Marry Me?

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by Cowboyzz

Summary

Before Ilya can bite out a teasing remark at his state, Hollander starts to speak in a jumble of words that seem like they've been on the verge of spilling out for a long time.

"Don't marry her, Ilya." Hollander says desperately, now using the hold they had on each other for balance just a moment ago, to keep Ilya from running away. "Please, don't marry her."

"Hollander?" Ilya says the name dumbly, at a loss for how to answer.

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Marrying Svetlana seems like the obvious solution to the growing pile of problems in Ilya's life. It's not like Hollander would care since he's dating one of the biggest movie stars in the world. Right?

Notes

I was literally at the emergency room today and I somehow managed to upload this lol. The grind never stops fr.

Like most of the worst decisions in Ilya's life, the idea comes to him when he's with Sasha.

Ilya was attending a fashion event in Paris, and because he's been feeling particularly lonely since Hollander decided to play happy family with Rose Landry, it was almost instinctual to fall into bed with Sasha.

They're in Sasha's bedroom. It's warm, and the air is full of the scent of Sasha's cologne, the one that fills his head with memories of being 16, confused, and possessed with a want for things he shouldn't. It eases the loneliness in his chest only slightly.

Sasha is pressed tight against him, his skin still bare. Ilya moves anxiously under the covers, mad that he hadn't remembered to bring a pack of cigarettes.

Ilya has been slowly trying his hardest to quit them since the last time Hollander refused to kiss him after he'd smoked. It was one of the hardest things Ilya had ever attempted to do, and now all his hard work is as good as useless, because Ilya has no reason to stay sober anymore.

Sasha is texting somebody on his phone, completely distracted, and Ilya is left with nothing to do but to stare at the television hanging on the bedroom wall. Some stupid American gossip show is turned on.

Suddendly the screen fills with images of the two people he left America to escape. Shane Hollander and Rose Landry look good together, even he can admit that. They're social media's perfect couple, wholesome, sweet, romantic, and everything Ilya could never be for Hollander.

For some reason, over all of their years of seeing each other, Ilya had never seriously considered the possibility that Hollander might end it one day.

Of course, he knew logically that they couldn't keep hiding forever, and an actual relationship would never be possible. Still, he never thought about the fact that it could, on one random day, just end. Like it never even began. Like it never even happened.

It hurt watching Hollander walk out of his home that day. Leaving Ilya with a pain in his chest, his lungs collapsing on themselves, and his fists clenching unconsciously.

He didn't want to care, because caring about other people only ever brought pain, and he's been shown that to be true once again. It's not Hollander's fault. It's Ilya's, because why the fuck did he ever think anybody could actually love him? Of course, it was his mistake, and now he's paying for it.

So, Shane moved on. Who cares? The world didn't stop spinning, and Ilya Rozanov would not fall over dead because of it. Their relationship was a mistake all those years ago when they were both still practically kids, and it still is to this day. Maybe it's for the better, for it to end.

And Ilya is so done with lying around in his own misery, of feeling sorry for himself. He's tried everything from drinking his feelings away to fucking them out of his system. Nothing has worked.

It made him feel better for a little while. If he was fucked up enough, he could even forget about it all for a fleeting moment. It all came back eventually, though. They were his indulgences, the casual sex, alcohol, light drugs, and expensive cars. A form of escape.

They won't kill him (probably), so he might as well. And even if any of them do, he can't think of a better way to go.

Angry, while in the middle of an argument, his father once asked him if he would be proud of what he's achieved if Ilya died tomorrow. The question seemed stupid then. If he were dead, he obviously wouldn't care about any of it. His success, his trophies, his legacy, would all be meaningless.

And didn't that sound nice? A world in which Ilya didn't have to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, one without the pressure and expectations placed upon him. Without the misery of it all, of every facet of his life. Who could you disappoint if you're not even there to do so?

Obviously, he hadn't answered that because he would have sounded suicidal, which Ilya obviously isn't. At least most of the time, when he can distract himself from those kinds of thoughts.

Ilya wants many things. Another Stanley Cup, better teammates, more cars, peace, to have a better relationship with his family, Hollander…but mostly he just wants a cigarette.

"Can you turn this shit off, jesus." Ilya complains, having gotten tired of staring at Hollander's obnoxiously happy face plastered all over the television screen.

"Fine, I'm sorry." Sasha sends him an odd look, but turns the TV off anyway. He places his phone on the nightstand.

Silence fills the room.

"You're a hot topic in Russia right now. Do you know that?" Sasha then asks, sounding genuinely curious.

"I'm always a hot topic everywhere. Have you seen me?" Ilya says to deflect because he didn't know. Sasha lets out a snort and playfully flicks Ilya's side.

"They're wondering when you will settle down, find a nice Russian girl, get married, and have kids." Sasha explains with a teasing smile as if he finds the whole thing ridiculous.

"You should see what they write about you. That you're a man whore. They say you've been westernized, brainwashed by degenerate American values. They see you as a traitor to the culture. You're not living up to what they expected of you, the Russian golden boy." He continues.

His tone is light, like it's all a big joke to him, as if Ilya's heart isn't sinking in his chest the longer he talks.

"There are even rumors being spread about you not marrying a woman because they're not to your taste." He laughs lightly. "If only they knew." Sasha leers.

Ilya stares at him with complete and utter fear in his gaze, the kind that would be impossible to hide, even if he wanted to. It's a bone-deep instinctual fear, brought on by the fact that Ilya's entire world could come crashing down on him.

His biggest fear is staring him in the eye. The thing he worked so hard to hide, to keep under wraps. His sexuality, which could destroy his entire life, his entire future, his life in Russia, is now a hot topic in gossip magazines.

Sasha sees the change in Ilya and stops laughing. Ilya has known Sasha since they were kids, and through the many years they've been friends, Ilya has never seen him as anything other than a carefree hedonist. Everything to him was always no more than a joke.

That's why it sends a chill down his spine when Sasha's expression turns deadly serious.

"If you keep going down this path, you can say goodbye to a life in Russia. I would be careful if I were you." Sasha says, in his eyes, there's a genuine warning.

"Careful how?" Ilya asks, and it's a mystery how his voice doesn't shake.

"You mentioned marrying Svetlana one day for citizenship, right? I know she wouldn't mind. Your father would be delighted, hers too. Russia would love it. It would keep you safe."

He and Svetlana have talked about it, countless times in fact, but only ever as a joke. Ilya has never seriously considered the possibility, at least until now.

"Ilya, in America, you can do what you want, but that doesn't mean there are no consequences in Russia. Don't forget this. You'll have to return one day. maybe make sure you'll actually be able to do that safely."

Ilya is suddenly struck by the thought that Sasha knows all of this because he's in the same position as Ilya. Sasha is also hiding his sexuality from the world, from his family, and from the Russian government. He understands Ilya's struggle intimately. Probably better than anyone else.

"That's fucked." Ilya says emotion bleeding through every word. He's filled with a deep sense of helplessness.

"That's life. And that's Russia. It's fucked up, but it's home." Sasha says, voice heavy with meaning. "Keep yourself safe, yeah?" He adds almost as if he's asking Ilya to promise it. Is begging him to do as he says.

"Yeah." Ilya mutters, voice far away to his own ears. Suddenly, despite the body pressed against his, he feels awfully cold.

Since that night in Paris, Ilya has been thinking of marrying Svetlana almost obsessively. Because maybe she's not his mom, and Ilya isn't his dad, and they could be truly happy together.

His relationship with Hollander has made him realize that if he were to lose everything, which he probably eventually will, he will have nowhere to go. If Boston kicked him to the curb, he would have to leave America, and what happens if Russia doesn't accept him?

Does he end up without a home, somewhere to belong to? Where is he supposed to go when he's too Russian for America and too American for Russia? It would be nice to have a place to go. It would be nice to belong to someone, maybe.

Does he owe it to his country? To his father, who built him into who he is? To his heritage, his blood, his family, to the people of his motherland?

Would they finally accept him if he played the game by their rules? Crafted himself into who they wanted him to be? Would his family finally see him as more than an open wallet? Would the hole in his chest finally be filled? Would he quit being painfully lonely?

Would marrying Svetlana make him happy?

He sees an apartment in Boston, modern and cozy. He sees himself and Svetlana at a bar with their friends, laughing. He sees them going to thanksgiving to his teammate's house. He sees himself playing for Boston for years to come, kissing Svetlana after a victory, all for the cameras to see, without shame or fear of being ostracized.

He sees himself picking up the kids from school in a Maybach. He sees dinner dates on Fridays and church on Sundays. Polos and Richard Milles, golfing and members' clubs.

In another life, he sees summers in the French Riviera and winters skiing in the Swiss Alps. He sees a Birkin beside his training bag and a pair of Louboutins beside his Adidas sneakers. He sees half of his vanity covered with expensive makeup and his bedroom smelling of high-end perfume. He sees a Rolls-Royce SUV parked next to his sports cars, a family car.

He sees a flat in Moscow, old and royal, him playing for a Russian team. He sees two kids with curly hair and blue eyes. He sees family dinners with his father and stepmother. He sees them babysitting his brother's kids. He sees dinner with government officials and interviews with the Russian media, praising him for being the conservative poster boy.

It would all be a funny story one day to tell at a dinner party. Can you believe I was like that once, he'll say. Wild, partying all day, fucking anyone willing. Sexually confused, destroyed by the plague of Western values.

But good that those days are over, that he's now a changed man, a family man. A husband, that could work, he thinks. Just like playing a new position on the ice, maybe he could learn to live in a new role. Refined, controlled, manageable. Somebody deserving of love, even.

Maybe he can be happy, accept the life he should have been living from the start. The one he may have been living already, if not for a certain Canadian pretty boy whose name hurts to even think about.

He and Svetlana are sitting in a coffee shop in Boston. The traffic beside their table continues to run wild, people walk past in a hurry, the world continues to spin, ignorant of the heavy silence filling the air around them after what Ilya said only moments prior.

"Would you marry me?" He'd asked.

He hadn't even realized the depth of his words before they were splayed out between them, being heavily analyzed by the woman sitting before him, leaving Ilya with the distinct feeling he was awaiting judgment on death row.

The sentence was in Russian, so the people around them, who to Ilya were otherwise sitting uncomfortably close, were completely foreign. Not to Svetlana, though, she understood their meaning perfectly. Maybe even better than Ilya himself.

"I really hope that wasn't a proposal because it's the least romantic thing I've ever heard." Svetlana finally speaks, a teasing smile to her otherwise stoic expression.

That's good, it means Ilya hasn't irreversibly damaged their friendship. It wasn't a no, and that's enough for Ilya Rozanov. He was taught that when you see an opening, you need to take the chance.

Ilya takes a drag of his cigarette to calm his nerves. It's nice to have something to do with his hands. He looks away to the busy street to avoid having to face Svetlana's piercing gaze.

"I'm wondering, if I asked you to marry me, hypothetically speaking, would you agree?" His voice is calm, measured, bored even, as if they're talking about the weather. He's trying to project confidence he's afraid he doesn't actually have.

Svetana looks at him, and her eyes are so intense that it almost feels to him like she's seeing all the way down to his soul. Maybe she sees his heart, which beats violently for someone it never should have belonged to. Maybe she sees all his fears and mistakes filling his lungs, making it impossible to breathe. Or maybe she just sees the pleading in his eyes.

No matter, her expression seems to soften for a fraction of a second. Still, she doesn't speak. probably to torture him a little, to make him work for it. He pulls the cigarette away from his lips and passes it over to her slowly. She eyes it for a second, then takes it from him. Instead of taking a drag like he'd imagined she would, she instead puts it out in the ashtray.

"What do I get out of it?" Svetlana asks, and to someone else it might seem rude. It's about the sweetest thing Ilya's ever heard.

It's bold and honest and unforgiving, but that's how their relationship's always been. It's familiar and a sign that she understands what this is at its very core, despite any love they might share, a business agreement.

Ilya looks at his cigarette, which is now little more than ash and paper in the ashtray. He would have liked to smoke the rest of it, but it seems like they're playing by Svetlana's rules now. Exactly like they will if they do marry.

"Millions of dollars and never having to work again. Call it a safety net, if you will. You'll get your father off your back about finding a husband. You'll get social status, reputation, and easy access to however much attention you'll ever need. Of course, I'd support you in anything you'd want to do, financially or otherwise." Ilya lists off.

He knows it won't offend her that he lists the reasons almost like he's pitching an idea to a board of investors. He's selling her a lifestyle after all. Asking her to devote herself entirely to him. She'll be free to do whatever she pleases in life, as long as she does it as Ilya's wife.

It's a lot to ask, he knows. Ilya understands better than anybody in the entire world why he isn't a good man to marry. He wants Svetlana to understand he can take care of her.

Even if he truly turns out to be unlovable, like he's afraid he might be, at least he can give her a good life. Maybe what he has in the material sense can make up for the shell of a person he makes up. Maybe if he can give her what she wants with everything he's achieved, then maybe she'll stay, love or not.

He can't buy love, but he might as well try. It worked with his family.

"And a promise to never be alone again." Ilya leans in close and whispers the words. And isn't that what everybody yearns for in the end? Everything Ilya's ever wanted? That, when everything goes to shit, he'll have something to call home, someone to call his own.

Svetlana thinks for a moment, like for the first time, she's truly considering it.

"I'd do it, but would you?" She finally says, probably wondering what he gets out of it, but knowing better than to actually ask. He guesses she doesn't have to ask, she can probably see the vulnerability right across his face.

Ilya picks his sunglasses off the table and puts them on, as if to physically hide the tide of emotions welling up inside him. Maybe he's a coward for that, but isn't Svetlana the one who knows that truly better than anybody else? And yet she's still willing to stay, maybe forever.

"I was the one who asked, wasn't I?" Ilya answers, and it's about the best response he can think of without actually committing to an answer.

She hums noncomitaly. Svetlana understands because she always does.

"Think about it." She says.

They leave soon after, topic put to the side, but not forgotten.

Ilya flies to Moscow during a break between games, without telling anybody. Not his team, or his friends, or Svetlana, or even his own family. He goes for the sole purpose of scratching a never-ending itch to return to his birthplace.

He can't really even put a finger on why he wants this so badly, only that he needs to lay eyes on the place that has raised him into who he is today. The country he does it all for.

He feels in his heart that he is searching for something. Maybe he needs to see where in the city he fits into after all these years away. What parts of it are still his?

He lands in the city early in the night and immediately leaves his hotel room to wander its streets. Moscow at night is cold and dark, but its embrace feels familiar to Ilya. There's still life on the streets, people rushing home from work, the nightlife just beginning to come alive.

He loves this Russia. Moscow's grand streets, its cathedrals and churches, signs of a religion he often misses in America, despite not believing in god. Maybe it's just one of those many cultural differences he finds impossible to adapt to. Every orthodox cross he sees, like the one hanging around his neck, loosens the knot in his chest a little.

He walks past the clubs he drank away his teenage years in, the ice rinks he learned to skate at, the parks he used to hang around with his friends in, and his heart fills with an odd sort of nostalgia for days that weren't nicer or easier than now, but simply ones where he still had that ever-present childish optimism.

He loves the people, his people. The ones who speak his language. He misses Russian. Its simplicity, how easy it slides off his tongue. Ilya misses the man he is when he speaks it, quick-witted, sharp, charming, compared to the one English makes him.

The embarrassment the English language forces him through. His accent is an everyday reminder that he is different, that he is an outsider. That he will never fit into the mold America wants him to.

This is what he's always imagined home to be. This Moscow, this Russia, that he sees before his eyes now. Not the house he grew up in, or his brother's apartment, or even the apartment Ilya owns in Moscow. The one he deliberately decided not to stay in. Those aren't home, only places he occupies, devoid of any real weight.

He sees this Russia in his dreams sometimes, yearns for it. Yet as he walks the streets of Moscow, he realizes this Russia doesn't truly exist. Under this government and law, in this society and culture, it is merely a pipe dream. A collection of rose-tinted memories he can barely remember.

The Russia he loves only exists in his head when he's in a different continent, kilometers away from the place he dreams of. The buildings stand here, the same as when he was a child, the same biting cold air scratches his lungs, and the same judgmental gazes are set on him. Everything is the same, yet completely unfamiliar.

The land he stands on now feels foreign, nothing like home. Nothing like his apartment in Boston. Nothing like the strong embrace, warm skin, and intoxicating smell that won't leave his head.

The thought makes him sick, and he leaves on a flight early the next day, running away from a realization he's not quite ready to accept yet.

When their dreaded match against the Voyageurs finally rolls around, Ilya finds himself in Montreal at a complete loss for what to do. The city has always felt vaguely important, a place immortalized in his mind with memories of adrenaline, intimacy, and want. Now it feels different, like he's there for the first time, all over again.

What is he supposed to do? Hockey has never been at the forefront of his mind when visiting the city, even though it's technically the reason he's here. It's always been Hollander invading his thoughts and later, after a few texts and whispers, his space, his bed.

There won't be any of that now, because Hollander left. Because Hollander has a girl, even though Ilya's never even heard of a rumour about hook-ups or affairs tied to him before. Ilya scared him straight. Literally, it seems.

So Ilya won't text, won't reach out, or even engage with Hollander on ice. Half to protect his own sanity, and half because Ilya's an asshole, but he's not a homewrecker. Now he just needs to find something else to keep himself occupied.

He walks the streets of Montreal without any real sense of where he's going. Some roads and corners look familiar, but he instead follows paths he's never walked down before. He wants to explore. to find something new.

That's when he stumbles right in front of a jewelry store. It looks grand, expensive, and oddly daunting. He steps closer to the display to examine it. There are watches, necklaces, bracelets, and rings. What look to be engagement rings, in fact.

Almost without his own volition, he steps inside the store. He's curious, that's it. If he wants to marry one day, whenever that may be, he needs a ring after all. Wouldn't hurt to take a look. Would it?

The inside is even larger than it seemed from the outside. Display cases are lining every wall, and Ilya finds himself at a loss for what to actually look for. As if sensing his distress, a sales associate approaches him.

"Can I help you?" She asks, and if she recognized who he was, she wasn't showing it.

"I need a ring." Ilya says, because he does. Or maybe one day he will.

"What kind?"

It's a completely innocent, regular question to ask a customer, but Ilya finds himself frozen. He finds he has no idea what Svetlana could possibly like. Something big and loud? Something small and quiet? He doesn't know.

"The most expensive one." He finally says. Money can fix anything, right? At least so he's been taught.

The sales associate seems taken aback, like she wasn't expecting the response. When she realizes he's serious, she just nods strangely and walks away.

Most men probably know their future wives slightly better than Ilya does, or at least he hopes so. It's no matter, they'll have their entire lives to learn about each other. The thought feels strangely claustrophobic.

Ilya looks around to spot where the sales associate had gone, but doesn't find her. Suddenly, he's hit with the thought that he shouldn't be here, that he should leave. He wants to find her, to say nevermind, that he doesn't even know why he's here in the first place.

Still, he stays rooted in place, almost unconsciously. He looks down at the display case before him and stares at the rings inside. Diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, and other rocks he couldn't even pronounce the name of stand before him.

"Rozanov? What are you doing here?" A voice Ilya has dreaded hearing calls out to him.

Only a few meters away stands Hollander. His hair is slightly longer, and dressed surprisingly well, but other than that, he looks the same. Plain, boring, and awfully irresistible.

Hollander's eyes are darting all over Ilya's body, like he's trying to convince himself it's really him he's looking at. What are the chances that in this giant city, on this exact day, they find themselves in the same store?

An uncomfortable thought fills Ilya's mind that Hollander doesn't even wear jewelry. That's when Ilya spots her. Rose Landry stands on the other side of the shop, trying on a necklace.

Ilya has thought a lot about what he'll do when he finally sees the two together in person. He's imagined it would fill him with anger or sadness or some other stifling emotion. Instead, he finds himself struck by how mundane it all is.

They look like an average couple shopping together, nothing out of the ordinary. Rose is beautiful, sure, but her presence isn't half as large as Ilya expected. She doesn't even spare a glance at the two of them talking.

The world doesn't end, even if Ilya feels like the room is closing in on him.

"Shopping." Ilya finally answers, his tone surprisingly measured.

"For what? A new watch?" Hollander asks.

He's standing there painfully awkwardly, playing with his fingers, like he doesn't quite know what to do with them. Ilya finds the sight very endearing, then quickly chases away the thought. Hollander isn't his to think about in that way anymore.

In that moment, the sales associate comes back. She's now wearing gloves, and in her hands she carries an expensive looking box. She gives Hollander a slight smile, probably thinking he's here with Ilya. She then opens the box, revealing a ring.

"I'm sure your girlfriend will love this. It's a one of a kind, vintage, six-carat, ethically sourced diamond engagement ring with a pavé band." She says, excitedly, and Ilya only understands half the words she says.

"Engagement ring?" Asks Hollander, who is staring at Ilya in confusion. He seems to be waiting for an answer, but Ilya is transfixed

Ilya stares at the ring without blinking. Even though he's never seen the ring before, it feels suffocatingly nostalgic. His mother wore a ring just like this, same cut and color, same overwhelming presence. It's beautiful, and it makes him slightly nauseous, just looking at it.

Before he knows it, there's no more sales associate or jewelry store or Hollander, there's only the ring and childhood memories he's spent so long suppressing all around him.

He sees his father yelling at his mother. Her crying in the kitchen after, her hand covering her mouth not to make a noise. Not to disturb the man who caused her this pain. Protecting her children from their own father.

“You’re proposing?” Hollander’s voice says, far away.

He sees his brother at his mistress's apartment, while his wife takes care of their baby, only a few months old. He sees his brother gambling away the money Ilya gave them, the one meant for baby formula and diapers. He sees his brother’s wife begging him to find some way to keep them afloat.

“Since when were you in a relationship?” Hollander speaks again, voice muffled.

He sees his stepmother, barely older than Ilya, married to an old, senile man. Her youth taken, married in the hope of stability, of the promise of never having to worry about money again. Of being alienated from the rest of her own family. He sees the sorrow in her eyes, the way she looks thinner and more frail every time he sees her.

“Are you really thinking of getting married?”

He sees his mother on the floor, dead, his father whispering that it was an accident. His father looking Ilya in his eyes and saying those words as if they both don’t know the hand he played. That he killed his wife, not physically with a weapon or even his own hands, but through years of psychological abuse, until she couldn’t take it anymore.

“Rozanov?”

And there she lay on the floor, as pale as the white tiles, red everywhere, staining every surface of the bathroom, even after the floor had been bleached a dozen times. The red is still there on the tiles, in Ilya’s head, in his nightmares, now staining every part of his brain.

“Hey, Rozanov? Are you listening to me?”

It was an accident, his father says, voice steady, like he was talking about the weather. An accident, that’s what he called it, and Ilya had never wanted to kill his dad before, despite all he’d endured through his childhood, but in that moment–

A hand touches his shoulder.

“Rozanov?“

Almost violently, Ilya finds himself back at the store. He realizes he’s been staring at the ring for god knows how long without saying anything. Hollander is looking at him, concerned, half crazy, desperate in a way Ilya’s never seen him. Ilya suddenly can’t breathe.

“Do you like it?” The sales associate asks. Does Ilya like it? He finds it impossible to string together a sentence that could encapsulate all that he feels towards the ring, in English or Russian.

“I need to go. But I will come back.” He takes a deep breath. “I will come back for it.” Ilya repeats as if to convince himself, not even really knowing if he means the words or not.

All he knows is that he feels like he’ll choke on his next breath and maybe suffocate in the middle of the store if he doesn’t leave now. Without another look at Hollander and his movie

star girlfriend, he runs out of the shop and into the nearest coffee shop, where he throws up in the nearest bathroom.

They're in a rooftop bar in Montreal. Ilya looks over the railing and at the busy streets below. From this far up, people look as insignificant as grains of sand on a beach, being swept around by the ocean. In his hand is a glass of champagne, which he takes periodic sips of every once in a while. He isn't in the mood to get drunk.

Svetlana stands beside him. She has just finished talking on the phone with a friend, and is now looking at him, expression unreadable. She's probably concerned. He hasn't said a word practically the entire night, and it's not like him to reject free alcohol.

"But what if I hurt you?" Ilya suddenly asks out of nowhere, voicing the question that's been filling his thoughts for days.

She seems to ponder the question for a moment, trying to fit it in the correct context. Ilya refuses to meet her gaze.

"You'd never hurt me. That's not who you are." She finally says, and it wasn't what Ilya was expecting. He looks up, and when their eyes meet, she seems entirely sincere.

"But what if I am and you don't know it?" Ilya questions again, this time more desperate to make her understand the gravity of what he's trying to tell her.

He is his father's son after all. What if he can't be better for her, no matter how hard he tries? What if there is a force inside him, powerless but too destroy everything good he's ever had?

He couldn't live with hurting her, not in any way.

She's quiet again, then her expression breaks into one of sorrow, like Ilya's words are painful to hear. She grabs hold of his hand. Obviously, they've held hands before, plenty of times in fact, but it still always surprises him slightly how small and soft they are. She has nice hands.

"I know everything about you, Ilya." Svetlana says, and it would have sounded ridiculous out of anybody else's mouth. "That's not you." She says like it's a fact.

Ilya squeezes her hand, as if he does it hard enough, he can somehow convince himself that what she's saying is true. Can physically transfer her full hearted belief to him. Then again, she's never lied to him, has she? He can't say the same for himself.

When Ilya received an invite to a mandatory sponsor-organized dinner between Boston and Montreal while they were in the city, he knew immediately it would be best not to come.

Sitting here now at a table bursting with tension, bored out of his mind, and doing his best to avoid the heated glare directed at him from somewhere down the table courtesy of Hollander, he's regretting not faking sick.

He stares at the glass in his hand and ponders different scenarios on how he could lie his way out of this stupid dinner. He tries to ignore the violent flashes of light from around them as cameras click to immortalize this hopefully once in a lifetime moment.

"So, am I invited to the wedding?" Says Cliff.

Cliff was his friend, someone he felt comfortable telling about his outlandish ideas and personal life, but also a complete and utter idiot. People sitting close to them suddenly become quiet and look at them in confusion.

"You got a girl, Rozanov?" A Montreal player says rather loudly, and that succeeds in getting almost the entire table to bring their attention to Ilya. It's one of the only moments in Ilya's life where he hasn't appreciated eyes on him.

He knows why they're interested, the idea is probably weird to them due to Ilya's reputation. The media loves to call him a man whore, a player, that he's commitment issues personified. It's all true, at least partly so.

Another one of Ilya's teammates starts talking before Ilya has the chance to answer.

"Cliff told me about that! My wife offered to help you pick out a ring. She said the worst thing a husband can do to his wife is buy an ugly engagement ring." He says, and a few of the guys laugh around him.

Ilya doesn't, because there are certainly worse things a husband can do to his wife. Like leave the supposed love of their life lying on the floor, lifeless in a pool of her own blood, and taking no responsibility for his own part in it after.

"I have ring." Ilya says.

He had called the jewelry store and had the ring shipped to his hotel room in Montreal, he couldn't stomach going into the store in person. It was delivered the next day, but Ilya hasn't worked up the courage to open the box yet.

“Will you move back to Russia, after you have kids? Or will you stay here in the States?” A Boston player asks. The entire table is still staring at him, hanging onto his every word.

“We will see.” Ilya mutters noncommittally.

Ilya decides not to think about the fact that he has never really thought about having kids seriously. He came to terms with the fact that he wouldn’t be a good father long ago. The question still makes his skin itch oddly.

“Who even is she? What’s she like?” Someone asks with genuine curiosity. “Is she hot?”

Ilya thinks about it for a moment, a short and fleeting one, because deep down, he already knows the answer.

“She is called Svetlana. She is warm, like the sun. The most beautiful girl I know.”

And it’s true when he says it, inside and out. Svetlana is truly the most remarkable woman he’s ever met, his ride or die, his rock, his best friend, and in the lowest points in his life, his everything. Ilya doesn’t deserve it, he truly doesn’t deserve her and her never-ending kindness.

And similarly, Svetlana doesn't deserve to pay the price for his ulovability. To be a front, a puppet unable to live her own life. He's an awful person, he realizes. Does she even want this? Is she doing it out of pity? That's all Ilya does, he uses people.

He is filled with such a deep hatred for himself that it feels like it'll eat him alive from the inside out. They can all probably see the rot in him, the bad, the meanness. It’s why nobody likes him, it’s why Hollander left that night, he’s sure of it.

Ilya revealed too much, and under his skin, under the soft touches and whispered words, Hollander could finally see his true self. the cruelty hiding beneath, running through his veins. He has his father’s blood after all. So maybe he can’t help but be an asshole.

Aren’t genetics funny? Hollander is boring like his father, who reads The New Yorker, and Ilya is a horrible person like his father, who watched their mother bleed out on the bathroom floor, without a tear shed, without one single ounce of regret for his actions.

It’s all genetic. Ilya knows it’s a matter of time before he’s identical to his father, even in that. Maybe he already is.

Ilya wonders if Svetlana would see marrying him as being locked in a cage with a wild animal. Would she be afraid of him? Would his very presence be stifling, suffocating her? Would she yearn to escape from him? To get as far away as possible from him?

She probably would, because even Ilya would run away from himself in that situation. He would never marry himself. Why would anybody else want to? Why would anybody want to stay? Why did Ilya think Hollander would?

He hates himself so much that it’s all he can think about. he hates himself, hates himself, hates himself–

“Rozanov–”

But he’s sitting at a dinner table, and everybody’s staring at him, and he has to keep himself together.

“That’s like the most romantic thing I've ever heard.” Somebody says. The words lack the teasing tone he was expecting, instead, they sound genuine.

“Yeah, man. She sounds like a lucky lady.” Another person says, sounding honest.

“I never took you for a romantic, Rozanov.” Somebody else says. A few sounds of agreement are heard from around him.

Ilya doesn’t reply because he doesn’t even really know what to say. He’s never been much of a romantic, has never bothered to put in the work, couldn’t stomach the intimacy of it all. The conversation quickly changes direction, and Ilya’s love life is now forgotten.

For the first time the entire night, his and Hollander’s gazes meet. He seems truly and genuinely distraught, panicked. For a second, Ilya is sure he sees betrayal, sadness, maybe even heartbreak in his eyes. It’s gone before he can be sure.

Hollander takes a sudden swing of whatever alcohol is in the cup in his hand, and Ilya is surprised. Hollander has never been much of a drinker. He stands up from the table, his movements sudden, uncoordinated, like he’s fighting to leave as quickly as possible, not really in control of his own body.

“I’ll be right back.” Hollander says, his voice a little too loud, and it brings the table's attention to him.

“You okay?” Pike asks, concerned.

Hollander’s eyes then meet Ilya’s again, like he was the one who asked. Like he was the one responsible for it all. There are so many emotions flashing in Hollander’s eyes, Ilya has trouble making out what they are, only that Hollander seems upset, devastated even.

For a moment, Hollander seems to be looking for something in Ilya’s eyes, and the action feels so intense that it leaves Ilya feeling entirely naked, stripped down to his very core. He can’t stand it, so he chooses to look away, like the coward he is.

Hollander then leaves the room, muttering something about being perfectly fine. He’s a bad liar, Ilya thinks. Or maybe he’s just learned to see through all of Hollander’s defenses.

That night, he dreams.

Ilya dreams of dark eyes, the kind where if you stumble into them, you never stop falling. Their depth never ending, a slow spiral you never climb out of. He dreams of freckles, like little stars dusted across the night. Creating their own constellation, so Ilya can trace different patterns, the possibilities endless.

He feels wide shoulders beneath his hands, rough lips tracing his skin, dark tufts of hair caught in Ilya's soft grip. It all feels far away, shapes vague, and feelings indescribable. A name sits on the tip of Ilya's tongue, but he can't quite form its shape in his mouth.

There's warmth surrounding him, filling his insides, spilling out of him.

A gruff voice calls out to him in English, and he can't quite make out what it's saying, only that Ilya wants to be closer to it, wants it to be the only sound he ever hears.

And then suddenly it all starts slipping through his fingers as the cruel hands of reality drag him away. Drag him back to the overwhelming cold, to the ever present loneliness. He fights and fights to stay just a moment longer, but he's powerless.

Ilya wakes up in a cold sweat, already dreading the day ahead.

The game against Montreal was exhausting. His performance was awful, nowhere near the standard both the league and Ilya have set for himself. The blame, like all of Ilya's problems, lies with Hollander.

Ilya spent the game carefully avoiding any sort of interaction with Hollander. He kept his gaze on the ice and his expression neutral. It should have been simple. If only Hollander hadn't been starving for his attention the whole game.

Petty calls, shoulder checks, and a gaze that never seemed to leave Ilya were all so uncharacteristic of Hollander that it threw him completely off his game. Ilya didn't break, though, if only for Hollander to feel a fraction of what he felt that day at Ilya's house.

He now stands in his hotel room, still in Montreal. A part of him is dying to leave the city, but his flight is scheduled for the next afternoon, so he must keep busy somehow. Svetlana, who came to check that he wasn't a suicide risk after the terrible game, stands before him looking very concerned.

The ring in his pocket feels like it'll burn a hole through his jeans. He feels its presence so vividly, like an alarm blaring in his head at all times. He wonders if that's normal or if he's really losing it now.

"Could you love me?" Svetlana asks out of the blue. The question sounds genuine.

"I already love you." He replies dumbly. There are very few things Ilya is certain of in his life. He's pretty fucking sure about this.

"Yes, but could you fall in love with me?"

Ilya mulles over the words, rearranges the question in his mind, tastes the words 'in love' on his tongue, like that will somehow give him an answer.

"Maybe." He says, like the pussy he is.

"And would you be happy with me?" Svetlana continues her interrogation.

"Of course. Everybody would love it. The Russian media would fight to the death to cover this. My father respects you greatly, and it would be beneficial for both our images in the public eye." Ilya explains, but it's clearly not the right answer for Svetlana.

"I'm not marrying your father or the public or fucking Russia. I'm marrying you. Would you be happy?" Svetlana questions an edge to her voice.

Ilya feels as if she can physically see through him. Through his every lie and joke and teasing remark. He feels like there's no point in pretending anymore, not to her.

"I just want to do one thing right in my life." He says, and his voice is slightly shaky.

"Do right for who? For your asshole father? For your family that only remembers you exist when they need money or a punching bag? For an oppressive country that hates everything you are?" She says, voice measured, but she might as well have yelled it in his face. That's how deeply it strikes him.

"That is not doing the right thing, that is being a coward and letting others control your life." Svetlana says, then pauses to let the words really sink in. "You love me, yes. But not like you love Jane."

Ilya is truly powerless to deny it. He spends a few seconds just looking at the hotel room floor, avoiding her all-knowing gaze. He lets her words fill his head, flow through his bloodstream, and pump his blood with something other than fear for the first time in ages.

"We cannot marry. You do not want this." She finally says.

They sit in silence for some time as Ilya contemplates. Then he takes a deep breath, and when he exhales, he feels the tension in his bones physically leave his body as he sinks into the mattress. He drags a hand over his face as if to scrub away the emotions threatening to show in his expression.

“I’m too much of an asshole for you anyway. For anyone, really.” Ilya says, but his tone is entirely too self-deprecating for it to really sound like the joke it was meant to be. It sounds raw.

Svetlana doesn’t laugh, she gazes at him thoughtfully. “You wear it like a mask, you know that?” She finally says, then continues without waiting for an answer.

“You use this exaggerated bad guy persona to hide the real you. To shield yourself from other people. Hurt others before they hurt you. You’re not an asshole for that. You protect yourself, so you don’t have to be vulnerable.” She says, her voice painfully soft, her eyes warm.

“You project this aura of confidence, but I know that inside you are your biggest critic. I just wish others could see who you are underneath all those walls you build around yourself.” She speaks again.

“You need to be kinder to yourself.” Setlana finally finishes.

It’s all so painfully honest that Ilya couldn’t keep the tears from his eyes even if he tried. So for the first time in what is most likely years, Ilya cries. Because he can’t help himself and because here in this warm, fleeting moment between them, he can fully let go.

She pulls him into a hug, and she smells like Moscow. Cold and distant, but also sharp and familiar. She feels like home, more than Moscow ever did, and for the first time, he thinks that maybe if he never came back to the city he was born in again, it would be okay. Because with Svetlana here, he will always have a piece of Moscow with him. Maybe the best piece of it.

“Maybe.” He says, after realizing he never answered her. It’s not a promise, but it’s something better than outright dismissal.

He pulls away after a moment, and Svetlana gently cleans a tear running down his cheek. In her eyes, there’s a promise that no matter what, she’ll stay.

It’ll be okay, he thinks. Maybe everything will be okay. Even if he doesn’t marry her, or any other woman, and is unable to ever return to Russia, and he never sees his family again, and Hollander really leaves him for good. Because at least he won’t be alone.

“We’ll work on it.” She says, then stands up. This is the most emotionally vulnerable they’ve been with each other, maybe ever, so she steps out of the room to give him a moment to compose himself.

He stands up, runs a hand through his hair, touches his overheated, wet face, and fixes his clothes. He feels surprisingly light.

“What do you need?” Svetlana asks when he leaves the room after her.

“To get blackout drunk.” He answers honestly.

Svetlana takes him to a popular club here in Montreal that was recommended to her by a friend. The music is loud, the lights are flashing, and the drinks are strong. It's exactly what he needs. He takes Svetlana's hand in his and leads her to the dancefloor.

They laugh as they pull eachother closer, swaying to the beat. She laughs as Ilya yells lyrics to some overplayed RnB song into her ear, probably getting half of the words wrong. He doesn't mind embarrassing himself a little if it earns him her smile.

When the song finishes and a slower one starts playing, Svetlana's smile turns soft.

"You look happy. I haven't seen you happy in a long time." She observes.

"I'm free."

"From me?" She asks, but she's joking. Like anybody would ever want to get rid of her, what an impossible thought.

"From the chains of my country, of expectations, of my family. I'm done with it all. I want to be me, whatever that means." Ilya says, truly meaning it.

"Like going back to being a whore?" Svetlana asks teasingly.

"If I want to, then yes. Whatever happens, whatever or whoever I decide to do…I think, fuck it." Ilya says, and he knows it's not just the alcohol speaking. "I don't belong to anyone."

Not to his country or to America or to Boston. In technicality, maybe he still does, but not in his heart. In his heart, he is free.

That would have scared him to his very core only days before, but now it sounds like the sweetest thing on earth. It sounds like the freedom he never really had.

He presses himself closer to Svetlana, now almost entirely wrapped around her. He loves her so much he can hardly find a way to express it, so he hugs her impossibly tighter, hoping she understands.

Then he feels a familiar gaze on him. On the other side of the club, through a gap between the mess of sweaty bodies filling the dance floor, he sees Hollander. He's dancing with Rose Landry, his hands resting loosely on her hips. His eyes, though, are stuck on Ilya.

Ilya's breath catches in his throat, and he looks away back to Svetlana before she can notice his wandering eyes. He focuses on her as if it could somehow erase the all-consuming

thought that he and Hollander are in the same room. That he's standing only a few meters away, arms wrapped around his girlfriend

It hurts, a stinging pain in his ribs that will maybe never leave. But that's okay, Ilya decides. He feels, for the first time in months, hope. Hope that he could maybe escape the purgatory Hollander has kept him in since their very first meeting.

Hollander is happy, and that's all that should matter. It's all that does.

Ilya fucked up that day in the showers all those years ago, and he fucked up in inviting Hollander to his room for the first time, and he fucked up trying to turn their relationship into something it was never meant ot be.

So, maybe this is for the better. If she makes Hollander happy, then maybe Ilya simply has to let him go. Because he can't keep him in some fucked up situationship against his will for the rest of their lives, would never want to.

Ilya feels hope that maybe there is something else for him out there, also. Maybe they can both be happy one day without each other, no matter how much the thought suffocates him now.

Hollander has already moved on, it's Ilya's turn now. If only that piercing gaze he knows so intimately could stop beaming into him like it's trying to dissect him.

Ilya dances with Svetlana instead. They are young and free, and ilya couldn't be fucking happier he isn't getting married.

Eventually, Ilya starts to crave a smoke, so he makes his way outside the club through a side exit and into an empty alleyway. He enjoys the quiet stillness there almost as much as the thumping bass inside.

He's only outside for a couple of minutes when the door to the club suddenly opens and out stumbles an apparently very drunk Shane Hollander.

Ilya instinctively throws out a hand to steady Hollander, who almost falls on his ass. It would be kind of funny if it wasn't the first point of contact they've had since that day in Ilya's home.

Before Ilya can bite out a teasing remark at his state, Hollander starts to speak in a jumble of words that seem like they've been on the verge of spilling out for a long time.

"Don't marry her, Ilya." Hollander says desperately, now using the hold they had on each other for balance just a moment ago, to keep Ilya from running away. "Please, don't marry her."

"Hollander?" Ilya says the name dumbly, at a loss for how to answer.

"I mean, does she even know you? Like really? Why her?" Hollander continues unhelpfully. His eyes flick wildly across Ilya's face. He's looking for some sort of answer. Is starving for it it seems.

“Hollander, you are drunk.” Ilya says instead. He feels the need to point it out before Hollander continues with his nonsensical questions.

“Is it because she’s a woman? Is it because I could never give you–” Hollander begins to rant, now even more upset than before, then stops before he can finish.

His eyes well up with tears, which causes Ilya to start panicking, and he tries his hardest not to let it show. At least one of them needs to stay in control of this situation.

“Let's get you inside and find Rose, yes?” Ilya says. Of course, it’s the last thing Ilya wants, but it’s the correct thing to do. Ilya has no right to Hollander in this intimate state, not anymore.

“No!” Hollander argues, his tone almost petulant. Like Ilya is reasoning with a child. When Ilya tries to escape his grip, Hollander only pulls him closer.

“She is probably looking for you. You want to see her?” Ilya tries again.

“I don't want fucking Rose, I want you!” Hollander suddenly yells out.

It’s loud, and Ilya momentarily looks around to check if they’re still alone. When his gaze falls on Hollander again, he’s breathing deeply and staring at Ilya in anger. The words are something Ilya could have only dreamed about hearing days before. His chest tightens slightly.

“Hollander.” Ilya says, and it sounds like a warning. He lets go of Hollander and takes a step back.

Then Hollander breaks and tears well up in his pretty eyes.“Fuck you’re getting married. You’re actually getting–” A sob breaks out of him, stealing his next words. Like a puppet with its strings cut, he crumbles to the floor, his back against the dirty club wall. ”–fuck, Ilya.”

Ilya stands there frozen for a moment, watching as Hollander cries, muttering things he can’t quite make out, all the while. Every few seconds, he calls out Ilya’s name, almost as if he’s begging.

Ilya can’t stand it. The sight pulls at his heart, and even though he knows comforting Hollander is not his place, he does it anyway, powerless to resist. He’s always been powerless in the face of Hollander. How could he have ever believed otherwise?

Slowly, he crouches in front of Hollander and gently grabs his face in between his hands. “Look at me.”

Hollander does as told, but his eyes are blurry with tears. He leans into Ilya’s touch like it’s the only thing keeping him present between them. They’re cold from the Montreal night, and they create a stark contrast to Hollander’s overheated skin.

“I am not getting married. I was going to, but I changed my mind. And it was never for love.” Ilya explains gently. He talks slowly and tries his hardest to be articulate, because he wants

Hollander to understand

Ilya thinks for a moment about how to describe his reasoning for wanting to marry Svetlana without the heaps of mental baggage and struggle he's gone through in the past few weeks.

"It was for passport. Svetlana is American citizen." He finally settles on.

Hollander seems to take it all in and starts to calm down slightly, which Ilya is glad for. The tears stop, and that's when Hollander's face scrunches in focus, as if he's thinking about something deeply.

"I'm a Canadian citizen. Canada has universal healthcare. Do you know that? It has one of the highest standards of living in the world, it's much better than America." Hollander says, his gaze now carrying the spark he gets when he sees an open goal and is on his way to score it.

"What?" Ilya is losing track of where the conversation is going again.

"You should marry me and live in Canada. You'd like it there, I think. I'd buy you a big wedding ring so everybody would know you're mine." Hollander giggles, actually fully giggles while gripping Ilya's finger where he'd place the ring.

Ilya would make fun of him for it if his heart wasn't beating a thousand miles an hour at the admission that Hollander would, for some unknown reason, like to marry him.

"Hollander, you don't know what you are saying."

"I'd be such a good husband, I'd take care of you, and we'd be so happy, Ilya. I'd do anything to make you happy." Hollander starts explaining like he's trying to convince Ilya, to reassure him.

The thought is almost laughable that Ilya would need convincing to marry Hollander.

"We cannot do that, Hollander." He says instead, and Ilya hates the way Hollander's entire face falls. The spark which light up his eyes only moments before burns out before him.

"Why? Because we're both men?"

"No– well, also that. But you have girlfriend, remember?" Ilya says, and he hates that he forgot about Rose for a moment, completely lost in the moment.

Interestingly, Hollander also seems to have forgotten, as he stares at Ilya in confusion. "Oh, right…"

It's the most underwhelming reaction to finding out you have a world famous actress as a girlfriend that Ilya has ever seen.

"So, let us go inside and find your girlfriend."

Gently, Ilya lifts his hands away from where they've been cradling Hollander's face and takes a step back. He expects Hollander to follow, but he instead stays seated on the ground. He lets out a groan of frustration and rubs both palms across his face.

"I don't even like her. I mean, I do like her. Rose is great. Shes so sweet. I love talking to her, we get along really well. But I can't stand kissing her, and i cant have sex with her. It just feels so wrong." Hollader rants.

"I think I'm gay, Ilya." He says then in a sort of self-hating resignation. Like the words are killing him to say. Ilya wonders if he's ever told anybody that before, if he's ever even said it out loud.

"That is okay. There is nothing wrong with that." Ilya says as gently as possible, he tries to reassure him, even though he feels incredibly out of his depth. "Thank you for telling me."

"And I am sure it is hard to have beautiful girlfriend if you are gay." He continues trying to make the statement sound as sincere as possible, no matter how stupid it sounds. Hollander nods at his words seriously, like he's glad his struggle is acknowledged.

"I have to break up with her, its not fair to her. I'll do it first thing in the morning." Hollander nods as if making a mental note for himself.

Then he looks at Ilya and his face lights up again, as if he's had an incredible idea. "Can I see you after? Tomorrow?"

It's so incredibly sweet that Ilya has to remind himself that Hollander is indeed blackout drunk. "If you remember anything."

"I'll remember!"

Hollander shouts, sounding genuinely offended at the idea that he, a lightweat who never drinks, might not remember what happened after a drunk night out. It's the type of competitive need to be the best at everything that has Ilya smiling automatically, because it's so typically him.

"Sure."

Ilya extends a hand to pull Hollander up on his feet. Hollander takes the hand and doesn't let go of it, even when he's standing again.

"So, can I see you tomorrow?" He asks, squeezing Ilya's hand. It's sweet, but they've spent enough time away from the club, and somebody's bound to come looking for them eventually, even if Ilya would gladly stay in this little bubble with Hollander forever.

"Listen to me." Ilya says and waits for a moment to really make sure he has Hollander's attention in his inebriated state.

"You will go inside, find your friends, be quiet about what we talked about, have fun for as long as you want to be here, then go home. In the morning, if you wake up and remember, call me. Okay?"

“Okay.” Hollander says with a dumb grin like Ilya has just promised him the world.

Jane: Hey
Jane: I’m sorry. I said a lot of weird things yesterday.
Jane: I was really drunk.

Ilya: You regret it?

Jane: No.
Jane: I really fucking miss you.
Jane: And I broke up with Rose. She was really good about it.
Jane: Can I see you today? Before you fly out?

Ilya: Will we go shopping for rings?

Jane: Fuck off.
Jane: What’s your room number?
Jane: Rozanov?
Jane: Ilya?

Ilya: 1120

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