

but I'm not a soldier

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but I'm not a soldier

by [montgomery](#)

Summary

Ilya's used to long winters. He longs for the sun. He finds it.

(Featuring: an Ilya-centric introspection of his depression, husbands-in-therapy, and a LOT of trite metaphors)

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Ilya's been empty long ago. Life consisted of moments threaded by the need for survival. Food. Water. Hockey for money. Sex. Vodka. He's pawed at the hole within him, deep in his chest, and wonders if there is still a soul there. Perhaps he'd given it all, just as they'd asked. Perhaps the little he had left was a mercy. There is no enough as far as Ilya was concerned; it was only the greedy chants of *more*.

Ilya often wonders if his mother wasted away because she had given all of herself. He wonders if he's taken from her, too.

Notes

After writing autistic!Shane fic, I figured it's time to roll around on Ilya this time.

depressed!Ilya and autistic!Shane speak to me so profoundly because I'm neurodivergent myself (ADHD), and my girlfriend has depression. The holidays are a tough topic for us and so I poured a lot of my own sadness into this, I guess.

Usual warnings apply: English is not my first language (and so I am prone to fucking around with it, hence some odd turns of phrase); written mostly on my phone so typos and punctuation errors are mine.

As is my usual style, this likely makes very little sense but I hope it will be as cathartic for you to read as it was for me to write!

Title is a lyric from All These Things That I Have Done by The Killers (which imo is a very Ilya song, but I guess that's just me)

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

Ilya hates staring at himself in the mirror.

He'd refuse mirrors altogether, if he could, but he'd been so carefully crafting his façade of bravado and arrogance that, if he'd shattered it with even just a hint of imperfection, he'd be banished to home.

No one is home anymore. All that remains are the tatters of scattered memories which, if he stayed awake for long enough, he thought he might forget.

He doesn't hate mirrors because he thinks he looks ugly. No, far from it: he hates being forced to look at his eyes in the mirror because he sees the scars he refuses to confront. They haunt him, they chill him like the winters he's always hated. They remind him of the darkness within him that he'd rather conceal.

—

Summers in Russia are cold. The sunlight teases him sometimes, and distant memories informed him of the trees that would grow in the backyards and parks where he and his mother would escape to. He remembers feeling, for the slightest bit, how the sun bit his skin. He basked in it; hoped he'd absorb enough of it to keep him warm for the harsh winter that would follow.

He didn't think he'd like the ice. Winters reminded him that he would not be free to roam the streets with his mother, and he would instead bear witness to his father's harsh demands of his mother, of him: *the food's too cold*, or perhaps *the wine had run dry*, or perhaps even worse, that *you're too soft on him, Irina*.

Perhaps Grigori believed that Ilya would be too naïve to understand the depths of his mother's emptiness, or of the chill of a hollow home. It would be the only explanation Ilya could ponder for why his father had been so brazen with his callousness.

His mother was not perfect. He'd been fed lies before, such as *he is only thinking of the best for you*, or perhaps even more egregiously, *he knows you are more, so he demands more, expects more*.

Ilya knows the latter to be untrue, with how he'd so dismissed Ilya's first successes. Ilya doesn't remember the feeling of basking in glory or of celebrating in victory: each game he'd played had been concluded with a list of mistakes he could, in his father's eyes, never rectify.

Ilya wonders if his mother ever believed her own lies. They had been as untrue for him as they were for her.

And yet his hatred of winter aside, it is in the ice where he feels the most free. First, it had been borne of necessity, a matter of survival: hockey had been his only escape, during the cold winter months, from his barren home and the constant sadness that permeated its walls. Then, it had been a source of that validation he'd craved from his father. At least on the ice,

Ilya is a source of spectacle, if not pride. Perhaps that spectacle had been the only way his father had loved.

He started smoking one cold winter morning. He was twelve.

At first it had been because he'd hoped to keep his lungs warm from the cold. Grigori did it. So had Alexei.

In fact, it was Alexei who had given him his first stick.

It was cloudy, with nary a ray to warm his skin. The grass had been endless. It was spectacle, it was glamour, it was dignified: the kind of event his father basked in; the kind of event worthy of their family name.

Ilya sat in silence, atop soft snow, by a large, barren tree. He stewed in the guilt he's felt. He didn't remember how she'd gone.

(He does. He chooses to forget it.)

Frost bit the tracks on Ilya's cheeks where sparse tears had earlier flowed. He wiped them with the sleeve of his coat, perhaps a bit too aggressively, if the dry patch of pink skin on his cheeks were any indication. His father was talking to dignitaries, some statesmen, all of whom had offered their condolences. They never really knew her, not really; they had only known her in relation to him. To these people, to the societies his father chose to surround himself with, her name was merely a decoration to his. Her tombstone read no more than this: *Obedient wife. Dutiful mother.*

Such a pity, they said. *She'd been beautiful.*

None of them would have known how her eyes look as she smiles when sunshine hits her cheeks. They only know the pursed lips, caked lipstick, and wide eyes. Graceful. Dignified.

They don't know how beautiful his mother's eyes looked under the sun. And yet they had the audacity to tell him, in hushed tones and with faux sorrow, that he has his mother's eyes.

It was then, by the barren tree, when Alexei had spotted him. Ilya would have thought that Alexei would ridicule the shallowness of his tears (*had they been shallow then?*). Instead, Alexei reached for the inner pocket of his coat, pulled out a cardboard box he'd no doubt stolen from their father, and handed over a stick to Ilya, and a gilded lighter.

A curt nod. Ilya knew what it meant. *Hide your tears now before father sees you.*

Ilya coughed the first few times. He hoped that the smoke hid his tears.

Vodka had come soon after. Ilya and Alexei hid underneath one of the help's tables. The help had pitied them too much to have told Grigori anything, and so they have allowed Alexei and

Ilya to drown their sorrows.

They both had their own forms of amnesia. Alexei's was coke. Ilya's was hockey.

That was the last time Alexei had been a brother.

The void within Ilya has made him an unreliable narrator, because it is not entirely honest to say that no one was home anymore.

He was thirteen when he saw a path to the sun and an end to the perpetual winter he'd resigned himself to.

Grigori wanted him to stay for the KHL—wanted him to stay in Moscow and a lifetime of snow. His skill had been meant for it. His body had been made for it.

The vodka swirled in his glass, reflecting the warm street-lights of a dark alley far from his home. The glass, much too expensive for drinking in dark alleyways, was Ilya's only rebellion.

It wasn't like his father would notice that the glass had been gone from his study anyway.

The sound of the cars nearby echoed and melded with a laughter he's grown familiar with.

His safety. His comfort. Svetlana.

It was sardonic, her laughter. Cynical, with a depth to it that should not have been possible for her age. And yet, just as she's shielded Ilya from the worst of himself, she has shown Ilya what more there is to the world..

She's seen more of it. His father was a superstar. She'd flown between Moscow and New York; would regale Ilya with stories of the truths she's seen in lands an ocean away.

And isn't it amazing, Ilya, how those decorated stars are not nearly as good as our players?, she'd say. *And yet they drive expensive cars, drink expensive wine. They lived in colorful cities and would fuck the most beautiful women.*

Ilya wiped the sweat from his brow. It was the summer, one of the hottest in recent memory. Perhaps even history, too. He poured her a glass of his father's finest vodka. She drank earlier, too, if only because the crowds she'd surrounded herself with, the international students, would do the same thing.

The NHL, Ilya. America. Leave this place; there is nothing here for you anymore.

Svetlana is the summer he's never forgotten; the season he'd been grateful had come.

He loves her, he knows. And yet much as Svetlana reminded Ilya of the summer heat, and she'd certainly become his comfort, she had not been the sun.

It was a cold winter in Saskatchewan when he first saw the sun. He saw it in the freckles that waved hello, stark against pale skin kissed with the faintest hint of gold.

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

Self-righteous—

I'm Shane Hollander.

Boring—

You're an awesome player to watch.

Flatterer—

—that's not happening.

Arrogant—

His freckles mocked Ilya. Those fucking freckles, crafted by the sun and arranged by the gods.

He'd indulged himself in the beauty of women and the wonders of men. He'd explored bodies, softness and muscle and all. They've warmed his bed, but none of them have stayed long enough to warm his soul.

And yet inches away from him, a breath away from him, his soul singed with the heat: first, of lust in his belly, undeniable; and then of an incredible wave, deep within his chest, that he'd refused to name. Ilya called it an unhealthy obsession then. It's the rivalry; it's the proximity; it's the mutually assured destruction of secrets kept and pleasures chased.

He would not tell a soul. He would not tell even his own.

Ilya yearned to reach for the light breaking through his false bravado. He's learned to conceal himself in fraudulent confidence and sham arrogance. And yet here he is, *Hollander*, who cannot seem to lie. Here he is, Hollander, whose words speak truths and whose body is an open book.

But Ilya doesn't love him.

Love is a ludicrous luxury, a delusional dream, a foolish fantasy. Ilya doesn't know the shape of it. He doesn't feel it, hasn't felt it, doesn't know what it had been like. What it could be like. He thought he'd seen it, in glimpses, from his mother, who would walk alongside him under the sun. He thought he'd felt it from Svetlana, whose heart had always been stronger, and whose spirit had been much more ferocious than Ilya's had been.

It isn't love, what he feels. It isn't love when he feels Hollander's lips on his. It isn't love, when Hollander opens up to him. It isn't love when Hollander obeys him, and it isn't love when Hollander looks into his eyes, with pleas of *please* and *more*, because Hollander, just like the rest of them, had always wanted *more*.

"More, Ilya—want more of you."

It was a familiar tune.

Ilya's life consisted in a series of *more*: first, from his father, who had wanted more success; then Alexei, who had wanted more money. *More* sucked him, it drained him dry, it left Ilya a walking carcass of flesh and bone and feet fit enough only to skate hockey, and only because it is the only tool with which he could be filled so he could supply *more*.

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Ilya often wonders if his mother wasted away because she had given all of herself. He wonders if he's taken from her, too.

Ilya made space for him, in his fridge, in his oven, in his bed. He'd allowed Hollander – *Shane* – to invade his sanctuary. He'd allowed Shane to invade his time, his thoughts, *his thoughts*.

He does not know when it happens. Perhaps it is the desperate cling of hope left in him. He didn't know he had that left, and yet—

Father. Alexei. Hockey.

Hockey. Money. Survival.

Russia, Russia. Because Russia.

Shane left his space once. Left when he'd started dating Rose Landry; left when Ilya had revealed too much of himself. Ilya spent too countless a sleepless night chastising his choice to step into the light. Constant chants of his father's reprove, his warning: *There is no emotion; only honor. There is no feeling; only prestige. There is no solace; only solitude.*

And, just as he exhales thin smoke, he reads, again and again, how hockey's good boy had scored a blockbuster princess.

Smoking isn't good for you.

He stubbed the butt on the ashtray. Tar clung to his skin and lungs, and nicotine coated his blood.

They'd make a good pair, he thought. She deserves him.

And another voice: *this is the price of wanting to take.*

But he came back. Shane came back.

That night, his façade cracked. Lights slipped in, tears flow: first, just one, then, as Hollander – *no, Shane* – breathes Ilya, for no other reason than to *speak* to him, the dam burst.

This cannot be. He does not deserve this. He does not deserve to take.

And yet that night, Shane had begged. His body, naked; his soul bared. Ilya could see it, see the beauty of the man beneath him, eyes shut, freckles visible still, even in the faint glow of the small, warm lamps adorning the walls of the hotel room. It was heated, and messy, but also slow. Ilya took him slow. Shane begged for slow.

Shane begged—

—*Ilya, please, take me. Take me, please.*

Ilya wonders if there is a hint of truth to the theory that children mirror their parents. It had been well-studied, well-documented, in pop science and journal alike.

He wonders if the void within him is because he had given too much. Sometimes, when he catches his eyes in the mirror when he forgets what he's used to conceal them—

Your eyes. They're like you're mother's—

—he wonders if he'd felt so empty not because he'd given, like his mother, but because he'd been consumed by hunger. Want. He wonders if he's demanded more from the world around him. He wonders if he's empty from wanting more, just like his father, just like Alexei.

He wonders if he's demanded more from him.

Shane.

2022.

“I’m home,” Ilya hears, and his heart should leap with joy. Unfortunately, the void does not choose when to make its presence known. The darkness within him does not announce itself.

The room is dark. The sheets are a mess. There are plates scattered on the sink. He hasn’t eaten much. He’d only stood up to feed Anya, and only because she does not deserve an end even if Ilya does waste away. No one deserves suffering because of the heaviness in his chest, least of all his precious Anya.

He’s bundled up in blankets, too lazy to move. He’s pressed in the gym; gotten smashed against the boards; even got into a few fistfights once. And yet nothing feels so heavy as this does. Nothing feels as heavy as the weight of the world pressed against his chest. He thinks, sometimes, how his mother, so young, so small, could carry so much of that within her. Ilya feels like he would break with it.

Maybe he’d break with it one day.

He’s tried. He’s tried so much. But he’s tired. So, *so* tired.

He doesn’t want to go by his own hands. He doesn’t want the pills, just as his mother had gone. He doesn’t want to jump. He doesn’t want to breathe noxious air.

And yet perhaps he bought his cars and drove a little too fast, a bit too recklessly because he wouldn’t mind it if he’d gone that way. He throws the first punch because he doesn’t care if bruises become hemorrhage. He drinks a bit too much because maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if his liver killed him. He smokes a pack a day because maybe it wouldn’t be so horrible if he could no longer breathe one day.

Never mind if it’s slow. Never mind if it’s fast. He doesn’t care how he goes, so long as one day, he *does*. There is comfort in that certainty, though he sometimes wishes it happens sooner rather than later. It may even be better if he’s gone, because maybe he would not have to burden—

“Ilya,” he feels breathed against his skin. The bed dips beside him, and the weight of the world’s replaced by the weight of his husband beside him, leg slung over Ilya’s waist. “I missed you.”

Ilya shuts his eyes and takes a slow inhale. He smells the sheets with a faint hint of the lavender laundry pods that Shane loves using. He smells his own sweat that had inevitably dried on his pillows as he slept wrapped up. He smells—

He smells airplane seats and vanilla. He smells soft powder. He smells a hint of deep amber and cedar. He smells Shane, *his* Shane. He breathes in again, and the muscles he does not know had been stiff, at that point, relaxes.

He feels the sheets loosen around him, and Ilya’s unwrapped from the swaddle he’s created. Hands find his, and it’s skin on skin, and Shane’s so warm next to him.

Hot breath beside the shell of his ear, and it's silence, slow and steady and calming. "Hey," Shane whispers.

Ilya loosens Shane's arms around him and he turns. "Hi," Ilya whispers back.

"It's dark in here."

Ilya nods.

"Have you been here all day?"

Ilya refuses to answer. He assumes Shane would know the answer. Instead, he says, "You haven't showered."

He sees the faintest trace of a smile on the corner of Shane's lips. "I miss you more than I miss my showerhead," Shane jokes.

Ilya smiles back. "What have you done to Hollander," he asks, "That he does not want to clean after flight now?"

Shane shakes his head. "This is more important. You are more important. You okay?"

Despite Shane's smile, Ilya doesn't miss the lines between Shane's brows that mar his lover's face with worry. Rivalry aside, Ilya and Shane have grown together. Have aged together. Shane looks so young, still; looks so innocent despite having reached thirty. And yet that despite, he could see the beginnings of wrinkles form between his brows; sees the lines beside his nose deepen the slightest bit. But there, too, in the corner of Shane's eyes, he sees indents forming where they often fold as Shane crinkles his eyes in a smile. No, not the smiles Shane gives for magazine covers and pressers; not the smiles Shane gives to be polite to the other players.

That smile, the one he sees Shane now try to give for Ilya despite the tenuous fragility of the room's silence. *That* smile, the one Shane gave Ilya at the altar. *That* smile, when he scores a goal and looks back to Ilya in celebration.

It's the smile he's gotten to know from having let this man in. He wonders if the wrinkles that border those eyes, deep and luscious, warm brown, are worth the ones caused by Shane's worry from Ilya having burdened Shane too much. And so Ilya says, "Don't worry about me. Go, shower—I know you feel gross after flight."

Shane shakes his head, and Ilya recognizes the slightest hint of a pout forming. "No," he says, and he sounds like a petulant child. Even now, with the world so dark around Ilya and pressing heavy against his chest, he feels the weight lift the slightest bit.

It is the indescribable magic of Shane Hollander.

"I don't want to move," Shane continues. "Want to hold you."

It is moments and breaths. It takes a few minutes before their breathing syncs. Ilya's blind to time, as he often is when he reaches states like these, and yet he feels the ocean swell within

his chest. He feels the dam within him break.

A tear slips from his eyes. Of *course* Shane doesn't miss it. He might have missed plenty of things in the length they've been together, but Ilya feels Shane's thumbpads on his skin anyway, wiping away the flood now spilling down Ilya's cheeks. "I'm sorry," Ilya chokes. "I'm so *sorry*."

Shane closes what little space is left between the two of them. Ilya feels fingers tangle themselves in his hair, and he's pulled closer until he breathes Shane. His mouth, his tongue, a kiss, then two, then he's planted on Shane's chest. "Shh," Shane whispers. "Don't apologize, *darling*," he says, voice steady, in Russian.

Ilya's throat constricts. He releases a moan he's held back for so long.

"What do you need? What can I give you?"

Don't ask for more, more, more—

Ilya isn't strong enough to fight the demons within him. Yet he wants to try, he wants to *try*.

Isn't that selfish?

Shane Hollander is too beautiful, too honest; Shane Hollander is too good, too earnest, to deserve Ilya: damaged, defective, better dea—

Ilya with his false façade; Ilya with the empty void, deep within, that no one can fill. He's tried. Not even Ilya *himself* could fill it.

Yet here—

It smells like cedar and amber. Vanilla and remnants of dry plane air. It smells like Shane, *Shane*, and he's surrounded by him. It's warm, and he feels light against Ilya's skin, and it overwhelms him. He's buried in Shane, secure; Shane, open; Shane, honest. It's addictive. It's heady.

Ilya wants more and it scares him.

Yeah, it is selfish—

He looks up from where he's buried. He sees Shane's eyes, bright, stubborn. The worry that he'd earlier seen had all but disappeared. In its place is Shane's face, determined, in the same way it is when they skate together.

—But it's worth it to try.

"Hold me," Ilya chokes. "Just... Hold me, please."

"Okay," Shane whispers. "Okay, love," and Shane pulls him in tighter, until Ilya's ears hear Shane's heartbeat. Tears flow, and flow, and flow, and with it, the heaviness of all that he feels.

It's another one of those days.

Shane felt his heart ripped out of his chest, the first time he's discovered that Ilya's been seeing a therapist. He knows Ilya needs it. Shane had even *suggested* it. And yet it still rips his heart out anyway, that Ilya's been so afraid to tell him when he started.

Shane's hurt, most of all, that Ilya seemed too scared to lean into Shane. Guilt crawled within him, too: guilt that he had not seen the signs; guilt that he'd not been stubborn enough, that he'd taken Ilya's words at face value, that he didn't *push* enough.

"But pushing him might have pushed him away."

Shane did not like her.

It took maybe two months after he found out about Galina when he'd gotten the referral for Kara from Rose. *The Center's discreet*, Rose said. *Don't get my shrink, obviously.*

Shane didn't. Instead, Shane got Kara.

He thought that Kara might be a good fit: she was, after all, efficient and straightforward and didn't give condescending advice that would no doubt send Shane into a self-doubt spiral. She said what she meant, and she wasn't afraid to cut to the chase. Shane requested, after all, that he be told the truth. No filter. *I don't think... I'd get it if you were, I don't know, using metaphors or whatever about it.*

Kara nodded. "No problem," she says. "It's why the Centre chose me, I think."

He had been candid when he told Ilya about it. *I'm seeing someone*, Shane quipped, right after dinner courtesy of his husband.

Ilya had been washing the dishes. Even from where Shane sat, by the dining table, he saw how Ilya's shoulders stiffened and concluded that and yeah, maybe Shane was the asshole in this scenario. Not a good joke. *No*, Shane said, *I meant, like, a therapist. I would never—*

Ilya turned to Shane, face in shock. *A therapist. Shane, are you—*

I'm okay. I'm okay. Just... Maybe it's okay to see someone, you know? To untangle what I'm feeling and stuff.

Now, as Shane took his mandated schedule with Kara over teleconferencing (the only good outcome of 2020, he believed), he decided that he did not like her, because she really liked hitting him where it hurts. He sighed. "But I just feel... I don't know. Maybe it's too heavy for him, and I just wish he'd tell me. I know—I could get obsessive over hockey, and it's been so important, and he gets that. It's just... I don't know if he knows that he's the most important thing. The most important person. He doesn't know I'd drop it all for him."

Kara hummed before she said, “Maybe he felt like he doesn’t want to make it any heavier for you, too. He’s clinically depressed, yes?”

Shane nodded. “That’s what he said,” he replied. “And... I don’t know, I feel like he should have trusted me. And it hurts, that he doesn’t.”

“But Mr. Hollander—*Shane*,” Kara said, “Maybe he didn’t want to be a burden to you. Have you reassured him that he isn’t?”

“Of course. He’s *never*.”

“Maybe it’s his way of protecting you,” Kara said. Shane saw her write a note down on her notepad. “Maybe he feels guilty about burdening you. Maybe the better question you can ask him is, *what can I do for you?*”

—

So, because it is another one of those days, he asks, “What do you need? What can I give you?”

He sees Ilya hesitate. Ilya’s big. Larger than life. Personality so boisterous, energy so infectious, that seeing him so small against Shane’s chest might just break Shane’s heart. He remembers, however, the not completely *wrong* advice about how maybe Ilya doesn’t want to burden him, about how Ilya doesn’t want to *worry* him. *You worry too much, Hollander*, Ilya would always say, and at the best of times, Ilya was very good at reducing Shane’s neurosis.

This was not, however, the best of times. In fact, judging purely from the darkness in their home, Shane thinks it might be one of the *worst*. But that’s just the way these things are, he concludes. These moments come in seasons.

Shane falls sometimes, too. Ilya catches him when he does. He can only hope he could catch Ilya when *he* falls, too.

And so he calms his worries. He rubs Ilya’s back. He hopes that maybe his skin would tell Ilya what he feels. *It’s okay*, he wants to tell him. *I can carry it with you. We take turns. In sickness and in health, remember?*

He hears a sigh as Ilya leans in even closer. Maybe Ilya understands what Shane’s hands are trying to say, because he cracks. A tear. “Hold me,” Ilya says. “Just hold me, please.”

Shane smiles. *Of course I will*, he thinks. *I will hold you until you feel like it isn’t heavy for you anymore.*

—

The shower hits Ilya’s skin, and it is at a mercifully kind temperature. He feels the grime from days inside slip away with the lather.

He doesn’t move much. Shane’s scrubbing his skin with his ridiculous soaps and expensive shampoo. “Surprised your hair is still so *flat* after spending so much on *shampoo*,” Ilya quips.

Shane rolls his eyes. “Well, not *everyone’s* hair can’t be as perfect as yours on Head & Shoulders. Now come on, leg out, gotta get soap there, too—*no*, letting the lather trickle down isn’t *washing your legs*, Rozanov.”

Ilya smiles. He indulges Shane’s obsessive showering and lets him wash his legs, then his feet. Sex with Shane is incredible. It *always* is, and yet there’s something... *intimate* about letting Shane wash his body. Something vulnerable.

Ew. When had he become so sentimental?

All thoughts quiet to a stop, however, when he finds Shane’s eyes just an inch away from his.

Shane smiles. “You okay?”

Ilya smiles back. He nods. “Yeah,” he says.

“Still heavy?”

And it’s ridiculous. Here, under the fucking *showerhead*, inside the stupid *Shane-designed shower*, is where it hits him. He sees Shane’s eyes looking at him like he’s something... *precious*. Like Ilya’s *worth* something. The last time he’s seen that is when—

Ilya, my baby—it’s okay if you didn’t win today. You’re still mama’s gold, okay?

—so he exhales, hot breath mixing with the water around them. Maybe it’s *okay* to take this time. “Yeah,” Ilya answers. It’s the truth. “It is. But maybe little less.”

Shane leans closer to him. “Okay. Okay,” he says, and Ilya allows himself to take Shane’s lips into his, under the stupid showerhead, while it’s still beating down water on him. Shane cares about water consumption, so of course, he shuts off the water with his tongue still in Ilya’s mouth.

They kiss until the steam dissipates and their skin runs cold from the moisture. Then they towel off and kiss, still, on top of freshly changed sheets.

It still feels heavy, but maybe Ilya can share the load with him.

—

Ilya cooks them dinner. Something simple. Salmon, brown rice, but Ilya actually knows how to use *spices* this time, and he is grateful to Jackie for teaching him the secrets of athlete-friendly *delicious* food.

(And if that means Ilya would have to be thankful for Hayden fucking Pike too, then so be it. Shane eats more when the food *tastes* good.)

He sets the food down on the table and sits beside Shane. He’d love to look at Shane’s eyes, but he needs his touch more now. He scoots his chair closer to Shane’s, and his right leg is precariously atop Shane’s left, toes touching.

He hears Shane moan when he has a bite of food.

“Is Japanese recipe,” Ilya says. “Jackie taught me. Yuna also helped.”

Ilya hears silence. He turns. Shane’s placed his fork atop the plate.

Nervous, he asks, “Food not good? We can do that phone thing.”

“No,” Shane replies, and he turns to face Ilya. Thumbs on his cheek. Shane has this look on his face, bright. It sucks Ilya in. It always does. “How is it,” Shane whispers, soft, as though he’d been afraid that his voice would shatter the stillness of the night, “that you still have so much love to give?”

Ilya purses his lips. A slow exhale. It stuns him, sometimes, that *this* is how Shane looks at him. Shane, the most perfect, the most *immaculate*, would look at someone so damaged as Ilya as though he were *precious* and *important* and—

Gold.

Ilya smiles back instead. “*It’s you,*” he says, in Russian. “*It’s you. It’s always you.*”

Today is one of those days and yet, as Ilya looks up at Shane looking down on him with so much *lightness* in those dark brown eyes, Ilya thinks that he can weather through them.

Ilya feels electric down his spine as Shane grinds back against him. He’s buried deep in Shane, and Ilya grips Shane’s hips, guides him back down.

It had been Ilya who had initiated this. It’s tradition, after all: post-reunion celebratory sex. He felt Shane’s hesitation at first, heard Shane ask, *are you okay?*, and *are you sure?*, and *it’s okay if we cuddle for now*.

“No, Hollander. I am not grandpa. I’m depressed, not castrated, and I missed you—”

Shane didn’t need much convincing after that. And yet, just as Ilya’s stretched Shane on his fingers, and their moans meld in harmony with the hum of the air conditioning around them, Ilya finds himself on his back, Shane on top of him. Shane’s lips, on his jaw, peppering kisses; Shane’s tongue, by his neck, licking stripes, warm, blowing air, whispering words in French he does not understand and yet gets a sense of. *Toujours, pour toujours*, he hears. *Forever, forever—*

Shane takes the skin atop Ilya’s pulse between his teeth. He loves it when Shane’s rougher like this. Like Ilya doesn’t need to be handled. Then Shane’s mouth’s on his nipple, and he sucks. Lower, still, and Shane’s mouth on his cock. Ilya feels the suction from it, and he feels the moment when his nerves fray off to explosions, skin electric.

He looks at Shane, focused and determined, just as he always is when he’s sucking Ilya’s cock. Ilya threads the fingers of his right hand through Shane’s hair and tugs Shane’s head

closer. Shane's eyes lock onto his, still stubborn, brown. Shane's lips, red; freckles, smattering skin, and even in the dim warm light of the room, Ilya sees it.

He sees the sun.

He feels how the sun warms his skin. He sees how the sun glows. The sun, with him, through winter nights like these.

Ilya gasps at the wonder he feels of being blessed to see beauty, of being gifted with perfection. Sweat, on Shane's forehead, dripping down; his back, arched so perfectly for him; Shane's ass, and he *wants*.

He grips Shane's hair, pulls him back, and if Shane had been perfect before—

Shane's face, blushed red; lips puffy, glossy; his eyes, dark, blown wide, corner of his eyes tearing up at the exertion. Shane is perfect and sunlight and he looks like that for *him*. And he could not believe it. Ilya could not believe that he could *have* this. That he could *take* this.

Shane's mouth shuts, corner of his lips upturned. One brow raised. "Too much, Rozanov?"

Ilya growls as he pulls Shane up by his hair and smashes his lips against his. No more pretensions of tenderness; no more softness. There are days for those, but not today. Today, Ilya needs to *feel* what the world has numbed from him. He needs his lips to hurt, to bruise, from the love of his life taking him. He needs the air in his lungs to give way to Shane's breath down his. He breathes Shane, he tastes Shane, mint from toothpaste and sweetness and indescribable, delectable Shane. Ilya's grateful that he no longer has to worry about the marks he leaves on Shane's skin, because this is *his*, and Shane is only like this – whimpering, and breathless, and desperate – for Ilya and Ilya alone.

It warms his blood to see Shane like this. It comforts him, like it does when he's underneath blankets inside a cabin during a blizzard, to see Shane so willing to *give*.

How is it that you still have so much love to give?

Stupid question, Hollander, he thinks. Ilya has only ever taken the love Shane's given him. The love Shane has, flowing in rivers, on the ice and in the way Shane has invaded his life, but especially in how he gives his body like this, like he trusts Ilya to treasure it.

And oh, Ilya *does*. He bites on the lobe of Shane's ear, before he growls, "Ride me. Take me inside you—"

—*Take what you can, because I'll always give more of myself to you. Always.*

Shane does not make a dance of how he sinks himself onto Ilya. It's not slow, and he knows the stretch is sudden and it might hurt – Ilya shakes his head and holds Shane's hips to slow – but Shane bottoms out not a minute later. "Oh, *fuck*, Ilya," Shane says, "Good. It's okay. So *good*."

"*Fuck*, Shane," Ilya says, "So fucking *tight*," and he feels Shane grip around his cock at the praise. Shane moves then, and it's a show he gives just for Ilya: Shane's right thumb on his

nipple and left finger in his mouth, sucking, before Ilya replaces that with his own thumb.

A crackle in the air. Ilya feels the winds change, because the tempo is faster this time. Shane fucks himself on Ilya's cock like a whore possessed; he loses himself in Ilya, boneless. Ilya *craves* the moment it happens: the moment where Shane, perfect Shane, the world's good boy Shane, cedes control of himself for *him*. For Ilya. Ilya, broken; Ilya, damaged; and yet Ilya, good enough to take this. Good enough to trust with someone so fragile and precious and warm and *warm* and—

“*Solnyshko*,” because dammit, Shane is the sun, and he's delusional to think that he's not. Shane is the sun, and he's bright and he's light and he's *his*. “*fuck*, I'm close, I'm close—”

Shane, lost in the feeling, cracks an eye open and says, “Then give it to me. *Please*, fuck, me too—*god*, Ilya, want to feel you in me, *please*—”

Ilya thrusts up to meet Shane, but not before he wraps his hand around Shane's cock, wet and hard. Ilya rises up to kiss the skin atop where Shane's heart would be before he takes it between his lips and sucks. He wants to mark this, mark Shane, if only as a visual reminder that he can have this. That he's allowed to *take* this. That he's allowed to ask for *more*.

Heat pools in his gut. He is electrified. Then Shane's mouth is on his as he burns from the sun and his mind quiets and the snow finally thaws.

They shower again after. So much for water conservation.

They lay on the sheets. His head's on Shane's chest, and Shane strokes his hair while he hums. Shane is the slightest bit tone-deaf, but Ilya would *never* tell Shane that, if only because he always likes it when Shane's *cute* like this.

“Hey, Ilya?”

“Hm?”

“Have I ever told you what your eyes look while I ride you?”

Ilya chuckles, before he says, “I don't know what you're talking about. They're not good eyes. Not pretty like yours.”

A slap on Ilya's back, then “Don't be ridiculous, Ilya. I'm *serious*.”

Ilya rolls his eyes, then indulges Shane. “What do you mean?”

“Your eyes. They're just. I don't know. I feel like I finally know you, when I look at your eyes. It's nice. Can't explain. Too many words, too tired.”

Ilya chuckles, and yet he remembers a cold winter morning. Remembers the cold, unfeeling voices of strangers who have never known him. *It's a shame that she's gone too soon*, he hears. *That little boy has his mother's eyes*.

“No, explain. What do they look like? They’re eyes. They’re normal eyes. Not pretty like yours,” Ilya repeats.

Ilya feels the gentlest of kisses on his forehead. “No, they’re. They’re *beautiful*, Ilya. Incredible. They’re like... It’s like the ocean. They’re so deep, and I don’t know. It’s. They *glow*, Ilya. It’s like stars, you know?”

“So like superhero with superpowers,” Ilya replies.

Shane shoves him. “You *asshole*,” he whines. “*No*. I mean... You know when the sun hits water? Like in the lake. Or when it’s sunrise, and the ocean’s different shades of blue and green? Your eyes look like that, and... It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve seen ever, I think.”

Ilya stops his cajoling. Honors Shane’s words with his silence. They weren’t good at this *words* thing, after all, and yet Shane had just told him *that*.

Like the ocean when the sun hits. I feel like I finally know you, when I look at your eyes.

He wonders how Shane does not see the darkness in Ilya’s eyes. He wonders how he could look at Ilya and think, even for the slightest second, that Ilya’s eyes look like the fucking *ocean*, and yet—

Ilya does. He knows it. He’s seen it before. He’s seen it when he’s strolled through parks during cold summer days from years and years ago. He’s the way the sun hits her eyes. He thought that hers had been the most beautiful he’d ever seen.

Blue, like the ocean. They sparkle as they ripple when the sun reaches it.

Ilya pulls Shane closer to him. “You know, I’m told I have my mother’s eyes,” he says, as he drifts off to sleep.

But before he does so, he hears Shane whisper to him, quiet, faint, “Then she must have been so beautiful.”

Ilya wakes up first that morning, which is entirely unusual.

He stands up and brushes his teeth in the bathroom, because Shane refuses to kiss him with morning breath. As he does so, he chances a glance at himself in the mirror. It takes a second or two before he has the courage to look at his eyes.

Green and blue. Like the ocean when the sun hits it.

And yet it would only be possible with the sun. The sun, his *solnyshko*, quietly snoring in their bed.

Ilya still sees the dark of his eyes. He still sees harsh winter snow and his soul’s scars when he looks at his eyes in the mirror. And yet he could not help but find, too, the oceans Shane had talked about.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to try. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to swim.

End Notes

A few things.

1. Солнышко (*solnyshko*) might be my most favorite Russian term of endearment which, loosely translated, means "sunshine" or "little sun." This fic spawned from that word, actually!
2. Yeah, yeah, this didn't exactly have grade-A smut even if I began writing this thinking of smut first. Then in the process of writing, I was like, "wait a minute, what the fuck, this got way too emo for my liking," but whatever. It's fun.

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