

watch the moon flower bloom

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by [sunshineonrye](#)

Summary

“Did you like them? My parents?”

Ilya squints at him. “I love them,” he says simply, like it should be obvious. “They’re your parents.”

But, Shane thinks idly, there's a difference, isn't there, between loving them and liking them?

(5 times Shane thinks Ilya doesn't like his parents and 1 time he finds out the truth)

Notes

title from crack baby by mitski. if shane listened to music he would listen to mitski. i believe this in my soul.

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

Chapter 1

The first time Shane notices it, it's almost easy to overlook.

He has a million things running through his head. *This is my worst fucking nightmare and I tried* but also *you're so brave* and *I love you*. Being around a table with his parents and finally putting his finger on why it feels right for the first time in his adult life as he watches Ilya fill the space that's usually left empty. His mom's smile when Ilya coaxes him out of his freakout with soft words and a hand squeezing the back of his head.

So there's a lot to think about during that visit with his parents. He can almost forget the way Ilya had spent the whole time making himself smaller. His voice was quieter, words chosen more carefully, face pulled to a carefully neutral expression. Even his jokes felt a little stiff, his little "Now I see where you get it from" about his mother's obsession with hockey said with a smile but without the usual mirth in his gaze.

He'd relaxed a bit, physically anyway, from when they'd first entered, arms crossed in front of him, shoulders squared, but there was still a clench to his jaw Shane only ever sees when Ilya has to talk to the press after a hard game, or near the end of a season when the exhaustion starts piling up, or over video call whenever he's in Russia.

It's so tempting to chalk it up to nervousness. Ilya had never met anyone's parents before, and he knew Shane's parents had been known to hate him, or at least the idea of him as Boston's Captain and Shane's rival. It was natural, the unease.

But, as they leave, climbing into the car, Shane can't get it out of his head. He had worried, as he does, about the tension that would arise if his parents had disliked Ilya. He hadn't even considered worrying about it in the opposite direction.

Except it's true, isn't it? Ilya doesn't like his parents. It's not hate, nothing with any logic or reasoning behind it, not the same emotion Shane feels towards Ilya's father. They're good, loving parents.

Shane loves his parents but he can tell, sometimes, that there might be something grating about their personalities. Ilya just doesn't like them. He grates against Yuna's questioning even though he answers them patiently, bristles when his loyalty is questioned. He's cautious with David, awkward, finding him boring in a way different and harder to overcome than Shane's own boringness.

His father likes to joke that each of their quirks are tempered by the other's in Shane. That he has his mother's ferocity but his father's gentleness, his mother's obsession and his father's clumsy but sincere way of loving. Shane doesn't know if he agrees. He thinks, instead of gentle tempering, it's something like the cracked pieces of shatter-proof glass still holding together at the zoo, the light reflecting just a little differently through each of the edges.

When the car pulls into the driveway of the cottage, Ilya is reluctant to let go of his hand. (Shane loves that he knows this now, this impossible fact that would have felt so far out of

reach even just last year: Ilya Rozanov loves holding hands in the car.)

Shane grazes his thumb gently over Ilya's knuckles and smiles. He brings the hand to his lips and kisses it gently. Then, he asks outright, "Did you like them? My parents?"

Ilya squints at him. "I love them," he says simply, like it should be obvious. "They're your parents."

Shane tries to let the words settle over him, untie the knot his stomach's twisted itself into. He believes Ilya when he says he loves them. *But*, Shane thinks idly as they finally separate their hands and climb out of the car, *there's a difference, isn't there, between loving them and liking them?* He loves them because he loves Shane. He loves them because if the two of them can make this work like they desperately want to, they'll be family.

But if he'd met them in some other contexts, if they were strangers or coworkers or anyone other than his boyfriend's parents, he wouldn't like them. They're not the kind of people he tends to like. If they were a blip in his day, in his life, their interaction would be marked with annoyance or irritation. Shane doesn't know why it bothers him so much. Ilya loves them. He doesn't have to want to hang out with them, too.

Ilya's hand finds his again as they close the cottage door behind them. He tugs, pulling Shane to his chest and then wrapping his arms around him. "I'm proud of you," Ilya says, softly.

Shane smiles into his shoulder, then kisses it. For just a moment, tucked into the safest place he knows, he lets himself forget about it.

Chapter 2

The thought keeps bothering him.

His mom texts at 4:40 sharp that they'd be there in 20 minutes. It's good timing, because he reads the text five minutes after it's sent, phone perched on Ilya's bare shoulder. Ilya, collapsed on top of him, makes a little questioning noise but doesn't lift his head from the space between Shane's neck and shoulder.

"We have fifteen minutes to clean up," Shane says.

Ilya tenses, slight enough that Shane's really only able to tell because they're pressed together. He wonders if he should've discouraged his mom when she set her mind to coming over with food. He had promised Ilya a week of quiet, just the two of them, alone but together.

Ilya tilts his head up to capture Shane's lips in a kiss. "What's wrong?"

Shane realizes he'd tensed up as well. He tries to relax, running his hand over Ilya's curls. "I just wanted to be with you for longer." It's the truth even though it isn't what he was thinking about. Ilya smiles, soft and fond in response. Shane kisses him again. "I'm sorry. We'll have the rest of our time here to ourselves, okay?"

This makes Ilya frown instead. "What are you sorry for? We have time, Hollander. The rest of our lives, if we get to be so lucky. That's what 'I love you' means, no?"

Shane loves being in love. The wonder of Ilya's reciprocation hasn't faded yet. He still wants to say "Holy shit!" every time Ilya talks about them being in love just like he did after the first confession. "I love you," Shane says against his lips.

"I love you too," Ilya says, and then reaches for Shane's phone. "Twelve minutes, now. Come on. You have time to shower. I'll clean up here."

"You don't wanna come with me?" They've taken all their showers together since Ilya got to the cottage. He already misses it.

Ilya kisses him. "That will take longer than twelve minutes, sweetheart." He taps the screen on his phone, glancing down at the time. "Eleven, now. Go, Shane, or you will spend the whole time feeling weird." They kiss, one last time, Shane basking in the comfort of being known so well, before Shane goes to face the shower alone.

When he returns, he hears multiple familiar sets of voices, wincing as he realizes he left Ilya to welcome his parents by himself. "Shane is just in the shower," he's explaining to his parents as Yuna unpacks the promised food on the counter. "He should be out soon." He sounds so fucking polite, so unlike himself Shane wants to scream.

“I’m out,” he says, still wiping his hair. A few droplets of water get on his shirt and he cringes at the feeling of the shirt sticking to him but ignores it. He doesn’t have time to dry his hair completely and he sure as hell isn’t going to go meet his parents shirtless, give them more reminders that their kid has sex with all the mouth-shaped bruises scattered across his torso. “Hi, guys.”

He gravitates to Ilya’s side, pressing an affectionate kiss to his cheek in apology. Something in his expression melts and Shane has hope that this interaction might go better than the last.

For the most part, it does, at first. The conversation with his parents falls into place as it tends to do, easy and inconsequential, something about their neighbors. Ilya is a natural charmer and fits right into their dynamic, asking questions when appropriate, reacting at all the right beats. But, that same damn muscle still ripples at his jaw when he’s not talking, tight and bracing.

Shane doesn’t understand, exactly. They’re not doing anything in particular right now. Maybe Ilya is just annoyed about the fact that they’re here in the first place. He had dismissed it when Shane brought it up earlier but Ilya tends to do that, dismiss his own feelings. He’s almost relieved when his dad says something about how they should get back, ready for a fond goodbye and a hug.

“You’re not staying for dinner?” Ilya asks. “We should eat together.”

“We thought you boys might appreciate your time alone,” David says.

“We have plenty of time, right, Shane?” With the force of that smile directed his way, mostly sincere but a little manic, Shane can’t help but nod. “You should stay for dinner. It can be easy, we can put on TV.” It’s sweet that Ilya’s trying to connect with his parents. He wishes he didn’t have to try so hard.

As they settle in the couches of the living room, plates balanced on their lap, Shane lets a hand creep around the back of Ilya’s neck and pulls him closer. “They really like you,” he whispers, quiet enough that they aren’t overheard. “Thank you for doing this. Trying.” Ilya doesn’t say anything in reply, just smiles, gives him a fond look, and skates a hand over the edge of Shane’s jaw affectionately.

There’s a hockey game on the TV. A rerun of a Ottawa vs New York game. The Admirals crushed them, of course, because Ottawa is a terrible team and Scott Hunter had a fire under his ass this season but it’s predictable enough to comfortably drift in the background as the conversation builds.

Shane feels a twinge of guilt. Ilya would be joining that terrible team soon. Leaving behind an incredible team for one that rarely ever even made the playoffs. For Shane. He would make them better, Shane knows. But he also knows the burden of being a one-man hockey machine, shouldering the weight of his team on his own back. He drops his head down onto Ilya’s shoulder, feels a ghost of a kiss against his hairline, and tries to forget.

Except now that his brain is running again, he keeps noticing things. Turns in the conversation that would be comfortable if he wasn’t looking at them through the eyes of an

outsider. His dad says something about the American penny. It's a nonsensical topic, Shane barely remembers how they got to American currency given they're Canadian and don't have anything to do with that. But he talks about minting costs and exchange rates, which has his mom murmuring something about the economy and contract negotiations and suddenly they're back on brand deals for hockey players.

Shane tries to steer the conversation into more neutral territory. "Hunter was really determined to win this season, huh?" he says as the screen shows a replay of one of his goals. It feels like being saved by the bell in school. It's a great goal.

"That's a nice goal for someone who lived through the Stone Age," Ilya says. "Not as beautiful as any of mine, of course, or," he hums, pretending to think, then shoots Shane a lopsided smile, "eh, some of yours."

"Some?" Shane asks, trying to stifle a besotted smile.

"Because of your terrible backhand, of course."

Shane loves it when Ilya mentions his weak backhand because it's the only chirp he ever directs at Shane's skills on the ice. It's worn and rehearsed, like he needed something to say, a remnant of the early days when they talked mostly in room numbers and swear words, when they didn't know each other well enough to tease in other ways. It's not true anymore, you don't win two back-to-back Cups with a weak backhand, and so all Shane feels in the pit of his stomach is nostalgic fondness. "My terrible backhand?"

"Mmm, yes. It ruins the... artistry of the goals." Shane mouths the word 'artistry' with a fond roll of his eyes, lifting his head from his boyfriend's shoulder.

"Of course he wanted to especially win this season," says his mom. "It's an iconic image, winning the Cup, then coming out. Good for the branding for him to prove to the world just how great of a player he is right before coming out so no one can dismiss him for his sexuality."

Shane cringes and tries to not let it show on his face. "I wonder what he would have done, if he did not win," Ilya says. "Try again next season? He has maybe one or two good ones left before winning more Cups is a fantasy."

"I don't know. If he'd really set his mind to it, maybe a Pride collab or a documentary? But he's really not a player with a lot of brand connections or media presence even though he's so good, so I'm not sure what the backup plan was. He really needs to start diversifying his streams of income now. He'll be retiring within the decade and then what'll he do?"

Ilya frowns, a quick blink-and-you-miss-it flash of a thing. As much as he likes to joke about Hunter's age, in the grand scheme of things, he isn't that much older than them. Shane had realized, as soon as he'd tipped over into his late twenties, that the end of his career was on the horizon. Still far, but visible enough, over the waves. His mother's matter-of-fact framing of the retirement of someone only a handful of years older than the two of them leaves a bitter taste in Shane's mouth.

“Well, he’ll probably spend time with his partner, mom,” Shane says. “Maybe relax for the first time in decades?”

“Yes, honey, of course, but that can’t be all life is. He’ll need to do *something* and he can’t establish anything if he doesn’t have any connections.”

His father and Ilya are quiet. His father, he understands. David Hollander is well accustomed to zoning out and occupying himself when Shane and Yuna get like this. His silence comes with years of precedence. He doesn’t have an opinion on this topic either way.

But Ilya does. Ilya has opinions about this, about hockey and Scott Hunter and life after retirement. But he just stays quiet. Not frowning anymore but uncomfortable in a way he wasn’t before, when he was teasing Shane about the artistry of his goals. Shane wishes he’d disagreed with Ilya when he asked his parents to stay. It would make his parents think of him as the sex-crazed menace he never was in his teenage years but Ilya wouldn’t have to sit here, in the safe space of the cottage, uncomfortable and distant.

“Not everything is done through media connections, Mom. Maybe he’ll open a bookstore or something. Or coach. It’s Scott Hunter. His records held until Ilya and I were around to break them and we’re the best.” His hand falls to the back of Ilya’s head as he fidgets with the curls there. He doesn’t know whether he’s soothing Ilya or himself with the motion. “He’ll be just fine.”

Yuna seems to read something in the interaction because she stops, and smiles at them. “Of course, honey. Sorry, I was just thinking out loud.” And then, after a moment, because she can’t help herself, she says, “You know, it’ll be a good litmus test. We should keep an eye out for what brands work with Scott Hunter now.”

On the TV screen, the Admirals win. The conversation drifts again. Shane lets himself melt against Ilya, his contributions shorter and shorter until he’s almost drifting off to sleep, dinner forgotten. Ilya’s shoulder is tense under his temple. Shane tries not to dwell on it.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

I am loving reading the comments theorizing on what's actually going through Ilya's head. It's the best writing fuel i've ever encountered <3

“If you get this one, that carpet has to go,” Shane says.

They’re in bed in his apartment in Montreal, both on their sides with Shane’s chin resting on Ilya’s head as they scroll through some real estate websites for houses in Ottawa. Ilya is still with Boston and there’s not yet any negotiations about a trade but they have a plan. A future. And for that future to come into being, Ilya needs to find a place in Ottawa eventually. So, househunting. It’s become a regular pastime when they’re together.

“Aw, but the carpet is why I want it!” Ilya whines. It’s a hideous carpet, black with blue and purple designs on it like an 80s-themed bowling alley. “It’s pretty. And it looks soft. It would be more comfortable when we fuck on the floor.”

Shane scrunches up his nose. “We’re professional athletes, we can handle fucking on hardwood.” He can almost hear the smirk building on Ilya’s face. Yeah, he heard it too. “Don’t.” He continues, “and if you think I’m ever getting naked on that thing, you’re insane. Carpets are so gross. That one, especially, looks like it’s been there since before either of us were born. It’s got decades of germs soaked into every fiber.”

Ilya sighs dramatically. “It has history,” he says, voice dripping with amusement. “There’s *memories* in every fiber, Shane.”

“Yeah, memories of someone’s grandma’s colorful vomit after a wild night of cocktails from ten years ago.” Ilya giggles and Shane realizes just then, a wave of fondness crashing against his ribcage, that he’s being baited for his reaction.

Ilya turns around in his arms, still giggling. “You are Mr. Poetry now, too, hmm?”

“Fuck you, shut up!” Shane laughs, kissing him.

“No no no, it was such... evocative imagery,” Ilya says, laughing against his lips. “You should pursue this new passion.”

“Evocative imagery,” Shane repeats, enunciating every syllable in disbelief. “Who is teaching you these words?” Their noses are pressed together now and Shane can almost feel Ilya’s lashes fluttering against his.

“I read!” Ilya protests. “I’ve been reading the New Yorker!”

“Is this still as much of a lie as it was in Vegas?” He thinks briefly about back then, years ago now, about how alone and unsure he felt. He remembers his own anger, remembers seeing Ilya’s eyes and folding immediately, letting him hold his face and tell him what to do. Remembers how terrible he felt afterwards with nothing but a distant goodbye.

If some divine force had told him at the beginning of that night that this, househunting in bed with Ilya Rozanov, is where he’d end up in a handful of years, he might have believed them, might have had some faith in the two of them working out eventually. But if the divine force had found him at the end of the night, hunched over his phone in the elevator, he would have thought he was going insane and checked himself into a psych ward.

“No, actually.” Ilya looks sincere, despite the laughter brimming behind his eyes. Things have changed so much. They’ve become so good for each other. Shane doesn’t know how he made this happen but he’s so fucking glad he did. “I’m serious,” Ilya continues as if Shane doesn’t actually believe him. “I got a subscription. I’ll show you when you’re in Boston. The covers are pretty.”

Shane grins at him, idly peppering kisses over his jaw. “Your vocabulary’s gonna be bigger than mine in a few years.”

“Not the only—”

“Nope!” Shane interrupts him with a kiss. It lingers. They kiss lazily, hands wandering over the curve of each other’s shoulders but not dipping downward. Kissing just for the sake of kissing. Shane is a little obsessed with it.

An insistent buzzing cuts through the haze. Shane’s phone rings on the bedside table. Ilya glances at it over Shane’s shoulder. “It’s your Dad.”

“I can talk to him later,” he replies, pulling his boyfriend back into the kiss.

Ilya lets it happen for a single second before he’s pulling away. “No, it’s okay, answer it. I want his opinion.”

“You want his opinion?” Shane asks, a little incredulous, but he’s already reaching for his phone. “Hey, dad,” he says as his father’s smiling face pops up on screen. “Ilya’s here too.” He tilts the phone to the side, showing Ilya waving at the camera.

“Hey boys! Great game yesterday.” It *was* a great game, the first they’ve played against each other since their love confessions. Both Shane and Ilya played at their absolute best, Shane knows it must have been a joy to watch. He reminds himself to make sure to download the game to watch later.

“Thank you, David,” Ilya says, squishing his face against Shane’s so they both comfortably fit on the screen. “It was a good game. I won.”

“By a single goal that wasn’t even yours, Rozanov! We scored the same number of goals each. That makes the two of us,” he gestures vaguely between them, “tied.”

Shane knows Ilya will argue the technicality. With a shit-eating grin on his face, he says, “I had one more assist than you. I win.”

His dad, the traitor, takes Ilya’s side. “Yeah, I think he’s got you there, bud.”

Ilya grins, sticking his tongue out at Shane. “You’re my favorite Hollander, David,” he says, solemnly.

His dad’s tinny laugh echoes through the room. “I appreciate it, kiddo, even though I don’t believe you in the slightest. Did you get around to reading the article I texted you, by the way?”

What. “Since when do you guys text each other?” Shane asks. He doesn’t even know when they’d had the chance to exchange phone numbers in the first place.

“Since forever,” Ilya says, stretching the word as if they hadn’t met only a few months ago. “What did you think we did while you and Yuna cried outside, just sit and look at each other?”

“Yeah, kinda?” Shane hadn’t really thought about it when he’d left Ilya at the table with his dad that day. He wasn’t thinking about much other than the pit of disappointment in his stomach and the clawing sense that he had been right to lock himself away from his parents for all these years.

“I am too charismatic, you know this, Shane.”

Shane knows exactly how charismatic Ilya is. He also knows how exhausting it is, to be charismatic: the sustained eye contact, making small talk to make it seem like he cares even though he doesn’t. Shane tries to cover up his wince with a huff of laughter. “What do you text about?”

“Real estate,” David says through the phone. “I know a little bit about the Ottawa housing market, you know.” That’s an understatement. If Shane got his obsession with hockey from his mom, he got his fondness for real estate from his dad.

“I read the article, David,” Ilya says. “I did not understand some of it but it was interesting.”

Despite the front Ilya puts up sometimes at events, his English is really good. He’s lived in America for a decade, he goes most days not speaking Russian at all unless he’s swearing or calling Shane an indulgent pet name. He sometimes even talks to himself in English, flitting around the kitchen or muttering in his sleep. He hasn’t had a hard time understanding an English text in years.

Shane can’t *not* ask. “What was the article about?”

He almost misses it, the flash of hurt that flickers through Ilya’s face before he can school his expression. “Ah, pop quiz,” Ilya drawls with a lopsided smile, his gaze sliding over to the phone screen, addressing David, “He keeps me sharp.” Before Shane can even protest, Ilya is barreling onwards. “It was about zoning laws, yes? How to look for places that will have... a

cohesive community character and avoid zones that will lead to... monotonous development patterns.”

He’s answering the question like Shane’s actually quizzing him, regurgitating buzzwords like he’s reading from notecards. Shane’s read enough similar articles about Montreal zoning laws to know those aren’t Ilya’s own phrasings.

“I had to google that word. Monotonous. It’s a good word,” Ilya says. “I like it. Like... Shane Hollander’s taste in real estate is monotonous.” David laughs through the phone. “No it’s true! Wood everywhere, like the cottage. He wouldn’t even look at a house with carpet.”

“I looked at it!” Shane retorts, laughing. “The carpet is just hideous. Ilya, show him.”

The conversation meanders from there. Later, after his dad’s hung up and he’s resisting the urge to ask to go another round because Ilya has to leave soon and he hates that particular echo of how they used to be, getting off and leaving right after, Shane brings it up. “You don’t have to, you know?” he says, words muffled against Ilya’s neck.

“Have to what?”

“Indulge my Dad. Read articles about boring zoning laws and memorize specific phrases from it.” He presses a kiss to the skin closest to him, right at the edge of Ilya’s collarbone. “I wasn’t trying to quiz you, earlier. I just wanted to know. Be in on whatever you two have in common.”

“You,” Ilya answers, “and Ottawa. We will share a city soon, no? There’s plenty to talk about.”

“I just—” Shane can’t put it into words. He looks up at Ilya, head resting on his chest, eyes trained to the mole on his cheek. “I know you find this stuff boring.”

“So? I find you boring and I still love you.” He says it so easily, like it’s a fact of life. Shane Hollander is boring. Ilya Rozanov loves him.

Sometimes Shane thinks about a different universe, one where he doesn’t look as pretty on his knees. A version of him that doesn’t have eyes or freckles or lips as appealing as this version of him does. What would attract Ilya to him, then? In another world, Ilya Rozanov meets Shane Hollander and thinks “boring” and nothing more. They might have been meant to fall in love with each other in that world but how would they ever get there?

“I mean,” he raises a hand to cradle Ilya’s face, tries to make this less about himself and more about his boyfriend who has been tense and uncomfortable both times he’s been around Shane’s parents. “You know you don’t have to spend time with my parents if you don’t want to, right? They already love you. I know you’re not the type of person that...”

“The type of person that what?” Ilya asks, voice a little rough, hitting the final syllable harshly.

“No, I mean,” he sighs, running his hands through Ilya’s hair, “if you met David Hollander at an event and you’d never met me, would you talk to him about zoning laws?”

Ilya makes a face like he’s thinking very hard about the question and then gives Shane a flirty smile. “Will he have his son with beautiful freckles with him? Then, yes, probably.”

Shane is thinking about *that* Shane Hollander again, the one that’s less pretty. He’s not real, he knows, but he can’t stop thinking about it. “Take me out of the equation completely, okay? You don’t know I exist.”

“Then, no,” Ilya says. Even though Shane’s expecting that exact answer, it settles like something heavy in the pit of his stomach. “I would have no reason to talk to him. No reason to look for a house in Ottawa.” It’s then that Ilya finally pulls away from their embrace, just a little bit. He doesn’t go far, just turns so he can face him entirely, holding Shane’s face one-handed like he loves to do. “Hollander, I don’t understand what you mean by all this.”

“Nothing, I don’t know.” Shane shakes his head, shifting a little to press a kiss to Ilya’s hand. “I know you’re making an effort to talk to them and connect with them because you love me. But you don’t have to, that’s all.”

Ilya shrugs. “Okay,” he says. “I still will.”

Shane laughs, because that’s such an Ilya answer, and kisses him, soft and slow. They have maybe ten or fifteen minutes before Ilya has to get up, start getting ready to leave. They kiss for the sake of kissing, just soft lips and warm breaths and steady hands. Their time is up in a blink but Shane thinks, as he bodily drags Ilya out of bed so he doesn’t miss his flight, even forever wouldn’t be long enough.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

ignore any hockey season inaccuracies I'm so sports-illiterate, last chapter when they were talking about the game they played against each other i had to google to make sure they actually called them 'goals' in hockey (google says they do).

thank you so much again for all your comments. It genuinely makes my day hearing all your interpretations <3

They're apart the next time, on two opposite coasts, Shane in San Francisco at an away game, Ilya in Boston. He has the weekend off, Shane knows, but when he calls him, mindful of the time difference that places Ilya squarely in early afternoon, he's dressed in a suit, headphones in, surrounded by bright lights.

"Hi, sweetheart," Ilya says, voice almost at a whisper. "I'm alone now but they're coming in to make me pretty soon."

"Wait, what are you doing? I thought you'd still be in bed today." Ilya had been excited for this, a day in the middle of the season with no game or practice, just a day to let his aching muscles relax. Shane looks at him, really looks at him, sees beyond the haze of the softness in his stomach at watching the man he loves. Ilya looks... tired. Beautiful, as he always is, but there's something drawn tight in his expression, something like worry, or maybe it's just the lack of sleep shining through.

"Ah, so you think I need to be made pretty?" Ilya pouts. "You don't think I'm always the most beautiful man on Earth? Love is dead."

Shane has become very familiar with Ilya's baiting but he falls for it anyway, like a sucker. "Fuck off, you're gorgeous. You know you're gorgeous." Ilya's answering smile lights up the screen. "You didn't tell me what you were doing."

"Ah," Ilya says, "commercial. For some perfume thing? Your mother set it up for me." Oh fuck. "You would hate this perfume. The smell," Ilya continues, like it's nothing, like Shane isn't spiraling again, "it would give you a headache."

"Ilya," Shane says softly. "Baby." He hasn't really been a pet-names person ever in his life, not with Rose, not with any of his high school girlfriends, but he tastes this one on his tongue, takes note of the way Ilya's lashes flutter at hearing it. "You're exhausted. It's been such a long season and you've been playing really hard."

Something in the back of his mind tells him that Ilya's been playing so hard because this is the closest he'll get to winning another cup for the foreseeable future now that he's set his mind on moving to a terrible team. Ilya just shrugs. "So, what? You do things like this all the time. It's good money and everyone will get to see my gorgeous face."

It's a ridiculous ploy to distract Shane. It almost works. "Everyone can see your gorgeous face all the time if they just turn on ESPN." He sighs. "You just don't usually do commercials, Ilya. I can talk to my mom, make her stop trying to take over your career if you want."

Ilya's easy smile vanishes, replaced by something steely like a Tampa hotel room, like a Montreal club. "No," he says firmly and Shane can almost see him rearrange his own face back to something easier, softer. "Don't."

"Okay, baby," he says softly, just to get him properly relaxed, not just put up the front that he is. "Okay, I just don't want you to feel like you have to do what she wants you to just because she's my mother."

"I know," Ilya says. "You are always taking care of me. For this, I don't need you to. I'm happy to do it."

You don't look happy to do it, Shane wants to say. You look miserable, you look exhausted, you look like you regret agreeing to this. How long will it take before you regret me?

It's cruel to think this of Ilya, who loves him so much. Think of him as bitter and resentful, even a hypothetical future version of him that's had enough of this. He thinks it anyway and then hates himself just a little bit. But he doesn't push.

Ilya looks up past the camera and smiles briefly, polite as anything. "Jane," he says, "hair and makeup are here."

"Okay," Shane replies, thankful for the headphones Ilya's wearing because he needs to say this. "I love you so, so much. Call me tonight?"

"I will," Ilya says. "I love you too."

Whispering an apology into the air as if it'll ever get to its destination on the other side of the country, he calls his mother. She picks up almost immediately, chirpy and bright, smiling wide. "Hey honey! I was just about to call you actually."

"Mom," he says. "Why is Ilya doing a commercial in the middle of the season? He's fucking exhausted. This was supposed to be his one rest day. Please just stop trying to take over his career." *Too*, he wants to add, though he doesn't. He thinks his mother can hear it anyway.

Yuna looks genuinely stunned. "Honey, I..." She takes a deep breath. "He asked me to put him in touch with some brands he could work with from Boston on his off days."

Shane's jaw drops, just a little bit, in shock. "What?"

“He didn’t want to commit to long term ambassadorships, what with his home base being kind of up in the air right now, but he said he’d like to start branching out. I wasn’t trying to take over his career, I swear. I can talk to him about taking—”

“No!” Shane lets out a shuddering breath. He can almost feel it rattling through his ribs. “I’m sorry, mom. I shouldn’t have gotten mad at you. You’re the reason I have as much as I do. I love you.”

“Shane, my baby.” Her voice is impossibly soft. Shane wants nothing more than to curl up with his head in his mother’s lap. “Don’t worry about it, I’m not upset. You have nothing to apologize for. You were just being protective, it’s a good trait to have.”

“He just looked really tired today when I called him.” Shane runs a hand over his face. “I think he just wants to make you like him, mom. He doesn’t really care about brand deals and ambassadorships, just you and dad’s opinion of him.”

“I love him,” Yuna says seriously. “I really do. I especially love him for you, honey. I’ve thought of him as family ever since he talked you down from a panic attack the day we met him.” He remembers that day, being right on the edge of a panic attack, clinging to Ilya’s soft words like a lifeline. *Shane. We’re good here. Your family is here. Your boyfriend is here.* No one had ever been able to talk him down as quickly as Ilya had, not even his parents. Shane wants desperately to see his face again, feeling his absence like a missing limb.

“You should tell him that, maybe?” Shane suggests softly. “Next time you talk. Don’t tell him I told you to, just—”

“I know, honey. I won’t. I’ll call him after the shoot and ask him how it went, slip in how much your dad and I love him. And next time I send him anything I’ll make sure he has other breaks in his schedule, I promise.” His mom doesn’t say she’ll stop negotiating brand deals for Ilya because that’s just how she is, how she shows love. But she’ll take care of him better as she does it. That’s how she is too.

He lets his mother distract him with other lines of conversation, neighbors’ barbeques and cousins’ weddings. Half his mind though, is somewhere else.

If Ilya, the Ilya of fast cars and loud music and hot girls on his arm, knew what he was getting into all those years ago in the shower, how fast would he have run away? If Shane had shown his true colors then, all his neuroses and obsessions in full force as they are now, would Ilya have stuck around long enough to fall in love?

He felt guilt crushing at his temple when he told his mother she shouldn’t try to steer Ilya’s career, because isn’t that exactly what Shane is doing? The transfer to Ottawa, the Canadian citizenship, the charity. Sure, Ilya is okay with it all, happy even, because he knows Shane does it because he loves him.

But, Shane is so fundamentally unlikeable when he’s himself, when he’s exactly like his parents. Loveable, sure, he’s gotten so good at putting on the mask, so good at being pretty and adorable and funny and competent. He’s perfected the siren song, made people, made Hayden and Jackie and Rose and Ilya love him.

He doesn't know if any of them ever would if he was himself, right from the very beginning.

After his mom hangs up, Ilya sends him a mirror selfie. He's beautiful. He's always beautiful but the makeup artist did a good job at covering up his exhaustion, making him look bright but sultry. Shane thinks there might be some eyeliner smudged under his eyes and something shiny at the peaks of his cheekbones. His hair has been mostly pushed back though there are curls that fall delicately around his face, framing it perfectly.

Gorgeous, he types in reply and then deletes it. *I hate that you're so far away. I want to see this in person.* He deletes that too. He needs something else, something sexy but not desperate, sincere but not clipped.

Jane: my man my man my man

Ilya sends back a phrase in Russian. Shane can't read the Cyrillic alphabet but he knows the slopes and valleys of these three words well. Ilya loves him. Ilya is his. He believes these two things to be true so deeply, nothing else really matters.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

When Ilya slides his phone across the kitchen counter of Shane's Montreal apartment to show him pictures of the house, Shane is, for a moment, smitten with it: the high ceilings, the smooth wood paneling, the gorgeous windows. If he didn't know any better, if he'd hit his head and lost his memories, he would think he had that house built himself.

Shane loves it so much, he's temporarily blinded by visions of himself existing there, in the future, socked feet against the hardwood at night, limbs pressed against walls. A house to grow in. It's Shane's dream house. But it's *Shane's* dream. He would love it, he thinks, if he hadn't spent months in his head about his tendency to squish Ilya into molds not made to fit him.

"I got David's approval for zoning stuff," Ilya is saying, though Shane barely registers the words. He's listing off aspects of the location on his fingers. It would be adorable if Shane could get himself to think of anything other than *he'll resent me more in a few years if he gets this house*. "And it's close to practice rink, close to highway, easy to get to from Montreal."

The trade is almost official. No one but management knows about it yet but it's happening. For real. Even though Ottawa sucks in comparison, even though Ilya would be leaving behind teammates he's played with for almost a decade, Shane is selfish. He can't bring himself to regret pushing for it.

Still, if Ilya is going to live in Ottawa for him, he should do it on his own terms. Get a house he wants. This one doesn't have room to store all his cars. The decor is a different aesthetic than the ones he'd chosen for his Boston house, more rustic and homely in comparison.

"Shane," Ilya says and Shane realizes he's been staring at the screen for a long time without speaking. Ilya is smiling, crooked teeth and crinkled eyes. "It's so perfect you're speechless, right? Is that what this is?"

"I—" There's a lump in his throat he can't seem to clear. When he speaks again, his voice comes out hoarse, like he hasn't spoken in hours. "I don't know, Ilya."

At first, it's just gentle confusion. With just a hint of a furrow between his brows and a slight tilt to his head, Ilya asks, "You don't like it?"

"I don't know," Shane says again. His thoughts are so jumbled he doesn't know what to do with them. "It doesn't really feel like you."

The furrow in Ilya's brow deepens. "I thought you would like it." He sounds shocked and unsure, like he'd reached for a handrail that wasn't there. "Your parents were so sure you would like it."

“I do like it!” Shane says. He feels frantic now, can hear his own heartbeat pounding in his ears. Ilya knows him so well, Shane hates that he ever made him think he doesn’t. “You don’t have to talk to my parents to know that,” he says. The words don’t sound as reassuring as he meant them to sound, the frantic energy he feels infecting it. It sounds insistent in the wrong way, he thinks. He doesn’t know how to fix it.

Ilya, when he responds, sounds so fucking hollow. Shane wants to take it back, the last few seconds, the last few idiotic things that came out of his mouth but it’s too late. “I don’t understand,” Ilya says.

“I just don’t know if it’s right for you,” Shane says, trying to sound as casual as possible. “It feels like...” He sighs. He needs to be honest. “It looks like the cottage. It looks like I had it built.”

It’s the wrong thing to say. Ilya tenses, his frown taking a turn from confused to a little angry. Distantly, Shane thinks, at least he doesn’t sound so hollowed out anymore. At least there’s an emotion there now. “I shouldn’t live there,” Ilya says, so slowly, like he’s tasting every syllable, trying to make sense of them as he says them. “Because it looks like you had it built.”

“I mean,” Shane wants to reach out to him but there’s a counter between them so he just runs a hand over his face, “it’s not what you want. It’s what you think I want.”

“I want what you want!” He sounds so much like his younger self, so much like the man that yelled *not everything is about you, Hollander* on a balcony. Shane wonders what that Ilya would think of this one, sitting in Montreal, showing Shane a house picked out specifically to appeal to him.

He wishes that were true, *I want what you want*. He wishes he couldn’t see Ilya’s fraying nerves, his desperate bid to hold on. “No, Ilya, you don’t,” Shane says firmly. “I’ve seen your place in Boston, this,” he gestures vaguely at the phone in front of him though the screen has now gone black, “is nothing like it.”

“The house in Boston is nothing. It means nothing.” Ilya is still angry but it’s different now, more pain-tinged. It shows differently in his voice, less like an awards show balcony and more like over a rink at Sochi. He’s said the word *nothing* with this same exact inflection before. “I bought it when I signed with Boston and did not make a single choice about how it looks. This house,” he taps and unlocks the phone, bringing the gorgeous airy house back into Shane’s field of vision. “Ottawa. It means something to me.”

The words are out of Shane’s mouth before he can stop himself. “What’s it mean, that you become some robot custom-built to be a Hollander?” He regrets it as soon as he says it, especially when he sees Ilya flinch away like he’s been hit. “That’s not what I want,” he says, voice as even and tempered as he can possibly make it. “For either of us.”

“What,” is all Ilya says in response. Fuck he sounds hollow again. Drifting out of his own body. It’s a question with barely any inflection, a flat single-syllable statement. *What*.

“You don’t do brand deals on your off days,” he says, using his fingers to count, “or care about real estate or want to live in a house decorated like this. That’s not who you are, Ilya. That’s not the man I fell in love with.”

Ilya is angry again. And hurt. And so fucking exhausted. It’s written all over every line of his face. “Then who am I?” he asks. “Do I have to be same asshole you met in 2008 forever?” His fingers dig into his own hair and tug. “Okay, I will be him. I will do coke off sports car and never talk about my feelings and then I will become the man you fell in love with. Is that it?”

“No, Ilya, that’s not what I meant. You *are* the man I fell in love with. I didn’t mean—”

“What are we doing, Shane? Because I’m trying to build a life with you.” He’s doing that thing again, turning his head, tucking it into his own shoulder. He’s gotten better about letting Shane see him cry. He cries now, at movies and sad animal videos and after nightmares, in Shane’s arms. In full view of him. Except now he’s turning his head and Shane made him cry and he doesn’t trust Shane to be gentle with his heart anymore. “I’m trying,” Ilya continues, “to remember the only fucking place I felt at home in since I got to this fucking continent.”

Shane reaches for him, walking over to where Ilya’s hidden his face, gently cradling his jaw. Ilya reaches for him, too, pulling him into his arms til they’re pressed chest-to-chest and rocking. “I don’t want to fight, baby,” Shane says gently.

Ilya’s response is muffled into the fabric of Shane’s shirt. “I know. You never do.” Shane pulls away just slightly enough to look at his face but by the time he can catch Ilya’s expression, it’s already shifted to something different, something contemplative.

“I’ll stop, hmm?” he says. “Talking to your parents.” It feels like a hollow victory, but at least this way Ilya won’t be uncomfortable. Shane is sure his parents will always love him regardless, they would have loved him even without the months of effort Ilya put into ensuring it. “And I won’t buy this house if you don’t want me to,” he continues. “I have time. I can keep looking.”

“No, Ilya, I’m sorry.” Shane feels soft fingers idly running through his hair. “I know you love the cottage. I didn’t think of it that way, you wanting the feeling of being at the cottage at home. I’m sorry.” He presses a series of gentle kisses to Ilya’s forehead. “I just got in my head about making you into someone you’re not. I really do like the house, it’s gorgeous. I love the ceilings and the paneling and all the natural light.”

“Yeah?” There it is. Ilya looks up at him, tentatively hopeful, reaching gentle fingers to cradle his jaw.

Shane leans into it. “Yeah, I think you should buy the house.” He tries to smile, as encouraging as possible. There’s still something to his expression Shane can’t quite decipher, something in his eyes. “I’m excited to see it in person. I’m sorry I made it such a big deal.”

“It’s okay,” Ilya says. And then, as if he’s a million miles away, like someone’s placed a heavy-duty tarp over the core of him, the bubbling happiness from earlier, when he’d first brought out the pictures, he whispers, “It will hurt. Living in this house without you.”

Shane Hollander has a few regrets in his life. Not too many, not really, he loves the life he has now and everything that lead to it. But he does regret this: Ilya from five minutes ago and Ilya now are entirely different. There's a light he can't help but feel like he snuffed out. He feels unsteady with it. He grabs Ilya's face and peppers it with kisses, ending at his lips. "I'll be over all the time, it's only a two hour drive," he says. "You'll be sick of me being here, actually."

Ilya cracks a smile, kissing him softly. "Impossible," he says, reverent and gorgeous.

"I love you so much," Shane says.

"You are," Ilya breathes, "the love of my life." He kisses him then, hands clutching desperately like Shane will disappear under his fingers.

"And you're—" Shane tries, but he's interrupted with another desperate kiss.

"I know," Ilya says against his lips. Shane feels unsettled, almost, at not getting to say it back. He feels unsettled from this whole conversation. He doesn't know if it's coming down from the high of his anxiety spiral or if it's something different, something less ephemeral. He thinks of the gorgeous house in Ottawa Ilya picked out for them to build a life in and kisses back the love of his life.

Chapter End Notes

this turned out a little more angsty than i anticipated. don't hate me, i'll fix it! let me know what you thought?

to the people reading this chapter-by-chapter as it comes out: I love you to pieces. it's 1am on New Years Eve as I post this. I will do my absolute best to have this done before the year is out. See you tomorrow (later today?) <3

Chapter 6: +1 (Ilya)

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year! I got a little overwhelmed with everything I wanted to include here and rewrote parts of this a million times so this is coming a few hours later than promised but to make up for it, this is about 4.5k words of Ilya's POV on this whole situation and it fixes as much as I can in the space of a single chapter. Please let me know if you like it?

On his fourth morning waking up in the new house in Ottawa, Ilya doesn't want to get out of bed. The edges of yesterday's bad day still cling to him as he blinks awake in the morning light. It doesn't feel like yesterday, like he *can't* get out of bed, like his limbs are rooted to their spot, he just doesn't want to.

The space in bed next to him is empty but if Ilya closes his eyes he can almost hear sounds of something in the kitchen, shuffling or a spoon clinking against a mug. Of course, there's nothing really there. Ilya is in his new house in Ottawa and he is utterly alone.

He lets himself wallow in it. Ilya was spoiled the first two days of living here, Shane at his shoulder, insisting on unpacking and decorating everything, making the house feel like home. This beautiful house and the man he'd bought it for in it felt like something out of his deepest, most secret fantasies. And then Shane had gone back to Montreal, to his team and his life. His comfortable, familiar life.

Shane loves him. Shane is going to leave him soon. Ilya is certain of both. He knows the feeling well, knows the look on someone's face when they love you but not enough to stay. Ilya feels like he's reclined on a TV psychologist's couch: *how does this relate to your relationship with your mother?* When he told Shane not to think of her as weak, wasn't he doing it so someone else would bear witness to her strength when all he wanted to do was wallow in his own childish anger?

Shane is going to leave him soon, Ilya can tell. Despite the ten-year plan and the i-love-yous at every turn, he's going to leave him. He might not know it yet, might not have let the thought take shape in his head but it will happen. When the thrill of keeping a secret is gone, when all that's left inside the husk of his sexy rival is a man that wants a soft place to come home to and people that want to take care of him, Shane will leave.

The look of relief on his face when Ilya promised to stop talking to his parents practically guaranteed it.

"It will hurt," he had said, months ago. "Living in this house without you." It already does. Still, Ilya can't bring himself to regret this life, this house in Ottawa, this life of being two

hours instead of five hours and a border crossing away. It's worth it, it's all worth it. If Shane leaves him tomorrow the specter of his face scrunched up as he decides what drawer in the kitchen to designate for cutlery will have been worth all of this.

A buzzing pulls him out of his thoughts. He reaches for his phone, buried somewhere within the sheets from where he'd fallen asleep on the phone with Shane the night before.

Yuna Hollander

We'll come by with salad stuff

and the pasta you liked at 5ish?

Ilya Rozanov

You don't have to.

He had done too good of a job integrating himself into Shane's family before he'd been able to pick up on the fact that Shane didn't want him to. It's strange, Ilya is usually good at reading people, and even better at reading Shane. He thinks maybe he just wanted this too much, wanted people who know what pasta he likes, who wanted to bring it to him without being prompted or needled, without a single ulterior motive.

Yuna Hollander

Why not? Will you be busy?

He can't lie to her. But, Shane will be upset, he knows. Shane didn't even want to tell his parents until his hand was forced because being gay might be fine but being with Ilya Rozanov isn't.

Ilya Rozanov

No I will be here.

Thank you.

Yuna Hollander

Okay see you then honey!!

He's found himself becoming enamored with these terms of endearment in English the Hollanders give him. It makes him feel like he's something precious, something to be treasured. He's going to miss it dearly, being *honey* and *kiddo* and *baby*.

His phone buzzes again. A video call from 'Jane'. Ilya lets out a shuddering breath and accepts the call. Shane is in the car, the phone propped up on the dashboard. "Good morning, Ilya," Shane says softly.

Ilya looks at his own face from the little window on the screen. He doesn't look too tired today, there's just the soft sleep-warm crinkles near his eyes. It's good. It means Shane won't worry about him. He sees a besotted smile overtake his face on the screen. He lets it happen. "Good morning. Driving to practice?"

"Yeah, first day back," Shane says, taking a sip of a breakfast smoothie Ilya knows is disgusting. He can almost taste it on his tongue, remembering the times he's kissed Shane over the kitchen counter in the morning. Ilya misses him like a lung. "It'll be kind of a waste of time today," Shane is saying, "but the guys are all hyped up so it might be fun. Your first practice is tomorrow, right?"

Ilya lets himself snuggle deeper into the blankets tucked around him before he responds, voice hoarse with sleep. "Yes."

"Are you excited?" Shane asks, looking a little nervous. Ilya knows Shane has a ridiculous notion that if he doesn't immediately love his team he'll regret moving to Ottawa for Shane and start resenting him for it. Ilya never would. Ilya would have quit hockey entirely if Shane had asked with the sweet promise of a future on his tongue.

"I don't know," Ilya replies, noncommittal. "Coach said they were excited to have me on the team."

Shane scoffs and then offers Ilya a brilliant smile. "Of course they are. You're Ilya fucking Rozanov." As he says his name, Shane does his best approximation of how his name is actually said, Il-ya, two syllables, Ro-ZA-nov instead of RO-zanov. A product of Ilya's late night Russian lessons. Shane's smile turns teasing. "The second best player in the league."

"Best player," is Ilya's automatic reply.

"Yeah?" Shane is smiling with his eyes now, the teasing well-worn and familiar. "By what metric? I scored more goals than you last season."

"I won more games. We are captains, yes?" It hits him that he's not captain anymore. He tries to not let it show on his face. "We sink or swim with our teams."

"Sink or swim!" Shane says with a delighted widening of his eyes. It's exactly how he looked right after Ilya said he loved him for the first time. "Look at you, Mr. Poetry."

"Mmm," Ilya hums, rubbing his face against the blanket at his cheek like a cat, "that's you." He thinks he might go back to sleep after Shane hangs up. He feels something warm in his chest. With Shane's voice in the room, he can almost pretend he's there, that there's a

comforting weight behind him in bed, reading a book, looking delicious with his glasses perched on his nose.

“Do you have any plans for today?” Shane asks after a moment, gazing at the screen fondly.

Suddenly, Ilya is awake and alert, more than he’d been all morning. “Eh.” Ilya shrugs. “Not much. Your parents are coming here later,” he says, as evenly as he can, eyes glued to the screen to observe Shane’s expressions. There: a frown just building, the downturn of his mouth. “I’m sorry,” Ilya says slowly and then looks away from the screen. He can’t see the disappointment set in, he doesn’t want to.

“Wait what?” Shane’s voice just barely cuts through the haze. “What are you sorry for? I can tell them to leave you alone.”

“If you want,” Ilya says quietly.

And then Ilya will be alone. He’ll go to practice, hang out with people that want to be around him because he’s Ilya fucking Rozanov, come home to an empty house in a city he doesn’t know in a country he’s only ever spent time in when he had games or a craving for Shane Hollander. Shane Hollander, who wants Ilya, who loves Ilya, but doesn’t want him to know him, doesn’t want him to be family.

“Ilya?” Shane says. Ilya feels a buzzing pressure building at the back of his neck. “Baby, where’d you go?”

“I’m still here,” Ilya says. He tries to be, tries to lock his eyes on the screen even though he wants to hide his face, tries to see Shane, all of him, even the expression on his face that comes out to be a mixture of worry and hurt and confusion. “Look at the road.”

“There you are,” Shane says and then looks at the road, because he’s Shane Hollander, of course he does. “Why were you apologizing?” Ilya sighs. Shane has his teeth in this now, he won’t let it go until he’s pried it out of Ilya. If Ilya is smart, he’ll be able to prolong revealing the truth until later, until it coincides naturally with when Shane leaves him. But now that the thought has occurred to him, sooner or later, Shane will coax it out of Ilya. He always does.

“I told you I would not talk to them anymore,” Ilya says, trying to choose every word carefully. “They just wanted to bring me food tonight. I know it bothers you when I spend time with them. If you want to tell them to not come,” he sighs, “it’s okay.”

A strange expression is etched on every contour of Shane’s face, not confusion, really, just a sheer single-minded focus Ilya’s only seen Shane direct at game footage. “It doesn’t bother me,” he says slowly.

Ilya laughs, just a little. Shane is a terrible liar. “It’s okay, Shane,” he tries to soothe. “You were sweet about it when telling me. But I understand.”

“Ilya,” he says, his voice just as slow and measured as before, the expression on his face unchanged. Shane Hollander at his best, with a problem to work out. “Understand what?”

Ilya feels something like frustration, or maybe dread, in the back of his throat. “I understand what you want me to be. In your life. In your family. You like things separate, yes? Sorry, it took me so long to notice. I was trying to be something else, in the beginning. I understand now.”

“Ilya.” This time, Shane says his name differently, which means he’s caught the meaning of something he hadn’t before. “I don’t want you to—”

“Shane,” Ilya can’t hear the rest of the sentence. He thinks the rest of the sentence would haunt his nightmares for the rest of his life. “Stop it. It’s okay. I’m not upset. We can talk later, yes? You need to think about practice now. Meet the new rookies, give big Captain speech. I’ll still be here.” He can’t offer any other truths, so he offers this one: “I love you.”

The reply, blessedly, is automatic. Like it’s still a fundamental truth for Shane too. “I love you, too, Ilya.”

“I think maybe I will go back to sleep,” Ilya says absently. “It’s still early. Goodbye, my love. We will talk later.”

He hangs up before Shane can say something else. And then, Ilya drifts. He does fall asleep, for bits and pieces of time. Mostly, he dangles in that hazy edge between waking and sleeping, where time slips through his fingers like water and he feels untethered from the world but his mind still races in the rigid track of wakefulness.

He dreams in fits and starts. Dreams of his mother calling him *Ilyushenka*, though every time she says it it’s in a different voice. It’s the first thing about his mother he’d forgotten, her voice.

If his memory fails him, like his father’s, he wonders if the memories that go will be sequential. If there will be a time when, like a child, all he knows is his mother, the imperfect shade of her he’s managed to cling to after her death. Funny and beautiful but nothing else. What do you really know of your mother at twelve? Your mother, the person, and not the role she serves in your life. Do you really know her?

He dreams, of course, of Shane. His touch, his smell. Dreams of a weight on his chest, a steady shoulder, a hand clasped in his, hands through his hair. He dreams of his voice, too, sometimes yelling at him for ruining this, sometimes crying, choking over love confessions, sometimes gentle.

“Ilya,” Shane says. “Ilya, wake up, please.” Familiar fingers card through his hair. A kiss is pressed to his forehead. Ilya opens his eyes.

It’s not a dream. Ilya is not this good of a dreamer. Shane, is here, in the flesh, sunlight shining on his freckles, eyes watery. “What?” Ilya mumbles, blinking rapidly to try to shake the sleep from his eyes. “What are you doing here?”

Shane smiles, blinking, and a tear falls on his cheek. Ilya reaches up to wipe it away. “I drove here,” he says. “It’s only a two hour drive.”

“What?” is all Ilya can say in response. Shane laughs, buries his head in Ilya’s neck, adjusting til he’s laying half on top of him, arms snaking around his torso. “You have practice,” Ilya says in disbelief, even as his arms automatically come up to hold his boyfriend.

“It was a useless practice anyway. They can go a day without me. I needed to see you.” He brushes his hand over Ilya’s face. “I might have messed something up.”

“No, Shane.” Ilya’s heart sinks with the weight of his guilt. He’s the one who messed up, dredged up all this nonsense, made Shane think he had to miss practice and drive two hours to come comfort him over nothing. “You did nothing wrong.”

Shane just shrugs. “I think I did. Listen, I told the team I had a last minute family emergency. And,” he presses a kiss to Ilya’s chin. “That wasn’t like a cover or anything. You are my family. You know that, right?”

Ilya’s tongue, the traitor, stumbles, just a little bit. “I— I know. Yes, I know.”

“You’re my family as much as my parents are. I don’t want things to be separate. I never did.”

“Shane,” he says. He doesn’t know what his face is doing. He feels pathetic.

“You don’t believe me, I know, that’s where I messed this up. Ilya.” Shane sits up, then straddles Ilya, holding his face. They make steady eye contact, and Ilya knows it’s a strain on Shane to hold eye contact, but still he does anyway.

“Every table I’ve ever sat around with my parents as an adult has felt empty. At home, in restaurants, at events. The two of them in front of me and a gaping hole in the space next to me. You filled that. The empty space where my partner was meant to be. For the first time, around that kitchen table at my parents', my family felt complete.”

“Okay, so I fit,” he says, as if this makes a difference, as if it couldn’t be any other fucking body in that seat instead of him: the enemy, the rival, the notorious asshole. He tries not to let it show but the bitterness drips from his next words. “It’s just me when I am by myself you do not want to spend time with your parents.”

“No!” Shane exclaims, leaning down, knocking his forehead against Ilya and resting them together. “Fuck, I’m still fucking this up.”

“No, hey.” He darts forward to kiss him gently. “Keep talking to me. Please.”

“I know you love my parents, Ilya,” he says, “but you don’t like them.”

Ilya frowns. “I don’t understand. You have to like before you love, no?”

“You love them because they’re my parents and you love me. Because we’re family. That’s what you do, you love your family. But interacting with them is different. You’re always uncomfortable and tense around them. You’re always making yourself smaller, into someone

you're not. You read a boring article on real estate and filmed a commercial while you were already exhausted, Ilya, just because one of my parents nagged you into doing it."

He loses the battle with eye contact and hides his face in the pillow. "If you met them without the context of loving me, you would hate them! You would think they were so annoying, some overbearing manager, some bland guy that cares way too much about real estate."

"Shane." Ilya says, gently lifting Shane's head to look at him. "Shane, listen to me. Family is complicated for me, you know this, right? What you just said, "that's what you do, you love your family," that has never been true for me."

"Oh fuck I'm such an idiot," Shane mutters.

"Stop. You're not. It makes me happy that you think of family and love as the same thing. It's how it should be. For me, family has been... a drain. A duty. If I have any love for my family it is just because of history. Memory of my brother and me sharing jokes when we were small, memory of my father being happy at my first hockey game. Your parents are lovely. They love me without... expectation. Hmm, no, they expect me to love you, which is like expecting me to breathe, so that one is okay. They want to take care of me. No one has wanted to take care of me for a very long time before I met you."

Shane sounds haunted, eyes wide and teary again. "And I took that away from you."

"No, you took away nothing." Another kiss. "They are still bringing me food later, yes? They are still taking care of me."

The reassurance doesn't fix anything but Shane's looking at him again as he says, "But I made you feel guilty about it."

"Stop it. Let me finish, okay? I was uncomfortable the first day but only because I wanted to make them like me. And a little bit because I was jealous. Of you, of how easily they love you. But mostly I wanted them to think I was good for you. So I was polite. And smaller. But nothing after that was different because of them. Not the real estate, not the commercial, nothing."

Shane doesn't look like he believes him. "Ilya," he says, face scrunched up like those pictures of wet disgruntled kittens Ilya's seen online. "You didn't do a commercial my mom sent you because you're just such a big perfume fan."

Ilya heaves a sigh. "Shane, I will say something and I want you to try to not be upset about this, okay? It was something from before. I think differently now. I will say this because we are being honest. But it will make you sad."

"Okay," Shane says.

"I never thought about what I would do when I retire. I never thought I would live long enough." It hits Shane like Ilya expected it to hit him, like a bullet, like a freight train, like Cliff Marlow at an unfortunate angle. "I get... sad, sometimes. Like my mother. I thought without hockey, I will have nothing. No future." He cradles Shane's face in his hands, like

something precious. “I have future, now, yes? I want to keep it. I want to have something when I retire. I want to buy us a house and live in it and I want to know about all the zoning rules so I can pick the place that is best. That is all me, Shane.”

Shane crumples, like a puppet with its strings cut. He’s crying in earnest now, miserable and so, so beautiful. “Ilya, I love that you and my parents love each other, I love that so much. It makes me so happy, I just haven’t let myself feel it because I thought it was hurting you. I’m so sorry.”

Ilya shushes him gently. “No. I should be sorry. I should have told you. None of that matters now. Tell me what you were thinking,” he prompts. “It upset you. When you thought I did not ‘like’ your parents.”

Shane lets himself breathe for a few seconds. It’s measured, like he’s following a pattern. Ilya copies him until they’re both less fidgety, more focused and grounded in the moment. “Every annoying character trait my parents have, I’ve inherited. I’m obsessive and I’m neurotic and I’m boring.”

“I know. I love you because you’re boring and obsessive.”

“I know. I know you do, I don’t doubt it, Ilya. The fact that you love me...” He sighs.

“There’s never been a single doubt in my mind about that. It just takes years for me to become comfortable enough with someone to loosen up, to show my real personality. I just don’t let people see that. Me with all my neuroses. ”

“I know that too.”

“Sometimes I feel like I’ve trapped people into loving me. That I’m a normal affable guy until you really get to know me, until you start to love me. And then I’m this weird wound-up thing you have to spend the rest of your life soothing.”

“Shane.” Ilya knows he needs to let him keep talking but he wants nothing more than to just hold him, squeeze him, remind him a thousand times how much he loves him, really loves him. He doesn’t say anything else, just lets the name, filled with as much fondness as he can possibly inject into a single syllable, linger in the air.

Shane smiles awkwardly. “It’s a little different with you, isn’t it? It’s similar but you didn’t think I was the nice but quiet guy when we met, probably ‘cause I hadn’t figured out how to be that yet, but you...” he takes a deep breath, “you thought I was hot. There’s this version of me in my head, a version of me that inherited a different set of physical traits but everything else stayed the same. A version of me that wasn’t pretty enough to be interesting to you. And all I would have to me would be these annoying traits from my parents and you would think of me as a pest and nothing more.”

“Shane,” Ilya says gently. He lets himself take a moment, gather his thoughts, translate and then correct them. “When we first met, I wanted you for two reasons, do you want to guess?”

“My freckles,” Shane says immediately.

“Yes, one. The most beautiful freckles in the world.” He lets himself indulge for just a moment and presses a series of quick kisses against Shane’s face, aiming for the most prominent freckles. “Guess the other one. This one you will never guess.”

Shane tilts his head in thought but gives up in about two seconds. Something settles in his face, like he thinks this is a distraction instead of a response. Ilya has to fix that expression immediately. “Just tell me.”

“You shook my hand. Twice. In about thirty seconds. I thought it was cute. I thought it was interesting. I wanted to get in your head, I wanted to know what you thought of me. If you forgot the first handshake, if you knew this, that as you gave me your hand again you were doing this for second time.”

Shane lets out a cute little laugh, eyes crinkling at the corners. “I don’t even remember. I was psyching myself up for that interaction so much, I think I blocked it out. I don’t even remember what I said past my own name.”

“You said this version of you in your head, the less pretty one. He would look different but be the same. So he would shake my hand twice too, yes?”

“Yeah,” Shane says. “I guess he would.”

“And you are funny if you think you tricked me into thinking you were someone else. You folded clothes after you took them off. You always kept on socks. You listened to everything I said like it was a rule. Even when you pushed back you never can break rules. Like you did not cut recipe at cottage. Same thing. You hate breaking rules.”

“I break rules! I skipped practice today didn’t I? Sleeping with you in the first place was breaking a rule.” He interrupts his own train of thought. “I guess those are implicit rules. Practice today wasn’t mandatory. And, I mean, no one told me I shouldn’t have sex with my rival.” Shane giggles. “Actually, a lot of people were telling me to ‘fuck Ilya Rozanov.’ I was just doing what I was told!”

Ilya kisses him. He feels lighter, a headache he hadn’t known was building soothed by Shane, collapsed against his chest and giggling to himself. “So obedient,” Ilya says.

“Mmm,” Shane hums. “Ilya,” he says. “You’re the love of my life, did you know that?”

Ilya thinks back to this morning, to his bone-deep certainty that Shane was going to leave him. Some of it still lingers in his chest. But, Shane thinks he’s family. Shane loves that Ilya loves his parents. Shane sees a future, a real future, beyond the abstractness of someday.

Ilya thinks back to that conversation about this house months ago. How he didn’t let Shane call him the love of his life back, interrupted him just as he was about to say it. Ilya hadn’t believed it then, had seen Shane’s reluctance to the house picked out for him as a reluctance to pursue the future they had planned. He had convinced himself, over the course of that conversation, that Shane would leave him. He would be a first love, a lost love, but not the love of his life.

Except now, Ilya really, really wants to believe it.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “I know.”

He kisses him. Later, Yuna and David will come to his house and bring him the pasta they know he loves. They will be caught off guard when they see Shane here but they won't be surprised, because they know how much the two of them love each other.

Tomorrow, Shane will go back to Montreal and Ilya will go meet his new team, live this life he's been trying to build since he told Shane he loves him under that bridge in Moscow, since he met a beautiful boy who shook his hand twice in Saskatchewan, since he picked up a hockey stick and never looked back.

On his fourth day living in the house in Ottawa, Ilya Rozanov gets out of bed with the love of his life and presses promises of brunch against his lips. It's a good day.

End Notes

Shane Hollander with your two loving parents you still feel like you have to hide huge parts of yourself from.... parents that annoy you with the traits you inherited from them ("my mom cares a little too much about hockey")... I see you, I love you.

Please comment your thoughts on this! This was actually kind of finicky to write and reading comments on my other works kept me going through this one. Thanks for reading <3

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