

Time Well Spent

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Time Well Spent

by [mansikka](#)

Summary

As Shane and Ilya navigate their lives after being outed, Ilya and his therapist decide he needs a hobby.

Notes

Hello! Here is a soft something or other; it did start life as a kind of 'five things Ilya tries for a hobby and one thing he actually likes' but didn't work out like that. The story is set around April to August of the year that Shane and Ilya marry in *The Long Game*. Because this started as one thing and ended up another, I've messed up the timeline a bit. Shane has his engagement ring earlier than in the book, for one. Ilya starts his antidepressant medication earlier too, and I think there was a third thing but right now, as I start proofreading, I can't remember what it is.

Everything is written for this already, I'm posting it in chapters just to give me time to proofread everything. No real warnings I can think of right now, just our boys navigating their lives after being outed. Enjoy!

Chapter 1

It's been a roller coaster of a week, and Ilya still catches himself staring off into the distance trying to understand everything. It's hard to put how he's feeling about it all into words. They have been outed, benched, hauled into a meeting with Crowell, and walked hand in hand around Montreal after it, which is the thing that Ilya finds himself thinking most about. The important things. Him and Shane together, openly, and the whole world knowing about it.

The Centaurs welcomed him back with open arms and cheering, which is another great thing. Montreal couldn't have been shittier to Shane, and the thing is, Ilya really isn't that surprised. Seeing how hurt Shane is by that, how he keeps holding on to all he feels about it, is probably the thing that angers Ilya most about everything that's happened. Not Shane, obviously, but the Montreal team and everyone behind it? They can all go fuck themselves.

With so much upheaval Ilya decided to do the sensible thing, and instead of lashing out like he wants to, booked himself another session with Galina. He feels better for it, Ilya decides on the drive home from the appointment, and even has a rough plan for how to handle whatever comes their way. That he has to keep working on himself is the message he's taken away from the session, which is why he has a slight knot in his stomach when he checks how long he has before calling Shane.

By the time he is due to call, Ilya has rehearsed what he wants to say. Shane will support him, no matter what, Ilya knows he will. In fact, Shane's eyes will probably light up the moment Ilya mentions what he needs to, and he'll turn *that* smile on him, the affectionate one that forever puts flutters Ilya's heart. He'll even want to help, and though that idea is a nice one Ilya knows full well they'll turn it into a competition, one that won't fail to end with them in bed. So, that's why he's planning his words so carefully, to make sure Shane knows Ilya wants to do this, and he wants to do this by himself.

Needs to, really. He doesn't want Shane to feel excluded, or disappointed, by that.

Also, it's a little bit ridiculous, isn't it? All his wealth, all he's done, all that's available to him, and he still hasn't a clue how to spend his time when he's alone. What he's interested in when he's being himself, which is the only person he truly wants to be these days, is a mystery to Ilya sometimes. What will be good for him, rewarding, what can keep him distracted from the sometimes-horrible words racing around in his head? Ilya has no idea.

Ilya's well-rehearsed words and self-criticism get stuck on his tongue when Shane answers his FaceTime sweaty-faced and panting, and only greeting him with a little out-of-breath wave. He's in the little shorts that Ilya loves seeing him wear so much, and nothing else, aside from the chain around his neck with his ring on it.

"Just gonna keep staring at me?" Shane says, turning the corners of Ilya's mouth up for how big his smile is.

"You dressed up for me. Of course I will stare."

Pink cheeked, Shane ducks his head, though soon lifts it again with a defiant-little puffing out of his chest.

“I thought you’d approve.”

“I only don’t approve that you look like that when you are there, and I am here.”

Shane bites his lip. “I’m sure I’d look like this for very different reasons than hot yoga if you were here.”

Ilya gestures at the screen. “*This* is hot yoga. *You* are. You could do some for me now.”

“I could.”

“Wait. Where are you?”

Blowing his hair out of his face, Shane reaches out of Ilya’s sight, and the soft beep that follows makes Ilya think of air conditioning.

“My hotel room?” Shane says, confirming that yes, that was the air conditioning Ilya heard because he closes his eyes then, slumping in relief as the cooler air hits him.

Admittedly, Ilya still doesn’t know a ton about yoga even after all this time, but he does think hot yoga is usually done somewhere more specific than a hotel room.

“There are no facilities at the hotel for hot yoga?”

Shane’s smile flickers, and his shrug is small, but his eyes say far more than those gestures. Ilya doesn’t need an explanation.

“You put on the heating in your hotel room to do hot yoga alone? Away from the team?”

Not that Montreal has proven itself to be much of a team to Shane recently. After everything he’s done for them, all the things he’s helped them achieve, they are treating Shane like he is nothing. No, it’s worse than that, not like nothing at all, like he has failed them each personally, as well as the team, by doing something as unforgivable as loving somebody.

Loving him.

“Honestly, I prefer to do yoga in private, anyway,” Shane says.

“You have done yoga with me before. *For* me,” Ilya points out, knowing renewed fury at Shane’s team and fighting the instinct to blame himself somehow.

Is he wrong to call now, to talk about something he needs for himself, when Shane is having to hide himself away in his room because his teammates are all assholes?

“I don’t remember getting much yoga done...” Shane says, the heat in his eyes drowning out the doubt threatening to stop Ilya from talking.

He will keep talking. In a minute, anyway.

“Not when you were wearing those shorts.”

Smiling, Shane tucks his thumb into the waistband of those very nice little shorts, hitching it down to reveal more skin. Ilya is riveted, about to nod to urge him on, and only stopped from doing so because he’s rehearsed these words, dammit, he has to get them out.

“No,” he says, slapping a hand across his eyes.

“What?”

Of course Shane sounds confused.

“No. You are very distracting.”

“You don’t... normally complain.”

“I’m not complaining,” Ilya says, peeking through his fingers and shaking his head. “Put on a shirt.”

“Since when do you ever turn down—“

“I wanted to talk to you, Properly,” Ilya says, and is immediately cursing himself for the way Shane is now on alert.

“What happened?” Shane said, already pulling on a hoodie out of nowhere, and making Ilya’s eyes dance in no good ways when he drops suddenly on to the end of the bed while holding his phone up.

“Nothing happened.”

“Is your medication not—“

“It’s good. Really. I think it is the right one.”

“Are you sure?” Shane asks, his eyes full of worry.

“Yes. Sorry. I’m not—everything is okay. I’m doing this wrong,” Ilya says, groaning and throwing himself backwards.

Anya sighs at him for disturbing her sleep, jumping down from the bed and disappearing in search of better things.

“Ilya—“

“I only wanted to tell you a thing. An idea. A therapy thing,” Ilya says, propping himself up on his elbow and wedging his phone against Shane’s pillow, so he can at least pretend Shane is in bed with him here.

“Bad, or good? Either,” Shane says, before Ilya can answer him, “I’m here for it. Here for whatever you need.”

“You. Always you,” Ilya says, quietly, soothed for how obvious it is Shane would do absolutely anything for him to help. “Is nothing bad. Promise.”

Looking both less and more worried, Shane nods, moving to mirror Ilya. “Tell me.”

“Okay. We talked. About therapy helping. And medication helping. It is, I think,” Ilya adds, “I think I am adjusting okay. No sick feeling, or anything, now.”

The first two weeks after he started taking his pill, Ilya couldn’t even face McDonalds for breakfast. The couple of days they got to spend together during those two weeks, Shane spent so much time cooking him alternative breakfast ideas that they’d lived on leftover breakfast food the entire time.

Shane looks relieved, and seeing that settles Ilya too. “Good. I’m glad.”

“I feel... okay,” Ilya says, which is true, and is a feeling he has been chasing for a while.

Not euphoric. Not convinced a bad mood won’t sneak up on him. Content. Peaceful, even. For now, anyway.

“The therapist. We talked about how therapy, and medication is good, but maybe I need more. Or, maybe not need... maybe would be good for me.”

“Okay. Like what?”

“She said, it is probably a good idea for me to find some... hobbies.”

“Hobbies?”

“Things I like to do, for me. Just for me, when we are apart. By myself. For me,” Ilya says with a helpless wave of his hand, sure all of this came out so much better when he’d rehearsed it earlier.

Nodding slowly, Shane doesn’t say anything at first, as though he is waiting for Ilya to say something else. When he doesn’t, he licks his lips, and says, “Okay. That sounds like a good thing, right? I mean... having something you like to do just for yourself, something new, that can’t be bad.”

“...no. I don’t think so.”

“In fact, that’s an amazing idea,” Shane says, fidgeting to get more comfortable, and smiling at Ilya eagerly, just how he imagined he might when he was planning this conversation.

“So... why do you look so worried to tell me?”

So stupid. He’s being so stupid about all this. Maybe he’s failed before he even got started.

“I don’t know...”

“Ilya,” Shane says, softly. “What is it?”

“Nothing. I don’t know. I don’t know what I want,” Ilya says, furious with himself and unable to look Shane in the eye.

“For a hobby? I get that. I don’t know if I could think of anything I’d want to try out of nowhere, off the top of my head. I mean... you could do anything.”

“I know.”

“Like... literally *anything*,” Shane says, clearly now really thinking about this.

“I *know*,” Ilya says, hoping he’s keeping the frustration from his voice.

“Is that what you’re worrying about? That you don’t know what you’d like to do for yourself, and there are too many things to choose from?”

“Is for myself,” Ilya says, wishing sometimes he could pick Shane up, put him in his brain, and let him figure out what he was trying to say for himself.

Only sometimes, though.

“That’s the point of this, though, right? It’s for you. To help you feel, you know. Better? More... you?”

“Yes.”

Shane is watching him, Ilya can feel it through his phone screen without looking up.

Then—

“You want to do something for yourself, that doesn’t include me.”

Ilya’s heart thuds. What a stupid reaction. The two of them are separate people, they have spent years, literally, doing their own thing when they are apart. It’s just that his own thing up until him and Shane admitting their feelings to one another involved sex. Pretty much only sex. Sex was his hobby, his pastime, his... only real occupation away from the ice, which says so much about him, possibly. Especially as he hasn’t been like that, for years, now.

“...yes,” Ilya says, looking up when Shane laughs.

“So? Why would you feel bad about that? *Do* you feel bad about that?”

“No. I just—I don’t know.”

“You need to do this, for yourself, by yourself. And,” Shane says, when Ilya nods, “you’re worried I’m gonna be upset about that?”

“Maybe?”

“And?” Shane says, clearly knowing there are more words in his head.

“Everything is a competition,” Ilya blurts out, avoiding Shane’s gaze again.

“Between us?”

“Yes. Most things, anyway.”

“And if I get involved in whatever it is you decide to do, we’ll turn it into a competition?”

“...maybe?”

“Oh, there is no maybe. We would. You know we would.”

“Exactly,” Ilya says.

He neither misses nor objects to the look of intent in Shane’s eyes right now, even for the mere mention of competition. It’s not the competition of it all he needs to avoid, or at least, it’s not only that. It’s just how fucking horny Shane gets about competing. How is Ilya supposed to focus on something new, around something as beautifully distracting as a horny Shane?

“Can people even get competitive about, I don’t know. Water colours, or something?” Shane asks, absently, like he might asking himself the question, instead of Ilya.

“We would.”

“Yeah. We would,” Shane agrees, grinning when Ilya looks. “Which is why it makes total sense for you to figure out some hobbies, just for you. Hey; maybe I should too. Separate from your thing, obviously.”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe we should, as well. Together.”

“Yes.

“We should. We *should* have a hobby just for us,” Shane says, beaming at Ilya, and then pointing at him sternly. “After you’ve figured out some just for you. We’ll figure out something for us later. This—you—are more important right now. Okay?”

Some of the tension drops in Ilya’s chest; in part because Shane’s attempts at being stern still remind him of an angry kitten, even after all this time. “Okay.”

“Besides. We do some things together now, aside from, you know. Sex.”

Sex with Shane isn’t a hobby, it’s his passion, his life’s work, his... Ilya tells himself *no*, firmly, and to concentrate on why he called in the first place.

“Like cooking.”

“See? Like that. That’s an us thing, and we can have so many *us* things any time we want.”

Their future unfolds in Ilya's mind, all the little things they will do together that feel so huge, because of how much they've had to hide for so long. Yes, he wants all of that, and more. This first, though. He needs this for himself, before that.

"Yes. We can," he says, watching Shane's eyes crinkle.

"But, we need some *you* things first. You need some you things."

"Yes."

"Can I help you think about what you might like to do? Or just, I don't know, listen, while you figure out something you want to try?"

It's that easy? Oh, sometimes Ilya really could curse his brain.

"Yes. That would be nice."

"If it's something artistic, you think you'd want to share it with me? You don't have to, obviously."

"...we will see?"

Flopping on to his front, Shane props his phone up higher on his pillow, reaching out of Ilya's view.

"Okay, Shane says after a short pause, waving his tablet, "I have a list of... give me a number between one and, uh... 70."

"Why?"

"C'mon."

"...Sixty-nine," Ilya says, earning himself a mildly exasperated glare.

"Let's see. How would you feel about... candle making?"

"No."

"Another number, then."

"Eight."

"Ballet?"

"No."

"Hey, maybe this is more you," Shane says, tapping his tablet. "How about dog walking?"

"I walk Anya—"

"No, but like a voluntary thing. Volunteering. Maybe at a dog shelter, or something."

Oh, Ilya thinks, a warm feeling starting to bloom in his chest. That might not be the worst idea.

“Maybe I could talk to Harris. There are always so many stray dogs left at the farm; I think he must have some contacts at some shelters.”

“What, for when there isn’t some sappy guy there to rehome them the second they lay eyes on one?” Shane teases.

He teases, but Ilya knows Shane loves Anya now almost as much as he does. So much so, in fact, that he buys more toys and treats for her than even Ilya. Not even in a competitive way, either. That’s how much Shane loves Anya, and that makes Ilya love Shane impossibly more.

“I might adopt all of them,” he says, earning himself an affectionate eye roll.

“We’d need a bigger house.”

“Maybe a farm…”

“Maybe, when play-offs are over, you should try to look into this first,” Shane says, with an easy laugh. “Dog walking, or helping at a shelter, or something like that. It might be nice?”

That warmth in Ilya’s chest flares to excitement. “Yes,” he says, and smiles as he imagines it.

Ilya’s first attempt at dog walking for a local shelter is an absolute disaster. Well, maybe not a disaster, as such; he did get to pet many dogs. But his heart was pulled in so many directions for there being just so many dogs to pet, that by the end of the day, Ilya was sure he had been more of a hindrance than a help. He’d left the shelter after giving a generous donation before he could adopt all of the dogs there, then went to Pet Circus and bought an obscene number of toys for Anya. He signed a few autographs too, and posed for several selfies, happy to do all of it, and even happier to be home.

“Do you think you want to try going back there?” Shane asks, when he calls him later.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“Or, another shelter?”

No. As much as Ilya thinks it is important he finds some hobbies, he also knows volunteering at a shelter is not going to be for him. He loves animals, he really does, but the thought of seeing so many dogs in need of homes, or coming to the shelter because they have no one, or because they are injured, or because there is no hope to save them—

No. That would not be good for him, Ilya is sure.

“I think maybe I could help Harris’ family sometimes. On the farm. When they have strays.”

“Do they get that many strays?” Shane asks, sounding doubtful.

He is right to. The farm does get far more stray dogs left there than Ilya approves of, but, thankfully not so many that would mean he could help very much.

“Not really. I could maybe help sometimes. Walking, feeding, company.”

Shane nods at this encouragingly. “That could be good?”

“Maybe. How is it there?” Ilya asks then, hating that he has to watch Shane’s smile drop before he puts on a brave face.

“It’s fine,” Shane says, with a shrug that says he doesn’t want to talk about. “So... do you have any ideas for another thing for you to try?”

Actually, Ilya does, even if he wishes Shane would let out all his angry words about his team, but he won’t push. He spent over an hour in Pet Circus browsing aisles for animals he has never even considered as pets, and while he doesn’t want another pet until after he and Shane marry, that browsing did lead to another potential hobby. One he’s already spoken to Harris about, and is hoping to try tomorrow.

He’s not telling Shane about it, though. Ilya has a very specific idea about how he will share it with him, so he only winks, which has Shane smirking immediately.

“Not gonna share?” he asks.

“Not yet.”

“I can’t wait. It’s gonna be good, just judging by that look on your face.”

“I think so. How long until you leave for the game?” Ilya asks then, sure they must be running short on time.

Not as short as before, though. Since their outing in that FanMail video, Shane has made sure to attend every practice and game for as little time as possible. Montreal won’t even let him do their interviews anymore. Shane’s contribution to the team he’s been so devoted to begins the moment he steps on the ice, and stops the second he is off of it. It’s awful to see him so upset by how his team have treated him, even if Ilya is generally grateful for the few extra minutes it’s meant they get to share on their calls.

Shane’s slumped shoulders tell Ilya everything he feels about the impending game.

“Maybe an hour?”

“There are plenty of things we can do in an hour.”

“I’m all yours,” Shane says, looking at Ilya expectantly.

All his. Yes. For now, and for always.

“Where do I start with you?” he says, watching Shane pull his engagement ring on its chain from beneath his hoodie, rolling it between his thumb and finger.

Shane grins at him. "Anything you want."

Oh, yes, this is... perfect. As close to perfect as anything can be. He has nothing but green all around him, trees in the distance, and a beautiful, tall, chestnut coloured horse beneath him. This is his second horse riding lesson, and already Ilya feels confident, sure of himself; almost like his first time out on the ice as a child. He won't be too cocky, though, because he wouldn't want to cause any harm or hurt to the wonderful animal that is helping to clear his mind, and also because he likes Greg, his instructor.

Greg has a weathered look about him, with dark grey hair that he keeps tied back in a pony tail, and a mischievous, wide smile. When he laughs, it's like a gun going off, loud and carefree, and happy. It's the kind of laughter Ilya hopes spills from his own lips when he is as old.

"Jasper's taken a shine to you," Greg calls out from his own horse, River, another beautiful horse with the glossiest black hair Ilya has ever seen.

"He is wonderful," Ilya says, patting Jasper's mane, sure the horse pushes his head into his hand for more attention.

"You're looking quite at home."

"It feels good. Easy. No, not easy; comfortable," Ilya says, then shrugs, sure he couldn't put how he's feeling into words.

"Few more visits, and you'll be off on your own," Greg says, and as though he wants to prove the confidence he has in Ilya, flicks River's rein so the horse both turns away from Ilya a little, and speeds up.

Ilya wouldn't mind. He didn't plan on trying horse riding to be a sociable activity, he only thought it might be good. It is, it's incredible, actually. This private ranch only 30 minutes from Ottawa might just be his new favourite place in the world.

It was Harris who suggested this place to him when Ilya mentioned he was thinking of giving horse riding a try. Maybe Harris is his go-to guy for all things animals now? Maybe. When he and Shane are ready for more pets, Ilya gets the feeling Harris will have, or know where to get, exactly what they want.

Maybe in a few months from now. Once they are married. He doesn't ever forget the fact that he and Shane are getting married, but he does remember the fact at least ten times per day. At least. Many more, especially on the days when he's missing Shane the most, which honestly, is most of them. It's so much easier now than it was, of course, but it's still hell being without him.

Maybe now is a good time to reveal his new hobby to Shane?

He's planned this, sort of, ever since he first considered horse riding, imagining Shane's reaction to seeing him in a cowboy hat. He could wait until he is even more sure of himself,

maybe to the point where he can ask someone, perhaps Greg, to make a video of him on horseback. Which would be weird, wouldn't it? Maybe he's too new at this to know for sure, so Ilya settles for sticking to his original plan, extracting his phone from his pocket as he checks Greg is unlikely to be turning around any time soon.

With a firmer grip on his reins, Ilya takes several selfies, and then makes a short video of his surroundings, getting in a shot of Jasper as well.

"This is Jasper," Ilya says in a loud whisper, hoping it's loud enough for Shane to hear but Greg not. "He is my new friend. He is very beautiful. His hair is almost as beautiful as yours. He is helping me, with my new hobby."

There is no cell service here, Ilya doesn't think, but he hits send on his messages anyway, knowing they will deliver later. Then, he slips his phone back into his pocket and returns his focus to his surroundings. Lush grass stretching out indefinitely. Birds flying overhead. And this beautiful horse trusting Ilya on his back, helping him to explore.

Shane's reaction, when Ilya's messages reach him much later, is suitably deranged. Ilya accepts his FaceTime invitation already smiling, and smiling harder still when the phone screen fills with Shane's face, eyes dark with want, and his breathing, heavy.

"Are you on a horse?" Shane asks, his voice hitched.

Oh, this reaction is even better than Ilya had hoped it would be.

"Not this moment, no. But yes. Earlier."

"You're fucking horse riding?"

"...yes."

"In that *hat*?" Shane hisses, showing Ilya he is palming himself through his sweatpants, already hard from the looks of things.

Of course he is. Ilya might be a little smug about that. He'll never get over how Shane reacts to him.

"It is... what is the word? Like necessary."

"Mandatory? Compulsory? I don't fucking care; it is *compulsory* that you're wearing that when I come home."

Mission accomplished. Ilya does enjoy riling Shane up so, so much. Though his jeans are now getting uncomfortably tight, and he knows he only has Shane for so long.

"If you ask me nicely, I will wear only this hat," he says, making a show of flicking open the button on his jeans.

Shane's breathing gets even shallower. "You will," he says through gritted teeth.

He could tease him. He could pretend he won't give Shane exactly what he's asking for. But seeing Shane's reaction to just a couple of selfies and a video promises Ilya all kinds of good things. So he only winks, then makes a show of shoving his jeans down his thighs.

There is something very wrong with him. There must be, right? Here he is, immediately stripping his bed after taking one look at the mess he just made of himself after FaceTime and thinking it was grim-looking. Who is he, sometimes-clean freak Shane Hollander?

Mr Shane Hollander? He could be that after they get married, couldn't he? Mr Hollander-Rozanov? Rozanov-Hollander? The possibilities are still endless and fascinating to Ilya, as he remakes his bed after a good, long shower, folding away his tripod and humming to himself with the most ridiculous smile on his face.

Humming. Happily so. Yes, something very wrong with him indeed, but it feels like the good kind of wrong, and today, Ilya's heart feels light.

His entire body, too. Phew. Ilya is not complaining at all that Shane went absolutely feral when he answered his FaceTime wearing his hat.

Maybe, Ilya thinks, as he picks the cowboy hat up from the floor, he should put this thing on a little stand in their bedroom for when Shane is home. Shane might actually lose his mind.

He is just contemplating all the beautiful expressions on Shane's face were he to do that, when his phone rings. He scoops it up, smiling when he sees Harris' name.

"Good afternoon," Ilya says in a sing-song voice.

He can hear Harris pausing, thinking, doing something on the other end of the call. "Uh. Good afternoon, Ilya. You sound happy?"

Snorting, Ilya shrugs into his empty bedroom and drops on to the side of his bed. "Is a beautiful afternoon."

Is it? Ilya looks over to the window and—oh. No, it's not so nice, in fact it's raining pretty hard.

"...is Shane there?" Harris asks.

Ilya's smile dips, but only slightly. He clutches his ring to his chest, and shakes his head. Not that Harris can see him do it.

"No."

"Okay. So, I uh. Remember when you said how you'd be happy to help out at the farm, if we had a stray dog show up?"

Ilya's heart thuds, immediately on alert. "Yes. What do you need?"

“We have a bit of a situation. Think you can come down here to give me a hand? We have a dog kind of stuck, in one of our old storage containers.”

He’s already moving. “Tell me what happened,” Ilya says, grabbing his wallet and keys.

“Wear something you don’t mind getting dirty.”

Ilya doesn’t even make a joke, listening as Harris tells him more about the dog. He gives Anya an extra fuss on the way out.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Hello! A little heads up for this chapter:

► **Warning**

“How did the dog even get in here?” Ilya asks, shrinking into the collar of the rain jacket Shane insisted he needed for their hikes.

He’s glad of it. The rain is far worse than it looked out of the window, and he’s glad of his boots too, though even they aren’t stopping him from sliding in the mud.

“They’ll get in anywhere for shelter if they’re desperate,” Harris says, also hunched down against the rain and grunting with the effort. “I’m mad at myself.”

“Why?”

Tapping the edge of the rusting storage container, Harris looks around, as though trying to plan their route in. “I meant to get rid of this ages ago. I kept putting it off. Now, I feel bad.”

“No. I don’t think you should feel bad. At least it is almost-dry here, yes? A little warmer?”

Harris still doesn’t look happy. “Maybe.”

They get to work, propping each other up as they slip and slide around the edge of the container, working the door open. The container has slipped at some point, so is at an angle, and of course the poor dog has taken shelter at the furthest end.

The dog, a Labrador Retriever according to Harris, shrinks away from them, whimpering softly. Ilya’s heart breaks to hear it.

“She doesn’t look... thin?” Ilya says, imagining someone dumping this beautiful dog, how they could even do it, and despairing at the world.

He doesn’t know for sure if she is a girl, but all Ilya can really picture is his Anya, his heart aching for something like this happening to her.

“We can hope she maybe just got out and someone’s looking for her. You’re right, she’s not thin, her fur looks glossy, and... oh.”

For the tone in Harris’ voice, Ilya braces to hear horrible things. He already warned him it looked like the dog had broken her leg, so he’s expecting bones and blood and other things he

doesn't really want to see. But then he follows the point of Harris' finger, and his heart just about stops.

"She has babies!" Ilya gasps, counting, two, three, no, four tiny squirming masses at her belly.

"Oh, wow, no wonder she came in here. She wanted somewhere to give birth," Harris says softly.

"Do you think she broke her leg getting in here?"

"No idea. Let's see if we can earn her trust a little, eh?"

Following Harris' lead Ilya crouches down, blanket at the ready and one hand on the cage that he does his best to keep out of the dog's sight. He holds his breath, watching Harris whisper softly to the dog, whose tail thumps out a nervous rhythm on the dry ground beneath her. Dry for how much longer, Ilya isn't sure, because while this container is providing some shelter from the rain he can see the way it is seeping across the soil, for all the rusted cracks letting the pouring rain in.

Harris moves closer, and closer, until the dog yaps, at which point he freezes on the spot and mumbles something like, *it's okay*. Then, he takes some food out of the bag by his side, slow in his movements as he reaches out to her. She's terrified, but also starving, and Ilya's heart breaks again watching the dog debating what to do for the best.

Hunger wins out. She stretches, only a little, gobbling down the food while her tail wags and her poor leg looks so sore.

He's not sure why he does it. One minute, Ilya is looking around the container for something to make a splint with, and then he is gently dropping to his knees, whispering soothing words as he pats the dog's flank.

"Careful," Harris warns, "with the pups, she might—"

"It's okay," Ilya whispers, pleading with the dog to trust him.

By some miracle she does, shaking but still holding still enough to let Ilya do his best to splint her leg. Then, wanting to get the dog and her pups out as quickly and safely as possible, Ilya gets the cage open, carefully lifting the dog at the same time as Harris scoops up the puppies, snapping the door shut the moment all are safe inside.

"Where'd you learn to do that?" Harris asks with a burst of laughter as they pick the cage up between them, carefully making their way outside.

"What?"

"With the splint?"

"I don't know?"

Harris snorts. “Looked like you know what you were doing.”

“It’s just bones.”

“Okay...”

“Not so different from human bones, no?” Ilya says, gritting his teeth when his boot slips and he almost loses his footing altogether.

“I mean, I guess. In some respects, anyway,” Harris says, his words strained as well because the ground seems a thousand times worse now.

“When I was very young. We were skating on a lake, on the ice. My friend’s little brother, he slipped, he fell, he... fell. Forward,” Ilya says while trying to demonstrate, and of course loses his balance, keeping the cage held up even if he is now convinced the ground is quicksand, because he can’t get back up.

“Damn,” Harris mutters under his breath, slowly lowering his end of the cage and then pulling on Ilya’s hand.

They both laugh when there is a disgusting sucking sound, but then Ilya is upright and his boot free from the mud. He grimaces at the cold, wet feeling seeping into his right side and plans a nice, warm bath when he is home.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. I’ll get this girl to the vet, and you can—“

“I will come with you. The vet would see worse messes than this, yes?” Ilya says, gesturing at his side.

Harris glances over him. “Sure. Yeah. Probably.”

“Then, let’s go,” Ilya says, gesturing for Harris to take his end of the cage again.

“...and the dog, Marmalade, she is very healthy, and happy, and I think she will go home tomorrow,” Ilya is telling Shane later that evening, tired after a long day but so excited by how the day went that he could probably stay awake for hours.

Shane’s smile is a small one, like he’s trying to hold it back, but his eyes, they are saying everything. Ilya can hear his *you are adorable* even if he isn’t saying it out loud.

“So, the dog belongs to one of Harris’ neighbours?” Shane asks.

“They are the neighbours of his parents, yes. They had a hole in their fence. She was scared by some big noise. I’m not sure how she hurt her leg, but, I think it is good she found somewhere on Harris’ farm.”

“The puppies are really cute,” Shane says, because of course Ilya sent a million photos.

“So cute.”

“So... how many are we keeping?”

Ilya blinks. “What do you mean?”

Stretching on his hotel bed, Shane laughs. “I mean, they’re really cute, and I know how you fell in love with Anya, like, immediately.”

No, that was with you, Ilya almost says, but Shane already knows that, so he only winks.

“Anya isn’t speaking to me,” Ilya whispers instead, loudly, sure he hears Anya grumble from her bed.

“No?”

“No. She tells me I am a traitor.”

"Aww."

"I came home, she smelled my hand, she went to bed, she put her back to me. I tried everything. Ham. Treats. Sausage."

Now, Shane’s eyes look even more adoring. “She’ll come around.”

“I hope so.”

“So?”

“So... what?” Ilya says, shaking his head.

“How many puppies do we now have?”

Ilya gets stuck on that happy word, *we*, before he catches up to what Shane is saying.

“We... have Anya.”

“I know we have Anya. We’re gonna have more dogs at some point, right?”

Ilya’s heart might beat out of his chest. “Yes. Of course.”

“Then...”

“Do you want a puppy, Shane?”

Shane shrugs. “I mean, I’m not against a puppy. And I know how much you love dogs. And I can’t believe how much I love Anya,” he adds, almost to himself.

Ilya is hit with the urge to climb through his phone screen and kiss Shane’s face off. Not that he doesn’t feel that way all of the time.

“...I thought, maybe, the next time we choose a pet, we should... choose them together. When we live together,” Ilya says, watching the soft look Shane is giving him transform into excitement, and love, and... so many things.

They’re going to be married soon. Really. They know, because of course they know, but in moments like this when they are reminded, it’s overwhelming. In the best of ways.

“I like how you said, *pet*,” Shane says, all those soft looks transforming to a little teasing.

“...yes?”

“So, you wouldn’t be against us maybe getting another dog sometime, or... you know. Maybe a cat?”

He loves dogs the most, but Ilya is not immune to a cute kitten or a grumpy old cat who secretly just needs a cuddle. He could draw this out, feign disinterest, tease Shane in all the ways he usually does, but instead he just smiles.

“Dogs. Cats. I don’t mind.”

“No?”

“No. No snakes, though.”

Shane scrunches up his nose. Now who’s being adorable?

“No. No snakes. Or spiders.”

Ilya shudders. “No. Not them. No loons, either,” he says, which has Shane laughing softly.

“No loons. Hey.”

“Yes?”

“You look really happy,” Shane says, his eyes now filled with nothing but love.

“I am really happy,” Ilya says, and means it.

Of course he’d be happier still if he was sitting on this couch with Shane beside him, but it’s been a pretty good day, even without that.

“I miss you,” Shane says softly then, his mouth turning down in a wistful smile.

“I miss you, too. Just a couple more days?”

“Yes,” Shane says, sighing it out.

Montreal won their game tonight. Ilya watched with David and Yuna in a mixture of pride for Shane, who scored almost all of the goals, and fury at the team. Even on the ice the way the team is still angry at Shane resonates; surely the fans must see it too? As far as Ilya is

concerned, free agent season can't come quick enough. Shane needs to be away from that team.

Hopefully somewhere far closer to home. The more they talk about him joining Ottawa, the less like a dream it all seems. Ilya can't let himself get carried away, though.

"You deserve better," Ilya says, which has Shane pinching his lips, and sighing.

"Tell me more about these puppies..."

Ilya is happy to distract him, in whatever ways he can.

"Hey. I almost forgot. I have a present for you," Shane says, untangling himself from Ilya's grip and sliding off the couch.

Ilya mumbles a response, grumbling for the cold air replacing the heat of Shane's body against his.

He arrived at the cottage barely two hours ago, so riled up by the conversation they'd been having by text over the last 24 hours that they barely got the front door closed behind them before he was in Shane, cursing up a storm.

In, because the fucker had been driving him wild all day, and was smug about it, and had the decency to have himself ready for him when he got here because of that. How lucky is he that his husband-to-be is a horny little shit, and Shane is as needy for Ilya as Ilya always is for him?

A little sleepy, and a little cool without Shane's body heat, Ilya pulls down the very-Canadian throw from the back of the couch, covering himself over. Secretly, he loves this thing, and on the days he gets to the cottage before Shane does he likes to curl up in it, comforted by its softness and how it's so very Shane.

"Tired?"

Ilya cracks his eyes open giving Shane a once-over now he's rejoined him, and shakes his head.

How lucky is he that his fiancé has zero inhibitions about walking around the house naked anymore?

"Only a little sleepy," Ilya says, holding his hand out that Shane instantly reaches for and squeezes. "You have a present for me?"

"Yes."

With a longer, more deliberate glance over Shane, Ilya winks. "Another one?"

Less inhibitions, but still blushes as much as he ever did. Ilya is so glad. He takes in the rosininess of Shane's cheeks and how that always makes his freckles stand out, and tells

himself for the millionth time just how lucky he is.

“An edible one. A different kind of edible,” Shane says before Ilya can say a word or let his eyes drift again.

He’s so comfy here, though. Ilya stretches, and taps the back of Shane’s hand. “I need to come to the kitchen?”

“Not right now, if you’re sleepy, I just wanted to show you. There is bread, though.”

Immediately, Ilya is more awake.

“*You*, bought bread?” he says, smirking.

Yes, Shane has gotten far less uptight about his special boring diet ever since they were outed, but willingly buying bread? This is almost more entertaining than the Snickers he knows Shane has stashed away in his bag for emergencies. More important, anyway. He’ll never say it out loud, or at least he hopes he never has to, but sometimes he does worry about Shane’s attitude towards food. Sometimes he worries about it a lot.

“I did,” Shane says, not even bothered by his teasing, proudly brandishing a jar. “And, something to go with it.”

Just from the colour of the jar alone, before even getting to read the label, Ilya is grinning. “You bought me jam?”

“Raspberry jam. I went to the farmer’s market with Dad this morning. Picked the bread up there, too.”

“My favourite,” Ilya says, taking the jar and balancing it on his chest.

“What, my dad, or—”

“Get here,” Ilya says, and in seconds is on his knees with a laughing Shane on his back on the couch, legs either side of his.

Ilya pops the lid of the jar and breathes deeply, making a show of it, loving that even this, even him just being silly, makes Shane’s eyes light up so brightly.

“There are two jars,” Shane says, puffing his chest out and looking oh, so proud of himself.

“We have enough to make cookies later?”

Of course Shane hesitates, but then of course he surprises Ilya, reaching up to stroke a hand over his torso, and nodding. “We could.”

Triumphant, Ilya opens the jar, a satisfying though loud pop of the lid coming off making Anya grumble in her bed.

“I must taste test,” Ilya declares, and before Shane is able to say another word, is moving down the couch, swiping his finger through the jam and drawing a heart on Shane’s chest.

Mouth open wide of course about to protest, Shane looks down at himself, and sighs. Not with any heat behind it though, in fact, he’s already smiling when he looks up, and Ilya knows that pout is just for effect.

“Sticky.”

“You are sticky?” Ilya repeats, echoing Shane’s grin when he nods. “Want me to help?”

“You should.”

“I should?”

“Yes,” Shane says, lightly cupping the back of Ilya’s head when he bends down, tracing out the heart with his tongue.

“It’s good.”

“Yeah?”

“You should try,” Ilya says, propping himself up, getting more jam on his finger, and painting Shane’s lips with it.

Ilya watches in fascination as Shane darts his tongue out, tasting the corner of his mouth.

“Not bad.”

“Mm,” Ilya says, bending down to lap the jam from his lips, flicking his tongue against Shane’s so he can taste some more, then sucking it clean.

“It’s pretty good,” Shane says, his voice all low and scratchy in that way Ilya loves so much.

“I think so. But I need to be sure...”

This time, Ilya swipes jam over both of Shane’s nipples, his ring where it sits on its chain against his chest, and then a further trail down his stomach.

Shane’s eyes narrow and get impossibly dark, and of course his cock is already twitching.

“You’d better clean that up.”

“Or?”

“Or,” Shane agrees, which makes no sense, but Ilya isn’t complaining, not about that, or the way Shane suddenly flips them so Ilya is now sitting on the couch, and Shane is straddling his lap.

He even leans, pressing his nipple against Ilya’s mouth insistently, mouth falling open when he swirls his tongue over it. His gaze grows even darker when Ilya bends and takes his ring

into his mouth, sucking that clean as well.

Ilya knows he approves, because Shane doesn't even protest when Ilya puts the jar without its lid on the couch cushions beside him before hauling him up to lap the jam trail from his stomach. Especially, judging by the way he groans, when Ilya then takes him in his mouth.

"Marmalade is doing better," Ilya says much, much later, when they are in the bath together, Shane's back against his chest.

"Mm," Shane says, maybe in response to his words, or Ilya's kiss to his shoulder. "And the puppies?"

"So big already."

"Sure you don't want one?" Shane says, with a tone of half-hearted tease.

"No," Ilya says, shaking his head, pressing opened mouth kisses to Shane's neck and loving how he hums for it.

"Okay."

"When we are married, we will have all the pets."

"Definitely some pets," Shane says, wriggling back against him with a contented sigh, and laughing softly for Ilya's whispered, *yes, yes*, into the back of his hair. Then, he says, "It's my birthday soon. In a couple of weeks."

Yes. Ilya knows this, knows how much Shane is trying not to show how bothered he is that he's about to turn thirty.

"Mm. Old man."

"Fuck off."

"No."

"Okay."

"...did you want a puppy for your birthday?" Ilya asks, snorting when Shane knocks his head against his shoulder.

"All I want for my birthday is a quiet dinner with you, and my parents."

Would he have wanted something more, perhaps, had things been different? Ilya doesn't believe Shane would want much of a fuss for his birthday, but it does feel like he is shutting himself away from everything. That makes him worried, and sad.

"We will have that. We will have anything you want," he says, slotting his hands together around Shane's waist.

“You know. We’ve been talking, lately, about me, being a free agent. Leaving Montreal,” Shane says, after a long pause, tracing his fingers absently over Ilya’s forearms.

They have been. Long, long hours they’ve spent on the phone, or in bed together just dreaming, really, of how their lives might look after.

Ilya doesn’t mean to hold his breath, but finds himself doing it anyway. “Yes.”

“I’m going to. Leave, I mean. Obviously, I need to wait until free agent seasons starts.”

“I know.”

“Ottawa,” Shane whispers, knocking his head back against Ilya’s shoulder again. “I want to come to Ottawa. I want the Centaurs as my first choice.”

There are tears in Ilya’s eyes, but they’re happy ones. “I love you,” he chokes out, surprised and laughing when Shane moves quickly and turns, sending water splashing everywhere as he straddles his lap.

“I love you too,” Shane says, with tears in his eyes as well, “so, so much.”

The bath squeaks as Shane braces against the back of it, pushing Ilya down, their combined laughter echoing around the bathroom walls.

Two weeks after Shane’s birthday, Ilya is out on Jasper breathing in the fresh air and tilting his face up to the sun. Life is so good right now. So, so good. It’s not perfect, obviously—Ilya has come to accept he might have a regular battle with himself—but there is so much good in his life that he can’t quite stop himself from smiling.

Shane really wants to join him with the Centaurs. Ilya can barely let himself believe it, both knowing it is a fact, and still half-holding his breath until he sees it happen. He keeps getting lost in the thought of seeing Shane in a Centaurs jersey, and forgetting everything else, then worrying about all the reasons it might not come to be, before firmly telling his brain to fuck off.

As well as this wonderful, incredible, unbelievable thing happening, Anya is thriving, their little family together a happy one. Marmalade and her puppies are doing well, Ilya has been to visit for a few cuddles, and he’s also helped out with the dogs at the Drovers’ farm a few times. Also, Jasper, the horse currently beneath him, already feels like a faithful friend.

More important than any of that, though—although that Centaurs thing really is a very close second—is that he and Shane are actually getting married. In July, so really only a few weeks from now. They have a date set, they have sent invites out, and even if it ends up that there are just a handful of people in his backyard for it, Ilya knows it will be the best day of his life. They’re getting married. Now. Soon. In weeks, not the years and years away they had thought their wedding might be. Shane Hollander is going to be his fucking husband, and he will be his, so it’s pretty damn hard to find a thing wrong in the world right now.

“I’m thinking we can let you loose out here on your own next time,” Greg says, reminding Ilya that he isn’t out here quite alone.

Ilya’s smile only gets more ridiculous. “Really?”

Greg’s place is private, he tutors people only by referral, and if it hadn’t been for Harris, Ilya wouldn’t even know this place existed. There are incredibly few people who come here to learn horse riding, and Ilya knows fewer still are trusted enough to just come pick up a horse and roam. So that Greg is showing that trust in him so easily, it means so much to Ilya. He’s even convinced he misheard him, waiting for Greg to look his way so he can confirm it.

“Really,” Greg says, easily, adjusting his grip on his reins. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone so natural with the horses—and who cares about them so much so soon, either. You’d be welcome here any time you want.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you, Greg.”

“You can even bring your guy out here,” Greg says.

Ilya’s mouth twitches. “My guy?”

Chuckling, Greg nods, looking out to the horizon. “He isn’t your husband yet. I don’t know what else to call him.”

“Are you saying he can’t come here until we’re married?”

Now, Greg is really laughing. “...no?”

“Because if there are other restrictions, other... things you wouldn’t approve of us doing before we are married, then—”

“I can’t imagine either of you waiting for anything unless you really had to. You don’t seem the types.”

“We’re not,” Ilya says. Oh, this is a bizarre conversation, and if he didn’t know better, he’d say that heat flushing up his neck and over his cheeks was a blush.

Greg actually snorts. “I didn’t think so. Anyway. Married, not married, whatever. If he wants to come here, he’d be welcome. After some lessons, of course.”

Mm. Shane on a horse might be quite the sight, but Ilya knows Shane won’t join him here.

“Thank you. I will mention it to him, but I... I think it will be just me. This is a hobby, for me. It’s... it was a therapy thing. Suggestion.”

It’s honestly weird to Ilya that over the last few weeks, he’s found it easy to open up to more people about all sorts of things. Sure, he’s felt like screaming for years about his and Shane’s relationship, but now the world knows about that, the most important thing in his life, it just feels easier to speak about everything else. So, the rest of the Centaurs know he is in therapy. Ilya no longer hesitates or second-guesses himself when talking to other players elsewhere in

the league. His walls aren't up, permanently, something Shane has noticed, and looks so happy for seeing, that it's impossible for Ilya not to kiss his face off every time he mentions it.

"Horses can be very therapeutic," Greg says with ease, not at all bothered by what Ilya's just told him. "Can be pains in the ass, too, but, that's true of a lot of things, I suppose."

"It's true."

"Did you try a bunch of things before you tried horse riding?"

Ilya winces. He sort of meant to try his hand at all sorts of things, and he is still open to trying more hobbies. Right now, though, he feels quite peaceful with the changes he's made in his life. Galina seems pleased with his progress, anyway, and has also warned him about the risks of taking on too much at once.

"Not very much," Ilya admits to Greg. "I tried to volunteer at a shelter, for dogs. I wanted to take them all home."

Greg nods at this. "I can understand that temptation."

Ilya knows this. One of the other amazing things about this ranch is that Greg himself has three dogs, who Ilya spends lots of time with before he even considers coming out on a horse.

"Yes. I have no room in my backyard for Jasper, sadly," he says, patting Jasper's flank, "so he is quite safe from me."

"I don't think he'd mind."

"No. Maybe not."

"Any idea if there's anything else you wanna try?"

"Not really? I am trying to read more. My team, they want to start a book club," Ilya says, knowing it sounds like a joke, but, a few of them have mentioned wanting to give it a try next season.

"Nothing like losing yourself in a book," Greg says.

"Maybe. I also tried drawing a little. My teammate, Luca, he is incredible. He has tried to teach me. It wasn't good."

"Stick men and doodles?"

He's not sure what a doodle is, but Ilya nods anyway. "Exactly. Shane bought me paints to try, too. Watercolours. I haven't tried them yet."

Shane has bought him a ton of things in his pursuit of hobbies, actually. Those watercolours, a harmonica, a stack of puzzle books, and that's just for starters. The problem is that Ilya

doesn't know what else he wants, but at the same time, maybe when he started thinking about hobbies, he wasn't so aware of what he already has around him.

"I think, maybe, I already have more hobbies than I am thinking I have," he says to Greg, though also to himself.

"Like what?"

"I play Yahtzee, and do puzzles, with Shane's—with my... in-laws," Ilya says with pride that he can actually call Yuna and David his in-laws. Not officially for a little longer, obviously, but they are already parents to him. "I hike, and cook with Shane a lot. More than we have in a long time."

"It's nice to cook with someone."

It is. Actually, Shane surprised him with a cookery class for them to go to next week, as a date night. Date nights feels so new to them, even though they aren't, really, though public ones absolutely are. Ilya really can't wait.

"Yes," Ilya says absently, lost in the thought of Shane elbowing him in the side, or trying to prepare something faster than him, but more than anything the adoring look he knows will be on his face in that class the whole damn time.

Or maybe that determined one, when he wants to get things perfect first time.

Or Shane's competitive one, which is a danger in public. No, Ilya won't let himself think about that just now.

"Me, I'm simple. Horse riding, a bit of wood carving. That's all I need," Greg says.

"You carve wood?"

"Trinkets, and things. Small animals."

Could he carve something? Ilya isn't sure. He stabbed himself with a needle when he and Shane went to Coach Wiebe's for dinner the other night. Their youngest daughter had insisted he try a cross stitch with her, a big, child-friendly thing with an even more child-friendly red plastic needle. Even that made his finger tip sting. And although Shane happily kissed it better, and that obviously led to other things once they were home, Ilya isn't sure he likes the idea of any sharp objects in his hands. He isn't clumsy, not for most things, but carefully using a tool to create something? No, it's probably not for him.

"Sounds nice," Ilya says in response, eventually.

"There are so many things we can do with our time. Sometimes the hardest thing is knowing what to do with it. And sometimes, I think, we don't always appreciate what we already have," Greg says.

Yes, exactly, that's exactly what Ilya thinks. Maybe everything he is doing for himself right now, and enjoying, is exactly what he needs.

“I think so.”

“I also think sometimes new things come into our lives when we aren’t expecting them. Hobbies. People. All kinds of things.”

Now that is truer than Ilya could ever have imagined. “It’s true for me.”

“I imagine,” Greg says, turning a teasing smile on him. “Can’t imagine you set out planning on falling for your big hockey rival.”

He’s not blushing. Honestly. His cheeks, though, they do feel pretty hot. “Not at all.”

“Seems like a good guy. Hollander.”

“He is.” And more. So, so much more. Ilya won’t elaborate though, because he will be here all year.

“Great on the ice. Pity I have to hate him a little when he’s playing against Ottawa.”

Excitement flares in Ilya’s chest, and it’s a fight not to blurt out Shane’s future plans. Greg, it turns out, because he only told Ilya the last time he was here, is a lifelong Centaurs fan.

“I don’t mind it,” he says, which isn’t quite big enough for what he means, but earns him yet more teasing laughter.

“I’ll bet,” Greg says, and when Ilya looks, his eyes are lit up with glee.

“You should come to a game. I will give you tickets,” Ilya says, attempting a subject change but bursting out laughing anyway.

“I would like that.”

Imagine if he got Greg tickets for the opening game of next season, and Shane was right there on the ice beside him? Yes, that is a nice thought, one that Ilya plays over to himself as they continue their unhurried ride.

Chapter 3

They don't spend a lot of time at his house over the summer, much preferring the privacy that the cottage brings. Though if Shane does sign with the Centaurs then he will be moving here permanently and selling the house in Montreal. Already, Ilya can picture having Shane living here, having one home to come home to, a place that is theirs, together. He still won't let himself indulge too much in the thought in case that doesn't become a reality.

Still, as Ilya watches Shane dress and contemplates tackling him to the bed and just staying here tonight, he does feel like it's good to be home. Anya is in her bed, snoring, less suspicious now of the balloons that Yuna and David filled the house with to celebrate Ilya's birthday. And cards. And streamers. And all kinds of things. He's still grinning for it, even if there is now, probably, glitter in things he stands no chance of getting clean again.

It's his birthday, and he's been thoroughly spoiled, from Shane feeding him breakfast in bed to the thirty—thirty!—presents he'd gotten up early to hide around the cottage, in the boatshed, and on their deck beside the lake. Ilya feels so loved, and to be honest, after their not-so-lazy rest of day in bed before they drove over here, he'd be happy enough to curl up on the couch with Shane and do nothing at all.

"Mom's texted me eight times since they left," Shane says, coming to stand at the foot of the bed while scowling at his phone.

He looks incredible. Black jeans and a blue shirt that looks so effortlessly perfect on him. And to think Shane used to dress like he was trying to hide how beautiful he is.

"We aren't late."

"No. But she's checked to see if our taxi is here yet twice now."

Rolling over, Ilya grabs his phone, snorting at the time.

"In ten minutes, yes. Is this restaurant very... strict?"

"No idea," Shane says, sighing, then smiling down at Ilya as he reaches out and pats his foot. "You look amazing."

Ilya winks, then tilts his chin for Shane to join him, but Shane only shakes his head. "No?"

"No. We'll get distracted."

"It's my birthday."

"And you can pout all you want—"

"I do not *pout*."

"But if we're late, you know Mom is gonna—"

“Okay, okay,” Ilya says, already getting up off the bed. He loves his soon-to-be mother-in-law, and will not cope with the look of reproach she will give them if they show up late.

Even if she always blames Shane when they are, whether it’s Ilya’s fault or not.

He does get a quick kiss in, though, one that lingers until they hear the taxi pull up. Shane’s eyes are glassy and his lips bruised; Ilya loves him so very much.

Shane is chatty tonight in the taxi, pulling Ilya’s hand into his lap and playing with his fingers as they talk, full of smiles whenever he looks his way. It’s almost as though he’s nervous, Ilya realises when Shane’s voice raises, pulling his attention back from looking out of the car window.

“Where... is this restaurant?” Ilya says because he’s already seen where they are. This is near Monks; he doesn’t remember there being an exclusive-looking restaurant near here, especially one that Yuna said she had a fight getting them a table at.

“Mom said she wanted us to pick something up on the way.”

They are stopping right outside Monks. “Uh...”

“Come with me,” Shane says and all but shoves him out of the taxi then grabs Ilya’s hand and drags him toward the bar before he can get a word out.

Noise erupts the moment they step inside, so loud that Ilya would have stumbled backward were it not for the tight grip Shane still has on his hand.

“Happy birthday!” Wyatt yells right in his face before blowing on a party horn so hard that it pokes Ilya in the cheek.

Happy birthdays echo around him, and there are cheers, and yells, and his name called out repeatedly over a thunderous applause. Ilya is stunned, letting Yuna and David hug him in turn and then being passed around for more hugs and congratulations. Even Hayden is here with Jackie, and for once, Ilya can’t even pretend to be pissed for seeing him. He hugs Jackie first, of course, but it’s Hayden who makes the move to hug him next.

“Hey. Happy birthday,” Hayden says, quietly, sort of embarrassed, sort of accepting.

Ilya clasps his shoulder, and squeezes, nodding in thanks.

It takes forever to get back to Shane, who is waiting with two glasses of champagne, the most triumphant smile lighting up his face.

“You made a surprise party for me?” Ilya says, beaming even if there is a lump in his throat.

“I know you like the attention,” Shane says, and kisses him, then nuzzles against his temple and adds, “and you deserve it. All of it. You deserve to see how much you are loved, by everyone here.”

He could cry. As he looks around, all of his team are here, everyone he knows from the Centaurs, even some players from Boston. The only other person he might have expected to be here is Svetlana, but she called him from a visit to Russia early this morning. Everyone else is here. Friends. Family. Fiance. Fiance who is kissing him, openly and freely, with everybody here to see. How lucky is he?

“Smile.”

Blinking for the sudden flash, Ilya waits for his eyes to refocus, seeing Harris’ smiling face when he can.

“You blinded me.”

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

“Are you taking photos for the Centaur’s Insta?” Shane asks.

Ilya’s stomach knots a little.

“Uh...” Harris says, looking to Ilya for guidance. “They don’t have to be?”

“No, it’s good. Hold on,” Shane says, then darts over to the bar.

Ilya raises his hands in an *I don’t know* gesture when Harris raises an eyebrow, both of them watching Shane as he comes back.

“Hold still,” Shane says to Ilya with a look of concentration on his face.

There is a slight snap of elastic beneath his jaw and something now sitting on his head at what feels like an angle.

Harris bursts out laughing and snaps a picture, turning it for Ilya to see. He’s wearing a sparkly, pointy hat that is emblazoned with the words *birthday boy*. He flares his arms out posing for Shane, who just grins back at him like he’s the best thing he’s ever seen.

“Okay. Now you can take photos,” Shane says, and to Ilya’s surprise grabs his wrist, raising his arm so he can duck beneath it and tuck into his side.

It’s only a photo, but it means the entire world to Ilya, especially when Harris posts it and tags them both, and Shane immediately comments. He’s proud to be with him, he’s proud to be seen, and though Ilya knew it anyway, having evidence out there for everyone else to see, well, it really does mean everything.

The rest of the Centaurs descend next insisting on a group photo just as Ilya thinks he’s about to tear up for how happy he is. Shane goes to leave so it can just be the team, but Ilya tugs on his hand for him to stay, pretending to pout. And Shane does stay, smiling as he nestles back into Ilya’s side, looking as comfortable to be there as anything.

Honestly. This might be the best birthday of his life.

“What about that one?”

Their boat slows as Ilya drops the oars to follow the point of Shane’s finger. On the branch of a tree beside the lake Ilya sees what he is gesturing at, a small bird that is mostly white with black and grey wings and tail.

“Some kind of gull?” he guesses, picking up the bird-spotting book by his feet and starting to look through the pages. “Or a tern?”

“What’s the difference?” Shane asks, stretched out quite happy to let Ilya steer them, just how he always is when they’re out on the lake together in their boat like this.

Shane doesn’t know what this bird is, does he? Ilya doesn’t think so. It’s one thing spotting a very obvious loon or something, and Ilya still smiles when he remembers that time they startled a stork because they’d got carried away with their kisses on this very boat, but these birds? No. He knows a little, of course, because this bird spotting book was one of many purchases Shane made when Ilya was first thinking about hobbies. That he knows this thing is a gull or a tern at this stage is actually pretty good progress, considering this book never seems to leave their boat.

This might be Ilya’s favourite summer with Shane so far. It’s hard to know for sure, of course, because that first one was so perfect, and life-changing, and he’s loved every moment of every other summer since. But this one, this is the first one they have been out for, and it feels... special. More real, in a way.

It’s not the date nights they’ve had, completely unbothered when they know there are cameras on them; Ilya was particularly smug the day after a night out with Troy and Harris, though, because photos of him and Shane were everywhere. It’s not even the lazy strolls they’ve taken through Montreal or Ottawa, the hours spent in cafe corners, the way he can hold Shane’s hand in public without a care. Those things are all wonderful, and he often takes out memories of these moments to replay.

It’s here, their place, their time here at the cottage away from everything. They don’t have to hide, they aren’t hiding, there is no reason for them to, and yet being alone together is still their favourite thing. That’s what Ilya loves.

“Hey. Still with me?” Shane says, knocking his foot against Ilya’s ankle to get his attention.

“Mm?”

“The gull. Or tern. Or... whatever it is. What’s the difference?”

“Oh. I don’t know?” Ilya says, shrugging.

Shane narrows his eyes, his lips twitching up into a smile. “Do you care?”

“Not really,” Ilya says, then is laughing as he tries to keep the boat steady, for Shane launching himself across it—and over their picnic basket—and kissing him.

Ilya has a half-thought about protesting, saying something like *‘it’s good that Anya is back at home instead of here because she would be in the water’*, but he will never ever turn away Shane’s eager mouth, for anything. Plus, this is their afternoon, they are drifting slowly to the tiny island they discovered years ago and decided was theirs. Memories were made there too, so many of them, and today will add another.

“I was trying to show interest, in your hobby,” Shane says in between kisses as he settles in his lap, fingers tugging on Ilya’s hair.

“Hobby?”

“You know. Bird watching. Identification.”

He can get Shane’s shirt off now, right? They are only a few minutes from their island. “It’s okay sometimes. Here. But not for me, I think,” Ilya says, smirking when Shane only raises his arms the second he starts tugging at his hem.

“That’s too bad,” Shane says, settling in his lap.

“It’s okay. I like other things. Many things,” Ilya whispers, with his hands at Shane’s neck, then chest, then cock.

Shane looks so pleased. “Good.”

“Tree? Lake? Blanket? Where do you want?” Ilya asks the moment they are on land, grabbing the picnic basket as Shane takes the cooler.

Shane’s cheeks are pink, because of course they are. “Um.”

“Tell me.”

Truthfully, Ilya suggested they come out here as a distraction. Tomorrow is July First, so there is absolutely no chance Shane will be sleeping tonight, unless Ilya wears him out. Himself too; how’s he supposed to sleep when, tomorrow, Shane is finally a free agent, and will hopefully be picked by the Centaurs?

Ilya keeps telling himself that if he can’t, it’s not so bad, it’s fine, so long as Shane goes somewhere he is appreciated. But the thought of playing beside Shane, having years maybe of them on the same team working as a team, instead of against one another, well. He must be feeling his age, or something, because right now he can’t imagine anything better. Anyway, there will still be opportunities for them to compete. They’ll find them, because that’s just what they do, even if they do it less on the ice soon.

“So, no bird watching?” Shane says much, much later, tapping the back of his fingers against Ilya’s chest.

Ilya lifts his head, observes the way Shane is sprawled out naked beside him with no shame about it, and smiles.

“I have many more nicer things to watch.”

Tap, tap, tap go Shane’s fingers. “I know. But...”

“Yes?”

Sighing, Shane hauls himself up, bending for a kiss before propping himself up on an elbow. “It’s just, it was really important to you. Not bird watching, necessarily, but, finding a hobby. You know. Something to do for yourself?”

It was. Ilya feels foolish for it now, in a way, because it was another attempt, maybe, at an instant fix for his mood.

“I did. I am horse riding now.”

“Do you... think that’s enough for you?” Shane says, worry in his voice.

Raising his arm, Ilya gestures for Shane to tuck into his side, kissing his forehead when he settles. “I think, maybe, for now. Yes. It is not all I do, anyway.”

Shane nods against him, tucking his toes behind Ilya’s calf. “True.”

“I am happy,” Ilya says, and smiles, because he really is right now.

He feels Shane smile against him as well, and that can only lift his mood further.

“Good.”

“I will not always be happy. But I am happy—I am good, right now. And, I think, I have everything I need to help me be happy. I like horse riding, and I like puzzles, and Yahtzee, and pool. Reading. Cooking with you. Hiking. I do a lot.”

“Well, when you say it like that, it doesn’t sound so bad.”

“Not bad,” Ilya agrees, squeezing his arm around Shane. “Maybe, before, I was overthinking. A little.”

“That’s my job.”

“Yes, yes.”

“...maybe we can share.”

“Overthinking?” Ilya says, as Shane moves so he is smiling down at him, fingers splayed against his chest.

“We share everything else.”

“Soon, hopefully, our team,” Ilya says, his heart thudding as he thinks about having Shane with him at the Centaurs yet again.

“Exactly,” Shane says, his nervous, excited smile echoing how Ilya is feeling, probably. “Hey. Maybe we can share my splinters.”

“You have splinters?”

“Probably. I feel like I have tree bark digging in my back.”

Ilya grins. “How did that happen?”

“I have no idea...”

“I will check for splinters,” Ilya says and moves suddenly, so Shane is immediately lying on his stomach. He kisses a path down his back and over his ass, smiling for the content way Shane sighs beneath him.

“What about this one?” Shane says.

Pressing his forehead against Shane’s bare shoulder Ilya then lifts his head, looking at Shane’s phone screen. He is going through all of his posts, apparently, uninterested when Ilya says people don’t just go through old posts on Insta like he is doing, not unless they want to be accused of stalking.

He’ll be his husband in two weeks. Two weeks! So is this really considered stalking? It’s quite sweet, actually, that Shane is now going through and liking and commenting on everything he’s ever posted. Ilya can’t even bring himself to tease Shane that there are years worth of posts he’s missed.

There is also the fact that next week, literally seven days from now, Shane is officially joining him at the Centaurs. No more planning their time together in stolen moments between games and flights. No more waking up in bed alone. No more anything alone, actually, no more hiding, no more having to pretend. He can love Shane openly, and have Shane love him back for all the world to see. Is this really what his life is right now? It’s hard to believe it. But for the warm body pressed against his own, Ilya reminds himself that he really can.

“This one is... in St. Louis,” Ilya says after a few seconds looking to recognise the photo, and to get his almost-permanent smile under control.

With an irritated little huff—the one that Ilya loves so much—Shane kisses him on the top of his head, and wriggles against him.

“I know it’s in St. Louis,” he says.

“...how?”

“The date you posted it,” Shane says.

Ilya looks at the screen again. Shane knows where he was just by the date?

“Okay.”

“We had movie night.”

Movie night. Yes, they do do that occasionally when they are on the road, when too tired for sex or talking. It’s nice, watching something together in real time and discussing it, almost making Ilya feel like he is at home with Shane on the couch. Nowhere near as good of course, but something he has come to appreciate.

“Yes,” Ilya says, and smiles, rolling his eyes to himself. “You complained the whole time.”

Kissing his forehead in protest, Shane wriggles again. “Not the whole time.”

“Most.”

“Not about everything,” Shane mumbles under his breath.

When he looks up, Ilya knows Shane is remembering the same specific moment as him. The glint in his eyes is magical.

“Anyway. Why the photo of the menu?” Shane says, nodding at his phone again.

Really? Ilya thinks it’s pretty obvious, and starts laughing, but no, apparently Shane isn’t seeing what he’s seeing at all.

“Maybe I was hungry.”

“I don’t think it’s that...”

“Sometimes, I think you are very innocent,” Ilya says, shifting so he can sling his arm across Shane’s waist.

“Yes. Well.”

“And sometimes,” he says, smacking a kiss to Shane’s cheek, “I think you cannot read.”

Scowling, which is adorable, Shane looks back at his phone once more, narrowing his eyes.

“It’s not the salmon. I think I’ve put you off salmon, because you say it’s too healthy.”

“Not with that sauce...”

“What sauce? Hollandaise?”

His fiancé is utterly charming in his naivety—or, Ilya’s not as funny as he thinks.

Of course he is, he’s hilarious.

“Is you.”

“What is?”

“This is what you look like when you eat salmon.”

“Like hollandaise sauce?”

“Yes, Hollander.”

Shane goes very still, raising an eyebrow. “Because... hollandaise, Hollander?”

“Oh my god,” Ilya mutters mostly to himself, pinning Shane to the bed.

Shane doesn’t protest, in fact he grins like this was his plan all along.

Maybe it was. Maybe Ilya is the naive one here.

“You know that makes no sense,” Shane says, triumphantly dropping his phone on the bed as he hooks his ankles over the backs of Ilya’s legs.

“It makes very much sense.”

“If you say so.”

“I do.”

“I was looking at your photos,” Shane mumbles, but it’s against Ilya’s mouth, so there is no way he is actually interested in his Insta right now.

“You like my photos?”

“You take really good photos.”

“You want to pose for me?” Ilya says, feeling Shane pause, like he’s thinking about it, watches the play of thoughts written there in his eyes.

“...I don’t know?”

Hmm. Well, that could be interesting, couldn’t it? “I think you would like that. I think you would like posing, just for me.”

Shane starts squirming. Oh, yes, he likes this idea already, Ilya can tell. “I... you could? But... maybe not on your phone.”

“Oh, you want me to take them on your phone, so you can admire yourself?”

“Fuck off. No,” Shane says, and kisses Ilya quickly. “I just meant... we always deleted all the photos we sent each other.”

A pang of loss hits Ilya. They really did delete everything. So many wonderful photos that he no longer has access to.

“Yes.”

“We don’t... we don’t need to delete them anymore. But,” Shane says before Ilya can answer, “I think I... maybe, if you wanted—”

“And if you wanted,” Ilya says.

“Fine. If we wanted. If we did want to, you know. Keep photos for us, just for us, I... it’s still no one’s business, right?”

“Is this because I made a photo of your freckles yesterday?” Ilya says, watching those freckles stand out against Shane’s instantly-flushed cheeks.

He did take an up close photo of Shane’s freckles, and he did post it on his Insta, and, well. His followers loved it. Shane hadn’t seemed to mind. Maybe he did, and Ilya didn’t realise?

“You can post whatever you want about me, anywhere you want to. I’m yours,” Shane says softly, and, well, that wasn’t the reply Ilya was expecting, but it does make his heart soar.

“Okay. I will.”

Shane licks his lips, looking frustrated with himself. “I just meant. If that was a thing you wanted to do. Take photos of... me. Us. For us. I think I’d just feel, I don’t know. Safer, maybe, if you didn’t take them on your phone, with, you know. Access to wifi, or whatever.”

“You worry I could accidentally post your balls for everybody to see?”

Shane’s cheeks are impossibly red. Ilya has to kiss them repeatedly. “Maybe?”

Ilya could protest, point out how that has never happened, not once, not ever in all of these years. Then, the idea of getting a camera, a good one, having photos somewhere privately that aren’t even printed, but are just for them. Yes. That is a nice idea.

“Can you believe we have all of these presents?” Shane says as Ilya walks back in from letting Anya outside.

The dining table—their dining table, in their living room—is spilling over with various boxes and packages. Even the chairs are stacked and, when Ilya looks, he sees a couple of bags on the floor as well.

It’s a lot. It’s so much, actually, and it’s even more because they are millionaires, they can buy anything they want several times over, and yet the people who love and know them best have celebrated their marriage with them, bought them gifts. Ilya is in awe. For many things, the most spectacular part of all being that Shane is now his husband, but as he slings an arm around Shane to pull him back against his chest, he is overwhelmed by gratitude for everything.

“So many,” he says, faintly, smiling for Shane resting his head against his shoulder, stroking his fingers up his arm.

“I can’t believe so many people came.”

“Me, too.” Despite everything, so many people care about them. It’s incredible, and he’s married, did he mention that? He married the love of his life barely 24 hours ago.

“I’m glad they were all here.”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad they’re all gone, now,” Shane adds, turning in his arms and pressing his chest against Ilya’s.

“Much better,” Ilya whispers, kissing him, hands trailing down Shane’s back to cup his ass.

Married, and somehow they are even more horny for each other, barely having slept since their last guest left last night. He aches, in all kinds of good places, and probably could do with some sleep, but his new husband is giving him that look, and well. It’s not like they don’t have the time.

“What’s thi—is this a marriage certificate?” Shane asks later when they finally start to go through their presents, knocking a cardboard tube against his leg to release whatever is inside.

“We have one of those,” Ilya says, still debating if he’ll get theirs framed for the wall.

A small mound of glitter now covers Shane’s thigh. “Oh.”

Inside, there is a rolled up piece of paper that Ilya thinks smells a bit like it’s been dipped in sugar, or at least has been decorated when there were sugary things around. He bursts out laughing as he starts to read, though also starts tearing up.

He even thinks a thank you in Hayden’s direction. This whole being married to the love of his life thing really has made him soft.

“This is our official marriage certificate,” Ilya says, hooking his chin over Shane’s shoulder.

The Pike kids have outdone themselves. There is a crayon drawing of him and Shane in their wedding outfits, a dog that is either Anya or the dog they’re still hoping to get, and a big five-tier cake with a star on top. And a Stanley Cup.

Sniffing, Shane flattens the paper out better against his lap. “I love it.”

“Me, too. Who knew Hayden could spell?” Ilya says, pointing out their names carefully scrawled, earning himself a half-hearted jab in the ribs.

“This one is definitely going on the wall.”

“Yes.”

“We should frame both,” Shane says, which Ilya loves to hear.

The marriage certificate from the Pike kids is one of Ilya's favourite gifts, though he really does love them all. They do have more money than they can easily spend in a lifetime so can buy whatever they want for themselves, but every gift here is personal, sentimental in some way. Things they can treasure, take out and be reminded of their wedding day, and the love they have around them.

"Who's this one from?" Shane says then as he unwraps a small box against Ilya's knee.

Ilya ducks for the label that just fell from the box. "Oh, this is from Greg."

"Greg, from horse riding?"

"Yes. Oh," Ilya says and grins, as a beautifully carved miniature loon now sits on Shane's hand.

"He made this?" Shane says in awe, holding it up to inspect from every side.

"Yes. He likes to make things with wood."

"It's amazing."

"Yes."

Turning his head, Shane gives Ilya a smile that catches his breath. "He knows about our loons?"

"He knows something. He saw my tattoo, he asked what it was for. I didn't tell him everything," Ilya adds, almost out of habit.

Shane's smile dips just a little, just for a moment, then gets twice as wide as he leans in for a kiss. "You can tell him, and everyone, everything, now."

Ilya helps push scrunched up wrapping paper out of the way as Shane climbs into his lap. "Everything?"

"Okay. Maybe not everything."

"No. Everything, is not for everyone. Everything, is just for us," Ilya says, watching Shane's eyes light up.

"Just for us," Shane agrees softly, then kisses Ilya really slowly, the soft thunk of the loon hitting the couch cushions the last noise that isn't Shane that Ilya hears.

They leave for their honeymoon in just three days, and Ilya is finally, finally thinking about packing. Finally, because Shane has had his luggage packed for three weeks already, constantly repacking and then taking out the things that he still needs. Ilya has been diplomatic about this, or at least, he has been diplomatic once or twice, but mostly he's enjoying teasing Shane for it. The scrunched up nose and little scowl are absolutely adorable every time he does.

Still. He probably should pack, because they are at Bood's for a grill night tomorrow, then are having lunch with Yuna and David the day after to say goodbye. In between all of that they will have some time, but Shane's constant panic about things they might still need to buy has gotten to Ilya. They probably will need to go into Montreal for at least a few things before they leave.

Maybe even this afternoon?

As Ilya is contemplating his choices—and an afternoon shopping with Shane knowing exactly how he'll react to him trying on clothes—he hears Shane walk in the bedroom behind him and smiles for the kiss he receives on his shoulder in passing.

“Still haven't decided on everything?” Shane asks, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Almost.”

“Okay.”

“Maybe I should go shopping,” Ilya says. “Maybe we can go today?”

“Maybe. Hey. Come here a minute.”

Oh? No fond exasperation at him leaving things until the last minute? Ilya turns to look at Shane, seeing him fidgeting in that way he does when something has excited him.

“What?” Ilya says, taking Shane's hand when he extends it to him, and sitting when he tugs.

“Nothing.”

“No?”

“Okay,” Shane says, practically bouncing on the bed; is he trying to keep something hidden from him behind his back? It looks like it. “So... I know we said we weren't buying each other presents...”

Ilya's heart skips. They did say that, but he has thought of at least ten things he wanted to buy Shane. Now, he feels bad that he hasn't.

“Shane—”

“It's sort of something for both of us. Sort of. Just for us, and maybe for... our honeymoon.”

Ilya presses a hand to his chest, and gasps, teasing him. “Do we have new toys?”

“No,” Shane says, shoving his hand against Ilya's knee before then patting it. “At least, this isn't intended for—it's not a toy, okay?”

“Okay.”

Still vibrating with excitement, Shane reaches behind then is resting a large bag by Ilya's leg. Ilya reaches in, not taking his eyes off Shane.

"We talked about... it's for... you know. But you know, you're really good at—"

This time Ilya's gasp is a real one.

"You bought me a camera?"

"Yes," Shane says, then launches into an excited ramble about the research he did, the make and model and charging units and European adapters for when they are travelling, and so many things. "And I thought, we... before, we couldn't keep photos for so long."

Shane looks as devastated by that as Ilya always feels.

"Yes."

Shane taps the camera box. "We need a million photos of our honeymoon."

"Two million."

"Ten. I don't care," Shane says and laughs as he leans in to kiss him, briefly resting their foreheads together before he sits back. "I just want to, I don't know. Maybe not make up for all the photos we couldn't keep, but... it's our honeymoon. We should have a million photos."

"For memories?" Ilya asks quietly, not quite trusting his voice because there is a lump in his throat.

Shane smiles shyly at him. Why shyly? Ilya doesn't know, and doesn't care, because whatever look is on his husband's face always means everything to him.

"For memories," Shane agrees, then pats Ilya's knee again, "and because, you know how people keep saying how much they like your random photos on Insta? Well. Maybe you could keep taking more photos. Maybe, I don't know. Maybe make a hobby of it. Even take a class, or something, when we're back, if you felt like it?"

Ilya's heart is full, which it already was, but this gesture, it's getting to him, making him tear up happy tears. His husband gets him, is looking out for him, so invested in him being well and happy that it's kind of hard to believe he gets to be loved like this. It's just a camera, yes, of course it is, but the thought behind it is so many things at once; how is Ilya not to supposed to be feeling every emotion he is right now?

"Thank you," he whispers, leaning over and hugging Shane tight, pressing kisses and smiles into his neck.

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