snowprint tracings

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by boxysmiles

Summary

Long before he ever sees a photo of her, Shane dreams of Irina Rozanova.

Notes

a lot of this was fuelled by: my own strange dream when my nanna passed, on the clock yaoi, awful sleeping habits, and sea, who was a huge cheerleader and supporter for this. thank you, my lovely <3

what's the canon timeline in this, you ask? it's a blend of the show from HR and then into the book for TLG. don't look too hard at it, it's all vibes, as per my usual <3

See the end of the work for more notes

Shane dreams of people he hasn't seen before.

Or, at least, he thinks so. But he must be wrong, because one of his teachers says something like it's a funny little anecdote but a confirmed truth of the universe—*did you know your brain won't make up a new face? Every person in your dream is someone you know*—and he stares at her in confusion.

Shane doesn't remember his dreams often, but when he does, maybe once or twice a year, he knows he has never seen the faces of the people who are with him. They don't speak to him. They don't even tend to notice he's there, most of the time.

But he's with them. He *sees* them.

"Shane?" She asks him, catching his confused stare. "Do you not think so?"

Now, the entire class is looking at him. He shrinks in his seat — he doesn't like being called upon, and he certainly doesn't like catching the attention of the entire class.

It's not like they're.... *mean* to him. Not directly, anymore, at least. Sometimes they try, but Shane's started learning the tells of when they're just trying to make a joke of him, and he tells them to fuck off. The curse words are bulky and awkward on his tongue, but saying *screw off* or *piss off* isn't cutting it anymore. The teachers pretend not to hear him, even though a 10-year-old shouldn't be saying it, because they pretend not to hear any of the other comments, too.

"Um," he says, fumbling under the stares. "I think I've dreamed of people I don't know before."

She nods at him, then looks around the classroom to see if anyone's in agreement. He *hates* it, because it's usually just another way to make Shane feel like he's wrong, like he's oh-so different, like he's the only one on a team against an entire class. To Shane's relief, some of the other kids are *also* confused enough to forget they're usually not meant to side with Shane, as they nod hesitantly.

She claps her hands together, a little too loud, and he startles. At least most of the attention is off him.

"Right, I said it's someone you 'know', didn't I? I should have said 'seen'. So you could have seen these people in a magazine, on the television, maybe just passing on the street! You don't have to *know* them, really. You might not remember them, but your brain has," she says.

There are a couple of kids muttering amongst themselves. *Yeah, that makes sense. I guess I see a lot of people. Oh, I think I dreamt one time about a lady I saw at the shops! I dreamt once about that actor, you know, the—*

Shane chews on the inside of his cheek. He doesn't remember seeing the man who was in his dream three nights ago anywhere else. Not in a magazine, not on the television.

His features were unfamiliar, but he seemed friendly, as Shane decided to sit next to him in the dream. The man was old, wrinkled, with white hair — reminding him of Shane's grandparents. They sat together, watching the ducks in the lake, until Shane's alarm broke through the dream.

Shane doesn't remember ever seeing the park from his dream before either, but maybe the backgrounds don't work the same. Maybe brains can just make them up, different landscapes of green and blue and orange, apparently unlike human faces.

It's disconcerting, realising his brain can just *remember* these faces without *actually* remembering the people. Shane does not remember seeing the man, but maybe he glanced at him down a shopping aisle while walking with his mom. His memory might not remember, but maybe his subconscious does.

No, he decides. No more *maybes.* That's just what's happened, he decides. He saw the man somewhere else before, because that has to be the truth. Because no one else is still on Shane's side, no one else is still confused or thinking it's weird that they don't *actually* remember the people of the faces they see in their dreams.

So Shane has to have seen that man before. And the younger man before him, a few months ago. The woman, a year ago. The dreams, the very few he remembers, are ones he never forgets.

But he must have forgotten the people he saw *before* those dreams. His brain must have just taken those pieces of their faces and locked them away, just to put them as a person sitting next to him for the night, a quiet and solemn presence to keep him company for the night.

Now, realising it's his brain just bringing forth *random* people, faces he doesn't even remember, people he doesn't and won't ever know... It feels lonely.

He sinks further into his seat. He's used to being lonely, whether it's in a classroom, whether it's on the ice with twenty other boys.

Still, it stings.

He remains quiet for the rest of class. Thankfully, by the time he's out on the ice after school, it's put in the back of his mind.

The next time he dreams, half a year later, he wonders where he’s previously seen the elderly woman who sits with him for the night. Maybe the cinema, when his dad took him a couple of days ago. Maybe the shops again. Maybe she's one of the grandparents of one of the boys down at the rink.

He does not think about the fact that he tries to always make a point of remembering the faces he sees. Still, he does not remember having ever seen her face before. He does not think

about it, because he has to be wrong, and it doesn't matter, anyway, does it? Shane just needs to remember hockey. That's all.

The night that Shane shakes Ilya's Rozanov's hand — twice, because he forgot he'd already done it the first time before it was too late — he dreams.

The scenery around him is blurry. Like someone's put him in one of those vision tests, and they've purposely put it on at the heaviest setting; like the hot air balloon is just an indistinguishable blob of red in amongst blue.

He squints his eyes, but the scenery doesn't become any clearer.

Is this what it's like to be drunk? He finds himself wondering, because the boys have become more insistent on talking about alcohol over the past few months, and he's never quite had the urge to join in on it.

He's never had the invitation, either, to any of the quiet house-parties or secret gatherings. Being surrounded by drunk teenage boys seems like a waste of his time, and *being* drunk around them seems like a bad idea, but... *still.* He finds himself wondering what's so good about it, what he might be missing out on.

If *this* is what he's missing out on, he doesn't really see the appeal.

He taps at the bridge of his nose, checking if his glasses are maybe there, if he's maybe wearing the wrong prescription. They're not on his face, and he rubs at the delicate skin under his eye, but he's not wearing contacts either.

Shane's vision really only goes to shit when he's reading, anyway. He's always been fine with distance, with seeing *real* hot air balloons, with seeing pucks fly across the other end of the ice. It's never been like this.

He turns around, like somehow *behind* him will be any better, and he startles as he realises someone is standing a few metres away.

They're brighter in colour than his surroundings of brown and grey and *so* much white, which Shane is starting to think might indicate snow. Or a really weird hospital.

He squints, but it does little to help. He can see that they're approaching, the blob of colour moving closer to him, but he can't quite make out any features; they *might* have light brown hair, long and potentially curly. Or it might be a fur hood and coat.

Yeah. He's not a fan if *this* is what it's like being drunk.

He remains where he is. He doesn't feel nervous, even though he's not sure who's approaching. But he's sure, instinctively, that this person won't do anything to hurt him.

A woman, he thinks. The curls around her head are hair, he’s sure now, though they start to blend into the coat she's wearing. Half-right. He can't discern much else; he can tell where the dips of her facial features sit, but he can't tell what colour eyes she has, can't see what shape her mouth is making if she's trying to speak.

They stand there, opposite each other. Shane has a feeling that it's only him with the blurry vision — he feels like she's able to see him with perfect clarity.

He makes sure that his shoulders are squared back, but in a polite, not intimidating way. Tries to make sure he comes across well, his mother and father's words in his ears, touches on his back reminding him how to stand when he's talking to someone important.

She moves, ever so slightly. Her head tilts. He thinks, maybe, that she's smiling. She holds out her hand, and Shane's brain freezes, then quickly reboots. *Shake her hand, idiot!*

He reaches out with an awkward jolt of movement, but he somehow manages to grasp her hand despite the blurriness of his vision. He can't really *feel* her, or the pressure she's applying, but his dad's voice is in his ears, reminding him to have a firm grip but not *too* tight, and he tries his best to follow it.

When their hands drop, the scenery fades away, and so does the woman before him.

The dream is short. He remembers it when he wakes, just like all of his dreams, though he's not sure what to make of it. He supposes that it doesn't matter — it gets tucked away anyway, right in the back of his mind, as he watches Ilya Rozanov take to the ice.

Whenever Shane dreams, it is always of a new person. Someone different to sit or walk with for the night, wondering if he saw their faces at the rink, or at the shops, or somewhere in a magazine.

And then, the night before Canada is to play in the Gold-winning match for the Olympics, Shane finds himself back in the blurry white and grey world he'd been in so many years before. He still remembers it, still remembers how strange it'd been — so he can tell, now, that some of the details are sharper. Clearer than it'd been the last time he'd been standing in this dream.

He can tell properly, now, that the white that drowns out the scenery is snow. The brown — which is becoming red, everything becoming sharper in saturation the more he looks — and greys are buildings buried underneath it as snow softly falls, though he can't make out any of the finer details. It's like the blurring filter is still there, but it's thankfully just a *lot* less intense than it'd been the last time he dreamt of this place.

He turns, his footsteps not making any dents or shadows in the snow beneath him. A woman, standing on the other side of the street that he's on, is currently looking over at him. She starts

to walk across the street, and he realises it's easier to tell where the curls of her hair ends and where the darker brown coat begins now.

Her footprints make impressions in the snow as she walks. Shane shifts a little, just to double-check, but he makes no impression in the white beneath him.

He's certain it's the same woman he saw in his dreams so many years ago, though he's never had this happen before. He's never had the same face ever appear again.

Her features don't quite clear up even when she comes closer, but he can see a few more edges than he previously could. A few more shadows, a bit more dimension, and places where the light reflects off her skin. He thinks her eyes are something light in colour — blue, maybe, or green. The colour of her lipstick is a cherry or wine sort of colour, but he still doesn't think he'll be able to make out any words even if she mouths them.

"Hello," he says anyway, when she comes close enough for him to be able to reach out and touch her. His voice seems to echo in the empty street, and he fights back the grimace that wants to appear on his face.

Sometimes, the people in his dreams don't acknowledge his presence. Not once have any of them ever acknowledged him when he's tried to speak to them. But she tilts her head like she's heard his words, and he is suddenly reminded that he's seen this motion before, back when she'd held out her hand for him to shake.

He thinks she might be trying to smile, in a strange echo of his last memory, but the edges of it don't lift very high. Something about it just feels... sad, Shane thinks. Lonely.

"I'm Shane," he introduces, which is stupid, because this is his dream, and this is someone he's never met but somehow remembers. They're in *his* subconscious; they should know his name. His own subconscious should certainly know his name.

But still, her smile seems to lose some of the sadder edges, so he feels a *little* less stupid for it.

He doesn't hear it if she says anything, because her mouth seems to be making some kind of shape. He tries listening, but all he can hear are his own breaths. The snow doesn't make a sound, even as her walking creates footsteps in the depths of it. It's like Shane is in his own personal bubble, a strange ghost-like intruder in his own dream.

"I'm sorry," he winces, "but I can't hear you."

Which, again, he feels stupid for saying. This is *his* subconscious, this is his dream. Whatever she's saying, it's something made from his very own mind.

But he wants to hear it. He wants to know what she might be trying to say. Very few of the people in his dreams acknowledge his presence, none of them acknowledge his words, and certainly, none of them have ever actually tried *speaking* to him.

They stand there for what seems like an eternity. The snow continues to fall around them, though Shane can't feel it even as flecks of white come so close to his face.

It's familiar, he thinks. This street. The buildings. Maybe it just reminds him of Russia — though it's not quite the sight of the Olympic village that he's grown so used to over the past few days. More like something out of some of the books he'd taken to reading about the country when his name had finally been put down for the Games.

Maybe his brain is just filling in the details of his last dream. It's always bothered him, wondering *why* that dream had been so different to all others. Maybe his brain, under all the stress, is just trying to give him *something* else strange to focus on instead.

He'll take it over any of the other stress dreams he could've been plagued with like his teammates. Getting on the ice with no blades on his skates, forgetting *how* to skate, scoring a goal into his own net. The scenarios for losing are *endless,* really. He'll certainly take this strange little street with this unknown — and yet, not — woman.

Still, the very *reminder* of the game tomorrow kicks his heart into overdrive. He reminds himself to take in a breath, trying to convince his heart to slow down, to not let the nerves get to him. He's been excited for most of these games more than he's been nervous, but now, with the looming game just one night away, it's getting harder to think of the fluttering in his stomach as just excitement.

She reaches a hand out, and Shane remains still. Her hand comes up to rest on his chest, and though he can't see her fingers properly, he can make out the way she's patting at his chest. Too fast, a hummingbird on his chest that he can't feel, but he knows what rhythm she's following: his own heartbeat.

He swallows, throat dry. "Yeah, I'm... Nervous. Big game tomorrow."

He can see her nod. Her hand falls away from his chest. She turns, and she beckons over her shoulder in a motion he can tell means for him to follow. She walks slowly, and Shane keeps pace, his mind starting to focus on where it is they're going, where she wants to take him.

But she doesn't seem to have a direction in mind. It's like they're just taking a casual walk through the street, not hurried, nowhere to be. This, now, feels more familiar to Shane — he's used to doing this with the people in his dreams. Walking, sitting, just *existing* next to someone.

He's not used to them acknowledging him, still. He's not used to ever seeing them again.

But the woman beside him is a calming presence, and he finds himself looking around, trying to make out more details. He doesn't get much else, other than a general idea of buildings, as the colours still bleed together and the white of the snow still covers most of it.

Still, he doesn't mind it. They walk for a while, though only the woman's footprints make any trace in the snow, showing where they've come from.

Eventually, they slow to a stop. The woman turns to him and reaches a hand out again. When she rests it on his chest, she leaves it there for a moment, before she starts to pat out a rhythm. Much slower, now. Much more normal.

She nods again, pleased.

"Thank you," he says, though the words are lost as the dream slips away.

He wakes up ready for the game, nowhere near as nervous as he'd been when he went to sleep. He knows he has his dreams to thank for it.

The woman appears a couple more times in his dreams over the years.

Shane can always tell when he'll meet her — the scenery gets a little sharper each time, but there is still a slight blur to everything on the street he finds himself standing in. Snow is always falling. Every time he turns, he starts to see her features just a little better.

Still, she doesn't talk. But she doesn't mind when he does, he realises. She nods along, gently encouraging, though Shane doesn't say much at all. Not for a while. Not until Rose sits across from him at a dinner reservation, and gently breaks up with him in the kindest way possible.

His heart is still somewhere in the restaurant, starting to crack apart as Rose gently pried him apart. *Was it better?* His heart was always still somewhere in hotel rooms, somewhere on one of the steps of the staircase of his house, somewhere on Ilya's couch after Ilya breathed his name for the first time.

The woman in his dream reaches out to touch his chest. But she doesn't tap along to a rhythm. She just presses her hand there, like she's able to feel all of those splintered fragments, like she can he's struggling to keep hold of all the pieces left.

"I think I've made a mess of things," he breathes out. Is it admission, an attempt to repent? He doesn't know. He doesn't think so. This is just his subconscious, isn't it? He's not saying anything he doesn't already know he's guilty of.

Her hand comes up, then. He thinks she can see specks of colour on her nails, maybe. A subtle pink, like the flush of cheeks. But then he can't see her nails at all. She's cupping his cheek, and though he can't feel it, he still tips his head a little more into her palm.

He hasn't seen her for a while. Not since... when? The night before he went to Ilya's, he thinks. She'd appeared then, and they'd taken a quiet walk upon the snowy street, a quiet comfort and reassurance before the game he had the next day.

It's a reminder of just how much has happened. What led him to this desperation, this attempt to try and be *normal,* to just... *try.* Try and be someone he's not, to feel something for

someone he couldn't. To *try* with Rose, only for it all to crumble as she saw right through him anyway. Made of glass, transparent, just a ghost — like he's been, for years, in this dream.

"I panicked," he whispers. "He said my name, and I just... it was too much, in that moment. I felt too much. Like that same guy in the elevator, upset over a kiss. I felt—*feel* too much for him, and I know, I *know,* that I can't, that I shouldn't-"

Her lips are still blurred, but he can see the way she's got them rounded, a *shh* sound he thinks he'd almost be able to hear.

The absurdity of having his subconscious try to calm him shakes something back into place. He breathes out, even though he doesn't think he actually really needs to worry about his oxygen intake in a dream. He's calmer now, not as panicked, not as hunched over with guilt, but her hand still stays on his cheek.

He doesn't want to move just yet. So he doesn't. And she stays right in front of him, too, though her hand moves. She brushes his hair back, and he can *almost* feel it.

Like she knows, she only starts to walk when Shane feels steady enough. It's a slower pace than normal, like they're enjoying taking in all the details around them, even though Shane *still* can't quite see them all. Better, now, but if there are any signs in the windows, any writings on signposts or buildings, he can't see it.

Still, he thinks, it reminds him of Russia.

"He might have found someone else," Shane quietly says, into the blurred snow. "Another woman, someone reliable, someone—" He cuts himself off with that tangent before he can spiral. She doesn't say anything, but he can tell she's listening. "He might not be interested in me anymore. He wouldn't look at me at the last game. Hasn't texted me. But we have the..."

It's hard, even in his dreams, to admit this to anyone. It's hard to admit that it's another hockey player, that it's someone he's got such a televised rivalry against, someone he *should* hate. That he thinks he does, just a little, for making him feel like this. For doing it for years — tying Shane Hollander, who's always made a point to be so straight-laced and uptight and *strong,* into terrible knots.

Her hand comes up through his elbow, and she takes hold. He still can't feel her, but he tries, in that moment, to pretend like he can feel some of that warmth, some of that strength, in the grip of her fingers.

"There's the All-Star game coming up. And I'm excited for that. I'm excited to play with him. And I want to... I *need* to talk to him. Because that— it can't have been nothing. *We* can't be nothing. So I want to try. I really do."

He thinks, maybe, her grip tightens just a little. He can see it by the curve of her fingers, curling over just a little bit more.

"It can't just be me," Shane whispers.

He hopes the woman who walks beside him, for the rest of the night, for as long as Shane can have, thinks so too.

Shane's head still hurts, even in his dreams.

The white of the snow feels too bright. He thinks it's blurrier, this time, than it'd been all those months ago.

"Ugh," he complains, pressing a hand to his head. This isn't fair. Why does his head still hurt in his *dreams?* He's concussed, sure, but surely he should get a break from the persistent ache when he's asleep. He'd gotten a break from it in the hospital, and he *thinks* the night before, maybe, but he never remembers his dreams unless they're like this.

He squeezes his eyes shut for a moment, but he wants to turn around. He still wants to see this dream through, even if it aches.

When he opens his eyes, he realises it's different. The bottom of his stomach drops out, thinking he's actually managed to change the dream, having missed his chance to take a walk with the woman in the snowy streets.

He turns, and the woman is still standing across from him, and relief is quick to flood in.

His head hurts significantly less now, too. He's not surrounded by white, not entirely. He realises they're standing in a park, like it's been a few hours since the last snowfall, and it's now night. In the distance, he sees the shape and soft glow of a lamp-post, but the brightness of the dream has significantly dimmed.

Still, he can see the woman. Can make out her coat and the curls of her hair.

Her eyes are green, he thinks. He's certain of it now.

When she's close enough, her hand reaches out. Her knuckles brush against his cheek, and Shane gets a sense of deja vu, the sudden memory of Ilya standing beside him in the hospital bed. He remembers bits and pieces of Ilya's visit, remembers the tightness in Ilya's expression, the worry he'd been carrying on his shoulders, remembers just... *wanting*. Wanting to make Ilya feel better. Wanting Ilya to know he was okay.

Wanting, simply, Ilya.

Then her fingers brush through his hair. Then, suddenly, knuckles rap on his head.

He laughs, surprised by her exasperated motion. He sees the edges of her lips finally lift into a smile. She tilts her head, like she's waiting for an answer to the question she hasn't voiced.

He figures it out, anyway.

"Concussed," he agrees.

Her knuckles then tap against his collarbone. He can't feel it, so it doesn't ache.

"And a broken collarbone, yeah."

Her fingers smooth out over his arm. At least, in the dream, he isn't wearing his sling. Still, she steps around to his other side, and slides her hand into the crook of his elbow.

She gestures over to a bench that he can faintly see in the distance. He hums, considering, but his headache has pretty much disappeared now, and he feels pain-free.

"I can walk," he says, "if you want to."

Her hand motions out to the path before them. He smiles, takes the first step, and they walk in quiet around the dark, green and white of the park for the rest of the night.

In the back of his mind, he knows that he's stopped thinking of her as just... something his subconscious has made up. He's stopped thinking that she's just a version of himself, his memory trying to communicate to his subconscious. It's just easier, better, to think of her as *someone.* Someone familiar to him, now, giving him comfort in the night.

Which is weird. He knows it's weird. Another secret to carry.

But this one doesn't feel heavy. This one doesn't bowl him over, doesn't tie him in knots he can't hope to untangle.

Shane wakes up, feeling rested, better than he has in days.

The woman appears on the last night that Shane and Ilya can have at the cottage.

He's glad for it. Her presence always makes him feel better. More settled.

They're back out on the snowy street, for this dream. Shane almost misses the park they'd walked through, but he can finally see this street in the most clarity he has yet. He can *almost* make out the individual bricks of the building closest to him. He thinks, that if he comes across any signs, he'll actually be able to read them.

When he turns, he can *finally* see the woman properly. Individual curls of her hair, if he looks closely enough. Her green eyes. The colour of her lipstick, a deep pink that matches the pink blush of her nails.

She's pretty, Shane thinks. Older than him, maybe, but not by that much.

He wonders who she might be. Wonders if Shane's filled in the details of her face only recently; maybe she's someone he's passed in the street, in the shops, in the rink, in the last couple of years.

Or maybe she's always had this face, for all these years. Maybe Shane's brain has held onto these details, but his subconscious has obscured them for some reason.

The rules of his other dreams — which he still gets, on occasion — don't apply to her, though. He walks with people he's never seen again. He sits with people he wonders where he saw their faces of, though struggles to bring any memories to mind.

He doesn't remember seeing them, not until his dream. And then he never sees them again. No dream has ever been the same, not like this.

"Hi," he says. He feels a smile come to his lips easily. It's their last night, and it comes with the mourning of the time that Shane's managed to steal away with Ilya for the summer. Tomorrow, Shane will drive Ilya back to the airport, and they'll say goodbye to this bubble of what they have been, what they *want* to be, when they're together.

He grieves it already, but he's excited, too. Excited that Ilya wants to try. Excited for Ilya to move, to be closer, to make this *work.* Ilya loves him. He loves Ilya. He's so full of happiness, bubbles under his skin from all the times Ilya has touched him, that he's afraid he's going to just *burst* with it.

The woman's hand reaches out, thumb brushing against the corner of his lips. He laughs softly, elated with every single emotion. He can finally see her expression, the way her own smile softens her face, the way that her eyes are so bright and full of emotion.

"I'm very happy," he tells her, another secret to admit in this quiet world. "He makes me so happy."

Her eyes glass over with a wet sheen. Her smile brightens, though, so he only starts to fill with even more of that bubbling sensation.

Her fingers trace over his jaw, cheeks, freckles, nose. Under his eyes. Over his eyebrows. He can tell she's studying each of his features, like she's suddenly gotten her own clarity in this dream.

It might be strange, but Shane remains still under her fingers. Maybe he doesn't mind it because he can't really feel it. But, mostly, he knows it's because he's thinking of Ilya, doing the same to him just a few nights ago.

You look like your mother here, and here, Ilya's voice had said, soft with sleepiness and happiness as his fingers traced over Shane's face. *Your eyes, most of all. Your father here, and here.*

And here, you are both of them, Ilya had finished with, poking the side of his head. Shane had laughed and swatted his hand away, though he'd not let it get too far as he threaded their fingers together.

What did you get from yours? Shane had asked in turn, softly as he could manage. He wasn't sure what the lines were with Ilya's parents, what he could ask, what he *should* ask. He wants to know what Ilya's parents look like. He'd gotten a glimpse of Ilya's father, so, *so* many years ago now, at the draft night. But only a glimpse. Not close enough to know what features Ilya had physically taken from the man.

Ilya's expression shifted; something troubled, at first, then something more melancholic.

Always so many questions, with you, Ilya had said.

You don't have to tell me, Shane had whispered, wanting Ilya to know that Shane wouldn't ask for anything more than Ilya would be willing to give.

I know. And then, after a few moments of quiet, he said, *I have her eyes. The hair — the curls. Not the colour. Papa always thought it... messy. Long.*

I think it's beautiful, Shane had said, taking a strand and curling it around his finger.

Maybe, Shane thinks, looking at this woman before him, he is seeing the construction of Ilya's description. She's still not as clear to him as Ilya is, but he thinks he sees Ilya's eyes in her face. The curled ringlets of her hair — perhaps they're more defined, now, that he's been looking at Ilya's own so much.

He has to be losing it a little, he thinks. Dreaming of what his newly-called boyfriend's mother might look like.

Her fingers drop from his face, and he decides to just shove his thoughts in the back of his mind. He will lose all the peace of these last two weeks tomorrow — he doesn't want to lose the peace he finds here in his dreams, too.

She holds out her arm, this time, and Shane knows to slip his arm into hers. They begin their walk for the night.

Shane sees Ilya's expression shift over the video call, a distraction that has his eyes flicking up to the top of the screen.

"What is it?" He asks, having managed to catch the moment as he settles into bed.

"Svetlana sent me a photo," Ilya replies, surprise curling his words into something like a question.

"Oh yeah?" Shane questions, finding himself curious. Svetlana hasn't come up in conversation for a while now, though they've had little time to talk casually to each other between Ilya moving and getting the foundation up and running.

He sees Ilya consider the notification, but eventually taps into it. And he sees the way that Ilya's expression turns from confusion, to surprise, to something more visceral.

Shock, he thinks. Then upset.

"What is it?" Shane asks carefully, his heart dropping.

Ilya's eyes flicker up to the camera, like he's suddenly remembered it's there. He presses his hand to his mouth, fingers digging into his cheeks. Shane can tell, in that moment, he's thinking about the way to hide his emotions, the way he's panicking slightly about letting too much of his expression slip.

"Baby," Shane says, gentle. His mind is spinning, trying to think of the best way to get Ilya to open up to him, to not hide whatever it is that's suddenly hurt him. The word *baby* does the trick, surprising Ilya enough that he hesitates with his emotions. Shane prompts him after a moment, seeing the wet sheen across Ilya's eyes, "You okay?"

"I..." Ilya croaks out. He whispers something in Russian, a word that isn't familiar, and looks away from the camera as he takes a steadying breath. Shane bites down on the inside of his cheek — he needs to learn Russian faster. There's nothing he can do but wait for Ilya to put his words back in English, or in simpler Russian terms that Shane will understand.

But he has a feeling that *this* will be too big for Ilya to be able to explain in such small matters, will be too much for Shane's limited vocabulary to be able to grasp.

Ilya looks back at the screen, but Shane knows he's still looking at whatever it is that Svetlana's sent him.

"Is everything okay?" Shane asks, because he's getting really worried, now. Is it his brother? Something to do with Russia? There are few things that get Ilya quite this upset. Shane doesn't know what to do; he feels useless on the other end of the video. He just wants to be with Ilya right now, able to reach out for him, able to take his hands and kiss him and remind him that everything will be okay.

"It's..." Ilya's voice is still rough. He clears his throat and straightens up. "Yeah. Is okay. Just... old. Old photo. Old memory."

Shane swallows, something thick in his throat, reacting to Ilya's own pain.

"Is it... painful?" Shane asks, because he's not quite sure what to think of it all. He wants to know what the photo is, but he doesn't want to demand that Ilya show it to him if he doesn't want to. But he wants to try and figure out what's got Ilya like this, what Svetlana could have possibly sent to him.

"A little," Ilya admits. "I'll send to you."

"Are you sure?" Shane asks, because he feels like he's maybe questioned too much, maybe he's prodded too far, maybe he's overstepping. It's clearly hard for Ilya — Shane doesn't want

to make this any worse. Doesn't want Ilya to linger in the hurt if he doesn't need to. "You don't have to. It's okay, if you don't want to."

"Only fair," Ilya says. "Have seen so many of you."

The reply confuses him enough to cut any further protests from his tongue. He sees a new notification pop up, a message in the chat, and his heart thuds heavily in his chest as he opens it up.

It's a print from a digital camera, with the same sort of grainy filter that's on most of the old photos that Shane's parents have kept framed in their house for way too long. This is what he means, Shane realises. Ilya's run his fingers over all the young, baby-faced photos of Shane. His father has pulled out one of the old photobooks just to let Ilya get a glimpse of Shane as a baby, as a toddler, as a bumbling little kid with his first ever pair of rental skates on.

Shane has never seen a photo of Ilya as a child. There are some younger photos of him, put up by the social media teams, of Ilya in Juniors. The youngest that Shane has ever seen him, he thinks, is around the age of 14 or 15.

Not this young. Not... *5,* maybe, at best. With slightly crooked teeth, one of his front ones missing, a boyish and happy smile as he grins at the camera. He's wearing hockey skates, and has gear on that looks sort of ridiculous on a 5-year-old. Shane doesn't think it's actually his; maybe the rink's. Maybe a try-out, or something similar. Maybe Ilya, putting the gear on for the first time, knowing that this is exactly what he wants to do.

Even at such a young age, Shane can see it — the way he stands, the confidence, the playfulness. His eyes are bright, full of cheeky promises. All the potential that he will grow into.

He looks so, *so* happy.

But then, right as Shane's lips are about to lift, infected by the joy of seeing such a young Ilya, he freezes. Crouched beside Ilya, one hand around his waist and the other pressed flat against his stomach, there is a woman.

Shane does not know what Irina looks like. He does not know what features her son has inherited from her, other than what Ilya has told him. He has never seen a photo of her, not until this very moment.

But Shane has seen Irina before.

He has seen the lift of that smile that she is giving the camera. He has seen those green eyes. He has seen that light brown hair, the curls draped over her shoulders.

He has seen her. Many times over the years. On the same snowy street, in his dreams, where they walk together, arm in arm.

His throat goes dry. He can't hear anything other than the roaring of blood in his ears.

This doesn't— this doesn't make sense. This doesn't make *any* sense.

Shane has never seen Irina before. He has *never* seen any photos of her.

And yet, and *yet.* He has known her face before he ever truly saw it.

"I..." Shane croaks out. He can't manage anything else.

"She's beautiful, isn't she?" Ilya says, and his voice is so close to shattering that Shane reacts immediately, snapping himself out of his own panic for the moment.

"She is," Shane says, voice a whisper, because anything louder might just crack on his own hysterics. "This is..."

"My mama," Ilya confirms, voice just as soft.

Irina Rozanova, smiling at the camera, holding her son in her arms.

This is— this is insane. Shane *must* be insane.

He must have... he must have seen her face, somewhere. He *must* have. Maybe Ilya has shown him a photo before without even realising. Maybe Shane's eyes glanced over her features before, somewhere he doesn't even remember.

He can't let himself spiral with these thoughts. Ilya needs him now — he blinks, once, and the wetness from his eyes drips down his cheeks. Shane's heart cracks clean in two.

"Oh, Ilya," Shane breathes out. "Ilya."

Ilya presses his fingers into his eyes and shakes his head. Shane can see his jaw clenching, trying to stop any noise from escaping. Shane wants *nothing* more than to be with Ilya right now, able to take him in his arms, able to hold him as he cries. Shane's brain is scrambling, trying to find *something* to say, but all he can do is softly repeat Ilya's name, trying to remind him it's *okay* if he wants to cry.

But Ilya is doing his best to keep it together. His fingers are playing with his necklace, tugging the cross back and forth across the chain. He breathes in, steadying himself. Shane aches, but there are no words coming to his tongue.

I think I know her. I've seen her. She has taken my arm, and she has walked with me through streets of—

Russia.

Holy *fuck.* How long has he been dreaming of this? Of *her?*

Okay, *no, no, no.* He can't, he *cannot,* panic right now over this. He can't do this in front of Ilya.

He tilts his phone back, giving himself the moment to look up, to make sure his face settles back into something a whole lot less panicked, just in case Ilya flicks the app back over. He

matches Ilya's breath, tells himself he can deal with *whatever* his subconscious has done to him *later.* Later, later, later. Ilya needs him now.

"I don't know where she got this photo," Ilya says, right as Shane manages to rally himself, and he taps back on the app to get Ilya's current face on his screen. He knows he only has limited time with the childhood photo — he'll have to delete it, because even at such a young age, Ilya is recognisable. Shane can't have a trace of him on his phone. His heart breaks further at the thought of having to part with it, of not being able to see Ilya's bright expression, the happiness in his face as his mother takes a photo with him.

But Shane can't look at Irina without spiralling. So he focuses on Ilya's expression *now,* the quiet heartbreak, the sheen on his cheeks that he hasn't wiped away. His eyes are roaming over the screen, taking in the details of the photo. Shane's glad for it — his expression probably isn't as controlled as he wants it to be, and Ilya can read him well. He'll probably know that *something's* wrong the moment he sees Shane's expression. It's lucky that Ilya's attention is entirely taken up by the photo.

"My father, he... He ruined the photos we had of her. Threw them away. I tried so hard to look for this camera, but he... I don't..." He's stumbling over his words, overwhelmed. Shane can do nothing but chew on the inside of his cheek.

He ruined the photos we had of her, Shane repeats, over and over in his mind. Ilya... Ilya doesn't have any, is the assumption that Shane can make from that statement. Ilya doesn't have any photos of his mother, and he's been looking ever since.

So *where* did Shane see her? How does Shane know her face already? How has Shane already dreamed of her face, and potentially, *maybe,* has been for years?

He *must* have seen her. Somewhere between that first dream and the latest one. And Ilya looks quite a lot like her; maybe Shane's brain just made the corrections, the assumptions. Maybe he just got lucky. Maybe his brain filled in the woman's face with Ilya's own, once he was told about which features to look for.

"You have her eyes," Shane manages to say. He's trying to convince himself, he thinks. *See? You already know Ilya's eyes. His smile. Of course, they are easy to apply to other faces.* "And her hair."

Ilya takes in another deep breath. Lets it out, slow and measured. Piecing himself back together, pulling back his thoughts, stopping himself from feeling overwhelmed. Slowly getting his thoughts back in order, both in Russian and English.

"Yes," Ilya agrees. His voice is getting steadier. Warmer. Finally, his eyes soften, some of the upset turning into something gentler. "Told you."

"You did," Shane breathes out. "You did, yeah."

Ilya filled in the gaps for him. Shane's brain made a correct assumption about the colour of her hair; Ilya already told him that he did not have the same colour as hers.

"How old were you?" Shane asks. Maybe if he can focus his thoughts on just Ilya, maybe it will be easier to stop thinking of the snowy street that he's walked down so many times.

Ilya hums. "I think, hm, five? Maybe? Maybe younger."

"First time in hockey gear?"

"Yes," Ilya answers. "Had... trials? Try-outs."

"Yeah," Shane encourages, confirming the word with Ilya's hesitation.

"Don't remember much of it," Ilya says, voice distant, like he's caught somewhere in the memory of it. "But I remember that she came. I was so happy. She didn't—" He falters, then tries again, "She tried to come. When she could."

Shane nods, then remembers Ilya probably isn't looking at him, so he forces out an acknowledging noise past his throat.

Shane's own parents had been at as many practices as possible. His mom, particularly, was always *somewhere* in the rink, watching him skate for hours. Watching the other boys, comparing them, figuring out how high Shane could go.

Seeing Ilya's young face now, he wonders what practices looked like for him. How many times he was dropped off at the rink without a parent watching, without someone there to support him.

Still, in this photo, Irina is there. It clearly means the world to the little boy smiling.

"She looks very proud of you," Shane says.

"Yes, I think so," Ilya agrees.

Shane knows so. "You smile the same," Shane says.

He has seen that curve of Ilya's lips levelled at him before, all that pride, conveying *this is mine, this is the person I love.*

"I do?" He sounds so much younger, suddenly. Like he's still somewhere back in that memory, in his mother's arms. After a moment, he says, "Yes. I think so, too. I... There aren't many memories. No photos."

What he'd give, right now, to just be able to reach through the phone. To be right by Ilya's side.

"There's a photo, now," Shane softly reminds him, trying to patch over some of the heartbreak in Ilya's expression.

"Yes." Shane watches as Ilya's eyes flicker, and then he moves, and Shane can tell he's just put the video call back on the screen. "It's late. You have to sleep."

"I can stay," Shane offers immediately.

Ilya's features go so soft it's a wonder he doesn't just melt.

"No, is okay," Ilya says quietly. Shane can tell he just needs a few moments, maybe, to be on his own with the photo.

"Okay. But you call me if you need anything, or you want to talk, or whatever," Shane tells him. He can tell the photo has stripped Ilya raw, has flayed him right open. He doesn't want Shane seeing this much of it, he knows, but there's nothing Shane wants more than for Ilya to be able to take comfort in him. If Shane can help, then he *wants* to. "Seriously, Ilya. I don't care what time."

"You will care at two in the morning, when I miss you most," Ilya says. And it's an *attempt* at trying to tease, an attempt at his usual joking and flirting manner, but it falls short. Ilya groans as he realises he hasn't quite managed to be as cheeky with it as he'd have liked to have come across, trying to keep the mood light.

"I won't," Shane promises. And because he can see the way Ilya's expression starts to crack, the way he's barely holding it together, the way he's obviously upset he can't hide his emotions, Shane tries to joke, "Okay. Maybe if it's just a booty call at two in the morning, then I'll not be happy about it."

Ilya's eyes flick away from the screen for a moment, just a quick glimpse of him trying to collect himself, before he looks back. "Okay. Will booty-call at one in the morning. Not two."

Shane rolls his eyes good-naturedly — his heart isn't in it at all, and neither is Ilya's.

"See how that goes for you," Shane tells him. He knows he needs to hang up, knows he needs to give Ilya the time to process the photo and his mother. Shane knows *he* needs to process his own emotions that have come from seeing a familiar face. But the moment he hangs up, he's going to have to delete the photo he's been given. He can't look at Irina without his mind spinning with panic, but it still feels like a loss, the thought that he won't be able to open his phone and have this photo of Ilya's child-like smile again. "Ilya, hey. You should get it printed."

Ilya, for a moment, stares blankly at the camera. Like he's trying to process what Shane means by it — like he's processing what it's going to mean to have a proper, actual photo of his mother. And then his face softens, young and boyish.

"Yes. I will," Ilya says softly. "Goodnight, Shane."

"Goodnight, Ilya."

He wants to remind Ilya that he'll be on the other end of the phone, waiting with his ringer turned up just to make sure he doesn't miss anything. But he doesn't want to push, or intrude on this moment of Ilya seeing his mother.

Who Shane has, apparently, *maybe* been seeing in his dreams.

"Okay," he breathes out, running a hand down his face the moment the call disconnects. He squeezes his eyes shut and thinks about the snowy dream.

He's been seeing this woman for *years.* He takes a moment to recall, trying to remember the first ever time he'd ended up seeing the blurred swirls of colour around him. He's been seeing her since... since the first night that Shane introduced himself to Ilya.

The realisation makes him bolt upright.

He hadn't known anything about Ilya, then. Details about his life were scarce and hard to come by; very little about Ilya's profile other than what had been translated to English for the Junior circuit, which wasn't much. Shane had no confirmation about Irina's passing until Ilya confessed it to him in the cottage. He had no idea about *anything* to do with Ilya's mother the day that Shane had reached out—*twice*—for his hand.

But she'd been nothing but a blur, then. A brighter splash of colour against all the white and grey. He'd gotten details slowly, over the years, but never anything quite as defined until *after* Ilya described the features he took after his mother.

And Shane has studied Ilya's features, his eyes, his smile, so much. He's no artist, but he thinks if he were given a pencil, he'd still be able to draw the outlines of Ilya's features. If Shane's mind were to put *anyone's* expressions or facial features to this woman from his dreams, then of *course,* it would be Ilya's. It's the face he knows the best.

There are so many mannerisms of the woman that he sees in Ilya. The tilts of her head. The edges of her smile. The way her fingers brush over his skin, in the same places that Ilya has. Of course, Shane would see Ilya in this woman. Of course, his subconscious would put Ilya's face onto hers.

He hasn't thought of her as something made from his subconscious for a long time, now, but this— this *has* to be the proof. Shane's teacher has always been right; that Shane can't just *make up* a face he's never seen before. All the people in his dream have always been someone he's seen before. Or knows the features of well enough that he's able to put them there.

It *has* to be his subconscious. Because the alternative is too absurd, too *insane,* to even consider.

He falls back on his bed and pulls his duvet over his head.

And then he remembers that he hasn't deleted the photo from their messages. He hesitates as his fingers curl back around his phone.

He *wants* to keep it. He doesn't want to delete this image, so full of love and warmth. His first ever glimpse into little Ilya, into his mother, into the two of them together.

But he has to. He can't keep this.

He unlocks his phone, and the photo is right there, already on his screen. Ilya and Irina, beaming at the camera, clutching at each other.

Fuck. Ilya really does look like her.

He counts himself down. Five, four, three, two—

He deletes the message with the photo. Exhales. Ilya will print the photo, at least. And when they come out, when they retire and reveal everything, Shane will be free to put the photo right back on his phone, always to have his own copy of it.

Folding the phone down on his chest, he has to try and count out his breaths. Has to recite some older breathing techniques.

It takes a while to fall asleep. He doesn't dream.

Shane doesn't dream again for months. The next dream he remembers, there is a middle-aged man accompanying him. They walk along the coast of a beach, watching a sunrise. Shane doesn't say anything — he's not sure if he's relieved or disappointed that it's not a snowy street.

And then, another couple of months later, the night they announce the Irina Foundation to the world, Shane dreams of it.

His heart is pounding so hard in his chest that it almost feels hard to breathe. It's like the snow has started to build up in his throat, in his lungs, thickening and suffocating. He knows who he's going to see when he turns.

He almost doesn't want to. But he does, of course. She's already crossing the street, making her way towards him.

It's... It's *definitely* Ilya's mother that he's dreaming of.

There's no denying it. There's no hope in pretending otherwise. Her features are clear now, like Shane's vision has *finally* adjusted.

"I'm... I'm dreaming of my boyfriend's mother," he whispers to himself, distraught.

It is, most definitely, Irina who is walking closer. And then, as she steps close to him, as both her hands come up and cup his cheeks, he realises that her cheeks are damp. Her eyes are watering, and a tear falls as she blinks.

"Oh," he says, heart thudding painfully in his chest for another reason. His hand comes up to brush at her cheeks, worry tugging painfully in his chest. "Oh, no. Hey. What's wrong?"

In the back of his mind, he considers this a stupid question. There is *so much* wrong with this entire scenario. The fact that Shane is dreaming of her. The fact that he's dreaming of her *crying.* Is it because he's being reminded of Ilya's own tears when he first saw that photo? Is

the panic trying to twist itself around, his subconscious carrying guilt over the fact he hadn't been able to reach out and brush at Ilya's own cheeks in that moment?

And then she—*Irina*—laughs, though it's a wobbly expression. Tears of joy, he thinks. She shakes her head, an '*oh dear'* sort of motion, though it's gentle enough that it doesn't dislodge Shane's hands from her face.

Shane realises, in that moment, he just *heard* her laugh.

His ears are ringing, suddenly. He's not sure if the white is from the snow of his own vision going funny anymore.

He doesn't register as her hands come up to brace against his own, keeping his palms cupped to her cheeks.

He has never heard anyone in his dreams make a sound. He has never heard a breath. Has never heard a sigh.

And has, certainly, never *heard* a laugh.

"What..." He trails off, helpless.

He sees Irina's face change. The way that Ilya's own does, when he realises Shane's taken something a little too close to heart, the way he looks when he goes into damage-clean-up mode.

The thought of Ilya only makes him spiral more.

How is he ever meant to explain this? How is he ever meant to tell Ilya that he thinks he heard his mother *laugh?*

Isn't that cruel? Ilya... Ilya doesn't even have photos. His memories are faded. He's confessed to Shane that he's forgotten the sound of his mother's voice, though he tries, still, so hard to hold onto it.

Her laughter went first, Ilya had said. *Very few memories of it. And now it is her voice.*

And here Shane is, hearing it.

No. *No.* No way.

Because if he *is,* then it means— *what?* Irina is in his dreams, somehow? Irina has taken to slipping into them at night, over the years, just to visit? *Him?*

No. There's no way.

Shane's dreams have always just been... weird. They've always been weird. He knows he doesn't dream like everyone else seems to. He knows that it's strange to dream of faces he doesn't know, even though he *must* know them all from somewhere. It's strange to always

come back to this street, to have some faceless woman slowly shift into the exact resemblance of his boyfriend's mother.

Shane has always been weird. This is just something else, on top of it all. This isn't anything more than his brain just being *weird.*

It's all it can be. It's all he'll accept.

He realises they're slowly crouching down together, like both of their knees are slowly giving up on them. Irina takes his hands and holds them between their bodies now, keeping them clasped between her fingers as they get lower and lower.

"It's— snow," he says, rather pointlessly, glancing between her and the ground, but she just smiles at him. He keeps letting her lead him down, until they're no longer standing. When Shane sits, the ground is solid, but it isn't cold. Isn't damp with the snow. When he touches it, he can feel that there's *something* there, but it doesn't have the same bitter bite of chill. Still, the snow does not move under his touch. There is no trace of him in this snow. It just seems to... disappear, underneath him, as he sits on the side of the road. Like it was never there at all.

It's just a dream, after all. Of course he can't feel the snow. Of course, it's not really underneath him. It's not *real.*

Irina keeps his hands between her own. They sit there, watching the white flecks fall.

When Shane glances over, he sees that her cheeks are still tracked by tears — new ones, fresher than the ones that had been on her cheeks that he tried to wipe away earlier.

She's smiling. But it's different from the way her lips had pulled with her joyous laugh.

There's something so incredibly *sad* about her.

Shane's heart aches. He wants to try and help, but the moment he opens his mouth, the dream slips away from him.

He wakes up, and swears he can still feel her hands in his.

He doesn't tell Ilya.

There's already so much going on in their lives. Between Ilya's move of hometown *and* team, the foundation, the change in their rosters, just... *everything,* Shane decides it's not something to mention.

He doesn't know how to go about that conversation, anyway. *Hey, Ilya, did you know I've had dreams of your mother? I've heard a laugh, though I don't know if it's hers. I think I made her*

cry the last time I saw her. I couldn't make it better. I'm sorry.

Yeah, *no.* It sounds like something that will get him sent to the team psychologist for mandatory sessions. It sounds crazy, and most of all, it sounds cruel. It sounds so incredibly cruel.

He won't do that to Ilya. He won't bring it up, not when it's just going to hurt him. Not when Ilya's only just recently put the photo of his childhood self and his mother up on a frame in his house.

When Shane had last visited, his breath had been pulled so quickly from his lungs at the sight of it. He felt like he could reach out and touch her, with her beaming, proud smile. Ilya caught him staring at the photograph, though neither of them said anything about it.

But he asks, a couple of months later, resting on Ilya's lap as they lazily enjoy the rare afternoon together, if Svetlana has managed to find any more photos.

Ilya's expression shutters over and tightens so fast that Shane feels like he gets whiplash from it all. His stomach drops out.

"Sorry," he says immediately, going to sit up, but Ilya puts his hand on Shane's chest and keeps him down.

Unable and unwilling to move now that he knows Ilya still wants him to stay, he can only stare up at Ilya, silently waiting. Ilya's expression slowly shifts as he works through his emotions.

Shane brings his hand up and circles it around Ilya's wrist, swiping his thumb back and forth across Ilya's skin. He can insist, really, that *no, it's okay. We don't have to talk about this. You don't have to tell me.*

But he can tell that Ilya *wants* to. He's just struggling to bring it up — it's not like either of them to sit with emotions too heavy, to let the other person in on them.

"There are a couple more," Ilya says. "One with Alexei and my father. One of just my mother. She's very young in it. I think... our age, maybe. Younger."

Shane is admittedly *very* curious about all of these photos. Especially about Ilya’s family. He certainly doesn't like his father and brother, not from whatever fragmented pieces he can make of the men that Ilya has deigned to share with him, but he's always hungered for whatever pieces of Ilya's childhood he can get. Which isn't many.

"Do you have them?" Shane asks, and then quickly corrects himself with, "Do you mind showing me?"

Ilya hums, but after a moment, he squirms on the couch and pulls his phone out from the pocket of his sweatpants. He pulls out his phone and scrolls through it, tapping into a conversation that's entirely in Russian. Shane's eyes glaze over a little at the overwhelming amount of it, *way* too much for the meagre amount he's been studying.

And then, moments later, as Ilya hurriedly taps into the contact name and searches through the media, he belatedly realises most of the text boxes had been in grey. Svetlana has messaged him a lot; Ilya has not messaged back.

His thumb taps against Ilya's skin as he considers what it might mean. Maybe they're having a fight. Maybe Svetlana isn't saying anything that needs a response.

Shane can't even read the dates properly. He doesn't know how long ago the last conversation might have been. Fuck, he needs to work on his Russian.

Ilya taps into a photo and offers the phone over. Shane lets go of Ilya so that he can take it, holding it with both hands so that he doesn't drop it on his face. When he sees the photo properly, his lips go round with a small *oh.*

It's Irina, certainly. Cropped from a larger photo, pixelated and blurred. Similar to how he'd seen her in his dreams a couple of years ago. It just makes it all that much easier to recognise her — and for Shane's breath to feel like it's been snatched.

She's wearing a brown coat. One that Shane recognises. The one she typically wears in his dreams.

"Pretty, right?" Ilya mumbles.

"Very," Shane manages, clearing his throat when he realises how croaky he sounds. "Yeah. Really pretty."

She looks *so* much like Ilya. It's even easier to see with these younger features on her face, looking so close to Ilya's age now.

Shane takes a few moments to look, and then he swipes across when Ilya gives him the go-ahead.

A family photo.

Holy *shit*, is all Shane can think, his brain screeching to a stop. He'd known what to expect, of course, since Ilya told him, but... it just seems so *different,* now, seeing it right in front of him.

They're standing outside, a candid photo, like someone has just passed them on the street and has asked for a shot. Irina is holding Ilya, small enough to be carried on her hip. His little fists are clutched to her coat, the same brown one she'd been wearing previously. The same one in Shane's dream. Ilya's fingers have also managed to grasp some of her curls, and the strands are catching the light. So much closer to the colour of her youngest son. She's standing next to an older man, one Shane has only ever caught a glimpse of — her husband, Ilya's father. Between their legs, there's another young boy, staring at the camera with a solemn expression.

Ilya is staring at his mother. Eyes wide and adoring. Irina is attempting to smile for the camera, but Shane has seen the sad lift to her lips before, and he knows what it looks like.

Her husband wears the matching expression to his oldest son.

My father, he was so hard on her, Shane remembers Ilya telling him, as they both watched the crackling of fire.

This is the only photo he's ever seen of the four of them, but he can see it. The gentle sadness of Irina, and the harshness of her husband. Shane's heart aches — Ilya is so young in the photo, so wrapped up in the sight of his mother. This little boy, who has no idea he's about to lose his entire family.

Shane swallows thickly. He passes the phone back to Ilya.

"We should print that, too," Shane whispers.

Ilya makes a noise, closer to disagreement. "Maybe just the one of my mother."

"We can crop the one with your family," Shane says, guessing the issue with the second photo. "If you don't want to print out your father and brother, then... let's just cut them out."

"Will make for an awkward photo in the frame," Ilya mumbles. "Wrong size."

"We'll find a frame that fits," Shane replies.

"Mhm. Maybe." Ilya puts the phone down on the couch. He takes a deep breath. "Maybe."

Shane curls around Ilya, making himself press even closer — it's almost impossible, because there's very little space between them, but Shane curls around him as much as possible and holds tight.

I've seen that coat before. I've seen that smile before. He could say it. He *could* say it.

And sound insane. And sound so awfully, terribly cruel.

He presses his face into Ilya's chest and shudders with his next breath. Ilya's fingers stroke through his hair.

There's no point bringing it up, he tells himself. Not right now. Not when Shane will have to leave in a few hours, and Ilya will have to think about whether he wants to print the photos of his mother and put them up in this house.

And Shane hasn't dreamed of Irina in a while, now, anyway. Maybe his brain is done with... whatever weird trickery it's trying to confuse him with. Maybe it was stress, or anxiety, about their relationship manifesting in possibly the strangest, cruellest way. He knows that it doesn't make complete sense, knows that there are so many things that don't add up. But he must have missed a few steps, his memory losing against his subconscious in this game of confusion. There has to be a *reasonable* explanation behind the dreams. Because that's all they are.

And there's no point worrying Ilya with them.

They have so many other things to deal with, anyway. Shane has so many other things he has to focus on.

So Shane doesn't bring it up. He puts his head down, and he focuses on hockey, on the foundation, on *everything* else.

He does not dream of Irina for months. He doesn't dream much at all. He has one dream, after almost an entire year. It is not of Irina — just another face he doesn't know, another walk around a park that he has never seen before. It's the longest he's gone without having one of these dreams, and he wakes up slightly disoriented and confused from it.

Another year passes.

And Ilya asks him, *"What sacrifices, Shane? What have you given up?"*

Shane, blindsided, angry, *confused,* rises to the fight that's been prickling under their skin for this entire afternoon. For the last few visits, things have been strained, and Shane has been *trying* to reach across, to get Ilya to talk to him, but Ilya shuts him down and shuts him out, and now, *now,* suddenly, Ilya is changing the plan, wanting to introduce Shane to the Centaurs at a party, and even as a friend it's too close to what they've been trying to hide for so long now and this *isn't what they agreed on, this isn't—*

And then—

"You wouldn't even choose me, would you? If it is between me and hockey."

Shane fucks up. He hesitates, stumbling when Ilya asks it, because he can't lie, he's always been so bad at lying. He'd pick Ilya, he'd pick Ilya, he *does* pick Ilya, but — he hesitates, because he thought they were both in agreement about their current choices. He thought they were in agreement to keep themselves private, hidden, *secret,* so that both of them can prioritise their careers *now*. The reveal was always going to be *after.* After retirement. After they didn't have hockey to lose anymore.

But now Ilya is proposing something that happens *during,* an ultimatum they've done everything to avoid, and Shane stumbles, because— they were putting hockey first, weren't they? For now? It was going to be hockey, and *then* them. They were doing this so that they wouldn't *have* to choose, if it came down to it. It was safer, easier, this way.

That's... that's the plan. Isn't it?

He thought they were in agreement. And he thinks that if Ilya has the question fired back at him, he'll understand Shane's hesitation, he'll stop *pressing* for a stronger, better answer that Shane isn't able to give in the heat of the moment.

Ilya says *you should go,* and Shane thinks it's a diversion, it's Ilya picking hockey first but being unable to say it after getting shitty at Shane and he's a fucking *hypocrite* for it, and then —

Ilya backs Shane against the wall. Puts a hand on his chest before he quickly puts it on the wall instead. Shane still thinks *he's chosen hockey, he can't answer because he's fucking chosen hockey—*

And then, it's—

I already chose you, Hollander.

And then it's Ilya, telling him to go home. And then it's driving home, with so much anger, shock, fear. And so, so much shame.

The realisation crashes into him, all at once, and leaves him hardly able to breathe. He thinks *this is it.* He thinks he's fucked it up beyond repair; Ilya has given up so much for him, and Shane has been a *shit* boyfriend. The absolute worst. Ilya deserves better than that, and Shane's taken him for granted, and this is it, this is Shane losing Ilya, this is Shane losing his entire world—

The call with his mom helps, at least. It reminds him to calm down, to give Ilya some time. Shane loves Ilya, and Ilya loves him, and still— he still *will.* He does. He won't lose feelings so quickly. He won't. He can't.

Shane's head is a mess. Sleep doesn't come easily, but he manages to get a reprieve from his cycling thoughts.

Only to see a snowy street.

His heart sinks. It's been two years — he thought, maybe, that these dreams had stopped. That he'd be able to stop worrying about what seeing his boyfriend's deceased mother would mean.

But Shane wants nothing more than to talk to Ilya, to see him, to properly apologise. To make this right. Maybe this is something in his brain just trying to grasp onto *anything,* pulling back a dream that he hasn't had in so long now. Maybe this is guilty consciousness, trying to make him repent.

He turns to see Irina, who's already making her way across the street.

Maybe this is it, maybe this is the goodbye, Shane thinks somewhere in his mind, some of his earlier, most despairing thoughts coming back to the forefront. Maybe he didn't dream of her for two years, maybe something in the back of his mind *knew* that he was doing wrong by Ilya, that he was taking him for granted. Of course, Irina wouldn't want to see him — what an awful, awful partner Shane has been to her son.

Irina comes closer. Shane's heart is beating so fast, and despair has made a hollow cave where his chest should be.

"I'm so sorry," he chokes out, guilty and ashamed. "I'm so sorry. I'll— I'll fix it. I'll make this right."

He sees her lips purse, expression falling as she walks closer, and then he hears—

He *hears*—

"Sh, sh," she hushes. She's shaking her head as she approaches, eyes soft, all too kind for what Shane deserves.

"I'm sorry," he whispers again, because he needs her to know this — he is. He is *so* fucking sorry.

She reaches out her hand and cups his cheek. She brushes her thumb under his eye, still shaking her head as she gently hushes him.

"He's done so much for me, and I—" He swallows thickly, his words getting choked up in his throat as he starts to unravel. He just... he *needs* her to know. He needs these pieces of Ilya, the pieces he has in his dreams, to know.

He can't lose Ilya. He doesn't want to lose this, either. He's... missed her. He's missed these dreams, even if he knows this is only going to cause even more confusion, even if it means the thought of telling Ilya about them is suddenly a concern once more.

He can't, of course. What an *insane* thing to say. It'd sound like some kind of ploy to get Ilya to try and talk to him again, if he tried to say it now.

Still... *Still.* He's missed these dreams. He can admit that much. Even if they feel like some kind of slightly twisted cosmic joke. Of course, Shane dreams of Irina for the first time in two years when he feels like he's on the verge of losing Ilya.

Irina stands with him until Shane's breaths start to calm, until he can finally feel like he can swallow without something lodged so thickly in his throat. Her fingers smooth over his skin, tucking his hair behind his ear, and then she lifts her hand from his face.

Only to place her hand back down on Shane's chest. For a moment, Shane thinks she's checking his heartbeat, but when Irina levels an expectant gaze at him, he realises this is a purposeful motion that she's trying to communicate *something* with.

He goes to put his palm on the back of her hand, but she shakes her head. She lifts her hand, then places it on an imaginary wall beside his head. It clicks, then.

She watches the realisation cross his face, and she puts her hand back on his chest. She is still watching him, waiting for something. Her expression crosses into something a little more exaggerated, but Shane starts to understand what she's asking.

"He'd never hurt me," Shane says, eyebrows furrowing. The thought never crossed his mind, not even in the face of all of Ilya's anger, all of his emotions spilling forth. He tries again to cup her hand, and she lets him. He holds it between both of his own, cradling it between them.

When Ilya had been in front of him, the hand on his chest, Shane had seen it — that split-second of terror. Ilya realising what he was doing, and the potential of what he *could* do scared him. Shane had known, *does know,* that Ilya would have never let anything more

happen. Ilya would never hurt him — not outside of hockey. Not in a real fight. He'd never let his anger cloud him in that way, would never let his hands turn into fists, would never put them on Shane.

My father, he was so hard on her.

Ilya has implied, before, that Grigori was not only hard on Irina. That he would turn his anger on his sons. Ilya posed it as something justified, like a coach getting angry when a student misbehaves, like there is ever a reason for something physically harmful to come of it. When Shane had tried to encroach on that topic, to gently question him, Ilya had shut it down entirely and hadn't budged a millimetre.

And Shane knows, he *knows,* that Ilya was scared of being like his father, in that moment.

"On the ice, he can be brutal," Shane tells her quietly. Not just with his words; there are plenty of hard checks, hard smashes into boards, plenty of dropped gloves with other players. On the ice, Ilya Rozanov is a player that most have scruffed with at one point or another. For a moment, he thinks about some of the scrappier games they've been part of, pushing and pulling at each other. Then, his voice softens as he says, "But off the ice... he has always been so gentle. Like love and kindness was just something always given to him. I know it isn't, not with his father. But..."

Irina's touch has always been kind. The path of her fingers has always traced over Ilya's own, a shared language. One that Shane is quietly confident that Ilya has never forgotten the language of love that his mother taught him. Whether he dreams of it or not, whether he *imagines* it exists this way, he is sure that it is simply the truth of the universe. Irina Rozanova gave it to her son, and he has kept it so close to his heart, and has chosen Shane as the one to give it to.

It's a reminder of just how badly Shane has messed it all up. He breathes in, and it rattles in his chest, delicate and cracking.

"I'll be better at loving him," Shane breathes out, a quiet promise. "I'll do my best at showing it, too. I'll do my best to deserve him."

Irina hums, a wonderful note that carries through the street like a lullaby. She brings up her other hand to cup his cheek again, and Shane closes his eyes and leans into her touch.

This is a dream. It's a dream, and Shane is dreaming of Irina, but there is—

There is something very *real,* about it all. So many moments that Shane can't quite explain, so many smaller details that he is too scared to look into.

But it doesn't matter right now, he decides. Irina is reaching out for him, holding him, and all Shane can do is feel relief that she is here with him.

Shane does not think she is asking for forgiveness. But he does his best to be worthy of it anyway.

When he wakes up, his fingers are reaching for someone he can't hold.

Ilya hasn't texted back yet, but Shane will wait. He will do whatever it takes to make sure he makes this right.

They make up from the fight — as much as they can, with all the distance between them. There's a lot more to do, he knows. A lot more for *him* to do.

But Ilya talks to him, and Shane apologises and apologises and apologises, and they're— they're *okay.* Shane knows they'll be okay, that they'll come out on the other side of this stronger, *better.* Shane certainly will. He'll make sure he does right by Ilya.

He's not going to lose Ilya. He won't.

And then, he almost does.

Or, rather, he is suddenly hit with the possibility of what life would be like if it happens. If Ilya's plane hadn't been able to land as safely as it had. If the last ever messages Shane would have from Ilya would be the ones on his Instagram. *I am safe in your heart. I believe it.*

That's... that's *all* that Shane would have of him. That's all that would have been left.

A fight, Shane can work through. A breakup would be devastating, but at least Ilya would be *alive.* But if Ilya dies, then... there's no recovering from that.

He could have lost Ilya. One faulty engine and a free-fall and nothing but fucking Instagram messages. The entire world would not have known about them, and Shane— Shane can't fucking bear the thought of it.

He won't keep Ilya a secret. He can't. It'll kill him, he knows. If he loses Ilya, and the levels of his grief become something he has to *hide*, if he can't let the entire world know about the way Ilya loves him, how *wonderful* he is, how much Shane wants nothing more than to be his husband, then there's no point. There is *no point.* If all Shane has left of Ilya are just fucking messages under a *Lily* and Instagram thread, a final goodbye, no photos, no fucking rights to the house they were meant to share, no rights with his body, so little evidence of how much they loved each other, of how *long* they've loved each other, *nothing fucking left* — then there is nothing left for Shane.

Shane wants Ilya. Above everything, anything. He will choose him above all else.

Hockey doesn't fucking matter. Not nearly as much as Ilya does. Shane won't keep hiding how much he fucking *loves* this man. He loves him, he loves him, he loves him, and he will not — *can not* — lose him.

Sleep takes a long time to pull him under, but he eventually goes as his mind continues to turn over the fear of losing Ilya. He's almost glad that he doesn't have nightmares — he knows that this will haunt him, all the possibilities of what could have happened will torment him.

He doesn't expect to dream at all, but he finds himself on a snowy street.

He's never had this dream so soon; it's usually months between. Two years. Shane thought he wouldn't be seeing Irina so quickly after the last time he dreamed of her, only a few days ago.

It almost feels like a lifetime, though. Shane, thinking he'd pushed them to the brink of breaking up, worried Ilya was going to break up with him. Now, Shane's heart is still pounding hard, like he's still hearing about the emergency plane landing, like he's still reading over Ilya's Instagram messages.

"Fuck," he breathes out, running a hand over his face. *Fuck.* He almost lost Ilya. The realisation just keeps slamming into him, over and over again. He could have lost Ilya, and he would have had nothing. Nothing to show for it, nothing to keep, nothing *left.*

He straightens his shoulders and tries to remember to breathe. Ilya is okay. Ilya is *okay.* He called Shane, and promised he was fine. No injuries. Barely even a bruise. Just a scare. Just what he thought would be his last ever messages, sent to Shane.

His mind is playing tug-of-war with itself. One end, Ilya is fine. The other, he is not. *Shane* is not.

He's so scared about losing Ilya. And now, here he is in this dream again, dealing with the same fear manifested into something a whole lot worse this time. Here, Irina is again.

He turns, and Irina is a couple of steps away from him, her hands clasped in front of her. She's waiting, her expression open and so, *so* soft. Eyes wide, a wavering smile at the corner of her lips as she tries to silently say she's here, she's right here with him. The way Ilya had looked when he'd realised Shane had been crying.

Shane feels his chin tremble. He tries so, *so* hard to keep it together.

But then she steps closer and holds out her hands, an open invitation, and Shane doesn't hesitate to step towards her and wrap his arms around her. She's solid, and Shane can *feel* the texture of her clothes as he hugs her, ducking his head down. She makes a pained, sympathetic noise, stroking the back of his head down the way Ilya sometimes does when Shane's feeling a little overwhelmed.

He's not crying. Not properly. Sobs aren't rising and catching in each breath. But when he blinks, tears fall from his lashes, blurring his vision over and falling into the snow below. Some of them trace down his face and land in Irina's coat, dampening the fabric. He clutches at it. It feels real. *She* feels real.

He manages to slowly get his frantic breaths back under control. His vision starts to clear. Irina's hand is still stroking down the back of his head, comforting him.

Slowly, he lets go of her coat. He takes in a deep breath and steps back, immediately trying to wipe at the corners of his eyes to clean himself up as much as possible. She doesn't let him go far, putting her hands on his hips, looking him over with sharp eyes.

He breathes out a helpless laugh. "Sorry. Sorry. I'm..."

He shakes his head. He doesn't know *what* he is. Overwhelmed, maybe, is the best way to put it. He's overwhelmed. He could have lost Ilya. The fear of it refuses to let go entirely, but it's eased up, now, getting to just take a few moments in Irina's arms and be held as he tries to breathe through it.

She pats his cheek, smiling.

And Shane wonders, then, if this is the kind of vision that will greet Ilya at the end. His mother, welcoming him into her arms, comforting him, a gentle and kind presence to be with him. He wonders if Irina was right there, beside him, as Ilya typed out what he thought were his final goodbyes.

It almost starts the tears anew. He looks up and blinks them back. Her fingers continue to smooth over his cheeks, waiting for him to look at her again.

He does, slowly, once he's sure he won't start tearing up again.

He says, "I need more time with him. I still have to marry him. I want him to be my husband. You won't take him yet, right? You can't take him yet. Please don't take him yet."

Her lips fall open, a silent *oh* that befalls between them.

Slowly, her hand falls from his cheek. Shane thinks he might have said something wrong, as Irina's eyes flick to the side, as her expression falls into something so heartbroken. He thinks *please don't, please don't, you can't, you can't take him from me yet, please—*

Her gaze falls back on him, once she takes a few seconds to compose herself. And then, suddenly, she breaks into something like a laugh, her smile wide and joyous at the end of it. She takes his hand, and Shane is almost frozen still at the sudden change in her composure, but she tugs insistently as she starts to walk. He almost trips over his feet, but manages to get himself by her side again as she walks hurriedly through the streets.

She's clearly taking him somewhere, and he simply follows. He tries to look around, taking in sights of streets and alleys he hasn't actually seen before. They all start to blur together, until she comes to a stop in front of a particular building. Shane doesn't think he's ever seen this one before. He's looking up at the signage for it, but he's unable to pick out anything.

She tugs at his hand again, getting his attention. She pulls him over to the storefront windows and taps at the glass, pointing to something on display inside.

Shane gives her a curious look, but he looks through the window as she's asking him to. It's a jewellery store, he realises.

And then, a moment later, he realises what she's pointing to.

In the middle of the display, there sits a ring in a box. It's clear what it's meant for. Shane has been looking at sites sporadically throughout the last few months, trying to decide what kind of style to go with for their rings. He hasn't committed to any, hasn't looked all that seriously, not yet. Not while they're in the middle of the season, and they've got — or rather, *had* — the plan to decide this all in the summer.

His head whips around to look at her. She's still smiling, looking the happiest he's ever seen.

In his dream, Irina Rozanova is pointing at an engagement ring. In his dream, Irina Rozanova is laughing at Shane's current expression.

He's speechless. He tries to open his mouth, to say *something,* but nothing comes forward.

She clasps his hands between her own. Leans forward and kisses his cheek.

And in his ear, she whispers,

"Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov."

Shane wakes up, and his heart is pounding. No longer in fear.

Shane rests his head on Ilya's chest, and his fingers come up to run across his chest. Slowly, as subtly as he can, he touches the edge of Ilya's ring that's now dangling on the chain. It's been there for a few weeks, and the thought that Ilya has been playing every single game with it under his jersey has made Shane's heart trip and fall over itself every single time.

And then, slowly, his fingers brush against the edge of the cross that Ilya has worn on his chest for so long now.

Ilya's got his head tilted back in the pillows, eyes closed. Shane would think he's halfway asleep already, but he knows that Ilya won't quite doze off until Shane does too.

Ilya looks peaceful. Relaxed. All the creases of his worry, and all the creases of his laughter, have smoothed out into an image that makes Ilya look so much younger. It makes Shane think of their first meeting, just two boys quietly curious about each other.

He thinks of the first time he dreamed of a snowy street.

"Ilya," he whispers.

Ilya slowly blinks his eyes open, squinting at Shane as he pulls himself from the edges of sleep. "Mhm?"

"Do you think..." He trails off. He doesn't know how to approach this, he realises. He feels like if he opens these doors, the floodgates will collapse; Shane will have to admit to all of

his dreams, to all the times he has seen Irina. All the times he has seen her, *felt* her.

"What is't?" Ilya asks, words mushing together. His voice always gets a little deeper when he's tired, his accent thicker. Shane's stomach always flutters when he hears it.

Shane runs his thumb over the shape of the cross. Traces each edge and dips into each corner. Ilya must feel it, as he props the back of his head up with his elbow, giving him a better angle to see what Shane's doing.

"Do you think she looks over you?" Shane asks, a little too quickly as the words spill out. He tries to shut the gates before everything else spills out, waiting for Ilya's response.

They haven't actually really... *talked,* about this. Ilya has shared more pieces of Irina, has the photos printed and displayed in the house, but he has never quite explained to Shane what other pieces he carries of her. He has never quite told Shane how close he feels her — if it's only the cross there as a reminder, as a memory, or if there are other things.

He has never told Shane if he dreams of her.

Ilya blinks at him, then his gaze traces up somewhere to the ceiling. He hums. "Yes. I do."

"Do you... do you feel her? With you?" He asks, a little more hesitantly now.

Ilya's eyes drop back down to him. He looks over Shane's expression, eyes darting over his face. Shane does his best to hold his gaze steady in turn.

"I do," Ilya replies.

Shane exhales. The step from this, to his dreams, is only a short one. All he needs to say is something like—

Ilya's phone starts to buzz.

Ilya ignores it, but it's enough to jolt Shane from his thoughts. Enough to disrupt him, enough to have his next step wobble, until he eventually puts his feet back together and stands where he is. His fingers drop from the cross, but Ilya puts his hand over his own to stop him from pulling away entirely.

"I'm glad," Shane makes himself say, which is *such* a different pivot, definitely not where he meant to go with this conversation, but he's not sure how to get back to this conversation. Whatever he'd managed to scrounge together to get himself to finally talk about his dreams dissolves away, and he can't get it back in this moment.

"I am too," Ilya says, threading their fingers together.

Ilya's phone buzzes again. He reaches out, checks it, then silences it.

"Just some groupchat meme," Ilya explains with a sigh. "Forgot to silence it earlier."

He sounds so despondent about it that it makes Shane laugh. Ilya's shown him glimpses of the groupchat before, things that their social media manager sends to them. Shane's privately been keeping up with some of the social media posts. The Ottawas do, at least, have a sense of humour, though Shane's quipped before that *maybe* if they spent less time on memes and more time actually shooting goals, they'd get somewhere in the rankings. Ilya had just laughed and said *better than the stick up Montreal's asses.*

They settle back in the bed, relaxing with the time they can have together.

Shane doesn't bring up Irina again. Every time he sees him, every time he thinks about Ilya playing with the ring under his jersey and the cross sitting right beside it, he thinks *I should tell him, I have to talk about this—*

And then, Hayden posts a video.

Shane's life kind of turns upside down. He doesn't dream.

Not until the night before the wedding.

It's a short dream. Only quick, like Irina only has a few moments to spare.

The snow is still falling on the street, but when it falls to the ground, it disappears. For once, Shane can see the ground beneath him entirely, like it's been recently cleared.

Shane is in his suit that he plans to wear tomorrow. It startles him, and he smooths over the fabric on instinct, in disbelief that he's somehow in it. When he looks up and around, Irina is dressed differently, for the first ever time in his dream. She is wearing a long dress, with some pieces of her hair pinned back, and slightly different makeup. Brighter lipstick, a little more blush on her cheeks.

"Oh," he says, struck in awe.

She looks beautiful. Shane can imagine her, one of their guests at the wedding, watching as Ilya and Shane exchange their vows. Helping Ilya to get ready in the morning, kissing his cheeks, giving her blessing.

But now, she reaches out for Shane, and she kisses his cheeks instead.

When she speaks, it is in Russian.

He is still sounding it out as he wakes up, only a moment later.

"Ilya," he says, shaking him awake, *needing* to know.

He's never heard these words before. Similar, perhaps, and he thinks he *might* know the idea of them, but he knows Ilya has never quite said these words to him before. Not these same ones.

Ilya grunts and swats at him, but he's stirred just enough that Shane can talk to him. He sounds out what he'd heard fall from Irina's lips, trying to copy it exactly. Ilya seems to wake

up a *little* more at that, which means Shane's making some kind of sense. He quickly asks, "What does it mean?"

"Why are you practising Russian so early?" Ilya grumbles at him, still half asleep and wanting to stay that way, not quite registering what's going on. "Means... my good son— mhm, more like my dear son."

My son, Irina called him.

Shane presses his weight back into the mattress. On the morning of his wedding to Ilya, he wakes up with tears in his eyes, and his heart so, so full of love.

Many months later, after Shane has taken to the ice in a Centaurs jersey and a whole new team, he dreams again.

He hasn't dreamed of anyone else other than Irina in a long time, now. He still hasn't brought it up to Ilya; not with everything going on. It already feels like there are so many changes, so many new things they're facing together, and—

And there's something in the back of Shane's mind that *worries.* If he talks about Irina, if he admits to Ilya that he doesn't quite think that they're dreams anymore, that Irina isn't just a face he's made up from Ilya's features. He thinks...

There is something very *real* about her.

And Shane worries.

Ilya has inherited his mother's eyes. Her smile. Her curls. Her gentleness.

And her sadness.

It's getting— *better,* Shane thinks. Between his therapist and the new medication he's trying out. Ilya is doing better. But the bad days still scare Shane, when he sees Ilya gripping at his mother's cross a little too tightly, his expression too tight and drawn, his eyes just a little too distant. He sees the way Ilya itches for a cigarette, fingers twitching like he's trying to light one up. Sometimes, he does. Shane has decided not to comment when this happens — he knows Ilya needs *something* to try and soften all the sharp edges. If smoking helps him, then Shane will twist his lips with worry, but he'll put mints in his pocket for Ilya to chew on later, and he'll leave it be.

They've had *something* of a tense disagreement, still lingering from the practice session. Shane's still adjusting to not being a Captain, still adjusting to losing Montreal and all the team members he just... *knows* how to play with. He knows how to play with Ilya, most of the time; during All-Stars games, they play like it's a secret language only the two of them are fluent in. But it's been longer than just a week of games — this is something more permanent,

and Shane needs to work out how to match up with the rest of the guys that Ilya already has a whole other language with.

He's struggling, and it's been a tense couple of days, coming to a bit of a head at tonight's session. Nothing they won't get over, but they'd both gone to bed still a *little* pissed. It's mostly gone by the time Shane has fallen asleep — he knows he'll wake up, and he'll apologise before Ilya can even roll out of bed, and he'll pin him down and kiss him the moment Ilya brushes his teeth and he'll make it right before they head for the rink.

He slips into sleep, and he dreams.

It is not snowing. He is not on a street.

Instead, he stands in a kitchen he's familiar with. He frowns down at the countertop under his gaze, slightly confused as his brain scrambles to try and catch up with what he's seeing.

He's never dreamed of a place he's known before. He looks around, just to be sure. But it's real. He's standing in the kitchen of the cottage.

He tries to move, but he finds that it feels like his feet have been placed in cement, heavy and unyielding. He can feel his heartbeat pick up; terror is quick to rise, though he tries to push it down. He's never had a nightmare before and he doesn't think this, suddenly, is where it's going to start.

He sees movement, and he looks up to see Ilya crossing the lawn behind the cottage. He goes to call out, even as something in the back of his mind starts ringing in alarm — *he's never dreamed of someone he knows, he's never dreamed of them in a place he is familiar with* — but Ilya's eyes are focused on something in front of him. Shane can see it, if he turns just slightly; there is someone in the hammock, the one they installed together a couple of summers ago.

The weight in the hammock shifts, and Shane can see an arm dangling from it. Feminine, nails dusted pink. Her hands move, dancing as if she's the only one to hear music.

He knows those hands. They have reached for him so many times, now, over the years.

But there has never, ever, been someone else. There has never been Ilya.

The terror is blinding.

He sees Ilya smile. Sees Ilya walk faster. Sees Ilya reach the hammock.

"Don't," he tries to say, but his shout echoes like he's trapped inside a small, barren tunnel. It bounces off the walls, taunting him. *Don't, don't, don't.*

Irina takes her son's hand. Shane's heart drops, and he thinks *please, please, please, not yet, not yet, please, Ilya—*

He sees Ilya speak. He can't hear the words, and he can't hope to read his lips, not from this side angle he can only watch from.

And then, Ilya looks at him.

Shane's heart fucking *stops.*

Ilya waves. And the world spins.

Irina, suddenly, is clutching his elbow. Her nails are digging in tight, a small pressure that Shane can distantly feel.

Shane grasps at her. "Please, please—"

She shushes him, patting down his hair, a soothing motion. Shane looks out the window, and Ilya is gone.

Shane chokes on his next breath. Irina presses her hand to his chest and pushes, trying to get him to breathe.

He looks at Irina, trying to make sense of this dream. Trying to make sense of *anything.*

Irina is looking at him worriedly, but there is a determined press to the lines of her lips. She does not look afraid, nor guilty.

And Shane knows, then, that Irina has not led Ilya anywhere Shane can not go. Not yet. Even if Ilya had been the one to walk towards her, to reach for her, Irina has not taken him yet.

Shane drops his head. He lets his next breath tear through him.

"I know he misses you," he whispers, ashamed of what he's going to be asking of her, but he’s so terrified that he can’t quite stop himself from *trying*. "I know he wants to see you. But please... don't let him take himself from me. Please."

Irina's fingers press over his cheeks. Her fingers, softly, press over his closed eyes.

Shane wakes, and it's in the middle of the night.

He's not the only one up. He sees Ilya's own expression, eyes screwed so tightly shut like he's trying to forget that he ever saw something. Or trying very, very hard to remember it. To not let it slip away.

He is clutching his cross very, very tightly.

"Ilya," he whispers, putting a hand to his cheek.

Ilya's eyes flutter open. He looks at Shane, and he is not quick enough to hide his crestfallen expression.

Shane's heart shatters. He quickly scrambles up, moving so that he can put himself as far across Ilya as he can, as he cups his cheeks.

"Baby," Shane breathes out, and kisses his cheeks, his nose, his eyelids. Kisses his lips, soft and sweet and slow. Just wanting Ilya to know that he's here, that he will *always* be here.

Ilya wraps around him, and falls apart.

And all Shane can feel is relief, messy in its sticky-sweetness. *Thank you for not taking him. Thank you for not letting him go. Thank you for letting me be here.*

The next time Shane sees Irina, it is the first night of the Summer camp. The Centaurs have won the Stanley Cup for the season, and the past few days have been a mixture of celebrations and preparation that has passed by in a blur.

He's sitting at the sides of an ice-rink, somewhere in the small number of spectator seats that are stacked up on one side of the rink. It's small; not an arena. Just a practice rink.

It is not one he recognises. He looks around, and he sees a couple of posters, a couple of sponsor banners hanging from the wall, a couple plastered on the barriers.

It's all in Russian.

He looks around, and he sees Irina, sitting on one of the benches just above him. Her eyes are on the ice, but only for a moment, before they flicker down to look at him.

Shane stands, and he makes his way over to her, lifting his knees as he picks his way over the benches until he can make his way beside her. He doesn't sit; not yet. He's getting closer to her age, now. Something inside of him breaks at the thought.

She pats the seat beside him, and Shane sits down without further invitation. He looks at her. She looks back, but only for a moment, before she looks back at the ice. He turns his hand over in offer, and she slides her fingers through his.

Shane can hear the hum of the dehumidifier in the air. The sounds of an ice-rink, like it's holding its breath, fresh after a cut. Waiting for the first skater to put their blades down, to cut through the ice, their edges pressed down into the ground and echoing in the air.

Irina makes a noise. A pained one, trapped somewhere in her throat. He whips his head over to her, concerned, but sees she is focused on something else.

He follows her line of sight, and he sees—

A small boy. Sitting on the lowest bench, wearing a thick jacket, a beanie on his head, and a scarf around his neck. He is hunched over, trying to tug at something near his feet.

Shane recognises the blonde curls, little tufts of them spilling out from under the wool on his head. Irina squeezes Shane's hand, and Shane looks back over at her, seeing the way her eyes

are starting to sheen, the lights in the rink reflecting on the watery reflection.

"Ilya," he says, but it's a name barely heard over the hum of the rink. Barely heard over the sound of Irina's ragged breaths that he can hear. Barely heard over the soft grunts of frustration, made by a small child who can't quite get something right.

Irina stays on the bench, watching the scene with wide eyes. Shane looks between them, and makes the decision to stand.

Irina looks at him, something young and scared in her gaze. Shane smiles at her.

"Come on," he encourages, still holding her hand. He switches it to Russian, but she doesn't move, even as her eyes flicker in surprise. Shane tugs at her, gently, and she makes another noise. He crouches down, makes sure to get her gaze locked onto his. "Let's go help Ilya put his skates on." In Russian, he slowly and slightly clumsily pieces together, "*let's help Ilya."*

The name makes her shudder. She closes her eyes, and tears slip down her cheeks. Shane reaches out and brushes them away.

"Irina," he whispers.

She nods. Pieces herself back together, clutching Shane's hand tightly. When he stands, she pulls herself up too. Hand in hand, they make their way down the stands, until they are on the same level as the younger version of Ilya. He looks almost the same as the photo they have printed, where they are clutching each other tightly, both wearing matching smiles.

He's trying to lace up his skates, but it's clearly a new motion for him to try. He's grunting, frustrated as he tries to tug them through the hooks, not quite coordinated enough yet. It's a far, far sight from the captain who can lace up his skates in all of a minute, throwing jokes and jabs out as he smiles at his teammates, not at all watching the way his hands naturally fly through the hooks.

Irina chokes on another sound. Shane squeezes her hand, then pulls her forward. Ilya is paying both of them no mind, not realising either of them are there.

Shane pulls Irina forward until she's standing before Ilya. He crouches down slowly, encouraging her to do the same.

Then, finally, Ilya's eyes flicker up. He sees the face of his mother, and immediately his hands go slack, letting go of the laces entirely.

"*You're here,"* Ilya says. His voice is high, a child who is lost in his wonder. He's speaking in Russian, though the words are simple enough for Shane to translate.

A couple more tears slip past Irina's lashes, but she's smiling, now. She reaches out and fixes up his scarf for him, tugging it a little tighter around his neck so that there are no exposed parts. When she's done, she taps at his chest, where his cross usually sits.

"Always," Irina replies.

Ilya laughs, something close to a childlike giggle. Shane's stomach flips over itself.

Irina ties up her son's skates. Ilya's earlier frustration is nowhere to be seen — now, he's humming, happy as he watches his mother carefully tug at his laces. When she's done, she taps at the sides of the boot.

"*Done, my little star,"* she tells him. Shane knows this word. Ilya will sometimes throw in terms of endearment in amongst the names of inanimate objects.

When Ilya had said it, once, Shane had known it was something different, something softer. Something his mother used to call him.

"Thank you, mama."

Ilya gets to his feet, bending down in his skates, the same way he still does even now. He makes a satisfied noise, then starts walking to the edge of the rink, little hands reaching for the barrier. Irina opens it for him, but before she can step back, Ilya's fingers fist into her coat and he tugs at her.

"*Come, mama. Skate."*

Irina laughs, the sound thick and wet but so full of love. She shakes her head, and Ilya pouts at her. He takes hold of one of her hands, trying to get her to come with him.

Shane decides for her. He slips past Ilya, stepping out onto the ice. He's used to doing it in skates, of course, but there have been a few times he's gotten on with usual footwear. He shuffles across the ice, only a couple of steps, before he reaches out his hand for Irina to take.

She's staring at him, wide-eyed and surprised. He can't help but smile as he beckons for her to step out on the ice.

And then, she laughs. She shakes her head in disbelief. She reaches out, and she takes Shane's hand. She's still holding onto Ilya with her other hand. Ilya steps between them, still unsteady, just a little kid getting used to skating. He waits patiently for Irina to step out on the ice, a little more afraid than both of them, but Shane won't let her slip. He sticks close, making sure she stays balanced, before he lets go.

He gestures out to the ice. An empty rink, all for mother and son.

Irina levels him with an exasperated stare, but she's still smiling, unable to help it as Ilya joyfully tugs at her. They get across the ice, slowly and carefully, both of them laughing whenever there's a small slip. Shane shuffles a couple of steps behind, letting them have their moment, but ready to catch either of them if a slip gets a little treacherous.

They stop at one of the blue lines painted on the ice, and Ilya holds up his arm. Irina seems to realise what he wants immediately, as she helps him turn on the spot, a little spin between two rather unsteady dance partners. Ilya's laughter bounces off the walls, making everything seem so much brighter and warmer.

Ilya slows, and then almost falls right back as his feet do a little panicked march to keep himself balanced. Irina laughs, and Shane does too, as Ilya dramatically puts his hands on his knees once he's steady and declare *I'm dizzy, mama!*

Irina looks back at Shane, then. She holds out her hand.

Shane walks forward, and he takes it. The three of them shuffle around the rink, hand-in-hand-in-hand, until they finish a lap. Irina slows as they get to the gate at the barrier. Shane and Ilya do too.

Irina slips her hands from both of theirs. She crouches down, getting closer to Ilya's level, and cups his cheeks between her palms. She studies him, eyes flickering over his features, before she leans forward and kisses his forehead. She closes her eyes, and takes in a deep breath.

And then, the scenery changes.

Shane is standing in... a park, he thinks. It's disorientating, and it takes him a few moments to come to terms with the realisation he's no longer in an ice-rink.

The sun is low in the sky, an afternoon glow breaking through the trees around him. It seems to flare for a moment, bright enough that Shane has to put his hands up to shield his eyes. When it dims, and he lowers his hand, he sees two figures. One of them waves over at him, and beckons him over.

The scenery has a little blur to it, one that clears with every step he takes forward.

As he gets closer to the two figures, he's starting to realise he's not just in a park. There are trees, and greenery, and a beautiful sunset.

But there are crosses, planted in the ground. Headstones.

Shane is walking through a cemetery.

As he comes closer to the two figures, both sitting on the ground, he can make out the curls of their hair. Matching patterns, though in different colours. One golden, blonde and familiar, strands that Shane has threaded his fingers through plenty of times before. The other, longer and darker, though Shane has known them for so long, now, from blurred colours to the clarity he can see now.

They are both sitting at a gravestone. Ilya — older, again, the usual figure that Shane knows him as — is holding Irina's hand, brushing his thumb over the back of it. With his other hand, he reaches out for Shane.

"There you are," Ilya says, with such relief. "I have been waiting for you to meet someone. Shane, this is my mother. Irina." He switches to Russian, as he says, "*Mama, this is Shane. My husband."*

He shares a smile with Irina. He takes Ilya's hand, and he lets Ilya tug him down until he's sitting, too.

He says,

"Yes. We've met."

Irina laughs. She rocks to her knees, until she can lean over and cup Shane's cheek, and then press a kiss to the other side.

She says,

"My dear son."

Shane smiles. Whispers, in Russian, "*thank you, mom."*

Both of their eyes are teary as Irina settles back. Ilya is watching both of them, surprised, but his fondness is so clear to see. His eyes are watering, too, and both Shane and Irina reach out to brush under his eyes. Ilya laughs — not nearly as childlike, not nearly as joyous, but it still makes Shane's stomach flip.

Over Ilya's shoulder, Shane reads the gravestone. It's all in Russian, but he knows the letters of *Irina Rozanova.*

His eyes snap to her. She seems to have been waiting for his realisation, as she smiles softly, not at all surprised.

His mouth opens, then closes. A heavy feeling starts to settle in his chest.

Irina looks at Ilya. She gets to her knees again, rocking forward so she can kiss his cheek, his forehead, his eyelids, his nose. Her hands press against his chest, where the cross sits, and then she tugs at the collar of his jacket, closing it over so it sits tighter and warmer on his skin.

"Mama," Ilya says.

Irina kisses his cheek, one more time, before she sits back. She reaches for Shane's hand, and she brings their hands close to her chest.

She says,

"I am safe, here in your heart."

She says,

"My good sons, I can rest."

She says,

"I love you."

The sun sets.

It will be the last time that Shane dreams of Irina Rozanova.

Shane and Ilya wake at the same time.

They both wake blearily, eyes blurry and wet, as they reach for each other.

Shane's heart is heavy. It feels like loss; like he has just woken up, and he has to face the memory that someone is no longer with him. It feels... *final.* Different.

When Shane looks at Ilya, seeing his expression, his mind starts to spin. He aches, seeing Ilya upset, but it feels—

The dream, last night. It felt like Irina, saying goodbye.

And Ilya was there. *Ilya was there.*

Shane brushes his cheeks, watching as Ilya swallows thickly, as he also catalogues Shane's expression.

Ilya doesn't have these dreams, Shane is sure. *No one* has dreams like this. No one has ever dreamed of someone they do not know before. But...

"What did you dream of?" Shane asks, voice croaky and soft in the morning light.

"You," Ilya whispers in reply, after a moment of careful hesitation. Shane stares, waiting, and Ilya's eyes fall up to the ceiling as he painfully admits, "my mother, too. Both of you."

Shane paints his fingers over Ilya's skin. He nods, words tight in his throat. "Were you introducing us?"

"Yes," Ilya replies, with a small smile, as he recalls the dream.

Shane's heart is so loud in his ears.

He leans down, and kisses the corners of Ilya's lips. He says, scared but not willing for Ilya to be alone, "But we've met."

He feels the way Ilya freezes. The way all the air escapes his chest, as he punches out, "What?"

"We've met, before."

"Shane—" He can hear Ilya's warring emotions: the surprise, the disbelief, the soft, soft, hope.

Shane pushes himself up. He kisses Ilya's cheek. Forehead. Eyelids. Nose. By the time he presses his hand to Ilya's chest, fingers against the cross, he can see the way that Ilya's slowly coming apart.

"Shane. Shane. What— what is this?" Ilya asks, so confused, still so confused, trying to figure out how this is possible. Trying to figure out *how* Shane knows the path that his mother's lips traced on his face, the way that he's repeating the same words.

"I met her. The same day that we did," Shane finally admits, after all these years, closing his eyes as he recalls the dream. "She shook my hand. Twice, just like I shook yours."

He feels Ilya's hands on his cheek. "Shane, that's..."

There aren't words for it. Shane knows.

"I know how it sounds," Shane laughs, though it's without much humour. He tries to duck his head down, to press it to Ilya's chest, so he can try and do this without looking. But Ilya doesn't let him — he cups Shane's chin, and he keeps his head up, making them look in each other's eyes. He takes a breath and steadies himself, because he should have said this so long ago. "I didn't believe it. For so long. I thought it was all just... my subconscious, messing with me. But the only dreams I've ever remembered, I never know the people in them. I have never met them before. It was always someone different, every time. Until... until Irina. I couldn't see her well, at first. The dream was blurry. But I saw the curls of her hair. And then, over the years, I could start to properly see her face."

Ilya is watching him as he speaks, quietly taking it all in.

Shane feels stripped bare. He doesn't know what he'll do if Ilya thinks maybe Shane has lost it, that he's imagined it all this time, that he didn't— that he didn't *feel,* what it was, last night.

"When else?" Ilya asks him, voice hoarse. "When else did you see her?"

Shane takes a few moments to think it over. He recalls, saying it aloud as his mind turns over the information, "The Olympics. When I... When I left your house, that first time. Um. I could see her, but I didn't... I didn't realise *who* she was, not until... not until Svetlana sent you the photo. And I realised I had seen her before."

"That long ago?" Ilya asks, surprised. Shane thinks he's angry for a moment, but when he feels Ilya brush his hair gently back from his eyes, he realises it's not quite. It's just something sharp with shock, trying to piece it all together.

"I didn't believe it. I thought I was just... going crazy. Thinking of your mother, when we weren't even *together,"* he hurries to say. He needs Ilya to understand *why* he never said anything. "I thought my brain had just pieced her together. That I'd seen a photo of her before, somewhere. It sounded ridiculous. I kept seeing her, but I just... I couldn't believe it. No one dreams of someone like this."

Ilya makes a small noise of consideration. Shane looks at him, and he sees Ilya's expression soften. He keeps trying to tuck back the most stubborn piece of Shane's hair, doing it over and over again, working up the courage as he asks, "When did you believe?"

Shane breathes out. "It's hard to tell. Maybe... maybe after the emergency landing of your flight. And then I didn't dream of her again. Not until the wedding. And that's when she called me—"

"My dear son," Ilya recalls, eyes widening, fingers going still. "You woke me up. You asked what it meant."

"Yeah," Shane whispers.

Ilya lets out a shaky breath. He puts his hand on the back of Shane's head, then rises up to meet him in a kiss.

"I was right," Ilya whispers. He stares at Shane so fondly that Shane is breathless with it, trapped under his gaze. "She loves you. Like I love you. So much that she had to see you from beyond."

Both of their eyes are watering again. Shane laughs, helpless, and presses his face into Ilya's chest. He listens to his heartbeat as he studies the ridges of the cross on Ilya's chest, catching in the light streaming in from the window.

"Will you tell me? About all the dreams?" Ilya asks him, soft and young — just a boy, who used to be called *my little star,* who used to have his mother tie his skates, who used to have his mother tighten his scarf around his neck to make sure he stayed warm. Just a boy, missing his mother.

Shane pinches the cross between his fingers. Presses a kiss to it.

Thank you, he tells Irina. *Thank you for letting me love him. Thank you for loving me. I love you.*

"Of course," he tells Ilya, and he begins.

End Notes

the next time shane dreams, it is of something mundane, something typical, with someone he already knows. he no longer dreams of people he has never met.

some extra little content things:
- irina visits alexei. a lot more, when she first passed. a lot, when grigori is sick. and then, when ilya goes to russia for the last time, she doesn't really at all. there is a lot of guilt that she carries for this, but she only has so much energy to visit. she starts putting it towards other people, who need and want her more.
- irina visits ilya's dreams sometimes, though he never remembers them. she is always beside him, on the nights of his biggest events. the day before/after, she is typically with shane. (she is quick with her visit on the night before the wedding: she spends the night with ilya, mostly. and she tells her thanks to shane's parents for looking after her boy)
- when shane and ilya's time comes, they are greeted by a snowy street, warm hands that wrap a scarf around their neck, a kiss pressed to their cheeks, and хороший мой - *my dear son.*

thank you for reading <3 <3
this is heavily unedited i am just kinda throwing it into the void tonight jfgkdbnlfdjgk i hope it's enjoyed !! <3
twt

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