

Mama's Boy, Mama's Boy

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Mama's Boy, Mama's Boy

by [WhimperSoldier](#)

Summary

Shane's first mistake was going to talk to Ilya Rozanov before their game. His second was immediately, stupidly, meeting the eyes of Rozanov's very much dead mother hovering at his side.

Notes

Did that line about Irina loving Shane hit you as hard as it did me? Well I already have Irina alive in a different fic so this time she's still dead, sorry. Still, they are going to be besties in this world, so there's a bright side! For those of you saying "hey don't you have another series you haven't finished yet?" Yes, I do, mind your business, I'm getting to it! There is also a gratuitous amount of Google translate used here, so there WILL be mistakes in Russian. Sorry :(

Title comes from "Mama's Boy" by Dominic Fike and is such an Ilya song it's nearly sickening.

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

Chapter 1

When Shane was six he'd gotten sat down by his teacher and his parents and told to work through a list of questions with a strange woman in a suit. He'd answered their questions as best he could, his mom had always said honesty was the best policy, but they were hard so he kept turning around to ask Mrs. Kline if she could help.

This had the opposite effect; they all looked at him sharply, saying he was being mean, and that if he didn't want to answer, all he had to do was say. It was Mrs. Kline who leaned over and explained while all the other people seemed to talk over his head.

"Oh, baby," She'd hummed, hand touching his head but never with any pressure, "they can't see me, Shaney."

Because to everyone but Shane, Mrs. Kline had died of a heart attack six months ago.

Most ghosts moved on without help, Shane found. He'd catch them out of the corner of his eye, floating behind a person, lingering like a shadow. It was one of the reasons he hated hospitals and always asked for private rooms. It never stopped it completely, the wailing of the recently deceased ringing in his ears all night. When he'd cracked a rib at sixteen, he'd had to be sedated because he kept trying to raise his hands to his ears and tearing out his IV. It was only his mother's intervention that got him out of a psych hold.

His parents knew, at least enough to know not to mention it when Shane was around. They knew he talked to the air and knew things he shouldn't about people he never met. When he was thirteen and his neighbor died, his mom got really into crystals to try and keep Mr. Richardson out of the house after Shane made the mistake of meeting his eye at the visitation. It didn't help, Mr. Richardson kept wailing at him to call his daughter. When Shane finally broke down and did, she called him a monster and threatened to call the cops. Still, it got her to the house and Mr. Richardson went with her so Shane could finally sleep.

But it was always there, the threat of someone not like his parents finding out what he could do. Or worse: that they'd shove some pills down his throat and he'd learn it was all in his head.

Yet on most days, he could keep his head down, eyes averted, and keep to himself enough that the ghosts lounging around him were background noise.

All of this to say that when he walked into the combine he was unsurprised to see faint outlines of ghosts hovering over parents and coaches and a few unfortunate kids. A grandmother knitted a sweater she'd never give her grandson, a father cheered on a son even when he tripped himself, and a coach shouted out corrections to his student who couldn't take the advice.

Yet even among their large number, Irina Rozanov stood out under the lights, pale skin and wearing a white nightdress with hair as blonde as her son's. She was unmoving, staring off into space until her son stepped close. Like a flower, she looked up at him and Shane got the sense of light she must have had in life at the way she looked at him while he stared off at the other players.

His first mistake was going to talk to Ilya Rozanov before their game. His second was immediately, stupidly, meeting the eyes of Rozanov's very much dead mother hovering at his side.

“Ты меня видишь, мальчик?” She demanded and Shane kept his focus back on her son, trying to get out some bland answer while she hovered near him, demanding. “посмотри на меня!”

“I'm Shane Hollander.” Shane said, watching Rozanov watch him with a confused side-eye, cigarette hanging from his mouth. “You're an amazing player to watch.”

“Что вы говорите?” She demanded and Shane looked anywhere but at her face. Her son just gave a half-hearted, “Okey.”

Shane stood there, ignoring the ghost who had stepped into his face and was repeating the same question, slowly as if he were a child. The stress was already mounting and she was not helping, with a stuttering exhale, he lied “Anyways, I-I should go. They're waiting on me. But good luck in the tournament.”

He held out his hand, pushing through the ghost's midsection, a move which got him an incredulous laugh and her muttering, “Ах ты маленький молокосос.”

She repeated it again as Shane waited for Rozanov to move the cigarette to free up his hand. When they touched, his mother kept repeating, “молокосос, Ах ты маленький молокосос!”

“I don't speak Russian!” Shane hissed and Ilya Rozanov looked at him with a curled lip that people did when they were making fun of him.

“That is why I speak English.” He said with a smirk.

Flinching, Shane muttered, “Sorry, that's not—my parents are waiting.”

“You will not be so nice when we beat you.” Rozanov chirped but Shane just kept walking because his head was pounding and he wanted to sink into the leather seats of his parent's car and pretend none of this ever happened.

The draft was worse. She seemed to lock onto him in the crowd, walking beside him and trying to talk. She seemed to cycle through every English word she knew which was mostly just “See me? Talk son! Ilya, son talk! Me?”

He was so shaken that he hadn't even realized he'd lost to Rozanov until he was in front of a camera flashing up two fingers and trying to hold back his tears. His parents were smiling

and clapping, happy with the deal but Shane could feel some growing gulf in his stomach rolling like he swallowed the sea.

“Вы хорошо справились.”

Shane couldn't turn, but he did tilt his head so that he could see the pale shape of her over his mother's shoulder. Rozanov's mother was smiling for the first time, head cocked and watching him with slightly narrowed eyes but not mean, just observant. The Montreal GM was still talking so Shane couldn't speak, but he did give her the smallest nod, and then she was gone. Probably back to Rozanov who was talking on the balcony above them.

When Shane risked a look up, he realized the eyes he'd caught were not hers, but her son's. Ilya Rozanov watched him, looking sharply away but Shane found himself caught by the way his mother seemed to be cycling through hand gestures beside him. He didn't know most of them, but from the way her face was all twisted up, they probably weren't kind.

When she gave a particularly big one, throwing her whole body into something with a first and her thumb, he honestly laughed. His party all turned to him, surprised. “Sorry, it's just been such a big night.” He apologized. The GM brushed it off, but his parents watched him with that little crinkle between their brows he knew meant they were worried.

Mrs. Rozanov must have seen him, because then she was leaning out over the banister and making the gesture again and Shane coughed to hide his smile and then excused himself to go get a drink.

That night, it was her familiar pale shape that he saw first, not her son's, in the small hotel gym. As they raced, she smiled and watched and when Rozanov, who was fresher and hadn't been biking for the last thirty minutes, crept ahead, she called out “Не дайте ему победить!”

She clapped even when he stumbled off the bike, following them to the floor in a frankly impressive crouch which both he and his mom could do but which his father never could. It was strangely intimate in the warm bubble they'd made.

“Whoo! What a fucking day, huh?” Rozanov huffed out, covered in a layer of sweat. Shane wasn't much better, panting and wishing he'd thought ahead enough to bring his own water bottle. “Is everything you dreamed of?”

“Almost.” Shane muttered and then watched Rozanov's mother reach out as if she might brush away a loose curl which had fallen into his face.

“Тебе нужна стрижка.” She huffed, pulling on a curl, right as her son gave a sly smirk and a laugh before saying, “I'm sorry.”

“No you're not.” Shane smiled back. His mother went a long way to softening any jealousy Shane had felt that day during the draft. Here, Rozanov was just another kid, one who lost his mother and would never know how much she clearly loved him.

“Montreal is...is nice, yes?” Rozanov asked and they went back and forth a bit, Shane not sure where the other kid was going until he asked “Boston is night nice?”

“He scared.” She spoke and Shane was so startled that he spilled water all over himself. When he finally realized that she'd spoken, broken and heavily accented but very clearly English, he realized she was watching her son intently.

“Hollander?”

Shane snapped back to him, realizing Rozanov had handed the water bottle back. “Yeah, I think so. People like it there.” Shane took a drink, then another when Rozanov told him to, and then ignored the little fissure of shivers which raced up his arms when they touched. Instead he avoided her eyes, and asked “I thought I saw you with your father tonight. You must get your looks from your mom.”

The sly smile he'd been wearing vanished and Rozanov hid his face by taking a long drink. His hand came up to rest over his chest, as if checking something, and then he muttered, “Sure, guess so.”

Shane felt his face flushing. He was so fucking bad at talking, he always said the wrong thing. “People say I look like my mom. I think it's just that we both look Asian.”

Shane wanted to kill himself. Why did he say that?

Even Rozanov's mother was looking at him with a raised brow and Shane could feel his already flushed cheeks somehow grow warmer.

“Okay.” Rozanov said. “So we will, uh...we will be seeing each other a lot?”

“Oh, sure, Montreal and Boston play all the time.” Shane said and they talked for a bit longer before they parted. For an instant, Rozanov's mother reached out and laid her hand on his shoulder. He couldn't actually feel the pressure, but he could feel the faintest chill that had shivers break out on his arms.

His last glimpse of the pair as he left the gym was of them crouched together, Rozanov looking off into the distance and his mother watching him, hand outstretched as if to cup his face.

When Canada won in the second Prospect Cup, Shane had been flying so high that he hadn't even realized Rozanov's mother wasn't with him until they were doing the handshakes. It was only in passing, Rozanov down a hall, phone to his ear, back to the doors did he spot her. Under the fluorescent lights, her tears were bright and when she caught sight of him, her face was empty and broken open. Defeated.

Shane had run before Rozanov could turn and see him but that look lingered long after they'd driven home.

When his mother told him about the CCM shoot, he almost told her about Rozanov's mother. She wasn't angry like some of the ghosts he'd seen, she just seemed sad, but Shane felt uncomfortable standing there knowing something it was clear Rozanov was unwilling to share.

Shane knew that because he went looking. He'd scoured player sheets, beyond just their stats, looking for some mention of a mother. He'd bought a Russian-English dictionary and went word by word through Rozanov's Russian page, but nothing was said except that he had a mother who died when he was young. It had to have been before he was sixteen, that was when the page was published, and Shane thought about his mom and how lost and directionless he would be without her and he got so upset he'd nearly thrown up.

So when he skated onto that ice, it was with three phrases of Russian memorized and a goal of learning her name.

Shane tried to keep a straight face but Rozanov kept laughing and that set off his mother who despite her demure appearance had a laugh like a sailor three times her size. It was loud and involved snorting and sent Shane into hysterics which seemed to set off Rozanov again.

When they finally called cut, Shane realized he had literal tears in his eyes from laughing too hard.

They talked a bit after while the crew set up for the next shots and Shane waited with bated breath for the moment that Rozanov had to go shoot on his own to catch his mother's eye.

She walked over with a raised eyebrow, and Shane tried to not let that intimidate him as he stuttered out in broken Russian, "Меня зовут Shane. Как вас зовут?"

Her face was surprised and it made her look younger. Then she smiled and leaned in to say, slowly as if she knew he'd need it, "Меня зовут Ирина."

"Irina." Shane tried and when she nodded, he said his final sentence. "Приятно познакомиться."

She let out a string that he bet was something like "Nice to meet you too" because it had nearly all the same words Shane had memorized, and Shane felt accomplished as they were released for the day to shower.

Then Rozanov jerked off in front of him and Shane gave out his room number and Shane forgot that Ilya Rozanov came with a ghost right up until the moment he opened the door and saw them both standing there. Shane blanched but Irina said nothing just gave a little wave before taking a leisurely walk off down the hall.

The room was all muted warm tones from the lamps, but when Rozanov leaned his head up after sucking him off, smirking and with a shameful flash of white on his tongue before he swallowed, Shane also realized hanging between their bodies was a familiar necklace.

"What kind of cross is this?"

Shane remembered Irina wore a cross, the only spot of color on her, and its twin, or more likely the necklace itself, now rested along his collarbone.

"Nothing." Rozanov huffed and then smacked Shane's stomach. He spoke some more, but Shane was distracted, thinking about Irina floating idly somewhere outside, seemingly

knowing and not caring that her son was hooking up with a man. He was stuck on that cross, so important that Irina imagined it on herself even in death. Shane's parents had never been religious. It suddenly felt stilted, this thing between them.

Shane played with his fingers, rubbing a thumb over the scar on his knuckle he got in pee-wee hockey. Then he thought again of Irina, leaning out over the balcony, pale hair drifting around her like a cloud. "Hey, what does this mean?"

Shane did the gesture she'd done, the folded first with the thumb sticking out, and Rozanov laughed and smacked his hand down, incredulous. "Who did that to you?"

"No one, I saw one of the Russian players doing it." Shane lied. "What does it mean?"

"Which player?" Rozanov demanded and then laughed again, pulling at Shane's hand as if checking that he'd seen correctly. "Is rude. Don't do to others."

"Alright." Shane thought of how strongly Irina had thrust her hand in her late husband's face. Of how not once during the draft when he had shamefully been spying on him, did Shane see Rozanov's father give him so much as a hug.

Then the outside world reinserted itself and a voice sounding too much like his mother for comfort started thinking about the optics of two up-and-coming rivals fucking.

"Please don't tell anyone."

It came out more pleading than Shane had wanted and Rozanov, huffed. "I have same secret. Who would I tell?"

Your dead mom who is probably hovering outside the door now? Shane wanted to say. Rozanov pulled on his clothes with the sort of efficiency of someone who had done this a million times and it sent something squirming in his gut.

Rozanov didn't stay long after that and Shane couldn't tell if that was a bad thing. He wanted to be alone, to parse through the feeling of a tongue on his cock, so different than when his first girlfriend Claire had tried, and yet also feeling strangely empty sitting alone on the bed.

He'd pulled some clothes on, legs folded up to his chest and head buried into his knees. That was why he hadn't realized someone was in the room.

"Был ли он плохим любовником?"

Shane's head jerked up and Irina was sitting on the bed. She was startlingly pretty, like something from one of those Russian fairytale drawings. Without thinking, his eyes fell down to her neck where the cross sat.

"I don't...I only know those three sentences." Shane threw a blanket around himself, he felt uncomfortable without a shirt on, and then went digging for his dictionary from his bag beside the bed. He found it under his discarded suit jacket and sounded out the first word, flipping through the alphabetical pages, holding it out to her until her finger landed on the correct one. "Was...I know that one, that's he, and that's...bad. Was he a bad..."

Her finger came down on the final word, her mouth moving around it, “Lov-er?”

“Oh my god!” Shane buried his head in his hands and then covered himself with the dirty comforter. “I’m not telling his mom what he did. This is so embarrassing.”

“Embr-ssing?” She asked and then pointed at his book until he groaned and flipped through it so she could read the Russian translation. He understood she got it when she threw her head back and laughed.

“Glad you think this is funny.”

Irina smiled and laid her hand over her heart, speaking slowly, a word at a time so that he could follow along. “Ты...ему...подходишь.”

“You are...good...for him—oh no! We just—” Shane tried to think of something that would be in the dictionary but the words ‘casual hook-up’ and ‘fuck buddy’ were probably not in there. “It’s not like that.”

He slowly repeated the words in mangled Russian but she was just smiling and nodding, looking at where her son had vanished a few moments before and the embarrassment rose up again. Oh god, he’d sucked off her son like ten minutes ago. Oh fuck, her son sucked him off ten minutes ago. Shane was going to throw up.

Before he could spiral any farther, she said something low and quiet that he couldn’t hear and had no hope of translating before she vanished.

They played again a few times that fall, Irina often a flash in the corner of his eye, but he didn’t speak to her again until All-Stars. They’d gotten all wired up and he’d had to watch her in the front row, bags under her eyes but smiling softly when Rozanov responded with one-word answers.

Shane, just having dove head first into learning another language, could commiserate when one of the reports spouted a meandering question even Shane had trouble following. He answered it the best he could and in the blandest of terms, which was made harder by the fact that Irina kept making faces in the front row. At least he knew where her son inherited his sense of humor.

That night when he saw Rozanov again he took one lap around the room to check for any wayward ghost moms and then immediately fell to his knees. It took his mind off the other million things buzzing around in his head and the steady pressure on his tongue, the repetitive motions, it soothed something in him.

Still, he was twitchy all night, thinking about Scott Hunter next door and Irina floating around somewhere, and so when Rozanov leaned back, Shane felt stupid and childish, until he muttered “Ok. So next time.”

“Next time?”

Then there is another thing for him to worry about, thinking about Rozanov and his mother in his apartment, of the sticky feeling of sheets being on his bed, and Shane hadn't realized he'd been breathing heavily until Rozanov leaned back.

"Hollander, you are having a panic attack." He joked. "Is just a plan to fuck."

Shane nodded, let himself sink into the mattress. He could feel the metal of Rozanov's cross on his chest, warmed from their body heat. After, there was a squirming in his chest, a burst of affection when Rozanov took his phone and put in his number.

Then the storm and the missed text. He used the time during the canceled game to practice a few new phrases in Russian, muttering them into Hayden's eldest's hair until her babbling had little Slavic lilts.

"Don't let her start sounding like Rozanov!"

Shane jumped, looking over his shoulder where Hayden had come back out of the kitchen with a beer. Shane turned down. "You trying to learn Russian?"

"There is this Russian woman who lives near me. I thought, with so many people in the league speaking it, it wouldn't hurt to learn."

"Damn, that's dedication to the sport." Hayden swallowed the lie easy enough, busy making faces at his baby in Shane's lap, but Shane let his guard down too early because Hayden followed it up with, "Is the Russian girl hot?"

"Nope, not going there. She's way older than me! Her son is my age!" Shane had absolutely no interest like that and turned to the baby to get off the topic.

"Alright, man. Just want you happy."

Shane smiled at that thought about the nebulous future where he had a wife like Jackie, maybe a kid, but the image never really settled. It hung suspended in his mind like the faint glow of ghosts, untouchable.

Any other thoughts were put on the back burner for Rookie of the Year. His mom seemed to think he had it in the bag, but he and Rozanov had tied in points, as much as he hated to say it, and Shane couldn't help but wonder if maybe drafting an acceptance speech was a touch premature.

The ceremony was bigger than he expected. Shane had never been to Las Vegas before and he disliked it almost as much as he expected to. It was too hot, every drive took ten times as long as it should, and there was not a single place where he could be alone, not even his room. His mother had gotten herself a key and let herself in and out the morning of the awards ceremony, steaming his tux and setting out his shoes. He tried to tell her he was an adult now but that just got him a sharp look which told him to shut up.

Vegas was also full of ghosts.

They were on every street corner, tucked away in every stairwell, lingering near attractions as much as the living tourists were. Shane knew that ghosts could travel, but only when attached to something, usually someone, as a guide wire. Irina was a good example of that, but now Shane could see that other ghosts must have had the same idea.

Luckily the swells of people and flashing lights distracted everyone, even ghosts, and not one seemed to realize Shane could see them. Still, he couldn't even go for a walk in his hallways without seeing an old-fashioned looking maid pop in and out of rooms as if looking for spectral messes.

When the ceremony itself started, Shane tried to pick out the pale white of Irina to help spot her son, but the whole room was moody and dark. When the lights went down and other awards were announced, he kept expecting to see her, the flash of her pale hair or white nightdress, but it never came. He was looking behind him towards the doors when his name was announced.

Like a robot, he stood and gave a little polite nod when he was handed his trophy and said the speech he was so thankful his mother had him prepare. Swarms of people descended on him afterwards, advertisers he directed to his mom and past athletes he sent to his dad.

Who he wanted to see was nowhere to be found. Without thinking, his hand brushed his suit pocket where, next to his acceptance speech, he'd tucked away his Russian sentences in case he forgot them.

"That better just be ginger ale, Rook." Scott Hunter leaned next to him on the bar. Shane nearly choked on his straw.

"It is, I'd never indulge in front of you." Shane rattled off, but his light hearted tone stumbled a bit and even though Scott was kind enough not to say anything, he definitely caught it.

But then, what exactly could Shane say when his dead parents hovered over each shoulder, flickering between track pants and tank tops to bloody, mangled, and missing limbs? Shane looked down to avoid their eyes, but he didn't worry too much. They only had eyes for their son.

"What would you say if me and some of the other old fucks wanted to do shots with the three Rooks?"

Shane nodded vigorously. Anything to take his mind off Scott's parents who had returned back to how they must have looked in life, dressed for practice, eyes filled with pride.

"Where's your boy Rozanov?"

"My-what?" Shane stuttered out. He ignored the way Scott's parents seemed to laugh, breathless and silent.

"No, I mean, not your boy. Just like, it's always Hollander and Rozanov, right? I just thought..."

Shane muttered some excuse which Scott thankfully bought and then Shane turned to avoid watching the couple flicker into bloody versions of themselves, flagging down the waiter.

Sometimes ghosts were more memories than anything, just afterimages of people. When Shane was four his grandfather had hovered over his bed for three days after his death but he never spoke, just watched until Shane got so overwhelmed he cried. His parents had thought it was grief and his grandfather had moved on not long after his body had been cremated, but it still stuck with him. Scott's parents never spoke, just watched, observed, loved. Somewhere around the third shot, he wondered if how you died might impact the type of ghost you'd become. He'd always avoided those thoughts when he was young. He hated the thought of being crazy and even after he'd determined time and time again that the information the ghosts told him was true, he just wanted to pretend to be normal.

Your boy Rozanov.

The words floated about his head after he broke away from the group, just tipsy enough that the whole world was a bit wobbly and his vision wasn't sharp enough to catch the details of his own hands, let alone ghosts. And yet, he saw her the moment he stepped out of the reception room and into the stairwell.

Irina was smoking an imaginary cigarette, wearing a magnificent black gown which pooled at her feet in diaphanous puddles.

"I don't think you should smoke here." And then realized that was stupid because she was dead and the smoke wasn't real so he instead pointed at her dress and stuttered out what he thought were the words for dress and pretty and hopefully in the right order. "красивое платье."

"Спасибо" She said and Shane beamed because he knew that one and then confirmed it when she repeated herself in English. "Thank you."

"How have you been?" Shane asked. He stumbled a bit which was embarrassing because he was just standing there but Irina smiled and took another drag so it must not have been that bad. He tried in Russian. "У тебя все хорошо?"

"Better." She hummed and at his confused look, "Your Russian. Still ugly, but better."

"Oh, uh, thanks? Oh, Спасибо!" He sat down on the stair in front of her so that he could press his head to his knees. "Sorry about this, I had too much to drink. Напиток?"

He tried to repeat that in Russian too but butchered it so badly that Irina's cigarette flicked out of existence because she was laughing too hard.

"I miss vodka." Irina moaned. "Never have because of... работа? Job? Then—" She gestured to her stomach and mimed it growing large. "What word?"

"Беременная? Pregnant?" Shane guessed and she clapped happily. He leaned in, enjoying the quiet conversation away from the cameras and all the people who wanted something from

him whether it was money or a sound-bite. Irina only wanted to talk and Shane thought not for the first time that being dead would be awfully lonely. “You got pregnant with Ilya?”

“No, no, Alexi. Oldest.” She explained.

“He never talks about his family.” Shane asked. He knew he shouldn't, that if Rozanov wanted to talk about something other than sex with Shane, he would, but the heat from outside was warming up the stairwell and the alcohol made his brain mush. “What was your job? Your работа? Why couldn't you go back?”

Irina opened her mouth and then closed it, looking for words, half-starting them and then giving up. Finally she just covered her mouth with her hand. Shane felt his already red face get warmer. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. I always say the wrong thing.”

“No, no wrong. Just...hard. And sad. After pregnant, no more фигурист.” Irina picked at her dress, finally looking over at him. This close, Shane could see that she looked older than Shane remembered her. She had been no older than mid-twenties when he'd last seen her, but under the bright fluorescent lights of the stairway she'd aged. “Husband was bad man. Mean man.”

“Did he—” Shane cut himself off. Always, always asking the wrong questions. Shane's stomach clenched and he prayed she couldn't guess what he'd stupidly been about to ask but from the way she leaned back, somehow casual and chic like her son, told him he hadn't fooled her. “I'm sorry, I shouldn't...it's none of my business. Извини.”

“Is ok.” She said, but the playful edge of her had dulled and Shane felt she had answered his question without saying a word.

“I, ah, actually came to find Ilya?” Shane deflected. His name still felt weird coming out of his mouth, but Shane thought it would be mean to call him Rozanov in front of his mom. “We were celebrating at the, ah, вечеринка. Do you know where he is?”

“Крыша.” She muttered and Shane racked his brain for any of the vocabulary he'd learned. When he came up blank she just pointed upwards. “Oh, roof, yeah.”

“Be kind. Ilya...” She smiled softly, waving her hand as though to pluck the word out of the air.

“Sad?” Shane guessed, something his mom told him not to do, but here it helped because Irina looked at him with thinly veiled thanks.

“да, sad.” She said softly, rubbing at her pale wrists. Because he was looking, he noticed that even though she could choose every detail of how she looked, Irina was not wearing a wedding ring. “You good boy, Зайка.”

“Oh, uh, Спасибо.” Shane logged the word for later, rolling it around on his tongue to try and get the sounds correct to try and translate when he got home considering all the online versions were shit. “Спокойной ночи, Irina.”

“Good night, Shane.” She repeated and then, “I watch door for you!”

“Oh that’s not...” Shane tried but she was laughing and even from the next landing he could see she’d remade her cigarette so Shane just let it go before climbing the stairs.

Slowly, making sure to take one step at a time so as not to fall, he sounded out the words on his tongue as he made his way up to the roof. Slightly drunk and seeing her son leaning over the ledge with a cigarette, Shane couldn't help but think of Irina. Had she jumped? Cut her wrists? Taken pills? Or had her husband done something? Had Russia itself been to blame? Something quiet, Shane thought, Irina wouldn't have wanted to scare her sons.

He was so busy thinking about the morbid fact that nearly all the ghosts who linger for years at a time were murders or suicides. There was just too much grief Shane thought, to let go easily on both sides of the veil. He didn't know what had caused it but Shane also knew that it didn't really matter all that much. Why would how she died matter when it looked like all her son needed was a hug from her?

“What does zai-ka mean?”

Shane hadn't meant to say that, but it seemed to startle Rozanov who seemed confused and then suspicious. He flicked ash off the roof. “Who called you that? One of the guys downstairs?”

“No.” Shane said. It had sounded affectionate when Irina said it but Shane would be mortified to learn it was mocking. “A woman in my building.”

“Called you little bunny?” Rozanov demanded and Shane had to press his head down into the railing to muffle laughter. “It's...affectionate.” He explained, smoke trailing up his face when Shane turned his head to look up at him. Then, as if he couldn't help it from slipping out, “My mama used to call me that.”

Shane's smile faded and he thought of the pair they made, two beautiful Russians smoking alone. Shane opened his mouth to say something but Rozanov cut him off, looking away and out into the city.

“Congratulations.” Rozanov gestured to below them and Shane had a strange moment where he'd forgotten receiving one of the biggest honors of his career. In the warm Las Vegas heat, Shane hadn't been Shane Hollander, Hockey Player, Impossible Idol, Unreachable Standard. He'd just been Shane, and it had been nice.

“Thank you.” Shane said, because that was what good, responsible, clean-cut people like him said.

“You are drunk.” Rozanov said, a touch proud, smile tilting the corner of his mouth. “Good. Big night for you.”

“I’m not!” Shane defended and then he really didn’t want to talk about the award anymore. “It could have gone to either one of us.”

“It went to you.”

Shane’s head snapped up and he had a rush of indignant anger. Rozanov went first in the draft, talked shit in interviews, and got to be seen out at clubs and with women. He was able to get drunk and get talked about because he didn’t have those kids who came up to him after games, saying they’d never seen someone like them somewhere like that—

Ilya’s sad, Irina had said. Shane groaned and he could almost feel the weight of Rozanov’s eyes.

“Are you, like, mad about it, or something? Angry you can’t do another victory lap?” Shane asked, but it was more unsure than anything. Rozanov grumbled something under his breath, the words just a touch familiar. “What did you say?”

“Not everything is about you, Hollander!” Rozanov growled and Shane wished he’d listened to Irina and left Rozanov alone. He felt worse than when he’d been in the reception room, surrounded by a thousand people and still alone. “What do you even want?”

“Nothing, I just needed some air and wanted to see the view...” It sounded weak to his own ears.

“And what? Here is the fucking view, Hollander, check it out. Fuck!”

Shane wanted to say something but he knew if he opened his mouth now whatever came out would be the wrong thing. It always was. His stomach was knotted up into one painful lump and his throat burned, maybe from the alcohol, but also the way it did like when he was about to throw up. That was second priority to the way his eyes burned. Shane bit his lip to keep the tears from falling.

“I go home in three days.”

For a minute Shane was confused. It felt like a complete shift in topic if not the way Rozanov delivered it like it should explain his nasty mood. Except it did in a way.

A bad man, a mean man, that was how Irina described Ilya’s father, and now he was going home to be stuck with him for three months. His own family was such a rock in his life that Shane had a difficult time understanding just how mean someone could be to make Ilya Rozanov look less like he was visiting loved ones and more like someone being led to the gallows. Still, Shane thought of the type of man who’d hurt a woman like Irina. The faintest of impressions of Rozanov’s father were in Shane’s memory, a stout man with large hands and the type of face he imagined a pit bull might have if they were human. He’d had medals on too, so maybe army or police.

“Will you be okay?” Shane asked. Obviously his mother was fine with it, she’d cracked more than a few uncomfortable jokes about it, but Shane didn’t think that acceptance would be shared by everyone. “Like, does your family know about...”

“Is Russia, Hollander, what do you think?” Rozanov sneered but his heart wasn’t in it. “Don’t worry, no one knows about you.”

“I’m not worried about me, I’m worried about you.” Shane pushed and he was looking directly at Rozanov and saw the little hitch in his breath as Shane spoke. “I just thought that we...” Shane’s voice trailed off and any confidence evaporated. “Nevermind. Ok, I’m going to...”

On unsteady feet, he turned, stopping only once to say something familiar, basic, acceptable just to that Ilya would stop looking at him the same way he looked at everyone else: as if he was making a grand joke that you were too stupid to understand. He clumsily held out his hand. “I’ll see you next season?”

Rozanov was blank-faced, looking through Shane instead of at him, right up until Shane’s back hit the wall and their mouths clashed in a wet kiss. Shane leaned into it, hands grabbing at Rozanov’s smooth chin, digging themselves into his curls. Finally the ground was familiar again and Shane knew exactly where to step.

Then Rozanov’s hand touched his neck and Shane remembered the constricting feeling of of his tie. He pulled back, Rozanov dipping in close to reconnect their mouths, and there was the burst of fear of getting caught, of cameras and his mother, and it was on his tongue to tell Rozanov off.

But Rozanov had more to lose and he chose to kiss Shane on an open balcony in their tuxes. Adrenaline junkie or attention whore, or maybe both, Shane tilted Rozanov’s head so that he could draw a line of open mouthed kisses down to his neck. It was a lesson Shane learned on the ice: Rozanov wouldn’t stop unless he was stopped, even when it was bad for him. Maybe especially then.

“Not here, not in our tuxes where anyone could see us.” Shane gave one final kiss which might have been more bite before gently pushing Rozanov away. Rozanov’s flippantness was annoying, and would have been too much for Shane if there was the chance of being caught, but there was only one door to the roof and Shane had a surprising amount of faith in Irina waiting somewhere a few flights down, watching the door. “Either come to my room or come back down to the party.”

“The party?” Rozanov asked and then seemed in the mood to push because he thrust his hips out into Shane’s hands. “No one is looking.”

“Maybe not now. What time is it? Do you have your phone?” Shane huffed but started a pat down it looked like Rozanov was enjoying too much. He found Rozanov's phone in the back pocket, screen filled with six notifications from a contact Shane barely realized he recognized. “Who’s that?” He asked as he handed it over to have Rozanov.

“My father. Are you going to send me dirty pictures while I am in Russia? Please don’t give poor man in Kremlin heart-attack when he sees them.” Rozanov joked but Shane just huffed. The notification still bugged him because the Cyrillic he’d seen hadn’t said father or dad, it had said Colonel. *A mean man*, Shane thought.

“Speaking of, Jane? Really?” Shane asked when he felt the ping of his own phone. Rozanov had sent him something. When he pulled it out, Shane laughed at the eggplant emoji. “You’re hilarious.”

Rozanov's face was a bit lighter and his shoulders were no longer as tight.

“You will miss me, Hollander.” Rozanov said brightly.

“In your dreams, Rozanov.”

“No, we both have less clothes on then.” He said and then leaned in for a final kiss, longer than it should have been but not as demanding as the first of the night. “Go on then, see you next season, Hollander.”

The stairwell was empty when he slowly meandered his way back down to the party, but there was the faintest hint of smoke still in the air.

When he got back to his room, he flopped back onto the bed and groaned when his head hit something. He wedged the Russian-English dictionary out from under his back and the comforter, looking at the cover and then thinking about the other word Irina had said that night he'd not known. Shane sounded it out, trying to determine which sound belong to which symbol. He found it on the bottom of the English Fs, фигурист, with a little picture. He made a noise, something with air getting trapped in his lungs. It was so fitting it nearly made him laugh, it nearly made him cry.

Irina Rozanov had been a figure skater.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

One thing that no one thought about when it came to seeing ghosts was how hard apartment shopping was.

i.e. their first time, the Olympics, and their Las Vegas hookup!

Chapter Notes

This chapter uses a lot of details from the Las Vegas Extra on the author's website, so if you haven't read it, I'd highly recommend!

Angst warning, it gets worse before it gets better! And a reveal! Kinda!

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

One thing that no one thought about when it came to seeing ghosts was how hard apartment shopping was. Yes, this high-rise had great views and an outdoor pool but it also came with a naked man who sat in it with half his head caved in. Sure the state of the art appliances were nice, but what about the disembodied baby crying in the next room for a mother who was never coming to hold them? Decisions, decisions.

He settled on a mid-rise in the business district, no ghosts that could talk but there was an orb which floated around a few times during the day but for some reason, never at night. Rozanov had cracked jokes about not wanting to be brought home but the truth of the matter was that his apartment close to the rink was filled with so many figments of players past, stuck in the places they remembered from their youth, that if one of them popped in while Rozanov was inside him, Shane would probably die on the spot.

Thus, the mid-rise. He liked it, liked how quiet it was and how homey the decorator had made it with the pillows and blankets. He liked the shiny appliances and the couch he sank into.

He liked it even more when Montreal won and Rozanov took him apart with his mouth and then his cock. The bed was nice, and there was not a single sound besides their panting, the slap of skin, and Rozanov's dirty talk which led to more panting and some of the most embarrassing noises Shane would never admit to having made.

Laying there after, Shane found he liked this better, the feeling of familiar sheets and the scent of his own laundry detergent in his nose. He almost said something, but it felt almost too intimate, even if they had been texting for nearly a year at this point.

What he really wanted to ask about, the illustrious career of Irina, was also so not appropriate for laying in bed with her son so he was stuck flipping through other possible topics while he showered.

When he finally threw himself back down on the sheets, Shane thought about saying something about the Olympics, or their teams, or the goals they both made that night, but settled on “That was so fucking hot.”

Shane thought it would settle Rozanov, he liked talking about sex, but he must have messed up somehow because Rozanov jumped up quickly, grabbing for his clothes and all but sprinting down the stairs. Shane followed, putting his own clothes into the hamper and picking out his softest sweatshirt and joggers to walk Rozanov out.

The stairwell was empty. He'd wondered where Irina was, and felt a little bad that he was happy to have some alone time with her son without constantly worrying about her waiting at the door. She couldn't tell anyone about it, obviously, but he still felt bad being stuck on the outside like that.

“So obviously we won't see each other during the Olympics, right?” Shane asked softly. His hands were digging into Rozanov's jacket when the man agreed and to keep him in place a bit longer, Shane kept talking. “Your family must be glad they're in Russia.”

“Mhm, yes.” Rozanov hummed but said nothing else. Shane wanted him to talk more. He had to push down the instinctive response of oversharing. It was unfair how cool and mysterious Rozanov could make it look.

“Is anyone coming to see you play?” Shane asked. He knew there would be at least one, but that Rozanov would not know that.

“My father, yes. Maybe my brother, but who knows?” Rozanov said and Shane felt his heart jump a bit.

“They should be proud, it's a big deal.” Shane said, then a bit cooler, “Even if all you'll get is a silver.”

“Hey, uh, remember when I made you come hands-free?” Rozanov snarked and Shane couldn't fight back his smile.

“Go fuck yourself, Rozanov.” Shane murmured as the man leaned in closer, breath rushing over Shane's mouth.

“Such a good trick.”

“Your cab is definitely here.”

The kiss that followed had his gut swooping. It was tender and familiar and slow, and Shane smiled until the door shut. Then he listened to the empty hallways and stood to go pack up his things.

He couldn't be alone with his thoughts that night.

Sochi was a rush from the moment he landed. There were six different screenings to get his baggage, something about sharp metal blades didn't agree with the officials, and he kept getting mistaken for other players. After the third French swimmer swore that she thought Shane was the Korean ice skater, he started to solely wear his Canadian team jacket.

Then Russia lost to fucking Latvia.

Shane sent off three messages, not one of which got a response, and Shane suddenly wished he had the magical gift of telepathy just to make sure Rozanov was doing alright. In all the interviews he looked beaten down, with massive dark spots under his eyes. He looked like his mother, sitting on that stairwell, looking at nothing.

“Russia is not safe for folks like that.” Vaughny had said and it stuck with him all day, rotating in his head until it got stuck with all the other facts he probably shouldn't know about Rozanov. His father was called Colonel, his brother didn't bother to come watch his Olympian brother play, and his mother held herself with the caution of one expecting a hit even in death.

So Shane sent another message.

Jane: Sorry about the shit goalie and nonexistent defense you got. You can't be the whole team.

He looked at it a few times as they sat in the stands and watched Joe give a flawless performance. Shane was so twitchy that when he spotted Ilya in the rafters, watching the ice so intently, Shane couldn't think of anything other than going to him.

He knew it was a bad idea, Rozanov told him not to talk, and when he got close, Irina was blocking his path. She was older again, wearing a nice dress and cardigan, the sleeves frayed from where she picked at it.

“No, not today, Зайка.” She said softly.

“He needs someone to talk to.” He then repeated it in Russian, clear enough that it seemed to startle Irina who flickered softly. He'd been practicing, had actually found a local spot where he could practice a bit, and he was thankful for it now. He couldn't read for shit, but his pronunciation was good enough.

Up close and without the screen between them, Rozanov looked somehow worse. His hair looked limp, his body heavy, shoulders folding in on himself. Shane could see Rozanov's jaw clenched the moment he saw him.

“Are you alright?”

That was good, simple. He'd been thinking about it all the way up here.

“Not here.”

Shane's stomach clenched and he felt wrong footed. “No, I know, I just wanted to see how you're doing.”

Irina floated up to Ilya, touching his shoulder, rubbing a hand down his back.

“Fine. Go sit down.”

Shane sighed, shoving his hands down into his pockets. Irina looked at him then, sharper than he'd ever seen her, and hissed, “Go, now.”

Shane didn't.

Stubbornness was an inherited trait and Shane clenched his own jaw until his teeth ached. “We...”

“We are not anything.” Rozanov said coolly and monotone and designed to hurt. Even his mother flinched. “Go away, Hollander.”

Shane stepped forward. “Are you ok? You didn't answer my texts.”

“No, I didn't answer your boring texts.” Rozanov turned to look at him for the first time during the whole conversation and Shane hated it. Hated the coldness in his eyes, the way his mouth was tight, the way he said *boring*. “Now will you go?”

And the truth was that Shane wanted to. He wanted to go back to his small shared room and cry a bit and maybe pretend that the flat look both Rozanovs were giving him didn't make him want to crawl into a hole and die.

But he knew too much and too little and he couldn't help but scoff. “Fine, fuck. I just came up here to tell you it wasn't your fault. You had a shit team made up of shit players who couldn't communicate for shit. Ok?”

Shane turned and left, suddenly angry at everyone, at Rozanov and his mom, at Russia and the Olympics as a whole. He was just trying to help. And fuck—

Shane stopped behind one of the pillars, away from any stairwell where someone might come up and surprise him. He knew this because he checked before he couldn't fight back the tears anymore. He'd gotten good at crying quietly.

The emotions came at him too fast, he couldn't parse through them all, it just felt like one big ball of hurt. His knees felt weak and he folded himself into a ball, head on his knees to keep his breath contained, quiet. He didn't hate them, that he understood, but he couldn't quite untangle all that as he frantically wiped at his face, praying that his eyes weren't too red or his face splotchy.

“Не плачь, зайчик.”

Shane waved her away, hatted her telling him what to do, he'd cry if he wanted to. He didn't want to see her, or for her to see him like this. "Go away! And stop calling me that!"

His heart was beating faster, his breath coming quicker, and it was scary because his vision was narrowing down to the flecked concrete under his shoes. He could feel his heart, how hard it was beating against his ribs. The uncontrollable fear of it bursting from his chest only created more panic, until all he could see was grey floor made hazy by tears and all he could hear was the harsh panting of his breath. When he did manage to look up, Irina looked frightened, outfit gone, replaced with her nightgown, hair loose and eyes wide as she watched on in horror. She was speaking, Shane could see her lips moving, but he couldn't parse out the words, except one—

"Ilya—"

"No!" Shane gasped. "Please, don't, please, no one can... I can't tell anyone!"

Later he would think about how stupid he was. Irina could no more talk to Ilya than it seemed Shane could, but in that moment the only thing which seemed worse than what was happening was to have it happen with Ilya watching.

Finally he wore himself out. His breathing evened out, his heartbeat slowed, and the aching cramps in his gut untwisted enough that he could lean back and meditate a bit. The whole time he was painfully aware that Irina was watching and he stumbled through his internal steps knowing that.

"I'm sorry you had to see that. I don't usually..." Shane said it in English, his brain too mushy for Russian, but even English was not enough to get his point across. "I don't know why that happened."

"You sick?" Irina demanded, her face sharp and searching.

"What? No, I just... I get a little worked up sometimes. I can handle it." Shane rubbed at his face, looking around for signs to the bathrooms, thankfully in English considering his writing in Russian was atrocious.

"Yes, handle well on floor passing out." Irina huffed. "Ilya's father too hard on him. He...how you say, набросился."

"Lashed out?" Shane translated, "it's fine. I can handle it."

"Okay." She said with the same disbelieving tone as her son and with that look, a quick up and down which let you know they were silently judging you. Shane didn't want to talk about him anymore, and immediately pulled out the question he'd been holding onto but hadn't gotten to speak to her about in almost a year.

"I looked up your routines, when you were a фигурист." Shane said softly. "You were really good. I liked the Swan Lake one, that was my favorite ballet when I was a kid."

“Repeat,” She demanded and Shane did, trying to replace all the English words with Russian ones with middling success, but she got it and her image shifted. When she rose from her flat footed crouch it was into a costume Shane had only seen through a pixelated screen. It was white, with the flair of fabric at her hips being lined with black. It had looked spectacular even with the shitty video quality when she’d jumped and the black had flashed to the audience.

Her face though, was the most startling. Irina had always, in Shane’s mind, had a sort of haggard quality to her. Most ghosts did, death was not easy and for the lingering sorts it was even worse, but he hadn’t realized just how browbeaten she’d looked until now. Now she was young, maybe his age, hair a bright blonde and pressed to her skull in a low bun. There were no dark marks under her eyes, or weight to her shoulders. She was a woman transformed.

“It’s beautiful. Красивый.” He said and watched her give a slow spin like he’d watched Joe do not thirty minutes before. “Did you teach Ilya to skate?”

“Yes, my little helper.” She said and then her face fell and the costume faded. Her face transformed most of all, not just older but more tight around the mouth. “Gregori said no son of his would do women's sport. So, hockey.”

“Did Ilya figure skate?” Shane asked, interested. He realized he was slightly smiling thinking about Ilya in a tight leotard doing swizzles on the ice. Shane had practiced with a whole lot of skaters in Ottawa and he'd liked it, but nowhere close to hockey.

“Yes, little bit. Bad at jumps, my little bunny.” Irina said and Shane laughed at the image of a tiny Ilya trying to be dainty and flowy on the ice. “Too solid hips.”

“Well, that makes him hard to knock down in hockey.” Shane thought. “So maybe he was meant to play.”

“Maybe.” She said with a considering look and a furrow in her brow as she watched him. She didn't stay much longer except to bemoan having to attend a party that night with Ilya with some important Russian politicians. Shane couldn't think of anything he'd hate more than politicking after the type of loss Ilya had just had. Still, from the hunch of Irina's shoulders, Shane didn't think there was much of a choice in the matter.

Shane slipped back into his seat, ignored the gentle ribbing about getting lost looking for the bathrooms, and watched the final few skates mostly in silence.

Shane’s phone buzzed that night while he was re-watching Irina's free skate, trying to imagine the moving blob as she had looked and with the references from the competition. Besides a basic knowledge, Shane didn't know much but he thought she'd been good. Clean turns, crisp jumps, fun elements like an intricate piece of footwork. He was so wrapped up in it, he almost brushed away the alert, thinking it was his mom's attempt to get him to look at Speedo's most recent offer, but it wasn't.

Lily: Is your goalie hurt?

Jane: Who told you that?

Lily: I'm winning the Cup.

Shane huffed and ignored the last text, focusing back on his video until he fell asleep, the music humming away in his brain. Maybe he would have responded if he'd known it would be the last text for months.

It made sitting on Hayden's couch, watching Rozanov tear through the other team's players like wrapping paper, all the harder. The house was quiet barring the screaming of living children and two dead ones who seemed to have followed one of the players in, a fact Shane tried to ignore. The timer ran out, his teammates all shuffled off to grab another beer or food from the grill. Shane was stuck to his seat, watching Rozanov raise the cup and—

He almost missed it over the yelling of the crowd and the blare of the announcers replaying key moments. Rozanov held the cup, sweaty and beaming, face so warm that it almost looked unfamiliar. But Shane did hear it over the din, because Ilya yelled it.

"I did it, mama!"

It was in Russian, and Shane felt the pit in his stomach drop. All for her and Shane couldn't even tell him that. Shane felt sick, begged off another ginger ale, and went back to his apartment to be as alone as he could get.

By the time awards rolled around in June, Shane had a more complete knowledge of figure skating than he'd ever cared to and a burning annoyance towards one Rozanov in particular. After the Cup comment, Rozanov had gone radio-silent. Every text was left unanswered and finally Shane got the message and stopped trying.

It was also why when he saw Irina hovering outside of a hallway at the awards, hand tucked up under her chin, pacing back and forth, he was a little worried.

"Irina?"

"Shane!" She jumped, funny for someone who could float. She looked guiltily at the door.

"Is Ilya in there?"

"No." She said and Shane wondered if Ilya got his lying gene from his father because Irina looked way too guiltily. "Maybe. Wanted to be alone."

"Is everything alright?" Shane glanced at the door and Irina slid in front of it like she could physically stop him.

"Yes!" She shooed him away. "Go...speak thing!"

"Present?" He offered and at her nod, he thought of what she might be hiding and his stomach clenched up. "Is he in there with someone?"

"What? No!" She said but undercut herself by running a nervous hand through her hair. Ilya did the same thing during breaks when his team was losing, it was a sign of frustration.

Shane bit the corner of his lip, worrying it a bit as he looked at the closed door. He wanted to smash in, to yell at Rozanov for never responding, for getting the Cup, and how rude he was the last time. But more than that, Shane didn't want to see Rozanov kissing someone else, he just knew he wouldn't be able to handle it. Already he could feel tears at his waterline and he threw his head back and marched away to avoid letting them fall.

Irina called for him, but Shane just blinked frantically to avoid smearing the foundation the make-up girl had applied. He focused on the speaker and the clapping of the crowd, listening more to the marks and the cues to tell him when he needed to come out. He prayed his eyes wouldn't be red on national television. His mom would kill him if any rumors started.

"Wow, nice watch, do they give those to you for free or what?"

Shane turned around and swallowed thickly. Rozanov was rebuttoning his suit jacket and his tie was askew like it had been taken off and hastily re-tied. His hair looked like hands had been run through it. Shane looked away quickly, eyes on the podium, Irina a white blob off to his left that seemed to be looking at him but he knew if he had any hope of getting through this speech, he couldn't look at either of them.

"We're on in five seconds." Shane muttered and his voice was tight enough that Rozanov noticed. Shane prayed for time to go faster.

"Twenty-five seconds."

"What were you even doing?" Shane demanded.

"I was busy."

"With who?" Shane couldn't help but ask, turning to look at him for the first time. Rozanov looked too, and Shane realized with dread the exact moment Rozanov clocked that Shane had been crying.

But then their names were being called and they were dragged out to perform like trick ponies. In the front-facing camera, Shane could see his eyes were still red, and Rozanov's smile was more forced than Shane had expected. It felt like an unending eternity, the clicking of the camera, Rozanov taking more photos than they needed for the bit.

Shane pushed past the wave of people lining up to prepare the next award, marching down the same back hallways and into the bathroom Rozanov had been hiding in not ten minutes before. So many fucking ghosts in theaters. It happened in places where so many people gathered. Now, he hated it when the door closed and he came face to face with two teens, one rail thin and with track marks on his arms and the other dressed like an extra from *Le Miserable*. He looked around, wondering where Rozanov been, if the faux-marble counter would still hold the heat of whatever hook-up he'd had. If it was in one of the stalls where a dancer in an ugly brown tutu peeked her bloody head out.

Breathing was getting harder, quicker. Maybe that was why his chest was so tight and painful. He pressed his hands down in front of the sink and pressed his forehead into them until he could feel the pressure in his skull. It was something else to focus on and it was broken when

the door opened and Rozanov swaggered in and leaned across the paper towel dispenser. Irina followed him, mouth tight and flicking between the two of them like she was unsure of what she should say. He felt surrounded.

“What are you looking at?”

Shane glanced over at him, realizing he'd been staring at Irina for longer than he'd realized. Rozanov looked at the far wall, where he unwittingly met eyes with the mother he couldn't see. Shane opened his mouth, but all he could feel was the prickle of humiliation to be caught like this and irritation by how good Rozanov looked. The dancer said as much.

“Oh so now you want to talk?” Shane huffed. He wanted to rub his face but knew that would only bring attention to his red eyes. “You don't answer a text from me in six months, so what exactly do you want, huh?”

“I want you to suck my dick.”

“Oh fuck you!” Shane huffed but any anger was undercut by embarrassment. The ghosts behind him tittered, enjoying the show and Shane wanted to melt into the floor. Irina was rubbing her forehead in the corner, almost pacing, but Shane noticed it wasn't in anger or annoyance, it was fearful, and worried. She was speaking softly in Russian but Shane could only catch every other word and she spoke back and forth, as if talking to them both, and Shane felt like the little plastic ball in a game of ping pong.

More than that, Shane felt this rolling boiling anger at himself. He wanted to kiss Rozanov, fall to his knees on this filthy bathroom floor, be folded up in his arms, anything to stop all the noise in his head, the laughing from the teenagers. It was a marching band, a parade, the deep rhythmic pounding of a drum line, trapped inside his skull. He was talking before he'd realized it, over and over, head down and eyes closed.

“I can't do this, I can't do this, I can't—”

Rozanov was close now, his cologne spicy and rich, soothing enough that Shane let his head thump onto Rozanov's shoulder. The Russian babble stopped, the muttering of the teens quieted, the marching band called to a halt.

“What is wrong with you, Hollander? Is just an award.”

And for the first time, Shane laughed at him. He didn't mean it to be rude but the way Rozanov went tense under him told him it came off that way. Shane rubbed his face into Rozanov's neck until the man's shoulders relaxed, until he understood that Shane had just said something stupid like Shane always did.

“It's not about the MVP.” Shane said finally.

Never before had Shane even considered telling someone about the ghosts. Even with his parents, he talked around it, never about it. But he wanted to tell Rozanov. Wanted him to know his mom watched him win the Stanley Cup in her honor, that she sat with him in the

stands and guarded him in stairwells when he was sad. He didn't want to hold onto this secret any longer.

"I need to tell you something."

"You're pregnant." Rozanov joked and Shane groaned and pressed his head into the man's collarbone like he had the sink.

"This is serious." Shane said and when Rozanov went quiet, just ran a hand down Shane's back in a tender mockery of what he had just done on-stage, Shane couldn't get the words out. "I can...I mean, when I was a kid—no, that's stupid. It's just hard, you won't believe me."

"I believe you." Rozanov said and before Shane could relax at his light tone, the man ruined it. "You're too boring to lie."

"Fuck." Shane huffed and pushed himself back. "Forget it."

It was like pulling off the skin on a sunburn, peeling himself from Rozanov. He put a distance between them, hands on Rozanov's arms to keep him away, to give Shane some room to fucking breathe, something he couldn't do the moment Ilya stepped into his personal space. Rozanov's hands were limp at his sides and his jaw was so tense it looked like he might crack a tooth. Irina was muttering in Russian again, "Oh, baby, my baby. Ilya, oh..."

"Why don't we play a game?" Rozanov offered, leaning so that his mouth was closer to Shane's, drawing him back into his inescapable orbit. "We will go back to our seats, watch the rest of this boring show, and then go to boring party after. And then, when you have been waiting all night for it, you will come to my hotel room. And I will maybe, maybe, do more than suck your dick."

Shane was so struck by the offer, the cool distance Rozanov had managed to make in words that had no right to get him as hot as they did. His cheeks flamed, he buried his face in his hands and wished so hard that he had the ability to vanish in a pop the way ghosts could. Oh god, he couldn't even look behind him to see if Irina was still there. His heartbeat felt painful in his chest and yet he couldn't help but laugh a bit, a thought which seemed to sprout the longer Rozanov talked and Shane decided if he couldn't drag himself away from Rozanov, then he'd drag Rozanov away from the topic he always seemed to swing back to.

"When did your English get so good?" Shane watched Rozanov's jaw loosen just slightly and he couldn't hear Irina's Russian muttering anymore. He couldn't bring himself to check if they still had an audience, just watched Rozanov's eyes and then his mouth when he realized Rozanov was avoiding eye contact.

"I read the New Yorker now."

"Really?" Shane asked. It was a lovely detail Shane couldn't imagine, maybe that was why he was a little sad to have it crushed a second later.

"No. The New Yorker is boring." Rozanov was looking away now, but Shane couldn't drag his gaze away. He was rooted to the spot, knowing they had an audience but being unable to

help the smile on his face. It was stupid and embarrassing, a trial in humiliation, and Shane couldn't stop his mouth if he tried.

“My dad loves it.”

“Ah. So boring is—is genetic.” Rozanov asked and Shane found himself absurdly charmed. How did he know that word?

“Wow.” Shane said softly, trying desperately to match Rozanov’s tone even while knowing he was failing. “Genetic.”

“Let’s make a deal. You win MVP I will blow you, suck, you whatever you want.” Rozanov offered and looked at him for the first time in what felt like a century. It was too much and Shane could feel the weight of his tears on his lower lash line. He must have looked so stupid.

“And when you win?”

Rozanov looked like he might answer but then he seemed to realize what Shane had said and stilled, eyes locked onto Shane. Then it didn’t matter who was watching because Rozanov was kissing him, deep and with a grounding hand on his chin, keeping his head in place. As if Shane would move, as if he could.

The slaps were an uncomfortable wakeup call. They were light, almost playful, but they were also uncomfortably mocking. Especially when they were followed by, “Good luck tonight.”

Then Rozanov was gone and when he finished brushing away his unfallen tears, he realized Irina had vanished and so had the tutu dancer. The teens were still there, but they were bent together, talking and ignoring him now that they’d had their show.

Rozanov won, just like Shane had said he would.

The hallway leading up to the penthouse was empty. Shane guessed not many people killed themselves in the hallways and then flinched at such a morbid thought. The doors to the elevator had closed behind him and he stood there for a few seconds rocking back and forth, feeling the squish of the carpet under his feet to eat up time.

He didn’t know why he was so nervous. They had done this before, so many times, and yet this time felt...different somehow. He felt it the moment he opened the door, in the cool, distant way Rozanov stood. The unfamiliar distance he kept between them, even when commanding him to strip.

“Good, now get on the bed.” Rozanov ordered and Shane felt himself respond without thinking. He felt a bit wrong footed, but he liked the floaty feeling he got when Rozanov told him what to do. “This is a good hotel, good vodka. Hard to find in America.”

Shane wanted to ask what made vodka good, it all tasted like battery acid to him, but his cock was hard and he desperately wanted Rozanov to cross the room and kiss him. Shane

swallowed thickly as he crawled on the bed. There had not been a single time they had met that Rozanov hadn't touched him. Shane's fingers twitched for something to pick at.

"Touch yourself. Show off for me, I want to watch you."

"You what?" Shane gasped. He looked around, thankful that expensive Vegas hotels were often remodeled, so often that they didn't seem to have too many lingering ghosts. Shane still looked around, Rozanov seeming to smirk at his caution.

"This is my special day, Hollander, I want to watch." Rozanov took another sip and Shane wanted something in his mouth.

"I've never—"

"No shit." Rozanov muttered.

Fuck you!" Shane couldn't hold back his laugh. "Give me some vodka at least."

"No, no, vodka is your reward for after."

Shane had a hundred responses on his tongue, some of them meaner than others. Instead, alone in a way he so rarely got, Shane thought about how he'd be touched if Ilya was on the bed with him. It's be his neck first, they usually started with kissing, or went for the jugular. His hand was a poor substitute, but it got Shane going enough that he could imagine the heat of Ilya's mouth trailing down his chest, catching on each dip of his ribs, tongue running over his stomach and the muscles they both shared. Finally, kicking his feet up to get a better angle, he took himself in his hand. It wasn't as satisfying as when Ilya did it, but when he opened his eyes, he saw the way Ilya watched with rapt attention. Shane felt strange, his stomach tangling itself up in knots. As if sensing that, Ilya spoke, eyes on Shane's erection.

"Do you want to know how it feels?"

Shane was too horny to think too hard. "How what feels?"

"Holding the Cup." Rozanov snapped his lips on the P and Shane felt a rush of indigent anger and a flash of humor in it. "Uh, I can barely describe it...Oh my god, Hollander."

"You fucking asshole!" He laughed, shimmying out of his briefs and throwing them. He wanted to make an accuracy joke, he'd demolished Rozanov's scores at the last All-Stars, but any thoughts were out the window when Rozanov brought the briefs up to his nose before dropping them to the floor.

It was easier now, Shane was warmer and looser and there were no ghosts to avoid or parents to please, it was just one set of eyes he had to worry about and they were locked on to where Shane slowly pumped his cock in his lap. He went slow, putting on a show, and something shifted the longer it went on. Rozanov's control had shifted, and there was something in his posture, a slight lean forward, like a hunting dog waiting for the whistle to release them. Shane sat on the bed and for the first time all night, felt powerful.

Powerful enough to ask the question that had been swimming around in his head since Rozanov had stepped up beside him back stage with his handsome fucking face. “Are you going to fuck me?”

“We will see.” Rozanov said but Shane knew weakening in a voice and he saw the way Rozanov was white-knuckling his glass.

“I need...” He drew it out, twisted his wrist like he knew Rozanov liked on his own cock, watched the man’s eyes flick down and then back up. Shane hated fishing, but the feeling of landing Rozanov might be enough to change his mind. “You know.”

“Tell me.” It was an order and a trap.

“You.” Shane said softly, watching the catch of Rozanov’s breath. “I need you.”

Hooked. Shane could see it, the thick swallow, the way Rozanov stood and took off his scratchy shirt he knew Shane hated the texture of. So Shane crawled, he wanted Rozanov to know he wasn’t the only one, that this rolling boil of feeling was shared. That it was worth the shame which ate away at him after, if he got to have Rozanov’s cock in his mouth now.

Shane mouthed at Rozanov’s pants, biting at the zipper until Rozanov gasped and shucked them off to let him get at his dick which was already hard. It was nice, familiar, heavy on his tongue. It took every thought with it, even when Rozanov pushed him away and Shane could hear the snap of a lube bottle. He was floating inside his own body, a ghost in his own skin, warm and heavy. He was meat to be moved around, Rozanov’s large hands grabbing him by the hips, shifting him until his back arched just right and he could glide right in. There was a hand on the back of his neck, shoving his face down into the bed. His drool stained the sheets, maybe a few of his tears too, when Rozanov’s cock went particularly deep.

Then there was the faintest sound, Rozanov speaking and Shane realized that he recognized the words. If anything, he thought they were going to be slightly mocking, or more curse words. But they weren’t.

“Почему это должен быть именно ты?” Rozanov murmured and Shane’s mush brain worked through the words slowly, thinking he was mistranslating them, but they were there, undeniable, and worse, Rozanov kept talking. “Почему ты такой идеальный? Это просто ужасно.”

“What?” Shane said, trying to shove his head up off the bed to better hear but being shoved back down by the strong hand along the back of his neck. It was unfairly hot, but also kind of annoying.

“Nothing Hollander. I said you have a tight ass.” Rozanov huffed, speeding up like he wanted Shane to forget whatever he’d heard, and Shane groaned a bit when it worked and he let his brain work through the words, mouthing them, stuck on a word, which he muttered again and again, until he spat out “идеальный, идеальный, прямо там!”

Rozanov jerked above him and then made a choked sound before coming. Shane was so startled that he made a little gasping sound and moaned loudly when Rozanov’s hand slid

under his hips to jack him off onto the already ruined sheets. They fell onto their backs, panting loudly in the quiet room, the air kicking on somewhere in the penthouse to keep out the heat rising up off the Strip. Shane didn't even get to savor the after glow because then Rozanov was over him, brows all tight and breathing heavier than a single orgasm should make him.

"You speak Russian now?" It wasn't cute or flirty, it was worried and slightly panicked. Shane realized, a little weirdly considering they were sweaty and covered in cum, that Rozanov had the same furrow in his brow as his mother.

Shane reached up and rubbed it out while sighing, "A little. I recognized the word."

A little more than the word, if he was honest but Shane had convinced himself that he'd misheard, that there was no way that Ilya Rozanov had said that Shane was *perfect*. That he'd looked down at Shane and asked *Why did it have to be you? Why are you so perfect?*

"What does ужасный mean?" Shane sounded the word out carefully and Rozanov looked like he'd grown a second head. "What? I like learning languages."

"No, you do not get Russian. Choose different one." Rozanov decided, reaching out to grab a cigarette. Shane huffed, disparaging remark half way out of his mouth before he let it go.

"I'm going to go look it up if you won't tell me." Shane threatened, sitting up. "Is it bad?"

"No, Hollander."

"Then tell me." Shane demanded.

"It means harder."

"No it doesn't, there are like three words for hard and that's not one of them." Shane pushed. Rozanov looked put off his game for once, rubbing at his eyes to avoid Shane's. "Fine."

Shane, still naked, stood to go grab his phone and look it up but Rozanov's arms wrapped around his waist and like some WWE wrestler, threw him back on the bed. The indignant squawk Shane let out was neither here nor there, but he could feel the way Rozanov's lips quirked up in a smile along his stomach where his arms were wrapped. Using his legs, he wrapped them around the trunk of Rozanov's hips and rolled them.

Rozanov's hand found its way under his chin, trying to push him back and Shane squealed when his other hand trailed up his ribs and they both froze when the fact that Shane was ticklish landed like a bomb in front of them. Shane threw himself to the side but it was too late, Rozanov had dug his fingers into his armpit and under his chin and all thoughts of Russian were out the window in favor of self-preservation. He squealed, yelped, laughed until he was near tears.

They were both heavily muscled hockey players at the top of their game and all Shane could think of at that moment was getting his feet between them and launching Ilya across the room. He did eventually manage it and they both laid sprawled across the bed, panting.

“You’re an asshole.” Shane said eventually and that finally got a laugh out of him.

There were a million things he wanted to say, but too many of them were things he should know nothing about and the others were things he knew he shouldn’t say. Sitting on the bed, sweat cooling on his skin and the AC raising goosepimples along his arms, all he really wanted to do was talk. Talk to the man who had, Shane was realizing slowly, called him *perfect*.

“Do you believe in ghosts?”

Rozanov looked up at him. “What the fuck, Hollander?”

“Answer the question.” Shane pushed.

Rozanov looked annoyed and Shane was a little worried that he’d kick him out, but then Rozanov sighed and picked up his cup of melted ice and vodka and took a drink. “No.”

Shane pushed himself up onto his elbows, thinking about how best to say what he knew he needed to, when Rozanov spoke again.

“Not always. But sometimes.” Rozanov took a drag. “Why?”

“Listen, I know how this is going to sound, but I...” Shane was shaking slightly, looking at Rozanov’s cross to avoid looking in his eyes. “I can see them.”

“See who?” Rozanov was leaning in, eyes darting back and forth over Shane’s cheeks like he was trying to follow some invisible conversation and failing. Then disbelieving, “Ghosts?”

“Yes.” Shane said right as Rozanov laughed and leaned back on the bed, putting more space between them.

“Fuck, Hollander, you’ve got to be kidding me.” He huffed, throwing back whatever dregs were left in his glass. “I thought you were serious.”

“I am!” Shane said and then his words stuck in his throat and all he could get out was “Your mother—”

“Get out.”

Shane hadn’t heard Rozanov’s voice ever get so low or so cold, not during annoying press junkets or even the Olympics, but now it was so cold and his eyes were so flinty that Shane actually moved back on the bed, the sweat on his body cooling and sending a shiver down his back.

“Rozanov...” He tried but the man was already standing, moving into the living room. Shane had to follow, couldn’t help it, trailing after him. “Please, I know this sounds bad—”

His carefully folded clothes were shoved into his arms and then a strong hand was on his arm, firm to the point of bruising, yanking him up out of the conversation pit. Shane was babbling now, trying to think of something that would allow him to stay, but whatever the

magic phrase, Shane never found it before he was shoved out into the empty hallways and the door was slammed shut, the sound of the lock painfully loud behind him.

Shane stood there for a few long seconds, unsure of what he was doing until he realized he was holding his clothes in his hands. By the time he'd pulled on his pants, he was crying, by the time his shirt went over his head, they'd grown to sobs he couldn't quite silence. Irina found him at some point after he'd dragged himself up and hobbled his way to the elevator.

"Where are you going?" Irina demanded. Shane clicked the elevator button again but it stayed stubbornly on floor two. "What happened?"

"Nothing, Irina." Shane said, but his voice gave him away. It was too raspy and he slammed his mouth shut to attempt to control himself.

"You cry!"

"I'm not—!" He said and then hit his head against the metal elevator plate, not wanting to look at her. "I'm fine. I'm always fine."

Irina looked back at the closed door and Shane couldn't help but miss his mom. He wanted to lay down with his head in her lap.

"You should go talk to him." Shane finally got out. Irina watched him with an uncertain squint but floated towards the door. "Wait!" She stopped and Shane, holding his shoes to his chest like a child with a stuffed animal, asked "What does ужасно mean?"

"Bad, terrible, awful." Irina said. "Why?"

The elevator dinged and Shane was never more thankful than then to see it empty. He stepped in and scanned the button panel to avoid the cutting eyes of Irina watching him from the door. She looked torn, so Shane just smiled and said "No reason."

The door closed.

Shane pulled out his phone, hands stumbling through the expected response which they had been perfecting, something along the lines of *See you next season* but he was shaking so he deleted the text. The next was worse, *We didn't even kiss*.

He wanted to tell him, about Irina, about the way she'd remained at his side for at least ten years, the way Shane hadn't realized he'd missed the kissing until he'd been denied, about how he knew exactly what Rozanov had said that night because he was learning Russian to talk to him and his dead mother. *Why did it have to be you? Why are you so perfect?* That had been what Rozanov had said to him, breathing heavily into his neck. In any other language, spoken by any other person, it could have been sweet. *Why are you so perfect? It's fucking awful.*

Shane let his phone go dark and wished, not for the first time, that he could do one fucking thing right.

Chapter End Notes

I know I don't respond to every comment, but I DO read every single one! Thank you so much for your care, it means the world!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Happy weekend, this week back kicked my ass! I stayed up late to do a final read through, but I'm sure there's some errors I missed so sorry about any mistakes. That said, thank you for all the wonderful comments, they make all of this so worth it to know you are enjoying this story! We're into the happier stuff soon!

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

In the end, it took Rozanov seven hours to respond to his bland *Have a good summer* text. Shane had spent every single one of those hours checking his phone. Warming up his meal, then checking his phone, going for a run, then checking his phone, getting some reps on the rowing machine, and then checking his phone. He nearly dropped his phone in the toilet when Rozanov responded, a simple *Don't have too much fun*.

It was enough, something untwisted in his stomach that had been tight since their last game where Rozanov hadn't even chirped him, instead he'd just been terrifyingly quiet and avoided Shane's eyes. That had been worse than anything he could have said. The fact that Boston trounced them didn't help.

Shane tried to keep focus on next season. He had a good feeling, something about the synergy of the team was coming together, but every now and again he'd open his phone and check the text chain just to look at it.

There were a few nights, rare because he refused to allow himself to slip so close to the start of the season, that he drove up to the apartment. It was untouched since the last time they were there, but it was wonderfully empty. No orbs or disembodied voices, no one to watch as he pulled up Rozanov's game clips and stuck his hand down his pants. This shame was his alone and while it made him squirm in embarrassment to think about it after, nothing got him harder or got him off quicker.

It was on one of those nights at the apartment, feet up on the couch and watching some old footage, that his phone alerted him to the fact that Rozanov had been tagged in a photo. Ignoring that he had set up the alert at all, he switched over to his email, answering a few until he felt like he'd done enough to earn looking at it.

When Instagram opened, Shane had trouble understanding what it was until he turned his brightness up and realized the blurs were actually two bodies which had been shoved together. One was a pretty woman, curly hair and a white smile, and the other was Rozanov. His hand was curled around her waist, possessively, and the other was hung over her shoulder, their fingers touching right over her breast. Something squirmed unpleasantly in his stomach. The caption was in Cyrillic, and Shane mentally debated going to grab his

dictionary before he clicked out of the app entirely. He only had it because his mom made him download it to market his brand deals, and now more than ever he wished that he could just go to his cottage and hide away.

But no such luck. The rest of the week was photoshoots butted up behind interviews trailing behind sponsorships and followed by meetings about more photoshoots, interviews, and sponsorships. Rozanov didn't do that, he shot one commercial for some fancy cars and fucked off to Russia which Shane knew he hated. Then again, Shane hated Orange Crush but he'd just been paid an exorbitant amount of money to pretend to drink it and post a fake photo of a six pack in his fridge. Shane pulled a pillow off his couch to try and smother himself.

When the season started back up, Shane had honestly expected the radio silence to continue. Hard to come back from "I see your dead mother" and expect to get another hookup, but the human spirit really was incredible because Shane got a text right before the game against Boston.

Lily: Room 1254

Lily: Leave the ghost talk outside.

Shane was blushing and he looked around to make sure no one was watching. Everyone was busy but Hayden who watched him with a small smile which Shane ignored. He read through the texts again, heart pumping fast enough that Shane could almost hear it. His fingers hesitated over the buttons, typing and then deleting a response.

He wanted to apologize. More than that, he wanted to explain, but greater than both of those feelings was the reminder of trying to quickly dress in that penthouse hallway, jumping at the sound of the elevator, even knowing there was no one on the floor but Rozanov.

Telling him would be stupid, it would only push him away, the one thing Shane had that was his. Not his mother's, or his team's, not even Shane Hollander the brand, but just *Shane's*. And he wanted that.

Jane: No ghosts. Promise.

He sent the text and when he put the phone down, he resolved to make those two sentences fact. Ignoring had worked before, it would work again. It would have to work again. No more ghosts.

It worked. Shane got to see Rozanov's penthouse apartment, got fucked up against the windows and then on the California king mattress with silk sheets. Rozanov followed him into the shower after and blew him against the terrazzo tile, laughing for the first time that night when Shane asked where he got them.

Shane was careful, he thought through every angle of what he said, made sure it was familiar, expected, nothing about Russian or ghosts. He kept to fucking and hockey, topics designed not to scare Rozanov off.

Only once in Shane's Montreal apartment did he slip up, halfway through their run at the Cup, when it looked like the night was coming to a close, his face was smashed into his lavender scented pillows, and they hadn't kissed once.

He tried to leverage himself up, but his arms were like jelly, his face just kept crashing down into the wet spot he'd made from drooling. They'd been at it for almost an hour, his body more liquid than solid, and when he finally shifted up so that they were vertical, Rozanov kept leaning back, away from him. He was so fucked out that words failed him, making pathetic little mewling sounds, apparently pathetic enough that Rozanov took pity on him and grabbed him by the hips, jerking forward and crushing their mouths together.

It was almost as good as holding the Cup. Almost.

Their texts got their banter back, Rozanov sent him more jokes, and Shane cut down the number of days he allowed himself at their apartment in case he became too reliant on it. He threw himself into reading, working through three biographies about notable coaches and one novel about the McGill players who started the sport. He ignored the notifications on his phone. Most of the time. Some of the time. Once.

It paid off. They played better, he got fucked against his banister so good he saw stars and six weeks later he won his second Cup. He celebrated with his team, got drunk at an expensive club and pretended to not see the three dead party girls hanging around the bar.

Harder was ignoring Irina.

She was there sometimes, at the games and during their press junkets, and she tried to talk to him enough times that Shane got familiar with keeping a straight face while being yelled at.

He learned every syllable in the Russian word for asshole, the number of times she yelled it at him. He only broke once, during one of their final hookups before summer in Boston where Shane had gone down to grab an extra towel and she had cornered him in his boxers. He'd nearly screamed, but clamped his hand over his mouth.

She was irate with him, frowning so hard it made wrinkles in her forehead.

"I can't do this, Irina!" He whispered quickly, looking up at the stairs and praying Rozanov didn't come looking for him. Talking to air was not a good look.

"Oh now he talks!" She yelled. "A year of ignoring me! A year! I had to talk to American ghosts, Shane! *American!*"

"It improved your English." Shane countered and she made a little scoffing sound. Shane grabbed the towel and then buried his head into it, pushing down the instinctive want to scream into it. He turned to her. "You saw what Ilya did the last time I mentioned you. I can't risk it!"

"Then you did it wrong. Do it right!" She gave a little wave and Shane threw his head back to avoid looking at her. She could be as infuriating as her son. He said as much in nearly fluent Russian.

She flipped him off right as Rozanov called, “Hollander?”

“Coming!” He yelled, flipping her off right back.

The summer after the second win was somehow busier than the last. Everyone wanted a piece of him. There was one nice weekend he got to spend at his cottage at the end of July. It was long days of lounging on the dock and grilling for his parents, stretching on his deck to the gentle lapping of the water and the calls of distant birds. He was intruded on the last few days by a camera crew who seemed set on shoving their nose into every one of his drawers and had way too many thoughts on where he should set his mat for some shots of him doing yoga.

When the season started back up, he almost welcomed the break in building his brand to focus on actual hockey and not the play pretend shit that got him on billboards and in ads. Being back together with his team also meant fielding questions about who he’d been with and what expensive vacation home they’d been shacked up at. Shane mostly ignored those conversations, but Hayden made it harder. He’d gotten a new catch-phrase:

“—and she has this friend...”

“Hayden, it’s the middle of the season, I don’t want her number.” He’d pushed back but he was quickly blowing through his excuses. He’d already killed off a nonexistent relative and then had to explain the bouquet Hayden had sent to his mom. He was getting a bit frantic. It was all the time now, from babysitting nights to taking the kids out to the aquarium.

“She does mommy yoga, maybe it’s just stretching but she’s seriously hot!”

Shane laughed it off, held Arthur and focused on the weight of him, the warm baby smell that all the Pike children had. He’d held each one, braving the hospitals because he loved them even before they touched his arms.

“Tell your dad to leave me alone.” He hummed into Arthur’s hair. The baby didn’t say anything, just babbled and smacked his hand around, but Shane thought it was endearing.

It got less endearing when Jade and Emma picked up on it and kept asking about when he’d get married. He’d cut their princess tea party short and drove home with the weirdest feeling that a clock was ticking over his head.

The break in this mounting pressure, of the games and his parents and Hayden, came from an innocuous address from Lily which Shane pulled up on Google maps to learn was a gated house just outside of Boston.

Shane had never been to Rozanov’s actual house. He had a penthouse closer to the rink they usually used, and Shane felt a bit off balance the moment he walked up to the door. It was a new build, thank god, and besides an old lady wandering around the road, was blessedly free from ghosts barring one he knew would be inside. He’d spent nearly an hour in the shower cleaning himself and then another forty minutes picking through his suitcase to decide on what to wear. He’d searched up ‘trendy outfits’ and bought whatever showed up so he hoped it looked alright.

Shane didn't worry long, the clothes didn't make it to the bedroom before they were left on a chair in Rozanov's living room. He had a huge couch, the kind you sort of sink into, and it was easy on his knees as he rode Rozanov.

They didn't do this often and Shane frantically wondered why the longer it went on. It wasn't as deep as he liked, but the smooth roll of it was nice, and seeing Rozanov under him, face scrunched up and almost in pain made the warmth in his gut magnify.

Irina was not there, at least not that he saw and they did make their way through most of the house. There were the blowjobs in the kitchen and the fuck on the couch and then the rutting they did in the laundry room when they went in to toss their clothes. Rozanov's hand was rough around their dicks, harsh and hot, and familiar. It was why he was so blindsided when Rozanov leaned forward to nose at his throat, muttering, "Will take an hour, come to bed."

Shane followed, but he hesitated on the threshold of the room. It shouldn't have been a big deal, they'd fucked on lots of beds, but there was something in Rozanov's tone, an intensity in his eyes and pressure in his touch which was new and different and a bit frightening.

"I'm going to grab a towel." Shane said, pulling back a bit, "Where's your closet?"

"I have towels." Rozanov pulled his hand and Shane faked a laugh.

"Seriously, if I have to wait an hour, I don't want it to be on your dirty towel or a wet spot." Shane pushed. His heart was beating faster and Rozanov was watching him again with the same look he got during a game, like he was thinking out which plays could nab him a goal.

"Down the hall, next to the bathroom." He said and then launched himself onto the bed. It was so plush he bounced a bit. "Don't be long or I'll start without you."

Shane found the towels and wrapped one around his waist. Quietly, he whispered, "Irina? Irina!"

"Теперь тебе нужна моя помощь?"

Shane spun around. Irina was wearing a Boston jersey with her son's number on the sleeves. Shane figured it was as close to a fuck you as a classy woman like her would get.

"Yes, I want your help." Shane said sharply. "What's wrong with him?"

"Maybe he finally understands, did you think of that?" She said, then she got closer and her voice got tighter and less angry, more sad, and she spoke in slow Russian. "He talks to me now. In the mornings, at sunset, he believes!"

"What? No he doesn't." He said because it had to be the truth. Rozanov hadn't said a single thing to him about Irina or ghosts. "He hasn't said a thing about it. You're wrong."

"I'm his mother, I know my son." She said and then followed him as Shane made his way back to the bedroom. He was betting on her being a little too grossed out by the sight of her naked adult son to follow him in. "Shane, listen, слушать, you must tell him something from me."

“I’m not doing that, нет, no!” Shane whispered but it sounded painfully loud in the empty hallway. He was slightly shaking now, his throat feeling uncomfortably tight. “I just got this back, this one thing that’s mine, and I’m doing everything not to fuck it up and you want me to go tell him, what, that his dead mom has a message for him?”

“Yes!” She said and her face was somehow both pleading and determined, her mouth pulled down but her eyes staring right at him, as if just daring him to swerve. “It is about when he was a boy—”

“No.” Shane said and then walked into the bedroom. Rozanov had not started anything, was laying spread out like a nude model, leg outstretched and one arm over his head. The sunlight, a rarity they never had in any of their other hookups, was doing wonders for him. When he heard Shane, he cracked open an eyelid and seemed surprised when Shane crawled over him and caught his mouth.

Shane had intended the kiss to be the wet, filthy type they favored, but Rozanov slowed it, deepened it, until they were lazily rutting together on midnight blue sheets. Shane was struck again by the light, the way it pooled in Rozanov’s cheekbones and settled under his brows. He was beautiful and Shane wanted him for himself. So badly it nearly ached.

They were coming to the end of their script. They had fucked and done the small amount of cuddling they were allowed, so Shane waited for the familiar refrain of *I’m tired, See you at the game, Enjoy your flight*, the shorthand they had for when their trysts were over.

But it never came.

Rozanov rolled him over and slid his cock between Shane’s thighs. They were still slick from the round on the couch and it rubbed along the underside of his own cock, sending delicious ripples of pleasure down his spine. This was new. It was nice.

The gentle rocking created a pooling warmth in his gut, a slow build and unlike the flames they usually made. Then again, this would be his third orgasm in almost two hours and it seemed almost like it was being pulled out of him.

He flexed his adductor muscles which ran along the inside of his thighs, thanking the long hours on the rowing machine for the way it dragged a groan out of Rozanov’s mouth.

“Hollander...”

It took nearly thirty minutes for them to cum, a long, painfully pleasurable thirty minutes which had him arching off the sheets and had Rozanov running through Russian swears by the end. That was always a good sign.

Rozanov collapsed on him, pressing soft kisses along his shoulder. Shane’s brows rose. It was strangely tender. He wondered if Rozanov was trying to throw him off his game considering they were in the running for another Cup to add to his collection.

“Do you know those ones?”

Shane looked over at him, still catching his breath and not understanding the question.

“What?”

“Those curse words? Do you have them in your little book?” Rozanov asked and Shane felt his face flush.

“How’d you know I have a book?”

“I didn’t. Figured you would pick book and then you confirmed it.” Rozanov was close, leaning into his space, face still flush and mouth quirked up in a crooked smile. “You know the naughty words?”

“Yes, I know swear words.” Shane argued but he pulled the sheets up to cover himself. He felt strangely exposed in the light, almost like he had nowhere to hide. The fact that Rozanov was talking about this was also unusual.

“You know ебать...?” He kissed Shane’s shoulder. “What about дерьмо...?” Down a bit, towards his nipple. “You must know ублюдок...?” His tongue caught it first, then his teeth. Shane moaned, dick trying valiantly to get hard again. He was so caught up by it that he almost missed Rozanov’s next words. “Clothes still need to be dried. You could stay.”

“What? Stay?” Shane grabbed Rozanov by his hair, pulled his head away from his chest long enough to look him in the eyes. The man was smiling but there was a slight tension in his jaw. His smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“Stay here tonight.” He said, eyes slipping shut a bit when Shane yanked, mouth falling open, and then laughed slightly, breathlessly. “I’m not done with you yet. And afternoon game means no morning practice.”

It was so wildly out of character that for a minute Shane thought he might be dreaming. He didn’t know what to say, except that he absolutely couldn’t stay and yet there was nothing he wanted more.

“I told Hayden...”

“Is Hayden your mother now?” Rozanov demanded.

“Fuck off.”

“Who cares what you told Hayden.” Rozanov huffed and then he leaned in, their breaths mingling between them. He shouldn’t, they don’t do this, they never did this, and yet... Rozanov leaned in with a tender kiss, almost chaste, and it unlocked something deep in his chest. It felt warm, like sunshine. “Stay.”

Shane had to be perfect, there was so much resting on him, but fuck, he wanted this, desperately, so much that there was only one word he could get out.

“Ok.”

“Ok.” Rozanov smiled, soft and boyish, and Shane smiled back.

They didn't talk much, not even when the laundry machine beeped at them. Rozanov just yanked him back down and buried himself along Shane's spine like a large Russian octopus. It was almost too easy to let his body unwind and to let the warm arms and soft bed lull him to sleep. When they woke it couldn't have been more than an hour and he woke up to warm puffs of breath along his neck and mumbled Russian into his hair. "Я голоден."

"Hungry for what?" Shane asked thoughtlessly, his sluggish brain translating but taking its sweet time. Rozanov seemed happy enough, grabbing his tit when he responded.

"For food, pervert."

Shane stretched out, felt for the familiar ache in his lower back, and flinched when Rozanov threw a pair of joggers at him. They were a bit small around the thighs, but he was swimming in the t-shirt he borrowed.

They made their way lazily to the kitchen and Shane avoided Irina who sat in one of the decorative chairs near one of the large windows. Shane was so busy watching her glare at him that he missed the sound of the fridge opening and nearly jumped at the sound of a can being sat in front of him. "Ginger ale?"

"You like?" He asked, then, "cold enough?"

"Ah, yeah." Shane said dumbly. Irina wandered over, hands behind her back like some Bond villain. Her dead-eyed Slavic stare didn't help.

"You like tuna melt?"

"You want to make me a tuna melt?" Shane asked, focused on keeping his eyes on Rozanov and not his mother who was doing a lazy circuit of the room and coming over to his side, leaning down onto her elbows to stare at him. It was wildly distracting.

"I was going to make one for me, I can make two." Rozanov said reasonably and Shane nodded.

"Special ginger ale. Wonder why he bought that?" Irina asked with faux-confusion. "Printed out recipe, practiced all last night. Why do that, you think?"

"Hm." Shane said to say something and it got both Rozanovs looking at him in confusion.

"Smooth." Irina said as her son dragged up a topic which at least put him a bit at ease.

"You head to Florida after this, right?"

"Yeah, right after the game. Tampa, then Sunrise. Then we go to Dallas and St. Louis." Shane explained.

"He knew that, he printed off Montreal calendar." Irina snitched and Shane rubbed a hand over his face to mask his quickening of breath. "Oh look, all the ingredients ready to go, wonder why?"

Rozanov was tense again as he took out the things he was using for lunch and Shane's gut swooped when he realized they were pre-portioned, like he knew he'd be cooking for two. Or maybe he liked leftovers, Shane's brain argued.

"Ah, all the hot spots." Rozanov said and then, "Food will be ready soon."

Shane picked at the tab of his ginger ale to give him something to do. He noticed distantly that it was his favorite brand, the one he had to bring with him when he came to America because they used a different recipe in the States and it didn't taste the same. When Rozanov slid the sandwiches into the oven and had Shane trail him back to the living room, Shane opened the can and took a sip.

It was the Canadian kind, with more ginger, and his stomach curled up into a knot. It only got worse when Rozanov sat down on the other side of his massive sized couch.

Shane tried to loosen his tight back, but Irina had followed them, leaning on the edge of the couch with that same gleam of energy her son had when he was being a little shit on the ice. That he'd inherited it from her was somehow both surprising and completely expected. He relaxed a bit with the shop talk. It was second-nature to chirp other teams, and Rozanov laughed at his joke about Buffalo.

"And people say you're not funny." Rozanov laughed.

"They do?" Shane demanded, slightly embarrassed.

"Yeah. They say you're boring too."

"Who says that?" Shane pushed.

"Me."

Irina threw her head back and laughed so hard she gave a little snort and that got a laugh out of Shane. As if some line had been crossed, Shane relaxed a bit, letting himself lean back against the couch. It helped that Irina had stopped glaring, instead giving her son a disgusted mom-huff when he shoved his hand down his pants before she went to claim a chair near the window.

"What's your, uh, favorite city to play in? On the road?" Shane eventually asked when the hockey game ended and the replays started up.

"Mmm, I like New York, 'cause it's New York. They fucking hate me there."

"They hate you everywhere."

"No, not Florida. It's full of Boston people." Rozanov was rubbing his ear and it was distracting Shane a bit. "And you?"

"He did that as a baby. Soothed himself to sleep when I couldn't get up to grab him." Irina said suddenly and Shane fought to keep his face neutral, not to think about what she meant or

little baby Ilya in a tiny crib, waiting for a mother to come comfort him. Shane cleared his throat.

“Uh, I like Ottawa, ‘cause it’s my hometown. Toronto, Winnipeg...I’m happy they have a team again.” He paused when he heard the laughter. “What, are those boring answers?”

“Yes.” Both Irina and her son answered at the same time.

“Well, I like the hot places too.” Shane tried and then Rozanov made a sound which made it clear he was poking fun again. “Hot like the weather, hot.”

“Ah, ok. LA is hot. Hot women.” Rozanov said and Shane could see over his shoulder that Irina had slammed her head into her palm. Shane’s comfort evaporated. He looked back up at the screen to avoid either of their eyes.

“Yeah, sure. I mean, there are hot women everywhere.” Shane tried to sound casual. If Irina’s disbelieving curled lip was any indication, he failed.

“There is a girl I like here very much, Svetlana.” He said. “She’s old friend from Russia. Her father was famous goal tender of Soviet team. She knows everything about hockey. And she likes you very much.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” Shane gritted out right as Irina let out a humorless laugh and buried her head into her white night dress covered knees.

“Oh Ilya, you дупак! Shut up!” She tried, then looked to Shane. “Don’t listen, my boy is silly sometimes.”

“So she’s like your girlfriend?” Shane asked and didn’t know exactly what he wanted to hear. Knowing Rozanov was a cheating asshole would make it easier to distance himself, but it churned up his stomach acid and he felt a little like he might throw up.

“No, no, nothing like that. She’s old friend...sometimes we fuck, but...she’s busy these days, you know, new business selling fancy cars.”

“Sounds perfect for you.” Shane said and thought about the girl in the photo last summer. Her name had been Svetlana. They were close. Old friends.

“Yes, it’s close to that but...”

“But what?” Shane asked.

“But it’s nothing more than that for either of us. But it’s nice to have regular woman like that around.”

Shane waited a beat, and thought through the day. Everything felt slightly out of joint, like trying to watch a 3-D movie with only half the glasses; he could tell he was missing half the picture. He looked to Irina for help, unsure exactly what Rozanov was getting at, because all Shane could think of was some roster, like a Russian sex draft where Shane’s was the lucky number to be drawn because beautiful Svetlana was too busy selling fancy cars.

“You think she’s the only woman in Boston who’d sleep with you?” Shane asked.

“I think I will find someone else.” he said and Shane let that hang like a sword between them. “But you know me. I’m lazy, so...”

“Исправьте свой английский! Fix your English!” Irina demanded of her son who couldn’t hear her. “I *could* find someone else, but I *don’t*, why not say that! Ебать!”

Shane thought Rozanov’s English was fine, and he couldn’t help but contradict Rozanov’s comment. “I don’t know that side of you at all.”

And that was the truth. Even when he rose to get the tuna melts, Shane couldn’t help but wonder who told Rozanov that he was lazy. He lacked discipline, sure, but no one baring Shane himself seemed to work harder.

“Don’t listen to that boy.” Irina pushed, sitting down in the space her son vacated. Shane could hear him banging around in the kitchen. He ignored the pang of something at the thought of how domestic this all felt. “He wants to impress you.”

“No he doesn’t.” Shane whispered. “He knows I’m easy.”

Irina looked at him then with her mouth open, and worse even than her anger was her pity. “Bunny...”

“Here.”

Shane took the offered plate, jumped a bit when Rozanov sat right next to him, nearly sitting on his mom who had drifted back just in time. They ate quietly, Shane’s moan nearly pornographic when he bit into it. He hadn’t had real cheese in weeks or bread which wasn’t more an oat cake than a loaf in longer. Finally, after they devoured their plates, Rozanov bumped his shoulder.

“You like them?” Rozanov asked, watching him carefully.

“Yeah, it was good.” Shane took another fry. It was a cheat day, he’d calculate it later.

“Girls.” Rozanov said suddenly.

Shane rubbed the grease off his lips and let out a slightly strangled sounding, “Oh. Yeah, sure. Of course I do.”

“I never hear about you with girls.” Rozanov pushed.

Shane brought his ginger ale up to his face to think through his answer. “I mean, it’s private.”

“Right, private.”

“Jesus Christ, Ilya.” Irina moaned, dramatically throwing herself back onto the couch.

“I keep a lot of things private. Obviously.”

Apropos of nothing, Rozanov stated, "I like girls."

"Yeah, no shit."

"But I also like you." He said, meeting Shane's eyes like Shane was supposed to get something out of it.

"Lucky me." Shane responded, short.

"Not as person, of course." Rozanov joked and Shane's fingers clenched a bit at the familiar jokes. At least now he knew the lines.

"Of course not, I'm boring."

"But you have a good mouth." Rozanov ended on and Shane figured he meant it as a compliment but Irina was covering her face with her hands and muttering so he didn't know exactly how to take it.

The phone rang and Shane saw only the faintest flash of a word before Rozanov was up and talking quickly, looking back at him with a flash of fear before he marched into the other room. *"Hello, papa. Yes, I got your message. I did answer you, we spoke yesterday—"*

Shane tried not to listen in. His written Russian was still horrible, but he'd gotten pretty good at speaking and even better at basic listening comprehension. To avoid listening in, he bumped up the volume on the TV.

This had literally no effect because Irina started yelling out a play by play.

"Alexei has left him alone and my husband's new wife is off spending all his money with her new Tennis instructor." Irina explained as she was leaning against the wall, "Good for her."

"Irina!" Shane hissed.

"No, no, now you listen." Irina demanded once she'd determined her son was apparently sufficiently busy on the phone. "I need you to tell him this—"

"I'm not. I can't." He said and it came out more choked than he'd wanted it to. Irina clocked it, but she pushed forward, leaning down so that they were facing each other. "Irina, please—"

"It will be hard, but you are brave." She said and then reached out as if to comfort him. They were both somehow surprised when her hand passed right through him. "He needs to hear this. You are the only one who can tell him."

Then she spoke, quick and low in Russian as if the words couldn't come out in English. "Tell him Это была не его вина. Я сказала ему идти на тренировку, я сказала ему спрятать ключ. Он всегда был таким хорошим мальчиком, всегда делал всё, что ему говорили." Shane missed so many words but he got the painful, ugly picture. "Я не хотела, чтобы он возвращался ко мне. Это должен был быть не он. Почему это должен был быть именно он?"

Her sentences were growing choppy and quick, as if they were pulled up from her stomach and cut on the way out.

“Передайте ему, что я уже была мертва до того, как он поговорил со своим отцом, и что даже если бы он рассказал ему о ключе, было бы уже слишком поздно.” She was sobbing now, big heaving cries which seemed to rattle her whole body. Shane could feel wetness on his cheeks too. “Это была не его вина, он просто пытался быть хорошим сыном—”

Shane let out a gasping breath, realizing the quiet yelling from the next room had faded and he frantically rubbed at his eyes, trying to pretend that he wasn't shaking.

When Rozanov came back, he was forcing a smile on his face and Shane's stomach clenched around all the food, making him wish he'd never eaten. Shane kept his eyes forward, towards the screen but actually on Irina.

“Are you still hungry?” Rozanov opened with.

“No, but thank you. That was great.” Shane tried to keep his voice straight but he wavered so to cover it he asked, “How's your father?”

Rozanov's smile wavered a bit, and in a playful tone which fell flat, asked “How much did you hear?”

“Not much, but the word dad is pretty universal.” Shane said softly, waiting with bated breath. He couldn't exactly pin point what he wanted, maybe just a sentence, something to show that Rozanov could trust him with this. But it passed, and Rozanov instead tucked him into his chest and clicked on a game Shane could not care less about.

There was nothing he wanted to talk about less, but the story had bloomed before his eyes, painful and inescapable. Irina sat on the center table, tired and panting as if she'd run a mile, teary gaze locked onto her son with such love it seemed to exude from her.

Rozanov's chest was warm, the hands in his hair were gentle, and just once he felt the barest press of a kiss to the crown of his head. It was too much. His mind was buzzing, adrenaline flooding him with nowhere to go. Irina had stood and walked away, face the oldest he'd ever seen, body almost leached of color till her skin looked almost grey.

The whole day had been treading water and now he was dumped into the deep end and he'd forgotten how to swim. They didn't do this, they didn't cuddle or talk about feelings, Rozanov had shown that time and again and Shane felt like he might be vibrating with worry. He was doing this wrong, something was wrong and Shane panicked that any sudden movement would shatter whatever careful truce they'd built.

It made sense to drag his hand over Rozanov's bulge, to crawl into his lap and kiss him until they got hard. Familiar, expected. It was rough and quick and dirty, a frantic handjob to hold back the words trapped behind his teeth, the uncontrollable emotions that he couldn't name or push down. This was his and he could have this, but only this. Shane was skilled in controlling his impulses. He had to be. But he stumbled and then fell, mouth moving without

his say, peppering kisses across Rozanov's face, over the bridge of his nose, down to the pale column of his neck.

"Fuck, Hollander."

It was familiar, it was good, Shane told himself. It was a sense of solid ground in a situation which was quickly spinning out of his control. It was why he followed the script, "Are you going to come for me, Rozanov?"

"Fucking make me." A challenge, Shane loved challenges and this one was easy, appealing in its simplicity. A handful of spit and two cocks in his hand and the world made sense again.

Except when Rozanov's mouth opened in a cut off moan, chest heaving, and whispered, "Oh, fuck, *Shane*."

He said it softly and yet it pierced something tender in Shane, the twisted unnatural part which seemed to squirm with joy at the sound of his name coming from his lips. It came without thought, without his say, new and ugly and unacceptable, "*Ilya*."

For a single blissful second, the words hung in the air and then he felt the smallest smile against his cheek, Rozanov's mouth curled up in happiness, and then Shane was blinking back tears. Shane put their dicks away, rubbed the cum onto the shirt and avoided the way it made him itch just knowing it was there. Shane stood, shaking, knowing he would have to say something and knowing it would break all of this. He was split down the middle, pulled in too many directions and he was spinning out.

"I should..." Shane started and then looked around as if a lie would materialize out of thin air. "Um, I should...I should go."

Rozanov's smile faded and the hands which had held Shane close fell limply to his sides. "Go?"

"Stay, uh, I can't...team meeting in the morning. I forgot. So..."

"Ok." Rozanov said incredulously. "*You* forgot team meeting?"

"Thank you for the tuna melt." Shane said, because that was what you said when someone did something nice for you. He was holding onto those formalities now because Rozanov, as always, had changed the rules and not told Shane. "I'm sorry. This...I just can't."

"Hollander." The name, his name, fell like a crashing wave over him, smothering any hesitation he had. It was distance and separation. It was painfully, achingly familiar. This was what Rozanov had promised.

"I can't...you don't understand. I can't do this." Shane said, his voice shaking and he didn't know who he was talking to anymore, Rozanov who was sitting on the couch with a hand still held out where it had once rested on Shane's hip, or Irina who had stepped back into the room and watched him with cold, suffocating disappointment.

“Shane,” Irina begged. Then Rozanov made it worse with a plea, softer and tenser, “Hollander.”

“I’m sorry.” It was low and tight to hide the way he could feel tears starting to choke him. He turned to walk out but Irina blocked his way. She was grey again, stiff from death and watching him with milky, vacant eyes.

He’d already ruined everything anyways, Shane thought, the one thing he’d allowed himself and it was gone now. He’d opened his mouth before he realized he was speaking.

“It wasn’t your fault.” He whispered. Rozanov wasn’t looking at him. The words were clunky and too cold, Shane felt it as they came out and even before he’d finished, he knew he was doing it wrong but it was too late. “When she asked you to hide the key to her room, you were just doing what you were told. It wasn’t your fault.”

Rozanov went still on the couch, not looking at him but his chest was moving quicker and Shane knew he had to get this out before Rozanov gathered enough thoughts to toss him out of this place too.

“Even if you had given the key to your father when he asked for it, it was too late.” Shane kept his words clear and concise, even when Ilya jerked a bit, like he’d been hit. “Irina says she’s sorry, that she didn’t think about you being a good son wanting to go to check on her. She says she’s so, so sorry. That you shouldn’t have seen that. That it’s not your fault.”

It was a long unending moment where Shane watched as Rozanov seemed to try and translate the words again, as if worrying he got them wrong the first time. Rozanov was looking down, panting, head shaking a bit like he was trying to manually clear his thoughts. Not a single word came to mind and Shane looked frantically to Irina.

He’d done what she’d asked, he’d told him, and then—

Shane couldn’t think about a minute from now without his brain going white with hot licks of panic. For a moment he stood there with his shirt in his hands, waiting for—something.

“I just, uh, I had to tell you.” He said and then made a sound that sounded closer to a choke than speech. “I’m so sorry. For all of it.”

“Hollander.” Rozanov tried again, standing, but Shane just shook his head and moved as quickly as he could to the door. His keys were in a little dish on the entrance way table and the sight of them, a little blue Montreal keychain mixed in with Rozanov’s sporting a flashy black and gold number 81, made his lunch threaten to make a reappearance.

Before the door closed, he swore he heard his name, a soft, pleading “*Shane...*” but he couldn’t for the life of him tell if it was Irina or her son.

He made it back to the hotel somehow. His whole body ached like he’d already played the game and got his ass handed to him. Hayden tried to talk but Shane just buried himself under his comforter and pretended the whole world didn’t exist.

But it did exist and it moved on around him. They lost horribly in the game, Shane missing easy passes, eyes in the stands looking for that familiar flash of white but finding nothing but disappointed fans. He jumped at every phone call to the point that his parents joked about him creating mob ties. But, he'd decided that he'd simply have to try harder. No more secret trysts or talking to ghosts. Shane Hollander was going to be normal. It was harder than expected, and he knew he was a bit snappy on the ice.

Hayden must have snitched, that was the only reason his parents seemed so set on driving up to see him and picking their favorite restaurant to eat and—Shane wasn't exactly sure—pressure him into a vacation? He couldn't think of anything he'd like less. Hockey was the only constant he had.

So when JJ called about the Le Tambour, Shane really had no intention of going. He'd been in a pissy mood for days and his sleep schedule was shit, and he kept waking up from half-remembered dreams about Irina grey and cold interposed with Rozanov on the ice, blood trailing behind his skates. Not to mention the restaurant was filled with ghosts, something about those hipster bars in old buildings attracted them like flies. Yet it wasn't somewhere Shane Hollander typically went and that thought alone made it slightly appealing.

The atmosphere was nice, homey, lit primarily through candles and shaded lamps and filled with an alright amount of people. More than made Shane comfortable but not enough to freak him out. He spoke with JJ for a few minutes, then felt self-conscious when he realized he didn't have a drink like everyone else. The bar was mostly empty and the handsome bartender smiled brightly when Shane walked up. He tried not to blush and pretended to read the menu.

"Uh, do you have any ginger ale?" He asked.

The bartender made a face, still smiling but Shane could see it was an abnormal request. "I mean I do, but..."

"Actually, just a beer please, whatever you have on tap." There, Shane thought, that was something normal people said.

Normal people didn't have to ignore the business man in the corner bleeding all over an equally ghostly glass of whiskey or tune out a crooning singer in a red beaded flapper dress tucked away in the corner with a slice through her throat, but Shane was taking it in steps.

"Shane Hollander can have whatever he wants here." The bartender said and Shane felt the faintest bloom of warmth in his stomach. Shane rushed to pull out money but the man shook his head, and Shane wondered if he felt the tension too. Shane pushed, but the man just slid the money back. "It's an honor."

Shane took a long sip. It was disgusting, like wet bread, but the bartender was watching him so Shane kept drinking until he could think of something else to say. He settled on "Cool crowd, huh?"

"You kidding? A bunch of famous actors are here tonight." Then he leaned in like he was imparting a secret. "Rose Landry's here, man."

“She is?” Shane gasped. He’d seen nearly all of her movies, most not his choice but playing on the planes, but the thought of a movie star was exciting enough to get him out of his own head. Then again, Shane had never been one for being star struck. That was normal, right? “I might be needing another one of these.”

Being a lightweight was not something Shane worried about all that much, but when he finished his first beer and realized the crooning woman had started singing louder and JJ got drunk enough that he started to want to touch everyone around him, Shane made an excuse to get some air. The bar had gotten busier, people in nearly every corner. Shane scanned quickly, spotting an empty seat and sitting down.

The singing had gotten louder, the sound intercut with bubbling sounds of the split flesh of her neck opening with the force of the notes. He was trying to keep his cool, was trying to follow whatever conversation JJ had been having, but when he thought about it, he couldn’t remember the topic they’d been talking about for the last twenty minutes.

“Are you here to help me finish these fries?”

Shane turned and was star struck. He couldn’t help but smile, Rose Landry looked just like her photos, better maybe, and Shane had the thought that he better understood why people might be excited to meet him if this was what it felt like. She smiled slightly, kindly letting him straighten up and probably close his gaping mouth.

“The chef gave them to me, and they are really good. I’m not going to fit in my costume if I eat them all.” She picked one up, chewing, throwing her head back. “Jesus Christ, those are so good.” Then, thrusting her hand out like he didn’t know who she was, “I’m Rose, by the way.”

“I’m Shane. I’m...wow, I’m a big fan.” Shane smiled again. Rose was nothing like he’d expected.

“Would you be surprised that I’m a fan of yours?” Rose asked and Shane couldn’t help the slightly giddy, “Really?” She smiled back, nodding. “I’m a Michigan girl with three brothers. Have a fry, Shane Hollander. Detroit's not going to go easy on you tomorrow night.”

Shane did, but he skipped the sauce. Too many empty calories. Still, they were good and it gave him something to do which wasn’t letting his excitement run too wild. Rose Landry knew who he was, knew about hockey, and more than that, she made him laugh.

He liked a girl. This was normal, he told his heart which was beating hard.

Rose was a great conversationalist. She had funny stories and the voice to tell them, lulls and pauses which Shane realized got you to lean in to better hear her. She knew hockey, made references to games, and Shane liked that too. They talked about her movies and Shane got to flex his recall. “It was good practice.”

“Getting kidnapped?”

“I have been kidnapped in no less than four movies, including the one I’m doing right now.” She said and then sat up, “Fuck, you...you didn’t hear that. They will literally have me murdered if they find out I told you.”

She was smiling and Shane smiled back. It was easy to talk to her, and more than that, she seemed to actually like talking to Shane for longer than a couple of minutes. “My lips are sealed.”

Rose smiled and shook her head, gesturing to him. “Ok, your turn.”

“Well, I’ve never been kidnapped. I mean there’ve been threats, but...” Shane answered and then realized by the end that wasn’t what she’d meant at all. Still, Rose didn’t look annoyed, she just laughed it off.

“No, not what I meant.” She went serious. “Shane Hollander, 8 years old. Paint me a picture.”

Shane at eight had been small for his age, moved up in the division because he was just too good. He’d not yet stopped talking to ghosts he thought were living people, so he was also friendless. Not exactly a good combo. Shane thought about him for a minute, that little kid who loved hockey and sat up for long hours watching his favorite players highlights and interviews, mimicking their words the same way he did their moves on the ice. If he knew what to say, maybe that would fix things, Shane remembered thinking.

Instead, Shane said “Well, I’m definitely on the ice somewhere. The scouting and crazy stuff didn’t start for another couple years, so I’m probably just having fun.”

“Did it stop being fun?” She asked and it cut right to the heart of the matter. Shane wasn’t used to people being so direct. His parents always danced around questions and Rozanov never asked them in the first place. Hayden might try, but there was never any push. Shane felt flayed open but in a good way, like airing a bruise.

“No.” He said because that was the palatable answer, but Rose was patient and watched him with no judgement so he sighed. “Well, I mean, kind of. I love it, but it got more intense, so I guess I kinda got more intense too, if that makes sense?”

“Yeah, it does.” She said and Shane believed her. If anyone could understand the fine line between loving something which could make you miserable, it would be an actor. “And I bet being the only Asian kid didn’t make it less intense.”

“I wasn’t the only one. There was one other.” Shane thought about Roger Nguyen and how by some secret rule both of them somehow knew that sticking together would only make the other white kids notice them more. There was also the other fact he became aware of later, “He hated me though. I have a Western last name, so it’s like the other kids kind of forgot to make fun of me.”

“And I bet you were pretty fucking good too, right?”

Lots of people had called him good at hockey, he had a growing trophy room to prove it, but it was nice to hear it from Rose for some reason. Maybe because she had no need for Shane

Hollander the brand, she just knew Shane for Shane and knew that Shane also was good at hockey. He smiled, "I was alright."

Rose spoke about her brothers, about how most of them were in the hockey world and Shane got excited the longer she spoke, the more terms she used. He didn't need to explain anything because she already knew them all. It was almost like talking with—

"God, it's loud in here." Rose cut herself off, rubbing at her temple. She was right, more people had shuffled in and the music had gotten louder as the conversations had grown too. Shane almost wanted to tell her to appreciate it. The flapper had taken up residence right behind their table and whatever singing she'd started the night with was faded into loud, waiting sobs intercut with long, unfamiliar croons right in Shane's ear.

A bit louder than he should have, considering he was the only one who could hear the noise, he asked, "So, this isn't your first time in Montreal though, right?"

Shane knew the answer, but watched her raise her voice to be heard too. "Ah, no, I was here a few years ago shooting this horrible FBI movie."

"*Under Dark*. Kidnapped again?" Shane asked and her laugh was nice. It managed to drown out the bubbly sobbing of the flapper.

"Come on. No!" She covered her face and dropped her head down onto the table.

"I—I fly a lot. I watch a lot of movies." He defended.

"That movie is so bad." She said.

"Its not great." He admitted.

"No, it's horrible!" She laughed and Shane realized his cheeks hurt from smiling so much. The crooner was back again, singing, and he leaned forward to try and hear Rose better. She did the same.

"You're really good in it." He defended.

"I'm so bad in it!" She argued and when he tried to defend her again, she laughed and rubbed at her temple again, as if to lessen a headache. "Well I'm barely in it. I was here for a week, and it was the summer."

"Kind of different in the winter though, right?"

"Michigan, remember? Your winter doesn't scare me." She said and Shane figured that was as good a time as any. He took a fortifying sip, thinking about how exactly he could ask to talk to her again. It was easy with Rose in a way it wasn't with other women. Maybe she was special, like his mom had always said when he was young, spouting off all that bull about a 'special someone.'

"So, um, are you going to be in town a little while this time?" He said right as the crooning woman let out a strange choking gargle from behind them. Shane jumped and sloshed his

glass over and the beer splashed over the table.

“What the fuck?” Rose asked at the exact same time. “No! No, sorry, sorry, it’s just...”

She was tossing napkins onto the pile, looking embarrassed for the first time all night. Shane was watching the napkins soak up the beer, face flushed. He’d thought that things had been going well, that Rose had found him funny. They’d been talking for hours. He was speaking before he’d thought about what exactly he was saying. “Forget it, you’re busy, I get that.”

“No! No, Shane. I was just...” She seemed to be thinking of something to say when the flapper let out another long, mournful croon and Shane couldn’t hold back a flinch. Shane prayed she took it as a sign of embarrassment, he didn’t think he could bear to have her think he was some sort of jumpy freak too. Rose looked at him with understanding, her hand touching his, “Hey, I jumped too, it had nothing to do with you, promise.”

“Sorry, let me go get a towel.” Shane muttered and rose to go nab a towel from the bar and take a minute to think about smacking his head against a wall. It had been a good night, they’d had a good conversation, and if a stupid fucking ghost ruined it, Shane would lose it. Finally, three deep breaths later, Shane finally felt calm enough to return to the table.

Rose was staring at his seat and smiled when he sat down, but there was a slight narrowing to her eyes. She let him wipe down the table, hands folded on top of each other. After a deep breath, she said, “This is going to sound weird, so ignore me if I’m, like, way off base, but do you hear her too?”

Shane was, weirdly, thankful he didn’t have a beer to drink because he would have spilled it again. He didn’t say anything, sure that her question was meaning something else, something he didn’t get, but his silence was answer enough because she clapped her hands over her mouth in a gasp.

“Holy shit! I could have sworn you heard her too, but you just kept talking so I was sure I was wrong!” She asked, but her voice was quieter now.

“You can see her?” Shane asked and something in his stomach seemed to freeze into an unmoving lump. His heart seemed to freeze too, waiting for her answer.

“See her? No, no, I can only hear them.” She said. “You can see them? What’s up with her, she sounds horrible!”

Shane blinked once, then twice and then on the third he realized that he was awake, this wasn’t a dream, that someone else heard the gross, wet, melancholy moaning the woman had descended into

“She has a, uh...” He mimed a cut throat and she made a disgusted face. Shane watched her take that in, tilting her head as if to listen better. “I’ve never met...”

“Oh, really?” Rose asked. “I’ve only met a few, all in LA, but no one could see them. That must suck!”

Shane felt something in his chest, a weight he hadn't realized he was carrying, release. Yes, it did suck, and there was something so simple yet wonderful in hearing it said aloud.

They talked for another three hours, relocating to a new booth away from the flapper, both sitting on the same side of the table, heads tilted together. Rose started hearing them at thirteen after a car accident. Nothing traumatic, more a fender-bender she swore, but that was all it took. Really, Rose was more interested in him. She apparently knew three others in LA and all of them could hear the spirits but not see them. Shane felt a flash of annoyance that apparently he was unlucky in all things, including supernatural powers.

"This is crazy! What are the chances!" Rose kept saying. "It's fate!"

Shane liked that. He liked the idea that he and Rose were supposed to meet, that she was destined to be important to him. They swapped numbers and Shane slept through the night for the first time since he fell asleep on Rozanov's sheets.

It was nice, dating Rose. She had lots of friends who liked to hear themselves talk and thought Shane was great because he just listened. She had a great laugh and this way of cutting to the quick of a problem that Shane liked. She could come to his games and wear his jersey and post pictures of him on her Instagram. She could look at Miles and say "My boyfriend" and no one batted an eye. His team stopped trying to set him up and let him off the hook for parties because they assumed he was going home to her. It was...nice.

Rose was nice, talking with her was great. They did walking tours of Montreal, her pointing out a noise and Shane explaining what it was she was hearing (A one-eyed woman on a stoop clicking her knitting needles against one another, a soldier's guts slapping together as he trailed an elderly woman who might have been his wife, an old man's cane clacking on cobblestones trying to keep up with his living granddaughter.) Shane could see Rose's eyes light up when he described it, the flash of understanding. For the first time in his life, his ability was something other than simply a burden.

She had a nice apartment, not free of ghosts but free of loud ghosts, and he pointedly ignored the fact that he hadn't told her there was a ghost free apartment he owned downtown. He'd take the nuns who sometimes wandered through Rose's living room on their way to watch the people in the gym.

The sex was—fine. Fine. He brushed it off the first time. They'd been ambushed by a drunk man with two broken legs who sort of drifted through the wall, but then Rose had laughed so loud when the ghost had called her a babe that Shane hadn't worried too much. The second time was worse. She kept asking if he saw something, if that was why he kept going soft.

He lied and said yes and then felt horrible about it.

But he'd fix it, Shane figured, Rose was literally perfect so it had to be him. It was why when she invited him to Ciel, he agreed to go even though what he really wanted most was to drive over to the apartment, curl up under the bedding, and not think about anything outside of those four walls for at least a day. Not the game, the shitty goal he managed by luck alone, the way Rozanov hadn't once looked his way. Irina hadn't been there, and Shane knew

because Shane had looked for her. One look at him and Shane was back in that house, on that couch with a hand in his hair and the creeping realization that something had shifted.

The club was loud, packed and smelt of sticky spilled drinks and sweat. It almost made him miss the chemically-bleachy smell of hockey locker rooms. The flashing lights also ramped up the headache he was already feeling built behind his eyes to the point that when Miles and Rose talked over him, he was only half aware of the conversation. He was vividly aware of her hands, running over the inseam of his jeans, too small palms too sweaty when she slid them against him and intertwined their fingers. It was a normal thing to do but his skin prickled uncomfortably.

"I want to dance!" Rose pressed and Shane tried to brush it off. He was a bad dancer, no rhythm, but she was determined and he didn't want to be left at the table alone with Rose's other friends. They weren't bad, but they weren't as friendly as Miles and so he followed behind her, watching the lights catch on the sequins of her dress.

Rose shoved her hands over his stomach, too small and soft to be familiar, and Shane tried to keep his eyes on her as she danced. She was good, but all it took was a single dip and Shane spotted the faintest flash of white over her shoulder.

Irina stood in the middle of the dancefloor, white dress standing out like a beacon even in the mess of glitter and sequins, the lights catching on her pale hair.

Shane's head jerked around, looking for Ilya. He was here, somewhere in the crush of bodies and Shane could feel it then, the electric rush he tried to tamp down with whatever drink Miles came back with. It didn't work.

Irina walked forward, coming close enough that he could finally see her expression. It was soft, sad, with down-turned eyes and mouth pulled tight at the edges.

"I'm so sorry, Shane." She said, and Shane's body went rigid when Rose's head snapped over to where she stood. He didn't understand for a minute, body so focused on Irina that he almost missed her son who danced right over her shoulder.

There was a girl plastered to Rozanov's front, thin and blonde and white and a woman. Able to kiss him in a crowded club. Not him, the exact opposite of him. Shane's stomach rioted, the beer souring on his tongue until he honestly felt like he might vomit.

"Shane, who's there?" Rose asked and Shane realized that even having shared all sorts of stories about the ghosts he'd seen over the years, he didn't want to share Irina with her.

"I gotta go to the bathroom." He stuttered out but Rose just looked at him with a pinch in her brow, letting go of his shirt and letting him slip out of the weird sandwich of people.

He knew Irina was following him, could hear her faintly calling him, but his eyes were stuck on the image Rozanov made, sensual and beautiful. Even like this, Shane realized faintly that the dominant emotion choking him wasn't anger or grief, it was a horrible, clawing flash of happiness at seeing him at all.

“Shane!” Irina called but he couldn’t look at her, not now.

He moved without thinking, slipping into the booth to grab his jacket and keys, before drifting out of the backdoor which had been propped open for smokers. The smell hit him and the acrid smoke was almost familiar enough to push out the tears he could feel hanging heavy in his eyes.

Irina was behind him, following him, watching him type out a vague excuse to Rose through a haze of misty eyes. They’d driven separately, but he knew he needed to pull himself together before she got home that night like they’d agreed.

Even the thought of that had his breathing become more difficult, catching in his chest. He shoved his hands into his pockets, hunching his shoulders on the short walk to the parking garage where he left his car. Irina was already in the passenger seat when he threw himself behind the wheel.

“No, go back.” Shane argued. He started the car, resolutely ignoring her, daring her to stay. “You can’t come with me. You need to go back.”

Irina sat resolutely in her seat as if challenging him. He frowned, annoyed at how much that petulant, stubborn look she wore was identical to Rozanov’s. Slowly, he pulled out into the night traffic, waiting for the moment she got that pale vaporized look that marked a ghost getting too far from whatever object they’d latched onto.

Yet, the farther they got from the club, the more his breath came in panicked little puffs as she stayed painfully solid beside him, watching him with sharp, knowing eyes he couldn’t meet. A horn honked at him and Shane yanked on the wheel, Irina cursing in Russian as he pulled over and pressed his head down onto his hands. The deep, rhythmic breaths he was trying were not working, and the failure of them caused the panic to mount higher, higher, higher, until it was a wave crashing down on him.

He was sobbing, he could tell that in some distant, floating way, like he was the ghost. They were painful, hacking cries and he clutched at his chest, part of him worrying his massive breaths might crack a rib. It was a stupid thought, but nothing about the crushing feeling suffocating him felt rational at that moment.

“Slowly, *милая*, in...out...in...out...” Irina coached. Her hand rested in the air just above his head and in the glow from the streetlights, she looked heavily backlit in honeywarm light. He looked at her from where he’d shoved his head down onto the steering wheel, peeking up and trying to see her clearly through the tears.

“You know I hate those kinds of words. They’re not in my book.” He said finally when he could speak again. He rubbed at his eyes so hard that he started seeing spots. Then, as if it was dragged out of him, “You stayed.”

“You needed me.” She said softly.

“He might need you.” Shane couldn’t bring himself to say his name aloud, as if it might summon the emotional tsunami back.

"I can't help him." She said and the tears on his face hadn't dried yet before they were replaced with fresh ones. He rubbed at them, sitting up and trying to clear his vision.

"I'm sorry. I'm fine. We can go back, you can...can latch back onto him and I can..." Shane trailed off, unsure of exactly where he was going. He can go fuck Rose like she had been wanting? Like the kind of boyfriend he was trying so fucking hard to be?

"Enough."

"Enough, what?" Shane demanded. "You don't want to bind yourself to me. I'm fine now."

"No, you're not." She said with such bone deep certainty that it made his whole stomach clench up. "Because your hands are shaking. Because I know about hurting yourself because you feel like you have no other choice."

Shane had taken hits on the ice which hurt less than that.

"I have to." He said, and it came out small and soft.

"Ok." She said and it was deeply sad and painfully understanding.

Rose was nearly at her apartment by the time Shane pulled up. Irina came with him, hovering around him like she expected Shane to toss himself out of the moving car or into traffic. He never would, but it flashed through his mind when Rose dropped her dress. It should have been fun, Shane was aware of that in some small hindbrain of his. He and Rozanov had fun, he could have fun. He *could*.

But it was just so *hard*. Should it be this hard to kiss her, to force that spark of attraction to flame to life in his gut the way it had from a single look from Rozanov in that club?

A loud, blood-curdling scream ripped through the air and both Shane and Rose jumped, pulling apart and looking at the door as if expecting it to be thrown open.

"Was that ghost scream or real scream?" Rose asked and Shane grabbed his jeans, pulling them on quickly.

"I'm going to go check, stay here."

"Fuck that!" Rose hissed and grabbed a shirt from her laundry basket and her thong. "I have pepper spray, stay behind me."

Shane didn't, but Rose looked around her apartment as if expecting someone to jump out of the walls. Shane guessed that wasn't an unjustified worry, especially considering he saw the culprit just standing in the middle of the living room.

"Shane, do you see anything?"

Irina was watching him with calculating eyes, as if waiting to see if he would say anything and snitch her out. Shane opened his mouth when Rose started checking behind curtains, but he stopped himself. Finally he said, "yes, a woman."

“Well that’s a mood killer.” Rose huffed, then to the room as a whole, “Couldn’t pick a different unit to scream in? The guy below us doesn’t recycle. Go cock-block him!”

The first emotion was unfettered relief, like taking in that first lungful of oxygen after holding it for too long, and the second was the crushing disgust at himself for wanting relief from someone he really, really liked.

“I think I’m going to head home.” Shane said, hands finding his pockets and avoiding both Rose’s and Irina’s eyes.

“You sure?” Rose asked and Shane nodded. “Alright, I have an early call time anyways, I’ll just pop in some headphones.”

“Sorry.” Shane had to say. He bit his tongue to stop anything else from falling out, about his ditching her at the club or his lack-luster performance.

“It’s alright, Shane.” Rose said softly, walking with him back to the bedroom to grab his things. “This kinda comes with the territory.”

Shane smiled and not for the first time that night, wished desperately that he could gather a fraction of that heat he felt with Rozanov to give to Rose. She was just so nice, and funny, and perfect and Shane had never felt more like a fraud than when standing outside of her door kissing her goodbye.

The drive home was quiet, Irina sitting silently in the passenger seat, both of them keeping their eyes on the road. It was only when they parked and sat there in companionable silence for a while did he feel like he had the energy to speak. Even then, he did so quietly, voice no louder than the little popping sounds coming off the cooling engine.

“Thank you.”

Irina looked over at him and sighed. “You need sleep. Come.”

He knew many things about Irina. More than he probably should, but as he watched her float through the door and up the stairs to the apartment he had unconsciously driven them to instead of his actual place, Shane realized two very important details.

One, that Irina really was, under a prickly exterior, quietly, selflessly kind. And two, that he really didn’t fucking deserve it.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, thank you so much for the lovely reception to the last chapter, all the comments and kudos are so wonderful!

Next chapter: All-Stars and Ilya finally being able to (kinda) talk to his mom!

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Me: *Creeps in with a chapter two weeks after I planned on having it out* Hey guys...been a while...

In all seriousness, sorry for the lateness, this chapter fought me every step of the way and I debated a lot on the changes I was wanting to make so hopefully they feel true to the source material! That said, the comments I got have been so wonderful and more than one made me cry. You're all wonderful.

A note: the Google Translate is REALLY bad this chapter, nothing was coming out like I wanted so if you speak Russian, maybe pretend you don't for this chapter.

Enjoy 18k of Irina being the world's best wingman for both her son and soon to be son-in-law!

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

“What is this?” Irina asked.

Shane jumped, nearly knocking his coffee maker over in the process. He glared at her and how she’d been trying to lean over his shoulder to see his phone. That was her favorite phrase Shane had learned, especially when she knew exactly what it was and just wanted to have you say it to her.

“Nothing.” Shane said, but he was not fast enough to hide the many, many tweets about Rose and him. They had ship names and edits, and people leaving long winding tweets under any photos she posted. Rose had briefed him about how crazy people got and Shane had thought he understood, but sports stardom and actor stardom were different. No one had ever tried to steal the plate he’d been eating off and that had happened last week.

“Oh, yes, that face means nothing.” She said, then as if tired, she gave a dramatic sigh. “Is this about the whole gay thing?”

Shane knocked his half-brewed low-fat cappuccino over and spilled most of it over the counter. He was getting really fucking tired of spilling shit. More than that, he was unused to never being alone.

“There is no gay thing.” Shane said, not for the first time. Irina was a dog with a bone and she seemed set on shaking it as many times as she could.

“No?” She said sharply, following him and his half empty cup to the couch where Rozanov's game played on mute. She gestured to the screen. “You just, lay back and think of Canada?”

“Oh my god, please stop!” Shane put his head between his knees and shut his eyes. Everything was too bright this early.

Even without making a sound or disrupting the cushion, Shane knew Irina had sat down beside him. She had a sizzling energy to her. He sat back, looking at her watching her son and any words he thought about saying vanished.

“You hurt yourself. I know about that.” She said, still not looking at him. He watched her, though, eyes tracing the bridge of her nose she gave her son instead of looking towards her eyes. “You deserve good things. Happier things.”

“Rose makes me happy.”

“As lover or friend?” Irina cut in and Shane looked away. The two women were surprisingly alike, they cut to the heart of the matter and didn't suffer fools. Except Shane, apparently.

He didn't have an answer, but he did have a thought which seemed to bubble up in him, harsh and mean, and acidic on his tongue.

“He doesn't want me, Irina.” Shane said sharply. “What does it matter? It's been years, and now he wants to, what, change things? I can't!”

Irina watched him but Shane avoided her gaze. It was like a weird back and forth, eye ping pong. On the screen Rozanov made a poor pass, it didn't connect, and the Toronto center took it down the ice toward Boston's goal. The camera zoomed in on him. There were bags under his eyes, and his hair was so plastered to his skull with sweat that it looked almost black.

“Ilya...so rarely wants.” Irina said softly. They were both watching him now as he battled for the puck on hostile ice. “I saw it. He wants. He just can't ask, too scared you'll say no.”

“I wouldn't have.” Shane admitted to the room.

“Ilya, he can't risk that.” She said and he looked over at her and she looked at him and they both had misty eyes. “Oh, bunny.”

“I just keep making mistakes...”

“Yes, that is life. Deal with it.” Irina huffed and that drew a laugh out of him. She was so tender with her actions that the harshness of her words didn't even register.

Looking at her now, there was a question he wanted to ask but which he knew would come out sounding insensitive and maybe cruel, but he needed to know.

“Did you ever regret it?”

There was no question about what the *it* was.

She looked at him, face soft.

“Yes.” Then her smile stuttered, her throat jerking with a painful looking swallow. “The moment I heard the door rattle.”

Shane closed his eyes and wondered which was the truth, the story he’d told Ilya or what she was telling him now. Wondered if Irina even knew. He turned back to the tv and watched Ilya get nailed to the boards, the opposing center snapping the puck away and tearing off, leaving him to pull himself up while the cameras shot away to follow the action.

He felt that way the moment Rose stepped foot into the apartment, like he was trapped between the boards and a massive, grinding shoulder shoved up into his ribs.

“Cool place, why have we never met here before?” She asked, looking around. “Quiet too!”

“It’s where I come when I need to be alone.” He said, true. “I made dinner.”

He led her into the kitchen to where he’d set up the tossed salad and cooked pasta. The sauce bubbled away on the stove, the air simmering with the rich scents of tomato and garlic. She smiled, throwing herself up onto the barstool.

“Better than Baritza’s” She looked around more, as if taking in all the details Shane had forgotten. Both of his apartments had been decorated by the same woman, but looking at it now, through her eyes, he saw that this place had taken on a softer look. There were more pillows on the couch, more colorful art on the walls. He felt flayed open as he scooped pasta onto the plates.

“You’re so cute.” She said, flicking at his apron. His parents had gotten it for him. He’d forgotten that he’d brought it over to this apartment. “Have I told you how cute you are?”

“No, I mean, maybe?” Shane laughed.

“Well, you are.” She sprinkled a bit of cheese over her plate. “Miles is extremely jealous.”

“Of me?” Shane asked, watching her take her first bite. He was nervous, the recipe asked for so much garlic that Shane had panicked as he added it in, but the recipe said it so he was focused on Rose’s face to see if she liked it.

“No, of me.” She said and then, “Holy shit, this is good.”

“Good!” Shane smiled, excited to take his own bite, when her words sunk in. “Oh! Oh.”

“Did you not notice Miles was gay?” She asked but there was a layer to her words now, a light disbelief.

“I guess I hadn’t really thought about it.” Shane kept to the neutral territory. He took his first bite. He’d been keeping to his diet so the richness of the dish made his teeth ache.

“Well he is. And he’s low-key in love with you.” She said and then seemed to watch his reaction. “Does it surprise you that Miles is gay?”

“No. I mean, of course not, no.” Shane pushed his plate away, any hunger sort of evaporating. As if called, Irina popped her head out from the bedroom. He wanted to frantically wave her back but she was watching with the same worried zeal as the audience at one of his games.

“Well, a lot of actors are. They’re just not all out.” Rose took a few more bites, looking at his own untouched plate and then back up to him. “Are there any, like, gay hockey players? I mean, yes. Obviously, there are, but are there any openly gay players?”

“Yeah, uh, no.” Shane brought his hands close to his body. He was so thankful he’d taken Irina’s advice and offered to host, Shane couldn’t imagine thinking about this in the middle of a crowded restaurant. “I mean, yeah, there are probably gay players or whatever but none that have said it publicly.”

Shane felt something twist in his stomach. Rose would know this. She talked shop with him, referenced players and stats, had brothers working in the league. She knew there was not a single out player and still she brought it up. Shane felt like he might throw up. She made a little sound and Shane, even knowing he didn’t really want to face it, asked, “What?”

“Sorry, I don’t think I’m going about this the right way.” She said and then looked around as if she wished for something to scream or make noise but this was the quiet apartment and so the only sound was their breathing.

“Going about what?” He asked, even as he felt the tell-tale trickle of discomfort roll down his spine. Rose rubbed her arm and then reached out, pulling his hand towards her. Her palm was clammy.

“I really like you, Shane.” She started and Shane knew this script.

“I like you too.”

She looked at him like he’d just said something wrong. She sighed, fingers tightening. “But I have a feeling that...maybe I’m not doing it for you?”

“Yes, you are!” Shane brushed it off and desperately wanted his hand back if only to wipe it on a napkin.

“I know you like talking to me.” She said and Shane said something, a confirmation, and she pushed forward. “Do you like kissing me?”

“Sure.” Shane said and Rose looked at him with her mouth dropped open.

“Wow...”

Irina, having to keep quiet, made a face, a grimace with a lot of teeth which wasn’t promising. Shane shook his head. “No. No, no, of course I do. Sorry.”

“No, hey, don’t apologize.” Rose put her other hand around his. “Really, I just have to ask... is it the...the boy thing or the ghost thing?”

Shane's brain went white. He'd had a conversation like this before in his nightmares, usually with more yelling, but the ghosts never factored into it. He opened his mouth but didn't even know how to formulate a question. It just came out, "What?"

"Like, I figured it was like, you wanted to kiss...not a girl." Rose said and then her face got really red. "But then there was the girl at the club and the scream and I thought maybe you had, like, a thing for a ghost—"

"Oh my god, no." Shane pulled his hand away so that he could bury his face in them. This was somehow worse than any other of his nightmares.

"Hey, it's—it's really ok." She said and Shane almost wanted to laugh at how supportive she was being about her thinking he was wanting to fuck a ghost.

"It's not—no. She's—she's like my mom's age!" He said and then realized he'd admitted about having a ghost follow him around and cock block them. "Um, she's the mother of—She's—"

"Here right now?" Rose asked. "I thought I heard her laugh when I asked you about kissing me."

Shane buried his head again. He wanted to go to sleep and never have to worry about any of this again. But more than that, he liked Rose and even knowing that she would see him crying, he needed Rose to know that. "I do like you. I really do. I like talking with you. I like being with you. I like all of it. I know the...sex stuff...is a problem..."

Irina made another disgusted face, waving her hands like she'd wanted to leave but also wanted to be supportive. It mostly looked like her turning to leave and then turning back, and then turning like she might leave again.

"It's not a problem." Rose said kindly. "A problem is something you can fix. We're more like a square peg in a round hole. Ew. No, I'm sorry. Forget I said that." She said and then leaned forward, not looking at him but trying to gather her thoughts. Shane could feel his eyes burning, not because the words were unexpected but because he knew he needed to hear them, even as they ripped him apart. "We're just...we're not meant to fit. And it's really fine. I just don't think we can keep trying."

"I get it. I—I just, uh..." Shane flipped through his list of responses, the carefully curated portfolio of mean-nothing phrases that he could drop in interviews but his whole brain was just a shaken hive of bees. He couldn't even hear himself think over all the buzzing. "I think..."

Rose, kind, wonderful Rose, smiled, pulled her chair closer so that she could catch his eyes. "Hey, you don't owe me any explanation. You say you don't have a fetish for ghosts, I believe you."

Shane laughed and then groaned a bit when it sent the tears he'd been holding back spilling down his cheeks. Then he laughed again when Rose rubbed at her own eyes. Again, he was grateful to be in his home where the only one to see him looking so stupid was two women who'd already seen him at his worst.

“I feel like I kinda do.” Shane tried to gather his thoughts.

“You really don’t.” She pushed and then, just a bit nosy, “Can I ask if you’ve ever been with a guy?”

It was instinctual, the look he sent to Irina, the stuttering breath as his mind flashed through those nights. They were quick and fleeting and yet as he handled them, the memories were warm and soft at the edges, tender like a bruise. He ached.

“Was it different with a guy?”

“Of course.” Shane whispered.

As if she already knew the answer, “Was it better?”

Shane groaned, half in embarrassment, and he muttered “Yeah, it was, uh...but Rose—” He ran his hands over his face. “That ghost is like...his mom and so this is really—”

“Holy shit!” Rose laughed and Shane felt when all the blood which had drained out of his face came rushing back in. “Well, she hasn’t said anything so she’s fine with it, right mom?”

Irina just crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows. She’d tried to have a similar conversation and seemed somehow just as embarrassed as Shane was but also determined to ride this conversation out. Shane was both touched and really fucking annoyed.

“The thing is, I...” Shane leaned back, laughed a bit, deciding if he was actually going to say it, but Irina deserved a bit of payback after all the chirps and he knew Rose would find it funny. “I kind of prefer being the hole instead of the peg.”

Rose threw her head back and laughed and then Irina did too, startling them both. Rose huffed out “Was that...?”

“Боже мой, Shane!” Irina huffed, annoyed, and Shane had one bright moment before Rose muttered:

“Hey, is she Russian?”

The door had just shut behind Rose when Shane spun around and glared at Irina. “I hope you’re happy.”

“I was right, you are gay, I save poor girl from bad sex, and you love my son.” Irina counted them off on her fingers. “I’m winning.”

Shane sputtered. “I don’t...it’s not like...!”

Irina shrugged and her outfit changed. It was a sundress, yellow with little white flowers, and her hair was wrapped around her head in neat braids. She pointed at his phone sitting innocently on the table. “We call my son now?”

“What? No!” Shane grabbed it up like she could actually touch it, looking down like he might have accidentally clicked a button. “What if he picked up?”

Irina stepped into his eyeline so that he could see her roll her eyes dramatically. “Oh my god, Shane, you are so silly.”

“I just, like...need time to figure this whole thing out. And to—to figure out what I’m going to say.” Shane moaned. “Oh fuck, what am I going to wear?”

“Как маленькая девочка!” Irina moaned back.

“I’m not a little girl! I just want to look my best!” Shane defended himself. “What if I get there and he takes one look at me and thinks I don’t care because I’m wearing sweatpants?”

“Why would he do that?” Irina demanded.

“I don’t know!”

Irina let out a long string of Russian curses. “So we shop. I can shop. Finally dress you like good Slavic boy.”

“I’m not wearing animal print.”

“Fine, dress you like boring Slavic boy.”

Shane did not want to dress like any Slavic boy, he just needed to impress one. He instead spent the next week so wrapped up in his research on his phone that his teammates asked if he was waiting on an important call. He was not, he was checking and then double checking his reservations at a fancy boutique.

The ladies were nice, professional, and knowledgeable about the outfits they picked out for him, mostly neutrals they assured him he could switch out without looking dorky. Irina seemed to dislike them all which worried him a bit, but her sense of fashion was too much like her son’s and involved plastering brands over his chest.

“I already feel like my face is a walking advertisement, I don’t need to go around wearing their names too.” Shane whispered in the limited time the two women, sisters he’d learned, left him to change and pick through some more options.

“Alright.” Irina gave in, but did point to the massive pile he’d tossed to the side. “But keep that white one, looked too good with your arms.”

“It’s sheer!” Shane huffed, slightly scandalized and more aware of his arms now.

“Oh no, people see body you work so hard on.” She huffed and pulled out the trump card she’d been wielding all morning. “Ilya will like it.”

Shane bought the fucking shirt.

“Is he out there?” Shane demanded. The fucking sheer shirt was sticking uncomfortably to his back with the Tampa heat. “Oh, fuck, I’m going to throw up.”

“Well don’t do that.” Irina coached. “He is at bar, looking sad in ugly shirt.”

“It can’t be that bad.” Shane peeked around the corner. “Oh, fuck, he looks hot!”

Irina looked again, then sighed. “Love makes you blind. What do you say, ‘go get the tiger!’”

“It’s ‘go get them, tiger.’”

“You’re stalling.” Irina accused and Shane shook himself to loosen the tight curdle his stomach had knotted itself into.

Then Shane stepped out from behind the wall and tried to stop his steps from looking too robotic. He purposefully avoided other groups, eyes on where Ilya sat at the bar. Irina was wrong, Ilya looked amazing, the bright colors working against his slight tan, his biceps pushing up the sleeves and the front buttons open enough that it gave a tantalizing view of his toned chest, sprinkled with hair. Without allowing himself to second guess, Shane pulled out the chair and sat. He felt painfully aware of Ilya next to him. The whole side of his body buzzed like when he was sitting too close to a ghost.

“Can I get you something to drink?” The bartender asked and Shane had to tear his eyes away from Ilya to answer.

“I’ll have the same as my teammate, please.” Shane muttered out and then looked forward to avoid following a bead of sweat down Ilya’s neck and onto his chest. He did catch Ilya soundlessly ordering a second after having downed the first. That couldn’t be good. Irina sat beside Shane, looking at her son with such open affection it made the tension in his stomach lessen slightly.

“So, what, are they out of ginger ale, Captain?”

Shane stopped his flinch. It felt too much like a subtle dig at their last night together that Shane had to flash a look to Irina to convince himself he could do this. She shot him thumbs up, but had a forced smile on her face. “I’m, uh, feeling a bit wild.” He started and then let himself think about the weekend. “I’m excited about this weekend. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to play on the same team.”

“Have you?”

“For fuck’s sake, give him nothing Ilyushenka.” Irina muttered and that managed to cut through his anxiousness enough for him to push through.

“Yeah, I have.” Shane groped around for something else to say, for any one of the topics he’d planned out in his head. “Nice that it’s in Florida this year, right?”

“You want to talk about weather?” Ilya asked, and it was just the wrong side of mean.

Shane tried to smile, but he knew it came off strained. He was inordinately grateful when their drinks arrived and he had something to do with his hands. It was cold and he took a long drink to avoid saying something else stupid. Ilya spoke before he could think of something.

“Did you, uh, come alone?”

Shane’s head shot up, catching Ilya’s eyes, and his panic was halted only slightly by the sight of his throat bobbing as he swallowed. Then it came roaring back. He was asking about Irina, what else could it mean—?

“He means Rose, Shane, keep up.” Irina gestured and all the wind seemed to be punched out of him. Ilya was watching him closer now, like they were on the ice and the slightest expression could give away his game plan. Shane tried to avoid looking over his shoulder at a person who was very much not there. Instead he thought through the question because surely Ilya wasn’t talking about Rose, why would he?

“Uh, my parents thought about coming but they’re going to Mexico in, like, two weeks and they’ve been to these before, so...” Shane answered. Ilya looked at him with an expression which looked eerily similar to his mom’s.

“Ah.”

“Also, I didn’t feel like being managed this weekend.” Shane explained, then to clarify himself. “I figure I should talk for myself.” Then, unable to stop himself and knowing the wrong answer would literally destroy him, “Did you, uh, bring anybody?”

“Nope.”

Shane couldn’t help it, at this point it was instinctual to watch Ilya watch him. There was something electric between them, which seemed to making his heart pound in his chest. Ilya hadn’t brought someone. Not the girl from the club, or Svetlana, or some other beautiful, impossible person for Shane to live up to. Shane couldn’t help but smile now. “I like the shirt.”

“Thanks. I like to, you know, get into the spirit.” He explained and picked at it. It was the most self-conscious thing Shane had ever seen the man do and it was strangely hot. Shane pushed that down to unpack later.

“Well, you’re pulling it off.” Shane smiled.

“Он ни разу не спросил обо мне!” Irina muttered. “His dead mother a foot away, and he’s worried about a boy. Typical!”

Vaughny distracted them, chanting out something about East Boys which broke the mounting tension which even Shane realized was probably not best for the middle of a very public bar filled with many familiar faces. There was also an undercurrent to Ilya’s words, the way they wrapped around “Who knows how much we might have in common?”

“You’re looking very pretty today. Different, maybe?” Ilya jumped topics, eyes never moving from Shane’s face. He knew he was blushing, but he couldn’t even look over to Irina to psych himself up about the stupid fucking shirt. “Someone take you shopping?”

Yes, Shane wanted to say, *your mom picked out the shirt she thought you’d most like to fuck me in*, and then sputtered a bit on his beer. It was gross, he wished he’d just ordered a ginger ale even if he’d looked stupid. Instead he lowered his voice a bit. “If I, um, tell you something will you promise not to tell anyone or make fun of me?”

“Well, it depends.” Ilya said but Shane clocked the way his shoulders rose up and his whole body seemed to tighten like a giant coil, bracing for release. Shane huffed, which managed to drag a “Yeah, sure” out of him.

Like it came pouring out of him: “Thiredastylist.”

Ilya would have looked less shocked if Shane had hit him over the head with his stick. “What?”

Shane, quieter and knowing the reaction it would get, said slower, “I hired a stylist.”

It was like watching the sunrise in real time, the way Ilya’s whole body sort of sagged and his furrowed brow and tight mouth loosened until his whole face broke into a bright smile which seemed to transform his whole demeanor. Shane just wished it wasn’t at his expense.

“Fuck you.” He said, but he could tell he was smiling too.

“Sorry.” Ilya said back, and Shane could tell he didn’t really mean it, but that somehow just made him smile more. “Wow. Of course you did.”

“I shouldn’t have told you.” Shane sighed and took the chance to glance over at Irina. He was more relaxed now, the banter familiar enough that it came easy to talk to Ilya like they always had. Only now there were no expectations and Shane, for the first time, knew exactly what he wanted and it was sitting across from him in a shirt he was slowly realizing would be really fucking ugly on literally anyone else.

“No, no. I love it. I love it. You got, what, tired of looking like shit?”

“Ilya!” Irina hissed and then seemed like she might try and cover Shane’s ears before she realized she couldn’t.

“I didn’t look like shit. I just wore, like, athletic stuff.”

Ilya took a long drink. “I know what you wore.”

“Ok, this is getting gross. I want to leave.” Irina said and then seemed to look around for any ghosts to talk to but stayed firmly rooted to her chair.

“And some of the guys in the league are so fashionable.” Shane muttered and at his chirping, Shane clarified. “Not you. Some of the guys, not you.”

“Ok.” Ilya conceded and then rubbed at his nose. “So, this has nothing to do with Rose Landry?”

“What did I say? Huh, Shane?” Irina stood from her chair and Shane had to force himself not to look at her. “What is the word? Оправдание? I say he jealous, you say no, I say he talk about Rose, and look!” Then she snapped her fingers when she remembered the word and shouted, “Vindication!”

“No.” Shane said sharply, mostly to get Irina to sit down then thought about the question. He realized that Irina might have been right, that he didn’t know about the break up. “Well, I mean, yeah, she always dressed, um, very well and so do her friends, but...I just wanted to stop looking like I was always going to the gym. I’ve never really cared about clothes.”

“So, uh, you and her are not...”

“That’s right, Ilyushenka, just ask, Shane won’t get it otherwise.” Irina muttered in Russian before she moved around to be behind her son and Shane had to push down the instinctive need to roll his eyes.

“We’re not. She’s great, but, uh... We’re just not—” Shane’s eyes were stuck on Irina’s hand which had rested just next to her son’s. They had the same fingers, long with large knuckles. “Compatible, I guess. Совместимый.”

“Совместимый.” Ilya repeated, softly. Shane felt his stomach clench and noticed the way other eyes had found them, more than one looking like they might come talk to them. Shane wanted nothing less. It took everything in him to say “I should circulate, I guess.”

“You have new clothes to show off.”

Shane smiled and when he stood, he made sure it was close to Ilya, to feel the heat of him through the sheer fabric. He smelled good, his expensive cologne, the faintest hint of clean sweat. Shane realized rather embarrassingly, that his mouth was watering.

“That went well.” Irina cornered him the moment he stepped out of the bar and into a shadowed hallways to give himself some breathing room. She was dressed for the weather even though she had no way to feel it in a big woven sun hat and white palazzo pants.

“Did it?” Shane asked. “He didn’t say anything about you.”

“Yes, Shane, he wants to bring up his dead mom in middle of bar.” Irina huffed. “My Ilyushenka is sensitive. Always cried. Father never liked it, said it made him look weak.”

“I think I need to meet this man and he needs to meet my fist.” Shane muttered, peeking around the corner to make sure no one caught him talking to air. When he looked back towards Irina, he realized she had a small smile on her face. It was a new face too, he realized. She had wrinkles around her eyes and little parentheses around her mouth like his own mother had. For the first time she looked the age she would have been had she lived. Something sharp cut him to his guts.

“You are a good boy, Shane.” She said softly, and then snapped like she was remembering something. “Oh, and Ilya said he was going to pool so you should go put on those tiny shorts we bought.”

Shane did as he was told even if Irina huffed when he pulled a shirt on over them.

“He’s good with kids, yes?” She asked when they ended up poolside. Shane had also brought his biggest sunglasses so that he could watch Ilya without it being obvious. Shane only realized Irina was there when she spoke because Ilya also wore tiny shorts.

“Yeah.” Shane said softly, making sure not to be overheard. “Was he like that with his brother?”

“No, no. Alexei was older, but Ilya loved the littles at the rink.” Irina said and Shane smiled, thinking of the whip-thin boy he’d stood beside at the draft all those years ago leaning down to help a kid tie up their laces. Something flipped in his stomach. Shane turned to say something but then jerked his head back with a stutter and a blush. Irina laughed. “What, never seen a swim suit before?”

“That’s a strip of fabric, not a swimsuit.” Shane muttered. “You can’t even get a tan!”

“I’m living in the moment, Shane, try it sometime!” Irina waved her hand to magic up some sunglasses, name brand Shane noticed, and slid them onto her face. “I am so busy fixing you boys, I never get a break. This is my vacation too.”

“Ok, you won fair and square.” Ilya yelled from the pool to the gaggle of children at the far end. Then he pulled himself up, the water sloshing over his abs and toned shoulders, over his thick thighs. His suit clung to him and the distinctive and familiar bulge at his crotch. Shane forced himself to meet Ilya’s eyes when the man shook on him like a dog and then huffed out, “Hey, Hollander, can you give these kids some money? I don’t have my wallet.”

Shane smiled, not moving until he was swarmed with damp kids with grabby hands. Ilya watched it all with his hands on his hips, rivulets of water kissing every muscle. It was a trial in self-control and Shane was losing.

“Don’t spend it all in one place!” Shane called after the tangle of kids all jockeying to be the first to get to the vending machine and only realized that Ilya was standing over him when he was literally cast in his shadow.

“Those are new.”

Shane looked down at where Ilya was looking. “You know all of my bathing suits now?”

“Yes.” Ilya said and Shane’s breath rushed out of him like he’d been boarded. Oh, fuck, if he stayed here any longer he’d get hard in front of the whole NHL and all their families and kids.

Luckily the pool was clearing out, people going inside to get ready for the game that night, and Shane used it as an excuse to stand, brushing past Ilya and not touching him even if

everything in him seemed to want to reach out. "See you tonight."

If anything, it got worse in the locker room. Of all the places he'd been with Ilya, this had never been one of them since that very first commercial nearly eight years ago. They had picked cubbies beside each other, and Shane's heart felt too full and heavy in his chest as they readied together. Their shoulder pads bumped as they tightened the straps, their knees brushing when they sat to check their laces.

"This is almost sickening," Irina muttered from the bench in the middle of the locker room. She was watching nothing in particular, except one of the half-naked goalies which Shane didn't want to think about.

"Then leave!" Shane whispered. It was a little weird to try and dress with her turning her back like the overbearing mother she claimed she wasn't.

"What?" Ilya asked, looking around like he expected Shane to be talking to someone.

"I said, let's leave." Shane tried but knew his smile was a little too forced.

Yet none of that mattered the moment they stepped onto the ice. The games themselves were always light, no one wanting to risk anything leading into the second half of the season, but Shane loved them. Here, his real talents could shine.

He was fast, consistently one of the fastest in the league, and his puck handling was second to none. It wasn't even much of a debate and Shane was humble in most things, but not in this. In the shorter games where stamina was less of a problem and he didn't have to devote as much processing power to avoid desperate defensemen making bad checks, he got reminded of why he loved hockey.

Playing with Ilya was somehow even better.

It was so easy, was the thing, like he knew where Ilya would be because that's where he would place himself. They were fast too, Ilya always exactly where he needed him, a single flash of their eyes and they knew the play start to finish. Ilya sent him the puck, Shane crossed it, kept it from the opposing center, spun, slid it back to Ilya. Too many players Shane had played with were puck hogs, but not Ilya. All it took was two clicks, an opening, and a goalie with eyes so locked on one of the best scorers in the league closing in on him that he missed the other coming up the wing. It was magic, exhilarating, enough that his whole body was almost vibrating by the last goal he made. It was clean, textbook, and he saw Ilya coming before they connected but Shane didn't move.

He had to stop himself from doing what they'd always done and turning his head to connect their lips. Instead Ilya planted one on Shane's helmet and he saw a riot of camera flashes flip towards them. Shane just smiled

There was a group dinner Shane and Ilya were dragged to by their teammates, a Mexican place right on the beach. Shane had taken Irina's advice and ordered carne asada. She couldn't eat it, but apparently she could smell it and her pitiful moan made him laugh. Ilya put away two massive drinks, one blended and pink, the other a blue with a gummy shark in

it, and then tucked into three tortas. The oil spilled down his chin, and Shane had to stop himself from leaning forward to lick it off.

Their legs had brushed under the table, their thighs pressed together because there were barely enough chairs for their team. Sitting there, passing bowls of salsa and rice between them, Shane thought faintly of being able to do exactly what he wanted. Of leaning over and kissing Ilya, of having him in his bed, wearing his clothes. He wanted Ilya at his cottage for longer than these stolen moments. After a few too many margaritas, people split off into teams for sand volleyball and a few others ferried people back to the hotel.

“What a beautiful sunset.” Irina hummed. She’d changed again, this time into a long cotton dress. Shane followed her gaze and watched the way the whole beach was shaded in yellows and pinks.

Shane kicked off his shoes, looking back and seeing Ilya arguing over a game of pool with some guys from San Francisco. The sand was still warm and when he sat down, Irina sat down next to him, folding herself neatly.

“Thank you.” He said suddenly. She looked over at him quickly, unsure if he was talking to her, and seemed confused when she realized he was. “I never thanked you for staying with me that night. I know it couldn't have been easy to leave him like that.”

Irina smiled strangely at him, patting the sand next to his hand. She started in English, “I think sometimes you forget, Shane, that people love you.” She paused, then in Russian, as if making sure he understood each word, “*not just what you can do for them, but for who you are. I am one of those people.*”

Shane’s heart constricted painfully and he knew his eyes were teary when Ilya sat down next to him. Shane blinked a few times to clear his vision.

“Found you.”

“So you were looking for me?” Shane said softly.

“Of course not.” Ilya muttered, then faux-casual, “Oh, I looked up that word, uh, compatible.”

“Took him three times. He started with a K.” Irina snitched. “K-a-m-p-a-t-i-b-l-e.”

Shane let out a soft laugh. “What?”

“Compatible. I thought I knew what it meant, but I wanted to be sure.” Ilya said. “And your accent is terrible, so I worried you said wrong word.”

“Fuck you, my accent is great.” Shane laughed softly. Irina had made fun of him for years until he got decent at his inflection.

“So, you and Rose Landry are not...”

“Yeah, not compatible.” Shane said softly. “Not in that way, anyways. She’s great though, helped me get my head on straight–” Irina and Ilya both let out a huff of amusement. Shane laughed out a “fuck off” to both of them.

Ilya kept looking behind them, hyper aware of the men walking along the beach with their wives and girlfriends and of the game of volleyball being played up the beach. Shane was, strangely, the more comfortable one. After all, Irina was keeping an eye out for him.

“When do you fly out?” Shane asked suddenly. He needed to see Ilya alone, to finally crack the unspoken name which had been sitting like a lead weight between them.

“Early.”

“Same. Columbus.” Shane glanced under his lashes to Irina who was leaning down so that he could see her eyes, the little curve of her smile.

“Toronto.”

That little kernel of fear was still there, but more than that was the mounting fear that if he looked away now that Ilya might vanish, that this fragile thing between them might be snuffed out and be unable to be re-lit. Then Shane felt the faintest touch to his thumb. Ilya’s fingertips were rough, but warm. The point of contact made it easy to say, “We should talk. What room are you in?”

Ilya smiled slightly, thumb making slow, calming circles.

Ilya left first, Irina hesitating until Shane waved her away. He wanted to stay a while still, alone for the first time in weeks, watching the sun set and the waves crash rhythmically onto the shore.

The ride back to the hotel was quiet, and Shane had to push down the instinctive need to panic. Without Irina, he flipped through a thousand small problems: what he was wearing, should he shower, should he bring something, was he going to be too early, what about too late? He panicked so much thinking through how exactly to bring up the thing he’d been tiptoeing around all weekend that he was nearly late.

Ilya opened the door and Shane couldn’t look at him. He went right to the bed, put some distance between them. Shane knew if he was in touching distance, no talking would get done.

“This looks serious.”

“Yeah, I just...figure we need to talk. I’ve been dancing around it all weekend and there was no good time...” Shane rubs his thumb over his finger again and again, self-soothing. “Can you just sit down or something?”

Ilya, the ass, leaned against his mini fridge.

“Like we practiced.” Irina said softly from the doorway. Shane felt a touch insulted she’d hovered there like she was worried she’d have to make a break for it if they started sucking

face, but with how good Ilya looked in a tank top, he could admit there might have been some merit in the idea. Then again, he was also nearly shaking, thinking though all the lines Irina had helped him workshop, planning out how exactly he wanted everything to sound, the best ways to avoid confusion.

“It’s not just me?” Shane said softly. “You feel it too, don’t you?”

Then came the cold, “feel what?”

Shane looked to Irina, grounding himself in the knowledge that she knew her son and she said Ilya cared for him. Ilya followed his eyes and Shane pushed forwards. “Last time we were together...before—before was different.”

“What was different? That you talk nonsense and ran away?”

Shane scoffed. “Look, I’m sorry I freaked out, ok? I shouldn’t have dumped that on you and left.”

“Freaked out over nothing.” Ilya muttered and that annoyed Shane, honest annoyance.

“It wasn’t nothing. You know it wasn’t nothing.” Shane demanded. “Don’t act like that. This is hard enough without you being an asshole.”

“What do you want, Hollander?” Ilya asked and it was trying so hard to be casual but Shane could see that his hands were clenched tight around the mini-fridge. “We get together, we fuck. It’s simple.”

“Simple? I told you all that stuff last time and you think this is simple?”

“Is simple for me.” Ilya said.

“Bullshit.” Shane and Irina said at the same time. Irina turned to Shane and waved her hand. “Bring out big guns.”

“Ask me. We’ve been dancing around this for months.” Shane pushed. “I told you about Irina and you haven’t brought her up once.”

Ilya went still, eyes locked on the ugly painting over one of the twin beds. Shane wondered if he was going to get kicked out again. At least this time he had his clothes on.

“Why are you telling me this?” Ilya asked, groaning a bit like a child and still not looking at him.

Shane tried to keep his voice level. “I know this is hard to believe, but we can answer any questions—”

“She’s here?”

Shane paused, Ilya meeting his eyes for the first time, looking small and lost. He was breathing heavily.

“Yeah, near the door.”

Ilya didn't look, instead he kept his gaze locked on Shane. It was, horribly, a touch disbelieving, like he was waiting for the hit, the rug pull, for the cameras to come out and tell him this was all part of the world's most fucked up prank. Shane looked over to her, pleading to give him something.

“Tell him Мне до сих пор нравится его прическа, которая похожа на утиный хвост.” She said and Shane hesitated, trying to make sure he was translating it correctly.

“Um...she said to tell you that she still loves your duck tail?” Shane said softly, repeating the final words in Russian just to make sure he wasn't missing something.

Ilya let out a broken sounding breath, chest heaving and eyes locking on the doorway where his mother stood. His hand rested on the slight curl of hair along the nape of his neck which flicked up. She looked as shattered as he was that she couldn't reach out and touch him. Ilya blinked slowly, repeated the words and then stood, walking slowly over and then sitting down beside him. Ilya wasn't looking at him, but Shane couldn't tear his eyes away.

“She, um...she—” Ilya muttered, and Shane felt almost as wrong-footed. Ilya Rozanov was never without words and to see him so unsure had something in Shane clenching. Probably his heart. Like they'd practiced, Shane thought.

“You know, we talk about you all the time. You're her favorite subject.” Shane said softly. “I've seen lots of ghosts, but she was special from the moment I saw her. She cheered for you so loudly, never wanted to leave your side.”

Ilya's wet eyes flashed at him, panicked and disgusted “Was she with...us?”

“Ew, no.” Shane muttered and Ilya let out a massive breath neither of them had realized he'd been holding. “She like, drifted off, I don't know. Where did you go?”

Ilya watched him as he talked to the air, looking where he did. Irina was staring at him, tears swimming in her eyes. It took her a moment to respond. “I liked sitting by the pool. I liked the sound of the water.”

Shane repeated it, and Ilya looked back at him, mouth open in an awe Shane felt like he didn't deserve. He lost the plot, any planning gone out the window in the face of Ilya shaking like a baby deer on a truly hideous duvet cover.

“When?” Ilya demands, the faintest backbone reasserting itself in his voice.

“When, what?” Shane asked.

“When did you first meet her?”

Shane opens his mouth, not sure why that would matter but not wanting to upset Ilya. If he started crying again, Shane was going to jump in his lap and kiss him, his mother in the room be damned. “The first Prospect Cup? You were smoking under the no-spoking sign. She was

leaning on the wall next to you and I accidentally looked at her. She called me nasty names all the way back to my parent's car."

Ilya barked out a laugh, short and harsh. Then something seemed to come to him and he asked sharply, "You learned Russian. For her?"

"She knew, like, six words and one of them was your name. I figured it would be the nice thing to do."

"Is he..." Irina asked, then scoffed with a smile on her face. "He is jealous of his own mother!"

"What? No!" Shane said and then realized Ilya was looking at him, eyes flicking back and forth over his face like the unheard words might show up on his skin. "I mean, I learned it for you too."

"Sure." Ilya said, and then, "So she can hear me?"

"I could always hear you, Ilyushenka." She replied and Shane just nodded and repeated it softly.

"She must be disappointed in me." He said, looking at Shane as if he couldn't bear to look where Shane had pointed.

"No, Ilya." Shane said, not even needing to look at Irina to know she was shaking her head. "You can talk to her, and then I can tell you you're wrong from her too."

Ilya smiled but it looked strained. When he opened his mouth, it looked like he might spill out words, but instead he just choked out a pained, "Привет, мама."

"Привет, зайчик."

Shane hadn't realized he was crying until Ilya looked to him for a response and then raised his hand to brush tears from Shane's cheeks. "Sorry, sorry, she said hi. Called you bunny."

Ilya laughed and it seemed torn from his throat. They were sobbing now, all three of them, on that stupid, ugly duvet cover. The conversation was stilted and clunky, both parties shooting him sharp looks to translate faster, and Shane had to sound out unfamiliar words like the world's most morbid game of charades.

It got to the point that Ilya couldn't speak, could only make thick gasping sounds as his voice failed him. Shane, without thinking, threw himself onto Ilya's lap, pulled his head into his shoulder and started a gentle sway with his hips. Like a vise, Ilya's arms latched onto him. Irina whispered her own comforting words and Ilya drooped in his arms as if he'd heard them.

Somewhere around midnight, Ilya ordered a whole bottle of vodka from room service. He poured himself a generous two fingers and threw it back like it was nothing. Shane took a fortifying sip and then had to take the teasing from both Rozanovs when he flinched.

“You don’t normally drink.” Ilya’s statement was more a question.

Irina, lounging on a decorative chair, had magicked up her own glass to swirl around. “You should tell him about the gay thing now.”

“It’s not—” Shane huffed and turned to Ilya, “So I think...I think I’m gay.”

Ilya’s throat bobbed a bit as he choked on his shot, not spewing vodka but it was a close thing. With it trailing down his chin, Ilya let out a startled laugh. “Oh yeah? What—what makes you think that?”

“This has been kind of a big deal. To me, at least.” Shane felt a touch defensive considering Ilya was still laughing. “Hey, I’m serious. It’s not just being gay. It’s you. It’s this.” Shane checked with Irina, made sure he was getting across what he wanted to say. She was watching him with a tightness to her face, not disapproving but knowing. “Being gay is one thing, but this fucking your arch rival is another thing.”

“That’s why it is a secret.” Ilya said softly, pouring another shot but not taking it, just swirling it. Shane realized it was the same gesture that Irina did, and he wondered, sadly, who had learned it from whom.

“I know that, but last time...” Shane started and Irina snapped at him, reminding him, and he leaned forward. “And for the record, I am sorry about last time, ok? I’m sorry I freaked out and your mom says she’s sorry for dropping that on you. But before that...it was nice.”

Irina had actually spent a good four hours apologizing to Shane. Not in so many words, she danced around it, but she got there in the end, with a soft look and the words said quietly in Russian. It had needed to be said, she’d argued, but that had sounded weak to both their ears.

Ilya watched him, glancing once at the chair where he knew his mother sat, saying softly, “It was.”

“It felt like...like we could be something.” Shane pushed.

Ilya leaned back, watching the liquid in his glass instead of Shane. “We can’t be something, Hollander.”

Irina had stood up, leaning down close to Ilya like a sports fan watching a championship game. Shane was so startled by her moving that he took a long moment to realize what Ilya had said. For a moment, he wondered if he’d said something wrong, but Irina was eyeing him so intently that he couldn’t get a read on her. Instead he pressed more, to clarify his own feelings, to confirm what he knew to be the truth. “Would you want to be, if we could?”

“We can’t.”

“That’s not what I asked.” Shane said.

“What does it fucking matter?” Ilya whispered with a casual scoff even Shane could read was fake. Ilya was fingering the cross around his neck and Irina reached out and smacked it, her

hand flashing through her son's. Ilya jerked back, right as Irina let out a frantic Russian whisper, too quick for Shane to pick up more than a few words. "Did she...?"

"Slow down!" He tried, but all he got were curses and the word repeated over and over and over again, *Russia, Russia, Russia*.

"No!" Irina yelled. "We are told to do our duty. To give up ourselves for our people. Our families. I give myself to Grigori for duty. I give him sons for duty. I give up my life for *duty*." With a wild cry, she yelled, "I will not lose my son to this!"

"I don't understand!" Shane whispered and the act Ilya had been building up seemed to crumble. He was in front of Shane now, but Shane pushed him back, not wanting to lose sight of Irina. "Just tell me, I can help. Let me help!"

"Tell him this, Shane, tell him—tell him his mother was wrong." She was shaking now. "Tell him I'm sorry about what I said when I caught him and Sasha. I was scared for him. I didn't understand. I understand now!"

For a single long moment, Shane didn't say anything even when they both seemed to try and get him to talk. Instead he just cupped his hands over his ears and sat on the bed, curling his knees up into his chest until they both fell silent. Irina sat on his left and Ilya on his right. Slowly, Shane opened his eyes that he hadn't even realized he'd closed.

"Too much?" Ilya said softly and Shane nodded. "Sorry."

"I'm ok." He said to both of them, then, "She wanted me to tell you she's sorry, for what she said about Sasha. That she was wrong and that she understands now."

Ilya blinked and the tears were back. Shane took his face in his hands, mostly because Irina couldn't and Shane had to get the words out before they were strangled in his throat. "I don't think I can keep pretending I don't like you anymore."

"You can't like me." Ilya whispered and it was more a plea than a sentence.

"I do. I think I like you maybe a little too much." Shane admitted because Irina said he was brave and it would be worth it, taking this plunge, if it brought Ilya even an ounce of closure or relief.

"Don't do this, Hollander. I'm not..." Ilya muttered and Shane hadn't realized what he'd meant until Irina knelt before her son.

"You are worth this, all and more. Worth more than all of Russia." Irina said softly. Shane repeated it in Russian, watching the way his face flickered through disbelief and loss. Then to Shane, she explained, "He thinks he is broken. That you could never love him. Show him he is wrong."

Shane gasped a bit and blushed and resolutely didn't translate that. He'd never dared to so much as think of the L-Word in connection with Ilya, it felt like too much too soon. Still, he

needed Ilya to know that this wasn't spur of the moment, that he went into this knowing exactly what he was asking.

"Irina's told me things, Ilya. About your brother and your father. About what it was like living with them." He said softly. "I know what I'm asking here, about what could happen in Russia, and I get it if that's why you want to call this off."

Irina made a face at this. She'd tried to hide that from him, but Shane had never found a topic worth studying and not dug any deeper. He'd bought books on Russian history, and even had an independent Russian newspaper, *Novaya Gazeta*, shipped out from Russia for him to practice his reading. It hadn't been so scary at first. Then he'd seen the reports starting to come out from whistle-blowers, had thought back on the Olympics with a new found fear. It would crush him, but Shane would understand Ilya's hesitance.

He'd prefer to never touch Ilya again over losing him to some shadowy, inescapable prison.

When he said this to him, Ilya bit his lip, looking sharply away. Shane pulled him back so that they were laying on the bed, Ilya's head against his chest. Shane's mother used to hold him like that, had him count her breaths. Shane did that now, waiting until the hitch in Ilya's chest slowed. Irina had slipped out not long before, probably to be alone, and Shane knew he had to leave soon but couldn't get his body to move. Eventually Ilya sat up, rubbed at his face and looked around the room like he'd never seen it before. "Is she..?"

"No, stepped out, I think." Shane said and then softly, "I should be going too."

"Hm." Ilya said, but it wasn't agreement or disagreement, just a noise. Shane felt something new and fragile hanging between them. Maybe Ilya felt it too, because he watched Shane stand and ready himself with a strange look in his eyes.

"If you want to think of any questions, we're playing against each other in Boston in like two weeks." Shane offered as he picked up his shoes and slipped them on.

"Alright." He said and then softly, like he was testing something, "Good night, Shane."

Shane smiled and leaned down to kiss his forehead, tender and way too much, but he couldn't stop himself. "Good night, Ilya."

Irina was in the hallway, an unlit cigarette between her fingers. She was, paradoxically, in her costume, the Swan Lake one with the white skirt which slipped so that the underlining made a dark pool at her hip.

"I think that went well." Shane said, feeling uncomfortably vulnerable out in the open but felt strange knowing that she would stay here. He'd gotten so used to her presence in his life that her future absence already stung a little.

"It did, I think." She sighed. "If he listens to his mother this time."

He thought about asking about it then, about which of her stories was true. He wondered if she even knew. Instead he just said, "Good night, Irina. See you in Boston."

“Good night, Shane. Sleep tight.”

He dreamt that night of the cottage, of Ilya bathed in light like he'd been in his house on that beautiful day Shane had ruined, of Irina in her sun dress talking with his parents. When he woke up, and felt it fading a bit at the edges, it almost felt like relief to forget the impossible.

Life was quieter without Irina's commentary and he found in the following weeks that he missed it. Hayden had picked up on it, had asked if he was more annoyed than usual, and Shane had lied that he was feeling off. It was true, but mostly because he hadn't realized how much shit talking he'd been allowed with her.

“Are you just looking for my mother?” Ilya asked when Shane had pushed past him into Ilya's house and only half-heartedly returned his kisses.

“I missed her!” Shane defended. “I got so used to shit talking people with her and now I just feel mean doing it by myself.”

Shane had wondered if that was a step too far, but if anything, Ilya seemed excited by that admission. His smile was large and open, and when they kissed this time, it was filthy and deep. Shane understood that he was pulling out all the stops. “I told her I was going to ravish you on the counter.”

“What?” Shane screeched. “Ilya! I have to look her in the eyes!”

Ilya made a very good counterargument with his tongue and then his cock and then his tongue again. Shane bowed out in gracious and sticky defeat. And Shane could admit that it was nice, just the two of them in bed, talking about the game and how long they could nap and what they could eat before they left for the rink. It felt new and strangely domestic but not frightening. More like their relationship had simply broadened, like a river flooding and breaking its banks.

Then Shane caught the flash of Irina in the corner of the locker room after their game, night gown an inky black, and without a word, he knew.

Ilya ignored his calls that first night and Shane told himself that he had simply turned it off for the flight. A few times he just let the tone go long, waiting to hear Ilya's voice. But then the plane landed and no call came, and Shane tried not to feel too weird about the fact that he'd been tracking the only flights Ilya could have taken. He tried to go to bed early, but tossed and turned so much that he went out to lay on the couch. Three ghosts pounded their way down the hall and Shane grabbed his phone and charger before snapping up his keys from the hook.

The apartment hadn't changed since he'd last been in, but Shane felt himself lighten a bit. For one it was quiet and he kicked off his shoes and arranged them on the caddy before going to change into something to sleep in. What he'd been wearing felt dirty now.

When the call finally did come, it was late and Shane had been laying back on the bed, trying to read but really just flipping back and forth between the same two pages when he inevitably

drifted off and forgot what he'd read. He nearly tossed the book across the room in his haste to grab his phone when it started vibrating.

"Hey! Are you ok?"

Ilya's face was wan and tired but beautiful. And also looked strangely giddy. "You wear glasses?"

"What? Yeah, for reading." Shane pulled them off. "Where are you?"

Home." Ilya said, then, "Put them back on."

"Boston?"

"Moscow." Ilya said and that made a bit more sense when he looked at the velvet curtains and dark oak furniture which was at odds with Ilya's preferred style. "Can you...see-?"

"Not through phones or televisions." Shane said sadly. He'd wanted so badly to talk to Irina. Ilya would try to hide it, push down what he was feeling, but Irina would tell it like it was. He made a note to try and corner her at their next game in a few weeks. "How are you?"

"Fine." Ilya said. "Better when I see you in your glasses."

Shane huffed and put them on. "Happy?"

"Happier."

They were quiet for a minute and Shane knew Ilya wanted to say something but it seemed trapped behind his teeth. Finally, Shane pushed. "Just say it. I feel like you're going to pop a vein."

"I want you to take off your shirt." He said followed immediately with, "But I now worry about my dad's ghost."

Shane couldn't help it, he laughed.

"Most people don't become ghosts, they just drift off, fade. It's rare, rarer still to retain your personality." Shane explained the basics that he's picked up, and the thoughts he'd had since he'd taken to recording more information after Irina. "Your mom really is special. And I think she can take your dad, if it came to a ghost fight."

That got a laugh out of him before Ilya slumped boneless back against the couch. "She is special."

"I think she'd like taking a swing at your dad. You should've seen the gestures she was giving him at your signing."

"She was there?" Ilya asked. It was quiet, soft.

“Yeah, most of your games too. Awards night she guarded the bathroom door.” He said. Even through a screen, Shane felt like they were trapped in a warm bubble between them two. “That night in Vegas on the roof, she told me a bit about your dad. I know it must have been difficult, but I’m still sorry you lost him like this.”

Ilya watched him, his face tilted up in a smile and he said something under his breath in Russian that Shane missed.

“What did you say?”

“None of your business, take off your shirt.” Ilya ordered, then, “Keep the glasses on.”

It was, in a word, weird. It took Shane a while to get going, having to rely on the memory of touch rather than touch itself. Ilya’s voice helped, but Shane drew the line at pulling out his dildo. He just knew if Ilya saw it was purple, he would laugh and ruin the mood.

Their conversations after that were sporadic and taken in bursts. He’d look at his phone and realize the small few minutes of time Ilya had between the funeral and the dinner had overlapped with practice and the drive home. Every missed call hit like a lead weight. When he eventually caught one during the down time before their game, Shane didn’t even think about what he looked like sprinting down the hallway.

“How are you?” Shane demanded a bit stupidly.

“Ok. Not good. Probably bad.”

Ilya sounded rough, tired. Worn. Knowing he wouldn’t like the answer, Shane still asked, “How’s your family?”

“At their worst.” Ilya said softly. “My brother is...I don’t know. Scared. It makes him terrible. And it makes me terrible back.”

“It is very upsetting?” Shane felt stupid asking the question but without the facial cues, Shane felt adrift. He wanted to feel what Ilya wanted to feel and needed to check if he was right.

“Yes. But maybe I’m upset about the wrong thing?”

“You mean, not about your father?” Shane wished for the first time that he could hear ghosts through phones if only to get Irina’s read on the situation. Ilya’s monotone responses were worrying and Shane wanted to know how worried he should be.

“I wish he could know me, or...” He trailed off, unsure exactly where he was going with it. “I don’t know. I don’t know. English is too hard for me right now.”

“Speak Russian.” Shane said instead. “I won’t get it all, but maybe that will help?”

Ilya was silent for a moment. “You learned Russian. Bonjour.”

“That’s French, Ilya.” Shane laughed. “And Russian was way harder.”

“Yeah, I know, Shane.” Ilya said, but his voice was more animated now.

“Where are you, somewhere safe?” Shane asked. He'd gone on a bit of a research bender the moment he'd realized Ilya was in Russia. He had been pushing down the remarks about censoring their calls and texts for fear of something slipping. But Shane pushed it down. A voice which sounded irritatingly like Irina warned him that Ilya had lived in Russia for his whole childhood and could make his own informed decisions. Shane would call Ilya until Ilya decided he didn't want to be called.

“I'm just walking. I needed to get out.” Ilya said in Russian, slowly and clearly for Shane's benefit, and then as if digging deeper and with a deep sigh, “I don't think I want to come back here again. I fucking hate it here.”

And then as if pulled from his throat, warbling a bit like he was unsure if he was going to say it, “and they all fucking hate me.”

Shane wanted to argue, to push back that there was no way that someone could truly know Ilya and not love him, but Ilya was still talking and Shane realized quickly that Ilya might not have known just how fluent he truly was. It felt too intimate, too familiar, and Shane treasured each sentence even as they grew more mumbled and fast that he missed some words and was more relying on context clues.

“I pay for everything.” Ilya admitted, and then it was long strings of gendered nouns he thought might have been clothes and food and something about his father being buried. Then the list, “I want more, Ilya, more, more, more! What more could they want? I give them everything...”

“But I feel fucking—” Shane didn't know the word and it killed him. He wanted his book, the spine floppy and a few of the pages falling out but still used almost a decade later. Instead he mouthed the word, intent on looking it up later. He wanted to know everything about Ilya, anything he wanted to give. “They don't care. To them I'm a—”

Shane looked around for a pen and the paper he left near his bed for notes over his books. He wrote the words out phonetically, context, closing his eyes so that he could just focus on the cadence of his voice. Even when he couldn't understand, Shane got the essence and it nearly brought him to tears.

“My brother, he always hated me. And I know why, but...it kills me.” Shane's breath caught in his throat and Ilya must have heard it because he stopped for a second and the only sound was their shared heavy breathing. When he spoke again, it was too low and muffled, on purpose Shane thought, and forced himself to not translate the words, just catching a few, “care” and “father” and a damning “I didn't.”

Because you couldn't, Shane thought right as Ilya said, “But I couldn't. I wasn't here.”

Shane wished Irina could speak, could almost hear her voice in his head yelling about how Ilya had taken the sins of his whole family onto his shoulders and then felt inadequate when it grew too heavy. It was too great a burden.

“But I paid for it all. And he will never forgive me. For any of it.” He said and then softly, pained and as if imparting a secret, “For existing.

“I have no one. Well, not no one. I have...Svetlana. She loves me. And I love her. But not like...” Ilya hesitated, the phone went silent until the static was cut through with a snotty sounding, “Fuck me.”

Shane hadn't spoken in what felt like an eternity. He opened his mouth but no words came out, his jaw hanging loose. He thought then that Ilya wouldn't be sharing this if he knew and Shane finally forced air into his lungs.

“The first sentence I learned in Russian was ‘I love you.’” Shane admitted. It was an out for Ilya. The promise of Ilya's *but* hanging between them, a heat burning low in his sternum, the words he could say back, repeated in three languages. It would be easy.

But Ilya had never been one to take the easy way out.

“Do you know the worst fucking part of all this?” Ilya asked. For the first time, his voice sounded like a conversation, like he expected a response, and Shane sat up to better listen. “I only want one thing. One. And I don't know what to do about it.”

No, Shane thought, the worst part was thinking he understood but not wanting to give himself the hope. More than ever, he wanted Irina, her steady hand, calming words, guiding him. Shane wanted so desperately to be that one thing and was so terrified that he might not be that he couldn't bring himself to speak.

“OK. I'm done.”

“Was that better?” Shane asked.

“Yes.” Ilya said. His voice was rougher than normal. Thick with tears, maybe. Shane's sure was. “Thank you.”

“I didn't get all the words.” Shane admitted. “I still need a good teacher, I guess.”

“I teach, you wear the glasses.” Ilya murmured. “Learn only useful phrases.”

“Like ‘where is the library?’”

“No like, ‘Harder, please. Yes, sir.’”

“Fuck you.” Shane said, and then to be petty, repeated it in Russian and French.

“No, more like: fuck me, please.”

“What about, ‘I wish?’ Like the verb?” Shane asked.

“Если бы.” Ilya said back, quietly.

“Как бы я хотел, чтобы ты был здесь прямо сейчас.” Shane said. “Did I get it right?”

“Yes.” Ilya murmured. His face sounded close to the speaker. “Perfect. No accent.” Then, “I wish I was there too.”

It was almost more intimate than a confession. And it was true. More than anything, Shane wanted to hold him like he had in that Tampa hotel room, to wipe away his tears and remind him that he had people who lov—

Shane pushed that thought down and tossed his phone over onto the other pillow so that he wouldn't spend the whole night looking back through their text chain. He still slept like shit.

By the time their game rolled around a week later, Shane felt he might shake right out of his pads. It was on home ice, which was nice, but Ilya had been distant, even avoiding his eyes as the teams crossed on the way to the locker rooms.

Shane stopped in the middle of the hallway and Hayden nearly ran into him. “Everything okay, bud?”

“Oh, uh, yeah. I'm just going to go talk to...the trainer about. Stuff.”

He thought Hayden said something, an agreement hopefully, but his vision had narrowed down to the spectacle Irina was making in the hallway. She stood there in a massive white gown and whose skirt jutted out nearly two feet on each side. The sleeves were poufy and her face was covered by a misty veil. Even under that, Shane could see her smile as he got closer.

“What are you wearing?” Shane hissed, throwing open the room where the ice baths were kept and locking the door behind him. “A wedding dress?”

“Got your attention, though. Was mine. It's hideous, yes?” She spun around once and the tulle and lace all bounced like it was floating. “Fitting, since my husband is, you know—”

She made a little hacking sound, jerked her neck, and stuck her tongue out. Irreverent is what he'd call her if Shane didn't know that she'd have no idea what it meant and then call him a nerd because he did.

“Are you doing alright?”

“I am wonderful. Husband's ghost already gone, hopefully to hell.” She grew a bit more sedate, smile flickering at the edges. “My boys were...sad.”

“I'm sorry you had to go through that.” Shane offered.

“My Alexei.” She sighed. “Was good boy when he was young. Helped with dishes, folded clothes. But Grigori was hard on him. Eldest, more expectations.”

“I'm sure living up to Ilya wasn't easy either.” Shane thought. He never had siblings and unlike so many other only children he talked to, he'd never really wanted any either. He already felt inadequate, he couldn't imagine competing with someone since birth.

“No. Was unfair.” She said. “Ilya knows what people want, how to make people like him. Alexei wanted that too. I was not enough.”

Irina played with the hip pads. Shane wanted so badly to take her hands.

“Still,” She said, seeming to push down her somber mood through will alone. “You did good. With the call, your words.”

“I didn’t get all of it.” Shane felt a touch ashamed.

“Ilya needed to say it. That is what is important.” She reached out and gave him a pat on the shoulder he couldn’t feel. “Now go lose hockey game.”

“Hey, we’re going to win and then I’m going to bring Montreal a third Cup.” Shane laughed.

The door clicked open and Hayden popped his head in, looking around as if he expected to find another person hidden behind the tub. “Hey, bud. You coming? Coach is asking for you.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Shane moved to leave and stuck his tongue out at her which made her laugh. Theriault seemed a bit thrown off by his good mood but said nothing as long as Shane played a good game. They’d had a rough start, too many injuries had knocked them down to needing a wildcard spot, but Shane had faith in his team.

That carried out onto the ice. Maybe his team sensed it, could feel the energy he was bringing because he might have gotten told off for smacking around Ilya’s stick but it was worth it. The first period was textbook, Shane nabbing a goal within minutes, Ilya chirping him about his backhand, Hayden looking like he might toss his gloves right up until Shane laughed loud enough that it drew attention.

Ilya was coming over tonight. They wouldn’t fly out until the morning. He’d pay Ilya’s fine so that he could have his—whatever they were—stay the night. Shane would cook for him, he’d already gotten the ingredients for some sort of Russian soup and figured Irina could help him if he couldn’t figure out any of the instructions.

During the change out, Shane tried to focus on the game, but his thoughts kept wandering to the question he’d been working his way through the points of. He’d wanted to talk to Irina about it before Hayden had interrupted them and he felt a bit worried he’d mess something up without her input.

Come to my cottage this summer. Easy, simply, straight forward. You said you don’t like Russian, so come to my house. Correct, fact based, good. We could be together, alone, finally get a feel for what this could be—

Shane jerked as the second string hit the boards and Shane was a few seconds late on the handoff. Theriault said nothing but Shane could feel the weight of his gaze on his back.

During the next faceoff, Shane tried to keep his expression professional, but there was something about playing against Ilya which made him remember why he loved hockey in the first place. He only lasted a few seconds before he broke and smiled. Ilya did too, flashing white teeth under his mouth guard.

Shane snapped it up, clean and easy as breathing, and he was off, slapping it between his blade, nipping past St. Simone, spraying ice as he slipped down an opening his wingers helped make.

It was, Shane would later reflect, just really poor timing on her part.

If he hadn't spent the last seven years keeping an eye out for the faintest, familiar flash of white, he wouldn't have let his eyes flicker over to the crowd, seen the way Irina stood near the boards, arms around herself and looking to her son with a hand over her mouth and face shining as her tears reflected the lights.

Then, so slow as if he was stuck in molasses, he watched Irina turn to look at him. Her whole body opened, her hands reaching out to smack into the glass, her mouth opening like she'd say something—

Marleau hit him like a truck. Shane didn't know that then, only learned it after. At the time, all he could hear was the ringing in his ears and the radiating pain from his chest. He could hear, distantly, Ilya's voice.

"Is he ok? Fucking tell me!"

He sounded scared, and Shane's hand made an abortive jerk to comfort him but one of the paramedics tucked it back and strapped him down. He thought he moaned something, but all that came out was a long groan of pain.

"Shane, bunny? Shane?"

"Rina?" Shane muttered and he felt the telltale chill of ghostly hands on his face, then over his chest. It cooled the painful heat enough that he tried to crack an eye open. That was a mistake, it shot painful stabs of pain through his brain. At his whimper, he could hear more whispering in fragmented Russian.

"My 'arents?" Shane asked.

"Your parent, your GM is calling them, okay?" Someone, maybe one of the paramedics, answered but it wasn't one of the voices he wanted to hear.

"Ok. 'rina?" He tried again, then to whomever was listening, "Tell him I'm fine, I'm okay. He's going to worry."

"Tell who?" was jumbled together with the softest of whispers in his ear, "He knows, Shane. You'll be fine."

Then the pale light changed to a sharp red as he was lifted into the ambulance. It was a short ride, or he was on lots of painkillers, because he almost didn't realize when they'd got to the hospital. Almost.

It was the wailing he heard first, long and sustained, so loud it sent bolts of pain down his spine. Then was the moaning and whimpering, starting and stopping as they must have passed different rooms. With his head pounding so loud and loaded up on painkillers, he

couldn't distinguish what was real and what was dead. Worse than all that were the ghosts Shane knew from the way they yelled, screamed for someone to see them, that they weren't dead, couldn't have died, that something had gone horribly, horrible wrong.

Some part of him, compartmentalizing even under anesthetic, thought of the little book his mom had bought him when he was young and would get so overwhelmed with what he saw that he'd had a bad habit of just sitting on the floor and crying. It had been about the stages of grief, and showed them using little animals.

The wailing ones were in denial. A girl called out for her child who she couldn't seem to pick up, yelling for someone to help her, why was no one helping her?

Most who could speak were angry. So many got stuck in that stage, lashed forever to their trauma. Shane listened as they passed through the ER, it had to be because a man was yelling obscenities at a nurse, that his head was killing him and when Shane managed to look, it was because he held a pristine helmet in one hand and half his skull in the other.

In the OR, or what he assumed must be the OR, Shane focused on the sound of a girl in a corner room who seemed to talk to herself. He only heard a snippet of her frantic whispers as he was wheeled past, but he could imagine her clutching something, usually something religious. Believers always got stuck there, in bargaining, Shane thought.

"What did you say, Shane?" Irina said softly and Shane realized maybe he'd said something aloud. He wanted to ask her about her cross but the words were all jumbled in his head and never even made it to his mouth.

Probably for the best, Shane thought faintly as the nurses pushed something into his IV. They'd halted in a hallway and Shane could hear the distant thrum of a machine, maybe an X-Ray. Irina was beside him, he could just see the hem of her nightdress under his cracked eyelids.

Shane had pegged her as in that second to last stage, depression. She was so quiet, withdrawn, putting on a mask even in death for an audience of one. Shane wanted to reach out, touch her, ask her what it would look like, that final stage, acceptance. Then he wanted to cry, because then she might move on and he would lose her.

"Don't go." He whispered.

"We have to get you in for some scans of your brain and your chest." A nurse explained kindly. Irina knew the words were for her, but couldn't know what exactly he meant.

"I'm not going anywhere, bunny."

Irina kept her promise. In the X-Ray she kept near his feet but she had to leave the room for the MRI, something about her standing near him threw off the machine and Shane's already pounding headache was made worse by doctors trying to explain the issue with the magic magnet machine. They'd given him something for the pain and Shane had appreciated it at the time, but as he was laying in the donut, trying not to move, listening to Irina yelling jokes over the sounds, Shane had the strangest feeling of vertigo even as he was laying horizontal.

“I think...somethin’ wron’” Shane murmured and he could hear the cut off curses of the nurse and the doctor but more than that was the sudden and complete silence.

Not of the machines or their talking, but of the voices.

There was no screaming or wailing, not even distantly. Irina’s voice was gone.

Shane knew he was thrashing, that his collarbone ached, sharp and deep, and the nurse grabbed his shoulders and shoved him down, calling for something over his shoulder. The doctor yelled at him, but Shane couldn’t think, could only strain his hearing for Irina, eyes flashing towards the booth but the spot she’d been standing in was empty.

“This’s wrong, somethin’ wron’!” Shane cried out. “Get it out, I don’t wan’ this...”

They must have tried to knock him out because all he could see was the sterile white ceiling and hear the yawning quiet which made his stomach clench up and bile burn the back of his throat.

As they wheeled him past, he realized the sounds of children playing in the pediatrics ward were gone. The doors to the psych ward were quiet. Not one nurse in an outdated outfit walked past. It was loud the way people were and Shane at least waited until they deposited him in his room to turn to his side and vomit.

His mom came in at some point while he was sleeping, or drugged, Shane couldn’t tell, and when he woke up, he nearly pulled out his IV trying to reach her.

“Shane, baby, it’s alright, I’m here, I’m here.” She said, and he could touch her, feel the warmth of her hands, the smell of her Hinoki wood scented hand lotion. His room was empty, only the beeping of his monitors which seemed to climb the longer he looked at his mom. “Is it...you know? I can get you moved to a smaller hospital—”

“I can’t—” Shane gasped, crying, he realized. “They’re gone. I can’t—I can’t hear them. See them.”

“Oh,” His mom said, leaning down and there was a complicated expression on her face, brows all wrinkled together. She folded his hand in hers, careful of the wires and tubes. “Is that...Shouldn’t that be a good thing?”

Shane burst into tears and his frantic heart rate brought in the army of nurses.

They didn’t talk about it after that, his mom shaken and his dad sitting in the uncomfortable plastic chair looking at them both like they were a particularly difficult crossword which worked direction way but made no sense the other.

“When can they get me off of it?”

His mom sighed. “I talked to your doctor, they said they can wean you off it the next few days but that unless you have actual, physical adverse reactions, they don’t want to introduce any other, riskier, medications.”

Shane bit his lip and wished he could work his hands well enough to rub at his eyes. It would be painful with the swelling over his cheekbones, but it would make him feel better. The doctor had said as much. He'd been on a pretty crazy cocktail when it had happened and he couldn't say with surety what it was which messed him up. His health team hadn't exactly been helpful when he'd asked to stop cold turkey on all the meds and had tagged in his mom with her sad, mom-pleading to get him to sign off on a few more days even when it meant every minute felt like ants crawling under his skin.

"Okay." Shane said finally.

"You don't like things...quiet?" Dad asked. It wasn't like his mom, his dad was always more laid back with anything Shane threw at him. Ghosts, being a professional hockey player, buying them a house at eighteen, his dad took it in stride. Maybe that was why he wanted to tell him. It was easier to talk to dead people, who could they tell?

"It feels...wrong?" Shane tried. "Like my body knows there's something I'm missing. I keep expecting to hear something and I can't. It's throwing me off."

"You could learn to get used to it." His mom offered. "Like you did the apparitions."

"Feels wrong." Shane pushed and his dad shut down the conversation with a single press of his hand to his mom's shoulder. It was a miracle his dad miraculously recreated when he convinced his mom to go back to Shane's apartment to pick up a bag before grabbing lunch. A few hours alone sounded heavenly.

A nurse came by after an hour to give him another dose and Shane only just managed to hide his flinch, even if she did give him a look about it. When the door opened again only a few minutes later, he was prepared to be annoyed with his mom's speeding back, but then he saw the hazy shape of blonde curls lit honey by the sun and he was talking before he'd realized it. "Ilya~!"

"I, um, I just wanted to..." He paused. "Are you okay?"

Shane couldn't help but smile, taking in Ilya. He looked good, captain-ly, and Shane had the sudden urge to run his hands through his hair. "Concussion and a fractured collarbone. Out for the playoffs, but..."

"Could have been worse." Ilya filled in.

"Could have been worse." Shane echoed. He wanted Ilya closer. Why was he so far away?

"Marleau feels terrible. He did not mean to hurt you."

"I know. Part of the game." Shane hummed. "We all get our bell rung eventually, right?"

There was the faint sting of a perceived loss, that third Cup fading into the hazy impossible distance, but it was subsumed by his ache for Irina, and the matching ache for her son to come over to his bed instead of standing by the fucking door.

"Right." Ilya said, monotone.

“Hey.” Shane called, waiting for Ilya to look at him. Then louder, “Hey~!”

“Okay, okay, shh!” Ilya hissed, looking back through the little window and then moving forward. His hand was warm and large, scared along the knuckles from fights and calloused from gripping his stick. Their hands matched, their calluses overlapping. The faint scratch was nice.

“Yes! Bet-ter.” Shane muttered. The medicine was kicking in and he could feel himself starting to float. The only thing that would make this better would be his parents and Irina holding all the other hands he had.

“You scared me.”

It came out soft and scared and Shane forced his eyes open even though his eyelids felt like they weighed ten million pounds. Ilya looked...pained. Shane flipped through what he might have done to put that look there and landed on, “I’m sorry I didn’t text you last night.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” Ilya promised. Shane hadn’t realized his eyes had fallen closed until he felt the faintest brush of hands over his cheeks. He smiled, leaning his head into them. Then he realized he had words prepared, that he’d wanted to tell Ilya. More than ever he wished Irina was there to tell him if the words made any sense.

“I was excited about last night. I’m mostly mad at Marleau for fucking that up.” Shane smiled, heard Ilya offer something, but his thoughts were on his plan, on organizing his thoughts. He had a list, Shane thought, to focus on the bullet points. “You know, I had a whole plan to ask you something.”

“Maybe it’s better if you just rest now.” Ilya said instead. He looked around, “That is what she says too, yes?”

“No. I mean, I don’t know. I can’t hear her right now.” Shane said and then pushed on past Ilya’s furrowed brow. “I was going to ask you—”

“Hollander—”

“Will you come to my cottage this summer?” Shane sped out, smiling, already picturing it in his mind. “Don’t go to Russia. Come to my house. We’ll have so much fun. It’s so private. No one will know.”

“Hollander, you know I can’t do that.” Shane heard the words and then forgot them, instead trying to remember those final reasons he’d written out on those post-it notes.

“We could have a week or even two.” He muttered, his eyes falling closed. “We’d be completely alone. Together.”

Ilya smiled but it was small and didn’t reach his eyes.

“Maybe. Maybe.” He said softly, then, “You can’t see—?”

The door opened and the nurse, the evil one who gave him his meds, entered. Shane couldn't help his groan and muttered, "oh, no."

"Uh-oh!" She laughed. "You're not going to smother him with a pillow, are you Mr. Rozanov?"

Shane tried to keep up with the conversation but the words got him thinking about pillows and his face being shoved in them and the lavender scented ones Ilya had on his bed, the feeling of a hand at the nape of his neck, shoving him down until his back made an arch and Ilya's dick hit just right—

"Ah, no. No, no, no. But good thinking." Ilya said. "But no, I was just leaving."

Shane's high faded a bit. He was now thinking about Ilya as Mr. Rozanov and his brain was sort of circling around it, like a middle school girl with a crush, writing her name with sparkly marker. The flash of *Shane Rozanov* sounded stupid even in his own head and high off pain meds but it had him blushing and muttering out the first thing he could think of. "Okay. Bye-bye."

"Goodbye." Ilya said and there was the faintest brush of his fingers against Shane's hand which was hidden by the pale blue blankets.

Shane straightened up, stopped thinking about combining names and Ilya's broad palms on his neck enough to mutter "Mmm. See you next season."

A familiar refrain Ilya picked up with "Get well soon, Hollander."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." He said so that his mouth didn't instead think to say *Ilya Hollander* and make him have to sedate himself.

When he eventually surfaced from the haze of the meds a day later and saw Irina sitting on the window sill, picking at her nails, he shocked both her and his own mother with how hard he cried. Then he cried harder when they both leaned in to comfort him using so many of the same sentences that it made Shane laugh through his tears.

His parents, mostly his mom, handle all the paperwork, getting a car, packing up his apartment so he could go directly from their cottage to his without having to drive back down to Montreal in a month with his arm still in a sling.

His mom seemed set on treating him like he was sixteen again, watching his phone usage, hovering over him like he'd keel over any moment, spending long hours arguing with his sponsors about not being able to make it to whichever photoshoot he was missing.

"Powerful woman, Yuna Hollander." Irina said, not for the first time. "I respect her. Like strong, Slavic woman trapped in small, Canadian body."

"I can still fly back to Boston." That was Shane's constant refrain. Irina had stayed, too shaken up by Shane's sudden bout of ghost blindness, and Shane had felt bad about it until she seemed set on critiquing every square foot of his parent's cottage. He was set on settling

into his own in about a week and he was worried she's start in on that too. He's offered to fly to Boston just to let her be with her son, but she'd turned him down.

"I will see him this summer." She'd say and Shane had to panic about Ilya's answer, or telling lack of answer, all over again.

"I don't think he's coming, Irina." He said, trying to keep his voice neutral.

"He will come. Will find some excuse to show up." Irina waved at the screen where Boston was being demolished by the Admirals. "Not like he will be winning anything in this shape."

Shane and Irina both flinched when Scott Hunter smashed Ilya into the boards.

His mom popped her head into the living room. "Who you talking to?"

"Irina. From the hospital?" Shane answered. It had been too hard to hide and it had felt nice, after telling Ilya, to share this part of himself with his parents too. He knew it frightened them, his mom the most, but it was for the right reasons.

"They are scared of how world treats you. Good parents." Irina had deduced within hours of meeting them. Shane had to agree and tried to not get annoyed when his mom gave him that look, not disbelieving, but like she suspected he wasn't being wholly truthful. That she was right was only making him feel worse about all the other things he was keeping from her.

"What does Irina think about the game?" His mom asked, drying her hands and then hovering as the Admirals snapped up another goal and Ilya looked close to snapping his stick.

"You want truth, beautiful Yuna, I don't even like hockey." Irina said and Shane gasped, shocked enough that his mom whipped around to look at him. Irina seemed to like having a captive audience. "No good sport, too violent. Too many games. Now figure skating—"

"Irina, figure skating is not better than hockey." Shane switched to Russian instinctively. She wanted to insult home, well he'd dish it back in her native language. "О допинге в хоккее почти ничего не слышно—"

"Is that Russian?"

Shane glanced up at his mom and realized that there was yet another thing he'd been keeping from her.

"Oh, uh, yeah. I've been learning it the last few years." He thought about lying, talking about Russian rookies who don't know English or the fictitious woman in his building who'd been getting a lot of flack, but he already had so many lies flying around he didn't want to add more.

"Huh," She said, confused but not calling him on it. "Well, maybe throw some Japanese lessons in there?"

"Sure." Shane said quickly and then looked down to his black screen. "Actually, I just remembered I promised Rose I'd call her after second period. I'll be right back."

His mom and Irina both looked up to the tv where the first period hadn't even ended. Shane made a break for it, Irina's snorting laughter trailing him out. Thankfully, Rose picked up on the second ring.

"Briar's here, just an FYI." Rose opened with and Shane was thankful for the heads up. Briar was a trans make-up artist Rose had befriended during the most recent round of reshoots last year. Shane knew her only because Rose had picked up one of his calls about a month ago, him slightly groggy on pain meds, complaining about missing Ilya's dick and Briar had asked "Is that Shane Hollander?"

Now, Shane could say he knew three queer people, even if one of them was Ilya and the other was his friend Joe from his old rink. It also helped to get another opinion from someone who didn't really know him and was also alive. It also helped that she could hear ghosts like Shane and Rose, which made Shane feel better about her not snitching him out.

"How's the arm?" Rose opened with.

"Still in a sling but I can lose the thing in a few days, I think." Shane walked away when Irina floated around near the door, clearly bored and wanting Shane to entertain her. He waved her away and she rolled her eyes just like Ilya did before she drifted back inside.

"How's jerking off?"

"Ma'am, I'm at my parents' house, so..." Shane huffed. He felt like he was cornered on all sides by people who liked to make constant fun of him. Still, he was smiling.

"So, constant, endless?" Rose asked and he could hear Briar snickering on the other side.

"Pretty much." Shane confessed. That Ilya was keeping their texts impressively chaste was also not helping. Shane had tried to be vaguely sexy but that had just gotten him a string of questions about how many meds he was on and how they might be effecting his texting. When his most recent attempt got him the comment 'should put phone down. Eyes clearly not working right' Shane gave up. Trying not to think about that, he picked a sedate topic. "Um, how are the reshoots going?"

"Fine. I mean, this movie makes no sense." Then Rose huffed. "Don't laugh, Briar, it doesn't!"

Shane felt a bit too much like his mother when he answered. "At least you're getting paid properly this time."

"I miss being kidnapped." She sighed. "Speaking of being kidnapped, how's your ghost mom?"

"I didn't kidnap her and she is not my ghost mom." Shane answered on rote. "And you know her name is Irina!"

"Until she apologizes for screaming in my apartment, she is ghost mom." Rose said. "Plus, from what you said, she hates me so..."

“She doesn't hate you.” Shane said even though he did kind of think Irina hated her a bit. He didn't know why and Irina just huffed and gave a shrug any time he asked, but he knew they'd get along if they could just talk. It was one of the reasons he wanted Rose to come down for the summer, so they could meet properly. He figured now was as good a time as any, “My parents keep asking if you're gonna come by this summer.”

“I'm planning on it. They can't keep me here till September with dead directors and wilting scarlets. My head is already aching and I've only been here for two months. I'm going to lose my mind.” She huffed. “Briar's too nice to say it but she agrees.”

“I don't think that's what his parents mean.” Briar said Shane was glad he didn't have to say it.

“Well, just tell them!”

“Rose...” Shane warned. They'd had this fight a few times and Rose was never one to back down. Shane could see Irina watching him from one of the windows. Worry-wart. He waved her away. She looked like a horror movie cliché, a pretty blonde woman hovering in the window wearing a pale night dress.

“Just do it.” Rose hummed as she invented. “Tell them I'm gay and you got sick of being my beard.”

“I can't lie to them.” The words felt tough coming out, hard to chew and impossible to swallow. There was a long silence over the phone that felt pointed. “You know, more than I already have.”

“Well, I think they'd love it.” Rose offered. “And then they'd have to keep my secret. My big lesbian secret.”

Shane heard the girls commiserating about not liking girls and felt a sudden connection to them even thousands of miles away. “You don't see the way my mom still looks at me when I talk about the ghost thing. You think dropping the *I'm Gay* bomb is going to help that?”

Shane jerked when his mom popped her head out the door. “Third period's starting.”

“Coming!” Shane shouted. “I'll figure it out. Okay, I gotta go, but let me know what you decide about Labor Day weekend.”

“I will.” She said. “Listen, I have a good feeling about this summer. Fate brought us together Shane Hollander, I'm here till the wheels fall off. And I love you.”

“I love you too.” Shane said softly. “Bye, Briar. Enjoy shapeshifting.”

“I never should have told you about that!” Rose griped before the call cut out.

Ilya wasn't doing any better in the third period than he'd been in the first or second.

“He's playing hurt. It's his ribs, I bet.” His mom speculated. She got like this after a few glasses of wine. Shane had wondered more than once if there was something to it, more than

just a good eye. She was rarely wrong.

“How do you know that?” Shane demanded. He knew Ilya's ribs were bruised because he'd texted Ilya about the hit that caused them, but there really was no way for her to know that.

“Am I right?” She demanded. “We should get you a ghost in every stadium, that way you'd always know what players you had to watch out for.”

“I don't know.” Shane said to avoid talking to his mother about Ilya. “And that'd be cheating.”

“It's just using what the universe gives you! No one expects tall players to make themselves shorter.” She argued. “And look at that goalie. That knee? Surgery for sure.”

“Your mother's a witch.” His dad joked but there was a slyness to his face which made Shane think he wasn't entirely joking. “Okay, Boston's lost. Would my witch wife, medium son, and ghost guest like dinner to celebrate?”

“Dad!” Shane argued. It shouldn't matter, he'd said shit about Ilya to his parents before, but it meant more now, not even because Irina was here to witness it. He just wanted his parents to see Ilya like he did and it might take time, but one day when he felt they were ready, he'd introduce them. Even the thought was enough to ignite something in his stomach.

“What?” His dad demanded. “We don't hate him anymore? I can't keep up!”

“We hate the team, just...” He tried to think back over whatever he'd blabbed to his mom while still high on the meds.

“Rozanov went to see Shane in the hospital.” His mom summarized and was then thankful when they did that gross parent thing where they sort of circled each other and looked like they might kiss. He hoped he and Ilya never looked like that because from the outside it looked embarrassing.

“Oh, so now you like him.”

“Well, now I hate him less.” His mom explained and then tossed out, both casual and prophetic, “And good for Scott Hunter!”

“Why good for Scott Hunter?” Shane asked, honestly. His mother had called him the night before his own first Cup win with a steady voice without a lick of worry and just said “This game is yours.”

“I don't know. It's his year.” She said vaguely.

“How can you possibly know that?” Shane demanded and wondered about placing a bet under her name on one of those websites. She'd guessed correctly on every Championship game for as long as Shane had been alive and he figured she'd be right with this one too.

“She's a witch!” His dad joked, this time with humor.

“Stop it with that!” She laughed and then Shane groaned quietly when he heard his dad push and his mom flirt back, “Or I’ll cast a spell. Turn you into a newt.”

“A sexy newt?” His dad asked and Shane wanted to be back at his own cottage away from any thoughts of flirting and his parents.

“They are very gross.” Irina muttered. “In sweet way, like puppies, but also in gross way.”

Shane couldn’t agree more.

Being at his parent’s cottage had, in many ways, regressed him to being a teenager in many ways. He felt a little like he was learning what an actual childhood should have been like when it come to hiding his texts and giggling under the covers. Irina walked the forest at night so it felt private and intimate, warm under familiar flannel blankets, waiting with bated breath for Ilya to reply. It was nice.

Ilya didn’t believe his mom’s predictions, a little weird considering one of the closest people in Shane’s life was his dead mom, but Shane liked the jokes and looked forward to being right.

Ilya learned that a week later when the final minutes of the championships played out and Shane got to send a smug:

Jane: My mom was right.

Lily: I’m so irritated.

Shane looked over to where Irina lounged on the window seat. She wore a massive fur coat like a stereotype of a Russian femme fatale in an old movie. She wasn’t wearing any shoes and her bare feet peeked out the bottom. In her hand, she’d liked the look of it so much that she’d conjured a glass of what Shane assumed was vodka to match his own mother’s glass of wine. He didn’t know if she could taste anything but it made her happy so Shane couldn’t say anything.

On the screen, the Admirals were celebrating. Shane felt the ghost of that rush, of holding the Cup, the heft and weight of it, and he thought about asking Ilya if he felt that way too, if he missed the touch of cold metal on his lips, the slight burn of your muscles from lifting it as the captain who dragged them there.

Not many people would understand that. Shane was so focused on those thoughts that he’d missed what was happening on the screen until Irina reached out and smacked at his arms and the tingles rippled up from his arm.

“Shane, look!” Irina hissed and Shane watched as Hunter waved someone down from the stands. His phone buzzed.

Lily: What’s he doing?

Jane: I don’t know...?

Shane looked back up, his eyes locked onto the screen, not realizing he wasn't breathing until his chest grew tight and he let out a sharp gasp right as Hunter turned and looked at the man. He knew it was coming before it happened, maybe that intuition of his mother's but it seemed to plow into him the moment they came together in a massive crash, the kiss long and deep and undeniable; shaking something loose, the only thought in Shane's head was *I want that*.

His phone flashed in his hands and Shane knew without looking who it would be. Shane nearly jumped to his feet, dashing around the corner and could feel Irina following behind him, leaning in to hear her son speak. Before Shane could so much as formulate a sentence, Ilya had already said sharply, "I'm coming to the cottage."

Irina who had been hovering at his shoulder let out a wild yell which he realized was actually a single word, screamed with the joy Shane had only seen in someone winning a Stanley Cup.

"Finally!"

Chapter End Notes

I have read EVERY SINGLE comment and you are all so lovely and wonderful. Thank you for making this fandom so welcoming and this story so rewarding to write.

I'll see you at the cottage!

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

To the cottage!

Chapter Notes

The final instalment is here! Thank you for your patience, I was not happy with how it was coming out and had to delete and change a bunch of things around. I'm still not completely satisfied and might come back to it when it's not four in the morning, but I wanted to get this out as soon as possible. Sorry for any mistakes!

Thank you so much for reading and following me, motivating me, and leaving lovely comments for me!

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

“What about this one?” Shane held up the bottle of expensive vodka for Irina. She was lounging dramatically over a display rack of wine wearing sunglasses and a large fur coat in the middle of June. “Irina, this is serious!”

“Agh. Is it?” She asked, sitting up and letting her glasses slide down her nose to see the label. “Or are you worrying? Also, shit vodka, put back.”

“Thank you, that’s all I wanted to know.” Shane put down the bottle and went back to reading the little information cards.

They had over a month before Ilya was coming but Shane had felt like that deadline was a noose slowly closing around his throat. He’d already planned which groceries needed to be bought, cleaned out both closets in the guest room if for some reason Ilya decided he wanted to sleep there, and had his well tested to make sure the water hadn’t spontaneously gone bad. The surveyor had looked at him like he was crazy but had taken his money and given him a clean reading.

His parents had, politely, kicked him out when his worrying had started to craft a literal hole in their floor. Then again, they thought he was preparing for a silent retreat and his panicking was only helping that lie.

“What about this one?”

“With ugly dragon on it? Be fucking for real with me.” Irina hissed. He’d been setting up his I-Pad in one of the guest rooms and turned on Auto Play for some Russian soap operas Irina seemed to enjoy. So much so that she’d started dressing like them.

“You could just say no.” Shane muttered. He knew whatever he settled on would be way too expensive and probably not what Ilya even liked to drink. He’d hoped Irina following him around for over a decade would mean she’d have some idea but she’d just looked at him with a single raised brow. “What about this one?”

She rolled off the display, floating down gracefully, her coat billowing around her slinky black dress. “Actually, that one is not bad. Good.”

“Good.” Shane looked at it again. It looked like something his dad would drink. “It’s only—holy shit! What do they brew it in. golden barrels?”

“You are bad millionaire.” Irina offered. “Should buy a—what do you call those big stupid boats we make fun of?”

“Yacht.” Shane muffed, putting the bottle in his basket.

“Are you finding everything alright?” The proprietor, a pretty woman wearing a wrap dress who’d seemed unwilling to leave Shane to browse alone, stepped out from behind some decorative crates. “Oh, good choice!”

“She wants to fuck you.” Irina said but Shane had gotten pretty good at not reacting to whatever god awful take she spouted in public.

“Just this please.” Shane smiled and held out the vodka.

Back in the car, he placed it gently in the passenger seat. Irina liked to sit in the back, said it made her feel like a celebrity being chauffeured around, and that was why he was surprised when he looked over and realized she was waiting for him to move his purchase to the back seat. “Why do you want to sit up here?”

“I cannot want to talk with you?” She demanded.

“Not usually, no.” Shane pulled his list from his pocket. There was still so much to do in only three weeks.

“You need to tell your parents you are gay.”

Shane folded up the list and was glad he hadn’t turned the car on. He might have accidentally driven them into traffic. He glared at her, grateful that he’d gotten the windows tinted. “Why would I do that?”

“Shane, they already think you might be gay.” She made a little shrugging motion. “So just tell them, make you feel better.”

“I—they think...was there—something I did?” Shane couldn’t look at her anymore, he was looking ahead at the trees behind the busy highway. “Was it, like, during a game or

something?”

“Ah, shit. No. I’m doing this wrong!” Irina cursed. “No, no, you are just...sensitive.” Irina flinched and shook her head. “Fuck, that is stupid too. Stupid English.”

“I can’t let them down, Irina.” Shane said and then repeated it again. “They put so much into me, money and time. They drove me to games, paid for me to get new equipment. A tutor when I fell behind in school. I don’t want them to have to worry about this too.”

“You are good son, Shane.” Irina said sharply. “I am mother. I know what I would do for my son. I also think...I think—”

“What?” Shane pushed and Irina rubbed her hand over her chin like she was psyching herself up for something.

“I think these things come out. I don’t want to see you hurt.” She said it softly. “When I... when I found out suddenly, about Ilya, I responded badly. Scared instead of loving. You deserve loving, not scared.”

“I’m always scared.” Shane admitted.

“Yes, well I can’t do everything, Shane.” Irina waved her hand. “I want coffee, that nice place near the trains.”

“That’s not coffee, it’s sugar and syrup, and you can’t even drink.”

“Let a girl live!” Her second favorite phrase recently to get Shane to do something, right behind, “Ilya would like it.”

“Yeah, well, Ilya likes anything that will take a few years off his life.” Shane grumbled but turned into the coffee shop drive-through anyways.

At home, he started in on the part of the preparations that he was most nervous about. Cooking.

“They can not mean all this sour cream.” Shane held the bowl over the bubbling pot.

“If you skimp, it makes a shit soup.” She hissed. “Ilya won’t like.”

“That all you can say now?” Shane demanded and folded in the sour cream until it lightened the whole pot to a pale pink. “Maybe he’d like it with the low fat stuff.”

“Maybe.” Irina snarked from her chair. “Maybe I’m tsarina and you’re Prime Minister.”

“You’ve gotten meaner since we got here.” Shane noted. She’d been so specific about the instructions, thoughtful about how to teach him that he knew it couldn’t just be his poor technique. “Are you worried too?”

“Will be first time away from home by myself.” She said softly and Shane melted like the sour cream into the boiling soup.

“You don’t have to go. You can stay here the whole time.” He turned to his side to look at her but also keep an eye on the stove. “I like having you here.”

“Is because you’re too nice.” Irina griped. “And will be good for me. I want to see the pyramids.”

“Well, you’re going to Paris, so good luck with that.”

Irina had, rather surprisingly, decided not long after he and Ilya had picked what weeks he could come up for that she’d be taking a trip. She’d been listening in on his father’s morning coffee gathering and had announced to him that one of his neighbors would be gone for a week, the second that Ilya would be at the cottage. Shane had seen right through her, but she’d seemed to throw herself into planning too. For her, that meant slipping in and out various outfits and asking Shane’s opinion which she then disregarded.

“You can’t be trusted.” Irina argued. “You say everything looks nice.”

“It does, you could pull off a sack.”

“Flatterer.” Irina muttered but she was smiling. She turned around and the double-breasted coat flashed into a backless silver dress. “Still, I want to look nice for those French ghosts.”

“Why?” Shane demanded. He was working on a new recipe Irina had given him, a dessert, and he felt he must have missed a step because the dough looked lumpy. “Hey does this look right—wait, what do you mean, French ghosts? Why does that matter?”

“I must teach you everything?” Irina questioned, leaning over to see the mess he’d made of the bowl. “Birds and bees, bunny.”

“That’s not..!” Shane sputtered and then, “You can...?”

“Oh yes.” Irina smirked. “This is right, now the cocoa powder and the...whatever you call them.”

“Hazelnuts.” Shane filled in, avoiding her eyes and any thought of ghosts fuck— “What’s next after the kartoshka?”

“You want to try more fish?” Irina asked. His last attempt had gone so bad he’d had to air out the whole cottage for a day. He’s steamed fish before, but somehow the halibut he’d gotten had not wanted to cooperate and there was always way too much milk involved for him to feel confident. Irina read his expression and laughed. “We do grandmother’s recipes then.”

“Were these not her recipes?”

“No, grandfather from down south, Rostov.” She explained. “All fish and fruits. Ukha with fresh bream. But grandmother, she was from east, so more spices.”

“Not a whole lot of that in these.” Shane had known the broad strokes of Russian history from Irina and his research, but there was something informative about making the food.

Nothing was wasted, clearly made from a time of scarcity even by a family he knew had been decently well-off for most of her childhood.

Shane thought faintly of asking his mom about any of her own mother's recipes, if he would feel that same strange thready connection to a past he wasn't really a part of but felt touched by nonetheless.

"Not really, no. Remember salad?"

"That was not a salad, that was a head of lettuce in a bath of mayo." Shane argued and Irina laughed. He'd finished rolling the kartoshka and the smell of condensed milk and the feeling of crumbs under his nails was making him uncomfortable but Irina was smiling and she'd spoken of how she and Ilya had always stopped at this little bakery on their way home from the rink and how he'd talked her into a treat each time. Shane wanted it to be a surprise.

"You liked the sirniki." Irina pushed.

"Yeah, it's fried." Shane huffed but she was right. He'd only allowed himself one but it had been fluffy and filling, the cottage cheese texture hadn't even bothered him warm, and he'd even tried it with the sour cream like Irina had demanded. "And I hated the...what was it? With the buckwheat?"

"*Yours was poorly made!*" Irina hissed in Russian. "Ruin good kasha. Have Ilya make it for you. Then you like."

"The texture was horrible." Shane shivered even thinking about it. It had been slimy and he'd left the rest with his parents to get it out of the house. "Alright, I'm done."

Irina leaned in and took a sniff, smiling. "Good, bunny."

Shane picked up the kartoshka and took a bite. He hadn't had chocolate in months, maybe years, and the burst of sweetness over his tongue sent shivers down his arms. It was good, not too sweet, and the texture was nice, not as smooth as mochi but the condensed milk helped it stick together in a way which didn't have it stick to his teeth which he liked. "It's good."

"Yes?" Irina leaned down to see his face. "Need to eat more. You're so thin. We need you strong." She reached out like she might brush his cheek and Shane realized he had cocoa powder on his face. "I'll get you eating more pickles in no time."

Shane had a new jar of pickled cucumbers in the pantry. One of the ladies at the Russian grocery store Shane had driven into Montreal just to shop at had recommended them and by the time he'd left, it was several hundred dollars lighter. A good chaser for vodka, she'd said and Shane had tried to hide his disbelief at who'd want a pickle after a shot but moved them into the checkout line anyways.

"What about something healthy?" Shane asked. "I'm getting hungry."

"Open the fridge." She demanded and Shane did as he was told, watching her pick through all of his groceries. He was flagging a bit but he also wanted to use up the frankly ridiculous

amount of food he'd bought. Ilya seeing that might put him into a coma. "We make vinegret. Grab the beetroots and pickled cabbage. And that oil that you use."

"Sunflower?" Shane asked then followed her directions until he had a fresh looking salad with no mayo in sight. When he took it out to his deck, he took his first bite with Irina chattering his ear off in Russian and felt a single flash of disconnect at the bite of the beetroot and the sharpness of the language for a moment before he smiled and took another.

Slowly, he worked his way through a majority of the ingredients until he was left with enough to last two weeks along with the more standard fare of pasta, hot dogs, and burgers. To do so though, he ate more Russian food in two weeks than he'd ever thought and the smell of mayo was almost, *almost*, less revolting.

He was feeling good, more confident. That's why, three days before Ilya was set to fly in, Shane sat down and watched Scott Hunter win MVP.

It was a foregone conclusion. The top brass had been too slow in a response after the win, more than a few posts dodging the issue entirely and trying to frame the whole thing as just another Stanley Cup win, and they'd been raked over the coals for weeks. Giving him the MVP would smooth ruffled feathers and Shane was only slightly annoyed that his season ended so early that he'd not warranted an invite.

Ilya had been texting him throughout the awards, mostly variations on the theme of Hunter being old, but he sounded lighter even through the phone. They'd had phone sex the night before, Ilya taking him on an extended tour of his penthouse suite while narrating all the things he'd do to Shane the next time they were there together. He'd had been inordinately glad Irina had decided to stay at his parent's because the sounds he'd made had been obscene and way too loud.

When Scott stepped out onto the stage, Shane had watched him settle himself, opening with a soft joke, "You might have noticed...", and then Shane felt something drop in his stomach, yawning and cavernous, as he continued. It happened the moment Scott stopped smiling, when Shane listened as the chirpy whistles and played-up laughs went silent.

"I've never really shared anything about my private life, but from what I've seen the last few weeks, it's—it's maybe important that I do a bit." Hunter went on and Shane felt his stomach clench again. There were no more polite laughs and the pans to the audience were of solemn faced managers and distracted players turning to their sides to whisper under their breath the longer Scott talked. Then there was a moment when Shane could pinpoint that Scott went off script, the way he held himself, the rocking he did, as if deciding if he would actually say it, and then he spoke. "When I was a teenager, I...I realized I might be that thing that hockey players like to throw around as an insult."

"Oh fuck." Irina muttered.

"The kind of language that I heard on the ice and in the locker room every day was a constant reminder that I was different." Scott said and Shane felt Irina turn to look at him. He couldn't look back, his mind was already filling in the polite blanks Scott had left, the feeling of the slurs rolling over his shoulders, down his back, around his lungs until he felt like he might

choke on them. On the screen, it looked like it might choke Scott too. “Wh—when you have a secret that you work as hard as I did to protect, it’s, um...It’s exhausting. It’s a nonstop effort. And it’s also really, really...lonely.”

Shane missed the next few moments, his brain circling that word around and around. Lonely.

“You should tell him.”

Shane’s head jerked around to Irina. “What?” He hissed and then followed her pointing finger where Scott was spouting off something about love beating all. “No. What? I can’t.”

“This Hunter man understands. If you not tell your parents, tell him.” She made a little waving gesture. “Then you have practice and your parents not so scary.”

“I’m not afraid of my parents.” Shane tried and when Irina shot him a disbelieving look, he looked back towards the tv where Scott was exiting the stage but all Shane could hear was the muted claps, the way the cheers were half-hearted and few and far between. Shane pointed at the screen. “I’ve won that award before, twice actually, I know what it should sound like. It shouldn’t sound like that.”

“They clap?” Irina shrugged again and all Shane could see was her son, the cavalier way they walked through the world, and more than annoyance, Shane felt a sickening envy.

“And then turn to talk under their breath to each other. They laugh at him.” Shane didn’t have to say anything more. The cameraman had spun around to allow time for the stage to be reset and it had revealed an audience all huddled together into little gossip pockets, faces more sneers than smiles. Irina said nothing. “I tell him and it gets out? That’s what I get. And I’m not Scott Hunter.”

Irina, even as a self-proclaimed hater of hockey, was well versed enough to know that. Scott had been the poster boy for the NLH for nearly his whole career, he’d been squeaky clean and, maybe most importantly, he was near retirement. Had a few good years left, but a perfect opportunity to show diversity without having to actually change anything. And there was also the glaring detail that Scott Hunter was also white.

“Well, fuck.” Irina said again. “Tell Hayden then. Boy is half in love with you.”

“He’s my friend! He’s not in love with me!” Shane sputtered.

“You forget I see everything.” She tucked her hand under her chin. “Boy looks at your ass too much to be just friend.”

“I’m going to bed.” Shane huffed.

“Tell someone!” Irina yelled, then a few moments later, “And put on *House Hunters*!”

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“Is that what you are wearing?” Irina opened with the moment he got into his car.

“What?” Shane glanced down at his linen shirt. “Yes. What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing.” Irina said quickly.

Shane slammed the door closed a bit harder than he needed to and glared at her through the rear-view mirror. “Don’t freak me out, I’m already panicking. Do we need more toilet paper?”

“Did you already use the three packages you hid in the guest room closet?” Irina asked and that was at least one less worry for Shane to fixate on during the two hour drive. After only ten minutes, Irina leaned forward. “Put on a podcast, your panicking is stressing me out.”

They started on a music station which seemed to only play old French love ballads but Irina had glared at him until he’d changed it. He did have a number of Russian lessons on tape but Irina got annoyed with those two. “I teach you Russian, not stupid tapes!”

Her ‘lessons’ lasted about twenty minutes and were mostly just weird idioms Shane thought she was making up as she went. Finally, they settled on some pop station for the last leg of the drive and then silence the moment Shane pulled into the city proper. He got a little more nervous on the massive highways and downright shaky in the mess of veering lanes and turns in the airport.

“This is right lane, stop your tapping.” Irina promised, but she was tapping her foot too and when Shane looked down at it, she shifted huffed. “Ok, I’m nervous too. I missed him.”

“Me too.” Shane admitted. A dark flash in the rear view mirror showed Ilya and Shane felt himself make a strange sound. He looked– “Holy shit.”

“This is going to be the whole next week, yes?” Irina said quietly as if just realizing it and Shane felt himself flush a bit. Sue him, Ilya looked like he walked off a runway somewhere for leisurewear.

The door opened and Shane braced himself for something–anything.

“Is this a Jeep?”

Not that. Shane looked at his car again. “It’s a Jeep Cherokee. What’s wrong with a Cherokee?”

“Nothing.” Ilya said but he had a look on his face. “And...and she lets you drive her around in this?”

“It’s practical. Good in the snow.” Shane defended. “And she gets chauffeured around, so she doesn’t complain. Much.”

That got a tight smile out of him, but Shane became painfully aware that Ilya had never used Irina’s name, not even calling her mother.

“Передайте ему от меня привет и скажите, что он выглядит нелепо.” Irina said but it was undercut by the sheer joy she wore just at the sight of him.

“Irina says hi and that you look ridiculous.” Shane translated and Ilya, for the first time and with a bravery which made his heart jump against his ribs, turned and looked into the backseat, talking directly to Irina for the first time since Tampa.

“It’s a good disguise.” Ilya tried.

“Ruined perfectly good shirt.” Irina leaned forward to wave at the cut-off her son wore.

“He’s a millionaire, I don’t think one shirt is going to bankrupt him.” Shane argued and Ilya smirked as if picking up on the conversation from context clues alone. He picked at the frayed edges of his shirt.

Irina looked insulted. “You take his side?”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side!” Shane huffed. “There are no sides!”

There was a long pause in the car.

“That sounded like you taking my side.” Ilya said and Irina made a little ‘hm!’ sound and Shane just laughed.

“You’re lucky he can’t hear me tell him all the embarrassing things you did last week.” Irina threatened but she was smiling too.

“Are you hungry?” Shane asks instead, and he hoped his blush wasn’t as obvious as it felt. If Ilya’s stare was anything to go by, it was. “It’s a two hour drive but we can stop for something if you want?”

“No, I’m okay.”

Shane thought through all the meals he’d prepared, worried that somehow Ilya would hate every last one. Or that he’d take one look at the cottage and ask to be driven to the airport. Shane took a breath, flexed his hands on the steering wheel, and imagined the voice of Irina, telling him all those thoughts were stupid thoughts and to simply stop having them. It didn’t always work, but it claimed him enough now.

“I think you’re going to like the cottage. It’s, uh, relaxing.” Shane said softly. Ilya looked at him and even without saying it, Shane knew what Ilya would have said if his mother hadn’t been in the backseat. So Shane clarified. “I would like to relax with you. For once.”

Ilya was looking at him now and he could feel Irina’s eyes too. To avoid that and the emotion bomb he felt like he just dropped, Shane pressed on, thinking of something else to say. “I bought groceries, so we don’t need to leave. Or not leave much. If we don’t want to—”

“Thank you for inviting me.” Ilya cut in and Shane was grateful to be stopped. Irina leaned over the console so that he could see her.

“I was going to stop you too. You ramble. Stop.” She raised an eyebrow. “He is already here and trapped in your car. Where can he go?”

“He’s not...trapped!” Shane muttered and Ilya laughed at that and Shane knew he was blushing properly now. “I’m just...glad you’re here.”

“Me too.” Ilya said and then he paused, looking behind him and then to Shane, smiling a smile Shane so rarely saw, childlike and more impish than usual. “But...also, like, terrified, yes?”

It untangled something in his chest that Shane hadn’t even realized was knotted. He laughed, breathing sharply, and then nodded. “Speaking of your outfit, did anyone recognize you? At the airport or anything?”

“My handsome son? Everyone.” Irina said casually and Shane didn’t translate. Ilya already had a big enough ego.

“No, no. Not that I noticed.”

“Cool.” Shane muttered and then moved on to the next safe topic with Irina in the car. “The cottage is super private, so we don’t need to worry about anything.”

“Not even your parents?” Ilya’s face did something funny. It was pointed and searching even behind his sunglasses. Irina leaned in too, forgoing flipping through nail colors to look first at her son and then at Shane for an answer. They looked eerily similar.

“No. I told them I was on a silent retreat, like a meditation thing.” Shane didn’t even get the whole thing out because Ilya was laughing. “What? Does that sound fake?”

“Yes!” Ilya laughed but it wasn’t being laughed at, Shane knew that feeling intimately. It was inclusive, and somehow tender. “It would if it was anyone but you.

“Your mom wanted me to admit it was a sexcation, but I worried my parents would think I was sleeping with a ghost.” Shane admitted and that got Ilya to laugh again.

“Who taught you word, sexcation?” Ilya demanded, taking Shane’s hand and looking at him head on now. Shane had actually googled it but it felt embarrassing to admit it, yet if anything, Ilya seemed more charmed.

The drive went quickly, Shane found, with a warm hand in his and the faint sounds of the radio, drowned out by soft conversation.

“Tell him I love him and to drink lots of water.” Irina listed. “And I will be on the trail at six, don’t forget me there, I hate bugs.”

“You can’t get bit.” Shane countered and then promised anyway. He wanted so badly to get Ilya vertical he would have promised just about anything.

They’d tested the distance Irina could wander and latch onto a new person. They’d capped it at about a mile. Shane slowed at the entrance to his parents driveway. It was about half a mile and Shane waited five stressful minutes until he knew Irina had made it inside because she didn’t reappear in the back of the car.

“She’s gone?” Ilya asked as they drove off, Shane keeping a constant eye on the driveway like his parents might decide to take a random drive at noon.

“I, um, asked her to stay there for a while.” Shane admitted.

“What plans do you have for us?” Ilya leaned over and rested a hand on the flesh of his thigh and Shane nearly sent them into a ditch. “Eye’s on road!”

“Don’t put your hands down my pants!” Shane whimpered but placed his over Ilya’s when the man tried to pull away. “I just want you to myself for a while.

Ilya smiled and his thumb moved in distracting motions over the sensitive skin. Five minutes had never felt so long.

He made sure to be the first out of the car and around to the back to grab Ilya’s bag mostly because he knew his ribs would still be healing and also because he knew it would annoy Ilya a bit. He’d made a comment on how stupid the word cottage was when they’d driven up and Shane wanted to punish him a bit. It worked.

“Hey, I can carry my own bag.”

“How are your ribs?” Shane countered.

“Fine, I can take my bag.” Ilya said again.

“I can’t believe you played with those bruised ribs.” Shane chided but it rang false and Ilya knew it.

“Whoa, you can’t?” He mocked. “Lifted cup with broken thumb.”

“Ok, maybe I can. Still, you shouldn’t lift heavy things.” Shane said instead.

Ilya followed a bit behind, closer than he’d been since he got in the car, so close that his breath fanned out over Shane’s neck. “I’ll lift you.”

Shane watched Ilya take in the cottage and realized he desperately wanted him to like it. There had never been a place he’d felt more comfortable, more himself, and it felt almost intimate to let Ilya inside.

“No candles?” Ilya asked and Shane shot him a confused look as he placed down Ilya’s bags. “No crystal ball? No ghost boards?”

“Ouija boards?” Shane asked and then, “I’m not an actual medium, Ilya.”

“Hm.” He said and then did a little spin. “No, you’re Mr. Real Estate. The fetish really paid off.”

“I, uh, didn’t buy this, I had it built.” Shane thought about it, his thoughts drifting through the list of amenities like an actual agent.

“Oh, I know.” Ilya said and Shane paused for a second because it threw him off for a second, seeing Ilya here, bathed in the light off the lake, soft in comfortable clothes and looking at Shane as if he had nowhere to be and no one else he’d rather see. It was intoxicating, but Ilya didn’t move and so Shane fiddled with his sleeve and shoved his hands into his pockets and moved to put some distance between them.

“I can give you a tour, if you’d like, or I could make us some lunch. I got some ingredients Irina recommended.” That was all he could get out. If he admitted to the hours he’d spent over the stove, he’d have to throw himself out one of his many windows. “Also, I got you Coke, though the water here is really good. I have my own well. You can see it. In case you’re thirsty.”

Ilya moved closer, slowly, eyes never breaking from Shane’s and he thought a bit ashamedly back to Irina’s demand to not be in the cottage after the airport. At the time, Shane had thought she was being dramatic. They’d waited months, they could wait until the sun went down, but looking at Ilya now, Shane had never been more grateful for her foresight.

Because Shane wound tight as a top and if Ilya didn’t shove him down onto something vertical soon, Shane would drop to his knees and do it for him.

It was startling, just how much he was vibrating by the time Ilya’s hand brushed his cheek, rubbing before his jaw was cradled and then they were kissing. They bumped into his side table and a lamp and then the edge of the couch.

Shane knew there was a question he wanted to ask Ilya, that he’d written out on his schedule for the day before Ilya ruined it with his unfairly wonderful tongue, but it didn’t matter as much when a hand slipped its way into his shorts and cupped him. Maybe even more distracting was the hand at his neck, scruffing him. It sent tingles down his spine, and if there wasn’t already a hand on his dick, Shane might have tried to wriggle his way down to Ilya’s crotch.

“Wait, um, it’s been a while, so I might not last long.” Shane admitted.

Ilya huffed. “Yes. Same, but we have two weeks.”

“Yeah, cool.” Shane muttered, then the words actually processed. “W-wait, same?”

“Shane, nothing kills boner faster than thinking your mother might be watching.” Ilya huffed. “Don’t make big deal.”

Shane tried to nod, but it felt like a big deal. Ilya had spent almost a decade being papped next to who Shane assumed was every single woman in Boston, but now he was here, on Shane’s boring beige couch. Shane tried not to let that go to his head.

“So you haven’t been with anyone lately?” Shane asked, clarifying. He tried to keep his voice smooth but Irina had told him he couldn’t lie for shit and Shane could already feel the way his mouth was pulling up into a smile.

“No.” Ilya said, but he kept Shane’s gaze, challenging. “So can we...”

“Really?” Shane asked once, and then it sunk in that Irina had been an excuse. Shane had told Ilya that his mother was staying with Shane, he’d briefly explained that they were grounded to a singular person, meaning Ilya was lying. Ilya didn’t sleep with anyone for months, after years of being caught with a new girl every week. For Shane. Now he couldn’t stop his smile and the way he could feel his voice grow brighter. “Really?”

“Hollander, it’s not a big deal, okay?” He tried to give his hand a little jerk to get Shane with the program but Shane was having too much fun and shoved his hips down to trap Ilya’s hand between their hips. “Can we fuck now, please?”

Shane couldn’t help but kiss him.

“I have an idea.”

Ilya groaned but Shane was still riding the high of knowing Ilya was just as pent up as he was, that the only thing touching him in the last three months had been Shane and his right hand. It was strangely thrilling.

Ilya’s response, when it was dragged out of him, was low and annoyed. “...What?”

“For the next two weeks, let’s just be honest with each other...about what we actually think and...maybe how we really feel?” Shane asked. He had workshopped it in the mirror and had felt too self-conscious to even run it by Irina.

Ilya’s eyes stayed locked on him, soft and focused, but there was the faintest tension around his eyes even as his mouth twitched up in a wistful smile. “I will try.”

“Yeah?” Shane asked, grinding his hips down and letting his head tilt just slightly so that their lips brushed when they spoke.

“Yes.” Ilya moaned. “I will do anything if it will make you touch my dick right now.”

Shane did touch his dick, mostly with his mouth but the blowjobs had not really taken the edge off just how needy they both were. There was still that tingling at the base of his skull when Ilya leaned over him on his bed, body heavy, mouthing at the sensitive skin right behind his ear that Shane hadn’t known existed until Ilya Rozanov had found it with his teeth. He worried about a wandering ghost or his parents deciding they needed laundry soap or his phone ringing to tell him he’d forgotten he’d host a party of all his closest friends and they were at the door right now, come let them in.

“So dead people see us fuck.” Ilya had muttered when he’d shoved the remote to the blinds somewhere under the bed so Shane couldn’t get it. “Lucky dead people. Their lives are very sad Shane, let them have this.”

“And if they tell someone?” Shane had argued, mostly to be contrary and maybe also because he liked the way Ilya’s face scrunched up when he got all high and mighty.

“What will they say? Dead person told me two sexy hockey players fuck?”

Shane had to concede there.

Shane had showered first, pushing Ilya out of the bathroom. “If you come in here, no washing will get done.”

Ilya’s shark-like smile was answer enough.

Shane picked through his fridge. He had the stuff for salads which would be easy, but Ilya never struck him as the leafy greens type, so Shane pulled out the stuff for burgers. He had just flatted the paddies when he heard the shower turn off and had just lit the grill when Ilya appeared through the glass. Shane swallowed thickly.

“How long do we have until we have to go...” Ilya didn’t seem to know how to say *pick up my ghost mom in the woods* without it sounding ridiculous. Shane figured that ship had already sailed.

“I told her six, so after we eat but before the sun goes down.” Shane forced himself to stop looking at the dark trail of hair Ilya flashed when he raised his shirt to scratch at his toned stomach. He forced his eyes back down onto the grilling burgers. “She doesn’t like the bugs.”

Ilya stumbled for a second, but recovered, curling around Shane like a snake. Even in the silence, Shane could feel words go unsaid. Instead, Ilya whistled. “Why are you making so many burgers?”

Shane looked down at the grill for the first time and realized that while during playoffs he could maybe pack away four burgers, during the summer he probably shouldn’t be. In his worry about pulling out food-based proof of him possibly overstepping, Shane hadn’t even realized the portions he was making from the print out he’d hidden. “The recipe was for eight, so...”

“Okay, you cut it in half.” Ilya asked, but there was no weight to words. “What, you can’t do math?”

Shane was actually more focused on Ilya’s hand on his hip, resting right over the bruises. “Leave me alone.”

“No.” Ilya said simply.

He’d found that spot again, behind his ear. To keep himself from burning their dinner, he muttered, “Can you go grab the sauce from the fridge?”

“Okay.” Ilya murmured, but his mouth had latched onto the hickey he’d started in the bedroom and seemed set on expanding it down to his collarbone.

Shane took a deep, grounding breath when the humid air came rushing in when their bodies separated. Ilya watched him as he circled the grill and Shane had a handful of seconds to realize that this was happening, that he was being honest to god domestic with Ilya Rozanov, his situationship for nearly a decade, right at the same time he realized why he wanted Ilya out of the kitchen.

“Wait, Rozanov!” Shane called but it was too late because Ilya had already pulled out the containers and Shane, like a fucking idiot, had labeled and dated them. He felt a blush rise up on his cheeks as Ilya looked from him back into the fridge, making note of all of the neat stacks. Shane felt strangely defensive. “I was practicing with Irina, it’s not all...”

“Russian food?” Ilya finished. “You made kartoshka...?”

“Sure.” Shane said softly. “She said they were your favorite.”

Ilya didn’t say anything after that, just grabbed the neatly organized sauce bottles and an onion from the crisper drawer.

The silence which had felt charged before had become oppressive in an instant. Shane focused on the burgers, on pressing them until they steamed and checking to make sure not a fleck of pink remained. He’d had an irrational fear of salmonella since he’d learned about it at seven. Without looking up, he asked, “Are you...mad?”

“Mad?” Ilya asked, turning in his chair to look at Shane. “No, Shane. I’m...I don’t know.”

“If I overstepped—”

“No, no. No.” Ilya pressed, standing again and pulling the spatula out of Shane’s hand to transfer the burgers to the waiting buns. Ilya was right, any longer and they’d look more like a hockey puck than a food. Slowly, Ilya pulled Shane over to the table. “I’m not mad, at all. I’m—sad. Sad you...know her. I never really knew her.”

“She’s your mother...” Shane tried but Ilya was focusing on putting together the burgers and waved his comment away.

“Yes, my mother. That is all I knew her as. You know her as a person.” Ilya finished and then let out a shuddering sigh. “I’m jealous, I think.”

“I’m sorry.” Shane offered but Ilya waved that away too.

“You gave her back to me. How could you apologize for that?” he said softly, and then with a tight laugh which even Shane realized marked a shift in the conversation, Ilya clapped. “You want pickles?”

The food was good and Ilya seemed more settled the longer they talked. His hands even shifted over, resting on Shane’s knee, and it was strangely erotic. Ilya had lost that tightness around his eyes the longer they sat there in silence, eating and watching the lake. Then, after his first burger, Ilya’s face broke open into a smile, soft when it settled on him. Shane gestured to the pile of burgers left behind.

“Okay, fine, I should have cut it in half.” Shane admitted, only partly because he wanted to see Ilya’s victorious smile. “Ordinarily, I would give the rest to my parents, but that would probably ruin my whole silent retreat lie, I guess.”

“Yuna and David, yes?” Ilya said quickly and Shane shot him a surprised look Ilya rolled his eyes at. “You know my mother, I can’t know yours?”

Something fizzled like a can off pop in his brain, the worried buzzing of uncertainty at the very thought of his mother and Ilya in the same room. He was so easy-going and his mother had never seen an issue she didn't want to manage.

“No, of course you can.” Shane said quickly and took another bite.

“And?”

“And what?” Shane questioned.

“Tell me about them.” He asked and took a hardy swig of his ginger ale that he’d poured himself.

“What do you want to know?” Shane asked. This felt weird, like stepping off the dock and knowing you’d fall, that little flutter of weightlessness before gravity takes hold.

“I don’t know. I don’t know anything.” He admitted and Shane came to the disconcerting realization that he had Ilya at a disadvantage. He thought about his family, talked about his father and they bantered about McGill and his normal dad and manager mom, and he shouldn’t have been surprising when Ilya eventually asked, “So where do you get your gift from?”

“Oh, ah...” Shane picked at the sheds of bun he had left over on his plate. “I don’t know exactly. Mom says my grandma would talk to the air, but she also got diagnosed with Schizophrenia and passed away before I was born.”

It had been one of the defining reasons Shane felt his own parents had so isolated themselves. Neither of his grandparents liked their in-laws, his mother’s parents thought his father too white, and his father’s parents thought his mother was not white enough. His Ojichan had been the only one he’d been close with and he’d died when Shane was only four, but Shane had a felt there was something in his eyes as he hovered over Shane’s bed, that he knew to come to Shane at all—well, he never told his mother even after she’d started to believe him.

“So just you?” Ilya asked.

“No, there have been a few others.” Shane admitted. “Rose, for one—”

Ilya sat up with a puffed up chest. “Rose sees ghosts?”

“No, she hears them. Most people just hear them, I get to see all the gory details.” Shane tried to brush past that and prayed Rose wouldn’t mind Ilya knowing her secret. Miles and Briar already did, but he’d make sure to ask her next time.

“Gory, what does this mean?” Ilya took a chip in his mouth.

“Gory like, nasty, gross.” Shane tried. “Bloody, you know.”

Ilya looked up at him, his brows knitting together. “You see them, bloody looking?”

“I mean, yeah, however they die, mostly. Some can change what they look like, but it takes control and focus so most don’t bother.” Shane explained and then laughed a bit at Ilya’s incredulous look and hanging mouth. “What?”

“Is that not...scary?” He asked. “Sad, seeing all that?”

“I mean, yeah, it can be. But most don’t linger and those that do usually aren’t so bad.” He wanted to say the correct thing to wipe that look off Ilya’s face, like he was some fragile bird that needed coddled and bottle fed. “I’ve dealt with it all my life, I’m fine.”

Ilya let it go and Shane tried not to let the relief show on his face. After they finished and had packed away all the leftovers, and with minimal teasing from Ilya about him cooking enough food for a small Russian army, they made their way down the trail which he’d tamped down with a log and his four-wheeler a few summers ago.

“So, do your parents know?” Ilya asked abruptly.

“About you?” Shane said sharply. “Of course not.”

“No, about you.” Ilya said casually, kicking a branch out of his shoe with a wince. When Shane shook his head, Ilya asked, “Would they not be good about it?”

“I don’t know.” Shane said and then realized that was a lie. “I mean, no, they’d be fine. I’m sure they would be, but...I don’t know. We haven’t talked about it. Irina says I should, but I just...”

Shane didn’t know what to say. He hadn’t known what to say to her either. He kicked a rock. Honestly, even if he had been brave enough to say it in front of Irina, Shane thought he might have told them already if his relationship history had just been a string of meaningless hook-ups or comprised of real attempts at dating. Explaining to his mother the weird patchwork of fucking his rival for the last seven years made him break out into hives. “Our situation makes it difficult.”

Ilya was looking at his feet and his ridiculously large Adidas slides and only looked back at him when it seemed like he’d processed the words, finally. “Oh, this is my fault?”

“No.” Shane said, then, “Well, yeah, kinda, and your mother’s. Rose already guessed who you were from her accent.”

“Rose met my mother before I did?” Ilya spun around sharply but before that could go anywhere, Shane saw the familiar pale shape of Irina waiting near the little lake overlook and nearly tripped in his haste to get to her.

“Hello, Irina!” He said quickly. Irina took one look at Ilya behind him and raised an eyebrow.

“What did you say?” She demanded.

“Nothing.” Shane promised.

“You met Rose first.” Ilya shouted to the air. He didn’t know where his mom was but knew she could hear him and Shane almost regretted telling him this information because she looked over at him sharply, mouth dropping open when Ilya followed it up with, “Is my fault he’s not come out to his parents.”

“That’s not what I meant!” Shane argued but then he had two annoyed Rozanovs.

“Look, I think you can tell your parents you’re gay without giving them a list of all the guys you’re fucking.” Ilya argued. His jaw was tense and he held himself like he did on the ice when he was preparing for a hit.

“I know, I know. It just doesn't really matter.” Shane said sharply and then spun on his heels and marched back down the trail without waiting to see if they’d catch up.

He knew they were talking, or at least Ilya was talking and Irina was listening, but Shane was just stuck in a loop of how telling his parents would mess everything up. He’d just got Ilya to the cottage and he’d nearly spontaneously combusted. If he had to sit through a conversation at his childhood dining table talking about Pride merch with his name on it, Shane felt like he might implode. And his mom would do it, she had a nose like a bloodhound for these sorts of things.

Shane got back to the cottage and went right to the fridge and pulled out the kartoshka. There were twelve in the container, each placed neatly in a little cupcake liner, and Shane took a guilty bite. He ate it over the sink so that he wouldn’t have to wipe down the counter, but when Ilya followed him in, he paused for a second and then followed him over. His hip checked Shane’s softly, grounding, before he plucked one out and popped the whole thing in his mouth.

“s ‘ery ‘oo.” Ilya gummed out and Shane couldn’t help but laugh. When Ilya reached for another Shane smacked his hand lightly but it didn’t stop him for long.

“Finish the one you’re still chewing. You look like a chipmunk.”

“Is chipmunk cute?” Ilya asked, looking like he might try and reach for his phone and then realizing he had a kartoshka in each hand.

Shane sighed. “Yeah, chipmunks are cute.” He said softly, and then when he checked their hips again and laid his head on Ilya’s shoulder, he whispered, “But they’re still rodents. Rats.”

Ilya tried to wrap an arm around Shane’s neck and when Shane managed to wiggle out of it, he shoved both kartoshka into his mouth and then raced Shane back to the bedroom where Irina knew not to get near.

Their pants were around their ankles and then Ilya’s hand trailed down Shane’s stomach, wrapping around their cocks. Shane felt a shiver which had nothing to do with arousal and everything to do with thinking about powdered sugar on his dick.

“Where do you go?” Ilya asked, giving them a dry jerk.

“I’m thinking about yeast infections.” Shane answered honestly.

“Jesus Fucking Christ, Shane.” Ilya said but it tapered out into a full body laugh.

Shane made Ilya go wash his hands after a thorough wipe down and peeked his head out to check that Irina had retreated downstairs to her iPad. When he checked on her, she was lounging on the bed in a loose nightgown, different than the one she normally wore, and waved him over.

“Something new?” She asked and Shane skimmed the streaming service, letting her look through the options. “Maybe something French?”

“Preparing for your trip?” Shane asked and changed the search results. “They have *Ratatouille*, or...”

“That one.” Irina picked and so he clicked on it and let it play. “What a lovely name, Amelie.”

“It’s French.” Shane said.

“Oh, really?” Irina laughed and then, “Oh, hello Ilya.”

Shane turned and looked and Ilya stood there quietly, leaning against the door jam. “You watch movies?”

“Your mother’s going to Paris next week, so she’s going to watch a movie about it.” Shane explained. “Do you...do you want to watch?”

“Okay.” Ilya honest to goodness fidgeted and then climbed onto the bed. He thought about telling him that Shane meant on the expensive tv he had built into one of the cabinets upstairs but it was too cute, watching Ilya recline on the headboard, and heartbreaking to watch Irina curl up next to him, like she wanted to brush his hair.

“Wait, here.” Shane pulled down one of the massive decorative pillows right into Irina’s lap. She huffed but then all the annoyance vanished the moment he pulled Ilya down to lay his head right where her lap would be. The pillow gave the illusion and it was helped along by the way Irina looked down on him, like there was something infinitely precious in her lap.

Shane sat the iPad on the dresser and then leaned back so that his head was resting near Ilya’s hip. It was warm and with the lights low, they felt contained in a small bubble.

Later, after the credits rolled and Shane rubbed away his tears, Ilya muttered out in rough Russian, “*What a stupid fucking movie.*” This was undercut by his pulling up his shirt to rub at his eyes.

“Go do something else, something exciting.” Irina said as Shane sat up, but her eyes hadn’t moved from her son’s head. “I think I need to be alone right now.”

Irina had these moments and Shane nodded once, pulling Ilya up. “Let’s go make a fire.”

Ilya didn't say anything, not even about the poorly planned exit, but he did look back into the room and Shane couldn't see his expression.

His fire pit was easy enough to light and Ilya seemed strangely impressed at his skill with a lighter and some kindling. Then when the fire was little and sent up the scent of heat and ash, Ilya looked at it and then at Shane and then at it again with eyebrows which slowly inched up his face. "So we just sit here and look at it?"

"Yes." Shane said slowly. "We just sit here and look at it.

"Canada is fun."

Shane shoved his elbow into Ilya's ribs and then immediately regretted it when Ilya flinched and he remembered he's been playing on bruised ribs. "Sorry, sorry!"

His phone buzzed, and Shane glanced down and smiled when Rose's name, along with the little emoji she'd made him add to the end, flashed on his screen.

*Rose 🌹: hows the cottage*

*Rose 🌹: and the hot russian*

*Rose 🌹: completely unrelated but how many rasputin jokes am i allowed*

Shane sent back the middle finger emoji and clicked off his phone. When he glanced over at Ilya, he was wearing a slight frown and had his eyebrows were raised, like he was deciding if he should be mad. "It's just Rose."

"Mh. Just Rose?" Ilya murmured and Shane thought of Irina's sudden and clearly forced dislike of one of his only friends outside of hockey.

"She's just checking in." Not exactly true, but Shane was wanting to wait until they met in person so that when they got along like a house on fire, he could say 'I told you so' to both of them. But Ilya looked away, his jaw moving like he was grinding his teeth. Shane couldn't help the joy which infected his words. "You're not jealous, are you?"

"No."

Oh god, Shane hoped he was, just a little bit. Maybe it made him a little bit of a bad person, but he'd spent whole weeks with his 'Ilya Rozanov' Google alert showing him picture after picture of Ilya in low-lit rooms with models on his lap, so sue him if he was enjoying this a bit. Irina was a bad influence, she always told him to be a bit meaner. Shane couldn't help but laugh a bit when he enunciated clearly, "Ilya, I'm gay."

"Yeah, not so gay you can't fuck Rose Landry." Ilya said sharply and any hope Shane had of not laughing was gone. Ilya was upset and Shane tried to tone it down, not let the proof of Ilya's care go to his head.

"Oh my god. It was, like, twice. And both times were complete disasters." Shane explained, making sure to meet Ilya's eyes even when it seemed like Ilya wanted to look anywhere else.

Shane wanted him to know he wasn't laughing at him. "I'm not sure she's looking for a repeat performance."

"Disasters like how?" Ilya demanded and there was the faintest stirring of hope in his voice that drew another laugh from Shane.

"I'm not going into details." Shane said, but did mutter, "Your mom was there once, she screamed bloody murder until I left."

This, more than anything else Shane had said, even that he was gay, seemed to settle Ilya. He smiled and opened his mouth to say something, probably a nice compliment about his mom, when a loon call echoed over the water and Ilya jumped like he expected someone to jump out of the woods.

"What the fuck was that?" He gasped.

Shane couldn't help the half incredulous laugh. "A loon? You know, the bird?"

"Sounds like a fucking wolf!" Ilya hissed, looking back over the water and shifting like he might need to run back into the house. It was so endearing that Shane felt his heartbeat almost grow painful with how big it felt in his chest.

"It's a bird, trust me. Your mom knew it was a bird." Shane explained but Ilya still wasn't looking at him. "You're so scared!"

Ilya flashed him an indigent look. "What kind of bird makes a noise like that?"

"A loon! A fucking wolf?"

"You boys alright?" Irina's voice floated over the sound of the fire and Shane caught sight of her drifting down the cement steps.

"Ilya's scared of loons." Shane snitched and Ilya made an insulted sounding 'huh!' when he realized Shane had snitched him out to his mother.

"Stupid Canadian wolf bird."

Shane watched Irina take a seat across from her son, pulling her feet up into her lap. She wore a new outfit he'd never seen before, a long cream skirt and patterned button up. She always looked so put together that this simple outfit distracted him to the point that when the loon called again and Ilya jerked around to scan the water, Shane really had no choice but to bring his hands to his mouth and let out a loon call.

Ilya turned and looked at him with a frown and furrowed brows. "Don't speak bird, now you are just annoying me."

"Fluent, no accent." Shane said.

"I hate you."

“No you don’t.” Shane and Irina said at the same time.

The fire does seem to untangle something in both Rozanovs, though. Irina eventually slumped down in the chair and Ilya shifted away from him, enough that Shane had worried he’d done something wrong, right until Ilya’s head landed in his lap. It felt natural to rest his hand along the curve of Ilya’s ribs and the other in his hair. In his lap, Ilya went boneless.

“Ask him about his brother.” Irina said softly. “Is he still hounding him?”

“Your mom’s asking if you’ve talked to your brother lately?” Shane said softly, waiting for Ilya to flinch or scrunch up, but he didn’t, just shook his head and watched the flames. To both of them, Shane asked, “Is that a good thing?”

“Probably, I don’t know.” Ilya said.

Irina hummed quietly and stood up, floating down to the lake edge. Shane ran a hand down Ilya’s hair. When she was out of ear shot, Shane leaned down so that his voice was soft and quiet.

“Irina’s down by the water.” Shane said softly, then, “What was she like, when you were young?”

He could only see the side of Ilya’s face and it seemed to flicker only once down to the water’s edge before latching back onto the fire.

“She was so funny and beautiful.” Ilya said but Shane could hear the pause. “But she was so sad. And my dad was so hard on her. And...”

Shane had a moment of disconnect looking down at Ilya, shaped so profoundly by the loss of a woman who was skipping imaginary rocks down by his lake. He felt a sudden and profound thankfulness for his gift, for knowing that love did continue after death, it lasted and lingered and sometimes it haunted.

Then a loon called out over the water and Irina called from the dock, “*Don’t worry, Ilya, mama will protect you from the wolves!*” and Shane had to lean his head back so that he could hopefully hide his tears.

Ilya noticed. Ilya always seemed to notice and Shane pushed him down so that he didn’t ruin this moment. “Your mom said that she’d protect you from the wolves.”

Ilya seemed as struck by that sentence as Shane was and he curled up into himself, his hand catching on his earlobe and rubbing it softly. “Do you wanna go inside?”

“Not yet.”

Shane didn’t say anything else, just let Irina settle back into her seat and kept a steady pressure along Ilya’s ribs. Eventually without Shane feeding it, the fire sputtered out to flickering charcoal. He placed the lid over it to smother the ashes and helped Ilya to his feet. Irina waved them off, looking out over the forest.

When he woke up the next morning it was to their clothes smelling like smoke and learning the smell of Ilya's morning breath. It was disgusting and lovely in turn, an element of domesticity he'd never imagined he'd be partial to. He slept like a baby, head back, mouth open, arms both thrown up. Shane started the morning with a smile.

"Good morning."

"oog ornin" Ilya muttered, eyes barely open. Shane tried not to be charmed. His accent was thicker in the morning, less polished, more reminiscent of the boy Shane had met outside that rink in Saskatchewan. He was so busy thinking of that kid, of how much he'd been juggling and at such a young age, that he almost missed Ilya's faint, "I like you."

Shane paused for only a second. "I like you too."

Probably more than liked, Shane could admit to himself, but this was a step for them. How long had the pair of them skated around that simple thought? They liked each other. It was a revelation.

There was also a small part of him which was relieved. Shane knew he was hot, Ilya and the few other people he'd hooked up with had confirmed that for him, and he knew he could be good at sex, though it was mostly Ilya weighing in on that one, but people didn't usually *like* Shane.

They liked what Shane could do, what he could get them, but he still remembered his first coach stopping him in the middle of watching tape and tell him "You might want to stop that if you want to make friends on this team, Hollander."

Shane hadn't known what 'that' was, but he understood the sentiment well enough. That it wasn't even the ghosts he could use as an excuse, just something fundamental, structural, like his spine, which had him feeling always on the outside. Ilya was the first to really look at him, see all the messy insides of him, and stick around anyways. Shane thought again not only of little Ilya but little Shane, of the uncertainty and the, he can admit it now, roaring jealousy he'd felt at how together Ilya had seemed to be.

Shane laid his head down on Ilya's chest and let himself drift back off to the sound of his heartbeat.

They woke up late, spent a sweaty hour in the gym which ended up with Shane bent over his rowing machine and then another forty-five minutes testing the power of his hot water heater in his bathroom.

"I have some pasta, or I can make Golubtsi, but I use Napa cabbage. Its leaves are more tender." Shane asked once they'd dried off. Ilya watched him from the island. The light was back in his eyes, a casual jauntiness to his moments which Shane also found endearing. It was like a flower uncurling and spreading its leaves in those time lapse videos he always got sucked into.

"Golubtsi." Ilya picked.

“Fine but Irina already made fun of me for how terrible I am at wrapping them, so don’t start.” Shane made him promise but Ilya wasn’t looking at his hands anymore, he was watching Shane’s face and Shane turned away to grab his rice cooker and avoid the heat Ilya was sending his way.

It turned into a late lunch; Ilya kept creeping into Shane’s space to make their arms brush, ignoring the vegetables he was supposed to be cutting. “If you grab my ass one more time—”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

“In my own home?” Irina hissed in disgust, peeking around the corner of the stairs like she expected to see them fucking on the stovetop.

“It’s actually my home, Irina.” Shane clarified. Shane started wrapping all the ingredients up and caught the look Irina and Ilya both sent his way. “Not a word.”

“Like pocket, Shane.” Ilya explained. “Looks like little poop.”

Shane shoved Ilya over to do it instead and only felt a little annoyed when his were near uniform little triangles which cooked perfectly and didn’t split even a little. They were good, a little under seasoned for him, but Ilya ate eight of them, so Shane counted it as a win.

“What is with...?” Ilya pointed at the third plate with a singular golubtsi on it.

“Oh, your mom likes to smell the food and I don’t like her leaning over my plate.”

“Oh,” Ilya said, looking at the seat where Irina sat.

They migrated back to the couch eventually, Shane plugging in his gaming console when Ilya got bitchy about watching ESPN highlights for sports that didn’t have the distinction of being hockey. He let Ilya set up the game, he’d had a shit eating grin when he’d seen which version of the game Shane had bought.

The banter was—nice. It was friendly and somehow Shane hadn’t realized that between the sex and the rivalry, he also seemed to like Ilya as a person. It shouldn’t have been as surprising as it was.

His phone buzzed and he shoved Ilya back and went to answer it.

“Is she around?” Ilya asked. Shane frowned when he pulled his phone closer to his ear. He’d yet to call Irina mother or even her name and even Shane was starting to worry.

“No, she hates watching me play this.” Shane explained thoughtlessly as he saw Hayden’s name flash over the screen.

Ilya nodded coyly and Shane watched him with a raised eyebrow as he clicked the accept button.

“Hey, buddy, what’s up?”

“At this point, I don't know. I thought the twins were rough, but this girl's got a set of lungs on her.” Hayden opened with. “And don't even get me started on the in-laws. I thought my parents were bad. Jackie's mom asked why she hadn't dusted the baseboards. The fucking baseboards, are you kidding me?”

“Sounds rough.” Shane answered and watched with a detached sort of interest as Ilya sat up and rested his large hand on the warm inner length of his thigh. Shane smacked his hand. He made a face that only made Ilya smile wider. Quietly, with the phone angled away and Hayden complaining about hospital food, Shane hissed, “What do you think you're doing?”

“I think you know.”

Shane had a moment of disconnect where the buzzy, floaty sensation Ilya always brought out in him almost smothered his ability to understand English. Hayden was still talking so Shane muted him and only felt slightly bad about it. “Not now.”

“Make it a game?” Ilya asked and Shane knew he'd say yes before Ilya had even stopped talking. “I don't touch—but if you get hard...”

“I won't.” He would.

“So no problem then.”

It was sinful how earnest and sincere Ilya could make his face. Shane clicked off the mute button.

“What was that Hayd?” He finally asked and tried not to be angry when Ilya's face split into a massive smile when Shane shifted up onto the back of the couch.

“Jerry is back. You know the one.” Hayden huffed and Shane made an agreeing sound, eyes locked on the paused game screen to avoid the affectionate little way Ilya placed his chin on Shane's knee.

“Mhm.” Shane murmured as he felt Ilya's strong fingers dig into the meat of his thigh, tucking up into flex of his hip but not touching his traitorous dick which was already chubbing up from Ilya's breath on his knee alone, let alone the gentle flexing of his hands.

Maybe worst of all, it was the kiss that did it, even if Ilya had no way to know that at the moment. It was a throwaway mark of affection and it somehow got him harder quicker than Ilya's hands could.

Hayden was saying something else but Shane couldn't have translated it if he'd tried. His friend could have been speaking Spanish for all he knew. The moment Ilya curled up into his lap, pulled down the elastic of his sport shorts, Shane had decided that this was happening.

Ilya's mouth had been his first and only repeat experience when it came to receiving blowjobs but Shane felt that he'd just gotten lucky because Ilya had to be exceptional at it. That was why he had to bite his lip and shove his phone into his neck to avoid Hayden hearing the, frankly embarrassing, moans Ilya always managed to draw out of him.

But the smacks Shane could do without. They were distracting in an already distracting situation, but, and he wouldn't admit this even under torture, there was something vaguely hot which added to the roiling boil he felt building in his pelvis, about the faint trace of warmth left behind after Ilya's hand smacked his cheek. Between his fingers, Shane gave Ilya's curls a sharp tug in retribution but it only dragged a moan out of him which rippled down Shane's dick and had him inching ever closer.

“One...one minute Hayd—” Shane managed to slip out and then he muted him, forgetting about anything other than Ilya's curls between his legs, the feeling of the man's fingers flexing so hard into his glutes that he was sure to leave bruises, of just how wet Ilya's mouth was, the feeling of drool sliding down his taint and of hanging up and throwing Ilya onto the couch and riding him.

It was an impossible fiction, Shane would never risk leaving lube in his living room and he had a guest downstairs, but it was hot enough for him to cum, yanking Ilya's hair again, pulling him close until he could tuck the man's head into his stomach and just hold him there.

He remembered Hayden an uncomfortably long time later.

Shane shoved Ilya onto the side of the couch, tucked away his soft dick still wet with saliva, and for good measure planted his foot on Ilya's chest to keep the man where he'd pushed him.

“Sorry, Hayd, I got a delivery at my door—” Shane spouted out whatever stupid lie he could think of.

“Oh, man, whatcha get?” Hayden asked. There was crying now, sounded like it had been happening for a while now, and Shane was somehow grateful for his newborn god-child for distracting her dad.

“Nothing big, just some kitchen stuff. Can I call you next week?” Shane asked and Hayden made an agreeable sound as the crying escalated to full-blown screams as they presumably got closer to the nursery.

“Sure, sure, enjoy your package.”

“I will.” Shane laughed and moved his foot down right over where Ilya's pants were tented. He didn't press hard, but enough friction that it gave Ilya something to grind up against.

“Love you, Hayds.”

“Love you too, man.”

The line went silent but Shane didn't move except to toss his phone to the side. Under his foot he could feel Ilya's hips shifting, a slow, steady grind.

“You love Hayden?” Ilya asked, breathing growing a bit heavier. Shane shoved the ball of his foot down so it pressed the head of Ilya's cock painfully tight against his navel. The sound that was drawn out of him was half-pained, half a laugh.

“I don’t touch, but if you get hard...” Shane echoed, watching Ilya’s eyes never once stray from Shane’s face even as he kept humping upwards against Shane’s foot. It was fucking hot, Shane could admit, Ilya’s hands resting at his sides, following the rules of the game Shane hadn’t known he was playing until right that moment. Shane realized belatedly that he was breathing heavily too. Ilya looked worse, face flushing as he inched his way towards cumming.

Ilya gave a particularly messy thrust followed by a grunt that seemed caught in his throat and Shane’s drifty post-climax thoughts watched him rut upwards. Shane followed the movements with a distant awe, and then, before he’d even realized he’d done it, right as Ilya’s hands clutched on the throw pillows and he made that pinched face he did right before he came, Shane lifted his foot.

Ilya made the most magnificent sound, something between a whimper and a cry, and it dragged Shane’s dick back into the equation. Shane was on his knees, yanking at Ilya’s own shorts until he got them shoved down to his knees, and the words slipped out, thoughtlessly, more an observation than anything.

“So good, Ilya. Humping my foot.” Shane leaned down, prepared to swallow him down. “Так хорошо. Like a *dog*—”

Shane hadn’t even got his mouth on him before Ilya came and cum splattered across Shane’s face and dripped down his chin. A small amount had even got into his open mouth and Shane was too shocked to close it.

Ilya made a pained sound, and then whimpered again when he looked down at Shane. “Oh fuck, блядь. Look at you.”

Ilya’s thumb rested against Shane’s lip, gathering up some cum and then dipped into his mouth to press down on his tongue. Shane could taste the salt, the muskiness of it, and when he blinked, he could see a faint flash of white on his lashes.

Shane yanked his head back and made a face. “Oh gross, this is disgusting!”

He tried to wipe some off, but it only served to rub it in and that sent a ripple of nausea down his spine. Shane made a noise and tried to stand, but Ilya caught his hand, yanking him down and rubbing at his closed eyes with a wet finger.

It was objectively, revolting, and the saliva was only slightly better than the cum. Then he felt the wet muscle of Ilya’s tongue on his cheek and he shoved the other man off to go shower. From behind him, he heard Ilya yell, “That was for the dog comment!”

“Like you didn’t come from it!” Shane muttered back and laughed when he heard the tell-tale slaps of Ilya’s feet on the wooden floor, following him to the shower.

The water was warm and once he got through his first rinse, he had enough of his brain cells back to turn and press a kiss to the water collecting in Ilya’s collarbones. “I didn’t mean it, the dog comment.”

“Is ok.” Ilya muttered, hands venturing south the longer they stood pressed together. “Honestly, was really fucking hot. The foot thing, though, that was new.”

Shane laughed and pressed his face into Ilya’s neck. They’d left marks, knowing they’d have time to heal, and Shane had been working on a really deep one along the juncture of Ilya’s shoulder. Shane’s were mostly on his thighs.

“Why was that so hot?” Shane eventually asked. “The phone thing, do you think?”

Ilya ran a hand through Shane’s hair, forcing his head back to clean out any remaining conditioner. “Because you like to be bad.”

Shane shoved the hand away, forcing Ilya to meet his eyes. “You know that’s not what this is, right? You and me?” Shane leaned his head into Ilya’s palm. “Maybe it was at first, but not now and not for a long time.”

Ilya watched him with that soft little smile he got sometimes, and it melted Shane’s heart and made him feel like he’d collapse into a puddle if Ilya directed it at him too long.

“You’re prune.” Ilya eventually said, and they climbed out of the shower and wrestled each other in Shane’s massive fluffy white towels until their hair stood up on end and then they crawled into bed to have a nap.

Sometime around three Irina came up the stairs singing some Russian dirge in the most dramatic operatic voice possible, and ended it near their door with a call of “I’ve been cooped up for hours, entertain me!”

They settled on sewer ball in the yard, which Irina found to be a bit of a let down. Shane watched her lounging on one of the chairs, a large hat and sunglasses perched on her nose, and noticed that there was a change in her that went beyond the physical. A lightness had come back into her since her husband died, or maybe it was talking to her son for the first time in over a decade.

“So I was thinking, I’m a free agent next season.” Ilya muttered apropos of nothing.

“You wouldn’t re-sign with Boston?” A voice which sounded uncomfortably close to his mother’s wondered how Ilya could even think about leaving the team that drafted him, the team he captained. The other voice, the one which had started to sound like Irina, thought about how painful it could be to lose that. “Where would you sign to?”

“I don’t know, I was thinking maybe a Canadian team.”

Irina sat up in interest.

“Not Montreal, yes?” Ilya joked, popping up the ball. “But I would love to not have Russian passport.”

“Shaney, that’s as good as a proposal for a Slav.” Irina laughed and then gestured to her lap where Shane had tossed one of those trashy gossip magazines he’d picked up in the airport and which Irina seemed to love but couldn’t turn the pages.

Shane ignored her but her words stuck inside him, so much so that Ilya snaked the ball from between his feet.

They lingered as they migrated back inside to make dinner, this time a cheesy pasta which Shane waited until Ilya finished before telling him he'd snuck broccoli into the sauce, before Ilya flicked on the tv as they were doing dishes to a tennis match. After they'd finished drying, Shane curled up on one side of the couch and Ilya tossed himself down on the other.

Shane didn't find people on a whole to be something he could relax around. Even his parents, they always asked him things, and he loved them for it, but he realized that when he'd always thought of a relationship he'd imagined a life of stifling, of always putting on the Hollander Mask. The photo smile and the constant overthinking of what words and phrases to use. Of forcing himself to touch what he disliked, like stretching a muscle you knew would hurt but in the hope it would unknot.

Sitting with Ilya on his couch was nothing like that. It was—simple. Shane sat one one side, Ilya the other. Their feet brushed, and once when Ilya scooted down to lay flat, Shane got to run his socked foot up Ilya's thigh. It was heavily muscled and unlike any of the women he'd been with, also hairy. Shane liked that, the roughness of it. They hadn't touched since the morning and Shane caught himself thinking, nonsensibly, about Vegas. Faintly, he imagined moving forward, maybe crawling or shuffling on his knees, maybe shrugging off his shorts and slipping up one of Ilya's thighs and see if he could feel the coarse hair on his—

“I could marry Svetlana.”

Shane's daydream crumbled to ash and he knew his face was doing something complicated. Ilya continued as if he'd asked to hear more.

“She's American. Would be easy citizenship. She would do it.” Ilya was typing on his phone and Shane had the absurd thought of grabbing it and tossing it into the lake so he couldn't text anyone, especially Svetlana, again. “Her father is goalie Sergei Vitrov.”

“Yeah, you've told me.” Shane muttered.

Sing-songy, Ilya said, “She would help me.”

Shane thought back to the passport comment, of the casualness of it, and wondered how weird it would be to offer him Canadian citizenship instead. It was better than American, offered healthcare, and Shane thought back to some article his mom had sent him about a happiness index. They had to be higher than America right? Shane was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn't even think about how nasty his words would sound until they were already out.

“But...is she, I don't know, someone you'd want to marry?” Shane asked. He looked over into the kitchen where Irina had been puttering around over all the pamphlets he'd sent away for so that she could read through the sights she might be able to visit in Paris, but she was gone.

“We are friends. We would be fine.” Ilya said. “And it would be for the passport.”

He said it so casually that Shane's instinctive response (*we're friends too*) seemed to stick behind his teeth. Shane was nothing like Svetlana. It had never bothered him as much as it did in that exact moment.

In a single bright flash, Shane had the wild idea of locking Ilya up in his cottage and never letting him leave. Fuck the governments, they could come and pry him from Shane's hands, but that was a stupid idea and Shane would miss hockey. Still, he felt his toes flex like they could catch Ilya's and anchor him here.

"Okay, but..." Shane didn't know what exactly he was going to say. He had the insane wish to yell for Irina because this conversation was spiraling. "You said...I mean, you could find someone you'd want to marry for real and still get the passport."

*Canadian*, Shane didn't say.

"Maybe, but..." Ilya finally put his phone down but was looking over his head out the windows.

"But what?" Shane asked sharply. It was only the thought that even if Ilya did decide this was too complicated, decided he wanted to be fucking American, married beautiful Svetlana who probably was classy and put together and spoke better Russian than he did, that they'd have to split Irina in the not-divorce.

"I have this problem." Ilya sat up, finally looking at him.

Shane felt the familiar heat of tears and he avoided blinking, not letting them fall. "What's the problem?"

"I like women, yes?" Shane let out a breath and at his bitchy reply, Ilya went on, "And everywhere I go I'm surrounded by beautiful women. And they love me."

Shane looked away, eyes on the pamphlets. The Eiffel tower and Notre Dame. "Sounds rough."

"Yes, it is. Listen." Ilya's foot brushed his ankle. "And these women, they're so sexy and fun. But I am always thinking about this slow fucking hockey player with beautiful freckles." It was such a small detail that Shane couldn't help the slight twitch of his lips. "And a weak backhand."

"A weak backhand?" Shane demanded. "Can't be me then."

"Yes, yes. Very weak." Ilya answered and confirmed and it settled something in him. "And he's so boring and he drives this terrible car. And he talks to my mom too much."

"It's a normal car and she talks to me!" Shane argued.

"I am always wishing these women were him." He said and, strangely, he had the same instinct again, to lock Ilya up in the bedroom and feed him Russian food and never let anyone touch the soft parts of him that he had to hide. Ilya as he was now, tender in his borrowed clothes, made Shane's heart ache. "It's a terrible problem, huh?"

Shane took a breath, whispering, “He brings a lot with him. Like, ghosts and things. You sure you don’t want that problem to go away?”

“No. I don’t ever want that problem to ever go away.” Ilya said immediately.

In all those hazy ideas he’d had about his future with an equally hazy wife and whatever average number of children average people had, he’d never once thought about actually talking about it. It seemed stupid now. Shane could talk to air and Ilya didn’t look at him weird, didn’t question him after those first times because he knew Shane, trusted him, and it seemed to stitch something in him that Shane hadn’t realized had been cracked. “Don’t marry Svetlana.”

It was the only thing he could think to say.

“Just—don’t.” Shane almost wished his mom was here. She’d already have contingencies for this. “I know it wouldn’t be for love or whatever. Just don’t. Me and Irina are good planners, we’ll figure something else out, okay?”

“Okay.”

Shane sniffed and knew that his attempt to hold back the tears was failing spectacularly. Ilya stood up an hour later, going to switch their laundry over to the dryer and Shane pressed down on the tender bruise which domesticity gave him. It ached pleasantly.

He stood up too, carefully folding all the pamphlets back up one at a time, aligning their edges until they sat largest to smallest in a pile on the island. He leaned down, head dropping down between his arms as he tried to regulate his breathing and not worry Ilya who was just down the stairs. Under his arms he saw the flutter of white. When he raised up his head, he saw Irina tucked behind the privacy wall.

“How much did you hear?” Shane asked softly.

“Enough.”

She was herself, or as close to the version that Shane thought was what she looked like when she was alive. There were lines around her eyes and a tired set to her shoulders, and there was no glow to her, instead her clothes had the dinginess<sup>0</sup> that some fabrics got when they were washed too much. Her hair was not the curated curls but instead fell a little lank onto her forehead and around her shoulders.

“It went good, right?” Shane said softly. “I did good?”

“Yes, bunny. Good.” She came over and leaned against the stone countertop. She glanced to her left where the light over the stairs spilled into the dark kitchen. They could both hear the sound of wet clothes smacking into a metal drum. “My Ilya needs to know how far he can push. So he knows the—Границы?”

“Boundaries.” Shane answered and at her raised brow, he said, “like the animals at the zoo, pacing the bounds.”

“Pacing bounds. Yes.” She nodded.

The sound of Ilya's footfalls had Shane straightening and when he rounded the corner and Shane reached out and pulled on Ilya's hand to lead him to bed, it was with the knowledge that he wouldn't be sleeping much.

Shane tried to, tried counting the rhythmic breaths Ilya made, but eventually Shane shifted off Ilya's chest and sat up with his back against the headboard. The darkness made it easier to think but what would help was—

Without even thinking, Shane slipped out of bed and only allowed himself a handful of seconds to internally coo when Ilya's body curled up in the space he left behind.

“Irina?” He called and he saw her sitting up on the couch. She'd been trying to touch physical objects for a few months now with no luck and it seemed like she'd turned her focus onto the remote they'd left abandoned on the ottoman.

“Bunny? Can't sleep?”

“What if Ilya played for Ottawa?”

Irina, if she was startled by his non sequitur, didn't show it. Instead, in an eerie echo of her son a few hours earlier, she sat up and leaned against the backrest, patting the cushion next to her.

“Ottawa?” She asked and made a thinking sound. “The bad one with ugly colors. Not worse than Montreal though.”

“They're not that bad.” Shane defended half-heartedly. “And this would be plan B. But in Ottawa, he would be closer.”

“But on bad team.” She asked, but it wasn't unfamiliar. It was why Shane liked talking to her, she was a perfect sounding board who listened to everything before she tore apart your ideas. Shane could appreciate the simplicity of it.

“Boston and Montreal hadn't made playoffs in almost a decade before they drafted us, Ottawa could do the same.” Shane defended.

Irina looked at him with her trademark sharp look and cutting silence.

“Okay, yeah, maybe Ottawa has never won a Cup, but Ilya could change that.” Shane wished he'd made a list before he started this. “There was chatter about a new coach coming in and they have the cap space to take him. Nowhere else close could afford him.”

“Well at least he will be paid for losing.” Irina huffed.

“You don't even like hockey!”

“I like my son happy and I know what won't do that is shit team.” She shot him another dark look. “And when would you tell your parents about your boyfriend in the same city? Before

or after you tell them you're gay?"

"He's not my—" Shane huffed instinctively and then paused. "Oh shit, he's my boyfriend."

Shane looked at her dumbfounded. She just sighed.

"Good you noticed." She said dryly. "Now, answer question, you tell your parents?"

Shane thought of his parents and Ilya in the same room and his first instinct was that they didn't mesh, repelling each other like water and oil. But that was the Ilya of years ago tainted by Shane's own preconceptions, not this newly revealed version who liked tender ear kisses and dressing in Shane's clothes. He could almost see it, Ilya at his parent's table, in his bedroom back in Ottawa with his Pee-Wee hockey jersey on the wall and an incriminating poster of a shirtless now retired player Shane had plastered across his closet which was almost funny when he thought of it now.

"I think he'd like them." Shane said softly, then more painfully, "I think they'd like him if they could get past the whole 'in love with your rival' part of it."

"Tell me your timeline." Irina granted, waving her hand like a queen allowing an underling to speak. "I know you have one."

"We play out the year. I was thinking we also put together a foundation, like something we could put our names on and that could actually do some good, and we meet up to build it, then maybe people wouldn't lose their minds if they see us together." Shane laid it all out. "That would be, I don't know, May, maybe? Then Ilya's contract is up. He moves closer..."

Irina nodded along with him until he trailed off. "And then..."

"Then we're closer. We change the narrative, let other younger guys play up the rivalry."

"Until you both retire?" Irina cut to the heart of it.

"I mean...I guess?" Shane said even as his stomach clenched.

"And you, when your contract is up?" She asked. "Where you live? Still Montreal?"

Shane thought a little shamefully of the apartments he'd already bookmarked along the highway from Boston to Montreal.

"I mean, I'd drive down to stay with him. Be close to my family." Shane said and then actually thought through the logistics. "It's not a long drive, and if it's secluded enough I could come even when he had practices. Be there when he gets done."

It was too much, the image of some sun drenched kitchen with Shane plating something for an Ilya still dewy from practice. The same image but flipped, Ilya folding golubtsi for Shane slipped through his mental filter and he nearly swallowed his tongue. It was almost sinful and Shane pushed down that thought with a harsh clearing of his throat.

Irina glared at him as if she could sense the direction his thoughts went in. Shane pushed down his blush unsuccessfully.

“Maybe I’m jumping ahead. Yeah, that’s probably too fast. I don’t even know—” Shane looked away, scooting back from Irina and laughing a bit. “I just got excited when he mentioned how he’s a free agent—”

“No, no, he said it because he would leave Boston for you.” She said, closing the distance Shane had made. “Even to bad team like Ottawa. I just want you to answer my questions, one very important one.”

“What’s that?”

“The question, Bunny, is would you do this for him?”

Shane's mouth closed so hard that his jaw clicked. Irina leaned forward, hand resting next to his arm in a way he knew she meant to be comforting considering Shane had fucking hesitated.

“I—”

“It's okay, Bunny.” She chided, not mean but blunt. “If you ask Ilya to do this, he would. You could ask him to move to—” She waved her hand as if to magic up an imaginary place. “What is place where no one lives?”

“Antarctica?” Shane offered.

“Yes there, and he would go. Because he loves you.” She continued on. “But you need to understand what he gives up.”

Shane didn't say anything. Instead he leaned his head into the backrest and pressed it until bright flashes burst behind his eyelids and forced himself to imagine letting go of Montreal. Of skating into an unfamiliar arena, to hear an unfamiliar chant when he scored. It would be hard, impossible maybe, unless it meant having Ilya. It came to him as a pit in his stomach that he'd give up a lot for Ilya, more than he wanted to name, even.

“I'd do it.” Shane said softly and Irina nodded like she expected that answer. Then she waved him on.

“Then ask him.” She gestured at him to talk. “What else is eating you up, bunny?”

“I was thinking--I mean, I've been thinking for a while but—” Shane stuttered until it seemed to choke him and Irina looked close to trying to smack him on the back when it all came spilling out. “It's just that—I thought we could do something with mental health. You know, for the charity? You know, maybe...suicide prevention.”

Irina's incorporeal body seemed to stiffen and for a minute Shane wanted to snatch the words back.

“We don't have to, I can figure out something different—”

“No, no.” Irina said quickly. She sniffled once, scratched at her nose in that faux-casual way her son did too. “Is good idea. I like it.”

“Oh, good.” Shane smiled, and then tried not to sound bashful when he added softly, “I also thought we could, maybe, name it after you.”

Irina's cool exterior crumbled and she looked at him with her mouth dropped open. It was so sudden that it managed a laugh out of him before he could stop it.

“No, not me.” She said, but she couldn't rebuild her walls fast enough and Shane shifted forward and dipped his head down to meet her eyes in the same way his mom did when he was being difficult.

“Yes, you. You're important to us.” Shane said softly and then, giving voice to the idea planted by Ilya last night in front of the fire, he murmured, “and I want you remembered for how strong you are.”

Irina, always carefully controlled, sniffled again, throwing back her neck and looking away to try and hide her tears. “Ugh, boy, look what you did! I'm crying!”

“I can't help that!” Shane muttered but rubbed at his own eyes which felt a bit watery. “If you cry, I'll cry, you know this.”

“Why are we crying?”

Both Shane and Irina screamed and Ilya, voice deep and raspy from sleep, nearly tripped over the stairs in the dark trying to backpedal.

“Mother fucker!” Ilya hissed. “Why are you talking in the dark?”

“Oh, it's...” Shane looked at Irina and she gave a watery smile and a little head jerk and Shane smiled back as he stood. “Let's go back to bed, I want to ask you something.”

Ilya followed him, his hand kind of clammy from sleep, but his head was turned back to the couch until Shane closed the bedroom door. Ilya seemed to be a strange mix of wired and sleepy, eye locked onto Shane but also drooping a bit when Shane tucked him in.

“Enough.” Ilya huffed when Shane was trying to tuck the sheet in around each leg. Ilya's hand grabbed Shane's thigh and rubbed. “Hollander, I just woke up. Just tell me.”

“Okay, Plan B.” Shane opened with. “What about Ottawa?”

“Plan...Like the pregnancy?” Ilya hissed and then instinctively looked down at Shane's stomach which was so objectively funny that Shane had to laugh even as Ilya parced through his words. “No, you said...Ottawa? What about worst team in league?” Ilya asked and Shane thought about abandoning the whole idea there, but it seemed Ilya was awake enough to ask, “I go to Ottawa? But...same division. We're still rivals.”

“Boston and Montreal, two of the Big Six, and our wins, that's intense. But Montreal and Ottawa...” Shane was leaning over Ilya now, needing to ground himself. Ilya's chest was

broad and warm and Shane idly traced out a square over and over as he spoke. “And you’d be super close by and I could come down when I didn’t have practice. We could find a house and it would mean being closer to my parents anyway.”

Ilya looked at him, more alert now and Shane panicked a bit wondering what it was that caught his attention. Yet, Ilya hummed and seemed to move on, shifting his head to rest near Shane’s hand. “You said Plan B. What is, uh, Plan A?”

“Well, we stay where we are, try to make the long distance thing work.” Shane said softly. “The video calls and the stolen skip days... We could maybe make that work.”

Ilya’s head was already shaking before Shane could say another example. Shane hadn’t wanted to push, but he could feel that whatever this was, would be untenable for the long haul. He wanted Ilya with him too much and he figured from the way Ilya leaned his head into Shane’s hand that the feeling was mutual.

“So I was thinking Plan B: Ottawa.” Babbling a little, Shane continued, “Ottawa needs a star center, and they’re nowhere near their cap, so they could definitely afford you. And I was thinking, we could do something this year, change the narrative a bit.”

“What? Hollander, I just woke up. What is narrative?” Ilya shifted a bit, hand coming up and covering Shane’s. Their thumbs brushed.

“Uh, история?” Shane tried.

“You mean рассказ?” Ilya corrected and Shane nodded.

“Look, lots of guys have friends on other teams. We’re not rookies anymore. There are younger guys coming in frothing at the mouth. Let them hate each other. We don’t need to keep this up until we retire, do we?” Shane demanded, more to the room at large than the sleepy Russian whose eyes were locked onto Shane’s face. “I mean we’re not fucking wrestlers.”

“Hollander, Hollander, okay, it’s very late. Is so many words.” Ilya’s settled along the bridge of his nose, Shane noticed. “But you said...you said we find a house.”

“I mean—” Shane had practically word-vomited all over him and Shane had that familiar feeling that crawled down his spine, like he’d done something wrong. “We don’t have to, I just. I mean we’d only be two hours apart instead of six, and I was thinking we start a charity, yeah? Something that, you know, we both care about—”

“Shane.” Ilya’s hand covered Shane’s and he hadn’t even realized that it was shaking. “Okay, I get it now. So, charity. I came to you and say what? Let’s save orphans because I now am one?”

“Shut up, this is a good idea!” Shane chided, but Ilya was listening and his brow was crooked in the way that meant he was listening. “We could tell the press and everyone that by working on this cause that we both love, that we developed a mutual respect for one another and, um...”

“And we like sucking each other’s dicks. Any questions?” Ilya quipped and Shane couldn’t quite stifle his laugh.

“Fuck off, Rozanov!” Shane leaned over and planted his head on Ilya’s chest. When he looked up, Ilya was watching him, fully awake. Shane wanted to say the thing he’d been dancing around, the plan that had laid itself out as Irina pulled him along on his little Odyssey in the living room, but he hesitated. Instead he cleared his throat and muttered, “It wouldn’t be bullshit either. We could actually help people. And we’d still play hard against each other on the ice.”

Ilya laughed and Shane turned his head and bit Ilya's nipple to get his attention. It worked too well and Ilya made a yelping sound and his strong arms wrapped around Shane’s head, pressing it down to rest between his pecs.

“And this house?” Ilya said again and Shane looked up and saw only the sharp line of Ilya’s jaw. He wouldn’t look down at Shane but to have brought it up again...Shane felt the burgeoning flicker of hope that maybe Ilya’s dreams of what happened after this summer were not so ephemeral.

“It’s just...I was thinking something with lots of windows.”

“You think?” Ilya gestured to the two glass walls and Shane pinched his side, enjoying the feeling of Ilya squirming under him. “And this house, it has a yard. For a dog.”

“A dog?” Shane asked and then let himself go, let the dream fill itself out. A large yard fenced in by hedges, neat lines of windows and a large kitchen made warm with vintage woods. A big dining table, for friends and family. A large wall for photos. It was easy to see now, so simple that for a minute he thought of the image he’d had of his future, of the thin WAG-looking wife and clawing, aching loneliness. Ilya had cracked that hard shell open and Shane was letting all his little fantasies spill out. “Okay, a dog. But it can’t sleep on the bed. And we’d need extra bedrooms for Irina and maybe And we’ll have to apply for citizenship here in Canada. And—”

And here it came, unbidden and impossible not to say now when it had been building all night—

“And I was thinking if we could get this charity started that I could invite you to the cottage next year, you know, like, officially, and we could, I don’t know, maybe tell my parents. If that’s alright.” Shane rushed out, having to take a breath by the time he finished. “It would make it easier, if my mom knows, and, I mean, then when we retire...we could just, be, you know? Like, for real?”

Ilya didn’t say anything, he just watched Shane, but it didn’t set his nerves alight like it would with anyone else. Ilya was just looking and Shane let him look until he was ready. Ilya swallowed and it looked like it might have stuck in his throat. “You really think that far ahead, Hollander?”

That was the easiest question he’d been asked all night. “I do. About this.”

“This is what you want?” Ilya asked softly. “A house and a yard and a dog? Old and retired with me and my mother?”

Shane was wrong, *that* was the easiest question of the night.

“More than anything.” Shane brought his arm up to trace Ilya's chin. From his chest, Shane could see the tightening of his jaw, the flex of his neck as he clenched his teeth together.

“Hey...”

Ilya didn't move, wouldn't lower his chin so that Shane could see him so Shane brought up his thighs and locked them around Ilya's hips while tightening his hands around Ilya's biceps and rolling them, forcing Ilya to plant his arms around Shane's ears to balance himself. With a brush of his fingers, he felt the faint wetness from Ilya's cheeks and it was easy to kiss him, offer this comfort.

Ilya leaned down, planting open mouthed kisses along his chest and then neck, muttering something Shane knew was Russian but it took a second for his brain to process it. He'd only ever seen it in a book and to hear it now, coming out rough and thick from tears, it rendered it snotty and perfect. “Я тебя люблю...”

“Я тоже тебя люблю.” Shane said suddenly and Ilya's face popped up from Shane's neck, red-eyed and somehow still so impossibly attractive. Then, to make sure Shane got his point across. “I love you too.”

“Fuck, Hollander.” Ilya muttered and then he collapsed like a marionette with its strings cut, face tucked into Shane's chest and with his ear turned up perfectly to allow them to whisper the words back and forth in all the languages they knew until they both fell asleep.

The emotional hangover the next morning was rough. Ilya was quiet, the type of quiet he normally associated with Irina, and it had worried him when he got out of the shower, his first where Ilya hadn't tried to follow him in with a half-baked excuse, to find the man still on the bed, not having moved since he left.

“I used to talk to my mother.” Ilya finally said as Shane pulled out the ingredients for a protein scramble. Shane hadn't heard him come into the kitchen. Irina watched from her place perched on the island. She had her knees tucked up to her chin which made her look younger and looking at them side by side, Shane almost missed what Ilya said next. “At sunrise or sunset. They reminded me of her.”

“She was probably there.” Shane offered and Irina nodded, not taking her eyes off her son.

“I think...I think I need to talk to her now.”

Shane stopped cracking eggs and watched Irina's face flutter through emotions he would miss on a good day and had no hope of deciphering then. She didn't look worried or or happy to hear this, maybe a touch sad, but Shane couldn't really tell, especially with half her face turned from him. Shane nodded and pointed down towards the dock.

“There’s this rock a ways down the shore. We had to move it when we built the dock.” Shane explained. “It’s flat on top. Perfect for sitting.”

“Okay.” Ilya said and then, as if waking from a daze, he walked forward and placed a kiss on Shane’s forehead before he walked out the side down and down towards the water. Shane had to push down his instinctive call for Ilya to come back and take a sweatshirt. The morning chill still hung onto the air this early. But he didn’t, he just let them walk down the path, slowly following their trail with his eyes. Ilya’s mother followed next to him and the way the sunrise caught in their hair transfixed him for a long while.

He finished the recipe and then made a new pot of coffee just for something to do. Down near the dock he could see the pair sitting and could clearly see the red cherry of a cigarette flame in the lingering darkness. Next to him, Irina had conjured her own though it didn’t put off any light.

When his scrambles grew cold and the new pot of coffee had finished, Shane couldn’t help it anymore. He poured three cups and grabbed the throw blanket from the couch, the one Ilya had denied liking to cuddle with, and slowly picked his way down the rocks.

As he got closer, he kept an ear out for the sounds of speaking, but the only thing he heard was birdsong and the gentle lapping of the water. Shane didn’t say anything, just handed Ilya a cup and sat the other behind him for Irina and held his out over the grass as he shimmied his way up the rock, close to Ilya.

It was cold and Shane shoved a corner of the blanket towards the other man, waiting for him to cover his shoulders and then catching the edge to tuck it under his arm and cocoon them together. Their shared warmth quickly spread and Shane let himself take Ilya’s cold wingers and tuck them up into his armpit to warm up which, while a bit gross, seemed to charm Ilya.

Shane didn’t know what he should say, if he should say anything at all, and Irina was no help. She was behind them, leaning down to let the stream of the coffee flutter over her face.

Ilya broke the silence for him. “I like this place.”

“I do too.”

Ilya looked at him, brushing hair out of his eyes. “You are more...you here.”

“A good thing?” Shane asked for a laugh.

“A great thing.” Ilya said immediately and Shane became immediately aware of the press of Ilya’s newly warmed hands along his ribs.

The whole week seemed to stretch out before them as a wellspring of possibilities and he forced himself to lean his head down onto Ilya’s shoulder so as not to start something he really didn’t want to do in front of the mother of the man he—the man he loved.

Shane smiled and let himself enjoy the sunrise.

They did manage to salvage the scrabble and they ate it over the stove from the pan. Irina had asked to spend the day at the neighbors, trying to learn where the family would be visiting so she could better tailor her outfits. It was an excuse, Shane was sure, but Irina was a good person and did actually seem happy when she slid out of the car and tossed them both a jaunty wave.

Alone again in the cottage, Shane expected a stilted silence to creep in, or for things to grow awkward, but it didn't. Ilya stuck to his side like glue as they cleared up breakfast and talked half-heartedly about lunch before they both gave up the pretense and their mouths connected.

Navigating back towards the bedroom was difficult but they made it, their mouths still connected and their lips growing wet with saliva. The bed was made and the sheets had already been mused but not ruined so Shane figured they would be washed either way.

Then he thought about the damp spots even as Ilya lowered him to the mattress and spread his knees apart. Shane had cleaned himself before, and the lube was exactly where they'd left it, and the familiar feeling of Ilya's finger was soon replaced by the equally glorious feeling of his tongue.

"Oh—Ilya. Fuck me." Shane gasped.

"Yes, is the plan." Ilya said but it was deeper than he normally spoke and the idea Shane had tried to ignore seemed to sprout as his fingers curled inside Shane, sending sharp tingles down to his toes and along his spine.

It grew as Ilya opened him up, flowered when Ilya leaned over him and asked softly, as if they hadn't been dancing around each other for nearly a third of their lives, "Are you okay?"

"I got a blood panel in the hospital." Shane explained. Well, thought he explained because Ilya looked at him as if he'd grown a second head which was a bit concerning for a man with fingers in his ass.

"Okay." Ilya said supportively and it would have been sweet if Shane weren't a little embarrassed to have to say it explicitly. Usually Ilya just knew, could sense it maybe. Shane had a fleeting thought that maybe like Shane, Ilya was gifted too and his gift was just knowing how to fuck real good. Maybe picking out little closeted hockey players and knowing just what got them going.

But it wasn't a power, and somehow to Shane that was hotter. Ilya knew what Shane liked because he knew Shane. He knew Shane because they had been together in some way or another for almost a decade and that showed.

"I got a full blood work done in the hospital." Shane said softly. "I'm clean. And you mentioned you hadn't been with anyone..."

That was enough for Ilya to get the idea and it seemed to light up his whole face.

"I have never—"

“Me either.” Shane said pointlessly. He’d had only fleeting hookups of both genders and there was not a single other person he’d trust like he was trusting Ilya.

“How did we let this happen?” Shane didn’t even really know what he meant by the question.

As if struck by energy, Ilya's fingers started up again, curling and flexing and curling again, scissoring him open until Shane was panting against his pillow. Ilya was speaking, muttering English of which Shane could only understand every other word of. Shane kept his eyes on Ilya’s face, flushed and lit by the soft afternoon sun. He looked like some Greek statue came to life.

“We were both very stupid and irresponsible.” Ilya adjusted himself and Shane felt the head of his cock brush against the cleft of his ass.

“But we’re real.” Shane meant it as a statement but it came out like a question. Ilya lined himself up, a grounding hand on Shane’s thigh.

“Yes.” Ilya said and Shane thought faintly of little Shane Hollander hearing voices no one else could hear. This was real because Ilya said it was, so he allowed himself to enjoy it.

“Please fuck me.”

Ilya started slow. It wasn't the quick, hard thrusts he usually started with, more a deep sinuous roll while he seated himself inside Shane. There really was not much of a physical difference without the condom, but the knowledge that it wasn’t there was doing something to both of them. It gave the act an intimacy, made his dick trapped under his thigh leak as it rubbed against the sheets. He’d come like this, Shane realized, from the friction and the fucking and the knowledge that he’d have Ilya’s cum in him.

Ilya’s grip on his thigh was edging into bruising and with his face so close, his mouth dropped open in a moan, Shane slipped his thumb in, pressing down on his tongue. He knew he was pulling Ilya’s hair, could feel Ilya’s moan vibrate his fingertips which clenched his jaw.

Then Ilya thrust harder, planting his outstretched leg to get more leverage and Shane had to pull his fingers free of Ilya’s mouth to brace himself against the headboard. It left Ilya’s mouth open and Shane knew what he was going to do even before the teeth caught on his nipple and Ilya soothed the sting away with his tongue. The saliva chilled even in the warm room and Shane felt like his whole body was sparking like a live wire.

And Ilya never looked away, never seemed to blink even as his thrusts grew rougher and more sporadic, as his moans got whinier and Shane caught him by the jaw to kiss him. “I can’t...uh, *uh*. uh, *Shane*—”

It was that moan, his name, the pained little sounds, it had Shane rocking back, watching Ilya strain to hold on even as he fell apart. He’d always tried to make Shane cum first, said he got off on making his partners feel good, and Shane could see the appeal as Ilya tried desperately to hold himself back.

“Ilya, baby—” Shane was going to say—something, maybe that it was alright to cum, or that he loved him, or just that Ilya looked beautiful like this, but it didn’t matter because the moment the words were out, Ilya made a choked gasp and came.

Shane had only the faintest sensation of fluid, a smoother glide, and then there was a hand on his dick and the words so filthy rolling off Ilya’s tongue that he only caught half of them. He was edging closer, Ilya’s dick growing soft and that disgusting sensation was offset by the hand Ilya brought down and rubbed around his hole. Shane only realized what exactly he was running his fingers through when he had Ilya’s fingers in his mouth and the salty tang of cum exploded over his palate. Shane made some sound, Ilya trying to hush him with his hand but that only really made Shane moan louder, and then Shane had to roll away because every nerve in his body felt like it was sparking with overstimulation.

Yet, like a wave, after cleaning themselves up in the sink and throwing around the wet washcloth before making out against the vanity, Shane curled up into Ilya’s body, blanketing him.

Ilya had always run warm, would probably argue it was his Russian blood, but Shane didn’t mind the smell of clean sweat. Ilya always smelled good. The world reasserted itself as the sun crawled down the walls and lit up Ilya’s body. Shane made a game as they drifted there in the hazy, perfect afterglow, mapping out Ilya’s moles, seeing if he could trace hidden pathways between them.

It was in a triangle Shane had made over his collarbone that Shane realized that he had not mentioned the part of this plan he’d been more nervous about.

“I was thinking we could start a hockey school. I was talking to your mom about it last night. Like a summer camp for kids.” Shane said softly. “And give the money away to mental health organizations. Like suicide prevention.”

Ilya was uncharacteristically quiet but his eyes were locked onto Shane’s face.

“It was just an idea.” Shane rushed to say. “Irina and I could figure something else out too.”

Ilya’s face softened somehow, his lip tilted up and Shane felt he looked painfully young when he smiled. For his part, Ilya just tightened the hold he had on the short hairs at the nape of Shane’s neck. “I forget sometimes.”

“Forget what?” Shane asked.

“That you love her. Like I love her.” Ilya said it like it was a revelation. “That I get to have this.”

Shane blinked quickly, not wanting to look away from Ilya’s gaze but also not wanting to cry. He managed, but it was hard when his voice broke on every syllable of “Я...тебя... люблю...”

Ilya repeated them back, and then looked away, blinking quickly into the sun. Shane had learned that he was sometimes too much like his mother, that there were moments when he’d

turn and it took them a second to shove their walls back up, to click back into the conversation from wherever inside themselves they'd drifted off to. But Ilya did not push away, he clung harder, and Shane let him.

He eventually convinced Ilya to get up and come sit on the dock. It took more time to convince him he'd need swim shoes.

"I have tough Russian soles, like bear leather." Ilya proclaimed but Shane thought it was mostly to get him to laugh.

Shane dropped his feet into the water over the edge of the dock and watched Ilya splash around. It was a nice day, clear skies, and he thought that he might get in once the sun warmed him up a bit.

"Is this where you do yoga, or up there?" Ilya yelled. He'd drifted out a bit and was paddling back with big unnecessary slaps of his feet.

"No, I do it inside." Shane answered thoughtlessly. "The producer wanted me... Wait, you saw that?"

"Yeah, it was very good." Ilya swam up to him, rolling to show his toned stomach like one of those harbor seals in a nature documentary. "I needed help sleeping, so..."

On route, Shane muttered, "You're an asshole."

"How's the water?" Ilya asked and at Shane's raised eyebrow and muttered, "You're in it?" Ilya came closer. "I want to know how you like it."

Ilya brought his feet up and kicked, splattering water down his hips and soaking his swim trunks. "Fuck you! What if I had my phone?"

"Ah, you don't. You set it up for Mama on the table and never grabbed it. It's been ringing all morning." Ilya explained and Shane realized that he had played something, a video about basic French phrases which he'd been annoyed with because he could actually teach her French, and never thought to pick it back up. He'd been busy.

His whole world felt shifted, full of new possibilities.

"You're still an asshole." Shane couldn't help and say, but Ilya understood. He always understood. That was Ilya's gift, Shane decided, perfectly understanding Shane in the same way Shane could hear ghosts.

Ilya swam up, kissed the small bone in his ankle, then up to his knee. "Gimmie kiss."

"You're cold." Shane complained even as he leaned down. "Think about getting out soon, I want to go grab Irina before it gets dark."

Ilya nodded and threw himself back, kicking off the dock and diving backwards into a handstand. Show-off. Shane stood and waited until bubbles rippled the surface and Ilya broke

the water with gasp before Shane took three steps back and then raced forward to launch himself into the water right next to Ilya's head.

He could hear the muffled laugh Ilya made when Shane sprayed him and he felt hands all over him even before he broke the surface of the water.

“Roughing! Two minutes!” Ilya accused. “Ref, call it!”

Shane pushed closer, letting the heat of Ilya's body soften the goosebumps which had broken out all over his body the moment he'd been submerged.

When they both crawled their way up the ladder, they ended up sprawled across the sun-warmed wood, the only sound the lapping of water and distant calls of birds. They rested there for a long while, hands drifting between them. Shane's trailed the bumps of Ilya's defined abs, Ilya's ended up curled around Shane's neck, fingers digging into the muscle behind his ear.

Ilya climbed to his feet first, grabbing a towel and tossing the other over Shane's face. When Shane eventually forced himself to sit up with the towel still over his head, he was unsurprised to feel familiar fingers digging into his scalp, presumably trying to dry his hair but Shane's face was too close to Ilya's dick for it to come off innocent.

“Race you!”

Ilya was already half way up the lawn before Shane was even off the dock and when he yanked the towel off his face he was momentarily blinded by the sun, the pale blur of Ilya stomping up the stone steps and then Irina racing around the side of the house, the pathway connecting his driveway to the back of the cottage, face white as a sheet and waving her arms frantically.

He was moving before he could think, her voice only reaching him right as he crested the hill and saw his literal worst nightmare playing out on his patio.

It was right when Ilya turned, his face a poor mask covering his fear, Shane's father standing shocked in his kitchen, that Shane could actually hear Irina's words as she rushed up behind him, her voice cutting out when she saw the tableau playing out in front of him.

“Bunny! It's your father—!” She yelled and then a cut off, “Oh. Oh no.”

Ilya turned fully towards him but Shane couldn't keep his eyes from his father whose face was shadowed and hard to see in the shade and by the time Shane convinced his feet to move, his father was already gone.

“Shane...” Ilya said softly but Shane couldn't push open the door, couldn't stop staring at the place where his dad had stood. Ilya's warm hand pressed against his bare back. “Should we...?”

Shane must have said something because then he was in his house and out his front door just in time to see his father's car round the driveway.

“Bunny, it's alright.” Irina tried but Shane couldn't really hear her, not over the roaring of his ears. It was like a slowly building scream, rattling and shaking his whole body until all he could do was bury his head in his couch and try to force air out his mouth. His heart was beating so hard, he could feel it against his ribs.

“Oh fuck, what the fuck am I suppose to do?” Shane demanded to the room and both Rozanovs said nothing.

His head was spinning, Ilya was talking but it might as well have been gibberish for all he understood. Shane's hands pressed against his head, and he tried to press down the painful pressure he felt behind his eyes.

His father had seen them, seen something, and had left. And he'd tell his mom—oh shit, *his mom*—and Shane groaned and pressed his head against a support beam to try and feel something grounding. He had the faint urge to smack himself, to hit his thigh or chest until he could feel his body as something not floating above his head, but he forced it down, thought through ideas until his head spun.

“I need to—Oh fuck, maybe call them?” Shane huffed. “No, say something, because he'll tell my mom—oh fuck, my mom!” Shane groaned and buried his head into his arms. “What if they don't want to talk to me?”

“They will talk to you.” Ilya said, solid, unmovable. “He didn't see anything. You can just tell him we are friends. Friends come to visit.”

“Yeah, but I fucking lied to them. For so many years I fucking lied to them.” Shane pushed. “So what if we weren't necking, my parents... Oh god, this is my fucking nightmare.”

“Okay, okay.” Ilya said softly, taking Shane's hands. “Then maybe it's time to wake up, yes?”

It was Ilya who never moved, who remained central and unshakable, who waited until Shane came to him, fell to his knees and realized he would need to tell his parents something. Shane tried to think about what he'd say to his parents but all that came was white noise in his head, a buzzing which just made his panic rise and rise and rise.

“Shane, baby, it'll be alright.” Irina tried but she was fidgeting. “Maybe he thinks you're really good friends?”

Shane laughed but it was tight and painful, yet he was also bracketed on both sides with soft voices. Quietly, as if imparting a secret, Shane whispered, “Fuck, I'm scared.”

“Yes, it's scary.” Ilya said immediately. “But you're brave.”

Over his shoulder, Shane watched Irina's face as he said it. She was smiling at them, Ilya mostly, and she looked something approaching proud and it made something in Shane settle. Irina had accepted them in minutes. She'd taken one look at the clearly gay disaster that was Shane and had never said a bad thing about it except to show her care.

Irina looked up at him and it was almost as if she could see the revelation in his eyes. She was quiet mostly, just standing behind her son and watching Shane hold onto Ilya's strong shoulders for dear life.

"Maybe...maybe he thinks we're really good friends?" Ilya offered and it was so similar to his mother's words that it made Shane laugh, his stomach cramping as he slid down into a crouch to calm himself down.

"Do you want me to come with you?" Ilya asked and for a minute Shane imagined coming up with some stupid lie without him. Something about friendship and being 'just really good friends' and it seemed fucking unbearable.

"Would you?" Shane pleaded.

"Of course." Ilya said instantly and it loosened something that had tightened in his chest without his realization.

"Buttons, bunny." Irina said and he realized that he'd missed a button on his shirt in his haste to get to his car. Ilya was throwing on a shirt and Shane wanted to be snotty about it, but he was too busy thinking of the lie they'd settled on to do more than glare at the Boston logo emblazoned on Ilya's shirt.

*Ilya and he got close after All-Stars. Shane invited him to the cottage. They were friends. Just friends.*

The drive over was so nerve racking that Shane nearly asked to pull over and have Ilya drive. At one point Ilya leaned down to kiss Shane's knuckles and Shane finally was able to feel something which wasn't the rolling dread of adding another lie to the already long list. When he rolled up to his parent's house, he nearly hyperventilated in the driver's seat until Ilya's hand rested on his neck.

"Maybe you should wait here." Shane said suddenly and the way Ilya looked at him made the stone in his stomach drop. "No, that's—nevermind."

"They love you, bunny, remember that." Irina pressed and Shane hadn't even realized that she'd spoken until he'd stepped up to the porch and knocked on the door. "Did you just knock on your parent's door?"

Shane had. He huffed and then clicked open the latch. "Mom? Dad? It's Shane."

His parents watched him come in but his mom's face was more confused, especially when Ilya walked in not far behind him. He had a moment standing there that sent him reeling for something to say. His father beat him to it.

"I forgot my charger at your place." He said and Shane could hear the note of regret in his voice. He knew, he had to. At least some idea.

"Can we, um, sit down?" Shane asked and his parents made the awkward shuffle to the kitchen table. Shane's vision was locked on the familiar divots in the wood, the scratch of the

table legs on the worn floors, the unfamiliar looks of his parents as they evaluated him.

“So, uh, this is Ilya. Rozanov.” Shane said carefully. “But you already knew that. He’s visiting.”

Shane had the sinking realization somewhere between the moment he sat down and the time his mother leaned forward to ask her first question that he was supposed to simply lie. He would tell them he and Ilya were *friends*, that he’d invited him as a *joke*, any number of stupid, probable lies. He watched his parent’s faces, knew they would do as they always did and believed him. He wanted, more than anything, to not do this. Because *this* would always be there.

Irina was at the head of the table, sitting in the window seat and he caught her eye as they took sips of tea and everyone seemed to be waiting for someone to set the pace.

“Well, this is unexpected.” His mom started and in retrospect, Shane shouldn’t have been surprised she was the one brave enough to jump head first into the morass he’d made. Shane didn’t say anything, couldn’t, and like that interview what felt like a lifetime ago, Ilya bumped Shane’s foot and took the pressure on himself.

“Shane and I got close at All-Stars. He invited me down. We know our public faces are different and didn’t want to ruin any reputations.” Ilya started and his explanation was perfect. *No one would question it*, Shane thought. They’d think exactly what he said.

“Well that’s...something.” His dad muttered, raising his mug for a sip. “We just, never thought you were so close with Rozanov.”

“Ilya.” Ilya corrected.

“Ilya.” His father acquiesced and smiled slightly. His mom did not and Shane felt something in his stomach twist even as they let the lie sit between them.

They’d do it, Shane realized, looking at his parents and the pitying expression Irina wore. If he called Ilya his friend and said that was all their was to the story, they’d believe it because it was Shane asking them to. It was him at sixteen again, crying to his mother that there were voices, real voices, that if she left him in that hospital on meds that made him loopy and a psych hold which had him drugged to the gills, he might never come back out. She’d looked him in the eyes and told him she believed him even as she questioned it because the only other option was calling her son a liar and Yuna Hollander trusted Shane.

“I’m gay.”

The conversation which had remained stilted and cold seemed to come to a screeching halt. Ilya looked at him, his hands almost as white as the porcelain mug he gripped.

“Shane...you don’t–” Irina tried but he did have to. He did.

“This wasn’t exactly how I wanted to come out but–” Shane looked over at Ilya who watched him with a shocked, awed sort of look. That did it, pushed Ilya enough that it was almost

easy to say the rest of what needed to be said. “We’re together. Have been. For a while.”

“Oh, well...” His father said and his mother made a little face that had Shane wanting to snap closed like a clam.

“I guess we kinda thought you might be gay.” His mom said softly, or at least as softly as she could which still came off a little condescending. Shane wanted to pinch himself, see if this was one of his nightmares or if he had just admitted to the sword which had been hanging over his neck for the last decade.

“You did?” Shane said softly. He wanted to ask more questions, if it was something he said or did, or how he dressed or acted, but he held himself back.

“I think we thought it was certainly possible.” His father said and Shane focused on his face. It was the face which had always been his metric for how bad something really was. His father somehow had the best and worst poker face and Shane had always been able to determine how bad something was by if his father was worried or not. Here, his brow was tight but he was watching Shane like he might vanish like one of his ghosts and that frightened Shane slightly, especially when his father tenderly added, “We both know you pretty well, Shane.”

“How long is a while?” His mother asked with that faux-uninterested look she did when she was really, really interested.

“Since our...rookie season.” Shane said and then flinched when Irina broke out into a loud and echoing laugh, the real one that seemed to boom out of her and cover his own mother’s gasp.

“Since your rookie season! Shane, baby, was it...” And then he could see his mother putting together pieces of a puzzle that Shane had hoped would take her a little longer. She glanced tellingly at Ilya and then back to Shane. “That Russian woman at the hospital...”

“Yeah it...” Shane closed his eyes and when he opened them, Irina was there. She made up his whole vision, bathed in sunlight and made warm by the butter yellows of golden hour. She was smiling at him, not saying a word but also somehow loud in her silence. She was happy, enjoying this not in a voyeuristic way, but in the same way Shane was, deep, deep down. Like relaxing a tense muscle with hard press. It would hurt and then it would feel better. Shane glanced over to Ilya and he gave the same smile as his mother, the small one which tilted up their lips. “Irina is his mother. I met her at the combine.”

His mother said nothing and then blinked. “Well. I think I need a drink.”

Shane watched his dad stand and then saw the way both Irina and Ilya perked up when he sat the good vodka down on the table. It was enough to slow his heartrate slightly.

“This is good vodka.” Ilya complimented and Shane knew that meant a lot considering he’d critiqued Shane’s bottle when he found it in the fridge.

“Thanks. I try to buy the Russian stuff.” His dad said bashfully and Shane had to hold himself back from pouring another shot into his glass. Irina watched with a scrunched brow and Shane got up instinctively, plucking one of the decorative shot glasses from the cabinet and pouring Irina a shot.

“This is for Irina.” Shane said and the question his mom had been trying to ask stopped and then they looked at him differently. It wasn’t as hesitant and involved more frantic glances between themselves and between Shane and Ilya.

“Irina.” His mother said and Shane had a disorienting moment where he realized that he’d never heard her name said aloud on anyone’s lips but his own.

The conversation had a few sharp moments, his mother wondering if he’d ever thrown a game, his parent’s pitying looks about hiding until they retire, his father asking about Ilya’s many pap shots with models and party girls, but for every prick was a release. They never played better than when they were on the ice together, they’d do whatever they needed to do to stay together, they’d never loved another person the way they did the other.

The press came, a hand on a knot, grinding up until the pinnacle when you had lost faith and assumed you’d put yourself through all the pain for nothing right before that moment the muscle gives. That was the rush that came when Ilya’s foot brushed his.

Then his mother stood up and in the little space between the kitchen and living room, she dipped out the front door and Shane’s stomach dropped out of his seat.

“Go talk to her, Bunny.” Irina said softly.

It was only in the relative isolation of the entryway that he could whisper the worry which had been growing teeth the longer it had gone unspoken. “What if she’s disappointed in me?”

“Then she is not the woman I think she is.” Irina said, not letting him spiral. “She loves you, deeply. She is mad at herself, I think. I understand that.”

Shane watched Irina lean back against their old coat rack, squinting out the frosted window to where his own mother paced the yard.

“Ilya forgives you.” Shane said and Irina’s head snapped back to him so fast he worried he’d hear a crack. He smiled, softly and already tearing up a bit. “It’s impossible for someone so full of love not to.”

“Go talk to your mother, bunny.” Irina pushed and Shane did, not because she told him to but because he knew he needed to, even if it pulled at so many muscles that Shane worried he’d end up a pile of goo at his mother’s feet.

In a way he did. The words were worn smooth from how long he’d held that knot, trapped behind his teeth and it felt liberating and heart-breaking to say them. Then the release of the secret, the long, painful “I really, really tried.”

The hug which seemed to compress his bones which felt like they might rattle right out of his body. The forgiveness which was easier to give than a breath.

“Ok, ok. Enough.” His mother huffed and he smiled at the familiar glint in her eye. “I’m going to run up to the study and–”

Shane watched her talk through a plan. They made both of them feel safe, he knew, and yet when she turned and started into the house, he waited just long enough for her to notice he wasn’t following her.

“I’m, ah...” Shane hesitated. “Just, can you give me a minute out here?”

“Sure, honey.” His mom said and it was with the same tone as her affection, the understanding ones.

Irina watched her go inside and then walked over the grass to stand near him, looking towards the door where the large glass panels gave a clear view of the kitchen where Ilya stood near the stove over their pasta pot with his dad stirring something and his mother supervising while pulling her Montreal corkscrew out of the drawer to open a bottle of wine.

“You think he will be okay in there alone?” Irina asked. Shane looked away from the scene, even though it felt like a physical pull to walk in and join them.

“Yeah.” Shane said and took in Irina. She was herself again, and had been for most of the week. Her hair was not perfectly coiffed and her nightgown was worn and she had bags under her eyes, but it suddenly felt imperative to let out all the truth and Irina was as much a part of that as anything. “I’m so glad I met you in that parking lot in Saskatchewan.”

Irina looked over at him with a coy little smile which seemed to falter a bit in the face of his earnestness. “Bunny...”

“Don’t go to Paris.” He said suddenly. “I know you think you’re a burden or something, but you’re not. You’re one of the greatest things that ever happened to me and I’m happy you’re a part of my life.” Shane confessed and felt confident enough to tack on, “A part of my family, if you want to be.”

Irina was silent for a long moment, huffing once and turning her face to hide her tears but then looking back, boldly showing him the streaky way they ran down her cheeks. “Let’s go inside, Shane.”

It was as close to an agreement as Irina would allow herself and Shane took it gladly. He opened the door for her, letting the smell of tomato and garlic roll over him and imagined the future he’d dreamt of and allowed himself to expand it. A larger table, set for his parents and a small plate for Irina. Christmas songs sung in both English and Russian. The good vodka in the bottom drawer of the freezer.

Shane reached out and laid a hand on Ilya’s back, feeling his body loosen slightly. Even then, he was smiling, worried but not frightened, and more beautiful than Shane had ever seen,

standing in a place he'd worried would be impossible, stirring pasta with an old spoon discolored by summers of mixing Kool-Aid.

He looked over at Irina, watching his parents bicker with the interest of one watching a tennis match after never learning the rules of the game. When she caught his eye, she winked and Shane let himself relax.

A mistake, Shane had thought the first moment he'd accidentally met Irina Rozanova's eyes in that grey little parking lot. He decided in his parent's homey kitchen with Ilya at the stove and Irina sitting on the counter between his own parents, it was a good kind of mistake.

He'd maybe even call it a miracle.

## Chapter End Notes

I know some people worried I would have Irina moving on, but I think there's still so much they have left to do! That said, I have also made the decision that I will be continuing this Au into the events of The Long Game, so if you are interest in that, you can follow the series.

This was a labor of love. I want to thank every single person who left a comment, you were the backbone of this story along with the heart.

## End Notes

Thanks for reading, consider leaving kudos and comment if you feel like it? Along with Diet Dr. Pepper, they are the only thing fueling me.

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