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# Just What Was Rumpelstiltskin Expecting to Do with a Baby, Anyway?

by [withershins](#)

## Summary

Turning to a witch to save a loved one's life is one of the riskier gambles a person can take, but it's one that's arguably noble and brave. Falling in love with the witch, though—now that's just foolish.

## Notes

set during an imaginary, non-specific season

inspired by [this awesome post](#) (slightly spoilery)

Every child grows up knowing the signs of a witch's house. They learn them the way they learn to look both ways before crossing a street, to not take candy from strangers, and how if they ever get lost they should stay put right where they are. Zhenya, as a boy, was no different. He and his brother memorized every childhood mnemonic rhyme and singsong phrase that taught the signs and warnings, and they dutifully promised their mama that if they ever came across a witch's property they'd stay well clear.

*Garden in light, you'll be all right; garden in shade, a price to be paid.*

Witches are only dangerous if you offend them. They keep to themselves, and if you leave them

alone they'll return the favor. But trespass on their land, or steal from their magic gardens that grow in the deepest shade, or break their heart, and you can count on retribution threefold. Safer just to give them a wide berth.

Zhenya knows all this. Yet here he stands anyway, at the foot of the gate of what is unmistakably a witch's house.

"This is a bad idea," says Flower, sounding strangely satisfied at the prospect. "So stupid. Maybe," he adds cheerfully, "the stupidest idea I've ever been part of."

"Yes," Zhenya agrees, because there isn't really anything else to say. It is stupid, and dangerous, and he's doing it anyway.

"You sure you wanna pick this one? We could find a different witch-house. I know at least one other in Pittsburgh."

Zhenya studies the house with a speculative eye. It's a neat, unassuming place, small and simple, easily overlooked next to the splendor of the tall, graceful forest protectively twined around it, blocking much of it from view. A little ways in front of the house, much more noticeable, the telltale shaded garden is clearly—perhaps proudly—displayed with long grow boxes all in a row, rich greenery spilling out beneath the shadows.

"This one fine," he shrugs. It's not as if it matters. He needs a witch, and he's not in a position to be picky.

"All right, big guy. Your choice." Flower surveys the place. "I think I like this one, anyway. A little bit it reminds me of the house of the witch who turned me into a sunflower when I was a kid." He turns a grin on Zhenya. "Hey, I ever tell you about the time I was turned into a sunflower?"

"You tell me five hundred times," Zhenya says absently, more focused on scanning what can be seen of the house's windows for movement—a shadow against a pane, a twitch of curtains. There's nothing.

"Yeah, well, it's a good story. She stuck me in a pot and gave me back to my mom with watering instructions. Not many people can say that happen to them before."

"You lucky witch so nice, only make sunflower spell last for couple of days," Zhenya says, like he's said five hundred times before. Most kids who stole blackberries from a witch's bramble would've ended up much worse—or their parents would've.

"Yep," Flower agrees readily. "After I turned back, my mom made me bake the witch a pie to say sorry. Make sure there's no grudge left over, you know?"

Zhenya grunts. "Smart."

"Yeah." Flower glances over. "So, you ready to go in and be the stupid boys our parents didn't raise us to be, or should we stall some more?"

"Fuck you," Zhenya returns, and he pushes the gate open and takes a step inside.

He's half expecting to get turned into a toad on the spot, but nothing happens. The wind just slips curiously through the trees and a deep-black bird quietly takes flight.

"So far so good," Flower says, following him in.

"Don't steal anything."

"C'mon, I was a kid! And I learned my lesson."

They take a winding path deeper into the grove, where the witch's house awaits. The back of Zhenya's neck prickles.

In the cool shade of the trees, on either side of the path, he sees all manner of herbs growing wherever they please: bright sprigs of rosemary, secretive clumps of thyme, and many he has no name for. He minds his step carefully.

As they reach the stone steps leading up to the little pale house, Flower abruptly snatches Zhenya's elbow.

"Geno," he whispers. "Do you see?" He meaningfully lifts his eyes skyward, and Zhenya follows his gaze up.

Perched on the gnarled branch of an oak tree that's nestled right up against the side of the house, a silky black cat watches them with unnerving eyes.

Zhenya swallows.

"Hello," he says in as friendly a voice as he can manage. The cat blinks. Sincerely admiring, but also because it's smart, he adds, "Very gorgeous fur. Thank you for let us see you." Being allowed to see a witch's familiar up close is not something to be taken for granted—not if you're looking to stay curse-free.

The cat tilts their head.

"Not here to steal or be trouble," Zhenya continues, holding his hands up palms-out to show they're empty. "Just have question to ask your witch. Okay for us to knock on door?"

Nimble, the cat leaps from the branch and lands at their feet, still fixing them with an unwavering gaze. Flower subtly tenses, and Zhenya fights to keep his expression pleasant and free of the nervousness thrumming through him.

The cat circles them once, twice. And then the world shifts, Zhenya's grasp on how exactly it happens sliding sideways out of his mind, and suddenly the cat is a man.

Flower hisses in surprise. Foolishly gaping, Zhenya can only stutter out, "You're not witch familiar."

"No," the man says, eyes sharp and smile slight. "I'm not."

The man—the witch himself, surely—is shorter than either of them, but he probably outweighs Flower by a good fifteen pounds in muscle. He's toned and solid, and he carries himself with the confidence of someone who knows their own body well. He's dressed simply and not much like Zhenya expected witches to dress. Loose sweat pants that still don't conceal the power in his well-muscled legs and a plain white tee-shirt are all he wears. His feet are bare in the dirt where he stands. His eyes are dark and warm and watchful, and his dark brown hair is just long enough to show a teasing of curl.

Unbothered by Zhenya's scrutiny, the witch crosses his arms and says, "You have a question for me? Must be pretty important if you risked crossing a witch's gate to ask it."

"Very important," Zhenya agrees, gut clenched. Only desperation has brought him here.

The witch's eyes narrow curiously, and for a moment he doesn't speak. His gaze burns into Zhenya's like he's searching deep into his soul for answers Zhenya doesn't even know himself. Zhenya holds very still and prays he's not about to get zapped to dust. The witch looks away.

"You'd better come inside, then," he says, turning. He disappears into the house, leaving the door open behind him.

Zhenya and Flower swap apprehensive looks.

"Got your back," Flower whispers, and Zhenya makes his feet carry him inside.

The witch's garden, he finds, extends indoors as well. The inside of the house is filled with plants: vines tumbling out of hanging planters, mint and basil growing along shelves on every wall, every available space filled.

He toes his shoes off and makes Flower do the same.

"In the kitchen," the witch calls. Zhenya follows the voice down the hallway into a cool-colored kitchen teeming with plant life. The witch stands at the counter, pouring coffee.

"Sit down," he gestures towards the four-chair wooden table. "Coffee?"

They nod, because refusing drink from a witch seems dangerously rude. The witch serves them coffee in mismatched, brightly-colored mugs and seats himself across from them with a mug of his own. Through the open window, a glossy black crow soars inside and perches on the back of his chair, imperious and indifferent.

"I'm Sidney," the witch says, reaching back to stroke the crow's front with a gentle finger. "This is Stride." There's a glint of matching humor in his eye and the bird's as he adds, "My familiar." Witch and crow look expectantly at Zhenya.

"Very pretty," he says obligingly. "Most pretty crow I ever see before." Stride preens smugly.

"What brings you to my house?" Sidney asks, taking a sip from his mug.

"I'm Geno, this is Flower," Zhenya introduces, because they may be in Pittsburgh but expecting a witch to know them by sight seems foolish. "Come to ask if..." He gulps nervously. "If can buy magic from you."

Sidney's expression doesn't change, not even a flicker.

"You want to learn to do magic yourself?"

Zhenya shakes his head. "Need you to do special spell for me. Just one. Will pay you," he says earnestly. "Anything."

"Anything?" Sidney's lips hook upwards in a smile. "That's a dangerous offer to make. Especially to a witch."

"Is worth it."

"Everyone says that." His eyes slide between Zhenya and Flower. "What would you ask for? Another Cup?"

"You know who we are?" Flower asks, surprise audible.

The witch just smiles. "Maybe."

"Not Cup," Zhenya answers. "Get that without cheat or magic. It's..." he hesitates. "It's for my mama."

Sidney says, "I'm listening."

"She's sick," Zhenya explains, voice thick. "Not getting better. Doctors say is mystery, don't know what wrong. Keep going, she die soon maybe, no one know why."

Sidney looks down, eyes and thoughts hidden. Zhenya waits, heart in his throat, heart in his hands.

"Can you help him?" Flower asks.

When Sidney looks up again, Zhenya can read nothing in his face.

"Yes. I know how to save her."

Some gnarled, thorny knot Zhenya's been carrying around in his gut for months blooms with hope.

The witch adds, looking to him, "Whether or not the price is worth it will be up to you."

"Anything," Zhenya promises, hands tremulous with relief. "I give you anything I have, all of it, yours. Anything."

"Then give me your firstborn child."

Beside him, Flower hisses a breath, sharp and hurt. Zhenya, however, feels nothing. Everything in him is frozen.

"How can you ask that?" Flower demands. "What sort of monster asks for someone's kid?"

"This is the cost," Sidney says impassively. "An equal price for the favor gained. It's your decision to take the trade or not."

"I'm not have..." Zhenya begins numbly.

"A child yet, I know," Sidney finishes. "But the first child you claim as yours, whether by blood or adoption, you'll give to me when I come for them. And in exchange I'll save your mom's life."

"What the fuck kinda choice is this?" Flower seethes, up in arms. "You could ask for anything, and you ask for his first baby?"

"This is the cost," Sidney repeats. He appears unmoved, but Zhenya notices that the room is slowly dimming, and the plants are growing darker, and the crow twitches with a dangerous gleam in its eye.

"Flower," he bites out. "Calm down."

Flower, furious, whirls on him, but his sharp eyes swiftly pick up Zhenya's meaningful look and the darkening tension in the room.

"Fine," he huffs, sitting back. "I still think it's shit, though."

"Noted," Sidney says blankly, and the room brightens again. He turns to Zhenya. "Well? Will

you take my offer?"

He swallows. "Have time to think?"

"Sure. You have one week to decide." Sidney pauses, head tilted as though listening. "Your mom will die in two."

"Bastard," Flower spits out, and Sidney shrugs.

"It is what it is. Her timeline of life is outside my control." His eyes fall on Zhenya. "Unless you take my offer." He stands, carrying his half-empty mug with him. "Come back in a week. Or don't, your choice." The crow hops up onto his shoulder, black feathers blending in against his hair. "Leave the way you came, please. I'll know if you don't." And then he turns and goes, disappearing deeper into the house.

Flower makes a noise of disgust. "Let's get out of this place," he says, and Zhenya nods.

He looks down at his mug of coffee. It's untouched, which might be ruder than refusing it in the first place would've been. He hurriedly gulps it down. The coffee is dead cold, even though not enough time has passed for it to have cooled much at all, let alone so completely.

They leave the witch's house by the path they entered, and when the gate quietly clangs shut behind them, Zhenya sees a black crow watching them through the trees.

Zhenya spends the next days seeking out other witches, to see if there is another deal he can make—surely there is a witch out there with a thing for money instead of stealing babies—but he finds nothing. The few places around Pittsburgh he once was certain were witch-houses now are empty lots, or normal homes, never where he remembered. He knows it's no coincidence.

So Zhenya is faced with an impossible decision, but in the end it's no decision at all. His mama is dying and no one knows why, but he has in his power a way to fix it. He'll just have to make sure she never finds out what he sold to save her.

A day before the week is up, Flower gives him a look that says he knows his intentions.

"Want me to come again?" he asks, and Zhenya shakes his head.

"Do this alone."

"Kay." He bumps Zhenya's shoulder, eyes somber. "Hey—we'll find a way around this, all right? Don't worry. We'll figure something out. You're not gonna have to give up your future kid, we won't let that happen."

Zhenya nods but doesn't really believe it. Trying to cross a witch and renege on a deal sounds like the stupidest thing he's ever heard. He doubts he'll be so lucky as to be just turned into a sunflower for a couple of days if he tries.

Sidney's house is right where he remembers leaving it, at least. The trees are the same, lofty and thick and sheltering, and the garden is the same, growing where no natural garden should want to.

He picks his way down the path, watching for cats or crows, and arrives at the front steps unmolested. Uncertain, with anxiety an ever-present clench in his gut, he shifts from foot to foot. Is he supposed to knock? He should knock.

"You came back," a voice behind him says, inflectionless. He whirls around to find Sidney, again barefoot and in sweats, watching him. Stride, the crow familiar, is nowhere to be seen.

"Yes," he answers, carefully calming his nervous breathing. "Want to talk about offer."

Sidney nods. "Then follow me."

They end up in the kitchen again, Zhenya with a mug in front of him. It's tea this time, a blend he usually has to bring from Russia because nowhere in Pittsburgh carries it. He eyes it suspiciously and, after a moment, takes an appreciative gulp.

Instead he turns his suspicion on the witch.

"You tell other witches to hide from me? So I only deal with you?"

Sidney, seated opposite him, takes a sip from his own mug. "No," he says blandly, and Zhenya doesn't believe him. How else to explain the sudden, inexplicable dearth of witches? Always expect trickery from a witch; every child knows this.

"You're going to take my offer?"

Trickery or not, Zhenya's choices are what they are. He looks to his hands, wrapped around his mug.

"Maybe. Have questions first, though, before agree to anything."

"Okay."

Zhenya looks up, studying the witch's expression carefully. "*Why* you ask for baby?"

"This is the cost."

He rolls his eyes. "Yes, *know*, you say so before. But what you do with baby once you have? They'll be—" He swallows. "They'll be safe?"

"They'll be safe," Sidney says, tone neutral but eyes unexpectedly soft. "They won't be hurt."

"Promise? Can make that part of deal?"

"Yes."

Zhenya is surprised by the readily agreed-to promise, and he isn't sure he believes him. Everyone knows why witches ask for firstborn children—well, maybe they don't know the specifics. But firstborns have magical significance; there are enough horror stories of children being sacrificed for a spell or potion to know it's never anything good. Why else would a witch want a baby but for dark magic?

"And if I'm never have baby or adopt? Never have kids. This make trouble with you?"

"No," the witch says slowly. "I won't...punish you or anything if you never have kids." He pauses, looking off-balance for the first time since Zhenya met him. "Do you...not *want* to have kids ever?"

Zhenya shrugs, dismissive. "Not think about much," he lies. "Maybe one day. Maybe never. Not big thing I want a lot, you know?"

"Oh." Sidney bites his lip, humanly uncertain, and Zhenya finds a certain vicious pleasure in

temporarily gaining the upper hand. Not that it wins him anything, in the end. "Well. This is the cost, and the cost doesn't change. Your firstborn child, if and when you have one, will come to me." He seems to be regaining his equilibrium as he speaks, and Zhenya tries to keep his expression from souring. "And in exchange I'll save your mom's life. These are the terms. Do you agree?"

Zhenya sends a heart-sore apology to the future child he'll now never let himself conceive, thinks of his mama's waning face, and says the damning words: "Yes, agree."

Sidney leans across the table, eyes brighter than Zhenya's ever seen them, and extends a hand. Perhaps it shouldn't be so surprising that a witch's deal is sealed like any other, but Zhenya was expecting something a little less mundane.

He takes Sidney's hand, shakes it once, and when he tries to pull away, Sidney doesn't let go.

Sidney's eyes aren't just bright—they're *glowing*. And the room, he realizes, is darkening, like all its light is being stolen into Sidney's unearthly gaze.

Something snakes loosely around his right wrist, and in the gloom he can just make out a thin, darkly green vine twining around and around.

"Don't worry," Sidney says as Zhenya takes a shuddering breath and his heart pounds faster and faster. His hand is cool and dry in Zhenya's. "It's just my magic marking the agreement."

"Will leave mark?"

"Not one your eyes can see."

Zhenya's wrist itches and tingles, but when the vine slides away it looks the same as ever. Sidney releases his hand with a thin smile, eyes returned to normal. The room brightens again.

"It's done," he says quietly.

"My mama?" Zhenya asks, wringing his wrist with his other hand. A tingle lingers.

Sidney whistles, low and sharp, and Stride swoops in through the windows. In his beak is clasped a small, cloth pouch.

The crow drops the pouch on the table in front of Zhenya, then sweeps around to land atop Sidney's shoulder. He stares at Zhenya with beady, intelligent eyes.

"That's yours," Sidney says, gesturing to the pouch. "Don't open it. Put it under your mom's pillow for three nights while she sleeps, and after the third night burn it and bury the ashes."

Dubious, Zhenya plucks the little pouch up. It isn't very heavy at all and feels like it's filled with leaves.

"And this cure her?"

"If you follow those instructions, yes."

Zhenya nods, pockets it, and drains the rest of his tea.

"Thank you," he says, rising. "For help." He says nothing of his anger and heartbreak for the price of the help, because it's still not smart to offend a witch, even one you've already sealed a deal with. He's made his choice, and it'll save his mama.



The witch blinks, and nods, and says nothing. So with a parting nod to him and the crow familiar, Zhenya leaves the shadowed house.

In the days following, he performs Sidney's orders exactly. He tells his mama and papa—who've been staying with him in Pittsburgh for the past months as his mama's health deteriorated—nothing about what he's done. He sneaks the pouch under her pillow three nights in a row. After the third night, with a desperate, hopeful knot in his throat, he burns it and buries the ashes among the trees in the backyard.

When he returns inside, his mama is sitting at the kitchen, looking fuller with color than she's looked for ages. His papa hovers nearby, trying and failing to look like he's not actually hovering.

"Mama?" Zhenya says cautiously.

"Are you going to scold me too?" she asks with fond exasperation. "I'm feeling so much better today, I thought I'd try getting up for a while. I know my limits," she adds wryly, "unlike certain impatient boys I could mention."

"Mama." He stumbles over the word, overcome with hope, and swoops her up into an embrace. She gives a huff and a surprised chuckle.

"Maybe now you'll stop oozing around with those terrible sad eyes as though I'm on my deathbed, hm?"

Zhenya thinks of the witch's words, of how close she was to leaving him, and says nothing. He just hugs her tighter.

His mama gets better and better, until the day the ache in her chest is permanently gone, and she can breathe without her lungs creaking. Zhenya unashamedly cries with joy when the doctors give her a clean bill of health.

The very next day, he returns to the witch's house bearing a cake he baked from his mama's recipes. But the gate is locked, and he's not stupid enough to hop a witch's fence. He leaves the cake at the gate, and he hears a crow's caw as he leaves.

A year passes. He stays a Penguin, his mama lives, his parents eventually head back to Russia, and he never sleeps with anyone without birth control measures in place. He stops looking so hard for someone to spend his life with and build a family with. His mama's alive, and that's enough for now.

Then one morning in November, Zhenya and his team spill into the locker room after a hard practice and find Sidney perched by Zhenya's stall, waiting. Enough otherness clings to him, despite being dressed in normal clothes with no familiar in sight, that the guys all stumble to a stop and crowd near the entry, unwilling to go further in. There's just something about witches, and Sidney's no different. A darkness lingers around him—not evil, not malice, or anything like that. Just darkness. An unknown, something the mind turns away from.

"Hey, man," Kuni says equably, but eyeing him with a belying wariness. "I don't think you're supposed to be in here right now. You better go, eh?"

Sidney doesn't speak, and he doesn't move his eyes from Zhenya's, meeting across the heads of his teammates. Zhenya swallows, chilled.

Flower abruptly pushes his way to the front of the pack and marches right up to Sidney, unafraid.

"You! You think you can just waltz in here? Go away, there're no babies to steal here."

"Who is this guy?" Tanger asks, pushing up next to Flower.

"He here to talk to me," Zhenya says at last. He looks to Sidney, who looks calmly back. "Come outside, we talk there."

Sidney stands. The other guys all seem to realize at once that his way out is through them, and they scatter out to the edges of the room.

Except for Horny. He asks in a low tone, hand at Zhenya's elbow, "Everything okay?"

"Yes, fine," Zhenya says. "Go shower, you smell worst."

Horny squeezes his elbow and goes, shooting Sidney a measuring look as he does.

"Your teammates care for you a lot," Sidney notes as the two of them slip into the empty hallway.

"They're good guys."

Sidney hums lightly. "How's your mom?"

"Healed," Zhenya says a little hoarsely, choked up despite himself, even a year later. "Thank you, for make her better. Save her life. You get my cake I leave?"

"I got it. You didn't need to do that."

Zhenya shrugs. "Good to be polite."

Sidney smiles, a little sharp and a little warm. "Especially to witches?"

Zhenya's not sure what possesses him to wrinkle his nose and tease, "I make cake for all witches who save my mama's life, you know, you not so special."

It takes the sharpness out of the witch's smile, so Zhenya hopes that means he's not about to get cursed.

"I'll keep that in mind." He turns to face Zhenya fully, and his eyes drop briefly to Zhenya's wrist where his invisible mark remains. "You haven't forgotten the other half of our trade?"

Zhenya's smile drops like it was never there.

"I'm not forget. You don't need to come here to remind."

"Have you changed your mind about wanting kids?"

"Why? You here to change for me?" Zhenya's lips quirk unhappily. "Seems like bad plan. How you think you can make me want kids when I'm know you gonna take them away?"

"Just the first one," Sidney argues, as though he really thinks that makes it better. "You've got an entire life ahead to keep having other kids."

Zhenya makes a dismissive sound, hiding the sharp ache in his heart. "Eh. Kids always smell so bad, you know, always so noisy. Maybe I'm have them later. Right now I'm rather be free."

Sidney's face sets in a grumpy frown, and if this weren't the witch trying to take his firstborn baby,

Zhenya would find it adorable. Instead it's just hollowly satisfying to see him displeased.

"I see. Then I suppose there's nothing else to say. For today." Sidney turns to leave, then pauses and, glaring, adds, "Tell number 8 to adjust his grip on his shots from the point."

Bewildered, wondering if this is some sort of witch threat, Zhenya asks, "Or what?"

"Just tell him." And then the witch is gone.

The guys have questions when Zhenya gets back, but he fends them off. It works for most of them. But Kuni, Tanger, and Duper corner him by his car, Flower lingering behind them.

"All right, talk," Tanger demands. "Who was that guy? Why is a fucking witch dropping in to chat with you?"

"That's Sidney," Zhenya says unhelpfully.

Giving him a flat look, Tanger says, "Hey. Are you trying to make a deal with a witch? 'Cause that never ends well, okay."

"Not trying, no."

Flower huffs. "Just tell them, G."

Zhenya scowls, but he says, "I'm already make deal, last year. Sidney save my mama's life."

"You mean when she was so sick?" Duper asks in his gentle voice. "This witch helped her get better?"

Zhenya nods. "He say she die soon, so I make deal, and she gets better right away."

"*Crisse de câlisse*," Tanger groans. "And you didn't ever consider he was lying about how bad her health was? Or maybe even he was the one who made her sick in the first place, to trick you into coming to him?"

Prickly and angry, Zhenya snaps back, "So I'm just supposed to take chance? Say, maybe witch lie, we wait and see if mama not die after all? Fuck you, Tanger. I do what I had to."

"Look, sorry, I don't—" Tanger scrubs his hands over his face. "I'm glad your mom's better, and I'm not saying you shouldn't have done anything necessary to save her. I just... Witches always charge a cost, right? And magic this big, life-saving stuff, it's always gonna be a big cost." Tanger looks to him, dark eyes sad. "What'd you have to give up, Geno?"

Zhenya looks down. "Firstborn."

"*Fuck*."

"Firstborn, like firstborn *kid*?" asks Kuni, quietly horrified. Zhenya nods.

"What're you gonna do?" says Duper, somber.

Zhenya laughs wetly. "Never have any kids. Can't risk—you know, can't risk giving strange witch my baby. He say he won't hurt them, but can't risk. Don't know what he do. Not fair to baby, you know?"

"What about adoption?"

"No, he say adoption count too. Take any firstborn that's mine."

"Shit."

A sober silence falls over the group. Glumly, Zhenya shrugs.

"Kids not so great anyway," he says, not believing a word of it. "I have kids, then I become sad old man like all you."

"Nah, fuck this," Flower says. "We'll find a way. Just need to put our heads together."

Zhenya knows Flower hasn't stopped all year looking for a way around the deal that won't bring retribution. If there was something to be done, it'd be found already.

"Thanks," he says anyway. "Okay if not, though. Saving my mama always worth it."

No one has any argument to offer against that. Tanger just squeezes his shoulder and says, "Well, if that witch shows up again let us know, we'll chase him off. Bad enough what he's done already. He doesn't need to hang around you and remind you of it, make everything worse."

Zhenya scoffs. "Chase him off? More likely get yourself cursed, make me feel guilty forever. No," he shakes his head. "Everything fine. Leave alone. Witch only check in on me. Probably not see him again soon."

He's wrong about that. Sidney shows up again the very next week, in the produce aisle while Zhenya's doing some lazy off-day grocery shopping. Zhenya curses and nearly drops the tomato in his hand when he sees him.

"What you do here?" he asks, annoyed and recklessly irreverent. He spots a mother nearby clutch her young daughter's hand and pull her away, abandoning the cucumbers she was examining. "Don't have baby for you yet."

"I know," Sidney says, hands loose at his sides. If he notices the fear and unease being directed at him from every shopper in the vicinity, he doesn't seem discomfited by it. Once again his witch-nature is inescapably apparent, though Zhenya can't put his finger on *why*. Sidney should just look like a normal person out buying their weekend groceries, dressed in casual comfort, and yet he stands out as obviously as if he were dressed in a stereotypical witch's pointed hat.

"So why you here?" Zhenya asks. He returns to the tomatoes, blasé in a way he's not feeling.

"I have something for you."

Zhenya eyes him suspiciously. "What cost?"

"No cost. It isn't like that. Here." He holds out a magazine, and, cautiously, Zhenya takes it.

It's a baby magazine. A bright-eyed, brown-skinned little baby laughs up at him on the cover, and all of Zhenya's words get caught behind the lump in his throat.

"Just some light reading," Sidney says casually while Zhenya's still choking on emotion. "Something to think about."

When Zhenya manages to look up again, the witch is gone.

It doesn't stop there. He finds a baby magazine slipped underneath his front door, one left on the passenger seat of his car, another mixed among his Sunday newspapers. It's when there are no

less than three left blatantly in his stall one night after a game that the team starts to notice.

They think it's a prank at first, but one look at Flower's stony face—normally the usual suspect—clues them in that something's not right.

And so the whole story comes out. His teammates are nosy, and they're family; he never expected to keep it from them forever. He tells them about his mama's illness, about his desperation for answers. He tells them about the witch he found and the deal they struck. And he tells them about Sidney's campaign to change his mind about having kids.

"But G," Tishy, distressed, says once he's done, "you want kids more than like anyone I know."

Zhenya shrugs. "So? Can't give baby to witch. Can't trick witch out of deal, either. Just way things are."

"D'you think he's taunting you or something with these?" Phil asks, holding up one of the magazines. "Or really trying to change your mind about having kids?"

"Not sure. Hard to read him."

"He sounds like a fucking dick," Scott mutters, and a chorus of agreement rises up.

"And he just showed up here the other day? That was him? Fucking ballsy."

Coler shakes his head. "Ballsy? Not really. Who's gonna stop him? He's a goddamned witch, remember."

"Witch or no," Tanger says definitively, "he shouldn't be allowed to harass G like this. That wasn't part of the deal."

"Yeah, it's way out of line."

Zhenya goes home that night feeling warmer than before, but he should've given more thought to the protective ire in his teammates' voices. Because a day and a half later, when he stumbles in to morning skate, he's the only one who shows up. He waits, then calls all of their phones and gets no answer from anyone.

He pokes around the locker room a bit, and that's when he finds the plate of gingerbread men. There's a note on top of the plate, written in careful handwriting.

*Don't eat these. They're your teammates. –Sidney*

Coach Sullivan gives him a patient, expectant look when he tromps out on the ice with no one coming out behind him and a plate of cookies in his hands.

Zhenya holds the cookies out. "Team do something stupid, maybe."

Dangerously calm, Sully says, "You better explain, then."

Zhenya does. Sully doesn't like it.

"Fucking Christ Almighty!"

"Yeah," Zhenya agrees miserably. He hasn't felt this guilty since...he can't remember the last time he felt this guilty.

"All right, here's what we're gonna do," Sully says, steely in the way he gets when they're going

into the third down by two. "Practice is canceled. You're gonna take me to wherever this witch lives, and we're gonna get our fucking team back. Okay?"

"Okay, Coach."

They briefly fill in the rest of the coaching staff, then the two of them set out together, Sully driving, Zhenya navigating with the plate of cookies on his lap. He tries everyone's phones again, just to be optimistic, and isn't surprised when they all go to voicemail.

Sidney's property, when they get there, is still and quiet and dark, but the gate's unlocked. He hopes that means it's all right to enter. The two of them shut the gate behind themselves and wind down the shady path.

Zhenya knocks on the front door, a careful grip on the plate. No one answers, but a black shape swoops down in front of Zhenya's face, a brush of feathers against his cheek, catching him by surprise. When he looks up, Sidney's crow is perched on the porch railing, one of the gingerbread cookies caught between his beak.

"Careful!" Zhenya yells, terrified. "That's not—that's real person! Don't eat!"

Sully takes a quick step towards the bird, almost catching it, but it hops just out of reach.

"Don't tease them, Stride," a voice says, and Sidney appears from a little trail leading back towards the other side of the house. "Don't worry, he's not going to eat him."

Stride flies over to Sidney's shoulder and drops the cookie into his waiting hand.

"One of your goalies," Sidney says, looking down at it. "You're here to get them all back to normal, I'm guessing? Or are you here to yell and ignore locked gates and harass my garden?"

"Gate wasn't locked," Zhenya says.

"Not for you, no. I'd figured you'd be by." His eyes fall on Sully. "Didn't expect you to bring company, but neither of you are unwelcome. For now."

Sully gives the witch a friendly nod, but his eyes are quiet and watchful in a way Zhenya knows from the ice.

"Mike Sullivan. I'd like to apologize for my team bothering you. And I ask that you return them all to their former condition. We've got a game tonight, and Geno's good but he can't win it for us singlehanded."

Sidney looks considering. "I appreciate the apology. But I'm not sure I'm ready to change them back yet. They were very rude." He smiles, almost apologetic.

"My fault, though," Zhenya says, ignoring Sully's sharp look. "My fault they come here and act so rude."

"Yeah, maybe you could help clarify that for me, actually. I wasn't entirely certain what they were so upset about. Something about the magazines I'd left for you?"

Zhenya swallows. "Is because they know magazines make me sad."

Sidney frowns. "How would they make you sad? They're supposed to make you interested in having kids. They're cute," he adds a little defensively.

"Yes, know this, but I'm maybe—" Zhenya shifts nervously. "I'm maybe not all the way honest with you before. I'm say to you that I'm not want kids but is...maybe little bit a lie."

"Oh?" The witch's tone is completely neutral, but something dangerous hovers. Zhenya picks his next words carefully, thinking fast.

"Yes. Because, truth is, I'm want kids a lot, only not want to have alone. Want to find person to build family with, first. Person I love. Then have kids together."

Sidney's shoulders relax. "Oh. And you haven't found that person yet?"

"No. Is hard, when playing hockey all the time. So I'm see magazines of babies, babies I'm want to have but not ready, and it makes me sad. Team sees this, think you send magazines to be mean."

For a moment Sidney doesn't speak. At last he says, in a soft voice, "I see. I didn't send you those to be mean, but I can see how from their perspective it might seem that way. All right. I can make an allowance for them, in that case. They were acting out of protection of you, and that's... admirable, at least."

Zhenya breathes a sigh of relief, and beside him Sully relaxes just a little. "Thank you."

"Besides, I suppose it wasn't fair of me to punish *all* of them. Only about seven or eight of them actually came here trespassing. I cursed everyone else on your team too because, well—" He smiles ruefully. "I guess I lost my temper a little. It happens."

He puts the goalie cookie back on the plate with the others.

"Would you rather I change them back now, or after you take them home? Transportation might be an issue if I turn them now."

Considering they only have Sully's car and a whole hockey team to get home, Zhenya sees Sidney's point.

"After we get them home would be best," Sully says.

"All right. Stride?" The bird takes flight, into an open window of the house, and returns a moment later with a small pouch in its beak, not unlike the one Zhenya used to save his mama, then drops it in Sidney's hand. "Thank you," Sidney says. He tosses the pouch to Sully, who snatches it deftly out of the air. "Sprinkle each of them with a little of this. It doesn't have to be a lot, just a little will do the trick. There should be plenty for all of them."

Sully fingers the bag open and peeks inside, then shoots Sidney an incredulous look.

"This is a bag of baking sprinkles."

Sidney's eyes sparkle, and his lips quirk suspiciously. "Yes. And it'll break the spell, I promise."

Sully chuckles, shaking his head, looking amused despite himself. "Fair enough, I guess. Thank you for hearing us out."

Conflict resolved, Zhenya finds himself unable to resist adding, "But sprinkles and gingerbread together, no frosting? Taste terrible."

Sidney laughs once, sharp and loud like it was surprised out of him. "I'll keep that in mind for next time. Maybe they'd rather be sugar cookies?"

Zhenya grins uneasily, uncertain if it's a joke or a threat. It's hard to know with witches. He's pretty sure it's a joke, though.

They part ways on much better terms than Zhenya expected going in. Sidney even walks them to the gate and watches them drive off, which was a little unnerving but seemed to have been intended as a friendly gesture.

They were lucky Sidney was willing to listen to reason—if he hadn't, a whole slew of the Wilkes-Barre guys would've been getting their NHL debuts tonight, because there wouldn't have been much else to do about it. The frightening truth is that there's little recourse against the power and whim of witches. The best protection is just to not piss them off in the first place.

After getting back to UMPC, what follows is a surreal few minutes as, one by one, Zhenya and Sully lay out their cookie team and sprinkle them with the rainbow sprinkles Sidney gave them. Each time, the world takes a step to the left, and suddenly a human is where the cookie was.

"Sorry," says a shamefaced Tishy, the first to change back. "Maybe we didn't plan that out so great."

It's easy to flush out the guilty parties, those seven or eight who actually went to Sidney's house. Most of the team, after they turn back to themselves, look confused or tired. But Tanger's expression is stormy, Flower's smile entirely too innocent, Horny's stare too challenging. Tishy of course confessed willingly. And four of the younger guys—Rusty, Shearsy, Tom, and Scott—all duck their heads away when Zhenya meets their eyes.

"Look," Sully says when they're all human again and gathered together—except Pooh, who apparently was caught mid-shower when he was turned into a cookie and needs to grab some clothes. "I'm not gonna stand here and pretend I'm not proud to see you guys sticking up for your teammate, 'cause I am. But we're smarter than this. Okay? Trespassing on a fucking witch's property? We lucked out. I don't want to hear about anybody—*anybody*—going back to that house to harass that witch. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Coach," they all mumble.

"And we're sending him a gift as apology, so put your heads together and come up with something good. All right? Now head home, get ready. I'll see you all tonight at warm-ups."

They end up sending Sidney tickets to an upcoming home game, a week and a half away. Sully approves because the gift is deemed suitably friendly and thoughtful. Most of the team approves because no one really thinks the witch will want to use the tickets. Zhenya remembers Sidney's one-off suggestion about Dumo's point shot, and says nothing.

He's right in his suspicions. Sidney shows up.

Zhenya notices him first, during warm-ups, sitting calmly in his aisle seat several rows up behind the players' benches. He's getting a few wary looks from fans around him, but he doesn't seem bothered, and no one does anything more than shoot looks. The seat next to him, belonging to one in the pair of tickets they sent him, is empty.

Zhenya dithers about mentioning anything to the team, worried it might throw some of them off their game, but the decision becomes moot when Tanger spots the witch next and swears fiercely. Word gets around, then.

Knowing a witch is in the crowd doesn't throw anyone off their game. Instead they light it up; everything's clicking, Zhenya getting two goals and an assist himself, and it's at least a one-point



game for six other guys on the team. They destroy the Wings 6-1.

The weeks following end up being some of the very best games of their season thus far. They don't win them all, but they win a fucking lot of them, and in increasingly lucky ways. In that time, Zhenya doesn't catch a whiff of Sidney anywhere, and no more magazines get slipped among his things.

It's a welcome relief, but Zhenya can't help feeling uneasy. The start of their lucky streak is too coincidentally timed with the game Sidney attended. It's not that he thinks they don't deserve to be winning like they are—they're playing hard, playing united, playing fast. They play like that, and they'll win more often than not.

But game after game, it seems like every single bounce goes their way. Fluky wrist shots from the point make it in for them again and again against the odds. The refs only seem to catch a tenth of the penalties they accidentally (or deliberately) take, if even that many. And no one's had worse injury than a bruise in weeks. They've never had this kind of prolonged luck before in all of Zhenya's memory.

On the other end of the ice, it's reversed. Their opponents seem to eat post far too often, or lose an edge just at the right moment to give the Pens a 3-on-1 rush, or accidentally crash into their own goalie and leave behind a gaping, wide-open net and a Penguin with the puck on his stick.

It goes on for long enough to paint a worrying picture; Zhenya's not surprised when someone finally brings it up.

It's Horny who does, but Zhenya's noticed Hags, Bones, and Phil whispering together with increasing regularity and suspects they've been building up to it too. Horny just gets to it first.

It's after a 7-0 trouncing of Calgary, where the Flames fanned on every quality shot attempt they had, took two different delay-of-game penalties, and then took *three* too-many-men-on-the-ice penalties just for good measure. The Penguins are in a celebratory mood as they all clamber into the bus to head back to the hotel, but Zhenya can see a shiver of unease among some of the guys. Horny sees it too.

"Look," Horny says loudly enough to be heard all over the bus. "I don't wanna take away from a great fucking win, 'cause it was. But we need to start talking about this."

There's confusion on a few of the rookies' faces, but most everyone else is nodding grimly.

"You mean how we've been just a little too lucky for a little too long?" says Ben. "Yeah. I've been worrying about that."

Frowning, Rusty asks, "Wait, that's a bad thing?"

"Think about which game it started at," Cully says quietly, and it's obvious from Rusty's face when the pieces click together for him.

"Oh," he says in an unhappy voice.

"No one made any deal with him, right?" Kuni asks. "After the cookie incident?"

There's a chorus of "no" and a few furtive glances at Zhenya.

"We're just gonna have to go to the witch and ask straight out if he's giving us luck," Horny says. "And if he is, figure out if he thinks it means we owe him."

"I can go," Zhenya says, and every head swivels towards him.

"You don't have to," Kuni says mildly. "Out of anyone you have the best cause to avoid the guy."

"My job," Zhenya shrugs. "I'm captain."

"I'll go with him," Tanger says, and next to him Flower snorts.

"Yeah, because that went so well last time. You lose your temper at him again, and I'm just gonna eat you when he turns you back into a cookie. Think he does snickerdoodles?"

By the time they get back to Pittsburgh, they've decided on Cully, Fehrsy, Tanger, and Flower to accompany him. He appreciates the support, but he's not sure he needs it. Sidney seems all right, for a witch, for someone waiting for Zhenya to have a kid just so he can steal it away.

Okay, so there's no feeling better about that, but Zhenya tries to remember that Sidney *did* save his mama just like he promised to. And everyone knows asking for magical intervention brings a heavy price. Based on the common stories, many witches might have asked for worse—for his papa's life instead, for a virgin's lifeblood, or any number of twisted, painful things. Zhenya's deal, in essence, is only taking away from him an opportunity. At least no one else is hurt by it.

They head to the witch's house first off day they get, the five of them wary and quiet. The gate is unlocked, but when they wind through the trees down to the front door, no one answers at their knock. Fehrsy and Cully, the only two who haven't been here before (except as cookies carried on a plate), eye the house curiously. Zhenya, remembering his very first visit, looks up to the higher branches of the nearest trees.

He spots a telltale twitch of a thin, black tail hanging down from a branch. The cat leaps down a moment later, and Sidney-the-human straightens up from the landing. His expression guarded, he says nothing, just watches them expectantly.

"Not here for trouble," Zhenya says reassuringly.

"Okay," says Sidney. "Thank you for the tickets."

"You're welcome. Thank you for change team back."

"You're welcome."

Zhenya shifts his stance, trying to find a friendly segue, until Tanger finally snaps, patience gone, and asks, "Look, just straight out, did you give us good luck? Magically?"

"What we mean," Cully steps in, "is that we've had an unusually lengthy string of good luck ever since you came to our game, and we wanted to make sure it hasn't left us with any...unresolved debts."

Sidney's eyes flit between them. "Luck?"

"Kind of freakishly good luck, yeah," Fehrsy says. "Just wanted to check we didn't owe you for it."

"Oh. No," Sidney shakes his head. "I didn't do anything to require payment. You don't need to worry."

Shrewdly, Flower asks, "But did you do *something*?"

"I didn't give you magical luck, no."

Zhenya, like Flower, is beginning to recognize this witch's style of evasion. "But you do *something*," he repeats Flower's words.

Sidney smiles, a close-lipped and secretive curl of his mouth. "Maybe."

Fehrsy and Flower exchange uneasy glances, not quite sneakily enough. Sidney's smile drops.

"No," he says seriously. "I didn't do anything. I didn't use any magic on you, and you have no debts left to me. Well—" His eyes flit to Zhenya's. "Besides the obvious."

Zhenya nods. It's not like he's forgotten.

There isn't much else to say after that. They thank Sidney for his time and then leave. Their good luck lasts for a few more games, until the day Dales gets a puck to the face during practice and has to get stitches. After that, games return to their usual mixed bag of luck. Despite Sidney's reassurance, it's only then that most of the team truly relaxes.

Another month passes, and Zhenya's got hockey to play. The subject of Sidney doesn't come up in the locker room again—not until January, when the Predators roll into town and James Neal is scratched from Nashville's roster for the game because he's been turned into a mouse.

"We decided to bring him with us anyway," Shea Weber says, big hands gently cupped around a little white mouse who, apparently, is Zhenya's old winger. Zhenya's not sure he sees the resemblance. "Just in case he turns back in time for tonight."

"Nealsy?" Zhenya says dubiously, bending down to get a closer look. "This you?"

Nealsy squeaks.

"Still sounds like him," Duper says, bending closer too. "Well, shit. What happened?"

Josi, who, with Weber, dropped by the locker room after the Penguins practice to explain Nealsy's plight, huffs.

"Nealer happened. He was an ass to a little old lady who turned out to be a witch, and now he's a mouse. The witch is gone, no idea where, and we've no idea how to break the spell."

"We're pretty much out of options at this point," Weber says grimly. "Unless we can find someone who knows the breaker for this particular curse—if there even is one—we're fucked."

Zhenya shares a quick glance with Duper.

Weber's eyes narrow at them. "What? What was that look?"

"Maybe know someone who can help," Zhenya says slowly.

"Really? Who?"

"You're not gonna like it much," Duper answers, "but it's another witch."

Weber makes a confused face. "Another witch? We're not trying to get the rest of us turned into mice too."

"That not happen," Zhenya says. "Probably. Be polite. Maybe he can break curse for you."

Josi says, "What about the cost?"

"Worth it to ask, at least. See what he charge you, don't have to agree if don't want. Say no, you still in same situation as now."

It's Weber and Josi's turn to share a glance.

"And you trust this witch?" Weber asks. Zhenya lifts a shoulder.

"All the way, no. For this, yes. Ask him, be polite, nothing bad happen. Maybe he can help, maybe not, but worth it to ask."

Josi nods, and Weber says, "Okay. When can we go?"

They have to wait until after the game to go, at which point Zhenya's cranky from a close 4-3 loss, but the Preds are flying out tomorrow morning so there won't be time then. Zhenya swallows his bad mood, for Nealsy.

The four of them—Zhenya, Duper, Weber, and Josi—plus Nealsy pull up outside of Sidney's gate, Duper at the wheel. Zhenya can see Weber and Josi eyeing the place suspiciously, and he doesn't blame them. It's even eerier at night. They file gamely out of Duper's car all the same.

"If gate locked we go away," Zhenya says, as they approach the property gate. "Not locked, okay to go in."

The gate isn't locked. It swings open at Zhenya's touch.

The winding path through the witch's darkened grove looks very different after the sun's gone down. The trees seem darker, encroaching, threatening, and the whole place feels like it's brimming with something ancient and dangerous and watchful. Beside Zhenya, Duper shivers.

Perched in Weber's hands, Nealsy abruptly begins squeaking frantically, twisting this way and that like he's trying to get free from Weber's grip even if it means a several-foot drop to the ground.

"Shit, Nealer," Weber says, trying to tighten his hold without squashing the mouse. "Fucking chill for a sec, will you?"

Out of the trees, swift and sudden, a small black figure sweeps towards them alarmingly fast, diving straight for Weber. It swoops low over his hands and is gone a second later on a feathered flap of wings.

"James!" Weber shouts, deep and loud. He looks pale in the gloom, his eyes wide and frantic. "That thing just took Nealer!"

"Oh god—" Josi starts scanning the skies, but the trees block all vision of where Nealsy was carried off. "A bird, that was a bird? We've got to catch it, it'll eat him!"

"Not normal bird," Zhenya says, thinking fast and remembering the flash of glossy black feathers. "Witch's familiar. It won't eat Nealsy." At least, he really hopes it won't.

Josi takes off at a jog down the path, still scanning for any sign of them. "That's worse!" he yells over his shoulder.

They all tumble down the path towards the witch's house, where they find Sidney sitting on the

front steps, Nealsy squeaking around in front of his feet, perfectly alive and unharmed.

"Oh thank fuck," Weber breathes, slowing to a stop, and Sidney looks up.

"He belongs to you?" he asks, scooping Nealsy in one hand and standing. Then he notices Zhenya and the others coming in behind Weber. "Geno."

"Sidney," Zhenya greets. "Sorry for bother."

"I'm guessing this is the reason for your visit?" he asks, holding out Nealsy for Josi to gently take. "I didn't cast this curse, if that's what you're here to ask."

"Not that," Zhenya shakes his head. "Here to ask if can help turn Nealsy back. Makes very cute mouse, but his dogs will eat him if not turn back to human."

"Geno said you might be willing to help us," Weber says warily, not taking his eyes from Sidney.

"I can't remove another witch's curse—only the original witch can lift it. But I can tell you how to break it."

Josi asks, "And the cost?"

Sidney smiles, a slight, easily-missed expression. "No cost for information."

"So just like that? You'll just tell us the curse breaker?" says Weber, suspicion palpable.

"Why wouldn't I?" Sidney's smile turns a little sharper. "Or would you rather I charge you for it?"

"We don't want to be left with any debts," Weber says firmly.

"Don't want to owe a witch a favor? Smart of you, I guess. All right. The cost for my information is a clipping of your hair."

Weber looks uneasy, probably as everyone would who'd learned as a kid to never give a witch your hair or teeth or nails, because who knew what dark magic they'd perform with it? Sidney smiles like he knows exactly what Weber's thinking.

"What'll you use it for?" Josi asks.

"This or that. I haven't decided. Nothing that would affect you."

"All right," Weber says grimly. "Deal."

"Then hold still." Sidney takes a step closer to Weber, and a pair of scissors materializes in his hand, appearing from thin air like unfurling ribbons. Weber stiffens but holds still as Sidney leans in and gently snips off the tips of a few strands of his hair.

"There." The scissors disappear, and the clippings go into a pouch in one of Sidney's pockets. "It's done. As for your mouse, the curse-breaker requires that the victim be willingly kissed by someone who dislikes him or harbors ill will towards him." He smiles. "I'll leave finding such a person up to you."

"Just find ex-girlfriend," Zhenya chirps, relieved the curse-breaker is so relatively simple. He's heard stories of awful, convoluted breakers that are almost worse than the curses themselves. "Or anyone he play dirty against."

"And you're certain this'll work?" Weber checks. "Absolutely?"

"Yes. You can come back if it doesn't, but I promise that won't be necessary. It'll work."

Weber relaxes a little. "Then thank you. We probably never would have discovered the breaker on our own. You've been...a big help."

"You're welcome."

Josi gives Sidney a nod in thanks as well, and Nealsy, in his hand, squeaks something that might be gratitude. Sidney smiles like it is.

As they turn to leave, Sidney says, "Geno? Can I speak with you a second? Alone."

Duper shoots him a worried look, but Zhenya waves him off. "Yes, fine. Go," he adds to the others. "Meet you at car soon."

Duper doesn't like it, but they go. Alone with Sidney, Zhenya says, "Have question for you, too." He nods towards Sidney's pocket. "Why you want gross hockey player hair? Can ask you this?"

"Oh." Sidney looks down and smiles, a sly little twitch. "I'll tell you, if you promise not to share what I tell you?"

"Okay, promise."

Sidney pulls the pouch of hair from his pocket. "He needed reassurance that I won't count him in my debt. Giving me some of his hair makes him feel like he's repaid me, without making him actually give up anything of value." He looks to Zhenya with smiling eyes. "I was serious when I said he didn't need to pay me for just giving information."

"So hair—is useless for you? Not plan to put in..." Zhenya stops, unable to remember the word in English. He gestures with his hands, trying to indicate a cauldron shape.

"In a potion?" Sidney guesses.

"Yes, potion."

"No, I won't. But it'll be good for him to think I might." He upturns the pouch and lets the hair flutter harmlessly to the dirt.

"Sneaky," Zhenya admits, appreciative.

"So you won't tell?"

"No, keep promise." Breaking a promise to a witch is just stupid—besides, Zhenya's not convinced that knowing this would be all that reassuring to Weber. He'd probably just worry that it meant he still owed Sidney a debt.

A thought occurs.

"You do sneaky trick like this on me, my deal?" he asks, not even letting himself think about the implications of Sidney's answer either way.

The humor fades from Sidney's eyes. "No. That's different."

"Because you give me magic, but Weber you just tell stuff?" he guesses.

"Right."

"Okay." Zhenya lets go of the nascent hope that had been building against his wishes. "Is what I think already, just ask to check. What you need to talk about?"

Sidney tucks the empty pouch back into his pocket and asks, not looking at Zhenya, "Are you dating anyone?"

Zhenya coughs in surprise, face turning red. For an insane moment he wonders if Sidney is asking him out. "Dating?"

Sidney glances up, confused, but it quickly blends into understanding.

"Oh. Don't worry, I'm not asking to date you myself. You said earlier that you don't want kids until you have someone to raise them with, remember? I was just checking in to see how...that side of things is going."

"Oh, yes, yes, obviously," Zhenya recovers. "Uh, not dating anyone now, no. Okay though," he adds hurriedly. "Will soon. Don't need send me dating magazines or something."

Sidney frowns like he's affronted. "I wasn't going to do that."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

"But I could give you a spell that'll find potentially compatible matches for you?"

"What?" says Zhenya, helplessly confused.

"I could give you a necklace or ring that will glow when you're nearby someone who'd be a good romantic match for you."

"...Magic can know this?"

"Yes."

"Oh. No—thanks, no," Zhenya says weakly. "I date regular way, find someone regular way. Thank you for offer."

"Okay," says Sidney, visibly disappointed. "Let me know if you change your mind. You can go now."

"Okay. Um. Bye. Thank you again for help Nealsy."

"You're welcome."

Zhenya gives an awkward wave and leaves quickly, rejoining the others in the car. Duper slides him a questioning look as he climbs in, and he shakes his head.

"Everything fine."

Duper doesn't look convinced, but he puts the car in gear and pulls away. From the back seat, Weber, with Nealsy on his knee, says, "He wasn't quite what I was expecting. How're you guys on familiar terms with a witch, anyway?"

"Long story," says Zhenya, not interested at all in sharing it. Weber nods and doesn't say anything more.

The Preds fly out the next morning, and a few days later Zhenya's phone buzzes with a picture from Nealsy, human again and smiling next to a pretty redhead who's flipping him off. Zhenya chuckles and sends the pic to anyone on the team who'd care to know Nealsy's recovered.

Very briefly, he wonders what it would be like to have Sidney's number—do witches even have phones?—and send him the picture too. Would he think it was funny? Would he care to know if his advice helped or not? Would he tell his witch-friends the story, gossip about the stupid human hockey player who got himself turned into a squeaky mouse?

...Do witches even *have* friends? Or families, for that matter? Surely they have to be born like everyone else; they don't just appear one day fully formed. Or do they? Zhenya's factual information on witches is pretty lacking.

He knows the common theory, that witches are human children stolen by the devil and seduced into witchcraft until all their humanity is replaced with magic, but he's always found it unlikely. Even more so now, having met Sidney. Maybe witches are just like everybody, born to witch parents with witch siblings in little witch neighborhoods. If this is the case, it's strange no one's ever seen a little witch child before—but witches have always been secretive. Perhaps they just insulate their children carefully.

From that point, it's hard not to start picturing Sidney as a little kid. Did he have those same dark curls, those same bright eyes? Did his mom teach him how to turn other kids into cookies when they were mean to him? The mental image is surprisingly adorable, but a little hard to reconcile with Sidney's distinctive, witch-dark aura. Did he have that too, as a child? A softer one, less intense, getting stronger and darker as his magic grew?

Maybe that's why witches so closely guard all mention of their children. Witch aura or not, it's harder to be completely afraid of them when you picture them with chubby little kid-hands and kid-cheeks.

If he ever sees Sidney again, maybe he'll ask him about it. Very politely.

Zhenya shouldn't be surprised by this, but he sees Sidney again sooner than he expects.

He's tired from a late flight after a long game, ready to sleep in his own bed again, but he's not so tired he doesn't recognize the black cat curled up on the head of his Alien statue that guards the front of his house. He parks his car and walks up closer.

"Sidney?" he asks, as the cat lifts his head and watches him lazily. "What you do here?"

The cat leaps down from the statue, and a moment later Sidney is straightening up.

"Hello," he says normally, like he hasn't been lurking in cat form on Zhenya's property. "Do you have a few minutes? I have some questions."

"Um." Zhenya scratches his head. "Okay? Very tired, though, long flight. Maybe not be as smart for talk right now, you know, English worst right now."

Sidney's face falls minutely. "Oh, of course, sorry—I didn't think of that. Of course you're tired. I can come back later?"

"Tomorrow," Zhenya says, not bothering to waste the energy wondering what the witch wants. "We talk then."



"Okay. I'll come back tomorrow." Then Sidney is a cat again, slipping off into the night. Zhenya shoves all his curiosity off for tomorrow and goes to bed, falling asleep within a minute of his head hitting the pillow.

The next morning, Sidney's quiet knock comes as he's making breakfast.

"Hi," Sidney says, hands in his pockets, when he opens the door. "Is this too early? You just said tomorrow."

"This fine." Zhenya decides *fuck it* and adds, "Want breakfast? Have eggs and juice."

Sidney blinks. "That...would be really nice. Thank you." He follows Zhenya inside to the kitchen and, at his gesture, takes a seat at the counter. Zhenya plates them both and drops into the stool next to him.

"Nealsy better," Zhenya says around a bite of eggs after Sidney politely thanks him again. "The mouse. Find ex-girlfriend to kiss, just like I say."

"Oh. That's good. I'm sure his team is happy to have him back." Sidney follows Zhenya's lead and takes a bite too.

"Yeah. Think they want to send you thank-you gift soon. Does mailman deliver package to witch house?"

"Sometimes, the braver ones. But they don't need to send me anything. I didn't really do much."

"Make them feel better," Zhenya shrugs. He shoots Sidney a lazy grin. "Don't like gift, just give to me. I'm always like to get gift."

Sidney smiles back. "I'll keep that in mind."

Zhenya passes him the juice and says, "So what you want to talk about? Wait, I'm guess. Make sure I'm date?"

Sidney slides him a look like he's not sure if he's being teased or not. Zhenya grins to make it clear.

"Only thing you ask me about, babies and date. Just like my mama, you know, that all she ask me. She even pushier than you, though, you need to work harder."

"Did you just call me pushy?"

Zhenya has a moment of panic, but then he catches the amused gleam in Sidney's eye.

"Most pushy! Besides my mama. You not agree? You say you *not* here to ask about date?"

Sidney shifts. "I...maybe."

"'Maybe'." Zhenya snorts, biting back a laugh. "Means yes."

"Okay, yes, I am. You said earlier it's hard to find people to date because you spend so much time playing hockey, but you didn't want to use magic to help. You want to do it the regular way. So I thought maybe..." He rummages in his jacket and pulls out a few sheets of paper, folded over. He holds them out and, at his encouraging nod, Zhenya takes and unfolds them.

*1—Gender preferences, if any? Elaborate below.*

*2—What quality is most important to you in a partner?*

*3—How important is it to you that your partner share your interests?*

*4—Describe the perfect date.*

He takes a peek at the bottom of the last page. It goes on for forty more questions.

"What?" he says helplessly.

"It's a questionnaire, to give me an idea of what kind of people you're interested in. That way I can find for you people you might like, and then if you're interested you can try dating them."

Zhenya covers his eyes with his palm. He imagines unleashing a determined Sidney on the unsuspecting dating populace and immediately feels faint.

"Sidney. This...this not regular way," he says shakily.

Sidney frowns. "It's not that different from a dating website," he argues. "I'm just doing the middleman work for you."

"Dating website!" Zhenya grasps at the idea in desperation. "Good plan! I sign up for dating website instead. You can help?" He thrusts the questionnaire at Sidney, who reluctantly tucks it back into his jacket.

"Okay. If that's the way you'd prefer to do it."

This is how Zhenya ends up in front of his computer with a witch at his side, making an OkCupid profile.

"Are you sure this is the best site?" Sidney asks dubiously.

Zhenya's sure of nothing of the sort—this was just the first site he came across that didn't charge a fee. But he says, "Of course, best site! Get best match here, everyone know this."

"All right. I guess you'd know better than I would."

"Witches not use dating site?" he asks innocently, and Sidney quietly laughs.

"Not really, no. The Devil tends to get jealous and drag our human lovers down to Hell, so it's not worth the hassle."

Zhenya stares at him; Sidney stares back, impressively pokerfaced until finally his lips start twitching.

"That was joke," Zhenya realizes.

"Yeah. You know—" He peers a little closer at Zhenya. "You know witches don't *really* consort with the Devil, right? Our magic has nothing to do with that."

"How I'm know this for sure?" he asks, miffed. "Witches never say anything about magic!"

"I guess that's true," Sidney allows, still smiling. "All right. Now you know for sure, then."

They spend a few minutes filling out the profile, and Zhenya can feel Sidney judging him for every sparse answer he types out.

"I put more later!" he says defensively when he finally has had enough of the silent judgment.  
"This just for now."

Sidney looks at him. "Are you going to put a picture up?"

"No, bad idea. People know my face."

Sidney looks disappointed but concedes the point. "You're probably right. You'd get more interest if you put a picture up, though."

"This enough for now. See what happen, okay?"

Sidney agrees, reluctantly. He takes over the mouse and clicks on a few of the suggested matches, the ones of pretty blonde girls like he's already familiar with Zhenya's dating history, but Zhenya makes sure to find fault with all of them. Eventually Sidney starts getting twitchy and says he has to go.

"But give the site a chance, okay? It won't work if you don't even try it," he says as he's leaving. Zhenya blithely agrees and sees him to the door.

For the next few weeks, he happily deletes every message OkCupid emails to him and never once thinks about opening them.

He's not surprised, this time, when Sidney shows up at his house again about a month later.

"No, listen," he sighs when he opens the door and sees the witch standing on his step. "I'm not in mood to talk about date people today. Okay? You can come in, but no talk about babies or date."

"Okay," Sidney agrees, and he steps inside.

Zhenya didn't expect him to still want to come in, but he's too tired and frustrated today to let things get weird. He just herds Sidney into his TV room and makes him watch the Penguins' game against the Islanders with him.

"How's your hand?" Sidney asks halfway into the second period.

"Broken," he answers tightly.

"I could fix—"

"No," he interrupts, before he can let himself get tempted. "No magic help."

"Okay."

They watch the game mostly without speaking, and Sidney leaves as soon as it's over, but Zhenya's mood lifts just a little for the rest of the day. Company usually does him good when he's in a sulk—and Sidney may be a witch, but he's also unexpectedly relaxing company, when he's not harping on about dating or babies.

After that, like a door's been opened, Sidney starts showing up every away game to watch with him while Zhenya's hand heals. Sometimes they talk and sometimes they don't. Zhenya discovers his suspicions were right and Sidney does know a surprising lot about hockey, and he isn't shy about sharing his opinions when he wants to. He quickly gets used to a talkative witch jabbering next to him for at least half of any game they watch together, critiquing and complimenting and

analyzing in turn.

"I'm just saying, the play would work better if you kept number 14 in front of the net and sent number 43 to the half boards. Their strengths—"

"Yes, yes, you so smart, Sid. Now be quiet, want to hear what Pierre saying about Schultzy."

Sidney snorts. "If you're going to lie to get me to stop talking at least pick one that's semi-believable." He makes a sudden appreciative noise, a swift intake of air. "Oh wow, did you see that pass from Kessel? That was so soft, right on the tape."

Zhenya had missed it because he'd been glancing over instead to see that delighted little smile Sidney gets when he's being teased, but he says, "Yes, very pretty pass."

It's nice, having Sidney over. He loves hockey, it's obvious, and he has a knowledgeable, quietly enthusiastic way of babbling about it that just puts Zhenya in a good mood. It makes him feel loose and expansive, and in the midst of an injury that's a great way to feel.

Zhenya knows he's gotten a lot more comfortable around Sidney, losing the cautious and wary edge somewhere in the weeks of watching hockey together, but he doesn't realize just how stark that change is until the day Tanger drops in to see him while Sidney's still there. There's no Pens game this night, but Sidney came anyway, so they turned on the Flyers and Capitals game. They're right in the middle of happily arguing about what the Washington power play should do to ease up some of the pressure Philadelphia is putting on Backstrom at the half boards when Tanger strides in.

Sidney spots him first, and the smug smile he was wearing as he explained his point slides right off his face. Zhenya twists a little and sees Tanger standing tense and still in the doorway of the room.

"Kris!" he says cheerfully. "Come here, come help me tell Sid why he's most wrong."

"Yeah, I think I'll pass," Tanger says in a tight voice, his expression closed-off. "Is everything okay, G?"

Zhenya frowns. "No, Sid have very wrong ideas about power play, need to fix."

"No," Tanger says bluntly, "I mean why're you watching the game with the witch?"

Zhenya blinks and looks at Sidney, who's staring back at him calmly. He remembers once finding that stare unreadable and unnerving—now it's just Sidney, who's sometimes wrong about hockey but is usually right and always is warm and passionate about it.

He opens his mouth to explain and realizes he doesn't know how to. What does he say here? That Sidney started keeping him company while his hand heals, and at first it was weird but mostly it's been really fun and easy? That he doesn't exactly forget Sidney's a witch, one he sold his firstborn baby to, but he doesn't always remember it either? There's no way to explain this that'll make sense to Tanger. It doesn't entirely make sense to him.

"I'm going to head out now," Sidney says, rising.

"Probably a good idea," says Tanger tersely, just on the border of still being polite.

"What? Is okay—" Zhenya starts, feeling like he's five steps behind in this conversation.

"I'll see you later, Geno." Sidney brushes past Tanger and disappears, and Tanger turns

incredulous eyebrows on Zhenya.

"Are you fucking kidding me right now? Really?"

"What?" Zhenya mutters, defensive even to his own ears. "Just watch game together, is normal."

"You're gonna try that line?" says Tanger, unimpressed. "Really gonna pretend like nothing strange is happening here?" His face tightens with worry. "What's going on, G?"

"Nothing! I know it sound weird, don't know how to explain. We just...watch hockey sometimes. He's keep me company."

"You forget who he is? You forget *what* he is?"

"He's good guy."

"A *good* guy? G—" Tanger rubs both hands over his face, through his hair. "God, G, I just—I don't wanna see you get hurt, or cursed, or anything. What're you thinking here? You *trying* to get yourself cursed?"

Zhenya shrugs. "Not get cursed. This just—happen. Get to know him, Sid's not so scary. Big hockey nerd."

"You're calling him 'Sid'," Tanger points out judgmentally.

"He say it okay."

"That's really not the issue here."

"What you want me to say?" Zhenya asks, anger picking up. "It just happen."

"I want to know what's going on! Is he trying to pressure you again into having a baby?"

"No," he says slowly, thinking back. He realizes Sidney hasn't said anything about babies or dating since the day they set up that stupid online dating account. "Just watch hockey together."

"Jesus." Tanger rubs his face again. "Only you, Geno. Just...fuck. Let us know if you get into trouble, need some help. We care about you, you stupid fucking idiot."

"Okay. Seriously though, everything fine."

"Just...stop talking. And scoot over. I'll watch the rest of the fucking game with you. Making friends with the witch," Tanger mutters, dropping next to him on the couch. "Only you. Jesus."

Word spreads, of course, to the other guys on the team. Not all of them mention it to his face, but he can see in their eyes the evaluating caution and concern, like they're trying to judge if he's been bewitched.

Flower is one of the ones who mention it to his face.

"I'm not gonna tell you what you should or shouldn't do," he says, after gently cornering Zhenya after practice. "But just be careful, okay?"

"I'm not get cursed," Zhenya promises, already getting sick of saying this. "Everything fine."

"You getting cursed isn't the only way this can go bad," Flower says cryptically. "You ever hear a story of someone who fell in love with a witch that ends happily?"

Zhenya's eyebrows shoot up, and he swallows a cough. "Not in love with Sidney."

"I'm not saying you are."

"Then what you saying?"

"I'm just saying, be careful. Be smart. Be kind. No one knows enough about witches to guess what they'll do, if they react to stuff same way we do."

Zhenya swallows and says, "I know."

"Okay." Flower squeezes his arm and doesn't say any more.

Zhenya wonders after that if Sidney will stop coming, but he shows up a few days later like usual and makes no mention of the Tanger incident. Zhenya tries to feel weird about their strange little hockey friendship but can't quite manage it. Sidney's easy to be around, despite every reason he shouldn't be.

They don't talk about the deal, the invisible binding mark around Zhenya's wrist, his debt. It's not an uncomfortable avoidance, but it's an unspoken agreement they both seem committed to. Maybe it should be more awkward than it is.

They don't talk about any of that, but eventually Zhenya feels comfortable getting a little nosier about Sidney's magic itself. He's curious, and he knows Sidney well enough by now to feel confident he won't curse him for asking too many questions or being mildly annoying. He might turn himself into a cat and ignore Zhenya—that's happened before—but he won't seriously curse him.

Zhenya waits until the first intermission, then asks, "Sid? Before you say that magic doesn't come from Devil, yes?"

Sidney glances over at him. "Right."

"So where is magic from? You always a witch, born like that? Can ask this? Or is it secret?"

"Secret?" Sidney tilts his head, considering. "Not exactly. There aren't any rules against talking about it, if that's what you mean. But I'd rather you didn't spread it around to a lot of other people."

"So...secret. Okay, can keep secret." He mutes the TV, which is on commercial anyway. Sidney straightens, and when he turns to face Zhenya fully the look in his eyes is cautious but bright.

"Are you sure you want to know?"

Zhenya nods, trying to keep his expression open.

"All right." He doesn't speak for a moment, chewing absently at his bottom lip, eyes distracted. Then he says, "You should know, to start, witches aren't born. It's not a genetic thing, carried in the blood."

"Born human?" Zhenya tweaks his mental picture of little kid-Sidney.

"Right. Just like anyone else."

"So family is human?"

"I...yes."

Zhenya squints. "Why you pause?"

Sidney shifts evasively. "Theoretically, they're human. I don't actually know them anymore."

The words don't make sense, and Zhenya shakes his head like that'll make them fall into an order that does. "How you not know?"

"Witches don't choose magic; magic chooses us. When it does, we—" He shoots Zhenya a wry glance. "This is where the stories about the Devil stealing children come from."

"Okay," Zhenya says, not quite understanding.

"It will sound strange to you. Just let me explain to the end. It has to do with the nature of magic. Magic is...the best way I can think to describe is to call it the world's shadow. I—I'm doing this all out of order. Here, let's start with this. Don't freak out." At once, all light in the room flees—the lamps, the glow of the TV screen, the sunlight from the window. All of it is gone.

Zhenya yelps.

"Hey, no, it's okay," Sidney says, and then a warm ball of light flickers into existence, hovering over his open palm. His face, illuminated unevenly, looks a little concerned and a little amused. "It's fine, I'll put it all back, this is just for an object lesson. Okay?"

Zhenya nods warily.

"Here, look at my shadow." Sidney holds up his free hand, wiggling his fingers, and on the floor the shadow of it wiggles as well. "Where light is present, a shadow always exists. Right?"

"Yes."

"Think of the light as humanity's understanding. The brighter humanity's light gets, the deeper and darker the shadow it casts is. Magic is the shadow. It's...the dark, fertile places of earth, and secrets hidden in humanity's psyche, and questions not meant to be answered, and wild things your bones know but you don't. I'm—getting off track."

Across the dim light, Sidney's and Zhenya's eyes connect. The moment stretches a beat longer than Zhenya expects, quiet and intimate like candlelight. His chest feels tight.

Then Sidney looks away, and as suddenly as it left the room's earlier light returns, and the little ball of magical light disappears. Off-balanced, Zhenya blinks until he can see normally again.

"The point," Sidney continues, not quite looking at him, "is that a shadow is reactionary to light. A shadow can't exist without a light source, and a light can't exist without casting a shadow."

Zhenya turns the words over in his head. "Right, understand," he says, clearing his throat.

"Magic choosing witches is reactionary in the same way. The shadow falls and...needs somewhere to go. When magic falls on a human, that person becomes a witch."

"Becomes how?" Zhenya's voice is still hoarse, and he's not sure why.

"We call it the Hollowing. Magic comes, and it burns through you, and it leaves all its secrets

with you. It makes you part of it. The process...changes you. I mean, obviously it does," he quirks a dry grin, eyes briefly flickering to meet Zhenya's, then back away. "It makes you magic. After you wake up, after the Hollowing, you know things humans don't. But you also can't remember some of the things you once knew—human things. The faces of your family, their names, your friends. Stuff like that."

Zhenya feels vaguely sick. "So you...can't remember family at all?"

"Some stuff I remember. I know I had a mom and dad and a sister. She, my sister—she was just a baby, though. And I think they might be Canadian." Sidney grins. "I mean, listen to my accent."

"They know what happen to you?"

"I don't think so, no. After it happens, the Hollowing, you wake up in the woods somewhere else—someone else. I think as far as your families know, you just disappear. Maybe their memories of you get taken away too."

"How old? When become witch?"

"It varies. For me, I was nine when it happened."

"Just little kid," Zhenya realizes, disturbed. "Who raise you?"

"Nobody—not like you're thinking. Or I guess magic raised me. It's...hard to explain to a human perspective. I told you it would sound strange."

'Strange' doesn't seem like the right word, Zhenya thinks. 'Terrifying' might work better, or perhaps 'monumental oversight in basic child care'.

"We're just as safe as any human child," Sidney quietly continues, like he knows Zhenya's thoughts. "And being raised and sheltered by our magic until we're grown is as much a part of becoming a witch as the Hollowing. I know it's...alarming from your perspective, but it's how things work for us."

"What about—" Zhenya has to pause to clear his throat. "What about when witches have kids? You say magic not genetic, so—human? Have human babies, raise human way, right?" He cracks an uncertain grin. "Not stick kids in forest to have magic raise?"

Sidney looks at him, and this time his gaze is unreadable to Zhenya, in a way it hasn't been for weeks.

"Witches don't have children," he says at last. "Magic—the Hollowing—it makes us sterile. Unable to have children."

Zhenya swallows. They're straying close to the thing they don't talk about anymore. And he can't shake the gut-deep, bone-deep feeling they're on the brink of something irreversible.

"What about adopt?" he asks in a breath-heavy voice.

Sidney's face is so still and empty it could be carved from marble. Like an inverse halo, the air around him seems darker, tense and waiting. He's never seemed so alien and unknowable—and yet, Zhenya feels like he's never been so close to breaking him open as he is in this moment.

"Witches aren't a part of humans' legal systems," Sidney says carefully. "We exist outside of your laws. We aren't subject to your governments, and we aren't recognized by your courts. We don't



even have last names. Usually that's a good thing, keeps us safe. But it also means we can't adopt human children, not officially like you can."

Zhenya's skin feels like it's buzzing. "This is why—?"

"I have to go," Sidney interrupts, standing jerkily.

"Wait—" Zhenya stands too, knowing somehow that it's important he keep Sidney here. He reaches out with his good hand, but it closes around nothing. A small blackbird, smaller than Stride, twists away from his clenched hand, out the doorway and down the hallway.

"Stubborn little shit," he mutters to himself. Knowing the kitchen window—the one window without a screen—is currently closed, he yells after Sidney, "How you open front door with no hands?" and the distinctive sound of the front door opening and then shutting answers him.

He drops back onto the couch, both weary and bursting with energy. This is—he needs to think on this. He needs to think. This could change...a lot of things.

And he needs to talk to Sidney again.

First, though, he talks to Duper, Flower, and Tanger. They're the ones who've interacted the most with Sidney, and they're some of Zhenya's oldest friends on the team. They'll be able to help.

He drags them out to lunch one off-day and without preface blurts out, "Think maybe Sidney want baby because baby."

The three of them exchange glances.

"Gonna have to explain more than that, G," Flower says. "You're talking about the deal you made with the witch?"

Zhenya nods. "Think Sid wants to be dad."

Tanger looks incredulous. "What're you talking about? You're what, saying he wants your firstborn so he can raise it himself?"

"Yeah."

Duper lets out a long stream of breath. "There's a pretty big body of evidence for what witches do with firstborns," he reminds in a soft voice. "And it isn't raise them into happy, healthy people."

"Besides," Tanger says, "if he wants a kid why doesn't he just go out and get one himself? Easier than trying to make you have one."

"Sid can't have kids," Zhenya says carefully, taking seriously Sidney's wish for secrecy about the specifics of witches and magic. "Sterile, I think he say? And witches not allowed to adopt."

"But they can steal," Tanger counters. "Nothing stopping him from just taking a baby out of a hospital, he wants one that bad."

"Think Sid too nice for that."

"How is what he's doing to you any nicer?"

Slowly, Zhenya says, "Because he's give me deal, give me something back. Huge gift, save my

mama's life. Give me choice."

Flower tilts his head back and forth, considering. "So we're looking at this almost like him just... prearranging an adoption or something?"

"A coerced adoption," Duper puts in, "but probably better than planning to sacrifice your baby for a magic ritual." He looks at Zhenya. "You know Sidney best. What seems more likely to be true?"

Everything humans collectively say about witches says the sacrificial ritual theory is most likely, but Duper's right—Zhenya knows Sidney. And more and more, he can't picture Sidney wanting a baby for any reason but to love it and raise it and be its papa.

"Not sure yet," he says cautiously. "But if have to bet, you know, I'm bet Sid want baby to raise."

Flower leans forward in his chair, and Tanger sits back heavily in his. Duper takes a drink of water.

"So this means what?" Flower says. "This change anything?"

Does it? Is he willing to gamble a kid's life and happiness that he's right about a witch's character, for the chance to have more kids of his own? He's not sure. Desire aside, there's no knowing if Sidney would be a good parent. Having been raised in the woods by maybe-sentient magic isn't exactly the best of credentials.

"...Don't know," he says at last.

"Best case scenario," Flower continues. "Say we prove for sure Sidney is a nice person who wants a kid. You willing to be the one who gives him one?"

"Don't know! Is...is hard thing." Fuck. He'd thought he was resigned to never having children, but apparently not. One little spark of dangerous hope, and suddenly all that ache and yearning comes rushing right back, strong as ever. "Need to talk to Sid."

"Kay." Duper gives him a soft smile. "You want us there?"

"No. Better if just me, you know, but thanks."

"Kay. Let us know if we can do anything."

Flower adds, "And let us know how the talk goes."

"Okay."

Tanger shakes his head. "If he was such a good guy," he says darkly, "he wouldn't hold you to this deal in the first place."

Zhenya ignores him, already planning out in his head exactly how to broach the subject with Sidney next time he comes over.

The flaw in his plan, Zhenya realizes a couple weeks later, was the assumption that Sidney would be coming back. He doesn't. Zhenya's hand heals, he gets back on the ice with the team, and Sidney still hasn't come back. It's annoying and childish—and Zhenya fully intends to march up to Sidney's door and tell him that. But when he gets to Sidney's property, the outside gate is

locked.

Zhenya eyes it calculatingly anyway—it wouldn't be too hard to jump—and suddenly he can taste a hint of gingerbread on his tongue, like a warning.

"Sid!" he yells in the direction of the house instead, hands cupped around his mouth. "Stop hide like little kid! Come talk!"

A minute later, a black cat slinks up to the inside of the gate and unfolds up into Sidney. He crosses his arms.

"I'm not hiding," he claims.

"Uh-huh," Zhenya says indulgently. "Why you freak out last time we talk? Why you're not come over anymore?"

"That wasn't exactly a freak-out."

"Was biggest freak-out. I'm not even know witches can—oh," Zhenya cuts off, a sudden realization sending his blood pumping faster, his hands steadier. "Oh. You're witch."

"Just figured that out?" Sidney says tartly.

"No, mean—you're witch. Witches always so...secret, big mystery. No one ever know how witch think, what in heart. But I'm—" He swallows and looks Sidney in the eye. "But I'm figure out. I'm know how much you want to be dad. I'm...see you, see heart. This why freak out."

Sidney just stares at him, expression wiped, saying nothing—but it answers every uncertainty Zhenya had. He's right; he knows he is. He couldn't say how he knows, or how he became so expert at reading a blank-faced Sidney, but that doesn't matter. There's a longing in Sidney that echoes Zhenya's own, and it's as obvious in this moment as if it were painted across his skin: he wants a kid.

"Tell me secret about how magic work, no big deal," Zhenya babbles, maybe just to fill the air up with something. "But this—big thing, big want in Sid's heart. Scary for someone else to see it."

"This doesn't change anything," Sidney speaks at last, his voice a little unsteady. "Whatever my—whatever else, our deal is the same. You still owe me your firstborn."

"Okay. I'm not...I'm not try to trick you, Sid."

"Like you could trick a witch." Sidney's shoulders lose a little of their tension, and in a smaller voice he says, "I'm glad your hand's better."

"Yes, me too," Zhenya says, happily holding up the healed hand and wriggling it. He lets Sidney get away with the subject change. "Glad to play again."

"Yeah, I bet. You look good out there—though that was a stupid penalty you took in the third against Winnipeg."

"You watch that game?" Zhenya asks, pleased, waving the last bit off.

"Yeah, I saw it. You guys were flying. Power play's looking better, too."

"Power play always look better with me," he says smugly, and Sidney laughs.

"Oh for sure, can't argue with that." He shifts, looking at the ground then back up at Zhenya over

the gate. "Look. I'm not—I'm not really sure what you want to happen next. It was nice watching games together, but your hand's better now."

"Need broken hand to hang out with you?"

"I—no. Not if you want to. Hang out."

"Well, I'm want. Miss you talk about hockey."

Sidney cracks a smile. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. So you start come over again?"

"Okay. I—okay. I'd like that."

Zhenya grins.

The next morning, before practice, Flower takes one look at Zhenya's face and grabs him.

"You talked to Sidney," he says, after pulling him into a quiet corner.

Zhenya smiles. "Yeah."

"And?"

"I'm sure—he's definitely want baby so he can be dad."

Flower sucks his lips in, thoughtful. "Okay. So what're you gonna do?"

This, Zhenya doesn't know. He says as much, and Flower does him the favor of just nodding understandingly.

"Yeah, weird situation. Well, you don't have to decide anything right now. Just keep us in the loop, okay? We want to help."

Zhenya nods and ducks his head, touched. "Still lots of questions. Lots to think about."

"Yeah, I get that. We'll see what comes, hm?"

Like he said he would, Sidney starts coming over to watch hockey again on Zhenya's off nights. It's pretty much instantly comfortable—perhaps in part due to the silent reinstatement of their policy to not talk about the baby thing.

Which isn't to say they're not thinking about it—at least, Zhenya is. He can't speak for Sidney. But Zhenya, his hope's alive again, whether he wishes it or not. Some part of him seems to have already decided that, one way or another, he'll be a papa one day.

But it's good to have Sidney back on his couch. It's only now that he's got him chattering in his ear again, watching the game with sharp, happy eyes, that Zhenya realizes exactly how much he missed this the weeks while Sidney was hiding. In fact, Sidney, a foreign witch, is well on his way to becoming one of his most comfortable friends, and isn't that a fucking twist he never would have seen coming at the start of it all.

He doesn't know what to do about the baby thing, and the weeks pass with nothing decided. Sometimes he pictures Sidney's lopsided smile and warm eyes and thinks—would it really be so

bad to give him a baby to raise? To take the chance on a good man, and in return get the opportunity again to have babies of his own? But something holds him back. He keeps telling himself that he'll think about it in the summer, when he has more time, but he knows he's just putting it off.

"Hey," Tanger says to him one day, waiting on the edges of the rink in between drills. "Haven't seen you dating or hooking up much for a while. Or've you got someone you haven't told us about?"

Zhenya shrugs, not looking away from where Flower's making save after save and chirping all comers. "Just busy. Other things to think about right now, you know?"

"I guess, yeah." There's an odd note in Tanger's voice, but when Zhenya looks over at him there's no clue of anything off in his expression, and his eyes are focused on a laughing Rusty trying valiantly to screen Flower by standing pretty much right atop him in the crease. Tanger shoots Zhenya a wry grin. "C'mon, let's go rescue Rusty before Flower takes his knees out."

Laughing, Zhenya follows.

In March, Zhenya's parents come to Pittsburgh for a visit.

Maybe it's Zhenya's fault for forgetting to warn Sidney about it last time they were together. Maybe it's Sidney's fault for not having a phone Zhenya can text once he *does* remember, too late. Maybe it's both their fault for being so comfortable that Sidney no longer knocks when he comes over.

Whoever's fault, the end result comes the day Zhenya hears a shriek from the kitchen where his mama's tinkering around, and dashes in there to find a bewildered Sidney sitting on the floor, a frying pan on his lap and a muffin a few feet away from him, lying on its side. Zhenya's mama is nowhere to be seen. With a sinking feeling, he looks again to the muffin.

"Sid? You change my mama...?"

"Sorry!" Sidney says with a guilty glance between Zhenya and the muffin who may or may not be his mama. "She threw a pan at me—I reacted by accident! I'll—I'll change her back. Here, look." In an instant, the muffin becomes Zhenya's mama again, blinking up at him with fear and confusion.

"Zhenya?"

"I should go," Sidney says, and before Zhenya can stop him he turns into a bird and flees. It's becoming distressingly like a pattern.

He can deal with Sidney later. Instead he rushes to his mama and gently lifts her to her feet, checking her over for injury. She seems fine—just rattled.

Zhenya," she says, stilling his hands by taking them in her own. She looks up into his eyes with solemn urgency. "Zhenya. That man was a witch. What was he doing, flying into your house? Are you in some sort of trouble?"

"Mama, no," he says soothingly. "I know he's a witch, and everything's fine. That's—" He swallows. "That's just Sidney." He's told his parents about his friend Sidney before now. He just left out some of the details. Okay, most of the details.

For some reason, this news turns his mama pale rather than reassuring her. "*That* was Sidney?" she asks, visibly stricken. "Sidney is a witch? Oh, Zhenya, what have you gotten yourself into?"

"Nothing! Nothing terrible," he amends. "Sidney is a good person; there's no reason to be afraid of him. He's not dangerous."

His papa wanders into the kitchen before she can respond. He eyes their position and tense shoulders and asks, "Everything all right?"

"His Sidney is a witch!"

"A *what*?"

"Not a bad witch," Zhenya says, feeling like the situation is rapidly getting out of hand.

"He turned me into a muffin," his mama reminds him, releasing his hand so she can gesture while she speaks. "A muffin!"

"You threw a pan at him. He was startled."

"I was startled! I hardly expected a bird to fly through your window and turn into a man!"

"Of course," he says, conciliatory. "Your reaction was reasonable. Did he—did it hurt you at all? Being changed?"

"No," his mama says. "It wasn't painful, only disorienting." His papa comes closer and puts a supportive hand low on her back.

"Zhenya," he says gravely, eyes full of warm concern. "What's going on?"

With the two of them side-by-side, looking at him like that, he can't keep it from them anymore.

"Mama," he says, swallowing hard. "Sidney, about him, you need to know—he saved your life."

"My life? What are you talking about?"

"You remember how sick you were a couple years ago?" he starts, and this time it's his papa's turn to pale.

"Tell me you didn't—"

"Just—let me finish first, before you say anything, please. You were so sick, Mama, and the doctors didn't know anything. They kept making noises about preparing for the worst, and I—" His voice breaks. "I didn't know what to do!"

He abruptly finds himself gathered into a hug, and he lets himself clutch to her. He hasn't forgotten what it felt like to watch helplessly as she turned increasingly shrunken and listless, her hair limp and her smile tired.

"So you went to a witch," his papa murmurs.

"I went to Sidney," Zhenya says, pulling gently away from his mama's hug. "And he gave me something that took the sickness away. You saw how it worked, how fast she got better."

"I knew it was too fast," his papa says unhappily. "I didn't think to be suspicious." His eyes are worried as he adds, "Our family must owe him an incredible debt."

Zhenya shakes his head. "No, it's taken care of, you don't need to worry about anything."

His mama reaches out, clasps his wrist. "What did you have to pay him?"

"It's not paid yet." He hesitates and decides, however guilty it makes him, he needs to smudge the truth a little. For everyone's sake. "I just need to help him out so he can adopt a child. Human legal systems won't work with witches, and he wants to be a papa. I just need to help him—as a middleman, so he can have a baby. It's not—it's not a big thing."

"A baby? To a witch? Zhenya, there's a reason adoption agencies won't work with witches!"

"Sidney will be as good a parent as any human," he defends, and as he says it he feels the truth of it in his bones. "He's a good person. He just wants the chance to be a papa."

Sorrow heavy in her eyes, his mama cups his face with her hand. "You have too big a heart."

"Isn't that supposed to be a good thing?" he jokes with a smile that's only a little unsteady.

She looks away, pinched with worry. "I don't know. I don't know."

In the days that follow, they speak little more about the subject, but Zhenya knows it isn't far from any of their minds. He catches his papa more than once looking quiet and pensive, and his mama cooks enough food that his freezers will be full for months. He'd hoped to have spared them this worry; whether they believe it or not, they have nothing to fear from Sidney.

"Be careful," his mama says the day he takes them back to the airport. There's a knowledge in her expression that makes him feel uncertain. "I know you've become close to that boy, that you're friends with him, but please be careful. Protect your big heart. Witches aren't human."

"Of course, Mama. I'm always careful."

She huffs and pats his cheek. "My grey hairs say they don't agree with you."

He kisses them both and sees them off, heart heavy with its fullness.

Instead of going home afterwards, he goes to Sidney's house. The gate's unlocked, and the instant he steps through it Stride swoops up and lands on his shoulder.

"Hello," Zhenya says and digs out from his pocket the little baggie of sunflower seeds he's gotten used to carrying around. Stride doesn't always accompany Sidney, but Zhenya likes to be prepared for when he does. He holds the bag up to the bird. "Sid busy?"

Stride happily roots into the bag and snaps up a few seeds. Then he takes off again, flying slowly enough for Zhenya to keep up.

The pair of them find Sidney out back behind the house, sitting in the dirt at the foot of a tree with a small, squat cauldron between his legs. The liquid inside gurgles a dark, plant-like green.

"Hey," Sidney says, looking up with a smile.

Zhenya nods towards the cauldron. "Make something?"

"Nothing that can't wait," Sidney says as he rises and dusts off his pants. More quietly, he asks, "Is your mom okay? I'm really sorry for scaring her."

"She's fine. Just little bit scared, don't worry."

"I...was going to bring her something as an apology, but I wasn't sure what she'd like. And I wasn't sure if she'd want to accept it."

"Was accident, say sorry—not need anything else."

"Still, though." Sidney wrings his hands absently, looking like he's spent the past week stewing in guilt. Zhenya nudges him, fond but confused.

"Hey. Why is big deal? Turn whole team into cookies, not this sorry."

"This is different. It was your *house*," Sidney just says, which really doesn't help in explaining. Zhenya thinks of all the lore surrounding witches' houses and the dangers of trespassing, and decides it must be a witch thing.

"Okay," he says. "Don't need to worry, though. My mama, she's not mad." He grins. "And you know, if I'm know how to turn people into muffin, someone throw pan at me, I'm do exact same as you."

"Yeah?" Sidney's lips tug up in an answering smile, an appealing mix of pleased and impish. "Muffins, specifically?"

Zhenya considers this. He nods. "Blueberry muffins."

Sidney giggles, showing his teeth. "Blueberry? Why blueberry?"

"Looks like saddest muffin."

That sets Sidney off on another round of giggling, even though Zhenya knows it was a pretty weak joke. It's not like he *minds*; there's little better than getting Sidney to laugh like this.

Sidney looks up at him, eyes brimming with mirth, and from nowhere Zhenya is struck by a sudden image: what it would be like to crowd in close, chest-to-chest, and trade exploratory kisses with a flushed, giggly Sidney who can't decide between laughing and kissing so does some of each. More surprising than the sudden image is the surge of longing that accompanies it, so strong and swift it leaves his heart feeling wrenched in two and his gut in knots.

Sidney's laughter fades away, his expression turning concerned.

"Hey, you okay? You got a funny look on your face just now." He puts his hand on Zhenya's arm, a gentle, thoughtlessly supportive touch, and it's like electricity zipping all across Zhenya's skin.

"Of course, fine!" he says, pulling back, startled and shaky. He babbles, "I'm go home now, you know, long day, but later you come over again? Parents gone, no one throw pans at you."

"Sure," Sidney says. "I mean, of course I will. Listen, are you sure everything's okay? Did I do something—?"

"No!" Zhenya jumps in. "Yes, no—you not do something, everything fine. Need to go home now. See you?"

"For sure. See you later," a clearly bewildered Sidney waves him off, and like a great big jittery oaf Zhenya does the only thing he's capable of in that moment: he hoofs it out of there.



Zhenya's a smart guy. He only needs his body to hit him with one earth-shaking, overwhelming clue to figure out the score. He's falling in love with Sidney.

He doesn't waste time trying to convince himself it's purely a physical attraction thing—like he said, he's a smart guy. Sidney's gorgeous, of course—soft lips, sharp jaw, arresting eyes, deliciously strong frame—but that's not what Zhenya wants from him. Well, not the primary thing, at least.

God help him, he wants to date the guy. As in take-it-slow, see-if-we've-got-something-that-could-last kind of dating, where you take them to meet your parents, and gradually cinch your lives together, and figure out if you have compatible opinions about finances and future plans and children.

Oh fuck—children. That's a mess. At least he knows Sidney wants kids as much as he does. But the thought of trying to date with this firstborn deal hanging over them—well, it's complicated. If things work out between them and they want a family together, sure, it seems perfect, a win for both of them. But what if things don't work out? Or what if it interferes with a relationship developing organically between them because he can't forget that *if it works*, he doesn't have to give up his child? Their friendship has gotten along by largely ignoring the existence of the deal, but doing the same while dating seems too optimistic.

He's getting ahead of himself, making too many assumptions. Maybe Sidney isn't interested in him. Maybe he doesn't date humans, or men, or gangly Russians with big noses and messy hearts they wear on their sleeves.

Or what if he thinks Zhenya is just trying to trick him out of the deal and is only dating him for a chance to keep his firstborn? He hopes Sidney knows him better than that, but he doesn't want to make him doubt Zhenya's sincerity even for a moment, not in something this important. He doesn't know what to do.

So he waits until his parents' plane has landed in between connecting flights, then he calls his mama.

"Zhenya?" she answers right away, sounding tired. *"We're not home yet, is something wrong?"*

He finds he can only swallow heavily and say, "Mama..."

There's a weighty silence on the other end of the line, then she sighs.

*"I see. You've figured it out now, haven't you."*

"I—Sidney..." he manages.

*"I know, Zhenechka, I know. The way you've talked about him for weeks, it was obvious."*

"You knew? You never said anything."

*"I wanted to see this boy for myself. And afterwards, when I learned what he was, I was hoping—well, never mind what I was hoping."*

"You were hoping I wouldn't ever realize that I'm—I'm falling in love with him. That the *problem* would just go away."

His mama makes a huffy little noise. *"Don't pretend you can't understand why. He's a witch. That's not a life I want a hand in arranging for my son."*

"It should be my decision!"

*"Yes," she says. "And it is, now. But it was my decision not to tell you something you might never have even realized for yourself. Don't blame me for hoping your feet wouldn't realize the path they were on." She sighs. "Listen to me. If you decide this boy is what you want, if he's worth it to you, we'll support you. And if he hurts you, all his magic won't be enough to protect him. That's what I can promise you."*

"I...thank you, Mama," he says, trying to hide how choked up he is, how relieved they won't hate him for wanting Sidney. "But it's not so simple. I'm not even sure if he wants me back."

*"Then you need to be brave and ask him."*

"I can't just—"

*"You can. And if he matters this much to you, you will."*

He sinks heavily down onto his couch. "I'll...try."

*"I've never known just 'trying' to ever be good enough for you," she says, tiredly amused. "Listen to me now, I have to go in a minute, our next flight is boarding. You have a good heart, Zhenya. I can't understand loving a witch, and I know nothing about this boy, but I know you. I know your heart. You wouldn't care for him if there wasn't some good in him, somewhere."*

"There is," he says softly. "So much good, Mama."

*"Then all you have to decide is if he's worth the risk. Let the rest worry about itself."*

"But, what if he—"

*"Zhenya," she interrupts, loving and firm. "Stop fucking about. What is it you want? Do you want to date this boy or no?"*

"I do."

*"Then all you can do is ask him. If you were brave enough to ask a strange witch to save me, you're brave enough to ask your friend Sidney if he could love you."*

He chuckles, feeling unsteady. "Why're you encouraging me? I thought you were opposed to Sidney."

*"I'm opposed to your unhappiness. Can you tell me that now you've realized your feelings, you'd be happy letting him go without at least trying?"*

"No," he says quietly. "I can't."

*"Then there is your answer to why I encourage you now. I—that was the last call for boarding, we need to go. You'll be fine, Zhenechka. Goodbye. Call us if he turns you into any baked goods."*

He laughs and kindly doesn't mention the note of true worry she can't quite keep from her voice. "I will. Goodbye, Mama. Safe flight."

He hangs up feeling much better than before. It was a good idea to call his mama. She was right. He can do this, he can ask Sidney if he's interested in dating. It's just Sidney—nothing to be scared of. All he has to do is ask. No more fucking about. Nothing to it. Easy.

Instead of getting up, he lies all the way down on the couch and curls up in a loose ball.

He can do it later. Tomorrow. Tomorrow's good. He'll do it tomorrow morning.

He ends up going to optional skate in the morning instead of Sidney's. It's fine, though; he'll do it later. Maybe next week, after they get back from their next road trip. That's when he'll ask Sidney.

Now that he thinks about it, the playoffs are coming up soon. It'd probably be better to just wait until hockey is over, right? He wouldn't want to distract himself, let the team down. He'll talk to Sidney after the playoffs. It's the responsible thing to do.

He throws himself into hockey and barely surfaces for air—which is about normal for the final stretch into the post-season, actually. The only difference is this time around it has the added bonus of distracting him from worrying about thoughts of Sidney never wanting to see him again.

Then one day as he's stripping down in the locker room, it strikes him that he's spent so much energy avoiding Sidney that he hasn't noticed Sidney has been avoiding him just as much. It's been a couple weeks, and Zhenya hasn't seen hide or feather of him since their talk right after dropping his parents off at the airport. He straightens up, taut with worry. Sidney doesn't avoid him this long unless something's wrong.

"Hey, everything okay?" Flower asks in a low voice, pausing as he passes by.

"Just realize Sid not come over for few weeks," he says distractedly.

Flower makes a quiet noise, and when Zhenya looks at him his expression is guilty.

"You should probably talk to Kris," he says, not meeting Zhenya's eyes. Zhenya's gut clenches.

"Why? He do something?"

"Just talk to him." Flower leaves him with a sad smile and a passing, supportive shoulder bump. Zhenya turns to where he last saw Tanger sitting, and finds him watching the exchange with unreadable eyes. Zhenya stalks over to him.

"You know something about Sid? Know why he not come over anymore?" He knows his voice is a little too loud and that they're drawing attention from the team. He can't spare any thought to care about it.

"I just had a talk with him," Tanger says quietly.

"Talk? About what?"

"I pointed out a few things he should have thought of a long time ago. I don't know why he's avoiding you. I didn't tell him to stay away from you or anything."

"Kris!" Zhenya growls, frustrated. "Point out what things?"

Tanger looks up at him steadily. "Like the fact that if he really cared about you as a friend, he'd

be more sorry about what he's done to you."

"What he's done? Not done anything!"

"Seriously?" Tanger says flatly. "Or did you just forget about how he's making you give him your firstborn kid? How you haven't dated anyone for two years because of it, and how you've entirely given up on ever having family of your own?"

"I'm not give up," Zhenya protests. Maybe he had once, but not now. Not since learning *why* Sidney wants his firstborn. He swallows any mention of his hopes that Sidney might be the one he builds a family with one day, and just says, "Have to get Sidney baby first, though. Maybe egg donor," he adds, thinking of one of the options he came across during late-night research. "Figure out during summer."

"Yeah? Then how come you never date? You could still be dating in the meantime. You used to date all the time, fall in love left and right, but you haven't been serious about anyone since the day you made that deal."

Zhenya looks away. "Okay, at first, yes, I'm not date because I'm give up. Then I'm too busy to find someone. Now I'm—" He swallows. "Now I'm find someone, but don't know if they want me too. Need to ask."

"You've found someone?" Tanger straightens. "Who, when? The only people you're ever around these days are us and—oh fuck. Geno, for fuck's sake, please, tell me you aren't talking about the witch."

"His name Sidney," Zhenya says, feeling both mulish and nervous.

"You're serious?" interjects a clearly eavesdropping Flower. "You and Sidney...?"

"Need to ask him," Zhenya repeats. He looks to Tanger. "Hard though when someone say things to Sidney that make him stay away from me."

Tanger meets his stare and says nothing.

"You're sure about this?" asks Flower. "About Sidney?" Zhenya nods.

"Yes."

Flower and Tanger exchange a look, Tanger grim and Flower thoughtful.

"Then all right," says Flower. "Just tell us what you need, and we'll help."

What Zhenya needs is to find Sidney and talk with him. Who knows what sort of wrong ideas he's been convincing himself of while Zhenya was busy being an idiot?

"Need to see Sid," he says, making for an exit, mind five steps ahead. Something Tanger said must have struck deep with Sidney, otherwise he'd never have stayed away so long. And Zhenya's the fool who was too stuck in his own head to notice how long it'd been since Sidney had been by.

"Whoa, G, hey," Flower grabs his elbow. "Cool it for a second, you're not even dressed."

"Under Armour enough clothes," Zhenya says. "Don't need other."

"You haven't showered yet," Tanger says in a quiet tone. "It'll only slow you down a few extra

minutes, and you shouldn't go to his house reeking from practice. Nothing's gonna change in that time."

Zhenya shoots him a suspicious look, which Tanger meets evenly.

"Fine," Zhenya says, about-facing towards the showers. "Shower first."

He takes the fastest shower of his life, mind and skin buzzing the whole time. Only for a few seconds does he get distracted when he wonders if later, if things work out and he gets Sidney's hands on him, he'll wish he'd been just a little more thorough washing himself. He brushes the thought away quickly. There he goes getting ahead of himself again.

He flies out of the showers and starts yanking clothes on, barely caring to make sure they're his first—and only caring because he doesn't want to look like an idiot showing up at Sidney's house wearing pants three inches too short.

"Atta way, G!" someone yells as, showered and dressed, he starts for the door. "Go get your boy!" A few laughing cheers follow him on his way out. He's not so distracted, however, that he doesn't notice the expressions of subdued worry on several teammates' faces as he passes. It's fine; he hopes in time they'll all get the chance to see there's nothing to fear from Sidney.

He makes it to Sidney's in record time and parks haphazardly in front of his fence. As he leaps out of his car, his first thought is that he somehow came to the wrong place.

Sidney's gate, the sturdy little one Zhenya once would have been able to climb if he'd dared to try, seems to have grown taller by at least nine feet, now towering and imposing. The fence has grown as well, not only taller but also thicker, so it blocks the view of the interior completely. Only the tops of the trees above him reassure him that he really is at Sidney's house.

The gate, of course, is locked. He knocks on it and yells, "Sid! Sid, come out, need to talk!"

When only silence answers him, he tries climbing. But there're no footholds on the gate or fence, and it quickly becomes clear that it's impossible to scramble up more than a few feet, still many feet too short.

"Sid!" he yells again. "Have very important question! Come open stupid gate!"

He yells and knocks until his fist and throat are sore, and he would have kept going until the sun was down had a black bird not flapped up to perch on the fence, peering down at him.

For a wonderful second, he thinks it's Sidney's bird form, but a quick glance shows the bird is too big for that. It's Stride.

"Hi," Zhenya croaks, voice going hoarse. "Can get Sid for me? Need to tell him I—tell him important thing."

Stride tilts his head at him, then, with no warning, launches straight for his face.

"Hey!" Zhenya yells, barely ducking away in time. "Fuck is your problem?"

Stride dives at him again and again he ducks—then again, and again, and again, until he realizes he's being firmly herded back towards his car.

"Fine, I'm go!" he throws his hands up, full of tightly leashed frustration. "But tell Sid I'm come back later! Can't hide always!"

He climbs into his car and nearly shuts the door on Stride, who swoops inside after him and settles on the dashboard on the passenger side. The crow calmly starts preening at his wings, like he didn't just spend the last minute trying to peck Zhenya to death. Zhenya shoots him a dirty look.

"Stupid bird," he mutters under his breath and starts the car.

Seeing little other option for now, he starts for home. He'll have some strong words for Sidney later about siccing his familiar on him, but for now he can't see what else he can do. Maybe he can try to hold Stride hostage and smoke Sidney out that way.

He eyes Stride, considering. Stride eyes him right back like he knows what he's thinking and is daring him to try something.

They make it to Zhenya's house in relative peace, the only excitement coming when Zhenya tries to make a stop for coffee and Stride nearly causes an accident by attacking him until he gets back on the road that leads home. Stubborn witches with stupid, stubborn birds.

As Zhenya pulls up to his driveway, it becomes clear why Stride was so persistent about getting him home, and Zhenya instantly forgives him every savage peck. Because pacing outside his gate is a figure that can't be anyone but Sidney.

"Sid," he breathes, throwing the car into park and leaping out. Stride beats him out the door and smugly takes up perch on Sidney's shoulder.

"Geno?" Sidney's saying, startled, looking between the two of them. "Why do you have Stride with you?"

"Go to your house to see you," he explains, soaking up the sight of Sidney. Fuck, he *missed* him. "Stride make me come here."

"Oh, I—sorry. I've been waiting here for you to get back from practice. I wasn't at my house at all. I—Geno," he says, taking a step towards him. "I need to talk to you."

"Me too," Zhenya nods. "Have most important thing to ask."

"And you can ask me anything, of course, if you want to, but first I need to—" He breaks off, grabs Zhenya's hand, and looks up at him. His eyes are glowing. "First I need to do this."

When Zhenya looks down at their joined hands, he sees a vine appear from thin air, sitting wrapped around his wrist. As he watches it turns blackened and dead then falls away from his wrist, hitting the sidewalk below and shattering apart into nothing.

Flustered, confused, Zhenya can only ask, "What?"

"I released you from your debt to me," Sidney says, letting go of his hand, magic fading out of his eyes. "God, Geno, I never wanted you to give up on a family because of me. Even before I— from the start, I didn't think our deal would make you decide against having kids ever."

"No, Tanger not know everything, I'm still plan on have kids," Zhenya tries to explain, but Sidney interrupts.

"Even if you are, I've been thinking about this for a while, even before Letang said anything, and I—I can't do this, Geno. I'm not going to take your firstborn from you. I can't. Your mom will still be okay, I won't take that back," he hurries to add. "But our deal is off. You'll keep your firstborn, whenever you decide to have kids. You don't have to worry about that anymore."

Reeling, Zhenya has to swallow a few times before he can speak, and when he does his voice is stupidly raspy. "What about cost?" he croaks. "For magic. Magic always have cost."

Sidney smiles, sad and fond. "No, it doesn't. *Witches* always charge a cost for magic, but it's not because one is required for the magic to work. That's just what we want humans to think, as—as a protection, I guess. To keep humans from thinking they can use us to get anything they want."

"But, you get in trouble, with other witches? Because you give me magic for free?"

Sidney shakes his head. "I'm not the first witch to have done this. I'll be fine."

"Sid—"

"No, let me finish, please. I need to tell you how sorry I am. If I hadn't gotten to know you I don't know if I'd have realized how unhappy it was making you—and that just makes it worse, probably. I'm sorry. You need to know—if you'd refused my deal, back at the start, I'd have found a way to save your mom without you knowing it was me, I wouldn't have just let her die. But you came back and took the deal and I—well, you know what I did. I'm so sorry. I understand if you don't want to see me now—"

"Sid," Zhenya interrupts gently, heart fluttering, and takes Sidney's hands in his. "Listen."

Sidney stops talking, eyes wide and upset.

"Remember questions you bring me months ago, help me find person to date?"

Sidney nods.

"Have answers for you now."

"Oh—of course," Sidney blinks abruptly, looking like he's reacting on autopilot. "Right, we can do that. So you want to find someone that way? I mean, of course you want to get started on your family as soon as possible now, with the firstborn thing gone, and dating someone is the first step. I'll be happy to help any way you—"

"Sid," Zhenya interrupts again, squeezing his hands. "Not listening to me."

Sidney's mouth snaps shut. "Sorry."

"Answer to first question? Is you. Answer to second question is you. Answer to third question is you." He looks deep into Sidney's eyes, hoping the truth of what he's saying is obvious in his own. "Answer to all questions for me is you."

Sidney stares, mouth dropping softly open. Then, like he can't help himself, "But—some of the questions on the list don't make sense answered like that," he babbles, looking a little wild around the eyes. "What about the one asking whether you like mountains or oceans better? Or the one about—"

Zhenya groans. "Sid! Forget mountains, oceans, not important! I'm say here that *you* the person I want to date." His voice goes quiet as nerves bubble past his frustration. "If you want that too."

"Geno, I..." Sidney drops his eyes, something frighteningly heart-sore and sorrowful about him, and Zhenya is sure he's about to be rejected. Oh god, this is it. He can only hope Sidney still wants to be friends after finding out how he feels.

Sidney presses his hands once, firm and warm. "I want that so much," he whispers.

It takes Zhenya a too-long moment to process the words as something other than a rejection. Just in case, he tries, "But...?"

That gets Sidney's eyes up towards his again. "But what?"

"You say you want that so much, but...?"

"But..." Sidney blinks a few times, confusion obvious. "Um. But...but... I'm sorry, is there something else I'm supposed to add there? I don't get it."

"So you want me too, not but? No but?"

"Geno, I'm really confused. I just want to kiss you right now but you keep talking about butts or butts and I just—yes, I want you, I want all of you including your butt, and I hope you want me and mine too—"

Zhenya shuts him up with a kiss because he's always wanted to do that in general and, lately, to Sidney specifically. Sidney immediately clutches him and returns the kiss, nothing held back, and Zhenya either wants to melt weak-kneed into it or find the nearest wall and pin Sidney there with all his strength—he hasn't made up his mind.

His indecision costs him, because a moment later Sidney breaks away, cheeks flushed and his breathing flatteringly uneven.

"Oh. That was—oh."

"Bad?" Zhenya has to ask.

"Definitely not."

Sidney's eyes drop to Zhenya's lips, and Zhenya's drop to his. Zhenya's sure they're seconds away from kissing again, then Sidney steps back.

"Wait. What about the—the firstborn thing. How can you still want me after I put you through that? For the past two years you've—"

"Sid," Zhenya says, grabbing the front of Sidney's shirt and using it to reel him in closer again. He ducks his head and sticks his nose in the top of Sidney's curls, because eye contact is a little hard right now. From the safety of this position he says, "You save my mama's life. Even if you forget that part, I'm not forget. You and me—more than even."

Quietly, voice directed towards Zhenya's chest, Sidney says, "I'm a witch, Geno. I don't always think like a human would. I might...miss stuff that you think should be obvious, or react to something in a way that doesn't make sense to your perspective. There's a reason that, historically, witch-human relationships tend to fail. Fail dramatically."

"Know enough to trust you, Sid. Know you have good heart. You trust me?"

"I—whether or not I trust you isn't the point. *You're* not the one liable to permanently turn someone into a frog if things don't work out between us."

Zhenya straightens so he can look down into Sidney's eyes again.

"Think maybe is the point," he says. "Sid. You trust me? Trust me with this?" he taps Sid lightly over the heart once. "Trust enough to try?"



Sidney gets a steely, determined look in his eyes that sends Zhenya's heart pounding. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I do."

"Then we try. See what happen, figure it out. I already know your worst secret, nothing else scary left."

Sidney frowns. "My worst secret?"

"Yes." Zhenya grins. "Already know that you biggest hockey nerd ever. What worse than that?"

Sidney makes a sputtering noise of laughter and kisses Zhenya's mouth quiet, which happens to be exactly what he was angling for all along. Smugly pleased, he closes his eyes and sinks blissfully into the kiss.

A little while later, surfacing for air, a thought strikes him. He scans the surrounding area.

"Where Stride go?"

Sidney hums and licks absently at bitten-red lips. "He stole your bag of sunflower seeds and flew off like ten minutes ago. Didn't you notice?"

"He can keep," Zhenya says, and he lets Sidney tug him back in close. Right against Sidney's lips, noses brushing, he adds, "This your sneaky witch plan? Distract me so familiar can steal my snack?"

Sidney says, "Maybe," and grins into their next kiss.

For the rest of the season, Zhenya spends all his spare energy and time—which isn't much—soaking up dates with Sidney. They get odd looks when they go out—Sidney's witch-nature is as easy to spot as ever—but Sidney always ignores it, and Zhenya learns to focus more on enjoying Sidney's company than worrying about wary stares.

He tells him mama about the two of them the same time he tells her that he'll be staying an extra month in Pittsburgh that summer to train and spend time with Sidney.

Her tone is hard to read over the phone as she says, *"Are you bringing him home to Russia with you when you come?"*

"No," he says, wading the conversation carefully. "We decided it wouldn't be a good idea for this summer."

*"I see. And is he making you happy? He hasn't turned you into a muffin?"*

"Very happy," he answers and decides not to mention the time Sidney—very briefly!—turned him into a little cake when the two of them couldn't agree on a place to grab dinner and Zhenya kept talking over all of Sidney's suggestions. Afterwards, Zhenya had really only been bothered that his cake hadn't been given any creative decorations.

*"I'm glad to hear so. Then I suppose we'll see you when you come home."*

Her voice is a little clipped, but her goodbyes are warm and she calls Sidney by name at least once in the conversation. Zhenya will take it. He knows his parents are still cautious about Sidney, but he hopes in time that will change. For now, this is better than he'd have hoped for.

As for the team—Zhenya and Sidney talk about it, and they decide it'd probably be best to give the team a little space before exposing Sidney to them again. Collectively, their main interactions with him to date have been at best wariness tinged with hostility, so Zhenya's...hesitant.

"I won't use magic against them again, if that's what you're worried about," Sidney says.

"No, worried they say something, make unpleasant for you."

Sidney gives him a quick, smiling peck. "Thanks. I'm not worried about that—I know they're just protective of you. But thanks for thinking of me."

"Not embarrassed about you," Zhenya reassures him, worried he might be getting wrong ideas again. "Just think best to give them time to get used to idea."

Sidney's eyes turn soft, the way that always makes Zhenya's insides feel warm and squirmy. "I know. I don't have an issue with waiting."

The conversation gets a little derailed from there, because warm and squirmy insides are obviously best dealt with by kissing, and preferably lots of it. Sidney seems to agree.

Several on the team—Flower and Duper in the forefront—make noises about wanting to meet Sidney again now that the deal's off and the two of them are dating, but Zhenya manages to fob them off. It's not hard; there's little time outside of hockey this time of year, so it's easy to make excuses.

The summer's even easier. None of the team are staying in Pittsburgh, so Zhenya gets to enjoy an entire month where all he has to worry about is training and keeping Sidney's skin from turning too red in the summer sun. Witches burn easily, it appears.

Parting for Russia is painful, but it's made better by the phone Zhenya convinced Sidney to let him buy for him. It's not the same as being able to see each other every day, but they make it work.

It isn't until just before the start of the next season, when everyone's gathering back to Pittsburgh from their corners of the world, that the team puts their foot down and forces the issue of re-meeting Sidney. Zhenya's not expecting it, still too caught up in the warm glow of being reunited with Sidney to be suspicious.

There's a Penguins preseason family skate coming up, a casual one where there won't be cameras but there will be plenty of kids. He and Sidney talk it out and agree it's not the best time to reintroduce Sid to the team, not with everyone's families there. Zhenya doesn't like it—he's getting sick of hiding Sidney away—but he agrees to the logic of it when Sidney points out it'd be better to do it at a time when no one has to feel protective of their kids.

He's therefore considerably surprised when, only a little bit after he gets out on the ice himself, he looks up from where he'd been trading babble-talk with little Scarlett Fleury and sees Sidney hovering awkwardly just outside the rink. Before he can react, he sees Dales skating over to Sidney and stepping off the ice to talk with him, his son in one arm, a warm smile in place, and his free hand outstretched. Sidney shakes it, smiling cautiously and darting little looks across to Zhenya.

Zhenya makes a helplessly confused noise which makes Scarlett giggle and try to copy it.

"Thought you'd get away with not inviting your boy?" Flower, next to him, says casually, and Zhenya looks over.

"You invite...?"

Flower shakes his head. "Can thank Trevor and Kris for that."

*That's* not what he's expecting to hear. "Tanger do this?"

"It was his idea. He checked with everyone to make sure they were comfortable first. Trevor was the one who volunteered to go to Sidney's and extend the invitation."

"Sid didn't say..."

"We didn't invite him until yesterday, and we asked if he'd keep it a surprise for you. Looks like he did."

Dales is clearly in the middle of introducing his little boy to Sidney, and Sidney—god, Sidney. He looks so cautiously happy, smiling so warm and soft and gentle that Zhenya is half ready to steal all his teammates' children just so he can give them to Sidney and keep him looking like this always.

Flower whistles, low and long. "Looks like you've found someone as baby hungry as you. Guess this shouldn't be a surprise, considering."

Zhenya starts skating towards Sidney, Scarlett still tucked in his arms.

"Hey, hey," Flower calls after him, laughing. "Remember you have to give her back, okay?"

Before he reaches Sidney, he's joined by Tanger, Alex on his hip.

"Ready to go meet Geno's witch, little man?" Tanger says to Alex, with a quick glance at Zhenya. Alex nods and mumbles something in soft French. Tanger murmurs an answer back in the same, then says to Zhenya, "Hey."

"Flower say this your idea," he says, nodding to where Sidney, still soft-eyed, is now greeting Fehrsy and his daughter.

Tanger shrugs, shifting Alex. "Way things sound, you and him are gonna be a long-term sort of thing. Yeah?"

Zhenya swallows thickly and nods. "Hope so."

"Then no reason for him not to come to these." He smiles, a little sharp but mostly not. "Long as he doesn't try to steal any babies."

"I'm one you have to worry about anyway, everyone know that," Zhenya says as they reach the edge of the rink where Sidney and the others are gathered.

"Hey," Sidney says quietly, looking up from where he's crouched next to Elle and Trevor Jr. He exchanges a careful nod with Tanger in greeting but is quickly distracted, clearly helpless to keep the smile from his face when he sees Alex peeking shyly down at him.

"Hello there," he says gently to Alex, straightening cautiously from his crouch. "I'm Sidney. It's really nice to meet you." Alex grins and ducks his head into his dad's shoulder, saying something that can't be caught.

Tanger relays, "He wants to ask if you can do any pretty magic for him. Something little," he adds more quietly, meeting Sidney's surprised look evenly. "Just for show. If that's something you're comfortable with."

"I—of course," Sidney stammers, looking blindsided. "I didn't expect—one moment, let me think." He smiles suddenly. "Oh, I've got an idea." He whistles low and sharp, and all the nearby kids gasp in wonder as Stride drops down from the rafters, a black feather carried in his beak. He places the feather neatly into Sidney's waiting hand.

To Zhenya's slight surprise, Stride then takes up perch on his shoulder instead of taking off again. Zhenya gives him a friendly stroke on his chest and feeds him a few sunflower seeds from his pocket, Scarlett watching inquisitively.

"Watch," Sidney says, and under the bright-eyed, curious stares of the kids, he begins flicking the feather back and forth through his fingers, back and forth, until the feather is little more than a black blur. Then he twists his hands and the blur becomes a spinning ball, floating free of his hands entirely. Elle laughs and claps in delight.

Smiling, Sidney deftly tugs a little pouch out of his pocket, takes a little pinch of the black powder within in it, and blows the powder onto the spinning ball. It immediately drops to floor, and when it lands, it's a—

"Puck!"

Sidney laughs and bends to scoop the innocuous black puck up, then holds it out for Alex to take.

"Here, for you. Not dangerous," he adds for the benefit of Tanger, who, to his credit, wasn't looking worried. "It's just a puck now."

"Should we go try it out?" Tanger asks, and Alex happily nods. That breaks up the little gathering, since all the kids are interested in seeing the magicked up puck in use. Soon it's just Sidney and Zhenya left on the side of the rink—and Scarlett, who seems to have gotten into a staring contest with Stride.

"It's okay that I came?" Sidney asks. "Daley—Trevor said everyone had agreed to it. I should have checked with you beforehand but he said they wanted to surprise you with it."

"Of course," Zhenya says, smiling down at him, heart feeling full. "Now you here, you help me steal Scarlett?"

Sidney glances around furtively, looking spooked. "Don't joke about that! Someone might think you're serious and kick me out of here." Zhenya knows where to look for clues, though; the corners of Sidney's mouth are twitching.

"Never see you do magic that way before," he says, nodding towards where the puck is skittering around the ice. "Flashy."

"Yeah, the whole spinning and everything wasn't really necessary. I thought it'd be more fun for the kids, though, if I put a little show into it."

"Very fun. But they're not think witches very scary, now."

Sidney shrugs, looking out towards the ice. "What we really want is for humans to respect our boundaries. Making them fear us is just the simplest way of ensuring that." Quietly, he adds, "These people are important to you. I don't want any of them to be afraid of me."

Zhenya scoffs. "Only reason anyone afraid of you is because afraid you talk hockey at them five hours, no break for bathroom or snack. Only reason you scary." He wishes this were completely true—but they're getting closer to that point. The number of players who showed up here today with their families, knowing Sidney would be coming, is indicative of that.

"You were pretty scared of me, once," Sidney says with something suspiciously like smugness.

Zhenya makes a dismissive noise. "Eh. Maybe little bit, before I know how huge nerd you are. Just little bit, very little."

Sidney snorts but stays quiet. His eyes are on Alex Letang, babbling cheerfully away to his dad as Tanger listens and nods intermittently.

"Someday," Zhenya tells him, voice small with the weight of so much hope, "want you and me like that. I'm move into your house, we adopt little baby. Make family together."

Sidney turns to look at him, expression startled. "You'll move into my house?"

"Oh," Zhenya says, realizing he's once again assumed too much. "You not want? Didn't mean —"

"I, no, it's not that," Sidney interrupts. "I just always assumed, once we were ready, you'd want me to move into your house. It has more room for your parents, and I thought you were pretty attached to it."

Confused, Zhenya asks, "But how we move all your garden there?"

Looking far too stunned for what Zhenya thinks was an obvious point, Sidney can't seem to find an answer for a few seconds. Then, swallowing heavily, he says in a slightly hoarse voice, "I... yeah. Moving the garden would be...difficult. Without damaging it. But we can figure something out. We don't have to decide anything right now. And Geno," he says, smile full of something Zhenya can feel echoed in his heart, warm and precious, "I can grow a new garden if I need to."

"Come on," Zhenya tells him, unable to keep the blatant tenderness out of his voice. "We find you skates now. You skate before?"

"Yeah, when I was a kid. It's something I remember most clearly from...before. I've always wanted to pick it up again."

"We find you skates," he repeats, overwhelmed with the lightness in his chest, feeling useless for anything that isn't smiling or trying to kiss Sidney. Considering the child in his arms, he sticks with smiling for now.

He has a day on the ice with Sidney ahead of him. He has the support and friendship of his team, and the love of his parents. He has the future to look forward to. Life's pretty fucking great right now.

"I was thinking of bringing cookies or something today," Sidney says as he follows Zhenya to the spare skates. "For the kids. But..." he slides a small, sneaky grin Zhenya's way. "I thought the gesture might not be taken as friendly as I meant it."

Zhenya chuckles, knowing every fond thought he has for Sidney is plastered all over his face. "Next time," he suggests, because the mental image of his teammates' expressions when presented with a plate of cookies from Sidney is too good to pass up.

"Yeah," Sidney agrees, biting down on his grin. "Next time sounds good."

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