

other forms of intimacy

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by [ultravioletdaydream](#)

Summary

Shane and Ilya have a lot of sex. A lot of hot, intimate, dirty sex. But sometimes they don't. Sometimes, for one reason or another, they find more intimacy in the unexpected moments where their plans to fuck don't work out.

Or:

Shane and Ilya taking care of each other.

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I: Shane Hollander has too much to drink.

II: Ilya Rozanov gets the fucking flu.

III: Shane Hollander suffers an Autistic shutdown.

IV: Ilya Rozanov misses his mother.

Notes

A set of short stories that, in theory, take place within and after the HR TV show canon timeline. Note that while the scenes are in chronological order, they aren't meant to represent sequential meetups. Shane and Ilya meet up "as usual" between these fan-fictional instances.

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

Chapter 1: 2015 All Star Game: Los Angeles

Chapter Notes

Chapter 1 content warnings: alcohol, (very) minor injury, vomit, implied sexual content

Shane Hollander did not get drunk. Shane Hollander *certainly* did not get drunk at All Star Game after parties.

But here he was, white-knuckling the edge of the bar after his sixth – or was it seventh? – shot of tequila. He blamed J.J. He blamed J.J. and his goofy grin and his convincing way of insisting that Shane loosen up a bit.

Shane slumped into a bar stool and put his head in his hands. The events of the day replayed in his mind through an ultraviolet filter. His team had won their game. It had been his second year as the "captain" of his All Star Team, if you could really even call a person a captain of a fake team for a no-stakes game. Both teams had met up at the swanky hotel bar afterwards, like they did every year. Shane thought he remembered some players ordering food earlier, but he'd been too busy talking to people he barely saw the other 364 days of the year to grab a bite to eat.

It had started with a beer to keep his hands busy while he worked his way through the crowd. Then another when he couldn't nurse the first for any longer. Then J.J. got him started on the fucking tequila shots. Shane was smart enough to know he couldn't outdrink J.J., so why had he even tried to keep up?

It's because they think you're boring. They think you're boring and uptight and too serious, and you wanted to prove them wrong for once.

A whole lot of good that had done him. Shane checked his phone for what felt like the millionth time in the last hour. Rozanov always sent Shane his room number after All Star Games. But tonight his notifications were still nonexistent. Shane groaned into his fist. Rozanov had left the bar almost two hours ago. Why hadn't he texted? Why hadn't he freed Shane from this fucking circus of a party?

Shane considered ordering another drink. He was already spectacularly drunk and would surely pay for it tomorrow with a spectacular hangover. His mental gymnastics were put on pause when he felt a firm hand smack his shoulder. J.J. was leaning on him, breathing hot tequila breath on his face.

"Hollllllaanderrrrrr," J.J. said. "You've been holding out on us. Who would've thought you could hold your alcohol like a champ?"

J.J. laughed and gestured to some of the other players to join them back at the bar. "Whattya say, one more?" J.J. said it like a question, but he was already waving down the bartender.

What the hell, why not?

Shane's fingers missed the rim of the shot glass the first time he tried to pick it up. Fuck, hand-eye coordination was usually his whole thing. On his second try, Shane secured the shot glass in his grip. He threw it back before he could think too hard, wincing at the disgusting burn of the alcohol down his throat.

Why did people like this stuff?

Shane felt his phone buzz in his pocket. *Finally*. He hopped – no, stumbled – off of the bar stool and slurred some excuse about needing to use the bathroom. As soon as he was out of the main bar area, he slid open his phone.

Lily: *Don't leave me hanging, Hollander.*

Leave him hanging? What was he talking about? Shane had been waiting for over an hour for the stupid room number!

Shane's eyes slid up to the message before the one "Lily" had just sent.

Lily: *1721. See you soon (;*

Oh. Rozanov had sent the room number almost two hours ago. Somehow, in between the Patrón and the conversations and fucking J.J., Shane had missed it.

Ugh. Two hours wasted.

Shane loosened his tie at the thought of making his way up to Rozanov's room. He fantasized about what he hoped might play out when he made it upstairs. A simmering heat crawled down his spine as he made his way to the elevators.

Maybe he'll blow me. Maybe he'll let me blow him. Maybe he'll let me be on top. Maybe we won't even make it to the bed.

Shane liked that last idea best of all. It had been a couple of months since they'd last seen each other. He liked when Rozanov was desperate for him. He liked feeling like the playing field was level for once.

After what felt like forever, the elevator doors opened on the seventeenth floor. Shane stumbled on his way out of the small space, holding onto the frame of the elevator door as he glared at the plastic plaque with the room numbers and the arrows. The numbers swam together. Shane squinted, willing his brain to properly connect with his optic nerves.

Eventually he worked out that he needed to turn right, and made his way down the hall. 1715. 1718. 1719. 1720. *Perfect*. Shane knocked on 1720, leaning his forehead against the pale wood door while he waited. No one came to open it. Shane knocked a little louder, looking back down the hallway to make sure no one else was there. No one answered the door.

"Rozanovvvvvv," Shane whisper-yelled into the crack of the door. Suddenly, the door *behind* Shane opened. Rozanov stood in the doorframe, eyes wide in a rare moment of confusion.

"What are you doing? I told you 1721," Rozanov said. Shane glanced at the number of the door he'd been knocking on. 1720. *Oops*.

Shane took three steps towards Rozanov, who backed up into his hotel room as Shane made his way into the space. He ran into the door handle on his way in. It dug into his hip with a sharp pain that would surely leave a bruise.

"Ow. Fuck," Shane said as he closed the door behind himself.

"Are you drunk?" Rozanov asked.

"Have I ever been known to be drunk before?" Shane replied. He slurred the words in the middle together, as if he was saying a tongue twister instead of one simple sentence.

Rozanov stepped into Shane. He grabbed Shane's chin firmly and tilted Shane's head up so that their eyes met. Shane admired Rozanov's bright hazel eyes as they searched his own. *Rozanov looked realllyyyy good tonight*. His hair was messy, like he'd been running his fingers through it.

"Your eyes are glassy. Your breath smells like tequila. You are two sheets to breeze, yes?" Rozanov said.

"Three sheets to the wind," Shane corrected, laughing harder than it was funny.

"Is not funny, Hollander," Rozanov said.

Shane imagined there was a touch of real concern in Rozanov's voice. Shane didn't like that he'd put a downer on Rozanov's typical cool, carefree demeanor. He'd do something about it. He'd make it right, and he knew just how to do so.

Shane slid his fingertips into the waistband of Rozanov's pants. His fingers had just slipped past the band of elastic on Rozanov's briefs, just barely started their journey to earn forgiveness, when a firm hand clamped around his wrist.

"Stop," Rozanov said. The unyielding tone of his voice left no room for interpretation. Shane felt the cold sting of rejection rattling around in his mind. He pulled his hand back out of Rozanov's pants and turned his face up to the ceiling.

"Why? Don't you want to fuck? Isn't that why I'm here?" Shane asked, staring at the ugly outdated popcorn ceiling as he spoke. The room started to spin.

A beat of silence passed between them. Rozanov released a sigh, and placed his hands on either side of Shane's face. For the second time tonight, he tilted Shane's head until he was forced to meet Rozanov's gaze.

"Do you think I am monster? I would never fuck you like this, Shane. You are drunk. You are so drunk that you banged on wrong door-"

"I did not *bang* on the wrong door," Shane interrupted.

"You did!" Rozanov replied instantly. "You are so drunk that you took stick out of ass and forgot your own stupid rules for sneaking around."

"Okay, so what, I had a few drinks! It's not like you never have a few drinks before we hook up," Shane said, thinking back to that night in Vegas with the chair and the vodka and the showing off.

Shane was starting to feel dizzy. He leaned into Rozanov against his will, his forehead landing on Rozanov's collarbone with an audible thump. He felt a strong pair of arms wrap around his torso; he felt a warm pair of lips come to rest on the top of his head.

"How much did you have to drink, Hollander?" Rozanov asked into his hair.

"Mmmmm. Not that much. Just a couple beers. Just some shots with the team. I don't like tequila, it's even worse than vodka." Shane's reply was muffled by Rozanov's shirt and garbled by the alcohol in his system. He thought fleetingly that it would be a miracle if Rozanov understood him at all.

Shane heard Rozanov mumble something in Russian. Shane was starting to feel really bad. Mentally, sure, he was feeling like a dumbass. But more pressingly, the nausea in his stomach was rising through his chest at an alarming rate.

"I think I'm gonna puke." Shane barely got the words out before he felt the burn of bile in his throat. He strode towards the bathroom and flung the toilet seat up, knees slamming into the tile as he knelt in front of the porcelain bowl. Shane's stomach emptied itself violently. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

Disgusting. Shane hated throwing up. He hated the smell and the sensation and the feeling of being out of control.

Shane rested his forehead on the cool white ceramic of the vanity. He closed his eyes, willing the waves of nausea to fizzle out. He heard the toilet flush. He felt Rozanov sit down on the floor behind him. He felt a warm hand moving in soothing circles on his back.

"I'm sorry, Rozanov," Shane said. He was embarrassed by the weak, raspy quality of his voice. "This isn't what you signed up for."

Rozanov didn't say anything in response. Instead, he pulled Shane back to rest against his chest. They sat like that, back to chest, Rozanov's chin resting on Shane's head, while Shane continued to work on returning his ragged breathing to normal.

"I'm sorry," Shane repeated. "I didn't mean to. I was looking forward to seeing you tonight. Kept checking my phone. Don't know how I didn't see your text. I missed you."

Shane instantly regretted saying that last part. They didn't say shit like that. They didn't cross that line. Shane certainly didn't like to be the one showing his cards.

Rozanov wrapped his arms around Shane's chest and hugged him tightly. Shane felt soothed by the pressure. He felt safe and warm. He allowed himself to relax into the touch, resting his head back on Rozanov's shoulder. Behind him, Rozanov shifted. Shane could feel the press of his mouth against Shane's ear.

"I missed you too," Rozanov said, so quietly that it probably qualified as a whisper.

Did Russians whisper? Did Rozanov just say he missed him too? Was Shane's brain so thoroughly soaked in tequila that he was hallucinating? Was this what being blackout drunk was like? No, right? Surely, blackout drunk was more to do with forgetting than remembering.

"I can hear mice in your brain running on tiny wheels," Rozanov said. This disarmed Shane, and scattered his thoughts. He laughed, wet and loud and honest.

Rozanov shoved Shane's shoulder playfully, then stood up. He attempted to pull Shane up with him, but he was unsteady on his feet. Shane leaned against the counter as he regained his balance. He felt Rozanov's fingers working to undo his belt. Shane was surprised Rozanov had changed his mind. Rozanov looked at Shane through the mirror as he pulled down the zipper on Shane's pants.

"Do not get any ideas. I meant what I said, I will not fuck you like this," Rozanov said as he continued to pull down Shane's pants. Shane thought he heard Rozanov mumble something like *no matter how badly I want you*, but Shane wrote this off as another hallucinatory side effect of his current state. Next Rozanov worked on untying Shane's shoes. He pulled them off, one at a time, along with his socks.

"So you're undressing me for fun then?" Shane asked, feeling like he was missing something.

"For fun? Yes, but no. You will not get in bed with me until you shower, am I wrong to think this?" Rozanov asked as he returned to standing.

"In bed with you? I thought you said..." Shane really felt like he was missing something.

"Oh my god, Hollander," Rozanov said with a huff of mock frustration. "You had too much to drink. You got sick. You are so drunk, by the way, that you did not notice you have vomit on shirt."

Ew. I'm so disgusting. Why is this beautiful fucking man wasting his fucking time taking off my fucking puke shirt on a night like tonight.

Rozanov worked on unbuttoning Shane's shirt as he spoke over Shane's racing thoughts, as if he didn't mind. "You will shower. You will borrow clean clothes. You will lie in bed with me

for little bit until room stops spinning. Sounds good yes?"

Was the room still spinning? Oh yeah, he supposed it was. Shane shrugged a shoulder noncommittally as Rozanov pulled Shane's shirt down his arms. He was almost completely naked now, except for his underwear. He suddenly felt embarrassed and exposed, standing in front of the mirror in the harsh blueish light of the bathroom.

Rozanov pressed a quick kiss to the back of Shane's shoulder, then reached into the shower to turn on the water. They stood there for a minute while they waited for the water to heat up, staring at each other's reflections. Rozanov's hands were resting confidently at Shane's hips, pressing harder than was strictly necessary into Shane's skin. Shane closed his eyes again; partly because Rozanov's gaze was so intense, partly because there were suddenly two Rozanovs.

Before either of them could think about it too hard, Rozanov yanked off Shane's boxer briefs in one swift pull. Shane couldn't help but lock every cell of his attention onto the feeling of Rozanov's thumbs gliding down his thighs, there and gone in an instant. Shane felt himself being guided into the shower by his elbows, but kept his eyes closed. He had to admit, showering was a good idea. The rivulets of water gliding down his back were grounding. The temperature was just how he liked it – *how the hell did Rozanov know the exact temperature Shane preferred his showers?* Luck, he supposed.

"You stay here. Make friends with bar of soap. I will be back," Rozanov said as his voice receded from the bathroom. Shane thought he heard the hotel room door open and close, but it was hard to be sure over the white noise of the shower.

Shane clumsily ripped the shitty bar of hotel soap out of its packet and rubbed it halfheartedly across his chest and arms. When he bent down to work on his thigh, he lost track of his center of gravity again. He plopped down onto the floor of the shower, banging his elbow against the rim of a shelf as he went. When he looked down at his arm, he saw the top layer of skin was peeled back, and he was bleeding a little bit.

"God fucking damnit," Shane said in frustration, to no one but himself. The cut was nothing major, but was nonetheless another reminder of how he'd let tonight get way out of control.

Shane sat on the shower floor, head resting on his knees, and allowed himself to tune out everything other than the feel of the water splattering on his skin. He wasn't sure how long he sat like this, but at some point, his thoughts drifted away from the water and back to Ilya.

Ilya, who had let him in even though he was a mess. Ilya, who didn't want to fuck him. Ilya, who helped him through this whole fucking bathroom debacle. Ilya, who was strong and secretly kind and super fucking hot and could read Shane like a book. Ilya, who – wait, he should not be thinking like this. Ilya was just Rozanov. Rozanov was just the guy he fucked after intensely competitive hockey games sometimes. And texted on the weekends sometimes. And felt weird about in his chest when Shane thought about it too hard.

Holy fuck Hollander, get a grip!

Just as Shane let out another groan of frustration with himself, Rozanov reappeared in the bathroom. He tossed a handful of loose objects on the counter and knelt next to the shower, a hand coming to rest on Shane's shoulder.

"Hollander, you okay? Did you fall? Are you hurt?" Rozanov asked.

Shane shook his head, turning his face to look at Rozanov. Shane thought Rozanov looked concerned, like he was scared of something. Shane took this as his cue to get it together. He reached up to shut off the water, stretching his arm with the fresh scrape up to do so.

"You *are* hurt," Rozanov said. He pulled Shane back up to standing and wrapped a huge hotel towel around Shane's shoulders.

"S'no big deal. Lost my balance a little. Guess it's just the price I'm paying for acting like a fool tonight," Shane said. He pulled the towel tight around his shoulders, feeling unexpectedly cozy in the large, fluffy towel.

Rozanov guided Shane back out of the shower, and began ripping open a packet from the pile of stuff he'd brought back with him. Shane noticed it was a toothbrush. One of those little travel toothbrush sets with a matching toothpaste. Shane's chest got tight. Rozanov squeezed a blob of toothpaste onto the brush, and handed it to Shane.

"I'm sorry for being gross," Shane said before shoving the toothbrush in his mouth.

"Gross? You think I care about gross? Think about all the places on your body my mouth has been. All the places my fingers and dick have been. Think about what happened fifteen minutes ago. You think I am worried about "gross?" Rozanov said with a roll of his eyes. "No, I do not care, Hollander. But I know you do. Or at least you do when you are not drunk out of your mind."

Rozanov started inspecting Shane's arm as he spoke, checking to make sure the small scrape had stopped bleeding. It had, and Rozanov pressed a kiss into the skin next to it.

Shane chose not to think too hard about this, and turned his attention to spitting his mouthful of toothpaste down the sink. When he was done, his eyes landed back on the small pile of items Rozanov had apparently brought back from the convenience store in the hotel lobby.

A bottle of water. A two pack of ibuprofen. A sleeve of those shitty cheese cracker sandwiches with the peanut butter in between. Shane loved those shitty cracker sandwiches, they were one of his guilty pleasures.

"How did you know I like these?" Shane asked, nudging the packet with his pinky finger.

Shane caught Rozanov's eyes in the mirror. He noticed a blush, which he'd never seen before, creep its way across Rozanov's cheeks.

"I saw wrapper on nightstand once. In your condo. Like you were stress eating before I come over, or something," Rozanov said, trying to play it off with a playful squeeze to Shane's elbow.

"Or something..." Shane mumbled under his breath. He took it upon himself to lead the way back out of the bathroom, but then he wasn't sure where to go from there. Should he sit on the bed? Should he find his clothes and get dressed to leave? Should he fling himself off the balcony?

Rozanov made the decision for him by producing a pair of baggy black sweatpants out of his duffel bag. With a single finger, he pushed Shane to sit on the edge of the bed. Rozanov tossed the pants into Shane's lap, then returned to the bathroom briefly. It wasn't until Shane had pulled the sweats all the way on that he realized they were Boston fucking Raiders merchandise.

"Rozanooooovvvvv what the fuuuuuckkkk," Shane flopped back on the bed, his annoyed tone tainted by the obvious laughter in his voice.

"What? You look good in black and gold," Rozanov responded. He held out the bottle of water out to Shane. "Drink some," Rozanov said.

Shane sat up on his elbows and took the water bottle from Rozanov. Shane tilted his head back and downed half the bottle. In his periphery, he noticed Rozanov watching his throat.

Rozanov looked away, focusing on the flimsy cracker packet in his hands. He ripped it open, holding one out to Shane flat on his hand. "Eat something."

Shane considered, for more than a second, eating it right out of Rozanov's palm. In the end, he decided to be good, as thanks for everything Rozanov had done for him tonight. Shane took the cracker and diligently chewed it. He noticed Rozanov doing the same, his brows knit together.

"I do not understand why you like these," Rozanov said. "Is like cardboard with hint of fake cheese flavor."

The cracker brought back another wave of nausea for Shane, but he swallowed it down as he laid back down on the duvet.

"I dunno. Reminds me of being a kid, I guess," Shane said.

All of Shane's thoughts short circuited as finally, thankfully, blissfully, Rozanov climbed on top of him.

"Hi," Shane said as he looked up into Rozanov's face. "Did I tell you yet how good you look today?"

"Hello, Hollander," Rozanov said in response. "No, you have not, but is implied."

"Are you capable of letting me be nice to you?" Shane asked, half joking, half not.

"I do not know if I am," Rozanov said, surprisingly earnest.

Shane felt his breath catch in his throat. He wanted to focus on remembering the little things Rozanov had done for him tonight, but got distracted when things started to get spinny again,

now that he was horizontal. Shane's eyes slid closed, just as his hands slid to the sides of Rozanov's torso. He felt like he needed to hold on for dear life.

"I feel horrible. I am never, ever, getting this trashed again," Shane said.

"Can I... do anything to help?" Rozanov asked. One of his hands was carding through Shane's hair as he spoke.

Never stop running your fingers through my hair. Lift up your shirt so I can feel the press of your stomach against mine. Lay on me, with your full body weight, so I can feel the full force of two hundred pounds of pressure on my body. It soothes me, is it weird that I like that? Tell me how you really feel about me. Tell me you –

Shane's train of thought was interrupted by Rozanov pulling his shirt up, just enough so that the skin of their stomachs pressed together.

"Did I say all that out loud?" Shane asked. He should end it all. He could not be doing this right now.

Rozanov didn't reply right away. He just shifted his body until he could comfortably lower his weight down onto Shane. Chest to chest, hips to hips, Rozanov tucked his chin into the crook of Shane's neck. He resumed his fingers' lazy journey through Shane's hair as he spoke. "Like this?" Rozanov asked, as if he wasn't fulfilling all of Shane's desires word-for-word.

"Y-yeah," Shane said, a little breathless. "I like to be squished. I know it's weird, I'm embarrassed I said it out loud. It makes me feel -"

"You do not need to explain yourself, Hollander," Rozanov said simply. "You can have what you want."

Shane wondered if this included the whole *Tell me how you really feel about me* part, but he didn't want to push his luck. Instead, he just wrapped his arms around Rozanov's torso and linked his hands at the small of the other man's back.

"I just want to be here with you," Shane said.

"We can do that," Rozanov replied.

They laid like that for a long time. Shane traced little patterns on the small of Rozanov's back. Rozanov went back and forth between mumble-shit-talking Shane's team in the game they had played against each other earlier in the day, and pressing little kisses to Shane's neck. Shane realized, suddenly, that he hadn't gotten a turn to kiss Rozanov yet tonight.

Shane wiggled out from underneath Rozanov, who rolled off of Shane and laid on his side, head propped up on his fist. Shane shifted onto his side to align with Rozanov, hooking his leg over Rozanov's hips. Shane leaned in to kiss Rozanov, who pulled away in response. Shane let out a whine. A pathetic, needy whine. Rozanov grabbed Shane's chin.

"You are allergic to being good tonight?" Rozanov asked.

"I just want a kiss. That's all, I promise," Shane said. He wasn't sure his tone was at all convincing, but he did mean what he said.

Rozanov leaned in and gave Shane what he asked for. The kiss was soft and restrained and quite simply not enough, but Shane was grateful anyways. *Always*. When Rozanov pulled away again, he let out a chuckle.

"Your mouth has never tasted like that before. Beer and ginger ale and Snickers bar, yes. Tequila? Not my Hollander," Rozanov said.

My Hollander. Shane never wanted to leave this hotel room. Despite this thought, his next one was a realization that he had no idea how much time had passed since he got here. He sat up in bed to look at the shitty alarm clock on the nightstand.

4 AM? Where the fuck had the last two hours gone? Time was the stupidest thing ever invented.

"I should go back to my room," Hollander said. "Early flight."

"I know," Rozanov said. "Do you feel better?"

"A little bit," Shane admitted. "Less drunk. Less nauseous. More headache-y. More annoyed with myself."

Reluctantly, Shane sat up from the bed and slid himself towards the edge. He shucked off Rozanov's sweatpants and, even more reluctantly than he had gotten out of bed, put his own pants back on. He took the time to fold his jacket and disgusting shirt into a neat pile, returning to the main area of the hotel room with a sigh. Rozanov was sitting at the edge of the bed, watching Shane move through his space.

Shane closed the distance between them, stepping in between Rozanov's legs. Rozanov rested his cheek on Shane's stomach; Shane's hand rested in Rozanov's hair.

"Boston plays Montreal in two weeks," Shane said, feigning an ability to be casual.

"You will let me come over after?" Rozanov asked, an obvious smile in his voice.

"I will. What's so funny about that?" Shane asked in return.

"Usually takes more convincing. At least five sexts," Rozanov said, laughing fully now.

"Don't be an asshole, Rozanov!" Shane said, but he was laughing too.

When they had both caught their breath, Shane bent down to press a kiss at the corner of Rozanov's mouth. An invitation. A question?

Rozanov slid his hand up to Shane's neck and kissed him properly. Shane welcomed the familiar wave of staticky warmth as they made out, wishing his body could melt into Rozanov's. When Shane's lips were swollen and his hair was mussed and his heart rate had just started picking up again, Rozanov pulled away.

"Want to borrow shirt? Or will you prefer to put vomit shirt back on?" Rozanov asked.

Shane hadn't wanted to ask, but he was glad not to be faced with the options of making his way through the hotel hallways in either his gross button up or a state of undress.

"Um, borrow one, I guess?" Shane said timidly. He rubbed the heel of his hand against his eye socket as the headache pulsing in the back of his skull got stronger.

Rozanov must've noticed, because he slid off the bed and returned to the bathroom, making his way back to Shane after he'd opened the package of ibuprofen in his palm. Rozanov held the two red pills out to Shane in one hand, and grabbed the water bottle off the nightstand with the other. Shane took both, taking the medication gratefully. Shane turned to watch Rozanov dig in his duffel again, and groaned when a Boston Raiders shirt was produced from the depths of the bag.

"I know for a fact that you do not only own these free fucking t-shirts they give us at the beginning of each season," Shane said. He tried to say it with an annoyed tone, but some part of him felt a stupidly giddy about wearing something so branded, so brazen, so *Ilya's* back to his hotel room.

"Put it on," Rozanov said, tossing the shirt to Shane nonchalantly. He went back to digging in his bag as Shane pulled the shirt over his head. Even as he was doing it, he swore to himself that he wasn't sure why.

When Rozanov looked up from his bag again, a real smile split his face in two.

"Wow, I should take picture. Hollander in Raiders shirt could get me big bucks in online gossip site," Rozanov said.

"You're such an asshole!" Shane exclaimed, but he was laughing too.

Rozanov stepped back to Shane, holding out a hooded sweatshirt in his hand.

"Here," he said, not offering any further explanation.

Shane took the sweatshirt, a plain forest green Pegador hoodie as far as he could tell, and pulled it on. He looked down at himself, assessing. Shane wondered if this was a power thing, or maybe a possession thing, for Rozanov.

I don't care what it is for him. I like what it is for me. This is a nice sweatshirt, he's never getting it back.

"Feels okay? Not too scratchy or too tight?" Rozanov asked, gently linking his fingers with Shane's as he did so.

Shane was surprised that Rozanov cared about that kind of thing. Shane certainly did, to the extent that he typically bought the same ten items of clothing in different colors. But he'd seen Rozanov in plenty of random, ridiculous, Russian outfits over the years.

"Yes, feels good. Smells like you," Shane replied.

"Good, good," Rozanov said. He looked away from Shane for a moment, gaze flicking towards the window before he spoke. "So, see you in a couple weeks, yes?"

"Yeah, sure."

Shane took this as his cue to leave. He gave Rozanov's fingers an unnecessary squeeze before he stepped away, picking up his pile of clothes and shoving them under his arm. Shane slid his feet into his shoes and turned to look back at Rozanov before he left.

Shane caught a flash of an emotion he couldn't identify pass over Rozanov's face. Shane smiled softly, in a way that he hoped was some form of reassuring.

"Goodbye, Hollander. Don't forget to drink some more water when you get back to your room," Rozanov said, his hazel eyes seemingly assessing Shane's face.

Shane rolled his eyes. "I won't forget. Bye, Rozanov."

But Shane didn't turn the handle to leave. He didn't want to say goodbye from six feet apart. He didn't want to say goodbye from two inches apart, or goodbye at all, if he was being honest with himself.

He settled for stepping back into Rozanov and pressing a series of kisses to his neck, his cheek, and finally his lips. Rozanov's eyes slipped closed, and he let out a satisfied hum as his hands ghosted over Shane's biceps.

"See you soon," Shane said shyly as he pulled away. Rozanov nodded, pressing his fingertips to his mouth to cover a smile as Shane stepped back to the door. He turned the handle and left, before he could think about it for another second.

By the time Shane made it back to his own hotel room, the total exhaustion of the day started to hit him. Shane toed off his shoes and set his dirty shirt and jacket in a neat pile on the bathroom counter. He took off his pants and folded them, adding them to the stack to deal with in the morning.

He hung Rozanov's hoodie on the back of the desk chair and took a few sips of water from his water bottle before crawling into bed. He was still wearing Rozanov's Raiders shirt. Not because he was feeling warm or fuzzy about it, no. Just because the air conditioning was blasting.

Shane wrapped himself in the duvet and counted backwards from the time he needed to wake up to calculate how long he'd have to sleep. Only a couple of hours.

Just long enough to have a dream about how I'll make it up to Rozanov, Shane thought, as he drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 2: Winter 2016: Montreal Metros @ Boston Raiders

Ilya was sweating. He had barely finished getting his gear on, and he was sweating through his undershirt. His head hurt too, pounding aggressively despite the perfect combination of a black coffee and an orange Gatorade and a cigarette that he had consumed that morning.

Ilya shook out his shoulders. Why did his skin feel so weird? Like every square inch was on high-alert, sensitive and sore.

If he didn't know himself better, Ilya would think he was sick. But he *never* got sick, not even when norovirus took out a third of the hockey roster at the Sochi Olympics. Despite his menagerie of questionable habits, his father had blessed him with one good quality: a half-decent immune system.

His phone buzzed in the top cubby of his locker. Ilya checked his notifications with a smirk, seeing Jane's name light up the screen.

Jane: want to do something boring after the game tonight? (:

Ilya: No.

Jane: oh, okay.

Ilya: I'd rather do something dirty with rival team's captain for three or four hours to celebrate my win.

Jane: YOUR win?! yeah, right.

Ilya: Don't worry. I will make sure you get nice consolation prize in form of orgasm.

Jane: fuck. you.

Ilya: Fuck you? I thought you'd never ask.

Ilya smiled in self-satisfaction, cracked his neck, and made his way out to the rink for their pre-game practice.

Focus. Few drills, few plays, brief pep talk, that's it. He'd done this, quite literally, hundreds of times.

Ilya slid onto the freshly Zamboni-ed ice with a content sigh. Was there anything better than a glassy practice rink? Shane Hollander's mouth came to mind, but Ilya pushed that thought back into its box. *Later*, Ilya promised himself.

The rest of the Raiders joined Ilya on the ice to start their usual drills. Ilya tried his best to be just as committed, just as tough, just as good of a leader as he usually was. But over the course of the next hour, Ilya felt himself slipping. He missed shots he could've made as a

fifteen year old. He tripped and fell over his own feet twice. Cliff fucking Marleau out-raced him in cone drills!

"Rozy, what's going on with you today man?" Marleau asked as Ilya doubled over to catch his breath, hands resting on his knees.

"Fuck off, Marleau," Ilya replied, standing back to his full height and glaring at his teammate.

"Nah man, I'm serious. You alright?" Marleau asked, clapping a hand on Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya shrugged, trying to play it cool, but he couldn't catch his breath. He was starting to feel dizzy.

Against his will, Ilya shook his head. Marleau helped him skate back to the edge of the rink and sit down on the bench. Ilya ripped off his helmet and tossed it on the ground. He felt so hot. *Was it hot in here?*

Marleau must've alerted the medical team to Ilya's status, because the next thing he knew, a doctor and a nurse were looking him over. They asked him questions about how he'd been feeling and what he'd eaten today. They shined a penlight in his eyes and listened to his lungs with a stethoscope. When they took his temperature, a quiet but unmistakable gasp escaped the nurse's lips. He showed it to the doctor, who huffed and began repacking her medical bag.

"You have a fever of 101, Mr. Rozanov," the doctor said with a sympathetic frown. "I think you likely have the flu. Based on your symptoms, I'll have to recommend that you be sidelined tonight."

Ilya didn't even have the energy to argue. He just nodded and stood, waving his alternate captains over to the bench. He explained the situation curtly, partially because he was annoyed, but mostly because he needed to lie down as soon as humanly possible. Once things felt settled with the team, he made his way back to the locker room.

He packed his gear bag by shoving everything in in whatever order it came off of his body. He checked his phone to see if Jane had replied yet, but his notifications were still at zero. Ilya headed out of the rink without speaking to anyone else. He knew his teammates, the medical team, and his coaches would sort everything out.

Ilya got in his Porsche and drove straight home, driving with the windows cracked despite the chill late February air. He needed the breeze to help keep his focus on the road. He needed the sound of the wind in his ears to distract him from his headache. He needed the feeling of cold on his cheeks to counter his fever.

Once back at home, Ilya made a beeline for his bed. He kicked off his shoes along the way and flung his coat in the direction of the entryway closet. Next off were his jeans, shuffled down his thighs with everything still in his pockets and forgotten by his bedroom door. He peeled off his shirt and socks last, sitting on the edge of the bed to do so. *Fuck*, his head really hurt.

Ilya wrapped himself in the duvet and let his eyes slide shut. Fatigue pulled at the edge of his mind as his thoughts faded into a strange dreamlike quality. *I should text Hollander after my nap*, Ilya thought to himself. *Let him know I can't meet up tonight*. Before he made it to his next thought, sleep pulled Ilya under.

It had been a busy mess of a fucking day for the Metros. Their flight into Boston had been delayed by a blizzard, so much so that they had to go straight from the tarmac to TD Garden after landing. The team was now gearing up in the locker room with only minutes to go before they needed to head out onto the ice for their warmup stretches and practice for the fans who had arrived early.

Despite being the last one in the locker room, Shane spared one last glance at his phone. No notifications. He tried not to read into it, even though Rozanov typically sent him at least a handful of sexts before their games. Shane figured Rozanov liked their banter, liked trying to throw Shane off his game, even more than he actually liked hooking up.

Shane rolled his shoulders and made his way out to the rink. As he skated onto the ice, his eyes scanned for that familiar #81 jersey on Boston's half of the rink. *Weird*, he didn't see him. *Maybe he fucked up his skate or something and was getting it adjusted in the locker room*.

Shane continued to be distracted from his warm ups by glancing around the arena for Rozanov. He even missed an open net practice shot, drawing an audible laugh from the Boston fans seated behind the goal.

Where the fuck is he? Why the fuck isn't he on the ice with the rest of his team? Why hasn't he texted?

The Metros skated back to their bench after the national anthem. Shane was supposed to be starting center, as usual, but he couldn't help but scan the Raiders bench one last time. Rozanov was definitely not here.

"Coach, no Rozanov tonight?" Shane asked, trying to keep his tone nothing more than casually curious.

"You didn't hear? He's sidelined. Sick or something, the Raiders announced he was out several hours ago," Coach replied.

Damn. Maybe being chronically offline did have its downsides.

"Oh, cool. We should have this in the bag then," Shane said.

And the Metros did have it in the bag. By the end of the second period, they were up 4-0. As the team headed back to the locker room for the intermission, Shane's mind was a blur of adrenaline from his two goals in the second period mixed with a lingering concern for the Raider's missing captain.

They were, under no uncertain terms, not supposed to be on their phones during intermission. And Shane was a rule follower to his core. Despite both of these facts, he slid his phone open and sent off a quick text.

Shane: hey, are you okay?

Hayden must've noticed Shane was distracted, because he went ahead and took the lead on the intermission pep talk. Shane half listened to Hayden and half listened for his phone to vibrate as he chewed on the mouthpiece of his water bottle. 20 minutes came and went, and the Metros were back on the ice before Shane heard back from Rozanov.

Shane managed the hat trick in the third period, but he also let the Raiders get a goal in. At the final buzzer, the score sat at 5-1. As was usually the case with away-game wins, the stands were filled with grumbling and frustrated shouts as Shane celebrated halfheartedly with his team. Beating Boston was not as fun without Rozanov on the ice.

Back in the locker room, Shane discovered his text to "Lily" was still unanswered. He sent another, not really caring about the needy implications.

Shane: hey, let me know if you're okay. nbd if you don't want to meet up. just let me know. please.

They used to cancel on each other all the time, leaving messages on read or not reaching out at all. But this season they'd met up after every single matchup. Almost every game last season, too. Shane supposed it was a part of his routine now; maybe that was why this felt so weird.

It always took forever to get out of the arena after games. He gave some sound bites to the press, congratulated his teammates again, and took a hot shower. By 9:00, he was the only player left in the locker room. He packed his gear bag with agonizing precision, fitting each piece in the same layout he used every game. When he finished zipping up his bag, he knew he was out of time to stall.

Shane had Rozanov's address saved in his phone. Rozanov had invited him over there a couple of years back, but Shane hadn't gone. He'd preferred hotel rooms then; he'd preferred the anonymity, the ability to stay one step removed.

Now though, he called a car and recited the address to the overly-friendly customer service worker on the other end of the line. He waited only a few minutes before the text that the car had arrived chimed into his phone. Shane handed his gear bag to the driver and slid into the backseat of the car. In what was an uncharacteristically rude move for a Canadian, he rolled up the tinted divider between himself and the front seat before the driver got back in the vehicle.

Shane sat in complete silence for the fifteen minute drive from the arena to Rozanov's address. He chewed on the skin around his fingernails, biting his thumb in particular until it bled. When the car arrived at what Shane presumed had to be Rozanov's house, he was equal parts relieved and concerned that the only car in the driveway was Rozanov's familiar Porsche. *It was the one that had been in that GQ article*, Shane thought.

After collecting his bag and trudging up the short walk to the front door, Shane peered inside. Not a single light was on, but an elegant, glass-enclosed fireplace illuminated the space a bit. He could hardly see anything aside from the sleek shapes of contemporary furniture and a single sneaker, tipped on its side.

Shane tried the doorbell, and heard it chime inside. No answer. Then he tried knocking. No answer. Then he glared at the keypad lock below the door handle, and let his mind spin on what the code might be.

8181? 1991? 1234? 8124? Ugh, no fucking way. What if an alarm will go off if I get it wrong too many times? What if I get it right and he's not alone in there? What if he is?

Shane realized he hadn't actually tried the handle yet. He rested his hand on the cool metal and pushed it down, and the door swung open. Shane took two steps inside and dropped his bag onto the floor.

"Rozanov? You here?" Shane called out into the house. The response was an eerie silence.

He noticed a second sneaker on the floor, a match to the one he'd noticed through the window. A few steps further down the hall, a brown leather jacket lay in a heap. Shane followed the trail of clothes, feeling sick to his stomach. In the doorway at the end of the hall, a pair of jeans was strewn across the threshold.

Shane hesitated, palm resting on the partially open door. This felt like a really fucking bad idea. He'd basically broken into Rozanov's house and discovered what was internationally recognized as a trail of sex breadcrumbs on the way to what he was pretty sure was Rozanov's bedroom. Shane considered turning back and leaving.

He took a deep breath to steel himself, fingers trembling as he decided he might as well see this through. He pushed the door open, and stepped into the room.

Ilya was dreaming of his mother. Not the recurring nightmare he typically experienced, but an actual, beautiful dream of his mother on a beach by the sea in Russia.

He could practically smell the salt in the air. He could almost feel the cool foam of the waves on his feet. He reached out to grab his mom's hand, amazed and comforted at the familiar shape of her palm.

He was, miraculously, aware that he was dreaming. Aware that this was a precious, fleeting moment. Irina tugged on Ilya's hand, pulling him in for a hug. As they embraced, Ilya's eyes started to sting. He inhaled the warm scent of her amber perfume and allowed himself to savor this moment.

"Я скучаю по тебе, мама," Ilya whispered.

"Я всегда с тобой," Irina whispered back.

"Rozanov." Ilya heard his name being called by someone far away, the sound getting lost in the crash of the waves.

"Rozanov, wake up," he heard again, this time more clear. The beach was fading, his mother's embrace evaporating along with it.

"Ilya, please," said the voice, no longer so far away.

Ilya stirred in bed. He came back to his body in an uncomfortable, groggy panic. He tried to sit up, but he felt weighed down, like his skin was filled with sand.

"Hey, hey, are you okay?" Ilya recognized that voice. No, he didn't just recognize it, he knew it. Shane Hollander was here.

Ilya's eyes fluttered open as Hollander pressed the back of his hand to Ilya's forehead. Hollander cursed under his breath at the contact.

"Mmmmm. Hollander. Are you in my house?" Ilya asked, feeling even more confused by the fact that it was nearly pitch black in his room. He reached over to switch on the bedside lamp, accidentally knocking his watch and a box of tissues off the nightstand in the process.

When the light switched on, Hollander's face was bathed in a warm glow. He would've looked angelic, if it weren't for the deep-seated look of panic in his eyes and the concern creasing his brow.

"Uh, yeah, I'm sorry. I -" Hollander trailed off as his eyes took stock of Ilya's face and chest. He blinked a few times before he spoke again. "I didn't hear back from you, and then I heard you were sidelined, and then I guess I panicked and showed up at your house, and kind of broke in?"

If Hollander hadn't immediately started speaking again, Ilya might have chuckled.

"What's wrong? Have you been sleeping the whole day? Can I get you anything? Are you okay?" Hollander's hand found Ilya's and clenched it tightly.

Warmth bloomed in Ilya's chest at Hollander's sincerity. He knew that asking questions was Hollander's way of showing how much he cared.

Now that he was almost fully conscious, Ilya mentally scanned his body. He'd apparently sweat so much that his sheets were damp and suffocating. His throat felt like sandpaper. His head was still pounding so hard he could hear every beat of his heart. His sinuses were aching. He was super fucking thirsty. It seemed to be nighttime, which meant he had been asleep for eight or nine hours. *Figures.*

Ilya reminded himself of Hollander's questions and went down the list to answer them. "Team doctor says I have flu. I wanted to take nap after leaving practice, but I guess I have been asleep long time. I am thirsty. I feel like shit, but I will be okay. What time is it?" Damn, even just talking was exhausting. Ilya leaned back against his pillows, allowing his eyes to slip shut again.

"It's almost 10 p.m. Hey, Rozanov, don't go back to sleep yet. Let me get you a glass of water. Do you have any cold medication?"

Ilya didn't feel like talking. He wanted to go back to his dream and his beach and his mother. But Hollander was being nice to him; Ilya owed him at least a few more sentences.

"Maybe, in cabinet in the bathroom," Ilya said, gesturing towards the en suite. He heard Hollander get up from where he was sitting at the edge of the bed. A few moments later, he returned with a glass of water and a package of cold and flu medication. Ilya took the glass and sipped from it as Hollander struggled to free the medicine from the moisture-safe child-safe puncture-safe tamper-safe packaging. Eventually, two blue and red pills were placed in Ilya's palm. He tossed them back and drank the rest of his glass of water, setting the empty cup on the nightstand when he was done.

Hollander reached up and brushed the backs of his knuckles across Ilya's cheek. Ilya leaned into the touch, enjoying the subtle spark he always felt when his skin touched Hollander's, even after all these years.

"Can I sit with you?" Hollander asked, breaking the bubble of silence that had formed around them.

Ilya couldn't resist. Didn't want to resist. He nodded and pulled back his sweaty ass bedsheets so Hollander could crawl in with him. Hollander situated himself so that he was sitting with his back against the headboard, and gently maneuvered Ilya so that he could lie with his head in Hollander's lap.

Hollander's fingers were in Ilya's hair, combing through his curls in a calming, affectionate way. Ilya melted into Hollander's body, surprising himself when he realized how safe and comfortable he felt despite his current state of wellbeing. Sleep tugged at him again, calling him back to a dreamlike place.

Ilya thought about Hollander as he drifted at the edge of sleep. He wondered how he'd managed to get to his house, how he'd managed to get in. He knew, even as he internally asked the questions, that the answers didn't matter. He was happy Hollander was here. He was happy to have gotten back what was sure to be the best part of his day, hell, his week, despite thinking it was off the table.

Hollander's nailed raked over Ilya's scalp in a way that had him utterly blissed out.

"*Da*, like that, Hollander," Ilya mumbled against Hollander's thigh.

"Shhhh, I've got you. Get some rest," came Hollander's reply.

Ilya's last thoughts before he succumbed to sleep were of brown eyes and pink lips and freckles scattered like constellations.

When Ilya woke up again, the cool blue light of very early morning filtered in through the windows. He had been dreaming again, about the beach, yes, but not his mother. Shane had

been there; they'd been walking hand in hand along the water's edge. He'd been working up the courage to tell Shane what he really meant to him.

"Shane, I -"

Then he'd been awakened unceremoniously by the shrill chirping of a phone alarm. Ilya reached blindly in the direction of his bedside table, surprise zinging through his body as his palm landed on a forearm instead.

He felt a body stir beneath him, a hand resting gently on the side of his neck. The alarm was silenced. The night before floated back in bits and pieces.

Hollander is here. Hollander broke into my house to check on me after I was sidelined. Oh my god, Hollander broke a rule! A law, even.

Ilya cracked an eye open and sat up from Hollander's lap, watching as Hollander stretched his neck and rolled his shoulders. He was still sitting up against the headboard, but it looked like he had dozed off too. *He looks cute when he's sleepy*, Ilya thought. He realized simultaneously that this was technically their first sleepover.

Hollander's face cracked into a soft smile as his gaze met Ilya's. He raised a hand to push a curl off of Ilya's forehead, not-so-subtly checking the temperature of his skin as he did so.

"Did you sleep okay? How do you feel?" Shane asked.

"Good morning to you too," Ilya said. He wanted to lean in and press a kiss to Hollander's mouth, but thought the germs might bother him. "Sleep was good. I feel little bit better, maybe, but still like shit."

Hollander frowned at this, his hands cupping Ilya's face as he brushed his thumbs over Ilya's cheekbones. Ilya allowed himself to lean into the touch; allowed his eyes to slip closed. "Do you have to go?" Ilya asked, remembering the alarm that had woken them up.

"Yes, but not yet," Hollander replied. "We have a flight to Dallas to catch at noon, and I have to make it back to the hotel at some point... but I thought I'd wake up early and make sure you were okay and get you set up with a few things before I go."

For reasons that escaped Ilya, Hollander looked embarrassed at his own words, as if he wasn't currently being sunshine in human form.

"You can go back to sleep if you want, I figured I'd just Doordash some groceries and medicine, maybe tidy up the kitchen or bathroom while I wait. I don't want you to have to worry about anything for the next few days," Hollander said all of this while avoiding Ilya's gaze, looking at his chin, his eyebrow, his left ear.

"Mmmmm, no, I do not want to go back to sleep," Ilya said as he sat up in bed. "Shower I think. I didn't even get a chance to, after practice yesterday."

Ilya expected Hollander to cringe at this, but instead he went into To-Do List Mode, as Ilya liked to think of it. Hollander slid out of bed and made his way to the bathroom, turning on

the shower and then returning to bedroom to get Ilya. Hollander pulled Ilya out of bed, gently grasping his elbows to help him catch his balance as he stood up.

Ilya rested his head on Hollander's shoulder, pressing a kiss to his collarbone through the fabric of his sweatshirt. *No, this is my sweatshirt*, Ilya realized. The green Pegador from a couple years back. He smiled to himself, but decided, for once, not to say anything.

Hollander led Ilya to the shower. Ilya slid off his briefs and stepped under the warm spray of the water. The temperature was just how he liked it – *how the hell did Hollander know the exact temperature Ilya preferred his showers?* Coincidence, he decided.

One thing Ilya Rozanov loved? Pissing in the shower. He figured there were two types of people in the world: people who pissed in the shower, and liars.

He heard Hollander recede from the bathroom as he rinsed out his hair. Ilya enjoyed the way the steam was soothing his sinuses and throat, but the sensation of the water on his hyper-sensitive skin was grating. He showered fast and sloppy, skipping his legs when he got to the body wash step.

When Ilya turned off the shower and slid open the glass door, Hollander was waiting for him, holding out a towel. It was warm to the touch. "I put it in the dryer for a few minutes," Hollander said by way of explanation.

The cozy towel was fucking magnificent. Ilya wrapped it around his shoulders first, drying himself off in a way he hoped was at least 10% sexy.

Hollander rolled his eyes at this, and turned to leave Ilya alone in the bathroom again. He brushed his teeth and combed out his hair. Just as he was thinking about mouthwash, a wave of lightheadedness hit him. He leaned against the counter and took a deep breath. *Fuck, being sick was so stupid.*

As if he could read Ilya's mind, Hollander returned to the bathroom as Ilya was rallying for the short walk back to the bedroom. Hollander took Ilya by the elbow and walked with him, motioning for him to sit at the edge of the bed. Ilya realized his sheets were blue; they'd been black when he had gotten up.

"Did you change my bedding?" Ilya asked as Hollander dug in his dresser. Hollander produced a clean pair of underwear and a frankly embarrassing set of pajama pants printed with pink Playboy bunny logos.

"Uh, yeah, I put the other sheets in the wash. I found this set in the linen closet," Hollander said as he tossed the clothes at Ilya. "It's okay, yeah? I just figured since you had a fever and you hadn't had a chance to shower yesterday that clean sheets might feel nice but I should've asked and I—"

"Is okay, Hollander," Ilya said, cutting off Hollander's babbling spiral. "Is nice of you, even."

Ilya pulled on the clothes Hollander had thrown at him, finding himself out of breath again after doing so. Ilya flopped back onto the bed once he was decent, feeling defeated and sore

and tired and *ill*.

"Want to help pick out things for the delivery order?" Hollander asked as he approached Ilya's bedside. Ilya nodded, and Hollander climbed back into bed. They lie on top of the blankets, propped up on pillows, Ilya's head on Hollander's chest.

They scrolled through Doordash together for way longer than was necessary, fingers intertwined at the back of Hollander's phone. They laughed together as they finished with the cup noodles and the medicine and the Gatorade and switched over to adding more ridiculous items to the cart: an industrial sized bag of pierogis, a bottle of strawberry flavored lube, a pair of fuzzy socks with penguins printed on them.

Ilya enjoyed feeling Hollander's laughter rumble through his chest. He enjoyed feeling their shared warmth bleed together at all the places their bodies met. Even though he was typically the one that did the holding in their relationship, and liked it that way, it felt so fucking good to be enveloped in Hollander's gentle embrace.

Hollander finished placing the order and tossed his phone a few feet away on the bed. He turned his attention back to Ilya, pressing an unexpected kiss into his hair. Ilya hummed in approval, burying his face further into Hollander's chest.

I could sink into you, if I let myself. I could drown. If I let myself explore your depths, if I let myself believe you want it too... I don't know if I would ever come back up for air.

Ilya's train of thought was interrupted by a sudden coughing fit. He sat up and hacked into his elbow, faintly aware of Hollander's hand resting reassuringly on his lower back. When Ilya was done, Hollander slipped back out of the bed, and Ilya almost, *almost* fucking whined.

Something must've shown on his face, because Hollander gave him a sympathetic smile. "Don't give me that look, Rozanov. Let me get you some more medicine, maybe a snack."

As if on cue, Ilya's stomach growled audibly. Hollander raised a *see, I'm right!* eyebrow and left the room without another word. In his absence, Ilya felt cold. He worked his way under the blankets and flipped on the television. He scrolled through the movies on Netflix until he found one that looked interesting enough, a new zombie apocalypse movie.

After what might have been an eternity or might have been ten minutes, Hollander returned to the bedroom with a bottle of Gatorade tucked under his arm and a small plate in his hand. Ilya sat up in bed, accepting the plate with a grateful smile.

"Grilled cheese," Hollander said simply. "You really don't have much in terms of groceries, Rozanov."

Ilya shrugged. "We are millionaires, Hollander. I eat out, I order in, I don't worry about frozen pizzas."

Hollander's nose crinkled at Ilya's mention of frozen pizzas, and he mumbled something about healthy eating as he handed Ilya another dose of the cold and flu medication. Hollander

cracked open the Gatorade and passed that to Ilya next, watching with intensity as Ilya swallowed the pills along with the lemon lime drink.

Hollander's eyes softened as he glanced away from Ilya, sitting down on the edge of the bed. He turned his attention towards the television, a quiet laugh escaping as he seemed to recognize the movie.

"*Train to Busan*? Have you seen this before?" Hollander asked.

"No," Ilya replied around a mouthful of grilled cheese. "Is zombie movie, yes? Is good?"

"Good" is the understatement of the year. I love this movie, you're in for a wild ride," Hollander said, squeezing Ilya's calf through the duvet in excitement.

"I would not have guessed you were a fan of zombie movies, Hollander."

Hollander didn't say anything in response. His eyes were transfixed on the television as scenes made up of decaying zombies and high speed train cars and baseball players filled the screen. During a lull in the action, after Ilya had finished his sandwich, Hollander got up from the bed again and took the plate from Ilya's hands.

"Keep watching, I'll be back," Hollander said as he left the room. He threw a smile over his shoulder as he exited; it tugged at the corners of Ilya's own lips.

Ilya tried his best not to doze off as he watched the next hour of the movie. The sun rose for real and began shining in gentle beams through Ilya's gauzy curtains. Ilya heard Hollander milling about in his house; clinking dishes, the ring of the doorbell, the rustling of plastic bags. He pictured Hollander moving about, opening cabinets and drawers, discovering the deeply unorganized depths of Ilya's kitchen. He felt a little bit guilty, sure, but he mostly felt strangely happy that Hollander was here, in his house, making himself at home.

Some time later, Hollander returned to the bedroom with a couple of items in his hands. First, he set the ridiculous bottle of strawberry lube on the nightstand a little too nonchalantly. Second, he tossed Ilya's clothes from their heaps on the floor into the laundry basket. He even plugged in Ilya's phone on the nightstand, freshly fished out of its forgotten place in yesterday's jeans.

Then Hollander moved to the foot of the bed, flipping up the covers to reveal Ilya's feet. He tugged on the completely unnecessary, and wholly snuggly fuzzy penguin socks. When he flipped the blanket back down, he lingered next to the foot of the bed like he wasn't sure what to do next.

"I finished unpacking the delivery order, did some dishes," Hollander said, watching the television distractedly as he spoke. "The way you organize your kitchen cabinets makes no sense," he tacked on.

Ilya shrugged. "The way you worry about cabinet organization makes no sense." He reached a hand out to Hollander. He blamed his next words on the cough medicine. "Come back to bed," he said, earnest and unguarded.

Hollander seemed surprised at the request. Ilya could practically hear the gears grinding in Hollander's mind as he presumably argued with himself over whether he was allowed to have this. *Is like I am croutons on a kale salad*, Ilya thought, amused. Hollander's face morphed into something soft, almost adoring, as he decided he could let himself get back under the covers beside Ilya.

They watched the last half hour of the movie like this, with Hollander tucked up against Ilya's side. When the credits rolled, Ilya heard a quiet snuffle from Hollander as he quickly wiped his eyes with the back of his hand.

Ilya wanted to tease him, but his eyes were stinging too. "Well, did you like it?" Hollander asked casually, pretending there wasn't a reedy quality to his voice.

"I did. Did not know zombie movies could be heart touching films about family dynamics," Ilya replied, running his fingers through Hollander's hair.

"Zombie movies are so much more than the cheap apocalypse flicks people write them off to be!" Hollander sat up in bed, a look of excitement on his face despite the glassy look in his eyes. "They tell us stories about society, about relationships, about the complexities of the human condition. They explore themes of resilience, and courage, and -" Hollander trailed off, probably because Ilya was grinning at him like a fool.

"Sorry, I just, I really like this kind of thing," Hollander said, averting his gaze to the window.

"I can tell," Ilya responded, "Is cute."

"Fuck you, Rozanov," Hollander said, playfully smacking his palm on Ilya's chest. The sound seemed to create a fissure in their cozy fortress of comfort, and Hollander checked his phone.

"Shit, I have to go," Hollander said. He rose from the bed, straightening his clothes as he went.

"You still have it," Ilya said out of nowhere, gesturing at the sweatshirt Hollander was wearing.

Hollander looked down at himself, as if he wouldn't already be acutely aware of the clothes on his own body. "Oh, yeah, I guess I do," he said plainly. "Do you want it back?"

Ilya smiled at the look on Hollander's face. It was like he was trying to calculate which combination of eyebrows and cheek muscles would make him appear cool and uncaring. But Ilya could tell he was chewing on the inside of his lip, and it gave him away.

"Definitely not," Ilya replied. He didn't miss the way Hollander's eyes brightened. "I have seen how much you chew on hoodie strings. All yours." *All yours*, Ilya repeated in his mind, feeling the words extend past their given meaning to tug on something in his chest.

Hollander surprised Ilya by leaning down and kissing him hard. Their teeth clashed together as Hollander's hands settled in Ilya's hair, and a soft groan of satisfaction hummed in Ilya's

throat. They kissed each other hungrily. Hollander met every stroke of Ilya's tongue with one of his own, returned each nip of Ilya's teeth with a beautiful moan.

They broke apart when Hollander's phone started to vibrate obnoxiously on the nightstand. Ilya had to extract his hand from underneath the other man's shirt as Hollander answered the phone, but kept his other hand firmly entwined between Hollander's fingers.

"Yeah, what's up Hayden," Hollander answered the phone. Ilya reveled in the breathless quality of his voice. He heard Hollander make some comment about going to pick up a breakfast smoothie, and promise to be back to the hotel soon. A moment later Hollander hung up, and slid the phone into his back pocket.

"Time is up," Ilya said, more of a statement than a question. He knew that they were both aware that it might be a while before they saw each other again; last night had been their last regular season matchup.

Hollander pressed a kiss to Ilya's forehead, gentle and reverent and sweet. Ilya squeezed his hand in return, wishing he could pause this moment in time.

But Hollander pulled away. As he did, Ilya watched as a mask of collectedness seemed to slip over his features. Hollander shoved his hands in his pockets, obviously ready to go but unsure how to say goodbye. Ilya would throw him a bone.

"So, probably will not see you until MLH awards in June, yes?" Ilya said as he reached his hands up and laced his fingers behind his head.

Hollander's eyebrows knit together in confusion, or maybe annoyance. "What? We'll see each other during the playoffs, no? I know we usually don't meet up but we'll at least see each other on the ice."

Ilya knew his joke about the Metros not making it to the playoffs had gone over Hollander's head. *This magnificent fucking man and his painfully literal lens of the world will be the fucking death of me*, Ilya thought. "Well, you will definitely get flu after sticking tongue down my throat. And with Pike as new Alternate Captain..." Ilya sucked his teeth, a deliberately mischievous look in his eye. "I do not like your chances of making playoffs."

"You're such a fucking asshole!" Hollander shouted, an undeniably irritated tone in his voice, but an equally undeniable blush on his cheeks. "I'm leaving now," Hollander said as he turned and stepped towards the bedroom door. As he crossed the threshold of the bedroom, he spared Ilya one last look over his shoulder.

Please never stop lingering. Please never stop looking back.

"Goodbye Rozanov. Feel better soon."

"Goodbye Hollander. Thank you, for being here."

Hollander shrugged. "It's nothing, don't mention it."

It is not nothing to me.

Ilya just gave Hollander a half smile and a nod, pulling his blanket back up to his chin. Hollander turned and continued on his path out of Ilya's house. He heard the front door click, heard tires in the driveway a few minutes later.

Alone, and undistracted, Ilya's symptoms felt a dozen times worse. He ended up spending most of his day oscillating between napping, watching 20-30 minutes of various zombie movies before falling back asleep, and sipping his Gatorade.

As afternoon turned into evening, Ilya's phone chimed with a text alert. He picked it up for the first time in more than 24 hours, and couldn't help but smile when he saw Jane's name on the screen.

***Jane:** it's been 8 hrs, take another dose of medicine.*

***Jane:** there's food in the fridge for you. (:*

Ilya shuffled to the kitchen in search of the medicine and dinner, throw blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He swung open the refrigerator to find four plastic quart containers lined up on the top shelf. He tipped one to get a better look, and noticed Cyrillic writing on the top.

Solyanka. Ilya's throat tightened. He tipped the second container to read the top. *Borscht.* *Shchi* was printed on the next lid, and *Rassolnik* on the last. Four kinds of Russian soup. He took the final container from the fridge and put it directly in the microwave. He could practically hear Hollander's voice telling him to heat it on the stove, or at least transfer it to a bowl before microwaving it, but Ilya didn't have the patience.

He leaned back against the counter as the microwave spun, sending off a message to Hollander.

***Ilya:** Where you find this?*

***Jane:** special delivery from a restaurant downtown! i thought it might be comforting.*

***Ilya:** You would hate Shchi. Sauerkraut and nice Canadian boys do not go together, I think.*

***Ilya:** Thank you.*

***Jane:** ur welcome. hope it helps.*

The microwave beeped, and Ilya immediately pulled the soup out. Gentle wisps of steam curled above the surface. He sipped directly from the rim of the container, his eyes involuntarily slipping shut as the liquid flooded his mouth.

It didn't taste exactly like his mother's. It wasn't exactly evenly warmed. Hollander wasn't here to try it with him. But it was grounding and thoughtful and so fucking delicious. Ilya caught himself smiling, no, grinning to absolutely no one but himself, in the middle of his half-dark kitchen.

***Ilya:** You have no idea.*

Chapter 3: Winter 2018: New York City

Chapter Notes

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 take place post-s1ep6 of the HR TV show. The scenes are written with the plot of The Long Game book in mind, but do not spoil anything directly.

Chapter 3 content warnings: graphic description of Autistic shutdown, accidental self-injury, implied sexual content

Three days. Three entire days, mid season, alone together in New York. Three days was an impossibility. Three days was a blessing. Three days was a fucking miracle.

Quite frankly Shane had a very hard time believing the MLH really cared enough about mental health to announce a mandatory three-day pause for a second time in the season. The league had said it was something new they were trying out, to give players a brief respite before things ramped up to the playoffs. Shane figured it was more likely that they were finally admitting to themselves that basically no one in the States tuned into games over Super Bowl weekend.

Either way, he didn't care. He had three beautiful days in New York with Ilya, a penthouse suite in Manhattan, and the promise of room service and snuggles and blowjobs. Shane couldn't wait.

They'd decided to meet in New York because Shane had to fit in a photoshoot for Rolex this morning. He'd flown in very early; watched the sunrise over the skyline as they descended into JFK Airport. He'd go get this brand thing out of the way and be in Ilya's arms by midafternoon, and they'd have the rest of the weekend alone.

As he navigated out of the airport, Shane's phone vibrated with a text alert.

Lily: *Just woke up. Flight at 10. So excited to see you.*

Shane smiled at his phone screen as he typed out a reply. He was excited too, and he was excited that they could be honest about it with each other now.

Shane: *really? i thought i was boring.*

Lily: *Is true, but I think it turns me on.*

Shane shook his head, laughing under his breath as he looked around the arrivals lobby area for the driver that he knew was supposed to pick him up this morning. He spotted them a few moments later, standing near the exit with an insanely fancy digital sign printed with a shortened version of his name, *Shane H.*

Shane nodded to the driver and the pair walked out to the sleek black towncar parked outside. As he slid into the backseat, he punched out a reply for Ilya.

Shane: *can you even name three things that aren't a turn on for you?*

When the driver returned to their seat, Shane's senses were overwhelmed in a thick cloud of too-strong cologne. It reminded him of Axe Body Spray in middle school locker rooms. Shane swore he could feel the responding headache gnawing at the base of his skull almost instantaneously. He wasn't a big fan of cologne or perfume; he felt it was always too strong and too chemical-y to be anything resembling pleasant.

The drive to Manhattan was a little more than a half an hour. By the time they made it to their destination, Shane's headache had progressed in earnest. *I can feel it in my fucking eyeballs*, Shane thought. Regardless, he didn't blame the driver, and was even thankful for their service.

It's not their fault you're too sensitive.

As Shane took the high rise's elevator to the studio they'd be doing the photoshoot in, he closed his eyes and did a set of centering deep breaths. *You got this. It'll be easy, and then it'll be over, and then you'll be with Ilya.*

Three hours in, Shane realized he couldn't have been more fucking wrong if he'd tried. This photoshoot was a disaster, at least for him.

It had started with a wool suit the stylist had insisted was the perfect piece for the upcoming season. Shane couldn't, and wouldn't anyway, object, but the suit was itchy and tight in the armpits and way too warm. He tried to write it off, telling himself that it wasn't that big of a deal.

Then an assistant had offered Shane something to eat, and he'd eagerly taken them up on the offer. He hadn't had time to make anything before his flight, and plane food never appealed to him. Rolex always had the good shit, always asked Shane in advance what he'd like them to have on set. *Ginger ale, blueberry Clif bars, green grapes.* He asked for the same things every time.

That's why his surprise was so sour, when the assistant returned with their tray of options: Sprite, peanut butter Clif bars, and red grapes.

"Sorry it's not exactly what you asked for, Mr. Hollander," said the assistant. "The delivery person said the store was out of stock on the soda and bars, so they grabbed the next best thing. At least we still have the grapes you like!" The assistant set the tray on Shane's vanity with a polite smile.

The grapes are the wrong color. They're the wrong color and Sprite reminds me of the smell of Clorox wipes and I don't like any flavor of Clif bars besides blueberry. The peanut butter is the worst, it sticks in my teeth and is at least fifteen percent more chalky than the other kinds.

But Shane Hollander was not a fucking diva. Especially not when a kind, certainly underpaid studio assistant was looking at him with hopeful eyes. If he said anything, maybe she'd get in trouble for bringing the wrong things. Besides, what sane person cared this much about the color of grapes?

"Thank you, it's fine, no worries," Shane said with a nod of his head. To be extra convincing, he reached out and plucked a grape from its stem. When he popped it into his mouth and chewed, it took real effort not to allow his features to morph into a cringe. *Too soft. Too sweet.*

Thankfully, the assistant wandered off after that. Shane spent a few more minutes in hair and makeup, tray sitting untouched on the counter for the rest of his time in the green room. Just after the stylist and makeup artist finished, his phone buzzed with a message alert.

Lily: *I thought of three things.*

Lily: *When you leave your socks on during sex.*

Lily: *Paper straws.*

Lily: *And stupid Canadian wolf birds.*

Lily: *Heading to the airport, see you soon* 🐱❤️

Shane: *the socks thing is a lie and we both know it*

Shane: *if you get to the hotel before me, our room number is 3201 and the code for the door is 2481. shoot is about to start, love you.*

Shane felt like he was generally well suited for studio photoshoots. For Rolex especially, the poses were rigid and professional and easy to anticipate. The photographer they typically worked with was great at cuing Shane on adjustments and facial expressions. It was like he didn't even have to do the thinking for himself when it came to imitating a certain expression or figuring out where to put his hands. Someone told him how they wanted it, and he copied it, and it went off without a hitch.

Rolex was also known for using giant soft light boxes for every campaign. Shane figured this was for practical purposes, so that there wouldn't be reflections on the watches to worry about, but he appreciated the gentler lighting strategy all the same.

As Shane headed out of the green room, he remembered a shoot he had done for an energy drink company back in his first or second season. It had required neon orange lighting and a too-sour beverage and a stylist spraying him down with water between every clip. Safe to say he didn't do a second campaign with that brand.

A familiar mixture of shame, annoyance, and embarrassment crept into Shane's mind as he walked through the hall. He was hot, hungry, and itchy. His head still hurt a little bit, too.

Chill the fuck out. None of this is as big of a deal as you are making it out to be. It's all in your head. Tighten up. Tamp it down. Reclaim control.

When Shane stepped onto the set, his eyes scanned around the room for Rolex's photographer, Tanya Halliday. Instead of the bubbly pink-haired woman that was typically behind the camera, an unfamiliar man smiled back at Shane.

"Mr. Hollander, welcome. I'm Bryant Finke, your photographic collaborator today."

"Where's Miss Halliday?" Shane asked. He realized after he spoke that questions like this were considered rude. He didn't agree; he just preferred to be clear and direct. Regardless, he mentally chided himself when Bryant's smile faltered.

"Miss Halliday is on a maternity leave. Rolex brought me in for this shoot, but it's just a one-off. I'm a staff photographer for Sports Illustrated, though, so I'm plenty familiar with your work." Bryant winked playfully. Shane knew it was completely harmless, but it still made his stomach turn. *Only Ilya is allowed to do that.*

Shane nodded in response, and reached up to adjust his tie. "Where do you want me?"

Bryant gestured to the set, and explained his vision to Shane. It was mostly simple; Shane would execute a variety of poses on a red leather couch. They were going for a classic, luxury look with a twist – they'd be using the on-camera flash for today's shoot. Something about "inviting a candid vibe" to the photographs.

All Shane heard was that he'd have a blinding white light flashed in his face at least 500 times in the next two hours. *Fucking. Perfect.*

As Shane got himself situated in the couch, he recognized an unwelcome, but not unfamiliar sensation sparking at the edge of his mind. It happened when too many out of the ordinary things happened in a row; when too many plans didn't go as scheduled. It was like he started short circuiting a little bit, like a robot left out in the rain.

He shook his head, as if the movement could jostle his train of thought back to a safer track. The photoshoot began simply with a series of product close ups; just photos of his hands and wrists. The problems began when they started to zoom out.

"More natural, please."

"A little less corporate and a little more holiday party, yeah?"

"Let's try to invite playfulness into the space with us today."

Shane did not know what *the fuck* any of this meant. Tanya's typical instructions were much more logical to Shane's brain. She said things like *eyebrows up*, and *smile like you just got the best text of your week*, and *bite your lip, no not like that, YES, like that*. Clear, specific cues with clear, specific outcomes.

Shane noticed that Bryant and the assistant were speaking in hushed tones as they reviewed the most recent set of images on the computer. He could tell there was a tinge of frustration in the air, that things weren't clicking today. The photographer seemed to come to some decision, and he and the assistant broke apart.

"I think we need to try a more hands-on approach to nailing these poses. Jasmine can help with your adjustments, if that works for you?" Bryant said it like a question, but Shane wasn't sure there was an alternative option left on the table.

Jasmine approached with a polite smile. As she reached out to fix Shane's hair, she asked "Can I touch you?" This too, was said like a question, but Shane knew it was merely a nicety. Her hand was already millimeters from Shane's temple. As if saying no was a choice he really had in this moment.

No, I'm so overstimulated that if you fucking touch me right now, I'll die inside. No, I fucking hate being touched by strangers, but thanks for asking. No, I'm not okay with being manipulated like a fucking marionette.

But Jasmine was kind and young and just doing her job and didn't deserve to be cussed out, even just in Shane's head. So Shane nodded his consent woodenly, and bit down on the inside of his cheek hard when Jasmine's fingertips connected with his hairline.

Tighten up. Don't be a freak. Everything is fine. Tighten up. It's almost over.

Shane did his best to lasso every shred of consciousness that was blasting out of his control. He wrapped each piece tightly in string and placed it in a box at the back of his mind. He checked out, plastered on his most convincing mask of equanimity left in his mental armory, and moved on.

For the next 90 minutes, Shane was nothing more than a watch model. He allowed his chin to be tilted, his hands to be placed, his hair to be carded through. He changed outfits, twice, when they asked him to. He shook his head no when they asked if he wanted a break or some water. He acted like the flash of the camera in his face was nothing to him.

By the time they were done, Bryant was beaming over the images they'd made. Shane registered that the photographer was thanking him as he walked out of the studio, but he was too focused on the fact that they were done to say anything in response.

Back in the green room, Shane shut the door harder than he meant to. He slid against it, down to the floor, and released a shaky breath. He drew his legs up to his chest and squeezed himself tightly, cheek resting on his kneecap. Days like today reminded him that he was different, weird; that something about him was *wrong*.

He didn't feel like he was fully in his body. Like it was hard to grasp the concept that he was Shane Hollander, Canadian hockey star, and not an actual alien from outer space. He flexed his fingers in front of his face, trying to reconnect his mind to his flesh.

It's over. You did it. It wasn't that bad. This is part of the job. People do this kind of stuff every day. It's not a big deal. Tighten up.

Shane pulled out his phone to check the time and his messages. He noticed the shoot had gone later than it was supposed to, and that he had a notification from Ilya.

Lily: Waiting for you in hotel bed. Did you know room has jacuzzi?

Shane felt his lips turn up in his first real smile in hours. *Of course I know there's a jacuzzi, that's why I picked this hotel room.*

Ilya's message reminded him of his favorite parts of reality, of what he had to look forward to over the rest of the weekend. *See, you're all good. You're smiling. Ilya is waiting for you. It's all good.*

Shane rose from his place on the floor, moving to change back into his street clothes. He looked in the closet, on the counter, on the floor. His clothes were nowhere to be found. His clothes were gone and the driver had taken his stupid bag to the hotel for him three hours ago.

Shane stuck his head out of the dressing room door, and waved over Jasmine when he spotted her at the end of the hall.

"Hey," Shane's voice had a hoarse edge to it. He cleared his throat, and tried again. "Hey, Jasmine, I can't find the outfit I wore here this morning. Did someone move things around in here?"

Jasmine's forehead creased in concern. Shane opened the door to let her in, and she joined him in looking around the room for his missing clothes. After a few minutes of searching the small space, all they had found were the outfits from the photoshoot. Jasmine pulled out her phone and said something about texting their wardrobe person.

The duo sat in silence as Jasmine's fingers flew over her keyboard as she discussed the situation with whoever was on the other end. Shane knew he should be making small talk, knew he should be making this less awkward for her. But he didn't have the energy. He was so drained that he couldn't do anything but sit in his uncomfortable chair, chewing at the skin around his fingernails. His mind drifted to a staticky place.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hollander. It seems your clothes were taken to the cleaners with some of the set clothes on accident."

Jasmine's voice sent a bolt of surprise through Shane. He flinched in his chair as he was forced back into the present moment to process her words.

"You can take any of the outfits from today. We'll have your clothes delivered to your hotel later this evening. I'm sorry, again, for the mixup."

It was almost comical, to Shane, how many things had gone wrong today. It was almost funny too, how his list of perceived offenses could be nothing to someone who wasn't him. But the tight feeling in his chest, the numbness in his fingertips, the ringing in his ears – none of that was laughable. He knew what could come next if he didn't make his next move with extreme caution.

I have to go. I have to get out of here before it's too late. Ilya, I need to get to Ilya.

Shane took a big breath in, and looked up from his seat into Jasmine's face.

"Okay. Thank you. See you next time." Seven meager, flat words. Shane rose from his chair, grabbed his phone and wallet, and walked out of the room.

By some miracle, something went in Shane's direction, and the driver was already waiting at the curb when he exited the building. Shane tried to haul some fresh air into his lungs in the twelve steps between the door and the car, but the air was stale with the stink of sewage. He tumbled into the backseat, pulling it shut behind himself before the driver had a chance to do so.

He slammed his eyes closed, forehead coming to rest on the back of the seat in front of him. Shane started chewing on his cuticles again as the car rolled into motion. His mind was simultaneously moving at the speed of light and of too-old honey, crystallized in the back of the cabinet.

He tasted blood in his mouth, and figured he'd torn through the skin of his thumb. He moved on to the next finger, completely uncaring now that the photoshoot was over and no one would be scrutinizing his hands.

A confusing mixture of comfort and anxiety roiled through Shane when he thought about being reunited with Ilya in a few short minutes. On one hand, he'd been looking forward to this for weeks. Ilya was his safe place, his ultimate solace. On the other hand, Shane had never had one of his episodes, or breakdowns, or whatever the fuck it was called in front of another person in his adult life. And he knew it was coming. He was 99% sure he was past the point of no return.

What if he thinks I'm a fucking freak? What if he leaves? What if he finally realizes that I'm not who I pretend to be? What if he can't help?

Shane didn't notice when the car came to a stop. Didn't notice until the driver had already opened the door for him, until he had to reach out and gently shake Shane's shoulder. Shane recoiled automatically, but was able to spare an apologetic glance in the driver's direction as he slid out of the car.

He strode into the hotel with quick steps. The lights in the elevator were harsh. When he caught his reflection in the mirrored wall of the small space, he stopped breathing.

Who is that? Is that me? Do I really look like this? The unfamiliar outfit from Rolex only served to further detach Shane from reality. He almost felt like he was looking at a stranger through a window, instead of a reflection of himself.

The elevator dinged with the force of a thousand decibels as the doors clunked open on the thirty-second floor. Shane made his way to the end of the hall and punched the code he'd set into the door. Inside the room, he turned back towards the door he had just shut and leaned against it as he toed off his shoes. He slid off the suit jacket next, and loosened his tie. Before

he could make his next move, or even turn to face the room, a pair of strong arms wrapped around his waist from behind. A familiar chin rested on his shoulder.

"Finally," Ilya said. "I was beginning to wonder if Rolex kidnapped you." Ilya spoke playfully, squeezing Shane affectionately as he spoke.

Shane tried to respond, but the words got stuck in his throat. He tried to raise his hands to rest on top of Ilya's, but he couldn't make his limbs move. He felt stuck in tar. *Like the mammoths at La Brea*, he thought.

He felt Ilya sink to kneeling behind his back, kissing his way down his spine as he went. Ilya's kisses weren't unwelcome, but they didn't make Shane feel electrified like they usually did. Ilya tugged at Shane's pant leg.

"Turn around, I want to see you," Ilya said, an obvious smile in his voice.

It's over. He's going to know. You're going to be exposed.

Despite his thoughts, Shane turned around. He lifted his hand so that he could go back to chewing on his cuticles. He tried to meet Ilya's eyes, but everything was unfocused and blurry. Shane realized, in this moment, that his eyes were filled with tears.

Ilya stood so quickly that Shane could barely track the movement. In an instant, Ilya's hands were on the sides of Shane's shoulders. He tasted blood in his mouth again, he'd ripped open another fingertip. He didn't care.

"Shane? What's going on? Are you okay?" Ilya's voice was brimming with concern. He rubbed Shane's arms in a way Shane knew was meant to be consoling – would usually be comforting - but it was abrasive in this moment.

He felt his face scrunch as he squeezed his eyes closed. He focused on the feeling of his teeth on his fingers, focused on peeling off tiny strips of skin.

"Shane," Ilya repeated. "Can you hear me?"

Shane nodded yes. Clinging to Ilya's questions was all he could do to stay in this moment.

"Yes? Okay," Ilya replied. Shane wondered if he imagined the tone of understanding in Ilya's simple response.

"You are overwhelmed, yes? How you say... overstimulated?"

Shane nodded again. Ilya's hands lifted from Shane's arms.

"Did someone hurt you?" came Ilya's next question.

Shane shook his head. He could feel the tears in his eyes starting to spill down his cheeks.

"It's okay Shane, you are safe here," Ilya said. There was a beat of hesitation before Ilya spoke again, as if he wasn't quite sure how to proceed. Shane tugged at the collar of his own

shirt, a silent cue, an unspoken cry for help. "Do you want help changing clothes?"

Shane nodded yes, and he immediately felt Ilya's fingers working open the buttons of Shane's shirt. Once the shirt was off, he started working on the belt buckle. Shane could tell Ilya was trying to minimize how much he was touching Shane. He felt another strange blend of content that Ilya recognized his physical needs and loss at intimacy he knew he was missing out on.

In mere moments, Shane was standing in his underwear. He knew he would usually feel cold and exposed, but instead he felt nothing besides the sting in his eyes and the dull pain in his bitten fingers.

"Is it okay if I lead you to the bed?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded small. He was grateful for Ilya's gentle questions to guide him through this space he felt detached from, but he didn't know how many more he could stand to answer. He felt tired. He felt like there was lead lining his lungs.

Ilya gently placed his hand on the small of Shane's back and pressed them both forward. Ilya maneuvered Shane so that he was sitting on the edge of the bed. Shane's eyes were still closed, but he heard Ilya moving around the room, digging through his bag. He returned a moment later and knelt at Shane's feet, hooking a pair of sweatpants around his ankles.

In under a minute, Shane was redressed in his own clothes. The subtle, familiar scent of his own laundry detergent was grounding. He brought his hands to his face, slicking away the tear tracks staining his cheeks. Finally, he opened his eyes.

The room was too bright, his throat was too dry, and eye contact was fucking hard, but he met Ilya's gaze regardless. Ilya's face was open to him, a look of concern and fear and devotion written across his features. Shane rested a hand on Ilya's cheek, and Ilya leaned into it. Shane hoped this gesture of comfort was enough – it was all he had to offer.

Shane flopped back onto the bed with a loud sigh. Thoughts started churning in his head again as he stared up at the tiled hotel ceiling. He wanted Ilya to lay on top of him like he had that one time in LA. He wanted the pressure of Ilya's body to iron the buzzing sensation out of his skin. But he didn't want to ask.

"Can you -" Shane's words were barely audible. The voice speaking them sounded unfamiliar. "Remember that one time?"

"Remember that one time," real fucking nice Hollander. You wasted four words on incoherent nonsense. You can't expect the people around you to read your fucked-up mind.

Shane watched as Ilya stood from his place on the floor and leaned on the bed, knee sinking into the mattress next to Shane's thigh.

"You want pressure, yes? Me to lie on top of you?" Ilya asked. The way he said it sounded logical, not embarrassing. Shane nodded, and Ilya's response was instant.

It took a few tries for them to situate themselves on the bed in a way that was comfortable, but once they'd figured it out, Shane knew he'd made the right choice. Ilya and his body felt like the warmest, safest, most solid thing he'd ever had the luxury of experiencing in his life. Shane brought his hands up to rest on Ilya's back.

Ilya didn't try to make Shane talk, but he knew he needed to say something while he still had the benefit of consciousness. He didn't think he had many words left in his bank.

"I love you, don't be scared," Shane said.

Ilya pressed a gentle kiss against Shane's neck. He reached up to pet Shane's head, fingers running through his hair in a familiar way. "Is this okay?" Ilya asked.

Shane nodded, and his eyes slid closed. "I love you, Shane. You are safe, you are not alone. You do not scare me," Ilya replied.

Shane's mind returned to the driftless place. The edges of his psyche burned and fizzed as he played the events of the day over in his mind. He thought of everything that had caused him to stumble, thought of all the ways he could've been stronger. He must've started crying again at some point, because he felt Ilya brush a tear off of his cheek.

Eventually, thankfully, Shane ran out of time to torture himself, and slipped into a restless sleep. His dreams were an unsettling tapestry of reality and memories and made up things that he would never admit out loud.

Shane woke to the sound of the hotel room door clicking shut. He sat up bed, eyes struggling to understand the details of the darkened room around him.

Is it already nighttime? How many hours did I lose?

In the dim light of the bedside lamp, Shane watched Ilya move back across the room towards him. Ilya crawled into bed, but didn't reach out to touch Shane.

"What time is it?" Shane asked. He stretched a hand out to Ilya, nodding in confirmation when Ilya enveloped it in both of his own.

"It's only 5:00, I just shut the curtains to make it better in here for you. I'm sorry I woke you up, was just collecting delivery," Ilya said. He squeezed Shane's hand like a lifeline as he spoke. "Are you feeling little bit better?"

"Yeah, I feel better, still pretty tired. Thank you for helping me," Shane replied. He pulled on Ilya's hands, hoping that he could get back into the safe embrace of his arms.

Instead of complying right away, Ilya reached for something on the nightstand. He handed Shane a bottle of water, and gave him a serious look. Shane didn't argue; he was fucking parched. He finished the whole thing in one desperate go, and handed it back to Ilya, empty and crumpled.

Ilya discarded it and reached up to comb his fingers through Shane's hair. "Are you hungry? Have you eaten anything today?" Ilya asked.

"Not yet," Shane replied. It was an answer to both questions, but he hoped Ilya wouldn't press him too hard about it. He wanted to be held. Needed it, he thought.

"Hold me, please," Shane asked, averting his eyes from Ilya's as he spoke. Ilya arranged himself so that Shane could lie on his chest. Shane settled himself into the crevice of Ilya's armpit, and nodded gratefully when Ilya's arm came around his shoulder.

They lie together in comfortable silence. When Shane raised his free hand to play with Ilya's crucifix, he noticed there was a bandage on his thumb. Ilya must've noticed him noticing, because he spoke up, gently.

"I don't like seeing you hurting yourself," Ilya whispered.

"It's not on purpose, the hurting. It's just an automatic thing, a way to occupy my teeth and my hands and my mind," Shane replied.

"Do you want to tell me what happened at the photoshoot?" Ilya asked.

Shane rolled Ilya's question over in his mind. He didn't want to relive this morning, but he didn't want to be alone on this fucking liferaft anymore either.

"It was just a lot of little things..." Shane began. He went through his morning, trying his best to explain the details that had affected him the most. When he got to the part about the photo assistant posing his body, Ilya sucked his teeth. Shane paused his story, turning up to Ilya with a questioning look.

"Asking someone permission when you are already on your way to doing what you are asking permission for, is as good as not asking at all. They did not leave room for you to say no," Ilya said matter-of-factly. He said it like Shane wasn't to blame.

"I had a job to do..." Shane said, words trailing off as an uncomfortable feeling of being caught between his rules and his needs washed over him.

"You are allowed to walk away, Shane. I know Rolex brand is important to Yuna, or whatever, but when you feel like you're hurting yourself by staying... You are allowed to leave."

Shane understood that what Ilya was saying was based on a very solid, intelligent foundation. But it was at odds with Shane's own set of rules and guidelines and tools for himself.

Shane Hollander always performed. Shane Hollander always did what was asked of him, and earned every available gold star along the way. Shane Hollander kept his word.

"I know it is hard to come to terms with, when your own mind is against you," Ilya continued. Shane thought about Ilya's own struggles through grief over the past several years. He knew Ilya understood him, understood that brains were messy, unbalanced things sometimes.

Shane continued telling Ilya the story of his day, all the way up until the part where he arrived in the hotel room. Ilya continued to stroke his hair as Shane spoke, fingers ghosting across his scalp in soothing patterns.

"It's happened to me before, the uh... episodes. It used to happen more when I was a kid, used to be a lot more angry and stressful. Now they're less frequent, and more... stoic, I guess. Internal," Shane could feel Ilya's intense gaze on his face as he spoke, but he didn't interrupt.

"It becomes hard to speak. I get very tired. I sometimes start to feel... not real? But I've always been good at hiding it. You're, uh... the first person in my adult life who has ever had to witness that fucking mess. I'm sorry, by the way, and grateful. You were very helpful."

Shane spoke hurriedly, hoping that if he could just spit the words out fast enough they could move on and forget this afternoon had ever happened. He could count on one hand the number of times this had happened to him as an adult.

Once when he was 19, and his grandmother had just died, and he led the Meters to a spectacular 9-0 loss against Tampa. He'd had to lock himself in the hotel bathroom for hours, claiming to Hayden that he'd eaten something that had upset his stomach.

Once when he was 21, and had tried hooking up with another guy for the first time. The guy had kissed with too much teeth and had fucked Shane's mouth too hard. He'd left without taking his clothes off and broke down in his car.

Once when he was 22, and went on a trip to Arizona with his parents. The sun had been blistering and the food had been unfamiliar and there had been way too much talk of his nonexistent love life. He had lied and said he had a migraine, locking himself in his equally unfamiliar bedroom in their AirBnb, smothering his sobs with a pillow.

And once when he was 25, and had spent a glorious day eating tuna melts and napping in Ilya's bed and experiencing too much tenderness. He had been angry with himself about this time most of all, when it had all been too different, too much, too soon, and he fled. He'd barely made it out of Ilya's house in time.

Shane's chin was tilted up by Ilya's thumb and forefinger. Their gazes locked, and Shane recognized the shine of tears in the corners of Ilya's eyes.

"I'm sorry you've had to struggle alone, Shane," Ilya said. His voice was gentle and reverent. "Never apologize. You are allowed to be your true self with me, whatever that looks like. I want you to feel... safe."

"I do, I do," Shane replied. "On the way here, I was so scared for you to know my truth, but so relieved that I'd be able to fall into your arms."

Ilya smiled at Shane's words. Despite the tears and the hard shit and the hours wasted on his stupid breakdown, Ilya was *smiling* at him.

Shane leaned up to press a sweet kiss to Ilya's lips. Ilya tilted Shane's head and deepened their kiss, claiming Shane's mouth with his tongue like he was desperate for it. They kissed

for a long time, wet and urgent. Shane pulled away first, nervous that he'd send the wrong message to Ilya if they kept going. He felt better, yes, but he wasn't ready to have sex yet.

Ilya didn't need Shane to say this out loud, because, *of course he didn't*. Shane pouted over-dramatically when Ilya got back out of bed to collect a paper bag from the table by the door. His interest was piqued.

"What's that?"

"Your favorite," Ilya replied in a casual tone, but the ridiculous glint in his eye was giving him away.

Ilya reached into the bag and pulled out a stack of takeout containers. Shane recognized the bright red packaging.

"No way – North Dumpling?!" Shane's grin split his face in two. "No fucking way. How did you even get this delivered? I know for a fact they don't believe in delivery apps there."

North Dumpling was Shane's favorite restaurant in all of New York. You could get ten of the most delicious and comforting dumplings for less than five dollars, as long as you remembered to bring cash. He tried to stop in every time they played the Admirals.

"Old school method. Bicycle courier service, promise of big tip, works like charm," Ilya said as he worked on arranging the containers on the nightstand for Shane.

"How did you know?" Shane asked. He was surprised Ilya knew how much this place meant to Shane.

"What do you mean, how did I know? Shane, you text me picture of dumpling plate every time you are here to kick Scott Hunter's ass. My mind would have to be very feeble to forget such thing." Ilya pushed at Shane's shoulder playfully as he sat down on the bed next to him, a carton of dumplings in one hand and a pair of chopsticks in the other.

Shane leaned over to give Ilya a smacking kiss on the cheek. "God, you're the best," he said.

"Oh, I know, but thank you for reminder. Now eat your dumplings, so we can binge watch *Ink Master* from the jacuzzi," Ilya said.

Shane hated *Ink Master*, it was so fucking garish. But he loved Ilya's outsized reactions to terrible tattoos, loved complaining about who was eliminated with way too much enthusiasm, and loved spending time doing nothing with his partner.

Shane chewed a bite of dumpling with a smile, enjoying the sharp flavors of pork and five-spice on his tongue. He leaned gently into Ilya as they ate, feeling, finally, like he was back in reality. Feeling, finally, like he'd be okay.

Chapter 4: Summer 2019: The Cottage

Chapter Notes

extra domesticity as a treat. <3

Chapter 4 content warnings: mild sexual content (fade to black), grief, depression

If someone would've told 2010 Ilya Rozanov that his favorite place in the world would one day be a boring, Canadian cottage in the woods, he would've laughed in your face. But these days, Shane's cottage was his sanctuary. A much needed intermission between seasons and summer camps and media speculations. This year they even got to come earlier than usual, their schedules aligning in June.

Deep in the woods of Lanaudière, time was a malleable, unimportant thing. Shane could let the crushing weight of the expectations of the league fall from his shoulders, even just for a short while. Ilya could help him; Ilya could join Shane in letting go. Ilya could let himself forget the things that haunted him in the past and in his nightmares and the most wretched corners of his mind.

For two weeks, every summer, they could just be.

On their first day at the cottage, Ilya wanted to do nothing more but float in the lake. They had impulse bought two matching inflatable lounge floats in the seasonal aisle of the supermarket on their drive up. Shane had been flustered, thanks to the fluorescents and the unfamiliar store layout and the eleven packs of sour gummy worms Ilya had thrown in the cart. But when Ilya added the two inflatables to their basket - one pink and one green - Shane's face cracked into a real smile.

"Cosmo and Wanda," he said quietly.

"Who and who?" Ilya asked.

"*Fairly Odd Parents*? You've never heard of it? It's a TV show, it was popular in the early two thousands."

"No, I have never heard of this. But, by early two thousands I was busy, working on becoming best hockey player in a generation," Ilya replied.

Shane rolled his eyes, but didn't take Ilya's bait. "It was about this goofy kid who had two fairy godparents that would grant him all kinds of wishes. Usually it didn't work out the way he'd hoped."

"What does it have to do with inflatable pool beds?" Ilya asked. He wasn't trying to rush Shane to the point; he just felt like he was missing something.

"Oh, Cosmo has green hair and Wanda has pink hair," Shane said simply.

"So... beds remind you of magic fairy coworkers?" Ilya asked.

"No! They weren't coworkers, they were married, madly in love." Shane responded.

Married, Ilya liked the sound of that. A collage of moments that hadn't yet happened danced across Ilya's mind.

Lazy evenings in a hot tub, steam rising from the water and turning Shane's cheeks pink. A refrigerator full of Coke and ginger ale. Walking through the neighborhood, fingers entwined, not caring who might see. A gold ring glinting on Shane's left hand.

Ilya glanced over his shoulder. The aisle was empty, and he couldn't help himself. He leaned across the cart and pressed a quick kiss to Shane's cheek. Shane leaned into Ilya for a millisecond before they broke apart, the promise of *more, later, soon*, shining in Shane's eyes.

Hours later, after sloppy sex on the couch and sandwiches for lunch and at least a hundred more kisses, Ilya sat on the dock, blowing up the Cosmo and Wanda floaties. He was in the middle of regretting his most recent relapse into smoking cigarettes when he heard Shane's soft steps approaching. Ilya tried to pretend he wasn't spectacularly out of breath and leaned up to kiss Shane, who bent down to meet him in the middle.

Ilya groped Shane's ass, which earned him a yelp of surprise.

"Careful, you'll make me spill!" Shane shrieked.

Already did that once today, Ilya thought to himself, a wicked smirk on his lips.

Shane scoffed, as if he could read Ilya's mind. "I meant the drinks, you fucking pervert," Shane said, gently shaking the tumblers in his hands for emphasis. "I made fresh limeade, I hope you like it."

Shane passed Ilya one of the tumblers, a blue metal cup with the Metros logo engraved on it. Ilya took a sip, savoring the tart, creamy beverage as it covered his tongue.

"Is delicious, thank you," Ilya said. He turned back to the inflatables in his lap, both looking pathetically underfilled.

"Are you ready to admit you want help blowing those up?" Shane asked.

You make this way too easy for me, Ilya thought.

"You want to help with blowing? If you insist," Ilya said as he laid back on the dock, tugging the waistband of his swim shorts down an inch or two.

"You are fucking impossible," Shane said, snatching Ilya's cup back out of his hands. He set the cups on the dock, then pounced on top of Ilya. They wrestled and laughed and tangled strong limbs together until Ilya had Shane pinned, hands pressed together over his head.

"Beg for mercy," Ilya demanded, a wild, familiar look in his eyes.

"Never," Shane replied. He hooked his thighs around Ilya's waist, and with a grunt, rolled them both off of the dock and into the cold water of the lake. They splashed and swam and clung to each other for warmth. Ilya adored the way Shane's face always found itself in the crook of his neck, like Ilya was Shane's own private cove of contentment.

Eventually, they hauled their bodies back onto the dock and raced to see who could fill their inflatable bed first. Shane won, earning Ilya the sight of his boyfriend's proud smile. They slipped back into the water, reclining on their respective floaties. Ilya held his tumbler in one hand, and used the other to cling to the strings of Shane's swim shorts. He didn't want Shane to float out of reach, even for a second.

Ilya closed his eyes and allowed himself to soak in the simple gifts of the present moment. He heard birds singing on the riverbank, and wondered if Shane would be able to tell them what kinds they were. He felt the cold, consistent splash of lake water on his heels. He enjoyed the warmth of the sun on his chest, almost as good, almost as bright as the feeling lodged behind his sternum. Ilya's train of thought was interrupted by a question from Shane.

"Would you rather drive a pickup truck or play wing?"

Ilya scoffed at the question, disliking both options. But he'd indulge Shane; this was his favorite way to fill the silence. No small talk, just this low-stakes game to learn more about the ways Ilya's mind worked.

"Mmmmm, play wing, but only if you center me. Pickup truck is embarrassing, no class," Ilya said.

"It would be nice to be on the same team all the time," Shane said earnestly. "Being rivals was hot for the first decade, but it'd be crazy to play together, to live together."

Shane trailed off, and a few beats of taught silence passed between them. Ilya felt the same, of course, but their shared dream seemed like an impossibility.

Shane cut the tension with another question. "Would you rather get to look at my browser history, or my messages app?"

Ilya debated for a moment, bouncing the question back and forth. "Browser history is probably boring. Things like *how many carbs in Tim Hortons breakfast wrap?* But messages app, at least I could see what you and Rose Landry talk about."

"Come on -" Shane started, but Ilya interrupted him.

"I am only teasing you, sweetheart. Honestly, I am not that interested in what is on your phone," Ilya shrugged, taking a sip from his limeade.

Shane had another question ready. "Ooo, would you rather lose the ability to lie or believe everything you're told?"

Ilya raised an eyebrow at this, turning his head slowly to look Shane in the eye.

"What?" Shane asked, reaching to squeeze Ilya's wrist.

"Both options are just features of your personality, no?" Ilya teased gently.

Shane blushed, a bright bloom of red spreading across his cheeks and down his neck. He grumbled his reply under his breath. "It doesn't make sense to me, why people say things they don't really mean."

"I know, *moy lyubimiy*."

They sunk into a comfortable silence then, just floating and holding hands and listening to the sound of the water lapping.

On their fourth (or was it fifth?) day at the cottage, Ilya woke before Shane. The sun was streaming in through the blinds, casting slivers of light across Shane's bare back as he slept on his stomach. Ilya watched him sleep, physically resisting the urge to reach out and graze his nails over the shadows on Shane's shoulders.

I could spend every moment with you, until the end of our lives, and on the shore of the River Styx I'd still beg Hades for one more day by your side. You complete me, in every conceivable way. You make me a better man. I am so in love with you, that if I think about it too hard, it makes my chest hurt. You don't even know how many times you have saved me.

Ilya didn't realize he was crying until a tear had already escaped, blazing a hot track down his cheek. He wiped it away, cursing himself for how much of a crier he'd become over the last few years.

He leaned over Shane's sleeping form, slowly enough that he wouldn't cause his boyfriend to stir. He pressed a tender kiss to Shane's temple, pulled the quilt higher up his back, and slipped out of bed.

Ilya made his way to the kitchen to make Shane breakfast, pulling on a soft athletic charcoal shirt as he went. He thought, absentmindedly, that Shane must have this shirt in at least six colors. He counted them through memories in his head: *ruby red and indigo blue; plain white and arctic periwinkle; obsidian, maroon, and olive green*. The last one was Ilya's favorite; he loved the way it complimented Shane's skin.

As Ilya pulled open the fridge, he set his shoulders determinedly. He'd be taking careful mental notes over the last several days, memorizing Shane's breakfast routine down to the

last detail. He knew that if he wanted to cook for Shane, and wanted it to be safe for him, it had to be just right.

He took out the eggs and an avocado, just barely soft enough to be edible. After setting a small pot of water on the stove to boil, Ilya went to work on peeling and pitting the avocado. He mashed it in a bowl, making sure all of the chunks got smoothed out, and mixed in three shakes of pepper and one shake of salt. Once the avocado was smooth and consistent, he dropped a slice of multigrain bread in the toaster.

While he waited for the toast to brown, Ilya returned to the refrigerator. He pulled out the carton of orange juice and filled Shane's favorite juice glass, a short green cup that didn't match the rest.

The water on the stove started to boil just as the toast popped. He turned his attention to the stove first, turning off the burner and using a spoon to swirl the water into a tiny vortex. Then he cracked one egg into the center of the pot, and set a timer on his phone for three minutes and fifteen seconds. He held his breath for at least the first thirty seconds, watching to see if the white would separate from the yolk. Whether it was by a stroke of luck or if his careful observations paid off, the egg stayed together and started to cook.

By the time Ilya's timer went off, he had successfully spread the avocado on the toast, making sure the bread was evenly coated from one crust to another. He slid the glistening egg onto the avocado toast, smiling proudly to himself as it all came together. *It looks exactly like it's looked every other day this week. Thank god.*

Ilya briefly entertained the idea of bringing Shane breakfast in bed, but scratched the thought almost as quickly when he imagined Shane's reaction to crumbs in the sheets. Instead, he returned to the bedroom and sunk to sit on the mattress next to Shane, gently waking him by raking fingers through his hair. Shane's eyelashes fluttered, and Ilya's brain short-circuited. *Prettyprettyprettyososopretty.*

"Mmm, good morning," Shane mumbled, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Good morning, sweetheart," Ilya replied, leaning down to steal a kiss. "I made you breakfast," Ilya mumbled against Shane's lips.

"Really? What did you make?"

Ilya didn't miss the tenuous tone of apprehension in Shane's voice, like it was too early for surprises in the form of unexpected breakfast offerings.

"Your special toast with the fancy egg, just how you like it," Ilya replied.

Shane sat up in bed, grinning unabashedly at Ilya's words. "You don't even like avocado," he said as he swung his legs out of bed.

"No, but you do," Ilya responded simply.

Ilya watched as Shane pulled on a familiar green hoodie. It had been his favorite since he stole it from Ilya some years ago. Ilya even tried to buy him a new one once, in Shane's favored shade of blue. But it was often forgotten in the back of the closet in favor of the original green, stretched out in all the right places.

Shane wasted no time in making his way to the kitchen, and Ilya followed close behind, enjoying the view. He leaned against the counter, watching Shane as he slid onto the stool next to his prepared plate. Ilya didn't miss the way Shane looked at the food for a beat, clearly trying to ensure his gaze was one of casual observation rather than intent inspection. After another moment, his lips curled into a pleased smile.

"It's perfect," he said, fork sliding through the food to cut off a bite. He nodded as he chewed, looking up to meet Ilya's eyes when he swallowed. "Yeah, it's perfect," he repeated. "The same as I always make it."

A cool, satisfying wave of relief washed through Ilya at Shane's words. As Shane continued to eat, Ilya shifted to stand behind him, hands resting on his shoulders. He rubbed gentle circles into Shane's back with his thumbs, leaning to brush his lips against the shell of his ear.

"Perfect food for my perfect boy," Ilya murmured. He felt Shane shiver in response, as if his body reacting to Ilya's words was a feature of his autonomic nervous system.

Ilya couldn't help himself. He pressed open-mouth kisses along the column of Shane's throat and down his shoulder. Ilya heard Shane set his fork down and blindly reach a hand up to tug at Ilya's hair. Ilya nipped at Shane's shoulder blade in response, mumbling against the skin.

"Keep eating. I am just showing you my love, perfect boy."

Shane didn't pick up his fork. Instead, he pulled harder at Ilya's hair, writhing in his seat as Ilya continued his trail of kisses along Shane's upper back. When Ilya noticed Shane wasn't listening, he pulled away.

"You cannot hear me, or you are not listening on purpose?" Ilya asked, voice gravelly, but even.

An honest to god whimper slipped out of Shane's lips, and Ilya earned himself a glare, but Shane turned back to his food. He shoveled in the rest of the toast in three large bites, Ilya's lips returning to Shane's skin once the plate was clean.

"Good, so good for me, so perfect," Ilya whispered reassuringly, hands gliding soothingly over the outsides of Shane's arms.

They fell into each other then, all messy kisses and frantic hands. Ilya ended up carrying Shane back to the bedroom, savoring the pressure of his ankles locked behind the small of Ilya's back as he walked. He tossed Shane on the bed unceremoniously and quickly fell into place on top of him, caging in Shane's limbs with his own. He captured Shane's mouth in another searing kiss, his mind blissfully focused on the man beneath him as the rest of the world faded away.

I'll never get enough of this, enough of us, enough of you.

By the end of the first week, the days started blurring together in earnest. Shane and Ilya binge-watched zombie movies, took the paddleboards out on the lake, and even played cards with Yuna and David in the evenings, sometimes. Ilya allowed himself to relax into the softer version of himself that dared to show his face here, only here, only with Shane.

The night was crisp as the heat and humidity of the day faded with the sunset. Ilya sat beside Shane on the patio sofa, watching the fire crackle. They played another round of Would You Rather, Ilya taking the initiative to ask Shane ridiculous questions like "Never have ginger ale, or never have blow jobs?" Shane had looked affronted, as if Ilya had asked him to choose between drowning a puppy and committing arson at an orphanage.

"I'd give up ginger ale, I guess," Shane answered reluctantly.

"But you would resent me forever, no?" Ilya replied.

Shane huffed a laugh, hooking an arm around Ilya's neck to pull him to rest against his chest.

Ilya let his eyes slip shut, soaking in the comfort provided by the heat of the fire and the steady beat of Shane's heart. Ilya's mind wandered to two summers ago, when he'd laid right here, in Shane's lap, and told him about his mother for the first time.

As soon as the memory appeared in his mind, the warmth in Ilya's chest turned to ice. Shane must've noticed somehow, because his fingers on Ilya's neck stuttered along their lazy path. Maybe Ilya had tensed, or maybe Shane was becoming telepathic.

"What day is it?" Ilya asked tightly. He feared he already knew the answer. Hoped to a God he didn't really believe in, that he was wrong.

"Uhhh," Ilya felt Shane shift as he fished his phone out of his pocket. "June 28th."

No, nonononono. No way. He couldn't have. It was impossible. No fucking way.

Ilya sat up abruptly, pulling himself away from the safety of Shane. The guillotine in his mind was falling, promising to sever the fine cord of joy that Ilya had spun over the past week.

"Ilya, what's wrong?" Shane asked. He reached out to rest a hand on Ilya's knee. *Don't, I can't, I don't deserve your comfort.* Ilya pushed it away, the panicked motion resulting in a cruel smacking sound.

Ilya's gaze reconnected with Shane's just long enough to see the blatant hurt blaze across his face. Ilya looked away, burying his face in his hands. Guilt and shame and anger were hot in his chest, threatening to burn him alive.

You forgot. How could you forget? You had one fucking job, to remember her, to honor her memory, and you couldn't even manage to notice, manage to care.

The onslaught of negative feelings that consumed Ilya was merciless and swift. He felt furious, and remorseful, and so, so fucking sad. Being on the razor edge of emotion like this was always hard for him to reconcile. Half of him felt like the pain would never end, like he couldn't escape it if he tried. The other half of him was numb, uncaring, uninterested in anything and everything.

Ilya was so consumed in his own hurricane of self hatred that he was startled when a sob wracked its way out of his chest. He could tell he was crying loud and ugly, the kind of breakdown that was meant to stay hidden behind closed doors.

He was surprised again when he felt his hands being pushed away from his face as Shane made room for himself in Ilya's lap. Ilya didn't have time to protest, to refuse the comfort he didn't deserve. Shane was enveloping Ilya in an instant, straddling his thighs and wrapping his arms tightly around his shoulders. One of Shane's hands cradled the back of Ilya's head, pressing his face into the soft, private safety of Shane's chest.

The instinctual part of Ilya's brain briefly debated making a break for it. He could hardly stand Shane's compassion, especially when it was so distinctly unearned. But he'd already accidentally hurt Shane once today, and couldn't risk doing it again.

So Ilya allowed himself to be held, and rocked, and kissed on the top of his head. He sobbed into Shane's sweatshirt, his mind gripped fiercely in the unrelenting claws of anguish.

I'm so sorry, mama. I promised I would never forget. I failed you, I don't know how I let this happen, but I'm so fucking sorry. You gave everything for me; you stayed in father's fucking prison of a house for me. And I forgot. I let your day slip by.

Ilya's mind was an echo chamber, begging for forgiveness, unrelentingly, from a ghost who could never give it to him. Eventually, involuntarily, Ilya ran out of tears. His head was pounding, and his throat felt raw.

Shane continued his gentle ministrations, fingers combing through the hair at the back of Ilya's neck in the way they both knew he loved. Ilya could hardly stand it, could hardly allow this perfect angel of a man to protect his wretched existence.

Ilya pulled back, clearing his throat hard. He couldn't look Shane in the eyes, but an apology was the least he could do.

"I am so sorry Shane, I did not mean to hit you. I panicked... are you hurt?" Ilya's voice was thin, barely a whisper.

"Hit me? That's dramatic. You just pushed my hand away, and yeah, I was surprised, but you did nothing wrong." Shane hesitated for a beat before he spoke again. "Do you want me to get off of your lap, Ilya?"

Ilya sucked his teeth, and made the selfish choice. He shook his head once, definitive and plain.

Shane's hands slid along Ilya's neck to rest on the sides of his face. In the comforting grasp of Shane's strong hands, Ilya closed his eyes. Shane pressed soft kisses across his forehead, murmuring reassuring *I love yous* between each one.

"What's wrong, honey?" Shane asked quietly, once Ilya's breathing had finally returned to normal. To answer Shane's question, to admit what he'd done out loud, would cost Ilya something. He was deeply opposed to exposing anyone to this side of himself, to letting anyone know just how deep his grief and sadness ran. He decided to try anyways.

"June 27th, 2003, was the day my mother died. And, I guess, somehow, I forgot this year." Ilya's voice cracked on *forgot*, a fresh wave of hot tears stinging his eyes. "How could I forget, Shane? How could I not notice?"

Ilya returned his face to his hiding place in Shane's chest. Shane embraced Ilya tightly and resumed their gentle rocking rhythm from before.

"I'm so sorry, Ilya. I know how much she means to you, how much you love her," Shane whispered.

Ilya shrugged pathetically. English was too hard in this moment. He just clung to Shane, and kept his eyes squeezed shut, as if he could wrangle the violent nature of his mind with sheer will alone.

When the fire was nothing more than coals, Shane climbed off of Ilya's lap. He didn't say anything, just offered a hand for Ilya to take. Ilya did, feeling hollow despite the obvious kindness Shane was affording him.

Ilya followed Shane into the house, their journey paused only briefly when Shane stopped to retrieve a glass of water. He'd handed it to Ilya with an expectant look on his face. Ilya managed a few sips, but ultimately returned the cup to the counter before he even drank half.

Ilya led the rest of the way to the bedroom, stripping off his clothes into an unceremonious heap next to his side of the bed. He slipped under the quilt in silence and lie still on his back, hoping that if he was quiet enough, Shane wouldn't make him talk about it. Not yet.

To Ilya's immense relief, Shane just removed his pants and sweatshirt, crawling into bed next to Ilya in his t-shirt and briefs. Ilya felt Shane's pinky brush against his hand, a silent request for contact. Ilya hooked his own little finger around Shane's, grateful for the grounding touch.

In a matter of minutes, Ilya's mind sank back into its storm of self deprecation. He thought of his mother, the day he found her, the days after. Everything had changed for him that day.

I understand you now, mama. I know why you did it, why you had to. Sometimes I.... I don't want to die but... sometimes I wish I wasn't alive. Like the world would not notice if I was gone.

Even when he thought of hockey, and of his successes with the Raiders, and of Shane and the Hollanders and the cottage, and of Svetlana, and of the future... Even when he thought of it all, Ilya couldn't help but listen to the voice in the back of his head. The one that sounded like

his father. The one that told him that everyone and everything had gotten along just fine without him before, and could just as easily do so again.

Ilya wasn't sure how much time had passed, but when his mind landed back in the present, he noticed Shane's breathing had evened out into the serene cadence of sleep. Ilya snuck back out of bed noiselessly, and walked back out to the patio. He sat back down on the patio couch, pulling a cigarette out of the pack he'd left on the side table earlier in the afternoon. He lit it in one easy flick of the lighter.

He reclined back on the couch, head tipping to look at the smoke swirling above him and the stars in the sky. Goosebumps prickled along Ilya's skin; it was cold out, and he was ridiculously sprawled in only his underwear. Regardless, he smoked his cigarette unhurriedly, lighting a second when he finished his first. Two in a row was rough for Ilya these days. The hot first drag of the second was sharp and unpleasant in his throat.

Just as Ilya pulled the last drag, he heard the sound of the sliding door. *Fuck*. Shane closed the distance between them wordlessly, draping a blanket across Ilya's shoulders as he came to sit next to him on the sofa. Ilya flicked his cigarette butt into the fire pit, and Shane finally spoke up.

"What was your favorite thing about her?" Shane asked. He placed his hand palm-up on the cushion between their bodies, a quiet offering.

Ilya was surprised by Shane's question. He'd been expecting something like *what's wrong*, or *are you okay*, or *what are you doing back outside*?

"Her humor, I think," Ilya said, his voice a whisper. He laid his hand on top of Shane's, but didn't meet his eye.

"Tell me more about it, please," Shane gently requested.

Ilya took a deep breath, and started talking. "When I was little, she always makes up stories for me before bed. Ridiculous stories about magic or animals or hockey or whatever season we were in. I always fell asleep with smile on my face. When I was older, and father was getting worse, more angry, she would tell jokes to lighten the mood. Can you believe that?" Ilya looked at Shane now, meeting his eyes. "Even at her lowest moments, she still tried to make me smile."

Ilya shook his head. "She was amazing. I feel... I feel so guilty for letting myself forget the anniversary of her death."

Shane stared back at Ilya with intensity as he spoke. "Maybe it's part of healing," he said. Shane cringed at himself, as if he was worried he wouldn't say the right thing. "I don't know what it's like, obviously, but if I know one thing about you, it's that you could never forget your mother. Just because you managed to let go of the worst moment of your life for a few days... I don't think it means she is any less important to you."

Ilya swallowed hard at Shane's words. They were pretty, and kind, and difficult to believe.

"I do not think a good son would forget. You would not forget," Ilya said. He knew as the words left his mouth that it was an unfair thing to say. A dirty check.

Shane chewed on his bottom lip, glancing away as he thought. He squeezed Ilya's hand though, an unspoken signal that he wasn't jumping ship.

"I think..." Shane started. "I think our brains are very different. Mine is obsessive to a fault. So maybe no, I wouldn't forget. But I don't think letting yourself be free, be at peace, for just a couple days out of the entire year, makes you a bad person. You're doing your best. I think if your mom could see you, she would be proud of that. I think she would be happy that you allowed yourself to be... soft."

Shane's words were brutally honest. Whether it was what he wanted to hear, Ilya could always trust Shane to give him the raw truth. Ilya leaned into his boyfriend then, head resting on Shane's warm shoulder. He nodded, to himself or to Shane he wasn't sure, and released a modicum of the tension in his shoulders.

"I love you," Ilya whispered.

"I love you too," Shane replied. "So much."

The following handful of days were hard for Ilya. With Shane's help, he went through motions. He watched more apocalypse movies. He ate the meals Shane put in front of him on the table. He swam in the lake, and sat in front of the fire, and did his best to let himself be distracted.

Little by little, it worked. First he caught himself laughing at the way Shane's face screwed up at a particularly gory kill in a movie. Another time Shane insisted on teaching Ilya what a s'more was, and he enjoyed it so much that he made three.

He knew he was really getting better when he woke up to the sound of Shane in the shower, and wanted nothing more than to join him. Ilya practically fell to his knees as soon as he entered the shower, worshipping Shane's body with his tongue until they both fell apart.

It wasn't perfect, linear healing. Ilya didn't feel like the stitches he was sewing in his heart were quite even. But he did his best, and hoped it would be enough.

In the late afternoon on their last day at the cottage, Ilya woke from a nap on the couch to a quiet house. He called out to Shane, but didn't get a response. Ilya checked the driveway, and sure enough, Shane's car was still there. Ilya slid on his shoes and stepped outside to continue his search. He made his way down the grassy hill by the water and spotted Shane on the end of the dock, sitting with his feet dangled over the edge.

As he approached Shane from behind, he could faintly hear that Shane was speaking. He wondered who Shane might be on the phone with.

By his third step onto the dock, Shane noticed Ilya's presence. He stopped talking and turned around to look at Ilya as he came to join him.

"Who are you talking to, Hayden?" Ilya sat down next to Shane, crossing his legs.

Shane hesitated, and looked towards the water. He seemed to be overthinking his answer in the way that annoyed and endeared Ilya in equal measure.

"Uh, no. My phone is inside," Shane replied, a little too casually.

Ilya's brow furrowed. Shane still wouldn't look at him. Ilya reached out and hooked a finger under Shane's chin, turning his face back so he could try to read it. When Shane's eyes met Ilya's, they were faintly wet.

"What is it, sweetheart?" Ilya asked, hand sliding to cup the side of Shane's face.

"I was -" Shane hesitated again. "I was talking to your mother," he admitted. There was a tone in his voice Ilya didn't quite understand, like Shane was embarrassed about his admission.

"I've just been thinking a lot about her, since the other day. I wished I could meet her, wished I could love her the way you love my mom," Shane stated this despite the fact that Ilya had never openly said he loved the Hollanders. He hadn't had to, apparently.

"What did you talk to her about?" Ilya asked, curiosity written plainly on his face.

Shane squirmed under Ilya's gaze, but ultimately relented.

"I talked about how much I love you. I talked about everything you've meant to me over the years. I told her I'd," Shane broke off again, looking at Ilya's throat. "I told her I'd take care of you. That I've got you; that I won't let anything happen to you. I just wanted... I just wanted it out there in the universe."

Ilya couldn't believe it, his luck. It was a precious and impossible thing to be seen so clearly. He smothered Shane in a tight hug, burying his face in Shane's soft hair. He squeezed Shane so hard that he whined, but he hugged Ilya right back. Ilya spoke his next words reverently, like a thank you, like a prayer.

"I wish she could have met you. I wish she could have seen the light you bring into my life. I wish she could've loved you, and I wish you could have loved her," Ilya paused to press a kiss to the top of Shane's head. "Thank you for seeing me."

Shane nodded against Ilya's chest, murmuring sweet words of devotion against his shirt.

They sat entangled in each other's limbs at the end of the dock until the sun set. Ilya shared quiet stories about Irina. Shane listened and nodded and asked more questions that surprised Ilya.

As the last light of the day waned from the sky, Ilya remembered why the cottage was his secret haven. Here, together with Shane, his heart was safe.

End Notes

Thank you for taking the time to read my story. <3 Please take care of yourself.

If you liked this story, you might want to check out [spun out so far](#), a longform informal sequel to this work. Shane navigates an Autism diagnosis during his first year as an Ottawa Centaur.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!