

conscience runs, 'til out of breath

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by [tothemoon](#)

Summary

Ilya considers, then, the idea of a smaller joy, the kind so molecular no one would know how to make him feel sorry for any of it. He thinks of Svetlana and him at McDonald's, drunk and laughing; sprints, instead of long and dreadful runs; and even then that familiar swath of freckles, all faded from weak winter sun.

There are times when Ilya is sorry, and there are times when he is not.

(or: *Heated Rivalry*, as told through so many apologies.)

Notes

some things before reading:

- please note that this fic's timeline largely follows the original novel series, but I've taken the liberty of also incorporating elements from the show I really liked too, so please go with it!
- also, you don't necessarily need to have read "The Long Game" to read this fic, but the additional context is helpful with how I treat Ilya's characterization

Chapter 1: retribution

The first time Ilya ever apologizes, he is six and with his mother. It is one of his earliest memories, the two of them hugging in the middle of the crosswalk, because he had just run off all on his own, car barreling towards him on a green light. The car had stopped, of course, and he just seemed to keep living despite a lot of things, but he'd been young then, with no awareness that life was called life and death was called death.

“Why did you run off?” his mother had asked then, scared out of her mind. “Ilya, what were you thinking?”

All he knew was that his father had been mean to him, telling him off for his meager weight, his clumsiness on the ice, that even his beautiful mother's hand had begun to feel like a leash. And so he'd run down the sidewalk, if only so he wouldn't have to be anyone in that moment, just feet and breath and eyes, which did feel as glorious as a six year old could ever dream of.

But now his mother is crying and her stockings have dirt on them. Ilya cries too, if only because his mother has seen his father's meanness the most of all.

“I'm sorry,” he says, “I'm so sorry,” and he means it with everything in his body; but thank goodness he is so meager, so small, and so able to hide in her embrace.

The next time Ilya apologizes, he's learned not to say it outright. His sorry comes with the terse nod of his head, made out of obligation: at fourteen his coach is berating him for tripping on the ice, a rare misstep after years of brutal excellence, even after his mother's death two years ago. Ilya knows he will have to apologize again later to his father, because the coach will talk to him, and so he prepares a tight jaw, that nod, as if to say, *this is fine, I am nothing, I will be a vessel*. When he thinks of all the other boys in his life, apologizing in the same way, nodding with their eyes down at the floor, he tries following their lines of vision.

But on his way down he sees that gold glint of his late mother's crucifix, never not around his neck. It taunts him, the light hitting in a strange way, so much that he can barely keep his gaze towards the ground.

The first time he's saying sorry to Shane Hollander, it's with a grin and not meant in the slightest. They're sitting on the hotel gym floor, both of them drenched in sweat from racing on exercise bikes, all because Ilya had taken it upon himself to give Hollander a little hell on a whim.

"Sorry I ruined your big day."

It was the day of the draft, and Ilya had come in first over him, which pleased him to death if only because it riled Hollander up, made him focus on Ilya like he wanted to beat him, or kiss him, or both. Ilya had noticed this immediately, those dark, brimming eyes, and decided it'd be fun to goad him on. Coming overseas had been a whirlwind so far, so much all at once and yet somehow a storm of nothing, and so he figured: why not have a little fun for once? In the coming days, he'd have to sit in new rooms and fill out paperwork, apply for visas, find an apartment in Boston, all on his own. He was barely eighteen, so if he had to lay claim to so much in so little time, couldn't he have this too, even if it would amount to nothing more than passing the time?

Ilya thinks that what he calls his will never last anyway, so he counts the seconds before Hollander will clock his insincere apology, this farce, and walk away. He wonders if the boys here are like the boys back in Russia: short in conversation, cruel. He wonders if this one will be too. He wonders if there will always be ice.

But Hollander smiles, lifting the freckles over his cheekbones. “Fuck off,” he tells him, second in the draft be damned, and Ilya cannot help but feel the back of his neck warm.

“Montreal is nice, yes?” Ilya cannot help but keep talking.

“Yes.”

“Is Boston nice?” he asks next, perhaps because he doesn’t know anything about this new world.

They’re both disgusting and glistening, their grand stage a gym hotel with bare minimum equipment. Ilya hands him his water bottle, insisting on the shared spit, like a ritual promising more chances to meet.

He’ll let himself have this today, this stupid hope, and apologize for it tomorrow.

Sometimes, when he’s in an empty locker room, or a morning run alone, Ilya will catch that strange glint from his crucifix and wonder if his mother is talking to him. Ilya does believe in god, but not like god as some benevolent deity; but god like a mailman who might have new messages from his mother. If only this god was a decent translator, too, because Ilya is never sure what his mother means by her signals, this shine. All he knows is that it makes him stop, every time, like being a good son requires a reverence outside religion.

On one particularly terrible morning run by the Charles River, Ilya can barely get a kilometer in before declaring it all for naught. At first, he wonders if it’s because it’s January, and a decidedly biting one at that, or if it’s his achy knee, *that bastard*, beginning to suggesting early retirement. He thinks of his sick father, still in Moscow, calling Ilya to bring home bread. His brother and his coke habit and an insatiable need for wired cash.

But mostly Ilya thinks of his bed, and what paths to take to return to it. He dreams about lying there for days at a time sometimes, the numbing pleasure of losing all context. He looks to the river even, that flowing, ceaseless thing, and imagines the very bottom of it.

“Fuck,” Ilya whispers in Russian. “Sorry,” he says to no one, or his mother, but certainly not himself.

He dabs at the corner of his eyes, blaming the cold, and sucks up running for another four kilometers. It's overcast today, no trace of sun or a message from the mailman, but still he can feel his mother's posthumous gold, closer to the chest than any god.

Shane Hollander is never someone Ilya wants to apologize to. They are both nineteen now, the prime of youth, and being with him feels like a constant stream of *thank you thank you thank you*, rather than *I'm sorry we've ever had the fucking displeasure of meeting*. It's a secret thought he has, nothing he would ever utter out loud to Hollander of all people, but still he can't help but gnash into a smile about it, like suffering could ever be so exhilarating.

Tonight they're in Montreal, having sex for the first time. Ilya knows this comes with at least some pain on Hollander's part, being inside him, but he is being a good sport about it, the MVP of handling Ilya's size and magnitude. Moreover, Ilya had seen that flicker in Hollander's eye, a challenge, like desire could mean its own light theory. It'd been so much for him, Ilya even had to admit, that he had to command Hollander to turn over, all faceless and distant on his stomach.

Still, Ilya wonders if Hollander is feeling this too: some sense of gratitude at their meeting, the chance to even touch. Maybe this is all he can afford, he thinks, like a beggar, but so what?

"Was fun," he tells Hollander after, rather flippantly. Best not to take too much.

“I am thankful for good vodka,” Ilya says one afternoon at Cliff Marlow’s house, where he’d been invited over for a Very American Friendsgiving.

“Come on, Rozy! Get serious.”

“What, is true,” Ilya says, puckering after sipping at his mediocre glass. “Makes me thankful for good Russian vodka, when I have—what is this again?”

“Tito’s,” Cliff tells him, “and no one is asking you to drink it straight up, dickwad.”

Not long after, his teammates start talking about their lovely, boring families; *my parents are the best, my brother’s a saint*. Ilya takes this as a cue to go into the kitchen, if only to dig his face into the cool zone of Cliff Marlow’s fridge.

On the first shelf, he finds nothing but hot sauce and expired milk, alongside take-out boxes and a hunk of Parmesan cheese. So much for mixers, Ilya thinks, until he finds a single green can of something in the back. He hopes it’s Sprite at the very least, but grimaces when he realizes it’s ginger ale, probably the blandest soda offering on the planet.

“Where the fuck are the mixers?” Ilya waves over to Cliff, showing him the can. “All you’ve got is this shit.”

“Sorry, Rozy!” though Cliff is clearly not sorry. “Maybe it’s best you endure,” he grins, holding up his clear full glass of bullshit.

Ilya grimaces at the green can again, his only friend, and ultimately pops the tab before mixing it with his Tito’s. He realizes he’s never really had this combination before, this particular sweet and this particular bitter colliding; it’s not so bad he even has to admit, though the vodka’s ass and he would never keep ginger ale in his own fridge. Still, he downs it, like gasoline reigniting his showmanship.

He goes back out into the dining room, a little warmer than before, and announces, “You know what? I think I’ve got something else to be thankful for.”

“And what’s that, Rozy?”

“All you motherfuckers!”

And maybe he means it, a little. There’s laughter, and profanity, and even a little bit of singing, and Ilya finds his seat at the head of the table.

The next time Ilya doesn't feel like apologizing to Shane Hollander, they're on a rooftop in Las Vegas, looking too young in their tuxedos like dressed-up toy dogs. He can tell Hollander is angry about something, sees it in his narrowed eyes which again have gone polished with tears. But summer is coming, which means Moscow for some endless stretch, and Ilya cannot bring himself to parse out the problems in someone's else very charmed life.

"Is the party over, then?" Ilya is asking, partially to parse if he'll be able to get a drink at the bar now without a crowd, and partially because he's always wondering, maybe, if this will be the last time he'll see Hollander like this, just the two of them in some place that isn't a rink. Hollander's just won Rookie of the Year, after all, and despite all the league narratives about their rivalry, he knows that there's only really one golden boy here; that there will be an ascension that isn't his.

They talk about the award, but Ilya doesn't really care about this, before Hollander puffs up next to him, unleashing: "So you're just sulking up here all night, then? It bothers you so much that I won?"

Ilya takes another drag of his cigarette, not apologizing for the smoke. He thinks of Russia again. Thinks about it like bite to the neck, a force so hard he can't help his next utterance, this under-the-breath mother tongue.

"What was that?"

"Not everything is about you, Hollander."

And then, quiet. Maybe just for a moment. They talk about the view, though it's all just a strip of a city in artificial light.

Ilya notices those big, worried eyes again despite himself, and decides to offer him something, not an apology, but a pore's worth of an opening: "I go back to Russia. In three days."

Maybe he'd wanted Hollander to say, *sorry, I had no idea*. But how could he have known? Hollander just looks flummoxed, even with all that light pooling in his eyes, his confused silence like so many words. He doesn't understand, Ilya thinks, and he never will.

And so, he thinks of another kind of bite: maybe a punishment, petulance, some other version of talking. Soon, he has Hollander against the wall, firing the hot air into his throat, hand squeezing a clenched jaw.

Lily: room number?

Jane: 1980

Jane: sorry I mean 1890

Lily: what happened? did I slam you into the boards too hard? confusion?

Jane: confusion? do you mean concussion?

Lily: whatever

Jane: maybe you're the one who hit their head too hard.

The end does not come for him and Hollander. Ilya always thinks it always will, after every tryst, with Hollander in the throes, right on some verge of startling clarity after the climax. Ilya braces himself for this, Hollander's *sorry, goodbye* right after he's regained his senses, a face hardening into something all serious and funereal. In his visions, there is always an exit. In his visions, there is a door, and Hollander is walking right through it.

But tonight, all sweaty and finished, Hollander looks up at a dangling crucifix, considering it with a softened stare. Ilya catches this, this golden boy's wondering, and decides it is not a closeness he can afford.

“Sorry,” Ilya sing-songs, smacking him on hip with a grin and some practiced ease. “I have to go. Early flight tomorrow.”

At this, Hollander lays back on his pillow, eyes closed, probably still on another planet that is more tender than this one. Ilya thinks this might be the best time, maybe, to end things, to afford him a more serious *sorry, I think this is the end*—like something akin to going for the jugular. A mercy kill. Stamping Hollander out before he can even register it.

“Next time,” Ilya says instead, because he can never help it.

Before he leaves, he notices Shane’s shirt on the floor, unfolded. Ilya picks it up for him, just a mere kindness, and leaves at the foot of the bed for him later.

Strangely, Ilya never dreams about his mother when he’s in Russia. He wonders, maybe, if the part of her still with him has settled happily in North America, her essence now free of any domain where she once suffered. But selfishly, Ilya cannot help but want her to visit; Russia has just lost to Latvia in the Olympics, after all, a horrific showing for his team on the ice, and he is big enough to admit that having his mother there would’ve made the sting a lot less worse.

But dreams are just dreams, and his have been nothing but a vodka-blurred black under closed eyelids.

Alone in an auditorium he doesn’t remember getting to, eyes glazed over at the figure skater doing leaps, he feels sorry as sorry can be: *apologies to my country*, he thinks, with obligation, which turns to, *apologies to you, mother, for trying to call you back to somewhere so unkind*. He doesn’t really know what to think in the end, and decides to be content in his blankness. He watches the ice like a white sheet, pretending he is nowhere at all.

“Hey,” comes a small voice, calling from a few feet away.

Ilya tries not to think of Hollander by the thrum of his voice against the ear; how he’s kissed down his body. At least there is distance here, he thinks, a whole country’s worth, which makes him stare back, resolute, like any good patriot would do.

“We are not anything. Go away, Hollander,” he says, without moving from his place.

But there are some days where Ilya Rozanov is not a sorry bastard.

When Boston wins the Stanley Cup, he thinks that maybe he will love his city now, that maybe he will love hockey the way hockey has loved him. Ilya even considers forgiveness, like all it had taken was a bit of some new gold hardware, the roar of a hometown crowd, and reporters calling his performance *dominating* and *certainly fitting for a captain* to reconcile every wrong that had been committed against him. Ilya thinks, for once, to feel safe in the praise, to build a real, proper life out of it: like with a wife and kids and a dog and a home. Maybe even a house for the summers.

It's past noon when he wakes. Svetlana is sleeping next to him, and he remembers the both of them getting so drunk they'd skipped the sex and passed out the night before. Everyone's at his penthouse now, those nameless people in his outer circle, warm bodies slumped over houseplants and in their own vomit on the floor; in bathtubs; in guest rooms; even on the front door welcome mat, already itching for an escape.

Ilya stands upon the wreckage, the only one awake in the house. He has a victory parade later, and about a thousand interviews. He wonders, briefly, how Shane Hollander would

begin a day like this, and considers that he would never make such a mess; but if he did, he'd run the vacuum, load up the laundry, and banish anyone who'd sleep in his houseplants.

At the thought, Ilya grabs a swig of good vodka, squints at all the sun in the room, and makes a beeline back to bed.

Lily: sorry, won't be able to make it i think

Jane: ?

Jane: don't be an asshole. i cancelled dinner with hayden for this. you're the one who wanted to see me last minute

Lily: something came up

Jane: if you don't want to meet just say so

Lily: no its not that

Lily: i mean fine

Lily: lets meet then

Jane: cool. let me tell you the new passcode.

Ilya thinks that all this coming and going is one continuous apology, a mix of *sorry we keep doing this* and *sorry we haven't been able to leave*. He knows this has been a sort of limbo for

the both of them, neither of them willing to reincarnate into something wiser; it's a thought he will never be able to translate into words though, language barriers aside, because he would rather not leave their red line anyway.

Besides, the words melt away from his brain as soon as his lips touch Hollander's skin, until he forgets what he was trying to be sorry for. He's gotten good at making Hollander feel good, or maybe he'd always had been. At first it'd be a matter of pride, a reassurance to himself, that he was good enough to make someone come quick regardless of who they were; and it all sort of reminded him how he played hockey—very powerful, with a fucking mouth on him, if only because it made people look at him, acknowledge him.

And maybe that's what it had been in Vegas that second time a little bit, Hollander touching himself on the bed and saying, *I need you*; Ilya had to admit that this drove him wild, like it was first time having a body, and one that wanted, at that; but then Hollander just had to ask about Russia, that summer ahead, like suddenly their limbo hadn't been enough. Like maybe Shane was from somewhere, heaven, maybe, and expected to Ilya to follow.

And so he considered it, ending things. He'd considered it as he partied all summer in Moscow, all the way through pre-season practices, past the final buzzer of that first game versus Montreal, past the longer than usual cab ride to Hollander's, and then with his lips on his stomach, dragging the both of them down to filth.

"Rozanov," Hollander moans, louder than he usually allows himself, and the sound of it makes Ilya want to ask back, *yes, Shane?*

But thank god he has his mouth full, relishing in the soft pubic hair, and skin; thank god he'll choke on it, this name, which he'll never let himself say.

Sometime after New Years, Svetlana shows up at his door with a stack of old magazines, poster paper, and craft miscellany.

"What the fuck is all this?" Ilya asks, letting her inside.

"We're going to make vision boards. I figure since we haven't been fucking lately, might as well spend the time in other ways."

And it's true, they haven't been lately, but Ilya hasn't done a lick of arts and crafts in his life and doesn't plan to; but when he thinks of hooking up with Svetlana for the hell of it, or to at least put a stop to her plan, he pauses, considering that he really isn't in the mood for sex tonight.

"You make them at the beginning of the year," Svetlana continues. "Flip through magazines, print out stuff, whatever. Do you even own a printer?"

"Why the fuck would I have something like that?"

"Well either way," Svetlana rolls her eyes, "the goal is to visualize what you really want, and then glue it all onto the board until you've got a whole picture to work with."

"Can't I just look at the magazines and think about whatever?" Ilya flips one of the magazine pages, to a random advertisement of a supermodel hawking perfume. "Like here. I would like to fuck her, it's in my brain now. Goodbye."

"It's not for your own brain. It's to ask the universe, I guess. Or at least, I don't know, to really stick with something. No apologies. It's on the board so it has to get done."

"Since when were you into this woo-woo shit?"

"I'm not." Svetlana shrugs, searching Ilya's face with cool eyes. "Just something to keep busy."

Ilya takes a seat across from her, maybe too exhausted to pretend he's above anything. Aside from home games and practices, he's been at home, not doing much partying, forgetting how he's even spent his evenings. It was a familiar rhythm, like this: he'd ignore the fuck out of all his texts and calls until Svetlana came to his door, proposing Chinese takeout, or wearing his jersey, or relaying the newest gossip about the worst people back home.

So he really appreciates Svetlana, for helping pass the time less painfully. "I'm sorry," he tells her, though he isn't sure why he's saying it.

Svetlana reaches over to pat a hand over his chin, shaking her head, giving him an out. *We don't have to talk about it*, she's saying, without the words, and Ilya finds some pang that he wants to call relief.

Halfway through flipping magazines, Svetlana declares: “This is the most boring thing I’ve ever done in my life, a huge mistake,” and then the both of them are laughing.

Ilya looks down at the open pages. On one of them, Hollander is smiling awkwardly with an orange soda in his hand, and he tries not to take this as a cosmic sign.

Lily: sorry :(

Jane: for?

Lily: hat trick in the third :(too sad to have sex now?

Jane: oh fuck off.

Lily: 🐟🐟🐟

Jane: why the fish?

Lily: not just any fish. is bluefin tuna

Lily: one for every goal scored

Jane: i’m blocking you.

And then one day, Ilya decides: I’m going to go to the supermarket. And it’s not his first time going to the supermarket, but he’s never really had a list like this before, some purpose instead of aimlessly wandering the aisles for junk food. He thinks he’s done a good job, getting in and out of there, until an article from TMZ comes out with the headline, ***STARS—THEY’RE JUST LIKE US! Watch Ilya Rozanov fumble lemons in the fruit aisle!***

But it's just not the fruit aisle. Because he is in Boston, and possibly a step above being a local celebrity, there is footage of him throughout the supermarket, a clown in the pursuit of tuna melt ingredients. In one video, he sees himself, all furrowed eyebrows over the different tuna selections, *fish in water* or *fish in olive oil*, like he is choosing what wire to cut to avoid a big explosion. In the next, he is considering cheeses with a troubled face, with a caption reading: ***ILYA ROZANOV, LACTOSE INTOLERANT?***

There is also a video of him amongst the bread products, accidentally swatting an old woman with a comically long baguette. He's apologizing profusely, which Twitter thinks is hilarious: *has he ever said sorry once in his life before this*, someone is asking, while another user is wondering if such traumatic event will change the way he plays on the ice forever.

But lastly, perhaps on a more wistful note, a netizen has caught Ilya in the parking lot, his back to the camera towards a setting sun. This one is from a real fan, maybe, the caption a little earnest: *what are you thinking, Ilya*, which feels personal, too personal, the use of his first name.

Still, he thinks about how he'd answer: freckles and eyes and neatly folded clothes before sex. Wet hair in the shower and a crucifix pressed close, between chests.

And Ilya supposes he should be more specific about his answer, to put a name to this view of the sunset.

He puts his phone away instead, upon hearing the doorbell ring, and smooths his hair back.

The next time Ilya is really fucking sorry, it's with Shane Hollander in his lap that same evening, feeling the moment slip away from him.

It began when he'd asked Shane to face him during sex. Ilya likened the sensation to driving a very fast sports car down a winding road, not knowing which curve and sudden turn would kill him; but he followed through anyway, letting Shane ride him, so breathless and tunnel-visioned inside him he'd would've been nothing but happy, for some demise together.

But then he'd survived their speeding, and then he was drinking in the slow scenic route of Shane's hip, and his sated face, and his tidal stomach. Such a rise and fall, he thought. "You could stay," he'd even said, so nervous he wanted to die. He'd prepared for another crash right then and there, said some last silent prayer up to whoever was listening, only for Shane to tell him, quiet like a Sunday drive, *okay*.

Okay? because Ilya had had to make sure.

Okay.

So that wasn't the thing he'd been sorry about. He hadn't been sorry about offering Shane a tuna melt either, as much as he could see his eyes flicker from the uncertainty of this new and strange territory. He'd come to know that being with Shane, in whatever capacity, meant clearing some space Shane didn't know he needed, all before some well-meaning push into the unknown.

And so there Shane was, climbing onto Ilya's lap on his own accord, because of course this was what it all was: this reciprocity made in momentum, the both of them moving each other to the brink. He made no apologies for the way their hands stroked each other, or how their noses and cheeks and lips and foreheads had met in some continuous shifting, or how his eyes were seeing double, and then something haloed, and then something swimming. God, had he been crying? Maybe no, definitely not, but Ilya had felt it.

He thought, perhaps now, despite everything, he'd have something—someone—to never apologize for. That Hollander, somehow, had become Shane—*Shane, Shane, Shane*, and—

“Fuck, Shane,” he'd let slip.

He'd said the name, and then there was panting, and then silence. “Ilya,” he heard back, so quiet it was like his name was being written out of existence; like he'd be all right, if no one else in this life had ever spoke it again.

He hadn't been sorry about this, no. And he hadn't been sorry for the sudden weight coming off of him, Shane hurriedly finding that uptight posture again.

“I'm sorry, I can't,” Shane had said, to which Ilya could only call back *Hollander*, like a call for forgiveness.

And then the room had gone empty, Ilya included, like suddenly he had never been there to begin with. He felt like a ghost watching a montage of his own wishful thinking, and he was sorry he'd ever hoped for anything in the first place.

“Sorry,” Ilya says listlessly a day after the non-incident, when he accidentally takes a teammate's duffle bag. That poor rookie had had to run all the way to the parking lot to get Ilya's attention, calling, “Roz, Roz!” like a madman, and so here they were, exchanging bags by his trunk.

Ilya had noticed, then: freckles. But the constellation was foreign, erring on splotchy, and not at all reminiscent of stars.

He drives home that night, alone, and goes to empty his fridge.

“Sorry,” he says to his own toe silently, when he stubs it on an exercise bike a few weeks later.

He doesn’t apologize to Cliff Marlow, however, who’d been insistent about watching yet another news segment about *the budding love between NHL Star Shane Hollander and A-list Actress Rose Landry*. The boys had been talking about it all week since they found out, much to Ilya’s annoyance, and now it was starting to incur some bodily harm.

So be it, he thinks. *Harm*. By the next game with Montreal, he’s slamming Shane against the boards, knowing there won’t be any real damage there, that this is how the ice goes when there is nothing left to say.

The worst of it comes when he feels Shane looking at him from the sidelines, about a thousand glances over his way, as if Ilya could ever let himself look back.

Sorry, Ilya’s reflection says to him that night. *I’m sorry you feel this way but I won’t be going anywhere.*

Still, Ilya thinks to try. There is a club, a bitter drink, and a woman pressed close to him.

And then there is Shane on the dance floor too, watching, and Ilya feels like he is looking into a mirror.

Shane Hollander comes to Tampa not sorry about anything. It is a whirlwind of nicer clothes and an easy posture and some announcement that him and Rose Landry are no more; it is knowing looks on the ice and perfect chemistry; it is legs sprawled out on a beach chair, eyes blatantly drinking Ilya up behind his sunglasses. Ilya notices it all, this strange and new force coming from Shane. He'd planned on civility this whole weekend, no exchange of glances or hotel room numbers or spit or kisses, only for all of it to have been a useless exercise.

Otherwise, Tampa feels all nice and loose on Ilya's back. He thinks of reasons for feeling this way all weekend, like the warmth, and the hotel swimming pool, and loose summer clothing in the middle of winter. He thinks of the direct sun, and how it looks perfect on his crucifix, and the Florida crowd—all retired Boston people—who love him by the way of Rozanov chants and Rozanov signs and Rozanov jerseys. It's close to paradise, he thinks, that by sunset he's taking off his sandals, trudging through the sand, catching his own shadow in his view like he could allow someone else in the splendor.

Ilya finds Shane sitting on the beach alone, despite the long swath of the shore, and all the people coming and going, and how easily he could've lost him in the shuffle.

"Found you," Ilya says, finding his spot in the sand instead. He thinks of distance, each of them holding out a straight arm, and how just a short stretch would mean finding touch.

"You were looking for me?" Shane asks.

"Of course not."

Ilya remembers the last time they were together, and then Shane bolting. It occurs to Ilya, more than anything, more than Rose Landry, or the entirety of this paradise, that he wants an apology for Boston. To have never been left in the first place.

He lets the possibility of this hang there, losing Shane. The end of their long weekend. He thinks of girls like Rose Landry and Svetlana and the ease of walking away altogether, of growing old in some dull and warm place with their wives, slowly forgetting the cities where they used to play and play and play.

Ilya inches his thumb in the sand towards Shane anyway, and Shane finds him back. It's no *sorry*, but it's dizzying, the contact, and it terrifies Ilya, how much he cares that this is happening.

“What room are you in?” Shane is asking next, quiet under the gull cries. Still unwavering, and straight on, like he’s hellbent on absolution.

And later that night, Shane *is* saying sorry: for freaking out the last time, for leaving, and Ilya registers the sincerity of this like something caving in, collapsing, all around him. He thinks about chasing Shane out of the hotel room altogether, because he’s too close to the chest—his barrage extends past apology, into questions about Russia, and his father’s dementia, and Ilya thinks that this really might all mean the end.

“Sorry,” Ilya says back, small, with a turned cheek and a tear he doesn’t mean to cry. It is all so much, to have to be here sometimes. He thinks about not existing until Shane pulls him back into it, this body, and lets himself settle when their bodies are curled together, embracing at the foot of the bed.

For weeks after, Ilya thinks of all their differences. Shane Hollander, hockey’s eternal golden boy. Ilya Rozanov, jabbering anti-hero on the ice. These are talking points he’s memorized at this point, played up for reporters, if only because they often laughed at his answers and

laughter was never a bad thing. He thinks of the differences in their cities, these home and away crowds, and their travel schedules, promising only the most momentary of intersections. He thinks of Shane's weak backhand, to his own perfected *Rozanov* shot, and the different ways they had cut the ice under their blades.

But most of all, he thinks of the last time they had fucked in that Tampa hotel room. How different it had been, even compared to their last time in Boston. Ilya had felt nothing but embarrassment, crying to Shane that night, so much so that he wasn't sure he'd be able to perform, but then there he was, looking him in the face as Shane straddled him, so unforgivably warm he'd wondered if he'd been secretly drugged, or hypnotized, or both. And maybe some of it had been the same, him telling Shane where to lay, how to spread his legs, taking him from behind, but Ilya had felt slow for once in sex, like all that had mattered was getting as close as possible, past skin and muscle and brain; he'd wanted to forget, not his circumstances concerning Russia, but the fact that he and Shane were ever different entities to begin with.

Sometimes, he finds himself grinning about it with his crucifix dangling from his mouth. Their differences, and yet. Today it is raining, with possible delays, so Ilya's taken to slumping in his seat at the departure gate, reading articles about Tampa. He drinks in the pictures of him and Shane, the both of them in the same uniform for once, stopping on a shot of their kiss on the cheek after a near-telepathic power play.

Just then, Cliff Marlow whips around, looking at Ilya's phone. "Rozanov and Hollander—perfect chemistry!" he reads from one of the captions.

"If they say so," Ilya says, though he'd secretly loved the commentary.

"Well, don't go running off to Canada now, Rozy. I don't think the league would stand a chance, if you ever teamed up for real."

Ilya considers this with no real seriousness. Of course not. But he looks up at the departure board anyway, for flights to Toronto, and Montreal, and Ottawa, and raises an eyebrow at some idea of common ground.

"Sorry, Marly," Ilya says, teasing. "I've got some bad news for the front office later."

Jessica (Detroit): we meeting tonight, stud?

Ilya: sorry, can't. too sore from game

Jessica (Detroit): since when has that ever stopped you?

Ilya: im getting old. like scott hunter old

Jessica (Detroit): you're no fun

Ilya: yeah like scott hunter

Maria from NJ: hey 😊 great game tonight.

Ilya: we lost tho?

Maria from NJ: oops. but whatever, you know why im texting

Ilya: ?

Maria from NJ: don't play dumb.

Ilya: i think i am concussed maybe. suddenly can't read. so sorry melissa

Maria from NJ: ??? it's maria ???

Philly Dan: hey roz, saw you're in town. thinking about last time and your big cheesesteak. wanna meet?

Ilya: sorry, who is this? wrong number

Philly Dan: come on you know who i am!

Ilya: i do not

Ilya: and please do not ever say cheesesteak to me again

Jane: and then anderson from buffalo was chirping, saying i looked like fucking snoopy in ice skates

Lily: hahahahahahahahaha

Lily: im sorry but you kind of do

Jane: oh fuck you.

Lily: soon :)

Jane: keep dreaming.

Before he knows it, Ilya finds himself laughing at Shane's texts, even when they aren't very funny and maybe a little mundane. He knows they're just words on a screen, and nothing like the real thing in bed with him, but he's liked it all, from the droll hockey talk, the innuendo, some promise of the next meeting. Sometimes, he'll even dig up news from around the league, just for something to say, because he knows that anything hockey will be a lure, to Shane.

This makes him think about the size of his happiness. Ilya thinks he's felt it before, in big ways, like getting drafted first his rookie year, and winning the Stanley Cup, and booking that

first plane ticket out of Russia—but what did it matter, these enormities, when they were always quashed like ants under stomping feet? All roads led back to Moscow anyway. His father was forgetting his meanness more and more, which meant that Ilya would never get an apology for any of it. His brother was a coke head, a disaster, not much else to say about that. His mother, god bless her, would always be his mother, but even then she was blurring at the edges, the memory of her vaguer by the moment.

Ilya considers, then, the idea of smaller joy. Things so molecular no one would know how to make him feel sorry about any of it. He thinks of Svetlana and him at McDonald's, drunk and laughing; sprints, instead of long and dreadful runs; and even then that familiar swath of freckles, all faded from weak winter sun.

Boring, he thinks, when his phone lights up.

So boring, he knows, before he's grinning at a new text from Shane Hollander.

Jane: and for the record, i do not look like snoopy!

Ilya had known, maybe, that his father would pass away soon. It was a few nights before a Boston home game against Montreal, and Ilya had dreamt up a memory, one he thought he'd forgotten with time. But there it was, this instance of his mother and him in a coat closet; he'd been ten, and his father had berated him at a state dinner, so there he and his mother were amongst the wool coats and fur parkas, doing his best to quell his crying. Ilya had broken a dinner plate or something, and there were so many men with their glowering eyes

down at him, and maybe they were just looking for an excuse to look at him this way, only because he'd been so very young and so very kind and too much like his mother. But there she was either way, with thumbs catching his tears, cooing at Ilya like she always did: *moy solnyshko*, she whispered, *my little sun*, but Ilya had only felt like pure darkness.

"I wish he would just die," Ilya even said, and he wasn't even sure who he meant. His father? The men at the table? He just thought it was right to practice this cruelty, to grow into it, before he could grow sorry at its sound.

The words didn't feel right, though he'd tried. He'd tried and tried and tried.

At this, his mother had looked back at him in horror, but maybe also in understanding. Ilya just cried even harder into her shoulder then, as she made tears, too.

"Sorry," he tells the flight attendant in Russian, when he finds himself on a plane back to Moscow that evening. "Could I get the ginger ale, instead of a Coke?"

And it's terrible. So flat and blandly sweet. He finishes it anyway, settling in for the long trip home.

Ilya pays, and Ilya arranges, and Ilya does the paperwork.

What people don't tell him about death is how much minutiae there is to it, how all the hard work seems to gravitate to the one person still standing in the face of grief. He supposes, though, that someone has to get it done, and it's nice because he's left to it alone, quiet, in the backs of rooms.

No knows how to talk to the boy who left home, so he glances up to see his brother receiving the condolences: here there aren't any tears, just very firm handshakes and neutral faces and curt nods, and so many people saying, *your father was a very great man* which makes Ilya's stomach hurt a little. "He will be someone just as fierce in the next life," one of his nutty aunts even offers, "a war general, or a king," while Ilya just hopes for kindness.

Sometimes, he drums up the idea of another life: one where he'd grown up somewhere warmer, safer, with a mother that was still alive and a father who knew how to apologize. His brother would have been a brother to him, maybe also a hockey player, and not just seething, jealous and nasty, on the sidelines. And maybe they didn't even have to play hockey at all, maybe they could've just been boys in this other life, laughing on a very green lawn by the water, under a deep hot sky.

Ilya is knocked out of the thought, alone in his house in Russia, when he sees the words ***Jane*** on his phone. It floors him that it's not a text message this time, but an actual incoming call; it lets it ring for a few seconds, in case it's a mistake that Shane might want to take back.

"Hollander?" Ilya finds himself answering, despite.

"Yeah. Hi."

And then Ilya is quiet, transported for a moment, too busy drinking in the words.

"Are you okay?" Shane asks.

"I don't know," Ilya laughs, and he can't tell if it sounds exhausted, or elated, or a mix of both.

He decides that it can be all of it, this feeling as ambiguous as the world in front of him.

He tells him the news. "I'm so sorry, Ilya," Shane says, and what a world this is.

It's enough for Ilya to call him a few days later, after the funeral. Shane suggests it first, saying everything he needs in Russian, and Ilya spills into it, not contrite about anything.

“That's the worse fucking part of all of this—that all I want is you. It's always you. I'm so in love with you, and I don't know what to do about it.”

On his first night back in Boston, Ilya has another dream, a memory he considers a classic: his mother, singing a rock opera song in the kitchen, her voice so big and bright and free because her husband had been out of town for the long weekend.

Ilya had been home sick that day, and so he'd been lying on the couch, watching his mother distantly, half-conscious from the living room. With her arms outstretched, she'd looked like such a lonely star in the afternoon sun, the lyrics so sad, like extra seasoning for her soup in the pot.

“I know the sooner you'll leave,” she'd crooned, “the sooner we'll be together forever,” and even then the sound of his had made Ilya feel sorrier than any flu. He couldn't grasp at the feeling then, but maybe he'd always known: that was always a matter of departure, no one staying, all of it too good to be true despite all your feeling and effort.

He takes this dream like a premonition, staring up at the blue ceiling of another morning. The song lingers, then fades, and promises Ilya nothing but the end.

And for the first time, Ilya is the most sorry to Shane Hollander. He thinks of all their wasted years, and how he'll have to end it later, after this game with Montreal; it's all in the rink now, the two of them here, because this is the only thing they can afford when their world has always been one of ice.

"Hi," Shane says anyway, like a dare on the edge of the centerline. He hasn't been sorry since Tampa, not in the way he once was, and this all makes Ilya's neck warm.

"Hollander," he says back, nodding, the name like his blade on the red line.

Shane pretends to inspect his hockey stick, and Ilya finds this impossibly endearing. "We still on for tonight? After?"

Another nod. Ilya can feel Shane looking at him, each glance like a needlepoint, expectant, so much so that he can only look away, towards the corner of the arena. "Same place?" Shane's even relentless in asking, that conqueror in him again, and Ilya can barely eke out a *yeah* in the face of it.

"Hey, you all right?"

And Ilya looks up, sees those big searching eyes hidden under the plastic of a visor.

"We'll talk later," Shane offers next, so unaware of their imminent demise.

Then there is the crash, the moment so quick and brutal it has speed-run itself into memory. For the first hour, Ilya can't even remember the collision by an unconscious Shane, just the bright orange spinal board, and Cliff Marlow's front missing tooth, the blood on a skate. And Ilya supposes this is all a mercy, remembering in the periphery, because it's better than thinking about his boy in blue, his 24 all crumpled on a white bed of ice; he thinks it is better than likening it to white sheets at home, and his mother with her pale arm outstretched and that already looming history.

By dinner time, his trainer has to goad Ilya into eating.

“That’s not like you,” he says, and all Ilya can do is muster up a joke, the deepest, sincerest apology, for not salivating at brown rice.

Later in the night, Ilya is on a treadmill in his hotel, with his speed set to zero. He’s staring up at the TV, and ESPN is showing Shane in full display on the spinal board. Ilya sees his own face during a post-game interview next, one practicing a more solemn-than usual nonchalance. “Is very unfortunate,” he’s saying, “and I hope he gets back out on the ice soon.”

“But Ilya, you looked quite concerned out there on the ice for Shane. Is there something you saw out there? Anything you think we should take note of?”

And the Ilya on the TV wrinkles his nose a bit, looking away for a moment before remembering some little-used media training.

“No, nothing,” he says, though it is everything. “It is just a very sorry thing to see, no matter what team you’re on.”

“Hey Roz, can you turn that thing down?”

That night, Ilya is sharing his room with Ryan Carmichael, who is the lightest sleeper on the planet. Ilya hadn’t noticed that his phone had become some full beacon in the darkness, a malevolent deity demanding search engine questions.

“Sorry,” Ilya tells him listlessly. “You do need all the beauty sleep you can get.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Sooner or later, Ilya hears soft snoring and goes off into the bathroom anyway. The thought of lying in the dark frightens him somehow, like it's suddenly all a mausoleum. Under harsh light, he finds himself settling into the empty bathtub, typing and deleting, the browser tabs endless.

shane hollander injury updates

can you die from human contact

top 10 worst hockey accidents

prayer for health

hello god are you there

He keeps on Shane's Wikipedia page, fixed on a photo of him on the bench. He's staring, studying, and Ilya takes in all the life pooling in focused eyes.

Even at her lowest, Ilya's mother would powder her face and pick a nice dress, greeting neighbors down on the curb on her way to the market.

This is what Ilya remembers when he's running a hot shower the next morning, digging out the hair gel from his travel bag. He wears the aftershave Shane likes and a jacket that Shane had once blushed over at the door, and even considers skipping his morning cigarette before the cab ride.

Ilya doesn't ultimately, because he sees it as a chance for Shane to chide him, even at his own expense. Darkly, he even imagines that Shane might be comatose at the moment, and in need of some rousing, so why not do the trick with tobacco smoke? *I want you to scold me*, Ilya thinks, *even back from the dead*, and the thought of it is so stupid and indulgent he can only laugh miserably in the backseat.

This extends past the reception area of the hospital, the elevator, and then hallways into other rooms; he looks into them, parsing the space between the bed and the door, and practices a straight and pleasant face.

But there Shane goes, looking so beautiful and alive under hospital lights. Ilya thinks he'd like an apology now too, for all the damages, for how quickly he's crossing the gulf of the room despite all the distance, his determined mission to end things. It's all a blur, and soon he is being reduced to the grazing of freckles, as if this had all just been a pilgrimage, all because Shane had made the call, his always small and always gentle "*hey*," and Ilya had had no choice but to heed it.

"Come to my cottage this summer," Shane tells him later, ever-barreling, this instigator. He looks satisfied with the question, already in heaven off the good drugs, and Ilya thinks this is another face-off he's lost.

"Maybe," Ilya tells Shane, and Shane is still smiling.

"Maybe," Ilya says again, and he feels like he is stranding himself on the answer.

This is what Ilya usually likes about Manhattan: no one saying sorry here; all of them rushing and going; this island so small he cannot believe all that it contains. Madison Square Garden is gorgeous, he thinks, not for the people telling him to fuck off, *go home Rozanov*, but for the lives they'll have after, their dinner plans and dates and drinks at the bar.

He thinks about it for a moment, joining them. There are regulars in his phone after all, those very efficient New York hookups, always reliable for some time and place and not much small talk.

Instead, he decides to go for a run along the West Side Highway after that first win, pleased that Boston's quashed some hometown advantage. Ilya even thinks about sprinting, only denying himself this because he's definitely fucked up his ribs.

He opts for some rare slowness instead, which turns into sight-seeing after a few failed minutes of trotting. Ilya leans against some railing, wishing: for cool air in the high humidity;

for another cup; maybe somewhere fun and raucous, maybe, in the off-season.

Still, it's gone all orange and lovely on the river tonight, the sun setting later and later. He watches the other people passing by, their laughter, their openly held hands on the pier, and winces in wanting this.

Ilya does not apologize for bad habits. The day after he is eliminated from the playoffs with New York, he pretends his bruised ribs aren't killing him, calling the car dealership up for an appointment in the afternoon.

"Yes, the 2015 Porsche 918 Spyder," Ilya tells his dealer over the phone. "Gorgeous car. Masterpiece." He figures this is the best way to nurse the loss, and slough it off just as fast.

"And what lucky lady will get to sit shotgun side with you?"

Ilya really isn't in the mood for his dealer's usual locker room talk. He laughs wearily, not really an answer, before hanging up the phone. He hadn't bought cars with hookups in mind, anyway. They sometimes did sit next to him, if only because they needed to go from point A to point B, to a bar or a club or an apartment. They had never been long drives, and most times Ilya would skip offering them a ride altogether, giving them cab money instead.

With Shane though, Ilya had imagined a leisurely, scenic drive more than once. The roof top would always be down, and sometimes Ilya would pick up speed, if only because he'd wanted to see Shane with the wind in his hair and the thrill in his eyes. He'd never go too fast, either, but there Shane would be in this vision, chiding him for this tin can of death, complaining they were like sardines...

Ilya grins at the thought, calling the dealer back.

"Sorry, I don't think I can come in," he says, when he thinks of a better use for his time. He looks for Jane in his contacts, typing:

Lily: toyota prius

Lily: honda civic hatchback

Lily: hyundai elantra

Lily: wait. no i know. ten thousand minivans.

Jane: what the fuck?

Jane: do i even want to know?

Lily: just thinking what about your car collection would look like. if you had one.

Jane: you cannot be this bored already.

Jane: and for the record those are very good cars. i like the safety rating on the honda.

Laughing, Ilya decides that maybe he'd love to be next to Shane anywhere, even in a Toyota Prius.

Sometimes, Ilya is especially sorry for not seeing Svetlana. He hasn't been sleeping with her, but she's also been having a vibrant start to her own summer, jetting off to places like Miami, and St. Barts, and San Tropez all *just because*. He's happy for her, he thinks, for this beautiful girl in the sun; he's happy that she'll call once in a while, still, because Ilya is in Boston, nursing sore ribs.

"So actually," Svetlana tells him one evening. "I met Rose Landry tonight."

"Oh, did you?" Ilya asks flatly. "Where are you, again?"

"Paris. We met at a party," Svetlana says casually, like Rose isn't a literal movie star. "I didn't think we have much in common, but she was nice enough."

"And do you have a lot in common?"

"For?"

"I don't know," Ilya wants to say, *to be with someone*, before settling on the fact that he actually has too much in common with Shane; that their sport and their status is what has put them in this position to begin with. "Never mind," he's telling her next, "I think I'm dying of boredom," and soon Svetlana is humming like she agrees.

"Well, I guess we did have one thing in common. Did you know that she likes rock operas? My god, she even knows *Juno and Avos*."

Ilya knows the story—that by the end, the lovers go on to die separately, one of illness, and the other in a convent. They never meet again, because this is life, which is always leading to death.

“I know the sooner you’ll leave,” he recites, “the sooner we’ll be together forever.”

“Christ, Ilya. Is everything all right?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”

“That’s a real sad fucking song!”

“Well, you’re the one bringing up this damn opera!”

And then the two of them are laughing for some reason, and Ilya finds he has tears in the corner of his eyes. They don’t say anything for a while, and soon someone is calling Svetlana away again, to some after-party in another *arrondissement*.

“I should get going,” she says, and Ilya feels the emptiness of his living room again, the impending silence. “But I guess it’s not so bad.”

“What isn’t?”

“The lyrics.” Svetlana explains. “I mean, sure, it didn’t end so well for those other lovers. But that’s the thing. You’re not those other lovers.”

Ilya swallows at the thought. It has never not astounded him, how much Svetlana knows.

“Well anyway, enough of being *gross*,” she says.

“Yes, enough of that,” Ilya grins, before telling her good night.

But then he has that dream of his mother again, always the same lately, with her in the kitchen, singing that song about the bitter end—“I know the sooner you’ll leave,” says her anthem, “the sooner we’ll be together forever.”

This time, Ilya senses he is no longer a sick child on the couch. He is standing at the open front door, all grown now, just a heel turn away from the warm weather.

Jane: i can't believe New York is finally going to win the cup.

Lily: i hate hunter.

Jane: no you don't.

Lily: i do.

Jane: stop. i'll get jealous if you keep talking like that.

Lily: do you think hunter is going to drink tea out of the cup?

Jane: caffeine? no way. hunter isn't that hardcore.

Lily: milk then.

Jane: warm milk. and then straight to bed!

And then there is a trophy, and it is gold and gleaming.

Jane: i'm happy for him.

Lily: of course you are.

And then so it goes, other people's triumphs. Scott Hunter calls over a man from the seats, and Ilya knows what's about to happen. Of course Ilya does, because he has never not envied these other lovers, openly kissing in the street, on trains, in supermarket lines. Those lovers in the arena, despite it all, their summer winning over ice.

Ilya goes for his phone when he wishes he could use his feet to run. He finds the name he wishes was another name and waits for him to answer.

“I’m coming to the cottage,” Ilya says to Shane, only sorry for not telling him sooner.

Chapter 2: recompense

Chapter Notes

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

On his flight over to Ottawa, an avid fan snaps a picture of Ilya in his plane seat, sharing it only to a private channel of other dedicated Ilya Rozanov fans. They'd know him anywhere, they claim, geared up or not, by nose or eye or single curl, and the consensus is this:

ClubRozanov: That can't possibly be him. He's blushing and he does not blush.

8puckbunny1: yeah OP like I don't think I've ever seen his mouth do that before, there's no way that's his smile...

haydenhateclub: I mean, that is his Yohji Yamamoto Adidas black tank top though? I can tell because his arms always look crazy in it.

ClubRozanov: Oh come on, anyone could own that. Besides, what business does he even have in Ottawa?

8puckbunny1: maybe scoping out the city? Imagine him signing with the Centaurs during free agency

haydenhateclub: LMAO

ClubRozanov: Good one!

haydenhateclub: like that would ever happen

ClubRozanov: But seriously, how could that be him? He's grinning way too hard, and he's definitely still hurting from the playoffs.

haydenhateclub: especially with the scott hunter win ugh

8puckbunny1: and his poor ribs 🙄

ClubRozanov: Yes, exactly. Not to get too parasocial, but I imagine he's probably still feeling like one sorry bastard right about now...

But Ilya doesn't. Not when he's inside Shane like this, in a bed he'd never thought he'd see, bodies fitting together after so many months of absence. They'd barely been at the cottage for a few hours, but that had been long enough, like somewhere they had died waiting and had become something else entirely new.

Ilya listens: how this would all be too loud for hotel rooms, the spoken names too obvious for thin walls. Shane's mouth opens more than he's ever seen anyway, like a window, or a door, and suddenly Ilya wants nothing more than to speak back into the gape. "Shane," he groans, like it might mean something else; "Shane," he says, like it's someone he could ever claim.

As if to answer, Shane lifts his legs, hooking his ankles over Ilya's shoulders. He smiles back at Ilya with some dazed audacity, dark eyes in the middle of the day.

Ilya meets him in equal measure. He presses in deeper, suppressing something giddy, and pretends that two weeks can stretch into forever.

By the time they manage to get around to dinner, Ilya has gotten barbecue sauce on his crucifix. This isn't the first time this has happened—his mother would want him to eat well, condiments included—but he's always hyper-aware of it usually, and quick to clean up any spills with a silent apology. Only, it's Shane who takes notice first this time, and soon he's standing over him with a napkin to the thin cross of gold, yanking delicately on the chain to get the sauce off.

Ilya swallows, and Shane is maybe close enough to hear his loss for words.

“Sorry,” Shane says, his face flushed from either the beer or their proximity.

Ilya keeps his eyes on him from where he’s sitting, a little bit of a dare. He warms anyway, too, because this is all very new for them, not the sex, or the closeness, but the enormity of this time together. Ilya stretches into this, tugging at Shane’s shirt to get him closer, if only because it’s another reminder of the present, with no flights to catch or hotel rooms to sneak out of.

“What?” Shane lingers between Ilya’s thighs, all while keeping the crucifix in his hands. He’s barely grazing it in his grip, metal barely laid over his fingerprints, and for a second Ilya thinks it all feels too holy, too close, to bear.

“Are you a believer now, Hollander?”

“Now, you know I’m not religious.”

“You could pray to a god of hockey if you wanted.”

“Yeah? And what would I pray for?”

“To fix your slow skating.” Ilya muffles kisses into Shane’s stomach. “Or that terrible backhand. Or having Hayden as a teammate.”

“Hey,” Shane manages to part with soft laughter, perhaps a call for some seriousness. He runs one of his hands through Ilya’s hair, like it could be anything soft. “I was just remembering, you know, what you told me in Tampa. How this cross was your mother’s.”

Ilya stalls, bracing for some possibility that he will be ridiculed for missing his mother. He searches Shane’s face for this, though he knows it is an old instinct, that he is insulting Shane for even imagining the scenario. Still, he feels his jaw tighten. A curt nod, loading up in the chamber, with some excuse that he’d only shot back in self-defense.

But Shane says nothing, demanding no apology or explanation. His hands stay in his hair and on the cross. He’s staring, soft but focused, and soon he is kissing Ilya all closed-eyed, knowing where to weather away the hardness without looking.

At the cottage, Ilya thinks of all of life's indulgences. He lists them in no particular order, all these pleasures of the outside world, like drunk cigarettes and blini with honey; the new car smell and the smoky perfume on the crook of a neck in the club. He thinks of sports cars, and endorphins from high speeds on the treadmill; booing crowds and cheering crowds all the same, and his name, being said over loud speakers; *NUMBER 81, YOUR CAPTAIN ILYA ROZANOV*, turning into *Ilya*, just Ilya, after so many years of evading the syllables.

"Ilya, forgive me," Shane is saying now with a barely-contained smile, under Ilya on a bed that might as well be a private island. He has one of Ilya's shirts on, but it's already climbed up around his collarbones, threatening to come off altogether.

"Mister pool boy," Ilya allows himself. "You really did do a very shitty job this morning. There are still many bugs in the water."

"I'm so very sorry," Shane plays along. "What will happen now?"

"Cardio is important, yes? But now I cannot swim. It's good to exercise, before big movie shoot."

"And what are you going to film?"

"Why, I am big action star," Ilya improvises. "They're telling me I will be the next James Bond."

At this, Shane breaks out laughing, shaking his head. "I'm sorry, but I thought you were supposed be a bored housewife in this fantasy."

"I changed my mind."

"Yeah?" Shane challenges. "And so you're what? An A-list actor now? Like..."

"Oh, shut up," Ilya says, tickling Shane's waist. "You still have pool to clean."

"Yeah? And what if I don't feel like cleaning it anymore?"

Ilya grins, leaning in to kiss Shane by his freckles. "Then you will have to make it up to me in other ways. My husband will be home very soon."

"This fantasy makes no sense."

Ilya shrugs and Shane reaches up, looping his arms around Ilya's shoulders anyway. They're grinning while they're kissing, and soon Ilya cannot help but indulge: in the way Shane's head rolls back, when Ilya kisses down his chest; in the way shorts slide off hipbones; in the way Shane grips Ilya by the hair and the way he says his name, *Ilya*, only *Ilya*.

The name comes, and comes, and comes, high and loud, all of it spoiling Ilya to death.

“I’m not sure if you know this,” Shane says one afternoon. “But I once got into a fight with Scott Hunter.”

Ilya knows about this full well. It’d been early enough into their affair, and Ilya had happened to catch the highlights on ESPN. It had amused him greatly, watching Shane bark on the ice, which had turned into one of life’s greatest mysteries for him. In the way people wondered about alien lifeforms, or how the pyramids had been built, it’d always plagued Ilya, not knowing why the golden boy of hockey had gotten into that brawl.

In fact it makes him sit up now on the couch where they’re both sitting, suddenly alert. Ilya mutes the boring Scott Hunter documentary on the television, and Shane lays back on his pillow, lifting his hips so he can shimmy his shorts off.

“No, no,” Ilya says, though *that* can come after. “I want to know about this brawl you had. Why did you fight a defenseless old man?”

“It was stupid,” Shane says. “Now can we just...?”

“No, I want to know.”

Shane searches for the words, looking everywhere in the room but Ilya. He finds him again, though, blushing, and Ilya can only grin like he’s about to get a tawdry confession.

“I tried chirping at him, you know, because why not? Like, it wasn’t even anything crazy. I think it was something along the lines of, *oh, well, I hope the next time you play you actually show up!*”

Ilya stifles a laugh. “A good chirp for toddler, maybe.”

“Oh, fuck off,” but Shane is sitting closer to Ilya now, hands loosely tangled in his. “And I thought that would be it, because god he was playing *so badly*—”

“So very. Truly horrible.”

“—Right? So I thought, OK, I’ll go skate away now. But then, he looks up at me and says, *you’re starting to sound like him*, and I fucking lost it.”

“Like who?” Ilya frowns.

“Who do you think?”

Ilya is confused until he isn’t. His face falls like the collapse of an ancient civilization, when he realizes he’s mattered to Shane for this long.

“I was so pissed that my first thought was you,” Shane says. “And so I took it out on Scott Hunter.”

At this, Ilya thinks of a few retorts—*how could you, Shane, Scott Hunter is 100,000 years old; you should be sorry because my chirps are more high caliber than that*—and lets this all be revisionist history instead.

He thinks about making fun of Scott Hunter again, before letting Shane is topple over him on the couch. He fumbles for the remote, TV off, no one else on the screen but their own reflections.

They’re laying together on the patio couch together, fire going again. A loon calls, and Ilya doesn’t think of wolves at his neck.

“Those loony birds again,” Ilya says, huffing a kiss against Shane’s temple. “Always with the noise.”

“You still scared?” Shane laughs.

“No,” and Ilya means this. “The sound is very faraway.”

“It is. They can’t hurt you.”

“And also,” Ilya pauses, trying to conjure the memory. “It reminds me of something else.”

“Oh? Like what?”

And Ilya can sense that Shane is bracing himself for a joke, judging by the small knit between his eyebrows. Ilya kisses this away, mashing his mouth closed with a shyness that feels achy.

“This neighbor dog, back in Russia. Always howling at everyone. I used to be very scared of him, when I was young. He would growl and my father would call me a coward.”

Shane quiets, before telling him, “I’m sorry.”

“Is okay,” and Ilya pretends he means this. “But that dog really was the devil, biting people.”

“And did he? Bite you, that is.”

“Yes,” Ilya says. “Always on the ankles. So maybe I had reason, to be scared. I thought, one day this dog will bite somewhere wrong and I will never walk again.”

“Hm,” Shane seems to ponder, and his eyebrows furrow again like this is a serious inquisition, not the silly fears of a long-gone child. “Well, you were wrong. I think you’ve walked plenty since then. Run, even.”

“Yes, laps around *you* on the rink.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Overhead, the moon is full, and the loons are calling with outstretched wings. Somewhere, real wolves are hunting because this is nature, this is violence, those boys being boys and men being men. Hadn’t Ilya been right then, to run? To pick up speed and never stop, everything fast, always so fast, so no one could ever catch him?

“But you know,” Ilya says. “I think I would like to be slow right now, with you.”

There is quiet, and Ilya follows the rise and fall of Shane’s breathing against his. He rolls over him, all at some perfect pace, and bites Shane’s shoulder with nothing more than a gnaw.

And it begins, or maybe it had always been there: the words making some uphill climb up his throat, daring to be said.

At first, Ilya considers blurting them out. He likened this to what he did on the ice; no language barrier could contain him when he was chirping, like he’d been born to talk shit and get hit for it. He thinks about saying *I love you* in much of the same way, like when he’s beating Shane in video games, or giving him trouble about the amount of burgers he’s grilling, if only because then it’d be over, something easily brushed off as his usual antics if Shane didn’t hear, or worse, reciprocate.

Case in point: Shane sitting across from him in the hot tub, looking as red as ripe fruit and very precious. He opens his mouth, before Shane pushes a foot into Ilya’s chest, a very red foot, telling him, “don’t fucking start.”

“Start what?” Ilya asks, now with Shane’s calf in his grip for an impromptu massage.

“I don’t know. You have this look on your face.”

“What look?”

“Like you’re about to make fun of me.”

“Never,” Ilya says, which is to say, *not this time*.

“It’s fine, just get it over with,” Shane says, already melting into the water. “Lay it on me.”

But Ilya doesn’t. Suddenly at a loss, he just grins, like the words are still on the way.

“Do you want to learn some Russian?” Ilya offers instead, completely serious.

“Oh, sure,” Shane says.

“Moy pomidor.”

“*Moy pomidor*,” Shane tells him back. “What does that mean?”

“My tomato,” Ilya says, maybe something close to love, while Shane looks halfway ready to drown him in the hot tub.

One day, Ilya thinks about coaxing the words out of Shane, that first *I love you*, like it might be easier if he gets to follow in saying it.

It’s a simple enough scheme, which starts at dawn. Ilya gets out of bed first, scouring the kitchen; and soon he’s boiling coffee, and scrambling eggs the way Shane likes them, then making smoothies so green he may as well have liquified grass. He even goes outside, quickly gathering a wildflower for garnish—a weed, maybe, he’s not sure—before serving it up on a tray for breakfast in bed.

Shane is still lying in bed, half-asleep, when he sees Ilya coming with the spread. He squints at the sun, and then the realization that this is happening, before looking so fond that Ilya has no choice but to recover at the sight, bowled over and sitting at the foot of the bed.

“Thank you,” Shane just tells him instead. He takes the wildflower and tucks it behind Ilya’s ear, feeding him a mouthful of egg.

“Ya tebya lyublyu,” Ilya tries covertly, in a whisper, when Shane is running the laundry at noon. He doesn’t hear this—the dryer is loud and the both of them are half-awake—but Ilya lingers near him regardless, content to watch him sort through the linens they’d ruined that very same morning.

Ilya is tempted to say it again, maybe in English this time, before Shane picks up their comforter from the basket. “Take the other side,” he says, and soon they’re folding everything together, like they have always shared sheets and a home and a life.

It overwhelms Ilya, the sentiment. He pretends to crouch down, looking for lint bunnies, while Shane says something in passing about fetching a broom and a dustpan.

“Broom and dustpan,” Ilya repeats quietly back to himself, like this could ever mean love, like an old but just-unearthed language.

It’s the late afternoon and Shane is asleep on Ilya’s lap, spent from a day of working out and video games and a swim in the lake. Ilya is content to stay like this; he has the TV on low, since their intention was to watch a few home videos of Shane’s childhood. Ilya had insisted upon it, after finding a box of tapes labeled *Shane’s fifth birthday party* and *Shane CAN/AM Challenge Cup 2000*, even though Shane had grumbled he should’ve taken them back to his parents’ back down the road. And so Ilya had laughed at Shane’s hockey-themed birthday party (of course he had had one) and then marveled at footage of his mother and father, cheering him on ferociously; he’d decided, then, that he was thankful for their care, if only because it’d allowed him this house and time with Shane.

Ilya turns his attention to the Shane on his lap, completely at rest and perhaps a little more undone. His mouth has gone just a tad askew, with a bit of drool, and Ilya considers something drastic, like taking picture of him, framing it, and hanging it in the Louvre.

This is until Shane's body tenses up, shoulders as rigid as the day he was drafted second. At first Ilya thinks it's something he did, but he's been sitting still, and soon it becomes clear to Ilya that Shane is having a nightmare. Shane frowns into it, fists curling. A scream comes but decides it cannot be a scream, settling as a howl trapped in the body.

"Shane," Ilya coos. He gives Shane a light tap against the face with a hand, running it in his hair. "Shane, wake up, you are having nightmare."

Shane is already sitting up when he wakes in a jolt, sucking in an inhale. "Shit," he says, "where am I?"

"With me."

This calms Shane instantly, enough to fall back in Ilya's lap. Ahead of them, the home videos are still playing on the television, and Ilya can feel Shane squirm at the footage of him, winning MVP at some junior tournament. Small Shane is beaming proudly on the ice; then comes a trophy and he is hoisting it over his arms, just the beginning of all his accolades.

"You must have been so happy that day," Ilya remarks, when Shane has gone quiet. His fingers trail alongside Shane's face absentmindedly, which he leans into, sighing.

"Mmh, I think so."

"Only *think so*? Look, your parents even brought a sign."

SHANE HOLLANDER, NUMBER ONE! flashes across the screen. Shane shifts in Ilya's lap again.

"You're still in your nightmare a little bit," Ilya deduces. "Is ok."

"Yeah, maybe."

"What did you dream about?"

"It's embarrassing."

"Oh?" Ilya grins. "Now you must tell me."

"We were, you know, fucking on the couch," Shane says. "Or about to, I don't know. And it's not even a sexy dream, really, because I'm looking out the window, and there are all these birds, a whole wall of them. And they're all staring back, squawking, making all this fucking noise like..."

"We have been found out," Ilya finishes for him.

"Well—*no*, but, fuck. Yeah."

Shane stays where he is, turning so he can stare at Ilya, instead of the television, that golden boy in the making. He has that look again, wide-eyed and studying and maybe even

panicked; it makes Ilya sit back on the couch even more, hand outstretched over the top of it, like the practiced ease will reach his posture and hopefully his face.

In the end, he knows it doesn't, which is to say he wasn't trying very hard anyway. The moment looms, big and strange and heavy, and Ilya considers saying it, the words, if only to kill it.

Ilya smiles at him instead, mouth trembling, everything felt. Shane takes notice in a slow blink, smiling back, like it all doesn't feel a little helpless.

By nightfall, Ilya has made his mother the moon. She doesn't even have to be full for Ilya to look to her, in fact he likes when she's all these phases, because it means she's alive, and so much all at once that even the oceans have to move for her. It's a guilty thought, partially, because he hasn't dreamt of her once here at the cottage; but he thinks that maybe she is everywhere regardless, so impossibly bright that Ilya cannot help but look up.

Shane is inside, taking a shower. Ilya had said a stupid thing not twenty minutes before, and he'd seen the way the tears beaded in Shane's eyes as a result. *I could marry Svetlana*. It was a quick idea for citizenship, which he maybe thought Shane would find practical in the moment, like he was only trying to speak the language of their situation, their reality. Shane had looked so tense where he was sitting, and so Ilya found himself wanting to run his mouth again, if only to unspool him from that tight coil.

He'd talked about having this terrible problem. That, despite how fun and sexy women were, he'd had only on his mind this one hockey player, one who was so slow on the ice and drove a terrible car and played with a weak backhand. *Beautiful freckles*. At this, he'd gotten a smile out of Shane; and then it'd faltered just the same, and then there Shane was asking, *do you ever want the problem to go away?*

And Ilya could've answered, then, with the usual diffusion. Locker room ease, a joke, another moment lost to the breeze.

No, Ilya had said instead, too serious, too greedy; a promise to be honest. *I do not want the problem to ever go away*. He supposes this is why he's out here now, looking to his mother for guidance.

"Am I even allowed to have this, mama?" he asks, before cupping his hands to his face

Ilya waits, expecting doom, like the moon could ever fall out of the sky. He knows the changing of phases and feelings; self-sabotage; all those eventual goodbyes.

But his mother just shines back, a blue glow on the water. It is low, but so soft, that Ilya has no choice but to follow it.

And then comes Shane, shaking him awake. It's late when he puts the light on, his gaze already bright and aware and searching.

"I have an idea."

"What idea?" Ilya asks, still barely conscious. "What is happening?"

"What if you played for Ottawa?"

Shane has a plan, and Ilya spells out a life. Ottawa, Shane says, but Ilya hears *closer*. And maybe it's because he's still half-asleep, but he lets himself have this, this private translation, like this talk of star centers and charities and new friendships and less heady rivalries might mean nothing but *together*; nothing but *you and I*.

Ilya listens, waking into the idea. He already has one foot in the front office in Boston, paperwork all done in his head, because this is Shane and he decides he'll do it all, even in exchange for just a few good years; that even if Shane were to grow tired of him, or if it were to all fall apart, he would still have had this shared stretch of time. Because in his visions, there is always an exit, and there is always a door, and Shane is walking right through it, and so he expects as much, the coming of Shane's clarifying, cautious language, a call to remember who they are under arena lights, and during face offs, with all the pundits talking and talking and—

"Maybe someday, when we both retire," Shane tells him instead, "we can be together, for real," which Ilya barely even hears, until he does.

Ilya lays there, staring, all the coolness draining from his face.

Shane follows, like a mirror, his softness a reflection.

“You really think that far ahead, Hollander?” Ilya asks, eked out it is the only question in the world.

“I do about this.”

“And this is what you want, to be together?”

“So much that it terrifies me.”

Ilya turns his head away, if only to gather himself, because if he is a vessel he has only ever been kept in check, no overfilling here; no flooding. *Stern jaw*, he can hear those old coaches say, *keep that stern jaw, Rozanov*—

Because even if Ilya had imagined a life with Shane before, it’d only come in piecemeal, visions existing only because he hadn’t been careful enough to curate his boredom. He’d just be at a supermarket and imagine Shane standing in the same aisle, reading ingredients on a jar, or he’d be sitting on a plane and wonder if Shane would order anything besides the ginger ale. They were only permeations then, secret and loosely held scenarios, ones that Ilya would lose just as easily, because he was convinced he was never meant to keep them in the first place, but—

Ilya turns back to Shane anyway, sees no dreams or visions or wishful thinking. His head goes blank with the body lying next to him, and soon all he wants to exhaust his kisses on this very real thing, everywhere, if only because this has always been their way of speaking. And maybe he’ll never be able to say it, and so he’ll show it, like he always has; he’s got teeth and his tongue and an open jaw, after all, knows how to move Shane to tears regardless —

And so he goes this way, mouth on mouth; mouth on neck; until it is a mouth making words because it can no longer be helped. “Ya tebya lyublyu,” he repeats, until even that feels too faraway, too much of a secret kept, because—

I love you, Ilya thinks.

“I love you,” because it is the only thing left to say.

At this, Shane mouths an expletive, eyes glossy and wide. There is a world in his stare, all their history and their future unfolding.

“I love you too,” he says back, and Ilya lays back into him, all gushing and relieved and near the brink of death.

Ilya finds himself at a loss a few days later, when he is in the Hollanders’ kitchen. There is soap and water splattered on the floor, and a dinner plate, gone to pieces.

“Fuck,” Ilya mutters to himself, when he kills the sink and crouches down to tend to the mess. So far, Shane’s parents have been nothing but hospitable considering the circumstances, but he still feels like a small animal here, a nocturnal entity in a very bright house. He flinches when he hears the footsteps behind him, and soon David Hollander is crouching next to him, with a whole roll of paper towels in hand.

“Whoa there,” he says, and Ilya thinks he’s broken a valuable heirloom of sorts, that it was all nice while it lasted. But David just presses a paper towel to Ilya’s big toe, sopping up the blood Ilya didn’t know he’d shed.

Sorry, an old impulse thinks to say, but Ilya settles on “thank you,” instead. David gathers a first-aid kit from the cabinet next, pouring rubbing alcohol onto a cotton ball.

“It’ll sting for just a second,” he warns, and Ilya sits back on the floor, barely steeling himself. He had bled plenty before, after all, always spitting out teeth with a smile, waving off medical staff when he was sore.

But he has to admit that there’s something nice about not playing through the pain this time; that at the touch of that soaked cotton ball, Ilya can hiss at the air and curse in Russian, laughing at how hurt can come one moment and then go in the next.

Shane and Yuna come into the kitchen not long after, confused at the scene. There’s worry, until there isn’t, and Ilya settles into the mundane chatter as the pieces are swept.

Sometimes, Ilya reevaluates the size of his happiness. He thinks it doesn't have to be big, like Shane picking off random dust off Ilya's chest, or the point of Shane's incisor tooth when Ilya sticks a thumb in his mouth; in fact he decides that his happiness with Shane can reside on a molecular level, that he'd be content with just a pore or a lash or a single cell if it meant that Ilya could keep any of him.

"Fuck, you're so perfect," Ilya says that afternoon, when he has Shane bent over the washing machine. They'd already had sex in all the rooms in the cottage, plus on several tables and counters, so Ilya had taken it upon himself to start with foreplay as Shane was loading up the laundry, if only to account for any last unexplored territory.

Now the machine is rumbling—high spin—and they are, too. Ilya grins into it, thinking about the lint Shane will have to pick off him later, and sinks into him deeper by the hold of his waist anyway. He lies over him, kissing the freckles on the back of his neck; he shudders at how good Shane feels all around him, like something he'd caught airborne that's gone suddenly, blissfully, terminal. Ilya thinks he could die like this, right here, and they'd have to find him at peace and pantless with all the rest of their laundry. He knows Shane is feeling this too, by how he's one hand dug into Ilya's thigh, how red his ears have gotten, how his mouth tries to claw at the words only to drag out the moans.

That is, until he's peering over his shoulder, eyes focusing on Ilya. He has a smile on his face, and Ilya knows this means trouble.

"What would...you call this?" Shane manages to ask, before letting out another gasp.

"I don't know," Ilya exhales. "Fucking your brains out?"

"No, not that."

"No?" Ilya's offended; thinks he might have to have Shane on the dryer, next. "Then what?"

"Guess."

"Best sex of your life?"

"Try again."

"A fucking good time?"

"Nope."

“Now you are hurting my feelings,” though Ilya goes undeterred.

“I think you could call it...” Shane trails off for a moment, lost in Ilya’s strokes. “I think you’d call it making love.”

Ilya can’t help but short circuit, to the point where he’s cursing in Russian. He comes not much longer after this, which sets Shane off, all laughing and victorious and undone.

“Fuck, Hollander,” Ilya pants, staying right where he is, over Shane like they’re suddenly conjoined at the lungs, huffing together. “I thought you hated words like that, *lovers*.”

“This is different,” Shane says, a little more serious. “When it’s just us, together.”

Ilya can’t say much to that. He rewards his winner with a blur of kisses, laughing into the shell of his ear before spotting it: a puff of lint in Shane’s hair, ripe for the picking.

At this, he thinks to correct the size of his joy. Ilya decides, all breathless, that it is more than enormous.

“Shane,” Ilya whispers to him one morning, extra sweet because his flight back to Boston is later in the afternoon.

“Mm?”

“I’m going to step out for a little.”

“Yeah?” But Shane still clings onto him anyway, nuzzling his head in his chest. “Remember, we have houses to look at later. I think I like the one with the lawn...and the pool...and the coolest fucking rink in the basement.”

Ilya laughs, confused, until he sees the drool; a face at absolute rest. “Are you dreaming still, Hollander?” he asks, almost laughing, planting a kiss on an eyelid to rouse him.

“No,” but he is, though he’s frowning now, and it’s cute when Shane’s annoyed, especially mostly asleep like this. “The real estate agent will be so mad if we’re late again, so you better be on time, okay?”

“Okay,” Ilya promises. “I just have somewhere quick to be. I’ll be right back.”

“Take one of your sports cars if you have to,” Shane murmurs. “Race *onnnnnnn* home to me after.”

“I think you’ll regret saying that, once you’re awake.”

“Make it fast, Ilya. Make it fast...”

Ilya lays kisses Shane all slow in a denial, from his chin down to his neck, and lingers at the collarbone, letting himself live in its divot. It’s hard to part like this, but Ilya manages, picking up his clothes off the floor, and tucking a cigarette behind his ear for later.

Somehow, along the way, Ilya had gotten to know the cottage: like where Shane kept the coffee grounds, and what buttons to press on the maker; where to lift the curtains so there was good morning light but not a glare. He knew how to unlatch the dryer too, how to de-lint the trap within, and where the basket was, to fill with their laundered clothes still mixed together.

He sighs at this honest work, only regretful that he cannot have it for a longer stretch. Eyes on the floor, he catches a beam from the sunrise and nods back, looking up to follow it.

That morning, his mother has ceased being the moon. Ilya settles by the water, sights glazed over at her shimmer instead: how it rules over the ripples, the wavering trees; how her star dictates the flying birds and the waking of a world.

Taking the lighter from his pocket, and the cigarette from behind his ear, he flicks a flame close to his cross, his light small like a church offering. He’ll smoke in her honor this morning, he thinks, before letting the tobacco go unburned altogether.

“Ah, sorry, mama,” he says, when he realizes it’s the first apology he’s made in weeks. He covers his mouth again, smiling into the feeling until it’s become laughter.

“There is a boy back at the house I’d still like to kiss,” he tells her, all choked up, with a lump in the throat he doesn’t mind.

His mother only beams back, orange and bright. Her sun on the water might as well be tears, but the happy kind, the glint infinite with blessings.

Three hours before Ilya's flight back to Boston, an aforementioned private channel has found itself in a frenzy.

Roxie4Rozy: Guys. Sorry I've been so MIA. But you'll never believe this.

Roxie4Rozy: So, I've been vacationing with my parents up in Ottawa, like at our cottage, right? And I thought, oh, let me get some footage for my vlog. Well, I'm getting some footage of the drive, and I was just playing one of them back and! I think I accidentally captured Ilya on camera?

ClubRozanov:?

ClubRozanov: No way. Proof or it didn't happen.

Roxie4Rozy: *has attached a video*

Roxie4Rozy: Isn't that him in the passenger seat? I would recognize his ear lobes anywhere.

haydenhateclub: and that is the bridge of his nose omg

8puckbunny1: Wait a minute, though. Do you see who's driving?

8puckbunny1: Isn't that...Shane Hollander?

haydenhateclub: um holy shit

haydenhateclub: I think it is

8puckbunny1: WAIT do you remember the sighting from the plane from a couple of weeks ago? Does that mean it was Ilya, then? It was his Yohji Yamamoto tank top, I swear!!

Roxie4Roxy: Fuck this is so crazy

ClubRozanov: OK, everyone relax. So maybe it is him. And maybe it is Hollander. Is this anywhere online yet?

ClubRozanov: Nevermind, I just did a thorough sweep. Looks like it isn't.

haydenhateclub: so what do we do with this?

ClubRozanov: I mean, obviously nothing. We take this to the grave. Remember, our top priority should be protecting Ilya's privacy, above all. Besides...don't they look a little troubled?

Roxie4Roxy: I know right?? Hollander looks like he's about to cry.

When Ilya watches the other cars pass them on the highway, he realizes Shane has gone under the speed limit. It's a bit of a danger, he thinks, if not in terms of road safety, surveillance: no one had recognized them on the road yet, but he knows that Shane would rather not have the internet speculation if they were found together, holding hands and driving slow to the airport. At this, Ilya thinks to chide him—*what happened to you wanting me in a sports car*—before settling on pulling Shane's arm into his lap. Ilya draws his gaze up: at thumbs fidgeting in the grip; shoulders gone tense; the tears brimming in Shane's eyes. "Pull over," Ilya insists then, the one to press the hazard lights.

Shane does, merging into a shoulder that's flanked by a line of tall trees. He drives a little further towards the forest, until the road under them feels gravelly in the terrain, killing the ignition altogether.

"I'm all right," he mutters to Ilya, as he's laying his head against the steering wheel. "Just give me a second."

"Are you thinking about the foundation again?" Ilya asks, massaging a palm over the back of Shane's neck. "You have it covered, yes? You and your mother were very thorough and—"

"No, it's not that."

“Then?” And with a bit of humor: “Maybe we spent too much time before, in bed?”

“God, Ilya.”

“Did I tire you out?”

“No!”

“Then?” Ilya asks.

“I’m going to miss you, you asshole. Don’t you get that?”

Ilya waits for Shane to gather himself. He would miss his flight if he had to, and all his flights after this, to sit with Shane here. Part of him, perhaps the one most nonsensical with love, would even set up camp here forever in the Canadian wilderness if he had to; he’d build a house right here on the shoulder of this highway, between the measly trees and the racing SUVs, if it meant more time together.

“Sorry,” Shane says.

“No,” Ilya says, understanding. “Don’t be sorry.”

Shane turns his head from the steering wheel, his wet eyes back on Ilya. This makes Ilya imagine how they will be the airport parking lot later: sunglasses back on, baseball caps donned; with no kiss goodbye or hug goodbye or even so much as hands skimming in the farewell. And it drives Ilya mad, the thought of this, to have to walk away later like the last two weeks have been nothing. Back and forth between Boston and Montreal they’ll endure, if only for another season; back on this never ending road they’ll drive, with so many more miles to go.

In the end, Ilya decides he’d like it all anyway. He lets his hand fall over by Shane’s chin; he holds it, if delicately, before firming at the touch.

“How about you kiss me instead?” he asks, his grin small and wincing but visible.

And Shane blinks. He leans over, smiling back like a spark for this life to come.

Unhurried, Ilya meets him too, so slow, then slower still. He kisses him like this, hinging open the jaw, the rush of an inhale like the welcoming of forever.

“Just so you know,” Ilya says. “I will miss you, too.”

Up ahead, the horizon is wide and waiting. There are clouds today, like many such days, but the windows are cracked open and the air will flow through.

Chapter End Notes

Hi everyone!! Thanks for reading. Some notes below:

- Again, this was a mix of plot/visual elements from both the novel and the show. There were some things from the show (like tuna melt and Shane saying sorry in Tampa that I loved so I felt compelled to include them, but the timeline is largely based on the books)
- Title is based off lyrics from “This Eve of Parting” by John Hartford, my second fic using this song as inspiration like the yearning in this song is unmatched
- for anyone who has read my hq!! fics this has been such a huge study in experimenting with voice (although my lyrical nature will always be there to some degree oops)
- Hudson Williams I am very enamored with your teary-eyed portrayal of Shane, so I also incorporated this into the fic at several points
- ***SPOILER for TLG*** I also found it important to allude to Ilya’s depression or at least show hints of it throughout (though I apologize for not completely exploring it...I did want to cover TLG too but I fear this would have ballooned to like 40k and I have other writerly duties to attend to soon)
- also I’m deeply attached to the black muscle top Ilya has on in episode 6 (it’s Yohji Yamamoto!! The Y-3 collab with adidas to be specific) so that got a mention too
- the lyrics from the recurring nightmare/dream are from a Russian rock opera called “Juno and Avos”
- ClubRozanov is a parody version of the very famous ClubCh@lamet account 😭😭😭
- Endless light motifs. Oops!
- I tried following what Jacob Tierney did episode 6 in which there are a lot of call backs to the previous episodes visually, with camerawork, etc. obviously different with writing as a medium, but I kind of wanted the same effect between the non-cottage and the cottage chapters
- I found that important to explore spatially in the text during the cottage sections, especially since Ilya is slowing down and reflecting more in the cottage - I think the size

of the sections reflect this, while letting part one be more truncated and snippy. I wanted Ilya to indulge a little (a lot) at the cottage!! I hope they really christened all the rooms for anyway please find me on [@sixthmoons](#). comments and kudos are so appreciated!! and if you could share where you can, I'd also love that hehe 😊 see ya later!!

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