

Nutcracker!

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Nutcracker!

by [OpalApparition](#)

Summary

"You will bend for me many times, I think, before this production is over."

Shane means to say no. He means to tell Ilya Rozanov—arrogant Bolshoi principal dancer and professional pain in his ass—to fuck off and stop moving set pieces without permission. Instead, he ends up on his knees in a dressing room, which is definitely not how the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's stage manager is supposed to handle conflict resolution.

Three weeks until opening night. One impossible rivalry. And absolutely no way this ends well.

or: Ilya comes to Winnipeg for The Nutcracker. Shane tries very hard to hate him. The mind-blowing hate-sex doesn't help.

Notes

If anyone from Winnipeg, or the Winnipeg Royal Ballet, happens to be reading this... hi! I haven't seen your production nor your city, but one day I'd like to. Please excuse any inaccuracies you might find within this work of self-indulgent fiction written by a non-dancer.

Obligatory: *I am not a dancer, a stage manager, or at all qualified or experienced enough to be writing this fic on any technical level*, but um... trying anyway.

Further, please read the tags! This fic is in Shane's POV entirely, and he is an *unreliable narrator*.

Thank you to [slateskyblue](#) for copyediting!

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

- Translation into Русский available: [Nutcracker! | Щелкунчик!](#) by [PANDAR](#)

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Who moved the tree?”

Shane stood in the wings, headset clamped over his ears, staring at the Christmas tree centerpiece that had somehow migrated six feet upstage from where it belonged, where it had been this entire time. It was Monday morning, the first day of integration rehearsals, which meant no full-out yet, with only a narrow slip of time remaining before opening night. Company class had ended twenty minutes earlier. Calves were still warm from *petit allegro*, rosin tracked across the Marley in pale crescents, and the *répétiteur* was packing his marked score while the ballet master argued with wardrobe about missing buttons on the Act One jackets.

Buttons were manageable issues, and, thankfully, they’d been rehearsing for this production of *The Nutcracker* for six weeks now, even if the agreement for the Russian Bolshoi Ballet’s own principal dancer to come to guest and dance the titular role had taken an additional month to iron out.

He had, allegedly, arrived in Canada a week ago.

Shane had the confirmation email, the customs clearance, the signed housing paperwork. What he didn’t have was any actual contact with the man himself. No response to Shane’s three emails about rehearsal schedules. No callback to the two voicemails Shane had left. He was somewhere in the city, presumably sleeping off jetlag or exploring or doing whatever Russian ballet gods did when they weren’t answering their stage managers, and Shane’s blood pressure climbed higher with each passing day.

And now someone had moved the goddamn tree.

Despite the pretty baubles and bows and cranberry red ribbon that decorated it, the tree *wasn’t* decorative. It was motorized, counterweighted, and cued to the Sugar Plum transition, rising on a fixed count that had to clear the snow drop and the RCMP charge without clipping the lifts. Moving it meant recalibrating cues and clearance tolerances, and making three separate union calls. The Royal Winnipeg Ballet had a reputation to maintain—Canada’s most distinguished ballet company, despite what Toronto liked to claim—and Shane intended to keep that reputation intact.

Around him, dancers warmed up for the integration rehearsal, and his lighting designer was asking him a question through the headset that he couldn’t process because the tree was *wrong*, and no one moved set pieces without clearing it through him first.

“Shane?” The lighting designer’s voice crackled again. “Do you want me to hold the LX cue for the snow scene or—”

“Hold everything.” Shane clicked through to the stage crew channel. “Who authorized moving the tree?”

Static. Then: “Um. No one moved it?”

“It’s six feet upstage.”

“Shane, I’m looking at the spike marks right now. The tree is exactly where it’s supposed to be.”

Shane pulled his binder out from under his arm, flipping to the blocking page. His blocking page. The one he’d confirmed with Moscow three times via email, with measurements and photos, choreography, traffic, every spike mark, lift clearances written in margins, fake snow machine fall zones, even *child wrangler* pathways. Red tape for Act One, blue for Snow, glow tape marked for blackouts. He knew exactly where every Sugar Plum lift traveled in this house, where the Rat King’s tail nearly clipped the Parliament Hill crossover, where the RCMP sabres passed within inches of the children’s heads on the diagonal.

This was the boring stuff. But Shane Hollander was boring; he excelled at boring, just as he excelled at keeping dancers upright, lawsuits theoretical, and lackluster performances far away from his unimpeachable record. And—

“Excuse me.”

The voice came from directly behind him, close enough that Shane could feel the warmth of another body in the narrow space. He turned and found himself looking at a face that belonged in a museum, all sharp lines and pale eyes and the kind of bone structure that made photographers weep. The man wore ripped jeans and a leather jacket over a thin white shirt, his light brown hair carelessly mussed. He held a phone in one hand, and he was smiling.

“You are Shane Hollander, yes? The stage manager.” His accent was thick, Russian, and he pronounced Shane’s last name with too much weight on the first syllable, rolling the ‘r’ like a sugarplum on his tongue. “I am Ilya Rozanov.”

He said it like Shane might not know, which was ridiculous considering Shane had been the one coordinating his arrival for the past two months. Flights, accommodation, rehearsal schedules, even dietary requirements for *the* Ilya Rozanov, darling of Moscow, crown jewel principal male dancer for the Bolshoi Ballet, here guesting for the season.

Shane knew more about Rozanov’s logistics than he’d wanted to, and his being here wasn’t a surprise, but nowhere in those many exchanges with the Bolshoi Ballet had anyone mentioned that their principal dancer would be personally involving himself in technical staging... Because principal dancers didn’t do that. They showed up, they danced, they left the logistics to people whose job it was to handle logistics.

Ilya Rozanov. Whose face had been on the cover of Dance Magazine three times in the past year. Whose performances had critics reaching for words like “transformative” and “transcendent.” Standing in Shane’s wings, moving set pieces, causing problems.

“I know who you are,” Shane glowered, foot tapping. “What I don’t know is when you got the idea that you could rearrange things as you please?”

“It should please you, too. The tree,” Rozanov continued, gesturing toward the stage with his phone, “is better where it is now. In Moscow, we keep more depth for grand lifts. *Bolshoi* stages are wider. You need space to let the men travel. Also, sightlines from house left were shit.”

Shane couldn’t help but scoff. He’d spent two months coordinating this production while Rozanov was presumably sleeping through his emails in Moscow. “Better sightlines? Productions in Moscow must have incredibly forgiving audiences if they don’t mind half the corps disappearing into shadow during the party scene. No. The answer is no. The Bolshoi theatre is larger, and the audiences sit farther back. Your designers can afford depth like that, but in this house, house left loses the corps if I move that tree an inch. And our lighting plot was designed around the original positions. Unless Russian designers don’t bother accounting for ensemble visibility?”

Rozanov’s smile flickered.

Shane’s headset crackled with his lighting designer asking another question. He held up one finger to Rozanov and clicked through. “One moment. Don’t touch anything else yet.” Then back to Rozanov. “That aside, when did you even get here, Rozanov? Why haven’t you answered any calls or emails? I was starting to think that you *died*—ugh. Never mind. You are here, fine. You are here, and you’re here to *dance*. The production team agreed on this blocking two months ago.”

Agreed, meaning signed off by production, ballet masters, stage management, and three departments who never spoke to each other unless something had gone wrong.

“Yes.” Rozanov tilted his head, studying Shane with open curiosity. “And now that I am here to catch mistake, we do it better than bad agreement.”

“You can’t just change the staging without—”

“I can change anything I want.” Ilya’s smile widened. “Is my show.”

“It’s a co-production,” Shane said, keeping his tone level. “Which means half of it, is mine. And in my half, we don’t move set pieces without clearing it through stage management first. I don’t care if you’re Baryshnikov’s heir apparent.”

Rozanov’s smile widened. “Baryshnikov defected in 1974. Very old news.”

“The principle stands.”

“Ah, you have principles. Good to know, I was beginning to worry. I keep hearing how Winnipeg Ballet is very important. Very prestigious. First ballet company in all of Canada, so I have read.” Ilya stepped closer, and Shane had to resist the urge to step back. The wings were too narrow for this conversation, too narrow for the way Ilya seemed to take up more space than his body required. “Royal Winnipeg Ballet is several centuries younger than its

older, wiser sibling in Russia. It is not your fault you, or even younger sibling New York City Ballet, have not yet learned these things, but we have. So when I say the tree is better six feet upstage, you should write it down in your..." He glanced at the binder under Shane's arm. "Your very organized, obsessively bookmarked notebook. You carry this like Holy book. Do you kiss it before sleep?"

Shane's jaw ached from clenching. He had forty-eight hours to integrate two companies that had rehearsed separately for months. He had lighting cues timed to the second, prop changes coordinated with costume changes, and a technical crew who needed clear, consistent information. What he did not have was time for a principal dancer with a god complex and a face that made Shane's brain go temporarily offline.

"The tree stays where it was," Shane said. He'd stage-managed collaborations with the National Ballet of Canada out of Toronto and coordinated two international tours in the past two years. He'd run productions at the Banff Centre and managed two sold-out international tours in the past two years, both in Paris and New York. If Rozanov was a master of his craft on stage, then Hollander was a master of his own behind it, knowing how to handle temperamental choreographers, union disputes, and opening night disasters.

He was obsessive enough, anxious enough, to worry about every detail until it polished to shine. What he didn't handle was people making unilateral decisions about his production without consulting him first. The Bolshoi Ballet could send whoever they wanted, but their protocols ended where his began. "We designed the lighting plot around the original positions. Moving it means re-plotting every overhead special *and* re-timing cues locked to music *and* rechecking lift paths so no one decapitates a dancer on opening night. This is not how this works."

"So re-plot them, shitty placement doesn't work either, this is not how it is done in Moscow." Rozanov shrugged, the leather jacket moving smoothly over his shoulders. "Is that difficult for you, Mr. Hollander? I am told Royal Ballet here is very competent; is two lights, maybe three. You have very good lighting designer, yes? He can fix in five minutes."

"*She*," Shane corrected automatically. "And it's not five minutes, it's—"

"Shane." The lighting designer's voice cut through his headset again. "I actually agree with him. The tree is blocking too much from house left in the current position. Want me to pull it upstage?"

Rozanov stood there, eyebrows raised, waiting.

"No," Shane said into the headset. "We designed the plot around the original position. Moving it means recalculating every overhead special, re-timing cues locked to the music, and rechecking lift paths. That's not happening three weeks before opening."

"Even your designer says is good idea," Rozanov pointed out.

Even if it was, Rozanov needed to learn that Shane wasn't just here to execute his whims. It was true that stars got concessions; that was the reality of working in ballet. But there was a

difference between accommodating artistic vision and letting someone treat his production like their personal playground.

“My designer doesn’t get to make that call alone, and neither do you. Changes now will bring budget overruns when we have to add rehearsal hours.” Shane clicked through to the stage crew channel. “Tree stays. Mark the original spike and move it back. Now. Maybe if you’d raised this idea a *week ago*, when you arrived, there might’ve been some wiggle room, but not this late in the game. And moving forward, I don’t care if you’re the Prince, the choreographer, or the ghost of Balanchine. You want to move something, you *ask* first.”

Rozanov’s smile sharpened. “So you are stubborn *and* boring. This will be very interesting three weeks. But I see. Mr. Business, Mr. *Budget*, likes to be asked *nicely*. I beg very pretty, Hollander, but only after first date. Also... I see bear in wardrobe. Large bear costume with fur and claws. Why is there bear? This is not Russian fairy tale. Is *Nutcracker*.”

Shane pinched the bridge of his nose. “It’s a Canadian production. We have a bear in the party scene.”

“A *bear*.” Rozanov’s eyebrows climbed. “Dancing bear? Like circus?”

“Like a character at a Christmas party. The children love it.”

“Oh, because that is good reason. Put bear. Nobody asks why. Everyone claps. Hollander, children would love many things. Clowns. Fireworks. Supercar with machine gun. Does not mean we put them in Tchaikovsky.” Rozanov waved a hand. “But fine. You keep your bear. You keep your tree in wrong place. Very *Canadian*. Very... *creative*. I am learning so much.”

The way he said *creative* made it sound like an insult.

“Are you always like this?”

“Like what?”

“Insufferable.”

Rozanov laughed, the sound low and entirely too pleased.

Deciding to be the bigger person, Shane did not flip him off and spent the rest of the morning avoiding Rozanov, which proved impossible in a theatre where the man seemed to occupy every room Shane entered. Twice in the costume shop. Once in the hallway outside the administrative offices. Each time, that same lazy smile, like Rozanov knew exactly what he was doing.

By the time the afternoon rehearsal started, Shane had reorganized his entire lighting plot and reworked three scene transitions. He’d also drunk two cups of coffee that now sat acidic in his stomach as he stood near the piano in studio three.

It was the largest rehearsal space in the building, and it stretched forty feet wall to wall, the sprung Marley floor scarred with decades of rosin and tape marks. Mirrors climbed one wall from baseboard to ceiling, reflecting the afternoon light that poured through the frosty

windows. Barres lined the opposite wall in parallel rows. So, in other words... perfect for this practice of *Grand Pas de Deux* now that they had their eponymous Nutcracker in the building. Their usual principal, Dale, had retired at the end of last season after twenty years with RWB, and, really, after meeting Rozanov Shane's opinion of him, and his expectations, had plummeted.

Until he started to warm up and dance.

Rose arrived in soft pink rehearsal wear, her dark hair secured in a tight bun that showed off the elegant line of her neck. She crossed to Rozanov and extended her hand. "Hi, my name is Rose. Your Sugar Plum."

Rozanov took her hand and brought it to his lips, a gesture so theatrical Shane's eyes nearly rolled into the back of his head. "Ilya Rozanov. But you know this already, I think."

"Of course, your reputation precedes you, both bad *and* good." Rose winked. "Try not to drop me."

"I have never dropped partner in my life." Rozanov placed a hand over his heart. "You insult me. I am only bad in the fun ways."

"Good. Keeps you humble." Rose moved to the barre to finish warming up, and Rozanov watched her with open appreciation.

"She is very beautiful," he said to no one in particular. Then, louder: "And mean to me already. I love this."

The Bolshoi Ballet and RWB shared the Petipa foundation, Ivanov's original 1892 choreography formed the skeleton both companies built on, but decades of interpretation had layered over it. Bolshoi favored *attack* and amplitude, *épaulement* pushed hard into the space. RWB smoothed the phrasing, favoring continuity and musical softness over brute force. Rozanov slipped out of his jacket and into athletic wear, and within 30 minutes had already adapted his Russian-Style muscle memory to a large portion of RWB's variations and syntax. He'd done it fast enough that Shane suspected he'd been studying video long before he arrived, but even beyond the technical prowess, it was the way he *moved*.

Dale had been technically immaculate, every line clean, every transition placed exactly where the ballet masters wanted it. Rozanov danced like the rules were a suggestion he'd already mastered and discarded, and he wanted to prove just how little he needed rules at all—especially to Shane.

Shane had spent seven years working with dancers. He'd been surrounded by attractive people his entire career—beautiful ballerinas, strong male dancers with the kind of bodies that photographers loved. He could appreciate aesthetics the way anyone could. He'd dated a few ballerinas over the years, gone on dates with people outside the ballet world who never understood why he'd choose tech week over dinner plans.

None of it had gone anywhere. The ballerinas were lovely but he'd felt nothing beyond friendly affection. The others didn't get why he'd rather spend a Friday night in a lighting

booth than at a bar. After a while, Shane stopped trying to figure out what was wrong with him and focused on what he was actually good at: running productions.

But... now it was hard *not* to focus on Rozanov rather than just running things. Rozanov who had proved himself to be an asshole within 30 seconds of meeting him, who didn't look like the familiar RWB dancers.

He looked like he could break someone in half.

The thin white t-shirt he wore clung to his torso, damp with sweat, and outlined every shift of muscle as he moved. Rozanov was tall. His shoulders were broader than most dancers, built for partnering and lifts, and his arms had the defined bulk of someone who spent hours hoisting ballerinas overhead. When he held a penché arabesque, leg extended behind him in a perfect vertical line, his back arched and Shane could see the ladder of his spine, the muscular wings of his shoulder blades spreading.

There was nothing soft about him. Nothing delicate. Ballet as a whole was mocked sometimes for being effeminate, for being less than other sports, but it was hard to imagine anyone seeing Rozanov dance and coming to that conclusion. His thighs were thick with muscle that flexed and released with each jump, and his calves looked carved from marble with impressive definition. His rehearsal pants hung low on his hips, and Shane could see the V of his pelvis, the dark trail of hair below his navel disappearing into the waistband, the ridges of his obliques shifting as he transitioned into the next combination. A bead of sweat tracked down the side of his neck and Shane watched it slide over his collarbone before disappearing into the collar of his shirt, and...

... oh... no.

Rozanov spun—three rotations, four, five—and when he stopped, he was facing the mirror, panting lightly. Facing Shane's reflection. Their eyes met, and Rozanov smiled without breaking the choreography, that cocky smirk that made Shane want to walk out of the studio and also stay exactly where he was. Rozanov shifted the angle of his body deliberately, turning just enough that Shane's gaze had nowhere polite to go. He held the look through the mirror, unapologetic, like a challenge.

It had to be a dare, because Rozanov had to *know*.

He knew Shane was watching him, and he was enjoying it.

The bastard added a flourish that wasn't in the choreography—leg extended past what the combination required, holding the arabesque while he turned his head to check Shane's reflection in the mirror. Showing off. His arms swept overhead and Shane tracked the flex of his biceps, the way tendons stood out along his forearms as he held the pose. The studio filled with sound—the pianist's accompaniment, the ballet master's corrections, and underneath it all, the controlled force of Rozanov's breathing. Shane could hear when it changed, when Rozanov pushed through a difficult transition without letting his lungs betray the effort.

When Rozanov landed from the next jump, his shirt had ridden up slightly, exposing a strip of golden skin and the lower edge of his abs. He didn't pull it down. He reached for his water

bottle instead, and Shane watched his throat work as he drank, watched the way his fingers wrapped around the plastic, watched the small adjustment of his waistband that meant nothing and meant everything because Shane couldn't stop cataloging these irrelevant details.

This was a problem. This was a *massive* problem.

He transitioned into the next sequence, and Shane, oh fuck, shit—

He'd been starting at Rozanov's stomach for five full seconds without breathing.

This was a problem.

Rozanov attacked the choreography with an intensity that made the other dancers look tentative by comparison. He moved like he was daring gravity to try and hold him, daring the music to keep up, daring Shane to look away. His body was a weapon—controlled and dangerous and beautiful in a way that made Shane's fingers tighten around his pen until his knuckles went white.

When Rozanov lifted Rose for the final sequence, his arms locked around her waist, and he hoisted her overhead and she arched back, arms extended, trusting him completely. Her legs formed a perfect split in the air. The muscles in Rozanov's forearms corded, his shoulders bunched, and Shane could see the power in him plainly.

"Higher," she said from above him.

"Bossy," Rozanov replied, but he adjusted easily.

"You can take it," Rose said, and when Rozanov lowered her, she was grinning.

"I like you very much," Rozanov told her. "You are almost as stubborn as your stage manager."

"Almost?" Rose laughed as she moved into the next sequence. "I taught him everything he knows."

Their chemistry was immediate, not romantic, but the kind of partnership that made choreography *sing*. She was beautiful. So was he. Rose matched his energy, trading flourishes, pushing back when he showed off. When he added an extra rotation to a lift, she extended her line further to match his own flashier flow. When she landed, Rozanov was beaming.

"See, Hollander?" he called toward the mirror, toward Shane's reflection. "This is how it should be. Partner who is not afraid to make change."

Rose shot Shane an apologetic look, but she was still smiling as they kept going.

It was unfair how good he was. Shane had worked with technically perfect dancers before, Dale had been flawless, but this was different. Rozanov didn't just execute the choreography; he made it look like he'd invented it. Made it look easy.

Which made Shane want to find something wrong with it all the more.

“Again,” the ballet master called, and they reset.

This time when they moved through the partnering sequence, Shane noticed how Rozanov adjusted his grip to accommodate Rose’s RWB training—smaller adjustments in hand placement, different timing on the promenade. He was learning her style even as he danced it.

Rose said something Shane couldn’t hear, and Rozanov snickered a laugh. She was easy with him in a way Shane couldn’t imagine being, teasing him between phrases, correcting his hand placement on her waist with a slap that made him mock-wince and pout like a child.

“You are very violent partner,” Rozanov complained, hardly sounding like he minded.

“You love it,” Rose replied, and reset for the next lift.

She was right. He did.

From the sidelines, Shane crossed his arms over his chest, head tilting to the side to watch more closely. There had to be something. A missed count, a sloppy transition, any small flaw he could point out later to prove that Rozanov wasn’t as untouchable as he thought.

But Rozanov only continued with his lift, hoisting her overhead like she weighed nothing. They moved, gracefully returning her to earth before sliding into the next leap, and when Rozanov’s feet hit the ground again, he turned toward the mirror—toward Shane—and *winked*.

That asshole!

Shane walked out of the studio before he did anything stupid, like keep watching, or worse: before he admitted that Rozanov might actually be worth the trouble he was causing.

Rozanov was transcendent when he danced, Shane could admit that, *privately*, while standing in the wings with his headset on and not in the same room as that show off. It was infuriating.

Shane himself had tried performing once, after years of lessons as a child and professional classes, and then a semester in college before he realized his brain worked better behind the scenes than in front of an audience. His mother had been disappointed in the shift—*you’re happy just making other people look good? What about you?*—but the control freak within him was better suited for this role backstage. He could read a space, anticipate problems, coordinate moving parts... but he didn’t have whatever made someone like Ilya so compelling to watch. Sometimes it felt like inadequacy, but more and more often Shane allowed himself the truth: it was just different wiring.

Which was fine. Shane liked his wiring. It meant he ran the tightest productions in Winnipeg, if not the whole of Canada, and stars like Ilya Rozanov needed people like him to make their brilliance actually happen on schedule.

But yes, Rozanov was *infuriating*.

So Shane kept himself busy as best he could, and avoided studio three.

“He’s something,” Jackie said during the break, appearing at Shane’s elbow with two coffees. She managed most of the costuming, and she’d stopped by the studio while her husband Hayden helped with the rigging of various lights and props backstage. “Very talented. Very pretty. Very aware of both those things.”

Shane accepted the coffee without looking away from his notes. “He’s a nightmare.”

“He’s been here four hours.”

“It’s been a long four hours.”

Jackie laughed. “I heard he arrived this morning and was looking for you immediately, and then during that practice, he was looking *at* you.”

“He keeps *arguing* with me.”

“Those aren’t mutually exclusive.” She bumped his shoulder.

Shane didn’t dignify that with a response. He had a production to run.

The Keg on Main Street had a Monday special on sirloin that Hayden swore by, and Shane tended to trust his opinion on food, which was how he ended up in a booth with three people who actually understood why he looked like he’d aged a decade in four hours.

Hayden cut into his steak with the kind of aggression usually reserved for rigging particularly shitty, uncooperative equipment. “I’m telling you, the guy’s a *nightmare*. Showed up this morning and started moving shit around like he owns the place. My wiring? Fucked. My stacks of gear? Also fucked. *Fuck* that guy.”

“Swear jar, baby. And... I mean... He *does* kind of own the place,” Jackie said from beside her husband. She’d changed out of her work clothes into jeans and a sweater, her dark hair pulled back in a ponytail, and was lounging comfortably in their shitty vinyl booth. “He’s the star. That’s how it works, doesn’t it?”

“He moved the *tree*,” Shane said.

Rose Landry, sitting across from him, raised her wine glass. “To be fair, the sightlines could be better. I’ve been saying that for weeks.”

Shane pointed his fork at her. “*You’re* supposed to be on my side.”

“I am on your side.” Rose’s smile was warm, the one that made her a favorite with audiences since she’d joined RWB five years ago, the one that dazzled even before she stepped into her first *arabesque*. The same one that had Shane sort of, almost, not-quite-right in love with her. “But I also saw him dance. He’s incredible, Shane. Like, *genuinely* incredible.”

“He’s an *asshole*.”

“Again, those aren’t mutually exclusive,” Jackie said. She stole a fry from Hayden’s plate. “Talented people are often difficult. It’s part of the package.”

“The package can go back to Moscow,” Shane muttered.

Hayden laughed and raised his beer. “Amen to that. A few more weeks and he’s gone, though. We just have to survive until Christmas Eve, and then we never have to deal with his bullshit again.”

“Christmas *cannot* come soon enough.”

“Oh, also, Shane, he was asking about you,” Rose said.

Shane nearly choked on his own food. “What?”

“After rehearsal. He wanted to know how long you’d been with the company, what other productions you’d worked on.” Rose swirled her wine, watching him over the rim of her glass. “I think he’s impressed.”

“He has a funny way of showing it.”

“He’s Russian,” Jackie said, like that explained everything. “They’re direct. Confrontational. It doesn’t mean the same thing it would coming from someone Canadian.”

“It means he’s an asshole in Russian,” Hayden said. “He was on his phone during the whole party scene run-through, too. Like, we’re trying to time the toy soldier cues, and he’s just... scrolling.”

Rose snorted. “He was also very busy flirting with half the corps during breaks. I watched him work the room like he was collecting phone numbers for a scavenger hunt. I can’t say he’s interested in the *show* but he clearly has, ahem, *interests* if you know what I mean.”

Shane laughed despite himself. The tension in his shoulders eased slightly as the conversation drifted to other topics: Jackie’s ongoing battle with the wardrobe department over missing buttons, Hayden’s plan to reorganize the fly system, their herd of children in RWB’s youth courses, Rose’s sister visiting from Toronto for opening night.

It was comfortable. Easy. These were his people.

“You look tired, Shane.” Rose said as they were finishing up. Her eyes were kind, concerned in the way only a real friend’s could be. “Are you sleeping?”

“What do you think?” Shane said, laughing. “You know my answer by now: I’ll sleep after the run for this production ends.”

“That’s *weeks* away.”

“Then I’ll be very well-rested in a few weeks. I’m thinking about hibernating for a month or two.”

Rose shook her head but didn't push. She knew him well enough to recognize when he'd dug in.

They paid and headed out into the November cold, breath fogging in the air. Hayden and Jackie peeled off toward their car with promises to see him tomorrow. Rose lingered, pulling her coat tighter around herself.

"He's going to be a handful," she said.

Shane didn't need to ask who she meant. "I know."

"But he's good for the production. You know that too."

Shane did know. That was the problem.

Rose squeezed his arm. "Try not to kill him before opening night, okay? I need my Nutcracker alive. *I* get to be a star too if he's here."

"You are *always* a star. And no promises," Shane said, smiling.

He watched her walk to her car, then headed to his own, hands shoved deep in his pockets. The heater took three tries to start, and by the time warm air finally blasted through the vents, his fingers were numb.

Just until Christmas Eve. He could survive until then.

Maybe.

Tuesday's rehearsal moved to the stage, which meant Shane had less of an excuse to escape should a certain someone decide to... look... at him during dancing. He stood in the house with his headset on, watching the dancers mark through the party scene while the lighting designer adjusted levels overhead.

Rozanov arrived late, which seemed to be his standard operating procedure. He swept onto the stage in sweatpants and a tank top that showed off his arms, those ridiculous shoulders, and Shane refused to look at any of it. He had cues to call.

"From the top of the party scene," Shane said into the headset, and the music started.

For twenty minutes, everything ran smoothly. The dancers hit their marks, the lighting cues landed on time, and Shane started to think that maybe today wouldn't end with him fantasizing about strangling their star dancer with his own headset cord.

Then Rozanov stopped mid-choreography.

"Wait, wait." He held up one hand, and the music cut off. "This entrance for Drosselmeyer, is wrong."

Shane's pen stilled on his cue sheet. "The entrance is exactly as blocked."

“Yes, I know this.” Rozanov walked upstage, gesturing as he went. “He steps in from stage left, yes? But Drosselmeyer is magician, he should appear, not walk like normal person going to grocery store buying things for making tuna melt. He needs entrance from above, or through trap door, or at minimum from upstage center so lights can hide him until moment of reveal.”

“Rozanov,” Shane said, sounding exasperated, “we don’t have a trap door not time to build one into the stage.”

“Then fly him in.”

Fly him in? The fuck? Shane barked out a laugh and was just about to deliver the most satisfying *fuck no* of his career until he recalled: 2013. That season they’d done *La Sylphide*, and used wire rigging for the fairies to make them more ethereal... and much of that equipment and other items were here. A chance in the blocking yes, and he’d be a hypocrite for considering flinging a person in the air when he’d refused to move a *tree* but...

It did make for a frustratingly intriguing idea.

Shane clicked through to the stage crew. “Hayden, do we have the capacity to fly someone in for the Drosselmeyer entrance?”

A pause. Then Price’s voice cracked back: “I mean, yeah, we could rig a wire descent. But that’s a full day of rigging work and another day of safety rehearsals. You want to add that to the schedule? I can do it, man, but...”

Rozanov was watching Shane from the stage, waiting.

“No,” Shane said into the headset. Then louder, to Rozanov: “We’re not adding a fly system three weeks out. It’s... not a terrible idea, but again, we don’t have the time for that change while staying on schedule, so the blocking stands.”

“Is *boring* blocking.”

“It’s *safe* blocking that doesn’t require insurance waivers and union overtime to install the rigging last minute.”

Rozanov turned to the dancer playing Drosselmeyer, an older company member named Cliff who’d been with RWB for fifteen years. “Your entrance has no magic to it. You look like man who misses applause. What do *you* think?”

Cliff glanced between Rozanov and Shane, clearly aware he was being used as a pawn. Shane also knew the man well enough to know that he was an adrenaline junkie and would’ve loved being flung through the theatre. “I mean... I wouldn’t mind a more dramatic entrance.”

“See?” Rozanov spread his hands. “Even he knows.”

Shane came down the aisle and up the stage stairs. The other dancers had backed away, sensing a fight. Rose caught his eye from upstage and mouthed *good luck* before pretending to adjust her pointe shoes.

Rozanov stood center stage, still sweating from the previous run-through, his tank top clinging to his chest and shoulders. Shane walked toward him, closing the distance until he had to tilt his head back to meet Rozanov's eyes. Rozanov didn't step back or give him the space most people would, instead, he actually looked *thrilled* by the possibility of an altercation, and his plush lips spread into a crooked sort of snarling smile. Shane could smell his sweat, he could see the dampness at his hairline where curls stuck to his forehead.

"You can't just change choreography because you think it lacks 'magic,'" Shane said when he reached Rozanov. "This is a co-production. We've been over this already, these things have already been decided and last minute changes is not how RWB does things."

"Yes, before I arrive to see how bad it is." Rozanov stepped closer, and Shane became aware of how the stage lights made his eyes look almost gold. "You are afraid of change, I think. Everything must be exactly as you plan it, even when plan is shit."

"I'm afraid of adding complexity that we don't have time to execute safely."

"Ugh. *Attempt* to have some imagination, Mr. Business. No rigging, fine. So we do simpler version." Rozanov turned and walked upstage, and when he passed Shane, his hand landed on Shane's shoulder firmly, moving him aside like a piece of furniture. The touch lasted less than a second, but Shane's skin burned through his shirt where Rozanov's palm had been. Rozanov's long-legged strides ate up the distance to center stage. He positioned himself just behind where the Christmas tree stood. "Lights go dark here... during moment when children are sleeping?"

"For four counts," Shane confirmed.

"Perfect. Drosselmeyer enters here during dark, gets into position behind tree, steps out in time with a coloured flash—magic—and then it is better than sad man wandering on stage." Rozanov demonstrated, moving behind the tree and then stepping out to the side. The tree's branches would hide him until the reveal. "Is simple. Is better, even you must see that. You add one cue to lighting sequence. Tell children to look stage right on cue so they are surprised when he appears stage left. Done."

Shane hated that it would work.

He hated that Rozanov was right.

The solution was simple. Effective. Exactly the kind of staging choice that would've occurred to Shane himself if he hadn't been so focused on following the agreed-upon plan. Which meant admitting Rozanov was right felt like admitting he'd been rigid.

Except...

"One condition," Shane said. "You run it past the ballet master first. This is your idea, you clear it with her. I'm not doing your diplomacy."

Rozanov's smile faltered slightly. "You want me to ask nicely? This is your kink, yes?"

What a cheeky fucker.

“You said it was a better idea. Prove it.” Shane met his eyes. “If it’s really such an improvement, the ballet master will agree. Unless you’re worried she won’t?”

“Oh, she will. Just as you have now.” Rozanov smiled at him, lazy and smug. His gaze dropped to Shane’s mouth, to the frown Shane was *sure* he was wearing, lingered there for half a second, then flicked back up to meet Shane’s eyes. Shane caught it. Rozanov made sure he did. “See? Is not so hard to admit when I am right.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

“Oh, I think I will get very used to it.” Rozanov walked past him, bumping their shoulders on purpose in a blatant check. “You will bend for me many times, I think, before this production is over.”

Shane’s face heated and he sputtered, unable to form words fast enough. Rozanov had to know how that sounded.

The bastard was laughing as he walked away, already crossing to where Cliff and two corps dancers were standing. “You two. I have question—the RCMP officers in battle scene,” Rozanov said loudly enough for Shane to hear. “Why are there police? Police do not fight mice. Soldiers fight mice—toy soldiers. This is very strange *Canadian* thing... And you! Marlow!”

Cliffed head snapped up, “Uh, yeah, Roz?”

Roz? Were they friends now?

“Come. You show me where is good coffee in this city, and I tell you about trap door disaster from Mariinsky, maybe five years back.” Rozanov threw an arm around Cliff’s shoulders, steering him toward the exit. “Dancer fell through stage—flew down into basement like cartoon. No one died, but very close. Was on live television. Everyone love it.”

“Strip.”

Shane nearly dropped the costume list he’d been reading over. He looked up to find Rozanov standing in the middle of the costume shop, Jackie already circling him with her measuring tape in hand.

“My favorite part,” Rozanov said, setting down his water bottle. “I stand still, people poke me with sharp things. Very relaxing. At least you are very beautiful woman.”

Jackie only laughed and swatted his arm. “I am *married*, Mr. Rozanov.”

“No, no, call me Ilya, and run away with me.”

Another playful swat. “I said, *strip*, Mr. Rozanov.”

“Bossing me around will only make me love you more. I have warned you.” Rozanov grinned. He pulled his tank top off in one smooth motion.

Shane’s throat went dry.

He looked stunning. All at once, Shane was again astounded and irritated by how manly Rozanov was: the sharp edge of his jaw, the defined planes of his musculature. He was so tall and strongly proportioned and... god, they would’ve loved him in the Renaissance. People would’ve paid to have statues like this in their homes. And... oh? Shane’s eyes flicked to the hollow of this throat, noticing a gold crucifix. The chain caressed the base of Rozanov’s long neck, the cross resting comfortably on his broad chest.

Jackie stepped forward, all business. “Arms out.”

Rozanov complied, spreading his arms wide. His biceps flexed, and Shane tracked the movement, watching the way his chest expanded when he breathed, the definition in his obliques when he shifted his weight.

“Turn,” Jackie said.

Rozanov turned, and Shane saw the bare skin of his back. For a Russian, his skin was a lot more golden than it had any right to be. *All* of him was golden. There was a small mole just below his left shoulder blade. Shane looked back down at the costume list in his hands and pretended to read it. Really, there were so *many* other things to pretend to be interested in or looking at in here: bolts of tulle and silk lined the shelves along the back wall in neat rows organized by color, and two dress forms stood near the window wearing partially finished Sugar Plum variations...

And... then he could *feel* Rozanov looking at him.

Shane risked another glance over, and Rozanov caught his eye in the mirror across the room.

That crooked smile spread across his face, lazy and knowing. He shifted his stance slightly, shoulders rolling back, and Shane realized the bastard was *posing*.

“You are reading very intently, Hollander,” Rozanov said. “Should I flex more? Turn slower? I can make easier for you to... concentrate.”

Shane quickly turned his eyes to the floor. He had worked with hundreds of male and female dancers in his life, in fitting rooms and costume shops just like this one. People were naked all over the place backstage, especially for costume changes. It was just part of the ballet life. He had never looked at any of his cast before though. It was just... unthinkable.

“Fuck off, Rozanov.”

“Such language. And in front of my beloved *Jackie*.” Rozanov’s grin widened. “I am only trying to help. You were staring so hard, I thought maybe you needed better angle.”

Jackie snorted, looping the measuring tape around Rozanov’s chest. “Both of you behave. I have six more fittings today, and I don’t have time for this.”

“I am behaving perfectly,” Rozanov said, pouting. “Is Hollander who has problem.”

“*You* are my problem, Rozanov!”

Today’s rehearsal ran long.

Act 1 Scene 1’s party scene needed polish. The children kept missing their entrances. The orchestra had shown up an hour late because of traffic from a Jets game, and Rozanov was... Rozanov. By the time Shane called a break, his headset felt like it was crushing his skull and his throat was dry from calling cues. Dancers and back stage staff scattered to each and rest, and Shane lingered a moment to leave his things neatly organized before going to the break room to grab his own food... only to find Rozanov already there, sitting with Cliff and two other male dancers Shane recognized from the corps. They were speaking a mix of English and what sounded like terrible attempts at Russian phrases, Rozanov correcting their pronunciation between bites of his sandwich and laughing when Boodram, who was playing the Rat King, tried to say something that came out completely wrong.

“Wait, wait—how do you say ‘good job’ again?” Boodram asked.

“Moodlets,” one of the other dancers attempted.

“No, no—*blyat* is more... here, watch my mouth—” Rozanov demonstrated.

“*Blyat!*”

Rozanov blinked, “Wow. You say that one perfect. No accent. *Molodets* is good, but clearly *fuck* excites you more.”

The table erupted in laughter.

Shane grabbed his food and left before anyone noticed him, eating on the go as he returned to the theatre. Technically eating in here was not allowed but... technically... no one here would give *Shane* of all people a hard time about it. He nibbled on a protein bar, standing in the house, ten rows back from the orchestra pit in the center section where the sight lines converged. His spot. *The* spot for him, really where he had the best view of all goings on inside the theatre.

RWB’s main theatre held just over 800 seats, the rows rising in a steep rake toward the back wall. It wasn’t as grand as Toronto’s Four Seasons Centre, but the intimacy worked in their favor. Audiences sat close enough to see sweat on the dancers’ faces, close enough to hear pointe shoes strike the stage. The proscenium arch framed the stage in dark wood and gilt that caught the work lights, and Shane could see clear across to the stage left wing from here, which was exactly why he knew Rozanov’s Drosselmeyer entrance would land wrong.

He finished the protein bar, crumpled the wrapper, and checked his watch. Five more minutes before he’d call everyone back. He headed down the aisle toward the stage, took the side stairs up, and cut through the wings to check the props table one more time. The break room

chatter had died down—people were filtering back, stretching, retaping toes, adjusting costumes.

Shane was restacking the soldier props when he heard footsteps behind him. He turned to grab his water bottle from where he'd left it on an equipment case, tilting his head back to drink. The cold hit his throat, and he closed his eyes for half a second of peace.

"Hollander. The snow machine."

Shane choked. Water went down the wrong pipe and he coughed, eyes watering as he turned to find Rozanov standing two feet away, already invading his space. His lunch break was clearly *over*.

What was that wood? Fuck? *Blyat*.

"Ah—okay. What about it?" Shane managed once he could breathe again.

"Is in wrong place." Rozanov gestured toward the stage. "Needs to be stage right, not stage left. Snow falls wrong direction for Clara's entrance."

Shane screwed the cap back on the water bottle. "The snow machine is exactly where it needs to be. We've been testing it for three weeks. The fall pattern is perfect."

"For version you planned, maybe. But Russian version, Clara enters from opposite side." A single caged work light overhead threw harsh shadows across Rozanov's face. "So snow falls wrong way. She walks through nothing instead of snow falling around her like magic. Is less beautiful."

The wings were narrow here, barely six feet deep before the brick exterior wall cut off any further retreat. Costume racks crowded one side, heavy with Act Two tutus wrapped in garment bags. The prop table took up the other side, cluttered with the toy soldiers' rifles and the oversized pocket watch for Drosselmeyer. Everything stank like fog machine juice.

"We're not doing the Russian version," Shane said. His back hit the wall, and when he tried to shift sideways, a coiled cable dug into his spine. "Clara enters stage left. The snow machine stays where it is."

"But *why*?" Rozanov spread his hands. "Is simple fix. Move machine, Clara enters other side, is better for everyone."

"Because we blocked it stage left, and moving it puts snow under the Clara entrance track. Wet Marley, pointe shoes. I'm not breaking ankles for symmetry. And because the costume change happens stage right, and we'd have to move that too. Because the lighting plot is designed for stage left, and we don't have time to re-plot every cue in that sequence." Shane could feel his pulse in his temples. "We're not rebuilding the entire second act because you think it looks nicer the Russian way."

"Is not about nice. Is about *correct*." Rozanov's eyes narrowed. He stepped closer as he spoke, and Shane realized the bastard was *enjoying* this. He invaded Shane's space like he

had every right to be there, and Shane had no right to be here at all. “You don’t understand because you are not performer. You sit in booth, you push buttons, you tell people where to stand. But you don’t *feel* the stage. You don’t know what works and what doesn’t.”

Shane’s fingers tightened around the water bottle until the plastic crackled.

“You’re right,” he said. “I’m *not* a performer. I’m the person who makes sure performers don’t break their ankles on wet Marley because some visiting star wanted prettier staging. I’m the person who knows this building’s fly system has a three-second delay that your ‘perfect Russian staging’ doesn’t account for. I’m the person who’s been here for seven years making sure every production runs safely, on time, and without lawsuits, *perfectly* every night, every season.”

He stepped closer, nearly chest to chest now, leaning *up* to hiss directly into his face. Rozanov’s eyebrows rose slightly but he didn’t back down—of course he didn’t, the bastard never did.

“You’ve performed on stages all over the world?” Shane seethed. “*Great*. I’ve run productions on this specific stage for longer than you’ve been a principal. So maybe before you lecture me about what I don’t know, consider that *you* don’t know a goddamn thing about running a theatre.”

For a fraction of a second, Rozanov’s eyebrows rose and his mouth parted slightly before his jaw set again. Surprise, maybe. Or—

“And you don’t know *anything* about me.”

He shoved past Rozanov, their shoulders colliding hard enough that Rozanov stumbled back, but Shane was already walking away, the water bottle still clenched in his fist. Behind him, he heard Rozanov call something—his name, maybe, or some comment he didn’t want to hear.

He didn’t stop until he reached the administrative hallway, where the theatrical chaos gave way to bureaucratic calm. Walls here were painted institutional beige instead of theatre black, lit by fluorescent panels that hummed overhead, and there weren’t any Russian dancers who could corner him to dissect his failures.

His hands were shaking.

He set the water bottle down on a desk and braced his palms against the edge, breathing through his nose until his pulse slowed.

There’d been a time where... maybe... if he’d pushed himself harder, made himself fit, if his wiring wasn’t wrong...

Shane shook his head. *No*, he thought, *no*, *that bastard doesn’t know anything about me and I am good at this. I am. I am...*

Rozanov didn't know anything. He didn't know about the auditions Shane had bombed in college, the sleepless nights of panic before a call, the pressure he was under from his mother despite her good intentions, that time he'd tripped and fallen and the crowd *laughed*. He had no idea what it was like to be different in more than one way, to be starry eyed and singled out for being 'mixed', like it was a dirty word when he introduced himself as half-Japanese in a world of only one color. Rozanov didn't know about the panic attacks, the way Shane's brain would go blank the second the lights came up now. He didn't know that Shane had loved dancing right up until the moment he had to do it *for* other people, and then it had felt like drowning.

He didn't know any of it. He didn't know, and Shane didn't *care*, he loved ballet, he loved himself, he...

Why did it still hurt?

He ran the cleanest *Nutcracker* in the country. And still, somehow, he was the invisible part of it.

The corps had been practicing the ice-pond hockey sequence for forty minutes when Shane heard the studio door slam open hard enough to rattle the mirrors.

"What is *this*?"

Shane didn't need to turn around to know who'd just walked in. Rozanov's accent rolled across the studio, warm and loud enough to make heads turn.

"It's the hockey scene," Shane said without looking up from his blocking notes.

"*Hockey*." Rozanov said the word like it tasted rotten. "Tell me you did not put *puck* in my *Nutcracker*. This is *ballet*. Not... not *sports*. What is next, we add basketball? American football? Maybe monster trucks?"

"It's Canadian," Shane said. He clicked his pen and made a note about the formation spacing. "Hockey is part of our culture."

And... more than that, it was a memory. Standing here even now, listening to the *whrring* of those plastic wheels as they rattled over the Marley always made him picture outdoor rinks and scraped knees and dads shoveling ice at dawn.

"We can sell hot dogs in the wings next. Drizzle with maple syrup. Buy one, get one *grand jeté*. Pike can put scoreboard over proscenium."

"Shut *up*, Rozanov."

But Rozanov did not, in fact, shut up.

"In Russia, we have culture too." Rozanov's footsteps crossed the studio floor. "We do not put it in middle of *Nutcracker* like... like commercial for Tim Hortons."

Shane bit back a laugh. “Tim Hortons is also Canadian culture.”

“It is bad coffee because is not European coffee, not culture, and this is my *point*.”

On stage—well, on the studio floor marked with tape to simulate the stage—six corps dancers glided across the Marley on rollerblades, sticks in hand, passing a foam puck between them. The choreography was clever, actually, built like a *divertissement*, lines opening and closing around the puck, patterns clean enough to read from the house. A lead dancer executing a series of turns while maintaining balance on wheels, the others weaving around him in patterns that mimicked both hockey plays and classical formations. It still looked insane on wheels, and Shane loved everything about it.

It was also, Shane had to admit, a little ridiculous.

“*Sveta, tebe nuzhno posmotret’ na eto der’mo*,” Rozanov had his phone out, filming. Or was he on a video call with someone from home? The glow of the screen lit his face as he watched through the camera, tracking the dancers’ movements.

A tiny voice came out through the phone’s speakers: “*Chto eto takoye, chert voz’mi? Podozhdite, eto zhe tak milo, chto eto?*”

“They are on *wheels*,” Rozanov continued in English, gesturing wildly with his free hand, still filming. “This is ice skating, yes? So why not actual ice? Commit, Hollander. Flood the orchestra pit. Bring Zamboni. You can put real hockey rink in theatre. Make everyone very wet and cold and miserable like true Canadian experience—”

The lead dancer attempted a *pirouette*, only for their wheels to catch. He careened sideways, arms windmilling, headed straight for the pianist.

Shane’s hand shot out and grabbed Rozanov’s arm, yanking him backward at the last second as the dancer sailed past them and crashed into the wall with a thud that made the mirrors shake. Rozanov’s phone jerked in his hand, the video capturing the moment at a wild angle. The puck skittered across the floor and came to rest against Shane’s foot.

For a second, nobody moved.

Rozanov lowered his phone, thumb moving across the screen. Shane caught a glimpse of a woman, a face, before the call ended. Rozanov’s mouth twitched into a grin as he typed something back, then pocketed the phone. “You see? I arrive and immediately someone tries to die.”

Shane was still holding his arm. Rozanov’s bicep was warm and solid under his palm, and Shane could feel the muscle flex as Rozanov gestured with his other hand toward the dancer currently untangling himself from a folding chair.

“Careful,” Rozanov said softly. “You keep grabbing me like this, people will talk.”

He let go and stepped back.

“Are you okay?” Shane called to the dancer, who gave a shaky thumbs-up.

“This is what I am saying,” Rozanov said. “Is *ballet*. We do not need gimmicks. Tchaikovsky does not write music for hockey. Next you will tell me there is curling scene. Or... or lacrosse.”

“The audience loves it,” Shane said. “This show is for Canadians. For Winnipeggers. People who grew up skating on frozen ponds and playing street hockey. It’s *fun*. Stop being such a fun sucker.”

“What is *fun sucker*?” Rozanov repeated the words like Shane had suggested they perform the entire ballet in clown costumes. “You think I am... What is word... fun sucker?”

“Someone who ruins fun. Takes the joy out of things.”

“Ah.” Rozanov’s eyebrows rose. “But I am not this. I *love* fun. Sucking is always fun, no?”

Shane’s face heated. “That’s—that’s not what—”

“In Russia, we have saying: *dazhe yozh poymot*.” Rozanov pronounced each syllable slowly, like Shane was particularly dense. “‘Even hedgehog understands.’ Meaning is so obvious that even small animal with brain like walnut can see truth. And truth is: ballet is *not* hockey.”

“And yet,” Shane said blithely, “we’re doing it anyway.”

Rozanov stared at him. Then he laughed, and the sound was sharp as it bounced off the set pieces. “You are *very* stubborn, Hollander. You enjoy making me suffer. Stubborn and boring, and you have terrible taste. But I think...” He paused, and his gaze dropped briefly to where Shane had grabbed his arm moments ago. “I think maybe you are also little bit fun. Just very small amount. Like grain of salt.”

“Thanks,” Shane said flatly. “That’s the nicest thing you’ve said to me all week.”

“Week is not over yet.” Rozanov smiled. “Maybe tomorrow I say something nicer. If you behave.”

He walked away before Shane could respond, leaving Shane standing there with a foam hockey puck at his feet and the ghost of Rozanov’s body heat still warm against his palm.

Shane’s ladder hit the stage floor with a crash that made three dancers jump.

“Shit.” Hayden stared at the bent aluminum frame. One of the supports had buckled when he’d tried to extend it, the metal warping with a sound like a gunshot. “Yeah, fuck that, that’s not safe.”

“No shit.” Shane looked up at the catwalk fifteen feet overhead, then back at the ruined ladder. The Christmas tree’s counterweight mechanism had jammed during morning rehearsal, leaving the tree stuck at half-height. Without manual adjustment, the tree wouldn’t clear the snow drop for tonight’s run-through. “Don’t we have another one? The... uh... there’s a red one, I think.”

“Yep, I know the one. I’ll grab the spare from storage,” Hayden said. “Just give me twenty minutes to dig it out from behind the *Swan Lake* crap.”

“Thanks.” Shane pulled out his phone to check the rehearsal schedule, already calculating whether they could push the snow scene back—

“Is problem?”

Shane’s shoulders tensed. He didn’t need to look up to know who’d appeared behind him. Rozanov had a gift for materializing whenever Shane thought he’d get five minutes of peace.

“The ladder broke,” Hayden said, already heading toward the wings. “Be right back. Don’t kill each other and don’t do anything dumb.”

His footsteps faded, leaving Shane alone with Rozanov and the broken ladder between them. The house was empty, seats rising in the dark beyond the footlights, the open stage suddenly feeling too exposed.

Rozanov’s hair was still damp from the shower, curling at his temples. He’d changed into jeans and a thin sweater that clung to his chest and shoulders. “Why you need ladder?”

“The counterweight mechanism needs adjustment, and since it’s up there,” Shane gestured toward the catwalk, which was a narrow steel grate bolted above them that ran the length of the stage. “And it’s manual access only, I also need to get up there to fix it.”

Rozanov studied the setup, head tilting as he traced the rigging lines with his eyes. Then he looked at Shane. “How much you weigh?”

Shane’s stomach flipped. “*No.*”

“I have not said—”

“I know what you’re about to suggest. The answer is no.”

“I could lift you.” Rozanov stepped closer, close enough that Shane caught the clean scent of his soap. “Two minutes. Very simple. I lift Rose every day. I never drop her.”

“Rose is *tiny*, and I’m waiting for the ladder.”

“Because you do not trust me.” Rozanov’s mouth curved. “You think I will drop you on your head. Make big mess. Ruin your perfect schedule.”

“I think,” Shane said, “that there’s no reason to do something dangerous when I don’t have to.”

“Ah, yes. Mr. Safety. Mr. Protocol.” Rozanov moved around the broken ladder, closing the distance between them. “Always you must have permission, forms signed in triplicate, union representative present to watch you sneeze. You know what I think?”

“I don’t care what you think.”

“I think you are afraid of me.”

Shane scoffed. “I’m not afraid of you. I’m afraid of breaking my *neck* two weeks out from opening night.”

“That *would* make it easier for me to change things to the way they should be.” Rozanov was close now, close enough that Shane had to tilt his head back to meet his eyes. “But... no, I think. Even if you do not understand what it is to be on this stage and breathe it as the dancers do. They risk themselves every day for the art.”

“You’re delusional.”

“Am I?” Rozanov’s voice dropped lower. “I think you are coward. Come on, Hollander, have some balls. Let me lift you. Fix your problem. Unless you prefer to stand here and wait like good boy while Hayden brings ladder and does job for you. Let Hayden fix all the things, maybe. Why are you even here?”

Shane’s grip tightened on the wrench in his hand until the metal bit into his palm.

He had built his entire career on being the person who solved problems before anyone else noticed them. He belonged back here. He knew the timing, the weight limits, the margins where disaster lived. Every clean cue and seamless shift was proof that he wasn’t ornamental. He was *necessary*.

“*Fine*.” Shane said it too fast, the edge unmistakable. He stepped under the rigging and tilted his chin up at Ilya. “Lift me.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows rose. His gaze dragged over Shane, slow and assessing, like he was recalculating the situation on the fly. The corner of his mouth twitched. He clearly hadn’t expected Shane to take the bait. “You are sure?”

Shane pressed his tongue to the back of his grit teeth. “Yes. Come on already, before I change my mind.”

“Okay.” Rozanov rolled his shoulders, an athlete preparing for performance. He moved behind Shane, and Shane felt the heat of him even before Rozanov’s hands settled on his waist. Thumbs anchored at his lower back. Fingers curved around bone, not squeezing yet, just claiming position. Shane’s stomach tightened reflexively. “You will need to trust me.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“Have it your way. Makes it more exciting.” Rozanov’s fingers tightened. “On three. One—”

The floor dropped.

Shane sucked in a sharp breath as his boots cleared the stage. His balance went liquid for half a second, panic flaring before the grip at his waist locked him in place. Rozanov didn’t wobble or strain, and his hands were solid around his waist, thumbs pressing into his lower back, fingers spreading across his ribs. And—and for a bizarre second, all Shane could think

of was what it had to *look* like, how *could* this look like Rozanov had during the *Grand Pas de Deux* with Rose since he was twice her weight and a full head taller and—

Focus, Shane.

“Higher,” Shane said, forcing his brain back to the task at hand, and reached out for the catwalk railing. “You need to lift me higher if I’m going to reach it.”

“Bossy.” Rozanov shifted his grip, lifting Shane another six inches. His hands slid up Shane’s ribcage, and Shane sucked in a breath as his fingers missed the railing.

“You are very tense,” Rozanov said from below him. “Relax. I will not drop you.”

“I’m not tense.”

“Your back is like iron. Also, you are holding your breath.” A pause. “Also, I can feel heartbeat through your shirt. Like little rabbit in there, kicking away. *Uspokoysya, krolík.*”

“Oh just stuff it already—”

Shane grabbed the catwalk railing and pulled himself up, getting his knees onto the platform. From up here, the stage shrank to a playing board, its dimensions foreshortened and strange. The Christmas tree looked absurd in its painted grandeur, a prop rather than the focal point it would become under stage lighting. Above him, the grid stretched into darkness—a maze of pipes and electrical conduit, lighting instruments hanging like sleeping bats. Beyond the tree he could see clear across to the opposite wing, could trace the diagonal of the RCMP entrance path in glow tape. Below, Rozanov stood directly beneath him in the spill of the work lights, looking up.

He could see the *top* of Rozanov’s head, and it was a thrilling change of their normal height difference. Looking down at him, rather than *up*, was a welcome change. And now that he was up here, he could actually fix the counterweight... which ended up being very simple: only a jammed pulley that needed persuading. Shane worked it free, testing the resistance until the tree descended smoothly.

“Is fixed?” Rozanov called up.

“Yeah.” Shane looked down and found Rozanov watching him, arms crossed over his chest.

“Good. Now come down.”

Shane hesitated. “How about I just wait for Hayden to come back with the ladder to come down?”

“How about I fuck your mother. Come on, Hollander. Jump. I will catch you.”

“I’m not jumping.”

“Why not? You let me lift you already. This is same thing, but backwards.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“No, is easier. Gravity does half the work.” Rozanov spread his arms. “Come. I promise not to let you break anything important.”

“That’s not reassuring.”

“Is best I can offer.” Rozanov’s grin widened. “Unless you want to for Pike to rescue you like frightened cat in a tree. I will wait. I have all day. I will take pictures to share with the kids at practice so they can laugh too.”

Shane looked at the door where Hayden had vanished into, then back at Rozanov.

Fuck it.

“Do *not* let me die.” He swung his legs over the edge of the catwalk and dropped.

For one terrifying second, there was only air. Then Rozanov’s hands caught him, one arm hooking under his thighs, the other around his back, and suddenly Shane was cradled against Rozanov’s chest.

“See?” Rozanov’s face was inches from his own, and his breath was fanning over Shane’s cheek. “I told you. Very simple.”

Shane’s hands had fisted in Rozanov’s sweater, clinging and repulsed and... and...! Oh god, what must this look like right now? Held bridal style, close enough to kiss, holding onto him like a terrified koala in a eucalyptus tree. He was close enough to count Rozanov’s fucking *eyelashes*. If anyone walked in right now—

“You can put me down now!”

“Can I?” Rozanov didn’t move. “But you are so comfortable here. Like little bird in nest.”

“*Rozanov*—” Shane pushed, but it was all arms and no follow-through. His feet stayed planted. His body did not agree with his mouth. He was dizzy with the solid *wall* of Rozanov, how easily he was just *holding* him here, despite being nearly 90kg and almost six feet tall. “Put. Me. Down.”

“Ask me *nicely*, Mr. Hollander,” Rozanov said, dipping his head down even closer still, teasing. An inch, and their lips would touch. Rozanov’s fingers pressed into his ribs, his thigh. Every point of contact burned. “That is your kink, after all.”

Shane was sure his face must’ve been on *fire*. He wanted to strangle Rozanov. He wanted to close that last inch between their mouths and find out if Rozanov tasted as arrogant as he sounded. He wanted to flee the city, the country, and vanish into the ether to wherever there was a place without ballet. He... he wanted to be put down before his heart beat out of his chest, and before fucking Hayden came back and saw exactly how hard Shane was getting from being manhandled like this. God, what was wrong with him?

“... put... me down now, *please*, Rozanov.”

“As you wish.” Rozanov lowered him slowly, letting Shane’s body slide along his own until Shane’s feet touched the ground. Shane felt every inch of the descent—the flex of Rozanov’s arms, the friction of their bodies dragging together, the way his own thighs bracketed Rozanov’s hips for one brief, devastating moment. Even then, his hands lingered on Shane’s waist. “There. Safe and sound. No dropping. No breaking. I am very trustworthy, yes?”

Shane stepped back, and Rozanov’s hands fell away. His fingers were shaking slightly, and he shoved them in his pockets before Rozanov could notice.

Rozanov leaned against the nearby broken ladder, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Was that so terrible?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, he says.” Rozanov repeated the word like it tasted bitter. “I catch you like prince catches princess in fairy tale, and you say is *yes, is terrible*.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“That having my hands on you was *far* from terrible.” Rozanov pushed off the ladder and moved closer. “When I held you, you grabbed my shirt like you were afraid I might let go.” Rozanov’s eyes tracked across Shane’s face. “And right now, you are *blushing*.”

“I’m not—do you have to flirt with everything with legs?” Shane’s skin burned everywhere Rozanov’s eyes landed, and he took a step backwards to steal back what little space now that he could. Rabbit-heart indeed, and Rozanov was looking at him like a *wolf* now. “First Jackie, then Rose, now... this! Are you trying to fuck the entire corps?!”

“Entire RWB? No. Is too much work, even for me.” Rozanov admitted with a shrug. “I focus only on the pretty ones.”

The word *pretty* hit Shane like a fist to the gut, like missing a landing, like missing one of the steps on the stairs in the dark. His pulse hammered so hard he could feel it in his throat, his wrists, between his legs. It roared in his ears. “You’re disgusting.”

“And you look very *pretty*, all pink and distressed for me like this, Hollander. Should I try to fuck *you*?”

“You’re—”

“I am what? Arrogant? Pushy? Too direct?” Rozanov braced one hand against the tree beside Shane’s head. “All of these things are true. But you still have not answered question.”

Rozanov leaned in, his free hand coming up to cup Shane’s jaw. His palm was still warm from Shane’s waist, and Shane could feel his own pulse jumping under Rozanov’s thumb.

“I...”

“Shane?”

Rose's voice carried from the wings, followed shortly by her light footsteps.

Rozanov pulled back smoothly, his hand dropping. By the time Rose appeared around the corner, he was standing at a respectful distance, examining the counterweight mechanism like that was all they'd been doing all along.

"There you are," Rose said, slightly breathless. She carried a stack of costume pieces. "Jackie needs you to approve these button replacements. And—oh, hi Ilya."

"Rose." His voice was perfectly steady, his smile easy. "You are looking very beautiful today."

"Charmer." She rolled her eyes, then looked at Shane. "You okay? You look flushed."

"I'm fine." Shane's voice came out almost normal. "There was... a problem with the tree. Rigging issue. It's fixed now."

"Well, Jackie's in the costume shop when you're free. No rush."

"I'll be right there."

Yes, rush.

Shane didn't give himself time to think. He didn't give himself time to say *anything* to Rozanov. He turned and walked, fast enough that his badge bounced against his chest with the embarrassing little anxious job he was doing now, until the corridor swallowed him whole.

He was so fucked.

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

This silly, spicy, story comes from the powerful mind of [therogueskimo](#) :) Thank you for letting me play in this sandbox!

This work was unbeta'd, so apologies for typos I may have missed in my review. I am doing quite a bit research for this fic and I have a horrifyingly long reference section now dissecting Vagonova vs. NYC vs. RWB ballet styles, but anyone with experience in Ballet and/or Stage Management, I would welcome your feedback in particular! Also I fully admit on the front end of this work that I am taking some artistic liberties: for example, I do have the Nutcracker character dancing with the Sugar Plum Fairy for the Grand Pas De Deux (rather than the usual Cavalier character or Prince Coqueluche), which I thought made for more of a narrative punch with what I wanted to accomplish.

Also, **yes**, the hockey, the animals, the classically Canadian twists to *The Nutcracker* are real, lol. The RWB puts on a neat show! It was a blast to research. [Here is a clip on YouTube!](#)

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🎨 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🦋 “yearning for my own lift”
- 🏒 “dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”
- 🧑‍🎤 🦋 🐭 🎄 “something something Nutcracker”

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

and in this chapter, we start to properly get our bells *jingled* and earn our E rating 🎄

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

“You’re staring at your phone again. Is it really that fun? We’re supposed to be on a date.”

Shane looked up to find Rose sliding into the seat across from him, two paper cups balanced in her hands. The café was warm, fogged windows blurring the grey Winnipeg morning into watercolor smears. String lights blinked red and green along the counter, and a small artificial tree sat next to the register, tilted slightly where someone had bumped it. The barista had looped garland around the espresso machine, and Rose had snowflakes caught in her hair like scattered sequins, and she was wearing the leg warmers Shane bought as a gift last year, shoved into a pair of boots. She pushed one cup toward him, black coffee, no sugar, because she’d known his order for five years now, and wrapped her fingers around her own hot chocolate.

“I’m not staring,” Shane said, waving her off. “I’m checking emails.”

“At seven in the morning? On your day off?” Rose raised an eyebrow. “I had to text you six times to get you here. Six. I counted. Shane, our coffee dates are *sacred*.”

Shane pocketed the phone and took a sip of coffee. It burned his tongue, too hot, and he welcomed the distraction. He *had* been staring at his phone but... okay, fine, it hadn’t been at emails. He’d been staring at the rehearsal schedule, calculating how many hours until he’d have to be in the same room as Rozanov again and pretend that they hadn’t... um...

He wasn’t entirely sure *what* had happened between them. It was just a lift, and then it was definitely not just a lift. Was it a power play? A joke? Some test Shane had failed by letting himself be picked up? Shane’s brain kept circling back to it like a tongue probing a sore tooth; Rozanov’s big hands on his waist, his own fingers had fisted in Rozanov’s sweater, Rozanov calling him *pretty*.

He had been called “pretty boy” a few times before, and he hated it. He wished he hated it this time.

Was... was it possible that Rozanov wasn’t making a joke or a power play at all? It was hard to fathom that he might’ve been serious in his offer. It didn’t make sense, and it didn’t *fit*. People did not see Shane Hollander, and that was by design. He tried to file away the anomaly of it all under *Difficult Personalities* or *Artistic Temperament* or any of the other neat labels Shane used to make sense of the chaos that came with running productions. But Rozanov didn’t fit. He was arrogant, yes. Infuriating, absolutely. And Shane had no idea what

to do with the fact that being challenged, being pushed, being *looked at* like that had made him feel more awake than he'd felt in years.

And, perhaps worst of all: he'd seen something in himself, too, and it was getting harder and harder to unsee it. Rozanov was a pain in the ass. He was also, unfortunately, stunning. Shane told himself, desperately, that this was *irritation*, not interest. Rivals were supposed to get under your skin. That was normal. Wanting to punch someone and wanting them to look at you again were, unfortunately, adjacent impulses.

Shane took another sip of coffee and scalded his tongue worse.

The problem was how he'd felt through all of it. That was the part Shane couldn't rationalize away. He'd been attracted to people before in an abstract, aesthetic way; the same way he could appreciate good lighting design or a perfectly executed *fouetté*. Rozanov was objectively attractive. Anyone with eyes could see that. But getting turned on from being manhandled by an arrogant asshole who'd spent a week making Shane's job harder?

That was new. That was a problem.

Shane had spent two days trying to logic his way out of it. Adrenaline response. Unexpected physical contact. Stress manifesting in weird ways. Except Rozanov had looked at him like he knew *exactly* what he was doing.

You look very pretty all pink and distressed for me like this, Hollander. Should I try to fuck you?

Shane rolled his shoulders and exhaled, trying to shake the memory and the feeling of it all from where it'd lodged in his spine. "I was in the shower for three of those."

"And the other three?"

"Deciding if I wanted to put on real pants."

Rose snorted, laughing. "The fact that you're wearing jeans right now is honestly impressive. I half expected you to show up in your blacks." She blew on her hot chocolate, steam curling between them, and her gaze lingered on his face a beat too long. "You look tired. More than usual, I mean. You've got that thing happening." She gestured vaguely at her own eyes.

Shane resisted the urge to rub his face. He knew what she meant—the shadows that settled under his eyes during tech weeks, the tension he carried in his jaw that he couldn't seem to unclench even in sleep. "It's week two. I always look like this during week two."

"No, this is different." Rose set down her cup. "Week two Shane is stressed and snippy. This Shane is stressed and snippy *and* keeps zoning out mid-sentence. You've checked your phone four times since I sat down, and you're not even reading what's on it. You're just... staring."

Shane's thumb pressed against the side of his cup. She knew him too well, that was the problem. Five years of closing night drinks and Sunday morning coffees and long conversations in the wings during endless tech rehearsals. She'd seen him through two failed

attempts at dating apps, one spectacularly awkward setup with a friend of Hayden's, and the slow realization that he wasn't broken, just wired differently than he'd assumed.

"I'm managing," he said, which wasn't a lie. "The integration is going smoother than I expected."

"Uh-huh." Rose didn't look convinced. "And our visiting prince? How's that going?"

Shane's coffee went down wrong. He coughed, thumping his chest. "He's..." Shane searched for a word that wasn't *infuriating* or *magnetic* or *constantly in my head*.

"That badly, huh?"

"Worse," Shane coughed again, "He is a menace."

"Yes, but at least he's a good dancer; he's challenging to dance with because his style is so *out* there and I don't want to be outshone, but it's been fun partnering with him," Rose said, taking another sip. Over the rim of her cup, Shane caught her studying him again.

"What?"

"I was just thinking. About partnering and all that. Shane... are you... seeing anyone lately? Partnering up?"

This time, Shane didn't choke, but he pulled a face. "You *know* I'm not."

"I know you *weren't* last time I asked. That was two months ago. Things change!"

"Not for me, and not this time of year with everything going on. It's not exactly easy to find... someone... when I basically live in the theatre November through New Year's."

And even if he had time, what would he say? *Hi, I'm Shane, I'm terrible at small talk, I panic in crowds, and I'm maybe-possibly-probably attracted to men but I've never actually done anything about it because the idea of being vulnerable with another person makes me want to crawl out of my skin?*

Dating required vulnerability. It required letting someone see him, *really* see him, much like dancing did and... that... had also not worked out so great. Shane had tried that exactly twice in college and once with Rose and each time he'd felt like an actor reading lines phonetically in a language he didn't actually speak. The women had been lovely. He'd felt nothing beyond friendly affection and the creeping certainty that something in him was possibly broken, even with the lingering thought that he maybe, possibly, definitely noticed men more than women.

Rose hummed, unconvinced. She traced the rim of her cup with one finger, a habit she had when she was working up to saying something she thought he wouldn't like. Shane braced himself.

"So... I've been thinking. My friend Miles is visiting from Toronto in January," she said. "After the run there ends. He's sweet, he's funny, he works in arts administration so he'd actually understand your schedule more than most people. And he's *cute*, Shane."

“Rose—”

“Oh shush, I’m not saying you have to marry him! I’m saying you could get dinner. See a movie. Have a conversation with someone who isn’t me or Hayden or Jackie. Maybe remember what it feels like to be wanted by someone who isn’t your lighting designer asking for overtime approval. God forbid you actually like him, Shane. It wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

“I don’t need you to set me up.”

“I’m saying this because I love you: yes, yes I do.” Rose laughed and set down her hot chocolate, pushing it aside before leaning across the table to scoop up his hands. Shane let her, his coffee forgotten between his elbows. “Just because *we* weren’t compatible doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you. I do. I love you and you’re *hot* Shane, like annoyingly so, and I hate watching you be lonely. You deserve someone to spoil you rotten and appreciate that ass—”

“Rose...”

“—you’ve worked so hard to sculpt. I want you to have someone who makes you laugh and brings you terrible coffee and texts you good morning and takes you to bed to do peg and hole activities—”

“Oh my *god*, shut up.”

“—and someone who is sexy and funny and affectionate who won’t let you disappear into your own head! And then the three of us can go on morning jogs, get coffee, and gossip about everyone in the company! And everyone will think I have two hot boyfriends when we walk arm in arm!”

“That’s... very specific.”

“I’ve given it no small amount of thought.” Her smile turned teasing. Rose released one of his hands to pick up her cup again, taking a triumphant sip. “My Christmas wish this year is to get *you* laid, Shane Hollander, and find you a boyfriend. In that order or reverse, I’m not picky.”

“*Rose.*”

“What? It’s a good wish. Very selfless of me, I could’ve wished for a hot straight boyfriend for myself.” She picked up her hot chocolate and took a long sip, watching him over the rim. “Aw, *Shane*, you’re blushing. God, you’re so easy to fluster. It’s a gift. Have I told you lately how adorable you are?”

“I’m not—” Shane pressed his palms to his cheeks, which were, in fact, burning. “Can we talk about literally anything else? Please?”

“Fine, fine. I’ll drop it.” Rose held up her hands in surrender. “For now. But think about Miles, okay? No pressure. I’m just saying the option exists. And... I may have shown him

your instagram already and he definitely *would*.”

What Rose didn’t know—what Shane wasn’t about to tell her—was that he’d already spent far too much mental energy this week on someone. Someone arrogant and Russian and currently making Shane’s professional life a living hell. That wasn’t interest. That was... stress. Fixation born from conflict. His brain cataloging Rozanov the way it cataloged potential disasters, because that’s what the man was: a disaster waiting to happen.

He didn’t want Rozanov. He just... couldn’t stop thinking about him, which was completely different and significantly more annoying.

Shane managed to extract himself from the café twenty minutes later with promises to think about Miles (he wouldn’t) and Rose’s insistence that his Christmas needed to include something other than tech rehearsals and spreadsheets. He drove home through streets lined with snow that had turned grey at the edges, wet November cold seeping through coat seams and making his fingers ache on the steering wheel.

His apartment was small, furnished with bland beige walls and carpet that had seen better decades. No decorations. He’d meant to pick up a wreath at least, something to acknowledge the season, but tech week had swallowed November whole and December was slipping past just as fast—there was, however, a tree at his parent’s place, and usually he just sort of hoped that covered him in terms of festive cheer as well.

The fridge held leftover takeout containers in various stages of questionable, yogurt that expired last week, and a bag of coffee beans he’d forgotten to grind. He ate standing at the counter, scrolling through his phone without reading anything, then spent the evening reorganizing files that didn’t need organizing. By the time he collapsed onto the couch, his phone was already buzzing with tomorrow’s call time.

Sunday bled into Monday too fast.

Shane arrived at the theatre before sunrise, let himself in through the stage door past the drooping garland someone had stapled to the frame. Inside, the administrative hallway already smelled like cinnamon—Jackie’s desk candle, burning since she’d arrived even earlier. He spent the quiet hour before company class checking equipment and running through cue sequences.

He worked the way he always did when he was keyed too tight to sit still: hands busy, thoughts corralled into checklists, and it was nice to be here alone. He could take his time, and it felt like the theatre was waking up too. Like, maybe, in his own weird way, they came to life together as he set things to order and collected nonsense. Someone had left a theraband looped over a barre like a forgotten snake (it went straight into lost-and-found, where abandoned gear went to die) and no one had restocked the drink fridge, so he did that, turning the bottles so labels faced out.

By nine, the building had been reset and filled with bodies and noise, dancers scattering after class to warm up or gossip or dig through costume racks.

Monday's rehearsal was chaos from the start. Not because of arguments or staging disputes, but because Rozanov had apparently decided that today was the day to give extensive notes to everyone who wasn't asking for them. He spent ten minutes explaining to the corps how the Mariinsky would stage the party scene. He stopped Rose mid-phrase to demonstrate a different quality of port de bras. He gave the pianist suggestions about tempo—*To be fair, your tempo is like turtle steps. I am aging in real time*—that made the accompanist's eye twitch.

Unfortunately, Shane was loathe to admit, many of these little notes and tweaks were *good* too. Rose was enjoying the difficulty of this amalgamation of styles. The other dancers in the corps generally seemed to like Rozanov, and both accompanist and ballet master tolerated things with a biblical level of patience Shane could only dream of having himself.

The ballet master tolerated it with impressive patience, probably because Rozanov's notes were, annoyingly, good. But it made everything run long, made the dancers second-guess themselves, made Shane's carefully planned schedule disintegrate into loose suggestions. His margins evaporated. Ten minutes became twenty. Breaks slid. Nothing catastrophic, just enough slippage to make his skin itch.

And Rozanov kept seeking him out whenever he wasn't dancing.

Shane was adjusting the counterweight on the snow drop—crouched in the stage left wing with a wrench, tightening the bolt that had worked loose during yesterday's run. Rozanov finished his water break and walked past. Close. Closer than the wing required. His leg brushed Shane's shoulder.

"Oh, sorry," Rozanov said, not sounding sorry at all. "Narrow space."

Shane didn't look up. "There's clearance on the other side."

"Yes. I saw." Rozanov leaned back against the flat anyway, gaze angled down. "But this side is more interesting. Has better view."

"What do you need?" Shane asked. Not rude. Flat.

Rozanov smiled a little. "I'm curious."

"About what?"

"You," Rozanov said easily. "What are you doing?"

Shane tightened the bolt another quarter turn. "I'm fixing another counterweight, but—ah, so sorry, no ladders or lifts required."

Rozanov's eyes followed Shane's hands. "You do this yourself? No crew?"

"Hayden is usually on this stuff, but they're trying to get everything finished for Tech Week so... I'm here, and it's a ten-second fix."

“Ah. So you are not only beautiful, you are also union violation.” Rozanov’s gaze tracked down to where Shane knelt, then back up with obvious interest. “On your knees for your work. I notice this about you now.” Rozanov’s boot shifted, close enough to Shane’s hand that Shane had to move it. “Is comfortable position for you?”

Shane’s grip tightened on the wrench. He stood, forcing Rozanov to step back. “Don’t you have a rehearsal to get back to?”

“Yes. I am going.” Rozanov pushed off the flat but didn’t move away. “But if you need task later—getting down on your knees—you tell me. I can think of several.”

He walked away before Shane could respond, flitting back out for his next part, as nonchalant as ever. Rozanov was a menace, and by lunch, they were forty minutes behind.

The company scattered for their break. Dancers moved in a flock to the green room with packed lunches that fit their macros, crew disappearing to the coffee shop across the street for pastries that were more butter than bread. Shane stayed behind, using the quiet hour to coordinate the prop changeover for Act Two. He was checking the gift boxes against his inventory list when he heard it: small, hiccupping sobs coming from one of the practice studios. He paused, listening. The crying continued, muffled but persistent and... being the person he was, needing to know what was wrong and needing to fix it, he followed the sound to Studio Two.

Studio Two was one of the smaller ones available for practices, and the door was cracked open. There, through the gap he could see one of the younger girls sitting on the floor against the barre, knees pulled to her chest, tights already pilled at the knees. Her face was red and blotchy, tears streaming down her cheeks.

Rozanov sat cross-legged on the floor beside her.

Shane’s hand stilled on the door frame.

“Is not fair, I know,” Rozanov was saying. His voice had lost its sharp edges, softened into something Shane hadn’t heard before. “You practice so hard, you want bigger role. This makes sense.”

“I’m the *best* in my class,” the girl said between sobs. “My teacher said so, and I try *so* hard. I practice more than anyone! But I’m just a stupid party guest. I don’t even get a solo.”

“Yes. And many people are best in their class,” Rozanov said, leaning back on his hands. “This does not mean they get what they want immediately. Ballet is very rude like this. But still I think party guest is important, that is where entire story begins. You think I start with leading roles? No. When I am your age, I am in back row. Very back. So far back, audience cannot even see me, sometimes I play role of rock, even, no better than prop. I practice every day, I work very hard, and still—back row.”

The girl sniffled, wiping her nose on her sleeve. “Really?”

“Really. And sometimes I am very angry about this. I think, why do they not see how good I am? Why they make me stand in back when I should be in front? Stupid Andrei has horrible balance the two left feet and face like a boar, why is he in front?” He shrugged. “But now I understand. I was not ready. My technique was not clean. My performance was... how do you say... too much. Like puppy who is very excited and knocks over furniture.”

That pulled a watery laugh from her.

“You are nine, yes?” Rozanov asked.

She nodded.

“So your bones are still growing. Your body is still learning what it can do. I see you watch the older dancers en pointe, and you think: I want to do that. Yes?”

“I practice in my room sometimes,” she admitted quietly. “Just to see what it feels like.”

“Ah,” Rozanov said, and winced theatrically. “I knew a girl who did this. Practiced en pointe too early. Very ambitious. Very impatient.”

The girl sniffled. “*Knew?* What happened?”

“She needed a double leg transplant.”

She stared at him.

“Yes,” he said solemnly. “Both legs, but they could not find little girl legs, and so she ended up with *horse* legs. I hear she is very good in 100 meter dash now, but not so much for dancing. Hooves... stage... they do not mix. Very tragic, really. I sent basket of carrots for condolences.”

“That’s not real,” she said, offended on behalf of science.

“I tell you it is real! Who are you to doubt me? Ms. Nine Years Old? Ms. Expert?”

She cracked, a laugh breaking through her tears.

“Okay,” he said, dropping the act. “Fine, fine... No transplant or horse legs. But she did stop dancing, that part is real. Feet are not toys. Better to wait and build up the right way, learning technique so clean, so perfect, that when you are ready for pointe, you will be better than girls who rushed. You understand?”

“I guess.”

“Is not *guess*, are you mocking me little girl? Is truth.” Rozanov stood, offering his hand to pull her up. “I know waiting feels stupid, everyone older looks like they are having more fun. But rushing just means you hurt yourself and then you are bored at home watching everyone else... but... that does not mean you cannot have more fun without pointe, even as party guest. Come, I teach you something. Secret Rozanov technique.”

He moved to the center and planted his feet in first position. “I show you *chaînés*. You know this, yes? The turning chain?”

“*Everyone* knows that.”

“Yes, and everyone think is boring, boring, boring.” He turned in place, arms limp, head fixed forward like a department store mannequin. “This is how I see you Canadians do it. Very polite. And it *is* very boring.”

The girl giggled.

“But in Russia—” He reset his position, arms lifting to frame his shoulders. “We do not turn like robots. We make audience wonder where we will look next. There is magic in it.”

He launched into the turns, feet whipping through the chain, but his head moved independently—snapping to spot, then tilting with a slight delay, then lifting his chin on the final rotation before his eyes cut sharp to the side. The effect was magnetic. Even just standing there in sweatpants in an empty studio, he looked like he was performing for a sold-out house. He stopped clean, arms settling into a high fifth, and held the position with his head angled just enough to suggest he was waiting for applause.

And... when it didn’t come, he frowned.

“Well? Where is my enthralled crowd? I do not work for free.”

Giggling, she clapped and Rozanov took a little bow. “You see? The turn is same. But the head—the eyes—this is what they remember. And small dancers like you?” He gestured at her height. “You do this better than tall ones. Is your advantage. Big people”—he pointed at himself—“we turn like elephants. You turn like little hummingbird. Fast, sharp, gone before they blink. Very pretty. Now, I teach you, and you try it Russian way.”

She tried it. The turns were fine, but her head stayed locked forward.

“No,” Rozanov said immediately. “You are doing the robot again. Your head must snap—here—” He tapped the side of his own head. “Then tilt—*here*—then finish looking *past* the audience, like you see something they cannot.”

She tried again. Better, but tentative.

“More,” he said. “You think you are showing off, yes? That is the point. Is okay to be beautiful and strong and most wonderful person in the theatre. Give them something to watch. Make them think: *who is this small one stealing my attention?*”

On the fifth attempt, she nailed it—the whip of her head on the turns, the delayed tilt, the final sharp focus past the mirror like she’d spotted something in the wings. Her grin broke wide when she stopped.

“*Da*, good! Yes! That is how you make them forget about pointe shoes.” He smiled. “Use this. Girls en pointe will hate this trick. Here, we do together now.”

Shane pulled his hand from the door frame. What... the fuck? He was transfixed. Rozanov demonstrated the turn sequence again, slower this time, narrating the head movements in a mix of English and Russian that the girl seemed to follow anyway. When she tried it and stumbled, he crouched beside her and physically turned her head with his hands to show the timing. Patient. Gentle. The same focus he brought to Rose's *port de bras*, but without the showmanship.

... he... was being so nice. Shane never even imagined that the asshole might've been good with kids. Rather, he'd filed Rozanov away after their very first introduction: talented, arrogant, professionally difficult. Stars like him were predictable. They demanded accommodations, pushed boundaries, charmed whoever they needed to charm and dismissed everyone else and that was that. Rozanov in particular seemed to be not only pinnacle dancer, but pinnacle *dick* with his arrogance, his lack of care for anything outside of his own interests.

Which was why this didn't fit. Ilya Rozanov, comforting a little nine year old girl with nothing to gain from it at all.

"*Da*, yes! Like that! Wait, hold on, maybe you are doing *too* good now. You tricked me! Are you trying to steal attention from *me*? The *Nutcracker*? Is my show, you little fiend—"

Dancing practice quickly devolved into Rozanov gleefully chasing her about the studio, and peals of laughter.

So he could be nice. If he wanted to.

When Shane finally turned away, he took the long route back to his office. The corridor stretched familiar and strange at once, and he couldn't name why his usual path felt wrong, why he needed the extra thirty seconds of walk to sort through what he'd just seen. Rozanov was still an asshole. That hadn't changed. He'd been twenty minutes late *again*, arriving without an apology, and slid into stretching at the barre like nothing was wrong. The ballet master had glanced at the clock but said nothing. Stars got away with things the corps couldn't. So. Asshole. But also... more?

Shane's mental file labeled 'Rozanov: Nightmare Principal' had developed an inconvenient asterisk.

The problem was that Shane didn't know what to *do* with asterisks. His brain preferred clean categories: dangerous rigging, union issues requiring immediate attention, minor annoyances he could ignore. Rozanov kept slipping between categories. Infuriating one moment, then patient with a crying nine-year-old the next. Arrogant about his own talent, then genuinely invested in teaching someone else a better way to turn.

Shane pushed open his office door and sat at his desk without turning on the lights, feeling a little more settled in the dim darkness. Two more weeks until opening night. Fourteen days. Three hundred and thirty-six hours, if he wanted to be specific about it, and he did, because specific was *safe*. Countable. He'd survived worse—that choreographer in Paris who'd imploded the cast by having an affair on his wife with not one, but *three* dancers. Hayden's flu during last year's tech week when Shane had to learn basic rigging in four hours. That

time a principal dancer for *Swan Lake* fell and rolled their ankle on opening night three years ago. That one soprano in New York who'd thrown a shoe at him during tech week.

He could survive Rozanov being nice to children. He could survive not understanding why it was that, despite being the industry's biggest playboy and being a professional pain in the ass, part of him *liked* the attention from Rozanov. He could definitely survive two more weeks of innuendo and proximity and those stupid pale eyes tracking him across the theatre like Shane was the most interesting thing in the room.

He could do this. He could *do* this, asterisks be damned.

It was Tuesday, and already he could not do this.

"Shane! Perfect. Hold this."

Jackie shoved a stopwatch into Shane's hands before he could object. She was already turning back to the quick-change station in the stage left wing—a rolling rack crammed with costume pieces, a small table laid out with medals and sashes and the elaborate military jacket that would transform their wooden Nutcracker into a prince.

"I need to time the full change. David's out with the flu so I'm down a hand to help with the dressing, and you know the cue sequence better than anyone, so I need you to handle Rozanov."

Handle *who*?

"Get one of the other dressers—"

"Thirty-two snowflake headdresses, Shane. *Thirty-two*." Jackie pinned him with a look. "I'm sorry I need them where they are, and I need *you* to do this. Eighty seconds, jacket off, sash off, new jacket on, medals straight. The Prince costume just came out of the shop this morning and I need to know if the change is even possible before we run Act Two."

Shane opened his mouth to argue, then closed it. Jackie was right—he did know the cue sequence better than anyone, and she was drowning in snowflake maintenance. He glanced out towards the stage. There, through the gap in the wings, he could see the battle scene building toward its climax. Parliament Hill rose in forced perspective behind the dancers: the Peace Tower painted on a massive flat, its clock face glowing amber in the stage lights. Mice swarmed the steps while a line of red-coated RCMP officers drove them back, sabres flashing. The choreography turned the battle into something between a military drill and a hockey brawl, and Shane had always loved the absurdity of it: Mounties versus rodents, only in Canada.

At the center of the chaos, Rozanov's Nutcracker dueled the Rat King. The Act One costume made him look carved from wood with its boxy red jacket with painted gold buttons, a tall black shako strapped under his chin. His choreography was toylike too, leaning towards more sharp and angular, nearly staccato, flow, bringing the Christmas soldier to life as he fought for the girl that believed in him. Rozanov had danced this role before at the Bolshoi, where

the production favored even more exaggerated rigidity. Here, he'd adapted the characterization to RWB's softer aesthetic, though Shane could still see glimpses of Moscow's harder edges in the way he held his shoulders.

In about ninety seconds, he'd come offstage and Shane would have to strip him out of it.

He sighed and looked at the stopwatch she'd forced upon him, and it was still warm from being tucked into her waistband.

"Okay, okay, I've got you. Eighty seconds."

"Seventy would be better. The lighting cue is tight." Jackie moved down the rack, checking that each piece hung in order, and the hangers squeaked. "Don't let him charm you into going slow."

"Don't tell me you think he *has* any charm."

Jackie snorted but didn't argue.

Beyond the wings, the battle crescendoed. Shane watched through the gap as Rozanov drove his sword through the Rat King—a dramatic thrust that sent the creature sprawling down the Parliament steps—and the remaining mice scattered to the winds. A Mountie raised his sabre in triumph. Blackout.

The sound of pointe shoes pattering offstage, then heavier footsteps, and Rozanov materialized in front of him. Breathing hard, sweat gleaming at his temples beneath the shako, chest heaving under the stiff red jacket.

"Hollander?" Rozanov's eyes crinkled at the corners, and he was smiling again. "What are *you* doing here to greet me?"

"One of the dressers is out sick, I'm filling in. C'mon, hurry, hat off, arms out."

"So *commanding*." Rozanov unclipped the chin strap and handed over the shako. His hair was damp, curling at the ends, and he pushed it back from his forehead with one hand while Shane hung the hat on the rack. "If you wanted to undress me so badly, we could've done this much sooner you know."

"And inflate your ego further?" Shane pretended to gag, stepped in, and started on the buttons. "Hard pass."

Rozanov's eyebrows lifted; a flicker of surprise before the smirk returned. "You think my ego needs inflating? Is already very healthy, I promise."

"I've noticed." One, two, three. Shane's fingers moved fast, efficient. "The whole building has noticed."

"Good. I would hate to be subtle." Four, five, six. Rozanov watched Shane's hands with open interest. "You are very quick with buttons. Much practice undressing men?"

“I’ve dressed a dozen principals over the years. You’re not special, Rozanov.”

Rozanov’s smile thinned. His shoulders pulled back half an inch, chin lifting. “No? I am told I am very special. Reviews say so. *Transcendent*, they call me. *Once in a generation*.”

“Reviews don’t have to button your pants.” Shane yanked the last button free and shoved the jacket off Rozanov’s shoulders. “And further: I don’t fuck dancers in my own company. Arms down.”

“Is this rule, or excuse? Because I am *guesting* and not technically—”

“Arms *down*, Rozanov.”

The jacket fell away, revealing the thin white undershirt beneath—damp, clinging, translucent in patches where sweat had soaked through. Shane could see the shadow of Rozanov’s chest hair through the fabric, the darker circles of his nipples, the ridges of his stomach tapering toward his hips... Swallowing, Shane grabbed the sash at Rozanov’s waist and didn’t let himself look lower.

“Shane! Remember the sash hooks in the back, it’s different this year,” Jackie called from somewhere behind them. “You have to reach around.”

Shane stepped closer. Too close, really but there was no choice otherwise. Rozanov’s skin still damp from exertion, his breathing not yet settled. He reached around Rozanov’s waist with both arms, fingers searching for the hook at the small of his back until his nail scratched against the metal. The position pressed them nearly chest to chest, Shane’s face inches from Rozanov’s collarbone.

“This is nice,” Rozanov murmured above him. “You, in my arms, in such a hurry to touch me. We should—”

“I’ve had warmer embraces from the costume rack.”

“You are *mean* today, Hollander. This is fun,” Rozanov laughed, a genuine sound of surprise.

Shane found the hook and yanked it free. He stepped back—tried to—but Rozanov’s hand caught his hip.

“What are you doing?” A stagehand passed three feet away, gaze fixed on her clipboard. “People can *see*—”

“See what? Dresser helping dancer.” Rozanov’s thumb pressed into the jut of Shane’s hipbone through his jeans, one slow stroke. “Very innocent.”

“Is this your move?” Shane kept his voice low. “Just grab whoever’s in reach?”

“Only the ones who look at me like you do.” Rozanov leaned in, breath warm against Shane’s ear. “Like you want to punch me or fuck me. Maybe both? I am flexible about order.”

“Oh, keep this up and you’ll certainly be getting *one* of those things. Now shut *up*, I’d like to finish this change in under eighty seconds.” Shane wrenched himself free and grabbed the Prince jacket from the rack.

The new costume was a different creature entirely. Where the wooden soldier had been stiff and toy-like, all painted-on details and rigid lines, the Prince jacket commanded attention through sheer craft. Deep blue wool, so dark it looked almost black in the wing’s dim light, with gold braid cascading down the chest in elaborate loops. Epaulettes broadened the shoulders. A high military collar would frame the jaw of whoever wore it. The medals weren’t attached yet—Jackie would pin those—but even bare, the jacket transformed whoever wore it, changing dancer into a *character* the moment it touched their shoulders.

“Arms,” Shane said.

Rozanov slid his arms into the sleeves, and Shane moved behind him to settle the jacket into place. The wool was heavier than the first costume, more substantial. Shane smoothed the fabric across Rozanov’s back, feeling the shift of muscle beneath, the warmth of skin bleeding through the lining. His hands lingered a half-second too long on those shoulders before he circled around to the front.

Below the jacket’s hem, Rozanov wore only his tights and dance belt.

Shane had seen dance belts before. He’d worked in ballet for seven years—the sight of a man’s *equipment* pressed flat and forward, barely concealed by thin fabric, was about as remarkable as a pointe shoe. Routine. Unremarkable. He’d never given it a second thought. Only... only this was Rozanov, Rozanov who had made it very clear just how he’d like Shane to handle his *equipment* and he was giving it several thoughts, all of them unhelpful. Worse, Rozanov’s dance belt did nothing to disguise the *scale* of what it contained. The white fabric stretched taut, everything pressed forward into a smooth curve that Shane’s eyes kept drifting toward no matter how firmly he tried to focus on the buttons.

“You can look,” Rozanov said. “I don’t mind.”

“Why would I want to? You’re not that impressive.”

“No?” Rozanov’s smile sharpened. “You are very focused on my buttons for someone who is not impressed.”

“You’re very pushy.” Shane started fastening. One, two. The buttonholes were stiff, new, fighting his fingers. “Has anyone ever told you *no*, Rozanov?”

“Many times.” Three, four. “They always realize their mistake, though, and come running.”

“There’s a first time for everything.”

“Is there?” Rozanov shifted his weight, and his thigh pressed between Shane’s legs, hard muscle flush against him through layers of fabric, testing. Shane’s hands stilled on button five. Shane sucked in a startled breath and nearly faltered, fingers splaying flat against Rozanov’s chest, feeling the heat of him through the thin undershirt, before he snapped

himself back to the task. Shane's fingers faltered on button five but didn't stop. "I'm not so sure."

"The buttons are stiff." Six, seven. Shane kept his voice steady even though his cock was stirring, even though Rozanov's muscular thigh was *right there*, pressure and heat exactly where Shane didn't need it. His hands were shaking—Rozanov could see it, could probably feel it where Shane's knuckles brushed his stomach. Shane met his eyes in what he hoped was defiance. "And... and you're not that exciting."

"Really?" Rozanov leaned in, voice dropping to a murmur meant only for Shane. His thigh pressed forward with clear intention now, muscle hard against the seam of Shane's jeans. Rozanov's hands came to Shane's hips, gently tugging him into a dizzying rock of friction. "You are getting hard."

He was, and Shane had to bite down on his lip to swallow the pathetic little sound that wanted to come out.

Rozanov's thumbs traced small circles into Shane's hipbones. "... but still you fight wanting this. Why?"

"Because—" Shane's breath hitched when Rozanov rocked him again, affectively letting Shane hump his leg like a *dog*, giving just enough friction to make Shane feel pathetic for wanting more. His cock throbbed behind his zipper, and heat crawled up his neck. "Because this is—we can't—"

"Tell me you hate this. Tell me to stop. I will. I will never touch you again."

"I hate *you*," Shane spat, and the rest of the words sat right there on his tongue: *I hate this, stop, let go*. Simple. Easy. The smart thing to say.

His hands fisted in the front of Rozanov's jacket instead, and this time *Shane* rocked back against him, stealing another scrap of friction. He hated Rozanov. He did not, unfortunately, hate his *body* flush up against him like this, and for a split second, he was tired of acting like he did.

Rozanov's pupils dilated. "*Smotri-ka*, Hollander—"

"Shut the fuck up—" Shane's voice came out strangled.

"*Chyort*," Rozanov's grip tightened, and he pulled Shane into another rock of friction that made Shane bite back a sound. "Then why do you run from me all week? Why do you—"

Because this was insanity. Because they were *not* alone.

"Medals," Shane snapped when Jackie appeared. He stepped back fast enough to nearly trip. "I—we—we're ready for the medals."

"Here." Jackie appeared at his elbow with a velvet board, and Rozanov stepped back. The pressure between Shane's legs vanished, leaving him unsteady, blood rushing in his ears.

Jackie didn't seem to have notice as she began pinning medals to Rozanov's chest. "Hold still. These pull if I pin them crooked."

Shane used the moment to breathe. His legs felt unreliable. His cock was half-hard in his jeans and there was nothing he could do about it except angle his hips away and hope no one looked.

Jackie finished the last medal and stepped back. "Turn."

Rozanov turned to the wing mirror propped against the wall, and Shane watched the transformation complete itself.

The Nutcracker Prince looked back from the glass, blue wool making Rozanov's hazel eyes pale and sharp as winter ice. The gold braid caught the dim work lights and threw them back in warm flickers. That high collar framed his jaw like it had been measured for him—which it had, Jackie didn't make mistakes. The epaulettes squared his shoulders, gave him the bearing of royalty, the posture of a man who expected to be obeyed.

He looked like the kind of prince little girls dreamed about, that slayed the Rat King and swept Clara off to the Kingdom of Sweets and made everything terrible in the world disappear, just for one night, just inside the theatre's walls.

Shane hated how beautiful he was.

Rozanov caught him staring, *again*, because of course he did, and looked smug about it immediately. Smirking, his eyes dropped to Shane's mouth, then lower, tracking down Shane's body with open interest. Taking inventory of exactly what state Shane was in, and clearly liking what he saw.

"We finish this later," Rozanov said. "Yes?"

He didn't wait for an answer. He turned and swept toward the stage, gold braid glinting, shoulders set, every inch the prince he was costumed to be.

Shane stood in the wing with the stopwatch still clutched in his fist. Around him, the chaos of the scene change swirled—crew hauling flats, dancers rushing to marks, Jackie already disappearing toward the snowflake headdresses. Nobody looked at him. Nobody noticed him pressing the heel of his hand against the front of his jeans, willing his body back under control.

On stage, the transformation music swelled. Light bloomed gold and pink across the Parliament Hill flat as it flew out, replaced by the swirling painted drops of the snow scene.

Shane checked the stopwatch.

Still at zero, since he'd forgotten to time the entire ordeal at all.

Fuck.

“—cannot believe there will be no Russian Trepak,”

Nope, never mind. Nothing about Rozanov was nice.

Rozanov had cornered him, because of course he did, in the costume area near the stage holding up a ribbon-trimmed vest. Rose leaned against the barre nearby, watching him with barely concealed amusement.

“That’s for the Ukrainian dance,” she said.

“I know what is for!” Rozanov turned the vest over in his hands. “Ukrainian, Indian classical, and... what is other one? The, ah, jig?”

“That’s Métis jigging, specifically the Red River Jig,” Shane said.

“What is *Métis*?”

“The Métis are a group indigenous people that formed from the offspring of First Nations and French Settlers, and they’re an important part of Canada’s history, so—”

“Ugh, yes okay, I see where you are taking this.” Rozanov frowned at him. “But you remove Russian dance—Russian dance, from Russian ballet, with Russian composer, Russian choreographer, and now Russian principal dancer standing here telling you this is wrong. You see problem?” He tossed the vest onto the costume rack. “What is left of it that is still Russian? I do not say Ukrainian dance is not beautiful. Is very beautiful. Very strong tradition. But when you remove Russian dance, you remove piece of story too. Not because Russia owns Nutcracker, but because... connection to origin matters also. Both things can be true, yes?”

“The Russians don’t get to forever dictate how to put on the Nutcracker, Rozanov. The Nutcracker was written in 1892. The world’s changed since then. Canada is—”

“—is baby country stealing toys from older sibling. No, Russia does not *own* Nutcracker maybe, but it is in its soul.” Rozanov picked up one of the sashes from the table, the red fabric shining under the work lights. He turned it over in his hands. His thumb traced one of the geometric patterns—white and black beads woven into chevrons that arrowed down the length of red wool. “This is hand made,” he said, and his voice had lost its edge. He examined where the fringe began, each thread secured by hand. “How long does this take to make?”

“Months,” Shane answered. “Sometimes longer. Actually finger weaving *ceinture fléchée*, the sashes, is traditional craft, a labor of devotion and pride. They’re part of their regalia.”

Rozanov set the sash down with more gentleness than Shane had seen him handle anything all week, smoothing it flat against the table. Then he straightened and the irritation returned to his face. “They are beautiful and... this is painful. To me, the Russian dance is best dance in entire second act. Yes, yes, you put hockey and mounties and now you remove dances that have been performed for hundred years—”

“Hundred and *thirty* years,” Shane corrected. “And those ‘traditional’ dances? Let’s talk about the Chinese tea dance. The Arabian coffee. They’re Orientalist stereotypes from Imperial Russia. Should we keep performing those too? Just because they’re *traditional*?”

“Hundred and *thirty*,” Ilya repeated, deadpan. “Spasibo. Thank you Mr. Math. You are not wrong, but you are also not fun. Tragedy. And is not same thing as what I am saying.”

“Isn’t it?” Shane picked up one of the Métis sashes, the red fabric catching the work lights. “You want to talk about erasing culture? Russia’s been doing that for centuries. The Bolshoi performed for the tsars while they colonized half of Asia. And now you’re upset that *we’re* choosing to celebrate the cultures that actually exist here, in Canada, to perform to Canadians, instead of repeating the same Eurocentric program?”

“I—stop. No, that is not what I am saying. Give me a moment to find words in English.”

Rozanov took a large breath of air and stilled himself, rubbing at the furrowed brow on his otherwise perfect face. “My English is not so great, so I am not sure if I am saying currently. I am *not* upset about celebrating cultures. I have no issue with Ukraine or Métis or any other cultural dance. I believe *all* dances beautiful, truly. I am worry about *replacing* Russian culture in Russian ballet, it is not the same thing. You are—what is word—throwing out baby with bathtub.”

“We’re not throwing anything out. We kept the score, we kept the choreography, and there is also *you*.” Shane held up the sash. “We’re just asking: why should Clara’s dream kingdom only have these eurocentric or even blatantly racially stereotypical dances? There are productions with *fu-manchu* mustangs and chop-sticks in people’s hair for fuck’s sake. It’s a caricature. We’re here in Winnipeg, the corps is Canadian and so is our Clara, so why can’t it have the dances *she* would actually know? Ukrainian, because half of Winnipeg is Ukrainian. Métis, because they were here first. Indian classical, because we have one of the largest South Asian communities in Canada.”

“Because is not what Petipa choreographed—”

“Petipa’s been dead for ninety years, Rozanov.”

“And his work lives on! This is point of classical ballet—to preserve, to honor—”

“To *evolve*.” Shane’s grip tightened on the sash. “Or it dies. You want to honor Petipa? Fine. Dance his choreography. But don’t tell me that a nine-year-old Métis girl can’t see herself in the Kingdom of Sweets. Don’t tell me that honoring dead Russian men is more important than letting living Canadian kids see their own cultures onstage.”

Rozanov stared at him. His fingers drummed against his thigh—twice, three times—the only tell that Shane had landed something.

“You think I am... what? Colonialist?” Rozanov’s accent thickened. “My grandmother survived Siege of Leningrad. My mother grew up in communal apartment with six families. We did not *colonize* anyone, we were—”

“What—no. Rozanov, no. I didn’t say you colonized anyone.” Shane softened fractionally. “I’m saying the art form has a history... and... we get to decide whether we repeat it or reimagine it. And these changes are *fun*, they are good, and people like them, and we are the only people in the world that do it this way. It’s special, this is *our* tradition, and you can be part of it.”

Rozanov picked up the sash, finally. His thumb traced the geometric patterns, red and black and white beadwork catching the light. He was quiet for longer than Shane had ever seen him quiet, longer than he ever might’ve thought someone like Rozanov *could* be quiet.

“In Moscow,” Rozanov said slowly, “we have saying: traditsiya—*eto ne poklonenie peplu, a sokhranenie ognya*. Tradition is not worship of ashes, but preservation of fire.” He set the sash down. “You think I am worshipping ashes.”

“I think you’re defending something that was already a fantasy.” Shane’s tone was gentler now. “Clara’s Kingdom isn’t real. It’s a dream. Why can’t the dream change?”

Rozanov’s shoulders dropped half an inch. He looked at the Ukrainian vest, then at the sash, then at Shane. “Ukrainian costume is not ugly,” he admitted grudgingly. “I have seen worse. And I *do* like this ‘act of devotion’ you mention. The sash. And... is possible... Indian classical has very good technical demands. Requires strong dancers.”

“They’re incredible,” Rose offered from the barre. “The company we hired are artists.”

“Mmm.” Rozanov dragged a hand through his hair. “And Métis jig? River jig?”

“Fast footwork. Lots of rhythmic complexity,” Shane said. “Everyone loves it, and so could you.”

“Oh *could* I, Hollander,” Rozanov muttered. But his mouth twitched. “As I said... I... love dance. I respect these other ones. I... will perhaps come to the practices for these to... learn more.” He straightened, pulling his usual arrogance back on like a coat. “Besides, I am good enough to make any production work, even production that removes best dance in Act Two.”

“Did you just concede an argument?” Rose’s eyebrows climbed.

“I am being mature and professional,” Rozanov said archly. “Also—Hollander, annoying as he is, makes good point for once in life and I hate this of course, But...” He picked up the vest again, studied it. “Fire, not ashes. Maybe is not terrible idea. Maybe. Ugh. Enough of this. Look at me. Growing as person. Disgusting.”

The prop table needed reorganizing.

Shane told himself this was a legitimate use of his time: the gift boxes for Act One had migrated out of sequence, and the snow globes were clustered on the wrong side for the stage left handoff, and several of them were already clouded with fingerprints from the kids shaking them between entrances. He was being productive. He was doing his job. He was absolutely not hiding in the wings because Rozanov had spent all of Thursday’s rehearsal

finding excuses to brush past him, to lean too close when asking whatever asinine things that came to him, to murmur things to Rose while looking directly at Shane in the mirror.

“You are rearranging same box for third time.”

Shane’s hand jerked, knocking a snow globe onto its side. He caught it before it rolled off the table and turned to find Rozanov leaning against the flat behind him, arms crossed, watching with open amusement.

Shane set the snow globe down with more force than necessary. “Did you need something, Rozanov, or are you just here to critique my filing system?”

“Ah, there it is. The prickly deflection.” Rozanov pushed off the flat and sauntered closer. He’d changed out of his rehearsal clothes into jeans and a black sweater that looked soft enough to cost more than Shane’s rent. His hair was still damp from the shower, curling at the ends. “And you go through all this effort for me, specifically. Very flattering.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“I don’t need to. You do it for me.” Rozanov stopped on the other side of the prop table, picking up one of the wrapped gift boxes and turning it over in his hands. “Every time I walk into room, you find reason to leave. Every time I speak to you, you look at my mouth instead of my eyes. You think I don’t notice these things?”

“I think you see what you want to see.”

“Mmm.” Rozanov set the box down and circled the table. Shane tracked his movement, refusing to back away, refusing to give ground. “Maybe. Or maybe you are very bad at hiding what you want.”

He stopped close enough to invade his space again, though Shane held his ground.

“What I *want*,” Shane said, “is for you to stop treating my theatre like your personal playground.”

“Your theatre.” Rozanov’s lips pulled into that crooked smirk. “So possessive. I like this.”

“Fifteen years of perfection says I’ve earned it. Besides... I think I’ve earned some possessiveness over the years. So fuck off. “You ‘like’ everything. You’d flirt with the curtain if it had legs”

“Mmm. And you defend it like dragon guards gold. Very sexy.” Rozanov tilted his head, eyes tracking over Shane’s face the way he tracked choreography in the mirror, looking for weak points, places to push. “But I notice: you tell me to fuck off, then you *watch* me. You say I am disgusting, then your pupils get very big when I stand close. Mixed signals, Hollander.”

Shane’s blood ran hot. He could feel the flush climbing his neck, could feel the way his body wanted to lean forward, to close the distance, to find out if Rozanov’s mouth was as soft as it looked.

And so he stepped forward.

Rozanov's mouth opened—probably to say another infuriating thing—and Shane didn't want to give him the chance. He didn't want to listen to him tease anymore, fucking tired of the back and forth. Shane grabbed a fistful of his Rozanov's sweater and yanked him down to his own eye level, forcing him to hunch, and they were close enough that their noses nearly touched, close enough that Rozanov's breath ghosted across Shane's lips. Close enough that Shane could see his pupils blow wide.

Close enough to kiss.

"You're a very good dancer, Rozanov, and because of that you seem to think you've got me figured out," Shane said. His heart hammered against his ribs. He could feel the heat of Rozanov's body through the fabric, could feel the subtle shift as Rozanov leaned into the touch. Was he enjoying this? "You think I'm some uptight stage manager who'll eventually crack if you push hard enough, and that's part of your game. 'Winning'."

Rozanov's hands came up and gripped Shane's forearms, but he didn't push away. His fingers tightened, holding Shane there. "Am I wrong?"

"You're half right." Shane's grip tightened on the sweater. "I *am* uptight. I *am* wound too tight. But I'm not going to crack for you just because you're attractive and you know it."

"Attractive." Rozanov's voice dropped. "You think I am attractive?"

'Attractive' was almost an insult in how much it undercut the truth. Rozanov did not look pretty. Rozanov was not attractive. He was *stunning*, in costume, out of costume, meddling in all of Shane's business and smirking down at him, *letting* himself be dragged down as if he couldn't pull away if he wanted to. Once again, Shane was astounded and annoyed just by how strong and masculine Rozanov was in an art that often was viewed through a lens of femininity. No one would be calling Rozanov 'pretty' like the had to Shane, no, not with that sharp edge to his jaw, the lack of baby fat, the cut of his broad shoulders. And *eyes*, glittering like gemstones.

"Yes." Shane said. He would not be *telling* Rozanov these things. Instead, he just rose onto his toes, bringing their mouths closer still. Rozanov leaned in, lips parted in anticipation—

Then he pulled back.

Not far. An inch, maybe two. But enough that Rozanov's mouth met only air, and the hand on Shane's hip tightened in surprise, even as Shane kept his fist twisted in his sweater to keep him bent and off balance.

"And, attractive or not, if I want you or not, I think you are an *asshole*."

Shane stepped away, sliding out of Rozanov's grip with a casualness he absolutely did not feel.

"Goodnight, Rozanov."

He turned and walked away before Rozanov could respond, before his face betray how much he wanted to close that last inch, before he could do anything stupider than what he'd already done.

The stunned silence behind him was *delicious*.

Shane made it to his car before the mortification hit.

What the fuck was that?

He'd been trying to prove a point. Take back some control. Show Rozanov that he couldn't be pushed around or charmed into submission like every other person who fell at the man's feet. Shane wanted to make Rozanov *want* something he couldn't have for once.

And it had worked. He'd seen the flash of surprise on Rozanov's face, the way his grip had tightened, the way he'd leaned in expecting Shane to meet him halfway. Shane had taken the upper hand and walked away with it for once.

So why did he feel like he'd made a terrible mistake?

Bossing me around will only make me love you more. I have warned you.

Ah, right. He'd said that in the costume shop, Jackie's measuring tape around his shoulders, that crooked smile: "*Bossing me around will only make me love you more. I have warned you.*" Shane rolled his eyes at the time, filed it under *Rozanov being insufferable*.

Right now, he was wondering if he should've filed it under WARNING!

There was a chance that... this... was *exactly* the sort of thing that Rozanov actually liked. There was a chance, a horrifying chance, that this whole time Rozanov hadn't even been joking, that he meant every word that came out of his mouth no matter how outrageous.

Shit.

Shane pressed his palms against his eyes until colors bloomed behind his lids, but that look on Rozanov's face remained: the surprise, the hunger, the flash of frustration when Shane pulled back. He looked hungry and wounded and when had anyone cared enough to want him to be annoyed about it? The image would be burned into Shane's memory for weeks. Months.

The rest of his natural life, probably.

He started the car and drove home through streets that glittered with frost, the radio playing something he didn't hear. His apartment was cold when he got in, the heater taking its usual three minutes to wheeze to life. He ate leftover pad thai standing at the counter, showered until the water ran cold, and lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

Bossing me around will only make me love you more.

Shane pulled the pillow over his face and groaned.

He'd meant to take control. He'd meant to prove Rozanov couldn't push him around. Instead, he'd probably just made himself an even more irresistible toy to mess with.

And... so Shane vowed to become an expert in exit strategies.

Wednesday's spacing rehearsal put him in the house calling cues while Rozanov ran the Snow scene. Shane kept his eyes on his cue sheet, on the lighting board, on literally anywhere except the stage. When the dancers broke, he excused himself to check rigging in the fly loft—a space Rozanov couldn't follow without climbing a ladder. He mapped his routes through the building like a general planning troop movements: costume shop via the back hallway, administrative offices through the stage door entrance, his office only when the rehearsal schedule guaranteed Rozanov would be occupied elsewhere.

It worked until it didn't.

Friday was a disaster.

By evening, the building had emptied. Dancers scattered to dinner plans and Friday night freedom, crew finishing their lockup rounds, and the building settling into that particular hush that came after a full day of rehearsal. Shane stayed behind to run tomorrow's cue sequence—wanting the stage to himself, wanting the uncomplicated company of switches and dimmers and problems he knew how to solve.

"You are avoiding me."

Shane's hand froze on the light panel. Fuck.

He turned slowly to find Rozanov in the wings, changed out of his rehearsal clothes, hair damp from the shower. The work lights carved shadows under his cheekbones and caught the gold chain at his throat where his crucifix rested against skin.

"I'm working," Shane said. "Not everything is about you, Rozanov."

"Ah, but this is." Rozanov walked closer, each step unhurried, paced like a diagonal crossing the stage, until he stood near enough that Shane could smell the clean sweat on him, soap and exertion and warmth. "All week you find reasons to be somewhere I am not. Very impressive, actually. Theatre is not so big, but you make it feel like maze. I turn corner, you disappear. I enter studio, you leave through other door. Like magic trick, but less fun. I enter studio, you find excuse to leave. Like I have plague."

"Maybe you do." Shane turned back to the panel. "Arrogance is highly contagious."

"You have been *hiding*." Rozanov stopped an arm's length away. The space between them felt smaller than that. "I make you nervous, I think. Even afraid."

Shane's fingers curled around the edge of the light panel. "You make me *annoyed*. There's a difference, and I'm not afraid of anyone, especially not you."

“Then why run?”

“Because—” Shane was trying and failing to actually *do* anything with the panel, looking at the same parts over and over again. “Because you don’t take no for an answer. Because you think you can charm or push your way into getting whatever you want. Because I’m trying to do my job and you keep—”

“Mmm.” Rozanov tilted his head, studying Shane the way he studied choreography, looking for the mechanics underneath, the places where the structure gave way to instinct. “When I lift you last week, after ladder, you held to me *very* tightly. Like you are afraid to fall, or maybe afraid I let go. Which was it?”

“Neither. I was afraid you’d drop me and I’d have to explain the workers’ comp claim.”

“Liar.” The word came soft, almost fond.

Shane released the light panel and stepped back. The move put the prop table between them—a flimsy barrier of fake snow globes and wrapped gift boxes waiting for Act One.

“Rehearsal’s over, Rozanov. You can go.”

Rozanov didn’t move. His eyes tracked Shane’s retreat the way a cat tracked movement through tall grass. “You think I do not notice? How you argue with me over things that do not matter because you want excuse to be close and also far at same time.” He circled the prop table, slow, keeping Shane in his sightline, the way partners marked around each other before a lift, never turning his back, never losing Shane. “I am very observant, Hollander. Is one of my many talents.”

“Humility clearly isn’t.”

“Why would I be humble? I am excellent.” Rozanov stopped at the corner of the table. One more step and they’d be in the same space again, breathing the same air. “But... I am confused, Hollander. You give me very mixed signals and I do not understand. This game is only fun if it is fun for both. You understand?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Do you ever make sense?”

“Sometimes.” Rozanov stopped at the corner of the table. “Right now you are the confusing one. I notice you looking at me, you notice me looking at you. I *tell* you I am interested, and you do not answer, but you *do* touch me, and you like it, like dressing change. I think: ah, good, he wants this too. Then you run away *again*. All week you hide from me like I have plague. *Then* you grab me, pull me close, you look at my mouth like you want to kiss me—and then you walk away *again*.” His head tilted. “So I am confused. Very confused. These are not signals that make sense together.”

“I...”

“I need to know,” Rozanov continued, and his voice lost some of its playful edge, dropping serious in a way Shane had never heard from him. “You hate me, yes, I understand this. You

think I am arrogant asshole who makes your job difficult. This is fine. But—do you hate me *and* not want me? Or do you hate me and still want to fuck me anyway?”

The work lights hummed in the silence. Shane’s pulse jumped in his throat. He could feel it hammering against his collar.

“Because,” Rozanov said, “if is first one—if you do not want this—I stop. I leave you alone. I am professional, I do my job, I go back to Moscow, we never speak of this again. But if is second one...” Rozanov’s lips curved into a svelte, wicked cupid’s bow. “If you want me but you are just very stubborn and very scared of wanting me... then I need you to say it. Out loud. With words. So I know I am not... how do you say... harassing you? Being creep?”

Shane’s breath caught. The fact that Rozanov was even asking—that he’d stopped to clarify, that he cared enough about Shane’s actual consent to risk looking uncertain... And still the *smart* words sat on Shane’s tongue—yes, *I don’t want this*—simple syllables that would end this, that would put distance back where it belonged. He could say them. He *should* say them. Rozanov was a temporary complication, a visiting star who’d be on a plane back to Moscow by January. Getting involved with him was professionally stupid and personally reckless and Shane had spent his entire adult life avoiding exactly this kind of chaos.

“I...” Shane’s voice came out rough. He swallowed and tried again. “I do hate you.”

“Yes, you have mentioned this already. Many times.”

“You’re arrogant and pushy and you’ve made my life hell for two weeks, and I don’t think it’s going to get *any* better as time goes on.”

“Also mentioned. Very hurtful, but go on. I can handle ‘no.’ I just need you to say it like grown man, not like angry kitten.”

“Do you *have* to be such a dick all the time? Jesus. And—” Shane’s mouth had gone entirely dry, he was furious and entirely fixated. “I want you to shut the fuck up. I want you to stop being so goddamn smug about everything. And—fuck—And I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Rozanov went very still.

“I think about you when I’m trying to work,” Shane continued, the words coming faster now like a dam breaking. “I think about your hands on me. I think about—” He stopped, gritting his teeth.

“About what?” Rozanov’s voice had dropped lower.

“About what it would be like if you put your mouth on me. If you—if *I*...” Shane met his eyes. “I want you. Okay? I hate that I want you, but I do. Is that clear enough? Fuck you.”

Wait, no, shit, he shouldn’t have said that out loud! The admission hung between them for three beats of Shane’s rabbit-fast pulse. He’d said it. Out loud. No taking it back now, no

pretending he'd meant something else, no professional deflection to hide behind. He'd just told Ilya Rozanov of all people that he wanted him. There'd be no living this down.

Shane waited for the smirk, for the victory lap, for Rozanov to make him regret his honesty.

Instead, Rozanov *moved*.

He closed that last distance between them, and suddenly Shane's back was against the wall beside the light panel, and Rozanov's hand was braced above his shoulder, and there was nowhere to look except up into pale eyes gone dark under the work lights. Shane had seen this timing before, the moment a dancer committed to a step and trusted the music to catch up.

"I knew it," Rozanov murmured. "Little rabbit who wants to be caught."

"I'm not—"

"Shh." Rozanov's other hand came up, thumb pressing against Shane's lower lip, silencing him. The touch was light, barely there, but Shane felt it through his whole body like a current. "You talk too much. Always with the schedules and the protocols and the *no, Rozanov, we cannot do this, Rozanov*. Very exhausting. I have better use for this mouth."

Shane's breath stuttered. His hands had found Rozanov's hips without his permission, fingers digging into the fabric of his rehearsal pants. He could feel the heat of Rozanov's body through the thin material, the shift of muscle when Rozanov leaned closer.

"Tell me to leave. Mean it. I will go."

The words sat right there—*leave, go, get out*. Simple. Easy. Professional. It could be over. The world would return to sense.

Shane's hands found Rozanov's hips instead, and Shane couldn't remember what he'd meant to say. Couldn't remember why he'd been fighting this. Shane's hands slid up, past hips, over the sculpted torso, to the collar of his shirt, and he dragged Rozanov down to him again.

Their mouths crashed together with none of the finesse Shane had imagined in his weaker moments. It was all teeth and desperation, Shane biting at Rozanov's lower lip hard enough that Rozanov groaned—a low, rough sound that went straight to Shane's cock. Rozanov's hand came up to cup the back of Shane's head, angling him deeper, his other hand gripping Shane's hip like he was afraid Shane might bolt again.

Shane opened for him, and Rozanov's tongue swept in, claiming, possessive. He tasted like the coffee he'd been drinking during break, bitter and dark, and Shane couldn't get enough. His hands fisted in Rozanov's shirt, pulling him closer, needing more contact, more friction, more—

Rozanov rocked forward, his thigh pressing between Shane's legs again, and Shane made a sound he'd be embarrassed about later. His hips canted forward on instinct, seeking pressure, and Rozanov's grip on his hip tightened, guiding him into it.

“*Bozhe*,” Rozanov breathed against his mouth. “*Ty takoy*—” The Russian dissolved into another groan when Shane bit his jaw, scraped his teeth down the tendon in Rozanov’s neck.

Shane could feel how hard Rozanov was, the thick line of his cock pressed against Shane’s hip, hot even through layers of fabric. His own arousal throbbed behind his zipper, and every point of contact between their bodies sparking and oversensitive. Rozanov’s hand slid under his shirt, palm hot against Shane’s ribs, thumb brushing the underside of his pec, and Shane arched into the touch like he’d been starving for it.

He *had* been starving for it. That was the problem.

A scrap of sense returned—the work lights still on, anyone could walk by, this was his *workplace*—and Shane wrenched his mouth away. “Wait—wait—”

Rozanov’s pupils were blown wide, his lips already swollen from kissing. “What is wrong?”

“This is a mistake,” Shane said, but his hands were still fisting in Rozanov’s shirt, holding him close instead of pushing him away.

“Yes. Big mistake. Terrible idea.” Rozanov’s hand slid to Shane’s hip, steadying him. It felt like the start of a supported turn, pressure applied and then held, waiting for Shane’s balance to answer it. “We do it anyway?”

“Fuck, *yes*,” Shane whined, “We—my office. Not here, anyone could walk in. My office, now.”

Rozanov’s grin sharpened, victorious and hungry. Was he starving too?

“So he *can* say what he wants. I am shocked and in awe.” Rozanov stepped back, giving Shane room to move, but his hand caught Shane’s wrist before he could get far. “Lead the way, Mr. Stage Manager. I follow.”

The walk to Shane’s office took forty-five seconds. Shane counted them, hyperaware of Rozanov’s presence behind him, of the way their footsteps echoed in the empty corridor, of his own pulse hammering in his ears. Bad idea. Bad idea. There were all these chances to say *no*, and he’d meant to tell him *no*. This was wrong, this was not how the Royal Winnipeg Ballet’s stage manager is supposed to act. He’d tried to hard to hate him enough not to want.

Shane’s office was small, little more than a room with a desk buried under paperwork, two chairs, a filing cabinet, a couch he’d slept on more nights than he wanted to admit during tech weeks. He barely got the door closed before Rozanov crowded him against it.

“Lock,” Rozanov said against his ear.

Shane fumbled behind him and turned the deadbolt. The sound of it clicking into place seemed to flip a switch.

Rozanov’s mouth found his throat, biting down on the tendon, and Shane’s knees went weak. His hands scrabbled for purchase against the door, against Rozanov’s shoulders, unsure if he was trying to push him away or pull him closer.

“Wait—” Shane managed. “Just—wait—”

Rozanov froze, hands stilling where they’d been shoving under Shane’s shirt. He pulled back enough to meet Shane’s eyes. “You change your mind?”

“No one can know,” Shane said, heart beating furiously in his chest, “*No* one can know.”

“I do not kiss and tell, Hollander.” Rozanov’s mouth returned to Shane’s throat, gentler now, tongue tracing the bite mark he’d left to make Shane gasp. “Your secrets are safe. I am wondering, do you ever turn off the brain in that pretty head?”

Shane’s hands were in Rozanov’s hair now, fingers threading through the damp curls.

“Always so worried, so tense.” He bit down again, making Shane gasp. “Always so *bossy*.”

“Fuck you,” Shane said, but his hands held Rozanov there, tilting his head to give him better access.

“Not tonight,” Rozanov continued, moving his mouth close to Shane’s ear. “Tonight I will go easy on you.”

Shane wanted to tell him to fuck off, but Rozanov was kissing down his throat again, scraping teeth over sensitive skin, and Shane threw his head back against the door with a thud. He felt Rozanov chuckle against his neck—smug bastard—and then Rozanov’s hands were working Shane’s belt open.

“You are very eager,” Rozanov said, fingers popping the button of Shane’s jeans. “For someone who hates me so much.”

“Shut up.” Shane’s hips jerked forward when Rozanov’s hand brushed the front of his underwear. “Just—shut up and—”

“And what?” The zipper hissed down. “Use your words, *krolik*.”

Shane wanted to hate that nickname, wanted to tell Rozanov to stop calling him that. Instead, he heard himself say: “Your mouth. I want your mouth on me.”

“Ah.” Rozanov dropped to his knees in one fluid movement, just as graceful as any on stage *à genoux* and the sight of him there, the arrogant Bolshoi principal, star dancer, on his knees between Shane’s legs—made Shane’s brain short-circuit. “You want me to suck your cock?”

Shane’s face burned. “Yes. *Yes*. Is that clear enough for you, asshole?”

Rozanov’s grin was wicked. “Very clear. See? Was not so hard to say what you want.” He tugged Shane’s jeans and underwear down to his thighs, and Shane’s cock sprang free, flushed and leaking. Rozanov made a satisfied sound. “Look at you. So hard for me already. And we have barely started.”

“Are you going to narrate the entire—*fuck*...!” The word dissolved into a moan as Rozanov licked a stripe up the underside of Shane’s cock, tongue tracing the prominent vein.

“I like to talk.” Rozanov pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the head, tongue catching the precome beading there. “You will get used to it.”

Shane’s fingers found Rozanov’s hair again, gripping the soft golden-brown curls tightly. “Are you just going to fucking look at me or are you going to *do* something? Less talking. More—*oh god*—”

Rozanov took him in. All the way down in one smooth motion, no teasing now, swallowing around Shane’s cock until Shane felt the back of his throat. The wet heat of him, the feeling of him, was devastating. Shane’s hips bucked forward on reflex, and Rozanov’s hands came up to grip his thighs, holding him still against the door.

Shane forced himself to look down. He had to see this, to watch the arrogant Bolshoi bastard on his knees, lips stretched obscenely around Shane’s cock, those pale gemstone eyes flicking up to meet his. Rozanov’s cheekbones were flushed rose petal pink, his perfect hair destroyed, and he looked like every fantasy Shane had shoved down into the darkest recesses of himself.

“*Fuck*,” Shane gasped. His head fell back, skull cracking against wood. Shane fucking hated him. But Rozanov was really good at sucking cock, and he was, for whatever reason, *willing*. He forced himself to move, to look back down, because he wasn’t going to miss a second, needing to see the way his own dick slipped past those smug lips. “Fuck, that’s—you’re—”

Rozanov pulled off enough to speak, hand wrapping around Shane’s cock to keep the pressure constant. “I am what?” His thumb swept over the head, smearing slick. “Tell me.”

“You’re good at this,” Shane admitted, the words dragged from him. “You’re really fucking good at this and I hate it.”

“You hate that I am good? Or you hate that you like it?” Rozanov took him in again, deeper this time, and Shane couldn’t answer. Could barely breathe.

Rozanov’s hands slid from Shane’s thighs to his pelvis, pinning him back against the door easily. The grip was firm, controlling, holding Shane exactly where Rozanov wanted him, and he was reminded just how *strong* he was. Shane tried to shift, to get leverage, maybe even buck his hips, but Rozanov pressed him flat against the wood, keeping him still, keeping him spread, owning the space between his thighs, setting the pace the way principals did in rehearsal, forcing the count to slow until Shane stopped trying to rush ahead of it.

The message was clear: *stop moving, let me work, take what I give you.*

Shane’s hands scrabbled uselessly against the door, against Rozanov’s shoulders, finding no purchase. He was trapped between Rozanov’s body and the wall, unable to do anything but stand there and take it. And fuck—*fuck*—he was kind of into that. Into being held down, being controlled, being made to just feel without the option to fight or flee or think his way out of it. All he could do was shudder and surrender to the feeling of it all, pinned against the door, while Rozanov took him apart with his mouth. Rozanov licked and sucked the head, tonguing the slit and pushing Shane dangerously close to the edge already.

He worked Shane the same way he worked on stage: aggressive, over the top, *breathtaking*. Rozanov was shockingly good at this. He read every hitch of breath, every tightening of Shane's fingers in his hair, adjusting angle and suction and speed until Shane was trembling, knees having gone weak, completely at Rozanov's mercy.

And, infuriatingly, he made it all look *easy*, he made it all look *beautiful*. Even on his knees, Rozanov kept his spine stacked and his head lifted, that perfect posture drilled so deep it didn't disappear just because the setting had changed.

"I'm—Rozanov, *Rozanov*, shit—stop, I'm going too—"

But instead of stopping, Rozanov just took him deeper, picking up the pace to match Shane's own desperate breathing, humming around Shane's cock, and that was it. Shane came with a broken sound, fingers tight in Rozanov's hair, pulse after pulse down Rozanov's throat. Rozanov swallowed it all, working him through it until Shane had to push him away from oversensitivity,

A stream of nonsense fell out of Shane's mouth. "Holy shit. I—oh. *Fuck*. sorry. Oh my god. I'm so sorry. *Fuck*. Wow. God. Why didn't you—"

"I don't mind." When Rozanov pulled off and stood, his lips were swollen, and he could see that crooked smile and those playful eyes. "Besides, was fun. That was *very* enthusiastic for someone who hates me."

Shane's legs were quivering. "Shut up."

"No." Rozanov crowded close again, and Shane could feel how hard he was, the thick line of his cock pressing against Shane's hip. "I think I keep talking. I think you *like* when I talk, even when you pretend you do not."

Shane's hands found Rozanov's belt on instinct, fingers working the buckle. "Do you ever stop being smug?"

"Why would I stop? I just made you come so hard you cannot stand." Rozanov's breath hitched when Shane popped the button of his jeans. "You wanted to keep me there forever."

"I wanted you to shut up." Shane shoved Rozanov backward, walking him across the small office. Three steps—his heel caught the chair leg, sent it rolling into the filing cabinet with a hollow thud. Another two steps and Rozanov's shoulders bumped the bookshelf, sending his production binder sliding sideways. "I *still* want you to shut up."

Rozanov let himself be moved, hands finding Shane's hips, guiding him forward even as Shane drove him back. His thighs hit the desk edge and papers scattered—cue sheets, costume notes, the week's rehearsal schedule sliding to the floor in a whisper of disorder that Shane couldn't bring himself to care about. Rozanov's hands found Shane's waist, pulling him close, and Shane could feel how he was breathing—harder now, faster, control slipping. "Then fucking *make me*, Hollander. I'll let you suck my cock, if you get on your knees."

Shane dropped to his knees; if Rozanov had done *à genoux*, then this was just a *fall*.

“Fuck,” he heard Rozanov breathe, startled maybe that he’d actually done what he asked. The cheap carpet was thin, institutional, digging into his kneecaps through his jeans. He didn’t care. He worked Rozanov’s pants and underwear down, and Rozanov’s cock stood hard and flushed against his stomach, precome beading at the tip.

Shane had never *actually* done this before. He had thought about it—late at night, in his own bed, images he’d shoved away as soon as they surfaced—but never with a real person even though he’d imagined this, he’d imagined *Rozanov*, even. He’d especially had never done anything like this here with him kneeling in his office with his own release still singing through his veins.

“You do not have to—” then stopped when Shane licked a tentative stripe up the underside of his cock, because apparently Shane was done thinking and ready to find out if reality matched imagination. His hips jerked forward. “Fuck. *Yes*, Hollander...”

It tasted like...skin. Shane circled the head with his tongue, exploring, learning the shape of it. The slit was already leaking, and Shane caught the bitter-sweet precome, swallowing reflexively. Rozanov’s thigh muscles tensed under Shane’s free hand.

Shane took him deeper. His jaw stretched wide to accommodate the girth, and the weight of Rozanov’s cock pressed heavy on his tongue, filling his mouth completely. He held there for a moment, adjusting to the intrusion, to the way it pushed toward the back of his throat and made his eyes water. He had no idea what he was doing and that... was frustrating. Shane liked to be perfect at everything, never messing up. He didn’t know if he’d gag or if Rozanov would find his inexperience disappointing rather than endearing. The not knowing was maddening, and made him want to try *harder*, even if his only reference was what had been done to him in previous failed relationships—vague memories of girls’, them flattening their tongues beneath the weight of his shaft, the hollow of their cheeks, their manicured hands... He tried to replicate it, hollowing his cheeks experimentally. His mind was racing, worrying about technique and about what exactly this all meant.

Rozanov made a choked sound above him, fingers were tangled in Shane’s hair, and Shane was reminded that this was fucking *hot*.

Shane’s eyes flicked up. Rozanov stared down at him, lips parted around shallow breaths, the muscle in his jaw jumping. His eyebrows had drawn together, pulled taut like rigging under load. A flush crawled up his throat, staining his collarbones pink. His hand came up, cupping Shane’s jaw, thumb stroking over the stretched corner of Shane’s mouth where his lips sealed around Rozanov’s cock.

“*Vot eto da*,” Rozanov breathed, and then something else in Russian that Shane didn’t understand. “*Posmotri na sebya*.” Then in english: “Look at you.”

Shane looked up at him properly now without pulling off—meeting Rozanov’s eyes while his mouth was full, while he knelt there on the cheap office carpet with Rozanov’s cock heavy on his tongue. The position made him feel exposed, vulnerable in a way that sent heat straight to his own spent cock, already starting to take interest again, but the sight above him burned through any doubts.

Rozanov braced back on his hands against the desk, shirt rucked up to show the ladder of his abs, his hair completely destroyed from Shane's fingers, his mouth parted on harsh breaths. His chest rose and fell rapidly. Those plush lips were swollen from kissing, bitten red, and his pale eyes had gone dark and hungry. He looked wrecked. *He* had done that. Him, *Shane*, who didn't know what he was doing, who was probably terrible at this—

“You are so—” Rozanov's voice came out strangled. “So beautiful like this. *Krasivyy*. On your knees for me, your mouth—*fuck*—”

Beautiful. Shane had been called pretty before, always hated it, always felt diminished by it. But the way Rozanov said it now, staring down at him like Shane was something precious and profane at once—that didn't feel diminishing. That felt like power.

Shane pulled back slowly, letting Rozanov's cock slide from his mouth with an obscene wet sound, then took him in again. Deeper this time. The head hit the back of his throat and he gagged slightly, eyes watering, but he didn't stop. He wrapped his hand around the base where he couldn't reach with his mouth and started working—up and down, matching the rhythm, adding a twist of his wrist the way he remembered, using his tongue along the underside on every upstroke.

“Hollander—” His name came out broken. Rozanov's hips jerked forward, seeking more, and his hand tightened in Shane's hair. “*Ty takoy krasivyy*—you are—I cannot—”

Shane took him in again, deeper this time, swallowing around him the way Rozanov had done, and Rozanov made a sound like he'd been punched. His fingers tightened in Shane's hair.

“I am—I am close—if you do not want me to—”

Shane sucked harder, hollowing his cheeks, and Rozanov came with a Russian curse that sounded like prayer. Shane tasted salt and bitterness, felt Rozanov's cock twitch against his tongue, and swallowed because he didn't know what else to do.

When he pulled off, Rozanov sagged back against the desk, chest heaving. For a long moment, the only sound was their breathing.

Then Rozanov laughed—breathless and surprised. “You have never done that before.”

Shane wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Was it that obvious?”

“Little bit.” Rozanov reached down, pulling Shane to his feet with surprising gentleness. “But—*bozhe moy*—you learn fast. Very enthusiastic student.” His thumb brushed Shane's lower lip. “And you look very beautiful on your knees, but I already knew this. My favorite view.”

Shane's face heated. “Fuck off.”

“*There* is my prickly Hollander.” Rozanov tucked himself back into his pants, then reached down to help Shane with his own. His fingers were steady where Shane's still shook. “Always so angry, even after I make you come.”

“Especially after you make me come.” Shane stepped back, putting distance between them now that his brain was coming back online. He tried to find his discarded belt. “This doesn’t—this doesn’t change anything. Actually, wait, *no*, fuck that, this isn’t happening again.”

“Mmm.” Rozanov’s was smirking again, amused but not arguing. He picked up Shane’s belt from where it had fallen and held it out. “As you say.”

The easy agreement made Shane more nervous than an argument would have. “I mean it, Rozanov.”

“I know you do.” Rozanov moved toward the door, then paused with his hand on the deadbolt. “But, Hollander?” He waited until Shane looked at him, and his smile was lazy, knowing. “Next time you want to hate me like this, you tell me. Save us both the running.”

He unlocked the door and left.

Shane stood in his office with his belt in his hands and the taste of Rozanov still on his tongue, and the horrible certainty that *next time* was not an if but a when, and there was only one more week to opening night.

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

I know this one was LONG! Thank you for giving it a read. I realize we went down some rabbit holes before things got really spicy, but I appreciate you hanging in there.

I thought about glossing over the dance conversation mid chapter, but... that’s never been in my nature. The RWB really does perform a uniquely Canadian Nutcracker with Ukrainian, Métis jigging, and Indian classical dances instead of some of the other more classical/traditional elements and I wanted to include this discussion because representation in classical arts matters, both honoring the art form’s origins AND evolving it to reflect the communities actually watching and performing it. I wanted Ilya and Shane’s conversation to reflect that complexity: Ilya isn’t wrong that connection to origin matters, but Shane isn’t wrong that letting kids see themselves onstage matters too.

Anyway, it’s actually kind of a fascinating topic, a worthwhile conversation, and I recommend checking out some of the many nuanced articles on The Nutcracker and other works.

And last but not least... thanks for reading! If you liked it, I’d love to yap in the comments.

UPDATE 4/2/2026: A reader pointed out that Métis sashes are not beaded as I had them in the fic. I’ve updated to correct. Thank you!

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🌈 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🦋 “yearning for my own lift”
- 🏒 “dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”
- 🦃🦋🐭🎄 “something something Nutcracker”

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Please be sure to read the updated tags!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane's back hit the mirror. Glow tape unstuck at the corner. The laminated NO FOOD OR DRINKS sign, curling from years of humidity, pressed into his shoulder blade.

A reminder. Rules existed here.

He was breaking every single one. Rozanov's mouth found his throat and Shane stopped caring about rules at all.

This was supposed to not happen again. Shane had said that on Friday—*this isn't happening again*—standing in his office with his belt still undone and the taste of Rozanov on his tongue. Rozanov had left with that infuriating smile, and Shane had spent the entire weekend telling himself he meant it.

He'd lasted two days. Forty-eight hours, sixteen waking hours per day if he averaged six hours of sleep (he'd averaged four), 1,920 minutes of telling himself he wouldn't do this again.

His record for maintaining a schedule without deviation: 839 days.

His record for resisting Ilya Rozanov: 2,880 minutes.

Pathetic.

"You came to find me," Rozanov murmured against his skin, teeth scraping the tendon below Shane's ear. His knee pressed between Shane's thighs, the friction stealing the air from Shane's lungs. "Knocked on my door. Very bold, Hollander."

"I was checking costume inventory." Shane grabbed Rozanov's belt and worked the buckle open. "Jackie said you got a dressing room now that—"

"Mmm. And inventory requires locked door now? Is new safety protocol?" His head tilted to the side. "Ah, you are here to *murder* me."

"No! Ugh, just shut *up*, someone might—" Shane's words cut off when Rozanov's hand slid down the front of his jeans, palm cupping him through the denim. He was already half-hard,

had been since he'd walked past this door and heard movement inside and made the spectacularly poor decision to knock.

"Someone might what?" Rozanov's thumb pressed against the seam of Shane's jeans, finding where the fabric pulled taut. "Walk in? See us?" His other hand yanked Shane's shirt up and over his head in one motion, breaking contact only long enough to get the fabric out of the way. "That could be fun. I love an audience."

"No."

"Tragic. You deny me both pleasure and applause. And tragic because you like it too, Hollander. Look how hard you are just thinking about putting on a pretty show with me."

Shane was. His hands shook as he got Rozanov's belt open, as he worked the button and zipper. "I hate you."

"I know; you say it every time right before you do exactly what I want." Rozanov kissed him, hard and claiming, tongue sliding past Shane's lips like he owned the space there. Shane opened for him without thought, tasting coffee and raspberry jam—that Danish he'd seen Rozanov eating during morning break. "I can live with this, your hate, Hollander. You hate me *so* much you came looking for me. Could not even wait for rehearsal to start. Very poor impulse control for man who runs whole show."

That was true and infuriating. It'd be easy to blame it on work, Shane could just blame Nutcracker's final rehearsal week like it did this to people. Too many hours, daylight already gone before the end of the workday. There was too much proximity within the accumulated load of long calls and short breaks. Too much pretending that magic happened without hands and sweat and bodies breaking down.

It almost made sense.

It was even more maddening that the *entirety* of the truth managed to still be worse: he couldn't wait, and he hadn't been able to *stop* thinking about Rozanov all weekend. At home in his apartment, Shane had woken up at five AM with his hand already between his legs, Rozanov's voice in his head: *Next time you want to hate me like this, you tell me*. He'd come into his own fist thinking about Rozanov on his knees, about the way he'd looked up at Shane with those pale eyes blown dark, sucking the soul out of his dick in his *office* right next to all the *paperwork* and the pictures of his *parents* framed on the wall.

Then he'd spent an hour in the shower trying to convince himself it meant nothing.

It had worked until he'd walked into the theatre. Until he'd passed through the wings where Rozanov had pressed against him for quick change. Until he'd reorganized the prop table in the wings where they'd almost kissed that first week. The building, which had always been *Shane's* sanctuary, was full of Rozanov now—every corner held a memory, every hallway echoed with his voice, his laugh, the fiery twinkle in his eyes.

And so. Yes. Between the late night fantasies, the not-so subtle reminder from Rose on their coffee date that it'd been several millennia since the last time he'd gotten some, and a strange

hateful *want* of the man that was ruining his production, Shane's feet had carried him down the administrative hallway, past the overworking heater fighting against December in Winnipeg, past the other dressing rooms to this one—the corner room they'd just cleared out for principals now that costume fittings were done—to his own hand lifting to knock before he could talk himself out of it.

The door had opened. Rozanov had looked at him, still in street clothes, hair damp from a shower, those pale eyes tracking over Shane's face like he could read every thought Shane had tried to bury over the weekend—and Shane had pushed past him into the room and locked the door behind them. Within seconds Rozanov's mouth was on his, Shane's back pressed against the mirror, and two days of pretending evaporated like fog.

“Off,” Shane managed, tugging at Rozanov's shirt. “Get it off.”

Rozanov pulled back long enough to drag the fabric over his head, and Shane's hands went straight to his chest. Warm skin, the firm swell of muscle, the faint scratch of hair under his palms. He'd thought about this all weekend—lying in bed Saturday night, alone in his apartment, touching himself to the memory of Friday and hating himself for it, the mantra in his head repeating: *This is a bad idea. Stage managers don't do this, you don't do this.* Shane had spent years building a reputation for perfection, never late, never unprepared, never making mistakes, and here he was, unraveling it for seventy-two seconds of Ilya Rozanov's attention.

He tried to file it away as his eyes roved over Rozanov's body. *Physical Attraction: Temporary Fixation.* But the folder wouldn't close. Rozanov kept spilling out of every category Shane tried to shove him into: *Difficult Personalities* (but he'd been kind to that little girl), *Professional Obstacles* (but they'd compromised on the cultural dances), *Mistakes to Avoid* (but Shane kept seeking him out anyway).

“You are staring,” Rozanov said, dragging him out of the spiral. His hands found Shane's hips, thumbs hooking into his waistband.

“Shut up.” Shane kissed him again to make it true, biting Rozanov's lower lip hard enough that Rozanov sucked air through his teeth, fingers tightening on Shane's hips. Rozanov's elbow clipped the garment rack and the Prince jacket swayed, tags whispering against the lining. Jackie would murder someone if that hit the floor. Shane's own jeans were open now, Rozanov's hand sliding inside to wrap around him properly, and Shane's knees nearly buckled.

“So hard already.” Rozanov's grip was firm, his thumb swiping over the head of Shane's cock to gather the slickness there. “Did you think about Friday? When you touched yourself?”

“I *didn't*.”

“You lie badly. Your face gives you away first, promise me you will never play *durak* or poker.” Rozanov stroked him slowly, root to tip, and Shane had to brace his hands on Rozanov's shoulders to stay upright. “And fine. I will tell you then that *I* did. I think about it Saturday night. Sunday morning. Sunday night again.” Each admission punctuated with

another stroke. “Thought about you on your knees. Your mouth on me. How you looked when you came, and how much I want to see again.”

“Jesus—” Shane’s hips moved on instinct, seeking more friction, more pressure.

Rozanov’s hand stilled. “You want more?”

Shane shook his head and wouldn’t answer. He wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of having caught him so plainly.

“Stubborn.” Rozanov dropped to his knees without warning, taking Shane’s jeans and underwear down with him in one smooth motion. Shane’s cock sprang free, and Rozanov made a pleased sound, one hand wrapping around the base while his tongue traced the underside.

“*Fuck*,” Shane tipped his head back against the mirror, skull meeting glass with a dull thud. His body was trying to strain away from it, overstimulation starting to nip at his heels and bleed into his veins. The prospect of more pleasure, the very pleasure he’d denied himself for *years*, was too much to resist though, and Rozanov was giving in excess.

“So responsive.” Rozanov licked the head, catching the precum beading there, and Shane’s fingers found his hair, gripping those golden-brown curls like a lifeline. “I could do this for hours. Make you come over and over until you cannot stand.”

“We don’t have hours.” Shane’s hips jerked forward when Rozanov’s tongue circled the head again, teasing. “Someone will notice—”

“Then I work faster.” Rozanov took him in, all the way down in one motion, no warning, and the wet heat was devastating. Shane bit down on his lip to keep from making a sound, but Rozanov pulled back just enough to speak, lips still brushing Shane’s cock. “No. I want to hear you.”

“Someone will—”

“Building is empty. Everyone at breakfast still.” Rozanov’s hand joined his mouth, stroking what he couldn’t swallow, and Shane forgot why he’d been arguing. “So you can be as loud as you want, *krolik*.”

Shane wasn’t loud. He wasn’t. But when Rozanov took him deep again, throat working around him, Shane heard himself make a sound that would’ve embarrassed him if his brain was working properly. Rozanov’s free hand slid from his hip, trailing down over the curve of Shane’s ass, and Shane was too lost in the heat of his mouth to track where it was going until he felt fingertips brush between his cheeks.

In an instant, Shane’s body tensed up. Danger. *Oh*. Oh no. His thighs clamped together and his fingers turned to claws in Rozanov’s hair.

Rozanov pulled off immediately, hand stilling. “Relax,” he said, looking up at Shane with those pale eyes. His other hand kept stroking Shane’s cock, keeping the pleasure constant

even as his fingertips traced lower, skin on skin, finding the cleft of Shane's ass. "Is okay?"

Shane couldn't speak. His fingers tightened in Rozanov's hair, and he didn't know if he was trying to pull him closer or push him away. His jeans were bunched around his thighs, trapping him in place, and Rozanov's hand was right *there*, warm against skin that had never been touched like this by anyone else.

"You have done this before?" Rozanov asked. His fingertip circled, feather-light, and Shane's breath caught. "Let someone inside you?"

Shane shook his head.

"No?" Rozanov's thumb swept over the head of Shane's cock, making him gasp. "You want to try?"

"I don't—" The words stuck in Shane's throat. Shane could hardly think at the moment, couldn't remember how to find his voice beyond the sensation of Rozanov's hands on him. "I don't know."

"Mmm. You are nervous." Rozanov's fingertip traced a slow circle, not pressing in, just exploring, and Shane felt it everywhere—not just where he was touching, but up his spine, behind his ribs, in his throat.

"I'm not nervous."

"No?" Rozanov pressed gently, just the pad of his finger, no penetration, just suggestion. "Then why do you tense like violin string when I touch you here?"

Shane's ears were burning. He couldn't answer, couldn't think past the feeling of Rozanov's hand on him, the implication of what he was offering. His body didn't know what to do—whether to press back into the touch or pull away.

"Do you touch yourself like this?" Rozanov asked. "Here. When you are alone? Put fingers inside? Dildo?"

"Jesus—" Shane's head thumped against the mirror again. "Can you not—"

"You are blushing. All the way down your chest." Rozanov sounded fascinated. "Such a pretty color on you."

"Fuck off."

"Why so shy? You've had my dick in your mouth. This is somehow worse?"

"That's different—"

"How is different?" Rozanov's hand on Shane's cock moved faster, building him back toward the edge while his other hand stayed where it was, that maddening lightness against Shane's hole. "Both ways of fucking. Both feel good. Or you think one is more... what is word... *gay*? Or you think one version of this is somehow braver than the other."

“I didn’t say that...”

“Because it is. Gay. Just like sucking my cock in your office,” Rozanov circled again, and Shane made a sound he couldn’t control. “... and seeking me out here so I could put my mouth on you again. Very *fucking* gay, Hollander.”

Rozanov took him back into his mouth without warning, sucking hard while his finger pressed just slightly, not breaching, just testing, and Shane was so close, right there, the combination of sensations dragging him toward the edge—

“*Stop.*” The word came out sharp, bitten off. His hands pushed at Rozanov’s shoulders, and Rozanov pulled back immediately, both hands withdrawing, sitting on his heels.

“Too much?” Rozanov asked. His pupils were still blown wide, his lips swollen, but his voice had lost its teasing edge.

Shane’s chest was heaving. He could still feel the ghost of Rozanov’s fingertip, pressing, *waiting*, and now receding to give him space to think through the stab of panic. “I’m not—I don’t—”

There was a knock, and then the door handle rattled.

They both froze.

“Rozanov? You in there?” Jackie’s voice came muffled through the wood. “I need to check the shoulder seams on your Prince jacket before rehearsal.”

Fuck! Shane’s hands flew to his jeans, still pooled around his ankles.

“One moment, Jackie,” Rozanov called through the door, his accent thickening the words. But he didn’t move. He stayed exactly where he was—on his knees between Shane’s legs, one hand still wrapped around Shane’s cock, the other resting on Shane’s hip. His eyes met Shane’s, bright with mischief, and he pressed a finger to his own lips. *Shh.*

Then he leaned forward and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to the soft skin of Shane’s inner thigh.

Shane’s breath stuttered. He mouthed a furious *what the fuck are you doing* with enough venom that Rozanov had to bite back a grin against his skin.

“I am getting dressed, not decent at moment,” Rozanov continued, lips brushing Shane’s thigh as he spoke. His hand on Shane’s cock gave one slow, deliberate stroke, and then he was *actually* biting, leaving a welting mark on the otherwise unmarred skin. “... Taking my time,” he continued, leaving a second hickey to add more insult, “... want to make sure everything... fits properly.”

“Oh, sorry!” Jackie’s voice carried through the wood. “I thought you’d be in costume already. Do you need another few minutes?”

Rozanov kissed higher, tongue darting out to taste the crease where thigh met groin. Shane's fingers dug into his shoulders, half pushing him away, half holding him there. Shane's cock throbbed in Rozanov's hand, oversensitive from the interrupted buildup, every nerve ending lit up and screaming. He was still close—dangerously close—teetering on an edge of a cliff. His legs trembled, and Rozanov noticed, making a pleased sounding hum.

"*Five* is enough," Rozanov said, his breath hot against Shane's skin. Another kiss, another stroke. "Maybe... wait." His thumb swept over the head of Shane's cock, gathering wetness. "Maybe seven. Yes. Seven minutes should be perfect for what I need."

Shane bit down on his fist to keep from making a sound.

"No problem. I'll grab coffee and come back. Have you seen Shane around? He's usually here by now."

Rozanov looked up at Shane, eyes dancing with wicked amusement. "Mr. Hollander?" Another kiss, this one directly beside Shane's cock. "No, I have not seen him recently. But I am sure he is somewhere... close by. Doing very important work." His hand tightened, stroked. "Very hard work."

He *winked*.

"Okay, I'll text him. Back in five!"

Jackie's footsteps receded down the hallway.

"You...!" The second the sound faded, Shane shoved at Rozanov's shoulders, though it hardly seemed to matter against the solid wall of muscle. How had he pushed him so easily *before* then...? Unless... Rozanov had let himself be shoved the first time? "You're a fucking *asshole*."

"Yes, we have established this many times." Rozanov stayed exactly where he was, on his knees, hands still on Shane's hips, looking up at him with that infuriating smirk. "But I save you from embarrassment, so maybe I am asshole who is also helpful?"

"You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Mmm. But your heart is beating very fast for other reasons too, I think." Rozanov's thumbs stroked over Shane's hipbones, and Shane tried even harder to ignore the sparks following the paths of those thumbs as they traced invisible designs. "You were close before Jackie interrupted, yes? I could feel it."

Shane's breath caught. He was. He'd been right there, teetering on the edge before the panic hit.

"Let me finish what I started." Rozanov's hand cupped him through the denim, and Shane was still hard, still aching. "We have seven whole minutes and door is locked and no one will bother us. Unless you want me to stop? I will. But you look like you need this, Hollander. Shh. You worry too much. Let me do the worrying."

The smart play: say no. Pull away, fix his clothes, walk out with whatever dignity he had left. Instead, Shane leaned back against the mirror and let Rozanov break him down all over again, and this time, Rozanov didn't tease. He took Shane in his mouth and worked him with single-minded focus, one hand wrapped around the base, the other gripping Shane's hip to hold him steady through the ramping arcs of building pleasure. His fingertips stayed where Shane could handle them, hip, thigh, the safe territory they'd already mapped rather than venturing farther this time, and the wet heat of his mouth was all Shane could think of, all he could feel. All he could hear were the obscene, filthy, *wonderful* slurps of smirking lips on his shaft in the small room.

This stupid dressing room! The cramped space amplified everything. Each thrust rattled the costume rack off to the side, its hangers chiming against the metal bar, the Prince jacket swaying in peripheral vision. Shane bit down on his own hand to muffle the sound clawing up his throat. Dust tickled his nose from disturbed fabric. His knee knocked against a storage bin, the plastic thud too loud. Too *obvious*. Anyone walking past would hear them.

Anyone.

Shane lasted *maybe* ninety seconds before he came with a bitten-off groan, hips jerking forward. There were no words—so many words, actually—but he was too far gone to even pretend to think them as his thighs clamped up around either side of Rozanov's bulky shoulders, but the Russian hardly seemed bothered by it. Rozanov swallowed him, and his spend, down like it was nothing, like he did this every day, like Shane's orgasm was just another part of his morning routine, like it was some fucked up *reward* for his earlier quick thinking.

And... then it was over.

Rozanov rose from his knees the way he'd exit a *grand pli  *, weight gracefully shifting to his toes, spine lengthening vertebra by vertebra, shoulders the last to settle. He wiped his mouth with a hand, and then caught Shane's wrists before Shane could push him away, holding them against his sternum. Captive there, Shane could feel his heartbeat under his palms, still elevated and running fast.

"Better?" Rozanov asked, and his voice had gone soft, almost gentle. "You are wound so tightly I wonder how it is you do not explode. But we stop now. Is fine. We do not have to continue if you are not ready." His expression softened, just fractionally. "Jackie will come back, I will show her the jacket, she will leave. You can stay here if you need moment. Hide behind costume rack like scared rabbit. Remember that nothing bad happened. All these worries are not good for this pretty head of yours."

A pause.

"This too much thinking is poison for you," he added, not unkind. "You should let other people handle it sometimes. Take break."

Shane stared at him. Was Rozanov actually being... nice? That didn't fit. Rozanov was supposed to be smug and insufferable and—

And Shane didn't want to think about what it meant that Rozanov was giving him an out, offering him a safe place to collect himself, reading his anxiety like choreography, respecting his boundary even after all that teasing.

He pulled his wrists free and dropped to his knees instead.

Rozanov's eyebrows shot up. "What are you—"

"You said *seven* minutes. We still have a few."

"Hollander—"

"Shut up and let me finish this."

Rozanov's protest died when Shane got his hands on him again, when Shane took him in hand and then in mouth without preamble or hesitation. His fingers found Shane's hair immediately, threading through the dark strands.

"*Bozhe*," Rozanov breathed. "You are—*ty soshyol s uma*—you are insane."

Shane pulled off just long enough to say, "Stop. *Talking*," before taking him deep again.

Rozanov's knees buckled slightly. His hand braced against the dressing room mirror, palm squeaking against glass. "You will kill me. I will die here, and they will find my body, and everyone will know you murdered me with your mouth."

Shane would've laughed if his mouth wasn't full. Instead, he worked faster, hand and mouth together, learning what made Rozanov's breathing hitch, what made his fingers tighten, what made him curse in Russian. It took three minutes and forty seconds before Rozanov came with Shane's name caught between his teeth.

When Shane stood, Rozanov pulled him into a kiss that tasted like both of them. "You are terrible," he panted against Shane's mouth, each little huff of hot air tickling over his lips. "And I like you very much."

Shane shoved him away before he could think too hard about that. "Costume. Jackie. Go."

"Always so bossy." But Rozanov straightened his clothes, ran his fingers through his hair, and headed for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob, sighing dramatically. "And impossible to resist. Tonight, after rehearsal, I have ideas for things we should try. You will come to my hotel?"

"No, absolutely not."

"You will absolutely *think* about it." Rozanov opened the door and slipped out, leaving Shane alone in the dressing room with the taste of him still on his tongue and the certainty that he absolutely would think about it. "And, if you are lucky, I will even let you in when you *absolutely* arrive."

Shane made it through the rest of Monday's rehearsal by treating his body like a machine that needed specific inputs to function, and by sheer force of will and years of practice pretending everything was fine. Water every forty-five minutes. Protein bar at lunch, eaten standing in the wings while checking prop placement. Emails answered between calls and random odd jobs. Did anyone know? Why was that tech *looking* at him?

His clipboard became a shield he could hide behind.

No one seemed to notice that he'd spent his morning with Ilya Rozanov's dick in his mouth. Jackie had checked the Prince jacket's shoulder seams and left humming. The corps ran through their marks without incident. Hayden called lighting cues from the booth, voice crackling through Shane's headset like always. The world kept turning.

And Rozanov—Rozanov performed like nothing had happened at all.

The Snow scene ran long, entrances drifting as fatigue crept in, with Rozanov working through his variations with the same cocksure intensity he brought to everything, pushing his extensions higher, giving full performance energy to every jump and turn where other dancers might save their strength. The dancer playing Clara matched his energy, and the other dancers watched from the wings with the mixture of admiration and exhaustion that Rozanov seemed to inspire everywhere he went. The ballet master watched with arms crossed but didn't intervene. Shane stayed in his usual position at the tech table, calling cues to lighting, double-checking his run sheets.

"LX 21 standby... go. LX 21 on my count, three, two, go." The familiar rhythm settled into his bones. This he could do.

This made sense.

And from this angle, he could watch Rozanov work without being obvious about it, and that was the problem: he *couldn't stop* watching.

The man moved like water finding paths through stone: inevitable, relentless, wearing down resistance through sheer persistence. When he demonstrated a lift sequence with Rose, his hands settled on her waist with easy confidence. The same hands that had gripped Shane's hips in the dressing room. The same hands that had held him steady while Shane came apart.

Rose laughed at something Rozanov said. From across the stage, Shane watched her touch his forearm, watched Rozanov's answering grin—warm, charming, effortless.

Was he like this with everyone?

Rozanov had called him *pretty*, and had, alarmingly, been kind in the aftermath of his panic, even offering a space to hide and come down. He was interested. But he'd also spent the past week flirting with half the company. Shane had *seen* him do it: compliments scattered like loose change, that crooked smile given freely to anyone who'd receive it.

"You good?" Hayden appeared at his elbow with a fresh battery pack for the headsets.

"You've been staring at that same page for like three minutes."

Shane glanced down. He'd drawn a small, dark box in the margin, then traced over it until the pen had nearly torn through the paper. "Fine. Just thinking."

"Uh-huh." Hayden swapped out the battery and clipped the dead one to their belt. "Well, when you're done *thinking*, can you check the comm line to booth two? I'm getting static every time lighting calls a cue. I also think we might be down one of the IEMs for the rats, so if you could find a replacement..."

"I'll do it after this scene."

"Cool." Hayden lingered, watching the stage where Rozanov was now running through his solo variation. "He's good, I'll give him that. Even if he is kind of exhausting."

Shane's hand stilled on his clipboard. "Exhausting how?"

"Just... you know. Big personality. Always on." Hayden shrugged. "Half the company's already halfway in love with him. Jackie thinks it's hilarious. I think it's gonna be a nightmare when he leaves and everyone realizes he was just being charming because that's what he *does*, you know? Like, it's not personal. It's just his whole thing. If Jackie didn't make me promise to leave him alone after that whole 'run away with me' bullshit the other day, yeah I heard about that, I'd kill the guy myself. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm sure he's a good guy or whatever. Talented as hell. But the dude's a player, Shane. Capital P. I'd bet money he's hooked up with at least three people here already." Hayden laughed, shaking his head.

Three people already.

"You think he's already hooked up with people here?" Shane asked before he could stop himself.

"Oh, absolutely." Hayden laughed. "Jackie keeps a running joke about it. She saw him leaving the building with one of the corps dancers last week—Madison, I think? And he's been flirting with literally everyone. Rose, the costume assistants, that guy from lighting... Dude's not very picky. It's like a sport for him." Hayden shrugged. "I mean, why not, right? He's here for a month, he's hot, he knows it. Get what you can while you can. If I didn't hate him, I'd respect it."

A... running joke.

"Bet he's got someone new lined up already," Hayden continued, oblivious. "Probably working through a list. You know the type—collects people like souvenirs."

Shane's name probably fit somewhere on that list too. He was just next in line. Another name on whatever mental tally Rozanov kept, another conquest to laugh about with the next warm body. Shane's pen stopped moving. The dressing room suddenly felt like evidence—proof that Shane was exactly as stupid as he feared. Had Rozanov cornered someone else in a dressing room last week? Would there be someone new next week, after Shane stopped being interesting?

You came to find me, Rozanov had said, smug and knowing. *Very bold, Hollander.*

Like Shane had done some novel thing. A thing Rozanov found *amusing*.

“You okay?” Hayden was looking at him now, eyebrows raised. “You got weird for a second.”

“Fine.” The word came out too sharp. Shane forced his shoulders to relax, forced his hand to unclench from the clipboard. “Just thinking about the costume changes for Act Two. Tight turnaround.”

“Jackie says she’s on it, so don’t worry.” Hayden’s paused, glancing back at the stage, to Rozanov, to a gaggle of giggling ballerinas in the wake of his smile. “Hey, would it be weird if he hooked up with Rose, you think? Like, she’s your ex. Would that bother you?”

The question caught Shane off-guard. “Rose and I were never—you know that didn’t work out. We’re better as friends.”

“Right, but... *still*. If he went for her, would that be weird?”

Shane opened his mouth to say *no, why would it be weird, Rose can do whatever she wants*—and realized with creeping horror that it *would* bother him. Not because of Rose. Because of *Rozanov*. Because the thought of watching Rozanov turn that focused attention on someone else, watching those hands settle on someone else’s waist, watching that crooked smile mean something to someone else—

His stomach twisted.

“I’d be fine with it,” Shane lied. “Rose is an adult. I can’t exactly stop her or—” of himself, clearly, “—anyone else from hooking up with him if that’s what people want to do. If she wants to hook up with a visiting principal who’ll be gone in three weeks, that’s her choice. I’m not a babysitter.”

“Yeah I guess. Shit. I’d be mad as hell. You’re a better person than me, Shane,” Hayden said, already walking towards the lighting booth. “Bigger man and all that. I have a hard time wrapping my head around anyone wanting that kinda... man whore anyway, ya know? Man slut energy. The real problem is making sure his ego fits through the door when he exits, I guess.”

Shane said nothing, but shrugged with a meaningless laugh, and when Hayden was gone, when he was alone enough to spiral, his eyes found Rozanov again. Now he was finishing coaching one of the younger corps dancers—patient, thorough, ending with an encouraging pat on the shoulder. The dancer’s face lit up like Rozanov had handed her the sun.

Shane recognized that look. That *I’m special, he noticed me*.

He’d probably had the same look on his face two hours ago.

Fuck.

Rozanov probably left a trail of half-broken hearts everywhere he went, people reading meaning into attention he gave as casually as breathing. This was why Shane didn't do casual. This was why he kept people at arm's length, why he'd spent years building a reputation for professional distance. This sick, twisting feeling in his gut over a man he wasn't even dating, this panic that he'd misread everything and was *actively* making a mistake, this was exactly what happened when Shane let someone in.

And Rozanov wasn't even *in*. Rozanov was a temporary mental malfunction, a complication, who'd be back in Moscow by January, leaving Shane to pick up the pieces of whatever emotional wreckage he left behind.

You are terrible, and I like you very much.

Shane clicked his pen closed and shoved it in his pocket. He had work to do. Real work. The kind that didn't involve obsessing over whether he was just another name on Ilya Rozanov's list of conquests.

Work always made things go faster. Afternoon bled into evening. Rehearsal wrapped at six, dancers scattering to dinner plans and rest days. Shane stayed behind to check the fly rail like he'd promised, then the prop table, then the lighting gels that didn't actually need checking. By the time he locked his office and headed for the parking lot, the sun had set and his hands had finally stopped shaking.

He found Hayden in the parking lot, leaning against his truck with his phone.

"Hey." Hayden pocketed his phone. "You heading out?"

"Yeah. Where's Jackie?"

"She's meeting up with some friends so I," Hayden grinned, waggling his eyebrows, "Am a free man! Want to grab food? There's that pho place on Corydon. You said you liked ramen, right?"

Shane's answer came automatic even as his brain registered the casual equation—pho, ramen, Vietnamese, Japanese, all the same apparently. Besides, what would he even say? *Actually, I'm Japanese-Canadian, technically Nikkei and I know you don't know what that is, but I'm not Vietnamese, and ramen is Japanese, not Vietnamese, so they're not interchangeable?* That conversation never went well. It just made people defensive, or think that he was nitpicking, and made Shane the uptight one who couldn't take a joke, made everything *worse*.

And Hayden was his friend. The correction would make things awkward because he *knew* Hayden didn't mean anything by it, and Shane had already spent enough energy today pretending his morning hadn't happened.

Sometimes it was easier to let these things slide. "Sure."

Shane's apartment was dark when he got home after pho and beer, the street lights outside the windows casting orange stripes across his living room floor. A neighbor's balcony glowed

with premature Christmas lights, blue and white LEDs flickering against the snow piled along the rail, already crusted from plows. The theatre had been full of voices and notes and moving bodies, but here there was only the refrigerator's hum and the faint hiss of heat in the vents. With nothing left to coordinate, the day came back all at once. He dumped his keys on the counter and stood in the kitchen for a moment, still full from broth and banh mi, still processing the mental backlog surrounding Hayden's casual *would it be weird if he hooked up with Rose?*

He should shower. Deal with the dishes piled in the sink. Maybe prep his notes for tomorrow's rehearsal. Instead, Shane collapsed onto the couch and stared at the ceiling, letting the day's accumulated weight settle into his bones. Hayden's comment about Rozanov being a player. His mother's voice in his head asking about dating, about why he was always alone. And then—

His phone buzzed on the coffee table. Mom.

Shane stared at the screen. Monday nights she usually called after her book club, which meant she'd had two glasses of wine and would want to talk. He *could* ignore it and let it go to voicemail, text her tomorrow. But ignoring Yuna Hollander's calls only delayed the inevitable, he'd learned over the years.

He answered. "Hey, Mom."

"Shane," her voice came warmly through the speaker, "You're home? I thought you'd still be at the theatre."

"Rehearsal wrapped early. Went out with Hayden after."

"Oh, good. You need to eat. You work too much." She paused, and Shane heard the clink of glass against wood; her setting down her wine. "Your father says hello. He's watching that show again, the one with the dragons. I don't understand it but he seems happy. And he almost won cards earlier, so I remain undefeated champion."

Shane smiled despite himself. His father had discovered *Game of Thrones* three years late and was methodically working through all eight seasons with the same level focus he usually reserved for tax season. "Tell him I said hi."

"I will." Another pause. "So. How is the production? Opening night is coming soon, isn't it?"

"Less soon and more 'imminently,'" Shane said with a sigh, "Including today, there's just a week and a half left before opening night on the tenth."

"We have tickets for the twenty-fourth! Your father already put it on the calendar. And then we can go out and get a nice dinner together, just the three of us." Pride crept into her voice, and it always made him want to squirm. "My son, stage manager for the Royal Winnipeg Ballet's Nutcracker. Do you know how many people I tell? Everyone. At book club tonight, Jennifer was asking about you—"

"Mom—"

“—and I said, my Shane runs the whole production. Every light, every costume, every dancer. Without him, nothing happens.” She laughed, and Shane heard the happiness in it, the genuine satisfaction. “She was very impressed. We all are. I don’t know if I tell you enough how wonderful we think you are, Shane. Your father and I brag constantly.”

Shane leaned back against the counter. His mother’s approval had always been a complicated thing, demanding and absolute when he was young, softening only after he’d stopped dancing and found his place backstage even though she’d cried at the kitchen table while Shane packed his pointe shoes into a box.

You’re giving up.

But when he’d gotten the job at RWB, when he’d proven he could build a career in ballet without being on stage, she’d shifted. She planned ahead, she read articles, she never missed a production, and always brought flowers to congratulate a job well done. For all her own complexities, let it never be said that Yuna Hollander did not love her son, because there was no greater cheerleader on his ‘team’.

He should feel good about that. He *did* feel good about that.

“I’m glad you’re coming,” Shane said, and it was true. If he was more like his mother, more like *the* Yuna Hollander, maybe he wouldn’t be in this mess right now.

“Of course we’re coming. We come every year.” Her tone shifted, turning sly. “And this year, maybe... you can bring someone to introduce to us? Hm? Maybe even a date for the twenty-fourth?”

There it was.

“I’m working, Mom. I can’t exactly sit in the audience.”

“After the show, Shane. For the reception. You always come to those.”

“I’m usually exhausted after—”

“You’re always exhausted. I know, sweetie, I don’t mean that.” She didn’t let him finish.

“What about Rose? You two were so good together. Did you patch things up?”

Shane’s hand tightened on the phone. They’d had this conversation before—multiple times—and it never got easier. His mother loved Rose. Rose was perfect: talented, kind, from a good family, the kind of girl Yuna could introduce to her friends without qualification. The fact that Shane and Rose had tried dating and it had been a disaster didn’t seem to register.

“Rose and I are friends. We’ve been friends for years. We’re not getting back together.”

“But why not? She’s lovely. She’s talented. She understands your work—”

“Because it didn’t work the first time. We’re better as friends.”

“Sometimes things take time. Sometimes people need to grow—”

“Mom.” Shane pinched the bridge of his nose. “Rose and I are not dating. We’re not going to date. Can we please drop it?”

Silence stretched across the line. Then: “Are you seeing someone else?”

The question landed like a spotlight snapping on mid-performance. Shane’s brain supplied approximately seven thousand terrible answers: *Yes, I’m hooking up with the visiting Russian principal in dressing rooms and my office. No, it’s not serious. Yes, I know it’s a bad idea. No, I haven’t told anyone.*

Also, he’s a man. Surprise!

“No,” Shane heard himself say. “I’m not seeing anyone.”

“Shane.” Her tone shifted, worried now. “You work too much. You need balance. You need someone who cares about you, who makes you happy. Someone to come home to who can make dinner or at least ask about your day or—”

“I’m fine, Mom.”

“I worry you get lonely.”

“I have friends. I have Rose, I have Hayden and Jackie and—”

“Friends are not the same.” She sighed, and Shane could picture her: sitting at the kitchen table in her reading glasses, wine half-finished, probably underlining passages in whatever novel book club had assigned this month. “When was the last time you went on a date?”

Shane’s mind supplied an image: Rozanov on his knees in Shane’s office, Shane’s fingers in his hair, the door locked and the taste of him still on Shane’s tongue. Did that count as a date? Probably not.

“I don’t have time right now,” Shane said. “After the run closes, maybe. But right now I need to focus on work.”

“You always focus on work.” But her tone had softened, resigned. “That’s probably my influence, I realize. Okay. After the run closes, you promise me you’ll try? Meet someone nice. Go to dinner. Let yourself be happy. And rest more.”

“Sure, Mom. I promise.”

It was a lie, of course. He wasn’t going to meet someone nice. He wasn’t going to go to dinner. He was going to keep doing exactly what he’d been doing: working too hard, sleeping too little, and... apparently... hooking up with arrogant Russian principals who would be gone by January.

They talked for another ten more minutes about his father’s dragon show, his mother’s book club pick, their Christmas plans. They’d do their celebration on New Year’s Eve like always, since Shane worked Christmas. His mother would make *osechi*, his father would put on

terrible music while they sat on the couch and opened gifts one at a time, and they'd stay up past midnight eating food that took days to prepare.

"I love you, Shane," his mother said before hanging up. "Take care of yourself. Eat something other than takeout, please. And think about what I said."

"I will. Love you too."

The call ended. Shane set his phone on the counter and stared at the dark screen.

Are you seeing someone else?

He wasn't. Rozanov wasn't *someone*, wasn't anything Shane could name or claim. Rozanov was a complication. A mistake Shane kept making. A bad decision wrapped in a better body than Shane had any right to want.

And in a few weeks, he'd be gone.

And his mother was right. He needed to rest, and so Shane stripped in the bathroom and flicked on the lights. In the shower, hot water beat against his shoulders, washing away the smell of pho and beer and the entire exhausting day. He stood under the spray until it ran lukewarm, then cold, then shut it off. His reflection stared back from the fogged mirror. Dark eyes, wet hair plastered to his forehead, water dripping down his chest.

He looked... good. Shane knew he wasn't unattractive, that wasn't the problem. Morning runs before coffee dates with Rose, the long days on his feet, the habit of treating his body like equipment that had to keep working, it all showed. His shoulders were strong. His waist was trim and his legs were muscular. The freckles across his face, his shoulders, all of him, still annoyed him, though, and they always had, no matter how many years he told himself they were just skin. They felt like noise on the surface, motes of dust or distortion that drew attention when he would rather pass unnoticed. Rose had liked them. Rose had liked him. He accepted that as fact, even if it never quite translated into recognition when he looked at himself.

And so. The disconnect in the mirror.

Shane pulled on boxers and collapsed onto the mattress, staring at the ceiling. The bed was too big, too empty, the apartment too dark. Outside, a car alarm went off and then stopped. Someone's dog barked. Normal sounds. A normal Monday night.

Except Shane's brain wouldn't shut off. He reached for it on the nightstand. No new messages. He opened his texts anyway, scrolling past Rose's memes from earlier, past Hayden's reminder about the IEM replacement, past Jackie's costume notes. Oddly, he was more interested in the name that *wasn't* in his messages, and the pause was enough for memory to do what it did best, replay a voice in his ear, the press of a hand at his hip, the look that said Rozanov already knew what Shane would deny.

His cock stirred against his thigh.

Shane threw the phone onto the nightstand hard enough that it bounced. This was pathetic. He was pathetic. Lying in bed getting hard thinking about a man who was probably doing the same thing with anything with legs. *Man slut energy*, Hayden had said, and Shane had laughed because what else could he do?

Do you touch yourself like this? Rozanov's fingers had circled his hole through the panic, teasing, waiting. *When you are alone? Put fingers inside? Dildo?*

Shane's hand slid down his stomach.

He did. Of course he did. He had a dildo tucked in the back of his nightstand drawer under a tangle of charging cables and old receipts because god forbid anyone *find* it. Not that anyone came over. Not that anyone would look, even though Rose knew and had cackled in delight to learn that it was *purple*. But Shane had spent his entire adult life building walls between what people saw and what he wanted, and the dildo lived behind those walls where it belonged.

His cock was fully hard now, tenting his boxers. Shane palmed himself through the fabric, hips lifting into his own touch. This was stupid. He should go to sleep. He had work tomorrow, rehearsal at nine, a hundred things to coordinate, and here he was—

I could do this for hours. Make you come over and over until you cannot stand.

God, fuck, he'd sounded so *sure*. Like it wasn't even dirty talk but *fact*, like he really could've done just that. Shane shoved his boxers down and wrapped his hand around himself properly, breathing huffing out a little faster. He thought about Rozanov on his knees in the dressing room, that smug grin when Jackie knocked, the way he'd kept going even with someone right outside the door. That fucking *wink*, those plush lips spread around his cock, the awful, wicked curl of his tongue, the way he'd held Shane pinned against the mirror, controlling the pace, taking what he wanted—

No. Taking what *Shane* wanted too. That was the problem. Shane wanted it, wanted Rozanov's hands on him, wanted that mouth, wanted—and he *did* want, *fuck*, what would've happened if he'd said *yes*—

Fuck it.

He reached for the nightstand drawer.

The dildo was silicone, average size, unremarkable except for what it represented: years of Shane learning his body in private, figuring out what he liked when no one was watching. He'd bought it online, used a fake name for shipping, deleted the confirmation email immediately. As if anyone cared. As if it mattered. And again: *purple*. Shane grabbed the lube from the same drawer and slicked his fingers. He knew how to do this, had done it dozens of times, hundreds maybe. Lying on his back with his knees bent, feet planted on the mattress. One finger first, working himself open, the stretch familiar and grounding. Then two. His free hand wrapped around his cock, stroking slowly while he worked himself wider.

But tonight his brain wouldn't cooperate. Tonight his brain supplied Rozanov's voice instead of the usual fantasies Shane cycled through.

You want more?

Yes, Shane wanted to cry. Three fingers now, scissoring, and Shane's thighs trembled. He was breathing hard, hips rocking between his hand on his cock and his fingers inside himself, chasing sensation, chasing the edge. This was always the worst, *worst*, part. Always too in his head. Shane felt like this, this struggle of wanting and flying and falling, would have been easier with someone else to help him, to do the hard work for him. To take the sore wrist and tired fingers for him, and a whimper bubbled in his throat, caught on the tip of his tongue as one of his legs pulled upward, toes curling, breaking down under the rising tide of pleasure, the waves of want lapping across his body. He was full of it, pressing in to fill every corner and divot of his body, but, *no*, not yet, he wanted—

God, he wanted a boyfriend. Shane groaned, mouth dropping open at the thought of someone to loom over him and kiss him quiet, to swallow his sounds, and *make him come*. It was why he and Rose, petite, sweet, Rose, would *never* work. He wanted a man, someone masculine and strong, big enough to hold him down and fuck him into the mattress, to stroke his shaking thighs and pin his restless hips down, strong enough to soothe the wracking shivers that took over his body.

What would it feel like? Not his fingers, not the dildo, but *someone*?

Again his thoughts betrayed him, going to Rozanov.

Rozanov who was probably doing this same thing with whoever else Hayden didn't know about.... And the thought should've killed his arousal, but instead it made an ugly, wanting, twist in Shane's chest. Fine. If Rozanov wanted to fuck half the company, Shane could play that game too. He could use Rozanov, that smug asshole, right back. Take what he wanted and walk away without making it mean *anything*.

It could just be sex and feeling good and nothing else. Bottoming didn't *have* to mean being vulnerable. It didn't have to mean anything if he didn't want it to other than getting fucked down and scratching this itch. Shane could control this—set the terms, initiate on his timeline, prove he wasn't some nervous virgin who needed coddling. He wasn't falling for the same charming bullshit everyone else fell for.

He was just using Rozanov's body. That's all this was. They were *even*.

Shane withdrew his fingers and reached for the dildo, the logic settling into place like armor: If he did this on his terms, in Rozanov's hotel where Shane could leave whenever he wanted, then *he* was the one in control. Not Rozanov.

And then he would *know* what it felt like, not his fingers, not the dildo, but *Rozanov*.

Rozanov who was bigger than Shane in every direction, who could lift him like he weighed nothing, who'd pinned him against the mirror with one hand. What would it feel like to have all that strength focused on making Shane come apart?

Using lube, he slicked the toy, positioned it, pressed in slowly, the blunt silicone head familiar and almost lifelike enough. The stretch burned in the best way, filling him, making his cock leak against his stomach. He gave himself a moment to adjust, then started moving it, fucking himself with it while his other hand worked his cock.

He tried to imagine what Rozanov might've said had things gone different: *Could fuck you right here. Against the wall. You would like that, yes?*

Shane would. He hated that he would. Each time he withdrew it pulled all the air from his lungs and left a void in his center. Then it all came rushing back when he pushed it back in, filling him and forcing him to breathe. His other hand worked his cock, matching the rhythm. Shane hated imagining Rozanov's hands on his hips, that low voice in his ear, the weight of him pressing Shane into the mattress. Or against the wall. Or bent over his desk. Or—

What if Shane had said yes in the dressing room? What if instead of panicking when Rozanov's finger circled his hole, Shane had said *yes, please, fuck me right here where anyone could hear?* What if he'd let Rozanov strip him down and work him open? He wondered what Rozanov would look between his thighs. If he would bite, if his hands were rough from callouses, if he'd shush him with kisses while thrusting *deep*, leaving him whining for more.

Would Rozanov do things that Shane asked him to do? Or make him beg? Shane didn't know. He wished he did.

Shane's head pushed harder into the back of his pillow, tongue sliding past his lips as he panted openly, one of his legs starting to shake and thrash as the pleasure ramped and ramped upward. The waves were tsunamis now, and he was shivering, sinking into them, mind going foggy. Rozanov Rozanov Rozanov. He was drowning. He wanted. Rozanov was in his head. In *him*, in these fantasies, and the thought of it all, the horrible rightness of it was so good that he was finally *there*.

Shane came with Rozanov's name bitten between his teeth, harder than he'd ever come in his life, spilling across his stomach in spurts. There was nothing holding him back now, just him and the thoughts of big, broad shoulders to cling to, a thick shaft pumping in and out of him, and the feeling of finally letting go, dildo was still inside him, his thighs shaking, lungs working hard. One rope. Two. Oh *god*, had he *ever* come like this? Delirious and shaking, he rode the aftershocks until they faded, then withdrew carefully and collapsed back against the pillows.

As the high faded, Shane slowly let himself rise out of that deep ocean. His shoulders ached, and so did his abdomen. His one leg was still shaking, and his hair was sweaty, sticking to his forehead while his heart still hammered in his chest. He was dizzy and boneless where he lay. The dildo sat discarded on the sheets beside him, and he could still feel the ghost of fullness, that terrible emptiness that wanted to be filled again.

What the fuck was that?

He closed his eyes and let his body come back from the intense orgasm he'd just experienced, trying to make something like sense out of it all. Okay. Okay. It was just a fantasy, so it didn't

matter, right? He still didn't like Rozanov. He still resented his arrogance, his lateness, the way he disrupted everything Shane had carefully built, and even now in his afterglow, Shane felt that familiar irritation sitting in his chest.

But he didn't want to move just yet. His limbs felt heavy, relaxed in a way they hadn't been in years. The fantasy had been good. Too good.

And... if he hadn't been such a coward, maybe it could've been real.

But—no. *No*. Not with Rozanov.

The ceiling stared down at him. The street lamp threw the same orange stripes. Nothing had changed except now Shane was sticky and ashamed and more confused than before.

He cleaned up in the bathroom, threw the cleaned dildo back in the wire-mess drawer, and lay in bed staring at nothing.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd be professional. Tomorrow he wouldn't seek Rozanov out, and he'd never think about this again. Besides, Rozanov would be gone by January, and he was probably fucking someone *right now* in his hotel room, because he didn't *need* fantasies.

Tomorrow.

It was *tomorrow*, Tuesday, and Shane's car pulled into the theatre's parking lot at 8:11 AM.

Early enough that the lot was still half-empty and the morning sun hadn't burned off the frost clinging to windshields. He grabbed his messenger bag from the passenger seat and shouldered the door open, boots crunching on gravel scattered across asphalt that the plows had chewed up over the weekend, the city's idea of winter traction, as a silver Honda pulled in two spaces down. Shane tried to remember who it belonged to, Emily maybe? Emma? Ah, wait, no, it was *Christine*, and she parked and climbed out, already in her warmups with a pink puffer coat thrown over top. A man got out of the driver's side, early thirties, wearing a Jets hoodie and holding a travel mug.

They met at the hood of the car. The man handed her the coffee, and Christine wrapped both hands around it, steam curling up between them. He said something Shane couldn't hear. She laughed and shifted her weight, the movement unconscious—hips tilting toward him, shoulder dropping. Thirty feet away and Shane could read the familiarity in it, the way her body knew his body, the way she rose onto her toes without thinking because she'd done it a hundred times before. Even in sneakers, ballet dancers would do ballet. The kiss was quick but unhurried. His hand found the small of her back, fingers spreading wide, and hers settled on his chest, right over his heart. They stood like that, foreheads nearly touching, his thumb rubbing small circles against her coat. A fluffy dog wagged in the back seat, nose pressed to the window, borfing with jealousy.

The whole stereotypical package. A cute couple, a cute dog. Kisses on snowy mornings.

And... *Shane*, who was staring like a creep thinking: *I want that*.

Because it looked *easy*. The way Christine leaned into him, the way his hand knew exactly where to rest, the coordinated timing of a Tuesday morning drop-off. Someone who brought coffee without being asked. Someone who knew her schedule well enough to arrive at 8:00, not 8:30 or 9:00. Someone she kissed goodbye in parking lots without caring who saw, because why would she care? There was nothing to hide when you had *this*—this casual intimacy that didn't require locked doors or careful timing or pretending the next day that nothing had happened.

It was easy to lie to his mother but she had been, annoyingly, right. Shane was lonely. He wanted someone to text good morning. Someone who'd ask about his day and actually listen to the answer. Someone who'd notice when he worked too late and bring him food because Shane forgot to eat when he got fixated on a problem. Someone warm in his bed instead of cold sheets and too much empty space.

But there was a difference between watching Christine get her coffee and actually... doing something about it himself, for himself. The logistics alone made his head hurt.

Christine waved as her boyfriend (husband?) drove away. She turned toward the theatre, spotted Shane, and lifted her travel mug in greeting. Shane raised his hand back. She headed for the stage door, ponytail swinging.

Shane stayed by his car.

You need someone who cares about you, who makes you happy. Someone to come home to.

He thought about Rose offering to set him up with Miles in January: *He's sweet, he's funny, he works in arts administration so he'd understand your schedule.*

Why was it that the women in his life both felt like he was some problem they needed to fix? Did all women have the same broadcasted imperative?

Get Shane a boyfriend. Get Shane laid. Get Shane to stop being so lonely. Get Shane a relationship.

But relationships required vulnerability. Required letting someone see him, really see him, and Shane had spent his entire adult life making sure no one looked too close. What happened when someone wanted him to open up and he had nothing to give them except spreadsheets and production schedules and the ability to fix problems that didn't involve his own broken parts?

His phone buzzed. Jackie: *Where are you? Need you to check the comm line before rehearsal starts.*

Shane pocketed his phone and started across the parking lot. His boots left prints in the frost. The stage door was propped open with a doorstop shaped like a ballet slipper, one of Jackie's many themed purchases from Etsy, and inside, the building smelled like coffee from the break room and the industrial cleaner the night crew used on the Marley.

He could hear dancers in the main studio already, the pianist running scales while someone warmed up at the barre. Normal sounds. A normal Tuesday.

Except Shane's brain wouldn't shut *up*. Rozanov's fingers, Rozanov's mouth. Rozanov Rozanov Rozanov, who kissed him and sucked him and made it *very* clear he'd like to fuck him too. Which, *no*, absolutely not, *bad idea*, but in the same vein... why... not? Shane felt at war with himself. He had a goddamn sex toy, a dildo, just because he *liked* how it felt. All that purple silicone was proof that Shane knew what he wanted even if he couldn't admit it out loud.

And Rozanov. Rozanov Rozanov Rozanov, who knew anyway and was offering.

His fingers had cramped on the bathroom counter. *Stop*, he'd said. He'd *wanted* it, wanted Rozanov's hands on him there, and still he'd said stop. Shane pressed his palms against his eyes until colors bloomed. So why had he said *no*? Why couldn't he just ask for it?

Not the relationship. Not the coffee in parking lots and meeting the parents and learning someone's favorite takeout order, but the same thing that Rozanov did, the physical part while he was here for his two month long loan to guest. Physical only, and easy only. The same as a sex toy, if he really thought about it. That he could do. That he'd done, repeatedly, with Rozanov, and it had been—

Good. It had been *good*. Better than good, if Shane was being honest with himself, which he tried not to be because honesty made things complicated.

Rozanov was here. Rozanov was willing. Rozanov was, according to Hayden, working through half the company like it was a sport, which meant he definitely wasn't looking for emotional connection. He'd be gone by January, back to Moscow and the Bolshoi and whatever life he had there that didn't include Shane. But at least for *now*, while he was here and willing, Shane could have a few weeks with someone interested, who knew what they were doing, and wouldn't ask for anything more.

And there it was, the moment that dangerous thought began to crystallize: if Rozanov was using half the company for easy sex, then Shane could do the same thing right back. Not be *used*—that implied passivity, implied being another name on a list. No. He could *use* Rozanov. Choose it. He could walk into that hotel room on his own terms, take what he wanted, and leave when he was done. Rozanov wasn't offering a relationship; he was offering his body, and Shane had one too.

An exchange. Equal.

Christine had her boyfriend and her coffee and her easy intimacy. Shane would have this: a few weeks with someone who knew what they were doing, who could give him what his own hands and mind couldn't, who wouldn't ask for anything more than Shane was willing to give.

And when it was over, when Rozanov left, Shane would still have his job, his theatre, his carefully built life.

It was practical. Strategic, even. He wasn't falling for anything. He was just taking advantage of an opportunity that wouldn't come around again, and he'd do it with his eyes open this time.

And so an idea began to form further, even as the morning passed in its usual chaos. Shane checked the comm line for Jackie (static cleared after he tightened a loose connection in booth two), replaced the missing IEM for the rats, and spent twenty minutes untangling the fly lines because someone had walked through them over the weekend. By the time he made it to the main stage, rehearsal was already in progress. And it was... surprisingly fine? When was the last time that happened?

Rozanov stretched at the barre while Shane updated his cue sheet across the way. Without Rozanov in his orbit, he could think a little more clearly, he felt a little more relaxed. It was still quiet here too, and feeling a little relaxed, Shane shifted his weight, unconsciously dropping into a perfect classic position as he did so, heels close together, toes pointed out, weight distributed exactly as it should be, a thing of habit, distantly pleased that his knees didn't cave in or that his ankles didn't roll. His feet still knew what to do after all these years. It was the same resting position he would've stood in on the side lines in class when he was still dancing.

And then he felt... eyes. His head flicked up, and he found Rozanov *looking* at him, eyes tracking down, fixed on his—oh.

Shane snapped back to standing normally.

"Are you staring at my feet, Rozanov?"

"Your turnout is very good for someone who just moves props around."

Shane rolled his eyes. "I do more than that and you know it."

Rozanov shrugged, and just like that, the moment was over. Had that been a compliment? Was he being friendly?

No, of course not, because twenty minutes later, he and Rozanov were having an argument.

"The tree is still wrong," Rozanov said, eyes tracking the downstage edge. His hands were on his hips, and he was frowning. "Six feet upstage, I told you opening week."

Shane looked up from his clipboard. They were back at this? Again? "And I *told you* we're not moving it. The sightlines are fine."

"For you, maybe. You are not one dancing around it." Rozanov walked a slow circle around the tree, examining it from every angle. His rehearsal clothes were fitted—black joggers that sat low on his hips, a grey tank that showed off his arms. Shane did not notice. "When I exit stage left during battle scene, the branches block audience view for two full counts. This is *amateur* mistake, Hollander, and I am still surprised you make it."

"Then exit upstage of it."

“Choreography does not allow—”

“Then we adjust the choreography.”

Rozanov turned to stare at him. “So *now* you want to change choreography? When was such an issue before?”

“I want to keep the tree where it is and where it’s supposed to be, which means you can either exit around it or through it, I don’t really give a shit which.” Shane made a notation on his clipboard even though he wasn’t writing anything. “Your choice.”

“My choice is that you move the tree.”

“And my choice is that you adapt.” Shane met his eyes. “You’re the one who keeps talking about how flexible you are, Rozanov. *Show me.*”

Rozanov’s eyebrows lifted fractionally, and his mouth curved into that crooked smile. “You want me to show you how flexible I am, Hollander?”

Oh. Oh no. Shane’s face heated. Wait. *No.* “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“You say things like that and then look surprised when I take you seriously. And I am *very* flexible. Can show you later, if you like. In private.”

“Again, *not* what I meant Rozanov.”

“Mmm.” Rozanov’s eyes tracked down Shane’s body and back up, slow and obvious. “But maybe you think about it anyway? During lunch break, maybe? How flexible I can be?”

He walked away before Shane could respond, leaving Shane standing there with his clipboard and his racing pulse and the absolute certainty that yes, he would think about it during lunch break and probably every other break for the rest of the day.

Fuck.

Lunch break, visions of flexibility aside, found Shane in familiar territory: his office while reviewing the final tech schedule for Friday’s final dress rehearsal. He’d made it through four hours of rehearsal without seeking Rozanov out. Four hours of maintaining professional distance while Rozanov stretched at the barre with his leg extended at shoulder height, or showing off the svelte curve of his spine, the flex of his hips...

What a fucking dick. It was enough to have him reconsidering his earlier fascination about maybe actually sort of going through with his offer...

And then the knock came.

Shane knew who it was before he answered. “It’s open.”

Rozanov slipped inside and locked the door behind him. “You are working through lunch again.”

“I have a lot to...” Shane’s words died when Rozanov crowded him back against the desk. “What are you doing?”

“You told me to show you how flexible I am.” Rozanov’s hands found Shane’s hips, thumbs pressing into the jut of bone—Shane tried to ignore the sparks following the paths of those thumbs, tried to ignore how his skin warmed under Rozanov’s touch even through his shirt. “So I come to show you.”

“I didn’t mean—” Shane’s breath caught when Rozanov dropped to his knees. “Rozanov, *no*.”

“Rozanov *yes*, I think.” Rozanov’s hands slid up Shane’s thighs. “You are very bad at hiding what you want, *krolik*.”

He was. Shane’s cock was already getting hard, and Rozanov hadn’t even touched him properly yet. It only made Shane angrier that the feeling of Rozanov on his knees, looking up at him with those pale eyes, made his skin flush hot. “What does that even mean? Crow-lick? Stop it. Don’t say shit I don’t understand. Anyone can walk by right now.”

But even as he was saying that, Shane’s hands went to his belt immediately, no hesitation, working the buckle open, helping Rozanov in his endeavors.

“Door is *locked* Mr. Businessman. Everyone at lunch.” Rozanov popped the button on Shane’s jeans. “And you want this. You came to me yesterday, you seek me out today...”

“I didn’t seek you out, you came to my office!”

“Mm. Unimportant details. As you say in English: tomato, tomato. Is still *pomidor*.” The zipper hissed down. “If you want me to leave, say so now. I will go. But I think...” Rozanov palmed him through his boxers. “I think you want me to stay.”

Shane’s hips jerked forward. His hands found Rozanov’s shoulders, gripping. “You’re infuriating.”

“Yes. You say this like it is new discovery for you.” Rozanov pulled Shane’s cock free, wrapped his hand around it, stroking, “And you’re going to melt for me anyway, aren’t you Hollander?”

He would. Shane hated that he did, hated how easily Rozanov could read him, how predictable he’d become. But when Rozanov’s mouth closed around him, hot and wet and perfect, it made it easier not to care. Rozanov rewarded the surrender immediately, eagerly lavishing him with kisses and tongue and lips. After—when Shane’s legs still trembled and Rozanov wiped his mouth with the back of his hand—Shane heard himself say: “Tonight. Your hotel—you mentioned your hotel. What room?”

Rozanov’s smile could’ve lit the stage. “1221. But we cannot tonight, I have—”

“Wednesday then.”

“Wednesday I have dinner with—”

“I don’t *care* what you have, Rozanov. Cancel it.” Shane straightened his clothes, fingers still shaking. “I want to... try something.”

“Bossy.” Rozanov was grinning. “Fine. Consider it canceled. And you want to try what?”

Shane couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “You *know* what.”

Understanding dawned across Rozanov’s face. His pupils dilated. “*Bozhe moy*. You are serious?”

“Do you want me to be or not?”

“I want—” Rozanov stood, crowding back into Shane’s space. “I want you to do as *you* want, but I do need you to *say* it to me. With words. So I know exactly what you are asking because English is stupid, and I want no misunderstandings with this.”

Shane opened his mouth, then closed it, struggling to find words. His hands found the edge of his desk, gripping hard enough that his knuckles blanched. This was insane. How many times blowjobs at the theatre in under a week was it now? He was standing in his office arranging to get fucked by a man he barely knew, a man who’d be gone in three weeks, a man who probably had a dozen other people lined up. What was he doing?

“Hollander?” Rozanov’s head tilted, reading him. “You do not have to—”

“Don’t.” The word came sharp. Shane’s jaw set. He hated the concern in Rozanov’s face, hated being *managed* like he was fragile. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Treat me like I don’t know what I’m asking for.” Shane forced himself to meet Rozanov’s eyes. “I know exactly what I’m asking for and so do you.”

Rozanov studied him, and for once the teasing had dropped from his words. “Then say it. With actual words. So there is no confusion or more of your confusing mixed messages. You are hard to read, even for me.”

Shane’s ears burned. “I want you to... I want *more*, Rozanov. What you offered me in the dressing room. I want to come over to your hotel room on Wednesday night. Your hotel. Is that clear enough?”

“*Da*. Yes, and finally, clear instruction.” Rozanov’s hand cupped Shane’s face, thumb stroking his cheekbone. “I did not think you had this in you, Hollander. You are sure? You do not have to—”

“I’m sure.” Shane pulled away before he could lose his nerve, and the words came out harsh. Transactional. Exactly what Shane needed them to be. “And I’m bringing my *own* condoms

and lube, so don't bother."

"So romantic. You sweep me off feet, Hollander. Be sure to bring largest size."

"Get out of my office."

"I do love it when you tell me what to do. Like angry kitten." Rozanov leaned back in, reclaiming what little space Shane had stolen back and kissed him. It was a quick, perfunctory, *smug* kiss that ended before Shane could even be offended, and then Rozanov was... surprisingly heading for the door. "Wednesday, 8pm, then. I am staying at Fairmont, room 1221. Do not be late."

"*You're* the one who's always late."

"For this?" Rozanov was grinning again. "I will be *early*."

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

We, uh, sucked a lotta dick in this one, huh? It's for the plot, I swear!!!! Originally, this chapter was even LONGER, but with the advice of a friend, I chopped it in half. Next chapter should be out soon! See you in room 1221 later. 💋

References:

1. IEM = in ear monitor for dancers on stage to hear music mixes or cues.
2. [Japanese Diaspora and Nikkei](#)

And last but not least... thanks for reading! If you liked it, I'd love to yap in the comments.

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ "I liked/loved it!"
- 🎮 "this wasn't my favorite"
- 🍆 "I have... a... thing..."
- 🏒 "dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy"
- 🗡️ "this usually isnt my thing... and yet"
- 💀 "how dare you (affectionate)"
- 🧑🏻‍🤝🧑🏻 🐭 🎄 "something something Nutcracker"

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Crack some (literal) nuts / Crack open some feelings. 🤖

Chapter Notes

This chapter deals with some heavier themes, please re-read the tags! It gets worse before it gets better, so hang in there.

***updated this chapter and previous with some additional passages in Shane's POV for more interiority for his arc, you may wish to reread!

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

Shane couldn't focus. It was *Wednesday*, and he missed cues, forgot to check the snow machine's output. Someone had cranked the humidifier in the wings again, and the marley felt a hair tacky under his shoes. Winnipeg winter meant the air outside wanted to mummify you and the air inside wanted to turn every prop table into a swamp. He misplaced his headset twice. His brain kept circling back to tonight, to what he'd promised, to Rozanov's hotel room and what would maybe, hopefully, happen there.

You are sure?

He was. He wasn't. He had no idea.

Rozanov didn't seem to share any of those reservations, even as he was approached by Marlow and Boodram by one of the water fountains during a break between run-throughs.

"Wait—what? You're not coming? Thought we agreed we were going to hit that club tonight."

"Cannot tonight. I have important plans."

"What is more important than going out and getting some ass?"

"It's a secret," Rozanov said matter-of-factly, "If I told you, surely I would be murdered."

"So... secret... and dangerous. Rozanov, you're not secretly working for the KGB, are you?"

"If I was, would be very bad spy to tell you."

Marlow laughed. “Bood. It means he *has* some ass already planned.”

“Oh.”

Shane’s face went hot. *He* was the planned ass. He was the reason Rozanov was turning down a night out with the other dancers, his friends. The embarrassment should have been worse than the weird, stupid flutter in his stomach, but it wasn’t. Rozanov had chosen him over a club full of options. Rozanov had called it *important plans*.

Shane forced himself to breathe normally and moved away from the fountain before anyone could notice him eavesdropping, but by the time rehearsal wrapped at six, Shane’s nerves were shot.

“You okay?” Rose caught him in the wings while he was pretending to check prop placement. “You’ve been weird all day.”

“Fine. Just tired.” Shane lied. That didn’t even begin to cover it.

“Uh-huh.” She didn’t look convinced. “You want to grab dinner? That Thai place on—”

“Can’t. I have a... um. A thing.”

“A *thing*?” Her eyebrows climbed. “What kind of thing?”

“A work thing. Inventory. Boring.” The lies came easier than they should. “Rain check?”

Rose’s eyes narrowed, and she looked him over again, slower this time. Then she reached out and tucked a stray strand of hair from his head behind his ear. “And... You’re wearing the jacket I got you for your birthday. The nice one. And—” She leaned in, inhaling. “Is that *cologne*?”

“I just—”

“You hate cologne. You told me it gives you headaches.” Her eyes went wide with delight. “Oh my god. *Shane*. You really are meeting up with someone. Oh my *god*—who is he?”

“I’m not—” Shane glanced around, confirming they were alone. “I’m not telling you.”

“Oh come on! He has to be someone stunning for you to skip on Miles, because Miles is a *babe*. I’m dying to know who caught *your* discerning eye. You’re the pickiest of my gay boyfriends, Shane.”

“We’re not doing this Rose...”

“Is he at least hot?”

“Rose—”

“He would need to be to get *you* hot and bothered. And it’s not a date so... a hookup? Love that for you, Shane. Love that. Hookups are good for the soul, Shane. Get that dick. Is he a

dancer? Please tell me he's not a dancer. Actually, no, tell me he *is* a dancer so I can figure out who based on process of elimination—”

“Oh my *god*, can you please not...” Shane scrubbed his hands over his face, waiting for her to keep pushing. She always did.

Rose caught his arm, gently pulling his hands away from his face, and her smile softened. “Hey. I’m happy for you. Whoever he is, whatever this is—you deserve someone who makes you look like *that*.”

“Like what?”

“Nervous and excited and alive. You’re always so fucking cute like this.” She squeezed his arm. “Just... be careful, okay? And if he’s an asshole, I’ll kill him. Slowly.”

“... thanks, Rose.”

“So will you *please* tell me who he is so I can stalk his socials?”

“No, Rose, and shh, anyone could hear—”

“You’ve gotta give me *full* details later on our next coffee date.”

“You’re not getting them.”

“Even if I buy the coffees this time?”

“Yes, even if you buy the stupid coffees!”

Rose laughed softly. “We’ll see about that.”

She squeezed his arm once more, then headed back toward the stage where the last few dancers were gathering their bags. Shane watched her go, heart still hammering from being read so easily. At least she hadn’t asked *where* he was going. Or pressed him on the who too much. Small mercies.

Shane waited until the building emptied. The last dancers trickled out through the stage door, Rose among them, throwing him one more knowing grin over her shoulder before disappearing into the parking lot. He locked up, double-checked the prop table one more time because his hands needed a task, then drove home through streets already dark at six-thirty.

He showered, shaved, agonized over what to wear before settling on jeans and a sweater because this wasn’t a date, this was just—

What was this?

He grabbed the condoms and lube from his nightstand, shoved them in his jacket pocket, and drove to Rozanov’s hotel before he could talk himself out of it.

The Fairmont in Winnipeg was nice, nicer than Shane's apartment, definitely nicer than anywhere Shane would've booked for himself, but such was the life of an international dancer at Rozanov's level. Rising out of Portage Avenue like a glassy block of restrained money, all neutral stone and reflective windows, the hotel was connected to the underground concourse, the skywalk and tunnel system everyone used when the wind came screaming off the river. Shane never used it, because stepping underground felt like admitting winter had won.

He'd never stayed here, his parents never stayed here, and if it wasn't for this insane hookup plan, Shane was sure he'd never have stepped inside to the lobby with its marble floors and its fancy pianist in the lounge.

The elevator ride to the seventh floor took approximately seven years. Shane found room 1221 and knocked before his brain could supply all the reasons this was a terrible idea.

Rozanov opened the door in sweatpants and nothing else.

"You *actually* came," he said, stepping back to let Shane in.

"You sound surprised."

"Little bit, yes." Rozanov closed the door behind them.

The room was larger than Shane expected, the proportions generous in that expensive, impersonal way. A king bed dominated the space, crisp white duvet pulled tight and untouched, the headboard upholstered in dark fabric. A heavy desk sat against one wall with a neatly arranged lamp and notepad no one ever used. An armchair angled toward the window looked more decorative than comfortable. Beyond the glass, downtown Winnipeg spread out in cold pinpricks of light, traffic threading along Portage far below.

Rozanov's suitcase sat open on the luggage rack near the closet, clothes folded and... huh. Shane didn't think Rozanov looked like a man that knew *how* to fold, and he'd half expected warm-ups and rehearsal shirts spilling out over the edges like he'd stopped caring halfway through. It being a hotel room, there weren't any personal touches so to speak. No photos. No personal clutter. Nothing that suggested permanence.

That was, oddly, almost sad. Even though Shane had made the bookings for Rozanov's stay, he hadn't actually considered what it might feel like to be in another country, alone, in a hotel for such a long period of time.

But Rozanov was talking again, and he didn't have time to linger on the thought.

"I am surprised because I think maybe you change your mind. Decided it is too much, too fast. Run away and hide again."

"Did you *want me* to change my mind? There's still time for me to leave."

"No." Rozanov moved closer. "But I want you to be sure. We can just—we do not have to do everything tonight. We can work up to it, take time—"

Shane kissed him to shut him up.

He didn't want patience or Rozanov being careful with him or the fucking act of caring. This was supposed to be using each other, not—whatever gentleness Rozanov was offering.

Rozanov made a surprised sound against his mouth, then his hands came up to grip Shane's hips, pulling him closer. They kissed like they'd been starving for it—teeth and tongue and desperation. Shane's jacket hit the floor. Rozanov's hands slid under his sweater, warm against skin, and Shane shivered.

"Bed," Shane managed between kisses. "I want—bed—"

They stumbled backward—Shane's foot caught the luggage rack, sent Rozanov's suitcase tilting, clothes spilling onto the carpet. Two more steps and Rozanov's shoulders hit the desk, the lamp wobbling, the notepad and hotel pen clattering to the floor. Another step and Rozanov's thighs met the mattress edge and they went down together, Shane following him onto the bed, the duvet pulling loose from its tight hospital corners in a whisper of disorder Shane couldn't bring himself to care about.

Rozanov's hands found Shane's hips, pulling him forward, and Shane went, straddling Rozanov's lap as the bigger man sat propped against the headboard, legs spreading to make room for Shane between them. Rozanov's hands found his hips immediately—left hand on bone, right hand splayed across the small of his back—pulling him down until Shane could feel the hard ridge of Rozanov's cock through their jeans, pressing right against where Shane wanted him most. He ground down and Rozanov's voice dropped into Russian—filthy-sounding words Shane couldn't translate but could *feel*, the rough timbre vibrating through his chest where they pressed together.

Shane pulled his own sweater off, tossed it somewhere behind him. Rozanov's hands found his chest immediately, thumbs brushing his nipples, and Shane gasped. "I brought—condoms and lube—jacket pocket—"

"Very prepared. Very sexy." But Rozanov didn't move to get them. Instead his hands mapped Shane's chest, his ribs, the curve of his waist. "You have done this before? With fingers or toy?"

A nod.

"Words Hollander, I do not speak mime."

Shane gritted his teeth, eyes flicking away to stare at the wall rather than Rozanov's expectant face. "I—jesus. Okay. I have a... thing."

Rozanov's brows furrowed, and he looked confused. "A... *thing*?" His voice dropped lower, repeating the word like it was foreign, and Shane felt it in his stomach—a swoop of heat that made his toes curl.

Clearly coming here was a mistake. All of this was going so *wrong*. Shane felt his cheeks turn to flames, how was it real he was saying this out loud?

“I... I... have a dildo,” he muttered, and glanced back at Rozanov’s face just in time to see a disgustingly pleased smirk spread across his attractive face.

“What... *color*?”

“That’s it, I’m leaving. Nevermind.”

Rozanov’s hand shot out and caught Shane’s wrist, yanking him back. Shane stumbled into his chest and Rozanov’s mouth found his neck, teeth scraping the tendon below his ear. He was always so gentle it was easy to forget how *strong* Rozanov was.

“No, don’t go.” Rozanov’s other hand slid around Shane’s waist, pinning him in place. He kissed down Shane’s throat, tongue tracing his pulse, tonguing his pulse point. “I want to *fuck* you. But I must do this right, yes?” Another kiss, softer this time, at the corner of Shane’s jaw. “So... *thing*. You have *thing*, and... have you done this with *person*?”

Shane’s eyes went to the window instead of Rozanov’s face. “Can we not turn this into a whole discussion.”

“Yes, if you answer.”

“It’s not like I don’t know how it works!” Shane said, too quickly.

“*Hollander*,” Rozanov said, “I am not asking for embarrass you. It matters. Have you done this with a man?”

Shane screwed his eyes shut and huffed, feeling himself deflating despite the indignation. “...No.”

“No?” Rozanov’s hands stilled. “I am your first?”

Shane’s face burned. “Don’t make it weird.”

“Is not weird. Is—” Rozanov pulled him down into another kiss, softer this time. “Do *not* worry. I will take care of you, yes? Make it good for you.”

“You don’t have to—I’m not some virgin who needs—”

“You are virgin for this.” Rozanov’s hands slid down to grip Shane’s ass, pulling him closer. “And I will make sure you enjoy it. Now, off, all these clothes. I want to see you.”

They stripped down to skin. Rozanov’s body was exactly what Shane expected—sculpted muscle, the kind of definition that came from decades of dance training. A dancer’s body, all lean power and controlled strength. Shane felt small beside him, ordinary, until Rozanov pulled him back into his lap and kissed him. Rozanov with his perfect dancer’s body, the carved planes of muscle, the aristocratic features of his face. Shane had to tilt his head back to find Rozanov’s mouth, had to rise on his knees to close the distance, and when Rozanov kissed him it was like being *consumed*, like he was trying to crawl inside Shane’s skin—all teeth and tongue and possession, biting Shane’s lower lip until it throbbed, sucking on Shane’s tongue until Shane whimpered into his mouth.

“You are shaking,” Rozanov murmured against his mouth. Rozanov’s hand slid between Shane’s legs, wrapping around his cock. “Is okay to be nervous.”

Shane’s hips jerked into his grip. “I’m not scared.”

“No?” Rozanov’s other hand slid lower, between Shane’s cheeks, one finger circling his hole. “Then relax for me, *krolik*. But really, is okay. Can always tell me to stop, too.”

Again. That word. What did it mean? What did—shuddering, Shane tried to relax. He breathed through it when Rozanov worked one finger inside, then two, stretching him carefully. It felt different than doing it himself—less control, more vulnerable. Rozanov’s fingers curled, finding that spot inside that made Shane see stars, and Shane moaned before he could stop himself.

Getting fucked by Rozanov, even with just his fingers, was nothing like Shane’s fantasies. That toy, the dildo, had been predictable, controllable, safe. Rozanov was unpredictable—gentle one moment, devastating the next, reading Shane’s body like choreography and adjusting on the fly. He was patient until he wasn’t, soft until Shane needed rough, praising him one breath and pushing him harder the next. This was so much better than anything he’d done alone. *God*, why had he waited so long? The thought scattered when Rozanov hit that spot again, and Shane couldn’t remember what he’d been trying to prove by keeping his distance, couldn’t remember why he’d convinced himself this was a bad idea. Right now, pinned under Rozanov’s weight with those thick fingers working him open, it felt like the best decision he’d ever made.

“There,” Rozanov said, sounding pleased. “You feel good?”

“Yes—*fuck*—yes—”

“Good. We go slow. You tell me if anything hurts, if you want to stop.”

“I don’t want to stop.” Shane grabbed the jacket from the floor, fumbled the condoms and lube out of the pocket. “I want you to fuck me. *Now*. Please.”

Rozanov’s eyes went dark. “Bossy even in bed. I love this about you.”

He arranged Shane on his back, knees bent, and took his time working him open properly. Three fingers, then four which felt like overkill but then again Shane *knew* how large Rozanov was, and then more lube than Shane thought necessary, until Shane was writhing against the sheets and begging.

“*Please*—Rozanov—I’m ready—”

“Not yet.” But Rozanov withdrew his fingers and rolled the condom on, slicked himself up. He hooked Shane’s legs over his shoulders, positioning himself. Rozanov’s cock nudged against his rim, and it was thick, blunt, and wickedly slick against his skin. Shane could feel how big he was, the weight of him heavy between Shane’s legs, and his body clenched in anticipation.

“You are sure?” Rozanov asked.

“If you ask me *one* more time I swear I’ll end you.”

Rozanov smiled. “Threat noted,” and then he pushed in.

Rozanov pushed in and Shane’s breath locked in his chest. His fingers clawed at Rozanov’s shoulders, nails biting skin. The burn spread from where they joined up through his stomach, made his eyes water and his thighs try to clamp shut around Rozanov’s hips. Too much. Too full. His throat closed around air that wouldn’t come.

“*Dykhat*,” Rozanov said, holding completely still. “Breathe. Is okay. You are doing so well.”

Shane couldn’t. His chest locked up with that same airless panic he’d always had. But this time Rozanov’s hand slid to his face, thumb brushing his cheekbone, and the touch anchored him. Shane dragged in air. The burn eased. Rozanov rocked forward another inch and Shane felt it *everywhere*, not just where they were joined but in his throat, his fingertips, the back of his skull, and then Shane’s mouth dropped open, breathing coming in wet gasps against Rozanov’s shoulder, his face pressed into the curve where neck met collarbone.

This was *alive*, hot, another person’s body breaching his, closer to another person than he’d ever been in his life and—and—

“Talk to me,” Rozanov said, braced above him. “Tell me how you feel.”

“Full. I feel—you’re so—” Shane couldn’t find words. “Move. Please move.”

Rozanov pulled almost all the way out, savouring the wet slide and Shane’s breath catching on a broken sound, before pushing back in. The bedframe creaked with the next thrust, headboard tapping the wall in rhythm, and the angle drove straight into Shane’s prostate. Shane cried out, spine bowing off the mattress. Rozanov’s shoulders blotted out the hotel room lights, his body a wall of heat and muscle and weight pinning Shane to the bed.

He did it again, withdrawing until Shane felt empty, then filling him in one long slide that made Shane’s vision blur. The rhythm built slow, each stroke timed to Shane’s breathing, pushing in as Shane exhaled, withdrawing as he gasped for air. Perfect didn’t cover it. Shane’s hands scrabbled at Rozanov’s back, trying to pull him closer, deeper, trying to get him to move faster, but Rozanov kept that same maddening pace, pulling out, pushing in, hitting that spot inside Shane that made stars explode behind his eyelids.

“*Vot tak*,” Rozanov breathed. “Look at you. So beautiful like this.”

Shane couldn’t respond. Could barely breathe. A sound broke from his throat—desperate, needy, too loud—and Rozanov ducked down and kissed him, swallowing it greedily. Shane kissed back frantically, gripping Rozanov’s shoulders as that thick cock kept moving inside him, hitting his prostate over and over. Rozanov kissed him through it, tongue in his mouth, catching every moan, every gasp, until Shane had to turn his head away just to get air. And even then, Shane couldn’t stop the sounds spilling from his mouth—broken *ah, ah, ahs* with each thrust, higher-pitched than he’d ever heard himself, almost whines. When Rozanov

changed angles and nailed his prostate dead-on, Shane keened, the sound muffled against his own forearm as he bit down to stay quiet.

Fuck the fantasies. The sensation was nothing like his dildo, nothing like his own fingers. This was Rozanov inside him, Rozanov's hands on his thighs, Rozanov's eyes watching every reaction. And wasn't that so fucked up? Wasn't that so fucking funny? This is everything he'd wanted: Rozanov was *strong* and masculine and sure, big enough to hold him down completely, strong enough that Shane couldn't move even if he wanted to, solid and real in a way Shane's fantasies had never been. He didn't treat him like glass. Rozanov was looking at him, sucking marks against his skin, and *looking at him*.

Being filled and being *seen* at the same time, no hiding, no walls, nothing between them but skin and sweat and the obscene sound of their bodies moving together. Shane's thighs were trembling, his hips trying to move, to chase the sensation, but Rozanov's hands came down on his hips, pinning him in place.

"No," Rozanov said, not unkindly. "You stay still. Let me do this part." Rozanov said, and Shane did, surrendering control, letting Rozanov set the pace of each thrust while Shane's own hands scrabbled uselessly at Rozanov's shoulders, his back, finally fisting in the sheets because he needed to hold *anything* or he'd fly apart. One hand slid up Shane's shaking thigh, stroking the tensed muscle, soothing even as his other hand kept Shane's hips pinned to the mattress.

"You can touch yourself," Rozanov said, sounding generous, sounding magnanimous about it all, so kind of him to offer. "I want to watch you."

Shane wrapped his hand around his cock, stroking in time with Rozanov's thrusts. The prospect of just lying here and doing nothing but this—being fucked, being watched, getting off while someone else did all the work—was mind-boggling. Shane managed everything: every detail, every crisis, every demand on the production. He was always in control. But here, legs spread and pinned, Rozanov inside him and watching him stroke himself, Shane didn't have to control anything. Could give it up entirely, just for this, and the weight lifting off his shoulders was dizzying. The combination was too much. Being fucked and jerking himself off while Rozanov watched, while Rozanov murmured filthy praise in Russian and English.

"*Bozhe, ty takoy*—" The words cut off on a groan, and then Rozanov was just cursing, Russian and English mixing together, "*fuck, fuck, ty takoy krasivyy*, so tight, taking me so good—you are killing me."

Shane could feel it building—pressure coiling low in his belly, tightening with each thrust. His toes curled. His thighs started shaking. The pleasure ramped higher, almost painful in its intensity, and Shane couldn't breathe through it, couldn't think, could only feel Rozanov inside him, around him, everywhere.

"I'm—" Shane couldn't finish the sentence. "*Close*, I'm so close, please—"

Rozanov's hand wrapped around Shane's cock and that was it, his climax crashing into him like lightning; electric, devastating, turning his bones to sparks and his blood to fire. It raced

up his spine, scattered through his ribs, lit up every nerve ending until he couldn't tell where Rozanov ended and he began. Shane came with a broken sound, spilling across his stomach in spurts that painted white across his abs, his ribs. His vision went hazy at the edges, sound muffled like his head was underwater. Rozanov's voice reached him through the fog—Russian, English, he couldn't tell—and Shane's body kept shaking, aftershocks rolling through him in waves. His fingers had gone numb where they gripped Rozanov's shoulders. His thighs trembled where they bracketed Rozanov's hips.

When Rozanov came, Shane felt it—the pulse of him, the warmth flooding Shane's body, the way Rozanov's hands tightened on his hips hard enough to bruise, hips stuttering, Shane's name caught between his teeth. As Shane shivered and shook beneath him, Rozanov gentled, hands stroking down Shane's sides, his thighs, soothing the trembling.

“Shh,” Rozanov murmured, Russian and English mixing together as he petted Shane through it. Rozanov didn't let go, even after Shane's breathing had steadied, Rozanov kept him close—one arm around his waist, the other stroking down Shane's flank in soothing passes. “So good, you did so good. I have you...”

“Ngh...”

Eloquent, Shane.

They stayed like that for a few moments, or maybe days, but eventually Rozanov did pull out, carefully disposing of the condom before gathering Shane back into his arms. Shane let him, too wrung out to protest, his limbs heavy and useless. Rozanov kissed him with slow, soft kisses that tasted... different... than the desperate ones from before. Was that possible? Could affection have a taste? Regardless, they were gentle. Shane kissed back without thinking, and let Rozanov tilt his head with careful fingers, let himself sink into it.

This is nice, he thought.

When Rozanov pulled back, Shane tried to follow blinking at him owlishly before he realized he'd even done it, and Rozanov smiled, just a small curve of his mouth, and kissed him again. And again. Little presents, each one, and it wasn't even Christmas yet. Rozanov spoiled him with them, all over his body. Rozanov's mouth found the hinge of Shane's jaw, the sensitive spot behind his ear, the tendon in his neck that made Shane's breath stutter. Each kiss was a map, Rozanov mapping out the ley lines of his body, breaking apart and coming back together until Shane was dizzy with it, until his legs were trembling for entirely different reasons.

“Come,” Rozanov said, helping Shane to unsteady feet. Shane's thighs protested and he nearly went down, but Rozanov caught him easily, one arm around his waist. “Shower. Then bed.”

Shane wanted to argue—he should go home, should leave, this was supposed to be just sex—but Rozanov was already guiding him to the bathroom, and Shane's body had apparently decided for him. His legs weren't working right. His brain felt foggy and slow. He let Rozanov turn on the water, let him help Shane under the spray, let those big hands wash him

with surprising gentleness. The ghost of Rozanov's lips against his pulse point—not quite a kiss, just breath and heat—made Shane shiver despite the hot water.

Rozanov didn't push for more though, and he didn't try to escalate. Instead he just cleaned them both up, dried Shane off with one of the hotel's fluffy towels, and steered him back toward the bed seemingly to have him *sleep* there.

"I should—" Shane started, but Rozanov pressed a finger to his lips.

"Is late. You are tired. Stay, Hollander."

Shane *knew* he should say no. But the bed looked soft and his body was so heavy and Rozanov was already pulling back the covers, and—

And Shane was so tired of fighting.

... *but*...

Shane closed his eyes, pulling his shoulders and spine straight. *But that's not the plan*, he reminded himself. This was him using Rozanov back. "No. I need to be going home."

He said it like a boundary he could hold onto, because if he stayed, he would start treating this like it meant more than it did. And it didn't mean anything. He was *using* Rozanov right back—taking what he wanted, scratching an itch, proving he could separate sex from feelings the same way Rozanov apparently did. This was transactional. Equal. Shane had gotten what he came for, and now he was leaving on his own terms.

That's what made it, and him, different. That's what made it *his* choice.

He could control when he left. He couldn't control what he'd feel if he stayed.

Shane picked up his clothes, shucking them on hurriedly. He grabbed his jacket from the floor and shoved his arms through the sleeves. "I'll see you at rehearsal tomorrow."

"You say this like door will disappear if you stay five more minutes." Rozanov watched him from the bed, propped up on one elbow, hair mussed and lips still swollen. A stricken expression flickered across his face—Shane caught it before Rozanov's mouth curved into that familiar smirk. "Hollander, really... You are sure? Is late, you could—"

"I'm sure." Shane found his shoes, his keys, checked his pockets for his phone. Everything accounted for. Everything controlled.

"You are sure you can drive? You are—" Rozanov gestured vaguely, and his hand dropped back to the sheets. "Tired."

Tired? That was it? It was strange to hear him speak so plainly without the sass and insults pithy one liners. Shane glanced back and caught the way Rozanov's shoulders had tensed, the way his eyes tracked Shane's movements across the room without the usual amusement. Not quite hurt but not anything he could label with a *name*.

“Good night, Rozanov,” Shane said, and then he was out the door before he could think about why Rozanov looked like that.

Back at his own apartment, he didn’t sleep.

Rozanov had been kind. That was the part Shane couldn’t stop turning over in his head. He’d checked in, slowed down, made sure Shane felt good. He’d been patient without making Shane feel pitied. It was like the little girl in Studio Two. It was like beneath all his bravado, he was actually a *nice* person, and... and...

It didn’t fit.

The problem was Rozanov kept doing things that didn’t fit the script Shane had written for him. Rozanov was supposed to be the playboy Hayden described—collecting hookups like souvenirs, moving through the company with that easy charm. He was supposed to be all flash and ego. The ideal dancer, the ideal lover, confident and beautiful and entirely surface-level. He was shallow and arrogant and those were easy things to hate. Those were safe things to resent.

But Rozanov kept... being *more* than that. Listening about the cultural dances. Being gentle when Shane needed it. Like the way he’d washed Shane in the shower, hands sliding soap across Shane’s shoulders and there’d been nothing sexual about it at all. Like the way he’d checked in three separate times during sex, voice dropping soft: *You are okay? Tell me how you feel.* More than necessary. More than just making sure Shane wasn’t about to panic again.

Using him, Shane reminded himself, staring at his ceiling. *I’m using him. That’s all this is. And he is using me.* The words felt thinner each time he repeated them.

Shane rolled over, pressed his face into the pillow. Maybe he’d been wrong about what he felt. Maybe it wasn’t hate at all—maybe it was jealousy wearing hate’s face because jealousy was harder to admit.

Maybe this was wanting what Rozanov had. Or maybe wanting what Rozanov *was*. Or... was this just *wanting* him at all?

Somehow that had twisted together with wanting Rozanov himself until Shane couldn’t untangle them anymore.

He couldn’t explain how easily he’d been convinced, either, when Rozanov tempted him into a goddamn storage closet for a quick fuck between different rehearsal groups, one of his big hand over his mouth to muffle Shane’s whines.

“Shh.” Rozanov’s hips snapped forward, driving deeper, and Shane bit down on his palm to keep from making a sound. “You are very loud today, *krolik*. Anyone could hear.”

Shane couldn’t answer, not that he wanted to. Rozanov was right. Anyone could hear, and they were stupid enough to be *here*, doing *this*, instead of going to the hotel or anywhere else

like adults. But, no, no, clearly both of them had lost their minds, because waiting felt *impossible*.

His back pressed against the cold metal shelving, the ridged edges biting into his shoulder blades. Fake snow globes rattled above him with each thrust, their hollow plastic sound mixing with Shane's gasping breaths. Sweat made his shirt cling, the fabric dragging against his skin where Rozanov's hand gripped his waist. The other gripped his thigh, holding his leg hitched high around Rozanov's waist. They'd barely made it inside before Rozanov had him pinned, jeans shoved down just far enough, condom rolled on with shaking fingers.

Shane tried to shift, to get leverage, to buck his hips, but Rozanov pressed him flat against the shelving, keeping him still, keeping him spread, setting the pace.

The message was clear: *stop moving, let me work, take what I give you*.

And Shane wanted, *so badly*, to just let him give.

It was embarrassing, really, how *easy* he was for Rozanov. Why was it that any time Rozanov got near him, Shane seemed to leave his mind and his ideals at the door? Why couldn't he escape the Russian's arrogant, awful, magnetic gravity? One look from those hazel eyes, and Shane was already calculating whether they had time, whether the door locked, whether anyone would notice. Having Rozanov inside him, filling him, hitting that spot that made Shane see stars—Shane couldn't get enough of it.

He loved it, actually, which was its own problem. God, Shane really hated him. If only the sex wasn't so mind-blowingly good. Because it was *Rozanov* who made him feel this good, Rozanov who could take him apart with a few well-placed thrusts, Rozanov who knew exactly how to touch him, and *Rozanov* on his mind.

This was the third hookup this goddamn *week*. Shane had told himself Wednesday night would be the last time—had driven home from Rozanov's hotel with that promise echoing in his head—but then he'd walked into the theatre Thursday morning and found Rozanov stretching in Studio Two, and his resolve had lasted approximately forty-five seconds.

And now he was here, *here* of all places, in this filthy little closet that smelled like dust and old cardboard, cleaning supplies rattling on the shelves. On top of that, each thrust punched sounds from Shane's throat he didn't recognize: broken, desperate noises that should've embarrassed him but didn't because Rozanov was making answering sounds, low Russian curses and Shane's name like a prayer.

"Harder," Shane gasped against Rozanov's palm, and Rozanov obliged, changing the angle, and Shane was lost. Every hit was like a lightning bolt through his spine and fracturing outwards to the tips of his toes and fingers. His eyes rolled back, his fingers scrabbling for purchase on Rozanov's shoulders. He loved these stupid shoulders, these awful arms. Rozanov filled him and the space entirely; When he braced himself above Shane, he blocked out the little dangling light entirely, his body a wall of heat and muscle and weight. His hands could—*did*—span Shane's waist, fingers meeting at the small of his back when he pulled Shane into a better position.

“Like this? You want it like this?” Rozanov’s accent thickened, words coming between harsh breaths. “*Fuck*, you feel so good, so tight—*fuck*, Hollander. Think about you all the time, *krolik*, every moment you are not—” Rozanov cut himself off, bit down on Shane’s shoulder instead. “—not on my dick, I mean.”

What? He couldn’t possibly mean that. But Shane’s brain was hazy and his body was chasing release and he had no space to think about what every moment might actually mean.

Using him, some distant part of Shane’s mind whispered. *Using me. Using him back.*

And then there were footsteps in the hallway outside.

They both froze. Rozanov’s hand tightened over Shane’s mouth, his hips stilling mid-thrust, but only for a *moment* before resuming. Shane’s heart hammered against his ribs, every muscle locked. The footsteps passed. A door opened and closed somewhere down the corridor. The sound faded, leaving only the steady *plap plap plap* of the kiss of Rozanov’s pelvis, the insanity of this.

“Are you *insane*?!” Shane seethed, but it came out more as a whine, and Rozanov hardly looked bothered. The asshole. Shane’s head lolled to the side, chest heaving. *God*, he was so fucking thick, too, big and *deep* and Shane felt like he was split open, the stretch burning-good, making him grateful for the wall holding him up because his legs had gone useless.

Rozanov pulled his hand away and kissed Shane instead, swallowing whatever other sounds tried to escape. His hips started moving again, slower now, rolling instead of snapping, drawing it out. Shane clutched at his back, his shoulders, anywhere he could reach, chasing the building heat low in his belly. Shane’s mind was hazy and the only thing he could really focus on was his need to come, was Rozanov around and in him and everywhere.

When Shane came, Rozanov caught the sound with his mouth, kissing him through it while Shane’s body clenched around him. Rozanov followed seconds later, face buried in Shane’s neck, breathing hard. Shane barely had the energy to stand on his own feet, and he definitely didn’t have enough to stop his listless lean against Rozanov’s chest. At this point, he just wanted to pass out, but they had—fuck—they had the rest of rehearsal to get through.

After, when they’d cleaned up and Shane had his jeans back on, Rozanov caught his wrist before he could leave.

“Tonight,” Rozanov said. “Come to my hotel again.”

Shane pulled free. “I have a *million* things to do, this is the last week before opening night. I have prop checks and notes and...”

“After notes then.”

“I’ll be exhausted.”

“I do all the work, you just lie there and look pretty.” Rozanov’s smile turned wicked. “Is very easy job for you.”

“Fuck off.” But then: “... Maybe. If I don’t kill you during rehearsal today.”

“You would miss me too much,” Rozanov teased.

Shane scoffed, and let his eyes glide down to Rozanov’s, now clothed, cock. “*Parts of you.*”

The rest of the rehearsal, in comparison to their little pre-practice-performance, was running smoothly so far.

Too smoothly, almost. Which meant Shane had time to notice things he’d rather not notice. Like how Rozanov kept gravitating toward wherever Shane was standing. Not obviously, but Shane watched him cross the stage during a break and somehow end up in the wings where Shane was checking prop placement. Watched him take water at the fountain nearest Shane’s position instead of the one backstage. Watched him linger after the ballet master dismissed the corps, stretching at the barre while Shane updated his cue sheet ten feet away.

Shane tried not to track Rozanov’s movements, but it was easier to try to not breathe.

Once, Shane glanced up from his clipboard and caught Rozanov staring at him from across the stage. Not the usual smirk, not teasing—just looking, with an expression Shane couldn’t read before Rozanov’s face shuttered and he turned back to Rose, even going so far as to fling an arm around her shoulders like they were friends, or sweethearts..

Stop it. Shane gritted his teeth and focused on his notes. *He’s not—this isn’t—* But his pulse kicked up every time Rozanov came near, and Shane hated that his body knew before his brain did.

Beyond that internal crisis, theatre buzzed with pre-show energy—dancers stretching in the wings, crew running last-minute checks, Jackie barking orders about costume quick-changes. Shane stood at the tech table with his headset on, running through his cue sheet one more time. Opening night nearly here, just one more practice tomorrow, then the weekend and... and then no looking back.

Everything had to be perfect.

“Places for top of show,” he called into the headset. “House lights down in sixty seconds.”

He made his way to the wings as the house lights dimmed, wanting to watch the opening from backstage where he could see both the stage and the wing traffic. The overture began. Shane watched from the wings as the curtain rose on the Stahlbaum parlor, the Christmas tree glittering under warm lights. The party scene unfolded exactly as rehearsed—guests arriving, children playing, the bear, Drosselmeyer making his entrance with the flash of light they’d fought over in week one.

Then came the gift scene.

Clara received her nutcracker doll from Drosselmeyer, cradling it like a precious thing Her brother Fritz, played by one of the younger boys from the school program, snatched it away,

teasing. The choreography called for him to toss it in the air, catch it, toss it again. On the third toss, something went wrong.

‘Fritz’ caught the doll awkwardly and wobbled, spinning to keep it from falling and the nutcracker’s wooden head broke free from its body, flung forward by that little spin. A little wooden missile. A mistake and Shane watched the rest as it happened it happen in slow motion, his brain already calculating trajectories, but even he couldn’t have predicted *just* how badly this was going to go:

It hit Rozanov, who’d been standing in the wings, square in the balls.

Rozanov went down like he’d been shot, collapsing like a picnic chair, both hands cupping his groin, and the Russian that poured out of his mouth needed *no* translation. The music kept playing. The dancers froze. Fritz stood center stage still holding the nutcracker’s headless body, looking horrified.

Someone laughed—a nervous, shocked sound from the wings that cut off immediately. Then another snicker. Shane heard a stifled giggle from one of the younger corps dancers.

Rozanov’s head snapped toward the sound, face going red.

“Stop, stop, *stop!*” The ballet master’s voice cracked through the theatre. “Stop the music!”

The orchestra tapered into silence. Shane was already moving, but he caught the whispers starting:

“—got him right in the—”

“—oh my god did you see—”

“—literally a nutcracker—”

Shane crossed the stage toward where Rozanov had curled into a ball. Jackie appeared from stage left with an ice pack. Rose hovered nearby, one hand over her mouth, eyes wide.

“Rozanov.” Shane crouched beside him. “Can you move?”

“*Yob tvoyu mat’*—” Rozanov sucked air through his teeth, and Shane could see the humiliation burning in his face alongside the pain. More whispers rippled through the wings. “Why do you ask stupid questions?”

“I need to know if you’re injured.”

“My balls are in my fucking throat, Hollander, what do you think?”

“Shh! There are *kids* here Rozanov!”

A string of Russian poured out that Shane was grateful he couldn’t translate, though the venom in Rozanov’s tone needed no interpretation.

Jackie thrust the ice pack at Shane. “Here. Tell him to put this on it.”

Shane took it, hating everything about this. “I’m not—you tell him.”

“He likes you better.”

“He doesn’t like me at all.”

“Exactly, so he’ll actually listen.” Jackie fled back toward the wings before Shane could argue.

Rozanov had rolled onto his side now, still cupping himself, breathing in short harsh bursts. Shane knelt beside him and held out the ice pack, and Rozanov glared at him like Shane had personally thrown the nutcracker head.

“Here. Put this on... it.”

“*It*,” Rozanov scoffed between pants, “Yes, yes, I know where it goes.” Rozanov snatched the ice pack and shoved it between his legs with a hiss. Shane heard more snickers from the wings—quickly silenced, but not quick enough. He watched Rozanov’s shoulders tense, watched him curl tighter like he could make himself smaller, invisible. “Fuck. *Fuck*. I will *kill* whoever built this piece of shit prop—”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” Shane glanced over his shoulder to where the boy stood pale and terrified, half-hidden behind one of the party guests. “It was an accident. The head wasn’t secured properly. Rozanov, can you stand?”

“I can dance.” Rozanov pushed himself up, ice pack clutched between his legs. His voice came out harder than necessary, louder than it needed to be, like he was trying to convince the entire room.

“That’s not—slow down. It’s okay, if you’re hurt we need to stop.” Shane’s tone stayed level, but there was an edge to it that made several dancers glance over. He could clearly see the strain in Rozanov’s stance, the hunch to his back, and the blatant *pain* in his eyes. “I need to know if you’re injured enough that—”

“I said I can dance.”

“And I’m saying we have an understudy for exactly this situation.” Shane turned to the ballet master. “Get Dale warmed up. We’ll run it with—”

“No.” Rozanov’s hand shot out, catching Shane’s wrist. “Are you deaf? I say I am fine. Fuck the understudy and your con—ah, *fucking* English—*K chertu vashe sniskhoditel’noye otnosheniye!* I can dance.”

Shane pulled free, his expression going flat in that way it did when he’d made a decision.

“No, fuck *no one*, and you’re clearly not fine. You can barely stand straight. We’re three days from opening and I’m not risking—”

“You are not risking anything, Hollander. You stand in wings with headset while *I* risk injury every time I step on stage. Every jump, every lift, every—My balls are *bruised* and you’re already talking about replacing me with stupid—” Rozanov cut himself off with a hiss and a wince, the ice pack pressed against his groin. “You stand in wings with your headset and your clipboard and you tell me what I can and cannot do with my own body. But you know nothing about—”

Shane could see it now—the fear beneath the anger. In Moscow, he’d heard that showing weakness meant losing roles. Getting replaced meant you weren’t good enough. And here Shane was, in front of everyone, calling for the understudy like Rozanov was disposable, and now he was doubling down on principle. *Shit*, okay, he had to deescalate. Shane kept his voice low and leaned in, trying to calm things back down. “I’m not—Rozanov. I’m not—I know enough to see when someone’s hurt and trying to push through because they’re too stubborn to—”

“I do not need understudy. I need you to stop treating me like I am made of glass.”

“Rozanov,” Shane said, still trying to drag this back to a salvageable state, “*Ilya*,” he tried instead, softer and nearly pleading. “Calm down, I’m just saying that if you’re hurt, we have an understudy so you can take a break—”

“Do not say my name and talk about replacing me in the same breath,” Rozanov snarled, “And in front of everyone. Like I am nothing. Like any dancer can step in and do what I do.”

Why was he taking this so personally? Shane had seen dancers push through worse injuries, but they didn’t react like Shane had insulted them by suggesting rest. Again, maybe it was a Bolshoi thing. Maybe Rozanov heard *you need a break* and translated it to *you’re not good enough*.

“That’s not—”

“What will you tell Moscow? That their principal dancer got hit by a *toy* and stage manager immediately replaced him because he could not handle little accident right before opening night?” Rozanov’s jaw was tight. “Do you know what that would—” He stopped himself again.

Shane glanced around. Every dancer, every crew member was watching. Waiting.

“I’m trying to protect you—”

“I do not need protection. I need you to let me do my job.”

“Your job isn’t to dance through injuries because you’re too stubborn to—”

“Stubborn? Or maybe I know my body better than stage manager who has never danced a day in his life.”

The words landed like a slap. Shane felt his spine straighten, his professional mask sliding into place. “Fine. If you feel like that, and want to speak to me like that, then we’ll run it

without you and you can watch from the wings until you remember who it is you're speaking to." Shane turned to the ballet master. "Can we get Fritz's understudy for the toss? I want to see if it's the choreography or the prop."

The ballet master nodded and started calling instructions.

"I should have know it would be like this with you," Rozanov snapped coldly. "So quick to push people aside when they do not perform exactly as you write down in notebook. You judge everyone from your safe place behind curtain, but you never put yourself out there. Never risk anything yourself."

"That's not true, you have no idea what you're talking about."

"No? Then why do you hide? Why do you work so hard to never be seen?" Rozanov pushed himself fully upright, ice pack falling away. His voice dropped, meant only for Shane even though everyone could still hear. "You manage everyone else's work, but what do you create yourself? You move props, you turn on lights, you tell people where to stand. You hide behind clipboard and pretend this makes you artist."

Shane's nails bit into his palms until he felt the sting. His shoulders wanted to curl inward, wanted to make himself smaller, but he locked his spine straight because he wouldn't—*couldn't*—let Rozanov see how deep that cut.

But inside, he was bleeding. "*I keep this entire production running—*"

"Yes, you are very good technician. Very organized. Very safe. We will clap for you at end, of course." Rozanov's lip curled. "But you do not understand. To stand on stage, hundreds of people watching, knowing you can fail—you have never done this. You have never tried, have you? Never auditioned, never performed, never let yourself be seen." He gestured at the empty house seats. "At least the people on stage have courage to try. What do *you* have? Bruises or no, at least I *have* balls, Hollander. Who are *you* to tell me not to? To stop? To *replace* me?"

The theatre fell silent. Shane could feel eyes on him, dancers in the wings, crew at the tech table, Rose standing frozen by the barre.

Everyone waiting to see how he'd respond.

Shane tried to speak, but all he could do was swallow the lump in his throat. The words sat there on his tongue, behind his teeth, and burned like acid—*I did try, I failed, you have no idea how much I tried*—but letting them out would mean admitting Rozanov was right. That Shane was a coward who'd given up and hidden backstage where no one could see him fall.

"And what about you? Because you're so perfect?" Shane heard his own voice like it belonged to someone else, cold and distant. His hands balled into fists at his sides. "*You?* You showed up a week late because you couldn't be bothered to respect anyone's schedule but your own. You've spent three weeks treating this production like it's community theater, like we're all so fucking lucky you deigned to show up at all. The great Ilya Rozanov, slumming it in Winnipeg for a month before he goes back to Moscow and forgets we exist."

Shane took a step forward, and something hot and vicious coiled in his stomach. He'd been swallowing this for weeks—every smug smile, every dismissive comment, every time Rozanov had looked at him like Shane was a joke. It didn't matter that the sex was good. It never mattered at all, because that was *using* and this was the *truth*.

“You're right. I don't perform. I don't put myself out there for people to judge. You know what I do instead? I show up. Every single day. I do my job. I don't—”

I don't put myself out there for people to judge. I show up and try my best with what I am good at. Every single day. I do my job. I don't treat people like they're beneath me or like this theatre is doing me a favor by letting me breathe its air. I don't act like being talented gives me the right to be a piece of shit to everyone around me.

But this wasn't about just *him*, or how Rozanov made him *feel*, this was about the show.

“—I do what I need to do. *You* treat everyone where like they're some amateurs, like you *always* know better, like you have to tolerate this production until you can go back to Moscow. Being talented gives me the right to be a piece of shit.”

Shane's voice cracked, and he hated it, hated that Rozanov could see him breaking. But he couldn't stop.

“And you want to know what's really pathetic? Most of the company thinks you're amazing. They watch you like you're some kind of god, and you eat it up. You let them worship you, and then you—” Shane stopped himself before he said *fuck them and throw them away*, before he admitted that he knew exactly what Rozanov did to people who got too close. “You don't even care.”

The words were out before Shane could stop them, and even as he said them, some distant part of his brain was screaming that this wasn't about the tree or the schedule or even opening night. This was about Wednesday night in Rozanov's hotel room. This was about being vulnerable with someone who was being cruel to him now and for *what*? For his pride? This was about the impossible paradox of Rozanov, about soft hands and gentle things juxtaposed by all that hurt. This was about *man slut energy* and Shane going along with it anyway because he was so stupid, so weak, for someone to even *look* at him, even if that someone arguably hated everything about this production that wasn't Russian, that wasn't Bolshoi, that wasn't *'right'*. This was about Rozanov being this far-flung ideal of ballet that Shane him self would never *be*.

But Shane couldn't stop. The words kept coming, sharp and cutting, and somewhere underneath the anger was fear.

“To you, this is all a game. The production, the people, all of it. You'll be gone in a few weeks and you won't think about any of us again. Ever. Poof. Are we even people to you?”

Rozanov's eyes went wide for half a second, and mouth opened as if to argue, then closed. His shoulders drew back, that performer's posture clicking into place like armor, but his hands—his hands curled into fists at his sides and shook there for three full seconds before he forced them open again. And then his body locked down, Rozanov's face went blank. Not

angry—blank. Like Shane had hit him somewhere he couldn't defend, and he'd shut down rather than let it show.

"You think—" Rozanov stopped. Swallowed. When he spoke again it was flat and empty. "You think I do not care."

Not a question. A statement. Like Shane had just told him something fundamental about himself that he was only now learning.

"You *don't*."

And it was quiet for a long, horrible, moment before Shane spoke again, breaking the interregnum.

"Fifteen minutes, and we go again. Everyone reset, but *you*," Shane said into the headset, his voice steady despite the way his hands shook, "*You*, Rozanov, you're out. Done. We're going with the understudy tonight. Go *home* to your hotel. I don't want to see you until tomorrow, and even then leave me the *hell* alone. Everyone else... places for top of Act One. We're running it from the party scene."

"You cannot tell me to—"

"I *can* so if you want to dance at all on this stage for an audience you will go *now*. I know you think I am a joke, Rozanov, but nothing happens on this stage without me allowing it to happen. I'm sorry about you getting hit, that's also my fault because this is *my* stage and I didn't protect you from that prop failure, but I'm not going to let you walk all over this production when everyone here cares about it. Goodnight, Rozanov. Go, before I call theatre security to escort you out."

Shane turned and walked off stage despite Rozanov calling after him. Before he could lose his nerve. Before anyone could see the way his vision blurred at the edges, the way his lungs had forgotten how to work. Shane made it to his office and locked the door. He sat at his desk and stared at the wall, his heart beating too fast, his throat tight, and all he could hear was Rozanov's voice:

You have never tried, have you? Never auditioned, never performed, never let yourself be seen. At least the people on stage have courage to try. What do you have?

Nothing. He had nothing, and he'd *blown up* at the man in front of everyone. Was any of it even real? What he felt or what he said? Rozanov didn't care, he didn't because he couldn't and that wasn't supposed to be how it was, arrogant Bolshoi prince, a thorn in his side, and someone who cared wouldn't have said... that... to *him*.

But, Shane knew, Rozanov also didn't *know*. He'd never given him a chance to know or care. So why would he?

The silence pressed against his eardrums. His hands wouldn't stop shaking.

Rehearsal resumed without him after those fifteen minutes. Hayden pinged him on his cellphone that, surprisingly, Rozanov did leave. But even then, Shane stayed in his office, listening through the headset as the ballet master called corrections, as the music swelled and faded, as the production moved forward like it always did. Even as Hayden called over the headset that he was going to see how to make repairs to avoid any further *projectiles*. No one needed him in the wings. The show ran fine without him standing there watching.

Maybe that proved Rozanov's point.

Rose appeared in his doorway twenty minutes later without knocking.

"You want to tell me what the hell that was?" She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, arms crossed.

"What are you doing here?" Shane didn't look up from his laptop.

"Checking on *you* while letting my own understudy get some practice in. Shane. What *happened* out there?"

"Rozanov was..." Shane pursed his lips, searching. "He was being Rozanov. I handled it."

"Handled it?" Rose's voice climbed. "Shane, you eviscerated him in front of the entire company. I've never seen you lose it like that."

"And he didn't eviscerate me first!?"

"He's a dick and we all know it, but *you're* not! I expect him to take the cheap shot, but you, Shane... and you told him he treats people like they're beneath him, which—" Rose pushed off the door and came to sit on the edge of his desk. "Shane. Is that even true? Because I've watched him with the corps. He gives good notes. He's patient with the younger dancers. Yesterday he spent his lunch break helping one of the girls with her fouettés."

Shane's hands stilled on the keyboard. "He's—Hayden said—"

"Hayden *thinks* he's hooked up with half the company. That's different from *knowing*." Rose's expression softened. "Shane, really, what's going on?"

Shane's felt that awful panic, that claustrophobia, rising in him again. He wanted to tell her about Wednesday night, about everything. It would feel so good to just have *one* person who knew... Instead he said: "Nothing is going on. He's leaving. In three weeks he'll be back in Moscow and none of this—none of us—will matter to him."

Rose was quiet for a long moment. "Did he say that? Or are you assuming?"

Shane closed his laptop. "I should get back to work."

"Shane—"

"I'm fine, Rose. Really. It was just... opening week stress. I'll apologize... later."

Rose studied him, then sighed and slid off the desk. “He owes you an apology too, to be fair.” She headed for the door, then paused with her hand on the knob. “Do you want me to kill him? Slowly? I know I offered before for your not-date, but...”

Shane huffed out a miserable lack, wiping at his eyes. No, no crying in front of Rose. “No... I... *no*, but... thank you again for offering. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“If you change your mind, I think Hayden might help us hide the body.”

The door closed softly behind her.

Shane stared at his laptop screen and felt the broken glass in his stomach twist. He waited until rehearsal ended, until he heard the last dancers leave before venturing out. The theatre was dark, the stage empty except for work lights. He should check the prop table, should verify the backup nutcrackers... again... and thought should review notes for tomorrow.

Instead he walked to center stage and stood there, looking out at the empty house.

At least the people on stage have courage to try.

Shane replayed the argument for the hundredth time, but this time he forced himself to hear what he’d actually said instead of what he’d meant to say:

“You’ll be gone in a few weeks and you won’t think about any of us again.”

Us. He’d said us like he was protecting the company. Being professional, except, and *fuck*, that wasn’t true at all. Rose had been watching Rozanov with the corps all week, had told Shane he gave good notes, was patient with the younger dancers. Jackie liked him enough to give him keys. Even Hayden’s complaints were about lateness, not cruelty.

Shane had been the only one raging about Rozanov not caring. About being forgotten.

“You don’t even care.”

The overstuffed file in Shane’s head with its million not-right-labels (*Rozanov: Temporary Fixation, Rozanov: Asshole, Rozanov, Nice to Children, Rozanov: Doesn’t Care About This Show At All, Rozanov: Menace, Rozanov: Might Like Hockey Scene, Rozanov: Arrogant Playboy Who Treats People Like Souvenirs*) should’ve been accurate. Shane had built it methodically, added evidence piece by piece. Even though it didn’t fit any category, even though the labels contradicted each other, it was still *right*. Right? Hayden’s comments about hookups. The easy charm Rozanov used on everyone. The assumption that this was all just physical, that Shane was being smart by “using him back” before Rozanov could discard him first.

Except.

Except Rozanov had asked Shane to stay Wednesday night. Had looked—what? Disappointed? Hurt?—when Shane left. *You are sure?* he’d asked, like he genuinely wanted Shane there for more than just sex.

Which didn't fit in *Rozanov: Man Slut Energy*.

And in the dressing room, when Shane had panicked: *Is okay to be nervous. You can always tell me to stop*. Patient. Gentle. Reading Shane's anxiety like choreography and adjusting without making Shane feel weak for having it.

That didn't fit in *Rozanov: Asshole*.

And then today... after a literal nutcracker, Rozanov had stood there in front of everyone and fought to keep dancing, not because he was arrogant, but because *showing weakness meant losing roles*. Because maybe in Moscow, being replaced meant you weren't good enough. And Shane had... Shane had called for the understudy. In front of everyone. Had proven exactly what Rozanov feared.

Rozanov: Doesn't Care About This Show At All was wrong.

And so, of course, Rozanov had lashed out. About never trying. About—

About things that were true.

That was the part that kept circling back. Rozanov had been cruel, yes, but he'd also been *right*. And Shane had responded by telling him he didn't care, that he'd forget everyone here, that none of them mattered to him.

A post-it appeared on the file: *When had Shane started needing to matter to Rozanov?*

The hotel Wednesday night. No—before that. The dressing room when Rozanov's hands had settled his hip: *You are wound so tightly. Let me do the worrying*. The storage closet when he'd covered Shane's mouth to keep them from being caught but kept moving, kept making Shane feel good even with danger right outside. Every time Rozanov had checked in, had made sure Shane felt safe, had asked *you are sure?* He'd shoved him once, and Rozanov was an immovable *wall*, but a single 'stop' had flung him back like a foam prop.

You came to find me, Rozanov had said Monday morning, and Shane had. Had walked to that dressing room, had knocked on the door, had pushed Rozanov against the wall because waiting until after rehearsal felt impossible.

That wasn't using someone. That was... wanting them. Actually wanting them in this weird, fucked up way, whether it was feelings or just fucking it didn't matter, and he'd gone and blown up in front of the entire company.

Shane pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes until colors bloomed. When had he become this person? This messy, panicking, ugly-feelings-having disaster who developed emotions during casual hookups like some kind of romantic comedy protagonist?

You wanted to keep me there forever, Rozanov had said after that first time in Shane's office, cocksure and drunk on the madness between them after kneeling between his legs. And Shane had filed it under *arrogant dirty talk* instead of recognizing it for what it was: the truth.

Shane stood in the work lights and hated Rozanov for being right.

Friday, Shane did something he'd never done before in his entire life.

He called in sick. Or... rather he'd pinged the group chat.

RWB Besties

Shane: Stomach bug. Can't make it in. Hayden has my notes for today's run.

His phone lit up immediately:

RWB Besties

Shane: Stomach bug. Can't make it in. Hayden has my notes for today's run.

Jackie

Jackie: Oh no! Feel better! We've got this.

Rose

Rose: are you okay??? do you need anything?? Soup???

Rose: my earlier offer still stands

Hayden

Hayden: shit man that sucks. rest up.

Hayden: I wanted to let you know too that we fixed the Literal Nutcracker (new nickname). A peg in the neck broke, but I fixed it. Shouldn't be any more nut cracking

That... made sense, Shane supposed. Cheap construction, probably. They'd been using these props for three years now, and wood dried out, glue failed, things broke. It was bound to happen eventually, even with him checking over things as neurotically as he did. Shane turned his phone face-down on the nightstand and stared at the ceiling.

He wasn't sick. His stomach was fine. His head was fine. Everything was *fine* except for the fact that he was sick in the head, in the heart, in his soft underbelly where Rozanov's words had burrowed under his skin and refused to leave: *You have never tried, have you?*

Shane had built his entire adult life on being the person who showed up. The reliable one. The one who never missed a cue, never dropped a ball, never let the production down. In seven years at RWB, he'd worked through the flu, through a sprained ankle, through his father's bypass surgery.

He'd been there for opening nights and closing nights and every goddamn night in between.

And now he was lying in bed at 7:15 AM while his crew ran Friday's final dress rehearsal without him.

His phone buzzed again. He ignored it.

The day passed in a blur of nothing. Shane didn't shower. He didn't eat until his stomach hurt enough that he forced down toast at 2 PM. He sat on his couch and scrolled through his phone without reading anything, then put it down and stared at the wall instead. The rehearsal would be running right now. Hayden would be calling cues. Jackie would be managing costume changes. Rose would be dancing the Snow Queen variation, and Rozanov would be —

Shane squeezed his eyes shut.

He checked his phone. Three more texts from Rose throughout the day, increasingly worried (*I can come over and we can not talk and just rot on the couch*). Two from Jackie with updates on the rehearsal (*smooth, no issues, the backup nutcracker worked perfectly*). One from Hayden (*weird not having you here man*).

Whatever was wrong with me, Shane thought, *at least I have them*. These people cared about him, really cared. He didn't deserve them, honestly. They were the best parts of working at RWB, the reason he stayed when other opportunities came up. His people. That was it, though. Just three people. No one else that had his number used it to check in or chat. Rozanov didn't have his number—they'd never exchanged contact information, had never needed to when they kept running into each other at the theatre, kept finding excuses to be in the same storage closet or dressing room or hotel room.

Shane didn't know why the absence of a text he couldn't have received anyway made his chest hurt.

The apartment got dark. Shane didn't turn on the lights. He sat in the growing shadows and thought about fifteen-year-old Shane walking off stage mid-audition. He thought about filing himself under *Former Dancer: Archived* and spending a decade pretending that was fine.

What do you have?

Nothing. He had nothing except a job he was good at and a life he'd built around avoiding exactly this feeling, the hollow ache of wanting something he couldn't let himself have.

His phone buzzed one more time around 9 PM.

Rose

Rose: i'm coming over tomorrow morning with coffee and pastries and you're going to tell me what's actually wrong.

Shane typed and deleted three responses before settling on:

Rose

Rose: i'm coming over tomorrow morning with coffee and pastries and you're going to tell

me what's actually wrong.

Shane: I'm fine. Just needed a day.

Rose: is this about the not date or about Rozanov?

He could almost laugh, because of *course* everyone thought those were two separate issues.

Rose

Rose: is this about the not date or about Rozanov?

Shane: No

Rose: i will actually kill people for you if you ask

Rose: please ask 

Shane: I promise I am okay, but thank you for the offers of assassination

Rose: bullshit but okay. I love you. Feel better

Rose: i will be there at like 11

Shane set his phone on the coffee table and went to bed at 9:36 PM. He didn't sleep. He lay in the dark and replayed Thursday's argument on an endless loop until the words lost meaning and became just sounds, just noise, just the evidence of how thoroughly he'd fucked everything up.

By 6 AM Saturday, he'd given up on sleep entirely.

Shane's key turned in the stage door lock at seven AM, the bolt sliding back with a click that echoed down the empty hallway. The building was empty—no rehearsals scheduled, no crew milling around the loading dock, no dancers warming up in the studios. Saturday mornings were always like this before opening night, and in it Shane hoped, a liminal sanctuary. The building belonged to him for the next two hours. Rose wouldn't be knocking at his door until eleven, and no one scheduled Saturday rehearsals this close to opening night; dancers needed rest, crew needed recovery time, and Shane needed *this*:

Time alone with the stage, the lights, the ghost of who he used to be before he'd filed that part of himself under *Former Life: Archived*. He needed space to be alone with just his thoughts and *ballet* and nothing, no *one*, else.

The stage was set for Act One: the (goddamn) Christmas tree stood center, surrounded by the Victorian parlor furniture they'd been rehearsing with all week. The toy cabinet sat stage left,

the fireplace facade upstage right. Work lights threw harsh shadows across everything. Shane dropped his bag in the wings and pulled out a new pair of ballet flats from wardrobe. He'd signed them out yesterday under the pretense of checking them for one of the male corps dancers. No one questioned the stage manager handling logistics, nor the loss of yet another pair. They burned through hundreds. Thousands. Pointe shoes barely survived a single show. No one cared about flats.

So he could steal *one* pair for himself.

If they had been pointe, Shane would've beat the shit out of the shoes on the floor to break them in, and he would have enjoyed their destruction as he tore or bent different parts here then there. He would have bent the shank where his arch needed it, crushed the satin under his thumb, scuffed the platform until the shine died. Flats didn't need this, but he still prepped his feet: Tape. Lambswool. The familiar tug across his toes. Then, finally, he could slip the flats on, and re-taped them back up the way he liked before tying them and walking to center stage. Empty theater seats stared back at him, rows and rows of spectre spectators. He closed his eyes and counted his breath the way his old teacher had taught him. *Four counts in, hold for four, four counts out.*

The music would help. Shane walked to the stage manager's console in the wings and connected his phone to the theater's sound system. The opening notes of the *Grand Pas de Deux* filled the space through the house speakers—strings building, woodwinds answering. Of course by now, he knew it all by heart, but it did sound different from this point of view.

He started with the basics. *Plié, relevé, tendu*. His body remembered the positions even as his brain tried to catalog all the reasons this was pointless. He was not a dancer anymore. He would never perform on a stage like this for real, and if anyone saw him it might look foolish; no doubt he was so far out of proper practice that it'd all look messy despite his best attempts but... but. His muscles knew better, thousands of repetitions picking up the slack when the brain failed. Muscle memory within him knew the stretch in his hamstrings, the pull through his core as he held an arabesque, leg extended behind him while his arms reached forward.

A little wobbly. That was okay. He could try again, and it felt good to be moving in the theatre in a way that wasn't pacing.

The Marley felt different under his feet than it had through regular shoes. Springy. Responsive. Marley always told the truth. Too much rosin and it grabbed. Too little and it went slick under your turns. Today it felt honest, and *receptive*. Shane's body dropped into first position and muscle memory took over: heel forward, weight on the ball of the foot, his core engaged.

He rose to relevé and his calves burned with the stretch. How long had it been? A year? Longer? His body had forgotten nothing even as Shane had spent a decade trying to forget this.

The music swelled and Shane moved into the Nutcracker's opening sequence. The first combination came back to his body: chassé, grand jeté, land, repeat. His legs remembered the pattern even as his brain cataloged how much easier Rozanov made it look. Shane's leaps

didn't eat up the stage the way the Russian's did. His extensions pulled tight at his hip flexors, stopping short of where they should. When he tried the turning sequence, he managed three rotations instead of five, landing with his weight pitched forward.

Fuck. Whatever. *Keep going.*

He used to love dance, didn't he? Didn't he still?

Shane shook out a stiff breath and adjusted. *Keep it simple, stupid.* He took out the double tours, modified the jumps. The decade since he'd trained seriously showed in his stamina, in the way his thighs burned halfway through the variation, but so did his time away from *actually* training. No one would call him beautiful, Shane knew the RWB or any other company wouldn't take him on, but his turns were centered, his footwork landed on the music. For him, right now, that was maybe enough. When he held the final arabesque, leg extended behind him, arms reaching toward the empty house, a long-seated knot, an old wound, cracked open in his chest. The stage lights were warm on his face. His lungs worked hard and his thighs shook but he *held* it, held the line, held the moment where he felt like himself instead of the carefully constructed version he showed everyone else.

This.

This was what he'd given up. This feeling of *flight*.

He wasn't Rozanov. He didn't have that raw power, that impossible height on his leaps.

But he'd had *something* once, before the panic attacks started. Before the audition for the National Ballet where he'd frozen mid-variation, limbs locked, breath gone, audience faces blurring into a wall of judgment. Before the artistic director had called him 'technically proficient but lacking stage presence.' Before he'd realized that *loving* dance and being able to *perform* it were separated by a chasm he couldn't cross.

Except here, alone, he could still fly.

He could at least do this for himself, selfishly, where no one could see.

Shane attacked the combination with everything he had, spinning through fouettés until the stage tilted around him. And then—smiles. Yes, *this*, that feeling of soaring, strong and powerful and graceful and, *yes*, okay, he landed the next move too. When he landed, his thighs burned and sweat dripped down his spine.

This felt good. This felt right. How long had it been since he'd danced now? Over a year? How'd he ever gone so long going without?

And now, the final pose. Shane sucked in a breath and pushed himself to the limit for it. Arms overhead, chest lifted, one leg extended in a penché that pulled his hamstring tight. He held it, breathing hard, and—

Applause.

What?

Shane's head snapped up. His leg dropped and he stumbled, nearly losing his balance.

Rozanov leaned against the proscenium arch at stage right, still clapping. He wore a grey hoodie and dark joggers, hair mussed like he'd just rolled out of bed. How long had he been standing there? Shane would've seen him if he'd come through the house. He must've come in through the stage door.

How long had he been there?

"Fuck." to cover his face, to hide, to somehow undo the last ten seconds—then dropped because that made it worse. Rozanov had *seen* him. Not stage-managing, not competent and controlled, but *this*: sweating and breathless and doing the one thing Shane never let anyone watch. "How long have you—what are you—"

"Long enough." Rozanov's voice came out differently than usual; it was soft, almost reverent, the way someone might speak in a cathedral. He pushed off the proscenium arch and walked down the aisle toward the stage, and Shane couldn't look away from his face. "You are good. Why did you not say you could dance before?"

Rozanov's eyebrows drew together, his usual swagger gone entirely, replaced by raw confusion that pulled his mouth into an unfamiliar line. And for a strange moment Shane thought that he looked hurt—actually hurt—that this was kept from him. All the while, Shane's brain scrambled for the words to redirect this conversation. "How's your—ah—are you okay? After Thursday, I mean. The nutcracker head, that was—"

"I am fine." Rozanov waved him off without breaking stride. "*It*, as you called my dick, is also fine. Very nice try at deflection, Hollander, but we are not talking about my balls right now. We are talking about why stage manager who spends all week hiding behind stage can dance like this. So." His eyes narrowed, head tilting. "Why you not say you dance when I say you knew nothing? Clearly you do. When I say you never perform, never try, you let me say these things. You could tell me I am wrong, that you *do* understand. But you say nothing. Why?"

A million answers pricked on Shane's tongue. *Because it's none of your business. Because I don't anymore. Because this is private. Because this is something deep and old and not anything I want to say to people.*

Because even if he was good, even if it mattered, it was *meaningless*. It meant nothing because how could he ever explain? How his childhood ballet director had called him 'technically proficient but lacking warmth.' How he'd been cast in the Nutcracker's Chinese Tea dance at fifteen even though he was *Japanese*, because to them Asian was *Asian*: rice paddy hat, finger gestures, all of it wrong and none of it him and no one cared about the difference. How being the "good Canadian boy" meant being white, being only half of himself, and swallowing every microaggression, every casting choice that reduced him to his cheekbones and dark eyes.

How loving ballet felt like loving someone that would never love him back.

And Rozanov. *Rozanov* who could not, would not, would never understand—not because he was cruel, but because he'd never had to. Rozanov was who was everything ballet wanted. Born that way. Tall, white, Russian, from the Bolshoi's hallowed halls. Rozanov had probably never been told he lacked stage presence. He had never been cast in a role that reduced him to racist shorthand. He had never walked into an audition knowing he'd have to be twice as good for half the consideration.

And... Shane couldn't even hate him for it, making it all worse. Hating Rozanov would be easy, would fit neatly into a folder labeled *Them*. But Rozanov kept refusing to stay filed away. He'd been kind to that crying nine-year-old. He'd listened about the cultural dances, actually listened. And now he was looking at Shane like he'd discovered something precious instead of pathetic.

RWB had given him a place where he was valued. They reimagined things, dreamed, and Shane was free to reach for and celebrate the cultures that actually existed here, in Canada, instead of repeating the same centuries old Eurocentric programs. He was accepted here, loved maybe. He didn't pretend to be *only* one half himself. He still loved ballet. But *dancing*? That belonged to the fifteen-year-old in a rice paddy hat, to the rejection letters, to his mother's fury at the directors who couldn't tell Chinese from Japanese and her disappointment that he'd let them *win* by quitting. To a version of himself he'd buried so deep he'd almost convinced himself it was dead.

Until Rozanov had caught him trying to resurrect it.

The flying was gone now, this was freefall. Shane's heart threatened to beat out of his chest, hurt and humiliation rising within him in a maelstrom. "The theatre is locked, how did you even get in here—"

"I ask for key," Rozanov said with a shrug, still raking his eyes over Shane from head to toe. "After humiliating on-stage argument, I mentioned to Jackie that a certain stage manager accuse me of still being a week behind with practice, and asked for access for pick up slack. Seems you had same idea. Are you planning to steal my spot on stage, Hollander?"

Shane's stomach dropped. This was apocalyptically bad.

On a scale of career-ending disasters, this ranked somewhere near accidentally sleeping with a principal dancer (which, fine, he'd already done that) but worse because this was the thing Shane didn't share. Not with Rose, not with Hayden, his parents, not with anyone. It was his, it hurt, and Shane knew that Rozanov of all people, perfect principal that he was, would just crush it under his own perfect steps. Horrified, Shane looked around wildly for his bag, his jacket, all the things he'd need to snatch up before he bolted. The stupid music was still playing over the speakers. "I was just—I needed to—"

"You dance very well." Rozanov walked toward the stage, moving down the aisle like he'd already measured it for his own entrance cue. His shoulders stayed square, his head angled to track Shane without turning away from his path. Each step landed heel-toe, a dancer's gait even in joggers and sneakers, annoyingly handsome and confident, so self assured that he owned every room he entered. Better than I expected from man who spends all day yelling at people through headset."

“I wasn’t *yelling*—”

“Just other day you bickered with lighting designer for seven minutes about gel color.” Rozanov reached the stage stairs and climbed them, each step bringing him closer. “But this? This is different. You have training. Real training. So why are you hiding backstage when you can do this?”

Shane’s hands flexed at his sides. The ballet flats suddenly felt ridiculous on his feet, like he’d been caught playing dress-up. “I don’t perform anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Because I—” Shane’s throat tightened. He couldn’t explain it, not to Rozanov, not to anyone. How his body knew the movements but his brain froze the moment someone watched. How his mother’s disappointment still bothered him all these years later even though she was so proud of him now. How being half-Japanese in a world of blond-haired blue-eyed ballerinas had meant always being *different*, and different had felt like *wrong*.

Shane had loved dance the way other people loved music or cooking or sunsets on a beach: necessary, natural, the thing that made sense when nothing else did. Until it didn’t anymore. Until there weren’t enough categories and there were too many sidelong glances or words or *slurs* even, and performing under the expectation of failing, of being that nervous half-Japanese boy and nothing more, felt like skinning himself alive in front of strangers who were grading him on how well he bled. He couldn’t explain that to Rozanov. He couldn’t explain how you could love something so much it destroyed you, and then spend a decade pretending you’d never loved it at all.

“I’m a stage manager. That’s what I do.”

“But you *were* dancer.” Rozanov stopped a few feet away, head still tilted in study. “I can see it. In your turnout, your *port de bras*, the way you breathe through transitions. Someone trained you well, and you are *good*.”

Shane bent to untie the ribbons on his shoes. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.” Rozanov crouched down beside him, and Shane froze. “Listen, Hollander... On Thursday...”

Rozanov stopped. His hand came up, rubbed the back of his neck—the first uncertain gesture Shane had ever seen from him. His eyes tracked to the floor, the wings, anywhere but Shane’s face, before dragging back like it cost him something. “I did not know you could dance.”

Statement, Shane noted, not apology.

Shane blinked at him, feeling very much in a deer in the headlights. “O...okay? So?”

“So.” Repeated, looking uncomfortable. His shoulders pulled back, tension spread across them, but but his eyes stayed unfocused, looking at Shane without quite seeing him. “So I say

things. About hiding. About never trying. About—” His teeth clicked shut. Another breath through his nose. “And now I see you here. Like this.”

“And so *what*? What do you want me to say, Rozanov? You said shit. You saw me. It’s nothing.”

“*Not* nothing.” Rozanov’s hand dropped from his neck. “I want—” He stopped again. His weight shifted foot to foot, a tell Shane had never seen before. “You *are* a dancer. So why...” He cut himself off, searching for the words for a long moment.. “Why do you manage from wings when you can do this?”

He gestured at Shane’s flats, at the stage, at the evidence Shane had been trying to hide.

“Rozanov, why are you even *here*?” Shane asked instead of answering.

“I came here to practice since bossy stage manager has reminded me of shortcomings in very public way, and because I am not going to be replaced by understudy unless he kills me in back alley,” Rozanov’s shoulders straightened, some of his usual confidence sliding back into place. “But I find you here instead. And I... better understand now, I think, how you love ballet and the stage. Even if... I do *not* understand why you hide. And it gives me idea. This one time I can maybe bend for *you*, Hollander.”

“You need to know what that sounds like...”

Rozanov waved him off. “Hush. I am being serious. I came here to practice. Russian Ballet and RWB, we share Petipa foundation, yes, but decades have made us different. Despite my skill, I must practice more than everyone else to make sure I can use *this* country’s dance to the best advantage with my own. I need to train my body to adapt.” He stood, extending a hand. “So... since you are here...”

Oh *no*.

“...we practice together. You help me with RWB style, beat me into shape you need for *your* show, I help you with your forms. Is fair trade, yes? You know this production better than anyone. I need to understand Canadian approach better than I do to defeat the understudy. And you—” He gestured at the stage. “You clearly still *dance*, so you use me to learn. We both improve. Is win-win.”

And there it was again: the impossible paradox of Rozanov. He made it sound so simple, like they weren’t fucking in secret and arguing in public. He made it sound like he genuinely thought any of this made up for what he’d said, like they could just *get over* the argument as easy as this.

“You *cannot* be serious.” Shane stared at his hand, then his face. Shane couldn’t read Rozanov’s expression. This felt like... what? Not an apology, Rozanov didn’t apologize, but maybe an acknowledgment? A reset? Shane didn’t know what to call it. “I’m not dancing Sugar Plum or Clara to practice with you.”

Rozanov's mouth curved into a slow grin. "I would pay money to see you in sugar plum tutu, Hollander, but... no. We run through Nutcracker variations, you can be another Nutcracker maybe and I occasionally use your body to practice lifts, it does not matter if you are man or woman for that." He wiggled his fingers. "Come. Don't be coward now."

The challenge was there, but softer than usual. Like Rozanov was offering instead of just provoking.

The impossible paradox of Shane: he was so *angry* at Rozanov for what he said, for what he *stood for*, and... part of him still was considering saying *yes* anyway.

Shane stared at the offered hand like it was a trap. Because it *was* a trap, wasn't it? Rozanov had just watched him dance—watched him do the thing Shane never let anyone see—and now he wanted to what, practice together? Like they were colleagues? Friends? Like Thursday hadn't happened and they were on speaking terms again?

"You think this is how it works?" Shane's murmured, disbelieving. "The fuck is this, Rozanov? You say I'm a coward who hides behind a clipboard, you tell me I've never tried anything in my life, and then two days later you want to—what—help me with my alignment? Out of the kindness of your heart? I'm not a coward."

What even was this? Pity? Was Rozanov trying to prove something—that he could fix Shane the way he fixed everything else? Or was this another game, another way to get Shane horizontal and compliant, because apparently that was the only language they spoke?

"I know. So show me how wrong I was, Hollander."

And there it was. The challenge. The same bait Rozanov always used, and Shane was *so fucking tired* of being tested.

Shane took his hand. Rozanov pulled him up, and suddenly they were standing close. So close. The stage lights threw Rozanov's shadow long across the floor, swallowing Shane's smaller frame entirely. Shane was five-foot-ten on a good day. Rozanov had to be six-four, maybe taller, with shoulders that blocked out half the stage.

"The size difference..." Shane started.

"Is nothing." Rozanov stepped closer, and Shane's back hit the flocked fake-pine branches of the Christmas tree, which poked through his t-shirt. "I have lifted you before, Hollander, and I have lifted dancers who weigh more than you, *yes*, including men when we do all-male productions. I have no problems with either." His eyes tracked down Shane's body and back up, slow and obvious. "Do you?"

Shane's pulse hammered in his throat. "With what?"

"Have issue dancing with man instead of woman."

"No," Shane said, sounding less sure than he wanted to. "No, it's... not a problem. You know it's not a problem."

They had fucked. Multiple times. How could be a problem? The problem was that he was *Rozanov*, not that he was a man.

“Good.” But Rozanov didn’t step back. Instead, he moved closer, closing the gap between their bodies until Shane had to tilt his head back to maintain eye contact. The Christmas tree branches dug into Shane’s shoulders through his t-shirt. Rozanov’s hands came up and settled on Shane’s hips, thumbs pressing into the jut of bone through his rehearsal clothes. “Then we start with simple combination. I will lift you for Snow pas de deux. You remember the mechanics, yes? The timing? So we should...”

But Shane couldn’t hear the rest. Rozanov’s hands settled on his hips, thumbs pressing into bone, and Shane’s vision tunneled. The stage lights became too bright. The Christmas tree branches dug into his shoulders. Rozanov’s touch burned through fabric. He was so *close*, and all at once it was *too close*. Shane could see the dapple of morning stubble along Rozanov’s jaw. He could smell the mint of his fucking *toothpaste*. They were touching. He was too close and the whiplash was too *much*. Coward. Fraud. And now... dance with me? What? Someone had hurt him, then *seen* him, and now they wanted to dance with him. Those big hands were on his hips and for the first time actually touching him without trying to flirt or fuck, and if they stayed there a moment longer, touching him, trying to *dance* with him, Shane knew he would feel even more, and he would *fall*.

Abort, abort, get out.

“I need to go.” The words tumbled out too fast, tripping over themselves. Shane ducked around Rozanov and the tree, avoiding his hands, avoiding the toothpaste mint, the strange and interested sparkle in his hazel eyes, heading for the wings where he’d left his bag. He avoided Rozanov’s eyes, not wanting to see them search his own. “I just remembered I have to—there’s a thing with the—Jackie needs me to—”

“Hollander.”

No. No. Shane couldn’t do this. He couldn’t let Rozanov be gentle with him again, he couldn’t let those big hands correct his port de bras or spot him through lifts or touch him. Couldn’t risk Rozanov asking *you are sure* one more time because Shane didn’t trust himself to say *no*. Being seen dancing was already too much. Being seen by someone who’d hurt him and who he wanted anyway? Impossible.

He didn’t stop. His fingers fumbled with the ribbons on his flats, yanking them loose. He should’ve worn his normal sneakers, should’ve known better than to—

“*Hollander.*”

“I can’t do this,” Shane shoved his feet into his sneakers without bothering to untie them first. He grabbed his bag and walked toward the stage door, jaw set.

Behind him, Rozanov called out: “Offer stands. Anytime you want to dance, I am here. And I am...”

Shane pushed through the door and let it slam shut behind him before he could hear the end, the echo ringing through the loading alley. He was what? *Stupid? Cruel? Sorry?* No, stop it. Shane didn't let himself parse whether that was shitty version of an apology or another test or just Rozanov being Rozanov—taking up space, taking what he wanted, assuming Shane would bend.

I can maybe bend for you, Hollander.

Cold November air hit his face as he stumbled into the alley behind the theater, lungs working hard. His hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking, actually, and he couldn't tell if it was from the exercise or from the way Rozanov had looked at him or... or...

He didn't even know.

He needed to get home. He needed to shower and eat something and stop thinking.

Shane shouldered his bag and started walking.

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

 And here was that second half I promised. I debated waiting to post this, but it's here, it's done, we crack some nuts (haha) and some hearts and I am too impatient to wait to share it. 

This chapter was SO HARD. On one half there's Shane who has his own insecurities and stereotypes that he's putting on Ilya as this 'ideal' Russian dancer, and then there's the attraction between them, the feelings, stress because opening night is RIGHT THERE loomin menacingly... I wanted the escalation here to make sense while also leaning into the fact that some of it is Shane projecting. It's easier for him to reduce Ilya (Rozanov) to a cardboard cut out of a playboy Russian dancer because facing Rozanov as a complex person would mean... facing his own feelings. The horror. And then Ilya... ah, my beloved. This work is not in his POV so I can't exactly *show* you his inner thoughts and world, but both the boys are stressed and scared and lashing out a little bit, and then at the end... when Ilya sees that he's wrong, it's uncomfortable. How do you apologize for devaluing a person to their role? Can you?

Tune in to the next episode of Dragon Ball Z to find out :)

P.S — Ilya, my sweet prince, I am so sorry I sent that penile projectile your way, thank you for taking one for the team to advance the plot

References:

1. Asian hate in ballet manifests as historical, Eurocentric "yellowface" caricatures...
["Final Bow for Yellowface"](#)
2. ["Phil Chan is breaking down Asian stereotypes one ballet at a time"](#)
3. [Asian American Ballet Project](#)
4. Please check out this amazing version of "Chinese Tea" featuring lion dances from the [Hong Kong Ballet!](#)
**I had made a mistake in my earlier note here calling these 'dragon dances'. A reader kindly pointed out that "... the ones where there's two people and they're actually hidden inside the costume are lion dancers; the ones where there's a whole bunch of people holding a long snaky thing above their heads on sticks are dragon dancers."*
5. As a few readers pointed out... most men in ballet do not dance en pointe (though more and more are in modern interpretations of dance!). I had originally written this scene with Shane dancing en pointe, but edited for more realism following this info. I am NOT a dancer and I have never tried dancing ballet, so I appreciate the help from more knowledgeable readers. Thank you! More info here: [Men's Ballet Attire](#)

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ "I liked/loved it!"
- 🎭 "this wasn't my favorite"
- 🍆 "I have... a... thing..."
- 🏒 "dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy"
- 🗡️ "this usually isn't my thing... and yet"
- 💀 "how dare you (affectionate)"
- 🧑🏻‍🎨 🐭 🐹 🎄 "something something Nutcracker"

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Shane barely remembered the drive home from Centennial Concert Hall. It was a blur, a sojourn between salted streets and red lights with a white-knuckle grip on the wheel. It was probably a miracle that he hadn't crashed into a snowbank.

Shane's apartment was cold when he got back. He cranked the heat, and the pipes rattled in protest before settling into their familiar clank and hiss. His hands pulled at his sweatshirt hem, tugged the zipper of his jacket up and down until the teeth caught and stuck. He yanked harder and the tab broke off in his palm. He stared at it for three seconds before dropping it on the floor.

On autopilot, still reeling, Shane stripped out of his clothes. Each piece came off wrong—the sweatshirt tangled around his elbows, the waistband of his pants caught on his heel and he had to hop on one foot to get free. He left everything in a pile by the bathroom door because folding felt impossible, because his hands wouldn't coordinate well enough to match corners.

He felt filthy. He felt skinned. Opened and exposed, every nerve ending raw where Rozanov's eyes had tracked over his dancing. The shower would help, he told himself. Hot water could wash away sweat and the phantom weight of being watched. It could not touch what lived beneath. A shower would help.

Probably.

Shane stood under the spray until the water ran lukewarm, then cold, and his fingers pruned. He scrubbed at his arms, his shoulders, the back of his neck, trying to scour away the feeling of being *seen*. He rinsed and rinsed but his skin still felt tight, stretched wrong over his bones. His thighs ached from holding balances. His calves burned from relevés. Every muscle screamed that he'd pushed himself past what his body remembered how to do.

Good, part of him thought. Physical pain was manageable. Physical pain had a clear cause and a predictable recovery timeline.

The rest of it—Rozanov walking in, Rozanov *watching*, Rozanov's face when he'd said *I did not know you could dance*—that didn't have a timeline. That sat in Shane's stomach like he'd swallowed rocks.

No reps or cooldowns existed for this. No protocol, no checklist.

He got out, toweled off, pulled on clean clothes. The apartment was too quiet, and that made everything else feel loud. His breathing, the creak of floorboards. The internal screaming from this morning that still hadn't quite *stopped*.

Rozanov had *seen* him.

The thing that was *his*, private and broken and carefully buried under a decade of distance. And now Rozanov knew. Rozanov, who could probably tell from three seconds of watching exactly how much Shane had lost, how the extension stopped short, how the adagio started to shake, how far he'd fallen from wherever he'd been at fifteen. Rozanov, who'd stood there and said *you are good* like it was a compliment instead of—what? Pity? Mockery waiting to happen?

Shane's hands wouldn't stop shaking; washed up dancer's hands that knew how to spot a turn, how to measure six counts of eight, how to hold an arabesque until the music released him—these hands had forgotten their training. The tremor started in his fingers and spread like a failed relevé, his whole body listing off-center. No amount of breath control could fix this. He'd lost his spotting point, lost the invisible string pulling him upward through the crown of his head, and now gravity was winning in ways it never had when he danced.

The apartment walls felt closer than they should, the air too thick to breathe properly. He'd lived here three years and the dimensions had never changed, but now the distance from couch to kitchen looked wrong. Too short. Like the room was compressing. His peripheral vision tunneled. He could see straight ahead fine, but everything else went fuzzy at the edges.

A panic attack? No. No, not quite. But maybe? He didn't know. What was he supposed to feel?

He checked his phone. Then the counter. Then the bathroom floor, scanning like he was hunting for spike tape that wasn't there. He didn't know what he was looking for, only that he had to find it. Opening night was four days away. Shane made coffee, dumped it after three sips because it tasted like dirt and his stomach was already acid.

I want—Rozanov had said, and then stopped. What? What did he want? To make fun of Shane for hiding? To point out how pathetic it was that he practiced alone in an empty theatre instead of auditioning for real companies?

Or maybe—and this was the part Shane couldn't shake—maybe Rozanov had *meant* the offer. The practice together thing. Like he actually thought Shane was good enough to help and partnering with him wouldn't be a complete waste of Rozanov's time. A compliment from *Ilya Rozanov*, principal dancer at the Bolshoi, wasn't a small thing. Shane had watched him take apart other dancers for sloppy footwork or weak extensions. Rozanov didn't lie about technique. If he said Shane could dance, then—

Then nothing. It didn't matter. Shane had a show to run. He had responsibilities. He had an entire company counting on him to keep this production from imploding, and he'd already fucked up enough for one week.

Focus. He could focus.

Shane opened his laptop and pulled up the master cue sheet. He'd review it one more time, make sure every transition was timed, every lighting cue mapped to the score. This he could control. This he could fix.

This obeyed rules. If he followed them, nothing catastrophic would happen.

His phone buzzed on the counter.

Rose

Rose: Still on for 11? Bringing almond croissants and that oat milk latte you pretend you don't like

Shane stared at the screen.

He'd forgotten. How had he *already* forgotten?

His first instinct was to text back and cancel. Make an excuse—*no I'm still sick, need to sleep, maybe later*—anything to avoid having Rose here while he was still unraveling. But that would be rude. She'd already driven out in minus-twenty weather and was only coming because of his colossal fuck ups in the first place.

And canceling would raise more questions. Rose would *know* something was wrong, would probably show up anyway, would corner him at the theatre on Monday with that look that meant she wasn't letting this go.

Shane's thumbs hovered over the keyboard.

Rose

Rose: Still on for 11? Bringing almond croissants and that oat milk latte you pretend you don't like

Shane: Yeah. Thanks

He sent it before he could reconsider.

Fine. Rose was coming. Which meant he had—Shane checked the time—forty-five minutes to make himself look like a functional human instead of someone actively having a breakdown.

He cleaned up the kitchen because it gave him something to do. Wiped down counters that weren't dirty, reorganized the cupboard where he kept mugs, threw out the expired yogurt he'd been ignoring for a week. The radiator ticked and hissed, pumping heat into the apartment until condensation gathered on the windows. He opened one to let cold air in, then closed it again when his hands started going numb.

The cue sheet sat open on his laptop, cursor blinking in the margin where he'd stopped mid-note. Act One, scene three, the battle sequence. Thirty-two individual lighting cues, each one timed to the orchestra, each one dependent on the dancers hitting their marks. If Rozanov was off by even two counts—

Shane slammed the laptop shut.

Don't think about Rozanov. Don't think about Thursday. Don't think about this morning or the way Rozanov's hands had settled on his hips or the offer to practice together or any of it. Just get through the next twenty-four hours. Get through opening night. Keep the show running. That's the job. That's all that matters.

By the time Rose knocked, the apartment looked presentable and Shane felt marginally less like he was coming apart at the seams. Marginally. He could hold it together for an hour. He could smile and eat a croissant and pretend yesterday was just a stomach bug and nothing more.

He opened the door.

She swept in with a paper bag and a drink carrier, her hair pulled back in a messy low ponytail. Snow clung to the hem of her coat and the cuffs of her jeans, already melting into dark patches on his welcome mat. "You look like shit."

Shane stepped back to let her through. "Good morning to you too."

"It's eleven-thirty. Not really morning anymore." Rose set the bag and carrier on his kitchen counter, wet boot prints bloomed on the floor where the snow melted instantly, then turned and pulled him into a hug before he could deflect.

Shane's body locked up. His arms stayed pinned to his sides, every muscle rigid, because accepting comfort meant admitting he needed it. Rose's arms tightened around his sides anyway, locking him there, all 120lbs of her holding all 200lbs of him prisoner, and after three heartbeats Shane's shoulders dropped. His arms came up. He hugged her back and hated how good it felt.

"Thanks for coming," he mumbled into her shoulder.

"You don't need to thank me. I would've broken in if you'd said no. I am *worried* about you Shane Hollander." She squeezed once more, then released him and started unpacking the bag. "And so I got you an almond croissant and one of those apple things you pretend you don't inhale when you think no one's looking."

"I don't—"

"Shane. I've known you for three years. You're not subtle." She handed him a coffee, then grabbed her own and the pastries. "Couch?"

"Couch."

They settled on opposite ends, Rose leaning against one armrest while Shane sat with his elbows on his knees, coffee balanced between his palms. The apartment was too *warm* now. He'd cranked the heat up after his shower, trying to chase away the cold that had settled in his bones, and now the radiator ticked and hissed while condensation gathered on the windows.

Rose bit into her croissant. Chewed. Swallowed. Took a sip of coffee.

“So.” Rose looked him over, blunt as a checklist when it became clear that Shane wasn’t going to say *anything*. “Want to talk about it, or do I have to guess?”

“There’s nothing to talk about. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“Shane. Uh-huh. That’s why you called out sick yesterday for the first time in, what, three years? Four? You look like you’ve been run over by a bus. Multiple times. So either you tell me what’s wrong, or I’m going to keep showing up with pastries until you crack.”

Shane picked up the latte. The cup was still warm. He peeled back the lid and the smell of espresso and cinnamon hit him, exactly the way he liked it even though he always told Rose it was too sweet. “I needed a day. I... couldn’t sleep. It’s been busy.”

“I know, but *why* did you need a day? What’s keeping you up? Is it what happened on Thursday? Or... is this about a guy? The not-date you had?”

Shane’s thumbnail found the seam where the cup lid met the rim and down until the cardboard edge bit into the pad of his finger. The radiator ticked. Outside, a car door slammed. Rose took another bite of her croissant and the flakes scattered across her lap.

She wasn’t going to let this go, and that patient expression that meant she’d sit on this couch until spring if that’s what it took.

“It’s just... a lot of things stacked on top of each other,” Shane said after another excruciatingly long moment. “It’s *everything*.”

“That doesn’t really mean anything. What’s ‘everything’?”

The words were *right there*—simple, factual, three seconds to say out loud—but his body refused to cooperate. His lungs forgot how to pull air. If he said it, Rose would *know*. And if Rose knew, then it was real. Not something that happened in storage closets and hotel rooms where Shane could pretend it didn’t count. Real. The kind of thing people asked questions about, had opinions on, wanted *details* about, details that hurt and were humiliating and—

“Shane.” Rose set down her croissant and leaned forward. “You’re spiraling. I can see you spiraling. Just... tell me what’s wrong.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know how to say it without making it... worse.”

Because saying it out loud meant admitting he’d been *lying*.

Shane thought in English, dreamed in English, fucked in English—but shame lived somewhere older, in the language his mother spoke when she was disappointed. *Hazukashii*. Embarrassing. The kind of failure that reflected on your whole family, that proved you weren’t disciplined enough, weren’t careful enough, weren’t good enough.

He'd kept Rozanov secret the way his mother kept family business private: contained, controlled, never spoken where outsiders could hear. But secrets in English felt different than secrets in a language he barely spoke, and now Shane had to find words for it all to explain why he'd lied to Rose on Wednesday—*I have a thing*—when he'd been driving to Rozanov's hotel with condoms in his pocket. He'd lied by omission every time Hayden complained about Rozanov and Shane had nodded along instead of saying *I've had his dick in my mouth*.

He'd been lying to everyone who'd asked what he was up to, thanking him for working *so hard* on the show while he'd been sneaking off to fuck Rozanov between rehearsals.

Because Rose would ask *when*, and Shane would have to say *weeks*, and she'd realize he'd been hiding this the entire time.

And it was more than that. He'd spent years letting everyone assume he was just a stage manager who happened to work in ballet. Tangentially, his few friends *knew* in the way that he knew that Hayden once, maybe, played little league baseball as a child for a summer. It was some passing, ephemeral, unimportant thing. And so was Shane's past, because no one had ever asked if he'd danced before, and he'd never volunteered it here at RWB so he'd never had to outright lie to anyone's face. The fact that he felt like not telling them was a lie in the first place, this broken piece of him that *only* belonged to him, might've been an issue too.

How much did he have to give of himself to others? Where did the line stop being privacy and start being dishonesty? Did it even matter?

Ballet. Not ballet. This part of his life, this intentional deletion, omission, sat differently than the Rozanov secret. With Rozanov, Shane had actively chosen deception. But the dancing? That felt more like... protection. Keeping that part of himself private because it still hurt in ways he couldn't explain to people who hadn't lived it and never would.

You let them make you feel like you didn't belong, and then you proved them right by leaving.

Two secrets, then. Two lies, tangled together: I'm not fucking him. I was never a dancer. Both lived in the same territory: the parts of himself that were too raw, too complicated, too *much* to carry in the open where people could see them and have opinions.

"Is it the guy from Wednesday?" Rose's voice went softer. "Did he hurt you? Because if he —"

"No. Yes. I don't—" Shane pressed his thumb harder against the cup seam until the cardboard buckled. "It's not—he didn't—"

The words tangled. His brain supplied six different ways to finish that sentence and none of them were true. *He didn't hurt me* except he had, on Thursday, in front of everyone. *He's not the problem* except he was, he absolutely was. *I'm fine* except Shane had called out sick for the first time in years and was currently having a breakdown on his couch while his best friend watched.

Rose moved closer, scooching across the cushions. “You don’t have to tell me anything you don’t want to. But you’re clearly—Shane, you’re not okay. And I’m worried.”

She was *worried*. About him. Because he’d been acting like a disaster and she’d noticed and she *cared* enough to show up with coffee and demand answers.

He owed her the truth.

“It’s been—we’ve been—” His thumbnail scraped along the cup rim again, again, the favorite distraction of the moment. The thing his hands needed because they wouldn’t stay *still*. The cardboard made a small tearing sound. “Since week two. Actually, wait, almost—sort of before that. I don’t—the timeline is—”

“Shane.” Rose’s hand found his knee. “Who is ‘we’?”

And there it was. The question he couldn’t dodge.

“If I tell you...” His voice came out rougher than he meant. “If I say it, you can’t—you have to promise you won’t—”

“I promise.”

“You don’t even know what you’re promising.”

“But I know I’m promising *you*, Shane.” Rose’s hand found his knee. “I love you. Now spill.”

The words stuck in Shane’s throat like shrapnel. He could feel them tearing him open on the way up, could taste blood and panic and the certainty that once he said this, he couldn’t take it back.

“It’s Rozanov.” The name came out like something he’d swallowed whole and couldn’t digest. “The not-date, the—” His throat closed around the rest. “I’ve been sleeping with Rozanov.”

Rose’s hand stopped halfway to her mouth. The croissant hung there, forgotten, flakes drifting onto her lap. Her eyes went wide—actually wide, the kind of surprised that Shane couldn’t read as anything but genuine shock.

“You—” She blinked. Set the croissant down. Dusted crumbs from her fingers with slow, deliberate movements. “Rozanov. *Ilya* Rozanov.”

“Unless there is *another* one I need to have a panic attack about, *yes*.”

Rose sat back against the couch cushions. Her mouth opened, closed. She tucked one leg under her and reached for her coffee, took a long sip, set it down again. The silence stretched between them for five seconds. Ten. Shane counted each one, waiting for the judgment, the questions, the inevitable—

“Oh, thank god.” Rose’s shoulders dropped, tension bleeding out of her frame all at once.

“*What?*”

“Shane, I *suspected*, it was obvious there was something *there*. I just didn’t realize you’d done something about it with him.” She waved a hand between them. “I mean, okay, I didn’t know for sure until you said it, but come on. You two have been circling each other like—” She paused, searching for the word. “Like magnets. Horny, aggressive magnets. I saw him strutting out of your office more than once, and then that thing with the storage closet? I thought you might be fucking in there, since when you both came you looked like you’d been in a fight but your shirt was inside-out?”

“It was *not* inside out!”

“But you *were* fucking in the closet, huh?”

“I—” Shane’s face burned. “That was one time and I had to—there was a rigging issue—”

“Oh hush, you will not out-slut me, you novice.” Rose waved a hand. “Week two, Snow scene blocking? He spent the entire break standing six inches behind you whispering in your ear while you white-knuckled that clipboard. You think I didn’t notice? Then there’s the way he watches you during run-throughs when he thinks no one’s looking. And the way *you* watch *him* when you think no one’s looking, which is—it’s a lot. And it’s okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes! It’s okay! And I mean, I *suspected*. You’ve been weird around him since day one, and not just your normal ‘visiting star is making my job hell’ weird. I’m guessing he was your Mr. Wednesday night, then?” She brushed crumbs off her fingers. “But I figured if you wanted to tell me, you would until I realized that you literally tell no one anything unless they corner you with snacks. So... here I am. With snacks. How are you feeling about it?”

“How am I—” Shane laughed, a sharp sound that didn’t feel like amusement. “Rose, he’s a fucking disaster. I am a disaster.”

“And you slept with him more than once?”

“Yes, but...”

“Was it *good*?”

Shane’s ears went hot. “That’s not important!”

“It’s a relevant question. If he’s terrible in bed, that’s one kind of problem. If he’s *not* terrible in bed, that’s a different kind of problem.”

Shane took a long drink of his latte instead of answering.

“*That* good, huh?”

Rose waited, eyebrows raised, until Shane finally muttered: “Yes. Okay? Yes, it was good.”

“Good enough to go back for seconds? Thirds? How many times are we talking here hookup wise?”

Shane’s fingers found the edge of his coffee cup, tracing the rim. “I don’t know, it’s not like—fuck, I’m not counting—” he was, he absolutely was, “—Multiple times.”

“Multiple as in three, or multiple as in you’ve lost count?”

“Rose—”

“I’m trying to gauge the severity of the situation.” Shane rubbed a hand over his face, half mortified, half relieved she was joking instead of dissecting him. “Because if this is just a hookup that happened once or twice, that’s one thing. But if it’s more and *that’s* why you’re upset that’s... different.”

Shane’s hands found each other in his lap, fingers lacing and unlacing, tying themselves in knots. “It doesn’t matter how many times. The point is it was stupid and I should’ve known better and Thursday happened and—”

“He was such a fucking asshole to say that to you, Shane. Seriously.” The vehemence in her tone startled Shane enough that he looked up, flinching like anger directed at Rozanov might still ricochet and hit him. Before him, Rose’s lips were pursed, her hands curled into fists on her knees.

“I mean, he’s talented, obviously,” she continued. “The best dancer I’ve ever worked with, probably. But Jesus Christ, Shane. You can be the most gifted artist in the world and still be a complete dick to people.” She reached for her croissant, tore off a piece with more force than necessary. “And the thing is—he didn’t *know*, right? About you dancing before? I mean I only know because, again, I think I forced you to tell me.”

“No. I never told him.”

“So he made those assumptions without knowing shit about your actual experience.” Rose popped the pastry in her mouth, chewed, swallowed. “Which doesn’t excuse it, by the way. Saying backstage crew aren’t real artists is ignorant bullshit regardless. But it does mean he was talking out of his ass about something he knew nothing about.”

Shane’s thumb pressed against the cup seam again. The cardboard buckled under the pressure. “He wasn’t completely wrong though, he didn’t invent it out of nowhere.”

“About what?”

“About me hiding. I... do hide. I don’t know. No, I mean I do know but... ugh! I manage from the wings instead of performing and I don’t, I mean I manage ballet but I don’t *do* ballet anymore, so yeah, maybe he was an asshole about it, but—”

“But nothing.” Rose set down her coffee and shifted closer. “Shane, you had reasons for stepping back from performing. *Valid* reasons. And you didn’t give up on dance—you found a different way to be part of it.”

“It feels like hiding.”

“So what? You’re not allowed to hide? Fuck everyone, you don’t owe anyone anything. Look, he was a dick to say that to you. Complete asshole move.” She paused. “And... since we’re being honest here, *you* were also a fucking asshole to him in front of everyone and you’re the Stage Manager. So.”

“So *what?*”

“So you’re supposed to be better than that because he’s a diva and the show depends on you. So you *both* fucked up. Which makes sense now that I know you’ve been sleeping together. God, the sexual tension must’ve been—”

“He saw me.” The words tumbled out before Shane could stop them. Now that he’d started talking, he couldn’t stop. Everything he’d been holding back was pouring out all at once now, like he’d pulled the plug from a sink and it was draining draining draining, everything doing down in the swirl. “This morning I went to the theatre early to practice alone... um. I didn’t want to bother anyone but...”

“Oh, baby, I would’ve gone with you if you wanted.”

Shane shook his head, “No, uh, I mean let me finish. I *wanted* to be alone and just... clear my head. And it was good for a while. I don’t know. I sort of—maybe I forgot it could feel like that? I was so angry about what he’d said and I just wanted to, even if I was just proving it to myself... Anyway. He’d gotten a key to come in to practice himself and he—ah—*saw*.” Shane stopped, staring at the ceiling now rather than Rose’s face. “He said I was good. He offered to practice with me.”

Rose’s eyebrows climbed. “He what?”

“He just—he was there. I don’t know how long he’d been watching but he saw me and then he said I was good. He offered to practice with me, that he’d help *me* with me techniques and I could help him with the RWB style, like it was...” Shane gestured helplessly. “Like it was no big deal. Like Thursday didn’t happen? I don’t know.”

“He didn’t apologize?”

“No, he didn’t, but...”

“But *nothing*, that dick. And what did you say?”

“I left. I panicked and I left. Which I know is not helpful. I know, *I know*.”

Rose was quiet for a long moment. She finished her croissant, brushed crumbs from her lap, took another sip of coffee. Shane could feel her thinking, could see the gears turning behind her eyes.

“Okay,” she finally said. “Okay, so. Let me see if I have this right. You’ve been sleeping with Rozanov. He’s apparently incredible in bed. You had a massive public fight where he said some truly shitty things. You also said some shitty things. Then two days later he finds you

dancing alone, compliments you, and offers to help you. And your response was to run away.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because! Because what am I supposed to do with that! He can’t just... he hurt me and then he saw me and then he wanted to—I can’t trust that. I can’t trust *him*.” Shane’s eyes dropped to his latte. The steam had stopped rising. A skin was forming on the surface.

“Shane.” Rose’s voice went softer. “I’m going to ask you one more thing and you can tell me to fuck off if you want.” She waited until he looked at her. “Is this just physical? The thing with Rozanov?”

“I—yes. That’s all it can be.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

Shane’s wanted to say yes, wanted to file this whole disaster under *Physical Attraction: Temporary* and be done with it. But Rose was watching him with that patient expression, and lying to her meant lying to himself, and he was so tired of lying. “That’s the truth though. That’s all it can be. That’s it.” Shane pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. “This is such a mess.”

“Yeah, it really is.” Rose’s thumb rubbed circles on his knee. “But that’s okay. Messes are allowed. You’re allowed to have a mess of feelings for an asshole. That doesn’t make you an idiot—it just means you have terrible taste in men. Like me. That doesn’t make you stupid or weak.”

“It feels stupid.”

“That’s because you’re in it. From the outside, it looks like two people who are attracted to each other and terrible at communicating.” She pulled her hand back.

The radiator ticked. Outside, someone’s car alarm went off and cut out again. Shane stared at the water rings on his coffee table and felt something in his ribs split, like his chest was cracking open, about to jettison his heart to expose all the other messes knotted around it..

“I’m not telling anyone,” Rose said after a minute. “About you and Rozanov. That’s yours to share or not share. But if you need to talk, I’m here. And if you decide you want to figure this out—whatever *this* is—I’ve got your back.”

“Thank you.” Shane’s voice came out rough. “For not... judging.”

“Please. I’ve done way worse with way less reason. You are a *novice* compared to my slut-scepadess.” She picked up her coffee. “Remember that principal from Seattle last season?”

“The one who couldn’t remember your name?”

“The very same. We hooked up in his hotel room and I stole his favorite leg warmers on the way out.” Rose grinned. “You’re sleeping with someone who actually knows who you are. That’s progress.”

Shane huffed out a breath that wasn’t quite a laugh. “That’s... um, Rose, that’s a low bar.”

“What can I say? Call me the limbo queen. I don’t care.” She finished her coffee and set the cup aside. “And... Shane, I have to know. And you can tell me it’s none of my business, but—” Her grin widened. “Is he *actually* as good in bed as you’re implying? Rozanov talks some big fucking game and I usually chalk that up to smack, but the way you’re avoiding eye contact suggests *yes*, and I need confirmation. How big *is* it? Is he packing his belt?”

“Oh my god.”

“Because honestly we’ve all sort of seen it, but—”

“*Rose!*”

“Does he do that thing where—”

“I’m not giving you details!”

“I don’t need details. I just need you to rate the experience on a scale of ‘pleasant’ to ‘life-altering.’”

Shane grabbed a throw pillow and shoved it at her face. “You’re the worst.”

Rose caught it, laughing. “Ah, okay, so ‘so good I cannot form words’. God, good for you. Terrible decision, but at least you’re getting incredible sex out of it.”

“I hate you.”

“No you don’t. You love me and my invasive questions. And if he’s a dick to you again, I will personally destroy his Achilles tendon with a stiletto heel.”

“Please don’t assault the principal dancer.”

“Then he better behave. And... Opening night is almost here. You ready? If you need to take another break I think we would be okay but... Shane! You’re my lucky charm. I think I need you to dance my best.”

Shane thought about the cue sheets, the prop checks, the lighting review he still needed to do. Thought about Rozanov on stage, about watching him perform and trying not to remember what it felt like to have those hands on his hips. “No. But I will be.”

“Good. And to make sure of that...” Rose pulled out her phone. “I’m staying.”

“What?”

“I’m staying. We’re having a sleepover.” She was already typing. “And I’m texting Jackie and Hayden. Movie night. Here. Tonight.”

“Rose, you don’t have to—”

“I’m not asking.” Her thumbs flew across the screen. “*You* need your people around you, and I need to make sure you actually eat something besides toast. When’s the last time you had a real meal?”

Shane opened his mouth to answer, then closed it.

“That’s what I thought.” Rose’s phone buzzed. “Jackie says she’ll bring wine. Hayden wants to know if your Netflix password still works.”

“Of course it works, I haven’t changed it in three years.”

“See? Easy.” Rose stood and headed for his kitchen, opening cabinets like she lived here. “Do you have snacks, or do we need to order?”

“There’s... popcorn? Maybe some chips?”

“We’re ordering.” She pulled up a delivery app. “Pizza okay? I know you like that place on Osborne street. *Red Swan*?”

“... yeah. They have, ah, that shawarma chicken one...”

“On it. I remember Hayden likes the spicy Hawaiian too.”

The apartment felt less like a tomb now. Rose moved through his kitchen, opening the cabinet where he kept bowls without asking, pulling his liquor bottles from their usual spot, arranging things on the counter.

And the group chat was already popping off:

RWB Besties

Rose

Rose: movie night at Shane’s tonight!

Hayden

Hayden: oh shit

Hayden

Hayden: bringing the good vodka

Jackie

Jackie: I’m IN, let me figure out a sitter for the kiddos

Jackie

Jackie: okay amazing my mom can spend the night

Rose turned from the counter, two wine glasses in hand, and stopped. Her eyes tracked over his face—the way he was still gripping his phone, the hunch in his shoulders. “You good?”

“... Yeah.”

“Yeah, okay, very believable” She set the glasses down, and pointed at the couch. “Now sit. You look like you’re about to pass out.”

Shane sat. He sat because, honestly, really, he didn’t want to think anymore and Rose bossing him around was easier than thinking or panicking. He could hear Rose humming in the kitchen, the clink of glasses, the rustle of packaging. Outside, a car drove past with music bleeding through closed windows. The radiator ticked and hissed. It was calm for a second, quieting in his mind as she rummaged through his shit and invited people over and... Shane slowly felt him let out the shaky exhale he’d been holding.

This was good. This was what he needed—people who knew him, who showed up without requiring explanations, who could sit in his apartment and exist there.

Hayden arrived first, twenty minutes later, with a bottle of Belvedere and a bag of gummy bears. Jackie followed him through the door with two bottles of wine. “Okay, I don’t know what crisis we’re managing, but I’m here for it,” Hayden said.

“No crisis,” Rose said from the kitchen. “Moral support.”

Hayden looked at Shane. “You okay, man?”

“Yeah, it’s—It’s just opening night stress,” Shane said, which wasn’t entirely a lie.

“Ah.” Hayden nodded like that explained everything. “Yeah, you look like shit. No offense.”

“Fuck you. None taken.”

Jackie set the wine on the counter. “Are you sure? Because you look—”

“He’s fine,” Rose interrupted. “We’re having a normal movie night because we can.”

Jackie narrowed her eyes. “Suspicious. But okay.” She set the wine on the counter. “What are we watching?”

“Something stupid,” Shane said.

“Something with *explosions*,” Hayden added.

“Something where no one has to think,” Rose finished.

“A christmas movie?”

“A *romance* movie.”

“No!”

They settled on an action movie Shane had seen twice before and couldn’t remember the plot of. The kind of film where things blew up every fifteen minutes and the dialogue existed purely to move between set pieces. Perfect. Mindless.

Pizza shortly after with a plethora of sides. They spread it across Shane’s coffee table: two large pizzas heaped with toppings, nachos with salsa, chicken wings, a veritable mountain of garlic bread, and a slice of each kind of cheesecake to split (even though everyone wanted oreo). Rose poured wine. Hayden cracked open the vodka. Jackie stole the best spot on the couch and refused to move.

Shane sat on the floor between Rose’s legs, his back against the couch cushion. His plate balanced on his knees: pizza slice, three wings, garlic bread he wasn’t sure he could eat. Behind him, Rose had shifted, her knees bracketing his shoulders. The pressure came on both sides at once from muscular legs, hemming him in. Holding him in place, just like she’d done before with the hug at the door. She was keeping him prisoner again in the way that Shane... didn’t... even know how to ask for, that he didn’t even know how she *knew* about.

Shane leaned back, letting his shoulders settle against the couch cushion, and letting Rose’s shins box him in. The pressure increased slightly as she adjusted, and he found himself breathing deeper. His hands stopped their restless movement. The plate on his knees became an anchor point instead of something to fidget with.

Rose. God, Rose. He did love her, he did, even if it wasn’t in the right way. For such a long time he’d been so *sorry* he didn’t love her in the right way, but Shane was selfish for her now, for how she’d managed to figure him out so easily, and for knowing that he needed something outside himself to tell him where his edges were when they got blurry.

On screen, something exploded. Hayden threw a gummy bear at the TV. Jackie laughed so hard she snorted wine, and Shane—

Shane ate a wing. Then another. The grease and salt tasted real. The heat from Rose’s legs seeped through his sweatshirt. Hayden’s running commentary about the terrible CGI made Rose groan and throw popcorn at him.

And Shane laughed. Actually laughed, the sound surprising him.

When had he last done this? God, he couldn’t remember. The apartment felt full in a way it hadn’t in weeks or really ever, warm and loud and crowded with people who cared about him. People who’d dropped everything on a Saturday night because Rose had texted them, who’d shown up with wine and vodka and gummy bears, who were now arguing about whether *Die Hard* counted as a Christmas movie.

“It takes place at Christmas,” Jackie insisted.

“That doesn’t make it a Christmas movie,” Hayden shot back.

“It has Christmas music!”

“So does Lethal Weapon. Is that a Christmas movie?”

“*Obviously*, you uncultured swine.”

By midnight, Jackie was asleep on the couch with her mouth open, one arm dangling off the edge. Hayden had moved to the floor, stretched out like a starfish, scrolling through his phone with half-closed eyes. Rose leaned against Shane’s shoulder, warm and solid and already drowsing.

“You feeling better?” she mumbled.

“Yeah. Much better,” Shane said, debating if he should wake Hayden and Jackie to let them use the guest room. But that would mean Rose couldn’t use it, so maybe they were fine on the couch?

“Good.” Rose yawned and squeezed his arm. “You’re going to be fine. Opening night is going to be amazing. Fuck that guy, okay?”

Shane wanted to argue and wanted to say there was nothing to figure out because it was over, done, finished. But Rose knew him too well. She’d see through it.

So instead he said: “Thanks for staying.”

“Always, baby.” She pushed herself upright, stretching. “Now help me get these idiots into your guest room before they wake up unable to move their necks.”

“You’re not taking the guest room?”

“Nope. I’m staying with you.” She said it like it was obvious, like they’d done this a hundred times before. “You think I’m leaving you alone to spiral all night? Come on.”

They woke Hayden first. He mumbled something incoherent and let Shane haul him up by the arm, stumbling down the hallway like a drunk giraffe. Jackie was easier—she woke up enough to walk on her own, grumbling about “why is your couch so uncomfortable” before face-planting onto the guest bed beside Hayden.

Shane made sure they had water on the nightstand, then closed the door.

Rose was already in his room, stealing one of his t-shirts from the drawer like she’d done it before. She disappeared into the bathroom to change while Shane pulled on sleep pants and crawled under the covers.

When she came back, she slid in beside him without asking, turning on her side to face him in the dark.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

And... actually... Shane realized that he *was*, and it wasn't a lie at all.

After Rose and the other left in the morning, the rest of Sunday passed in a blur of laundry and grocery shopping and staring at his laptop without actually reading anything on the screen. Shane cleaned his apartment twice. He went for a run in the cold until his lungs burned and his thighs screamed, then came home and showered and still felt restless.

Monday's rehearsal started at ten AM sharp. Shane arrived forty-five minutes early because he always did, because the building needed him before anyone else showed up. He checked the prop table, verified the backup nutcrackers were stage-ready, reviewed Hayden's notes from Friday's run. He tested the quick-change station placement with a stopwatch—sixty-two seconds, right on target. He walked the fly system paths, checking clearances and making sure nothing would catch during transitions. He confirmed with the lighting operator that all cue times were locked in the board. The marley was clean, freshly mopped and dry. The wings were organized, every cable taped down, every flat secured.

Everything was exactly where it needed to be.

Dancers trickled in—the corps already at the barre, running pliés and tendus while principals claimed their usual corners. Shane stayed in motion, checking sight lines from the house, conferring with Jackie about the quick-change stations, adjusting the placement of a prop cabinet that was two inches too far downstage.

He saw Rozanov arrive through the stage door at 9:47. The Russian was scanning the wings, the tech booth, the stage itself like he was looking for *someone*.

Shane turned and walked the opposite direction.

The ballet master called places for the top of Act One. Shane took his position in the wings with his headset on, clipboard in hand, every part of him locked into stage manager mode. He kept his spine straight and his focus narrow, every part of him locked into the role he knew how to play. He called cues, tracked dancers, tracked the flow of each transition. When Rozanov appeared onstage as the Nutcracker soldier during the battle scene, wooden and stiff in his painted costume, Shane kept his eyes on his clipboard. And they stayed there. Through all of it, through the fight, the magic, the moment Rozanov shed the costume and became the Prince.

The Snow scene ran without incident. Rose nailed her entrance, the corps hit their marks, and the fake snow drifted down on cue. Shane called the lighting transition into Act Two, watched the stagehands reset the Christmas tree for the Kingdom of Sweets, and checked his watch. Right on schedule. The ballet master clapped twice from the house. "Ten minutes, everyone. Water, stretch, then we run the divertissements."

Dancers scattered; some to the water fountain, others collapsing onto the floor in splits to keep their muscles warm. Shane turned to update his notes on the prop table timing.

Predictably, he was interrupted.

“Hollander.” Rozanov’s accent cut through the wings during the ten-minute break. “I need to speak with—”

“Can’t right now.” Shane didn’t look up from his notes. “Ask Jackie about costume adjustments, she’s by the dressing rooms.”

“Is not about *costume*, I want to—”

“Then it’ll have to wait. We’re on a tight schedule.” Shane turned and nearly walked into Rose, who’d appeared beside him with the precision of someone who’d been eavesdropping.

“Oh, Rozanov!” Rose’s smile was all teeth. “I’ve been meaning to ask you about that lift in the Snow pas. Do you have a second? It’s *urgent*.”

Rozanov’s jaw tense, and his eyes flit between them, assessing. Even he had to know that Rose was acting little more as a sugarplum bodyguard. “No. I do not have time now. I need to speak with Hollander—”

“It’ll only take a minute.” Rose was already looping her arm through his. “The balance point is off and we open in two days. You want me to fall on my ass in front of eight hundred people?”

“Rose, I am sure is fine—”

“Humor me.” Her grip tightened. She glanced back once and caught Shane’s eye, one eyebrow raised in a look that said *you’re welcome*.

Shane mouthed *thank you*, already walking away, and went back to his notes.

The pattern repeated through lunch. Rozanov tried to catch Shane by the prop table, but Rose intercepted with questions about the Grand Pas. Then he tried again near the lighting booth, but Hayden, even without knowing about the secret-fucking did know about the not-so-secret stress overload, appeared with a fabricated rigging concern that required immediate consultation. Hayden was just doing what friends did: running interference without asking questions.

By three PM, Rozanov had stopped trying. He stayed in Studio Three during breaks, working through variations alone while the rest of the company ate or stretched or complained about the cold. Shane found himself walking past that very same Studio Three during the dinner break. Not intentionally. He was checking the hallway emergency lights—a legitimate task—and the studio just happened to be on the route.

Through the window, Rozanov moved through the Nutcracker Prince solo. Alone. No accompanist, no music Shane could hear. Just Rozanov counting under his breath, lips moving with the timing, locked in with a focus that looked almost desperate, repeating the same combination four times, five times, adjusting his *épaulement* each run-through like he was trying to solve an equation with brute force. Shane’s hand stilled on the emergency light he’d been pretending to inspect.

Four repetitions. Five. Each one minutely different, Rozanov hunting for something in the mechanics that Shane couldn't see. His curly brown hair stuck to his forehead with sweat, darkening from light brown to near-black. The grey shirt he wore had gone charcoal down the spine, under the arms, across the chest.

Between the sixth and seventh repetition, Rozanov stopped. Bent forward, hands dropping to his knees, head hanging. His back rose and fell, once, twice, three times, each breath visible in the expansion of his ribcage. Then he straightened, rolled his shoulders back, and started again.

Rozanov looked tired. He looked alone and angry and frustrated, trying to fix something only he could see.

Shane recognized himself in that, the futile desperation of it. That need to perfect something that was already technically flawless, to run it again and again until muscle memory overwrote whatever was wrong in your head. That'd been the goal Saturday morning, him, alone, running phrases alone, trying to prove something to himself because no one else was there to prove it to.

Rozanov was exhausted. Anyone could see it in the way his landings got heavier as the repetitions mounted, in the half-second delay before he launched into the next run. But he didn't stop. Didn't sit. Didn't drink water even though there was a bottle sitting against the mirror.

He just kept dancing.

Was this what Shane looked like when he danced alone? Shoulders tight, jaw set, repeating the same movements like if he just got them perfect enough, something would finally click into place?

No. No don't think about that now.

Shane's chest ached, and he looked away.

By five PM, the company gathered on stage for final notes. The ballet master went through corrections, called out dancers who needed to sharpen their spacing, praised the corps for their hard work in the battle scene. Shane stood in the wings and waited.

When the ballet master finished, Shane stepped forward.

"Alright, everyone." His voice carried across the stage without needing to shout. Years of projecting through chaos. He could do this. This was his element. He was fine. "I... wanted to take a minute to say thank you to the entire corps. We've done incredible work these past three weeks. You've adapted to changes, you've supported each other, and you've made this production something special."

Faces turned toward him, dancers still catching their breath, crew leaning against the proscenium, Jackie standing by the costume rack with her arms crossed. Rose gave him a small nod from her spot by the barre.

“And so, as usual... you’re all off tomorrow. I know that many companies prefer to back-to-back their rehearsals with opening night, but *everyone* here deserves a break. Please use it: sleep in. see your families. Do not—and *I mean this*—do not come to the theatre unless the building is literally on fire, and even then don’t hurry.” A few scattered laughs. “Get your jitters out tonight. Scream into a pillow. Go for a run. Whatever you need to do to show up Wednesday ready to perform, okay?”

He paused, scanning the group. His eyes snagged on Rozanov for half a second before moving on.

“Opening night is Wednesday. You’ve earned this. I’m proud of you all.” Shane’s throat went tight, but he pushed through. “Thank you for your hard work. Now get out of here! Go! Shoo!”

More laughs this time. The company started dispersing—dancers heading for the dressing rooms, crew securing equipment for the night. Rose squeezed his arm as she passed. Hayden gave him a thumbs up from the tech booth.

Shane stayed in the wings until the building emptied. Until the work lights cast everything in harsh shadows and the only sound was the HVAC system cycling through its evening routine.

He locked up at 7:15 and drove home through streets already dark.

Shane’s breath fogged instantly in the minus-twenty air as he walked the cleared path at The Forks, hands shoved deep in his coat pockets. String lights crisscrossed overhead, glowing amber and red bulbs already lit against a sky that went dark too early this time of year. Vendors had set up wooden stalls selling roasted chestnuts, hand-knit scarves, pottery glazed in festive blues and greens. Someone nearby was selling bannock out of a foil-lined cooler, the smell cutting through the smoke, and it smelled *wonderful*, especially as it mixed with cinnamon spice and nutmeg from hundreds of paper-cup hot chocolates between the fire pits scattered throughout the market.

He’d come here to buy a gift for Rose, something small, something that said *I’m sorry for being a disaster of a human lately* without actually having to say it. Maybe one of those hand-thrown mugs from the ceramics vendor, the ones with the midnight blue glaze she’d admired last year.

The crowd flowed around him in messy crossings and diagonals, families with children bundled in puffy coats, couples walking arm-in-arm, everyone moving with the same particular winter shuffle: step, step, warm your hands. Try to look like you weren’t freezing while *definitely* freezing. Shane pulled his scarf tighter and kept walking.

This was his tradition. Every year, the day before opening night, he came to The Forks to be alone, to buy bullshit, and to do nothing at all for *one* day between the weeks of prep and the weeks of performances about to begin. This was his twilight, the moment before the clock struck midnight, and he came to let himself exist outside the theatre for an hour before the final push. Rose knew. Jackie knew. Even Hayden knew, though he’d made fun of Shane for it last few years—*You and your little pre-show ritual, so precious*—before admitting he got it.

Shane needed this. The space. The cold air. The reminder that Winnipeg existed beyond the walls of RWB, that people gathered and celebrated and didn't give a shit about snow cues, fly timing, or whether the Act One transition hit on the downbeat. Even better, they didn't give a shit about him, *Shane Hollander: Disaster Human*, *Shane Hollander: Stage Manager*, *Shane Hollander: Imposter*.

He stopped at a vendor selling mulled cider and bought a cup, wrapping both hands around the paper container, heat seeping through his gloves. He took a perfect, scalding, sip and kept walking.

Today was December the 9th.

And tomorrow... Tomorrow was opening night.

Tomorrow, Rozanov, not the understudy, would dance. The company would perform. Eight hundred people would fill those seats and watch the production Shane had spent three weeks building, three weeks simultaneously fucking and fighting with and then—

Shane shoved the thought away, back into the wings of his mind, trudging forward only to be confronted by a craft stall full of hand-painted ornaments: tiny wooden nutcracker soldiers dangling from red ribbons, and next to them, rows of matryoshka dolls with their painted smiles. Russian nesting dolls at a Canadian Christmas market, sitting in neat rows like the corps de ballet at the barre. Shane stared at the display for three full seconds before turning away.

Of course. Even here, Rozanov followed him. Of fucking course.

And just like the nesting dolls, each uncategorizable version of the man fit inside the next, nested and hidden, and Shane didn't know which one was real. Maybe they all were. Maybe that was the problem.

Still, he was determined to push the man, the memory, far far deep down until it vanished or crushed beneath that ocean of suppression. This was *his* tradition, his twilight, and he was going to *enjoy* it. Shane found the ceramics stall. The vendor, a woman in her sixties with white hair braided down her back, smiled at him. "Back again this year?"

"You remember me?"

"You bought the set of bowls last December. For your mother, you said." She gestured at the display. "The mugs are new this season. Midnight blue, like you were looking at."

Shane picked one up. The glaze shifted in the light, dark blue bleeding into purple at the rim. Rose would love it. "I'll take this one."

She wrapped it in tissue paper, tucked it into a small box. Shane paid and was sliding it into his messenger bag when he heard:

"Hollander?"

His spine went rigid.

Shane turned slowly, the ceramic mug box pressing into his hip through his messenger bag.

Rozanov stood three feet away, bundled in a black woolen pea coat that made his shoulders look even broader, a grey scarf wrapped around his throat. His hair curled out from under a knit beanie, and his nose was pink from the cold. He looked... normal. Not like a principal dancer or the man who'd eviscerated Shane in front of the entire company. Just... a person, standing in a Christmas market, holding a paper cup of spiced *something* that steamed in the December air.

"What are you doing here?" Shane asked.

"I could ask you same thing." Rozanov took a step closer, just one, and stopped when Shane's shoulders tensed. "But I already know answer. The little dancers, they tell me Mr. Hollander, Mr. Business, comes here every year before opening. That is his tradition, they say. Very sweet. Very predictable."

"You *asked* them where I'd be?"

"I bribed them with candy." Rozanov said it matter-of-factly, like this was normal behavior. "Vending machine candy. Little girls, they are very helpful after that." His lips tipped upwards at the edges, but the smile was wrong and fragile, carefully worn like he was testing it out to see if it fit. "Keys to kingdom for price of two Snickers bars and one Kit-Kat."

"That's—" Shane didn't know what that was. Invasive? Thoughtful? *Insane*? "Why would you do that?"

"Because I have hobby. Harassing stage managers in public."

"If you're just here to fuck with me I'm leaving."

"I will bribe children for address to your *house* if I must, Hollander. Now let me talk."

The smile faded. Rozanov looked down at his cup, watching steam rise and dissipate in the December air. When he looked back up, his eyes were different. Serious. Maybe even nervous, though Shane didn't know if Rozanov was capable of nervous.

"*Fine*. Is because I need to talk to you, and you have run away from me several times now, or Pike or Landry run interference"

"Why on Earth would I want to talk to you Rozanov? Fuck off."

"Language, Hollander. There are children here." Rozanov's mouth twitched, almost a smile, before going serious again. "And I do not blame you for feeling this way. After what I said, after..."

He stopped. His free hand came up, rubbed the back of his neck in that uncertain gesture Shane had seen exactly once before, Saturday morning in the theatre. The beanie pulled up slightly with the movement, exposing more curls.

"Can we walk? Please?"

“I get the feeling that if I say no, you’ll just stalk me somewhere else.”

“Probably.” No smile this time. Just honesty. “It is important that I say this to you, and that you hear it.”

Shane sighed. He knew, already, that this was a bad idea. He should just take his gift and leave, go home, prepare for tomorrow. But Rozanov was looking at him like he was bracing for rejection, and Shane found himself nodding.

Of course I’m nodding. Of course I am.

“Five minutes,” Shane said. “You get *five* minutes, and then you fuck off.”

“Yes, I will fuck off, throw myself into the sun and die, take flight back to Russia, whatever you want, Hollander.”

They started walking. Not toward anything specific, drifting past stalls selling hand-knit mittens and carved wooden toys. The crowd pressed around them in shifting currents, forcing them to walk closer together than Shane would’ve chosen on his own. Rozanov’s shoulder brushed his twice before Shane moved a few inches to the right.

Rozanov didn’t say anything for the first minute. He sipped his drink, whatever it was, and kept his eyes on the path ahead. The string lights overhead cast moving shadows across his face as they walked. Shane could see him forming words, discarding them, trying again. Rozanov sipped his drink, watching the path ahead like he was choreographing his words, until:

“I owe you apology.”

Oh.

“For Thursday,” Rozanov continued, “For what I said about you hiding, about never trying, about—” He stopped walking. Shane stopped too, half a step ahead, and turned back. “I was an asshole. I said shit that was stupid. Sorry.”

Shane waited. This could be, and likely was, a trap. Rozanov being sincere felt like standing on ice that might crack.

“You... don’t apologize,” he said in disbelief.

“No. I do not. I am famously terrible person.” Rozanov agreed, sighing. “And do not look at me like that. I am trying to be mature and it is exhausting. Turtle steps. But I *was* wrong, and you should know this. I did not know you danced before. I made assumptions about why you work backstage instead of performing.” His eyes met Shane’s. “Stupid assumptions. Blind assumptions.”

“And now?”

“And now...” His free hand came up, gestured vaguely. “Saturday, when I saw you... *blyat*. I see you *do* understand. You understand better than I gave credit for. And I hurt you when I

should have just *asked*. I should have asked why you manage instead of dance. I should not assume.”

Rozanov’s shoulders dropped slightly. “In Moscow, we are taught that if you step back from dancing, it is because you failed. Because you were not good enough. This is how we think. But you... you are good, Hollander. You already know you are good. My saying this is not revelation I know, but I should have asked why you stopped instead of assuming you never tried. So. I ask now. Why did you stop?”

There it was. The question Shane had been avoiding since Saturday morning.

“Can we keep walking?” Shane asked instead of answering, and all he could hear was Rose in his head: *You’re allowed to have a mess of feelings for an asshole. That doesn’t make you stupid or weak.*

She’d held space for his confession without judgment. She’d sat on his couch and listened to him spiral and hadn’t tried to fix it, hadn’t told him what to do. She’d just... been there. Contained him when he couldn’t contain himself.

Maybe Rozanov could do that too.

Maybe Shane could let him try.

Rozanov tilted his head to the side, regarding him a moment. “Of course.”

They walked. Past a stall selling hand-poured candles that smelled like pine and cinnamon. Past a fire pit where a group of teenagers warmed their hands. A street musician had set up near one of the vendor clusters—a woman with a violin, playing something slow and achingly familiar. Shane couldn’t place the melody but it pulled at something in his ribs.

Rozanov stopped. Pulled out his wallet and dropped a twenty into her open case.

“That’s—” Shane blinked. “That’s a lot for—”

“She plays beautifully. She should be paid for beauty.” Rozanov said it like it was obvious, like there was no other option. The woman looked up, surprised, and nodded her thanks. Rozanov nodded back and kept walking.

Shane followed, brain recalibrating. That wasn’t a performance. That was... genuine. No one was watching. No one cared. Rozanov had done it because he wanted to.

“My mother loved Christmas,” Rozanov said after they’d walked another thirty feet. His cup steamed between his gloved hands. “Every year, she would make *kutya*—is like... porridge? But with wheat and honey and poppy seeds. Very traditional. She would make too much, always too much, and we would eat it for week.” His mouth curved, but the smile was distant. “She loved the lights. In Moscow, we did not have markets quite like this, but there were lights on Tverskaya Street, all the way from Red Square to Belorussky Station. She would take me and my brother Andrei to walk there every December. It was so cold your spit would freeze before hitting ground.”

Shane didn't know what to say to that, to how Rozanov's mouth had gone soft at the corners, the usual smirk nowhere in sight. His eyes stayed fixed on the fire pit, unblinking, and the muscle along his throat worked once before he swallowed.

"She would have liked this place," Rozanov added, quieter now, and Shane didn't miss the *past tense* of what he was saying. "All the handmade things. The music. She always said Christmas was about making something beautiful in the dark."

The fire popped. Sparks drifted up and died before reaching the string lights overhead. Rozanov sat eighteen inches away, close enough that the heat coming off his body registered as a separate warmth from the fire. Shane knew the temperature: minus twenty Celsius. He knew how long exposed skin took to freeze at that temperature: approximately ten minutes. He knew Rozanov had been talking about his mother for three minutes and forty seconds and... that... was somewhat terrifying.

When had Shane ever let someone be unguarded around him? When had he wanted to?

His filing system offered: *Rozanov: Surprisingly Human*. He rejected it. Offered: *Rozanov: Tactical Vulnerability to Win Argument?*

They passed a toy stall. Wooden trains and painted dolls and a rocking horse with peeling paint. Rozanov stopped at a set of small wooden figures—a nutcracker soldier no bigger than his palm, crudely carved but earnest.

"I had one like this when I was small," he said, picking it up. "Before Bolshoi. My mother bought it at market like this." He turned it over in his hands. "I used to carry it like charm. Stupid, but it worked. For luck. I needed so much of it then. I was very small, if you can picture, and very scared. Trying not to get yelled at."

"You were never scared of anything."

"I was scared of *everything*," Rozanov said, shaking his head. "I was terrified I would not be good enough. That I would disappoint my mother, my teachers, myself. I threw up before my first performance at Bolshoi. Actual vomit, backstage, into trash can. Very glamorous. The lucky nutcracker did not help with that. My brother teased me for months."

Shane stared at him. "You're lying."

"Sadly, no, I am not."

The image was so absurd—Ilya Rozanov, principal dancer, puking into a trash can—that Shane almost smiled. Almost.

They kept walking. The market sprawled ahead of them, stalls and lights and people bundled against the cold. Rozanov asked about the ceramics vendor, and asked if Shane had found what he was looking for. Shane said yes, a mug for Rose. Rozanov nodded like that made sense.

"You are very loyal to your friends," Rozanov said. "This is good quality."

“They showed up for me. It’s the least I can do.”

“Still. Many people, they take loyalty for granted. You do not.”

They stopped at another stall selling carved wooden ornaments. Miniature skates, tiny hockey sticks, a moose in a Jets jersey with comically large antlers and a hockey stick. Rozanov picked up the moose, examined it with the same focus he’d given choreography.

“This is very silly,” he said.

“It’s a Christmas ornament. They’re supposed to be silly.”

“In Russia, our ornaments are... I think work is elegant. Glass, very delicate. So many things are stars or soldiers from folk story like *Skazka ob Ivane-tsareviche, zhar-ptitse i o serom volke*. This is...” He turned the moose over. “This is *absurd*. I love it.”

After Rozanov bought the ridiculous moose ornament, he held it up and took a photo before tucking it into his coat pocket. His thumbs moved across the screen—typing, all rapid fire cyrillic, then sending.

“Sending that to your family?” Shane asked, and was surprised that he hadn’t been curious *before*. Outside of the RWB, outside of fucking and fighting with *him*, who did Rozanov talk to?

“Mm? No, no. Is for friend. Svetlana. She is dancer at Mariinsky; could not leave this season for guest work, so I send her silly things I find.” He pocketed the phone. “She will say I have terrible taste and am wasting money. She is probably right, but I do it anyway.”

Shane’s brain was *struggling*.

The mug for Rose sat in Shane’s messenger bag, wrapped in tissue paper. Rozanov had a moose in his coat pocket. They were walking through a Christmas market together, buying gifts, drinking cider. The shapes these actions made looked familiar, pulled from some template Shane had seen in movies or observed in other people’s lives.

Their walking had found a rhythm, Rozanov’s longer stride shortening to match Shane’s, Shane’s pace unconsciously adjusting when Rozanov stopped to look at something. Partnering, his body recognized. The same kinesthetic awareness from a pas de deux: tracking your partner’s weight shifts, predicting their next movement, making space or closing distance without conscious thought. Shane’s body understood this language better than any words Rozanov could say. The way Rozanov had angled himself to block the wind. How their shoulders found each other in the crowd. The careful not-touching that was more intimate than contact, like the breath of space between a cavalier’s hand and the ballerina’s waist during a partnered pirouette, hovering, supporting without grasping, trusting she wouldn’t fall.

This felt like dancing. This felt... oddly... almost like a date.

“You are staring,” Rozanov said.

“I’m not.” Shane’s hands found the strap of his messenger bag, adjusting it to fidget. More labels: *Apology: Required After Public Argument*. But apologies didn’t involve learning about someone’s dead mother or watching them grin at ornaments or walking close enough that their shoulders kept brushing when the crowd pressed in.

“You are. Do I have something on my face?”

“No, I—” Shane shook his head. Shane tried another label: *Hookup: Extended Conversation Edition*. Also wrong. Hookups didn’t include *this*, whatever this was. “I’m trying to figure out *who* you actually are.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows climbed. “You are doing big thinking. Careful. You will sprain something.”

“I mean you’re...” Shane gestured at him, at the market, at everything. “You’re confusing. One day you’re telling me I’m a coward in front of everyone, the next you’re apologizing and buying moose ornaments and talking about your mother. I don’t know which version is real.”

“All of them are real.” Rozanov stopped walking and turned to face Shane fully. “I am not different person when I am kind versus when I am—what did you call it?—dick. I am same person. I am just...” He searched for words. “Maybe word is ‘complicated’. Like you.”

“I’m not complicated.”

“Hollander,” Rozanov deadpanned, “You are *most* complicated person I have ever met. You want me but you also hate me, or maybe you hate that you want me, I do not know which. You are so talented but you hide it like shameful secret. You are—” Rozanov stopped himself, mouth snapping shut.

Shane’s pulse kicked up. “I’m what?”

“You are making me *insane*,” Rozanov said with an exasperated sigh. “Every day since I meet you, I try to understand you and I cannot. You are puzzle with pieces that do not fit together, but somehow they make picture anyway.”

They were standing too close. The crowd flowed around them, people moving past with shopping bags and hot drinks and children pulling on coat sleeves. No one paid them any attention, but Shane was hyper-aware of the space between their bodies.

Less than a foot. Maybe eight inches.

“Why do you even care?” Shane asked. “About understanding me? You don’t have to. No one asked you to.”

“Because—” He stopped again. Looked away, toward a vendor selling roasted nuts. “We should keep walking.”

It was a lame pivot, but they kept walking anyway. Shane didn’t know why he let Rozanov deflect and why he was even still here because it was well over five minutes. Why he didn’t push harder?

They ended up at a quieter section of the market, away from the main vendor clusters. The path here was less crowded, lined with smaller stalls selling art prints and handmade jewelry. Rozanov bought another mulled cider from a teenager manning a slow cooker, then offered it to Shane.

“I have my own,” Shane said, lifting his mostly empty cup.

“That one is cold now. Stop being martyr. Take hot one.” Rozanov pushed it into Shane’s hands, then bought a second for himself.

Shane wrapped his fingers around the new cup. Rozanov was right—his first cider had gone lukewarm. This one burned his palms through his gloves. He took a sip. Cinnamon, clove, apple. Better than the first and... spiked?

“It is better with vodka, but *Stroh 80* is fine,” Rozanov said, sensing his question. “*Vyp’yem Za Teby.*”

“Um. Cheers.” Shane said dumbly when their paper cups tapped together to cheers. “And... thank you.”

“*Pozhaluysta.*”

They found a bench near one of the fire pits and sat. Not close enough to touch, but close enough that Shane could feel the heat radiating from Rozanov’s body in the frigid air. The fire crackled, sending sparks up into the dark.

“You asked why I stopped dancing,” Shane blurted out after a few more sips. “Earlier. You asked.”

Rozanov turned to look at him, but didn’t say anything. He waited.

“I... fuck... I... loved it,” Shane continued. “Ballet. I loved it the way some people love music or books or, I don’t know, the way you’re supposed to love something that defines you? It made sense to me when nothing else did.” He stared into his cider, watching steam curl from the surface. “I started when I was six. My mom enrolled me because I had too much energy and she thought it would help me focus. Turned out I *was* good at it. Good enough that my teachers pushed me toward professional training. Good enough that I actually thought I could make it.”

“But?”

“But what? Most people don’t make it.”

Rozanov sipped at his cup. “So what? That is it? You were not good enough? *Yerunda*. Nonsense, Hollander.”

Shane whirled on him, cider sloshed over the rim of his cup, scalding his fingers through his gloves. “*It’s not nonsense—*” His voice climbed, sharp enough that a couple walking past glanced over. He didn’t care. “It didn’t even matter if I was good enough or not. That’s not the fucking point and it never was.”

“So what *is* point? Explain me like you think I am idiot. You will not have to try hard.”

“What is there to explain, you have fucking eyes, don’t you?”

He did, and both of them narrowed. “Okay, now perhaps I *am* idiot. I am not understanding.”

“You’ve seen what ballet looks like!”

Rozanov frowned. “I am looking. I am not seeing what you are trying to say.”

Shane looked at Rozanov’s face, at his sharp cheekbones, the pretty pale eyes, the bone structure that belonged on a Mariinsky poster, and saw every casting panel he’d ever stood in front of. Every director who’d scanned Shane’s body and paused, trying to figure out where to put him. Every choreographer who’d smiled tightly and said “*We’ll find something that works.*”

This was what ballet wanted. What it had *always* wanted. Rozanov didn’t just fit the mold, he *was* the mold. Tall, white, Russian, gorgeous, European lineage stretching back through Imperial theaters and tsarist stages. The industry had been built to showcase bodies exactly like his. No one had ever asked Rozanov to justify his presence. No one had ever needed to decide if he was “ethnic enough” for one role or “too ethnic” for another.

“I’m not white!” He snapped, the admission burned coming up, years of careful omission condensing into three words.

Japanese-Canadian, his mother said, like the hyphen meant something, like it was a bridge instead of the gap between two places he didn’t quite belong. White enough to surprise people with his mother and grandparents. Asian enough to be asked where he was *really* from and to be confused by the name ‘Shane’. Too pale for some casting directors, too dark for others, his face a question mark they couldn’t fit into their aesthetic equations. Ballet wanted bodies that disappeared into symmetry; swan corps, snowflake corps, soldiers in matching rows. Shane who wasn’t their ‘good’ stereotype of the slight, culturally obedient, entirely hairless waif of an asian dancer. Shane’s face had always been the wrong answer to their unspoken question. And he’d hated himself for caring, hated that he’d internalized their geometry until he couldn’t see his own reflection without measuring how far it deviated from the ideal.

He was handing Rozanov the thing he never talked about, the wound he’d learned to carry in silence. And he was handing it to the person who embodied everything ballet wanted, everything Shane could never be.

The irony would have been funny if it didn’t hurt so much.

“I’m not white, I’m—I mean I’m *half*—but who fucking cares what the percentage is.” It tasted foul on his tongue. It tasted like admitting defeat to the person who represented everything he’d never be allowed to have. “Ballet doesn’t know what to do with people like me. I wasn’t white enough to disappear into the corps. I wasn’t Asian enough—whatever that even *fucking* means—to fit the exotic roles they wanted to cast me in, even as everyone else

got more varied roles as we got older. It was fine once, maybe. But every year? Every time even when I had learned more? I was a checkbox, not a dancer.”

He couldn't look at Rozanov's face. Couldn't watch those pale eyes process what Shane was handing him—this ugly, humiliating truth that he'd never spoken out loud to another dancer. Especially not to someone who'd never had to think about it, who'd walked into every audition knowing he already looked the part.

“*You*,” Shane continued, and his throat wanted to close around the words but he forced them out anyway, “are what they want. You walk into any studio on earth and no one asks you to justify your body. They don't need to decide where to put you. You already fit. You've *always* fit. You don't know what it's like to love something that doesn't love you back because your face is wrong, because your name is wrong, because you're—”

Other.

He didn't say that last word. Didn't need to.

The fire popped. Shane's pulse hammered in his ears, too loud, drowning out the distant music from the market.

He'd just confessed this to Ilya Rozanov. To a principal dancer from the Bolshoi. To someone who embodied every standard Shane had failed to meet. The irony was so brutal it made him want to scream, to throw the cup and spill everything on the snow.

Rozanov was quiet for a long moment, long enough that Shane started cataloging exit routes, calculating how fast he could walk away before this got worse. Then:

“This is bullshit.”

Shane's head snapped up. “Don't fucking patronize me Rozanov, you—”

“*No*. I am not disagreeing with *that*,” Rozanov interrupted, shaking his head. “I am saying that the way they treat *you* is bullshit.”

“No shit.” Shane said, slightly mollified as he took another sip. “But that's how it was. They'd put me in a stupid hat or have me run around in chopsticks. Or they'd cast me as the Arabian dancer, or—it didn't matter. As long as I was ‘ethnic,’” he made air quotes with one hand, cider sloshing dangerously, “I could fit their diversity quota without actually being diverse; it was more about being seen as having cast me at all rather than making any effort to understand me.”

“This is—” Rozanov looked angry now, his mouth pressing into a hard line. “This is stupid. They wanted you as decoration. That is not art, that is furniture. You are talented. What does your... race... race is word? What does it have to do with *how* you dance?”

“Everything, apparently.” Shane's laugh came out bitter. “And it wasn't just the casting. It was the way people talked to me. The way they assumed I'd be good at turns because ‘Asians

have low centers of gravity,' like that's a real thing. The way my ballet director told me I'd never be a principal because I didn't have the 'look' they wanted."

He stopped, squeezed his eyes shut, and recentered.

"And in the end it didn't matter because I wasn't good enough. I had a panic attack in my last audition," he said, and he could still hear the piano introduction—*Tchaikovsky, Sleeping Beauty, Act I*—could still count the two bars of pickup before his entrance. One-two-three-four, five-six-seven-eight. His feet knew the steps. His body knew the timing. But when he'd stepped into the light, the music had kept going and his lungs had sealed shut like a vacuum-locked door. No air in, no air out, just the piano cascading through arpeggios while Shane stood frozen in fifth position, every eye in the room watching him drown on dry land. They'd stopped the accompanist. Let him start again. He'd made it through the combination on muscle memory alone, but they'd already seen it, the moment his body betrayed him, the moment he proved them right.

"I can't even explain why either," Shane continued, "I... I couldn't breathe. The music kept going and I just—froze. And I knew what they'd write down: *not professional under pressure*. At that point it was already over. I was just watching them waiting for me to fuck it up confirm what they already thought—that I didn't belong there."

Rozanov was quiet for a long moment. The fire popped, sending another shower of sparks into the air.

"They wanted a picture, not a dancer. I do not understand this," Rozanov finally said. "This... racism. I cannot say I understand because I do not. I have never—" He gestured at himself. "I look like every other Russian dancer. Marginally more handsome, maybe, but no one questions if I belong or what roles are for me. No... this was not about talent. This is about their stupid, lazy eyes. They wanted you to fit picture they already had in their heads, and when you did not, they blamed *you* instead of their own—" He stopped, searching for the English word. "*Tupost*". Their own stupidity."

Shane stared at him. Rozanov looked angry now, genuinely angry, his mouth pressed into a hard line.

"I benefit from this," Rozanov said quietly. "This system that hurt you. I walk in, they see what they want to see, they see Ilya Rozanov, Mariinsky poster come to life, and doors open. I know this. I cannot fix it, I cannot understand it the way you do, but I can see it is wrong. And I can see they were fools to lose you."

"That's it? They were fools?"

"What else can I say?" Rozanov's hands spread, helpless. "I want to say something that makes it better. But there is nothing. I cannot wave away this hurt for you. That is—" He stopped. "*Blyat*. That is terrible. I am sorry that happened to you."

Shane's vision burned. He told himself it was smoke from the fire, the cold air, anything but the shape of Rozanov's kindness that was making his eyes water.

“I am glad you tell me,” Rozanov continued. “And they were idiots. I think you are stubborn enough to be principal anywhere, if world was fair, you would be. But world is not. I know this. And you... you attack things all at once. Bossy mind, impressive body, I was fool for not seeing the love you put in your work.”

He shifted on the bench, angling toward Shane. “This is why you hide? Because they made you feel like you do not belong?”

“I didn’t hide. I just... found a different way to be part of it.”

“By managing instead of dancing.”

“Yes.”

“But you still love to dance?”

“It doesn’t love me, and—That’s different. That’s private.”

“Why?”

“Because no one can judge me if they don’t see me.”

“And,” Rozanov said slowly, “no one can tell you that you are *good* if they do not see you either.”

Breathless, Shane turned his head toward the fire, watching sparks spiral upward, because looking at Rozanov’s face would crack him open entirely.

“RWB has recreational company,” Rozanov said after a moment. “For dancers who do not want professional career but still want to perform. Rose told me about it some days ago when I ask more about company. Why do you not do that?”

“I don’t need to.”

“But do you *want* to?”

Did he? Shane had never let himself think about it. Dancing, even on the recreational level, meant putting himself back in the position of being judged, of being told he wasn’t enough. Managing *only* was safe. Managing *only* meant he could love ballet from the wings where no one expected anything from him except competence.

“I don’t know,” he said honestly. “Maybe. I don’t know.”

“You should try,” Rozanov said. “If you want to. You are too good to only dance when no one is watching.”

Shane huffed out a breath. “You saw me for like five minutes on Saturday. You don’t know if I’m any good.”

“I know.” Rozanov’s eyes met his, and Shane saw something there he couldn’t name. “I watched you for longer than five minutes, Hollander. I saw the way you move, the way you breathe through transitions. No wobble in ankles. And the penché at the end, your hamstring flexibility let you drop your chest parallel to the floor while your leg stayed at vertical.” He demonstrated with his free hand, showing the angle. “Most dancers, their back leg drops to compensate. Yours did not.”

“The fouettés,” Rozanov continued, “you spot with your head, not just eyes. And your recovery between combinations... you breathe through the transitions instead of gasping. I can see your training. Real training, not YouTube videos and wishful thinking. And—” He stopped, seemed to reconsider, then pushed forward anyway. “And you are very beautiful when you dance.”

Shane’s brain stalled out. Beautiful. Rozanov had called him beautiful.

“I—that’s not—you can’t just—”

“Why not? Is true.” Rozanov shrugged, but the gesture looked forced. “You want me to lie instead? I can call you ugly, but is not true.”

“No, I—” Shane shook his head. “I just don’t understand you. Why are you being nice to me? After everything?”

“Because I was wrong to be cruel. And then, like before, I was... frighten, maybe, that again, I would not be good enough. I threw up in trashcan again Thursday, the one in back alley. And because—” Rozanov looked down at his cider, swirling it in the cup. “Because you are interesting, Hollander. Even when you are frustrating. Even when you avoid me for entire day with help of bodyguard Rose and accomplice Pike.” He paused, mouth curving into something between a smile and a smirk. “And because I respect talent when I see it. You have it. I was blind not to see before.”

The words sat between them, too big for the small space on this bench. Shane’s pulse hammered in his throat.

“I don’t know what to do with that,” Shane admitted.

“You do not have to do anything.” Rozanov stood, offering his hand.

Shane stared at it. Rozanov’s gloved palm was open, waiting. The glove was dark wool, snow melting into the knit where it had collected. This was a choice. He could stand on his own, could say *I need to go home*, could rebuild the walls he’d just torn down, and hide again.

Instead... he... took Rozanov’s hand.

The grip was firm, warm even through two layers of wool. Rozanov pulled him up and Shane’s balance shifted, forward, into Rozanov’s space rather than away from it. Their shoulders brushed, and Rozanov’s thumb moved across Shane’s knuckles, just once, barely perceptible through the gloves. Testing. His eyes searched Shane’s face, and Shane watched

him do it and recognized himself in the motion again: this was Rozanov cataloguing whatever he saw in there.

He was *filing*, maybe even *labeling*.

Were they both so confused about each other?

The walls were down. Shane couldn't hide what he was feeling even if he wanted to, and he found he didn't want to. Not right now. Not after laying himself open and being met with *this*.

"Come," Rozanov said quietly, and the command had gone soft. "I want to show you something."

Shane nodded. He didn't trust his voice.

Rozanov's hand slipped from his, but only so they could walk. Only so Rozanov could lead him deeper into the market, past the main vendor area into a section Shane had never bothered exploring before since it was off to the side and quieter. They reached a poorly decorated Christmas tree half-hidden from the main path. Behind it, a small clearing. No vendors, no crowd. The string lights overhead cast everything in festive red twinkles.

Rozanov stopped, turned to face him. "This is what I wanted to show you."

"A poorly decorated tree?"

"Mm, no. Privacy." He stepped closer, one step, then another, and Shane's spine met rough bark, and something in him settled the way a plumb line finds true vertical. Rozanov's body was a wall of heat in front, solid and unmovable, and Shane's breath finally deepened past his clavicle, past his sternum, all the way down to the bottom of his lungs where it hadn't reached since Saturday morning. Shane could see his own breath fog between their bodies. "You are too tense on the bench, wound too tight again. I bring you here so you can breathe. I will do the worrying."

His mother used to adjust his posture with two fingers—one at the base of his skull, one at his sacrum—creating that long line from crown to tailbone that every ballet teacher demanded. *Stand up straight, Shane. You are a Hollander, not a willow tree.* But this wasn't about posture. This was his body giving up the fight to hold itself together, letting Rozanov's proximity do the work instead. The tree held him up from behind. Rozanov pinned him in place from the front and he was contained. Safe. *Held*.

It was the same geometry as Saturday night, with Rose's knees on either side of his shoulders, holding him in place on the couch. That pressure from both sides that had somehow made his thoughts stop spiraling; she'd given him something outside himself to push against, and his nervous system had finally quieted.

But Rose had been safety. Comfort. The platonic weight of a friend who knew he needed containing.

This was *Rozanov*, and there was nothing platonic about the way his hand came up to brace against the tree beside Shane's head, nothing comforting about how his other hand found Shane's waist through his coat. The containment went from grounding to *dangerous* in the space between blinks, the same geometry but flooded with want instead of calm.

Rozanov's eyes tracked over Shane's face, and something shifted in his expression—recognition, maybe. Understanding. Like he could read exactly what this position was doing to Shane's nervous system.

Rose had shown him he needed this. Rozanov was showing him he *saw* it.

"You like this," Rozanov said, and it wasn't a question. His thumb pressed into Shane's hip, finding bone through layers of fabric. "Being held in place. I notice this before, in storage closet. Hotel room. The way you breathe different when you cannot move. I like it too. You do not *panic* and you do not *run*."

Shane felt dizzy. And angry. And kind of weak in the knees. The tree bark dug into his shoulders. Rozanov's thigh shifted forward, not quite between Shane's legs but close enough to make the option *extremely fucking clear*. And...

"F-fuck, Rozanov..."

This was the pattern. The same one from the storage closet, from the hotel room, from every time Rozanov got close enough to pin him somewhere. Shane's mind would go offline and his body would just... give.

He hated it. Hated how embarrassingly easy he was.

"I have been thinking since Saturday," Rozanov continued, and his accent went thicker, rougher. "About what you said, about this being too much. About not trusting me." His hand slid from Shane's waist to his lower back, pulling their hips closer. The pressure increased. Tree behind, Rozanov in front, nowhere to go and Shane's body was lighting up like a goddamn circuit board.

This was Rose's safety turned inside out—the same containment but drowning in want instead of comfort. Shane couldn't move and didn't want to. And wasn't that the problem? He should want to move and push Rozanov back, reestablish boundaries, remember that this was a terrible idea in public behind a poorly decorated tree where anyone could walk past. Instead, Shane's grip tightened on Rozanov's coat, pulling him closer rather than pushing him away.

"Let me finish," Rozanov said, and his breath ghosted over Shane's mouth, cinnamon and spiced apples. "I do not know what this is between us. But I know that I want you. More than just once or twice in storage closet. You are—"

He stopped. His hand on the tree trunk shifted, knuckles brushing Shane's temple, and the cage got tighter. Shane could feel Rozanov's heartbeat through their coats. Could feel his own pulse trying to match it.

“I know that I think about you all the time,” Rozanov continued. “When I am dancing, when I am eating, when I am trying to sleep. You are there, in my head, bossing around my thoughts. I cannot make you leave. You are annoying me all the time. You are most frustrating person I have ever fucked, Hollander. And somehow that makes me want to fuck you more.”

His hips pressed forward—just slightly, just enough to make Shane’s breath catch audibly. The tree bark scraped between Shane’s shoulder blades. He was pinned, held, *surrounded*, and his brain was short-circuiting trying to reconcile safe-contained-Rose with this-electric-overwhelming-Rozanov.

“Why should we stop?” Rozanov’s voice dropped lower. “Unless you are bored already. Are you *bored*, Hollander?”

Shane’s eyes were wide, and all he could do was *shiver*. “I...”

Rozanov’s hand came up, fingers brushing Shane’s jaw. His thumb traced Shane’s bottom lip, and Shane’s breath stuttered.

“Tell me to stop,” Rozanov murmured, tracing his mouth, pressing against his lip, nearly dipping the top of it inside his mouth. “If you want me to stop, say it now. I will walk away. No argument, no questions.”

Shane’s hands were still fisted in Rozanov’s coat. He could feel his own heartbeat in his throat, in his wrists, everywhere. They were in *public*. He *hated* him. Anyone could walk past. And he’d been avoiding Rozanov for days, had told himself this couldn’t happen again, had built walls specifically to prevent this exact scenario.

“I don’t—” Shane’s voice cracked. “We’re in public.”

“That is not ‘stop.’” Rozanov’s thumb pressed against Shane’s lip again, not pushing, just resting there. Waiting. “I am asking: do you want me to stop?”

The honest answer was no. The honest answer was that Shane wanted Rozanov to kiss him, wanted those hands on him, wanted to forget every reason this was a bad idea and just take what was being offered.

“No,” Shane breathed. “Don’t stop. Ilya—”

Shane couldn’t finish. God, he was so weak for this, stupid, even. For Rozanov’s hands on him, for the weight of his body, for the way he could take Shane apart with just proximity and pressure. It would be humiliating if it didn’t feel so good. Rozanov’s thigh was definitely between his legs now, solid muscle pressing up, and Shane made a sound he’d regret later—something between a gasp and a whimper that got lost in the space between their mouths.

“There. Brave boy.” Rozanov’s eyes went darker, pupils blown wide, and his grip on Shane’s back turned possessive. The hand beside Shane’s head slid down, fingers threading through his hair at the nape, tilting Shane’s head back to expose his throat.

“*Da*,” he murmured idly, lips brushing Shane’s jaw. “You are not bored.”

The kiss, when it came, tasted like violence. Like Shane’s confession still hung between them—I’m not white enough, I wasn’t good enough, I didn’t belong—and Rozanov was trying to devour it, consume it, make it disappear down his throat. Shane opened for him immediately because his body had already surrendered, had been surrendering since Rozanov first pressed him against this tree.

Rozanov’s tongue swept into his mouth and Shane’s knees went liquid. The only thing keeping him upright was the tree trunk behind him and Rozanov’s thigh between his legs, bearing his weight as he sagged into the pressure. His hips rolled forward without permission, seeking friction, and Rozanov groaned into his mouth and the sound shot straight down Shane’s spine where it pooled molten in his gut.

So easy. He was always *so easy* for Rozanov.

Shane kissed back because of course he did. Because he was constitutionally incapable of resisting when Rozanov had him pinned like this, when that mouth was on his and those hands were holding him in place. His body had already made the decision—surrender, take what he gives, let him work. His hands found Rozanov’s coat, fisted in the wool, holding on. There it was again: that magnetic pull he couldn’t escape. Rozanov’s arrogant, awful gravity dragging him in, swallowing him whole.

One minute fighting, then next tangled like this, nearly drunk on the feel of another body against his, the taste of spiced wine and strong rum and the electric shock of desire that shot through him when Rozanov’s teeth caught his bottom lip.

Shane pulled back, breathless in a rare moment of sense. “We can’t—someone might see—”

“I do not care.” Rozanov’s hand stayed on Shane’s waist.

“*I* care.” Shane’s hands were still gripping Rozanov’s coat, but the grip had changed—less pulling him close, more holding him at bay. “We’re in public. Anyone could walk past and —”

“And what? See that I want to kiss you?” Rozanov’s eyes searched his face, and something shifted in his expression. His hand stilled. “Would that be so terrible?”

“Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.” Shane’s thoughts were tangling, his breathing coming too fast now, the good kind of overwhelmed tipping into the bad kind. “I don’t know what this is, Rozanov. We—shit. Okay. We fight, you apologize, I dump my childhood shit on you and now we—*this*? I don’t know what you want from me. And then there’s the *show* and...”

Rozanov went still and his mouth flattened, the teasing curve disappearing. His eyes narrowed, tracking over Shane’s face like he was hunting for something specific; a flaw in the line, a timing issue.

“Okay,” Rozanov said quietly, and both hands dropped from Shane’s body. He stepped back, putting space between them. “Okay, Hollander. We stop.”

“... wait, what?”

“You are not enjoying this now. You are tipping into panic. I am not doing that to you, so we stop. Is fine.”

“But...”

“It *is* fine. Really.” Rozanov’s voice gentled. “But I need you to hear me, yes? Tomorrow is opening night. We have worked for three weeks, and you are brilliant in this role. I will not let us fuck this up because you are scared of... this. Whatever this is.”

“I’m not going to fuck up the show!”

“I know. I *know*. Good. And what I want is simple: you will stop hiding from me backstage like I have plague.” Rozanov’s eyes narrowed. “You will do your job. You will boss me around when I need bossing. You will yell at me. You will be Hollander who runs perfect show, not Hollander who runs away or hides or does any of these things.”

“I don’t... run away.”

“Do not lie if you are going to do it badly. At least be competent. I want you, yes. I want to fuck you again, many times, yes. But more than that?” His hand came up, pointed toward the direction of the theater somewhere beyond the market. “More than that, I want to *dance* in show we have built. I want perfect Grand Pas. I want audience on their feet. I want them screaming. I want to prove RWB made right choice bringing me here, and I want *you* prove without you this show would fall on its ass.”

“You are best stage manager I work with,” Rozanov continued. “You are precise, so smart, you see problems before they happen. And Saturday, I learned you are also dancer who understands what we do on that stage. So tomorrow, I need *that* Hollander. The one who fixes everything and sees it all and *feels* it. Not the one who hides. Tomorrow we show up, we do our jobs, we make beautiful show. Everything else—what you want, what I want—we figure out after final curtain. *Da?*”

“You’re saying we just... ignore this until the show is over?”

“I am saying the show comes first. I have trained my entire life for stages like this. You have worked three weeks to make this production perfect. We do not waste that because we cannot stop fucking or fighting long enough to think straight. And after, if you want to talk, we talk. If you want to fuck, we fuck. If you want to never see me again after I leave for Moscow, fine. But we *earn* that choice by finishing what we started.”

Shane nodded.

“Good.” Rozanov checked his phone. “Now go home. Sleep. Tomorrow morning, I will arrive on time for call. I will hit every mark. I will make Rose look like angel in Snow scene. I will make *you* look like God’s gift to ballet. And you will make sure I do not die when that fucking Christmas tree rotates.” His eyes met Shane’s. “This is deal. We give opening night everything. No more running or hiding. Just work.”

Just work. As if that had ever been true between them. As if they could bottle this up when he'd already failed to do so.

"Just work," Shane repeated.

"*Da.*" Rozanov's hand lifted, and for a second Shane thought he might touch him again. Instead, Rozanov shoved both hands in his pockets. "I should go. Early morning, many things to prepare."

He turned to leave, got three steps away, then looked back over his shoulder.

"Oh, and Hollander? If you *do* want to fuck after opening night..." His grin flashed, quick and devastating. "I will clear my entire schedule."

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

Surprise surprise, some platonic domesticity and some spice at the Christmas Market.



I have several thank yous to say for readers who have messaged me, commented, and otherwise assisted with this fic and I will condense them here: THANK YOU! I have learned so much more about ballet, about Winnipeg, about many facets of art and intersectionality in writing this piece and talking with you all. Truly, I am thankful and humble: in writing, we never really know how our work will be interpreted or if it will even connect with others... but... I think there is the hope that it will, somehow, 'connect'. Without waxing poetic on it, I am feeling a little overwhelmed with just how much I have been able to connect and talk to people in writing this. So again, really, thank you.

I think there will be one chapter left, but hey, maybe two. The prose does whatever it wants at this point.

UPDATE 1/26/2026: I am still on the mend from my hand injury (TL;DR: puncture wound THROUGH my right thumb nail), and I want to be up front that it may take me a bit more time for the next chapter - typing is pretty painful at the moment still. Thank you for your patience.

Thank you for reading!

Notes/Clarifications:

- Once again but THANK YOU to all the kind people, but especially to atessouhairs, for reaching out with detailed corrections on this attempt of writing ballet.
- Some additional reading [here \(Amplifying Voices: AAPI\)](#), [here \(6 AAPI Dancers Share Their Stories\)](#), and [here \(The Breakthrough of AAPI Representation in Western Dance Cultures\)](#).

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🌈 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🦌 “I need the stupid moose ornament”
- 🏒 “dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy”
- 🗡️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”
- 🦃🦋🐭🎄 “something something Nutcracker”

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Snow cue in five, four, three...” Shane’s voice stayed level in the headset, counting down while his eyes tracked three things at once: the corps forming their snowflake pattern downstage, the stagehands positioning the palace backdrop painted with frost-rimmed Canadian pine boughs in the wings, and Rozanov’s exit timing from the battle scene. “Two, one, go.”

On cue, fake snow descended, heavier than sparkle snow, cut to fall like real prairie winter instead of glitter. Shane had argued for this two weeks ago when Jackie wanted the cheaper option, and watching it now, he knew he’d been right.

Perfect white flakes caught the blue wash from above Parliament Hill, drifting down as the Nutcracker collapsed to the ground following the battle with the Rat King. Wooden and stiff in his painted soldier costume, trim edged in red and white like a toy Mountie’s jacket, Rozanov sold the transformation even while motionless.

Five seconds until the costume changes.

Shane’s internal count started before the strings finished climbing, a habit from years of not trusting orchestras or really *anything* or *anyone* on opening night.

Darkness swallowed the stage.

Shane counted seconds internally while chaos moved in the dark below: stagehands striking the battle debris, Parliament Hill flats folding into the wings, the Rat King’s severed tail coiling into a prop bin. Clara’s thrown slipper was retrieved from three feet left of its spike mark—the girl had panicked on the throw, Shane had seen her wince from the booth—but Rozanov had adjusted, lunging to meet the distraction cue, and the Rat King had died on schedule.

And... somewhere in that blackness, Rozanov was stripping out of the toy soldier jacket while a dresser worked the Prince costume over his shoulders.

They had only *ten* seconds to finish the change, the same one he and Rozanov had practiced together in the wings with the godforsaken stopwatch and an enormous *seventy* seconds back in week two, back when Rozanov was a thorn in his side, half-naked and making commentary while Shane was half-hard and trying to time it.

Seventy to ten was a brutal allowance he knew, but by now it ran on muscle memory, even with the margin for error shaved down to nothing. Still... the stakes were high. Before, it’d only been other members of the corps watching, but eight hundred paying guests were watching now.

Shane's pulse kicked against his throat as he counted internal beats, waiting for the lights to come back up and prove the magic worked.

The lights came back up, and Rozanov rose from the ground transformed, and Shane's shoulders dropped half an inch. The wooden soldier was gone, replaced by the Prince in white and gold, winter regalia rather than court dress, and the audience gasped at the magic of it.... The magic of Jackie's quick-release hooks.

He knew it was hooks and tape and practice, hardly magic at all, and skill and brute force on a timer. And still. *And still.*

Knowing the mechanics did nothing to diminish the wonder of watching a man become something else entirely, the way a held breath becomes a sigh, the way a wish becomes a plea.

Clara, danced by one of the younger soloists, stood watching from downstage left, her nightgown glowing under the special.

Rozanov extended his hand to Clara. She took it, and he guided her upstage as the snowflakes began emerging from the wings. Traveling steps, a supported turn—not choreography meant to dazzle, just passage. Clara being led deeper into the forest Shane's crew had painted with frost-rimmed pine boughs and northern constellations as in their wake the Snow Waltz started.

More snow drifted downward, paired with special lights as dancers flowed onto the stage in white, layered skirts edged with crystalline patterns, less tutu than snowfall, built to move like drifting powder. Jackie's design, again, built to drift rather than bounce. The headpieces she'd obsessed over for two weeks caught the stagelights exactly as intended too—the woman was a witch with costuming and Shane loved her even *more* in that moment, heart thump-thumping with pride as the snowflakes danced in formation—traveling turns, interlaced crossings, expanding circles.

They really did look like snow. A star-shine gust of winter, rolling in in the evening to paint the world silver and glittering. Why did that make his heart sad? Why did it always make something in him *sing*? There was a story his mother used to tell him about the first snowfall of winter, how the Yuki-onna walked between the flakes, and how if you looked too long at falling snow you might see her face and forget your own name... why wasn't there a ballet about that? There should be. There *should* be.

He hadn't thought of that story in years. But watching now, he understood the warning differently: some beautiful things you watched because you wanted to remember them, and some beautiful things watched you back. And this was beautiful, even though this was the kind of synchronized corps work that fell apart if even one dancer lost the count, because of all the hard work these dancers had put in. Everyone knew exactly where they were needed and what to do.

Shane knew what *he* needed to do. Track the technical elements. Snow descent rate, corps spacing, the lights, safety. But so much of that was already set, already spinning forward without his hands on it, and he found himself thinking—stupidly, dangerously—that this

must be what it felt like to watch your own heart beat. You could not stop it. You could not start it. You could only hope it kept going, kept doing what hearts were meant to do.

It was... a profoundly powerless, *proud*, feeling too that was swelling in his chest at the realization that while he was *worried*, he was not scared.

Tomorrow we show up, we do our jobs, we make beautiful show, Rozanov had said at the market. *Everything else—what you want, what I want—we figure out after final curtain.*

They'd done exactly that. Shown up. Done their jobs. Put everything else aside—the wanting, the confusion, the mess of *them*—because the opening night mattered more with both Bolshoi and Royal Winnipeg Ballet's pride on the line.

He had spent so long learning to hold things together that he had forgotten what it felt like to let go. To trust. To stand in the wings and watch the thing he loved best in the world unfold without him, knowing that his fingerprints were everywhere and nowhere, that he had built this and now it did not need him. The grief of it surprised him like it always did.

So did the relief.

And so his eyes, occasionally, left the cues and drifted to Rozanov upstage. Just standing there in the Prince costume, watching snow fall around him with Clara at his side, and somehow that stillness commanded more attention than sixteen dancers in motion. The angle of his head, the placement of his hand at Clara's shoulder, the way his weight settled through his standing leg. Even motionless, Rozanov was performing.

Everything was working.

And Shane... for the first time, allowed himself to soften, just a little, and watch not as Stage Manager, but like any other person in the audience. Beside him, the lighting operator adjusted a dimmer. That blue wash deepened as the Snow scene built toward its climax, and Shane's eyes tracked the shift for half a second before returning to the stage. Rozanov and Clara were moving now, crossing downstage while the corps opened around them.

"Shane?" Hayden's voice crackled in the headset. "You still with us?"

Shane blinked. The snow scene was ending. He'd lost thirty seconds watching instead of working.

"Yeah. Here. Act One finale cue coming up." The finale transition required perfect timing: the end of the Snow Waltz, lighting, the forest scrim lighting up, and the palace backdrop flying in while the Christmas tree rotated to reveal the Kingdom of Sweets gateway on its reverse side. Five moving parts that had to execute in sequence or the whole thing collapsed into visible chaos. This was his job. This was what he was good at. "Standby on the tree rotation. Hayden, you ready on the fly?"

"Ready."

“On my mark...” Shane watched the choreography, counting internal beats. The music built toward the act break, brass section climbing. Rozanov and Clara hit their final pose, her leg extended in penché while he supported her from behind. Perfect.

“Tree rotation, go. Fly cue, go. Lights, go.”

The stage transformed. Spinning on its axis, the tree turned to reveal a glittering archway on its reverse side worked with northern motifs of stars and geometric patterns borrowed from beadwork. The palace backdrop flew in from above, settling into place with the hydraulic hiss Shane had triple-checked this afternoon specifically because hydraulics failed when you didn’t triple-check them. Lights shifted from cold blue to warm gold. The corps rushed offstage in organized chaos, counting down to their fifteen-minute break.

Forty-five seconds until intermission.

Shane’s hands held the clipboard steady, locked into the rhythm he knew better than any choreography he’d ever performed. Call the cue, watch it execute, confirm completion, prep for the next. His own dance, the one the audience never saw. Invisible but essential, the skeleton that let Rozanov’s magic live.

The curtain dropped on Act One to thunderous applause. Shane made a mental note to check the snow netting after final curtain; flakes always escaped, would turn up in costume pockets and wig boxes for weeks. The stagehands were already sweeping, fastest cleanup in theatre history, racing the house lights.

“Good work, everyone,” Shane said into the headset. “Fifteen-minute intermission. Stagehands, I need the Act Two set ready in twelve. Dancers, you know your call times!”

He pulled off the headset. His ears rang in the sudden quiet, that specific post-cue silence that felt louder than the show itself. His shirt stuck to his back with sweat even though he’d been still for the last forty minutes, hands cramping around the pen he’d been gripping too hard. Opening night adrenaline, same as always.

And... even now, there was more to do.

The lighting operator stood, stretched, headed out for water. Shane stayed put, skimming his notes for Act Two, looking for failure points.

Divert. - Ukr. sp. ✓ Métis floor clear ✓ Ind. tempo - hold (?) ✓

Gibberish to anyone else but him, but the language of a tight show nonetheless. And all those pressure points were fine, checked and rechecked which... just the Waltz of the Flowers with its corps work that had to be synchronized or the whole thing fell apart. Then the Grand Pas de Deux, the showpiece with Rozanov and Rose dancing together.

His pen hovered over the page.

Gd Pas - Rose tutu attach. post-Flowers ✓ Rozanov jacket buttons ✓

Those... should be fine too, then. He was reaching the limit of what he could control from backstage, and all that was left was to hand it all over and trust the dancers.

Rozanov, who'd arrived early like he'd promised and gone straight to warm-up. Who'd checked in once about the tree rotation timing—friendly, brief—and when Shane had confirmed it was fixed, had smiled and said “Good. You are best at this job, Hollander,” before heading back to prepare.

Shane had seen him throughout the day in the normal chaos of opening night prep. Rozanov stretching in the wings, running through his phrases in Studio Three, helping one of the younger dancers with her entrance timing. He'd waved once when their eyes met across the stage during spacing check. Another time, he'd passed Shane in the hallway and squeezed his shoulder—just once, just a brief touch—before continuing on.

He wouldn't be coaxing him into any closets or sneaky makeouts in the back hallways, no. The ball was in Shane's court. Rozanov had made that clear at the market: *Tomorrow we show up, we do our jobs, we make beautiful show. Everything else—what you want, what I want—we figure out after final curtain. Da?*

Professional. Friendly. Exactly what Shane had needed.

Except now Shane was sitting in the booth realizing that Rozanov had apologized yesterday at the market—for Thursday, for calling him a coward, for making assumptions—and Shane hadn't apologized back. Not for screaming at him in front of the entire company. Not for making it personal in ways that had nothing to do with staging. He'd been too busy panicking about feelings and proximity and that fucking kiss behind the poorly decorated tree to remember basic professionalism.

He wanted Rozanov. He owed him an apology. Neither could happen until after final curtain because there was still so much to do and so much that could, potentially, go wrong.

“Shane.” Hayden appeared in the booth doorway with two bottles of water, offering one. “I think there are some congratulations in order... since in the hockey scene, not a single rollerblader ate shit into the orchestra pit. We are already head and shoulders over the 2012 Nutcracker season opening.”

“The bar was on the ground compared to then, Hayden. We stepped over it.” Shane took the water, cracked it open. “You seriously still doubt my Marley prep?”

“Nah, I know and love your neuroticism for that kind of shit.” Hayden leaned against the doorframe, grinning. “And... look. Don't tell Rozanov but... shit. I think I do like the way we're doing Drosselmeyer's entrance. People and kids out in the stands seem really excited and Bood was *thrilled*. It's been good, Hollsy. I can tell *you* that, but...”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“Thanks man, because otherwise *fuck* that guy, right?”

Shane's mouth opened, closed, and then settled on the safest possible answer. “Right.”

“Enough about him, I should head back in a second. You good?”

“Yeah. Let me know if you need anything through the headset.”

“Three minutes to Act Two,” someone announced in the hallway outside the booth.

Shane stood, put his headset back on, and moved to the booth window where he could see both stage and wings. Below, the house lights were still up—audience members returning from the lobby, programs rustling, eight hundred people settling back into their seats. The energy was good. Act One had landed perfectly.

Below, in the wings, he could see Rozanov was warming up. Relevés, pliés, testing his ankles the way dancers did before big variations. Shane had watched him do this exact sequence a hundred times over three weeks, but from the booth it looked different. Smaller. More human. Rose appeared beside him, said something that made him laugh—actually laugh, head tipping back—and they ran through a lift sequence. Rose jumping into his hands, Rozanov catching her, lowering her back down. Once, twice. Muscle memory.

They looked good together. Matched heights, complementary lines. The Grand Pas would *also* land perfectly.

“House to half,” Shane called.

The audience noise dimmed. The overhead lights lowered, and Shane’s pulse kicked up the way it always did before a performance even though he hadn’t performed in years. His body didn’t know the difference between calling cues and dancing—both felt like standing in the wings counting down to an entrance that would either prove him or destroy him.

“Places for Act Two,” he said into the headset.

Below, the dancers took their positions. Rozanov crossed himself once—quick, habitual, his gold cross catching light—then walked onto the stage in time for the curtain to rise... and begin act two, opening to reveal both Clara and the Prince arriving in the Kingdom of Sweets to continue their adventure. Rose’s entrance as the Sugar Plum Fairy drew applause mid-scene, her pink tutu looking as sweet and airy as spun sugar, and she bid the pair welcome, with open arms and a port de bras that made the gesture look like an embrace, beckoning them to enjoy a showcase of treats.

Divertissements, apart from the roller blade hockey, were always a favorite with the audience and for good reason.

Spanish turrón brought sharp footwork and castanets. The Indian classical piece followed with controlled isolations, mudras precise as knife-cuts. Métis jiggers took the stage with feet flying in patterns older than the building itself. Shane watched the jiggers’ footwork and felt the same swell of pride he did every year—this version of *The Nutcracker*, this quintessentially *Canadian* version with its silly hockey and bears and *fun* and these dances, this was *theirs*, built for *Winnipeg*, and the people who lived in it. Any kind of person, any kind of Canadian, could be sitting in that audience right now, any adult or maybe a little girl

watching dancers who moved the way her family moved, seeing things she recognized, and seeing that not only that they *mattered* but that they were *loved*.

But Ilya's face in the costume shop came back to him too.

The way he'd stopped arguing and gone still, fingers resting on the Ukrainian vest with an unexpected gentleness, searching for words his English couldn't quite reach. *I am worry about replacing Russian culture in Russian ballet*. Not anger—loss. The Trepak had been Ilya's, the way the jig was Métis, and beyond that so many things were Winnipeg's, and watching it disappear from a ballet his country had made must have felt like arriving at a family dinner to find your chair removed from the table.

Shane hadn't thought about it that way at the time. He'd been too busy being *right*.

He added it to the list of things they needed to talk about. The list was getting long.

"Shane." Jackie's voice cut through the headset, clipped and furious as the Ukrainian *makivnyk* dancers took to the stage. "Dewdrop's headpiece for the Flower Waltz, It's not at her station."

"What do you *mean* it's not at her station?"

"I mean it's *gone*," Jackie hissed, "I set it myself at half-hour call and now there's nothing but bobby pins and an empty mannequin head. Someone moved it or someone took it and either way I need it *now* because she's on in eight minutes!"

Shane was already scanning his cue sheet, running locations in his head. "Fuck. Okay. We have time. Did you check the quick-change station stage right? Maybe one of the Flower headpieces got swapped during the Ukrainian number—"

"That was a *wreath*, not a—"

"Jackie. Stage right. Behind the garment rack, bottom shelf. Rose's backup tiara was there at intermission, and if someone grabbed the wrong box—"

A pause. Rustling. Then: "Oh, you *beautiful* man. It was under the wreath box. Some idiot stacked them."

"Do we know which idiot?"

"I will *find out* and they will *suffer*. After curtain." The headset clicked off.

Shane set his pen down and pressed both palms flat on the desk until the trembling stopped. Eight minutes of margin. Backstage was a living organism that wanted, at every opportunity, to eat itself. His job was to keep it fed and moving in one direction. Most nights he did. The terror was in the nights he wouldn't.

After Ukrainian *makivnyk*, there was marzipan, liquorice allsorts, and buttercream roses.

And then the Waltz of the Flowers *with* Dewdrop's goddamn headset.

Sixteen corps dancers moving as one organism, bouquets of pastel tulle creating patterns that shifted and reformed. Shane's breath caught during the formation changes, waiting for someone to miss a count, but no one did. They were perfect. *His* dancers were perfect.

"Grand Pas standby," he murmured into the headset.

This was the heart of it. Not the most famous music—that belonged to the Sugar Plum Fairy's solo, the celesta melody that people hummed in grocery stores without knowing why they knew it. It wasn't the most spectacular staging either, since that belonged to the growing tree, the battle, the snow. But the Grand Pas de Deux was where the ballet stopped being spectacle and became *story*; the moment when Clara's journey meant something.

The kingdom's finest gift to Clara, offered in gratitude for her courage: *look what we can do. Look what beauty exists. You earned the right to witness this.*

Shane had watched this dance a hundred times from a hundred different wings. Had dreamed of dancing it, once, back when dreaming felt like planning instead of grief. The Cavalier role, Prince Coqueluche, or the Nutcracker himself depending on the company's direction was front and center here, and regardless of who he *was*, he was always strong and elegant, lifting his partner toward the light, catching her when she fell.

He'd practiced the supported pirouettes alone in his mother's basement, arms circling empty air, pretending someone trusted him enough to lean back into his hands.

That boy felt very far away now. But watching still hurt in the same old places.

Rozanov partnered Rose through the adagio with the same control Shane had watched him drill for three weeks. The lifts they'd practiced worked. When Rose extended into *développé*, Rozanov's support let her hold the balance—eight counts, just like rehearsal—and the audience gasped. Shane didn't. He'd known she could do it all along, for years, moving through phrases, *floating*, almost, in a way that made Shane's dancer brain light up—thirty-two fouettés, spotting clean, supporting leg solid, not a wobble in sight. The crowd was clapping before she'd even finished, applause rolling through the theatre like a wave breaking.

She belonged on that stage. *She* had earned it.

And Rozanov—

There was a word in French, *porteur*, for the male dancer who carried his partner. The one who bore the weight. Shane had always thought it sounded like a kind of devotion, the way some words for love also mean to suffer, to endure. Watching Rozanov partner Rose through the adagio, he understood why. Every lift was an act of faith. Every catch, a promise kept. Rozanov's hands at Rose's waist were firm but never grasping, and when he raised her overhead, his arms did not tremble. At the top of the lift, with Rose suspended above him and the theatre holding its breath, Rozanov's eyes swept the house—and found the booth.

It lasted less than a second. A fractional shift of his gaze during the rotation, there and gone before Rose descended back into his hands. No one in the audience would have caught it. The

lighting operator beside Shane didn't notice. But Shane's whole body went still, pen frozen mid-notation, because Rozanov had looked *up* and found him in the dark the way dancers weren't supposed to be able to do from a lit stage—past the footlights, past eight hundred faces, straight to the booth window where Shane sat with his notes and his headset, watching.

I see you.

Or maybe: *Do you see me dancing?*

For you?

Or maybe Shane was reading into a half-second glance because he wanted it to mean something, because he'd spent three weeks wanting everything Rozanov did to mean something, and that was its own kind of pathology.

Rozanov set Rose down. His eyes were back on his partner, fully present, and the moment closed like water over a dropped stone, and Shane counted the beats since he couldn't help himself until her weight settled fully onto pointe before releasing.

You could not fake that patience. You either felt your partner's balance in your own bones, or you didn't.

Rozanov felt it. And Shane, watching from the booth with his clipboard and his headset and his carefully ordered cues, felt something crack open in his chest that he did not have a name for.

The adagio ended with Rose in arabesque, Rozanov's hand at her hip, both of them breathing hard but hiding it. Applause scattered through the house—premature, eager—and then Rozanov stepped back.

His solo came first. In some productions, this was the Cavalier's solo, the prince's solo, the Nutcracker's solo, and while the character changed the awe and raw skill required remained the same: all jumps and beats and turns, the athletic showcase that balanced the Sugar Plum Fairy's dainty floats. Shane's fingers tightened on his clipboard.

Every jump Rozanov took hung at the apex, suspended in that impossible moment between rising and falling where gravity forgot its job. His cabrioles beat clean—front leg striking back leg, both feet pointed, the whole thing happening so fast it looked like a magic trick. His tours snapped into place with his head whipping around last, eyes finding the audience like a challenge, like a promise. *Watch me. I dare you to look away.*

Shane couldn't. Of course he couldn't, when had he ever been able to drag his eyes away from Rozanov? Even in the beginning, it'd always been... this, with him, tracking the line of Rozanov's body through space and feel his own muscles firing in sympathy, waiting, maybe hoping, that their eyes would catch in studio mirrors. The double tour en l'air at the end should've shaken the stage when he landed—that much force, that much height—but the impact was silent. All that power absorbed through his legs, controlled down to the cellular level.

Rozanov stepped back, ceding the stage, and the celesta began.

Everyone knew this music. They'd heard it in commercials, in shopping malls, in a thousand Christmas memories they couldn't quite place. The twinkling, bell-bright melody that meant *magic* even to people who'd never seen a ballet. And Rose—

Rose *owned* it.

She moved through the choreography like the notes were falling through her, each step landing precisely where the celesta chimed. Bourrées so fast her feet blurred, relevés that seemed to suspend her mid-air, her arms lifting and falling with that particular port de bras Shane had watched her drill since the day they'd met. Delicate. Crystalline. The kind of dancing that looked effortless and cost *everything*.

This was her moment. The solo little girls dreamed of dancing someday, the one that separated principals from soloists, the reason people came back year after year.

God, he loved this. He loved her. He loved this theatre. He really, *truly*, loved ballet. And...

... and his thoughts drifted as a coda brought Rose and Rozanov back together once more, side by side, the final flourish of supported pirouettes and fish dives for Clara and the world's appreciation. Rose's back arched over Rozanov's arm as he walked her in a circle, her head thrown back in absolute trust. They finished in the traditional pose: Rose in arabesque, Rozanov kneeling at her feet, both of them breathing hard and hiding it.

The theatre was so quiet, the audience rapt and breathless, and Shane realized his face was wet.

He wasn't crying. He was just—this was—

For a moment, for a *few* horrible moments these past weeks, for the first time, it felt like he was *failing* and it loomed like a smoke backstage, curling like smoke in the rafters. Fucking and fighting between practices, nitpicking and arguing over every little thing, ego and exhibition and then whatever the fuck *yesterday* was and was it enough—could it ever really be enough—to just shove it all to the side and out on the show anyway? And trust it?

Somehow, Rozanov, despite the blowouts and despite never getting his own *I'm sorry* had trusted in the production enough to try.

He didn't have a word for this. For the way grief and gratitude could live in the same breath, the way you could mourn something you'd never had while celebrating what you'd helped to build. He had given up dancing because it hurt too much to want it. And here he was, wanting it anyway, wanting *all of it*—the stage, the lights, the weight of a partner's trust, the terror and the triumph of being seen.

He had built this. He had built this, and it was beautiful, and it did not *need* him, and somehow that was the most beautiful part of all.

Kingdom bid Clara farewell. The pages guided her and her Prince back through the snow, back through the forest of frost-rimmed pines, the journey unwinding in reverse. Shane called the lighting cues on autopilot—warm gold fading to cool blue, the palace backdrop flying out, the living room set rolling into place. Clara settled onto the sofa with her Nutcracker clutched to her chest, and the Prince knelt beside her one last time before the magic released him.

The lights dimmed. When they rose again, Clara woke alone in her family's parlor, blinking at the Christmas tree, the wooden doll in her arms. Just a girl. Just a dream. Or maybe not—the way she held that Nutcracker said she wasn't quite sure, and neither was the audience.

Perfect.

Curtain call blurred past. Full company bows with children first, then corps, then soloists. Rose and Rozanov took their bow together to applause that rattled the chandeliers, and Rozanov kept gesturing to the orchestra, to the crew in the wings, refusing to take sole credit even while the crowd screamed his name.

Eight curtain calls. The conductor had to stop them at nine because union rules said the orchestra couldn't play past eleven, and Shane pulled off his headset with hands that wouldn't stop shaking. Below, the house lights were coming up. Audience members gathering coats and programs, already telling each other which parts they'd loved best, already forgetting the names of the people who had made it possible.

That was how it should be. The magic was supposed to look effortless. The seams were supposed to stay hidden. It was a dream for Clara, and for them, and it was a *good* one.

They'd done it. Three weeks of fighting and fucking and nearly destroying each other, and they'd built something beautiful anyway.

Backstage was a flood.

That was the only word for it. The second the curtain hit the deck, the wings cracked open like a dam—dancers spilling offstage, stagehands already hauling flats, the wardrobe team descending on costumes with garment bags and lint rollers like paramedics triaging the wounded. Jackie herself was stationed at the quick-change area with a checklist and a look that could strip paint, intercepting dancers before they could sit down, lean against walls, or do anything else that threatened the structural integrity of her work. One of the party scene fathers tried to hang his tailcoat over a chair back and Jackie materialized behind him so fast Shane wondered if she'd learned to teleport.

“Hanger. *Hanger*. Put it on a hanger or I kill you.”

“O-oh, right, yes ma'am. Mrs. Pike. Ma'am. Sorry.”

“And *who* was it that put Dewdrop's headpiece beneath the goddamn wreath box?! When I *catch* you—”

“Mrs. Pike is *scary* when she gets mad,” the boy playing Fritz murmured to Clara, who could only nod.

Behind them, someone was crying near the prop table... happy tears, Shane hoped, because he didn’t have the bandwidth for a crisis right now, and two more of the party scene children were chasing each other through the legs of the corps while their handler shouted threats. Shane moved through all of it, clipboard tucked under his arm, headset around his neck, answering questions as they hit him.

“Snow netting?”

“Check it after we clear. I saw drift in the stage left wings.”

“The tree rotation stuck on the second pass—”

“I heard it. Put in a maintenance ticket tonight, I’ll look at the hydraulics tomorrow morning.”

“Great job Mr. Hollander!”

“Great job to you too, Christine, you were great out there tonight.”

“Shane, the *flowers*—did you *see*—”

“I saw. You were incredible. Go drink water.”

He was good at this, the *after*. The organized chaos of a show winding down, every piece accounted for, every person pointed toward their next task. His hands moved on autopilot—checking off items, flagging issues, touching shoulders and offering nods that said *good work, we did it, go home and sleep, yes, see you tomorrow when we do it all again*. It was a language he spoke better than English or French, and tonight, for the first time in weeks, it didn’t feel like armor.

Rose caught him near the quick-change station, still in her Sugar Plum tutu with her stage makeup shining under the work lights. She threw both arms around his neck and squeezed hard enough to lift his heels off the ground, kissing him brazenly.

“We did it,” she said into against his lips, before cuddling into the crook of his neck. “It was *so* good, Shane, Shaney, tell me you thought so too, because it *felt*—”

“Amazing. It was, and no, I could *not* look away,” Shane held her back, and meant it. “And those *fouettés*.”

“I know.” She pulled back, beaming, mascara already smudging at the corners. “I *know*. I could feel them landing and I thought, *don’t you dare think about it, don’t you dare jinx it*—”

“You didn’t.”

“I didn’t.” She laughed, a little wet, a little wild. “God, Shane. Eight curtain calls.”

“Nine, actually. The conductor cut us off and it was getting too late so I had to end it there.”

“*Nine*.” Rose pressed both hands to her cheeks like she was holding her own face together. “I need to call my mom, they’re not here until the last showing. Is that when yours are coming? I need to—oh, Jackie’s waving at me, she wants the tutu back before I sweat even more through it. I’ll find you after?” She was already moving, walking backward, pointing at him. “Drinks? Drinks. You’re coming. No excuses.”

“We’ll see.”

“That means *yes*. I’m holding you to it. I *will* find you, Shane Hollander. I told you years ago that you’d regret ever meeting me, because I will *always* find you and drag you into the sun. Or to drinks.”

She disappeared into the crowd, and Shane turned back to his clipboard, smiling in a way that hurt his face because he’d apparently forgotten how to do it without engaging muscles he hadn’t used in a while.

God, he loved her.

Just then, two other male soloists passed him in the hallway, still in their marzipan and liquorice costumes, one of them demonstrating a jump combination with his water bottle as a prop while the other filmed on his phone. Jackie, still on her post show rampage, shouted after them—“If you rip those tights I’m billing you *personally*!”—and they scattered, laughing, sneakers squeaking on the floor.

Near the callboard, Shane caught a fragment of conversation from two corps dancers pulling bobby pins out of their snowflake buns:

“—the way he landed that double tour, I actually thought I was going to pass out, the tights hide *nothing*—”

“Get in *line*—” They spotted Shane and went abruptly, suspiciously busy with their hair. He kept walking.

No doubt they were talking about... Rozanov. Rozanov who... where *was* he?

Hayden appeared, looking like he’d sprinted from the fly gallery. “Dude. *Dude*. Bood wants to buy everyone drinks at The Toad. You in?”

“Maybe, Rose also mentioned going out but I *really* need to make sure we’re set for tomorrow.”

“You *really* need to be *celebrating*, Hollsy. Come on. One drink.”

“Let me close out the booth first.”

Hayden pointed two fingers at his own eyes, then at Shane, smiling behind the threat. “*One drink*.” He vanished back into the crowd.

The backstage energy was thinning now; dancers peeling off toward dressing rooms, stagehands finishing their sweep, wardrobe whisking garment bags away with the urgency of people who had opinions about sweat stains. Shane made his rounds. Checked the snow netting. Confirmed the prop inventory. Signed off on the maintenance ticket for the tree rotation. The work was mindless and soothing, his body operating on a track it knew by heart while his brain replayed moments from the show in fragments: the snow falling, missing props, that misthrown shoe, Rose's solo, the gasp when Rozanov rose as the Prince, the way the theatre had gone so still during the Grand Pas that Shane could nearly hear his own breathing.

He was heading back toward the booth to grab his jacket when he turned the corner by the dressing rooms and nearly walked into Rozanov.

Still in the Prince costume.

The white and gold jacket was unbuttoned at the throat, the collar loosened, and his hair—normally styled for stage—was pushed back off his forehead where he'd run his hands through it. Stage makeup still on: the lined eyes, the contoured cheekbones. Theatre rouge warmth painted across his face that made his actual features look sharper by contrast. He was leaning against the wall outside his dressing room with a bottle of water, and when he saw Shane, his whole body shifted—weight settling, chin lifting, that crooked half-grin pulling at his mouth.

“Hollander.”

Shane stopped. The hallway was emptier here, most of the dancers already changed or gone, and the noise of the backstage celebration felt muffled and distant..

“Rozanov.”

“Good show, yes?”

“Yeah.” Shane exhaled. The word wasn't enough, wasn't anywhere close to enough, but his throat had decided to constrict at the sight of Rozanov in that costume with his collar open and his eyes still bright from performing. “Yeah, it was—you were—it was good.”

Smooth, Hollander. Really articulate.

“That is the best you can do?” Rozanov's grin widened. He pushed off the wall and closed the distance between them, stopping just inside Shane's space the way he always did, the way that used to make Shane's teeth grind and now made his stomach drop for entirely different reasons. “You are a picky man, Shane Hollander. What do I have to do to earn your praise?”

“I... I mean... you don't need to *earn* it, I...”

“What is this?” Rozanov asked, tilting his head to the side, “Audience loved everything and you deflate as soon as you see me. What is wrong?”

Shane swallowed. “I owe you an apology.”

Rozanov's teasing grin faded, not into displeasure but into attention, and... he waited.

"Maybe two. One for taking so long to actually apologize in the first place—but—I... Um. I know I need to, and I *want* to apologize for how I acted on Thursday during practice," Shane said. "For—all of it. I shouldn't have singled you out like that in front of every one else, and... looking back on it, I *made* it personal when it wasn't really about you at all. You apologized at the market and I didn't—I should have said it then and I didn't, and that wasn't fair to you."

He forced himself to hold Rozanov's gaze even though every instinct told him to look at floor, his shoes, any speck of snow that'd been missed, the wall, the floor, anywhere that wasn't those hazel eyes going soft and focused in a way that made Shane feel like he was standing under a spotlight with nowhere to hide.

Rozanov was still for a moment. Then he nodded, once. "Thank you," he said, and he meant it—Shane could hear the weight of it, the way the words landed without deflection or sarcasm. A beat passed, and then the corner of his mouth twitched. "Now. You are forgiven. Is done. Can we stop talking about this?"

"I—what? I wanted to make sure you—"

"Hollander." Rozanov stepped closer. His hand came up and caught the edge of Shane's clipboard, tugging it down and to the side so there was nothing between them. "We had people giving standing ovations. Little children squealing with glee so loud they needed to be shushed. Orchestra wanted to *murder* us for how many curtain calls. Is opening night. *You* handled everything backstage so well I only hear about problems *after*, and you make it look *easy*. I kept my promise, I hit every mark, and I *felt* it tonight. Did you? Feel it?"

"I..." Shane trailed off, blushing. He had felt *many* things tonight.

"I thought so. And you are standing here looking like sad puppy who peed on rug." Rozanov's thumb ran along the clipboard's edge, knuckles grazing Shane's fingers. "I accept your apology. I appreciate your apology. Now can we please be *done* with apologies and we celebrate like normal people, or do you need to apologize for three more things first?"

The laugh caught Shane off guard—genuine, a little helpless, escaping before he could decide whether to let it. "I might've been making a mental list."

"Of course you have list." Rozanov took the clipboard from his hand entirely and set it on the floor, leaning it against the wall with the disrespect of a man who had never organized anything in his life. "List can wait."

"That has my cue sheets on it—"

"Cue sheets can also wait."

"Rozanov—"

"Ilya."

Shane's breath caught. Rozanov was close now, close enough that Shane could smell the stage makeup and sweat and whatever product was losing its battle with his hair, close enough that the gold thread on the Prince jacket caught the hallway fluorescents and threw tiny sparks of light across Shane's shirt.

"I want you to call me Ilya," he said, "Try it. I want to hear my name from your mouth."

"Ilya," Shane said, and watched the way it landed, the way Rozanov's—Ilya's—eyes darkened a shade.

"*Krasivo*. Now. Come inside," Ilya said, tipping his head toward the dressing room door. "I want to show you something."

"That's the worst line you've ever used."

"Is not a line. I genuinely want to show you—no, *okay*, fine, is a line. Come inside anyway."

Shane looked down the hallway. Empty. The noise of the backstage celebration was fading as people filtered out toward the lobby or the parking lot. He could hear Rose's laugh somewhere far off, and Hayden's, and the clatter of set pieces being stacked. They'd be looking for him to go out to the Toad, and... really, he *should* go get drinks. He should finish his closing checklist. He should do anything other than follow Ilya Rozanov into a dressing room on opening night while the man was still wearing the Prince costume that eight hundred people had just applauded.

He pulled out his phone.

"What are you doing?" Ilya asked, half-amused, half-offended.

"Texting Rose that I'll be late." Shane typed it out without looking up—*something came up, go ahead without me, I'll catch up*—and hit send before he could think about how transparent that was going to be to a woman who already knew everything. Rose would read *something came up* and know exactly what—or who—had come up. That was a problem for later.

Shane pocketed the phone and followed Ilya inside.

Just like before, the dressing room was small, little more than that mirror ringed with bulbs, a costume rack, a chair piled with Ilya's street clothes, the counter cluttered with makeup and bobby pins and three empty water bottles. Ilya closed the door behind them and leaned against it, arms crossed, watching Shane, and he could see the way Ilya's weight shifted against the door, the way his crossed arms sat high on his chest, shoulders pushed back—performance posture held past the final curtain. The overhead bulbs caught the sweat still drying at his temples and the white of his teeth when his mouth pulled into that crooked, knowing grin.

"So," Ilya said.

"So."

"You liked the show."

“It was adequate.”

Ilya laughed—short, surprised, his arms dropping. “Adequate. He says *adequate*. Must you torture me like this?”

“I said the *show* was adequate. I didn’t say anything about *you*.”

“Cruel thing.” The grin shifted. Ilya uncrossed his arms and took a step away from the door. “And? What about me, Hollander? Must I beg for your regard?”

Shane should have had a witty answer, or deflected, redirected, maintained the safe distance he’d been keeping all day. Instead, he heard himself say: “You know exactly how good you were. You don’t need me to tell you.”

“No,” Ilya agreed, taking another step. “But I would like you to. I would like to hear *many* sounds from you, Hollander, but lately, I think, all I want is your praise.”

“Then... ask me nicely,” It was Shane who closed the last of the distance, “and call me Shane.”

“Fuck, *Shane*—”

Later, he wouldn’t be able to say what exactly tipped him, the adrenaline still buzzing under his skin, the relief of the show landing, Ilya’s mouth curving like he already knew what Shane was going to do and was going to enjoy every second of watching him do it. But one moment there was space between them and the next there wasn’t, Shane’s hands fisting in the gold-embroidered lapels of the Prince jacket and pulling Ilya down to meet him, a *cambré* in reverse, bending the prince toward him instead of away, and when their mouths connected it wasn’t desperate the way it had been before—in the office, in the closet, against walls and doors with teeth and frustration.

This was slower. This was *hotter* for being slow. Ilya’s hands found Shane’s waist and pulled him in, and Shane kissed him like a reward, like gratitude, like the answer to a question neither of them had been brave enough to ask out loud.

“Mm,” Ilya hummed against his mouth. “Better than adequate, yes?”

“Shut up.”

“Tell me what I want to hear, then maybe.”

Shane bit his lower lip, and Ilya groaned, his hips pressing forward, and then they were moving, both stumbling backward until Ilya’s thighs hit the dressing table and makeup rattled against the mirror. Shane pressed him against it, one hand braced on the counter, the other still gripping the lapel of that ridiculous jacket, and Ilya pulled back just enough to look at him with those stage-lined eyes blown dark.

“You are still in your headset,” Ilya observed.

Shane reached up, yanked the headset off, and dropped it on the counter next to a tin of setting powder. “Better?”

“*Luchshe*. Better.” Ilya’s hands slid under the hem of Shane’s shirt, palms flat against his stomach, fingers spreading over his ribs, and Shane sucked in a breath. “*Namnogo luchshe*.”

They were kissing again, deeper now, Ilya’s tongue tracing the roof of Shane’s mouth in a way that made his knees threaten to give, and Shane’s hands were working the rest of the Prince jacket buttons open without conscious thought, fingers finding closures by feel. The jacket fell open and Shane pushed it off Ilya’s shoulders—

And stopped.

Underneath, Ilya was still wearing the dance belt and the fitted undershirt from the costume, the white fabric clinging to the sweat-damp lines of his chest and stomach. The dance belt sat low on his hips, the flesh-toned fabric leaving approximately nothing to the imagination.

Shane stared.

“Is problem?” Ilya asked, clearly enjoying this.

“Jackie is going to kill me.”

“What?”

“The jacket—I can’t—” Shane looked at the Prince jacket now crumpled between them, gold embroidery and white wool and probably three hundred hours of Jackie’s handiwork. He could hear her in his head, clear as a headset cue: *Hollander, if you get so much as a wrinkle in that jacket I will end you and make it look like an accident*.

“She’s going to *literally* murder me. They’ll never find my body.”

Ilya looked down at the jacket, then back at Shane, and burst out laughing. Full, loud, head-thrown-back laughter that crinkled the stage makeup at the corners of his eyes. “You are worried about *costume* right now?”

“You don’t know Jackie. She will—she has a *system*, Ilya, there are *garment bags*—”

Ilya grabbed the jacket, turned, and hung it on the costume rack behind him with one hand, the hanger swinging. “There. Is hung up. Crisis over. Now come back here.”

“The pants too—”

“Shane,” Ilya caught Shane’s belt loop and pulled him forward. “If pretty Miss Pike is truly searching, then we have maybe twenty minutes before she finds us here. You want to waste time talking like this?”

Shane looked at him—the smeared eyeliner, the undershirt riding up where he’d stretched to reach the rack, the gold cross resting against his collarbone, the way his chest rose and fell

with each breath—and thought, very clearly: *Jackie would understand. Probably. Maybe. She would definitely not understand but that was a problem for future Shane.*

“Twenty minutes is generous,” Shane said, and kissed him again.

They didn’t fully undress. There wasn’t time and there wasn’t really a *need*, and there was something about the half-dressed urgency of it: Shane’s shirt rucked up to his chest, Ilya’s undershirt pushed to his collarbones, Shane’s belt undone but his pants only shoved past his hips, that made it dirtier than naked would have been. Ilya’s hand wrapped around both of them—long fingers, a dancer’s grip, the same hand that had held Rose overhead without trembling now shaking against Shane’s hip—and groaned. Shane braced one hand on the mirror behind Ilya’s head and watched their reflection: the two of them pressed together, breathing hard, the makeup-ringed bulbs throwing warm light across skin and sweat and the shift of muscle under Ilya’s undershirt as he worked them both.

First position port de bras, his dancer brain supplied uselessly, arm rounded, wrist soft.

Shane’s hips rocked forward into Ilya’s fist, matching the rhythm Ilya set, and when Ilya turned his head and caught Shane’s earlobe between his teeth, Shane bit down on his own whines hard.

“Let me hear you,” Ilya murmured against his ear.

“We’re in a *dressing room*. Someone will—”

“Let them hear. Tell me.”

“*Ilya—*”

“Tell me what I want to hear.” Ilya’s rhythm slowed fractionally, an *adagio* tempo, drawn out and devastating, the same patience he brought to partnering, and Shane’s thighs shook with the effort of not bucking forward into each agonizing, lazy drag, and ruining it. “You said you would. If I asked nicely.”

“That’s not—*fuck*—that’s not what I—”

“I am asking.” Ilya’s mouth found the hinge of his jaw, teeth grazing, lips following. His hand moved in a slow, twisting pull that made Shane’s vision blur. “*Nicely*. Shane. Tell me how I was tonight, tell me what you thought of me. I was dancing for you.”

Shane squeezed his eyes shut, forehead dropping to Ilya’s shoulder again. He could see Ilya’s hand between them: wrist rotating on the upstroke, thumb pressing on the down. His traitor brain catalogued the movement the way it catalogued everything Ilya did: *port de poignet*, the wrist articulation Vaganova drilled into every student, and Christ, Shane was losing his mind if he was mentally footnoting technique right now. He could feel the heat building low and bright, could feel Ilya *waiting*, that infuriating patience, his hand barely moving now, and Shane was going to die here in this dressing room if he didn’t—

“You were—” Shane’s breath hitched. “God, you were—during the whole thing, your s-solo, the—fuck—coda, the double tour, I couldn’t—”

Ilya’s hand rewarded him with a full, firm stroke and Shane gasped against his collarbone.

“*Khorosho*, Shane. More.”

“The—when you rose as the Prince, the whole theatre stopped breathing, I—I stopped breathing, and the way you partner, the way you held Rose in the lifts like it was nothing, like she weighed *nothing*—fuck you’re so—”

“Mm.” Ilya’s rhythm picked up, steady and devastating, and his mouth was hot against Shane’s temple. “You like how strong I am? Pick *you* up like nothing? *Yeshchyo*. More.”

“F-fuck! You *know* how good you are,” Shane managed, half-wrecked, his hand curling into a fist against the mirror glass. “You don’t need me to say it.”

“No, no I *do*, Shane.” Ilya turned his head, caught Shane’s earlobe between his teeth, and Shane felt the shape of his grin against his skin. “I need. I need to hear it, I am breaking for it, I need it from *you*.”

And Shane—stupid, stubborn, helpless Shane—gave it to him.

He shuddered, and gave him all the half-spun thoughts from practice. The way his shirt had been riding up, and the moments in between. Tonight when the whole audience had leaned forward during his solo like plants turning toward sun and Shane *too*—“I couldn’t look away, fuck, Ilya, I couldn’t *stop*, ”—and gave him the way Shane’s own muscles had fired in sympathy watching from the booth. Each admission cost him and Ilya devoured every one, his grip tightening, his breathing roughening, a low groan vibrating through his ribs when Shane choked out that the moment Ilya had looked up and found him in the booth through eight hundred faces and a wall of stage light, that *that* had been the peak, the best, he *felt* it, he wasn’t dancing but he *felt* it—

“*Blyad’*,” Ilya breathed, and his hips snapped forward, rhythm faltering for the first time. “*Blyad’*, Shane—”

The sound of his own name in Ilya’s wrecked mouth sent Shane over the edge — shaking apart against Ilya’s chest with his teeth sunk into the collar of the undershirt to muffle the sound that tore out of him. Ilya followed seconds later, his head tipping back against the fogged mirror, a bitten-off curse in Russian that unraveled into Shane’s name, drawn out like a held note.

They stayed pressed together for a long, trembling moment. Shane’s hand was still braced on the mirror, fingers leaving prints in the condensation. Ilya’s arm stayed around his back, heartbeat jackhammering against Shane’s ribs. They were both shaking, the post-show adrenaline crash hitting at the same time as the orgasm, and Shane felt hollowed out and rebuilt in the same breath.

He had... missed... this.

Ilya was the first to move; just his head, turning to press his lips to Shane's temple, leaning against him, *falling* into him in a very ungraceful slump, all but forcing Shane's hands to snap up and *hold* him there while Ilya, inexplicably, sighed and kissed then the other temple.

The gesture was so soft, so different from everything that had come before it, that Shane's hand curled into a fist against the glass and... through the feel good chemicals firing in his head, he thought of the boy, himself, back in his mother's basement again, arms circling empty air, rehearsing lifts with no one to catch. He'd wanted someone to trust him enough to lean back into his hands. He hadn't considered the reverse: what it would feel like to be the one leaning, to tip backward with nothing but faith that the hands would be there.

Rozanov hadn't trusted the production. Why would he? The parts he loved, like the Trepak, were removed. He'd fought the hockey scene, the cultural dances, the Canadian staging, half the blocking and most of the props. He'd arrived a week late and spent three weeks telling Shane everything that was wrong with his theatre and... stayed anyway. He stayed, which a principal probably wouldn't do if he really thought the show would besmirch their own reputation.

So why say? Why let himself fall back without anything to catch him?

Unless... maybe Rozanov hadn't trusted the production at all. Maybe he'd trusted Shane.

"So... *Adequate*?" Ilya whispered, and Shane choked on a laugh.

"Shut up."

"Mm. *There* is my prickly Hollander again." Ilya reached past him for the box of tissues on the counter, cleaning them both with the efficiency of a man used to quick changes. "I had begun to miss him."

Shane leaned back, surveying the damage. The undershirt was wrinkled, damp, and had teeth marks in the collar. The dance belt was—well. They'd deal with the dance belt. Two tins of setting powder had fallen off the counter at some point, leaving a faint dust of translucent powder across the floor. And the mirror behind Ilya was fogged and smeared with fingerprints and what he very much hoped was only condensation.

"We're animals," Shane said flatly.

"Speak for yourself. I am *prince*." Ilya gestured at himself—undershirt rucked up, dance belt askew, stage makeup now thoroughly smeared—and somehow still managed to look dignified. Or at least like he was trying to. "A prince who has celebrated a great victory tonight."

"You have setting powder in your hair."

Ilya looked at himself in the smudged mirror, spotted the powder, and shrugged. "Adds character."

Shane pulled his pants up, buckled his belt, tugged his shirt down. His hands were still trembling. Opening night. Nine curtain calls. The best Nutcracker he'd ever managed, and he was standing in a dressing room with his stage manager shirt untucked and the principal dancer of the Bolshoi wearing his come on an undershirt.

His life had taken a *turn*.

"I should—" Shane gestured vaguely toward the door. "We should talk more, I know, but, I should... go. Everyone's getting drinks. Rose and Hayden are expecting me, it's important for me to be there as the stage manager on the first night, so..."

"*Da*. You go. I need to..." Ilya looked at himself in the mirror again and winced. "Okay, yes. I need to fix... all of this before I go also. Bood also invite me for drinks."

"Good luck explaining the undershirt to Jackie tomorrow."

"I will come up with story, and she will understand."

"She will *not* understand."

Ilya grinned, wide and crooked and so unguarded that Shane had to look away before it did permanent damage. "Then this was a worthwhile way to spend my last night as a living man before she will murder me." Ilya caught Shane's wrist as he reached for the door handle, pulling him back for one last kiss—brief, warm, tasting of salt and makeup and something sweeter underneath. When he let go, his thumb traced a circle on the inside of Shane's wrist.

"Good show, *Shane*."

"Good show... *Ilya*."

Shane slipped out of the dressing room, checked the hallway—clear—and walked toward the stage door on legs that didn't feel entirely connected to the rest of him. His shirt was untucked. His headset was still on the counter next to the setting powder. His cue sheets were right where they'd been forgotten.

He'd go back for them. He'd go back for all of it. But right now, Rose and Hayden were waiting, and the December air hit him like cold water when he pushed through the stage door, and somewhere behind him Ilya Rozanov was standing in a wrecked dressing room in a dance belt and an undershirt, grinning at his own reflection.

Chapter End Notes

[Bsky](#) | [Tumblr](#) | [My Hollanov fics on AO3](#)

Helloooooo and welcome to opening night! Mr. Shane Hollander and Mr. Ilya Rozanov do hope you enjoyed their respective performances. I, for one, was very excited to share

this reverse-praise-kink-soft-domming-frottage bit for a WHILE.

You may have noticed that the chapter count's changed! In writing this, I decided that I needed a little bit more space to tell the story I wanted, and this reflects that. Opening night deserved a chapter all its own, but rest assured, there is more coming! I appreciate your patience. Where works like Wolfbird are largely pre-written, Nutcracker is NOT, and it takes me more time between each chapter... especially when there is research involved. Speaking of research:

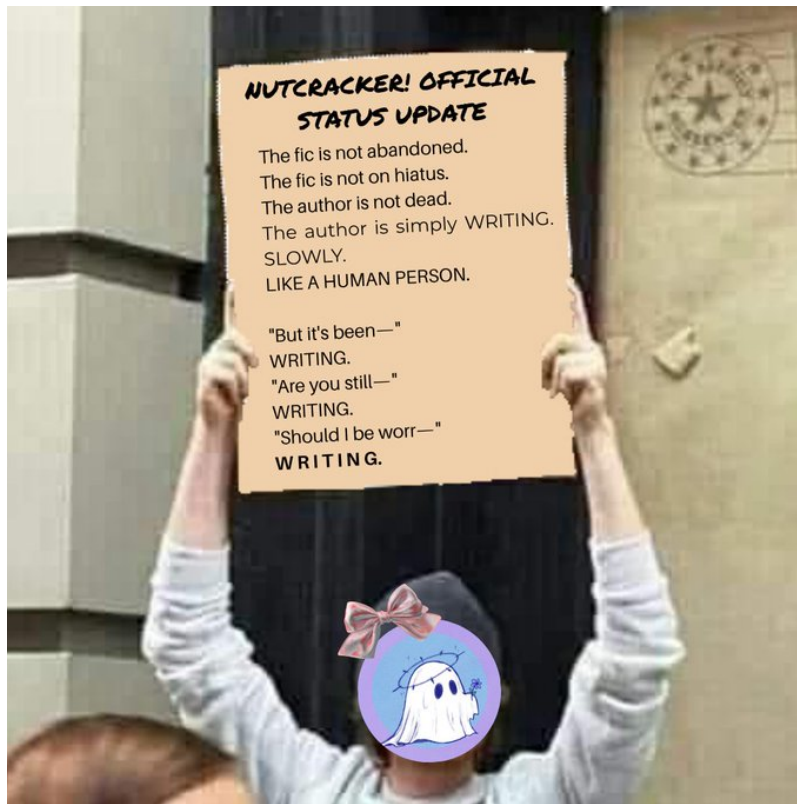
Reference:

1. [The Plot of the Nutcracker In a Nutshell](#)
2. [Boston's production actually DOES have the Nutcracker do the Grand Pas with the Sugar Plum Fairy!](#)
3. [More on Prince Coqueluche, meaning "whooping cough" in French; it likely referred to a lozenge candy.](#)
4. For everyone that liked Shane's thoughts about there 'should' being an original ballet about Yuki-Onna... you are in luck because... there IS A YUKI-ONNA BALLET! [Here's a link, "Liszt B minor Sonata in the Ballet Yuki-Onna"](#), please enjoy and support the original choreographer and dancer, Yuki Tokuda!

Massive thank yous to atessouhaits, hwanaisance, and to everyone else for their thoughtful feedback, experiences, and corrections in the comments! I am learning a lot in writing this work, and it's been a joy as much as a privilege. When I started writing this fic, it really was *teehee horni dance and theatre boys kissing in the dressing room*, but it's evolved since then and I am so grateful to each of you to your support and for letting me see into *your* lives.

As always, I am very open to polite concrit on my work. Thank you!

3/23/2026 UPDATE:



Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🌈 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🏒 “dumb hockey (ballet?) boys make me happy”
- ⚔️ “this usually isnt my thing... and yet”
- 💀 “how dare you (affectionate)”
- 🍷🖤🐭🎄 “something something Nutcracker”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Not back online or on social media, but not dead.

Thank you for being patient with this chapter!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Drinks at The Toad after opening night lasted until one in the morning.

Rose cornered Shane at the bar and whispered, “You look like you had *fun*, tell me everything? Please?” and Shane told her to shut up and bought her another gin and tonic. Ilya arrived forty minutes after Shane, cleaned up and grinning, the undershirt swapped for a black henley that fit him well enough to be a war crime, and he worked the room the way he worked a stage—every person he talked to felt like the only person in the building. Shane watched from across the bar and drank his beer too fast.

Hayden got drunk enough to hug Ilya. *Ilya*, who twelve hours earlier he’d called “that Russian prick” in the booth and was first to admit that he loathed the man, and Shane snapped a photo on his phone for posterity.

Predictably, Jackie found the undershirt the next morning, and she did *not* understand whatever story Ilya had tried to spin.

Shane heard about it thirdhand from a scandalized dancer who reported that after being confronted with *evidence* that he’d *fucked* in the theatre, Jackie had held up the stained garment at arm’s length, said “*Rozanov*” in a voice that could curdle milk, and then, according to the corps dancers who witnessed it, spent fifteen minutes lecturing Ilya on the cost of custom-fitted undergarments while Ilya stood there nodding and looking penitent and probably not understanding a third of the rapid-fire-furious English.

He’d bought her flowers by lunch.

Shane suspected they would not be enough, but it was a start.

Nutcracker season rolled on from sold out show to sold out show, and between those shows, *during* those shows, after those shows, the theatre kept its rhythm, and Shane kept his, and Ilya kept showing up where he wasn’t invited. And why wouldn’t he? This was a man that had hardly ever cared about most boundaries before. He appeared during Shane’s pre-show checks, leaning in doorframes with his warm-up jacket unzipped and his ankles crossed, watching Shane run safety protocols with an attention that had nothing to do with fire exits.

He appeared during intermissions, finding whatever dark corner of the building Shane had retreated to for his fifteen minutes of half-silence, and talked. He appeared after, in the dressing room or the prop room or the corridor behind the cyclorama where only the ghost light reached. And then at the the next show—

—Shane dropped to his knees in the wings twenty minutes before places and sucked Ilya off against the fly rail, then ran the show with the taste of Ilya still on his lips.

He'd washed his hands though, he was a professional. And not a whore.

Or... not entirely, or at least not for anyone that... wasn't... Ilya.

And Ilya had the decency not to mention it. Ilya did not, however, have the decency to stop grinning about it looking very much just-fucked and swaggering and looking at him, which was arguably worse, because Shane could ignore many things, but not Ilya Rozanov's mouth when he knew the sounds it'd been making just a few minutes ago in the dark.

Another evening, Ilya returned the favor: pulled Shane into his dressing room before half-hour call, locked the door, dropped to his knees on the carpet with the same single-minded attention he brought to every *relevé* and *développé*, and took Shane apart with his mouth while Shane bit down on the heel of his own hand and stared at the ceiling and tried not to make any sound that would carry through the walls to the hallway where Jackie was distributing garment bags and calling dancers by name and number.

He failed. He heard Ilya laugh about it afterward, lips still wet, wiping his chin with his thumb, and Shane's ears burned for the rest of the evening.

Then one night, after another sold out house and standing ovations and rave reviews, they'd barely made it back to Ilya's hotel at all, and fucked into the early hours of the morning.

And they *talked*.

Shane had not expected this. The sex, yes, god. Ilya's appetite was as advertised, and Shane's own surprised him only in its persistence, the way he kept touching Ilya, fingers hooked in his waistband, mouth on his shoulder, even when there was no reason to, even when they were just talking.

He was addicted to touch, and Shane... was... learning how *starved* he was for it.

But Ilya between the sex was a different animal entirely. Ilya between the sex sat cross-legged on his dressing room floor with a tennis ball under his arch and told Shane about *Yelizaveta*.

Yelizaveta was a former principal at the Bolshoi who had retired into the wings thirty years ago and never left. She ran the backstage like a woman who had once commanded the stage itself; which she had, in a career Ilya described with the kind of reverence he reserved for no living choreographer. Now she sat at her station in a wooden chair she'd brought from home, spine straight as a barre, hair pinned in the same chignon she'd worn in every role, and she

kept a crystal dish of butterscotch candies beside her prompt book. No one touched them without permission.

But every new dancer who joined the company received one on their first performance.

Ilya's had come at seven, her palm flat between his shoulder blades propelling him onstage for his debut as a party-scene child after he'd frozen on his entrance cue.

"She pushes me," Ilya said, rolling the tennis ball with a wince. "With her hand, on my back—*go, go*—and I am falling onto stage like baby deer. After, she gives me candy and says, *Good, now you know worst part is over, everything after this is easy.*" He switched feet. "Is a lie, of course. Nothing after that was easy. But the candy was good."

Shane sat in the dressing room chair with one ankle crossed over his knee, his phone dark in his lap. He'd come in to confirm the matinee schedule and... That had taken approximately about forty seconds. He'd been here for twenty minutes now though, and Ilya was telling him about the crystal dish—Waterford, a gift from a retired principal—and how Ilya mailed Yelizaveta butterscotch from every city he toured in, and how she kept a map on the wall of the backstage corridor with pushpins marking each one.

"London, here. Tokyo, here. São Paulo." Ilya tapped imaginary locations in the air. "And now, Winnipeg. I must find butterscotch here before I leave, or she will be very offended. And you do not want Yelizaveta offended. She controls the fly system. People have... what is the word. Accidents."

"I know a place on Corydon that should have some," Shane said, and then heard himself and stopped.

Ilya looked up. His grin—the crooked one, the one that preceded most of Shane's worst decisions—widened. "You will take me?"

"I said I *know* a place, not that we'd go. Did you forget how busy we are? And, actually, I think they mostly do *chocolate*, not other candies and, I didn't say I'd—"

"You will take me. Tomorrow, before show? We will buy butterscotch for Yelizaveta and you will help me pick because you have better taste than me. In candy," Ilya added. "In other things, I have superior taste. Obviously."

"Obviously," Shane said flatly, and wrote *Corydon/butterscotch* in the margin of his cue sheet before he could stop himself.

The following day, Shane unplugged his Civic's block heater, tossing the stiff, frozen extension cord onto the snowbank before climbing in, and picked him up at two from the hotel.

Ilya climbed into the passenger seat of the Civic wearing a charcoal wool coat and pulled the seatbelt across his chest with one hand while the other landed on Shane's knee, squeezed

once, and withdrew. The whole gesture took two seconds. Shane's skin buzzed through his jeans for the next thirty.

Ilya settled back and looked him over in one indulgent, slow, sweep that went from top to bottom.

"You look pretty," he said.

Scoffing, Shane put the car in drive.

He'd changed his shirt three times before leaving. The dark green henley, the one Rose said made his freckles stand out, which was a stupid reason to wear a shirt and also the exact reason he'd worn it. The first one was boring. The second one just hadn't felt right, which was not a thought Shane Hollander had about clothing, ever, and the fact that he was having it now about a trip to a *candy shop* was information he intended to bury in a shallow grave and never revisit.

Ilya adjusted the seat back two notches, stretched his legs into the footwell, crossed his ankles, and looked around the car's interior. The coat was new, or at least new to Shane, and underneath it Ilya wore a black crewneck that fit close enough to remind Shane of every muscle he'd had his hands on every night before. He was wearing a nice watch on one wrist, there was a ring on a finger, he had sunglasses clipped to his collar and—and—was that *cologne* he was smelling?

Shane had catalogued all of this in the four seconds between Ilya opening the door and sitting down.

"You also dressed up," Shane said, eyes on the road.

"And? Do I also look pretty?"

"Pfft. No. You don't look pretty." Shane checked his mirror, signaled, pulled onto Pembina. "You look like you always look."

"Stunning, then."

"I did *not* say that."

"You will also not *deny* it because while you are stubborn, you are not a *liar*."

Shane didn't deny it. He also didn't look over, because Ilya was watching him with that particular tilt of his head, chin dipped, eyes warm under his dark brows, and if Shane met that look while operating a vehicle they'd end up in a snowbank on Corydon before they made it to the candy shop.

He pulled into traffic. Ilya's hand went to the radio dial without asking, of course without asking, and skipped past two talk stations and a Christmas jingle before landing on something with a low, rolling beat and a woman's voice singing in French. He left it. His thumb tapped twice against his knee, finding the rhythm, and Shane recognized the song a few bars late:

Stromae, one of the older tracks, that might've showed up on European playlists and Canadian ones alike.

Ilya's head tipped back against the headrest. His eyes half-closed.

"So. Tell me about where we are going. I have not done much exploring in my time here between practices, and with no metro or car..."

"I mean you could've used the buses."

"Mm. I rather my chauffeur here drive me. Now. Tell me things."

Spoiled prick. And still, Shane found himself *telling him things*.

"Corydon used to be the Italian neighborhood, before I moved here. You can still see it in some of the older signage, a few of the restaurants..." Shane turned onto Stafford, heading west. "I've heard from people that it's changed a lot since then, more shops now, more turnover. But I only know it as I know it *now*. I like this area, and they do the lights every winter through the trees along the sidewalk, and in summer the patios spill out onto the street and you can't drive down it without someone's chair in your lane. The food here, Winnipeg in general, is also like... great. Better than Ottawa, even though my childhood friends and neighbors would murder me to hear me say it."

"Your secret is safe with me."

"Good. Because I would like not to die." He switched lanes. "Rose found the candy shop our first year here. She dragged me in after a Saturday matinee because she wanted saltwater taffy and I didn't want to go home yet, this is when we were still sharing an apartment, and we ended up staying for an hour." He paused. "It's... one of the neighborhoods that still feels like a neighborhood. Ottawa had that too, in certain pockets, but this is—smaller. Closer together. You learn a street here and it learns you back. Does that... shit, that doesn't really make sense, does it?"

"I understand just fine. You love this city."

Shane checked his blind spot, then merged. "Yeah. I do."

"And Ottawa? You love that city too?"

"Of course," Shane said, "I grew up there. And my parents still live there and, yeah, they fly in to visit and they'll be here for the last show, but it's not the same as having them, like, *close*. And I miss the Mayfair; it's this awesome single-screen movie theatre there..."

They drove south on Osborne, surprisingly easy back and forth talk and music filling the car and the wipers squealing against a scrim of frost on the windshield. It was easy. That was the part Shane kept circling back to, how easy it had become to be in a small space with this man and not need to fill it, but also to *want* to just tell him things.

Corydon had strung white lights through the bare trees along the sidewalk. The snow was still clean, thick along the curbs, and the afternoon had that flat, blindingly white prairie glare that

only meant *more* was coming. Shane parked a block past the shop, boots crunching and squeaking on the hard-packed snow ruts along the curb, and when he got out of the car, he saw Ilya pausing on the sidewalk with his hands in his coat pockets staring at the pigtail protruding from the grille of his car.

“I have been meaning to ask about this wire, I see them on many cars here.”

“That? It’s for the block heater... it keeps the engine working so I can turn the car back on when it drops below minus twenty or so. It gets cold in Russia too, don’t tell me you don’t winterize cars there?”

“Of course we do, but we use autostarts to run ten or fifteen minute or a *Webasto* using gas to heat engine. We do not plug them in like toaster.”

Shane rolled his eyes, because of *course* they had found some other cultural thing to argue about even though autostarts were *also* a thing here, fed the meter, and herded them both towards the entire point of this outing.

The shop was called *Wolfbird*, with a stylized painted loon on the glass door and handlettered hours underneath. Ilya held the door open and Shane walked through, and Ilya’s palm grazed the small of his back on the way in—a touch so brief it could have been accidental if Ilya had ever done anything by accident. He’d started doing this over the last week. Shane had not asked him to stop.

The warmth hit first, then the smell: fresh cocoa butter and burnt sugar layered over darker espresso notes and the roasted edge of caramelizing honey. The shop was narrow, barely wide enough for two people to pass without turning sideways, and every wall was shelved from floor to ceiling with glass jars: maple taffy in waxed paper twists, sponge toffee in jagged slabs, licorice ropes coiled like dock lines, hand-poured caramels the color of old pennies. A cabinet near the register held rows of bonbons behind curved glass, each one painted like a tiny lacquered egg. Deeper in, past a display of chocolate bark studded with Saskatoon berries and pistachios, the shelves shifted to imports like Swedish fish in actual tins, French nougat, boxes of Turkish delight dusted in powdered sugar.

A woman behind the counter was breaking a sheet of toffee on a marble slab with a small brass hammer, and she looked up when the door chimed and said, “Afternoon, boys. Holler if you need anything.”

“I will be needing *many* things,” Ilya was already moving down the first aisle, pulling jars toward him to read labels, picking things up and putting them back, touching everything. He’d grabbed a basket at some point, and was already stuffing things into it.

Mentally, his file expanded: *Ilya Rozanov... has a sweet tooth?*

Shaking his head, Shane thought back to that time with Rose, with the saltwater taffy, and then the times he’d come here by himself, like that one October to buy yuzu truffles and maple crème bars for his mother’s birthday that Yuna had eaten in two days and then texted him about for a week—*Where did you find these, Shane? Do they ship? Can you get more?*—so he would absolutely be buying more of those today.

His father David had simpler tastes and would happily demolish a pound of chocolate-covered peanuts, so he'd get those too.

And butterscotch... that... should be right over there, on the far shelf on the left.

He expected Ilya to go straight for it.

Ilya, of course, did not go straight for it.

He made his way down the entire first aisle, picking up jars, reading labels, unscrewing lids to smell things he had no intention of buying along with things he was *very* keen to throw into his basket.

He opened a sample tin of smoked salt caramels and ate one and closed his eyes and ate a second—*I will buy this, Shane, no need to call police*—and stood there with his thumb and forefinger pinched together, still working the last of it off his teeth. Then he brought the tin to the counter and asked the woman if she made them herself, and when she said yes he asked how long they took, and when she said six hours per batch he leaned both elbows on the glass and started asking about the salt; where she sourced it, whether she'd tried Maldon versus flake, whether the smoke was in the salt or the butter.

The woman lit up, and within two minutes she was pulling a tray from under the counter to show him the batch she'd finished that morning, and Ilya was nodding along and tasting the difference between yesterday's and today's like a man who had opinions about butter.

Did he have opinions about butter?

Ilya Rozanov... secret gourmand?

He probably did. Shane was learning that Ilya had opinions about everything that went into his body, and that most of those opinions were correct, and that this was annoying.

Shane drifted toward the imported chocolates while Ilya talked. He found the yuzu truffles in the same, familiar, gold box, and tucked them under his arm, picked up a pound bag of chocolate-covered peanuts for his father, then found the maple crème bars stylized like little leaves in their tin. From here he could see Ilya in profile at the counter, one elbow on the glass, his other hand moving as he spoke. The woman had come around from behind the register to stand next to him, and she was showing him a tray of hand-painted bonbons, pointing at each one and explaining—Shane caught fragments, *cardamom, birch syrup, the rosemary is from my garden*—and Ilya bent over the tray with his whole body angled toward her, asking follow-ups, tasting what she offered, and every piece of his attention locked on this woman he'd met four minutes ago.

He did this. He always did this and it was always so effortless.

Shane had watched him do it with Rose, with Jackie, with the corps dancers, with the journalist from the *Free Press* after opening night. Ilya Rozanov walked into a room and people handed him pieces of themselves, their best stories, their newest work, their laughter,

because he made them feel like the most interesting person he'd ever met. Like they were the principal dancer in life, on the center stage, beneath the spotlight of his focus.

And maybe they were, in the moment. Maybe that was the trick of it: Ilya wasn't performing interest. He *was* interested, genuinely and completely, for exactly as long as he stood in front of you.

The woman said something Shane couldn't hear, and Ilya tipped his head back and laughed and she laughed with him, flushed and pleased, and Shane's fingers dug into the truffle box and he looked away. Studied the label on a jar of honeycomb, reading it twice without absorbing a word.

Was... was he... *jealous*?

He was still staring at the honeycomb when Ilya's hand found his wrist.

"Shane. Come, come—you must try this." Ilya's fingers circled his wrist and *pulled*, not hard, but with that specific Rozanov insistence that assumed you were already following, and Shane let himself be towed to the counter. Ilya pressed a bonbon into his palm and it was small and dark chocolate, painted with a single gold stripe. "Birch syrup and black cardamom. Tell me this is not the *best* thing you have eaten."

Shane bit into it. The shell cracked, and the ganache inside was smoky and sweet and strange, like someone had distilled a campfire into chocolate.

"Well?" Ilya still had his fingers around Shane's wrist. His thumb rested against Shane's pulse point, and Shane could feel his own heartbeat pushing back against the pressure.

"It's good."

"*Good*. He says *good*." Ilya groaned and turned to the woman. "You see what I deal with? This man, he has no poetry. I apologize. It is not *good*, these are excellent."

"And *you* are a sweet talker," she laughed again. "You must have your hands full with this one, don't you hon?"

Shane blinked and realized she was talking to *him*, smiling at *him*, and—oh shit—she must think—

"Luckily he is *extremely* skilled with those hands. You see *Nutcracker* at the Royal Ballet? His show, all his hard work. Now..." Ilya let go of his wrist, but slowly, his fingers trailing across Shane's palm before dropping away. Then he leaned back on the counter and asked the woman if she shipped internationally, because he knew a woman in Moscow who controlled a fly system and needed to be kept happy with *excellent* chocolates like these even after Nutcracker season.

Shane stood there with chocolate melting on his tongue and the warmth of Ilya's thumb still pressed into his pulse and thought: *the last show is in a few days. He leave in a few days.*

He'd looked up the candy shop's hours last night. Had checked that they'd be open before the evening show and mapped the drive from Ilya's hotel in his head while brushing his teeth, calculating parking, calculating time. He'd done all of that and then gone to sleep and woken up and driven to the hotel and not once considered not going because... because...

Because... he.... wanted this.

The wanting was so plain and so large that he couldn't look at it directly, the way you couldn't stare into the stage lights without going blind. He wanted to dance. He wanted Saturday afternoons in candy shops. He wanted Ilya's hand on his wrist and chocolate and every ordinary afternoon stretched out ahead of them like a road with no turnoff. Wanting, wanting. He had not *wanted* like this in years.

He wanted to be the person Ilya turned to and searched for after charming the room into oblivion, the fixed point he circled back to.

And in fourteen days Ilya would fly to Moscow and all of it would be a thing that had happened once in a Winnipeg December.

"She is shipping to Moscow for me," Ilya announced, appearing at his elbow again, smelling like caramel, sweet and burnt at the edges. He held up a small paper bag the woman had pressed into his hands. "And she gives me samples. Now. *You*. What do you like here, Hollander? You did not like the perfect bonbon, so show me. And then we find the butterscotch for Yelizaveta before I spend my entire per diem on chocolate."

"You really like chocolate, hm?"

"Only the kind worth eating: dark. But yes. I admit that even I have a flaw. But now, again, I want to see what it is that *you* like Mr. Boring."

"I thought we were getting butterscotch for your Yelislava?"

"*Yelizaveta*, you are lucky she is old and far away and cannot hear you butcher her name like this. And, yes we are, and *also* I want to know what you like. These are two separate things."

Shane looked at the shelves. He'd never had a strong preference for candy—he was specific about food in ways that embarrassed him when he thought about them too long, but candy wasn't the specificity. "I don't really have a candy thing, I don't have a sweet tooth like it seems you do."

"So you like *nothing*?"

"Well... I do like mochi ice cream."

Ilya frowned. "What is moshi?"

"*Mochi*. It's a rice cake. Pounded rice, very sticky, and they wrap it around ice cream. My favorite is red bean."

“Red... bean.” Ilya said it like Shane had told him his favorite flavor was concrete. “You eat *bean* ice cream.”

“Red bean is sweet and it’s almost like chocolate.”

“*Chocolate* is chocolate.”

“It’s—just trust me. My Mom taught me how to make mochi and it’s delicious; you cook it down with sugar and it becomes a dough and there’s a lot of cornstarch involved. And the red bean... okay, yes, it’s *not* chocolate, but it’s subtle and nutty and not too sweet and used in a lot of Japanese desserts. It’s *good*.”

“*Bean*,” Ilya said again, tasting the word. “I am... going to trust you, but I want you to know that I am trusting you *very much* right now.”

“You don’t have to eat it.”

“Of course I have to eat it. You like it, so I eat it. This is how it works.” He said it simply, like a fact of engineering, and Shane’s ears went hot. Ilya either didn’t notice or pretended not to. “In Russia we have *plombir*. It is *real* ice cream with *real* cream and eggs and vanilla... Soviet recipe from even before my parents. My mother made it.” He mimed stirring, and the motion was borrowed from a woman’s hand based on how it was smaller, quicker, and more decisive than his own usual gesticulation. “With candied fruit; cherries and apricots. She soaked them in kirsch for days and it was *incredible*. Lyosha and I would steal them from the jar sometimes when no one was looking, but... they are better in the ice cream. The kitchen smelled like a church at Christmas. Plombir and your bean mochi—I don’t think these are the same thing. But. Same feeling, maybe.”

The stirring hand dropped. Shane had watched that hand do incredible lifts and things, and now it hung at Ilya’s side, emptied of a motion borrowed from a dead woman’s kitchen, and Shane understood that he had just been shown something *very* rare and fragile, and that Ilya had given it anyway.

“Who’s Lyosha?”

“My older brother, Andrei.”

“Oh... I didn’t know you had a brother.”

“*Have*, actually; and you would not know because I do not often waste breath about him.” Ilya corrected, and Shane realized the distinction mattered because Ilya *had* a mother at one point too. “But yes, *have*. Just as I would like to *have* and try this mochi-bean creation.”

“I mean, I can... sort of make it. It’s not hard, but it’s sticky and mine never look pretty the way that they should when I make them so I, uh, sort of *don’t* make it.”

Ilya frowned, and Shane was already trying to fix it in the next breath.: “*But* there’s a place off on Des Meurons called *Dug and Betty’s*... um. They won’t have plombir or mochi. But they *do* have good house made ice cream if... you wanted to go. With me.”

Ilya hooked up an eyebrow, that green-flecked hazel steady on Shane's face, and Shane held the look because he was learning, slowly, not to flinch away from it.

"Hollander," Ilya said. "Are you asking me on a date?"

"I—ah—I mean—"

"*Bohze moy*, Hollander," Ilya rolling his eyes dramatically. "Okay. Yes. I will go with you to get ice cream on another day. *And* I will be buying these."

He reached past Shane for the butterscotch jar on the top shelf, his arm brushing Shane's shoulder on the way up, and came down with it cradled against his chest. He unscrewed the lid and checked inside and found gold wrappers and his whole face opened.

He bought three dozen, plus an alarming amount of dark chocolate, plus an entire gift basket to send back to his friend Svetlana.

Shane bought the yuzu truffles, the maple crème bars, a pound of peanuts for his father, and a box of the smoked salt caramels because Ilya had eaten half they tray of samples meant for other customers and Shane's manners wouldn't let him leave without compensating for it, and the woman wrapped everything in tissue paper and wished them a good show tonight, and Ilya said, "You are coming? Which night? I will dance better if I know you are watching," and the woman flushed and called him a terminal flirt and Shane bit the inside of his cheek to keep from smiling because she was *right*.

They walked back to the car. The cold hit Shane's face after the warmth of the shop and he breathed it in—the clean bite of it, the smell of snow and woodsmoke from the restaurant chimneys along the block. Ilya swung the bag at his side and knocked his elbow into Shane's arm, once, and Shane knocked him back, and they walked like that for the rest of the block, shoulders bumping every few steps, not talking, the *Wolfbird* bag crinkling between them in the cold.

"Fuck, oh fuck, *Ilya*—"

Later, in the hotel bed, Shane's back arched off the sheets and his hips tried to follow, tried to chase, but Ilya's arms were locked around his thighs, thumbs dug into the muscle hard enough to bruise, and he was *held*. Pinned open and kept exactly where Ilya wanted him while that mouth worked him with a focus that bordered on devotional—long, dragging strokes of his tongue followed by the wet, tight seal of his lips, and then the suction, god, the *suction*, pulling Shane's cock deeper into the slick heat of his throat until Shane's vision swam and his fingers twisted in the sheets and tore them free from one corner of the mattress.

On the nightstand, one of the boxes of chocolates from Wolfbird sat open, two squares missing.

Ilya had eaten one in the elevator, bitten it clean in half and let the other half melt on his tongue while he looked at Shane with those heavy-lidded hazel eyes. Then he'd pressed the second square to Shane's lower lip with his thumb, and the chocolate had been bitter and

earthy and good, and the kiss that followed tasted like both of them and cocoa butter and recklessness.

Now Ilya was between his legs and Shane was trying not to make the kind of sounds that would carry through the hotel walls, and he was failing. He could feel it building—the hot, liquid tightening low in his belly, his thighs shaking against Ilya’s grip, his breathing gone ragged and thin. He reached down and found Ilya’s hair and fisted it, not to guide but to hold on, and Ilya growled around him—a vibration Shane felt in his *spine*—and swallowed him deeper, nose pressed against skin, throat working, and Shane’s hips bucked against those iron arms and went nowhere.

“I’m—*fuck*—Ilya, I’m going to—”

Ilya only hummed though, encouraging him on, like this was just one more sweet for him to sample, and he tightened his grip on Shane’s thighs and hollowed his cheeks and Shane came with Ilya’s name behind his teeth and his free hand fisted in the pillowcase so hard the seam bit into his palm. His body locked, every muscle drawn taut, his back a rigid arch off the bed, and Ilya held him through it—mouth still on him, swallowing, unhurried, easing him down with slower strokes until Shane’s spine gave out and he collapsed flat against the mattress, chest heaving, skin prickling with sweat.

Ilya stayed where he was for a few seconds. Forehead resting against Shane’s hip, his breath coming hot and uneven against the crease of Shane’s thigh. His thumbs loosened from the bruise-deep grip but didn’t leave, tracing absent shapes into the marks he’d left there, and Shane’s hand was still in his hair, fingers slack now, petting through the damp curls without any coordination or intent.

“You taste good, Shane. Maybe better than chocolates.”

“I...”

Then Ilya crawled back up the bed, one arm dragging across Shane’s stomach, and reached over him for the chocolate box. He snapped off a square along the scored line by feel, and put it in his mouth. He settled with his head on Shane’s chest, mouth working the chocolate slowly, letting it melt, and Shane’s hand found his hair again. His heartbeat was still hammering under Ilya’s ear. He could feel Ilya’s stubble catching on his skin with every small shift of his jaw and then when he was done:

“Gimme kiss.”

And he did, of course he did, and it was dark chocolate, and sweet and *Ilya*, and Shane’s fingers moved through his hair in slow, brainless passes while his breathing came back down to something human.

There were only a handful of days left now, and there were other things Shane learned during the run, in no particular order:

Ilya kissed his cross before every entrance. Quick, automatic—his thumb and forefinger finding the gold at his collarbone in the dark, pressing it to his lips for half a second while dancers jostled past and stagehands rolled set pieces into position around him. Shane had first noticed it on opening night, and by the third show he'd stopped pretending he wasn't looking for it.

Ilya wasn't religious. He'd said so himself, offhand, over takeout one night—*God and I, we have understanding. I don't bother Him, He doesn't bother me*. But his mother *had* been. And the cross was hers. So every night, in the thirty seconds before the wings cleared and the lights shifted and Ilya transformed from man to character, he put his mouth to the small warm piece of her he still carried and then he walked onstage.

Shane recognized the gesture in his own superstitions, his own meaningless, meaningful, rituals. He did his own version of it every time he held his phone to his lips when he was *thinking* about how to answer a text, or every time he ran a thumb down the edge of his cue sheet before house lights dropped: *I am here. I am about to do this. Let it be enough*.

Two people pressing their mouths to small things before the dark. He did not think about what it meant that he'd started watching for Ilya's version. Maybe it was the same way he watched windows in his apartment complex when he felt alone and needed proof that someone was home, proof that the house was not yet empty.

Ilya ate dark chocolate between shows. Most of it was from his mountainous hoard from *Wolfbird*, Shane presumed, but maybe from other sources too.

He'd snap a square off whatever bar he kept in his dressing room and his eyes would half-close and he wouldn't chew right away, instead letting it melt there a moment on his tongue, and only then after would he indulge and then when it was gone would he snap the next square off and do it again. Shane knew this because he'd watched Ilya do it through six shows now: standing in the dressing room doorway pretending to check the schedule, or catching it sidelong from the wings while Ilya sat on a prop crate and worked through his second square of the night.

He knew that Ilya preferred seventy-percent cacao now. He knew he preferred chocolate even *more* when it was paired with espresso.

He knew Ilya's thumb always found the scored line by feel.

None of this was information Shane had gone looking for. He'd collected it the way he collected everything about Rozanov lately—by failing, repeatedly, to look anywhere else.

Ilya's accent thickened when he was tired. The articles disappeared first—*the* and *a* dropped from sentences as though the exhaustion couldn't sustain the extra syllables—and then the syntax loosened, clauses rearranging into Russian word-order until his English came apart at the joints. After another evening show, Ilya had leaned against the wall outside the dressing room and said, "Tonight is good. Audience very warm. This one I am liking. And... you are coming, yes? To hotel?" and Shane had understood all of it including the parts that weren't in the words.

They fucked at his hotel after the show, and afterward, Ilya called down for room service before Shane had finished catching his breath.

Shane lay on his back and listened to Ilya order while the suitcase sat open on the luggage rack and the duvet hung off the foot of the bed where they'd kicked it. The room looked the same as it always did. One mug sat on the kitchenette counter beside a toothbrush standing in a water glass, and on the luggage rack the suitcase gaped open, never unpacked.

It was the room of a man who could leave in twenty minutes and probably had before, from other rooms in other cities.

He knew Ilya was leaving, and soon.

He knew that living in a hotel, even a nice one, must've been miserable to some extent.

"I should've pushed harder on the apartment," Shane said, when Ilya hung up. "Before the run started. I should've just gone ahead and signed a lease when you wouldn't answer me."

Ilya dropped onto the mattress beside him, close enough that his shoulder pressed into Shane's. "I should've answered your calls, your emails, and not thrown your welcome packet in garbage."

Ilya turned his head on the pillow. Up close, his eyes were lighter than they looked onstage—more green than brown, the hazel flecked through with gold in the lamplight. He studied Shane for a long moment, and Shane held still under it, because Ilya looked at people the way he read choreography: fast, thorough, missing nothing.

"I am fine, Shane. I can see this bothers *you* though. I don't mind this room. I have lived worse. In St. Petersburg, my first year with Bolshoi, I share apartment the size of this bathroom with a corps boy who eats raw garlic every morning for his immune system. *Every* morning. I am smelling garlic in my dreams. I am smelling garlic *now*, ten years later, if I think about it for too long." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "This is a palace compared to then, so you do not need to look at me like I am some sad orphan in a Dickens book. I have pool, a gym, and people that come and clean up after me every day. I send to have laundry done like a prince. I have steak and fresh bread and chocolate cake coming up on a pretty silver tray and I have just fucked a beautiful man in my bed... and... I think I have time to do so *again*. This is a far thing from a tragedy, and I am able to find myself an apartment when I will need one."

Room service arrived twenty minutes later: steak for Ilya, a grilled salmon filet with rice and vegetables for Shane which was... surprising considering Ilya had ordered for him without asking.

"I ask Rose Landry what things you like," Ilya said, already cutting into his own food, as if that explained everything.

They ate in bed, Ilya cross-legged with the tray balanced on his thighs and Shane partway using an end table for his own, and Ilya reached over and stole a green bean from his plate at

one point, followed by replacing it with a piece of steak, and neither of them said anything about that.

“Tell me things,” Shane said. He had a forkful of salmon halfway to his mouth and a duvet pooled around his waist and the countdown in his head had not stopped ticking since the candy shop.

Ilya told him things.

He told him about Moscow in December. How the Bolshoi hung lights along the facade that turned the whole building gold. How his apartment there had a radiator that clanked so hard his downstairs neighbor called the police once, convinced someone was being killed or beaten to death. How the old woman across the hall left him soup on four days because she thought he was too thin, and he ate every bowl even though it was terrible because she stood in her doorway watching until he finished, and you don’t *do* that to a woman like that.

“Babushka Polina,” he said. “She is eighty-four and she could kill me with her hands if I disappoint her.” He said it easily. Fondly. The way he said most things about the life he’d built around the hole his mother had left: brick by brick, person by person, filling the space with people who fed him and scolded him and stood in doorways making sure. Suddenly it was making more and more sense why he flirted with anyone with legs, why he gravitated to those who bossed him around.

Ilya was full of affection and hardly had enough people to give it to. And he *liked* those who cared enough to boss him around.

And he kept talking—not only that night but in the days after, between Acts, in the wings, in the parking lot by his car with two paper cups of coffee from Tims:

I got you one, it is not good. I am not sorry.

Ilya mentioned *syryniki* on Sunday mornings while Shane unlocked his office, and Shane learned this was farmer’s cheese pancakes that made the kitchen smell like vanilla. He heard about Fountain Season in Moscow while Ilya stretched his calves before the Wednesday matinee, one heel hooked on the barre, his chin resting on his knee.

He’d said “my mother’s favorite” about a Tchaikovsky passage during Act Two, pointing at the ceiling to indicate the orchestra. Ilya had told Shane at the Christmas village that Irina was dead, and Shane had held that knowledge gingerly ever since, not sure when it was safe to set down.

Ilya talked about his mother the way he talked about weather in cities he’d toured through: casually, without setup, dropping her name into sentences the way he dropped sugar into his coffee. He carried it like his cross, like a *key* maybe, a key to a room he visited often, and sometimes he let Shane see inside.

Ten days left. Then nine. They were in single digits now. They still had to go get ice cream, Shane thought, chewing on his lip, they still had to—did they need to *talk* about this? What if

it was only working *because* they weren't talking about it? It was a perfect winter thing, a temporary thing, maybe, melting like a snowflake already, and Ilya was only so free because he knew it would be over and he would be gone, and that was why they were so close now, why he brought him coffees in the stupid parking lot and visited his office so often.

Hayden brought it up the next time they were alone together, which happened to be when they were in the booth during intermission, Hayden perched on the counter with his water bottle, Shane at the desk running through Act Two notes. The house lights were up. Hundreds of people milled in the lobby below, buying overpriced concessions and checking their phones.

A normal night.

"So I need to ask," Hayden said, "and I want you to know that I'm asking as a friend and also as someone who is genuinely confused."

Shane's pen did not stop moving. "Okay."

"Why does Rozanov keep finding you? Like, specifically *you*. Jackie said she saw him in your office yesterday eating your weird healthy granola bars. And Rose gave me this look when I brought it up that made me feel like I was missing something, which—do I *want* to know what I'm missing?"

Shane set the pen down. He owed Hayden at least eye contact for this.

"We... get along better now," he said. "That's all. I know how to put up with him."

Hayden waited. The lobby noise swelled below them—intermission conversations, the clink of wine glasses, somebody's kid shrieking near the merch table. Hayden let the noise fill the space Shane wasn't filling, which was a move Jackie had probably taught him, because Hayden on his own would've barreled straight through with more questions.

"Okay," Hayden said when he finally lost his patience with waiting. "Sure. You get along. That's nice. Except three weeks ago you wanted to strangle him with a fly line, and now he's camped out in your office eating your snacks and you've got this whole..." He gestured at Shane's entire body with a hand. "Thing."

"What are you talking about?"

"You have a *thing*, Shane. You're doing that thing where your whole face goes neutral and your voice goes flat and you think it makes you harder to read. It doesn't. My kids are better liars than you. The only time you go blank like that is when you're freaking out. I know you, Shane."

"Look," Hayden rubbed his face, clearly gathering himself. "Listen. I think I'm last *to* get it, but I think I get it. I do."

"Y-you... you do?"

“Fuck, Shane. Yeah. And you don’t need to look so horrified. I sort of figured it out a while ago when you were dating Rose fuckin’ *Landry*, who is an eleven out of ten for any man with eyes, unless they’re... you know... not... using their eyes to look at... ah... *women*.”

“Um.”

“Listen, I know I am not saying this right. And... I’m not using *my* eyes to look at men!”

Was... was this a fever dream? Was he hallucinating?

“I’m straight as a board but even *I* can see why someone would be into Rozanov. He’s charming in that fucked up asshole way people like. He’s talented, which I *hate*. He walks into a room and every person in it turns around, and yeah, I’ve watched him be surprisingly decent to the kids and to Rose and to basically everyone who isn’t me. Fine. And I was worried that he wasn’t being decent to *you* after that Saturday but... you’re all buddy buddy now and I worry. ‘Cause he does this *everywhere*, Shane. This is what Rozanov does. He shows up, he’s dazzling, people fall all over themselves, and then he *leaves*. That’s the gig. He is a guest artist. He goes home.”

Shane knew all of this. Of course he knew this. He knew this at two in the morning while Ilya’s hotel room still smelled like room service and sex. He knew it in the suitcase that never got unpacked. He knew this from the entire life back in Moscow—brother, apartment, Svetlana, the clanking radiator, Babushka Polina and her terrible soup—a whole life waiting for him on the other side of an ocean that he would *return* to.

“And remember what we talked about Shane... what I said before? His reputation?” Hayden continued. “You *know* he’s got a reputation. He’s a serial flirt at best and at worst he’s just... working through the company one warm body at a time until the contract ends and he flies home to Moscow and does it again somewhere else. And you’re *you*.”

“The fuck does that mean?”

Hayden threw his hands up. “It means that you’re *you*! And I worry about you! I want to punch that fucker in the face! I want him to trip down the stairs and have a career ending injury because of what he did to you to make you so upset that you got *sick*—”

“It wasn’t like that, you don’t understand—”

“And I don’t need to, Shane. I would deck anyone for you.” Hayden’s water bottle crinkled in his grip. “I love you. The no homo way, but I love you, and I am freaking the fuck out because I think there are heart emojis in your eyes lately and *you* might love someone who doesn’t deserve you.”

Heart emojis. Shane’s hand found the edge of his pen and pressed until the clip bit into the pad of his thumb, a small sharp point to organize himself around.

That Svetlana mention snagged—Svetlana, who Ilya had texted at the Christmas market. Svetlana, his childhood friend from the Mariinsky, who he called Sveta, who he sent photos of ridiculous moose ornaments to. Shane had filed her under *friend* because Ilya had said

friend, and Ilya didn't lie, he was pathologically honest about almost everything, but Hayden didn't know that.

From the outside, Svetlana looked like one more name on a long list.

"I'm not one of the corps girls with a crush, Hayden."

"No, you're not. Which is why I'm worried, because *you* don't get crushes. You don't get *anything*. In four years I've never seen you look at anyone the way you—" He stopped himself and recalibrated. "I don't want to know what else you're doing when you think no one is looking because I *know* you are fucking on the props."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I handle the props! Which! By the way! *Ew!* And because Jackie noticed, and then I noticed, and we've been married long enough that I know what it looks like when someone starts rearranging their life around another person in ways they think are invisible. He's here for another week and then he's on a plane and you're still here, running shows and dealing with that sudden shift and I don't want to watch you go through that."

The booth was warm. Too warm. The heating vents blew directly onto the desk, and Shane could feel sweat gathering at his collar, the booth shrinking around him, the walls of the conversation narrowing with it.

Below, the lobby lights flickered with the two-minute warning for the audience to return to their seats.

Seven days. Hayden had counted too. Or Jackie had counted, and Hayden had absorbed it, because that was how they worked—Jackie noticed and Hayden cared and between the two of them nothing stayed hidden for long.

"I appreciate you saying this," Shane said, and meant it, and hated that he meant it.

"But you're not going to *listen* are you?"

"I... can we just get through the rest of the season?"

Hayden looked at him for a long moment, then nodded once and picked up his headset.

"Alright, man. But Shane, when he leaves, and he *will* leave, just... make sure you've still got your own shit in order. That's all I'm asking. You can call me anytime."

The house lights dimmed. Shane put his headset on and called the Act Two standby, and his hands were steady, and his cues were clean, and below him Ilya walked into the wings in full Nutcracker costume with that looseness in his shoulders that meant he was warmed up and ready, and Shane watched him from the booth and thought: *seven days*.

He thought: *Hayden is right*.

He thought: *I don't want him to leave*.

The rest of the show went without a hitch. And why would there be a hitch? The production was, by every measure Shane could quantify and several he couldn't, the best Nutcracker the RWB had staged in a decade. The *Free Press* arts critic had used the word *transcendent* in her review and then used it again two paragraphs later as if she'd forgotten she'd already spent it. The *Globe and Mail* ran a feature. The CBC had called Bood's office twice about a potential documentary segment. Standing ovations had become routine by show four, which Shane knew was statistically unusual because he'd kept a tally in the margin of his cue book—not on purpose, not at first, but the data had accumulated the way all of his data accumulated, and by show six he'd stopped pretending he wasn't tracking it.

And Ilya.

Rozanov.

The reviews talked about Ilya the way they talked about celestial events akin to meteor showers, like fantastical phenomena to be witnessed. *A revelation.* Shane had read that in one review and then closed the tab before he could read the rest, but the sentence had already gotten in, burrowing past his defenses like a draft under a door and bringing with it cold. Out of support for their principal, or just maybe to remind the Canadians who their star actually belonged to, the Bolshoi had reposted two of the RWB's promotional photos on their official Instagram. A choreographer from the Paris Opera had left a comment in French which Shane read at two in the morning and immediately wished he hadn't, because it was a job offer wrapped in flattery, and the flattery was deserved, and the job was in *Paris*.

Paris. Or Moscow. Or London, or any stage in the world that would scramble to book the dancer who'd turned a mid-budget Canadian Nutcracker into a national talking point. Ilya Rozanov had walked into the RWB weeks ago and turned Shane's tightly managed production inside out, and now all the major companies that already knew his name also knew he had more range than ever before, slipping into localizations and new methods that were different from his roots. He'd always been famous.

Now he was *ascendant*, and ascendant people left.

And Shane... did what he always did. He filed that, sorted it, and it was stamped and labeled with *This Has Always Been Temporary* or maybe even *This Is What Is Supposed To Happen*, because this was the thing that anyone should want or hope for a promising dancer. And it was good for Shane too because it meant he'd succeed also; Shane who was indispensable from the wings, who'd built his career out of being the person who held up the spotlight for someone else to be seen better.

Of course Ilya was leaving. That was the entire physics of it. They went up and the people holding the ropes stayed on the ground. Shane was a parenthetical in his highlight reel. A footnote. *Enjoyable winter fling with local crew member, nice ass, Winnipeg, December.*

And Shane, with his feet so firmly planted on the ground, somehow hadn't planned for after that rapture when he was left behind.

He was a man who planned everything.

Everything.

He could plan a full production load-in across three venues in different time zones and languages. He'd done it *twice*, once for a touring Swan Lake that hit Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto in the same week, and he'd slept for four hours a night for six days and it all ran like fucking clockwork. Then he'd done it *again* for Romeo and Juliet on an even tighter schedule.

He was good at logistics. He was good at seeing the whole board.

Shane had contingency spreadsheets for his contingency spreadsheets, backup sheets laminated and filed by act, emergency protocols for emergencies that had never happened and probably never would—and he had not once, in six weeks, allowed himself to think past December 24th.

Ilya *made* him not think. Ilya's mouth on his neck made schedules dissolve right alongside sense. Ilya sitting cross-legged on the dressing room floor talking about anything—his mother, Moscow, or butterscotch candies—made Shane forget he owned a *calendar*.

This was the trick, and Shane had fallen for it completely: *you couldn't dread a deadline you refused to look at.*

He was looking at it now.

Shane made it to his office.

That was the benchmark he was holding himself to: get to the office, close the door, sit down, do not fall apart in a hallway where anyone could see. He'd managed it. So:

Success!

He dropped into the chair, set his headset on the desk, and stared at the wall of production schedules pinned above the whiteboard, and the wall stared back.

He picked up his pen and drew a line through today's date on the run sheet. That left seven boxes. A week with matinees and evening shows, with the last one on December 24th that would strike the set and the Kingdom of Sweets would cease to exist, and the company would scatter for the holidays, and Ilya Rozanov would land at Sheremetyevo some fifteen to twenty hours later after running the YWG to SVO circuit and walk back into the life that had been waiting for him all along.

And that was just the thing, wasn't it? The Nutcracker and the prince and the whole *goddamn* story always ended the same way and Shane knew it, he knew it, he knew that Clara woke up.

The Nutcracker she'd danced with was a dream.

He'd always *been* a dream.

Shane set the pen down.

Heart emojis, Hayden had said.

The worst part was that Hayden wasn't even wrong, and he was the densest member of their friend group when it came to matters of the heart. No, the worst part was that Shane could map the whole thing if he let himself: the Christmas market and the mulled cider and the ridiculous moose ornament and then cross kisses and seventy-percent dark chocolate, room service, that voice, *his* voice: *You are coming, yes? To hotel? Shane?* There was the way Ilya's whole body had tipped into Shane after they'd finished on opening night—that stupid, devastating lean, temple kisses, a sigh and—

And of course he'd clung to it all. He *wanted* it. Ilya Rozanov made it easy to want him, and Shane wanted, and wanted, and he'd filed it all away.

And he, stupidly, had missed that every scrap, every catalogued detail, had an expiration date stapled to the back of it.

His phone sat face-down on the desk. Ilya had texted sometime after he'd gotten off stage, and Shane had felt the buzz and ignored it, which was new, which was a policy he'd implemented tonight in the booth while the audience was still applauding, a policy with no name and no logic beyond the sour, crawling certainty that if he kept letting Ilya close, the leaving would *break* him.

Withdrawal was the only tool Shane had ever trusted.

You couldn't lose what you'd already let go of. You couldn't grieve a distance you'd put there yourself.

He turned the phone over and read the text.

Ilya

Ilya: this was even better than last night

Ilya: you are coming over?

Ilya: we can celebrate another perfect show)))

Shane typed *can't, closing out paperwork* and sent it before he could second guess the lie.

And... was it even a lie?

No. He was busy trying to unfuck himself, to prepare for the end the way a doomsday prepper stocked up on canned goods. He would get through this. He would run the remaining shows, and they would be clean, and he would not let a single cue slip, and on December 24th he would shake Ilya's hand and say *good season* and mean it, and then he would go home and sit on his couch and... probably... probably feel like shit and call Rose, and Rose would come over again with Jackie and Hayden and Hayden would threaten to punch Rozanov again but he'd already be *gone*.

That was the plan.

Shane drew another line on the run sheet—this one through nothing, an empty margin, his pen carving a groove into the paper for no reason at all—and began his closing checklist.

Ilya

Ilya: this was even better than last night

Ilya: you are coming over?

Ilya: we can celebrate another perfect show)))

Shane: can't, closing out paperwork

Ilya: :(

Shane's avoidances started small in the last handful of days to closing night.

After all, Ilya hadn't done anything wrong, and it hurt, it was uncomfortable, but Shane didn't want to be cruel, and he didn't want to make it worse than what it would be.

So... they still kissed. Sometimes. That was the thing—he couldn't make himself stop entirely, not yet, not when Ilya found him in the corridor after a matinee and backed him against the wall near an unused storage room with one hand already sliding under Shane's shirt, and for ten seconds it was the same as it had been, Ilya's mouth hot on his and Ilya's hand spread flat against his ribs and Shane's fingers curling into the front of his warm-up jacket and then—

—he'd find some excuse and pull back, turning his head and his eyes away. "Sorry, I have to get back," he lied, and then ducked under Ilya's arm and left him standing there.

And then again.

Ilya caught him near the loading dock, tugged him by the belt loop into the shadow behind the set storage, kissed him once, and Shane let the kiss land and hated how good it felt and then stepped back, and this time he saw Ilya's eyes narrow as they tracked the retreat.

"Hollander."

"I really do have to go."

"*Hollander.*"

But he was already gone, and at some point he'd stopped going to the hotel after shows. He texted back every time—*can't tonight, closing out the books or rain check, need to be up early for rigging check*—because ignoring Ilya's messages entirely would be cruel and Shane

wasn't cruel. He was preserving himself. Canning his emotional goods for the winter that was coming whether he stocked the shelves or not.

He stopped eating in the greenroom. His office had a door and the door had a lock and behind the lock Shane could eat his lunch—when he remembered lunch, when his stomach cooperated—without the risk of Ilya appearing in the doorway with two coffees and that tilt of his head that meant *come with me*.

Ilya

Ilya: are you angry with me?

No, *no* he wasn't, and that was true so it wasn't a lie at all when he wrote back:

Ilya

Ilya: are you angry with me?

Shane: No, I promise I'm not angry

Ilya: if I did something tell me. I will fix it. I am good at fixing things when people tell me what is broken instead of HIDING

Shane knew, objectively, that he was behaving more like someone in witness protection instead of a normal person.

He stopped lingering in the wings during warm-ups. He stopped finding reasons to walk the backstage corridor after curtain call. He stopped being in the parking lot at the exact minute Ilya left the building, which was a habit Shane hadn't realized he'd built until he had to dismantle it—the way you don't notice a wall until you're the one taking it *down*, brick by brick, your own hands aching from work you chose.

And... he still checked his phone for texts anyway. It was hard not to want to fall back into the routine, to build back up the foundation and the wall that had almost started to look like a house, because for a while it had all been so good and easy. It was hard to deviate because he knew Ilya's entire schedule, his habits, the sound of his breathing, the slant of his smile, because it'd all been memorized without even trying, saved compulsively, whether he wanted to or not. At 10:50 the stage door would close. At 10:53 Ilya would be crossing the parking lot, collar turned up against the cold with those dragon's breath puffs of air from his lips in the cold and he might even be looking for him there.

He wasn't. He... couldn't.

Ilya

Ilya: I thought we were past this

Shane tried to bury himself in the work, and subsequent shows ran cleanly. Shane called his cues from the booth and they were tight and on time and no one in the audience would ever know that the stage manager had a crack running through him that he was holding shut with paperclips and scheduling and willpower and the stubborn, stupid hope that if he made the production perfect enough, the rest of him wouldn't matter.

The distance helped. The distance and avoiding Ilya hurt.

Shane told himself the distance helped, but it always fell apart, and of course Ilya found him during the pre-show walk.

Shane was mid-circuit of the stage running the prop inventory before half-hour call; easy work that had a beginning, a middle, and an end, that couldn't be interrupted without consequence. He heard Ilya before he saw him: the specific rhythm of his gait, unhurried even backstage, even now, the way he moved through every space like it had already agreed to make room for him.

"Hollander."

"I've got about four minutes before I need to call places."

"I know what *half-hour call* means." Ilya stopped beside the prop table. "I am not here to talk about the show."

"I figured." Shane moved down the table. Checked the snow globe. Checked the nutcracker. "What do you need?"

A beat.

"You are avoiding me, first I thought, yes, you *are* busy and what you do is hard, I understand that, but now you are hiding in your office, not answering me at all."

"I told you, I had—"

"Paperwork." Ilya's voice was flat. "Yes. You said. And before that you had an early call, and before that you had the rigging check, and before that—" He paused, and Shane could feel him recalculating, the way Ilya recalculated everything: fast, quiet, landing exactly where it hurt. "That night you did not even answer."

The nutcracker soldier stared up at Shane from the table with its painted grimace. "I've been swamped. This is a big run, there's a lot of—"

"Shane." Not Hollander. Shane, the way he said it when he wanted Shane's full attention and knew how to get it, and Shane's hand stilled on the page. "Look at me."

He didn't.

Ilya didn't touch him. He could have, and he usually *would* have, with a hand on Shane's arm or a thumb finding the back of his neck, always reaching for skin like he'd forget what he

wanted to say without it. He didn't. The not-touching was louder than touching would have been.

"Did I do something?" Ilya asked. "Has something... happened?"

The question was direct. Ilya was always direct, it was one of the few things Shane had come to count on, but there was something stripped back in it now, the swagger held in reserve because he was actually asking, wanting to know the actual honest answer.

Shane's throat closed around the honest answer, though,

"No," he said. "You didn't do anything. I'm just—it's the end of the run, there's a lot happening, I'm tired." He looked up then, briefly, and made himself hold Ilya's gaze for long enough to sell it. "It's fine. It's—we're fine."

Ilya looked at him. Read him, the way he read choreography: fast, thorough, missing nothing.

"*Da*," he said, after a moment. "*Fine*."

He said it the way he would have said *I see you*—which was worse, somehow, than if he'd pushed, and Shane's teeth found the inside of his cheek and bit down, *hard*.

"We're fine," he said again, because the first *fine* hadn't been enough, because he could feel Ilya still standing there not believing it and why would he when it was so clear Shane didn't either? "Really. I am always stressed like this during the run and we're *so* close to the end. This isn't... anything. I..."

And it was at that moment, Shane's headset crackled: "*Shane, we've got a missing prop crate stage left—*"

Thank god for exit cues and convenient issues.

"On my way." He was already moving and already calling it back, already putting the length of the wing between them, and he told himself this was the job, this was necessary, this was *fine* just like he said it was, and he did not let himself look back to see whether Ilya was still standing at the prop table or whether he'd walked away.

The days ticked down. The *Free Press* ran a second feature and this time it wasn't only a review but also a profile: Ilya photographed against the snow-dusted exterior of the theatre in his street clothes, collar turned up, looking like a man who could walk into any company on earth and have a contract by lunch.

A CBC documentary crew arrived for a matinee with cameras and a producer who called Ilya *magnetic on film* while Shane fed cable through the wings ten feet away and pretended he couldn't hear. Rose caught his arm after and said, "He asked me where you've been," and Shane said, "The booth," which was true, and Rose let go of his arm without saying anything else, even though he knew that she *knew*.

Ilya

Ilya: where have you gone

Ilya: Shane what is happening

Shane: Sorry, it is just busy at the end, I have so much to do

He didn't buy it, and Shane wasn't surprised when Ilya started stalking him in doorways including once after an evening show: house dark, most of the company already gone, the backstage settling into that particular post-curtain emptiness where the ghost light did the only work left to do. Shane was in the corridor behind the fly gallery running the last of his post-show checks when he turned a corner and Ilya was simply there, sitting on a road case with his elbows on his knees and his warm-up jacket zipped to the collar, still in stage makeup, watching the door like he'd been watching it for a while.

Shane stopped.

Ilya didn't stand up. He looked up, and the stage makeup made his eyes sharper than they needed to be, the lined lids making the hazel go dark and direct. He'd been waiting, and he was done with waiting, and there was none of the performance in him that usually cushioned this kind of thing—no grin, no lazy lean, no opening move designed to get a reaction. He just looked at Shane like Shane was the answer to a question that had been bothering him for days, which he was, which Shane could not let him have.

“*Pogovorim*,” Ilya said. “We talk, Shane.”

“It's late, I still need to—”

“Sit *down*, Shane.”

The use of his name twice in one day was a *thing* as was the quality of Ilya's voice right now. Shane was aware of it as a thing and did not sit down. He crossed his arms over the clipboard instead, which was the sort of body language even someone far less perceptive than Ilya Rozanov could read from twenty feet.

No.

Ilya read instantaneously, of course. He'd always been perceptive.

He'd always also been *stubborn*.

“You do not want to sit. Fine. Stand.” He unfolded from the road case, and the motion was unhurried the way all of Ilya's motions were unhurried, a body that had never once rushed to accommodate someone else's discomfort. He didn't cross the distance between them. He halved it. Four feet became two, and Shane's shoulders hit the wall behind him before he'd registered the retreat. “I want to ask you something and I want you to answer me honestly.”

“Ilya—”

“*Honestly*. I want to know what is actually happening because I am—” He stopped. His jaw shifted. “I am finding this week very difficult to understand.”

The corridor was empty. The ghost light was somewhere in the wings and its glow barely reached the hallway, and in the shadows Ilya’s face was tired in a way the stage never showed—the post-show drop that came when the adrenaline finished its work and left the person behind.

“I thought,” Ilya said, carefully, like he was choosing Russian idioms and discarding them, hunting for English, “that we were past the part where you run. I thought—after the market, after the show, after—” He made a gesture with one hand, open-palmed, indicating the accumulated weeks. “All of it. I thought we were past. Was I wrong? Did I read this wrong?”

Shane didn’t answer fast enough. His mouth opened and nothing came out, and in the gap Ilya’s gaze dropped to the clipboard Shane had pinned against his own sternum like a plate of armor, both hands white-knuckled on the edges.

“You are holding that like I am going to take it from you,” Ilya said.

Shit.

“You didn’t read anything wrong. I’m not running. I’ve just been—it’s the end of the run, Ilya. There’s the CBC crew, and the Saturday matinee sold out so we’re adding a pre-show talk, and my parents arrive Thursday, and I’ve got the strike schedule to finalize, and—”

Ilya reached out and hooked one finger over the top edge of the clipboard. He didn’t pull but rather rested it there, one knuckle against the backs of Shane’s fingers, and Shane’s entire list died in his throat.

“—and,” Shane managed.

“And?” Ilya’s thumb shifted. It grazed across Shane’s knuckle, once, the barest drag of skin, and Shane’s breath caught so hard his ribs hurt with it.

“A-and...” He heard himself faltering, reaching for the not-lies. Every item real, every item true, every item a brick he was laying between himself and the actual answer. “It’s a lot. We’re fine.”

We’re fine. Again. The same two words he’d given Ilya at the prop table, and they tasted worse this time.

Ilya sighed, looking tired. “So we are fine, you are busy, and this is about your *parents*.”

“Yes.”

“This is why you have not come to the hotel in days. Your parents, who are not even here yet?”

“It’s not just that. It’s everything building up, it’s stress—”

“You are lying to me.” Ilya said it without heat, without accusation, the way he stated technical corrections: as a fact that required acknowledgment before they could move forward.

He stepped closer, bracketing him in, swallowing up all the available space. Shane pressed harder into the wall and none of that mattered because Ilya lifted his hand and set two fingertips beneath Shane’s jaw, tilting his face up so he *couldn’t* avoid him, and it was the same the way he’d tilt a dancer’s chin for a correction, and Shane let him do it with a miserable, wonderful, shudder.

That was the catastrophe too, just how *soft* he went in his hands. Malleable and stupid, shoulders dropping an inch, his eyes half-closing. His head tipping into the pressure of those two fingers like a door swinging open on a hinge it had always had. His body did not know the difference between this corridor and the hotel room. His body knew only: Ilya’s hand. Ilya’s hand, and the slackening that followed it, and the surrender he could not stop giving a man he was actively lying to.

And his body responded the way it always did, whether it was in bed or at the worst possible moment, slithering heat and want crawling up his neck and pooling low in his belly and he *loathed* it.

He loathed that Ilya could feel his pulse hammering against those fingertips and knew exactly what it meant too.

And he *did* know. Ilya could’ve pressed his thumb to Shane’s mouth and Shane would have opened for him, right here, in this corridor, with his clipboard crushed between them and his career on the other side of that stage door, and Ilya *chose not to*, and that restraint landed harder than any kiss would have.

Instead he said: “I am not angry,”

Ilya’s thumb was a centimeter from Shane’s lower lip, and Shane’s mouth was dry. “I want you to know that. I am not—I do not want to fight you. But I know you are lying to me because while you say *fine* everything you do says many other things.”

Hazel eyes dropped to Shane’s mouth for half a beat and came back up, and the look was not sexual, or not *only* sexual as it was cataloging all the ways Shane’s body contradicted his words and choosing, with visible effort, not to use any of them.

“Confusing as always, Shane. I want to understand. Because from where I am standing it looks like just a week ago we were good and now we are not, and I do not know what changed, and I can see you running—*again*—and I would like to know what changed.”

Shane looked at him. At the stage makeup and the tired eyes and the cross and the still hands.

He thought: *because the Bolshoi reposted two photos and a choreographer from Paris left a comment at two in the morning and you have a suitcase you never unpacked and I’ve been*

counting days since the candy shop and I am so far past the point of being able to walk away from this without it costing something that I cannot let it cost more.

Shane pulled his chin out of Ilya's hand. It took more effort than any movement should, a physical peeling-away that left his skin buzzing where those fingers had been, his body still angled toward Ilya's even as he turned his face, still *leaning*, like a plant bending toward a light source it couldn't reach.

He could feel the flush on his neck and the ache between his hips and the pathetic, traitorous warmth of wanting to be touched by the person he was actively lying to, and he swallowed all of it and said: "Nothing changed. I promise. I'm just tired and there's a lot going on and I've been in my head about the end of the run. It's not about you."

The last sentence was the worst lie he'd told all week, and he said it smoothly, and Ilya heard it.

Shane's hands were shaking, so he pressed them flat against the clipboard and held them there and it was the same way he'd do it if there was a hydraulic stutter or some other issue. *Calm, Shane. Calm.* He was very practiced at this. He could stand in front of a man who had kissed his temples after sex and eaten his room service in bed and told him about butterscotch candies in Moscow and look him in the eyes and say *it's not about you*, and his face would not move, and his hands would not shake *any more*.

It was fine. It would be okay. Ilya would leave and forget him and it would be okay.

And Shane would be fine.

None... of this was fine and it was *not* okay and he was *days* from losing this man and he was spending the time he had left pretending he didn't have him.

Ilya's mouth flattened. Sharp hazel eyes stayed on Shane's and held there, searching, before... he stopped. Ilya's chin dropped half an inch, his gaze softening for a miserable moment as he pulled in a breath through his nose, pulled away, and after that.... Nothing.

Nothing at all. Silence did not *stretch* and the air was not *heavy* nor was it *charged*. This was a void, a nothing, the antithesis and it was as awful as it was vast.

"You are so full of shit, Hollander." Ilya said finally.

And then it was Shane's turn to give *nothing* even though he agreed.

"*Spokojnoj nochi*, Shane."

He walked past Shane toward the stage door, a hairsbreadth apart but not touching, and Shane stood in the corridor with his clipboard and the ghost light and the absolute knowledge that *okay* had cost Ilya something, and that he'd taken it anyway, and that this was what Shane had asked for.

He stood there for a while after the door closed.

Then he finished his post-show checks, because the work was still there and the work didn't care, and the work had never once broken his heart.

It was December 24th and Shane hadn't eaten since eleven, and the granola bar in his pocket had been open so long it was probably stale. He'd taken one bite during the pre-show walk, and his stomach had seized around it so hard he'd spit the mouthful into a napkin behind the prop table where no one could see. The bar went back in his pocket. It kept digging into his hip every time he leaned over the call desk, and he kept not throwing it away, because throwing it away meant admitting he wasn't going to eat it, and he was going to eat it. Later. Probably.

His phone buzzed thirteen minutes before the half-hour call.

Mom & Dad

Mom

Mom: We're here!! 🎄

Beneath the text, a selfie that loaded slow on the theatre Wi-Fi: Yuna in her good wool coat, the dark one with the fur-trimmed collar she saved for performances, her hair blown sideways by the wind. David beside her, ruddy-cheeked and grinning, one arm slung around her shoulders, snow caught in his eyebrows. His father had worn a tie covered in reindeer, and it was one Shane recognized as being the same one he gave him as a joke three Christmases ago, and David had worn it to every performance since with absolute sincerity, as though Shane had handed him an heirloom rather than a clearance-rack gag gift from a Portage Avenue shop.

Behind them, there was the lit facade of Centennial Concert Hall through a curtain of fat, lazy flakes that turned the parking lot into a snow globe. His mother had angled the camera to catch the marquee—**ROYAL WINNIPEG BALLET presents THE NUTCRACKER—FINAL PERFORMANCE**—and Shane could see the line of audience members already curving around the entrance, bundled in parkas and scarves, stamping their boots, breath rising in white plumes that dissolved into the early dark.

Mom & Dad

Mom

Mom: We're here!! 🎄

Shane: You look great. Both of you. Dad, the tie...

Mom

Mom: He ironed it twice this morning

Dad

Dad: Once for luck, once for excellence. That's the Hollander way 😎

Mom

Mom: Your father thinks he is very funny

Dad

Dad: Your mother KNOWS I am very funny

Shane: I left your tickets at will call under Hollander. Your seats are in the orchestra section, row F. House should open soon!

Mom

Mom: We know how it works Shane, this is not our first ballet 😊 Go do your job, we are so proud of you!! ❤️

Shane locked his phone and pressed the edge of it against his mouth for a second—a habit he'd picked up from his mother, who did the same thing with pens and chopsticks and the arms of her reading glasses, any slim object she could hold to her lips while she was thinking. He hadn't known he'd inherited it until Rose pointed it out two years ago. He set the phone face-down on the call desk and pulled his headset on, and the theatre took him back.

It was good they were here, he *wanted* them here, but...

But. Just as Rozanov was quick and perceptive, knowing something was *wrong*, so would his mother.

And there was less and less time before him to figure out how to *hide* it, and every time someone opened the front doors, Winnipeg's December came inside with them. Shane could feel it from backstage. No doubt, flurries gusted across the lobby floor in little swirls before the doors swung shut, and Shane knew the ushers swept them away with their feet, and then the doors opened again and more came in.

I can do this, he told himself, just one last show. Just hold it together.

Backstage was already a hive. The energy on a closing night ran differently from opening with overall less terror and more tenderness that came from knowing every gesture was also a goodbye. Dancers stretched at the portable barres with a focus that bordered on devotional, rolling through their ankles, marking port de bras with their fingers instead of full arms, saving everything for the stage. The party scene children were borderline feral; Christmas Eve plus final show plus an audience full of their own families had turned them into small, glittery grenades, and their handler was physically blocking the corridor to the wings with her body and a bag of candy canes.

"If I see *one more* of you near that curtain before your call, I will tell Santa myself," she said, and she meant it, and they believed her, and there was a brief, fragile peace.

Christmas miracles.

Shane gave the handler a nod of solidarity as he passed. She'd earned combat pay. He made a mental note to put her name in for the end-of-season gift card draw *twice*, which was an

abuse of his administrative power that he felt zero remorse about.

Jackie was everywhere and nowhere, her voice crackling through Shane's headset in bursts, tracking costumes, confirming quick-change stations, running her own final checks with the ferocity of a woman who had spent six weeks building a world out of tulle and thread and was not about to let it come undone on the last night. "*Shane, Dewdrop's spare headpiece—tell me you moved it from the shelf.*"

"Locked cabinet, stage left. I moved it yesterday after the matinee."

"*Thank God. If that wreath box incident happens again on closing night I will burn this building to the ground.*"

"Please don't burn my theatre, Jackie. At least not without me."

"*Can I help?*" Hayden chimed in, sounding eager.

"*Of course baby. And 'my theatre', he says. Cute.*"

The headset clicked off.

Rose found him at the call desk five minutes later, already in her Sugar Plum costume. She had her pointe shoes in one hand and her phone in the other, and she was grinning.

"My parents just texted. They ran into *your* parents in the lobby. Our dads are taking a selfie together."

"Of course they are."

Rose grinned and squeezed his arm and then she was gone, the pink tutu swishing through the wings like a bell, and Shane was alone with the theatre again.

He put his headset on. Settled into the booth chair, the vinyl cracked in the same place it had been cracked since October, the left armrest wobbling when he leaned. The orchestra was tuning below—oboe first, then strings, the sound rising through the booth floor—and beyond the curtain the house was filling.

He would do this again next year. Different cast, different guest artist, same cue book with updated margins. He'd sit in this chair in twelve months and call the same lighting sequence for the tree transformation and the snow would fall on cue and the audience would gasp the way they always did. But Ilya would not be in the wings stretching his calves on a road case. Ilya would not be muttering corrections in Russian to his reflection in the backstage mirror. Ilya would be in Moscow, or Paris, or wherever the world wanted him next, and Shane would run a clean show with a competent Cavalier who hit his marks and did not rearrange the furniture or bribe children for information or bring coffee to the parking lot at seven in the morning, and it would be fine and it would be correct and it would be the thing Shane was good at, and he would not think about this December at all.

He uncapped his pen. He pressed the talk button and said, "Stand by, house to half," and his voice came out steady, which was all he needed it to do.

Act One ran smoothly, which was good and predictable, and Shane watched from the booth and did not let himself feel any of it. The curtain dropped on Act One. House lights rose. The ballet master was already in the wings giving notes to the corps, and the crew moved through the intermission reset.

Shane pulled his headset off, left it on the desk, and slipped out of the booth.

He needed fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of not looking at the stage, not watching Ilya move through a world Shane had helped build and would lose in three hours. He'd do his job. He'd drink water. He'd stand somewhere with a wall at his back and breathe until his lungs loosened enough to take a full inhale, until the shallow sipping breaths he'd been running on since the overture gave way to the kind that actually reached the bottom, and then he'd go back and call Act Two and it would be fine.

He ended up stage right, in the pocket behind the last legs where the fly lines ran down to their cleats and the masking flats leaned against the wall in a row like dominoes waiting to fall. It was the deadest corner of the wings during intermission—too far upstage for the quick-change stations, too close to the grid rigging for the dressers to store anything useful. It wasn't private enough but it was all he had, and the work light above the pin rail threw a yellow wash that didn't quite reach the floor. He sat on a road case with his back against the brick, knees drawn up, and pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes until he saw *stars* and it hurt a little and weirdly it hurting a little almost made a little sense.

Forty seconds of this. Maybe a full minute.

Then footsteps, and the faint creak of a costume that cost more than Shane's rent.

He opened his eyes and Ilya was there, still in the Prince costume—white and gold, the winter regalia with the epaulettes and the high collar, Jackie's masterwork—and his stage makeup was perfect and his hair was set and his mother's cross was tucked beneath the jacket where the audience couldn't see it. He was supposed to be backstage getting touch-ups. He was supposed to be stretching, hydrating, running the Grand Pas in his head. He was supposed to be anywhere but here, and he was here, and two of the snowflake corps girls were stretching at the portable barre ten feet away and could see both of them.

"Not now," Shane said, and then again, almost begging. "Please."

"Yes *now*." Ilya stopped three feet away. He didn't lean against anything. He didn't cross his arms or tilt his head or do any of the things he usually did to make himself look casual, to give Shane the comfortable fiction that this was easy and low-stakes and nothing to run from. He stood the way he stood before an entrance—weight centered, shoulders open, every part of him committed to what came next.

Shane scowled at him, gritting his teeth. "No, Ilya, I can't do this right now."

"You cannot do this *ever*. That is the problem. There is never a right time for you because you do not want there to be a right time." Ilya's accent thickened the way it did when he stopped translating and started speaking. "I ask you what changed and you say *nothing*. I ask

you if I did wrong and you say *no*. I ask you to come to the hotel and you say *paperwork*. And I believe none of it, Shane, I believe *zero* of this. I am not *doing* this anymore, Shane.”

The two snowflake girls had not come back, but a stagehand was coiling cable fifteen feet away and could absolutely hear them. Shane was aware of this just like he was aware of the wall behind him and the muffled rumble of the audience returning to their seats beyond the heavy fire door—all of it present and none of it enough to stop what was happening.

“Doing what?”

“Pretending I believe you and doing this stupid running and chasing and running and chasing. I did not take you to be a coward, Hollander, so stop acting like one.”

A mouse—one of the battle scene children, still in half her costume with the tail dragging—skidded past the masking flat, saw them, and froze. Her eyes went very wide.

“Go—go find your handler,” Shane said, pulse thudding in his ears, and his stage manager voice came out on autopilot, steady and calm and completely detached from the rest of him. The mouse fled. “Rozanov we are in the middle of a show I *cannot* do this with you right now, it is closing night, there is *so much* I need to do—”

“You are always busy! You were busy when I brought coffee. You were busy when I texted. You were busy when I stood in your doorway and you would not even look up from your clipboard—”

Shane’s headset crackled. “*Shane, props for the Flower Waltz —stage left or stage right? We moved it for the matinee and I can’t remember if we moved it back.*” Jackie..

“Stage left,” Shane said into the headset, eyes locked on Ilya.

“*Thank you. Also tell whoever is blocking the corridor behind costume storage to move, I need that path clear for the Act One change parade.*”

They were blocking the corridor behind costume storage. Shane did not relay this information. “I’ll have it handled.”

He exhaled, feeling himself shake, clicked off his headset, and looked at Ilya. “I don’t have time for this,” Shane said, and he meant the conversation and the feelings and the entire catastrophic situation of being cornered in a hallway by magical transforming prince who was about to leave the country just like he would leave Clara when the dream ended. And had it ever even been real at *all*?

“You are talented, Hollander, fucking *make* time for it. Talk to me, *now*, or I do not go out on stage.” Ilya’s voice dropped but did not soften. Two dressers passed behind him carrying garment bags, and neither of them pretended not to stare. “Everyone here can see what you are doing. Jackie asked me yesterday if I had done ‘something wrong’ because you have been—what was word she used—*broody*. Hayden will not look at me. Rose looks at me like I am the one who—”

“Don’t bring them into this.”

“They are already in this! You brought them in by making it so obvious that the entire backstage knows you are miserable and thinks it is *my fault*—”

“It *is* your fault!” Shane’s voice cracked and he hated it, hated the sound of himself losing control in a concrete corridor where anyone could walk past, where the guy in the bear suit was probably around the corner adjusting his earpiece and hearing every word.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, the stage manager part of him hysterically noted that this was a fire code violation; two people blocking an egress corridor during a live performance but all he could think about, all he could *say* was:

“You—you show up and you rearrange *everything* and you make me—I was *fine* before you got here, I had a system, I had a plan, and *you*—”

“Fuck the plan! You had a plan to be alone in your locked office eating nothing for lunch and calling cues for other people’s art for the rest of your career, and I *ruined* this plan, so now you punish me by—”

“That’s not fair.”

“None of this is fair! I am not *fair*, you are not *fair*, the fact that I have eight minutes before I go onstage to dance a love story while you sit in your booth and pretend I do not exist is not *fair*—For once, Shane, *fuck* the fucking plan, we have good thing and I not—blyat—I *do* not understand why you are suddenly treating me like I have plague, you keep running from me and you are worth chasing, but you act like I hurt you—”

“*You are going to hurt me!*”

Ilya was *going* to hurt him when he left and the dream ended and he had to wake up again, and Shane would reconcile that he wasn’t worth chasing at all, he’d worked *so hard* to make that as clear as he possibly could that he wasn’t in the most obvious self sabotage.

“...What?”

“Fuck you! You are going to *leave*! And—and I don’t want you to go!” Shane’s hands were shaking. His eyes burned and his throat was closing and he said it again because once wasn’t enough and because Ilya had asked for the truth and this was it, this was the whole of it, the rotting core of every excuse he’d built in a week of withdrawal. “”You are going to leave and I’m—I am a fucking *idiot* because you were never—this was a hookup for you, this was a season, I was convenient and available and stupid and I *know* that and I still don’t want you to go. I don’t—you’re going to leave and—*fuck*—none of it even meant anything and, and I knew you were leaving the whole time and still I started to want *more* and I’ve—”

“Shane—”

“—trying to make it hurt less when you leave and it’s not *working*, it’s making it worse, and I’m sorry, I’m sorry I lied, I’m sorry I’ve been—” Shane’s hands came off his thighs and one

of them gestured at the space between them, the three feet of corridor air that was also a week of distance and a flight to Moscow and a life that didn't include him. "I can't, I—"

"*Shane.*"

The sound of his name in Ilya's mouth stopped him. Ilya had stepped closer during the flood of his feelings, close enough that Shane could see the glue line of the false lashes Jackie had applied an hour ago and the tiny smudge where Ilya had rubbed his eye before catching himself.

Ilya opened his mouth. "I—"

And from in another part the wings, a voice carried: "*Places for Act Two. Let's go everyone! One minute!*"

That was Hayden. Hayden, who was covering because Shane had stepped out, who would be looking for him, who would find him in this corridor with Ilya sixty seconds before the curtain rose on the last act of the last show.

Ilya's mouth closed. He looked at Shane, brows knit with fury, and said... nothing. For the first time since Shane had known him, Ilya was being a model professional, keeping his mouth shut, and committing to the show.

He turned, walking away, and only paused at the edge of the work light to look back over his shoulder and the gold epaulettes, and his eyes were bright under the stage makeup.

Then he stepped past the masking and was gone.

Shane stood in the there in his wake with his hands shaking and his face wet and the stagehand fifteen feet away very carefully not looking at him, and the orchestra was tuning and eight hundred people were settling into their seats and Ilya Rozanov was walking onto a stage to dance a love story, a fantasy of happiness and what could be, while the real one bled out in a hallway.

He dragged himself back to the booth.

Act Two was the longest forty-five minutes of Shane's life.

He put his headset on. He watched the curtain rise. The crew ran the cues they'd been running for two weeks and didn't need him for, and Shane sat at his desk and tracked the show and said the right things into the headset at the right times, and Hayden kept glancing at him from the other side of the booth.

Hayden had seen him come back from the corridor. Hayden had seen his face. Hayden, who had spent the entire run making jokes about Ilya leaving soon, who had figured out weeks ago that Shane's hostility toward Rozanov had curdled into something far more complicated—Hayden looked at him once, and then looked at the stage, and then looked at him again, and said, very quietly into the headset: "You okay?"

“Fine,” Shane said, and Hayden let it drop, because Hayden was good at reading rooms and this room had a sign on the door that said *do not enter*.

Onstage, Clara and the Prince arrived in the Kingdom of Sweets. Rose made her entrance as the Sugar Plum Fairy to the celesta solo that always, always raised the hair on Shane’s arms, her pink tutu catching the warm gold wash, and the audience applauded, and Shane gripped his pen and watched and did not feel it.

The divertissements passed. Spanish, Indian classical, Métis. The Waltz of the Flowers. All of it perfect, all of it irrelevant, all of it counting down to the Grand Pas de Deux, which was Rose and Ilya, which Shane had watched from this very booth a million times now and which he now had to watch again while Ilya’s unfinished sentence lived in his chest like a swallowed coal.

Ilya danced, and on stage he turned every private thing into fuel and burned it onstage where no one could tell the difference between art and anguish.

He partnered Rose through the adagio with hands that had almost touched Shane twenty minutes ago, lifting her overhead, turning her, catching her, and the audience held their breath the way they always did, and Shane held his for different reasons entirely.

It was beautiful. It was *agonizing*, and Shane knew that the tension in his shoulders during the overhead lift was not from Rose’s weight.

He was dancing angry. He was dancing *beautifully*.

Ilya wasn’t pacing himself. Shane could see it in the height of his jumps during the variation, the way he spent the air at the top of each one instead of conserving it for the landing—a dancer with twelve more shows ahead would hold back, bank energy, ration the spectacular, but Ilya danced the way the brightest stars *burned*, which was completely and too fast, converting everything they had into light until there was nothing left to fuel the going-on. Ilya was leaving it all here, on this stage, under these lights, in a building he would walk out of in three hours and never perform in again, and he was making it *blaze*.

Shane’s sniffled and—oh fuck, please, *no*—and Hayden was kind enough not to turn and acknowledge the tears because Shane’s face was wet and the warm gold wash was turning Ilya and Rose into their own constellations as the fish dive brought them through that final, slow circle—two bodies bright enough to navigate by, and every person in the building leaning toward them, pulled forward by the same gravity, drawn in by this rare passing comet that would not come again, here for the last time within the expanse of painted northern stars of a Canadian Nutcracker.

He got through it. He didn’t know how, but he got through it and when Hayden murmured “Dude... are you...” once during the coda he said “Later” and Hayden, thank god, shut up.

The kingdom bid Clara farewell. The snow scene reversed. Clara woke in the parlor with the Nutcracker in her arms, and the lights dimmed, and when they rose again the audience cheered and... now curtain call.

The bows went in order, the way they always did—children first, giggling and waving and completely destroying the solemnity of the moment, then corps, then soloists, then Dewdrop, then the Snow Queen, each receiving their applause while the company lined up behind them. Rose went second to last, stepping forward in her Sugar Plum tutu to a roar that shook the chandeliers, and she bowed with the regal composure of a woman who had done this a hundred times and would do it a hundred more, and the flowers piling up at her feet were already knee-high.

And then it was Ilya's turn.

Except Ilya did not walk onstage.

Shane was in the wings, stage right. He'd come down from the booth after curtain—there was nothing left to call, the show was over, and he'd needed to move, needed to not be sitting anymore, needed to be closer to the ground. He was standing between a flat and a rope cradle with his headset around his neck when Ilya appeared from the opposite wing, sweat at his temples and his chest moving fast from the finale, and he was not walking toward the stage. He was stomping, angrily, cutting through moving through the backstage chaos like a heat seeking missile honed in on a *singular* target.

He was heading towards *Shane*.

The applause beyond the curtain was building. The audience was waiting for the male lead. The company onstage was waiting. Rose was waiting, her head turned toward the wings, and Shane could see the confusion beginning on her face from here.

"Y-you need to go take your bow."

"*Nyet*." Ilya stopped in front of him. A dresser with an armful of snowflake headpieces swerved around them. A stagehand moving a flat slowed, looked, kept moving. The wings were full of people and Ilya did not lower his voice. "You had your turn. You talked, I listened, I danced your fucking show. Now you stand here and you listen to me."

"Rozanov, the audience is—"

"I do not *care* about audience!" Ilya all but yelled, so angry the articles were dropping from his English, and two stagehands froze mid-task. "And I am Rozanov now to you? And *I* am the one that does not care? For forty-five minutes I am smiling and dancing and landing every lift thinking about all the bullshit you say to me, telling me I don't—that this—you are so *stupid* Shane." He pressed the heel of his hand against his sternum, hard, knuckles white against the Prince jacket. "You are stupid and you are wrong. You are *wrong*, Shane. About all of it. Every single thing you said to me, you were wrong."

"You're going back to Moscow, you have a career, you have the Bolshoi you don't even like it here, you don't want—"

"Stop telling me what I want! You don't get to decide this for me! I want *you*. And you would know this if you had let me *speak* instead of running your mouth and then crying about it!"

“That’s not what happened!”

“—and I am not *finished!*” Ilya shouted, and it would be a miracle if the entire theatre didn’t hear him at this rate. “I do not know how to make it more clear, any more clear, that I *like you*, Shane Hollander. I am not playing pretend, I am not some toy that is going to vanish. And I am furious, I am *furious*, that you made me say this in a fucking wing with stagehands listening because you could not give me *ten seconds* in the past *week*—”

“You don’t mean that,” Shane said, and he said it fast and flat and certain because he had to, because if he let himself believe it the fall would kill him. “You have—you can’t just—”

Ilya stared at him, deadpan. “You do not believe me.”

“It’s not... I...”

“You *still* do not believe me. *Ladno*,” Ilya muttered to himself, pinching at this brow. “*Tak, znachit? Khorosho. Togda ya tebe pokazhu.*”

“... what? What does that mean?”

And then, without translating, Ilya grabbed Shane’s wrist, the same wrist, the inside of it, where his thumb had traced a circle on opening night, and *pulled*.

“What are you—Ilya—Ilya—*what*—”

Shane stumbled after him because the alternative was falling at this point, and Ilya’s grip was absolute and uncompromising, and he was walking toward the stage, toward the curtain line, toward the light and the noise and eight hundred people who were waiting for their prince only to see him accompanied by... who? Some man in blacks? That uniform of invisibility—and he was being dragged into the lights by a man in white and gold who did not look back, who did not slow down, who walked through the wings and past the curtain line and onto the stage of Centennial Concert Hall on December 24th like he owned it, because for tonight, for the last time, he *did*.

The light hit Shane’s face and the sound hit him a half second later: the roar, the full-house standing ovation, two thousand hands clapping for the man beside him who had danced the Nutcracker Prince as if his life depended on it, and maybe it had, and maybe it always did.

Ilya bowed deeply, one arm sweeping across his body in the reverence he’d been trained to give since he was a child in Moscow. The audience screamed. Flowers flew. Rose, standing upstage with the company, had both hands pressed over her mouth.

Shane stood there. In his blacks, headset around his neck and in his ugly shoes, in the light, with Ilya’s hand still locked around his wrist, and he did not know what to do with his body because no part of his training or his planning or his desperate, meticulous control had prepared him for this, for being *seen*, for being dragged out of the wings by a man who refused to let him hide.

Ilya straightened from his bow and looked at Shane. “Take your bow, Hollander.” He said, and Ilya’s grip on Shane’s wrist loosened just so he could take his *hand*, interlacing their fingers. “This is your show. This is your work. *Bow*.”

And, feeling starstruck and stupid, Shane... bowed.

He didn’t know what else to do. He bowed, and the applause swelled because the audience didn’t know who he was immediately but they understood what they were seeing *something* and it was *special* and a couple sitting in row F were standing and clapping louder than anyone else, and when he straightened back up, Ilya was still glaring at him but also—smiling? What? What was happening?—and Shane was still processing the daredevil *fuck you* smile, when Ilya’s free hand came up and caught the side of his face, dragging him into a kiss.

It was not a sweet kiss.

Ilya kissed like he argued, with his whole body behind it, his hand on Shane’s jaw to *hold* him, thumb pressed into the hinge of it, tilting Shane’s head back, and his mouth open and angry and sure with soft lips and need and fury, eight hundred people on their feet and the entire company watching from upstage and every stagehand in the wings and the CBC documentary crew who were definitely still rolling, and Ilya Rozanov did not *care*. He was proving a point. He was finishing the argument and Shane thought for a moment that this kiss, this kiss with Ilya in the Prince’s white and gold with his hand fisted in the collar of a stage manager’s blacks was the answer he’d been running from all along—

—and the answer was not a word at all but the press of Ilya’s mouth, a summer storm of a kiss, a block heater to break open the sludge of his heart, something that could level cities or grow flowers in the cracks of a parking lot in December, and behind it, under it, through it: *I meant it, I meant it, I meant every word*.

Shane’s hands found the front of the Prince jacket and grabbed it with both fists and crushed the lapels and kissed him back, and Shane’s knees buckled for one stupid, glorious second before Ilya’s arm locked around his waist and hauled him upright.

Epaulettes bent under his grip. The gold braid was going to be destroyed. Jackie was going to kill them both.

Shane did not care. Ilya’s mouth was on his and he tasted like sweat and stage makeup and setting powder, and his hand was shaking on Shane’s face, and the shaking was what undid him—because Ilya Rozanov’s hands did not shake, not in rehearsal, not in performance, not in lifts, never—and they were shaking *now*.

“*Ty verish’ mne teper’?*” Ilya murmured against his lips, barely audible over the roar, “Do you believe me now?”

“I—you are *insane*. Yes. Oh my god. I can’t believe you—” Words failing, Shane kissed the tremor off his fingers by pressing harder into Ilya’s palm, turning his face into the hand on his jaw, and he could feel his own pulse hammering against Ilya’s thumb hard enough that Ilya must have felt it too.

“Shh. Smile. One more bow, yes? Everyone else was coming out on stage now. Yell at me after. Boss me around. Enjoy this first. Look.”

And as the entire corps came back out on stage, similarly inspired and joyously dragging tech crew from the darker wings. Jackie with her pincushion still strapped to her wrist, Hayden half-shoved through the curtain line by Rose with his headset crooked. A sound tech. Two dressers. The stagehand who had been coiling cable fifteen feet from every confession Shane had made tonight, blinking in the stage lights like a man surfacing from deep water, filling up the marley.

Shane looked out at the audience and felt seen, just barely making out his parents, and the applause felt like it might last forever. And in all his time here, Shane had *never* once stood inside a curtain call, content with the outspread arms and points to the dancers to cue applause for the tech crew, and... and.. It was *warm* and it was *brilliant* and he hadn't expected that it would feel like being *held*, all those palms meeting in the same rhythm, a heartbeat that matched the one still hammering in his chest.

Ilya squeezed his hand as they took one more bow together with everyone else. One squeeze, the same as the one in the car on the way to Corydon, and Shane squeezed back, and the lights were very bright, and the snow outside was falling on a city he loved, and for now, for this one held breath between the show and the life that came after, Shane Hollander stood in the light and let it find him.

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Christmas Miracle on the Prairie: Bolshoi Star Rozanov Staying in Winnipeg After Record-Breaking Nutcracker Run

By Opale Fantôme, Arts Correspondent

Call it a Christmas miracle.

In a development sure to send ripples through the Canadian and international ballet communities, Bolshoi Ballet principal Ilya Rozanov, whose sold-out *Nutcracker* performances with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet have dominated the local arts conversation for two weeks, will not be returning to Moscow as planned. Instead, Rozanov has confirmed that he will remain with the Royal Winnipeg Ballet for an extended creative collaboration, marking the first long-term partnership between the Moscow-based company and Canada's oldest professional ballet company.

The announcement follows what critics have called the most electrifying *Nutcracker* season in the RWB's recent history that drew national press attention and record box office returns for Centennial Concert Hall.

"We are thrilled beyond measure," said RWB's Artistic Director in a statement released late on December 24th. "Ilya's artistry and his partnership with our company have produced a *Nutcracker* that none of us will soon forget for... well, several reasons. The opportunity to continue working together is a tremendous gift for the RWB and for Winnipeg. I, like everyone else, am excited to find out what happens next!"

The nature of the extended engagement has not been finalized, though sources within the company confirm that discussions include guest appearances in the RWB's spring repertoire and a potential co-choreography project. A spokesperson for the Bolshoi confirmed that Rozanov has been granted a leave of personal interest from the Moscow roster, a designation reserved for artists pursuing approved international work.

When *Apogee Press* asked backstage after the performance what prompted his decision to remain in Winnipeg, Rozanov was characteristically direct: "Do you even need to ask? I think the reasons are obvious, but since it is Christmas I will tell you anyway. The dancers are strong, the production values are high, I am learning new things while I am here while teaching others about the dances I bring from home, and the stage management is best I have worked with in my career. I have specific requirements for the person managing my productions. Those requirements are met here."

Pressed on the nature of those requirements, Rozanov paused briefly before adding: "Ah. Well. He must be very organized. Very talented. He must argue with me about everything because I find this motivating. The bossier the better. Also, he must be very handsome. This last one is not negotiable. I am not interested in working with anyone else."

The "he" in question appears to be RWB production stage manager Shane Hollander, 28, who has managed the company's productions for multiple seasons, and we can only assume that he is the one meeting all of Rozanov's exacting specifications.

[Photo: Rozanov, still in his Prince costume, kisses RWB stage manager Shane Hollander on the mouth onstage at Centennial Concert Hall during the closing night curtain call on December 24th. Hollander, in stage blacks, has one hand gripping Rozanov's sleeve. The company can be seen applauding behind them. Photo credit: @aphantastic_wpg]

Rozanov pulled Hollander onto the stage during his solo bow, an unscripted moment captured in audience footage that has since been viewed over 200,000 times on social media. The two kissed in front of the full house. Several audience members described the moment as the highlight of the evening; one commenter on the RWB's Instagram post called it "the real Christmas miracle."

It appears they were not far off.

"I honestly thought they wanted to murder each other for most of the season," said senior stage technician Hayden Pike when asked for comment backstage, with statements corroborated by other crew noting the rocky beginnings. Looking rather sour, he clarified: "I'm happy if Shane is happy though."

Rose Landry, who partnered Rozanov as the Sugar Plum Fairy throughout the run, was less restrained. "Ilya is a once-in-a-generation talent and I would kill to keep dancing with him. The fact that he's staying is a miracle, and I don't say that lightly during Nutcracker season, because we use up all our miracles on the snow machine." She added: "Also, I called it. Week *one*. You can print that."

Hollander's parents, David and Yuna Hollander, who traveled from Ottawa for the closing performance, were spotted in the lobby afterward. David Hollander, asked for comment, said: "Hell of a show. That's my kid." Yuna Hollander declined to speak with press but was photographed embracing Rozanov near the stage door. Sources close to the family confirm that Rozanov spent Christmas Day with the Hollanders at their son's apartment.

Hollander, who has historically been described by colleagues as reserved and press-averse, declined to discuss his personal life when reached for comment through the RWB's communications office. "We're in early discussions with the Bolshoi about a formal collaboration structure," he said. "It's an exciting development for the company and for Winnipeg." When this reporter pointed out that the widely circulated footage suggested the development might be exciting on a *personal* level as well, Hollander paused for several seconds before responding: "I'm not going to comment on that."

Rozanov, who was apparently still within earshot, could be heard saying: "If you will not I will. He is my boyfriend. You can print this."

A brief, muffled exchange followed—this reporter caught fragments including "*why are you like this,*" "*I will end you,*" and what sounded like Rozanov laughing—before Hollander returned to the line.

"I apologize for the interruption. As I was saying, the collaboration is an exciting opportunity for the RWB, and we look forward to sharing more details in the new year."

“He loves when I interrupt,” Rozanov added, from what sounded significantly closer to the phone than before. “He loves when I do everything he tells me not to do. This is our whole system.”

The line went dead.

For a company that draws over half its annual revenue from its holiday production, Rozanov’s continued presence represents a significant artistic and commercial opportunity. This season’s Nutcracker broke the RWB’s all-time single-production box office record, and the company’s social media following has more than doubled since Rozanov’s arrival, driven in no small part by the closing night footage, which continues to circulate under hashtags including #PrairiePrince, #NutcrackerKiss, and, inevitably, #ChristmasMiracle.

The RWB’s spring season opens in March. Further details are expected in the new year.

Apogee Press Arts & Culture. Opale Fantôme covers performing arts, the CSA, and hockey in Montreal. Follow her at @opalapparition_

Chapter End Notes

And.... so. Curtain call for this fic.

I hope you had fun! Part of the reason this chapter took as long as it did, sucking up nearly two months, was because I was sure not everyone *would* like the ending and I was really fighting it. That’s what I get for pantsing this one vs. prewriting, but ultimately I went with the ending I wanted and liked. This fic was always meant to be more of a fun thing, anyway. ~~There is still an epilogue coming to tie up what remaining loose ends (after all, a certain set of BOYFRIENDS need to dance together, we have an ice cream date to iron out, and then holidays with the Hollanders) remain... and it will be from Ilya’s POV!~~

I also know many people wanted Shane to get back into dancing and ‘fix’ his relationship with ballet. I didn’t feel like that was appropriate here, and especially not when the climax of this past chapter was about working how things with Ilya. I don’t like the idea of someone coming in and waving their magic wand and ‘poof’ all those experiences and prejudice you faced are fixed and don’t hurt now, you know? I certainly see Ilya supporting Shane in exploring dance and ballet however he pleases, but he can’t be the one to repair or heal the parts that hurt. Again, I didn’t and don’t expect everyone to like this ending, but this is what I chose and I hope you enjoyed reading regardless.

Once again, also, I am clearly not a stage manager or anyone who should be trusted to run a stage production, so apologies for the numerous errors and logistical things that don’t make sense. Can we chalk it up to whimsy?

Special thank yous to my friends, especially those in Canada that explained block heaters, local candy, and all the other shit I did not know, all the kind people giving me ballet and stage notes, my friend and beta [Aphantastic](#) for pointing out that I cannot use a calendar and use two instead of to too often, and also the wonderful [slateskyblue](#) for slowly getting through copyediting all the previous chapters (sorry for all the comma issues, I swear I can read).

Thank you again for reading, support your local library, be nice to animals, and yes that includes other people.

Not sure what to say? Comment anxiety? How about...

- ❤️ “I liked/loved it!”
- 🎨 “this wasn't my favorite”
- 🌸 “flowers for the dancers and crew”
- 🗡️ “this usually isn't my thing... and yet”
- 🧑‍🎨🐭🎄 “something something Nutcracker”

References & Misc

1. Red Bean Ice Cream: <https://www.justonecookbook.com/red-bean-ice-cream/>
2. Mochi Ice Cream: <https://tastesbetterfromscratch.com/mochi-ice-cream/> , though I actually first learned how to make this from this amazing series on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iisOssAvc6c> because I'm more of a visual learner. I *highly* recommend you try this with your favorite flavors, it is so good.
3. More on plombir here: <https://foodperestroika.com/2014/08/18/plombir-russian-ice-cream/>
4. So I don't know where I got in my head that the theatre in Centennial Concert Hall head seating for 800 people because... that... is not right. It's actually around 2300 with orchestra seating and two balconies so... I will be going back to edit that once I've completed the epilogue rather than spot editing in the interim. For now I beg you to suspend your disbelief. For the RWB staff group chat that has allegedly found this work... sorry! 😊
5. Wolfbird as a candy shop is a nod to [Wolfbird](#), and sort of a daydream of the sort of things I wish that version of Shane and Ilya could be doing together day to day. Originally I had asked for irl candy shops and locations from local Winnipeggers (and thank you everyone for your suggestions!), but ultimately it ended up being a bit easier for me narratively to make my own place up. This was also just a fun rabbit hole in general because I got to learn about about regional candies and good god do I want to try tire d'érable. I am horrified and intrigued by ketchup crisps.
7. On block heaters and autostarts and Webasto brand fuel-operated heaters: I live in a very very warm climate and my feeble mind can barely comprehend any of this, so I apologize for mistakes. From my understanding and research, it seems like most people in Moscow don't use the plug-in block heaters the way people in North America do.

8. Is *The Nutcracker* a love story? Yes and no, and it all depends on how you look at it. More on that here: <https://www.bondandgrace.com/lit-talk/the-story-of-the-nutcracker-from-book-to-ballet>

9. Apogee Press is a nod to [Apogee](#)

End Notes

This was translated into Russian by the amazing [PANDAR](#), who's work can be found here [on FicBook](#)!

Thank you to [slateskyblue](#) for copyediting!

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