

enforcer

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Summary

Ilya knows there is a thing about himself he has to always keep hidden in the deepest recesses of his body, behind his molars and in his core. He thinks Shane Hollander might be the same, except the thing about him he cannot hide.

Ilya Rozanov is the biggest hockey talent of his generation. So is Shane Hollander.

But over the years Ilya notices that the vicious media and the clamouring fans and some of his more foul-mouthed teammates treat Hollander differently than any other hockey player.

Notes

the gay hockey show got me too.

i am not japanese, russian, or north american, and i only know a few things about hockey. however i do know more than a few things about racism, the immigrant experience, being asian, interracial relationships, pro sports (if you look at my locked fics you'll understand), and love.

follows the show timeline, is a little time-fucky especially with the year 2014, don't worry about it. enjoy!

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

2008
REGINA

It's Ilya's first time outside of Russia, but Saskatchewan this time of year doesn't look particularly different from home. His knuckles are cracked from the bitter wind whipping around the building that he became intimately familiar with while smoking a cigarette this morning; the snow falls in tufts on the ground, untouched. The huge black fake fur-lined Team Russia jacket does surprisingly little to stave off the cold. He's chewing his lip, alone in the dark rafters, as he taps his foot against the floor and watches the Canadian team practice on the ice far below him.

When Shane Hollander puts the puck in the back of the net in a drill the clang of the metal echoes around the empty arena. He doesn't celebrate, doesn't even put a fist in the air. He just nods—like he's made a deal with himself—and adjusts his mouthguard, skating in a drift around the goaltender before he goes back to centre ice.

Shane Hollander. It's impossible not to know him. It's impossible not to be curious. He moves the same way he does in the video tapes stitched to the backs of Ilya's eyelids: graceful with an innate power. His backhand is weak but he zips through the lines so fast he blurs. It's natural, Ilya thinks, to pit himself against Hollander. To see if where he lacks is where Ilya can wield his strength to knock him behind in the running for the first draft pick. Or to see if they can sharpen each other into further heights.

Ilya exhales through his nose. Across the ice two people are huddled together. He's watched Hollander's interviews. He knows who they are. The short white man with thin greying hair is knitting what seems to be a very ugly blanket with three types of yarn, and the beautiful prim-looking Asian woman is watching Hollander with iron-clad attention, taking notes in a tiny book. His parents.

That's the other thing. The most important thing to Ilya is getting drafted at all, getting out. He's watched Hollander's interviews. He knows what he's like. His eyes are quite blank, very brown. He's got freckles swept across his strong nose. He speaks like he's been trained by a PR agent since he was twelve. Very polite, very perfect, very Canadian. Not a single blemish on his record. He probably plans his meals down to the calorie, his days down to the minute. His parents flank him like loyal shadows everywhere he goes.

Fuck. Ilya presses the heel of his palm to his eyes. He needs another cigarette.

The locker room is a mishmash of guys he's played with across the national levels since he picked his stick up for the first time and dual-nationals he doesn't know at all. Most of them mind their own business, taping their sticks and grasping for their Russian. It's the Americans he doesn't like. Too loud, too messy, too much posturing. He'd thought Canadians were meant to be quieter, but Ivanov—a bulky D-man with a missing front tooth and fake canines who's been on the team for two years—is fluttering between the discarded black jerseys and the swish of gloves, running his mouth.

“Rozanov,” he sings in noisy, accented Russian, slinging an arm around his shoulders. His fat bottom lip is torn and puffed up from where he’d smashed an opponent into the boards last game. “Everyone’s talking about you, Ilyusha.”

Ilya shoves him off, readjusting his shin pads. “Don’t call me that,” he snarls.

“Oh, he bites, too.” Ivanov looks delighted. Ilya wants to kick him in the balls. “No worries. We’ll make sure you pull ahead of Hollander for the draft.” He grins, leans in to whisper, “I know all about what he’s like.”

Ilya blinks. “What?”

“You know. His kind.” Ivanov straightens his mouth into a thin line, makes his eyes go blank. “Focused. No social skills. Had zero luck with girls back then. He’s like a fucking robot.”

Three winters ago Ilya had been drying his hair after a nail-biting, jagged, end-to-end game at home. He’d scored a hat trick, got his mouth bloody in a fight when a winger had dropped his gloves, and stewed in the penalty box for four minutes before tearing back out and checking the other team’s star player into the boards. He’d been nursing his purpling eye in the mirror when the coach’s son, Sasha, tall and fresh off an exchange in Paris, had sidled into the empty locker room and looked at him with dark, half-hooded eyes. Ilya knows there is a thing about himself he has to always keep hidden in the deepest recesses of his body, behind his molars and in his core. He thinks Shane Hollander might be the same, except the thing about him he cannot hide.

“I don’t know anything about that,” says Ilya flatly. “Hollander is a good player.” He feels for his mother’s necklace, fixes it on his sternum. “Mind your own business and play your fucking game, Ivanov.”

2009 LOS ANGELES

Ilya fucking hates events like these.

It had started as a firework, the feeling in his chest when he had been drafted first—and to Boston as well, a city where people *breathed* hockey—but now, at the afterparty with balding businessmen, it dissolves in pinpricks of lingering colour. His pressed shirt itches at the nape of his neck. He can’t feel his cross through the layers. His father stands, talking to one of the execs for the Admirals about Russia, and it feels like an iron fist is clamping around his throat.

He nods along to the rhythm of the conversation, letting his gaze slide across the room. Korogyi is bent in a rapid-fire exchange with his beaming and proud mother, a very stressed

waiter is zipping around with fancy hors d'oeuvres and slender flutes of champagne, and Hollander is looking very stiff in his crisp suit. A gaggle of old men have gathered around him and his parents, all of them from Montreal. It's a good place to go. It fits him, the good responsible Canadian boy. Ilya knows from the interviews that Hollander's mother is the hugest Metros fan the world has seen. But the colour has seeped out of Hollander's face. He's gripping his drink very tightly. He looks like he's gearing up to go into battle.

They mingle, they circulate. At some point Ilya, after charming Miami's owner, ends up within earshot of Hollander, who's still being held hostage by the Montreal execs. He drains a glass of champagne. What he needs is a cigarette, but every time he smokes these days it reminds him of Saskatchewan, of leaning against the wall of the WHJC arena with his pink hands turning blue in the cold, of Hollander scuffing his feet as he'd introduced himself to him, of his surprised smile when Ilya had chirped him, brushing those freckles. He'd kept tabs on him after that. Watched him play. He'd be surprised if Hollander hasn't done the same.

"Montreal prides itself on pioneering diversity," says one of the suits. Ilya watches Yuna Hollander's eye twitch. He doesn't know what half of the words in that sentence mean. "We're very proud that Shane is, uh, half-Asian. It looks very good for the team, and, of course, for the future of hockey as well. I'm sure you didn't have many people to look up to in the league when you grew up, did you, Shane?"

Hollander swallows. "No, I guess not, sir. I plan to be a role model for kids to look up to." The words sound carefully planned out, rehearsed.

"I'm sure you will be, son. What's hockey in Japan like?" The suit laughs once, nervously, when a beat passes. "You *are* from Japan, right?"

"Well, I'm from Ottawa, but yes." His forehead wrinkles. Ilya frowns. "And I don't know."

The cross beats under Ilya's shirt, on his heart. He thinks, not for the first time, what would Mama have thought?

It takes a little under another hour till Ilya can make a beeline for the bathroom. It's huge, an ostentatious sparkling chandelier floating from the ceiling, large pristine mirrors spanning the wall over the white-gold marbled sinks. Ilya exhales, loosening his tie. His father's words ring in his head, gather themselves like marbles in his mouth. *He can be lazy*. Ever since Ilya picked up a hockey stick all he's done is drill, skate, score, repeat. He shakes his head, smooths back his curls, ready to go back out there.

Only someone comes into the bathroom, door swinging shut with a slam behind them.

Ilya blinks as a tired-looking Shane Hollander sags against the patterned wall, hanging his head. There are bruised rings under his eyes Ilya hadn't noticed. He realises he hasn't seen Hollander with anything but perfect posture before, the handful of times he's watched him.

He clears his throat. Hollander snaps to attention, looking around wildly.

“Oh, Rozanov,” he says, straightening back up. His hands are fists at his sides. “I didn’t see you there.”

“Yes, well.” Ilya’s English feels like water slipping off skin. “Sometimes in public bathroom there are people.”

That shocks a snort out of Hollander. “Fuck off.”

“I think I am here first.”

He shakes his head. “You’re such an asshole.”

“This, maybe,” concedes Ilya. He watches Hollander chew his lip. “You think Korogyi is going to come in here also? Secret draft pick meeting, yes?”

“God, I hope not. I just needed to get away from all of it for a bit, you know?” Hollander looks up to meet Ilya’s gaze, holding it. His eyes are so brown, like a baby deer. Ilya hadn’t thought—Hollander, in the interviews, seems like he’s got everything together. His parents, his routines, his sharp focus. He shrugs a shoulder, continuing, “Anyway, you must be excited. Boston.”

“Yes. Montreal—is nice, no? Is good for you. Since you are from Canada.”

Hollander blinks at him. Suddenly, his mouth crooks into a wide smile. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I am. Montreal’s great.”

Ilya nods. “Good.” He clears his throat. “I should go back.” He hesitates. “You maybe also.”

“I will in a second.” He steps out of the way of the door, tucking a stray strand of hair back into his neat, perfect fringe. “Thanks, Rozanov.”

Ilya squints at him. He’s not sure what he’s done, or hasn’t done. But Hollander looks less like he’s carrying the weight of a generation on his shoulders, and Ilya’s aware of what that feels like in the first place. “Yes,” he says, and leaves.

2010 MONTREAL

“Shane Hollander,” drawls Ilya, chewing around his mouthguard as he bends down for the face-off, “did you miss me?”

It’s their first NHL game against each other, fresh on the ice. The pink of Hollander’s tongue peeks out from between his lips. When their eyes meet it’s fucking electric. A spark leaping onto dry tinder. Hollander’s mouth, bitten and red, reminds him of that night in LA. How he

had writhed between Ilya's body and the wall as he'd arched into his kisses, then dropped to his knees desperate to get his mouth on and around Ilya's cock. He's had better skilled than Hollander, but he's never had more enthusiastic. Hollander had watched, transfixed, as Ilya had returned the favour and swallowed his cock into his throat, then taken his come. He hadn't seen him but he'd felt the stare drilling into his skull, those beautiful eyes.

"Nope," says Hollander, popping the 'p', and the ref drops the puck, and he's off.

Hockey is a lot like sex. Movement, bodies, desire. In Ilya's case: hard, fast, reckless. Smashing a player up against the plexiglass, rattling the edge of the net with a goal, it all zaps the same thrill down the knobs of his spine. He watches as Hollander slips out from underneath Marleau's check, curling his stick around the puck and sliding it across to Pike. The twist of his body staking out the play is not dissimilar to the arch of his back when Ilya had made him come in a minute flat. Their goaltender blocks the puck, and then Boston are on the attack.

He can hear the knives of Hollander's skates slicing the ice as he tries to catch up to him. Ilya imagines it: Hollander pinned down underneath Ilya's body, his breath coming in pants as he begs Ilya to fuck him. The tight core of his body expanding to fit Ilya's cock, crushing around him. Hollander would take it so well, he thinks, so sweetly. A tightly-wound perfect guy like him needs to let loose. He wonders if Hollander would let him. If he would want to.

On the next play he checks Hollander into the boards, grinning at the hiss from the Montreal home crowd. This is the thing he loves about hockey. He leers up at them before leaning in close to whisper, "Remember how I made you come?"

A fire sparks to flames in Hollander's eyes. He shoves him off. "*Fuck you, Rozanov.*"

"Ah, if you want."

In the end they lose the game. It's a close thing; Hollander wins the puck off of him at the face-off when their coaches send them in for it, tied at three-three, and then it's all over. It's not a bad result away. Ilya has bruised himself enough about it for the night. Tomorrow he will sober in the grey morning light, ignore his brother's taunting phone calls, and watch the tapes in the film room to see what went wrong. He's mapping it in his mind, the power play, the line change. He glances out of the door, into the raucous Montreal night. He wonders what Hollander's doing now. He wonders if he parties. He wonders if his teammates coax him out onto the club floor, if they set him up with girls. If he has more luck with them now.

"Head up, rook," says Adams, their third line centre. He's burly, older, has a mean smile. He swats Ilya with a wet towel as he walks past. "Montreal's not an easy place to come to. We'll get them next time." He whistles through his teeth. "Hollander, though, what a firecracker. You two know each other, right, what's he like?"

Ilya thinks, *He bites his lip when he comes*, and says, "Boring."

Adams snorts. "Well, I didn't expect him to play like that."

Ilya frowns. "He is boring, but very good player. Not as good as me, but still, very good."

Adams shrugs, drying his hair lazily. “Ever met an Asian guy good at hockey?” he says. “Hollander might be the first.”

Hollander, Ilya thinks, is a fucking enigma. The ocean of him is deep. He’s wrapped tightly in thin gossamer layers; having slept with him once, Ilya’s only managed to unspool him a little. He’s awkward, but in the off-season he’s on the big screen modelling for Calvin Klein; he’s very blank and polite off the ice to the media, but as soon as the skates are on he’s graceful and fast and fucking *powerful*. A bruise is blossoming on Ilya’s ribs from where Hollander had shoved him into the boards in overtime. He presses his fingers to it, the hot raised skin.

“Does not matter what he looks like,” says Ilya. Half of his own teeth are fake. “He is good hockey player.”

He grabs his phone, trying to signal to Adams that the conversation is over. Adams will be gone soon, anyway, now in the twilight of his career. There are whispers of a trade to the West Coast. He swipes away two missed calls from his brother, clears out their chat of angry texts. Ilya’s got alerts on for Boston, and for Hollander’s name. It’s normal, he thinks. The media asks Ilya so much about him that it pays off to know what he’s doing.

Today there is a picture of Hollander on the Metros’s Twitter, chin defiantly tilted up to the sky and his stick in the air after his overtime goal, his teammates clustered around him in pride. The blue lights strobed around the arena reflect in his eyes. Ilya gets it. The Canadian boy playing for the most legendary Canadian franchise, bringing glory to the city against their deeply-hated rivals. He thumbs down to the comments, snorting at the ones that pit the two of them against each other, rolling his eyes at people that proclaim that he’ll win the Calder this year.

He squints at a comment, the profile picture a man in a Metros hat. *Didn’t think much of Hollander when he was drafted*, it says, and the guy’s probably never even fucking picked up a hockey stick, *but he’s proven me wrong*.

Ilya clicks his phone shut.

2011 NASHVILLE

There are a thousand camera shutters clicking in their faces. Their black dress shoes are pressed up against each other under the cover of the table, and Ilya is messing with the lapel of his jacket, smoothing it down over and over. It had been obvious that the two of them would be at All Stars. Ilya has been looking forward to it, to the bright lights and the wide rink and showboating for the crowd alongside a still, serious Hollander. He’s been looking forward to later, maybe, when he could get him alone.

Ilya has not been looking forward to this.

English is not a language that makes sense. He'd learned it in classrooms till he dropped out because he was better at hockey than anyone else he had known at the time, and then continued teaching himself the grammar painstakingly. The dream was always the NHL. The words slip around in his mouth, need a second to materialise. He gets away in post-match interviews by being blunt and charming, grins for scripted league campaigns, but this, sit-down pressers, they're not his scene.

Ilya scrapes his nail against a splinter in the table, presses his foot harder against Hollander's. Hollander is very good at these things. PR perfect, says a lot without actually saying anything, redirects everything to the team, the fans, the city of Montreal. His accent has the same lilt that Ilya's heard out of the mouths of the few Canadian teammates he has. The previous question from a bald journo, quickly said and clunkily formulated, he'd passed off to Hollander, hoping he would take it without Ilya having to ask. It had just been too long. But he understands most of what they ask him nowadays. They're just a few variations of the same thing. *What do you think of your season so far, Ilya? What do you think of your playoff chances, Ilya? What do you think of Shane Hollander, Ilya?*

Shane Hollander is currently scanning the gaggle of reporters for the next question and knocking his knee gently against Ilya's. A woman in the back raises her hand, hair tied back tightly in a blonde ponytail. The press officer gestures for her to go on.

"Ilya," she says, looking straight at him, "I know it's early, and it's only your rookie season, but you've already developed a reputation for having a loud voice in the locker room. Do you think becoming captain is something that lies in your future?"

Ilya blinks. He glances over at Hollander, whose jaw has tightened imperceptibly, his knuckles white from where he's flexing his hands against each other. Ilya clears his throat, winces at the feedback from the mic. "Yes," he answers honestly, and a ripple of laughter flicks through the room. "Hollander too. We are best rookies in years, yes? If we continue, we will be captains."

He captained his junior national team. So did Hollander. It's not a huge leap to make. But Hollander's touch against his knee turns searing, giving way till their legs press up against each other completely.

The press officer wraps everything up and the room drains. When Ilya makes to get up, Hollander stops him with a hand to his elbow.

"You're not as much of an asshole as you pretend to be," he says, looking quite firmly at Ilya's forehead.

He's so polite it's painful. Ilya's only slept with him once, but they're so caught in each other's orbit he knows some things now. He knows that Shane Hollander's manager is his mother, who locks him in with brands like Rolex; he knows that Shane Hollander eats bird food and doesn't drink even after a huge win; he knows that Shane Hollander, when he sings O Canada, squeezes his eyes shut so hard it looks like it hurts. He picks up a puck to toss to a kid decked out in red-and-blue after every game. His French is fucking perfect. Ilya doesn't

get it. They love him—or the idea of Ilya Rozanov—in Russia. He thought it was the same here for Hollander.

He manages a grin. “We will see if you still think this after I beat you in shot accuracy competition.”

“Fuck off,” says Hollander, but he’s hiding a laugh under his sleeve.

2012
BOSTON

*Shit backhand Hollander
Should pass to Pike there*

Ilya thumbs out of the chat and tucks his phone into his side, crossing his arms as he watches the large flatscreen. It’s already chilly in Boston. The wind howls through the streets of the city, with it the downpour of sleet and rain, making the team beg off their customary drinks at a private club downtown after practice today. Instead, blown up huge, is Montreal’s game against Miami. Hollander is leaning down for the face-off, his entire body a line of focus. Ilya can picture it, the furrow in his brow, the sweat on his upper lip. How he bites the inside of his cheek when Ilya chirps him on the line like he’s trying not to glare at him or smile.

He glances back at the chat. He thinks of Hollander’s pretty eyes leaking with tears as he’d taken Ilya into his mouth, so deep his nose had brushed his pelvic bone. The same big wet eyes had looked up at Ilya as he’d had him pinned down, wide when he’d breathed, *Next time?*

The next time is not here yet, but Ilya knows it will come. He wants to see Hollander beg for him.

On the screen the ref drops the puck. He watches, idly fiddling with his cross, and expects Hollander to zoom off.

Only he doesn’t. Hollander stands, shell-shocked, like he’s seen a car crash. The ref is already between him and the centre from Miami even though neither have done anything. It’s like the world takes one single, staggering breath.

And then Hayden Pike drops his gloves and punches the centre from Miami in the jaw, sending him flying onto the ice in a large, brilliant splatter of blood.

It’s chaos. Two huge linesmen hook their arms around Pike’s stomach and try to hold him back, but the camera has cut to a close-up of him and Ilya can see him screaming, yelling so much his face is twisting into an ugly blue, trying to throw off the officials and get in another

hit. He scrabbles at the ice, digging his skates in. The shot pans out. Others have dropped their gloves but look hesitant seeing a player sprawled on the ice. Ilya leans forward, tries to spot Hollander among the specks of red-and-blue. The announcer is saying, *Wow, that came out of nowhere. Pike must be looking at misconduct at the very least.* The blood pools on the ice, the medics stained in scarlet.

Hollander is still standing there, hand clenched in a fist around his stick.

In the end Pike catches a major, stewing in the penalty box every time the cameras swivel over to him, whereas it's the Miami centre booked for misconduct. Hollander plays like a man possessed. He doesn't celebrate his hat trick. It's not surprising when Montreal wins the game. Ilya lets an hour pass, then texts Hollander: *What the fuck happened?*

He waits ten minutes. Nothing. He tries again, stabbing at the keyboard:

Hollander
I watch your game
What happened

His phone lights up.

Nothing.
Just a fight. Part of the game.

Ilya frowns. *You do not fight*

Yeah and I didn't get involved.
Hayden shouldn't have done that. I'm pissed off with him.
Johnson was flat on the ice anyway.

Ilya touches his cross absentmindedly. He types out: *Want to feel better?* Deletes. He types out: *Pike should learn how to punch, very weak.* Deletes. He types out, thinking of how still he had been in the bloodbath: *Hollander are you OK*, and deletes it, letter for letter, click for click.

Instead he sends, *Did Miami centre chirp?*

You worried about me, Rozanov?
It's fine.
Don't you have a game tomorrow anyway?

Ilya grins. *You know Boston's schedule now? Did not know you are groupie*

Oh fuck off, you asshole.

It nips at Ilya. He swipes over to his browser, wades through his alerts. He skips over videos of the fight; when he refreshes the page, however, a post-match interview with a shirtless, red-in-the-face Hayden Pike pops up. He's glaring at the ground. Ilya hits play.

“Hayden,” says the reporter, “I think the biggest story of tonight is when you dropped gloves at the face-off. Do you mind shedding some light on what exactly happened there?”

“Yeah, I can tell you.” Pike turns to the camera, glowering. “Fuck you, Johnson.” He shifts back, hand trembling where he holds the mic. “Racism has no fucking place in hockey. Chirping is fine, it’s part of the game, we all do it. But not this shit. I don’t want to repeat what he said. His team should deal with him. All I want to say is that Shane is the best fucking player in the league and we at the Metros are so lucky to have him. Players trying to throw him off by using the fact that he’s Asian against him is fucking sick. He’s my best fucking friend.” He holds his chin up high. “And I’d do what I did again if it comes to it.”

There’s a charged silence before the reporter, flustered, is saying, “Okay, thank you, Hayden, moving onto the game, what do you think this means for your chances—“

Ilya lets the video fade out. It’s not uncommon for players to use the soft parts of you to wriggle their way under your skin. There are D-men who mutter crap accented Russian at him when he skates past them. Under his cross his heart is thumping in his chest.

He thumbs across to his chat with Hollander. *Your hat trick*, he types, definite, *fucking good hockey*.

A week later they’re gearing up at home against Miami. Ilya rolls his mouthguard under his tongue and lines up for the face-off. Johnson looks fucking hideous, but quiet. Off-ice repercussions then, if there had been any at all. Oh, well. Ilya will just have to coax it out of him. No problem at all. He leers at him, sticking his tongue out. In fact, this should be more fun.

He spends the game skirting under the ref’s watchful eyes. He checks Johnson up against the boards, hard enough for it to bruise for days, purple then sickly yellow; he rips the puck from underneath his touch; he makes eye contact with him after he scores a needlessly skillful goal past Miami’s goaltender, grinning. Marleau shoots him an amused look during the celebration. Ilya knows the questions will pile on. He’s vicious, yes, but it’s never targeted. It doesn’t matter. He can feel the tension thrumming underneath Johnson’s shaking, bandaged jaw. It’ll come soon.

Late into the third period Ilya slams him against the plexiglass. Johnson’s ugly face contorts in anger. He drops his gloves.

Ilya grins.

He’s icing his bruised knuckles when his coach, sighing, calls him out for an NBC interview. Ilya takes the bag of ice with him. He thinks, from looking at the long-suffering expression on her face, that she might be the same one that interrogated Pike last week.

“So, Ilya,” she says, shoving a mic into his hand, “tell us about your fight with Johnson.”

He lifts a shoulder in a shrug. “He started it.”

“He was involved in a fight last week as well. Did you—”

“Fight is part of hockey. This is normal. But Johnson, he is asshole, yes? There is line.” His eyes darken. “He should not cross this line again.”

Ilya is five shots of horrible American vodka deep when his phone lights up in the club. He blames the alcohol for the grin that melts his face, excuses himself from the nice girl that he'd been getting friendly with, her soft hands creeping down his thighs, and feels across the wall for where the pink strobe lighting gives way. He finds a door to the outside roof, to the whipping cold. He lights a cigarette, letting his head roll back as he puffs the smoke out.

*Rozanov what the fuck??
Why did you do that?*

Ilya types out carefully: *Like I said. Johnson is asshole*

Did he say something to you too?

Hollander still has both of his parents. Sometimes when he's on the ice he looks like the man he is and the child they all were when they first tied the laces on their skates at the same time. Many of the guys maintain a persona in public and are potty-mouthed in the locker room. Hollander is forced to lie about a lot of things, the same secret furtive way Ilya is, but the goodness of him is stupidly real.

Ilya watches the smoke dissipate into the skyline. The moon hangs in the sky, fat and ripe and full, and Ilya sees how immobile it seems. Hollander would hate what he's doing. He would say, *lung cancer, Rozanov, you're an athlete.*

He did not need to say anything, texts Ilya. *He is second rate hockey player and loser who will never win the cup.*

A beat passes.

Hollander texts, *You're an asshole. But not like him.*

Another beat passes. Ilya crushes his cigarette with the toe of his boot.

*Did you do that for me?
You and Hayden, Jesus.
I can handle myself.*

Ilya cradles his phone in both palms. When he was younger, everyone at hockey camp was good at hockey. There were kids who were beautiful skaters, ones who got tired of chasing the puck and chased each other instead, ones who scored goals with their eyes closed. But the year Ilya leapt forward of the pack there was nobody left for him. Nobody left to match him, nobody left to keep up, nobody left to go toe-to-toe with him. It's a team sport. You only win the Cup if your chemistry clicks. If you know, by the scrape of the ice, where your winger is going to be. But even in a team sport: at the summit of the mountain, life is very lonely. Ilya's life has been lonelier than most. And Shane Hollander, with his perfect parents and his perfect fucking life apart from the thing, could maybe be lonely too.

He wants, suddenly and very badly, to make Hollander come apart.

Yes you can, he texts. *But I wish I punch him harder.*

2013
MONTREAL

Ilya flops over on the bed and sees the shift in Hollander's expression as soon as he gets out of the shower, hot steam clouding behind him. They had cleaned up separately. Ilya had perhaps kept it vaguer than he would have liked, telling Hollander that he was going to shower, but all he could picture was washing him off gently. Just the image had sent shockwaves spasming through his nerves. It had been Hollander's first time, after all, he reasons with himself. And he had taken him so fucking well.

Ilya looks now. Drinks his fill. His world funnels into this moment. Hollander's eyebrows are furrowed slightly as he discards the fluffy white towel, giving Ilya one last glimpse of the cut of his pelvis, those strong thighs, before pulling his boxers on. It makes his calves flex. Ilya thinks, if he kept looking, he could get hard again. Just from that.

Hollander frowns further at him. He's pulled his socks on, white and long. "What are you looking at?"

"What, so I can fuck but I cannot look?"

He blushes then, bright pink all the way down to his beautiful chest. "Fuck off," he says, but it comes out half-hearted.

Ilya knows he should leave soon. He will. They've got a long, gruelling set of away games dotted in front of them, and his flight out to Toronto is slated for early in the morning. But he'd stolen a sheet from the plethora of Hollander's throw blankets and put it down over where they'd made a mess. He watches Hollander notice it, sees the slight upturn of his mouth before he settles in gingerly, his body warm. Ilya smiles to himself. Here there is none of the prim and proper Shane Hollander. Here he has no clue how to hold himself, what to say. It's thrilling. Exhilarating.

He glances over at Hollander, who has his palms folded over his belly, knuckles white, and is staring intently at the fireplace. It is very warm in the room, very molten golden and dark. It smells like sex. The low lamplight floods over the planes of Hollander's smooth skin. Ilya noses at his neck, kisses his jaw sloppily, open-mouthed. Hollander shivers. "What is wrong?" he murmurs against the shell of his ear.

"Nothing."

“Hollander, I can see your brain is exploding from so many thoughts.”

“Asshole.” Hollander snorts. “I don’t know. It’s stupid.”

Ilya nips at his earlobe, then retracts. “Yes, many times you are stupid. Maybe most of times. But still, problem is problem.” A vice grips his throat. “You did not like?”

He doesn’t think that’s it. The way Hollander’s body had welcomed him in, how he’d ground against Ilya and panted for it—he’d wanted it. Ilya had made sure of that. Checked in every time he changed something big, and touched him gently across the freckles between his shoulder blades, around the waist, inside of him. But still the fear sprouts a sudden head.

“No! No, I liked it.” Hollander stares at his hands, cheeks flushing harder. Ilya watches, enthralled. He wants to lick his blush all the way down his body, over his pecs, his clavicle, his navel, till he’s back down facing the wet pink tip of his cock. “I liked it a lot.” He sighs, scrubs a hand over his face. “I guess that’s what’s bothering me.”

Ilya frowns. “You are sad because you like sex.”

“I’m not *sad* because I—” He cuts himself off, twisting his fingers in the silk sheets. “I just—I just liked it. Being, you know, on the bottom.” His shoulders are a line of tension. Ilya feels a little like he’s approaching a spooked horse. “I wanted it. I kept—thinking about it. And I really liked it.”

“Okay.” Ilya lets his hand brush against Hollander’s. He wants to know everything about what he’d thought of. Had he thought of Ilya inside of him? Was the Ilya in his imagination rough or gentle? “And this is bad thing?”

“Have you ever bottomed before?”

“Once or twice, yes. It was okay.” Ilya remembers it keenly. The feeling of being so full, pinned down like a fluttering butterfly, it had made him want it all more and triggered his flight response simultaneously. “I like it other way around more.”

Hollander looks at him. His eyes are shining and a little wet. “I think,” he says quietly, “that I wouldn’t like topping so much.”

The confession threads into the air between them. “Okay,” says Ilya carefully. “This is okay. Is good, yes? Fits for you and me.”

“Yeah.” Hollander presses the heel of his palm to his eyes. The conversation is over. Ilya should go. In the locker room they talk about guys from other teams, and Hollander is an easy target. Their goalie had said, once, *You don’t expect a guy like him to be that built*. Ilya’s gaze drifts and lingers on the pile of neatly folded clothes on the large soft-stripped armchair in the corner of the room. He’s sorted them in the way he’ll put them back on again, dull grey sweatpants on top. He looks back at Hollander, and he can see the strings in him tightening.

Ilya clears his throat. “Is not weak, Hollander, to like this. I think is brave. To trust.”

Hollander’s smile is tentative, slow like syrup. “Oh. You think so?”

“Mm, yes.” Ilya shifts to kiss the slope of his shoulder. Hollander’s skin flutters underneath the touch. “I should go.”

“Okay.”

Ilya gets up, stretches his arms above his head. He doesn’t have to look down at Hollander to know he’s looking back. That’s the thrilling bit about all of this, how neither of them can stop looking. Ilya’s whole life has been about hockey. When he closes his eyes he sees the ice, the blue frozen over lake framed by a deep forest where his mother grew up, the place where he learned how to skate. During face-offs against Montreal the crowd noise rings muffled in his ears; he’s always looking at Hollander for as long as he can get away with, desire deep and simmering in the pit of his belly. He fucking loves trouble.

He gets dressed, brushes a thumb over his mother’s cross. Hollander is half-asleep, like a horse, sitting up against his pillows. Ilya picks up his phone from the bedside table, tucks it into the pocket of his jeans, and then hooks a finger under Hollander’s chin. His eyes flutter open, creasing at the edges.

“Goodnight, Hollander,” murmurs Ilya, and leans down to kiss him before leaving.

2014 BUFFALO

Ilya is not actually watching the game when it happens. The Raiders are on a series of away trips dotted along the East Coast, starting in New York a few days ago, where they’d handily beat a depressed and wilting Scott Hunter and the Admirals, and now fresh off an end-to-end penalty-riddled game against Buffalo, won only because of Ilya’s slick overtime goal. He mists cologne against his pulse points, runs a hand through his hair, watches his face in the giant mirror. Most of the clubs in Buffalo are fucking boring, but their goaltender has a cousin who’s opened a new one downtown he swears is a vibe.

“Captain!” says Marleau, ducking his head in the open bathroom. He’s got a cigarette tucked behind his ear. “Guys are waiting in the lobby downstairs. We heading out?”

Ilya is about to nod when his phone vibrates on the granite counter, the display lighting up. Jane. He blinks, clicking his jaw shut. Hollander never calls him. They’ve never talked on the phone before.

“One second,” he tells Marleau, snatching up his phone.

“Your Montreal girl, isn’t it, brother?”

He flips him off as Marleau laughs and leaves the room, letting the door fall tightly shut behind him. Ilya leans against the sink and puts his phone to his ear. “Hello,” he says, a lazy grin unfurling at his mouth. “Did you miss me?”

“What the fuck have you told him, Rozanov?”

Ilya’s heartbeat leaps into his mouth. He hasn’t checked the Internet since the two beats between different interviews post-game. “What?”

“Scott Hunter, what did you tell him?”

“Hollander, what are you talking about?”

Over the line Hollander’s breaths become ragged. “You haven’t seen?”

“What? I just finished game in Buffalo! What happened?”

“Oh. Oh, I forgot about that.” He can hear him pacing, hard, across a wooden floor. “Um, it’s all over the news. I—I got into a fight.” He inhales deeply. “We won in New York, and I chirped Hunter after the game, I swear it was just a normal chirp, nothing bad, and he—”

Ilya’s blood runs cold. “Hollander.”

“He said I sound like you.” A beat passes. “You’ve not—you played in New York a couple of days ago. You didn’t tell him anything, right?”

A laugh loosens itself from Ilya’s body. He slumps against the wall. He wants to see, now, the fight on the ice. Hollander has never thrown down his gloves; even when his teammates snarl at the opposition, he plays the role of the calm, stoic captain, holding his dancing partner at bay and separating players. He’s never had to be held back. There’s a sudden zip in Ilya’s jaw when he thinks about someone else holding Hollander down.

“Yes, I tell him, ‘Hunter, do you want to know all about story of me and Hollander fucking, you want to go to papers about it and sell story before you are kicked off of the Admirals because you are so old and very shit?’” Ilya snorts. “I did not tell him anything. He knows nothing. Just stupid chirp.”

Hollander is inhaling what sound like huge gasping gulps of air. “Oh,” he says. “Okay. Sorry. I thought—”

“Hollander. Calm down. Is fine, yes? Nobody knows.”

“Okay, yeah, okay.” His breathing slows. “Fuck, sorry for calling you. You’re probably busy.”

Ilya shrugs. “Yes, a bit. But is okay.”

“I shouldn’t have let him get under my skin like that. He’s a nice guy as well.” His words are slurring again, picking up pace. “Fuck, I’m gonna have to put out an apology online.”

He frowns. “Apology online? You killed him or what? He is dead?”

“No, Jesus Christ, of course he’s not dead!”

Ilya shrugs. “Then these things are part of hockey. Hunter probably forgets this already.”

“I know, but it’s—it’s damage control. I have an image.”

“Yes, image of being most boring guy in league. Mr Bird Food.” Ilya runs the pad of his thumb against the counter. He had noticed, last time, that Hollander’s hands were big as well, as big as his, and had callouses in all the same places. When he’d pressed them together while Hollander had begged for his cock inside him they’d felt like one. “Is not a big deal. I get into many fights.” He scrunches up his nose. “I did not apologise to Johnson.”

Hollander’s breath hitches. “Well, Hunter isn’t a dick. And I started it.”

“What did you say?”

“Uh. I, uh, just told him that I hope he shows up the next time we play him.”

Ilya starts convulsing with laughter.

“Oh my God, Rozanov, you’re such an asshole.”

“No, no, this is very good.” He wipes the tears from his eyes. “What is this, baby’s first chirp?”

“Fuck off!”

“Very cute, Hollander.”

“I’m hanging up.”

The next day a new alert pops up on his phone. They’re cooped up in a stuffy-smelling airport waiting on their delayed flight to Pittsburgh, half of the team sprawled and snoring on the seats. Marleau’s eyes are red-rimmed from the hangover he’s been droning on about all morning; he’s sitting opposite him, trying not to nod off. Behind him their coach is murmuring with the harangued-looking airport staff. Ilya thumbs at the post. It’s from Hollander’s Twitter, the one managed by his PR agent.

It’s an actual fucking apology.

He scrolls through it, the familiar ugly lick of anger crawling up his throat. When he reads: *I will make sure this doesn’t happen again*, and then the comments, *Hollander is so classy*, Ilya switches his phone off, grips it tight in his fist.

He had seen the fight. Hollander had barely dropped his gloves before tiny Pike had been hauling him backwards to the bench instead of finding a dancing partner. It had been nothing. Ilya’s knocked out teeth and never put out a public apology.

He's not an idiot. He knows, and has heard muttered to him on the ice, that he's protected from the media. It's a hyper masculine sport, an old boys' club, he's made a reputation for himself for being a scummy playboy asshole, and he's a fucking good hockey player. There have been enough Russians in the league before him for that angle to be uninteresting, for it to have no meat to latch into. Everything he doesn't want the media to know about—his dead mother, his sick father, his leech brother, stupid gorgeous Hollander—is tucked firmly away.

Hollander's nearly as good of a hockey player as him. Sure, he was drafted second, but him being Canadian has to make up for it. Still, around people, his jaw is rigid. Ilya shuffles up in line, finally, for their flight, and tries not to think about it.

The mixed zone after games is always a clamour of noise. Ilya shakes his clumped hair out of his face, flicks away the sweat percolating and matting on his bare chest, and sighs. He needs a shower. He fucking reeks. He recognises the reporter from ESPN looking at him hopefully; at least he's always succinct. "Hello, John."

They cycle through the usual questions: the bitter loss that had taken them by surprise today—Ilya had scored one goal and uncharacteristically missed three shots afterwards, out of his skin and out of sync with his linemates—and their chances for the playoffs—doing a two-peat in a row is fucking impossible, but Ilya's well-versed in the impossible—and then finally, John wipes his forehead and says, "You must have seen Shane Hollander's bust up against Scott Hunter a couple of days ago. I'd wager saying at least on the ice, you know Hollander better than anyone. What do you think of the incident? Do you think Hollander has changed his playstyle in a bid for the playoffs? Become more aggressive?"

Hollander is as aggressive as the rest of them. Hockey loves seeing blood; hockey also loves its narratives. Ilya remembers, in rich detail, the first time Hollander had checked him. It had been smart, sly, solid, and it had taken the wind out of Ilya for a good second. He'd nursed the bruises for a week straight, his ribs tender. He remembers pressing his fingers to them and not wanting them to fade—wanting the white press of his own touch stitched against the blue-purple of the reminder that Hollander thinks he's a good enough player to want him to stumble.

"I think," says Ilya, "hockey is contact sport, violent sport. Anyway, he did not touch Scott Hunter. Public apologies just because people expect perfect from Hollander, very stupid. He kept it on ice. I am sure Scott Hunter does not care anymore." He squares his shoulders. "And Hollander is hockey player like the rest of us. Hockey player who is behind me in points. This is more interesting story, yes?"

In the locker room, after scrubbing the life and the loss out of his skin, he finds a text from Jane.

Wow. That was almost really nice of you.

Ilya grins. He catches his necklace between his teeth.

Ready to fall even more behind in two weeks when we play sad Montreal?

Bring it on, asshole.

2016
BOSTON

Ilya's hands are sweating. His hands are fucking sweating. This has never happened to him before. They're slipping on a sleeping Hollander's warm skin, against his chest that is rising and falling with the snuffle of his breaths. The weak afternoon light filters through the sheer curtains, pools across Hollander's beautiful face. Ilya thinks there must be a bleed in his brain, slow and oozing into his nervous system, for him to feel this way. For him to keep his eyes half-open and nuzzle into the nape of Hollander's neck where the fine hairs live.

There has to be something wrong with him. He's known this since he found himself tangled with Sasha for the first time, never knew it would manifest like this, then catches himself in those thoughts transplanted into his mind from his father and his brother and stills his entire body.

His cross is pressed gently against Hollander's back, where his freckles litter into a constellation, a supernova. Ilya wonders—would his Mama have liked him? He shuts his eyes, breathes in Hollander's clean scent, can't stop himself from kissing the freckle at the dip of his neck. She would have, he decides. Everyone who meets Shane Hollander has no choice but to fall in love.

Hollander stirs to life in his arms at his kiss, a lazy smile across his mouth before he's even opened his eyes. "Hey," he murmurs, shifting to face him. His voice is rough with sleep.

"Hey," echoes Ilya. His heart thuds in his chest. Hollander had told him he would stay, but now that he's awake Ilya can hear the clock ticking down in his head like a bomb. He's got the stuff for tuna melts in the fridge, carefully prepared and pre-portioned, and Hollander's disgusting ten-pack of ginger ale, cooled. If he's fast enough he can make him stay.

He opens his mouth, but then Hollander's phone vibrates on the nightstand.

The name is not in English. It is also, obviously, not in Cyrillic. Ilya's hope plummets at the timing. Hollander sighs, a round open sound, and fumbles for the phone. He shifts right back into Ilya's arms. Ilya holds his breath.

"Hi, Mom," he mumbles. A pause. "Yeah, I saw the new contract. *Yes*, Mom, I'll sign it and send it over. Actually, I had a note or two, I'll email you later today, can you bring it up with them?" Another beat, and now Hollander is smiling, eyes scrunched in embarrassment. This expression Ilya knows very well. He'd worn it last time they'd fucked, in a nondescript hotel room in LA after a charity game, and he'd made to get up to steal a bottle of water from the mini fridge, as he always does, but Ilya had stopped him by pressing one to his chest. Hollander has his routines. "Yeah, I've been taking my vitamins. Okay, Mom, I need to—"

And then he starts speaking in a language Ilya's never heard of out of his mouth.

When Ilya was eighteen he watched Shane Hollander give an interview in perfect French to the Quebecois media for the first time. No accent and no halting sentences. Ilya had been eighteen and stumbling through the thick forest of English, all of his words scrutinised, and in that moment he had *hated* Shane Hollander. And then, a moment later, looking up his Wikipedia page for the thousandth time and reading that his father's family were all from Quebec, he had hated him even more. And then, another moment later, Hollander had smiled tightly when the interviewer switched to English to compliment him on his French, and Ilya had found, horrified, that he hadn't hated him as much as he'd just thought.

Hollander hangs up, tucking his phone under the pillow and looking back up at Ilya. He's still sleep-warm, his hair mussed, his eyes large and brown and looking at Ilya. He smiles.

Ilya clears his throat. "Your mother?" He thinks he does a great job of not cracking on the word like he usually does.

Hollander hums, trails his fingers across the sheets absentmindedly. Ilya wishes he had them on his skin instead. He wishes he could suck them into his mouth, one by one, trace every ridge until he could draw his fingerprints from memory. "Contract renewals with brands."

Ilya doesn't comment on how boring that is and says, instead, carefully, "I did not know you speak Japanese."

Hollander's fingers still. "Oh." He doesn't meet Ilya's eyes. "Yeah. I mean, not very well, but a little."

This, Ilya thinks, is another one of those things that make Hollander's strings go tight. He treads lightly. "On the phone you sounded very, how do you say, fluent?"

Hollander snorts. "You don't know any Japanese, Rozanov." He pinches the space between his eyebrows, and then he says, "I'm stuck on, like, eighth-grade level Japanese because that's when my grandma died. My mom, she grew up speaking both, and it's just easier in English with her—I don't know. It's just hard. I try my best, you know?"

Yes, thinks Ilya with sudden ferocity, *you always do*. He catches Hollander's fingers in his own, envelops his hand in his. "People know about this?"

"Not really. It's a personal thing, and I'm, um, a private guy. Obviously." He flushes, like he's realising he's here in Ilya's house and in Ilya's bed with a naked Ilya all over again. The sleep that was clouding his eyes clears. Ilya is already missing it. "Hayden knows."

Ilya rolls his eyes. "Pike, he is seriously your mother. He knows everything. Does he also know you like when I—"

Hollander swats him in the chest. "Fuck off!" He's laughing, dark freckles scrunched under his eyes. He looks like fucking bottled sunshine, slipping through Ilya's fingers. "Besides, my mom doesn't know everything."

“Ah, what does she not know except you fucking your devilishly handsome Russian arch rival? That you secretly do not like her food?”

“*Devilishly handsome*, who taught you that?” He shakes his head, smiling. “And my dad does most of the cooking at home.”

Ilya pauses. He should ask if Hollander is hungry now. That is the plan. He would fuck him the way he wants it—and today Hollander had wanted to be on top, back arched and head thrown back, caught in a gasp as he’d rolled his hips against Ilya’s cock, and Ilya had been too fucking stunned to do anything else but groan and run his fingers down those raised stretch marks on his hips—and that would remind him that Ilya’s the only one who can give it to him the way he needs it. Then Ilya would feed him food he makes with his own hands, and then—he would see what Hollander gives him.

It’s Hollander who begs in bed but sometimes Ilya thinks he’s the one who’s a dog on a leash, tongue lolling out of his mouth for anything he can get.

He inhales. He asks, “Do you want to learn more?”

“Hm?”

“More Japanese.”

Hollander shrugs. He looks, suddenly, very sad. “It’s—complicated.”

Ilya grasps for the right thing to say. “You could learn very quickly, I think.”

“Maybe.”

Ilya touches his cross. The years are slipping by. He’s lived more time without his mother than with her, knows one day he will grow older than she ever got to be, and it’s a knife in his belly. Sometimes he finds he forgets the lilt of her voice, the finer details of her face. But her ghost is a physical presence in any room. And Ilya doesn’t know if he’ll ever stop thinking: *what would Mama do if she were here right now?*

“Are you hungry?” he asks, hoping.

2017
LANAUDIÈRE

Outside the world exists in an echo chamber, narrowed down to a funnel of dark trees thickening towards the skyline and a beautiful, large, shimmering lake, reeds stitched together and blanketing it. Ilya peers out of the window in the hallway of the cottage, sees the

ducks paddling in the water. The sun is creeping up the blue empty sky. It's be nice to go onto the dock later today. To kiss Shane in the real world, not just in the boxed rooms they've spent their whole lives in.

There's a giddiness in Ilya that buoys him up to the surface. He can hear Shane pottering about in the kitchen making breakfast, humming to himself with the radio on low. It feels like they're finally tethered together. Like Ilya can just pull on the thread and have Shane tumble into his arms. He doesn't remember, in the decade they've been doing this, a time where he's been with Shane in the same place and they haven't been exploiting every second on the clock. Now the hours drip like molasses. There is a lot of time for everything.

Ilya still feels like none of it is real.

The walls of the hallway are littered with photos. There's a small Shane bundled up in a huge jacket, hair dripping over his eyes and looking very serious in his tiny hockey gear as a beaming David and Yuna Hollander kneel down behind him on the ice, all three of them wearing their skates. Ilya smiles at it, at the happy childhood Shane got to have. Next to it, an older version of Shane, maybe in his early teens, just coming into that first growth spurt, with a toque tugged down around his eyebrows and a shy smile on his face. The background is carved with snowy mountains, stunning, idyllic, decidedly not Canada. Ilya brushes a thumb against the frame.

"You were," he tells Shane as he enters the kitchen, "a very cute child."

Shane turns around from where he's plating up a stack of protein pancakes, eyes scrunched in embarrassment. He turns back to the stove. "Oh, you saw the photos."

"Mm, I want to see more," murmurs Ilya. He circles his arms around Shane's waist from the back, tucks his nose into the crook of his shoulder, nosing the soft fabric of his hoodie out of the way so he can breathe in the clean scent of his skin. He's warm, solid. Shane's laughter rumbles between them. "Tell me about teenager Shane. I bet he never got into trouble."

"Not really, no. I was very serious about hockey."

Ilya smiles. "If we went to same school, you would have had crush on me, yes?"

The flush on Shane's neck deepens. "Probably. I definitely wouldn't have done anything about it." Then he says, "Did you have the same hair you do now back then?"

"Yes, I think pretty much. One year I get—you know, I shave hair very close to my head. This is almost Russian tradition for teenage boys."

Shane switches the stove off and turns in Ilya's arms, scratching his fingers behind Ilya's ear and tracing his curls all the way up to his scalp. Ilya shuts his eyes, leans into his touch, gives himself over. "A buzzcut? Do you have photos?"

Ilya shakes his head. "My mother took most of the pictures." He clears his throat. Shane knows her name now. It's like having his heart stumbling outside of his body. "I saw picture of you in—Japan, yes?"

Shane smiles a little wistfully. He folds his hands against Ilya's chest, picks at imaginary lint. He doesn't meet his eyes. "I must have been about twelve or thirteen. It was when my grandma died. She'd always wanted her funeral to be held where she was born, in the country just a little outside of Osaka. It was really nice, honestly. Beautiful." He laughs a little, shaking his head. "I've never seen Mom so at ease, even though she was battling her grief. Might have been the only summer she wasn't stressing out about hockey camp or the gear I kept growing out of and how they were going to afford everything. I keep thinking I should go back someday, but hockey's so busy, I don't know."

"We could go together someday."

Shane blinks at him. "Really? You'd want to do that?"

Ilya catches his hand in his and tells him seriously, "I want to see every place important to you."

They eat their pancakes on the dock, watching the water rippling under the warm sun. Ilya keeps thinking about the photo of Shane in Japan, his happy eyes, and the one time he'd heard Shane speak Japanese, right before Ilya thought he fucked everything up forever, and all those years back when Ivanov—now undrafted in the KHL—had first spoken of Shane's *kind*, and Ilya hadn't known anything about Shane at all but known in his bones he had to say something. He watches Shane now, his gorgeous eyes, their legs tangled together.

When Ilya's mother died for a moment he wanted to give it all up. Hockey, the whole world. He wonders if little Shane with his unbelievable intensity, who must have waded uphill his whole life, had ever thought about it too.

Ilya is a bull stumbling around this soft spot. He twists his necklace around his fingers. He has to try.

"Growing up," he says carefully, "you were only Asian player on your team?"

Shane leans his head against Ilya's shoulder, tousled hair tickling at Ilya's neck. One of those horrifying wolf-birds swoops down close to the water. "No, I wasn't. There was one other kid for a couple of years."

"Oh?"

"His parents were Chinese. He hated me. I have a very Western last name and he didn't. It's like the other kids forgot to pick on me. And then when he moved, well—" He sighs. "I don't know. Locker rooms are locker rooms, you know, and then there were scouts and it all became about something else entirely. But I still remember this one time when I was maybe seven. When it was just about skating and handling the puck and having fun. Dad was on a work trip; it was the first time Mom was at one of my games alone. And I remember skating over to her after we won the game, all the way to the other side of the ice, and I remember thinking: *why's Mom not standing with the other moms?*"

"Shane..."

Shane laughs wetly. “It’s okay, Ilya. It was a long time ago.”

Ilya knows all about things happening a long time ago and still carrying the phantom hurt of them in his body, behind his ribcage, like a living thing. He puts an arm around Shane’s waist. “Is also okay if it still hurts.” He burrows a thumb under his T-shirt, down to the skin. “But you knew your grandmother, yes?”

Shane smiles. “Yeah. My grandpa died before I was born, but my grandma, she was amazing. She’d pretend she didn’t understand me if I spoke with her in English. She always made me Japanese food when I was at her house. I don’t know where she found half the Japanese snacks she snuck me under the table. She got sick at the end, so—” He sniffles. “She loved hockey. Was even more intense about it than Mom.”

“This cannot be possible,” says Ilya, and is delighted when it shakes a laugh out of Shane. “And—your grandparents on your father’s side?”

Shane shrugs. He picks at a splinter in the wooden dock. “I don’t know, I never really knew them. They’re super old-fashioned. They weren’t happy about Dad marrying Mom. I think Dad kept hoping they’d come around someday, especially when I was born, but—I don’t know. I saw my grandma once, at my grandpa’s funeral when I was maybe ten. It was weird.” He scrunches up his nose. “She called me after I won the Cup for the first time to say good job. Don’t know how she got my number. We hadn’t talked in years. We’ve not talked since. But, you know, Canadians. We’re all hockey people.”

Ilya holds Shane to his side very tightly. He thinks, with sudden violence, how anybody could be like that. To have a tether to Shane Hollander—talented, beautiful, hardworking Shane Hollander—and not love him with every last one of their cells. He remembers both of his grandmas before they’d passed away, and how they squeezed his cheeks and fed him chocolate and fussed over him being too cold.

He thinks: *if you will let me I will spend the rest of our lives making up the balance of the love you should have had, the kindness you should have been shown.*

Shane seems to realise how still Ilya has become. “Hey, it’s not that bad,” he says, jostling him a little, “I don’t need them to want me to be happy.”

Ilya kisses his strong cheekbones, his fluttering eyelids, the tip of his gorgeous nose, until Shane is giggling and squirming in his arms. “They are very stupid to miss out on you just because they have idiot dinosaur opinions,” he tells him fiercely. He takes a breath before saying, “I want you, Shane. Okay?”

Shane smiles, then leans in to kiss him very softly. Ilya catches his fat bottom lip between his teeth, sucks it into his mouth where he can keep it safe. “I love you too, Ilya,” says Shane.

2018
OTTAWA

Harris springs a camera on Ilya as he sits on the bench, taping his stick. “Ah, yes, hello,” he says, waving one hand and looking into the lens, “what are we doing today, Harris?”

“The fans want to know who everyone’s favourite NHL player of all time is!” Harris wags a finger. “You can say Gretzky, but that would be a very boring answer.”

Ilya draws himself up, mock-offended. “I am not boring!” he says. “I was not about to say Gretzky, anyway.”

“Who is it, then?”

Ilya hesitates. Everything is going according to their plan. They’d set up the Irina Foundation over the summer, Ilya running his fingers over his mother’s name on the paperwork—a name the world would now never forget—and made sure that they had been seen together getting coffee after the news of Ilya’s shock trade to the Centaurs. There had been the day they had lured the paps into taking flashing photos of them through the grimy window, Ilya’s foot curled around Shane’s underneath the cover of the table as they’d tried not to laugh.

People know, now, that they are friendly. It wouldn’t be a big deal. It would make Shane pretend to be mad, his eyebrows knitted together, before he would concede that Ilya had actually been rather sweet and kiss him. Over all of his hockey gear Ilya can’t feel for his mother’s necklace, but it’s always a comforting weight.

“I think,” says Ilya, returning to taping his stick, “Shane Hollander.”

“Ilya...” Harris is shaking his head fondly.

“No, I am being very serious. You see my serious face? I am giving interesting answer. Shane Hollander. Boring guy, but very talented. Very hardworking. Only player who can keep up with me. Lots of odds stacked up against him but still, he is Shane Hollander.” He smiles, thinking of that biting winter day in Saskatchewan, two days before Christmas. “Great player to watch, and good guy. This country should appreciate him more, is all.”

Harris drops the shot. “You’re a nice guy, you know that?”

Ilya sticks his tongue out at him. “I am just saying truth.”

It doesn’t take long for the video to blow up. He sees a Tweet from a fan account, their profile picture a screen grab of Shane’s face with his blue helmet undone, nose scrunched into his angry kitten face, that says: *an actual active NHL player hinting towards the covert racist microaggressions shane’s had to deal with since his rookie year? i’ll be fucking damned.* Another thread reads: *Remember in 2012 when the league failed to implement repercussions against Johnson for his racist comments against Hollander at the face-off? The only reason we even knew what went down was because Pike told the media. A week later*

Rozanov got into a brawl with Johnson. Do we think those two things are related? And another simply states: shane holland is the greatest canadian talent of this generation. maybe it's time the mainstream starts asking themselves why they don't talk about him the same way previous canadian talents have been talked about.

He likes those Tweets, retweets the last one, and shuts his phone off.

Later, at home, Shane says very casually, "I saw what you said."

"Yes," says Ilya. He hesitates, pink flower-dotted dish gloves slipping against the plates in the sink. On the windowsill a curl of basil licks against the glass. Shane is the opposite of weak. For everything Ilya has heard, everything that has lived inside of his skin, there are a thousand instances where Shane has gone through it alone and shouldered it by himself. He remembers the satisfying crack of Johnson's jaw under his fist, Shane texting him, *I can handle myself*, and then he remembers LA, all those years ago, at the draft where Shane had been shifting in his fancy dress-up clothes while execs picked at his heritage, his family, making empty promises about the future of the league. He doesn't need the protection Ilya wants to envelop him in. But the only thing that Ilya wants is to make the whole world better for him.

"So I'm your favourite player."

Ilya looks very intently at the bubbles foaming up on their dishes, the ones they'd eaten the beef stroganoff they made together off of. "You are maybe best player ever, tied with me."

Shane laughs at that, kissing the side of Ilya's face. "Factually I don't think that's true, Ilyusha."

There had been many Russian players in the NHL to look up to when Ilya was a boy with dreams. He'd watched the people that had come before him pave the path for him, walked it after them thinking of the hands that put in the work. There are players better than Shane, have been and probably will be, but Ilya thinks nobody has changed the world quietly the way he has.

Ilya sheds his gloves to let the dishes soak, his fingers wrinkled. "When Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend—who is so much less boring than him, oh my God, I do not know how these two are together—after winning the Cup last year, I thought: maybe there could be a way for me and Shane. I think when you played your first NHL game a lot of kids think the same thing."

There is a pause. Then Shane is kissing him, pushing him up against the counter, hooking his arms around his neck. "You," he says, "are not an asshole at all."

Ilya laughs into his mouth. "My love, this is secret between you and me."

THE FUTURE OTTAWA

The summer hockey day camp that was the genesis of the Irina Foundation has sprawled and expanded into a million things: sleepaway programs for kids of all different ages, community outreach for underprivileged children in Ottawa and the neighbouring regions, charity matches between some of the older participants and ex-NHL pros like Scott Hunter, where the kids win every time. They have their own float at Pride. The donations are a steady stream into the Foundation's fat treasure chest. It all goes to mental health organisations across Canada and Russia. The entire thing is a roaring, screaming success. When Ilya types his Mama's name into Google the first result that pops up is this thing he's spent years building, all in her memory.

These days the operation is too large for him and Shane to be everywhere and do everything. But today they can. The cool of the rink is a welcome relief to the height of summer flourishing across Ottawa, dog-day cicadas buzzing in long blades of grass. Ilya ties his skates tightly around his ankles and holds a hand out to Shane over the boards. Shane smiles and takes it, shaking his longer hair out of his eyes.

On the ice Hayden Pike is already entertaining a gaggle of six year olds wobbling around. "Ah, here they are!" he says. "You two are running late."

Shane purses his lips. "This guy's fault. He just *needed* ten more minutes to do his hair before we set off."

Ilya makes a huge deal of looking at his imaginary watch. "We are on time," he says, and then waggles his eyebrows. "And this is G-rated lie for the children."

Pike splutters. "Gross, Rozanov, I don't need to know about that!"

"I think you know all about this, considering you have one million children."

"I don't! I have four! I had a vasectomy!"

"Boys, play nice," says Shane, smiling.

Before Ilya can torture Pike a bit more, a small voice calls across the rink: "Coach Shane!" They turn towards the direction of the sound. It's little Mizuki, her long straight black hair pinned back with a butterfly clip. She's been shuttled to the camp since she was four. Now she's pouting at the ground. "Can you help me tie my skates, please?"

"Please don't kill each other while I'm gone," says Shane, and skates off.

"Mizuki *so* has a favourite," says Pike.

Ilya smiles. He remembers their second year hosting these camps, back when it was still tiny and they had to needle Ilya's Centaurs teammates to come help out with the coaching. Shane had been going through the attendance lists a couple of nights before the first day. His eyebrows had scrunched up then, but it wasn't till the day they were on the ice welcoming the kids and Shane had gone stock still that Ilya had realised there was something underneath the surface.

"My love," he'd asked then, "what is wrong?"

"It's nothing." Shane had his fist to his mouth, his beautiful eyes wide with light unshed tears. "Just—there are more Asian kids here than I've met my entire life playing hockey."

"Shane is everyone's favourite," he tells Pike now, and he doesn't argue.

Ilya watches Shane kneeling down on the cold ice, like his parents had in that photo of him all those years ago, little Shane deeply serious about hockey. Mizuki is babbling about something or the other in that English-Japanese mishmash of hers, and Shane is nodding patiently, his mouth rounding to make sounds Ilya can't decipher from this far away. The words come easier to Shane these days; during Ilya's therapy sessions he and Yuna take Japanese lessons. Shane stands then, towering over Mizuki, and holds her hand as they fly over the ice together.

Ilya's hand touches his necklace, the one his wedding ring is now looped on. The two people that matter most to him are linked together over his heart. Shane kisses his cheek as he skates past, and Ilya smiles. He closes his eyes for a second and thinks, *We're doing it, Mama, we're changing things*. He opens them again, sees the ice spray soar in the air as Shane scores a goal to show off for the kids, sending them into fits of laughter and yells to do it again. *He's changed the game. He's changed my world.*

End Notes

ilya is nooooooot an enforcer lol, but when it comes to shane he would be anything. and shane, well. he's a game-changer too.

leave a comment/kudos if you liked it x

edit: you can now reblog this fic on tumblr [here!](#) thank you everyone for your positively lovely comments so far. i am overwhelmed. will be replying soon :)

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