

like how spring melts the snow

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like how spring melts the snow

by [eemolu](#)

Summary

The straps of Shane's hockey bag dug into his shoulders as he stood by the welcome table and hoped that this year, it would be easier. It was reasonable, in his second year at camp, to expect that he wouldn't be so caught up in everything that wasn't hockey, what to eat and where to go and who to talk to. Maybe this year, because he knew how everything would work, the routines and the expectations, he could actually make some friends.

Shane hugged his parents goodbye and assured them that he would be fine, just like he was last year—he hadn't been fine, he'd been miserable, but there'd been hockey so it had been worth it—and then watched them drive away with only the smallest pit of fear in his stomach. He was hopeful. He was optimistic.

And then Shane locked eyes with Ilya, and something in that look told him that he was wrong, that he shouldn't be sure of anything, that this person was going to divide his life into two pieces and he was helpless to stop it.

(or, after ilya's mother died, he was sent to live in canada with his aunt)

Notes

i'm going to be honest i don't know shit about hockey so i'm coasting along on many CHL wikipedia pages and my own audacity. i plan for this fic to cover many years into their careers as nhl players, so if we could all cross our fingers hoping i'm a quick study, that would be incredible. that said, if any of this information is colloquially false or happening at the wrong time of the year or just implausible, well, assume i'm doing it for the plot and not out of plain ignorance. that will help me.

in terms of content warnings, nothing in this story is beyond canon typical levels. as always, if you spot anything you think i should warn for, please let me know. and thanks!

title here is from the leith ross song "grown up" which is fun because now i have a song named after each of their albums. can't write a fic without an accompanying soundtrack from my other favorite gay ottawan!!! the playlist of their complete discography is the only thing i write to. thank you leith.

k enjoyyyyyy

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

Chapter 1: camp

2005

The straps of Shane's hockey bag dug into his shoulders as he stood by the welcome table and hoped that this year, it would be easier. Hockey was never a problem for him. At least not one he didn't know how to solve, the ache in his muscles a reward for having cracked a new move or skating harder, faster than the day before. Maybe this year, because he knew how everything would work, the routines and the expectations, he could solve the problems that weren't hockey. Maybe he could actually make some friends.

Now that it was his second year at camp, it was reasonable to expect that he wouldn't be so caught up in what to eat for breakfast and how to shower in the dorms and what he was supposed to do when they said free time and everyone cheered but him. This time he would start off already knowing about shower shoes and the cereal bar and the fact that free time meant they prowled around outside looking for places the adults couldn't see, not because they wanted to do anything bad but because they wanted to know they could.

Shane hugged his parents goodbye and assured them that he would be fine, just like he was last year—he hadn't been fine, he'd been miserable, but there'd been hockey so it had been worth it—and then watched them drive away with only the smallest pit of fear in his stomach. He was hopeful. He was optimistic.

And then Shane locked eyes with Ilya, and something in that look told him that he was wrong, that he shouldn't be sure of anything, that this person was going to divide his life into two pieces and he was helpless to stop it.

He didn't know, yet, that the boy he was looking at was Ilya Rozanov. He just saw a scowl, light brown curls, and hands shoved into the pocket of his sweatshirt. And yet even motionless Shane could tell he'd move with a feral kind of grace. There was something about him that was paradoxical, something Shane thought maybe he could've figured out if Ilya hadn't caught him staring.

Shane wanted to look away, but the glare he got was a challenge. As far away as he was, he couldn't tell anything about the boy's eyes beyond their sharpness. Shane only lasted a few seconds before he turned away, pretending to adjust his bag on his shoulder. When he looked back, the boy was staring somewhere else, careless, impassive, while a woman who looked like him with all the vitality leached out patted his shoulder and said things he plainly wasn't listening to.

Then everyone was herded to the dorms so they could get settled, meet their roommates,

but mostly to unpack their skates and get on the ice as soon as possible. The first practice was only an hour after drop-off, but not a single person complained. This was the camp you went to if you were serious about hockey, if you lived and breathed it. Shane felt his shoulders finally relax as he stepped onto the ice and glided to the center of the rink to be sorted onto a team.

He didn't learn the other boy's name until the end of practice. They'd been sorted into different groups, kept entirely separate as they did drills in stations, each group rotating with a volunteer junior coach from the CHL. But then someone shouted, "Rozanov! Stop showing off!" and Shane turned to see him, the boy from earlier, skating backwards circles around his group. It didn't look, to Shane, like he was showing off at all. It looked like he was just that good.

Shane wanted to go skate next to him, to see if he could go that first, take turns that tight and controlled, but he just stood there and watched like everyone else. Then, out of nowhere, one of the kids in Rozanov's group stuck his stick out and hooked Rozanov's ankle, sending him flying. He hit the ice and skidded towards Shane. Before he even stood up, he shook off his gloves and tightened his bare hands into fists so tight his knuckles went white.

Shane moved forward, reached out a hand. "That was dirty," he said, and then winced at how stupid and childish his voice sounded.

Rozanov shook him off. "I do not need your help," he said, his accent thick. He paused and stared at Shane.

"Hollander," Shane supplied.

For a moment, Shane thought Rozanov was going to take his hand. He lived in a world where he got to pull this boy to his feet with all his strength, where they skated off together, and he couldn't think of what would happen beyond that point but Shane thought probably it would be good. Instead, Rozanov got up on his own and shoved Shane backwards, hard. "Fuck off, Hollander," he said, loud enough that everyone heard, even the coaches.

Someone took Rozanov off to talk to him about his language. One of the nicer kids from Shane's group—McKenzie, he thought—asked if he was okay. Someone else said Rozanov was an asshole, and they said it the right way, so only the players could hear. Shane just stood there long enough to be sure he'd blinked all of the tears out of his eyes, and then he went back to hockey.

He didn't have another conversation with Rozanov until the last day of camp. It was only a week, and he could tell that they'd been kept deliberately apart. That didn't mean Shane

didn't watch him, though. He couldn't stop himself. He was fascinated by Rozanov, the way he played and the way he talked and the way he always seemed to catch Shane in the act of looking at him. They never spoke, though, or even got close enough for Shane to try.

And then there was the tournament on the last day of camp. Shane's team had sailed into the final game, as had Rozanov's. Shane was humble but he wasn't stupid; he knew he and Rozanov were the best in their age group even if they were barely 14. The coaches finally cared more about winning than they did keeping Rozanov out of trouble, so it was the two of them facing off at the beginning of the game.

"Hollander," Rozanov said, looking Shane up and down. "I will not ask to pick you up off ice when I beat you."

"That won't happen," Shane responded. He knew it wasn't a cool comeback, but he didn't care. He wanted the puck to drop. He wanted, finally, the chance to measure himself against Rozanov, to see who could skate faster, shoot harder, play better.

It was a magnificent game. Shane would've known it with his eyes closed, that was how good he felt. Rozanov felt it, too. Shane could tell by the smile on his face as he pushed Shane into the boards and they fought for the pick. It was the first time Shane had seen any expression on Rozanov's face but a scowl. Even then, he barely registered it because they were scrapping for the puck and there wasn't anything more important to him than skating away with it.

The third period ended and Shane almost collapsed onto the ice. His team had won, but barely. He and Rozanov had been trading goals back and forth the entire time. Shane thought that if the game had been even one minute longer, Rozanov would've scored again and they would've gone into overtime.

Instead, it was over. Shane's team gathered around him and slapped his back, his helmet, anywhere they could reach. They cheered for him and told him he was so good, the way he played was crazy, he was unstoppable. But nothing mattered more than what he got from Rozanov: a single handshake, half a smile, "See you next summer."

Shane left camp without friends, but he left knowing Ilya Rozanov was out there, and that was almost better.

2006

Ilya's aunt had been shocked when he'd asked to go back to camp. She said she'd sent him to

try and make him feel better, and he came back sullen as ever. What, then, was the point? Ilya didn't mention the fact that nothing in the world could've made him feel better that long, fucking terrible year. Instead he said in a flat, unaffected tone, "Maybe it will work this year." Ilya's father was still sending money for hockey, and his aunt didn't argue.

Aunt Masha was not warm, but she was kind, and some part of Ilya felt badly for not giving her any kind of affection. It wasn't a big enough part to override the anger and fear that he'd felt the moment his father had sent him to this strange, boring country. The only place he felt at home was a rink, and that wasn't because he loved hockey, it was because they were the same everywhere. The only time hockey had given him true joy was on the last day of that stupid camp.

So Ilya sat on the bench in the changing room and laced up his skates and waited for Shane Hollander.

He'd been the talk of the locker room so far, or as much of the talk as Ilya could understand. He did great in one-on-one conversations, now, but the overlapping chatter was much harder to decipher. He got the general sense, though, which was that everyone was very impressed Hollander had gone to the World Junior's Selection Camp, even if he hadn't been picked for the team. It was rare for fifteen year olds to get anywhere near World Junior's, which at this point was mostly full of people in their first few years in the NHL and very few phenomenal younger players. People knew that title belonged to Hollander. Ilya knew it better than anyone.

When Hollander walked through the door he looked shocked by the attention. He stood there with his bag slung over his shoulder like a deer in headlights while people clapped him on the shoulder and asked about the coaches, the kinds of drills they did, if he thought the people who got picked over him deserved to be there. He gave very short, polite answers, and then when it didn't look like people were going to back off enough for him to start getting dressed, he did the last thing anyone expected: he walked over to Ilya and he set down his things.

Hollander didn't say anything as he started to pull out his gear, but he did heave a big, pitiful sigh, and Ilya couldn't help himself. He said, "Is hard, all the attention?"

"A little," Hollander answered, a glimmer of truth in his answer, but then Ilya watched as that glimmer went away and he added, "It was just a great opportunity, really."

Ilya rolled his eyes. Hollander had been looking, and he definitely noticed. They quietly put their gear on, side by side. Ilya waited after Hollander was done lacing up his skates to walk out to the rink with him. He couldn't say why, but the idea of leaving Hollander pathetic and alone in the changing room to get hounded by mediocre Canadian teens was made him a little bit sad. "You think they will put us on the same team this year?" Ilya asked as they walked.

Hollander waited until he had one leg over the boards to look back and say, “Of course not. They have to make it fair for everyone else.”

Then he pushed off onto the ice, and was gone.

He was right, obviously. They kept Ilya in different groups to Hollander, made it so that they were only scrimmaging under each other in controlled conditions, with objectives that were the execution of complicated plays rather than the simple direction Ilya loved, which was to score at any cost. Still it was the best time Ilya had had in a year, observing Hollander out of the corner of his eye, doing something flashy and stupid and incredible to watch him do something right back.

All of it improved Hollander’s reputation, but it didn’t touch Ilya’s. He still sat alone at meals and glared at anyone who got close. He didn’t hang out with any of the boys in his group. He said yes to their invitations only once, the night they all snuck out and got drunk—it was in some local sports bar where a mediocre rich kid from British Columbia palmed who knew how much money to the man at the door, and the vodka was shit, even he knew that—but he’d left them all there and snuck back in his dorm by himself, so it didn’t make him any friends.

It wasn’t until the last day of camp that Hollander approached him outside of the rink. He sat down next to Ilya at breakfast, his tray a veritable shitshow of fruits and vegetables and scrambled eggs, and said, “I know you hate me, but I have to know one thing.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows, because what ever happened to hello, and then he said, “I do not think of you, Hollander.”

“Why weren’t you at that selection camp too?” Shane asked, ignoring the lie Ilya had just told him. “Half the guys that got selected- you belong there.”

Ilya shook his head. “I am not eligible.”

“What do you mean, not eligible?”

“I am Russian,” Ilya said flatly. “You know this.”

It was very clear that Hollander kind of hadn’t. He actually scratched his head like a morning cartoon and said, “Peterson told me you live in Ontario.”

“Ya ne vsegda tak delal,” Ilya said, *I haven’t always*. He wasn’t sure he could have said it in English, even if he technically knew all the right words. English was the language he struggled with, got through, the language of after. Anything real, he felt in Russian. Except for this conversation, which seemed to be in some third, strange place that wasn’t necessarily before or after.

“Are you going to play for Russia?” Shane asked, and the suggestion seemed to perk him up a little bit. Ilya was pleased to get direct confirmation that he’d been right, and Hollander liked playing against Ilya just as much as Ilya did against him.

But there was one problem: “No,” Ilya was not playing for Russia.

Masha would not have allowed it, not even if his father had asked to have Ilya back. And his father had not asked. Alexei was the only one who called, and that was only when he was drunk. And if he did go back to Russia, where it was all before, nothing but before, without the one person who had made before bearable, Ilya didn’t know if he would make it back out.

“Okay, then, can you switch your eligibility?” Hollander asked, like this was an easy problem to solve.

And maybe it was, Ilya really wouldn’t know. Masha only engaged in hockey because she didn’t have to pay for it and it kept Ilya busy. She didn’t know if he was good or not, and she’d never asked. Ilya cocked his head to the side and said, “What, and play with bad players for boring country?”

“I’m going to make it next year,” Hollander said, and Ilya could tell he wasn’t bragging. “The coach told me I was. He said I was the best prospect he’d seen in years. I told him he should come see this guy I play with at camp.”

“We do not play together,” Ilya said. It was the only thing he could think to say.

“I want to,” Hollander responded. Like it was simple, like it was easy.

Ilya couldn’t speak. He took a sip of coffee, instead, and looked out the window as if he saw something so much more interesting than this conversation. He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to play with Hollander instead of against him. He would not let himself. He didn’t deserve it.

Hollander took Ilya’s long silence as a dismissal. He and his disgusting breakfast got up from

the table, but before he walked away he said, “Think about it,” and knocked twice on the table.

Ilya tried not to think about it, tried to tell himself he’d already decided, but first it didn’t work and then it ruined his breakfast, so he got up, dumped his tray, and headed to the rink.

At the end of that year of camp, Ilya’s team was victorious. His teammates all jumped on him in the change room, smothering him, and Ilya was surprised to find that he liked it. He enjoyed leading the team, cracking jokes, having the bright beam of their attention on him. And it really had been a great fucking game. Ilya had scored a hat trick and their goalie had gone crazy, made some spectacular saves that made it so three was enough goals to win the whole thing.

A few of Ilya’s teammates said they hoped they’d be on his team the next summer so they could be back-to-back champions on their last year of camp. A few more said that Ilya would win for sure, since Shane was probably going to get selected for World Junior’s and not come back. Ilya didn’t respond to any of it. He checked his phone and saw that Masha was waiting by the car, had already loaded his stuff and signed him out.

Then he left without saying goodbye.

Chapter 2: world juniors

Chapter Summary

the last year of hockey camp, the first year of world junior's, the same two idiot hockey players <3

2007

Shane's mom was the one who was the most upset about his last year at camp. She kept talking about how small he'd looked the first time they dropped him off, how much bigger he was now. She was so rarely sentimental, and no one was really sure how to stop her, so Shane endured it for the entire drive, sharing a look with his dad in the rearview mirror every now and then and breathing a sigh of relief when she moved onto possible sponsorship opportunities.

If anyone had asked Shane—asked and actually been looking for a real answer instead of the nice one, which he was learning to tell the difference between—he would've said that no, he wasn't that upset. Hockey had exploded in the past year. Or he had exploded within it, whichever metaphor made the most sense to describe how many people were talking about Shane, predicting a massive professional future. People kept using the word "generational." The end of camp didn't really compare.

But there was one reason Shane had insisted on making time to go back. He'd been keeping tabs on that reason all year. If Shane had exploded, Ilya Rozanov was a stick of dynamite with a lit fuse. The only thing Shane could imagine that was better than competing against him again was getting to be on the same team, especially since he'd heard that Rozanov was going to start playing with a CHL team next season.

Shane had the same roommate from the year before, a goalie named Mitchell who lay down in the net too often and was always getting yelled at for it. He was neat, though, and he mostly kept to himself. The only annoying thing he did was spend hours on his bed talking to his girlfriend, but they were repetitive conversations that were easy for Shane to drown out. Someone told Shane that Rozanov was rooming with McKenzie, one of the closest people Shane had to a camp friend. People were saying McKenzie was going to get eaten alive. Shane tried really hard not to be jealous.

Everyone made it to the first practice, though. There was the usual introduction of staff and junior coaches, some of whom were Shane's teammates from World Junior's. hey gave him

nods as if to say, don't worry, we won't coach you too much, and Shane saw everybody else notice it, too. Then there was the usual speech about sportsmanship and effort and teamwork, and Shane had made it as long as he could without looking at Rozanov, so he turned. He looked.

Rozanov, already staring at him, made a big show out of rolling his eyes. And Shane tried, he really did, but he couldn't help it. He laughed. He did a really bad job hiding his face in his arm and disguising it as a cough. A smirk spread across Rozanov's face.

Out of something—retaliation, frustration, curiosity—Shane skated over to Moreau, one of the guys on his line from last year's selection camp. He was just old enough to be working as a junior coach, and he was probably doing it to win brownie points with the senior coaches. Shane leaned in close and asked, quietly, "What are the chances Rozanov and I are in the same practice group this year?"

Moreau turned to Shane, confused. "Zero. Everyone knows you hate each other, man. We would never do that."

"What if you did? Is it too late to change the groups?" Shane pressed. He didn't bother to correct Moreau, because it wouldn't have done any good. Rozanov had gotten in a fight with Hollander and then they couldn't stop trying to crush the other at every available opportunity. They were rivals. That was how the story went.

"I could talk to Kenilworth," Moreau said, but he still didn't sound convinced. "Why would I, though?"

Shane shrugged. "It's nice to have competition around, and he's the best I've got."

Moreau skated away, but not before muttering, "You crazy son of a bitch." Shane had been called worse for much smaller reasons, and what was more, he kind of agreed, so he didn't worry about it.

And sure enough, when they read out the groups, Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov were first up for a passing drill, stuck together in the same practice group for the rest of the week. Something about Rozanov was different this summer, Shane realized quickly. He played more reserved, with more control. The best way Shane could think of to describe it, after watching Rozanov once again take the puck from one of the better guys in the group, was intention. Rozanov understood what he wanted. He was picking his battles, and he was picking them hard. Shane could feel himself getting better, even after one practice, because he was learning what Rozanov was going to go after, and then he went after it himself.

It was hard for anyone not to thaw after that kind of a practice, and Rozanov was no exception. He threw his shoulder into Shane's as they were walking back to the change room, hard enough that Shane almost stumbled into the wall. He didn't, though, so he just smiled and said, "Nice work out there."

"Nice?" Rozanov repeated. "Not 'nice.' Was beautiful. I played perfectly."

"You passed it to the wall," Shane pointed out, even though that one hadn't been entirely his fault.

Rozanov flapped a hand in the air, dismissive. "The wall needs pass too, sometimes."

Shane laughed, and he didn't realize until he saw Rozanov's expression—surprised, proud—that he was doing it entirely unselfconsciously. One day on the ice had torn down whatever walls they'd spent two years building. "Do you want to, uh... do you want to maybe?"

"Hollander, you are freaking out," Rozanov said. He started stripping off his gear, without seeming to care at all who was looking. Shane turned to face the lockers. "We are on the same team. We will eat together."

They ate together that day, and the next day, and the one after that. It was as easy as breathing, even when Rozanov spent the entire meal making fun of him, even when people stared and whispered and always seemed to be asking questions about what the hell the two of them were doing together when they were supposed to hate each other.

Shane brought it up one morning at breakfast, the way everyone thought about them. Rozanov picked up his bowl and drank his leftover cereal milk. Shane made a disgusted noise that didn't seem to register with him, because he just said, "I do hate you."

"No you don't," Shane said, smiling in spite of himself.

Rozanov raised his eyebrows, his ridiculously expressive face a parody of disdain. "I do. You are like- what is the bug that sucks your blood?"

"A tick? That's gross, Rozanov."

"Yes, tick! You hang onto me and suck all my greatness for yourself," Rozanov said, and

maybe Shane had failed biology—no time to do homework when there was always more hockey—but he thought Rozanov might have been onto something. There was a kind of symbiosis to their relationship on the ice, complimentary. They made each other better in a way that couldn't survive without the other.

Instead of saying any of that, he said, "Ew. You're disgusting."

Rozanov doubled down, shoving his fingers against Shane's neck, pinching and making kissy sounds, going, "This is you, Hollander," and it was funny until Shane realized how badly he wanted it to not be a joke, Rozanov's hands and lips and every other part of him as close as possible. Shane jerked himself backwards so hard his chair squeaked. Rozanov yanked his hands away almost as quickly.

"I, uh. I have to go back to- I left something in my room, I think," Shane said, and then he all but ran out of the dining hall.

Practice that day was depressingly normal. Both of them played well, but nowhere near what they were capable of. Not only that, but the threat of the last day of camp was looming, no promise of next year to make Shane feel okay about leaving things the way they were. Rozanov must have thought he was so pathetic, so desperate, and on the year they were finally on the same team. Shane wanted so much, but nothing more than what he and Rozanov both wanted, what they knew they were capable of: to change the fucking game.

The knock sounded on Shane's door at 10:30, just after lights out. It was just two quick knocks, loud enough that Shane's roommate looked up from the call he was on with his girlfriend before very obviously deciding to ignore it. Shane pulled on a shirt and opened the door ever so slightly so he could peer out. "What the fuck are you doing here, Rozanov?" he hissed.

"I came to talk about the games tomorrow," Rozanov started, but Shane clapped a hand over his mouth and pushed him into the hallway.

"Oh my god, shut the fuck up," Shane said, in the sternest whisper he could manage. He eased the door closed behind them so Mitchell wouldn't hear. "You're not supposed to be here. Go away."

Rozanov licked Shane's palm and looked exceedingly satisfied as Shane yelped and pulled his hand away. "You need to relax, Hollander. People sneak out every night. Coaches do not care."

"We could get kicked out of camp."

“Yes, they would kick out star player one night before the last day. Very smart choice for them.”

Shane’s heartbeat had slowed down enough that he could understand the sarcasm in Ronzanov’s voice and the logic in his argument. He still, however, did not want to have any kind of conversation in the hallway, and his room was out of the question, so he said “Come with me” and started walking toward the exit stairwell. Rozanov followed without protest until Shane started walking up the stairs instead of down. It was easy, though, to ignore him and just keep walking, especially when Shane started taking the stairs two at a time, practically taunting Rozanov into keeping up with him.

They emerged onto the roof out of breath, jostling each other to see who could get out of the door first. Shane won, but not because he was faster. As soon as he figured out where they were Rozanov paused, face slack, taking in the view. It wasn’t much—trees, campus, cars driving by—by there were also plenty of cars, and that was where Rozanov’s eyes went first.

“Are they the same stars as in Russia?” Shane asked.

It felt like the wrong thing to say as soon as it came out of his mouth, but Rozanov just tipped his chin back to consider them harder, spinning so he had his back to Shane, nothing in front of him but the roof’s edge. “I think so, yes. I know that one.” He pointed to Orion’s Belt.

“I think it’s not the same everywhere,” Shane said, like an idiot.

Rozanov ignored him, thankfully. He said, still not looking at Shane, “I do not want to let this morning cause problems.”

It seemed as close as he was going to get to an apology, judging by his tone, and yet Shane didn’t want to accept it. He wanted them to do nothing but move past it, exist only in relation to hockey, the easiest and purest relationship he had. He was afraid what would happen if they were more. But he couldn’t just say nothing, so he explained, “One of the older guys showed me this place, my first year here. I guess the lock on the door is broken or something.”

“I thought you wanted to murder me,” Rozanov said.

“I do, a little,” Shane responded, and he wasn’t totally lying. “But I never would. Then I wouldn’t get to play with you, so.”

Shane was startled by his awareness of Rozanov's body, even the small things, like the way a muscle jumped in his jaw as he asked, "Do you still want me to play for Canada?"

"Yes," Shane said, the easiest answer in the world.

"I do not know how it would be possible," Rozanov admitted. "How could I ask my family something like that?"

"What do you mean?"

"My father, back in Russia. He is with my brother." There was a pause where Rozanov's features drew in, like he was holding something back or maybe pushing it down, but less than a second later it was gone. "They already hate that I am gone."

"Then why haven't you gone back?"

"I can't," Rozanov said, fast and sharp.

Shane couldn't stop himself. He stepped forward and put a hand on Rozanov's shoulder, fully expected it to get shaken off. When it wasn't, Shane said, "Do you miss it?"

"Yes," Rozanov said, and then just as quickly, "No. It is too complicated. You have too many questions."

"I'm sorry," Shane offered, but Rozanov shook his head.

"Is fine. Not your fault. I am... is probably best you stay away from me." The light tone Rozanov was putting on only broke at the very end. His accent got thicker, as though he was working harder to translate what was in his head, or maybe it was that he didn't feel like he had to try so hard. Whatever the reason, it made Shane want to cry, but he took a deep breath and let it pass.

"I don't think I could if I tried," he admitted. It came out no louder than a whisper.

Rozanov turned, the expression on his face a warning and an admission all at once. "Shane,"

he said, and that was all he said before Shane tentatively reached out and Roznov ducked into him headfirst.

They were gripping each other so hard Shane wasn't sure he could say they were holding one another, and yet somehow it was exactly right. "Ilya," Shane said quietly into his hair, and then he understood why it was also right to stop there. They had said everything they could to each other. They were used to holding back, to having only one week a year where they played hockey, watched each other. This was so much. It was enough.

The next day was a foregone conclusion. They won the tournament so decisively, so spectacularly, that some people didn't even stay for the final game. It was their loss; the game that Shane and Ilya played together was brutal, beautiful, new.

They ended that summer each with an arm around the other's shoulder and a trophy between them. And when Shane stopped Ilya on the way out of the change rooms—he had this stupid, nervous look on his face, he could tell from the way Ilya smiled at him—to say he wasn't sure when they'd see each other again but he hoped it'd be soon, Ilya rolled his eyes. "You have phone, yes?" he said, and slid his own cell phone out of his pocket. "Put your number in."

Shane saved his contact in Ilya's phone under **Shane Hollander**. Ilya chose **Better Hockey Player Rozanov**.

"We'll see about that," Shane said, and then, a little more serious and a little more sad, "Bye, Ilya."

He was rewarded with one of Ilya's half smiles and the response, "Goodbye, Shane Hollander."

2008

Ilya wasn't nervous. He didn't have the capacity to be; the situation was already so ridiculous. The fact that he was about to get on a bus to a selection camp he had no business being at, the speed with which everything had fallen into place. The knowledge that he'd see Shane in a few hours after a year of sporadic texting, watching as many of his games as Ilya could get his hands on.

He'd done plenty of things in the intervening year, of course. All of a sudden being brooding and mysterious at school, especially the fact that he only managed to go to about half the classes, meant girls liked him, and that was fun. So did the captain of the lacrosse team,

which was more fun only because of the sneaking around. And there had been hockey, which was getting better even without Hollander around. Even if “better” was nowhere near as good.

Masha helped Ilya load his bags under the bus and then, something she hadn’t done since the awful day Ilya had arrived in this country, she put one hand on each of his shoulders. “Eto dlya vazhneye deneg, da?” *This is more to you than money, yes?*

Ilya nodded, just one quick jerk of his chin. The money was how the scouts from the league had convinced Masha and then Ilya’s father, the promise that had sustained them through the paperwork and all the deep, intrinsic ties it severed. Ilya would never have gone through with it if it were just money.

And Masha knew that, because she was his mother’s sister. She told him often, “Kat dve kapli vody,” that he and his mother were like two drops of the same water. It meant he thought with her same face, his expressions hid nothing. And he wasn’t hiding anything there in front of the bus, either. Masha kissed one cheek, and then the other, and then one final time before she was gone. Ilya watched her car drive away, and then he boarded the bus.

Shane texted him right as he was about to fall asleep, the window cool against his temple. Ilya wanted to ignore it, but, like always, he’d clicked the message open before he could muster any kind of meaningful resistance. *Just got here*, it read. *Are you on your way?*

u think the announcement was lie? Ilya texted back.

Shane’s response came immediately: *I don’t want you to be late.*

There were a lot of things Ilya wanted to say, that only boring people showed up on time, that maybe if Shane had other friends he wouldn’t be so worried about Ilya’s schedule, that he was going to jump out of the bus window since agreeing to see him again was a mistake. Instead Ilya just texted *i am on the bus* and put his phone away.

One of the selection camp staff had arranged for a car to pick Ilya up at the bus depot and take him right to the rink. She’d sounded confused on the phone, to hear that he was coming on the bus without any kind of guardian, but it was her job to manage the under 18s—never mind that Ilya’s birthday was less than two weeks away—so he’d let her schedule his days as much as she wanted. She had asked if his aunt wanted to go over anything, but Ilya hadn’t even asked. Masha only needed to know when he would be back, and if he would be needing food when he got there. Other than that, Ilya mostly did as he pleased.

A very serious, very young looking woman was waiting for Ilya when he stepped off the bus. She said her name was Elisa and then she asked him, in halting Russian, if she could take his bags.

Ilya shook his head and laughed. He wasn't sure if he was surprised, or delighted, or both, but he apologized in Russian for his rudeness anyways, "Izvinitye," and followed her to the car.

"My father is Russian and played hockey for the NHL," she said, still in Russian, an answer to a question that Ilya hadn't asked, "in San Francisco and Toronto, mostly. I only speak it with him, and not often, so I'm very rusty."

"I can speak English," Ilya offered, in English, as though that one rudimentary sentence would prove his claim.

Elisa opened the trunk of her car and gestured for Ilya to throw his bags inside. "I got promoted job because they wanted to be sure if you were comfortable. I don't know if you've noticed, but there aren't very many Canadians running around that are fluent in Russian. It's really hard to learn. I feel like I kind of owe you, a little."

"Is easy," Ilya said, and then he switched back to Russian. "Who was your father? I need to know how much to respect you."

Luckily, Elisa's Russian was good enough that she understood jokes, and she rolled her eyes. The rest of the relatively short drive was a rare, strange joy, speaking Russian with someone who knew nothing of his past. Hearing about Elisa's father—a middling defenseman who had retired to Florida and had a new girlfriend every year—was simple, easy gossip. Ilya had her laughing within minutes, and they kept it up until they were in the parking lot of the rink.

She escorted him to the ice first, so Ilya could wave to the coaches and Elisa could remind them that Ilya wasn't late, he was scheduled to be a bit behind because of the bus schedule. Ilya's eyes snapped immediately to Shane, who was skating circles around the ice. He was pretending not to look over, Ilya could tell. As a sort of test, to see where things were after a year without seeing each other, he laid it on thick with Elisa as she said goodbye, a hand on her shoulder, a long, lingering smile as she left to drop his bags off at the hotel. Shane skated faster with every passing second. Ilya made sure to take a mental note.

But then, when Ilya stepped onto the ice in his gear, Shane skated right over. The only tell that Ilya had gotten to him was in the set of his jaw before he said, "Look what the cat dragged in."

"What cat?" Ilya asked, because he was tired of stupid English idioms that made no sense. "It

is good to see you, Hollander. How do you feel now that you will no longer be the best hockey player at this camp?"

Shane punched him in the arm, but between the gloves and the pads and the fact that Shane couldn't throw a real punch to save his life, it was barely a swat. "I really didn't miss your ego."

"Ah, but you did miss *me*," Ilya crooned, and where Shane took an inch he was starting to realize he wanted to take a mile, so he slung an arm around Shane's shoulders and pulled him close.

"You wish," Shane responded. He didn't pull away for a long second, and right when Ilya was gearing up to say something the coach blew his whistle and everyone skated in for introductions.

Ilya hadn't been to a selection camp before but he had been to plenty of foreign, unfamiliar places where he'd had to let hockey speak for him, and this seemed no different. The only new thing was that he had Shane. The intervening year hadn't taken the spark out of their partnership. It only took two practices for Ilya to overhear one coach say to another, clipboard over his mouth for plausible deniability, "Fuck, they really weren't wrong about what they saw at that fucking camp."

Ilya made sure to give a little more of a show the next time he had the puck, stopping so fast his defender skidded all the way to the boards while Ilya lit up the lamp. "I was open," Shane said as he skated over to reset the drill.

Ilya shrugged. "So was I."

"Yeah, well, not every defender is gonna fall for your tricks so easy."

"Is not trick," Ilya argued, "is good hockey," but Shane had already shifted his focus to the play in front of him and Ilya's taunts didn't make it through.

Shane wasn't the only friend Ilya made, not by any stretch. He got close with Marleau, who played for the Raiders and was about to age out of Junior's, and Klepperman, who'd just been drafted to Toronto. The only difference was that Ilya could feel himself slipping into a performance in front of anyone who wasn't Shane. He liked the performance, that wasn't the problem. It was fun when he got to be the life of the party, standing in the center of everything to say something outrageous and make people laugh. But Ilya knew it wasn't real. It buried something within him that he was starting to think would never surface, not if it weren't for Shane fucking Hollander.

The night before the final team was announced, there was a knock on the door of Ilya's hotel room. He knew immediately at the sound of it—two quick taps, a little too soft to be truly confident—that it was Shane. Ilya's roommate was nineteen, was never around because he was trying to make the team one more time before he capitulated to the NCAA and seemed to think going out drinking every night was the way to go about it. All that to say, Ilya invited Shane in before he even had the chance to say hello.

Shane took his shoes off and then sat perched on the edge of Ilya's bed like the most awkward statue of all time. Ilya bounced on the mattress a few times to try and get him off balance, and when that didn't work he said, "You are the worst hooker of all time."

"I am not- shut the fuck up, Ilya," Shane spluttered. His blush, as always, spread across his cheeks and down past the collar of his T-shirt.

"You are all nervous, and stiff. Calm down, I will pay you," Ilya said, and it wasn't all teasing. He knew, as it happened, that Shane would relax ever so slightly, just to prove a point. Once he noticed Ilya was done making fun of him, Shane relaxed just a little bit more, and then it was almost like they were friends, hanging out.

After a long moment, Shane wiped his palms on his shorts and said, "Are you nervous about the list coming out tomorrow?"

"I think we will be on it," Ilya said, which was the answer, regardless of how conceited it sounded. "Are you?"

"Gonna be on the team? You just said you thought-"

"No, Hollander. Are you nervous. You seem very nervous."

Shane's eyes darted from Ilya's face to his legs, crossed on the bed, to the window. "No."

He was the worst liar in the world, and Ilya told him so. "You know you are good at hockey."

Shane had finally locked his eyes on something, but it was the corner of the bedspread, not Ilya, that he was staring at as his eyes filled with tears that didn't fall. "Did you come here because of me? I didn't think, when I asked... What if we lose it? Whatever we have, the awareness or whatever it is, what if we use it up and then you did all this-"

“Woah, Hollander, calm down,” Ilya said. “I am good hockey player without you. Great, actually.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Shane started, but Ilya kicked at him with one foot to shut him up.

“I am getting there, okay? This language is hard.” That was true, but what was more true was that Ilya understood exactly where Shane was coming from. He’d had the same thoughts the first time the scout called, over and over again during every step of the eligibility process. It had even through all the other feelings the final call to his father had brought up, the stern voice from his childhood sounding almost impossibly older as it said, “*Lučše by èto togo stoilo.*” *This better be worth it.*

And the truth—the real truth, the one Ilya would never say out loud—was that he’d decided it already was. With Shane, hockey was about joy, not survival. Ilya knew that was exactly why his mother had loved watching him play less and less as he got older. He also knew, deep in his bones, that she would’ve loved watching him play now.

Ilya took a deep breath, and did his best: “I am here because of me. We are able to do great things together, and that is part of it, but not all. I also will not stop being your friend if all of a sudden you score no more goals and I have to do all the work. Okay?”

It seemed to be enough for Shane, who blinked the tears out of his eyes and nodded. “I think we’re better as friends,” he said, his voice thick with something Ilya refused to guess at the origin of, “instead of whatever everyone was calling us before.”

“Mortal enemies?” Ilya joked.

“Yeah,” Shane responded, entirely serious. “All anyone could talk about at camp last year was how weird it was that we didn’t hate each other or something. Someone literally told me that if I wanted you dead, they knew a guy.”

Ilya felt his eyes go wide as he processed, and then he was hiding a laugh behind his hand. “That is ridiculous. If anyone is killing, it is me.”

“It’s neither of us, I hope,” Shane said, and then they were talking about anything, everything. Shane explained what the schedule would look like in the lead-up to World’s. Ilya told him about the beautiful Russian speaking staff they’d hired just for him. They traded NHL players they couldn’t wait to play against. Ilya tackled Shane when he suggested Scott Hunter, because “is a stupid choice! He is already past his prime!”

“He’s a rookie,” Shane tried to yell, but it was muffled in Ilya’s chest. He grabbed Ilya and they rolled across the bedspread, arms locked around each other, trying to get position. When they stopped, Ilya was on top of Shane, an arm barred across his shoulders, knees bracing his hips. For a second there was the possibility of something, but then Shane shoved Ilya’s arm away and Ilya rolled off him, settling far enough away that there could be no accidental touching. He would not contemplate the possibility of it being on purpose. Not that night, at least.

“Is anyone coming to celebrate the team selection with you tomorrow?” Shane asked, doing his best to force casual conversation.

“No.”

“I know your dad is in Russia, but I thought your mom, maybe.”

“My mother is not in Canada,” Ilya said, and even that was almost too much. Shane, as always, had more questions. “Who are you here with, then?”

“My aunt,” Ilya answered, and then, knowing Shane wasn’t going to stop asking, he added, “Masha. She does not care for hockey.”

There was a look on Shane’s face like he’d never even considered that as a possibility, the idea that someone might not be interested in hockey. He said, “My parents are coming. I think we’re going out to dinner, if you want to come? My mom likes you. I showed her one of your games, she was really impressed.”

Ilya couldn’t help it. He stood up, took a few frantic steps away from the bed, and said, “I don’t think so. Look, Hollander, I probably should go to bed.”

“Yeah,” Shane said, and then again, as though he could convince himself Ilya was having a normal reaction, “Yeah. Okay. I’ll see you tomorrow?”

Ilya stood by the door, held it open with one hand. “Sure. Yes. Tomorrow.”

The next day, when the list was announced, there were families and girlfriends and teammates all celebrating with each other, sharing in something that Ilya would only ever be on the outside of. He watched Shane get enveloped into a hug by his parents, one on each side, and he tried not to feel too bitter, too hungry. When Shane found him—because he

always managed to, no matter how loud or crowded or chaotic it was—Ilya put his phone up to his ear as though he'd just gotten a call.

Then he turned, and walked away. Training started up again in two weeks. Ilya listened to nothing and hoped beyond hope that it would just be hockey, and he could keep it together. Shane hovered in his peripherals like a taunt, one Ilya didn't rise to. He left Shane to his family, and he headed back to his room to pack. He was expected to be home by dinner.

Chapter 3: draft

Chapter Summary

2009 & 2010 - best friends, and then nothing, and then more !!!

Chapter Notes

this chapter contains canon-typical discussions of suicide - they are located in the second part, during the conversation on st helen's island. please skip if you need!!

other than that, enjoy<3

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

2009

Shane sat on a bench in the change room listening to Marleau talk about how hard they were going to have to work because this was his last year and he needed to fuck up Sweden, needed it bad. A lot of guys on the team cheered, but Shane kept his elbows planted on his knees and his gaze on the floor. They wouldn't need to work very hard to fuck up Sweden, he knew. If you asked Shane, the only team that would've warranted this kind of speech was Russia, and they'd been knocked out of contention for even the bronze medal. You could have good defense all you wanted, but that didn't mean anything if you didn't score goals.

Ilya had watched all the Russian games, and as a result so had Shane. They'd sat as far up in the stands as possible. Ilya had watched them win and lose with his arms crossed and the same grim expression on his face the entire time. The only time it slipped was when they'd been knocked out of the tournament altogether. It had been barely noticeable—Shane was pretty sure he was the only one who watched Ilya close enough to catch it—nothing more than a slight widening of his eyes, and his jaw unclenched, if only fractionally. Disbelief, relief, Shane knew well enough not to ask about either. The last time he'd tried, Ilya had gone home from selection camp with only a text to say goodbye. He'd showed up at training like nothing happened, but Shane had learned his lesson. Family was off limits.

There was a louder burst of cheers that told Shane the speeches were over, so he pushed himself to standing, bouncing on the balls of his feet to test his muscles. The crowd was huge and already buzzing during warmups. It helped that they were the home team and most of the

fans were theirs. It didn't help that the only thing people were reporting on was the upcoming draft, speculating whether Shane was going to be the first pick or if it was going to go to Ilya.

Like he was reading Shane's mind, Ilya skated over and tapped his stick against Shane's. "We will show them how they would be crazy to separate us," he said.

Shane fought the urge to dig his toe into the ice in frustration. "We're going to different teams."

"Yes, but I want them to be so sad about it." Ilya punctuated his sentence with a performative pout. Shane watched him skate away, stealing a puck from Bronson as he went. Ilya had been nothing but friendly with Shane since selection camp. They ate meals together, hung out after practice, stayed up late watching movies. Ilya had even convinced Shane to go out a few times, goaded him to let loose. But they always sat carefully apart from one another, touched only performatively.

It didn't affect how they were on the ice, that was clear from the first puck drop. The coaches had experimented briefly with Shane and Ilya playing center on two separate lines, but it had been largely disastrous and they were back on the first line together, flying down the ice, almost telepathic. All Shane had to do was tap his stick on the ice and the puck would be there. He scored twice in the first two periods. So did Ilya.

They were in the center of the crush of teammates when the whistle blew to end the game. Ilya's helmet was gone, for some reason, his sweaty hair pressed into Shane's neck. It was the first gold medal for Canada in years, and that was what the crowd was cheering for, but it wasn't what mattered to Shane. He skated out of the huddle with Ilya's arm wrapped around his shoulders and they did a lap around the rink just for the joy of it, ignoring all the people cheering and clapping. It mattered that Ilya had been right: now everyone knew what the world would be missing when they watched Hollander and Rozanov play against each other instead of together.

At the end of the lap, Ilya bent his knee into the back of Shane's so they both went tumbling down together. They were flat on their backs on the ice. Shane couldn't see a single spectator. He reached out an arm to hit the nearest part of Ilya he could reach, which turned out to be his shoulder, and said, "You absolute fucker."

"You love me," Ilya goaded, and even though Shane knew it was a joke it still caught him like a punch.

He did love Ilya. Even if it wasn't in that way, even if he couldn't even say what that way

was because the idea of it terrified him so much, he could admit to himself that Ilya Rozanov was his best friend. “I fucking wish I didn’t,” Shane responded. Ilya nudged him with a skate. “We should probably get up now.”

Ilya groaned. Somehow it was audible even over the crowd. “Can you pull me back to the bench? I did all the work out there, you know.”

“We scored the same number of times,” Shane said as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Mine were more impressive.”

Even as everyone else in the room—and really, it was a massive room—came back into view, Shane still felt a little like they were still alone and staring at the ceiling together. He rolled his eyes but still picked a stick up off the ground and waved it over Ilya. “Grab on.”

The video of Shane dragging Ilya across the ice was on ESPN the next day. His mom texted him a link to it, and Shane couldn’t tell if he was being admonished or not. Mostly they just looked like stupid kids, which they were a little bit, and the sportscasters loved it. Everyone was talking about some new future of friendship in the NHL, except for one guy, who wouldn’t stop yelling about how it would ruin the competitive nature of the sport if hockey players stopped hating each other. Shane thought that was insensitive given that ESPN was also reporting on the trade of a couple guys between St. Louis and Tampa. Were they just supposed to immediately start despising their former teammates?

ppl love us obviously, Ilya responded when Shane sent the SportsCenter clip. *except that stupid bald guy in ugly suit.*

What’s wrong with his suit? Shane responded.

...tacky

Shane was going to ask what about a suit made it tacky, but then he started to worry that was something he should already know. As the draft got closer and closer it seemed to Shane like there were all these extra pieces to hockey that he didn’t understand. Anything that didn’t concern the actual game seemed beyond him, while Ilya understood it all. The fashion, the partying, the internet. Ilya navigated it all easily. To Shane, everything about it was terrifying.

It stayed that way in the months between World Junior’s and the draft. The weather got

warmer and Shane's penultimate season in the CHL wrapped up, as did Ilya's. They didn't end up playing each other much, which was fine, because Ilya had moved out of Masha's house and moved into an apartment in Ottawa proper. He said he was tired of living in the middle of nowhere, and judging by the amount of time he spent partying it seemed like he was trying to make up for lost time. He spent plenty of time with Shane, too; they went for runs that turned out to be more like impromptu races, and played video games on Ilya's couch.

By the time June rolled around Shane had almost forgotten that he was probably going to have to move to a new city, and so was Rozanov. Boston had the first pick, so there were plenty of good natured arguments about who would move to America, if they would get an accent. Shane secretly wanted to stay in Canada, although he wasn't sure how secretive he could really be when it came to Ilya. He had this way of looking at Shane, raising his eyebrows and widening his eyes so they were huge and blue, that let him figure out pretty much anything Shane was thinking.

The one thing they didn't do that spring was touch. Or, not much beyond casual claps on the shoulder or the knocking of fists. Both Shane and Ilya were very careful to keep their bodies on either side of the couch, their hands by their sides. There were exceptions, of course: the rink, always, but also when they were tipsy or once after Ilya had gotten a call from his brother and Shane had given him one of those hugs that turned from earnest into a sort of macho backslapping contest when the emotions ran too high.

All that to say, it was surprising but not unprecedented when Ilya wrapped his arms around Shane after they were picked. The photographer had only asked for something friendly, and Shane thought maybe they'd gone a little past that, but no one said anything beyond how sweet it was that they were friends. The Metros owner said it with a little awkward lilt to his voice, like he kind of wanted it not to be true, but Shane's mom was going most of the talking and so Shane didn't have to answer. He mostly just said he was excited to play for the Metros, which was true, and then he watched people walk around the room with trays of drinks and tried to spot Ilya.

He didn't have to wait long; Ilya's chat with Boston was much shorter than Shane's. He didn't know if it was because Ilya tended to give very terse, blunt answers when was stressed or because Yuna always wanted to talk about Montreal hockey. Probably a mixture of both. But when Ilya came down the stairs from the balcony by himself with a champagne flute in hand, Shane ducked his head and said something about needing air and waited to be excused.

He caught up with Ilya by a table laden with shrimp. Instead of hello, he said, "You always have to beat me, don't you?"

Ilya turned around to fix Shane with his megawatt grin. "What can I say? Everyone loves

me.”

“I just spent twenty minutes talking to a guy who for sure doesn’t,” Shane said, tossing a look over to his shoulder at where his parents were still locked in conversation. Or maybe it was wrapping up, he couldn’t tell. “How about you?”

“Did my guy hate you? Yes, of course.”

“No, just- how did it go?”

Ilya shrugged. “Was fine. He wants me to score goals, I know how to do that... he will see me next year in September.”

September. Shane’s future felt like a physical presence in the room with them, and also next September was forever away. He didn’t want that stretch of time in front of him to prepare for what his mom kept calling “a career in hockey.” Shane didn’t want to film commercials or negotiate endorsements. He wanted hockey. That was all he’d ever wanted, and he didn’t give a shit what kind of package it came in.

Shane felt pressure against his upper arm, fingers fisting in the fabric of his uncomfortable suit jacket. “Wake up, Hollander, you are losing it.”

“I’m not,” Shane said, but he said it through gritted teeth so it wasn’t entirely convincing.

The grip on Shane’s arm tightened. Ilya said, incomprehensibly, “Shane. Take me to meet your stupid parents.”

“What?”

“Your parents. You want me to meet them, you are always saying. Take me now so you stop freaking out.”

Shane said, “I’m not freaking out,” but that was because he couldn’t let Ilya have the last word. Ilya knew that, too, and he followed Shane through the crowded ballroom without jabbing back at him. Shane didn’t confront the fact that Ilya’s hand was still wrapped around the upper part of his arm because he couldn’t or maybe because he didn’t want to.

His parents were at the same table he'd left them at, but the Montreal owner was gone. They brightened when they saw Shane but their smiles froze when they noticed Ilya right behind him.

Shane's dad was the first to recover; he stuck out a hand and said, "Rozanov. It's so great to finally meet you."

"Just Ilya," Ilya corrected, and then he let go of Shane to shake David's hand. "I have heard many things about you."

"All good, I hope," Shane's dad said, because of course he did. Ilya raised an eyebrow and Shane resisted the temptation to shove an elbow in his ribs.

Shane's mom wasn't quite so easy to charm. No matter how many times he explained that they were friends, that he loved playing against Ilya and with him even more, she was always fixated on the fact that they'd end up on different teams in the NHL. Never mind that that was over a year away, never mind that people were friends with players on other teams all the time. Yuna Hollander did not do healthy rivalries. There was a version of Shane that took after her in this way, one he was trying really hard to check into the metaphorical boards in his mind as his best friend stared down his mother.

But then she smiled—a little forced, but it was the thought that counted—and said, "You're quite the player, Ilya. I hope it's okay that I don't congratulate you on going first."

Ilya shrugged and responded, "Is better Shane stays in Canada. He likes it better here. I can go anywhere."

This seemed to be the right thing to say, although Shane wasn't sure how true it was. Ilya was settling into Ottawa, at least as much as he could when he wasn't gone playing in the CHL. The last time he'd had Shane over to his apartment they'd hung some pictures he'd had printed. One was a snowy landscape with a pond in the foreground, grooves from skates just barely visible in the composition. The other was unmistakably Ontario, a field somewhere with pine trees lining its edge, the sky a soft, thin blue. Shane had done a really good job making sure they were level, but he hadn't asked where Ilya had gotten them from, not like he'd wanted to.

Yuna spoke before Shane could try and figure out the meaning behind Ilya's expression: "You'll fit in well there, I think." There was genuine sincerity in her voice.

"I hope so," Ilya said, and there was still something strange about the way he spoke, at least

until he cleared his throat and added, “I will wait to try, though. I would like to start NHL career with one more gold medal for Canada.”

“Atta boy,” David said, and clapped a hand on Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya looked at it, for a brief moment, like it was a foreign object, but then he shook his head and grinned. “With me and Shane, it will be easy.”

And Ilya was almost right. Shane got the workouts from the Metros’ trainer and the meal plans from the nutritionist. He followed them meticulously. He did press for a team he wasn’t yet on and he filmed commercials for various sports apparel brands. He played as much hockey as they would let him. All of that was easy. What wasn’t easy, what he was scared would never be easy, was the thing that stirred in his guy when he saw Ilya. When Shane’s parents warmed up to him, like everybody did, and started inviting him over for dinner every now and then. When he insisted on seeing Shane’s bedroom and made fun of the hockey posters on his walls, when he carefully noted the one on the ceiling. When they played hockey together and Shane always knew where he was on the ice, the pure physicality of him, the beautiful way he moved. The effort of keeping that in was hard. It was monumental.

But Shane was used to working hard and making it look easy. He put his head down, and he kept going.

2010

Ilya was used to being hungover on New Years’ Day. Even when he was young and it was his father consenting to let him have some vodka, detskiy glotok, only it never ended up actually being a little bit. He didn’t quite know what to do with this clarity, this clearheadedness, especially not when everywhere around him people were speaking the language of his past.

This year, Russia hadn’t gotten knocked out of the tournament early. They were skating around Ilya on the ice, warming up, calling out to one another with such ease it made Ilya’s heart clench in his chest. If his life had been different, these might have been his teammates. He might have had a C on his shoulder, gotten to give pregame speeches in a language he could swim in rather than one where he was only barely treading water.

Shane skated up then, ramming his shoulder into Ilya as gently as he could, on the ice. He asked, “Hey, you okay?”

And that was it, wasn’t it? If Ilya had stayed in Russia, he wouldn’t have this.

Oh, he would've met Shane. At this game, or a different one, they would've faced off against each other. There would still have been that moment of recognition, the *holy shit* of understanding Shane Hollander was the one person who could match him, against whom competing was like speeding down the highway with every window rolled down. An utterly exhilarating joy. But there wouldn't be the rest of it: runs together through the park by Ilya's apartment, ginger ales in his fridge for movie nights, a tally on the whiteboard Shane had hung by the front door so they could keep track of who was lifting more.

And there was also the fact that Ilya's life would not have been his. He would have belonged to his father, his family. Lived in their house, eaten their food, spoken only when they gave him permission. He never would have been able to hang a photo of the pond on which his mother had taught him to skate, not in that house, not with his life.

He knew all of that. Still, he heard Russian, and he ached.

"I am fine," he told Shane, knowing it would not be convincing. "Thought I would try meditating or whatever the fuck you do to look stupid before a game."

"I do that in the locker room," Shane protested. Of course that was what he took issue with, the fact that Ilya had the wrong venue and not that he'd been called stupid.

"Yes, well. Is stupid anywhere."

Shane said something in response, but Ilya was distracted by someone from the Russian team skating past him, saying "vyb'ju étu dur," that he was going to kick the shit out him, and Ilya was suddenly startled by how familiar the voice sounded. As he moved away, Ilya read the Cyrillic script on the back of his jersey and the sense of recognition grew stronger.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Shane said, bringing Ilya back to what he was supposed to be focusing on. The ice, the game, his own teammates. "You're kind of-"

"I told you I'm fine," Ilya snapped, and skated away.

Ilya finally realized where he knew that player from as he was sitting on the bench during the end of the first period. He knew the last name Sayankov from when he was a child playing hockey, after he had gotten good but before he'd been the phenom spirited away to Canada. This was the younger Sayankov. Ilya had played with both when he was eleven and twelve. This one, Lukyan, had always been nice to him. He remembered him asking if maybe he could come over after practice. He'd looked to his mother, and she'd shaken her head; his

father was home, and wouldn't like strangers in the house. Ilya had moved away less than a year later.

Ilya felt a tap on the side of his skate. He looked over to find Shane, sweaty, looking concerned. "I know you said you're fine, but--"

"Gospodi, Hollander. Leave me the fuck alone, okay?"

And he did. They went into the third period tied, a goal each, Ilya having played the worst he had in years. The worst part was that Shane was playing fine, skating circles around everyone on the ice, Ilya included. Ilya had never been included in that group before. So when Sayankov, finally off the bench for longer than a minute, tried to shove Ilya into the boards, he exploded. His gloves were off before anyone realized what was happening.

Taking Sayankov down was easy. It was stopping that was hard. There was a tiny voice in the back of Ilya's mind telling him this was a bad idea, he shouldn't be doing this, but Ilya was so good at ignoring that voice, pretending it didn't exist. He kept swinging. Then he felt hands on the back of his jersey and a more familiar voice that he couldn't ignore yelling at him to fucking stop, please.

The elbow Ilya threw was pure instinct. So was the "Jesus, fuck," that Shane spat out, along with a mouthful of blood. He didn't let go of Ilya's jersey. It was that grip that finally got Ilya to stop, fists hanging bloody at his sides. The ref swept in at that point, directing Ilya to the penalty box, giving him a time Ilya didn't hear. Lukyan had gotten one good hit in before he'd fallen, and Ilya relished in the throbbing pain in his jaw, hoped to God it would bruise.

Shane scored another goal. The game ended. Ilya shook hands and didn't speak at all as he skated down the line of players, not in Russian or in English. They sent Elisa after the game to ask him about press, like hearing it in Russian would make it better, and Ilya couldn't keep himself from hurting her then, too, telling her she could take her shitty accent and get the fuck out. She managed to keep a professional face on over her surprise, but Ilya knew their relationship would never be easy again. Just another person he pushed away.

Meanwhile everyone else was celebrating, putting on their stupid Team Canada jackets for the gold medal ceremony Ilya didn't deserve to attend. They left to see their families in the stands with huge smiles on their faces, posing for the digital camera one of the younger guys was passing around. Ilya stayed behind in nothing but sweatpants so he wouldn't have to put on any country's name.

Of course, he wasn't alone. Shane stood by the door and said, "What the fuck, man?" His lip

was split, swollen around a red scab, and Ilya could still feel the impact in his elbow, the sharp crack of it.

“I am sorry.”

“You need to-” Shane started, and as Ilya’s words registered, his eyes went wide. “You’re what?”

Ilya took a deep, shuddering breath as he let the shame run through him, familiar and terrible. “I can’t,” he began, and then he turned his face towards the wall as he felt the first tear drip down his cheek.

The first few steps Shane took were hesitant and unsure, but then he picked up speed until he was standing in front of Ilya. He reached out and took Ilya’s bruised hands in his own. “It’s okay,” he said, with that stubborn belief he always had. There was no room for argument. Ilya had to believe him, so he did, if only a little. “What’s going on?”

“I haven’t heard Russian like that since...” Ilya trailed off. He hadn’t heard Russian like that since he was a child, since his mother was alive. What he spoke with Masha was a pale imitation, the barest dressing over the biggest wound. Ilya thought it all, and he looked at Shane. He was standing there, expression wide open, concern obvious on his face. Concern for Ilya, who’d fucked everything up, whose hands were in his and he didn’t even know what he was doing to Ilya with that. He never had. He was just there, always there, his stupid freckles and his big sad eyes making it so Ilya wanted to open his mouth and tell him everything. Ilya couldn’t do that, no matter how badly he wanted to, so he didn’t the only other thing he was capable of in that moment: he leaned forward and put his mouth to a different use.

Shane made a noise that Ilya very quickly swallowed, one that started as a question but ended as a moan. It wasn’t a great kiss—Shane didn’t let go of Ilya’s hands, and Ilya was being very careful with Shane’s busted lip—but it was still heady, still good. Shane opened up his mouth for Ilya’s tongue and then gave as good as he got, pressing forward until he had Ilya’s bottom lip between his teeth. Ilya grunted with surprise, with want, and it was that which seemed to jolt Shane out of the kiss. He tore himself away, fingers curled around empty air like he was holding the ghosts of Ilya’s hands. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” Ilya said, even though he did. A part of him wanted to taunt Shane, tease him into admitting he’d kissed Ilya back like he’d liked it, but a wiser part—the part that was Shane’s best friend—told Ilya not to. “I- we should go. Make nice at medal ceremony.”

The expression on Shane’s face made it clear that the medal ceremony was the last place he

wanted to go, but he followed Ilya anyways, a careful distance behind. Shane won MVP of the tournament. His parents took him to a very nice steakhouse to celebrate. Ilya went out with his teammates and found a girl to take home who was sexy and chatty and nothing at all like Shane Hollander.

The next morning, Shane texted, *Let's just forget about it, okay?*

Ilya didn't respond. There was plenty to occupy his time: press for the upcoming season and workouts and clubs, first in Ottawa and then, once he moved that summer, Boston with his new teammates. He got along well with them, at least the younger ones who'd stuck around during the break. None of them asked him about anything that wasn't hockey or girls, and Ilya was okay with that.

He did not think about Shane. Well, he did when the NHL promos with Shane's face on them played on ESPN and sometimes even the TVs at the gym, but that wasn't his fault. And there were times when he thought about Shane on runs and wondered if he'd found someone new to talk to, if they could give him a literal run for his money like Ilya used to do. There were also the nights when Ilya was alone (and sometimes when he wasn't) where Shane would pop into his head, the little sounds he'd made into Ilya's mouth loud in his ears. But that was it. His rookie season started, and he was doing just fine. Playing well, scoring goals, just as good as everyone expected him to be.

And then, the morning before his first game against Montreal, Ilya's phone lit up with a text: *We need to talk.*

Ilya could feel his heart start to thud in his chest. He texted back, *st helens?*

Be there in an hour.

Ilya hadn't been to Montreal many times, and he'd wandered around the city even less, but he liked St. Helen's Island. Someone had taken him the first time he'd played a CHL game in Montreal to blow off steam in the nice weather, and it had made an impression. It was, at its core, just strange little park right in the middle of the river. He could walk and walk and have water on all sides. When it was warm out, there was a pool, and when it wasn't, there was the biting cold off the water that made Ilya feel as at home as he possibly could.

Ilya was loitering near the steps of the Metro when Shane came walking up, his toque pulled low and his hands in his pockets. It hit Ilya all at once how much he'd missed Shane, how much he'd forced himself not to feel every time he'd prodded the fact that they were no longer friends like a loose tooth in his mouth. Shane looked ever so slightly older, but certainly not any taller or bigger. Ilya still had him there. There were no hellos, no how are

yous, only Shane striding up and commanding “Walk” under his breath like he was a spy on the run. They walked in silence for a few minutes, away from the very few people willing to be out in the November weather. Then, only then, did Shane turn to Ilya and say, “I can’t believe you.”

“Hello,” Ilya responded, dripping in sarcasm, “Is good to see you. How is your season?”

“You’re the one who-” Shane paused like he couldn’t physically say the words. “You changed everything and then stopped fucking texting me back.”

“I texted you back.”

“You didn’t.”

Ilya spread his hands, gesturing to the walking trail they’d ended up on, the fact that he was on it. “I am here, am I not?”

“You always fucking do this. You run away, and I’m tired of getting left behind like an idiot. And this time was so much worse, because my parents keep asking about you. They’re fucking worried.” Shane paused, breathing heavy, as though he was waiting for Ilya to say something. Ilya didn’t. “We had months, okay? Months to figure this out before you moved to fucking Boston, but you didn’t, and now we’re- say something, you asshole.”

“Is my job to figure this out?” Ilya asked, raising an eyebrow.

And this Shane was different, or maybe he was just so angry he forgot to be cautious, because he looked wild rolling his eyes at Ilya’s weak attempt at diverting blame. “I asked if you were okay,” he said, “over and over, and all you did was tell me to fuck off.”

That wasn’t true. Ilya had done one other thing, but Shane had asked him to forget it, and that was what he’d been trying to do. He finally admitted to himself, in that moment with Shane standing right in front of him, that it was probably impossible. “I am stubborn.”

Shane scoffed, a word Ilya had recently learned and could think of no better example of, and said, “No shit.”

“No, listen. I am trying to be vulnerable.”

“I didn’t think that word was in your vocabulary.”

It was Ilya’s turn to scoff, but he did it the Russian way, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “I have been here for a long time. I know plenty of words.”

“Not in a language way, in a…” Shane paused, gesturing up and down the length of Ilya’s body. “You way, I guess.”

Ilya decided to ignore that, because if he didn’t he would just create the same problem over and over. It could be fun, but it could also be disastrous, and after having first known and then missed what it was like to be Shane’s friend, Ilya didn’t feel like taking that risk. He said, “You kept asking me if I was okay, and I was not.”

Ilya watched the explanation land on Shane’s face, confusion as he tried to place the conversation and then recognition, empathy. It was the last one that Ilya had always been so afraid of, that someone would try to meet him in the deep well of his hurt and decide it was too complicated, too much. Or, even scarier, not worthy of the years and years of effort Ilya had taken to bury it. Not enough.

Shane didn’t do any of that. He took off his toque so he could scrub a hand through his hair and said, “You could’ve said that.”

“You would have asked why.”

“Well, yeah, obviously,” Shane said. He put his toque back on, adjusted it. Ilya did not think about how much that simple gesture had the potential to utterly wreck him. “But you could’ve- you can tell me anything. If anyone would understand, it would be me, right? I know you better than anyone.”

Ilya didn’t disagree, because he didn’t think Shane was wrong, but he did ask, “Do you know why I left Russia?”

Shane’s brow furrowed. “To live with your aunt.”

“No.”

“But that’s what you tell everyone,” Shane said. Ilya felt a swell of affection rise in his

stomach for Shane's stupid, stubborn belief in the things he was told.

"Yes. It is."

"So then why?"

"My mother died," Ilya said. He didn't like to couch it in flowery language or hide it in euphemisms, he never had. The effect on his life had been as stark and as precise as the language he used. "My father did not want to keep me."

Shane's hands balled into fists at his sides like he was holding himself back, even as his whole body turned toward Ilya's. At some point, they'd stopped walking. "That's- shit, Ilya. I'm so sorry."

It was the first time someone had said that to him in a long time. He very carefully did not let that register on his face. "I was young."

"Why didn't he- why did you have to go live with Masha?"

The memory of his mother's handwriting rose in Ilya's mind unbidden, the shaky ink in loops and swirls of her script that was usually so elegant, the way his father had tossed the note at him like it was meaningless, like it was trash. "She asked him to. Mama."

Something flickered behind Shane's eyes when Ilya named his mother in Russian, the same thing that wavered in his voice when he asked, "Was she sick?"

"She was not sick. Not like that. But she left a note, and she asked..." Ilya registered the tears on his cheeks only when a breeze blew by, tracks of cold across his face proving he'd said too much. He couldn't stop, so instead he switched to Russian: "Ona znala, chto ya ne smogu ostat'sya tam s nim, potomu chto ya drugaya." *She knew I could not stay there with him, the way that I am.*

It didn't seem to phase Shane, that he only understood half of Ilya's response. He just said, "That's awful," and then he wrapped Ilya in a hug just as tender as his tone. His nose was cold against Ilya's neck.

"She was so beautiful," Ilya confessed into Shane's hair. "And so sad."

Shane hummed in acknowledgement, one of his thumbs running up and down on Ilya's back over his coat. A shout sounded from around the bend of the walking trail they were on and Shane tensed, pulled away. "Sorry," he said reflexively, and then, "Can we go back to my apartment? I don't want to end this conversation, but it's a little public out here."

Ilya glanced around and saw no one, but he nodded, understood the risk. He explained it as best he could on the drive back, the way hearing Russian had made him feel, everything with Sayankov, not wanting to put on his Canadian jacket but not wanting another one, either, for any country. He also made fun of Shane's car, which was almost as boring as he was. He was grateful that Shane was such a careful driver, that he kept his eyes on the road and his hands at ten and two. It made it that much easier for Ilya to let it all spill out of him, knowing that Shane wasn't going to look over or try to touch him. He barely even responded except to defend his choice of vehicle, and it was exactly what Ilya needed, an argument about a practical car to temper the fear of explaining that, in one of the rare drunk calls Ilya had received from Alexei, he's said that if Ilya hadn't looked so much like his mother, he might've been allowed to stay.

Shane's apartment was exactly what Ilya had imagined, on the rare occasion he'd allowed himself to get that far. It was spacious and modern and a little impersonal, but it had a lot of light and a very big, very comfortable couch that Ilya threw himself on right away. Shane toed off his shoes and then put both his and Ilya's nearly on the mat by the door before he sat down, too. He was careful to leave a cushion between himself and Ilya's socked foot. He took a deep breath and said, "I think we should talk about it."

Ilya frowned. "We have talked about all of it. I have never talked so much in my life."

"Not that. I mean, thank you for telling me all that, but that's not the reason we haven't talked since Junior's. At least, not the only reason."

Hollander was being very brave, Ilya thought, but not very consistent. "You are the one who said forget about it."

"I know," Shane said, a little frustrated, a little contrite. He was wringing his hands in his lap, which Ilya found a little too charming and he had to look away. "I don't think we should, anymore."

Something fluttered in Ilya's chest, like a baby bird learning to fly just under his ribcage. "What should we do instead?"

"I just- why did you do it?" Shane asked. There was a catch in his voice, right at the end of

the question.

“Lots of reasons,” Ilya said. He slouched down on the couch so he could press his toes into the side of Shane’s leg, tapping him with each one: “To shut you up. To not talk about being not okay. Because you were there, because I wanted to.”

There was a long pause. Shane was staring at a spot on the wall very hard. Ilya couldn’t tell if he was breathing or not, that was how still he’d gone. The one point of contact between them burned, even through Ilya’s sock, Shane’s sweatpants. This was usually the part Ilya was good at, wanting people, knowing if they wanted him back, and how. Not this time, not with Shane. Ilya had always been helpless when it came to Shane.

“I think I wanted it, too,” Shane said, so soft Ilya almost didn’t hear him. Almost. “But we shouldn’t. I mean, we can’t.”

He was right. He was always right, and still Ilya asked, “Why not?” because he couldn’t stop himself.

“We have a game tonight,” Shane said. He looked at Ilya finally, his eyes full of unshed tears. “We finally made it. This is what we’ve been working towards our whole lives. We can’t mess that up, no matter how bad we want to.”

Shane had swallowed before the word *want*, and Ilya knew he was watching the bob of his Adam’s apple too obviously, too hungrily. “So we will not forget it, and we will not do it again. What is something else, then?”

“Move on,” Shane offered. “Stay friends. That can be enough.”

Could it? Ilya’s gut was telling him no, it would never be enough, but he was tired of listening to his body, the stupid naïve tree sparrow (*polévoy vorobéy*, he thought without meaning to) that beat its wings fruitlessly in his chest and would never fly. He said, “Okay. Friends. Enough.” His voice sounded, to his ears, like he was speaking a language that was neither English nor Russian, that was how little he wanted to say the words, and yet it seemed like Shane wanted to believe them enough that he didn’t notice. He patted Ilya’s foot and then stood up, clearing his throat.

“Do you want to do pregame yoga with me?”

Ilya would’ve rather died, and he said so, ended up watching Shane doing his dumb poses

while throwing couch cushions at him to knock him over, turning on SportsCenter with the volume on max and bragging whenever the pregame coverage predicted Boston would win.

And at the game, at the start of the third period when it was tied 1-1 and the coaches finally let Ilya face off against Shane, he could barely hold in his smile as he dropped into position, leaning just the other side of too close. "Shane Hollander," he said, luxuriating in every syllable. "Will you disappoint them?"

Shane chewed on the edge of his mouthguard, a failed attempt to hold back his smile. "Nope."

The puck dropped. Shane skated away with it, Ilya on his heels, and it was as good as it had always been, no matter what they called each other. Ilya got close enough to jostle Shane for position and he heard him laugh as he shoved back, and for that moment, it was more than enough. It was everything.

Chapter End Notes

was gonna put 2011 in this chapter but it kind of got away from me and then i realized i fucked my outline but basically i will fix it and then as soon as that's done there will be more. i am sticking to five chapters only and i can see the end! ! thank you to everyone who has read so far, you are all saying such kind and meaningful things to me. (^^ ~ ^^)
thank youuuu love you byeeeee

Chapter 4: olympics

Chapter Summary

we're covering 2011-2013 and so many happy best friendships and then also the year 2014, which is the reason the rating of this fic just changed and also some of the most insane love scenes i've ever written. strap in.

Chapter Notes

rating change!!!! be aware of that:) and thanks for reading

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

2011

“I don’t see why they call it the All Star Break,” Shane told Hayden as he put his gear neatly in his locker.

Hayden was shoving his stuff in his locker, too, and then slamming it shut before anything could fall back out. He turned toward Shane and rolled his eyes. “Most of us aren’t All Stars, Hollzy. I’ll be having a nice break, you know? Sitting on my couch and watching you assholes play.”

Shane told him to fuck off with the cadence of a nice goodbye, and then he headed towards his car. He liked playing in the NHL. He’d always known he would like the hockey, but he was surprised by how many other parts there were that he liked, too. He liked how regimented things were, how predictable. Warm up, play, talk to the press, review game footage, repeat. He liked being Hollzy, even liked the teasing that came with it, the jokes about how he was the reporters’ golden boy, grown in a lab, part machine. And the parts he didn’t like—the jokes tinged with bigotry or the regulations that chafed—he found relatively easy to ignore when he reminded himself that he was in the NHL. He was literally living his dream.

So he showed up for All Star Weekend more full of energy than anyone else there, fully expecting to like everything just as much. The first thing Ilya did when he saw Shane was put a palm flat on his head and push down, hard. “Calm down,” he urged in a low voice, “you are

going to jump through ceiling.” Shane ducked out of his grip and did his best, but he still couldn’t hide his grin.

The theme that year was Europe vs. North America, which meant Shane would get to play on the same team as Ilya again. Because they were All Stars and very important, they all got their own rooms. Ilya knocked on the door of Shane’s just before 10pm on the night before the skills competition. He walked in and collapsed face first on the bed without preamble.

“Shoes,” Shane reminded him, but Ilya just kicked his feet. Shane walked over and took them off for him, tossed them by the door. “You can’t possibly be this tired.”

“I carry all of North America on my back,” Ilya said, muffled into the pillows, “and I wasn’t even born here.”

Shane rolled his eyes, even knowing Ilya couldn’t see him. “A year without me and you think you’re that good?” he joked, and sat on the bed. The mattress dipped with his weight, and Ilya slid fractionally closer.

He flipped towards Shane, revealing half his face, curls mashed against the duvet. “A year and almost 40 goals, but who is counting.”

“I have two more than you.”

“Ah, so is you who is counting.”

Shane shrugged. “Of course. I’ll probably get more than you in the game, too.”

And that was too much for Ilya, evidently, because he sat up and hucked a pillow that hit Shane square in the head. Luckily it was a hotel bed, and there were plenty of pillows, because they didn’t stop whaling on each other until one of them burst, filling the air with feathers. They argued over who’d exploded it through everything on their schedule the next day: the coaches’ meeting, warmups, even as they sat on the bench during the skills competition.

Ilya was going over how much he lifted when Scott Hunter turned to Shane and asked, “Does he ever shut up?”

“Not when he’s wrong,” Shane answered, more for Ilya’s benefit than Hunter’s.

“I am not wrong!” Ilya said, loud enough that everyone on the bench looked over. Ilya was used to performing for a room, was very good at it, so he explained, “Hollander thinks he is stronger than me. Is not true.”

“Not stronger,” Shane corrected, although he kept his tone low enough that only Ilya and maybe Hunter could hear. “We’re talking about strategy. Finesse.”

“Fin- you are making up words, Hollander.”

“I’m not. It means like... I can only use it in a sentence, I think.”

Hunter watched the conversation with a long-suffering look on his face. Shane assumed he’d been around enough rookies to be used to their antics, but he intervened like he couldn’t help himself. “Hollander won the accuracy shootout. They timed it.”

Ilya shook his head. “Is not about skills competition. Is about pillow fight.”

“This is about- fucking Christ. You better have it sorted out by tomorrow,” Hunter said, and then he fully turned his body away to talk to Vaughn. There was a time when this kind of dismissal would’ve sent Shane into a tailspin, made him feel like some sort of irrefutable other. But this time Ilya pounded a gloved fist into Shane’s thigh and got right back to explaining how Shane’s win in the accuracy competition wasn’t good evidence because it wasn’t accuracy that exploded pillows, it was pure muscle.

When Shane showed up to his first practice back in Montreal, Hayden was already at his locker putting on his gear. Shane gave him a look, and he said defensively, “So I sat on my ass and watched you get a hat trick against every European guy in the league and it made me want to work a little harder. So what? Don’t look at me like that.”

Shane grinned into his locker. “I played fine,” he said, and knew as he said it what a gross understatement it was. He’d played spectacularly, and so had Ilya. They always did, when they were together.

Hayden knew, too: “Shut up. Watching you and Rozanov together is like watching angels play hockey or some shit.”

“Angels? Woah, Hay, watch out. You’re gonna give me a god complex.”

Hayden finished putting on his gear and slammed his locker shut. Shane was pretty sure he'd never closed a door normally in his life. "If you don't have one already, I think we're in the clear."

"You keep me plenty humble," Shane said lightly.

Then Hayden's tone shifted to something a little more serious, even a little petulant: "Hey, how come you and Rozanov work so well together?"

There was a beat where Shane considered the question, wondered how much to divulge. If he even knew the answer or if he'd be grasping at straws trying to explain the depth of it, the history. Instead he just said, "We've known each other a long time," and let Hayden walk out of the change room.

It was as true as anything he was going to come up with, Shane knew. A long time. Most of his life. At least, most of the parts that mattered. All the parts where he'd felt the most alive, they all belonged to Ilya. Shane could finally acknowledge it without feeling like he was going to fall to pieces or be set, spontaneously, on fire for everyone to watch. It was almost too much to ask for, having Ilya and the NHL. Shane pulled his practice jersey over his head to cover his smile as more teammates walked into the change room, and then he headed out onto the ice.

2012

one more 4 me!! hav 3 now, Ilya typed out. He added a smiley face before he pressed send, just to be an asshole, and he was watching Shane's three dots appear and disappear when a staffer stuck their head into the change room to tell Ilya there was someone waiting for him in one of the hospitality rooms. He assumed it was press, or maybe a big team donor, but when he shouldered the door open and stepped inside he was met with the face of someone he never thought he'd see again.

"Sveta," he said, because it was all he could say.

"I go by Svetlana, now that I am so independent and beautiful," she said. It took Ilya a second to register that she'd spoken in English, the same accent as his clipping her vowels and softening her consonants.

They stood on opposite sides of a big wooden table. It was supposed to be for tour groups of important people, or sometimes a place to put promotional material during meet and greets,

but it was still just the two of them in the room. Sveta was wearing a Raider's jersey, Ilya's, he could tell by the 81 on her shoulder. Ilya was wearing a Visit Canada hoodie Marleau had gotten him as a joke, and his hair was still wet.

Ilya moved first but Svetlana met him halfway and hugged him just as tightly. She was tall but willowy, and Ilya easily picked her up and spun around once, to hear her laugh. The sound was so familiar he felt it deep in his chest, up under his ribcage. He set her down and asked, "What are you doing here?"

She shrugged, gave a coy glance to the ceiling. Ilya remembered the expression so well, even from the first time they'd met. Her father had been running a hockey clinic for the top youth prospects in Russia, and she had always been sneaking into the rink to bother them. The staff had given her fairy tale nicknames—feya, or besenok if she was being particularly bad—and generally let her run wild. The expression had matured a bit, Ilya noticed, but not too much. "I came to watch you play."

It took Ilya a second to translate, because she was still speaking in English. He had never known Sveta in English, and it was strange, but he figured it out. He still responded in Russian, asking, "Yes, okay, but why are you in Boston in the first place?"

"I live in New York," Svetlana explained. "So I took a train. I wanted to see you play Shane Hollander in person."

Ilya blinked. It was maybe breaking his brain to hear Shane's name come out of Sveta's mouth. It could also have been the simple fact that she was there, in front of him.

She'd always been his most beautiful friend, the most enchanting person he knew. Her father had lived in America and only come during the summers to coach hockey, so her mother and Ilya's had become fast friends. She'd been over at his house often to play, and then to stay nights when her mother dated her various boyfriends, and she'd always loved that Ilya could distill what was wrong with her mother's men into just a few cruel words. After everything, the thought of her had merged with homesickness and grief so that he hadn't been confronted with the truth of her in years. But it was truly very simple: "Ya skuchal po tebe." *I missed you.*

Svetlana stood on her toes and pressed her lips to Ilya's cheek, lingering for a long moment. Then she stepped back, gathered herself, and responded, "How do you think I felt? You disappeared and I thought I would never see you again, until I went to watch my boyfriend play at World Junior's and saw you beating the shit out of him."

"You dated Sayankov?" Ilya asked, walking the line between horrified and delighted.

“Not for long,” Svetlana said, waving a dismissive hand. “He wasn’t good at hockey, it was a turn off.”

Ilya’s phone buzzed in his pocket. He wouldn’t have answered if Svetlana hadn’t noticed too, gestured at him to look. It was a text from Shane: *Fuck off*, and then another right after asking if he was going to go out with the team.

probably not, Ilya responded. *old friend from russia is here*.

Shane’s response (*Who???*) was instantaneous, but Sveta asked “Who is it?” before Ilya could text back.

He slid his phone back into his pocket and said, “A friend.”

“Is it Shane Hollander?” she asked, eyes lighting up. “Now there is someone who’s good at hockey. And handsome, too. You should set us up.”

Ilya ignored the swoop of discomfort in his stomach at the thought of Shane hooking up with his friend and did his best to match Sveta’s lighthearted tone as he said, “Oh, is that why you’re really here?”

“No. It would be a bonus, though.”

“He wants to know if I am going out.”

“Tell him yes,” Svetlana said quickly. She bounced on the balls of her feet, her curly brown hair swaying against her cheekbones. It had been much messier when they were children, and a darker color, but it still moved just the same.

It made Ilya feel tired, the game he had just played catching up to him along with the years he had missed watching Sveta grow up, change. He asked, “How long have you been here?”

Svetlana swallowed. “My father wanted me to come to university here and then I stayed. I like the people. They are not so worried about what everyone thinks. Or at least, not in the same way as back home.”

University. Ilya had never contemplated going—he'd been too good at hockey too young—but he'd heard enough stories from his American teammates to know Svetlana had been in the US for at least three years, probably more. And she'd known where he was since Sayankov, since Junior's. "Why did you never come until now?"

"I didn't think you would want to see me," she said, as guilty as Ilya had ever seen her. "But I watched you play, and then last month you told the reporter who asked about the Olympics that there were many things you miss about Russia, and you were excited to go back. Yesterday I finally stopped convincing myself you were just playing nice for the press and I bought a train ticket."

Ilya remembered the interview she was talking about. He'd been surprised by the question given how far off the Olympics actually were, enough that he'd told the truth without really thinking about it. He did the same thing now: "Ya rad, chto vy prishil." *I'm glad you came.*

They did end up going out that night, although it was just the two of them at a divey place Ilya liked because no one ever asked for his autograph but the drinks were still free. Sveta stayed in Ilya's bed and he fell asleep on the couch, warm and happy from the drinks and the conversations and knowing someone in his life could come back to him and it could be only good.

Sveta visited again, and Ilya saw her whenever he played in New York. She wore him down enough that the next time the Metros played in Boston (3-1 Montreal, 2 of them Shane's) he introduced them. Svetlana terrified Shane and Shane fascinated Svetlana, and Ilya found it all hilarious and wonderful. He could not stop putting them each under an arm and crushing them to him, their cheeks smooshing against his shirt as they protested but did not try to wriggle free. Someone had taken a picture of Ilya doing just that and posted it to Twitter, and he saved it, reposted it to his own accounts.

"She is an old friend from home," Ilya answered proudly when the guys in the change room asked who the hot girl was that went partying with him and Hollander. "They both are."

Marley just said, "I didn't think you had those" and turned back to his shower.

Ilya hadn't thought so, either, but he'd never been so happy to be wrong.

2013

Shane had only said yes to JJ's invite because they were headed into a break. It wasn't

because there had been pictures of Ilya at a club that was somehow also a boat in Miami, arms wrapped around an objectively gorgeous woman. And it wasn't because he could hear Ilya's voice in his head saying *we cannot all be interesting and fun* like he'd said at the last All Star Game when Shane had turned in early. He'd just beaten New York, handily. Shane wanted to celebrate. He deserved to celebrate.

He refused to regret it, either, even when the lights were flashing and the music was loud and JJ kept bringing him drinks that tasted horrible. At least drinking them was something to do that wasn't just standing there watching awkwardly. Some of his teammates were dancing and some of them were mingling at the bar talking to women, or fans. Maybe women who were fans, Shane wasn't sure. He didn't want to discriminate.

"Women can be hockey fans," Shane said to the person standing next to him.

Thankfully, it was Hayden. He gave Shane a curious look and said, "Yeah, I know. I married one."

Shane shook his head. "Jackie likes Toronto. That doesn't count."

Usually Hayden would have jumped into an argument about how Jackie's home team meant nothing to her anymore and she had switched her loyalty when the Metros had traded for him, but this time he just asked, "You okay, bud?" and gestured at the drink in Shane's hand. "You had enough of those?"

"Yeah," Shane said, and then, "Maybe no. I'm not sure."

"I'm gonna go get you a water," Hayden announced, and then he headed for the bar with everyone else.

The thing was, Shane mused as he sipped from his glass—it really didn't taste so bad anymore, now that he thought about it—was that Shane didn't get drunk that often. He went out with the team every now and then, but he had a strict two drink maximum, if that. Everyone knew he was pretty intense about his meal plan and actually listened to the advice from the team nutritionist, no matter how exasperated she sounded when she delivered it. Alcohol during the season impacted performance. But then the other thing was that it had been a really long time since Shane had felt normal. Or, not normal, just understood, but he would settle for normal.

Two things happened before Hayden came back with water: Shane got a text from Ilya, and one of the women who were also hockey fans came up and started talking to him. She put a

hand on Shane's arm and told him he'd played well in the game while he read and tried to process Ilya's text (*good job beating dinosor saw ur goal*). Shane had given up any hope of responding to Ilya when she pressed her body close enough that he could no longer ignore it. The dress she was wearing was black, and very soft against Shane's arm.

"I played okay," Shane said honestly. He'd only scored the one goal, and he'd had the opportunity to score at least one more, probably a few. "We won, though, which is good."

"And you're celebrating, I bet," she said. Her teeth glinted in the strobing lights. "I'm Belle."

Shane squinted at her. It really was hard to see, and he was starting to believe Hayden about how much he needed that water. "Belle is French. Oh, sorry, rude. I'm Shane."

Belle raised her very perfect, very dark eyebrows and said, "Everyone here knows who you are."

Shane was opening his mouth to respond, probably something like I hate when people say that, but his phone buzzed in his hand before he could. It was Ilya again. Shane brought his phone closer to his face so he could make out the text, *u r being boring at home??* And that could not stand, so Shane told Belle, "I'm sorry, I have to..." and then he texted back, *I'm at a club with the team. So there.*

When he looked up, Belle was a little further away, her posture a little more closed off. It hit Shane all at once that she'd been hitting on him. A feeling that would have been panic if it had been able to get a hold of him rose and then was pushed down by the floaty, easy feeling in his chest. He could absolutely handle this. He just needed to wait for Hayden. Or, it had been a while, he could go looking. He told Belle he needed to find his teammate and she nodded as though they'd had an entire conversation and reached an understanding Shane hadn't been aware of.

He walked through the crush of people towards the bar. Shane was usually pretty good in a crowd but this one was full of hockey players that were much less polite than he was. It took a little bit, but he finally found an empty spot to put his elbows down on the sticky bartop and let his head droop down in front of him. "What can I get you?" the bartender half shouted over the music, and Shane made a noise that sounded enough like "water" to get his point across.

There was a guy standing next to Shane who looked annoyed as he ordered, but then he looked again and his expression shifted. "Can I get you yours?" he asked, except it was much

louder by the bar than it had been over by the wall, and Shane had to ask him to repeat himself a few times before he understood that someone was trying to buy him a drink.

Shane was used to free drinks. He got free things more often than he paid for them in Montreal, and even when he was outside of his home city, he was a well known enough face in the NHL that a lot of people insisted on it. But this guy wasn't looking at Shane like he knew who he was. His eyes were darting all over Shane's face, from his eyes to his cheeks, down to his lips and back up. It was all the good parts and the bad parts of being electrocuted, right there by the bar. Shane said, "I'm just having water."

"Too bad," the man said, but he didn't turn away and he didn't try to flag down the bartender. "I can't convince you to have one more?"

There wasn't even time to begin to contemplate the question before Shane's phone buzzed again: *liar*.

I am not lying and actually I think I'm being hit on right now. Shane looked at the text and then added a *haha* to the end, for levity.

The bartender came back with Shane's water. He'd put a lime on the edge of the glass. Shane took it off and set it delicately on the counter, the peel side down, not that anything could make the bartop stickier than it already was. "I'm Alex," said the guy.

Shane took a big sip of his water and then set it down so he could offer his hand to shake. "I'm Shane."

Alex gave Shane's hand a look, a little bemused, but he still took it. His palms were soft, and his grip was strong. Shane felt himself blush, saw Alex notice, and then realized he had to get the hell out of there. He picked up his water and made some bullshit excuse, moving through the crowd much faster than he had before until he was standing out on the street, still holding his stupid glass.

Ilya had texted back, written *send pictures or i dont believe u*.

Shane stared at the message and then he locked his phone, put it in his pocket. It was late March, the time of year when the weather was still brisk but turning into something almost bearable enough to be called spring. Shane downed his water, ignoring the rivulets that escaped out of the sides of his mouth and down his chin. He had a jacket, and he loved this kind of weather, and his head was spinning in a way that he knew wasn't wholly because of the alcohol.

He turned, and handed his water glass to the bouncer, and then he started to walk.

His phone said the hotel was really far away, but Shane was an athlete. He could handle a walk. It would be good to stretch his muscles after a game, too, like active recovery. And the cold weather was probably also good, kind of like nature's ice bath. He was absolutely making the right decision and not running away scared into the night because he couldn't handle normal team activities.

And he fucking hated the word normal. He was so tired of it. Was it normal to win the Calder with 62 goals in his first season alone? Was it normal to hear talk about him being captain of the fucking Montreal Metros by his third season? Was it normal for him to play hockey the way he did, night after night, to get called a generational talent by coaches and fans and even sometimes other players? No one seemed to think any of that shit was normal, and they loved him for it. So what was it about the rest of Shane's life that made him feel like he was last in a race when he'd never even noticed the starting line?

Shane's phone lit up with another text: *no pictures :/ guess ur liar*

Ilya's voice was sleepy and hoarse when he picked up. "Hello?" he said, careful, a little confused. They texted plenty but they never called, or at least they never had before.

But Shane needed to set the record straight more than he needed to follow whatever dumb rules Ilya had set in their relationship without them knowing, so he just said, "I'm not a liar. I was standing there waiting for Hayden to get back with water and this girl was hitting on me and then I had to leave because Hayden was taking too long."

Silence, on the other end of the call.

"There was also a guy, at the bar, and I think he was checking me out too," Shane said. He had no clue why he was saying it. He wanted to take the secret back and bury it a hundred feet underground. He wanted to tell Ilya about how watching Alex's eyes on his lips had made him want to lean in closer. Instead, he said, "Now I'm walking home."

"You are- Hollander, is cold. Get a cab."

"It's not that cold," Shane protested. He tried to picture what Ilya looked like on the other end of the call. He was in Washington D.C., Shane knew, and had an afternoon game the next day. He was probably in bed, his phone next to him on the pillow. And then he tried really hard to stop picturing it and said, "I'm fine. I'm from Canada."

“I’m from Moscow,” Ilya retorted. Shane could basically hear him rolling his eyes. “You do not know cold in your country.”

“Our country.”

“Yes, ours, except when it comes to this. In this I am always Russian. Call a cab, please.”

Mostly, Shane knew that was a good idea. It was a long walk back, like, more than an hour, and probably when the adrenaline wore off he’d be tired from the entire game of hockey he’d played. Still, he heard himself whine into the phone, “I want to walk, though.”

There was a pause. Shane braced himself to be convinced to call for a ride, but instead, Ilya’s voice was low and gravelly as he asked, “Who was this guy who was checking you out?”

“Alex,” Shane said, which was technically the right answer but also somehow wrong, he realized immediately. “He was just some guy waiting for his drink.”

“Alex,” Ilya repeated. “And he was cute?”

Shane was already walking very fast, but he picked up the pace. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

“Was he just some guy, or was he cute?”

“Can he not be both?” Shane said, and the exasperation must have sounded in his voice, because Ilya’s laugh rang so loud through his phone that he pulled it an inch away from his ear. “He was fine. Tall, I think. Why do you care?”

Ilya laughed again, quieter this time. “You do not know if he was tall? Were the lights not working?”

“They were flashing, it was hard to see. Why am I- I don’t need to defend myself or whatever. I called you.”

Shane stopped to wait at a light, and it was like the world stopped with him. The only sound he could hear was Ilya take a sharp breath in and then ask, “And why did you call me?”

“I don’t know,” Shane said. It was the easy answer, the quick one, and he knew that Ilya wasn’t going to buy it.

“I think probably you do.” Ilya’s voice was so low. Shane was afraid he was going to get lightheaded, wondered if maybe it was the alcohol, but that usually dragged him down rather than whatever the tenor of Ilya’s voice was doing to him, even over the phone.

Friends. They were friends. That was what they’d decided, and it had been working. Shane still had Ilya in his life. He could leave a club at one in the morning and call him, “Because I can.”

“Hmm,” Ilya hummed. “And you are still too stubborn to call cab?”

Shane nodded, and then remembered that Ilya couldn’t see him. “Yes.”

“Then I will have to stay on the phone with you and listen to you be boring while you walk.” It sounded stupid, and a little bit crazy, even in Shane’s head, but he swore he could hear the smile in Ilya’s voice when he called Shane boring.

They talked about how much Shane hated EDM music and how much Ilya loved it. They did their best to describe what it smelled like just before it started to snow. Ilya tried to come up with a club that was perfect for Shane—dim, stagnant lighting and lots of little games for him to win like darts or Pac-Man, and loser music, of course—and Shane told him about the time his parents had taken him to Yellowknife and he’d seen the northern lights, so screw Moscow being colder than Canada, it wasn’t true.

When Shane walked onto the Brooklyn Bridge it was almost two in the morning. The few cars on the road sped by him, everyone with places to be, and Shane stopped listening to Ilya to take in the dark shapes of the arched supports, the liquid darkness of the river that snaked below him in the ambient light of the city. “Hollander, you are ignoring me,” Ilya complained after the third time he’d repeated a question and gotten no response. “I want to know if have ever had snow- how do I say this? Cover all of you, even your head.”

Shane put his phone on speaker and held it out in front of him, as though he could show Ilya what he was looking at. “I just got to the bridge,” he said.

It must’ve sounded in his voice, because Ilya said, “Ah. Is beautiful, probably.”

“It is, yeah.”

Shane listened to the rustling noises of Ilya turning over in bed, the sigh that meant he’d flopped down onto his back. He was always stretching out and taking up space, putting his arms behind his head or putting his feet up on things even when it was impolite. Shane stretched his own arms out to either side of him, giving it a try. He must’ve still been a little bit drunk, because it felt so good that he let out a whoop into the night air. His breath steamed in front of him, ever so slightly.

Ilya was talking when he took the call off speaker, brought it back to his ear. “How is your phone battery?”

“Fine, I think,” Shane said, but he checked anyway. It was not fine. He was running on sixteen percent, and still had an hour’s walk to get back to the hotel. “I’m going to call a cab once I get into Manhattan.”

“You will have to hang up, then,” Ilya said. He sounded disappointed and also soft, fond.

Shane wanted to say a lot of things. He wanted to describe what he was looking at to Ilya, how big and small it made him feel, all at the same time. He wanted to say that in the brief moments he’d been talking to Alex at the bar, he couldn’t stop thinking of Ilya. And mostly he wanted to tell him that he wished he was here right now. He would’ve walked hours for it. Instead, he pressed the phone closer to his ear and he said, “We still have time.”

He walked very slowly over the rest of the bridge. His phone died in the cab, a few blocks from the hotel, and when he got back and plugged it in he found a text waiting for him: *i hope u r at hotel nd not dead xo*

Shane’s fingers were still ever so slightly numb from the cold, even after so long in the car. It took him a long time to answer, and then when he did, Ilya’s reply was instantaneous:

Go to sleep

only now that u r inside warm. goodnite

Goodnight

2014

Ilya couldn't believe he was in Russia. There were a lot of reasons why that was true; the emotional ones, mostly, but also the fact that he was staying in a tiny room with shitty beds and never more than five feet away from Shane. He was convinced the coaching staff had put them together because they hated Ilya's guts, no matter how many times they said it was to make sure he had support and a solid, good influence right there with him. Shane agreed that it was good he could keep Ilya out of trouble, keep his head focused on the game.

It was bullshit. When Shane was around, the only thing Ilya was focused on was him.

Of course, the Olympics had other plans. There were all sorts of ways Ilya tried to distract himself. There were the opening ceremonies, with the ridiculous fluffy Canadian outfits he was forced to wear. There were thousands of very hot, very available athletes wandering around everywhere he went, everyone in peak physical performance and looking desperately for a way to relieve stress. There were also practices and then, finally, pool play, which Ilya threw himself into with abandon.

Canada was in a different pool than Russia, which Ilya had been quietly thanking whatever God existed for since the schedule had been released. They beat Finland, and then Austria, and then finally Norway, and even though there was a verbal ban on watching media coverage while the tournament was still going on, Ilya knew the way people were talking about him. He was Russia's prodigal son, except that this wasn't a return, it was a betrayal. Everyone who wasn't Russian was impressed by him. Everyone who was fucking hated him.

And then Russia lost to Latvia in a stunning upset, and Ilya's phone rang an hour after while he was eating dinner with the team. The screen lit up with a name that Ilya had thought he'd never see again, but it didn't shock him to see. It had felt inevitable, ever since the plane had touched down on Russian soil, that Ilya's father would reach out. Ilya stood up and quickly shoved his phone in his pocket in case anyone saw it. He mumbled an excuse and walked outside into the cold, his breath steaming in the air as he took the call and pressed the phone to his ear.

Ilya's father spoke before he could say hello: "Are you trying to be an embarrassment to me? Do you play like shit on purpose?"

Ilya was almost surprised by how even the tone of his voice was when he replied, "Allo, Papa. It is good to hear from you."

"Good? How could it be good, when you have lost to Latvia? Fucking Latvia! The only thing you should be feeling is shame in having let Russia down."

Every muscle in Ilya's body froze. His father's voice was harsh, yes, but it was also feeble. When Ilya had left home, his father hadn't seemed old. He'd seemed enormous, indomitable, a brute force of a man who had made his mother's life small enough that it was snuffed out. That was not the man who spoke to him now on the phone. He said, "I am not playing for Russia."

"Excuses," Ilya's father spat. "You should be good enough that the coach has to play you every minute you are able."

Ilya took a deep breath. His father was confused. His mind was stuck in his memories. If he'd had time to think about it, he might've figured it was a fitting punishment, for the man who had forced Ilya to outrun his past thousands of miles across an ocean to be trapped in his own, but there was no time to think. There was only his father's voice, the phone, the sight of his breath on the air. "I play for Canada, Papa. I am on the first line. I have won every game."

"Canada, Christ, fuck Canada. Do not speak to me about Canada," Ilya's father spat. Ilya could, somehow, feel the heat of his breath through the phone.

And then there was the anger that rose above any concern that Ilya might have been having for his father, the frustration that had begun the moment his father had put the boarding pass in Ilya's hand at Sheremetyevo and left him there to get on the plane alone. Ilya said, "You did not say fuck Canada when you sent me to live with Masha and never brought me back home."

There was a long silence where Ilya thought maybe his father had remembered, maybe they were truly going to have it out, but then he said, "Your mother's sister? I would never send you to live with Maria. No son of mine would live with that whore."

Ilya felt any last thread of decency within him snap. "I am not your son," he said through gritted teeth, "and you will not talk about Masha. Ever."

"How dare you speak to me in this way," his father began, the opening words to a thousand sentences Ilya had already heard before.

"Ya ne razgovarival s toboy shest' let," Ilya said, *I have not spoken to you at all in six years*, and then he hung up the phone.

It was immediate relief, flooding through his entire body. Ever since the team announcement

had made this whole fucked up homecoming real, this had been Ilya's biggest nightmare, and he'd endured it. He'd woken himself up. He leaned back against the shitty plaster wall of whatever temporary building he'd hidden behind and let his head fall back, his eyes close.

And then he heard, quietly, Hollander's voice asking "Ilya? You okay?"

Ilya couldn't help the laugh that bubbled out of him, although he tried as hard as he could to stop it from becoming tears. He was only partially successful. "It was just a phone call, Hollander."

"But it sounded serious," Shane said, and he had that same stubborn look in his eyes Ilya had seen about a million times.

"Was not," Ilya said, and he could hear himself dropping the article, could feel his accent thick against his tongue and teeth after so long speaking in Russian and found that he didn't particularly care. "Was just my father."

"Your—" Shane began, and his eyes widened so that Ilya could see a perfect ring of white around the deep brown. "Holy shit, Ilya. Are you okay?"

"I already answered that question."

"Well now I have more context, and I feel like maybe you lied the first time," Shane said. He spoke quickly, but from urgency and not anger. He was hovering a few feet further away than he typically did, teetering forward on his toes like he wanted to step forward but he was stopping himself. And probably he was, and probably that was good. This was Russia, the Olympics. They could not open up this can of worms—Ilya was pretty sure that was the saying, and it was just gross enough for the mess he felt inside his heart when he looked at Shane—here. No matter how much Ilya wanted to.

So Ilya waved a hand in front of himself, a physical letting go of the conversation and any of its implications. He said, "I didn't lie. I am fine."

It didn't seem like Shane fully believed him, but he dropped it only a little slower than Ilya had. He walked back to dinner and didn't say anything while Ilya inhaled one plate of food and then another, even though most of it was outside of what the team nutritionist had recommended they eat. As the night dragged on, with the team occupied with the ever persistent question of how the hell to occupy their time when they couldn't go out and party until after the tournament, Ilya felt the relief trickle away, the low simmer of anger taking its place again. Beneath it was a bone deep sadness that Ilya was suspecting would never leave

him, not until it destroyed him. Or maybe he if he destroyed himself. And it didn't make sense, of course it didn't. He'd spoken to his father, told him the truth, hung up the phone. Why the fuck did he still feel like this?

Neither Ilya nor Shane spoke to each other at all that night. They just turned away from one another and went to bed, silence like a physical presence in the room with them. It made it hard to sleep, for Ilya. He thought, judging by the circles under his eyes the next morning, that maybe it had been the same for Shane.

But they had the game against Slovakia to worry about, the first one where losing meant they were out of the tournament, wouldn't leave with the medal they were expected to bring home. Ilya kept everything shoved down, out of the way. He joked around with his teammates in the change room, showed off during warmups, was a dick to the Slovakia player he was facing off against in the first period. He played his part, and he played it well.

The game was a little bit of a different story. He and Shane still moved well on the ice, but Ilya knew he could do better. They'd only gotten one goal by the start of the second period, and it had mostly been because the goalie had had some kind of severe lapse in judgement and left the top corner of the net completely open for Shane. Neither of them had even had to work very hard.

And then, halfway through the second period, one of the guys from Slovakia checked Shane into the boards, hard.

It was a legal hit. Even in the blinding rage that came over Ilya, he knew that. He'd caught him at a bad angle, that was all, and Shane was getting up off the ice almost as soon as the audience was done with its collective gasp, waving off teammates that skated over to him to check and see if he was okay.

Ilya was not one of the people checking on Shane. His gloves were on the ice, and he had the player who checked him by the neck of his jersey, pushing him up against the glass. Ilya didn't even know what he was yelling at him, just knew that he wanted to scare the shit out of him, to tear him apart. He'd gotten in two good hits when one of the referees grabbed him and hurled him away toward his bench. "Uspokoysya, blyat!" he spat, and Ilya was about to turn and charge him when a voice cut through the noise.

It was Shane, yelling, "What the actual fuck are you doing?"

Ilya turned, taking big, heaving breaths like he'd just finished a sprint. He looked at Shane, on his feet, fine. The rage didn't go anywhere.

“Are you gonna answer me?”

He wanted to, he really wanted to. He could imagine the way it would go: he'd say that his father had called him and acted like he'd never left Russia, and Shane's expression would change like it always did when Ilya let him in about his family, soften with understanding and concern, and then he'd pull Ilya into his arms and—what? Fucking what would he do then, on the ice, in front of thousands of people and more behind the cameras where this game was being beamed live into millions of living rooms? So Ilya said nothing.

Shane skated closer, stopping so he was less than a foot away. He talked quietly, his face directed at Ilya's ear and not his eyes, and said, “I asked if you were okay, and you said you were fine. So be fucking fine. We can figure it out when we win.”

Ilya sat his five minutes. He came back fine. They won that game, and the next one, and the next one, which happened to be the gold medal game. Ilya played it all on autopilot, with none of the usual joy that playing on the same team as Shane brought him. He wondered what it said about their relationship, that their chemistry was so intrinsic they could dominate a tournament at this level when they were barely talking, when it felt like just another chore to get out of the way.

There was the ceremony after the game, where they all stood and listened to the Canadian anthem, and Ilya wore his team jacket and stood very far away from Shane in the line of players. Then there was press, where he talked to media outlets about what it had been like to win a gold medal. He said all the right adjectives—exciting, amazing, holy cow—and got the hell out of there. And then, finally, there was him and Shane in their tiny room, Shane standing by the door and Ilya sitting on the bed with his feet sticking off.

They were supposed to be getting ready to go out and celebrate with the team. Instead, Shane spread his hands in front of him and asked, “Are you going to talk to me?”

“Not if you are going to be an asshole.”

The laugh Ilya got in response was all frustration, no amusement. “I'm the asshole? You sure about that?”

Ilya said, “You know it is hard for me to be in Russia,” already knowing Shane was going to call bullshit.

And he did: “Bullshit, Ilya. We talked about that. We had a plan, you were supposed to tell

me if-”

“There are no memories here!” Ilya said, and it was louder than he’d meant it to come out. He knew how thin the walls were, and he really hoped whoever was next door to them was somewhere else, because now that he’d started he wasn’t sure if he could stop. “I never came to Sochi before, I never played for Russian team, there are no fucking memories here so I did not tell you anything. And you got everything you wanted, no? Your gold medal and your reputation and going home captain of the winning team where everybody loves you.”

Shane was still standing by the door. He had a hand on the wall, was braced against it like he was preparing for some great force to come and knocking him back. He said, always so stubborn, “What happened? When you got that phone call?”

And Ilya wished it had been anyone else, or maybe that he’d done a better job keeping Shane at bay. Made it harder for Shane to read him, reach into his head and pluck out his thoughts as easy as breathing. But Ilya had been selfish, and the only thing he’d ever done was drag Shane closer. He made one last ditch effort to change the conversation: “I lied when I said it was my father. It was your mom on the phone, obviously.”

“You’re fucking unbelievable, you know that?” Finally, Shane moved into the room. He stayed standing, looming over Ilya. “It wasn’t my mom. She said she texted you good luck and you never responded.”

Ilya rolled his eyes, just to piss Shane off, but then he told the truth. “My father didn’t remember sending me away,” he said. He closed his eyes. It didn’t make it that much easier, but it helped. “He called to make me feel bad for losing to Latvia.”

“We didn’t play Latvia,” Shane said, and Ilya raised his eyebrows until Shane put it together. “Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck. He is maybe sick, I don’t know. I probably will not find out until he is dead,” Ilya said, realizing it was true only as it came out of his mouth. Someday Masha would call him and tell him his father was dead, and how it happened, and only then would Ilya know why his father had called him about a game he had never played. “I do not care.”

“Ilya,” Shane said, and that was all he said.

“I don’t care,” Ilya repeated, only this time it came out thick with tears. One of them escaped, rolled down his cheek, and he turned his head away from Shane and toward the wall.

“Ilya,” Shane said again, and when Ilya still didn’t look he did the last thing Ilya ever would have expected him to do.

He dropped down to his knees in front of Ilya, reached a hand out and held Ilya’s chin in the palm of his hand. He turned Ilya’s face toward him with a whispered “hey” which ended up being nothing more than a puff of air on Ilya’s cheek. Shane crowded in between Ilya’s legs, nudging his knees apart with his elbows, carving a space to press forward and put—God, finally—his mouth on Ilya’s cheek. The kisses were open-mouthed and wet, more like licking the tears off Ilya’s face than anything tender or sweet, and Ilya loved it. He felt a tear drip down towards his chin and knew Shane would chase it there so he turned his head ever so slightly, and then-

Shane Hollander was on his knees in front of Ilya, kissing him filthily, making these little noises into his mouth that Ilya didn’t think he would ever recover from.

Kissing Shane back was unconscious until it wasn’t, and then Ilya was doing what he’d wanted to do for years, getting one hand on Shane’s chin and the other on the back of his head. Holding him right where Ilya wanted him. And when Ilya moved his hands, because he had to touch Shane on every part of him that he could reach, Shane kept his head exactly the way Ilya had arranged it. Ilya bit his lip and then chased it with his tongue and Shane let out a moan like it had been punched out of him.

The angle was strange, with Shane on his knees and Ilya on the bed. Ilya was fully hard and pressing against Shane’s sternum, knees bracketed around his ribs. Ilya was contemplating sliding down to the floor himself, or maybe hauling Shane up onto the bed, but before he could Shane was dragging his lips down Ilya’s neck and the front of his shirt until he reached Ilya’s lap. Shane pressed into Ilya’s dick through his sweatpants and Ilya gasped in a way that hurt as it tore its way up and out of his throat. Shane looked up, then, stupidly long lashes framing his eyes. They were already glazed over, unfocused, and Ilya brought a hand to Shane’s face, swiped a thumb across his cheek. He said, “The bed, please,” and Shane didn’t hesitate even a moment before getting up and sitting on his twin bed, back against the pillows.

Ilya followed him. He’d been following Shane for years, and he wasn’t going to stop now, not when Shane was in front of him like this, breathing heavily, legs crossed one over the other like he was trying to hide how hard he was, like Ilya wasn’t going to surge forward and kiss him, press him back into the shitty mass-produced mattress and get a hand down his pants just so he could swallow the whimper Shane let out, smile into his mouth. Ilya was pretty sure he’d been crying a minute ago, but he couldn’t guarantee it, not when he was so happy, so hard, with Shane writhing underneath him as Ilya jerked him off.

Shane turned his head to the side, said frantically into Ilya's cheek, "Hang on, I'm gonna-please, let me," and when Ilya stilled his hand, squeezed the base of Shane's dick, his head fell back against the pillows. Ilya pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the long column of his throat. "I want to-"

"You want to come?" Ilya asked. "Give me three more seconds and I will make that happen."

"No," Shane said, frustrated and flushed and a little bit embarrassed, his eyes only half open. "I want to..."

Ilya ducked his head down so he was in front of Shane's eyes, a silent plea for eye contact that Shane answered reluctantly. "Tell me what you want."

"I want to blow you," Shane answered, the words coming out all in a rush, "I've been thinking about it for forever. Please, just-" and then he was pushing Ilya to the side, or as far to the side as he could go before hitting the wall of their room and sliding sideways onto the mattress.

All Ilya had to do was nod, hearing his heartbeat in his ears, before Shane crawled backwards down the bed to tug down his sweatpants and get his dick out. Ilya jerked immediately at the contact, barely kept himself from crying out at the first press of Shane's mouth over the head. Usually Ilya would throw his head back, close his eyes and luxuriate in the feeling, chase release, or plan the moment where he would change positions, return the favor. But when it was Shane, all he could do was watch, get a hand in Shane's dark hair and clench at how good it was, how perfect he looked. It was so much better than any other time. It was so perfect, seeing Shane like this, feeling the moans around Ilya's cock that meant Shane liked it just as much as Ilya did, finding out after all these years that there was something other than hockey that they'd been made to do together.

Ilya tapped Shane's cheek with his thumb and swore, "Fuck, Shane, I'm going to-" and Shane pulled off so he Ilya could get a hand around himself. The look on Shane's face as he watched Ilya spill onto his stomach was naked amazement. They were still half dressed—Ilya had lost his shirt at some point, but Shane hadn't, and Ilya's sweatpants were still bunched around his thighs—and Ilya wondered, so suddenly that it made him breathe out the tiniest of laughs, if his teammates were still getting ready to go out and celebrate.

Let them go to a shitty bar where they'd get overcharged as tourists. Ilya knew exactly how he wanted to celebrate. He grabbed the hem of Shane's shirt and tugged it over his head, watching his face carefully. He was a mess. There was spit down his chin and his lips were swollen, light catching on the remnants of tears underneath his cheeks. He was so beautiful.

Ilya wanted to wreck him, wanted to gather him up in his arms and never let him go, wanted to piss him off and watch his expression twist as he tried to come up with a good comeback. He settled for pulling his briefs off and swallowing his cock in one long pull, the weight of him heavy against Ilya's tongue.

Ilya learned quickly what Shane liked, chasing the noises he liked the best, the swears and the words he couldn't make out because they were interrupted by moans, long vowel sounds that transcended language. Ilya reached a hand up to roll Shane's nipple between his fingers and he felt all the muscles in Shane's stomach tense, heard him choke out, "*Fuck*, Ilya," and then Shane had a hand on either side of Ilya's head so he could tug upwards, "you gotta get off, I'm gonna-" and he came into Ilya's mouth with his fingers curled into Ilya's hair.

Ilya flopped sideways as best he could, which meant he was still pressed against Shane. They were sticky and sweaty and they'd just crossed an invisible line they could never come back from, and Ilya couldn't find it in himself to care. He reached for Shane's chin, used it as leverage to tip their bodies together and kiss him, filthy, all tongue. He felt Shane make a face at the taste of himself in Ilya's mouth, and he laughed a little, pulled back and said, "Oh, you want to suck my dick so bad you beg but I can't kiss you after?"

"Shut up," Shane said, petulant. "I tried to warn you."

"You did warn me," Ilya said, and then he pressed his nose into the crease between Shane's jaw and his neck, inhaling deeply. "But I did not care."

There was a moment where Ilya thought Shane was going to say something funny, or sweet, something that would've kept them in the bubble of whatever they'd just done, but before he could there was a thud in the hallway and then a series of voices all overlapping until they faded out of earshot. Shane's eyes were wide. He said, "We shouldn't have done this here."

"No one will find out," Ilya said. "Everyone fucks at Olympics. We could be anyone."

He watched it land on Shane's face. We could be anyone, but it wasn't anyone, was it? It was them, Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, teammates, rivals. Friends. "How are we going to do this?" Shane asked.

Ilya reached over the side of the bed to the floor, grabbed Shane's shirt and tossed it at his head. "We shower, we go and celebrate with team, nobody knows. Easy."

Shane took the shirt but didn't put it on. Instead, he clutched it with both hands and stared at it as he asked, "No, I mean... this. Us. How do we make this work?"

“Is it not already working? What do we need to change?” Ilya asked. He was reaching the stage he always did after a hookup, where the sweat and the come was drying and being sticky wasn’t hot anymore. He was cold. He really wanted a shower. He didn’t noticed, in Shane’s expression, the little tells of confusion and hurt that his questions created, not until much later when he replayed the conversation in his head over and over again.

Instead, he heard only what was on the surface as Shane said, “Nothing changes?”

“Da. Next time I am sad about my father and you need to kiss it better, we can do this again.” Ilya was sure, as he stood up, that it was clear he was joking. And then he was more serious when he added, “We can do it more often, too. Whenever you want.”

“Whenever I-” Shane repeated, like he was solving a puzzle.

Ilya cut him off and said, “I am going to shower first, if that is okay.”

When he came back out, towel wrapped around his waist, Shane was still lying on his bed. He had the sheets pulled up over his stomach, but he sat up when Ilya walked back in and it fell down to reveal the V of his waist. Ilya wanted to bend over and bite it, leave a mark with his teeth, but judging by the expression on Shane’s face it wouldn’t be welcome.

“What do you think that was?” Shane asked. He’d waited until Ilya had his back to him, was rummaging through his suitcase to find one of the few shirts he’d brought that wasn’t practice gear, so Ilya couldn’t see the look on his face while he said it.

Still, he turned around, tried his best to be honest: “One very good blowjob and one medium good one?”

Shane rolled his eyes, tugged on the sheet so it covered more of him. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Okay. What did you mean, then?”

“I meant, like- we weren’t supposed to do this, and then we did. Or, I did, I guess. And I just... it changes things for me.” He said it like he said all important things, in fits and starts like only the perfect words would do. Ilya could feel the rush of feeling for him rise from his stomach into his chest, a fluttery, warm thing that he could not acknowledge.

There were so many reasons why he shoved it back down. They were in Russia, and even if they weren't, even if Ilya'd had an easier past, wasn't from a country where this could never be true about him, they were about to head back to the NHL as gold medalists. "Nothing must change," Ilya said, and he could see on Shane's face that he'd picked the wrong words, but they were the only ones he had. "We are the same," he tried again. "Only a little more. Friends, who fuck."

"Friends who fuck," Shane repeated with a humorless laugh.

"Friends who are very good at fucking," Ilya tried.

"I want to be more than that," Shane said simply. Ilya felt the floor drop out from underneath his feet, actually looked down to check and make sure it was still there. "All I could think about the whole game was whether or not you were okay. Playing at the Olympics has been my dream since I was a little kid, and now I'm just- it's you."

Ilya could take a hit. He was famous for it, for not falling over, for staying on his feet and playing through it and managing to come out with the upper hand, but Shane Hollander had him standing there with the wind knocked out of him and blood roaring in his ears with two sentences. Ilya panicked like he hadn't in years, since he was twelve and helpless and nothing anybody said made any sense to him. He said, "We are friends, Hollander. Friends care. But I am okay."

It was, quite possibly, the cruelest thing Ilya had ever said. He watched it land on Shane's face, the sting of it and then the stoicism that Shane drew over top of it, the blank mask he wore when he was devastated and knew he couldn't show it. Ilya pretended to fall for it, pretended that he couldn't see right through any front Shane put up.

"Are you coming to the party?" Ilya asked once he was dressed. Shane was still sitting in bed, sheets pooled around his waist, eyes shiny with tears he wouldn't let fall. He shook his head. "Don't wait up, then."

Ilya went out, and he took shots with his teammates, and he climbed on the bar when they asked him to. He shouted and danced and walked back to the Village swaying in the cold. Shane was asleep when he stumbled into the room, and gone by the time Ilya woke up. Ilya tried to catch him over the last few days they were in Sochi—asked which events he was watching in his spare time, hovered around after they did press to try and talk—but no matter what he did Shane always managed to find polite ways to escape. Ilya took the hint and found other places to sleep. He shared a shitty twin bed with a slalom skier, a biathlete, someone who did luge, whatever the fuck that was. Every night, he felt them breathe against his chest and wished they were Shane. They left before the closing ceremony, because the NHL

wanted them back and they were supposed to be grateful they'd been allowed to play at all. Unlike the way there, they were going to different cities and weren't on the same flight, so there was no one there to distract Ilya as he sat in the terminal and looked out the window at the planes taxiing across the tarmac.

This was probably the last time he'd be in Russia until his father's funeral, he thought as he stared at the sky. It was gray, oppressive, just like his mood. All of the things he'd thought he'd feel about Russia, upon coming back, he had not. It hadn't felt like home, but it hadn't felt strange. So why the fuck did he feel so hollow leaving?

Ilya thought about calling Svetlana, got so far as to pull up her contact with his finger hovering over his phone, but he didn't. She wouldn't understand it. Not because she wouldn't try, but because Ilya hadn't told her so much about his father, about Masha, about every time he'd been confronted with his past and let rage and fear turn him into something he was not. Ilya had only ever told Shane about all of those things, and most of them he hadn't had to say, because Shane had lived them right next to Ilya, been the one to bring him back to himself.

He was so fucking stupid. He was so, so fucking stupid, because Shane had looked at him and asked for everything Ilya had ever wanted, and he'd just lied, over and over.

The gate agent called Ilya's boarding group. Maybe if he'd had more time, he wouldn't have been able to do it, but he knew soon he'd be in the air, flying away from Russia and back to Boston, and he might never get the chance to fix the moment he'd broken, the memory of the Olympics that he'd carry in his mind for the rest of his life.

The last text Shane had sent was innocuous, an easy, *Dinner soon?* from the day before pool play had begun.

Ilya typed, *i am sorry i did not mean what i said.*

The reply came as he was walking down the bridge toward the plane: *I did.*

you were right, Ilya sent back, although it took longer than it should have because his fingers were shaking. *we r more.*

He waited for a response until there was no more time. Then he switched his phone to airplane mode and tried to fall asleep.

There hadn't been many chances for Shane to see Ilya since the Olympics, at least not in person. Not since the text that had sent Shane's entire nervous system into overdrive, *we r more*, because Ilya couldn't use proper grammar even when he was changing Shane's life with a single sentence. They'd played against each other once, but it had been a back-to-back game for Boston and he'd flown out that night. It had been delicious torture, fighting with him for the puck and chasing him across the ice knowing they couldn't really see each other afterwards. Ilya had slammed Shane into the boards in the second period and lingered, hot breath on Shane's neck, for just a second too long. It made Shane furious at the same time he felt the thrill of contact low in his stomach, all of it combining to make him play just that much sharper.

Boston had won, but barely. Shane got two goals and an assist, but Ilya left with a hat trick and a text that Shane couldn't help but jerk off to alone in his apartment that night: *wish i was in ur bed not on this stupid plane. want to fuck you ;(*

There was the mental image of it but also the fact that it was just like Ilya, to put a wink on a sad face. Shane thought about that a lot as he watched Ilya play from his couch. He got into the habit of texting updates during the game, when he knew Ilya's phone was in his locker. It only got worse after Montreal missed their shot at the playoffs—Shane had kind of known it was coming when their goalie got hurt, but it still stung—and he could root for Ilya's success without the guilt that came with knowing it could hurt his own team if Ilya won.

Hayden invited him over to watch what turned out to be the last game of the finals, but Shane made up some excuse about needing to do something around the house so he could watch the game alone. When he watched Ilya win, watched him lift the cup and thank his mother, tears streaming down his face, Shane could not have been more grateful he'd stayed home. It meant he could text Ilya messages riddled with typos because his vision was blurry with his own tears, *I'm so priud of yuo* and *You are the mst beautiful olayer in the league* and, embarrassingly, *Yuor last assist wad so hot*.

Fifteen minutes later, Ilya responded, just *thx :))*, but Shane knew what it really meant, that the first thing Ilya had done when he got back to the change room, before champagne or conversation with teammates or even taking his gear off, was text Shane.

It was because of that, really, that Shane went on his phone and bought a plane ticket to Boston. It was last minute, expensive even though it was a Wednesday evening in the middle of the winter, but it meant that Shane could be with Ilya in a few hours, but Shane had plenty of money and he wasn't thinking straight. He was at the airport an hour later, his weekend bag carefully packed, hat pulled low over his eyes so he wouldn't be recognized. He watched a dumb movie on the plane, couldn't have said anything about the plot beyond the fact that a girl got kidnapped in the first ten minutes because that was when he gave up on trying to distract himself and let himself think about Ilya, his face when Shane showed up, what they

would spend the night doing. How Shane could try to convey how proud he was, how happy, without sounding like an idiot.

He texted Ilya when he landed, *What's your front door code?* and Ilya responded with a picture, himself at a club, a glass of something in his hand and a confused expression on his face. *y do u need door code ??*

Shane waited until he was in the cab and had given the driver Ilya's address to text back, *Wanted to be there when you get home.*

Ilya's responses came so fast Shane's phone buzzed without stopping:

*wat do u mean
my house???
r u in boston?
do not joke with me pls
shane
is not funny ok*

And then Shane's phone started ringing. He checked to make sure the divider was closed before he picked up, pressing the phone to his ear. Ilya didn't wait for him to say hello before he said, "What are you saying to me right now?"

He sounded tipsy but not drunk, and the music was quiet in the background, muffled. "Where are you?" Shane asked.

"I went to the bathroom. Winners can skip line." He breathed in, sharp. "Where are you right now?"

"A cab," Shane said, keeping his voice low just in case. "On the way to your house."

There was a long silence, and then Ilya said, slightly strangled, "I am leaving this club right now."

"No, don't," Shane said, and he really did mean it. "You should celebrate with your team. You just- you earned it, I can wait."

"I know you can wait. You have waited so well for very long time," Ilya said, and the tenor of

his voice as he said it made Shane shift in his seat, hold his breath. “It's me who does not want to wait. Not anymore.”

“Okay,” Shane said, although it was mostly breath.

The background noise got louder as Ilya left the bathroom and then muffled again as, Shane assumed, he put his phone in his pocket without hanging up. Shane stayed on the line while Ilya moved through the club, listened as he said goodbye to his teammates and ignored their disappointment at the fact that he was going home early. It was only a minute or two later that the music faded altogether and Ilya's voice was, once again, loud in Shane's ear: “0581.”

“What?”

“The code,” Ilya said, impatient. “You will get there before I do.”

Shane nodded, and then realized Ilya couldn't see him so he said, “Okay, yeah. I'll just- uh, I'll see you soon.”

“Yes. Soon,” Ilya repeated, and then he hung up.

It was the longest half hour of Shane's life, asking the driver to let him out a few blocks from Ilya's house, walking up to his door and putting in the code, dropping his bag in the entryway and toeing off his shoes. He sat down on the and then decided that felt creepy, or cliché, so he got a glass of water in the kitchen and leaned against the counter, too anxious to sit down, too excited.

Ilya came into the house like a hurricane. He threw the door open and kicked off his shoes so fast Shane barely had time to spin around before he was walking barefoot into the kitchen. He was on Shane without even saying hello, kissing him greedily, his hands everywhere. It was impossible for Shane to tell how long it had been when Ilya pulled away to look at him—he was dizzy, breathless, could not be expected to keep any sense of time—but it was long enough for Shane's shirt to be rucked up and his hair a mess, with no air left in his lungs.

“I thought maybe you were not real,” Ilya said. His thumb was kneading circles on Shane's hip, below the band of his shorts.

Shane shook his head, staring, not bothering to cover up the emotion he knew was plain on his face. “I should've asked, but I just wanted to see you.”

Ilya's smile was bright, unguarded. It took over his whole face. When Shane leaned forward to kiss him, it was gentle and slow. He tasted like tequila and lime, which Shane had never liked before but found himself unable to get enough of. This time, Shane was the greedy one, walking backwards until he felt the counter behind him, moaning when Ilya lifted him onto it. He wrapped his legs around Ilya and tugged him closer, always closer.

Eventually, when Ilya was scraping his teeth over Shane's neck, he tipped his head forward and said into Ilya's hair, "I'm- *fuck*, ah- I'm so proud of you."

Ilya pulled his mouth off of Shane. It made an obscene noise, wet and loud, and Shane felt himself flush. "We are talking about hockey right now?" Ilya asked.

"We're talking about you," Shane corrected. With Ilya off of him he could think clearer, say what he'd really come all the way to Boston to say: "All I could think of during the game was- I've been watching you play for a long time. No one deserves this more than you."

"I don't know," Ilya deflected, "I am sometimes asshole, lots of people tell me."

Shane brought his hands up on either side of Ilya's face, lifting it so their eyes met. "Can I teach you a word?"

Ilya nodded. Shane cradled the weight of him in his hands, and thought he'd never carried anything so precious.

"Transcendent," Shane said. "It's like when something is so good that they have to belong to some other world. That's what it's like to play hockey with you. And what it's like right now, being here."

For a second, Shane thought he went too far; Ilya's expression froze and then crumpled, and he tipped his head forward into the hollow between Shane's neck and shoulder. "Ya tebya obozhayu," he said, voice thick. And then, much easier for Shane to understand, "Will be transcendent when I fuck you, yes?"

"Fuck off," Shane said, but there was no heat behind it, just like there was no danger in the way Ilya picked him up off the counter and walked him over to the couch, tossing him onto the cushions.

When they were finished, Shane lay draped on top of Ilya, his head pillowed on his chest,

right in the center of his sternum where his crucifix usually lay. Ilya had it in his mouth, trapped between his teeth as he watched Shane trace circles on the back of his hands and up his arm, the lightest touch of his fingertips leaving a trail of goosebumps. “This is more,” he said, gold necklace falling from his lips, and Shane felt the rumble of his voice against his cheek.

“I want it to be,” Shane said, and then, as if correcting himself, “It is for me.”

“For me too,” Ilya said. “Can I teach *you* word, now?”

Shane nodded, shifted his posture so he was looking up at Ilya with his chin on his arm.

Ilya said, slowly, deliberately, “Solnyshko.”

He paused, and Shane sounded it out one syllable at a time. “Solnyshsko?”

“Yes. Is something you call someone, when they are important to you. Means, ah, sun coming down?” Ilya held a hand up, wiggling his fingers, and Shane was so happy he had to close his eyes for a second.

“Sunshine?”

“Yes, exactly. You are my solnyshko, I think.”

Somewhere very far away, in the back of Shane’s mind, he knew there was so much to be scared of. There was his career, the fact that not a single man in the NHL had ever publicly come out, the casual way slurs were tossed around on the ice and off. And there was his friendship with Ilya, the thing that had sustained him for years, had kept the deep loneliness of feeling like there was some fundamental difference between himself and other people at bay when he needed it the most. There was also the simple fact that doing this—falling in love with this man, that was what Shane was doing, he admitted—would change everything about his life.

But for once, that voice was almost so quiet Shane couldn’t hear it. He was so fucking happy. All of the different words that came together to make happy, too, pleasure and joy and contentment and the way all of the tension had been fucked out of him so he was a loose puddle of limbs scooped onto Ilya’s chest, held together by his hands. He knew the voice would get louder eventually, it always did. Right then, though, Shane leaned into Ilya. He closed his eyes. They fell asleep.

Chapter End Notes

so this chapter is monstrously long but for good reason, i think. we had a lot of ground to cover. and now only 3 years & 1 chapter left!!! for those folks who have stuck around as i wrote this THANK YOU & <3 & \(^_^\)/

Chapter 5: everything else

Chapter Summary

it's done!!! i did it!!!! 2015-2018 and it took me a normal amount of time

Chapter Notes

FINISHED!!! so.

if there are plot inconsistencies with the show or things i got wrong about how the nhl works, well actually no there aren't. i did so much googling about hockey stuff and i did so much research into russian idioms and grammar so you'll have to forgive me if some or much of it is wrong, i did try my best.

some conversations have similar dialogue to the show, but to my knowledge i didn't copy any 1 to 1 because it is in fact canon divergent. so think about that!!!! no new content warnings.

please enjoy this, being the last chapter and the end of this fic.

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

2015

Ilya had known how the game was going to go before it had started. That wasn't to say he hadn't played hard; he had a fresh bruise blooming across his ribs and an eventually futile assist in the second period to show for it. He examined the bruise in the shower, running water the only noise in the subdued visitor's dressing room. No, Ilya had been able to see the future because he'd been with Shane that morning, sensed the energy coiled beneath his skin. Ilya wanted to win that day but Shane needed it, had bent his entire purpose towards one singular outcome. Seeing him on the ice with his team, Ilya knew he'd just lost to the next league champions.

He wasn't going to say that to Shane, obviously. But he was going to figure out where the Metros were celebrating and show up. It was to piss them off, but only a little. Mostly it was because Ilya was supposed to fly back to Boston the next morning and he wanted as much time with Shane as he could get.

No one on Ilya's team wanted to go with him, which was fine. Only the rookie told him he was crazy, but that was because the rookie didn't yet realize that Ilya was very publicly an asshole and also Shane Hollander's best friend, both of which combined made great reasons for him to strut into whatever dumb club the Metros had picked and scan the crowd for Shane.

It was like an electric current went through Ilya's body the second their eyes met. All the aches from the game, the deep fatigue that always set in once Ilya accepted the season was over, gone at the sight of Shane leaning against the wall, JJ next to him, glasses of beer sweating on the table they were gathered around. And, just like always, as soon as he felt Ilya looking, Shane's eyes flicked up to catch him at it. Shane flickered through a few emotions as Ilya walked over: confused, happy, annoyed, a little horny, if Ilya was reading him right. By the time Ilya got close enough for the rest of the Metros to spot him, Shane had settled on a pleased frustration.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Rozanov?" JJ asked.

"I am gracious loser," Ilya said, just loud enough to be heard over the music. "And is a good thing, too. You are drinking beer? After you did the impossible and beat me? No. I will get us shots. Hollander, come help me carry."

Shane followed Ilya without protest, waving off JJ's concern as he passed. He waited until they were out of eyesight to lean in close to Ilya and ask, "Should you be here?"

The question underneath the word was clear. It had been hard enough when they were just dancing around each other, but since the Olympics Shane had become twice as skittish, scared of getting caught. Ilya was also scared, but it wasn't as intense as what Shane felt. He'd lost worse than a hockey career, and knew he could survive it. Even so, Ilya considered how far he could go, how close he could get, and he put a hand on Shane's waist. It was just a ghost of a touch, and he took it away after only a second. "We are friends," Ilya said, and then, quieter, "I wanted to see you."

Shane's pupils were enormous. For his sanity, Ilya blamed the low lights of the club and concentrated on getting enough shots for everyone. He ordered two for himself and downed one before he started gathering the rest in one hand. Throughout his tenure as captain of the Boston Raiders, buying and transporting drinks had become one of his most practiced leadership skills. Ilya slid Shane a few shots, just so he could feel like he was helping, and turned to head back.

Shane stood in the way, hands empty. "You don't have anything else to say to me?"

Ilya looked him up and down, slowly, deliberately. “You want me to say it here?”

“It’s kind of rude to crash my party without saying congratulations,” Shane said. The only thing that gave him away was careful way he swallowed as his eyes flicked from Ilya’s hands and back up.

And Ilya loved nothing more than to break Shane’s composure into little pieces, so he got in close and said, “If I can’t get you on your knees and congratulate you the way I want, I won’t say it at all.” Then he walked off towards Shane’s teammates. He could picture what Shane looked like behind him—hands braced on the bar, eyes down, taking deep breaths—and it was only because of that that Ilya managed to make it across the club without turning around.

Passing out shots earned him a little bit of good will, even if most of the Metros were still trying to figure out why the fuck Ilya was there at all. He responded to all their taunts with his biggest, most infuriating smile, and by the time Shane got back with the rest of the drinks, most of them had decided to ignore him. Ilya knocked back his second shot in the middle of the stupid impromptu toast Pike was giving about glory and victory. It burned pleasantly on the way down, waking him up, sharpening his focus.

Shane was truly awful at doing shots; he coughed and squeezed his eyes shut while JJ pressed a beer into his hands to chase it. He caught Ilya’s eyes fleetingly, cheeks red, and Ilya knew it was a bad idea but he winked anyway. That was the last time Shane looked at Ilya for a while, which Ilya thought maybe he deserved. And he wasn’t there to take over Shane’s night, not really.

Mostly he was there to share in it, watch Shane bounce around from conversation to conversation, always hovering around the edges.

The best part was when Ilya got to overhear him do his best to try and explain Ilya’s presence: “We’re friends,” he told Miitka. “Since we were, like, fourteen. So it’s not weird.”

“We just knocked his team out of the playoffs,” Ilya heard Miitka counter, but Shane just shook his head, insistent.

“We go way back. Further than any of that shit.”

Shane made his way back to Ilya once people started spreading out across the club. His older teammates had begun peeling off to go home to wives, families, and Ilya could tell Shane

wanted to do the same thing. He stood a respectable, friendly distance away from Ilya and said, "I can't believe you're here."

"What is it you Canadians say? You are tasting your medicine?" Ilya said, and he was rewarded with a laugh.

"A taste of my own medicine, yeah," Shane repeated. Ilya knew he was thinking about the year before, in Boston. On Ilya's couch and then in his bed and then in his shower the next morning, the two of them insatiable, wrapped around each other at every opportunity. They'd been trying to make up for years of friendship from opposite ends of the couch, always careful not to get too close or say too much. Ilya felt his fingers twitch, and he wrapped them around his drink. It was a poor substitute for Shane, but it was better than nothing. "You played really well, by the way."

Ilya shrugged. "Not as good as you, this time."

"No, really," Shane insisted, "that play you made in the second was crazy. I can't wait to watch it back on the tapes."

"It was good," Ilya admitted. "You looked very stupid, letting me get by you."

"I didn't *let* you do anything. Whatever you get from me, you earn," Shane said, and Ilya knew he was talking about hockey, and that at the core of it Shane was right. He was good enough that he didn't make mistakes, and just tipsy enough to admit it. If they hadn't been friends for so long it might've been harsher criticism, less generous, but since camp they'd always been honest about hockey, at the very least. It was just that now, Ilya couldn't stop thinking about what else he could earn from Shane that night. He could think of a lot of things, most of them more satisfying than an assist. Ilya thought maybe Shane could tell from his expression what he was thinking, judging by the long, slow blink Shane gave him over the rim of his drink.

"I am going to go," Ilya said, setting his own drink down. Shane's eyebrows rose at the click of the glass on the table. "I don't want to, ah... intrude on your night. And I save my congratulations, yes?"

Shane didn't respond beyond a nod, just one quick jerk of his chin. Ilya got a text as he was outside waiting for a cab: *Fuck you.*

other way around ;)), Ilya sent back. how long can u make it at party without me?

Ten minutes later, when Ilya was halfway to Shane's apartment, his phone buzzed in his pocket. *Just left*, Shane wrote, and then a followup as Ilya was looking at his screen, *I hate you*.

Ilya was on the couch when he heard the door open. There was a brief pause that meant Shane was taking his shoes off, and then footsteps towards the living room, socked feet on hardwood floors. "You do not hate me," he said as Shane rounded the corner into view.

"I do," Shane insisted, but he was also stepping over the back of the couch and right into Ilya's lap, crowding him up against the cushions. It was very contradictory, Ilya wanted to say, but Shane was tipping his head back with a hand in his hair, so he said nothing. "I hate you," Shane breathed into Ilya's mouth, and ground his hips downward.

Ilya did his best to get his thoughts into a coherent order, grabbing at Shane's jaw, forcing him to look up into Ilya's face. "Tell the truth."

The noise Shane made was tiny, hot, desperate, but it was not a word, and so Ilya did not move. Finally, Shane gritted out, "I don't hate you."

"Thank you. Now tell me how you do feel." Ilya was used to feeling powerful, when he had sex like this, when he bossed people around. It hadn't been until he'd started doing this with Shane that he'd felt this out of control rush to please someone, to make them happy. He would do, God, fucking anything to get Shane off. He writhed a little in Ilya's lap. Ilya loosened his grip but didn't let go of Shane's face. "Shane. What are you thinking?"

"I can't believe you showed up," Shane breathed. "I was thinking about you at the game, and then in the change room, and then I looked up and you were there-"

Ilya couldn't hold out any longer. He kissed down Shane's neck toward the neckline of his T-shirt and then flipped them over so he could go lower, nosing under the hem until he reached his stomach, the waistband of his jeans.

"I thought I was supposed to be on my knees?" Shane asked as Ilya began to undo the button. He tugged at Ilya's shirt and then took off his own.

Ilya grinned, but didn't move. "There will be time for that," he said. "It will be a long congratulations."

At some point, they made it to the bed. Ilya had tried to pick Shane up and carry him, but Shane had insisted on walking, wriggled enough in Ilya's grip that they'd both ended up on the floor, just another bruise to add to the gallery. They were lying boneless on top of the sheets, Shane's back pressed against Ilya's chest, when Shane said, "I want to do this every year."

"Mmm," Ilya hummed and kept tracing circular patterns on the length of Shane's thigh. "What is 'this?'"

"Showing up for each other," Shane said, and then suddenly he was self-conscious again, Ilya could hear it in his voice and feel it in the way his shoulders tensed. "Not, like- one of us has to lose, that's how the game works. But I want to be there either way."

It was such a simple statement, and yet it cracked Ilya wide open. He and Shane had celebrated plenty together, playing for Canada. He could see the medals proudly displayed above Shane's dresser. But no one had ever really wanted Ilya around after he'd lost. People loved hockey, and Ilya was good at hockey, and so they passed that emotion on. That wasn't what Shane was saying. Every year, Ilya thought. Every single one.

The emotion overtook him quickly. He felt the tears coming, hot, inevitable, and he buried his face in the back of Shane's neck. "Ya tebya lyublyu," he whispered, because he had to say it in Russian, needed this to be said first in the language that meant home.

"Ilya- what?" Shane asked, and twisted in Ilya's grip to look at his face. "Are you okay? I didn't mean- we don't really have to-"

And Ilya looked at his concerned eyes, his beautiful freckles, and he said, "I love you."

Shane's eyes went wide. "Holy shit," he breathed, like a reflex, and there was a second where Ilya thought he had made a mistake, that he'd given Shane something he didn't want, but then there were tears in Shane's eyes as he said, "I love you too."

Ilya buried his face in Shane's neck. He didn't give a shit that his body was wholly on top of Shane's, covering him entirely. One of Shane's arms was curled around him, the other was in his hair. Ilya let himself be held. He let himself believe in every year.

A few weeks later, Shane won the cup. Ilya was in the stands with Svetlana, cheering. When they put his picture on the scoreboard in the slideshow of notable fans, he flipped off the camera, because fuck the league's fine, and fuck the Metros, even if his definition of fuck

was very different depending on which one you pointed to. Shane did press, and then he went out very briefly with his teammates, and afterwards he snuck Ilya up to his hotel room for the first night in a promise they'd made about forever.

2016

The funniest thing about the situation—and Shane used the term funny loosely, otherwise he'd cry—was that he was only in it because of Ilya. If Shane hadn't been spending every spare moment he had going to see Ilya, running home to call him, sometimes running home just to sit and think about the fact that he wasn't there, JJ wouldn't have been able to coax him out by threatening that Shane never did anything fun. Shane would've gotten to stay home, ice on his shoulder, and watch Boston play LA before going to bed early.

Instead, he was sitting at a booth in some new fuckoff fancy restaurant sharing a plate of fries with Rose Landry.

Shane knew who she was. She'd been in a lot of movies they advertised on the welcome screen of most airlines' in-flight entertainment screens, easy to watch thrillers and dramas where people got kidnapped or people fell in love despite the fact that they were orphans and had emotional baggage. The crazy thing was that Rose knew who Shane was, and seemed very interested in talking to him even though he knew how boring he was being. Everyone was always telling him people didn't want to talk about hockey, and Shane would've changed the subject, really, but Rose kept asking him questions about his next game, and did he think this or that player was as good as everyone said. It felt impolite not to answer her, so he did.

Mostly, Shane was honest, and Rose was laughing a lot. He figured that was a good sign. He was talking about something Comeau had said to reporters when Rose sighed and put her elbows on the table. "I hate press," she confessed, and slumped forward that much more. "I almost didn't do this movie because I didn't want to imagine how awful it would be to do the talk show circuit."

"But you like acting, right?" Shane asked, like an idiot.

Luckily, Rose took his question at face value. "I do, of course. It's just all the other stuff that gets to me. There's someone on my team whose job it is to post candid behind the scenes content on my Instagram, and she needs like four signatures before every picture. It's like, why can't I just act and that that do the talking?" She paused, and then buried her face in her hands. "Sorry, I probably sound like such an ungrateful asshole."

"No," Shane assured her, "you're talking to the right person. I hate that stuff too."

Rose peeked out at him between her fingers. “Really?”

“Yeah. Especially after games. They ask all these questions about how it went, and what plays I made, and if I’m happy with the result or not. I just want to go, didn’t you watch it?”

“Exactly! You can see how it felt to film that scene. I was feeling it on purpose, in front of cameras, as part of my job.” Rose stuck a fry in her mouth but still managed to smile at Shane, all crinkled up and twinkling eyes.

Shane could see why it was such a big deal that she was at this party. She kind of radiated.

After a pretty long silence—not uncomfortable, just quiet—Rose leaned back in the booth and asked, voice very careful and even, “Would you maybe want to get dinner sometime? Something a little fancier than fries neither of us ordered.”

Shane could feel himself doing the wrong thing: he went totally stuff, just blinked at her like an idiot. He could see the hopeful expression on her face shift into something more guarded so he scrambled for something to say. He really liked talking to her, didn’t want to ruin something good because he was- fucking him, awkward and different. Finally he blurted out, “I’m not... uh, looking for anything like that right now. Sorry. I mean, it’s not you, it’s just- I’m kind of taken? I think.”

He thought it was going to be a disaster, that she was going to pry or maybe just get up and leave, but Rose took it easily. She reached across the table and patted his hand, said, “It can be a friend dinner. That’s fine with me. I just haven’t met a lot of cool people in this city yet, and I’d hate for this to be the last time I see you.”

Shane felt the smile take over his face, a bit of happiness completely outside of his control. He ducked his head a little to hide it and said, “Yeah, that sounds good. I have terrible taste in restaurants, though.”

“That makes sense. I heard about your diet,” Rose said, and tossed a fry at him. It landed on his jacket and then bounced onto the table. “My brother tried it for a month in college when he was thinking about trying to get drafted and he said it was fucking awful. His words, not mine.”

Shane accepted the teasing, kept smiling at her even when JJ dragged them into a poker game over in the corner. She kept wiggling her eyebrows at him over her cards, and won when she went all in on a pair of fours. One of JJ’s friends had folded with queens in his hand and Rose

threw her head back and laughed as Shane wondered what it would feel like to move through life so easily, if maybe by spending time with Rose Landry he could learn it by osmosis. He left with her number and a cautious sense of optimism. He'd made so few friends outside of hockey, and he really wanted to keep this one.

Of course, their lunch date was photographed. Shane didn't make it a habit to check social media but his mom texted him a link, and a little while after it was blowing up in the Metros group chat. Ilya called him that night, waited until a few minutes into their FaceTime to very casually bring it up. "So," he said, lying on the bed with the phone propped up in front of him, fiddling with his ear, "Rose Landry."

Shane's heartbeat kicked up. Not because of Rose, but because of Ilya, how heartbreakingly calm he was trying to be. "We're friends. I met her at a party."

"Friends," Ilya said, slowly enough that Shane could see the way his accent flipped the r, caught on the s.

"I mean, she asked me out," Shane admitted, feeling his face get hot, "but, uh. I told her I wasn't available."

Ilya frowned. "Why not?"

"Why aren't I available?"

"Da."

Because of you, Shane wanted to say, fucking obviously, but he'd known Ilya a long time, and that wasn't typically a good way to get him to listen. He said, instead, "We're not compatible, I don't think. At least not like that."

"Compatible?"

"Like, even if I was looking for a relationship, I don't think it could be with her," Shane explained, and he was hoping Ilya would get it but it didn't seem like it was landing. His expression was still tight, lips pressed into a thin line. Most people thought Ilya was doing that when he was holding back from saying something, but Shane knew better. It was how Ilya looked when he was trying to come up with a response, any response, when something hit him so hard he couldn't think of a single thing to say.

Finally, he asked, “With who, then? If she is not your type.”

“You act like I could have anyone I want,” Shane said, and it came out on the tail end of an utterly joyless laugh.

“I think probably yes,” Ilya continued doggedly. “You are very pretty, and you are a good fuck. Many girls like that.”

Many girls. Shane thought about the girls from his past, tried to line them up against Rose Landry. His first girlfriend, from way back when he was pretty much a kid, had been funny. The one he’d had up until the draft had been smart, and driven. She hadn’t been waiting around for Shane to give her something to do. And in his first few years in Montreal, on the rare occasion when he’d tried dating, dragging himself out to bars and restaurants, the girls he’d met had always been pretty. And still, it had never worked. Shane had only felt more lonely, every time, until there was Ilya.

“It wouldn’t work,” Shane insisted, and he tried to keep his voice light. Like it didn’t matter, like he was fine.

But clearly, to Ilya, it mattered: “Stop arguing with me. You are wrong.”

“I’m not- why do you care so much about this?” Shane asked. For a little bit, at the beginning of the call, Shane had thought Ilya was jealous. Now he had no clue what was going on. “It wouldn’t work because it never works. I’m not good at it.”

“It?” Ilya asked.

“What?”

“You are not good at ‘it,’” Ilya repeated. “What is ‘it?’”

And Shane was tried to trying to explain it, just wanted the conversation to be over, so he snapped, “I don’t fucking know.”

Ilya was nothing if not persistent. “You don’t mean sex?”

“No,” Shane said, feeling his face go red. “I don’t know, maybe.”

“It it holding hands? How do you say it here, gooey stuff?” Ilya held a hand up in front of the camera, wiggled his fingers.

“Ilya. Can we please-”

“You are bad at pet names, probably-”

“It’s everything!” Shane felt himself say, without having consciously decided to say it. “I don’t know how to do any of it, and even when I pretend or fucking do what everyone else is doing I can tell I’m still doing it fucking wrong, okay? So I couldn’t date Rose Landry. I’d embarrass myself.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, “you are very embarrassing.”

Shane opened his mouth to argue, to call Ilya an asshole, but he stopped at the expression on Ilya’s face. It was somehow frustrated and earnest all at once, even grainy as it was through the screen of Shane’s phone.

“No, listen. You are right that you are boring, and you don’t know how to hold hands, and you are not very good at talking about not hockey.” Ilya paused, took a sharp breath in. “There are people everywhere who do those things better. I like those people. I do not love them.”

Shane froze. He felt the instinct to grab his phone and flip it face down on the bed, to hide the expression he knew was about to overtake his face, and he resisted it as best he could. The room got blurry as his eyes filled with tears that he wouldn’t let fall. There was so much he could’ve said about being outside of everything, about how deep that feeling went, how the only time he truly escaped it was when he was with Ilya. On the ice, when they went on runs, at their houses and in their bedrooms, even on the shitty hotel mattress over FaceTime. Instead, he said, “I told Rose I couldn’t go to dinner because I was taken.”

And that must’ve been what Ilya was trying to figure out, because the video on his end became shaky as he moved the phone. A few moments later he settled back into game, his body visible down to his shins. When he smiled, it was with teeth. “Move,” he insisted. “Want to see you.”

And it was always so surprising, how Ilya managed to make Shane feel, so many things he thought there couldn't be room for anything else. Somehow he was embarrassed, and tender, and then an undercurrent of lust rose and crested over him like a wave. He still blushed and said, "We're having a serious conversation."

Ilya paused. He still had his shorts on but he'd taken his shirt off, his hair rucked up at the back where the fabric had dragged over it. "No, is done," he said, and then he slid his hand under his waistband and grabbed his dick.

"I feel like maybe we have more to say," Shane forced himself to say, even though he could feel himself getting hard.

"It is," Ilya repeated. "I have taken you, and now Rose Landry cannot have you, and it is because I love how you are such a bad boyfriend to me."

There was a second where Shane thought he'd misheard, and then another where reminded himself that it was possible that he hadn't. "Boyfriend?"

Ilya groaned, threw his head back, and Shane wasn't sure whether it was because he'd started jerking himself off in earnest or because he was frustrated at how much Shane was arguing with him. "Mmm, yes," he said, and Shane figured it was somewhere in between. "Unless you think you will be too embarrassing."

"No," Shane said as he finally got a hand around himself, "not with you, never with you. Fuck, Ilya," and it was the coherent last thing he was able to say for a nice long while.

2017

All things considered, Ilya had thought his life was going pretty well. He'd just won a game against Montreal, which always felt better than winning against any other team. He was in the passenger's seat of his boyfriend's car, on the way to his house, which Shane only allowed if Ilya walked several blocks away from the stadium and into an alley for inconspicuous pickup, but still. It was better than the old days of awkward cab rides that had to drop him off at random locations in Shane's neighborhood, the fucking freezing anticipatory walks through the snow to Shane's front door. His team was playing well enough that they were almost guaranteed to make the playoffs. Shane was holding his hand over the center console, low enough that it couldn't be seen through the windows, but he'd interlaced their fingers together. He was getting better at it, these clandestine touches, and it made Ilya's heart feel as though it was too big for his chest.

Then Ilya's phone rang. A picture of Svetlana posing cheek to cheek with him in the North End flashed under her name, phone buzzing in his hand. He glanced towards Shane who nodded like it was okay for him to pick it up.

"Allo, Sveta," Ilya said. "Vso v poryadke?"

The way Svetlana paused gave Ilya the answer to his question. Everything was not okay. Still, it gave him goosebumps to hear her ask, "Ty odin?" *Are you alone?*

"Is just me and Shane," Ilya answered in English, so Shane would understand why his name was coming up. He switched back to Russian to ask, "What's going on?"

She said, "Vash otets umer," *your father has died*, and Ilya felt his grip on his phone go slack. He recovered quickly enough that it didn't fall, but Svetlana must have noticed the sound his fingers made on the glass because she paused before she said, "I'm so sorry. It happened yesterday, I think."

Ilya had always thought Masha would be the one making this call. She was very stern, focused on action. She would never have asked him if he was okay. She would never have apologized. It would've been logistics about plane tickets, maybe a few details about how it happened, and then she would've hung up to leave Ilya to deal with it alone. And Ilya would have been able to lean on that solidity, the expectation that he would not be sorry or need consoling. Why was it not Masha calling him? He asked Svetlana, "Where is Masha?" and there was a very long, very heavy pause.

"Alexei wouldn't let anyone tell her," she answered eventually. "He told my father not to tell me because he didn't want you to know. Apparently he was very sick, with dementia. I thought- it wasn't fair for you not to know. I'm sorry, I don't think I'm the right person to be telling you this."

"No," Ilya said quickly, "no, you are- thank you."

He paused, tried to think about what to do next. Shane had picked up, with even his meager understanding of Russian, that something was wrong by the tone of Ilya's voice. He was a careful driver and rarely looked away from the road, but when Ilya paused his hand drifted up to brush over Ilya's neck, a silent question. Ilya responded by shaking his head. Everything was not okay. Nothing was okay, in fact, and he was maybe drowning.

"I have to go," he told Svetlana, no matter that she was in the middle of a sentence about

when the funeral was happening. “Thank you for telling me. Bye.”

Ilya let his hand fall into his lap. He was still clutching it tightly, as though it might fall, and Shane’s hand had moved down to his thigh. “What was that about?” Shane asked.

“Ostanovi mashinu. Mne nuzhno vyyti,” Ilya said, and then as Shane’s eyebrows scrunched up he realized he was still speaking in Russian. It took a second for him to try and scramble for the right words, say, “Stop car here, I need to get out,” and even then he was still met with confusion from Shane.

“What?”

“Stop,” Ilya said, and then some small part of him remembered that this was the man he loved, and he was probably being very scary, so he added, “please.”

Shane put his blinker on and slowed to a stop. They were five minutes from his house, far enough outside the city center that the sidewalks were quiet and dark. Ilya practically threw himself out of the car and into the night air. It was fully spring, although in the dark there was still a chill in the air that he welcomed, relishing in the way he shivered when a breeze ran through him. It somehow made it easier for Ilya to scroll to the top of his contact list and find the one labelled **Alexei Rozanov (ignorirovat)**.

Ilya did not ignore it. He called the number, pressed the phone against his ear, hard. It went to voicemail and so he called again, and then again. On the fourth try, the call picked up on the last ring. His brother didn’t say hello, and Ilya wasn’t sure how to begin, so he just said, “Alexei.”

“Why the fuck do you still have my number?” Alexei said. Ilya hadn’t talked to him since the Olympics. In three years, his voice had gotten hoarser, more tired. Or maybe that was just the situation; Ilya imagined if he was still living in Russia he would’ve been smoking instead of sleeping, too.

“Pape umer?” Ilya asked, *Did Dad die?* He sounded like a child, and he hated himself for it. The sound of Shane’s door closing was loud against the quiet of the street.

Shane came into sight right as Alexei said, “Who told you? Was it that bitch Svetlana? I fucking told her father-”

“Don’t call her that,” Ilya snapped, grateful for the anger that came roaring back, restored his

voice. “You should’ve told me. I would’ve-”

“You would’ve what?” Alexei asked, and it was like a taunt. Ilya usually knew what to do with taunts, was famous for responding to them on the ice with quick, decisive force, but in that moment he just stood there. “You aren’t his son anymore.”

“Whose fault is that?” Ilya said, and he felt the weight of the word *vinoj* in his mouth. In English fault and guilt were two separate concepts. Not in Russian. Not here. Who was guilty for his exile, who was at fault for sending him away, questions that Ilya had been too terrified to ask every day since the worst one. When Alexei didn’t answer, Ilya looked up and saw Shane standing by the curb. His hands hung awkwardly by his sides when normally he’d put them in his pockets, as though he was standing ready to reach out, to catch Ilya or maybe just hold him even if he didn’t fall. It was clear that he didn’t understand anything Ilya was saying, and that was always worse, with Shane. He always wanted to know, to fix, and Ilya watched him try desperately to parse the meaning of the Russian Ilya spoke into the phone, “Did he ask for me?”

Alexei clicked his tongue against his teeth, nonverbal disapproval that sent Ilya reeling back into childhood. There had always been something wrong with him, the way he stood, the way he spoke, the words he said. That noise had chased him through the vast hallways of his house all the way onto the ice, where he could finally do something right. “On by ne stal prosit' u tebya pomoshchi, yesli by byl v zdravom ume.” *He would not have asked for you if he’d been in his right mind.*

And there was so much there, Ilya realized, hidden in the phrasing, the fact that Alexei had said it at all, that he had not lied. The enormity of it could’ve forced Ilya to his knees. He held out a hand and Shane was there, gripping him tightly, even though they were out in the open where anyone could see. “I won’t come to the funeral,” he told Alexei, and as Ilya said it he knew it was the right choice. There was no one for him in Russia, there hadn’t been for a long time. The version they wanted was twelve years old and terrified, wasn’t the man holding his boyfriend’s hand on the side of the road in Canada so tightly his fingers were going numb.

“Good,” Alexei said, “I don’t fucking want you there,” and all Ilya could do was mutter a goodbye and hang up.

He held the phone against his ear for a second, hearing the thud of his heart, and then he asked Shane, “Can we go?”

“Yeah,” Shane said without hesitation, even though Ilya knew he must have been desperate to know who was on the other end of the call, what was going on. He didn’t let go of Ilya’s hand

until Ilya had settled into the passenger's seat, but he also didn't ask what was wrong, and Ilya knew how much effort that took.

He gave himself until they were in Shane's driveway to hold the information close. As the car came to a stop he said, voice just a little too quiet, "My father died."

"I'm so sorry," Shane said, and Ilya started to shake his head because Shane shouldn't have been sorry, didn't need to be. But then he climbed over the center console into Ilya's lap. The immediacy of Shane's body forced Ilya's mind quiet, and he took a deep breath against Shane's neck. Shane smelled like soap and sweat and him. They sat like that, cramped in Shane's stupid, sensible car, until Ilya wiped his cheek on Shane's shoulder and said, very quietly, "Sorry."

"It's okay," Shane said. "Let's go inside."

Ilya knew if he were alone he could've handled this quickly, found a way to put it somewhere it couldn't come back and bite him, but with Shane right there he had no clue how to start. He knew what would happen if they went inside. Shane would be a steady rock for the ocean of Ilya's feelings to beat himself bloody upon. The last time Ilya had gone that deep, had let anyone into the very bottom of his feelings, he'd been sent so far away he'd needed a new passport.

So he said, "I have to go."

"Your flight isn't until tomorrow," Shane said. He was still in Ilya's lap, although he'd shifted his weight back, was supporting some of it with his hand against the door. And he was right, hovering over Ilya, his face nothing but sweet concern. This man who loved him.

Ilya could not confront it. He said, again, "I have to go," and he scrabbled for the car door.

They tumbled out together, the cool air a welcome pain as it entered Ilya's lungs. He felt Shane's hands around his arms, steadying him, and as a kindness he said "Don't worry, I will walk few blocks before calling cab."

"To where?" Shane asked. He wasn't yelling but his voice carried. "Are you going back to the hotel? Let me drive you."

"No," Ilya said, still moving. "I will go alone. Is okay. I just have to figure things out."

A part of Ilya thought maybe Shane would run after him, chase him down. He wasn't sure what he would do if it happened, if he would let himself be held and pulled back to the house or if he would fight like a caged animal, run off into the street without looking where he was going. But he didn't have to figure it out; Shane called from by the car, "Can you at least text me so I know you're safe?"

Ilya did not say yes. He turned around and he said, "I love you," and he left.

The cab took him straight to the car rental place, where Ilya asked for the fastest one they had. The person at the desk recognized him but didn't mention it beyond taking a surreptitious picture on the way back from grabbing the keys to a Maserati. He was in Ontario in two hours, at Masha's in three. She was waiting for him in the doorway when he made his way up the front walk, probably because she'd seen the bright red sports car pull into her driveway and known it couldn't be anyone else.

She looked Ilya up and down and said, "Skol'ko let, skol'ko zim." *How many years, how many winters*, literally, but in practice Ilya knew it to mean that it had been a long time. His mother had always said it jokingly when she picked him up from hockey, as though even that much time apart was an eternity. But Masha used it correctly and without judgement; it had been a long time since Ilya had visited, and she didn't blame him.

Masha stood aside so Ilya could walk past her into the house. He stood, instead, on the sidewalk in front of the steps, said, "My father is dead," for the second time that night, the first in Russian.

"Davno pora," she said, *it's about time*. "Are you going to come inside?"

Ilya had driven hours with nothing but the thud of the bass and his memories to keep him company. He did not want to go inside this house, the one where he had wandered, more ghost than child, until the day Masha had sent him to hockey camp in Ottawa proper. He didn't know if anything still looked the same. In fact, he'd be surprised if she'd kept anything familiar in his bedroom beyond the sturdy, eternal frame of his bed, so heavy it had always seemed to him that the house had been built up around it. Still, Ilya wanted to stay outside, frozen on the sidewalk.

He nodded, and walked up the steps.

Everything was so much smaller. It started with the mat by the door where Ilya left his shoes and then continued as he moved through the entryway and towards the kitchen. Masha had the same painting of Moscow hung by the window but there was a new little table, and the

walls were a different color. The same was true of the kitchen. Ilya's eyes caught on all the things that were the same because of how rarely they appeared. He was too big for this house. He stood in it awkwardly while Masha came in behind him and immediately went to the fridge. "Do you want anything?" she asked, and Ilya shook his head.

"Are you going to ask any questions?" Ilya said, and even his voice felt too loud.

Masha didn't pull her head out of the fridge to answer, "I just asked you."

"Rech' ne o yede, a o pape," Ilya said, *not about food, about Papa*.

There was a long pause. Masha put a Ziploc bag full of kovrizhka on the table. Neither of them made any move to open it. "It's enough to know he's dead."

And all of a sudden it was a good thing that Ilya felt so large. He could let the anger fill him to the tips of his fingers, beyond, grow to fill the house to its fucking corners. Ilya's voice was the dangerous, low tone that every single player in the NHL knew to fear as he said, "Alexei told me he had dementia. That kills you slowly. Did you know that? He's been dying for years, asking for me, and nobody told me."

The look on Masha's face was one Ilya had never seen before. It was very Russian, that was the only way he could think to place it. Instead of happiness, satisfaction. "That bastard killed my sister," she said. "I will not pretend to be sad he's in his grave."

Oh, Ilya thought suddenly, his grave, and he told Masha, "He will be buried next to Mama. And we'll never go back to see her. All this because you took me—"

Ilya had never said anything that had made Masha truly angry before. Not when he was thirteen and cursing out anyone who looked at him, not when he was fifteen and started smoking cigarettes in his bedroom, not a single time out of hundreds that he snuck out of the house and found a ride to a club, to a bar, anywhere she told him he could not go. She'd always met him with a hard, indifferent sort of disappointment. Masha was the wall upon which Ilya threw himself. She did not keep him from bruising, but she would not let him go over the edge.

Now, her eyes turned hard, her nostrils flared. She spat her words rather than spoke them: "I know where she is buried. Where she is buried, and my parents, and my brother, and I will never see any of them because it is better to be alive than to die in a place that does not love you." Her voice softened, age and exhaustion creeping around the edges. "I said that to her

when I left, and she wrote it in her letter about you. I don't understand why she didn't believe it about herself."

Ilya put a hand out to steady himself on the counter. He didn't think he was going to fall down, but he needed the contact to have something to push against. He'd always thought he'd gone to Masha because she was the only person his mother knew who wasn't in Russia. He hadn't known it was because they had the same secret, that his mother hadn't sent him away, but rather towards something. Instead of saying something—there was nothing to say, Ilya knew, that would make any of this better—he reached out and took a kovrizhka.

Masha watched him eat, her chin jutted upwards, appraising. It felt a little like sand in Ilya's mouth, but a comforting sort of sand, the flavor familiar. When he swallowed, Masha said, "I was happy to have you."

It was all Ilya could do to nod, and take another bite. When he was finished, food sitting heavy in his stomach, he told Masha, "I hate him, but I still wish I had been there."

She tilted her head and responded, "Nu, uzh kak yest." *It is what it is.*

And maybe it was what it was. Ilya's father was dead and he hadn't been there and he would have to live with that for the rest of his life, and his mother had died and he hadn't been there and he would have to live with that for the rest of his life, and one day his brother would die and he wouldn't be there and he'd have to live with that for the rest of his life, thousands of miles away. And what did he have, after all of that?

Shane.

Ilya turned to Masha and he said, slowly, "Yest odin mal'chik. Ya yego lyublyu." *There is a boy. I love him.*

Masha said, in the English Ilya so rarely heard her use, "That is what you are here for."

There were so many things that Ilya was afraid of, with Shane. He was scared he'd have to tell people before he was ready, that when that happened he'd lose his career, be unable to play hockey, lose the rush of competing and performing at the very height of what he was capable of. That the money would go away, and the accolades, and most importantly the routine that had sustained him since he was a teenager. He was scared that going through that would be too much, and Shane would leave him. He was scared that Shane would stay and resent him for it. He was scared that he wouldn't know who he was.

But he wasn't scared of losing his family. Masha would not be pushed away by something so simple as an international sports scandal. Then she asked, "Is he Russian?" and Ilya felt himself get a little bit scared. Just a little.

"No," Ilya said, and then, a little defensively, "He's from Canada. I met him at hockey camp."

Masha tutted. "I will live," she said, and then handed Ilya another kovrizhka.

2017, still

Shane woke up to a text from Ilya: *I am ok*, and nothing else. He wasn't sure when he'd managed to fall asleep. It was probably around three, but he'd been tossing and turning for hours before then, worried out of his mind, trying to figure out what to do. He wanted to call, wanted to get into his car and drive to the hotel even though he had no clue what room Ilya was in. He had this idea that he'd march into the lobby and ask the receptionist, and because he was Shane Hollander, they would just tell him. It was a ridiculous idea but it meant Shane could get his eyes on Ilya, see for himself that he was okay.

But now there was this text. It wasn't as good as seeing him would've been, not even comparable to holding him, but it was something. Shane could work with something. He'd had a lot of practice with making the most of what little time he got, when it came to Ilya.

Still, he played enough like shit at practice that Hayden pulled him aside afterwards and asked him what the hell was up. "I know you hate losing to Rozanov, but you gotta pull it together," he said.

Shane ducked his head and said, "I know, sorry. I think I'm just in my head."

"Want to come over for dinner tonight? The kids are so loud it's impossible to think at all, if that helps," Hayden offered.

Maybe it would be another night of sitting and waiting for news, and a distraction would help. But there was also the chance that Ilya would call, and Shane couldn't take risk the chance he'd be eating dinner with the Pikes when that happened. "I think I just need to go home and try to relax," he lied, which Hayden accepted easily.

"No worries, man. I just want your mind right before we play Vancouver," he said, clapping

Shane on the shoulder before he left the change room.

Shane's mind was not right by the time they played Vancouver. He heard that Ilya hadn't gone to Nashville with his team from JJ, of all people, who'd gotten it from a sports blog that had some kind of inside source on the Raiders. Shane was supposed to be the one with the inside source on the Raiders. Or at least the inside source on Ilya. His teammates were surprised Shane didn't have more information; Comeau made some kind of joke about Ilya being the same kind of asshole as a friend and a player and Shane clenched his fists so hard he heard a knuckle crack.

He managed to pull out a win, but it was ugly and exhausting. Shane couldn't manage the press, sent Hayden and Miitka to do it instead so he could turn the shower on as hot as it would go and stand under the spray until he couldn't take it anymore. His phone rang a half hour after he got home. Ilya's contact photo toed the line between friend and more—it was a picture of him with his hand over his mouth, preparing to blow a kiss—but it was worth every bit of anxiety the second Shane saw it pop up on his screen. He muted the TV and picked up, pressing the phone to his ear. "Ilya?"

"Hi." Ilya's voice was more crackly than it usually was, although Shane wasn't sure if that was because he was grieving or because the cell service was bad.

"Where are you?" Shane asked. He knew he was talking too fast, his tone too frantic, but he felt like he hadn't fully calmed down since two nights before when he'd had Ilya in his car and the plan was still to spend the night at his house. "Are you okay?"

"I am with Masha," Ilya said. His accent was stronger than normal, like it had been at the beginning of each week of hockey camp when they'd been kids. "I am not bad, I think. Probably not okay."

Shane knew his sigh of relief would be audible over the phone, but he didn't think he could've stopped it even if he'd wanted to. Ilya was with his aunt. He wasn't in Russia, or in a ditch somewhere. Unless Masha had sold her house and moved into a ditch in Ontario, and then Shane would have a lot more to worry about. But no, he stopped himself. Ilya was somewhere between bad and okay. That was the important thing. He asked, "Do you want to talk about it?"

There was a rustling sound like Ilya was shaking his head, and then he said, "Can I just listen to you talk?"

"Yeah, of course," Shane said, but then he paused and realized he had no idea what to say. Every topic he could think of felt like a minefield. "About what?"

"You could tell me why you played like shit tonight," Ilya said.

“You’re such an asshole,” Shane snapped, but there were no teeth behind it. There was so much hidden in Ilya’s request: he’d watched the game, he’d noticed Shane was worrying, he wanted to help him unload.

Shane could practically hear Ilya shrug over the phone. “Yes, well. You are obsessed with me, so.”

And that was it. That was the thing Shane wanted to talk about, how much he missed Ilya, all the things he would’ve done if they’d had their night in Montreal. Ilya’s team had left early that morning but they still would’ve had hours and hours of time spread out in front of them. Shane started with the small stuff, the food they would’ve ordered from the Italian place Ilya liked, the episode of TV they would’ve put on and then not watched because they were too busy talking shit about the game, and, fuck it, this was a fantasy, so Shane gave them tiramisu and talked about feeding it to Ilya on the couch. Even though Shane would never eat tiramisu during the season, and he never would’ve let them eat on the couch.

Then there was the rest of the night, how badly Shane had wanted to sink to his knees in front of Ilya and take him in his mouth, how he knew that Ilya wouldn’t let him stay down there for long. He always dragged Shane back up to kiss him, shove him up against something, get him on the bed and start the long, glorious process of taking him apart. Shane hadn’t let himself be upset that he’d missed that until he heard Ilya groan on the other end of the call. It sounded like it was involuntary, though his teeth, and Shane blushed and kept going. He’d wanted Ilya to lie back and let Shane ride his fingers. He’d wanted Ilya to fuck him hard, fast, and then again later in the night when it was slower, tender. He’d wanted Ilya to hold him after, and not let him get up even when he was uncomfortable and sticky and whining about it, because they only had so long.

Eventually, Shane ran out of wants. They stayed on the phone for a long moment, breathing, and then Ilya said, “I told Masha about you. Not who you are, just... that you are mine.”

Shane closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure what was scarier, the possibility of Masha finding out about him or the enormity of the love that crashed through him, pushed at the edges of who he was like the first wave of a rising tide. “What did she say?” he asked.

“She said it was okay you are not Russian,” Ilya answered, a little bit sheepish, and Shane couldn’t help himself. He laughed.

The next time he saw Ilya in person was ten days later, when the Metros played in Boston. Ilya had only been out for a few games, and the press knew it was for the death of his father. Some news outlets had been sniffing around his life story—it always seemed to confuse people that he had a father in Moscow but played for the Canadian National Team—and it

was because of that scrutiny that they decided not to meet up before the game. Shane had waited, agonizingly, and he knew he could wait a little bit more if it meant Ilya didn't feel like he was in a fish tank, people ogling him and tapping the glass to see if they could get him to perform the grieving son.

But fuck, when Shane first saw him out on the ice during warmups, he wished they'd had even five minutes alone. Ilya looked tired down to his bones, the kind of tired that Shane knew only he would notice. It was something about his eyes, and the way that he bent into his stretches. Shane skated over as close as he dared and said, "I can't wait to see you later."

Ilya's eyes flicked up, and in them was the only evidence of his smile. "Hello," he said, sarcastic, "how are you, I am so sorry you have a dead dad now."

"My condolences," Shane said, like an asshole, and then Ilya couldn't hold back his grin.

"Keep them," Ilya said. "You will need them after I beat you so bad you look like rookie all over again."

"Excuse me, Rookie of the Year," Shane corrected.

Ilya blew a raspberry at him. "Yes, how could I forget. What else are you? Number two draft pick?"

And it was so good to see him, to hear him chirp like he always did, that Shane just said "I am, yeah. I wonder where the first place guy is, I should go look for him," and skated away.

"Is me!" Ilya called after him, still on all fours on the ice. His entire team was looking at him, and he didn't give a shit, and Shane loved him.

He tried really hard not to let it show on his face as he skated back to his team, but Hayden still picked up on something. It was the wrong something, but it was more than anyone else managed. He tapped his gloved fist against Shane's and said, "What's up with him tonight?"

Shane turned to look at Hayden, sharp. "Well, his dad just died."

"Oh, fuck. Right," Hayden said, and at least he had the grace to look chagrined. "Should I go tell him I'm sorry, or...?"

“Jesus. No. He would fucking hate that,” Shane said immediately.

“All the more reason to do it, then,” Hayden muttered as he made his way towards their goal. Shane knew he wouldn’t actually, because as much as Ilya hated him he was at his core a decent guy. He also knew that Ilya was, at his core, someone who really enjoyed being an asshole, so he skated after Hayden and told him to maybe steer clear of Rozanov, just in case.

And then there was the face-off. Shane settled into his stance while Ilya was still dicking around with his helmet. He winked when Shane looked up at him, and Shane felt his teeth clench around the edge of his mouthguard where it hung out of his mouth. Usually Ilya would say something, but tonight he just crouched down, got his stick into position. To fuck with him a little, Shane feinted forward. Ilya just met him there, grinning, focused.

Shane won the face-off and he was gone, Ilya at his heels, and it was just as good as it always was. The pleasant burn of the muscles in his legs, the huff of his breath and the beat of his heart, all of it present but quiet against the focus he spread out across the rink. Or the focus he usually spread across the rink, because a disproportionate amount of it was still behind him, on Ilya. He always knew where Ilya was but the feeling wasn’t usually this strong, this persistent. Shane looked over his shoulder to try and see if anything was different. He caught a glimpse of Ilya’s face under his visor, the smile still on his lips, and he wanted to keep looking forever but then the smile dropped and Ilya’s eyes widened. He looked scared, Shane had time to realize, and then there was impact and Ilya wasn’t in his field of vision anymore, the crowd and the ice a blur until he slammed into the boards and crumpled.

There was nothing , and then Shane’s cheek was cold. Like, really cold, and his head was throbbing, and he didn’t even want to think about his body, because there was something wrong there, too. Someone was telling him to open his eyes over and over, “Shane, buddy, you need to keep your eyes open,” but it was really bright and he didn’t want to. Why were people always asking him to do things he didn’t want to do? Why couldn’t he just play hockey?

That was the first thing he said, even though he didn’t mean to say it out loud: “Just let me play,” except his voice slurred and he dropped a lot of the consonants at the end of the words.

“You’re done for the day, Hollander,” someone said, and Shane felt a rush of happiness he couldn’t place. Why was he happy when everything hurt so bad?

But then, there it was. Done for the day. The game was over, which meant he got to go home with Ilya and stay for the whole night. They’d already worked out a lie, in case anyone asked. It would make sense for Shane to go over to Ilya’s and make sure he was okay and then stay

too late playing video games. He was going to tell people he slept on the couch. They were going to wake up together in the morning.

The voice spoke again, and this time it came with the pressure of hands on his shoulders: “We really need you to open your eyes, Shane.”

This time he listened, and there was the ceiling, and everything was too fucking bright. Shane closed his eyes again and said, “Ilya,” because that was what he wanted to look at, not the stupid ceiling. “Where’s-”

“Is he okay? Will someone just tell me if he’s fucking okay?” Someone yelled, except it wasn’t just someone. Shane would know that voice anywhere.

“Tell him I’m fine,” Shane mumbled, and then his head gave a particularly nasty lurch as the medical staff lifted him onto the backboard, like a divine punishment for lying. “Ilya, tell him- please.”

A small argument broke out among the people moving Shane across the ice—“He keeps asking for Rozanov,” said one voice, and then another, “We can’t call over a player from the other team”—and then finally someone who knew what they were talking about said, “We need him awake. If Rozanov’s what it takes, get him the fuck over here.”

Shane blinked and then there was Ilya, gloves off, skating awkwardly next to the stretcher. His curls were sweaty and stuck to his head even though the game had barely started, and his eyebrows were drawn in. Shane looked at the shine of his eyes and said, quietly, “Ow.”

“I know, it hurts,” Ilya said. “You will keep your eyes open, yes? That is what they are saying.”

“It’s bright,” Shane said, and then he remembered that there was a way to fix that. He closed his eyes.

There was the gentle press of Ilya’s hand on Shane’s forearm, right at the spot where his glove ended. “No, no, Shane. You can’t sleep. I know it’s bright. Here, is this-”

The world was suddenly a little darker. Shane squinted and saw the palm of Ilya’s hand cupped over his face, blocking the stadium lights. “Yeah,” he slurred, “better.”

“Okay,” Ilya said. Someone told him they were about to leave the rink, to watch his step, but Ilya’s hand stayed steady the whole time. A different voice called that Ilya didn’t have skate guards, and he would damage the blades, and he snapped, “I don’t give single fuck.”

It was too loud. Shane groaned, asked, “Where are we going?”

“Hospital,” Ilya answered immediately.

Dread came over Shane. Dread was different than pain, and he already had too much of one, so he tried really hard to understand why there was this new bad thing coursing through him. He figured it out all at once and reached up to tap on Ilya’s hand. “Finish the game,” he tried to say.

Ilya understood him, because Ilya always understood him. He also didn’t listen, said, “No, I’m not going to-”

“You can’t come with me. People are gonna-” Shane stopped dead. Everything in him hurt, but even then he still knew enough not to go off the side of that cliff. “Please.”

They’d stopped moving. There was still noise, and the bustle of people moving around, but it seemed like there was more things for people to do that didn’t involve staring at Shane, or moving him around. And so Ilya moved closer, bent his body over the stretcher so Shane could get a full look at his face even though he was wearing the stupid fucking neck collar. Ilya’s eyes were big and wet and shining. The green flecks Shane could usually see in them were missing, and it was only then that he realized his vision was blurry. And oh, that was scary, and Shane wanted Ilya to stay. He couldn’t want that.

Ilya said, “Do you promise to stay awake?”

“Yes,” Shane said, as one of Ilya’s fingers pressed gently against his jaw, right where the neck collar ended. He was so fucking tired, and everything felt too bright again, and he wanted to cry. Ilya seemed to sense it, and he opened his mouth to say something but then the medical staff was rushing back in talking about how the ambulance was ready. He jerked his hand back like he’d been burned and as soon as Shane was wheeled away he was out of Shane’s vision.

Shane closed his eyes so the tears wouldn’t fall. As soon as they put him in the ambulance, he let sleep take him.

He kept slipping in and out of sleep like that, involuntary and against doctor's orders. He answered as many questions as he could: it was 2017, Trudeau was the Prime Minister, it was a Thursday. No, he didn't remember who hit him. Yes, he was pretty sure someone from his team had called his parents. Then that someone would leave and Shane would wake up to the noise of his door opening so he could go through it all again. He thought at some point they took him to an X-ray machine, put his arm was in a sling, gave him pills and helped him take them with a small swallow of cold water, and still Shane slept.

The noise of the door woke him again. Shane felt his eyes flutter open, expecting a doctor. But, oh, it was so much better. It was Ilya.

"Ilya," Shane said, drawing out the vowels, leaning on his excitement. "You're here."

Ilya held a finger up to his lips. "Shh, solnyshko, there are doctors."

Shane said, "Hi," and really tried his best to be quiet about it. Judging by the look on Ilya's face, he failed. It wasn't his fault for being excited, Shane knew. His boyfriend was here. He loved his boyfriend. That was, like, science or something. "Why are you over there?"

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked, ignoring Shane's question.

That was annoying. Shane was annoyed. He held his good arm out over the side of the bed, palm up. "I'm dying."

Ilya rolled his eyes—Shane wished he could take a video, watch it over and over again, it was always so fun getting under his skin—and walked towards the bed, lacing his fingers with Shane's.

"Yes," Shane hummed. He squeezed his hand twice in quick succession, a little heartbeat like his mom used to do. "You saved me. Now it's just the concussion and the broken collarbone, and that's chump change."

Ilya frowned. "Chump change? What is that?"

Shane squinted up at him and said, "Change for chumps. Duh."

And this seemed to be the thing that finally convinced Ilya that Shane was okay, because his face crumpled and he lurched forward, burying it in the bed by Shane's elbow. His grip on Shane's hand was so tight Shane could feel his bones grinding together, but he didn't mind.

He was already in the hospital. If something broke, they'd just fix it. Instead, he made soothing noises and got mad about the fact that he couldn't get a hand in Ilya's hair. Stupid sling. Stupid collarbone. Stupid hit, because even on painkillers Shane knew it must've been legal. He just hadn't been paying attention. Well, he'd been paying attention to Ilya, which was the whole problem.

"We should've fucked before the game," Shane mumbled, a very strong departure from the shushing sounds he'd been making. Ilya picked his head up and stared, all shock and tearstained cheeks. "I could've focused if we did that."

"Is my fault?" Ilya asked. He let go of Shane's hand, and Shane would've protested except he reached up and ghosted it over the bruise on Shane's cheekbone, the side of his jaw where he'd pressed down back at the rink.

Shane closed his eyes at the contact and said, diplomatically, "We can share the blame, I think. That's fair."

Ilya's fingers kept moving across Shane's face, tracing his features, the arch of his eyebrow, the slope of his nose. "I love you so much," he said. His voice was thick, and Shane noticed belatedly that his hands were shaking. "You scared me."

"I fell asleep in the ambulance," Shane admitted. He'd promised he wouldn't, and he felt bad that he'd broken his promise. He didn't like doing that to anyone, but Ilya especially. Ilya deserved better. Shane wanted to give that to him. "I'm sorry."

"No," Ilya said quickly. His hand slid around to cup the back of Shane's neck. His hair was greasy and disgusting, no shower when you go right from the game to a hospital bed, but Ilya ran his fingers through it anyways. "No, is okay."

Shane smiled as best he could, although he was sure it was still wobbly. What mattered was that he tried, he thought stubbornly as he said, "Everyone gets their bell rung eventually, right? And I'm out for the playoffs, which means you have a shot now. You should be happy about that."

The look on Ilya's face told Shane that he was very much not happy, but before he could explain himself the door opened and a nurse stuck her head in. Ilya took a quick step back, clasping his hands behind his back like he needed to hide the evidence of all the tenderness he'd just displayed, like his love would be visible on his fingertips. "Oh, hello Mr. Rozanov," she said brightly. Her name was Keirah, and she'd told Shane that if he stayed awake until the doctor came back, she'd get him a ginger ale from the staff fridge. He liked her. He also

really wished she'd go away so that Ilya could maybe climb in the bed and lie down next to him, although he wasn't sure how they would fit.

Ilya hovered awkwardly in the corner while Keirah checked the monitors and asked Shane the same set of questions he'd been asked a thousand times already. When she got to the memory ones, Shane looked to Ilya and said, "Do you know who checked me?"

A muscle in Ilya's jaw jumped as he answered, "Marleau. He feels really bad. Told me to say sorry."

Shane waved a hand in dismissal. "It's not his fault. I already told you, I was—" he remembered Keirah was there and he coughed. She was checking the cart at the end of his bed. One of her braids had escaped from her ponytail and she tossed it over her shoulder. "Uh, distracted. By something."

They stood—or, in Shane's case, lay in bed—in an awkward silence until Keirah started towards the door. Before she left, she turned towards Shane and Ilya and said, "You know, I've always loved how close you guys are. I think it sets a good example, being such good friends off the ice." And then she left, and the only sound in the room was the click of the door shutting and the whirr of the air conditioning.

"Hey," Shane said, and then again when Ilya didn't look at him, drawing out the vowels again, "Hey. C'mere."

Ilya dragged a chair over to the head of Shane's bed and dropped into it. It took a lot of effort for Shane to sit up. There was a dull throb in his collarbone at the change of position that he ignored, because it was worth it to be able to get a hand on Ilya's neck, stroke a thumb over his pulse. Shane could feel Ilya's muscles relaxing, saw the tension drain out of his shoulders and his eyes flutter shut. "Ya vas ochen lyublyu," he said, and that was one of the few Russian phrases Shane could translate without having to try: *I love you very much*.

"I love you too," Shane whispered. He felt more than saw Ilya's head drop forward to rest on his chest, Ilya's forehead resting right above his heart.

Ilya murmured something in Russian that was too low and fast for Shane to catch, "Ya bol'she ne khochu pryatat'sya," and Shane could feel the heat of Ilya's breath through the fabric of his hospital gown.

They stayed like that for as long as they dared, and then Ilya sat back in the chair as Shane drifted back into sleep. Shane had been determined to stay awake, but determination seemed

to be the main thing that the hit had taken out of him, because when he blinked awake after what he thought was only a few seconds, his parents were rushing into the room. Ilya stood, a little too formally, while Yuna and David rushed to Shane, ran their hands up and down his arms as if to convince themselves he was fine. Shane said, “Hi, guys,” on the tail end of a yawn.

Yuna smiled a little, tilted her head. “Guys?”

“Sweetheart, he’s concussed,” said David, and then he turned to Shane. “How are you?”

“Okay,” Shane said, and then like it was the second half of the explanation, “Ilya’s here.”

“We saw,” Yuna said. She put her hand on the top of Shane’s head and rested it there, pressing gently. “Thank you, Ilya, for looking after him.”

Ilya’s smile was tight. “Was nothing. He is not so boring, on drugs.”

David moved around the edge of the bed to hold out his hand. Ilya hesitated, but took it. They shook, a firm, brief press of hands and then David asked, “Anything the doctors said that we should know?”

“Oh,” Ilya shook his head, and Shane could hear something tight in his voice, “no, they do not tell me anything. I am not family, so.”

“Right,” David said awkwardly.

Yuna didn’t look away from Shane when she said, “I don’t know, I think you count. It’s been ten years.”

There were a lot of people talking, and Shane was still kind of groggy, so he knew there was nuance he was missing when Ilya coughed and said, “I will leave you with your parents, Shane.”

“No, stay,” Shane said, and he was kind of proud of himself for sounding as casual as he did.

“Ah, I can’t,” Ilya said. He beat Shane in being casual, which was annoying. Shane wanted to tease him about it, but his parents were right there. “I have flight in morning. We are playing

North Carolina.” When he was done speaking, his eyes finally met Shane’s, and there was so much there. Longing, and frustration, and resignation to the fact that there was no world where they’d get to do what they wanted, which was to squeeze in the bed together and finally, in each others’ arms, rest.

So Shane let Ilya said goodbye to his parents and squeeze his arm, the most touch they could get away with as friends. He looked over his shoulder as he walked out the door, and he managed a small wink that made Shane smile despite the fact that his mom was talking to him about home care instructions and checking his phone, remarking that he had so many people asking if he was okay, that one of them was Rose Landry, wasn’t she famous? And who was Svetlana, how did he know her?

Shane let his head fall back against the pillows and his eyes slide closed. The feeling of missing Ilya was a dull ache not unlike the one in his collarbone. The painkillers Keirah brought in dulled one but not the other, and all Shane could do was fall asleep.

The team doctors cleared him to look at his phone for a little bit each day a week later, when he was convalescing at his parents’ cottage up in Ontario. Shane knew he should’ve used the time to check his email or respond to supportive texts from his teammates and friends, but instead he opened YouTube and typed in *Shane Hollander Boston hit*. He scrolled until he found local coverage and pressed play. He was lying on the couch, phone propped up on his chest, but after the first watch Shane brought it closer to his face, a headache already starting to form around his eyes.

He’d been right that the hit was legal. He’d also been right that he’d been distracted, looking at Ilya, although he could only see it in the video because he was looking for it. The thing that he hadn’t expected, the thing that made him sick to his stomach as he watched the hit over and over, was the way that Ilya looked after it happened.

He stood there with his body slack, let his stick drop to the ice. It was the only time Shane had ever seen Ilya look awkward on the ice, confused, like he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. The camera was far enough away that Shane couldn’t make out Ilya’s expression but he could imagine it: slack jawed, terrified. When he skated over to where Shane’s body was crumpled on the ice, a referee got in front of him and stopped his progress with a palm flat over his chest. Then, finally, he was fighting. Shane could see the moment where Ilya called out to ask if he was okay, although the broadcast didn’t have sound, just the announcers talking over the footage about how rare it was that Hollander took hits that bad, how much mutual respect he and Rozanov had for one another, well documented in the many years they’d been playing both together and against one another.

The timer went off, the one that meant Shane’s screen time was up. He clicked replay on the video, watched it again. He checked the time stamps; Ilya’d had to wait two minutes and

sixteen seconds before he'd been called over by medical staff. Over two minutes where he hadn't known what was going on, was forced back by people who didn't know Shane needed him, loved him. If Shane hadn't asked—and been so bad at keeping his eyes open, which he was still a little embarrassed about—he would've been taken to the hospital without Ilya getting to see him at all. If it had been the other way around, Shane would've gone crazy.

He pulled up his texts with Ilya. They were dry, just updates on how he was doing that Yuna had sent as Shane dictated them, silently panicked that she was going to scroll up and see the proof of their three year long relationship. Fuck, three years, and he hadn't been able to say I love you for days and days because they were still hiding. He typed out a message: *Doctor said I could be on my phone again. Saw the video of me getting hit, I'm so sorry you had to see that.*

There was no response. Shane knew there wouldn't be, because Ilya was playing in the first round of the playoffs in less than an hour, so he kept going.

*I love you so much
I want to tell some people. My parents and Svetlana and maybe our teammates eventually?
Not everyone, just the ones who matter
What do you think??*

The response came back less than fifteen minutes after Ilya's game ended. He'd won, would be playing the Admirals in the next round, and Shane could picture him standing in front of his locker, sweaty, most of his gear still on. Ilya said, *i think i lov u. i think yes.*

Shane was trying to think of a response when Ilya ruined the sweet tone of his messages by adding, *i think i can't wait until i win cup 2 come 2 ur cottage and fuck u*

He didn't win the cup. The Admirals knocked them out after five games because everyone was saying it was Scott Hunter's year, and then Ilya flew to Ontario and looked so hot in his tank top and sunglasses that Shane only lasted forty five minutes before pulling over at a scenic overlook to make out with him over the center console. It always managed to surprise him, after a long time apart, how good of a kisser Ilya was. Shane couldn't imagine anyone being able to convey the same amount of tenderness and filth with one swipe of his tongue, and that wasn't even counting what he was doing with his hands. Shane pulled away before he was too hard to concentrate on the road, and then when they got there Ilya made good on his promise, bending Shane over the kitchen counter and fucking him so well Shane thought he might end up in another plane of existence.

He was wiping the granite off with the special cleaning spray when Ilya pressed a kiss to the back of his neck and said, "We are going to tell people about us?"

Shane felt his heartbeat speed up. "I told my parents we'd have dinner with them tonight. I was going to do it then, unless you don't want to be there."

Ilya had been sliding his hands up and down Shane's sides, but as Shane spoke he stopped, dug his fingers into Shane's waist. He tugged insistently until Shane turned around and then he said, "Of course I will go," his eyes so soft that Shane couldn't speak for all the love that welled up inside him.

That turned into lazy making out against the counter that moved to the couch, became frantic once more until Shane got Ilya's pants down and sucked him into his mouth, taking him as far as he could and swallowing so his throat worked around Ilya's dick, loving the moan that tore its way out of Ilya as he did it. Then there was the shower they took until the hot water ran out, Ilya rubbing soap on every part of Shane's body, kneading into his calves and the backs of his thighs until he moved higher and had Shane coming again on his fingers, water running down over his open mouth and the column of his neck as he cried out.

Ilya stopped them as they got dressed so he could suck a hickey onto Shane's chest, the exact place where he'd rested his forehead in the hospital, and then when he was done he told Shane what he'd said in Russian, *Ya bol'she ne khochu pryatat'sya, I don't want to hide anymore*, and Shane couldn't stop himself from straddling Ilya on the bed, humping against him like a teenager until he could get his hand around both of them and tug, slick with what Ilya had spit into his cupped palm. They didn't kiss so much as pant into each other's mouths as Shane ground his hips down and worked his hand over Ilya's cock and his own. Then they had to take another shower, except this one was chaste out of necessity, because there was only cold water left and they were already late for dinner.

All the easy joy of having Ilya at the cottage evaporated on the ride over. Shane couldn't stop running through scenarios in his head: his parents would laugh and tell him he couldn't be gay because he played hockey, they'd be disgusted, they'd be disappointed, his mother would tell him she couldn't be his agent anymore because he was no longer marketable, his father would say he wasn't a man. Shane knew that the versions of his parents who did and said the things he was picturing didn't look or sound like his parents at all. David cried every Christmas when they watched the claymation Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, and Yuna had always told him he could be whatever he wanted, over and over again. The trouble was that Shane had never wanted to be gay. He'd just wanted to be normal.

Ilya grabbed Shane's hand off the gear shift where he was nervously tapping his fingers and brought it to his lips, kissing each knuckle. He was noisy about it, and his kisses were wetter than they needed to be, so Shane scowled at him and said, "Come on, stop."

"You are nervous," Ilya said, and it was half question, half confirmation. Shane nodded.

“Your parents love you. They will be okay. And if they are not, we call Masha. She will yell at them.”

Ilya had told Shane, some over the phone and some when they’d managed to come up for air that day, about his visit to Masha. Shane had watched the look on Ilya’s face as he recounted what Masha had said, the reason his mother had sent him to live with her, the meals they’d made from his childhood, the literal meaning of the idiom she always used to describe how much Ilya liked like Irina. Shane had paused when Ilya said that, Ilya’s body draped over his on the couch with delicious pressure, repeated, “Irina?”

“My mother’s name,” Ilya said, and then he cupped Shane’s face in both of his hands and said, “She would’ve loved you. Like I love you,” and Shane had looked at Ilya’s face and wondered how the fuck he was so perfect, so real. His life was like a dream he never wanted to wake up from.

But just then, in the car, it was teetering on the edge of a nightmare. Ilya could tell, kissed Shane’s hand noisily again before depositing it back on the gear shift. He followed Shane into his parents’ cottage a step behind him, and Shane felt him press a hand against the small of his back as he stepped into the house and called out, “Hey, it’s me. Uh, Shane.”

Yuna came out of the kitchen and said, “Yes, we know who you are. Come on in, your dad’s almost done with the pasta.”

Shane knew what to do. He’d gone in and out of this cottage a million times. He was supposed to take his shoes off and go into the living room, chat with his mom until his dad said dinner was almost ready, set the table without being asked. Instead of doing any of that, he blurted out, “I have something really important I want to tell you. Can we sit down?”

“It can’t wait until dinner?” Yuna asked, and Shane felt himself shake his head just a little too hard. Ilya’s nails scratched up and down his back, and he took a deep breath through his nose, letting it out through his mouth.

“I kind of want to get it out of the way,” he said.

Yuna didn’t let on that she was worried, even though Shane knew she was. She just headed into the kitchen, murmured conversation audible as she let David know what was going on. Ilya brought his other hand up to pat against Shane’s stomach, his way of saying good job. It was intimate, a long standing inside joke, and Shane realized that in a few minutes Ilya would be able to do that in front of his parents. This conversation was worth it.

They sat at the dining room table. There were so many pictures of Shane on the walls, from summers at the childhood pool to him holding the Stanley Cup. He forced himself to look at his parents, sitting rigid across the table, staring at him expectantly. “What’s up, bud?” his dad asked, and Shane couldn’t stop from reaching for Ilya’s hand under the table.

Shane focused on the heat of Ilya’s palm against his and said, “I just- I have something really important to tell you. And I know I should’ve said something a long time ago, and you’re probably going to be upset that I’ve been lying to you for so long, but-” Ilya squeezed Shane’s hand twice, a little heartbeat. “I’m, uh. I’m gay.” He dropped his gaze down to the table, so he could get it all out without trying to figure out how his parents were going to take it. “And Ilya and I are together. We have been, for a while.”

There was a very long pause. Shane couldn’t lift his eyes off the table, the same four placemats laid out since before he got drafted. They’d always had four and only ever needed three. Yuna said “Oh,” softly. Shane tightened his grip on Ilya’s hand.

“How long is a long time?” David asked. His voice was so casual that it looped back around to being awkward.

“Since the Olympics,” Shane admitted, “but we were always kind of... something.”

Shane could hear the smile in Ilya’s voice as he added, “I had a big crush on him first year at hockey camp.”

This was news to Shane, who stopped investigating the placemats and turned to look at Ilya instead. “The only time you ever spoke to me that year was when you told me to fuck off.”

“Is not true,” Ilya argued. “I also said see you next summer.”

Shane rolled his eyes, but it was undermined by the fact that he was smiling now, too. Yuna said, again, “Oh.”

“I thought maybe something was going on in the hospital,” David said when Shane finally looked over to the other side of the table. “He was so good with you. But then you came to stay with us, and I wasn’t sure.”

He paused, and that was the moment that Yuna typically jumped in, conversational patterns

Shane had come to rely on since childhood, but instead she pushed her chair back from the table and said, “I think we all need something to drink.”

There was silence in the wake of her going, so that when she walked out the back door and onto the patio everyone heard it clear as day. David looked like he wanted to say something but Shane got up before he could. “I’m just gonna go check on her,” he said to no one in particular, and followed his mother outside.

She was staring out at the treeline, a stemless glass on wine held in both hands. When she saw Shane coming she set it down on the picnic table, the sound of glass on wood strangely loud enough to hear over the noises of an early summer evening. “Hi,” Shane said, moving to stand next to her, hands in his pockets. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Yuna said crisply, like she didn’t mean it.

Shane took a deep breath. He’d imagined this conversation so many times, had so many things he wanted to make clear, and now that it was really happening he could feel all his control slipping away. “I just wanted to come out here and tell you that I really tried. I think maybe if I hadn’t met Ilya when I did, or if we hadn’t played so much together...” Shane trailed off, and realized he was wrong. In any world where he met Ilya Rozanov, he would have loved him. It might have looked different, taken longer, but it always would’ve ended the same. “I just love him. I tried really hard, but I just can’t help it. I’m sorry.”

And that was when his mom’s face crumpled and her hands, finally, reached for him. She held onto his shoulders and Shane screwed his eyes shut, trying to stop tears from rolling down his own face. “Sweetheart, no. Look at me.” Shane ducked his head, and his mom put a hand on his cheek, steadying him. “Look at me. You have nothing to be sorry for, okay?”

Shane looked at her. She cried the same way he did, her eyes filling with tears without letting any of them spill out. “I really hated lying about it,” he admitted, and Yuna let out a watery laugh.

“Of course you did,” she said, and then she broke his fucking heart by saying, “I’m proud of you, okay? And I’m so sorry that I made you feel like you couldn’t tell me. Can you forgive me?”

Shane fell forward into her arms, resting his forehead against the top of her shoulder. “I forgive you, Mom,” he said, muffled against her shirt, and he felt her sigh.

She rubbed a hand up and down his back, firm pressure, and said, “I’m just so happy you

have each other. He was always my favorite, out of all your friends.”

“Even Rose Landry?” Shane asked as he pulled away. He wiped the tears off his face with the back of his hand. Yuna reached up to get a spot that he missed, fingers gentle, and shook her head.

“Yes, more than Rose,” she said, and Shane wasn’t sure why that made him so happy. It was enough that it did.

They went back inside. Shane sat next to Ilya, held Ilya’s hand on top of the table as they ate pasta and talked about what could happen if they told more people, sponsors and management and maybe, one day, the press. They talked about their futures, the private one and the public one, and they explained a little bit of their past for the benefits of Shane’s parents’ curiosity. Ilya talked about Masha, and nodded when Yuna suggested they all meet once they were back in Ottawa.

Shane knew it was the first step of many, that it might be years before he was ready to do some of the things his mom suggested, court interviews and reach out to brands and talk to a lawyer about how the league could react, but even this first step had made him happier than he’d thought was possible. He leaned towards Ilya as his dad got up to grab dessert and kissed him, soft. Ilya’s eyebrows drew together as Shane pulled back, a silent question Shane answered by saying, “I missed you, I think.”

“I’m right here,” Ilya responded, blunt but fond, and then he lifted their joined hands to his mouth and kissed Shane’s thumb.

Then he opened his mouth and fucking bit it, and Shane yelped. “Oh, fuck you,” he said, and yanked his hand away.

“Boys,” Yuna said warningly, and Ilya turned to look at her with a smile so bright Shane almost closed his eyes.

Almost, because he didn’t want to miss any of this, and so he didn’t. He took it all in until they drove back to Shane’s cottage and Ilya spooned him from behind, fucked into him so slow and so good that Shane had no choice but to close his eyes and arched back against him, groaning openmouthed into the pillow. “Fuck me, please,” Shane moaned, and Ilya did, pleasure building quickly as they moved together until they were sticky and sated and lying exhausted on top of dirty sheets.

It was, he thought, the first night of forever. Then he rolled over and tried to convince Ilya to

go on a run with him the next morning, early, before the bugs got too bad.

2018

Ilya stood behind Shane and rested his chin on Shane's shoulder, squinting at his phone screen. Shane tolerated it for about three seconds, and then he shrugged Ilya off and grumbled, "Your chin is pointy."

"You are baby," Ilya said cheerfully. "Let me back, I want to read your email."

Shane locked his phone and narrowed his eyes. "Stop reading over my shoulder."

"Pay attention to me, then, instead of your stupid email," Ilya whined, and even if Shane rolled his eyes he still pulled Ilya into a hug. They were both a little sweaty still from their morning run, which Ilya not so secretly loved. He buried his face in Shane's neck and breathed in deep.

Shane squirmed and said, "I'm a person, not a scented candle."

"In Russian, please," Ilya said, and watched Shane's brow scrunch up as he concentrated.

"Is it... svecha is candle, but I don't know how to say the first part."

Ilya kissed him—only once, briefly, because proportional rewards were important—and then said, "Aromaticheskaya svecha." Shane repeated it, and then tried again when Ilya shook his head at the pronunciation.

They'd been at the cottage for a few weeks, a short playoff run for both their teams meaning they'd had some time to settle in before the weather got truly nice. Now that it was they spent a lot of time like this, out on the patio looking at the lake. The first week had been frantic as they tried to settle into the idea that they weren't seeing each other in stolen snatches of time, but they'd settled into a calmer feeling, a contentedness that Ilya could feel in his bones as he dragged Shane down onto the couch with him, propping his feet up on the unlit fire pit.

"People keep trying to get me to do interviews about what I think you'll do with your contract," Shane said finally. He tossed his phone onto the furthest couch cushion and leaned back against Ilya, the hair on the top of his head tickling Ilya's chin. "Like I'd ever publicly talk about that. I'm not allowed to speculate, and even if I was, who cares what I have to say? This isn't about me."

Except that it kind of was, Ilya thought. They'd had a lot of talks about their future, over the past year. It had always been hard to see each other so rarely during the season, but now that Svetlana knew, and Rose, Masha and Shane's parents—and even Pike, who Ilya hated but put up with because he loved his boyfriend—it was a little bit easier. Ilya had people he could talk to, and people who knew why he didn't call them back when he had two days off in a row and wanted to spend all of them with Shane underneath him in bed.

“Mr. Hollander,” Ilya joked, pitching his voice deeper, “What do you think about Mr. Rozanov joining the Metros so he can live in your house and fuck you every day?”

Shane grabbed the hand Ilya was holding in front of him as a pretend microphone and wrapped his arm around his waist, instead. “I think he's too expensive for my team to afford and he'd get killed by fans before he ever stepped out onto the ice.”

Ilya put his chin on the top of Shane's head and then moved it away again, before Shane could tell him it was too pointy. “What if I played on Admirals, with Scott Hunter?”

When Shane's shoulders tensed, Ilya let out a laugh. “You don't want to play for a geriatric captain,” Shane grumbled.

“I have new kink,” Ilya said, squeezing Shane's hip. “I love gay Stanley Cup winners.”

Shane tipped his head back so he could look at Ilya over his shoulder. “We're supposed to be talking about your future.”

“That is my future. I'm gonna fuck every gay man who ever win Cup-”

“Scott Hunter doesn't want to fuck you.”

Ilya scoffed. “Everybody wants to fuck me.”

“He and his boyfriend just got engaged,” Shane said, exasperated. “He absolutely is not interested in you.”

“Is good, actually, that he is taken” Ilya said. “He is much more your type, and I do not share.” He punctuated that last sentence with a soft bite to the back of Shane's neck.

Shane shivered and said, “Why’s he my type?”

“Boring, old.”

“Shut the fuck up. I’m like one month older than you,” Shane snapped, because it was an argument they’d been having a lot, ever since Ilya had seen someone on Twitter use the term cougar and asked Shane to explain it.

Ilya brought his other arm around Shane’s waist and used it to haul him farther into his lap. “Is good we are not engaged. I would be like child bride.”

“I hate you,” Shane said fondly, and then he settled back against Ilya and closed his eyes.

They had a lot of future to look forward to, Ilya thought as he looked out over the lake. There were so many different ways their lives could turn out. He could stay with Boston or sign with another team, maybe one closer to Shane. He could go to a team on the West Coast, in a different conference so that they weren’t direct rivals when they told the media they were together. He could go play in Florida, and be warm year round.

There were also the parts of future that had less to do with hockey. Shane had brought up the idea of starting a charity, running a hockey camp to raise money for mental health charities. They’d talked about taking a trip together, just the two of them, to Greece or maybe to Italy, somewhere with a beach where no one would know who they were. Ilya wanted to get a dog, kept texting Shane links to adoption websites.

What Ilya knew, in that moment with his arms wrapped around Shane’s waist, rising and falling with each of his slow, easy breaths, was that he would have a thousand more mornings like this, and then a thousand more. He wasn’t very good at math, because he’d dropped out of school having barely passed algebra to have more time to play hockey, but he was sure two thousand mornings was a lot. And anyways, hockey had brought him Shane, and that was kind of everything. “Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya whispered into his hair.

Shane hummed in response, and that wasn’t good enough, so Ilya wiggled his fingers to make him squirm. “I love you too,” he grumbled, and flipped over in Ilya’s arms to curl into his chest. It was a sweet gesture, and it also protected all the most vulnerable areas of his body from being tickled, and Ilya was warm with the joy of knowing him so well. Here was his best friend, and his boyfriend, and he was sure one day his husband, although he’d only been joking a little about feeling far too young to get married.

But it really didn't matter in the end. None of it did. They had the rest of their lives to figure all of it out, and that was plenty of time.

Chapter End Notes

i so enjoyed writing this. everyone was so kind in the comments and to my personal friends who read this: lol sorry this chapter is literally 17k words... you will simply have to read more.

BUT all that to say, thank you dearly. your kudos and comments have sustained me. i have dearly dearly enjoyed writing this and getting a little too intense about Being In The Minds of these hockey boys. so thanks!!! and that's all i think. blowing you kisses (~ 3~) and byeee

End Notes

hello!!! hi!!! thanks for reading, hooray, etc.

comments, kudos, finding me on tumblr (@eemolu) all are like catnip to me. would love to hear what you think and thank you (again) for reading <3

Δ(◡̈)> love ya bye

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!