

know it's for the better / no, it's for the better

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by [selfishambition](#)

Summary

Ilya Rozanov has been carrying his mother's ghost since he was twelve years old.

Sochi is where the weight finally breaks him. Russia is eliminated in the most humiliating loss in their history, and their captain sits on a twelfth-floor balcony railing thinking about letting go.

Shane Hollander has a gold medal game in fourteen hours. He comes anyway.

Notes

stay safe while reading + know i love you

i've only watched the show but will be reading the books. apologies if i misstep with the characters in any way!

title from waiting room by phoebe bridgers

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

When Ilya Rozanov was twelve years old, he learned what death looked like.

It seemed quite a lot like sleep, actually. His mother was still in her nightgown, after all, and she looked peaceful despite lying too still.

Death, Ilya thought, looked like empty pill bottles on his mother's nightstand. It also looked like his own hand reaching out to shake her shoulder -- *Mama, wake up, we're going to be late* -- and cold, clammy skin.

Ilya only realized something was *very* wrong when he noticed the foam and vomit by his mother's mouth. He used all the knowledge his twelve years of living had given him to realize, *oh, Mama isn't going to wake up ever again*.

During this entire discovery process, Ilya Rozanov did not scream once. No, he did not let out a sound. He should have screamed, as that's what normal children would do upon discovering their dead mother.

But Ilya was taught to be silent. He wasn't going to make any inappropriate noises which would disturb his father, who was surely getting ready for the day himself.

Honestly, it was as if his mother's ghost put her hand on his mouth and kept it covered shut. He stood in that bedroom for a long time, staring at her and willing her to open her eyes.

He just didn't understand why his mother didn't want to start breathing again and wake up. As his young brain tried to wrap his head around such a phenomenon, the house remained even more quiet than Ilya. He could hear that somewhere down the hall, a clock was ticking, so Ilya permitted himself to breathe.

Ilya stood shell-shocked until his father found him. He felt, perhaps, that his reaction wasn't so abnormal when his father, discovering his wife's drug overdose, also didn't make a sound.

"Go to school," his father said.

"But Mama--"

"Go to school, Ilya. We don't talk about this. Do you understand? We never talk about this."

Ilya obeyed. He went to school and sat nicely at his desk so that he wouldn't get reprimanded by his teachers. He would stare at the blackboard but couldn't quite understand what his instructors were saying.

This was how Ilya learned how to float when his emotions got too big for him.

When classmates would ask where his mother went, Ilya would say she was sick. She was still sick when he got home. Ilya was starting to doubt his lie when strange men entered his home to take her away in a black bag. Nobody believed Ilya's lie when they lowered her into the ground three days later, and instead they pitied the strange boy who stood beside his Mama's grave in his best suit and watched the dirt fall onto the coffin.

Every few minutes, he couldn't help but think, *wake up, Mama. Please wake up.*

She never woke up.

Ilya wasn't stupid; he was old enough to understand what happened. He knew what suicide meant, even if everybody was too cowardly to say the word out loud. Ilya was acutely aware of the deep sadness which molted his mother's skin.

I am tired, Ilya, she used to whisper late at night when she mistakenly thought her child was asleep. *I'm so tired.*

He didn't understand then. He was too young to comprehend that tired could mean something more than needing sleep. He remembered thinking, *well Mama, why don't you just sleep?*

Oh, how Ilya Rozanov was once so innocent and pure.

He understood now.

His father remarried within a year. Polina was fine -- she was not cruel, but she was simply a presence in the home. This new woman would make dinner and do the family's laundry and sleep in the bed that used to be his mother's. Ilya learned to call her by her first name because calling her *Mama* would be a lie and calling her nothing would be rude.

Ilya found it quite disrespectful how no one talked about Irina Rozanova. Her photographs quickly disappeared from the walls; Ilya would find them in trash cans and hide them in his pillowcase. His mother's clothes disappeared from her closets, and Ilya couldn't do anything about that. Worst of all, Irina's name disappeared from conversations.

It was as if Ilya's entire world never existed at all. Ilya had to look over those photographs certain nights or else he would think he dreamed the feeling of her fingers in his hair when he couldn't sleep.

But he didn't dream up the bedroom. His imagination wasn't cruel enough to create upsetting narratives about empty pill bottles or cold skin. Ilya had nightmares about his mother finally getting the rest she'd always wanted, but it wasn't a dream.

That part was real. That part was always real, every time he closed his eyes.

He was only twelve years old but he already knew that the people you love can leave without saying goodbye. His loved ones could choose to go somewhere he couldn't follow.

Ilya Rozanov was twelve years old when he learned that love wasn't enough to make someone stay.

Ilya was fifteen when he figured out he liked boys.

Not instead of girls or anything. He liked girls fine. He had kissed a few, would kiss more, and genuinely enjoyed the soft curves and sweet smells and all the ways girls were different from him. But he also liked boys. Ilya liked how Sasha, the coach's son, looked at him during practices.

They fucked for the first time in a storage closet at the rink. It was quick, clumsy, but not forgettable by any means. Afterward, Ilya's hands wouldn't stop shaking and Sasha laughed at him, not unkindly, and said, "Relax. No one has to know."

No one has to know. That became the rule for this part of himself... Not the liking boys part, but the acting-on-it part. In Russia, you could be whatever the fuck you want as long as you were very quiet about it. Ilya smirked at this loophole -- if he didn't make his life anybody else's problem, nobody would have an issue with him. Ilya learned to keep this particular want in a box, to take it out only in dark rooms with people who wouldn't tell.

His father would kill him if he knew. Not metaphorically. Grigori Rozanov would actually kill him, or close enough. Ilya knew about his strong opinions regarding men who fuck other men, and he had never been shy about sharing them.

Disgusting. Unnatural. They should all be locked up.

Ilya sat at the dinner table during one of his father's extensive rants about the Western World's mentally ill vermin and nodded along when his brother nodded along and felt something inside him curdle.

The draft happened when Ilya Rozanov turned eighteen.

He was first overall to Boston. This was the culmination of everything he had worked for. His literal life's work.

Ilya found himself on stage with this new flashy jersey, smiling for the cameras and shaking hands with important people. Ilya thought he would have been absolutely ecstatic when this day came. Instead, he was disappointed to know he felt the way he always felt: present but distant.

Ilya watched his every move from somewhere far away. His father harshly attacked his son's character around every well-meaning and impressively powerful person they came across, but Ilya didn't mind. It wasn't like his father was saying anything he hadn't already thought about himself.

As Ilya floated around the floor, he noticed the boy across the room. The other prospect, the other future star. Shane Hollander, Canadian golden child, second overall to Montreal. He was beautiful in a way that made Ilya's teeth ache.

They hadn't spoken since their quick introduction before the International Prospect Cup and probably shouldn't speak one-on-one again. They were going to spend the next decade trying to destroy each other on ice.

Ilya couldn't stop looking at him.

That night, in the hotel gym, he found Shane alone. They didn't properly fuck that night; not in the way that Ilya craved. But their chemistry and lust for one another were undeniable, and they did end up exchanging numbers at some point -- fake names in each other's phones, *Jane* and *Lily* -- and when Ilya got back to his hotel room that night, he lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling and thought: *I'm fucked. I'm so completely fucked.*

He texted Shane a completely out-of-character good morning text the next day. Shane texted him back.

And that was how it started.

The years seemed to blur together even more after that.

Shane and Ilya would meet when they could. Hotel rooms, mostly, during road trips or All-Star weekends or the handful of times their schedules align. It would never be enough. It was always too much.

Ilya spent the time between their meetings going through the motions of his life, fucking women he enjoyed well enough and being the person everyone expected him to be. Some part of him counted down the days until he could see Shane again.

He would tell himself he was so addicted because it's physical. Convenient. That Shane was an itch he needed to scratch, and once he scratched it enough the wanting would fade.

The wanting didn't fade. It got worse. It got so bad that Ilya started dreaming about him; not sex dreams, though there are plenty of those, but other dreams.

Ilya held his dreams quite sacred, so to say this scared him shitless would be an understatement. These were soft dreams where they would walk somewhere together in public, not hiding. There were also dreams where Ilya woke up next to Shane and didn't have to leave. Most horrifyingly, there were dreams where he would say things he had never said to anyone before and Shane said things back.

He would wake from those strains of dreams feeling disturbed. His subconscious was quite funny, trying to show him what he desired most but didn't deserve.

In public, they were rivals. The press loved the narrative -- Hollander vs. Rozanov, Canada vs. Russia, good vs. evil. Ilya would play into it because it was easy and it gave him more

attention. Of course, it was also because it was safe and nobody would look at two men who hate each other and think *maybe they're fucking in hotel rooms every chance they get*.

In private, Shane would say strings of sentences that made Ilya want to crawl out of his skin and never come back.

I missed you.

I think about you all the time.

I wish we didn't have to hide.

Quite honestly, Ilya had no fucking idea how to respond to that kind of affection. So he deflected, made jokes, and turned everything into sex because sex was simple. Sex didn't require vulnerability. Sex allowed him to take what he needed and leave before Shane could see too much.

But Shane would see everything anyway. That was the worst part. Shane looked past all of Ilya's defenses and saw him like he had worth.

Gross. Ilya really didn't know what to do with all that intimacy bullshit. The last person who looked at him that way was his mother, and she chose to leave.

The depression overwhelmed Ilya slowly, the way it always did.

He didn't really notice it was coming his way at first. Sure, he would be sleeping more and enjoying things less. And okay, the things that used to matter didn't anymore.

That was just his life on a good day.

Hockey was still hockey, with the ice, the speed, and the controlled violence he came to love.

However, somewhere along the way, hockey stopped being enough. It didn't fill up the empty space inside him.

Nothing filled it anymore, actually. He went through his days feeling muted. Colours seemed dimmer. He would lie in bed at night and feel melodramatic as he stared at the ceiling.

Ilya felt so numb from emotions he couldn't name that he dug his fingernails into his palms as hard as he could, pressing until it hurt, because at least pain was *something*. At least pain proved he was still alive.

He started having thoughts. Dark thoughts. He thought about his mother, because he thought of his mother every day of his life, and he thought about the peace on her face when he found her, because he thought of that distressing peace every day of his life.

She must have been so tired, Ilya thought late during one of those difficult nights. Everything must have felt incredibly heavy.

He would go on with his days acting like the perfect player he was and then race home to throw a tantrum in bed.

One night, he wondered if he should tell anybody about how he was feeling. He almost laughed at the stupidity of such a thought. He wouldn't dare tell anyone about how he was beginning to drown in his mother's familiar shadows. Who would he tell? His father, who couldn't remember his wife was dead half the time? His brother, who only called when he needed money?

Shane, who was actually in bed next to him, so close Ilya could reach out and touch him, but might as well be on another planet for all the good it did?

No. He carried it alone. The way he had always carried everything.

The 2014 Sochi Olympics were supposed to be Ilya's self-redemption.

That was what Ilya was telling himself, anyway. He was the captain of the Russian national team, leading his country to glory *on home ice*. Ilya Rozanov felt utterly honoured at the opportunity, and would do anything to see victory on his lips.

This was a chance to prove himself and make his father proud for at least a moment. Ilya wanted to feel like the hero everyone acted like he was.

Instead, it was a tragedy.

Russia lost to Slovenia first. Ilya assisted on both Russian goals, but it didn't matter. They still lost, 2-3 in overtime, and the booing started before they were even off the ice.

When he checked his phone in the locker room, Ilya felt a little misty-eyed at the one-word text from his father. *Disappointing*.

Then, Russia lost to Finland. Ilya took a penalty in the third period that led to the game-winning goal. He sat in the box and watched his team fail and thought: *this is what you are. This is all you'll ever be*. His father texted him before he had even showered: *Your mother would be ashamed*.

If Ilya wasn't already spiralling, he would have thought about how diabolical it was for his father to say something so despicable and knowingly trigger Ilya. But he was already upset with himself and replaying every single move he made. Thinking of his mother just made matters worse.

His mother. Who, again, his father could not even fucking remember was dead most days. His mother who gave up and chose to leave Ilya.

Irina Rozanova swallowed a bottle of pills and never woke up.

His mother would be ashamed of her son.

Ilya stood in the tunnel and read the message and felt something inside him go very, very quiet. He didn't even have a chance in the following match, not after how dark Ilya got.

He knew that if he didn't win this next game, Russia would be eliminated.

But why should he fucking care? His mother was ashamed of Ilya from the grave. He didn't know what he did at twelve years old to upset her, but clearly he did. All these years later and he wasn't even trying to play well in her memory.

So, naturally, Russia lost to Latvia.

Latvia.

The word rattled around his skull for hours, a small pebble that somehow ended up in his sneakers. *Latvia.* A country with a population smaller than St. Petersburg. A team that had never, in Olympic history, beaten Russia. A team of part-time players and farmers who shouldn't have even been on the same ice.

And Ilya, the captain and supposed saviour of Russian hockey, watched it happen. He single-handedly allowed his team to fall apart on home ice. Because he couldn't be damned anymore. He blankly stared as the Latvian players wept with joy while Russian fans sat in humiliation and probably rage.

Game over. Russia was the first country eliminated in Men's Hockey.

Nobody could have seen that coming in a million years.

The locker room afterward was deadly quiet. No one even looked at each other. They must have expected some speech from Ilya, but he was sitting wordlessly on the bench himself. He waited for someone to tell him what to do next.

Of course, no one did.

Ilya was the leader.

And he was a fucking failure.

His phone buzzed, and he anticipated another biting remark from his father, so he self-hatingly pulled the screen to his face to see a message from Shane: *Hey. I saw the game. You okay?*

Shane. Who was here, in Sochi, playing for Canada. Right.

He kept texting Ilya even when he didn't respond. Somehow, Shane gave a fuck about him despite everything.

Ilya stared at the text. His thumb hovered over the keyboard. He thought about replying but couldn't stomach the pity.

That night, he passed out after drinking an entire bottle of the best vodka he could find. Go big or go home.

The hangover the next morning was brutal, but it was a slight distraction from the disgust he felt from living in his body.

The figure skating venue was crowded and bright.

Ilya shouldn't be here. This place was full of happy people celebrating talented athletes and he would only ruin the fun with his amateurish self. But he couldn't stay in his hotel room anymore after getting kicked out of the Olympic Village. It was no big deal; it was the name of the game, really -- once you were done competing, you went home or managed your own room-and-board.

His new hotel room's mattress was far nicer than the Village's cardboard-box beds. And yet, Ilya felt uncomfortable lying down. The walls in the room were closing in. The silence of nothingness was too loud.

Svetlana had kindly made her presence known, coming over to keep his depressed self company. Ilya had appreciated this so much that he gave her his second key so she could come and go as she pleased and drop off her belongings if need be. He wasn't particularly skilled at texting right now, so Ilya really did value the visits.

Unfortunately, she had some excuse as to why she couldn't be around the parasitic Ilya Rozanov today, so he decided to venture into the outside world. He found a spot in the upper level, away from the crowds, and watched the skaters without really seeing them.

And then Shane was there.

Of course Shane was there. Shane couldn't leave anything alone. He somehow tracked him down in a crowd of thousands because he was worried and cared.

Shane fucking Hollander kept reaching for Ilya even when Ilya gave him nothing in return.

"Hey," Shane said.

Ilya couldn't take the kindness, nor the risk. "Not here."

"No, I'm not- I saw you up here. I wanted to see how you're doing."

How I'm doing. Ilya almost laughed. How the fuck did Shane think he felt? He was standing in a country that would destroy him if it knew what he really was. The only person who made him feel anything was standing right in front of him and Ilya couldn't have him. Not really. Not in the way he wanted. "Fine. Go sit down."

"We..." Shane hesitated.

All Ilya could think about was how he fucked Shane weeks ago, whispering things safe for a western audience against his skin.

Ilya couldn't do this. He couldn't possibly stand here and look at Shane's worried face and pretend everything was fine. Shane kept caring when all Ilya did was take and take and give nothing back. Ilya wouldn't let him. He needed to ruin this all. Now.

"We are not anything," he said coldly. Ilya wanted it to hurt. "Go away, Hollander."

Shane's face fell. "Are you okay?"

"Please. Go."

"You didn't answer my texts."

"No, I did not answer your boring texts. Now will you go?"

Shane's worry hardened into hurt or anger. Hopefully it was the latter. Anger was easier. Anger was safer than whatever else was in Shane's eyes when he looked at Ilya.

"Fine, fuck."

He walked away.

Ilya watched him go and felt like he successfully ruined everything he ever loved.

He really was his mother's son.

The next time Ilya came to, it was right before the stupid gala.

His father had arranged it weeks ago, back when they thought Russia would, at minimum, place. Now, they were using it as an opportunity for damage control with politicians and ministers.

Ilya knew he was going to have to give his best performance of normalcy yet. It was particularly comedic to him because he felt like nothing had ever crumbled around him like this before.

He put on his suit. The fucking tie wouldn't cooperate; his hands were shaking far too much and the fabric seemed to sit permanently askew. He tried a ridiculous number of times to fix it before finally giving up, leaving it slightly crooked.

He wasn't sure how or when his father entered the room or if he was there the entire time. Ilya just remembered the sound of his father pouring alcohol for the two of them into a glass and berating him as he did it.

"Stand up straight."

Ilya straightened his back.

"Smile."

Ilya smiled. It turned out that it was hard to breathe behind a facade. He felt like he stole the identity of Ilya Rozanov and the man would never return again.

His father reached out to adjust his tie, frowning. "Your mother doesn't know how to do this properly. She never could."

Ilya stopped breathing.

"Father," Ilya said flatly. "Mom is dead. You remember?"

His father's hands paused on the tie. For a moment, confusion flickered across his face. Ilya would never wish dementia on his worst enemy, even if that was his father. It was too sadistic of a disease. Ilya could pick up on these negative emotions across his dad's features: loss, bewilderment, and heartwrenchingly, some memory he couldn't quite place.

Then it was gone.

"I meant your stepmother," he said. "Where is Polina?"

"Moscow."

"Ah. Of course."

And that was all. Once upon a time, Irina Rozanova killed herself, and her husband couldn't even remember she was dead. Some fairy tale.

They made it into the main hall, where Ilya followed his father across the room and shook hands with the minister and said all the right things. His father stood next to him, always criticizing his son, but in a way that let Ilya know he was performing well tonight.

Ilya wondered if this was what his mother felt at the end. He felt present enough in his body to speak but he wasn't really there. No matter how much Ilya slept, he felt this bone-deep exhaustion that never went away.

I'm so tired, Ilya. I'm so tired.

He understood completely now, Mama. He finally understood.

Svetlana was Ilya's saving grace, whisking him away from his father.

She took him to a quiet room and reminded him that his father was an asshole who would have publicly punished him either way. She wasn't wrong. She was never wrong about these things.

"You look terrible," she said.

"Thank you," Ilya responded.

"When's the last time you slept?"

Ilya debated telling Svetlana the truth but he wasn't sure he remembered.

They drank. Svetlana talked about hockey. Her words didn't make a lot of sense but he nodded all the same. He felt himself drifting further and further away.

At some point she left and then Sasha was in his face -- Sasha, who used to fuck him when they were teenagers and still looked at Ilya like something to be consumed.

"Remember when we were kids?" Sasha's voice was low, seductive. "You used to like danger."

"We're not kids anymore, Sasha."

"No. We're sure not," Sasha said. "Come on. Let me take you somewhere. Let me--"

"No."

Once, he might have said yes. He would have lost himself in the physical sensations for a few hours, using the heat and the friction to feel something other than this creeping apathy.

But that was before Shane. Ilya had since learned what it felt like to be touched by someone who acted like they actually understood him.

Sasha, annoyed, left to find a party and someone who was actually exciting. The room was now empty. Ilya sat alone with the alcohol and the silence and sixteen years of grief he had never been allowed to feel.

He thought about his mother.

Bad idea.

He thought about Shane.

Much easier.

You know what else would be easier? Ilya thought. *If you weren't around to keep hurting Shane.*

Ilya laughed at his playful thoughts.

He finished the bottle in his hands before going back to his lonesome reality.

Ilya hated how dark it was in his hotel room.

He found the city glowed lamely through the large window. He didn't turn on the lights, as he physically knew where things were, even if his mind was somewhere else entirely.

Ilya knew he couldn't sleep, even though he had even more obligations tomorrow. There would be more press and more apology tours. More, more, more. Everybody wanted more from Ilya.

He should have eaten something, showered, or done any of the things to take care of himself. Ilya cannot keep floating in his body -- it's simply not sustainable.

With a drunken giggle, Ilya wondered if that was the point.

He found his body walking toward the balcony. He had to give the door a bit of a shove to open; even though this was a five-star hotel, it was still Eastern Europe. The air was so sharp it instantly burned his body.

Obviously. It was February in Russia.

Ilya didn't really think he was shivering, though, but that couldn't have been true if he was still wearing his dress shirt from the gala.

He couldn't fucking *feel* anything. That was the issue when Ilya got this low. There was an absence at the center of his very essence; this place where feeling used to live but didn't anymore. He had been walking around for weeks like this, going through motions and saying the right words. Nobody had noticed because no one ever noticed there was something wrong with the indestructible Ilya Rozanov. No one looked past the surface. No one asked what's underneath.

That's when Ilya really gave the balcony a good look. It was quite narrow, but being twelve floors up at least meant he had a nice view. The fountain was turned off for the winter, but the tall trees looked beautiful against the snow. The railing wasn't too shabby: it was waist-height, iron, more decorative than functional.

Ilya leaned against the railing to take the view in a bit better. He felt the cold metal through his shirt. He *felt* it.

Finally, some kind of sensation.

That was when he looked *down* rather than straight ahead.

His mother stood on a balcony once. Not the time that killed her, of course -- that was the pills -- but once, when Ilya was ten, she climbed out onto the ledge outside her bedroom window and stood there for a while. Ilya hid in his closet with his hands over his ears, trying to block out his father's screaming 'at her bullshit'. *Irina, stop being dramatic! Think of your son! Get inside this instant!*

She came inside eventually. His father hit her until she apologized.

Two years later, Ilya's life forever changed.

Ilya really felt an innate connection to his poor mother and their urge to feel *something*, anything, even if it were to be the last thing they ever felt.

He was certain she heard the same whisper he was hearing now, seductive and almost kind.

You could let it all go. You wouldn't have to carry it anymore.

The lights below blurred a little as Ilya tried to shake the thought out of his head to no avail.

You could rest. Isn't that what you want? To finally rest?

Ilya did.

He listened to the voice, lifting one leg and setting his foot on the lowest rung of the railing. He pushed himself up, and felt quite foolish at the scene. He was straddling the railing, one leg on either side, the bar between his thighs.

It was odd for any onlooker, but there was nobody outside. The timing was perfect. No one would ever know what Ilya was up to. He looked down to confirm that it would be far enough to be a certain peril.

The wind picked up after Ilya finally got comfortable with the concept of a painful death.

He should be afraid.

He was not. Ilya was *terrified*. Either way, he knew he was sick of this fucking go at life. He'll try again in the next one or something.

He lifted his other leg over the railing until he was properly sitting, feet dangling over nothing. The only thing keeping him upright was his hands gripping the cold iron bar behind him.

One push and it would be over for Ilya Rozanov. He would never have to feel this empty again.

I'm so tired, Mama. I'm so tired.

He let go of one hand, just to see how freedom felt. His heart was pounding in his chest, even though he knew this was the right call to make.

The door opened behind him.

"Ilya? I forgot my--"

It was fucking *Svetlana*. Her voice stopped in its tracks.

Ilya swung his head back to see her in the front doorway, still in her gala dress. Her one hand was frozen mid-reach for whatever she came back for. Her eyes went from him, to the railing, to the way he was sitting.

If the stakes weren't so high, Ilya would have laughed at her face. She looked like she had seen a ghost, but Ilya wasn't dead yet.

"Ilya," Svetlana said, "I'm coming closer to you, okay? I'll need you to take my hand when I get there."

"I'm fine," he replied lazily because he didn't know what the fuck to say.

"You're sitting on a railing however many floors up. You're going to take my hand."

"It's twelve floors."

"Take my hand. Right now. Please."

Ilya flinched -- when had Svetlana gotten so close? She was outside on the balcony now, hand outstretched, her eyes fixed on his face.

"I wasn't going to do anything," Ilya said. "I was... thinking."

"You can think inside. Take my hand."

"I'm fine."

"I swear, Ilya, if you say you are fine one more time," Svetlana said. "Please just take my hand."

Ilya didn't think he was going to, but there was something in her voice at the end there. Ilya was foolish to pinpoint it as love, but that was the only thing that really cut through his fog. He would later attest that to be what saved his life.

He remembered staring at her, then looking down at the drop below him. He thought one second more about the choice he was balanced on the edge of, and then made the executive

decision to reach back and take her hand.

Svetlana's fingers closed around his incredibly quickly. She pulled hard with an unexpected strength. Ilya swung one leg back over the railing, then the other. His body fell against the balcony floor.

It stung. They stayed there as they recovered from the moment, panting. Ilya tried to wrap his head around what just happened. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to feel in a foiled situation like this, but there was an overwhelming guilt.

"I'm sorry," Ilya spoke first.

"Don't," Svetlana was shaking. He could feel it where she was holding onto him, her whole body trembling. "Do not apologize."

"I wasn't going to do anything."

"You were sitting on the railing!"

"I was thinking about it. That's different."

"Is it?" she asked. "Is it really?"

Ilya didn't respond. He finally pulled away from her, just to look at Svetlana's face. He wasn't expecting to see her makeup completely smudged from crying.

"You're staying with me tonight," she said. "You're not leaving my sight."

"That's not-"

"It wasn't a question, Ilya."

She led him inside and they went to the bathroom, where Ilya pouted on the floor. She began opening every one of Ilya's belongings and taking items here and there. When she began putting Ilya's prescribed sleeping pills from his travel bag and a shaving razor from the counter in her purse, he began to see red.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Ilya asked, even though he knew.

"Making sure."

"I'm not going to-" his voice became frustrated. "I'm not going to hurt myself anymore, Svetlana. You're being dramatic."

"Am I?" She continued with her invasive removal of Ilya's belongings. "I don't think people tend to sit on their balcony railings when they're having a good night."

"All that you saw was-"

“Don’t lie to me, Ilya.” She turned to face him now, arms full of everything sharp or dangerous. “I’d hope you respect me enough not to do that. I know what I saw. You can say whatever makes you feel better, but I will not be leaving you alone tonight, and I won’t be leaving anything in this room that could hurt you.”

Ilya decided shutting up was a good strategy moving forward. He didn’t like it when he looked into Svetlana’s eyes and saw fear living there. Fear. For him.

“I’m fine,” he tried one last time.

“You are not fine.” Svetlana set the collected items outside the bathroom door, then came back to sit across from him on the toilet seat. “But you’re going to be. I’m going to make sure of it.”

They sat in silence. Minutes passed. The wall was cool against Ilya’s back, and he leaned into how nice that felt right now. Ilya realized he was in a losing battle.

This was his rock bottom.

“Is there anyone I can call?” Svetlana asked eventually. “Anyone you want here?”

Ilya shook his head.

“There must be someone. Your brother-”

“No. Not Alexei.”

“Okay. Not Alexei.” Svetlana held eye contact with Ilya. “What about Jane?”

Ilya’s whole body went still.

Svetlana shrugged, thinking his behaviour stemmed from his fear she was jealous. “I don’t mind, Ilya. I know you text someone named Jane. You always smile when her name shows up on your phone.”

He knew Svetlana knew *of* Jane. He was terrified she would figure out the truth. She had always been incredibly insightful.

“I assumed it’s someone you were keeping private,” Svetlana continued. She reached out and touched his hand. Ilya felt trapped. “Should I call her?”

Ilya closed his eyes. He needed to think for a second.

He snapped at Shane at the figure skating event and he hadn’t answered any of his far-too-sweet texts. Shane didn’t want him.

But Ilya was selfish and tired. Svetlana fucked up his spur-of-the-moment plan.

Maybe Shane telling Ilya to get the hell out of his life would be the fuel Ilya needed to blow up his life once and for all.

“Call Jane,” he whispered.

Svetlana nodded and went to get his phone in the hallway.

Ilya’s eyes were firmly shut as Svetlana scrolled through his contacts.

“Jane,” she read out loud. “Jane’s in Boston? You should be able to reach her. It should be sometime in the evening for her.”

“No.”

“I would call you all the time-”

“No, Jane is not in Boston.”

“Then where...”

“Sochi. Jane is here. At the Olympics.”

Svetlana paused for a moment. Ilya opened his eyes, embarrassed.

“The Olympics,” she said slowly. “Jane is an athlete.”

“Yes.”

“Is she American?”

“No.”

Svetlana waited for more. Ilya didn’t want to speak more than he already had.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m calling.”

Ilya nodded wordlessly. *Here comes the beginning of the end.*

He closed his eyes once again when he heard the receiver’s end pick up. “Hello?”

Shane’s voice was confused and rough from sleep.

He didn’t want to see Svetlana’s reaction. The jig was officially up and it was all Ilya’s fault.

“Hello,” Svetlana said in clipped English. “This is Jane?”

“Who is this? How do you have this phone?”

“My name is Svetlana. I am Ilya’s good friend. He asked me to call you.”

There was a lot of shuffling on Shane's side. "Is he okay? What happened? Is he hurt?"

"He is-" Svetlana paused. "Can I ask who I am speaking with?"

"Jane- I'm... it doesn't matter who I am. Is Ilya okay?"

"I must know who you are before I tell you anything."

Ilya could almost hear the calculation happening -- Shane thinking through the risk of saying it out loud but feeling intense fear that something must have happened if Svetlana was calling.

"Shane," he decided. "Shane Hollander."

Another silence. This one was from Svetlana's side. Ilya could picture her shocked face, the pieces clicking into place.

Jane was an athlete at the Olympics. Not American. Not even a girl. *Shane Hollander*.

He couldn't open his eyes yet but he knew Svetlana was staring him down.

"Hollander," she repeated. "You are Shane Hollander."

"Yes. Can you please tell me if Ilya's okay?"

"I found him hanging off a balcony, Hollander. If I had come back five minutes later, I do not think he would be alive."

Silence. Ilya knew Shane was going to tell Svetlana that he should have just gone along with it.

Instead, Shane lets out a watery "*Fuck*."

Ilya frowned. He should have known that Shane would be too good to ever say anything nasty to Ilya. Cruelty was Ilya's specialty.

"He is safe. Sitting on the bathroom floor of his hotel. Asked me to call you."

"I'm coming."

"You cannot come. The Village keeps records-"

"I don't care."

"You have the gold medal game tomorrow. If someone sees you-"

"I said I don't fucking care. Tell me where he is."

"After Russia was eliminated, they moved him to a private hotel, the Pullman. Room 1208."

"I'm on my way."

The call ended. Ilya didn't know what to say.

Svetlana sure did, recovering from her surprise enough to smirk out, "Shane Hollander."

Ilya poked one of his eyes open. "Yes."

"How long?"

"Summer before the draft," Ilya waited for disgust or judgement and was confused to receive an amused smile. "I don't know when it became what it is."

She nodded with understanding. "He sounded terrified."

"I know."

"He's coming to see you even with the game tomorrow."

"I heard."

Svetlana took his hand. "I'm glad you have someone. He cares about you a lot."

"I don't deserve him."

"You do. You're not as alone as you feel, Ilya."

Alone, the word echoed. He had felt alone his entire life, even though he had been surrounded by so many people all the time. He never felt *seen*.

His mother saw him, but then she left.

Maybe Shane could see him too. Either that, or he was repulsed by him and just doing this as a favour.

"He's coming," Svetlana said. "Hold on until he gets here. Could you do that?"

Ilya nodded.

They waited.

Shane marked his arrival with a series of intense knocks at the door. Svetlana squeezed Ilya's hand, then went to meet Shane.

Ilya heard their voices in the other room. It was far too difficult to understand English being spoken so quietly but Shane and Svetlana both sounded concerned. Ilya didn't understand why.

The door opened and closed once again, which Ilya was confused about. Maybe Shane didn't want to see Ilya, after all?

But then there was Shane standing in front of him without Svetlana in tow.

Ilya was so confused by his appearance. He was wearing sweatpants and a Team Canada hoodie, which seemed innocent enough. But his hair was matted, like he was in too much of a hurry to brush it. His eyes were clearly red-rimmed. It looked like he was crying, which didn't make any sense.

Shane won the semifinal yesterday. What did he have to cry about?

"Ilya," he said.

"Hi."

Shane took that as permission to practically run across the bathroom and pull Ilya into his arms.

"You're alive," Shane said. "I'm so happy you're safe."

"I am sorry," Ilya said, because he was disoriented and didn't know what else he could say in response to that.

"Why are you sorry?" Shane moved away for a moment to look into his eyes, concerned.

"I was on the railing, Shane. I was--"

"I know, Ilya. Svetlana told me." Shane held Ilya's face in his hands. His fingers were shaking. "But you're here now. That's what matters."

Something cracked open in Ilya's chest. He desperately needed Shane to know the truth. There was still time for Shane to find out and hopefully run far away from this wreck of a person. "I wanted to fall."

Shane didn't say anything, so Ilya took that as an opportunity to get the words out as fast as he possibly could. "I was not just thinking about it. I wanted to fall. I want it so bad. And I am so ashamed Svetlana caught me. I am ashamed I did not- that I could not--"

"Ilya--"

"It should have been done before she came back. I had time. I was sitting there and I could have let go and I did not and I do not know why I did not do it. Now I have to live with knowing that I want to die and how I cannot even do that right--"

"Stop." Shane's hands tightened on his face. "Stop, Ilya. Please."

"It is true."

"I know it's true. I know." Shane said, voice raw. "But you're here. Whatever the reason, you're here. And I need you to be here. I can't do this without you, Ilya. I know that's selfish, and I know I'm not supposed to say that, but I can't. I don't know how I could have gone on if you had-"

Shane couldn't finish his sentence. He was crying -- no, *sobbing* -- and Ilya realized that he had never seen Shane cry before. Not once, in all the years they've known each other.

"I am sorry," Ilya said.

"You don't have to be sorry you feel like this." Shane wiped his face with the back of his hand. "Why didn't you tell me? That it was this bad? I would have- I don't know what I would have done, but I would have done something."

"I did not know how."

"You could have said anything. You could have said '*Shane, I'm not okay*'. You could have-"

"I have never been okay," Ilya said. "My mother killed herself when I was twelve and I was the one who found her body. I have been trying to run away from it ever since, and I cannot escape it. It is in me. It has always been in me."

Shane stared at him. The tears were still wet on his face, but something else was there now -- shock, maybe, or horror.

"Your mother," he said. "I had no idea."

"No one knows. My father promised me not to talk about it."

"You were twelve?"

"Yes."

"And you found her?"

"That is what I said, no?"

"Ilya, I don't... I don't know what to say. I'm so sorry. That's- that's not enough. I know it's not enough. But I'm so fucking sorry."

"It was long time ago."

"No matter how long ago it was. Fuck, twelve years old, Ilya. You were a kid and you weren't able to talk about it with anybody-" he stopped and shook his head. "No wonder you- no wonder-"

Once again, Shane Hollander was rendered speechless. He pulled Ilya into his arms again.

"I'm sorry I don't know the right thing to say, Ilya," Shane said. "I know I can't fix this. But I'm here and I won't go anywhere and I- I don't know what else to do."

It wasn't the right thing, per se. Shane wasn't perfect or poetic or instantly-healing.

But Shane kept coming back to Ilya, even when he was at his most shameful. Somehow that made him feel a little better.

It was Ilya's turn to break after this realization.

The sobs were torn out of him, harsh and anguished sounds he couldn't control. He cried for his mother and himself. He didn't know what he was going to do next. He just needed this evil out of his body.

Shane held him as Ilya said nonsensical things in both English and Russian. He didn't ever tell Ilya he was too loud or too strange. Shane even kept whispering that Ilya could cry with him, that he was safe.

When the sobs finally slowed down, Ilya felt less heavy.

"What do you need from me right now?" Shane asked.

Ilya knew he could finally be honest. "I am so fucking alone and I always have been. I need someone. No, not someone. I need *you*. No, that is also wrong. I *want* you. I *want* to not have to hide anymore. I *want* to wake up next to you and never have to leave. I just *want, want, want*, Shane. I want so much and I never let myself *want*."

Ilya immediately wished he could take it all back. He felt far too vulnerable, but Shane eased his fears as he always did.

"I want that too," he said. "I don't know how we would do it, but I want it."

"Why? I have been so cruel to you."

"You've been scared, Ilya."

"Is that really an excuse?"

"No, but it explains so much to me. It's a reason. I'm scared too. I mean, fuck, I came here without a plan because all I know is that I can't lose you."

Shane's words weren't pretty. Ilya knew he wouldn't find them in any book.

What Ilya knew, though, was that he had dreamed of having Shane.

Maybe not all dreams were bad.

They ended up on Ilya's bed, fully clothed, holding each other. Shane curled around Ilya from behind, his arm tight around his waist.

Shane had a gold medal game in fourteen hours. His career could be destroyed if someone saw him here. And he was still here.

"Sleep," Shane whispered. "I'll stay."

Ilya finally slept.

Canada won gold.

Ilya watched it on his room's flat-screen TV, Svetlana beside him. When Shane scored the winning goal, something complicated moved through his chest.

I almost missed this.

Shane came back that night, gold medal in his pocket. He proudly showed it to Ilya in the dim light. Ilya held it and felt the weight -- this thing Shane dreamed of his whole life.

Ilya didn't even feel a single pang of jealousy.

Okay, that was a major lie.

A part of Ilya felt incredibly incompetent to have not at least won bronze for his country.

Fuck, he wanted to be playing against Shane for gold. At least that would have allowed Ilya to feel like he mattered.

What was done was done, though. Ilya couldn't change things. He could just move forward.

And he was so grateful to be able to celebrate this man who meant so much to him.

"You still should not have stayed last night," Ilya said. "You should have slept."

"I slept enough."

"Liar."

Shane grinned. "We won anyway."

Svetlana kindly pulled some strings to arrange the next steps in Ilya's care.

Within a week, Ilya was on Long-Term Injured Reserve -- medical leave -- and on a flight to Switzerland. The facility in Zurich she found was quiet and far too beautiful for Ilya. He honestly had no idea how Svetlana swung it.

The space was ridiculous, to be quite honest; a converted chateau with grandiose chandeliers and picturesque, big windows. Svetlana and Ilya were both well-off given their careers, but still. Ilya didn't feel like he needed this level of care, but who was he to turn away from Svetlana's gift?

Ilya was beginning to understand how much concern and care she held for him.

Most importantly, Shane called every day.

"How was today?" he asked after giving Ilya a week to settle in.

"Hard. But less hard than yesterday."

"That's something."

"Is it?"

"I think so. I don't know." Shane laughed awkwardly. "My therapist used to say any day that's less hard than the one before counts as progress."

"You have therapist?"

"Had. Before the draft. For anxiety, panic attacks, the works," Shane said. "I wanted you to know, I guess. That you're not the only one who's gone through this stuff."

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Telling me a little bit of your story. I do not feel so alone when I talk to you."

"Always. I am always going to be here for you, Ilya."

Six weeks in, Shane FaceTimed Ilya.

Ilya was in the garden, wrapped in a blanket and reading an actual paperback book. It felt nice for his life to slow down for once. It made things feel more manageable.

Shane's face appeared on screen, slightly off-center.

“I’ve been working on something,” Shane said. “Don’t laugh.”

He was holding a Russian-to-English dictionary that he must have picked up second-hand. It was destroyed to shit and full of sticky notes.

“I wanted to say something to you in your language.” Shane cleared his throat. “So, uh, here goes... *Ya... loo-BLOO... tee-BYA.*”

His pronunciation was absolutely atrocious. Ilya, who was taken aback, *cackled*. He couldn’t help it -- he doubled over, tears streaming down his face, laughing harder than he had in months.

“That bad?” Shane asked.

“That is the worst Russian I have ever heard.”

“I practiced!”

“You practiced *wrong*.”

Shane tried again. Somehow, it was even worse.

“Say it back to me,” Shane finally said, giving up. He was smiling. “The right way.”

Ilya breathed in the fresh air around him. There were tall, snowy mountains around him, and he genuinely felt so *alive* at this moment. “*Ya lyublyu tebya.*”

“That’s what I was trying to say,” Shane said. “*I love you*. That’s what it means. Well, you know that already, but I wanted to tell you that I love you.”

“I know.”

“You’re not going to say it back, asshole?”

“*Ya lyublyu tebya*, Shane.”

Shane nodded happily. “In English, too?”

“I love you.” The translation felt unfamiliar in Ilya’s mouth, but he was happy to say it. “I have never said that to anybody before. But I love you.”

Shane tried to discreetly wipe his eyes. “Come back to me soon.”

“I am trying.”

The facility released Ilya eight weeks after he arrived.

He didn't go back to Russia. He didn't go back to Boston, either. He went to Montreal, to Shane's apartment.

Shane picked him up from the airport in what Ilya had called "the most boring car in North America for the most boring man in North America" -- a sensible car that could belong to an accountant or a suburban father of three.

"Welcome back," Shane had said with a lopsided grin when he saw Ilya.

They drove to Shane's apartment in comfortable silence.

Ilya loved his newly-rediscovered freedom. He was able to watch the city all through Shane's shitty car window. It was late April in Montreal, so the last of the snow was finally melting away and people were walking around in winter coats for the first time in months.

The joy outside was contagious for the pair.

Shane's apartment was just as nice as Ilya remembered it. There were books on the coffee table, a few family photos on the wall. It looked like a proper home.

"I cleaned," Shane said nervously. "I mean, I hired someone to clean, but then I cleaned some more after that because I felt it wasn't perfect yet for you, and then--"

"Shane."

"Yeah?"

"Your home is perfect."

"*Perfect*? Oh, okay. Good. That's good." Shane ran a hand through his hair. "Are you hungry? I could order something. Or there's food in the kitchen. Before I lost track of time and rushed to pick you up, I went shopping and didn't get a chance to put it all away. I didn't know what you'd want, so I got... Well, I Googled 'Russian food' and I think that might have been a mistake, but I tried--"

Ilya walked into the kitchen.

The counter was covered with groceries. Bread, cheese, fruit, vegetables... normal things. And then, on the end, slightly separate from the rest, was a jar of pickled herring. Ilya's jaw nearly dropped as he saw other nostalgic foods: a container of smetana and a massive frozen block of homemade borscht that was definitely melting.

He stared at the haul and then looked back at Shane.

"I didn't know what you liked," Shane said. "I went to three different stores. There was a Russian grocery store in the east end and this woman there kept trying to help me but I don't speak Russian or French very well and she didn't speak much English. I think I might have bought something with fish eggs? I don't know."

Ilya picked up the jar of pickled herring. "Hollander."

“Yeah?”

“I have lived in America for many years. I do eat your normal food.”

“I know! I know that. But I thought- I wanted you to feel...” Shane sighed. “I don’t know what I thought. I guess I panicked. I wanted you to feel at home.”

Ilya goofily smiled at Shane, who was standing in the kitchen doorway with his hands shoved into his pockets and his shoulders hunched up around his ears. He looked terrified that he had done something wrong and embarrassed himself.

Ilya found it all so very sweet and perfectly Shane.

“You bought me pickled herring,” he said.

“I bought you pickled herring.”

“And sour cream.”

“The container said smetana. I didn’t know what it was. Google Translate was not helpful.”

“It is sour cream.”

“Oh.” Shane’s face fell. “I could have gotten that at the regular store.”

“The taste is little different but yes.”

“The Russian grocery store was pretty far from here.”

“I believe you.”

They stared at each other across the kitchen. Shane looked miserable. Ilya felt something bubbling up in his chest. He didn’t recognize this emotion at first, it being uncomfortably foreign and strange.

As Ilya learned in the last few weeks, though, he needed to force himself to feel instead of repressing it downwards.

He was *laughing again*.

Shane was staring at him in disbelief, which only made things worse. Ilya laughed even harder, gasping for breath, the jar of pickled fucking herring still clutched in one hand.

“I don’t-” Shane started. “Are you okay? Is this, like, a breakdown? Should I be worried?”

“You bought me fish,” Ilya wheezed. “You travelled far and went to three different stores to buy me pickled fish and sour cream.”

“I was trying to be thoughtful!”

“That is the most thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me,” Ilya said. “And also the stupidest.”

“Okay, that’s-”

“I love you.”

Shane stopped whatever defense he was going to say.

“I love you,” Ilya said again. “*Ya lyublyu tebya*. Both languages. Because you went to Russian grocery store to buy me pickled herring even though I have never once expressed any interest in pickled herring.”

“You might have liked it.”

“I hate herring.”

“Oh. Well, I know that now.”

At that, Ilya put the jar on the counter, walked right up to Shane, and kissed him with all the intent of words he still didn’t know how to say yet but was learning how to.

“Thank you,” he said against Shane’s mouth. “This was very kind.”

“You’re welcome.” Shane’s arms came up around him. “Can we order pizza instead?”

“Yes. We can order pizza.” Ilya smiled. “Also, I love borscht.”

Shane’s answering smile was so full of joy that Ilya decided he didn’t want to look at anything else.

They ate pizza from Shane’s favourite pizza place in Montreal, Pizza Bouquet. Ilya thought it was pretty decent.

Outside, the sun was setting. Ilya felt consumed by shades of pink and gold. It was particularly pretty -- he had since learned a lot about nature’s beauty after his experience in Switzerland.

Ilya felt *safe*.

“I’m really glad you’re here,” Shane said.

Ilya looked at him and smiled the most genuine smile yet.

“I am really glad I am here too,” he said with more meaning than one.

And yes, right now, he really meant it.

There would be days when he won't. Ilya will feel a darkness coming on when he wakes up and he won't remember why he should get out of bed. The weight will settle onto his chest and Ilya can't move no matter what he does.

On those days, he will look outside his window and reminisce on how it felt to want to fall. It's not because he wanted it now, but because the memory lives in his body and etched its way into his bones.

Shane won't always know what to do during these episodes. He will hover too close, anxious, bringing Ilya water he won't drink and food he won't eat. He will say the wrong things sometimes -- *maybe if you went for a walk* or *have you tried the breathing exercises* -- and Ilya will want to scream at him that breathing exercises don't fix the kind of broken he is.

Sometimes he will scream.

"I am not your project," Ilya snapped one night. "You cannot fix me with your stupid *happy thoughts*."

"I'm not trying to fix you!"

"Then stop fucking hovering! I am sick of you looking at me like I am broken!"

"I'm not..." Shane sighed. "I don't know what I'm doing, Ilya. I'm scared. I'm allowed to be scared."

"Scared of what?"

"Of you dying!" The words came out louder than Shane probably intended. The pair flinched at how violent it sounded. "I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm afraid of waking up one morning and you're *gone*. Fuck, Ilya, I'm terrified all the time. Every minute of every day. So yeah, I hover. I'm sorry. I didn't know what else to do."

The anger seemed to drain out of Ilya and make him feel like a giant asshole.

"I am sorry," he said pathetically.

"Hey, Ilya, it's not on you to apologize," Shane said. "I'm not trying to make you feel guilty by saying this. I just don't know the difference between hovering and staying close to you. I know one of them is helpful and the other very much isn't. I just don't know what the line is."

"I do not know either."

"Great. That's... Great. We're both fucked up."

"And this is news, Shane Hollander?"

Shane laughed weakly and Ilya smiled in turn.

“What if we figure out the line together?” Ilya said. “We talk? I tell you when you hover. You tell me when you are scared.”

“That sounds like lots of talking.”

“Yes.”

“I’m not good at that.”

“You will get better at it.”

Shane nodded. “We’ll learn.”

“We will learn,” Ilya echoed.

“Okay,” he said. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

They figured it out.

Ilya knew it wouldn’t be instantaneous, and it sure as hell was not.

Still, they learned.

Shane realized that on bad days, Ilya needed someone to sit with him in his room but leave the lights off. He wanted Shane to say *I’m here* and mean it, and then shut up and let the silence be enough. Shane picked up Ilya’s reading habit as well during these days.

Ilya had assumed when Shane asked him *did you eat today* or *did you take your medication*, Shane was thinking Ilya was an incompetent child who couldn’t take care of himself. That was as far from the truth as it could get. Ilya learned Shane was so terrified of losing him that checking in was the only way he knew how to handle that fear.

They mastered the art of having arguments without destroying each other. The pair learned how to say *I need space* without it meaning *I don’t want you*.

It was hard. Honestly, it was the most difficult thing Ilya had ever done.

Healthy relationships were so much harder than hockey or hiding or, fuck, standing on that balcony and choosing to come back inside.

But he kept doing it. He woke up every morning and chose to stay.

And they both were ready and willing to heal.

When the season started in autumn, Ilya went back to Boston begrudgingly and Shane stayed in Montreal.

They became more careful. Their phone calls were held every night, and they continued to text during the day. Every now and then, their schedules would align and Ilya would spend the weekend in Montreal. It was never enough time, but, hey, it was something and it was defined.

Ilya and Shane were *boyfriends*. It was more than Ilya ever thought he would have.

He began to see a therapist in Boston. The league found him some woman who didn't let him bullshit his way through sessions and made him talk about things he had spent his whole life not talking about. She was annoying as hell, but she was also the reason he was still alive. Ilya encouraged Shane to start seeing his therapist again too, and it actually helped a lot to have someone to go over the last few months with him.

Ilya even agreed to start taking an antidepressant. It made him feel slightly muffled for the first few months, but settled into something manageable. It didn't fix him. Nothing fixed him. But it took the edge off the darkness and made the bad days less frequent and less deep.

"I miss you," Shane said one night during their daily calls.

"I miss you too."

"This is hard."

"I know."

"But it's worth it. Right?"

Ilya thought about it. The hiding and distance left a lot to be desired, as did the way his chest would ache every time he had to say goodbye to Shane.

But *having* Shane in his life?

"Mhm," he said. "It is worth it."

Shane's parents had invited their son's partner over for Christmas.

Ilya almost said no. It was too much, too fast. It felt incredibly daunting to meet your secret boyfriend's parents, especially when said parents didn't know their son was gay or that they had been seeing each other for years.

Worst of all, they most definitely had no idea it would be Ilya Rozanov, some big-bad-Boston enemy.

“They know about you,” Shane said when Ilya brought this concern up. “I told them.”

Ilya’s heart stopped. “You told them? And did not tell me?”

“Not everything. Not the- the Sochi stuff. But the rest of it, like that we’re together. How would they invite you otherwise?”

“When did you tell them?”

“A few hours ago. I wanted to make sure they were... I didn’t want to surprise you.”

“What did they say?”

Shane was quiet for a moment. “My mom cried.”

“Bad cry or good cry?”

“Good cry, I think. She said she was happy I had someone. She’d been worried about me, supposedly. Thought I seemed lonely.” Shane smiled. “She said she couldn’t wait to meet you.”

Ilya didn’t know what to say. His own father didn’t remember his mother was dead most of the time now. His relationship with his brother was still non-existent.

The idea of parents who cried happy tears and said they couldn’t wait to meet their son’s boyfriend was so foreign to him.

“Okay,” he said finally.

“Okay?”

“Okay. I will come for Christmas. I will bring the pickled herring.”

Ilya didn’t bring the pickled herring, which was a good thing because he would have immediately shattered the jar after Shane’s mother scared him shitless with the largest hug known to man the very second he walked into Shane’s parents’ house.

He forced himself not to flinch as Yuna Hollander wrapped her arms around him. What did Ilya think, that Shane’s mother would smack him upside the head as a *hello*? She wasn’t anything like Ilya’s father.

“I’m so happy to finally meet you,” she said. “Shane has told me so much about you.”

“He has?”

“Well.” Yuna finally pulled away, smiling. “He told me some things about you aside from hockey, of course. I’ve inferred the rest.”

David Hollander, Shane’s father, shook his hand firmly. This was to be expected. However, Ilya did not anticipate him to warmly look Ilya in the eyes as he did so and say, “Welcome to the family.”

The immediate approval from these two of all people nearly made Ilya’s head explode. Fathers were to berate you and be disappointed in you. Shane’s father seemed so incredibly different from Ilya’s.

It was different. Good, but different.

The house quickly became full of conversation. Ilya couldn’t help but notice the large Christmas tree in the living room. It was absolutely covered in ornaments, lights, and tinsel. He smiled as he looked more closely at the paper-and-popsicle-stick ornaments; they were the kinds of things children made in school. *Shane’s childhood.*

“That’s from when I was six,” Shane said, catching Ilya looking at a lopsided star. “My mom kept everything.”

“Of course I kept everything,” Yuna called from the kitchen. “What kind of mother throws away her baby’s art projects?”

The kind of mother who swallows a bottle of pills and never wakes up, Ilya thought grimly.

It was too dark to be said out loud, and he couldn’t prevent those thoughts. His therapist said it was better for him to think about his mother than to repress his mother. Even during the holidays.

Shane agreed, sending Ilya a wave of support by squeezing his hand under the table during dinner. His parents didn’t comment or make a big deal about it. They passed potatoes and talked about hockey and asked Ilya lots of politely invasive questions.

“Do you have a lot of family in Russia?” Yuna asked at one point.

Ilya’s throat tightened awkwardly. “My father. A brother. We are not close.”

She didn’t push. She nodded, well-meaning sympathy in her eyes, and changed the subject to funny stories from Shane’s childhood.

After dinner, Ilya found himself alone in the kitchen with Shane’s mom. She was washing dishes and Shane had decided to shower. With nothing better to do, he offered to help; she gratefully handed him a towel.

“Thank you again for coming,” she said.

“Thank you for having me.”

“Shane is different with you,” Yuna handed him a wet plate. “He looks happier. More himself.”

“He makes me happier too.”

“He told me you had a hard time earlier this year. He didn’t give details, but-” Yuna looked at him with a kind maternal smile that Ilya had missed dearly. “You seem to make each other better. I’m glad you’re spending the holidays with us.”

All of this felt outside of his comfort zone. Ilya had no idea what Yuna wanted him to say.

“Me too,” he decided. “I appreciate him a lot. And I also appreciate both you and your husband. The holidays are not so easy for me.”

She patted his hand reassuringly. They were wet and full of soap, but he didn’t mind. “You’re family now, yeah?”

Ilya thought about his mother and how she used to run her fingers through his hair.

He was sure Irina was the last person who could ever love Ilya unconditionally like that. Especially as a mother.

He was so glad he was wrong.

“Yeah,” Ilya said. His voice came out watery. “We are family now.”

End Notes

thank you to the wonderful emily (@nexttsemesterr on twitter) for beta-reading!

you can find me on twenty one pilots twitter LMAO at @onlyfrienduknow. lmk if i should fully join heated rivalry twitter i am debating

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