

clear to a hedgehog

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by [magneticwave](#)

Summary

Every Boston Raider knows that although their captain has a girl in every port, he's got a soft spot for the one in Montreal. Dr. Shane Hollander knows it's better to have a semi-regular source of casual sex than try to make a relationship work during residency. Ilya Rozanov knows that the doctor he's fucking in Montreal is unaware that he plays hockey, and in fact probably thinks he's Bratva.

A week before training camp begins, one of the front office people—a generally mild-mannered older woman who prefers to be called Miss Sheila—calls Ilya in for a meeting with the coaching staff that turns out to be an ambush. While they can't technically force him to house a rookie, which has allowed him to put it off for years with increasingly stupid excuses, time appears to have finally run out. "You can't pick and choose which parts of the captaincy you want to take on," LeClaire says. "You have the C, so fucking act like it."

"No one else speaks Russian," Miss Sheila adds, like that's Ilya's fault and not a decision that's been actively made by management for the last eight years. You can't throw a fucking rock in Madison Square Garden without hitting five Slavs.

"I live in an apartment," Ilya says. "No room for rookie."

"You live in a four-bedroom condo," Miss Sheila says. "Three bathrooms and in-unit laundry. I looked it up on Zillow."

"My condo is on *Zillow*?" Ilya says.

Miss Sheila ignores this egregious violation of Ilya's privacy to continue, "Do you have any roommates sleeping in one of those three other bedrooms?"

"Roommates, no. Guests, yes." Ilya tries to leer at her, but Miss Sheila is made of stern stuff.

"You can still have guests," she says. "No one expects you to be a monk, Mr. Rozanov. We all know better. But that poor child doesn't know a lick of English."

Ilya's seen tape of the new kid—straight out of a fucking Siberian mining town, about twelve feet tall, with chin scruff he probably had to start shaving at age seven—and his nasty slapshot hadn't exactly filled Ilya's heart with pity.

"I think about it?" he tries.

Miss Sheila slides a stapled stack of paper across her desk. "Think while you're signing these," she says. "Initial in the yellow boxes."

As he's leaving Miss Sheila's office, his phone buzzes in the pocket of his athletic shorts. One vibration, so it's WhatsApp. Obviously Ilya is a cool fucking customer who would never do anything as stupid as fumble for his phone just because of a fucking WhatsApp notification, but his phone almost slips through his fingers as he quickly digs it out. Jane: *I'm going to be in Boston next month. Oct 4-9. Meet up?*

Shane's in Boston every October. The North American Society of Something Extremely Boring's Annual Meeting. *Fucking CME*, Shane had complained to Ilya once, a little awkwardly. He never seemed to realize that when he lied (which embarrassed him, because he was a good Canadian boy who had been raised right) the subsequent flush would make his freckles stand out. So whatever this Boston conference is, it has nothing to do with CME, whatever the fuck *that* is. But it is a excuse for Shane to fly to Boston every October and Ilya's hardly going to give that gift horse a fucking dental exam.

After a careful, deliberate pause—he counts a hundred seconds—Ilya sends back a thumbs up emoji.

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Three years before, on a chilly November evening, Ilya had been irritably sucking down on the cigarette pinched between his thumb and forefinger in front of a pair of automatic doors that had claimed to lead to the MUHC emergency department. He'd barely heard the hiss of the doors sliding open behind him, he'd been so annoyed. "Here is a thought," he had said to Marleau, darkly. "The next time that cocksucker thinks he can fuck up one of my guys, I send the pieces of him back home to his mother in a tiny box."

"Probably it'd be a big box," Marleau had replied. "Like. Realistically."

"Fine," Ilya had said, punctuating his statement with a deep drag on his cigarette. "Next time, I send him home to his mother in a medium-sized box. Overnight shipping."

"Uh," someone had said, "you're not supposed to be smoking here."

When Ilya had twisted to shoot an annoyed glare over his shoulder, a man in bright green scrubs had been standing behind him. He was wearing a grey knitted sweater that was unzipped and laying open across his broad chest and a lanyard with plastic-encased cards looped around his muscled neck. His pretty face looked annoyed the way a very fluffy kitten might look annoyed after being scruffed. Without quite meaning to, Ilya had let his eyes trace the wing of his dark hair, long enough to be pushed back from his forehead and behind his ears.

"Da?" Ilya had said, exaggerating his accent.

The guy's mouth had flattened and he'd jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the automatic doors, which were plastered with a number of large stickers that explained in both English and French that neither loitering nor smoking ought to be occurring in their vicinity.

"No English," Ilya had said.

The guy had rolled his eyes. "Whatever," he'd said. "Who cares if you compromise the care of the critically ill patients inside this building, eh?"

This had gotten to Marleau, predictably; he'd elbowed Ilya in the side and whispered, "Maybe—?"

Ilya had sucked pointedly on his cigarette and ignored Marleau. He had felt something zip up his spine, not dissimilar to the sensation he got in the milliseconds before a face off, when he knew that because he was faster and smarter and meaner he was going to win. He had casually strolled towards the disgruntled Canadian in his bright green scrubs, exaggerating his steps. He'd wanted the man to notice Ilya's big frame in its expensive suit, the handmade leather dress shoes that were never scuffed because Ilya only ever wore them on game days, the diamond-encrusted tie pin that he'd bought himself to celebrate when he'd won the Calder.

The man had looked at Ilya. The fluorescent lights embedded in the concrete above their heads had exaggerated the bruised shadows under his dark eyes. His mouth had parted, slightly, and Ilya had lowered his cigarette and casually shot his cuffs, so he could flash the edge of his watch—a Breitling, from the sponsorship deal he'd cut three years before, after his first Cup.

The man's mouth had opened all the way to say, "If you try to bring a lit cigarette into this hospital, it's a five thousand dollar fine."

"Is *not*," Ilya had immediately countered, because Canadians were insane but surely they weren't that insane.

"Canadian dollars," Marleau had clarified behind him.

"This country is ridiculous," Ilya had said. "Is one fucking cigarette, you won't get cancer just from touching it."

"I didn't realize you were also a doctor," the man had said sarcastically. "Also, and I can't believe this needs to be said, if you come in and try to start a fight, the consequences will be worse than a fine."

"You will call security?" Ilya had asked casually.

He had been close enough then to see that the doctor was near to his own height. Not as broad, of course, but solidly built. His scrub pants had been drawn tight over his thighs; the horrible fluorescent lights exaggerated the long curve of each quadriceps. Gym rat? If so, whatever he was doing on leg day was fucking working.

"I won't need to," the doctor had said calmly.

Ilya had waggled his eyebrows. "Ooh," he had said. "I'm. Uh, how you say—" and he had said *waiting for you to drop to your knees and suck my dick* in Russian.

"Feeling a sudden sense of civic responsibility?" the man had suggested flatly.

Marleau had snorted out a laugh. "C'mon, man," he had said, coming up and clasping a hand on Ilya's shoulder. "Let's not piss this guy off any more. Sorry, doc, we're just waiting to hear if our buddy came out of surgery okay."

The man's eyes had softened. "Check in with Vinnie at the desk," he had said. He had paused then and hitched a slightly awkward breath before continuing, "We have the best trauma team in the province. Jackie's the charge nurse tonight and she runs them like it's the navy. Your friend is in good hands."

Marleau had said, "Thanks, man," and headed towards the automatic doors. A few seconds later, having made a dramatic theatrical production out of stubbing out his cigarette, Ilya had followed. He'd felt those dark eyes following him, jabbing between his shoulder blades, and when he'd turned to give a final, casual glance over his shoulder he'd seen that the doctor had turned to watch them leave, his eyebrows drawn low into a suspicious squint.

Since Ilya had been hoping to provoke something a little more slack-jawed, this expression had inspired a brief moment of introspection. What had he and Marleau been talking about when the doors had first opened?

Ah.

“He thinks we are mobsters,” Ilya had decided.

“Cause you’re fucking trashy, Roz,” Marleau had replied immediately. “It looks like you mugged my grandpa for that shirt.”

“This is raw silk,” Ilya had said. “North Americans have no taste. None of you know how to dress. Is embarrassing for me, to always be showing you up. Make more of an effort, okay?”

LeClaire had swooped down on them like a fucking bat the moment they’d stopped at the desk to speak with this so-called Vinnie, a bespeckled beanpole wearing scrubs covered in strange little yellow one-eyed creatures. “Rozanov! Marleau! What are you two chucklefucks doing here, curfew’s in half an hour.”

“How’s Duxy?” Marleau had asked.

“Says he’ll sleep like a baby without Rozanov’s snoring,” LeClaire had said. “You get two minutes with him, a proof of life photo for his girlfriend, and then you’re back to the hotel, got it?”

But in the end, Ilya had sent Marleau back on his own and stayed with Duxy until his girlfriend—still in Toronto after he’d been traded last year; visa problems, apparently—had been able to book a seat on the first Porter flight of the day, which would get her to Montreal by nine the next morning.

“You want me stay?” Ilya had offered. Duxy had snorted, then groaned and lifted the hand that wasn’t in traction to his forehead, where a lump the size of a fucking Imperial Fabergé egg had begun to emerge from a purpling bruise.

“Go,” Duxy had said, slurring slightly.

“You not want my dulcet tones?” Ilya had asked.

“You fucking snore, man, I don’t know what to tell you,” Duxy said. “Your girls are lying to you. Probably because they can tell how fragile your ego is.”

Ilya had turned on all the overhead lights as he’d left, grinning to himself at Duxy’s squawk of outrage and pain, and made his way down to the first floor lobby of the hospital. He’d been about to duck into a private corner to call a car service when he’d seen a tousled head of dark hair bending down to chat with Vinnie-at-the-desk and somehow had known to stop.

“—fucking beat,” Vinnie had been saying. He’d pushed up his glasses with a thumb and forefinger spread into a V, like a villain in one of those weird animated shows Marleau and his girlfriend liked to watch. “You’re coming off of night float, right?”

“It’s fine,” the dark-haired doctor had said. He had been writing something with a pen, his attention wholly focused on the folded sheet of paper.

“Only you would say that,” Vinnie had said, with an audibly appreciative sigh. *For fuck’s sake*, Ilya had thought irritably. But he had understood the impulse; from this angle he had been able to see those bright green scrubs pulled tautly over an extremely well-developed ass. Maybe the pretty freckled doctor with a great ass knew how to skate. Duxy claimed all Canadians were issued a pair of skates at birth, as part of a federal welfare program.

“It’s not just me,” the doctor had said distractedly. “All the residents have to do night float. This is a very good pen.”

“MUJI,” Vinnie had said.

“Oh!” the doctor had said. He’d clicked the end to retract the tip and looked at it more closely. “Nice action,” he’d mumbled quietly and clicked it twice. “Do you know if I can order these? Like, online?”

Vinnie had put his chin in the palm of his hand. “Keep it,” he’d said. “I have a box.”

The doctor had smiled at this. Ilya had felt his entire body jolt, like he’d just been boarded from behind. What the actual fuck. “Thanks,” the doctor had said, “that’s really generous of you, Vinnie. Can I send you an e-transfer you for it?”

“Two dollars? I mean, sure. Or you could buy me a coffee.”

Vinnie had blinked a few times to really make his point. Ilya had been striding across the lobby before it occurred to him that this was an objectively insane thing to be doing; maybe Duxy hadn’t been the only one to sustain brain damage at the hands of the Metro’s defense. But before he’d been able to do anything particularly stupid, someone in a yellow tissue paper gown covered in smears of blood had burst through a set of swinging doors bellowing *HOLLANDER YOU’RE UP* and the doctor had taken off at a dead sprint just as Ilya had felt a hand latch onto the back of his neck and heard LeClaire hiss, “You better have a good fucking reason for breaking curfew, Rozanov.”

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Ilya calls the nutritionist that does his meal prep and tells him to make double of everything for the foreseeable future; asks his cleaning lady when she comes by on Thursday to make up one of the guest bedrooms and stock the nearest bathroom with Q-tips, Kleenex, and clean towels; has his doorman cut a second set of building keys. After that, he calls it a day. He’d spent his rookie year sleeping in Berrien’s basement, getting woken up at six every morning as the guy’s approximately four thousand kids and army of dogs had thundered into the kitchen for breakfast. Between them Marie-Louise and Ilya had been able to speak about twelve words of English and most of them were hockey cognates, so they’d invented an elaborate series of mimed gestures for the household chores that Ilya had performed, mostly badly, to make up for the enormous amount of food he ate and the giant piles of stinky laundry he generated.

If Ilya had been the kind of person who worried about things, he might have worried about his new rookie—but he was not, and he does not. The kid will do fine or he'll go down to the farm team in Providence and neither outcome will have anything to do with how soft Ilya's guest bedroom mattress is.

The day before training camp starts, as he waits for the interminable welcome meeting upstairs to end, he sits in front of his locker, damp towel hooked around his neck, and texts Jane: *what r u wearing*.

Don't sext me when I'm about to scrub in, asshole.

What is this, Ilya asks. He's imagining a giant round bristle brush like the one his cleaning lady uses on his kitchen sink.

I'm prepping to go into the operating room for a surgery, Jane replies.

Ilya immediately tabs over into Google to investigate what this entails. *so u are wearing scrubs. cute mesh hat?*

Go fuck yourself, Jane suggests.

(((can't, not flexible enough. show me some yoga moves?

Jane marks his message with the thumbs down emoji. *Putting my phone in do not disturb btw. Do NOT send a dick pic while I am doing this bypass.*

The door to the locker room bangs open before Ilya has time to do anything except tap a few sad-faced parentheses. "This is Rozanov," LeClaire barks. "Rozanov, this is Pogonin."

Ilya lazily rolls to his feet. "Hey," he says. The kid is not quite twelve feet tall in person, but he's stocky and square-jawed, wearing a white and yellow striped polo shirt and a pair of jean shorts cut off and fraying at the knees. His curly hair is gelled flat to his head. "How's it going?" Ilya asks him in Russian.

"Hello sir I am Vladimir Andreyevich," the kid replies all in one breath.

"Only people I'm fucking call me sir," Ilya tells him as he shakes his hand. "Roz is fine."

~

Two and a half years ago, on a beautifully crisp April morning, Ilya had gone for a long run to distract himself from the fact that his stupid fucking circus full of idiot fucking monkeys had lost the previous night to the Metros in overtime. He'd wasted thirty minutes actively seething to himself about Itkonen's lazy fucking passing and barely noticed when he hooked a left turn that brought him down to a canal—but then he had, abruptly, because an absurdly pretty man with dark, sweat-soaked hair had been running towards Ilya on the opposite side of the path and the familiarity of his features had hit Ilya like a shoulder to the solar plexus.

He'd stopped and put his hands on his hips for a second, wheezing.

The doctor had nearly passed him, turning his head and giving a twitch of acknowledgement because, presumably, this was the civically responsible thing to do, and then he'd visibly clocked Ilya and done a double-take. "Oh," he'd said. He did a very cute little awkward shuffle as he attempted to decide in real time whether or not to stop.

"Hello," Ilya had said, once it had become obvious this was a paralyzing decision for him to make.

"Hi," the doctor had said. "Uh—do you—run down here often? I've never—seen you."

Like a sane person, Ilya usually used the hotel gym on road trips. As he'd watched Ilya lace up his running shoes earlier that morning, Duxy had said *somebody's gonna spit on you but fine, it's your fucking funeral, Roz*. But since the alternative had been going to the hotel gym and potentially beating one of his own teammates to death with a 25lb dumbbell, Ilya had opted to go out of doors.

"No," Ilya had begun to say, and then the doctor had frowned and lifted two fingers to his own eyebrow.

"Are you bleeding?" he had said.

"Ah shit," Ilya had mumbled in Russian, pulling up the hem of his shirt to dab at his eyebrow, which Wiśniewski had split the night before. The sweat-wicking grey fabric was splotted brown when he lowered it. "Better?" he had asked in English.

The doctor has been staring at him in undisguised horror. "Your ribs!" he had said, aghast. "Why are you *running*?"

"Not so bad, just—ah, on the top?" Ilya had said.

"You're still bleeding," the doctor had said. "What the fuck is wrong with you. Come on." And without saying anything else he'd turned and begun to climb up the grassy bank to the road. "Come *on*," he had said, and for some reason Ilya had followed him. Possibly it had been the bossy way he spoke, like someone who was used to issuing orders that other people were too stupid not to follow; Ilya had been trained since he was a small child by a series of camps and coaches to respond to this type of authority. Alternatively, it had been the tiny little shorts the doctor had been wearing. They were dark blue. The doctor had been golden all over except for the skin of his inner thighs, which Ilya had been able to see thanks to the wide steps the doctor had been taking to climb up the bank—that skin had been a paler, pinker color. Ilya had wanted to sink his teeth into that inner thigh like it was an apple.

The doctor had stomped up the grassy bank, across four lanes of traffic, down half a deserted block, and shoved his way through the rotating glass door of a high-rise building whose lobby was cavernously empty. "Unbelievable," he'd been muttering to himself. Something something something and then, "probably fucking pneumothorax," followed by a few more grumbles. His sweat-dampened face had glistened under the lights of the lobby, and the elevator, and the carpeted hallway of the twenty-second floor. Inside unit 2221 he'd flicked on a series of lights, kicked off his shoes, and pointed at a half-closed door. "In there," he'd

ordered Ilya, and in Ilya had gone, fascinated by his own meek acquiescence. What the fuck was he doing? *What the fuck are you doing?* he had asked himself, and he'd had no answer.

The door had led to a bathroom. The doctor had made Ilya sit on the closed toilet lid and take off his shirt, which Ilya had done very slowly so the doctor would be able to appreciate the fine network of muscle that Ilya had spent a decade building. Instead of looking impressed, the doctor had pulled on a pair of green nitrile gloves from a box in a drawer and knelt between Ilya's knees to palpate the edge of the bruise that had swelled overnight over Ilya's ribs.

The doctor had frowned. "Tenderness here?" he had asked.

"Fine," Ilya had said.

"I can see the imprint of individual knuckles," the doctor had said. "Here, and here. Obviously somebody whaled on you for a while, so stop being fucking stoic and tell me if you feel tenderness when I press. Unless, of course, you'd prefer to puncture a lung and slowly drown to death in your own blood."

"Is this typical Canadian manner of bed sitting?" Ilya had wondered.

"Beside manner," the doctor had corrected shortly, and then he'd pressed down on something that had made Ilya inhale sharply through his teeth. "Okay, take a deep breath and exhale for me."

Ilya had done as ordered. Despite the pain of his ribs—which the team doctors had already assured him were unfractured, just ugly-looking—and the itching discomfort of the blood drying into his split eyebrow, he had been suffused by a very strange and lovely sensation, sort of like he'd been taking a very hot bath and someone beautiful and naked had just leaned over and offered him a cool glass of mint tea. He'd stared down at the doctor kneeling between his legs, brow furrowed as he'd pressed his strong fingers in a series of short strokes along the left side of Ilya's ribcage, and Ilya had briefly fantasized about slipping his thumb between those serious, unsmiling lips and gently pressing against the tongue inside. The small bathroom was warm and smelled overwhelmingly of sweat and some kind of lemon-scented cleaning product.

"I can't detect any movement, which is good," the doctor had finally announced, leaning back on his heels. "You clearly got stitches—didn't your doctor tell you to take it easy?"

Ilya had shrugged elaborately.

"Let me clean up your eyebrow," the doctor had said. "Or maybe you'd like to continue bleeding all over yourself."

"So hospitable," Ilya had said. The doctor had stood up, and he'd put a hand out to brace himself as he'd wobbled; he'd been kneeling strangely on the tile floor, so probably one of his feet had gone to sleep. His hand had clamped down on Ilya's shoulder. Ilya's hands at the same time had gone to his waist, to steady him. His waist had been narrow under the loose shirt he was wearing and banded with firm muscle. The doctor had quickly released Ilya's

shoulder with a muttered *sorry* but Ilya had not reciprocated. Instead, he had dug his fingertips in. Just for a second. Just to feel if there was any give.

The doctor had frozen under his hands. His head had tilted down. Ilya had watched his pupils bloom like he was being concussed in real time.

Approximately thirty seconds later, the doctor had been flat on the tile floor as Ilya had crawled on top of him, licking into his damp, panting mouth, the hand that wasn't scraped raw from knocking out two of Wiśniewski's teeth stroking the hardening length of the doctor's cock through his tiny little blue athletic shorts. *What are you doing?* some part of Ilya's brain had wondered, but frankly it had not been a very loud part.

Ilya had made the flight to Boston, but only just. "Where the fuck have you been?" Duxy had asked when he'd sprinted into their hotel room thirty minutes before they were supposed to board the bus. "You missed breakfast."

"Long run. Got lost. Canada streets very confusing," Ilya had said, whipping off his shirt and kicking off his shorts as he'd stepped into the bathroom.

"Are those *bite marks*?" Duxy had squawked, but Ilya had already turned on the shower.

~

Vladimir Andreyevich sits silently in the low-slung passenger's seat of Ilya's 918 Spyder and says nothing for the entire drive to Ilya's condo building. Had Ilya been this nervous as a rookie? But the thought is unfathomable; Ilya has always been a cocky little shit.

"Here's your keys," Ilya says once they're inside. "Shoes off, are you a fucking animal?"

The kid scuttles back and hurries to kick off his flip flops. "Sorry," he says, flushing. Piled around him are two enormous duffle bags and a hard-shelled suitcase that looks like it could be hiding a large dog or a small person. His luggage had only barely fit in Ilya's car. "Thanks," he adds shyly as he accepts the key.

Ilya's phone buzzes once. "You're the second door on the left," Ilya tells the kid, gesturing vaguely in the general direction of the hallway as he pulls his phone out of his pocket. Jane: *Ilyusha, why did DHL just email me to tell me I have to sign for a package.*

He grins to himself.

The kid is still standing there when Ilya looks up. "What?" Ilya says.

"Is that your girlfriend?" Vladimir Andreyevich asks.

"Do you want to still have teeth by the end of your rookie season?" Ilya says. "Don't ask stupid questions. Tomorrow is the first day of training camp. I leave at seven. You can be ready to leave by seven, or you can take the bus. Got it?"

I'm working a hundred hours this week, Jane continues. I don't have time to go home and sign for a package. Did you send me a dildo again? God you're such a freak.

“Got it,” the kid says.

“Food’s all labeled in the fridge,” Ilya says absently, thumbing in his passcode. “You’re not allergic to anything?”

“No?” the kid says, but in a way that strongly suggests the idea has never even occurred to him. Ilya has attempted more than once to explain to Shane that food allergies are the exclusive provenance of the decadent west and here, further proof that he’s right. Good Siberian boys have never even heard of food allergies. Meanwhile, if Shane puts his lips anywhere near a kiwi they swell up like little puffy balloons.

“Good,” Ilya says. “Oh, and don’t drink the ginger ale.”

Not a dildo, Ilya types into WhatsApp. *What do you take me for? I got my girl a treat because her pussy is always so soft and wet for me.*

That’s what you said when you sent me the dildo, Jane replies.

That was a treat for pussy, Ilya sends. He searches for the little heart-eyes cat emoji and sends that, too. *This is a treat for you.*

At the top of the screen, *Jane is typing* appears, disappears, appears, disappears. Ilya pictures Shane’s flustered face, the way he pretends to be annoyed when Ilya bullies him, the wobble of his mouth as he tries to bite back a smile. Telling Shane that his name was Ilyusha had been a stroke of fucking genius; every time it appears in WhatsApp, usually as a prelude to a scold, Ilya wants to bark like a fucking dog.

Practical, Ilya adds. *You’ll like.*

“I’m going to—uh—go?” Vladimir Andreyevich says.

“Why are you even still here?” Ilya asks.

~

Two and a half years ago, as Ilya had attempted and failed to find a comfortable way to sit in his plane seat that didn’t put pressure on his bruised ribcage, he’d used the in-flight Wi-Fi to navigate to WhatsApp, where he’d saved Shane’s number under First Name: Jane Last Name: (montreal), the usual naming convention Ilya used for his reliable hook-ups. There weren’t as many of them as his teammates assumed; Ilya did not like sharing his phone number and it wasn’t like it was particularly difficult to find someone willing to have no-strings sex with little notice. Why had he given his number to a random Canadian doctor? He’d never given his number to a male hook-up before. Repeats were dangerous.

But Shane hadn’t seemed to recognize him. He’d accepted the name Ilyusha without any sign of hesitation as he’d added Ilya to his WhatsApp contacts. Frankly, it seemed very likely that he did assume Ilya was a mobster—a big, expensively-dressed Russian covered in bruises, what else was he going to think? Ilya’s split knuckles would have been impossible for him not to notice, considering that Ilya’d had two of those fingers nearly down the back of

Shane's throat. And when Shane's tongue had been in Ilya's mouth, panting and gasping and sucking, wetly, he would have been able to feel the gaps where Ilya had lost two of his own teeth.

Ilya had come twice that morning, once in the crease between Shane's inner thigh and groin, a second time up along Shane's lower back so he could watch his come pool into the dimples there, and yet as he sat on the plane he had felt his dick valiantly attempt to twitch itself to hardness for a third round. That had probably been why Ilya had been stupid enough to give Shane his phone number: pure, uncut horniness of such exquisitely high grade that it had hit Ilya's bloodstream within seconds of seeing him.

this is ilyusha)) was the only message in their chat. Sent at 9:27AM. Two blue check marks. There was zero reason to send anything else; Ilya wouldn't be back in Montreal again for months unless both teams made the playoffs, and frankly the Metros were not playing like a team that had any expectation of making it to the postseason.

Never one to let practical reality dilute his pleasure, Ilya had sat there, lazily fantasizing about how nice it would be to sweep the Metros and then take a car over to Shane's cramped one-bedroom apartment, which had appeared to house approximately one thousand throw pillows and zero art or photos on any of the walls. Maybe he could fuck Shane on the floor, or maybe on top of the throw pillows—which Ilya had to admit were uniformly very soft and perfectly plump, like the product of some kind of throw pillow natural selection—and while he was trying to imagine what kinds of sounds his cock might be able to hammer out of that beautiful throat he had watched it appear: *Jane is typing*. Then disappear. Then reappear. Then: *Jane last seen today at 11:53AM*.

Ilya had grinned to himself. "Tabernak," Marleau had called from across the aisle. "You look like a fucken serial killer, Roz."

~

Ilya goes into the kitchen at six-thirty the first day of training camp and finds Vladimir Andreyevich in a mostly-dark room, like a fucking vampire, eating spoonfuls of grey sludge out of a glass dish as he stands over the sink. Ilya hits the wall switch to turn on the overhead light and the kid flinches like a cockroach.

"Good morning," the kid says around a mouthful of sludge. "Uh, Roz."

"Good morning, Vladimir Andreyevich," Ilya says. In order to put off consuming his own container of sludge for as long as possible, he begins the long process of coaxing a double espresso out of the enormous machine that lives on the far side of the kitchen counter. Ilya had drunk his caffeine almost exclusively in the form of carbonated canned beverages until he'd begun fucking Shane, who felt very strongly that there was one correct texture for every single thing he ate or drank. Ilya mostly did not give a shit, so it was easy to switch to the machine. It impressed most of his idiot teammates, who had convinced themselves that the espresso machine was a necessary lure for the caliber of woman they assumed Ilya pulled. Ilya has, of course, frequently found himself having sex with beautiful women, but the benefit of being Ilya Rozanov is that he doesn't need stupid shit like espresso machines for

that to happen. He does, however, need this specific brand of espresso machine to ensure Shane actually stays for breakfast when he is in Boston.

When Ilya turns around, cradling his double espresso in the palm of his hand, the kid is watching him with wide-eyed amazement, as though Ilya has performed a magic trick on par with sawing a beautiful woman in half.

“What,” Ilya says crabbily.

“Can—I—?” the kid asks.

“Change any of the settings and I’ll break your fingers,” Ilya says.

The kid stutters his way through an assurance that he’d never dare. Ilya walks him through the process of making an Americano and then reluctantly admits to himself that it’s sludge time. Left to his own devices, Ilya’s preferred breakfast is a can of Coke and a cigarette, but that had been beaten out of him robustly by Marie-Louise Berrien his rookie year, when she had managed to use a series of sarcastic hand gestures to inform Ilya that he was tired all the time because he wasn’t eating enough protein for breakfast. Three scrambled eggs and four slices of whole wheat toast each morning had, unfortunately, made such a difference in Ilya’s third-period numbers the second half of that season that LeClaire had taken him aside to gruffly interrogate him about whether he had been stupid enough to start taking steroids.

Ilya spoons gritty proteinaceous sludge into his mouth. This week’s containers are dotted with blueberries. *What do blueberries do again?* he texts Jane.

Antioxidants, Jane replies in seconds. *Reduces oxidative stress*. And then, predictably: *You know what else reduces oxidative stress?*

Ilya sticks his spoon into his mouth so he has both hands free to swiftly type, *You are so fucking boring. Do you ever get tired of being boring?*

Jane sends him a photo of a chest and hand; Shane is flipping him off. As is perhaps true every single day of his life, he is wearing green scrubs and a grey zippered sweater. *Dr. Hollander* is embroidered across the breast, under a weird logo that Shane had gotten very offended that Ilya had not recognized as belonging to some fancy Canadian university. *Sorry to ruin your humble brag*, Ilya had said at the time. Shane hadn’t answered his texts for a week and a half afterwards.

Ilya looks at the selfie for a very long time, using his forefinger and thumb to pinch and zoom in on the dry, reddened skin of Shane’s knuckles, the strip of pale skin where his Apple Watch normally sits, a loose thread wiggling its way to freedom from the neck of his scrub shirt. About to go on call, Ilya diagnoses. The lighting isn’t bad enough to be hospital fluorescents, so he must be getting dressed at home.

Reporting you to medical board. Patient abuse, Ilya sends. Then, reluctantly, he deletes the selfie.

If I ever had you as an actual patient I’d probably commit murder, Jane replies.

Whoopsie, Ilya suggests.

Yeah, whoops, my hand just slipped.

Ilya grins and rescues the spoon he'd been keeping tucked up against his soft palate. There is a noise, then; he flicks up a quick glance and sees that Vladimir Andreyevich is making a production out of drinking his Americano and not looking anywhere near Ilya, but his overcorrected nonchalance has resulted in him almost breaking his cup against Ilya's stone countertop. "Sorry," the kid stutters. His enormous ears have turned magenta.

Ilya sighs and slips his phone into his pocket. "Vladimir Andreyevich," he says, scraping the last spoonful of sludge out from the bottom of the container, "you have got to fucking relax, or you're going to have a heart attack and never finish camp. Hockey players, we are all dicks. Surely you know this."

"Uh, sure," the kid says, unconvincingly.

Well, he'll learn eventually. Or he won't, and he'll move to Providence. Ilya puts the spoon and empty container into the sink and claps his hands together. "Chop chop!" he shouts in English. "Time to go!"

~

Two years ago, Jane had texted Ilya on a Friday in late September.

Ilya had been mere milliseconds away from putting on his gloves and leaving the visiting team locker room to emotionally, physically, and (he hoped) metaphysically destroy Scott Hunter. He had frozen with what had felt like an audible glass-shattering air raid siren noise when he tilted his phone enough to read the preview on his lock screen.

Ilyusha, do you want to meet? I'm in Boston next week.

Did he want to fucking meet? Ilya had stuffed his mouth guard between his teeth and yanked on his gloves. If someone had told him all he had to do to win another Cup was drink Scott Hunter's bone marrow, he would have been able to get the job done with his bare hands. It had felt like his veins were made of pure adrenaline. When LeClaire had put a hand on his shoulder in the middle of the second and whispered, *get me a power play*, Ilya had launched himself over the boards with a broad grin, delighted to comply. While Ilya loved taunting everyone equally, he especially enjoyed baiting the Admirals, who felt compelled to defend their geriatric dickhole of a captain's precious honor with comically obvious attempts at knocking out another one of Ilya's teeth. Ilya could draw penalties out of them like Michaelangelo carving the Pieta out of a slab of marble.

Ilya had scored twice, once on the power play, and set Itkonen up for a top shelf beauty in the last forty seconds of the third that had visibly sapped the last youthful energy out of Scott Hunter's bones and drew groans of disappointment from the rafters of Madison Square Garden. Everyone complained that Ilya didn't play fair, but Scott Hunter seemed to take everything so fucking personally, like a baby instead of the oldest man in the fucking world.

“Good game, yes?” Ilya had said to him sweetly in the handshake line.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Scott Hunter had demanded, shaking Ilya’s hand.

“Your team sucks and I am fucking bored,” Ilya had replied. “This I tell you for free, because it sickens me—your new D-men leave holes like fucking engraved invitations. *Dear Captain Rozanov, please come into our house and score, top left is open just for you.*”

Scott Hunter’s face had turned an interesting shade of greenish-reddish brown, not dissimilar to what Ilya’s niece produced when she decided she wanted to use all of her paint colors at once. “You—“ he had said, strangled.

“Am not wrong?” Ilya had suggested.

“No!” Scott Hunter had fumed. “You’re not! So fuck off, man. I’m just trying to fix what Dynamo broke in the first place.”

This pathetic attempt to malign Ilya’s hometown scored Scott Hunter no points, because Ilya did not feel even a single ounce of loyalty to Moscow. He would have gladly died without ever setting foot within its city limits ever again. And Dynamo was a shitty team.

“Work harder,” Ilya had said. “Please. For my sake.”

Scott Hunter had looked like he was seriously considering ripping Ilya’s helmet off and bashing his face in with it. But in the end, he had decided not to—maybe his arthritis was acting up?—so Ilya had gone back to the visitor’s locker room, unlocked his phone, and texted Jane, *yeah, when?* instead of just sending the address of his condo and an invitation to stay for the week, which had been what he’d really wanted to do.

Tuesday?

see u tues then, Ilya had replied. And then, because he was a gentleman and didn’t believe in springing anal sex on someone without prior notice (rude!), he sent the peach emoji, eggplant emoji, and the water droplet emoji. And then the emoji that stuck out its little tongue, with a question mark, in case Shane had not yet understood Ilya’s plans for the evening.

When Ilya got out of the shower he saw that Jane had sent back, *I prefer not to top*, as if Ilya might have somehow missed the many clues that this was the case. When Ilya had flown to Montreal in August for a brand meeting and the trip had happened to intersect with a nineteen-hour gap in Shane’s on-call schedule, Ilya had sucked Shane off and then pinned him face-down into a pile of uniformly pleasant throw pillows in the middle of Shane’s tiny, barren living room and rubbed his cock into the cleft of Shane’s ass for as long as he could physically stand not coming, which had turned out to be about three minutes. Cracked moans had spilled out of Shane’s mouth in galloping little hiccups the entire time, like he was too overstimulated to even breathe properly.

Am surprised to hear this. Perhaps shocked, even, Ilya had replied.

Fuck you.

I will do fucking, hope this is clear, Ilya had replied. Btw are your ears pierced?

~

The first week of training camp hits Vladimir Andreyevich like a truck. After the morning Ilya walks in on the kid eating peanut butter and raw oats out of a bowl with a spoon, having already scarfed down his daily jar of sludge, he calls his nutritionist to increase his weekly order again. “Prep for three,” Ilya says. “This rookie has a tapeworm I am also feeding.”

LeClaire and Miss Sheila force him to come upstairs to have a meeting at the end of the week. “How is Poge settling in?” LeClaire asks.

“Fine,” Ilya says, leaning back in his chair and lacing his fingers across his stomach. Miss Sheila gives him a very unimpressed look; Ilya shrugs. “What? He is fine. Quiet. Works hard. Honestly, even sleeping in guest room he is less of a pain in my ass than Itkonen as rookie.”

LeClaire makes an annoyed little grunt that means he agrees. “Great meeting,” Ilya says. “We are done?”

He scuttles downstairs fast enough to catch Marleau on his way out the door. “Hey,” he says. “Assistant captain, job for you.”

“Fuck off,” Marleau replies immediately.

Ilya ignores this. “The kid needs a place to stay next week,” he says, clamping a hand on the back of Marleau’s neck. “You and your girlfriend, you will take him in and teach him about your weird little animated shows? Important cultural exchange.”

“For the last fucking time—” Marleau begins, clearly building up a head of steam, so Ilya cuts him off.

“—I know, da, da,” Ilya says impatiently. “I am a dick, I do not respect your hobbies and personal life. Of course. This is fair. But you will like me even less if this kid is not out of my apartment next week.”

Marleau sighs and shrugs out of Ilya’s grip. “Yeah,” he grumbles, “we’ll take him. But, Roz, man, don’t you think this is getting a little ridiculous? It’s one thing to be hosting the fucking Sexcapades your first couple of seasons—but every year? We’re getting too old for this shit.”

“I will never be too old,” Ilya says, and he means it sincerely: if he ever somehow ages out of being able to fuck Shane, he hopes somebody shoots him in the head and puts him out of his misery immediately, like a lame horse.

Marleau squints at him. “Is it—you know?” he asks, lowering his voice.

“No,” Ilya says flatly, “I do not know. Know what?”

“The girl,” Marleau says. “The one from Montreal. The one you got those earrings for—”

Ilya immediately pushes Marleau away from himself. “Do not be stupid,” he says. “Also, make sure you help Pogey practice his English. None of this French bullshit.”

“Yeah, okay, Roz, whatever,” Marleau says.

~

A year and a half ago, in the middle of a May thunderstorm, Ilya had been desultorily packing for Moscow when his phone had vibrated with a WhatsApp call from Jane.

“Allo,” he’d said, wedging his phone between his ear and shoulder.

“Hi,” Shane had said. “Is this an okay time?” That had been the third time he’d asked, if you counted all of the check-ins by text, which Ilya did.

“Do they revoke your citizenship if you do not do this?” Ilya had wondered. “Please, sorry, is this okay?”

Shane had huffed out a snort, staticky and muffled. “Are you allergic to being polite?” he’d asked. “For fuck’s sake.”

“Yes,” Ilya had said seriously. “*Sorry* passes my lips and they swell up. Like you eating a kiwi fruit.” He had frowned down at the nest of USB charging cables he’d dumped in the middle of the bed and seriously considered simply not bringing any of them. But he hated reading contracts on his phone and there would be many of them waiting for him in Russia, so his laptop had to come. He’d ground out a little huff of frustration.

“What are you doing?” Shane had asked.

“Packing,” Ilya had said. He’d picked up the whole nest and poured it into his suitcase. “I leave for Moscow tomorrow.”

“Right,” Shane had said. “I forgot, I can’t believe it’s the 19th tomorrow. Fuck, I think I’m giving case presentation on Wednesday—shit, where’s my phone.”

“In your hand,” Ilya had suggested, and he’d heard the saccharine fondness melt into his voice like a spoonful of jam in hot tea, a deepening of the vowels that he’d always associated with his elderly grandfather crooning to his wrinkled little grandmother: *Annushka, stop fussing over the babies and come sit next to me.*

“I’m putting you on speaker,” Shane had said distractedly. “Do you have plans already, for what you’re doing in Moscow?”

“Meetings,” Ilya had said. And then, because he had already melted, and it was dark because the thunderstorm had come on so suddenly that Ilya hadn’t yet turned on any of the lights—Shane hated overhead lights, Ilya was slowly losing the habit of using them—and Shane had seemed to be distracted, Ilya had not stopped himself from continuing, “I think this will be the last time I see my father alive.”

There had been a muffled noise from the other end of the call. “Ilyusha,” Shane had said. “Fuck. I’m sorry. Is he sick?”

Ilyusha. It made his fingertips throb. No one had called Ilya by that name since he’d found his mother’s body.

“English word, for the mind getting old,” Ilya had said. He had picked up two pairs of dress shoes tucked into their protective cloth bags and dumped them into his suitcase on top of the cables.

“Dementia,” Shane had supplied instantly.

“He forgets everything. Even forgets he hates me,” Ilya had said with morbid amusement. “He made my mother miserable but now she is all he wants. But she is dead. So he calls me and asks where is she, when is she coming back, he wants her to make him tea because the maid does not do it properly. The maid is my stepmother, by the way, so this makes her very angry and then *she* calls me to complain.”

Shane had proceeded to gently coax details out of Ilya—Was there a nurse who came to stay with him? What did the doctors say? How was his mood most days?—and Ilya had let himself be fussed over and soothed by the gentle murmur of Shane’s calm voice. This Canadian bed sitting technique really did have a lot to recommend it.

What sort of meetings, Shane had finally asked, and Ilya had felt settled enough to say, “Annoying ones. I will be—ah, what is English word for when you have most money and biggest dick, so everyone must do as you say?”

“There is no English word,” Shane had replied drily, “and I’m pretty sure you already knew that. There can’t possibly be one in Russian that means all that.”

“Pakhan,” Ilya had joked, and then it had immediately occurred to him that there was a line between letting Shane suspect he might be a closested mobster and actively lying about it, and teaching him the Russian term for a Bratva boss was probably winging perilously close to the latter. So before Shane had had the chance to repeat the word and give Ilya the opportunity to correct his pronunciation—this was how Ilya had taught him to say *Ilyusha* as sweetly as any doting girlfriend, as well as *please fuck me* and *spit in my mouth* like he’d been born speaking Russian—Ilya had said, “What should I bring back for you?”

“What? Nothing,” Shane had said.

“It is very cold in Montreal,” Ilya had mused. “Maybe you need a new coat?”

“If you try to give me a fucking fur coat, I’m never going to suck your dick ever again,” Shane had threatened.

Ilya had laughed, like it had been a joke. But as he pictured how Shane might look wrapped in a big sable coat, like the one his grandmother had worn to the ballet when he was small, it occurred to Ilya that the warmth of it might put a flush in Shane’s cheeks: tousled dark hair, cheeks dotted with freckles, that soft gleaming wetness in his eyes that always came when

Ilya bullied and teased him into soft compliance. *Spit in my mouth*, Ilya had told him to say, in Russian, and Shane hadn't hesitated.

"You sure?" Ilya had asked. It had been too long since he'd laughed, he'd realized; and his voice was too thick.

"You fucking freak," Shane had marveled.

"I don't want you to be cold," Ilya had said. "When I'm not there."

Shane had laughed. After a second, Ilya had also managed to do so. But he was also extremely fucking hard, and astonished by the realization that he missed Shane with a paralyzing intensity of which maybe a quarter could be attributed to Ilya's desire to sink his cock into Shane's plush mouth. He had wanted so badly in that moment to ask Shane to come with him to Russia—to be his pretty, sensible boyfriend and hold his hand in all the stupid fucking meetings with the bank and his agent and Ilya's brother and stepmother, to let Ilya lay his head in his lap at the end of each day and pet Ilya's head in that careful way he had that was somehow extremely soothing but didn't make Ilya's hair frizz (witchcraft), to talk to the doctors and help Ilya make sense of what was happening to his father's disgusting, corroding brain—that Ilya actually told himself for a few seconds, *Do it. Hockey is fun but it's just a game. You can play other games. There's no one else but him.*

"Why would I bring coat?" Ilya had said instead. "You won't even wear earrings."

"Those things weigh a ton," Shane had said. "If I wore them I'd never get any work done, they're too distracting. I don't like always knowing where my earlobes are."

"Westerners don't understand utility of portable investment," Ilya had said. "If you ever need to flee a regime change what will you do, pack up your condo and put it in your backpack?"

"Holy shit, you sound like my grandmother," Shane had said. "Her mom sewed a bunch of jewelry into the seams of her clothes when they were put in the internment camps. She always said it was the only way her brother could afford to go to college after the war."

"There you go," Ilya had said. "Very smart woman. You should listen to her."

Sometime during their conversation, Ilya had sat down on the floor next to the bed. He had been looking out the large windows but not really paying attention to the storm outside; but as Shane told him another story about his practical, no-nonsense grandmother, Ilya had watched the streaks of white and purple lightning shatter the sky above Boston into thousands of black shards, like stained glass, and the urge to be near Shane moved almost entirely out of his cock and up into his chest.

What the fuck are you doing? Ilya had asked himself. It had been the first time he'd been willing to admit to himself that maybe this was something more than just a semi-regular hook-up.

Ilya informs Vladimir Andreyevich that he'll be moving into Marleau's guest room on the drive home. The kid looks wiped out, eyes blinking closed, head gently bouncing off of the passenger seat window, but he jerks upright at this news.

"Did I do something?" he asks immediately.

"What?" Ilya says. "No, I just need my apartment back for a week. I'm supposed to be helping you practice your English but it's fucking boring and I don't want to. You'll get more out of staying with Marleau and his girlfriend. She's Brazilian; doesn't speak any French."

"It's not, like, a permanent thing?" Vladimir Andreyevich asks. "Because you're sick of having me around?"

"Of course I'm sick of having you around," Ilya says. "You ate an entire package of Wasa crackers yesterday—which, what the fuck? Those things taste like fucking sawdust."

"But you have like ten boxes of them in the pantry?" Vladimir Andreyevich says.

"Nine, now," Ilya says.

Ilya's phone, wedged in place on the center dashboard, vibrates once and wakes up to display his lock screen (selfie from Ilya's last Cup day) and a WhatsApp preview from Jane: *Ilyusha why did I just get confirmation from United I've been upgraded.*

Bzzt. How did you even get my reservation information??

Very quietly, Vladimir Andreyevich says, "Ilyusha," sounding out the unfamiliar spelling. His entire face turns pink. "Oh!"

"If you read my texts again I'm going to dig out your eyeballs with my bare hands," Ilya tells him. Vladimir Andreyevich sinks down into the already low-slung seat and cups a hand over his eyes. "Is this what passes for manners in Siberia?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the kid mumbles. "It was just—right there."

Ilya says, "Do you want to die? Arrangements can be made."

"I'm sorry, really," Vladimir Andreyevich says. "It won't happen again."

Bzzt. The package from DHL came today btw. Thank you for not sending me something disgusting.

Ilya says, "There's no fucking privacy on a hockey team. We spend nearly every hour of every day together during the season. Being nosy is only going to make you enemies. And you have enough of those already—the second we drafted you, all of fucking Montreal immediately hated you. So maybe pay a little less attention to who your teammates are fucking and a little more to what your teammates need during PK."

The kid makes a pained noise underneath his hand. "Right," he says. "I mean. Yes. That makes sense."

“One day you’ll go through puberty and everything will make sense,” Ilya tells him kindly.

“Right, right—hey!”

~

A year ago, in November, Ilya had had a rare 40-hour break—no games, optional practice only—and Shane had texted him at the beginning of the month to crow about having something called a *golden weekend*, claiming he was going to sleep for the entire thing.

Obviously that had not happened. Ilya had walked off the ice in Toronto and directly onto the last flight of the day to Montreal, where he called a car service to drive him to Shane’s condo building. Less than three hours after crushing the Leafs into ignominious crumbs, Ilya had stepped through the door of Shane’s condo, fitted one hand around his neck and the other under his thigh, and licked into Shane’s mouth with a wide, flat swipe of his tongue. Shane had tasted like toothpaste. He had made little *ah ah ah* panting noises, his pulse hammering under Ilya’s palm. Ilya had used his hips to pin Shane against the wall and felt Shane’s hands slide into his hair and hold on, tightly, as though Shane was worried one or both of them might float away.

I won, what will you give me: that had been on the tip of Ilya’s tongue. Embarrassing, really; it was hardly impressive to have beaten a team as pathetic as that season’s Leafs.

Instead, he had stripped off Shane’s soft t-shirt and sweatpants, slipped his hand inside of Shane’s briefs, and gently stroked the wet tip of his cock until it had begun to weep against Ilya’s palm and Shane had been making incoherent little noises in the back of his throat that might have been *please fuck me* in Russian, except Ilya wasn’t giving him enough space to breathe and actually exhale the words.

When he had released Shane’s cock and stepped closer, bending down to slide his hand between Shane’s thighs, behind his balls and over his perineum to a familiar hot little hole, he had felt a betraying dampness there, too.

Ilya’s whole body had shivered. He had still been fully dressed in his game day suit and the wool overcoat he’d worn over it to ward off the clammy chill in Toronto; he knew that Shane was going insane with lust because he hadn’t yet yelled at Ilya about taking off his shoes or folding the sweatpants crumpled on the floor. Ilya was starting to get a little sweaty, overheated, but he couldn’t imagine letting go.

“Ilyusha,” Shane had breathed, trembling under Ilya’s hands.

“But it’s my favorite part,” Ilya had said, stupidly.

“We only have forty hours,” Shane had replied, then he’d put his hands on Ilya’s shoulders and boosted himself up, using his unbelievably beautiful abs to steady himself as he wrapped his legs around Ilya’s hips. Ilya had felt the shapes of their cocks slip against each other and had genuinely whited out a little bit, possessed by some insane and overwhelming impulse that he hadn’t really understood—and when he’d finally felt a little less fucking crazed, he’d

been kissing Shane with fevered urgency as he crushed him down into the mattress that he knew Shane had bought after testing literally hundreds of options.

Ilya had only managed to remove about one and a half items of clothing before fucking himself into Shane, neither of which had been a shoe. After he'd recovered from his two pleasant-looking orgasms, Shane had pulled his feet up onto the bed like the floor was lava and ordered Ilya to vacuum the path from the front door to the bedroom. Cajoling and petting and kissing on Ilya's part had not dissuaded him from insisting on this; but after Ilya had put the vacuum away, Shane had carefully cleaned Ilya with a damp washcloth and then lay next to him on the bed and held his softened cock in his mouth until Ilya had recovered enough to get hard again. It had only taken about five minutes. Those fucking freckles; those dark eyes, glazed with tears like cherries.

Shane had only ended up getting about twelve hours of sleep for the entirety of his golden weekend. As an apology, Ilya had sent him a crate of twenty-four jars of his favorite brand of almonds.

~

Shane flies in from Ottawa on October 3rd, the day before his conference starts. Ilya gets out of training camp and races home just in time to meet Shane in the parking garage of his condo building. It takes a tremendous amount of willpower for Ilya not to molest Shane in the elevator up to the penthouse; he accomplishes it by staring at the unblinking fish eye lens of the security camera mounted in the corner.

Shane has to shower after flying, this is non-negotiable, but luckily the waterfall showerhead in Ilya's master bathroom is big enough for two. They stumble out an hour or so after getting in, prune-fingered, light-headed from dehydration, and go to raid the fridge. "Want something to drink?" Ilya asks. "Ginger ale?" He slides a can across the counter towards Shane without waiting for an answer.

They eat sandwiches standing up at the kitchen counter. As Ilya shoves the plates into his dishwasher, Shane goes to use the bathroom and then comes back into the kitchen to fetch himself a second ginger ale. "You want anything?" Shane asks.

Ilya wants a glass of vodka and a cigarette, but he knows neither of those is likely to happen. "No," he says, turning on the faucet to rinse off the knife he'd used to cut Shane's sandwich into triangles. When he turns it off again, there is a strange quality to the silence.

Shane is standing in front of the open fridge. As Ilya watches, he slowly closes the door without taking anything out.

"Ginger ale should be cold," Ilya tells him. "I put cans in weeks ago."

"Who is Vladimir," Shane asks flatly.

Fuck.

"Ah," Ilya says.

Shane presses, “Is that his toothbrush in the bathroom?”

“Shane—“ Ilya tries.

Shane blinks twice. He is not looking at Ilya directly so much as he is squinting in Ilya’s general direction. “Right,” Shane says. “Sorry. Probably a weird question, right? Since we never said—that this was exclusive, or whatever.”

Ilya feels a cold wave of sensation crush his spinal cord like a fucking bug. “Not exclusive?” he parrots, stupidly.

“We never talked about it,” Shane says. “Because we’re not, right?”

“What?” Ilya says dumbly.

“*Exclusive*, Ilya!” Shane shouts and then he visibly recovers himself. “Sorry,” he says to somewhere over Ilya’s left shoulder. “I’m—I shouldn’t be—that was rude.”

Ilya is too baffled to move. *What the fuck is happening?* he wonders to himself. Shane is not wearing a shirt and for once this seems to genuinely discomfit him; he’s shifting from foot to foot as Ilya stares at him, drawing his arms across his chest.

“Of course we are exclusive,” Ilya says. “Who else am I fucking? Who else are *you* fucking? You work a hundred hours every week, you have no time.”

“I’m not fucking anybody else, but I assume you’re fucking *Vladimir*, the guy who *lives here*,” Shane says venomously.

Ilya is finally able to move his arms. He makes a wild gesture of confusion. “Vladimir is an infant! He is eighteen years old and cannot speak English so he sleeps in my guest room!”

Shane stops twitching. He also stops staring over Ilya’s shoulder and actually looks at him. “Wait, is Vladimir your rookie? Pogonin, right?”

“Yes,” Ilya says immediately, gratitude and relief coursing through his entire fucking body. “Wait, wait, how—“ because Shane had known to say Vladimir was a rookie. Shane had called him *Ilya*.

Shane flushes so deeply that Ilya can suddenly make out freckles he’s literally never seen before. “I know privacy is important to you,” he says, very stiffly. “For obvious reasons, since there’s never been an out player in the league. I thought you were telling me that you—you know, didn’t want to talk about it. With, like. Cues.”

“Cues,” Ilya echoes, baffled.

“Right,” Shane says, beginning to relax again. He clearly thinks Ilya is successfully following this insane trail of logic (he is not). “So it would have been awkward to, uh. Bring up hockey. So I didn’t.”

“Did you want to?” Ilya asks.

“I mean, I guess?” Shane says. “Whatever the hell was going on with Itkonen last year seemed like it was probably pretty stressful for you.”

“Itsy had seventy points,” Ilya says, dazed. “Objectively not bad season.”

“He’s right wing for the best center in the league, seventy points is ridiculous,” Shane says. “Wait, sorry, was there—like, an injury, or—something—?”

“No, he is just shit hockey player,” Ilya replies. “But you know this, too. How?”

Shane bites the corner of his mouth. “Just a fan,” he says. He lowers his gaze, staring at the floor; his dark eyelashes sweep down and freckles bloom over his cheeks like stars. “I—played—I guess. As a kid. I had to stop when they found the VSD.”

“That is this?” Ilya asks, pretending to draw a line down the middle of his chest in the spot where a faint, silvery scar is visible between Shane’s pecs.

“Median sternotomy to close it, yeah,” Shane says. “The scar has faded a lot. It’s kind of a cliché, but—I mean, the surgical team who did it saved my life. Why wouldn’t I want to help other people in the same way? And they told me I couldn’t play professionally.”

Ilya feels so insanely light-headed that he has to briefly tuck his chin down and rest it on his chest. “Number 24 Hollander,” he mumbles, squeezing his eyes closed. “World Juniors in Helsinki, whole tournament your backhand was weak as shit and then—“

“My backhand was not weak,” Shane cuts in, “it was *strategic*—“

“—it was tie-breaker against Sweden,” Ilya finishes. “Fuck. Fuck!” He straightens up, slams down the bread knife he has for some idiotic reason been holding for this entire conversation, and crosses the kitchen in half a dozen strides. He grips Shane’s head between his hands and tilts his head back. “Shane,” he says seriously, “first, I want exclusive. You fuck anyone else, I will be very upset. Second, I am very rich hockey player—you know this, so stop complaining when I buy plane tickets and nice presents. Third, you still skate? Okay for heart?”

“Yes,” Shane mumbles.

“Third, I have ice time on Friday,” Ilya says. “Private, work on personal things. You will come.”

Shane doesn’t open his eyes straight away—probably he’s a little too overwhelmed—but some of the tension seeps out of the muscles under Ilya’s hands. A small smile cracks open across his face. “You’re such a pervert,” he manages to get out, just before Ilya kisses him.

~

Six months ago, mid-April, Ilya had finished his annual pre-playoffs tape review and decided that so long as his teammates insisted on drawing too many men penalties, Ilya would insist on bag skates to cap off practice. LeClaire had not protested. In this way, he had always been

a good coach for Captain Rozanov—he knew when to give Ilya a little bit of room to do his own thing.

“Bag skate continue until line change improve!” Ilya had bellowed. He’d been met with a chorus of groans. Someone had mumbled that they were going to throw up. Fucking babies.

“Roz,” Marleau had said as their teammates had all wearily poured into the locker room, “this is fucking insane, even for you.”

“I am always sane,” Ilya had replied.

“Not fucken true, man,” Duxy had panted as he’d pushed past.

Itkonen had mumbled something in Finnish to Lappalainen, one of the guys they’d just traded for from Carolina; Lappalainen had shrugged.

“I review tape of all games this year at MSG,” Ilya had said, “and you—how am say—*moronic fucking chucklefucks* can’t change a line cleanly to save your fucking lives.” He had pointed at Itkonen. “Itsy, you are on my last shred of patience.”

“Got it, Roz,” Itkonen had lied.

“Be better!” Ilya had bellowed. “I want third fucking ring! If Scott Hunter wins Hart this year I will make it a problem for every single one of you.”

“Yeah, well I want fucking Olive Garden,” O’Neill had mumbled.

Ilya had pivoted and pointed at him. “Neilly, you were not terrible. Only drew one penalty against Admirals this year, five minutes for trying to kill Carter. This is acceptable to me. We will go to Olive Garden.” This declaration had drawn actual, if ragged, cheers from various corners of the locker room and everyone had dispersed to the showers. Ilya had taken advantage of the brief moment of privacy to check his phone. Nothing had come in during practice, just like nothing had come for days at that point, so he’d just bitten the bullet and texted Jane, *when will you hear about fellowship match?*

Ilya had been halfway through demolishing his second plate of spaghetti bolognese when the reply had finally come. *April 29th. Probably I’m going to have a fucking aneurysm before then, though.*

Ilya had immediately stopped paying attention to any conversation occurring around him. *Ottawa have to be stupid to not take you.*

That’s unfortunately not how it works, Jane had replied. And then, *I would say thanks but I’m pretty sure you do think Ottawa is stupid?*

Boring, Ilya had corrected. *Just like you))) perfect match.*

As they arrange themselves in bed to Shane's satisfaction, Ilya asks sleepily, "Do you like lunch box?"

"Oh!" Shane says, startled in the middle of arranging the pillows into their optimal configuration. "Yeah, it's pretty cool. My mom used to pack lunch for me, you know, like—rice balls, that kind of stuff—uh in a box like that."

His face has flushed a little, Ilya realizes with pleasure.

"Insulated, too," Ilya says. "For soup."

"I can't believe you remembered I like soup for lunch," Shane mumbles as he settles back against the pillows.

"Cornerstone of meal," Ilya recites from memory. He wriggles around a little until his face is comfortably set into the curve of muscle suspended between Shane's collarbone and pec. Shane smells both rubbery and powdery; the dueling odors of his various skincare products. He also smells very faintly of sweat. Ilya wants to lick it all off of his skin, every molecule of shared salt that managed to survive Shane's postcoital shower. It is easy for Ilya tell himself that he is fine with what they've been doing—hooking up, seeing each other casually, long-distance whatever—when Shane is hundreds of miles away and Ilya is distracted by the dumb fucking cats he is being paid millions of dollars to herd. But when they're together like this, squished into bed, and Ilya's mouth tastes like Shane and his nose tingles from the chemical burn of Shane's various expensive creams and his spent cock can rest against the hairy, muscled length of Shane's thigh, Ilya cannot believe he has been stupid enough to let them live for three years with a fucking international border between them.

"Am thinking," Ilya says quietly. "I will be free agent at end of season."

"Maybe you should go to Detroit," Shane mumbles sleepily. "You really clicked with Petrov on your left wing in Sochi. And they've got cap space with Donahue going to LA."

"I would rather die," Ilya says seriously.

Shane huffs out a short laugh.

"No, I am not going to fucking Detroit," Ilya continues. "Ottawa reached out to my agent."

Ilya feels Shane go stiff under his cheek. "Really?!" he says, less sleepily. "What gave them the nerve?"

Probably Ilya telling them he was interested. But he doesn't tell Shane this. "They want me very badly. Of course. Because they are terrible team and I am best living hockey player."

"Gretzky is *still alive*," Shane says, "you dick."

"Nearly as old as Scott Hunter," Ilya says dismissively. "I expect him to die any day now."

Shane says, "Ilyusha."

“Bad idea?” Ilya asks, pretending nonchalance he absolutely doesn’t feel. “Now you are in Ottawa for fellowship, it’s too weird?”

Shane splutters, “No! Well! Maybe? No! Ugh. What do you want to happen?” He sounds frustrated and slightly frazzled by that frustration, as though Ilya is a crossword puzzle clue he can’t figure out. “Would we just—keep doing this?” And then he says, “Hooking up? Exclusively?” in a strained voice.

“No,” Ilya says. He turns his head and bites Shane’s pec. “You would be—lover.”

“Oh,” Shane squeaks. “Like. Partner?”

“Bland Canadian word for not at all bland relationship,” Ilya grumbles.

“Would it be weird? I don’t care about being out at work,” Shane says. He is clearly thinking out loud; it makes Ilya feel very cozy and privileged to experience the workings of Shane’s anxious mind in real time, with audio commentary. “In general I kind of wish I knew—less, about the personal lives of everyone I work with. But my parents are really important to me. I would like them to know.”

“Smart grandmother?” Ilya asks.

“Dead,” Shane says. “And we don’t talk to the other one. When the pediatric neurologist diagnosed me as a kid, Grandma told my dad I was probably just really Japanese and it was my mom’s fault. I just care about my parents. I’m assuming your brother—?”

“Can die in fire,” Ilya replies. He kisses Shane’s chest. “Okay. Good plan.” He carefully frames a flat brown nipple between his index and middle fingers and licks it. “Done with planning now?”

Shane moans, hand coming up to cup Ilya’s cheek. Ilya kisses the little scar over Shane’s heart, open-mouthed, letting the smooth texture of it slip over his tongue. “Ilyusha,” Shane says, “please fuck me.” And he asks for it in Russian, so sweetly that there’s no way Ilya can possibly refuse him.

~

In eight months, the Admirals will win the Stanley Cup and confirmed cradle-robber Scott Hunter will celebrate winning the Hart by groping his secret boyfriend on live television. Ilya, slack-jawed and offended, will be watching with his boyfriend’s parents in the living room of Shane’s new house in Ottawa. Shane will be stuck in surgery for another three hours and miss the entire thing. When he does finally make it home, he will find Ilya and his mother still awake and hunched over an Excel spreadsheet as they outline a four-year strategy that will allow Ilya to move to Ottawa, play for Russia in Pyeongchang—“not that I really care,” Ilya will tell Shane, “but your mama thinks optics are better”—come out, retain his corporate sponsors, and then get Canadian citizenship in time to play in Beijing. *Easy to do through a spouse*, Shane’s mother had said with studied nonchalance, and although Ilya had agreed he hadn’t let her add it to the spreadsheet, just in case it spooked Shane.

But all that is eight months away. For now, Ilya sleeps in Boston in a cloud of carefully-arranged pillows, his head on Shane's chest, listening to the steady metronome of his heart. He does not fucking snore.

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