

Luchik, Darling

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Luchik, Darling

by [chaentics](#)

Summary

Ilya used to not miss anything when he returned to Moscow during the off-season. He was standing in a convenience store, some July day in 2015, flipping through the newsstand, when it hit him that he didn't particularly care about anything going on there. He was counting down the days before he could get on his flight back to Boston, as if there was anything there to greet him on his return. Maybe it wasn't Boston he was missing. The realization is not welcome.

“Do you think you will stay in Boston?” Shane asks, stroking Ilya's upper arm. His touch is soft. Ilya wants it endlessly.

Notes

just got back from my home country with the understanding time moves without me and people will age as i do. anyway. this one's for you, kris. #soulbonded. thank you to velvet for the twice beta.

02/16/26. okay so i have edited this fic a bit. don't hit me.

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

“Oh,” Shane Hollander says, eyes on the view.

Vegas glimmers below them.

Ilya almost asks him to look properly, to turn his face back to Ilya.

Do you understand, Hollander? Ilya wants to ask. My summers are not sunshine and family dinners. Are not family board game nights or picnics or whatever the fuck you and your parents get up to. There’s a plane taking me straight back home to my least favorite place, with people who hate me while they beg me for money. Do you get it? But he can’t tell Shane Hollander that. Golden number twenty-four. Rookie of the Year with his picture-perfect family, his parents who sit at every game, who probably call him for reasons other than money. Like to tell him that they love him and miss him. Who blow on scratched knees. This is simply one of the numerous things that will eventually drive them apart. Ilya hopes that it happens sooner rather than later.

Something to prevent the impending wreck they are hurdling toward.

And it’s not a form of fucked-up revenge when Ilya kisses him on that rooftop. Has nothing to do with wanting to put the words Ilya wants to hear right on Shane’s tongue. It’s just desperation. The same kind of desperation that Ilya feels when he lies in bed later, alone, and thinks of how he wasted their last evening together before the next season. How even thinking it is *wasted* is dangerous. He turns his phone off, ignoring the half-hearted condolences (*Stay humble, Roz! You’re our favorite!*) and resists the urge to text Hollander, who is surely off with his family and team now to continue the celebrations. Or perhaps he is cozying up at home, much like Ilya, desperately hoping for a calm evening to rest off the buzz he was so clearly riding up on the roof.

Must feel good, Ilya thinks, to be so easy to love.

It’s 2017, and Ilya is reveling in the afterglow of his company. The sun is cold this early in the morning. It is near the only thing Ilya enjoys about Canada before the world wakes: he can close his eyes, arms bare to the winter winds, smoke rising in wisps from the cig perched between his lips, and Russia is only as far away as his open eyes.

He misses her only until the shadows breaking from within his hotel bedroom move, and he knows that inside, Shane must be stirring. And as he does, Russia moves from its illusionary place in Ilya’s frantic, humming brain to the other side of the world, perfectly at odds with him. With everything he wants.

Instead, everything he wants is tucked into crisp hotel bedsheets and a sheen of sweat Ilya contemplates licking off once he's back inside the bedroom. He flicks his cigarette.

Some decades from now, they won't have this: the first frost of February, the biting cold on their cheeks, the anticipation rattling in their guts, hot and frantic like a second pulse. They're going to be old. They're going to have to find something to bring them together that isn't the ice, isn't infatuation.

Shane seems to think it will be enough to hold their hearts. That the understanding of what they are, even if no one else knows, can sustain them.

But it is one thing for Shane to desire him, and an entirely different thing to have faith that the world will let him act on it. Ilya doesn't have much faith in anything these days.

Last night, father called again—*Where is my wife, Ilya? Can you tell her that my suit must be ironed out before tomorrow's dinner? She hasn't come back from her walk*—and his gruff voice sounded frail. Thin. Like even he was aware that something was awry, even if he could not figure it out. Ilya walked him through the conversation, leaving his mother's name out of it. Let my mother rest, Father, Ilya almost says. You are seeking her out even now. Has she not done enough for you? And they go question for question until Grigori corrects himself: *Polina, Polina, Polina, where is Polina?* As if Ilya would somehow know where she's at since she fled to that fancy apartment while his father disappears in Ilya's childhood home, split between past and present.

Ilya plucks the cig off his lip. He rotates it between two fingers, flicking a waft of embers off, watching them trickle down the edge of the balcony. Right below his collarbones, the gold cross catches the gleam of the cigarette, the sun. A car alarm goes off. Other noise begins to rise up like steam.

He retreats inside when his cigarette burns to the filter, and it is more morning than night. If it snows, perhaps the flights will all get delayed, and then Shane might be convinced to stay a little longer. Another night. Ilya reaches for the wide curtains to seal them off from the world again, but there is a sliver of light where they don't quite reach.

Then, before he can turn around, Shane's fingers push up the hem of Ilya's tank top. Shane's forehead presses against the back of his head, his breath on Ilya's neck before his lips follow in a dry kiss. It is tender in a way Ilya's body wants to both lean into and ignore.

Continuing upward, Shane's palm follows Ilya's spine, and Ilya's chest fills with heat. As if Shane's presence radiates warmth. His fingers prickly with an insistent need to touch. Perhaps more so because Shane is pushing up against him from behind with the balcony door still ajar. At least to Shane, this must be dangerously exposed.

To Ilya, it is not quite public enough. He would fuck Shane with the windows and doors open if he was allowed. Shane's breath grows damp on Ilya's skin, his tongue peeking forth between his teeth to touch Ilya's neck.

Ilya lifts one arm and turns so that he can slide his hand over Shane's shoulders, slipping it down to cup Shane's upper arm and squeeze it.

“Morning,” he says.

Shane is quiet. Maybe barely awake. His eyes are dazed.

He is glorious, anyway. Ilya wants to tell him this, but doesn’t know how, really. Says instead, “You look very pretty in morning sun, Hollander,” and watches Shane’s eyes flicker with interest as the light falls on his face through the crack in the curtains. His hand on Ilya’s neck; his fingers gripping curly hair; his mouth on Ilya’s, hard and insistent, licking his shiny row of mostly-not-real teeth.

Ilya pants into Shane’s kiss, hardening in his underwear. How much time before he must be downstairs? Not enough. Perhaps he could smash every clock in the room and convince Shane that they had more.

This is his fantasy: a full day together. And the one following that. Another one right after. Maybe even a whole fucking week.

So, in an attempt to keep Shane’s focus on himself rather than the ticking-away time, he brings his lips to Shane’s neck, his collarbones, the dip down his chest, the hard ridges of muscle, over his stomach down to the waistband of his boxers. Kisses him through his underwear, eyes up, tongue soaking the fabric. His teeth graze the soft, sensitive skin on the inside of Shane’s thighs.

And when he sucks Shane’s cock, he makes sure it’s wet and sloppy, loud. Takes Shane’s hands and drags them to his head so that Shane’s tense fingers and uncertainty can instead find great relief by tugging on Ilya’s hair until his scalp hurts.

He asks Shane from that perfect place on his knees, “Do you want me to fuck you?”

For a second, he has his fantasy.

Shane stares back at him, eyes hazy and lips glossy from spit, and it’s nothing if not desperate when he nods. “Fuck me.”

When the hour is up and Shane can’t be convinced to shower together (“*It won’t be a shower!*”), Ilya brews himself a cup of terrible instant coffee from the hotel’s drink bar and tries to shift the sad-weird longing into excitement. Confidence. Something he can work with. He must seem pretty fucking out of it, though, because when Shane steals his mug straight out of his hands, he doesn’t notice until Shane has already emptied it.

Shane grins at him, licking his bottom lip for that last drop of coffee. When Ilya doesn’t do anything but reach out to take the mug back, Shane furrows his brow. His grin thins.

“Hey, are you alright?” he asks.

Ilya bares his teeth in what he hopes is a really sexy and *not* stressed smile, because he doesn’t want Shane to walk out this door and not see him for God-knows-how-long with this as his last memory. He understands Shane well enough to know what that would do to him. And, after all, Ilya doesn’t get stressed about hockey. Hockey is exciting! It is only ever fun,

because Ilya is great at hockey which means winning, often, and winning is never boring. Surely.

“Just picturing ways to embarrass you on the ice, Hollander,” Ilya says, tapping his forehead with his finger. “Is very good, you know? Mental practice. I read it on the internet.”

“Yeah, okay,” Shane says with a snort. “And next time we meet, you’ll tell me you won because you pictured it in your head. Whatever works for you.”

Ilya shrugs one shoulder, raising his brows. “Hm.”

He is spinning a phrase on his tongue, hoping to rile Shane up just a little more so that he leaves Ilya’s hotel room a bit bothered. Semi-hard even. But he is distracted by the fact that Shane’s not wearing pants, and he is most definitely *not* in the same underwear he was in earlier. He stares hard enough that Shane waves his fingers in front of Ilya’s face.

“You already had that for breakfast,” Shane says, and this time Ilya can’t help but grin back.

“I think you are funnier after orgasm. Maybe your boring is not genetic but because you have brain that is in knots until your dick pops,” Ilya tells him, reaching out to snap the elastic band of Shane’s *very* luxurious looking, dark gray underwear. He smooths his palm up Shane’s hip, thumb following the line down to his crotch. It would be so easy to slide his hand a bit further down again, just one more... “I did not know you like this brand.”

“I don’t,” Shane says, wrapping his fingers around Ilya’s wrist. “They’re yours.”

Ah.

Ilya hooks his finger in the elastic band, holding on. He wets his lips. “Hollander, I will bend you over this sofa and fuck you if you do not leave now, I will make sure you feel my cock in you for entire game. Even on the bench, you will sit in your seat and wriggle and remember how I filled you up.”

For a moment, Ilya believes that Shane will stay; he's wavering, a heady look in his eyes as he peers up at Ilya through his stupid, long, pretty lashes with his dark eyes. Like he’s really contemplating letting himself be taken right there, as if it isn’t the dumbest fucking idea ever knowing Shane has to be out of the hotel in thirty minutes flat. But they've done stupid shit before. Maybe Shane's willing to take another stab at it.

“*Hollander*,” Ilya warns, again. It doesn't sound all that convincing. He knows this.

“Not helping,” Shane says. “Turn around and don’t look at me until I leave or I *won’t*.”

“Okay. Okay, fine. I am not looking.” Ilya raises his hands defensively and turns around, listening to Shane rummaging around while finally getting dressed.

He should make himself a new coffee. Maybe take a shower. Smoke another cigarette with Shane out the door, so he can’t complain about the taste or any of the other numerous fucking things always prickling Shane's brain. He's always feeding Ilya little facts, as if he can slowly

but steadily alter Ilya's habits. Ilya doesn't mind letting him try. It won't make him toss his Marlboros out, though.

He lowers his hands only when Shane returns, bag flung over his shoulder, and taps Ilya on his back. "See you... soon?"

Ilya hates how they never really know. He doesn't tell Shane that, though. It's so much easier to take Shane's face into his hands and kiss him until they have to pull apart to breathe. Shane's bottom lip is plump and glossed from Ilya's tongue, and he wants to keep Shane there, gnaw on him a bit until he aches and has to spend the rest of his day remembering who did it.

"Sure. Soon," he tells Shane, and holds the door for him after Shane has assured himself enough times that no one is waiting to catch him outside. "Good luck. Not that you need luck against players who are not me."

Shane flips him off. Ilya's heart leaves with him.

And then he's alone again.

Ilya has found, since he began playing hockey in America, that Moscow does not remain like stagnant water while he is away. After that first season in Boston, he returned to a Moscow entirely identical to the one he left. Same stores, same people, same brands of chocolate wafers on the shelves. Now, it is a patchwork of old-new. The hairdresser he used to go to as a kid has changed names, but the owner is the same. Someone runs a second-hand music shop on the corner where Ilya used to sit and loiter when he didn't want to go home. He doesn't recognize any of the music playing on the taxi radio. At times he is convinced the smell of the buildings have changed. The air shifting. Occasionally, in a drunken haze, he's not entirely sure he's in the same place. His father grows old. Each year, his hair thins; his eyes become less steady. Somehow, he is more present and less, at the same time. He speaks about Ilya's childhood as if he was there. Ilya stops himself from correcting him after the third try.

It is a special kind of grief to return to Russia as a foreigner, Ilya thinks. To know he is the only person in the world who considers himself a stranger to his country.

Summer, 2011; Ilya arrives at Sheremetyevo International Airport. His father picks him up outside. They do not speak on the drive home. Everything is as it has always been. Summer, 2012; Ilya takes a cab to his pristine apartment and doesn't bother unpacking with how full his closet is. *Jane (1)*. When passing by his old hockey rink, the white paint is flaking off the building.

Everything is as it has always been. Summer, 2013; Svetlana greets him in her new car. The view from the balcony of his apartment is familiar, even with the cranes jutting out against the shadow of the buildings. *Jane (1)*. He watches the American morning news over breakfast before his runs, shoveling muesli into his mouth. His childhood favorite restaurant has moved locations sometime in the recent months. Everything is as it has always been. Summer, 2014; The weather is hotter than expected.

He thinks about going back to Boston early. Knows he has no excuse to. His father talks to him about hockey games of Ilya's, back when he was a kid and more desperate. Less polished. Ilya sits across from him, silent. Remembers only his mother in the stands.

He buys cigarettes at a corner store that still recognizes him from high school. *Jane (2)* A new road cuts through the city, and Svetlana brings him to her new favorite bar. That old restaurant has closed, and a café with an American-sounding name has taken its place. Everything is as it has always been. Alexei comes home only to fight. Ilya reorganizes his father's medicine cabinet in the aftermath. Summer, 2015; A giant LED led screen advertises a new movie, but the cinema logo has changed. English words are bolded amidst the Russian. *Jane (1)* The corner store has closed and he is forced to buy cigarettes elsewhere. His old hockey rink is freshly painted. Everything is mostly as it has always been.

He thinks about going home. His mouth grows sour with guilt. When he calls Hollander, he doesn't pick up. The call back comes when Ilya is well into sleep.

Summer, 2016; The moment he lands: *Jane (1)* He takes a wrong turn during his morning run and ends up somewhere he's never been. *Jane (3)* Every morning, he looks at his phone before he gets out of bed. *Jane (2)*. He splashes cold water on his face. He buys a new shirt and converts the price from rubles to dollars while thumbing the price tag. He buys his cigarettes in Russian and stands outside, under Moscow sky, staring at Moscow buildings and reading news about celebrities he has never heard of. His lighter has the Boston Raiders logo on it and barely works.

Everything is not as it has always been, except for Svetlana, who is standing in his kitchen, leaning toward him.

"Let's go drinking," she says, and because Ilya is Ilya, he has no reason to say no. "Come on. Let's go dancing, you can't just run laps in the park and then sit in your apartment all day. This is deranged behavior."

She doesn't use the word *boring*, but the look she gives him as she leans over his marble counter top might as well be telling him so. Ilya Rozanov? *Boring?*

"It takes a lot of work to be the best in the world," he tells her while gesturing around the apartment with one hand, eyebrows raised, and she simply rolls her eyes. "What? You have something to say about my play?"

She is right, of course. Ilya is as dazzling today as the withering plant in his bedroom, which is a problem. He is in a slump. He is glued to his stupid fucking phone and picking at himself like a restless animal. The same stupid phone buzzes. Svetlana and Ilya turn to it at the same time, and Ilya reaches for it before he can even think twice. *Jane (1)*. Their eyes meet,

Svetlana peering back at him with a knowing expression, and Ilya slowly puts his phone back down without looking at the message. This is wrong, Ilya thinks. This is a sort of wrongness, for him to feel a relief deep into the pit of his stomach over a text message. Ilya doesn't give a fuck about texts or hookups or *relief*.

He swallows dryly. This is an easy, practiced smile. An expensive smile.

"Okay, let's go to your party and get fucking drunk and dance and have fun," he agrees. "Anything you want."

He expects her to smile back at him. She doesn't.

"You're not going to answer lovely Jane? Not very gentleman-like of you." A pause. "I am not going to stop you from texting your... friend. If you don't want to come with me, I won't make you. You can sit and rot here while I enjoy myself alone, as I am perfectly capable of. I *hate* being placated."

Ilya reaches for her hand. He runs his fingers up the back of her hand so that he can squeeze her wrist. Her skin is soft. "Sveta, it is always my greatest honor to accompany you." He brings her hand to his mouth, kisses it sweetly.

Something in her eyes tells Ilya that she doesn't believe him at all, but she doesn't push back. Instead tells him, "Put on that black tank top I bought for you. I can't deal with this pathetic look. I am keeping you around as eye candy, not as a downer. The least you can do is look hot."

Ilya releases her hand and spreads his arms out in feigned shock. "*Hot?* I am always hot!"

"But not the *hottest*," Svetlana says, soothing his feelings with an appreciative look down his chest.. "According to the *Cosmopolitan's* rankings last year. Better luck this year, perhaps. I wouldn't expect anything as long as Shane Hollander is also a contender, though."

"Why are you reading that shit? You have eyes! Every year they put that garbage list out and I'm forced to hear about it! And don't tell me about Hollander, I know about Hollander." He reaches for the vodka. "What do I need to do to fix this? Pose nude on social media? An underwear ad? I will get one. Call my agent."

"Oh, sweetheart, don't let it get to you." Svetlana slides him another cold shot glass. "Tonight, you are the most desirable man in Moscow. Now go change."

Ilya downs his shot. He's not entirely sure he gives a fuck about being wanted by all of Moscow, but perhaps it can tilt the scales a bit.

And he is *desirable*, he knows. He's not fucking stupid. Like at the cramped bar-slash-club Svetlana has brought him to, where there is a beautiful woman with her hands sliding up his stomach, over his pecs, testing the skin of his bare shoulders with her long nails. When he drags his nose up the slope of her jaw, her dark hair brushes against his face, the smell of her fruity perfume mixing with sweat. There are bodies on bodies. His edges pushed into

someone else's. She puts one hand on the waistband of his jeans, peering up at him, her face freckled, eyes wide and pale like silver.

It feels nice to be touched again. Without hockey and the constant exercise and exhaustion, Ilya finds his own body coiling itself tight, constantly trying to connect with the world around it. Like it needs a reminder that Ilya fits. That his air is the same as everyone else's. That to hold him is a pleasure.

At the club, Ilya Rozanov is easy to love, because he is barely anyone. Just hot. Available.

Easy work to slide onto the dancefloor, even easier when he sheds his jacket, when he takes another drink. Physicality is just one more language.

Like any number of the nameless women before her, this one lines her hips up with Ilya's, her fingertips moving up to toy with the hem of his tank. He could ask for it, her name. Could give her some room to exist in his world, if only for an evening. Ilya can't make out what she says when she leans in to brush her lips over his ear, only feels the vibrations of her words against his skin. Enough to send a shiver down his spine as she spreads her fingers over his lower back. He tells her that she smells nice and she laughs, but the sound is swallowed up by the music that rattles through the air. It's good. It's good *enough*. By the time he has even thought so, Ilya knows it's too late. How pathetic would he be to bring a woman home for a *good enough* fuck? A total disgrace. So he wraps his fingers around her wrist and brings her arm around his neck, mouthing down the line of her throat, and thinks of everything except Shane Hollander.

But Ilya doesn't bring her home. He gets in a cab and slumps into the worn backseat and finds himself upset that he does not smell like Shane's oaky body wash but instead like Sergio Nero's *Lost Paradise Seduction*.

The day after, Ilya runs himself sweaty under the sun and does his best to avoid mostly everyone he knows, Svetlana included. Which he knows is a terrible thing to do, especially after leaving early without an explanation. His shirt sticks to his back from the sweat. Stray curls are pressed flat against his forehead, his hair soaked to the roots. *Jane (1)*. Ilya remembers Svetlana's face back in his apartment when his phone had gone off, then her gentle hand on his at the party as his face was lit up by the screen. *Jane (2)*. He keeps his phone in his pocket, but only until he's stumbled back through his front door. *Jane (3)*. Fucking Shane Hollander.

He's reading the messages before he can think about it twice. *How's Moscow?*

Ilya runs a finger along his gold chain necklace down to his collarbones. He pauses.

The photo he takes isn't the best one, but it shows just enough of his sweat-stained shirt and bare skin to set Hollander off, he knows, especially with his hand pushing the hem of the shirt up to show off his abs. *Too hot. Wish I had help to take this off.*

Silence.

I think you're perfectly capable of taking that off on your own.

Ilya cackles, pulls his shirt off his head, and moves toward the bathroom.

I did. Want proof?

Summer in Moscow is slow, that year. Ilya doesn't allow himself to think about why.

Yes.

He doesn't think about why Hollander's eagerness pleases him, either.

There are several things that Ilya remembers vividly about the 2008 World Junior Hockey Championships. How fucking good it felt to win, for once. Shane Hollander's awkward shuffling round when he told Ilya not to smoke outside the rink, second.

Ilya's father had signed off on whatever forms were needed; beyond that, he was nowhere to be seen. His absence, however, did not mean that Ilya got away with slacking off. That was Grigori's favorite new phrase. *You are slacking off.* Go for a run. Are you going to eat that garbage? If you have time to go downtown with your friends, you have time for another three hours at the rink. The phone calls come like clockwork. Morning, Moscow time, 8 a.m. sharp, only on days when Russia played. During the calls his father didn't ask for anything beyond the game score, and how much of the victory could be attributed to Ilya, specifically. Probably scouring for early gold stars to bring up around his business friends later. Or to mention to the scouts that had begun sitting in on his practices back in Moscow.

So Ilya, like most of the junior players not from North America, shows up in Saskatchewan with nothing but his bag of gear and an attitude. After Hollander takes off, Ilya sneaks back to the Russia team. He knows that it wasn't windy enough outside to completely rid himself of the scent of smoke, so he crosses his fingers and hopes his coach will let him off the hook. Not that he ever does. Ilya runs five extra laps for warmups later that day, and his coach searches his bag for the cigarette packs, and then tosses them in the trash.

Fine. Whatever. Ilya's not going to keel over and die. He's just going to be in a shit mood for the rest of the championships, and according to his teammates, it's not like he's putting smiles on their faces, anyway. After they're done with practice, he stays behind at the rink to watch the Canada team.

Well, he stays behind to watch Shane Hollander.

Ilya chews the stick of minty gum his coach forced into his hand while Hollander glides effortlessly across the ice. He's fast. He's precise. And, above all else, his team seems to like him. Ilya rubs his gum against the roof of his mouth and sinks deeper into the plastic spectator seat. At some point, Hollander looks in his direction, and Ilya considers raising his hand to wave, if only to throw the guy off his rhythm. But before he can make up his mind, Hollander has already turned away, heading toward the group huddle at the center of the ice.

Ilya can't pick up on anything their coach is saying, but it doesn't matter much. Ilya gets it, anyway: Shane Hollander is a fucking prodigy.

Or, in the words of his father, Shane Hollander is *disciplined*.

Ilya spits the gum out in the trash on his way out and shoves his hands into his pockets. On the way out, he catches a glimpse of the same man and woman he'd spotted earlier during Russia's practice. He assumes they are Hollander's parents. They're both wearing ugly scarves with Canada's colors on them, and the woman looks just like Hollander. She's got the same dark eyes and crinkly smile. Ilya slows down a bit, pausing by the doors to the rink, and catches Hollander skating by, waving at his parents. His mother throws up both of her thumbs, and while Ilya can't make out much of Hollander's face from behind the visor, he sees a flash of teeth.

Must be nice, Ilya thinks. He tries to imagine his own father there, watching his every move, and immediately scratches that thought.

Nothing would be more nightmarish than Grigori Rozanov in the stands, able to nitpick every little fucking shot he takes. Ilya gets plenty of that on the home front. The man next to Hollander's mother makes eye contact with Ilya, and then he is leaning in to whisper something in the woman's ear, and she turns, too, and Ilya hurries out before they can get a good look at him. Ilya doesn't need Hollander to think he's there because he's scared Russia is going to lose. As if Hollander will need any help blowing his ego up: the fucking press is doing an amazing job at it, already.

Ilya doesn't need any media blast reminder about all the reasons Canada's shining star is the one to watch. He's perfectly aware of all the things that divide them. And perfectly aware, as he leans forward to face Hollander across the center line, that out of the two of them, he is going to play better.

Shane Hollander is, undoubtedly, a greater hockey player than Ilya is. But he is predictable; he has sportsmanship. Ilya can see it in his eyes—Hollander *cannot* stop thinking. Can't, for just a few minutes, let the adrenaline take him places that no amount of preparation or *discipline* can.

Like the gold spot on the podium.

His father's call goes about as well as it can: no "good job" or "congratulations," but Ilya doesn't really need those. He beat Canada at home, and the look when he shook Shane Hollander's face is almost, *almost* as sweet as when he raises the gold medal up for a victory photo, and his eyes catch on Hollander's. Again, the visor doesn't do much but obscure, but he can feel Hollander's smoldering gaze in the pit of his stomach. And Ilya knows it's going to be the two of them, over and over, until they're worn to the bone. Hollander had said that next year, in Ottawa, he's going to win, and Ilya is happy to let him believe that. It won't change the fact that between the two of them, Ilya is the more desperate one.

And it doesn't matter that when Ilya steps off the ice, Hollander is hugging his parents off to the side. His mother is squeezing his cheeks, right where his freckles are, and his father is

patting him on the arm and, as upset as Hollander looks, there's a slight curl to the end of his mouth.

None of that matters at all when Ilya is on a plane back to Moscow, gold medal stuffed into his bag. Another one for the shelf: the only thing of Ilya's on display in his childhood home.

He's eleven when his left front tooth is knocked clean out of his mouth by some snot-nosed asshole with a vengeance complex. The kids' hockey school had split them up into teams that morning, and by lunchtime Ilya had racked up enough goals to get on someone's nerves. More than one, probably, but the boy staring down at him now was clearly the only one desperate enough to soothe his bruised ego to do something about it.

It takes Ilya a second to push himself back up, gums throbbing and head ringing, feeling like his brain is bouncing from temple to temple. Then he spits the boy right in the face, blood and all, his front tooth lying on the ice by his feet. When Ilya and the boy are both sent home early, Ilya makes sure to walk the long way. It's a Wednesday, which means it's the one of the few days of the week his father has dinner at home with him and his mother. He's probably already there. And normally, Ilya would saunter right home, if only to act as another body in the room. To, in a way, maybe dampen the sound of his father's voice as it rises, little by little, until he is screaming.

It's always fucking something. He'll probably find a way to blame his mom for Ilya's missing tooth, even if she hadn't even been at the rink that day. Then it'll be something about money, or how the food tastes bad, or how the house is dirty, or how his laundry has a wrinkle on it somewhere. His mouth still hurts, but the bleeding has stopped. The taste in his mouth won't go away, though, so he digs through his gym bag for the chocolate wafer candies his mother had packed for him over a week ago. He'd mostly used them to trade with the other boys, but now he chews on the little chocolate piece as if it were going to magically regrow his tooth for him. The wafer bits sting with each bite.

After wasting half an hour wandering around the residential blocks he finally heads home.

His father sees the missing tooth, cusses, and Ilya does his best to lick his teeth clean so he won't also see he's been eating candy. He considers lying about being home this early, too, but he doesn't doubt they've already called his father to inform him of what happened.

Grigori doesn't ask Ilya if he's in pain. He says, "Being tripped on ice is your own failing. You should have avoided it. Did you at least score afterward?"

Ilya looks to the side. His mouth doesn't taste like chocolate anymore, so he tells his father, "Yes."

Grigori nods. From behind his father's figure, Ilya's mother is hovering. She has schooled her face into perfect neutrality, but Ilya knows what her restless anxiousness looks like. It's all in her eyes, how they lose focus.

"Good. Tomorrow, you will play better. And none of this nonsense." His father sits back down at the dining table. He is already reaching for the newspaper when he uses his other hand to gesture toward Ilya and tells Irina, "Set up a time with the dentist. Only to make sure it will not cause him problems."

Ilya's mother makes him rinse his mouth with antiseptic. They don't say a word to each other, but she rubs his cheek over and over, smiling with her lips stretched thin. She looks so tired, Ilya thinks.

"Good?" she asks, as if that's all she can muster tonight. Father must've already went at her today.

Or maybe, like Ilya, she's just wearing thin.

"Good," Ilya promises, and she pats his cheek one last time before ushering him out of the bathroom.

He goes to bed early, leaving the door slightly ajar. It's not that he wants to listen when they fight, but just in case—in case it ever gets really, really bad. Worse. Then the voices would wake him, he hopes, and he could rush out there. Ilya closes his eyes and relives the game, the stick shaft smacking him right in the face, the ringing, the ringing, the ringing. The cold ice on his back, even through all the clothing. He never wants to feel that way again, but he knows he will.

The day after, before they even make it onto the rink, he grabs the boy by his collar and they stare at each other, all of Ilya's curses on the curl of his tongue. He doesn't say any of them, just loosens his grip.

Ilya grins wide, making sure to show off the gap in his teeth. "Better work on your aim if you don't wanna eat shit next time. Not that they need you to win."

And it's enough for the boy to crash into him during their first game, trying to send Ilya flying into the boards. But he's so obvious about it. He can't keep his eyes off Ilya even when the puck is elsewhere, his knees angled toward him, ready to pounce. Ilya lets him barrel into the boards on his own. The boy doesn't lose any of his own teeth, but his ankle is so swollen he can't get it back into his skates after the coaches look at it, and he's sent home. Again.

When he jumps out of the rink on one foot, held up by two older players, Ilya makes sure to wave at him. Father's gone that evening. So is Alexei. It is about as close to peaceful as the house ever gets, so Ilya makes sure he sits on the sofa with his mother until it is way past his bedtime. She doesn't send him up even then, instead brews him tea and checks his teeth again, as if suddenly he will begin to spit them out one-by-one. The moon rises early this time of year, white and full. Ilya's first fake tooth is just as shiny, and sometimes he pops it out with his tongue just for fun. Only not around his mom, whose face drops whenever she sees the gap in his teeth.

Ilya doesn't really get it—by the time he's playing professionally, he's going to be losing more of them, anyway. But he keeps the denture on during dinner, even if it's annoying to eat with.

“Are you having fun?” his mother asks him when it is only the two of them.

And Ilya thinks of the ice cutting against his skates, the air parting for his body at the highest speed, the weight of a win, the painted metal trophies on a shelf in his room and the medals, his mother on the other side of the boards, waving. He thinks of how she smiles back at him when he raises his hand after a goal. Her gentle hand on his shoulder after the game as they wander home together. Her golden cross around her neck.

Ilya says, while stuffing his mouth full of dry chicken, “Winning's always fun.”

She has photos of him at every tournament he's ever been in. They're nestled into the mosaic of his father's official portraits and him shaking hands with people who Ilya know are important but couldn't care less about. His parents' wedding photo is smaller than most of them. Even Ilya's first headshot in his hockey gear takes up more space. One time, Ilya watched his mother nudge her fingers behind the frame of the wedding photo, as if she was about to take it down. Then she touches her cross necklace, closes her eyes, and murmurs something he can't hear.

He waits, dressed in the nice clothes his father got him just for church. It's about the spectacle. They can't show up looking however if they're meant to be Grigori Rozanov's family. Before they leave, his mother bends down a bit to fix the collar of his shirt, even though it has been so pristinely washed and folded that Ilya thinks his mother must be imagining wrinkles where there are none. She's only a little taller than him now, with the seven centimeters he's grown this year alone.

“So handsome, sunshine,” she says, patting him on the chest. His blond hair doesn't have its summer gold this time of year, but it doesn't stop her from calling him that.

In the pews, Ilya folds his hands together, forehead to his thumbs, and prays.

He imagines an empty house for his mother, devoid even of him. Maybe that would be easiest, for her, to not have to see his father in his eyes or in how easy it is for him to slam his opponents on the ice, his sturdy shoulders and broad jaw as age comes for him. She calls him her boy. Ilya wonders how long it will last before he is more his father than he is her son. He hopes that day never arrives. That there will never be a morning he looks into the mirror and has lost her dimpled chin and crooked smile. Dear God, he thinks, if you give a fuck about us, please give my father something to love, even if it's not mom or me.

Maybe then he'd understand.

“Rozanov!”

The barista slides the ceramic cup over from the other side of the counter. He’s the same guy working the morning shift as most other days, probably only a few years younger than Ilya himself. Ilya should ask for his name one of these days, if only because it makes him feel like an asshole to come so often and have no clue who any of these people are.

Nowadays, the moment any of the staff sees Ilya set foot in the small café, he is already prepping the espresso. Ilya can’t complain—he likes his morning coffee, and he only ever orders one thing.

In the milk froth, a wonky but heartfelt 81 is written. Ilya’s phone buzzes in his back pocket. Buzzes. Buzzes. Buzzes.

“Thank you,” Ilya says, taking his cappuccino. He gestures at the numbers. “Very nice.”

“Keep playing awesome, okay? Looking forward to the next game!” The guy throws him two thumbs up, flashing a bright smile. “My family got seasonal tickets!”

Ilya’s not really sure how to respond, but he nods, smiling back, and lifts his cup in a little toast before retreating to the corner of the café. His phone continues to vibrate.

When he first moved to Boston, Ilya had spent an absurd amount of money on a fancy espresso machine that had all the bells and whistles: bean grinder, milk frother, pulling double-shots. He discovered immediately that the noise it made whenever he used it was unbearable, and the coffee he made sucked. He pawned it off to someone else for close to no money, and instead began driving into town to visit the café just a short walk from the rink, even on his days off.

Now he’s walked himself into a habit he can’t seem to shake. It’s just him, his expensive (and delicious) cappuccino, and the rush of people walking past the wide glass windows. Ilya sits there for an hour, watching people pass, ignoring the text messages on his phone until his cup is empty.

It’s father.

Ilya doesn’t want to take this phone call here, in public. Even if he doubts there are any Russian speakers around eager to spill his family secret for national gossip, Ilya understands that as long as he is not at home, he is never truly alone.

Someone will take a photo and then suddenly the slope of his shoulder, his tense posture, his downturned mouth—anything will be up for discussion. Is he upset? What is making Ilya Rozanov so pissed off? Was the coffee that bad? Did he find out Shane Hollander scored twice last night, beating Rozanov out yet again? Let us speculate wildly!

Ilya presses the red *reject phone call* button and then wraps his scarf around his neck, raising his hand in a wordless goodbye when he passes the barista. He flees back to his shiny car in his stupid American town. The engine rumbles into action, the seats heat up.

He takes a deep breath. Curls one hand around the steering wheel. Calls his father back.

“Papa,” Ilya says. “I am sorry, I was training. What do you need?”

It is easier to start with an apology; it is simply the first in a long list of them.

“Ilya.” Grigori’s voice sparks through the phone. Bristling noise drowns out what his father says next before the audio stabilizes again. *“Ilya, where are you? It is afternoon, already. You were not at hockey practice.”*

“Papa,” Ilya repeats. “I am in Boston, remember? I live in Boston now. In America.”

The line goes quiet. Ahead of him, snow begins to swirl over the roads and through the air and everything is white and endless and not-home and home at the same time, is familiar and new.

“America? Why would you be in America?” Father’s voice sounds younger, somehow, stripped of everything but confusion. He doesn’t even seem angry. He seems so nothing, so stranger.

But it’s easier like this. Like taking a phone call from a lost man who has no bearing on Ilya’s peace.

“I will tell you about it later, okay?” Ilya says, squeezing the steering wheel so tight his nails burrow into his skin. “Did you eat dinner? Should I call Alexei? He will be there soon, I promise. I am going to call him right now.”

Fucking Alexei. Fucking fucking *shit*.

“I am hanging up now. Are you at home?”

“Yes, I am watching TV. When is dinner? Are you coming?”

“Not today. But I will come home soon and have dinner with you, I promise. But I am going to hang up now and call Alexei, and he will be there in a minute. Is that okay?”

The snow keeps falling. Ilya waits for the *beep* of his father disconnecting from the call before pulling up Alexei’s number. He doesn’t even drive into the garage, just swerves into his driveway and leaves the car running while he is sent to voicemail. And then he calls again. If Alexei’s going to be a fucking dick about this, then so can Ilya. Can be worse, even, relentlessly annoying, just like when they were kids. Calls again. He slams the door to his house open, kicks his shoes off. Calls again. Rips his fridge door open to find a Coke. Calls again. And calls, calls, calls—

“I am working!”

It’s not a relief to hear Alexei’s voice. It just pisses Ilya off more.

“The fuck you are,” Ilya says. “You need to go to father’s house. Or make sure Polina goes there, I don’t care—he is not supposed to be alone! Why the fuck is he alone?”

Noise on the other end, a crash, Alexei's cussing interrupted by the static of his phone. *"People have lives, Ilya! I cannot watch him like a child, every second of the day. I already have one kid at home! Pay someone to go!"*

Ilya's jaw is so tightly clenched he fears he's going to grind his teeth into fine dust. "I pay *you* asshole! I pay *YOU!*"

Alexei hangs up on him and does not pick up again, even after Ilya rings him another five times. Dick. Ilya feels young and useless and fucking exhausted, spends the next hour trying to get in touch with Polina, who finally answers, only to let him know she is not even in Moscow. Ilya reaches back out to his father, who tells Ilya that Alexei is taking him out for dinner like the great firstborn son he is. It is more praise Ilya has heard for Alexei in years. And later, he knows, Alexei's going to call him up and ask for twice what he spent that night, and Ilya is going to send him the money because what else is there to do? If Alexei wants to look good in his dying father's eyes, Ilya doesn't have the energy to fight him.

And, unlike Ilya, Alexei is there. He is in Moscow. He is with their father, as sparse as it is.

"Enjoy dinner, Papa," he says, clearing his throat. "Order something expensive."

When the call ends, Ilya is surrounded by silence.

His big fucking house with its bright lights and humongous bed and clean surfaces he pays someone to tend to and the backyard with a patio no one ever sits on, and it's only ever quiet and sad and useless. At least he can smoke inside. Ilya pulls his Raiders sweater off and throws it over the kitchen counter. His phone lights up, and he considers throwing it at the wall. It'd give him a day to recover, maybe, before he'd need to buy a new one.

But it's not his father calling again, and it's not Alexei, or Polina, or anyone else on the list of people who are as exhausted of Ilya as he is of them.

He runs cold water in the sink, soaks his hand, and then drags it over his face. Steady breaths. Steady thoughts. He presses his phone to his ear.

"Hollander," he greets, trying to shed his anxieties by peeling his shirt off, too. "You are calling to congratulate me early on my victory? So kind of you."

"Very funny, Rozanov."

"No? Then why this honor?"

Almost a minute passes. Ilya flicks the light on in his bedroom.

"You're right. I should hang up."

Don't, Ilya wants to say. Don't hang up. Stay on the phone with me until it's night time and I can sleep. While I pour myself a drink and think about you here with me. You're the only one who ever calls me without any reason to do so, Shane Hollander.

"Just... wanted to see what you were up to, I guess."

Ilya lets out a soft breath. He leans against the doorway and closes his eyes, pictures Shane in the room with him, naked on his bed, or clothed, even. Maybe just in his socks and nothing else. Canada feels very, very far away.

“There is party tonight,” Ilya lies. “Maybe I will go.”

“Really? You have a game tomorrow.”

“No, Hollander,” Ilya assures him. “I am not going anywhere. Is snowing here, very bad. And I am alone at home and cold.”

“Still think you’ll be able to fly out tomorrow? And if you’re cold, you should really make sure the heating is working. It can take a while to fix... You might get sick.”

Ilya’s tension bleeds out of him. “How would I know? I am not pilot. And heating is fine, too. I am cold because I took my shirt off.”

“Right...” Shane goes quiet again. *“I’m going to go look at the weather predictions for tomorrow.”*

“This is what you want to talk about?” Ilya groans. “Hollander, weather is not sexy. Tell me what you are wearing.”

“I said I just wanted to know what you were up to! I didn’t call for... Whatever.” Rustling on the other end. *“I’m wearing... sweatpants. The grey ones.”*

“And?”

“And nothing.”

Resting his forehead against the door frame, Ilya runs his palm over his stomach, down to his waistband. He presses his tongue against his teeth. Just a few weeks away from Shane has turned him into an easy man. He shouldn’t be hard in his jeans from listening to Shane stumble through his attempts at phone sex, but he is. He’s always fucking hard.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, walking into his bedroom and undoing his belt with one hand. “Spread your legs.”

Shane’s breath hitches on the other end. *“Fuck—okay. Okay.”*

And Ilya can’t see it, but he *knows* Shane is doing as he says. He is going to fuck his hand until he comes while listening to Shane finger himself, and then he’s going to take a shower and pass out on his bed, pretending that Shane is curled up next to him, already asleep. That the reason Ilya can’t touch him is because he would wake Shane, and not because they are hundreds of kilometers apart.

“Shane,” Ilya calls, emphasizing the *e*, kicking his pants off while listening to Shane’s heavy breaths turn to a high-pitched moan, feeling frantic, feeling fucking *starved*. “Tell me how you are touching yourself.”

His back meets the mattress, phone pressed against his ear, stomach surging with want. He's hard and insatiable and so fucking lonely in this fucking house and it's not going to change. It's not going to fucking change.

"Shane," he repeats, the name thick on his tongue. Not enough to soothe anything.

"Ilya," Shane says, and Ilya contemplates getting into his car and taking off. What is some snow? Cars are meant to be driven, not to sit in his garage. He could leave right now and be there before tomorrow morning. It's not impossible.

"Again," Ilya tells him. "Say it again."

Ilya's eleven. He keeps winning.

This is not new—he has always been extraordinary. Everyone tells him so, and Ilya's not stupid. He knows why the other boys hate him. He also knows

He even gets a second nice suit. One with a bowtie he can wear to the dinner parties his father brings him to, now that he is beginning to care. Finally, his eyes seem to say, something to brag about when Ilya stands at his side. What worth does a son have if he cannot contribute to his father's good name? A coach shakes his hand. Someone his father used to play hockey with as kids, he says. Is Ilya interested in visiting the rink sometime the coming week? It's mostly older kids, but that shouldn't matter with a grip like his, surely. Then they can see if he might be a good fit in a few years when he is old enough to play junior league. And of course Ilya is interested, as his father says in his place. He is honored, even. He is honored! His father is going to personally take him there, in his nice car.

Ilya listens as they talk. He thinks of his mother at home, alone. How she is never invited to these parties. Her name is not spoken in connection to his father's finely polished social life. When the coach leaves, Ilya's father grabs his arm and leans in, says, "He thinks you have promise. I know better than that, so Ilya, you must learn discipline. Do you understand?"

And Ilya says, "Yes, Papa," because it is what he wants to hear.

Ilya knows what his local rink looks like before all the lights are on. He is there in front of the doors, waiting to be let in as the winter chill bites his cheeks and nose. What is he, if not disciplined? His father invents his faults as easily as his mother does wrinkles on his pristine shirt. But what can he say? *But Papa, I am there every day. What am I lacking? I score, and I win. What else do you want?*

It's exactly that, Ilya knows. Win again. Win bigger. Win *greater*.

"Being talented is good, Ilya," his father tells him. "But any man can be born talented. You must work hard. You must work harder than every other talented boy in Russia for it to

matter.”

Ilya’s chest is full of noise. It coils and rattles and shakes and screams inside of him. He swallows thick. His eyes feel so moist.

“Yes, Papa,” he replies.

But when Ilya’s team wins another practice tournament that weekend, he doesn’t tell his father. His mother holds his arm as they walk home, side by side.

“My pride,” she calls him. “You are getting so big, now. And so good at hockey! Everyone else will see, too. The whole world will know that Ilya Rozanov is the best in the world at hockey.”

As they’re walking, Ilya tries to comprehend the scope of the world. It is even harder trying to understand being *the best* in the world. How many disciplined players out there are there, ones good enough to skate circles around him with their eyes closed? The kind of guys whose dads show up to their practice games and tell them *well played*. Ilya doesn’t want to wish for his father’s support, but he does, anyway. Even though it fills him with guilt. He wants his mother to hold his hand as they walk. He wants to hear her say *the best* again and again and again, and he wants it to be true. He can *make* it true.

In the afternoon light, her hair looks thinner than usual. Her eyes stare ahead, even as they speak to each other. Someone is playing music inside of a store with the door open, and Ilya can’t understand any of the English words, but his mother is humming along. He runs his tongue along his teeth, testing out the way the foreign words fit in his mouth as he mimics them, and his mother walks with a bit of a bounce in her step the whole way home.

The junior team wrecks Ilya completely the following week when he’s allowed to join them during practice. It is the first time Ilya’s ever really felt like a loser, even though they tell him he did well.

“What did I say? Discipline. You need discipline,” his father says. His car smells like fresh leather. “You are young, but only for so long. You must learn.”

Ilya clenches his jaw and screws his eyes shut. He wills himself into a disciplined person throughout their quiet drive home. Like magic. He is going to wake up tomorrow and be an eleven-year-old disciplined enough to compete with sixteen-year-olds whose parents throw money at them to be good at this thing Ilya is just figuring out.

Mother waits for them at home.

That night, they eat dinner together. Alexei is nowhere to be seen.

And Ilya is relieved to find that it is only he and mother eating breakfast the day after, the way it is meant to be. He grits his teeth at the emerging bruises along his arm and shoulder.

There’s no hockey practice that day, so they sit together in the back yard and Ilya’s mother paints her new birdhouse while Ilya climbs the massive tree in the corner of the yard. He’s

tall enough now that he can swing from its lowest branch and have his toes touch the grass. His t-shirts don't fit that well anymore. Pants riding up his ankles. Shoes too tight. Ilya's mother had picked up his dirty white sneakers just the other day when he complained about them and checked the size.

"We will buy you new ones, okay? Ones you can run in," she'd said. "Alexei grew so fast, too, when he was your age. I almost forgot."

And while Ilya didn't like being compared to his brother, he liked the idea of going shoe shopping with his mother and no one else.

Now he watches her from where he dangles off a branch. She is sitting in her white plastic chair with a little board for her paints, squinting in concentration while painting five-leaf flowers all around the walls of the bird house. They already have three different ones hanging off the tree and propped up among her vegetable garden, but some of the neighborhood kids had snuck in and smashed one of them last week. Ilya found it broken on the ground. If she noticed his scraped knuckles the day after, she didn't say anything, for once.

"What do you think, Ilya? More flowers?" she asks, holding the yellow house up.

"Draw a bird!" he shouts back, swinging himself back and forth, feeling the burn on his bare palms from the bark. Ignores how his feet touch the ground now because he's growing faster than he can keep up with.

Later on, she asks him to climb even further up, so that they can put the little bird house high enough that no one else would think to reach for it. Ilya's not sure if it will be any popular with the birds, but at least it looks nice. He scoots down the tree slowly. His arms are still hurting from yesterday's practice—his entire body is an ache, now. Hasn't stopped hurting for years. His mother catches his eyes when he winces, and Ilya is convinced that she is going to make him go inside and show her the bruises, but she doesn't. Instead she takes his sore hands and rubs them between hers, asks, "Should we get ice cream?" Even though stuff like ice cream is really for when you're a winner, are disciplined, and Ilya feels like anything but, right now. He wonders how long it'll be before she won't feel the need to ease his losses for him. Maybe never. Maybe he'll be grown and rich and successful and she will call him to say he played well even when he didn't.

They walk through the park, Ilya eating vanilla ice cream out of a wafer cone, and his mother tells him about all the birds, even though Ilya rarely remembers more than the most common: the house sparrows and the gulls and the finches. The brown-wood park benches they sit on face a thin river, and by the time mother has named every bird in view, Ilya is licking the last sticky drops of ice cream off his fingers. His hands are dirty.

"Only a few of them stay here during winter," his mother tells him. "Moscow is quite cold. Sometimes it is better to go elsewhere."

Ilya looks up at her, but she is staring into the river, her hands stained with paint she had not bothered washing off, and he imagines her taking flight.

Tonight, Ilya will fly to Nashville, and he will do so after securing yet another win for his team. He has ignored three phone calls from his brother already, and the flight will give him a few hours of peace, at least. Can't take a call if there's no reception.

His brother never texts him. He only ever calls. Just like how, when they were both living under their father's roof, Alexei would open his door without knocking. The one time Ilya locked it, Alexei kicked it so hard it came off the hinges.

Then he'd turn around and leave. Part of Ilya believes it was Alexei's attempt at molding himself into their father, so that when the anger came, his father would not consider him a transgression, but a mirror. And Grigori always likes seeing himself in his sons. Especially when they are admired.

What else does that old man have, now? Nothing but dinner parties where people speak of him as if he still holds influence. But the lights on his father's career are fading. His father, who is no more able to hold a coherent conversation than Ilya is interested in having one with him.

The thought makes him feel like shit. Even in its truth, whenever Ilya pictures his father at his new home in Moscow, alone. He doubts Polina is there with him, or has bothered to hire him an attendant.

His phone lights up again.

Ilya stuffs it into his bag and closes his eyes. Around him, his team is changing into gear, yelling at each other, at him, at the world, at the opponents, at fate. He pinches his nose and wipes the sweat off his top lip. Let the heat come to him. Let it consume his body.

And it does consume him, until he comes off the ice and clasps his insistent, ringing phone. Unable to have even this day to himself.

Ilya decides he can only ignore Alexei for so long before it becomes an issue. He lifts his phone to his ear, tossing his helmet onto the bench.

His head is buzzing, his throat itching with all the useless questions he has stopped asking: how much money, this time? Five thousand? Ten? What the fuck are you even doing with it, Alexei? Have you even visited father in the last week? You're snorting up *my* fucking money, you fucking pain-in-my-ass. What good is your job if you can't pay your own bills? Feed your own kid? I don't owe you *shit*.

Instead, as always, "*What do you want?*"

Ilya's golden cross has snagged on the neckline of his tanktop. It catches all the overhead lights.

And the world is so quiet. Ilya wishes desperately it wasn't Alexei's voice on the other end of the line at that moment—that miraculously, Shane has called him under a different number. That it is Shane's voice calling him back home, and that home is somewhere not-Russia.

But it isn't.

Sadness sits inside of Ilya like a strained muscle. He moves: opens the windows, rolls his shoulders in an attempt at easing the stiffness, makes father his breakfast sandwich and black tea. Moves to diminish the restlessness. Father keeps pulling the curtains shut these days, as if the landscape is unsettling to him. Every time his phone pings, he hopes it is Shane. More often than not, it is. Alexei is not one for phone calls, and now that Ilya is there to care for their father, he is escaping their household as much as possible.

Ilya can't blame him for this. As much as Ilya resents the fact, it is true that for the rest of the year, the only person who looks out for their father is Alexei. Ilya's money is not a substitute for his presence. Just more band-aids on an open wound.

Alexei loves reminding him of it, too. A few nights ago he had shown up at the Rozanov residence, face flushed from alcohol even though his voice was steady.

"Not staying in your fancy apartment, golden boy?" Alexei asks, kicking his shoes off while stepping inside.

Somewhere on the second floor, Grigori is already asleep. Ilya had talked to him until his eyes closed. Remember when you took me to get my hair cut and they shaved all of it off, and it was one of the few times mother got really mad? Sometimes I miss walking from this house to the bus stop and seeing the neighbor's dog chase me along the fence. I heard they moved. Did you notice? What about me do you remember?

Alexei leaves his boots flopped over on the floor.

Ilya nudges Alexei's boots into a neater line. "What are you doing here?"

"What? I need a reason to come by? Who do you think is here more often, huh?" Alexei counters. He throws his jacket over the back of the sofa. "I'm sleeping here tonight."

Explains the booze, Ilya supposes. Alexei fucking reeks. Ilya wonders if his wife had locked the doors this time.

"Father has a hospital appointment tomorrow."

"Hospital, hospital... They will tell you the same shit, anyway, what's the point? If you're going to throw money away, there are other uses for it."

“He’s not getting better.”

Alexei stops, and Ilya can see his fingers closing around something invisible. But he doesn’t swing. He stands in their father’s living room with a tight fist, and he looks so much like Grigori that for a moment Ilya is nine years old with ice in his chest.

“You think I don’t know that?” Alexei says, finally turning around to face Ilya once more. “You don’t think I *know* that? Who the *fuck* do you think is over here every day making sure he doesn’t piss himself? Make sure he’s at home when he’s supposed to be? It’s me, Ilya. Fucking *me*! As if I don’t have a job, too! While you’re jerking off in America and getting paid to do fucking nothing! Can’t even bring yourself to fly home more than once a year. What kind of son is that, huh? And what do I get for it? Fucking nothing! Father doesn’t even know my name half the time! He’ll call me and ask for Ilya, Ilya, Ilya, ask me how you’re doing in the Russian leagues, where mother is... So fuck you. Fuck! You!”

Alexei grabs the empty glass left on the coffee table.

Ilya has to step around the shards, later, when Alexei has retreated to the guest room. Maybe he’s breaking whatever he can get his hands on in there, too, if only to make Ilya have to spend more money replacing shit. Or throwing money away, as he’d put it.

He is picking up glass pieces when the stairs creak, and Ilya looks up to find his father in a bathrobe.

“Papa,” he says. “It’s not morning yet. You should sleep.”

Grigori ignores him. He wanders over to where Ilya is kneeling on the floor, dropping shards onto a damp towelette. “Are you boys fighting? That’s not good, Ilya.”

Not fighting. Your oldest son is throwing a fit and breaking shit because he got kicked out of home and he’s being a fucking toddler about it, Ilya wants to tell him.

“Sorry,” Ilya says, folding the towelette up around the glass. “Can I get you something to drink?”

“No.” Grigori folds his hands behind his back. He peers out the window, but it is so dark outside that no shapes can be distinguished. Even the stars are out of sight. “Let’s sit.”

They sit across from one another. Grigori on the sofa and Ilya on the cushy armchair.

“Playing in America...”

Ilya forces himself to maintain eye contact, even though his insides are sickly and twisted and so fucking tired. He doesn’t want to talk about his job in America with his father. It’s too late in the day for him to brace for another one-sided rant about how he is wasting his time playing for a different country, like a turncoat mesmerized by America’s shiny buildings and cars.

“What is the name of your team?” Father asks instead, and it is as if a knot made of all of the things that pain Ilya untangles itself. Not all at once, but bit by bit. A frayed edge.

“The Boston Raiders,” Ilya tells him.

“Of course,” Grigori says. “I knew that. And you are a star player.”

“Yes.” Ilya turns his eyes to the floor. Something heavy fills him, like lead. “They love me over there. I am very good.”

In Boston, at least. And Florida. And, Ilya thinks indulgently, there is at least one person who does so sincerely, even if only ever in private.

“No wonder. After all, you are my son, you were always going to be great, wherever you went,” Grigori says, like he believes it.

Ilya nods slowly. Screws his eyes shut. He needs a drink so bad. A drink and a walk and some time alone to pick through the scraps of this relationship that his father, in his forgetfulness, is somehow attempting to salvage. Ilya wants to tell himself that it is too late. That he cannot love his father now, after all this time and all this hurt. That it would be a smear upon the love his mother graced him with for all of her life.

He feels young and worn out all at once. He wants to be held. He wants everything to be done with.

“Thank you,” Ilya whispers, instead.

His father squeezes his shoulder, but then leaves the room to wander back upstairs, and Ilya is granted his moment of peace. He presses his palms together, squeezing his hands tight, tight, tight, and lets the sadness wreck him in whatever shape it comes first. He is not crying, he thinks. But the ache is there, the trembling in his jaw, his heartbeat pulsing between his temples. Ilya nods to himself again. Lets himself droop forward, forward, until his head hangs between his legs and the feeling of being pulled so taut in all directions he is going to snap begins to give, little by little. Nausea lies slick at the back of his tongue.

He doesn’t call Svetlana. He doesn’t leave the house. He doesn’t pour himself another drink.

Ilya clutches his phone between his hands and remains curled up in the armchair until the dizziness settles.

Jane (1).

“What did your parents think?” Ilya asks, some years into his... whatever-it-is with Hollander. “When the media started writing about Rozanov and Hollander against each other.”

It's already nine in the evening. Shane had shown up later than Ilya expected with his usual amount of anxiety plastered all over his pretty face. Maybe getting so worked up seeing Shane running circles inside his own head is going to have a permanent effect on Ilya. It is a little too late to worry about that now, though, he realizes.

"Oh, well..." Shane avoids Ilya's gaze. Instead, he is suddenly intently focused on the liquor Ilya is pouring them. He'd picked the least offensive bottle from the gold-rimmed hotel bar cart. "You know... They said it was inevitable. Like. It was going to happen, right? Because we're—"

Humble Hollander, Ilya thinks, and finishes the sentence for him: "Because we are the best."

"Right," Shane agrees. "From the beginning."

"Is true," Ilya says. "You should not pretend it is not. So, your parents hated me, yes? What did they say?"

"Do we really have to talk about my parents right now?" Shane asks him, fiddling with the buttons of his shirt.

He is not wearing pants, much like how Ilya is not wearing anything up top whatsoever.

"I am curious," Ilya shrugs. "What? Is secret?"

"I just think it'd hurt your feelings."

"Hollander." Ilya leans forward, raising a brow. "Every time we meet, you say I am an asshole. But we are here now. You think I care what people call me?"

Holding his hand out, Shane waits for Ilya to give him his glass. Ilya makes sure to drag his fingers slowly over Shane's hand, if only to watch Shane shiver at the gesture.

"My mom thinks you're a dirty player," Shane tells him. "And she's right, by the way. Or at least she was. That finale in the World Junior Hockey Championships was awful, and you know it! I can't believe you..."

Ilya steps closer. Their hips align, and Ilya can feel Shane begin to harden against his thigh. Even if he doesn't admit it, Ilya thinks Shane likes it. That they're opposites. That Ilya is not afraid to get rough with him, both on and off the ice, even though he pretends otherwise. One time, Shane showed up at Ilya's apartment with a sore back and shoulder from a particularly nasty collision. When Ilya kneaded Shane's muscles with his hand while fucking into him from behind, Shane moaned so loudly that he nearly bit his own tongue to shut himself up, and then came all over himself without any help from Ilya's hand.

He watches as Shane raises the glass to his lips without taking his eyes off Ilya's. They're still glossy from Ilya's mouth on his.

"Dirty," Ilya repeats, pretending to be deep in thought while he rubs Shane's hip. "I think your mother has good eye."

“Stop! This is why I don’t want to talk about my parents when we’re—when we’re about to —”

“Fuck?”

“Yes!” Shane’s face and neck are flushed pink and Ilya cackles while he leans forward to pepper kisses along Shane’s jawline, down the center of his throat to his collarbones. He makes sure it’s open mouthed, a bit wet. He wishes he could dig his teeth in and leave a nice, prominent bruise.

“I am very charming, you know,” Ilya says. He takes the empty glass from Shane’s grip and puts it back on the table. “Maybe your parents will love me. It could happen.”

He should’ve kept his mouth shut. Ilya can *see* the exact second the thought begins to spin in Shane’s head, too fast too much, putting them off course for what they’re *actually* there to do, and before Shane can open his mouth to say anything about parents or meetings or futures, Ilya kisses him.

“Or hate me because I keep beating their precious son at hockey, maybe,” Ilya follows, placing his hand on Shane’s lower back and sliding it lower, lower, as a distraction.

Shane slides his tongue into Ilya’s mouth, clearly as eager to move on from hypotheticals as Ilya is, and reaches for the button on Ilya’s jeans with expert fingers. This part is easy. This is what they know, and all they really have to know.

“Bed?” Ilya asks, and Shane looks up at him from dark eyelashes, then shakes his head.

“What about... right here. On the couch?”

The wide curtains are drawn closed.

Ilya nods, mouth suddenly very dry, and gets down on his knees. Easy, he tells himself. Easy, easy, easy.

When Ilya’s mother dies, she has no will.

All of her belongings are sorted meticulously by family members that Ilya has never really gotten to know. Grandparents, cousins... People who are no more present in his life than his father is. What part of her does he get to keep? Every day is a fight of some kind. Ilya begins to keep his door shut at all times. There’s not enough room for his sadness anywhere, but everyone expects it out of him. Why isn’t the boy crying?

He props his bedroom window open and watches the house sparrows picking on the sidewalks. If he jumped down this time, he thinks he could land safely. How many hours

would he have before they realized his closed door led to an open window?

Someone says over his head, *He's just a child, he shouldn't be involved in this*, and squeezes Ilya's shoulder. Someone else has the kindness to wrap the photos of Ilya's mother up into a separate box, after his father decides they need to be taken down the wall. Ilya's mother is dead, and they are severing the last thing tethering her to earth without pause. His father's eagerness to get rid of her doesn't surprise Ilya, nor does everyone else's willingness to go along with it.

He doesn't remember if he asks for her necklace, only that in the first game after her passing, it rests against his chest beneath all of the gear and expectations. He wins that game. Wins the next. Father begins to show up. He loses. The drives back from the rink begin to wear him ragged. His father calls their one-sided talks 'a good dose of criticism' even when Ilya tilts his head against the cold car window. He says, Yes, father, if only to avoid hearing the same thing repeated over and over.

Twelve-year-old Ilya kisses the golden cross before he gets on the ice; thirteen-year-old Ilya kisses the golden cross before he gets on the ice; fourteen-year-old Ilya kisses the golden cross before he gets on the ice. It is a witness.

His father spends money on him. Alexei avoids him like the plague. Scouts are calling his father on his private number to speak about Ilya's future, about all the possible accomplishments, how far he can go, how he can wear Russia's colors in the Olympics someday, even. All possibilities, his father tells him. But only if you stop being so overconfident. Who do you think you are, Ilya? The winner is the hardest worker. Put your head down. Keep moving.

His mother's death anniversary comes and goes. Ilya goes alone. Just a boy with whatever cheap flowers he could get his hands on. One year he snuck into his neighbor's garden to cut some off. When they caught him, he apologized, and his father remained none the wiser. The year after, they pretended not to notice when Ilya climbed the fence. Ilya is twenty-five years old when his father accompanies him to his mother's grave. They stand side by side and Ilya wants to tell him to get the hell out of there. That this is a space he is not welcome in. But all those years ago, Grigori had lost a wife as Ilya had lost a mother, even though he didn't deserve her.

"She loved hockey very much," Ilya's father says. "Her father and I played against each other sometimes. I did not beat him often."

They are wearing nice clothes that are too stuffy in the summer weather. Ilya doesn't say anything back. He nods. Of all the things in the world to say about his mother. In his haze, or perhaps his wilful ignorance, does his father believe that Ilya's mother showed up to each of his games because she loved hockey?

Ilya fixes the collar of his crisp shirt and feels her ghost there. He remembers her fingers combing through his wet hair after a shower so that it would look nice and appropriate for church. How she scolded him when, at ten years old, he tried to sneak out of the house to meet friends by climbing out through the window and fell so hard from the second floor he twisted his ankle. She had been red in the face. Ilya can't recall if she cried.

“I will always love her more than you,” Ilya says. “Even if she barely got to know me.”

Maybe he is being cruel. His father stares back at him, and his grief is so distant to Ilya’s own that it doesn’t make him feel sick anymore. It doesn’t matter if Ilya does not love him. If he does not feel loved *by* him. They are strangers. They have no one else; but they don’t even really have each other. A new, unnamable loss grips Ilya. Perhaps it will untangle itself some decades from now. Perhaps it, like his mother, will stay with him.

“Rozanov,” Shane says, a warning, his back pressed against the hotel door. Even so, his tongue keeps darting out to lick his bottom lip, and his eyes just won’t stay on Ilya’s. They drift everywhere else: Ilya’s mouth, his exposed chest, his collarbones, his underwear peeking out from his low-rise jeans.

Earlier, Montreal had demolished them. Ilya doesn’t even really care.

“*Hollander*,” Ilya mimics. His hands find Shane’s hips. “No one will hear.”

Ilya twists the hem of Shane’s t-shirt around his fingers and pulls it so far up it gathers under Shane’s armpits. “Bite.”

Shane squirms, but he doesn’t protest. He opens his mouth and Ilya tucks the fabric between his lips. When they stare at each other, Shane’s eyes glimmer, and Ilya knows that as much as he pretends he doesn’t, Shane gets off on the idea of someone hearing him. Maybe half fear, half excitement. Ilya is not a stranger to that kind of kink.

“For your win,” Ilya says, sinking to his knees. And for his own enjoyment.

There are few things in life Ilya enjoys as much as he likes sucking Shane Hollander’s cock. That reality is probably something worth thinking about more deeply, but what is the point? Ilya likes sex, and now he is having sex with Hollander. Just bodies coming together.

But it’s not *just bodies* when Shane pulls him up after he’s come in Ilya’s mouth, spitting out the t-shirt from between his teeth so that he can kiss him deeply. When they first began hooking up, Shane was a lot more hesitant with his tongue. Nowadays, Ilya will lean in for a kiss, and Shane is parting his mouth, already out of breath.

“Whoa, Hollander.” Ilya laughs, leaning back only for a second—it doesn’t matter, because Shane is already closing the space between them, his mouth on Ilya’s chin, the crook of his lips. “Breathe. We have whole hour, yes?”

The scratch of his beard can’t be comfortable, but Shane doesn’t seem to care.

“Not enough,” Shane protests, both hands working on Ilya’s belt. “It’s not enough time.”

And Ilya can't disagree with him, so he follows Shane's lead, stumbling on one leg to kick his pants off and get them both to the bed. Shane's right. It's not enough time. Ilya wants to spread Shane out and lick him from his wrists to his armpits to the muscles leading down to his cock. He wants to blow him again, slower, pull off when Shane is about to come, and do it all over again. Then, when he's relaxed and needy, Ilya wants to press into him and fuck him so hard he comes again, and then Ilya can drag his tongue through the spill, eyes locked with Shane's, and know that no one else has ever fucked Shane Hollander like that, and, if Ilya gets his way, no one ever will.

Shane stays a little past the hour. Maybe he, too, can't bring himself to leave.

He props himself up, peering down at Shane, who is lying on his back, reeling from his orgasm. It always takes him longer to recover when his dick isn't involved, Ilya has noticed.

He squeezes Shane's ankle, then works his way up his leg. Ilya covers Shane's knee with his hand, stroking up and down, continuing along the line of his thigh muscle, trailing higher...

"I can't," Shane wheezes, eyes remaining closed.

Ilya hums. He could maybe convince Shane if he wanted to. *Maybe.*

"You are sure?" he asks, keeping his hand halfway up Shane's thigh, fingers pushing into the sturdy flesh. He lowers his mouth to Shane's knee, kisses right above it, following the path to his hand. It is so easy to get Shane hard. He pops his lips. "It will be many weeks before I am back in Montreal."

"Fuck," Shane says, covering his face with his hands. But then he is reaching down, grabbing Ilya's hair, and Ilya grins into the kiss.

It is way past Shane's self-imposed curfew by the time Ilya is even close to satisfied, and he has probably barely scratched the surface of Shane's own needs. Even now, years after they first began to sleep together, Ilya finds himself constantly surprised by Shane's... ferocious appetite. He can't be getting his dick wet very often outside of their rushed, sporadic meet-ups, but even if he *was*...

Ilya has felt wanted many times in his life. He has had women kiss their way down his body like they're partaking in something life-changing. Sometimes sex is just that good. But when he's with Shane, unable to contain themselves, scrambling for even the smallest bit more contact, thighs to thighs, stomachs pressed together, Ilya is god-like. Shane is so fucking *present*. Taking in all of Ilya even when his eyes lose focus. When it is just the two of them, Shane has such few inhibitions. At least when it comes to pleasure.

And though Shane is convinced that everyone is searching all over for him because he is late back to his room—by barely half an hour—no one has texted him. It gives Ilya enough leverage to pull Shane's head onto his lap.

"No one is waiting, Hollander," Ilya promises. He runs his fingers through Shane's newly washed hair that smells of Ilya's shampoo.

He had tossed the hotel-branded body wash in the trash, too. If Shane noticed during their shower, he didn't comment on it.

Shane's eyes droop. He must be tired. If Ilya was a nicer man, he would send Shane back to his hotel to get some proper sleep before his flight tomorrow, but Ilya is a lot more interested in being greedy, right now. He strokes Shane's cheek.

"I am thinking of buying a house," Ilya says.

Shane raises his eyebrows. "Oh? You're suddenly interested in real estate?"

"Calm down, or you will get hard again," Ilya teases, leaning down to kiss the bridge of Shane's nose. "Need somewhere to keep my nice cars."

"I should've figured," Shane says. He rolls his eyes, but then they inevitably land on Ilya's mouth again, and Ilya kisses him, if only to show that he, too, could keep going. "Did you have a house in mind?"

"No." Ilya continues petting Shane's cheek. "But big, I think. Lots of windows, fancy kitchen, nice bedroom with huge bed..." He flashes Shane a grin. "And I like—" He falls silent.

Shane reaches up to rub the side of Ilya's neck. "You like what?"

"Nothing. Is stupid. Does not matter when buying house, really."

"Come on!"

"Ugh." Ilya pinches the soft skin right on Shane's jaw. "In Moscow, I would watch birds. In the morning, with my mother. It would be nice to have a place to sit outside."

"That's not stupid," Shane tells him.

"Maybe," Ilya says.

He doesn't tell Shane that, more than anything, he wants a house so that Shane doesn't scramble in through his hotel door like he is being actively chased. He wants to know a Shane who is not desperately biting his own hands to keep quiet.

America used to be lonely. It is not that Ilya's teammates do not seek him out—who is more fun than Ilya Rozanov? More available? But those friendships felt temporary. *Transient*. Ilya heard that one, somewhere. Most of the Boston Raiders have families who they can meet in less than a day's travel, who they can see for every holiday. And while they extend invitations, Ilya is always at the edge of things. There is nothing to stop the world from suddenly turning on him, and then he will be on a flight back to Russia. What would he actually leave behind? What is waiting for him in Moscow?

Ilya lives his life expecting to be in movement, always. He has a home with things, but none of them are particularly valuable. He can just spend more money and buy something else. His

apartment came pre-furnished. The wheels on his cars have barely touched anything other than garage concrete.

He's just drifting.

Ilya used to not miss anything when he returned to Moscow during the off-season. He was standing in a convenience store, some July day in 2015, flipping through the newsstand, when it hit him that he didn't particularly care about anything going on there. He was counting down the days before he could get on his flight back to Boston, as if there was anything there to greet him on his return. Maybe it wasn't Boston he was missing. The realization is not welcome.

"Do you think you will stay in Boston?" Shane asks, stroking Ilya's upper arm. His touch is soft. Ilya wants it endlessly.

"Not sure," Ilya says. "Is not too bad, here. Except for shitty apartment garage and shitty weather and shitty alcohol."

And Shane laughs. Ilya tries kissing him through it, but it only spreads to him, until the both of them are panting into each other's mouths, eyes crinkling from their smiles, from the breathlessness, the understanding that this is all they have. Is all they ever will have.

To think he'd be back here before summer comes to Moscow. The lit cigarette between Ilya's fingers doesn't stop his skin from turning pink from the cold.

Tomorrow, he will bury his father.

And later, when Alexei ruins dinner for the sake of another argument, a reminder of how little they have been and always will be to each other, Ilya weighs the consequences of putting his knuckles to his face one more time.

Svetlana takes his hand in one of hers, then touches his shoulder with the other. She is so gentle with him, and still he wishes she was someone else. Love, Ilya finds, has made him endlessly greedy. Maybe terrible, even. If Svetlana notices, she doesn't tell him. He considers leaving through the restaurant's exit door. Then he stops simply considering and just goes, returning only when the cold air has soaked into his skin.

He needs to speak to Shane. He needs to go home. He needs to send his dead father off.

He returns to dinner. He offers condolences and exchanges stories. It is as if, in death, his few good memories of his father have been coated in a sheen of polish. His father is blurry in them, his expression muddled, voice softened. His ideal self, in a boyish Ilya's eyes. He was not always so awful. Not to Ilya, at the very least. But he was not good. Still, even thinking this, Ilya remembers his father kneeling on the floor of a shop to help him try his new skates

on. Just to make sure the fit was perfect. And when they did, he patted Ilya's ankle and told him, "You are already great, my son. You must have the gear to match you." He showed up to Ilya's next game. but not the one after.

How did his father remember him from so far away? Even when Ilya became a professional over in America, he knows his father did not watch him play unless it was for Russia. In the months he went without seeing his own son, did he continue to picture him as the eighteen-year-old who left his family to play hockey across the world? Did he ever greet Ilya and wonder: who is this man my son is becoming in absence of me? Did he hate that man? Did he ever love Ilya?

Russia is empty. It is empty and for someone else. Someone Ilya maybe never was and most definitely will never become. If they buried his body in Russia, would anyone visit? Ilya thinks of his mother's grave. Of how father's grave will be somewhere entirely different. He stares at his glass of wine, avoiding any further glances from Alexei. When people speak to him, he responds in as few words as possible.

He flees after another hour, leaving behind his jacket. Snow falls around him; it sticks to his lashes and the black fabric of his crisp suit.

And he calls Shane Hollander.

Later, when he has offered himself up in his entirety to a Shane who still knows nothing, Ilya puts his cellphone to his forehead. He closes his eyes. Shane has already hung up, but his presence hums from Ilya's lips to the tips of his fingers. Not like I love you, he thinks in an echo. Like I love you. Like I want you here. Like I want to be there, with you. It is a grand sensation. It doesn't really fit in Ilya's chest. He says it into the world, for himself, so that the weight in his heart lightens a little. But it is still such a big feeling. And tangled. And achingly sweet and terrible at once.

The person closest to Ilya in the world is as far away as he can be, he realizes. Perhaps he doesn't even want Ilya like that, despite everything. He is grateful it is so cold. It is a familiar feeling, at least, in a Moscow which does not recognize him.

There's no light that can press through the crack in the door to Ilya's bedroom, but he knows his parents are awake. Sounds of glass on glass, footsteps up and down the stairs, the radio prickling. And because Ilya is cursed with childhood curiosity, the type of frightening need to understand what his parents are like when he is out of the picture, he pulls his bedsheets off and sits down in front of the closed door. He rests his head against the door frame. Even before he can make out what they are saying, his stomach flutters nervously. Like it is telling him to go back to bed. That whatever he hears will not make his life easier. Will not help him make more sense of his father.

The stairs creak again.

“Just because he doesn’t cry does not mean you’re not hurting him, Grigori,” his mother says.

And his father’s voice slurs familiarly when he replies, “He is a soft! A soft boy gets nowhere! They will eat him alive! He will become an *embarrassement*.”

“He’s ten!”

“Old enough to know he must grow a spine,” Grigori counters. “None of this bleeding heart nonsense. A boy like that will not survive competitions. You must know this, Irina, don’t be foolish. You can hug and patch him up all you want, but that boy wants to play hockey, and if he wants to play hockey, then he will need to be better than he is now, and *tougher*. I am not raising cowards.”

“You’re not raising him at all!”

Silence. Ilya begins to slide back along the floor toward his bed, trying not to make any noise. He doesn’t actually want to hear any of this. He wants to be asleep.

“Who do you think is paying for his skates? Who pays for his hockey camps and his new clothes and the food he eats? All the trips he goes on with his team? Are you? Who signs the checks, Irina? You tell me, and then we can talk about who is raising that boy.”

Ilya presses his fingers against his eyes.

“That’s very cruel of you,” Irina says, and Ilya loves her, and he wishes he was a little braver. “I hope you can at least love that boy a little more than you hate me.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Grigori says. “He is going to take after you.”

More steps. Ilya climbs into his bed and screws his eyes shut and hopes the dream he has is so terrifying he remembers nothing else when he wakes. Everything except for the fact that, in so many ways, he is like his mother.

Montreal is not Ilya’s favorite place on earth, either, but it is not the worst one. Especially not now, when he is wrapped in Shane Hollander’s bedsheets. The ones that smell like the both of them together, and not his lavender-scented laundry pods. Yesterday’s game is still reverberating in his bones.

Games against Shane are always like that. Even after they fuck the most urgent of the heat out of their bodies, Ilya’s adrenaline rarely ebbs out until they have parted ways. He itches for a smoke.

Instead, Ilya turns his head to the side. Shane's chest rises and falls slowly, lips slightly parted. There is a persistent furrow between his brows even in sleep.

"You know, Hollander?" Ilya murmurs. He mouths at Shane's bare shoulder, down the line of his muscle into his bicep. "You are like the sun to me."

The hour passes. Shane nudges his fingers between Ilya's, resting their hands on the curve of his hip. Spring is shy outside his window, barely green. The wind drags across the glass.

Ilya closes his eyes but does not sleep.

At some point, Shane begins to wake. Typically he is up way before Ilya, but it seems yesterday's two-orgasm runthrough was just what he needed to get a full night's sleep. His palm brushes up Ilya's hip to his stomach, fingers moving in tiny circles, around and around. Shane's breaths are steady, still not quite conscious. He has drool in the corner of his mouth, right where his head rests on Ilya's chest. Ilya will have to tease him about it later. He cannot wait.

He brushes his thumb over Shane's soft cheek. Over the freckles beneath his eyes.

Shane's eyelids twitch. Ilya drags his thumb up Shane's nose to his right eyebrow, scratching at the dark hairs, following the slope to his temple. Rarely does he get the chance to just... touch. And Ilya likes touching. Enjoys the sensation of feeling someone's body tenderly. Most of them he forgets, but Ilya is fairly certain he knows every part of Shane. Probably better than anyone else. He hopes, at least. Believes it.

"Okay," Ilya murmurs, putting his mouth so close to Shane's that their breaths mingle. "No more sleep. Come on, Hollander."

Shane cracks one eye open. His cheeks turn warm and red under Ilya's touch. Ilya slides his hand down so he can cup Shane's jaw with one hand, pressing his index finger to the corner of Shane's lips. Shane parts his mouth without hesitation, and Ilya kisses him lazily, like they have time.

Ilya blows smoke and looks down at the bundled lilies in his hand.

His mother's grave is covered in a layer of dusty snow. Ilya wipes it off with his sleeve, then puts the bouquet down in front of the gravestone.

"Hello, Mama," he says. "Have you been well? Sorry I have not been visiting often. You understand, I hope. But if you don't forgive me, I understand." Hunched over, his fingers touch the sharp edge of the memorial stone. "Did you know? You were wrong. I am not the best hockey player in the world."

His cigarette frazzles. A gentle breeze scrapes his cheek.

“And it’s okay. I think it is alright that I am not the best in the world. And I know you did not say that to pressure me. I know. But I wanted to tell you first, before I told everyone else. He’s pretty good, I think. Well. That’s a lie. He is perfect. Perfect at hockey, but perfect at everything else, too.”

The words should come easy to him, but he finds himself hesitating between the sentences, trying to make sense of himself in Russian the way he was able to do just last night. There is no barrier between him and his mother’s remains, only cold air.

Ilya takes another drag of his cigarette. “I think you would have loved him. But not too much. I want to be the best in the world at loving Shane Hollander, and you are too sweet, Mama. You would win.”

Ilya’s mouth stumbles around the word *Shane Hollander*. It stands as a jagged reminder that Shane cannot fit amidst the rest of Ilya, as things are. Why is his voice so gravely? Will she recognize him?

“Should I light you one, too?” he asks, huffing out a strained laugh. He removes the burnt-out candles and a piece of plastic which has caught on the corner of the gravestone. “Once winter is over, I will tidy up here, okay? Then I will bring vodka, too, and I will tell you about boring Shane Hollander and his stupid good hockey.”

Ilya sinks down and smothers the end of the cigarette in snow.

He blinks and turns chin up to the sun. His throat feels thick.

Ilya says, “Please understand”, says, “Please understand this part of me I never got to share with you, please,” says, “I could not tell Papa. I couldn’t. But I wish so badly sometimes that I did, ” and, “You would know, right? How we cannot tell him so many things. He is not the type of man to listen or try to understand. I’m sorry. I wish I could have been stronger for you. I’m sorry. I’m trying to be strong right now,” promises her, “So I’m going to be strong, okay? I promise. I’m sorry that it is for someone else. Can you be happy for me?”

Ilya has never been obsessed with anything until he met Shane. Or at least not obsessed in a way that mattered: mind-numbingly, single-focused. He has always wanted things because they make him feel good: like being fantastic at hockey. Sex. Good liquor. But if he had to go the rest of his life without them, he would persevere. If someone told him he could never see Shane Hollander again, Ilya wasn’t sure what he would do.

“What do I make of this?” he asks, covering his eyes with his hand. “What am I supposed to do?”

He dips his hand beneath his shirt to rub his fingers over the gold cross on his necklace, says, “I want to go home. I want to leave here and not come back. But how can I go? I can’t. I can’t, you understand. But I miss him. It won’t go away. Have you lived like this? Did you love someone like this? I have all this money, Mama. I have so much money, what is a few

dollars? But I buy cigarettes and convert the rubles into dollars on my phone, just because I am not quite sure how much a ruble is worth anymore.”

He rubs his fingers hard into his lashes, willing his eyes to stop stinging. “I get on a plane to my apartment in America and think it is nice to be going home. How is that right? How could I be right to think that, when you’re here? And now father has died, too. What do I care about seeing Moscow in summer? They know my name at the café where I get coffee in the mornings in Boston, you know? I don’t even need a GPS to get around. But today, I had to find a florist by looking it up online. How does the internet know more about my home than me? And I can’t ask him to come here. I couldn’t ask him.”

“What do you think?” he asks. “What should I do?”

He lights another cigarette and smokes it to the filter.

Ilya knows it is likely the last time he will be here. He will need to contact the graveyard and set up regular flower deliveries, someone to come here and get the grime off the stone in the summer if he cannot do it. Alexei would never do it. His pride would not let him, Ilya knows. For Alexei, to love their mother is to admit he did wrong against her. That she was undeserving of his hatred.

Inside, Ilya wishes that one day Alexei is forced to reckon with that reality, and that he might wake up to a message in which Alexei apologizes for how he treated their mother. That in her death, and in the absence of everyone else in their family, he has realized that he will need someone to tend his own grave. That for such a thing to happen, people must love him. That right now, no one loves him that way. Perhaps not even the family he has built himself using Ilya’s money.

He stares at the gravestone and contemplates lighting himself another cigarette. Something to busy his hands and mouth and thoughts. But instead he hears Shane’s voice, feels Shane’s fingers on his throat in the aftermath of sex, *You really need to stop smoking, it’s so bad for you*, and longs to be anywhere but here. Not anywhere, perhaps. Not really. He wants to be in the bed of Shane’s apartment, his nose tucked into the crook between Shane’s armpit and collarbone.

There is a goldfinch on the trail back. Ilya watches it take off into the sky.

“Okay, Mama,” he tells her, dragging his cold fingers over his eyes one last time. He blinks and blinks and blinks and blinks. “Okay.”

That evening, Ilya packs up the last of his stuff in the apartment he leaves in Alexei’s name as Svetlana pours them drinks and lets the radio play. There’s not much. Some clothing. Photos. The nice liquor he sends home with Svetlana. He would rather throw it in the garbage than let Alexei drink it after he leaves.

Alexei who does not come to say goodbye. Perhaps it is for the better.

It must be a relief to have him gone, Ilya thinks. Finally, Alexei is the only son, as he always hoped for. Ilya stands by the kitchen counter. He sips his drink. He tries to imagine a world in

which Alexei came to the rink with him, and afterward they walked home together. A world where, for all of their youth, Alexei did not kill himself in order to earn father's favor. Favor he was never going to get, anyway. A world that had space for both of them. One that let Ilya leave for America without shame. This undeniable, inescapable shame. What does he owe his father? Nothing and too much.

Svetlana asks about going drinking, and Ilya sends her home early. She wraps her arms around him and does not insist he look at her. She must feel his tears on her neck as he buries his face in the crook of her shoulder. And Ilya knows she does not pity him, that her holding him at that moment is a reminder that as much as he wants nothing more than to leave, it is not always bad. It is not enough to make him reconsider. Years ago, it might have been.

On the flight back, Ilya closes his eyes and thinks of Shane's apartment. His plain navy sheets. How they are somehow the most comfortable bedsheets Ilya has ever slept on. He is going to have to call. Shane will need to know he is back in America. The flight attendant offers him some water and he waves her away with a grateful but stuffy, "Thank you."

They will see each other soon. Maybe Shane will hold him again. Kiss him gently on his brow, his cheek, his mouth. Ilya could ask.

Ilya leans forward in his seat, resting his arms on his knees. Eventually he turns to stare out the window, watching Moscow as it becomes little more than fading colors through the airplane window while trying to recall if it looked the same the first time he flew to America. The glass is cold against his temple. The flight attendant returns some time later, this time offering coffee, and this time Ilya says yes. He sits in his cushy airplane seat, watching as land creeps into water. He misses his Boston café and his sleek (unreliable) car and his house and he misses Shane Hollander and he doesn't, he accepts, miss Moscow.

Ilya stares out at the lake. Somewhere inside his massive house—*cottage*, whatever—Shane is researching the steps to starting a charity organization. Working, during their perfect two weeks together. Ilya supposes he shouldn't be surprised. This is exactly what Shane gets a kick out of. By the time Ilya really came to it, some hours after they returned from Shane's parents' house, Shane already had a spreadsheet and a list of people to call, as well as a plan-of-action list.

"Just... give me, like, three hours, okay?"

"Three hours? Shane Hollander, I am starting to think you are in love with working, not me," Ilya says, staring at Shane with wide eyes as Shane wraps his arms around his laptop to stop Ilya from closing it.

"That's not true," Shane protests, then looks down on his computer and, with a somewhat embarrassed expression, turns it off. "Sorry, I know I get really... I get really into it, right

away. But I can do this later, you're right."

Ilya steps closer. He rubs Shane's back, squeezing his shoulder and neck, and then bends down so he can kiss Shane's warm cheek. "Is okay, sweetheart. I am teasing. How about compromise? You work one hour, and then we go sit outside by the water together, yes?"

Shane looks at him. His eyes glimmer, and Ilya recalls the Vegas landscape that night when he thought Shane was the furthest person away from him in the entire world.

"Maybe I go visit your parents again while you work. I think I can make them like me before you are done."

Shane smiles, soft and wide and everything Ilya wants. Everything he has.

"I think they already do. Like magic."

Ilya doesn't say, *Because they must see that I love you, they have to, they have to know, don't they?* He just kisses Shane's cheek again, then the corner of his mouth, his lips, and lives knowing it is true. An undisputable fact, like all other undisputable realities: that Shane Hollander is in love with him like Ilya loves Shane in turn, that he probably has been for a long time.

"One hour," Shane adds. "Then..."

"Then?"

"I'll show you later," Shane promises, twisting his fingers into the hem of Ilya's shirt.

And Ilya is the world's most patient man. Never before in his life has he felt such relief at the word *later*. But they'll have later, and they'll have it again, some other day: all the laters, all the summers.

End Notes

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