

way down under the ground

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by [nightrose](#)

Summary

Doctoral students Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander have been competing for everything since they were on their college's hockey team. They're the best of the best on the ice and in the classroom and, as far as anyone knows, they hate each other. They've also been fucking in secret since they were eighteen years old.

But some secrets don't stay buried.

Notes

hiii gaianess i hope you like it! i've never written an AU for them before but i tried to get all of the prompts in there.

content notes at the end.

i had a hyperfixation on paleoarcheology in undergrad but my information may be wildly out of date at this point, it's mostly there as set dressing!

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

Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov had been thrust into competition with each other more or less continuously since they were freshmen in undergrad. Shane had been recruited for McGill's hockey team; the team didn't scout internationally, but if they had, Ilya certainly would have been as well. Instead, he got to dangle it over Shane's head that he had gotten into Canada's best university on academic merit alone. Shane always retorted by saying Ilya wouldn't have been good enough to get recruited for the team, and that he was lucky to scrape by in try-outs. which definitely wasn't true but did pretty consistently irritate Ilya.

He and Shane were neck-and-neck, clearly the standouts not just of the team but of college hockey in general. Recruiters had sent in offers, but Shane had promised his parents he'd get his degree first, and Ilya wanted to take a path to North American residency that wouldn't disappear with the first bad injury. Even at the college level, their rivalry had hockey commentators and MLH scouts talking. Not to mention anyone who cared at all about college sports. They brought out the best in each other, some said. But mostly they talked about the spectacle of it: the polite, clean-cut young Canadian and the brash Russian. They represented the two sides of the sport, or so everyone said. Sportsmanship and competition. And they were pitted against each other at every opportunity.

It wasn't just on the ice that they were competitors. They were also on the same academic track, with irritatingly overlapping interests: human evolutionary anthropology. A small and viciously competitive subfield within a small and viciously competitive discipline in the large and viciously competitive world of academia. Ilya got the department's first year merit award. Shane got the only freshman spot on their shared advisor's dig that summer. Ilya was selected to TA when he was only a sophomore. Shane went to Italy to present a paper at a conference when he was only a junior. They were alone together at the top.

Everyone knew that Shane and Ilya hated each other. After four years of competing for the same prizes off the ice and in the classroom, it would have seemed like a relief for their paths to diverge. They both figured they would never see each other again, except the occasional conference where they could courteously ignore each other.

Improbable as it was, of the five PhD students accepted into Harvard's PhD program that year, one of them was Shane Hollander, and one of them was Ilya Rozanov. It had been several years since the department had accepted anyone with an interest in evolutionary anthropology, and this year there would be two of them. Two bright stars from McGill, with impressive CVs, publications as undergrads, field experience, and everything an advisor could hope for. Their competition made them perform better, as it always had. Nearly every grant, departmental award, and field opportunity went to one of the two of them.

It was always Hollander and Rozanov. Rivals, rising stars, neck and neck for every opportunity first the ice and then the university had to offer. They were still opposites, even now that hockey was a hobby for Shane and a memory for Ilya. Rozanov was known as a great teacher, with a gift for making things comprehensible to even the most obtuse of undergraduates; he could often see sweeping patterns that other researchers missed; he was ambitious enough to go for and get grants that should have been off-limits to a mere graduate student. Hollander was known for his diligence, his ability to focus on the details, his

absolutely unparalleled work ethic, and his quick, innate intelligence. They were equals and opposites and, as far as anyone knew, enemies.

They had also been fucking in secret since they were eighteen years old.

It had started when they were freshmen, in the shared bathroom of their residence hall—with Rozanov jerking off while making direct eye contact with Shane, who he had, admittedly, caught staring at him. They'd both known it was a terrible idea. But the sex was too good to give up.

They were deliriously, explosively compatible in bed (and in the showers, and in the locker room, and on one memorable occasion in Professor Hunter's office while he was out of town). Shane had been a virgin when they started sleeping together, except for an awkward, fumbling blowjob from his high school girlfriend, which had clearly been a nightmare for both of them. Ilya was experienced and shockingly (in retrospect) confident for someone who was only a teenager himself when they started. He had led the way, led them both into Shane's bed.

Ilya shaped their encounters so beautifully that Shane could not be afraid to say yes to him, could not be afraid to say yes to what he wanted. Ilya pushed him up against the door of his dorm room and kissed him until he was dizzy, until instinct was telling Shane to slip onto his knees. He wanted to suck Ilya Rozanov's dick more than he'd ever wanted anything, and Ilya let him. Yes, let him. That's how it felt, anyway, like Shane was being unleashed. Like he was being given delicious permission to let go, to exist, to feel.

Rozanov was always careful with him, but careful didn't mean gentle. He always asked *is this okay* and *you like it?* as they tried something new, as he was Shane's first with everything, but he could be rough, too. He sometimes held Shane down, sometimes bit him when they kissed, often told Shane what to do in smooth, sharp orders that Shane knew he shouldn't enjoy even half as much as he did.

Because Shane did like it. He liked it more than he was willing to admit even in the silence of his own mind. He loved the way he felt when he was with Ilya, and not just because Rozanov could make him come unbelievably hard. But also because of that strange floating sensation Rozanov could give him. The sense that he was drifting, safe and peaceful, on top of Rozanov's desires for him, and that he could relax knowing that Rozanov would steer them both safely to share.

It was wonderful. It was bliss, all Shane's anxiety and all the pressure he put on himself fading into a warm cloud of happiness under Rozanov's hand, gentle and guiding or rough and demanding. Whatever Rozanov wanted from him, Shane would be. And his desires were so easy to meet. Shane didn't have to be the best hockey player in the world and a perfect student and a role model and a good son all at once. He could just be on his knees for Rozanov, under Rozanov, making Rozanov come. He could be free of it all for just a little while.

So no matter how stupid an idea it was, no matter how much it went against the narrative everyone had of the two of them as these bitter, hateful enemies, Shane could not possibly give it up.

Neither could they let anyone know what they were doing. Shane was still steeped in the hockey culture that had raised him, even if he'd decided against playing professionally, and was even more intent on being the perfect son. Ilya still didn't know if he might have to go home to Russia. And everyone thought that they hated each other.

They didn't hate each other. They'd never hated each other.

They didn't spend a lot of time together in private, because neither one of them wanted to risk getting caught. But the time they did spend, increasingly, wasn't just spent fucking and arguing about whether *A. sediba* was arboreal ("Those phalanges are *identical* to a gorilla, Rozanov!" "Like we can make any kind of definitive claim off one juvenile and half a jawbone!") and agreeing about the misclassification of the *naledi* find within the genus *Homo* ("With that cranial volume?" "Someone should check the cranial volume of anyone who thinks that was a burial, it's a cave-in! And anyway, elephants bury their dead!"). It was also spent... hanging out. They cuddled after sex. Sometimes they watched a movie, or ate a meal. It was starting to feel less like they were rivals who liked to fuck, and more like they were friends who liked to compete with each other (and also fuck). Or maybe something else. Maybe something even more.

They both tried not to think about that. It would have made things complicated, that's what Shane kept reminding himself. Even now that it was clear that Shane's career would be at a university and not on a professional hockey team, he was too shaped by that culture to easily come out. Rozanov still had a Russian passport. And the idea of having to fill out departmental paperwork declaring their relationship, and facing gossip from everyone from their advisors to the undergrads they TA'd for, was nauseating.

Well, it was nauseating to Shane, at least. He didn't know what Rozanov thought, because they'd never discussed it. They didn't talk about what they were to each other, about the strange not-relationship that had at this point lasted their entire adult lives. It was better not to. The consequences of being more than each other's dirty secrets could have been enormous—especially for Rozanov.

So they didn't ask each other what their secret rendez-vous meant, and they didn't tell anyone they didn't hate each other.

It was a good thing, too, because their advisor, Professor Theriault, had invited them both to help excavate a site where several *H. erectus* specimens had been unearthed two years before. And he was a cranky old homophobe, who would never have let them come if he knew they were gay, much less if he knew they were a couple.

Not that they were a couple.

Even though Theriault was an asshole, even though his digs were notoriously brutal, the opportunity was too good to pass up. A small group, a potentially ground-breaking find: anyone with aspirations to a serious career would put up with any conditions for that. It was Theriault, two professors from other universities who brought one student each, and Rose Landry, the department's newest professor.

Shane liked Rose a lot. She was friendly in a department with a hyper-competitive culture. Despite only being an associate professor, and being a woman in a field that was, unfortunately, still incredibly misogynistic, she never hesitated to offer someone else a hand up. She and Shane had become something like friends.

He'd even thought about asking her out. He'd never had a serious girlfriend, not since high school, had never been particularly interested in a girl. He'd always figured that would change once he met the right one (he'd always told himself that it had nothing to do with his thing with Rozanov, an idea that was becoming less and less convincing by the moment). And maybe Rose could have been the right woman, but it was against department policy for professors and graduate students to date. Shane didn't want to deal with a bunch of paperwork. But friends, they could be friends. And it was easier to be out here, in the desert heat, dealing with Theriault's temper and the bad food and the uncomfortable tents, when he had a friend.

Even with Rose to complain to about everything else, there was one problem no one could know about: having Rozanov ten feet away through two layers of canvas and not being able to touch him was getting to Shane. Shane knew he couldn't go to him. It would be a terrible idea. It could be the end of both of their careers if they got caught while they were out in the field. They were third-year doctoral students, they lived and died on their advisor's good graces. And Shane was here to work.

Finds on the dig so far had been limited. Most of the excitement thus far surrounded whether or not a rock was just a rock or a hand-axe. Theriault and Rose were tearing into each other about it. He and Rozanov were in agreement that there was absolutely no point in arguing about it until they got it back to the lab, and that it was certainly distinctive enough to be worth shipping back to Cambridge, and that Theriault needed to watch his tone while he talked to Rose because he was being blatantly misogynistic, but no one was going to listen to a pair of PhD students on any of those points.

While this less-than-thrilling debate went on, and Rozanov and Shane continued the tedious tasks that were their lot as the most junior people on the dig (except the undergrad, who wasn't even allowed *in* the cave, but remained at the campsite cataloguing bone fragments, poor thing), Theriault was shining a bright flashlight into the corner of the cave.

"I think the system goes further down," he said. Everyone turned at once to rush the corner.

Under the single beam of light, beyond the rock blocking off the crevice, far, far down a dark passageway, Shane caught sight of something. Color. A single streak of red—not the color of any rock he'd ever seen.

"And I think that's pigment," Rozanov says, before Shane can point it out. Great, now when the paper gets published Ilya will be the second author, and Shane will be lucky to get credited at all. Theriault, of course, will be first, no matter how slight his ultimate contribution. He could be at home with his feet up in his air conditioned office and he'd still get all the credit.

Shane reminds himself that this is the system he's chosen to work in. Soon enough he'll have his own PhD and, if he's lucky, his own professorship. Then he can be the one who benefits

from other people's barely-paid work. Not that he's going to do that, but he looks forward to being able to run things a little more fairly once he's the one in charge.

"Rozanov, Hollander. Get in there."

They both turn to face their advisor in tandem. "What?" they chorus. Usually, the possibility of a new find like this wouldn't be left to a couple of doctoral students. Of course, it could be a trick of the eye. Light reflects in strange ways in cave systems, sometimes. It could be graffiti some kid left last week.

Or it could be ancient art. *Homo habilis* ancient art, which would definitively place the earliest evidence of artistic production millions of years before the currently accepted timeline. Which would be a major, even definitive, contribution to the eternal debate of when human ancestors became human beings. And which would mean that whoever found it could write their ticket to any job they wanted.

"You two used to play football or something, right?" Theriault asks.

"Hockey," Shane corrects under his breath. He should be used to it by now, of course. No one in academia knows anything about any sport, or cares to try to understand what it had taught Shane and what it means to him.

"Looks like there's a lot of heavy rocks that way, and we haven't done the kind of site rating we'd need to be able to use power tools on them. If anyone's going to be able to just lift them out of the way, it's you too."

It's... a surprisingly sound argument. No one else on the dig looks like they've lifted anything heavier than a microscope in years, and Shane and Rozanov are still in the same shape they were when they'd brought home the University Cup.

They get kitted out for the excavation. Every kind of light, emergency whistles and panic buttons, plenty of water, cave-ready cameras. Anything and everything they could possibly need. Shane feels like he's being strapped back into a full suit of hockey gear.

Theriault gives them a long list of detailed and, frankly, patronizing instructions. They've both been on digs before, they know what they can and can't do to protect the site, to gather the evidence they need, and to establish the validity of their findings. Although, if this is what it looks like it might be, it'll be the most major discovery to come out of Harvard's department in many years. It'd be the high point of even Theriault's career, let alone the students'. It would mean that Shane could stop panicking to the point of hyperventilation every night about the state of the academic job market. So they probably *should* be extra careful. Both with the find and in the interests of not dying down there—it's not common for digs to be deadly, but it's not unheard of.

Rose takes his hand before they set out. "Watch out down there, Shane."

"I will. Don't worry about me too much."

"I'm going to."

And then Shane and Ilya are being sent together into the darkness.

You move slowly, inside a cave. No matter how good your equipment—and they have the best—the darkness remains indescribable. You are constantly aware of the fact that all around you is the dark, pressing in, and that if your equipment were to fail you would see nothing, not even your own hand in front of your face. Nothing until the cave darkness set in and you began to see the red circles of your own retinas against your closed eyelids, your brain hallucinating the missing data that vision would provide. And you can feel, all around you, how narrow the space is, how close the rocks, how perilous every step. At any moment, the whole world could crumble around you and trap you there, in the darkness and the strange echoing silence. You cannot forget that you could be walking through your own grave.

Shane isn't claustrophobic, of course, you really can't be if you're going to do field paleoanthropology. There are a lot of tight spots. But he does usually feel the creeping dread of it. This time, when the person walking right behind him—the passageway is not wide enough for them to move side by side—is Rozanov, he feels almost relaxed.

"What do you think?" Shane asks him, gesturing his light towards the spot on the back of the passageway where they'd seen, maybe, the flash of color. "Do you see anything?"

"We will see it when we get there, Hollander. You are always racing ahead."

Shane rolls his eyes. Rozanov can't see it in the dark, of course, but it makes him feel better. "I'm just trying to make conversation."

"Is not necessary."

Fine. They continue on in silence.

If they find anything further along in the cave system, someone will come by later and excavate every inch of the path they're walking currently. For now, they just keep an eye out for anything obvious. They see nothing. No coloration on the walls, no bones or fragments visible from the surface, nothing that looks like it might have been carved into a tool.

They speak only when they run into an obstruction in their pathway. Theriault was, unfortunately, right—together, they're strong enough to clear the medium-sized boulders that would otherwise block passage through the cave. It's... nice, working in tandem with Rozanov again. Shane misses a lot of things about playing hockey at an elite level, although he's still in a beer league on the weekends. It's possible that one of the things he misses most is playing with Rozanov. Which is embarrassing to admit even inside his own head in a dark cave with nobody around.

It takes them about an hour to make it to the end of the passageway, between the narrow sections they have to crawl through and the obstructions they have to clear.

Now that they're there, it's crystal clear. There's pigment on the wall.

And not just pigment, but, unmistakably, painting. Handprints, outlined in red, pressed against the wall of the cave. Far too small to be human, or at least far too small to be *H.*

sapiens. Just two of them, side by side. Shane has to hold back the impulse to reach out his hand as well.

People were here. An entirely different species, but people nonetheless.

"Holy shit," Shane says, and Rozanov swears in reverent Russian, and that's when the cave-in happens.

It's so quick. Over before they know it's even started, really. There's no warning. It must have been the sound of their voices that had done it, even that slight vibration in this still chamber where no sound has come for maybe millions of years. Fortunately, the rockfall is all behind them—they're not hit by any of the debris as it tumbles from the cave ceiling to the floor.

Unfortunately, the cave-in is complete. A thick barrier of stone and dirt has fallen, and there's no way through.

"Fuck," Shane says, and then, quiet, shaky, "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Hollander," Rozanov's voice is firm and clear, "You are panicking. This will not help."

"Of course I'm fucking panicking! You should be panicking too. We're trapped in a cave, we're going to—"

"We are going to be fine. Breathe."

Rozanov's hand closes around the back of Shane's neck, heavy and steady. Shane has to admit that the pressure is... soothing. It feels good, to have Rozanov hold him like this. Rozanov keeps his hand there until Shane's breathing evens out. Then he drops his hand, letting it hang limply at his side.

"Okay. We will radio for help."

They both have ultra-low-frequency radios, which can emit a signal even through conductive rock. Hopefully a strong enough one to reach the rest of the team. Rozanov turns his on and speaks into it, calmly.

"We made it to far end of passageway. Very important find is here, clear evidence of art production by hominid ancestor. But trapped by cave-in. Will require assistance."

He ends the transmission. They don't expect an answer—they'll be lucky if they were heard, there's next to no chance any sound could make it back through layers of rock and dirt.

"You told them about the handprints before you told them about the cave-in?"

"What will Theriault come for faster, our lives or a first authorship in *Nature*?"

That's a really good point. Sometimes Shane hates that Rozanov is as smart as he is. And savvy, about people, about how they work, in a way Shane isn't.

"So now what?" Shane says. "We just... wait? Try not to run out of air?"

"And try to stay calm, yes? If you hyperventilate, we will run out faster."

"Oh, great." That definitely doesn't make Shane's head start spinning again.

"Hey. Hey." Rozanov puts an arm on the small of Shane's back and guides him to sit down against a cave wall. His hand is warm and firm and strong. There's nothing he can do except let Rozanov steer him. It's a relief to let him take control. Comfortable. Familiar. Not that Shane would ever admit that out loud. "Is going to be all right. I am here, Hollander. We will get through this, yes?"

"Yeah. Okay. Fuck." People die in cave-ins. People die in cave-ins all the time. People die on *digs* all the time.

Shane really doesn't want to die. Not without...

An extremely unwelcome thought pops into his head.

He doesn't want to die without having told Rozanov how he feels.

Well, now's your chance, Shane thinks to himself. They'll never have a more guaranteed opportunity for unbroken privacy, after all. Best case scenario it'll be hours before they're rescued. And it could be days.

But the risk is also maybe the worst it has ever been. They're literally trapped down here together. If Rozanov doesn't feel the same way, they'll have to sit here in the enormity of Shane's unrequited feelings. At that point, dying from the lack of oxygen would probably come as a huge relief.

So he bites his lip, and tries to breathe. The only thing keeping him steady is Rozanov's hand on his shoulder.

Shane turns towards him. Even in the dim light, Rozanov is beautiful, with a face like a sculpted angel. His blue eyes are gleaming as he looks down at Shane. He wonders what that expression means.

Then, so he doesn't have to keep wondering, Shane turns his face up and looks at Rozanov's lips instead of his eyes—what he's always done when he wants Rozanov to kiss him. He knows he could close the distance between them himself, but Rozanov has always led the way between the two of them.

"I don't think is good idea right now," Rozanov says.

"Yeah. Probably not." It's the first time Rozanov has ever said no to the idea of hooking up. Shane tries not to let his disappointment show. It was an insane thing to suggest, kissing—and everything it has always led to for the two of them—while they're literally trapped in a cave system underground as a distraction from the fact that they might die down here. It's totally reasonable for Rozanov not to want to, even though it stings. "Forget it. We should be focusing on making a plan."

Rozanov smiles at him in a way that almost erases the pain of the rejection. "Okay. What is your plan, Captain Hollander?"

"Shut up." It's been years since Rozanov had been named the captain of their undergraduate team when they were both sophomores, and he hasn't stopped teasing Shane about it for a second. "What do we have with us?"

They lay out their supplies. There is some good news. They have three working flashlights of different frequencies each, and plenty of batteries for all of them, and besides that lighters and long-lasting candles. There's next to no chance they'll end up hiding in the dark.

They have a decent supply of water—three days' worth apiece, although they can stretch it to four on the schedule that Shane suggests. And more than enough food. They'd die of thirst way before they'd run out of protein bars, even at the rate at which two very well-built young men need to consume calories.

"I am allowed to eat whatever I want, Hollander? This is very generous."

"Shut up. I'm just trying to make sure we have the best possible chance of getting out of here."

The bad news is that the only way they have to communicate is the low-frequency radios, and low-frequency radios don't work very well, and there's absolutely no way of knowing if their message made it out or if they're waiting for a rescue that will never come.

Before Shane can freak himself out again, Rozanov reminds him that the rest of the team knows exactly where they went. "Is nothing like those digs where people get lost, Hollander. We walked down one straight path, for not even one hour. When they realize we have been gone too long, they will come and they will find us. A few hours, that is all."

Except that it's not just about knowing rescue is needed, as they're both keenly aware. It's not so easy to find a way to clear a cave-in without making things worse.

The only other thing they can do to increase their chance of survival is the exact thing they had come down here to do—getting a sense of the shape and nature of this place. There's always a chance there's another passageway they missed (although moving would have its own risks), or, better yet, back into the main passage of the cave.

There isn't. And the way back is completely blocked by the rockfall. Although they can knock some of the dust and smaller rocks away with their hands, there is just far too much of it. And other the detritus are several huge hunks of heavy rock, far heavier than either of them can lift. With nowhere to lift them to, with the dust and debris on all sides. They *do* manage to move enough of the smaller stones to clear a tiny opening to the main passageway.

They take turns screaming for help through it, until both of their throats start to ache. "That's enough," Shane declares. "Remember, we only have so much water."

On the bright side, that tiny hole means that there is air flowing into the cave and carbon dioxide flowing out. They aren't shut in an airless chamber waiting to die gasping.

They *are* shut in an airless chamber waiting to die of thirst, but at least that will take longer.

"Okay. Since we're here, we might as well start taking a look at this incredible find," Shane says.

He practically hears Rozanov rolling his eyes, even in the darkness. "*Incredible find*. You are incurable nerd, Hollander."

"You are literally in the same PhD program I am, Rozanov. The whole cool jock thing is a pretty unconvincing act at this point."

To his surprise, Rozanov doesn't banter back. Instead, he walks up to the handprints and looks at them, very, very closely. "They are almost same size," he says. "Almost, not quite."

"Probably more than one person." Or, not person, he probably shouldn't say that. More than one individual. But it's hard, looking at the handprints on the cave wall, not to think of them as having been made by a human, even if it was a human of a different species.

"Same height. Same size. They stood where we are standing now, and put their hands here. Made their mark. Maybe just for curiosity, but maybe it was some kind of ceremony."

"You're speculating wildly," Shane points out. "We have no idea if these marks were even made in the same millennium, let alone at the same time."

"Do you think we are the first species to marry?" Rozanov asks, suddenly.

"That's an unanswerable question. Marriage isn't a static—

"I am not asking for your professional hypothesis. I want to know what you think. Did the people that came before us stand side by side and reach out and make a promise, *I will always be with you*?"

Shane wants to continue to insist that they don't know. That it's an abstract enough question not to be worth hypothesizing about. But looking at these two hands, pressed into this wall, he says what he thinks, which is, "Yes. I don't know what they called it, or how they thought of it, but I think as long as there have been people, they've made promises to each other. Sometimes they've kept them, and sometimes they haven't, but I think it's probably part of what makes us human, yeah."

Ilya is silent for a long moment. In the darkness, it feels like an absolute eternity. Then he says, "Do you think they were both men?"

"What?"

"The handprints. Do you think might both have been males? Or both females? They're the almost same size, almost the same height. Habilis was much more sexually dimorphic than we are."

Rozanov is obviously being ridiculous. There are a thousand explanations for every feature of this strange find. They don't know the timeline of when they were made, if they were actually

made by *H. habilis* or some other much later individual, if they had any meaning at all to the individuals who created them or if they were a mere accident. There is no reason to think that two people, a different species but still people, stood shoulder to shoulder the way he and Ilya are now, dipped their hands into a pigment made from crushing berries or grinding rock, and pressed them into the wall to symbolize a bond they wanted to last for eternity. That's romantic fantasy, not science.

Shane reaches his hand out in the darkness. And Ilya reaches back. Pressing his palm against Shane's. His palm is warm and callused and it feels so right. It feels like a touch that could last another two million years.

And then Rozanov drops his hand and pulls away. Like he's pulled away so many times before, when Shane asked too many questions, when Shane pushed them towards being anything other than what they are—colleagues, rivals, and secret lovers.

"We shouldn't," Rozanov says, and for once, Shane doesn't let him act like nothing happened.

"Why not?"

"Not now, Hollander."

"If not now, then fucking when?" Shane asks, and suddenly, he's angry. He's been letting Rozanov put this conversation off for a *decade*. He's been letting himself do it, too. But there might not be any *later* to have it. There might never be a better time. They could very well die down here and he's not dying without telling Ilya how he feels.

All of a sudden, none of the things that used to matter feel even the slightest bit important. He has devoted his life to a field that is supposed to give him perspective, supposed to look at history through the longest possible lens, but he's been incredibly myopic. He's always looked decades ahead like that was the future. Like a legacy of papers and trophies was enough to make a life. Like he had something to prove and owed the world everything until he proved it.

Two million years from now, no one will remember his name. Every part of him will be erased. Except maybe this one gesture—one human being, reaching out to another.

"You really want to die without ever talking about this?"

"About what?" Rozanov says, completely unconvincingly.

"Us. You, me, the thing we have." Their secret, fucked-up thing, as Shane has always thought of it. But maybe it doesn't have to be secret, and maybe it isn't fucked up. Maybe it's the best of both of them. "Is it really just sex to you?"

"It is nothing," Rozanov says, and his voice is flat.

Shane whirls around. "Bullshit. Do you really have to act like that when we might die down here? Are you that afraid of giving up the upper hand?"

"I am afraid," Rozanov says, his tone again betraying nothing, "of what happens if we don't die. If we go back into the light, where your girlfriend is waiting for you, and I have to watch you walk away."

"My *girlfriend*?" Shane sputters.

"Your girlfriend. Beautiful, successful, star of department, waiting for you right outside this cave, probably cannot wait to see you—" Rozanov retreats behind sarcasm, the way he so often has before.

"Wait, you think Rose is my *girlfriend*?" Is this why Rozanov has been pulling away? Why he hasn't knocked on Shane's door for weeks before the dig, why he hasn't replied to any of Shane's more flirtatious texts.

Rozanov just looks at him. It's somewhere between exasperation and anger. And something else, something he doesn't recognize, lurking beneath. The same expression he'd worn the first time Shane said it *must be nice* that he was going home over the summer. Like surely Shane couldn't be this stupid.

"Ilya, I'm gay," Shane says. He's never said it out loud to anyone before. He's never even really said it to himself. But fuck it, if they're going to die in here, he doesn't want to die a liar. "Rose is my friend, and that's all. I don't have a girlfriend. I just like..."

"What?" Ilya says, and his expression morphs into something else, something soft, something that Shane really can't read because he's never seen Ilya look at him like this before, except maybe in the stolen minutes they sometimes indulge in immediately after sex. Urgently, he asks, "You just like what?"

"I just like you," Shane says, quietly, into the dark still quiet of the cave. The rock walls almost swallow his confession, but he knows that Ilya has heard him.

"You don't like me," Ilya cuts him off, and Shane reaches out for him in the near-darkness. Hands touching hands.

"Yeah. I do. I like you too much."

"Shane," Ilya says. He's never said Shane's first name before, in the decade that the two of them have been sleeping together. "Don't do this, please."

"Why not?" Shane swallows. "Are you saying you don't feel the same way?" He doesn't think he believes that. Not with how gentle Rozanov is being with him while they're trapped here. Not with how jealous he was of Rose. And not with the way he's looking at Shane now, eyes glossy with tears.

"I don't... don't do it like this. Not as... as deathbed confession. We will go back up in the light and you will remember why we always have to hide, why it would be better if you were dating Rose Landry and had never met me, and you will wish you hadn't said this. And I..." Ilya trails off. He looks at the walls of the cave for a long time, studying the miracle they've

found there, while he searches for his words. "I think probably I cannot bear that. Because I think I love you. I think I have loved you for a very long time."

"I love you too," Shane says, and then he's crying, and reaching for Ilya, and finally, Ilya is wrapping his arms around Shane and, fuck, if they die down here, without ever getting to stand together in the light, even once, at least they'll do it hand in hand.

Handprints on the wall, reaching thousands of years across time, and his hand in Ilya's reaching across the abyss other people's expectations have carved for them both.

Shane can't even be upset with himself, with either of them, for all the time they wasted. It doesn't matter now, not even if they don't get more time. Because they have this. They have these moments, alone in the dark like they've always been together, but at least being honest with one another.

He stays like that for a long time, listening to Ilya's breathing, to his heartbeat, together in the almost-darkness.

He leans into Ilya, and their shoulders press together. Ilya turns towards him and kisses the top of his head, his forehead, and only then his lips. It feels exactly like every kiss they've ever had, tender and possessive and claiming. It feels brand new, because now they're in love. Now they can admit that they're in love, after all these years.

Ilya's hand comes up to wrap around his jaw, the other around the back of his neck. He holds Shane like that for a long moment, and then leans in for another lingering kiss. Shane feels himself sighing into Ilya's mouth.

He also feels himself getting hard.

Ilya's eyes flicker downward at Shane's moan. Even in the semi-darkness, he can see—they have enough experience, after all, in dark rooms. Ilya grins. "Really, Hollander? *Here?*"

"Shut up."

"You are insatiable."

"Adrenaline makes lots of people—"

"We have been facing life or death situation for an hour. Only now are you getting hot and bothered."

"Don't say hot and bothered," Shane says, even though it is, unfortunately, doing it for him, because everything Ilya does gets him, unfortunately, *hot and bothered*.

"Do you want me to suck your dick?" Ilya murmurs in his ear.

"Ilya, you can't just *say* things like that—"

"I think I can say whatever I like to you," he says, and nips at Shane's earlobe. Then he catches the sensitive flesh in his mouth and sucks, hard. Shane's knees go a little wobbly, and

he tries and fails to bite back his moan. "I think you like it."

"Fuck, Ilya."

His voice is low, his breath hot in Shane's ear. It's crazy, Shane thinks to himself, that he's turned on right now. They might actually be about to die down here. But everything he and Ilya have ever done together has been crazy. What's one more bad decision?

Ilya grabs his jaw, hard. "I asked you a question, Shane."

His name sounds so good coming from Ilya's lips. It makes Shane's head fuzzy in a way that makes it difficult to remember what he's supposed to be saying.

He squeezes, just enough to hurt, forcing Shane's lips into a pout. Ilya leans forward and bites his lower lip hard. "I asked you if you want me to suck your dick?"

"Yeah," Shane breathes, and he no longer cares how bad an idea it is. He's aching for it, to be touched, to be claimed like that by the man that he loves. That he can now, at last, admit that he loves. The man who, somehow, loves him too.

"Ask nicely."

"What?"

Ilya's mouth is so close to Shane's that Shane can taste his breath. "If you want me to get down on my knees on the filthy ground and suck your dick, you're going to have to ask nicer than that."

Shane's eyes flutter shut. He feels himself swallow hard. His mouth is dry, but his mind doesn't even flash to their limited water supply. He's caught entirely under the spell of Ilya's words, under what he's offering and what he's demanding. "Please," he says, the word thick in his mouth. "Please get on your knees on the filthy ground and suck my dick. Please."

Ilya smiles at him, a wicked little smile, and for a second Shane is afraid he's going to say *no*. But instead he says something much better, much worse. "Good boy," he praises, and Shane's knees buckle. Ilya has never called him that before.

Ilya puts a hand on his chest and pushes him backwards, until Shane feels his back hit the wall. He keeps his hand there, holding Shane in place, groping easily at his chest through his shirt, as he sinks fluidly to his knees. After all of these years, Shane will still never understand how Ilya can be so graceful, so confident, so sure of himself and his body.

"Put your hands behind the back of your neck," Ilya says. "And don't move."

Shane does as he's told. When has he not?

Then Ilya is unbuttoning Shane's jeans and yanking them down just enough to expose his cock, which is mortifyingly hard. He shouldn't be, not in this situation, but Ilya always has the unerring ability to fill him with desire. To turn Shane, who is usually so disciplined, so in control of himself, into a wanting hungry creature.

Ilya, blessedly, doesn't tease him. He swallows Shane's cock in one easy motion. Shane can feel him almost smiling around it as he lets out a broken cry of pleasure.

Every thought flies out of Shane's mind all at once. He forgets that they're in a life or death situation. He forgets that they might never see daylight again. He forgets that if they do, they'll still be left facing the question of what to do with a relationship they've kept secret for more than a decade.

He forgets absolutely everything except how it feels to have his dick disappear down Ilya Rozanov's throat.

Ilya sucks cock the way he always has: like he is staking a claim. He does not give himself a moment to adjust or to play with Shane—he takes him all the way in in a single smooth motion, until Shane is sliding into his throat, and then *sucks* so hard that Shane's knees buckle. Only Ilya's hand on his chest, which is now casually groping Shane's pecs through his shirt, keeps him upright.

It takes everything Shane has to obey Ilya's order, not to move. He aches to put his hands in Ilya's curls, and he keeps having to fight to keep his hips from thrusting forward.

Shane lets out a broken moan and Ilya pulls off. "Such pretty sounds you make for me," he says. "No one is as responsive as you. No one wants it the way you do."

Shane wants to quip something back about how he's fairly sure everyone likes getting their dick sucked, but he can't make his mouth work to do anything other than pant Ilya's name and then cry out as Ilya swallows him back down, fucking his own mouth hard and fast on Shane's cock. "Fuck, fuck fuck fuck, can I—"

He doesn't always ask permission to come when they're hooking up, but Ilya likes when he does. He particularly likes saying no, making Shane squirm desperately and beg. But this time he doesn't. He doesn't even pull away from Shane's cock so he can say anything, just looks up at Shane and winks.

And that cocky gesture, so clear even in the dim artificial light, so sure of himself even in this absurd situation, in spite of everything, sends Shane over the edge. He comes hard down Ilya's throat, and Ilya swallows it and then gets to his feet.

"Get on your knees. Don't move your hands," Ilya growls, voice low and demanding, and Shane does what he always does. He does what he's told.

Ilya is standing above him now. Shane can half-see his face in the low light, his body silhouetted. The outline of his hand moving over his cock, just like he had the very first time they were together. Shane longs to put his mouth on Ilya, but he won't move without permission.

"So fucking beautiful," Ilya groans. He moves a little closer, close enough that the head of his cock brushes Shane's cheek, leaving a wet streak of precome behind, crowding Shane against the wall of the cave.

"I bet you can't even see me. Pretty dark in here," Shane replies, just to see what Ilya will do.

Which is grab a handful of Shane's hair and yank his head backwards, hard enough to hurt, so that Shane is looking up at the underside of Ilya's dick, at Ilya's hand busily working over it, and beyond that at Ilya's face. He looks enormous from this angle, and not just his cock—Shane feels so small and so safe at his feet.

Ilya stops moving and looks at Shane for a long, long moment. And then he says, "I see you, Shane. No matter how dark it is. I see you everywhere."

"I love you," Shane says, and maybe it's a weird moment to say it, while Ilya jerks off in his face, but it makes Ilya groan and come. His release covers Shane's cheeks, dripping down towards his mouth.

"You're even more beautiful like this," Ilya says. "All covered in me. Marked as mine."

"I'm yours," Shane murmurs in return. "Fuck, Ilya. I've always been yours."

"Come on, up." He tugs Shane to his feet and pins him against the wall of the cave again, kissing him hard.

Ilya traces two fingers through the come coating Shane's cheek and slides them over Shane's bottom lip and then, slowly, into his mouth, making Shane taste the salty, bitter tang of his release. Shane sucks at his fingers with an eagerness that surprises him, but he's been longing to get his mouth around any part of Ilya for what feels like hours even though it's certainly only been a few minutes. Ilya lets Shane suck his fingers for a few precious moments before pulling them away so he can feed Shane more of his come.

As he does, he's saying things, filthy and tender and possessive and sweet all in turn. "You are perfect," he tells Shane. "Did you know that? You are so perfect that sometimes I cannot believe that you are real, let alone that there is any way you would ever want to be mine. You are beautiful. You are so good for me. It is incredible, that you let me have you like this. That you let me make you mine."

"I am," Shane says, around the fingers in his mouth. "Yours."

Once Shane's face is clean, Ilya pulls his spit-soaked fingers away and kisses Shane, fierce and claiming, until Shane's knees buckle and Ilya has to hold him up. "I love you," Ilya says, as he guides both of them down to a relatively comfortable seated position on the ground. "I love you so much. For so many years."

"I love you too." And yes, he's still scared. Scared that they could die down here, scared about what it will mean when they're rescued, scared of what the world will think.

But Ilya makes it easy to be brave. They hold each other, and they know they love each other, and they wait.

It's a long time before anyone comes for them, but Shane can put his fear aside, as long as Ilya is here. They don't even talk, really. A little bit, here and there. Speculation about the

find, ideas of what it might mean, proposals for the papers they're each going to write. Maybe a few hours pass there, in the dark.

Shane thinks that, except for the obvious possible-starvation problems, he could happily stay down here for the rest of his life. Just him and Ilya, alone, together.

But maybe they don't have to stay in the dark.

The radio crackles to life.

"Rozanov? Hollander? Can you hear?" It's Theriault's voice.

"We can hear!" Shane says. "We hear you."

"Local emergency team says it's safe to drill through. No risk of further collapse. How far is the find from the rockfall?"

Because of course that's what he's worried about. "Uh, maybe ten yards? It's on the far side of this part of the cave, for sure."

"Go stand over there. Just in case. We should have you out of there in twenty minutes."

So they do, pressing their backs up against a bare expanse of cave wall. Right next to the handprints someone left behind, thousands and thousands of years ago. The ground around them trembles as the machinery begins to work, a horrible scraping noise echoing through the rocks.

Ilya reaches for his hand, and Shane takes it. They wait, in stillness and in silence, watching as tiny particles of rock begin to fall at the opposite end of the cave. Watching as this strange, dangerous sanctuary they'd found themselves in, found each other in, is opened up. As the light begins to stream in. As voices—Rose's, Theriault's, others they don't recognize—begin to shout their names, ask if they're okay. As the opening becomes big enough for them to see through. Big enough for them to be seen.

"Come over so we can see you!" Rose calls, and Shane steps forward.

Ilya starts to let go of his hand, but Shane holds tight. He shakes his head, and keeps their fingers intertwined.

Ilya smiles at him, as bright as the sun, and, hand in hand, they step together into the light.

End Notes

content notes: claustrophobia, life or death situations (everyone is fine), jealousy/reference to infidelity (no one is actually cheating)

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