

(i am done) trying for beauty.

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77383786) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77383786>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warnings:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings , No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov , Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov & Irina Rozanova
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Svetlana Vetrova , Hayden Pike , Rose Landry , Irina Rozanova
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - College/University , Hockey Player Ilya Rozanov , Nursing Student Shane Hollander , Alternate Universe - Roommates/Housemates , Strangers to Lovers , Strangers to Friends to Lovers , Angst with a Happy Ending , Mental Health Issues , Implied/Referenced Suicide , bc of ilya's mother , irina is a central character in this and is studied through ilya's grief , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort , food as the sixth love language , Language Barrier , Canon Autistic Character , Mutual Pining , Touch-Starved , both of them but esp ilya , Non-Sexual Intimacy , Unresolved Sexual Tension , Dom/sub Undertones , Painting , Grief/Mourning , Dysfunctional Family , the immigrant experience bc i think about this a lot as a first generation , me locking in on shane speaking french bc i speak french so , Soft Ilya Rozanov , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Shane Hollander Loves Ilya Rozanov , they are down bad its sooo , guys its not as bad as it reads please i swear , im really proud of this , Slow Burn , more like medium burn but , ilya's mother died later in his life than canon
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of любовь и усилия. love & effort. (hollanov.)
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-09 Words: 19,745 Chapters: 1/1

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by [hcneymooners \(romqntics\)](#).

Summary

Ilya glances at Shane, at the way the dying light is catching in his hair, refracting. At that spiderlily mouth, slightly open and curling coyly, two teeth peeked through the dark gap like an American Girl doll. At that shoulder, bare and pale and close enough to touch if Ilya just leaned forward, if he just reached out and took another liberty.

To touch another person is to say: I know you will die, and I am doing this anyway.

His mother used to say something like this. About painting.

Every portrait is an act of faith, Ilyushenka. Faith and futility both.

★

contrary to personal preference, ilya gets a roommate.

Notes

content warning: this fic deals heavily with grief, and parental suicide. ilya's mother died by suicide before the story begins, and her death is central to his character arc; however, the act is never discussed in graphic detail. this story is ultimately about healing and choosing life, but the journey is emotionally heavy. please take care of yourselves.

title sourced from "i'm not sorry" by simone person.

thank you so much for giving this a chance. i hope you enjoy reading as much as i enjoyed writing. all my love. x

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

I. H8

The body first: a spine curved over granite countertop, bending, bending. The shoulder blades are where Ilya catches first, scapulae visible through the thin cotton of a sleepy green long-sleeve shirt. Then, down, a strong hand wrapped firmly around a mug that steams coil after coil of fragile jasmine into the air. The afternoon light cuts a yellow and wide swath across the apartment flooring in strange shapes, Art Deco leaning toward Nouveau, and this stranger exists in the largest rectangle of sun.

A mouth opens, rosebud. A voice, low and soft, a tongue dripping cool words that stray from English. "*Oui, maman. Je suis arrivé ce matin. Non, non—c'est bien. Le vol était—*"

French.

Ilya stands in the doorway with his duffel still in hand, the leather dark and cracked around the edges, and feels something in his chest recognize itself. He is not fluent in this language. He doesn't speak French, only has room for *native-home-not-home* and his punctured version of English, though he knows its rhythm from Quebec road trips, and from his teammates who slip into it when they're angry or homesick.

But the act of it, this code-switching. This particular loneliness of calling home in one tongue while living in another, of dressing yourself in its fabric occasionally so as not to lose the shape. His necklace burns against his skin, phantasmic.

French in February is romance layered atop each other. And when the body turns to him fully, there is a sweet face with doe eyes, lashes dark and sweeping across the high bones of symmetrical cheeks dappled with freckles. *лань*. A romance language for a lovelorn face.

There's a spark of something different cutting through the consistent drone of grief. The thing no one tells you about mourning is that sometimes it is a broken lament that begins to sound in you one evening without a single pause. The heart just weeps and weeps.

Ilya wishes it would cease for one moment. He is tired. He has been tired for six months, which is to say he has been tired his whole life, which is to say his mother died, and the tiredness is only now visible.

His mother had died. It was odd to say that out loud. And he is looking at this sweet face and seeing the same line of his mother's jaw, the same draw, and for a moment there is no stranger but a flash of memory: pale fingertips darkened with charcoal, the canvases new and old stacked along the floor, the flash of an ankle with its sphere of rigid bone stark against thin skin as his mother crouched to sweep a line onto the white. The rush of fig from her neck as her head rose and her hair fell back, the tilt of her shoulder from beneath the serpentine shift of her grass green robe—silk kissed all around with blood-pink flowers.

An artist through and through, his mother. She had an odd body, like a bird always perched. She was so strong, his mother.

Irina. *Peace.*

His necklace burns, is burning.

This stranger's body turned to him, interrupts. The phone is still pressed to his ear, but that rosebud mouth stops mid-sentence. Ilya catches there, now. It is more like a lily, the cupid's bow, and a subtle pout. His eyes—that color Ilya still can't name, yellow-brown-green depending on the light—take in Ilya's presence. Ilya's own body, reminiscent of his father's and better than his brother's. Nothing to be treated delicately. *Irina.*

Six foot three of a Russian hockey player standing in the doorway, backlit by the hallway fluorescents. Six foot three, curls baptized like a Botticelli angel.

"*Attends, maman,*" The man says, and his voice shifts registers, becomes polite in a way that suggests that the warmth from before was private. "Sorry, you must be Ilya? I'm your new roommate. Shane."

He doesn't offer his hand because one is holding the phone—slim and lithe and a vivid violet that signals it being an older iPhone make—and one is holding the mug, but there's a soft drift upward of his mouth. Spiderlily blooming. His head dips as he nods, and Ilya follows the line of his neck; his mind assigns direction, places where things could go: kiss, perfume, bite. He finds his own lips spreading in a return, finds it funny that he asks 'Ilya?' as if Ilya Rozanov is not a name near to God on this campus, as if he's not as famous and wanted as he is. But there is something in those eyes, that gaze, that suggests this may be the truth. It loses the humor, turns lovely then.

Maybe he is transfer.

Shane turns slightly back to the counter, but doesn't continue his conversation. Waiting.

Ilya recognizes the courtesy of it, this offer of privacy by interrupting his own.

"Ilya," he confirms. "I can—you finish. I just put things in room."

His English always worsens when he is tired, run-down. Grief has run him down like nothing else. Shane's expression doesn't slip; there is no change and transformation of the body like the one the Americans do, where they lean in and speak louder, like volume will aid comprehension.

"Feel free to take the room on the left," Shane says. "Better closet space. I'm on the right."

Then, back to the phone, slipping into French again: "*Désolé. Oui, il vient d'arriver...*"

Romantic, so romantic.

Ilya does not go to his room for whatever reason. There is something here he must stay for, except for perhaps Shane's "not-knowing" of him. He watches as the other ends the call, sets

the phone down. There's a tight moment where Shane's face does something strange, as if a surge of emotion has peaked and he is fighting to hold it hostage. Where the throat dips and signals for tears, the face restrains and restricts, blanks. Ilya watches as Shane takes a measured sip of his tea instead, watches as he seems to suddenly re-register Ilya's presence fully for the first time.

"Oh, you're still here," he says, the words not unkind. It is a simple state of fact.

"Jasmine," he continues, lifting the mug slightly. Ilya gazes at his hands. "Want some? You're welcome to; I made a whole pot."

"Is okay," Ilya says. Then, "You are from Québec?"

Shane's eyebrows lift slightly—surprise or approval, Ilya can't tell. They are dark too, thick, and paired with the gentle slant of his eyes; they speak to a culture further than Canada's womb.

"Montreal, originally. You could tell from the accent?"

"I hear is French, but not France-French. And you say '*arrivé*' like—" Ilya makes a gesture he immediately regrets because he doesn't know how to finish the sentence.

But Shane smiles. Spiderlily—small and real. "Yeah. Joul. Very Montréal. Do you speak French?"

"No. Russian."

"Ah." Shane nods, setting his mug down as he leans back against the counter. He studies Ilya with an unrelenting directness that should be more uncomfortable than it is. Somehow it isn't.

"Harsh language. Not as pretty," Ilya jokes, throat suddenly warm.

Shane's gaze never breaks, but he makes a low noise of disagreement. "No. I've always thought it beautiful. Sometimes, when I was a kid, my mom would play me *War and Peace* to get me to sleep. My dad would say it was a lot for a little boy, so my mom found a translation, so I wouldn't understand it."

Ilya smiles, then. It's an odd, long creak. (*Peony*, Shane thinks. *No, golden root.*)

"You liked it?"

"*da*," Shane quips, and Ilya evolves, laughs. "No, but really. I did. I internalized a lot of it to help with other things."

"Like?" Ilya asks.

Always pushing, his mother would say, tugging at a curl. He'd follow the drag, the pain. He'd have followed her anywhere. But she's gone somewhere he is barred from, chained to the edge.

Shane's face constricts again. Then,

“‘You can love a person dear to you with a human love, but an enemy can only be loved with divine love.’ Does wonders for clinicals.”

Medical, Ilya notes.

“Huh. You are interesting, War-and-Peace Shane.”

This time, Shane laughs awkwardly.

"Maybe. You too. We're both a long way from home."

Ilya feels something begin here. A rooting. North of desire, south of friendship. But there is a recognition. Two people who sometimes dream in languages this new country did not like you to speak, standing in borrowed space, learning the shape of each other's exile.

So romantic, so romantic.

II. E3

Ilya wakes to iris.

He's practically being swallowed by it, that powder-dark note lapping wildly at the cartilage of his nose, pressing into his ears. Vaguely sweet. *приторный*. It isn't the flower itself—he wouldn't know an iris from a rose if asked, though his mother once painted them, he thinks, in thick smears of oil—but the *scent* of it, the stain.

He aches to vomit, but nothing comes up, only burning: head, throat, nose, eyes, necklace.

His head *throbs*, will not stop. Vodka, too much of it, with Marleau and the rest of the team celebrating a win against Northeastern. It had been a rare moment when the night had come as he had wanted, when someone's girlfriend had known someone with a house, and the music had been so loud that the glass in all of the windows thrummed and threatened endless shatter. Ilya had grinned until his face hurt, lips screaming to split, and drank until he could no longer feel the constant hum of his mother's absence.

He should feel worse. He *wants* to feel worse, maybe. Deserves to. But instead he's suspended in this strange in-between: hungover but not destroyed, the apartment silent except for the radiator's occasional clank, and that smell. Everywhere. In the air, in the grapefruit-colored tissue of his cheeks, clinging to the inside of his skull like fog.

Iris. *Iris sibirica*. Family: *Iridaceae*. Family: *Irina*.

Flower. Mother. *умершая*.

Memory is between his teeth now. Ilya bites down on it, the tip of his tongue pierced by bone. Blood sounds along the muscle, slick against spit, and he groans.

He surfaces slowly, reluctantly. His phone says 11:47 AM—Saturday, then. No practice. Shane's door is closed. Has been closed, probably, since Ilya stumbled in at 3 AM, knocking into the coat rack and cursing in Russian.

He sits up, now. The inside of his mouth tastes strongly like regret and something nearing medicinal. This, too, reminds him of his native tongue. There's water on his nightstand that he doesn't remember pouring, in a glass as blue as dusk could be in a Boston winter, ridged with intricate glass textile, two aspirin beside it on a folded paper towel.

Hollander.

That is his last name, Ilya knows now.

The thought comes with a strange heat that nears embarrassment or might be something else. Ilya takes the aspirin, rolls the pill until each tablet begins its turn to dust, drinks the water. He feels his throat roll each time, imagines his *мама* doing the same. Stands.

The apartment tilts slightly before righting itself. For a moment, he is close to her.

Peace.

The smell is stronger in the hallway, as if the flower itself has infested their drywall, is leeching out and into him to grow into the wet of his lungs. It leads him with a heavy hand toward the living room, and it is here he finds the source: Hollander's yoga mat, unfurled by the windows. Purple—not quite, more like... what's the word? Plum. Mauve.

The color of Hollander's scrubs, his iPad case when it is closed in a rare moment, the color of the fruit sitting plump and docile on their counter. It makes him think of ~~Shane's~~ Hollander's cheeks, how full they are when he is happy and sweet.

The mat is still slightly damp with sweat, a black diagram sleek down the middle where the body is supposed to lay.

Ilya's shoulders scream as he bends to touch it, aggravated by a simple stretch and his dwindling lack of care for himself lately.

And on the kitchen counter, next to that swollen purple pearl that Ilya aches to eat, a small amber bottle. Hollander must have left it out after his bath.

Essential oils: Iris, Orange Blossom, & Apricot. The label is handwritten, from some boutique space Hollander had probably found in the North End or Cambridge, the kind of place Ilya has never entered and never would.

He liked an online shop, things coming to him.

It irks him, this scent. It's *everywhere*. Inescapable. In the bathroom—~~Shane~~ must have used it this morning—the tub is still faintly damp. In the kitchen, where Hollander's mug sits in the sink, dregs of jasmine tea at the bottom of its chipped yellow body. Even in the living room, where an endless amount of textbooks are stacked with neurotic precision on Ilya's rather expensive coffee table, the smell seems to emanate from the pages themselves, as if a flood of it came and settled into everything, a powdery sticky drowning.

Too bright. Too sweet. Too *much* of this other man—this person who has somehow colonized the apartment with his routines, his tidiness, his strange floral habits, while remaining almost invisible himself.

He wasn't even supposed to be here, Ilya thinks, suddenly irrationally angry. *I was supposed to be alone. I asked for that.*

But the woman on the phone had paused, had said in a delicately morose tone, "I'm so sorry for your loss," and then given him Shane.

Ilya feels his throat start to close, and stumbles to open a window. February air rushes in, sharp and punishing. Better. He can breathe.

He makes coffee strong, the way his mother used to. Before she stopped drinking coffee, citing her stomach hurting, her heart fit to burst from the caffeine, stopped eating.

Just stopped.

He drinks it black at the counter, scrolling through his phone. Messages from the team. From Svetlana: *Hope you had fun last night. Call me when you can?* A missed call from his father at 9 AM that Ilya will not return.

The apartment seems too silent without all the iris to distract him.

He finds himself, without meaning to, picking up the little amber bottle. It is easy to uncap it, easier for the odor to bloom, immediate. Less aggressive in its concentrated form, more complex. Not just iris—there's something darker underneath.

Earthy. Almost animal.

It does not belong to *apricot* or *orange blossom*.

He thinks about ~~Shane~~ Hollander in the bath last night, or maybe this morning, while Ilya was passed out drunk. Hollander in their old clawfoot tub that came with the apartment, water dark with this oil, that tall body folded into the porcelain, bulk folded and eyes closed, existing in some private world Ilya will never access.

The image does something to Ilya's chest that he doesn't examine.

Всяк сверчок знай свой шесток.

He caps the bottle. Puts it back. Looks at Hollander's closed door.

12-hour clinical rotation, Shane had mentioned. If Ilya remembered correctly. Pediatrics this week. He was sure of that detail because he had watched Hollander's mouth spiderlily all around it.

Pee-dee-AT-ricks. Pidi'ætriks.

Primary stress on the third syllable; a secondary stress on the first.

He won't be back until late evening, possibly later.

Ilya has the flat to himself. Should feel like relief. Instead, it feels like abandonment.

He closes the window, thick fingers lingering on the sill. The oil's smell settles back into the space, no longer as overwhelming as before. Almost...not unpleasant. Close to something he could get used to, given time.

Ilya tries to save himself from the sadness, makes more coffee. Tries not to think at all. He glances at the plum, thinks of Hollander's affinity for them.

What a strange little man.

He thinks of his mouth around it, the crack of his teeth against the seed, the bite down.



Shane Hollander does not think about God often. Maybe sometimes, but he thinks about money more.

This is what they forget to tell you about nursing school: yes, you will reach your dream of saving a life, that fantasy that has plagued you since you first watched a medical soap and pledged to be the best. You will learn to calculate drip rates and identify heart arrhythmias and insert IVs on the first try, but you will have no choice but to do it in a building where the simulation lab has mannequins from 2008 and the break room coffee tastes like hell runneth over.

You will spend twelve hours on your feet in the pediatrics ward watching a six-year-old with leukemia ask if dying hurts, wishing the yellow of the walls were brighter like your *maman's* favorite color, like *yamabuki*, and then you will go home and eat miso soup that tastes nothing like the one made by your mother's hand but is the only thing left in your budget after tuition.

Wellington University loves its hockey team.

This is understood by Shane innately, known the way he knows anatomy: automatically, unavoidably. The athletic center seems newer every year, tempered glass and glistening steel and light light light.

Cathédrale.

天国.

The rink has heated floors in the locker rooms, and there are plaques in the hallways with long names etched in wide stretches of gold. The walls are a slew of photographed championship teams dating back to 1923, heritage preserved tightly in bronze and Cartier diamond and money, money, *money*.

The nursing building, by comparison, is old. Not charmingly old, nothing to romanticize—simply old. The lights flicker, fluorescent and overworked. The bathrooms have stalls that don't lock properly, so you whisper a prayer to be left alone every time you go. The anatomy lab has two cadavers for forty students, which means you spend half your time waiting your turn to identify the brachial plexus on a body that's been touched by so many hands it's beginning to fall apart all over again. You pray you don't begin to do the same.

You become very religious as a nursing student.

Shane does not resent this, exactly. Resentment requires energy he doesn't have.

But sometimes—often—he wishes the university loved finding a cure the way it loved victory.

He is thinking this now, Thursday evening, 6:47 PM, standing in the nursing building's main hallway. There's a new poster on the bulletin board: ***Congratulations to Wellington's Men's Hockey Team on their victory against Northeastern!*** Below it, in smaller print: ***Reminder: Clinical supplies will be limited this semester due to budget constraints. Please use resources mindfully. We appreciate your understanding.***

Shane stares at the poster for longer than necessary. His backpack—the Crosby by Coach, a rich burgundy gift from his best friend Rose last Christmas—weighs approximately fifteen pounds. It is straining over so much: textbooks (he likes the physical copies, sue him), the forest green curl of his personalized stethoscope (Hayden's gift this Christmas), a Tupperware container with leftover rice and chicken that he'll eat cold between lectures because he doesn't have the time to properly heat it. His shift at the hospital starts in two hours.

Pediatrics again, this time overnight. Twelve hours on his feet, then home at 7 AM, then sleep for four hours if he's lucky, then back to campus for pathophysiology at 2 PM.

This is the rhythm now. Has been the rhythm. Will continue to be the rhythm until May, until graduation, until—what? A job that pays enough to cover loans? A job that doesn't leave Shane so exhausted that he forgets to eat and speaks so slowly over the line to his mother that even his father gets worried in the background?

He thinks about the flat, the *apartment*. About Ilya Rozanov, who appeared three weeks ago with his expensive duffel bag and his famous last name and his way of taking up space like he'd been born knowing he deserved it. It drives Shane close to envy, the ease with which

Ilya sits with legs spread wide enough to trip over and fall into, the ease with which he laughs and puts off finishing an assignment for another day.

Shane had known, vaguely, that Rozanov was someone important. He'd seen the name bolded on flyers littered around campus, had heard it shouted once or twice in the dining hall—a diminutive: *Rozy*. But he'd been in Montreal for the holidays when the housing office called, when they said there'd been a "situation" with his previous roommate (graduated early, moved out without warning), and would Shane mind terribly if they placed him with someone new?

Shane had said yes because he'd had no choice. Because the last flat had been subsidized housing for nursing students, and without this new one, he'd be sleeping in his car or back in Montreal, admitting defeat to his parents, and neither option was acceptable.

So: Rozy.

Ilya.

Rozanov.

Shane turns away from the poster, pushes through the heavy French doors out into the February cold. The wind is eager to bite at him, scrapping for skin, begging for a shred. The campus is beautiful in that postcard way, brick buildings and weighted iron gates rusting toward the bottoms and snow that hasn't yet been turned to slush. Students move in clusters, bursts of thermographic images laughing, their breath beautifully visible in the air. Shane loves this sometimes, this proof of life. He's needed it more since starting clinicals.

Somewhere across campus, the hockey team is probably practicing. Shane can almost hear the sound of it, that particular thunder of skates on ice, pucks hitting boards. A roar of accomplishment as a goal is scored.

He wonders if Ilya is there now. Probably. Ilya is *always* there, or at the gym, or out with teammates whose names Shane has started to recognize from their loud voices in the hallway or in the flat itself. Marleau. Kozlov. Someone who they call "Sammy" who has a laugh like a car alarm.

Shane does not dislike Ilya. This is important to note, to himself, specifically. He does not dislike Ilya.

But.

Just.

Ilya is so *loud*. So present. His things sprawl across surfaces Shane has carefully organized the evening before, uncaring. His music plays at odd hours, these bright slashes of Slavic melody that go out like a star come an odder hour. He comes home smelling like ice and sweat and sometimes Belvedere, and Shane will be at the kitchen table studying, and Ilya will say "You are always studying, Hollander," with this tone that borders on admiration and judgment, and Shane can never quite tell. He has never been able to tell his whole life.

And the *looking*. *Dieu*, Ilya looks at him. Often.

Shane will be making tea, and he'll feel eyes on him, will turn to find Ilya in the doorway watching with an expression Shane cannot decode. Curiosity? Assessment? Something else? More unreachable than that.

It makes Shane aware of his body in ways he usually isn't. Makes him conscious of how he moves through space, whether his hands are doing something strange, if his face is doing that thing his mother always mentions where he "goes away" into his thoughts.

Shane does not like being perceived this intensely.

Or—he doesn't know if he likes it. Can't decide. The jury is still out.

He catches the T to the hospital, finds his spot in the back corner where no one usually sits. The train rocks and sways. Shane closes his eyes, breathes, and tries to prepare himself for the night shift. He does his best not to give any thought to the apartment, about whether Ilya will be awake when Shane gets home at dawn, whether he'll have left his gear bag in the middle of the living room *again*, whether Shane will walk in and find him asleep on the couch looking younger than he has any right to look.

He leans against the window and tries not to think about last Saturday. About coming home to find Ilya passed out in his bed, clearly drunk, clearly having had the kind of night Shane will never have because he doesn't have the time for parties or drinking or moments of joy that aren't found in specially colored boxes scheduled on his calendar.

But Shane had left water. Aspirin. Had stood in Ilya's doorway much longer than necessary, watching the rise and fall of his chest, the way his curls spread dark against the pillow. In the dark with no moon, you would never know he was blonde.

He'd thought, inexplicably: *You have no idea how much space you take up, do you?*

Then Shane had gone to his room, had run a bath with his favorite iris and apricot oil—the scent his grandmother sent him for his birthday, the one that was supposed to be reaching every *ki* point in his body—and had tried to wash away whatever strange feeling had webbed into his chest.

The hospital appears outside the train window, all lit up like the opera against the winter's dark weep. Shane gathers his bag, stands, and exits.

Twelve hours. He can do twelve hours.

He's done harder things.

The first touch happens on a Wednesday.

Ilya comes home, arrives breathless from practice at 8 PM, flushed and loose-limbed in that post-workout way, his hair still damp at the temples. Hollander is at the kitchen table surrounded by an open textbook and black-and-white printouts, color-coded notes spreading like a medical mandala across the surface, his legs crossed beneath him. He's dressed in grey wool pants and a navy blue, oversized sweatshirt reading *Wellington U* in screaming yellow varsity letters.

"You are always studying," Ilya says, already needling, dropping his gear bag by the door with that particular thud that sends Hollander's mouth twisting to the left. "Is so boring. Just looking at diagrams all the time."

Shane looks up, eyes the way Ilya's curls kiss coyly at his temples and cheeks. (*Golden root.*) He looks down, vying against looking up again. He resumes tracing the brachial plexus on a laminated chart, trying to commit the nerve pathways to memory for tomorrow's practical exam. "Mm-hmm."

"Seriously. How do you not fall asleep? Is just—" Ilya waves his hand vaguely, coming closer. He smells sharper with the lack of distance: pink pepper and musk. "Lines. Colors. Same thing over and over."

"It's *anatomy*," Shane corrects, still not looking up. "It's how your body works."

"I know how my body works," Ilya says, something leaning playful in his voice. "I use it every day."

Shane finally looks up. Ilya is further away, leaning against the counter now, arms crossed ~~with biceps bulging~~, that mischievous grin that always gives the illusion of him looking younger than he is. There's a challenge in it, a peculiar strain of masculine bravado that Shane recognizes from every *men's-something-athlete* he's ever treated in the ER.

"You don't, though," Shane says.

Ilya's eyebrows rise. "What?"

"Know how your body works." Shane closes his textbook with an odd delicacy. "You know how to *use* it. That's different."

"Is same thing."

"It's not."

They look at each other. There is a shift in the air between them from the disagreement, but it is not hostile, only charged. Ilya's grin widens slightly, teeth set in an endearing pearlescent line, a golden brow feathered and raised as though he's found something interesting.

"Okay then," he nods. "Teach me."

Shane shouldn't. He has an exam tomorrow. He needs to review the cranial nerves, the cardiac cycle, the mechanism of gas exchange in the alveoli. He needs to—

"Lie down," Shane says, standing. Ilya watches his legs swing down, imagines the muscles flexing. *Газель*.

"What?"

"On the couch. If you want to learn, lie down."

Ilya's expression shuffles over a range of complex emotions, settling on something complicated. But he moves to the couch, a horrid leather trap that came with the apartment, and lies back. His practice shirt is still damp in places, clinging to his chest and stomach. His sweatpants ride low on his hips, his V-line strong and demanding. He puts his hands behind his head, ~~biceps flexing~~, and looks up at Shane with something that might be curiosity or might be something else entirely.

Shane moves to stand beside the couch. He should get his stethoscope and make this clinical, professional. Instead, he just remains there, peering down at Ilya Rozanov—hockey star, campus royalty, son of someone important in Russia that Shane has never asked about because Ilya tenses when he calls—sweaty and flushed and *waiting*.

"Close your eyes, please," Shane tells him.

Ilya does.

Shane starts at the shoulder. Places his hand there: the deltoid, anterior and posterior heads, insertion point at the deltoid tuberosity of the humerus. His fingers are cool against Ilya's warm skin.

"Deltoid," Shane says. His voice is steady, polite. This is just anatomy. This is only teaching. "Abducts, flexes, and extends the arm."

He moves down. *Biceps brachii*. "Flexes the elbow and supinates the forearm."

Ilya's breathing has changed, gone slightly deeper. His eyes are still closed.

Shane continues. *Brachioradialis*. *Flexor carpi radialis*. Each muscle gets named, gets touched. Shane's hands move with the precision he has practiced in clinicals, but his bedside manner begins to bleed through. He slides down the scale of professionalism and falls to tenderness. But he is still sure, knowing exactly where to press and how much pressure to apply.

"This is weird," Ilya says, but he doesn't move. And he doesn't open his eyes.

"You wanted to learn," Shane reminds him.

Down to the chest now. Shane's hand spreads over Ilya's sternum. "*Pectoralis major*: Adducts and medially rotates the arm."

He can feel Ilya's heartbeat beneath his palm. Fast. Faster than it should be for someone at rest.

"Breathe, Rozy." The nickname slips and falls, surprises even himself. Shane continues, pushing past the discomfort so as not to draw attention to the mistake. (Ilya has the mistake in his palm, and will not let it slide away.)

"*Rectus abdominis*," Shane says, fingers tracing down and down again. The muscles are defined beneath the moist blend of the fabric, tensing slightly at Shane's fragile touch. "Flexes the lumbar spine."

Ilya makes a sound that Shane thinks is intended to land as a laugh, but it doesn't quite.

He moves to the hip. *External obliques. Iliacus*. His hand rests briefly on Ilya's hipbone, that sharp jut visible above his waistband. Ilya's breath cleaves here, draws ragged.

"Okay," Ilya says, voice rougher now. "I think I am learning."

Shane represses a smile, though he knows Rozanov's eyes are not open. He moves back up. Arms. Forearms. Traces the *ulna*, the radius. Finds the pulse point at Ilya's wrist—*radial artery, 82 beats per minute, slightly elevated*. His brain drives the information in, pink and pleased at the understanding.

And then—the throat.

Shane's hand hovers there for a moment. He can see Ilya's Adam's apple move as he swallows. Can see the necklace, some kind of pendant on a thin chain, resting in the golden hollow of his clavicle.

"*Sternocleidomastoid*," Shane says, and places two fingers against Ilya's neck. The muscle is tense, unbearably so. Shane presses down, massages, and feels the first and second swallow—forced. "Rotates and flexes the head."

His fingers brush the necklace. It's slightly twisted, the clasp visible at the front instead of the back.

Ilya's hand flies up suddenly, catching Shane's wrist. The bone is refined. A bird's skeleton; *Irina*.

His eyes open. They're very dark, pupils wide.

"*Hem. Don't*," Ilya says. But heat is lacking because there is no anger; there is something else. Something raw and wet and cold and borne of a grief so vivid and violent that Shane almost crawls back from it.

Shane goes very still. "Sorry. I'm sorry. I won't—"

But then Ilya's hand loosens. He doesn't let go, just softens. His thumb presses against Shane's pulse point—turnabout, maybe. Fair play.

"Is from my mother," Ilya says quietly. "No one touches it."

Shane nods. Understands. "Okay."

Then,

"What was your mother's name?"

Ilya looks away from him as he answers. "Irina."

They stay like that: Ilya's hand around Shane's wrist, Shane's fingers near but not touching the necklace. This close, Shane can see the pendant is a cross. You become very religious as a nursing student.

The apartment is very quiet. Outside, Boston continues into blue hour then black, but here, in this moment, there is only breath and pulse and the small space between touching and not touching.

Then Ilya's hand falls away. "You can fix it," he says. "Is twisted."

Shane hesitates. "You're sure?"

"*da*."

So Shane does. He does a careful slide beneath the chain with his fingers—the metal warm from Ilya's skin—and carefully rotates it, finding the clasp, moving it to the back where it belongs. His knuckles brush Ilya's throat. Ilya's breath hitches high again.

"There," Shane says, pulling his hand back. "All fixed."

Ilya sits up slowly. His face is flushed darker now, a beautiful vermillion that speaks to shame. Shane doesn't think it's just from practice or their closeness anymore. He touches the chain reflexively, checking it's still there. His hand moves to his own face. Thumb and forefinger pressing into the inner corners of his eyes, dragging down. Then to his jaw, rubbing there. Then back to the necklace.

Shane has seen this before. Not in Ilya specifically, but in pediatric patients. The self-soothing. The way children touch themselves when they need comfort but don't know how to ask for it, or when there's no one there to provide it.

He thinks suddenly of a girl, maybe seven, post-surgery. She'd kept stroking her own arm, over and over, the same spot. Shane had asked if it hurt. She'd answered no, told him her mother used to do it when she was scared, but her mother was in the waiting room, and she wasn't allowed back yet.

So, Shane had taken over, stroking the girl's arm the way her mother would have until she fell asleep.

"Ilya," Shane says, before he can stop himself. (*Rozy*.)

Ilya's hand stills on his face. His eyes open again. Dark, slightly unfocused but still impenetrable. Like he'd been somewhere else entirely. Shane could understand the feeling.

"What?"

Shane doesn't know how to say it. Doesn't have the words. So instead he just—

He reaches out. Slowly enough that Ilya could pull away. He places his hand on Ilya's shoulder again, focused less on maintaining professionalism and more on providing contact. Warmth.

Ilya goes so still, to stone. His eyes search Shane's face deeply, scavaging for something. Judgment, maybe. Pity.

Shane keeps his expression neutral. This is what he's good at. Being present without expectation.

"You're okay," Shane says quietly.

Ilya's throat works. For a moment, Shane thinks he might cry, or leave, or say something sharp to rebuild the distance between them.

Instead, Ilya just nods. Once. Small.

"Thank you," he says.

Shane tries a smile. "You're welcome."

They look at each other.

"I should shower," Ilya says finally.

"I need to get back to studying."

Neither of them moves for a long moment. Then Ilya stands, his shoulder brushing Shane's arm as he passes.

"*Cnacubo*," he says again, but his voice is different now. *Thank you*.

Shane hears the bathroom door close. The water starts.

He goes back to the kitchen table. Sits and stares at his anatomy notes without seeing them.

His hands are shaking slightly. He looks at them, spreads the fingers.

These hands have inserted IVs into premature infants, have performed chest compressions, and have held dying children while their parents sobbed. But nothing had ever felt like what had just passed. His hands had never felt this buzzing that came from having just mapped Ilya Rozanov's body, a territory he had no right to claim.

Shane picks up his pen, tries to refocus on the brachial plexus.

In the bathroom, the water is still running. Shane imagines Ilya under it, touching his own throat where Shane's fingers had been, feeling the necklace sitting correctly now against his skin.

No one touches it.

But he had let Shane.

Shane doesn't know what that means. He isn't even sure if he's ready to know.

He goes back to his notes, starts at the heart.



The water is too hot, but Ilya doesn't adjust it. He stands under the spray and touches the bulge of his throat, Adam's apple, where the necklace sits correctly now, clasp at the back the way his mother used to wear hers.

His mother.

He watches his skin flush red, feels his head go light with the steam.

His mother.

Who had taught him to tie his own shoes when he was eight because "*my beautiful boy, you must learn to do things for yourself*," but really it was so his father would stop raising a hand to him, would stop choking on his rage spurred by Ilya's perceived softness. His mother, who had stopped doing things for herself somewhere around his sixteenth birthday, stopped eating properly, stopped sleeping, stopped painting. *Точка*. Who had looked at him one morning and said, "*Ilyushenka, my love, I'm so tired*" in a voice that scared him.

His mama, whom he had found on the floor of the room three months later. So sad, so funny, so beautiful. Her necklace—the one she always wore, the silver one with the small Orthodox cross—was still around her throat.

Ilya had fixed it then, too. He'd reached down with shaking hands and turned the necklace so the clasp was at the back, so she looked proper, so when his father came home, everything would be—

Ilyushenka, my love, I'm so tired.

He digs his fingers into his eyes now. Hard. The pressure grounds him, but the sob comes strong and unshakable. This is what he does. Presses his face, rubs his jaw, touches his own arms the way she used to when he was small and scared of thunder.

You must learn to do things for yourself.

And he had. He had learned. He provides his own comfort now because asking someone else feels like admitting he's still that sixteen-year-old boy who couldn't save his mother, who slept through her last night, who had woken up like a wolf sensing the death of a pack but had still been too late.

But ~~Hollander~~ Shane had touched him. Had lingered along his body with such an intensity of tenderness and then, at the end, had touched his shoulder with something purer still. He had seen the self-soothing—Ilya is sure of it now, the way Shane's eyes had tracked the movement—and hadn't shamed.

You're okay.

Was he?

Ilya doesn't know. He hasn't been okay for six months, which is to say he hasn't been okay for much longer than that.

But Shane's hand on his shoulder had felt—

Ilya presses his forehead against the tile and tries not to think about how desperately he wants that again. How he wants to ask for it. How he doesn't know how.

How does he not know how? When did he lose this?

His eyes slide shut. He is so tired.

His mama, him. *Две стороны одной медали*. Mirror, mirror.

What was your mother's name?

Irina, he mouths now, lips wet and pink with the heat—swollen. *Peace*.

IV. C6

What does it mean to witness someone in their mother tongue?

Ilya stands in the kitchen alcove, unpacking the groceries he managed to rouse enough strength to go buy—black bread, smetana, the too-sweet orange juice Americans drink, a rack of cherries suspiciously bright for being out of season—and listens to Shane's voice rise and fall in syllables that mean nothing to him but somehow mean everything.

He *must* be Ilya's age, mid-twenties—he's another student for God's sake—but something about him reads older, or maybe just more hardened. He is telling his mother about clinical

rotations. Ilya catches "*hôpital*" "*patients*" and "*fatiguant*."

He understands tired. Tired is the same in any language. The body, once felt, never loses its meaning.

Shane laughs at something his mother says. It transforms his face entirely. Ilya looks away quickly, puts the juice in the refrigerator, and focuses on the small domestic task of arranging food in a stranger's kitchen that is now also his kitchen.

This is what immigration does, Ilya thinks. Makes you live in the conditional tense. This apartment is mine, but also not mine. This city is home, but also not home. Even Svetlana—a piece of the life he left right here on this campus—is his but also not quite his, and hasn't that always been the problem?

"*Je t'aime aussi*," Shane says softly, and Ilya's chest does something complicated. *I love you too*. He knows those words in French because Svetlana's aunt is Québécoise. Because he's heard her say them at family dinners, because love is one of the first things you learn to recognize in any language, on any tongue.



7:13 AM, and Shane is home. Ilya knows this because he has been awake since 6, which is to say he has never really slept since sixteen, just dozes in the fractured way he does now. He hears Shane's key in the lock, and as the latch gives, his heart performs a small acrobatic ceremony.

A tart is on the counter. Cherry, because Ilya had seen the way Shane looked at the preserved cherries in the alley of the international market when they'd both happened to be there last week (Shane buying miso paste, Ilya buying black bread, both of them pretending not to notice each other). Ilya had spent three hours yesterday making it. It was his mother's recipe, the one she used to make him for his birthday.

Tender crust, tart-sweet filling, the deep red of the cherries bleeding nearly purple into cream. It was a wonder to eat it on his own, to receive one small enough to prevent him from having to share with Andrei. A small wonder, despite his brother never coming home anymore.

He'd timed it so it would still be slightly warm when Shane's shift ended.

Shane walks in and stands in the doorway, stockstill in his plum scrubs, his stethoscope a black snake around his neck. His face is pale in that bloodless way that signals something terrible has happened.

"Hollander," Ilya says, half standing from the couch. "You okay?"

Shane doesn't answer. In fact, he doesn't seem to hear him. He shuffles inside, pressing the door closed behind him with a trembling hand, and sets his bag down with mechanical action. Off go his shoes. Up goes his coat. Every movement is so controlled, so neat that you could almost miss the pressure building underneath.

"I made—" Ilya gestures at the counter. "Is cherry tart. I thought maybe you want—"

"Okay," Shane says. His voice comes flat as he moves to the counter, and Ilya can see his hands are shaking.

Shane picks up the knife Ilya left out and eyes it with an unreadable expression before applying enough force to cut a slice with the same meticulousness he could use to suture a wound. He slides it on a plate—pink china, a hummingbird at the edge with its wings mid-beat—and sits at the counter.

Ilya is stuck hovering. *Чистилище*. Should he leave? Stay? He doesn't know the protocol for this.

Shane takes a bite. There is a moment where his body does nothing, all the muscles rigid in place. And then his face simply crumples.

It happens so quickly that Ilya almost misses it. One second, Shane is chewing, and a moan of pleasure is released at the burst of fruit and sugar on his tongue. Next, there is another moan, but with this one, his eyes are squeezed shut, and tears are sliding down his cheeks, and the moan mutates halfway through into a ragged weeping until the man goes silent, and the salt drips faster, relentless. Shane's shoulders start to shake, and the fork tumbles, clattering against the plate.

"*Merde*," Shane whispers. "*Merde, merde, merde—*"

Ilya settles into a state he might call adrenaline. He's rounding the counter before he can stop himself, think better of it, and Shane is folding forward, elbows on the granite, long hands covering his face, and Ilya—

Ilya pulls him in.

Shane resists for maybe half a second. Then he turns into Ilya's chest, and there is a cleaving. He ruptures, hands fisting in the black cotton of Ilya's v-neck, and he sobs—these awful, wrenching sounds that Ilya has only heard once before, from his father, after. From himself.

"Okay," Ilya murmurs, one hand coming up to cup the back of Shane's head. "Okay, okay."

He doesn't know what else to say. Doesn't have the English for this, might not have the Russian either. So he just holds Shane because sometimes the touch is what the body and the mind need.

Shane's words come in chunks, muffled against Ilya's chest: "I couldn't—we couldn't—"

"Shhh," Ilya says, and it comes out rougher than he means. His throat is tight. "Not your fault."

"I did everything right," Shane chokes out. "*Everything*. By the book, but she—"

"I know."

"She asked me yesterday if dying hurt, and I said—I told her—"

Shane can't finish, and Ilya is slightly grateful. He doesn't want to know what he might've told her, might've lied about. He just wants to stand here as Shane cries harder, hard enough to hollow himself of the pain. Ilya holds him tighter, one hand stroking through his hair without thinking about it, the way his mother used to do for him. He watches the dark strands kiss and twist around his pale, calloused fingers.

They stay like that for a long time. It is long enough that the morning light shifts and brightens, and long enough that Ilya's shirt is soaked through. Shane's breathing eventually evens out, the sobs spacing further and further apart until they are sporadic as Florida rain.

Finally, Shane pulls back. His eyes are red and swollen, his face blotchy and pink all over. He won't look at Ilya.

Ilya wishes he would. He knows he's a beautiful crier, so tremulous with it, so careful.

"'M sorry," he says. Ilya despises that this is his first instinct. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"Don't," Ilya cuts him off. His hand is still on the small of Shane's back. "*Остановить*. Don't apologize."

Shane nods and wipes at his face with shaky palms. He closes his eyes and thumbs at his collarbone, inhaling a shuddering breath.

"The tart is really good," he says upon exhale, and it's so absurd that Ilya nearly laughs. Almost.

"You want more?" Ilya asks instead.

Shane looks at him again. He is beautiful in grief, as Ilya has always suspected.

"Yeah," Shane says quietly. "Yeah, I do. Thanks."

So Ilya cuts him another slice. And another. And they sit at the counter as Boston wakes up around them, and Shane tells him about Karolina—six years old, leukemia, who loved the color duck egg's blue more because of the name and not the shade, who wanted to be a veterinarian. Who had coded at 4 AM and didn't come back despite everything Shane and the team had done.

"Her mother just started screaming," Shane tells him, staring at his plate. "There wasn't any crying. Just screaming. Like an animal. I've never—" He stops. Swallows. "I had to hold her while security removed her from the room. She was hitting me, kept hitting me. She said it was my fault."

The last two words are said very, very lightly. It is like ice on a lake.

"Was not your fault," Ilya says firmly.

"I know. Logically, I know. But—" Shane's voice strains again. "She's right, though. Isn't she? I was supposed to save her. That's my job. To save them."

"You cannot save everyone," Ilya says, and he's thinking about his mother now, about how he couldn't save her either, how she went somewhere just out of reach.

"Sometimes people—they are too tired. They cannot fight anymore. Is not about you."

Shane is looking at him, and his gaze is so invasive that Ilya looks away, his hand falling from the small square of Shane's lower spine. But something passes between them. Understanding. Recognition.

"Your mother," Shane says. It's not a question. "Irina."

"*da*," Ilya says. "My mama."

They sit in it. The shared grief. The understanding that some people slip away no matter how tightly you try to hold them. Sometimes it is your stupid heart that continues beating while theirs needs to sleep.

Sometimes you are angry about this.

Sometimes you are sixteen forever.

"Thank you," Shane says eventually. "For the tart. For—" He gestures vaguely at Ilya's chest, his still-damp shirt.

"Is nothing," Ilya says, but it doesn't feel like nothing. It feels rather enormous, which is destabilizing him despite his being firm on his feet.

Shane finishes his second slice. He licks a dark smear of cherry from his thumb absentmindedly, and Ilya has to look away from that.

"I should try to sleep," Shane says. "I have patho at two."

"You should skip," Ilya says. "You need rest."

"Can't. Exam next week."

"Hollander—"

"I'll be fine," Shane says, and it's clearly a lie, but Ilya lets it go. "Promise."

"Bullshit," Ilya mutters.

Shane ignores him and stands, carrying his plate to the sink. It's there that he pauses with his back to Ilya.

"I meant it," he says quietly. "The tart. It's really good. Your recipe?"

"*da*," Ilya says. "Well, my mother's. She made it for my birthday every year."

He finishes here with more to say, but he doesn't need to. They both hear it.

Until—

Until.

"Thank you for sharing it with me," Shane says, and there's something in his voice that makes Ilya's chest ache. "For making enough."

Shane goes to his room. Ilya stays at the counter, looking at the remaining tart, the pink china plate with its crumbs and cherry stains.

He thinks about Shane's face when he bit into it. The way he'd broken open, let Ilya see him. How Ilya wanted to see more.

You can love a person dear to you with a human love, but an enemy can only be loved with divine love.

Shane had told him that. But what kind of love is this? This thing building between them like pressure, like spring, like snowfall on a roof waiting to change the shape of a house.

Ilya doesn't know. He hates this, this not knowing.

He covers the tart and puts it in the refrigerator in a perfect, clear square of Tupperware that Shane had once scolded him for putting in the microwave. He heads to the shower, wanting the heat before his own practice.

In his room, he can hear Shane's breathing through the wall. He doesn't think he's asleep yet; he thinks he is just lying there.

Ilya presses his palm flat against the wall. Wishes he could pass through it. Wishes he knew how to ask for what he wants.

His phone buzzes. **Svetlana:** *Lunch this week? Miss you xo*

Ilya looks at the text for a long time.

Miss you xo

Then puts the phone face down without answering.

He wedges himself into a corner, runs his fingers along the bottom portion of the wall, and then knocks a knuckle gently into it. He waits one second, then two.

He's close to five when a knock sounds back.

V. NF3.

Shane is on the couch when Ilya emerges from his room at roughly three in the afternoon. Practice is cancelled; this is a rare gift of afternoon light. It's been a week or so since his collapse over losing a patient, and it isn't like he hasn't seen Shane since then, but still—the sight hits with the same effect as seeing a loved one rise from the tomb.

He's curled into the corner like a cat, legs tucked beneath him, laptop balanced on his knees. There's an oversized navy sweatshirt swallowing his frame, with “*Wellington U Hockey*” emblazoned across the chest in screaming yellow letters. The collar has slipped down, exposing the long line of his shoulder, the ridge of his clavicle—the skin pale, like snow fallen.

Ilya stops, lingering at the edge of the room to take him in.

He has a bit of a Hepburn-esque quality—assigned to him through Ilya's wealth of knowledge gathered during Sveta's vintage film phase—with his short hair that kisses delicately at his nape, and the spray of freckles across his face and neck. It's as if a star had died over him, leaving a shower of space behind. Shane's face is doing what it always it does when he's concentrating: tongue pressed against his top teeth, eyes narrowed slightly, lashes thick and fanned against his cheek every time he blinks, body present in a way that makes Ilya aware of his own distraction, his own inability to focus on anything lately except the particular quality of air in the apartment when Shane is in it.

"What do you do for fun?" Ilya asks, and his voice comes out much rougher than he'd intended.

Shane looks up. Blinks. (*Those lashes dip again. Ilya tongues at the inside of his cheek.*) There's a moment where he seems to be translating the question, finding it strange. "What?"

"For fun." Ilya crosses to the couch, sits at the other end, careful to leave space between them even though he wants—what does he want? "When you are not studying or at hospital. What do you do?"

Shane's expression shifts through several registers. Surprise. Suspicion. It briefly lands on something that might be pleasure at being asked, before going blank.

"You're going to think I'm boring."

"I already think you are boring," Ilya says. It comes out fond.

When did that happen? When did boring become a word so warm in his mouth, a word nearing affection?

Shane's mouth does a small, complicated thing; it isn't quite a smile.

"Fair." He closes his laptop with a soft click and sets it aside. The sweatshirt shifts, and more shoulder appears. Ilya thinks of home, of Russian road swollen and distended with snow, of the fall and rise of the spires of Terem Palace.

Ilya looks away, then looks back, helpless.

"I play chess," Shane continues. "Online, mostly. There's a club in Cambridge I go to sometimes."

"Chess."

"I know. Very exciting." That almost-smile again.

"No, is—" Ilya leans forward, elbows on his knees, and his heart is in his chest doing that routine again, that small acrobatic rite. "I play chess. My mama taught me when I was very small. It's good for brain, for learning to think many steps ahead."

The light in Shane's face changes. "You play chess?"

"You sound so surprised."

"You're—" Shane gestures at him, a vague sweep of hand that somehow encompasses Ilya's entire existence. Ilya is caught on that hand. "Hockey. Popular. You go to parties. You don't seem like—"

"Like what? Like I have brain?"

"No. God, no. Just—" Shane stops. Starts again. "You don't seem like the type who sits still long enough to play chess."

"What is the type?"

Shane looks down at himself. "Me."

Ilya laughs. It surprises him, how easy it comes.

It surprises him, how Shane watches him do it.

"Okay. Is fair. But I am good. Better than you probably."

"That sounds like a challenge."

"Maybe is challenge."

"I'd like that," Shane says, and his voice has gone soft, dropped into a register that feels private, intimate. He glances up from underneath his lashes, and Ilya feels gunned down. "Playing with you."

The words hang between them, and neither of them is in a rush to fill the silence. *Ты мой свет в окне*, Ilya thinks dizzily, and he touches his neck in surprise at the sentiment's arrival.

His eyes catch on the sweatshirt again, really seeing it now that he needs something to draw himself out of this spell. *Wellington U Hockey*. He knows these sweatshirts. Has several in his own closet. They give them out to the team at the start of every season, and the fabric is heavy, expensive, embroidered rather than screen-printed.

"That sweatshirt," Ilya says, trying and failing to keep his voice neutral. "You bought it?"

Shane glances down as though he'd forgotten what he was wearing. Ilya has the thought that he is so blue, so calm, and sleek and easy as he moves. So collected, water that deceives you that it's still.

"Hmm? Oh, Hayden gave it to me. Hayden Pike? I went to watch practice last week—Rose wanted to see Sammy play, so I went with her—and I was freezing in the rink, and Hayden just pulled this out of his bag and—"

Shane is still talking, but Ilya has stopped hearing him.

Hayden. Hayden *Pike*.

The name lands in Ilya's chest like a stone tossed callously through a window. There is a reason there is a ribcage around the heart, but Ilya's has always been widely spaced.

Hayden Pike, who is co-captain of their team. Who is beloved by everyone, coaches and teammates and fans. Who has that easy schoolboy charm, that corn-fed handsomeness, that way of making everyone feel seen and valued. Who Ilya respects professionally and resents personally for reasons he's never examined too closely. Who just couldn't stay a fucking alternate, and let Ilya handle the rest.

Hayden *fucking* Pike, who apparently gives Shane his clothes. Because he was cold. *Ha самом деле, иди нахуй*.

"—so yeah, he said I could keep it since I'm always cold," Shane finishes. Then, seeing Ilya's face: "What?"

"Nothing."

"That is *not* your nothing face."

"I don't have nothing face."

"You absolutely do. You did it last night when I texted you an apology after you tripped over my shoes, and you came into my room to accept the apology in person." Shane tilts his head, studying him with an invasive intensity. "Are you—wait. Do you not like Hayden?"

"I like Hayden just fine."

"Ilya."

"We are teammates. We work together. He is good *co*-captain."

Because Ilya cannot help himself, okay?

"But you don't like him."

"I didn't say that."

"You didn't have to." Shane is still looking at him, reading him deeply as if he were one of his medical textbooks, searching for patterns. Finding them. "It's okay if you don't. I'm not going to—"

"How do you know him?" Ilya interrupts. The question comes out sharp as a blade and utterly revealing. "Pike."

"Um, we've been friends since freshman year. I was his anatomy tutor. He needed help passing so he could keep playing. We just clicked, I guess." Shane pauses, shifts. Something flickers across his face, gone in under a second. Understanding, maybe. "He's one of my best friends."

Best friends.

The relief is immediate and humiliating. It floods through Ilya so fast that he feels dizzy with it. *Best friends.* Not anything else. Not what Ilya thought when he saw Shane in Hayden's clothes, clothes that smelled like another man, marked by another man's generosity.

"Oh," Ilya says. His English has abandoned him. "Good."

"Is it?"

There's something in Shane's voice now, rich and knowing, and Ilya makes the mistake of looking at him. Hollander is watching him with those eyes that change color depending on the light; in this moment, they are more green than anything, moss and sprigs of perennial plants—spring happening slowly around the outer edge of the iris.

"*da*. Pike is good guy. Good friend."

"Mm-hmm."

"I am happy you have good friends."

"Are you?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I don't know, Ilya. You tell me."

They're looking at each other. The sweatshirt collar has slipped further. Ilya can see the hollow of Shane's throat now, the place where his pulse would be visible if Ilya were close enough. He thinks of touching there, their lesson, feeling Shane's heart rate elevated and fast. He thinks of it flexing tightly as it swallows, opens, and lets out sound. He thinks of it wet and slick with exertion, arcing up as Ilya fucks and fucks and *fucks* him.

Fuck.

He leans forward and fingers the sweatshirt's collar instead, dragging it upward in an attempt at self-preservation, taking all the shoulder back so he has less skin to work with when he's in the dark later. Hand around his cock. Hand on his stupid fucking heart.

"Were you...worried?" Shane says, eyes suddenly more brown again.

He's watching Ilya cover him up. It's a question phrased more as a statement, and Ilya understands this. The words trickle out gently, but firmly.

"No."

Shane worries his bottom lip between his teeth, eventually letting it drop so that the light sings across it, the vermillion bright pink and full with blood. "Were you...jealous?"

Ilya jerks in place, then scoffs. "*No.*"

"Ilya."

He sighs, cursing under his breath and running a hand through his curls. Their gold mills about his fingers before he lowers them.

"Fine. Maybe." The word costs him something. "Maybe little bit."

"Why?"

This is the question, isn't it? Why does it matter who gave Shane the sweatshirt? Why does Ilya care that Shane has other friends, other people who notice when he's cold and offer comfort?

Ilya glances at Shane, at the way the dying light is catching in his hair, refracting. At that spiderlily mouth, slightly open and curling coyly, two teeth peeked through the dark gap like an American Girl doll. At that shoulder, bare and pale and close enough to touch if Ilya just leaned forward, if he just reached out and took another liberty.

To touch another person is to say: I know you will die, and I am doing this anyway.

His mother used to say something like this. About painting.

Every portrait is an act of faith, Ilyushenka. Faith and futility both.

You capture someone knowing they won't stay this way, knowing eventually they'll age or change or die, and you do it anyway because the alternative is worse. The alternative is letting them pass through your life unrecorded, unseen.

Ilya has been recording Shane. Every morning. Every evening at the kitchen table. Every moment of tenderness and grief and exhaustion. He's been building a portrait in his head, cataloging details: the way Shane takes his tea, the particular scritch and scratch of his pens

while studying, the sound of his breathing through the wall at night, its awkward hitch when he mistakenly wakes.

He's been *seeing* Shane, and somewhere in all that seeing, something shifted. Something he is unsure if he has a name for yet, or maybe he does have a name for it, but. *But*. Saying it out loud would change *everything*, would cross a line he cannot uncross, another border into another country. No man's land.

He gives in, just a little. It takes something, a lot.

"You know why, *Умный мальчик*," he murmurs, thumb curving across Shane's chin. "I don't like seeing you in someone else's clothes."

The admission feels huge, dangerous. But sometimes. Sometimes, the thing is simpler than you fear it is.

Shane's breath catches. Audible. "Oh."

"*Oh*," Ilya teases, switching to deflection to mask his disappointment. "Is stupid. Forget I say."

"It's not stupid."

"Hollander—"

"Shane," comes the swift correction, a precise decimation of Ilya's attempt at distance.

"Shane—" Ilya begins again.

"Why don't you like it?" Shane asks. His voice has gone very soft, very careful. He sounds nearly breathless. The sleeve slides down again. Ilya wants to kiss him there.

Everything, every feeling, is hitting him like a car crash.

Because I want you in my clothes, Ilya thinks. *Because I want to give you my sweatshirt and watch you drown in it and know that you're marked by me, that anyone who sees you would know you belong to—*

He stops himself. Belonging. That's not—they're not—

"I think," Ilya says slowly, carefully, feeling his way through English and emotion both, "I think maybe we are not just friends."

The silence that follows is *enormous*. It fills the whole apartment, presses against Ilya's ribs, makes it so much more difficult to breathe.

"No?" Shane says. His face has gone very still. Only his eyes move, searching Ilya's face for—what? Confirmation? Escape route?

"No," Ilya says. "I think—I don't know what we are. But is not just friends. Or at least, I don't think I want to be. *Just* that."

Shane nods once. Small. He settles back, teeth chewing at the tissue of his inner cheek. Then, "Okay."

Ilya blinks. "Okay?"

"I think—" Shane stops. Swallows. His hand moves to his collarbone, that self-soothing gesture Ilya recognizes now. "I think you're right. I don't want to be just that either."

Outside, the city continues. Cars pass, and students walk by on their way to lectures or coffee or lunch or wherever normal people who aren't desiring their flatmate go on weekdays, their whole world untilted.

Inside, there is just this: two people on a couch, the space between them charged and perfectly measured by one thigh and the next, both afraid to move, afraid that moving will shatter this butterfly of attachment, so fragile and new.

"So," Shane says eventually. "Chess?"

Ilya blinks. "Sorry?"

"You said you wanted to play. We could—if you want to. Now."

It's a deflection, maybe. An offering of balm to the clear way, Ilya is chafing in his own skin under the weight of sudden vulnerability. A way to stay in this moment without having to name it further, without having to decide what comes next.

"*da*," Ilya says. "Yes. We play."

He stops, then grins recklessly. "I beat you. I win."

"Haha," Shane says drily, eyes lit with silent laughter. "Let's see if you can *really* live up to all this bravado."

Shane unfolds himself from the couch and goes to his room, (*Газель. Маленький олененок*, Ilya swallows. *Бэмбу*) and comes back with a board. Physical, wooden pieces click gleefully as they're set down. He sits on the floor by the coffee table, starts setting up, and Ilya slides down to join him.

Their knees touch. Neither of them makes to fix it.

Shane chooses white. Opens with e4. Ilya responds with e5. The game begins, quiet and intent, and Ilya realizes: this is how they could talk now. This is the language for whatever they struggle to say daily.

Shane's shoulder is still glinting like open bone, bare in Hayden's sweatshirt. Ilya is close enough now to see the goosebumps rising on Shane's skin, to know without asking that he's

cold again.

After the next game, Ilya thinks. After the next game, I'll give him my sweatshirt. I'll watch him put it on. I'll see my name across his back—Rozanov—and maybe then I'll understand what he is, with my name attached to him. What we are.

For now, though, he moves his knight.

It's a stupid move, and he is not even trying, and he is so easily going to lose, but. *But.*

Shane smiles.

It is worth it then.

VI. QE2.

The thing is, Ilya and his interest seem fit to fall. Shane tells no one because he doesn't think this will last.

And it is as if Ilya has sensed this thought. Suddenly, he is indispensable. So ridiculously involved. Shane feels him always, like his own shadow. But warmer, with weight. *En art comme en amour, l'instinct suffit.*

He supposes it's the waiting that does it. This anxious notion that there is another shoe, somewhere, preparing to drop. It contributes to his open surprise when he walks out of the hospital, and there's Ilya. Just loitering in the parking lot, face golden under the streetlight, bored.

He's wearing a black beanie, a selection of eager golden curls dusting across his forehead from beneath. Then: long-sleeve Uniqlo thermal and those low-slung black sweatpants that are threatening Shane's self-control in ways he can't examine here, in public, at work, under this incessant fluorescent buzz. A cigarette hangs from his mouth, the end burning.

Shane is annoyed—the lack of care, the health of it all. But then Ilya blows smoke out through his nose, and Shane's stomach turns, drops, goes liquid.

Ilya drags his eyes up from his phone, thumb pausing whatever video mid-motion. The edge of his mouth quirks. He ditches the cigarette, grinding it beneath the heel of his emerald Sambas, and moves toward Shane fluidly. Easily. Like his blood is beholden to some magnetic current that routes him directly to Shane's body, inevitable as weather.

“Hey, *дopoзoй*. Good shift?”

“Um,” Shane replies, a bit dazed. “As good as it can be.”

Ilya floods him. The smell of him, everywhere. He's so broad, so filled out—even more than Shane, who was nothing to laugh at, but still. Ilya is *more*. Shane tastes every note of his cologne on the backs of his teeth: smoke, caramel, the thick, lush throat of woods. A blend of spice and spun sugar. Tonka bean. Violet violet *violet*.

Shane knows the name, too. knew exactly where to find it when entering Cartier—has pretended to shop, grabbing only samples, has spilled it all over his sheets when he couldn't get to his hips to slow down, stay down.

He needs Ilya to *hold* them down.

Shane goes strawberry bright, eyes flickering nervously to Ilya's face as if the thought had been broadcast, only to look away again. He has never been this nervous before. He was normally nervous all the time, but not in this way. Not this—this bright animal panic.

“Mmm,” Ilya leans in closer, eyes dark as sapphire. His lips land on the ridge of Shane's cheek before he loops an arm around his waist and begins to walk him toward the crimson G-wagon lying in wait, headlights leering like watchers' eyes. “You hungry?”

Shane is stuck. He'll admit it. He was fully prepared to slog home on the train, eyes closed in brief prayer every time it stopped on the track, brain calculating if he should get off early and just firm it on the bus instead. But Ilya is here. Ilya is here with his hands on Shane's waist, his hands that reek of nicotine. His fingers. Fingers Shane perversely wants in his mouth, eyes big and starry as he goes wet around them.

This is pathological. *He's* pathological.

“I could—I could eat,” and his voice cracks, and Ilya laughs. “I have lunch left over though, so we—”

Ilya drags him up by the hips, practically slinging him in the seat, except he's more careful than that. His face is scrunched with sudden displeasure, protective. He nudges Shane's thighs apart until he's in the middle, a crown jewel, their foreheads close enough to rest together.

“Real food, Hollander. Not that healthy shit you barely can swallow.”

“Hey!” Shane recoils, sliding into a subconscious pout.

Ilya's pupils blow, a wolfish grin spreading slowly, an infection of need.

“I do not struggle to swallow,” Shane insists. “It's as good as it looks.”

“So not very good then,” Ilya nods.

Shane hits him.

“Fuck you, Rozanov. You learn a little English, and suddenly you think you're all that.”

"I am." Ilya ducks inside the passenger seat more fully to better kiss the edge of Shane's mouth. Shane loses all thought. Goes blank and hot. "But I guess I can give little credit to *New Yorker*. Boring, but good to learn. Oh, and Wordle."

Shane loses a high giggle then. The sound was almost absentminded, surprising even to him. A little pulse of joy thuds at the vision of Ilya completing his daily Wordle before a game, hunched over his phone in the locker room, scowling at green and yellow squares.

"Feet, *dopozoy*."

Shane brings them into the car. Ilya closes the door, pleased with himself.

Shane watches him round the car. Skin a golden vision for a minute, haloed in streetlight, before he's back beside him in the driver's seat. Ilya adjusts the heat, then hoists himself up to lean backward, digging around the back seat for something unknown. The motion causes his tee to rise, baring a small strip of skin like a gilded desert, and Shane shuffles his legs closed, eyes squeezing shut. He forces himself to relax, but it doesn't work.

He opens them to the sight of Ilya's chain dangling, crucifix catching light in admonishment.

Shane closes them again. Stays there in the dark behind his eyelids where his desire requires no witness.

Ilya settles back into his seat with a triumphant noise, and Shane opens his eyes to see him holding a container—no, a proper bento box, one that speaks to being expensive with compartments and a small frog clasp at the side.

"What is that?"

"Food, *duh*," Ilya says, popping the lid with his thumb. Steam rises immediately, curling in the space between them, fragrant and rich and everything Shane's tupperware meals are decidedly not. "I made for you."

Shane's stomach betrays him, growling audibly. Inside the container: diced beef glistening with some dark sauce Shane has lost the name for, mushroom rice that is such a simple variation from his meal prep quinoa, and a small thermos that Ilya unscrews to reveal miso soup, the scent of it rushing the car. A seizure of ground.

"Ilya, you didn't have to—"

"You work twelve hours. You need real food, not cardboard." Ilya is already mixing the rice and beef with a spoon he produces from somewhere obscured, making sure the sauce distributes evenly through the grains. His movements are sure, practiced. He's done this before, has cooked, prepared, and considered what someone else might need.

Shane thinks of his mother—*Irina, Irina*—and his mouth tightens with grief.

"Open."

Shane looks at him, eyes squinting with disbelief.

"I can feed myself."

"*da*, but you won't. You will say—" Ilya pitches his voice higher, a terrible impression "'is fine, I eat later,' and then you fall asleep on couch and eat nothing." He brings the spoon to Shane's mouth, eyes dark and intent. "Open, *милая*."

Shane should protest more. He should. He should sit and insist on his independence, his ability to take care of himself, the careful autonomy he's built over years of living alone, of being alone. But there is a part of him that is tired.

And so, instead, his lips part.

The spoon slides in, and *oh*. Oh, oh, *oh*—the food is still warm, perfectly seasoned. The beef is tender enough to fall apart on his tongue, strands finding the wedges between pairs of teeth, the mushrooms earthy and deep, the rice sticky and comforting in a way Shane's carefully measured portions never are. It tastes so delicately perfect, near his mother's own, his grandmother's.

It tastes like someone he could love, like someone he does.

"Good, yes?" Ilya asks, watching Shane's face intently. (*In the light, here, he looks a little more Audrey than ever. Забавное лицо. The thought makes Ilya bite back a smile.*)

Shane makes a noncommittal sound around the spoon, trying to maintain some dignity even as he's already leaning forward slightly, body betraying want, betraying need.

Ilya's eyes narrow. He withdraws the spoon slowly. "You are being difficult."

"I'm not—"

"Swallow," Ilya says, and his voice has dropped, suddenly belonging to a certain space that makes Shane's spine straighten, that pulls a wire low in his stomach—clenching tight whenever he finds a way to crawl right into it.

Shane listens, swallows. The food goes down thick.

Then Ilya's hand is at his jaw, fingers splayed wide along the bone, thumb pressing gently at the hinge to keep Shane's mouth soft, available. He leans in—slow enough that Shane could pull away but quickly enough that Shane's breath stutters and stops, lungs spasming with desperation—and kisses him.

It's nothing like Shane imagined during those long nights with Ilya's stolen cologne on his sheets. There is no need to be hungry or anxious, or rushed. It is *soft*, devastatingly so. Ilya's lips barely press against his, just this whisper of contact that somehow feels louder than anything. There is a pause and then a tilt of the head, Ilya learning the shape of Shane's mouth, making them fit.

His tongue slides gently against Shane's bottom lip, tasting the sauce there, leaving spit there, before retreating. Shane follows the motion, head bobbing for more, like searching for an apple underneath the water. In an instant, he knows he will become addicted to this, if not

already there. This is a taste he'll crave in the spaces between seeing Ilya, in the quiet of his own room, when he is at practice, and Shane is on the floor of the supply closet in the hospital, weeping and overly exhausted.

Searching for apples, a slice, in every moment from now until—until—

When Ilya pulls back, his eyes are so dark, moonless, pupils swallowing the blue until there's almost nothing left but want.

"Tell me it's good," he murmurs. His thumb is still on Shane's jaw, a point of heat. "Tell me."

Shane's brain has evacuated. Left the building entirely. "It's—yeah. It's good."

"*What* is good?"

"The—" Shane's voice cracks. He clears his throat. "The food. It's really good."

Quieter, "Thank you."

Ilya's smile is slow to rise, feline, satisfied in a way that makes Shane want to do something stupid like climb into his lap. "Good boy."

The noise that slides out of Shane is mortifying. A flash of sound between a whimper and a gasp, high and needy, and Ilya's smile transforms beautifully into something nearing malevolence.

"Now *eat*," he says, and it's not a request.

And Shane does. He lets Ilya feed him while they sit in the hospital parking lot, the car's interior warm and dim, the world outside forgotten and irrelevant. Each bite punctuated by Ilya's soft praise—*good, дорозой, one more, almost done*—until the container is empty and Shane feels full for the first time in weeks.

It is not only food, but with something else. Someone else, maybe. He doesn't think about it.

"Better?" Ilya asks, wiping a grain of rice from the corner of Shane's mouth with the pad of his index finger. The touch lingers.

"Yeah," Shane admits, and his voice comes out quieter than intended. "Better."

Ilya starts the car. The engine purrs to life, and he pulls out of the parking lot onto the streets of Boston, which are silent and still at this hour. The city has been beckoned into that liminal space between night shift workers heading home and morning commuters heading out, and it has entered it. The city in-between, neither asleep nor awake.

Music fills the car, a sudden invasion. Jeff Buckley's voice, ethereal and aching: "*Everybody here wants you...*"

Shane closes his eyes and allows himself rest, allows himself to sink into the creamy leather seat, into the warmth bleeding from the vents, into the safety of Ilya's presence beside him,

one hand on the gear selector. He could fall asleep like this. Probably will.

His body is heavy with fatigue and food and a sluggish happiness that is more near contentment, like peace.

Irina.

Then Ilya's phone buzzes on the dash.

He ignores it. It buzzes again. A call this time, insistent.

Shane opens his eyes, glances at the screen. **Svetlana calling...**

His entire body goes tense. Every muscle that had just relaxed now pulled taut as a wire.

Ilya notices immediately—of course, he does. Ilya notices everything. Or at least everything Shane. He has not stopped looking since he began.

"Seems kinda urgent," Shane says lightly, and Ilya is silent for a moment, still looking at him.

"No, is fine." Ilya declines the call with his thumb, sets the phone face-down in the dark space behind the gear stick, like that will make it stop existing.

The music continues. Buckley singing about desire, about aching, about everybody every-fucking-where needing you. The irony sits bitter on Shane's tongue.

Ilya's jaw tightens. Shane can see it in his peripheral vision, the muscle jumping. He signals—sharp, efficient—and pulls the car over to the curb with more force than Shane believes necessary. The G-wagon rocks slightly, and Shane puts a hand to his head, wincing.

Ilya puts it in park, kills the engine, and turns to face Shane fully.

The loss of motion makes everything fall incredibly still, and the world dwindles to just their breathing (Ilya's deep with irritation, Shane's slightly haggard with nerves) and Jeff, who just won't give it up, and the distant sound of traffic.

"Don't do that," Ilya says. His voice is low but edged.

"Do what?"

"Shut down. Go away from me like you weren't just here." Ilya's hand finds Shane's knee, squeezes once. The pressure is grounding. "Was Sveta, yes?"

Shane nods. His throat is too tight for words.

"She is my *best friend*," Ilya says. Each word is careful, deliberate, like he's translating in his head before speaking. "Since we are children. Since before I can remember being anyone else. Our mothers, they were best friends too. We grow up in same spaces, same hallway almost."

Shane looks out the window at the dark Boston street, at the closed shops and empty sidewalks. "Okay."

"Shane. *Look* at me."

Shane doesn't want to. He has no desire to see whatever explanation is coming up Ilya's golden throat, whatever gentle letdown is being spun on his tongue, whatever *it's complicated* that will confirm what Shane already knows: that he's temporary, that this is temporary, that good things don't—

"*Shane.*"

The repetition breaks something. Shane turns his head.

Ilya's face is serious, stripped of its usual playfulness. He looks older like this. Tired. Real. Shane almost reaches out to him, a nurturer's instinct rising, a sudden will to make Ilya's demand of living easier to carry.

"Sveta and I, we had a moment. Is true. We try, because everyone expects it. Our families, they wanted this since we were small. They make jokes always—*when is wedding, when do we get grandbabies*—like is already decided." He pauses. "We tried to want it too. We have sex, few times. But is only bodies. Is not—" He gestures vaguely at his chest. "Not here. You understand?"

Shane's throat is tight. "Ilya, you don't have to—"

"No, I *need* you to hear this." Ilya's hand moves from Shane's knee to his thigh before flipping and sliding to his hand, fingers threading through Shane's with deliberate care, thumb finding the pulse point at Shane's wrist. Palm to palm. Shane wonders if he can read them. "She is my *best friend*. She will always be my best friend. But is not romantic. Is not what I want. And she—she knows this. She agrees. She even laugh at me last time we talk, says I am obvious about you, says everyone can see."

"See what?"

Ilya's eyes are very dark. Very steady. "That I am locked in on you. *понимаешь*? Only you. Not her. Not anyone else."

Shane's breath catches. He is uncomfortable with this much raw appetite looking him in the eye, staring him down. "It's fine, Ilya, you don't have to—"

"*Hem.*" Ilya's voice cuts sharply. He is almost angry, and in response, Shane settles his free hand flat against his chest. Ilya relaxes, the release almost instantaneous. "Don't do that. Don't make it small. Don't pretend you don't care, that this doesn't matter." His grip on Shane's hand tightens. "Don't treat me like I'm stupid and can't see that you are jealous."

"I am *not*—"

"You are," Ilya interrupts. His free hand comes up now, cups Shane's face, forcing eye contact. "Same as me with Pike. Same like I was ready to fight him for giving you his

sweatshirt, like I wanted to tear it off you and burn it." His thumb strokes across Shane's cheekbone. "Is okay to be jealous, *догодой*. Means you care. Means this—" he gestures between them with a tilt of his head "—means something. To both of us."

Shane's eyes are burning. *Oh*, he thinks. *When did that happen?* "I just—I don't know how to do this."

"Do what?"

"*This*, Ilya. Want something. Want someone, and have them want me back. All of me." Shane looks down at their joined hands, at the way Ilya's fingers dwarf his own. "I'm not good at it. I always—I miss cues, I—I fuck it up, or it just fucks *up*, and people leave, or I leave, or—"

"Or maybe," Ilya says softly, breaking the loop, "maybe this time is different. Maybe this time you stay, and I stay, and we see what happens."

"You don't *know* that. You can't promise—"

"No," Ilya agrees. "But Shane—" He waits until Shane looks up. "You are in me like a soul."

The words hit like a physical blow. Shane's breath stops entirely. "What?"

"You are in me like a soul," Ilya repeats. His accent is thicker now, vowels rounded with emotion. "Is—how you say—you are not just on my mind. You are inside. In my chest, in my thoughts, in everything. Like you live there now. Like you are part of me." His hand on Shane's face trembles slightly. "You are instinct. I cannot take you out even if I want to. And I don't want to."

He ducks slightly, meets Shane where he is before saying, "Rather be dead."

Shane can't breathe or think. No one has ever said this to him, has ever even thought this. This he knows. *Instinct*, as Ilya says.

"You don't have to say anything," Ilya continues quietly. "I just need you to know. I need you to understand that when I say I am serious, I mean—" He stops. Starts again in Russian, softer: "*Ты мне нужен как воздух*." Then, translating: "I need you like air. You are my oxygen. *понимаешь?*"

Shane's face is wet. When did that happen? "I—fuck. Ilya—"

"It's okay," Ilya says, wiping Shane's tears with his thumb. "Is okay to feel too much. I feel too much too. Like *моя мама*. Is scary, yes? But also—also good, maybe. To feel this much. To want this much. We are allowed."

"I don't—" Shane's voice breaks. "What if I mess us up?"

"Then we mess up together," Ilya says simply. "And we fix it. And we keep going. Because Shane—" His forehead drops to rest against Shane's. "Because you are in me. I think maybe I am in you, too, yes? Little bit?"

Shane laughs wetly. "Yeah. Little bit."

"More than little bit?"

"Yeah," Shane whispers. "A lot, actually."

Ilya's smile is a sweet arrival, sunrise-gradual, disarming. He kisses Shane again. Still tender, excruciatingly meticulous, but deeper this time. His tongue slides against Shane's, a thirst for salt, a promise that binds them both, inevitable as a planet turning.

When they break apart, both breathing hard, Ilya's thumb is still stroking Shane's cheekbone. Shane presses into it.

"You should—" Shane gestures vaguely at Ilya's phone. "You should text her back. She's probably worried."

"*da*, yes." Ilya pulls back, giving Shane space. "I need to drive, but you do it. Tell her you are with me. Tell her—whatever you want. But Shane?"

"Yeah?"

"Do not hide me." Ilya's eyes are intense, serious. "I won't hide you either. Deal?"

Shane nods, throat too tight for words.

He picks up Ilya's phone with shaking hands, types: *Sorry, Ilya's driving. He's asking if everything is okay? This is Shane Hollander, btw.*

Svetlana's response is immediate: *Finally, my God. Yes, fine, just wanted to catch up.*

Another text follows: *He's been pathetic about you. Truly. I'm so glad you're putting him out of his misery, and me out of mine.*

Shane shows Ilya the screen, unsure of what to say to that. Ilya's grin is blinding, boyish, unguarded.

"Tell her I said fuck off."

"She knows," Shane says, suddenly dazed again.

"Of course she knows. Sveta knows everything about me." Ilya puts the car back into drive, checks his mirrors, and pulls back onto the road. "She tell me three weeks ago I am in love with you. I say no, is just—how you say—fascination. She laughed at me."

Shane's heart stops. "She said—I'm sorry?"

Ilya glances over, eyebrow raised. "What?"

"You—she said you were—" Shane can't find the strength to finish the sentence.

"In love with you?" Ilya's voice is careful. "ðə. She say this. I tell her she is crazy. But—" He pauses, considering. "Maybe she is not so crazy."

The car fills with silence; the music is finally turned off. Shane stares at Ilya's profile: the strong nose, the bow of his lips, the way the streetlights paint him in alternating shadow and gold. Beautiful. So stupidly beautiful it makes Shane's chest ache.

"Maybe not so crazy," Shane echoes quietly. Then, "If you could go back home, would you take me?"

Ilya's hand finds his across the console, threads their fingers together.

"Why go back?" he asks, and the words come so easily.

The light melts from yellow to red, and they roll to a stop. Ilya shifts to better look at him.

"You are my home. I am already there."

VII. BIRD'S OPENING (CHECKMATE).

To return to your mother is the ethos of human life, Ilya thinks.

You return to the earth's womb when you pass, after a life spent cheating a birth-founded pact with death. You see your mother in your last moments, you call her during disaster. Ilya comes into June dreaming of his.

She is bright and so beautiful. He is awake in the dark for a long while, lashes supple against his cheek as the tears sting and roll far down. He wishes that he could keep her.

It is this that propels him to go out on the summer solstice and buy paint.



The art store in Cambridge smells exactly like his mother's studio used to. Linseed oil and turpentine, wood and pigment, and a sense of profound possibility just on its way past you. Ilya stands in the doorway for a full minute before he can make himself go inside. His hands are shaking. He shoves them in his pockets. He finds his eyes wet.

He wants to close them, so he can stop finding his mother in every inch of this boutique, the way one finds God in the spread of your lover's teeth, in the fist of a newborn child, of a sibling's limb before division.

The woman behind the counter looks up, smiles. She's beautiful, a soft face like his Shane's, a small mouth that is brushed a deep pink. Her hair is long and black as a raven's wing, long as Ilya likes to imagine his mother's could've been.

"Can I help you find something?"

Irina. Peace. Please.

"Paint," Ilya says. His English has gone again, fractured under distress. "For—oil paint. And canvas. And—" He gestures vaguely. Everything. He needs everything.

She's kind about it, eyes his hands shaking in his denim pockets, but asks nothing of it. She simply rises and begins to walk him through the aisles. She's patient with him. Walks him through the store, asking questions he is unsure of how to answer. *What size canvas? What colors? Does he need brushes, or does he have some already?*

The knowledge left with his mother. Fled, shed him like old skin, and went wherever she went.

His throat tightens at one point, and the woman—Mila—pretends that she's heard someone else ask for her, giving him her back and a brief sense of privacy. He thinks that mostly, people desire not to harm each other.

He stands there for what feels like hour upon hour, just looking at it all. Touching nothing. Eventually, Mila turns back to him, though she does it slowly, giving him time to disappear. He clears his throat and braces his shoulders, prepares for impact, the same way he does when he knows a player is going to crush him into the rink's boards.

Much of life has felt that way.

"I need new brushes," he tells her. "Good ones. The best you have."

He leaves with two bags, an emptier bank account, a survey Mila didn't impose but he promised to complete anyway, and a feeling in his chest like he has done something illicit. Like he's stolen from his mother's grave, touched something he wasn't supposed to let his fingers graze.

At home, he spreads everything across the living room floor. The canvas—he bought the biggest one they had, 36 by 48, absurd and ambitious—is accusatory in its absence of everything, tubes of paint lolling awkwardly like small, rigid bodies. Cadmium red and ultramarine blue, and titanium white, colors his mother loved. Colors she always started with.

He doesn't touch them yet, but his fingers flare out as if feeling an energy, reading an aura. He sits there on the floor, legs crossed, staring, sixteen again.

The new brushes, still stiff and perfect. Lifeless. He sees her on the bedroom floor.

Irina.

His phone buzzes. Jane, of course. Running joke.

Jane: *Clinical running late. Won't be home until 9. You okay?*

Ilya types back: *Yes. See you tonight.*

Then, because he can't help himself: *Miss you*

Jane: *Miss you more, baby. Save me some dinner if you cook, please.*

So, Shane is at work, won't be home until evening. Ilya has the apartment to himself, has these hours to—what? Prepare? There's no preparing for this. You either do it or you don't.

He gets up and goes to his closet, leaning into its open mouth. His hand grazes across a box he hasn't opened since the funeral. The case is wooden, handmade by his father decades ago, before everything went wrong, before love calcified into a different stone, something harder than diamond.

Inside: his mother's brushes. They are exactly as Ilya remembered. Some stiff with dried paint—she'd been working on something when she got too tired to finish. Others are clean, carefully maintained. He can see her hands in his mind, washing each brush with such care, such attention.

My tools are an extension of my body, Ilyushenka. You must treat them with respect.

She had stopped, and he understood. Forgave her for the instinct. Finishing meant continuing, and continuing meant staying, and staying was too much to ask.

I'm so tired, Ilyushenka.

He takes the case to the kitchen sink. Runs warm water. Begins the slow process of salvaging each one, working the dried paint out of the bristles with his fingers as though working grave dirt from a bone, watching the water run rust-red and then blue and then clear.

It takes hours. His back aches. His fingers prune. The water runs colors he remembers through a haze of childhood: ultramarine always used for skies prettier than any of Moscow's offerings, alizarin crimson for flowers, the green ochre she mixed into everything because *we always return to the earth, Ilyushenka.*

Russia. Their home, never quite a home, and more a museum. Then a mausoleum. The way the afternoon light would slice through the windows and paint everything gold.

He lays them out on a towel to dry and looks at what he's done.

Good, мамочка? he thinks. *Am I doing this right?*

No answer. There's never an answer. But the brushes gleam in the afternoon light, and that feels like something.

He thinks: She saw beauty everywhere. Even at the end. Even when she was drowning in it.

He thinks: I am just like her.

He thinks: But I want a different ending.

And the arrival of the notion feels less like a betrayal than it did in the beginning.

The brushes gleam on the towel when he's done. His mama, resurrected. Ready to try again. His hands smell like turpentine and grief.

Is this okay, mama? He asks the empty kitchen. *Am I allowed to do this? To take your tools and make something for me?*

The apartment is silent, dead. But the brushes catch the light, and somehow that feels like an answer.

Ilya bends over the counter, hands in his hair, which then come to scrape over his face. The sob rumbles up from his stomach, the same way the sadness used to smoke up from his mother's womb.

He opens his mouth, and a sound falls out.

He leaks.

Shane comes home near destroyed.

Ilya knows this exhaustion now, has learned its particular flavor. The twelve-hour shifts that hollow you out, leave you walking but not quite present. He knows now that with these, nothing has gone catastrophically wrong, but everything has taken more energy than his *ангел* had to give.

Shane's scrubs are wrinkled—this week's are a lovely, lace-like yellow—his hair mussed from his hands running through it, dark circles under his eyes. He drops his bag by the door and just stands there, swaying slightly.

"Hey," Ilya says, crossing to him. Cups his face, kisses him softly and briefly. "You ate?"

Shane's gaze lands on Ilya, eyes widening, and something in his face softens. Ilya feels special that it is he who is causing this.

"Hospital cafeteria." Shane makes a face, mouth twisting.

"So no."

"Ilya, I'm fine—"

"Sit."

Shane, too tired to argue, sits.

He heats the rest of their pelmeni from three days ago, his grandmother's recipe (maternal), something he hasn't made in years, but his hands remembered how, though his mind had fought the memory. He brings the bowl to Shane with sour cream and fresh dill, watches as Shane takes the first bite, and his jaw seems to unclench. He continues to watch Shane eat, continues to watch the way food brings him back into his body, loosening his spirit and allowing it back into the room that Ilya pictures pink and perfect and gossamer soft around his heart.

"Better?" Ilya asks from beside him when the bowl is empty. "Good?"

"Mmhm. So good," Shane mumbles around a mouthful. His eyes are soft, grateful. He looks as young as he should always. "Thank you, baby."

"Always. You need to eat more. You are too skinny."

"*What?* Excuse you, I am *not*—"

"You are." Ilya reaches over, squeezes Shane's bicep. "Where is muscle? I know is under there somewhere. Is okay. We cannot all be strongest like me."

Shane kicks him under the table, but he's smiling. Takes a second helping.

They sit like this while Shane eats, Ilya watching him with something dangerously close to contentment, and when Shane finishes and pushes the bowl away with a satisfied sigh, Ilya asks: "You are tired?"

"Exhausted."

"Too tired for something?"

Shane's eyes sharpen with interest despite the exhaustion. "What kind of something?"

"Dirty mind," Ilya teases, but he stands, offers his hand. "Come. I show you."

He leads Shane to his bedroom. Shane follows, curiosity evident on his face, and when Ilya opens the door, Shane stops in the doorway.

"Oh," he says quietly.

The room has been transformed. Ilya's bed pushed against the wall to make space. The easel, intricate and engraved with *I.R.* at the very bottom right side, is set up by the window, canvas mounted and waiting, blank and terrifying.

"Ilya," Shane breathes.

"I bought paint today." Ilya's hands are shaking like before. He shoves them in his pockets, flexes them until the pain returns him to the present.

Shane is very still. "Oh."

"I want—I thought maybe I try. Is stupid, maybe. I don't know if I remember how—"

Shane crosses to him, takes his face in both hands. "It's not stupid. You are *not* stupid. Not ever. You are—" His eyes are bright. "You are very brave."

The words hit like a fist to the chest. Ilya has to look away, blinking hard. He has waited his whole life for such simple words, the acknowledgement that it is hard sometimes, all the time, and he is good and courageous for pushing through.

"Mmm," he manages.

"You are," Shane says firmly. Then, tentatively, as if to keep him from spooking:

"What are you going to paint?"

Ilya glances up then, studies the exhaustion in Shane's face, the softness, the way the evening light from the window catches in his hair and turns it nearly white. At the freckles scattered across his cheeks like stars, like his mother used to paint constellations, connecting dots into meaning.

The bear tattooed across his left pectoral burns.

"You," Ilya says. "I want to paint you."

Shane's breath catches. "Me?"

Ursa Major, Ilya thinks. *Follow me to find you, North Star.*

"*Da*. If you let me. If you—" Ilya stops. Starts again. "You don't have to. Is a lot to be looked at for so long. To sit still. I know you are tired, so maybe another day—"

"No," Shane interrupts. "We can do it now. I want you to sit for you now."

"You are sure?"

"I'm sure."

"I am—" Ilya's throat closes. His eyes follow suit as he swallows hard. He tries again. "I am so scared."

Shane doesn't ask why.

"I know," he says.

"I don't know if I can—what if I'm not good? What if I try and it's bad?"

"Then you tried," Shane answers. Ilya tries to breathe through his mouth without letting any salt fall. "And you try again. That's what she would want, right? For you to try?"

Would she? Ilya doesn't know. His mother wanted so many things that she never communicated. She had once wanted to paint professionally but married instead, wanted to be free but stayed. Wanted to live but couldn't, in the end.

Couldn't find a reason big enough to keep going. Not even him, 6'1 at age sixteen.

This is not fair, and he knows this, but it is a secret resentment, and he must learn how to let go. Must name it.

But she'd taught him how to paint. The basics. That much he knows. She'd taught him everything she knew, patient and careful, her hands guiding his.

"Yes," Ilya says finally. "I think she would want me to try."

"Okay," Shane closes the distance between them, takes Ilya's shaking hands out of his pockets, and steadies them. Leans in, head on chest. "Okay."



They go like this: Ilya gives Shane his jersey.

His game-specific jersey with **ROZANOV** across the back. It smells like every win, every loss, every moment on ice where Ilya felt closest to something like transcendence.

"Just this?" Shane asks, holding it. He runs his fingers over the embroidered letters.

"Just this. Nothing underneath."

Shane flushes, but nods. He strips, unselfconscious after months of Ilya worshiping every inch of his body. The scrub top comes off first, revealing smooth skin, the sharp jut of the clavicle, the small hollow of his throat where his pulse thunders when Ilya lies there at night.

Then the pants, kicked off and left in a puddle. Shane stands there in his boxers for a moment before pulling those off too, and Ilya— Ilya has to look away, or he won't paint anything. Will just remap Shane's body with his hands, his mouth, his desperation. Make music instead.

When he looks back, Shane is drowning in the fabric. The jersey falls to mid-thigh, sleeves past his elbows, neckline slipping off one shoulder to bare the curve of it, pale and perfect.

ROZANOV across his back. His name. His claim.

A voice possessive and primitive roars to life in Ilya's chest.

Mine, that voice says. *Mine mine mine*.

"Okay, Michaelangelo. How do you want me?" Shane asks. And he has no idea what those words do to Ilya, the images they conjure.

Ilya smiles despite himself, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. "On the bed. However is comfortable."

Shane climbs onto Ilya's bed and settles cross-legged with his laptop. "Can I—I was going to play chess online tonight. Do you mind if I—"

"No, is perfect. Yes."

Shane opens his laptop, navigates to whatever chess site he uses. The screen illuminates his face in the dimming evening light, and Ilya has to stop. Stare.

Shane in his jersey, the shirt ill-fitting in a gorgeous way. Head bent slightly toward the screen, that little furrow of concentration between his brows. Fingers poised over the keyboard. Blue light snagged in his hair, painting shadows under his cheekbones, turning his eyes that color Ilya still cannot put a name to.

Beautiful. The word isn't big enough. Doesn't capture the way Ilya's chest aches looking at him, the way his hands itch to touch, to capture, to keep.

"You're staring," Shane says without looking up. His mouth quirks. "Are you going to paint or just look at me all night?"

"Maybe both," Ilya admits.

Shane laughs gently, pleased. "Then you better get started."

So Ilya does.

He arranges his palette, trying to remember how his mother did this, the order of colors, the way she'd squeeze the paint in neat lines along the edge. His hands are shaking so badly that he drops a tube. Red bleeds onto the floor like an omen.

I can't do this, he thinks.

You can, Сыночек, his mother's voice sounds in his head like a mass's bell. *You must. This is how you survive me.*

He picks up the charcoal.

The first stroke is a mile wide, dark like the world ending.

The body, yes. The body remembers. His hand moves across the canvas, and it's like muscle memory. The weight of the charcoal, the way it drags and smudges, the pallid sound it makes against the canvas as if being dragged back into a life it has no choice but to live.

He starts with sketching the rough composition on canvas—Shane's form, the slope of his shoulders, the bend of his neck. His mother always said: *The structure is everything, Ilyushenka. Get it right, and the rest follows. It is a flow.*

He loses time. Could be minutes, could be hours. Shane is quiet, focused on his game, occasionally muttering in French when a move doesn't go his way. It's domestic, oddly intimate in a way that has nothing to do with sex and everything to do with existing in the same time together, breathing the same air, together.

Being, together.

"She taught you to paint?" Shane asks eventually, voice like a lullaby so as not to break the spell.

They know who she is, the shape of her, the way she is always in the room.

Irina. Irochka. Mother, wife, spectre.

"Yes." Ilya is mixing colors now. He's mixing colors now—white and ochre for Shane's skin, trying to get that particular pale warmth right. "She was very good. Could have been professional. But she chose my papa instead, chose family."

"Did she regret it?"

Ilya pauses, brush hovering as a hot, hard ball clogs the base of his throat. He speaks around it. "I think—yes. Not me or my brother, but. The life. Being a wife instead of artist. My father—he didn't understand. Thought painting was a waste of time. Not real work. He was so hard on her. So fucking *hard*."

Ilya takes a breath, the anger lapping at his teeth overly familiar.

"That's terrible."

"*da*." Ilya loads his brush, begins laying base color. "She painted anyway. In secret sometimes. She tell him she is at market or with friends, but really she go to studio in city. I go with her sometimes when I was small. I remember—"

His throat *squeezes*, and he tries to cover his face, but Shane has already risen. Coming to him, iris benediction.

"I *remember* how she looked when she painted. Like she was most herself. Like she could breathe."

He rests his head on Shane's shoulder, mewls slightly at the way Shane tucks him into his neck.

"You look like that now," Shane tells him, and Ilya can feel it as he speaks. "Right now. Like you are yourself."

"I am myself," Ilya says. "Through her."

Ilya pulls back, urges Shane back to the bed with a languid, wet kiss. Shane settles back in position, watching him over the lip of his laptop, eyes knowing. The jersey rides up his thigh. Ilya's brush hand falters.

"I know," Shane says, finally. "Keep going. I want to see."

Ilya keeps going, returns. Builds a layer of different colored worlds. He paints the drape of the jersey, trying to capture the weight of the fabric, the way it falls. He paints Shane's hands, long fingers, elegant even in stillness. There is no keyboard, only flowers spilling all over, down his knees onto their ~~marital~~ bed.

"You can tell me more about her," Shane says. "If you want."

Ilya is quiet for a long time, focused on constructing depth. Then:

"She loved color. Really loved. Painted every room in our house different. My room was blue. Sky blue, like in summer. Andrei's room was green. Her and Papa's room was—I don't remember. I was not allowed in there much. But yellow—I think."

His voice cracks. He clears his throat, switches brushes, to add highlights.

"She painted lilies all the time. They were her favorite. So beautiful but fragile. Don't last long." He pauses. "I think she saw herself in them."

"Do you still have any of her paintings?"

"Some. Papa kept a few. The rest—I don't know. Maybe he destroyed them. Maybe Andrei has them. If they are with him, I'll never get it back." Ilya's fingers tighten along the brush's stem. "I wish I took more. Before. I should have known to take them."

"You were a child," Shane says gently. "You shouldn't have known, not ever."

"I was old enough to see she was in pain."

"Because you were, too." Ilya's head snaps up, and Shane's face is indescribable, eyes fierce. "But not old enough to fix it. I don't think we ever get old enough to do that. And it's not always our responsibility."

Ilya sets the brush down now, presses his palms against his eyes. "I know. I know this. But sometimes—sometimes I think if I just—"

"Don't you dare," Shane interrupts. His voice is firm. "Don't you dare do that to yourself, Ilya. It wasn't your fault, baby. It was *never* your fault."

"How do you *know* that, Shane? How—"

"Because I know you." Shane closes his laptop again, setting it aside. "And I know that if there was anything you could have done, you would have. You would have done anything. Ilya, sweetheart, you loved her so much. And she loved *you* so much. It's so obvious, and it doesn't—we don't have to make it more than that."

Ilya drops his hands, looks at Shane. At this person who has somehow become—what? Everything?

"You sound like therapist," Ilya says, trying for lightness.

"I *sound* like someone who cares about you," Shane corrects. "And who hates seeing you hurt yourself like this."

"I'm not—"

"You are." Shane's voice is soft but unyielding. "You paint because you miss her. You wear her necklace every day. You memorized all of her recipes. You're—Ilya, you're trying to keep her alive, and that's—that's beautiful. But you also punish yourself for not saving her, and that's not. She wouldn't want that."

"You don't—" Ilya breaks off, frustrated. Overwhelmed in a sudden surge of this ocean, this secret lake of sadness unfrozen without instruction. "You *don't know* what she would want."

"Mm," Shane leans back, allowing him to be angry. It reminds Ilya of an archer, body tight and bow strung, poised to let go.

Shane releases.

"But you do."

It hits the mark, and Ilya feels a sob rip out of his chest, a small star chipped off a sun of pain that has radiated for a millennium. Shane stumbles off the bed, almost falling in his haste to get to Ilya, arms strong and suspending them both upright in a tight embrace. He coos, a mourning dove, hands sliding along Ilya's back, mouth placing kiss after kiss along the valleys of his face.

"I am *just* like her," Ilya says. His voice is untrustworthy, his mind even more so. "I am exactly like her. I feel too much, I—I get so *tired*, Shane. Sometimes I am so tired I don't know how to keep going."

"I know," Shane says. "But you do. You keep going. And you have me. And Svetlana. And my mom and dad. That's the difference. No one else was for her except for you, sweetheart. But you have so many people around you. So many people to tell when it gets hard."

"What if I *can't*? What if one day I—"

"Then I'll be there," Shane says simply. "If you were gone, I'd know. I'll be there, and we'll figure it out. Together. Okay?"

Ilya pulls him in closer, like a child after a nightmare. Shane only holds him, makes room, always making endless room.

"I don't want to end like her," Ilya whispers. "I don't want to—I want a different ending."

"Then we'll make a different ending, baby," Shane whispers. "Simple as that. *понимаешь?*"

Simple as that.

"*Да,*" Ilya confirms, small and wet. "Yes, I—I understand."

"I miss her," Ilya whispers against Shane's skin. "I miss her so much."

"I know," Shane murmurs, hands running through Ilya's hair, holding him steady. "I know, baby. I know."

They stay like this for a long time. It's long enough for Ilya's breathing to even out, for the lake behind his ribs to freeze back over. Long enough for the light outside to shift from twilight to gold to pink, dawn's breath pushing out and over the city like a blanket.

Finally, Ilya pulls back. Wipes at his face. "Sorry. I am supposed to be painting you, not—"

"Don't apologize." Shane cups his face, thumbs stroking his cheekbones. "No reason to. I love you. That's what I'm here for."

"I love you." Ilya leans into the touch. "You are—" He doesn't have the words. English or Russian. He goes back to that feverish place in his car, months ago, winter. "You are in me. Like soul, remember?"

Shane's smile is resplendent, shining. "I remember."

"Good." Ilya kisses him, brief and sweet. "Now go back. I need to finish."

"So bossy."

"You like it."

Shane returns to the bed, picks up his laptop, and settles back into position. Ilya picks up his brush, continues.

The painting grows.

Night after night, Shane comes to Ilya's room in his jersey—keeping it in his own room now, a gesture neither of them acknowledge, but both understand—and sits on the bed while Ilya paints.

Sometimes they talk, but mostly they are quiet. Sometimes Ilya has to stop, and Shane will come to him, will hold him until whatever plagues him stops.

One week in, Ilya fills in Shane's face. The slope of his nose, the curve of his mouth, constellations all over. Two weeks in, he's still painting. Adding depth and trying to improve upon the present layers. He is working hard to capture something essential about Shane—not just how he looks, but who he *is*. That is much harder; it comes without lines and guides.

"You know," Shane says one evening, "Rose wants me to join her chess club."

He's just won two games and lost the third, cursing softly in French at the screen. Ilya had stifled his laugh when he looked up and glared at him. Now, Ilya just hums consideringly.

"She said I should lead it with her," Shane continues. "Said I need to do something other than work and study and—her words—'pine pathetically after my hot Russian boyfriend.'"

Ilya grins. "She is smart, this Rose."

"She's a menace." Shane shifts slightly. "But I think I might. Join the club. If you—"

Ilya waits patiently, watches him figure it out.

"Would you come? Sometimes?"

"To chess club?"

"Yeah. I know it's not your thing, but—"

"Is my thing now," Ilya interrupts. "If it is your thing, is my thing. *da*?"

Shane's face does something complicated. Soft and vulnerable and open. "Yeah. Okay. *da*."

They smile at each other. Sometimes, their love feels adolescent in its intensity. Electric.

Ilya goes back to his painting. He is trying to do it the way his mother taught him—with attention, with love, with understanding. But also—also he is painting Shane in his own way, with the ideology of immortality, that he will last. Like he'll be here tomorrow and next week and next year.

This isn't temporary. They have time.

Maybe they don't. Maybe this will end the way everything ends. In loss, in grief, in one person leaving and the other staying behind, a heart ripped out of oneself voluntarily. But maybe it won't.

Maybe this time will be different.

Ilya looks up again, the motion almost lazy. He just wants to indulge. Shane's eyes are very bright.

One night, some days, many weeks into the project, Shane looks up from his laptop and asks:

"When will it be finished?"

Ilya pauses, brush mid-stroke, and gazes at Shane. Takes in the slight sunburn on his nose from walking to lecture, the newest freckle that's appeared on his left shoulder, probably from the afternoon they spent on the Charles River with Rose and Hayden and Sveta and everyone else they liked enough to keep close, shirts off, soaking up every inch of UV pollution.

"Hmm," Ilya hums, pretending to think.

Shane's lips curve into a smile. Ilya shrugs, and Shane laughs, begrudging him nothing.

Everything is exactly as it should be.

У любви, как у кольца, начала нет и нет конца.

"Never, maybe," Ilya says slowly. "You keep changing in the light."

End Notes

thank you so much for reading, and for making it all the way through. i love you so much, and i hope you're staying warm. please feel free to comment to your hearts desire; i respond to every single one. x

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!