fall in love again and again

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by galactictsukki

Summary

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"I can pick people up," Shane says again, moving off his bike and out of Ilya's sweaty embrace. "And I don't have to do it by concocting schemes or stripping on top of the LAX bros' coffee table."

Or, after some team chirping at Shane's expense, Ilya accidentally interrupts a few of his potential dating prospects and then keeps on doing it less than accidentally

Notes

howdy pals!! this is my first crack at hollanov and i'm just hoping it sticks the landing lmfao. yall already know i got into these dingdongs 2 weeks ago and immediately started plotting different ways to fulfill my favorite tropes that rachel reid shockingly didn't manage to cover in her amazing collection of my favorite tropes bc that lady is a mind reader :) all my hockey knowledge is based off heated rivalry, growing up with a red wings fan, and my eternal og beloved, the incomparable omg check please by ngozi ukazu WHICH EVERYONE NEEDS TO READ IMMEDIATELY!!!!!!!!!! IT WILL CHANGE YOUR LIFE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! NURSEYDEX RISE UP!!!!!!!!

the falcons & central ottawa university are made up, as is my team, which is a hodge podge of the centaurs + hayden and marly bc i said so and bc i love them <3 also i know hudson

said in a recent interview (teen vogue???) that he never said "rozy" he was just moaning and cut off rozanov or whatever that crazy mf said, but hudson can be wrong for once in his perfect hot life and i say he said rozy 100000% (jk i would fight god for hudson williams)

title of this fic comes from one of two things i can't stop replaying: everything is romantic by charlie xcx and the "never in life have i blushed, russians do not do this" scene

WARNING: there are 2 instances of unwanted touching/nonconsensual touching between Shane and another character and #2 kisses him when he isn't into it, just in case that is triggering to anyone!!!!!!!!

See the end of the work for more notes

The whole ordeal begins, like most catastrophic events put in motion by a men's hockey team, as a bit of friendly chirping.

Pike has been ranting and raving about the women's tennis captain, Jackie, for the better part of the semester. Since the very first party hosted by the women's swimming team, in fact. Which was the week before school even started up. Dykstra has been lamenting the fact that school means less clubbing time, which means less time to terrorize the general population of Ottawa coeds. Marly has a weird thing going on with Dillon and a pair of wing spikers from the women's volleyball team that Ilya has zero interest in learning more about. Barrett and Harris are still skirting around each other and their inevitable happily ever after. One that Ilya would love to happen sooner rather than later so he can stop hearing about Harris's sparkly eyes in detail.

In short, the COU Falcons are all young, dumb, and full of—

"Bullshit," Bood says from a treadmill. "There's no way that you actually got her number."

This is directed at Hazy, who is supposed to be spotting Luca's bench pressing, but is mostly focused on verbally sparring with Bood.

"I swear on my mother! She gave it to me right before she left!"

"Pull up her contact info right now and show me. Let me call her."

"Are you fucking crazy? She'll block me the second she hears the sound of your voice down the line instead of the hot piece of ass she gave her number to in the first place."

"Aish," Ilya mumbles. He ups the resistance on his stationary bike and hopes he'll pedal so fast so hard that he'll black out and miss the rest of this idiotic conversation.

He loves his teammates to bits and pieces, truly. Ilya couldn't ask for better guys to grow into himself with, both on and off the ice. But they're a very two-tracked group and only ever talk about two things: hockey and fucking. Which are also his two favorite things, but only one of them he enjoys getting opinions on from people like Marly, or Dillon, or Dykstra.

Shane is on the bike next to him and, unlike Ilya, remembered to charge his headphones prior to the mandatory team workout. He gets to listen to something mildly less terrible than tales about Hazy's potential hookup, like an audiobook on how bricks are made, or NPR's latest fiscal review of Wells Fargo stockholders, or whatever it is that well-behaved members of society fill their silences with.

He notices Shane noticing his change in speed, and notices Shane up his speed, too. It's Ilya's preferred distraction from thinking about Bood's and Hazy's sexual escapades. He ups his resistance one more level just to be contrite.

Shane waits until they're ten minutes into a steep incline to pull an earbud out and ask, "What am I missing?"

“The only thing worth living for,” Ilya drolls. “Hazy’s girl troubles.”

“Yuck. Maybe he should be more worried about his algebra grade.”

“Good point—Hazy! Less talk about phone numbers, more talk about numbers you should be able to count to to not get kicked off the team.”

Hazy points at Shane first, says: “Narc,” then points at Ilya and says: “That’s what we’re talking about, Roz! This girl is going to turn the terror of algebra into a melody of equations and parabolas that will keep me from flunking out. And if I happen to get more out of it, then all’s well that ends well.”

“Whatever the fuck that means,” Ilya replies. “Don’t fail your exam or I’ll make you do suicides with Price all night. He likes them.”

Hazy shivers. “I know he does.”

“Don’t listen to Rozanov,” Bood cuts in, waving off Ilya’s threats. “He’s just mad because his regular booty call graduated in May and now he’s gotta find someone else.”

True, but mean. “At least I know how to successfully establish a booty call. You two have to create… Hollander, what’s the word again for bad plans?”

Shane seems unimpressed by them. “Schemes.”

“Yes. You have to create schemes for women to like you.” Then, because Ilya knows fun phrases too: “Don’t hate the player, hate the game.”

Luca cracks up under the barbell, forcing Hazy to actually pay attention and spot him. Bood snorts, like Ilya is 51 instead of 21. Chouinard, who has spent this entire time deeply focused on his rowing machine, graces them with a reluctant smile. Price continues his weight lifting in the corner without acknowledging anyone, focused only on his regimen and his headphones.

When Hazy recovers from saving Luca’s life, he turns back to Ilya, and by default, Shane. “I don’t see you harassing Hollander for his lack of game. He gets the least action out of any of us by a landslide. I’m pretty sure there are widows in nursing homes that see more action than our A.”

Shane’s exercise flush deepens, travelling from the tips of his ears down to his jawline. “Fuck you, Hazy. Sorry I don’t want to spend my precious and very limited free time being weird to girls and letting them down.”

“Simple way to fix that—don’t be weird and don’t let them down. Those come with practice, by the way, which I know you know how to attend.”

Ilya half-comes to Shane’s rescue. “Ah, I can’t make fun of him. Too easy. Anyone who looks at him knows he gets nervous just opening the door for his date. Low-hanging fruit, right? I’m getting good at these comparisons.”

“I don’t have time to waste on picking up girls.” Ilya watches a bead of sweat roll down the side of Shane’s pink face, and wonders suddenly if he could feel the heat radiating off of his skin without actually touching it. If it would sear into him like an open flame. “There’s practice, and games, and working out with you assholes, and homework, and making sure to call my mom once a week so she can ask me about *allll* of those things I just mentioned.”

Bood, appropriately, boos. Marly, arms hooked over the lat pulldown bar, leans forward and laughs until he’s in danger of falling off the bench.

Dillon asks, “Are you saving yourself for marriage? That’s so romantic, dude.”

Shane’s face is a bright magenta now. Ilya can hear him working himself into a tizzy over the implications of being a virgin, and he’s helpless to do anything but laugh, too, sprawled across the bike’s screen.

“I don’t need to tell everyone every time I get to third base!”

“I heard that they just released a new docu-series on the complete evolution of Darwin’s finches,” Dykstra says. “It’s, like, twenty hours long. You finish that in a single weekend or did you save some for this weekend?”

The Falcons are exceptionally aware of how fun it is to harass their assistant captain. He’s uptight and polite and nothing like Ilya, something Ilya has heard Pike compare to Fun Dad and Strict Mom. He thinks he should feel more bad about the way the team pushes Shane’s buttons until he snaps like a rubber band, but it’s addictive. One of his favorite things in the world is letting Hazy and Bood and Marly work Shane up until Ilya can deliver the final blow and properly enjoy the resulting fireworks.

Ilya is curious to see where this conversation is heading. There’s nothing that gets under Shane’s skin to the same degree as his love life, besides jabs at his hockey skills or dedication to being the team’s assistant captain.

Hockey and fucking. The Falcons’ notorious ouroboros.

Shane stops pedalling and puts his hands on his hips, panting from exertion and irritation. Ilya thinks he’s never looked cuter.

“I like to keep my private life private. You might think everyone else is interested in hearing about getting your dick sucked at the annual Smixer, but I like to keep those encounters to myself. They’re for me and my partner and no one else.”

Dillon says, “We never even see you talking to someone! How can we believe you’ve been on the plate for third base when we’ve never seen you make it to first?”

“Why does it even matter? I’ve never been about to kiss a girl and thought, ‘Gee, I wish my friends were right here with me to see it happen!’ There’s actually nothing that kills the mood more than thinking about kissing someone and looking up to see Dykstra watching me.”

“Fuck you, man. I would be there cheering you all the way to your home run.”

Barrett bumps Dykstra's shoulder with his and says, "Good going, Hollander, you hurt Ev's feelings. That's bad for team morale. He just wants to be there for you during your greatest achievements."

Shane grimaces at them. "I'm putting in a transfer request to Carleton this afternoon."

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He directs this jab at Dillon, and then turns and stomps away toward the water refill station. Ilya considers telling him he left his water bottle in the holder under the bike, but decides against it. He hates to watch Shane go, but loves to watch him leave, etc. Another trip to the bike and back just means more time to watch him have a tantrum.

"You think he's going to start picking up at parties?" Bood asks the room.

"No way," Marly says. "We'll be lucky if he finds a nice girl from his econ class to settle down and have 2.5 kids with in ten years. Right, Roz?"

Ilya hums, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Shane is the most private of them, but arguably the most stubborn and focused when it comes down to it. He gets the best grades, has the best stats, and chats with the most NHL scouts at their games. He's the assistant captain for a reason, besides skill: he's collected and scarily intelligent on the ice, hidden perfectly behind Ilya's daring plays and ferocity. The moon lying in wait behind a blinding sun.

If he wants to find someone, he'll do exactly that. Maybe to spite his obnoxious and overbearing teammates, but also because he can accomplish whatever he puts his mind to.

Ilya smiles to himself. This is going to be a very interesting semester, indeed.

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The Central Ottawa University library is not a place that Ilya frequents, but today he goes to out of complete necessity. The team house's wifi has been on the fritz all morning, and has

left him with no choice but to do homework on campus while a tech figures out what's wrong. He's tempted to leave it be and spend the few hours he has between classes, dinner, and practice taking a nap, but his accounting project is due soon and is worth a hefty portion of his grade, which spectacularly kills that dream.

The main floor of the library seems busy for a place advertised as a calm studying environment: there are tables packed with students and several whirring printers and a full café stationed in the corner with baristas calling out names every two seconds. It's a complete nightmare.

Ilya stops and stares, unsure where to go or how this will work. A girl walking by with a name badge and a stack of textbooks says, "The quiet floors are 3 and 4. They have desktop computers you can sign into if you need them and printers in closed rooms."

Ilya could kiss her on the mouth. "Thank you. You're my angel."

There are significantly less students on the 4th floor, so Ilya has his pick of empty tables. He notes the wall of desktop computers with pull-out screens on either side of a seat to create the illusion of being alone. There are a few different printer rooms with the number posted in big, bold letters on the door separating it from the main floor. There are also individual study rooms that can be reserved, which Ilya looks at for a moment, wondering if he should try and reserve one on the fly. The first few are either occupied or have someone's name penciled in for the upcoming hour, but there's one at the end that seems promising. Ilya heads to it, gaze going to the reservation sheet, and out of the corner of his eye, happens to catch a flash of—

Shane is in the room next to the one he's standing in front of, and he's not alone. There's a girl sitting to his right, and though their collection of books, notes, and laptops take up a great portion of the table, she's turned in her chair to face him directly, indicating that there's little studying being accomplished. She's pretty, with dark hair and dark eyes to match Shane's, something Ilya's sure his assistant captain is aware of since he's also staring directly at her.

He watches them exchange words, frozen in place just outside the door, and sees the moment that Shane starts laughing at something she's said. It scrunches up his nose and loosens the perpetual military line of his posture; the door and window deafen it completely, but Ilya can hear it in his mind, a memory of all the times he's ever had the pleasure of making Shane Hollander come the tiniest bit undone.

Ilya's turning the handle and slipping into the study room before the thought is done processing. The girl sees him first, her enamored smile turning into a surprised O.

"Sorry, we still have some time left—"

"It's okay," Ilya says, dropping down across from Shane. "I'm here to mooch off Mr. Responsible."

Shane jumps and turns at the sound of his voice. "Ilya!"

The girl doesn't exactly relax, but she stops staring at Ilya like he came to hold them hostage. "Oh, you guys know each other?"

“I’m Hollander’s better half,” he says, just as Shane says, “Rozanov is my teammate.”

“What do you mean?” Ilya asks, insulted.

“What do *you* mean?” Shane asks, genuinely confused.

“I’m not just teammate. I’m your captain!”

Shane rolls his eyes and turns back to the girl. “Sorry, Syd—this is my *captain.”*

“And better half!”

Ilya is expecting Syd to glare at him or be more obvious in her dislike of him for interrupting studying-slash-flirting time, but all she does next is grin. “Oh, I see. It’s nice to meet you, Ilya.”

Syd says his name carefully, like she wants to put all of the vowels where they’re supposed to be, and Ilya softens toward her. He feels 5% bad about interrupting her conversation with Shane instead of 1%.

“You too, Syd. I hope Hollander is a good study buddy.”

“He’s great!”

“I also hope that you don’t let him be in charge all the time. On the ice, he’s known for being a hydrant sometimes.”

“Tyrant,” Shane corrects, sighing.

“Same difference.”

Shane is back to his military posture and no-nonsense attitude. It delights Ilya as much as the softer version; this is the person who has forced Ilya to become a better player, and has become a better player in return. He’s ready for the verbal sparring that’s bound to happen, but before it takes off, Syd shuts her textbook and clicks around on her laptop, as if saving work.

“Well, it’s probably good you came and brought us back to reality. I’ve got another class to head to and was getting distracted talking about our professor’s weird obsession with Quentin Tarantino’s huge forehead.”

Ilya says, “Ah,” like this sentence makes any sort of sense to him. Shane’s lips twitch upward.

“See you Thursday for more of the same?” Syd asks Shane, who nods and replies, “Definitely.” She waves at Ilya, says, “Have a great rest of your day,” and flounces out of the study room, leaving the two of them to their own devices.

“She was nice,” Ilya observes, meaning it.

“Yeah. Thanks for that, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Dropping in unannounced. What if we had been taking a test or presenting?”

“There is no way you two were doing anything serious. I could hear you chattering like church ladies from outside the door.”

“No you couldn’t,” Shane disagrees, with half the amount of conviction Ilya suspects he intended to use. “It’s soundproof.”

“Okay. Whatever helps you to sleep at night.”

With even less conviction, Shane says, “Maybe I was trying to get to know her better.”

“You can’t date her, Hollander. It would never work—she distracts you from your studies. You two go out, put off studying to do *other things,* and before you know it, your grades are in the trench. You will get kicked off the team and forced to work in postage office for the rest of your life.”

“It could be just a hookup!”

“Marly taught me a great phrase for this situation,” Ilya says, grinning. “‘Don’t shit where you eat.’”

“Marly is disgusting and doesn’t deserve to breathe the same air as women.”

“He is also right.”

This knocks the fight out of Shane. Ilya can tell Shane thinks both he and Marly have a point. “It was just a thought.”

“Well, have a new one. Maybe about how you will help me save my accounting grade.”

“Oh, so I can’t ask out a cute girl from my seminar because it will ruin my grades but you can have bad grades for no reason?”

“Yeah. That’s why I’m the captain and you’re the assistant.”

Shane flips him off. “I wish I never met you.”

“Too bad, so sad. We only have the room for another half an hour, Hollander—stop your dilly dallying.”

“Whoever keeps teaching you these turns of phrases needs to be sent to prison.”

Shane never mentions Syd again, and Ilya never sees her again, but she leaves them to a nice afternoon of studying and bickering, so he has to thank her for that.

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The next girl he finds Shane talking to with clear intent is before practice is set to start, which already makes her a no-go in Ilya's humble opinion. Hockey comes before anything else in their lives, even fucking. Which his A should be completely aware of.

They started a casual routine at the beginning of the semester, where Ilya picks Shane up from his dreadful economics class before evening practice if he gets out of his dreadful biology class on time. This is one of those occasions, and Ilya is eager to forget about the horrors of E. coli bacteremia via collecting Shane from class and harassing him all the way to the rink.

It takes Ilya a minute to locate Shane in the crush of people trying to leave the building. He finally spots him standing next to a large potted plant, backpack slung over one shoulder, duffel bag at his feet, and hands shoved into his hoodie pouch. He looks comfortable and end-of-the-day rumpled, a combination so adorable that it takes Ilya another minute to realize that Shane is talking to someone.

This girl is much shorter than Shane, barely coming up to his shoulders. The sight of her head tipped back and his head tipped forward to maintain eye contact is strangely intimate to witness. She's as painfully cute as he is in her oversized hoodie and well-loved jeans, enormous heart-shaped glasses, and dozens of intricate, beaded braids. He watches Shane say something, no doubt in that straightforward manner he says everything, and watches as the girl tips her head back further to laugh at whatever it was. Shane's smile grows as hers grows, nearly squeezing his eyes shut.

The thought comes to Ilya, unbidden, the same as Marly punching him right in the gut: *this is the girl from econ that Shane will have 2.5 kids with.*

He wades through the throng of students to reach Shane's side. When he's close enough to hear them, the girl makes what he assumes is a reference to the lecture they just left, and it's Shane's turn to laugh. It pushes him farther into her space, and Ilya sees her visibly trace the curve of Shane's mouth, glowing under his attention.

Like with Syd, he feels only slightly bad about interrupting their conversation, but they really do have to get to practice. That's in an hour. And is a ten minute walk away.

"If we're late, we're going to set a bad example for the kids."

Also like with Syd, Shane jumps at Ilya's sudden appearance. "Jesus Christ, Rozy! Stop doing that!"

Ilya certainly feels rosy at the familiar nickname. He takes Shane's left cheek and pinches it, cooing, "Oooh, I am sorry, Hollander. Next time I'll announce my entrance with microphone."

Shane bats his hand away. "You'd better not, you're too fucking loud as it is."

Ilya turns to the girl and says, "He jokes. He loves the sound of my voice."

"Not more than you do."

To her credit, Shane's classmate takes the whole ordeal in stride. In fact, she appears to be excited by Ilya's interruption, smile (somehow) widening further. "Holy shit, you're Ilya Rozanov! Wow, it's awesome to meet you in person! I go to every single home game, and I just have to tell you that the Falcons are an incredible team. We're so lucky to have you all representing our school!"

Shane Hollander has a knack for picking the kindest girls attending COU, Ilya will admit. He holds out his hand to the girl and shakes it warmly.

"Thank you, Ms…?"

"Cora."

"Ms. Cora," Ilya repeats, adding his other hand to the mix.

Unnecessarily, Shane says: "She's in my economics class." Ilya adores him for it.

"Ms. Cora, thank you for your support. We're honored to play for the Falcons and with the Falcons. I hope you're excited for us to kick U Ottawa's asses this weekend."

"I'll be there!" she promises, and squeezes Ilya's hand before pulling away. "And I'll let you two get to practice. See you later, Shane! Nice meeting you, Ilya!"

Cora gives Shane a fistbump and heads for the door, leaving behind the scent of strawberries and vanilla. Ilya announces, "She was cute."

Shane groans. "Your timing is uncanny, dude."

"You were planning to get her number or something?"

"Maybe, but it doesn't matter now that she's met you."

Ilya's stomach flips. "Why?" Shane stares at him without speaking, so he insists, "Tell me."

"Every single girl on campus would kill to talk to you." The *or do more than talk* goes unsaid. "And once you've caught their attention, it's over for everyone else. Even Hazy gets ignored after they see you or talk to you or watch you play."

"You talk as though you're not hot." Ilya puts an arm around Shane's shoulders and jostles him playfully. Now there's a hint of something clean and masculine cutting through the strawberries and vanilla, which makes Ilya's stomach flip again. "You have many fans at our games, Hollander. You are usually too focused on the game and putting the kids in their place to notice."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. But you don't need to worry about it—all that attention is too much distraction from winning the championship. You only need to worry about getting one number: #1."

"You should put that on an inspirational poster or throw pillow, Rozanov."

“Can’t. Too busy taking care of our ducklings and beating the Gee-Gees with their own sticks.”

Shane hauls his duffel bag off the ground and lets Ilya steer them toward the door. It’s probably obnoxious to get to the rink forty minutes before anyone else, but Ilya loves the quiet and getting focused with no one else around except his assistant captain. They always perform better when they’ve had time to warm up and pseudo-meditate together, like two halves of a body reconnecting. Ilya likes girls, and he likes getting their numbers, but there’s nothing as fulfilling to him as doing what he loves most with…

Someone who loves it most, too.

Shane lets Ilya bump their hips together as they walk, clearly parsing over the conversation with Cora. They’re passing one of the science buildings on campus when he says, “I can’t go for any of my classmates because they’ll distract me from my work, and I can’t go for any Falcons fans because they’ll distract me from the game. Is that what you’re saying?”

“Yes, exactly. You are a quick study.”

“Who does that leave?”

“That leaves people who will come into your life when the time is right,” Ilya replies, both to be a shit, and to try and genuinely put Shane’s worries to rest. “There is plenty of time for kissing and boring texts later. Now is time for making Bood and Pike run so many laps that they die.”

Shane laughs at this, which settles the weird churning of Ilya’s stomach. They’re back on familiar ground: chirping each other and planning great bodily harm toward their underlings during evening practice.

“You’re right. Between hockey and homework I barely have time to think, let alone date.”

Ilya’s not sure if he means it, but he says, “Save your kissing for after the championship. Will make it better.” Then, “Wait, wait, wait—did you say what I think you just said?”

Shane groans, much more dramatically this time. “Rozanov—”

“No, no, you said it! You said it!”

“Ilya.”

“You said I was right!” Ilya raises his voice so that it carries across the sparsely occupied courtyard and declares, “Shane Hollander said I was right! Everybody mark your calendars! Pop the champagne!”

They waste ten more minutes of warm-up time wrestling with each other behind the science building, but the grin that Shane wears for the rest of the night is totally worth it. He never gets Cora’s number, either.

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“Where’s Hollander?”

Barrett shrugs. “No idea, Roz.”

He asks Luca next. “Seen Hollander?”

“Sorry, Cap. Just got out of the showers.”

Ilya goes to Marly, their know-it-all, and is rewarded. “Have you seen Hollander?”

“He stepped out into the hall to call his parents a few minutes ago. Hasn’t come back since.”

“Thanks, Marly.”

Ilya slips into the rink’s main hallway and wonders where Shane might be hiding. They played a grueling game tonight against University of Michigan, and were only just able to beat them 3-2 during overtime. It had taken Ilya assisting and Price and Chouinard practically beating the hell out of the other defensemen, but Shane managed to get the puck past the Wolverines with less than a minute to spare. Ilya’d almost dropped to one knee and proposed after the buzzer went off, but had been spared the humiliation by their entire team dogpiling them at the goal.

Now he wants to revel in the win with his assistant captain and strong-arm him into going to the afterparty being hosted at the house a few of the rookies are renting.

Ilya is imagining what he might have to say to get Shane to agree when he stumbles upon a familiar yet surprising scene: a puck bunny cornering one of his teammates. One particular teammate, actually, that flusters easily under the hypnotic attention of puck bunnies.

“Your stamina must be amazing,” the girl says, twisting a lock of blonde hair around her finger.

“Um, yeah. Hockey requires a rigorous training schedule and diet.”

“‘Rigorous.’ Do tell.”

“Well, we do lots of weight training? And agility exercises?” Shane leans back as the girl leans even closer, which is a truly impressive feat, seeing as how he’s already flat against the wall. “We also spend a lot of time on the ice practicing our plays. For when we’re actually playing. On the ice.”

Puck Bunny makes a *woahhh* sound, like Shane didn’t just say the same sentence twice. “How much can you bench? I bet it’s in the two hundreds, isn’t it? You threw that Michigan center around like it was nothing.”

“He, uh, gave me an easy opening.”

“That’s so hot.” The girl presses one fingertip to Shane’s black Under Armour-clad chest. “Can you lift and hold weight for a long period of time? Maybe around the one thirties range? For, like, fifteen minutes straight?”

Shane's eyes are so wide that Ilya's afraid they're going to pop right out of the sockets. He wants to wait and hear what the response to that obvious invitation will be, but Shane looks like he might be heading straight into cardiac arrest, which Ilya can't allow, no matter how hilarious the ride might be.

He pretends to have just stumbled upon the scene and says, "Hollander, I've been looking everywhere for you! Coach needs to see us."

Shane's panicked gaze flits to Ilya. The sharp breath he releases pulls Puck Bunny's touch away from his chest. It occurs to Ilya that part of Shane's distinct discomfort might be from this undesired touch, and something dark and acidic wells up inside of him. It's not unlike whenever Shane gets checked hard enough to force him to be benched and evaluated.

Ilya holds out his hand, a casual 'let's go' gesture to the public but a clear lifeline for Shane. He slips past the puck bunny without touching her again, says, "Have a good night," and makes haste back to the locker room. Ilya forces himself to follow without giving the girl a dirty look or a biting remark.

As they're walking away, Ilya quietly asks, "Okay, Shane?"

"Yeah. She came out of nowhere and I didn't really know what to say."

Ilya clenches his jaw. "It did not seem like you wanted to talk to her. It was very clear, so I do not know why she kept trying."

Shane's head dips, hiding his expression from Ilya.

"Shane."

They stop together, and Shane looks at Ilya from under his lashes, uncertain and small in a way that he never is after a successful game. Ilya aches to touch his shoulders, or his hands, but refuses until it's communicated that the touch will be welcomed. Instead, he holds their eye contact, encouraging Shane to relax his breathing and body language, and asks again. "Okay?"

"I'm okay."

"She should not have touched you without your permission. Tell anyone who does that to go fuck themselves if they want to touch so bad."

This brings a smile to Shane's subdued face. Brings with it the warmth that Ilya had been looking forward to seeing after the game ended. "I'll be sure to remember that from now on."

"Good. Now let's go party until the sun rises! Alcohol fixes everything!"

They continue walking to the locker room. Shane lets their shoulders brush together and Ilya feels like a million dollars rolled in gold.

When the entrance appears, Shane comments, “I don’t know why I didn’t want to talk to her. She was cute, and obviously loves hockey, but…”

Ilya knows what he’s trying to say. That dark, jagged sensation arises again, thinking about the puck bunny touching Shane and asking him about being able to fuck her standing up because he’s hot and athletic. Thinking about her not stopping to gauge his body language before invading his personal bubble.

He hides the vicious anger behind his normal, unserious persona. “She gave too much away at the start. It’s better when they are mysterious and hard to get. Leaves you curious.”

Shane laughs, loud enough that it echoes down the hallway they just fled from. “We’re turning this into another one of your dating rules?”

“Anything can be a dating rule! Next time, tell the puck bunnies that you only fuck people who know your middle name. And when they ask what it is, tell them they unlock the answer on third date.”

“You’re insane.”

“I am a genius. And I don’t get stuck with puck bunnies who touch you without your permission. Win-win, Hollander.”

Shane seems to consider this piece of advice. “Hmm. I guess it makes sense.”

When they’re a few steps inside the locker room, Ilya says, “Promise me one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Do not take dating advice from Pike—based on his personality, the only people he can set you up with will try to wear your skin as a coat.”

Pike hears him and promptly chokes on his Gatorade. Shane’s laugh fills the entire room and the angry, jagged pit of Ilya’s chest with sunlight.

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Ilya would say that he’s a morning person only out of necessity versus desire. He got used to rising early to take care of his father and avoid seeing his brother as much as possible, and the habit never quite went away after he left Moscow for Ottawa. He still wakes up before his alarm goes off at 7 A.M., but now he can quietly get ready for the day without being hypervigilant throughout the process.

At least, until he gets to the team breakfast table.

“You talk too much. Morning is supposed to be for silent time.”

“Morning,” Bood argues, “is for gossiping.”

“We see each other every day. What could you possibly have to gossip about?”

“I’m so glad you asked! Haas actually told me last night that Mallory, the women’s volleyball captain, heard from her assistant captain who heard from Taylor, the women’s water polo captain, that…”

Ilya tunes the nonsense out and sips his abysmal dining hall coffee. He prefers to take a hands-off approach to Bood’s penchant for harmless gossip, and only adds to his fun facts by saying, “You should start a column in school paper. You might be better at that than hockey.”

Hazy laughs and spits out a few Frosted Flakes. Marly twitches away from him and says, “Gross, bitch, chew your food.” Barrett complains, “Don’t give him any bright ideas, Roz, the last thing this world needs more of is Bood’s opinions.”

Dykstra says, “Hey, don’t be mean to Boody,” and just as Bood starts to say, “See, someone on this team loves me—” Dykstra finishes with: “His frontal lobe is still developing, he can’t help it.”

Even Ilya has to laugh at the outrage on Bood’s face. He glances to his left to capture Shane’s reaction to their ducklings’ shenanigans, and 1) remembers that Shane went to grab some more food from the dining hall’s breakfast bar, and 2) realizes that he still hasn’t returned from said adventure.

When he picks Shane out of the mass of hungry, bleary-eyed twenty year olds, he sees that there’s a guy standing *very* close to his A, grinning and looking far too pleased with himself for the early time of day. Shane says something, and Ilya watches the other guy laugh; Shane doesn’t laugh with him, but he does smile shyly and glance away at the fruits, which makes Ilya’s heart kick uncomfortably.

Almost in slow motion, he sees the guy press his knuckles to Shane’s arm, to the vulnerable curve of his inner bicep. Ilya thinks of the puck bunny who trapped him against a wall a few weeks ago and nearly jumps out of his seat to go to him. But this time, Shane allows the touch, and doesn’t appear to panic or jerk away from it.

If anything, he appears to lean into the touch. His encouragement should calm Ilya’s concern, but all it does is replace it with a nebulous sour feeling.

“Who are you glaring at?”

Ilya flinches at this question, and the unexpected presence of someone else’s face so close to his. “No one. Mind your business, Pike.”

Pike follows his supposed glare to the fruit station. Then he turns to Ilya. “Rozanov, you gotta do better than that.”

“What?”

Blessedly, at a lower volume, Pike says, “You are being *super* obvious right now, dude. If you frown any harder at that guy he’s going to burst into flames.”

“Not frowning. Shut up and eat your eggs before I beat your ass with a chair.”

“I will if you drink your coffee and stop acting like a creep.”

“I am not acting like anything!”

“You’re staring at that guy like you’re two seconds away from ripping his arms off of his torso just for speaking to Shane. Ob-vi-ous. Even he would be able to tell what you’re thinking.”

Ilya turns and definitely frowns at Pike. “What am I being so obvious about, then?”

They stare each other down for a full minute. Ilya gathers that Pike must think he’s a complete moron, but as far as Ilya is concerned, being a moron is required to play with the Falcons. He’s also not the one that ate shit tripping over their own shoelace two days ago.

“You’re giving mega possessive vibes right now,” is what Pike breaks the silence with.

“Like, the horror movies with demons?”

“Not possession, idiot, possessive. Like… ownership. Caveman. Staking a claim.” Ilya blinks, so Pike says, “Rawr, Shane Hollander is mine, no one else can have him, look at him and die an agonizing death.”

“No one else can have him, Pike—he’s my center and no one else’s.”

“I’m not talking about hockey.” Pike makes two hand puppets and brings their ‘mouths’ together in a crude kissing gesture. “I’m talking about you and Hollander. Get it?”

He shoves Pike’s hands under the table. “Stop it before Bood sees! Or Marly! And go fuck yourself while you are at it—is not like that.”

For once in his life, Pike complies, but not before saying, “Get your shit together or keep it out of the public eye. Bood and Marly will notice on their own, if they haven’t already.”

During their spat, Shane apparently wrapped up his conversation with Weird Man, because he’s sliding back into the seat between Ilya and Pike without a moment to spare. Pike sits upright with a smirk, and Ilya gulps his coffee, hoping to avoid looking suspicious.

“Did you get his number?” Pike asks bluntly.

Shane replies, “Who?” and Ilya struggles between not choking on coffee and not choking Pike out.

“That guy you were just talking to for an hour.”

“It was five minutes. And no, I didn’t get Jared’s number.” Shane, cerebral, straightforward Shane, then asks, “Should I have?”

“It’s too early for this,” Chouinard says. He puts on his headphones to continue eating in peace, which must require not being able to hear Pike and Shane having a conversation.

Pike presses forward, and though he's facing Shane, it feels like he's talking to Ilya. "He definitely wanted yours. Don't you think, Rozanov?"

Shane's adorable, confused expression flicks to him. "He wanted my number?"

Ilya can't resist those puppy dog eyes at the best of times. Especially not in the morning, when they're sweet and warm and free from the stress of the rest of the day. "Yes. He probably wanted you to ask first."

"He was all over you, Holly. That hand on your arm should've been the giveaway."

"We were just talking about our stats for the year so far."

"Well, don't be surprised if he shows up at our game on Saturday and demands to take you to midnight IHOP to 'celebrate.'"

Shane's face floods with color. It's one of Ilya's favorites, a peach blush that perfectly highlights his freckles and the tips of his ears. The idea of douchebag Jared getting to see Shane in any position where this blush could be present makes Ilya want to flip the breakfast table. He refuses to look too far into why that might be.

"You don't have to say yes to him, Hollander," Ilya says, verbally flicking away Pike's commentary and suggestions. "He would not be a good match for you, anyway."

"Oh, not this again," Shane bemoans, but there's the edge of a smile on his pretty mouth. The one Jared was absolutely trying to figure out how to kiss.

Before you could, Ilya's brain screams.

"He does not respect team bonding and schedules. Anyone who keeps you away from your team during the most important meal of the day is not to be trusted."

"Dillon's been asleep for the past ten minutes," Barrett points out.

"But he's sleeping with his teammates."

Bood laughs. "Rephrase, Roz."

"Oh, thank you, Bood. He's sleeping by his teammates. At the team table. Different than sleeping away from us during the most important meal."

Dykstra says, "It's a good thing we're hot, because that's all we got going for us."

Shane goes quiet for a moment, picking at his bowl of fruit and yogurt. When he speaks again, it's mainly for and to Ilya.

"That's why I shouldn't get his number? Not because…?"

Ilya's throat closes at the implication. He wonders if this is a fear that Shane has been carrying with him for weeks, months, years. He has made no secret of his bisexuality since

starting with the Falcons, and had hoped everyone else on the team would feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality if they wished to do so. Ilya hopes that if Shane is trying to say something to this degree, it's because he's unsure of where he sits on the spectrum and not because he believed anyone would think less of him. That Ilya would ever, *could* possibly ever, think less of him.

Ilya pushes their knees together under the table. "You can get any number you want, Shane. Boy or girl or in between. Just not from Jared, since he doesn't respect team breakfast traditions. He is blacklisted."

Shane presses back into him and giggles, the pretty blush deepening. Ilya thinks: *I'm most complete whenever you're at my side,* and then thinks: *Hayden Pike is the motherfucking bane of my existence.*

"So, if I were to pick up a guy at our party this weekend, it'd be okay?"

"Sure. As long as he meets all the requirements I have said already." Ilya considers, and adds, "Also, no one who wears cargo shorts. They are uglier than sin."

"Hey," Hazy says, outraged. "I wear cargo shorts all the time!"

"It's okay, I already told Hollander about the not shitting where you eat rule. He won't ask for your number."

"My man!" Marly cheers, clapping Ilya on the back.

"Guess we better nuke the team group chat," Luca says.

Bood says, "It's okay, Hazy, there are more important reasons why Hollander should avoid dating you at all costs," and the table erupts into chaos, all worries about burgeoning sexualities and getting numbers from freaks named Jared forgotten.

Chouinard keeps his headphones on the entire time, even when Ilya makes good on his intention to choke Pike out, and calmly enjoys his wholesome blueberry oatmeal and bacon egg bites.

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It seems now that Ilya has made a playbook for Shane to follow when talking to people who want to do much more than talk, he sees them everywhere. Girls hit on him in line at the dining halls, when they're leaving the rink after a late practice, on the front steps of the Arts & Humanities building—anywhere they can catch a spare moment of Shane's time to compliment him. These instances don't gouge Ilya like they used to, now that Shane has fully come out to him.

It's the boys that Ilya has to worry about now. After he said the words "I'm gay" out loud for the first time, it evidently sent out a Batman signal for every queer guy on campus to alert them of the fact that Shane Hollander is accepting new clients. Guys invent creative and terrible places to ask Shane out, like directly from the stands at their games, or in the middle

of a group presentation, or once, notably, in the dining hall bathroom. It's a never ending cycle of boys wanting a kiss or phone number from Shane and Ilya trying not to roundhouse them on sight before telling Shane why he should look elsewhere.

Though it pains him to admit it, it's possible that Pike was correct in insinuating that Ilya is probably in love with his assistant captain. The idea of marrying him and raising those 2.5 kids previously promised to a girl from econ class gives Ilya legitimate butterflies and a throbbing headache.

After practice one night, Pike says, "You should talk to him before someone else successfully gets his number. Or he gets theirs."

"Talk about what?"

"Rozanov." He makes the hand puppets kiss again. "You know exactly what I mean."

Ilya is learning how to be vulnerable with his team one day at a time, but he still chokes more often than not. Pike is strangely patient with him as he figures out how to reply.

"Is probably not a good idea for the team."

"You two already act like you're married. We'll be exactly the same as we are now."

"What if it goes badly? Or… he doesn't feel that way? About me?"

For possibly the first time in their careers together as teammates, Hayden Pike looks at Ilya with fondness. Exasperation, absolutely, but now also with clear fondness. "Roz, I promise that you have nothing to worry about. I would never lie about something like this."

A lightbulb goes off in Ilya's queer little brain. He whirls on Pike and grabs him by both shoulders. "He said something to you?"

"What?"

"Hollander said something to you about me? About us?"

Now he's back to looking strictly exasperated. "It's not my place to say, man. You need to nut up and talk to him yourself like the adults I know you can be. And stop scaring off the dudes who get near Shane—he's starting to think he smells bad and it's messing with his psyche."

Ilya lays awake that night, staring at his ceiling and wondering, wondering, wondering. Shane's bedroom is next to his in the team house, and Ilya longs to go to him, longs to crawl in beside him and soak in the warmth of his body and ask plainly if he always feels this way, too, like his skin is pulled too tight over his bones unless they're in eye sight of each other. He doesn't know which answer he's more afraid of: Shane not reciprocating these suffocating feelings, or hearing that he does and being doomed to suffocate together for the rest of time.

The endless thoughts keep him awake late into the night. Ilya falls into a restless sleep around 2 A.M. and wakes up as normal before 7 A.M., groggy and aching everywhere. He scrapes

by during breakfast and practice, but after his first class it's apparent that a caffeine boost is required for him to make it through the rest of the day.

Ilya swings by the kitschy coffee shop on the north end of campus, ready and willing to fork over $8 for an iced Americano. Between mourning the loss of his money and mentally calculating if he can slip a nap in somewhere, he becomes aware of a familiar voice speaking near him, and a familiar laugh following shortly after.

He already knows what he'll find, but Ilya looks anyway, a siren's call to the bitter end.

Shane's at a table with another guy, back to Ilya (Ilya would recognize the planes of his shoulders and the cute point of his ears anywhere). He knows that Shane recently got out of his geology class, and sure enough, both have geology textbooks opened to the same page. Ilya doubts there's any studying happening; the moony expression on the guy's face says all he needs to know about the situation.

"Are you ready to order?"

Ilya snaps back to reality. The barista is twirling her marker and staring oddly, and he feels bad, knowing there's a line piling up behind him.

"Hi. Sorry. I'll take an iced Americano, please. Large."

She plucks a clear cup off the stack of larges and scribbles on it. "Name?"

"Roz. R-O-Z."

"Got it, my love. It'll be at the pick-up counter in a few minutes."

As compensation for his actions, Ilya stuffs the other $2 from his $10 bill into the tip jar. "Thank you. Have a lovely day."

He plots while waiting for his coffee. Shane hasn't noticed him yet, which gives Ilya time to figure out what to do next. Should he let Shane be and enjoy his conversation with geology boy? Should he say hello and keep going, just to see if Shane will follow him outside? Should he sit on the other side of the coffee shop and observe for a while and hope he doesn't get caught?

Ilya's half-watching Shane and his classmate converse when the other barista says, "Iced Americano for Roz!" Shane glances up, like it's second nature for him to come to that name when it's called, and meets Ilya's gaze across the room. Ilya watches Shane's lips part when he sees Ilya staring back. Ilya watches the guy he's talking to reach out and touch Shane's wrist, wanting to reclaim his attention. To take it away from Ilya, who is one of the only people in the whole world entitled to it.

"Thanks," Ilya says, sparing the barista a smile, and then stalks over to Shane's table with his enormous cup of cold espresso water. He didn't become fierce on the ice by playing it safe in real life. "Good morning, cream puff. How was class?"

Shane makes a horrified noise. "What the hell is 'cream puff'?"

“It’s you.” Ilya squishes Shane’s cheeks together twice in quick succession before pulling away, just in time to avoid getting slapped. “Well? How was it?”

The first barista’s odd stare is nothing compared to this one. “It was fine.”

“Good.” Ilya knocks their coffee cups together, then pretends to have suddenly noticed their other table mate. “Oh, hello there. Who are you?”

“I’m Grant.”

“Nice to meet you,” Ilya replies, not meaning it a single bit. “I hope you do not mind me joining—I get anxiety if I can see Hollander but can’t smell him.”

Grant glances between them. Ilya indulges in the way he slowly drags his hand away from the general direction of Shane’s and sets it in his own lap.

Shane hisses, *“Ilya!”* like he’s trying to sound furious, but to Ilya, he sounds like an annoyed kitten. To Grant, he says, “I’m sorry about him. I wish I could say this is out of the norm, but it’s not. He usually saves it for home or the rink.”

“You… live together?”

“Yes,” Ilya answers, stretching his arm across the back of Shane’s chair. “We share a wall. Sometimes we whisper secrets through it at night.”

“We live with our teammates,” Shane corrects, kicking Ilya’s ankle under the table. “And we don’t whisper secrets into the night, or whatever. He’s kidding.”

Ilya goes for the killshot. “You should see his pajamas. He must own every pair of silk short-shorts ever made and sold in Canada.”

Shane keens. The sound is more animal than human. “He’s not—I don’t—”

Grant smiles, fake as Ilya’s friendly conversation. “You two seem very close.”

Ilya crosses the fingers wrapped around Shane’s back and holds them up for Grant to see, purposely brushing them along Shane’s upper arm. “Closest on the team.”

“Well, I think I’ll leave you guys to it. I’ve got another class to get to soon.” Grant stands and scoops his belongings up in one neat move, giving them another bland smile. “Catch you next week, Shane.”

Grant practically sprints out of the coffee shop without looking back. Ilya takes a victorious sip of his Americano, pleased with his work, and almost spits it back out when Shane elbows him in the ribs.

“What the *fuck* was that about, Rozanov?”

Oooh. Last name means Shane’s definitely kind of mad. Ilya thinks it's hot as hell.

“Was just being friendly.”

“You were not being friendly! You were being an asshole!”

Ilya caresses his arm again. “You love it, cream puff. That is why you stayed with me and not him.”

Blush #7 blooms across Shane’s freckled cheekbones. #7 is the one that materializes when Ilya hides his homework or Bood and Hazy use their sticks for inappropriate reasons. #7 means that Shane is for sure, definitely mad and willing to throw a punch if it comes down to it.

#7 might be Ilya’s favorite blush, but it’s hard to choose just one.

“Fuck you, dude. We were having a nice, normal conversation about class before you barged in. Now he’s never going to talk to me again.”

“What a loss that would be.”

A vein bulges in Shane’s forehead. Before Ilya can poke it, or maybe kiss Shane silly in public, he stands and scoops up his belongings the same way that Grant did. He also storms out of the coffee shop in the same manner, but not before taking the time to push his chair all the way in and grab his crumpled napkin off the table.

Ilya gives Shane a ten second head start before chasing after him. It’s fun to watch him storm down the sidewalk, backpack bouncing between his shoulders, jeans pulling tight over his ass. It’s remarkable, Ilya observes, that it took him this long to figure out why he hates to see Shane go but loves to watch him leave. Past-him has never appreciated these moments to their fullest, and that breaks a piece of his heart off and lights it on fire.

He catches up in no time, not bothering to smother his grin. “You can do better than him. He wasn’t right for you.”

“Jesus,” Shane scoffs, walking faster. “You say that about every single guy I try talking to. They can’t all suck that bad.”

Ilya throws an arm around his shoulders again and pulls them together, so that he can feel the tense line of Shane’s body cutting into his.

“It would never work out, Hollander. He’s too boring.”

“You think I’m boring! You say it all the time! ‘Shane Hollander is so incredibly boring—his clothes are boring, his hockey books are boring, the jokes he finds funny are boring!’ Maybe I should be talking to someone who’s boring too, huh?”

“You are cool and boring. He is boring-boring.”

“What the fuck does that even mean, Ilya?”

“It *means,”* he says, squeezing Shane close, “that you have other personality traits besides being boring. You are dedicated hockey player and captain. You get amazing grades. You’re smart and talented and funny when you are not so… serious about things. Yes, you like boring books and don’t listen to music that is not on the radio, but you are more.”

You are more. Ilya wishes he had the full vocabulary to describe what Shane means to him, and what he means to their friends. He vows that if he ever manages to get Shane to marry him, he will spend the rest of his life studying English grammar and adjectives to properly formulate all his deepest thoughts and admirations about Shane.

Blush #7 mellows into Blush #3, which is the one Shane wears when he’s bashful and trying to hide from the spotlight. Ilya wants to kiss him so badly that he aches everywhere with it.

“Assistant captain,” Shane corrects softly.

“We are equal. Fun Dad and Strict Mom, remember? Pike must know who takes it without us having to say. Thoughtful of him.”

Shane elbows him in the ribs again, but he’s laughing and groaning and not exactly arguing with this logic, which does complicated things to Ilya’s insides. “Hayden’s a dumbass.”

“He is your best friend, though.”

Shane settles back into Ilya’s arm and smiles at the ground. “One of them.”

Ilya gives in the smallest amount he can. He presses the pad of his thumb to the exposed line of Shane’s neck, just under his jaw. That brief skin-to-skin contact is enough to make his gut burn with want.

“You can’t date that guy. It will be like two fossils boning and spreading their dust around. No good for anybody.”

“Ilya!”

“The Smithsonian will be calling and asking to turn you into an exhibit. We have Cups to win.”

Just to argue, Shane says, “What if I want someone boring for after our games? To ease the adrenaline drop?”

“Do you?”

Shane thinks it over. “No. Not really.”

“There you go. Delete Boring Grant’s number from your phone and tell him to get lost if he asks you out. If he asks why, say that adrenaline is important and hockey is only what comes first.”

“What comes next?”

Ilya brushes his lips against Shane's ear, just to see him squirm. "You, Shane."

This produces a new blush, cherry red and gorgeous. Feeling the heat of it ignite against his mouth makes it even more precious.

"I'm not saying that to Grant from geology."

And Ilya knows exactly why that pleases him when he replies: "Good. Just for us."

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Whenever the Falcons host their own post-game parties, the turnout is always absurd. They have a good rapport with basically every sports team on campus, women and men alike, which leads to their house being packed full of athletes. And they usually invite their non-sports friends, who sometimes invite their friends, until the house is overloaded with hot twenty year olds who drink like the world is ending and take beer pong as seriously as an Olympic event.

One of the downsides, of course, besides the unfortunate occurrences of finding people fucking in their rooms, is that Bood is usually in charge of the music.

"This song sucks!" Marly complains. He has to yell to be heard over the terrible rave playlist blasting through their speakers. "We should make it an official rule that Boodram can't be the DJ anymore at our parties."

"You tell him," Ilya says. "I'm sure that it will go well."

"No way, dude—he sulked for, like, ten days after I said it last time."

"Make Wyatt do it!"

"Then Hazy will be in charge of the music and we'll have to listen to fuckin' Justin Timberlake all night!" Marly slaps Ilya's back and pushes him forward. "You should go tell him, Captain. Make Dykstra take over and put on an approved early 2010s playlist or something. Anything but this shitty EDM!"

Ilya swallows down the rest of his quality vodka, relishing the burn. "I will need more to drink if I am going to hurt Bood's feelings."

"Better to hurt his feelings than listen to this all night. We'll get bad reviews from the LAX bros and never be able to show our faces in public again!"

Marly lets him go to get another drink. Ilya has no real intention of kicking Bood out of the DJ spot, but he's excited to see how long it takes Marly to come to this same realization. He's a close second to Shane for Ilya's favorite person to harass on the team.

He greets other athletes he's friendly with on his way to the kitchen, thanks some for coming and congratulates others on recently won games. He runs into Jackie, the girl that Pike is in love with and has finally managed to ask out, and greets her with a hug.

“I heard you are letting Pike take you to dinner tomorrow! Let me know if he fucks it up and you can come watch us hit him with pucks for an hour.” He feels Jackie laugh against him, and then says, “Actually, you can come do that any time, even if dinner is okay. It will not be a hardship.”

“Thanks, Ilya! You’ll be the first to know if I need that to happen!”

The kitchen is as packed as the rest of the house when he enters. There’s not any dancing happening, but there’s plenty of conversation and giggling and drinking. He’s careful as he squeezes his way to the makeshift bar and stealthily retrieves the vodka he buys for himself, pouring two fingers worth, then making it three. The awful rave music is less abrasive out here, and Ilya can enjoy the common sounds of a party without his brain liquifying in his skull.

When he turns to rest against the bar, new drink in hand, he scans the kitchen crowd. There’s a large portion of both basketball teams in here, talking about how much they mutually hate their rivals from Carleton University. Two girls from the swimming team are making drinks next to Ilya and talking about a class they share and are struggling with. Couples linger in free corners of the kitchen and dining room, which is connected to the house kitchen in an open floor layout. Girls with girls, guys with guys, both with both, a beautiful, fluid mix of everyone enjoying being together and following the spark of attraction. Becky from gymnastics is flirting heavily with Savannah from basketball. Will from baseball is casually running his hand up and down Olive from soccer’s arm.

Shane is in the darkest corner of the room, talking to a guy from the lacrosse team.

It’s a well-known fact that the hockey and LAX teams don’t exactly like each other, but Shane has never played into the rivalry like the rest of the teams do. Ilya isn’t sure if it’s because Shane doesn’t have the energy to care or if he’s too nice to be mean to anyone who hasn’t actually offended him, but he’s cordial with them even if Ilya is telling their captain to choke on a dick or Barrett and Dillon are jeering from the sidewalk as they pass the field.

It seems that there’s one LAX bro that doesn’t take the rivalry too seriously, either, if the way he’s up close and personal with Shane is any indication. Ilya knows he should leave them to it, that he’s been interrupting too many of Shane’s pick-up opportunities to be considered a joke, but he can’t make himself walk out.

There’s something about Shane’s face, half-hidden in shadows and half-lit by their obnoxious, Luca-approved-and-installed ‘club lighting’ that Ilya can’t look away from. He can always tell what Shane is thinking and feeling, despite seldom hearing it directly from the source. But right now, Ilya can’t tell what he’s thinking at all, if he’s into the LAX bro, if he wants to be here talking to him, if he’s thinking about taking things further.

There’s something about the idea of Shane taking things further in this house, *their* house, that roots Ilya to the spot. The images come to him like one of Marly’s gut punches: Shane taking LAX bro upstairs, kissing him against the wall that separates their bedrooms, coming undone and blushing all over while Ilya is one floor below him, close enough to touch but entirely out of reach.

Move, moron, Ilya tells himself. He sees the guy's gaze drop to Shane's mouth, wet with ginger ale and puffy from Shane's nervous biting habit, and feels his stomach somersault in response. Ilya knows what happens next. Ilya doesn't want to see what Shane will choose to do after that.

Before he can turn and leave, though, possibly after adding two more fingers of vodka to his cup, LAX bro swoops in and kisses Shane. It's a nightmare coming to fruition, a vision that's going to haunt Ilya to his grave. He covers Shane's mouth entirely and kisses him hungrily, as if trying to completely dissolve the sweet tang of ginger off his tongue.

Ilya should shove his way through the crowd and go outside to calm down, but he's stuck right where he is, watching this nightmare unfold. Watching Shane be kissed by someone who means it, watching Shane let someone kiss him like they mean it. *It should be me,* Ilya tells himself this time, heart twisting and cracking and bleeding out in his sternum. *It should be me, it should be me, it should—*

Shane gets a hand between them and pushes the guy off, polite but firm. Ilya watches him speak to LAX bro, can hear the way he's stuttering and trying to assert himself in his head even if he can't hear it across the room. Hope bursts to life inside Ilya's breaking heart—*Shane doesn't want to be kissed by the lacrosse guy, Shane is pushing him away*—and then it falls apart when LAX bro kisses him again mid-sentence. This time the kiss is hard and deep, and the guy grabs Shane by both wrists to pin them against the wall of the kitchen. The ginger ale falls onto the floor, and Shane visibly tries to wriggle away from him, arms straining against LAX bro's hold, eyes wide open and shocked. He's fight-or-flight in every way the other guy is dominating. LAX bro's hold on his wrists goes white-knuckled from how hard he's pushing Shane into the wall.

One second Ilya is leaning against the bar counter, entranced and sick to his stomach, and the next he's at Shane's side, yanking LAX bro off of him. Ilya doesn't remember moving his arm to grip the guy's hoodie, but he enjoys the act of pulling him back and letting him stumble into a wayward chair.

"Dude, what the fuck?" LAX bro swears.

Shane takes a gulping breath and says, *"Ilya,"* like he's a benevolent archangel. Ilya is very suddenly and very, very dangerously the angriest he's ever been in his life.

"Don't know how to take hints?" Ilya shouts over the music. "He said no!"

LAX bro makes the mistake of getting into Ilya's snarling face. "What the fuck! You weren't even involved, Rozanov! Kissing usually only involves two people, so how would you know if he wanted it or not?"

"Usually my partners kiss me back instead of trying to push me away!"

LAX bro makes a worse mistake, and looks over Ilya's shoulder to leer at Shane. "Some people like it rough! I was just giving him what he wanted."

Ilya grabs two fistfuls of the hoodie and drags him close, so that he can't see Shane at all. "If we are making assumptions tonight, then I am going to give you what you seem to want—a fucking broken neck! Maybe broken spine, too!"

LAX bro grabs Ilya by his shirt until they're nose-to-nose and daring the other person to strike first. Ilya calculates how many hits he could realistically get in before other people broke up the fight, if it would be enough to get it through lacrosse fuckface's head that Shane is off-limits, how much he could get away with without being suspended from the team and/or school, which would blow, but he would do it for Shane in a heartbeat, especially after watching in real time as some scumbag touched and kissed him without his consent and *pinned him against a wall—*

Another hand touches Ilya's back, between the rigid line of his shoulder blades. A touch that Ilya would recognize anywhere, blindfolded or asleep or filled with white hot rage like he is now. A touch that is equal parts gentle and commanding.

"Ilya," Shane says, entering his line of sight. He's panicking but trying to hold it together for Ilya and anyone else who might be watching. "Let him go before you do something you'll regret."

"Nothing to regret," Ilya replies, jerking LAX bro forward another inch. "Nothing he deserves but a broken neck for kissing you when you did not want it."

The guy bares his teeth. "Seems like you're the one who wants it. Maybe you're pissed because I was brave enough to give Hollander what he was asking for."

It's a mangled echo of his previous thoughts, but filled with poison instead of the longing Ilya thought them with. Ilya would treat any affection Shane gifted him with reverence and gratitude. LAX bro would treat it as an invitation to take and take and take until there was nothing left to have.

"Keep his name out of your mouth," Ilya murmurs, hackles rising to a new and frightening height. "And when I let go, I suggest you leave my fucking house and never come back unless you want to end up in hospital."

The severity of his rage must finally click for LAX bro, because he swallows and shrinks back the extra inch Ilya pulled him forward. "Big words with no action, Rozanov."

Shane's hand presses harder into his back. Ilya angles his body so that Shane stays mostly hidden behind him.

"I can upgrade offer to the morgue. Do not let it be my choice, or it will not be the hospital I send you to."

They stare each other down while EDM pulses through the house and Shane's unsteady breathing works itself up higher and higher until Ilya's afraid he's going to start hyperventilating. Then LAX bro wrenches away from Ilya's grip and stumbles over the leg of the chair and into the corner of a countertop.

“Whatever, dude,” he says dismissively, straightening out his clothes. “I can get my dick wet anywhere, Hollander’s not that special.”

Ilya moves to take him down, but this time, Shane grips onto his shirt and holds him in place. “Ilya, *stop.”*

He obeys only because he can feel Shane shaking, and making sure Shane is okay is more important than anything now. He barks, “Get the fuck out, now! Before I find Price!”

The mention of Ryan Price does the trick. LAX bro pales and takes off, not bothering to say sorry to the people he runs into on the way. Ilya keeps watching until the front door opens and slams shut and he sees the guy loping across the front lawn.

When he’s sure that LAX bro is actually gone, he turns to Shane. His eyes are wild, and he’s visibly trembling, and Ilya wants to throw up all over the kitchen floor.

Ilya wants to hold him, but he doesn’t want to cause any more damage than what’s been done.

“Did he hurt you?” he asks, starting to tremble, too. “I saw that bastard grab you and push you against the wall. I should have been faster, I should have come to you immediately—”

Shane touches his hands, which are curled into fists. “Hey, I’m okay. I’m okay, Ilya, he didn’t hurt me.”

Ilya looks over Shane’s wrists in the obnoxious rainbow club lighting. He doesn’t see any scrapes or bruises, but tomorrow morning might be another story after they’ve had time to develop. Shane’s fingers pluck at Ilya’s, gentle and commanding and trembling, until Ilya realizes that he’s trying to break open his fists and hold his hands properly.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Ilya says. “Get out of this crowd and away from Bood’s repulsive music.”

Shane takes Ilya’s hand and lets him lead them through the crowd to the staircase. They actually do run into Ryan Price, who asks, “Roz, you guys alright?” and then says, “Don’t worry, I got you covered,” when Ilya only shakes his head in response. Knowing that Price will guard the staircase and keep the others out of their space calms Ilya somewhat, and he pats Price’s shoulder gratefully.

They go to Ilya’s room without discussing it. Ilya knows how to calm Shane down, and Shane trusts him to do so. And maybe there’s part of it that has to do with Shane being in his space, surrounded by the life Ilya has created from the ground up, that makes the challenge that much more rewarding.

When the door is shut, separating them from the rest of the world, Ilya takes Shane’s chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifts it. His eyes are glossy with unshed tears.

“Did he hurt you?” Ilya asks again. One word and he will be out the door, Shane in the care of their team, Pike by his side to ruin the rest of the LAX bro’s night.

Shane takes an unsteady breath. “No, he didn’t hurt me. He just startled me, is all. I wasn’t expecting it to go down like that.”

“He was a fucking asshole. I could tell all the way across the room that you did not want him to touch you.”

“I had been talking to him for a long time, though. I’m sure he thought that’s where it was heading, and I didn’t sound that confident when I was explaining why I didn’t want to kiss him.”

Ilya is trying his best to contain his rage. Once the vial cracks open, it’s nearly impossible to cork again, and the rage will maim anyone in its path. He’s gotten better since leaving Russia, but when it comes to the people he loves… When it comes to *Shane*... The rage is infinite, and turns Ilya from a man into a war-bred beast.

Ilya lets go of his chin so that he can cradle Shane’s face between both of his palms. Rage and pious devotion take turns overwhelming him.

“No means no,” Ilya says slowly and with conviction. “Stop means stop. After you pushed him away, he should have walked away. You do not *ever* need to explain yourself if you are uncomfortable with someone touching you or talking to you or being near you. You do not owe anyone anything, no matter if you talked to them for ten minutes or ten years. Do you understand, Shane?”

Shane’s bottom lip quivers. “Yeah.”

“Do you remember what we tell creepy fucks who touch us without our permission?”

The laugh he gets is watery, but beautiful. “Go fuck yourself if you want to touch so bad.”

“Good job. Gold star for you.” They look at each other in silence, Ilya’s thumbs delicately brushing over Shane’s cheeks, Shane trying to calm his breathing down. Pious devotion takes over the rage and puts a lump in Ilya’s throat. He sounds devastated when he says, “Oh, sweetheart. I am so sorry he did that to you. You are safe with me, okay?”

Shane nods. Then he tucks his face into Ilya’s neck and lets himself cry, hands clenching in Ilya’s t-shirt near his hips. Ilya gathers him into his arms and lets him cry, cheek pressed to the vulnerable crown of Shane’s head.

“I am here. You do not have to be brave.”

Shane cries, and Ilya holds him, and nothing about this situation is okay, but Ilya takes a speck of solace in knowing that Shane trusts him enough to be held through the aftermath of being violated. He forces himself to let go of the rage and focus on the devotion—there will be plenty of time for revenge and digging two graves later, once Shane has been taken care of.

The tears stop after a while, but they stay in their embrace, swaying slightly.

“Maybe I will die a half-virgin,” Shane eventually says, voice scratchy. “Dillon will be disappointed there wasn’t even a wedding.”

Ilya wishes this moment came about in a better way, because it would be highly inappropriate to propose to Shane now after the night he’s had.

“You keep saying things like this. You will find someone when you are meant to find them. You want to be with a man who is confident in himself without acting like a boy when he does not get his way.”

“More rules?”

“Yes, but this one is most important rule so far. Your man needs to know how to be confident without being too much. I don’t know the exact word I’m trying to say, but I hope you know what I mean.”

“Assertive?” Shane guesses. His hands are flat on Ilya’s lower back now, and Ilya can feel all ten points of heat pressing into his skin. “Like, being direct?”

“Yes. He should be assertive, not aggressive. There is huge difference between the two. That motherfucker downstairs was being aggressive. A real man would have checked with you to see if you wanted to be pushed against the wall and kissed. A real man would have stopped the second he noticed you were not enjoying yourself.”

“Are you experienced with pushing other guys into walls and kissing them?”

“Perhaps. I am more experienced with giving someone what they want instead of taking what I want without asking, though.”

Shane thinks this through, and Ilya holds him through it.

“So, to summarize your criteria for a good boyfriend,” Shane begins, “I need to find someone who doesn’t distract me from my studies, doesn’t prevent me from getting to practice on time, doesn’t proposition me without my permission, doesn’t interrupt team bonding time, isn’t boring, and knows how to be assertive without being aggressive. Did I remember everything?”

“Perfect, perfect. These rules are key to finding the right match. When you find the *man* you want to be with—not boy, Hollander, make sure you put that on list—he will check all the boxes.”

“You’re 100% sure?”

“Cross my heart, hope to die.”

“I can tell Hazy’s the one who taught you that phrase.”

Ilya smiles against his hair. “I want to hear you say it, Shane.”

Shane untucks himself from Ilya's neck. His cheekbones are still damp with tears, but his eyes are clear again, and his breathing is steady, sure as when he's on the ice and about to face U Ottawa. Ilya will never not be in love with this boy, this *man,* who is the strongest and kindest person he's ever met.

"The man I choose to be with will check all these boxes," he recites. "And I won't settle for less."

"No you won't. Because then you'll end up with someone whose neck I will have to snap, or someone drier than those books you read for fun. Terrible all around."

Shane laughs, head tilting back, loose and adorable and every one of Ilya's dreams come true. "What would I do without you, Ilya Rozanov?"

"I don't know, Shane Hollander. Probably go out with boys who like to discuss the weather and are bad in bed." Unable to help himself, Ilya tucks a stray piece of hair behind Shane's ear, dying and groaning inside to hold him forever. "Let's not find out, hm?"

"Let's not," Shane agrees, grinning.

Ilya's marriage proposal can also come later. This—Shane in his arms, smiling and laughing after being backed into a corner, saying he wants Ilya in his life—is what matters most now. Ilya would give up everything to keep this.

Even the chance to beat LAX bro's ass and bully him into changing universities.

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Ilya takes Pike's advice the following Friday night and nuts the fuck up.

They're at some ridiculous bar known for being a COU student hot spot, and Ilya hits his limit approximately one hour after they arrive. He's still nursing his first beer, thoughts spinning and repeating themselves in his head, while sitting at the bar between Marly and Barrett. Conversation is about well-versed topics: NHL, school, and love lives. Marly and Barrett both predict that it will be the Devils vs the Hurricanes for the Stanley Cup this year. Marly hates his psychology professor, Barrett wants to switch his major from computer science to basket weaving. Marly and Dillon are advancing on their plans to date the wing spikers, and Barrett has, thankfully, gone on three whole dates with Harris and things are going amazingly.

Ilya has been rehashing the party last weekend during the entire conversation, and, honestly, the entire last week. He can't go anywhere or do anything without thinking about holding Shane and spending the rest of the night talking and relaxing instead of pretending to enjoy Bood's playlist.

There are two wolves inside of him: one wolf is gay and scared of monumentally fucking up his relationship with Shane by asking him to become more than friends. The other wolf is also gay and scared of going his whole life without knowing if he has the chance to become the man of Shane's dreams.

It doesn't help that Ilya has had to sit and watch Shane chat with another random guy for twenty of these sixty minutes. They'd started talking by a pool table (where Bood and Dykstra absolutely crushed two of the guy's friends) and eventually ended up in a booth together. The lighting above their table is dim and brassy, giving the entire picture a romantic aura. Ilya wants to pluck his eyeballs out with martini toothpicks, and he wants to slink over to Shane and beg him to accept his affections, if only so that Ilya won't have to watch him flirt with another guy ever again.

"Earth to Roz," Marly says, forcing Ilya to look at him. "Dude, what's up? You've been quiet all night."

"Nothing. Just thinking."

"If you think any harder, you might stroke out."

"Shut up, Barrett. Keep your comments about Harris and his pretty eyes or whatever."

Troy Barrett rarely backs down from a snark-off, but he does tonight. "Roz, can you please go talk to him? I seriously can't take this anymore."

"What? Talk to who?"

Marly says, "Hollander, dipshit."

Barrett says, "I need you to go confess your undying love for him in the next five minutes or I'm going to suffer a brain bleed. This has been dragging out for way, wayyyy too long. You need to end it tonight."

Marly says, "And don't make excuses about the team being affected or Holly not reciprocating your feelings, because we've heard them before, and it's not going to work. Pike prepared us ahead of time."

Barrett says, "So get your ass up and go tell him you're in love with him, or I will lock you two in a room until it's taken care of."

Ilya says, "You are all the worst," and then says, "Fuck it. If I can leave my home and make a new one, I can do this. Hollander keeps picking the boring ones, anyway."

He gulps the rest of his beer and lets Marly and Barrett slap him on the back encouragingly. Ilya slams the empty glass on the bar, says, "If it goes badly, you do suicides with Price all night long after the game tomorrow," and strides over to Shane's booth.

Ilya is scared out of his mind, but he also feels weightless, like when they're in overtime during a playoff game and everything is dialed up to 100. Success comes down to him alone and being able to lead his team there, an insurmountable pressure that not anyone can survive, but is something that Ilya has conquered and grown resilient through. Colors sharpen, noises fall silent, and his focus zeroes in on his target: winning the game.

Shane has been laughing with this guy throughout their conversation, and the guy seems nice enough, but Ilya doesn't detect any real chemistry between them. There's no spark of

adrenaline in Shane's expression, no dare to push him to his limit and then keep pushing to see what lies beyond. There's the gentle nature and polite interest in what's being discussed, but there's no wicked smile like when they're teasing each other during practice, or relaxed, inviting body language, or the belly laughs Ilya can coax out of Shane with a few cracks about Hazy's weird goalie rituals.

This guy seems nice, but Shane deserves more than nice. He deserves someone who will respect his boundaries while pushing him to improve himself in all aspects of life. He deserves someone he can be weak with and grow even stronger with and confident in demanding the best from.

Shane deserves everything and more that Ilya would die to give him, and he's going to fucking give it to him right this second if Shane will accept it.

Ilya gets five feet away before Shane notices him approaching. His mouth parts, maybe out of surprise, maybe to ask Ilya what the deal is, but Ilya beats him to it.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, looking at Shane's acquaintance, "but I need to speak with him."

Ilya points a thumb at Shane, in case there's any misinterpretation.

The guy glances between them rapidly. "Uhhh—now?"

"Yes. Now." Ilya raises his eyebrows to tack a silent *duh* onto the end.

"We're in the middle of a conversation."

"And now you're at the end of it. Bye bye."

"Ilya, do you really need to talk to me this very second?"

Ilya meets his eyes. He has no doubt that his expression is one Shane recognizes from their million nights of grueling practices and beating each other's best goals. The spark Ilya knew was missing lights up in front of him.

"Yes, Shane. Right this second."

Shane swallows, and glances back at the guy. "I'm sorry. It was nice talking to you, but this is important."

Stranger scoffs. "You're fucking kidding me, right?"

"Goodbye," Ilya says pointedly, jerking his thumb in the opposite direction of Shane. "I learned a new phrase this week, just for you—it is 'kick rocks.'"

Shane poorly disguises his laugh as a cough. The guy mutters, "Whatever, I don't have time for this," and gets out of the booth. Shane, expecting Ilya to take the guy's seat, splutters for real when Ilya slides onto the bench right next to him.

“You gonna tell me what the fuck that was about?”

“He was talking to you, and now he is not. I thought my mission was obvious.”

Shane hits him square in the chest. “Oh, come *on,* Rozy! What could you have possibly found wrong with that one? You didn’t even talk to him first before getting rid of him!”

“I did not need to talk to him,” Ilya says, grabbing Shane’s hand and holding it in place. “He’s not right for you.”

“Why not? And don’t say it’s because he’s boring, because you *did not* speak to him at all.”

Well, here it goes. Ilya’s infamous all or nothing. The guts that took him away from a broken family in Europe to a wonderful family in Canada, the guts that helped to lead his team to a Frozen Four championship last year and will lead them there again this year.

Ilya presses his thumb into Shane’s pulse point. It’s the same as hearing his own heartbeat during the last thirty seconds of a game. Visceral and calming and what he wakes up and lives for.

“I know he is not the one for you. You know why I know that.”

A pause. “Your rulebook?”

“Yes. He does not meet the requirements.”

“How do you know?” Shane asks again. The incredulous tone is careening into something desperate, a tone he hardly ever uses.

Ilya doesn’t let him slip away. “Tell me the rules, Shane.”

“You know I know what they are.”

“Tell me again.”

Shan’s fingers flutter against his shirt. “He shouldn’t distract me from school or hockey. He shouldn’t interrupt breakfast with the team or be boring or creep on me in the back of the rink without my permission.”

Ilya squeezes his hand. “Last one,” he prompts, wanting to hear the words, wanting them to come from Shane’s pretty mouth.

“If he’s assertive, he shouldn’t be aggressive.” Shane looks for clues between Ilya’s unwavering stare. “He should know the difference between giving someone what they want instead of taking what he wants at their expense.”

He lets the words simmer for a few heartbeats, lets Shane internalize them and put them together with Ilya’s body language. He might find reading other people difficult, but he’s had enough practice reading Ilya that Ilya is confident it won’t have to be completely spelled out for him.

They're on the precipice of something new, and Ilya can only hope it's brilliant, not devastating.

"That guy does not meet any of the requirements, because they are supposed to add up to one person. Who do you think that person is?"

Instead of answering, Shane inhales sharply. 1-0 for Ilya and the other lame specimens who have tried to court his assistant captain thus far. He leans in closer, presses Shane's hand firmly to his chest, and says, *"Me,* Hollander."

Shane stares at him harder. Ilya lets him stare, and stares back, allowing Shane to move at his own pace. He should be close to vomiting, but he feels incredible, like another enormous weight has been lifted from his shoulders. No matter what, he won't have to hide this piece of himself anymore; Ilya is tired of tucking away everything that makes him complex.

"Don't—don't joke about this."

"I would never. I am being completely serious."

Shane knows Ilya wouldn't fuck with him about something so important. He lets Shane remember this, knowing that it's probably being drowned out by all the other thoughts and high emotions he's sifting through right now.

"You think you're the right one for me?" This is asked genuinely, inviting Ilya to explain.

"I do. I want to be, and I meet all the requirements. I do have more to give than those, though, if you have concerns."

"You made those requirements," Shane argues, laughing deliriously.

"They are valid, Shane. You deserve to be with someone who celebrates your achievements and respects you continuing to grow and change. You should choose someone who does not feel intimidated, or lesser, because of your high achievements, or because you know who you are and what you want out of life." Ilya, unable to resist, brushes his other hand down Shane's arm. "You should choose someone who knows when to give you space and when to push you for more. You deserve more than safe and comfortable. You deserve someone who wants to see you live!"

Shane says his name, a low, wounded, *"Ilya,"* that cuts him to the core. Then he says, "You deserve someone who wants to see you live, too," which cuts Ilya deepest yet.

Ilya cups his face and holds his hand and jumps the last hurdle separating Shane from this final secret. "Don't you see? That's who you are to me. There is no one else I could ever want to spend my life with except you."

Shane says nothing for a few, long moments, where Ilya traces all of his micro-expressions and feels his pulse hammering under his skin and tries to predict what the response will be. He knows he has to give Shane a lifeline, because this is not only Ilya's decision.

“It is okay if you don’t feel the same. I would never want you to feel pressured to say yes to me, or make this kind of change when we have the team and school to worry about. I just wanted you to know how I felt, because it was killing me to watch all those idiots try to get your number without taking my shot, too.”

Shane pulls him closer, fingers wound completely in his shirt. “Ilya… I thought it was obvious.”

Blood rushes through his ears. ”What? What was obvious?”

“All those girls from class—all those guys at our games and on campus—they were just me trying to find a good substitute.”

“For what?”

“For who, actually.”

“Who were you trying to find in them, Shane?”

Shane tilts his head up. It brushes their mouths together in a serene butterfly kiss when he finally says it: “You. Always you.”

It’s the winning puck sliding home. It’s executing the perfect play on the ice after hours and hours and hours of perfecting it at practice, when his body wants to give up but Ilya knows he can push it into overdrive. It’s Ilya’s blood and guts paying off again, his most rewarding victory yet.

“I’m going to kiss you now,” Ilya says, practically into Shane’s waiting mouth. “And then I’m going to take you home and fuck you until you scream, if you would like to do so.”

“Yes,” Shane replies, putting his other hand on Ilya’s chest. “Yes, yes—”

Ilya kisses him hard, right there in the lame COU student bar. Shane melts into his touch completely, knuckles flexing under Ilya’s hold, cheek tilting to fill his palm. He tastes like ginger ale and hot sugar and whines when Ilya slides their tongues together to taste more of it. He’s everything Ilya could ever dare to beg the universe for.

They’re jolted back to reality when their team starts cheering in the background. Marly and Barrett are yelling, “That’s what’s up, Cap and Cap 2!!!” Dykstra is wolf-whistling while Bood starts calling for bets to be collected. Pike says, “Jesus, get a room if you’re gonna do that,” and Hazy says, “Someone find Haas, we need to protect his innocence!”

Ilya can’t help but laugh, one that comes from deep within his soul and can’t go anywhere but out into the room, where all the people he loves are around him and celebrating his love for their assistant captain. Shane laughs too, pressing his face into his neck; his blush burns through every inch of Ilya.

“Let’s go and leave these losers to it.”

Shane kisses his throat. “Yeah, let’s go home.”

Ilya slides out of the booth without letting go of Shane's hand, unwilling to be apart for even a second. When they turn around, their teammates are beaming from ear to fucking ear.

"We love you," Ilya announces, holding up their joined hands. "You will prove how much you love us back by staying the fuck out of the house for the next two hours."

Shane chokes next to him. Chouinard says, "Two? Make it three."

"Overnight if you are feeling generous," Ilya adds. "Seriously. Don't interrupt us or I will let Price pick how many suicides you do on Monday night."

"Get out of here," Pike says. He might be smiling hardest of all. "We'll keep ourselves busy."

As Ilya is ushering Shane out the door, Marly says, "Not as busy as those two, goddamn," and Ilya silently agrees, intending to keep Shane very, very busy for the foreseeable future.

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He has to wonder how he lived multiple years without this. Not knowing what it feels like to carry Shane up the stairs with his thighs around Ilya's waist because they can't stop kissing long enough to walk two centimeters apart. Not knowing the intimate sensation of Shane's stubble dragging across his lips, the intimate drag of his tongue along each and every sharp tooth inside of Shane's mouth. Not knowing that Shane loves it when Ilya squeezes his pecs and bites his nipples, goes wild for being groped until he's borderline overstimulated.

Not knowing the searing heat of Shane wrapped around three of his fingers, slick with lube and expertly orchestrating every synapsis of his pleasure.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya growls, watching his fingers disappear and reappear with rapture. "You take me so well. Born for this."

Shane is sprawled across Ilya's sheets, naked and flushed and the most ethereal creature he has ever had the honor of laying eyes on. His hands are clenched in Ilya's pillows, head titled back, knees bent close to his ribs. When he hears Ilya's praise, that gorgeous cherry blush he produced at the coffee shop blooms to life, traveling down the valley of Shane's throat to his chest and back up into his hairline.

Ilya knows extremely limited French, and even less Quebecois, but a phrase pops into his head watching Shane's flawless skin light up and watching his fingers stretch the hot, pink rim of his hole: *la vie en rose.*

He pushes his fingers in again and spreads them, making sure to drag the pad of his middle finger directly across Shane's prostate. Shane's responding moan fills the enclosed space of Ilya's bedroom like a choir inside of a sanctuary.

"C'mon, c'mon," Shane babbles, grabbing Ilya's wrist. "I want it. I'm ready."

"Ask me nicely."

Shane always replies to this type of ribbing with disdain and sarcasm. Now, completely at Ilya's mercy, cock hard and drooling onto his quivering belly, he's quick to comply. "Please, please, please. I need it, Ilya, I need you. I've been waiting forever for you."

"Fuck," Ilya hisses. So much for being the player and not the played.

He pulls his fingers out and fumbles for the condom he had the forethought to grab prior to working Shane open. Shane, who is either an uptight control freak or a fucking death machine (real life and sport life, respectively), is proving unable to be anything but completely shameless in Ilya's bed. He vocalizes every ounce of pleasure he feels, incapable or unwilling to swallow it down. He melts at each word of praise that Ilya gives him, lets Ilya stare at his bared skin and exposed nerve endings without shying away. He lets Ilya push his legs back farther yet, until he's panting into the crease of his knee, hands hooked behind his thighs to give Ilya full access to his ass.

He makes sure to peel his eyes open when Ilya pushes the head of his cock against Shane's hole so that he can watch, despite having never done this before. Ilya worked out of him (while working his fingers into him) that Shane has touched himself plenty and even has a dildo squirreled away in his room, but hasn't had the time, motivation, or opportunity (thanks to Ilya) to go all the way with someone else.

Knowing that he's Shane first sets Ilya's blood on fire, makes a possessive, animalistic sense of accomplishment spread to every corner of his mind, body, and soul. Shane doesn't know it quite yet, but Ilya intends to be his only, too.

"Okay?" he asks, caressing Shane's flank.

Shane nods, dark eyes half-mast and glittering like gemstones. "Want you."

Ilya grips the base of his cock, promises, "I'm yours," and pushes in, slow and smooth and perfect, perfect, perfect. It should be torture, going so slow when Ilya's been starving for this for months—years, if he's being honest now—but it's incredible, a delicious and taunting form of pure agony. He sinks inside Shane's body like he's had the privilege a hundred times before. Shane's body welcomes him like it knows Ilya would crawl across broken glass and hot coals to be worthy of touching its host.

When their hips meet, Ilya takes a ragged breath, muscles coiled with anticipation of delivering further pleasure to his partner.

"Still okay?"

Shane is breathing deep and even, like Ilya instructed him to, but his hand is trembling slightly when he drags it down the underside of his thigh. It brushes over the spot where they're connected, and Ilya's hips kick forward without his permission, knowing Shane can feel the stretch of his rim around Ilya's dick.

"Oh," Shane gasps, toes flexing. "Do that again."

Ilya does as he's told, pulling out a knuckle's worth before sliding in again. Shane says, "Come on, I'm not going to break," so Ilya goes, starting them at a gentle, steady rhythm. Shane lets go of his legs so that he can wrap them fully around Ilya's hips and settles his hands on Ilya's biceps, trusting Ilya to take care of him and hold him through this enormous step in their relationship.

As if Ilya would ever take it for granted.

He works his arms under Shane's back and hoists his torso up, so that they're near-embracing as Ilya begins to properly fuck into him. He feels the first time he nails Shane's prostate, both around his cock and in the way Shane's limbs crush him closer. He can count each inky eyelash as they flutter across Shane's freckled cheekbones. He smells the fresh, masculine scent of Shane's body wash cut with clean sweat, watches his mouth open and close around wordless cries, gets to focus solely on the ways he can unravel perfect, pristine Shane Hollander and put him back together again.

"You are so beautiful," Ilya says, smearing a kiss along Shane's glistening forehead. "Always beautiful. But like this, you are… Stunning."

Shane manages a laugh in between his whining. "Stunning?"

"Stunning," Ilya confirms, kissing his mouth next. "Gorgeous. Hot. God, you are so hot, it sickens me."

He thrusts hard and lingers, grinding in tight, neat circles; Shane sobs out his name, practically screams, "Fuck, Ilya, *fuck!"* while precome leaves pearlescent trails across his stomach.

"So wet," Ilya observes, picking up the pace. "I bet you could come just from this. My cock and nothing else."

Shane peels his eyes open to blink up at Ilya. They're dazed and unfocused, practically swallowed by his pupils. Ilya wants to sink into him until they're one whole being, until he's also been swallowed up and settled at Shane's warm center.

"I've n-never tried," Shane says.

Ilya brushes their lips together. "Do you think you could?"

He thrusts hard again. Shane babbles, "Yes, yes, anything," head dropping farther back, completely submitting to Ilya.

Ilya's orgasm fizzles at the base of his spine. As much fun it would be to challenge them both to get Shane there without a hand on his cock—

"Next time, sweetheart." Shane sobs again when Ilya moves to curl a hand around his cock and pulls from head to root and back, slicking him with his own precome. "This time, I'm going to get you there."

Ilya focuses the frenetic urgency of his orgasm on making Shane come first. He angles his hips so that he's nailing Shane's prostate on every single thrust. He presses his thumb to the underside of the sensitive head of Shane's dick and times rotating his wrist with sliding all the way back into his pliant, waiting body. He combines his dedication to athleticism with his dedication to fucking good and hard and does his best to make Shane see stars.

"Come on," Ilya echoes Shane's earlier demand. "I want to see you make a mess of yourself, Hollander. I want to see you come for me."

Shane digs his nails into Ilya's back and, after three more thrusts, gives him what he wants. He clenches around Ilya, presses his flushed, sweaty face into Ilya's messy sheets, and yells, "God, Ilya, I'm—!" as he starts to come. Ilya keeps his eyes open and holds the rhythm steady while Shane orgasms, hypnotized by the sight of his beloved unraveling entirely by Ilya's own doing. He comes so hard that it shoots all the way up his chest, a visual that Ilya will be seeing every time he closes his eyes from now until death.

"Fuck, fuck," Ilya swears, bucking erratically. "So beautiful. Made for this."

Shane, dazed and high on endorphins, focuses long enough to say, "I was waiting for you. I only ever wanted you, Ilya."

He thinks he screams, but all sound becomes TV static when Ilya finally comes. It goes on forever, pleasure and static and euphoria, a brand new Ilya-and-Shane ouroboros, until Shane's hands on his face guide him back to reality. The tension from holding himself up cuts like puppet strings, and Ilya collapses into Shane, pressing them together from tingling toes to sweaty, come-streaked chests.

When Shane kisses him, breathing no steadier than Ilya's, he's so overwhelmingly happy that he could burst into tears. Love, such an unobtainable pipe dream from his past, now resides in every molecule of his DNA, illuminates every aspect of the life he's built for himself.

Is reciprocated tenfold by the man in his arms, who is touching Ilya like he's worth being loved, and has been intentionally loving him since they met.

"I love you," Ilya says, because he can't hold the words in any longer. He knows it's a cliché time to admit it, but he doesn't give a single fuck. "You are everything to me, Shane Hollander. And I want to be everything to you, if you will let me."

Shane beams, the illuminating presence of love in Ilya's life personified. "You're already everything to me, Ilya. I've loved you as long as I've known you."

Ilya smothers him with kisses across his jawline and cheeks and nose until Shane is laughing and wheezing from it, and then kisses him deeply on his grinning mouth, head spinning from the overwhelming joy of it all.

Ilya pulls away only far enough to meet Shane's eyes. He says, "I do have a confession to make."

"What's that?"

“You have to promise not to tell anyone.”

Shane kisses him again, fingers winding into his curls. “I promise.”

Ilya stares for a moment, letting the suspension build, and then whispers: “Pike is the one who told me to confess my feelings to you before someone else did.”

Shane stares in return, and then starts laughing again, harder than before. Ilya wants to be affronted by this reaction, but Shane is lovely when he laughs, and he’s carefully cradling Ilya’s head against his chest, and there’s no room for anything in Ilya’s body right now but utter love and adoration.

“I won’t tell,” Shane manages to say.

Ilya kisses his cheek. “Thank you, darling.”

Shane then says, “I won’t say anything because I’m sure Hayden already knows he’s smarter than both of us put together,” and Ilya has to tackle him all over again, yelling, “My boyfriend thinks I’m imbecile! My honor is in tatters!” as Shane shrieks with laughter and Ilya alternates kissing him and tickling (groping) him.

At some point, the kissing goes from teasing to hungry, and Ilya forgets about cursing Pike’s name in favor of general cursing when Shane demands he find another condom and get to work on round two.

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“Do you think it’s been long enough?”

Barrett glances at his watch. “Hazy, it’s only been three hours.”

Chouinard, who was the one to guess Ilya and Shane would need only three hours, now says: “We should make it four, guys. Trust me.”

Bood sighs, but it’s fond. “Who wants to partake in midnight IHOP?”

All the Falcons raise their hands. Pike, who acts as the parent when Ilya and Shane are otherwise apprehended, stands from the bar booth and says, “Let’s go, kids. We’re getting pancakes instead of scarred for life.”

End Notes

i'm also galactictsukki on twt lots of hr and kpop yeeeeee boi

Works inspired by this one

silk-like hips (conscious lips) by ja9ntk

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