

chained myself to a friend

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by Anonymous

Summary

“Board games,” Ilya said, kneeling them higher up his chest. Shane stared at him. “You travel with those?” he asked, trying to go for scathing. It never quite got there. He didn’t have Ilya’s skill. Ilya smiled wide and shark-like. “No,” he said. “I got them from Emily. Mrs. Lansow.” Shane felt even more baffled. “The owner of the hotel,” Ilya said. “I know,” Shane said. He just couldn’t imagine Ilya interacting with that sweet woman. Or her asking him to call her by her first name. “Why? I mean, why did you get them?” “You have better things to do?” Ilya asked. “I have a phone. And a laptop. And there’s a television,” Shane said. Ilya squinted dismissively. “Screen is bad. Melts your brain.” “You sound like my mom,” Shane said, a little softer than he intended and smiling reluctantly. Ilya tilted his head. “This does it for you?”

Shane and Ilya learn what it's like spending time together with their clothes still on.

Notes

title taken from instant crush by daft punk and julian casablancas. might be in my making-everything-about-shane-and-ilya era but i feel like the song is pretty fitting :)

cw shane food weirdness

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

Shane and Ilya met up on average seven times per year. One night last off season, sleepless, Shane had done the math. Considering all their hook ups were linked to specific events – games, all star weekends, award shows – it was pretty easy to track.

This year they were on pace for nine, thanks to a scheduling quirk that had had Ilya in Montreal for a five day stretch and, now, thanks to this ad shoot. A shoot was how they had gotten together in the first place, and this was the first one they had done since then, and Shane felt strangely giddy – more than he usually did at the prospect of sleeping with Ilya, which was saying something. It was for CCM's Christmas campaign and they were going all out, featuring all their ambassador athletes in high-concept settings. Shane had been insulted and excited when he learned he was being grouped with Ilya. He knew most other athletes were getting solo features, but this kind of thing was inevitable, their names linked forever like Magic and Bird. It was funny that the outside world saw Ilya as being as relevant to Shane's life as Shane secretly felt him to be, but for entirely different reasons. His agent had literally told him they were both more recognizable if they were photographed together – that casual fans mightn't know either of them on their own, but would know them next to each other. In a game of word association, if one person said Hollander, the other would say Rozanov. It just had nothing to do with all the sex they were having.

This shoot was at a frozen lake, a real one, not green-screened in. Ilya complained but Shane secretly thought it would look cool, and might also be less mind-numbingly boring than the studio shoots he had become used to. The most challenging part had been finding suitable nearby accommodation for millionaire athletes. They were more or less in the middle of nowhere – Canadian nowhere, which was saying something. Ultimately the company had magicked up a small boutique bed and breakfast, four stars and only one more room than that. Shane had been informed, earnestly, that four stars was five stars for little hotels.

The shoot wrapped up, Shane's muscles aching and ears ringing like he'd just played a game but with none of the satisfaction or adrenaline to make up for it, and they arrived at the bed and breakfast around midnight. Ilya was in a foul mood – he didn't seem to have Shane's coping mechanisms for all the mindless marketing obligations that came with their fame – and once upon a time that would have made Shane worry Ilya wasn't up for Shane coming to his room. By now he had learned that Ilya was always up for that, whether he was pissed off, exhausted, grumpy, injured, or wired. One time when he'd been in concussion protocol he'd still tried to convince Shane to visit.

Ilya's mood could however change the tenor of the encounter, and Shane wasn't surprised when the sex that night proved rough and quick. Shane spent his last lucid thought on enjoying the contrast between Ilya's filthy, unrestrained advance on him and the quaint, old-fashioned bedroom.

It was over fast because Ilya didn't take any of the usual precautions for drawing it out and Shane was still embarrassingly easy for him. He came hard, his moan only slightly muffled by the pillow, and Ilya followed, groaning into Shane's hair, settling down half on top of him. Shane's eyes were closed but instead of black he was seeing bright white, like there was a burning light in the room. He knew there wasn't, that they'd fucked in near darkness, but his

eyes had adjusted remarkably well – he swore he could see the gold of Ilya’s hair, the green flecks in his eyes, by the end.

Then he fully came down from the orgasm and the light faded some but didn’t disappear. He opened his eyes, frowning. None of the lights in the room were on, but there was light, shimmering and white, from outside. Shane began to drag himself out from under Ilya’s warm body, holding in his laugh at Ilya’s groans of protest. Ilya’s hand caught on his elbow and stayed there for as long as it could, flopping over the side of the bed when Shane got too far away. He walked naked to the window and saw what he’d been expecting: a thick blanket of snow covering the courtyard outside and the street beyond it, reflecting the street lights and the security lights of the bed and breakfast so that the ceiling of Ilya’s room shimmered.

“It’s snowing,” Shane said. It must have started while they were fucking, and that felt special too, but Shane couldn’t say that. He couldn’t call it magical.

Ilya laughed like Shane had said it. Shane turned to him, instantly defensive, though not quite as sharp as he’d have been if he hadn’t orgasmed minutes earlier. “What?” he asked.

“You look like—” Ilya shook his head, rolled onto his back. Shane swallowed at the sight of his naked body stretched out, somehow still not used to it. “I have teammate from Florida. This is how he reacts to snow. Surely Canadians are used to it.”

“Fuck you,” Shane said, a little half-heartedly because he wasn’t sure what exactly Ilya was mocking.

“No, is sweet,” Ilya said, then laughed again. “Come back to bed. I know snow is beautiful, but I am too.”

Shane took one last glance out the window and then obliged. When he lay beside Ilya, Ilya flung the blanket over the both of them dramatically, and Shane’s laugh was interrupted by a shiver as the soft fabric settled over his skin. He felt very warm, and warmer still when Ilya leaned in and kissed him. None of Ilya’s kisses were especially gentle or sweet; they were all firm, all claiming. But this one didn’t have the burning intensity of the ones that had led up to the sex. It was sated, and seemed to transfer that satisfaction from Ilya to Shane, settling it into his bones. Still: “I should get back to my room,” Shane said, quiet.

“Mmm,” Ilya said, dragging his lips over Shane’s cheekbones. “Why?”

Shane floundered. They never gave reasons for leaving. But then, today was different; there was no teammate back in his room to question his absence. That was why he’d been especially excited for this night together – far less cover up was necessary than usual. He’d convinced his mom not to come along specifically because he always felt weirder meeting up with Ilya when she was in the same city, much less the same hotel. The owner of the bed and breakfast, an efficient lady in her sixties who’d been at the front desk, had told them there was only one other guest booked in, a lone hiker gone off grid. Shane sneaking back to his room in the morning wouldn’t be all that different from sneaking back to his room now.

“You want me to stay?” he asked, his voice a little thick. God, he was embarrassing.

Ilya smiled, his eyes traveling all over Shane's face before answering. "Yes," he said. "So rarely get to go at you twice."

Right. If he stayed they could fuck again before they left tomorrow morning. It wasn't like Shane didn't like that idea – in fact he liked it a whole lot. So there was no reason to feel disappointed.

"Don't act like I'm a sure thing," Shane said, to cover for whatever it was he was actually feeling.

"No," Ilya said, shaking his head. His hair got mussed by the pillow and Shane resisted the urge to fix it. "I work very hard to have you, each time."

Shane's eyes widened and he searched for any hint of irony in Ilya's face, coming up empty. It often felt like Ilya saw through him entirely, more than anyone else on earth. It didn't make sense for him to not know how easy Shane was for him. Shane didn't know what to say. Slowly, Ilya's smile grew, and he kissed Shane again.

They kissed for what felt like hours, and was certainly far longer than they usually got to. Shane felt taken apart, melted into the bed, not a single atom in his body holding any tension. The kissing stopped being kissing so much, just their mouths existing in the same space, rubbing occasionally against each other, the skin warm and sensitive. And as far as Shane could remember, that was how they fell asleep. He'd never done anything like that before, even though kissing was always his favorite thing to do with girlfriends. He wouldn't have thought he trusted Ilya enough to fall asleep right up against him, still touching him, being touched by him. But then, that was another one of the confusing contradictions Ilya brought into his life. For all the parts of himself Shane tried to guard from Ilya, for all the uncertainty and suspicion Ilya could elicit, in ways there was nobody Shane had ever trusted more – Ilya was the sole keeper of his biggest secret. And sex took trust too, especially the sex they had, uninhibited and intense.

Despite Ilya's promise, they didn't have any more sex that night; Shane slept uninterrupted until morning, and woke to a sound that should have been more alien than it was – Russian cursing. It made him a little uncomfortable how innocuous that felt, first thing in the morning. Ilya was sitting against the headboard, hunched over his phone.

"What's wrong?" Shane asked.

"Flight canceled," Ilya said. "Yours probably too."

"Seriously?" Shane asked, grappling for his phone. "Why?"

"The wonderful beautiful snow," Ilya said. Shane didn't need to check his flight tracker or the airline website, because the first thing he saw was a text from his mom that had come through an hour ago. *Honey I'm trying to find a solution but seems like you won't be able to make the gala tonight with canceled flight due to weather conditions. At least it's a very good excuse! I have the screenshots to prove it and everything :) and that B&B looked too cute, enjoy!*

He couldn't help but smile a little.

“You are happy about this?”

Shane was very surprised to find Ilya looking at him, his eyebrows raised, disbelieving.

“No, it’s just—” Shane didn’t want to say why he was smiling, didn’t want to say his mom tracked all his flights. He didn’t even have to do anything about the situation, because beneath the text from his mom was a text from his agent saying they had sorted another night in the bed and breakfast, and that he should just stay put until the worst of it past. He shook his head. “We’ll—” then he floundered.

“I have booked flight for tomorrow morning,” Ilya said. “Fuck around until then, I guess.”

It was always surprising, the things Ilya could be philosophical about. Shane felt more like throwing something and complaining about the unfairness of the world. All he was missing was that gala, which he hadn’t exactly been excited for, but he didn’t like when his plans were disrupted.

“What do we do?” he asked, and he wondered too late if it was a mistake to say we, to act as though they would be facing this together.

“I’m hungry,” Ilya said, stretching beneath the sheets in a way that Shane, despite having been fucked by the man last night, felt he had to look away from. “I want breakfast. They do fry here. It gets rave reviews online.”

Shane was momentarily speechless, hit with something he didn’t want to call affection. Did Ilya read hotel reviews? Why would he do that? It wasn’t like they got to decide where to stay themselves.

Ilya nodded to himself and climbed out of the bed. He was still entirely naked, and seeing that so early in the morning hit Shane like a ton of bricks. He watched helplessly as Ilya pulled his clothes on. He was a lot quicker at it than Shane was, something Shane had noticed before. He wondered if it was an ancillary skill that came with frequent meaningless hook ups. As he was buttoning up his shirt – one-handed, presumably just to fuck with Shane – Ilya said, “You want breakfast?”

Shane took a moment to process the question, then shook his head. “I mean, yes, I’ll have breakfast, but not here,” he said. He couldn’t have fried food. “I’ll look for somewhere nearby online, or go to a store.”

Ilya stared at him, then snorted. “Okay,” he said, and left. Shane wasn’t sure why what he’d said had been ridiculous until he pulled out his phone and searched for coffee shops near him. It turned out the weather hadn’t just shut down flights. All businesses in the vicinity were closed for the day too, and the roads were inaccessible. Shane rose from the bed and looked out the window as he had last night, his perspective this time sharply absent of post-orgasm wonder. The snow was probably three feet deep and still falling. Shane was hardy, would have been able to get about, but only if he had the right gear. He had tennis shoes and glorified work out clothes. He had wanted to travel light. Fuck.

Ilya had drawn attention to fried food but it was hardly like it was all the hotel offered. Most places had vegan options these days, which generally translated into Shane's regimen in a pinch. He'd go downstairs and see what he could salvage. While dressing he realized belatedly that this was Ilya's room – that Ilya had left him unsupervised in his room. His hotel room, sure, but it still felt unexpected. Ilya's bag was on the floor by the foot of the bed. Shane had to fight the urge to go through it.

The breakfast area was small, as suggested by the 'Brekky Corner' sign on the door that led into it. Ilya was the only one in there, an overloaded plate of food in front of him and a look of utter concentration on his face. Shane ignored him, walking past to the buffet against the far wall. He stared at the offerings. Beside the fried eggs and meat, there was scrambled egg and some fruit salad. Maybe Shane could make a meal out of that. There were also little boxes of cereal and some of the brands he didn't recognize, so he took to reading the ingredients.

Then Ilya was beside him, closer than necessary, loading food up on a plate – eggs, sausages, mushrooms, buttered toast. Shane knew how many calories it must take to maintain Ilya's form so he didn't question the idea of him needing a second helping. Then the plate was being shoved into his chest.

"What?" Shane asked.

"They do not have your stupid fucking food here," Ilya said. "You will not find it hiding in cereal boxes. Eat."

Shane had nothing to say, mouth agape.

"Fucking eat, Hollander," Ilya said, inexplicably annoyed. "Any food is better than no food. Starving is least healthy thing to do."

"I'm not starving," Shane said, but Ilya had already started walking away, returning to his seat, as though satisfied Shane would do as he said. And, after a few moments, Shane picked up the plate Ilya had left him with. To maintain a little dignity, he did also make himself a bowl of fruit salad.

A new dilemma presented itself: where would he sit? He and Ilya didn't eat together, didn't do anything together in public, but especially now that they had already interacted it would feel weird to take a separate table. He realized how rare it was for Ilya to be his only option; almost always he was choosing Ilya over his teammates or family or a night out. Here it was Ilya or no one. If the hotel owner or the sole other guest came in, and if they knew who Shane and Ilya were, they'd probably think it was weirder for them to sit apart. Shane had always feared he was pretty transparent, but he didn't think someone would look at him and Ilya eating breakfast at the same table in an otherwise empty room and deduce that they'd been fucking for a number of years.

He sat at the seat across from Ilya, who didn't look up. He was shoveling food into his mouth. He had a big mouth, which Shane had noted before in other contexts for other reasons, but at this time it seemed comical. Maybe even charming or endearing, if it had been someone other than Ilya. But it was Ilya, so. Just comical.

Shane began eating his own meal at a slightly more measured pace. It was good, really good; it wasn't like he didn't like this kind of food. He just had discipline. He could go without. The only thing that had ever not been true about was sex with Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya finished before him, pushed the chair back from the table and slumped down in it a little, then set to watching Shane in that unnerving, unwavering way he had. Shane's self-consciousness at being observed didn't make sense. Shane was socially awkward, this was undeniable, but his shyness didn't extend to his body. It couldn't. His body was his career. It wouldn't make sense to be shy about it, not with scouts measuring his wing span since he was eleven years old, and all the communal showers, and more recently the photographers debating just how prominent his nipples should be to best sell a cologne, and his body fat percentage being public knowledge. But when Ilya looked at him there was no other word for it. Shane felt shy. Stranger still, he liked it. Like his body wasn't just a tool, was something susceptible and unpredictable.

When Shane finished they both stayed in place, their empty plates in front of them, and said nothing. Shane racked his brain for an easy comment to make, but it was hard when he had no idea what chord he even wanted to strike. He didn't imagine the same panic was unfolding in Ilya's head; he was presumably content just sitting there. Slowly, Shane looked up and made eye contact. Ilya's lip twitched into a smile.

"So, I—" Shane began, and then Ilya's phone started ringing. Maybe if Shane had kept talking Ilya would have ignored it – he'd ignored calls before, when he and Shane were together – but Shane didn't keep talking, he immediately shut up. Ilya glanced at him, then at his phone screen. Shane did too, but the contact name was Cyrillic so he couldn't tell who it was. Shane had no idea of the kind of social life Ilya left behind in Russia, who his family and friends were. Except for a coach's son.

"I must take this," Ilya said, standing as he lifted the phone to his ear, answering in brusque Russian. That would leave Shane feeling awkward enough, but with his free hand Ilya gathered up his cutlery, coffee cup and plate and carried them over to the cart by the kitchen door. It was surprisingly thoughtful, but it also indicated that Ilya was done in this room. He left and Shane didn't think he would come back. Shane stared at the vacated chair, not sure how he was feeling. Had he been expecting to spend the day together with Ilya? They never had before, and unless it was a sex marathon Shane had no idea how they would. Maybe, between rounds of sex, they could watch hockey replays. It was the only other piece of common ground they had. They didn't even eat the same kind of breakfast food.

Shane should be relieved that Ilya had left swiftly. Now he could go back to his room – a room he had only been in thus far to dump his bag and hang the do not disturb sign – and fuck around on his phone and wait for the day to pass, safe. And, actually, he was relieved. The frisson of panic had defused. He was undeniably more relaxed now that Ilya wasn't sitting across from him. It was just that he never only felt one way about anything, and especially not when it came to Ilya Rozanov.

He stayed at his table, staring at his empty plate, until the other guest wandered in. He was bundled up in hardy clothing like he intended to face the elements and Shane remembered

being told he was a hiker. He was older than Shane, maybe late thirties or early forties. He was also objectively handsome. When Shane realized that, he looked back at his plate.

It'd be easy to strike up a conversation with him. Shane was socially awkward but he could say something about the snow, about the guy's gear. Canadian wilderness was a safe subject for Shane. But to what end? Even if the guy wasn't straight, what would Shane want? He got terrified when anyone other than Ilya flirted with him. He'd never really fully flirted back with anyone other than Ilya.

He thought, sometimes, about what it would mean to sleep with another man. He hated that Ilya was still the only guy he'd ever had sex with – the only person on earth he'd ever had good sex with. He knew this wasn't true for Ilya, and that most people – most of his teammates, at least – found good sex easy to come by, weren't reliant on a single person for it. Shane wanted to know if Ilya was only his exception because he was a man. Maybe Ilya wasn't actually special, maybe Shane would be this easy, this desperate, for any attractive guy willing to fuck him. But at the same time, that was a further reason to fear testing the theory. Another mixed emotion courtesy of Ilya Rozanov: how awful if Ilya was truly unique, the only person who could bring Shane real pleasure; and how inexplicably sad if Ilya wasn't special, if everything this had come to mean in Shane's head was in reality inconsequential.

Shane went back to his room without so much as mumbling good morning to the hiker, got into comfortable clothes and lay on his bed. He turned on ESPN on the television but left it on mute, then pulled out his phone. He opened his chess app, which he'd gotten pretty into recently, but kept glancing at the time in the top right corner of the screen. It was passing very slowly.

He jumped into sitting straight up, heart pounding, when he heard a knock on the door, the rhythm familiar as Ilya's. Enough time had passed that it wouldn't surprise him if Ilya had come to fuck him. Shane wasn't horny, but it only took him about thirty seconds of being in Ilya's proximity to get there. He was already on his way when he opened the door.

But apparently that wasn't what was on Ilya's mind. He was holding a pile of brightly colored boxes, frowning as he maintained their balance.

"What?" Shane asked, dumbly.

"Board games," Ilya said, kneeling them higher up his chest.

Shane stared at him. "You travel with those?" he asked, trying to go for scathing. It never quite got there. He didn't have Ilya's skill.

Ilya smiled wide and shark-like. "No," he said. "I got them from Emily. Mrs. Lansow."

Shane felt even more baffled.

"The owner of the hotel," Ilya said.

“I know,” Shane said. He just couldn’t imagine Ilya interacting with that sweet woman. Or her asking him to call her by her first name. “Why? I mean, why did you get them?”

“You have better things to do?” Ilya asked.

“I have a phone. And a laptop. And there’s a television,” Shane said.

Ilya squinted dismissively. “Screen is bad. Melts your brain.”

“You sound like my mom,” Shane said, a little softer than he intended and smiling reluctantly.

Ilya tilted his head. “This does it for you?”

“Oh, gross, fuck off,” Shane said, grimacing. Only Ilya could make him go from endeared to disgusted in less than five seconds. It was almost impressive.

Ilya seemed to misinterpret this as a welcome, and barreled past Shane into his room. “Your mom, she likes board games, I guess,” he said.

Shane stared into the hallway for a moment, contemplating how swiftly his situation could change, before closing the door firmly and turning around. “New ground rule,” he said. “You’re not allowed to talk about my mom. Ever.”

For a moment something flickered across Ilya’s face, and foolishly Shane thought it was hurt. It couldn’t be. Maybe Ilya just didn’t know the phrase ground rule. Whatever it was it resolved quickly, and Ilya said, “I mean the Hollander family play board games. Right?”

Shane flexed his jaw. It seemed only a couple degrees removed from a joke about how boring he was, but it was also undeniably true. They had a tradition of getting a new board game every Christmas and then playing it so often it was banned in the household by New Years. There were no doubts about where Shane had picked up his taste for competition.

“Right,” Shane said, and Ilya smiled. He was facing away from Shane, Shane could just see the edges of it, but he suspected it was smug. Ilya placed the pile of board games on the floor by the small table, then took the one at the top of the pile and put it on the table. He sat on the chair – it was really too small for him, spindly and delicate, and it should have been comical, but it was closer to erotic. He splayed out on it, his limbs hanging akimbo. Shane felt slightly flushed. He could still shock himself with how easy he was. Ilya gestured regally to the other chair. Shane sat down, because of course he did. Ilya opened the board game box and took out the instruction leaflet, handing it to Shane.

“You read it and explain it to me,” Ilya said.

It made sense. Board game rules could be hard enough to follow regardless, and presumably especially in a second language. But it felt like more than that, felt like another of Ilya’s games. Shane unfolded the paper and cleared his throat, for some reason nervous. He could feel Ilya looking at him. He wasn’t sure how long it took him to feel he had enough of an understanding to explain it to Ilya, but it felt dragged out, infinite, the way many moments

with Ilya did. That was probably a blessing, considering how brief their time together actually was.

“Right,” Shane said. “Okay, so, it’s like—we both have a fleet of boats, and we’re trying to get them across the board, to the other person’s water. But we can attack each other’s boats too. I guess it’s kind of like chess? But with different pieces and rules for what the pieces can do. And a different board.” He expected Ilya to mock him, but instead he just nodded. Like a good student, an avid listener. Shane had to swallow a laugh. “So, um—I guess we’ll set up the board and then we can talk through the different kinds of ships.”

The game was for up to four players, and there were four different sets of ships – red, blue, yellow, and green. Ilya grabbed the red bag instantly. “I am red for Russia,” he said. “We will re-start the cold war. Settle it once and for all, here and now.”

“First of all,” Shane said. “The Canadian flag is also red. Second of all, Canada didn’t play all that big a role in the cold war. There’s not really a score to settle between our countries.”

Ilya shrugged. “Russian school books say different,” he said. “Old military rivals.”

“Shut up,” Shane said, grabbing the green bag because it was his favorite color.

“My great uncle fought in the first Russian-Canadian war,” Ilya said. “Brave hero. This is for his honor.”

Shane had a natural urge to fight against Ilya’s humor. But this wasn’t—it wasn’t mocking, and it wasn’t salacious, the way Ilya’s jokes almost always were. It was just silly. There was no harm in playing along. “Actually,” he said. “Now that you mention it, I think my great-grandma was a spy in that war.”

“Ah,” Ilya said, smiling. “So you play for her honor.”

Shane stopped biting down on his smile and laughed. Then he set out his pieces, feeling flushed again when he realized Ilya was mirroring his movements, following his lead. It was nice. Shane would not have guessed that Ilya had the patience for a board game, not Ilya Rozanov of the fast cars and beautiful women and straight alcohol. Of course, obviously, they had limited options for what to do and this presumably wasn’t Ilya’s top choice for how to spend an afternoon, but he still seemed genuinely engaged. Shane didn’t feel like he had to cover up his own interest in these kinds of activities, didn’t feel like Ilya would mock him for enjoying it.

If anything, Shane was in the position to mock. Ilya’s insane competitiveness carried over to this, and it was funny to see him apply the same ferocity that struck fear into people on the ice to these tiny plastic figurines. Shane got the first minor victory of the game, taking out a ship on Ilya’s right flank. Ilya cursed protractedly in Russian, making Shane laugh, but put the piece obligingly to the side. Then he bent down and pulled off a sock. Just one.

Shane frowned, confused and immediately on edge the way he always got when he wasn’t sure what Ilya was up to. “What are you doing?”

“Those are rules, yes?” Ilya asked. “I lose a ship, I lose a piece of clothing.”

“No,” Shane said, firm. “No, we are not playing strip board games.”

“I think we are,” Ilya said. “I think is in the rules.”

“No, it’s not,” Shane said. “I read the rules.”

“You missed it,” Ilya said. Shane opened his mouth again, but Ilya beat him to the punch: “Why do you complain? You like when I am naked, don’t you?”

Shane fish-mouthed, unsure. Maybe he was a little disappointed that Ilya had turned this into flirtation, a very strange form of foreplay. Maybe he’d been liking the idea that they could just have fun together, casual fun with nothing illicit about it. But then, really that was a lot more dangerous. They weren’t friends. He should be grateful to Ilya for bringing them back to familiar territory. And, also, the most simple consideration – he did like it when Ilya was naked. Even just getting to see his right foot, the tendons and long toes, made Shane slightly giddy. Shane said, honest and only realizing once it was out of his mouth exactly how it sounded, “I’m only wearing four things.”

Ilya scanned his body – socks, sweat pants, and hoodie. “Ah,” Ilya said. “Interesting. You better play smart. Well, unless you want to get naked for me.”

Shane swallowed, flushed. “I always play smart,” he said.

“Yes,” Ilya said, quiet. “Almost always.”

Shane glanced up at him, alarmed, but Ilya was placidly contemplating the board. Shane bit his lip. He was always looking for traps with Ilya, for hidden meanings.

During the game, Shane had a realization. It was on the basis of all these little games within games Ilya was setting up – the Russo-Canadian war and stripping were just the start. Ilya bet a single dollar on who would get to the center row first, gave different ships different personalities, made explosion noises when he took one of Shane’s out. So this was the realization: Ilya was weird. He was a strange person, an oddball, a misfit. It was just hard to pick up on because, staying true to his paradoxical nature, Ilya was also cool, way cooler than Shane would ever be. That had distracted him from the weirdness, which with hindsight seemed glaring.

This was a troubling realization because while Shane didn’t really think of himself as weird, he’d always believed that he got on best with weird people. It was part of how he explained his social struggles to himself, dating back to his childhood. Shane was so undeniably a jock that it had been hard for him to get out of jock circles, and socially that wasn’t really where he naturally fit. If he’d been able to hang out with the dorky kids or the arty kids, he always believed he’d have had an easier time.

He hadn't thought about that in a while, because over the years he'd figured out how jocks worked and spending time with them had stopped being so painful. He genuinely enjoyed the company of some. Hayden, for example: Hayden was kind, funny, easy going, happily married so he didn't talk much about women or sex. Basically the perfect friend. But even around Hayden Shane didn't feel entirely relaxed, always a little scared of saying something wrong, something that didn't fit the person he was supposed to be. Hayden met all the positive stereotypes of a hockey player and none of the negative ones. He didn't exactly make Shane feel under less pressure to be perfect. The only time that pressure eased was when he was around people who weren't interested in being who they were supposed to be. And during the board game it became clear Ilya was one such person. Ilya fit a lot of the negative stereotypes of hockey players, few of the positives, and had invented plenty new ones just for himself. The concept of perfect did not seem to be on his radar, except as a punchline for when he made fun of Shane. For the first time it occurred to Shane to appreciate that.

Shane won the game, but it didn't really feel like it because Ilya still had his boxers on and Shane had been sitting there naked for half an hour before the game ended. It was strange. Ilya was eyeing him, it wasn't like the nakedness was entirely irrelevant, but they hadn't escalated it. After dramatically protesting Shane's win, Ilya stood and grabbed a blanket from the foot of the bed and held it out to him. Shane swallowed then stood and wrapped it around himself. He wasn't sure why he wouldn't just put his clothes back on, if they weren't going to do anything. He began clearing up the pieces and Ilya helped. Once the game was packed away Shane felt a little clueless. It had been a good time but he wasn't sure that Ilya would want to play another game. He wasn't sure what Ilya would want to do, he just knew he didn't want him to leave. Shane looked around the room, the floral wallpaper and lace curtains. "I can't believe we're stuck here," he said, hoping to get Ilya in on brainstorming ideas.

Ilya shrugged. "There are worse places," he said.

"It doesn't even have a gym," Shane said. Ilya shrugged again.

"You like it here?" Shane asked, baffled. He couldn't imagine why.

"Yes," Ilya said. "Nice change from normal hotels. I hate them."

That made Shane a little sad. They spent an awful lot of time in hotels. "Why?" he asked.

Ilya took out his phone and did what looked like texting, but Shane knew it wasn't. He was finding the English word for what he wanted to say. "Impersonal," he said, then. "All the fucking same. I swear the same lamp shade was in the last six rooms I stayed in."

Shane laughed, and Ilya smiled. "This place has personality. I see the person who designed it. They made it how they like it, not for how it would look on website. You know?"

Shane nodded, a little taken aback.

“And they made it nice. Everything soft and useful. In normal hotels, so many things are stupid and impractical. Cushions that shine—I hate shiny cushions. They are awful material, it feels disgusting. Why would you design cushion for how it looks, not how it feels?”

Shane was forcefully reminded of how Ilya had mocked the pillows on the bed in Shane’s investment property. If it had been anything other than an excuse to make fun of Shane, Shane would have assumed it was machismo, a disdain for attention to interior design. But apparently not – rather, it came from Ilya’s strongly held views on interior design. That bedroom was probably impersonal in the same way those hotels were. Shane felt for a moment guilty for bringing Ilya there, rather than his actual home, and then killed the feeling. There was too much between them that was already personal. A little impersonal was good for them.

“You’re a homemaker,” he said, and he meant it as a jab but it came out more wondering.

“Yes, I will make wonderful wife and mother one day,” Ilya said. Obviously a joke, so there was no explaining the twist in Shane’s heart. He wondered if Ilya thought about his future and if he had any plans. He wondered how long he wanted to stay in the league and if he’d move back to Russia when he retired. Shane wondered when the last time he’d ever see Ilya Rosanov would be. Maybe they’d get inducted into the Hall of Fame the same year, sit near each other at the ceremony. God, what a pathetic train of thought. He tried to think of something else and, because of how his brain worked, landed on another problem to worry about.

“Shit,” he said. “This is a bed and breakfast.”

Ilya raised his eyebrows, not dignifying him with a verbal response.

“Bed and breakfasts typically don’t provide lunch,” Shane said. “Like, by definition.”

“Ah,” Ilya said. “Emily will make something for us. You hungry, you want to go now?”

Shane stared at him. “Are you just assuming that, or did she say that?”

“She said,” Ilya said. “I praised her breakfast.”

There was something wrong with Shane, because that sounded dirty. Or maybe there was something wrong with Ilya. “So, what, we just show up and ask?”

“Why do you say that like it’s so hard?” Ilya asked. “Yes, we go to her and ask for food.”

Shane felt a twinge of jealousy often provoked by anyone who seemed to find life easy, who didn’t worry over every little thing. “Okay,” he said, and bit down on his other questions – what kind of food? Should he bring his wallet to pay? Where was she, exactly? Would they take the food back to their rooms? Instead he dropped the blanket and moved to get his clothes.

“Mm,” Ilya said. “Not yet.” His hands fell on Shane’s hips, and he backed him up against Shane’s still perfectly made bed, gently pushed him into sitting on the edge.

“Oh my God,” Shane said. It was the first time in a long while that he’d been taken by surprise by one of Ilya’s advances. And then again, when Ilya dropped to his knees: “Oh my God, Rozanov.”

Ilya pressed his mouth against Shane’s inner thigh. It was embarrassing how quickly Shane got hard. Shane found almost everything embarrassing about sex. Ilya said, “We’ll be quick, yes?”

Shane laughed breathlessly and, when Ilya moved his mouth to his dick, dropped back on the bed, covering his eyes with his forearm. “Yeah,” he said. “Quick.”

And Shane kept his promise, with no lasting evidence other than Ilya’s slightly too-red lips, the mussed corner of the bed, and Shane’s own teeth marks on his wrist. Shane often lingered on that, how quickly the evidence faded. Condoms were kind of the one exception. He’d had a major freak out once Ilya left the first time they’d fucked, wondering what to do with the condom in the bathroom trash. He’d ended up walking three blocks and dropping it in a street trash can, feeling incredibly lecherous and simultaneously incredibly stupid.

Ilya stood up, groaning and stretching with obnoxious satisfaction, and Shane reached out instinctively to the bulge in his boxers, feeling over him. He began to lean in but Ilya hummed and caught his face, stroking at his cheek as he held him away. “No, not now,” he said, quiet.

Shane looked up, questioning, and Ilya’s thumb caught on the corner of his mouth. Shane’s tongue darted to it like it was magnetized. Did Ilya want something else? Ilya smiled down at him.

“We go get lunch,” Ilya said.

“You don’t want?” Shane couldn’t figure out why. Ilya was hard, and their arrangement was very—transactional. They’d never hooked up where only one of them got off before. If it was to ever happen Shane imagined it being part of some stupid power play, a bet maybe related to whoever had won that night.

Ilya looked down at him and didn’t quite answer the question. “I got what I want,” he said, and then stepped away.

Naturally Ilya got dressed far quicker than Shane did, and was leaning against the door while Shane pulled on his shoes. Shane’s hands were a little shaky. He said, “If we’re going to see Mrs. Lansow should we bring back the boardgames?”

Ilya cocked his head and after a pause said, “Okay.”

Shane was hit with stupid regret. He shouldn’t have suggested it – he had suggested it more to get a read on the situation, or for Ilya to reject it. Now he was left wondering if they would go their separate ways again after lunch. “Actually I’ll bring them down later,” Shane said.

“Okay,” Ilya said, like Shane was boring him, but his mouth tipped up a little.

Ilya led him unerringly to a door marked STAFF ONLY and knocked on it in a rhythm different to the one he always used on Shane's hotel room doors. Shane didn't know what to make of that.

Mrs Lansow opened the door and smiled. She was a smartly dressed woman in her sixties with a brusque air of effectiveness. She reminded Shane of every single one of his mother's friends and not a small number of his teachers. Clearly they'd interrupted – there was a laptop open to spreadsheets on the desk in the small room behind her – but she smiled and said, "Hi, Ilya," with what sounded like genuine fondness. Then to Shane, with a little more professionalism in her voice, "And good afternoon, Mr. Hollander."

"Hi," Shane said. "Um, Shane, you can call me Shane."

"And you can call me Emily," she said. "So, you boys are hungry?"

"Famished," Ilya said, smiling wide. Shane was glad it wasn't directed at him. He wasn't sure if Ilya had ever smiled at him like that. Ilya probably hadn't ever tried to get Shane to like him. Shane wondered what that would be like. He knew Ilya hooked up with a lot of women, but were they all as quick to get into bed as Shane, or did he have to wine and dine some of them? God, Shane really shouldn't be thinking about that.

"I know lunch isn't part of the deal, but we'd be really grateful—even if there's something we can make ourselves," Shane said.

"He is health freak," Ilya said, still smiling.

"Oh," Emily said. "I hope the breakfast was okay for you?"

"Oh, yeah," Shane said, only resisting elbowing Ilya or stepping on his foot because he was sure Emily would disapprove. Give him detention or something. "It was delicious, you have a great chef."

Emily smiled. "I do, but this morning's breakfast was all me," she said. "The snow has thrown things off, there weren't as many options as there usually are. I'm sorry for that."

"No, it was lovely," Shane said. "Seriously. Everything I needed."

Emily nodded, not looking entirely convinced. "Well, we'll see how healthy we can make this lunch," she said. Shane felt very conflicted, torn between what he felt politeness dictated – assuring Emily whatever she had was fine – and his need to at least attempt to conform to his diet.

She made to leave the room, so they both stepped aside and let her lead the way down the hall. "We're stocked up on vegetable soup as a contingency meal," she said. "And it's dairy free and all local produce. But I'm sure you boys need more than soup. I could make grilled cheeses, but I'm not sure if that's quite healthy. There are greens – they're for tonight's dinners as well, but if you don't mind a repeat I can put them as a side with this, too."

When Ilya remained quiet Shane said, "That all sounds wonderful. Thank you so much."

Emily waved a hand. "I suppose this is going to happen with a place like this," she said. "I need to know how to handle it."

Shane raised his eyebrows. "Oh, you haven't had it long?"

"Nearly two years now," she said. "But this is the first time a snowstorm has come with no warning. I'm not from here, so I couldn't really know what it would be like until it happened."

The conversation was interrupted by their arrival at the kitchen door, back in the room where they'd had breakfast. "You two can wait out here if you'd like," she said. "It shouldn't be too long."

"Can we come with you?" Ilya asked, surprising Shane. "Or is it bad luck to have guests in kitchen?"

Emily smiled. "I'm not superstitious, Mr. Rozanov," she said. "You can come on in."

They followed her into a small but well-stocked kitchen. Ilya hopped up on one of the stainless steel counters and, once it didn't draw Emily's censure, Shane joined him.

"Where you're from doesn't get snow?" Shane asked, picking up the conversation where they'd left off.

"No, it does," Emily said, with her back to them as she rummaged through cabinets. "I'm from Vancouver. Where did we land on grilled cheeses?"

"I want one," Ilya said immediately.

After a moment of indecision Shane said, "Me too, please." Ilya smiled at him. It wasn't the same smile as the one he'd given Emily, but it was still a lot.

"Great," Emily said. "Anyway, Vancouver gets snow but it's a totally different infrastructure. Things don't shut down like this. I managed a hotel out there but always wanted a place of my own, and this was the opportunity that presented itself. I love it but I wasn't prepared for how different it would be."

"Yes," Ilya said, with what sounded like surprising understanding. "Is big change, city to country."

Shane realized then he had no idea what kind of place Ilya had spent his childhood in, whether it had been rural or urban. He didn't even know what part of Russia he was from. Russia was a pretty big country. It seemed suddenly crazy that he didn't know, but it wasn't the first time he'd been struck by this contrast; the intimate details of Ilya he had memorized and the basic facts he was ignorant of.

"Is bad for you, for your business, the snow?" Ilya asked.

"This is a quiet time of the week at a quiet time of the year," Emily said. "So it doesn't make too much difference. Only I had a workman scheduled to come out to fix the banister this

morning and he had to cancel and I'm not sure when I'll be able to get him next."

Ilya nodded, considering. Then he said, "Hollander is very handy."

Shane looked at him, agape, and Ilya smiled for a split second. Shane cleared his throat and turned back. "No, yeah," he said. "I mean, obviously I'm not, like, certified, but if it's a small job, we could take a look at it. If you'd like."

Emily laughed, glancing back at them. "You're very sweet, but you're also guests. I don't have guests do the work around here."

"You don't usually make guests lunch," Shane reasoned.

"It will be very good for his reputation," Ilya said. "He is good boy of hockey league, you know? This is the kind of story fans love. His agent will release it next time he fucks up people's parlays."

"Don't curse," Shane said automatically. He couldn't imagine cursing in front of Emily.

"See?" Ilya said. "Good boy."

Emily laughed. "I really couldn't," she said.

"Emily," Ilya groaned. "We are sick of board games. We are going crazy. We need things to do. Please give us something to do."

"It would be nice to stay occupied for a while," Shane said. His smile widened when he saw Emily waver.

"Well, in any case," she said. "Food first."

When Emily served them lunch, Ilya stopped talking just like he had at breakfast. Shane was glad to know it wasn't just him that Ilya was willing to ignore for food. The only thing he did say was *thank you* in a goofy voice Shane belatedly realized was an impression of him, after Shane had opened his mouth admittedly to thank Emily again. He had kind of been doing it every second bite.

Once they'd finished Emily led them to the stairs in question, where one of the posts in the banister had fallen out of place. She gave them her toolbox but was clearly still in two minds about allowing them to do work – Ilya had made the point that they technically weren't paying guests, because check out was at eleven and check in was at three, and this was the sweet spot between the two. Still Shane wasn't sure she was actually going to go through with it until she got a call that made her frown down at her phone.

"I'm sorry, I have to take this," she said, already walking away. "But thank you so much, boys."

It was her third time calling them boys and it made Shane feel fidgety. It was strange to hear them be grouped together but not as rivals. As a unit. A lot of their time with Emily was strange – momentous, even. It was the first time they had ever spent time together with another person also present, which Shane wouldn't have felt confident they were even capable of before. It was the first time he'd ever heard Ilya talk about him in the third person – health freak, handy, good boy.

“Who do you think that was?” Shane asked, absently.

“Secret lover,” Ilya said. “He is blackmailing her. We should kill him for Emily's honor.”

“Jesus Christ,” Shane said. “Okay, how do you want to do this?”

Ilya, sitting on the stairs while Shane stood beside them, the offending post between them, stared at him blankly. “I do not know,” he said.

“I mean I guess we nail it in,” Shane said, crouching by the tool box. “Should be simple enough. Or glue?”

“There is no we,” Ilya said. “I volunteered your services. I am not helping.”

“What the fuck,” Shane said, standing up straight with outrage.

Ilya shrugged. “I am not handy,” he said.

“Neither am I,” Shane whisper-shouted. “You just said it for no reason. You just made that shit up.”

Ilya waved his hand around. “You should have stood up for yourself,” he said.

“I wanted to be helpful,” Shane said, a little louder.

“Then help,” Ilya said. “Fuck. Everything is drama with you.”

Shane wasn't sure if anyone had ever read wikihow articles or wielded a hammer passively-aggressively before, but he did that afternoon. Ilya shook the post violently to test Shane's work and then gave him a thumbs up. Shane swung around to sit on the stairs too, a couple below Ilya.

“Is it still snowing?” Shane asked, not quite sure why he expected Ilya to know.

“Probably,” Ilya said. “Not supposed to stop until tonight.”

Shane nodded, and the movement brushed his head against Ilya's shin. “Did it snow a lot, where you grew up?” Shane asked.

“In Russia?” Ilya asked, sarcastic. “Yes.”

Shane had meant Ilya's specific hometown. There must be a lot of climatic variation throughout Russia. He didn't bother clarifying. He said, “Same.”

“Yes, in Canada,” Ilya said.

“Shut up,” Shane said. “Did you like it? The snow, as a kid.” Ilya didn’t respond straight away, so Shane kept talking. “I did. We’d play a lot of games. You must have had those too, right?”

“Games?” Ilya asked.

“Snow games,” Shane said.

“Snow games, this is phrase?”

“Well, no, but you know what I mean. You must have had some.”

“Yes.”

Shane smiled. Sometimes it felt like the only power he ever managed to hold over Ilya was harping on a subject Ilya obviously wasn’t interested in, or for some reason wished to avoid. “So what were they?” he asked.

Ilya sighed. Shane rearranged himself to sit sideways on the stairs so he could look up at Ilya.

“If I tell you you have to tell me,” Ilya said.

“Yeah, that’s how conversation works,” Shane said.

“Okay,” Ilya said. “My mother and I would—” Then his face changed and he shook his head. “No, that one’s no fun. Okay, me and my brother and all the neighborhood kids. We would do snow burials. Is where you hold someone down and cover them in snow. You win when they are covered completely. The deeper the better.”

“Wow,” Shane said. “It sounds—potentially very dangerous.”

“Yes,” Ilya said, smiling.

“I was gonna say we could go out and do one of these games, but I’m not sure I’m up for that.”

“I don’t know that it works one on one,” Ilya said. “This game is all about strategy. Alliances.” He tapped his temple and Shane laughed, begrudgingly.

“You mean you need multiple people to hold someone down to bury them,” Shane said.

“Yes, exactly,” Ilya said. “You are natural.”

“It sounds very, very stupid,” Shane said.

“No, is art,” Ilya said. “If there was professional league for snow burials, I would be star in that. I would never touch a hockey stick again.”

Shane's smile faded a little. "Was there ever anything else you were ever going to be?" he asked. "Other than a hockey player, I mean."

Ilya was shaking his head before the question was finished. "No," he said. "You?"

"No," Shane said, and for the first time in his life felt a little sad about it.

Ilya shook his head again as though to re-focus, and Shane wondered if he was feeling sad about it too. "Okay, your snow game," Ilya said. "Go."

"Well, the one I'd get the most into was an accuracy game," Shane said. "My dad and I. We'd set up cans or something in different places in the yard and try to hit them down with snowballs. We convinced mom it was technically practice, that it was like a transferable skill for hockey? I don't think it's ever come in useful, but it was really fun. He'd get tired eventually but I'd stay out there for hours."

"Sounds creepy," Ilya said.

Shane pulled a face. "What?"

"If I saw a little kid doing that for hours I would think he was creep," Ilya said. "I wouldn't want my kid to be his friend."

"Well, I wouldn't want to be friends with your kid," Shane said.

"Fuck you, my kid is awesome," Ilya said, and then they both laughed. Shane tried to bite it down.

"I could beat them in a snowball throwing accuracy competition," Shane said.

"Ah," Ilya said. "This is challenge?"

Shane nodded, feeling flushed. Feeling like he'd just asked a girl to prom. Or how he imagined that was supposed to feel, because when he'd actually done it it had given him a migraine.

Ilya looked down at himself and Shane couldn't help looking over him too. Along with the beautiful body, he noted a thin t-shirt and sweats.

"We'll need to get into weather appropriate gear first," Shane said.

"Yes," Ilya said. "Weather appropriate gear."

Shane checked his watch. "Meet outside in ten?"

"Okay," Ilya said, and then all of a sudden jumped into standing and started sprinting up the stairs. Shane held in his laughter.

"This isn't part of the competition!" he called after Ilya, and then, to himself: "fuck it," and started running up the stairs too.

It was unclear who won the game because they kept changing the stakes – how much speed mattered, and how many attempts they were entitled to, and whether height or distance was more impressive. But it was fun, and tentatively Shane added another item to the column of what they had in common: sex, hockey, and being able to handle the cold. They were out there for over an hour before it became too much. Ilya let himself fall onto the snow banked against the courtyard wall and Shane joined him, gasping. For a moment he was reminded of the aftermath of sex, the both of them side by side on the bed. He tried to dismiss it from his mind, but it was further reinforced when Ilya said, “I need to smoke.”

Shane decided against making a comment this time.

“Fuck,” Ilya said, patting himself down. “Left them in my room.”

Shane felt a twinge, thinking that might mean an end to this if Ilya went to retrieve them, but Ilya stayed put. Shane watched Ilya’s breath fog up in front of them. He had the instinct to wave his hand through it but stopped himself. It would be overly familiar, somehow.

“What are they like?” Shane asked. “Cigarettes, I mean.”

Ilya looked at him, alarmed.

Shane shrugged. “I’m just curious.”

“I’m not giving you one,” Ilya said. “I will not ruin you.”

Shane frowned. “I don’t want one,” he said. “They kill you. I’m just wondering what they’re like.”

“You’ve never had?” Ilya asked. “Not even one, not even as teen?”

Shane shook his head, and Ilya smiled.

“You were always sensible?” Ilya asked, his tone a little softer.

Shane flushed. “Just tell me what it feels like,” he said. “It must be good, if people kill themselves for it.”

Ilya shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Is not like alcohol or sex. Or even hockey. Doesn’t feel fun or free or exciting. You just want it, it just makes you want it. You don’t know why. You just want.”

Shane swallowed and nodded. He’d never smoked but he understood that.

Eventually the cold got too much and they retreated inside. Shane thought it might be the point where they went their separate ways, but then: “I need shower to warm up,” Ilya said, smacking himself lightly on the cheek.

“Good idea,” Shane said.

Ilya grinned at him. “You think?” he asked.

“Oh,” Shane said, and looked down, flushing. Ilya laughed, and when they reached his room they both went in.

They showered together and obviously got off – but there was a minute or so at the start where the purpose of the shower really had just been to chase the cold out of their bones, where there was nothing flirty or needy, they were just huddled together under the spray. Shane couldn’t really put into words how that had felt. He wasn’t sure he’d felt it before.

Afterwards they landed on Ilya’s bed, Shane staying naked with his clothes drying on the heater, and again he thought maybe this was it, maybe they would exchange a kiss and a few words and Shane would go back to his room. But Ilya straight away reached for the remote and turned on ESPN.

Shane smiled. “I thought screens melted your brain.”

Ilya made a dismissive noise. “Yours, not mine,” he said, and then used the remote to gesture at the screen. “I fucking hate this guy.”

“The player or the commentator?” Shane asked, trying to catch up. “Either way I get it.”

If somebody had told him he would spend the day with Ilya Rozanov, this was how he would have imagined it: no board games, no chats with nice older women, no messing around in the snow. Just them collapsed in a hotel room watching sports coverage and bitching – not unlike how Shane passed time with his teammates, although he was generally fully dressed for that. At a certain point Ilya’s hand landed high up his bare thigh and stayed there. It was the first thing so far that day that didn’t feel weird, that Shane wasn’t spending half his brain power on freaking out about. He liked it enough to ignore the hunger that eventually built in his stomach, to want to put off dinner for as long as possible so he could stay in Ilya’s bed debating the veracity of various trade rumors. But then it was half eight and the kitchen stopped serving dinner at nine, and Ilya hadn’t given any indication of moving, so it was up to Shane.

“We should go if we want dinner,” he said, trying to not sound regretful.

Ilya seemed surprised by this, and more so after glancing at his phone. He didn’t explain but Shane thought maybe he hadn’t realized how much time had passed. The idea made Shane happy.

They made their way downstairs, where the ‘brekky corner’ sign had been replaced with one reading ‘dinner nook’. Ilya beelined for the door to the kitchen, knocked, and for good measure called out *Emily* in a wheedling, sing-song voice. She opened the door already smiling. Shane looked at the floor, a little overwhelmed by he didn’t know what.

“Can we please pretty please eat our dinners upstairs?” Ilya asked.

“It’s just—we’re watching a game,” Shane said. It hadn’t been a game, it had been a countdown of last season’s best goals which had obviously gotten them both feeling very competitive, but he didn’t feel like he could explain that. Emily hadn’t given any indication of being a sports fan. “We’ll be very careful and tidy.”

Emily considered them for a moment, but Shane had enough experience with women like her to know it was just for appearance’s sake. She was already won over. “Okay, fine,” she said. “But don’t mention it in any review, I can’t set a precedent.”

“No, is just for rich, famous, handsome guests,” Ilya said. “That’s okay.”

Emily shook her head and closed the door. Ilya leaned against the nearby table and Shane laughed lightly.

“What?” Ilya asked, looking to him. Shane shook his head. There wasn’t anything funny, he was just enjoying himself.

Emily handed them plates of chicken, potatoes, and the same greens they’d had for lunch, and with a pitcher of water they returned to Ilya’s room. Along the way Shane started thinking about why this was a bad idea – letting Emily know they were in a room together, that they had been in a room together. Ilya had indirectly called Shane handsome to her. But it didn’t actually create any danger, Shane realized, because they weren’t doing any of it to fuck. They were doing it to hang out, the way friends hung out.

They ate their dinner side by side, watching the end of the countdown. Ilya’s game winner against St Louis was in the number one slot, but two of Shane’s had made the top five which he argued was more impressive. This was fun too, getting to actually argue about various accomplishments, about which of them had the more impressive resume thus far in their pro career. It was a debate that had been had thousands of times before by fans, and Shane and Ilya had made passing references to it, usually as foreplay, but they really got into it then, breaking it down advanced stat by advanced stat. And it could have been foreplay again, because they were close to each other and they were working each other up and at one point Ilya pushed Shane away with his hand on Shane’s jaw. But it didn’t escalate into anything else. It was its own thing.

Eventually they settled back into watching TV, a retrospective on an old Chicago player that neither of them knew much about drawing their attention. During the ad break Shane’s thoughts wandered to Stan Harkin.

Stan was a journeyman who Shane had played with last season after they’d traded for him from Boston – the only player Shane had ever played with who’d also played with Ilya. Before their first game against Boston they’d naturally interrogated him about his old team, how it worked and what its weaknesses were. Also naturally, this had become interrogating him about Ilya specifically, and eventually the facade of game planning fell away. They were pettily searching for dirt on their rival team’s best player. Shane hadn’t participated but he’d listened in. Stan had told them about Ilya’s bloodthirsty locker room speeches, his terrible taste in music, how he crossed himself when the team bus passed a church, how he fought like a dog with training staff trying to play through every injury, his refusal to teach his teammates Russian curse words because if they knew what he was saying about them at

practice they'd mutiny. They'd pushed but Stan wasn't able to say anything actually bad about Ilya, so they'd gotten bored and moved on.

It was the first time Shane had gotten any insight into what Ilya was like as a teammate. He must have understood this was dangerous knowledge because he'd pushed it to the very back of his brain, where it had remained until now.

Shane had had stupid, embarrassing fantasies about alternate realities for him and Ilya before – meeting in an anonymous club where they hadn't realized who the other was, or meeting when they were neighbors or members of the same gym. He never lingered long, the humiliation stronger than whatever gratification the fantasies might give him. Now a more powerful fantasy reared its head. What if, somehow, he and Ilya had been drafted to the same team? What if they'd never hooked up, never so much as kissed, but had instead become friends? He would know what bad music Ilya liked. When someone fucked with Shane on the ice, Ilya would be in the crowd of teammates defending him. Ilya would teach him how to talk trash in Russian. Maybe they'd share hotel rooms, but they wouldn't hook up – it wouldn't be worth the risk when they were on the same team, when they had a friendship. Maybe some nights when they couldn't sleep they'd stay up talking instead. Maybe sharing rooms with a health freak would be the impetus Ilya needed to quit smoking for good. When the more forward teammates asked Ilya about his life, about his family back home, Shane would listen in. When they were asked about each other in interviews instead of trading barbs Shane would call him an unstoppable force, say that nobody could so much as redirect his path, and Ilya would call Shane the best playmaker he'd ever played with. Rozanov and Hollander would still go together, but for different reasons.

"That's fucking bullshit," Ilya said, and Shane blinked back into the moment.

"Right," he said, trying to catch up with what was on screen. His heart was speeding and his voice had come out weak.

Ilya went quiet again and Shane couldn't properly move on from his train of thought. It was pounding in his head. He cleared his throat and said, "Do you think..."

Ilya gave him a while to finish the sentence and then prompted him. "Yes?"

"Do you think we'd have been friends?" Shane asked, flushed. "If we were teammates or something. If we were on the same side and had to spend time together. If we got to know each other."

Ilya looked at him, his expression going from shocked to hard and suspicious. It was familiar to Shane, but not from today. He hadn't done anything to make Ilya look like that today. After an extended moment Ilya said, "No. I think you would have gotten front office to trade me our first off season."

"Rozanov," Shane said. "Seriously."

"This is not serious," Ilya said. "This is fantasy. There's no point. It's a waste of time, Hollander."

Shane nodded, tried not to cry. “Right,” he said. “You’re right.”

He turned to face the television, staring straight ahead and pretending to focus. He had no fucking idea what he was watching. Then he heard Ilya sigh, and felt Ilya’s thumb on his chin, two of his long fingers settling on his jaw. He pulled Shane into facing him and waited patiently for Shane to look up, to make eye contact. As soon as Shane did, Ilya kissed him. It was hard and wet, his tongue licking into Shane’s mouth, no illusions as to what this was about. As always, it worked on Shane, his thoughts dissolving, his hands shaking as they curled into Ilya’s hair. Ilya maneuvered himself on top of Shane. Shane hitched his legs up on Ilya’s hips, bearing his neck to Ilya’s teeth. It probably took all of five seconds, from not even touching to this.

“You liked when I called you good boy,” Ilya said, right against Shane’s jaw. “I noticed.”

Shane flushed, the last vestige of decorum or dignity evaporating from his body. “Shut the fuck up,” he said, and Ilya laughed.

Shane remembered their first ever encounter, thinking Ilya was like a sex god. It was a ridiculous, adolescent thought, but the main reason it embarrassed him to recall it was that it had only come to feel more and more true. Shane didn’t think of him like that on the ice, or when he caught Ilya’s brazen post game interviews, and he hadn’t thought it when they were messing around in the snow or playing board games. It was only when he was on his knees for him, or when the full weight of Ilya’s body was pressing down on him, or when it had been months since they’d last gotten to hook up and he was alone in his bed at 3am, unable to sleep for thoughts of him. Then he thought about Ilya as some kind of God. Something divine, something more than human. A profile on Ilya in GQ, which Shane had read online and then debated buying a physical copy of for so long stores no longer sold it by the time he tried to, had called him a fallen angel. Shane did his best not to think about it.

Ilya’s hands slid up Shane’s chest, burning, and landed on his pecs, rubbing in a way Shane had used to find a little humiliating. Ilya had worn him down and now he just surrendered to the pleasure, arching up into the touch. The worst part about sex with Ilya was when they had to break contact to take off clothes. It was always a little angry the way they stripped, like they were pissed they had to do something other than touch each other.

Ilya got inside him quick, his hand pressing down on Shane’s mouth preemptively, knowing how he responded to that first push. Shane bit down on Ilya’s little finger and Ilya smiled. He liked it. Ilya seemed to like every single thing Shane did to him. It wasn’t unlike how they’d fucked last night, rough and unrestrained, except the light was on, the TV was on, and they were facing each other. Shane’s legs slipped up higher, to Ilya’s ribs, and Ilya’s hands clutched the width of his thighs. Shane closed his eyes. If tears fell, it would be nothing that hadn’t happened during sex before. Ilya mightn’t even notice; his forehead was against Shane’s ear, his breath hitting the base of Shane’s throat. Shane’s hands were still in his hair, had hardly moved since Ilya first kissed him. They pulled when Shane came, and Ilya liked that too.

Shane could remember, vaguely, what he'd been thinking before they'd fucked, but he would let it fade. It was good, Ilya had righted the ship. This was what they were, who they were. They had impossibly good sex, sex that melted Shane's brain, that made him feel like an animal. That was enough to have to deal with.

He swallowed but his voice still came out thick. "I should get back to my room. My flight's pretty early."

"Yes," Ilya said. "This makes sense."

Shane closed his eyes, opened them, stood and clumsily dressed in clothes still a little damp from the snow. Then he nodded. "I'll see you..."

When it became clear he couldn't end that sentence Ilya said, in a casual tone and with his eyes closed, "You have game in Boston next month."

"Okay," Shane said. "I'll see you next month."

It wasn't all that long a wait, not by their standards. There was no reason for Shane to ache. Ilya said nothing and Shane turned and left.

Once he got back to his room he collapsed on the bed and forced himself not to cry. He needed to pull himself together, he needed to forget everything, or he at least needed to put it in perspective. They'd been screwed by their flights getting canceled, and they'd done what they could to pass the time. Simple, meaningless.

Actually, the strangeness had started before their flights had been canceled – it had started the previous night when Shane had said he'd go back to his room and Ilya had asked why. But there was no point in thinking about that; there was no point in thinking about anything that had transpired in the last twenty four hours. Maybe the snow had made them crazy, like Shane's aunt said about the full moon. It was all a glitch, an anomaly. Nothing like it would ever happen again. After all, Shane played smart.

Almost always.

End Notes

this was supposed to be like 5k. thank you for reading hope you enjoyed!!

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