and i spit out the seeds

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by linearity

Summary

A video of Shane sucking Ilya's dick is leaked. Over the next twenty-four hours, Ilya goes on an odyssey.

Notes

massive thank you's to s0litaire-y and krissywendell on tumblr for dealing w/ my silly hockey questions, and to faith and ela of course. #hollanovgooners

obviously spoilers for the book and series which hasn't come out yet, but it's canon divergent after chapter 22 and just before the end of e5

▶ a few book-canon divergent details:

when the TV show comes out i'll update this with any important canon divergent details. the only one ik of rn is that the boston bears = boston raiders

11/28 edit: i guess the voyageurs are the fuckass METROS 🙄 also while i'm here omg ty for all the love on this fic! Absolutely crazy

12/21 edit: hey guys! ty again for all the love on this fic. just adding a note because people have been reposting this fic + unauthorized translations on ficbook. please do NOT post this fic or any of my fics on external websites like ficbook or wattpad. if you see one of my fics on there, i did NOT approve—please let me know if you have. translations are generally welcome as long as they are only posted on ao3 and you ask for permission first. (look at my profile for the specifics.) thanks!

final note, if it isn't clear, this fic takes place a few weeks before the admirals win the cup/scott hunter comes out.

now introducing: ilya rozanov's 24hr odyssey

See the end of the work for more notes

May 2017—Boston

Cliff Marlow's booming laughter forcibly pulls Ilya from sleep.

Brows furrowing together, he rubs at his eyes and squints toward the noise, collected at the other side of the cabin. It isn't just Cliff, but the whole team, Ilya discovers, raucous laughing and shouting about something on their phones.

Ilya is about to ask what the hell everyone's being so loud for, only for Cliff to meet his eyes, noticing he's awake, and shout, "Holy *fuck*. Roz, come look at this."

In between everyone's comments—*Jesus fucking Christ,* Cliff says, *he's really going for it*—and laughter, Ilya hears something… dirty coming from someone's phone.

It's probably porn, or something, he thinks sleepily, and a bit annoyed that his teammates are all doing this in public. It might be a private plane, but Ilya considers the poor stewardesses.

"No."

Ilya crosses his arms over his chest. The sting of getting knocked out of the playoffs by Scott Hunter is annoying enough—Ilya doesn't need his own team setting him off. He rarely thinks about hockey when he doesn't have to, but the disappointment is visceral. With Montreal out of the running this early, he knew this was his best chance at a second Cup.

Oh well, he thinks. There's always next year. Spilled milk, or whatever the Americans say.

It's only an hour flight from New York to Boston, give or take. Ilya wanted to get as much sleep as he could before landing. He had poor sleep last night, and his flat is over an hour away from the airport. He needs this time to himself.

Victor's clutching his stomach, nearly bent over in laughter. "Roz, you gotta see this. It'll cheer you up. Promise."

Ilya clenches his jaw, sighing in defeat.

Being the captain, he's figured out that with these guys, it's usually better to give in than to argue. It's a waste of time either way, but giving in is usually faster.

"Fine," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets and shuffling over to the other side of the cabin, toward the club seating. He ignores the scattered empty champagne flutes on the table.

Carmichael is sitting at the center, and the guys are all sitting around him, peering at his phone.

"Fucking knew it," Cliff says, as Ilya stands before his team, still unable to see what they're all watching.

He can hear it, though.

Ilya was right. It's porn.

"Fucking knew what?" Ilya asks.

Carmichael grins, pauses the video, scrolls to the beginning, and hands the phone to Ilya.

It's a black screen. Ilya looks at the team and asks, "What is this?"

"Just press play, man," Victor says, clapping Ilya on the shoulder.

Ilya frowns. He's too fucking asleep for this, but he presses play, ignoring how his teammates are all clearly watching his face for his reaction.

The video takes a few seconds to get going. It's fuzzy, hard to make out, warm-lit and dim. Sheets rustle. Ilya lifts his eyes, shooting Cliff a look that means, *What am I supposed to be watching?*

And then the footage becomes clear. Ilya drops the phone.

But the video keeps playing. Now, Ilya understands the noises he'd been hearing before.

White noise. A ringing in his ears. Tinnitus. Ilya feels bile rise up his throat.

"What the fuck?" he asks, too rattled to care about how his voice cracks.

The crowd around him all boom with more laughter. Victor reaches down to grab the phone, trying to hand it back to Ilya. Ilya shoves his hands in his pockets. He furls them into fists. They're shaking too much for him to try holding it. He purses his mouth. Had he given anything away? Had they seen it on his face?

Victor gives up and just holds the phone in front of Ilya. He squeezes Ilya's shoulder. He presses play.

And maybe Ilya had it wrong. Maybe it wasn't actually—

"Look at him," Cliff laughs, and it takes everything that Ilya has to look. He fights the urge to run. He fights the urge to vomit when Cliff says, "You can see it on his face. Hollander fucking loves it."

It was stupid.

Ilya doesn't even really remember when it happened. He recalls it was some time two years ago, after Sochi, after he led the Bears to Stanley Cup victory, and after he won MVP at the NHL awards, but he can't place it in time.

He recalls that he had been drinking. The Bears had just humiliated the Voyageurs 6-1. Ilya scored a hat trick: his first goal off Cliff's assist, the second one-handed over the goalie, and the third—thirteen seconds left and beautifully ran from one net to the other, down the ice, through the heat, a fucking roofer. He had something to celebrate.

Hollander didn't, but it was one of the rare few times that he had been drinking too. He played a terrible game that day, had about four scoring opportunities and made none of them.

That night, they were at Ilya's flat. Ilya was itching for a smoke but settled with a glass of vodka. It was cold in his flat, so he tossed his sweatpants back on, forgoing his underwear.

Hollander was beside him, still naked, no signs that he was wanting to leave. Ilya tried not to let his surprise show on his face. Usually Hollander was in a rush to throw his clothes back on and run out as soon as possible, especially when they were at Ilya's place.

Each time, Ilya ignored the impulse to ask Hollander to stay.

But this time, Hollander's eyes kept dropping to Ilya's hands, at his glass, so Ilya asked, "Do you want?"

He shook the glass in his hands slightly, enough that the liquid slid around the interior, leaving a wet sheen. This was good vodka—Svetlana had brought it over three weeks prior, the last time that she was around. They hadn't actually fucked, then, is the thing. They had made out, a little, but Ilya hadn't been able to get into it. The Voyageurs had been 3-3 against the Admirals; Ilya knew they were in the midst of playing the final game in MSG that night. Ilya had kept wondering if they would be knocked out of the playoffs. Svetlana had sighed, crawled off his lap, and turned on the TV. Over her very nice vodka, they'd simply watched Hollander bring his team closer to their first cup in decades. She had left the mostly full bottle there that night, waving her hand, saying that they'd just enjoy it the next time she came over. Ilya knew she wouldn't mind if the bottle was a little less full the next time she visited.

In Ilya's apartment, he was expecting Hollander to shake his head and say no, and Ilya was prepared to use one of the new words he'd learned from Cliff. *Buzzkill*, he wanted to say, because when Hollander wasn't on his knees and begging for it, he really was a buzzkill.

Instead, Hollander bit his lip. His cheeks were all flushed. His eyes were all open and easy in that way he only ever got after Ilya was done with him.

"Maybe a little?" he said, and he looked shy.

Ilya's heart did a little thump. Hollander really was adorable sometimes, he thought to himself, then buried that thought deep down. It was fucking terrifying, just how much Hollander was capable of making Ilya feel.

Ilya lifted a brow. His forefinger of the hand he was holding the glass in flicked out. He really was itching for a cig right now.

Instead, his eyes honed in on Hollander's mouth.

Ilya had an idea. He brought the rim of his glass to his lips, watching as Hollander frowned at him.

Suddenly it didn't feel too cold in his flat. Maybe it was the vodka, but his whole body felt on fire.

He let the liquid tip into his mouth, more than he usually would in a sip; then he leaned over, and with a free hand, brought two knuckles under Hollander's chin.

His mouth was already parted. His eyes were so dark, and Ilya suddenly felt dizzy. The alcohol burned on his tongue, but their lips were crashing together, and Ilya opened his mouth. Hollander swallowed greedily. Ilya pushed his tongue into Hollander's mouth. Hollander bucked forward, and Ilya could feel his erection against his hip.

When Ilya pulled away, Hollander chased his mouth. His eyes were blown wide. His mouth was shiny. He didn't seem too bothered by the sharp taste of the vodka. Ilya swiped his tongue over his bottom lip.

"More?" he asked, voice sounding rough even to his own ears.

And Hollander gave this beautiful little nod, jerking toward him like he couldn't control himself. His breath was ragged. Ilya wondered what was wrong with him; he wondered what was wrong with the both of them. He brought his glass to his lips, poured the liquid into his own mouth, and brought his lips to Hollander's again. He kept his eyes open, watched as Hollander's eyes fluttered shut. How he shivered under Ilya. Reveled in how he moaned.

They finished Ilya's glass like that. Really, there wasn't enough in it to make Ilya drunk—not even tipsy, but Hollander was a lightweight. He was grabbing Ilya's hips and kissing down his jaw, asking for more, and Ilya pressed his thigh against Hollander's length—he was already fully hard again.

Ilya laughed, teeth brushing Hollander's ear, and said no. He wanted something else, now.

He managed to put the glass on the side table, next to Hollander's phone.

As soon as his hands were free, Hollander was crawling all over him, sucking wet kisses into the side of his neck—no teeth. He wouldn't leave any marks. They were both so used to each other that they knew not to do that.

Hollander's mouth dragged along Ilya's chest. Ilya could feel himself growing hard as well, pushing up against the fabric of his sweats. His normal refractory period was already pretty short for a man, but with Hollander, it was something else.

When Hollander's mouth came over Ilya's bulge, Ilya groaned. Hollander was fucking perfect. Ilya had never met anyone who loved it as much as Hollander did, who wanted it so much. He still remembers their first time; how sweet Hollander had been, even though he hadn't known what he was doing, had clumsily brought his lips over him, had been over-careful with his teeth, gagging a bit when the head touched the back of his throat. After half a decade, Hollander had practically perfected the art of the blowjob, always doing it exactly as

Ilya wanted, knowing exactly what Ilya liked. Ilya wondered if he did this with anyone else; if anyone else had ever had this wonderful mouth. He looked down.

“Fuck,” Ilya said, his hands flying down to Hollander’s hair, thumbs curling around his ears, then coming down to brush his cheeks. He was burning. He looked so beautiful. “Look at you.”

Hollander made a noise, wanting. He was still licking over the fabric, nuzzling his cheek against Ilya’s crotch, mouthing over him, and Ilya took pity on him and lifted his hips. Hollander saw the gap and slipped his fingers under Ilya’s waistband, pulling the fabric down to his knees. But he was starved for it—so much that he didn’t bother pulling his sweats down completely. Hollander pressed a kiss to the base of Ilya’s dick, hands coming under to cup Ilya’s balls, then licked a stripe up the length.

Ilya threw his head back, but quickly realized that was a mistake because he wanted to keep looking at Hollander. *Shane,* he thought to himself, but swallowed before he let it leave his mouth.

He breathed out, uneven, and sought to find English in his brain.

“Want to see you like this all the time,” he said, because he did. Because Shane Hollander looked like something from Ilya’s wet dreams. He always looked like that, even when they barely knew each other, even from their first meeting. He was running his mouth. He didn’t care. Not when Hollander’s mouth was around him, when he was doing that thing with his tongue he knew Ilya loved, when he was doing that thing with his thumbs he knew Ilya loved, when he was groaning and humping the bed—because he loved this too. Ilya knew that there was very little that Hollander loved more in the world than doing this. Maybe hockey, but was there anything else?

These thoughts were floating in the back of Ilya’s mind. They were dangerous. They were fleeting, and that was good, because Ilya knew it would not be good to linger.

“Fuck,” he breathed out, switching to Russian, *you’re fucking beautiful,* he said, staring at the dark freckles mottling Hollander’s cheeks, then bit his bottom lip hard so he wouldn’t say anything else.

Hollander’s hands moved to Ilya’s hips, and he pulled off.

Ilya groaned and tried to bring Hollander back down, but Hollander resisted, and rested his cheek on the hard dip of Ilya’s hip bone.

“You can,” he said, then his eyes glanced to the side, “if you want.”

And Ilya had no idea what Hollander was talking about.

“What?” he asked, with force and impatience, losing his composure. He wanted that mouth back.

Hollander's whole face was so flushed. His eyes were glazed over. He was red all the way up to his ears and down to his shoulders. Ilya had never seen anyone so beautiful.

"My phone," Hollander said, and Ilya still didn't understand. "You can… if you want."

The cogs in Ilya's brain kept turning and turning, until they finally landed on what Hollander was trying to say but was too embarrassed to say.

His hand found Hollander's cheek once he realized. He needed to hold onto something. He felt like he was about to pass out.

"Are you sure?" Ilya asked. He wasn't sure if he said it in English or Russian.

Hollander sucked in a breath. "It will—just for us," he said, with a slight stutter, and really, Ilya should have said no. He knew Hollander wasn't someone who could hold his drinks. He knew Hollander wasn't the sort who thought things through. He knew that Hollander, right now, wasn't thinking straight—but neither was Ilya.

His eyes dragged over Hollander: the pink sheen of his cheeks, the glassy look in his eyes, the way he was grinding against the bed, wanting it so bad, wanting it so much.

And Ilya found Hollander's phone on the side table, nearly knocking his glass over, and slid to open up the camera.

His hands were shaking as he pressed record. It took a while for the camera to focus.

He dragged his hand through Hollander's hair, making sure that his perfect mouth—his *face* —was in the shot, before pulling Hollander all the way down.

Really, the video is barely a half-minute long.

At about ten seconds into the video, you can hear Hollander groaning, can see the swell of his ass, and how he jerks against the bed, taking *someone* all the way down into his throat as he loses himself.

A few seconds after that, ragged breathing from above—but no words. Ilya had been too worked up to remember his words—any words, in either language.

On the plane, surrounded by all his teammates, Ilya watches the last few seconds of the video: his own hand burying in Hollander's hair, grabbing whatever he could, then yanking his head back.

The camera, once again, focuses on Hollander's face, as if there is any question about it, who it is.

Hollander's eyes meet the camera. His mouth opens to show white on his tongue. He draws it back into his mouth, then swallows.

A thumb pries his lips apart, fingers curling under his jaw.

Like a reflex, Hollander's mouth closes around the digit. He closes his eyes. He moans. The video cuts.

Hollander never ended up sending it to Ilya.

Which was, of course, completely fine. It was safer, Ilya thought, that they'd recorded it on Hollander's phone anyway.

Ilya realized what a bad idea it was minutes afterward, once Hollander was gone. He snuck out while Ilya had gone to grab a washcloth, intending on cleaning them both up. No matter, Ilya thought; his heart was so wild in his chest he could barely register anything else.

He knew that it was a mistake, that they had crossed some line then, and he worried that maybe things would be weird between them going forward, but in the end, it never came up.

Like clockwork, a few months later, at the next Boston versus Montreal match-up, Hollander texted Ilya his hotel and room number. He hadn't mentioned the recording. Ilya assumed Hollander deleted it.

Things hadn't suddenly become weird—of course, Ilya knew that their whole arrangement was weird, that NHL players don't fuck their decade-long archrivals, but the recording hadn't changed anything. Things were normal-weird. A part of Ilya forgot it happened, and no matter—the few hours he would have with Hollander every few months kept him going. They didn't keep him sated—instead, they kept him starved and wanting throughout all the months between—but they were enough. When he closed his eyes, he could see it—he'd seen it enough in real life have it burned into his retinas, saved into his memories: the vision of him, splayed out before Ilya, freckles spattering his flushed cheeks, his mouth curled over him, the ripping muscles of his back when Ilya took him, and the sweet, embarrassed look in his eyes when he asked Ilya for more.

And then Hollander became Shane. And then Ilya's father died. And then Shane got a concussion at one of their fucking games and Ilya was terrified that his fucking teammate had turned Shane into a fucking vegetable. I love you, Ilya thought, but couldn't say, in that moment, standing there on the ice. I love you, he thought, and maybe there has never been a moment where I haven't loved you, not in all the years since my mouth met yours for the first time, and I hate myself for not telling you. I want to tell you this all the time. I want to be with you even though we cannot be together. I love you, and I cannot love you. I maybe love you more than I have ever loved anything else. This thought terrifies me. Because it means

that we're doomed. Because it means I might never return home to Russia, even though there is nothing to return to.

It wasn't fun anymore, what they were doing. They had gone too far. *I have ruined you,* Ilya once said. But he hadn't told Shane the whole truth: *You have ruined me too.*

But you know what? Ilya thought in the hospital, sleepless from scouring the internet for news on Shane's condition, sleepless because each time he closed his eyes he saw Shane's unmoving body on the ice—it struck fear throughout his whole body, the thought that maybe he might actually lose this, that they would never have this again. He thought this to himself: You might be worth it. I love you so much that this all might be worth it. I would risk my fucking life for you. I would give everything up for you. I want to come to your cottage. I want to make you tuna melts and I want to watch hockey with you and I want to kiss you on your lovely mouth—everyday, and all the time. I want more time with you. I want you, and I have always wanted you. I want you forever. I want a whole fucking lifetime with you. I want everything with you. But I cannot have you.

In the hospital, Shane asked him to come to the cottage and looked at him like his heart would shatter if Ilya said no, so he took the coward's way out and said *maybe,* even though he knew it was the worst idea in the world.

Get well soon, Hollander, Ilya finished, ignoring every instinct in his body telling him to *stay, stay, stay,* even though he knew it was impossible and that their whole fucking *thing* was impossible, and left the hospital room.

This was the last time they saw one another.

On the plane:

Ilya can barely hear his voice over the beating of his heart, but he feels his mouth moving. "Who sent this?" he asks, eardrums muffled. He's going to be sick.

Cliff gives him a look. "Dude, it's all over the internet."

Ilya freezes. "What?"

Another teammate chimes in. Ilya can't tell who it is. He doesn't bother turning his head to look, and his brain can't tell left from right right now.

"Heard he got hacked, or his phone got stolen."

"Is—" Ilya's throat might close up. "Is *fake.* Obviously," he lies.

He knows that his teammates are looking at him weirdly. He can't bring it in himself to care.

Ilya taps around his pockets. His phone, he thinks. He needs to call Shane.

Are they still in the fucking air?

Victor smirks. “Doesn’t look fake. I’m not surprised. Hollander always struck me as a—”

After the flight, Ilya drives straight back to his penthouse. His knuckles are starting to bruise, but he managed to clean up the blood off his hands during touchdown. Victor was so shocked by the punch to his cheek that Ilya had enough time to go for a second hit—aiming straight for his mouth this time—but Cliff grabbed Ilya and held him back before his fist could make impact. Carmichael held Victor back before he could retaliate.

No one spoke to him for the rest of the flight. Good, he thought, as the rest of them mumbled on the other side of the plane about what a psycho he was. Ilya halfheartedly heard Cliff telling the rest of them that Ilya must be taking the loss to Scott Hunter hard. *Fuck you,* Ilya thought. *You don’t know anything about me,* but he chose not to say anything. He just needed to get service.

He called Shane as soon as he got a single bar—no answer. He calls Shane again three times during the drive from Logan back to his flat—the calls go straight to voicemail. Ilya nearly crashes his damn car, but he manages to get back to his flat. He paces around his room, terrified to check the news. Was it really all over the internet?

He thinks of the last night they spent together: he thinks of Shane’s knuckles, brushing Ilya’s bare chest and golden crucifix. He thinks of when he pressed his mouth to Shane’s fingertips, to the warmth of his palm.

An hour later, after driving himself crazy trying not to look, Ilya looks.

It’s the first story that comes up on Twitter. ESPN hasn’t broken it yet—how would they even go about it? Ilya never pays attention to sports gossip like that, and he doesn’t know if it’s something that reputable outlets actually cover.

Regardless, it’s all over social media.

After ten minutes of sleuthing, Ilya figures out that it was posted by a blank Twitter page earlier this afternoon, while the Bears were flying back from New York, and though the video’s been taken down dozens of times, it keeps circulating. It looks too real to be fake, or someone who just looks exactly like Shane Hollander.

Ilya has only watched it the one time. He can't stomach another watch. One of the tweets reposting the video has over twenty thousand likes.

It's all anyone's talking about.

Ilya does not like the things that people are saying. He also recognizes just how bad this is for the league, and for Montreal. Neither have put out official statements, but Ilya doubts they'll let this be swept under the rug.

He searches around online, even asks Cliff privately if anyone has a clue who the other participant in the video is, but no one knows, and no one has speculated wildly enough that it would be another *NHL* player, let alone an All-Star, let alone Shane's rival, Ilya Rozanov.

Secretly, a part of Ilya wishes everyone knew it was him in the video, that it was *his* cock that Shane Hollander was sucking. It would make this impossible situation even worse, but at least then they'd be in it together.

In the history of the NHL, not a single player has come out as gay.

Of course, Ilya is sure that there are other queer players than him and Shane in the league; he doesn't know any himself, but there have to be. And even if there aren't, there have to be some players who'll be sympathetic. Anyone with a brain can see that Shane doesn't fucking deserve this, any of this.

Right?

Ilya drives to Montreal.

Google Maps tells him it's a five-and-a-half hour drive—Ilya makes it four-and-a-half in his Aston Martin. He leaves Boston just after midnight and arrives while it's still dark out.

He calls Shane a handful more times and texts about a dozen times during the drive, but the calls again go to voicemail, and none of the messages are delivered.

Once he sees the Montreal sign, Ilya is struck with the realization that he has no idea where to go, that he has no idea where Shane is, that he's never been to Shane's real home, that Shane has never let him in.

For the first time, as he takes the exit to Montreal, Ilya has a thought:

Would Shane even want to see me?

The last time they spoke, Shane had seemed so happy that Ilya came to see him; he was doped up, but it had seemed so real.

Haven't you ever wanted more time?

Since the very day they met at World Juniors, where Ilya was smoking and Shane came to see him and all Ilya could focus on was his dark freckles and stupid button nose, all Ilya has ever wanted was more time—on the ice and off it. He actively sought it out; he told himself every single time that that time would be the last time, but it never was. Like every single last cigarette Ilya has ever had.

For a while now, Ilya had thought that it was the same for Shane—that he was in agony too. Increasingly, he could see it in Shane's eyes, in the stolen moments they had together. He saw it over Skype, when Shane was wearing his glasses and pressed his fingers to his mouth, then to the camera.

But what if Ilya had it all wrong?

No, Ilya thinks, running his thumb along the smooth leather of the steering wheel; his free hand taps his knee impatiently. He is sure of it, how Shane felt—and that's the problem, the impossibility of their relationship. It would be one thing if it was just sex, and another if it was unrequited.

But now, he wonders this: What if it has all been ruined?

In the hospital—no, even before that—in Moscow, the week Ilya buried his father, he knew that it was too late. That it was all ruined; there would be no going back to a time before he loved Shane Hollander—Ilya could barely remember a time where he didn't love Shane so much that it hurt. He knew that he would feel this way forever; Ilya had carried it with him for his entire professional career—he had carried it with him for a lifetime. This horrible, fucked up thing.

But what if now it was all ruined?

Ilya has never felt more certain of this fact: he will feel this way forever.

Will Shane?

Ilya goes to their secret apartment building because it's the only place he can think of going.

He arrives, parks out front, then feels like an absolute idiot when he realizes he can't even get inside; that the first floor is rented out, that it's not even light out.

He covers his face in his hands and presses his forehead to the steering wheel. He wants to scream, but he doesn't. He wants to smoke a fucking cigarette, but he's four months clean and he doesn't want to go through the effort of quitting all over again. Ilya is absolutely terrible at quitting things that are bad for him, even when he knows it'll just hurt him in the end.

Instead, he thinks.

He thinks of how he felt when he Skyped Shane for the first time, the feeling in his chest when Shane kissed his fingers and pressed them to the camera. *Goodnight, Ilya,* he said. Ilya had never felt more happy, but at the same time he wanted to cry. With that happiness came a feeling of terror: that the other shoe had to drop. That he would have to come down. That maybe he would never feel this happy again. That perhaps he had made a deal with the devil without even realizing it. He wasn't sure what he had given up.

Ilya clears his throat.

He decided that since he's already in fucking Montreal, four-and-a-half hours out from Boston like a fucking idiot, he can't give up now. Even if Shane doesn't want to see him, Ilya needs to see him. He will be selfish. He has to at least try.

He checked the address, like, a million fucking times, but he's been standing on the front step of this house for ages, alternating between ringing and knocking, and nothing.

Until—

Ilya can't help but feel smug. Hayden Pike looks especially stupid at half past six in the morning.

"Hello," Ilya greets, instantly staring at the small but sort of smelly stain on Hayden's shirt. He vaguely remembers that this guy has like a million kids.

Hayden still has one hand on the door knob. The other comes up to rub at his eyes. There's crust on the inner and outer corners. He blinks once, twice, three times, then rubs at his eyes again. Ilya wants to make a joke about genies but doesn't know how to put it in English. He settles on announcing, "I'm Ilya Rozanov."

Hayden continues to gawk, but at least this time he finds his words.

"What the fuck?"

Ilya tries not to smirk. He remembers what he's here for, and that he probably should be serious about this. "I wish to speak with you," he says, straight, to the point, and a little proud of himself for holding back from saying something snarky.

Understandably, Hayden does not seem to understand Ilya's very simple wish, and repeats, "What the fuck?"

This time, Ilya can't hold himself back from asking, "Are you a broken record?"

Hayden sputters. He rubs at his eyes again.

The sun is just starting to rise over Hayden's house—they're in the suburbs of Montreal, so the area is a little wooded, very simple and almost quaint, though the building itself is pretty massive. Hayden has like, what, five, six kids?

"I'm *wondering,*" Hayden says, like even just speaking to Ilya is like pulling teeth (Ilya struggles not to find satisfaction in that), "what the *fuck* Ilya Rozanov is doing at my *home.*"

"Is fine. Will be very quick. Do not worry," Ilya dismisses.

"Well I'm pretty fucking worried. How the fuck did you get my address?"

Ilya got it from Evan, a Bears benchwarmer who played in the Quebec league for Drummondville with Hayden many years ago.

He doesn't feel like explaining all of that, so he crosses his arms over his chest and asks, "Is fuck the only word you know? I am concerned about your vocabulary. Were you dropped on your head as a child?"

Hayden jerks forward, "You fucking—"

"There it is again!" Ilya says, grinning.

Miraculously, Hayden manages to calm down, taking a deep breath and letting it out in a long, pained sigh. He closes his eyes and pinches the skin between his brows.

"What do you want? It's fucking early. Jackie and the kids are asleep."

Ilya furrows his brows together. "Who is Jackie?"

Hayden glares. "My wife."

"Oh, okay," Ilya says, then adds, "poor Jackie."

Hayden's eyes bulge. "You—" Once again, he stops himself from blowing up, then asks through gritted teeth, "Okay, just— *What* the fuck are you doing in Montreal?"

Ilya reminds himself to stop taking swipes—no matter how easy Hayden makes it—and focus.

"I wish to speak with Shane. I don't know where he is, and I thought you would know."

The mood changes; Ilya can't tell if it's more tense or less. Maybe… more careful.

"Hollander?" Hayden asks, shocked, but also hesitant.

Ilya, for the first time, considers that maybe Hayden has seen the video, and isn't okay with it. That he's just like Cliff and Carmichael and Victor and the rest of them. Ilya's knuckles sting with pain; the ghost of impact. He doesn't regret it at all—well, he thinks, he regrets not being fast enough to make the second hit land.

He quickly throws this thought away. Shane wouldn't be so stupid as to be best friends with a homophobe.

"I do not know any other Shanes," Ilya says, pursing his mouth.

For a few seconds, Hayden just… stares. Ilya stares back. Holds his gaze. Waits for Hayden to speak. To ask the question that Ilya knows he wants to ask: Why do you want to speak to Shane?

But he doesn't end up asking it. Instead, his eyes flick out to Ilya's Aston. "Did you *drive* here?"

A memory: at his third All-Star game, Shane jumped on a loose puck and caught Ilya and the rest of the team off-guard, scoring the winning goal for the North American team.

Ilya recovers his balance on the ice.

"Yes," he says, trying to think of a response that will irritate Hayden the most. "I do not own a private jet, so."

Hayden's jaw stiffens. "You could've called instead of driving up."

Hayden really makes it too easy. "And you would send plane?" Ilya asks.

Huffing, Hayden grits out, "No, we could've just talked over the *phone*." He crosses his arms over his chest and looks to the side. "And I could've hung up," he mumbles under his breath.

"I do not have your number," Ilya points out.

"You could've gotten it," Hayden responds. "You *somehow* got my address."

Ilya swallows. He doesn't know how to explain that he only got Hayden's address *after* he'd already arrived in Montreal. He doesn't want to explain it either.

"Does not matter," he says, trying to bring this back on track. None of this matters. All that matters is—

"Do you know where Shane is?"

"He's—" Hayden starts, then stumbles, like he's just starting to pull himself back into focus as well. "Wait, what the fuck does it matter to you?"

At his second Worlds, Russia lost to Canada in the finals. Back then, it drove Ilya fucking crazy, the fact that Shane had decided to get revenge for the year before—the fact that he had finally met his match. He thought about Shane's stickhandling that game, his playmaking;

Shane hadn't scored any goals, but he'd assisted all three of Canada's goals. That night, Shane won each face-off and lifted the trophy high above his head.

That was eight years ago. Ilya's life has been turned upside down since.

"He matters," Ilya says, because that's what it comes down to.

"What?" Hayden says, of course not understanding. Ilya barely understands it himself.

He decides to shift topics.

"I saw the video," he says. No use ignoring the elephant in the room—*was that the correct expression?* he wonders, waiting for Hayden to come up with a response.

Hayden's eyes immediately narrow. His voice is quiet and lower than before when he says, "I'm gonna tell you this one time, Rozanov. Leave Shane alone. He's having a hard enough time as it is. He doesn't need you fucking with him, or giving him a hard time about the video, or whatever the *fuck* you think you're doing."

How protective, Ilya thinks. This would almost be sweet, if it wasn't irritating as fuck.

Puffing out his chest, Hayden finishes, "This has nothing to do with you."

For the first time all morning, Ilya makes a concerted effort not to be a dick; he's grateful that, at the very least, Shane has someone in his corner right now. He just wishes it was someone less stupid.

Above, the sky is starting to lighten. It had been a light wash of grey when Ilya arrived: the last few moments before dawn.

Where are you? Ilya thinks. *Are you okay? Are you well?*

His thoughts swirl in a mix of English and Russian—no longer is he constantly translating from English to Russian and Russian into English. He still struggles with English, but it comes easier off the tongue and in his brain these days.

Maybe you could teach me Russian someday, Shane once said.

Someday, Ilya thinks. *Do we still have that? Can we still have that?*

Ilya has wasted enough time as it is.

This has nothing to do with you, Hayden said.

The whole sporting world already knows about Shane against his will. The least that Ilya can do is share this one secret if it means that it'll bring him closer to Shane. He'll deal with the consequences later.

"It has everything," Ilya says, slowly and with meaning, meeting Hayden's eyes, just to make sure he will understand.

Hayden doesn't, at least not immediately, which isn't much of a surprise to Ilya.

He reels for a long time, and asks, "What?"

Ilya doesn't say anything. He will not help Hayden with this. He will just have to figure it out.

And so, Ilya watches as the gears turn in Hayden's head—slow like fucking a turtle. He can practically hear metal grinding. It takes a million fucking years before Hayden's expression flickers with something that isn't bafflement.

Disbelief comes first.

"No," he says, blinking rapidly. He punches a hoarse laugh out of his throat.

Ilya breathes in deeply. "Yes," he says.

"No," Hayden repeats, laughter coming to a halt.

"Yes."

Hayden's voice rises. "This isn't fucking funny."

Ilya recognizes how it's a little inappropriate, that a part of him *does* find it funny how red Hayden's face is getting. He wonders if he knew about Shane before the video was leaked. He wonders if Shane told anyone other than him. He wonders if anyone else knew that Shane was gay, or at least that he likes men.

They spoke about it once, after the All-Star game. Ilya can still remember the sand Shane got all over his bed—he didn't care, not when he had Shane's soft hands and warm mouth all over him. Ilya's mind wanders to everything they said, and hadn't said. It was then, and it was that night, that Ilya realized the full impossibility of their situation: that love alone could not be enough.

"I can show you my dick," Ilya says, "if you do not believe me."

On second thought, Ilya isn't quite sure if his dick could be easily recognizable from the video. The lighting was quite poor. The only thing you could make out for sure were the distinctive contours of Shane Hollander's face—his nose, his mouth, his freckles.

"I'm really close to punching you right now."

Ilya shrugs. A part of him wouldn't mind—the pain would maybe be sobering. Maybe it would help put his feelings back into his body. "That is okay," he says. "But maybe you will not like to wake up your kids and your Jackie. We can go to your backyard if you would like to do this."

Hayden doesn't take the bait. His voice shakes when he starts, "If this is a joke—"

"Is not a joke."

Hayden grabs the doorframe, like he's on the ice without his skates and might lose his footing at any time.

"What the *fuck*?" he repeats, and is silent for a long time. Ilya is very patient with him.

He regrets his patience, because soon Hayden's eyes narrow again, and his mouth twists, asking, "Did you—"

Instantly, Ilya understands what Hayden is getting at. If he'd had more than an hour of sleep over the past 24 hours, his already bruised fist would be connecting with Hayden's ugly nose.

"No!" he shouts. "I would not. Never."

Even just the idea of that cruelty—Ilya would not be capable.

"Is old video," he sighs, shaking his head. "Years ago. I cannot remember when."

Hayden sucks in a breath. "Years?"

Ilya considers telling Hayden the extent of it: the ancient history and present devastation. Instead, he meets Hayden's eyes and nods.

"Just the one time?"

A cool breeze washes over Ilya's arms. He's still wearing the same clothes that he'd been wearing on the plane. He still has a bit of Victor's blood on his shirt—his nose had bled like a fucking faucet. The exhaustion is starting to settle in. He had a coffee at a gas station just before he crossed from Vermont into Canada, but he hasn't properly slept in over 24 hours.

Ilya shakes his head. "We have been…" He cannot think of a word that can describe what they have been. He trails off and leaves it for Hayden to figure out. "For a long time."

A lifetime, Ilya thinks, but doesn't say.

"Hayden. Who is it?"

The woman's voice calls from deeper inside the house before Hayden can reply. Jackie, Ilya surmises.

"It's—" Hayden starts, turning to face inside, then presses his lips together. "It's Rozanov."

"Rozanov?"

Soon, Jackie comes closer into view, pulling her robe tight over her body. Long dark hair falls down her back. She has bags under her eyes which go wide when she sees Ilya standing quietly on the porch.

"Oh," she says, momentarily stunned. Though she appears a thousand times more tired than Hayden, she collects herself a thousand times quicker than Hayden had. Ilya decides that he likes this woman. She seems far too intelligent for her husband.

With a pained sigh, she glances between Ilya and Hayden who are still very civilly standing before one another, pinches the space between her brows, and sighs. “Just come in. Both of you.”

Hayden gawps. “What?!”

While Hayden is upstairs changing Arthur’s (their second youngest) diaper and keeping an eye on Amber (their newborn, Ilya discovers, which makes him feel a bit bad for disturbing their home so early in the morning), Ilya explains to Jackie why he’s here over coffee. She is, understandably, quite surprised, but she takes it much better than Hayden had, which increases Ilya’s respect for her. He’s at the same time increasingly baffled at what a woman seemingly as great as her sees in Hayden.

He’s pouring himself a third cup of coffee when Hayden comes down the steps, holding Amber against his shoulder, bouncing up and down slightly.

Amber is adorable. A lot of babies are quite ugly and their parents convince themselves that they’re cute when they’re really not, and it makes everything awkward because everyone has to fake-coo and pretend like the baby is the cutest baby in the world. But this one’s actually cute. Ilya cannot believe Hayden Pike half-created this. He legitimately and audibly coos, which Jackie notices.

She asks him if he wants to try holding her, which Hayden makes a big fuss about, but doesn’t actually fight with any fervor.

Ilya nods. He has a few cousins back in Russia who have young children, and he was able to hold them when they were babies. He explains this, but Hayden still looks like he’s about to have a panic attack when he passes Amber over to Ilya.

Holding Amber, Ilya—for the first time in a long time—imagines his future.

Could you want this? he wonders, the very thought a betrayal. He glances around Hayden and Jackie’s perfect suburban home, their four children all soundly asleep, the aroma of coffee in the early morning air. *Could you want this with me? Could any of this even be possible?*

But back to business.

Hayden has been thinking. It’s obvious because guys like him tend to have a thinking face, and he’s had it on ever since Ilya asked about Shane’s whereabouts again, having passed

Amber off to Jackie, who is stroking her still slightly wrinkled cheek with her thumb.

“You’re out of luck,” Hayden says.

Ilya frowns. He finishes off the rest of his coffee and waits for Hayden to continue.

“I don’t know where he is,” he finally reveals, and Ilya’s heart drops. “He hasn’t been picking up my calls either, and I already tried his apartment. I checked last night. He’s not there.”

Fuck, Ilya thinks. Had he wasted this time? Had he driven to Montreal all for nothing?

He stares at his coffee mug furiously, trying to figure out where to go from here. Back to Boston? No, he thinks. He’s already come so far.

“But I guess—” Hayden starts again, and Ilya lifts his head. “Maybe, he might be at his parents’.”

“Okay,” Ilya says, feeling like maybe not all hope is lost. “Where is that?”

“Ottawa,” Hayden says.

“Where in Ottawa?”

Ilya takes out his phone, clicks on the Maps app, and hands it to Hayden, who stares at him like a dead fish.

“Here. Type in address.”

Hayden stammers dumbly. Ilya thinks of pushing his coffee mug toward Hayden, but reconsiders; maybe he shouldn’t poke the bear, at least not until he gets the address.

“Are you gonna *go* there?”

“Yes,” Ilya says. Ottawa’s a little over 100 miles away, he thinks. He should have more than enough gas in the tank.

Hayden blinks. “Right now?”

“Yes.”

Seated in the kitchen, sunlight floats in through the window panes. Ilya hasn’t been here for long, but he’s eager to find Shane. The more time Ilya spends on the road, the more untethered he feels.

However, it is nice, he thinks, to have this break. It’s a two, three hour drive depending on traffic, and he’s likely going to catch rush hour.

“Why?” Jackie suddenly asks.

Ilya blinks. His instinct is to question why she asks *why*—he told her about him and Shane already, and how it was him in the video—but then he realizes the weight behind her

question. He glances between Hayden and Jackie. His eyes find Amber, still sleeping soundly in Jackie's arms.

"I want—" Ilya starts, then corrects, "I need to see him. If he is… okay."

Hayden's face tightens; he isn't showing Ilya the same hostility from the porch, but reluctance and suspicion underlie each movement and each word.

"Maybe he doesn't want to see you."

Ilya has considered this. During his drive up to Montreal, he wondered if he was making a mistake, if Shane needed time to be alone.

He decided that he needs to make sure that Shane knows he is not alone—that he does not have to be, if he does not want to be. If Shane tells him to leave, Ilya will turn back. But he has to try. He has to take the shot.

"Maybe not," Ilya says, and he swallows the lump in his throat. "But I maybe will regret it forever if I do not see him now."

Distantly, Ilya recognizes that although his voice remains level, as casual as he can manage, his face is burning. Rarely does he get embarrassed about things like this; at the same time, rarely does he ever say these sorts of things out loud. He can count on one hand the amount of times he's allowed himself to be so vulnerable over the last year: each time has only ever been with one person.

Without announcement, Hayden stands and leaves the room. He makes for the stairs, and Ilya doesn't say anything until he returns with his phone about ten minutes later, mumbling about how he couldn't find it, and it turns out he accidentally left it in Amber's crib.

"Gimme a sec," he says, tapping away at his phone screen. "Shane sent me the address a while ago."

Ilya holds his breath. He unlocks his phone and makes sure Google Maps is open for Hayden to type the address into.

When Hayden returns his phone, Ilya jerks to his feet.

"Thank you for the coffee," he tells Jackie and Hayden, and politely pushes his chair back under the table. "I will go now."

Hayden and Jackie exchange a glance, then exchange words too quiet and rapid for Ilya to catch. He studies the route in the meantime, waiting for one of them to say whatever it is they want to say.

Eventually, Hayden clears his throat, and Ilya lifts his head.

"I'll come with you," he says, with resolve. It is not what Ilya was expecting him to say.

Ilya purses his mouth. He was under the impression that the one thing that he and Hayden Pike could agree on is that the less time they spend together, the better.

“Why? I have address,” he reminds, shaking his phone around.

“No, but—“ Hayden huffs, looking toward Jackie, who gives him an encouraging nod. “Like, whether Shane’s there or not, his parents might have a heart attack seeing *you* pull up out of nowhere. They know me.”

Ilya hates to admit that makes sense. He isn’t really thinking clearly right now, but he can’t escape the tunnel vision. Shane always makes him that way, since they were eighteen, in that gym—always losing foresight, rarely thinking things through if it means he can have one more taste, if he can feel Shane’s mouth against his.

“And you will help?”

“I’ll… try,” Hayden says, then his face softens with worry. “He’s my best friend. I’m worried too.”

Ilya turns to Jackie. “Your kids? You will be okay?”

Jackie’s eyes go a bit wide, like she hadn’t expected him to consider them. “My sister’s coming over in an hour or so to help, anyway. We can hold down the fort.”

Ilya makes a note to get Jackie a Christmas present. Partially because he wants to repay her kindness, and partially because he knows it’ll annoy Hayden.

“Let’s go,” he announces, fishing his keys from his pocket, only for Jackie to say, “Whoa, whoa. You are *not* driving.”

“What?”

“It’s just—” Jackie sighs. “When was the last time you slept?”

Ilya blanches. “I had coffee,” he replies, but the Pikes both glare at him. Evasively, he tacks on, “I slept on plane, a little bit.”

“Hayden will drive,” Jackie decides, and this is the first time all morning Ilya has had a grievance with her.

“He is *not* driving my car.”

Hayden rolls his eyes. “Of course I’m not driving your car. We’ll take the minivan. Just let me change into a shirt that doesn’t have spit up on it.”

Jackie laughs. “Good luck with that.”

As soon as Hayden turns on the engine of his Honda Odyssey, the sound system starts playing Wheels on the Bus.

“Shit, sorry.” Hayden fumbles to turn the music off. “This song’s, like, the only thing that’ll get Arthur to settle, so we just have a CD that loops it,” he explains, the back of his neck flushing.

As they leave the garage and enter the driveway, Ilya blurts out, “You like it?”

“The song? Fuck no.”

Ilya frowns. He didn’t mean the song, but he wishes he did. His actual question, on second thought, feels rather stupid. “I mean—”

Although it takes him a few seconds, Hayden somehow understands what Ilya meant. “My kids? Yeah, I like them a lot,” he says, propping up his phone on the holder on the dash and inputting the address of Shane’s parents’ house in Ottawa.

Ilya stares outside the window as they pull onto the street and make their way down the long row of gigantic houses. There’s nothing really like this in the area of Boston where Ilya lives.

“You have a lot,” he says absently. His fingers twitch by his knee. He could use a cigarette right now, or a pack to wake him up, but he knows that’s out of the question.

“Yeah, and they’re a nightmare, but worth it, you know?” Hayden says with a smile. Ilya swallows the feeling of discomfort rising up his throat. “Do you, uh, want kids?”

“Yes,” Ilya says, and they fall into silence.

Ilya takes his phone out and asks to connect to aux, but Hayden reveals that the aux is broken and only the CD player works. Ilya rolls his eyes, makes a comment about how the NHL must not be paying him well, and Hayden tells him to shut up.

Over silence and Wheels on the Bus, Ilya narrowly prefers silence, so he indeed shuts up.

But Hayden for some reason, about ten minutes later, chooses the secret third option: small talk.

“Did you see the email?” he asks, and Ilya instantly frowns. They’re driving through the main streets now, about to take the exit to the highway.

“No.”

“From Cromwell,” Hayden explains. The cheek facing Ilya goes hollow. He keeps his eyes on the road. “We’re not supposed to talk about the video. We need to pretend like it doesn’t exist.”

Ilya almost stiffens, but he thinks he does an okay job of pretending like it meant nothing to him. He was under the impression that Hayden wanted to talk about the video as much as Ilya did: not at all.

“It should not exist,” he replies, tapping his finger against the inside of the car door. Would Hayden kill him if he asked to stop at a gas station and grab a pack of cigs? Ilya quickly abandons that thought; he’s probably meeting Shane’s parents in a few hours.

“*You* made it.”

Yes, Ilya thinks, and I hate myself for it. At this moment in time, there is nothing I regret more. This is the biggest mistake I have made in my whole life, and I don’t know how to fix it, and I don’t know how to make it right, but I am trying. I will do whatever it takes. I will pay whatever price.

“What will happen to Shane?” Ilya can’t help but ask. “The league cannot…”

He trails off. Can they?

Shane led the Voyageurs to two Stanley Cups. He’s one of the faces of the league. He was the *All-Star Captain,* for fuck’s sake.

But Ilya knows that means he’s held to a higher standard. It doesn’t help that Shane’s known for being (aside from a talented hockey player, leader, and playmaker) a goody-two-shoes. He doesn’t sleep around, and when he dates, he dates a fucking *movie star.* That’s why he’s so beloved. Kids look up to him and adults respect him.

It would be one thing if Shane came out as gay, on his own terms. Then, although Ilya doesn’t doubt the league would push back and penalize Shane in some way, they would have trouble doing so without backlash.

But the *video.*

If Shane was with a woman in that video, maybe Shane could be forgiven. Hell, if Ilya had a sex tape leaked with a woman, he’s pretty sure the hockey world wouldn’t give a shit. Maybe everyone would just have a laugh.

Too many ifs, Ilya thinks. None of them do anything to erase the now.

Hayden shifts uncomfortably. He’s got his thinking face on again. He flicks on his signal as he cuts to the leftmost lane.

“Best case,” he says eventually, “he gets traded. Worst case… I don’t know.”

“Montreal will not keep him?”

“It’s Montreal,” Hayden snorts, derisively, and Ilya understands. “Would the Bears keep you, if all of this was the other way around?”

Ilya is silent. He doesn’t find any use in continuing this conversation.

“So you two are really…”

Ilya turns and furrows his brows together. “Yes. I said this multiple times, no?”

“Sorry,” Hayden says, but the way his mouth pinches tells Ilya he isn’t really that sorry. “I just don’t… Look, I don’t give a shit that Shane’s…”

Ilya raises a brow. He has never understood this, how his teammates and the entire NHL are so scared of it, how sucking cock is the biggest threat to their masculinity, how calling someone a cocksucker is considered the biggest insult you can give.

“Gay,” Ilya says. “You can say the word.”

“Fuck off. It’s just—a shock.”

“Is it really?”

“Yeah,” Hayden says, punctuated with a laugh. “He dated Rose Landry, and, uh…”

A memory: six years ago, Ilya fucked Shane for the first time. He took him, facing the back of his head, which Ilya now regrets. He could see the lovely line of his back, how his muscles rippled as Ilya pressed deep inside, but he wishes, in this moment, that he could’ve seen Shane’s face, the shocked, dumb, open expression that he knows now that Shane always displays, when he’s being fucked, like he forgets how good it is every time until the blunt force of Ilya’s cockhead presses against the give of his entrance. If Ilya closes his eyes, he can see it now: the flush on Shane’s cheeks, the way tears stuck to his lashes, how his mouth puckered into a small *oh* when he took Ilya for the first time. He can hear it too: the panicked gasp, the shaky exhale, the shuddering and strained *unhh* when Ilya started to fuck him for real, the staccato moans punctuating the air, the rustling of the fabric beneath him. Shane always gets so wet when they fuck, dribbling all over the sheets or his stomach and always making a mess. It’s one of Ilya’s favorite things about fucking Shane: how much he wants it, always, and can never hide it. Sometimes, Ilya doesn’t even have to touch his dick for him to start spilling. Ilya has never met anyone who loved being fucked as much as Shane Hollander, girls and guys both. He wishes he could have seen it the first time, the look on his face when he realized he loved it.

The next morning, Shane had an interview with ESPN. Ilya watched the broadcast, and he could see it, and he was smug with the knowledge that no one else would know what it was: the faint teeth-marked bruise in the shape of a ring, right below Shane’s wrist, from when he was trying to keep himself quiet.

“Anyway,” Hayden says. “I don’t care that he’s gay, but it’s still a shock that—he’s gay with *you.* What about all the women you’ve slept with?”

Ilya shrugs. It’s not that deep. “I like them too,” he replies. He thinks he likes them a little more in general, but saying that would only complicate things in Hayden’s Neanderthal brain.

“I’m bisexual,” he says, as casually as he can, even though this is probably the first time he’s said it out loud, to another person.

Hayden seems to consider that for a long moment. Ilya tries not to say something smart like, *Is this the first time you've ever heard that word? It means I like both men and women,* and instead lets Hayden sit with the confession.

"Wouldn't it be easier then," Hayden asks, "if you just got with a woman?"

When Ilya was a kid, back when he was back in Russia, part of the reason why he chose to be drafted in the NHL instead of the KHL (a very small part, since the NHL was a far superior league) was because it opened up avenues for him to leave Russia, to escape his family. Ever since his mother died, Russia has become less and less of a home, less of a place to come back to, and more of a burden. Secretly, since his mother died, Ilya has always dreamed of living in the United States or Canada long enough to gain citizenship. Getting drafted in the NHL would allow him to achieve that goal.

Over the past few years, Ilya has thought of this too: marrying an American citizen.

Svetlana would be a good choice, and a safe choice, one that people would approve of.

They wouldn't have to be in love; their sexual chemistry is great and they like each other as people. She would probably be okay with it, if he asked. Sure, there aren't any romantic feelings, but even just a green card marriage would benefit her and her family. Ilya is a big name in Russia and in the States. Ilya can imagine a life with her. He can imagine a future with her. Maybe they could learn to love each other. It would be so easy.

Ilya knows this. He knows all of this, but over the past few months, something scarier and something horrible started bleeding into his mind: something improbable, something dangerous.

I've never had anything. Like this. With anyone else.

When Ilya thinks of a future with Svetlana, a big wedding and marriage and kids, the vision morphs into something dangerous, something impossible which he cannot have, something he wants with impossible measure.

He thinks of everything he might regret, and everything that he would give up by choosing the easy way out.

A half hour into the drive, Ilya ends up dozing off. He doesn't even realize it's happened until he feels a hand on his shoulder, jostling him slightly.

Мое солнышко, a voice calls in the distance.

"Мама, как…?" he mumbles, rubbing at his eyes.

"What was that?"

Ilya blinks into awareness. The first thing he notices is that the car is no longer moving; the second is that Hayden Pike—why is he in a car with Hayden Pike again? Oh, right.

He glances around, and they're parked in front of what is probably the Platonic ideal of a white picket fence suburban home. The sun is high in the sky, shining warm even through the windows.

"We're here." Hayden undoes his seatbelt, and Ilya instantly mirrors the motion. "Just wait in the car. I'll knock and let them know—"

Ilya is already out the door.

"Rozanov, hey—" Hayden is shouting. Sunlight tingles against his cheeks. He feels gross with that post-nap sort of grime, but he fights past it and the general disorientation, and travels down the cobbled stone path to the front door, past the neatly-trimmed lawn, hedges, and the literal white picket fence. Of course Shane would grow up in a house like this.

"*Rozanov.*" Hayden's voice is drifting into the background, where he's fumbling to lock the car and follow after him. "Hey, I should—"

Ilya's finger is already pressing the doorbell. Hayden is somehow out of breath behind him, muttering about how he should've waited.

When there's no response after nearly a minute, Ilya goes to try the doorbell again, only for the door to come swinging open just as his finger's about to press the button.

The couple at the door are definitely Shane's parents. Ilya has vague memories of them from the NHL Awards each year—because of course Shane has the perfect family, with perfect parents who support him to a point of absurdity. Otherwise, he can see where Shane gets each of his features from.

Ilya ignores the tightness in his gut, as well as how Shane's parents are looking at him with confusion and shock.

"Hello," he says, the syllables clunky on his tongue. And when neither the man nor the woman react, he adds, "I'm Ilya Rozanov."

The woman (what was her name again? Ilya searches his brain hard; it was a Japanese name, for sure) presses her lips together, eyes darting between Ilya and Hayden, who is completely silent behind him.

"We know who you are."

But I don't know you, Ilya thinks, and I want to know you. I want to know everything about Shane, he cannot say.

Forward, he reminds himself. Always forward.

"I am looking for Shane," he says, straight to the point. "He does not answer his phone, and he is not in his home. Maybe he is here?"

Shane's dad stiffens. Ilya's eyes trace over his and his wife's faces, the dark bags under their eyes, the slightly terrified look in them, and he considers the hell they also must have been in the past 24 hours.

He tries to put himself in their shoes. Who is Ilya Rozanov? The captain of a rival team, a dirty player, an asshole, and a womanizer. Ilya is under no misunderstandings or misimpressions about who he is and how he is seen throughout the greater hockey world. In the end, most of what people say about him is entirely true.

"Why are you looking for our son?" the man asks.

The woman regards him carefully. Ilya realizes that this is his chance. If they haven't turned him down yet, if they are willing to listen, maybe not all hope is lost.

He glances into the house. He wonders if Shane is inside.

He returns his gaze to the couple, and he considers the question. Why *am* I looking for Shane?

Because of the way he scrunches his nose when I make fun of him, and because of the way his cheeks go bright pink when I praise him. Because his laughter is a little like sunshine. Because he is so good at hockey it pisses me off and turns me on. Because he is probably the best player in the league—other than me, of course—and he doesn't deserve any of this. Because he's a bit of a lightweight. Because he puts his left skate on before his right. Because he wears these adorable glasses and reads books about hockey. Because he has freckles that take my breath away. Because he wants to learn Russian for me. Because he was worried about me in Sochi. Because he called me when my father died. Because I have been in love with him for a long time, longer than I can remember, and I know it's horrible, and I know it makes no sense, and I know I ruined his life, and I'll never be able to forgive myself for this, but I cannot help the way that I feel. Trust me, I have tried. I have spent the past seven years trying not to feel this way. I have spent the past seven years failing.

"He is important to me," Ilya ends up saying. The words he cannot say claw at the back of his throat. Absurdly, he wishes he had a mouthguard in, something to chew on.

Shane's parents are quiet for a long time, looking at one another, before the woman says, "Shane said you visited him in the hospital, after his injury."

Ilya's eyes widen. "I did," he replies. A tactile memory: the ghost of Shane's fingers tangled up in his. The last time they touched. "He told you?"

Shane's mother nods. "He was high, so I don't think he remembers." Her eyes narrow. "He called you Ilya."

"Okay," Ilya says, because he cannot think of what else to say. "Is he here?"

"No," Shane's father answers immediately.

Ilya's stomach sinks to his shoes, fearing that he's hit another dead end. "Do you know where he is?"

At this, they both go silent, quickly exchanging a glance. Ilya sees the opening, sees the gap open up in real-time, in slow-motion. He feels a little like he does when he's at the rink, cold and hot all at once; he feels like he does in the moments before his stick hits the puck.

He has to go for it. It's all instinct.

"I would like to make sure that he is okay. After yesterday," Ilya says, finally addressing the elephant in the room.

"You've seen the video?" Shane's dad asks, lifting a brow.

"Yes," Ilya says, then follows up with the understatement of his life, "and I am fine with it."

As Shane's parents seem to digest Ilya's statement, Ilya sits with the silence; it's only now he hears his heart going in his ears.

"Uh," a voice behind him says, and Ilya turns around, remembering that Hayden is also here. He has a hand up, like he's a child at school answering the teacher's question. "I just wanna say that I am too. Okay with it, I mean. So."

Ilya resists the urge to roll his eyes. He supposes that it must provide at least a little encouragement that Shane has, at the very least, two NHL players on his side.

"Come in for coffee," Shane's mom decides—in the back of his mind, Ilya realizes she probably wears the pants in the relationship. "You look exhausted. You and Hayden both."

"You'd all let a fucking vampire into your homes," Hayden murmurs.

Ilya frowns. While he appreciates it, he really just wants to find Shane.

"Thank you," he starts, "but—"

"Please," Shane's mom continues, and Ilya realizes that she isn't asking them to come in out of mere kindness, "we insist."

Shane's parents—Yuna and David, he learns—do not like him.

They don't seem to believe that Ilya's there in goodwill, which Ilya supposes he can understand, since their only impression of him must be the man who's tripped their son and slammed him into the boards dozens of times since they were seventeen. They question his motives, and Ilya struggles to find a way to explain without saying outright that he and Shane are… involved.

After a few minutes, Yuna and David excuse themselves to discuss privately what they should do, which makes Ilya certain they know where Shane is and just don't want to tell Ilya.

"You should just tell them it was you in the video," Hayden says, chewing on an apple he grabbed from the table himself.

Ilya glares. Hayden, despite claiming back in Montreal that he would help with Shane's parents, has not helped at all. He has barely spoken a word since they've gotten here. He has, on the other hand, eaten two apples and is on apple three. Ilya winces each time he takes a bite. He's probably hungry—he can't remember when the last time he ate was—but he's not in the mood to eat.

"I do not think that telling them their son sucks my cock will make them like me more."

Hayden scrunches his nose. Ilya considers picking a fight about how Hayden must not be okay with gay people after all, even though he doesn't really believe it himself—because why would Hayden drive him all the way out here if that was true?—but he decides against it. Ilya's just so tired. All he wants is to do is see Shane. He's starting to realize what a stupid decision it was to leave for Canada in the first place when he didn't even know where Shane was.

"What do they think I will do? All I ask for is address," Ilya mumbles, pinching the space between his brows with his fingers.

"Dunno, man," Hayden says, taking a bite of his apple, punctuated with a loud *crunch!* He continues to chew with his mouth open when he says, "You're kind of a dick."

Ilya rolls his eyes.

"Shane's going through like, the worst moment of his life. They're just being protective. You're a rival. Maybe the Bears sent you here to do something fucked up."

Ilya pulls his jaw back and tries not to punch Hayden in Shane's parents' kitchen. He hopes that was a joke.

"Is already fucked up."

"What is?"

Ilya leans back in his chair. They're sitting at the breakfast counter on high stools, opposite the fridge. Ilya lets his eyes wander forward and regrets it, because the fridge is filled from top to bottom with pictures of Shane. As a baby, as a toddler, as a kid, as a teen, all the way up to his second Worlds, His team beat Ilya's that day. Ilya will never forget.

He forces himself to look away. He tosses his hand out flippantly. "All of this."

Ilya stands and rounds the breakfast table to check his phone, charging next to the fridge, beside the sink and kitchen appliances. It's almost ten in the morning already; he and Hayden must have gotten caught in traffic. Ilya must have slept for longer than he thought.

For the first time since last night, he checks social media and traditional sports sites to see if there are any updates about Shane. Nothing from ESPN and the like, and also nothing from either the NHL or the Voyageurs, but the news of the video has only spread further across the internet. More people have heard about it, more people know about it, more people have watched the video. More people are talking about it. Ilya doesn't particularly care to read what people have to say. He can only hope that Shane is offline right now.

"They're not stupid though."

Ilya turns his phone off and turns around to face Hayden. He's eaten this apple to the core. "What you mean?"

"You drove all the way from Boston to Montreal, then to *Ottawa,* just to see how Shane is doing after his *gay sex tape* got leaked. It doesn't take a genius to figure out you two probably aren't just rivals, as unbelievable as it is."

Ilya can't help but take the jab. "Took you a while."

"Fuck off. I was half-asleep," Hayden says. He throws his apple core away in the bin, then returns to his seat. Ilya is a little surprised he doesn't go for a fourth apple.

"Did you really visit Shane in the hospital?"

"Yes. Was last time I saw him."

Hayden puts his thinking face on again. Ilya busies himself by staring at the photos stuck to the fridge. He has a closer view now, and he lets his eyes wander all over the moments captured from Shane's youth. His cheeks were fuller and softer back then, but he's still pretty much had the same haircut all his life, the same terrible fashion—pre-stylist—and the same freckles, of course.

His eyes end up honing in on a moment he's quite familiar with: a photo from the draft, Shane on the left, holding up two fingers, looking like he was just picked last, and Ilya in the center, proudly holding a single finger up. This was one of the happiest moments of Ilya's life.

The photograph itself is half-covered up by the corner of another photo, hiding the third pick of that year's draft.

Whenever Ilya thinks of the draft, his mind wanders to what happened later that night, in the gym, when they raced each other on the treadmill. Ilya thinks about it: how badly he wanted to pin Shane to the floor, how badly he wanted that pink mouth on him.

"So what is it?" Hayden asks. "Are you two together? I realized you never said."

Ilya sighs. Everyone has so many questions and Ilya doesn't have a single answer. He only has what he carries in his chest, the sharpness he feels each time he breathes, knowing that Shane has been hurt because of something they did, something they made. Something like

this was always going to happen, Ilya thinks. He just wishes it wasn't so humiliating. "Is complicated."

Is not something you would understand, Ilya wants to say, but stops himself, realizing that isn't quite fair. He barely understands it himself.

Shane's parents return at that moment. Both Ilya and Hayden stiffen and sit up straight.

Yuna looks Ilya in the eye and asks, "Did you know?"

Ilya frowns. Shane's mom is kind of terrifying for a woman of her stature, nearly a foot shorter than Ilya. "Know what?"

"That Shane…"

This time, Ilya understands.

He decides to keep it simple. "Yes, I knew."

"And you… kept his secret?" Yuna says, lifting her brow. Ilya feels like she might be asking a different question.

He decides to answer both at the same time. Two birds, one stone, whatever the Americans say. "Yes," he repeats. "Since our rookie year."

Three pairs of eyes fly wide. Ilya bites his mouth.

"Since then?" David asks, shock coloring his voice.

Ilya's eyes flick to the photo of them from the draft, stuck to the steel fridge with a colorful Ottawa Centaurs rubber magnet. It really has been a long time, hasn't it? Seven years of their secret. Seven years of hiding.

"Shane and I…"

Ilya briefly considers telling Yuna and David the truth: that he loves their son, that he has loved him for many years, that this horrible thing between them has grown so much larger than either of them could have imagined in those showers when they were just eighteen—how Ilya, more than anything else in his life, is thankful for it. For Shane. That he met Shane. That Shane is in his life.

He isn't very religious, but every time he feels the weight of the crucifix over his chest he feels Shane's fingers fiddling with the metal and he thanks the god he barely believes in that Shane is in his life, that he was gifted with hockey talent and grit and determination because that led him to Shane; that all of that, all of this, has led him to Shane.

Inside his chest is a storm: he wants it, but he cannot have it. He cannot have it, and yet…

He decides against saying any of this. These words have not yet been spoken out loud. They should not be spoken to anyone but Shane first.

“I promise that I will explain more later,” he says, throat feeling tight with the force of all these words he cannot say out loud. It is always like that, when Ilya tries to think about what Shane means to him. He feels so much for him it is unthinkable. “Is hard to put it into English.”

The room is so quiet Ilya could hear a pin drop; he even hears Yuna suck in a breath. So Ilya continues, “But right now, I am worried that he is alone. I want him to know that he is not.”

In 2014, the Bears won game five—which turned out to be the final game—of the championship series in overtime. Ilya scored the winning goal. He still remembers the moment the veil of silence was lifted between him and the crowd, when the puck slid toward the net and the goalie could do nothing to stop it; how the whole stadium erupted in cheers so deafening Ilya felt like his ears were about to pop. He will remember this moment all his life.

He swallows, considers what he’s about to say, if it’s too revealing, if it’s too much. His mind wanders back to that deciding game, of the moments before his stick hit the puck, the chill of his breath, the tingle up his spine, how he saw the opening, how it all started to come together —not once did he worry about silly things like missing. He just had to try. Here and now, he tries as hard as he can. You miss all the shots you don’t take, right?

“I do not want to be without him for another second.”

“He’s at his cottage,” Yuna exhales, in one long breath, like she’s been holding it all this time.

“*Yuna,*” David breathes out.

Yuna’s grabbing a napkin from the counter and, seemingly, searching for a pen from the cupboards. “I’ll write down the address,” she says, ignoring her husband’s shock.

Ilya can feel and hear his heart beating in his ears, watching the look of shock on David’s face turn into one of fondness and acceptance.

“Holy fuck, Roz,” Hayden says, grinning like a maniac. “Didn’t know you were such a romantic.”

Is not romantic, Ilya thinks. *This is just how I feel.*

With shining eyes, Yuna hands him the napkin with the address. Ilya takes it, carefully folds it in half, then in half again, and places it in his pocket. He grabs his phone from the charger and is about to prepare to leave, only for Yuna to tell him to wait as she retrieves two large Tupperware containers from the fridge.

“Give this to him when you’re there, will you? For dessert. It’s his favorite. We were actually planning on surprising him with a visit tonight, but…” she trails off.

David finishes for her, “Maybe he needs to see you more.”

“Okay,” Ilya says, taking the two hefty Tupperwares and stacking them in one hand so that he can keep holding his phone with the other.

“He’s really beating himself up over it,” Yuna continues, pressing her lips together. Ilya can imagine it. He’s seen Shane after hard losses—he has reveled in it, even—but he knows that Shane tends to put the whole world’s weight on his shoulders. “We went to a restaurant last week. He misplaced his phone, or was pickpocketed, we don’t know.”

David tacks on, “For a while he was still looking for it, so he didn’t wipe it until a few days later, but it was too late.”

Ilya’s never been more thankful that his name is still saved in Shane’s phone as Lily—that and the video might have been enough for someone to piece everything together.

“Okay,” Ilya says again, because he isn’t sure what to say.

Yuna bites her lip. “It’s about two hours away. The cottage, I mean.”

Ilya nods, then glances at Hayden. “We go now?”

Hayden shakes his head and laughs. “You go. I’ll stay here. Don’t wanna ruin the moment or whatever.” And then he flushes and glances at Yuna and David. “That’s alright, right?”

David laughs and slaps Hayden on the shoulder. “You’re welcome any time.”

Ilya can’t help the pang of jealousy that strikes deep in his gut, even though he knows it’s irrational.

He bites the inside of his cheek and asks Hayden, “I drive your van?”

“Shit,” Hayden says, dragging a hand through his hair. “I didn’t think this through. I gotta get back home soon.”

“You can take Yuna’s car,” David tells Ilya. “It’s a Corolla, s’that alright?”

“Of course,” Ilya answers, with relief. As long as he has a way to get to Shane. He’d drive in a clown car if it meant he could get to Shane’s cottage, if it meant he could see Shane again, if it meant he could make things right, in any way he can, despite the fact that at this moment, he doesn’t have a clue how to actually do it.

Ilya would say he knows himself pretty well.

He likes his cars low to the ground because he can feel the road rushing through his body. He likes his grizzly bear tattoo even though it’s a bit ridiculous because it reminds him of where he comes from—it reminds him of the country he loves and he hates, a home that is not really a home anymore, but that has given him so much. He likes piercings but he can never get one because it would never work out with hockey. He likes his fake teeth because when he runs his tongue over the edges, they’re smoother than his real teeth. He likes cooking even though

he's not very good at it because it fills him with a sense of accomplishment. He likes instigating fights on the ice because he likes making other people lose their cool. He likes seeing the look in their eyes when they lose their self-control, because the first person who throws a punch loses. He likes the Bears because they're a good team, but he doesn't love them. Sometimes, Ilya wishes he was drafted to a Canadian team.

He likes hockey, but he doesn't love hockey.

No, Ilya thinks, that isn't quite right. He loves hockey, but he doesn't love it in the same way that most of the other NHL players love hockey. He loves hockey in the same way he has to love his body: because he cannot live without it. Hockey is everything to him, but not because hockey is special, but because that's how it all happened to work out, that's the hand he was given in life and he's played it as he was given. Even as a kid, from the very first moment Ilya was handed a stick and stepped out onto the ice, he knew, and his parents knew, that this was it. This is what he would do forever.

He was good at hockey. He was really fucking good at it—and he still is. At 26, he's among the best in the world, and sure, hours and hours were put into becoming what he is, but here's a secret: it wasn't that hard at all. Playing hockey is as natural as breathing.

But it didn't have to be hockey.

He loves hockey because of the way hockey makes him feel, but a lot of things make him feel this way: winning, sports cars, cigarettes, sex. He fucking loves sex.

Ilya loves sex in the same way that he loves hockey: it gives him something to do, and he's really good at it. He loves it because in a way he cannot live without it—at the very least, he doesn't know who he is without it.

Ilya is no secret to himself. He chases cheap thrills because his serotonin receptors are fried and his brain's fucked up and he needs that instant gratification; it has been this way since he was fourteen, too young to know any better.

Or maybe it was since he was twelve. He isn't sure. He can't be sure. His life back in Russia is a blur. He can't remember most of his childhood but he will forever remember the day he found his mother.

For a long time that pain was all he could feel, and it was all that he knew. He mistook the pain for numbness, but really, it was all the same. Hockey gave him clarity; stepping into the rink, the faint smell of ice and stale sweat filled his nose and pulled him out of the sludge and monotony of his life. The sounds of blades slicing across and sticks slapping against ice; the crunching collision of a body against a body. This he could hear. This he could feel.

For once, he could feel something that wasn't an absence.

He loves hockey because, in a way, it saved him.

And then came the cigarettes, and then came the sex: both gave him the same clarity as hockey. At fourteen, he was probably old enough for it, That's what the adults around him

told him, anyway.

The sharper these thrills became, the duller everything else became, and the more he relied on each.

If he had to rank the three, he would rank them like this: hockey, sex, and cigarettes.

When he was drafted to the Bears, they told him he had to quit smoking, or at least reduce how much he smoked. Stupid country, he thought, but he would do almost anything for hockey. He can't say he's been very successful at it, though, since he's been quitting on-and-off for the past six years.

But he could play hockey, and he could have sex; neither interfered with the other. In a strange way, they worked together. Women wanted to have sex with him because he played hockey so well; his teammates respected him and listened to him in locker rooms because he slept with so many women. The years between 18 and 25, roughly, he'd rarely go a week without having sex. He had a rotation going. He had a roster. Cliff lovingly called it his Saturday Night Fuck Club.

He knows all of this about himself. How he feels has never been a mystery to him, and it's never been a mystery to anyone else. The majority of his life is all out in the open.

But, of course, he does keep some things to himself.

Of course, most people don't know this: sometimes, he has sex with men. Less than five percent of the people he's slept with have been men, probably. Ilya has never kept count, but if he tried, he'd likely only need one hand.

Cheap thrills. Ilya hadn't even known for sure that he liked men until the first time he tried it, and he only tried it back in Russia with his coach's son precisely because it was so dangerous. It was merely a happy accident, or maybe a misfortunate one, that he happened to like it. And it wasn't an upending realization or anything. He's never been ashamed of it, who he is and what he likes—he's only kept it a secret for his own safety.

For a long time, the Shane thing was an offshoot of the sex thing *and* the hockey thing. Another cheap thrill.

Secretly, Ilya considered Shane the best of both his worlds. Shane was the second-best hockey player in the league (behind Ilya, of course), and a great fuck. An *excellent* fuck. The right sort of dangerous. It wasn't exactly convenient to fuck him, but it was consistent. An easy bet. A sure thing. It was casual: a few hours every few months, only when they happened to be in the same city.

Ilya should have seen it coming. He should have expected that the Shane thing, the intersection of the two most important parts of his life, wouldn't be satisfied with being a mere part of parts. He should have seen it coming, how it became the wrong sort of dangerous, how it grew larger and larger until there was no room for it in any other part of his life and became a thing of its own. Somewhere along the line, the thing with Shane stopped being about sex and it stopped being about hockey.

Ilya hasn't had sex since the last All-Star Game. Three months. It's the longest drought he has ever had since he was fourteen.

Somewhere along the line, the thing with Shane became more important than sex or hockey, than sex *and* hockey.

Somewhere along the line, it started swallowing him whole.

The cottage is far down along a private road, deep in the woods, and, in Ilya's opinion, it's not really a *cottage,* but more like a mansion in the middle of the woods. He's seen the structure on screen, but the TV show hadn't done its size justice. The tremendous stone-front structure is surrounded by trees, so Ilya can't even see all of it, can't even see where it ends from where he parks: at the front of the house, right next to a Jeep Cherokee that he assumes must be Shane's.

Ilya checks the time. It's just after noon.

Before he left the Hollanders' house, David ran up to the car and tossed in a pack of granola bars. *For the road*, he said, and Ilya was grateful. He ended up eating three but then felt guilty, so instead of finishing the whole box, he stopped by a Tim Hortons drive through and ate half a dozen donuts in the parking lot. The worker at the window looked like he was about to pass out when he saw who he was passing the donut carton to. Ilya sort of regrets it. Too much sugar. He's starting to feel nauseous, like his insides are trying to crawl onto the outside.

Just outside the cottage, Ilya cuts the engine, slips out, and locks the car behind him. The air is fresh and cool, smelling of salt and leaves; the sunlight hits his skin in patterns, half-shielded by leaves and clouds. Deep in the forest, cicadas and birds fill the air with song. It's serene, and quite beautiful.

Ilya makes his way down the long cobblestone path, reminiscent of Shane's parents' house, and thinks about how this is his third doorstep in the past, like, seven hours. He's finally here.

No time to hesitate. Ilya has been on the road for half a day. His journey ends here. Less than 24 hours ago, he was thousands of feet in the air, watching as Shane's life spun out and fell apart hundreds of miles away. While Ilya can't turn back time, while he might not be able to fix things, at least he won't be hundreds of miles away. At least he can be here, if Shane wants him here.

He can't find a doorbell, so he merely knocks on the door, hoping that somehow, inside this gargantuan structure, Shane can hear him.

Almost immediately, Ilya hears movement from inside, like footsteps. He's wondering if he imagined it, but then he hears those noises increase in volume and proximity, and spots a

shadow in motion behind the curtains of the front windows.

The door swings open. Ilya holds his breath.

“Mom, I said—”

Ilya watches as the irritated, slightly pouty expression on Shane’s face morphs into one of utter shock, the lovely moment when the skin around his eyes softens; he listens as Shane shudders, breath catching at the back of his throat, before exhaling, almost without tone, almost complete air, “Ilya?”

Since they were nineteen, they have never been afraid to touch one another. Sure, there was uncertainty the first time, but that wasn’t fear. It was the moment before the face-off, the held breath before the puck hits the ice. When Ilya’s mouth found Shane’s, the very first time, he could feel the panic against his lips, the moment of hesitation; it only lasted a split-second, and it was not fear.

It was different then, Ilya thinks. We were so young and we didn’t know what we were doing. We didn’t know what this would become. I knew, of course, and I think you knew too, that this was forever, that we would spend the rest of our careers pitted against each other, fighting at the very pinnacle. Yes, we knew what we were doing on the ice, but we didn’t have a fucking clue what we were doing in hotel rooms, what we were making between us. We didn’t know, and we should have known. We didn’t know there was anything to be scared of. We didn’t know how monstrous this thing between us would grow.

Ilya thinks: I will not move if you do not move. If you tell me to leave, I will leave. I just needed to see you, and I see you now and you look beautiful as always, but I see the dark circles under your eyes, the stubble across your jaw and upper lip even though you’re manic about shaving twice a day. I know what people are saying about you online and I can only hope that you don’t. I have been worried sick about you. I crossed the border to find you. I know this isn’t normal; I know we aren’t even together. When Hayden asked me if we were together, I didn’t know what to say. But you know what? You know what? I haven’t seen you in person since Cliff slammed you into the barriers, broke your collarbone, and gave you a concussion. I haven’t seen him in the same way ever since. I haven’t seen you the same way ever since. Do you know how terrified I was? To think that I might lose you? That, yes, that was fear. I was fucking terrified.

You take my breath away, Ilya thinks. Do you know that? Do you understand how terrifying that is? How terrified I am to touch you right now?

Looking at Shane, the pale coloring of his cheeks, the wide dilation of his eyes, how his Adam’s apple seems to be stuck in his throat, caught mid-swallow, Ilya realizes maybe Shane does understand.

Maybe Shane is just as terrified as he is.

Tell me, Ilya wants to say. Will you still have me? Has everything been ruined between us?

He cannot find the words, lost somewhere in the back of his throat. So he waits.

Ilya waits and waits, and it's like he sees it before it happens, when Shane, in one jerky motion, surges forward; it's like he feels it before their bodies even make contact, the collision and resulting warmth, a sort of embrace that restarts all the neural pathways in his brain and remaps every vein connected to his heart, shocking him to life.

Shane smells like seaweed shampoo and sports bodywash; his hair is damp and tickling Ilya's cheek and getting his shirt wet. Ilya knows he must smell like powdered sugar and stale sweat and the Breezy Pine air freshener from Yuna's car, but he can hear Shane breathing him in with his whole body. His hands are thrown over Ilya's shoulders and his mouth is pressed close to Ilya's ear, so Ilya can hear each of his ragged breaths. Ilya's hands have found their way around Shane's waist, clutching the back of his shirt, clawing at his skin through the cotton fabric, yanking him closer with a desperation Ilya only ever feels with the man before him. Shane stumbles onto the front porch. Ilya catches him, then squeezes him so tightly he might not be able to breathe. He cannot let go.

When Ilya realized for the first time just how horrible and impossible this had all become, not just for Ilya but for Shane also, kissing his fingertips and pressing them to the screen, Ilya wondered if he was making some sort of Faustian bargain. He wondered what he was giving up to feel this happy, what he had given up to have someone as lovely and wonderful as Shane in his life. Shane loved him back; yes, Ilya knew this, and he also knew it was impossible. Right now, holding Shane, running his hands up his spine, just to feel him, every muscle of him, Ilya understands what he had given up: the easy way out. He doesn't think he could live another second of his life without knowing with absolute certainty that Shane is in his life.

This is it, Ilya thinks. This has to be forever.

No more hesitation. No more uncertainty.

"You're here," he hears, barely audible, pressed right to his ear. Shane's voice is croaky and wet, and Ilya only now realizes, when he hears a small sniffle, that the wetness against his neck isn't coming entirely from Shane's hair. "How are you here?"

Ilya can hear how tired he is, can feel it, can smell it. Ilya breathes him in as deep as he can.

"I had a very long night," Ilya says. "And morning."

Shane's laughter is wet. His fingernails scrape Ilya's scalp, knuckles tangling in his curls.

"Me too."

For another few seconds—or minutes, Ilya cannot be sure—they just hold each other like this, holding on so tight it's like they're bracing for the surging tide, each breath savored like it's their last. They are too used to that, Ilya thinks, bracing for impact and treating every moment like it's their last.

He stays with his face pressed to the side of Shane's head when he asks, "How are you?"

Another wet, choked-out, half-hearted laugh from Shane. "Not good."

Ilya speaks over the lump in his throat. “I called. Many times. And texted.”

Shane hesitates for a moment. “I’ve been… offline mostly,” he explains, and Ilya’s chest expands with relief. “I lost my phone, if you haven’t heard.”

Ilya can’t help but snort. He sort of feels Shane frown against the side of his neck. God, they probably look ridiculous right now, just hugging each other in the afternoon light. Ilya doesn’t care.

“I was going to… eventually,” Shane goes on. “I just… I wanted to be alone. To have some space.”

Ilya pulls back. Shane makes a noise and furls the fabric at the back of Ilya’s shirt in his fists, but Ilya manages to put at least a breath’s distance between them, hands sliding to Shane’s waist.

“Sorry,” he says, eyes tracing the slightly puffy skin under Shane’s waterline.

A beautiful crease appears between Shane’s brows. Ilya has the urge to smooth it away with his lips.

“Why are you sorry?”

Ilya draws his bottom lip between his teeth. “You wanted space. I did not give it to you.”

Shane’s entire face flushes, but maybe that’s the sunlight, coming down on them and creating a sort of halo around Shane’s head. Right now, everything feels like a dream. Ilya never wants to wake up.

“I wanted it. Doesn’t mean I needed it,” Shane says, and it must be a testament to either how good an athlete Ilya is, or just how well he knows Shane, because he catches the exact moment the puck drops, the millisecond where it happens: when Shane’s eyes flick down, then quickly back up. When the flush on his cheeks darkens, and his top two teeth come down to bite his lower lip.

“I needed…” he says, like he’s heaving in a breath, and Ilya understands. He always knows what Shane needs.

Ilya’s hands drag up from where they’re planted on Shane’s hips, squeezing through the space between their chests. His right hand momentarily slides over his heart—Ilya can feel the rapid thumps against his palm, and Shane releases his lower lip from beneath his teeth, sucking in a breath through his mouth; they’re so close that Ilya can feel the movement in the air.

Upward: when his thumbs meet the collar of Shane’s shirt, fingertips brushing the skin at the base of his neck, Shane instantly tilts his head back. Ilya’s mind wanders to their first time, seven years ago, how Shane sank to his knees without Ilya needing to ask.

His thumbs run along the bumpy columns of Shane’s throat, feeling movement when Shane swallows.

Ilya's hands continue to move upward; his fingers curl under Shane's ears and his thumbs settle just below Shane's jaw. One digit travels up to Shane's mouth.

Shane is looking up at him like he is the world.

Without even thinking, Ilya presses the pad of his right thumb to the center of his lips, which part immediately for him, just like they had when they had recorded that video two years ago. A sight that thousands, hundreds of thousands—millions?—of people have seen.

Ilya drops his hand, sucks in a breath, feeling how it comes in shakily. This—it happens rarely enough in his life that he always knows when it's about to happen. God, there's something wrong with him. He's exhausted and he's been on the road for fucking ever, and he's just now come to terms with what he's committed to, what all of this means for him, and for Shane. For them, together.

He leans forward, turns his head to the side, and rests his forehead to Shane's shoulder because he's too embarrassed. Doesn't want Shane to see him like this.

"Ilya, what's—"

Shane stops when he hears Ilya suck in another shuddering breath.

Ilya presses his hot face to Shane's neck and says, "I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

After a long moment, Shane's hand finds the back of Ilya's head, stroking his hair, and Ilya is embarrassed that it's like Shane is the one who's comforting him right now.

"It was my fault," he says, but Ilya can also hear how Shane's voice cracks and breaks. How he has to pause and swallow. "I suggested it. I—"

"You did nothing. You—"

Ilya finds the strength to pull his face from Shane's shoulder, mouth pursing when he finds the dark spot of fabric on Shane's shirt. He blinks hard and repeatedly until his vision clears.

His eyes travel north, to Shane's red-rimmed, puffy eyes, glassy again. God, Ilya thinks. They're both so pathetic. God, he thinks. How could they be this stupid? How could they let this happen to them? It's so ridiculous he wants to laugh.

Instead, he brings his thumb up to swipe a tear from Shane's cheek. His other hand brushes Shane's hair back. Shane's eyes never leave his.

"Have I ruined you?" Ilya asks.

Shane looks caught. One corner of his mouth pulls up, and he looks to the side, bashful. Ilya cradles his cheek in his palm.

"You said it yourself," he says, then meets Ilya's gaze. "You ruined me a long time ago. No one else will do."

Ilya licks over his bottom lip. That wasn't the question he was asking, but he suddenly doesn't care.

He watches as Shane watches the motion, and he knows that there is no better time than the present, to let Shane finally know.

"It is… Same for me."

Shane's pupils dilate. His fingers still at the base of Ilya's neck. "Is it really?"

If Ilya is honest with himself, he has felt adrift these past few years. He's already completed one of his goals: winning a Stanley Cup. While he's still hungry for a second, he doesn't want it with the same desperation as he had, following Sochi. He knows that he doesn't have anything left to prove. Distantly, he knows that he doesn't have a father he has to prove himself to anymore. Off the ice, before this year's All-Star game, he spent the past two years in limbo: having sex with beautiful women, partying, clubbing, and it has all been a blur.

The few shining moments always involve dark freckles, brown eyes, and burning desire. These stolen moments—only one or two hours at a time, every few months, in his own penthouse in Boston, in that staged apartment bedroom in Montreal, or in hotel rooms—Ilya remembers more than he remembers anything else.

No one else, Ilya thinks. No one else will do. No one else takes me like you do. No one else knows me like you do. You do this thing with your tongue, and you're the only one who's strong enough to put me on my back, to hold my wrists down and take what you want. You're the only one who loves it as much as you do. They call you a generational playmaker, but you hate calling the shots in bed and I love that about you. I love everything about you.

Ilya nods, feeling the confession run through every atom of his body.

He waits, with bated breath, blinking away the wetness from his eyes, for Shane to respond.

Shane's mouth impossibly curls into a smile. His eyes are so bright, or maybe those are the tears. Ilya can't tell, and he supposes it doesn't matter.

"Then show me," Shane says, "how I have ruined you."

Ilya's breath is caught in the back of his throat. He marvels at Shane, Shane Hollander, the love of his life, wanting more, never satisfied with halves. Of course, Ilya thinks. Of course you'd be hungry for it, even now, even after everything that has happened. I love how much you love it. I love how much you want it. I love how you want it, always. I love how no one else sets me on fire like you do.

Yes, he thinks to himself, his thumb tracing the shape of Shane's cheekbone. No one else will do.

Ilya is the one to initiate the movement forward, but Shane meets him halfway, not in halves, but with the same force, intensity doubled and it's like they've collided on the ice, like Ilya might chip his front teeth, a second time, with the force of the kiss.

“I was honestly hoping you’d come find me,” Shane reveals, once they’ve managed to make it to the bed, tearing each other’s clothes off in the process. It’s a whole fucking affair, what with the million fucking rooms in Shane’s ‘cottage.’ “I thought it was a stupid wish.”

“I’m here,” Ilya groans, mouthing distractedly at the space beneath Shane’s lower jaw. He nips at the skin with his teeth. He knows he probably shouldn’t leave marks but, fuck it, he thinks, they’re both out of the playoffs, and Shane’s quite literally hiding away in the woods. Ilya wants this; he needs this. By the way that Shane is impatiently rutting against Ilya’s thigh, Ilya thinks that Shane wants this too.

Possessively, Ilya tangles his fingers in Shane’s scalp, however short his hair is, and says, “I found you,” before closing his teeth around skin. Shane moans, beautifully, and aches toward Ilya’s mouth.

It’s a sort of desperation that Ilya hasn’t felt since, maybe, that night he kissed Shane on the rooftop after the NHL Awards in 2011. Sure, he’d been feeling the sting of losing Rookie of the Year to Shane, but his mind was on other things: how he had to leave for Russia in a few days; how his father was dying and he didn’t know how to feel; how his brother was an asshole and how his step-mother was a gold digger and how everything was falling apart, probably. Amidst this all, he was risking his life and career because he was addicted to the feeling of Shane Hollander’s lips on his.

Absurdly, Shane was the only thing in his life that made sense.

Here and now, Shane continues to buck forward, like a wild animal; he lies on top of Ilya, cock rutting against his hip with each movement of his hips, breathing hotly into Ilya’s ear, hands spread out above his head. His eyes are closed; Ilya keeps his open, wanting to commit this image to memory. He slides his hand down Shane’s biceps, across his collarbone, down his spine, skin burning, sweat damp against his palm, wanting to feel him everywhere.

Ilya exhales into the space between their mouths, licking up his jaw.

He’s caught between taking his time and wanting to have Shane as soon as possible; the second desire wins out, and Ilya flips them over without notice. Shane yelps and calls Ilya a caveman, but doesn’t actually fight it. Ilya feels Shane’s cock pulse against the front of his thigh where they land and hears him shudder when Ilya grinds his thigh down, makes sure that Shane feels it.

Shane rolls over and fishes out a half-empty bottle of lube from the drawer, handing it to Ilya, who readily focuses on opening Shane up, working him open. Shane has already spread his legs around Ilya, has pulled his thighs back toward his chest for Ilya’s easy access—wanting it just as much as Ilya does.

Heart pounding wild, Ilya pours a hefty dollop of lube onto his hand, warming it up between his fingers, before tossing the bottle away and circling his fingertips around Shane's opening, slipping in one finger, then two, working him open and kissing his mouth until he can barely feel his lips. It's much harder to prep Shane like this, when he's on his back, and the angle is cramping his wrist, but it's worth it, solely because of this:

When Ilya pulls back, he can see Shane's face, every micro-expression, each eyelash, each freckle.

His eyes hone in on how Shane's mouth is swollen from when they'd been biting at each other, and he has a thought that he cannot keep inside.

"I am so angry," he says, feeling so hot he's breathing out smoke.

"At me?"

"No, at whoever did this," Ilya clarifies, his hand sliding down Shane's stomach, before curling around his length. Shane bucks forward; Ilya lets him, and continues opening him up with his other hand. "No one should see you like this. Only me."

"Yes," Shane groans, eyes rolling to the back of his head, and Ilya can't help but smirk at how much he loves it. "Only you."

"Why didn't you delete it?" Ilya groans, unable to help himself, fitting in a third finger and catching Shane's mouth with a kiss when his lips fall open.

Even after Ilya's released his mouth, Shane is speechless, his face completely red in the soft, bare light of his bedroom—they've taken their time, and the sun is too low in the sky to hit Shane's bedroom.

"I—" Shane starts, cut off by a sharp moan when Ilya's thumb strokes over his slit, collecting the liquid and spreading it over the length. Ilya licks over the bruise he left under Shane's jaw, smug.

"Sometimes," Shane says, the muscles in his abdomen rippling as he aches toward Ilya's hands. "I'd get off to it."

Fuck, Ilya thinks, sucking in a sharp breath through his nose.

"Yeah?" he asks, like that image isn't burning a stencil through his retinas right now.

"Not—to *me,*" Shane mumbles, turning his head to the side. Ilya takes the opportunity to press a kiss on the side of his neck. "But I liked that I… It reminded me of you. That I could have you like that. And I—" His breath goes uneven from where Ilya is mouthing at his throat. "Sometimes, I miss you." Then he corrects, "All the time I miss you."

Ilya's heart stops.

I will give it to you. You can have me. All the time, you can have me. You already have me. I am yours. Always, I will be yours. Already, I am yours, Ilya thinks and wants to say, but

cannot say. English leaves him. Even in Russian, he cannot find his words.

Overcome with emotion, Ilya decides to do what he can, tries to communicate the words that he can't say with his body instead.

Carefully, Ilya pulls his fingers out and brings that hand to the inside of Shane's thigh, pushing it to his chest. Shane responds by hooking both his ankles on his shoulders. He's so fucking flexible. He takes it with ease, folding himself in half.

Ilya's other hand comes lower, guiding his dick, blood-hard and pulsing in his palm, right to Shane's hole, feeling it spasm against his head, and starts to push inside.

Fighting through the thick cloud of want, Ilya manages to find the sense to lower his body until his nose meets Shane's, mouths hovering just a breath's distance from another. Again, Ilya breathes Shane in, each of his noises, each inhale and exhale, but this time he lets himself close his eyes. He wants to feel it, as much as he can. He wants to let this feeling fill his body.

And it feels—it feels different than before, than every time before. It feels—

"Ilya," Shane says, a hand coming from nowhere and grabbing Ilya's, lacing their fingers together and squeezing him as hard as he can.

"Shane," he moans, and it's only once he's fitting his cockhead inside Shane that he realizes what the feeling was, he doesn't have a condom on, and god, he should have asked about that first, and there's still time to ask about it, but then Shane's ankles lock around his waist, and he's pressing his heels at the small of Ilya's back, locking their bodies together, pulling him closer, taking him all the way to the base, and Ilya forgets everything he wanted to say.

Shane blushes like a tomato afterwards, mumbling about the mess, and Ilya laughs at licks at his lips, reminding Shane that *he* was the one who locked his ankles behind him *again*, just as Ilya was trying to pull out in time to spill outside.

Still on his back, Shane mutters a half-hearted apology, gasping when Ilya drags two fingers through the mess on his belly, bringing it up to his own mouth and sucking on the digits, just to watch Shane squirm and blush even redder.

"You don't like it?" Ilya asks. He brings those fingers, wet with his own spit, down lower, and presses them to Shane's fucked-open hole, where his release is already starting to leak out. He spreads the liquid around his puffy rim, marveling at the way Shane twitches and draws in a breath, but doesn't seem against the intrusion.

He almost seems… excited.

Ilya takes note of how Shane's dick twitches with interest.

Shyly, Shane shakes his head, but he arches his back, adorably nudging toward Ilya's hand. Ilya nearly laughs out loud.

Instead he flips Shane onto his stomach, ignoring how he moans about how sensitive he is, complaining about how he can't go again, groaning about how the mess on his stomach will dirty the sheets. When Ilya pulls his cheeks apart with his thumbs, circles his tongue around Shane's rim, and fucks his tongue inside, eating his own cum out of him, suddenly, Shane has no more complains. Ilya takes him apart a second time, not even needing to slip a hand under Shane and tug at his cock—Shane works himself up enough all on his own, humping the sheets and grinding back against Ilya's mouth and hands. The sight of him is so shockingly, mind-numbingly hot that Ilya frantically strips his own cock immediately after, shooting right along the beautiful line of Shane's back.

He takes a moment to indulge, revel in the sight: how Shane's wing muscles expand and extract with each ragged breath; the gorgeous curve of his spine; how the light pools right by Ilya's release; the way his mouth is half-parted, eyes closed, cheek pressed to the sheets as he heaves in breath after breath, looking bright as an angel against the dark sheets. Picture-perfect.

They laze around in bed for a while afterwards. Shane convinces Ilya into trudging over to the en suite to grab a damp towel, to at least clean *some* of the mess up. Ilya lovingly starts to clean Shane up, but Shane bats Ilya's hand away when he gets caught sensually dragging the warm towel over Shane's dick. He wanted to see if he could coax a third orgasm out of him. Shane glares and yanks the towel away.

Ilya decides to give it some time, and he lets Shane take over clean-up duty. He watches as Shane finishes wiping himself up, as well as scooping some of the liquids off the sheets and whatever had gotten on Ilya, but the mess had mostly been left either on or inside Shane.

Once Shane throws the towel off the side of the bed, he flops back down and rolls onto his side, looks at Ilya with sweet eyes, and Ilya's breath catches in his throat, his heart pressing up against his lungs, like it's about to leap into his mouth. As a stopgap, he presses his mouth to Shane's, tongue starting to push inside, and Shane is all too willing to acquiesce.

They trade languid kisses like that for what must be hours, tender and aimless. Ilya feels like he could do this forever, shuddering when he realizes that might not even be an impossibility anymore. The sky starts to dim through the window panes, but they keep kissing even as the room starts to go dark. Ilya only now realizes just how large these glass panels are, and wonders if Shane would want to be fucked against them one time. He wants to see just how fogged up the glass can get. Maybe Ilya can even get Shane to wear his glasses when they do it.

At some point, they both get too tired to keep kissing. Ilya still wants to crawl under Shane's skin, but he settles with rolling on top of Shane and pressing his face to Shane's collarbone.

Shane seems to like it, despite Ilya weighing substantially more than him. At least, he doesn't complain, quietly running his fingers through Ilya's curls. It feels nice. Vaguely, Ilya remembers that his mother used to do the same, when he had trouble falling asleep as a kid.

"What are people saying?" Shane asks all of a sudden, and Ilya feels tired and boneless enough that he doesn't think about his answer too hard.

"Fuck what people are saying." He nuzzles his cheek into Shane's shoulder.

Even though Ilya can't see him, he knows that Shane is melodramatically rolling his eyes right now. "Do they know it's you, I mean?" he prods.

"No," Ilya says, then he flops onto his back, realizing that their position was a bit impractical if they're trying to hold a conversation. "Well, Pike does now."

Shane squawks, jaw dropping, "What?"

"We carpooled from Montreal to your parents'," Ilya explains, shrugging. He peeks at Shane out of the corner of his eye. Shane looks like he's about to burst. "I told him it was me. Sorry."

Shane doesn't seem to care at all about the Hayden bit, instead shrieking, "You went to my *parents'*?"

"Yes. When I arrived, I thought you recognized the car?"

Shane's mouth opens like he's about to object, then closes with a pout, like he's putting it all together.

"It was a long morning," Ilya says.

"Did you fly?" Shane asks, propping his head up on his forearm, cradling his cheek in his palm.

Ilya is struck with the sudden realization of what they're doing: having *pillow talk.* They've only ever really done this one other time, after the All-Star Game, but back then, they hadn't been able to take their time. They were running on borrowed time, fraught with all the words they couldn't bear to say out loud. It is strange to think that they've been doing this for seven long years, but only a few hours at a time.

Ilya mirrors Shane's position so that they're face-to-face, then he slips a foot between Shane's ankles. Shane catches his shin with a fond expression.

"I drove to Montreal."

"From Boston?"

Ilya hums. He tries to play footsie with Shane, but Shane isn't having it, instead swallowing and looking at Ilya like he's about to cry again. Ilya dearly hopes he doesn't, because he feels

like he's navigating a minefield of his own emotions already, and Shane crying might just set him off again.

Shane swallows. "That's like a five hour drive."

Ilya tries to keep it light. He displays his best crooked grin, and says, "You underestimate me. I made it four-and-a-half."

Shane's eyes do something that makes Ilya's stomach flip. "And then two to Ottawa?"

More like three, Ilya doesn't say. "Pike drove—"

"And then another two to here—"

"Was mostly backroads—"

Suddenly, Ilya finds himself pushed onto his back. Shane's hands are on his sternum. He's looking down, looking absolutely manic. Ilya is in love.

"You're crazy," Shane says, shaking like he's on the verge of tears, like the words are wrenched out of him, like it's only now that he's realizing just how much he means to Ilya, just how far Ilya would go for him. I would go even farther, Ilya thinks. I would go to the ends of the fucking earth, he doesn't say. "All because I didn't respond?"

"I was worried," Ilya says, matter-of-factly. "You say you were waiting for me to find you. You did not make it easy."

Shane swallows. Ilya traces the moving line of his throat, adorned with a glisten of sweat, how he looks impossibly beautiful even in this lack of light.

"You must be exhausted."

"Is okay," Ilya says, even though he's actively fighting to stay awake at this point. It's a miracle he was able to get both him and Shane off—twice, no less. "You are worth it," he adds, when he really means to say, *You are a revelation.*

A million different expressions shimmer over Shane's pillow-creased face. Do you understand now? Ilya thinks. Do you understand?

Visibly overwhelmed, Shane presses a hand over his eyes. Behind his wrinkled knuckles and the whorls of his fingertips, his face is bright red, almost as red as he was earlier, when Ilya was fucking him into the headboard and he was whimpering like a wounded animal, coming untouched all over his own stomach and Ilya's.

"You said that you drove up with Hayden?" he asks, scrubbing a hand down his face. Immediately, Ilya softens, understanding that Shane isn't quite ready to talk about this, which is fine. Ilya will wait ages. He'll wait years. He'll wait forever, if this is what it takes. "How did that happen?"

Ilya explains the whole ordeal, how he drove up to Montreal and first visited the weird hideout building (Shane apologizes for the building, reveals he's planning to sell it, and explains that he was just being paranoid). Then, Ilya explains his subsequent thought process, how, having realized the apartment complex was a bust, Hayden would be his next best bet into finding Shane's whereabouts.

"How did you two not kill each other?"

Ilya shrugs. "I slept in the car. He is not so bad, I guess. He stayed at your parents' house. So I could see you alone." And he pauses to consider the implications of telling Shane's best friend about them without Shane's permission. "Are you mad? That I told Hayden it was me in the video?"

"Honestly? I'm a bit relieved that someone else knows. Him and Jackie are my best friends, so."

"I went to his house," Ilya mentions, excited to see how Shane reacts. "A teammate gave me address. His baby is very cute. Jackie let me hold her."

Predictably, Shane sputters, spurting upright and frowning at Ilya. Ilya laughs; he is so fond. How has this happened to him?

"You held *Amber?*" Shane shouts, indignant. "Before *me?*"

"I have had a very long morning."

One of the longest days of his life, Ilya thinks. He buried his father a few months ago. That had been nothing, compared to today, in terms of emotional involvement. He isn't sure how to feel about that. He supposes he doesn't have to unpack that today.

"Do my parents know that it was you in the video?"

Ilya shakes his head. His hands find Shane's, perched atop his thighs. He brushes his thumbs over the wrinkles of his knuckles.

"Well, I don't know," he clarifies, realizing that he never actually told anyone anything, today, about what he and Shane are—even now, he still doesn't really know. "But they know we are… something."

Shane's face is beatific. Ilya's heart soars with relief.

"What did you think of them? Did they chew you out?"

Ilya grins. "I won them over. Enough that I am here," he thinks. He isn't even sure how he did it, but he isn't going to question how. "Your dad is sweet. Your mother is scary. Maybe not scary. Intimidating? She was very strict with me at first."

Shane snorts. "That's just because you're Ilya Rozanov, and she thinks you're a dirty player."

Ilya laughs. He lets his eyes wander; Shane's room is pretty barren, just like the one from his Montreal apartment that Ilya has only ever seen on Skype. He has a small bookshelf that contains exactly three books, each of which appear to be about hockey, and about half a dozen framed photographs of his family.

"Oh, fuck," he says, remembering.

"What?" Shane says, his whole body stiffening above Ilya.

"Your mother gave me food to give you. I left it in the car."

It's been several hours.

Shane huffs out a breath and lightly slaps Ilya's arm. "Jeez, you had me worried it was actually serious. It's probably fine. It's probably like this Japanese cake thing she always makes me when I'm upset. It probably doesn't need to be refrigerated now." Ilya chooses not to comment on how many times Shane has said *probably*. "She made it for me after the draft, you know."

"Yeah?" Ilya lifts his hand and brings his fingers through Shane's hair and traces the shell of his ear with his thumb.

Shane tilts his head, nuzzling his cheek into Ilya's touch. He responds, brandishing a tender smile, "Worst day of my life," before swooping down in a gentle motion.

Ilya closes his eyes and is met with Shane's lips peppering his cheeks, his hand twirling Ilya's curls between his fingers. Shane settles on top of him like a weighted blanket, leaving soft kisses everywhere; it's so nice that Ilya starts to dip in that warm place between sleep and awake, those last few moments where you're not quite asleep but you're not quite embodied yet either, half in a dream, half in the world, a place where nothing hurts and everything is good.

But Ilya knows that at some point, they're going to have to talk about it, all of it, and if he lets Shane continue kissing his face, he might get pulled into sleep, wake up in his Boston penthouse, and discover that this 24 hour odyssey was nothing but a dream.

He needs something real. He needs something to ground him. He decides to start with the most pressing issue.

Sliding his arm around Shane's waist, then gently rolling them both so that they're on their sides again, Ilya presses his mouth to Shane's jaw and asks, "What happens now?"

Shane makes a sleepy noise. "With us? A bath maybe."

For the first time since that night they raced on the treadmills in the hotel gym, Ilya realizes that the he-and-Shane thing might be the simplest part of this whole dilemma.

"With hockey."

Ilya doesn't miss the way that Shane tenses in his arms. He smooths his hand down the line of Shane's back, ignoring the guilt that pleats his own chest into quarters.

"Didn't you see the email?"

Ilya frowns and remembers what Hayden said in the morning. "Why is everyone always checking their email?" he grumbles.

"The league at least isn't going to acknowledge it. I think they're hoping it gets swept up under the news cycle. I'm not sure how that'll work, but that's the plan."

Ilya privately hopes that the Admirals are using illegal sticks, or something.

In the end, no matter those distant, fantastical hopes, and no matter what new controversies may bury this one, Ilya knows that Shane will carry this throughout the rest of his career, that this video will underlie every milestone he makes and every record that he breaks. Fuck them, Ilya thinks. Fuck all of them. This does not define you. You'll make history; you'll go down in the books as one of the greatest ever. No one can take that away from you. I'll kill them if they try.

"Cromwell emailed me separately. He's pretty pissed," Shane finishes, bringing Ilya out of his thoughts.

Fuck him, Ilya thinks, but instead asks, "What did he say?"

"Just stuff about how I'm on thin ice. How it's a *kindness* that they're not booting me out of the league straight up." Shane twists his lips. "They had an emergency meeting about me this morning, apparently. They officially decided on no action. Think they're just afraid I'll sue. In any case, they're pretty much just leaving the rest in Montreal's hands."

It's complete bullshit, but Ilya recognizes that this is probably the best case scenario given the state of the NHL—they'd rather stand behind their Dallas Kents than their Shane Hollanders. It doesn't matter what you've given to the league; it only matters what you represent.

"What will Montreal do?" Ilya asked Hayden this earlier in the morning, but Hayden hadn't been sure.

The awkward and forced smile on Shane's face is all that Ilya needs to see.

"It helps that we're—*they're* out of the playoffs, and that I'm technically still recovering from the injury. They're… eager to have me off their hands as soon as possible."

Ilya finds his hand, limp between their bodies, and squeezes it.

"It might be okay," Shane says quietly.

Ilya perks up. He gives Shane's hand another squeeze. "Yeah?"

"Ottawa wants me," Shane reveals, "even though I'm…"

He trails off. Ilya can fill in the blank himself. Even so, he stays silent. He isn't sure what to say.

"Anyway, the new head coach—Wiebe? He emailed last night, because I wasn't picking up the phone, obviously, and let me know that the Cens management is planning to speak with Montreal and get ahead of the summer. It's my home team. Maybe this is for the better."

Ilya resists the urge to say something like, *But Ottawa is terrible and beneath you.* He knows that this is as good as it gets, that Shane is lucky that even the worst team in the league still wants him, after the video. He knows that Shane knows this too.

"And Scott Hunter, he— Hey, are you frowning at me?"

Ilya can't help it. Less than 48 hours ago, New York ruined Boston's shot at a cup this year. Ilya might as well just kill himself if New York makes it all the way.

"Stop it," Shane snorts, smacking Ilya's shoulder. Ilya does his best to smoothen his expression out. He sensually runs his toe along the inside of Shane's ankle, trying to distract him. Shane kicks his foot away and explains, "He reached out over email this morning. He told me that he'll support me. Maybe make some sort of statement? That was nice."

"I support you," Ilya says.

Shane's mouth quirks with a smile. "Do you?"

I would give it all up for you, Ilya doesn't say. *Hockey, my sports cars, the penthouse, all of it, everything I have. Everything pales in importance in comparison to you and who you are to me. I would destroy the whole world for you.* He doesn't know how or have the patience to put that into English, so instead, he says, "If you want, I can tell everyone it was me. In the video."

Shane smacks Ilya's side. "Don't be stupid."

Rationally, Ilya expected that—he thought he might as well ask.

"I am stupid about you."

Shane hums, sounding genuinely content.

Ilya brings his hand around the back of Shane's neck, pulling him close enough that he can leave a kiss to the center of his forehead, then he nudges Shane toward his collar, cradling him in the crook of his shoulder.

"Ilya," he starts, and Ilya swoons—he doesn't think he'll ever get used to that, the sound of his name in Shane's mouth.

"Yes?"

Shane snakes his arm over Ilya's side, under his bicep, fingers settling by the small of his back. They're probably as close as they've ever been. Impossibly, Ilya wishes they could be

even closer.

“Tell me a secret. Something that no one else knows about you.”

Ilya laughs. “I’ve been fucking Shane Hollander for seven years.”

“Be serious. Something I don’t know.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Shane mumbles. He sounds embarrassed. “I want to know more about you, I guess. You don’t have to if you don’t want to. I just thought…”

He pulls his head back so that he can see Ilya’s face, eyes tracing each of Ilya’s features with precision and care. It’s so strange to think about, how well they know each other and how little they know *about* each other.

Ilya considers the question. Something that no one knows. Something that Shane doesn’t know.

A million different thoughts swirl wildly in Ilya’s head, incomprehensible and split between languages, fragments of phrases, and somewhere deep in the bright forest surrounding the cottage, or down by the glittering waters of the lake, a bird is singing a love song. None of this is a secret, but Ilya thinks to himself: I want to be with you. I want this with you. I want to figure this out together with you. I want to make you happy, always. I want everything with you. You are the love of my life. I am certain about you and I am certain about this, even though I’m fucking terrified and even though it will probably be a mess—because it will be worth it, because the past seven years of agony have all been worth it. What more is a lifetime?

The words that fall out of Ilya’s mouth surprise even himself.

“I wish that my mother could have met you.”

Hot tears start to well at the back of Ilya’s eyes; a lump starts to form at the back of his throat. He doesn’t know why he said that. He doesn’t even know where it came from. He thinks of apologizing, but before he can even think to form the words on his tongue, suddenly, Shane comes crashing into him, grabbing his face and catching his bottom lip between his teeth. Ilya parts his lips in surprise, and Shane takes the opportunity to kiss him even deeper, until Ilya can barely breathe, shocked to life.

There’s no heat to the kiss; his mouth is more insistent than it is wanting. His hands find Ilya’s, bringing them up over his head and lacing their fingers together tight.

It’s only once Shane breathes out his name, rolls on top of him, and pins him to the mattress, that Ilya realizes what Shane is trying to say. It’s only once Ilya peeks an eye open and sees the determination furrowed in the skin between Shane’s brows, that he finally understands.

So he closes his eyes. He lets himself feel it. He lets it all slam into him: the weight of the man he loves and the lifetime between them, seven years of ancient history, the devastating

present, and their impossible future. Ilya resolves, in this moment, that whatever it takes, they're going to have it all.

EPILOGUE

September 2017—New York

Of course, the first game of the 2017–2018 pre-season is against New York, and of course, Boston gives them a thorough 7-2 spanking.

Fuck Scott Hunter, Ilya thinks, brandishing a sloppy smirk through the post-game, and fuck New York. He egged Scott into a penalty, which gave Boston the opportunity for a power play, yes, but it was mostly nice to see Scott's face go all red and furious through his helmet. Ilya played some excellent hockey too; there might be some moments for the highlight reels. He even got to fit in the Rozanov once. He's on fucking fire—he's excited to bring this energy into the regular season.

In the locker room post-game, the reporters don't seem very interested in the actual hockey played, which Ilya was honestly expecting. Instead, since Ilya hadn't done any interviews during the summer, a reporter quickly takes the opportunity to ask him about Scott Hunter, and how he kissed his boyfriend on the ice after winning the Stanley Cup back in June, and what Ilya's thoughts are on that.

Candidly, he was irritated that Scott got to do something so cool on camera—he tried to turn the TV off, but Shane wouldn't let him. In the end, his gratitude outshone any negative feelings he was harboring. Scott *had* told Shane that he was planning on making some sort of statement. It's nice to know that Scott Hunter is at least a man who keeps his promises.

Ilya, of course, cannot explain this, so instead, he leans forward and says into the microphone, "I am not too happy that he won the Cup." The room rumbles with easy laughter, and Ilya continues, "But I think it is a great step forward for the league. To have more players who are, what is the word, open? And this time by choice."

A few of his teammates turn to look at him. Ilya ignores their eyes and keeps his own forward. He has decided to start speaking his mind this season for real.

After some whispers from the crowd, the next reporter starts, “Your next game is with Montreal. How are you feeling going into that game, given that they’ve just… let go of their captain?”

Ilya presses his lips together, pulls on his towel, slung around his neck and draped around his bare shoulders—he hasn’t had time to put a shirt on yet. He isn’t surprised by the question; it’s hot news, after all. Montreal and Ottawa announced the trade only a few days ago, just before the start of the pre-season.

And he knows what they’re doing, what question they’re trying to lead up to, what question they’re trying to bait him into answering.

Good, Ilya thinks. He’ll take the bait. He’ll give them their quote. He was looking for an opening to do this, anyway. He was planning on doing it at his interview with *GQ* next week, but this is much better. Much simpler.

Cromwell will shout at him over the phone, but it’ll be all bark and no bite, especially since the Bears management already knows Ilya’s plans and promised not to take action. Given Ilya’s visa status, both Shane and his own team insisted that he play it safe and inform the Bears first, to make sure that he’d still have a job afterwards.

They weren’t exactly happy, and Ilya knows that his teammates won’t be happy, but Boston is shaping up to be especially strong this year, and everyone knows they can’t risk that synergy. Everyone is hungry for it.

With this, Ilya knows that he can never go back to Russia, but he’s settled all his affairs there anyway. There isn’t anything to return to in Russia. And besides, his home is somewhere else now.

“I feel confident. We will beat them,” Ilya declares, short and sweet. When all the reporters laugh, he decides to take the opportunity to add, hoping they find the opening he’s giving them, “Is not a joke. They will be much weaker team without Hollander. The Centaurs are lucky to have him.”

Ilya barely manages to suppress his smile when a new reporter takes *his* bait. “While we’re on the topic, obviously, the incident with Hollander earlier this year, I was wondering if we could get your thoughts, as one of the stars of the league, on how you feel that video has impacted the greater NHL community?”

Terribly phrased question, Ilya thinks. If he didn’t have any context, he would have no idea what the interviewer was actually asking.

He can figure out the gist, though. It’s what he was hoping for, anyway.

“You want to ask if I have problem with Hollander?”

The reporter blinks, looking both shocked at Ilya’s forthright question and mortified that a dozen or so heads are now turned toward him, and squeaks out, “Basically, yes.”

Ilya presses his lips together, maintaining a cool expression. “Why would I have problem? I have problem with who posted that video, but not Hollander. Is not his fault.”

He wonders if Shane is watching right now. He hopes Shane is watching right now. Shane is probably going to kill him because this wasn’t really the plan, but Ilya was going to do it anyway, so he might as well have some fun. Plus, Shane is very cute when he is very mad.

“Besides,” he continues, starting to feel that same excitement that he felt the first time, all those years ago, when Shane was Hollander and they were so young they didn’t have a clue what they were getting into. That danger, that thrill—it brought him to where he is today, and made him the person that he is now. He knows when to trust the feeling, when to follow that knife’s edge instinct. “Hollander and Hunter are not the only ones.”

Immediately, the dressing room erupts in whispers and camera flashes. Several of his teammates off to the sides drop their jaws, but Ilya’s eyes are focused ahead so he can’t see any of their faces, but he doesn’t have to. He already knows, and he also doesn’t really care.

Ilya shrugs. “Yes, I enjoy both.”

More reporters surge toward Ilya, shoving their mics in his face. Ilya tries not to bask too much in the chaos. Dreamily, he imagines the look on Shane’s face right now, probably watching on his phone on some hotel treadmill down in Tampa Bay. He has his own first game with Ottawa tomorrow night.

In the distance, Ilya can see both Bears security and MSG security starting to usher the reporters out of the dressing room, so he decides to get one more shot in.

He licks his mouth, makes sure that he’s looking directly into one of the cameras, and he says, “Hunter has a boyfriend, but Hollander, he is single, yes? If he wants to have some fun, he can give me a call.”

For good measure, as the locker room descends into disorder, he flashes the camera his best wink yet.

End Notes

all roads lead to the cottage

7 years and i finally understand by charli xcx are sooo hollanov btw...

thanks for reading!

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