

Judges

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Judges

by [a_good_soldier](#)

Summary

Ilya tries to breathe. Shane is the one who panics. In fact, Ilya has been so calm over the past hour. So, so calm. Soooooo so so so amazingly calm that maybe Shane will reward him with a very nice blowjob later. Ilya has been calm because Shane needs a rock to lean on, but Shane is gone and now Ilya is panicking. This is his only chance to rectify the first, shirtless impression he made on Shane's father.

“Do you still read New Yorker?”

OR: Ilya, on the confluence of Shane with David, Yuna, and Svetlana.

Notes

once again i am cooked i remain cooked mentally emotionally spiritually physically by heated rivalry. on tumblr [@agoodsoldier](#)

also the chapters all posted out of order which is so annoying so i hope it reads okay now!!

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

Chapter 1: David

“All right,” David says.

Ilya swallows. The back door closed quietly behind Shane, and a large, overwhelming silence has remained.

Ilya risks meeting David’s eyes. He doesn’t look angry, at least. But not so happy either. David asks, “Are you serious about him?”

“Yes.” This, at least, is an easy question to answer. “To death.”

“Ah.” David nods, and then looks at his food, and takes a large gulp of his wine.

“Is that...” Ilya nervously twirls spaghetti on his fork. “Not the right way to say it?”

“No, no, it’s just, uh. Very serious.”

“Yes. I am very serious.” Ilya tries to breathe. Shane is the one who panics. In fact, Ilya has been so calm over the past hour. So, so calm. Soooooo so so so amazingly calm that maybe Shane will reward him with a very nice blowjob later. Ilya has been calm because Shane needs a rock to lean on, but Shane is gone and now Ilya is panicking. This is his only chance to rectify the first, shirtless impression he made on Shane’s father.

“Do you still read New Yorker?”

David laughs in shock. “He told you that?”

Ilya winces, but commits. “Yes, during awards gala in Las Vegas. Sportsmanship award.”

“Oh yeah, you guys hosted.” Then David gets a look on his face that probably means he has realized they fucked after that. “Oh, Jesus.”

Ilya says nothing. He quietly scoops more pasta into his mouth. Swimming in the lake made him hungry.

He sees so much of Shane in this place. He looks so much like both his parents. Ilya’s eyes wander the room. The napkins are the same as the ones in Shane’s cottage. The lights are dim, the way Shane likes them. In the dining room, there is a picture of Shane as a little kid wearing little denim overalls. He looks so, so happy.

Ilya surprises himself when he says, “I still have the selfies.” And then he continues into the awkward silence, hesitantly, “They are only photos we have together.”

David blinks very hard. Maybe he is about to cry. After a moment, he says, “We’ll have to take some pictures of you two when we bring you dinner tonight.”

“Ah—” and Ilya turns to look out the window. His turn to cry. Normally he would not be so ready, so capable of tears in front of strangers, but he has been cracked open by Shane’s cottage. His love. As if seeing Shane in the early morning for the first time in all his life has made Ilya into a sapling, split down the middle by a crack of lightning, the wet chlorophyll insides exposed to air. And, worst of all, David has Shane’s nose.

Quietly, Ilya says, “That is very kind of you.” And, voice cracking, still looking away from Shane’s father into the afternoon sunlight, he admits, “For years I have wished for one more photograph together. Just one.”

“Jeez,” David sighs. “Yeah, kid. I think we can manage that.”

Ilya nods jerkily. He has another sip of David Hollander’s nice Russian vodka, even though it is a bit sacrilegious to drink it with spaghetti. When he looks up, David is smiling at him, and Ilya, surprised at himself, feels very safe.

“You gotta be serious about this,” David says to Shane in the kitchen. They are doing the dishes. Ilya was assigned to find a movie to watch while Yuna folds the laundry, but they’ve taken 20 minutes longer than usual, so now here he is, eavesdropping. “I like Ilya. I think he makes you happy. But if you’re gonna keep it a secret, you could get really hurt if it ever gets out, kiddo. So you gotta be sure.”

Shane stares at the counter. Ilya cannot see their faces but he knows the line of Shane’s shoulders better than anything. He knows Shane is processing what his father has said, and that Shane is sick to his stomach with it.

Ilya wouldn’t risk it all for himself. Ilya wouldn’t live in terror for years and years with the threat of outing over his head for the sake of Ilya Rozanov. He isn’t worth it. But he would do it for Shane, and after all this time, he trusts that Shane would do it for Ilya.

“Of course I’m sure,” Shane grits out eventually. He dries the pot his dad has scrubbed. “Heavy stuff for movie night, Dad, Jesus.”

“Okay, sorry,” David says lightly. “I just worry about you. Lots on your plate.”

“Well.” Shane puts the pot away in the cabinet and starts on the next one. “Ilya helps me carry it.”

Ilya can’t help the lovesick sigh that comes out at that. He is so utterly ruined by Shane that it’s embarrassing. Both of them whip around.

“Sorry,” Ilya says sheepishly. “I wondered where you were. TV is ready.”

“No problem, I was just having a moment,” David says, clapping his hand on Shane’s shoulder. Shane grins at his dad. Ilya’s stomach hurts to look at them. “We can probably leave the rest of these to soak overnight, huh?”

“You’re the boss.” Shane puts down the cloth and brushes past Ilya toward the living room, resting his hand on Ilya’s stomach for just a moment, a hot and intimate touch.

Maybe it is Shane’s hand. Maybe it is a feeling of being opened-up, skin bare despite his shirt and his sweatpants. Maybe it is the vast expanse of trust in Ilya’s chest, a great plain opened up to him that he had never thought to want before. Maybe it is the way Ilya’s eyes trail after Shane and do not track David coming from the sink.

Whatever it is, it makes him unguarded and off-centre. And so when David walks past him too, he puts a hand on Ilya’s shoulder, and Ilya flinches.

“Oh,” David says, taking his hand back, and Ilya hates himself.

“Sorry,” Ilya mutters, “sorry, it was— you surprised me.”

He can’t see David’s face while he’s staring determinedly at the wall behind David’s head, but he hears David’s quick exhale. “My fault,” David says. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Is okay,” Ilya replies, suddenly desperate to leave. “No problem.”

“Okay,” David says. And then he says, a strange but pleasant non-sequitur, “I really do like you, Ilya. I think you’re good for him. You make him happy.”

Ilya nods, like one of those horrible bobblehead sports figurines the MLH insists on producing. “Thank you.”

“And no matter what, you’re... well, you’re welcome here.” David pauses, consideringly. Awkwardly, he adds, “I hope you always feel safe in this house.” And with that, David leaves Ilya there, blinking at the wall.

Ilya knows he looks ridiculous. He usually spends the off-season with the Hollanders while Shane goes off to film his commercials and worry about his horrible diet. Right now, he is crouched next to a coffee table with David working on a puzzle while Shane sleeps off the stress of his latest Rolex meeting in his bedroom.

The puzzle picture is of a Canadian loon swimming in a lake. Ilya still doesn’t like the look in its menacing red eyes.

“Shane can do a pretty good loon call,” David says.

Ilya shudders. “Yes. I heard.”

David chuckles. He heard all about the wolf birds, which is probably why he picked this puzzle. David is a cruel, cruel man.

Ilya manages to put together three pieces in a row, which is something of a victory for him. He is not very good at puzzles—at least, David always assures him, not yet.

“Do you think we might ever meet your family, Ilya?”

When Ilya looks up, David is looking down at the table, fitting pieces together. Ilya watches his hand skim along the surface, looking and feeling for something that might complete his corner of the puzzle.

“I don’t think so,” Ilya says. He doesn’t feel afraid or nervous, exactly. Just strange and unmoored, the way he feels whenever he thinks of his family and his homeland.

He will never go home. Most times, he’s happy about it, but in some moments it cuts him deep. Three weeks ago he played in Toronto and spent an hour inside St Vladimir’s, looking at a gilded portrait of the Virgin Mary and digging his crucifix into his thumb.

In the end, someone had asked him if he wanted to stay for mass, and he had shrugged it all off and played the game.

“Ah, shit,” David says. Ilya thinks perhaps he has messed up his puzzle, but David is looking at him with a wry expression on his face. “I’m sorry, Ilya. I remember your dad passed away.”

“Yes.” Ilya swallows. He can already sense the question David will not ask: *Do you have any other family?* Perhaps out of a sense of accommodation, or just a desire to share the truth for once in his life, Ilya says, “There is only my brother left. He would not come to see me.”

David nods, and Ilya figures this is the end of it. He goes back to sorting background pieces from the bird’s wings.

After another few minutes of quiet puzzling, David says, “Well, son. I’m really glad you’re in our family.”

Oh. Ilya nods. He feels small and young.

Before he can reply, the sound of socks against the carpet interrupts him. Ilya looks up to see Shane rubbing his eyes sleepily. Half of his hair has been flattened against his face from his nap. Ilya wants to throw up from how good he looks. “We are doing puzzle,” Ilya says, unable to look away. “Your father is very boring man.”

“That’s what you like about me,” David laughs.

Ilya laughs, too. “You guys are so annoying,” Shane whines, flopping on the couch behind Ilya, which gives him a reprieve from his beautiful face. “What’s the puzzle of?”

“Loon,” Ilya says grumpily, staring at the mess of puzzle pieces in front of him.

“Ah.” Shane scrubs his hand through Ilya’s hair once, and then lets it rest on the floor. “You’re a loon.”

“That’s what you like about me,” Ilya tries, catching David’s eye. David winks. Ilya finds the last piece of the bottom edge of the puzzle, and slots it into place.

Chapter 2: Yuna

“She’s so fucking boring,” Yuna says, hands tapping on the wheel. David chuckles, while Ilya listens attentively and Shane stares out the window.

It has been just over five years since Shane’s cottage, which is one of the many anniversaries Ilya gets to celebrate. Shane finds it insufferable, but Ilya enjoys remembering every anniversary—the day they met, their first kiss, their first time having sex, their first day at the cottage, the night they said *I love you*. Of course, he can’t remember them himself (although he pretends he does so he can tease Shane for forgetting), relying on his calendar app to remind him of the dates. It still makes him happy to have a good occasion every few months to rim Shane until he cries.

Anyway, this is all to say that by now, the Hollanders have known about them for long enough that Ilya has been invited, or perhaps coerced, into the Hollander Christmas Eve dinner in a place called Whitby. David had called it *Shitby* and laughed, while Ilya had blinked at him, confused.

In the car, Yuna continues, “I mean, you remember when I won that Scrabble game and she *cried*? Who cries over a Scrabble game?”

“You did destroy her,” David points out. “421 is not an average Scrabble score.”

“Your sister-in-law is just mad an immigrant is better at an English word game than she is,” Yuna jokes. Shane snorts from the back seat. “Honey, you have Uncle Rod and Auntie Leah’s card back there, right? Christ, I’m never gonna hear the end of it if we forgot it.”

“For the tenth time, Mom, I have a card for them.”

Ilya shifts uncomfortably. This is not something he has ever experienced. He has never gotten his father a card for Christmas, and he has never made an aunt cry from a board game. In his experience, though, Yuna is indeed killer at Scrabble.

At dinner, Leah pulls turkey and mashed potatoes and steamed vegetables out of the kitchen while Rod and David and Rod’s son-in-law Jesse drink a beer in front of the TV. Shane and Ilya awkwardly drink wine in the doorway between the living room and the dinner table, while Leah’s daughter Pat bounces a baby on her hip.

“Dinner!” Leah calls, and everyone sits down and eats.

Ilya focuses on his plate. He just has to get through dinner. Yuna and David like him, which means it is not so important for Leah and Rod and Pat to like him, although Ilya would hate to embarrass them.

The conversation revolves around Leah’s book club, and Rod’s fishing trip with the guys, and Pat and Jesse’s search for a daycare. The daycare, in fact, takes up most of the discussion. David suggests putting her child into a bilingual immersion program. Rod suggests setting

savings aside for private school because the public school teachers might go on strike again next year. Leah says she likes diversity but it can be a bit much, going to school and seeing that half of the class are newly-landed immigrants. Everyone winces, but says nothing.

Yuna is unusually quiet. Ilya follows her example. Every so often, of course, he contributes things like *yes* or *no* or laughs along with everyone else, so he doesn't seem like a statue. No one asks him about his presence at dinner. Meanwhile, Shane is a completely different person who seems very sociable. He says things like, *Totally, if there's time in the off-season* when Rod asks if he'll come out on a hunting trip next summer. He says, *Yeah, that sucks*, when Jesse complains about the cost of gas these days. He drinks two beers over dinner.

"So, Yuna, how are you doing?" Leah asks. "I feel like an empty nester these days, even though Pat and Jesse are only ten minutes down the road."

No one has asked David how it feels to have Shane out of the house most days. Ilya's first language is not English, but he knows all about how women and men are supposed to relate to their children, and he can understand what it means for Leah to ask Yuna about an empty house.

"I'm just lucky we have Ilya around," Yuna says. "Keeps the house feeling full."

Ilya is stunned. This is a lie. Firstly, Ilya has his own house. Secondly, Yuna is one of the league's busiest managers. She has the personal phone number of the CEO of Speedo. She had a lunch meeting with the Pattison Group regional director last week to put Shane's energy drink posters in GO stations. Scott Hunter called her to get a second read on a press statement. It's not exactly a mystery why he picked Yuna, a woman who clearly loves her son with a fierce and genuine passion, instead of the dozens of media consultants the league throws at guys who don't have anyone to rely on.

Yuna catches Ilya's eye and says, "Plus, he keeps David occupied with his puzzles so I can work on my stuff. And it's nice to cook for more than two people again."

Ilya smiles back. Maybe it is not totally a lie. Yuna has her life, but, she is reminding him, she really does like having him at her house.

"That's great," Leah says. When she says it, it does not sound great. She says, "Is it hard not to have your family here for the holidays? I'm sure it would be nice to go home. I'm sure it's still tough to adjust to the norm here."

Yuna nods tightly. Probably they do not know that Yuna's parents both died more than ten years ago, or that Yuna's siblings are scattered across California. Dinner carries on. At one point, Leah proudly mentions that she's been reading poetry by Mary Oliver, who is a lesbian. Shane nods, possibly to express gratitude. Over dessert, they exchange gifts. Leah apologizes for not having any Japanese sweets, although she does have sake if they want it. Yuna declines.

To Rod and Leah, Shane presents the infamous Christmas card along with a bottle of wine that is just a bit too expensive for the situation. Pat winces when she sees the label, and Yuna lets Ilya see a small, self-satisfied smirk. David and Yuna receive a similarly standard-

looking card and four hockey-themed coffee mugs, which Ilya thinks is actually quite a thoughtful gift.

In the car on the way home, Ilya exhales. He tangles his fingers with Shane's in the back seat, because the skin hunger started to hit him terribly by the end of dinner. No one had said anything about staying apart, but Ilya did not feel that he wanted to share Shane with Rod and Leah, or at least, not the Shane that smiles at Ilya when Ilya thumbs over his forearm, his cheek.

David drives home. "Glad that's over with," he says, and Yuna agrees heartily. Shane seems mostly tired from so much talking. No one seems surprised at the course of the evening.

Back at their house, David clicks through the TV channels while Shane gets ready for bed. Ilya approaches Yuna with a bottle of wine and two glasses, and she nods.

They sit down at the dining table. It seems to Ilya that she has shaken off most of it. He loves Shane very much, and by extension, he has come to love Yuna and David, because they love Shane too. It is an unusual sort of feeling, an ever-growing thing that intensifies every single day.

Ilya thinks of a young Yuna, maybe just married, sitting through her first dinner with David's brother and sister-in-law, and his heart hurts.

After a sip, Ilya asks, "Was it hard for David's family when you married?"

Yuna sets down her glass. Her eyes soften. "You are so thoughtful," she says. The gentleness in her voice pierces him. "No, not really. I think it was just a surprise to them."

Ilya was a surprise too. But after one hour, the Hollanders welcomed him like no one has ever done before. In the last year he has more and more frequently wished to introduce Svetlana to Shane's parents, although this idea also terrifies him.

"Shane was a cute kid," Yuna continues, twirling her glass in her hand. "He went a long way to making David's mother like me."

"Ah."

"Things are better these days. When Shane first got drafted it was harder for Leah, I think. Not everyone can have an internationally renowned MLH star for a kid."

Ilya admires Yuna's gift for understatement. "True."

He thinks of his own mother. His father paraded her around like a trophy. She was very glamorous and beautiful. Ilya remembers this, and the smell of her perfume, and the smell in her room when she lay there for a few days at a time with her sadness.

There is something in Yuna that is like Irina, perhaps the sharp beauty of cut glass. Irina did not have anyone to protect her from the sharpness of herself. Ilya had not been old enough, then, to ask after her or make her tea or sit quietly with her.

So Ilya sits with his wine and Yuna Hollander. All he can think to say is, “Thank you very much for welcoming me into your family.”

Yuna laughs, a soft laugh that sounds like Shane when he’s surprised something can feel so good, when he is almost sad over the way it surprises him. It is the way Shane laughed when he walked into Ilya’s house one day and saw that Ilya had switched the bedsheets to the silk ones Shane prefers. “It wasn’t hard at all, sweetheart,” Yuna says, reaching over to cover Ilya’s fist with her hand. “You’re very easy to love.”

Ilya sniffs, and turns his hand palm-up to hold hers.

Ilya slides into bed next to Shane, already itching to rest his thumb on the back of his neck at his hairline. “Moya lyubov,” he murmurs.

“Love you,” Shane says, snuggling into his chest. Ilya kisses his forehead, his cheek.

Shane looks so beautiful in his bed. Ilya loves to look at him, loves to see his own hand resting on Shane’s shoulders, loves to feel him in his arms.

“I think your mom is sad,” Ilya says. “You should say you appreciate her.”

“I tell her I appreciate her all the time,” Shane says. But into Ilya’s skin, he adds, “I will, though. Is she really sad?”

“No, not sad, I think. Just... is hard for her around your father’s family. Makes her feel foreign.”

“Oh.” Ilya watches Shane trace a heart into his chest. “I never even thought of that.”

This surprises Ilya. Shane is very perceptive, he thinks. Shane notices when Ilya stumbles over his English in press conferences. He notices when Ilya is dehydrated, when Ilya has been thinking for too long about his brother. All those years ago in Boston he noticed when Ilya returned from his call with his father that he was dismantled and off-balanced.

“I guess I just grew up with it,” Shane continues. “I figured it couldn’t be the race thing. They’re nice to me. But you’re right. She’s always nervous about her English around them, which is crazy.”

Yuna Hollander’s English is miles and leagues beyond Ilya’s, so he has to agree that it does sound a little crazy. Honestly, he says, “I thought your mother’s first language was English.”

“When I was little, I thought so too,” Shane says.

Shane sinks into Ilya’s hold. For a long moment, Ilya thinks he has fallen asleep, until Shane says, “Did I ever tell you about my biggest fantasy before the cottage?”

From the tone of his voice, Ilya knows it is not sexual, but he still says, “Biggest fantasy... very scandalous, I hope?”

Shane laughs. "If it was sexy, I would've told you already."

Ilya tightens his grip on Shane's hair for just a second, before releasing him. "Okay. Even if it is not sexy. Tell me."

"I just really, really wanted you to meet my parents." In the closeness of their room, Shane hides his eyes. Ilya looks at the top of his head, thinking, I would love even the hairs on his head, if I could only have that. Even the tip of his ear would be enough to look at. "Not even as my boyfriend. I just wished... I wished it could be possible one day for you to, y'know, just be in the same room at the same time. I hoped my dad might shake your hand."

Oh, God. Ilya presses his nose into Shane's hair and blinks rapidly, hoping the tears will not fall.

"And now you love each other so much," Shane chokes out, "you care about them so much, and I never thought I'd get this lucky—"

"My baby," Ilya says, turning Shane's chin up to kiss him, to kiss the tears from his cheeks. He thumbs over Shane's cheeks, fingers digging in behind Shane's ear. "My love, my sweetheart. I am lucky one."

"Both of us, then."

"Yes, moya lyubov. Both of us." Ilya kisses his eyes again, and his forehead, and the side of his nose, and his mouth, his beautiful, gorgeous mouth. He says, "I never had this kind of wish because there was no one I would share myself with. But I am very happy to meet your parents."

Shane huffs out a laugh, the same surprised laugh as Yuna. "Really?"

"Yes." Ilya rolls them over so that Shane is under him, so that he can cage him under his arms, collapse down and feel him against every part of his body. "Even one lifetime does not seem like enough. I want to know everything about you, and to meet everyone you love."

"It's the same for me," Shane breathes, looking up at Ilya with stars in his eyes the way he did the first time Ilya fucked him, the first time he sucked Ilya's cock, the first time he looked up to find Ilya watching him on the ice in goddamn Regina.

"Good," Ilya says, and he kisses under Shane's jaw, presses his lips to the pulse just to feel it beat under him.

Chapter 3: Svetlana

“Are you nervous?”

“No.” Shane’s fingers tap against the steering wheel. He has his sunglasses on. He has chewed his lip to blood. “Of course not.”

Ilya laughs. “Is sweet. You are so cute.”

“Shut up. You’re so annoying.” But Shane lets him kiss his hand on the gear shift, and the inside of his wrist, and his cheek, without any complaint. “Anyway, why would I be nervous?”

“Maybe you are worried Svetlana will not like you,” Ilya jokes. “You are worried you will make bad impression on her. Fortunately it cannot be worse than the impression I made on David and he still likes me better than you.”

“Oh my god, he doesn’t like you better than me, you guys just bond over ugly puzzles.” Shane does settle a little, though, at the reminder that it would be hard to have a worse first meeting than Ilya managed to accomplish with the Hollanders.

When they arrive at Svetlana’s apartment, Shane stands just behind Ilya and clutches a bottle of vodka like one of Pike’s eight thousand babies.

Svetlana opens the door. She looks beautiful, of course. Ilya looks at the line of her hips, her thighs under the sheer dress, just for a moment, before snapping back up to her face. She looks up too, clearly doing the same thing. He’d chosen these trousers for a reason.

“Ilya,” she says, kissing his cheek. And then, “Shane!”

The way she says it, it almost sounds the way she said Jane, all those years ago. How embarrassing.

She takes the vodka from him and they follow her into her apartment, toeing their shoes off at the door. “You both look very handsome,” she calls from the kitchen. “I will pour, yes?”

“Uh— yeah,” Shane says, “thanks.” When the two of them make it to the kitchen, Svetlana pours three glasses, and this is the start of the night.

“I always told Ilya you had such nice hands,” Svetlana says from the couch. Dinnertime seems to have exhausted all of their hockey talk, which was mostly Svetlana and Shane bouncing statistics back and forth while Ilya watched contentedly.

Svetlana is leaning in a way that is casual, supposedly, except for the fact that her sprawl shows off her trim ankles, the slit of her dress riding up high on her hip to reveal that she is not wearing any underwear at all.

“That’s, uh, that’s nice,” Shane says, looking down at his glass. Ilya looks at him. He is so cute, face red with embarrassment and alcohol.

Ilya takes pity on him. “Even before she knew you were Jane, she knew I wanted you. Oh, how she bullied me!”

“I never bullied,” Svetlana laughs. “I was being a good friend, you know.”

“Yes,” Ilya says, not quite able to joke about it. “You are a very good friend.”

It is a strange but enjoyable dynamic to share Svetlana with another person. He had somehow become used to being alone. In Russia there was Svetlana and Sasha, of course, and even the reliable hurt of his father and brother, and the indifferent company of his teammates.

In Canada there was nothing. Perhaps the draft was what directed the course of his life. Perhaps he was always destined to love Shane. In the cutting loneliness of winter, sweating in a gym on a continent he had never seen before, he’d asked Shane if Boston was any good, and Shane had reassured him and said *yes*, despite their rivalry and Ilya’s English not being so good and the way Ilya had pushed himself and pushed himself on the cycling machine next to him. This was a kindness he’d never had before, except from Svetlana.

Svetlana meets his gaze and smiles, and then turns her laser focus back to Shane, who seems completely oblivious to her cleavage and the delicacy of her fingers and the heat in her eyes. Ilya knew he was gay, but this is, well. This is very gay.

“Tell me where Rose Landry took you,” Svetlana says, and Shane exhales, possibly in relief. No interrogation yet. “I love her style. I want to know where she buys her shoes.”

“Uh, I dunno, she has like, a personal stylist or something,” Shane sips his drink. “She took me shopping once but it’s not really... I mean, I hired a stylist, but I’m not really a fashion guy at heart, I think.”

“Do you have pictures of your little outfits?” Svetlana asks, and Shane pulls out his phone. “Let me see, let me see!”

Ilya leans over his shoulder too. Shane is paranoiacally meticulous about putting any photos of Ilya, even the perfectly child-friendly ones, into a hidden folder, which means that his photo app pretty much exclusively contains photos of landscapes, hockey arenas, and a set of about 12 photos from a few months ago featuring different outfits.

“Rose took all these,” Shane says, opening the first one. Shane is wearing a sheer blue shirt tucked into jeans of the same shade, with cowboy boots on. It does not look very Shane, but he does look very handsome.

The next photo is a black sweater cut to show off his enormous shoulders. Ilya zooms in on his forearms. “Jesus, Ilya—”

“Very handsome,” Ilya says, zooming out to look at the pants, which stretch tight across his thighs. “You will get another movie star girlfriend if you dress like this. Lucky for me you are

slob.”

“I’m not a slob,” Shane says, swiping to the next photo. A pink suit with no shirt on underneath. There is a rose gold chain necklace resting just atop his collarbone. Ilya wants to bite at the space between his pecs.

“You look so good,” Svetlana murmurs, nestling into Shane’s other side. Shane doesn’t seem to mind, laughing down at her as he moves to the next picture. Green button-down unbuttoned all the way to his navel and linen shorts. Tiny, tiny running shorts and a cropped T-shirt. More denim. Leather jacket. Ilya feels dizzy.

He contemplates the sleek line of Svetlana’s waist under her dress. If Shane wasn’t so gay he would consider a threesome, but then he realizes, horrifically, that he wouldn’t even want one. He doesn’t want to share Shane.

That is, possibly, the most humiliating thing that has ever happened to Ilya in his life.

Ilya kisses Shane’s forehead and goes to get them all some water. They are all in their thirties now, which means they must prevent a hangover at all costs.

Later that night, in Svetlana’s guest bedroom, Shane folds his clothes precisely. He always does this, but Ilya can sense that, perhaps, there is more to it.

He doesn’t have to wait long. “You can sleep with her if you want,” Shane bites out, rapid-fire like a bullet.

Ah. Haha. He is jealous. Ilya smiles delightedly. “Really?” he asks, stretching the word out, just to be a dick.

“Yes. Really.”

Ilya grins. Shane still hasn’t turned back to look at him. “Are you sure?”

Shane spins around, anger turning his face red. He looks so good. “Jesus fuck, Ilya—”

“You don’t seem so sure,” Ilya says, laughing.

“You think I’m gonna risk losing you just ‘cause I won’t let you sleep with your— your nice — your *friend*?”

Ilya blinks. This is not what he anticipated. “Is that what you think I want?”

Shane doesn’t say anything. Ilya stands up and pads toward him, crowding him against the wall. “I don’t want anyone but you,” he says, kissing Shane, sucking on his tongue, pressing his thumb into the space under Shane’s jaw just to feel him settle there. When he pulls back, Shane breathes out a little moan, and Ilya kisses him again. “I enjoy your jealousy,” Ilya murmurs. “I want you to own me.”

“Oh,” Shane says, voice rough, “yeah?”

“I want you to mark me,” Ilya says, “so everyone knows I am yours—”

Shane bites hard on Ilya’s pec, just above his nipple, and Ilya exhales with relief. It feels good. Perhaps it is not the same feeling Shane gets when Ilya presses into the back of his throat, the same surrender, but it satisfies him deeply. “Like that,” Ilya murmurs, and Shane sucks, tongues over the skin. “Give me a bruise.”

“Kay,” Shane says, and he bites lower, falls to his knees so Ilya can look at him. “Lemme suck you.”

“Yes, beautiful—” Ilya pushes down his sweatpants, feeds his mostly-hard cock into Shane’s mouth, watches his eyes close in pleasure. “Oh, fuck—”

Shane moans around him, pushes his mouth further down Ilya’s cock.

“No one else,” Ilya hisses, pressing a thumb into the bruise on his chest. Shane watches his hand with a desperate look in his eyes. “No one feels like this, no one can do this for me—”

“Hn—” Shane groans, chokes on Ilya’s cock, lets Ilya fuck into the back of his throat.

Ilya comes down his throat like that, watches him gasp for air afterwards and jerk himself off. “Gorgeous,” Ilya says, as Shane presses his forehead into Ilya’s thighs and touches himself furiously, breath hissing through his nose. “Like that, just like that—”

“Ah, God,” Shane gasps, biting into Ilya’s thigh to muffle the sounds. Ilya can still hear him, the low groan in the back of his throat pressed up against Ilya’s skin. He stays there for a moment, resting against Ilya’s body.

“Shane,” Ilya says eventually, “come to bed.” They stop in the bathroom to wipe themselves off—mostly Shane—and then collapse in bed, warm and close. “Even if Svetlana wanted me, I would say no,” Ilya says, kissing the top of Shane’s head. “No one else appeals to me now.”

“It’s so stupid that I think that’s sexy,” Shane says, kissing Ilya’s throat, his chest, the space under his armpit. “Love you.”

Yes, it is stupid that Shane finds this sexy, although it pleases Ilya that he does. Ilya feels like a fish who has been flopping around in little puddles and gorging itself on raindrops, but now has finally come to the ocean. Of course there is no one else. No other water will do.

Completely unable to express this, Ilya simply replies, “I love you.”

Shane is taking a nap after his early morning run, because he is disgusting. Ilya flips eggs while Svetlana squints angrily at the counter. Despite all their combined best efforts, she is hungover.

“Horrible,” she mutters in Russian, “I will kill vodka.”

“Harsh.” Ilya plates her eggs. She has no other proteins at all, but at least there is bread he can toast.

After fifteen minutes of desolate chewing, Svetlana seems a little more alive. Ilya is already missing Shane, embarrassingly. He looks up every so often at the doorway in case Shane will appear.

“Maybe I should bring him food in bed,” he says, which is not a thing he has ever said before.

Svetlana laughs at him. “You are so obsessed with him.”

“Yes,” Ilya admits, “I think so.”

“So, how is it?” she asks. “With Hollander?”

“Ah.” Ilya looks at his coffee. Oh, it is so embarrassing, but he is almost already about to cry. “It is... good. So good.”

When he looks up, Svetlana is smiling at him. It is a very gentle look. The last time she looked at him this way was when she left him in that bathroom in Sochi, with Sasha. “Are you very happy?” she asks softly.

“Yes,” Ilya says.

“You seem surprised. Are you surprised?”

Ilya blinks. There are tears in his eyes and he can barely speak. Something has been dislodged in his chest, maybe, or in his spine; something has released the crumbling stone calcifying in him. “I don’t know,” he says, voice hitching, “why I’m crying.”

“Of course you do,” Svetlana says, and Ilya looks away from her. He can’t breathe. “You’re in love.”

“Fuck,” Ilya says, burying his head in his arms, crying.

It is only that he has never talked about it before, Ilya thinks. He has never put it into words, that he had lived for so many years looking for the next beautiful thing to pass the time and found life instead. That there is someone who knows him, knows all of him, and sits with him there in the dirt of it and loves him. That there is someone who understands what his father understood about him but loves him for it, instead of hating him. That Shane is beautiful and quiet and prodding and gentle all at once. That the two of them see the world in the same way, that they want the same things, that they fear the same things.

“I am full of crazy things to say,” Ilya croaks into the table. Svetlana, leaning over the table, rubs his shoulder. “I’m a new man. I lived all my life before dawn, never saw the sun before him. Is this what it feels like?”

“Come here, my baby,” Svetlana says, and Ilya gets up to walk into her arms. “I’m happy for you. Do you know that? You deserve all this love.”

Ilya nods. His throat is clogged. He could not possibly say a single other word about Shane without breaking down.

Eventually, Svetlana pulls back to look him in the eyes. She wipes the tears from his face. Ilya tries to smile at her, and she laughs, beautifully.

“Will you go to Russia again?” she asks.

The question doesn’t hurt coming from her, not the way it does even when Shane asks. Svetlana knows this side of him more than Shane ever will—another thing that Ilya loves about him, that he would never change about him, but a distance all the same.

“At least once, I hope,” Ilya replies. “Before our relationship is public. I would like to see my mother’s grave one last time.”

Svetlana nods seriously. “After that,” she says, fixing Ilya’s hair, “I will bring her flowers every year.”

“On her birthday, yes.” Ilya steps back, busies himself with refilling his coffee mug so he doesn’t have to look at Svetlana. “You must tell her I am in love, and very happy, and that I wish she could meet him.”

“Every year,” Svetlana promises, coming up behind him to rest her forehead against his shoulderblade, the way she has done so many times, the way she did when Ilya’s mother died, when her father hit him for being in her room, when they heard Sasha had woken up in a stranger’s house with no clothes on, when Ilya left for the draft in Canada. She leans on him, and Ilya thinks to himself, *she is my rock*. “I will tell her every year, my Ilyusha.”

End Notes

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