

A Drag Path

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A Drag Path

by [thecouchsofa](#)

Summary

5 times Ilya says *I love you* in Russian, and the first time he says it in English.

Notes

Not the fic I intended to post this week, but it's the one that demanded to be written.

Set mostly during and just after the events of episode 5, with some 'cottage' elements – no spoilers for episode 6 or beyond.

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

(1)

Do you feel better?

There's an undercurrent of anxiety in Shane's tone that Ilya knows he shouldn't poke at. Over the years he's become adept at pressing his palms to his own wounds, stemming the blood that wells and flows and refuses to congeal, no matter how hard he tries. He's even better at prodding at other peoples', standing in front of them with a pointed finger and saying *what's that? Did you know that was there?* Insecurities, repressed parts of personalities, things best left hidden in side drawers and secret apps, reskinned and filed under 'work stuff' and 'default shit'.

But it's different now.

Shane's different.

The skin on Ilya's knuckles smarts when he brushes his hand against the freezing concrete wall. Pink paint flecks stick to his skin, and he wonders, briefly, what would happen if he punched it. Would colliding with it make the same sound as his brother's face? That blooming bruise would hang around far longer than Ilya plans to be in Russia, but ultimately it was ephemeral; his blood, splattered on the wall of the same tunnel where he once kissed a boy, would stain. It wouldn't be the first time he had shed blood for the motherland, and it wasn't likely to be the last; it faded from the ice quicker than it would a seedy Moscow underpass.

"Ilya?"

The lump in his throat refuses to be quelled. It blocks his ability to speak, rendering him mute and partially blind, wrung dry with grief and anxiety and that deep, deep well of adoration that seems bottomless when it comes to this man.

"Yes," Ilya says, after a moment. "Is better."

"Good."

Shane's smile is clear, even through thousands of miles and a really shitty phone connection. His clothes rustle as he adjusts himself; where is he, Ilya wonders. At home, maybe, or a hotel. He hasn't checked the game roster in a week, doesn't even know where the Raiders are right now. But they'll be in Montreal soon.

"Are you..." Shane trails off, clears his throat. "Are you going to be alright? Do you want me to stay on the line while you walk home?"

A long exhale rattles Ilya's chest. He tips his head back against the wall – it's too hard, a sudden jolt of pain lancing through him, but he probably deserves it. He's made everything worse by coming here, but he couldn't do anything else. And staying in Boston would have had long-lasting repercussions that he doesn't want to think about right now.

His fingers ache as they grip his phone tight. “No – is fine.”

“Okay. Do you ... tell me to fuck off if I’m overstepping, but did you want to talk about your dad at all? In English, I mean.” He lets out a half-hearted laugh, soft and quiet, the kind he sometimes does against Ilya’s mouth when he says something stupid. “I know I’d be super fucking devastated if it was me. So you can, if you want to.”

Ilya knows that if he were to ask Shane what he likes about his father, the call would go so long that he’d run out of minutes. He’d say stupid, boring things like *he does puzzles with me* and *he taught me how to tie my shoes* and *he drove me home from my first party and promised he wouldn’t tell mum*.

But what the fuck was Ilya supposed to say? His father’s in a marble tomb with all the ornate fixings he insisted upon and enough gold to make a villager’s head spin, and he doesn’t deserve any of it. He deserves to be in a pine box in the middle of Krasnoyarsk Krai, with the lid cracked and the scent of rot wafting across the taiga.

The best thing Ilya’s father ever did was give Ilya licence to prove him wrong. He’s spent his entire life doing it. It should stop now, but it won’t. The habit’s too engrained.

I was supposed to deliver a eulogy today. List all of my father’s greatest accomplishments. The only nice thing I could come up with was that he remembered me instead of his favourite son.

He could whisper it down the line – hand it off to Shane, let him take the weight of it.

Only, Shane isn’t adept at that. Hasn’t had the practice, doesn’t know what it means to grieve a parent before they’re dead. To sever a tie from his family in a manner so bloody and violent that it leaves a perennial ache in his chest. If he tells Shane what he really thinks, he won’t like it. And Ilya can’t bring himself to fight with yet another person about his family’s treatment of him.

On the other end of the line, Shane yawns. It pulls Ilya back into himself, shaking off the grime of this deep, disgusting pool he’s slowing drowning in.

Gently, Ilya asks, “Are you tired?”

“Hayden kept trying to get me to play this game with him last night – it’s a team thing, on an app. Building these little cities and shit. His kids love it.”

Ilya lets out a hum of acknowledgement. He’s so tired. He doesn’t know if it’s his family that makes him this way, or if it’s Russia. The pressure of having to hide in plain sight. He doesn’t want to go home, but he can’t stay here. His mother’s voice echoes in his head, reminding him to come home before the streetlights turn on, especially in winter. Don’t wear a white coat, don’t stray off the path.

Shane’s still talking about Pike. Usually, it would be grating. At present, it’s not.

“I’ll show you, when you get back,” Shane says. “I named one of the little pixel people after you.”

Ilya leans against the wall, tries not to shudder when his shoulder blades meet the frigid concrete. “Oh?”

“Yeah – the one with the worst hair.”

It feels good to laugh, even if it’s not properly. He closes his eyes and runs a hand down his face. Pretends that it’s Shane comforting him, rather than himself. “I should go.”

“Okay.” Another rustle, Shane standing up. “How do I say, uh, ‘see you soon’ in Russian? Or, like, that I’m looking forward to it?”

“Are you going to repeat it? Speak terrible Russian when I am already so sad?”

“Shut up. Maybe I’ll practice it in the mirror, surprise you when you get home.”

“Okay.” Ilya bites down on his bottom lip. His exhale is long, strained. “*Ya tebya lyublyu.*”

The words catch in his throat, strangling him. But Shane won’t know. Nobody needs to know.

“Cool. I’ll...”

“You’ll practice it?”

“Sure. Guess I’ll let you go.”

After he hangs up the phone, Ilya doesn’t move. He says those words aloud to himself again, in Russian. It doesn’t get any easier. Voicing those thoughts only worsens this awful feeling – the desire to run, to cut Shane loose because it’s what’s best for both of them.

But Shane doesn’t know what he really said.

So maybe it’s okay.

He sits in that filthy tunnel until the pink paint makes his eyes swim, and the flurries have ruined his leather jacket. His jaw aches, and his eyes burn, and he feels like he’s been picked up and shaken.

That finally, finally, something’s come loose.

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(2)

It’s a stupid fucking decision. He doesn’t need anybody else to tell him that.

But what the fuck is he supposed to do, when Shane's on the ice in front of him, kitted out in Montreal colours, and smiling broader than he's ever dared to in public.

They don't approach each other like this – not on the ice, and certainly not in full view of their teammates, the crowd, and whatever cameras have already been turned on. Somewhere, a commentator is definitely talking about the history of their rivalry, speculating on why Shane has decided to skate over to him. Why neither of them are currently shouting, or pushing each other, or hurling insults.

Or maybe he's finally lost it, and nobody actually cares.

"It's good to see you." Shane pokes at the ice with the blade of his skate, creating a small pile of shavings. "You look better."

"You did not see me in Russia. Maybe I was very happy."

"I didn't," Shane agreed, "but I could tell that you weren't."

"Ah," Ilya says, tilting his head as he smirks, "so you think I look terrible before?"

"Shut up."

"You think I am ugly? Beast of a man?"

"Holy shit," Shane mutters. But he's still smiling. "Yeah, you're definitely better."

Ilya nods. He's not *fine*, but anything's better than where he last left off. Although, coming face to face with Shane like this, with the glow of the rink lights and the chatter of the still-sparse crowd filtering in, it feels like he's back where he was before. Still undecided about what to do. How to handle this, how much to reveal.

Shane moves closer, dropping his voice to a whisper. "We still on for later?"

Unable to help himself, Ilya looks around. None of their teammates are close enough to hear, but it's still a risk. What if someone's mic'd up?

"I've been looking forward to it," Shane continues. "There's something I want to ask you."

It draws his attention back, eyes snapping to Shane's. "Okay?"

"Later," he says; his lips are pressed together, but his smile is still evident.

"I..." Ilya clears his throat, eyes widening as he catches himself just in time. He takes a step back, putting some much-needed distance between them, but Shane follows. It's the worst possible thing because he can't tell Shane to go – he doesn't have it in him. He's too raw, too vulnerable, and he wants nothing more than to speed through this game so he can curl up in Shane's bed under blankets that smell like them.

"Go on," Shane says. He nods like he's being helpful.

“I also want to ask you something. But not here.”

Shane’s grin turns filthy. “Can I get a hint?”

It’s impossible to look flirty right now; he’s never had trouble with it before, but this is something else entirely. So Ilya chooses his words carefully; he drops the volume and deliberately fumbles his pronunciation, speaking far too quickly. Even if there was another native speaker beside him, they wouldn’t be able to decipher his clunky Russian.

“I cannot wait to be alone with you. I have been looking forward to this all week. I love you. Are you listening?”

Shane taps his stick against his leg. He’s still smirking, eyelids lowering. He’s thinking about sex – it’s written on his face clear as day, for anyone who knows what to look for. And in this arena, that’s only Ilya.

But then Shane says, “That sounded familiar.”

Ilya’s head snaps up. He can feel his eyes widening, and he almost drops his stick. “What?”

“You said something like that when we spoke on the phone.” Shane shrugs. “I haven’t practiced much though. So maybe I’m wrong.”

“You *are* wrong,” Ilya lies. He swallows, trying to push down the sudden pain in his chest. “We will beat you tonight, and I will score three goals. Yes?”

“No,” Shane says; the flirty look is wiped clean from his face, replaced with that steely competitiveness that Ilya loves. “I’ll win the first face-off, *and* I’ll score before you. That’s a bet.”

“Okay,” Ilya replies. But when it passes his lips, it feels like he’s saying something else.

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(3)

The moment Shane hits the ice, time stops moving. He gets whisked away by the medical team, and Ilya’s left standing there wondering how the fuck he’s supposed to play through to the siren.

His face must speak for him, because he’s pulled almost immediately, left to stew on the bench with his stomach churning and his heart racing. He can’t stop bouncing his leg, can’t focus on anything in front of him. Coach is trying to talk to him, but he can’t even pretend to be listening. He’s going to develop an ulcer or something, and won’t that be a fucking laugh to explain.

Sorry, guys, I can’t play because the guy I hate got checked. Don’t worry about it.

He goes back to the hotel with the team, but he doesn't stay there. Instead, he puts on his running shoes and does loops around Ville-Marie until he tastes blood in his throat.

He wants to go to Westmount. If he sits in front of Shane's apartment long enough like a fucking lost dog, maybe he'll come home. But he doesn't know that he'll make it back to the hotel in this state, let alone an hour in the wrong direction on busy city streets.

He slows to a walk, keeping his pace brisk so that his body temperature doesn't drop too drastically.

I'll call an Uber at the next intersection, he thinks.

Then, when that passes, *I'll do it at that neon sign.*

It eventually morphs into, *If I'm level with that restaurant before I start shivering, Shane will be okay. If I don't check my phone, there won't be any bad news. If I delete the ESPN app, it will be fine.*

The convenience store on the corner has a flower display in the window. Some of the petals are wilting, the heads dipping low on flexible stalks. The lines that bloom across that soft, waxy skin remind him of the grooves that had marred his father's face; deep ones between his brows, more above his mouth. They only appeared when he was angry, or disappointed. So Ilya saw them often.

Shane has lines too – ones that arch above his smile, highlighting the apples of his cheeks. More on his hips, when he'd grown quicker than his skin could manage. Ones on his palms, that Ilya has traced with a gentle fingertip.

He goes inside and buys a bouquet. Small, easily hidden, even though he knows Marly won't ask.

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"Oh," Shane's cheeks darken, eyes locked on the package Ilya's attempting to set down as discreetly as possible. It doesn't work, despite the pain killer's Shane's doped up on. "Are those for me?"

"For your mother," Ilya replies, rearranging the *get well soon* card someone else has left; Pike, if the smear of blue crayon on the inside is anything to go by. "Because she has put up with you for so long."

"*You* also put up with me." He tries to sit up, wincing at the slightest movement. Ilya reaches out, then retracts, careful to keep his hands at a safe distance. "I'm fine, I'm fine. How are you?"

The lump in his throat is back. "Not fine."

Shane laughs – it must hurt, because he grimaces. "Where's my call button? The nurse can come and check you out."

“Stop moving.”

Shane rolls his eyes, but he does settle back against the pillows. His hand twitches, and Ilya finds himself winding their fingers together before he really knows what he’s doing. “Did you bring me booze?”

“No.”

“Fuck,” Shane groans.

“No ginger ale either.”

“This really fucking hurts.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, “it does.”

For a moment, Shane’s quiet. He can’t suspect anything, not really – he’s on another fucking planet, judging by the glaze in his eyes. But then he says, “Can I see them?”

Ilya runs his thumb over the back of Shane’s hand. “See what?”

“Whatever the fuck you’re trying to hide up there. You’re not very good at it.”

“Is just flowers.”

He lets out a giggle. “Dude.” Under the blanket, his toes start to wriggle. “That is *so* gay.”

The corner of Ilya’s mouth ticks up. “Yes.”

“Fucking cool.”

He has to press his lips together to keep from smiling. “I will get rid of them. You look too happy. Is not good.”

Shane cranes his neck, trying to get a better look. “Give them here.”

So Ilya does. He presses the bouquet into Shane’s hand and tries not to keep one eye on the room’s door.

“Not roses?”

“You only use glasses for reading, yes?” Ilya runs a finger over one of the flowers, feels the tiny petals bend. “Or is your concussion that bad?”

“No. I just mean ... roses are the romantic kind, aren’t they?”

Ilya huffs a laugh. “You are not sure?”

“No, I know they are. But you got ... daisies?”

“They are pretty. Like you.”

“Fuck off.”

“Is chamomile.” He swallows, keeping his eyes on the flowers and not on Shane’s face. “They used to grow in my *babushka*’s garden in Russia. Reminds me of home.”

“Oh.” Shane’s fingers tighten around Ilya’s. “Fuck. Maybe that’s better than roses.”

“Is not,” Ilya says, letting amusement creep into his tone. “My gift is not good enough, so I will take it with me.”

“Don’t,” Shane says, quickly. He tips the bouquet sideways, and the stiff white corner of the accompanying card pokes out. Heart in his throat, Ilya watches as Shane pinches it between thumb and forefinger, sliding it free from the plastic wrapping. He squints at it, his concussion and the absence of his glasses working in Ilya’s favour. “What does this say?” He looks so young right now, with the starched hospital blankets tucked around his chest, and dark bruises under his eyes.

Ilya can’t bear to lie to him.

But he has to.

Sliding the card from between Shane’s fingers, Ilya holds it between them. He pretends to read it, acts like he doesn’t know exactly what he’s scrawled there, in illegible Cyrillic script. As though he didn’t agonise over it last night, shoulders hunched as he sat at the desk in the corner of the hotel room, awash with dim lamplight.

Mouth dry, lips dripping from his lips, Ilya says, “Get well quickly so I can beat you sooner.”

Shane laughs; the sound of it is decadent. Ilya wants to bathe in the warm light of it, to kick off his shoes and climb into bed alongside him. To curl up next to Shane and refuse to move. The world can turn without him; he needs to be here, with this person. With *his* person.

“Hey,” Shane says, a tinge of anxiety creeping into his voice. “I was going to ask you something last night. Hear me out before you say no.”

Ilya nods. And while Shane’s distracted, he slips the card into his pocket. It was a fucking stupid decision to include it – even dumber than the flowers, which was already pushing it. He can’t risk someone finding it here, in Shane’s room. After all, there aren’t many Russian speakers who signed the visitor log.

So he puts the flowers back on the shelf and pretends that he doesn’t want to spend two weeks at Shane’s cottage this summer. He pretends and pretends and he gets so good at it that when the nurse arrives and he has to leave, he tells himself that it doesn’t feel like agony. And he almost believes it.

But then, as he enters the elevator, the corner of that card pokes at the soft skin between his fingers. He runs his thumb over the grooves – one’s he created with a leaky hotel pen. He pretends that he didn’t lie to Shane. That the messy script doesn’t say *I love you. Please never scare me like that again.*

He'd made his handwriting worse on purpose.

Just in case Shane's been practicing.

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(4)

Pregame interviews are always a fucking pisstake. Away game are the worst.

Ilya gets why they have to do them – he does. The league needs the hype from journalists as much as their websites need clicks. But why do they always have to send *him*?

“The ladies love you,” Coach says, clapping Ilya on the shoulder. “Decky reckons our retweets go up 80% if we have you in front of the camera. Double it if your shirt's off.”

Cadyn lets out a loud whistle that makes Ilya's ears ring.

“Come on, Rozanov.” Coach takes a step back, throws Ilya a wink. “Might help your chances tonight.”

He doesn't *need* the kind of chances everyone in the room is alluding too; he's not planning on picking up multiple women and bringing them back to the team hotel for an orgy. He's got no fucking idea where that rep has even come from, actually. What he got up to in Russia is his business – but that was also *years* ago, and US media outlets never cover his activities there anyway. But, still, it persists.

“Go on, Roz,” Marly says. “Give them something to talk about.”

So Ilya does. He pulls his undershirt over his head and goes to stand in the freezing tunnel in front of a crowd of reporters. He doesn't recognise most of them – at least at home, the regular crew knows what questions will elicit useful responses, and which ones he'll make fun of.

“What do you think the team's chances are tonight?”

“Good. Is always good.”

“What was the focus during practice this week?”

“How to find the goal. Is very hard to see with Jenkins in the way.”

“You're closing in on a record number of assists for the Raiders – do you think you'll break that tonight?”

“Is possibility. But Cadyn is very selfish with puck, so.” He throws in a wink, knowing it'll come back to him later.

“Is there anyone you’ll be playing for today? Maybe someone special in the audience?”

It gives Ilya pause. A new question, though sometimes invasive, is always welcome. Anything to break up the fucking monotony of traditional sports journalism.

“Yes,” he says, running his tongue over his bottom lip. “Marly’s wife is very beautiful – you have seen her? I think she is here.”

Laughter ripples through the gathered crowd, and the cameras are lowered.

“Rozanov,” someone calls, and Ilya hears the sound of the boys getting ready to form their pre-game huddle.

He turns on his heel and heads back to the locker room, but his thoughts are elsewhere.

He’s never had anyone ‘special’ in the audience, unless you count Svetlana. His father has avoided all of his games since he was twelve, unless they were played on Russian soil, and Alexei would never have offered. Typically, Ilya gave away his personal seats to members of the team, so that they could invite extra friends. Last week, one of the rookies brought their grandparents along.

But maybe it won’t always have to be like that.

His cheeks colour as he imagines looking up into the stands and seeing Shane there, between Marly’s wife and Cadyn’s girlfriend. Or seated beside Svetlana, both of them whispering into each other’s ears as they critique his performance. The thought of it makes his heart beat a little faster, and he fumbles with the fastening on his shoulder pads.

He always brings up the rear during the team entrance. Back when he was a rookie, they always made him go first; he pretended to hate it, muttering that one day he’d be up the back, occupying the most prestigious spot. Secretly, he enjoyed showboating, being the one to hype up the crowd. He still does.

He likes looking up clips from that time, spending hours on YouTube as he watches an eighteen-year-old version of himself. In those grainy videos, his smile stretches wide across his face, floppy curls flattened to his forehead by his branded helmet. Despite the token protests he made to the team before they exited the locker room, he always looked happy. Like his dreams were constantly coming true. He wonders when that stopped being the case. When he started looking for something else instead.

Marly goes out in front of him, raising his fists above his head as the crowd boos. He turns to grin at Ilya, opens his mouth to make a joke about out-of-town posers, but Ilya isn’t listening.

Out on the ice, he turns in a circle, eyes peeled for the camera that he knows will be tracking them. The wide shot is perfect – not close enough that his face will fill thousands of TV screens across North America. But enough to draw attention, if someone’s looking. And he knows that one person will be.

In the moments before, Ilya's heart drops to his stomach. He's standing on the ice with a full arena's worth of eyes on him, but he can't see any of them. They're a blur at the edges of his vision as his gaze locks onto the camera. Before he can second-guess himself, he twirls his stick in a circle. He doesn't know if Shane will get it – he used to do it to irritate him, right as they skated up to each other for a face-off. Shane's always been so fucking uptight about hockey, and seeing Ilya treat it as a game gets under his skin. Always has, always will.

With any luck, Shane's already grumbling. He'll be pulling out his phone, opening his text thread with Lily, and crafting an insult about how much of a dick Ilya is.

But he'll be looking.

He has to be – what the fuck else is he going to do, now that he's on IR?

After he rights his stick, Ilya takes a moment. He tilts his head up, faces the camera, and mouths something as quickly as he can. In Russian, because it's private. And because he doesn't actually want anyone to see it – not really. But he needs to say it. If he doesn't, it'll come out anyway, in a dramatic explosion that he won't have control over. But if he drip-feeds it like this, sates that addiction, that adrenaline rush ... maybe he can hold out a little longer.

He mouths it again. *Ya tebya lyublyu.*

Then he skates over to the bench and joins his team.

When he pulls his phone from his bag two hours later, hair shower-wet and skin flushed with the elation of a winning game, there's a (2) on his screen.

Jane: Good game.

Jane: Even though you're a showboating asshole.

He doesn't mention anything else.

Ilya tries to remember that's what he wants.

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(5)

The Admirals have run them into the fucking ice.

The entire team is pissed, channelling their aggression into pointed chirps and messy checks that leave them sitting in the penalty box far longer than normal.

"Is bullshit," Ilya mutters, sliding up alongside Marly as they wait for the game to resume.

“The refs are fucking biased,” Marly replies. He spits onto the ice and shoots Hunter a foul glare. “Hometown advantage my ass.”

There’s three fucking minutes left in the game and they’re down three goals. Unless one of them pulls off a fucking Gretzky, they’re out of the playoffs. And to Scott fucking Hunter of all people. Which is infinitely worse.

“Fuck this shit,” Ilya mutters, settling his mouthguard back into place.

Marly claps him on the shoulder before skating away, back into position.

Ilya loses the face-off.

Scott fucking Hunter scores.

The only proper course of action is to get blindingly drunk.

The team always goes out in New York. It would be the perfect place to shake off the disappointment; there’s no shortage of high-end bars, C list celebrities, and beautiful women. But they’re stuck in Boston, and everyone here knows who they are.

Ilya doesn’t care about having fun tonight – he’s pissed about the loss, keeps running the game over and over in his head, analysing where he went wrong. He doesn’t usually do that, preferring to look to the future rather than staying in the past. But the future’s so up in the air right now, the ground shifting under his feet, the walls morphing every time he stops to take a breath. So he buries his face in an overpriced beer and listens to Marly chat up a bottle-blond influencer.

“There’s this party my friend’s throwing. It’s in Southie.” She tosses her hair over her shoulder, looks at Marly from under her lashes. “Do you and your friend want to come?”

“Yes,” Marly says, not bothering to ask Ilya, knowing he’ll say yes. It’s an unspoken agreement – never go to a party by yourself after a big game. Part safety, part making sure nobody ends up trending on Twitter because they got their ass out in public.

The party’s in the penthouse of a building that definitely used to be industrial, back before they gentrified the shit out of the area – or so the girl says. She’s talking a mile a minute. Ilya hasn’t asked her name, and he’s not sure Marly has either. Her friend is an artist of some sort – abstract paintings, with a roommate that does photography. Both of them went to NYU and didn’t pay a dime out of their own pocket.

“Spent their twenties failing upwards,” she says, leaning in close and dropping her voice to a whisper, despite there being no one else in the elevator.

As the floors pass, Ilya stares at his reflection. His mouth is turned down at the corners, lips slightly pursed. He looks like he doesn’t want to be there. Which isn’t far off base, but he knows he should try. For Marly.

“So what else can we expect?” Marly leaning an elbow against the wall; he towers over the girl, despite her chunky black heels. “Strip poker? Charades?”

She giggles, moving in closer to him.

If they start fucking in this elevator, Ilya thinks to himself, I'll press the emergency stop button.

It wouldn't be the first time Marly's put him through that shit – they had to share a hotel room for his entire rookie season.

Who would Shane have bunked with? Pike, probably. They were rookies at the same time. Had they ever—

Ilya jerks himself out of that thought with so much force that he knocks his head against the mirror. Marly glances over, raises an eyebrow. Ilya waves him off, and he goes back to putting on the moves.

The last fucking thing he needs to be thinking of is Pike getting his dick wet – his day's already terrible enough. And Shane ... well, he's usually thinking of Shane.

If things were different, he wouldn't even be here right now. If he and Shane were official, exclusive, monogamous, whatever the fuck you want to call it, he'd be back at the hotel room on Skype, just like all the other married guys. He'd have an excuse, something better than sulking.

"Here we are," the girl says, and the elevator dings. She leads them across a short foyer and through an unlocked door. Inside, the party's in full swing, people milling about everywhere. Which is perfect, because it lets Ilya melt into the crowd. He'll find a quiet corner somewhere and scroll on his phone until Marly either leaves with the girl or gets blue-balled enough that he calls it quits. It's a 50/50 shot at this point.

When Ilya wedges himself between a large white pillar and a heavy bookshelf, he sees there's still no text from Shane. He has one from Svetlana – a crying emoji, accompanied with *you'll get it next year*. There's another from the Raiders' physical therapist, reminding him about his upcoming appointment. The team's group chat is filled with memes and links to articles that criticise the Admirals' defence line. He opens all of them and doesn't reply to a single one.

Sitting in the corner allows him to see the entire room – there's a table with cards, where people are playing some bastardised version of flip cup. There's a TV, turned to a channel that's showing artsy music videos from indie European artists. The kitchen counter's stacked with bottles of wine, and one single Absolut that has been hidden behind the toaster. But in the opposite corner, a group of girls are clustered together, holding sharpies in brightly coloured shades.

Intrigued by the prospect of a bit of youthful vandalism, Ilya wanders over.

"It's an art piece," one of the girls says, when he asks.

"It's not," another cuts in. Her laugh is pointed, critical. "Tessie's getting kicked out next week, so she wants us to sign the wall. They'll have to paint over it." She leans down and

adds a red heart beside her own signature.

“What’s your favourite colour?” the first girl asks.

Ilya thinks for a moment. He hasn’t been asked that question since he was nine or ten, and his mother wanted to have a special cake made. He thinks it was yellow. Maybe green. But he knows that Shane’s is blue.

“Blue,” he says, and then he’s holding a teal-coloured sharpie. It’s not the same shade as the Metros kit, but it’ll do the trick.

“Write whatever you want,” the second girl says. “Or draw a dick – that’ll fucking show them.”

He nods, waits for them to walk away; they move as a unit, arms wrapped around each other’s waists, heads tilted to press against one another. It looks nice. Safe. He should text Svetlana back. But first, this.

He finds a section of wall that doesn’t have much space left – someone’s drawn a red version of Garfield eating a tray of lasagna. There are many ‘*wuz here*’s, and initials separated by plus signs, and song lyrics written in cursive that he struggles to read.

Below a picture of a guitar, he presses the teal sharpie to the paint and lets the colour bloom. He doesn’t have to think about what to write – it’s been on his mind so often lately that it’s second nature.

He knows he should leave it there. But writing it doesn’t feel like enough, if it’s just going to get painted over.

He caps the sharpie and sets it down in the box beside the others, completing the rainbow. Then he gets out his phone and takes a step back. The picture’s zoomed out enough that nobody will notice the message he’s scrawled there – it’s in Russian, and most of his followers are from North America. And there’s no evidence that *he* wrote it, anyway.

So he scrolls through the filter options, selects Valencia, and hits ‘post’. It slots into his Instagram feed nicely, right beside the bottle of Corona on a bartop, the Tampa sunset, and the walking trail beside the St Lawrence River.

He doesn’t think Shane will see it. They don’t follow each other, and Shane really only reposts stuff about his team – PR shit that the social media manager definitely pressures him to do. That and brand deals, sponcon, the type of stuff that Ilya would talk endless shit about if it were anyone else.

So Shane probably won’t see it. He definitely doesn’t check Ilya’s profile as much as Ilya checks his.

But there’s always a chance.

And that’s what they’ve been relying on for the last eight years.

(+1)

They're playing pool when Shane does it.

All the windows are open, warm summer air filtering through the cottage. The scent of grilled meat has been wafting across the lake all afternoon, and Ilya's spent hours trying to convince Shane that his macrobiotic diet is both stupid and useless because the Metros are going to lose to the Raiders in their first game regardless of the torture he's putting himself through.

"Alright," Shane had said, leaning a hip against the pool table and raising his eyebrows. "If you win, I'll eat a cheeseburger. If *I* win, you have to eat lentils. And kale."

Ilya had pointed a finger at him, forcing a stern expression. "*Two* patties. And extra cheese."

"Deal."

But now Shane's doing his best to cheat, which is an unexpected development.

"You are losing worse than the Metros at playoffs," Ilya says. He watches as his ball slides straight into the pocket and nods to himself, satisfied. He doesn't look at Shane, who is doing his best to distract him. He's tried bending over, pulling up his shirt to wipe his face, and hollowing his cheeks around the neck of his beer bottle. But Ilya's desire to win (and avoid kale) is far stronger than the permanent haze of lust that envelops his brain whenever Shane's in the room.

Visibly disappointed, Shane sets down his beer. He leans against the bookcase and watches as Ilya lines up his next shot.

Without looking over, Ilya says, "This will go in. I will sink three in a row."

He knows Shane's rolling his eyes. He doesn't even need to look.

The desired ball goes in, and Ilya adjusts his position. He settles the cue against his finger, drags it back and forth to test it.

"Ilya."

Shane's said his first name enough times now that the novelty should have worn off. But it hasn't. He's starting to think he might never tire of it.

"Hey."

"Fuck off," Ilya replies. He adjusts his hand, tilting it toward himself.

"I want to tell you something."

“Yes, I bet you do.” He pulls back the cue, lining up the shot. Does his best not to glance over.

Then, “I really fucking love you.”

The cue skates off the side of the ball, sending it spinning.

Ilya whirls around, a buzzing sound filling his ears. He knows he’s staring, knows his mouth is probably open, knows he must look ridiculous.

Grinning, Shane says, “Made you miss.”

“Are you...” Ilya clears his throat, sets down the cue. “Are you joking?”

“Nope – you definitely missed.” His tone is neutral, but he’s fidgeting, rocking back and forth, fiddling with his fingers and the hem of his shirt. His feet are so close together that he’s not fully balanced. Anxiety is rolling off Shane in waves, and Ilya’s heart skips a beat at that.

He abandons the game in favour of crossing the room and taking Shane’s face in his hands. Up close, his freckles stand out against his skin; it’s the first thing Ilya notices, every time they’re together like this. When they were eighteen and in a parking lot in Saskatchewan, it was what originally drew him in. Nine years later, nothing much has changed.

When Ilya kisses him, Shane lets out a soft whimper. He grabs the front of Ilya’s shirt, using it to pull them closer together. Against Ilya’s lips, Shane whispers, “Aren’t you going to ask me again if I mean it?”

Ilya shakes his head; the tips of their noses brush, and he tilts his head to press a kiss there. “I already know, *lyubimyy*.”

Shane swallows; Ilya feels it against his palms, when Shane’s jaw moves. “So do you, uh, feel the same, or...?” His gaze drops for a moment, down to Ilya’s lips.

Smiling, Ilya slots their mouths together again. It’s gentle, luxurious, and he can feel Shane’s fingers tightening where he’s gripping his shirt. He rubs his thumbs over Shane’s cheeks as he pulls back to rest their foreheads together.

It’s a long time coming.

Such a long, long time.

Years past it’s due date.

Shane’s eyes are wide. In the indirect summer light, they’re as dark as the night sky. Deep, rich, *krasivyy*.

He holds Shane’s face in his hands, meets his gaze, as he says, “I love you. Very, very much.”

The smile that takes over Shane’s face is so wide that it must hurt; the apples over his cheekbones are absurdly round, ruddy and shiny. His voice is as gentle as the morning breeze

as he says, "It's my first time saying that. Aside from my parents. Feels weird."

Ilya can't help but smile. "Is not mine."

"Oh." Shane's grin falters slightly, his mouth turning down at the corners. "Like, romantically? Because it's different with my parents than with you. Obviously."

Ilya knows that he must look fond. He can feel his expression turning into something that he'd recognise on the faces of his teammates, when they Skype their wives on the road.
Lovesick.

"Yes," he says. Watching. Waiting.

Shane swallows. "Who? Wait, fuck, don't answer that."

Ilya's laugh is soft, more of an exhale than anything proper. Still holding Shane's face, he kisses the corner of his mouth.

"What?" A furrow develops between Shane's brows. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Like what?" Another kiss, to Shane's cupid's bow this time.

"Like I'm an idiot. Or missing the joke, or something."

Ilya drops a gentle kiss to Shane's forehead. He strokes a thumb over Shane's cheek as he allows himself the luxury of openly gazing at him. "I have said it a few times."

Another swallow, the downward twitch of a mouth. "Okay."

Biting down on his bottom lip to control his smile, Ilya says, "To you."

"Uh." Shane blinks; it's slow, like he's just waking up. "You haven't."

"I have, *lyubimyy*. In Russian."

A shudder rolls through Shane's body as he exhales; his relief is visible in the untensing of his shoulders, the hopeful look in his eyes. "When?"

"On the phone. When we talked on the ice. When you were in hospital. Some other times." He punctuates each with a kiss to Shane's brow, his nose, his cheek.

"No," Shane says. He tries to shake his head, but is stopped by the hands on his face.

"Yes."

"You *asshole*," Shane hisses, but his eyes have gone shiny.

Their next kiss is more desperate. Shane opens his mouth, swipes his tongue over Ilya's bottom lip. He's breathing heavily, chest heaving as though he's just come off the ice.

"Teach me," Shane says, after a long moment.

So Ilya does. He says it in Russian, just as he did the first time.

A tear spills over Shane's bottom lid; Ilya catches it as it runs down his cheek, smearing it across his lovely warm skin.

"I know that," Shane says. "Fuck, I remember you saying it."

As gently as possible, Ilya says, "I did not lie. I promise."

"You've..." Shane swallows. His fingers wrap around Ilya's wrists. "You've loved me for a while?"

"I have."

"Fuck," Shane says. When he kisses Ilya, it tastes like salt. He keeps doing it until they fall to the ground, laughing into each other's mouths, and all Ilya can think is *What will it take to get him to marry me?*

Later, when the sun has dipped behind the trees, Ilya voices that question.

Shane snorts, rolling over and resting his chin on Ilya's chest. It's pointy and hurts a bit, but he turns his face into Ilya's hand, and Ilya couldn't imagine ever asking him to get up.

"Maybe just ask?" His eyes widen and he stutters as he says, "Not, like, right now. Obviously. But sometime. Ages away."

Ilya runs a hand through Shane's dark hair, gently scratches his nails over Shane's nape.

"Okay."

Shane raises his eyebrows. "Okay?"

"Yes." He lifts one of Shane's hands and presses a kiss to the palm. "Okay."

And Shane's answering smile is so wide, so all-encompassing, that Ilya remembers exactly why he's here. That his rightful place in this universe is this exact spot, orbiting Shane's sun. He used to question his position, unsure of how close he was to the centre.

He doesn't think he needs to do that anymore.

He knows exactly where he stands.

End Notes

Feel free to come into my DMs on [tumblr](#) to talk about the episode, or tell me what your favourite ep 5 scene was below - I'm a mushy puddle right now.

Works inspired by this one

[Podfic] [A Drag Path by thecouchsofa](#) by [meems_toanend](#)

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