's fine," Nikita managed to say after a moment. "It was about the game."

"Ah," Pavel said. "That was a close save by him tonight, in the second period."

Nikita was almost happy to let his father drone on about the game, tuning him out. Say Tate managed to get around the passport problem. Should Nikita have a bag packed? What if they were in Moscow when the call came? Would it be a phone call at all? Anyone could be listening, then. Dima could get to Raskalov first and lock Tate out, or even send him home. But if Nikita *did* leave, maybe they would go to his parents. He had almost told his father just then. About Dima. That Tate wasn't here for a story at all. The words seemed to constrict his breathing. The less his parents knew, the better. If they were questioned, once he disappeared, they wouldn't have to lie.

"The American," his father's voice cut into his thoughts suddenly. "You can spot them from a mile away. That was Tate Beacon, yes? Writing the story on you. It was your rookie season you played with him? When did he retire?"

Nikita kept his eyes on his food. "Yes. The year after."

Pavel clicked his tongue in scorn. "I don't think I'll ever forget that puck he let in at the last second. I could have strangled him."

Nikita swallowed. "It's never one person's fault. You always say that."

"Hm," Pavel said. "Should we have the American for dinner? Maybe Dima, too."

"Metallurg would not allow it. They're strict about what Tate can say to me."

His father was silent a moment. “Oh...Of course they are. These types will say anything to get the talent they need. Better to be winning a Cup with Metallurg than get tangled into the sad state the Laurels are in, hm?”

Nikita didn't respond, only watched the dark road. *No*, was his honest answer. He'd rather be in San Francisco, and if there was a small wisp of shame that came with that, he'd have to live with it. He wondered if it would grow with time, a black eye after a fist to the face. It was another long moment before Pavel spoke again.

“And...have you thought any more about Metallurg's offer?”

Nikita closed his eyes. There it was. The question Pavel had been wanting and waiting to ask. The reason Tate was here at all.

“I'm not signing Metallurg's contract,” Nikita said forcefully. “I already told you.”

*And I'm leaving.* It was on the tip of his tongue. More than anything, he wanted to be able to tell Artemi. *I'm going to San Francisco. We're leaving, come with me.* The thought of his brother's face, the look of awe, of excitement, brought a lump to his throat. Artemi had been the slice of home he would have brought with him.

“What do the Laurels offer you that Metallurg doesn't? You just want to play with this—what's his ridiculous name—this Captain Callum *Holly*. Come on. You're better.”

“It's not about who's better—it's the *NHL*,” Nikita shoved himself back in his seat, letting his head knock against the headrest. “I don't get what you don't understand about that.”

“Metallurg is a *good* contract, Nikita. It provides for us, right here at home.”

And, *maybe*, Nikita thought. *I don't want to be at home.* It startled him.

“I signed with the Laurels,” he said. “Metallurg can't go back on their word like that.”

“They’re not going back—”

Nikita broke, just a little. He couldn’t sit here quietly and listen to his father defend them. “You didn’t see Raskalov, Papa. You didn’t see the way he looked at me when I said no, like— like he might...stop me.”

“*President Raskalov, Nikita, have some respect for your team.*” Pavel shook his head and turned his blinker on at the same time as the bus. “You should be honored he’s willing to fight for you.”

“Aren’t *you* willing to fight for me?” Nikita burst out. “I’m telling you that I want the Laurels’ contract, the one I’ve had for two years, the team that wanted *me*, that *drafted* me, and all you can talk about is *respect*?”

*I’m leaving. I’m defecting. Dima lied to me. Dima lied to us. Artemi should be with me, Artemi should be here.*

His father’s mouth was set into a thin line. He looked old, then. Not the wrinkles on his skin, around his brown eyes, but a deeper sort. Like energy was seeping out some hidden gap.

“Nikita...” he began softly. His knuckles were pale against the steering wheel, the skin of his hands thick and calloused.

“It’s not such a horrible thing to want,” Nikita said, tears creeping into his voice. He pushed the heel of his palm into one eye. “You never were like this when I got drafted, I don’t get it...”

“I understand,” his father’s tone was appeasing, nearly whispering, as if he was scared someone was listening. “But...understand me, okay?” He wouldn’t look at Nikita, maybe avoiding the sight of him wiping angrily at his wet cheeks. He did, however, take one hand off of

the wheel and put it on Nikita's knee, squeezing. "Nikita, I...If Raskalov wants you to stay... whatever that man wants, you must *do* it. Do you understand?"

Nikita was taken aback by the tremor in his father's voice.

"You must," Pavel said, and put both hands on the wheel again, chest rising and falling in an uneven breath. "You must do what he says."

"Because we owe everything to them?" Nikita said weakly.

His father wouldn't look at him. "Because they can take everything away."

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Tate had his phone caught between his ear and his shoulder, throwing his clothes into his suitcase. There was so much back and forth with the play-offs that he barely unpacked before he was packing again. This time, it was for Moscow. If Tate had a choice, he would never go back there in his life. It felt like returning to the scene of a crime.

"What in hell's the point of these phone calls if you won't fucking say anything over the phone?" Pat's annoyed voice said in his ear. "Is the kid coming or not?"

Tate let out a frustrated sigh through his nose. "Look, I'll just say one thing because I'm pretty sure they already know—"

"Know what? How?"

Tate balled up a t-shirt and tossed it in the direction of the bed. He badly needed to do laundry. He hadn't thought he'd be here for this long. "Dima Mikailov, he, uh..."

"Mikailov? The goalie? The one you played behind?"

"Yeah," Tate said, and recognized regret in his own voice. "Nikita and Dima are buddies and...turns out Dima's working with Raskalov. Wants Nikita to stay."

“Wow. Double agent.”

“Sure,” Tate said shortly. He sat down heavily on the end of the bed, rubbing at his eyes with his thumbs. “But Nikita says he’ll come. The problem is, I told Dima all about it before I knew about him and Metallurg, and so I’m sure Raskalov knows by now. So who can say what’s gonna happen next.”

“He says he’ll come?” Pat repeated. “Jesus, all right, then just get the hell out.”

A headache was building behind Tate’s eyes. “He doesn’t have a passport.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “Who...who the hell doesn’t have a passport?”

“No, he *has* one,” Tate replied. “It’s just that the team keeps them for the players.”

“Well, that’s certainly...”

“Secure?” Tate supplied, sarcasm heavy. “Yeah. Yeah, I know.”

“All right...” Pat sounded exasperated, but at least he was finally paying attention. He and the Laurels, for all of their investment, were treating this affair far too lightly. “Okay. We’ll work on the passport. Maybe we can get around that, or even get him the damn thing. You’ve got that money still, yeah? We’ll try to get word to him, too, if you can’t. We’ll bring some more people in on it.”

Tate’s fingers tightened around the phone. That’s what he had been telling them to do from the beginning.

“How is it otherwise?” Pat asked in a rare bout of interest in Tate. “Being back, I mean?”

Tate opened his mouth without knowing what to say. “It’s, you know...”

Tate knew his silence was stretching. He could picture Pat's face, bushy eyebrows raised and waiting. He could *tell* Pat. Right now. He could all but taste the words. *It started five years ago, Pat, and it started with me.* Dima was only so malleable because Tate had allowed them to lose. It had only made Dima that much more desperate, and what else did Raskalov and his men feed off of but desperation? Tate's, then Dima's, and now Nikita's. *It started five years ago, and it started with me.*

Tate stood from his place on the bed, rubbing a hand over his pounding chest.

“Actually...” He was breathing hard, sweating at his temples. “Pat, listen. I need to tell you—”

He was cut off by the sound of a dial-tone. Three loud beeps, and then nothing. Tate lowered his phone and stared at it, screen on the keypad again, then put it back up to his ear.

“Hello?”

Nothing. He tried to call Pat back. Nothing. Straight to an automatic voicemail, a voicemail that disconnected before it could record.

Tate's gaze turned towards the door. Then the window. Then the mirror above his bed. Then the alarm clock blinking the time. The lamps. The smoke detector. Anywhere. A small town, where everyone knew everyone, and the bigger shadow, unknown and all-seeing.

Leo was waiting for him outside when Tate rolled his suitcase out of the hotel entrance. He popped the trunk. “Ready to go, Mr. Beacon?”

Tate stopped, toes at the edge of the curb, and looked at him, looked for any sign that might give Leo away. A smirk, a light in the eyes. The *dropped* call. Leo's face was as blankly cheerful as ever.

“Yes,” Tate said. “I'm ready to go.”

They drove to the rink, which took them to a bus, which took the team to the airport for their first of hopefully just three flights to Moscow, if they could win this in a 4-0 game sweep. Leo stuck close to him, as usual. The players, just like in the NHL, kept to the same seats as though they were assigned. The Captain, Sergei Laskin, at the front left, close to Coach. Stepan Volkov behind him. Ilya Kuznetsov to the right, Viktor Orlov, Denis Yahontov, Gavrill Bortnik, Taris Lopatin... Tate knew that none of these men could be as oblivious as they looked. They were smart, though. They kept their heads down. They wore their headphones, slept, and played hockey for their lives. But they did watch Tate, always, walking down the aisle. Some of them, like Stepan or Ilya, whom Tate had played with, held out a fist to be bumped, but nothing more. There was a wall, a barrier that couldn't be crossed.

Tate didn't want more trouble now, not when he was so close to being able to go home with Nikita in tow. He sat at the back of the plane, Leo right across the aisle and already taking out his newspaper. Dima sat at the very back, too, just three rows ahead of Tate. Nikita was usually beside him, though now Nikita had taken to crossing the aisle and moving up a few more rows. Dima glanced back now, and their eyes caught. He looked exhausted, sick and frail, even. Nikita wasn't speaking to him, Tate knew that, and it looked like it was taking its toll. Gone was the joking smiles and sarcasm, the flicks of bright hair out of alert blue eyes.

Tate raised an eyebrow at him, questioning, and Dima turned away. When Nikita boarded, Dima sat up a little. It was as if he hoped, miraculously, that Nikita had changed his mind and would slide into his usual seat beside him. As Nikita made his way down the aisle, his head was high and his eyes were on Tate. For a moment, Tate thought he was going to sit next to Dima—he'd passed his new seat—but then he stopped in front of Tate.

“Morozov,” Leo shook his head. “Go, sit, we’re about to take off.”

“I need to talk to Tate,” Nikita replied shortly to Leo. “Listen if you want.”

Leo folded his newspaper on his lap with a papery slap and regarded Nikita carefully. Nikita just stared back until Leo gestured for him to sit beside Tate. Maybe he was as curious as Tate was as to what could make Nikita approach him like this. Nikita sat, carefully, and Tate noticed Dima was turned in his seat again, giving Tate a view of his profile, broken-nose, broad cheek bones. Listening hard.

Nikita looked—stricken, was the only word that came to mind. He wet his lips nervously, fumbling with the strap of his bag in his lap.

“I can’t come with you,” he said.

Tate’s eyes widened. His gaze snapped to Leo instinctively who looked, as he had suspected, like nothing had yet been said. Void and blank. Tate couldn’t even tell if he’d already known about this or not. He wished he could tell Nikita about the dropped phone call to Pat. Maybe he could. Maybe it was better to just put every little detail out in the open.

“Because—because you think you can’t return?” Tate asked. He didn’t blame Nikita for slamming the brakes against such a rough truth. There were things that could be done, maybe negotiations that could be had, but it usually took years, like forgiveness, and even then it was chancy. “Because that’s not always true.”

“No, no,” Nikita said, thumb digging into the bag’s zipper now. “Not that.”

Tate didn’t know what to say, especially not with Dima and Leo’s eyes on them. He thought of the Laurels. They had taken him through some options before he’d left, some paths to take for the part of this trip that had never felt real. The smuggling out. It all felt absurd. If things

were really bad, the lawyers had said, they could try to bribe a doctor to say that Morosov was sick and needed treatment that was only available outside of Russia. This was complicated, slippery, and expensive. Paying off one doctor would lead to the assistant, would lead to the office worker. Another chance was to try and slip away more quietly, with only the night as cover. This was dangerous and made Tate think hysterically of gun fights. Sergei Fedorov had done this, the first player to defect after the fall of the Soviet Union. He'd simply gotten into a car with a Detroit Red Wings reporter and boarded a plane. It was his fault, really, that it would not be so easy now, that Nikita didn't even have his passport. Leo was proof of that.

Nikita was still pulling nervously at the straps of his bag and Tate couldn't help it. The protectiveness surged up again, and he put a hand over his tugging fingers. Nikita's hands immediately stilled.

"No touching," Leo said from across the aisle, and Tate glared but pulled his hand back. As if he could pass some sort of note, right there. He only wished that he had come that prepared.

"Do you *want* to go?" Tate asked quietly. "Because that matters. It matters what you want. Don't listen to what others say."

"I have to stay," Nikita said, looking at him, hair falling in his face. He looked so young. "You don't understand. Hockey isn't just hockey here. It's everything. It is life, it's support, it's...not sport. It's a job."

"Is it about your family?" Tate asked.

"*Don't*—" Nikita's face tightened up. "Don't say anything about my brother. I'm tired of people using him to get to me. I'm tired of it."

“Okay,” Tate said hurriedly. “Okay, no, I don’t, I...I’m sorry. I am. I’m sorry for that, at the rink that night. It is bad of me.”

He glanced at Leo. He couldn’t tell if he knew about the night game, either. Dima, too, was looking down.

“But yes,” Nikita said, looking at Leo with hard eyes. “It’s about my family.” Nikita took a breath and rose as suddenly as he had sat down. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to do.”

He passed by Dima on the way, whose eyes followed him. He looked guilty and small. Dima moved as if to get up, to go to Nikita and sit by him. His whole body jolted as if he were about to, as if he were talking himself up to it, but in the end he stayed. He looked back, not at Tate, but at Leo.

“How do you live with yourself, Leo, hm?” he said in a low voice, and turned back around and shoved his headphones over his ears.

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It was entirely possible that the life Nikita saw for himself in San Francisco would never have come true, even if he had let Tate take him to it. In his mind, it was more like a movie set, now that he thought about it. He envisioned no bills to pay, or hard, early mornings, or meals alone, or teammates who he didn’t get along with. Instead, the image was bright with wins, with Stanley Cups, and, although Nikita knew otherwise, Artemi was always there with him in his mind. Part of Nikita still felt like Artemi hadn’t died. He wasn’t in the ground behind their church, but in San Francisco, waiting for Nikita to follow. Maybe that was the sign that the entire façade belonged in the past.

The explosion that had killed Artemi had not been a massive wreck. There had only been two bodies. There had been a joint funeral, Nikita walking beside Evgeni, the older brother of Maxim, the other casualty. Evgeni had wanted to talk and share in the grief, but Nikita had simply kept his eyes down. The caskets had been closed, the bodies deemed unfit for viewing—and maybe that was it. Maybe that was why Artemi was in San Francisco and not dead, because Nikita hadn't *seen* his brother after he'd heard the news. Maybe it was a mistake. Maybe Artemi was just waiting for him to run away, too. It was such a golden fantasy that it was painful to look at.

Raskalov had been there, out of respect. Deaths in his factories weren't so frequent that he passed them by. Seeing his thin, straight back and close cropped hair had been the only time Nikita had ever seen the President up close until that day in his office, when Nikita had refused to sign his contract. Raskalov had shaken his father's hand, kissed his mother's wet cheek politely, and then looked at Nikita with his dark eyes, carved above high, sunken cheeks.

"Congratulations on the Laurels. I know your brother loved to watch us play," Raskalov had said. "Work hard for him now, yes?"

*Us.* As if Raskalov skated out each night, too. Under that gray funeral sky, Nikita had ducked his head in a nod, but he had been picturing Artemi looking at the Laurels jersey in the mirror. His draft day in New York had only been two weeks prior at that point, and his agreed upon final two years in his Metallurg contract, now without Artemi, had felt as though they would last an eternity. Dragging himself to practice in those first few weeks had been torture. He'd swung recklessly between thoughts about quitting, and pushing himself so hard his legs

shook and he couldn't breathe. It had only been when Dima stepped in that he had begun to settle again. Hockey was routine, distraction, and he had needed that.

Perhaps it made sense that Dima and his betrayal had been what sent Nikita into free-fall again, cutting loose what fragile netting Nikita had built for himself. He wanted to *blame* Dima somehow, for everything. He wanted to blame *someone*. Dima, Tate, his father. It had been his father's shift, after all, that Artemi had been covering the day he died. And if Artemi hadn't died, would Nikita be so vulnerable to his memory? For his father, was returning to work every day anything more than a physical reminder that it should have been him instead? Was it the same for him as he was for Nikita? Every time he stepped onto that ice, Nikita had to remind himself that Artemi wasn't there watching in the stands. And Tate. Artemi had worked his way into Tate, too, as suddenly something of San Francisco, where his brother was supposed to be, had been put at his feet. The casket had been closed, but it felt wide open now. *Look*, each person in his life seemed to be saying to him. *What would he have wanted?*

Nikita's father was the only one not to talk about Artemi, not to use him in his own favor. In the car, that day after the bus ride, there had been no mention that Nikita was the only remaining son. After everything, Nikita had expected it. But his father had left the truth raw. It had nothing to do with Artemi. It was only Raskalov. If Nikita left, neither of them knew what Raskalov might do. The man did not seem particularly cruel from far away. He was detestably greedy, all the while using words like *we* and *us*, but the violence that lived in the skin of all men like him—the Kremlin's oligarch puppets—was well disguised. The one thing he didn't disguise was that the people of Magnitogorsk lived under his shadow, his gaze. He owned them by making them *owe* him. Nikita's father's position at work could be snatched in a moment. Their

car. Their home. And without Nikita's Metallurg salary, without Artemi's factory wage, there would be nothing left.

Nikita and his father hadn't looked at each other as these words passed between them. Nikita had barely even looked at Tate when he'd relayed them. *Is it about your family?* Tate had asked. Nikita didn't think Tate had any family. He remembered a girlfriend, American and thin. White, straight teeth and curled hair. He didn't know what Dima had meant when he'd told him to ask Tate about Moscow, but if it was anything like he thought it was, Tate should understand what it was like to make decisions in a place such as this. Choices didn't feel like choices. Metallurg was a sanctuary that no one player could afford to give up, and no family could afford for that player to even try. Nikita had been stupid, maybe Artemi, too, to think, even for a second, that all it took to achieve something was wanting it enough.

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Tate no longer had any family to threaten, and he wondered sometimes what he would have done five years ago had he known how his life would actually turn out. His girlfriend's name had been Danielle, and the pregnancy had been an accident, but they'd had fun talking about planning a wedding before she began to show. And then it had become all they talked about, and the more cribs and flowers Tate had looked at, the less he'd actually liked the idea of it at all. The colorful little wagon strollers on the soft ride wheels, *so as not to wake your little one*. Sometimes, mostly when he was wasted and sorry, Tate blamed Danielle for the end of his career. The thought only made him feel worse about it all, like he'd just kill to have it be someone's fault. Like he'd taken a wrong turn and had been lost ever since.

It felt like another life. He'd shared a house with someone. He'd shared a bed with someone. He could barely even imagine it now. They had put so much into making two lives into one, and all it had resulted in was the painful process of untangling themselves. She hadn't liked Russia. They'd both been homesick, truthfully, and that unease had led to bad tempers and raw nerves. Thank God, she'd broken it off with him. In the end, he wasn't sure if he could be happy with anyone at all. Danielle certainly hadn't been happy with him. He brooded when he lost or when he was benched—which was most nights. Life hadn't sat well with either of them. People failed, they changed or grew older, and Tate preferred not to watch—but he didn't want to leave Nikita.

They were back in Magnitogorsk for the night, for what could be the championship game. The Gagarin Cup would be in the arena, flanked by its white-gloved handlers. Nikita had been playing like fire. Tate didn't know if he was trying to prove that he deserved better competition, or if he was terrified that, having tried to leave, they suddenly wouldn't want him anymore and cast him out. Tate wished he had done more, wished he had seen the approach on the bus for what it was. He looked around his hotel room. He'd unplugged the alarm clock and turned it face down. He kept his curtains drawn, checked the lamps. He had wanted to unplug the landline but had decided against it. There was nothing he could do about the smoke detector, and he fell asleep most nights in this bed staring at the little red, intrusive light on it, blinking off and on again. He was homesick. He blamed himself.

Now, he could see Magnitogorsk's darkening sky through the gap in the curtain, and he knew Leo would be around to collect him soon to take him to the rink. He yawned, shuddering and wide. He'd forgotten the toll of play-offs, of being shuttled back and forth, back and forth,

playing for what had felt like his life. Then again, it *had* been his life. It was Nikita's, too, and Dima's. He couldn't decide if he was looking forward to the game. He wanted to see Nikita win these play-offs, if nothing else. He hadn't had the heart to tell Pat that they weren't getting Nikita Morozov after all. He was surprised at the intensity with which he wanted Nikita to change his mind. The Laurels should have sent someone else. He felt a flash of anger at them. Had they thought this would be easy? He felt bare of any preparation at all.

When the knock at his door came, Tate had a fleeting thought that it might be Raskalov on the other side, not Leo. His stomach turned. He didn't want to be sat down and given any more choices to make. He didn't want to steer wrong again.

"Leo," Tate said when he opened the door. He didn't know if this was better, or worse.

"Mr. Beacon," Leo said with a slight smile. He leaned around Tate slightly to see into the room and continued in Russian. "I see you've not unpacked yet. Good. I'm here to take you to the airport."

Tate took a step back, and Leo seemed to take this as an invitation to come in. He shut the door behind him with a click and walked down the short hallway to Tate's bed where his suitcase lay.

"No," Tate began, walking after him and speaking in Russian. "Leo, I cannot leave."

He surprised himself with the heat that came in his voice. No matter how awful this was, no matter how much he missed his own bed, the coffee shop down his street back home, he didn't want to leave without Nikita. He didn't believe that Nikita wanted Tate to leave him behind, either.

Leo raised an eyebrow. “You can do what we tell you to do. It is only respectful. Besides, I think we can drop the pretense of this *story* that you are writing, can’t we? You heard Nikita. You are not necessary anymore.”

Tate was fairly sure that he had never been necessary. It didn’t hurt as much now as it once had.

“Then I tell,” Tate said, urgently. “I tell about Dima, about Raskalov and Moscow. All of it.”

“Will you?” Leo asked, frowning. He walked to Tate’s suitcase and picked up the Russian-English dictionary Tate kept. It was well leafed through by now. “That won’t make you look very credible. And who’s to say you didn’t thwart the Laurels, too?”

“Who is to say that I did?” Tate replied, back in English now, too riled to focus on translation. “*You?* Raskalov? Your word doesn’t exactly carry weight in the U.S.”

Leo smiled. He kept to Russian and threw the dictionary down. “If your story were to come out, Mr. Beacon, it would never appear to have come from us.”

Tate let that sink in. Leo walked over and stared at the flipped down, unplugged clock. He righted it, but didn’t plug it in, and smiled at Tate, chuckling.

“Very funny,” he said, and Tate’s skin crawled.

“I don’t care,” Tate said, and forced himself to unclench his hands, which had curled into fists at his sides. “Tell. Fine. It’ll be a fucking weight off my back, I’ll tell you that much. But I’ll still be an American when I get home, and you’ll still be the Russians spreading dirt.”

Leo sneered at him. Finally, the blank face was gone. He took a step towards him. “When you get home?”

“What?” Tate said, blood pounding in his ears. “You gonna do to me what you did to Dima?”

Tate had a good amount of height on Leo, and was obviously healthier. In a fight, maybe he’d be okay. But if Leo carried a gun...who was to say the woman who worked the front desk would call for help?

“I already told you, Mr. Beacon,” Leo replied. His eyes were unreadable again, and his stance had regained the neutrality that Tate was used to seeing. “I am here to take you to the airport.”

Tate could decide whether to believe him or not. There was just as much on the line for Raskalov with Metallurg as there had been five years ago in Moscow. A Gagarin Cup. This time, he had a star player like Nikita that could get him there through sheer skill, rather than a failing one that could simply clear the way, like Tate. If he had hurt Dima back then when he had needed Tate to lose, he could just as easily hurt Tate now when he needed Nikita to win.

“People are expecting me,” Tate said. “Back home.”

“Why do you think we are sending you there?” Leo said. “Mr. Beacon, please.”

It would be as easy as it had been with Dima’s knee. They could make it look like an accident.

“Mr. Beacon,” Leo said again.

Looking at Leo standing there, shoulders back and relaxed with the knowledge that he was in control, Tate decided that he would try to get Nikita that passport, somehow. Even if he had to do it from home. If he couldn’t get him to San Francisco and the Laurels himself, he’d do

*something* to allow Nikita to get himself there, if that was what he chose. Tate hoped that it would be.

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President Vladimir Raskalov's office looked just as Nikita remembered it, all the way down to the white, harsh lighting of Nikita's memory. The polished wooden desk was in front of the windows so that the rink's glare appeared as a halo, or would have if Raskalov himself had been seated. Instead, the President was looking down at the ice, on which the only movement that Nikita could see from the doorway was the Zamboni. Rather than illuminate him, the bright light seemed to shave even more from his slim frame. When he turned at the sound of their entry, Nikita fought the urge to shy away. The light made his already slim face seem skeletal, and his tan suit made him look especially bloodless save for the needle-prick of red that was his pocket square.

The illusion was gone, of course, as soon as he took a few steps away from the window. Color returned to Raskalov's lips and eyes, but Nikita couldn't quite unsee it. Raskalov smiled, and stuck out his hand like he and Nikita were old friends. Nikita pushed away a traitorous flash of satisfaction. In all the moments he'd spent worrying about losing his talent, of waking up one morning to find that it had trickled away, surely it couldn't be so fleeting if a man like Raskalov cared this much. He deserved to be wanted as much by the Laurels, even if he may never see the San Francisco ice.

"Nikita," Raskalov greeted him. He gestured for him to sit and the glimpse of pride was quickly chiseled out by fear again. "That was a hard loss last night. How are you fairing? Ready for game seven?"

“Yes,” Nikita replied softly.

The game had gone to Moscow, 4-3, after a devastating last-second shot, and now they would be on their way back to Moscow tomorrow, back to enemy ice, for a final game seven. Whoever won tomorrow would be awarded the Gagarin, though Nikita was having trouble caring about the trophy at all. Tate hadn't been at the game last night, and it was one thing to refuse his help, but it was something else entirely to be alone again. Nikita wasn't leaving anymore. He wasn't the one who had gotten out. He wasn't going to turn it all around. Tate was no longer waiting to take Nikita to San Francisco, and Artemi would not be waiting there for him. Raskalov knew what Nikita had wanted, he knew what he had tried, and now they both knew that it had failed.

“Where is Tate?” Nikita asked, because he figured Raskalov at least owed him a few answers.

“Oh, I think it is better for you if we don't discuss Mr. Beacon,” Raskalov said, and opened a folder. The contract lay inside and made a soft *shushing* sound as Raskalov drew it out and onto the desk between them. “Don't you?”

Nikita stared at the contract. It looked the same as it had last time. He wondered what would happen if he tore it in two. He could sense Coach behind him, silent and watchful, along with Leo. If Nikita tried to get up and leave now, they could force him back into the chair. Wild, flashing ideas pushed through his mind. Finding his father in the factory, picking up his mother at home, and driving to Moscow. But he didn't have his passport. He kept forgetting that. Everything felt so unsettled until he remembered that he was already pinned into place, had always been pinned into place, by something as small as a booklet in need of a stamp.

“Don’t blame him,” Nikita said. “Please. *I* called him.”

It felt so strange to admit, especially to Raskalov. The actual phone call felt like it had happened years ago. He had thought it would be so simple.

“We know,” Raskalov replied.

Nikita nodded. “Dima told you.”

Raskalov folded his hands together on top of the desk. “You are very hard on your friend, Nikita. Too hard, I think, when he was simply trying to protect you and your family.”

A blank expression felt too heavy to keep up, and Nikita let it fall, let his mouth turn down at the corners and his eyebrows pull together. “Protect us from what? You?”

One of Raskalov’s fingers tapped the edge of the contract. He looked down at it and seemed to consider his next words carefully. “Nikita, we are more alike than you think. We were both born here. Our parents both worked hard to help us succeed. We were both lucky enough to be chosen to play for Metallurg. My family owes just as much to this city as yours.”

Nikita’s hands in his lap tightened into fists. *Us. We.* Nikita watched as Raskalov produced a pen from a golden holder by his elbow. He pushed the contract forward and laid the pen across the line marked by an *X* that waited for Nikita’s signature.

“You do not need protection from us,” Raskalov said. “We are your protection. And I am glad your decision ends this affair so fortunately for the both of us.” He gestured forward to the pen and paper. “Please.”

Nikita reached for the pen, but held onto it for a moment, the inked tip hovering above the page. Tate was gone, maybe the Laurels, too. Nikita was falling and no one, not even Dima, was there to catch him. That morning, he’d lingered a little over kissing his mother goodbye.

He'd even kissed his father goodbye, something he hadn't done for years now. They had both given him funny looks at that. He didn't quite know why he had done it. In case of what? In case he changed his mind? It was too late for that now.

When Nikita signed, it didn't look anything like his name, like any name, but the ink on the paper was there and that seemed to be all that Raskalov needed. He snatched it away, as if he was afraid Nikita could take it back somehow, and slipped the file into his desk. Afterward, he shook Nikita's hand, locking it between both of his own.

"I am sure you'll be happy to not be so far away as America," Raskalov said. "Especially with your brother gone. You wouldn't want to leave your parents alone."

Nikita yanked his hand out of Raskalov's grip, and if Raskalov took note of the force, he didn't respond, simply folded his hands behind his back. *Death*. God, Nikita wished people would just use the word. *Gone, loss*. Things that were gone could come back, and what was lost could be found. Artemi was dead, and here was just another person pushing that fact in his face, as if Artemi had become nothing more than some sort of blunt object, like the stick used when he was young to keep his knees and ankles from wobbling in his skates.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Raskalov said. "What was his name again? He did not play."

"What does it matter to you?" Nikita said.

Finally, a reaction. Raskalov took a small step back. He angled his chin up, eyes going hooded. If he didn't know Artemi's name, he didn't deserve to. If Nikita could take nothing else out of Raskalov's grasp, he could at least keep his brother for himself.

“Well,” Raskalov said, and turned away, back behind his desk, to the window where he had been watching over the ice. “I should let you go. You have a game to prepare for. Hopefully there will be champagne tonight, yes?”

“Hopefully.” Nikita didn’t wait to be dismissed. He turned and met Leo’s eyes briefly, Leo who was already holding the door open for him. Coach slipped into the elevator with him, but said nothing beyond a few awkward clearings of his throat.

Nikita closed his eyes as the swooping sensation of going down hit him. He stomped on the part of his brain that was still counting the days until he left, as the elevator doors pinged open again. He waited for Coach to go out first, only to almost bump into him when Coach stopped between the doors, hand pressed to the metal to keep them from closing.

“I hope you’ll be happy here,” Coach said. His watery blue eyes didn’t meet Nikita’s. He was a shy man, really, at his best when he was screaming orders from behind the bench. In any other room, he was awkward and vague. Nikita followed instinctively, drawn by the unreadable expression he had flashed him, as Coach hustled down the corridor and back to the Metallurg locker room. As he entered the room, there was Dima in his stall right beside Nikita’s, seemingly waiting for him.

For the past weeks, Dima had been nearly *shy*, so out of character that it almost made Nikita feel guilty. He was like a dog with its ears down, nervous and hesitant. When Dima looked up at him in the same manner as he approached his stall, Nikita glared.

“What?” he asked as he sat down and grabbed one of his practice-worn sticks to re-tape. “You’re getting what you wanted.”

Dima turned his head, just a little, as if trying to shield himself from the words. “No. No, I’m not.”

Nikita just shook his head and bent for his bag, looking for his tape. Something like adrenaline was thrashing through his veins, hot and acidic. He could still feel the pen in his hand, still see the way Raskalov had hoarded the piece of paper. He sat there, up above, day after day, staring down through that window. Nikita wished he had the strength to fire a puck up at it, cracking the glass. The adrenaline, the anger, had reached the back of his throat now, like bile.

It all froze when he opened his bag. There, sitting at the top, was a small, red book with Russia’s spread-winged eagle stenciled on like thin, gold thread. Nikita snapped the bag closed with his fist, lips parted around a sharp breath. Dima, beside him, was acting as though he hadn’t noticed Nikita’s jerking movements, but he had paused, too. Nikita didn’t dare look at him, but slowly opened his bag again. It could be a mistake. Some sort of illusion, but as he reached in with his fingers, shielded from view, and pried the booklet open, there was his own picture staring back at him, younger and wearing a wide-eyed expression. His passport.

From the corner of his eye appeared Dima’s pale hand holding out a roll of stick tape.

“This isn’t what I want,” Dima said softly. His mouth barely moved. Neither of them looked at the other. “If you’d just let me explain. Nikita...”

Nikita was trembling. San Francisco and all of its light burst back into his mind. Artemi was still there, impossibly waving from beside some new apartment door, and Nikita squeezed his eyes shut. This was as impossible as that image in his mind, and yet there it was in front of him. And he *wanted*. He wanted it so very badly.

Nikita reached out a hand and closed his fingers around the tape.

“Okay,” he said to Dima. “Tell me.”