Cicatrix

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/76773556.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Irina Rozanova, Yuna Hollander, David Hollander
Additional Tags:	Ilya Rozanov Needs A Hug, Ilya Rozanov-centric, Canon Compliant, Canonical Yearning, Missing Scene, POV Ilya Rozanov, Parent Death, Mutual Pining, Getting Together, Jealous Ilya Rozanov
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2025-12-31 Words: 10,528 Chapters: 1/1

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by mellish

Summary

> Ilya recalls his mother in fragments: her voice, gentle in his ear; her curls, warming his cheeks as she wrapped him in an embrace; the way her eyes crinkled, as she brushed his hair back and said, “You are getting so tall now, Ilyusha. What am I going to do about my very tall bear?”
>
> Ilya Rozanov has never belonged to anyone but himself. An Ilya character study, tracing canon events.

Notes

> This mostly follows canon timelines, though I mashed things up between the book and the series, and made some of my own changes. I haven't read any book besides Heated Rivalry, so it's very possible some of this gets canon-subverted eventually. Warning: this story spends a lot of time on Ilya's family dynamics, and Irina's death.

See the end of the work for more notes

Ilya recalls his mother in fragments: her voice, gentle in his ear; her curls, warming his cheeks as she wrapped him in an embrace; the way her eyes crinkled, as she brushed his hair back and said, “You are getting so tall now, Ilyusha. What am I going to do about my very tall bear?” The way she smelled like apples and pine, as he leaned down to smack her on the mouth. The steady beat of her heart beneath his cheek, as he lay against her and imagined taking away the sadness haunting her gaze.

Ilya was desperate to do something. So he asked her, “Mama, how can I make you happy?”

She looked at him with so much love, for a moment he couldn’t see the pain always dancing in her eyes. She kissed the top of his head and murmured, “Nothing, nothing. You already make me so happy.”

He stared at her. She wiped her eyes and laughed. “Don’t look at me like that, beloved. I mean it.”

Maybe he should’ve called her out on her lie, or shaken his head. Instead he only smiled and held her closer. He wanted to trust her. It was easier, to believe she knew best.

She was right, of course. He could do nothing. He was too young and weak and all the happiness he offered simply wasn’t enough. For years he’d replay that conversation, wondering what else he could’ve done. In the end, he always came away with the same answer: he should’ve been a different son. The kind who could save her.

#

After Irina died, what was left of Ilya’s meager childhood dissolved. Which is why America feels so great. It’s almost like being a kid again. He goes to parties. He eats ice cream when he feels like it (around his diet, of course). He relishes how no one tells him what to do (besides his coach, his manager, his agent, etcetera). He plays games almost every day, for a living—a game he happens to be very, very good at. This is hockey to him: pleasure, fun, and so much money, enough money to paper over the way his life is mostly holes, so huge and gaping that if he stays still for one moment it’s like he can hear the wind whistling through all the regret and loss and anger he’s been trying so hard to leave behind—

Hockey is escape. And it’s working.

Boston is beautiful, because it’s so different. The day after Ilya arrives, he goes for a run around the Charles River, and looks up where the Porsche dealership is, and because training doesn’t start til the day after, he ends up in some bar (King Kong?) where he slurps a horrendous drink out of a massive bowl with six other people (“Fuck! What the fuck is this?” “A scorpion bowl, dude, keep going!”). Music is blaring and the lights are neon and the terrible drink is almost worth it because people are screaming *Chug! Chug! Chug!* (one of his favorite new words that week), and it feels like the freedom he’s been seeking all his life. The freedom to make a silly decision. To smile and not get immediately told, *what’s so funny?*

He wakes up in the wee hours next to some girl who goes to—uh, MIT? She's studying engineering? She was pretty good with her mouth—and blinks in the light filtering in from her tiny dorm window. He could use a cigarette, but he's trying to be good for his team, and people in America seem really weird about smoking. He's debating how rude it would be to simply go, and whether her mouth is worth suggesting breakfast or something, when, without warning, he thinks about Shane Hollander.

Sweet little Shane Hollander, sagging against the gym wall, lines of sweat creeping down the sides of his face. His mouth saying *no thanks*. How quickly he complied, anyway, after Ilya shook the bottle at him. How he grinned as he handed the bottle back, looking both sheepish and annoyed, so that Ilya thought, completely uncalled for, *that's really not fair*. Not with those freckles.

It surprised him, what he did after, beneath the stream of a shower, so uncomfortably hot he could pretend he was getting off to no one in particular—because Ilya knows, better than anyone else, that Shane Hollander is forbidden. And too good to do something like this (even if Ilya didn't miss the way his eyes slid over Ilya's skin, how carefully he swallowed, trying to soothe his parched throat). They're going to be seeing so much of each other. They're going to be rivals, unless one of them completely fucks up this season, which Ilya knows won't happen. He wonders if Hollander has ever slurped down a scorpion bowl with six strangers. He wonders if Hollander's ever been fucked by a man.

What would Shane Hollander think if he knew what hockey was to Ilya?

Why is he wondering what Shane Hollander thinks?

MIT girl wakes up and asks if he wants a bagel, and Ilya thinks, *wow, I'm in fucking America*, and smiles and says yes.

#

Ilya doesn't think it's a big deal when he talks to Hollander about his girls. It's just context. Everyone knows, anyway.

When he mentions this story ("She tells me bagels are American culture"), Hollander says, "Boston's not a bagel place. Montreal is."

"Okay. Are you going to order me a bagel, Hollander?"

"No," Hollander mutters, grumpy for some reason. He's so *cute* when he's grumpy, Ilya wants to bite his cheek. "They're only good fresh."

#

The thing is, Shane Hollander is inextricably part of Ilya's new life. He's *everywhere*. He's there at the World Junior Hockey Championships (*round two*, Ilya thinks); he's there at the CCM ad shoot (never mind that Ilya suggested it); he's there at their first match in Montreal, glaring at Ilya on the ice. Hollander is at the All-Star Game. Hollander is in his phone as Jane—it amused Ilya when he picked it, and he hasn't stopped being amused. Hollander is

panting beneath him, back in a beautiful arch, hands fisted in the sheets and neck glossy with sweat as Ilya holds his hips and thrusts into the tight, wet heat of his gorgeous body. Hollander is underneath him, skin warm against Ilya's chest. He says something silly about a dirty bed, and Ilya tells him to shut up. Then Ilya kisses his spine, three times, between his shoulder blades, before he catches himself and thinks, *hmm. Better not*.

In the shower he puts a hand against the wall and blinks water out of his eyes, trying not to replay Hollander's voice saying *Fuck, God, just like that*; trying not to dwell on how great it felt, when Hollander pushed back against him, inviting him to go harder. This isn't a big deal. It's a sex thing, and Ilya's good at keeping things casual. He's never had a serious relationship in his life. He doesn't see the point.

It was fun. Yeah. Ilya tells Hollander this as he leaves, hand on his shoulder, watching the anxious flicker in his rival's eyes. That's all it is: nerves, the admission that this is fucking insane, the slight burn of shame. Ilya understands. It's just one other thing they're in together. It has nothing to do with the urge he had, while his lips were pressed to Hollander's back, to stay. Which makes no sense, 'cause if there's one thing Ilya and his dad agree on, it's that he's very good at running away.

Ilya thinks the sex-with-Hollander thing will stop. He keeps expecting it to. But Hollander answers his texts, and Hollander's body is so *wonderful*, and at some point Ilya thinks, *well, if he won't call it off neither will I*, because being together feels like another game and Ilya hates to lose.

And he likes Hollander. As a person, and as a player, even if he'll never admit that. It's fun to have a rival. Growing up, Ilya had a slight, secret worry that he'd get bored with hockey. He worked hard at it, but it often *was* easy for him, and so fun it rarely felt like work. "That's laziness," his father said, when he tried to explain it once. And maybe he was right. It didn't matter that Ilya had his share of struggles or frustrations, or that he felt like shit after a bad game. If he wasn't lazy he could fix all that. If he wasn't lazy, he'd challenge himself more, rise above things to meet some vague, impossible standard.

That standard materializes when he's seventeen, and its name is Shane Hollander. Here, finally, is a concrete reason for Ilya to push himself, a benchmark to track every score against. Facing Hollander, on the ice, Ilya understands what his family found so distasteful about him: the unfair advantage. Because any elite, professional player can work hard and try their best, but Shane has what Ilya has: a love for the battle on the ice. And a ravaging hunger to win, with the skills and luck to make it happen.

Ilya's never bored, now that Hollander's around. Their rivalry feels inevitable, like he's been waiting his whole life for it—something the commentators would surely play up, if Ilya ever verbalized it (he won't). Even better, Ilya understands the role he's expected to play in their neat media narrative. He knows what America (and Canada? Probably also Canada) wants from their Russians. They want villains. The cold stare and curled lip and casual brutality, and the accent helps. They want to boo him, hate him; to think *Shane Hollander is such a nice guy and Ilya Rozanov is such a dick*. And Ilya is very good at giving people what they want. It's one of the only things he's good for.

The asshole thing is only partly an act—Ilya relishes playing it up, but it's also *how he plays this game*. Besides, there's nothing fake about how hard it is to beat Hollander, which ranges from difficult to impossible, depending on the night. The stakes make the game more thrilling. Especially because he knows he'll be seeing Hollander after, and it's fun to look at his face, whether he's fuming because he lost (all his freckles scrunched and his eyes ablaze), or trying hard not to gloat because that's not a thing good boys do.

It's unfortunate, how much Ilya loves kissing him. He probably shouldn't enjoy it this much. He should also probably put a ban on gazing at Hollander between kisses. When Hollander puts his mouth against Ilya's palm and smiles, he looks *so happy*. Ilya stuffs away the cold dread in the pit of his stomach and reminds himself these feelings aren't special, or unique. This is Shane Hollander, after all. Everyone wants him.

#

The summers in Russia are there to remind Ilya that hockey isn't just a game. He always feels, on that long flight home, even in his very nice business class seat, the walls closing in, the pressure rising. The way everything he's built in his new life is worthless, the minute he's back home. It doesn't matter that he has his own apartment in Moscow. There's no place in this country where he isn't simply his father's son.

He still doesn't know how to look his father in the eyes. He doubts he ever will. In his last game an angry fan shouted, "You're a loser, Rozanov!" and God—if they only knew.

In Boston, people bitch about the weather constantly, but they don't really know winter.

Ilya still has his shackles. They're just invisible most of the time, like the rest of his scars.

#

Ilya doesn't know when it starts. Probably because he tries not to think too hard about it.

Maybe it's the first time Hollander rides him, pretty face creased in concentration, so determined and adorable it would make Ilya smile if he had any control over his face, because he feels *so fucking good*—"You're amazing, Hollander, Christ," he groans, and Hollander grips his shoulders and goes faster. Ilya wants to make some joke about leg day but his brain's gone offline and it's all he can do to hold on 'cause he doesn't want this moment to end, actually, not until Hollander's found his release—he's close, long lashes obscuring his eyes, mouth slightly open and a warm flush beneath his freckles and really there's never been a prettier person on Ilya's dick, ever.

He won't say that, of course. Not that it would be so bad. Ilya's been calling him pretty for a while—it's just a compliment, and in Hollander's case, just a fact. But lately it hasn't been so fun to watch the way Hollander's face changes when he talks about other sex partners; it kinda kills the mood. So he says nothing, just kisses the top of Hollander's head where it's resting on his chest. Hollander rolls his cheek against Ilya's skin and inhales deeply, and Ilya thinks, *yeah, I know, me too*.

It's silly, 'cause it's not like he knows what Hollander is thinking. He can't know unless Hollander says it. And Hollander won't say it, because he understands where their boundaries are, too.

It happens again, their next meet-up. They're in the middle of making out and Hollander somehow notices that Ilya's knuckles are messed up.

"Hey, what happened?" Hollander asks, leaning away from their kiss.

"Is nothing," Ilya says, biting at his neck to divert him, but Hollander doesn't give in. He holds Ilya's hand up and furrows his brow at the scraped skin over his knucklebones.

"Was this from the game?"

"No," Ilya answers, because he doesn't want to say that the last time his brother called he turned and punched a wall, except the wall was a stupid kind with texture. Ilya's quick to let emotions flow through him. He doesn't like to linger on things, doesn't like to hold things against himself; he did too much of that, as a child. Ilya already forgot his anger, and now Hollander's reminding him, frowning at his hand like it's not okay, and Ilya would like to go back to kissing please because that's so much easier than thinking *why the hell is Shane Hollander acting like he's worried about me?*

Ilya's debating whether to pull away when Hollander lifts Ilya's fist to his lips and kisses over the broken skin, so carefully Ilya's breath catches. He swallows, holding very still, until Hollander finally stops and looks at him. His eyes are bright.

Ilya doesn't know how to be handled this way. He wants to step back, to chalk it up to Shane Hollander simply being a very nice guy, but he knows this is tenderness, and that's not what's between them.

"What are you doing?" he asks, like it's not obvious.

He expects Hollander to say *It's nothing*. Instead, Hollander says, "You should be more careful." Ilya thinks *okay, okay, I can work with that.*

"You're not my mother," he deadpans, moving in to kiss Hollander again, with tongue this time, and the dangerous moment dissipates, thank God.

Or maybe the catalyst is that orange soda ad they shoot together. It's the middle of the afternoon in downtown Montreal, and Ilya's distracted by how Hollander's eyes are a different color when sunlight hits them—kinda like coffee with milk in it. They don't look like this under harsh arena lights, or in the dim lights of a hotel room, or even the overhead lights of a shower when Shane's looking up at him with his mouth full of Ilya's cock. His eyes are striking. And beautiful. But when else could Ilya have noticed? They're never outside together, standing this close under natural light—they've never had a reason to 'til now, holding up soda cans and beaming at the photographer. Eventually he says they're good to relax, and the makeup artists swoop in and touch them up—it's sweltering, so they need to keep dabbing away sweat.

They've dressed Hollander in some kind of linen button-down in light blue, and he looks so fresh and wholesome Ilya has the inexplicable urge to lean in and smell him. The shoot pauses briefly while they set up the next location—a wall covered in street art—and Hollander moseys over, cool as a cucumber, and hands Ilya a cold bottle of water. Ilya takes a grateful drink.

Hollander says, "You look nice."

Ilya's wearing a black muscle tee, because people aren't that creative. He grins. "So do you. Boyfriend Look, I heard hair stylist say."

Hollander blushes. He blushes so easily, Ilya would feel bad if it didn't delight him every single time. Hollander stands next to Ilya so they're not looking at each other and mumbles, "Kinda weird, isn't it? Being outside together like this?"

"Is different, sure." He's a little surprised Hollander is trying to make conversation when there are so many other people around. It occurs to him that Hollander's actually really…shy. He'd rather talk to someone he knows than a stranger, even if that someone is his nemesis. Ilya's sorta tired and the sun is really beating down on them, but he takes pity on Hollander and decides not to force him to carry out the conversation alone. "You like orange soda?" He asks. It sounds kinda stupid leaving his mouth, but he's not really one for small talk either. He used to chalk it up to a lack of English, but that excuse is getting less convincing over time.

"It's not my favorite," Hollander answers. "I know it's not yours either."

What does Hollander think his favorite drink is? It's not like they've ever had a meal together.

"No. But it pays good." Ilya takes another sip of water. "Your mother not here today?"

"She's in town, but she has relatives visiting, so she's busy."

What would it be like if Ilya's family was any bigger than it is? If there were people outside of Russia who might give a shit about him? Maybe an aunt in Philadelphia, or Ohio, who would make him pirozhki and occasionally mail him actually-good vodka. Or some estranged uncle who would cuss him out for a shitty game but in a jolly way, not in a way that makes Ilya feel like he's never done a single good thing in his life.

They stand in silence for a bit. Ilya wishes he had one of those portable fans. Hollander gestures down the street and says, "A couple of blocks over is a branch of St-Viateur Bagel. That's my favorite. My mom thinks Fairmount Bagel is better, though, so that's where she's taking her guests."

Ilya marvels at the easy way Hollander talks about his mother, how unfazed he is about being twenty-four and still having her be in his life in this huge way. For some reason he doesn't feel compelled to joke about it. He asks, "What kind of bagel do you order usually?"

"Um. Sesame bagel with cream cheese. Usually."

“Plain cream cheese.”

“Yeah.”

“A very Hollander order.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means boring.”

“Asshole.”

“I bet all your favorite foods are boring. Favorite salad: Caesar. Favorite soup: tomato. Favorite appetizer: fries. Favorite ice cream: vanilla.”

“Wrong. It’s cookies and cream.”

“See? Boring.” But Ilya’s smiling as he says it, and keeps smiling as Shane goes, “Okay, fine, what’s *your* special non-boring flavor?”

“Secret. Next time you visit Boston maybe I’ll give you.” He winks. “Unless you want a different treat.”

Shane shakes his head in disbelief and huffs out a laugh. Ilya knows they’re in a shoot but it still does something to his heart, seeing Shane framed in sunlight, so gorgeous that Ilya feels proud of making him smile. He thinks, *I should do that more often.*

Then, *Oh no.*

#

It gets worse, once he’s aware of it. Because *Hollander* is safe and *Shane Hollander* is accurate and kinda funny—but *Shane* is not okay.

So why does it keep threatening to spill out?

Ilya tries anchoring it on the fact that he likes fucking S—Hollander, and that’s really all it is. They’ve always had a strange intimacy. Ever since they started this, he’s known Hollander’s body intuitively. Like he got a cheat code to it: touch him here, kiss him there, do this so that he makes that sound Ilya likes so much. He knows it doesn’t make sense. A more rational explanation would be that he’s had a lot of sex with a lot people, and practice makes perfect, blah blah. But Ilya’s never shaken the sense that Hollander’s body is *for* him, and whenever he does something to make Hollander feel good, it unlocks some vast secret inside himself, too: *I can feel this way? Someone can make me feel this way?*

Truth is, no one makes him feel wanted like Hollander does. There’s always such a war going on in Hollander’s eyes, when he first draws near, whether it’s in a hotel room or Ilya’s apartment or his own shady sex building. Those eyes say *I don’t want this*, but as soon as Ilya touches him, his eyes shut, and it’s all about hands and teeth and tongue instead, all of them saying the same thing: *I can’t help myself.*

Ilya recognizes this fight. He surrenders because no one feels like Hollander does—in his arms, in his mouth, or engulfing him while he's chasing his own pleasure. It's only physical. Or, like, aesthetic appreciation. It has nothing to do with how peaceful he feels when Hollander's lying on top of him, eyes mostly closed, nosing beneath his jaw, for once not vibrating out of his skin with tension. He's only ever like this after they fuck, really, and it doesn't last very long. Ilya traces his fingers along Hollander's jaw, and thinks *oh, wow. Wow*. Like an idiot. Not having the right words is an easy excuse, but increasingly he really *doesn't* know what to think, when he looks at Hollander's face. Or maybe he knows his thoughts are dangerous, so he tries not to have them.

"You are very beautiful," he says, because that's still within the realm of okay. *Shane,* he thinks. *Shane Hollander,* he amends.

Hollander blinks his eyes open. A very dangerous gesture. "Oh, have I been upgraded from pretty?"

Ilya rolls his shoulder in a shrug. He wants to kiss him again, but some smarter part of him knows it wouldn't be wise. After a moment, Hollander cracks a grin. "Hottest Man in the NHL, according to *Cosmopolitan*."

Nicely done, Hollander. He's pretty good at bringing them back to safer ground, too. Ilya answers, "They are idiots. They put me at number five. Five!"

And Hollander goes along and says, "They were being generous."

Ilya ignores how that stings, just a little. He knows he's hot. But he doesn't know if Hollander would agree.

Later, in the shower, it's again Hollander who draws a line. "I think we're done here anyway, aren't we?"

Which—of course they are. There's nothing *here* to be done with in the first place. Ilya understands this perfectly. He should be grateful, that Hollander's enforcing it on his end, because Ilya feels himself on the verge of slipping and he knows it would be catastrophic if he did. It's stupid to feel a twinge when Hollander doesn't even see him to the door. It's probably only because Hollander is now so amazing at sucking Ilya's cock, throat working and eyes fluttering like he's in heaven. When Ilya said *I've ruined you*, there was something coiled in his stomach, a wish he spoke aloud to make it uncaring, untrue. Shane Hollander doesn't belong to him. Which is fine, because Ilya has never belonged to anyone but himself.

Maybe Hollander loves getting fucked by Ilya, but this has never been exclusive. Of course Hollander wouldn't let Ilya into his life. He's never complimented Ilya outside of sex, except on his hockey, the first time they met. He's never invited Ilya to his actual apartment. Shane Hollander is clean, correct, *good*—and this thing between them is none of that. There's no place for Ilya in Hollander's gilded life: with his supportive parents and his supportive city and his wholesome fucking smile.

Ilya doesn't belong there, and that's okay. He's never belonged anywhere.

#

For months after Irina died, Ilya was constantly replaying the worst moment of his life. It filled his dreams. It played like a movie every time he closed his eyes. If he let his attention wander even briefly, the scene would start again: Ilya calling for her, opening the bathroom door. The strange angle of her head against the tiles, the arrangement of her arms, one folded beneath her, the other stretched out. She was wearing a blue nightgown with yellow flowers on it. It looked like someone had spilled her on the floor.

Ilya tried not to sleep. Ilya took up smoking. Ilya snuck vodka when he could, until Alexei found out and slapped him across the face. Ilya lay next to his mother against the tiles and whispered *I love you* over and over, and no matter what was happening or what he was doing, he was always there, helpless beside her. Ilya couldn't understand what being alive meant anymore. He talked very little and he ate and drank water and lay next to his dead mother, and his coach cursed him out, and everyone thought maybe hockey would be over for him before it even really began.

Ilya hated to play it, for the first time in his life. But one day his father struck him on the cheek that Alexei hadn't bruised, and Ilya remembered it was better and safer to be outside of his house. He went back to the rink. He skated through an hour-long reprisal of how her head lolled as he pulled her into his arms. He did drills, arguing with himself about when he'd last seen her smile. And eventually, even through the fog of grief, his body did what it had to do. It said: *I know this place*. And: *I know this game*.

In a hockey match, after scoring the winning point, was the first time he forgot that image. He roared with triumph, emitting a sound that couldn't possibly come from inside him, as his world shrank to that singular moment: he was on the ice. His team had just won. His heart was beating in his chest; his chest was heaving with breath. He was *alive*, and this feeling was worth living for.

It didn't last. His loss returned as his team gathered around him, some parents shouting from the stands—she would never see her tall bear win again, never see him dominate this game. But as long as he was alive, maybe he could do it in her memory. Hockey meant that there was something he could do with this life: a hairline crack, in the frozen river that seemed destined to be his future. For a moment, her crumpled body was pushed to the back of his mind. Maybe those moments could turn into minutes, then hours, then days. Maybe there'd be happiness on the other side of this—a way out of this pain, or at least beyond it.

It's like driving a fast car or fucking a bad idea or winning a very close game. Hockey is exhilaration. It's losing himself. It's forgetting, which is his only freedom.

#

About the ginger ale. It's not like it was on his shopping list or anything. If they weren't on the way to checkout he probably wouldn't have bothered. But there they are, in a neat green tower, and he thinks hey, why not? He can be hospitable. His mother would've wanted that. Speaking of—does he know anything about what kind of cheese Hollander likes? Is he lactose intolerant or something? He seems the type to have a food sensitivity. Ilya has a brief moment of insanity where he thinks of texting S—Hollander to ask, but luckily, it passes. The

highest-rated recipe for tuna melt on Google calls for cheddar cheese, so that's what Ilya gets. He makes a practice batch that night. Or rather, he makes dinner for himself. It's not bad.

Svetlana seems to be onto something, when he sees her the next day.

"Are you taking a cocktail making class?"

"What?"

"Having a party?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Never mind." She shrugs, all innocent. Ilya plops his head onto her lap, and tries not to check his messages; she might be able to see them from this angle. He scrolls through emails instead. Svetlana grouses at the shitty match on TV, carding her fingers through Ilya's hair, before she says, "You're anticipating something."

"Mm. I don't think so?"

"Liar. You're excited."

Ilya considers denying it, but she knows him too well. "I'm looking forward to my next matches. There are some new plays I want to try."

"Ah. Montreal is coming up. Your favorite."

Ilya doesn't fidget. "Why would it be?"

"Because the risk of losing tends to be higher, and you like the thrill."

"Bullshit. We kicked their asses so hard two weeks ago."

"Hollander was off his game that day. When he's on it, he's better than you."

He rolls over and noogies her belly with his head. "Stop complimenting Shane Hollander in front of me!"

She laughs and leans over for a kiss. Ilya readily gives it, because kissing Svetlana is simple and fun and not at all fraught, and because he doesn't want to think about how much she knows, or what might've given him away.

#

Why did Ilya ask him to stay?

No one has ever made Ilya *wonder* as much as Shane Hollander does, but it's different now. He can't believe how fucking stupid he was to do that. And it doesn't help that every time he opens his phone he has to scroll past yet another post about Rose Landry and Shane Hollander getting dinner somewhere in Montreal. What the fuck is wrong with his algorithm,

that this is all he sees? Yes maybe he does hover over them or zoom in for a better look sometimes, but he's never liked anything, never commented, and after he looks he also taps *Not interested in this post :(* in the extra menu. It's already bad enough he keeps getting Shane's awful (hot) underwear ad.

It's not personal. It's probably because Rose Landry is a big fucking star, and gorgeous. (*But not*, Ilya's asshole brain supplies, *as gorgeous as the man next to her*, even if the camera turns Hollander's eyes red and the flash makes half his face a ghostly white).

Ilya knows, in his gut, that it's the ginger ale's fault. The tuna he could pretend about, but not the ginger ale. He has so much left in his fridge, and now no one's ever going to drink it.

Even worse, whenever he spies the offending cans, he remembers the last afternoon they spent together. Waking up to Hollander's head pillowed on his arm, a private smile on his face. Hollander reclining on his couch, talking about hockey and cities and being on the road, Ilya's girls, Hollander's girls or lack thereof. It didn't feel bad. It was kinda nice, even, especially when he pulled Hollander close and Hollander put his head against Ilya's chest and drowsed for a bit, letting Ilya press light kisses to his hair. It was calm. And sweet.

Until Ilya fucked it up and said his name. Fuck.

Ilya's only ever been jealous of hockey. He's never felt jealous over people. He's not a hypocrite. He *likes* people, and he isn't precious about affection or intimacy—he's always readily given those away. Maybe that's why jealousy feels shocking. Like it shouldn't be possible in his body.

Also it feels bad. Extremely bad.

It feels like losing. And whenever he thinks of reaching out he's reminded that Hollander has a celebrity girlfriend now, good for him, Ilya's never had anyone quite so high-profile, and despite her star status, being with Rose is safer and better for Hollander than being with *Ilya Rozanov*. Of course Shane left the moment Ilya messed up their dynamic. Shane doesn't like playing with fire, not the way Ilya does, and all this time, it's Ilya who's been asking for more. Pushing things further. Ilya who leans in first, who wants a room number, who tells him he's gorgeous; Ilya who invites him home, who says *let me fuck you*, who asks him, for some Goddamned reason, to stay.

But Hollander didn't.

Any more rejection would make Ilya feel pathetic. He won't allow it. He's spent too much of his life already, feeling that way.

#

He's heard the same lines from his father so many times, he could recite them from memory.

You were never hungry. You were never on the street. Do you know how fucking lucky you are? Do you have any idea what I've lived through? How you'd have to live, without me?

His mother would clap her hands over his ears, as if that would spare him. He could feel her trembling, but she always smiled when she said, “Please, not in front of Ilya.”

His father never struck his mother with his hands. He only used words. *You never do anything right. You’re going to ruin this boy.*

You could never ruin me, he’d think, wiping his mother’s tears with his shirt, once they were alone. But maybe that wasn’t true. His father would shake him if he saw Ilya comforting his mother. It was shameful for everyone. So he always had to wait, until his father was gone, and his mother finally stopped holding herself together.

He told her once, “Mama, you don’t have to worry about me. I will be okay.”

He could see how hard she was trying for him, and it broke his heart. He hated the sad curve of her mouth, the way her eyes randomly welled up, when she was telling him a story, or skating next to him. Ilya wasn’t a child anymore. He wanted her to know she could rely on him. Instead, those words gave her permission to leave.

He’s never told anyone this. He knows his father made her so unhappy, but Ilya deserves at least some of the blame. It’s another wound he carries, picking at it so it never heals, right there alongside the time he told his father he’d be playing for the NHL instead.

His father said, “You’re really going to leave Russia? You’re going to leave me, like your mother did?”

It would be easier if all he felt for his father was hate, but that wasn’t true. It was never true.

Ilya let the accusation roll over him, because he couldn’t say the truth: *yes, yes, I have to. This is the only way I know how to love you. I can’t stay here. I will die, like she did.*

It hurts, whenever he comes home to Russia. But it hurts whenever he leaves, too.

#

Ilya’s always been so aware of having Shane Hollander’s firsts, it’s overshadowed how the same is true in reverse. In a warm room in Tampa Bay, Ilya tells Shane about his family, and it’s the first time he’s said any of this to someone who doesn’t already know. Shane’s answering gaze is the first time someone’s looked at him like that—like he can see all the broken glass Ilya’s made of, held together by layers of bluster and snark and lightness, and still he wants to understand. It makes Ilya feel very young—and worried.

Ilya hasn’t been cradled, not since his mother died, and yet that’s what Shane is doing, palming Ilya’s skull, whispering *shhh, shhh*, because Ilya can’t stop crying.

Ilya’s used to being the giver. It’s all he ever does with his family. He doesn’t know how to be on the receiving end like this, but Shane makes it easy, stroking Ilya’s back and shoulders, kissing him gently in lieu of words. Holding Shane against him, after months of believing he never again would, feels like both solace and a death sentence. Ilya knows it can’t last. Every moment he allows this is only going to make things harder. But he’s carried his father’s

illness for years and years, and he didn't even recognize how heavy a burden it was, until Shane asked him to share it, to set it down. The words spill out of Ilya in drips, and Shane doesn't rush or force him. His warmth is permission and encouragement enough.

"The only thing my father never forgets," Ilya murmurs, "Is how much I disappoint him."

Shane kisses his forehead. "He's wrong. There's so much about you to be proud of."

Ilya feels scraped raw. He traces Shane's freckles with his knuckles. It's one of his favorite things to do.

"Sorry," he whispers, and means it. "It's sad. I do not like to tell people this."

"It's okay. I want to know more about your family. And you. Whatever you want to tell me."

"Why?"

"Nothing. I just want to." Shane swallows. "And, well, I told you. Because I like you."

Hearing those words twice in one night is making something in Ilya's chest go nuclear. He likes Shane too, but he can't. *They* can't. It was a bad idea when it started, but it wasn't dangerous, not like this. He needs to force distance between them, even if—or maybe *because*—Shane's proximity is the only thing keeping him grounded right now. This whole thing has already gone too far.

Shane says he wants to know Ilya, but the thing is, he already *does*. Not just his body, which Ilya can admit he's never shared with anyone the way he does with Shane. It's more than that. Shane has always translated Ilya: what he needs, what he wants. Even during their rookie season, when Shane knew Ilya couldn't follow the reporter's rapid English, he swooped in and saved him. Shane allows for Ilya's silences, for those moments when language leaves him. He never shames him for it.

Ilya looks into Shane's eyes now, glossy with tears and aching, certain they're mirroring his heart. Shane tips his head forward, and Ilya puts their mouths together, silencing himself. Truth is, Ilya has the words this time. He just can't say them.

#

Alexei calls him *that slur* to threaten him, to make sure Ilya knows that he knows. Ilya hears it on the ice, in the locker room, but it's different hearing it in Russian. It's different when it's his brother, spitting it at him, because of the threat it carries. Alexei won't do anything, because he's a coward, but they both know how potent fear is. How it lingers in the body, regardless of reality.

It would be comforting, almost, if it weren't so awful: how Alexei's accusations are so like their father's, except more bitter, more scathing. *You freak. You fuck up. You're a terrible person, Ilya. You're the most ungrateful son. All the money in the world won't change that.*

And yet you want my money, Ilya doesn't say. He won't say anything, anymore, to these people. He's too tired.

Alexei's hate is so deep, so familiar, Ilya can't remember what it's like not to live with it. It's been this way since they were children, since Ilya's gift for hockey became apparent. It gave him a different path. A chance for glory, money. And since he chose betrayal, it allowed him to run away—to escape this city, and their father's coldness, for most of the year. All options Alexei never had, because he got a job, and a wife and a child and a drug problem. His whole life has been smothered by the withering disregard of their father, whom no one could make happy, ever.

This is also hockey to Ilya. His brother's hate. A salvation that looks and tastes like desertion.

His mother used to tell them, "You boys should love each other. Family is all you have."

Ilya always, always tries to do what his mother said—but this, he can't do without his brother. It's impossible. It's going to hurt him forever.

#

Still, Ilya tried so hard to be happy for her. It was another thing she'd asked of him. And it worked, for a time.

He carved out a life, inch by bloody inch. There were long stretches of time where it seemed like he had everything: unlimited top shelf alcohol, a beautiful home, a beautiful body beneath his own. The kind of car he'd be proud to take his mother for a drive in. (She'd surely pull the sunroof down and pump her hands, let her hair stream in the wind. She would love blasting Rihanna and Madonna from these speakers.) The beam of stadium lights on ice as Ilya won a game and shouted in his mother tongue, so many hands slapping his back, so many voices offering those words withheld from him all his life: *good job, Rozanov, you fucking bastard. Nicely done. You killed it.*

It was good. It was a life. Ilya knew what he wanted, and he could always get it. It didn't matter that his heart clenched whenever his father called, or that increasingly he felt empty when a girl took off her clothes. ("Speak Russian to me," his New York lady said during their last tryst, and he couldn't think what to say. It felt like a weird request. "You're beautiful, sexy, fun," he said, taking her from behind, *and this doesn't matter*, he didn't add, though it was a near thing.)

Sometimes, when he was lying in bed alone after whatever stolen hours he could get with Shane, he'd feel the ghost impression of an embrace, and shudder with a sudden chill, eyes stinging. But it was easy enough to ignore those times, because the rest of life was so full and seething.

Before his father passed, that had seemed enough. Life made sense to him.

Before Shane, everything was so clear. Now nothing is.

Because Ilya's *in love* with Shane. And he also *can't lose this job*. He can't go back to Russia. It would destroy him.

Something changed in Shane, after Rose, after the All-Star Game. Shane's finally asking for more, never mind that it's impossible. Shane's saying and doing all these things Ilya wants, mostly unprompted, and it's tearing Ilya to shreds. He knows Shane likes him. But he can't possibly feel the same way Ilya does—like he's going to drown in this feeling if he doesn't swim against it, like it's going to drag him into oblivion. The sucking tidal wave of love he's never allowed himself, not after the loss he's lived through.

Maybe the worst part is that Shane is a terrible liar, but Ilya's quite a good one. So Ilya is the one who has to do something about it, now that they've crossed—whatever lines they've been drawing and re-drawing, all this time. (Sure, Tuna Melt was Ilya's fault. But Florida was all Shane.)

It was easier to push Shane away when he was still only Hollander. Ilya always knew when he was doing it. Knew it was unfair, wrapped up in his own pain, but early on it wasn't too hard: telling Shane they weren't anything, on that rooftop in Vegas. Telling Shane they couldn't be anything, in that Sochi arena. He gamely ignored the pang in his chest at Shane's troubled, mumbled *Fuck* as he turned away. He could squat on his bed and not move an inch in a Vegas hotel room, ignoring the urge to kiss Shane goodbye, because if he did, he would never get on that plane to Russia.

Ilya's spent a lifetime holding himself still, because of what might happen otherwise. That discipline is what carries him through every awful moment when Shane looks at him with tears hanging in his eyes. Sometimes Ilya thinks he's inflicted enough pain that it's *actually* over, but Shane always—closes the distance, after Ilya retreats. Lets Ilya fuck things up again, because they're addicted to ruining each other.

There's nowhere for this to go, no matter how much they might want it. So Ilya gathers his nerves to finally, truly, end things. He spends more than one night rehearsing how to break Shane's heart (assuming, of course, he even matters that much). How to push him away—not with any more cruelty than is necessary, but he knows Shane's determination by now, knows that unless he's very clear, Shane might persist anyway. A statement of facts seems like the kind of thing Shane would respond to. Ilya's ready to lay down all their cards, sequence them to the inevitable end: it's either hockey, or whatever this savage, terrifying thing is between them. And he *knows* hockey is Hollander's life. It's their past and their future. It eclipses them.

He *never* wants Shane Hollander to stop playing hockey. That alone is a good enough reason to say no. Ilya's proud of his argument. He knows it's going to be one of the worst nights of his life, but he knows how to heal from that sort of thing. It will get better over time. And years from now, he's sure they'll be glad they didn't trade everything away for each other. Ilya won't admit that Shane is worth it, but he already knows that he definitely isn't.

Then Shane gets knocked out on the ice.

On his hospital bed, looking cute and sounding loopy, Shane tells Ilya not to go to Russia. It's not the first time he's hinted at this, but it's the first time he says it so bluntly, like he's not guessing beforehand what it'll do to Ilya. It's also the first time someone's ever given Ilya an alternative for the summer. A different place to be. A different place to stay.

“You know I can’t,” he says, heart splintering in his chest. He’s glad of the feeling. Part of him was worried he’d left it on the ice, at last night’s game.

Shane grins, ignoring this very reasonable statement. “It’ll be fun,” he murmurs. “We'd be completely alone. Together.”

Actually, Ilya had it wrong. His heart’s not inside him. It’s in Shane Hollander’s fucking hands now, and he can’t do a thing about it. Witnessing Shane’s tiny smile, the bright hope in his eyes, more stark because of the bruises framing his face, the best Ilya can do is stroke his cheek and say, “Maybe.”

It’s a lie. They’re rapidly approaching a cliff edge, but Ilya won’t let them tip over. He won't let Shane fall deeper, or love him to self-destruction, the way Ilya’s mother did. This time, Ilya will save his beloved.

#

It doesn’t matter what he wants. What matters is what he’s allowed.

It’s a lesson burned into him, reinforced by every year he’s spent trying to survive his grief, outlast his own ruin. He expects to carry it to his grave.

Then Scott Hunter happens.

#

Ilya learned, when he was twelve, that he can’t be left alone if he leaves first. His heart can’t be hurt if he never exposes it, never lets anyone in.

He should’ve known none of that would matter to Shane Fucking Hollander, best in the world at everything, including making Ilya cry. He forces Ilya to bare his heart, to say the words he promised himself he absolutely wouldn’t. And now Ilya has to watch Shane freeze, his beautiful eyes wide with alarm, as he whispers, “Holy shit.”

And Ilya thinks well, that’s valid, who would want his heart anyway? It’s too bruised and battered, raw and useless; it’s changed hands, too many times. And no matter how tenderly Shane touched and spoke to him all weekend, in this beautiful house with its beautiful lake, and the beautiful ease that fills the air when they're together—Ilya still messed up, taking it too far. *It’s all right*, he tells himself, rapidly recalibrating. *You want him to reject you. This is what’s best for both of you.*

“I mean,” he starts, the words sticking in his throat, because how the fuck do you backpedal from that?

“I love you too,” Shane says.

“*Fuck*, Hollander." Ilya collapses onto Shane’s chest, kissing the skin over his heart. Repeating *I love you* against it, through his tears. Relishing the feeling of Shane’s fingers running through his hair, as those same words are murmured against his temple.

And suddenly, blessedly, things make sense again—because Shane Hollander *loves him*, and the feeling is mutual. It's simple now. Ilya can construct a life from this. A hundred, a thousand possible futures spill outwards from this moment, all of them gleaming and beautiful, because in every single one, they're together. It's like a camera lens being wiped clean, a blurry picture resolving. Like a wound inside him, stitching closed. A promise that it might heal clean, after all this time. A scar he'll treasure because of what it teaches him: that he doesn't always know the truth. That sometimes, there's a different truth, waiting for him to become the person that can learn it.

#

Ilya conjures his mother for Shane. He gathers the scraps of her he was too afraid to collect, the memories he could only bear to witness in pieces, afraid of what it would do to him if they coalesced. Lying next to Shane, he feels safe enough, for the first time in forever, to talk about what she was like. She was always a little mischievous, cracking a joke when her husband wasn't around. She was constantly telling Ilya not to forget his hat (because Ilya was always forgetting his hat). She was a beautiful skater. In her youth she'd been a ballerina, though she never had the chance to go pro. Ilya loved watching her spin on the ice, her scarf turning in the wind. She made the best soups, ushering Ilya over and asking him to taste and tell her if it needed to be more sour, or more salty; she'd add dill pickles, or black olives, depending on his answer.

When he was younger she read to him each night: fairytales, Pushkin's poems. Things with dancing animals and gleaming stars. He'd fall asleep to the sound of her voice, and wake up to her hand against his cheek.

She gave him the necklace when he was eight. They knelt and prayed together, side by side. It wasn't something he did anymore, but he felt such peace in that moment. The words didn't mean much to him as a child, and they mean even less now, but when he prayed with his mother it always seemed they were safe, ensconced in a shield that nothing and no one could pierce.

He doesn't pray anymore. But some of that feeling comes back to him, when he's nestled in Shane's arms.

"She was my best friend. And I was her bear."

"Oh," Shane breathes, rubbing at his eyes with the tips of his fingers. "She sounds—so, so lovely, Ilya."

She would've loved this soft-hearted boy. She would've fed him sour soup and raced him on the ice. Ilya realizes that she is, at last, alive again in a way that soothes his heart instead of breaking it. He can see her: smiling, rosy-cheeked, hair loose in a breeze; scrunching her nose, as she tells him not to grow up too fast.

"Yes, she was," he whispers, leaning in to kiss away Shane's tears.

#

They're outside by the campfire again, making S'mores. Ilya's made S'mores on team camping trips before, having a little too much fun melting marshmallows, but it's special to do it with Shane, who's normally a stickler about sweets. ("These are fat-free marshmallows," Shane says, and Ilya says, "Oh my God, I hope they do not taste like shit.") Shane's huddled against him, rotating his marshmallow precisely so that it burns evenly. Ilya's already blown out a clump of fire on his own marshmallow, twice.

They're asking each other questions, quick and silly ones, the sort of inconsequential things they've answered for media outlets countless times.

"Favorite song?" Ilya asks.

"Oh, um. That's a hard one. I like the music my dad listens to. Maybe…*Sitting on the Dock of the Bay?* Otis Redding?"

"Of course you like dad music." Ilya beams. "I want to hear that song."

"You?"

"*Call Me Maybe.*"

"You can't be serious."

"I won't sing it. It will get stuck in our heads forever."

"Did you know she's Canadian?"

"Ah, then she's my favorite Canadian."

Shane bumps his shoulder in protest. "Okay—*don't you dare*, I know that grin. Next question. Dream vacation?"

"Hmm. Bolivia. To see the salt flats."

"That sounds beautiful." Shane pulls his marshmallow from the fire and studies it. "I want to visit Kyoto. In Japan. My mother still has relatives there."

"We'll visit someday," Ilya says, trying not to think about how someday is probably at least a decade from now. It's fine. He can wait.

Shane must be thinking the same thing, because he switches topics. "You never told me your favorite ice cream."

"Hmm?"

"I asked you. During that soda commercial. In Montreal, years ago."

"Ah. Boyfriend Look." Ilya doesn't admit how he can't forget that day, because it was the first time he saw how beautiful Shane's eyes were in the sunlight. He might confess it, given the right moment. He feels he can say anything and everything to Shane now, all the words

that have been piling up through the years, in Russian and English and through touch alone: *you're mine, and you always will be*. He continues, "I remember. You like cookies and cream, which is sooo much less boring than vanilla."

"It's a normal flavor." Shane squishes his marshmallow down.

Ilya smiles. "I lied. I like normal flavor too. Mint chip."

"Huh! I wasn't expecting that." Shane takes a way-too-delicate bite of his S'mores. Ilya finds it cute. He's insane like that.

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't know. Rocky Road. Rum Raisin." There's still so much they don't know about each other, small facts like these, but Ilya's excited to learn everything. They have the rest of their lives to do so. It's what Shane wants, and it's something Ilya can grant. He feels giddy, thinking about how they can text each other these questions anytime. They can video call. Instead of rushing away every time they meet up, they can sometimes lie in bed together, or have a meal together, and just *talk*. Ilya loves fucking Shane, but he also fucking *loves* Shane, and hanging out with him is wonderful too.

"I like most flavors," Ilya admits. "I like ice cream. Boston has lots of good spots. One day we will go, and I will treat you to some JP Licks. Is delicious." They're doing it again. Talking about doing things together in the future. But it's joyful to think about, even if it won't materialize for a while. Ilya has never been a patient person, but being with Shane is changing that. It's also making him a campfire guy. He makes his S'more, ignoring the burns on his marshmallow.

"I'd like that."

"Yes. Ice cream. And then I will JP Lick you."

"That's gross, Ilya."

He smirks around a mouthful of S'mores. "Maybe true." He touches Shane's knee, then skims his fingers up Shane's thigh, which tenses up, appealingly. "Hey."

Shane glances at him, eyebrows raised.

He keeps tracing his fingers up, slipping them into Shane's shorts, as he says, "I just met you. And this is crazy—"

Shane shoves him off the log. The song gets stuck in their head for days.

#

In almost no time, Ilya realizes that his vision of the future doesn't only have Shane. It's got Yuna and David Hollander too, because *of course* it does. Ilya realizes, standing stiffly as Shane pushes through probably the toughest sentences of his life, that they're so *familiar* to

him. Years and years of seeing them at Shane's games has burned their faces into his consciousness.

He doesn't quite understand them. The grounded, effortless love between them makes his heart shake. They make him feel like a kid again. They make it so easy, for him to feel loved. Treasured. *Part of them.*

After their second meal together Yuna corners Ilya (with a bowl of mint chip ice cream! Are they psychic, or does someone share his good taste, or has Shane for some reason told them this useless fact?), and starts demanding his opinion on certain hockey plays from the past season, and she's so meticulous and dead serious about it Ilya uses up all of his mental capacity answering. ("I have friend you will like," he says. "She also hates Matheson.")

On their third meal together, David asks him what it was like growing up playing hockey in Russia, and Ilya gets to tell them honestly: it was so fun. It was messing around on frozen lakes with sticks, for a very long time; going fast, and then faster, because speed was the one advantage they'd never compromise on. Ilya's grateful that his English can convey this much now, even if he has to pause sometimes, or glance at Shane for the right word.

After dinner they all have hot cocoa together. Shane steps away to take a call from Hayden, and somehow Ilya doesn't feel too awkward, being left alone with Yuna and David. He asks about Shane's baby picture on the wall, and David has the brilliant idea to bring out a family photo album.

Shane is predictably mortified when he returns. They're at *Christmas 1998*, which is mostly pictures of Shane missing both front teeth and wearing an elf outfit.

"You're the worst," he says, though it's unclear who he's addressing. Yuna hides a laugh, badly. Shane tries to grab the album away.

"Nooo, don't, Shane," Ilya whines. "Is so cute. You're so cute."

"Give me that!"

"Why are you elf? Who made you elf?"

"It was for a school play or something—hey!"

Ilya grabs Shane around the waist and hauls him onto the couch. He makes it a little rough and comedic, so that neither of them get worked up, because parents. He loops his arm around Shane and drags him close. "Stop fighting. Let me enjoy cute pictures of you. Your parents will send them to me later anyway."

"It's embarrassing," Shane grumbles, but he stops struggling and leans against Ilya, drawing a blanket over their legs.

"You are cutie," Ilya reasserts. He stamps a chaste kiss onto Shane's cheek, and enjoys the rest of the album.

Their fourth meal together is the day before Ilya leaves the cottage. Ilya tells Yuna that she makes the tastiest pasta he's ever had, and that she's beautiful like Shane. Shane elbows him —but he should know better by now, that Ilya's flirting is probably also *genetic*. David puts his hand over his heart, mock hurt. Yuna laughs.

"And you?" David asks. "Who do you get your looks from?"

Ilya's heart skips, like it's stuttering over a record that won't play right anymore. Beneath the table, Shane tucks his hand into Ilya's, running his thumb over Ilya's wrist. He's never done that before, but Ilya likes it.

"Ah. Also my mother," he answers, softer than he means to. "At least the hair."

"We could meet her sometime," Yuna says. "I would like that."

Ilya shakes his head, hoping his smile obscures the way his chest has gone tight. *She would have loved them, too.* "No need," he says. "It is okay."

He can feel Shane's eyes on him. He knows they'll need to tell them sometime soon. But for now, he can't, and thankfully they don't press. David smoothly starts talking about a new coffee shop worth trying at the airport; Yuna asks if he wants more pasta. Ilya's breathing slows. He twines his fingers with Shane's, wondering if it's too soon to think that he isn't orphaned anymore.

#

The end of summer always felt like an exhale to Ilya: a loosened breath, after weeks of restraint, choking back every feeling for his own safety. Russia always made him feel small and broken, but he could power through it because of what was on the other side: his team, his game. And a slow fucking hockey player with beautiful freckles.

It's different, this time. He doesn't want summer to end. He's already delayed his flight as much as possible; he has to go. But he doesn't want to.

He's putting his luggage in the trunk of Shane's awful car when Shane comes around and leans into him. "I won't be able to do this at the airport," Shane says, his voice going wobbly at *airport*. Ilya's heart swells. He pulls Shane in, and Shane tucks his face into Ilya's shoulder and breathes out.

"I will be back next summer," Ilya says, as he cups the back of Shane's neck, kneading the warm skin there. "If you'll have me."

"Of course."

"And again the summer after, and the summer after that one. For the rest of my life I will come when you want me to. And someday we can be here in fall, winter, spring, anytime. And you can kiss me at the airport too, if you want."

"I do want."

It’s not like Ilya knows what the future will hold, but for now, this is enough. He can survive anything, knowing the cottage will be waiting for him.

Shane’s got tears suspended in his eyes, but he’s not letting them fall. Ilya almost can’t believe this is his archrival. In Ilya’s arms, Shane seems so fragile. It reminds Ilya of his mother. But he knows how strong she was, at her core, and Shane is just like that.

She always held Ilya up, held him together, her fingers light over his crucifix. “I pray to God you’ll love someone as much as I love you, Ilyusha,” she whispered. “And that you find joy together, forever.”

Ilya kisses the top of Shane’s head. “Don’t be sad, love. Please. I’ll do anything. Tell me, what can I do?”

“Nothing,” Shane answers, against his mouth. “Nothing. You already make me so happy.”

Ilya freezes. Shane senses this, and pulls back. He can't know what those words mean to Ilya, but he reaches out and holds Ilya's face, his thumbs resting on Ilya's cheekbones. He smiles, and his smile is a small miracle, a burst of warmth in Ilya's chest.

Ilya puts his hands over Shane's. “You’re sure?”

Shane nods. Ilya kisses him again, and realizes that this, too, is hockey now: the reason they’re together. A life he doesn’t have to face alone. A path through winter, into joy.

End Notes

1. I wrote this because I wanted more Ilya POV, and then realized as I started that it is actually so so fucking hard, lol.

2. Anyone else here from the IwaOi --> Zosan --> Hollanov pipeline?

3. Do I have more fic for this fandom? Maybe! I'd like to write a demisexual Shane Hollander fic, and maybe a rivals-in-another-context-AU, but we'll see what time allows.

4. Shout-out to everyone else using their meager holiday time to produce Heated Rivalry content. I am in awe at the collective wildness of this fandom, it has given me so much queer joy.

This story can be retweeted here. Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed. Comments are always greatly appreciated.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!