

the third option

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the third option

by [sevdim](#)

Summary

A teenage Ilya arrives at an elite six-month development programme already planning to kill himself.

Shane keeps accidentally interrupting his suicide attempts because he's obsessed with rules, routine, and following proper protocol.

Notes

Major trigger warnings for themes of suicide and suicide ideation. Like literally the main focus of the fic is the fact that Ilya is trying to die.

Some things are likely to be different from canon, like Shane's food issues stem more from having safe foods than full ED. More sensory issues, and so on. Also I'll be honest I haven't read TLG (because I wasn't a big fan of RR's writing style in the first book) so idk if Ilya's depression is exactly book-accurate or if the book even goes into it much.

Also, I'm British so it's going to show in my writing sometimes. The hockey and NA details in this will probably be the weaker bits but hopefully you enjoy the story itself. I can't even count how many times I've gone through it for edits so I pray it's okay. Please just pretend the 'National Elite Development Programme (NEDP)' exists. lol. ❤️

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicide ideation. Almost attempt (x2).

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

The first thing Ilya learned about North America was that people smiled too much. Airport staff, hotel receptionists, strangers in the lobby. It wasn't genuine; he could instantly tell that it never was.

The man from the league who handed him his laminated schedule smiled the hardest of all, when he gave a speech about responsibility and privilege. As though being drafted by the MLH was something holy and not just another machine Ilya had to survive.

Ilya watched the smile not reach his eyes, and he smiled back when required. He had always been good at playing systems if it meant survival.

The programme itself was simple enough: Wake up. Train. Conditioning, media training, nutrition, tapes. Mandatory team-building activities which Ilya already dreaded for many different reasons. And for the European kids, there were even English support classes.

Six months of this, Ilya thought, all because the league had decided they weren't quite ready for their rookie year.

And yet when Ilya stepped off the bus marked with 'THE NATIONAL ELITE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME' on its sides and looked over the yard now filled with this year's prospects, it was as though they walked differently after the draft.

They walked straighter somehow, posturing as though a camera might appear out of nowhere.

Ilya found it embarrassing.

Being drafted didn't change anything.

He had waited for it to bring excitement, self-satisfaction, maybe even pride—but it had never come. Because Grigory had beaten the pride out of him long ago, assuring Ilya that nothing he gave would ever be enough.

Being *first* didn't change anything at all.

His father had stood by as the Deputy of the Boston Raiders rained praises on him, and he had responded by calling him *lazy, un-disciplined*.

Foolishly, he had expected something dramatic at being drafted, some shift in his body, relief—like surfacing for air after years underwater. Because finally, *finally*, he would be leaving Russia. He would be leaving his father and Alexei, the way he had been wishing and working for since the day his mother had left him to bear it all alone.

Instead there had only been the same quiet flatness.

He had sat in the hotel room after, still wearing his best suit, while reporters downstairs raved about generational talent and the future of the league. He had sat there and sat there, and he had thought, very calmly: *Oh. So it follows you everywhere.*

The disappointment had lingered in his mouth for too long afterwards; tasting nothing like the long sought-after freedom that he had worked relentlessly for, had endured everything for.

His mother had endured it too. Until she couldn't anymore, in the end.

He'd been twelve years old and standing in the doorway to her now-empty room, stripped clean and smelling faintly of bleach, when he'd understood it all at once.

There were exits in life.

The knowledge had settled into him then, and it had settled into him permanently. Most children discovered love, or fear, or religion, and held onto it for the rest of their lives, letting it shape all their choices. But standing there, Ilya had discovered contingency.

He'd decided that if things became unbearable for long enough, there was always a way out.

That thought had been comforting over the years. But he had not expected to still need it here. It had sharpened across the last few weeks instead of fading, the way Ilya had expected it to.

Now, there was the option to stay, and keep going. And there was the option to go back to Russia, and keep going.

But then, there was that third option. Always there, waiting for him if he ever decided to take it.

He dragged himself through the first day, and cringed through the introductions and the awkwardness of the new living arrangements.

He was to share a dorm with four other guys. The room was big enough, but he was glad to not have to suffer through it for long.

He wasn't really paying attention either way. He'd spent the entire day inside his own head already calculating his way out.

In the end he decided that the roof was probably best.

He would give it two more days, because he could allow the prospects just a few more days to really feel the excitement, at least. He didn't want to cause a scene and ruin their joy at

being here so immediately. He could give them a few days to settle in a little, before the news broke, and they all had to pretend that they cared.

Those three days were useful, because Ilya spent them finalising his strategy.

He would have to do it during the quietest hours, sometime late at night when everyone would be asleep. Someone would find him eventually, early in the morning before anyone else really got up.

He had counted the floors—four floors up, to be precise. No risk of surviving with catastrophic injuries if done properly. The building overlooked concrete on the north side near the loading entrance, so hopefully the janitor would find him first. There was no reason to traumatise some exhausted eighteen-year-old for the rest of his life.

So; late on the third day after conditioning, when the trainers had dismissed everyone and encouraged sleep recovery, Ilya waited for the building to quiet. Then, at around midnight, he snuck out of his room-share, and climbed up the stairs slowly.

The roof access door opened with a heavy metallic groan that made him pause with a wince, listening for movement below. When there was nothing, he stepped out into the cold air.

It was actually kind of beautiful. The lake beyond the complex blinked back at him under the night sky, black and endless, and it kind of looked like home. A vast forest stretched around them on all sides, isolating the programme away from the rest of Montana. His eyes tracked a truck moving slowly along the distant highway and let it lull him deeper into a sense of calm.

He walked closer to the edge and looked down.

The concrete patch looked smaller than he had calculated. He'd have to aim properly, if he wanted to land cleanly. He leaned further over the ledge, testing the perspective. He leaned until his head hung lower than the rest of his body and breathed in, letting the cold air rush against his face.

He could imagine falling like this. The air almost felt like it was welcoming him.

Eventually he leaned back upright and reached into his hoodie, pulling out his cigarettes.

They had told him he would need to quit, of course, because coaches monitored everything and anything with long-term consequences was discouraged. But the point of long-term consequences became less persuasive once you stopped planning for a long term.

The lighter sparked three times, refusing to catch, before a voice stopped him in his tracks.

"I don't think you're supposed to smoke here."

Ilya turned, his eyes landing on a boy standing near the metal door staring at him with visible disapproval.

Pitch black hair tinted blue in the moonlight. Freckles dusted over the bridge of his nose. The Canucks jersey that Ilya had recognised earlier in the room he shared with the other boys, but

hadn't spared much attention to. Shane Hollander, second overall.

He looked exactly like the kind of guy assembled in a lab specifically to play hockey for Montreal. Even now at midnight he stood with impossible posture, shoulders squared like an invisible coach was evaluating him.

For a moment, Ilya just stared. Then Shane frowned slightly.

"There are signs," he pointed.

"Okay..." Ilya said, looking around at the empty roof.

But Shane kept going, shifting closer towards him. "Didn't you hear the complex coordinator during introductions? Our rooms would be raided if even a single cigarette butt is found on the ground."

"Yes," Ilya said, trying to soften his accent with effort. "Sounds very tragic."

"And you can get fined."

"By who?" he scoffed lightly.

"The programme," Shane said immediately and confidently, as if 'the programme' was a branch of government.

Ilya stared at him another second longer before lifting the unlit cigarette still pinched between his fingers. "You follow me up here because of a cigarette, or what?"

"No," Shane said slowly. "This is my spot."

"Is not your spot," Ilya said.

"I came up here first," he said matter-of-factly. "I was here yesterday."

"How do you know I was not here day before?" Ilya asked.

"Because I was up here then, too," Shane answered almost childishly. "I found it on the first night."

That finally made Ilya bare his teeth in something almost close to a grin. Shane only continued to look at him, his eyes drifting slowly over their surroundings as though he was finally registering them properly. A small furrow appeared between his brows when his attention landed on the ledge, and he stepped forward to place his palm flat against it.

Then he looked back at Ilya. "You're standing too close," he said.

Ilya almost shocked himself into an actual laugh. Not because it was funny particularly, but mostly because the observation itself felt absurdly innocent considering the situation.

"Yes," he said. "Was looking at the view."

Shane ignored him though, as if Ilya hadn't said anything at all. The furrow remained between his brows, and Ilya watched it as the other boy processed something internally.

"This is way too low. The council of Ottawa requires ledges to be at least a hundred and thirty two centimetres tall," he said slowly. Then he frowned harder. "But maybe it's different in Montana."

Ilya snorted softly. *Bozhe moy*, what was going on. Ilya had come up here to jump, and here was Shane Hollander talking about construction specifics.

"How do you even know that?"

"I read it in the building report when my parents bought their apartment," Shane explained, like it was the most normal thing to do. He nearly looked annoyed at himself for only noticing it now. "They really should build this higher. It's a liability. Someone could get hurt, and the NEDP would be held responsible."

Ilya was smiling again now, small and completely out of his control.

"You are...what? Building expert?" Ilya asked, which earned him a flat look.

The point of the night had derailed so completely from death that Ilya found himself vaguely annoyed by it, deep down. He had been ready, he'd thought everything through practically, the goal of it clean and linear. Hollander arriving to discuss proper conduct and roof safety felt almost disrespectful to the process.

But it was also very entertaining.

"Anyway," Shane said, "you shouldn't stand so close."

"Alright."

Shane's eyes dropped again to the cigarette in Ilya's hand. Making a point of it, Ilya tucked it back into his pack, and shoved it back into his hoodie pocket.

Then he looked at him properly. At the way he kept his thumbs in the pockets of his joggers, and the slight flush in his cheeks from the cold. The rigid posture that made him seem permanently braced for evaluation. He was unbearable. And somehow also, unexpectedly, a little endearing. Almost like a very anxious cat scoping out its new territory.

"I'm Ilya. Rozanov."

Shane clenched his jaw. "We met," he said through his teeth.

"Ah," Ilya said.

He didn't really know what else to say to that, because he didn't actually remember much of the draft - what with his father looming over him the whole time, making sure he was following the script.

He'd played against Canada before that, sure. At the Prospect Cup. But between his coach screaming at him, ugly and red-faced, and his father pointing out Ilya's insufficiency at leading his team, everything else had sort of blurred to the background.

"I'll keep your secret," Shane said after a moment, tone short. "About the smoking. Just this once."

"They do say Canadians are nice like that," Ilya replied, but the boy didn't seem to catch the humour in it, continuing on.

"But we should go downstairs soon."

"Why?"

"Because we're out past curfew."

"Ah, yes," Ilya murmured. "The rules."

Shane only nodded seriously. "The handbook said repeated violations can affect placement."

Of course he had read the handbook already. He'd probably read every word, possibly even twice over.

Ilya took a deep breath in, turning to look back over the edge once more.

The moment had passed now anyway. The stillness inside him had broken apart around the interruption, his thought pathways shifting elsewhere entirely, settling into something more like inconvenience. He would have to find another time, maybe another method, but it wasn't entirely catastrophic.

"Okay," he said finally. "I go back to bed."

Then he walked past him towards the roof door. Shane followed him down the stairs quietly, so quiet that Ilya barely heard his footsteps. It was remarkable how this hundred-and-eighty-pound boy simply drifted so silently behind him.

When they got to their room-share, Ilya glanced back. Shane nodded at him once before heading to his side of the room and climbing into bed. Ilya got in his own and tried desperately to shut his brain off for a few hours.

The room settled back into darkness around them. Someone across the room snored softly. A door creaked open somewhere across the hall. Ilya stared at the ceiling for a long time, listening as Shane shifted beneath his blankets for a while, before finally stilling.

The next time Ilya decided he would do it, it was a week later, and he went looking for pills.

The decision came to him midway through a video analysis session while some retired defenseman-turned-development coach paused footage every three seconds to lecture them about discipline in the neutral zone.

Ilya sat through it with his back leaned all the way into his seat, eyes fixed on the frozen screen while the thought settled itself neatly into place.

The roof was too inconvenient now, too compromised. Shane Hollander had apparently claimed it as *his spot*, which was ridiculous enough on its own, but worse than that was the possibility that he might appear again. He didn't particularly want an audience the second time round.

The image of the boy looking over and finding him like that was something Ilya tried not to think about too much.

Pills were quieter anyway, and he was kind of annoyed at himself for not picking it first. His mother had chosen pills. The thought arrived without emotion, just another practical consideration among many others. He remembered the pill bottle empty on the bedside table, the ambulance lights outside their apartment building. Pills had done the job well enough.

Ilya would set a blanket in a broom cupboard somewhere. He'd block the door and lay himself down, go with a little more dignity than the previous plan. Ilya only felt bad for the damn janitor, who would very likely be the one to find him again in *this* plan, too. But better a janitor than someone else. Janitors were better versed in dealing with messy situations, he thought morbidly.

It was only four in the afternoon, but he knew he had to sneak in before the medical office got locked up for the evening. It sat at the end of the first floor hall beside the physio rooms. Ilya had already mapped out the layout during orientation week, while the trainers explained injury protocols and emergency procedures. So he walked directly for it, dodging staff as they moved in and out of doors.

The door opened easily beneath his hand. He stepped in, an excuse already waiting on the tip of his tongue, but the room was humming with the quiet of the overhead lights. He breathed in, taking in the sharp chemical scent of disinfectant and something more stale beneath it. He breathed it back out, and made for the medication cabinets.

He needed to find something effective. Something that his body wouldn't reject too quickly before pulling him into something he wouldn't return from. He frowned as he read the names, none of them really registering.

He jumped, then, quite embarrassingly, at the sharp sound of plastic curtains being pulled open.

"Er, what are you doing?"

Ilya shut the cabinet with a soft bang and dropped his head low dramatically. For a brief second he genuinely considered whether Shane Hollander might simply materialise anytime he went to attempt suicide, like some kind of deeply irritating guardian angel.

He turned around to look back up at him.

Shane was sitting partially hidden away behind one of the privacy screens with an ice pack strapped around his knee and a roll of beige bandaging resting beside him. He wore a long sleeved compression shirt and tight grey athletic shorts. Ilya tried not to stare too long.

“You again,” Ilya said.

“You don’t always have to be an asshole,” Shane replied flatly.

Ilya didn’t really think he had been rude before, up on the roof. But maybe he had been the time before that? His father's voice rung through his head:

Stop mumbling, Ilya.

Don't speak unless you're being spoken to, do you understand, Ilya?

What did I do to deserve such a disrespectful child, huh? Answer, Ilya!

“Sorry,” Ilya said despite himself. Because if someone thought he was being an asshole, then they were probably right.

“What are you even doing here?” Shane asked.

He even looked disapproving, the way he had his eyes squinted at him, suspicion settling over the line of his brows.

“I’m looking for drugs.”

Ilya could have laughed at Shane’s reaction then. It was so immediate, the way his eyes widened very slightly, something closer to severe administrative concern rather than anything else.

He straightened abruptly. “What kind?”

“*What kind?*” Ilya parroted.

“What kind of drugs?” And Ilya sensed the note of urgency in Shane’s voice now, his brows furrowing deeper and deeper the longer Ilya didn’t answer back.

“You seriously cannot do that here,” Shane continued quickly. “There’s mandatory no-notice testing, and that's not even counting PED testing.”

Ilya opened his mouth in an attempt to respond but Shane ignored him entirely, already continuing down whatever anxious pathway his brain had committed itself to.

“And some medications affect reaction time and cardiac conditioning, so if you take something that interferes with performance metrics then your team will definitely get informed and—”

“You think I am doping?” Ilya interrupted.

Shane paused then. “Er... aren’t you?”

The silence that followed was so absurd that Ilya shocked himself by laughing.

He didn’t think he meant to laugh *at* him, really. No, this was a real laugh that escaped him before he could stop it, brief and rough around the edges from disuse.

Shane only frowned harder at it. He stared at him hard for another second, visibly trying to reorganise the interaction into something logical. His fingers tapped three times against the edge of the examination bed before going still again.

“It’s not funny. You shouldn’t take random medication,” he said finally, slower now. “Especially before rookie conditioning.”

“Does it say that in the handbook?”

Shane finally got the sense that Ilya was maybe making fun of him a little bit. He looked away, fixing his eyes on a spot on the floor.

The afternoon sun was dipping low in the sky, turning the room golden. Somewhere out in the yard, a few of the guys broke out in distant laughter.

For some reason the whole thing felt strangely intimate, hitting Ilya suddenly. Here were the two top prospects sitting alone in an empty medical office so far from home, and they weren’t even friends. They were still practically strangers. And yet it felt intimate.

“Do you like it here?” Ilya asked suddenly.

Shane blinked back up at him. “The programme?”

Ilya nodded, and waited as Shane considered the question carefully, like he was genuinely trying to calculate the correct answer.

“It’s been productive.”

There it was again, that same severe practicality. Shane spoke about hockey the way religious people spoke about God—with complete structural and unwavering devotion.

“I want to be ready for Montreal,” Shane continued, certainty settling over his voice. “They already sent development materials.”

Ilya almost smiled, softening. “I bet you have read them all already.”

Shane nodded stiffly, but his next answer came quickly again.

“I just want to be prepared.”

And it was certain enough that something underneath caught Ilya’s attention. He ran his tongue across his teeth briefly, trying to name it.

It wasn't arrogance at all. There was a reason this kid had been drafted second overall.

He needed this. It was *pure need*, as though he'd built his entire internal world around hockey so completely that failing at it would collapse something fundamental inside of him.

"Well, Montreal sucks," Ilya said lightly. "They are probably desperate enough they would have taken you without all your extra homework."

"They do not *suck*. And I still have to meet their expectations."

Ilya smiled faintly. "You know," he said. "Second overall is still impressive."

Shane's shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly, but Ilya caught it.

Ah. Maybe he was being an asshole again.

It was the wrong thing to say anyway. Everyone had spent the entire draft comparing them already, tied between the Russian prodigy versus the Canadian phenom. A perfect future rivalry manufactured before either of them had even faced each other for a professional game.

"Hey," Ilya said, trying to get him to meet his eyes again. "You will move up soon enough."

Shane looked at him like he was being thick. "That's not how drafting works."

Ilya smiled humourlessly, and for one terrible second, he wanted to say *it does if the first pick dies*.

Before he could come up with an alternative answer, footsteps rounded the corner from the other side of the wall.

Shane sat up straighter immediately, posture reorganising itself into perfect compliance. Like a doll returning to the same position that it had been left in.

A second later the doctor stepped back into the room.

She stopped when she noticed Ilya standing beside the cabinets.

"Hello," she said slowly, looking between them. "Is everything alright?" Her eyes focused back on Ilya. "Can I help you with something?"

The question lingered around Ilya, and he tried to work his brain around an answer, around something that could get him closer to what he was after.

He looked briefly at the cabinets behind him, then quickly at the shelves lined with more labelled bottles on the other wall.

Then, at Shane Hollander, sitting rigidly upright with the ice pack melting against his knee and the line of panic across his jaw.

“Yes, I...” he started, looking back at her waiting expression. “I wanted to ask for some sleeping pills. I have not been sleeping. Missing home.”

“Oh dear,” she said, and Ilya thanked the heavens—or mother nature, or whatever was out there—that she was the practical type, because she moved over to the cabinet.

Ilya stepped back as she reached in and pulled out a small orange bottle. He took a mental note of the name before she turned the cap, dropping two pills into his palm.

“Take one to start, then wait thirty minutes. It should do the trick, but you boys are growing, so you may need the second.”

Two pills. What was he supposed to do with two pills.

He pursed his lips and said, “Thank you.”

Looking back at Shane, he nodded a quick goodbye before dragging his feet to the door and leaving.

When he got to his bed, he bent over his bedside table and placed the two pills loosely towards the back of the drawer. They weren't much use to him now.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicide ideation.

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

By the end of the second week, Ilya had four pills in the drawer.

He opened it most nights before bed, mostly to confirm they were still there. The little white tablets now sat in a little old mint tin he had stolen from the common kitchen. They clicked softly when he moved the box. He would count them and close it again.

Four pills.

This was taking too long. He shut the drawer harder than he meant to and sat back on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees. He felt on the cusp of something fractured, something unstable, and he took a breath to steady the tremble in his shoulders.

The room was dark except for the hall light bleeding through the crack beneath the door.

Three of the boys were asleep already. Someone on the far side snored softly through his mouth. The heating pipes in the wall clicked every few minutes. Ilya wondered if loneliness could kill you. But clearly it couldn't. Ilya would have been long dead if it could.

Across the room, Shane was awake too.

Ilya more often than not kept the grey privacy curtains around his bed shut, but he didn't need to see to know that Shane Hollander never slept properly. He had memorised the pattern of it by now. The blanket shifting, then stillness. Then shifting again. A slow frustrated exhale. The mattress creaking once more.

Then nothing. Except for the days Shane would finally sit up, the bed releasing a sound in protest, as he would sneak out of the room. Up to the rooftop, Ilya guessed. Ilya sometimes still sort of hated him for taking his first plan away from him.

Now, Ilya leaned back against the wall and stared at the ceiling above him as he listened to Shane turning over. He tried to mentally estimate if four pills would do anything if he crushed them and mixed them into water. But the doctor had said one may not even be enough. She'd suggested he take two if necessary.

That meant they were weak. He would need much more than that.

To his right, the bed creaked again, and then Shane's voice carried over the space quietly.

“Ilya.”

“What,” Ilya murmured, his eyes still stuck on the ceiling.

After a pause, Shane shifted his curtain aside, bringing his face into view, one hand still holding the edge of the curtain. His hair stuck out in several directions, like he had driven himself mad attempting sleep and long lost patience with the effort.

“Did you take the sleeping pills?”

Ilya gave him a side glance. He could only make out the shape of his face in the blue-dark.

“Yes,” he lied.

Shane’s shoulders dropped slightly. Then carefully, he asked, “All of them?”

Clearly Shane noticed everything, even down to the number of times he’d managed to score so far. He hoped the boy’s perceptiveness wasn’t going to make things any harder for him.

“Yes,” he lied again.

That seemed to frustrate Shane. He looked down at the floor, processing. Then his eyes came back up.

“I can’t sleep.”

Ilya waited, but the silence stretched, and Shane didn’t seem like he planned on moving away.

Finally Ilya sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Why don’t you ask for your own pills?”

“I don’t want it to show in my reports,” Shane whispered, self-conscious enough that it almost sounded like embarrassment.

As though Ilya had invited him, Shane stepped through the curtain then, ducking his head slightly even though there was no need. He sat down on the foot of the bed and crossed his legs beneath him. He folded his hands in his lap.

In the half-dark, with his hair flattened on one side from the pillow, he looked much younger than eighteen.

It struck Ilya then how he had never really been allowed to feel like a teenager. He had been surviving for too long. Since he first learned he had to look after himself, because no one else would.

His father had taught him that crying only got him shoved into his room for the rest of the night. Alexei, despite being four years older, had never protected him from anything either, and he’d quickly learned waiting for help had always been pointless.

Looking at Shane now, sitting cross-legged on his bed like some kid, he felt something unexpectedly close to grief for something he had never had.

“Why you can’t sleep?” Ilya asked finally.

Shane pressed his lips together briefly, and Ilya’s eyes caught on it. The boy was pretty, but it had been so long since he’d indulged on pretty things, so he looked away.

“I don’t know. I think it’s the building. Or Montana,” Shane muttered.

Ilya snapped his eyes back to him. “The building.”

“The noises,” Shane said quickly. “I’m not used to them. I’m not used to the quiet, here.”

Ilya stared at him. He didn’t mean anything by it. All he ever did in response to anything was stare. But Shane looked briefly guarded under the silence, feeling the need to explain himself.

“My room in Ottawa doesn’t sound like this. There’s traffic outside my window, even at night. And the woman downstairs washes dishes before bed. And the girl next door plays guitar music to fall asleep.”

Ilya considered that. He understood it, actually.

Russia hadn’t been loud in the way Shane meant, but there was a noticeable absence here of Polina bringing her snobby, outrageous friends over four nights a week to play cards exactly when Ilya most needed sleep. There was no Alexei kicking his bedroom door in passing, just for the sake of startling him awake.

Ilya’s nervous system had learned to adapt to it all, until he was almost unfazed by it, even when his father would start raging at whoever crossed his path late at night, Ilya hearing it all from his bed and shutting his eyes against it.

“My mum says I need to find something familiar,” Shane said, quieter now. “Something sensory.”

“Sensory?”

“Sound. Or touch. I guess.”

Ilya looked at him properly then. He was still sitting upright, knees tucked beneath him, hands on his thighs.

“What do you think you need now?” Ilya asked. “To sleep.”

Shane shrugged, looking down at his hands “I’ve tried everything. I usually go to the roof for a while. The stars help.”

Ilya nodded.

Sensory. Shane had said sound, but also touch.

They couldn't exactly do much in terms of sound, since they were sharing the room with three others.

But maybe the presence of someone else beside him would be enough.

Without much further thought, Ilya shifted against the wall and pulled the blanket aside.

"Sleep here then."

Shane blinked. "What?"

"Hollander, you are already bothering me. Makes no change to me."

Shane searched his face some more, hesitating. Ilya attempted his best non-assholeish face, in case he was being one again without realising.

"Better decide quick, I think pills are working," Ilya said, theatrically faking through a yawn.

Shane smiled then, sudden and bright enough that it startled something inside Ilya, a quick spark of it. The mattress dipped almost immediately as he climbed under the covers.

He lay down head-to-toe exactly the way Ilya expected he would, keeping a strip of mattress between them like there was some invisible border he had strictly decided not to cross.

Ilya huffed a small laugh before he could stop it.

Shane folded his hands over his chest.

"If you kick me in your sleep," Ilya said, "you go back."

Shane turned his head slightly. "I don't move in my sleep."

"Okay."

Then the boy closed his eyes, ending the conversation.

Ilya lay there for a while, staring at the ceiling. At some point the room settled around them, and then somehow he slept too.

He woke to a weight over his chest.

For one irrational second he thought something had collapsed on him. His body jerked before his eyes opened to Shane's socked foot sprawled under his chin. His legs were pinned by an arm slung over both of them, like he had been dragged there during the night by some unconscious magnetic pull.

Ilya stared at the ceiling. *So much for not moving in his sleep.*

Very carefully, he lifted Shane's foot off his chest and pushed it away. Then he peeled the arm off his legs and slid himself free with the concentration of someone dismantling an explosive.

When he finally sat up, he checked the clock. 06:21.

He turned back. Shane was still asleep, breathing deep and even.

That alone was enough to hold Ilya's attention because Shane woke at 5:45 every morning. Exactly 5:45. He ran around the complex before sunrise, came back to shower, and was dressed before anyone else was awake.

He was still asleep.

Ilya looked at him for a little longer than necessary, leaning in despite himself, his eyes tracing the bridge of his nose, the pinch of his lips from the way his cheek was smushed down. Then he reached over and shook his shoulder.

Shane startled awake so violently he nearly hit the footboard. His eyes searched the unfamiliar side of the room before landing on the clock, and his expression dropped into immediate panic.

He threw the blankets off himself so fast they tangled around his legs, nearly taking him down as he tried to stand.

"We start in ten minutes."

"I know," Ilya said.

Shane glared at him, finally freeing himself before disappearing through the curtain to his side of the room.

Ilya stayed sitting for another minute mentally preparing himself for another chore-like day.

It exhausted him to think of it; the number of tasks he had to perform every day just to be able to make it to night-time. Showering, brushing teeth, putting socks on, taking a piss. Eating breakfast, then lunch, then dinner.

He quickly assessed which ones he could skip on today, and decided it wouldn't hurt not to have breakfast.

He could still feel the warmth left in the mattress.

He stood and dressed slowly.

Training passed the way most things did for Ilya. In sections. Fragments. Instructions reached him and then slipped away again before he had the energy to hold onto them.

Someone collided into him during line change and muttered something about Russian robots never smiling. The boys nearby laughed, but Ilya barely turned his head.

A few years ago he would have answered. He would have given them something sharp enough to regret. He would have turned it physical, because a punch was straight to the point and Ilya had been aware, even back then, that he was losing the energy to keep arguing.

But the depression had worn through the last of his self-preservation quite soon after. Now, most things passed through him untouched.

Ilya only noticed Shane Hollander was also being bullied because he recognised the tone of it immediately. At first it didn't look like anything: just boys talking, laughing amongst themselves. But Ilya stood close enough in the lunch queue to hear the exact tone of it.

Shane was two ahead of him, balancing his tray in both hands, his lunch exactly the same as yesterday—yogurt, blueberries. Plain chicken, brown rice, and a side of salad. With apple juice.

“That all you eat?” Said the boy ahead of him.

Shane looked down, as though he hadn't realised anyone was watching.

“Yes.”

“Every day?” the boy beside him snorted.

“Yes.” Shane said uncertainly.

“Because you like it?” The first boy smiled then, a little too interested. “Or because if you eat anything else the world ends?”

The laughter that followed made more eyes turn their way.

Shane frowned, but answered shortly anyway. “No. It's just consistent.”

One of them elbowed the other, like there was a funnier joke hidden somewhere, and Shane's eyes followed the movement.

Ilya stood behind them, tray pressed against his stomach, and felt something unpleasant tighten in his jaw.

Shane seemed to understand entirely what was happening. But he just shifted his tray slightly and waited for the line to move, as if the conversation had happened normally.

Ilya looked at the back of Shane's neck for a long moment, at the flush he could just make out creeping above his collar. Ilya tapped his fingers to the edge of his tray restlessly, but he didn't have anything to offer the boy. He couldn't even muster up the energy to defend *himself* these days.

Over lunch, Ilya moved food around his tray and left half of it there. At practice, he skated at half capacity and didn't care. At media training, when his accent caught on a word, the boys at the back laughed again.

Ilya looked at them once, then looked back at the instructor. That always seemed to annoy them more, and Ilya didn't care. He didn't care, he didn't care, he didn't care.

Why would he? He had an exit plan.

That evening he placed two more pills into the mint tin.

Six, now.

He stared at them for a long while, listening as the rest of the room settled around him. Someone brushing teeth on the other side of the wall. Water running in the bathroom. A locker slamming, two sets of footsteps running down the hall.

His hands were shaking slightly, enough to make the pills rattle softly against the tin.

He put them away quickly and shut the drawer, the sound too loud even with all the traffic in the room.

He lay back and pressed his palms against his eyes until white sparks burst behind them.

“You can think of something else,” he told himself quietly, in Russian. *“Come on. Think.”*

On the other side of the room, Shane shifted restlessly in bed.

Ilya turned towards the wall and wished, without any particular faith, that something would just kill him in his sleep. The thought was almost a balm over his racing mind, and he felt his body slowly start to sink.

The next morning, he woke to a socked foot hooked to the curve of his armpit and a hand bunched in the fabric of the leg of his joggers.

And the steady breathing of Shane Hollander in his bed.

Chapter End Notes

if you liked this chapter give a kudos or if u have any thoughts, leave a comment so I know what's working!!!! love youuuuu

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

TW: Mention of blood, self-harm, knives etc. Suicide ideation.

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

Shane ended up in his bed every night for the next two week. They never talked about it the next day, and it wasn't even awkward.

Shane had clearly started to find it harder to rouse himself awake at his usual time, since he'd finally unlocked deeper sleep in Ilya's bed. Ilya only envied him for it, because he still spent too long wishing he were dead and too little time actually getting any sleep himself.

His mind wouldn't shut off, and more than once he found himself reaching for one of the little white pills in his bedside drawer, but he stopped himself.

He was going to need those eventually, and he wouldn't go wasting them.

Six pills eventually became eight, but the last two came with a warning that if this became a habit, the doctor would have to refer him to the counsellor.

Shane and Ilya didn't really speak outside of the little space in Ilya's corner of the room.

Shane listened as some boys called Ilya names—bitching about how undeserving he was of the first spot—in the locker room. And Ilya watched as someone roughly smacked Shane's shoulder and asked him what the rulebook said about receiving a minor penalty and a major penalty at the same stoppage. And when Shane answered sincerely, the room burst into laughter.

This happened over and over again, and the boys seemed to enjoy quizzing him on things Shane would clearly know the answers to.

It happened again in video review, when the lights were dim as clips played across the projector screen.

Ilya was only half paying attention as he usually was, spending most of it staring at the backs of Shane Hollander's impressive biceps two rows ahead of him.

"Hollander," said a boy from their left, leaning over.

Shane looked up from his notes.

"If a player loses his helmet during play, what's the procedure?"

Shane's shoulders shifted slightly, his discomfort clear, yet he answered evenly.

"The player has to either retrieve and replace it properly or leave the ice immediately. If he continues participating in the play without a helmet, the referee can assess a minor penalty."

The boy nodded seriously as his friends laughed. Ten minutes later, the boy leaned over again.

"Hollander."

Shane nodded down at his notebook.

"What year was the forward pass legalised?"

Ilya could see the imperceptible way Shane shrank into his seat.

"I don't know. I only know NHL rule changes."

The boy grinned wide, like he'd finally cracked him. Ilya watched his perfect smile and wanted badly to knock his teeth out next practice.

Ilya knew why he wasn't reacting to his own bullying. What he didn't understand was why Shane wasn't. He was just sitting there, taking it, and at points, acting as though it was all normal.

When the session finally ended, chairs scraped backwards across the floor and the room dissolved into noise. Ilya dragged his body through the motions, halfway out of his seat when the boy stalked closer, slinging an unwelcome arm around Shane's shoulders.

"Hollander," he said, quieter now, only for select ears. "What does the rulebook say about being the biggest fucking nerd in North America?"

A few people snorted, but Shane only smiled politely, shrugging the boy's arm off and returning to putting away his things. And sure, Ilya could maybe understand staying quiet, but he couldn't wrap his mind around meeting vermin like this with patience and politeness.

The bullying only overlapped once during team bonding, when Coach assigned them both as leads to Team A and Team B. A group of boys to the right groaned.

"Fucking great. It's the robot and the other robot."

Shane winced his way, clearly having heard, and Ilya raised his brows back as they both got into their positions.

I won't always be here, he reminded himself privately. *None of it matters.*

"Now, you two," Coach said to them both. "Remember to play nice. I don't want any of that rivalry crap."

Ilya nodded solemnly. Right, the rivalry.

If only they all knew that Shane Hollander had spent the last two weeks sneaking into his bed every night.

As always, Shane gave it his all and Ilya gave it nothing. Coach told him off for wasting everybody's time.

That night, Shane didn't wait for Ilya to settle into bed before he crawled in, sitting cross-legged on the foot of the bed again. Ilya looked over his Canucks jersey, remembering that night on the roof.

He'd gone up to the roof a few times since then, but it had become too associated with the boy he knew was sleeping soundly in his bed. He'd smoke a few cigarettes instead, leaning over to assess the same concrete patch that would have been his fate, if it weren't for Shane Hollander. In the end, when he was done, he picked up the cigarette butts and carried them back down with him.

Shane had somehow become part of his routine. The mattress would dip at around the same time every night, and eventually Shane's breathing would settle into something deep beside him.

But Ilya hated that on the nights Shane took longer to come over, he found himself listening for it.

Looking at the boy in front of him now, sitting on top of his NEDP-issued duvet, Ilya could vaguely recognise that he was suppressing more than he realised.

"Do *you* like it here?" Shane asked after a long moment.

Ilya leaned his head back slowly against the headboard. "No, Hollander."

"Oh," Shane said. "Yeah. I think me too."

Ilya kept his eyes on him, dragging them down the blue-green-white of his jersey and landing on his hands. They were tangled anxiously together in his lap.

"I guess we will be out of here for Christmas break. We get 10 days off. I miss my parents. Are you planning to go back to Russia?"

His loneliness was clear in every line of his body. Ilya winced in empathy, even though it was a little different. Shane had people to go back to.

"No, I don't think so," he said. *Not unless it's in a body bag labelled human remains*, he wanted to say.

"Oh," Shane offered. He lifted the cover on his end of the bed, starting to crawl in, before Ilya stopped him.

"Ah. Hollander, I don't really feel like getting kicked in face tonight."

Shane paused, the corners of his mouth tilting down.

“Oh. Er,” he mumbled, slowly starting to crawl back out from under the duvet. “Okay, yeah.”

Blyat. No, that wasn’t what Ilya had meant.

He reached out suddenly for Shane’s wrist, stopping him just before he left the bed entirely.

“I mean,” Ilya blurted out, watching as Shane looked down at his hand still holding onto him. “You can sleep up here. Is fine.”

Letting go slowly, Ilya scooted back towards the wall.

He breathed again when Shane moved forward, getting into bed right next to him, the right way up this time.

The bed was slightly bigger than a single, but having them both in it this way meant that their arms were flush together. Ilya tracked the warmth of it as it travelled through the rest of his cold, cold, cold body.

“Thank you,” Shane said quietly.

Ilya didn’t respond, and it took a while for him to give in to sleep, long after Shane’s breathing had evened out.

In the morning, of course, Ilya only wished he were dead.

He kept his body facing the wall, even as he heard Shane starting to wake up, slowly detaching himself from Ilya’s back and untangling their legs carefully enough not to wake him.

Ilya was already awake. He only wished he wasn’t at all.

He lay there through the morning. He wasn’t sure what time it was exactly when he heard his privacy curtain shift.

“You missed conditioning again,” Shane said.

Ilya didn’t move to reply, keeping his face turned to the wall.

“Ilya,” Shane tried again. “You missed conditioning.”

Ilya did turn to him eventually, but he didn’t really say anything. He simply looked at Shane dully, his cheek creased from being in the same position for too long.

Clearly not knowing what else to do, Shane brought out a pack of biscuits and a banana he’d saved from lunch. He placed them on the nightstand before walking back to his side of the room. He must have picked them up specifically for him, because it wasn’t likely Shane would switch up on his typical lunch order.

That happened a lot from then on. Ilya stayed in a lot. He talked too little and barely ate anything, which was evidently really important to Shane because they were athletes and had

to follow a certain caloric intake. He'd take away the bruised banana still left there uneaten, replace it with an apple and a strawberry pudding.

Most of the time nobody noticed Ilya was missing except for the registry. But Shane definitely noticed, because Ilya was going to get himself kicked out. He told him exactly that on the fifth day Ilya had missed practice.

“You’re going to get yourself kicked out.”

Ilya turned over, finding Shane already lying down facing him. But Ilya still didn’t say anything. He didn’t remember the last time he’d spoken. It had definitely been a few days.

Shane looked like he wanted to say something again. After a long moment, though, he shuffled in closer, tucking himself under Ilya’s chin.

Ilya let himself breathe in the peppermint of his shampoo and closed his eyes.

Except he couldn’t sleep.

It was two hours later that he found himself growing desperate, wanting his heart to just stop beating.

This was not like himself, and he could recognise that he was currently losing the logical side of him.

He peeled himself away from the bed and slipped out of the room in a rush.

He didn’t know what it was he was looking for—he just knew he needed to find a way, any way, to make it all stop. Eight pills would only land him in the hospital with a pump stuffed down his throat.

He found himself in the basement kitchen. It was dark, almost too dark, except for the moonlight hitting the steel worktops, and Ilya felt his way around clumsily, hands reaching for cupboards and drawers. He stopped when he reached the stove, turning on the small light above it.

Squinting, he looked across the counter frantically until he spotted a knife block at the far edge, near the refrigerator.

He stumbled over, his shaking hand reaching for the medium-sized knife in the middle.

He turned it slowly beneath the soft light.

Could he actually do it like this?

He’d never had a problem with blood, but that had always been small scrapes and cuts here and there. This would have to be deep, irreparable.

There would be so much blood.

He dropped the knife with a clatter, feeling too unstable.

Leaning forward, he lowered his head until he could feel the cold steel of the worktop against his forehead and focused on evening out his breathing.

He'd have to think about this with a clear mind.

He'd have to come up with a proper plan. With a time and a place, and a way of getting the knife out of there without it being missed. He'd have to use his time efficiently for this to work.

It would be at night again, obviously. But where? Ideally, he could find somewhere easy to clean up, like the locker room showers or... no, that would risk being found by one of his peers. He feverishly wished there was a room made of nothing but steel... that would be ideal for the clean-up.

How do they do it in the movies? A bathtub, usually. Ilya didn't think there was a bathtub around, but the thought of it was peaceful despite all the blood.

If he couldn't go in a warm bath tinted pink with his blood, then he'd head to the woods out back.

Yes! The woods! Surely no one would find him there until they'd launch the search party. A policeman would be the one to discover him, most likely.

Slowly, he stood back up, placed the knife back in the block, and headed back to bed.

His thoughts were already whirring with this next plan of action, but his body felt soothed by the direction, finally easing off enough for his exhaustion to really set in.

As he snuck back into his bed, Shane grumbled something, piecing himself back into Ilya's body.

Ilya leaned into it, savouring it for the short time he could have it. He just hoped the boy hadn't formed any sort of attachment. Ilya intended on leaving behind as little mess as possible.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya being like gee I wonder if this boy who can't sleep unless its next to me will miss me when I off myself, hmmm probably not!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

TW: Suicide ideation. Almost attempt (x1). Thoughts of self-harm.

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

He decided to take a few days to really finalise his plan. It was a little stressful, thinking through all the details.

He hadn't been too keen on it at first, and as much as he wanted to disappear, it was truly a brutal way to go like that, bleeding out alone in the cold autumn night, surrounded by a vast emptiness. He had hoped to be kinder to himself when he eventually did it.

Sharing a bed with Shane was inconvenient to his planning in a way, because it was hard to plan something like that when the boy next to him had a loose grip on his wrist and his breath was warming his shoulder. Ilya would drag his gaze away whenever he caught himself staring, which was more often than he would ever admit.

One morning, as Shane dozed in and out of sleep half on top of him, Ilya's phone buzzed. It was a voicemail from Alexei, and dread dragged its way slowly up his spine. He clicked play.

Papa's been on my ass ever since you got yourself sent to camp. It's no surprise to me you weren't good enough to get straight in. But now I have to suffer because of it. Maybe you should follow Mama's example and just save us all the trouble.

Ilya listened to the tone click off and lay there staring at his phone for a long moment. Then he found himself laughing, quick and short, unable to hold the sound in. Because really, *he was trying*.

Shane sighed next to him at the sound, stirring awake.

"What was that?"

"Hmm?" Ilya asked, still too in his head. He turned his face into Shane's hair.

"Your phone."

"Ah, is just my family," Ilya started. "My family misses me."

He smirked as he said it. He couldn't even take himself seriously hearing it leave his mouth.

Shane shifted to look up at him, wiping the sleep from his eyes. "He didn't sound very nice."

Ilya felt his expression ease a little, softened by the sight of Shane's eyebrows sticking up every which way. For a boy so hung up on moving the right way, eating the right way, speaking the right way, he was a complete mess when he slept.

He reached up and smoothed a thumb over his brow. "Is just how they speak in Russia."

Shane frowned.

"Do you miss them?"

Ilya hummed again. He felt calm, despite the horrible wake-up call from his brother.

"I miss my mom," he told Shane in the end. "I will be with her soon."

"You said you're not going back to Russia for Christmas, right? Where's your mom? Is she not in Russia too?"

Ilya smoothed his thumb slowly across Shane's other brow, trying for time.

He was saved from answering when their 06:00 alarm sounded. It was something they'd both had to come to a compromise over—Shane wanting to wake earlier and Ilya wanting to sleep in. They'd settled somewhere in the middle, in the end.

He reached over Shane to turn it off, purposely crushing him into the mattress on the way, making Shane yelp out a laugh.

Ilya smacked a hand over his mouth, though there was no real need. The other boys had probably noticed by now that Shane never woke in his own bed.

Ilya was only surprised the rumour hadn't spread across campus yet.

He didn't care for his own sake. He was mainly worried that Shane's bullying would persist—might even get worse if the rest of the boys got wind of it—and it didn't seem fair that he would have to deal with that alone, considering Ilya wouldn't be around to get bullied too.

It was a great effort, on Ilya's part, to minimise any after-effects his death might bring.

The two still didn't interact during the day, though Ilya could never turn right away when he'd spot Shane sitting in the corner of the room, drinking his apple juice or going over his notes in between sessions.

Sometimes Ilya would catch himself searching for him before he even entered a room, knowing where he may find him.

It annoyed him every time he noticed himself doing it, and especially at the fact that he was relieved when he found him. A quick glance towards the usual spot on the bench or the second row during video review.

Shane was always the same—always alone, and always quiet.

He was quiet too, to Ilya's growing irritation, each time the same boys would bound over to antagonise him with their questions.

He asked him about it one night, about why he never defended himself. Shane had shrugged and asked him the same question back.

But before Ilya had managed to fabricate an answer—something other than the truth of *I won't always be here, so none of it matters*—Shane had continued on.

"I know how to fight. My mom already considered how people may treat me, because I'm different."

Ilya nodded, urging him on.

"It's the verbal stuff I'm not good at. I never know what to say, so usually I try to ignore it." Shane admitted, expression a little ashamed. "But I am trained in Jujutsu."

"So, why you don't just fight?" Ilya repeated.

"I just came here to play. I can't play if I get benched. And I guess I'm used to it, anyway."

He said the last bit like it was a completely normal thing to say, even with a little shrug.

Ilya was quite good at being alone. He knew to square his shoulders and put on a bored face, like it didn't affect him. He wasn't sure he believed this boy was capable of the same.

They were sitting in their positions again. Ilya sat against the headboard, Shane facing him at the foot of the bed, his arms wrapped loosely around his raised knees.

"Used to it, how?" Ilya asked, his brows furrowed.

Shane thought about it for a second. He seemed to remember something then, his expression brightening a hint as he said it.

"My dad says I should never change who I am."

The words sounded memorised, something repeated often internally, probably since childhood. Because clearly he had a father who filled his life with kindness.

"He says the right people will find me eventually and they'll stick around."

The statement itself was so absurdly optimistic that only Shane Hollander would say something like that with complete sincerity.

Ilya watched Shane's smile hungrily.

"And have they?" he asked, watching that smile dip just slightly.

Shane shook his head and crawled over to Ilya's side, sitting right beside him, their arms touching.

It was only eight in the evening, and the room was still empty of the other boys, probably still off in the communal areas playing video games or watching a game in the TV room. Either way, Ilya was always the first in bed, and with each passing day, Shane was joining him earlier and earlier.

He wanted to comfort him, now, but he didn't really have anything to offer. He didn't know what this boy's future looked like, and he had no way of sticking around long enough to influence it in any way.

Instead, he muttered, a small smile tugging on his lips as the image came to him, "Well, you will be best player in the MLH soon anyway. Then everyone will be begging to be your friend."

And Ilya truly believed it. He'd watched as Shane had spent the entire week embarrassing half the camp during drills—seen the way he'd threaded impossible passes through traffic and skated circles around boys two years older than him.

Shane's smile returned, big and wide at that, huffing out a pleased laugh.

"And you'll be second best."

Ilya only snorted at that. "Yes. Sure," he said.

Second best was beyond generous after the way he'd been moving carelessly through the programme. He had been putting in just enough effort not to get kicked out, because at least he had a roof over his head in the meantime while he planned.

He was hoping to be gone before the rookie season started, so he likely wouldn't be considered 'best' anything.

They'd probably release a few articles about his death. *No. 1 Prospect Found Dead in Elite Hockey Programme: Boston Raiders Send Condolences to the Rozanov Family.*

As the thought washed calmly over him, he shifted lower in bed to settle in. At the same moment, Shane turned to face him, and his elbow stabbed into Ilya's ribs.

He scrunched up his face. "Ow, Hollander."

Shane only giggled. "Sorry."

Ilya sighed, turning his face to him.

"Is okay," he said.

As reluctant as Ilya was to admit it, this space had become the highlight of his days. It was a terrifying thought. Ilya wasn't supposed to care about anything.

"Do you really think it'll get better?" Shane asked after a moment. "I mean, when I start with Montreal, and when you head to Boston... do you think things will get better?"

Ilya hadn't really included himself in the equation when he'd mentioned the future, but he couldn't imagine telling this boy—this boy who was so ready for the life he was chasing—that he didn't believe it ever would for himself.

So instead, he reflected the question back.

“What do you think?”

“I think it will,” he said with conviction. “I think this is just the rough start to a better story. Like, most truly happy people didn't start off happy, but they got there eventually.”

Ilya hummed.

He wondered if this was what two well-adjusted parents resulted in. He wondered if he would have wanted to live long enough to see this supposed happy future if his mother had still been around to raise him, or if he'd had a better father.

“You will have a happy life, Hollander.”

Some of the tension drained out of Shane's face then, and he ducked his head towards Ilya's shoulder, letting his forehead rest there.

They slept early that night. Well—Shane slept early, tangling his limbs through Ilya's. Ilya mostly still couldn't sleep.

There had been a few opportunities for him to go through with his plan. Those nights had been especially quiet, and his headspace had been exactly right for it.

But when he had gone to untangle himself from the boy next to him, he'd only grumbled and held on tighter.

It was four nights later, when that desperation finally started simmering beneath his skin again, that he decided tonight would be the night. He was set on it, determined to follow through on each little point of his plan.

Carefully, he started to pull his wrist out of Shane's grip, pausing each time the boy shifted.

Once his hand was free, he sat up to reach for Shane's left leg, holding his breath as he slowly dragged it off his thigh.

He released a long breath, finally able to move to get off the bed, but as he was moving over Shane and settling one foot on the floor, Shane groaned.

“Where are you going?”

“Go back to sleep, Shane, okay?” Ilya rushed out mindlessly, setting both feet on the ground now.

He moved quickly, shuffling through the curtain, heading out the door and feeling his way through the hallway.

He didn't know when exactly he reached the block of knives. One second he was moving through the campus and the next he was holding onto that same medium-sized knife with both hands.

Reminding himself he had to be efficient, he told himself to move, to walk out of the building and into the woods.

But he was locked in place, his breathing thick and heavy.

"You have a plan," he told himself in Russian, though he could barely hear it. His ears felt stuffed with cotton. *"Just follow the plan."*

"—Ilya."

Blyat.

He set the knife down hard on the counter, turning to find Shane coming up on his right.

He looked like he'd followed him straight out of bed. His hair was partly limp over his forehead, one leg of his joggers pushed up past his shin. He squinted back at Ilya, still half asleep.

"What are you doing?"

Ilya only looked at him in shock.

"Are you making something to eat?" Shane tried again, coming closer and looking around them.

"Da," he said, shaking the fuzz out of his head. *"—yes. You are—are you hungry?"*

Shane was looking at Ilya too intently now, and Ilya couldn't handle that. He looked away, moving swiftly to the pantry.

"Do you want something to eat?" he said, abruptly starting to pull down ingredients as he spotted them.

Shane nodded silently, still just watching as Ilya got to work.

Eventually, Shane lifted himself up onto the steel counter next to the refrigerators, blocking the knife block from Ilya's view. Ilya thought that was maybe a little symbolic.

"Did I wake you?" Ilya asked, just for something else to say.

He was making a shittier version of his usual tuna melt, which he'd mastered over the years. It was one of the few things he'd learned to make with the sparse pantry back at home. It had always been stocked with cans of tuna and very little else. His father always said it was the most effective source of protein.

Looking up at Shane now, Shane nodded again in place of an answer.

Ilya worked in silence then, as Shane sat and watched, one leg swinging slowly back and forth. And when the tuna melts were ready, they mostly ate in silence too.

Except halfway through his, Shane set it back down.

“I guess *we’re* kind of friends,” he said then, entirely comfortable. The way somebody looked when they’d finally decided they were welcome to step through the door.

Ilya felt his heart stop for a second.

“We can’t be friends, Hollander,” he said before he could stop himself, slamming the metaphorical door right in the boys face, wincing when his voice echoed off the steel.

He held his breath, sensing the fragility of the quiet that followed.

“Oh,” Shane said, finally stilling the swinging of his leg. He nodded once, sharp, like he was helping Ilya out by pretending it didn’t matter.

Ilya tried to meet his eyes, but Shane wouldn’t look at him.

“Yeah,” he nodded again. “I get that.”

“Shane, I...”

Only, Shane shook his head then, still not meeting his eyes. Another long silence stretched on.

Then, reluctantly, he said, “Is it okay if I still sleep in your bed?”

Ilya *hated* himself.

“Yes,” he said, gathering their plates and setting them in the sink for someone else to worry about. “Come on then.”

Chapter End Notes

okay no really, i'm going to ease up with the next chapter...

Thank you so much for all the comments, it genuinely makes me so happy and motivated each time I get a new one <3333

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

TW: as always, suicide ideation.

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

Ilya quickly became obsessed with measuring the space between their bodies, and would mentally estimate how many inches it would take for him to shift closer, until their skin would touch.

Mainly, his obsession came from the fact that Shane no longer crept over when the room first started to get dark. He stayed on his side of the room, sitting on his own creaky mattress, where Ilya could make out the soft blue light of his phone screen through his privacy curtains.

Now, Shane would wait until midnight—sometimes even until one or two in the morning—until he looked about ready to collapse from exhaustion, before he finally moved over.

He would slip under Ilya's duvet like a thief trying not to trip a pressure-sensitive alarm, his movements measured and agonisingly careful.

The worst of all, though, was that in bed everything was different now. Shane was entirely rigid.

Ilya would lie perfectly still in the dark, waiting, hoping, for the spike of heat from Shane's over-warm skin, only to realise that Shane had his hands tightly folded beneath his own chest or tucked tightly between his thighs.

He was actively and physically pinning himself down. He was holding his own body hostage for fear of reaching out in his sleep and violating the boundary Ilya had so recklessly drawn, not having meant it at all.

Once or twice, Ilya woke up in the grey twilight to find Shane's hand unconsciously resting on his chest, just over the easy hum of his heartbeat. Ilya would freeze, holding his breath, faking sleep.

Because he knew that the moment Shane's eyes blinked open and he realised where his hand was, he would rip it away. He'd untangle his legs with frantic efficiency and bolt out of the bed before he could really blink the sleep out of his eyes.

As the days crawled forward, Ilya realised the morbid irony of how difficult it actually was to manage to kill yourself. It required coordination, effort, and scheduling—all things that his

depression was steadily stripping from his bones. It didn't exactly help that Ilya currently lacked the energy to even lace his skates on properly.

He dipped in and out of heavy, paralysing episodes where the room dragged underwater.

He would wake up in the middle of the day, long after the others had left for the rink, to find a quiet trail of Shane's worry left behind on his bedside table. An iced tea and a blueberry muffin. Half a wrapped turkey sandwich and a small square of dark chocolate.

So Shane was still monitoring his nutrition. If Ilya were to ever die in his sleep like he so wished, his heart sparked a little private glow knowing that at least he would go with some food in his stomach.

When Ilya finally managed to drag his body back into the programme, he moved through it like he was already a ghost. He skated mindlessly, listened to coaches with a blank, flat stare, and let everything slide off him.

But his eyes were always on Shane.

He tracked him everywhere. Across the room, across the ice, or as he sat by the empty lockers speaking desperate and low into his phone, mostly in French.

Ilya couldn't understand the words, but he could hear the raw vulnerability in the cadence, not realising Ilya was there.

"Non papa, ça va. C'est juste que... vous me manquez, toi puis maman..."

"Ouais. Est-ce que je peux parler à maman?"

"I promise, dad. Ça va."

But then Shane asked his father something twice, his voice dropping into an anxious but hopeful whisper: *"T'es sûr? T'es sûr?"*

Ilya had stared at the wall, feeling entirely locked out of whatever structured, safe world Shane belonged to then.

He could roughly guess what those last two words meant. In Russia, if he'd asked his father if he was sure, he would have probably gotten hit.

They were moving into December now, and the Montana wind was vicious, rattling the glass panes of the complex. Ilya knew Shane was sneaking up to the roof even more often since the rejection, seeking the absolute quiet of the freezing air to cope with the isolation.

Ilya beat himself up over it continually. He had confused him. Shane had simply assessed the situation for exactly what it was—the whispered talks late into the night, giggling across the shared mattress, the midnight snack he'd made him—and his logical, rule-abiding brain had calculated that this meant they were friends.

Now, Shane had taken the rejection for what it was, had adapted to the new protocol, and had left Ilya alone.

Except for when they crossed paths in the halls. Shane wouldn't ignore him; he would look right at Ilya, offering a polite "hey" and a kind, gentle smile before moving courteously on.

Ilya shocked himself by how badly he missed him.

By the last week of November, the little white tablets in his mint tin had finally reached ten. But the last two had come with a price in the end. Because of his missed practices and the way he just stared through everyone, the doctor had ordered that he see the camp counsellor once a week to address his "insomnia."

The first meeting had passed in a gruelling silence. He had sat in a plush armchair across from a greying man with soft sweaters, refusing to offer anything beyond the initial baseline.

"I am fine," he'd said. "I have always had hard time to sleep. Nothing is different."

Then he had spent the remaining twenty minutes looking out the window, in the direction of the black lake there. He imagined filling his pockets with rocks, before walking into it, letting the freezing water drag over his head.

The worst part of the depression, Ilya decided, was how incredibly boring it was. He was starting to bore himself.

He couldn't remember who he had been before the flatness took over, or if he had ever been a normal person who enjoyed things.

Had he liked hockey? Maybe right at the start, before Grigory had dug his claws into it. Now, he just watched the other prospects barrel around him during scrimmages and wondered where they found the enthusiasm.

He passed mirrors in the locker room and cringed.

He hadn't realised he'd gotten so skinny. Not quite scrawny yet, but he was no Shane Hollander—who was growing bigger and stronger with every session, who had never disappointed a single person that mattered.

Sometimes he thought he wanted to *be* Shane Hollander. But more than that he wanted to be *near* Shane Hollander, to be under the heavy weight of his body, impossibly close.

But beneath all of that, he mostly just wanted to be at the bottom of that black lake.

During a routine afternoon scrimmage, Ilya stood near the boards, his eyes glued to the centre dot.

He'd started to avoid centre positions, because his new shrinking physique had ironically made him a bigger target, and it hurt too badly now when the other boys skated straight for him.

He watched Shane on the line instead, his posture ready, flawless, terrifying.

Across from Shane was the boy with the perfect smile. Ilya could make out the movement of his mouth, teeth glittering as he taunted Shane, saying something low beneath the buzzing of the arena.

But Shane didn't blink. He was entirely zoned in; a machine built for Montreal, waiting for the puck to hit the ice. He had never lost a face-off in the entire history of the camp, and he likely wouldn't now.

Except right before the referee's hand twitched, the boy aggressively skewed forward, slamming the cage of his helmet hard against Shane's with a sharp metallic crack.

The impact forced Shane's head back a little, and the boy leaned into the space.

Ilya wasn't close enough to hear it when he said, "Out there, everyone thinks the sun shines out your ass. When do you think they're going to realise that *this* Shane Hollander is really just a pathetic, friendless loser?"

Shane's shoulders didn't just tense, then; no, they completely locked. Ilya saw the way his brows lifted, a terrifying flash of something raw breaking through his armour and breaking his focus for a single fraction of a second.

As if on instinct, Shane's face turned, gaze locking right onto Ilya.

The puck dropped—and just as quickly, it slid away beneath his skates.

For the first time since arriving to this camp, Shane Hollander had lost a face-off.

With Shane's eyes still frozen on him, Ilya didn't think. He didn't calculate the consequences, and he certainly didn't care about the upcoming evaluation reports.

The dead flatness in his chest evaporated, replaced by a violent surge of anger.

Before the play could even transition out of the zone, Ilya drove his skates onto the centre with three long accelerated strides and dropped his shoulder directly into the unsuspecting boy's sternum, watching him go down hard, his helmet flying off.

The whistle blew repeatedly, cutting through sharp and frantic. Coaches were screaming, players were converging, but Ilya just stood over him, his chest heaving, his eyes fixed on the boy's pale stunned face.

He wanted to take his stick and break it over those perfect teeth to make him pay for the look he had just put on Shane's face.

Only when Ilya turned his head, searching, Shane was looking at him now, his eyes wide and horrified—and that was so, *so* much worse.

Predictably, Ilya got benched for the rest of the game.

That night, the room was suffocating.

Ilya lay in his bed, the curtains open for maybe the first time since that first day, his pulse drumming an unstable rhythm against his ribs. He wasn't waiting for Shane to cross over into his bed, because Shane wasn't even in the room.

Midnight passed. Then 01:00.

By 02:00, the worry had mutated into something clawing and desperate under his skin. Ilya couldn't breathe.

He pulled himself out of bed, and threw a heavy dark hoodie over his grey ones.

He took the stairs two at a time, the cold concrete seeping all the way through his socked feet, until he reached the heavy metal door of the roof, which was already unlocked.

The wind nearly knocked the air from his lungs. It was freezing.

Ilya found him immediately, sitting hunched over against the low concrete ledge where they had first met. His knees were pulled tightly to his chest, and he was wearing two layers of hoodies too—still entirely insufficient for the Montana winter. He was shaking violently from the chill.

He didn't look up when Ilya stepped closer and slowly sat down against the ledge right next to him, close enough that the fabric of their hoodies brushed.

When Shane finally spoke, his jaw was so stiff from the cold that the words clicked awkwardly together.

"They say... they say it's going to snow tomorrow. Or the day after." Which was so observational and just so heartbreakingly him.

Ilya looked at the profile of his face, catching his frozen lashes. Shane's chest hitched with his next breath.

"Extreme weather can shut down the local mountain passes for days." he said, shaking his head no. "It *can't* snow."

Ilya couldn't tear his eyes away.

"My parents," Shane whispered, like he so badly wanted what he was about to say to still be true. "I've been... They're coming to get me earlier, in three days."

At this, Ilya tapped his head to the cement behind him. It was still maybe three weeks before the Christmas break even started. Which meant that Shane would be gone for just about over a month.

"They spoke with the league coordinators already, and they agreed. My dad's coming to take me home."

The sheer weight of Shane's isolation hit him all at once. Shane hadn't just been calling his father to check in; he had been silently pleading for a rescue without outright saying it.

And his family—unlike Ilya's, who would have called him soft and left him to rot—had actually listened.

"The roads will not stay closed," Ilya said steadily, though his heart was pounding at the prospect of Shane leaving. He reached out, his hand light and warm, and slipped it into Shane's own frozen one.

Shane's brows furrowed at the touch, looking down at their hands. Ilya only readjusted the hold, slipping his fingers in between Shane's and squeezing.

"They have big trucks here, and they will clear the snow, Shane."

Shane nodded hesitantly, letting out a ragged breath.

His body finally collapsed out of its defensive shell, slumping completely into Ilya's side, his hand holding on with a crushing grip against Ilya's.

"You will come to bed now?" Ilya asked quietly

Shane shifted off his shoulder, leaning back enough to look at Ilya properly then, finally meeting his eyes. Ilya wanted to smooth the uncertainty right off his brow.

He kept hold of Shane's hand all the way back downstairs. Neither of them spoke. The stairwell was quiet except for the shuffle of their footsteps and the occasional shiver that ran through Shane's body.

Back in the room, Shane hesitated as he climbed into bed after him, not entirely sure where he was allowed anymore.

"Come," Ilya summoned.

Shane obeyed immediately, shifting closer beneath the blankets and curling in on himself.

Ilya hissed, feeling the cold coming off of him. Even under two hoodies and the thick blankets, he was still freezing.

So Ilya caught both of his hands and shoved them angrily beneath his own hoodie, and hissed again when he felt Shane's frozen fingertips on his warming abdomen.

Shane sniffled.

The angle had brought them even closer, and Ilya closed in on the remaining inches between them, until Shane was tucked right under his chin, clicking right back into place.

have y'all caught how I haven't named a single other character in the camp across this whole fic aside from Shane and Ilya themselves. like not even staff. I want this shit to feel downright claustrophobic, and show just how isolated they feel

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

He decided to make the most of having Shane close, while he could, before Shane left Montana. An ice-cold wave of clarity had crashed through him up on the roof when Shane had revealed the news. The new deadline changed the math of everything.

He was already practically a dead man walking, and the stakes of fucking up Shane's head now felt inevitable, no matter how fiercely protective Ilya had been of his distance.

"Hollander," Ilya murmured into the quiet morning air. He was smoothing a light, tentative touch up and down the muscles of Shane's back, tracking the solid heavy form of his body.

Shane shifted in his sleep, a soft sound escaping his throat.

After a moment, his eyes blinked open, lifting his head off Ilya's chest to look at him. With his hair messy and his eyes heavy with sleep, he looked so sweet it left an aching hollow in Ilya's ribs.

But then he watched as reality clicked in. Realising how they were positioned—how he was practically still sprawled half on top of Ilya, their limbs a tangled mess—Shane flinched back, scrambling to put distance between them on the narrow mattress.

"Sorry."

He avoided Ilya's eyes completely, his shoulders hunching over as if he had broken every single rule in his sleep and expected the penalty to drop at any second.

Ilya rose onto his elbows, shifting forward, trying to catch his gaze. "Hey..."

Shane moved to leave the bed entirely, his feet swinging out toward the cold floor. Ilya's hand shot out, his fingers catching Shane's forearm before he could slip quickly away.

"Can you stay?"

The words felt heavy. Ilya selfishly wished he could ask him to stay here, in Montana, and not just in his sheets, just now.

Shane finally met his eyes, and Ilya hated the fragile confusion he kept putting on the boy's face these days. He squeezed down on his arm to draw some of the rigid tension out of Shane's shoulders.

"I have to..." Shane started, his voice hitching slightly searching for an excuse.

But Ilya knew it was their off-day. By midday, the complex would come alive with rowdy teenage boys shouting down the halls. Ilya always spent those days hiding in his corner of the

room, staring at the wall, waiting for the sun to set.

Today, he wanted Shane with him, desperately.

“You want me to stay?” Shane asked tentatively, searching Ilya’s face for a trick.

Always, Ilya wanted to say. *I always want you near.*

Instead of speaking, he simply pulled Shane back in by the hold he still had on his arm. Shane followed the movement uncertainly, letting himself be guided backward until he was sitting flush beside Ilya against the wooden headboard, letting out a long shaky breath as the fight left him.

“I’m sorry about last night,” Shane said finally, staring down at his own hands. “I just... I really want to go home.”

Ilya didn’t think he had ever felt truly homesick in his life. He didn’t feel tethered to any place; he didn’t feel emotionally attached to anything or anyone. Except, maybe...

“What do you miss about it?”

“I didn’t expect it to be like this here,” Shane whispered, his voice incredibly small.

Ilya swallowed a bitter taste. He was well aware that his own withdrawal had played a massive part in making Shane feel so isolated.

“Can you tell me about what is like there?” Ilya redirected.

Shane nodded stiffly. “Er...My parents both work a lot, but usually my dad would be at home when I’d get back from school. He’s an amazing cook,” Shane said, and the heavy shadow finally left his face.

Ilya shifted his back against the wall, settling in just to watch him.

“I usually try a lot of new foods back home, different textures. He likes to try new recipes to see which ones I will like.”

“And your favourite?” Ilya asked, his voice low.

“He makes this fried rice with an egg omelette on top when I’m having a hard day eating. With sausages and ketchup.”

“What about your mom?”

“My mom works for the Bank of Canada, but she also manages all my stuff. Like, she handles the meetings and tells me what to do, I guess. My dad taught me how to play hockey when I was a kid, but my mom is the one crazy about it. She’s a little obsessive, but it’s because she’s like me. She says I’ll be in the Hall of Fame one day.”

Ilya huffed a small laugh. “Yes. I think maybe you will.”

Shane considered him nervously, the compliment hanging in the air between them.

“That’s what I want,” Shane said, his voice firming with intense certainty, the way he always got when he spoke about the game. “Don’t you want that too, anymore?”

Ilya didn't want to answer that. He couldn't look at Shane's bright future and talk about his own failures.

“Tell me about your days. In Ottawa,” he asked instead.

“I don’t know, just like—normal stuff,” Shane muttered. “I go down to the rink a lot to train. It’s only fifteen minutes by car. My dad takes me to the lake by my childhood home in the summer, and we swim and share some sandwiches he makes for us.”

Ilya closed his eyes briefly, picturing the scene as Shane went on.

"My mom likes to make us all watch the game together on game nights, and she ends up talking over it the whole time, lecturing me about playing right when it’s my turn.”

A safe house. A father who cooked comfort food on bad days. A mother who yelled at the TV and wanted better for her son. He could understand how those two specific humans would result in the boy sitting next to him now.

“Ilya,” Shane mumbled, breaking the silence. “Are you going to stay here over Christmas?”

Ilya hummed in place of an answer, his eyes still shut, his head resting heavily against the wall.

“Why?”

Ilya opened his eyes and looked at him again. Shane looked anxious, his brow furrowed, which was far from what Ilya wanted.

“Let’s go have breakfast, Hollander.”

Shane turned his head toward the digital clock on the desk. 10:08. They had completely overslept, which meant the main dining hall had already stopped serving.

A sudden blush crept up Shane’s neck, remembering how late they'd gotten into bed the night before.

“I think the canteen is closed.”

Ilya watched his freckles darken over the flush. He instinctively reached a hand up, his fingers brushing light against the heat of Shane's cheek. Shane held perfectly still beneath the touch, shutting his eyes and waiting for Ilya to take his hand back.

Ilya let his fingers linger for one more second before dropping them.

“Then we go find a kitchen, yes?”

Shane's eyes fluttered open. "Yes," he breathed.

They ended up sneaking down into the basement again. Shane was awake enough now to look around nervously, his shoulders tight with the anxiety of getting into trouble.

But Ilya was sure they would not be disturbed. This wasn't the main kitchen on the first floor, which was directly attached to the over-busy canteen. There was one more smaller kitchen tucked away in the upper levels where the admin staff had their lunch.

As soon as they slipped through the door, Ilya's eyes settled immediately on the knife block. A sudden, metallic rushing sound filled his ears at the sight—the familiar, heavy pulse of his own blood.

Trying to ignore the noise in his head, he forced his eyes away and began searching through the cabinets. Not getting any inspiration from the dry goods, he moved to the large commercial fridge.

"Ah!" He pulled out a large, plastic-wrapped pack of hotdog sausages, smacking them onto the stainless steel counter with a wet thud.

Shane had mentioned liking sausages. He watched him curiously as Ilya searched for a pan.

They ended up having hotdogs, without the buns. Shane managed to find a stash of unopened condiment packets in a drawer, and they sat side by side on the cold counter, squeezing ketchup directly onto the meat, eating them with their hands. Though Ilya only made it three bites in before giving up.

"Are you going to be okay?" Shane asked quietly when they had finished. He stayed sitting on the counter, swinging his foot back and forth, watching Ilya rinse the lone skillet in the sink.

"Of course I will be okay," Ilya said lightly. His tone was perfectly conversational, but he was focusing entirely too intently on scrubbing the grease off the metal, his grip harsh and white-knuckled.

Shane nodded, though his own hands were wringing worriedly in his lap.

They spent every single moment together that day. Shane even joined him when Ilya snuck out of the heavy maintenance door at the side of the building to smoke, and looked relieved that it hadn't snowed. The winter air was brutal though, and Shane stood a few feet away, watching cautiously as the smoke left Ilya's lips.

When they finally headed down to the canteen for dinner, Shane quietly slipped into the line three people behind Ilya. To the rest of the prospects in the room, they didn't look like they had come all the way down together.

That night, Ilya forgot to count over the little pills in his bedside drawer. Instead, he reached again, dragging Shane in by the hand, bringing him close into his sheets.

He was too tired to really think any of this through. His brain felt slow and heavy with the knowledge of what was coming.

He knew he would be fucking Shane up in the end. If he wasn't here when January came around. If this all went according to plan, Shane would have to ride out the last few weeks of the programme entirely by himself.

He was essentially leaving Shane with the memory of a ghost; some boy he knew briefly before his rookie season started, and would never see again.

The next day was more of the same, a slow quiet routine of touches and hushed conversations, and the growing tightness in Ilya's chest at the thought of having to say goodbye.

"Can I maybe have your number?" Shane asked sometime in the late afternoon.

They were lazing about on opposite sides of the mattress again, the winter sun hitting Shane's face. He was tapping his fingers restlessly against the wood of the footboard, the sound like a clock ticking down.

"I just mean... in case I need to ask something about the programme. Or—I don't know..."

Ilya stretched his leg out across the mattress, gently pressing his bare foot against Shane's socked one to quiet his nervous tapping.

"Sure, Hollander," Ilya murmured, his voice dry. "I keep you updated on all the homework. Don't worry."

That night, Ilya settled in tightly behind Shane, his chest warming against the furnace that was Shane's body. Shane was leaving tomorrow. Ilya dug his fingertips lightly into his waist, feeling the slow sigh Shane let out in his sleep.

At least he got to spend these last few nights like this. Ilya tried not to think much. He wanted to savour this just as it was right now, in the dark, where he could pretend anything else simply didn't exist.

On Monday morning, Ilya woke to Shane's warm breath puffing right against his collarbone, one of Shane's heavy arms draped completely around Ilya's waist in a protective bear hug.

The alarm kept ringing.

Ilya let it ring out for a moment longer, his fingers curling into the fabric of Shane's shirt, not wanting to leave this small pocket of safety just yet. In the room, he could already hear the other boys groaning at the noise.

Before long, Shane stirred against him, his eyes squeezing shut tighter as he let out a cranky, sleep-thickened mumble.

Ilya chuckled. He reached around Shane's broad shoulders, his arm stretching out to smack the alarm off.

“It’s right to media training this morning, Hollander,” Ilya said softly against his hair.

Shane didn't move. He only dug his face deeper into the crook of Ilya’s neck, his grip around Ilya's waist tightening like a vise. Ilya closed his eyes and held him back. He could completely relate.

They dragged their feet all the way to the media room, where Shane sat directly at the front, and Ilya instinctively drifted to the absolute back.

He stuck to the perimeter during their gym hour too, listlessly spinning the pedals on a bike machine near the north doors.

He was just watching the clock tick on when a short middle-aged woman poked her head through the double doors next to him. “—ane Hollander!” she shouted into the humid air.

Shane raised his head off the bench press, dropping his weights with a loud clatter. He wiped his palms on his shorts and rushed toward the door.

“Yes.”

“Your father is here. Step out into the hall please, Shane.”

Shane’s face went entirely blank with relief, stepping out quickly.

Ilya stepped off the bike, drawn forward by a sudden curiosity. He walked close enough to peer through the gap in the door.

“Dad,” Shane was saying. His father, a man slightly shorter than Shane himself, with mousy hair and kind blue eyes, was nearly drowning in Shane’s massive, athletic embrace. “I'm so sorry.”

“No. No, no. You can always rely on mom and I, Shane.”

“I promise I tried so hard. Is mom disappointed?”

Ilya really wanted to hear the answer, but he couldn’t catch the rest of Mr. Hollander’s reply over the low hum of the gym’s AC system. It didn’t help that his own brain felt sluggish, operating at a fraction of its normal speed.

He shifted his weight closer, causing the heavy door to creak loudly against its hinges, and froze as both Hollanders turned their heads to look directly at him.

“Er, dad... this is...” Shane gave his father a meaningful glance. “Ilya.”

Shane’s father raised his brows in immediate recognition, his posture softening as he stepped forward to shake Ilya’s hand.

“Ilya Rozanov. My wife and I were so glad Shane had made a friend here.”

“Je pense que je me trompais là-dessus, papa...” Shane muttered quickly, looking at the floor.

“Son, you don’t look great,” Mr. Hollander continued, entirely bypassing Shane's interruption as his eyes scanned Ilya’s decaying frame. “You must have lost a lot of weight in here. You look so different from your draft pictures.”

He glanced back at the administrative lady still standing out of earshot, his jaw tightening slightly before he looked back at Ilya.

“Are they not feeding you properly in this place?”

“No, sir, I just...” Ilya stammered, his English catching in his throat. He didn’t know yet how to interact with this man, still assessing what was safe.

“Il fait une dépression,” Shane blurted out, his voice sharp with a strange, frustrated protectiveness, as though he couldn't control his worry anymore. *“Il mange presque pas, puis il s'en fout complètement, du programme.”*

Ilya glared at him, not understanding, and a sudden spark of bitter anger broke through his numbness. He wanted to turn around and walk right back into the gym, away from the exposure.

But Mr. Hollander raised a gentle, staying hand, stopping Ilya in his tracks.

“Don’t speak in French, Shane, it’s rude,” his father said softly.

Then, father and son shared a long silent look—a private language that Ilya had no hope of decoding.

“Ilya, son,” Mr. Hollander said, turning back to him with an easy, encouraging smile. “Would you like to join us for the break?”

Ilya furrowed his brows, the words failing to compute. “Sorry?”

“To Ottawa.”

His heart began to hammer violently against his ribs, a frantic trapped rhythm. He coughed twice, trying to clear the sudden tightness in his throat.

He glanced at Shane, who looked just as stunned by the sudden offer.

It was crazy. It was entirely reckless to even consider saying yes. He had his plan, after all, and executing it would be infinitely smoother with Shane gone from their room, leaving him to his own quiet devices.

“Thank you, sir, but I don't think I would be allowed to leave.”

And anyway, Shane was the hockey prodigy here; he had earned his early release with flawless reports and top-tier metrics. Ilya was practically on the verge of being cut and sent

home packing.

“Call me David, please. And I'm sure we can figure something out here.”

A million conflicting thoughts were rushing through Ilya's head, and he forced himself to take a slow, level breath to keep the panic at bay.

This man wasn't just offering him a plane ticket; he was offering him a temporary respite from the suffocating walls of the programme, the claustrophobia of his own mind.

Ilya had exhausted his limits here. He wasn't even entirely sure he had the physical energy required to successfully go through with his plan in his current state.

He had his blue tin, and while ten pills felt like a decent number, now that his body mass had dropped some more, a few more weeks to ensure he had everything perfect couldn't hurt. He certainly wasn't going to get any more help from the camp doctor, who had already cut off his supply.

In the end, all he managed was, “Thank you, but...I don't have enough money for that.”

“Don't you worry about any of that, son.”

Ilya went to object again, his mouth opening to refuse, but Mr. Hollander clapped a warm, heavy hand onto his shoulder. Ilya jumped at the sudden contact.

“You two go ahead and get your bags packed, and let me go have a word with the Coordinator,” he said.

And just like that, Ilya found himself moving in a total daze, his feet operating on autopilot as he followed Shane back up the concrete stairwell to their room.

Once inside, Ilya sat heavily on the edge of his bed, staring at the floorboards.

Shane stopped right in front of him, his shadow falling over Ilya's lap.

Looking up, Ilya asked, “This was your idea?”

Shane shook his head quickly, his fingers twisting together.

“I'm sorry. He's kind of intense. Both of them are. But...” He looked away, his throat bobbing as he swallowed down his nerves. “You should come. It would be better than staying here.”

Ilya kept his eyes on Shane for a long heavy moment. He didn't know if it was just his own skewed wishful thinking, but Shane looked genuinely terrified for him.

Ilya knew he was losing his grip in this place as it was. He didn't know what it would be like to sit in this room for four weeks without Shane there to keep him sane. Maybe he would end up taking the pills a few nights in out of sheer desperation, even if ten wasn't a total guarantee.

Right now, the prospect of going sounded so much lighter than staying behind to decay.

“Okay.”

Shane’s eyes snapped back to his. “Really?”

“I think so. Maybe, yes.”

Shane’s face instantly split open into a brilliant smile. He practically jumped back in excitement, spinning around to face his own side of the room. He dropped to his knees, reaching beneath his bed to haul out his heavy duffel.

“Come on,” Shane said, his voice bright with a relief that Ilya didn't quite understand. “Let's go.”

A strange numbness took over as he began to pack too, his mind feeling entirely untethered from the heavy movement of his body. There was too much noise in his head, making it impossible to think straight.

He recognised the movements only vaguely, watching his fingers clumsily cramming his clothes into the mouth of the bag.

Then his hand instinctively drifted to the bedside drawer, and without a conscious thought, his fingers found the cool metal of the blue mint tin.

He slid it deep into the bag, just in case.

Chapter End Notes

This fic is relying heavily on the fact that Shane's mum has connections and his dad used to be in the hockey world, so he has the power to come in and grab his kid and his kid's maybe-friend just like that. LOL!

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The one where they finally leave the high-pressure, high-intensity hell that was Montana and finally get to fucking breathe.

Chapter Notes

TW: discussion of disordered eating?

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

“Now,” Mr. Hollander was saying, grabbing Ilya’s bag and lugging it down toward the rental car. “They agreed on a grace period. They’re not happy with you, I gather. Did the Coordinator mention anything to you just now?”

Ilya quickened his pace, his legs feeling heavy and clumsy as he tried to keep up with Shane's steady strides. “She said that if I do not improve after January, I'm off programme.”

Shane’s face dropped, and Ilya didn’t know exactly why it mattered to him. Shane was completely in the clear.

“But it's okay!” Shane said. “We just need to take a break, that’s all.”

It hadn't really registered with Ilya, being given an ultimatum like that, anyway. He’d tried to find the disappointment, or the panic, but there was only a vast empty space where he knew those feelings should be. He’d only worried over how it may complicate his plans.

Getting to the car, Ilya automatically opened the back door and slid inside, seeking the shadow of the rear window, planning to shrink himself against it.

Expecting Shane to get up front with his father, he watched in quiet confusion as Shane settled into the seat right next to him instead, his large frame crowding Ilya's side.

“Well, I suggest you both leave all thoughts of the programme behind for now,” Mr. Hollander said, his tone grave. “Honestly, I will be writing them a very strongly worded email.”

For a split irrational second, a cold spike hit Ilya’s chest. He assumed the email was about him—a formal complaint about his deteriorating stats, his lack of cooperation, his dead weight.

But then Shane groaned, dropping his forehead against the headrest in front of him.

“*Dad,*” Shane muttered, his voice muffled by the fabric.

The panic receding as quickly as it had come, and Ilya let out a breathless laugh at the dramatics.

He watched them, fascinated and unsettled by the easy dynamic between father and son. It was a relationship completely devoid of fear, entirely free of the threat of intimidation.

“Okay boys, it’s going to be a long journey, so you just let me know if you need a stop.”

Shane turned his head toward Ilya, his cheek still resting against the seat. He looked like he was just a kid going on a normal road trip, his face warm and full of anticipation.

Ilya dragged a hand across the fabric of the seat, resting his fingertips just an inch away from Shane’s thigh, close enough to catch the heat radiating through his jeans. Shane shifted closer until their shoulders pressed, a small easy smile still playing on his lips.

By the time they arrived at the airport gates, Ilya was dozing fitfully against the window, the vibrations of the road rattling into his skull.

To his right, Shane had completely succumbed to exhaustion, drooling now, his head slumped heavily toward Ilya’s shoulder. Two of his fingers were pinched tight to the hem of Ilya’s jumper, a stubborn grip, unwilling to let go of him for even a second.

Forgetting himself for a brief unthinking moment, Ilya smacked him lightly across the cheek, jolting him awake.

Shane jumped awake, said, “Fuck off, Ilya!”

“Shane!” Mr. Hollander barked from the front.

“Sorry,” Shane grumbled, wiping at his chin. “He startled me.”

Ilya held his breath, shoulders locking as he waited for the heavy weight of a reprimand. But Mr. Hollander only sighed, adjusting the rearview mirror.

“Please behave, you two. Let’s try to make it home without getting at each other’s throats.”

“Fine,” Shane said, at the exact same moment Ilya mumbled a quick, obedient, “Yes, sir.”

The terminal was a blur of fluorescent lights that made Ilya’s eyes itch. At the counter, Mr. Hollander bought all three of them their tickets, and Ilya cringed at the numbers flashing on the screen. He had been raised to earn his keep in sweat or blood, to contribute rather than take, and the fact that he was currently costing this man hundreds of dollars had discomfort crawling up his skin like a rash.

“Why don’t you go grab some snacks for the journey,” Mr. Hollander urged, handing a card over to Shane. “Meet me in the main waiting area at three.”

Shane grinned wide at Ilya, quickly thanking his dad and dragging Ilya away by the sleeve.

“How are you feeling?”

Ilya just nodded.

He was still processing, his brain operating on a strange lag; still screaming at him for allowing himself to be lugged around by the Hollanders like excess baggage.

This didn't feel like it was really happening, and the entire flight passed in that same muted space. The low structural thrum of the plane cabin seemed to echo the static in his own ears.

Shane dozed against his arm, his head dropping just enough for Ilya to catch the faint scent of peppermint before Shane would startle and shift back up again.

Mr. Hollander sat two rows ahead of them, getting up about six separate times under the pretense of stretching, his eyes lingering on them each time, checking they were warm, or if they'd eaten.

When they finally landed in Ottawa, Ilya's eyes felt dragged down with sand. The complete lack of rest made the dull thrumming in his head turn into a sharp ache, following him all the way into the city.

When Mr. Hollander opened the apartment door, Mrs. Hollander let out an excited scream that made Ilya violently jump. Shane was perfectly used to it, barrelling right past him and straight into her arms.

“Oh, Shane!”

“Hi mom,” Shane said into her shoulder.

“You had me so worried,” she said, leaning back to look over him, her hands on his shoulders. Then, plastering on a mock-stern face, she said, “You are never going back to that place again.”

Shane laughed shortly. “I have to go back. The Metros require it.”

“Oh! They will be hearing from me, you can be sure about that!”

It was so identical to what Mr. Hollander had said earlier in the day, about writing a complaint email.

Ilya still sort of felt like he was caught in that hazy place between reality and a dream, so he laughed—out loud, a sudden, raspy sound. He recognised a sharp pang of envy, curious what it must feel like to have someone so fiercely, severely protective over how you were treated by the world.

Shaking away the thought, his eyes focused back on the room, and he shrunk back a little when he realised everyone was looking at him.

Mrs. Hollander stepped closer, then, her brows raised in a quiet sort of surprise, though Ilya was sure she had already known he would be coming.

“Rozanov...” she said softly, her eyes dragging down his form.

She looked quickly to her husband, the two of them sharing a heavy loaded look that needed no translation.

Ilya winced internally, shifting his weight. He knew he looked ragged; he’d been actively avoiding his own reflection because his hollow cheeks and dead eyes frightened him.

Forcing himself to ignore the sting of exposure, he stepped forward to shake her hand.

“Ilya,” he said quietly. “Is nice to meet you, Mrs. Hollander.”

“Yuna, please.” She gave him a genuine smile, her palm warm as she squeezed his hand back.

After a heavy moment, she released him, and the room burst into movement and chatter.

Ilya let his eyes drift across the space, where the dim lighting cast warm shadows on the walls, and he could see the framed childhood pictures, of a boy well cherished and wanted.

“Go ahead and get settled in, the both of you,” Mrs. Hollander said gently. “Shane, can you show Ilya to his room, please? I’ll heat up the food now.”

It was so casual, the way she spoke, as though it really was Ilya’s room, just waiting for his homecoming.

The bedroom was regular enough—not too big or small, with soft blue patterned wallpaper and a single bed to the right.

Ilya set down his bag with a soft thump against the carpet. He was profoundly grateful to have somewhere to stay other than the complex, with its dull grey walls and institutional linoleum.

“It usually sits empty,” Shane said, hovering awkwardly by the door, just behind Ilya.

Ilya looked at the space again, feeling the weight of his own gratitude grow until it choked him.

Overwhelmed by it, he reached out and caught Shane’s jaw, his thumb resting against the strong line of it.

Shane leaned into the touch, shutting his eyes for a brief moment.

“Er,” Shane stumbled out, breaking the spell. “Let me show you the bathroom, too. It’s linked to both of our rooms,” he said, walking backward toward the adjoining door. Ilya stalked after him.

“Towels are in there. And extras of everything are stocked up in this drawer, so you should have everything you need. Er, and you can have the first shower today.”

Ilya stepped even closer, the corners of his mouth twitching with a hint of amusement. “First shower. So generous, Hollander.”

Shane blushed furiously, lowering his eyes to his socks.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

Ilya was still entirely unsure of his place in this house, but he knew it was a million times better than being back in Montana. He nodded.

“I’m glad to be here, too.”

When they’d both showered and changed into fresh clothes, they moved back out to the living space.

The open kitchen was attached to the main room, almost as if the occupants loved each other too much to ever want anyone out of sight, even while cooking. Mrs. Hollander was setting up the food on the island while Mr. Hollander moved around her, picking up the dirty dishes.

Shane sat down, dragging out Ilya’s stool with his foot to invite him over.

“Spaghetti today, Shane.”

Shane nodded easily, and Mrs. Hollander placed the plates down in front of them. The food looked bright, steaming and happy against the white ceramic.

“Mom, have you heard anything else from Montreal? Since I’ve been away?”

She hummed, settling into the seat across from them next to her husband.

“They’re very happy with your stats so far. The programme actually sent them over early so they could approve you leaving a bit ahead of schedule.”

Ilya twisted his fork around a mouthful of spaghetti, twisting and twisting until the noodles bunched up into a heavy, unmanageable knot.

He wondered if Boston had been sent his stats. He wondered if his father knew how badly he was fucking this all up. A sudden cold chill travelled up his body at the thought.

His father had called him once or twice near the start, reminding him to keep his act right. The third call had been three weeks ago, a short two-minute thing that Ilya had placatingly mumbled his way through.

“You’ve done so well, Shane. You just have to push through a little more.”

“I know, mom.”

“All that matters is that you’re here now, with us, for Christmas,” Mr. Hollander said gently. “Both of you.”

Ilya bowed his head in thanks, eyes glued to his plate. He didn’t want the attention on him, because if they kept looking, they’d see that he hadn’t actually taken a bite yet.

Self-consciously, he lifted the fork to his mouth and forced the food down. It tasted like nothing; his throat felt too narrow to even swallow.

“You don’t have to eat that if you’re not a fan, son,” Shane’s dad noted quietly, his eyes tracking the stiff movement of Ilya’s jaw.

“No, no. Is really great, thank you, sir,” Ilya rushed out, quickly taking another bite to prove it, though his stomach rolled at the weight of it.

He didn’t know how he could possibly explain that his brain had already set a goal, had already decided that he wanted to die, and his appetite had simply shut down to help him reach the finish line faster.

“Ilya struggles with food, too,” Shane said in simpler terms.

His tone was completely innocent, entirely unaware of how he was stripping Ilya completely bare, cracking his chest wide open to reveal the heavy emptiness bleeding straight through him.

“Anything is fine, really,” Ilya intercepted, his voice tight, pleading with his eyes for Shane to shut up. “I do not get very hungry.”

“Maybe you need to eat something you know you will like, like your favourite foods,” Shane said, turning in his seat to face him, entirely missing the panic in Ilya’s posture. “Like—I like spaghetti and omurice, so I know I can always eat those. What do you like?”

Ilya just shrugged, absolutely nothing coming to mind.

He wanted this interrogation to end so badly. To have his weakness pulled into the warm light of a normal family kitchen made him feel violently naked.

As if sensing his sudden shame, Mr. Hollander stepped in, his voice encouraging.

“Well, that’s okay. Just try to have a few more bites before bed, to keep your strength up.”

As they walked back to their rooms later, Ilya wondered if his father would call him soon. With the Christmas break nearing, he was morbidly curious whether Grigory would have even offered to book him a ticket home. He probably would have just left Ilya in Montana, telling him again to only come back when he had something of value to offer his family.

He was exhausted, his joints aching with a deep systemic fatigue. He probably hadn’t slept a total of six hours across the past two days. He wanted to lay in bed and never leave.

Heading straight for his new temporary room, he threw out a quick, offhand, “Goodnight, Hollander.”

He shut the door and climbed under the heavy blankets, after briefly bringing out his blue tin and counting through its contents.

But the silence of the guest room felt heavy, almost suffocating, emphasising the unfamiliar noises of the apartment building, just the way Shane had described—that neighbour washing her dishes before bed, the muffled sound of a man next door on the phone.

Every sound reminded him that he was an outsider in a place that didn't actually belong to him.

He lay there for two painful hours, staring at the unfamiliar ceiling, long after the building had completely settled down and the noises had faded into a cold silence, all but the staggered traffic below.

Unable to take his own company anymore, Ilya dragged himself up, his feet silent on the carpet as he padded through the shared bathroom and pushed through Shane's door.

It was pitch black inside, perfectly quiet, and Shane was already fast asleep. Squinting in the dark, Ilya made his way across the floor, crawling under the sheets without a word, letting the heavy familiar scent of Shane wrap around him.

Shane shifted instantly at the mattress moving, his hand blindly searching the dark until his fingers found Ilya's wrist, squeezing tight once before settling again.

Ilya let out a ragged exhale against the pillow, the static in his head finally quieted by the heavy rhythm of Shane's breathing, and let his eyes close.

It was late morning when he opened them again to the persistent tugging on his arm.

“My parents already left for work,” Shane was saying, his voice a keen rumble. “Come on!”

Ilya hadn't slept so deeply since before the programme had started. He was still heavy with it, reluctant to pull himself back into reality, but Shane managed to haul him up by the wrists anyway, dragging him out into the sun-lit kitchen.

Ilya deposited himself heavily onto a barstool, blearily watching Shane rummage through the fridge.

Shane fixed them both a bowl of yogurt, piling it high with berries and granola before pushing one across the counter toward Ilya.

“My dad drove my mom to work today,” Shane said, his eyes bright with excitement. “Mom said we can take her car out for a drive.”

Ilya hummed quietly, slow and noncommittal, licking the back of his spoon.

“I want to show you something,” Shane added, a wide smile splitting his face. He looked incapable of keeping a secret for more than five minutes.

Ilya stared at him, trying to memorise the exact shape of that smile, in case he ever needed it.

“What is it?” he asked instead.

“The lake,” Shane rushed out, leaning over the counter. “The one my dad takes me to in the summer. Wear your big coat, the black one. Some gloves, too. And thick boots.”

Ilya huffed at the rapid-fire instructions, pushing his half-eaten bowl away with a soft click against the marble.

“You forget to say *please*, Hollander. Where have your manners gone?”

“Fuck off,” Shane said, a little too quickly and a little too flustered.

Ilya tutted, hooking his foot around the metal leg of Shane’s stool. In that quiet moment, he found himself wishing he still possessed his old strength, because he desperately wanted to haul the boy in closer by the chair.

Pushing the thought aside, he picked up his bowl and washed it, clearing the counter until it looked like he had never been there at all.

“I go get ready, then,” Ilya said lightly, letting his tone tilt into something low and teasing. “And I dress just how you like—even if you *didn’t* ask nicely.”

Shane sucked in a sharp breath, nearly choking on his own saliva, and hacked roughly into his elbow to clear his throat.

Satisfied with the reaction, Ilya turned and walked back to the room with the blue wallpaper.

He dug out his thickest jumper, layering the heavy black coat over his frame and stuffing his gloves into the pockets. At the front door, he laced up his winter boots. He had learned the hard way not to underestimate the winter chill, especially now that his body was starting to fail at keeping itself warm.

Shane looked over his outfit, avoiding his direct gaze entirely, and turned to lead the way down to the parking garage.

They got into Mrs. Hollander’s car—an older, modest model that felt surprisingly normal compared to the massive apartment they lived in.

The drive took a little under an hour. Shane spent the entirety of it huffing and muttering under his breath, fiddling with the dial of the radio to get it to work.

Ilya simply watched him passively, his cheek pressed against the cold glass of the passenger window, watching the blur of buildings and trees pass by.

He sat up straighter only when the car began to rock over uneven ground. The city fell away entirely, replaced by quiet woods.

A few minutes later, the trees broke, and they stopped in front of a massive winter lake, its surface covered in a misty sheet of white frost.

Stepping out of the car, Ilya looked at Shane, his brows raised. Shane was already watching him, a proud smile on his face as he waited for a reaction.

“Do you like it?”

Ilya cleared his throat, but it felt far too thick to produce a proper sound. He could only nod roughly. The sheer quiet beauty of the place had knocked all the noise out of his head, for once.

“Come on,” Shane said, pulling his hood up and stepping toward the edge of the water. Ilya followed, his boots crunching in the frozen grass.

“I don't think it's completely frozen over yet, it probably needs a little more time. But when it does, we can come skate here...”

Ilya shifted closer to the edge, lifting his boot to settle it onto the fragile ice, but a heavy hand caught his forearm, dragging him firmly back close.

Ilya turned sharply, looking up at him.

“Don't, Ilya. It's not safe yet.”

Ilya released an uneven breath, the condensation puffing up between them like smoke.

Ilya wanted to touch him so badly—he wanted to show him, without the clumsy failure of his words, how thankful he was that Shane had brought him here, purely because he'd wanted Ilya to see the beauty the world had to offer.

He didn't know how to say any of it. So, he stepped suddenly forward and wrapped his arms tightly around Shane's thick shoulders, knocking a sharp puff of air out of the boy's lungs.

Shane didn't waste a second; his arms wrapped immediately around Ilya's waist, locking him close.

In the wide expanse of the freezing woods, their bodies burned hot with their proximity.

An hour later, on the drive back, Ilya finally took over the radio when he could no longer stand the mounting frustration radiating from the driver's seat.

Shane watched out of the corner of his eye, with a growing flush high on his cheeks, as Ilya's long fingers worked over the console.

Ilya was leaned closer in concentration, fiddling the plastic face off, messing with the loose wire in the back, before snapping it right back in.

Shane gasped as crackling radio-chatter filled the small car.

“How did you do that?”

Ilya shrugged, leaning back.

“The buttons were...” he tried to explain. “Just needed to get behind and click them in.”

Shane flushed, his eyes darting down to Ilya’s hands where they now rested casually on his own lap. Ilya looked over, checking his face.

“What’s wrong, Hollander?”

“Nothing!” Shane snapped, dragging his eyes intently back to the road.

Ilya snorted quietly. He switched through the channels until he settled on a low-volume track.

Leaning back, he found he actually enjoyed being in the passenger seat with Shane beside him. Car rides had never been peaceful in his own experience, back home.

With his walls pulled down like this, the low hum of the engine felt like a luxury, lulling him into a strange, impossible daydream; a nice life here, ten years from now.

By the time they reached the apartment, the afternoon sun was beginning to dip, bleeding a deep gold across Shane’s eyelashes, turning the colour of his eyes into smooth honey.

Ilya felt a sudden, tight panic at the thought of losing sight of him, and without conscious thought, he followed Shane straight into his bedroom, watching as Shane sank heavily into his desk chair. Ilya simply slumped against the side of the mattress, dropping onto the carpeted floor.

Resting his head back against the duvet, Ilya took in Shane’s space properly for the first time.

It was crowded with a life: a junior hockey stick hung on the pale yellow wall, a framed CHL jersey with *HOLLANDER* stretched across the shoulders. The shelves looked heavy with silver, and overwhelmingly more gold.

And then, in the corner, sat a dark oak guitar. It looked lonely, and very expensive, resting against the baseboard, set out of the way.

“You play?” Ilya blurted out.

Shane looked back at the corner.

“Oh... not really. I only got it a few years ago because... well, I guess I really liked the music the girl next door played at night. It helped me sleep, so I bought one. I was going to teach myself, but I’ve always been too busy with training. I only know one song.”

Ilya kept staring at the dark wood, wondering what the instrument would look like in Shane’s massive hands.

But Shane seemed to misunderstand the look. He stood up, retrieved the guitar, and eagerly pressed the body of it into Ilya's lap.

Ilya shot him a look.

"Try it," Shane urged, dropping down onto the floor directly across from him.

"Hollander, I don't know how to play..." Ilya muttered, already moving to set it aside.

Shane shrugged, his eyes tracking the movement of Ilya's hands.

Then, without a single word of warning, he crawled forward, shifting his large weight directly onto Ilya's lap.

Ilya let out a surprised grunt, his hands instinctively coming up to grip Shane's broad waist to steady them both.

Shane completely collapsed against him, slumping forward until his chest was flush against Ilya's own, his face buried deep in the side of Ilya's hair.

"Hollander—" Ilya started, his heart hammering against his ribs.

He couldn't comprehend what was happening. This was exactly what he had prayed for in the dark—to be this close to him, chest to chest, almost skin to skin—but the sheer ease of it completely short-circuited his brain.

Slowly, his palms slid up Shane's back, his fingers dragging through the soft hairs at the nape of his neck.

Shane let out a low breath against Ilya's neck, growing heavier and slacker the more he relaxed. He was almost purring with it.

"What's wrong, *kotenok*?" Ilya murmured softly into Shane's shoulder, the pet name slipping past his teeth before he could stop it. He couldn't help it, when Shane had crawled over him exactly like an almost 200lb over-large kitten seeking heat.

Shane only shook his head, the movement jostling Ilya's cheek.

Then, the heavy click of the front door echoed down the hallway. Shane's entire body jolted at it. He scrambled off Ilya's lap in a minor panic, settling cross-legged on the floor beside him just as movement brought the house to life.

"Boys!" Mrs. Hollander's voice carried warmly down the corridor.

"Coming!" Shane hollered back, his voice thick with moody, teenage irritation.

Ilya let out an abrupt, breathless laugh at the sudden shift, still hazy with confusion.

Shane breathed out, leaning sideways to rub his face miserably against Ilya's shoulder.

“Sorry.”

“Come on,” Ilya murmured, taking Shane’s hand and pulling him upward as he stood. “Don’t keep your parents waiting.”

Shane shuffled into the living room and dropped face-first onto the sofa.

“Well, hello to you too, Shane,” his mom said teasingly.

Ilya remained standing politely near the threshold, a small practiced smile on his face.

“Hi, Mrs. Hollander.”

She stepped forward, her expression softening. She reached out with both hands, gently squeezing Ilya’s arms.

“See how polite Ilya is?” she said pointedly toward her son, smiling at Ilya as if they were co-conspirators in a private joke. “And please, call me Yuna. Really.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ilya said instinctively, cringing internally the moment the discipline he was so used to left his mouth.

Shane’s mom only laughed it off, dropping her hands. “We’ll get you there eventually.”

“Shane, honey-glazed salmon today? Ilya?” Mr. Hollander’s voice boomed from the kitchen, where the sound of clinking pans had already begun. “I have everything prepped, it’ll be ready in fifteen.”

“Yes, please!” Shane called out. Ilya only nodded vaguely at nothing in particular, not comprehending where his input fit in.

He drifted over into the living space, watching Shane with a quiet curiosity.

Shane was the absolute picture of comfort, splayed out over the armrest without a care in the world. Ilya moved toward the smaller, separate armchair, intending to stay out of the way of the family.

He’d tried to take up as little space as possible so far, especially out here in the open. He was already so profoundly grateful for what he had been given, and he was terrified of overstepping, of taking more than what was being so generously offered, of being sent back

But then Shane reached out and caught the hem of Ilya’s shirt, dragging him downward until Ilya was forced to sit next to him on the larger couch.

Also guys I know nothing about fixing up cars, so I just wrote some bullshit, so my bad about that. It may be getting worse with the next chapter.

Lemme know what you think ❤️

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The one where Ilya forgets

Chapter Notes

TW: discussions of disordered eating. Suicide ideation.

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

Ilya was determined to sleep in his own solitary bed. He was so determined that, as he sat on the edge of the mattress, he'd taken out a single pill to ensure he did, in fact, sleep.

But those numbers had become a compulsion. Seeing them drop, even by one, without a guarantee of righting them back up was too much for Ilya right now. So he lay back against the pillow for a long time, thinking instead about the weight of Shane—heavy and grounding in his lap.

He tapped his fingers absently against his stomach as he laid there, feeling a knot of something beneath his own touch, beneath his skin. A new development; one of an all-consuming desire to touch Shane every second of the day, and even more during the night.

He craved him so severely that he couldn't quite fool himself anymore.

In the end, he crept through the dark and right back into Shane's welcome touch, letting the guitar music from the wall over sink into his skin.

It was a repeat of the same routine for the next four nights before he gave up all pretence. He simply followed Shane right into his room after they had both brushed their teeth in companionable silence, their eyes constantly drifting back to one another in the wide mirror.

Across those four days, Ilya tried hard to act naturally around the apartment.

He knew he was still jumpy every time Mr. Hollander's strong voice carried through the room, or each time Mrs Hollander called his name.

He watched Shane's easy shoulders and tried to force his own down, trying to shake the stiff defensive clench loose from his fists.

When he'd sat at the dining table on that fifth night, next to Shane—Mrs. Hollander finishing up on her laptop across from them—Mr. Hollander had set down a large tray of small pillowy baked buns, and a stewpot just to the right.

Ilya blinked.

"We're trying something new today," Mr. Hollander said to the table at large, settling in across from Ilya.

Shutting her laptop, Mrs. Hollander looked over the table, touching a hand to her husband's back. "Smells delicious, honey."

Shane leaned closer, curious.

"What is it?"

"Thought I'd try out some Russian recipes I've always been eyeing," Mr. Hollander said casually, reaching across the table as he started to pour each of them a bowl of soup. "Remind me of the name, Ilya?"

Ilya startled out of his trance, clearing his throat aggressively.

"P—Pirozhki?"

"Pirozhki," Mr. Hollander agreed, placing three small buns on Shane's plate. "There's minced meat, potatoes, and chicken. Give all three a go, Shane."

Shane nodded, still mostly distracted by the texture of the soup. "Thanks, dad."

"And cabbage soup," Mr. Hollander tapped on his bowl. "I hear it's very popular in Russia for warming you up on a winter day like this."

Pirozhki and Shchi. Mr. Hollander had made him *Russian comfort food*.

Ilya looked up at the man, but he was already talking about something—an accident on the highway, a bad one—with Mrs. Hollander. He looked at Shane instead, searching for some reaction, *any reaction* that reflected the way Ilya's heart was trying to squeeze its way up his throat.

Shane was only biting into his food hesitantly, and then more intently, allowing his tastebuds to explore. Entirely unphased.

Why would he do that?

The question pulsed behind Ilya's eyes, entirely disorienting. Yet there was no edge to Mr. Hollander's face, no trap waiting to be shown.

The kindness made him want to break down. But knowing he couldn't do that, Ilya started to eat. And though the food still tasted dull on his tongue, he found himself finishing two whole

pirozhki and almost his entire bowl of Shchi, simply because Mr. Hollander had gone out of his way to make it.

When he sat back, his stomach turning with how much he'd eaten, Mr. Hollander spoke again.

"So, what do we think? *'Yes dad, make it again.'* Or *'No, thank you, let's try something different next time.'*"

Shane snorted and said, "It was okay, I only liked the one with the chicken."

Ilya held his breath at the honest review, only then Mr. Hollander smiled, reaching to take the half-eaten buns off Shane's plate and replacing them with more chicken, in case he wanted more.

"But the soup was nice. Again, please," Shane continued.

"Ilya?"

"It was really great. Thank you, Mr. Hollander. Really."

Mrs. Hollander laughed brightly, getting up to stack a few empty dishes and lifting them toward the kitchen.

"I say you're good to make it again, David. The soup was especially wonderful."

Ilya nodded again, standing too quickly and getting to work on bringing the rest of the dishes to the kitchen sink.

"Ilya," Mrs. Hollander said, taking some off his hands, stacking them neatly down. "I booked Shane in with one of the trainers at the rink tomorrow. Want me to book you in for your own one-on-one?"

Ilya felt his shoulders stiffen all the way back up.

He hadn't really thought about hockey in a few days, and having Shane's mom bringing it up, who was arguably almost just as serious about her son's hockey as his own father was, made him feel slightly cornered.

"No, ma'am," he tried. "If is okay."

But of course, Shane's mom was entirely free of rot, unlike his father. She only set a free hand on Ilya's elbow, offering a kind, "Of course that's okay. You just let me know when you're ready to train. We want you two to keep your strength straight and your skills sharp, even through the break."

It wasn't exactly what he wanted to hear, but he nodded, hoping she would drop it altogether. After a useless moment of just standing there, Ilya turned back, looking for more dishes, but Shane was already finishing wiping the table down.

They bounded over to Shane's room early then.

Ilya tried not to watch as Shane worked through four sets of push-ups on the carpet, moving into sit-ups right after, squinting his eyes shut when Shane's shirt rose against his lower abdomen.

Searching the room for a distraction, Ilya reached quickly, mindlessly, for the guitar.

He tried a lazy note, not really knowing how any of it worked, twisting the gears and reckoning that changed something.

Shane glanced up.

"There's a *Guitar for Dummies* on my bookshelf," he grunted between sit-ups.

"Did you just call me a *dummy*, Hollander?" he said, and Shane groaned.

He almost set the guitar back in its spot, just to annoy him some more, but found himself actually searching the bookshelf instead, purely for something to do.

Looking through the book he found there, Ilya scoffed. It was filled with clichés, songs popular enough to reach Moscow, but he tried to pick something easy and repetitive.

Trying to make sense of the chords and translating it into practice took him a while. He kept trying a note, then trying it again slightly different until he got it, and then he would move onto the next. Again and again, until he had the first ten seconds of the song down.

It was gruelling, and yet he couldn't stop. The sharp sting of the strings digging into his fingertips gave him something physical to anchor onto.

Unlike the endless loops of his own head, the guitar followed strict rules. The more he learned, he understood that if he placed his finger precisely here, it produced exactly this sound. It was predictable. It was a closed system.

The task transformed things enough that the suffocating weight of the pressure, the ice, and his father's voice finally receded into a dull static as he forgot himself.

It wasn't until a while later that he realised he hadn't thought about dying all evening.

He looked up, only to find Shane dozing right on the floor.

Settling the guitar back against the wall, he crawled over to him, leaning in close enough to whisper.

"Hollander."

Shane sighed, clearly just on the cusp of sleep. "Yeah."

"Hollander, get up," Ilya said, pinching his cheeks together with a hand.

“Are you coming to the rink tomorrow?” he mumbled blearily through his pinched lips, his eyes dragging heavily to Ilya’s.

“Not this time.” Ilya let go.

Shane blinked up at him for a moment, then he moved to sit up, slowly rising and heading to brush his teeth. Ilya followed him through the whole routine until they were safely in bed.

The girl next door was clearly ready to sleep too, the guitar music starting up through the wall. Shane was already halfway gone, but Ilya just needed to feel him, to be able to sink himself. He twisted over, hooking his chin over Shane’s shoulder.

Shane was gone when Ilya woke back up.

It was past 11:00, and Ilya had slept beyond the point of feeling energised; his body now dragged with sleep-fatigue.

He lay in the room for a few minutes, staring at the pale yellow walls, but the buzzing inside his own head quickly grew too loud without Shane here. He got up and stepped out into the hallway, expecting the usual domestic hum, but the apartment was entirely empty.

Shane was at the rink. Mrs. Hollander was probably at work. Mr. Hollander too, though he sometimes worked from home. Ilya listened out, making sure.

For the first time since arriving in Ottawa, Ilya was completely alone in the apartment.

He walked into the living room, his bare feet making no sound on the hardwood. The late-morning sun cut through the large windows, warming the fabric of the sofa, and Ilya dragged a hand across it on his way.

He didn’t snoop, but he found himself wandering. His eyes caught that cluster of framed photographs—the ones he’d spotted that first night—resting on a sideboard near the hallway, and scattered across the wall above it too. He stepped closer, his chest tightening as he studied them.

Very few of them were posed.

In one, Shane was about eight years old, drowning in oversized hockey gear, laughing so hard despite his two missing front teeth.

In another, Shane's mom was fast asleep, her head slumping heavily onto her husband's shoulder in a crowded airport terminal.

There was another where the three of them were completely covered in dirt after a camping trip, their faces split on an almost-crazy grin.

He paused over one, on the far corner of the wall. Shane, with a broken arm, showing off his bright-red cast like it was something he was utterly, childishly proud of. Ilya shut his eyes tight, his throat dry, and tried to suppress the memories of his own broken arm at thirteen—the consequences he’d had to face for it.

But these pictures... these were flaws.

They were messy, imperfect, and completely unpolished.

And yet, the Hollanders had voluntarily framed them. They kept physical evidence of their unmasked joy, displayed openly on a wall, as if happiness was something you were allowed to feel even in hardship or discomfort.

He touched the edge of the frame with Shane's crooked smile, his finger leaving a small smudge on the glass. It was yet another language that Ilya struggled to translate; this family where purely existing was more than enough.

He stepped back, unable to look at them anymore.

Turning, he ran into Mr. Hollander just coming through the front door from the stairwell.

"Ilya, good morning," he chuckled, eyes tracking his wild hair. "Looks like you had a good sleep."

Ilya quickly smoothed his hand over the sides, his defensive posture instantly snapping back into place.

"Good morning."

"I'm headed back out to the garage to do some work, in case you want to give me some company. Could use an extra pair of hands."

Ilya nodded quickly, grasping at the task to stop his brain from spinning. "Of course."

"Great," Mr. Hollander boomed. "Grab your coat and meet me down there."

Ilya nodded absently. He moved quickly and grabbed his coat, walking down, still in his black and grey pyjama trousers. When he turned into the garage, Mr. Hollander was already kneeled under the side of his wife's car.

The garage didn't smell like the apartment. It smelled of repair and second chances. It was a space where things could be taken apart and put back together, and as Ilya stepped onto the oil-stained floor, he felt a strange pull.

He shuffled closer, careful not to impose with his presence. Mr. Hollander noticed him and glanced up from the floor.

"Ilya, hey. Grab me that wrench over there. The smaller one."

Ilya passed it over quickly.

He couldn't help leaning over, his natural curiosity taking over. Mr. Hollander was struggling, fiddling blindly with a rusted bolt near the front wheel.

"Can I help?"

Mr. Hollander grunted, his back creaking as he shifted weight.

“Yuna’s been saying the engine pops after a while of driving it. She’s already looking to buy a new car, but,” he said, patting the car on its side like an old friend. “There’s still some life in her yet...”

Ilya didn't hesitate. He dropped straight down to the cold ground, sliding himself under the edge for a better look. He reached out an assessing hand, his fingers tracing the cold metal line, feeling for the mechanical layout.

“I don't think is the engine. Something is frozen in the...” he tried to explain, failing. “I think it gets blocked when the car stays here overnight, and then pops when...” he mimed, forgetting the words *fluid* and *pressure*.

Mr. Hollander raised his brows, adjusting his position and grabbing a small hand-torch to see what Ilya was pointing at.

“Huh. Son, I think you’re right.”

Each time Mr. Hollander called him ‘son’ like that, Ilya couldn’t help but feel himself retreat into something quieter, something small and profoundly unsure, something close to a tiny stumbling child.

Over the next hour and a half, the garage became a quiet rhythm of working hands. Ilya found himself taking the lead on the tight intricate bits that Mr. Hollander’s larger hands couldn't easily reach.

Every few minutes, Ilya would catch himself glancing over at the older man, his shoulders bracing for the inevitable criticism, the sharp bark of correction.

But it never came. Instead, when the line finally cleared with a satisfying *click*, Mr. Hollander let out a booming laugh and clapped Ilya firmly on the shoulder.

“Brilliant, Ilya. You’ve got a real knack for this.”

The praise made Ilya instantly weary, though he smiled. He wiped his hands nervously against his trousers, mumbling a tight, "It was nothing."

He jumped at the sudden heavy groan of the garage door lifting.

“Papa?”

“In here, Shane.”

Shane walked in slowly, his cheeks flushed bright red from the cold air outside, his hockey bag slung over his shoulder.

Ilya popped up from behind the car, coming into Shane’s view. He grabbed a rag, wetting it under the cold stream of the utility sink in the corner.

Shane stopped then, his eyes tracking the grease on Ilya's forearms and the way they still gleamed, wet over his fingers. Shane watched him closely, his gaze wide and fixed as Ilya moved the rag over his fingers, getting the black grime off his skin.

“How was your session, *mon chou*?” His dad asked, checking his watch.

Shane hummed absentmindedly, his eyes never leaving Ilya's long fingers.

Ilya shuffled closer, a small knot of concern tightening in his chest.

Had something gone wrong at the rink? Shane seemed entirely distracted, distant, so unlike him after coming back from the ice. He wondered if the bullying from Montana wasn't just an isolated thing. If it had started here, in his hometown rink.

“Let's go up?” Ilya said quietly, trying to drag Shane's eyes back to his own.

Shane nodded mutely.

He stepped back out into the cold, waiting while Ilya meticulously put every tool back into its exact place, wiping down the counter until it was immaculate. Then they moved quietly back to the certainty of Shane's bedroom, leaving the door open behind them.

“It went okay?” Ilya asked again, because Shane was twisting around aimlessly in his desk chair now, his eyes darting everywhere but at Ilya.

“Yeah. Why wouldn't it?” Shane said, still spinning the chair on the spot.

Ilya stepped closer, slightly annoyed by the evasion. He stopped the spinning by planting both hands firmly on the armrests, bracketing Shane's body in, leaning down just a little trying to catch his face.

Shane shrunk slightly lower in his seat under the sudden proximity. Unable to handle the intense focus of Ilya's eyes, he covered his face quickly with both hands.

“Hollander, what—!” Ilya startled out a rough laugh.

He grabbed firmly at Shane's wrists, dragging his hands away from his face.

Shane tugged lightly against his hold, his cheeks flushing a furious, deep red.

Furrowing his brows, Ilya realised then that this wasn't about anything at the rink. This was something else entirely.

Shane glanced quickly away, staring out at the open door. Looking for an escape, maybe. Ilya let go, dropping his hands away instantly, a burning shock of heat hitting him low in his stomach.

“It was good, really,” Shane muttered, rocking the chair side to side nervously now instead. “I'm going again tomorrow. If you... er, if you wanted to come.”

“Ah. No. That’s okay,” Ilya said automatically. He shifted his weight back to avoid crowding him, trying to get his own body back to normal.

The corners of Shane’s mouth tipped just slightly down at his refusal though. He shuffled to sit up a little higher in his chair.

“Okay,” he said quietly, his tone dropping low. “Yeah. That’s okay.”

The interaction was giving Ilya whiplash. He walked over to settle himself cross-legged on the edge of the bed, grabbing the guitar purely for a distraction, hoping the unpracticed chords would settle the sudden tension in the room.

Almost reluctantly, he spent a lot of time cringing over that guitar over the next few days, trying to get the finger placements perfect.

He had already looked up the song online. He sang the lyrics in his head without really paying them any mind, repeating the lines over and over as he practiced the opening.

Each time he played, Shane would settle himself onto the bed with a book, or more often, with something Metro’s-related. But within ten minutes, like clockwork, he would end up napping the afternoon away, doing very little actual reading.

It was during those times that Ilya found it impossible to concentrate, because his attention had focused in, razor-sharp, on the view of Shane asleep, the arms of his Canucks jersey bunched up around his appallingly sexy biceps, his reading glasses crooked over his nose.

But when he was able to shake himself out of his reveries, mainly Ilya loved the sharp focus of the instrument. His hands got to work keeping busy, and his mind welcomed the distraction too easily.

Sometimes at dinner, Mr. Hollander casually offered them a new Russian dish, presenting it without any grand gestures.

One night it was Pelmeni, filled with lamb, covered in melted butter and a heavy dollop of sour cream, which Shane absolutely ravished.

Another night, it was a slice each of honey-sweet Medovik for dessert, which Shane passed on, not liking the condensed milk.

For breakfast one slow morning, Mr. Hollander set down a steaming pot of Kasha, and Ilya had leaned in to savour the smell of the buttery porridge, a vivid memory of his mother hitting him so hard he had to blink it back into place.

The Hollanders never made a big deal out of any of it, acting as though the offering wasn’t completely rearranging Ilya’s entire internal nervous system.

Watching Mr. Hollander set the food down reminded him so much of Shane; how Shane had done the exact same thing over the course of the programme, quietly switching out whatever uneaten food he’d left on Ilya’s bedside table for something different, just in case he might like it more.

And the strangest thing was happening: the more Ilya forced Mr. Hollander's cooking down purely out of a desperate gratitude, the more his appetite returned in small, shocking ways. His stomach began groaning in protest if he went too long between meals.

More annoyingly, hunger began finding him late at night when the apartment had quieted down and he couldn't do much about it, and by morning, he was actually hungry enough to work through an entire bowl of whatever Shane pushed across the counter.

Mr. Hollander sought his help out in the garage again, too. He would throw out a quick, casual, "Thought you could help me out today with the heating system," or "The tyres could do with an upgrade."

And Ilya would jump at the offer, welcoming the cold concrete and the smell of oil into his daily routine while Shane went off to train.

It wasn't just that he enjoyed the mechanical work alone. It was more about working alongside Shane's dad, whose steady praises and gentle guidance felt like a strange drug. It felt like something he might actually deserve, and not just if he worked hard enough for it, or if he stayed useful enough. He was good with his hands, for once feeling like he was fixing things instead of breaking them.

The man always seemed to find some new, invented problem for Ilya to work over, some new reason to keep him downstairs, some new thing to praise him for, and the praise would come easily like it didn't take much at all to earn it.

Far into the second week of being there, as he and Shane lay on their backs in the dark of Shane's room, letting the faint guitar music wash over them through the wall, Shane asked again: *Do you want to come to the rink tomorrow?*

And like always, Ilya said: *No, sorry.*

Shane shuffled, his mattress creaking as he looked at Ilya sleepily in the dark.

"You don't have to train, you know. It's an open rink tomorrow. Loads of people will be there, not just for hockey. You could just skate."

Ilya smiled faintly at the ceiling. It was so sweet, the way Shane's brain couldn't comprehend someone simply not wanting to be on the ice. He seemed to be desperately searching for reasons why Ilya kept refusing.

"Or," Shane continued, his voice lowering, turning self-conscious and hesitant. "We don't have to... like... interact, or anything, if that's what you're worried about. We can just drive there together, and then I'll get you when it's time to go."

Ilya shifted his head on the pillow, squinting through the gloom, not understanding the shift in tone.

"What do you mean?"

“That way you can come skate. If you want, we can just meet back by the car after, when we’re done.” Shane yawned, the heavy rhythm of his breathing indicating the neighbour's music was doing its job too well.

Ilya never felt more awake. Anxiety started a tight knot in his stomach, though he couldn’t quite pin down why.

“Hollander, what are you talking about?”

“I just mean... people won’t have to know you came with me,” Shane said, his tone completely natural. His voice was only dipping quickly into the heavy slurs of sleep.

That knot in Ilya's stomach tangled bigger, wrapping tightly around his lungs, growing black over his heart until he couldn't drag in a proper breath.

“What?”

“It’s okay if you don't want people to know we’re..” Shane’s eyes were shut now, a small, troubled furrow appearing between his brows as his half-lucid thoughts processed out loud. “Or, it’s okay if you’re not my...”

Ilya shot up onto his elbow, his entire body locking into a terrifying, rigid wire. He twisted to look down over Shane’s face, his heart hammering violently against his ribs. But Shane kept his eyes softly shut, letting the initial warmth of sleep wash over him, unaware of the devastation he had just dropped into the room.

“You’re still kind of my best friend,” he managed as a final, hazy murmur.

Ilya was completely frozen, his arm starting to ache with the brutal force of holding his own weight up.

He repeated Shane’s words over and over in his head, trying to make them make sense, trying to reorganise them into something that wouldn't make his chest feel like it was collapsing.

“Hollander,” he whispered, urgently.

He wanted Shane to wake up and take the words back. He wanted him to say them again. He wanted to run away and never look at this family again.

Had Shane believed, ever since Ilya’s stupid, defensive rejection back at the camp, and all the way up until this exact moment, that Ilya didn't want him? Had he just quietly accepted that Ilya would never claim him in the open? Like it was completely natural for someone to refuse friendship with him? Like he didn't deserve it any other way?

He couldn't understand how Shane had come to accept that narrative. Shane, who was surrounded by unconditional love, who had photos of his toothless smile on a wall, thought it was normal to be hidden. For him to pour into a friendship without expecting friendship back.

Then, the thought returned to him as a secondary thing, like he'd almost forgotten the bigger complication. Ilya almost had to remind himself that he *wanted to die*.

He sat up sharply on the bed, staring into the dark empty corners of the room, his eyes wild.

He had to face the reality of it now, the ugly truth he had been running from. His death wasn't harmless anymore. It wasn't the neat, quiet, uncomplicated exit he had planned back in Montana.

Because now... when he died, someone would lose their best friend.

He ripped himself free from the sheets as he rushed blindly into the shared bathroom, shutting the door behind him. He turned the shower dial all the way up, stumbling into the stream before it could even warm up.

And that night, Ilya couldn't quite hold off the waves of grief anymore.

He was suddenly overcome by dry, heaving gasps as the scalding water ripped at his skin, as he finally broke down.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I just want to say I love all of you who see a WIP and decide to give it a chance, and even better, decide to stick around and subscribe. thankful.

In my head, the song Ilya is learning is 'First Day of My Life' by Bright Eyes (because I love to be soppy and right on the nose, sue me)

♥ Still I'm curious what song you all imagine him learning?

For me a few other songs that fit him are:

I'm Your Man by Mitski

Smother by Daughter

I Know It's Over by Jeff Buckley

And pretty much give me all your yummy thoughts in the comments, feed meeeeeee

alright I seriously need to stop writing and focus on some job applications

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

B-b-bennie and the jetssssss

Chapter Notes

TW: again... suicide ideation, depression.

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

Ilya woke to the rustle of fabric and the awkward scuff of Shane moving carefully around the dim room. He waited until Shane had slipped out before he opened his eyes, blinking blankly at the pale-yellow walls.

That familiar weight was already waiting for him, telling him how much easier it would be to simply lie there and waste away.

It would be so easy to let himself be dragged back into the weird comfort of that numbness, even with the embarrassment now that there were two perceptive adults to observe the complete shame of it.

He lay in the dimness, listening to the muffled sounds of Shane moving around the kitchen, eating his breakfast.

That numbness never asked anything of him. He felt it heavy on top of his chest already.

But then he remembered the weight of Shane's frown the night before, and the sleepy confession that had horribly complicated his four months of careful planning.

Shane had sounded so sure that Ilya wouldn't want to be seen with him. The confession had kept Ilya awake most of the night, staring at the shape of him in the dark, wondering how he could ever manage to explain himself.

He couldn't bear it. He had to make Shane understand, even if he didn't have the words yet.

With a sharp breath, Ilya dragged himself off the bed, the movement taking too much out of him. With a frantically uncoordinated effort, he shifted over to the guest room to dress, pulling two thick knit sweaters over his head.

He shuffled quickly back into the hallway, trying to catch the end of Shane's breakfast.

Shane was only just stepping out the door. His gear bag slung low on his shoulder, his foot holding the apartment door open as he stretched to grab his mom's spare key off the wall hook.

"Hollander."

Shane turned, blinking dumbly at him.

Did he even remember what he had said the night before?

Ilya thought maybe he didn't, not with the surprise working over and across his brow now, his mouth settling around something unsaid—a question. His eyes flicked down to Ilya's laced boots, then up to the heavy coat zipped all the way to his chin.

Then, without a word he let the door swing open a little wider, wide enough to let him pass.

Ilya went.

They drove in a misty morning silence, unable to break the quiet just yet. The heater in the truck clicked and groaned again, letting out stale warmth against his knees, and Ilya made a mental note to check it out later if he still had any energy left.

When Shane finally pulled the car up just inside the rink gates, the brakes gave a tiny groan, too, as if begging for his attention.

As they stepped out of the car, Shane immediately offered a small smile across the hood, and almost instantly shuffled outward. A self-conscious widening of the physical gap between them.

Ilya wasn't sure if it was a conscious thing, but Shane certainly wasn't looking him in the eye.

He didn't let him get too far, either way. He strode quickly around the car, stepping right back into Shane's space until their coat sleeves brushed, actively closing the gap.

Shane flicked a quick questioning glance at him through his lashes, but he didn't move away again. They walked through the automatic swinging doors, arms brushing the whole way in.

Once they had laced up and stepped onto the ice, Shane turned to glide backward, his blades hissing softly over the surface.

"See you soon?" he said shyly.

Ilya nodded.

He watched Shane skate away, leaving him alone in the corner. He had absolutely no inspiration to practice himself.

The thought of running drills, or timing his speed or whatever it was he had done diligently for the past decade, left him feeling entirely empty. So he shuffled aimlessly along the

boards, never drifting too far like he already had one skate out the door.

He wasted the first hour that way, eventually stepping off the ice to lean his forearms against the scuffed plastic barrier, settling on simply watching the rink.

A few figure skaters were at the far end, a girl landing a double axle with a crisp *click-click* of her blade, the weight of pressure clear in the line of her shoulders. Another boy was practicing a triple, shaking around a harness with his coach holding the lines.

Closer to the middle, Shane was working with his trainer.

Ilya's gaze lingered, then hungrily tracked the power of Shane's stride, the pure skill of his aim. The trainer fired puck after puck across the ice, and Shane snapped every single one of them into the top corner of the net with terrifying precision.

Ilya didn't know what he was so hungry for. For Shane's love of the sport? Or purely for Shane? Probably it was both. Probably it was the fact that it was Shane who was the one holding the stick in his strong hands, rather than anything or anybody else.

He was a mirror to Ilya's own potential, if things hadn't been so fucked up for him.

A heavy slam against the boards right near him jolted Ilya out of his trance. A tall woman came to a rest there, bending immediately into a deep stretch. She groaned when her spine popped, righting herself back up.

She was in her forties, maybe, though her build was thick and strong, clearly having spent a lifetime on skates. Frizzy strands of white were scattered through her dirty-blonde hair, which was loose and wild where it escaped her low ponytail, and she looked entirely overwhelmed.

"They're fuckin' killing me today."

Ilya looked around, but she seemed to be speaking directly to him.

"Who is...?"

"These kids," she said, pointing.

Ilya followed her glove past her shoulder toward the left side of the rink, landing on a flock of children currently tearing the ice apart as they shrieked and fell over one another.

They were maybe six or seven years old, and they looked like clumsy little string puppets. A younger boy around his own age frantically tried to quiet them down, his hands splayed out like their very own overwhelmed puppeteer.

"Hey," she said, dragging his attention back to her face. "You're that boy from this year's draft... crap, I'm completely blanking on the name—"

"Ilya," he said, his voice still a little rough from the morning.

“Ilya Rozanov, yes!” She skated in a little closer, slamming her hip against the boards again and bending into another sudden deep stretch. She moved slowly back up, a hand held low on her spine.

No wonder she’s sore, Ilya thought privately, she was practically slamming herself all across the rink.

“Sorry, I’ve got a crazy case of mom-brain right now, and they’re not even my kids.”

“Uh,” Ilya said stupidly.

“What the hell are you doing in Ottawa, kid? Shouldn’t you be in Russia or... where was it... Boston?”

Ilya jerked his head, trying to get his brain up and running enough to assemble an English sentence.

“No. I am on christmas break. I am staying with...” He trailed off, his eyes instinctively drifting to find the familiar rhythm of Shane’s body across the ice.

The woman’s eyes followed his gaze, instantly softening with recognition.

“Oh—Shane!” Her voice rose, booming and fond. “I taught that boy his stops and turns when he was about this high. He’s such a good kid. Yuna must be so thrilled he’s home.”

Ilya nodded, a strange feeling cracking open over his chest hearing her fondness. She looked back at him, her eyes scanning his face, flicking back to Shane, and then returning finally to Ilya with a look of surprised but intuitive warmth.

“So you two are...”

The word *friends* sat like a stone in Ilya’s throat. He couldn’t swallow it down just yet, and he couldn’t just spit it out. He had come here to prove something, after all, but that didn’t stop his internal dilemma.

Unable to find the vocabulary for whatever terrifying thing they were becoming—roommates, maybe-friends, maybe-more, *he has saved my life more times than he could ever know*—Ilya just nodded, a jerky movement of his chin.

The woman’s smile widened, something deeply knowing and entirely gentle appearing in her face.

“Good for you,” she said. “Good for him...”

Before Ilya’s brain could even begin to make sense of any of that, a kid screamed especially loudly behind them, followed by the wet thump of two tiny bodies wiping across the ice.

The woman winced, refusing to look.

“Well. Duty calls. I'm Bennie, by the way. And hey, listen, Ilya—if you ever want something to keep you busy out here, you are so welcome to give me a hand with all...” She finally turned to glance, sighing, “...*that*. With the Christmas break, I'm already down two volunteers.”

“Uh. Okay,” Ilya blinked.

The woman, Bennie, gave him a final, slightly neurotic smile then turned on her heel, shouting, “You put that down, now!” The kids shrieked in laughter, completely unafraid.

Ilya watched her reach them, as the kids tried to right themselves back up and make to pay attention, though a few to the side seemed to be stuck in a fit of endless giggles.

He sat near the skate rental area for the remainder of the session. Shane found him not too long after, his hair stuck to his forehead with sweat, his body buzzing with the energy.

“Hey, ready?”

He nodded immediately, getting up.

Ilya had been ready to leave for the past two hours, when they had only just arrived.

This whole event had him weary and dragging his feet, as though he'd spent a whole day socialising, when he'd barely even managed a coherent conversation.

But despite the weariness, Ilya kept going back to the rink over the next few days, mainly to prove Shane's silent assumptions wrong. He couldn't let Shane think he was a burden to keep, or some sort of shameful secret to keep hidden behind doors.

And as he shuffled aimlessly on the ice, trying to hide from the bright glare of the lights, he couldn't quite ignore the chaos of the kids in the far corner.

The afternoons at the apartment had long fallen into a domestic rhythm that Ilya couldn't quite turn away anymore.

Every hour here was starting to feel like a treasure now, like stolen time. Something he needed to grab at before his time ran out.

So when Mr. Hollander walked through the living space toward the front door, the heavy weight of his timeline drove Ilya to desperately start reaching out.

He'd stood up off the couch, gently pushing Shane's legs off his lap where they had been resting.

“Mr. Hollander,” he'd said, trying to catch his attention before he could think better of it.

The man had turned, his eyes warming at spotting him. “Yes?”

“Are you... do you need help in the garage?” Ilya stammered out, aiming for casual and failing pathetically, not used to asking.

Mr. Hollander's smile had been immediate and wide. "Come on down, kid."

After that moment, Ilya had begun spending hours in the garage even when the man was still at work or out driving Mrs. Hollander around, the Jeep missing from its spot against the far wall.

In that time Ilya worked furiously, desperately, organising the space. He wiped down greasy edges, hung heavy wrenches by size on the pegboard, and swept the concrete until it was free of any signs of metal chips and sawdust.

He wanted to leave the space perfect for Mr. Hollander for when he was gone— a silent thank you that the man would never really grasp the true weight of— because as much as he didn't want to admit it, Ilya wanted to be remembered fondly.

The feeling had intensified through working right beside him, both of their hands getting dirtied under the mechanics of the old car. Especially when they'd get to the bottom of the matter at hand, finding the cause of an odd rattle, or twisting a bolt to rights.

Like always, Mr. Hollander would laugh big and proud and smack a heavy hand against his shoulder.

Ilya had stopped flinching so much now. He had even started to lean closer, his face warming under the man's attention whenever he called him 'son' or 'kid'.

Somehow, selfishly, Ilya found himself indulging in the thought of Mr. Hollander being his father. Or more so, of Ilya being his son. Mr. Hollander, whose eyes looked like his, only with a little more blue in them, and whose hair was just a shade darker than Ilya's own.

Shane had taken more to his mother, sharing her sharp features and directness of speech. With Mr. Hollander, though, Ilya could play pretend. He could picture him raising him, proudly claiming Ilya as his.

But then Shane would stand close to Mr. Hollander, and their shoulders would move in exactly the same way, their mouths frowning in the same familiar shape, their hands big and rounded just the same.

Ilya would quickly shake the thought away, pegging it down to exhaustion. Or, more likely, the starting dregs of insanity catching up with him.

Shane had clearly inherited his kindness, his thoughtfulness, and his capacity for love directly from his father; Ilya didn't think he could ever measure up to that.

Only two days after Bennie had first invaded his space, Ilya had finally made his way reluctantly over. She was entirely by herself that day, missing her usual teenage volunteer, and she looked about ready to rip her hair out.

"Ilya!" she gasped, spotting him. Without a second thought, she steered a tiny stumbling kid right into his hands.

Ilya looked down aimlessly at the boy, his gloved hand holding him securely by the scruff of his small jersey.

“What do I do with this?” he asked stupidly.

“Help him with his form, please,” Bennie said, dropping her voice into a desperate theatrical whisper. “*Help me.*”

Ilya nodded, watching her twist back around to separate two more kids in the back who had started to shove each other.

“Hey! If you lick that bar again your tongue will stick and I am leaving you there until you thaw!” she yelled, her voice echoing off the empty seats of the arena.

Left alone, Ilya looked down at the tiny bright-orange helmet.

“Well. Hello.”

The boy smiled crookedly, his eyes scrunched up with the effort of bending his neck back far enough to see Ilya’s face.

“Hi. Are you a coach?”

“No. Am not old enough for coach.”

“How old are you?” The kid asked.

“How old do you think I am?” Ilya said, trying to soften his accent for the boy.

The boy twisted some more, testing the grip Ilya still had on the back of his shirt.

“I dunno. Forty?”

Ilya couldn’t help the grin that broke across his face, genuinely amused.

“I am eighteen.”

The kid blinked up at him, entirely unfazed by the correction, his voice squeaking awkwardly as he spoke. “You sound a little funny.”

“You sound funny too,” Ilya said simply.

He let go of the kid’s jersey, dropping heavily onto his knees so he was at eye level with him. Up close, the kid’s gear was a disaster. His elbow pads were sliding down his forearms and his stick was held at a completely ineffective angle.

Ilya reached out, his thick gloves looking massive against the boy’s tiny frame.

He didn’t know how to teach children gently. He only knew the fear-driven methods Grigory and the trainers in Russia had used on him since he was five years old.

But looking at the boy's crooked smile, Ilya felt a hard wall lock into place inside his mind, refusing to let his thoughts even drift there.

Instead, he placed his hands firmly on the kid's hips, physically shifting his weight until his skates were properly aligned beneath him.

"Bend knees," Ilya instructed softly, tapping the back of the boy's shins with his fingers. "Let your body feel pulled down. Like... like a house. Heavy foundation, so nothing can knock you over."

He pulled both hands in straight, fisting them together and pretended it was a wrecking ball, coming down to knock the boy down.

The kid wobbled at the swing, giggling, then found his balance, his eyes widening in surprise as he realised he wasn't falling over anymore.

"Whoaaaa. I'm sturdy."

"Yes. Sturdy," Ilya repeated, a small warmth blooming in his chest.

For the next hour, and the days that followed, Ilya moved through the chaotic pack of six-year-olds like an insanely patient gentle giant.

While Bennie dealt with the screaming meltdowns, Ilya stayed on his knees, physically adjusting grips, picking up fallen ones by their waistbands like little dolls, clumsy and wooden.

Predictably, they were terrible at hockey, because they were six. Obviously they couldn't pass, their strides were uncoordinated, and half of them preferred to slide on their bellies across the ice laughing the whole way.

But as Ilya watched them shriek with laughter, totally unafraid of failure, a strange realisation settled over him.

Nobody was screaming at them to be better. Nobody was threatening to tell their families or convincing them they were worthless if they missed a move.

They just wanted to play, and they wanted to have made a friend by the end of the hour.

It was a version of being on the ice that was pure joy; a version that Ilya had been entirely denied his entire life, and Bennie had somehow managed it.

By the time the buzzer sounded to clear the ice that first day, Ilya's knees were frozen through his track pants from kneeling. Bennie skated over, her dirty-blonde hair completely wild out of her ponytail, her face blotchy and sweating.

"Ilya, seriously, I can't thank you enough," she breathed, leaning heavily against the boards. "If you come back tomorrow, I'll buy you a coffee from the machine. And you know, I won't ever slander your name when you're famous."

Ilya stood up, his joints aching from the cold. He didn't know that word, but he knew he wouldn't be getting famous, so the threat of whatever 'slander' was fell off him easily.

He looked back at the kids dragging their sticks toward the gate, completely unaffected at the way they'd given them a run for their money as they continued to talk a mile a minute.

"Tomorrow," he repeated. "Yes. I will come."

He helped out more after that, even when the other boy was back to volunteer.

With three of them now, they had a better handle on the kids, and Ilya got to make his way through the group one by one, picking them back up and showing them the basics.

"Elbows in, like this," he'd tell a little girl with little spiky space buns. "Balance."

She copied his form, poorly. Though she was still going on an almost nonsensical monologue about how her best-friend at school had seriously wronged her for stealing her favourite fuzzy pencil.

He felt like he was healing himself, the more he showed patience. The more time he took teaching the little ones how to do their turns and stops, the more he waited as they picked themselves back up, looking around for a reaction.

The only reaction Ilya ever gave was a big smile, a reassuring, "Is okay, happens to me all the time. Get yourself back up."

Shane would be waiting for him by the skate rental benches, his own training session long finished, watching him with an unreadable intensity.

Shane soon began to join him and his dad more frequently in the garage, too, having nothing else to do with Ilya being out of the apartment.

He would sit in the open passenger door of the Jeep, reading out loud the instructions for the new tyres they were installing, or the guide to working the new console they were putting in, one leg swinging the whole way.

Other times, they spent their afternoons just sitting at the kitchen island, sharing some Oreshki in the quiet apartment while Mr. Hollander showered off the garage grime.

Ilya would rest his hand over Shane's forearm where it lay on the counter, squeezing down occasionally, just the right amount of grounding pressure for Shane.

But internally, Ilya knew he was squeezing to anchor himself, holding onto the boy like a lifeline while the days ticked fast down toward January, and they had to leave.

He still wasn't sure how to behave around Mrs. Hollander. It wasn't that he wanted to please her, particularly; it was just that he really didn't want to disappoint anybody.

He was fearful that he was massively disappointing her each time she mentioned the bright potential of their futures, because he already knew he was on a straight path to failure.

Ilya knew she was quietly watching him, assessing something. But Ilya had also been watching her, each time she wasn't looking.

He often watched the easy way Shane moved around his mother, trying to make sense of it. The dynamic hit him clearly during those quiet afternoons.

Mrs. Hollander would have her nose buried in her laptop while Shane lazed beside her, reading over his Montreal materials. She would turn the laptop over at times, showing Shane a spreadsheet or a schedule. Shane would nod, wordlessly agreeing.

But then, sometimes, she would show him something else, and Shane's nose would scrunch, and he would shake his head no. Mrs. Hollander would react only by turning the laptop back to herself, moving on to the next thing.

It wasn't control, Ilya realised. It wasn't a dictatorship. It was a collaboration. A partnership, even. Shane needed the direction, and most of all he needed the push. As for her, she only sought structure, which was why he thrived under it.

The growing serenity of the past few weeks shattered on a bitter afternoon close to Christmas.

They moved in tandem from the car after a long double-session at the rink.

He shuffled closely behind Shane, crowding into his space on the elevator up. Shane welcomed him easily, letting Ilya lean his forehead against his firm chest, a hand raising naturally to the small of his back.

Mrs. Hollander was in the living space when they dragged themselves through the front door, dropping their heavy bags in the entryway.

"Boys, put those away in your rooms please, you know the rules."

For a moment her voice somehow soothed something in his chest, like his mother telling him off, only spoken in English. They picked their bags back up, dropping them off in Shane's room before heading back out to the couch.

Shane plopped down roughly next to her, letting his chin hook over her shoulder. "Hi, maman."

His mom looked up and over from her stack of papers, her expression instantly fond.

Ilya kept his eyes on them, moving clumsily to the armchair across from them, not wanting to tear his eyes away from the sight of mother and son.

"How was today with the new trainer?" she asked.

"Good. He says my precision aim is the best he's seen."

"Did you check your calendar? I want you to focus on speech this week, Shane."

Ilya watched curiously as Shane huffed.

“Mom, I hate speech therapy. And I was thinking me and Ilya could go to The Music Room tomorrow instead.”

Ilya focused in on her face, waiting for the tightening of annoyance or anger that tended to follow his own insolence back home.

But she just said, “You’re going to be talking to lots of new people away from home, Shane. I don’t want you struggling to make friends.”

Then she sighed, giving in just a little.

“You can take my car.”

“Thanks, mom.” Shane smiled warmly, kissing her cheek.

"But you're still going to speech, after Christmas." She said. "And make sure to ask Joanna to help you with chirping, too."

"Oh my god," Shane said, embarrassed.

"What? It's important to be prepared!"

She looked at Ilya then, and Ilya shrunk slightly under her gaze. He had been avoiding her, subconsciously, all through the apartment, despite having been here for nearly three weeks.

She hadn't even been bad with him or anything, because actually she was just as kind as her husband, and just as patient. She even called him *darling* and Ilya wanted to wrap himself around the word every time.

It was just that anytime she brought up hockey he would nod uselessly, wanting to run the other way.

“How was your session, Ilya?”

Ilya cleared his throat roughly. “Not a session, really. Just some skating.”

He still hadn't mentioned Bennie or the kids, and clearly neither had Shane.

Mrs. Hollander nodded easily, though her eyes were intense. Ilya looked away, staring too intently at the TV screen instead, which seemed to be running muted recaps of an Ottawa vs San Jose game.

Mrs. Hollander went back to her paperwork eventually, her pen scratching against the sheets.

Not looking at him, she casually said, “Ilya, have you gone over any Raiders materials, yourself? It's best you stay on top of everything early on.”

The question hit Ilya with a stinging shock of reality. To her, it wasn't anything but good planning. To Ilya, it was a reminder of his expiration date.

He wasn't going to Boston and he wasn't going back to Russia.

After New Year's, when he returned to that camp, he was finishing his plan because anything else was hopeless. He would rather not exist at all than go back to the cage of his life, before or after.

He looked around the warm room; the quiet peace of a home he had no right to occupy, and felt that same profound grief.

He was just a visitor getting a glimpse of a life he could never have and he knew it was going to end.

He only wondered how long it would take for the cleaner to notice the smudge of his fingerprint he knew was still on the glass of the picture frame, before she took a cloth to it and wiped the last of his trace from this home.

He gave her a polite nod.

"Not yet, ma'am. I will when we go back to camp."

She turned suddenly, remembering something.

"Actually, Shane, I've figured out a way for you to stay here..." she started, still too distracted by her screen to see the way both boys froze at her words, looking at one another, eyes wide around a shared anxiety. "...and they actually said that that's fine. That is to say, you worked very hard on your stats, and you're pretty much excused from the programme."

You are never going back to that place ever again, she had said, when Shane had first walked back into her arms again.

Ilya had thought she was only joking.

Her words now hung heavily in the room.

Then—

"I didn't ask you to do that, mom!" Shane said suddenly, his voice rising, sharp and broken.

He shifted away from her and stood abruptly, his shoulders tense as he looked between them.

Ilya made quick work of folding away his expression, plastering on a perfectly blank one.

"Shane, sweetheart, what's wrong?" she said, looking up from her laptop, expression utterly lost. "You said you hated it there."

Ilya could see all the thoughts warring between themselves in Shane's head. He could tell Shane was lost himself, his chest heaving, his eyes darting again to Ilya.

It was clear he didn't know if Ilya even wanted him to come to his defense, if he even wanted to be saved from the prospect of going back to that place.

And they both clearly knew no agreement could possibly be made for Ilya with Boston, whose organisers frankly may have looked at his recent reports and laughed right in his face.

Shane could be excused. But Ilya was still entirely and hopelessly trapped to take his third option out.

He lowered his gaze, wanting desperately to opt out of this interaction.

But his eyes startled back up when Shane said, "I'm going to go back," his voice thick with an anger Ilya hadn't heard before.

Before his mother could even speak, Shane turned right on his heel and stormed off down the hall, his bedroom door slamming shut a second later.

Mrs. Hollander shut her laptop, shuffling as if to stand up to follow her son, but she hesitated, eyes narrowing around a thought.

Left in the suffocating silence of the room, Ilya quickly refocused his eyes back on the TV, watching the muted hockey game stretch on, hoping that if he sat still enough, he'd simply disappear into the fabric of the armchair and dodge her calculating gaze.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter gave me hell for some reason, I think I got a bit lost with the pacing. I am officially out of already drafted/planned chapters so I may be taking a bit more time with writing up the final ones, but I have never not finished a project like this that I have already started so rest assured this fic will be done.

Left a six-seven sneak in there for my friend to laugh at when he reads this later.

Thank you all for the beautiful encouraging comments, I adore reading all the different interpretations, big sloppy kisses to you

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Happy Ilya.

Chapter Notes

TW: suicidal thoughts, ideation. Mentions of emotional abuse. Child neglect?

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

It didn't take long before Ilya couldn't handle the weight of Mrs. Hollander's gaze anymore. Even with him facing away from her, focusing on the TV, he could feel her eyes burning against the side of his face, tracking his every staggering breath.

He got up awkwardly, swiping his damp palms over his joggers. "I will... go see Shane."

Mrs. Hollander nodded, her expression tight and unreadable as he turned fast toward the hallway.

In the bedroom, Shane was sulking on his mattress, his back pressed hard against the headboard and his arms locked tightly over his chest.

He was trying to make himself small, a defensive posture Ilya recognised instantly. It was the very particular physical language of Shane when he was trying to distance himself from a world that had grown too much way too fast.

Ilya approached without a word. He crawled onto the bed, sliding into the narrow gap between Shane's bent legs.

On seeing him coming, Shane's thighs parted slightly—an instinctive invitation.

Meeting Shane's defensive glare, Ilya raised an index finger to his lips as if to say '*Shhhh*' and raised his brows in a question.

Shane let out a breath and nodded, looking entirely drained. Snapping at his mother clearly wasn't something he did often, and the guilt of it was already weighing him down.

Ilya thought it was ironic, that not long ago Shane had been up on the roof, bargaining with mother nature to not prevent him from coming home.

Now he was fighting his *actual mother* in order to go back, for Ilya's sake.

Ilya didn't mind the quiet this time; in fact, he was grateful for it. He wanted nothing more than to give Shane exactly what he needed to come back into himself.

Slowly, Ilya slid further into the space Shane had made for him between his thighs. He set his palms on Shane's knees, then dragged them slowly upward.

His touch was feather-light, tracing a tickling path up the fabric of Shane's sweats, drifting to the sides over his hips, to graze the bare skin of his waist where his shirt rode up.

Shane squirmed, a quiet huff of a laugh escaping his lips.

Spurred on by the reaction, Ilya leaned in closer still, burying his face in the crook of Shane's neck.

This time, Shane let out a soft gasp, half-heartedly trying to wiggle away from the tickling of Ilya's curls on his sensitive skin.

Ilya let a genuine laugh bubble up as he shifted back. He rolled onto his side, letting the back of his head thunk against the headboard beside Shane.

It was terrifying how easily he could exist here, in the quiet heaven of this room. The soft yellow walls and pale blue curtains always made the space look as though it was bathed in a permanent summer haze.

Having Shane lean his head against his shoulder here felt like a blessing too; though it was a choice that Shane was making, over and over again, to settle his body beside his, *choosing him*. So maybe that was the true blessing.

But Shane is going to be staying here, he thought. A comforting reality settled deep in his chest knowing it. *He will be safe in Ottawa.*

He was thankful that realisation didn't bring sadness with it; strangely it brought a sort of liberating peace.

He had spent weeks worrying about how he would survive the suffocating cage of the hockey camp without Shane by his side when Shane was set to leave him behind for the break. Then, he'd also spent longer dwelling on the fact that *he* would be leaving *Shane* all alone to complete the rest of camp.

Now, he didn't have to worry about any of that anymore. The plan he had kept folded away in his mind suddenly felt remarkably uncomplicated.

With Shane safe and loved here, there was no reason to fight anymore. Death felt slightly less terrifying somehow; he could finally rest, knowing his Shane could be safe and loved like he was here.

They sat like that for a long time, shoulders pressed together in the ruminative silence, while the apartment hummed to life around them.

Soon, the domestic sounds of the kitchen drifted down the hall, carrying with it the savoury scent of Mr Hollander's cooking.

Something about the smell drove Ilya to move.

He turned his head slightly, studying the dark spikes of Shane's eyelashes over his freckles.

"Hey," he murmured. "Want dinner?"

Shane's chest rose and fell in a steady rhythm, the anger from earlier entirely dissipated. He finally spoke, nuzzling his cheek deeper into Ilya's shoulder as he offered a lazy, "No."

Ilya nodded to himself, leaning down to press his nose briefly into Shane's hair, breathing in the peppermint for just a moment longer.

He felt a profound sense of lightness. In fact Ilya could be done with it all now, and he would go gladly.

Reluctantly, he pulled away, leaving Shane to his peaceful quiet, and walked back out into the living space.

Mrs. Hollander was already seated at the dining table, her chin resting in her hands, still lost in thought. Mr. Hollander was moving to sit beside her, leaning over to press a reassuring kiss to her temple.

On the table across from their own steaming bowls, two more sat waiting for the boys.

Ilya hovered at the edge of the room, clearing his throat to catch their attention.

Mrs. Hollander's eyes jumped to him immediately, then flicked to the empty hallway behind him, hoping to find Shane there.

"Uh. He is—quiet," Ilya offered. He didn't have the English to describe the way Shane retreated inward when things became too overwhelming. He had only witnessed it once before, but he had the feeling Shane's parents would understand what he meant.

Mrs. Hollander looked down at her plate, her expression softening with worry, while Mr. Hollander gave a slow nod.

"He just needs a moment," Mr. Hollander said, gesturing to the empty chair. "Sit, Ilya."

Ilya slid into his usual spot.

As he looked down, his heart did a sudden flip at the sight.

The soup in front of him was vibrant red, thick with cabbage and beef, steam rising lazily warming Ilya's face. It was a sight so intensely cozy, so sickeningly familiar, that he felt it rush all over his body.

For a split second, he wasn't in Canada; he was six years old and sitting in a tiny wooden kitchen in Russia.

“Borscht?” he asked, quite abruptly.

Mr. Hollander hummed warmly. “Looks like you really like this one, huh?”

“Yes, sir,” Ilya said, his mind whirring with the unexpected nostalgia until he was dizzy. “My mom was making... when I was small.”

“You must be missing her, being so far from home,” Mrs. Hollander said softly, leaning in to her own bowl. “She’s back in Russia?”

“No. I mean—yes. But she is dead.”

Dead.

The word screamed in his head the moment it left his mouth.

He froze, his spoon hovering inches from the bowl. Why had he said that? He never spoke about her. He had spent years building thick impenetrable walls around the topic, and with one mindless comment, he had let the gates wide open.

He looked up, shrinking under the suffocating silence of the room, stretching and stretching on. Both of the Hollanders had gone entirely still, their eyes wide and locked on him. He cleared his throat, hoping to break the silence even just a little.

Desperate to repair the damage and prove he wasn't *a total tragic orphan*, he blurted out, “My father is alive.”

The words sounded defensive, almost. Because he really didn't want their pity. It made him physically nauseous that they may be pitying him now.

“Your father,” Mr. Hollander repeated, nodding slowly as he tried to adjust to the sudden shift in the conversation. “You haven't really mentioned him, either. Does he know you're here? We've sort of kidnapped you away for the holidays.”

An icy shiver quickly replaced Ilya's nausea. The mention of his father felt like a cold hand wrapping around his throat, dragging him back to the reality he had been trying so hard to ignore while he's been here.

“Ah. No. He does not know.”

Mrs. Hollander's brow furrowed. “Really?”

Ilya shrugged, desperately wishing he could swallow the words and start the evening over. He wanted this dinner to be perfect. He wanted to be the polite and uncomplicated guest they deserved, not a dark cloud dimming the warm light of their dining room.

He picked up his spoon, and took a big spoonful of the soup to shut himself up.

“Well, I just mean... shouldn’t you call him? It’s almost Christmas,” she pressed gently.

He forced down the hot soup, though it burned all the way through his throat. His father hadn’t called in six weeks. Maybe even seven. He probably wouldn’t call for another long while.

“I am not supposed to call,” Ilya said quickly, his voice falsely casual. “And anyway, in Russia, we have Christmas after two weeks.”

A cold sweat was breaking out across the back of his neck. His heart was hammering against his ribs and his mind was spinning, spinning, spinning, spilling loose.

He knew he should stop talking, but the panic was making him reckless, the words spilling out of him in a desperate attempt to explain away the coldness of his life. The dead mother, the careless father, the child—far away and unaccounted for. He hoped they didn’t ask him anything else—

“What do you mean, you’re not supposed to call?” Mr. Hollander asked. The warmth in his voice had vanished, replaced by a tone that made Ilya’s stomach twist.

Ilya shook his head, looking down at his bowl. The silence stretched more around a beat, heavy and suffocating. That beat seemed to stick, so he spoke again, trying his best to sound casual.

“I am only supposed to call when I can...” He trailed off, his words failing him as his brain scrambled. “Пока не буду чего-то стоить...” He frowned, searching for the translation, “...to be worthy?”

Shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up!

He was ruining everything. They were supposed to have a normal family dinner.

He had already driven a wedge between Shane and his mother earlier, and now he was bringing his own broken life into their perfect dollhouse kitchen.

He risked a glance upward. The Hollanders were sitting completely rigid, faces troubled.

“I don’t understand—” Mrs. Hollander said, her voice rising slightly, though she didn’t seem to realise it.

She turned a helpless look toward her husband. Mr. Hollander reached out, placing his large hand over her white-knuckled grip on her spoon.

“Worthy? Worthy of what?” she asked, still looking at Mr. Hollander as if he could translate the horrific implication of Ilya’s words into something palatable.

But her husband had no answers. He just stared back at her, entirely unable to soften the blow of what Ilya had just revealed.

The sudden harsh scrape of Mrs. Hollander’s chair made Ilya flinch.

“I need to check on Shane— ” she whispered, her voice fluttering like something was stuck in her lungs, before she turned on her heel and fled.

The silence she left behind was heavier, with only himself and Mr. Hollander to share it.

Ilya stared at his bowl, his hands trembling so badly he had to hide them beneath the table, rubbing his palms hard against his thighs over and over.

“Im sorry,” he managed. “I did not mean to upset her.”

Mr. Hollander shook his head slowly. When he looked at Ilya, his eyes were incredibly soft, and it made Ilya feel so undeserving.

“No, son. Try to finish your bowl.”

Ilya picked up his spoon again, but his throat had completely closed back up. He managed two small spoonfuls before he had to set it down. He had been doing so well with his eating lately. But the weight of his own shame now had turned the comforting soup bland and shockingly cold.

As they both got to work clearing the table and eventually loading the dishes into the dishwasher, Mr. Hollander broke the quiet.

“Ilya, I’d like you to know how happy we are to have you here,” he said, clearing the roughness from his voice.

Ilya nodded, his own throat tight. He was about to try and explain how grateful he was, how much this warmth meant to him, but Mr. Hollander raised a hand, gently cutting him off.

“I don’t just say so because you’re Shane’s friend. You’re a great kid—anyone of sound mind and logic should be able to see that.” He said, his voice lilting into something a little angry and a lot protective. “It’s been my pleasure having you around. When I said that we’ve kidnapped you away, know that I would gladly do it again.”

Ilya watched Mr. Hollander with wide overwhelmed eyes. The older man looked so incredibly open, his face brimming with a sincerity that Ilya wasn’t used to having directed at him.

“I have been happy here,” Ilya said, the words slipping out in a moment of pure, raw honesty. He kept the rest of the thought locked behind his teeth: *I have rarely felt happy anywhere else.*

Maybe he had misjudged all those people he’d first encountered after landing in North America. He had been convinced that their smiles were fake, hollow. But he had been here three weeks and he didn’t remember the last time he had smiled this much. Maybe the people here really were just happy. It was disgustingly contagious.

“I will remember this for the rest of my life,” Ilya continued quietly. “Thank you, Mr Hollander.”

He found Shane already tucked into bed when he finally went down the hall. Shane was sound asleep, completely taken under by his exhaustion. Ilya crawled in right beside him, shifting close until he could lean his forehead against Shane's, taking in the steady heat of him.

Shane was feeling much better by morning, and Ilya happily let himself be dragged out of bed as they got ready for the rink.

Ilya felt entirely drunk on life, today.

It was a terrifyingly addictive sensation. He finally understood why people chased various highs. Whether it was vodka, cigarettes, drugs, or any other vice. He had been guilty of it himself, chasing it, before the appeal eventually left him all together.

Those things had made him feel not even a fraction of the lightness he felt now.

He felt completely drunk on Shane, on his touch, his eyes, on the life he lived. He felt drugged with Mr and Mrs Hollander's attention. He felt the rush of being so trusted by Bennie, and the chance at rewriting his own experience through his children.

But it was all a little like visiting a beautiful home he knew he could never afford to buy.

He leaned over and kissed Shane's shoulder when he finally put the car into park at the ice centre.

It wasn't enough, never enough. Ilya was a drunkard and he wanted more and more and more. Shane shifted just an inch closer at the contact though, letting out a contented sigh.

Inside the rink, Ilya let the kids skate stumbling laps around him. He glided lazy circles in the middle, letting himself get dizzy with the movement, laughing along with them.

He knew he wasn't supposed to have favourites—that was one of the many things that had fractured his relationship with his brother so early on—but he couldn't help it. There was one little girl with neat curly hair and big brown eyes that always looked a little wide and anxious. She wore a white hat with tiny ears poking up at the top, making her look exactly like a frightened little winter bear.

When she opted out of the laps, sliding near the middle instead, Ilya let her stay close. She reached out, holding tightly onto the heavy fabric of his snow trousers.

He leaned down to look at her.

“Hello, little bear. No skating today?”

She shrugged her tiny shoulders under her thick jumper.

In the background, Bennie was watching over the rest of the kids near the far boards, ready to guide them into the next task.

Ilya bent lower, sinking until one knee settled directly onto the cold ice so he was eye-level with her.

“Talk to me,” he said gently.

At his soft tone, her lower lip began to quiver. “I get scared at the turns,” she whispered. “It feels like I'm going to fall over. Everyone else can do it but me.”

Ilya shook his head, too keen to offer her a reassuring smile.

“But that’s okay, yes? You are still learning. You only started learning how to walk maybe five years ago,” he joked lightly, trying to coax a smile out of her. “Skates are very different from walking, yes?”

She gave a small nod, though her eyes remained nervous.

“We do it together,” Ilya said, rising back up and holding out one of his gloved hands. “We skate forward, and then you try to follow my turn.”

She tried her best, pushing off with her tiny blades, but when the turn came, her skate slipped wide.

Ilya was already there, and he caught her instantly, scooping her up before she could hit the ice or start to cry. He lifted up and settled her weight securely against his hip, and she buried her face directly into his shoulder.

Ilya raised a quick hand up in signal to Bennie across the ice, and Bennie waved him off with an understanding nod.

“You are okay, little bear,” Ilya murmured, rubbing her back. “No one is going to be upset with you. No one is mad.”

What good would it have done anyway? What good had it ever done for him to be treated that way? The frightful thought of returning to competition, of skating only to let someone else down again, made him feel physically sick.

His body had never truly belonged to him and him alone, not since he was six years old himself.

But holding this little girl, he wanted to keep her as far away from that cold logic as possible.

As he took slow, lazy strides around the perimeter of the ice, a famous Soviet lullaby from his childhood came back to him. It was about a little polar bear. He could almost hear his mother’s voice singing it in their quiet kitchen.

Under his breath, barely louder than the hum of the machines beneath them, he spoke the words in a swaying rhythm that matched the glide of his skates.

“Lozhkoy sneg meshaya...”

Stirring the snow with a spoon.

He pressed his cheek gently against the girl's fuzzy bear hat, feeling her rapid breathing start to sync with his steady strides.

“Noch’ idet bol’shaya...”

The great night is coming.

The girl's head was getting heavy against his shoulder, her breathing easing into a quiet pattern.

Ilya spotted Shane skating over. Shane was tracking the hypnotic circles Ilya was carving into the ice, as if the rhythm was calming him down, too.

When he made it close enough, he leaned in slightly, catching the little girl's eyes, and gave her an awkward but sweet little wave. The girl buried her cheek deeper into Ilya's shoulder in response.

“Hey,” Shane said softly, looking back at Ilya. He was flushed warm and pink from the ice-time, and, Ilya guessed, probably also from something else. “We should go before it closes.”

Ilya nodded in agreement. He linked the pinky of his free hand into Shane's own for a moment, hidden between their bodies.

“Five minutes? I will tell Bennie I am done for today.”

Shane squeezed his pinky in response, letting go to skate towards the the showers.

After the rink, Shane had planned to take him to The Music Room. It was a massive two-story building in central Ottawa, entirely dedicated to music.

When they got there, Ilya looked around in awe as Shane walked him through the aisles. The walls were painted a deep navy colour that made the hanging instruments stand out under the warm stage lighting all through the store.

Ilya lightly trailed his fingers along the acoustic guitars hanging on the wall, feeling the texture of the polished wood change with each one—cedar, mahogany, maple, rosewood. On and on, endless choices.

“I know you use mine. You can have it, it's yours already. But...” Shane said quietly, keeping his voice low to fit the hushed atmosphere of the store. “I thought you could see if you liked anything else, too.”

“What do you mean? Why would I?”

“I thought maybe it's kind of just like hockey sticks. It has to feel like the right one, you know?” Shane mumbled. “Like it has to feel like it was made for you, and fit your body and your hands exactly right, for it to feel like yours.”

It has to fit your body.

He kept on touching the instruments mindlessly, running his thumb lightly down the thick brass string of a beautiful Maritime guitar which probably cost eye-wateringly more than what measly amount he had in his duffle back at the apartment.

When he looked back, Shane was watching him with an expression that looked terrifyingly close to adoration.

It was too much. It felt like the borscht from last night — like a light so warm and bright that it only made Ilya's own shadow look darker in comparison. He shook his head slowly, trying to stay present.

“You can try them out, too. This place has some practice rooms upstairs.”

Shane reached out, lifting the Maritime gently from its hanger and guiding Ilya toward the creaking wooden stairs.

It was all sort of pointless, though. Ilya liked playing, sure. But he was perfectly fine using Shane's oak guitar for the time being.

He didn't really picture himself playing for long. Looking down at the dark wood of the hand-built guitar in Shane's hands, he felt a strange sort of detachment.

He knew this little guitar hobby would be left behind in Ottawa when January came, anyway. It was a temporary distraction, a beautiful yet borrowed thing he was allowing himself to hold for a few weeks before checking out.

Still, Shane seemed to desperately expect him to want more out of life; to want a future, to want *things* that belonged to him. And Ilya was more than happy to let himself be guided up the stairs, content to be the absolute center of Shane's focus for just a little while longer.

At the top of the stairs, Shane pushed open a heavy soundproof door to the left, and Ilya stepped into a dark-red room filled with loose practice instruments.

It looked like a music student's sex-dream. He drifted toward a huge expensive-looking piano, tapping his fingertips lightly against a key.

“I can try any of it?”

“Yeah, totally,” Shane said.

Ilya let out a soft laugh, because he'd only ever heard Shane say *totally* and nobody else.

He spotted a sleek black electric guitar resting against an amplifier in the corner. He slipped the strap over his shoulder and struck the strings, but only a thin sort of unplugged tinny sound came out.

“Oh, wait—” Shane said, jumping forward quickly to flip the switch on the amp.

Ilya tried again. This time, the chord he struck roared out, bouncing violently off the soundproofed walls and vibrating right through their heads. Shane startled at the power of it, immediately slamming his hands hard over his ears.

“Shit. Sorry. Are you okay?” Ilya asked, placing a palm over the strings and stepping close.

“Yeah, yeah. Go on,” Shane said, lowering his hands.

Ilya knew Shane didn’t have a problem with sound, necessarily. Nothing brought him to life quite like the pure chaos of an arena did, he knew. So when Shane urged him on once more, Ilya tried again.

He clumsily picked out the pattern of a faster song he’d been practicing back in Shane’s room. It was incredibly loud, the heavy pitch filling the tiny room.

Ilya didn’t mind the volume; if anything, the wall of sound did a better job of drowning out his own brain than even the acoustic could. It was an impenetrable barrier against his own thoughts.

But it was clear this wasn’t the kind of sound Shane sought after, judging by the uncomfortable tightness around his eyes. He wasn’t a fan of the bass.

Ilya stopped immediately, the noise cutting out. His own peace could wait; he wasn’t going to let Shane tolerate it.

He unhooked the strap from his shoulder. “I don’t like it.”

“Oh,” Shane said, relaxing his hands.

Ilya walked over to the drum set, just to see. He picked up a pair of wooden sticks and tapped them experimentally against the drums, but there was no real rhythm to it.

It felt awkward and unknown to him, and he couldn’t see himself ever taking it seriously, so he laid the sticks back down.

Just nearby, to his left, was a full-out portable DJ table. Ilya snorted, finally turning to Shane.

“I think I just like the guitar.”

Shane’s face broke into a wide toothy grin, like the pictures, only now all grown up. Ilya felt a fierce ache to press his mouth to Shane’s cheeks, to kiss his face all over, forever.

Shane held out the acoustic Maritime they had brought up from downstairs, and Ilya stepped forward to take it from his hands.

It really was beautiful.

For some reason, it felt sort of dangerous to admit how much he liked it—as if admitting he wanted something this nice or pretty would only guarantee someone would swoop in and take it away from him, like probably he didn’t deserve to have it.

That was exactly how he felt about Shane sometimes, too. Shane was so beautiful it physically hurt. And he felt like he wasn't allowed to want it.

"Let's go," Ilya said softly, with finality. He bent down, resting the guitar safely against the legs of a keyboard behind him, leaving it there.

Shane's smile dropped slowly as he watched the movement and followed Ilya silently out the door.

"Is everything okay?" Shane asked once they were out in the freezing air of the parking lot.

"You are too good to me, Hollander," Ilya quietly let some truth slip, stopping at the trunk of the car.

Shane's brows furrowed in confusion. "Are you making fun of me?"

"Never." Ilya said, stepping closer.

He took Shane's left hand and brought it up to his mouth, pressing a lingering kiss right in the middle of his calloused palm before reluctantly lowering it.

"Sorry if it was a bad idea," Shane muttered, his eyes dropping to their joined hands. "I thought maybe you would have liked to choose one. To maybe take it back with you, when we go back to the programme."

Ilya kept his hold on Shane's hand, his thumb gently tracing the knuckles. He hated how easily that word slipped out of Shane's mouth: *We*.

"You are not going back to the camp, Hollander."

"I am," Shane insisted, his voice stiff, unwelcome to objection.

Ilya let out a soft, frustrated huff. "No. You will stay here, where you will be happy, until you leave for Montreal."

"No."

"And after that, you will have a good life. Just like we talk about, remember?"

"No-"

"Hollander."

"I want to stay with you!" Shane said, his voice rising desperately in the empty parking lot. "I wish you'd tried harder, but you didn't—so now I'm not leaving you!"

Panic flared up in his stomach at the words, instantly dissolving the hazy lightness of the afternoon so far.

Shane wasn't supposed to follow him; he was supposed to stay here; safe, loved, and protected, while Ilya quietly stepped out of the frame.

Hearing Shane refuse to let him go made Ilya feel cornered, suffocated by a loyalty that he simply didn't know how to carry.

That panic made his voice sharp. He felt it rise like a defensive shield attempting to push Shane back before Shane could see too closely at the truth.

"Don't be so stupid," Ilya snapped.

He regretted the words the exact second they left his mouth.

Shane's hand dropped abruptly off of his own. His waterline immediately filled with tears, though he didn't let them spill. He looked so beautiful, and so deeply devastated.

The panic-induced anger seeped right out of Ilya's body.

He moved quickly, closing the small distance between them and pulling Shane tightly into his arms.

"I'm sorry," Ilya whispered frantically, his lips pressed against Shane's temple. "I'm sorry. I don't want to leave you. I don't want to be far from you."

"Can't you stay, too?" Shane asked, his own voice shaking against Ilya's chest, his hands clutching at Ilya's jacket. "You don't even want to play anymore. I know you don't. Why can't you stay?"

A suffocating silence settled over Ilya.

It wasn't just his lack of money, or even just his lack of a will to live, anymore. They would cancel his visa the moment the programme was over. And without the prospect of a future career in hockey, he was losing the option to stay altogether.

Not like he had any other way of getting help.

What, was he supposed to trust that the Canadian immigration laws would bend for one pathetic, abused, and mother-less eighteen year old?

Even if they did, where would he go, where would he stay? His mind was too fatigued to dwell on any of it. It took too much effort, and after all that effort, he probably still would have wanted to die.

Though sometimes he was beginning to doubt himself...

Sometimes, when the insanity was getting a bit much, he imagined himself kneeling at the Hollanders' feet, begging them to somehow let him stay.

Without Boston, of course, he would be sent right back to Russia. Back to Alexei, back to his father. That in itself felt like a slower, far more painful death sentence.

And yet, holding Shane in the freezing wind, he could see it was never as simple as he'd convinced himself it was. He was trapped all around, and what worried him most was that in every scenario, he would be leaving the only person he loved.

He had known it for a while now. But knowing was different than admitting it.

I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him.

He squeezed his eyes shut, pressing his face into Shane's hair.

"No," he murmured. "I can't stay. But let us be happy for now, okay? Let us pretend everything is happy, yes?"

Shane sniffled, shivering faintly in his arms.

"Please, Shane."

In the end, Shane didn't want to drive. Ilya took over the wheel, letting himself savour the car that had taken so much of his time over the weeks. It was one more thing he had to part with. He should have never allowed himself so many luxuries here.

But he didn't exactly regret any of them.

He let himself be happy, just for now.

He let himself walk back into the home, smiling big and with a heart so full it felt like it was choking him. He let himself sit close on the couch next to Mrs. Hollander, and let himself accept the mug of steaming tea off Mr. Hollander. He let his hand reach for Shane's hair as they settled in for the evening, in front of the glowing TV.

Western Christmas Eve was tomorrow. They were going to be spending it at the Hollander's Cottage, near that lake Shane had showed him.

He really was so happy.

Chapter End Notes

Ilya's emotions are all over the damn place, my bub. I kept getting emotional whiplash.

Please do let me know your thoughts! You all are so wonderful. Writing is so much fun!!!

Also... after this is complete, if I were to write a one shot for these babes, only set ten years later, would yall read it? I'd post it as a part 2 to this story, and they could each be read without the other, I guess.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Baby's first chirp.

Chapter Notes

TW: the writing of a will... sort of? Idk. Financial abuse.

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

Ilya unpacked his duffle slowly, kneeling on the floor of the guest room, pulling out the heavy knits until his fingers found what he was looking for.

He swiped the clothes aside carelessly to clear a spot and laid out the rest of his belongings on the carpet in front of him.

He didn't have much—he had left almost everything behind in Russia. He wasn't the type to bring a picture of his family to hang on a wall like some homesick prisoner, though a few boys back at the camp had done that. Ilya generally had very little to be sentimental about.

And anyway, his father had gathered all the pictures of his mother and sent them to some unknown fate when he'd first married Polina. Ilya barely remembered what she looked like anymore, except for her long glowing golden hair, which was miraculously always the same in his dreams.

He looked down now at the little crucifix in the middle—the last trace of his mother he'd managed to salvage from her jewellery box before Polina had taken over. The little charm was bare, missing the slim gold chain he always remembered around her neck. Ilya suspected Alexei had gotten to it first. He'd probably pawned it off for an easy bag.

Ilya picked it up delicately between his thumb and index finger, bringing it close.

He had to keep it safe, away from his family. He didn't want this last bit of her to end up forgotten in some pawnshop glass, or melted away to make space for something new and fresh, just as they'd done to her memory.

He brought it closer still, pressing it against his lips for a long moment, just breathing.

Who knew where it would end up, after? Maybe *he* was going to end up back in Russia, and judging by his failings so far, probably *not* in a body bag. He didn't trust that they wouldn't

get to it, even if he hid it from them. No. He had to keep it safe.

He was more unsure than ever before about pretty much everything. And yet, one thing he was absolutely certain of was that it would be safe here, with the Hollanders, no matter what happened next.

He set it back neatly onto the carpet and reached over to lift his Raiders jersey—the one he'd received at the draft.

He couldn't help the snort that escaped him, imagining it in Shane's hands, the little scowl of disapproval on his face as he opened his gift and realised it was anything other than the Metros' gear.

He smiled for a long time at the image. He couldn't wait to see it.

Sighing happily, he moved on to the last of his possessions: a little signet ring, stamped with the Rozanov family crest.

Such a silly little thing made of silver, meant to signify his bloodline, his name, his heritage—so much of what he was supposed to be. He didn't want to wear it; he didn't feel worthy of it, or perhaps *it* didn't feel worthy of being worn by *him* anymore.

Whatever he felt looking at it was too messy and disorganised to really understand or explain. He was just glad to part with it now, to give it to someone he would have loved to belong to, in an ideal life.

He laid them out side by side. The jersey, the crucifix, the signum. What a small life he'd lived.

He reached back into the duffle, scrambling along the bottom, empty now of anything else, but he wanted to check all the same.

Then his fingers knocked into something familiar, and it rattled with a pretty sound. His little blue tin.

He lifted it out and held it between both hands, his thumbs tracing the raised lettering. He shook it again just to hear it, the familiar rattle of it soothing, but he didn't open it. He stuffed it back down where he kept it, burying it under the rest of his clothes.

A dull buzz cut through the silence of the guest room. He searched for his phone under the mess. It wasn't a sound he heard too often, since nobody really called him, or even messaged.

When he unlocked it, he saw it was a series of texts from his brother.

Answer back this time you fucking pussy.

Listen, when can you make more money? I owe some people, Ilya.

Do a campaign or something.

Ilya stared at the Cyrillic letters blankly. He swiped back, his eyes searching for the chat history with his father instead—saved under *The Colonel*—which was unchanged since he had last checked, the last message being all the way from September.

Don't mess this up.

A bitter smile tilted the corner of Ilya's mouth, closer to resignation than anything.

The bonus had gone straight into his father's account instead of his own. It sounded like Alexei had gotten to some of it, too.

He wished he had some more of the money for himself, even just a little more than the hundred and forty dollars he had left with him now. He wished he hadn't wasted thirty five dollars buying an overpriced pack of cigarettes from some kid in the next dorm over.

He hadn't really thought he'd make it far enough to use up the money, so it had seemed fair enough back then.

He'd desperately debated with himself over just using what was left to buy the Hollanders' some real gifts, but he was worried he may end up stranded at the airport back in Montana, with no money for a cab or whatever.

He got to work wrapping the Hollanders' make-shift gifts with some of the plain brown wrapping paper he'd asked to use earlier. He tried to make it neat and pretty, but in the end, it looked a bit pathetic. Giving up, he looked down at his work. He was pleased with it anyway, and he couldn't stop smiling.

He kept that smile as he snuck back into Shane's big bed, where Shane was waiting, looking so pretty and cozy it fucking ached.

"Done?"

"Yes," Ilya said, a touch of mischief in his voice. "You will like your gift very much, I think."

Shane narrowed his eyes, disbelieving. But he dragged the blankets back, making space for him.

It was hard to leave the warmth of the pale-yellow room the next morning, but when they finally shuffled into the kitchen for breakfast, Ilya was glad they had.

Mr. Hollander came over to place a quick steady hand in his curls as passed to take his seat, and Mrs. Hollander gave a sweet smile as she served them both bowls of warm cinnamon porridge.

"Everything set for the journey?" she asked. "Dad's already packed your gifts into the trunk."

Shane nodded, swallowing a spoonful. "Yeah, I'll just go bring down my bag."

"Ilya?" she asked, her eyes turning to him. "Make sure you packed warm. It's a little colder down there."

Ilya nodded happily, his mouth too full to respond.

When they finally loaded into the car for the hour-long drive, Ilya and Shane settled into the back seat, keeping a safe small distance between them.

A few minutes into the ride, though, Ilya couldn't help but shift one leg over the foot space, pressing his boot over Shane's.

Mrs. Hollander's voice snapped his attention away from the tiny private smile forming on Shane's face.

"Sorry, boys, you're going to have to share a room this time," she called back from the passenger seat.

Both boys snorted suddenly, trying to tamp down the laughter bubbling up between them.

Mrs. Hollander twisted around in her seat, her eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"What?"

"Nothing, Mom," Shane got out. "And yeah, that's... no problem."

"At all," Ilya added, quieter, just to keep that smile on Shane's face a little longer. The other boy kept his boot pressed against Ilya's for the rest of the drive.

When the Jeep dipped into a long driveway edged with freshly snow-covered trees, Ilya shifted straighter, straining to get a look at the cottage.

"Here we are," Mr. Hollander said, steering the car smoothly into the garage.

The place looked like something right out of a winter hallmark movie. Ilya couldn't drag his eyes away from it, but he snuck a glance over at Shane, who looked almost desensitized by the view. Ilya thought that if he ever got to spend his Christmases in a place like this, he could never imagine getting tired of it.

They all climbed out of the car, grabbing their bags from the trunk, and followed Mr. Hollander through the side door into the house.

"God, it's freezing in here," Mr. Hollander said, his breath blooming faint in the air as they shuffled into the living room.

Ilya turned slowly, taking in the space. The room was cozy, despite sitting cold and empty for God knows how long. There was wood everywhere—from the heavy pine furnishings to the exposed beams running across the ceiling.

Somehow, there were even more framed photos on the walls here than back at the apartment. These were older, spanning from Shane's birth to what looked like his tweens, and even further back to when it had just been Mr. and Mrs. Hollander, alongside a few sepia portraits of Mr. Hollander's parents.

In the corner sat a wide, black cast-iron fireplace, sitting dark and dormant. Ilya watched as Mr. Hollander shuffled over, crouching down to lay the kindling.

“Go get settled in, boys. It might take a little while for the heat to kick in.”

Shane pinched Ilya’s sleeve for a brief second, a subtle pull to spur Ilya to follow him down the narrow hallway. These walls were lined with photos, too: school graduations, junior games, weddings, past birthdays.

When they reached the door, a bright reflective yellow sign hung at eye level in the middle.

WARNING: QUIET ZONE.

Shane cautioned a sideways glance at Ilya and caught the gleam in Ilya’s eyes at the sign, as Ilya lifted a mocking finger to his lips.

Shane huffed a quiet *"Fuck off."* He turned the knob and stepped inside.

The bedroom walls were painted the same predictable pale-yellow as Shane's room in the city.

Trophies lined the shelves, though Ilya could see some of these were older—scratched plastic, amateur awards from Shane’s early youth leagues. Mixed in among them were shitty, badly made school projects and clay models. Near the corner hung a reading chair, suspended by a heavy chain from the ceiling beam, probably not strong enough to hold Shane's current weight.

The bed was a single, dressed in plain crisp white sheets and too many pillows to make sense for such a small surface.

Exhaustion settled heavy in Ilya’s limbs, pulling him forward until he sank back against those pillows, falling deeper into them like heaven, letting out a low breath.

“You grow up here...” Ilya murmured.

Shane dragged his duffle inside and crawled onto the tiny mattress beside him, nearly hanging off the edge.

“Yeah. Until we moved to the apartment when I was thirteen.”

Ilya hummed, letting his head thud dully back against the wall.

“It is perfect. Everything here is so perfect.”

Shane shifted closer almost by necessity, considering the size of the bed left nowhere else to turn. He crawled over Ilya’s outstretched legs until he was sitting heavily in his lap.

Ilya instinctively brought a hand up to steady him, resting it against the warm fabric of Shane’s thigh, watching his face.

“I want to have my own place someday,” Shane said quietly, his eyes searching Ilya’s.
“Maybe a lot like this one.”

Ilya hummed, offering a gentle smile at the confession.

“What do you want?” Shane asked, his voice dropping an octave, testing the waters. “Tell me about your future.”

“Tell me about yours,” Ilya countered smoothly.

“Don’t do that,” Shane said, the words rushing out hurry-fast. “Don’t do that. I want to know about yours.”

Ilya tried to think, but his mind went instantly blank.

The future was truly something he’d rarely allowed himself to consider. He had always been more worried about getting out of whatever horrid situation he was currently in. That instinct was gone now, mostly made obsolete by the safety of the Hollanders’ world.

But still, he couldn’t start up that side of his brain fast enough.

“I don’t know... what... what do you want to know?”

“Anything. Tell me about the house you’ll live in, the car of your dreams... if you’ll be a father, or if you’ll have any pets.”

“I don’t need another pet. I already have one,” he said.

“You do?” Shane asked, entirely sincere, his brows pulling together.

Ilya smoothed his thumb back and forth over the fabric of Shane’s sweats. “A very pretty cat. My cat has freckles instead of...” He paused, searching his mind for the word.

“Whiskers,” Shane supplied shyly, a sudden flush blooming bright beneath his skin.

“Yes. And my pretty cat likes to always crawl in my lap.”

Shane shifted his weight self-consciously where he still sat straddling Ilya on the tiny bed, his breathing growing shallow.

“I’m not—I’m not a cat,” Shane stumbled out nonsensically.

Ilya huffed lightly, knowing his expression was probably too fond, too love-sick to possibly hide.

“A cottage would be nice. Maybe it will be me and my cat in a nice cottage like this,” Ilya only murmured, his voice softening into something dreamlike as he kept on, somehow unable to stop now that he’d started. “I will fill my house with guitar music, so my cat can always come sleep in my lap.”

Shane sucked in his lower lip, his eyes glittering in the faint winter light streaming through the window.

“What else?” he whispered greedily.

Ilya closed his eyes, letting his mind build this distant, make-believe sort of life out of thin air—a future he’d always thought was probably unreachable. It didn’t hurt to go all out with it, since it was only in his head.

“I think I will like to have many cars, so I can always keep my hands busy with them,” he admitted.

“Which ones?”

Ilya smiled softly, remembering his old friend who had been obsessed with cars—remembering her going on about gears and milage and engine power. She had moved somewhere else quite soon after that...Ilya didn’t remember where. Only that she had left him alone.

“A jaguar. Maybe a yellow one? And a red Porsche Spyder,” He said finally. “But maybe some old cars too, to work on. I know you would be driving something boring, like a Honda Civic or a Subaru Outback, no?”

Shane scoffed lightly. “Well yeah, those are practical. Good in the snow.”

“Yes, and they will probably never break because they are boring and ‘practical’. But if they do break, I will fix for you.”

Shane let out a tiny shaky breath and dropped all the way down in something close to relief. His chest settled roughly against Ilya’s, his face dipping deep into the warm space of Ilya’s neck, clearly his favourite place to be.

The bed really was tiny, and Ilya could feel the way Shane’s leg was slipping off the corner of the mattress. He hooked his hand into the curve of his knee there, adjusting him up until those muscled thighs were back firm against his sides.

Ilya sighed happily.

“I love this,” he whispered into the light bouncing false-summer off the walls. He let it drag some truth out from between his lips. “My mind gets so quiet when I’m with you.”

Shane shifted back slightly, leaning back to look down at him with those misty eyes.

“Really?” He asked softly, but his voice turned uncertain, and a little terrified as he continued. “I feel like I make sure my mind is always quiet. Focused. But... my mind only gets really loud about you, now.”

Ilya couldn’t tell if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Shane loved his quiet, so he wasn’t sure if he particularly wanted to be the thing that disturbed that peace. He wished he could just be easy to have around.

Shane shifted in his lap again, his thighs squeezing down against Ilya's own.

The pressure made Ilya's hands slide further up his thighs automatically, and Shane tracked the movement through heavy-lidded eyes.

The soft rap of knuckles on wood broke through the quiet tension between them.

With no where else to go, Shane scrambled frantically to the left, clumsily slipping off the bed and landing on the floor with a hard thud.

The door swung open then, Mrs. Hollander's face coming into view. Her eyes scanned over Ilya on the bed, then down at Shane who was still awkwardly sprawled where he'd landed.

"Shane, sweetheart, what are you doing on the floor?"

Shane only shrugged with forced casualness, while Ilya offered her an innocent grin. Mrs. Hollander tilted her head, her eyes narrowing with humoured suspicion again.

"Okay, then," She said, decidedly pushing the door open the rest of the way. "Come on, boys. Dad's put the fire on."

"Coming, mom!" Shane called after her, watching her leave.

As soon as he was sure her footsteps had faded down the hall, Ilya finally released his laugh, earning himself a sharp glare from Shane on the floor.

Out in the living room, the fire was steadily filling the space with a warm amber glow. Mrs. Hollander was moving around the kitchen, unpacking some groceries while Mr. Hollander was settled back against the couch, fiddling with the TV remote.

Shane sat down roughly beside his father. Ilya wandered over over to the kitchen counter, instead.

"Hi ma'am, can I help with anything?"

"Oh, hi, Ilya," she greeted, spotting him. "I'm about to start preparing some of the veg for tomorrow."

Ilya nodded, said, "I help."

"Great," she smiled fondly, shifting a pile of carrots and parsnips towards him across the counter. Ilya gathered them up, bringing them to the sink to wash. When he was done, laying them out to dry on a stack of paper towels, Mrs. Hollander set a bowl of potatoes down for him to wash next, as she started on soaking the Brussel sprouts.

They worked quietly and comfortably together for the next forty minutes. When Ilya wasn't doing something quite right, she would gently take the knife to demonstrate the angle, or hand him the peeler to make the job easier for him.

A little while into the work, the soft sounds of Shane and his father's chatter drifted over from the next room—some lighthearted debate about which movies to set up for tonight—which Ilya gave up on making out.

He shifted closer beside Mrs. Hollander, instead, watching her start to mash the potatoes, enjoying the newfound familiarity of her silence.

He had been so silly to be so worried about it before, when she would spend more time wrapped in her own thoughts than actually speaking them out loud, not until she felt she'd gathered enough data to speak, at least.

But he thought he knew her a little better now. He treated her the same way he treated Shane; allowing them the space to tell him exactly what they needed from him.

Ilya thought he and Mr. Hollander probably had that in common. He recognised he liked being useful, when he wasn't being coerced into it.

He would do anything if Shane asked him, and he was happy to do the same for Mrs. Hollander now. Somehow he felt that Mrs. Hollander needed clarity, more than anything else.

He hadn't really given her much to work with, so he was willing now to offer up some useless details about himself, just enough for her to be pleased with him.

So he told her about how his mother liked to make her potatoes, how she would sit him on the counter as she baked them into a little pie.

Shane eventually wandered into the kitchen, gently tugging Ilya away towards the sunroom at the back of the house. And naturally, Ilya didn't even think to refuse.

They found a football in the corner somewhere, and spent the next hour or so lightly kicking it across to one another in the enclosed room, as they talked about nothing and everything.

“What about, like...if a player says something about me being shit?” Shane asked, catching the ball under his socked foot.

“You know you are not shit.”

“No, I know. But what do I say?” Shane clarified, kicking it back over.

“You tell him: *‘You want to talk about being shit? You have three points all season and two of them was accident.’*”

Shane let out a sudden laugh. Ilya wanted to make him do it again and again and again.

“How do you even come up with this stuff?”

Ilya shrugged.

He'd grown up in the brutal Russian hockey camps after all. Psychological warfare came absolutely naturally to him at this point.

He sort of missed that part of it, if he was honest with himself, which made him seem exceptionally more like an asshole, he realised; to miss the chirping more than the competition itself.

“Give me other example,” he instructed with a hand. He wanted to leave Shane thoroughly prepared before he left.

Shane thought for a moment, his face entirely serious.

“Okay...” he said, bouncing on his heels as Ilya retrieved the missed ball. “How about if we’re at the face-off again and a player says I look like a high school runaway—like, i’m too young to be there, or something?”

Ilya thought for barely two seconds, before he offered, “ If the player is old, then you say: *‘Don’t worry, I’m sure they will not replace you with fresh rookie, yet. Maybe you have one more year left for you.’*”

“That’s so mean,” Shane exclaimed, shaking his head, tossing the ball back over to Ilya. “I can’t say that.”

“Why not?” Ilya asked, his eyes gleaming with quiet humour. “I think I would like for you to say to Scott Hunter.”

Picturing the scene almost gave him the will to live, just long enough for him to see it on screen, at least.

“Scott Hunter’s only like thirty-four.”

“Whatever,” Ilya shrugged, with a quick wave of his hand. He didn’t want to waste time attempting humour that wouldn’t land. This was more important. “If you want to make a guy lose his crazy, you make him feel small. Is about ego. You make him feel like he is not worth the game.”

Shane nodded then, as though he was mentally adding the bullet point to the end: Mess with their ego.

“And sometimes you should start it,” Ilya offered. “No waiting for them to say something first. Use it as advantage in the game.”

”Saying what, though?” Shane asked, scowling.

Ilya mentally sorted through his list of favourites, wanting to give him something he could actually use.

In the end, he landed on the most reliable one.

“*Will you disappoint them?*”

Nobody liked to be a disappointment. This would cut just deep enough.

Shane considered it, tilting his head a little. “I guess that’s fine.”

Distracted, Shane passed the ball harder than he meant to, slamming it straight into a little wooden table to the side of Ilya.

Ilya jumped, and Shane smacked his palms quick over his ears as he watched the table tip over, one leg breaking right off.

“Shit,” Ilya said, feeling his heart instantly start to race.

Shane came over next to him, knelt to pick the table back up, though it wobbled uselessly.

“Shit, you can tell your parents I break it,” Ilya rushed out, not making much sense.

Shane stood back up, looking over Ilya’s face in confusion.

“Why? It’s fine. Dad can fix it. I broke it before too, when I was a kid, so it wasn’t that sturdy to begin with.”

Ilya nodded, though his heart was still hammering in his chest. The ease of the afternoon had drained all the way out of him, replaced by a sort of anxiety he knew was irrational in the safety of this home.

Shane must have seen it on his face still, so he reached for his hand, squeezing down hard.

“Ilya, it’s okay.”

He tried to focus on the firm pressure of his fingers, forcing out a slow exhale.

“Yes. Sorry.”

Blessedly, Shane didn’t let go. Instead, he dragged him with purpose back into the living room, where Mr. Hollander was only just starting on setting up a puzzle.

“Dad, I broke that side table again,” Shane said easily, stopping them both before him.

But Mr. Hollander didn’t even look up at all, too focused on finding the corner pieces.

“Oh, I should probably throw that out anyway. I don’t think it’s sturdy enough to hold anything anymore.”

Shane squeezed down on his hand once more, leaning in to whisper, “*See?*” before letting go and dropping into the armchair nearby.

Ilya sank down to sit next to Mr. Hollander, who still hadn’t looked anywhere but at his puzzle. Ilya spotted a piece, pinching it between two fingers and setting it on its right pile.

There was a movie on screen he had never seen before, the scenes showing a chaotic over-the-top family trying way too hard to have the ‘perfect family Christmas’.

Ilya let himself enjoy the absurdity of the plot, especially given that he himself was definitely having the best Christmas of his entire life, and it seemed like the Hollander's barely had to try to get it perfect at all.

When the movie ended, Mrs. Hollander had lunch ready, which they ate on the floor over the coffee table as the next movie started up.

"We really should have set up a tree this Christmas," Mr. Hollander was telling his wife. "We've never not had one."

"We just had an especially busy winter," Mrs. Hollander said.

"Don't we have that old one in the attic?" Shane interrupted. "I can bring it down."

"I will help," Ilya said quickly, nodding keenly.

When they dragged the plastic tree down, it did look like it had seen better days—angled slightly off and dusty from the many years it had been stowed away for.

It may have been a decade old, even, but they found a box of polished vintage ornaments nearby, and spent the rest of the evening, him and Shane, decorating it with extreme care, wrapping the branches in pink string lights and carefully placing each of the ornaments just right.

"That looks wonderful," Mr. Hollander threw out as he shuffled back in from his own round of Christmas dinner prep. "Why don't you go grab the gifts from the garage and set them up underneath?"

The two of them raced their way through the side door of the kitchen, pinning each other's limbs against the narrow walls as they fought to get there first.

They ended up getting distracted in the freezing garage for a while, when they found Mr. Hollander's old goalie gear in a few of the boxes there.

For nearly an hour, they took turns strapping on the clunky shin and arm guards, and tried to block the crumpled-up newspaper balls they threw at one another in place of a puck.

It was around ten thirty at night when the combination of the warm hot chocolate and the dying glow of the fire in the hearth dragged a yawn out of him.

Mrs. Hollander looked over from her armchair fondly, quietly told Shane to grab the extra sleeping bag from the cupboard in the hall.

Shane nodded, told her he'd get it, and Ilya followed him down the hall.

They brushed their teeth jammed in together in the tiny bathroom, bumping shoulders and elbows and even bumping heads when they leaned down to spit.

It would have been far more practical to take turns, but taking turns meant losing sight of each other—and that felt unthinkable.

Naturally, Shane made no move toward the hall cupboard for the sleeping bag, because that too was entirely unthinkable. Instead they crammed themselves into the tiny single bed, using the narrow mattress as a perfectly reasonable excuse to get as close as possible.

Ilya snuggled deeper into the blankets, turning fully to face him.

“Well, what did *you* get me? I would like something very expensive and very big, I think. Like those cars I tell you about. I hope is a car, Shane.”

“Shut up, you asshole,” Shane muttered, shoving his leg aimlessly under the covers.

“Is okay,” Ilya conceded with a soft sigh. “I know you will be very rich soon. For now, I accept something smaller.”

Shane bit down on his lower lip to hide the small smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

“I could do that, though. Soon,” he mumbled, entirely bashful and trying not to let it show without much success. “I’d get you anything you want.”

Hearing it said made something small flutter hot and low in Ilya’s gut for reasons he didn’t really understand just then.

“Yeah?” Ilya asked, mostly trying to make sense of the new blooming sensation.

“Yeah,” Shane nodded, his breath drawing deeper. Ilya caught the flush spreading bright beneath his freckles—like maybe he felt it, too.

He shuffled closer, knitting himself against Ilya’s chest once more.

This had been the best day of Ilya’s life, probably, and the warmth of the day had sunk all the way into his bones. It was unlike anything else, and he was terrified at how he could so easily get used to it.

And he knew he couldn’t let himself get used to it.

That was how they fell asleep that night—fused as one in the tiny bed—and it was how they woke again the next morning, ready for their perfect Christmas day.

He really wasn’t expecting to ruin it all the way he did.

Chapter End Notes

The draft jersey, the crucifix necklace, and the signet ring being the only things in his will...

I’m gonna add another chapter to this fic just cos I really wanted to stay with happy Ilya for a little bit longer with this one.

Has anyone been keeping up with that fic where Shane and Ilya have been penpals since they were like 12, except Ilya signs his letters off as Elijah and he doesn't remember Shane's name so he just addresses him as Cat. I cannot stop thinking about it. Shane is so Cat.

This fic is turning out way longer than I first thought! Are we still vibing? I can't believe how many of you there are. When I reach 1k kudos I'm gonna get myself a little cake!

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

A totally normal Christmas.

Chapter Notes

TW: suicidal thoughts. Blood. You get the gist. Also medical inaccuracies (probably!)

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

“Right, how should we do this?” Mr. Hollander said, sitting down on the floor with a stiff groan, fingers looped around the handle of a steaming mug.

“Let’s go in a circle, open up one gift at a time,” Mrs. Hollander suggested, her hand reaching to rub against his sore back.

They were all sitting in a circle already, on the floor near the burning hearth. Shane was to his left, Mr. Hollander to his right. Mrs. Hollander was across from him, already separating the gifts from where they were piled beneath the tree.

She set three little gifts up in front of him, all tagged with his name. Real gifts, for *him*.

“Ilya, go on and start us off.”

Ilya smiled freely at her, and reached for what looked like a medium-sized box, wrapped in sleek black matte paper. He traced a finger over the neat edges for a moment, relishing the gift, before he neatly unwrapped it.

It wasn’t too clear what it was at first, with the way it was rolled up into itself. But it looked like leather—the real, soft, expensive kind—and the edges were stitched in a dark red. Ilya looked up, and Shane was smiling at him already, something timid.

“It’s, er... it’s for your guitar.”

Ilya looked down at it again, lifting it from the box until it unraveled into a long strap, something to loop over his shoulder when he played, for a better grip.

Shit, he loved it. More than that, he loved receiving it. He somehow didn’t know what to do with himself, receiving a gift like that—something he would never have thought to buy for himself, but Shane had thought of it for him.

“Thank you. I love it,” he said quietly. “A lot.”

Shane nodded, sucking his lip in to stop his smiling.

“You next,” Ilya told him, because his heart felt too big in his chest for him to be normal right now.

Shane picked one up from his own pile, bulky and rectangular in baby-blue wrapping paper. When he opened it, it looked like a text book. Ilya leaned closer, but he couldn’t quite figure out what it was about. There were different kinds of buildings and skyscrapers on the cover.

“Dad?” Shane asked, as he turned through the first few pages.

“Yeah, it’s me. It’s the one you liked at the bookshop, isn’t it?” Mr. Hollander asked.

“Exactly,” Shane grinned. “Thanks, Dad. Can’t wait to read it.”

Mrs. Hollander was next, and her hand reached for a little box. When she opened it, she pulled out a set of car keys, a surprised gasp leaving her lips.

Ilya couldn’t help but perk up, leaning in to see that it was the fob for her very own SUV.

Forgetting his manners, he turned straight to Mr. Hollander. “An Audi?”

Mr. Hollander leaned in like they were sharing a secret. “An Audi Q7, in black.”

Mrs. Hollander held the key in her palm, fingers testing the grip.

“Honey, you didn’t have to get it for me,” she said, but her voice was far too high-pitched for her to really mean it. She leaned across the rug and over the colourful mess of wrapping paper around them, catching her husband’s face in a long, loving kiss.

Ilya blushed, quickly glancing toward Shane. But Shane looked flushed too when their eyes caught, like he was remembering their conversation—his own wild promise from the night before, when he’d ambitiously promised that he would buy Ilya the world one day.

In a moment of pure girlishness, Mrs. Hollander squealed loudly, before she swiftly got herself back together.

“Okay, okay. Your turn, honey.” She squeezed her husband’s hand.

Mr. Hollander huffed contentedly at her, opening up one of his own packages: a heavy matte-black cast-iron Dutch oven he’d wanted to add to his growing collection.

When it came back to Ilya again, Ilya unwrapped a planner, bound in smooth navy leather with the coming year stamped cleanly high on the spine in gold. At the bottom, it was personalised—his initials embossed in neat little block letters.

He knew instantly who it was from. He tried to conceal the way he was privately battling a whole list of emotions at the gift as he thanked her.

“Of course,” she said softly. “Thought it might come in handy for the year ahead.”

Sure, he did like to plan. Especially recently. But it would feel too disrespectful to fill the planner with the kind of planning he had in mind.

He shook the thoughts away, thanking her again.

He turned to Shane’s pile to break his own spiral, pointing at the messy brown wrapping paper he knew was his own poor attempt.

“Open this one,” he told him.

So Shane did. Ilya watched the scowl drag Shane’s mouth lower and lower the more he unwrapped, until the Raiders’ black-and-white jersey came into clear view, *ROZANOV* stamped aggressively across the back.

Shane picked it up, holding it as far away from his body as possible, like he was holding up roadkill.

Ilya snorted at the sight. The reaction was just as he’d expected. Better, even.

“Ha ha. Not even funny,” Shane said flatly, but he was starting to smile.

“Come on, is a little funny,” Ilya grinned.

Mr. Hollander leaned to grab at the kit, starting to fold it back up, and setting it neatly beside Ilya, a tiny furrow between his brows.

But Ilya was still entirely focused on Shane. “Look, I have something else for you there.”

Shane rummaged through the mess he’d made of the wrapping paper, finding three rolls of stick tape.

Ilya hadn’t been able to just pass them when he’d first spotted them at the skate shop a week ago.

They’d been almost the perfect match to the pale yellow of Shane’s bedroom—maybe slightly brighter than the softer shade he now associated with Shane; with summer and warmth, like the feeling of life itself.

Still, he’d smiled like crazy as he’d snuck off to pay the eighteen dollars at the counter, before heading quickly back to Shane’s side in the gear section.

When Shane looked up now, Ilya explained, “So you can have a little bit of your room with you, when you go to Montreal.”

Upon hearing himself, Ilya was about to start worrying that Shane maybe thought the gift was stupid. But then Shane lunged forward, throwing his arms firmly around Ilya’s shoulders, and the sheer weight of him knocked Ilya back against the arm of the couch.

Mrs. Hollander laughed as she said, “Alright, my turn again,” and her voice was so light and airy, like there had never been a better morning. Ilya could sort of agree with her on that.

His heart lit up some more when she finally picked up his gift, the lightest one in her pile, but the heaviest in Ilya’s aching heart.

“What’s this?” she said curiously.

She unraveled the paper to reveal the gold of the little charm, glittering with the dancing flames of the hearth.

“I, uh... I’m sorry I did not have much money to spend. But, uh, this is very special to me.”

Mrs. Hollander’s brows lifted, bringing it closer to inspect between gentle fingers.

“It does look special. What is it?” she asked again.

Shane leaned in too, curiously trying to get a look himself.

“It was my mother’s,” Ilya said softly, smiling a little.

Mrs. Hollander’s brows pulled together, her smile faltering as she instantly tried to press the charm back into his hands. “Darling, I can’t take this—”

Ilya raised a quick hand to stop hers, trying to keep the desperation from his voice when he said, “Please, I want you to keep it.”

Her face was too conflicted, too unsettled for what Ilya had hoped. But before he could explain how much it would mean for her to keep it where he knew it would be safe, Shane’s curious voice broke through the quiet.

“Wouldn’t your mom want it back?”

Ilya paused.

“What?” he asked.

Because the question had sort of made his mom seem like she really was alive and ready to tell him off for giving away her most treasured necklace.

He wanted to stay in that fantasy for a second longer, but forced his focus back onto Shane’s open expression.

“What?” he asked again.

“Your mom,” Shane repeated, looking between Ilya and the charm. “Isn’t she going to miss it?”

Ilya frowned.

There was a painful silence growing around the circle of their bodies, one that Ilya didn't really know how to make better.

“Shane,” his father interrupted quietly. “Not now.”

Shane looked lost. “Why? What did I say?”

Mr. Hollander cleared his throat, then gentled his voice further into French. “*Shane... la mère d'Ilya est morte.*”

Ilya stared non-comprehendingly at the exchange in front of him, pupils bouncing between the two. He saw the lost look on Shane's face drop, replaced by a full, unwavering certainty.

“No she's not,” Shane told his dad.

“Yes,” his dad said patiently. “She is, kid.”

Shane's face turned to face Ilya then, his expression easy when he said, “She's not dead, Ilya. Right? That's what you said.”

“*Shane, s'il te plaît, pas maintenant.*”

“Don't speak in French!” Shane snapped at his father in a moment of unexpected, unfiltered frustration. “It's rude!”

The room froze. Ilya couldn't handle the silence that followed, because it made his breathing sound too loud by contrast.

Had he told Shane anything about his mother? Had he lied, and said that she was still out there, waiting for him?

He didn't fucking remember; his memories barely held up enough to remember what he'd done two days ago, let alone what he could have possibly said throughout the dragging depression he'd been in at the camp.

But he didn't think he'd ever speak about her as though she were still alive.

He shifted slightly back when Shane's eyes found him again, sharp.

“Right, Ilya? 'Cause you told me you were—” he sucked in a harsh breath.

Another beat, before it all broke apart around him.

“You told me you missed her, and that you were going to be with her soon.”

Across the space, he heard a small, horrified gasp leave Mrs. Hollander's lips, her fingers pressing down hard against her mouth.

Mr. Hollander was still, too still.

It felt like the floor beneath them had suddenly opened up. It seemed to have sucked all the air straight out of his lungs. Maybe it had sucked all the sound from the room too, because the warm hum of the hearth from moments ago, the crinkle of wrapping paper, the soft chatter of the family—it was all gone, replaced by his own voice screaming at him.

They know, they know, they know, they know, they know—

Shane had said it out loud, laid the raw, ugly truth out between them and Ilya couldn't pull it back.

He really wanted to crawl deep under into that hole, and bury himself away from everyone's eyes.

"I didn't... I didn't mean..." he tried.

"How did she die?" Shane said suddenly, his voice rising impossibly in the quiet.

"Shane!" Mrs. Hollander admonished, louder.

Ilya was completely frozen with panic now, mouth stuttering around a soundless answer.

He flinched suddenly when Shane rose to his feet, rushing loudly out of the room.

He could barely register his surroundings anymore, barely knew what to do with himself, other than the fact that Shane was upset, and Ilya never wanted *that*. He had ruined Christmas, he had ruined everything and now Shane was upset.

He wobbled onto his feet. His body was numb, steeled only by instinct as he stumbled to follow him, steadying himself against the walls of the hallway, knocking into the picture frames.

He found Shane in his room, back hunched over something on the floor.

"Shane—what are you—" he asked, the same moment he realised Shane was going through his duffel. He pulled at his shoulders to get him to stop, his voice turning frantic. "Shane, don't!"

But Shane looked absolutely crazed in his search, dragging Ilya's clothes out and dropping them across the carpet, littering them all over the floor.

"Do you still have them?" he shouted.

"Shane, stop, please," Ilya begged. He went to pin Shane's hand back out of pure desperation.

But Shane was still stronger, throwing his whole broad frame backward to break the hold. The point of his shoulder cracked full-force into the bridge of Ilya's nose.

Heat exploded behind his eyes.

He stumbled back, gasping as something hot trickled over his lip.

When Ilya went to wipe it away, his fingers came away red. But that didn't really matter, then, because in that exact moment, Shane spun around, clutching the little blue tin against his chest like a vice.

Ilya threw his weight forward, lunging for it.

Their hands collided over the slick metal, blood and sweat making their fingers slip as they struggled.

He didn't know when Mr. and Mrs. Hollander had rushed in, but they were suddenly there, tearing them apart with difficulty.

As they did, the lid of the tin snapped loose with a click, and Ilya watched in horror as the pills scattered messily across the carpet.

He fought wildly against Mr. Hollander's arms around his chest, trying to reach for his pills, needing to make sure none were missing.

Some had rolled under the bed. He could see one on the far edge of the room, sitting lonely near the dresser, taunting him.

"No! Wait, let me—" Ilya screamed, thrashing wildly, but the man's grip only tightened.

He could make out the sounds of a shuffle, of a body being pushed against the wall with a thud.

Mrs. Hollander was there, standing protectively in front of her son, watching wide-eyed as Ilya thrashed and clawed.

"Please, let me just get them," Ilya begged again, desperately struggling to sink down to his knees.

His mouth tasted like copper; he could feel it coating his teeth, dipping into his throat.

Mrs. Hollander looked terrified. Shane's face was pale as ash. All because of him.

He couldn't breathe.

He needed to get his hands around the handful of pills.

He needed to get things in order again.

And he couldn't fucking breathe.

"Yuna, call nine-one-one," Mr. Hollander groaned against Ilya's writhing.

Ilya heard a ragged, broken sound tear right out of his throat. "No! I'm not—I would never hurt you, I promise!"

I only want to hurt myself, he thought frantically. I only ever wanted to hurt myself.

“Yuna!” Mr. Hollander called again, and Mrs. Hollander finally snapped out of it, dragging her son clumsily with her out of the room as she rushed to find her phone.

“Sir, please! I’m not going to do anything,” he gasped again, the fight draining slowly out of him as his throat constricted, his chest heaving so hard he couldn’t get enough air in. “Let me pick them up, please. Please!”

Ilya wasn’t struggling so much anymore, suddenly growing limp with the steep drop in adrenaline, his breath wheezing out of him painfully.

The older man refused to let him fall, despite his dead weight.

“You’re all good, son,” he muttered into his hair. “I’ve got you.”

Ilya felt the sobs wracking through his chest before he could even recognise what they were.

“I’ve got you, I’ve got you.”

Twenty minutes later found him sitting on the edge of the couch, his body doubled over into his fore-arms, fingers twitching restlessly against his scalp.

His nose throbbed like crazy. Yet the pain was not nearly enough. He was presently sorting through a whole list of violent images in his head—terrible things he so badly wanted to do to himself, ways in which he could turn his current misery into something real and tangible.

He knew Shane was sitting too, a little to his right. He could feel the movement of his body through the couch, still rocking rigidly back and forth, eyes tightly shut. His breathing was heavy and staggered as his mind processed the emotional overload.

Together, right there on the couch, they were probably a right sight.

Mr. and Mrs. Hollander stood over them, speaking in low murmurs, the sound of their steps shuffling anxiously until several sets of boots moved over the threshold, dripping melting ice onto the old floorboards.

“He was going to hurt himself,” Mrs. Hollander whispered to them.

Ilya only held still in his curled form, feverishly hoping that maybe if he held still enough these people wouldn’t have to see his current shame.

But then, there was a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Hi, Ilya,” the paramedic said, her voice warm and kind. “Can I take a look at you?”

Ilya already felt cracked open. He’d be glad to never be looked at again, with how he’d already spilled his soul right out, leaving nothing inside.

With a deep, shaky breath, he sat back up.

When his eyes met her green ones, his throat seized painfully.

“Oh dear,” said the woman. She was maybe in her mid-thirties. Ilya imagined this was how his mother looked, before she had died.

Her hair was the exact same gold, with the window light shining through, making it as shiny as hers always was in his dreams. Somehow, her touch against his face felt like hers too—gentle, as she pressed clean gauze against his nose, tilting his head back slightly.

He closed his eyes, and it was like he was with her already.

“It's not broken, I don't think. But it's best we get it checked out,” she told him.

“Is he okay?” a second paramedic asked, somewhere too distant for Ilya to follow.

Mr. Hollander gestured toward Shane, who was still rocking beside Ilya. “He's fine,” his father explained quietly to the medic. “He's had a bit of a scare.”

Ilya screwed his eyes tighter, pulling away slightly as the paramedic wiped the dried blood from around his lip. He reached to scratch at the bump, but she stopped him with a hand and gentled her voice again when she spoke.

”Ilya, we'd like to take you with us to the hospital so a doctor can take a proper look at your nose and help you feel a bit safer right now. Is that okay?”

His mind was already made dull with exhaustion, as he stared down at her.

“*Ya tak po tebe skuchayu, mama,*” he whispered.

She gave him a sympathetic smile, before she stood straighter, turning to Mr. and Mrs. Hollander.

“His nose isn't broken, but given the pills, he needs to come with us for an assessment, or at least until he feels a bit more stable. His current mental state is a high concern.”

“He tried to give me his mother's necklace earlier,” Mrs. Hollander processed aloud, her voice trembling.

The paramedic grimaced. “I gather his mother has passed?”

When both Mr. and Mrs. Hollander nodded silently, she spoke again. “It's a strong warning sign, I'm afraid. Would one of you like to join him in the hospital?”

Mrs. Hollander sniffed, wiping at her eye again. She turned to her husband.

“I'll go,” she said. “You stay with Shane? Make sure he's okay?”

Mr. Hollander leaned forward to place a soft kiss on her lips.

Ilya's mind dragged into something slow and syrupy as the minutes passed, and the drive drifted in hazy fragments he barely managed to hold onto, aside from the constant gentle presence of the paramedic with the golden hair.

He closed his eyes once more, and imagined he was with his mama.

When he opened them again, he found himself in a blindingly clinical room—crisp white walls and scratchy hospital sheets tucked up tight around his sides.

He went to sit up, but something pinched the inner crease of his elbow, the medical tape pulling at his skin.

It hurt to breathe.

He reached his other hand to inspect his face, but a voice stopped him.

“Don’t touch.”

He glanced to his left, finding Mrs Hollander by the window. Her arms were crossed over her chest, face unreadable.

Ilya shrank deeper into the pillows, immediately assuming he was in trouble.

She lowered her arms and stepped a little closer. “How are you feeling?”

He felt a dry scrape in his throat and swallowed a few times trying to wet it unsuccessfully.

“I’m okay. I feel—“ he coughed roughly, needing water badly.

Mrs Hollander stepped even closer, bringing a plastic cup to his lips. He drank it gratefully before he attempted again.

“I feel weird... like I’m dreaming.”

She nodded in understanding. “They’ve put you on a drip. A mild type of sedative, just to calm you down.”

“You should get back...” he said, his voice dragging heavily with sleep. “I am making you miss Christmas with your family.”

He deserved to be here, in any case. He needed to be hidden away, to be locked up, so he could stop breaking everything he ever tried to touch gently.

“I’m not missing anything,” she said softly. Which made sense actually, because he’d completely stopped the festivities in their tracks with all his hysteria. She probably thought he was pretending to be suicidal for attention.

Maybe he was. He’d had plenty of opportunity to do it, so far. But he hadn’t, had he?

“I’m very sorry. I would have never done it here,” he mumbled, his eyes half-closed. “Never in your home.”

She was by his bedside now, though her hands were tap tap tap tapping against her sides.

She looked...Ilya still couldn't read her expression. He was still sort of drifting, the medication causing his limbs to settle like lead and his tongue to feel loose and clumsy.

"But you were going to do it," she said. Not a question.

Ilya nodded in answer anyway.

"If not here, then where? When?" She asked. Her hand had reached for him then like she couldn't hold back anymore, pushing away the strands that had stuck to his temple in his sleep. It felt nice, but he didn't deserve it. "Back in Montana?"

There was no point trying to lie now. And the drip in his arm had taken away the ability even if he wanted to.

So he nodded sluggishly against the hospital pillows. "Or Russia. If they kicked me out."

The thought of making the call to his father to break the news made him shudder. At this, Mrs. Hollander fussed with his sheets, pulling them up to his chin.

It would have been nice to avoid that call—to not have to tell his father that he had failed. Not just in coming back empty-handed, but because the admission would mean he had failed himself, too. At not having been able to finish the thing he'd started.

All those times he'd tried to persuade his father that he wasn't lazy, that he was capable of working towards something and actually getting the job done... his father had been right all along. Ilya clearly didn't have any follow-through, just like he'd always said.

"You never wanted to make it to Boston, did you?" She asked quietly.

With a slow breath, Ilya finally admitted it. "No, ma'am."

The truth of it was, he *was* too lazy for Boston.

He didn't have the drive anymore to push him up and out of bed early in the mornings, the kind of early that meant you were doing it right as an athlete.

Most days, Ilya thought it was a miracle he got out of bed at all.

"So," she started. "This was the plan all along?"

Ilya nodded again, closing his eyes tiredly.

The silence dragged long and heavy. Sleep almost claimed him again, until Mrs Hollander finally spoke.

"Well, I don't like it."

Ilya let out a weak, airy sort of laugh, his drug heavy eyes fluttering open to find her again.

"What?" He whispered.

“As far as plans go, it’s not great,” she said smoothly, as if they were discussing game-plan logistics. Like mother, like son. “There are far better plans out there.”

Ilya scoffed lightly, not wanting to admit that she was probably right.

He had thought through it all for months, had inspected every angle, every detail, religiously. He’d even had the grace to be considerate of the cleaning crew, for after.

All for nothing.

“Like what?” he asked, curious.

“Like staying.”

Ilya’s brow furrowed, squinting to keep his eyes open with effort. The sedative made it hard to track the conversation.

“Staying where?” he asked.

He felt Mrs. Hollander lean in closer, brushing his hair away from his forehead again.

“Here,” she said. “With us.”

“Oh. Right,” Ilya mumbled, because he had forgotten that he was dreaming.

He let himself sink into it, his mind drifting to images of himself and Shane driving away into the sunset in Mrs. Hollander’s terrible old car, the long road lined with towering Ontario pines, as he fell fitfully into sleep.

It was dusk when he woke to low voices in the room. He snuck a peek at the nurse by the closed door, with Mrs. Hollander facing away from him.

“The doctor has classified him as high risk,” the nurse was explaining gently. “In such cases, we strictly recommend a seventy-two-hour hold. Our assessment concluded that he was quickly progressing toward being a real threat to himself, given everything you described.”

“What does this hold entail, exactly?” Mrs. Hollander asked, her tone administrative.

“He will be moved to a safe room in our inpatient psychiatry unit. They’ll give him some clothes and take away anything he could use to harm himself. During his stay, a psychiatrist will formally evaluate him, probably give him a diagnosis. Once diagnosed, we will start him off on the appropriate medication.”

Mrs. Hollander released a long breath, her tangling hands giving away her worry.

“I don’t know... shouldn’t he be home?”

“I assure you, Mrs. Hollander, he will be much safer under professional care while we stabilise him.”

Ilya shut his eyes tight. *Look what trouble you've caused.*

It would be good to stay out of the Hollanders' hair for a few days, he reckoned. They could all probably use a break from him.

He hated the thought of spending the next few nights here without Shane to cuddle into for warmth, though.

You didn't get warm like that when you were in bed alone, no matter how high you piled the blankets. Shane warmed him down to the soul. He mourned the loss of it already.

He pushed himself up to sit as the nurse slipped out of the room. Mrs. Hollander sat by his side and took his hand in hers.

"I will be okay," he reassured her, lacing his voice with false-confidence. "Is better I stay here."

He was no good. It was about time everyone else caught on.

His father would have probably thrown his hands in the air if he were here, would have said: *See? See what I have to deal with?*

"I'll be back to visit soon."

"You do not have to," Ilya said, and hoped she would.

"I'll be back."

The nurses took the drip out of his arm and handed him a hospital-issued grey T-shirt to change into, with grey joggers and a grey sweatshirt to match—his prisoner's uniform for the next three days.

They took him by the arm, steered him down a maze of halls that seemed designed to prevent runaways, and eventually settled him into a small room devoid of all colour and soul.

When the psychiatrist knocked late into the evening, Ilya openly shared his poor review of the interiors.

"Maybe people would not want to kill themselves if there was some colour around here."

The psychiatrist, Dr. Hammadi, laughed lightly.

"I have to agree with you there, Ilya. Maybe they could paint the walls a nicer colour. Something like a sort of green, or a pink?"

"Yellow," Ilya said grumpily.

"Yellow is a good choice. Why yellow?"

Ilya shrugged, because explaining it to her would be too soft.

Instead, he said, “This is all very dramatic. I wasn’t going to kill myself yet.”

“It’s the ‘yet’ that I have a problem with, Ilya.”

She ended up asking him way too many questions—questions that made him itch uncomfortably. Questions about his mother, about his hockey, about his life in Russia.

When he tried to dig his nails into his arms, he barely made a dent. They’d clipped his nails short by inpatient protocol.

He watched the clock above her head tick on and wondered if his father had called. Which was stupid. Of course his father hadn’t called in the time between yesterday and today. But he wished he had his phone on him, just to be able to check.

It was Mr. Hollander who came to visit that first morning, the next day.

He greeted Ilya with a hand pressed to his flattened curls, and Ilya, like always, could do nothing but lean closer, desperate for a fatherly touch.

“How is Shane?” He asked cautiously, sitting cross-legged on the stiff mattress as he sipped the Shchi Mr. Hollander had brought him.

Mr. Hollander smiled sadly, offering him the truth. “He’s still a little out of sorts about how things went down.”

“Did he say anything? Does he...?”

Does he miss me even a fraction of how badly I miss him?

“He’s terrified of losing you,” Mr. Hollander said.

This answer made Ilya lower his spoon. His chest ached.

“Sir, I want you to know that I really did try to stay away. I never wanted to hurt him.”

The possibility that Mr. Hollander would think him selfish pained Ilya immensely. Maybe he would be quite justified to think it, since Ilya had clearly hurt his son.

“I even... I even told him that we couldn’t be friends, before,” he admitted, voice cracking.

He should have tried harder, probably. He should have never invited Shane into his bed that quiet night back at the camp. And then, all the times after that. But he had always been weak-willed.

Mr. Hollander’s face was processing something at his confession. He was probably internally cursing himself for ever getting his family into this mess when he’d first invited this troubled kid into his picture-perfect home.

“Well, it would mess him up now, if you died,” Mr. Hollander said in the end. “It would mess all of us up.”

Horribly, Ilya found himself curling into a pathetic ball right where he sat as deep, harsh sobs tore out of him.

He was fucking crying into his soup.

Mr. Hollander dragged the thermos to the side, and before Ilya knew it, the man was pulling Ilya tightly against his chest, holding him firm and still.

The unit was cold during the day, and even worse at nights. He asked for two extra blankets to make up for how badly he missed the feeling of Shane's skin.

On his second morning there, Dr. Hammadi brought him two little pills in a comically small paper cup. When he saw it extended out toward him, he laughed without any actual humour.

"You are giving me more pills?"

Dr. Hammadi nodded. "The Lorazepam we've been giving you so far is only temporary, to help you settle. This is different. I'd like to start you off on a controlled daily dose of this starting today, so we get an idea of how your body responds."

"What is it?"

She pointed at the little one in the cup. "We call these SSRIs. Anti-depressants. This one specifically is called Sertraline. It's going to help regulate your mood and energy levels over time."

Ilya narrowed his eyes at the offending pill. He tried to track the words into something that made sense, but all that stood out was *Anti-depressant*. He was so fucked in the head that he needed specific pills for it, apparently.

"It works by slowly balancing the serotonin levels in your brain," She continued patiently. "It's not a magic switch. It takes about two to four weeks to really set into your system and hopefully quiet some of the noise you described. For the first few days, you might feel a little nauseous, maybe more tired...It's best we start now so we can keep an eye on things."

Ilya sighed, too tired to process the medical jargon. "Whatever."

"This other one is for the nausea, to help your stomach settle while the Sertraline gets to work."

"Whatever," he repeated.

He tipped the cup into his mouth, and downed them both with a long gulp of the water she passed his way.

"I'll arrange some Mirtazapine for you to take at night, too. It should hopefully stimulate your appetite and help you sleep better."

How fucking fucked was it that he was here because of pills to begin with. And now here he was, downing a medley of them on a schedule.

The rest of the hours bled together, and the silence was only occasionally broken by the squeak of rubber soles in the hallway outside.

The medication seemed to wrap the sharp edges of his brain in thick cotton. His limbs were heavy, his stomach turning with the breakfast he'd eaten.

He tried to massage the tightness in his jaw loose and hoped he didn't look like a complete nut case. He momentarily wished he had a mirror to see how he looked, before quickly scolding himself for being so vain.

When Mrs. Hollander came through the door around mid-day, Ilya perked up a little. He sat with her in the cramped chairs near the window, around a tiny white coffee table, trying for some semblance of normalcy.

But he felt jittery, wound too tight, and the pill couldn't take away his agitation entirely.

"Your nose looks better," Mrs Hollander offered.

"How is Shane?" he interrupted, his knee bouncing erratically, foot tapping loudly in the room.

"Good. He misses you."

Ilya's knee kept hitting the edge of the coffee table, making it vibrate against the floor. Mrs. Hollander moved it slightly away.

Her eyes caught on the shoes the nurses had provided him. No shoelaces.

"Will he come visit?" he asked hesitantly, as he shuffled his feet away from her view.

"I'll ask him to come with me tomorrow," she said gently. She reached for his knee, stilling him. "He's processing, darling. Mostly he blames himself for getting you stuck here."

Ilya shook his head quickly. "Not his fault."

"No," she said. "But he also hasn't been entirely honest. He should have told us that he was so worried, but I think maybe he didn't want to break your trust."

Ilya loved him. It was the hardest thing about being in here—the fact that he couldn't see him, couldn't touch him.

"Please tell him to come see me," he said, his distress slipping through. "Please."

"I'll speak to him," she said again, and Ilya dragged a self-soothing hand over his eyes.

"Look, Ilya. I've come to a conclusion."

Ilya looked up at her, uncomprehending. "Conclusion?"

"A few conclusions, actually. Sorry—I just mean that I've been thinking about something."

“Oh, okay,” Ilya said.

“So, we’ve established you don’t want to go to Boston, right?”

Ilya nodded instinctively, though he didn't remember having that conversation.

“And you’re not too sure about going professional at all,” she continued.

Again, Ilya nodded.

“Which means there’s no point going back to the programme,” she pointed out.

“No, but I have to—“

“Because of your visa, I know,” she said, cutting him off in her haste. “But you don’t want to go back to Russia either, if we took Montana out of the picture.”

Ilya shrugged.

He felt dizzy, but he didn’t think it was from the medication alone this time.

“I’ve been talking with my lawyer,” she said hesitantly. “If I'm honest, Ilya, I started making calls since that day I told Shane he didn’t need to go back anymore, remember? I thought he’d be pleased, but he'd refused to let you go back alone.”

He blinked. That was like a week ago, before any of the mess he’d caused over Christmas.

“Then when you told us about your father, I...”

She let out a frustrated huff of air.

“I was trying to figure something out with the NEDP, but they shot me down, point blank. Bastards. So then we had to think around the whole visa situation.”

She pulled out a notebook, sifting messily through the pages until she found the right one.

“At first, I wasn’t too keen on our options. But then over Christmas, I got this idea. According to junior hockey rules, elite sports programmes can’t just drop a player following a mental health crisis without facing massive legal liability and—well, to say it bluntly—I would sue all of their asses if they did. So. They’d likely place you on Medical Leave, essentially keeping your current visa status active and protected. This buys us some time!”

Ilya stared in open confusion. He felt embarrassed at not being able to pick up on what she was trying to say, and having to admit it.

“I’m sorry, I really...I don't understand.”

“You’ll keep your roster spot, and Boston can defer you for a year in case you change your mind,” she rushed out. “Only *if* you change your mind, Ilya, but I’d like for you to still have the option. And, as I said, this route gives us time.”

“Time for what?” Ilya asked dumbly.

“To legally transition you from an athletic visa onto an academic one.”

His head hurt.

He couldn’t imagine what the inside of Mrs. Hollander’s own brain looked like right now, because he could barely pickup on one thought before she was starting on the next.

She paused, her face softening as she caught his glassy expression.

“I know your head is foggy, darling. Sorry. Here—” she said, as she set down her notebook where they could both see, and scribbled a rough timeline across the page:

‘Medical Leave → Boston Deferral → Student Visa → Open Work Permit → Permanent Residency’

Ilya dragged his eyes back up to meet hers. “So this means—?”

“Yes!”

Somehow, somewhere, he’d apparently started to trust her. Enough for her to hold his life between her capable hands, for her to do as she wished with it.

At least it wasn’t his father, who had always been too rough, leaving Ilya bruised when he’d set him down and pose him just so.

“Let’s make a deal,” she said, her eyes impossibly kind. “I’d like for you to be honest about what it is you want. And I want to do everything I can to make it happen for you. Okay?”

Ilya released all the air from his lungs, wanting to at least give it a shot, for her.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She beamed.

“Oh, and, a slight clause in the deal: you have to call me Yuna.”

Ilya nodded in a jerky movement.

“Yuna,” he said, a small smile breaking through.

A light moment passed as he thought about what it was he most wanted now. She had offered him anything, but in his haze, Ilya could only think of one thing.

“I would like to see Shane, please, Yuna.”

Yuna turned out to be true to her word, because the next afternoon, Shane walked through the door.

Ilya sat up straight on the hospital bed, his hand reaching out before his brain could even process the sight of him.

“Shane,” he managed.

Shane stopped just beyond the foot of the bed, his eyes rising slowly to meet Ilya’s. His lower lip was quivering, his waterline filling with tears in that way that made Ilya want to lick at them.

“Shane, come—please,” Ilya beckoned, the words rushing out of him.

That seemed to break Shane’s hesitation.

He crossed the space fast and sank right onto Ilya’s lap, burying his face into Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya released a broken sob, wrapping his arms tight around him as his senses finally filled with peppermint and summer and life—*so much life*.

Shane dragged his face back up, his cheek dragging against Ilya’s.

But before Ilya could even get a chance to beg for forgiveness, Shane crashed his mouth against his in a furious, open-mouthed kiss.

It was messy, his mouth had tasted fuzzy all day with all the meds and Shane could probably taste it. His nose hurt with every drag.

But he didn’t care. God—he didn’t care.

Shane was kissing *him*.

The boy’s hands were pressing firm against Ilya’s cheeks, digging in so hard it almost ached on his stiff jaw, like he was worried Ilya may just dissolve into thin air if he so much as let go.

It was sort of terrifying, how every single nerve in Ilya’s body had snapped to high alert even through the haze of the drugs. The slightest movement made him shiver.

He loved him so fully. It was something he’d clung to in here, a fine point of clarity, even with his head all scrambled the way it was.

Shane’s mouth was so hot the more he opened up for him, letting him in. Ilya could taste the panic in it just as Shane suddenly sprang back gasping, as he ripped his mouth away.

Ilya immediately chased after it, but stopped at the look on Shane’s face.

“Sorry—” Shane choked out, avoiding Ilya’s gaze.

He made to edge backwards, trying to push himself off Ilya’s lap to put some distance between them.

Panic seized Ilya's throat.

"No, no, no. Kiss me, Shane," he begged, his hands tangling in the back of Shane's hair, tugging, stopping his retreat. "I will die if you don't kiss me."

"Not funny," Shane rasped, chest heaving.

But then he leaned back in with a ragged sound and kissed him anyway.

He kissed him and kissed him and kissed him until Ilya's chest burned with a heat so bright—until the cold disappeared entirely.

Chapter End Notes

TW Sertraline. LOL. I shudder. Hopefully Ilya has a better time with it than I did.

One more chapter to go after this. I'm realising I really struggle with writing endings. But I'm also excited to start writing other things, after this is done.

Let me know your thoughts.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Sorry guys it's a long one.

Chapter Notes

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

When Ilya was finally discharged, Yuna came to pick him up. She didn't take the highway back to the cottage, instead pulling up outside the familiar brick building of the Hollanders' apartment. Ilya felt his heart twist in bitterness at the change in location.

He couldn't help but wonder how the rest of their Christmas had passed after the ambulance had taken him away.

Had they cleared up the scattered pills? Flushed them right down the toilet? Had they washed the small splatters of his blood out of Shane's sheets from when he had been screaming and thrashing? Had they cleared it all away and just... sat down to dinner?

He didn't get to be upset that he'd missed it—but that didn't stop him from wishing he had been there, playing house with them.

Stepping through the front door, he inhaled the familiar scent of coffee and sidestepped the clutter in the entryway. Wasn't he sort of still playing house, even now? Obviously the Hollanders were nice, nice enough to let him stay for a while. Still, Ilya couldn't quite shake the feeling that he was playing house, even now, and eventually the happy illusion would shatter around him.

He swallowed hard, looking toward the hallway. "Where is Shane?"

"Therapy," Yuna supplied easily, already shuffling behind the kitchen counter. Ilya's stomach dropped fast. *Because of me?* his mind supplied. *Did I traumatise him? Is he—*

"Speech therapy," she added quickly, catching the flash of panic across his face. "He'll have a session every Thursday now that he's started up again. He'll be back in a few minutes."

Ilya followed her voice deeper into the kitchen before taking a seat at the island. "Like... therapy for learning what to say?"

Yuna turned her back, preparing something bland enough for Ilya to stomach as per the doctor's orders. "That's where he's at now, yes. He missed out on captaincy too long for my liking. His last coach still wasn't convinced he could lead team morale," she tutted. "The

other kids didn't exactly make it easier. I just... I worry the league's going to let him down, too."

Before Ilya could begin to compare that to his father's style of encouragement—one which involved a hard-buckled leather belt and days-long silent treatment—Yuna set down a piece of brown toast, bare except for a thin layer of butter. His stomach churned with nausea at the mere sight of it, and he swallowed hard against the bile.

Sertraline, the doctor had warned. *It gets worse before it gets better.*

Yuna leaned against the counter, watching him closely. "Speaking of therapy, Ilya, you will be going too. Actual therapy, I mean, while you stay here with us."

Ilya paused, his fingers stuttering against the edge of the plate. He looked up slowly, his shoulders hunching as he weighed the words carefully.

"Is like a... condition?" he asked hesitantly, just to make sure. "For staying?"

"No," Yuna shook her head, repeating it over and over. "No, no. Nothing like that. No conditions."

She swore under her breath. Ilya shrank back, convinced he had annoyed her.

"We don't have any conditions for you to stay here, Ilya," she continued, her voice softening. She reached into her bag, sliding the release slip toward him and tapping it twice with her finger. "But I would like for you to try. You're going to need to keep on top of your meds—your anti-depressants in the morning, maybe something to help you sleep at night."

"I don't need sleeping pills," Ilya interrupted, feeling uneasy. He didn't want the temptation to hoard them again. Mindlessly, he couldn't stop himself from blurting out, "I sleep okay when I'm with Shane."

If Yuna thought what he'd said was odd, she didn't show it.

"But Shane will not always be here, right?" she pushed gently. "He'll be leaving town more from now, for ad campaigns and press junkets. And then for longer when he goes to Montreal. Look—we'll see how you feel about them over time, but the pills will have to go hand in hand with the therapy. Remember what the doctor said about grief?"

Ilya looked down, knuckles turning white as he gripped the edge of the paper. The clinical labels felt like they were insulting him: *Persist Depression, Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Dissociative Amnesia*. He did remember bits of the prognosis, too—a line warning about grief, how grieving past six months was considered 'chronic' and required urgent medical intervention.

"She's my mother," he said, voice flat.

Six measly months to grieve her, and then what? Was he supposed to just wrap it up, neat and tidy, and be like new again? Of course he was going to grieve her. He was going to grieve her

for the rest of his fucking life and no doctor with a clipboard was going to tell him when it was the appropriate time to stop.

"I know," Yuna said, her voice suddenly shaky. She placed her soft hand over his, stilling his twitching fingers. "I only want you to get better, Ilya. We will stand behind you through this, but eventually you'll have your own place, your own life, and you won't want to be around us so much. And like I said, Shane's going to—"

As though he'd been summoned, Shane burst through the front door.

A whirlwind of movement blurred through the entryway, and before Ilya could even turn his head properly, Shane slammed straight into his back, completely underestimating his own strength again.

"Ilya! Hi—sorry! I just—" Shane babbled, scrambling around him and throwing himself messily into the stool next to Ilya. He tugged on Ilya's fingers. "Let's go to my room, come on."

Ilya was already smiling, but he grimaced as he looked down at his barely touched piece of toast and slid it apologetically back toward Yuna. He didn't touch the release slip this time, refusing to acknowledge it anymore.

Yuna let out a soft sigh, and waved a hand at them both in gentle dismissal. "We will be talking about this later, Ilya."

Ilya barely even made it two steps into Shane's bedroom before Shane launched himself sideways, hanging his full weight off Ilya's shoulder and nearly bringing them both down.

"Shane!" Ilya complained, stumbling as he tried to keep his footing.

"Fuck you, I'm so happy you're back," Shane said loudly, his voice cracking with unfiltered relief. "Fuck!"

A breathless laugh bubbled out of Ilya at the chaos of it. He loved it when Shane swore. It was like watching a kitten hiss—that was how harmless it felt. Except Shane was not a tiny, harmless kitten, because not even a second later, he slammed his palms into Ilya's chest and shoved him hard. Ilya's hip knocked violently against the doorknob.

"Ow! What the fuck?"

"Sorry!" Shane yelled, his face flushed and his eyes blazing with an anger that had flared up way too fast. "Don't fucking do that again."

Ilya stared openly at him. Then slowly, trying to slice through the intense weight of Shane's rage, his lips twitched into a small, crooked smirk. "Clearly, you are the crazy one," Ilya teased, raising a hand up toward Shane.

"What? Shut up."

"Yes, I think maybe they took the wrong person. You are the crazy one," he declared. He stepped directly into Shane's space then, reaching out to grab him by the back of the neck, pulling him flush against his chest. "Come here."

Shane stiffened for just a second, like he was trying to hold onto what was left of his anger, before sinking completely into him. His emotions were jumping too fast, crashing over each other. Ilya felt the exact moment it all settled into one: fear.

"You shouldn't promise me those things," Shane whispered into his shoulder, sounding cracked open. A terrible tremor rippled through his entire frame as he started to sob.

"What things?" Ilya asked roughly, wanting to fix whatever it was.

"Our... cottage," Shane said quietly. "Your cottage with your—your cat."

Before either of them knew it, they were kissing. Softer this time than back at the hospital, when time had seemed scarce and had left them desperate. Now, Ilya took in the salty taste of Shane's tears, feeling his warm hitching breaths against his cheek.

Without breaking the contact, Ilya walked Shane backward, nudging him until Shane's knees hit the edge of the mattress and he fell down onto it. His thighs opened naturally to make room for Ilya, who sank down between them.

"My cat," Ilya murmured softly, dragging his cracked knuckles against Shane's cheekbones. "You're right, I was not being fair."

Shane looked up at him, eyes wide and guilty. "I should have done something earlier... but I wasn't sure..."

Ilya frowned. "What?"

"I should have done something earlier," Shane choked out again, clutching desperately at the neckline of Ilya's shirt, "I'm sorry."

"Shane. No," Ilya chided lightly. "Don't say that. You don't even know..."

He trailed off, struggling to pull the right words together because he had only ever worried about whether Shane would forgive *him*. Or... would have forgiven him? He was still sort of unsure if his plans had been entirely canceled or just postponed.

"I should have realised," Shane blubbered. "Maybe even from the moment we first met, I should have realised how bad it was."

"On the roof?" Ilya asked. Shane couldn't have known he had gone up there to jump, could he?

"No, at the prospects," Shane stuttered. "You were just so... I tried to say hi, just to introduce myself, but it was like you were looking right through me. I thought you were just being an asshole."

He frowned at Ilya's pained look.

"You don't remember," Shane said, like it only just occurred to him.

"*Fucking idiot*," he murmured in Russian, just to himself, dropping his head onto Shane's shoulder. "I don't know how I could ever ignore these pretty freckles," he swore again, his eyes stinging with shame. "I wish I remembered. The doctor said that I lose time, sometimes. I don't know."

"Oh," Shane sniffed, "why does it happen?"

"Ah, lot of people screaming at me, blaming me for something or, everything. Hockey was not so much fun for me."

"So, your mind sort of, like, shuts down?"

God, he really did sound fucked in the head, didn't he? He really just wanted to stop talking about it, so all he managed to do was hold Shane's gaze and give him the absolute truth of the past few months, hoping it would be enough.

"You don't know how many times you already saved my life, Shane. There was nothing else you could have done. I'm... sick."

Shane looked like he had more to say, but tears were still drying messily across his cheeks and Ilya kind of wanted to taste them again, so he leaned up to press a soft kiss to one cheek, then the other. He didn't want to stop kissing him, really, so he trailed them lightly all over his face, from the tip of his nose to the high points of his temples. Shane shuddered under the attention, his legs automatically shifting wider.

Ilya couldn't get enough. He only managed to pull away—practically hanging off Shane's lap by that point—when they heard Mr. Hollander's loud chatter start up from down the hall.

Back outside, Mr. Hollander greeted Ilya with a now-familiar hand to his head and dropped a cup of plain frozen yogurt into his palm, which proved much easier on his stomach than anything he'd had over the past few days.

"How are you feeling, kid?"

Ilya shrugged passively, licking at his spoon. "Do you know where my phone is?"

When Mr. Hollander came back with his phone a few moments later, he didn't even attempt to give Ilya space. Ilya leaned his back against the counter as he turned his phone on, his hands shaking as it buzzed alive with everything he'd missed during his hospital stay.

A few more vile messages from Alexei. One missed call from his father.

Mr. Hollander was still pretending to reorganise the cup rack, but he turned when he heard Ilya curse under his breath.

"My father is going to kill me," Ilya explained, heart beating too fast to hide his fear right then, his face having gone completely pale.

"I'll be right here with you," Mr. Hollander said firmly, ducking to catch his eye, "whenever you're ready to tell him."

Mr. Hollander had apparently decided to take the logistics of Ilya's estrangement into his own hands when, the next morning, he sat him down on the sofa and explained that he was something called an 'Advisor' for the 'Treasury Board of Canada.' Which meant, in simpler terms, that he was pretty good when it came to managing money.

"So you didn't get your draft money?" he asked.

Ilya shifted uncomfortably, finally having to confront the reality of his financial situation. "Some of it. My father says he should look after it so I do not spend all of it."

"So, your contract payout was directly deposited to his account," Mr. Hollander clarified, his tone low, "or was your father listed as a joint signatory on your account when you signed?"

"The second one, I think?" He nodded, not really understanding what was making the man's knuckles turn white. "He signed all the papers, told me was proper way of doing things, but then I think he moved the money somewhere else."

"He should not have done that, Ilya." Mr. Hollander asked, his jaw visibly tensing. "How much did he give you when you found out you'd be going into the programme?"

"Uh, like four hundred," Ilya mumbled, staring down at his knees, feeling weary at the heavy silence that was settling over the room. "He said I would not need more because there would be food there. But I had seventy-five saved from before, too, if maybe something bad happened."

He felt strange admitting that he had saved that extra money right after suggesting that he was bad with it. Who knows, he probably *was* bad with money; he probably would have squandered it all away by now anyway, if he had enough of it to actually spend. On more cigarettes, on bribes and gambles, or maybe a bottle of vodka to down with his pills if he could have convinced one of the other guys to sell to him.

But then, he hadn't done any of that, except for indulging in that pack of cigarettes that one time...

"And that money lasted you until now?" Mr. Hollander asked, a deep furrow between his brows.

Ilya knew how it must look. Sure, food was provided, but they still needed cash for extra snacks and drinks, for weekends out to town, or even for kit replacement fees. But he really had been very careful. He obviously couldn't afford to be reckless on the ice, and it definitely helped when he stopped having the energy for it anymore.

"I kept enough for a taxi back to camp, maybe. I was not sure if there would be buses at the airport," he told Mr. Hollander, who looked down for a long moment, shielding his face. "And for lunch, maybe, if there was enough left over."

When Mr. Hollander finally looked back up, Ilya was shocked to find his eyes had turned slightly red.

"Well, you won't have to worry about that now, son. It was smart of you to save that money, though. I'd say you're pretty responsible with money, so I'm not sure I agree with your father there."

Ilya so badly wanted to believe him, but a quiet guilt lingered at going against his father's judgment, who surely knew him better after going through all the effort of raising him—ungrateful, spoiled, disappointing child that he was.

"How about we get you set up with a new account?" Mr. Hollander continued. "One that's all your own."

Ilya sort of loved Mr. Hollander, at least enough to trust him, too. And what if his father wasn't always right about Ilya? Mr. Hollander sounded like he knew what he was talking about, so Ilya said, "Okay, yes."

"Good. Now," Mr. Hollander said, as he reached across the table and dropped two pills into Ilya's palm. "Here, take these."

Ilya nodded, still a little in his head as he stared down at the little tablets. But then Mr. Hollander kept watching him expectantly.

"Ah," Ilya said, embarrassed, when he remembered he was practically still on suicide watch. He popped the pills efficiently into his mouth, swallowed them dry, then stuck his tongue out for inspection. Proof that he hadn't cheeked them.

"Good," Mr. Hollander huffed again with a little smile, "I'll just go grab the laptop and we'll set you up with a clean account in no time."

When Ilya walked back into Shane's room a little while later, his head was still spinning with the realisation that his father had essentially stolen all his earnings. He sat heavily on the edge of Shane's mattress next to Shane, but his heel hit against a large box under the bed. Ilya bent over to shuffle it out.

"What's this?"

"Oh," Shane worried, "promise you won't get mad."

"Shane..." Ilya admonished lightheartedly. He reached to unlatch the clip on the side, only to reveal the pristine Maritime guitar—the exact one he knew cost nearly two thousand dollars—and all humour dropped right out of him.

"Wh-?" Ilya stammered, hand hovering over the polished wood.

"It's just that," Shane started, shuffling into his space. "I really like buying you things. And—and you looked really, er, good, when you were holding that, so." He leaned lower, trying to get a read of Ilya's expression, which was probably lagging a little bit. "Fuck, I knew it was a bad idea. I can return it, anyway... are you mad?"

"You should not be spending your money on me, Shane," Ilya said, a little stressed over the chunk leaving his bank account. "You can't just buy me things like this... this is too much money."

Shane shook his head. "It wasn't," he insisted, but he huffed, cheeks blazing red. "Well, maybe, but my bonus wasn't too bad. And I can just make more of it soon. I told you..."

"Told me what?" Ilya asked, feeling just as flushed as Shane looked.

And without a single doubt in his voice, Shane said, "That I'll get you anything you want."

"Shit, Hollander," Ilya swallowed hard against the sudden prickle of tears, because holy shit. In case Shane was only messing around, Ilya attempted a joke, and said, "You want to be my sugar daddy?"

"I could be," Shane insisted, chin held up in defiance. When Ilya only snorted, he deflated. "Fine, just forget it, I won't get you anything again."

"Nooooo, Hollander," Ilya whined, dragging him back to kiss at his jaw. "I think is very sexy. Imagine me as poor university student, can barely afford packet of noodles. But I have this super hot MLH player who is just soooooo obsessed with me, he keeps buying all my textbooks and sending me food so I do not starve to death."

Shane giggled, smacking half-heartedly against Ilya's chest to push him away.

Ilya turned his head to press a lingering kiss against Shane's hairline. He wanted more than ever to tackle Shane back against the sheets and thank him properly, but his parents' chatter was still too loud, disrupting the quiet tension between them.

"I'll come visit all the time," Shane said sadly. "And you'll come down to me, too? If you want?"

"All the time," Ilya promised, and made a mental note to figure out the hows and whens later.

Maybe Yuna was right about all of this. Three nights away had almost driven him crazy—or, crazier than usual. He didn't want to take Shane's warmth next to him for granted just then, so he stole another kiss, and tried not to think about Shane moving over a hundred miles away.

The days were passing with such little fanfare that Ilya only realised it was New Year's Eve when he heard the fireworks start outside.

They watched them spark wild on the TV, and when they got into bed, while the rest of the world was still out celebrating, Ilya lay in the dark beside Shane listening to his steady

breathing, and considered his own resolutions. After a long while of thinking, he only managed to come up with one: *Don't die*.

It was a low bar, but all Ilya had thought about until now—possibly since the age of twelve when he'd first learned of the possibility—was taking his own life, so, privately, Ilya knew this was already an improvement.

All the attention recently was making Ilya feel unsteady. It was clear Mr. Hollander had either taken time off work or opted to work from home to be able to keep an eye on him. Yuna, too, seemed to make sure he was never left alone. If it wasn't Yuna or her husband, then Shane was there, keeping him talking, keeping him busy.

He refused to let himself break down the way he had back at the hospital. He had better control of himself now. He only let himself get bad at night, in the few hours where everyone had gone to bed and Ilya couldn't quite hide it anymore.

He thought he had been doing a good job of hiding it throughout the day, though. He laughed and smiled when he thought they wanted him to, and he tried to get his energy back up to what they thought was normal. Sometimes, when he was better, he didn't need to hide anything at all. He cooked with Mr. Hollander, he watched a game with Yuna, he chased Shane around the couch and tackled him down into a struggling heap on the floor—breathless and gasping.

"Hey!" Yuna would shout, and Ilya would be a little proud of the way he didn't even flinch. "Stop that and come set the table, both of you."

"Sorry, Yuna," he'd say, his voice still edged with laughter as he dragged himself off Shane.

One of those times, Ilya was just close enough to hear it when Mr. Hollander leaned in to her and quietly complained, *"How come he calls you Yuna and not me?"* To which Yuna had whispered back, *"Honey, if you want him to call you Yuna too, you just have to ask!"*

That same afternoon, feeling determined, Ilya had snuck off to find Mr. Hollander tinkering with the old car in the garage.

"Oh, hey, Ilya. I'm trying to get the car set up as a spare for you and Shane to use when you need it. I know Shane doesn't care about any of this crap, but I want it to feel like yours. You'll be driving it a lot to and from your classes, too. I was thinking..."

Ilya watched as the man rambled on, feeling his heart swell at being considered in the same breath as his actual son. He'd definitely need to use the car for uni, but he could maybe even use it to visit Shane when the time came, too.

"If we go with the dark green, I may end up wrapping the exterior to match. But then this brown leather could also look quite nice. What do you think?"

"I... I like the green, David," Ilya attempted awkwardly, flushing when the man's head almost hit the edge of the car door at hearing him finally drop the formalities. "Maybe I can help?"

It was strikingly obvious that he was trying very hard to keep cool, purely for Ilya's sake. Ilya thought he probably wanted to jump right out and hug him.

"Good, green is good," David cleared his throat faux-casually. Then, considering Ilya for a moment, he said, "Your hair's getting pretty long, eh?"

Ilya ducked to catch his reflection in the car window. The man was right. Ilya had skipped the last trim at camp, choosing instead to stay in bed longer, and now his curls were brushing the base of his neck, having grown far past his ears.

His father always said it made Ilya look like a girl; he'd even accidentally called him 'Irina' once a few years ago, and Ilya had been made to buzz it all off as punishment for confusing him.

He swiped the front pieces back self-consciously. Did Shane's dad have a problem with it, too? Shane's hair was always clipped at the same short length, so maybe...

"I should cut it," Ilya suggested uncertainly.

"I can take you in to the barber tomorrow?" David said. Ilya's shoulders fell just slightly at the offer, turning his face away to hide his frown, but not before the man caught it. "Or not... you don't have to cut it if you don't want to, you know."

"I don't mind," Ilya said, trying to keep polite.

David's gaze lingered on his for a second longer, seeing right through to his anxiety. "But it's okay if you do mind, right? You can choose how you want your hair." He gestured toward the leather options displayed on the dashboard, because it was important for Ilya to know he had choices. "You can express yourself how you want..."

Ilya nodded half-heartedly, because yeah, he knew all that, as a concept. Sometimes Ilya still felt so unaccustomed to that kind of acceptance that he forgot Yuna or David would never make him do something he really didn't want to do. He was better, he asked for things now, he shared his opinions more openly. But it still didn't come naturally to him, even now, even knowing he knew he wasn't going to get slapped for speaking out of turn.

"Ilya..." David said, sounding a little put down. Ilya winced and tried to cover it up with a smile. "Okay, come on. We're going to Home Depot."

"Okay... did you need something for the car?" Ilya asked uncertainly.

"No. New project. Come on, get in."

Twenty minutes later, Ilya was staring at a gradient display of paint samples on a shelf, glancing non-comprehendingly at David beside him.

"Pick one," he instructed. "Pick a colour for your room."

Ilya immediately shook his head. "Thank you, sir—David, but I don't mind the colour it is already."

Which wasn't true, exactly. The blue-grey was sort of grim. It reminded him too much of the colour of his mother's lips when he'd found her.

"Pick one," David said firmly.

Ilya grimaced and looked at his options.

There were too many, a whole wall of colour that he didn't know where to start. Knowing he had to pick something, he walked directly toward the yellows and pulled out a golden one. It was a bright, warm shade, somewhere between yellow and orange, and definitely several shades brighter than Shane's own room.

Mr. Hollander looked over his shoulder, clearly thinking the same thing. "You sure you want to go with that one? It's a bit bright."

Ilya started to put the card back, already turning toward the more respectable creams and beiges, but Mr. Hollander's large hand stopped him.

"No, no, this one it is," he said decidedly. "Right, then. Let's get this checked out."

They painted the room that same day.

Shane helped tape the borders (poorly) with a line of heavy concentration across his brow while Ilya took a small brush to the corners. David used a big roller to expertly fill in the rest, the blue-grey quickly replaced by the new sunny shade.

When Yuna walked in to see the end result, Ilya could instantly tell she wasn't a fan, but the light reflecting off the bright walls made Shane look like he was glowing, and Ilya sort of felt like he was in the middle of a heatwave, despite it being only the beginning of January.

He spent more time in the room after that, enjoying the bright warmth, but he always found his way back into Shane's bed by midnight. The bed was bigger than his own, so it was obviously the practical choice. Besides, Shane kept complaining that his shade of yellow gave him a headache after a while and refused to spend more than an hour in there.

Falling asleep next to Shane was easier than ever. Getting out of bed in the mornings, though, sometimes still took too much effort. He'd wake up after what felt like either a few hours or possibly several days, to find Shane in the middle of stretching on his yoga mat or quietly studying his notes at his desk.

"Hi," Shane would say softly upon hearing Ilya's stirring. "How are you feeling?"

Ilya would grumble something offhand, trying to say *bad*.

Shane would crawl over, sliding under the covers beside him, tucking himself near. "Do you... wanna kiss?"

Ilya would cover his face with a hand, trying to hide his grin. It felt odd to smile when he got bad like this, and he sometimes got the urge to tell himself off for faking this whole thing—which he distantly recognised as ridiculous, because nothing about his depression actually

felt fake. He couldn't help smiling, he decided, when Shane was continually looking at the absolute worst parts of him and still wanted to touch him.

"I'm disgusting right now, Shane," he tried. "I should brush my teeth."

"I don't care," Shane would say, but on some days he'd take the opportunity to drag Ilya up toward the shower to gently lather shampoo into his hair.

There were also days when his mood would drop so hard that Ilya would find himself snapping at Shane over seemingly nothing. He always hated himself for it instantly when he got like this, begging for forgiveness the second Shane retreated to give him space.

Shane, of course, was always too quick to forgive.

"It's not okay, Shane. Stop saying it's okay," Ilya would snap again, frustration rising. "You should want someone better."

That would be the one thing that actually tipped Shane off. Shane was stubborn when it came to his agency being tested—he was always arguing back with Yuna about something or the other, telling her to "*Stop managing me, Mom!*"

"What—? I'm literally your manager, Shane," Yuna would huff back, neither of them backing down.

Ilya had started to find the whole dynamic entertaining, chuckling at their bickering until Shane would turn to him with a grumpy frown.

"Fine! If you don't like my management style, then—" she exclaimed, hands lifting in mock surrender.

"I like when you manage me," Ilya offered smoothly, plastering a cheeky smile across his face. It was true; he'd take her over his father any day.

Yuna immediately softened into a fond smile as she walked around the couch, pressed her warm palm to his cheek, then dropped a kiss to the crown of Shane's head.

Yuna, in particular, seemed to have made Ilya her main priority at the moment. She had completely zeroed in on helping him sort his life out. His planner—the same one she'd given him for Christmas—was always sitting open on the coffee table. It was slowly filling with her neat handwriting: an upcoming meeting about his financing options, a call with uOttawa, another with Carleton, and therapy with 'Marta' on Wednesdays and Fridays, starting next week.

"So there's quite a few options to choose from," she said later that night, pointing to her laptop screen. "We just have to find your fit. Carleton has a great Kinesiology pathway which lets you do a foundation year, or we could look at Recreation and Sport Management at uOttawa. Even Algonquin College has some great practical programmes."

Ilya leaned forward, staring at the listed courses. *Kinesiology? Recreation? What?*

"Can you choose for me?" he said in the end, looking up at her expectant face.

"Ilya, no," she urged. "Come on, you have to give me something to work with here."

He exhaled, burying his face into his arms.

"Okay, okay. Let's take it back a few steps," Yuna said gently. "We know you're good at hockey, so... maybe something to do with sports, right?"

Ilya raised his head, feeling a little addled. "I guess, maybe."

"How about Sports Science?" she offered. "Sports Journalism? Marketing?"

"Yuna, I... I stopped going to school when I was fifteen. What if I'm not good at any of this?"

"Then we will figure something else out. But for now, let's give it our best go, okay?" she said patiently.

There was something highly humiliating about this whole process—in the realisation that he didn't have hobbies, interests, aspirations the way kids ten years younger than him already did. He felt useless. He couldn't think of a single thing he might be good at now, at eighteen.

Except for...

"I have been working with Bennie," he said quietly, a little embarrassed at having been omitting that little detail this whole time.

But instead of reprimanding him, Yuna's eyes lit up.

"Oh," she said slowly. "And do you... do you enjoy it?"

He didn't even have to answer—it was enough for Yuna to read the expression on his face. She raised her brows as though reaching a decision, diving right back into her screen and typing away, completely ignoring Ilya's presence.

Ilya scraped his chair back gently, leaving her to it.

He was nervous to see Bennie again, even though she had no idea he'd been in the hospital. In a lot of ways, he was glad; if she knew, she might have a reason to keep him away from the kids on the grounds of being too unstable. It was one of the first questions they'd asked him when he was lucid enough to answer: *Just a few routine questions, Ilya. Right now, do you feel like you are a danger to yourself or others?* Ilya had scoffed then at the wording, because to say yes to his own despair would have unfairly lumped him in with monsters and criminals. He hated for Bennie to see him that way.

When Shane returned to the rink, Ilya followed along, worrying over how to approach her about it. As soon as he stepped onto the ice again, she wrapped him in a rough, angry hug and told him off for his disappearing act.

Ilya shuffled back nervously on his skates. "Actually, Bennie, I was thinking to ask you something."

Bennie raised her brows expectantly, and before he could chicken out, Ilya rushed on: "Uh, I think I will be staying here, in Ottawa with... with Shane and his parents. And I was thinking if maybe is okay I keep working with you?"

This, of course, led her into a whole monologue about how she was telling the truth when she said he was never allowed to leave her alone with the little monsters again, and how those little monsters hadn't stopped asking about him all week, and *wait—what about your spot with Boston?*

"I will not be going, probably," he said uncomfortably, and explained how he'd probably be going to university instead, feeling a little embarrassed about it. He wasn't mourning his lost hockey career at all, but he got the feeling everyone would be too eager to tell him he was making a massive mistake, throwing his life away, fucking up his future, whatever. He hadn't even told his father yet, who had called him twice more since the last time.

Bennie didn't do any of that. She smiled and told him he was welcome to work with her for as long as he could, and even hinted at a permanent assistant role the Board was considering, which she'd push his name for.

Ilya was astounded at her kindness. He was fine to continue unpaid, obviously, but he could seriously use the money. He'd love to offer it to Yuna and David as rent. University wouldn't start until September, and the idea of freeloading until then made him itch, no matter how much they insisted he belonged.

"Human Kinetics and Child Studies!" Yuna practically shouted when she saw them walk back through the door.

"Jesus, Mom," Shane said. Turning to Ilya with a sympathetic glance, he said, "Good luck," and fled.

"The course," Yuna told him, "focuses on youth development and childhood psychology in sports. It's perfect for you," she said, "and uOttawa is apparently the perfect place for you, too, because of its bilingual culture and they have a dedicated Russian Club, Ilya—where they host film nights and picnics! And okay we may have a problem qualifying for student loans without your school diplomas but—"

"Wait, uh, you said there is problem getting loans?" Ilya asked tightly.

"Oh, well yeah, since you left school at fifteen right? So, you won't easily qualify for it without any grades, especially as an international student. But—"

"Shit," Ilya interrupted again. It felt like he was suddenly plunged right into a pool of ice.

"But Ilya, listen, it's fine because we can use Shane's university fund—"

"No," Ilya said, feeling sick. "I won't."

"Ilya," she said slowly, "we kept it in case Shane ever wanted to go, but then he went straight ahead to the MLH and got rich all by himself."

Ilya shook his head sharply. "I can't. I can't, Yuna. I feel..." *like a charity case*, he wanted to say.

Yuna was talking about the sum like it was no more consequential than passing the salt over a dinner table. Money was a powerful thing; it came with strings, threats, expectations, something to hold over someone's head later—Ilya would know. If this were his father, then at least Ilya could have worked for the return on investment. He didn't imagine the Hollanders wanted anything more from him than to have a future.

"Darling, it's not like he'll be using it, the money's just sitting there," she insisted. "There's no difference between using it for him and using it for you, is there?"

Ilya swallowed hard, a volatile mix of deep humiliation and overwhelming relief burning in his throat. When he had joked about Shane funding his textbooks, he didn't think it would actually be the case.

"Can I—can I think about it?"

"Sure," she said, kindly, though it was more than clear she had already decided. "Alright, so, we should start working on your personal statement for your application—oh, you are so in! I mean, you're already the number one draft pick, they'd be stupid not to take you. But now that you have work experience too, we can really push for this 'child education' route—"

She was extraordinary. She had taken the impossible circumstances of Ilya's reality and solved them all, turning them around one by one, and didn't even seem to recognise the true depth of how she was slowly saving his life.

As the weeks passed and his medication settled, Ilya felt his strength returning. He'd always been more than happy to let Shane overpower him whenever they played around, but now it was far more satisfying to pin Shane beneath him, leave him writhing and flushed, Ilya's growing curls tickling his face as he triumphed over him.

"Ilya, wait—wait, I need to —" Shane said suddenly, trying desperately to push his hips back into the mattress and away from Ilya. Shane tugged his wrists free with sudden strength—clearly having been holding back—and scrambled out from under Ilya's hold, sprinting across the room to slam the bathroom door shut behind him.

"O-kay," Ilya said slowly, blinking at the closed door. "Shane?"

Ilya wasn't stupid. He quickly understood why Shane was starting to avoid his gaze whenever their kisses went on for too long; the times Ilya pulled him close and whispered, "*Come closer, Shane, stop squirming, give me your tongue. Are you okay? Is this good? Tell me.*" He could feel the proof of it growing hard against his hip.

Maybe his luck in life really was changing. Here he was, with the hottest guy he'd ever known pinned beneath him, horny and needy and moaning like a fucking dream.

The only problem was that Ilya couldn't seem to get his own dick to work.

"Sorry," he murmured one hazy morning when he woke up to Shane lapping at his neck, his hands drifting south to Ilya's unresponsive dick. "I want you, Shane, so badly. Fuck, I don't know what's wrong with me."

Shane pulled back to look at him, realisation dawning. "Nothing's wrong with you. It's just your side effect."

Ilya rolled his head back into the pillow with a groan. He hated bringing up the meds.

"What? It's true," Shane said matter-of-factly. "SSRIs mess with your serotonin and dopamine levels, and arousal is apparently tied to dopamine response? Or maybe it was the other way round..."

Ilya swore, hiding his face behind his hands. "This is the most embarrassing conversation of my life."

"Don't be dramatic," Shane admonished calmly. "I read up on it. It can apparently happen to up to sixty percent of patients. Suppressed libido and erectile dysfunction are totally normal at this stage, and—"

"Oh God, Hollander," Ilya gasped, attempting to slide off the bed and sink into the floorboards. "Please stop talking."

"Okay," Shane said obediently, dragging him easily back under the covers. Then, because he was still a horned-up teenager, he added, "We can still do other things. If you want?"

From then on, they tried plenty of other things that didn't involve Ilya's dick cooperating. All that time spent in the garage with David had made him surprisingly good with his hands—and his fingers. Shane, especially, loved his fingers.

Ilya tried to convince himself that he only followed Shane around like a dumb puppy because he was in love. But he knew the way he was in love was not normal. He didn't feel normal about Shane at all. When Shane went to the rink, Ilya had half a mind to skate around behind him, nearly forgetting that he now had a very real job with very real responsibilities.

"Wow," Bennie mused. "You're really gone on him."

Ilya tore his eyes away with difficulty from where Shane was working on his edge control. If he wasn't in company, he would have been drooling already. He fixed his eyes on Bennie, because she had said something, right?

Bennie chuckled at his glassy expression. "You must be glad you'll only be two hours away," she quizzed. Ilya watched her bend to pick up the red cones as she cleared up the end of the lesson.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I mean, it's better than what it would have been if you had gone all the way to Boston. When my wife had to travel for work just two cities away, I almost lost my mind."

"Oh—" Ilya started.

Shane saw this as the perfect time to skate over, and because Ilya was in love, so fucking in love, he completely forgot what he was about to say, ogling openly at Shane's sweat-slicked face and his heaving chest and his biceps and—oh, Bennie was saying something again.

Focus, Ilya!

"I was just telling your boyfriend here," she said pointedly, shaking her hand right in Ilya's face to check if she'd lost him again, "how glad you must be to not be doing long-distance."

The word rang through his head like an alarm. *Boyfriend, boyfriend, boyfriend.*

"Bennie, we're not—!"

"Oh, we're actually—"

They turned to face one another, mouths snapping shut at the same time with an audible click. The sudden panic on Shane's face was sharp and visceral, his posture stiffening as he prepared himself for the familiar sting of Ilya's rejection.

"He's my best friend," Ilya declared, looking straight at Bennie before turning his gaze fully onto Shane again.

Shane stood frozen on his skates, his mouth opening slightly in a tiny, silent gasp. Ilya saw the exact moment the words fully registered and the way the tension bled out of Shane's guard.

"Sorry, I thought..." Bennie murmured, sensing the shift and moving awkwardly away to give them privacy.

"You're my best friend, Hollander," Ilya repeated softly, making sure Shane heard every syllable. "And I'm sticking around."

Shane breathed out a shaky breath, a slow smile unfurling across his face. "Yeah," Shane whispered, his voice thick.

Shane kept him up all night and Ilya felt good. He felt so fucking good all night. Then, the next morning he just felt bad again.

"Are you okay?" Shane worried.

"Stop asking me that."

"Sorry," Shane sighed, "but how are you feeling?"

Usually the answer to that question was either "*bad*," or "*really bad*," or even on the rare occasion, "*fuck off, Hollander, leave me alone*."

Then, a week or two would go by in which he had so much to do around his applications that there was no time at all to get bad.

The work was a good way to outrun his thoughts, and by the time he'd received the acceptance in the mail, he was already deep into studying for his required English Proficiency tests, or attending some sort of weekend course to obtain his coaching certification for work.

During those times, when Shane would ask him again how he was feeling, Ilya would say, "Shane, I'm not bad all the time. I don't want to die right now."

"That's good," Shane beamed. "That's good, because I have some pretty long-term plans for us."

When he had been good for a while, and bad only the odd few times, Yuna quietly passed his mother's crucifix across the mountain of paperwork over the dining table. She didn't look at him as she did it. The charm was looped through a glittering gold chain. Ilya put it around his neck and gave a tiny "*Thank you*" for keeping it safe for him, just like he knew she would. Maybe she didn't need to anymore.

By late February, he and Shane went back to the lake and took to the ice together, chasing each other in wide loops until their thighs burned, whooping and cackling the whole time.

When Ilya skated a bit too far out toward the middle, he heard the sharp, high-pitched squeak beneath his blade. The sound echoed across the empty space as cracks webbed out across the surface. He froze, watching the lines spread.

A few months ago, he would have wanted to push down on it with the edge of his blade, he would have wanted it to give way beneath him, plunge him deep down into the freezing water.

His mind quickly supplied the image of him getting dragged with the current, trapped and suffocating under the ice, and it filled him with some sense of gratification—a sick, tiny hint of it—but nothing more.

"Woah," he rasped, arms outstretched, knees wobbling.

A wild laugh tore out of him as he shuffled carefully back onto safer ice, turning, speeding fast to an unsuspecting Shane, tackling him down into a cold heap and kissing him until they were both warm again.

"I love you!" Ilya exclaimed, needing to get it all out. He tilted his head up to shout it out, hearing it echo back tenfold: "I love you, I love you, I love you!"

"Ilya—I love you, too," Shane giggled, trying to hush him. "I love you, so much."

The first article that comes out about him was in a local magazine. He frowns when he sees it on the counter, reading over the title.

Top MLH Draft Pick Ditches the Big Leagues to Coach Local Youth

He wants to take it straight to the trash can, but Yuna snatches it right out of his hands. She clips the tiny section excitedly, tells him just how proud she is of him, of how far he's come so far. She frames it and hangs it up onto the wall along with the rest of the frames in the entryway.

He calls his father soon after, sure the articles would reach Russia soon enough. His father screams down the line for twenty minutes straight. Ilya doesn't call Alexei at all. After a long session with Marta, he blocks both numbers and goes to stare at the framed article again.

He doesn't know how it had happened, but he finds for the first time that his brain is no longer looping on despair, no longer seeking it out. He feels a little lightheaded without it—almost overwhelmed by the utter spaciousness of his current life; the possibilities, the options in front of him. He looks at that article and simply realises that he was happy. The worst had happened, and he was happy, and he had been happy for a while.

If he got bad again... *when* he got bad again, he knows he won't have to choose between two miseries or a final exit. Because actually, he can also choose that fourth, unwritten option; the one where he might someday walk up to a roof and look up instead of down, realising that the sky was much larger than he ever remembered it being.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit you guys I hate this chapter. DON'T tell me if you hate it too. Someone already said this fic was 'cute, not sad enough' and I had to stop myself from having Ilya jump off a cliff after all...

Sorry the ending took me ages, I may have gotten hit with the ao3 curse. This needs a lot of editing and cutting but I don't have it in me rn 🙄 I love you Ilya but I need to get out of your headspace now! Best believe when I finally edit this whole thing I'm cutting it by like 10k words. It's turned out too long for my liking.

I believe a good chunk of you came from a Reddit recommendation so thank you to the sweet person who recommended this!! Welcome everyone!! Thank you also for all the encouragement this far! I feel blessed!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!