

A Rivalry of One

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A Rivalry of One

by [cowboyoftheconeyisland](#)

Summary

They call it a Lucid Interval. A brief moment of clarity after a traumatic brain injury where the patient appears fine. Awake. Alert. Happy.

After the hit, Shane Hollander wakes up. He jokes with the nurses. He smiles at Ilya. He makes plans for the summer.

Ilya Rozanov just outed himself to the entire world on live television to save him, but he can't save him from this. Shane isn't getting better. He is dying. And these are the last conversations they will ever have.

A story about the hit, the confession, and the long, slow silence that followed.

They weren't saying goodbye to each other; Ilya was too confident that Shane would win.

Shane loved winning.

He lost, the first lost that Ilya didn't enjoy.

Because he only left Ilya to suffer more.

(finished, all done)

Chapter 1: not before I tell him that I love him.

Chapter Notes

I have angst addiction disorder

English is not my first language, if you find any errors don't hesitate to let me know because I can't see the screen thanks to my eyes sweating

The ice was supposed to be his escape.

That was the lie Ilya told himself when he boarded the plane back to North America, leaving the fresh dirt of his father's grave behind in Russia. He told himself that the cold inside the arena would numb the cold inside his chest. He told himself that if he just skated fast enough, the grief couldn't catch him.

But grief is heavy. It drags on your blades.

Ilya was skating, but he wasn't really there. Part of him was still standing in the snow in Russia, staring at a fresh mound of earth. His father. The grief was a physical weight, a stone in his gut that made every breath a labor.. He thought if he moved fast enough, the death clinging to him would fall off

Ilya felt nothing but guilt; guilt for not grieving enough for his father, guilt for grieving for him, guilt that everything about the funeral reminded him of his mother.

Every game was a blur of noise and violence. Ilya was playing on autopilot, his body moving through the drills, but his mind was a static haze. Until he saw him.

Shane, first game with Montreal since his return.

Shane smiling at him, Shane's shoulders brushing his, Shane winning the face off but Ilya couldn't care less because he felt more alive then he was supposed to feel, specially after his father's death.

Shane was flying down the wing, looking so alive, so infuriatingly brilliant. The puck was glued to his stick. He was cutting across the neutral zone, head up, eyes scanning for a pass that wasn't there.

He turned back a second to smile at Ilya.

He didn't see Marlow coming from his blind side.

Ilya did.

"Look out!" The warning died in Ilya's mouth, swallowed by the roar of the crowd.

"Shane!"

The name tore out of his throat, raw and terrified, but it was too late. The impact wasn't just a collision; it was a demolition.

Shane couldn't hear him.

The sound was nauseating. It sounded like bone snapping. It sounded like the shovel hitting the coffin.

Ilya watched, paralyzed for a microsecond that felt like a lifetime, as Shane's helmet flew off. He watched the back of Shane's head, that beautiful, stupid, covered in dark hair face, slam into the ice.

No slide. No movement. Just a dead stop.

The world went silent. The cheering cut off. The organ music died.

Ilya didn't remember skating over. One second he was at the blue line, the next he was on his knees, the ice soaking through his pants, his hands hovering over Shane's body.

"Shane?" Ilya's voice was small. A child's voice. "Hey. Get up."

Shane stared past him. His eyes were open, but there was nothing behind them. No spark. No arrogance. No Shane.

"Breathe," Ilya commanded, his hands shaking violently as he touched Shane's neck.

"Breathe, fuck, Shane?" His voice trembled, rose, and as he spoke, despair climbed from his heart into his words. "Why aren't you breathing?"

Nothing. No pulse. Just stillness. And then, the blood.

It pooled beneath Shane's head, dark and thick, spreading terrifyingly fast against the white ice. It was touching Ilya's knees now.

Not again. Not again. Not again.

"He's not breathing!" The scream ripped through Ilya's chest, burning his throat. He looked up at the refs, his vision blurring. "Help him! Why aren't you helping him?!"

The medics descended like vultures. Hands pushed Ilya back. Shoulders blocked his view.

"Clear the way! Get the AED!"

Ilya saw them cut Shane's jersey, the fabric ripping open, they cut the shirt underneath it, they removed his gear without moving him, as carefully as possible. It revealed the chest Ilya had kissed a thousand times in secret. He saw the medic lock his hands and drive them down onto

Shane's sternum.

They were manually beating his heart for him.

"No..." Ilya tried to scramble forward, his fingers clawing at the ice. "Stop it, you're hurting him! Wake up! Shane!"

A pair of arms locked around his chest, hauling him back. Then another pair.

Panic, primal and blinding, took over. Ilya wasn't the captain of the Boston Bears anymore. He was a man watching his entire universe bleed out on live television.

"Let me go!" Ilya roared, thrashing against the restraint. He felt a teammate's jersey but he didn't care, how could he? How could he care about anyone's thoughts when the man he loved wasn't breathing? He shoved him. Another player joined holding him away. He kicked. Another player tried to pull him back. He fought like a wild animal cornered by fire. "I need to be there! Get off me!"

I just buried my father. I can't do this again. I can't bury you too. You promised. You promised you're going to be there for me.

The hopelessness crashed into him. Shane looked so small on the ice. So pale.

"Don't let him go!" Ilya screamed at the medics, his voice breaking into a sob that echoed through the silent arena. "Don't take him away from me! Did you hear me?"

The arms holding him tightened, trying to shield him, trying to hide his breakdown, but Ilya was too far gone. The secret didn't matter. The world didn't matter.

"You are not fucking allowed to let him die!" Ilya wailed, his body sagging, his knees giving out as the teammates held him up.

He stared at Shane's lifeless face, the only thing he could see through his tears.

"Not before I tell him that I love him!"

The words hung in the air, absolute and irreversible. A collective gasp swept through the crowd, but Ilya didn't hear it. He only heard the terrible silence where Shane's heartbeat should be.

"Not before we get to live our life! He can't die! Please!"

He sounded pathetic. He sounded broken. He didn't care.

"I love him..." Ilya whispered, the fight draining out of him as he slumped against the chest of the player holding him. "Please, God. Don't take him."

"We have a pulse!"

The shout was electric.

Ilya's head snapped up. He watched through blurred eyes as they lifted Shane onto the stretcher. The moment the grip on his arms loosened, Ilya didn't hesitate. He didn't look at the bench. He didn't pick up his gloves.

He ran.

He ran out of the ice rink, straight to the locker room, he didn't even wait to get there. He was taking his clothes off while he ran.

He grabbed his phone and his wallet, he didn't put on his shoes, he just slipped them on his feet by stepping on the back. He tossed his gear somewhere in the room, grabbed a sweatshirt from the closet, and kept running. He didn't wait for somebody, he didn't wait to hear if the game was cancelled or not.

He kept running, stopping meant thinking, he kept running.

He ran out of the arena, he tried to look for a taxi.

Then, someone gripped his arm.

David Hollander, Shane's father.

Ilya felt his trembling hands, Ilya felt his fear, matching his.

David pointed to the dark green SUV at the door. Yuna Hollander was in the driver's seat.

The backseat of the SUV smelled like vanilla and stale coffee. It was too normal. A suburban car, for a suburban family, heading towards a tragedy that felt like a war crime.

Ilya slumped against the leather seat, his chest heaving. He was still wearing his drenched in sweat shirt that he wore under his jersey. His whole body was freezing, but his skin felt like it was on fire.

Yuna Hollander drove like she was running from the devil. She blew through a red light, her knuckles white on the steering wheel, her eyes fixed on the road with a terrifying intensity. She didn't look at Ilya. She didn't look at her husband. She was a machine with a single objective: Get to Shane.

Next to him, in the backseat, David Hollander was trembling.

The silence in the car was heavy, thick enough to choke on. It wasn't empty; it was filled with the things Ilya had just screamed on national television.

I love him.

The words echoed in the confined space, bouncing off the windows. Ilya stared at his hands. They were shaking so hard he had to clasp them together between his knees to stop them from vibrating. There was a smear of blood on his thumb.

Shane's blood.

He felt bile rise in his throat. "He moved," David whispered. It wasn't a statement; it was a question begging for confirmation. He turned to Ilya, his eyes red-rimmed and wide behind his glasses. "I saw... on the big screen. Before they took him. He moved his hand, didn't he?"

Ilya swallowed, the dryness in his throat painful. He looked at Shane's father, this man who had Shane's nose, Shane's jawline and felt a wave of nausea.

"Yes," Ilya croaked. His voice sounded wrecked. "He moved. He had a pulse."

But he wasn't breathing, his mind whispered viciously. For two minutes, he was dead. You held a corpse.

"See?" David looked at the back of Yuna's head, his voice cracking. "Yuna, he moved. He's tough. Shane is tough. He's got a hard head."

Yuna didn't answer. She swerved around a slow moving sedan, leaning on the horn.

Ilya squeezed his eyes shut. Don't throw up. Don't throw up.

He felt like an intruder. He was the enemy captain. The rival. The guy who was supposed to hate their son. And yet, here he was, half-dressed in their backseat, smelling like sweat and terror, having just declared ownership over Shane's heart.

Did they know? Before today? Did Shane tell them?

Or did I just destroy his life while trying to save it?

"You're Ilya," David said suddenly.

It sounded absurd. Of course he was Ilya.

Ilya opened his eyes words he wanted to say refused to leave his mouth "Yes."

David stared at him, studying his face, looking for something. He didn't look angry. He looked... grateful? Confused?

"We heard you," David said softly. The car hit a pothole, but neither of them flinched. "On the ice. The microphones, cameras... they picked up everything."

Ilya's stomach dropped through the floor. He gripped his knees tighter, his fingernails digging into his skin through the fabric of his pants. "I didn't... I wasn't thinking. I just—"

"You ran," David interrupted. Tears were leaking out of the older man's eyes now, sliding down his cheeks unchecked.

"Everybody else stopped. The refs stopped. But you ran to him."

David reached out. For a second, Ilya thought he might hit him. Instead, David's trembling hand covered Ilya's clenched fists. His grip was weak, shaky, but anchor like. With a single gesture, he showed the affection his own father had never shown him in years.

"Thank you," David whispered. "For not letting him be alone."

Ilya broke.

He sobbed silently, he didn't make a sound, but his face crumbled. He turned his head toward the window, watching the city blur by through a veil of tears he couldn't stop.

"I can't lose him," Ilya choked out, speaking to the glass. It was the first time he had admitted it to anyone other than the empty air of the arena. "I can't."

"We won't," Yuna spoke from the front seat. Her voice was steel, sharp and hard, but Ilya saw her eyes in the rearview mirror. They were terrified. "We are five minutes away. Hold on."

Ilya closed his eyes again, leaning his head against the cold window.

Please let the lie be true, he prayed to a God he hadn't spoken to since his father's funeral. Please let him be tough. Please let him wake up and make a joke and call me an idiot. But all he could hear was the sound.

Shane's head, hitting the ice.

The shovel hitting the coffin.

The car screeched to a halt in front of the emergency bay. Before the vehicle had even fully stopped, Ilya had the door open.

Chapter 2: the glass doors.

Chapter Notes

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

The hospital doors didn't slide open fast enough. Ilya shoved them aside, the sensor groaning in protest.

He didn't know where to go, but he didn't need a map. He followed the noise. He followed the frantic energy that buzzed in the air like static electricity. Nurses were running. Codes were being called over the intercom. The smell hit him first; antiseptic, rubbing alcohol, and underneath it all, the metallic tang of blood.

"Sir! You can't go in there!"

A security guard stepped in his path. Ilya didn't even slow down. He didn't look at the man. He just moved around him with the same fluidity he used to dodge defenders on the ice, his shoulder checking the guard aside with a force that had nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with desperation.

"Shane!"

He turned the corner into the trauma bay and stopped dead. The world tilted on its axis.

It was the Red Zone. Trauma One. The place where people went when they were already half-gone.

Shane was there. But he didn't look like Shane.

He was surrounded by a swarm of blue scrubs. Doctors and nurses were hovering over him, blocking the view, but Ilya saw enough. He saw the stillness of Shane's legs. He saw the pale, waxy color of his hand dangling off the side of the gurney.

And he saw his eyes.

Shane's head was taped down to a board, but his eyes were half-open, rolling back into his head, showing nothing but white. Twitching. Unseeing.

Ilya felt his own heart stutter and stop.

Beat. Silence. Beat. Silence.

His fingers tingled. His vision narrowed. For a moment he honestly wondered if he would collapse before Shane did. The floor felt like it was swaying beneath his feet.

It was a mirror image. On the ice, they had beaten Shane's heart for him. Now, watching Shane broken like a discarded doll, Ilya felt like he was the one dying. He felt the blood drain from his face, leaving him cold, hollow.

"Blood pressure is dropping! Get another line in!"

"Pupils are blown. Right side is fixed and dilated."

The medical jargon was a foreign language, but the panic in their voices was universal.

Ilya took a step forward, his hand raising involuntarily. He wanted to touch him. He wanted to grab Shane's hand and squeeze it until the warmth came back. He wanted to scream at him to wake up, to make a joke, to be Shane. But he froze.

What if he broke him more?

Shane looked so fragile. One wrong move, one touch, and he might shatter completely. The invincible Shane Hollander, the Golden Boy, was gone. Replaced by this... this body fighting a losing war.

"Sir, please!" A nurse noticed him, her eyes wide above her mask. "You need to step back! We need room!"

Ilya didn't argue. He couldn't speak. The air had solidified in his lungs.

He backed away, step by agonizing step, until his back hit the cold glass wall of the trauma bay. He pressed his palms against the glass, leaving sweaty handprints, separated from the man he loved by a transparent barrier that felt miles thick.

Don't die, he pleaded silently, staring at the plastic tube they were shoving down Shane's throat. You promised. You promised we had time.

He stayed there, watching the violence of saving a life. The cutting of clothes. The insertion of needles. The chaotic choreography of death. He watched until he couldn't see anymore because his vision blurred, swimming with tears he refused to let fall.

He got out of the room completely and slid down the wall.

He didn't care about the hospital floor. He didn't care about the people staring at the NHL star huddled in a ball, wearing mismatched clothes and a look of horror. He pulled his knees to his chest and buried his face in his arms. To block the sounds.

Time became a liquid thing. It might have been minutes. It might have been hours.

Footsteps approached. Heavy, frantic footsteps.

Ilya didn't look up when David and Yuna arrived. He just felt their presence join him in the hallway. They didn't speak. They didn't ask him to move. They just stood there, staring through the glass at their son, vibrating with the same terror that was eating Ilya alive.

Then, more footsteps. Faster.

"Where is he?"

Hayden.

Ilya lifted his head slowly. Hayden wasn't smiling. The jokester, the guy who always had a quip, looked like he had aged ten years in ten minutes. His face was gray. Beside him, a woman stopped, she looked like she was about to be sick.

Hayden saw Ilya on the floor, saw the blood on his thumb, the devastation in his eyes, and he didn't ask. He just looked at the glass, then back at Ilya, and the realization hit him like a physical blow.

"Oh god," Hayden whispered, his voice cracking. "Rozanov."

Before anyone could say anything else, the doors to the trauma bay swooshed open.

The noise of the machines spilled out into the hallway, loud and rhythmic. A doctor stepped out. He looked tired. He looked too young to be delivering news like this. He pulled his mask down, and his expression was grim.

David stepped forward, clutching Yuna's hand so hard his knuckles were white. "Doctor? Is he...?"

"We've stabilized his heart," the doctor said, but his voice held no celebration. "But the impact caused a severe epidural hematoma. There is significant bleeding between the skull and the brain membrane."

Ilya stopped breathing.

"We are rushing him to CT now to see the extent of the damage," the doctor continued, his eyes flicking to Ilya on the floor for a brief second before returning to the parents. "But you need to prepare yourselves."

"Prepare for what?" Yuna demanded, her voice trembling.

The doctor hesitated. That hesitation was worse than any word. "The pressure on his brain stem was... extreme. He was without oxygen for a significant time on the ice." The doctor took a breath. "The next seventy-two hours are critical. If the swelling doesn't go down..."

He didn't finish the sentence. He didn't have to.

If the swelling doesn't go down, he dies.

"He might wake up," the doctor added softly, a cruel glimmer of hope. "Sometimes, with these injuries, patients have moments of clarity. But I need you to understand... it doesn't always mean recovery. It can be deceiving."

Deceiving.

Ilya felt a ringing in his ears. A high-pitched whine that drowned out the hospital sounds.

Three days.

The timeline hung in the air like a guillotine blade.

The doors opened wider, and Shane was wheeled out past them toward the elevators. He was covered in wires, a machine breathing for him, his beautiful face obscured by tape and tubes. He looked small.

Ilya watched him go. He felt his brain shut down. He felt his heart stop beating, felt his blood turn to ice. He wasn't Ilya Rozanov anymore. He was just a ghost, haunting the hallway of a Montreal hospital, waiting for the end of the world.

Somewhere behind the glass, machines were keeping Shane alive. Somewhere inside his chest, Ilya was already dead.

He wasn't the captain of the Boston Bears. He wasn't a rival. He was just a man waiting outside a room where the universe was deciding whether his love got to exist or not.

Chapter End Notes

no one needs no now why i am at google searching bout head injuries at 2.00am shss

had a very bad day, it is not noticeable is it?

Chapter 3: seventy-two hours.

Chapter Notes

warnings:major character death, denial, grief

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

The doctor was a liar.

That was the only conclusion Ilya could accept. The man with the tired eyes and the grim charts talked about intracranial pressure and midline shift. He talked about a clock ticking down. He talked about seventy-two hours.

But Ilya looked at the bed, and he knew the truth. Shane was awake. Shane wasn't just awake; he was Shane.

"You look like shit, Rozanov," Shane croaked, his voice raspy from the tube they had taken out just hours ago. A lopsided grin tugged at the corner of his mouth, the mouth that wasn't drooping, the mouth that was pink and alive.

Ilya let out a breath that felt like a sob, collapsing into the plastic chair beside the bed. "Shut up," he whispered, grabbing Shane's hand. It was warm. It squeezed back. "You scared me. You are an idiot."

"I heard," Shane murmured, his eyes dancing with a drug-induced haze. He looked soft, floaty. The painkillers were doing their job. "Something about... 'not before I tell him I love him'?"

Ilya stiffened. The memory of his scream on live TV crashed into the room. But Shane didn't look angry. He didn't look worried about his career or the hiding. He just looked... peaceful.

"We're out, I guess," Shane giggled, a little delirious bubble of sound. "And you're in love with me, fucking finally."

"Don't talk about it now," Ilya said quickly, brushing a strand of hair off Shane's forehead. "We'll talk about the PR storm later. When you get out of here."

Shane blinked slowly, his smile fading just a fraction. "Yeah. Later."

Day 1

The denial was easy on the first day. How could he be dying? Dying men didn't complain about the hospital jello. Dying men didn't ask for the score of the game.

Ilya functioned like a guard dog. He didn't leave the room. He watched the monitors, and every time Shane's heart rate beeped a steady rhythm, Ilya added it to his pile of evidence against the doctors.

Voyageurs visited, they gave weird looks to Ilya. He still didn't leave his side.

"You had a good game, you scored so much in such a short time Hollander" He heard someone say, he looked him dead in the eyes. Why was everyone acting like Shane was dying? Like Shane was already buried? "He is still playing."

Voyageurs left, Yuna and David Hollander stayed with tears in their eyes. Shane was normal, Shane was laughing.

But the room was still heavy with unspoken words.

David and Yuna sat on the other side of the bed. They weren't planning for discharge. They weren't talking about rehab. They were just memorizing him.

Yuna was combing Shane's hair with her fingers, over and over again, a rhythmic, soothing motion. She was humming a lullaby, something Japanese, something from Shane's childhood.

"Mom," Shane whispered, leaning into her touch like a cat. "You don't have to look so sad. It doesn't hurt."

"I know, baby," Yuna's voice broke, though she kept smiling. A mother's brave face. "I'm just happy you're awake."

"I had a good run, didn't I?" Shane asked, his eyes drifting to the ceiling. "The Cup. The MVP. Beating Rozanov." He squeezed Ilya's hand at that, a weak playful gesture.

"You have a long run left," Ilya interjected sharply, the words tasting like acid. "Stop talking in past tense, why does everyone talk in past tense? Suddenly everyone forgot how to speak English and am I the only one who remembers?"

David looked at Ilya. The pity in the older man's eyes was unbearable. "Ilya," he started softly, a warning.

"No," Ilya snapped, looking back at Shane. "He's fine. Look at him."

Shane looked between them, his father accepting the end, his lover fighting it. He chose to comfort them both. "I'm okay," Shane said softly, closing his eyes. "I'm really okay. Just tired."

Day 1 past with a storm of people, everyone acting like Shane was dying. Ilya didn't understand why the doctors let everyone in. Shane needed to rest and heal, he didn't need to listen everyone talking like he was dying.

Day 2

Hayden came again, not to be there this time. To say goodbye.

He stood in the doorway, clutching a crumpled Montreal cap in his hands like a lifeline. When he saw Shane sitting up, sipping water from a straw Ilya was holding, Hayden looked like he'd seen a ghost.

"Hello Shane."

"Hey, Hayden," Shane beamed. He was higher today. The doctors had upped the morphine for the 'pressure.' "You look terrible. Ilya looks terrible. Is there a contest I don't know about?"

Hayden laughed, but it turned into a choke. He walked over, his legs shaky. He didn't punch Shane's shoulder. He reached out and touched Shane's arm, gentle as a feather. "We missed you at practice," Hayden said, his voice thick.

"Coach was screaming. Nobody knew who to pass to."

"You'll figure it out," Shane said. "You're a good center, Hayden. Better than you think." It sounded like a bequest. A passing of the torch.

"Don't," Hayden whispered, tears finally spilling over. "Don't do that, man. Just... get better. Please."

"I'm trying," Shane promised lightly, but his gaze was distant.

"Kids will miss their favorite uncle Shane, I will miss my bestfriend. You're the only excuse that I have for drinking ginger ale."

Shane laughed, he looked peaceful. Ilya hated it. Shane was supposed to ask what the fuck are you talking about to Hayden.

"So," Ilya interrupted, his voice loud, cutting through the grief in the room. He couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand them mourning a man who was still breathing. "Would you like to go to your cottage together this summer? It's your favorite place in the world, isn't it?"

Shane's eyes lit up, focusing back on Ilya. "Really? Will you come with me, instead of Russia?"

"Russia is cold." Ilya said, squeezing Shane's hand tight. "We could have week or two at your cottage, It will be hot and you can take your shirt off."

"Okay," Shane whispered, a sleepy smile spreading across his face. "I'd like that."

Hayden couldn't take it anymore. He excused himself, muttering something about the bathroom. Ilya heard him break down in the hallway, deep, racking sobs.

He simply got up and closed the door. He locked the sound out.

David and Yuna came back, they looked like...they looked like they already lost him.

Yuna never stayed long enough, he acted like Shane was already dead because she couldn't stand looking at him like that. She didn't want that the last think she remembered about her

only son being his death bed.

David never looked long enough. He didn't look at Shane in the eyes, afraid he might break. He just watched his hands, his body. Trying to memorize his son before losing him to the darkness, to death.

Ilya hated how everyone acted. Shane was healing, Shane needed support and fun, not tears and sadness.

Day 3

The third day was quieter. The silence was golden, filled with dust motes dancing in the afternoon sun.

The doctors had stopped coming in to check the vitals as often. They said it was to let him rest. Ilya told himself it was because Shane was stable. He ignored the fact that Shane's skin was paler, translucent like fine china.

Shane was sleeping more. But when he was awake, he was lucid. Painfully lucid.

"Ilya?" Ilya looked up immediately. "Yeah? You hungry? Thirsty?"

"No." Shane's dark eyes were clear, fixed on Ilya's face with an intensity that made Ilya's heart ache. "Come here. Closer."

Ilya moved to the edge of the bed. He climbed up, careful of the wires, settling beside Shane. He wrapped an arm around Shane's waist, resting his head on the pillow next to him.

"I am glad everyone knows who we are, I wouldn't want to do this without you by my bedside."

"I acted stupid, we will walk through a storm of questions after you get discharged."

"You were perfect," Shane corrected him. He turned his head slightly, his nose brushing Ilya's cheek. "I was so scared, Ilya. Not of dying. But of dying without... without this. Without anyone knowing."

"Everyone knows now," Ilya said fiercely, pressing a kiss to Shane's temple. "The whole world knows you're mine. And when you get out of here, I'm going to take you to your boring cottage. And we can visit Spain, you would like to meet Ibiza Ilya Rozanov. We can visit Norway, it is like Russia sometimes. But since I can't go back there, we can go to Norway. The sun never sets. It's like this... golden forever."

"White Nights," Shane repeated, the words rolling off his tongue like a prayer. "That sounds nice."

"It is. We'll walk by the Northern Lights. We'll eat your healthy terrible food. We'll be normal."

Shane looked at him. Really looked at him. There was a deep, ancient sadness in his eyes, mixed with overwhelming love. He knew. He knew he would never see the White Nights. But he loved Ilya too much to break the illusion.

"I love you, Ilya," Shane said. It was heavy. Final. "I loved you when we were eighteen. I loved you when we hated each other. I've never stopped."

Ilya's breath hitched. tears pricked his eyes, hot and fast. "I love you too. More than anything. That's why you have to stay. You have to."

"I'm right here," Shane soothed, his hand weak as he lifted it to cup Ilya's jaw. His thumb brushed over Ilya's lips. "I'm right here."

The sun began to set, casting long shadows across the room. Shane's breathing hitched, becoming shallower. "Ilya?"

"Yeah, baby?" Shane didn't open his eyes. A small, contented smile played on his lips. "I'm tired. Can I sleep now?"

Fear spiked in Ilya's chest, sharp and cold. But Shane looked so peaceful. So pain free. "Okay," Ilya whispered, his voice trembling. He leaned in, hovering over Shane's face.

"Just a nap. Then we'll watch the game."

"Okay," Shane breathed out. "*Goodnight, Ilya.*"

Ilya leaned down and pressed his lips to Shane's. It was soft, chaste, and tasted of salt and grief.

He lingered there, breathing in Shane's scent one last time, feeling the faint warmth of his skin against his own.

"Goodnight, Shane," Ilya murmured against his lips. He pulled back just an inch, watching Shane relax into the pillows.

He watched the tension leave Shane's body. He watched the chest rise and fall, slower now.

See? Ilya thought, closing his own burning eyes and resting his forehead against Shane's shoulder.

He's just sleeping. Tomorrow he'll be better. Tomorrow the 72 hour time line ends and we start the rest of our lives.

He didn't know that "Goodnight" was the last word Shane Hollander would ever speak.

He didn't know that the White Nights would never rise for them, only existing in his dreams.

Ilya slept for the first time in 3 days.

Ilya woke up with the machines beeping, someone gripping him away from Shane.

Chapter End Notes

A person I loved very much died the night of the day the doctors said she could pass any moment, I couldn't even go to the ICU to say goodbye because I knew that if I saw her in that state, I wouldn't be able to get up again.

When my mother told me that she was dead and only think working on her body was her heart 7 hours before her death I couldn't accept it at first because how can you accept something that scary? Someone you love is getting wiped out from the world.

And I slept for the first time that week because I was so tired my body couldn't take it anymore, watching the empty hallways with a hollow hope.

They made me go home, took a fucking shower, change my clothes, I fell a sleep.

She was dead when I woke up, I lost her that night, our last memory together is her at the hospital bed, watching some show and me making fun of the fact that she was fine enough to watch a cooking show and that she would probably left there soon.

She left 2 days later, in the coffin

I couldn't say goodbye, just like Ilya.

So I wrote this chapter ugly crying and I needed too reduce the emotional burden so it is kind of light for someone dying.

Chapter 4: whose funeral is this?

Chapter Notes

last chapter, final, the end and bla bla bla

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

Ilya wanted to lie down next to Shane, in the coffin.

The beeping never left his ears.

The sound wasn't in the cemetery. It was inside his head. It had been playing on a loop for four days. A relentless, monotone soundtrack to the end of his life.

Ilya stood in the rain. Of course, it was raining. The universe was cliché like that. It was a cold, miserable Montreal drizzle that soaked through his black suit, the same suit he had worn three weeks ago in Russia.

Three weeks.

In the span of three weeks, Ilya Rozanov had become an expert at staring at holes in the ground.

The cemetery was full. A sea of black umbrellas. The entire NHL seemed to be there. Journalists huddled behind the gates like vultures, cameras flashing. Teammates from Boston and Montreal stood in mixed clusters, the rivalry erased by the color black.

They were all crying. They all looked devastated.

Ilya hated them all.

He hated them for crying. What right did they have? They lost a teammate. They lost an idol. They lost a headline. Ilya had lost the other half of his soul.

David Hollander approached the podium first. He looked smaller than Ilya had ever seen him. The man who had raised a giant now looked like he could be blown away by the wind.

"Shane..." David started, his voice cracking instantly. He stopped, took a breath, and looked at the mahogany casket. "Shane was born on skates. Before he could walk, he could glide. We used to worry he would fall... we always worried he would fall." Ilya heard the sob, David was barely talking.

David gripped the wood of the podium. "He was the Golden Boy to all of you. But to us... he was just Shane. He was the boy who forgot to take the trash out. He was the boy who laughed

too loud at bad movies. He was the boy I used to take on my shoulders when he was tired to walk. He was the boy I took to practices at 5am almost every morning, afraid he might fall every time he stepped to the ice and the-" He took a break, he tried to wipe away his tears. "He fe-" He got stuck at the fe, he was sobbing so hard that David couldn't finish his sentence. He stepped back, burying his face in his hands.

Yuna Hollander stepped forward. She wasn't crying but her eyes were wet. She was standing with a sense of duty like she was made of steel but even steel snaps under enough pressure. She leaned into the microphone.

"Thank you for loving him," she said to the crowd, her voice hollow. "You all loved the player. You cheered for the goals. But you didn't know the heart." She looked directly at Ilya, her gaze piercing through the rain. "He had the biggest heart. And it beat for this game. It beat for his family. And it beat for the people he chose."

She stepped back, wrapping her arm around her crumbling husband.

Then came Hayden.

Hayden, who had been joking with Shane in that hospital room just days ago. Hayden, who looked like a man walking to his own execution.

"I don't know how to do this," Hayden admitted, his voice echoing over the speakers. "I don't know how to look at that empty stall in the locker room. I don't know who I'm supposed to pass the puck to anymore." He took a shaking breath. "The last thing he told me was that I would make a perfect center player but the only reason I was good on the ice was knowing Shane was next to me.

Hayden wiped his nose with the back of his hand, disregarding the formality.

"And now he is gone, I don't know anything. I don't know who to force about baby sitting with me, I don't know who to use as an excuse about keeping ginger ale at home because I love ginger ale too, And I don't know If I can drink again, I don't know If I can play again without the memory of him dying on the ice. I don't know how to wake up next day for practice knowing he won't be there."

Hayden turned over to the coffin, ignoring everyone else.

"I love you buddy, but I hate you for making skipping games a permanent habit, you never skipped anything before."

He left the microphone on the podium and left quietly.

And then, silence.

The priest looked around, unsure if the service was over.

Yuna Hollander moved, she had a microphone in her hand. She walked through the mud, past the family, past the teammates, straight to the man standing alone at the edge of the crowd.

Ilya Rozanov.

She didn't speak. She just held out the microphone

Ilya stared at it. His hands weren't shaking anymore. They were still. Dead still. Like everything else inside him.

He took the microphone. He didn't look at Yuna. He didn't look at the cameras. He didn't look at the hundreds of people watching him.

He walked past the podium. He didn't stop there. He walked until his knees bumped against the wet wood of the mahogany casket. He stood there for a long time, staring down at the lid, oblivious to the rain soaking his hair, ruining his suit.

"Whose funeral is this?" Ilya whispered. The microphone picked it up, a breath of sound that ghosted over the cemetery.

He gently placed his hand on the coffin, his fingers tracing the grain of the wood. He wasn't speaking to the audience. He was speaking to the box.

"Is it yours?" Ilya asked softly, his voice devoid of life. "Or is it mine?"

He let out a shaky breath, mist forming in the cold air. "Of course it is yours because you had to win didn't you Hollander. You needed to be first at everything." He rested his forehead against the coffin.

"I am twenty-four years old. And I am tired, Shane. I am so tired." He stopped for a second, thinking about the right words.

"My mother is gone. My father... I put him in the ground three weeks ago. I thought I had no more tears left. I thought I knew what empty felt like."

A single tear slid down his nose, dripping onto the varnished wood.

"But I didn't know anything. Until now."

He caressed the wood, a gentle, reverent touch.

"We wasted so much time," Ilya murmured, the regret heavy in his voice. "Years. We spent years playing a game. Hiding in corners. Pretending I didn't love you. Why did I pretend? Why was I so scared?"

He choked on a sob, but it was quiet. Broken.

"I should have held your hand in the street. I should have told you that I love you years ago. I should have told you every single day."

He closed his eyes, remembering the hospital room. "In the hospital... you smiled at me. You told me we had time. And I believed you. I wanted to believe you so much that I ignored the truth."

He opened his eyes, staring at the casket with pure heartbreak. "I was planning our summer. I was planing to tell you that I loved you on every inch of your cottage so it can be my favorite place too. I was dreaming of White Nights in Norway. I promised you the sun that never sets."

His voice broke, turning into a whisper. "But it set, Shane. The sun went down. And it's dark. It is so dark out here without you."

Ilya slowly sank to his knees in the mud. He didn't seem to notice. He slumped against the side of the casket, resting his cheek against the wet wood, curling into it like a child seeking comfort.

"I don't have anyone left to bury," he whispered into the microphone, his voice trembling. "Everyone I love is in the ground. You were the last one. You were the only thing keeping me here."

He closed his eyes.

"You were my rival," he murmured, a secret shared between them. "You were my best friend. You were the love of my life." He pressed a kiss to the cold wood of the coffin.

"I don't know how to do this," he confessed, his voice barely audible. "I don't know how to be Ilya Rozanov without Shane Hollander. I am just... a shell. Empty."

His eyes caught the cameras. "You stole years from us, years pretending that we hate each other because we supposed to hate each other. Years pretending we weren't just contesting but we we really rivals. Can you explain to me that how a rivalry with one person works?"

Ilya didn't get up. He let the microphone slip from his fingers, landing softly in the grass. He stayed there, on his knees, hugging the casket, motionless in the rain.

He wasn't waiting for an answer anymore.

He wasn't angry at the silence.

He was just part of it.

Ilya Rozanov died that day, watching the coffin carrying Shane Hollander's lifeless body being buried underground.

Ilya Rozanov's body kept breathing for another year. But there was nothing inside him but a void.

Ilya Rozanov quit hockey, he quit existing.

He locked himself at the apartment condo Shane bought for him, Yuna and David checked on him occasionally.

After a year of self destruction, his body gave up. His body gave up trying to handle drugs, his body gave up trying to heal scars, his body gave up trying to stop itself from drowning in

alcohol and smoke.

He died at a cold bathroom floor, needle in one hand and a picture of him kissing Shane Hollander on the cheek at the all star game.

Because that was the closest thing he got to what they had together.

He didn't accidentally swallow a bottle of pills, he never committed suicide, he just pushed himself so low that he didn't need to kill himself, he just needed to keep going.

Yuna and David buried him next to Shane, they did everything in their power but Russia didn't let Ilya rest next to his mother.

Exactly a year apart, NHL buried to star players to the ground, right next to each other.

They were together in the dark again, away from everyone's eyes.

The world never gave them the chance to be together in the light.

In the end, finally they were together, darkness was the only place they were allowed to be together anyway.

Chapter End Notes

finished this over one night, good night everyone

I've only managed to finish two books in my life (I've been writing books since middle school, and I'm in college now), I just normally love long stories and then something happens so I can't finish them I guess but the other one was a Stony fanfic about Civil War where Steve kills Tony and commits suicide right after the funeral when everyone left the cemetery. I have problems, I accept.

Chapter 5: we will be together soon

Chapter Summary

The year Ilya slowly killed himself.

Chapter Notes

I hate my self so this is the epilog episode of Ilya's self destruction

WARNINGS so this chapter contains severe drug and alcohol addiction (including needle use), depression, psychosis, hallucinations, and heavy grief. It explores the mindset of an addict and depicts a slow, painful year of deterioration leading to Ilya's death and funeral

It is extremely heavy and it can be triggering please bear this in mind before reading.

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

Ilya locked himself inside the apartment Shane bought to hide him after the funeral.

Yuna gave him the key, along with the key to Shane's real house. But Ilya didn't want his first glimpse of Shane's home to be without him, he didn't want to see the signs of Shane's life. Ilya just wanted Shane back. So he took the apartment key and locked himself inside.

Month 1

Week 1: Who is Shane Hollander?

The condo was terrifyingly clean. It didn't smell like Shane because Shane never lived here. There were no dirty socks in the corner, no half read books on the nightstand, no domestic clutter that proved a life was shared. This place wasn't a home it was a secret. Shane had bought it for one purpose: so they could touch each other without the world watching. It was a functional space for stolen pleasure, devoid of the warmth of a relationship.

Ilya spent the first week sleeping on the couch in the living room. He couldn't stand being awake because every second he spent with his eyes open was a reminder that Shane was gone. He couldn't go into the bedroom. The bed was the only piece of furniture that mattered here, the altar of their physical desperation. To sleep in it alone felt like a mockery.

The silence in the apartment was absolute. It wasn't the silence of a missing person; it was the silence of a life that never happened. He realized, with a crushing weight, that he didn't know

how Shane looked when he brushed his teeth in the morning. He didn't know how Shane took his coffee on a lazy Sunday. He was mourning a ghost he only knew in the dark.

Week 2: A graveyard that turns out to be the ice.

The Boston Bears didn't understand. They thought it was grief that needed a week off, just like his father, Ilya was going to take a week and come back. They thought it was 'compassionate leave'. The General Manager called Ilya's phone forty times in three days. When Ilya finally answered, he was sitting on the floor of the dark condo, staring at a wall.

"Ilya, we know it's hard," he said, voice tight with panic. "But we have a game against Toronto on Thursday. The league expects-"

"I'm done," Ilya said. His voice was flat, unrecognizable.

"Take a few weeks, Ilya. We can put you on injured reserve. We can-"

"No," Ilya interrupted. "I am not skating. Never again."

To Ilya, the ice wasn't canvas anymore; it was the weapon that killed Shane. The thought of lacing up his skates, of hearing the blade carve the frozen water, made him physically gag. He didn't care about the millions of dollars left on his contract. He didn't care about the fines, the lawsuits, or the legacy he was torching.

He officially emailed his retirement papers on a Friday night. The press called it a shocking departure. Ilya called it the only way to stop hearing the sound of Shane's skull hitting the ice. The Machine didn't break down; it simply refused to operate without its other half.

Week 3: The memories never existed.

For the first time in his life, Ilya went to Shane's real house, to his home.

He needed to smell him, he needed to remind himself that Shane Hollander used to be alive.

He remembered the tour Shane gave him while he was at Russia, on the phone.

He sat at the exact spot Shane sat, watching the wall.

He took his glasses, he took his rookie of the year award, he took his clothes, his perfume, his blue buttoned shirt, his hoodie's, his shirts.

He found a box at the trophy room.

It was full of Ilya.

His pictures, magazines, numbers of the hotel rooms they fucked inside.

Their pictures together, looking like enemies.

Except one, the picture of Ilya kissing Shane from the cheek at the All-Star game.

Only time it was acceptable for them to act like they liked each other.

He took the box.

He didn't look at the house any further, he couldn't watch the empty house imagining Shane.

He couldn't exist there, dreaming about the life they never had.

On his way home, he bought 3 bottles of vodka and 10 pack of cigarettes.

Shane hated when he smoked.

Shane hated when he drank to much.

Shane wasn't there to complain.

When he got home, he didn't wear Shane's clothes he couldn't afford to contaminate them with his own scent. He placed his blue buttoned shirt on the dining table and sat down opposite it.

He sat at the table they had never eaten a meal at, and stared at Shane's shirt for hours. It was an artifact from a civilization of two that had been wiped out before it could even build a settlement.

The walls of this house didn't hold Shane's memory. Shane wasn't real in this house. Only Ilya's pain and the echo of frantic, desperate sex and the sound of a door closing as they both left to go back to their "real" life existed inside.

Week 4: Drink and burn it all down.

He opened his third vodka bottle, not to get drunk, but to drown out the voice in his head that whispered 'You never even took him on a real date. You never held his hand in a grocery store.'

He sat by the window, watching the Montreal lights, drinking until the burning in his throat matched the burning in his chest. He realized that the tragedy wasn't just that Shane died. The tragedy was that they had wasted their entire time alive hiding in rooms like this, treating their love like a shameful secret until it was too late to make it a life.

Then he lit a cigarette from the 7th package he bought.

One month. Waiting for Shane to get better for 72 hours felt like a lifetime ago.

Ilya caught his reflection in the hallway mirror at wednesday. He looked gaunt. His beard was overgrown. He looked like a squatter in a luxury condo. And in a way, he was. This apartment officially belonged to Shane Hollander's estate now. Ilya was just the dirty secret kept inside, squatting in the ruins of a dead man's property.

He finally gathered the courage to enter the bedroom in a random friday. The sheets were still stripped from the last time they were here, they never bothered to make the bed before

leaving. It looked like a crime scene.

Ilya lay down on the bare mattress, curling into a ball in the center. He closed his eyes and tried to hallucinate the weight of an arm around his waist. But the mattress was cold. The room was sterile. And Ilya Rozanov realized he was the only living thing in a mausoleum built for a love that never saw the sun.

Month 2

Week 5: The liquid diet

The transition wasn't dramatic; it was inevitable. The three bottles of vodka from the previous month were gone. Ilya stopped buying groceries. The fridge was empty, except for a row of clear bottles and a few limes that were rotting in the crisper drawer.

Ilya discovered that if he drank enough, the timeline in his head blurred. The image of the crime scene bed softened.

But the image of Shane dying never left his eyes, the way his helmet flew away, the way his head hit the ice, the way his blood spilled, the way machines beeped, the way Shane died while Ilya was sleeping, thinking about the game they were going to watch after. The way he never got to say goodbye because he never believed god was going to take him away.

He placed Shane's blue button-down shirt on the back of the chair facing the TV. He poured two glasses. One for him, one for the shirt.

"Drink up," he slurred, raising his glass to the empty fabric. "It's a celebration. We survived another week."

He didn't drink like a person enjoying a cocktail he drank like a man putting out a fire. He drank until his coordination, the legendary hand-eye coordination that made him a trophy winner, failed him, and he stumbled into the coffee table. He bruised his shins, but he didn't feel it. Pain was a reminder he was alive, and the vodka did a good job of muting that.

Week 6: I don't think you're supposed to smoke here.

He hadn't touched a cigarette since Shane had wrinkled his nose after one game and told him, "*You taste like an ashtray, Rozanov. It's gross.*"

He sat on the balcony of the condo and lit one cigarette. The smell was instant nostalgia. It smelled like secrets. It smelled like cheap motel rooms and the back alleys where they used to meet before they fell in love and after because they were scared.

It smelled like the time he first saw Shane, shaking hands with him.

He took a drag. The smoke burned his lungs, familiar and toxic.

"Gross, right?" Ilya whispered to the empty air, exhaling a gray cloud. "You hated this."

He watched the pack of the same cheap harsh cigarettes he used to smoke when he was 18. When he was just a rookie who leaned against brick walls outside bars, pretending not to care about anything.

He smoked to taste the past. He smoked to undo the healthy version of himself that Shane had helped build. The Ilya who stopped smoking because it was effecting his game was dead. The Ilya who didn't give a fuck was back.

He started smoking 2 pack in one day. With every cigarette, he felt like he was erasing a day of the last seven years, systematically burning his way back to the start, before the heartbreak, before the hope, before Shane was dead.

Week 7: Digital torture

The silence was too loud, so he filled it with Shane's voice.

Ilya subscribed to the NHL vault. He didn't watch the highlights; highlights were too fast. He watched the full games. He started from Shane's rookie year.

He sat in the dark living room, illuminated only by the flicker of the giant TV screen, surrounded by empty bottles and an overflowing ashtray. He watched Shane skate. He watched Shane score.

It was masochism. He paused the frame every time the camera caught Shane looking at Ilya during their games. He analyzed every pixel of Shane's expression. Was he looking at me with love there? Or was it just rivalry? Did I miss a signal?

He spoke to the screen, pointing a lit cigarette at the pixelated figure. "Pass the puck, idiot. Pike is open."

When Shane on the screen smiled after a goal, that bright, sunny smile, Ilya touched the hot glass of the TV.

"Good job," he whispered, tears mixing with the ash on his face. "Do it again. Just one more time."

Week 8: Supply run

Day and night ceased to exist. There was only the screen, the bottle, and the smoke.

But supplies ran out.

Ilya had to leave the apartment. It was a military operation. He waited until 3:00 AM, pulling Shane's old hoodie that didn't smelled like him over his head, hiding his gaunt face and overgrown beard.

He walked to the 24-hour store. The cold air hit him, but he was numb.

He placed six bottles of vodka and two cartons of cigarettes on the counter. His hands were shaking so hard he couldn't get his wallet out.

The cashier, a young kid, looked at him with pity. "Rough night, buddy?"

Ilya looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed, hollow, dead. He didn't speak. He just threw a wad of cash on the counter, too much money, and grabbed the bags.

He ran back to the apartment like he was being hunted. He locked the door, slid the deadbolt, and leaned against it, gasping for air.

He was safe. He was back in the tomb.

He walked to the living room, opened a fresh bottle, and pressed play.

On the screen, Shane Hollander was alive. And as long as the vodka lasted, Ilya could pretend he was too.

Month 3

Week 9: The peephole

The buzzer rang on a Tuesday afternoon. It was a sharp, intrusive sound that cut through the haze of smoke in the living room. Ilya, lying on the floor surrounded by empty takeout boxes and vodka bottles, didn't move at first.

It rang again. Persistent. Gentle.

He crawled to the door. He didn't have the strength to stand, or maybe he just didn't have the dignity. He pulled himself up and looked through the peephole.

The fish eye lens distorted them, but he knew them instantly. Yuna and David. They were holding a Tupperware container. Probably food. Probably something warm. They looked older. David's shoulders were slumped, Yuna was staring at the door with a terrifying hope.

Ilya stopped breathing. If he opened the door, they would see the smoke. They would smell the rot. They would see the trembling wreck of the man their son loved.

Don't open it, the addiction whispered. You will break them. You are a monster.

He stood there, hand hovering over the lock, tears streaming down his face, silent as the grave. He waited until they finally walked away, leaving the food at the doorstep. He never retrieved it. He let it spoil in the hallway, just like everything else.

Week 10: The Voice Of a Mother

Since he didn't open the door, they started calling. Ilya had turned his cell phone off weeks ago, but the landline started blinking.

One night, drunk and masochistic, Ilya pressed play on the answering machine.

"Ilya..." It was Yuna. Her voice sounded so much like Shane's that Ilya dropped his cigarette. It burned a hole in the expensive rug, but he didn't notice.

"We know you're hurting," Yuna's voice crackled through the empty room. "We are too. But... please don't do this alone. Shane wouldn't want you to be alone. Please pick up."

Shane wouldn't want me to be alone? Ilya mocked, taking a swig of vodka. Shane wanted a summer in the cottage. Shane wanted to live. Look how that turned out.

He felt a surge of irrational anger. How could they be so kind? Why didn't they hate him? He needed their hatred. He could handle hatred. He couldn't handle their pity. He ripped the phone cord out of the wall, silencing the only voice that cared.

Week 11: The Siege

The concierge called up on the intercom. "Mr. Rozanov? There is a Mr. Hollander here to see you. He says he won't leave until you come down."

Ilya panicked, for a second he thought Mr. Hollander was Shane but then he realized the outside world was trying to breach his fortress.

He ran to the windows and pulled the blackout curtains tighter, taping the edges to the wall with hockey tape so not even a single beam of sunlight could enter. He turned off all the lights. He sat in the center of the pitch black apartment, shaking.

He was a prisoner of his own making. He imagined David sitting in the lobby, reading a magazine, waiting for a son that was never coming back and a son-in-law who was already gone.

Ilya waited him out. He sat in the dark for six hours until the concierge called back to say Mr. Hollander had finally gone home.

"I won," Ilya whispered to the darkness. He felt sick. He had successfully protected David from seeing the ruin of Ilya Rozanov, but the victory tasted like ash.

Week 12: The Accepted Silence

They stopped coming.

They realized, perhaps, that some doors are locked from the inside and the key has been swallowed. The knocks stopped. The intercom went silent. The hallway was empty.

Ilya should have felt relieved. No more pressure to be human. No more pressure to perform "recovery."

But instead, the silence felt different this time. It wasn't peaceful. It was abandoned.

He lay on the couch, he still couldn't sleep in the master bedroom, staring at the ceiling. The isolation was complete. He had severed the last tie to the living world.

He was officially alone with the ghost.

"See?" he muttered to the empty room, lighting a cigarette with a trembling hand. "I drove them away too. I'm good at that. I'm the best at that."

He took a drag, coughed, and reached for the bottle. The vodka was the only friend that didn't ask questions, and it was the only friend that stayed.

Month 4

Week 13: The Failed Anesthesia

The problem with being an elite athlete, even a retired one, is efficiency. Ilya's liver was a champion; it processed the poison too fast. By the thirteenth week, the vodka wasn't knocking him out anymore; it was just making him dizzy and angry.

The nightmares returned with a vengeance. He wasn't just hearing the shovel hitting the coffin; he was *feeling* the cold of the morgue. He woke up screaming Shane's name three times a night, his throat raw, his body drenched in cold sweat.

Ilya sat on the bathroom floor, staring at the empty clear bottles. They were useless. They were water.

He needed a heavier blanket to smother the noise in his head.

Every hockey player knew there was a guy in every city for athletes, selling drugs for injured players who needed to play through broken bones during the playoffs. He found the Montreal guys number. He didn't text *I need help*. He texted: *I need to sleep. Forever.*

Week 14: The Transaction

He didn't meet the dealer in a dark alley. It was a sterile exchange in the lobby of his building. The guy recognized him. Everyone recognized Ilya Rozanov, even with the gaunt face and the hollow eyes.

"You look rough, man," the dealer said, handing over a small plastic bag filled with white pills. Oxycodone. Heavy duty. The kind they gave Shane in the hospital right before the end.

Ilya didn't respond. He just handed over a wad of cash, he didn't even count it. It was probably thousands of dollars. He didn't care. Money was for the living, and Ilya was just renting space among them.

He took the elevator up, clutching the bag like it was a holy relic. He didn't feel shame. He felt a twisted sense of professional accomplishment. He had identified the problem called consciousness and acquired the solution.

Week 15: The First Silence

He crushed the first pill on the granite countertop of the kitchen island. He didn't take it with water he snorted it. He wanted it to hit the brain immediately.

The effect was instantaneous. It wasn't like being drunk. Drunkenness was messy; it was spinning. This... this was *stillness*.

The static in his head cut out. The image of Shane in the coffin faded into a soft, white blur. His limbs felt heavy, pleasantly useless. He lay on the kitchen floor, staring at the ceiling lights.

"Oh," he whispered, a drool of saliva escaping his lips. "He's gone."

For the first time in four months, the realization didn't hurt. It just *was*. He felt like he was floating in the middle of a frozen lake, numb and weightless. He closed his eyes and didn't dream.

Week 16: The New Fuel

The pills became breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Ilya stopped eating completely. Food was hard chewing required effort. Swallowing felt like choking. The drugs were easy.

His body, once a marvel of sports science that could skate for sixty minutes without tiring, began to cannibalize itself. His muscles, the quads that could squat 400 pounds, the arms that could check a 200-pound man, began to wither. The definition faded, replaced by the sharp angles of bone.

He looked in the mirror and saw a skeleton wrapped in pale skin. His eyes were pinned, tiny black dots in a sea of red.

He touched his own ribs, counting them through the skin. *One, two, three.*

"I'm disappearing," he said to the reflection. He smiled, and it was cocky, like grin. "Good. Make room for him."

He wasn't trying to die yet. He was just trying to exist in the same frequency as Shane: inanimate.

Month 5

Week 17: The Alchemy of Chaos

The pills were too slow. The vodka was too dull. Ilya needed to feel everything and nothing at the same time. He needed to bridge the gap between the living and the dead, and alcohol wasn't strong enough to build that bridge.

He started mixing. Cocaine to wake up, meth to keep the engine running, alcohol to smooth the edges.

His body became a volatile chemistry experiment. His heart, that powerful, athletic heart, beat in jagged, terrified rhythms.

He liked the meth. It made his brain vibrate. It made the silence of the condo sound like a roar. He paced the apartment for three days straight, not eating, not sleeping, just vibrating. He felt like he was skating at full speed, even though he was just circling the coffee table in the dark. He was burning the fuel of a Ferrari in a car that had no wheels.

Week 18: The Steel Kiss

Snorting hurt his nose. Swallowing ruined his stomach. Ilya, ever the pragmatist, sought efficiency.

He bought the needles.

He sat in the pristine white bathroom, the same bathroom where he would eventually be found. He tied a belt around his bicep. The vein popped up, thick and blue. A vein that nurses used to compliment during team physicals. "You have great veins, Ilya," they would say. "Easy to find."

Now, he punctured it.

The rush was immediate. It hit him like a slapshot to the chest. He gasped, his head hitting the tile wall. It wasn't just a high; it was an abduction. He was lifted out of his rotting body and placed somewhere else. Somewhere warm. Somewhere where the shovel never hit the coffin.

Week 19: The Visitor

It happened on a Tuesday night, right after a hit of heroin mixed with something sharp.

Ilya was sitting on the sofa, staring at the empty space beside him. And then, the space wasn't empty.

Shane was there.

He wasn't the Shane from the hospital with the tubes. He was the Shane from the ice. Healthy. Smug. Beautiful.

"You look like shit, Rozanov," the hallucination said. The voice was clear. It wasn't in Ilya's head; it was in the room.

Ilya didn't scream. He didn't cry. He smiled, a broken, bloodied smile that hadn't touched his face in months.

"I missed you," Ilya whispered, reaching out. His hand passed through Shane's shoulder like smoke, but his brain registered the touch as warm.

"I never left," Shane grinned, kicking his feet up on the coffee table. "Can you pick a movie?"

Week 20: The Domestic Horror

To an outsider, the apartment was a house of horrors. Needles scattered on the floor, windows blacked out, a skeletal man talking to thin air.

To Ilya, it was domestic bliss.

He started setting the table for two again. He poured two drinks. He cooked, well, he opened two cans of soup, and placed one in front of the empty chair.

"So, Pike was crying a lot at the funeral, he was probably sad about the fact he couldn't get you pregnant fast enough." Ilya told the empty chair, laughing manically at a joke only he could hear. "He misses you. But I have you. I win."

He spent hours debating hockey stats with the air. He argued about who was the better player. He laughed at insults that no one made.

The hallucinations were vivid, fueled by the toxic cocktail in his veins. He was no longer mourning; he was haunting his own life, living with a ghost that his dying neurons projected onto the walls. He was happy. Terrifyingly, tragically happy.

Month 6

Week 21: Collapse

It all happened in a blur of seventy-two hours.

The supply ran dry on Tuesday at 4 AM. Panic set in. The "portal" to Shane was closing. Ilya stumbled out into the freezing Montreal night, a wraith in pajamas and a coat, seeking poison.

He never made it to the store. The Machine stalled halfway down the block. He collapsed in the slush, his body shutting down from malnutrition and toxicity.

"Hey! Buddy? You okay?"

Ilya tried to say leave me alone, but all that came out was a bloody gurgle. The cold seeped into his bones, and for a second, he felt relief. This is it, he thought, closing his eyes. I'm coming, Shane.

Then, the sirens wailed. The world refused to let him go that easily.

Waking up was violent. The bright lights of the hospital room were an assault. The smell—antiseptic and death, triggered a primal panic. It was the same smell as that night. The night the beeping never stopped.

Ilya thrashed, ripping the IV out of his arm. Blood sprayed onto the clean sheets.

"Mr. Rozanov! Stop!" Nurses swarmed him, pinning him down.

"Where is he?" Ilya screamed, his voice wrecked, looking frantically around the room. "Don't touch me! Where is he?"

He wasn't asking for a doctor. He wasn't asking for someone alive. He was looking for the hallucination. The hospital drugs had flushed the illicit ones from his system, and the ghost was gone. He was alone again. Truly, terrifyingly alone in a room that looked exactly like the one where Shane had died.

They sedated him. They had to. He spent the week in a chemical twilight, tied to the bed, trapped in the very place where his life had ended six months ago.

Week 22: Someone left from Shane

They came on Friday. Yuna and David.

They sat by his bed, looking like they had aged a decade. Yuna was crying silently, holding Ilya's limp hand. David looked angry, not at Ilya, but at the universe.

"Ilya," David said, his voice trembling. "The doctors say you have severe malnutrition. Liver damage. Traces of... everything in your blood. Son, you are killing yourself."

"We can't lose you too," Yuna whispered, squeezing his fingers. "Please, Ilya. Come home with us. Let us help you. Shane would've wanted you to keep living your life."

Ilya looked at them. He saw their pain. He knew, logically, that he should care. He should squeeze Yuna's hand back. He should apologize.

But he wasn't looking at them.

His gaze drifted over David's shoulder, to the corner of the room.

Shane was leaning against the wall. He was wearing his game day suit. He looked perfect. No tubes. No bruises. Just Shane.

And he was smiling. That cocky, beautiful, *I know something you don't know* smile.

"They think I'm crazy," Ilya murmured, a small, delirious grin spreading across his own cracked lips.

"Ilya?" Yuna squeezed tighter, panic rising in her voice. "Who are you talking to?"

Ilya didn't answer her. He just locked eyes with the hallucination. Shane winked at him.

"I'm not going anywhere," Ilya whispered to the ghost, ignoring the sobbing parents beside him. "I'm right here with you."

Week 23: Silence.

The doctors called it "detox." Ilya called it an exorcism.

They kept him sedated, but not enough to stop the physical agony. His body screamed for the chemicals. His bones felt like they were vibrating. He vomited bile until his throat was raw.

But the worst pain wasn't physical. It was the solitude.

With the drugs leaving his system, Shane faded. The corner of the room was just a corner. The chair was just a chair.

Ilya spent the week staring at the white ceiling, tears leaking from his eyes. He wasn't crying because of the cramps; he was crying because he was alone.

"Don't leave me," he whispered to the empty air. "I'll fix it. I'll get the medicine. Just wait."

He realized then that sobriety was a prison. If he wanted to be free with Shane, he needed to escape.

Week 24: You're back

"You're lucky to be alive," the doctor said as he signed the discharge papers. "If you drink or use again, your liver will eventually fail. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Ilya said, taking the papers.

Yuna and David offered to drive him. "I just need to sleep in my own bed," Ilya told them, using the exhausted victim card. "I'll call you tomorrow."

They believed him because they wanted to.

He didn't go home first. He went to the contact. He bought double the amount he had lost.

He walked into the condo. It smelled of rot and stale smoke from a month ago. He didn't care.

He sat on the floor, still in his hospital clothes, and prepared the needle. His hands were shaking, not from fear, but from anticipation.

He pushed the plunger.

He waited. One second. Two seconds.

The warmth flooded back. The room softened.

And there, sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging his legs, was Shane.

"*Took you long enough,*" the hallucination grinned.

"I'm back," Ilya wept, collapsing onto the floor in relief. "I'm back."

Month 7

Week 25: The Calibration

Ilya learned a lesson from his collapse in Month 6. If he took too much, he passed out and missed Shane. If he took too little, the reality of the empty apartment crashed in.

He needed a balance. He became a scientist of his own destruction.

He measured his doses with terrified precision. Just enough oxy to soften the edges, just enough meth to keep the brain firing images, just enough vodka to steady the hands.

He sat on the sofa, vibrating with chemical energy, watching the empty chair.

"I'm awake," Ilya whispered, his eyes wide and dilated. "I'm right here."

Shane appeared, flickering slightly like a bad signal before solidifying. He looked concerned.

"You almost left me last time," the hallucination said.

"I know," Ilya promised, clutching a glass of water he forced himself to drink. "Never again. I'll stay in middle. I'll stay right here with you."

Week 26: The Shave

He stood in front of the bathroom mirror. The beard was thick, matted, wild. He looked like a castaway who had been lost at sea for months.

Behind him, in the reflection, Shane was sitting on the edge of the bathtub. He was swinging his legs, looking bored, playing with a loose thread on his jeans.

"You look like a cave man, Rozanov," the hallucination said, wrinkling his nose. *"It scratches when you kiss me. I hate it."*

Ilya stared at the reflection, touching his rough cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

He didn't just trim it; he ritualized it. He found an old razor. His hands were shaking from the constant chemical buzz, but he focused. *For him. Do it for him.*

He lathered his face. He scraped the hair away, revealing the sharp, gaunt jawline underneath. The face that emerged was pale and skeletal, but it was Ilya. The Ilya that Shane loved.

He turned to the empty bathtub, rubbing his smooth chin. "Better?"

Shane grinned, hopping off the tub. *"Much better."*

Week 27: The Domestic Routine

To an outsider, Ilya Rozanov was making a miraculous recovery. He was showering every morning. He was ordering groceries, actual food, not just liquor.

But the motivation was twisted.

He ate because Shane nagged him.

"You're too skinny," the voice would say while Ilya stared at a plate of scrambled eggs. *"I can't hold you if you're just bones. Eat the eggs, Ilya."*

So Ilya forced the food down, gagging on every bite, just to keep the hallucination satisfied. He showered because Shane "liked him clean." He dressed in fresh clothes, usually Shane's favorite blue shirt, because he wanted to look good for their dates.

He was taking care of a body he hated, solely to keep it functioning as a projector for the ghost he loved.

Week 28: The Perfect Host

The apartment was spotless. The vomit was cleaned up. The windows were washed (though the blackout curtains remained drawn).

Ilya sat on the sofa, high on a carefully calculated cocktail of pills, looking healthy, clean shaven, and utterly insane.

"Tell me about the game again," Ilya said softly to the silence.

He spent the evenings nodding as if in deep conversation. He laughed at jokes only he could hear.

"I love you too," he would reply to the thin air, his eyes bright and glassy.

He had created a perfect little world where the funeral never happened. He was functional, yes. He was clean, yes. But he was no longer living in the present. He was trapped in a perpetual, drug fueled loop where Shane Hollander was sitting right next to him, complaining about the referee, and Ilya was the happiest man in the graveyard.

Month 8

Week 29: The Request

It happened over a dinner of cold takeout. Shane was sitting across from him, looking more solid than usual, but his expression was pained. He pointed to the lines of white powder on the coffee table.

"Stop it, Ilya," the hallucination said softly. "You look terrible. Your heart... I can hear it skipping beats from here. Please. For me."

Ilya froze, his hand hovering over the straw. "I'm doing this so I can be with you."

"You're killing the part of you that I love," Shane whispered, leaning in. "I don't want a junkie. I want Ilya. Just... cut back. Please?"

Ilya looked into those dark, pleading eyes. He couldn't say no to Shane. He never could.

"Okay," Ilya whispered, wiping the table clean with his sleeve. "Okay. For you."

He flushed the pills. He poured the vodka down the sink. He decided to be clean, because Shane asked him to be.

Week 30: The Silence of Sobriety

The tragedy was immediate.

As the drugs left his system, the fog lifted. And with the fog, Shane vanished.

Ilya woke up on Wednesday completely sober. He turned to the other side of the bed. Empty.

He walked to the living room. Empty.

"Shane?" he called out. His voice didn't echo; it just died in the sterile air.

"I did what you asked!" Ilya screamed at the ceiling, his voice cracking. "I stopped! Where are you?"

Reality crashed down on him. The apartment was just an apartment. The silence was absolute. He realized with horror that his "cure" was his curse. To be healthy meant to be alone. To be with Shane meant to be dying.

He spent the week sober and weeping, begging the empty air to manifest a ghost that only poison could summon.

He spent the week sober because even though he was a game his mind played, Shane tried to save him.

Week 31: The Calculated Exit

He couldn't take the reality. It was too sharp, too cold.

If a little drug brought Shane to the room, maybe enough drugs would take Ilya to wherever Shane was.

He didn't want to hallucinate anymore. He wanted to migrate.

He placed a new order. Not from a doctor, but from the street. He asked for everything.

While he waited, he remembered the gift. A month ago, in a drug fueled haze of optimism, he had ordered a custom watch. He had engraved it: *For the White Nights*. It was supposed to be a surprise for the ghost, it was supposed to be delivered today.

"I'll give it to you when I get there," Ilya whispered to the empty room.

He prepared the final cocktail. It wasn't reckless; it was a ritual. He shaved. He put on his suit. He lay down on the floor of the living room, the needle in his hand.

"I'm coming back, Shane. Don't be mad."

He pushed the plunger.

The darkness swallowed him instantly. His heart fluttered like a trapped bird and then slowed.

The world was fading. He felt cold. He felt peace.

The intercom buzzed. It was a harsh, drilling sound.

Ilya couldn't move. He was already halfway out the door.

"Delivery for Mr. Hollander! Signature required!" a voice crackled through the speaker.

The delivery guy, impatient and perhaps confused by the unlocked lobby door because Ilya had left it open for the dealer, came up. He pounded on the condo door.

Ilya groaned. The sound was involuntary.

The door wasn't locked. Ilya had forgotten to lock it after the dealer left.

The delivery guy pushed it open. "Mr. Hollander? I have a package-"

He stopped. He saw the body. The needle. The blue lips.

Ilya heard a distant shout. "Oh god! Hey! Stay with me!"

He felt hands on his chest. CPR. Pain.

No, Ilya thought, his mind screaming in the void. *Let me go. I have his watch. Let me go.*

Week 32: Alive

He woke up in the ICU. Again.

Alive.

On the bedside table, among his personal effects, sat a small, velvet-wrapped box. The watch.

It had arrived just in time to save his life, and Ilya hated it. He looked at the box and wished he had never ordered it. He had been saved by a gift for a dead man.

Month 9

Week 33: The Kidnapping

They didn't give him a choice this time. After the ICU released him (again), David was standing there with the car keys, and Yuna was packing Ilya's bag with a terrifying efficiency.

"You are not going back to that apartment," David said. His voice wasn't angry; it was terrified. "You are coming home with us."

To them, Ilya was no longer just a friend or a lover. He was the *Leftover*. The last living piece of Shane Hollander. Keeping Ilya alive was a way of keeping Shane alive.

Ilya was too weak to fight. He sat in the backseat of the SUV, the same SUV where he had sit hoping Shane was okay, and watched the highway stretch toward Ottawa. He had a secret

supply of pills taped to the inside of his thigh, burning against his skin. He felt like a Trojan horse, carrying destruction into their sanctuary.

Week 34: The Boy in the Poster

They put him in Shane's room.

It was a museum of innocence. There were old participation trophies on the shelf. A faded poster of David Bowie. A bed that was too small for two grown men, let alone a broken Russian giant.

Ilya lay in the twin bed, staring at the glow in the dark stars Shane had stuck to the ceiling twenty years ago.

The irony was suffocating. He was sleeping in the bed where Shane had dreamed of becoming an NHL star, while Ilya was lying there dreaming of becoming a corpse.

He was careful. He waited until the house was asleep. He would creep into the ensuite bathroom, turn on the shower to mask the sound, and crush his pills on the porcelain sink where Shane used to brush his teeth.

He got high looking at Shane's high school graduation photo taped to the mirror.

"I'm in your room," he whispered to the reflection, his eyes pinned and glassy. "Are you watching? Is this close enough for you?"

Week 35: The Academy Award

Ilya Rozanov deserved an Oscar.

He realized that Yuna and David needed to see him heal. They couldn't handle another tragedy. So, he gave them a performance.

He came down for breakfast. He ate Yuna's pancakes, forcing a smile that didn't reach his dead eyes. He sat with David on the porch, talking about the weather, about hockey stats, about "the future."

"I'm feeling better," Ilya lied, the opiates in his system making his voice soft and compliant. "Being here... it helps."

David cried. He actually hugged Ilya, clapping him on the back. "We knew it. You just needed family."

Ilya hugged him back, feeling like a monster. He wasn't healing; he was just high enough to tolerate the act of living. He was stealing their hope, feeding them a lie because the truth, that he was already dead inside, would break them.

Week 36: The Great Escape

The performance worked too well.

By the end of the month, Yuna and David believed he was stable. They saw color in his cheeks, which was actually the flush of suppressed withdrawal fever, and light in his eyes, which was chemical.

"I need to go back to Montreal," Ilya told them over dinner. "I need to... face the apartment. I need to start living my life. For Shane."

It was the perfect line. It was exactly what they wanted to hear.

They were hesitant, but proud. They packed him leftovers. They hugged him at the door.

"Don't be a stranger," Yuna said, kissing his cheek. "I'll call every day."

"I won't be stranger," Ilya promised.

He got into the car, waving until they were out of sight. The moment the car turned the corner, his face dropped. The smile vanished like it had been wiped off with a dirty cloth. He slumped against the seat, trembling, exhausted from the effort of pretending to be human.

He was going back to Montreal not to live, but to see Shane again, even if he wasn't listening to him.

Month 10

Week 37: The Destruction of Evidence

He was back in Montreal, and the rage was different this time. It wasn't cold; it was molten.

Ilya sat on the floor, high on a dangerous mix of uppers, staring at the cardboard box he had stolen from Shane's house back in Month 1. The box full of Ilya. The box that proved Shane loved him, but only in the dark.

"You coward!" Ilya screamed at the box, tears streaming down his face. "Why didn't you put these on a shelf? Why was I in a closet?"

He grabbed the box and hurled it against the wall. It burst open. Photos of Ilya, magazines with his face on the cover, and the precious All-Star photo scattered across the floor.

Ilya didn't stop. He stomped on the magazines. He ripped the papers. He wanted to destroy the secrecy.

But the moment the adrenaline faded, the horror set in.

What have I done? It's all I have left.

He fell to his knees, his hands trembling violently from the drugs. He grabbed a roll of scotch tape. For the next six hours, he sat there, sobbing like a child, trying to tape together a torn magazine cover, trying to smooth out the creases in the All-Star photo.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the paper faces. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll fix it."

Week 28: The Wrong Ghost

He took enough heroin to stop his heart, hoping to see Shane. He wanted the smiling ghost from the hospital.

He opened his eyes. Someone was sitting on the sofa.

It wasn't Shane.

She was wearing a blue silk nightgown. Her skin was gray. Her eyes were exactly like Ilya's.

Irina Rozanov.

Ilya froze. The needle slipped from his fingers.

"Mama?"

She didn't speak at first. She just patted her lap.

Ilya, a grown man, a giant of the NHL, crawled across the floor and laid his head on his dead mother's knees. He wept. He cried for Shane, he cried for himself, he cried for the little boy who had found her body all those years ago.

"It hurts, Mama," he choked out.

"I know, sunshine." the hallucination whispered, stroking his hair with cold fingers. "Life is too loud. It's quieter where I am."

For a week, she was his comfort. She validated his desire to die. She didn't tell him to fight; she told him it was okay to let go.

Week 39: The War in the Living Room

The comfort didn't last. The drugs twisted the memory.

Ilya woke up screaming. Irina was standing over him now, looking angry.

"You are weak," she hissed. "You are just like me."

"I am not you!" Ilya screamed back, throwing a glass at her. It shattered against the wall, passing right through her. "You are not weak, you were just sad!"

Then he saw him. In the corner of the room, standing in the shadows. His father.

He didn't speak. He never spoke. He just watched, eyes full of disappointment, just like he had when Ilya was a child.

"Stop looking at me!" Ilya yelled at the empty corner. "I became the best! I won the stanley cup! I did everything you wanted!"

The apartment became a battlefield. Ilya argued with thin air, throwing pillows, smashing lamps, fighting a screaming match with his dead parents while the ghost of his father judged him from the shadows.

The video call request popped up on the laptop. David Hollander.

Ilya froze. He took a deep breath. He slapped his own cheeks to bring color to them. He put on a beanie to hide his unwashed hair.

He clicked answer.

"Hi, David!" Ilya said, his voice instantly shifting to a polite, calm tone.

"Hey son, how are you holding up?"

"Good. Really good," Ilya lied, while behind the laptop screen, his mother's ghost was screaming at him to end it. "I just made dinner. I'm going to watch a movie."

"That sounds nice. We love you."

"Love you too."

He hung up. The smile dropped. He turned back to the ghosts. "Now... where were we?"

Week 40: The Mirror Image

The fighting stopped. Acceptance set in.

Ilya realized he couldn't banish them. They were part of him. The addiction, the depression, the self destruction, it was all written in his DNA.

He sat on the bathroom floor the same place his mother had died.

Irina sat next to him. She wasn't scary anymore. She was just waiting.

"You're preparing," she observed.

"No," Ilya said, looking at his veins, which were becoming harder to find. "I am not trying to kill myself mama, I just want the pain gone."

Irina ignored him. "Do you think he's there?" she asked. "Shane?"

"I don't know mama, I don't know anything," Ilya whispered.

"You're going to die Ilya." Irina looked at him with sympathy.

"Then I hope he is there." Ilya said. "Because if he's not... then I'm just following you into the dark for nothing."

He spent the rest of the week in a heavy, drug induced trance, sandwiched between the ghosts of his past and the ghost of his future.

He kept the daily FaceTime calls with Yuna and David brief, afraid that if he looked at the screen too long, they would see his mother standing behind him, beckoning him to come home.

Month 11

Week 41: No more Shane.

Week 41, he tried to come to terms with the fact that Shane's ghost had left him. No matter how much he overdosed, Shane wouldn't come back for him.

His father took his spot. Screaming about everything Ilya did wrong, he wasn't just watching anymore and that was worse.

Week 42: The report.

He hadn't visited the cemetery in months because he had been busy building his fortress, and Shane was with him. But now, he needed to make a report.

He stood before the black granite. Shane Hollander.

He didn't kneel. Kneeling was for the defeated. Ilya stood tall, swaying slightly in the wind, his coat hanging off his skeletal frame like a shroud.

"I'm still here," he told the stone. His voice was raspy but defiant. "It hurts like hell, Shane. Every second feels like fire. But I'm taking it. I'm not quitting."

He wiped a bloody nose with his sleeve, a side effect of the drugs he snorted to keep going.

"She wants me to quit," he muttered, glancing nervously over his shoulder as if his mother were standing behind a tree. "But I won't. I'm going to outlast this pain. I'm going to win."

He truly believed it. He thought the drugs were his armor, not his poison.

"Rozanov?"

The voice came from behind. Ilya spun around, nearly losing his balance.

Hayden Pike stood on the gravel path, holding a bouquet of orange flowers. He looked terrified.

Ilya tried to put on his "game face." He straightened his spine. He tried to look intimidating, but with his sunken eyes and gray skin, he just looked haunting.

"What do you want, Pike?" Ilya spat.

"Jesus, Rozanov..." Hayden took a step forward, ignoring the aggression. "You look... man, you look like you're dying. Let me drive you to the hospital. Please."

"I'm not dying," Ilya snapped, offended. "I'm recovering. I'm handling it."

"You're not handling anything! Look at your hands! You're shaking!" Hayden's voice got higher as he spoke, what would Shane say if he left Ilya in that state?

"That's just the cold," Ilya lied, hiding his trembling hands in his pockets. "Go away, Hayden. Go back to your easy life. You don't know what it takes to survive this."

Hayden stood there, tears welling in his eyes. He didn't see a rival anymore. He saw a man who was already a corpse but refused to lie down.

"You're going to kill yourself, Ilya," Hayden whispered.

"No," Ilya said, turning back to the grave. "I'm proving I can live without him. Watch me."

Week 43: The Argument

Back in the apartment, the battle with the hallucination reached its peak.

Irina Rozanov was sitting on the kitchen counter, swinging her legs. She held a phantom bottle of pills the ones she had used to kill herself.

"Just take them all, sunshine," she cooed. "Why suffer? You are broken, just like me."

Ilya smashed a glass against the wall right next to her head.

"I am NOT you!" he screamed. "I found you! I saw what you did! You left me alone!"

He paced the room, his heart hammering a dangerous, erratic rhythm.

"You were tired" Ilya hissed at the ghost. "You couldn't take the noise, so you quit. I'm not quitting. I'm fixing the noise."

He crushed three oxycodone pills on the counter.

"See?" he told her, snorting the powder. "I'm just turning down the volume. I'm staying. I'm staying right here to spite you."

He didn't realize that in his desperate attempt to prove he wasn't her, he was using the exact same method that destroyed her. He was digging his grave with the same shovel, all while screaming that he was building a house.

Week 44: The Betrayal of the Body

The mind was stubborn, but the biology was finite.

Ilya tried to be normal. He tried to do push-ups in the living room, trying to reclaim number 81, Captain of The Boston Bears.

One. His arms shook.

Two. His chest burned.

Three. Darkness edged his vision.

He collapsed on the rug, gasping for air. His heart fluttered. It was a warning shot.

Irina was standing over him, looking sad. "Your body is smarter than you, Ilya. It knows it's time to sleep."

"Shut up," Ilya wheezed, clawing at the carpet to pull himself up. "I'm just tired. I haven't eaten. That's all."

He dragged himself to the sofa. He didn't call 911. He didn't call Yuna. Because calling for help would mean admitting defeat. It would mean he couldn't handle the pain.

"I'll just rest for a minute," he whispered, closing his eyes as a wave of nausea hit him. "Then I'll get up. I'll always get up."

He believed it. He genuinely believed he would wake up tomorrow and fight again. He didn't know that the war was already over.

Month 12

Week 45: Denial

The collapse wasn't sudden; it was a slow erosion.

Ilya tried to stand up from the sofa to get a glass of water. His legs simply folded. He hit the floor hard, bruising his hip.

A normal person would have called an ambulance. Ilya Rozanov dragged himself back onto the cushions, panting, sweat dripping from his nose.

"Just dehydration," he wheezed, his heart fluttering like a trapped bird in his chest. "I'll drink water later. I just need to catch my breath."

He lay there for two days.

Irina's ghost sat on the coffee table, watching him with pity. "You are dying, Ilya."

"I'm resting!" Ilya snapped, his voice barely a whisper. "Machines need maintenance. That's all. Don't look at me like that. I'm not going anywhere."

He took more pills to suppress the hunger pangs, convinced he was hacking his body's needs, not destroying them anymore, he convinced himself that he was healing.

Week 46: The Anniversary Noise

January arrived. The media cycle began. Every channel, every website was talking about Shane Hollander.

The noise in Ilya's head became unbearable. It wasn't just grief anymore; it was a physical roar.

He needed silence. He needed to be strong for the anniversary. He couldn't be a shaking mess when the day came.

He lined up his "medicine" on the bathroom counter.

"I need to be steady," he told his reflection. The face in the mirror was yellow, skeletal, unrecognizable. But Ilya didn't see the corpse; he saw a soldier preparing for battle. "I'll take a heavy dose tonight. Sleep through the noise. Wake up fresh and tell them I'm fine."

He wasn't trying to end his life anymore. He was trying to fast forward through the pain. His mother's ghost was too much, he just didn't want to die the way she did.

Week 47: The Eve of Destruction

He spent the entire week in a state of terrified vigilance.

He was afraid that if he closed his eyes, he would miss the date. He watched the digital clock on the cable box.

Jan 10... Jan 11... Jan 12...

He was barely conscious. His body was shutting down, kidneys failing, lungs filling with fluid, but his will kept the heart beating.

"Not yet," he whispered, shivering under three blankets. "I have to say happy anniversary. Not yet."

He spent hours taping together the torn magazine cover from Month 10. He folded his laundry, leaving it in a basket by the door. He was making plans for *after* the anniversary. He was planning to live.

Week 48: The Anniversary

January 13th.

The sun rose. He made it.

Ilya smiled weakly. He had survived the year.

But the pain... the pain was blinding. The silence of the apartment was heavier than gravity.

"Happy anniversary, Shane," he whispered to the empty room.

He tried to stand up to make coffee, but he fell. He crawled to the bathroom.

"I just need to sleep through today," he decided. "It's too loud. I'll take a nap. I'll wake up tomorrow, on the 14th, and start fresh."

He prepared the needle. His hand was shaking so badly he almost dropped it.

"Just a nap," he promised his mother's ghost, who was weeping in the corner. "Don't cry, Mama. I'm just tired."

He pushed the plunger.

He curled up on the rug, clutching the crumpled All-Star photo to his chest.

"Wake me up when the game starts," he murmured.

His eyes closed. He died thinking he was starting his new life tomorrow. He died happy, he was happy for the first time since Shane's death. He died thinking he was going to wake up and heal.

Six hours later.

David and Yuna arrived. They had driven from Ottawa to be with him on the hard day.

They found the door unlocked.

They found the laundry basket full of clean clothes, proof he planned to stay.

They found the glass of water he never drank.

And they found him.

When David touched his cheek, he realized the tragedy wasn't that Ilya had given up. The tragedy was that Ilya had fought so hard to stay alive for this specific day, only to die before the sun went down.

He had finished the race. He crossed the finish line of the year, and collapsed the moment he broke the tape.

The letter from the embassy was brief, written in cold, bureaucratic ink. The Russian Federation declined the repatriation of Ilya Rozanov's remains. The reasoning was glossed over as "suspicious circumstances of death," but the truth between the lines was clear: They viewed a broken hero who died clutching another man's photo as a national embarrassment. They didn't want the scandal.

David Hollander read the letter and tore it in half.

"Good," Yuna said, her voice trembling with a fierce, protective anger. "He didn't belong to them anyway. He belongs to us."

And so, the final arrangements were made. Ilya would not go back to the frozen earth of Moscow. He would stay in Montreal, in the plot of land David had quietly purchased a year ago, right next to Shane.

No matter how hard the world tried to separate them, death had bound them together tighter than ever.

It was raining. Of course it was raining. The sky over Montreal seemed to reserve its tears exclusively for these two men.

The crowd was smaller this time. The fair weather friends, the agents, and the glory hunters were gone. Only those who truly felt the crushing weight of the loss remained.

The two headstones stood side by side.

Shane Hollander

Ilya Rozanov

There were no dates on Ilya's tombstone yet, just the fresh earth waiting to embrace him.

David walked to the podium. He looked frail. He gripped the wood until his knuckles turned white and looked out at the sea of black umbrellas.

"Three hundred and sixty-five days ago, I stood here and buried my son," David began, his voice cracking but amplifying over the speakers. "I thought that was the worst pain a father could feel. I was wrong."

He looked down at Ilya's casket; shiny, black, and solitary.

"Watching Ilya Rozanov die was not a singular event. It wasn't a moment. It was a slow, agonizing dismantle. We watched a young man, a brilliant, strong, invincible young man, hollow himself out because he couldn't understand a world without Shane in it."

David took a shaky breath, tears mixing with the rain on his face.

"The world called them rivals. The world called them enemies. And when the truth came out, the world called it a scandal. But I lived with him. I saw him in the quiet moments. I saw him sleeping in Shane's childhood bed, clutching a pillow just to feel close to a ghost.

"Ilya wasn't a villain. He wasn't a machine. He was a boy who loved so deeply, so violently, that when the object of that love was gone, he simply... ceased to be. We tried to save him. God knows, Yuna and I tried. But you cannot save a man who is already walking in the afterlife.

"He didn't commit suicide to leave us. He just ran out of fuel trying to stay. Today, I am not burying a friend. I am burying my second son. And my only comfort is knowing that for the first time in a year, Ilya isn't lonely."

Yuna stepped up as David stepped down, placing a steadying hand on his back. She didn't look at the crowd. She looked directly at the casket, speaking to Ilya as if he were sitting in her kitchen.

"You were such a good actor, Ilya," she whispered, her voice soft but piercing. "You acted strong for the cameras. You acted happy for us in Ottawa. You acted like you were healing when you were really just saying a long goodbye."

She smiled through her tears, a heartbreaking expression of motherly love.

"I get angry at you sometimes. Angry that you left us. Angry that you stopped fighting. Angry that you wouldn't let us hold on to a piece of our son. But then... then I remember your face when we found you."

She paused, choking back a sob.

"You looked peaceful. For the first time since that terrible night on the ice, the lines on your forehead were gone. The pain was gone. How can I be angry at you for finding peace? You promised him you would be there. You were late, Ilya, but you kept your promise. Go find him. Tell him to clean his room. And tell him... tell him we love you both."

Before the casket was lowered, David brought forward a simple, polished oak box.

"We aren't closing their grave with medals," David announced. "We are burying him with memories."

He opened the box. Instead of flowers, people stepped forward with folded pieces of paper, notes written on the spot, ink blurring slightly in the damp air.

Hayden came first, he wrote "Goodbye Lily and Jane."

Marlow came second, Yuna and David couldn't look at his face. He wrote an apology letter.

Everyone left something, inside jokes, late apologies, funny memories.

Yuna and David waited until everyone left.

David pulled the velvet box, the watch from his pocket. The one Ilya had ordered for the "White Nights" that never happened. For Shane's ghost. He placed it gently inside.

"So you know what time it is when you meet him," David whispered.

Yuna held the photo. The crumpled, water-stained photo from the All-Star game. The one Ilya had died holding. She kissed the image of the two boys, then placed it face-up on top of the pile of notes.

"So you never forget that you were loved," she said.

The box was closed. Sealed.

David placed it on top of the casket.

As the machinery whirled, lowering Ilya Rozanov into the ground, the rain suddenly stopped. The clouds didn't break, but the deluge ceased.

The silence was absolute.

There was no rivalry anymore. There was no noise. There was no pain.

There were just two boys, side by side in the dark, finally safe from a world that was too bright and too cruel for a love like theirs.

Chapter End Notes

I planned to write a sentence for every week but the universe had other plans because i am pretty sure that this chapter is longer than the first 4

Ugly cried during this and I left my laptop at my dorm and couldn't find my tablet so I wrote this from my very full phone so it was hard and a word took a minute... Can't even control it rn I hope everything is fine, if it is not please let me know!!

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