it's worse to be nothing

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/77518531.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander, Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Episode: s01e05 I'll Believe in Anything (Heated Rivalry), Missing Scene, Texting, Character Study, Ilya Rozanov Character Study, Complicated feelings about homeland, Suicide mention, Developing Relationship, Feelings Realization, Ilya opened the floodgates with that call in Russian they're never going to have a lapse in communication again, Mother-Son Relationship
Language:	English
Series:	Part 3 of Liminal
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-11 Words: 4,037 Chapters: 1/1

it's worse to be nothing

by destielpasta

Summary

How are you feeling today?

Ilya stares at Shane's text, biting his lip.

You are asking too many questions again, Hollander, he types. His thumb hovers over the send button. Instead he deletes it, switching briefly to the Cryllic keyboard to type out: *I feel like I was hit by a speed train, but instead of killing me it punched a hole through my heart, making more room for you.*

Fuck, that's insane.

OR

Ilya eats pelmeni and texts Shane a lot while still in Russia. Takes place the day after the tunnel phone call in episode 5.

Notes

I wrote this fic in the way god intended, mostly on my phone standing up in my kitchen and sitting in the stairway. The title is taken from the song "Promise" by Laufey. The full lyric is "It's hard being something, it's worse to be nothing with you," which I feel not only describes Ilya and Shane's relationship, but also their relationship with their families and nations.

Edit from Pasta of the Future: I added this fic to my Liminal series retroactively because it explores the same themes of yearning and the liminal spaces left in their relationship. It is compliant with the rest of the stories, but it was written first and might feel stylistically different.

See the end of the work for more notes

How are you feeling today?

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He deletes that, switching back to English. Hollander is surely staring at those three dots disappearing and reappearing, the little crease between his eyes deepening. He would be overthinking words that were said last night, and the phone call where Ilya had spilled the contents of his heart onto the pavement of the abandoned tunnel.

It isn't right, or fair to Shane, but Ilya pockets his phone and pulls open the cafe door to the tune of a jingling bell that had been there since before he was born. Natasha's cafe is the same as ever, the same brown tables with spindle chairs. The same metal clock above the wide counter where the ancient cash register rested. Maybe a different color on the walls, he can't be sure.

There is a line at the counter, and he stands in it humbly like any other customer, but it doesn't take long for him to be spotted by the tall woman who emerges from the kitchen just seconds later.

"Ilyusha!"

Ilya blushes at the name, but is pleased to hear it all the same. She's older now, like a grandmother, but Ilya would know her smile anywhere.

"Natasha," Ilya says as she wraps him up in a tight hug, the homey scent of onions and cooking oil clinging to her apron. "It's good to see you."

"I'm not surprised to see you." Natasha takes him by the shoulders, sizing him up with her warm brown eyes. "I heard the news. I'm so sorry, Ilyusha."

Was she? Natasha is his mother's distant cousin, but had been more of an aunt to Irina. The little cafe had been a refuge, the place where he had learned his mother's laugh like a song. Natasha hadn't spared harsh words for Ilya's father in those days. Her hair had been bottle-dyed jet black, so dark that to his child's eyes it had looked blue. It's streaked with gray now, only a few stubborn dark strands remaining.

"We all have our time," he says, mimicking something he'd heard his brother's wife say when someone offered their condolences at the wake. It had struck him as elegantly restrained, for someone who had chosen to marry Alexei.

Natasha squeezes his arm, looking at him with maternal concern.

“Come,” she says, beckoning him with equal amounts affection and firmness, “Your table is free. I’ll bring pelmeni and you can have a break from your brother.”

He sits down where directed. “Thank you.”

Natasha scoffs, pulling out his chair as much as the cramped space allowed. “Don’t be so American. You don’t need to thank me.”

She bustles away, and in the noisy safety of the cafe the exhaustion hits him. It’s unjustified, he hadn’t done much but have complicated feelings of grief since the funeral yesterday.

He drums his fingers on the table, taking in the scene. He hadn’t been here since last summer, but Natasha always refers to the rickety table in the back next to the kitchen as Ilya’s table. He comes here enough in the off-season; sometimes with Sveta, half-drunk from clubs when Natasha would give them leftovers while she prepped for the next day, but mostly alone. It’s an afternoon place, where his mother would take him after skating lessons and then later after hockey practice. He tries to carry on the tradition when he’s home.

Even now, over ten years later, hearing it referred to as Ilya’s table strikes him as odd. It wasn’t his. It was Irina’s.

Natasha busies herself behind the counter, directing the servers and barking orders to the kitchen staff. Everyone smiles and greets Ilya as they walk by, busy in their work and content to see him as Natasha’s nephew, instead of Ilya Rozanov, superstar hockey shit-talker. He lets the sound of his native tongue wash over him, the joy of being able to catch snippets of conversation without thinking or translating, something he’d taken for granted before moving to play in the MLH. The table behind him is celebrating the Baptism of a sleeping baby. A man in line is talking on the phone, trying to convince someone to meet him here.

He takes out his phone, scrolling instagram aimlessly for a minute. A steaming coffee appears on the table, already fixed with cream and sugar. He toasts it to Natasha behind the counter, who knew his preference for coffee over tea. She waves a hand, mouthing “I’ll be over soon” from her busy perch.

The coffee is hot enough to catch at the back of his throat, and pleasantly strong. He thumbs over to his texts, looking at Shane’s message. He drags his teeth over his bottom lip, and types quickly.

Send me a picture of something. Anything.

He waits. There are no three dots this time. Ilya sighs and locks the phone, keeping it face-up on the table. Looking around, he sees more signs of age. The corners of the counter are round and smooth from many hands and servers brushing past. The old samovar is still polished to a shine, but the mugs beside its are chipped and faded. Or maybe it had always been like this, a little gray and a little old. His youthful eyes wouldn’t have noticed, it was too much of a safe haven for him.

Natasha passes his table, hoisting a tray laden with plates clearly meant for the noisy table behind him. She fishes something out of her apron pocket and sets it on the table.

“I found this the other day in the office drawer,” she says. “If I had known you would be home I would have gotten a frame for it.”

Ilya’s heart plummets. It is an old picture, creased and worn in the corners. His mother is the center of the shot, sitting in the very same seat as Ilya. She’s smiling, a laugh starting on her lips as Ilya, younger than twelve, shovels pelmeni in his mouth at what had probably been breakneck speed.

Ilya laughs; an odd, throaty sound. “Wow.”

Natasha nods knowingly before moving on to deliver the food, leaving Ilya to stare dumbstruck at the image. It had been so long since he’d seen Irina in this way. The only pictures of her he had seen growing up were her wedding pictures, her smile painted on as she stood next to his father’s imposing presence. She had seemed older then. Glamorous, and sad.

He looks at the picture, struck by how young she is, only a little older than the college-aged girls in America that wear his jersey at Boston games while they drink beer and cackle with friends and boyfriends in the stands. He had rarely seen such mirth from Irina, only when they were alone, perhaps only when they sat at this table. She would mime shoveling dumplings in her mouth before their plate even arrived, saying that she needed to ‘practice.’

You practice your skating, training hard. I practice my dumpling eating skills.

You don’t have to practice eating, Mama!

How will I get to the Olympics if I don’t practice, Ilyusha?

His shrill, six year old laughter echoes louder in his memory than his mother’s voice. Dimmer still is the memory of Natasha placing a bowl of candy in front of him while she pulled Irina to the side to talk in hushed voices. Ilya had focused more on the chocolate in that moment than mother’s frown while Natasha spoke to her, her normally joyful voice crippled by concern. He wishes he had listened closer.

The Irina that lives in his memory shakes her head at Natasha’s prodding, her curls bouncing on her chin, so similar to Ilya’s.

No, no, no, it’s nothing I can’t handle, Natasha. Ilyusha needs me and that keeps me going.

He hadn’t known then that he was halfway through his time with her. Six more years to know his mother, to speak with her, laugh with her, have fights with her about his silly childish needs. As soon as the GameBoy became available in the official market Ilya had wanted it, pawing at the dismal window display in the converted Soviet building selling electronics. Irina had bought it for him with crumpled bills from her purse, smoothing them out on the counter one by one while Ilya bounced with happiness. On the train home she had quietly told him that she needed to put it away until his father went to St. Petersburg for a work trip.

Ilya remembers his anger, feeling so wronged and persecuted that he hadn’t spoken to her the rest of the way home. He hadn’t protested, only mourned for the gray rectangle that was

supposed to cure his childhood woes. Even then he had known that when his father was mentioned, commands must be followed.

He blinks, realizing there were tears in his eyes just as they were about to fall. He wipes them on his sleeve as his phone vibrates against the glass-topped table. He opens his texts from Shane, seeing a picture from of an arena, a red logo in the middle of the ice. He shakes his head, laughing softly through the thick emotion in his throat.

Anything but pictures of Detroit.

Shane's reply is almost instant. *Christ. You only said 'send me a picture of anything!'*

Ilya checks his watch. Montreal versus Detroit tonight, primetime. Judging by the time, Shane was in the middle of their first break. Strange to think that people were still playing hockey.

I meant something to entertain. Tantalize maybe? Ilya replies. Shane likes it when Ilya uses silly English words. He visualizes the smile he might get from such a text.

A few moments pass, but Shane is still there. Another picture picture pops up, this one of a shot of Shane's feet in skates on the familiar padded floor of a locker room.

Better?

Ilya knows that Shane is conflicted about talking with Ilya before and during games. He has rituals, routines to center himself before taking on both the role of captain and player. He reads the sports books that talk about visualizing and mental strength. Ilya sometimes smokes a cigarette outside with his skates on while improvising a pre-game speech. Different strokes, as they say.

He responds quickly in case Shane wants to get back to whatever meditation he is doing.

I didn't know we were doing feet stuff now.

Shane's responds with about ten angry face emojis.

"Someone cheering you up?" Natasha asks, reappearing at the table and taking the seat across from him. "I will never understand you young people smiling at your phones like it's your best friend."

The best friend lives inside the phone, Ilya thinks to himself. The thought surprises him. When had he come to think of Shane that way?

"Just a funny picture on the internet," he invents quickly. "A cat with a shoe."

Natasha laughs, but it's more like a sigh. She looks around the restaurant with the distant expression of someone who had done the same thing for a long time. Ilya can't remember ever seeing her without an apron.

"How is your family?" she asks.

Ilya turns his phone face-down on the table. “Quiet, mostly.”

It’s not a complete lie. Besides his fight with Alexei, his family had been insufferably silent around him, as if he is a stranger.

Natasha hums her understanding. She hadn’t come around the house growing up. None of his mother’s family came around that much. It had been like Irina was entombed by the family she married into.

“And how is hockey? I don’t watch enough, our internet is spotty at best. Sveta shows me videos when she visits though.”

Ilya shrugs. “Hockey is hockey. Very much the same. We are having a good season. The team won last night.”

Natasha tilts her head, studying. “I’m sure. Not missing you at all, then?”

Ilya laughs at his own martyrdom, wishing he had Natasha to call him out on a regular basis.

She picks at an old scratch in the table, as if by making it worse it would go away. “I heard about your father’s illness, you know, not too long ago. Katya comes here with friends sometimes, speaks too freely. You know.”

Ilya imagines Katya has much to complain about, being married to Alexei. “She didn’t sign up for any of this.”

“We all sign up for something. Ah–” she flags down a server holding a plate and looking around confused. “Over here, yes, for my nephew.”

The pelmeni are heaped high on the plate, more than one person should ever eat in one sitting, topped generously with sour cream and the parsley Natasha preferred over dill. He inhales the scent of cooked meat and spices, feeling at home for the first time since landing Moscow. The first one is so hot it burns. He eats a scoop of sour cream straight up to soothe the burn.

Natasha wrinkles her nose at Ilya’s forkful of sour cream. “I hate when you do that. Without Sveta here you are a barbarian. Where is she?”

“Visiting her family,” Ilya explains. “We’re flying back to Boston together.”

“Someone sane to keep you in line, good.”

Ilya smiles around another dumpling, feeling like a child teasing Natasha once more. She’s content to watch him eat, sipping a cup of tea Ilya knows had long grown cold. His phone vibrates on the table. He leaves it.

Natasha taps her finger on the photo of him and his mother, leaving almost invisible finger prints on the once glossy finish. “You brought your mother so much joy. No one made her laugh the way you did.”

Ilya chews slowly. “I wanted to be funny and clever like her.”

“And so you are. Maybe not today…”

Ilya huffs a laugh, dragging his next dumpling through the sour cream and popping it into his mouth.

“She was going to leave him,” Natasha says, her smile fading but not disappearing. “Your mother. I think she mentioned it the day I took that picture.”

Ilya swallows, setting down his fork. “What do you mean?”

Natasha purses her lips before continuing. “She spoke about taking you and Alexei and going to live with a friend in Poland. She made some plans, but it never amounted to anything. One day she just stopped talking about it.” She drew her hand away from the photo, holding her mug in two hands. “I’m not sure why I’m telling you this. It’s unkind.”

Ilya clears his throat, swirling his fork around in the oil that had collected on the bottom of the plate. “It’s alright.”

“But will you be alright?”

He shrugs. “My father didn’t have much use for me when his mind was intact. It was nice, for a little while, to feel useful to him.”

“Ilyusha…”

He twists the fork in his fingers, walking it on the outside tines to another dumpling. “And she did find a way to leave him. So there’s that.”

Natasha knocks on the table, jingling the silverware and china. “No no, don’t walk down that road. I used to have to do this with Irina too, both of you only seeing the worst in the world.”

Ilya eats more, not knowing what else to say. Irina had stayed with his father for Ilya, and probably for Alexei, but more for him. Had stayed for Ilya’s skating lessons with expensive teachers and Ilya’s training with elite coaches who said things like ‘talent scouts’ and ‘potential’ and ‘Olympics’ in earshot of his father. He doesn’t need to make Natasha feel poorly by saying it. He already knows.

“This photo reminded me of the good times,” she says. “The good memories outweigh the bad. Do you remember her smile enough?”

Natasha knew Irina as a girl, before her marriage and in better times. Ilya had been a child, and a child remembers the laughter, but never forgets the sight of their mother bedridden. Seeing her motionless under the covers had not been new to him by twelve, he’d only realized the truth when he touched her cold hand.

Before Ilya can answer, Natasha is called away to the kitchen. She throws her arms up, exclaiming that nothing can go on without her before ordering him to clean his plate before. He settles in to do just that while she hustles away, and then remembers his phone buzzing.

Another text from Shane: *We're about to go back out. You sure you're ok?*

Shane would already be playing the second period by now, nearing the end of it. Ilya snaps a quick pic of his half-finished plate.

This many carbs would put you in the hospital, correct?

His smile feels silly, toothy and too wide as he pictures Shane opening the picture during the second break. Ilya checks the score on his phone. 2-0 Montreal, both Shane's goals.

Ilya settles in to clean his plate as directed and by the time he finishes his phone lights up again.

I'm not that crazy, asshole. That looks delicious. Would you share with me?

Ilya's heart usually lights up like fireworks when Shane flirts. Even in its current state, it does a sad little backflip.

Not these, no. But if you are very good I will make you pelmeni sometime.

Ilya bites his tongue as he sends the text without thinking. The last time he had tried to cook for Shane it hadn't gone so well. But that had been before Rose Landry. Before the All-Stars game. Before 'I think I like you a little too much.' His stomach clenches as he waits.

Seems fair. Would a hat trick count as very good?

Ilya squeezes his eyes shut, momentarily overwhelmed by a vision of Shane leaning in his cubby, smiling at his phone and the words Ilya types out clumsily. The blue light would illuminate him, making his dark eyes glow.

Yes, hat trick against Detroit only though. Not Boston.

Especially against Boston, Shane writes. *But maybe I'll save it for when you're playing again.*

Ilya taps his thumb on the screen. It would be easy to just play. To flirt and let Shane numb his pain. Maybe he's tired of keeping this easy, when the rest of his life continues to challenge him in the worst ways.

I did not ignore your questions, Ilya writes, *When you asked if I'm ok.*

The three dots appear and disappear a few times before Shane's answer.

It's ok. I know I ask too many questions.

Ilya frowns. He can't have that. Not anymore. He types something out; reads it a few times before hitting send.

You ask the right questions. I am better today, he said, and then in another text: *Better for having spoken with you last night.*

It was easier to answer difficult questions when it was for Shane. When it was to give Shane something he needed.

I'm glad to hear it, Shane says, and then: *I'm about to go back out. Send me another picture for when I come back.*

Ilya looks down at the photo resting on the table. Natasha had brought him an envelope to put it in for safe keeping. Ilya zooms the camera in on his young self in the picture, cropping out his mother. He sends it before he can think too hard about someone recognizing a grainy picture of his younger self over Hollander's shoulder.

He brings his plate to the counter, earning an appreciative thanks from one of the dishwashers. A few people recognize him, or recognize Ilya Rozanov, captain of Russian Olympic team, so he signs a few autographs and makes chit-chat with them while Natasha works and lets her patrons know that she knew him when he was only little Ilyusha. The sun is lower in the sky by the time Shane answers, high noon shifting into the dim winter afternoon.

Is that you???? Shane's text reads. Ilya laughs; his little punctuation warrior.

Yes. Even someone as dark and twisted as me was once a child, Shane.

Shane's reply is fast enough to give him whiplash.

You're not dark and twisted. Don't forget that I knew you when we were young

And then,

Ilya.

Ilya's tongue twists in his mouth. Shane isn't done:

Game's over. Can I call you?

Ilya swallows hard. They had spoken on the phone twice while Ilya was in Russia making plans for his father's corpse. The first time he had watched Shane pour lube over his cock and then finger himself while Ilya whispered filth over the phone, a beautiful little show with his glasses on. The second time Ilya had spilled the contents of his heart, albeit in Russian. What would happen the third time?

Hold on, he types. He ducks behind the counter to hug Natasha and thank her for the lunch. She kisses his cheek and tells him to travel safe. He promises to come back when he visits, to make it a point to have coffee with her every morning when he's home for the summer. He says the words, but as he stands in the doorway, looking back at the shabby cafe that had been his mother's haven, something nags at him, like it was a lie.

Outside, away from the burden of memory and in the frigid Moscow air, he begins to breathe freely again. His phone is warm in his ear as it rings.

“Hi,” Shane exhales when he picks up. From the sounds coming from his end, he must be walking too.

Ilya clears his throat. “Hat trick?”

Shane scoffs. “Fuck you. No. Hayden scored the last goal.”

“Ah. That’s ok. It’s good to give to charity sometimes.”

Shane laughs in earnest, punctuated by an exasperated “Come on!” and a quieter “Ilya.”

“I’m only being nice,” Ilya says, teasing. “Tell me about the game. I’ve nearly forgotten how to play.”

“I doubt that.”

But Shane does. Detroit doesn’t have a great line up this year, so surely it was an easy win, but Shane still explains the Metro’s strategy as if they were going up against the best team in the league. As if he isn’t the captain of the best team in the league.

“It was messy,” Shane says. “I’m going back to the hotel to watch the tape now.”

“3-0 is a messy win now?”

“You know what I mean. You know how I am by now.”

Ilya stops near a street corner. It’s a somewhat tight corner, condensing the wind enough that it whistles through the street like a flute. He takes a cigarette from his pocket, holds it between his fingers without lighting it.

Ilya switches to Russian, speaking in a hushed tone. *“I do know you, but I want to know more. I want to know everything about you. I want everything you are willing to give.”*

Shane breathes quietly into the phone. Ilya worries he’s pulling up google translate when he finally responds.

“Will you come over after our game this week?” Shane asks. He must be standing still now, it’s so quiet on the other end. “I mean. I want you to come over, if you can.”

Ilya pockets the cigarette. He will have it later.

“I’ll plan on it,” he says.

He can hear Shane’s smile. “Good. Ok. That’s good.” A sigh of relief. And then, “You gave me a serious dumpling craving before. What are in pelmeni?”

Ilya laughs at Shane’s attempt at the pronunciation. “Well, it all started with the founding and discovery of my homeland…”

Shane's exasperated "You're crazy" spurs Ilya to kick off the wall and continue down the cold street, the crisp sound of Shane's laughter fresh in his ear. With his mother's picture in his pocket and Shane's voice in his hand, he keeps walking.

End Notes

Thank you for reading! Please comment and subscribe, I have more ideas for Heated Rivalry fics.

I am ilyapasta on tumblr if you want to connect there.

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