Compulsion

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Compulsion

by Wolftales

Summary

“Need a bet to get laid, Rozanov? You’re really that desperate these days?”

“Nostalgic, maybe.”

“Wow. Big word.”

“Shut up, Hollander.”

Shane shuts up.

“When I win,” Rozanov continues. “I get *you for…twenty-four hours.”*

or

Shane and Ilya are in rival frats in their senior year and it's time for the annual Greek Olympiad. A bet is made.

Chapter 1: The Bet

Chapter Notes

> All I know about fraternities and sororities I learned from ABC Family's Greek and Pixar's Monsters University, because I'm cultured.
>
> If you can spot at least three references two those two pieces of media in this fic, I'll give you a cookie in the comments.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 2013

Shane has no idea how he let Hayden talk him into this.

Fraternities and Shane Hollander do not go together. Like oil and water. Cats and dogs. Or some other third pairing that shouldn't be mixed together. Shane had known this when he arrived at university for his freshman year days ago, but from the moment he walked into his dorm room, Hayden would speak of nothing else but rush week and Shane started to regret becoming roommates with his high school best friend.

After all, that's how he ended up standing in the middle of the Kappa Tau Gamma house holding a red plastic cup filled with God knows what and desperately trying to look not awkward.

According to Hayden, Kappa Tau was decidedly *not* a fraternity they would be pledging for, because he's apparently decided that both he and Shane will be joining a house. Kappa Tau is infamous for being the rowdiest party house on campus, and while Hayden couldn't resist a good party, he is apparently determined to go with a tidier image for his resumé. Still, he dragged Shane here for their last stop after they had already visited the other houses and their far cleaner and more professional welcome parties.

The Kappa Tau house is everything Hollywood had led Shane to believe fraternity houses would be. Too loud to hear himself think, a beer pong table set up in both the living room and outside (the one outside Hayden is currently excitedly participating in), couples making out in the corner of seemingly every room, and a carpet that looks like it hasn't seen a vacuum in months, to put it generously.

All in all, not Shane's scene.

Some of the other fraternities seemed okay. He had shown up mostly so Hayden didn't have to go alone. But once he got to talking with some of the fraternity leadership in the houses, he started to see the benefit of joining. It isn't all just parties and getting drunk. Though it seems that's all it really is to Kappa Tau. No one in the frat had even come up to speak to him and

Hayden about the house beyond just shoving drinks into their hands and inviting them to beer pong.

He's hoping Hayden won't want to stay much longer as someone bumps into him from behind and nearly knocks him and his drink into the laps of three girls sprawled over the couch. With that incident, Shane decides he needs a minute of quiet, if that can even be found in a place like this. He puts his untouched red cup of suspicious liquid on the closest table and leaves the room to seek out refuge.

The stairs in the entryway provide the closest means of escape. It doesn't seem quite as loud upstairs, though he imagines that may be because that's where partygoers sneak away for… private time in the bedrooms. He doesn't want to think about that but it's also the only place in the house that seems remotely quiet. He takes quick steps up the stairs.

Rather than taking the risk of scarring himself by entering one of the rooms, he leans against the banister when he makes it up, overlooking the party. He was right, it's not so bad up here. The music is a bit muffled and the lights are dimmer. One person comes out of the bathroom up here, but the landing he's standing on is unoccupied otherwise. Shane pretends the bedroom doors and whatever might be happening behind them don't exist.

He checks his watch. 11:32. Probably very early by the standards of Kappa Tau but for him, way past the time he's usually still up. They've only been here for thirty minutes, but Shane thinks maybe Hayden will get bored soon and they can leave. One thing is for sure; Kappa Tau is not a house he'll be spending a lot of time in after tonight.

"You want drink?"

Shane startles slightly at the voice from behind him. He turns around to see a man standing there, holding one of those red cups. Shane has no idea if he came up the stairs or out of one of the doors, he hadn't heard him arrive. The man looks about his age. Shane doesn't think he's an upperclassman, and he also heard the accent in his voice when he had spoken. Something European? Shane isn't sure. An exchange student, he guesses.

The man holds his red cup forward and shakes it. Shane remembers he had asked him a question.

"No, no," Shane says, holding his hand up. "I'm fine, thanks."

Shane looks over the banister again at the people beneath him, thinking that would be the end of the interaction. But the guy is suddenly standing next to him. Shane fidgets, having never been particularly good at the party small talk thing.

"Freshman?" the guy asks, and there's the accent again. Russian?

"Uh, yeah. Yeah. I'm a freshman." Great. Not awkward at all.

"Me too," he says, taking a sip from his mysterious drink in the red cup.

Shane thinks it's kind of funny that a freshman that is also here for rush week is going around a party asking strangers if they want a drink. Isn't that more the job of the Kappa Tau upperclassmen?

"I'm Shane Hollander," he says, suddenly remembering his manners as he thrusts his hand forward for a handshake. "It's nice to meet you."

The guy looks at his hand and then meets Shane's eyes for the first time, and Shane thinks he sees some amusement there, his lips quirking up. But he shakes Shane's hand, without offering his own name, Shane notices.

"Where are you from?" Shane asks. See? He can make conversation.

The guy hesitates for a moment, and Shane tries to stop himself from staring at his jawline.

"Russia."

Shane does an inner fist pump that he had correctly picked up on this guy's accent.

"That's awesome, are you an exchange student?" he asks, curious. "I saw that the president of the university released a statement about wanting to increase the number of exchange students for—"

"I'm here for hockey," the guy cuts him off, the amused look still on his face.

"Oh." Something clicks in Shane's brain then. Russian student. Freshman. Hockey. The news he read about the university hockey team snatching up a Russian player who showed a lot of promise. Ilya Rozanov. He remembers the name.

"You're Ilya Rozanov?"

The guy, Ilya Rozanov, nods, taking another sip of his drink.

Jealousy and excitement course through Shane's veins. He knows all about hockey, though he doesn't follow it quite as closely as he used to. Up until high school, he had played, and his coaches and parents talked about him like he was some kind of prodigy. Playing in college and then the pros was in his future. Everyone was saying it. It was a dream. He loved the game.

Then he blew out his knee on the ice in his junior year of high school and ended any chance of that dream ever happening.

The injury was not so serious as to be felt or impact him in his regular life, but he could never play hockey at the level he used to again. That became clear after many doctors visits and months of trying. So, he just stopped. If he couldn't play at his best, then he didn't want to play at all.

Not exactly something he likes to think about or feels like discussing in this situation with someone he just met. He turns away, looking back over the banister. "That's cool, man. Welcome to Canada."

Even when looking away, he can feel Ilya's eyes still on him. "You join this fraternity?"

Shane chuckles at that. Just the thought of himself as a Kappa Tau is preposterous. "No, man, I don't think this is the house for me."

"Why not?" It's odd, how Ilya sounds like he genuinely wants to know. Shane can't imagine why.

"Uh, I just don't think I'd fit in well here." He glances back at Ilya as he gestures between himself, and the people partying downstairs. "Some of the other fraternities would probably be better for me."

Huh. How about that? Looks like he's deciding he might actually join a fraternity. He didn't think that would happen when he woke up this morning.

"Which?" The peppering questions in that heavy accent continue.

"Uh, I don't know." Shane wishes he could stop saying "uh" like an idiot. He tries to reach back in his brain for the names of other fraternities he visited tonight. "Omega Chi Delta seemed pretty nice. They offer a lot of stuff like alumni job assistance, and they really emphasize academics—"

Shane hears chuckling from next to him and when he looks at Ilya, there's a grin plastered across his face. He's momentarily taken aback by that; his smile, his bright blue eyes, even though it's obvious Ilya is kind of laughing at him.

"*What*?" Shane asks, he feels his face heating and hopes it's too dark up here for it to be obvious.

The chuckles continue. "You join fraternity for academics?"

"I mean, yeah." Shane hasn't really minded this conversation thus far, but he's feeling a little put off now. Those mocking eyes grating on his nerves. "Fraternities are supposed to be fun, sure, but they're also supposed to help you with your classes and your future—"

Ilya snorts and says something under his breath that Shane can't understand. He can't tell if it was heavily accented English or Russian.

"What was that?" Shane is annoyed by how strained his voice sounds.

"You ever have fun, Shane Hollander?" Ilya asks.

"What?" Shane asks, a little cuttingly. That's the first time Ilya has used this name and he's not sure how he feels about how it sounds in that voice and in that accent, flowing off his tongue a little too easily. His fingers are tingling just a bit.

"Fun," Ilya says, drawing the word out. "You ever have it? This is English word, yes? Fun?"

"Yes, that's the English word and I—" Shane doesn't know why he's so defensive all of a sudden. "You ask a lot of questions, Ilya Rozanov," he grumbles, trying out the other's name

in his mouth for the first time. He's feeling embarrassed that he's been talking to this guy for all of five minutes only to be called a stick in the mud and feeling even more embarrassed at the fact that it might be true.

"Is that no? You don't have fun?" Ilya's eyes are trailing him up and down now, like Shane is a specimen under his microscope.

Shane sighs and shifts on his feet, feeling, for the first time tonight, like he needs a drink. "Can I have some of that?" he asks quietly, gesturing to Ilya's drink.

Ilya immediately holds out his red cup and Shane takes it from him, feeling Ilya's fingers brush his as he does. Ignoring the tingling sensation, he brings the cup to his lips, feeling Ilya's gaze still on him as he drinks.

It's awful, and Shane has to make every effort not to choke as the searing liquid makes its way down his throat. He had been expecting beer, this tastes like gasoline. While he avoids making a complete fool out of himself by spitting the alcohol back up, he knows he's wincing when he pulls the cup away from his mouth, bringing the back of his hand to his lips.

Ilya is grinning again.

"What *is* this?" Shane asks, his voice strained.

"Is vodka," Ilya tells him. "Not very good. The American stuff is shit."

Shane holds the cup back out to him, not wanting to even look at the liquid in the cup again. This time, Ilya's whole hand covers his as he takes the cup back, and Shane can't help but think that it felt deliberate.

Another chuckle. "You *are* boring." Ilya brings the cup to his own mouth and takes an easy swig, without even a flinch, winking at him as he does so.

Shane knows his face is fully red now.

"I'm not," he says, hoping he doesn't sound childish. "I mean, I came here tonight, didn't I?" This feels like a pretty weak rebuttal given that Ilya had found him upstairs hiding from the party.

"Hm." Ilya steps closer to him, their shoulders nearly touching, his hand sliding along towards Shane's on the banister. "You come here with anyone?"

Shane feels his body stiffening and he's not sure why. Ilya's hand is right next to his on the banister and he's suddenly overcome with the temptation to reach out his pinky towards his, to touch his hand and feel that sensation from earlier again. It's bizarre. He's being weird again. He tamps down on the urge to sidle up closer, forcing himself to be normal.

"Did I…?" Shane asks quietly. He's already forgotten the question.

"Come here with anyone?" Ilya says, leaning closer so Shane can practically feel his breath against his face.

Shane looks at him then, and the proximity overwhelms him, Ilya's eyes scanning over his face before pinning him with his gaze. He wobbles on his feet and opens his mouth to say he has no idea what when—

"Shane! Yo, Shane! You up here, buddy?" Hayden's voice. Feet pounding up the stairs.

Shane practically jumps backwards, as if he's been caught doing something he shouldn't have, which is ridiculous. They had just been standing there. Ilya doesn't look bothered at all. Only dragging his gaze to the staircase as Hayden comes bounding up. Obviously, Shane had misread the whole thing, overreacted.

"There you are!" Hayden says when he reaches them on the landing. He looks a little drunk but far from his worst. "You ready to bounce? I think I've had my fill tonight."

"Uh, yeah." Shane glances at Ilya, still caught in the previous moment. Leaving is probably a very good idea right now, he determines.

"Who's this?" Hayden asks, gesturing at Ilya, apparently just noticing that Shane is with someone.

Ilya doesn't say anything. Shane can't fully see his expression as he looks at Hayden, but he doesn't look particularly happy, though he doesn't know why that would be. He decides that Ilya's silence leaves him to make introductions.

"This is Ilya Rozanov," Shane tells Hayden. "He, uh, he's that hockey player the university found in Russia. The one I told you about?"

"Oh yeah!" Hayden says, smiling. He grabs Ilya's free hand, which had been hanging by his side, in his and shakes it enthusiastically. "I'm Hayden! Nice to meet you, man. It'll be awesome to watch you play this year."

Ilya appears to be glaring down at Hayden's hand clasped around his. "Yes," is all he says.

Hayden drops his hand. Apparently, even in his inebriated state, he detected the coldness of that greeting. Shane shifts awkwardly. It had been obvious from about halfway through the conversation, but Ilya Rozanov is not exactly the easiest person.

"Well, I'm ready to go if you are," Shane says, slipping around Ilya's body and putting a hand on Hayden's shoulder. He's suddenly anxious to get out of here, to escape whatever these last few minutes were.

"Yeah, I've been ready," Hayden agrees. Then he eyes up Ilya again uncertainly. "Nice to meet you, man."

Ilya doesn't even bother to acknowledge him as his eyes move to Shane. "Will see you around this semester, Shane Hollander" he says, his eyes lighting up again with their previous amusement. "Will be *fun*."

The word, which Ilya stresses ever so slightly, makes Shane flinch. He does his best not to scowl, which is probably exactly what Ilya wants him to do right now after all of the subtle or

not-so-subtle mocking at his expense tonight. He holds his chin up.

“See you around, *Rozanov*,” he says, turning away and walking to the stairs, pulling Hayden along with him.

Shane very much hopes that he won’t be seeing Rozanov around at all. The good news is, it seems Rozanov is interested in joining Kappa Tau, a house Shane has absolutely no desire to come within a hundred yards of ever again. Though he wonders if joining Omega Chi or another fraternity means he’ll see people in other fraternities a lot? He still barely has any idea how this works.

At least he’s getting away from him and that mocking stare now though.

“Huh, he was something,” Hayden says as they make it down the stairs. “Ilya Rozanov, huh. You talked to him? What was he like?”

“Kind of a dick,” Shane says as he opens the front door out to Greek Row.

March 2017

“Welcome everyone to the sixty-third annual Greek Week Olympiad!”

“It’s Greek Month, not Greek Week,” Shane corrects, though it’s not like the overly enthusiastic president of the student body making the announcement can hear him from all the way back here.

“Oh my God, Shane. Every year.” Hayden chuckles beside him, trying to get the Omega Chi banner in order for their march through the quad in the Parade of Houses.

“And I’m right every year,” Shane insists. “Greek Week is not a week. It lasts a month. The name is nonsensical.”

Hayden scoffs. “Just be a good VP and help me out with this stupid banner.”

“Of course, Mister President.” The banner is fine. Hayden is just more nervous than usual as they get their fraternity brothers in order to hold the banner right. It’s almost time for them to start moving, the student body president wrapping up the welcome speech next to the statue of the university founder.

Ah, Greek Week. Or Greek Month as Shane calls it. The event that Shane has always found to be the silliest part of Greek life. Not only is the name incorrect, but it does next to nothing to improve student life. It’s done a great job of increasing the animosity between houses though, and he supposes the collecting canned goods for donations part of the whole affair is a positive. That’s about it.

Sororities and fraternities all participate, though the actual games and competitions are optional. Flag football, beach volleyball, dance competitions, and a bunch of other random contests the student council comes up with, eliminating houses along the way. Whichever

house is left standing and has the most points at the end of the month wins the trophy and bragging rights. It's all very juvenile.

But still, Shane could never say no to participating in Greek Week. It is not required, even as vice president of Omega Chi, but he quietly loves it. It gives him the opportunity to revel in some competitive spirit, something he rarely gets to do outside the classroom.

And Omega Chi has won Greek Week the last three years in a row with him on the team, thank you very much, and he has every intention of making this a four-peat before he graduates and heads off into the real world.

"Alright, I think that's good," Hayden says as he steps back to look at the banner. He looks to Shane for confirmation. "Is it good?"

"It's great, man." He gives Hayden a slap on the back.

Hayden has made for a good Omega Chi president. Their junior year, he had told Shane that he should run, but Shane balked. As much as he had found things to enjoy about being in a fraternity after the hell of being a pledge, it was never exactly his calling. He's sure he wouldn't have joined one in the first place if Hayden hadn't dragged him into it. But Hayden and some of the other brothers wanted him in a leadership position, so he compromised by running for vice president. He gets to work alongside Hayden without having to be the face of the fraternity. Much better that way.

The job stresses Hayden out, but he's the right fit.

"Hey! Hey there, excuse me!" comes a familiar voice from behind their position in the parade lineup.

Shane cringes internally and turns around. Speaking of fraternity presidents…

Ilya Rozanov, president of Kappa Tau house, jogs up to them with some urgency, looking out of breath. Shane wonders if he just got here and where the rest of his house is. He's been here for over an hour getting things together and hasn't seen Rozanov until just now.

"Oh good, I caught you in time," Rozanov says, chest heaving. "You're in wrong place. The flight attendants convention is down the street. That way." He points off somewhere in the distance.

Shane has heard so many digs from Rozanov about Omega Chi's adherence to the jacket and tie uniform at campus events over the years that this one doesn't even make him blink. It's one of Rozanov's weaker lines, if he's being quite honest. Maybe, with graduation approaching, he's finally starting to run out of ideas.

"You know, Rozanov, that's what I'm gonna miss the most about you when I never have to see you again," Hayden says, crossing his arms. "That sense of humor."

"Glad to know you think of me, Pike, but your tie is crooked," Rozanov says, smiling.

Hayden looks down and his tie is indeed crooked. He curses and adjusts it.

Rozanov turns his attention to Shane, eyes scanning him up and down. “Very pretty as always, Hollander. Is difficult when your president cannot measure up, yes?”

Shane smiles. Rozanov is not going to spoil his mood today. He picks up the bag containing the Greek Week trophy, golden and gleaming and sure, just a basic looking trophy a university would buy, but a trophy nonetheless. “Laugh it up now, Rozanov, but this is the closest you’ll ever get to this trophy. So you should enjoy it while you can.”

“For real, man,” Hayden says, finished making sure his tie is perfect. “Why did you even enter the games again? You guys came in like, fifth last year.”

Rozanov shrugs. “Fourth place, actually.”

“Yes, fourth. That makes it less embarrassing,” Shane taunts, hearing the condescension dripping from his voice.

“So serious, Hollander,” Rozanov says with a mock yawn. “So serious about cute little Greek Week. They are supposed to be fun. You need trophy so badly?”

“Just feels nice to win something,” Shane returns. “I know you can’t really relate to that.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows raise at that and Hayden snickers. Shane thinks he might see his temper flaring just a bit behind Rozanov’s eyes and he internally crows with victory. It’s rare for him to hit his mark on Rozanov in their regular verbal sparring matches.

Just as Rozanov opens his mouth to say something else, the student body president announces, voice booming over the quad, “I now give you, the Parade of Houses!”

A few other student council members flit about the parade line, making sure that everyone starts moving, the fraternity and sorority names being listed off over the speaker. Hayden moves back to the banner, making sure it and their brothers look ready to go.

“Well,” Rozanov says, bringing Shane’s attention back to him. “I guess I should get my brothers together for parade.”

“That’s right. You should,” Shane agrees, turning from him and feeling absolutely delighted with himself as he prepares to move with the rest of his house. Basking in getting one over on Rozanov. It’s the little things in life.

When he tries to hand the trophy to Hayden to carry in the parade, Hayden balks. “Man, you won that thing for us all three years. You carry it.”

“You’re the president,” Shane argues.

“And the president doesn’t want to carry the heavy trophy.” Hayden pats him on the shoulder. “So, I leave that honor to my much stronger and beefier vice president.”

In truth, Shane is glad to be the one to carry the trophy. It’s his last year, his last semester, his last Greek Week. He won’t get the chance to do this again. He also doesn’t mind showing off.

He thinks he's earned that right. Hayden's not wrong, he did carry them to victory every year, though he wouldn't say that out loud.

The parade runs smoothly enough. They follow the train to the founder's statue and when their house name is called, they're introduced as the defending champions and Shane brings the trophy to be handed off to the student body president. He doesn't like to let it go but also knows it's temporary. When that's done, he and the rest of the Omega Chis take their place in one of the empty spots in the quad for the parade to finish.

It seems Rozanov was able to get his house together, though they are not in any sort of uniform. All mismatched in their usual jeans and t-shirts and jackets. Shane shakes his head as they pass him by. Then catches himself once again for having morphed into one of those fraternity snobs, which he never thought he would become.

"In the spirit of Greek unity," the student body president cuts into Shane's thoughts as the parade concludes. "I hereby declare open the 2017 Greek Week games!"

"Greek Month!" Shane chirps again.

"Shut up, Shane," a few of his brothers, including Hayden, groan in unison.

Shane grins, and as they wrap up their banner and start to disperse, Shane lets Hayden know he's going to find Rose. They made plans to get coffee after the parade.

The Zeta Beta Zeta house is always easy to spot in any location. Shane is pretty sure astronauts could see them from space in their hot pink matching tracksuits. Pink is usually the theme with ZBZ and why not? They wear it well. Rose in particular.

As he beelines towards Rose's redheaded form, her vice president, Melanie, spots him first and points. "Enemy approaching, Madame President."

Shane holds his hands up, showing he is unarmed. "I come in peace. I merely wish to take your lovely president for coffee, if she'll have me."

Rose looks over her shoulder and smiles, nodding approvingly at his jacket and tie. "You look nice today, Mister Vice President. I think I'll have you."

A few of the ZBZs giggle and look curiously between them. Shane can't help but smirk. He wonders how many of the pledges think he and Rose are an item or at least sleeping together. They wouldn't be completely wrong. They had tried that sophomore year. It…didn't exactly work. But Shane is fine if, for the sake of appearances, people on campus think there is still something between them, and Rose doesn't seem to mind, for his sake, letting people think that either. Never confirming but not denying.

Shane holds his arm out for Rose to take and they wind their way through the crowd and off the quad.

"Thank God that's over," Rose says with an exhale. "I thought it would never end."

"Aw, you didn't enjoy your last Greek Month parade?"

“Greek Week, Shane,” she corrects. “And yes, it was a bit nostalgic, but aren’t you exhausted by all of it at this point?”

Shane thought about that. The fourth time doing something was sure to be less exciting than the first, but Shane had found himself enjoying the whole day. “Sure, but I think having the trophy in my arms helps my enthusiasm.”

“Hey!” Rose pokes his arm in reprimand. “Don’t be arrogant. I’m taking that trophy this year.”

“From my cold, dead hands,” he says, not joking.

She looks at him and, completely serious, “I’ll do what I must.”

They both break out into giggles at that, Rose’s head landing comfortably on his shoulder. If another house had to take the trophy from them this year, Shane would be the least mad about it being the ZBZs and Rose. But he would certainly never make it easy for them, and he knows Rose wouldn’t want him to.

“So, before we get coffee…” Rose begins.

“Uh oh, what’s that tone?” Shane asks, recognizing it immediately.

“What tone?”

“You’re going to ask me to do something you know I don’t want to do,” Shane deduces, knowing he’s right. “Okay, let’s hear it.”

Rose bites her lip. “Kappa Tau is hosting—”

Shane groans.

Swatting him playfully on the arm, Rose continues. “They’re hosting a party tonight to celebrate Greek Week. You *know* I don’t want to go to that STD den. But a bunch of our pledges are going, and the council members and I can’t let them go without supervision.”

“So. You and the ZBZ council go and watch over the innocent freshmen,” Shane says. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Every time I go to the KT house, I get groped, hit on, or otherwise harassed,” Rose explains. “It’s like that house gives all the men on campus license to be pigs.”

“You’re not wrong,” Shane agrees.

“I’m asking you to go as my date,” she says. “All I need is for us to go to the party together and do a walk through the house when we arrive, you with your arm around me, so everyone knows *this woman is property of a man and is therefore off limits*.”

Shane frowns. It’s not the first time Rose has asked him for something like this, and every time he’s found it downright depressing.

“After that, you’re free,” Rose concludes. “You don’t have to hang out after that if you don’t want to. I know you hate those parties. And I can watch over my pledges without feeling like I’m a piece of meat all night.”

Sighing in resignation, Shane thinks back to trading barbs with Rozanov earlier. He doesn’t exactly want to willingly enter the lion’s den after that, but he knows he’s going to say yes.

“Please, Shane?” Rose turns her big, pouty eyes on him. “Please be my big, strong, handsome date for a stupid KT party?”

“You know I will,” Shane says without hesitation.

Rose throws her arms around him and kisses him on the cheek. “Shane Hollander, you are the best man I have ever known.”

“You’re funny.”

“And if *that* man bothers you while we’re there, just come find me and let me handle him.” She looks him dead in the eye for this, and Shane isn’t sure even Ilya Rozanov would deserve the wrath of Rose Landry.

It is almost impressive to Shane how little the Kappa Tau house has changed in four years. The Omega Chi house changes its landscaping annually, always factored into the budget. But Shane could see no difference between the KT house now and the KT house the night of rush week his freshman year. Funny that.

He waits outside for Rose and company, having arrived early as usual. 10:00 was early for a fraternity party but Rose knows he won’t want to be out that late. He had opted for casual tonight, wearing a navy-blue polo and jeans, and even put his university cap on. He passes well enough for the beefy boyfriend of a sorority president.

Clacking on the pavement alerts Shane to the arrival of newcomers. He turns and sees Rose alongside Melanie and a couple of other ZBZs. None of them really dressed up for this party, as the Kappa Tau house never called for that.

“Hey Shane,” Rose greets him, kissing him on the cheek. “Some of my pledges are already here and others are following us. Thanks again for coming with me.”

“Of course,” he says, slinging his arm around her.

She looks up and raises an eyebrow. “The backwards cap? Really?”

“I’m your buff, manly boyfriend!” Shane defends. “You don’t like it?”

“No, no, I love it,” she says, patting him on the top of the head. “It’s very masculine. You’re right.”

Shane grins as they follow the other ZBZs into the house.

Upon entering, Shane is immediately hit with the smell of junk food and marijuana. That also has not changed in four years. The party is as loud as it sounded like it would be from outside, and Shane draws Rose slightly closer to him in the crowd. He wonders what the administration would think of this being Greek Row's method of celebrating Greek Week. They would not approve, he imagines.

"The ZBZ house is throwing a themed party in a couple of weeks for Greek Week points," Rose says into his ear as they make their way through the living room. "And it will be a lot nicer than this, I promise you."

"I'm sure it will be," Shane agrees, spotting one of the university basketball players doing a body shot off of a girl on the counter, with quite a few guys lined up behind him to do the same. "What's the theme?"

She gives him a pointed look. "It's for Greek Week points. *Competition*, Shane Hollander. I'm not revealing any of our secrets to you, friend or no, so don't even try."

"I would never play dirty against you, you know that," Shane says with faux outrage, though it is true. "I'm a sportsman."

"And yet you love to win," Rose says with a glint in her eye. "I know you, Shane."

Shane smiles. She's not wrong.

They've made their way to the backyard now, standing on the back porch. He keeps his arm draped over Rose's shoulders, her arm around his waist. The party back here is just as raucous, the beer pong going full swing, a makeshift dance floor at the back near the fence, and someone has set up a tipi, where Hollander notices a couple of the ZBZs have parked themselves with their drinks.

And not that Shane has been looking for him since he walked through the door or anything, but Rozanov is standing behind the makeshift bar, handing out drinks to whoever asks. Shane supposes that's the appropriate place for the host to be. He doesn't look in Shane's direction.

"I think that's good," Rose says, dropping her arm from his waist. "Thanks, Shane. It's time for babysitting duty."

"You want me to stay with you?" Shane asks. After all, he's already here. "I don't mind."

"It's okay. You can bail. The girls and I will go back to the house together, don't worry."

"You'll text me when you get home?" Shane requests as she steps away.

"Always." Blowing a kiss, she turns around and heads for the tipi.

Well, that had been as easy as he hoped it would be. He weighs his options now. He could just leave. Rose has given him her blessing to go, and it's not like Kappa Tau parties are for him anyway. He hasn't seen any of his Omega Chi brothers here, Hayden least of all. But he also walked all the way here so just staying for five minutes and leaving also feels stupid.

He thinks he's settling on leaving when he hears someone call out his name. "Hey Shane! What are *you* doing here?"

Shane looks around and sees Troy Barrett, one of the Kappa Tau pledges, coming up behind him, a smile spread over his pretty face. Shane returns the smile. Despite Troy's choice to join KT instead of Omega Chi like Shane had wanted him to back in rush week when he was trying to woo recruits, Shane still likes this kid.

"Thought I'd scope out the Greek Month competition," Shane answers. "I must say, I'm not that intimidated."

"Isn't it called Greek Week?" Troy asks, his eyebrows coming together.

Shane waves the question away.

"I'm surprised no one stopped you at the door," Troy laughs. "You're public enemy number one around here."

"Not Hayden?"

"Oh, he's an enemy for sure," Troy allows. "But you're Ilya's favorite. Or least favorite, I guess. And the brothers follow Ilya."

Shane clears his throat and briefly glances over his shoulder to where Rozanov is standing at the bar. "You're not doing a great job following house rules then, pledge. You may incur penalties for that."

Troy scoffs and raises his eyebrows, giving him a doubtful look. "I already have to clean toilets every day and wipe up vomit from the floor after all our parties. That's just pledge life."

"It is indeed."

"You want a drink or anything?" Troy asks, eager to please. Shane's not sure but he doesn't think Troy's eyes have left his face for this entire conversation.

"No, but can you take me to wherever…?" Shane makes a motion with his hand meant to imitate smoking a joint.

Troy nods. "Sure! Follow me."

Shane follows. He doesn't smoke weed, or only has on very few occasions, but the room at parties where everyone smokes weed tends to be quieter, tucked away and a little easier for him to tolerate.

Troy brings him to what Shane supposes can be called a den, if the KT house could claim to have such a thing. The equipment is all spread out on the coffee table for use. Shane wonders how much it had cost them, and if Rozanov had purchased it himself. There are only a couple of people there, clearly already partaking in the room's designated activity. No one there who would have an interest in kicking Shane out, fortunately.

He takes a seat on the couch and Troy surprises him by plopping down right next to him. “Want me to roll you one?” Troy asks, already reaching for the table.

“No thanks,” Shane tells him. “Later maybe.”

Troy leans back against the couch, his shoulder touching Shane’s. “What are you doing here anyway, Shane? You barely ever come to these parties.”

“I came with Rose.” Shane settles himself more comfortably on the couch, elbow on the armrest.

“Oh yeah,” Troy says, a little flat. “She’s like, your girlfriend or whatever?”

Shane shrugs noncommittally.

“Well, she and the Zetas will probably also beat us in Greek Week,” Troy says, shifting the subject. “I hear that’s not really Kappa Tau’s thing.”

“Are you participating?” Shane asks.

He smiles. “Hell yeah, man. I’m a hockey player, you think I’m not competing in something like this?”

“You’ll find the time?”

“I’ll *make* time, even if I don’t sleep.”

Shane can’t help but be a little endeared. Troy is a pretty damn good hockey player too. It had been fun watching him at the games this season, and Shane was pretty certain that hockey was the reason he had chosen Kappa Tau over Omega Chi, choosing Rozanov over Shane and Hayden, though Rozanov had opted not to play on the team his senior year, much to the chagrin of the university and the student body.

But Shane had just figured that was because Rozanov wasn’t quite good enough to go pro. An excellent player, but there are levels, and he wasn’t really there. Still, Shane felt a little bitter about it when he heard the news. He would have killed to play four years of hockey at university, even if it wouldn’t take him to the pros.

“You think you’ll win it again this year?” Troy asks, pulling him from his thoughts.

Shane gives him a look that says *duh*.

Troy shoves his shoulder playfully. “Man, the other guys are right about you. You have an ego; you just cover it up with manners.”

“At least I have manners, unlike your—”

The door opens then and Rozanov steps in. Shane doesn’t finish his sentence.

Other quiet conversations in the room pause briefly as they all look in his direction. Shane seethes a bit in his seat. That has always annoyed him, the way Rozanov can so easily pull attention just by entering a room, the way he commands the space with so little effort, like the rest of them are just his audience.

Rozanov's gaze travels over the room for a few seconds, lingering for an extra beat on Shane, before he looks at the loveseat by the door and the guy sitting there immediately gets up so he can sit in it. He leans over to the coffee table and begins rolling himself a joint, hands moving quickly and methodically.

“Oh, uh, did you want one now?” Troy asks Shane, some hesitation in his voice.

Shane brings his eyes back to him. “Want…?”

Troy gestures to the coffee table.

“Oh. No.”

“I don’t remember sending you an invitation, Hollander,” Rozanov cuts in.

Shane chuckles. “Oh, do you do written invitations for your classy parties these days, Rozanov? You’re really improving your game.”

Rozanov has finished rolling his joint and brings it to his mouth, along with his lighter from his pocket. Shane does his best not to stare as he inhales.

“Usually, Omega Chis just know where they are not wanted,” Rozanov says, exhaling.

Two people in the room are making their way to the door, and the guy who had been in the loveseat is moving to follow. It grates Shane, that. Everyone just adhering to Rozanov’s apparently silent orders. Like he’s imprinting them in their minds.

“Rose asked me to come,” Shane says, opting for truth, some of the annoyance leaking into his voice. “Didn’t feel like getting harassed by your oaf brothers tonight.”

Rozanov raises his eyebrows as he takes another drag. “Really? She should come to me about that if someone bothers her. I have zero tolerance policy.”

“It’s true,” Troy chimes in, patting Shane’s knee. “It’s one of my jobs tonight. New rule this year for pledges to be on the lookout for that stuff and report anything to Rozanov.”

Shane does his best to keep his face neutral. The last thing he’s going to do right now is looked impressed or kiss Rozanov’s feet for having a single thought about women getting harassed in his fraternity house. It’s the bare minimum, as far as he’s concerned.

“But I know you like to be white knight for Rose, Hollander,” Rozanov says, eyeing him up and down. “Is sweet.”

The room has emptied of everyone except the three of them now. All without Rozanov saying a word about it. One more person hasn’t pieced it together though.

“Pledge, go down to basement and get another keg,” Rozanov orders. “We are running low on beer.”

“There’s *four* of them out there,” Troy complains.

Rozanov gives him a look that doesn’t allow for any argument. Even Shane knows there can’t be. Rozanov is Kappa Tau, the president at that, Troy is a pledge, still not an official brother. Troy does what Rozanov says, end of.

Grumbling under his breath, Troy gets up. “I’ll see you later, Shane.”

“See you,” Shane says, but keeps his eyes on Rozanov.

When the door closes behind Troy, a smirk breaks over Rozanov’s face and a laugh escapes him. “You cradle robbing now, Hollander?”

Shane’s eyebrows shoot up. “What?”

“Going to rock that freshman’s world?” Rozanov points to the door where Troy had just left. “Or are you just teasing the poor thing?”

Shane rolls his eyes, sort of comprehending what Rozanov is getting at. “Where did you even learn the phrase ‘cradle robbing’?”

“Your mom taught it to me when we were—” Rozanov is cut off by one of the couch pillows being chucked at his face. He manages to dodge it just in time.

Shane doesn’t have the energy right now to dwell on whether Troy has a crush on him. If Troy does, Shane hasn’t caught onto it in their many interactions to this point, though that is pretty typical of him.

“You have not been very nice to me today,” Rozanov scolds, eyes locking in on his face again.

Shane snorts and reaches down to pick up one of those dreaded red plastic cups from the floor, just to have something to do with his hands. The nerve of this guy, as usual, astounds him. Shane’s not sure there’s been a day during their four years at university where he and Rozanov didn’t trade insults, usually with Rozanov winning, yet he sometimes wanted to act sensitive about it.

He hears Rozanov get up from the loveseat as he’s leaning over, and when he’s back up again, Rozanov is occupying what had been Troy’s spot next to him on the couch.

“Well?” Rozanov says, drawing out the word.

“Well, what?” Shane says, placing the red cup on the table and being as casual as he can about it, forcing himself to make eye contact with Rozanov.

“You’re not going to say sorry?”

Now that actually gets a laugh out of Shane, his whole body physically rejecting even the notion of apologizing to this guy. “Maybe after a couple hundred written apologies from you, Rozanov. You owe me at least that many at this point.”

Rozanov graces him with a rare genuine smile at that, but he ruins it immediately by whacking Shane, though lightly, on the back of the head, knocking his university cap forward.

“Hey!” Shane protests, adjusting the cap to its proper position.

“What is this?” Rozanov places his index finger on the top of Shane’s head, referring to the cap. “You look ridiculous.”

“No, I look masculine,” Shane says with a smile.

Rozanov has somehow come closer to him on the couch without ever appearing to have moved. He brings his joint back to his mouth as he assesses him. “What liar told you that?”

“Rose, and she’s not a liar,” Shane defends.

“Hm.” Rozanov snatches the cap off of Shane’s head, ignoring his protests, and places it on his own, his curls sticking out of the edges as he does. Admittedly, the backwards cap looks a lot more natural on his head than it had on Shane’s.

“You said you come here with her tonight?” Rozanov asks, giving Shane’s now loose hair a quick stroke.

Shane swats his hand away but nods. “She had to babysit her pledges.”

“Surprised she left you alone with me around,” Rozanov muses. His arm drifts down to the couch cushion Shane is leaning against. “She does not like me.”

“There’s not much to like,” Shane retorts.

Rozanov lifts an eyebrow and gives him a knowing look.

“And she thought I was leaving so…” Shane adds.

“Hm.” More smoke as Rozanov exhales. “Why didn’t you?”

Good question. Why is he still here? It’s not like Rose asked him to stay or needed him for anything else. She has her sisters here. Troy had interrupted him just as he had been thinking he’d leave the party earlier, Shane reasons, and he didn’t mind sticking around to talk with him more. That was it, he decides. There wasn’t another reason. He knows what Rozanov is insinuating, but he has excuses readily available.

But before he can open his mouth to give any, Rozanov holds out his joint in front of him, making an offer.

Shane stares at it, then looks at Rozanov, then back at the joint. “You know I don’t do that.”

“Oh, right. I remember,” Rozanov says, drawing the joint back, understanding washing over his face. He brings the joint to his lips again and inhales deeply before learning forward and placing it in the ash tray on the table.

Before Shane can process what’s happening, Rozanov’s hand is on his face, his thumb nudging at his jaw. Shane’s mouth drops open and Rozanov leans in close, hovering just over him, barely a breath away. Rozanov exhales a concentrated cloud of smoke into his mouth before Shane even realizes what he’s doing, pliant in his hands. The sensation hits his veins immediately. Their eyes briefly lock, but Shane's eyes dart over to the door.

“I locked it,” Rozanov says before bringing his mouth down on his.

For a second, Shane doesn’t respond. He just leans his head back against the couch cushion and allows himself to be kissed. He isn’t particularly surprised. Rozanov had looked like he wanted to kiss him since he entered the room. It’s only when Rozanov dips his tongue into his mouth that he decides to respond, if only softly.

Rozanov apparently isn’t looking for something soft, however. He plunges his tongue against Shane’s and buries his hand in his hair, the feeling making Shane moan ever so slightly. Rozanov makes and satisfied sound in response and kisses him harder. It feels good, Shane can admit to himself, to be kissed again. But when he feels Rozanov’s hand dipping lower, reaching his rapidly hardening cock in his jeans, he pushes at his shoulder.

“Hey,” he chides, pulling back from the kiss. “We don’t do that anymore.”

Rozanov exhales in his face, irritation coloring his every feature. “Why not?” He tries to kiss him again.

“That was freshman year bullshit,” Shane answers and dodges him easily.

“Was not just freshman year.” Rozanov’s hand squeezes Shane’s cock in his jeans, emphasizing his point.

Shane shifts, sitting up on the couch and brushing his hand off of his crotch. It’s nice to be kissed and to know that Rozanov still carries a flame for him, even if it’s just a small one, but he knows better at this point than to go down this road. He’s close to hitting a full year Rozanov-free, a streak he is proud of and doesn’t intend to ruin now. Though he wonders if the kissing and groping they just did technically ended the streak. Whatever. He won’t count it. Small relapses should be forgiven.

“I think you can find plenty of willing partners at your party.” Shane smiles as he pats Rozanov on the knee, getting up from the couch.

As he steps over Rozanov’s feet, Rozanov makes a mild attempt to trip him and bring him stumbling back onto the couch. He stays on his feet, however, and moves towards the door.

“Tease,” Rozanov calls out. “Is like I said before.”

Shane chuckles and looks back at him. "*You* of all people calling *me* a tease, now that's a real joke."

"Then come back here and prove me wrong," he says, patting his thighs, a challenge on his face. Shane could laugh at how needy he's being right now.

But Shane knows himself well enough to know he needs to get out of the room before he does end up crawling into Rozanov's lap and letting him kiss him until he can't breathe. He turns towards the door again, ready to leave.

"I was thinking…" Rozanov's voice rings out again.

Shane stops in his tracks. God, he hates how that voice still has so much power over him. "Bad idea," he snarks, without looking back.

"Ha ha. Leave jokes to me, Hollander." Shane hears him standing up. "I was thinking, how to make Greek Week more interesting."

"Greek Month," Shane corrects, turning around. His curiosity piqued.

Rozanov blinks, then shrugs. "Greek Month."

"More interesting, how?" Shane asks against his better judgement.

"Your house and my house both entered the games," Rozanov states, stepping closer. "Winner gets the title, the trophy, blah blah blah, the boring stuff you like."

Shane nods and doesn't bother protesting the insult, too intrigued about where Rozanov might be going with this.

"That's the Greek Month game." Rozanov is in his space now. "But how about another game? Just between us?"

The warning sirens are going full blast in Shane's head now. The logical part of his brain is begging him to turn away, open the door, and leave Rozanov standing there in his weed den alone. That's exactly what he should do. But the greater part of his brain, the one that has never been able to quite resist Rozanov, let alone a challenge, is chomping at the bit. He knows which side will win out.

"You're talking about a bet," Shane says, his lips quirking up.

Rozanov smirks, seeing that he has Shane on the hook. "Yes. Bet. That is English word."

"I win; I get something. You win; you get something?" Shane asks to confirm, just so they're clear on what exactly they're doing here even with the language barrier.

Rozanov nods, sure. "You win; you get something. I win; I get something."

Shane's heart is pounding, competitive juices flowing, something he so rarely feels. The opportunity to beat Rozanov not only in the games but in a personal bet is simply too good,

and here Rozanov is offering it to him.

“What do you say, Hollander?” Rozanov asks, leaning in close. “You think you can win?”

Shane is nodding before his brain even has time to process the decision. One day he’ll do some serious thinking about how his brain goes haywire whenever he’s in the same room as Rozanov. Still, he tells him, “I know I will.”

The smirk hasn’t left Rozanov’s face. “Good. So, what do you want, Hollander, if you win?”

Shane’s brain stalls momentarily. In truth, getting whatever he wants from Rozanov seemed secondary to beating him and seeing the look on his face when he wins, trophy in hand. That’s really what he wants, the opportunity to rub his victory in Rozanov’s face. But he has to think of another demand, a consequence if Rozanov loses.

“A thousand bucks?” It’s the first thing to come to Shane’s mind. Not the most exciting, but he knows Rozanov can afford it.

Rozanov scoffs and raises his eyebrows. “Always so boring, Hollander.”

Shane thinks harder. Rozanov is right. He has the opportunity right now to ask for *anything*. Neither of them has placed any limits on the bet. And he knows he’s going to win, the consequence for Rozanov losing has to be *good*.

“When I win,” Shane starts, words tumbling out of his mouth. “You have to run through the Omega Chi end of the year party wearing only a speedo and with ‘Shane Hollander’s Bitch’ painted on your chest.”

Rozanov’s eyebrows shoot up and he tosses his head back a bit, looking startled. Shane briefly wonders if that was going too far.

“Wow, Hollander,” Rozanov says, his smile returning to his face. “Is not bad.”

Shane smiles triumphantly.

“But why not naked?” Rozanov asks.

“Public indecency is a crime, man,” Shane informs him. They may not have placed limits on this bet, but Shane is not going to ask someone to commit a crime.

Rozanov throws his head back and barks out a laugh. “Always so good. Has not changed in four years, I swear.”

“Okay, smart guy,” Shane says, rolling his eyes. “And what do you want if you win?” *Fat chance of that.*

But his arrogance drains out of him when Rozanov brings his head back down to look at him, all the humor gone from his face. His eyes pin Shane in place, the same way Shane remembers him doing years ago in this very house. Rozanov’s arm snakes around his waist and pulls him in until they are nose to nose.

“What do you think, Hollander?” His breath is heavy against Shane’s lips.

Shane squirms slightly under his gaze. “Need a bet to get laid, Rozanov? You’re really that desperate these days?”

“Nostalgic, maybe.”

“Wow. Big word.”

“Shut up, Hollander.”

Shane shuts up.

“When *I* win,” Rozanov continues. “I get *you* for…twenty-four hours.”

Shane gulps audibly.

Rozanov raises an eyebrow. “Think you can handle that?”

It takes a lot for Shane to garner up a defiant expression and tone with Rozanov’s lips only inches away from his. “Won’t need to. You’re not going to win.”

“I don’t know, Hollander,” Rozanov steps forward so Shane’s back is against the door. “I have never won these games before, is true, and you have never lost them.”

Shane shivers as Rozanov’s hand drifts down his spine.

Rozanov’s eyes meet his. “But you, Hollander, you have just given me something I want to play for.”

Those alarm bells from earlier are back, that sensible corner of his brain is feeling vindicated, and Shane is wondering what exactly he’s just gotten himself into, but he knows he’s in too deep now to turn back. He couldn’t live with himself if he chickened out.

“So, what do you say, Hollander?” Rozanov’s voice is low, drawing him out of his intrusive thoughts. “We have a bet?”

Before he can think better of it, his competitive nature overriding any and all sense, Shane holds his hand up in the little space between them for a handshake to seal the deal. Rozanov smirks down at it, stepping back so he can clasp Shane’s hand in his, giving him no time to change his mind.

“Should be *fun*,” Rozanov says. He pulls the cap off of his head and places it back on Shane’s, patting his cheek as he does so, his eyes alight with excitement.

Shane’s eyes meet Rozanov’s, and somehow, he knows he’s going to regret this.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos always appreciated, especially as this is a multi chapter fic so I'd like to know if people will keep reading if I keep writing.

And where I stand on the "Would Shane Hollander join a frat?" debate is he would join one for the good it would do for his resumé and future, so he'd join one of the more elitist ones probably. But I draw the line at Shane being a fraternity president. I just don't see it.

Chapter 2: Round One

Chapter Notes

Note the tags and enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December 2013

“Excuse me, are there vegan-friendly options?” The woman with the too-slicked back dyed blonde hair is looking hard at Shane for an answer.

“Yes! Yes ma’am,” Shane tells her, voice shaking. “The vegan options are on this table here.”

The woman looks between Shane and the table he had pointed at skeptically but, mercifully, leaves him alone to make her way to the vegan options without asking him any more questions.

The university Greek alumni Christmas party is thankfully planned and managed primarily by the Greek student councils of various houses. But the downside is that pledges must attend and work the events as part of their duties. This includes setting up the decorations and working various positions as the event goes on to ensure it all runs smoothly. Tonight, Shane has been assigned the buffet table. He’s to answer any questions about the food and let the kitchen know if they run out of anything. Horrifically, this requires him to remain at the party until dinner is complete and all the food and dishes have been returned to the kitchen.

Pledge life has its ups and downs. Shane doesn’t mind certain duties, such as being what basically amounts to a personal assistant for some of the upperclassmen. Occasionally it does him some good if they want him to work with him on their classwork or the house administration. Other things, like party planning and staffing, he could do without. At least he has Hayden and the other pledges to suffer through everything alongside him.

But Hayden had managed to get out of this particular event. His parents wanted him home the second Christmas break began, so he is long gone off campus. Shane didn’t need to be home for another day, so here he is. Answering questions about some terrible looking quiche for the probing alumni.

He checks his watch. 7:38. Dinner has only just begun so he’ll still be stuck here for a while. The line for the buffet is stretching to the back wall of the university ballroom. But with any luck, once the initial line has finished, no one will pay him any mind anymore.

His Omega Chi “big brother” as they’re called, really just an assigned mentor, and fraternity president Scott Hunter is seated at one of the tables nearby. The fraternity and sorority presidents are actually invited to attend the event rather than just work it. As Scott laughs at

whatever the alumni next to him are saying, Shane wonders if that's what's in his future, attending these inane events, and then eventually with the rest of his current class twenty years down the line.

"Nice party," comes a voice from next to him.

Shane startles and looks to his left to see Rozanov there. He hadn't heard him approach. Rozanov is dressed in a suit, as they all are, and Shane can't help but notice how well fitted the suit is and how nicely groomed he looks tonight, his hair elegantly styled around his face. He wonders if he did it himself.

But that's not something he can focus on right now. There's an event to be run. "Is everything okay with the band?" Shane asks. Rozanov's job at the party tonight is to be the point person for the entertainment.

Rozanov chuckles. "Yes, Hollander. Band is fine. Look." He points to the opposite corner of the room, where the locally hired student band is currently playing some light, gentle music for the dinner ambiance.

"Okay, that's good," Shane says, relieved that there's not a problem he'll have to solve. Standing here dealing with the buffet is more than enough.

Rozanov doesn't walk away, apparently not just passing by him to comment on how the party is going. Shane tries to keep his eyes fixed on the buffet table and not look at the man next to him.

This is hardly unusual from Rozanov, seeking Shane out during an event. Rozanov has apparently made it a point to be an exasperating presence in his life, like an itch that couldn't be scratched away.

It has been a regular occurrence all semester, ever since they met at the Kappa Tau house during rush week. He didn't always approach him. Sometimes Shane would just catch him looking in his direction from across the room, leaving Shane's skin feeling warm and the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. Other times, he did seek him out, usually with a comment about how "pretty" he looks or how "fun" a party is, clearly meant to be snide remarks rather than actual attempts at conversation. It riled Shane, left his face red and his fingers tingling, and he felt certain that was Rozanov's intention.

There was also one odd occasion when Hayden finally dragged Shane to a university hockey game, and he had been convinced that Rozanov had spotted him in the crowd. He scored three goals that night, and after each one, Shane swore he looked right at him, a self-satisfied grin on his face. Though of course Shane could not prove this, and it seemed ridiculous every time he thought about it, that Rozanov would have been looking at him in the middle of his game.

And here Rozanov is again now, and he seems utterly content to just stand there silently as Shane's blood pressure rises.

"Did you want something?" Shane asks, seeing that he must be the one to end the stalemate.

Rozanov just looks at him. “You seem stressed.”

He bristles. Yes, he is stressed. He has to help manage this stupid party populated by a bunch of snobby people for his fraternity, and having Rozanov next to him as he’s trying to do that is only making things worse.

“This could help?” Rozanov unbuttons his suit jacket and opens it up just a bit for Shane to see what’s there. Tucked in the inside pocket is a flask.

His eyes widen, and he glances around quickly, ensuring that no one has noticed. “You can’t have that here.”

“Is that no?” Rozanov smirks and reaches for the flask, pulling it out of the pocket.

Shane’s heart rate speeds up as Rozanov unscrews the top from the flask and takes a sip of whatever is in there. Probably disgusting vodka, if he had to guess. Rozanov holds his gaze as he drinks, but Shane wrenches his eyes away to make sure no one is paying attention. That’s just what he needs, for Rozanov to get him in penalty trouble with Omega Chi. They’re not supposed to be drinking on the job.

But no one is looking at them, no one paying attention to two pledges by the buffet table. There’s just a small train of alumni in the rapidly shortening line piling food onto their plates.

“No one cares, Hollander,” Rozanov says, and when Shane looks back at him, he’s tucking the flask back in his pocket.

Shane swallows, knowing it’s probably true, but hell if he’s going to take a drink out of the flask and risk anything.

Then Rozanov says something in Russian that Shane can’t quite make out. Shane hates it when he does that, always thinking he’s expressing some private joke at his expense.

“What was that?” Hollander demands, annoyance coloring his voice.

Rozanov looks like he’s concentrating for a moment. “You are…wound up tight? I think is this in English.”

Shane grits his teeth. This has been another one of Rozanov’s preferred activities when they are together. Unwanted observations. “I—”

“You should not be,” Rozanov interrupts. “Party is perfect, you look perfect, semester is done. You should relax, Hollander.”

You look perfect. Shane tries very hard to shake those words and the way Rozanov had said them out of his head.

“That’s not so easy for all of us,” Shane says, a little bitterly, taking in Rozanov’s calm and collected body language.

“Want help?” Rozanov asks, and there’s a seriousness on his face Shane hasn’t seen very often. His expression usually stays fixed in its amused or mocking expression whenever he’s talking to Shane, and he’s not sure how to respond to it.

“What do you—?”

“Excuse me, young man, there’s no serving spoon,” a nasally voice yanks Shane back into what he is supposed to be doing.

There’s a man standing at the table looking at him with barely concealed aggravation on his face, pointing to where the serving spoon had previously been and has now mysteriously disappeared from.

Shane rattles off an apology and jogs to the kitchen to retrieve another one, leaving Rozanov behind. When he gets back with the serving spoon, Rozanov is gone. *For the best* he tells himself, though he also feels an unwanted ache of disappointment, wondering what Rozanov meant when he had offered *help*.

Dinner carries on without incident. Shane is grateful he ate before the party because this would be torment otherwise. Some of the kitchen staff arrive to take the leftover food and serving dishes away and Shane helps them out, needing a distraction. He checks his watch again. 8:22. It won’t be much longer before he can leave. His dorm room and its uncomfortable mattress are calling to him.

It’s when the kitchen staff bring out the dessert and begin setting it up on the table that Hollander notices Rozanov again. He’s standing against the wall next to the ballroom entrance, very much not with the band like he’s supposed to be. His eyes are on Shane, the way they too often are on nights like this. But there must be something wrong with Shane tonight because rather than flinching and looking away like he usually does, he stares back.

After a few seconds of their little staring contest that has Shane’s stomach doing cartwheels, Rozanov pushes himself from the wall and, giving him a nod, walks out of the ballroom.

Shane looks at the dessert table, then looks at the door, and back again. It seems kind of obvious that Rozanov wants him to follow him. But doing that would be stupid. He’s supposed to be performing a pledge job right now. He doesn’t have time for Rozanov’s bullshit.

Want help?

Rozanov’s words from earlier ring in his ears. He doesn’t know what he meant. Maybe just the flask he had in his pocket, or he could have weed or something. Weed isn’t really Shane’s thing, but he does do it on occasion if he’s feeling particularly…wound tight. Which he is right now. He really is right now. It can’t hurt, he thinks, to see what Rozanov had meant. It’s not like he can’t come right back.

Don’t do this one corner of his brain screams at him as he weaves through the tables to the entrance, where Rozanov had just departed.

The hallway outside is empty, populated only by the check-in table and some unused speakers strewn about. Shane is relieved that none of the Omega Chis or other Greek upperclassmen are still stationed out here, but he doesn't see Rozanov as he makes his way down the hall. He wonders if he misread whatever that interaction was, or maybe Rozanov went outside? Well, it's at least nice to have some momentary quiet from the party, he supposes.

He's about to turn around and head back to the party when he notices one of the doors in the hall has been left ajar. Shane hesitates for a moment, glancing around the hallway again, still not seeing anybody there, before stepping forward and opening the door.

It's one of the administrative offices. Shane doesn't bother looking at the name on the door because Rozanov is in there, and as soon as he spots him, he steps inside, leaving the door cracked open just a bit.

The window is open, and Shane feels the cold air drifting in, snow coming down quietly outside. Rozanov must have opened it himself because he's standing there with a cigarette. He looks surprised by Shane's presence, his eyes widening.

"Hey," Shane says under his breath. If it's cigarettes Rozanov had wanted to offer to "help" then he's not going to be here long.

Rozanov doesn't say anything, just continues to regard him silently.

"So…" Shane starts, trailing off. Still nothing from Rozanov. "What did you want?"

At that, Rozanov raises an eyebrow. "*You* followed *me*, Hollander. Did you want something?"

"I mean…" Okay, this is true. But "You wanted me to."

Something comes over Rozanov's gaze at Shane's words, his eyes darkening as he brings his cigarette back to his lips and continues to look at him, not saying anything more.

Shane knows he's not always the best at picking up every cue from other people, but Rozanov had been staring at him from across the room, nodded, and then left. That seemed to imply he wanted Shane to follow, didn't it? But seeing Rozanov's reaction now, Shane remembers very well that recognizing what it is people are trying to communicate is one of his weaknesses.

"I-I'm sorry," Shane says, figuring he's completely misread what had just happened in the ballroom. Like an idiot. He puts his hand back on the handle of the door and starts to open it, turning away. "I'll just—"

Rozanov is suddenly there, his hand firm on the door, stopping its progress. Shane freezes, as he often inexplicably does when Rozanov is in his space. There are immediately alarm bells going off in his head and he can't bring himself to look at Rozanov's face, so he stares at his hand, big and heavy against the door.

“No, no,” Rozanov murmurs in a tone Shane doesn’t think he’s heard before, lower and gravelly, only a few inches from Shane’s ear. “Close the door.”

Shane’s hands are following Rozanov’s direction before his mind even registers what he’s doing. Rozanov doesn’t even have to push it closed, Shane does it himself until he hears the lock click shut, the sound reverberating in the quiet office. He drops his hand then, but Rozanov’s stays on the door, just next to his head. His proximity is oppressive and Shane is still not able to look him in the face, feeling caged in by his body even though he can easily get around him. Absently, he wonders where Rozanov’s cigarette went, smelling it on his breath.

“Good,” Rozanov says. “Now, why did you follow me, Hollander?”

Letting out a breath through his nose, Shane tries to answer. “I was just…I don’t know.” It suddenly feels very stupid to say *You nodded at me.*

“Hm?” Rozanov prompts, tilting his head like he’s trying to make eye contact with him, but Shane still won’t meet his gaze. “You need something?”

Shane swallows and wonders if Rozanov can hear it. “You…you asked if I wanted help, so I just thought…” He’s not sure what he thought anymore.

Rozanov hums quietly and leans in closer. Shane inhales sharply, able to see every mark on Rozanov’s face now that is usually invisible to him. His eyes dip lower, to his lips. Rozanov’s lips look so soft, always so soft even when they are spouting words that make Shane feel irritable and uneasy and heated…

He leans forward and their lips brush, Shane had not made the conscious decision to try to kiss Rozanov, it had just happened. It’s mortifying. More mortifying still is Rozanov pulling back just as their lips touch, denying him. Embarrassment floods his veins. Had he just tried to kiss *Rozanov*? Oh God, he is never going to live this down for the four years of university. His cheeks are on fire as he finally looks in Rozanov’s eyes, expecting him to laugh at him. It’s on the tip of his tongue to apologize and beg Rozanov not to tell anyone and forget this ever happened when—

Rozanov’s hand is on his jaw, fingers pressed into his cheek, and he’s kissing him.

Shane barely manages to keep himself from gasping into Rozanov’s mouth. The sensation is strange, though not unpleasant. Shane has never kissed a man before, and he takes note of how different it feels from kissing a woman. Rozanov apparently needs to shave soon because his not yet visible scruff is scraping against Shane’s skin. His hand feels big against his cheek, positioning his face how he wants it, his thumb probing at his chin, trying to get Shane to open his mouth.

Shane’s lips part, allowing Rozanov entrance. He seems to be taking his time, his tongue sliding slowly against Shane’s. Feeling out of his element, Shane lets Rozanov take the lead, responding to him only gently. But when Rozanov sucks on his tongue, he can’t help the moan that escapes his lips.

Rozanov responds with a pleased sound of his own, his hands drifting down to Shane's suit jacket, undoing the button and pressing his hands under the material, holding his waist over his white shirt. Shane feels nervous, unsure what to do with his own hands before hesitantly bringing them up to touch Rozanov's shoulders. Rozanov grunts and steps closer, pressing their chests together.

This is really stupid. Everything about this is stupid, Shane knows. He's kissing Rozanov. He's making out at one of these Greek events in an administrative office when he's supposed to be on pledge duty. And again, he's kissing *Rozanov*. He hates this guy and has no idea what any of this means.

Rozanov's hand slides further down to hold his growing erection over his pants. Shane gasps against his mouth, his fingers tightening their grip on his shoulders.

"*Tak legko*," Rozanov murmurs, now kissing his way to Shane's ear.

Even in this state, with all the coherent thoughts scattering from his mind, Shane doesn't like not understanding. He tries to pull himself together for a moment. "What—what does that…?" he stutters out.

Rozanov shushes him, and Shane inwardly balks at that, at being shushed like he's a child.

"Easy, Hollander," Rozanov says into his ear. His hand tightens around Shane's cock, completely hard now. "You ask for help, I give."

Shane's not sure this feels like help. It feels a lot more like he's being dunked under warm water with no way back to the surface. He keeps trying to reach it, that clearer headspace he lives in, but it eludes him. Jesus, has it really been that long since he's gotten laid?

Rozanov pulls his hand away and repositions himself, putting his arm around Shane's waist and dragging their hips together. Shane's breath catches as he feels Rozanov's own hard cock brush against his in his pants. The pressure is almost perfect, and he finds himself pushing forward, chasing that pressure again. Rozanov chuckles in his ear and grips his waist tighter, trying to force him still. Shane makes a noise of protest which, to his horror, sounds a great deal like a *whine*.

"Shh, *kotenok*," Rozanov murmurs, and holds him tighter when Shane persists in trying to grind against him. "Is okay. Try to stay still for me, hm?"

Ignoring him, Shane tries to press forward again, but Rozanov takes his hips in his hands and presses him back against the wall, holding him there with a disapproving sound. Before Shane can object, Rozanov manhandles him forward again, their hips meeting halfway, more roughly this time. Shane groans at the feel of Rozanov's cock against him, and Rozanov kisses him, open mouthed and messy as he continues his ministrations.

Shane's cock is leaking in his briefs now, and somewhere in his brain, he's alerted that he is going to come very soon if they keep this up. He doesn't know how to feel about that, but he knows he doesn't want this to stop. It feels too good, some of the tension in his body finally

loosening. As Rozanov presses him to the wall again with his hips, Shane lets out another mortifying whine.

“Gonna come?” Rozanov asks, and Shane can at least feel a bit gratified to see that he is breathless as well, his pupils blown wide.

Shane shakes his head, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of knowing how good this is.

Rozanov grins, knowing. “Liar.”

“I-I’m not—oh!”

Without warning, Rozanov shoves his hips into Shane's, keeping him pinned to the wall, in a motion that reminds Shane far too much of something else, Rozanov’s cock hard against him. He cries out, too loudly, as Rozanov repeats the motion.

“Quiet, Hollander,” Rozanov reprimands, but, cruelly, he doesn’t stop. “Don’t want anyone to find us, hm?”

And Shane doesn’t. He really, *really* doesn’t. Not like this.

Not trusting himself to stay quiet, he closes the miniscule distance between him and Rozanov and kisses him. Rozanov smiles against his mouth, kissing him back. Shane’s cock is twitching in his pants, nearly there, and it’s terrifying. Rozanov must be able to tell, swallowing the whimpers from Shane’s mouth.

“Good, that’s it,” Rozanov whispers against his lips, and then, “Come.”

He fights against it, because he has to, but he can’t for long. Shane comes. He keeps himself as quiet as he can, biting back his whines, and holds Rozanov close, needing to hold something, fingers digging in so hard he thinks he might bruise. Rozanov holds him steady as he does, murmuring something in Russian.

Shane isn’t sure he’s ever come so hard in his life.

Rozanov is breathing hard against him as Shane comes back to himself, trying to put the pieces back together in his head. It’s a slow process.

Before Shane is thinking properly, he feels himself drop to his knees, Rozanov having pushed him there, and he goes willingly enough. Still fuzzy, he opens his eyes and sees Rozanov has unzipped himself from his pants, his cock in his face. The first intelligible thought Shane is able to form is that Rozanov has a big fucking cock and wondering if he’s being asked to suck it right now. He doesn’t know if he has it in him to do that.

But Rozanov has his fist around his cock, and after one, two, three strokes, he’s coming.

Shane shuts his eyes, shocked at the feeling of come hitting his face. He feels it coat his cheeks and mouth, which he endeavors to keep shut. Rozanov is moaning above him as he finishes, and when Shane opens his eyes, he can see some come has landed on his eyelashes as well. He blinks, his mind still catching up to what just happened.

“Fuck…” Rozanov breathes out from above him. He grips Shane’s chin, drawing his unwilling gaze upward. “You look good like that, Hollander.”

Shane grits his teeth, staying resolutely quiet. The humiliation of it all is hitting him now. His own come sticking to him in his briefs, Rozanov’s come on his face as he looks up at his smug, satisfied smile. It’s almost too much for him to bear.

“Should I take picture?” Rozanov asks, eyebrows drawn together like he’s actually considering it.

That finally snaps Shane out of his reverie. “Fuck off.” He slaps Rozanov’s hand away from him and wipes his face with his sleeve, the come smearing onto his jacket. It might be ruined. He can’t bring himself to care about that right now as he gets to his feet on wobbly legs. There are tissues on the desk of the office, Shane shoves Rozanov out of his way to grab some.

“Better now?” Rozanov asks as Shane wipes his face with a tissue. There is amusement in his voice, but it’s also a genuine question.

Shane glares. “Better?”

“Not so wound tight now?”

Remembering back to why Shane came into this room in the first place, so Rozanov could “help” him, Shane sputters for a moment. He has no idea if this made things any better. When Rozanov had him pressed against the wall, on the verge of coming, he had certainly felt… something. Shane didn’t know what word to use for it. The only word that comes to mind is he felt…gone.

It had been nice, and that was the terrifying thing.

But fuck if he’s going to tell Rozanov any of that. “I need to get back,” he says, tossing the tissue into the wastebasket next to the desk and moving for the door, deciding he needs to get as far away from Rozanov as possible right now. Thank God the semester is over, and he has the Christmas break.

Rozanov grabs his arm as he soon as his hand hits the door handle. “Was fun,” he says lowly, eyes trailing over Shane’s face. “Yes?”

Staring into Rozanov’s eyes, which appear shockingly earnest, Shane can’t make himself answer. Cheeks still burning in humiliation from earlier, he shrugs out of Rozanov’s grip and opens the door, leaving Rozanov behind.

March 2017

“Shane!” Hayden’s shrill cry from outside his door nearly shocks Shane out of his fente haute pose. His door suddenly flies open. “Shane, he did the fucking—”

"*Hayden*!" Shane says, exasperated, getting up from his yoga mat. There are so few things he asks for in the Omega Chi house, and the mornings being his time to himself is one of them. Hayden has just ruined that. "What did we talk about?"

"I know, Shane. I'm sorry. But this is *important*." Hayden is waving his phone and pointing at it like he's about to share that the entire continent of Australia has just sunk into the ocean.

Shane's eyes drift down. Hayden is in his workout gear, obviously having just got back from a morning jog, and he still has his shoes on in his bedroom. Another violation. But he can see that Hayden is not going to hear much scolding from him right now. He'll deal with it later. "What is it, Hay?"

"Jackie just sent this to me," Hayden says, thrusting his phone right in Shane's face. "Rozanov did the fucking *polar bear plunge*."

On the phone there's a video playing. About two dozen shirtless men standing on a dock of the university lake. Shane, confounded, scans all of them before he spots Rozanov, and it finally clicks, what Hayden is so worked up about. In the video, Rozanov loudly counts to three and he and all the other Kappa Taus lined up on the dock jump into the lake together. On a March morning in Canada, that lake is freezing.

The polar bear plunge is one of several side missions that fraternities and sororities can do for Greek Week points. The more participants from a house, the more points that house gets. Looking at the video and all of the Kappa Taus currently floundering in that freezing water, Shane wonders what the hell Rozanov promised to get all of them to do that. Most houses never bothered with the polar bear plunge. It is by far the least appealing Greek Week task.

"That's like a million points, Shane!" Hayden says, pulling his phone back and looking panicked.

"No, it's just thirty per Kappa Tau brother." Shane doesn't want to do the math right now but based on how many KTs he saw in the video, he knows that's quite a few points.

"What the hell did he do that for?" Hayden is staring at his phone again. "*No one* does the plunge. Not really. And if they do, they don't get their whole house to do it!"

"Who knows why Rozanov does anything?" Shane says, ignoring the corner of his brain screaming *You know!* "He probably just wanted the attention. Don't let him get to you, Hayden."

"You think so?" Hayden asks, clearly wanting some reassurance.

"Listen, we're gonna win this year, like we always do," Shane says with as much confidence as he can muster. "Rozanov doing the stupid polar bear plunge isn't going to change that."

Despite his words, a seed of doubt is starting to grow in Shane's gut. He's done his best to keep the stupid bet he made with Rozanov out of his brain since the Kappa Tau party, assuring himself that he is sure to win like he does every year. The Kappa Taus were never motivated to actually perform for Greek Week, and he figured Rozanov would get bored

quickly with the whole thing. Shane knows very well that Rozanov is not that hard up to get laid.

But dragging what looks like half of his house to the lake this morning to jump in for Greek Week points, effectively putting themselves in an early lead, Shane isn't feeling so sure anymore, and he's wondering what exactly he's gotten himself into.

He hasn't told Hayden about any of this, nor will he. Even though Hayden knows Shane likes men, something he took in stride better than Shane ever could have imagined. But knowing that is one thing, knowing Shane has had something going on with Rozanov…that is another. He never thought he'd have to tell him. Things between him and Rozanov had been finished for a while, so why bother telling Hayden about something that is over? But the other night had complicated things.

He's thought about telling Rose. She knows a little more, knows about the Rozanov of it all. But frankly he is too embarrassed to tell her about this whole thing either. That he made a juvenile sex bet with Rozanov at his party. God, why the fuck did he do this? And now he has no one to talk to about it.

Never go to a Kappa Tau party. That should be in the pamphlet for freshmen.

"Okay." Hayden's voice snaps him out of his thoughts. "You're definitely right. This is probably nothing."

Shane nods, moving to his desk to pick up his phone. He had heard it vibrate earlier while he was doing yoga and now has a sneaking suspicion. "Just go to class and have your normal day man," he tells Hayden. "Don't even think about all this."

While Hayden is nodding and taking a step towards the door, Shane checks his phone. One message. From a name he hasn't seen in a while.

Lily

Better keep up, Hollander 😘

Attached to the text is a screenshot taken from Greek Week's Facebook page where the points are being posted. Kappa Tau now has six hundred and is in first place. Shane grinds his teeth together at the sight.

"Guys! Hey! Hayden! Shane!" A voice from down the hall is booming closer and closer.

JJ bursts into his room, excited and out of breath, and Shane looks down at his feet. Yet another person in his room with shoes on. He's going to need to vacuum.

"We got our first Greek Week clue!" JJ announces, grinning and revealing a box from behind his back which must have just been delivered to their door.

The Greek Council always sends out clues to each of the houses, vague but usually pretty obvious, for the Greek Week games a day in advance so houses could properly prepare. This is their first one, and Shane's heart rate picks up in anticipation.

“Open it,” Hayden tells JJ.

JJ wastes no time in ripping off the binding and throwing the lid off the box. Looking inside at the clue, he reaches in and pulls out the contents to show them.

In his hand is a rope.

Shane smiles. Hayden smiles. They look at each other.

“You know what that means.”

“Welcome, one and all, to this year’s first Greek Week Olympiad game, Tug-O-War!”

Shane stands with seven of his other Omega Chi brothers, stretching and ready for the games to begin. The participants from the five other fraternities and sororities are gathered around as well, preparing in their own ways. Other houses and non-Greek students have also turned up to watch. The event is taking place in the field next to the university library. Shane is nearly shaking with anticipation.

Tug-o-war is a bit of a Greek Week staple. It had been one of the games in his first two years, a favorite among the houses, but last year it was notably absent. Shane and the Omega Chis had never lost this event, and he’s glad it’s back.

The rules with multiple teams are simple. They’re split into two groups, in this case three houses per group, each house in a group plays each other. Whichever house comes out on top in the individual group plays the winner from the other group, and the winner is decided from there. Five hundred points on the line for this first round event.

The groups have already been determined. Omega Chi drew the ZBZs and Theta Xi, the third fraternity playing in the games. The Kappa Taus were with Mu Gamma Sigma and Phi Sigma Rho, two sororities. Shane is pretty sure he knows who is going to top each group, though he hopes the sororities give Rozanov hell.

Rose had already had her very justified venting session with him about the inherent unfairness of this event. As much as Shane loves this game, a sorority has never won it. All Greek Week events are not created equal, he knows. But he can’t focus on that right now. His mind is fixed on winning this thing.

“Try not to hurt yourselves, Omega Chis,” Rozanov’s voice rings out from behind him. “Don’t want the final to be too easy for us, yes?”

Shane looks over his shoulder. Rozanov is looking relaxed and confident in his black tank top and sweats, hands on his hips as he looks over the Omega Chis with an unimpressed air about him.

“You are so fucking dead, Rozanov,” Hayden bites out. “We don’t lose this event.”

“Ah, but the chance to be the first to beat you at it…” A grin spreads over Rozanov’s lips. “Is special to me, Pike.”

“You fucking wish, dude.” Shane can’t help himself, just like always, drawing Rozanov’s very interested gaze to him.

“We have saying in Russia, Hollander,” Rozanov says, thoughtfully. “Is about humility. I think you need some.”

“Yes, because that’s what I think of when I think of you, Rozanov,” Shane spits. “Humility.”

Rozanov’s grin widens. Shane knows he’s just taking his bait, but he’s never been able to help himself. Rozanov comes closer, leaning down to where Shane is stretching on the ground, moving just close enough to be too close. Shane’s breath hitches.

“When I beat you today, Hollander, do I get down payment?” His voice is low. No one around can hear him but Shane, and his eyes are alight in a way Shane rarely sees them.

Shane goes red to the tips of his ears. Saying that shit in public, in front of Hayden and everyone else around, it’s low. Shane wants to knock him on his ass for it, and he resolutely ignores the spike of arousal he feels in his belly. “Fuck off.”

Thankfully, Rozanov does what he’s told for once. Moving away from Shane and jogging backwards to where the Kappa Taus are standing, blowing Shane and the Omega Chis a kiss as he goes. Shane could kill him.

“I swear,” Hayden says, clenching his jaw and glaring in Rozanov’s direction. “That asshole has suddenly decided he cares about Greek Week because I’m president this year. He just wants to piss me off.”

Shane averts his eyes, staring at a very interesting blade of grass he just discovered. “Yeah,” he agrees. “That’s definitely it.”

Everyone is ready to begin. Greek Council members arrive to manage the two groups, moving them away from each other. The tug-o-war rope is set up with a stick in the ground to mark the barrier. The rules are simple. When every member of one team is pulled to the other side of the barrier, that team loses.

It’s the Omega Chis vs the Theta Xis first. The Theta Xis are consistent participants in the Greek Week Olympiad, but less consistent winners. Shane has barely given a thought to them this year. He takes his usual position behind the rest of his teammates on the line, the last one pulling. Hayden is just in front of him.

The Theta Xis give them a decent battle, and Shane finds himself stumbling forward a few times, off kilter, but in the end, the Omega Chis overpower them. Shane tugging hard on the rope, counting his team down for one last effort as they yank the last of the Theta Xis over the barrier, defeating them.

Their reward for winning is the Zeta Beta Zetas. And for this, Shane feels bad. Rose is right about the unfairness of this competition, but at least there are plenty of other ways for Rose and her house to earn Greek Week points, and he knows for a fact they will be taking advantage of all of them.

“Don’t hold back even a little bit, Shane Hollander, or I’ll never help you pick out an outfit ever again,” Rose warns as she passes by him. Shane nods furiously.

The ZBZs fight them fiercely, and in the first few seconds, Shane is concerned he and his teammates may all go tumbling over the barrier together in shock. But to his relief, they are able to dig their feet to the ground and, after much resistance by the sorority, pull them over the barrier and win this round, ensuring that they top the group.

Hayden high fives him. “We’ve so fucking got this, dude.”

Shane pants and looks across the field. He can’t tell from a distance how it’s going in Rozanov’s group, but he hopes that the fight is a good one. Kappa Taus don’t deserve a cakewalk. Based on the cheering over on that side, it sounds like there’s at least some excitement.

The ZBZs and Thetas duke it out for second place, points still on the line, and the ZBZs come out on top this time, stunning the Thetas with their quick attack that had almost overtaken the Omega Chis. Shane knows that might be enough to boot the Thetas from Greek Week this round. He doubts they’ve been participating in the side tasks like the sororities almost always do. He feels a sense of justice at their likely elimination.

That only leaves the final, and as both groups come back together, Shane learns that it’s the final he expected. The Kappa Taus have topped their group.

It’s Omega Chi vs Kappa Tau.

“Are we *ready* for the final?” the appointed Master of Ceremonies from the Greek Council asks the crowd, getting much applause in response.

“That’s what I like to hear,” he says, and smiles mischievously. “But I think…we should make the final a little more interesting, don’t you?”

There’s much “ooh”ing and “ah”ing in response. Shane only rolls his eyes, tapping his foot impatiently.

The Kappa Taus and Omega Chis are led to where the Greek Council is lined up. There, a very large, clearly man-made muddy puddle is waiting for them. Shane gets the idea right away. They won’t use a stick in the ground for the barrier in this final. First team to all go falling into the mud loses.

Unwillingly, Shane’s eyes fall on Rozanov, standing just a few feet away from his team. Rozanov is already looking at him, eyes wide and practically bouncing on his toes, like he’s about to burst from excitement.

“Ready for a swim, boys?” Rozanov shouts at them.

Shane ignores him and marches to his side of the rope, wanting more than anything to knock that smile off of Rozanov’s face. Hayden and the rest of his teammates follow him. He passes Rose as he goes, getting a pat on the back and a wish of good luck from her.

Taking his place at the back of the line again, Shane watches the Kappa Taus gather around their side of the rope. He spots Troy, wearing his university t-shirt and looking nearly as pumped for this as Rozanov is. To no surprise, Rozanov is also standing at the back of his team, the same position as Shane.

The Omega Chis pick up the rope first and the Kappa Taus follow. The chattering crowd begins to hush as the teams await their cue to begin. Hayden looks behind him and gives Shane an encouraging nod. Shane nods back and then looks to the Kappa Taus, catching a glimpse of Rozanov's face, fixed in concentration.

"Omega Chi, Kappa Tau, are we set?" the Greek Council member who will be acting as referee asks them.

Both teams nod and whoop to signal that they are ready. The referee holds the whistle up to his mouth.

"Ready?" he shouts.

Their grips all tighten on the rope.

The whistle blows and they're off. Shane is immediately pulling with everything he has. The Omega Chis taking a page out of the ZBZ book and stunning the Kappa Taus with a fast start. The KT at the front of the line nearly goes tumbling into the muddy water immediately, but behind him, the rest of his team is able to dig their feet in and hold themselves back.

Shane pulls harder, feeling the sweat break out over his skin, but the Kappa Taus hold firm and don't budge any further. Just from the first few seconds, he can already feel that this is a greater challenge than both the ZBZs and the Theta Xis, and he grits his teeth.

The crowd is already into it, he hears plenty of whistling and clapping, and he thinks he hears Rose yelling out his name in support. For the moment, both teams are locked in a stalemate, neither taking a step towards or away from the mud. Shane tries to count his team off to all pull together, but they are only able to gain a few inches, if that.

"This is gonna be a close one!" the master of ceremonies riles up the crowd further, and Shane knows it's true.

When Shane looks back on this later, he'll realize that the first sign of trouble was Hayden's knees wobbling. Hayden is one of the fittest guys in the house, always ready to compete in these more physical Greek Week games, but he faltered early. In the moment, Shane doesn't process it. When he hears Hayden bite out his name, he only shouts back at him to pull harder.

It's then that Shane feels his whole body suddenly jerked forward and is stunned by the sound of a splash as the first person in the Omega Chi line goes into the mud. Panic lights up Shane's brain as he does his best to find his footing again, feeling himself still being yanked forward mercilessly. When he finally manages to stop himself, their third Omega Chi is right on the edge of the mud pit. They've lost two teammates.

The crowd is getting rowdier now, and Shane is noticing a distinctly pro-Kappa Tau leaning to the cheers. He wonders at that for a moment before it clicks in his brain that everyone loves an underdog, and the Kappa Taus are certainly that. Omega Chi has won Greek Week three years in a row. The easy favorite to win it again, and they're being pulled into the mud by *Kappa Tau* of all houses.

Resisting hard, Shane is able to gain them back a few inches, Hayden finally getting his feet under him as well, but they can't dig their first two teammates back up out of the mud, and they're outnumbered like this. Six to eight.

"*Davay*! Pull!" Shane finally hears Rozanov's voice bellow out over all the shouting and cheering, but he can't see him at all anymore.

The KTs respond enthusiastically to Rozanov's encouragement, pulling the rope hard until the third man for Omega Chi can't hold out anymore and lands knee deep in the mud.

Five to eight.

This is bad, Shane knows. And it's only at this moment that losing actually presents itself as a potential reality in his mind. He hadn't truly considered it before. But here it is, poking him right in the face.

"*Shane*," Hayden grits out in front of him, and Shane can see his arms shaking, like he's going to give out.

"Hold tight, Hay, come on." Adrenaline is all Shane knows now. His arms like iron on the rope, refusing to let it slip even as his feet are tugged forward against his will.

"Mother*fuck*!" JJ's voice. Well, that's another Omega Chi in the mud, to the delight of the crowd.

Four to eight. *Fuck fuck fuck*. Half the team is gone.

And they feel it immediately. Shane can almost see the veins on his arms popping as he tries to hold on but within seconds, he's being dragged forward even faster than before, his two other teammates and then Hayden go crashing into the mud pit. Then it halts again. Shane is right on the edge, alone.

One to eight.

Shane looks up. All the Kappa Taus are a good distance away from the mud now, having pulled themselves well clear of it. This is over, Shane knows. He should drop the rope and surrender, spare himself what he knows is coming. He's not pulling his way out of this by himself. But as his eyes drag over the Kappa Taus, one right after the other, until they land on Rozanov's face, visible to him again at the back, he just can't make himself do it. Rozanov meets his eye, and the sense of defeat is now overwhelming. Shane can't surrender. Not to *him*.

Rozanov smiles, calls out to his team, and Shane is in the mud.

There goes Omega Chi Delta's perfect record in the Greek Week tug-o-war. This is the first thing Shane thinks as he lands in the pit. His second thought is how much worse it is that this played out in front of a cheering crowd, and one that wasn't even on his side. Third, he's gonna have to spend an hour in the shower scraping all this mud off of himself.

Getting to his knees, surrounded by all of his defeated teammates, he looks up, and the first thing he sees is a phone pointed right at his face.

Rozanov is towering over him and taking a goddamn picture of him. As Rozanov grins, Shane has to restrain himself from splashing him with mud like a poor sport and a child, though he desperately wants to do it. Instead, Shane just seethes, feeling a streak of mud falling down his cheek. Letting his phone drop, Rozanov winks at him. Suddenly it's all too familiar.

"You look good like that, Hollander."

Shane is going to *fucking kill him*.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 3: Teeth

Chapter Notes

> Thank you for all of the comments and kudos! As a reward, we're switching to Ilya's POV.
>
> And feelings have entered the chat.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

February 2014

Closing his eyes, Ilya can often pretend he is twelve years old again, in the woods with his uncle.

You must approach carefully. Don't make sudden movements or make any noise or the prey will startle. Then, when the moment is right, you strike.

Ilya Rozanov had applied his uncle's hunting instruction to many areas of his life. The man had been a master of his craft, and hunting, Ilya found even as he grew to disdain the practice, was often a microcosm of the rest of life. Sometimes, in the day to day, he would think back to the many remarks and pieces of advice his uncle had given when they were out in the wood together.

The bird wouldn't have been shot if it hadn't sung.

The wolf and the sheep do not hunt together.

The dog that barks the most is never a good hunter.

His words could be applied to many circumstances. Even in Canadian university, a place he is still trying to adapt to. It's not like it had been his first choice to come here, but when it became apparent that going professional in hockey was far from a guarantee, he had made the decision. It's not one he regrets; the university offered him a lot as far as hockey and benefits as an international student, but it can still be a struggle, a world away from home.

The decision to join a fraternity had been a fairly easy one after Svetlana encouraged him to do it, selling him on the party scene of Greek Row. But he is often struck by how far outside of his upbringing he is when in the Kappa Tau house. All the talk about community and brotherhood, concepts familiar to him, but odd when surrounded by virtual strangers. He would never admit it, but he had been intimidated at the start, unsure how anyone would respond to the Russian outsider. But he masked the fear, never letting anyone onto it.

Act like prey and you become prey.

Things smoothed out after the first few weeks, and he felt the acceptance of the people around him. The Kappa Tau brothers embraced him, and it was easy to get invited to nearly every party on Greek Row. It helped, he knew, being the university's new star hockey player. From the start, everyone had liked being around him for that alone.

Almost everyone.

Shane Hollander, pretty and polite Shane Hollander, is the exception. Ilya knows well that he only has himself to blame for Hollander's distaste for him. Hollander had been amiable enough when they first met, when Ilya approached him at the Kappa Tau party during rush week to offer him a drink. It was Ilya who goaded him, tried to get under his skin only minutes after they had introduced themselves.

But it couldn't be helped. From the moment Hollander had stuck out his hand for a handshake, given his name, and told Ilya, "It's nice to meet you", just like his mother and father surely taught him to say, Ilya knew he wanted to pry him apart, ruffle those perfect feathers for how earnest and mannerly the man was. And oh, it was so delightful when he realized how easy that was to do to Hollander. Always rewarding him with a blush or stammered, indignant reply.

It had become his favorite pastime over the course of the first semester. At any cross-fraternity event or house party, Ilya found himself seeking Hollander out, wanting to see what shade of red he could make him turn.

Ilya was aware from early on that his desire to be around Hollander was more than anything friendly. Knew it from their first meeting. But he was careful in gauging Hollander's interest. It had taken him some time to be certain Hollander wanted him too. It wasn't until the Christmas party, when Hollander followed him out of the ballroom, that any remaining doubt dissipated from Ilya's mind.

That night had been special, and Ilya has returned to it in his mind often in the last two months, particularly when alone in his room at night. The sight of Hollander's pretty, come smeared face was firmly fixed in Ilya's mind. He had almost felt bad about doing it, coming on Hollander's face in what was probably Hollander's first sexual encounter with a man. But in the moment, Hollander so malleable and soft in his arms, he couldn't resist pushing him to his knees and finishing that way.

It had been good, and he knew it was good for Hollander too, though he hadn't wanted to fess up at the time. But since then, Hollander had been invisible to him on campus. They had the entire Christmas break apart, but when they returned, it was like Hollander wasn't even enrolled at the university anymore. As usual, Ilya sought him out at Greek events or parties, but he was nowhere to be found. He had almost started to wonder if Hollander *had* left university until he heard someone in his fraternity mention that he was in one of their classes this semester.

On one occasion he thought he saw Hollander in the quad after lunch, a black head of hair moving away from him. But when Ilya dipped into the crowd to try to follow, he was gone.

He knows Hollander must be avoiding him. Not just avoiding him but doing everything in his power to never see him at all. This grates Ilya, feeling powerless to do anything to change that. It's not like he can bang on the door of Hollander's dorm room or the Omega Chi house and demand to see him, though he has thought about it. So, he waits. Believing their paths will have to cross at some point. Hollander can't hide forever.

"You are doing it again." The sound of Russian momentarily surprises Ilya and brings him back to this Alpha Phi or Gamma Rho or whatever the hell fraternity party he's at.

Svetlana is suddenly there, staring at him with her eyebrows raised, a smirk on her face.

Ilya recovers quickly and replies to her. "Doing what?"

"Staring at the door like you are expecting someone," she answers easily. "Whoever it is you are waiting for clearly doesn't want to be around you, considering you have been waiting for weeks."

Ilya clenches his jaw, not even realizing that he has been staring at the door, hoping Hollander might show up. It's a long shot, he knows. Even before their Christmas party rendezvous, Hollander barely ever showed up to fraternity parties like this. It's annoying that he had been waiting in hope for him, more annoying is that Svetlana had noticed.

"I don't know what you are talking about." He knows she'll see through him. She always does.

"Mhm." The smirk doesn't leave her face. "Instead of staring at the door like a creep, why don't you come take a shot with me?"

He would never deny himself the pleasure of Svetlana's company.

Later, as they're downing their second shots together on the basement couch (he needed to get as far away from the front door as possible) he wonders if Svetlana wants to go home with him tonight. They had tried dating when they were younger but have settled on remaining friends who sleep together from time to time. An arrangement that suits them both.

She looks great tonight, curly hair wild around her face and the dress she put on doing everything to enhance her already perfect figure. Just spending some time talking to her allows him to forget about Hollander for a few minutes, and he's on the verge of asking her if he can take her back to his off-campus apartment tonight when the object of his recent obsession wanders into his line of sight seemingly out of nowhere.

At first, he thinks he's imagining it, that his brain has conjured up the hallucination of Shane Hollander standing at the foot of the basement stairs, and he'll disappear in the blink of an eye. But Ilya blinks a couple of times, and Hollander is still there, shifting from one foot to the other, eyes darting around the room, like he's looking for something.

His eyes fall on Ilya and stay on him. Ilya is at a loss for a second, slightly overwhelmed by seeing Hollander again unexpectedly, and after so long. But he recovers, and is able to smirk in his direction, always an easy way to rile Hollander, and give him a friendly wave.

But Hollander doesn't seem particularly annoyed. He merely nods in response, then moves to the beer pong table that is set up in the basement, apparently to watch the game.

Bringing himself back to Svetlana, trying to focus on her, Ilya contemplates his next move. He's somewhat confused at Hollander seeming to be here by himself. Usually, if he shows up to these parties, he's accompanied by Hayden Pike, his friend and the single most annoying person on Greek Row. But a quick scan of the room tells him Pike is nowhere to be found, and Hollander doesn't seem to be with anyone else either. He certainly didn't come to the basement for some quiet time, as he is prone to do at these louder parties.

But when Hollander glances in Ilya's direction again from the beer pong table, something in him dares to hope…*is he here for me?* That seems too much too much to hope for, after all the weeks of Hollander avoiding him.

Ilya watches Hollander as much as he can while be as discreet as possible. After a second glance from Hollander, Ilya is starting to think that he could indeed be here for him. That he showed up to this party, exactly the kind of party he steadfastly avoided, in search of him.

When the time has come, the prey will go to the hunter.

Ilya projects a cool exterior when Hollander meets his eye, but inwardly, he's jumping out of his seat and pumping his fist. Maybe they're not done. Maybe Hollander wants more.

And Ilya is all too willing to give him just that. After a few minutes of stealing looks from across the room, Hollander moves to the drink table, with another surreptitious glance in Ilya's direction. Ilya quickly tells Svetlana that he'll get her a beer and stands up from the couch.

Hollander is not facing him as he approaches, but as Ilya sidles up to him, he knows he's expected. The tension in the other's body making him straighten up. Ilya gets as far into his personal space as he can without anyone around them thinking anything of it. Hollander doesn't look at him, keeping his eyes on the drinks that he is very much not going to be taking.

Leaning in, Ilya says under his breath, "Go upstairs, find empty bedroom, wait for me." Then he grabs one of the beers from the table, turns around, and walks back to Svetlana.

Thankfully, Svetlana has found one of her sorority sisters to chat with, so Ilya can turn his attention back to Hollander after he hands her the beer. Hollander ambles for a few seconds, looking back in Ilya's direction as he makes up his mind, before finally moving to the stairs and heading up, not turning back.

Always does what he's told so nicely. So well behaved, Shane Hollander.

Ilya wants to follow Hollander up the stairs immediately but knows he needs to give him a few minutes. So Hollander will have enough time to actually find them a room and also so he doesn't come across overeager, though he definitely is just that.

Once an acceptable amount of time has passed, he makes his excuses to Svetlana, who gives him a pointed look that Ilya doesn't have time to analyze right now, and goes up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

The party on the ground floor is a lot more raucous than in the basement, and Ilya is momentarily stricken deaf by the loud music, but his hearing comes back to him as he weaves his way through all the people blabbering on, drinking, or dancing to find the stairs that will take him to the second level.

It's not quite as loud upstairs, and Ilya remembers how he had first met Hollander when he was hiding out from the Kappa Tau party on the second floor of the house, clearly looking for some quiet.

Not wasting any time, he opens the first door on his right. Instantly bombarded with the sight of a couple in a compromising position, he shuts the door without even getting a look at their faces. The second door he finds locked and determines that either a fraternity brother was very smart to keep his door locked for a party, or whatever couple in there was smart enough to do it.

As he gives up on the locked door, he is briefly worried that Hollander didn't actually do what he was asked and instead left the party entirely, thinking better of the whole thing. But when he tries the third door, finding it open, a pair of hands immediately seize the front of his shirt and drag him inside.

Ilya only has a second to process that Hollander is the one in the room before he's pushed against the door and Hollander's mouth is on his. He hears the sound of the lock clicking, Hollander clearly not wanting to make the same mistake as couple number one in the other room.

Hollander is messy and uncoordinated, his tongue sliding into Ilya's mouth without any restraint or rhythm, just unadulterated fervor. Ilya can't help but smile. The last month since Christmas break ended had been agony. Hollander completely out of his reach and thinking he might never get to touch him again. It is a relief now to see that Hollander has been wanting him too.

"You come here for me, Hollander?" Ilya can't help but tease against his mouth. "You miss me?"

"Shut up," Hollander hisses out, trying to kiss him silent and press him harder against the door.

The feeling of Hollander's body against his is a familiar thrill. He pulls his jacket off and drops it to the floor, letting Hollander have access to more skin. Hollander follows suit, unzipping his hoodie and then leaning over to drape it over the desk chair sitting next to them. Ilya can't help but chuckle at the care with which he does this.

At the sound, Hollander hesitates for a moment, some of his initial eagerness draining out of him. But Ilya doesn't have the patience right now for second thoughts.

“Get on the bed,” Ilya tells him, deciding Hollander has relinquished the reins to him.

Hollander only lingers for a moment before complying, slipping his shoes off before lying back on the bed of God knows which frat brother in this house, and holding himself up on his elbows. Ilya can at least take some comfort in the fact that the bed is made.

After removing his own shoes, Ilya joins Hollander on the bed, sitting up on his knees and overlooking him. If Ilya wasn’t sure before that Hollander had never been with a man, he is now, watching Hollander squirm uneasily under his gaze. The introduction of a bed to the equation seems to make him more skittish than usual. It’s cute. Ilya wants more.

Without warning, Ilya reaches down and presses his hand against Hollander’s cock, already straining in his pants after just some kissing and groping against the door, not unlike their first encounter. Hollander gasps at the contact, his hips jerking upward.

“So hard already,” Ilya says thoughtfully as his fingers curl around his length. He isn’t fully hard yet, but he’s close. “Too easy, Hollander.”

“I said shut up.” His brow furrowing in irritation, Hollander tries to hoist himself up, hands reaching for Ilya, but Ilya immediately halts his progress and pushes his back down on the bed. Hollander makes a questioning sound as he lands on his back, then tries to push himself up again, only for Ilya to do the same thing, harder this time.

Ilya doesn’t miss the way Hollander’s breath catches at the treatment, his pupils dilating.

“You come here tonight for me. You could at least have manners, Hollander,” Ilya chastises, shaking his head in mock disapproval.

Hollander’s face scrunches up and Ilya nearly gasps at how precious he looks. “Could you just…please?”

Ilya wants to tell him to say the words, spell out what he’s asking for, but he wants to kiss Hollander more. He swoops down and does just that. Hollander’s hands are in his hair immediately as Ilya covers his body with his own. Moaning into his mouth, Ilya ponders Hollander’s kisses. He’s hardly the most experienced or cleanest kisser, but his eagerness more than makes up for it, as well as the little sounds he makes in the back of his throat, all of which go straight to Ilya’s cock.

When Ilya feels Hollander tilt his hips up against his own, Ilya repositions them, pushing Hollander’s knees up and settling himself between his legs. At this, he feels Hollander stiffen marginally against him. He feels on edge; Ilya wants to push him closer to it. Pulling Hollander’s searching hands out of his hair, he pins both of them down against the mattress.

A nervous sound escapes Hollander’s mouth and his body jerks as he bites down on Ilya’s tongue, causing Ilya to rear his head back and scowl.

“Play nice, *kotenok*,” he scolds. The bite hadn’t broken the skin, but it had hurt.

“What’s that mean?” Hollander asks, testing Ilya’s grip on his wrists. “You said it before.”

Ilya smiles, pleased that he asked. “Kitten.”

Hollander’s jaw clamps shut and his already flushed face goes impossibly redder, all the way to the tips of his ears.

“You like that.” Ilya’s grin widens, closing the distance between them again.

“*No*.”

“Was not a question.”

Ilya’s mouth is on his before he can protest any further. Hollander melts into him, his hands going slack where Ilya is holding him and his hips twitching upwards, seeking contact. When Ilya rolls his hips against his, he gasps into his mouth. Galvanized, Ilya does it again. He can feel how hard Hollander is even through their clothes, and given how he’s already trembling at his touch, he doesn’t think it will take too much for him to finish like this.

So, he carries on. Hollander rewards him with more of those sweet sounds, sounds that are becoming more urgent by the second. Releasing one of his wrists, Ilya reaches down to hold Hollander’s cock through his jeans, and Hollander’s whole body jolts beneath him. Momentarily, Ilya is in awe of how quickly he can work Hollander up to this point, his whole body a live wire beneath him.

“Fuck, *fuck*. Roza—" Hollander breathes out, barely coherent.

“That’s it,” Ilya encourages, pressing the heel of his palm against his cock.

“I—I’m gonna come.” His expression is bordering on panic, body curling towards Ilya’s.

“Good,” Ilya tells him, eyes trained on his flushed face. “Is the idea.”

“No, *wait*.” Hollander brings his free hand down to where Ilya’s is holding him in his pants, wrapping his fingers around his wrist. Just holding him, not pulling him away. “I don’t want to come in my pants again…*please*.”

Ilya freezes at the plea, slowly pulling his hand away. Somewhat disappointed, as Hollander looked so pretty as he was about to tip over for him, but also curious.

“Okay,” he concedes. “What do you want?”

Hollander’s gaze drifts downward and then back up to Ilya’s face. Ilya has an inkling about what he wants and is sure of it when Hollander presses against his shoulder, asking him to move off of him.

He does willingly, lying down on his back and making himself comfortable against the pillows as Hollander shifts his body so he’s kneeling astride Ilya’s legs. Slowly, eyes darting to Ilya’s face and back down again, he unbuttons and unzips his pants.

The pace not quite doing it for him, Ilya shrugs his way out of his pants and briefs himself, his hard cock finally free of its constraints. Hollander stares at it. He had seen it before, but

he hadn't had much time to look at it before Ilya had finished himself off on his face, Ilya smirks at the memory, the momentary shock that had washed over Hollander's expression when come hit his cheeks.

"You want me to come on your face again, Hollander," Ilya says, giving himself a few quick strokes. "Just ask nicely."

"Fuck off," Hollander says, though there's not much weight to it. He's still staring at Ilya's cock, contemplative, as if he's trying to work out a math problem.

Finally, Hollander leans forward and puts his mouth on him. It's tentative and experimental, but enough to make Ilya's breath catch. Looking down at Hollander, his tongue darting out to lick a trail down his cock, he wants so badly to take his head in his hands and fuck into his mouth. He wants to know what kind of sounds he would make with his cock down his throat.

But Hollander has never done this before, so Ilya restrains himself. Only stroking his hand through his hair when Hollander attempts to swallow him down, giving him an approving grunt. Hollander seems heartened by this, trying to take him deeper in his mouth before hitting the resistance at the back of his throat.

There's something about the way Hollander does this. It's so like how he does everything. Meticulous focus and determination, as if he's going to be graded on it later. When his teeth scrape over Ilya's cock, making him wince, Hollander licks the spot, as if in apology. It is so goddamn sweet, Ilya could throw up.

"Good, Hollander," Ilya praises when Hollander swallows around him. "Like that."

Hollander makes a small noise in his throat and brings his hand up to touch Ilya's in his hair. Noting this, Ilya brings his other hand to Hollander's head, and carefully pulls Hollander further down, his mouth taking nearly all of his cock. He groans. It feels like heaven.

He pauses then, waiting for Hollander to tap out or try to pull off, but no protest comes. So, Ilya carries on the movement, not quite fucking Hollander's throat but setting the pace for him, bring his cock in and out of his mouth. It's perfect, and when Hollander's eyes glance up to meet his, Ilya knows he's not going to last much longer.

"That's it, *kotenok*," Ilya grits out, and when Hollander moans, Ilya has to pull him off and finish in his hand, making sure it doesn't get on the bed. As much as he wanted to finish in Hollander's mouth, he knows this is his first time giving head, and he's not sure he wants to swallow.

Hollander looks out of breath as Ilya comes back from his orgasm, but his eyes are still on him, looking mesmerized, like he can't believe he just made Ilya come with his mouth.

"Not bad for first time," Ilya says when he's able to gather himself.

Hollander lets out a puff of air. "Fuck you, Rozanov."

Ilya looks at the side table next to him. Unsurprisingly, there's no tissues to be found in this frat room, but a cursory look under the table reveals a roll of toilet paper. Gratefully, Ilya reaches for it and wipes his hand clean of his come and tucks himself back into his pants.

Behind him, he hears Hollander shifting on the bed and his breathing picking up. When Ilya turns back to him, Hollander has his hand down his pants, now unbuttoned and unzipped, and is stroking himself. His hand moving with some urgency.

"Ah ah." Ilya grabs his wrist, jerking his hand away and pinning it to the bed again. "I thought you did not want to come in your pants, hm?"

"Fuck, Rozanov, could you just…?" Hollander wriggles under his gaze.

"Want to come?" Ilya asks, finding some pity in himself.

Hollander nods fervently.

"How?" Ilya asks, placing his hand on Hollander's cock again. He's even harder than before, and Ilya knows it won't take more than a few strokes. "Like this?"

Hollander's hips angle up at the touch but he shakes his head.

Ilya knows what he wants. But he wants to hear it. "Ask me."

"Suck my dick, Rozanov," Hollander blurts out, caving immediately. Then, being the well-mannered Canadian he is, "Please."

Ilya plants a kiss on his mouth and resolves not to torment him any longer. There will be plenty of time for that on other occasions (and he's decided there will be other occasions).

What's more, he wants to see Hollander's cock. He's only had the chance to feel it through his clothes, and he is now hit with the unrelenting need to look at it for himself. Hollander had seen his, after all. Fair is fair.

Yanking Hollander's pants and briefs down his hips, drawing a gasp out of the other man at his sudden exposure. His cock is fully hard and at attention, leaking and red. Ilya can't help but chuckle at the sight, at how much Hollander clearly got off on sucking his cock. Just the sight of Hollander bared in front of him makes his own spent cock give an interested twitch.

Hollander makes a needy noise, his hips shifting up, silently asking for what he wants. Ilya can only oblige, reaching up to take hold of Hollander's pec through his shirt, he swallows him down in one go. The feeling of his cock hitting the back of his throat is initially a shock but then comfortably familiar.

"*Fuck*, holy shit, *Rozanov*." Hollander is already whining.

Satisfied, Ilya swallows him down again, wanting more of those sounds. When Hollander snaps his hips up, making Ilya choke briefly, he stutters out an apology. Ilya makes a content sound and holds his hips against the bed with his free arm. Considering how responsive he is, Ilya knows this will be quick.

And it is. As Ilya squeezes down hard on Hollander's peck and takes him in so deep his cock is in his throat, Hollander bursts out with a warning, telling him to get off. He doesn't, holding steadfastly as Hollander spills into his mouth.

Swallowing easily, Ilya gives Hollander a kiss on the thigh before falling onto his back next to him. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand as Hollander reaches for his pants and briefs to pull them back up.

"You didn't have to…" Hollander trails off.

Ilya could tease him, but given what they just shared, he decides not to. Instead, he shrugs. "I don't mind it."

Hollander still seems to be coming back to himself. His eyes staring up at the ceiling as his undoubtedly busy mind tries to make sense of everything that just happened. Ilya thinks he could stand to shut his mind up more often.

"Give me your phone," Ilya says, holding out his hand.

Hollander's eyebrows draw together. "My…?"

"Phone. Give me your phone."

Hollander reaches into the back pocket of his pants, pulls his phone out, and deposits it in Ilya's hand.

"Passcode, *kotenok*," he says when the screen asks it of him.

"Stop calling me that." Hollander snatches the phone out of his hand and punches in the passcode with shaking fingers.

Ilya ignores the request, which he will not be following, as he opens up Hollander's contact list and adds his number under the name 'Lily,' a name he's used for discreet hookups before. He shoots off a quick text to himself, so he'll have Hollander's number as well. Tossing the phone on Hollander's chest, he gets up and starts to adjust himself, needing to look somewhat presentable before he goes back downstairs, especially if he sees Svetlana.

"So…" Hollander's small voice says from behind him as he's putting his shoes back on. "Is this…like…?"

Ilya looks back at him. Hollander is standing up now but isn't looking at him. Instead, he's staring down at his still socked feet. It's obvious that he has no idea how to complete his question.

A surge of something that feels suspiciously like affection blooms in Ilya's chest, a feeling he shuts down immediately. "Is just sex, Hollander."

Hollander glances up only briefly before looking back down and nodding.

Exhaling, Ilya approaches him against his better judgement. Hollander simply looks too soft and unsure for him to walk away from right now. He keeps his head down even when Ilya is right in front of him, so Ilya fixes that by taking his jaw in his hand and kissing him again.

He tries to keep this kiss gentle, not intending to get Hollander going again though he suspects he very much could. He slips his tongue in his mouth, but only just, and lets his fingers run through his hair, intending to soothe.

“You are okay?” he asks when they break apart, but still only a breath away.

Hollander finally looks at him again and, eyes twinkling, gives him a small nod.

“Good,” Ilya says, giving him a parting peck. “I will text you.”

At that, Ilya can see Hollander’s lips twitching upwards, a hint of a smile.

“You named yourself Lily,” Hollander says. “What’s my name gonna be?”

Ilya returns his smile. “Jane.”

March 2017

“Is that Jane?” Svetlana asks Ilya as he picks up his vibrating phone.

It is very much not Jane. It’s just a text from his brother; one he quickly swipes away from without bothering to read it.

“No,” he answers.

“Ah, of course not,” Svetlana says, returning to her notebook, splayed out on the floor of his room with everything she needs to study. “Why would Jane text you after that *sportsmanship* from you yesterday?”

Ilya has to restrain a smile. The memory of Hollander and his fraternity brothers flailing around in that mud puddle after Ilya and the Kappa Taus pulled them into it has been a source of great joy for him and the rest of his brothers. Hollander in particular, he knows, would have hated being covered in mud, which just made the photo he took of him with his phone all the more priceless.

“Maybe he wants to concede defeat,” Ilya suggests. “After that terrible performance.”

Svetlana knows who Jane is and has known for quite some time. It had been difficult keeping the secret from her when he saw her almost every day. After a while, it just wasn’t possible, and she pretty much figured it out by the time Ilya admitted it anyway. But they still call him ‘Jane’, even when speaking Russian in private, just in case anyone in the Kappa Tau house happens to overhear them when they’re hanging out in his room. In fact, they always call him Jane.

His Kappa Tau brothers certainly don't know about Hollander, but Ilya thinks one or two of them may suspect things about him. Seeing how it's none of anyone's business, as well as other more severe concerns, he doesn't confirm or deny anything, and they don't ask.

"You underestimate him," Svetlana says, chuckling and shaking her head.

Svetlana knows about the bet too. She had laughed in his face when he told her.

"I have never tried to win these games before," Ilya tells her, using the same logic he has used since he set all of this in motion. "I am trying now. So, I will win. It is simple."

"Hm." Svetlana presses the eraser of her pencil against her lips, looking unimpressed. "And you have a prize you actually want to play for."

"I never denied this," Ilya says, trying to return his attention to his book. Classes did not stop just because of stupid Greek Week.

"It is interesting to see you so motivated," Svetlana observes. "You somehow made your whole house motivated too."

Ilya snorts. It had been quite a morning in the Kappa Tau house when he dragged twenty of them to the lake to take a dip for Greek Week points. They had complained and argued from the moment they were forced to wake up, but Ilya had the power to make all of the pledges participate as part of their pledge duties. The rest of the brothers he convinced with various bribes and threats. That got them going.

But now, after they defeated Omega Chi in tug-o-war, he's seeing some real motivation from his brothers. They have very quickly come to believe they can win the Greek Olympiad, and their competitive natures are soaring.

"Well, what about your house?" Ilya asks, looking to put the attention back on Svetlana and escape her magnifying glass.

"What about us?" she asks, bored.

"You are a house president too." Svetlana is president of Mu Gamma Sigma, one of three sororities in the draw. "You want to win?"

"Not really."

"Then why enter?"

"Tradition, history, the rest of the shit they tell us. My whole house wants to participate," she rattles off her reasons. "We made it past the first round now that the Theta Xis are out. That is enough for me."

Ilya tsks at her. "You are not in the spirit of Greek Month, Sveta."

She raises an eyebrow at that. "Greek Month? It's Greek Week, Ilya."

“But it lasts a month.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Whatever. You are the last person who can lecture me about the spirit of Greek Week.”

“Don’t you at least want to beat the Zeta Betas?” he asks. “Are they not your rival house or something?”

“I have no years-long psychosexual warfare going on with Rose like you do with Jane, Ilya.” Svetlana pulls out her phone, apparently giving up on studying for the moment. “We would never be that stupid.”

“You are dramatic,” he says, flopping against his pillows.

“And you are blind.” She looks up from her phone. “Why don’t you tell me what it is?”

“What *what* is?”

“You don’t leave Jane alone.” She states this as fact. “You never could. Why?”

Ilya scoffs, thinking about denying it, but knowing that Svetlana will just poke holes in everything he says. She’s always been too observant, especially when it comes to him. As for her question, he could have answered it a thousand different ways since freshman year, so he elects to go with the answer best suited to the current moment.

“He runs,” he says simply. “I chase. The hunt is fun.”

“You hate hunting,”

He shrugs. “There were one or two things I took from it.”

“It is a mistake to think of Jane as prey,” she scolds, her thumb tapping against the screen. “He is not weak.”

“I never said that.” He snaps his head back up from the pillows to look at her.

“And he wants to beat you too.”

“He won’t.”

“Hm.” A smirk is spreading across her lips. “He’s beating you right now.”

He narrows his eyes. “What?”

Svetlana sits up on her knees and turns her phone around to show him the screen. “While you’re sitting here on your ass, Jane is on campus doing the task worth the most points of all, Ilya.”

On her phone is a post from Omega Chi’s Instagram page. Svetlana swipes through the photos as he looks. The Omega Chis are set up in different locations around campus; the

quad, outside the library, and next to the cafeteria with tables and huge boxes next to them, collecting canned goods. The text of the post is inviting anyone and everyone to come and make donations for a good cause. And of course, Greek Week points.

The last photo in the roll is Hollander at one of the tables, smiling as he accepts a can from a passerby.

“Oh, I can’t remember,” Svetlana says thoughtfully, tapping her chin with her index finger. “How many points are the canned goods worth again? Oh! That’s right! Ten per can! And look…”

Svetlana scrolls back to a picture with a huge box full of donated canned goods.

“Now, I’m not a math major, Ilya,” she says, bringing her teasing eyes back to his. “But I’d say that’s a lot of points.”

Ilya snatches her phone out of her hand to look closer. The day after the tug-o-war and the Omega Chis are already out there doing *this*? And have somehow collected what looks like hundreds of cans already? This has Hollander’s fingerprints all over it. Figures he would find the most boring of all the Greek Week side tasks to dominate.

Clicking away from the post, Ilya checks the Instagram page’s stories. A quick swipe through tells him that this is still going on right now, the most recent story of them collecting cans being from only ten minutes ago. He drops the phone and swings himself off the bed, practically jumping into his shoes.

“Where are you going?” Svetlana asks, looking like she already knows.

“To contribute to a good cause,” he answers, hand already on the door handle. He needs to stop by the kitchen before he leaves the house.

“Don’t forget, oh wise hunter,” Svetlana calls after him. “Your *prey* has teeth.”

Huh. His uncle would have liked that one.

The quad has hit a lull after the post-lunch rush. There are a couple of Omega Chi brothers scattered about advertising their canned goods collecting to the few remaining. One or two people have deposited a can at the table they have set up since Ilya arrived.

Hollander is stationed at the table, clipboard in hand, counting up every single can they’ve collected. An impressively sizable box sits just behind him.

Ilya waits until Pike and the other two Omega Chi brothers are a good distance away before he approaches the table. Hollander’s eyes are glued to the clipboard, tapping it with his pencil, so he doesn’t notice Ilya’s presence until Ilya announces it with a can of beans, which he had stolen from one of his brothers in the Kappa Tau kitchen, on the table.

Eyes drawn to the can, Hollander reaches for it before he looks up to see who the contributor is, his hand freezing mid-grab.

“Thought you needed all the help you can get,” Ilya says, nudging the can closer to him.

Hollander’s jaw clenches and he pulls his hand back. “How thoughtful,” he huffs, looking back to his clipboard. “But we don’t need *your* help, Rozanov.”

“Oh, Hollander…” Ilya says in mock-offense. “Are you going to deny a canned good for the hungry? All because of personal feelings? That is wrong, Hollander. Very wrong.”

Glaring, Hollander holds his tongue, not taking the bait. Ilya holds up the can and shakes it.

“Ten free points,” he entices.

Suddenly, the can is snatched out of his hand by a passing figure. Ilya doesn’t have time to hold onto it and when he looks over, Pike is dropping the can in the box and already moving away from them.

“Thanks for the points, Rozanov!” Pike calls out as he walks away.

Hollander chuckles and Ilya fumes that the moment was just ruined. Pike had a way of doing that over the years, and it had never endeared him to Ilya. He stares after him, wishing he could drop him into another mud pit right now.

“Your donation has been counted.” Hollander brings his attention back to him. There’s a smile playing on his lips now and he makes a mark on his clipboard. “Have a good day.”

But Ilya will not be dismissed so easily.

“I am glad you are doing this,” Ilya says, gesturing to the box of cans. “Should not be too easy for me or would be boring.”

“We do this every year, Rozanov,” Hollander says, not looking up from his clipboard. “I had this planned weeks ago. You just don’t notice these things because you’ve never bothered to participate in anything.”

Ilya raises his eyebrows, sensing that there’s more behind those words, but not quite sure what. “I am making up for it this year, then.”

“Three years late, how typical.” His voice is quiet and Ilya knows there’s something else to his words now.

“You have something to say, Hollander?” Ilya asks pointedly. This is not a new point of contention between them, or between Ilya and anyone who doesn’t speak Russian. He often feels like he’s a step behind when trying to completely understand someone in English. Language is not just about words, but how they are said. Hollander has confused him with not just his words but how he’s spoken them plenty of times since freshman year.

It’s why he’s so often had to make Hollander spell out what he wants to him. Like now.

Hollander glances around the quad and then finally at Ilya again. “When I have something to say to you, you’ll know it, Rozanov.”

“This is about yesterday?” Ilya asks, his voice sharp. “You are mad? That is petty even for you, Hollander. Was just a game.”

Hollander could be petty, certainly, but Hollander also thrives in competition. Ilya has seen him win plenty of Greek Week games or academic awards with a smug grin on his face. When he’s beaten Ilya at something, he happily rubbed it in. He’s hardly better than Ilya in this respect. And Ilya knows he hates to lose, maybe more than anything, but he also can take it. He might be pissed, but he doesn’t hold it against the winner. If anything, he holds it against himself. Defeat only motivates him to be better.

It’s why Ilya had no qualms about shoving his phone camera in Hollander’s face when he lost yesterday. Knowing it wouldn’t hurt him but light a fire under him. All the more fun.

“I don’t give a fuck about losing stupid tug-o-war, asshole,” Hollander says, glancing around the area again.

Ilya knows that’s at least a partial lie. He does care. But okay, that’s not what has him so worked up right now. Then…

Their bet? Their ridiculous bet? Is that what has him fuming? Ilya could almost laugh at the thought of that, but he doesn’t see what else it could be. It had hardly been something Hollander was coerced into. He had perked up the second Ilya suggested it that night and agreed readily. Ilya had known when he came up with the idea that Hollander would find the competition of a bet irresistible.

But since they had made the bet, Hollander’s attitude has shifted. Not that they were regularly warm with each other, but Hollander had been even chillier than usual at the tug-o-war and now these obviously pointed comments today. He feels like that must be it.

Well, Ilya wouldn’t mind calling off the whole silly bet right now. That is, if he gets what he wants.

Leaning in over the table and dropping his voice, Ilya gets Hollander’s attention again. “Okay. Then come to my place tonight.”

Not the Kappa Tau house. His off-campus apartment. Hollander knows this.

Hollander meets his eye. “Why?”

Ilya exhales and drops his shoulders, giving him a *really?* look.

Hollander doesn’t look like he considers this for even for a second. “I’m busy,” he snaps. “And besides, you haven’t won.”

“You can concede now and stop pretending this isn’t what you want,” Ilya suggests, falling into trying to provoke him all too easily.

The exasperation in Hollander’s eyes shifts into anger. “Desperation is not a good look on you, Rozanov.”

Ilya's eyebrows shoot up, taken aback by that one, and, irritatingly, a little bit hurt by it.

"Thought I was doing you favor," Ilya says, voice icy. But he dons a smile, just like he always does. "But is fine with me. I'd much rather beat you and claim my prize that way."

Shaking his head, Hollander sets the clipboard down on the table and looks directly at him with an earnestness that gives Ilya pause. "How do you do that?"

Ilya draws his eyebrows together, confused. "Do what?"

"Pretend."

A silence grows between them after the single word. *Pretend?* Pretend what? Ilya is about to open his mouth and ask him exactly that when suddenly Pike is standing next to him again.

"Hey man, we've got a class in like an hour, so we better pack up," Pike says to Hollander, then looks to him. "What the hell are you still doing here?"

"He was just leaving," Hollander says, turning away, not even sparing him another glance.

Ilya wants to drag Hollander to some private place and demand to know what he was talking about, coax an explanation of him. But he knows he can't, and worse than that, he can see that Hollander does not want him here right now in the least. So, he does just what Hollander says. He leaves.

That evening, Ilya is lying in bed staring at the ceiling.

He had done what he could for the rest of the afternoon to remove any thoughts of Hollander from his mind. Ordering the pledges around, which was always an amusing pleasure, and playing some stupid video game with Marleau and Connors. It had worked for a while, putting his attention elsewhere. But now that he's in bed with no one to distract him, Hollander's words from earlier keep replaying in his mind.

He thinks about calling Svetlana, just so he could talk to someone about anything. But he figures, after their conversation today, that she might do some more probing and unwanted observation, which he doesn't think he can handle right now.

Going out is an option. He could knock on the door of anyone in the house and drag them to the nearest bar with him. He could bring someone back with him, that might do something for his overcooked brain. But the thought of someone in his bed right now, the thought of fucking anyone is doing nothing for the headache that keeps building.

For probably the tenth time in the last hour, he picks up his phone and looks at the Omega Chi Instagram posts. He scrolls through the one from today and finds that smiling picture of Hollander again, taking a can from someone. Hollander hadn't come close to giving him a genuine smile today. Not that he's ever smiled much at Ilya.

But he used to. Sometimes.

Flipping over to his side, his fingers take him to his contact list and hit the call button next to the name ‘Jane’ before his common sense even catches up to what he is doing. He freezes once it starts ringing, unsure what the fuck he’s even calling for or what he’ll say, but he can’t make himself end the call.

But who is he fooling? He knows what he needs to ask. He wants to know what the fuck Hollander was talking about when he said that he *pretends*.

It rings and rings, and Ilya listens, not even taking a breath.

“Hi, you’ve reached Shane Hollander, I can’t come to the—”

Ilya hangs up.

It’s not even 9:30. He knows Hollander isn’t asleep yet. He could be doing any number of things, Ilya knows, but somehow, he is sure that Hollander didn’t simply miss his call, but rather he chose not to answer it.

And that is probably for the best after today, he tells himself. Whatever was said at the quad should probably just be left alone rather than dug up. Why would he want to do that if Hollander doesn’t?

His fingers are already typing a text message to Jane.

Me

Pretend what?

The text is sent before he can think better of it.

Maybe if Hollander couldn’t handle talking on the phone, he could bear to type out an answer to the question that has been burning him since that afternoon. He needs to have something from Hollander right now, even if it’s just a text telling him to fuck off.

His phone vibrates. He’s looking at the response before the vibration is even finished.

The text is not telling him to fuck off.

Jane

You pretend last year never happened.

I can’t.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos always appreciated.

Chapter 4: Ally

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for all the comments.

I'll try to update this as regularly as I can, but you know, life does happen. Your comments have encouraged me to finish this. I'm glad you're enjoying.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 2014

If you asked Shane last fall where he would be in one year, his answer would never have been “in Ilya Rozanov’s bed.” Yet here he is, and what’s more is Rozanov is on top of him, kissing him unabashedly into the pillows.

It’s only his second time in Rozanov’s apartment, but he already finds he’s getting comfortable here. The place is surprisingly well kept and clean, defying Shane’s expectations of Rozanov as a slob. Though Rozanov does have money, after all he can afford an off-campus apartment, so maybe he has someone come clean the place once a week or something. Whatever the case, Shane likes his apartment.

Rozanov hadn’t had any patience when Shane crossed the threshold this evening, immediately pulling him into the bedroom and telling him to get on the bed. Shane’s not sure, but he thinks Rozanov really likes having him in his space. Likes having him alone rather than hooking up surreptitiously at a party or Greek event. And Shane must admit he likes it too.

The rest of their freshman spring semester had consisted of the two of them sneaking away together whenever they happened to be in the same place. That, and a lot of suggestive texts, mostly from Rozanov’s side.

Shane knew every time he did it how stupid it was. A few times he planned to not do it anymore, but every time he saw Rozanov from across the room, his resolve buckled, and he went with him willingly. It was hard for him to see the wrongness of the whole thing every time Rozanov’s mouth was around his cock, or Shane’s was on his.

But that, for the most part, is all they have done. Nothing beyond their hands and mouths. And it’s because of this that there’s a niggling tension in the back of Shane’s head tonight, one that he’s trying to hide now even as Rozanov is pressed against him on the bed.

He wants more. He’s wanted it for a while, but tonight he had determined that it’s time.

It hadn't been easy for him to finally accept that he wanted this. Blow jobs and hand jobs with another man are one thing, but sex…that's something else. He didn't know what it would mean. Not to mention he has never had sex with a man before. He knows Rozanov has, as he had told him. But that did nothing to lessen his trepidations, afraid that he wouldn't be any good and Rozanov would be disappointed. He couldn't bear the thought of that.

But he does know that Rozanov wants it. He had made that very clear the third time they were together in the spring, when he pressed Shane against the wall of some frat boy's bedroom, his chest to Shane's back, wrapped his hand around his cock, and growled "I want to fuck you, Hollander" into his ear. His last name had barely left his mouth before Shane was coming in Rozanov's hand.

Still, Shane had hesitated. Initially, he tried to stammer out an excuse, but Rozanov silenced him with a look and told him, with surprising sincerity, that they don't have to do anything he doesn't want to do.

That didn't mean Rozanov didn't continue to make it clear that he wanted it, whether with his wandering fingers or his suggestive comments, but he did so without pressuring. Like he was waiting for Shane to decide.

When the spring semester ended and Shane went home for the summer, he wondered if things would be different in the fall. If maybe Rozanov would move on while they were apart and the thing between them would end. Rozanov certainly seemed like the type of person who would get bored of the same partner after a while, and Shane thought that might extend to him.

But he wasn't back on campus for three days in September when he received a text from Lily, asking him if he would be attending Kappa Tau's Welcome Back party. From there, things continued as they had in the spring, only now they've added Rozanov's apartment to the equation, and it was the first time Shane was in here a couple of weeks ago that he thought more seriously about sex. About sex with Rozanov.

Sex with Rozanov. Jesus Christ, he must be insane.

But as Rozanov peels his shirt from his body, allowing Shane access to his chest and abs, familiar cross necklace dangling between them, he knows this is what he wants. Insanity or no.

He's not sure how he should approach this. He was the one who chose to delay it, so he has to be the one to initiate, but he doesn't know how. It would all be easier if Rozanov just knew and could rip his clothes from him and give Shane what he wants. But as familiar as Rozanov has become to Shane's body, he's not a mind reader. Shane has to take the initiative, but his nerves keep him quiet.

When Rozanov's fingers start working the button of Shane's pants, he tenses, and Rozanov feels it immediately.

"Hey, you okay?" Rozanov asks, pulling his hands away. He starts to move his body away too, but Shane grips his shoulders, keeping him close.

“I’m fine,” Shane assures him, but he hears the strain in his own voice.

“We do not have to,” Rozanov tells him. “We can just—”

“I want to.”

Rozanov’s eyes scan over his face, unsure. “Hollander, what—”

“*I want to*,” Shane repeats, and his grip is tightening on Ilya’s shoulders now. He locks eyes with him, beseeching him to comprehend what he’s saying. Trying to be clearer, he adds “With you.”

Understanding begins to dawn in Rozanov’s eyes. Shane feels a touch of relief before anxiety rushes in, realizing he’s about to cross a line he’s never crossed with any man, and with someone he’s not even sure he likes very much, except when they’re alone and touching each other.

“Hollander…” Rozanov’s hand is on his chest now, rubbing circles in what Shane assumes is supposed to be a soothing motion. “You are scared.”

“*No*,” Shane rejects immediately, lifting his head up from the pillow. “No, I’m not *scared*.”

“Is okay to be,” Rozanov whispers, his hand on Shane’s chest repeating the motion, while also pressing him down gently but firmly on the bed.

“I want to,” Shane says again, reaching for his shirt and tugging it up, getting it over his head and off. Rozanov lets him. “Please.”

Shane reaches for Rozanov’s face and kisses him then, trying to drive all the tension and worries from his mind. This happens sometimes; he’s noticed. Not every time they’ve been together, but when he’s with Rozanov, he has a way of releasing Shane from all of the noise in his head. After a few words or touches, Shane becomes loose and serene, and it feels good.

He wants that feeling now, but he can tell Rozanov is holding himself in check. What’s worse, even as he pulls Rozanov closer to him and kisses him harder, he feels his heart rate speed up and can hear the sound of his own breathing in the quiet room. His mind, far from going quiet, is racing with a thousand words a second. Inadvertently, he whimpers into Rozanov’s mouth, and that seems to be enough for him.

Taking Shane’s wrists in his hands, Rozanov holds them down on either side of his head and pulls himself away from his kiss. “Hollander, calm down.”

Shane squirms, frustrated that he can’t make his mind shut up, but he tries to do what Rozanov says. He can at least make himself breathe a little more slowly if he concentrates. He watches the rise and fall of Rozanov’s chest, trying to match the same rhythm.

“That’s good,” Rozanov tells him, taking deep breaths of his own. “Just relax. Is okay.”

When Shane’s breathing has slowed to an acceptable pace, Rozanov leans down to kiss him softly on the cheek. Shane tries to lean into the kiss, but Rozanov makes a disapproving

sound, pulling away again.

“Hollander, I think is better if you let me,” Rozanov says thoughtfully, looking up and down Shane’s face.

“Let you?” Shane asks, feeling his face scrunch in confusion.

Rozanov considers his answer. “Just…be still for me. Right now, I think is better.”

Shane mulls this over and nods, forcing himself to go lax under Rozanov. It does seem like an easier task right now to be still, so he tries, not leaning into it this time when Rozanov trails kisses along his jaw. Rozanov releases one of his wrists and gropes at his pec, his thumb scraping over his nipple, and Shane has to stifle a moan at the feeling.

It’s tempting to run his fingers through Rozanov’s curls with his now free hand, but Rozanov asked him to be still so he will. For some reason, doing what Rozanov says feels imperative in this moment, and with every passing second under Rozanov’s lips and fingers, tension seems to seep out from his body.

The sound of Rozanov murmuring something in Russian against his lips brings him back.

“What’s that?” Shane asks, always wanting to know.

“You are doing well,” Rozanov tells him.

Shane trembles at the words and Rozanov removes his other hand from Shane’s wrist, the tips of his fingers soft against his skin as he moves southward, and Shane leaves his hand in place on the mattress, which Rozanov seems to note with an approving sound.

Whenever they kiss, it is usually a frantic affair, but Rozanov is taking his time with him now, his tongue sliding softly against his. Shane responds, but not too much, allowing Rozanov to kiss him as he likes. His hand finally finds its destination, sliding over his cock through his pants. At this, Shane tenses slightly again.

Rozanov feels it, pulling back from the kiss. When Shane tries to chase his lips, he pulls back further, shaking his head.

“Hollander, maybe not tonight,” he says quietly, removing his hand from his cock.

The words were spoken so kindly but rejection twists in Shane’s gut immediately. He blinks rapidly. “You…you don’t want to?” It’s embarrassing how small his voice sounds. He looks away, not able to bear what his answer might be.

Rozanov’s fingers are instantly on his chin, forcing his gaze back to his, and there’s an intensity there that makes Shane want to melt into the mattress. “Hollander, I *want*. Fuck. I have wanted since…”

He doesn’t finish that sentence, and Shane finds himself wondering exactly how long Rozanov has wanted this.

“I just don’t want....” Rozanov closes his eyes. Shane thinks he might be searching for the words in English. Finally, he settles on, “If you do not want, I do not want.”

Shane blinks. He hadn’t exactly imagined this conversation going this way. He thought when he told Rozanov what he wanted, they’d fall into each other and chase all the words from each other’s mouths. This has taken a turn he didn’t expect, and he’s not sure how to navigate it.

“I told you I want it,” Shane says. It’s the truth, and he tries to sound as firm as possible. “I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it.”

“You are sure?” he asks, and there’s a glint in his eyes that Shane hasn’t seen from him before, and Shane knows that he’s about to cross the point of no return.

“I’m sure,” he answers honestly.

After staring at him for a few seconds, as if ensuring that he understood the exchange completely, Rozanov nods. “Okay,” he says, exhaling. “Then ask me.”

Shane swallows. It’s not entirely unexpected. Rozanov always likes to hear him spell out for him what he wants. Shane isn’t sure if it’s a power thing or a language barrier thing. Maybe both. Either way, it’s usually non-negotiable.

“I want…” His voice trails off and he feels his face flushing. Not because he’s having second thoughts but because he’s never had to ask for *this* before. With a great deal of effort, he manages to hold eye contact. “I want you to fuck me.”

Rozanov’s lips are on his as soon as the words are out, and Shane only has a moment to be surprised that Rozanov didn’t ask him to say “please.” Considering the eagerness with which he’s kissing him now, Shane deduces that his patience for that had run out. His demeanor is more familiar now, closer to what they were doing before Rozanov had sensed his nerves and stopped them.

Shane feels Rozanov’s hands on the button of his pants again, and this time he complies easily, lifting his hips as Rozanov yanks his pants down and off of him. His briefs follow, and Shane is naked before him. Nothing Rozanov hasn’t seen before, but he sinks his teeth into Shane’s inner thigh and groans like it’s the first time all the same.

Instead of swallowing down his cock like he usually does, Rozanov gently pushes Shane’s knees up. At this, Shane tenses again and Rozanov gives him an encouraging kiss on the knee.

“You will like this,” Rozanov promises him before reaching for his bedside table. There’s a small bottle of lube sitting there.

Shane tries not to think about how Rozanov has that handy because he has people over all the time. It’s not like Shane is the only one he’s seeing. Though it needles him a bit now, knowing that Rozanov is the only person he’s been seeing in this way…the only one for quite a while now.

Though that is driven from his mind when Rozanov's lube coated index finger is sliding inside of him. The sensation is a shock, his hips twitching up from the bed before Rozanov pushes him back down, holding him against the mattress.

"Okay?" Rozanov asks.

Shane nods rapidly. It's not the first time he's had Rozanov's finger inside of him, though the other times were in the midst of Rozanov blowing him and prodding a finger into his hole to tip him over the edge. This, with the promise of what is to come, feels different. Shane tries not to clench up in anticipation.

"You do this with yourself?" Rozanov is working a second finger into him as he asks this.

Shane hisses quietly at the stretch. "You…yes. I told you that."

"Ah, right," he says as he scissors his two fingers inside of him, searching. "With your purple dildo."

"It's not *purple*, you di—*oh!"*

Shane's hand flies to his mouth and he bites down on the inside of his palm. Rozanov has just found that spot inside of him that he has previously only been able to nudge with the much asked about dildo. The sensation is sharp, but Shane wants more of it, feeling his knees draw further up on the bed.

"There?" Rozanov asks, quite unnecessarily in Shane's opinion.

"You think?" Shane returns, injecting as much sarcasm into the words as he can.

Rozanov chuckles and inserts a third finger, continuing to abuse that spot. "This…will be different from your dildo."

"Rozanov, I *know*—"

"Will be better."

He says this with such assurance that it raises Shane's hackles, even amongst the white-hot pleasure that Rozanov is continuing to draw out of his body.

"You talk a lot," Shane can't help but try to goad him.

"Only because you like it, *kotenok*."

That fucking word again. It had been a useless effort asking Rozanov not to call him that, especially since one occasion just before summer break when Rozanov had made him come in his pants with nothing but a hand on his cock outside of his briefs and the whispered words "So good for me, *kotenok*" in his ear. There was no denying the effect the word had on him after that, but it still embarrassed him every time.

He's leaking now, both from Rozanov's words and his devoted attention to that spot deep inside of him, and Shane is momentarily worried about coming too early and ruining this whole thing. It vexes him, that. How easily he can come apart. He hadn't known before he met Rozanov just how sensitive he is.

"*Rozanov*," he grunts out, both a warning and a plea.

"Close?" Rozanov asks, though Shane thinks he must already know this, so attuned to his body.

Still, Shane nods in answer and Rozanov pulls his fingers out, much to his relief, sinking back against the pillows. Some of his earlier anxiety returns to his body when Rozanov strips himself of the rest of his clothes, however, and Shane is once again confronted with the size of him.

He's seen Rozanov's cock before, obviously. In very intimate fashion. But taking it in his mouth was one thing. Now it has to fit inside of him, and Shane has been unsure from the beginning exactly how that is going to work.

Rozanov spots him staring and must sense his hesitation. "It will fit, Hollander. Don't worry."

The assurance makes Shane blush, but he nods. Rozanov is the one who has done this before, after all. He just has to trust that he knows what he's doing and go along with him. But he wants this, so he's willing to do that. And for some reason that he has never really understood, he does trust Rozanov.

Which is why he waits for Rozanov to tell him what to do now. He'll stay on his back or get on his hands and knees or whatever Rozanov thinks they should do. It's easier to let him decide.

After rolling a condom on himself, Rozanov spends a minute just looking at him before he seems to determine how to do this, pushing Shane's knees up, almost tucking them against his chest. He grunts out something in Russian so quickly that Shane couldn't even make out the words, only recognizing that they weren't English.

"Tell me," Shane says.

Rozanov shakes his head. "Stay still for me again."

Shane guesses that's not what he had said in Russian but is suddenly too distracted to wonder about it anymore. He feels the tip of Rozanov's cock prodding at his hole. Without meaning to, he tenses up, unable to completely rid himself of his nerves.

"S-sorry," flies from his mouth. "I didn't—"

"Is okay," Rozanov soothes, his hand is on his chest again and he leans down so his face is only inches from Shane's. "This is better?"

Shane hears his breath catch but he nods in answer. It is better, he thinks, for Rozanov to not feel so far away right now. He feels his body relax slightly.

Rozanov feels it too, the head of his cock prodding at him again. Shane winces as it enters him, trying his best to stay still against the intrusion. When Rozanov pushes further in, his hands shoot up to grip Rozanov's shoulders.

"Okay?" Rozanov asks, his hips freezing.

Shane nods. It's not comfortable, but he knew that would be the case, at least at first. "Please."

"I go slow," Rozanov tells him, placing a kiss on his brow.

He does go slow. Inch by painstaking inch. His eyes stay glued to Shane's face the entire time, noting his every twitch and expression. Shane wants to squirm under the intimacy of it, but he can't in his current position. He also wants to look away, but he finds he can't do that either, as if Rozanov's gaze is holding him in place.

When Rozanov is fully inside him, Shane lets out a breath. The fullness of it is a shock, and it still hurts, but not so much that Shane wants to ask him to pull out. He feels his body stretching around Rozanov's cock, oddly satisfying. Shane shifts his hips experimentally, but Rozanov's hand is on his hip instantly, stilling him.

"Let me," he says, and slowly begins to pull out of him. "Will hurt, but I will make you feel good, okay?"

Shane nods, believing him. He had done some research about this beforehand, not wanting to be caught completely unawares. The discomfort isn't a surprise.

When Rozanov pushes back inside of him again, he moves faster this time, and the pain is still there. Shane presses his lips together and his nails dig into Rozanov's shoulders, trying to take it without complaint. Rozanov whispers soft encouragement into his ear, stroking his cock as if to apologize. Even with the pain, the sensation of being filled up over and over is pleasing, and after the fifth time, a moan escapes Shane's lips.

"Is good?" Rozanov asks, noting his reaction.

"Yeah, 's good," Shane grunts out. "Could you—more?"

Rozanov's eyes light up at the request, and it occurs to Shane how much he's probably holding himself back, and how much, Shane realizes, he doesn't want him to. He wants to make this good for him too.

Obliging him, Rozanov pulls out and thrusts back in again, faster this time, and before Shane can get his bearings, Rozanov is establishing a steady rhythm. He gasps, his breaths coming much faster now. That edge of pain hasn't gone away, but it is giving way much more to pleasure as Rozanov moves in and out of him.

"Okay?" Rozanov asks, his voice rougher than usual.

Shane nods, and when Rozanov's cock finds that spot inside of him, he buries his hands in his curls. "Fuck, *fuck*, Roza—"

Rozanov kisses him then, his pace never slowing. Shane moans into his mouth, feeling Rozanov's tongue dart out against his lip before he's pulling away again, burying himself in Shane's neck instead. It feels good, his lips and his scruff against him there. That combined with Rozanov's persistent thrusting has his mind drifting, the way it sometimes does when they are together.

Between them, Shane's cock is leaking and insistent against Rozanov's chest, Shane reaches down, intending to stroke himself before Rozanov snatches his hand in his own and presses it to the bed.

Shane looks at his hand, trapped under Rozanov's, and pulls at it. "Please—"

Rozanov pulls out of him completely then, and Shane nearly wails at the loss, trying to pull him back.

"No, *no*, please—"

"Hands and knees," Rozanov tells him, sitting up on his own knees. "And don't touch yourself, *kotenok*."

Sniffling, Shane does what he's told, though it proves difficult. His arms feel like jell-o, and he's worried he won't be able to hold himself up. Rozanov immediately seizes his hips in his hands, pulling him back against him.

"Fuck, Hollander." Rozanov's accent sounds even more severe than usual. "Look at you..."

The insinuation makes Shane's face flush, even though he's already hot all over. He presses his face down against the pillow. "Could you please just…please?"

"Please what?" The head of his cock is at Shane's entrance again.

Shane has no more patience for teasing. "Please just fuck me. *Please*."

"Okay." Rozanov's lips are suddenly at his shoulder as he pushes himself in to the hilt again, making Shane cry out. "Only because you ask so nicely."

Rozanov's hand snakes up to the back of Shane's neck, holding him there, as he begins to move again. The angle is different from this position, much sharper, like Rozanov is deeper inside of him, and Shane can't stop the noises from spilling out of his mouth. Rozanov only seems encouraged by this, quickening his pace. Shane can feel his hot breath against his shoulder, the cool metal of his necklace hitting his back.

Curious, Shane pushes himself backwards, meeting one of Rozanov's thrusts. Rozanov immediately clamps down hard on the back of his neck and groans so loudly Shane nearly comes just from the sound of it. He glances over his shoulder, a question his eyes.

Rozanov meets his gaze, and Shane has never seen him look quite like this before. His eyes are hazy, his hair a mess, and his face is flushed. Shane gulps at the sight of him, unused to seeing Rozanov's control on a knife's edge.

“That’s good, Hollander,” he says as Shane pushes back again. “You can move.”

Shane isn’t of the mind right now to think about why it’s so satisfying to be given permission from Rozanov, so he just continues to move in sync with him, wanting to draw out more of those noises from him. Rozanov clearly wants the same, removing his hand from his neck and moving it to his front, groping at his pecs. But not, to Shane’s disappointment, going near his cock.

He so badly wants to touch himself, feeling his release is just there, but Rozanov told him not to, and for reasons he cannot understand, it feels good to do what Rozanov asks him. He likes knowing it makes Rozanov feel good too.

But it’s starting to get nearly painful with a particularly rough thrust against his prostate, tears springing to his eyes, his body begging for release. He’s close to opening his mouth and begging Rozanov to touch him, but all that escapes is a pitiful whine.

At the sound, Rozanov’s hands drop from his front, and he straightens up. Shane is momentarily mortified that he might be pulling out and away from him again, but without warning, he takes Shane’s hips in his hands and thrusts viciously inside of him, setting a breakneck pace.

“Oh, *fuck*…” is all Shane is able to grunt out. He’s no longer moving in tandem with Rozanov but just letting Rozanov push in and out of him without abandon, chasing his own release while also pushing Shane quickly towards his.

The sound of skin slapping against skin would humiliate Shane in his right mind, but he’s barely conscious of anything other than the feeling of Rozanov inside of him and a tear that has escaped his eye, sliding down his cheek, the pleasure overwhelming.

“*Rozanov*, I’m—” The words die in his throat.

“Are you...?” Rozanov asks, sounding near the edge himself, his movements unceasing.

Shane thinks he nods, but he can’t be sure. Any semblance of control he had is gone now. Rozanov seems to get the message, however, adjusting the angle until he’s found what he’s looking for and—

It’s enough. Too much. Shane comes with a shout, spilling onto his own chest, not even needing Rozanov’s hand to send him over the edge. The sound he makes is guttural, coming from somewhere deep in his dry throat. He keeps his eyes shut, unsure if he’d even be able to see anything if he opened them.

“Oh *fuck*, Hollander,” Shane hears Rozanov say, or something like that. Or maybe he spoke Russian. He doesn’t really know anymore.

Shane is barely lucid but is conscious of Rozanov’s continued frantic thrusting, using Shane to find his own release. Thankfully, it doesn’t take much longer. Shane feels him curl closer around him as he comes, his grunt loud in the quiet room.

Things go hazy for at least a few minutes in Shane's mind. He makes an effort to try to come back to himself while also enjoying this brief serenity. The next thing he's sure of is that Rozanov is holding him from behind, his chest against his back as his hand moves up and down his body, soft and mollifying touches.

"You are with me?" Rozanov asks quietly, noting Shane's cracked open eyes.

"Mhm," Shane is able to answer.

"Good," Rozanov says, leaning forward to kiss him. "It was good?"

Good isn't exactly the word Shane would use to describe what they just did. He's not sure his body has ever felt better in his life. Not during any of the sex he's ever had before, not even back when he could play hockey and was performing physical feats on the ice. No. *This* is somehow even better.

But it's not like he can say all that to Rozanov. Instead, "Yeah, it was."

Rozanov kisses him again. "Good. I pull out now, yes?"

Shane looks down, and somehow it hadn't even computed in his brain that Rozanov is still inside of him. What the fuck? Just what exactly have his brain and body been doing in the last thirty minutes? He'll worry about that later, he decides, and nods at Rozanov in answer.

As Rozanov gets up and Shane tries not to miss the feeling of his body pressed against his, he does his best to get his mind working as it should be. It comes back easily enough, and he starts to wonder if things are going to be awkward now that they've finally done this together. Rozanov doesn't indicate anything with his body language, pulling on his sweatpants and grabbing some tissues.

He approaches Shane again and starts wiping his chest, and Shane only now realizes that he still had come on his skin. Blushing, he tries to take the tissues away from Rozanov and do it himself, but he only holds them firm and shakes his head.

"What are you doing for Halloween?" Rozanov asks, Shane supposes, to make conversation and reduce any weirdness.

"Uh…" Shane vaguely remembers Hayden bringing up Halloween days ago. "Is Halloween a thing in Russia?"

Rozanov chuckles as he finishes wiping his chest. "No, Hollander. But it is here."

"Oh," Shane says, thinking that was a dumb question. "Well, what are you doing?"

Smiling and sitting back on the bed, Rozanov says, "Svetlana and I are going to party together as James Bond and Tatiana Romanova."

Oh. Svetlana. Shane knows who she is. Kind of. She's another Russian student. She's in Mu Gamma Sigma house, he's pretty sure. Shane sees her with Rozanov sometimes at parties. He's never met her formally but has wondered if she's Rozanov's girlfriend. He had never

brought her up before now. He shifts on the bed, suddenly feeling that anxiety again. He tries to focus on what Rozanov said.

“James Bond and…?”

“Tatiana Romanova, you know,” Rozanov says, eyebrows coming together. When Shane doesn’t say anything, his lips twitch into a smile. “From Russia with Love, Hollander. The movie. You don’t know James Bond?”

Shane looks away. “Of course, I know James Bond.” Though he’s never seen a single James Bond movie and isn’t even sure he’s ever heard of From Russia with Love. “I just forgot that one.”

Rozanov chuckles, leaning in to kiss him on the forehead. “So boring. Anyway, you did not say what you will do.”

Ignoring the heat in his cheeks, Shane tries to remember what Hayden invited him to do. It’s suddenly imperative that he gives Rozanov a decent answer and not tell him he’s staying home and studying like a boring person.

“I’m going to the Zeta Beta Halloween party,” he says, remembering exactly which house party it was that Hayden wanted to attend. “Going with some guys from Omega Chi.”

If this surprises Rozanov, he doesn’t show it. Only nodding approvingly. “Good. Will be fun. You need more parties, Hollander.”

“Yeah, says you,” Shane says, sitting up in bed. They usually don’t talk this much, and he’s starting to feel like it’s time to leave. “You probably need fewer of them.”

Rozanov smirks. Shane holds up a hand to him.

“Don’t say it.” Yes, yes. He’s boring. He knows. “I should go.”

“Ah,” Rozanov says, looking away. “Yes, that’s fine.”

Moving to stand up, it occurs to Shane that they made a complete mess of Rozanov’s bed, and there’s no way he’d be able to go to sleep tonight without doing his laundry. “Sorry about your…sheets.”

Rozanov looks at him, confused, then looks at the bed and barks out a laugh. “My sheets will be okay, Hollander. Thank you.”

Shane dresses as quickly as he can, feeling a bit sore as he does but trying not to let it show. He can take a hot shower when he gets back to his dorm, soothe any aches he still has. He tries not to think about how he’d like to be back in the position he was in before, with Rozanov running a gentle hand over his body.

“I will see you soon?” Rozanov asks once he’s dressed.

Shane shrugs, trying to look indifferent. “You know, I’ll see you around or whatever.”

“Or whatever,” Rozanov does his best impression of a Canadian accent.

“Fuck off, man,” Shane says, letting himself smile. “Have a good Halloween, James Bond.”

Shane thinks that’s the end of it, but Rozanov is suddenly in his space again when he turns to the door, holding his arm out to block him and his fingers are on his chin, bringing his mouth to his. The kiss is gentle, not meant to start anything up again, just to say goodbye. Shane trembles at the touch, unsure what to do with this softness.

Rozanov pulls away before long. The look in his eyes gives Shane pause, like he’s going to say something about tonight, or whatever this is between them, or anything. But then that flicker is gone, and that familiar playfulness is all that remains.

“Try to have fun, Hollander,” is all he says.

Shane exhales, trying not to feel disappointment over the loss of whatever that just was on Rozanov’s face. Before he makes the mistake of asking him about it, he just nods, walking out of the room and out of the apartment.

March 2017

Rose has not lifted her head from the table for nearly thirty seconds. If she keeps this up, people passing by are going to start looking at them.

“Please remember that I asked for no judgement,” Shane reminds her.

“You ask the impossible of me too often,” Rose finally says, her head still against the table.

They’re sitting at one of the outdoor lunch tables on the campus quad. Shane had decided after the first Greek Olympiad event that he couldn’t go on without telling someone about the stupid bet. Besides, Rose had given him suspicious looks after his interaction with Rozanov in the tug-o-war mud pit. She was already sniffing out that something was going on, so Shane just decided to tell her, as embarrassing as it is to tell anyone that he did something so ridiculous.

Taking a deep breath, Rose lifts her head from the table and looks at him. To Shane’s relief, there’s no judgement in her eyes. Only concern.

“You know you can just tell him you’re not doing this bullshit bet anymore, right?” she asks, eyes widening with hope. “You didn’t make a blood pact. At least you didn’t mention it if you did.”

Shane shakes his head. “No blood pact. But you know I’m not gonna tell him I’m quitting.”

“*Shane*.”

“I want to beat him, Rose,” Shane says, and it’s true. Tug-o-war only made him surer of this, and walking away from the bet will only make him feel like a coward. “I need to beat him.”

“You let him have too much control over you,” Rose says, shaking her head. “And he knows it.”

Shane bristles at that. “Maybe,” he admits, remembering what happened at their canned goods collecting a few days ago. “But it goes both ways.”

“I’m sure it does,” Rose allows. “I just don’t see how this ends well, and I don’t want you to get hurt.”

Shane frowns. He knows she’s not far off base. Getting involved with Rozanov had gotten him hurt before, something she knows well. But somehow, despite all of that, he almost finds himself wanting to defend Rozanov, which probably makes him an idiot.

“I just needed to talk about this with someone,” he says instead. “I didn’t tell you so you could worry about me.”

“You tell Hayden?”

He gives her a look that makes her burst into laughter. He relaxes a bit at that, some of the pressure dissipating in the air.

“Okay, that was a stupid question,” she admits. “But it’s probably past time you told him about what’s going on between you and Rozanov. He’s your best friend.”

“I don’t know, the race for that honor is close between the two of you,” Shane says with a chuckle.

Hayden is his best friend. So is Rose. He doesn’t really rank them so much as he puts them in different categories. He’s known Hayden for longer. Hayden knows his parents and knew him back when he lost hockey, the toughest time in his life. Shane can’t put into words how much Hayden’s support at the time meant to him.

Rose has been there for him through different struggles. He hasn’t known her as long, but he’s able to be more open and honest with her about some of his less savory decisions over the years than he can with Hayden.

“Maybe so,” Rose says, bringing him back to her. “I’m not sure he’d be that helpful anyway. He’d probably just want to kick Rozanov’s ass if you told him about what happened last—”

“He always wants to kick Rozanov’s ass for anything and everything,” Shane interrupts. “That’s why I never told him. It’s not worth the headache. Also, he can’t fight.”

“Rozanov would lay him out,” she concurs with a nod.

“I don’t think it would be very hard.”

“So, I am left to carry the Shane Hollander and Ilya Rozanov baggage,” Rose ponders, her eyes drifting to the sky philosophically. “That is my cross to bear in this world.”

“Ha ha,” Shane says, but also feels a twinge of guilt. “You know you can dump all of your love life horrors on me too, right?”

Rose smiles. “I’m afraid my love life does not hold a candle to the Shane and Rozanov Show. But one day I’ll let you in on some of my secrets.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “You? Secrets? From *me?”*

“In due time, Shane Hollander,” she says, raising her finger to her lips in a *shh*. “It took you a while to tell me about all things Rozanov, after all.”

That’s true, but Shane doesn’t mind being a hypocrite when it comes to this. If Rose has a secret boyfriend or something, he’s nosey enough to want to know about it. The fact that she’s being evasive just makes him want to know more. But he won’t bother her with any questions she’s not ready to answer.

He holds his hands up, signaling he’ll drop the topic. “Well, my problem has an easy solution at least. I win Greek Month, Rozanov has to perform some public humiliation, and I get the trophy.”

“I’m not sure public humiliation works on Rozanov.” Rose cocks her head to the side thoughtfully. “That man does not seem to have shame.”

Shane shrugs. That seems an accurate assessment. “It will make me laugh at least.”

“Anyway, you’re not winning Greek Week, I am,” Rose says assuredly. “And hey, that’s another solution to your problem, right? If you both lose, the bet is null and void.”

Shane chuckles, some of his competitive spirit lighting up. “Hey, I’m gonna beat Rozanov and the Zeta Betas myself. Victory in the bet and Greek Month.”

“Oh, I’m sure that’s what you believe,” Rose says, smiling and leaning further over the table. “But the Omega Chi reign is coming to an end. And it will be at my hands, not Ilya Rozanov’s.”

A lightbulb goes off in Shane’s head at her words. “A common enemy.”

“What?”

“The Kappa Taus. Rozanov. Our common enemy, Rose,” Shane says, mind racing.

“Yeah, what about it?” she asks, leaning back in her seat.

“Right now, it’s a three-way race for first place, right?” Shane is thinking back to the current point totals for all the houses when he checked this morning. “Kappa Tau got the lead with the polar bear plunge and tug-o-war. Omega Chi got second in tug-o-war but made-up ground with the canned goods. Zeta Beta won a round of tug-o-war, got some canned good points, and you’re doing that sorority shirt color thing.”

Rose points to her shirt. “It’s yellow day!”

Sororities have an extra task they can perform for Greek Week points. Sorority members wear whatever color is assigned that day whenever they're on campus or on Greek Row. Rose is wearing yellow today because, as she said, it's yellow day. And as far as Shane has noticed, the Zeta Beta sisters haven't missed a day on the color shirts.

There are two other sororities in the running, of course, with Theta Xi out. But as far as Shane can tell, the Mu Gamma Sigmas and Phi Sigma Rhos are primarily participating for the fun of it, not for victory like Shane, Rose, and Rozanov.

"If we keep ourselves ahead of Kappa Tau, one of our houses is sure to win," Shane says, still thinking. "We just need to make sure we're the last two houses standing."

Rose considers this. "I suppose the only drawback to that plan is that I wouldn't have the pleasure of kicking Rozanov's ass in the final. I'd have to kick your ass instead."

"Yes, I see the same flaw from my side of things," Shane says. He would also like to beat Rozanov in the final. But he'd also rather Rose have the trophy than Rozanov.

"And is this what you want, Shane?" Rose asks, her finger drawing circles on the table.

"What do you mean?"

"You want to keep Rozanov from winning?" She meets his eye again.

Shane squints at her, confused. Was that not what this entire conversation has been about? How they can make sure Rozanov does not win? Shane can't imagine a world where he'd be okay with losing to Rozanov. Not at Greek Week, not at anything.

The part of him that ponders what exactly twenty-four hours alone with Rozanov would entail, and how good it might feel, he shoves to the back of his brain.

"Yes," he says with as much confidence he can muster.

She looks at him for a moment, as if convincing herself of something, before nodding. "Alright then. Omega Chi and Zeta Beta will be in the final together."

Shane sticks his hand out over the table to shake on it. Rose laughs.

"Always so official," she says, shaking his hand.

"I like to have agreements," he says, remembering how he shook on his bet with Rozanov, and how that's another reason he wouldn't want to go back on it.

"You know, all of this is certainly going to make my Greek Week house party next week more interesting," Rose says when she pulls her hand back.

With all that's been going on in the last week or so, Shane had forgotten about that. "Oh yeah. What's the theme again?"

She narrows his eyes. “No way, Shane. You’ll get your invitation on Monday like everyone else.”

“No hints for your ally?” Shane asks in mock-hurt.

“It’ll be sexy, that’s all you get,” she says. “And won’t that be fun? All of us Greek Week participants together at my sexy party. Sounds like a disaster.”

In Shane’s book, anything Rozanov attends is likely to be a disaster, even if the theme is potato sacks.

“I’m more focused on tomorrow’s challenge anyway,” Shane says, relaxing in his chair. “You got the clue?”

Rose smiles and nods. “Rubber ducky.”

“You know, the name of this challenge has never made sense to me,” Hayden says, leaning to the side to stretch his legs.

“It’s because you get dizzy, Hayden,” Shane tells him. “That’s the point of the whole thing.”

“Okay yeah, I get *that* part.” He rolls his eyes. “But dizzy dizzy *duck*. Why duck? Where’s the duck in the game?”

“Alliteration,” Shane tells him the first thing that comes to mind. He has not given this much thought. “It rolls off the tongue. Dizzy dizzy duck. See?”

“Oh, so that’s what alliteration is…”

Shane overlooks the field, set up for the competition. It’s not a complex game. Each of the five remaining teams are provided with two buckets, one filled with water about sixty yards away, and one at the starting point alongside a baseball bat and a water pitcher. One at a time, team members will put their heads against the handle of the bat and spin around it ten times. Then, while dizzy of course, dash for the water at the other end of the course, fill up their pitcher with water, and bring back as much water as they can while spilling as little as possible.

The first team to get their bucket overflowing with water wins.

Dizzy dizzy duck is probably one of the funniest Greek Week games, at least that was Shane’s impression from hearing the laughter from onlookers the first time he participated in it. They did this game his freshman year and it hasn’t been used since then. It’s less funny to actually do it, but yes, it is silly to watch it performed.

Only five participants per house in this game, and Shane supposes that is so no one has too much time to recover from dizziness, for maximum disorientation. His team consists of himself, Hayden, JJ, and two pledge volunteers. Their lane is right in the middle of the other houses. The ZBZs to his left and the KTs to his right. Mu Gamma and Phi Sigma on the outside lanes. Most of the teams seem ready to go. Except one.

Rozanov isn't here.

The Kappa Taus, including Troy, are looking around anxiously, two of them have their phones out, probably texting Rozanov if Shane had to guess. Some other members of their houses are standing in the crowd to watch, but house presidents are considered team captains, and the captain has to be present for a house to participate.

Shane hasn't seen Rozanov since the canned goods drive the other day and hadn't heard from him since their text exchange that evening. He suddenly wonders if Rozanov has decided he's had enough of Greek Week and their bet. Maybe this is over.

A strange mixture of relief and disappointment floods through him at the thought.

Svetlana is standing with her team on the other side of the Kappa Taus. Shane figures if someone knows where Rozanov is, it's her. He manages to catch her eye, and points in the direction of the Kappa Taus, raising his eyebrows in question. She shrugs her shoulders and gives him a look that tells him she's just as in the dark as he is.

One of the Greek Council members is walking up to the Kappa Taus now.

"Hey guys, you know that your president has to be here to participate, right?" she asks them with an air of authority.

"He'll be here," Marleau, Rozanov's vice president, tells her. "He just texted me, I swear."

Shane barely knows Marleau but even he doesn't find that tone convincing.

"I'm giving him three minutes, then we have to start. With or without Kappa Tau, sorry." She turns around and walks back into the crowd.

All the Kappa Taus have their phones out now, desperately texting Rozanov to tell him to get here.

"How great would this be?" Hayden mutters under his breath.

Shane just glances at Hayden but doesn't say anything.

This is quite lame of Rozanov, Shane thinks. Even if he's decided he doesn't want to do this anymore, he still made a commitment to his house. Going completely MIA on them and not responding to their texts and calls…Shane thought Rozanov was better than that.

Part of him also thinks this might have to do with him and what happened the other day. But if Rozanov decides to just not show up, that is his responsibility, not Shane's.

The Greek Council member is back. "Guys, I'm sorry, but time is up—"

"*Here!* I'm here!"

Rozanov's voice suddenly bursts through the chatter of the crowd, shouting over them. He appears seemingly out of nowhere, sprinting up to the Kappa Taus, out of breath and sweaty,

like he just ran here from across campus.

"*Sorry*, I am sorry," Rozanov pants, chest heaving. "I'm here and ready."

"Thank you for joining us, Mister President," the Greek Council member says. "Alright, catch your breath. We're ready to go here in just a minute."

As she walks away again, Rozanov repeats his apologies to his teammates. He says he got the time of the event wrong and was off campus at his place. Shane isn't sure he's buying that, but his teammates are at least happy to see him. He prefers this to a forfeit.

Though he also notices that Rozanov doesn't look at him even for a second.

"*Alright, Greek Row!"* the voice of the master of ceremonies booms over the speaker. "Are we ready for the second game of the Greek Week Olympiad?"

The crowd roars their approval. The master of ceremonies explains what dizzy dizzy duck is and the rules for the audience and any house team members who may not know. He flies through the instructions quickly enough. Shane looks over at Rozanov a couple of times, but he keeps his eyes fixed in front of him.

"And for all houses, presidents will go first," the master of ceremonies announces.

"Well, shit, there goes our early lead," Hayden groans.

They had decided that Shane would go first. Presidents first wasn't a rule the last time they did it, but Shane isn't worried. This game takes plenty of trips to the water bucket. He'll get more than one turn.

He slaps Hayden on the back. "You've got this, Hay."

The presidents all take their starting positions, picking up the baseball bat and holding their foreheads against it. If this wasn't something that Shane was resolutely determined to win, he would see the humor in the position they're all standing in, and how serious they all look doing something rather ludicrous.

"*Ready!"* the master of ceremonies begins.

Shane glances at Rose, who has her hands gripped tight on the bat.

"*Set!"*

He looks at Rozanov, who has finally looked at him. But he doesn't have enough time to read his expression when—

"*Go!"*

They start spinning. The teammates all count them off as they do. Shane tears his eyes away from Rozanov to focus on Hayden, counting off the spins with his teammates.

Rozanov finishes first, grabbing his pitcher and bolting into an impressively stable run towards the water bucket, only a few sways side to side. Rose follows after him, slightly less steady on her feet but still close behind.

Hayden finishes and nearly falls to the ground when he starts running but recovers quickly enough. Svetlana and the Phi Sigma president finish their spins and head for their water buckets. Shane does take a moment to recognize how funny this looks, running while you can't see straight, and the crowd appreciates it as well.

Rozanov returns first, his pitcher nearly filled to the brim with water, hardly a drop spilled. Marleau picks up the bat and does his spins.

Rose comes back with an impressively full pitcher, followed by Hayden, his nearly half spilled. Shane knows right away he'll have to make up for that. He picks up the bat and begins spinning, his teammates counting him off.

Shane doesn't get disoriented particularly easily, at least not in activities like this. Probably has something to do with all the spinning he used to do on the ice, and he figures that's helping Rozanov and his team out right now too.

He's able to run at a reasonable pace without tripping over himself, though he almost definitely still looks funny, and when he returns from the water bucket with his pitcher, it's almost completely full. He pours it in their bucket and JJ begins his turn.

"I hate this game," Hayden says, panting and holding his fingers to his temples like he has a headache.

"It's all in the hands," Shane tells him. "Don't think about your feet being off balance, just focus on keeping the pitcher still."

JJ crushes his turn, finishing at lightning speed and pouring a full pitcher into their bucket. Shane claps him on the back as they count off their pledge's spins.

Shane looks in their bucket. There will still be at least two more turns for each of them, and after quickly checking the ZBZ and KT buckets, he can see that they're in about the same place. No one with a clear lead.

Rozanov takes his turn again and manages to go even faster this time. With encouraging words, Shane sends Hayden off, reminding him "Hands, Hay! Hands!"

It seems to work. Hayden isn't the quickest but, on this trip, he comes back with far more water, dumping it in the bucket as Shane begins his second turn, spinning as fast as he can.

Part of what makes this game tricky is the grass in the lanes to and from the water buckets gets slippery with all the spills from the pitchers. So, you are not only trying to keep your feet, but the ground is getting more slippery as you get dizzier. Shane navigates it fairly easily, returning with another full pitcher.

Another quick look at both the buckets on either side of Omega Chis tells him they have a slight lead now, unless the houses in the outside lanes are doing even better than they are. He looks over to see Svetlana speeding through another turn, laughing as she dizzily makes her way to the water bucket.

After Shane and the others take a third turn, their pledge running their last leg returns and puts them very close to completion. They start counting off Hayden on the baseball bat, and as they do, Shane abruptly hears the sound of a wet plop hitting the ground.

Looking over, he sees that Troy has slipped and completely faceplanted on the wet grass, losing all his water in the process. He looks uninjured, Shane assesses, but he's immediately apologetic as he returns to his team, having just set them back.

"*Fuck*, I'm sorry—"

"No sorry," Rozanov says immediately. "Is okay. Connors go!"

Connors starts taking his turn, double timing it on the bat.

Troy looks like he says something else to Rozanov, but Rozanov just pats him on the back, not looking the least bit annoyed.

Hayden returns with their water, a completely full pitcher, and they're right on the edge, not quite spilling over. The Greek Council member stationed with them shakes his head, indicating they need more.

Shane grabs the bat and spins, knowing that this will be the last turn and then they'll have it. He can practically taste victory, and the memory of falling face first into the mud during tug-o-war only motivates him further. He barely misses a step as he sprints to the water bucket, and on the return, he dodges every puddle with ease. Rose, he notices, is only seconds behind him, and he thinks they're about to finish as well.

He keeps his lead and dumps a nearly full pitcher of water into their bucket as his teammates jump up and down, water spilling over the edge. The Greek Council member throws his hand in the air to indicate they have completed the task and are first place. The crowd cheers, apparently back on their side now that they're winners again.

Hayden practically bulls him to the ground as he jumps into his arms. Shane grins at the feeling, happy to have earned this win for himself and Hayden, dumbest and silliest Greek Week game and all.

Moments later he hears the Zeta Betas cheering next to him as they come in second place. He looks over and watches as Rose tosses the pitcher into the air in celebration, embracing her ZBZ sisters.

In the next minute, the rest of the teams finish the game. Mu Gamma Sigma comes in third, Kappa Tau fourth, and Phi Sigma Rho last. Shane is momentarily impressed that Mu Gamma was so close behind the ZBZs. He spots Svetlana high fiving a couple of her sisters in the outside lane.

The Kappa Taus look disappointed. They didn't need to be worried about elimination this round considering all the points they've accumulated already, but still, they look defeated after coming in first in tug-o-war.

Rozanov doesn't like to lose, and Shane can see it in his slightly peeved expression even as he tries to comfort his teammates. Troy looks downtrodden. Shane wants to tell him it's just a game. Shane might be a little too intense about these games, but even he knows they're hardly that serious.

Unless you were dumb enough to make the bet that he had. Then they are that serious.

"Hey ally," comes a voice from behind him. He turns to find Rose there. "Nice one, but we're coming in first next time."

"We'll see," he laughs and pulls her in for a hug.

The hug is friendly. Something he and Rose do all the time, but when he looks to his left and sees Rozanov standing there, watching him as he embraces her, he stiffens. It's stupid. He's not doing anything wrong, but there's something in his face that makes him feel guilty.

"Hey," Rose says, feeling his tightness and pulling away. "You okay?"

He brings his attention back to her. "Yeah, of course. Want to celebrate tonight?"

"Hmm, you, me, Hayden, and Jackie?" she asks.

"I can make that happen."

"Deal." She squeezes his shoulder and turns back to her sisters.

When Shane looks at the Kappa Taus again, Rozanov is nowhere to be seen.

Chapter End Notes

I know Ilya and Shane didn't interact much in the present during this chapter, but we have to trust the process as they say. Tune in for the next chapter, which I did a lot of hinting at in this one.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 5: Jay and Nick

Chapter Notes

Please note the updated tags.

This is the chapter the first part of the story has been building to. It took a lot of work so I hope you enjoy. It's a long chapter.

small spoilers for the chapter

I wrote the present day scenes listening to the 2013 Great Gatsby soundtrack, I think it adds a lot while reading it back through and you might enjoy it too.

For the party costumes, you can imagine the characters in each of the linked costumes: Ilya Shane Svetlana Rose

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 2015

Jane

The drive here was long.

You better get us to the playoffs tonight.

Me

Wow you want it more than half my team

Jane

It's been ages since the university has been this close.

Don't blow it. I'm so serious.

Me

So demanding

What do I get if I win?

Jane

You get to go to the playoffs.

Ilya nearly bursts into laughter on the bus to the arena at that message. God, he really needs to be clearer when he communicates with Hollander, especially in texts. For the record, he does know that if they win their game tonight, they're going to the playoffs. But Hollander went ahead and clarified that anyway. He types up another text, aiming to be more specific.

Me

What will you give me if I win?

Jane

Whatever.

Well, now Ilya can't tell if that means Hollander will give him "whatever" if he wins or if he means "whatever" as a means to end the conversation. He's noticed a lot of Americans and Canadians use the word that way.

Me

You mean you will give me whatever I want?

Jane

🤦

Okay. That's not clear either. So, he chooses to take it as a yes.

Joke as he might, he is feeling some pressure tonight. His team is in Toronto for a game that will determine if they go to the playoffs, which is what he was brought to Canada by the university to do. The game already has a lot riding on it, the fact that Hollander and so much of the university populace followed them to Toronto to watch ups the stakes. Everyone knows this is big.

Hollander has been all over him about this for weeks. Every suggestive text he sent was answered with a scolding question about why he wasn't practicing or watching game footage to prepare right at that moment. It was annoying but also strange so finally Ilya just insisted Hollander tell him why he was so invested. After some dubious excuses, Ilya got the admission that he used to play hockey. He didn't get much else out of him, but it was something, and things made a little more sense after that.

There was, of course, no question that Hollander would be joining the team in Toronto to watch the game. He and most other students are all booked at the same hotel as the team, and Ilya doled out the extra cash to get himself his own room, which he plans to take full advantage of later, especially with Hollander's latest promise.

But first, the game.

And it is quite a game. They go down 0-2 early and Ilya has to rally his teammates when they're back in the locker room. He can see that the problem is nerves. All of them playing tentatively on the ice rather than the aggressive and powerful hockey they are capable of. He

reminds them of this and sets the example on the ice when they're back out there, and this seems to do the trick.

When Ilya scores their first goal, he sees the change in his teammates' expressions and body language. They're starting to believe, and he makes sure they keep believing with constant words of affirmation. The cheering from their fans gets louder by the minute, feeling the momentum swing in their favor.

At 2-2 with only a few seconds remaining, Ilya's teammates look to him to take them to victory. The nerves prickle over his skin but they do not overtake him. He scores their last goal and puts them over the line, taking them to the playoffs, and his team nearly tackles him onto the ice in celebration.

Ilya is grinning so big he thinks his face might be stuck that way for days. When he looks to the stands, he spots Hollander, looking just as excited. His smile grows bigger until he sees who is next to him. Rose Landry. They're high fiving and celebrating together, and it makes Ilya freeze in his tracks.

He's pulled away by the rest of his team to the locker room. Their whooping and fist pumping raises his spirits again. It feels good to be able to deliver this to the team and the school, and he also knows that his teammates worked their asses off for it, not just him. His joy is still there; it just hit a speed bump with what he saw in the crowd.

Hollander has been hanging out with Rose Landry for months now.

"She's awesome," Hollander had told him when he found the right moment to pry, trying to act casual. "I met her at that Zeta Beta Halloween party."

"She likes you," Ilya had said, sure this was true. He had observed them a few times at Greek events and parties, and Rose was not exactly being subtle about it. Though he knows Hollander can miss those cues.

"Oh," Hollander said quietly. "Well, I don't know…"

He had trailed off and said he needed to leave and that had been the end of that conversation. Ilya hadn't wanted to bring it up again, and Hollander didn't seem to want to talk about it. Whatever was going on there, it hadn't put a stop to Hollander and Ilya's hooking up, so Ilya knew he wasn't dating Rose. He just didn't believe Hollander would ever cheat.

Putting all thoughts of Rose Landry out of his head, he allows himself to be swept up in his teammates' celebrations. It's rowdy in the locker room as they all make plans to go out and party once they leave the arena. Ilya goes along with it, knowing he won't be able to avoid going out with his team but also knowing that he'll be sneaking off back to the hotel when no one is paying attention.

And so, he does. The bar scene in Toronto is a good one, and it seems most of the student body is with them to drink and bar hop. Though Ilya notices one exception. Ilya makes sure his presence is known, doing the rounds and having a couple of drinks but not enough to lose

himself. Once he's certain that no one will take note of his absence, he slips out of the bar and hails a taxi to take him back to the hotel.

He doesn't text Hollander to confirm he's at the hotel. He figures it's possible he got dragged to a bar to celebrate, but he doubts it. It just isn't his style, and he also knows very well that Hollander will want to celebrate with him. Alone.

Ilya texts him his room number as soon as he closes the door. He kicks off his shoes and changes his clothes, wanting to be comfortable for the night ahead, putting on his sweatpants but forgoing a shirt. Then, as he mulls over exactly what he's going to do this evening, he pours himself a glass of vodka. He had brought this bottle back with him from Russia, so he isn't reduced to partaking in the North American brands this evening.

A knock at the door comes before long. Ilya nearly leaps from his chair to open it before checking himself and counting to ten.

When he opens the door, Hollander steps in, and the first thing Ilya is aware of is the smile on his face. His brain stalls at the sight. It's rare for Hollander to be smiling in his presence, or smiling like *this* anyway. His eyes are bright and his teeth are showing. Ilya doesn't know what to do with it.

Hollander seems to know, however. He immediately pushes Ilya into the wall.

"Hey," he says, and doesn't give Ilya time to respond before he starts kissing him, eager and generous, his tongue dipping into his mouth. Ilya returns the kiss but allows Hollander to control the pace, going along for the ride.

"That was awesome tonight," Hollander says when he comes up for air. His hands, which had been sliding along Ilya's biceps, are starting to drift down to his waistband. "You actually did it."

Some of Ilya's senses are starting to come back to him. "Of course I did," he says, easily falling into his usual arrogance. "You have been so annoying for weeks, I had no choice."

Hollander smirks and plants a kiss on his neck, then begins working his way down to his collarbone, chest, abs, before he drops to his knees in front of him, tugging his sweatpants and briefs down. Ilya marvels at him, thrilled that he didn't even need to ask for this.

Without hesitation, Hollander swallows down nearly his entire half hard cock in one go. Ilya's hands fly to Hollander's hair, clutching at the strands as he grunts out a curse in Russian. Hollander has gotten very good at this. Their first time with his shy licks and hesitant movements a distant memory. Though Ilya still likes to have some control over him when he sucks his cock, and he knows Hollander likes it too.

Taking Hollander's head more firmly in his hands, he gently bobs him on and off of his cock, stopping only when he feels himself in the back of his throat. Hollander's hand slides up to grope at his pec, both trying to support himself and encouraging Ilya on.

“That’s good,” Ilya whispers, stroking Hollander’s hair the way he knows he likes. “This is what I get for winning, yes? You are my prize, Hollander?”

Hollander makes a sound that is something of a cross between a chuckle and a moan.

“But…” Ilya pulls Hollander off his cock completely this time, staring down at him. “I think you said I get whatever I want tonight, yes?”

Hollander’s lips are slightly swollen and his eyes are hazy; a sight Ilya has grown familiar with in the last year. He thinks over Ilya’s words for a moment before nodding in agreement.

“That’s right,” Ilya says, squeezing the back of his neck. “Now, stand up for me and take off your clothes.”

Hollander only hesitates for a moment before complying. Ilya pulls his briefs and sweats back up, tucking his hard cock back in and stepping away from the wall. He moves back to where he set his vodka down next to the television, taking a quick sip.

Pulling off his hoodie, Hollander glances at him suspiciously, obviously wondering what it is Ilya has in store for him tonight.

Ilya, for his part, hasn’t really decided. Ever since this began between them, Ilya has searched for Hollander’s limits and not found them, and he’s wondered if he ever will. Hollander always takes whatever he throws at him, begs for more even. It leaves Ilya feeling like he has plenty of options tonight, too many. But improvising usually works out for him.

“Get on the bed,” Ilya orders when Hollander is down to his briefs.

Ilya, leaning against the hotel dresser, allows himself a moment to appreciate Hollander’s body as he follows his instructions. Hollander may not play hockey anymore, but he clearly didn’t stop the workout regimen after he stopped. Habit, Ilya supposes. Hollander likes his routines.

As he sits back against the headboard, some nervous tension radiates off of him, and Ilya wants to let him stew in it a little longer. His own body relaxes as Hollander’s tenses up. The silence stretches out, only broken by the sound of the ice in Ilya’s glass as he takes another sip.

“Could I get some of that?” Hollander asks, probably just because he can’t stand to be silently observed anymore, because they both know he hates vodka.

Ilya’s lips twitch up and he approaches the bed. Hollander flinches at his movement but then tries to make himself relax against the pillows. Swinging one of his legs up, Ilya straddles Hollander’s stomach, seating himself on top of him.

Hollander looks like he wants to touch him but holds himself resolutely still, eyes darting between Ilya’s face, the glass in his hands, and his barely concealed arousal at his crotch. His chest is rising and falling more rapidly now.

Bringing his glass to his lips, Ilya takes a generous sip, holding Hollander's gaze as he does. Closing his mouth, he keeps the liquid on his tongue and leans down, holding his face inches away from Hollander's. His thumb presses against Hollander's bottom lip until he gets the message and opens his mouth.

Ilya leans in close and parts his lips, letting the vodka stream into Hollander's mouth. Hollander makes a tiny noise of surprise and Ilya brings his lips down on his once the vodka is gone from his own mouth. He swipes his tongue against the other's lips, intruding, tasting the alcohol, not letting up until Hollander manages to swallow it down.

When Ilya retreats, there's a single drop that has escaped Hollander's mouth, one that he takes a moment to lick from his chin as he shudders beneath him.

"More?" Ilya asks, shaking his glass so the ice rattles.

Hollander nods eagerly, his mouth dropping open without needing to be asked.

This time, Ilya gives Hollander less time to swallow before he's kissing him, dipping his tongue into his mouth to taste and steal some of the alcohol back, a little bit filthy. Hollander manages not to choke, getting as much down as he can while Ilya kisses him senseless, licking away any droplets that escape his mouth.

Hollander is panting from the effort when Ilya pulls away again, his lips coated with their shared spit and some excess of the vodka.

Ilya finishes the last of the vodka off himself, not sharing this time, and sets his glass on the bedside table. His fingers are slightly cold from the glass, so he brings his hand to Hollander's chest, pressing down, making him shudder from the cool touch.

"I want to try something," Ilya says thoughtfully.

"Sure." Hollander says this with no hesitation, and Ilya could laugh at the way he will just agree to something that Ilya hasn't even told him yet. Sometimes he wonders how far that might go, his curiosity. His compliance. Ilya's dick twitches at the thought.

"Don't come until I say," Ilya says simply, trying to be casual. Hollander has already agreed to try what Ilya wants, but he doesn't want to do anything to scare him off.

Hollander's eyebrows draw together. "Don't…?"

"Don't come," Ilya repeats, trying to enunciate the English words properly. "Until I tell you to."

Hollander appears to mull this over in his head, but not for very long. It's not too far off from some of their previous encounters. Ilya has told him when to come before, and Hollander is usually very good at listening in those cases. But Ilya has never told him not to come until he tells him to before. It's different, and Ilya wants it.

And in truth, he wants it because he thinks Hollander will like it. A lot.

In the end, Hollander just shrugs. “Okay.”

The easiness with which Hollander accepts this idea lights a fuse somewhere in Ilya’s chest. Like a challenge has just been put forth between them.

“You think you can do that, Hollander?” Hollander knows as well as Ilya does how sensitive he is. If Ilya wanted, he could probably reach back and make Hollander come with a few strokes of his hand and a few teasing words right now.

“Why would it be hard?” Hollander asks, and it seems like a genuine question too.

It occurs to him again, as he is prone to forget, that Hollander doesn’t sleep around much. Of course, this isn’t something Hollander has ever admitted to him, but Ilya knows. The same way he knows that Hollander hadn’t had much sex before Ilya. Sometimes, these things are just clear from a person’s very being.

Hollander would never have done something like this before. And Ilya has always been rather…generous with him, and his orgasms, so he isn’t picturing or able to predict exactly what Ilya has in mind for the evening.

This, naturally, only makes Ilya more eager to get started. Hollander may not realize what he just signed up for, but he’ll know very soon.

But first, “Tell me to stop and I stop, yes?”

Hollander shoots him a baffled look. “What?”

“Tell me to stop and I stop, you agree?”

Hollander shakes his head, confused. “I won’t need to stop.”

“*Hollander*, I need you to agree or we do nothing tonight,” Ilya says, putting as much weight into the words as he can. This is important.

Sighing, Hollander acquiesces. “Yeah, sure then.”

“Say it.”

“If I want to stop, I’ll say stop, happy?”

“Yes.” And Ilya rewards him with a kiss to show it. Then, he straightens up, evaluating him. Now that all the necessary verbal agreements have been made, he can finally get to what he wants and what Hollander wants, what he’s been thinking about all day. Good thing too, because his cock is going to need attention again soon.

Reaching for his glass on the side table again, he digs for an ice cube and pulls it out. It’s partially melted already, a perfect size. Hollander watches him, questioning expression on his face, as Ilya takes the ice cube in his mouth. He doesn’t chew or swallow it, only leans down to place a kiss on Hollander’s lips, the ice dipping against him there. Hollander inhales sharply at the coldness.

From there, Ilya keeps the ice cube trapped between his lips, dragging it along Hollander's cheek, down his chin to his neck. Here, he gives his special attention, knowing all the spots Hollander is most sensitive, having explored them thoroughly with his mouth before. He feels Hollander flinch and shiver against him but trying to force himself still. When Ilya slides the ice to his collar bone, he lets out a strangled groan in response, discomfort and arousal filling the sound.

Ilya goes lower still, down his chest and finding his nipples, already hard and sensitive. He traces the ice around his nipples, moving back and forth between them whenever Hollander's breathing picks up. They go darker and harder under his dutiful attention, and Ilya takes one of them entirely in his mouth against the ice cube. At this Hollander nearly jolts off the bed, and Ilya must press his hand against his shoulder, pushing him back down. But he releases his nipple from his mouth, knowing that they are just getting started here and he doesn't want to work him up too much already.

As he drags the ice further down against his abs, Ilya spots Hollander's hands firmly at his sides and gripping the sheets, fighting to control himself. When Ilya had imagined himself doing this earlier, he wondered if he might try tying up Hollander's hands over his head. But no, he thinks as he watches his hands tremble, it is so much better to see him struggle with himself like this.

Hollander hisses when Ilya presses his mouth and the ice cube against his cock, still clothed in his briefs. Ilya trails the ice cube along the hardness of him in the fabric. He's already so hard. Ilya chuckles at that. This might be a long night for Hollander, and he doesn't seem to realize that yet.

"*What?"* Hollander snaps at him, always alert to any perceived mocking.

Ilya places a soft kiss against Hollander's cock before coming back up to do the same against his lips, opening his mouth and letting the ice fall into Hollander's.

"Let it melt," Ilya tells him and turns his attention back to Hollander's briefs, tugging them over his ass and down his legs, then tossing them to the side of the bed. That might annoy Hollander, who prefers to tidy his clothes away, but Ilya will not be allowing that for the moment.

Instead, he swallows down Hollander's cock in one go.

"*Shit!"* Hollander's hips snap up hard, nearly making Ilya gag as his cock hits the back of his throat. He immediately presses his arm down hard over Hollander's stomach, keeping him still. "*Sorry!* I'm sorry…"

Ilya can hear the ice cube clacking against Hollander's teeth. He can't help but smile around his cock, swallowing him down again as a reward. Hollander is quite worked up, leaking into his throat. Ilya hums around him approvingly, licking at the tip.

"Rozanov…" Hollander grits out from above him, a warning in his voice.

Ilya ignores him, pulling himself off his cock only to lick the sensitive underside. He feels a twitch against his tongue, and he opens his eyes to look, fascinated. He takes his cock in his hand at the base and presses his tongue against the tip again, tasting him. When he begins to take him into his mouth again, Hollander's hand is suddenly in his hair, his control finally snapping.

"*Rozanov*, if you do that, I'm gonna—"

"Already?" Ilya asks, releasing his cock from his mouth. He looks up at him with wide, innocent eyes. "But you said this would be easy?"

"Shut up, I'm *fine*," Hollander hisses out rather unconvincingly. It looks like either the ice cube has melted or Hollander swallowed it.

"Good," Ilya says, his fingers skimming lower between Hollander's cheeks. "Then you should be fine with—"

"*Fuck*." Hollander's whole body convulses when Ilya's fingers find their destination. He closes his eyes, trying to maintain some measure of his composure as he spits out another round of swears.

Ilya is not entirely without pity, and he really doesn't want to push Hollander over the edge yet. He removes his fingers and crawls back up the bed, hovering just a few inches from Hollander's face. Hollander's heavy breaths tickle his face.

"Turn over," Ilya tells him. "On your side."

Hollander complies easily enough, carefully turning himself over. Ilya follows, pressing his chest to Hollander's back. Glancing around at him, Hollander looks unsure, perhaps not liking that he has to strain to see Ilya's face.

Not helping his uneasiness, Ilya grabs Hollander's hand, resting against his thigh, and bullies his reluctant fingers until both their hands are wrapped firmly around his hard length. Giving him a squeeze, he begins to slowly work both their hands up and down his cock, easy enough as it's already wet from his own saliva. Hollander's hand, resistant at first, begins following his movements, a shiver running through him that Ilya wouldn't have noticed if he wasn't pressed against him.

Dragging his thumb over the slit of his cock, he hears Hollander huff out a breath. Glancing at his face, Ilya sees that his eyes are shut tight, lips pressed together. Ilya has seen him like this before, like he's centering himself. One of his meditative yoga techniques maybe.

Seeking to drag him out of that carefully cultivated control, Ilya brings his body closer, deliberately pressing the hard outline of his cock against Hollander's ass, making sure he can feel him, a reminder of what is to come.

He hears Hollander whimper at the contact, and Ilya rocks against him again, moving his hips in tandem with their hands as they stroke his cock together, Ilya controlling the pace. At the third roll of his hips, Hollander's cock twitches in his hand and spurts pre-come. Ilya smirks

and does it again, drawing a strained moan out of the other as his self-discipline clearly teeters away from him.

“That’s it, *kotenok*,” Ilya whispers, taking his ear lobe between his teeth. “Being so good for me.”

Hollander grits his teeth. The flush across his cheeks is so dark now, his freckles look even more prominent than usual. Ilya leans down and kisses his cheek, thinking he would kiss every one of those freckles if he could.

Their hands pick up the pace over Hollander’s cock, stroking him faster, and Ilya continues to roll his hips in tandem. On a particularly rough stroke of his hips, Hollander makes a sound of protest, trying to scoot forward and put some distance between himself and Ilya. But Ilya holds him firm and draws him back against him, digging his nail in on his cock in reprimand. Hollander whimpers at the treatment but goes still again.

“*Look at me*.” Ilya needs to see his eyes, every flicker of emotion that he might get.

“Rozanov…” Hollander’s eyes drift open again to look at him.

“Better.” Ilya lets his free hand slide around the back of Hollander’s head, fingers probing at his mouth. “Open.”

Hollander’s mouth opens to Ilya’s insistent fingers, taking two of them inside. Ilya presses them against his tongue as Hollander closes his lips around them, moving them in and out, following the same rhythm as their hands working Hollander’s cock. Ilya starts hearing his own heartbeat in his ears at the sight of Hollander like this, his eyes starting to go misty as Ilya presses his fingers deeper into his mouth.

When Ilya rolls his hips against his ass again, Hollander’s cock jerks in their hands and he makes an urgent noise, his free hand clutching at the bedsheets.

“I-I *can’t*—have to—I’m gonna—“!" Hollander gasps when Ilya removes his fingers from his mouth. He stares down at where Ilya is still working their hands over his cock, leaking desperately.

“No, you won’t,” Ilya says against his ear, feeling him shudder against him. He slows their hands, because he really doesn’t want to push him over the edge yet, but he doesn’t want to stop either. “Because I’m telling you not to.”

“*Rozanov*—”

“Just relax,” Ilya tells him, loosening his grip on Hollander’s hand, letting him have further relief. “I know you can.”

Hollander gives him another look before shutting his eyes again, scrunching them tight in concentration. His breathing is still heavy as he tries to bring himself back under control, still not easy with his hand in Ilya’s stroking his cock. Ilya is pressed against him from behind but has ceased grinding against him, letting Hollander hold himself off with great effort.

After a few seconds, some of the tension seeps out of Hollander's body, his shoulders slumping.

"Good boy," Ilya purrs against Hollander's ear.

Hollander's eyes fly back open, and his cock spurts pre-come against Ilya's hand, enough that Ilya briefly worries that he just blew this whole experiment way too early. Thankfully, he quickly assesses, that is not the case. Hollander is glaring at him, however. The outrage blazing in his eyes in stark contrast with his bodily reaction.

"*Fuck off*," Hollander spits out, but he doesn't pull away.

Ilya smirks. "Why? Is what you are."

Hollander's face is red in indignation. "I'm not—"

"You *are*. My good little prize tonight, like you promised," Ilya says, pressing a kiss to his lips if only to get him to stop denying it. His body had already given away the truth, in any case.

Hollander whimpers into his mouth at the words, his cock twitching in their hands. Ilya supposes that settles that debate for now. He finally removes his hand from Hollander's cock and shifts their positions, grabbing the lube and condom from the bedside table as he does, so he's crouching between his legs. He's been hard and straining against his sweatpants for too long, shucking them off quickly and throwing them to the floor.

"Knees up," Ilya orders, quickly deciding that he wants to fuck Hollander face to face tonight. Observing his overwrought face as he's desperately tried to hold himself back from coming has simply been too good.

Hollander brings his knees to his chest, his own patience clearly wearing thin, and Ilya slips a lube covered finger inside of him. He knows Hollander is already quite sensitive from their activities thus far, and he doesn't want to bring on his orgasm before he can fuck him, but he can't help himself from seeking out his prostate as he stretches him out, sliding another finger inside of him.

"*Fuck*," Hollander grunts out, throwing his head back against the pillow. But he doesn't tell him no or try to squirm away. His face is back to the picture of concentration. Though on closer inspection, Ilya notices his eyes are wet. The strain of trying to hold himself back getting to him as Ilya continues to abuse that spot inside of him.

But still. He doesn't tell him to stop. Never that. Hollander's competitive spirit never ceases to amaze him.

"I need…" Hollander chokes out when Ilya adds a third finger.

"Hm?" Ilya scissors his fingers, watching his hole take them deeper. "What do you need?"

"You—*fuck*—you *know*."

Ilya shakes his head and tsks, driving his fingers deeper. He absently wonders if Hollander could take his entire hand. “I don’t know. You need to tell me, *kotenok*.”

Hollander whines at the pet name. “*You*. I need *you*. Please.”

How could he ever say no?

As he rolls the condom over himself and lines himself up, Hollander brings his knees up higher, allowing him easier entry. Pressing the head of his cock inside of him, Ilya notices Hollander’s demeanor has shifted, from his expression to the rest of his body, and he feels a bloom of delight in his chest. This is something that he’s become familiar with in the last few times they’ve met. As if Hollander’s brain clicks into a different gear when they are together. He turns completely soft. Malleable. Like dough in Ilya’s hands.

He’s grown a bit…obsessed with it.

Pushing himself inside, they both wince slightly but adjust easily. This has become easier for Hollander every time, something Ilya is grateful for. The first time, knowing that he was hurting him at the start, he had hated it. He had been determined to ensure that the rest was as pleasant as possible, and he thinks he at least managed that.

Hollander’s cock is red and leaking between them, and Ilya knows he won’t be able to keep this up for much longer. But still, he wants Hollander to hold out. He pulls out a few inches and presses himself back in, watching Hollander’s nose crinkle, his freckles even more stark on his skin now that Ilya is so close to his face.

“Takoy ideal’nyy,” So perfect.

Normally Hollander would demand to hear a translation, but he doesn’t have all of his faculties right now and only hums in answer.

Ilya starts fucking him in earnest then, sure that both of them are going to need release soon. He braces his arms on either side of Hollander’s head, balancing and holding himself close. Not for the first time, he thinks of how lucky he is that he gets to see Hollander like this. Hollander hasn’t exactly spelled out for Ilya who else he sees intimately, and that little corner of his brain annoyingly reminds him of all that time he’s spending with Rose Landry, but he knows for certain that it’s not very many people, if he sees anyone else at all. And that makes him feel good. Too good. He knows that should concern him.

The thought only makes him piston his hips faster, wanting to hear those sweet noises Hollander always makes for him, and he’s rewarded soon enough. Hollander is clearly caught between two minds as Ilya surveys him and pumps in and out without abandon. He wants to surrender to the pleasure but also wants to do what Ilya asked of him, a task that is clearly becoming more difficult by the second.

Ilya is taken out of his thoughts when he feels a slight pressure against one of his hands. Glancing up, he sees that Hollander is poking at his palm with his index finger, like he’s asking for something. Following his first instinct, Ilya moves his hand down, interlacing his fingers with Hollander’s. But Hollander shakes his head, his eyes wide and wet, and makes a

soft noise of protest, detangling his fingers from Ilya's and trying to move his hand further up the bed.

Ilya understands then. He slides his hand down over Hollander's skin until he reaches his wrist, tightening his fingers around him there and holding him against the mattress. He does the same with Hollander's other hand.

"Yes?" Ilya looks for confirmation.

Hollander nods rapidly, pupils dilated as he stares up at him. Ilya isn't surprised by this. Almost every time they've been together, Hollander has wanted to be…held.

"Can I—?" Hollander breathes out, cut off when Ilya finds *that* spot inside him again.

"*Nyet*, Hollander. Not yet," Ilya tells him, placing a kiss on his mouth. He's close himself, but this feels so good, both of them nearly *there* together as he pumps in and out of him, Ilya wants it to last.

"Please?" Hollander's voice is small as a tear escapes his eye.

Ilya watches as the tear streaks down the side of his face and disappears into his hairline. The tears had concerned him the first time he noticed, made him stop and nearly pull out before Hollander had grabbed him and yanked him back, begging him to keep going. So, he's come to expect tears whenever things get particularly intense between them.

"You're so pretty like this, *kotenok*," Ilya whispers, breath hot against his face as he nuzzles his nose. He feels Hollander tighten around his cock, vice like. "You need it?"

Hollander nods, more tears escaping his eyes. "Yes. *Please*. I-I was—" His mouth clamps shut, unable to finish. Ilya feels his cock spurt pre-come against his chest. He's right there. Ilya just needs to let him go.

"You were good for me, weren't you?" Ilya supplies the word. "So good."

He doesn't hesitate when he nods in agreement.

"*Blyad*, you're perfect," Ilya can't stop himself from saying. "Perfect for me."

Hollander can only whine at the praise, eyes welling up again as he looks up at him, the picture of pleading without saying a word. It's almost enough to rip Ilya's own orgasm from him.

"Hollander, be so good for me and come."

Surprise washes over Hollander's face as he rears up and comes with a sob. Perhaps he didn't think he'd ever be given permission. Ilya watches tears slide down Hollander's cheeks as he comes, properly crying now rather than just a few tears escaping. He mentally notes this, as it hasn't happened before. Usually, it's just a couple of tears. When Hollander is done, both their chests are coated with his come, and he looks completely spent, falling lax underneath him.

“Good boy.” Ilya presses his forehead against his, eyes locked on his wet cheeks. He keeps fucking him through his orgasm. “Such a good boy for me, Hollander.”

With a barely audible whimper, more tears come. Oversensitive and overwhelmed, Hollander turns his head to the side, trying to bury his face in the pillow.

“No, no.” Ilya’s fingers are immediately on his chin, tugging his face forward again. He feels a familiar shiver moving up his spine. His orgasm dangerously close. “Let me see you. I need to…”

The strain in his own voice is obvious as he struggles to even see straight, but Hollander nods for him. And somehow that’s enough. Hollander, fucked out beneath him, still wanting to be good for him, to make this good for him, through his tears.

His orgasm overtakes him, shocking a gasp out of him as he buries himself deep inside. He feels his hand squeeze hard around Hollander’s wrist, and he wonders if he’ll leave bruises, almost hoping he does. Hollander’s wet eyes stay locked with his, and with his last coherent thought, he’s able to lean down and kiss him through it, attaching himself to the only thing left in this little world they’ve created that feels real. Shane Hollander.

Jesus fucking Christ. That might have been the best sex he’s had in his entire damn life.

Hollander trembles as they both come back down, and it takes a great deal of effort for Ilya to keep himself steady rather than collapse on top of him. He doesn’t want to crush Hollander under his weight right now. He looks too fragile.

He slowly peels himself away from Hollander, removing his hand from his wrist and pulling himself out of him, taking his time, not wanting to shock him with anything too sudden. Hollander only hums softly as he does this, his eyes unfocused and staring at the ceiling. Uncertainty creeps over Ilya’s skin as he removes himself and observes Hollander. He suppresses it, tries to fall into their usual routines.

Rolling himself off, he removes the condom and tries to reach for the tissues on the bedside table when fingers are suddenly gripped tightly around his wrist, trying to pull him back. He whips his head around to see Hollander staring at him, something very close to fear in his eyes. Ilya freezes, momentarily petrified at the sight.

“*Don’t leave,*” Hollander says, his voice barely a rasp. There are tears welling in his eyes again. “*Please*.”

“Hey, hey.” Words just tumble out of Ilya, unsure of what should be said but knowing he needs to speak. “I’m not leaving. Just getting something. I’m right here.”

Hollander looks him over suspiciously before he loosens his grip on his wrist, allowing him to reach over the grab the tissues. Ilya’s nervous energy only goes up as he tosses the condom in the trash and turns back around, tissues in hand. Looking Hollander over, he sees that they have officially crossed into unfamiliar territory. Hollander stares up at him with beseeching eyes as Ilya wipes the come off of both of their chests. He does this quickly, feeling like Hollander is going to need something more from him very soon.

When he's turned over just for a moment to throw the tissues away, Hollander paws at his shoulder, asking him to turn back around.

"Please…"

Ilya faces him and instantly wraps his arms around his waist, pulling him in close. He's not even sure if that's what Hollander is asking for right now, but it's the only thing he can think of that makes any sense. Thankfully, Hollander makes a content sound and buries his face in his chest. Ilya feels the wetness of his earlier tears, and maybe new ones, against his skin. They stay like that for a few minutes; Hollander melded against him.

Thinking back to everything that just happened and staring down at Hollander now, Ilya tries not to panic. That won't do either of them any good at present. But anxiety is coursing through his veins. Had that been too much? Had he taken things too far? Had he…fuck, is Hollander *hurt*? The tears. So many more than usual. Just the thought has his stomach twisting with guilt. He rubs his hands up Hollander's back to his shoulders, seeking any pain or sore spots, wanting to soothe him, needing to do *something*.

Hollander makes an appreciative noise, and when Ilya looks down at his face, his expression is a little more focused, a little more like himself.

"Hollander," Ilya says quietly.

Not seeming all the way there yet, but seeming content, Hollander's eyes begin to drift closed again.

"*Shane*."

Hollander's eyes snap to attention then, lifting his chin to look at him. The word was out of Ilya's mouth before he could even think about it.

"Did—" Ilya stops, his mouth, his whole body in fact, rejecting what he's about to ask. "Did I hurt you?"

Eyebrows drawing together, Hollander initially shakes his head before glancing down at his body and making a few abrupt movements against him, like a quick self-examination. Then he brings his gaze back up to him. "No."

Ilya lets out a breath, some of the earlier guilt draining from him, but not all of it. He's still trying to work out exactly what this is. If Hollander's not hurt, then…this is a reaction to what they just did together. It's not something Ilya has experienced before, or watched anyone experience, but it's vaguely familiar. Chatter among people he's known about what can happen when brain chemicals go haywire during sex and what can happen when it's over.

He suddenly feels like an idiot for not preparing for this. It may not have happened before, but Hollander has always been…quick to go under. He should have researched, talked to people, something, so he'd be better prepared right now.

As Ilya's brain is running a million miles an hour, Hollander wriggles against him, looking uncomfortable at his staring, and tries to push himself backwards, out of his arms.

"Wait," Ilya says, dipping his head to kiss the corner of his mouth. Something he remembers about people needing affection when they get into this state. Maybe. *I don't fucking know, fuck.*

"I'm fine," Hollander grunts out against his mouth, and he at least doesn't sound like he's lying. He sounds a lot more like his usual self again. "Rozanov, really," he says when Ilya persists in trying to pull him closer.

Ilya is barely hearing him. "I just need to…you're—"

"*Ilya*."

The word startles Ilya pack to the present. He realizes he's nearly on top of Hollander again, having rolled them into this position when he was trying to bring him closer. But Hollander doesn't look relaxed or comforted. He looks like he doesn't want to be touched anymore, his body stiff against the mattress. Slowly, he backs off and lets Hollander move out from under him, despite his instincts still screaming at him to keep him in his arms.

Hollander looks like he's regained all of his faculties now. But…he doesn't look at Ilya, sliding his way to the foot of the bed, his feet hanging over the edge.

"I'm…" Hollander starts. He's hanging his head a bit but makes himself straighten up. "I'm gonna go."

Ilya swallows. He doesn't want him to leave. But some of the reality of their relationship is starting to creep back into the air between them. They don't…do this. They don't hold each other for very long in the aftermath. Usually that's done after the initial coming back down from their climax. They also don't spend the night. Ever. That's not them.

And yet it feels so wrong to watch Hollander get up and dress himself now, even though it should be the most normal thing in the world.

"You are okay?" is all Ilya can think to ask. He needs to know that at least, for his sanity.

Hollander doesn't look at him. "I'm fine."

"You will text me when you get back to your room?" Ilya blurts out the question, something he has never asked him before. But he's just had a horrifying thought that Hollander might struggle to get there. Should he offer to walk him?

"I'll see you around," Hollander says, shrugging on his hoodie. He still doesn't look at him.

"*Hollander*," Ilya calls out, but Hollander doesn't respond. He's already out the door.

Hollander doesn't text him that he made it back to his room. He doesn't respond to him the next day either when Ilya sends him a message while he's on the bus back from Toronto to check how he's doing. A simple *Hey you good?* Radio silence.

A week later, Hollander posts a picture of himself with Rose Landry on his Instagram. A selfie of the two of them at some scenic rooftop bar, her head tucked against his shoulder. It gets over three hundred likes and dozens of comments about how "good" they look together. How "happy" they are for the two of them. Hayden Pike's is at the very top.

Made for each other!!!

They crash out in the first round of the playoffs three days later.

March 2017

"The Zeta Beta parties are a little too hoity-toity for me," Connors muses as he cracks open his beer.

"I do not know what this means," Ilya says, leaning back against the loveseat in the Kappa Tau living room.

"Oh, hoity-toity?" Connors asks, bringing his beer to his lips. "It means like…uh…"

"Snobby, right?" Troy says as he walks by. "By the way, I can't go to that party, Ilya. I have a hockey thing."

"What hockey thing?" Ilya asks, head against the cushion.

Troy shrugs. "Team dinner. Coach wants to pump us up before the playoffs, I guess."

"Yes, I remember," Ilya says, thinking back to his many pep talks with Coach Yates. "Is fine. You don't have to be at party. Only fraternity president and council are expected."

"Wait, that's like required?" Marleau butts in, tearing his eyes away from the video game he has been playing. "I have to go?"

"You are expected," Ilya repeats, and that is enough of an answer.

Ilya turns over the Zeta Beta party invitation in his hands again, scanning the elegant font for the fiftieth time.

Gatsby Party

Friday, March 31st 9pm

Dress for the 1920s

Character Costumes Encouraged

Ilya loves a good Greek Row party, but he would normally skip out on any at Zeta Beta to avoid Rose Landry. Besides, in their very few interactions since becoming acquainted, it had been made clear to him that he wasn't wanted at the Zeta Beta house. He knows why. But for his own reasons, he didn't particularly want to be around her either.

It probably burned Rose to have sent this invitation to his house at all. But the themed party is for Greek Week points (the Greek Council would be there for the first hour to judge, after that the alcohol would arrive) and all of the participants in Greek Week were extended invitations. Including Ilya and Kappa Tau.

He certainly doesn't have to go, and he doesn't have to make the rest of his fraternity council go either. But he will. Because he doesn't want to give Rose the satisfaction of knowing he and his council skipped it. He prefers the idea of himself and his Kappa Tau boys together at her Zeta Beta party.

But more importantly, he's going because he knows Hollander will be there.

Things had grown icy between him and Hollander in the last week. They hadn't spoken, which was mostly Ilya's choice, but he's sure he won't be able to keep that up much longer, even if Hollander wants nothing to do with him right now. His last text seemed to indicate that.

But it doesn't matter. They need to have this out, he knows that. If Hollander is still holding grudges, then he can say it to him out loud rather than dropping barely readable hints in person and bombs in text messages. Then hugging Rose Landry right in front of him and *looking at him* while he did it. Their stalemate needs to end now. And he's pretty sure he can put an end to this stupid bet if he can just have five minutes alone with him. Maybe less. The bet is starting to feel like the source of all their problems.

At the very least, he needs to adjust the power scales in his favor again.

His phone rings. Again. Ilya looks at the screen, sees his brother's name, and immediately hits the ignore button. Again.

"Dude, who keeps calling you?" Connors asks. "That's like the third time since we've been sitting here."

"No one," Ilya says, using a tone that will not allow for any follow up questions.

Alexei had been hounding him for days. Non-stop texts and phone calls. It was because of Alexei that he was late for that stupid Greek Week game. He had finally picked up the phone when Alexei called eight times in a row, and it had quickly devolved into a screaming match over money. Not something he wanted to have a repeat performance of right now, or ever again. But the calls keep coming in.

"I don't even know what to wear to this party," Marleau says, mercifully taking Ilya's thoughts off of his brother. "Where do I get a 1920s costume?"

"Go to thrift store," Ilya suggests. "Or order online. I did this morning."

"Already?" Marleau looks at him. "Damn, you work fast."

Ilya had known what he wanted to wear as soon as he saw the invitation. While he's never touched the book, The Great Gatsby movie from the 1970s was one of the various English

language movies that would randomly play on television for him to watch growing up. Seeing Robert Redford in that pink suit when he was thirteen might have been the first time he understood that he was attracted to men. He searched for a replica from some higher end vintage stores and found it easily. A popular costume, no doubt, for other men that openly or secretly drool over Redford.

“Wasn’t there just a Gatsby movie like two years ago?” Connors muses. “Watch that for inspiration. DiCaprio was in it.”

“Redford is better,” Ilya asserts. He hasn’t seen the newer Gatsby movie, but he doesn’t need to see it to know Redford is better.

“There’s one with Robert Redford?” Connors asks.

“I don’t know who that is,” Marleau puts in. “I’ll watch the DiCaprio one.”

“Spider-Man is in that one,” Troy says, looking pleased to add something to the conversation, thin as it may be.

“This has been great bonding, guys,” Ilya says, getting up from his seat. “But I have exam tomorrow, so…”

He does not have an exam tomorrow. He’s just not been one for conversation in the last week. Constantly in a mood, mind always drifting elsewhere, usually to his family, the last place he wants it.

As if on cue, his phone rings again. He hits ignore without even looking at it.

“What, no Rolls Royce to whisk me away in?” Svetlana asks teasingly when she greets him at the door of Mu Gamma Sigma house. She looks torn from the pages of a magazine. Dark hair straightened and fashioned in an updo to imitate a short bob. Black halter dress bejeweled at the top. Floor length but with a slit that left very little to the imagination. A red lip to top it off. Svetlana takes theme parties very seriously.

Ilya feels comfortable enough in his pink suit and purple tie. He had it pressed beforehand. The vest included under the jacket makes him feel particularly formal. He had even made the effort of styling his hair similar to Redford’s in the movie. Though he didn’t straighten it. He hated his hair straight. Still, he thinks he captured how he remembers Redford looking.

He and Svetlana will be a picturesque pair in these costumes, which is nothing new. But Ilya likes the idea of showing everyone else up, particularly at this party. He needs gratification from anything at the moment.

“No car. We’re walking,” Ilya says. “Zeta Beta is two houses down.”

She frowns at his tone. “Who spit in your drink, Ilya?”

Ilya sighs, knowing he should be nicer. Nothing going on is Svetlana’s fault. He holds out his hand for her. “Sorry. Can we go?”

“Not until you show some manners to your date and tell me how nice I look,” Svetlana says, stepping away from his outstretched hand and giving him a twirl.

“You always look perfect,” he says, and means it.

“I’m Jordan, from the new version,” Svetlana says with her radiant smile. “Elizabeth Debicki with black hair…” she trails off, eyes looking to the sky dreamily.

“Haven’t seen it,” Ilya tells her, his hand still outstretched.

She finally takes it. “You’re Robert Redford in the 70s movie,” she determines as they move down the steps of the Mu Gamma porch. “Nice choice, though you’re not as sweet as Gatsby.”

“I am to you,” Ilya says, bristling at the comment.

“Usually, yes.” Svetlana gives him a sidelong glance. “But not this week.”

Ilya sighs and brings his gaze to her again. He hasn’t talked to anyone about this, but he knows he can talk to her. “It has been a hard time.”

Svetlana nods, eyes wide and understanding. “Is this about Jane?”

“No. Well, yes.” *Isn’t it always?* “But it’s Alexei.”

“He’s still calling?” Her hand squeezes his.

“Yes.”

“Block him,” she says, like it’s the most obvious solution in the world.

Ilya slows their pace, as they get closer to the ZBZ house, some other people in costumes passing them by. He’s grateful they wouldn’t be able to understand them even if they overhear. “Sveta, I can’t. He is my brother.”

“He’s a worthless loser who is harassing you.”

“Still my brother,” Ilya says, exhaling. “Still family.”

“You need to start understanding that you choose who is a part of your life, Ilya. It is almost like you want him to call you, to know he needs you, so you don’t block him or cut him off.” Svetlana stops them in their tracks, turning to face him. “Or are you punishing yourself for something?”

As if on cue, his phone starts ringing. Ilya pulls it out of his pocket, and as soon as he hits the ignore button, the phone is gone from his hands. He looks up and Svetlana is holding it, fingers moving easily over the screen.

“Sveta—”

“You block him for tonight, that’s all,” Svetlana says, handing him back the phone. “I did it for you. Blame me. Unblock him when the night is over. Can you try to do that?”

Ilya chews the inside of his cheek, considering it. It’s not like he was planning on answering any of Alexei’s calls tonight anyway. Yielding, and kind of pleased to do so, he gives her a nod, feeling a weight lift from his shoulders, his phone somehow lighter as he puts it in his jacket pocket.

Svetlana takes his hand again and pulls him towards the house. As they move up the walkway to the entrance, Ilya looks at her, drinking her in, eyes roving over her from her bright eyes, kissable lips, lovely figure only accentuated by that dress, down to her black heels with a silver sparkling pendant on the toe.

Their relationship may have been built partly on attraction, but it was never only that. She makes him laugh, understands what’s going on with him and his family in a way no one on this continent can. He needs her. He can’t imagine she needs him very much, and he wonders sometimes if she just sticks around him out of habit, or even pity, knowing how much it would hurt him to lose her.

Not for the first time, he thinks about how much he wishes things could work between them, not as friends, but more. How right she is for him in just about every way. They have both felt this way about each other, but that has fallen away in the last two years. He’s not sure it will ever come back. Svetlana hasn’t shown interest in that for some time, and Ilya can’t remember the last time he thought of her as more than a friend.

It would be easier if they could be more. But they’re not. And he’s starting to accept that they never will be. As much as he loves her.

“Stop staring,” she tells him, snapping him out of his head. They’ve made it to the ZBZ front door, the party already blaring inside, as they’ve shown up almost two hours after its beginning, uninterested in the alcohol-free part of the festivities. “I know I am perfect, but you have a party to attend.”

The door opens, and Ilya is transported.

The entryway to the ZBZ house is sparkling. Ilya is not quite sure how they managed that, as there’s clearly nothing newly painted. Maybe it’s just a trick of the light. Whatever the case, it’s like stepping into the stars. He looks up and spots two gorgeous blondes in baby blue feathered flapper dresses up on a raised platform performing a routine that they must have learned for the evening. Pledges, he assumes, who probably take turns with others ensuring that the first glimpse of the party is a striking one. And it is indeed.

They’re blocking the staircase as well. No clandestine hookups from partygoers in the ZBZ bedrooms on this sorority president’s watch. Ilya holds back a smile at the thought.

The entryway is busy, and he can see that the attendees have gone all out for this occasion. Everyone looks to have hit the thrift stores in the area, flapper dresses and vintage suits everywhere. Others have broken out their tuxes or high-end dresses, adjusting them slightly

to match the 1920s style. The Zeta Beta Greek Week party is the last one you ever want to slack on, and everyone knows it.

Looking to his left, he sees a grandiose champagne tower that is still up and functioning, but he and Svetlana were unfortunate to miss its christening. Well-dressed attendees all mingle around it. To his right is the roulette table room, where mostly men have convalesced. Ilya thinks he spots Marleau and Connors in there, playing a round. A *roulette table*. He could almost laugh. Kappa Tau beer pong could not hold a candle.

Rose Landry apparently also takes theme parties very seriously.

Making their way deeper into the house, they come to the dance floor, a colorful, vivid spectacle. The disco ball spinning from the ceiling, flashes of light glimmering off the dancers and their champagne glasses. Ilya spots a chocolate fountain in the corner of the room that he's suddenly dying to indulge in. He takes note of the booming music as well. An upbeat pop song.

A little party never killed nobody

"Well?" Svetlana is looking at him, a smug smile on her face.

He presses his lips together for a moment. It does sting a bit, having to credit Rose Landry for planning what is undoubtedly the party of the year.

Right here, right now's all we got

"Is this Fergie?" Ilya asks, pointing up to refer to the song. He shakes his head disapprovingly. "Fergie was not alive in the 1920s."

Svetlana laughs beautifully. "It is the Baz Luhrmann Gatsby soundtrack, baby." She grabs two glasses of champagne off of a nearby table and hands him one. "Rose Landry wins this round."

Rose Landry has won too many rounds against Ilya, in his opinion.

"Can you be trusted on your own for a bit?" Svetlana asks, leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. "I see some of my sisters on the dance floor. Unless you want to join?"

He shakes his head. Dancing is not what he's here for.

She looks at him like she knows exactly what he's thinking and takes a sip of her champagne. "Behave, Ilya." She disappears among the dancers as the song ends and transitions to who he thinks is André 3000.

I, I, I left no time to regret

Ilya turns away from the dance floor, the one place in the house he's absolutely certain Hollander is not. Hollander was nowhere to be seen on his first pass through the party, but it's a big house. He downs the rest of his champagne and places the glass on a table meant for empty glasses (Rose Landry thinks of everything).

His first stop in searching for Hollander would usually be whatever room is being used for smoking weed. Always the quietest room at a party and a convenient hideout spot for anyone looking for a moment's peace. But Ilya knows without a doubt that Rose Landry would commit a felony if anyone smoked weed in the Zeta Beta house. So, the most obvious place to check is not an option.

And you and you and you, you tread a troubled track

Moving back into the living room, weaving his way around all the bright costumes and tuxes, he picks Hayden Pike out of the crowd. He's standing next to the champagne fountain, looking exceedingly impressed by the display. His girlfriend Jackie, who Ilya has always pitied from afar and who is still so far out of Pike's league, is with him. They appear to be dressed in Gatsby and Daisy apparel, Hayden going with the predictable simple black tux, Jackie in sparkling pink with a headband.

A quick scan around where they're standing tells him Hollander is not with them. Disappointment flairs in his chest. If he's not with Pike, that could mean he's not here at all. Was showing up this late a mistake? Hollander wouldn't have missed Rose's party, but leaving a party early is exactly his style.

No, he's here. He's decided he has to be.

Not giving up, he walks through the entryway again to pass into the roulette table room. The room is full of men, black tuxes here, colorful suits there. Marleau is watching Connors take a turn at the game. He notices several of his other Kappa Tau brothers have made appearances as well, unwilling to miss the unmissable party. A cluster of them are blabbering on with JJ, Hollander's friend in Omega Chi. Hollander isn't with that group either.

As he steps towards the den, the next room over, he abruptly stops. There's a strange prickling at the back of his neck. A feeling he gets when…

We only said goodbye with words

He whirls around, and when he does, he glimpses a black head of hair moving away in the crowd. He can't see his face. But he knows who it is.

Ilya speeds across the room, just short of jogging, and dives into the sea of partygoers, but within seconds, he loses sight of that black hair. Swallowed up by feathers, sparkles, wigs. When he finally breaks free of the crowd and comes to a stop in the hallway by the stairs, Hollander is nowhere to be seen.

"*Blyat*," he curses under his breath.

"Are you lost, Jay?" A challenging and familiar voice from behind him.

Rose Landry is there. And, *fuck*, Rose Landry is a *vision*.

As she managed with the entryway, Rose has also apparently discovered some magical way to make herself inexplicably glow. The dress certainly helps. Mint green sequins stitched on

shimmering silk. Pearl strings dangling off the ends. The stunning flapper look is completed with the bejeweled headpiece, her red hair peeking out of the edges.

Ilya recognizes the costume immediately. Mia Farrow's Daisy in the Robert Redford movie. Standing there with her champagne glass in hand, she's the spitting image.

If Svetlana were not here, Rose would easily be the most beautiful woman at this party. How infuriating.

will.i.am is now playing over their heads.

That girl's a killer from a gang

"Not lost," he finally manages to answer her question, trying to pretend he's not in absolute awe of how she looks. "Just taking it all in."

She looks him up and down, considering his costume. "Redford."

He can't help but smile, pleased that she deduced correctly. "The better one."

"He is," she agrees, a rarity.

"And you are Daisy," Ilya says, stepping closer and testing his luck while Rose seems to be in a magnanimous mood. That doesn't happen too often when she's around him. "Look at us. We go together."

At that, she scoffs, and then smirks, shaking her head. "Don't flirt with me, Ilya Rozanov. You know better."

He does, but he couldn't help but poke. Raising his hands, he offers an excuse, "Habit."

"Lose that habit around me," she tells him, tilting her head to the side. "And besides, you're wrong. Gatsby doesn't go with Daisy. Gatsby goes with Nick."

Nick? Oh yeah. The cousin. Gatsby's friend. Ilya vaguely remembers that character.

He waves his hand. "American literature," he says dismissively.

"You're a literature major," she says, eyes all-knowing and unimpressed. "Don't pretend you don't read."

He nearly laughs at that and thinks, not for the first time, that he and Rose could have been friends in another life.

But he knows that's not to be in this one. While they had never spoken plainly about things, it's been made abundantly clear to him that Rose knows a lot of what has occurred between him and Hollander, maybe all of it. He couldn't put an exact date on when Hollander told her, but figures it was over the summer, as once the fall semester of his senior year started, so began the poisonous looks from her whenever they were in the same room together.

Given what she's probably heard from Hollander's side of things, he's never blamed her for this. In a way, he admires it. Her loyalty to her friend. A friend who was once more than a friend at that.

But still, when he thinks back to a certain Instagram post two years ago, and the feelings it stirred in him at the time, he struggles to feel any warmth for her, unfair as that may be. And so, the two of them have remained dueling icebergs, neither of them willing to budge.

"Russian literature major." he corrects, trying to keep up his smile. "You caught me. I read. Just not this American book."

She takes a sip of her champagne and begins to turn away, apparently finished with their verbal sparring for the evening.

"Your party is great," he bursts out to keep her attention.

She looks back at him, eyebrows raised. "A compliment? From Ilya Rozanov? Should I alert the university paper?"

"Where's Hollander?" he asks, unable to contain it any longer. He's been glancing around at intervals during this conversation, hoping to spot him, and he figures she must have noticed.

"Ah, there it is," she says, coming closer again. She does a quick scan of their surrounding area and shrugs. "He's the one dressed like Nick. Probably the only one."

"The boring one, of course." Ilya chuckles.

"Nick's not boring," Rose says, frowning at him. "Nick's *good*."

Ilya just looks at her then, not knowing what to say to that. He certainly doesn't feel like denying an obvious defense of her friend, especially when she's said something he wholeheartedly agrees with. But he won't be admitting that out loud.

Leaning in closer and raising her eyebrows, Rose tells him, "Try to behave yourself."

As she walks away, glimmering in the dim lights like some kind of phantasm, Ilya realizes that's the second woman in one evening to tell him to behave. Jesus Christ, does he really look like that much of a walking disaster tonight?

He grabs a glass of champagne off of one of the hallway tables and swallows it down in two gulps, placing it back on the same table meant only for full glasses of champagne, not empty ones. That satisfies something in him. This party is a little bit too perfect for his liking.

Lana Del Ray's voice floats into his ear, mellowing the party into a gentler hum.

I've seen the world, done it all

Resuming his hunt, he enters the room set up with the dance floor again, wondering if he's going to be reduced to staking out Hayden Pike for the evening, waiting for Hollander to approach him. But when he enters the room, he stops in his tracks.

Hollander is there, clear as day even in the dim room. He's standing in the corner by the chocolate fountain with, he squints, and no, his eyes are not lying to him, *Svetlana*. Their heads are cocked towards each other, probably to make out what the other is saying over the loud music, and Ilya spots a small smile on Hollander's face. Svetlana is smiling too.

Eyes tracing over them, Ilya sees that Hollander is indeed dressed like how Ilya imagines Nick when he thinks of the character. Light blue button down under a navy-blue blazer, a red handkerchief in the pocket matching his red bowtie. Khaki pants and white shoes. Ilya wonders how he could have missed him while searching the house. He stands out starkly in the swarm of tuxes and bright colored suits. He wonders if he chose the costume himself or if Rose picked it.

Ilya flounders, staring at them, and realizes Svetlana and Hollander are Jordan and Nick, looking exactly the part together. The two of them have barely ever spoken to each other as far as he knows, yet here they are, chatting and smiling like it's the most normal thing in the world. It feels like watching Saturn and Venus cross paths, something that is decidedly not supposed to happen in his universe and the planets that circle around him.

Sixty seconds of him standing there watching them feels like an hour before Svetlana gives him a friendly squeeze on the shoulder and walks away. Her gaze falls on him easily and she approaches, smooth, graceful steps, gliding towards him.

As soon as she's close enough to hear him, "What were you two—"

"None of your business, Ilya." She smiles as she passes him by, not sticking around to tell him anything more and vanishing further into the house before he can even make a move to stop her.

When he looks back, Hollander's eyes are on him. Their eyes lock and Ilya swears time stops for a moment. Hollander's face, usually so open and easy for him to read, is a blank mask. It unnerves him, scares him almost. He can only imagine what his own face gives away as he tries to keep his expression stony.

Will you still love me when I got nothin' but my aching soul?

Ilya's not sure how long this staring match lasts, and all he can think about is how beautiful Hollander looks, unable to make a single move. Finally, the song changes, and it's a song Ilya actually knows this time, and one that could not be a greater clash in tone with what had just been playing.

Human beings in a mob, what's a mob to a king?

The atmosphere shifts, the energy working back up again. Whatever was just going on between him and Hollander snaps with the song, and Hollander is the first to move. He works his way around the dance floor in the direction of the living room. Ilya doesn't hesitate before following, eyes glued to Hollander's head, refusing to lose him in the crowd again.

Hollander is moving quickly, and Ilya suspects he's seeking out sanctuary with Pike or Rose, presuming, hoping that Ilya wouldn't dare careen into his orbit with one of his friends next to

him. On any other night, he might be right about that. Tonight though, Ilya is not so sure.

But he's determined to catch up to him before it comes to that.

Hollander's constant quick looks over his shoulder have Ilya rethinking if chasing after him like this is most effective. Some of his uncle's old hunting wisdom returning to him. *The prey must never know of the hunter's presence, or it cannot be caught.* That old man's voice still rings in his ears, even above the pounding rap music.

We formed a new religion, no sins as long as there's permission

Ilya stops following as Hollander slips into the roulette room. Just knowing what section of the house he's in is enough for the moment. He moves down the hallway at the center of the house to the entrance of the room in the back right corner of the house. This room appears to have been set up as another dance floor, but with several raised platforms sprinkled throughout for people to jump up on and show off.

Waiting, Ilya keeps his eyes trained on the room's other entrance, where the den is situated between this room and the roulette room. It's crowded and dim, but not so much that he doesn't spot exactly what he wants when Hollander stumbles through, still glancing over his shoulder, but he won't find who he's looking for that way.

Positioning himself just outside the hallway entrance, out of sight, Ilya waits, knowing Hollander is unlikely to join the dance floor in this room or any room. Peeking back in, he sees Hollander making his way in his direction, but his pace has slowed and his shoulders have relaxed. Thinking, wrongly, that he's lost his pursuer.

Ilya's arm shoots out to block his path as soon as he crosses into the hallway. Hollander bumps into his arm and his head snaps up to see who has stopped him, stilling when his eyes land on his face.

No church in the wild

"That's enough running," Ilya tells him.

Gratefully, Hollander doesn't turn away from him again. He faces him, clenching his jaw and trying to stand up straight.

"Thought you were ignoring me." His voice is impressively steady.

"You noticed," he comments, dropping his arm from where it's blocking Hollander's body. He circles around him, herding him until his back is against the wall. He goes easily, just as he always has. But Ilya doesn't move too close, very aware of the surrounding prying eyes.

"Enjoying yourself?" Ilya asks when Hollander persists in staying quiet.

"I was," Hollander says, looking Ilya up and down pointedly.

"Hm, lie," Ilya says, and this he simply knows. In their four years, Hollander has never once looked at ease at a party. He manages when he's around his friends, but otherwise? They're

more of an obligation than something he actually enjoys. “I think you were very bored until now, is that right?”

“Svetlana was more interesting,” Hollander says, looking away.

Ilya narrows his eyes. “What did she say to you?”

“What did *Rose* say to *you*?” he shoots back.

Huh, so Hollander had spotted them talking together too. He wonders at that, Rose and Svetlana swapping Ilya and Hollander if only for a few minutes. Funny, but not something he can focus on right now.

“Oh, you know. She wanted to tell me how hot I look,” Ilya lies easily. “She said you were boring her so much, she needed someone interesting to talk to.”

Hollander rolls his eyes.

Ilya leans in closer then, so only Hollander will hear him when he says, “You look good.”

At that, Hollander tenses against the wall, his guard going back up. But it’s not like it’s a lie. He does look good. His blazer has been perfectly steamed, not a wrinkle on it. His hair is combed and styled. And when Ilya inhales, he knows he smells good too.

“This is cute,” Ilya says, reaching up to pluck at his red bowtie. His eyes survey his chest. “Always so pretty."

Hollander stiffens even more, looking like his spine could snap in half if someone merely flicked him. “Don’t.”

Ilya drops his hand. “No?”

He just shakes his head in answer, but there’s a familiar look in his wide eyes.

“You think about me when you get dressed tonight?” Ilya asks, dropping his voice even lower.

Hollander’s eyes go wider and drop to the floor, not answering, which is enough of an answer for Ilya.

“Comb your hair and iron your clothes, make yourself perfect?” Ilya carries on. “Wanting me to notice?”

“I…” he stammers out, eyes flicking up to his briefly again. “I-I don’t…”

“You don’t need to try so hard, Hollander,” Ilya tells him sincerely. “I always notice you.”

Hollander shuts his eyes for a second, looking how he always does when he’s trying to focus his senses. He opens them again quickly. “You can’t say that.”

“I can’t? Okay. You talk then.” It is taking a monumental effort not to touch Hollander right now. “You miss me?”

Inhaling sharply, Hollander’s eyes dart around, as if checking if anyone is paying attention to them. No one is, just a few party goers passing them by, not thinking twice about Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander having a conversation.

“Rozanov—”

“Tell me,” he orders, injecting as much authority into the words as he can. “Do you?”

Hollander is nodding before his brain seems to catch up to what he’s doing.

“Say it.”

“Please—” His eyes are on the floor again.

Ilya, unable to help himself anymore, tips Hollander’s chin up with his fingers, forcing eye contact. “Would it be easier to show me?”

Hollander immediately whacks his hand away from his face and looks around them again, anxiety coloring his features. His face is red even in the dim light. “We’re in public.”

“Then go back there,” Ilya tells him, gesturing to the empty hallway to his left, dark and cut off from the rest of the party. “I will follow.”

“Those are the sorority offices,” Hollander protests. “We’re not allowed in there.”

True, there is a sign in front of that hallway that says NO ENTRY but right now Ilya cannot bring himself to give a shit. He simply looks at Hollander, not saying anything, letting him decide.

Hollander squirms under his gaze. “Rose will kill me—”

“No,” he disagrees. “Rose will kill *me*.”

Hollander swallows, and Ilya simply nudges his head in the direction of that hallway, ordering him without words.

Finally, blessedly, Hollander submits and goes where he was told, body skirting around the NO ENTRY sign like it might burn him and enters the darkness of the hallway. Ilya does a quick look around, not interested in getting caught by anyone, especially Rose. He wasn’t joking when he said Rose would kill him for this. But no one is looking at them.

In the off-limits hallway, Hollander is trying the office doors. Apparently the first two were locked. Ilya charges past him, trying the next one and, to some shock, he finds it open. Wow, of all the things for Rose Landry to miss when setting up her perfect party tonight, it was this. A flaw in the system, finally.

When he opens it, he gestures for Hollander to enter first. He does, and Ilya follows after, shutting the door and locking it behind him.

Hollander's hands are in his hair and he's pressed against his chest the moment he turns around. Ilya slides his arms around his waist in return, holding him there.

"That's right," Ilya says, interrupting their heavy breathing. "You're going to show me how much you miss me, yes?"

"Fuck off," Hollander says, and then he's kissing him.

While it hasn't technically been very long since they last kissed, only a couple of weeks, it has felt like an eternity. Ilya makes up for lost time, plunging his tongue into Hollander's mouth the second he opens for him, seizing control of the kiss that Hollander started. He finds the button of the blue blazer and undoes it, tearing it off of Hollander's shoulders and tossing it to the floor. Hollander makes a noise of protest at that, nearly pulling away from him to pick it up, but Ilya doesn't let him.

Ilya takes off his own jacket and drops it to the floor, uncaring about any wrinkles or damage to the material. There are more important things to worry about right now. His brain works over his options, but when he spots the couch across from the office desk, he makes a decision, walking Hollander back towards it.

"We can't mess with anything in here," Hollander warns urgently against his mouth.

"Hm, no. Just you." Ilya shoves Hollander back onto the couch. He lands with a bounce on the cushion.

Breathing hard, Hollander looks at him head to toe as he stands over him. "What about the be —"

"Fuck the bet," Ilya says as he comes down on top of him. The stupid bet that caused so much of this bullshit is the last thing he wants to talk about.

Hollander doesn't argue the point further, sinking further into the couch when Ilya kisses him. Ilya hums approvingly, running his hands down his chest and finding the button of his pants. Opening his eyes, he locks onto Hollander's face, searching there. Hollander is still wide eyed and attuned with Ilya's every move.

Grunting, Ilya gets the zipper of Hollander's pants undone and shoves his hand inside, going past his briefs and taking hold of his cock, already hard and ready. Hollander gasps and arches underneath him.

"*Fuck*," Hollander breathes out. "I need—"

"I know what you need," Ilya says, pressing his forehead against his. "I remember."

As Ilya works his hand over Hollander's cock, he can feel that it's too dry, so he brings his hand up to Hollander's mouth. He spits on it without Ilya even needing to tell him to do it. Stomach fluttering, Ilya gets back to work.

His attention is diverted from the task at hand when he feels Hollander's fingers struggling with the button of his pants. Snatching his hand away, Ilya pins it to the couch. Hollander immediately tries to wrench it free.

"Please, *please*." Hollander looks up at him with pleading eyes. "I want to."

It's so hard for Ilya to say no when Hollander begs so prettily, asking to make him feel good too, even if what he wants right now is to play Hollander's body like a string. He lets him go and doesn't stop him this time when he unbuttons him and slides his hand into his pants, spitting in his palm to prepare. Ilya hisses at the first touch, then relaxes into him.

Hollander's cock is leaking in his briefs now, and Ilya knows he can finish him off like this without any trouble, but that's not what he's looking for right now. He keeps his eyes on Hollander's face but he's now looking down between them; expression fixed in concentration as he strokes Ilya's cock the way he also clearly remembers Ilya likes.

"Eyes on me, *kotenok*," Ilya tells him, using his free hand to bring his chin up.

When their eyes meet, Ilya catches a glimpse of what he's been wanting to see. Hollander's eyes are going dark, his jaw slack, and Ilya can feel his movements becoming less coordinated. Ilya leans down and kisses him, all tongue and teeth, wanting to push him further.

The song from the party drifts into the room, something Ilya hasn't heard before. But it's heavy on the percussion with eccentric rock vocals.

Love is blindness, I don't want to see

"Being so good for me," Ilya says against his mouth. He slides his thumb over Hollander's slit, watching him shudder at the touch. "Still my good boy, aren't you, Hollander?"

Hollander whines at the praise, his fingers digging in at Ilya's shoulders as some awareness seems to come back over his face. "Rozanov—"

Ilya hushes him and kisses him again, wanting him to sink back under, needing him to. Hollander responds to the kiss, opening for him and continuing to stroke his cock, his pace picking up. When Ilya meets his eyes again, he's still eager and alert. Ilya speeds his own hand up, his strokes growing erratic, feeling him leaking against his skin.

"Mne eto ot tebya nuzho." I need this from you. His voice is a shaking rasp.

Hollander's eyes sharpen, his hand slowing down. "What—" he cuts himself off with a gasp when Ilya strokes him more roughly, hips tilting up in response.

Won't you wrap the night around me, yeah?

Ilya buries his face in Hollander's neck, finding all the familiar spots where he knows he's most sensitive. He feels Hollander trembling beneath him, and he knows he's close. Ilya feels close himself, he's been waiting for this all evening. But when he looks back at Hollander's face, it's still not what he wants.

Hollander must notice his face drop, because he looks confused, then insecure, shifting under him. But Ilya doesn't want him thinking and kisses him again, this time Hollander's lips are more tentative as he kisses back, and Ilya can feel his body, which had just been relaxed, start to tense against him.

"Mne nuzhno, chtoby ty eto mne peredal." I need you to give this to me. It's practically a whine.

"Give you *what?"*

Ilya freezes, momentarily stunned. He tries to shake out of it, leaning down to kiss him again, when Hollander suddenly yanks both of his hands away from him and holds them up over his head.

"*Stop*."

The word. *Their* word. Ilya practically flings himself from Hollander's body on instinct, ending up on the other end of the couch.

Yeah, blow out the candle
It's blindness

They sit there on the couch panting for a few seconds, neither of them knowing what to say. Shame courses through Ilya's veins. He can't even bring himself to look at Hollander for having just pushed him past his limit.

But what the fuck had he just done? What happened? He's not even entirely sure.

What he had said. *I need this from you. Give this to me.* Ramblings in his native Russian against Hollander's skin, the way he scanned over his face looking for that fragile softness that Hollander used to give him so often, that he caught sight of a few times in the last few minutes and it lit a fire up his spine. That was what he had wanted, the thrill of that control that only Hollander gives him, and he pushed Hollander too hard to get there. Too hard when they haven't even been together in so long. Not like this. Not since last year…

"I am sorry," Ilya breaks into the silence, staring at his hands and hating them.

Hollander stays quiet for a few seconds. "I wanted it," he says, sounding like he's talking more to himself. "I wanted it but you—*fuck*."

Ilya's not sure he wants to know what the end of that sentence was going to be.

"This was stupid," Hollander bites out, getting up from the couch. He's tucked himself back into his pants. His clothes are wrinkled and his hair is unkempt. He looks wrecked. Ilya, despite his guilt, feels a familiar jolt of gratification at messing up his perfection.

"How did you…know what I said?" Ilya asks, one thing he doesn't understand about what just happened.

Hollander glares at him. "I took Russian last spring so I could understand you better."

Oh. Yes. Hollander did do that. They just haven't had many opportunities to experience the results. Ilya looks at the floor.

"You don't even remember, you fucking asshole." Hollander's voice is poisonous.

His temper flairs at that, bringing his eyes back up. Hollander stands in the middle of the room, holding his blazer with his arms crossed, staring down at him. Ilya feels like a child being scolded. "I had more going on last year than just you, Hollander."

"Gonna tell me about it?" Hollander asks, eyebrows raised like he already knows the answer.

Only silence. Exactly what he expects.

"That's what I thought." Hollander wipes one of his eyes. Ilya hadn't even noticed the tear. "I don't know what's going on with you *now*, Rozanov, but this," he gestures back and forth between them with his hand, his expression cold in a way Ilya has rarely seen it. "Is not going to fix you."

Hollander turns for the door as Ilya's entire body heats up, and unadulterated rage is all he can feel as he watches Hollander move to leave him. Rage for Hollander, for himself, for the world. It bursts from his mouth before he can stop it.

"Thanks, Hollander, now go crying back to Rose like you always do."

It's like the air goes out of the room as the cruelty hits its mark. Hollander stills and he thinks they both stop breathing. Everything in Ilya's body is screaming at him to take the words back, to apologize, beg for his forgiveness, tell him everything, *everything* that's happened from last year to now, why things are this way.

He doesn't. He just sits there. Like a coward. The seconds tick by and Hollander finally looks back at him. His eyes filled with contempt. His answer is brief.

"*Fuck you, Ilya.*"

Then he's gone.

Ilya buries his face in his hands, fingers reaching up to tug hard on his own hair. He can feel his face going red, his earlier arousal, guilt, and rage all combining into one burning hot mass at the center of his chest, like he could combust.

"*Fuck!"* The cry is strangled and loud. If the music hadn't been blaring outside, someone surely would have heard him. Thankfully, no one comes in, leaving him to fester in his self-loathing alone. It's what he deserves.

He spends a few minutes trying to pull himself together. All he's going to do for the rest of this party is leave it, but it still takes him time to work up the willpower to even do that, to leave this room where he can hide from the world. But it can't last forever.

He pulls out his phone and texts Svetlana, asking her if she's with people she can go home with safely. She responds quickly with a yes and he tells her he's leaving now, not offering

any other details.

Wearing his jacket again, he takes a few deep breaths before he plunges back outside, wanting to beeline for the front door and get out of here as quickly as possible. He maneuvers around the NO ENTRY sign, grateful that no ZBZ sister sees him to ream him out, and enters the crowded hallway, eyes on the front door. Florence Welch's voice pounds in his ears.

Because you're a hard soul to save
With an ocean in my way

He doesn't see Hollander. But he's not looking. He's not trying to see anyone right now, keeping his face down and hoping no one stops him or says a word to him. He makes his way through the throng of people, dodging bumps along the way, all of them in ignorant bliss in their glittering costumes and lost in their conversations and laughter. He hates them. He envies them.

The lights flash in his face sporadically, and suddenly he feels a sting in his eyes. It dawns on him that there's wetness there. He reaches up and rubs his eyes quickly, wiping any evidence away. He moves faster for the door, finally reaching it. His hand grasps the doorknob like it will save him.

Cry and cry and cry and
Over the love of you

There's no peace on the other side of the door. Just quiet. But at least he feels like he can breathe now.

It takes him a minute to begin moving his feet, and as he steps down from the porch, he pulls his phone out and finds Alexei in his contacts. He unblocks the number and places his phone back in his pocket.

He heads for the Kappa Tau house. Something like home. If he pretends.

It doesn't even take five minutes.

His phone rings.

Chapter End Notes

To be clear, the flashbacks in this chapter are not the mysterious "what happened last year." These flashbacks are to two years ago of two twenty year olds stumbling through a dom/sub relationship that they have found themselves in, and not always sure how to handle it.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 6: Fracture

Chapter Notes

So, I'm not sure what happened in the last week, but a lot more people have started following this work. If you're new, welcome. If you've been here since this had barely any hits or comments, thanks for sticking with me.

It's still my full intention to finish this work and to post chapters regularly. I do have a life and I also don't want to rush through writing the chapters. They take time and I want them to be good for you readers. I hope you'll be patient with me and I do hope you enjoy.

Edit: I take all comments and critiques seriously, and even though this is months after I posted this chapter, I put a warning here now because of a recent comment. Ilya and Shane in this chapter are on the outs. Their sexual encounter in this chapter involves the following: Ilya showing up unannounced at Shane's place, Ilya pushing him on the bed, Shane telling him to get off because they're on Hayden's bed, wrestling on the ground a bit after Shane makes him get off. All of the sexual content, their kiss when they're on the bed and the sex, is consensual. Shane responds to Ilya when he kisses him and is the one who initiates the sex they have on the floor.

I'm adding this now after having seen a criticism about this chapter. I want everyone to be aware of what is here in case they don't want to read it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

September 2015

“Is there a reason we somehow end up at the KT house the first week of every year?” JJ asks as they make their way across the street on Greek Row.

Hayden shrugs. “Don’t ask me, tonight was Shane’s idea.”

Both of their heads turn to him, and Shane realizes he’s expected to offer an explanation. His heart hammers in his chest, trying to think of something that sounds acceptable. “I mean, you said it, JJ,” he splutters out as the Kappa Tau house comes into view. “We come every year. I’m just used to it now.”

Shane neglects to mention that he only came to Kappa Tau’s Welcome Back party last year because Rozanov invited him. He also doesn’t mention the real reason he wanted to go tonight.

“You and your routines,” Hayden says as they approach the house, party already loud and rambunctious, the house practically vibrating with it. “But as long as I can avoid *him*, this

will be fun."

Shane internally cringes. Hayden and Ilya never got along after their less-than-pleasant first meeting. But their mutual distaste was solidified last year during Greek Week. The first-round game involved balloons filled with paint. The challenge was meant to be funny, but in the middle of the game, Rozanov nailed Hayden right in the face with a heavy balloon of red paint. He looked like a walking horror movie when he got up. It took him ages in the shower to get all the paint out of his hair, and he never let it go. Though Shane was sure it was an accident.

Pretty sure anyway…

But he and Rozanov hadn't exactly been talking at the time. In fact, they haven't talked at all since Toronto. This had been Shane's choice. When he started dating Rose, he knew he had to put a stop to what had been going on with them, whatever it even *was*. He probably should have told Rozanov it was over, but after Toronto, he didn't know how to do that. He was so embarrassed about what happened on…that night that he couldn't stomach the idea of even speaking to him.

He didn't think Rozanov would take it too badly. After all, it's not like Shane was the only person he was seeing. Rozanov could get sex wherever he wanted whenever he wanted. This is what Shane told himself when he first started dating Rose.

But the three or four times he saw Rozanov after Toronto, for parties or Greek events, he had the impression that Rozanov was deliberately ignoring him. Never once looking in his direction. And Shane didn't even feel like he could reach out and try to fix things because he was with Rose and…it was a mess.

Not quite as much of a mess as dating Rose was, however. He doesn't regret being with her, as it answered a lot of questions for him, but he does regret some of their disastrous sexual encounters. It wasn't the first time he had sex with a woman, but after being with Rozanov for so long, somehow nothing was working. It was like sex with a woman didn't even make sense anymore.

Finally, after the fourth try at the end of the spring, Rose just flat out asked him about it while they were lounging on her bed in the aftermath. She didn't think he was interested in her that way and said so. One thing led to another in that conversation, and he told her almost everything. That he had been with men (just one man but this part he omitted, as well as who that one man was) and he's not so sure he's attracted to women.

It had been distressing to admit all of this out loud, and he felt guilty, like he had used Rose. He feared she would feel the same. But to his astonishment, she wasn't embarrassed or hurt. She just listened and gave him a hug when it was over and the tears were rolling down his cheeks. They're just friends now, and Shane hadn't realized how much he needed a friend who he could talk to about this.

They kept up with each other by phone over the summer while Shane spent the whole time wondering if he should reach out to Rozanov to tell him…any of it. What happened with Rose. That it was over. That he kind of missed him. But he didn't do that. Didn't text him at

all until he got back on campus this week. A simple *Hey*. The second he sent it, he regretted it, throwing his phone at his pillow and burying his face in his elbow.

Rozanov hadn't responded. Shane waited a full twenty-four hours before he sent a follow up *Can we talk?* No answer to that one either. He understood why, and maybe it was stupid to reach out to him at all. Rozanov clearly hadn't wanted to talk to him at the end of the semester. By now, six months after they were last together, he's probably forgotten the whole thing between them and moved on to someone else.

This is what he told himself. But still, he asked his friends if they could go to the Kappa Tau party tonight. Because he still feels like he needs to say something. If only to just explain himself so he can move on from the whole thing. That would probably be best, even if a niggling feeling in the back of his head tells him otherwise.

"Earth to Shane."

Shane's head snaps up to see Hayden has his hand on the Kappa Tau house doorknob, his expression confused as he regards him. JJ is also looking at him, with much the same expression as Hayden's.

"You good, man?" Hayden asks.

Shane shakes his head once quickly, trying to clear this brain of all the thoughts rattling around inside. He realizes he's probably been silent for the last minute or so and was staring at the ground the whole time as they walked up to the house. "Yeah, Hay. All good."

Hayden doesn't look entirely convinced, but with a puff of air out of his mouth, he lets it go. "Alright, drink responsibly and all that, guys."

At the opening of the door, Shane is met with what he usually expects from a Kappa Tau party. Loud music that he doesn't recognize, the smell of weed, and sensory overload. He steps across the threshold with JJ, leaning into him slightly. JJ doesn't even look twice at him about it, which he appreciates. He needs this sometimes at the big events. At least at the start, it helps just to feel someone there, a grounding force.

It's so normal for Shane's eyes to immediately seek out Rozanov at these parties that he almost doesn't recognize that he's doing it. No Rozanov to be found, but they do find Jackie quickly. Apparently, she had been dragged to this party by her friends this evening. Hayden has been with Jackie since just before the Christmas holidays last year, and seeing her now, Shane knows that Hayden will be completely occupied for the rest of the evening as they make their way to one of the vacant corners of the room, Hayden's lips against her neck.

Giving them their privacy, he and JJ wrangle some beers together as Shane continues to scan the rooms for Rozanov. Still nothing, but he knows he wouldn't be anywhere else tonight. The Kappa Tau back to school party was practically mandatory for all brothers.

"Let's go outside," Shane suggests to JJ and heads for the back door without even looking to see if he's following him.

The party is almost as loud outside, the usual beer pong set up in the yard and different sororities and fraternities grouped off together. There's one of those inflatable swimming pools that you couldn't even pay Shane to set foot in set up at the back edge of the yard. But still no Rozanov.

Shane listens as JJ provides his regular amusing commentary about the party, casual digs at the Kappa Tau brothers (Shane jumps in with a remark about how filthy the pool they set up must be) and drooling comments about some of the sorority sisters (on this, Shane has less to say).

"So…it's over with you and Rose then?" JJ asks suddenly.

Shane starts a bit at the question. He hadn't expected JJ to bring this up. The only person he's told is Hayden. "You heard about that?"

JJ shrugs. "I kinda guessed. You haven't mentioned her since we got back."

Swallowing, Shane steadies himself to respond. "She's great, but we're not…" Shane trails off and JJ just looks at him, waiting. "Compatible, I guess."

"Compatible?" JJ's eyebrows draw together.

Shane shrugs. "We didn't make sense."

JJ just stares for a moment but nods, reaching up to awkwardly place his hand on his shoulder, clearly meant to be a comforting gesture. "I'm sorry, man."

"We're still friends," Shane says, appreciating JJ's obvious attempt at connecting with him. They don't usually do this.

"That's good. She seems cool," JJ says, dropping his hand. Then he seems more than ready to change the subject. He gestures to the beer pong table. "Want to watch me take a turn?"

Shane smiles. "Go for it."

It doesn't take very long for JJ to fall in with the guys playing the game, easing himself into their chatter easily and putting himself in line for a turn. Shane watches, observing how effortlessly JJ carries himself when surrounded by people, cracking jokes and picking up on every cue. He envies it. None of that has ever been something he can do without a great deal of emotional energy, and even then, he finds it feels forced.

Shane seats himself on the porch steps, making sure the path is clear for anyone to go by, and watches as different guys take their turn. When JJ plays, he wins in fairly impressive fashion, his Kappa Tau opponent immediately demanding a rematch. It's funny to watch, but as Shane finishes his beer, he's feeling restless, wanting to return to his initial reason for even coming to this party tonight.

Standing up, Shane sees that JJ is just fine surrounded by the guys at the beer pong table, and he turns to go back inside the house.

It's busy inside, but Shane doesn't make it more than two steps into the house when he nearly trips over his feet at what he sees.

Rozanov is there. On the couch. He's not alone.

A blonde girl who Shane doesn't know is draped over his lap, and he has his mouth pressed against her ear, whispering something. Whatever it is must be funny because it has the blonde bursting into giggles as Rozanov's hand slides around her waist, pulling her closer.

Shane tries to make himself move, to turn away, but he can't. His feet feel rooted to the floor, and he can't rip his eyes away from the scene.

They look nice together comes an intrusive thought.

This is hardly the first time Shane has seen Rozanov with someone else. He had spotted him with Svetlana at a couple of parties over the years, as well as other girls. But it's the first time since his relationship with Rose began. The first time since Toronto.

Shane feels something disturbingly like jealousy creep into his chest as Rozanov's lips latch onto the girl's neck, kissing her there in a way he's all too familiar with. Shane tries to suppress this reaction, the hurt he's feeling, knowing it's ludicrous. Unfair even. Especially when he had put an end to things between them. But that doesn't make it any easier as he stands there and watches.

Finally, he starts feeling like he can move again, but he starts to turn away, Rozanov looks at him. Eyes landing squarely on him where he's standing across the room, like he knew he had been standing there the whole time. Shane freezes again at the gaze.

Rozanov's heated scrutiny pins him in place, and he feels like his body is forcing him to keep looking. His lips are still on the girl's neck, and his hand trails up her waist. But he's looking at Shane, and Shane feels his face go red, embarrassed that he's standing there staring at Rozanov as he kisses and feels up some girl.

He feels his breathing getting faster, and it suddenly becomes very urgent that he get out of here. With a great deal of effort, he breaks eye contact with Rozanov and bolts for the front door. Air. He needs air. The house is smothering him alive.

When he's out on the front porch, he knows he won't be able to make himself reenter the party. Too embarrassed to be anywhere near Rozanov again probably for the rest of his life. He takes the porch steps two at a time and bolts away from the frat, heading in the direction of the Omega Chi house.

On his way, he shoots off a text to JJ and Hayden, telling them that he isn't feeling well, and he'll see them back at the house.

The Omega Chi house is a bit of a walk from Kappa Tau, but the distance feels like nothing at the moment, Shane's steps coming quick and easy. He's glad he didn't drink much at the party, not that he ever does that.

It's also a relief that he can escape from whatever the hell that nightmare was with Rozanov and just go back to the Omega Chi house rather than trek all the way to the dorms. Now that he's a junior, he was able to move into the fraternity house, and that put an end to the hell of dorm living. He's happy with the change. The Omega Chi house is one of the nicest on Greek Row, and he still gets to room with Hayden.

The house in sight, he starts feeling some of the weight from the evening lifting off his shoulders. That was a humiliating display, Rozanov catching him staring at him with that girl, but in a way, he probably got what he wanted out of the evening. He thought he wanted to clear the air between him and Rozanov, but instead he got confirmation that things were done between them.

For the best, he decides, even as his eyes sting.

Pushing his way into the house, Shane notices quickly that it's dead silent. Figures. It's the first weekend of the fall semester. Everyone is out at some party except for maybe a straggler or two hanging out in their rooms. He fully intends to join them as he takes the stairs two at a time. He's grateful knowing that Hayden is still back at the party caught up with Jackie. It wouldn't surprise him if he stays at her place tonight. That would be a gift.

The hallway upstairs is equally quiet, and Shane finds his door, wanting to be in his own familiar space as fast as possible. He finds the room as he and Hayden left it. They're both almost entirely unpacked. Only one of Hayden's suitcases sits next to the closet, waiting to be tucked away.

It's only when he closes the door behind him that he allows himself to acknowledge that he's crying.

He stands there for a moment, in the middle of the room, and tries to get a hold of himself. Closing his eyes and focusing on his breathing. Finally, when he thinks he's stopped shaking, he moves to the bedside table drawer, knowing that he tossed some packaged tissues in there earlier, and rips them open. Getting a handle on himself, willing the tears to stop coming, he wipes his face down with a tissue.

Stupid. So stupid.

Everything about this evening had been bad enough. But crying about it? All the more embarrassing. At least no one is here to see him like this.

A knock at the door.

Shane whips his head around. For a moment, he's sure he must have imagined it. Barely anyone is in the house, if anyone is in the house at all, and even if someone is here, why would they be knocking on his door so late at night?

Another knock.

Unless someone heard him come in and they need something? He can't think of another reason as he tosses the tissue in the trash, hoping all the evidence of his tears has been

cleaned from his face. He opens the door, prepared to ask politely what this person wants and make them go away as quickly as possible.

A hand is on his shoulder, pushing him back so they can step into the room. It takes his brain nearly a full five seconds to compute that it's Rozanov. He shuts the door behind him and their eyes lock. Shane is dumbfounded.

"How did you—?"

"You left front door open," Rozanov answers, anticipating his question.

Oh. Yeah, he did do that. His mind had been dead set on getting to his room, he just shut the door behind him and run upstairs. Dammit, he hasn't even lived in this house a week and he's already broken a house rule.

How Rozanov found his room is an answer he can come to on his own. His and Hayden's names were posted on the door, along with the names of everyone else moving in, so they'd know which room was theirs.

Rozanov's gaze is unwavering on him. He steps forward and Shane takes a step back on instinct. "Why did you leave?"

Another step back. "I—"

"I did not say you could leave." Another step closer.

At the implication in these words, Shane's temper flairs, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "You looked fucking *busy* to me."

Rozanov only smiles and shakes his head. "Yes, *busy*. Like you have been *busy* with your girlfriend, Hollander."

Shane takes another step backwards, somewhat stunned by the irritated edge to Rozanov's voice. Maybe he shouldn't be, thinking back to those occasions when Rozanov had determinedly ignored him after Toronto last semester.

"I don't—I'm not…" he stutters out. Rozanov only lifts his eyebrows, waiting for him to form a coherent sentence. Shane takes a breath. "We broke up."

"Ah, yes," Rozanov steps forward again. "I heard this. You two…not compatible?"

Shane freezes in his tracks. "You heard—"

Rozanov doesn't let him finish his sentence, shoving him backwards. Shane goes stumbling before he lands on the bed behind him and is momentarily startled at how far back they had moved in the room. Apparently Rozanov had been very aware of it, however, and he places his knee on the mattress, staring down at him.

"You cry?" Rozanov asks, leaning closer to rub his knuckle against his cheek, apparently noticing some leftover wetness there.

Shane smacks his hand from his face, unable to tolerate the thought of Rozanov knowing he had cried, let alone over him. "*No*."

"Poor *kotenok*," Rozanov says in mock-sympathy, tsking at him. He comes closer, holding his body over Shane's. "So confused, aren't you?"

Shane turns his head to the side, trying to escape Rozanov's all-knowing gaze, and the slide of the pillowcase against his cheek alerts him to something he can't believe he hasn't noticed until now. "Get off me. This is Hayden's bed."

"Is it?" Rozanov's eyes glint in a way Shane does not like. He settles himself against him, their chests brushing. "Then why did you take us to it?"

Mouth dropping open, Shane's brain nearly stalls. "I *didn't*."

"You did." Rozanov grins like a shark, shaking his head. "Oh, Hollander. You really lose that pretty head sometimes, don't you?"

Shane flounders, feeling his face heat. It's on the tip of his tongue to deny it again, but the certainty with which Rozanov is speaking has him doubting himself. Had he backed into Hayden's bed on purpose? No, that was ridiculous, why would he do that? But he had been the one backing up, and Rozanov had been the one following. No. He just hadn't been paying attention, he decides.

Before he can open his mouth to deny it again, Rozanov kisses him.

It's been so long since they've kissed that Shane has almost forgotten the feeling. That familiar electric sensation traveling from his lips all the way to his toes. He opens his mouth easily when Rozanov's tongue asks for entrance, even knowing this is a terrible idea. But his body has always been out of step with his brain when Rozanov touches him like this.

And Rozanov is touching him again. Shane almost whines at the feeling of his hands on him, trailing down his chest, lightly exploring, as though reminding himself of Shane's body. He can't help himself from bringing his own hands to Rozanov's neck and hair, holding him closer. Rozanov nips at his bottom lip then, and Shane whimpers into his mouth at the treatment.

At the sound, Rozanov pulls back and, before Shane can get his bearings, flips him onto his stomach. Shane lets out a startled sound as his nose is momentarily pressed into the pillow. *Hayden's pillow* he reminds himself. When he lifts his head, Rozanov has already pressed himself bodily on top of him, chest against his back and forearms on both sides of his head.

"You want to be fucked here, *kotenok*?" Rozanov purrs in his ear, rolling his hips against his ass. Shane can feel he's already hard. "In Pike's bed? I think you do. You want me to fuck you here until you come all over his sheets, don't you?"

"Shut up," Shane manages to bite out, even as his brain threatens to float away from him. "I don't."

“No?” Rozanov asks, his voice light. His hand slides around to his front and then lower, reaching his hard cock, still trapped in his pants, and squeezing him there. “Then why are you so hard just thinking about it?”

Shane doesn’t know what to say to that, his hips twitching forward into Rozanov’s hand, giving him away. He supposes he could argue the point by reminding Rozanov that he gets hard easily every time they’re together, now even more so when it’s been so long for him. But that would perhaps be an even more humiliating admission than what Rozanov is currently taunting him about.

“I knew it,” Rozanov says against his neck, kissing him there. “You like to be bad, Hollander.”

Does he? That doesn’t sound right. But if he’s learned anything in his first two years at university, it’s that he doesn’t know himself quite as well as he thought he did before he arrived.

Whatever the truth, he does know this. He’s not going to fuck in Hayden’s bed. Rozanov’s words might be twisting his stomach in knots, but he is not going to be the biggest asshole on the planet to his best friend tonight.

“*Get off*,” Shane snarls, and this time he means it.

“Make me.”

The dry amusement in that accented voice is enough to set him off. Shane jerks his body up, knocking Rozanov off balance and turning himself around under him. Then with one push, they’re both on the floor, Shane landing on top of him. Rozanov grunts in surprise at his sudden aggression, but responds immediately, seizing him around his middle, rolling them further away from Hayden’s bed so he is over him again.

His temper rising and not willing to be bested, Shane brings his hand up to Rozanov’s collarbone and squeezes hard at the skin there. Rozanov flinches, his grip loosens and Shane takes the opportunity to switch their positions, almost throwing Rozanov onto his back and seating himself on top of him. He presses down hard on his chest, intending to keep him there.

Rozanov stills then, his chest rising and falling fast under Shane’s fingertips, and stares up at him. Slowly, he brings his own hands up and holds them over his head, as if in surrender.

It occurs to Shane that Rozanov most definitely could flip them again and keep him pinned to the floor if he wanted. As much as Shane keeps himself in shape, a habit from when he played hockey religiously, he’s not the athlete he once was, that Rozanov is now. He also suspects Rozanov has been in more fights than he has (Shane’s fight count currently stands at zero). Rozanov is stopping now because he doesn’t want to keep fighting, Shane knows. He wonders at that.

But not for very long. He reaches down to tug his shirt over his head. Even harder now than he was before and liking the feeling of Rozanov underneath him. He doesn’t want to get up

from him to put his clothes away. So, as gently as he can, he tosses his shirt onto his bed a few feet away.

Rozanov follows his lead, his own shirt is already discarded when Shane looks back down. He puts his hands on Shane's hips and holds him there, but he stays put, making no attempt to put Shane on his back or stomach again. Shane hesitates, not used to taking the lead in these situations, but shakes it off, his hands moving to Rozanov's waistband.

"You were such an asshole tonight," Shane says as he works the button of Rozanov's paints, wanting to get his hands on him, feeling his hardness bumping up against his ass.

"You like it," Rozanov says, tilting his hips up to help Shane disrobe him. "And you missed me."

"I fucking didn't." The denial comes easily, but the lie tastes bitter in his mouth.

Shane supposes he's contradicting himself by yanking Rozanov's briefs down his legs and freeing his cock. He will at least admit to himself that he missed *this*. Rozanov's cock is how he remembered, big and somehow pretty, though that never makes sense to him. He swallows him down before he can second guess himself.

Rozanov swears above him and Shane allows himself a moment to feel smug. He knows he's gotten good at this, just as he always makes sure to master any skill. It had been a while, but he still remembers well how Rozanov likes it, the quickest ways to take him apart.

And after tonight, and the show Rozanov put on for him at Kappa Tau, which he's still mad about by the way, Shane wants to take him apart.

"*Fuck*, Hollander," Rozanov growls out, burying his hands in Shane's hair.

Shane's mouth is a little preoccupied at the moment, so he can't throw any taunting comments at him for his reaction. Instead, he swallows him down so deep that his cock bumps into the back of his throat, making Rozanov's hips twitch up, fucking into his mouth. Shane moans at the feeling, and at Rozanov's hands tugging harder at his hair.

"I didn't lock door," Rozanov grunts out.

Shane glances up to him at his words, finding Rozanov's eyes are on him. Tearing his gaze away, he gets back to what he was doing, licking the underside of Rozanov's cock where he knows he's most sensitive.

"You don't care, huh?" Rozanov asks when he looks away. "You don't care if Pike walks in here right now to find you like this for me?"

His hips snap up again into Shane's mouth, and a moan breaks out from the back of his throat unwittingly. His fingernails dig into Rozanov's thighs, leaving little crescent shaped marks.

"No, you'd like that wouldn't you?" Rozanov asks as he fucks into his mouth again. "Filthy *kotenok*, I know you would."

Deciding he's had enough of Rozanov's commentary, Shane pulls himself off of his cock, detangling his fingers from his hair. He knows Rozanov hadn't been far off from coming based on the way he was twitching against his tongue, but he doesn't care. He has other uses for Rozanov's cock tonight.

"You still talk too much," Shane says as he crawls back over Rozanov's body until they're eye to eye. "That hasn't changed."

He loves it when Rozanov talks, but he'll never tell him that. Instead, he presses his thumb against Rozanov's lips, asking him to open. Rozanov obliges, and Shane knows he's expecting either a kiss or Shane's fingers to slide inside.

But Shane leans down close and spits in Rozanov's mouth. He doesn't know what possessed him to do it, but it feels exactly right as he does. Even if it only proves true what Rozanov had just called him. *Filthy*.

Rozanov's face lights up with surprise before his eyes darken, closing his mouth and swallowing while holding his gaze steady on Shane's face. Not an ounce of shame to be found.

Shane feels his cock twitch in his pants.

Reaching for the button of his jeans, Shane suddenly remembers something. "*Fuck*, I don't have anything."

He had just moved back to campus this week and lube and condoms had not exactly been a priority in packing this year when his relationship with Rose was over and whatever he had with Rozanov was nebulous at best.

Without saying anything, Rozanov reaches down, bypassing Shane still straddling his lap, and when he comes back up, he's holding a small packet of lube and a condom, which apparently had been tucked into his pants. Because of course he came prepared tonight.

Shane scoffs and shakes his head. This man. He is truly unbelievable.

When Rozanov tears open the packet of lube, Shane snatches it from his hand. Rozanov initially looks confused but then leans back and watches as Shane shoves his pants and briefs down and squirts the lube onto his fingers. Usually, he lets Rozanov do this, and Rozanov has always liked it, tormenting him with his fingers until Shane is keening and begging. But tonight, he wants to do it. Maybe he wants Rozanov to just watch.

And watch he does, up on his elbows as Shane reaches behind himself to press a finger inside. He flinches slightly at the contact but presses further, feeling himself give way. Letting out a breath, he seeks that spot inside him. Though his cock is already hard and leaking and he knows he won't be able to do this for very long.

"That's right, open yourself up for me, Hollander," Rozanov encourages, his voice low. "How many fingers?"

“I—*fuck*—just one,” Shane gets out.

“Another,” Rozanov tells him.

He has a second finger inside as soon as the word is out of Rozanov’s mouth. And damn if he doesn’t feel himself grow even harder when he does it. It’s always been like this, and he wishes he knew why. Following Rozanov’s directions when they’re together like this has always felt so natural. Rozanov wanting to order him around was never a surprise, what surprises him is how much he likes it, how hard he gets just from doing what Rozanov tells him.

“You close?” Rozanov asks, his fingers curling around Shane’s cock.

Shane hisses at the sensation, driving his fingers harder into his hole. “*Ah*, I’m okay.”

“Good boy.”

At that, Shane feels himself tighten around his fingers and he winces. He only hopes Rozanov didn’t notice the reaction but of course he did, smirking as he gives his leaking cock a few hard strokes.

Liking it, no, *loving* it when Rozanov calls him that is far more mortifying than enjoying following his directions.

Thankfully, Rozanov doesn’t call him out in his reaction for now. Perhaps his own patience is wearing thin after so long. His control fraying. But still, he never rushes him, even at his most eager. “Ready for me?”

Shane nods, his eyes drifting back open. He hadn’t even noticed they had closed. They might usually prep a little more, but Shane determines that he’s stretched out enough he can take it without much struggle. He looks down at Rozanov and waits, expecting to flip him over onto his back or put him on his hands and knees, but Rozanov only takes his hips in his hands and looks up at him, anticipation all over his face.

“Like this, Hollander,” he tells him, pushing him back a few inches so his ass is just over his cock.

Shane stills, suddenly unsure of himself. They haven’t done this before. Usually, Rozanov takes him from behind or on top or against a wall. There was one occasion when Rozanov had flipped them in the middle of the act, laid on his back and looked up at Shane with a question in his eyes. But Shane had chickened out, insecure, and repositioned them so Rozanov was back on top.

Now, however, looking down at Rozanov between his legs, he’s not feeling so scared anymore. He can see how much Rozanov wants this, and he’d be lying if he said he hasn’t thought about it, even gotten off to the idea. Now seems to be the time.

The head of Rozanov’s cock nudges at his hole, and Shane begins to sink himself down. From this position, gravity is doing much of the work, but it’s still a tight fit. Shane grits his

teeth at the feeling, familiar yes, but it has been a while. Rozanov's fingers tighten on his hips, encouraging him to keep going. Shane complies, but slowly.

When he's fully seated on top of him, his cock stretching him out, Shane takes a moment to breathe. He can see that Rozanov is restraining himself from fucking up into him, and his consideration is almost irritating when Shane is trying very hard to be angry with him.

But he doesn't need long. Carefully, experimentally, Shane uses his planted knees to lift himself back up until Rozanov's cock is almost entirely out of his body. He watches Rozanov closely as he does this, taking in every flinch, every breath, and comes back down hard on his cock. Rozanov's reaction is immediate, a grunt escaping his lips and his fingers digging hard into his skin.

Satisfaction blooms in Shane's chest as he does it again, faster this time. He feels Rozanov's cock twitch inside him and only takes that as further encouragement as he sets a steady rhythm, one that has worked for them before but feels entirely different from this position.

"That's it," Rozanov almost sighs. "Like that—oh *fuck*."

The carpet beneath them is burning Shane's knees, but he can't bring himself to care. All that matters right now is how good this feels, and how Rozanov is clearly teetering on the edge of his control.

Shocking him, he feels Rozanov suddenly tilt his hips up as Shane is driving his hips down. Shane nearly chokes on his own spit, his hand slamming down on the floor next to Rozanov's head. His chest is heaving, but Rozanov hasn't stopped, he's lifting Shane up off his cock again and swiftly yanking him back down.

"*Holy shit*, Roza—" Shane's vision nearly whites out as Rozanov finds his prostate, his fingers curling into the carpet.

Their faces now closer together, Rozanov kisses his cheek. "Come on, Hollander. Keep going. You can."

Shane feels that sense of fuzziness coming over his brain at the words, something he hasn't felt in a long time, but missed. Planting his forearm on the floor next to Rozanov's head, he does what he says, trying to return to his previous pace.

Rozanov's hands encourage him, fucking up into him until they find a consistent rhythm together. Shane bringing his hips down as Rozanov brings his up. It feels different from any other position Rozanov has put him in before, but good. So good. And there's something about having Rozanov under him in this way, his body working in tandem with his. Looking down at Rozanov's open lips, Shane can't stop himself from kissing him.

When Rozanov finds his prostate again, Shane bites down on his lip and buries his face in Rozanov's neck to muffle his moans, not wanting anyone who might be in the house to hear him. Rozanov doesn't stop, abusing that spot mercilessly as Shane desperately tries to keep up.

“So good,” Rozanov murmurs into his ear. “You gonna come for me, Hollander?”

Shane’s brain is barely able to form a coherent thought right now, but he’s at least able to respond to this. He shakes his head against Rozanov’s neck and makes himself speak. “Y-you.”

“Me?” Rozanov asks, his voice strained. “What me?”

“Come.” Shane is somehow able to pick up his pace, fucking himself harder on Rozanov’s cock, drawing out a groan from him. “I want you to.”

Shane is not sure why he’s asking this. There are many ways Rozanov has surprised him over the years, but probably the most surprising is how…generous he is. Always intent on making him come before he let himself succumb. Though he did enjoy teasing Shane for being sensitive, there was never anything competitive about this, like he had proved something by holding out longer. Shane had the suspicion that watching Shane come got him off, and he was usually more than happy to let himself go first.

But tonight, Shane wants Rozanov to come first, to watch him come while Shane fucks himself on his cock, to take him apart first.

Rozanov seems to read this on his face, his hands holding him tighter, one of them sneaking up his chest to grip his pec. “Ask me.”

“Please come,” Shane works himself faster. He feels his cock leaking against his chest and knows he needs Rozanov to finish soon or he’ll ruin this whole thing by coming first. “Please Rozanov, *please*. I want you to come.”

Shane’s pleas, as ever, seem to have a profound effect on Rozanov. His jaw clamps shut and he thrusts hard up into Shane, and he feels it the moment he finishes. He keeps his eyes on Shane’s face as he rides it out, and Shane wouldn’t look away for anything in the world right now. For some reason, the only word he can think of as he’s staring at Rozanov’s face as he falls apart is *beautiful*.

Just watching Rozanov come beneath him is too much for him. Shane rears up and comes himself, feeling it spatter against his chest. He’s not able to mask his sounds this time, and later he’ll hope that no one had been around to hear him. His vision cuts out and he’s leaning down to steal another kiss before he knows it.

Shane’s face slides down Rozanov’s cheek, both of them breathing hard, chests pressed against each other. It occurs to Shane as they lie there that whatever he has with Rozanov is obviously not as over as he thought it was earlier. Also, his brain seems to be functioning a bit better than it had been after the last time they were together. That seems like a victory.

But still, there’s this…fog. His body also feels separate from him, and he realizes, with some panic, that it’s going to be very difficult for him to get off of Rozanov, his legs feeling weak against the floor.

Before Shane has to shamefully admit this, Rozanov shifts beneath him to get up. Shane is about to tell him to wait and that he needs a few more seconds when Rozanov's arms wrap around his waist and he lifts him up. His cock slips free of him, and Shane flinches at that, but he has Shane in his arms now as he stands.

Shane already knew that Rozanov could pick him up like this. He had done it a couple of times when they had met up before. It is usually met with demands by Shane to be put down. But not right now as Rozanov takes two steps over to the bed and puts him there, resting his head against the pillow.

As Rozanov straightens up, Shane feels it again. What he felt in Toronto when Rozanov had pulled out and moved away from him, like the distance of a few inches was a thousand miles. He blushes at the memory, at how pathetic he must have seemed, begging for Rozanov's attention in the wake of sex. It's almost painful now to resist doing it again, to not wrap his fingers around his wrist and pull him closer.

Picking up the washcloth Shane had dutifully draped over the foot of the bed, Rozanov wipes off both their chests. Shane appreciates being clean again so much that he can't even be annoyed about how he's going to have to do laundry to clean that tomorrow. Looking at Rozanov again, he still has that nagging feeling to pull him closer, and the fear that he's going to leave.

But Rozanov shocks him when, after pulling his briefs and pants back up from around his ankles, he climbs over Shane and presses a kiss to his mouth. It's a gentle kiss, not meant to start anything again, but Shane melts into it.

"You are okay?" Rozanov asks, eyes trained on his face attentively.

Shane nods, his hands moving to Rozanov's arms, sliding up and down there, just feeling his skin and his presence, a grounding force.

"Good," Rozanov says, shifting slightly so he can tuck Shane against his chest.

Shane feels like he should be embarrassed, and maybe he will be later. But right now, all he feels is warmth as he presses his face against Rozanov, matching his breathing with his. He feels…safe.

It's ludicrous. He knows. But he'll worry about that tomorrow.

"I'm sorry," Shane says after they have been in bed together for a few minutes.

Rozanov's hand stills in his hair, where he had been lightly petting him. "Sorry?"

Shane looks up at the surprise in his voice. His face is also confused, and he's looking down at Shane as if for explanation.

"Yeah, for…Toronto."

Rozanov just stares at him, and it goes on for long enough that Shane wonders if he's ever heard the word sorry in his life. But that's ridiculous. Surely he has. Everyone gets told sorry.

“You…you know the word right?” But holy shit why did he say that? That sounds so condescending. “Wait, oh fuck, sorry. I didn’t mean that. I wish—*fuck*—I wish I spoke Russian…”

“I know what sorry is,” Rozanov says, not looking offended, running his fingers back through Shane’s hair.

Shane lets out a breath, relieved. “Alright, good. What’s the word in Russian anyway?”

A hint of a smile on Rozanov’s lips then. “You want to speak Russian?”

“Shut up, what is it?”

“Many ways to say sorry,” Rozanov muses, eyes trailing over his face. “You can say *prosti menya*. This is *forgive me*.”

“*Prosti menya*,” Shane tries out on his tongue, knowing his accent is probably atrocious.

“Good.” Rozanov nods in approval. “You will be fluent in no time.”

“I do mean it though,” Shane insists, trying to catch his gaze again. “I am sorry.”

Rozanov meets his eye again, seeming to actually accept what he’s saying this time, and Shane relaxes at the sight because he wants so badly for things to be okay between them again, especially after tonight.

“I am sorry too,” Rozanov says. “I was dick tonight.”

“You were,” Shane agrees. He thinks back to earlier at the party. That had been awful, and he still is kind of mad about that. But maybe, for once, he can let something go. “How do you say *I forgive you?”*

Rozanov looks at him with wide eyes, like he hadn’t expected it to be this simple.

“*YA proshchayu tebya*,” he tells him quietly.

Shane smiles. “*YA proshchayu tebya*.”

April 2017

Turning over in his bed, Shane sees the light trickling in through the curtains. It’s still early. The sun is only just starting to creep its way into the sky. He can sleep a little longer. His body does not want to leave the bed and his mind for once is quiet. Content, he feels his eyes begin to drift closed, sleep calling him back.

Warm breath against his neck. Fingertips at his back. Strange. Isn’t he alone?

The small touches continue. Soft, almost tickling sensations. It’s nice, he thinks. At the slide of an arm around his waist and the sound of a soft moan, he opens his eyes again.

Rozanov is there. Just behind Shane, wrapped around him. The sunlight from the window framing his face, making him glow. Shane makes a pleased sound at the sight of him, his hand reaching up to touch his cheek, even as one corner of his brain seems to insist that Rozanov should not be here. *Could* not be here.

"Ilya," he says, as *Ilya* presses a kiss to his shoulder. "You're here."

Ilya smiles and shifts so he's holding himself over Shane, blue eyes meeting brown. He leans down to kiss him, and Shane sighs into his mouth, bringing his hands up to play in his hair. The kiss is soft but insistent, neither of them wanting to break apart.

As Shane feels Ilya's erection pressed against his thigh, it dawns on him that they're both naked. That's odd. Shane is sure he went to bed with clothes on last night.

But this doesn't matter as Ilya is suddenly inside of him. They hadn't even prepped; his hole is just open and willing for him as Ilya slides easily into his body. Shane gasps into his mouth at the stretch, Ilya already beginning to move in and out of him, gentle thrusts that are enough to drive Shane crazy, moans already escaping from his mouth.

"So good," Ilya whispers against his cheek. "Being so good for me, Shane."

Shane whimpers at the sound of his name on Ilya's lips, pulling him closer, trying to move his hips to match Ilya's beneath the covers. Ilya grunts in approval, his hand moving to Shane's waist, encouraging the movement. Shane can feel how hard he is, leaking between them, and he knows he just needs a little more. But when he leans up to try to kiss him again, Ilya pulls back.

"Tell me," Ilya orders.

Shane looks up at his face, at a loss. He doesn't know what he's supposed to tell him. Ilya presses his hand against him then, stilling him, and pauses his own movements. Shane whines at the loss, trying to move again, but Ilya stubbornly holds him firm.

"You need this, don't you, Shane?" Ilya asks, leaning down to press a kiss against his lips that is more teasing and chaste than anything satisfying. Then he makes eye contact again "You need me?"

Shane nods quickly, not even caring about what the admission means, just knowing that he needs him so desperately in this moment.

"Say it," Ilya says, still refusing to continue.

"I need you, Ilya," Shane gets out, feeling tears spring into his eyes. "I—*fuck*—I need you. I always have."

These words are finally enough and Ilya moves again, pressing their lips together. Shane's whole body relaxes, grateful. Ilya lets him move with him again, and Shane wastes no time in seeking his own pleasure, knowing that it will only take a little more. It's just there…

"*Shane*…" Ilya says softly, but his voice sounds a little different now, and Shane feels himself drifting, confused.

"*Shane*." That voice doesn't sound like Ilya at all. There's another sound too, it's…knocking?

"*Shane!"*

Shane's eyes fly open at the sound of a voice outside of his door. That's the first thing he's aware of. The second is that he is so hard he might be about to come in his pajamas.

"Hey, Shane!" Hayden sounds like he's trying to be loud enough to be heard but not too loud while he's knocking on his door, as it's still early in the morning. "I would just come in, but you told me not to barge into your room so…" He knocks again.

Biting his lip, Shane brings his knees up to his chest to hide his…problem from sight. He doesn't really want to let anyone in his room right at this moment, but Hayden doesn't seem like he's going to go away. "Come in, Hay."

The door opens and Hayden walks in. Thankfully, he doesn't have his shoes on like he does sometimes when entering Shane's room. Just his workout clothes. He looks at Shane on the bed and raises his eyebrows.

"Oh, did you not want to go for a run anymore?" he asks.

Shane remembers then. Hayden had invited him to join his morning run last night and Shane agreed. Usually, Shane just does yoga in the morning for exercise, but he decided he could use some Hayden time, and cardio.

"Oh shit, Hay. I'm sorry." Shane sits up a little more in his bed and checks the time on his phone. He should have woken up twenty minutes ago. "I forgot to set my alarm."

At that, Hayden looks stunned. "*You* forgot to set an alarm?"

"I was distracted. I—" Shane doesn't want to elaborate on this point. He can feel his face going red. "Just give me ten minutes and I'll be down, okay?"

Hayden still looks perplexed, but he nods and, mercifully, leaves his room.

Shane waits until Hayden's footsteps are a safe distance down the hallway before grabbing a few tissues from his bedside table and stroking himself to completion. It's quick and not remotely satisfying, but at least he's not hard and desperate anymore.

He goes through his morning routine faster than usual, so he doesn't keep Hayden waiting. Hayden was right about forgetting to set his alarm clock. That's not something he ever does. But he hasn't exactly been thinking clearly since Friday.

Mentally, he kicks himself again for what occurred at the Zeta Beta party. He still cannot believe he let that happen, that he threw himself at Rozanov like that. If Rozanov had kept his mouth shut, if he hadn't started spouting that shit in Russian, Shane knows they wouldn't

have stopped, that he would have let Rozanov do whatever he wanted and probably begged for more.

But that hadn't happened. And he should be glad that it didn't. But all he has been feeling since Friday is emptiness and regret. Not the first time Rozanov has stirred these emotions in him, and he hates himself for letting him do it to him again.

And as if it's not bad enough to be constantly trying to repress thoughts of Rozanov while he's awake, now he's fucking *dreaming* about him. He nearly chokes on his toothpaste for frustration over this. It's like he'll never escape.

Ready in his workout clothes, Shane bounds his way down the hall and takes quick steps down the stairs. He has a lot of energy he needs to work out of his system. A run actually seems good right now.

Hayden is waiting for him, eyes bright and pleased to see him. They set off together.

As soon as he's moving and breathing the fresh air, Shane feels a rush of gratitude for Hayden that he suggested this. He needed to get out of that room, that house. Hayden might run every day, but Shane is still a bit quicker than him. He slows his pace so they can stay side by side, not wanting to run his friend ragged.

Shane does his best to keep his eyes forward as they speed by the Kappa Tau house.

Go crying back to Rose like you always do.

His skin heats at the memory, even in the cool morning air. He had not gone to Rose after he left Rozanov in that room. He had stormed out of the party, not even telling anyone he was leaving, and walked back to the Omega Chi house, angry and alone. He hasn't told Rose what happened either. Once again, too ashamed of how weak he had been by giving in.

He's heard nothing from Rozanov, as expected, and he doesn't want to hear from him. After what happened, the silence from him is a gift. He needs space, even if Rozanov continues to consume nearly every thought he has.

Right now, he has no idea where they stand with each other. The stupid bet had somehow thrown his life into a whirlwind. Rose had been right all along. He should have called it off and prevented any of this from happening. He never should have made the bet in the first place. Anything involving Rozanov just leads to disaster. Why has he not learned this?

An image of Rozanov is conjured in his mind. The way he looked sitting on the couch on Friday night staring up at him. His eyes wide, uncertain, even afraid. Shane had wanted so badly for him to say something to him, for him to open up for once.

But of course, he didn't. And that had been enough to make Shane understand things, maybe for the first time. Their relationship, whatever the fuck it is, can never be anything more than the physical for Rozanov. That he can never give him more or maybe doesn't want to. Shane was the idiot for the couple of times over the years when he thought it might be different.

Accept that now or keep getting hurt the logical part of his brain tells him.

After a couple of laps around the university lake, Hayden finally taps his shoulder, needing to stop. Shane thinks he has needed to stop for a while now but held out longer for Shane's sake. He stops and follows Hayden to sit on one of the nearby benches.

"You're a beast, man," Hayden tells him as he slumps over, arms resting on his knees.

"Sit up straight." Shane pats him on the back. "Gotta get air into your lungs."

"Yeah, yeah," he complains, but he sits up straight. "I'm just not used to the Shane Hollander workout regimen."

Shane laughs. "If only we both went pro in hockey. I'd get to kick your ass every day."

Hayden shudders. "Don't even joke about that."

Jokes aside, Shane has always thought Hayden probably could have gone pro in hockey. After Shane hurt his knee, Hayden was undoubtedly the best player on their team when they were teenagers. But it was like seeing Shane get hurt completely altered him. "It's not fun anymore," Hayden told him one day after practice.

Shane resented this in some ways, that Hayden would toss away hockey so easily when Shane would kill to be on the ice. But he also knew in his heart that Hayden, while he loved hockey, didn't have that obsession with it that he always had. He also suspected that Hayden having to stand there and watch Shane hold his knee in agony, unable to get up, when he injured himself during that game hadn't done a lot to endear him to the possibility of going pro. This, Shane could understand.

"Thanks for coming with me," Hayden says, leaning back on the bench.

"Thanks for inviting me." Shane looks out over the lake. A few other students are taking their morning jogs in the early light of the morning.

After another minute of sitting there, watching other joggers go by, Hayden breaks the silence again. "Have you been alright, Shane?"

Shane's breath catches. He looks at Hayden, who has his chin dipped nearly to his chest, looking awkward, but keeping his eyes on his face. "I mean…yeah. Yeah. I'm fine."

Hayden lifts one of his hands to the back of his neck and scratches himself there. It's now obvious to Shane that he really had to work himself up to ask that question. Maybe spent days thinking about it. Asking Shane to go for a run with him must have been his way of forcing himself to finally do it.

"You've just been…I don't know, distant? Like your head is somewhere else." It's taking Hayden a great deal of effort to keep his eyes on Shane's face and not look away.

Shane takes a breath. He hadn't realized that everything that's been going on with Rozanov had changed his behavior in any significant way. Certainly not enough that Hayden would

have noticed. He used to be a lot better at hiding these things.

“I mean, yeah,” Shane says. He doesn’t want to lie, not when Hayden is asking him so earnestly. “I’ve had some things going on.”

“Do you wanna talk about it?”

Shane feels his shoulders stiffen. He looks away from Hayden and stares at the ground. Talking to Hayden about…this did not seem like a real option.

“Is it…” Hayden pauses, then drops his voice lower. “Is it a *guy* thing?”

He looks at Hayden again then and can’t help the smile that breaks out over his mouth. Hayden smiles in return, his face red. Clearly feeling incredibly flustered about this whole conversation. Shane can’t help the rush of affection that he feels for his best friend in this moment.

“Shit, man.” Hayden brings his hand up to cover his eyes for a moment, chuckling, before dropping it again. “I don’t know how to ask about this stuff.”

“It’s cute how you’re blushing.”

“Shut up.” He can’t seem to stop turning redder, but the grin is still on his face.

Shane has never regretted coming out to Hayden. It was over the summer when they were back home that he told him while they were hanging out in his room. Hayden had been going on and on about setting him up with some girl when they were back for the fall semester and Shane, without even thinking, interrupted him by blurting out “Hayden, I don’t think I like girls.”

Hayden froze while they were in the middle of a video game, his character immediately dying on screen in what Shane thought was an apt metaphor. Shane feared the worst, that he might get up, walk out, and never speak to him again. Neither of them said anything for what felt like an eternity before Hayden found it in himself to speak. “That…that’s cool, man.”

It was an odd thing to say, but he clearly meant it, and before long, they were both laughing awkwardly together. Hayden asked him some questions about how he figured it out (Shane didn’t lie exactly, but he wasn’t completely honest about *who* helped him figure it out) and it wasn’t long before they went back to their video game and things seemed decidedly… normal. Hayden hugged him when he left his house that day, and Shane teared up when he was gone.

Knowing that Hayden accepted him obviously meant a lot. Shane also told Jackie and that allowed their little group to feel a lot easier, freer. But still, he and Hayden don’t exactly talk much about these things. Shane is private and Hayden clearly feels out of his depth on the topic. So the fact that he’s asking now, it shows how much he cares. And Shane loves him for that.

“It’s…sort of a guy thing,” Shane says. Again, he doesn’t want to lie.

Hayden nods, not looking put at ease by this answer, but listening. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

“You want to talk to me about guys, Hayden?” Shane jokes, but he’s also trying to deflect.

“I’ll talk to you about guys whenever you want if that’s what you want to talk about,” Hayden tells him. His eyes are so big and honest that Shane could collapse.

There it is again. That nagging sense of guilt that haunts him around Hayden. He knows that his business is his business and Hayden didn’t have the right to know. But God, Shane *wants* to tell him everything. Hayden has been nothing but a good friend to him for as long as he’s known him and has only ever supported him. He’s lied to him for years, and he hates it. He hates himself for doing that.

He wishes he could tell him everything now, and maybe he will someday. But he knows he’s not there yet. Especially after these hellish last couple of weeks. He also still fears what Hayden would say if he knew it was *Rozanov*.

“I just, you know, used to see someone,” Shane says. He might not tell him the full truth, but he can give him something. More than that, he wants to get some of this out. “And, well, I still have something, I guess.”

“Oh.” It’s not news to him that Shane has had a relationship with a man, but that’s really all he knows. “Is it, you know, good?”

Shane lets out a breath. What a question. He had spent a lot of time thinking of Rozanov, but not much time wondering if what they had was *good*, whatever that means. He’s not sure he knows anymore.

“I think it was for me, sometimes,” Shane answers, pondering this out loud. “I don’t know about him.”

“Have you asked?”

Shane shrugs. “He won’t talk to me.”

Hayden is quiet for a moment. “But you wish he would?”

“Yeah, I did. For a long time.” Shane looks at Hayden again. “But I think it’s time I stop asking for something he can’t give me.”

Hayden seems to think about this. “You shouldn’t have to keep asking,” he says thoughtfully. “But maybe he—I don’t know.”

“What?”

He bites his lip. “It was really fucking hard for me to tell Jackie I loved her the first time. I knew for months and finally I got it out one day, but it wasn’t easy—”

“I don’t think this is like that, Hay,” Shane says quietly. The comparison seems absurd to him. Rozanov? *Love?*

“But you don’t really know that. That’s all I’m saying,” Hayden continues. “He won’t talk to you. And if he won’t, then screw him. You deserve more than that. I’m just saying maybe he wants to and can’t get the words out of his mouth because he’s scared or doesn’t know how you’ll take it or...I don’t know. I’m just rambling now.”

“So…what? I should keep asking?” Shane’s not sure that’s the kind of advice he can take right now. He’s so tired of begging for any crumb of honesty from Rozanov.

“No, you sound like you’re done with that,” he says, shaking his head. “But maybe, if he ever comes to you, give him a chance.”

Shane sighs. He doesn’t see a world where that would ever happen, and after the party, he’s no longer sure if he could bring himself to listen.

Go crying back to Rose like you always do.

No. Hayden’s words are much appreciated. But things are not that simple. Not after what just happened, and certainly not after last spring.

Still, this conversation had been like letting out a breath after holding it for hours. Even if Hayden had no idea who they were talking about, and Shane can’t imagine how he’d react if he did.

“Thanks, Hay,” Shane says, meaning it.

“Anytime, for real. I talk to you about Jackie. You can talk to me about stupid guys.” Hayden is also looking a lot more relaxed now.

“Did we just have a moment?” Shane smiles.

“Yes. Do you wanna make out?”

Shane laughs at that. There are worse ideas in the world. But “I respect Jackie too much, and I’m sorry but you’re like my brother.”

“I’ll ask JJ,” Hayden muses, blowing him a kiss. “You don’t know what you’re missing.”

Some of the tension from the air dissipates as they fall back into their more usual camaraderie. Shane looks around, and sees that more students are in sight, on their way to morning classes or breakfast at the cafeteria.

“Well, I guess it’s time to prep for tonight’s Greek Month challenge,” Shane says with some dread.

“Still Greek Week, and you’re right.” He stands up from the bench. “I’m ready to kick Rozanov’s ass again.”

Shane winces, but thankfully Hayden doesn't notice.

"Yeah," he says with as much upbeat energy as he can muster. "Me too."

"Greek Row, are we ready for some *pizza*?"

The crowd, big surprise, indicates that they are very ready for some pizza with their enthusiastic cheering. All the house participants and the crowd are packed together at the far end of Greek Row, the end closer to the university campus. The game is about to start.

"Do you think we'll get penalized if we eat some of the pizza during the challenge?" JJ asks, eyes to the sky like he's actually considering it.

"JJ if you do that, I will personally kill you," Hayden tells him, his voice not even implying a joke.

Shane chuckles and looks at the pizza boxes, the smell pungent even from a few feet away.

This isn't a challenge he's ever seen before in Greek Week, but the rules are straightforward, just like all the games. The four remaining sororities and fraternities must deliver a box of pizza to ten different Greek Row houses, making sure they match each pizza with their different toppings to the correct house. When they make the delivery, a fraternity or sorority member at the house will give them a flag to bring back to the starting line. If you drop or damage a pizza, you must come back to the start to get another. Five people per team, first team to deliver all their pizzas and bring back all ten flags wins.

The clue for this game had been a map of Greek Row with all the houses named and marked on it. He and his teammates had studied it closely before arriving here tonight. Shane had already known pretty well where most of the houses were located. Now he has them memorized.

Their strategy is set too. They'll each take two pizzas at a time, like he suspects most teams will do. JJ will go first and Shane last. Starting and finishing with their two fastest teammates. Hayden might go for a run every day, but JJ is still faster.

As the Greek Council Master of Ceremonies is finishing up explaining the rules for the crowd over the speakers, he and his brothers start to line up in their order.

The ZBZs next to them are all dressed in their matching bright pink. It looks like Rose will be going first for her team. She looks over and catches his eye, giving him a wink. Still his ally, Rose Landry. The plan is still for their two houses to be in the final together.

And it should be Zeta Beta and Omega Chi in the final. But the stakes for this challenge are a little higher tonight. Right now, Omega Chi has the lead in the Greek Week point race, but the point totals for the remaining four houses are close enough that whichever team comes in last tonight, including Omega Chi, will be eliminated.

So yeah, high stakes. They can't lose. And Shane knows which house he hopes does come in last tonight.

The Kappa Taus are just a few feet away from him, and Shane has spotted Rozanov out of the corner of his eye a few times. But he refuses to look in his direction. He has no idea if Rozanov has looked at him. It's better if he doesn't know.

"Our four remaining Greek Week houses," the Master of Ceremonies booms into the microphone. "Omega Chi Delta, Zeta Beta Zeta, Kappa Tau Gamma, and Mu Gamma Sigma, are we *ready?"*

All four houses indicate that they are ready with a combination of fists raised in the air, clapping, or whooping.

The Master of Ceremonies pauses for effect and then, with great solemnity:

"Take. Your. Pizzas."

Shane nearly snorts at that. JJ at the front of their line rubs his hands together and licks his lips as he grabs two pizza boxes from the table set up right next to them. They were given the list of their assigned houses for delivery beforehand. JJ has two cheese pizzas and already knows which houses he'll be going to. Shane had ensured here would be no chaos or confusion while they're running this race.

"Now, my esteemed pizza delivery boys and girls…*take your marks*."

JJ is holding the pizzas up with one hand (which doesn't concern Shane, JJ has waited tables for extra money before) and crouching to push himself off into the sprint.

"*Get set*…"

Shane looks around at the other teams. Rose is nearly denting the pizza boxes with her grip in anticipation. On the other side of the ZBZs, it looks like Svetlana's vice president will be going first, her pizzas also held up in one hand like JJ.

Reluctantly, he glances over at the KTs. They have Troy going first, good choice, and he's nearly bouncing out of his sneakers. And still, Shane doesn't let himself look at—

"*GO!"*

Shane's head snaps back over to shout encouragement at JJ as he sprints like a mad man into the night. Just like with most of the Greek Week games, the image is comical, four people taking off at a dead sprint holding pizzas while a crowd cheers them on. He can't help but smile about it. Shane also notes, with a great deal of satisfaction, that JJ charges into the lead very quickly.

The downside of this game is most of it will happen out of his sight and he can't provide help or directions if any of his teammates get confused or don't know which house is where. Some of the houses are within view, but quite a few cannot be seen from the starting line. Despite this, he trusts his team to know where they're going.

“Look! He’s already coming back!” One of his pledge teammates, Calvin, is pointing at an approaching figure in the distance.

Indeed, it is JJ. He has finished, it looks like, well ahead of the pack. He’s waving the two flags as he comes closer, indicating that he successfully delivered both pizzas. Shane internally pumps his fist. Choosing him to go first was the right call.

“Hayden, get ready!” Shane shouts at him, a little severely but he can’t help himself.

Hayden’s hands hover over the next two pizzas, as he’s not allowed to grab them until JJ places their flags down on the table. When JJ arrives and slams them down, Hayden is off within a second, one pepperoni and one veggie pizza in hand.

Shane gives JJ a much-deserved pat on the back, his other teammates doing the same or messing up his hair in appreciation. When Shane looks back up, Rose and Troy are both there, having completed their runs at the same time and dropping their flags on the table. Marleau and Rose’s vice president Melanie both take off with their pizzas.

Bringing up the rear is Mu Gamma. Svetlana fist bumps her sister as she finishes her run anyway.

Looking at Svetlana, he remembers talking to her the other night at the Zeta Beta party. How warm she was with him. What she had said to him about Roza—

He shakes his head. No. There’s no use in thinking about that right now. Or ever, really.

When Hayden returns, Kappa Tau and Zeta Beta are closer behind him, having made up some ground. Still, they have a good lead as Calvin takes his pizzas and heads off into Greek Row.

This time, when Shane steals a glance at Kappa Tau, his eyes inadvertently land on Rozanov. Rozanov, who is already looking at him. Shane’s heart rate kicks into high gear, wondering if he’s been looking at him this whole time. His expression gives away nothing. He is simply staring.

Shane tears his gaze away and tries to slow his breathing. He cannot deal with this. Doesn’t want to.

Their lead has shrunk further when Calvin returns, and Shane hears the Master of Ceremonies and the crowd getting a little too excited about that. Shane is almost ready to take the next turn himself but elects to let their brother go. It’s still best that he goes last. He knows he can make up any ground they’ll need.

Zeta Beta is in second place now, which he is happy to see. Kappa Tau is in third, with Connors taking his turn now. Mu Gamma is still in last, Svetlana about to run the fourth leg. Based on Connors taking his turn now for Kappa Tau, Shane knows that Rozanov is running the last leg for his team. He grits his teeth at the thought. He will not be losing to Rozanov tonight.

But his heart drops when he sees the leading fourth leg runners making their way back. Zeta Beta and Kappa Tau have both surpassed Omega Chi. Evan, their brother, is trailing them by a few meters. The crowd cheers get louder, knowing this is the last leg. Shane swears under his breath and gets into position to run, knowing that he will have to make up ground now.

Connors arrives back first, followed by the Zeta Beta sister. Rozanov and Zeta Beta have already taken off by the time Evan places his flags on their table. Shane doesn't hesitate to grab his pizzas, a veggie and a sausage, and sprint away. He passes Svetlana, who is still making her way back but made up some time, as he goes.

His two houses for delivery are Alpha Lambda Tau and Sigma Phi Omega. Sausage for the first, veggie for the second. Alpha Lambda is further away so he decides to take that one first, sprinting as fast as he can while holding two pizzas. He doesn't see Rozanov or the Zeta Beta, both of them probably having made turns to their respective locations to take their pizzas.

He's not nervous yet. They're behind, but not so far behind that he can't pass them both with this run. He knows Rozanov is quick though, so he can't afford any mistakes.

And he doesn't make any as he bounds up the steps of Alpha Lambda. A few of the fraternity brothers are there, leaning against the porch with grins on their faces. Shane remembers again that this game is quite amusing to watch. The seriousness and speed with which they are all delivering pizzas.

Shane shoves the box containing the sausage pizza into the hands of the one waiting at the top of the steps. The guy opens the box, nods, and pulls the flag out of his pocket. Shane snatches it out of his hand before he has even held it out to him.

"Thanks!" he yells over his shoulder as he sprints back to the sidewalk.

This is perfect. He covered that ground quickly. The Sigma Phi house is only a few houses down from the starting line. It will only take him a second to deliver the veggie pizza as well and then he's home free for the finish line and—

A sprinting figure collides hard into him, having come around a hedge where Shane couldn't see them. The wind is knocked clean out of him, and then he's on the ground. Not on the concrete, thankfully, but into a grass lawn. That at least cushions his fall, and Shane can tell quickly that he's not hurt, much to his relief.

But that relief is dashed when he looks a few feet away and sees his pizza box lying open on the ground, the pizza having splattered against the sidewalk. Panic courses through him, but it's nothing compared to his anger when he turns and sees—

Rozanov. On the ground right next to him after having bulled him over like a runaway train. Because of fucking *course* it was him. He's also on the grass, and appears just fine, if disoriented.

"You *fucking*—," Shane grits out, stumbling to his feet. Rozanov is looking up at him, eyes wide. He can see that Rozanov wasn't carrying any pizzas, apparently having finished his

deliveries. “You did that on purpose, *asshole*.”

“*What?* Hollander, I didn’t—”

Shane does not stick around to hear it. He clutches his one retrieved flag tight in his fist and makes a dash back for the starting line. There’s still another delivery to be made, and now he has no choice but to double time it or they’re out of the Greek Olympiad for sure.

When his team sees him approaching, they start waving their arms and jumping up and down, thinking they’ve come in first. Shane hates this, feeling guilty at having fucked up his turn. Letting Rozanov fuck it up. As he gets closer, they see he only has one flag and their celebrations stop.

“Uh oh, looks like Omega Chi has to make another trip!” the Master of Ceremonies informs the crowd in a voice that sounds way too delighted about a shocking twist in the game.

Shane slams his one flag on the table and grabs another veggie pizza. Hayden is looking at him in shock.

“What happ—?”

“Rozanov.”

Shane sprints away again, no time to provide further details. As he goes, the ZBZ sister is running back, waving her two flags in the air. *Good* he thinks. At least Rose will come in first, even if he and the Omega Chis are eliminated.

But no, he’s not going to let that happen. Thankfully, Sigma Phi house is not far at all. He already has it in sight as he hears the announcement from the Master of Ceremonies that Zeta Beta has come in first place. He doesn’t see Rozanov or the Mu Gamma sister anywhere.

Running through the yard of the Sigma Phi house, one of the house sisters is standing at the bottom of the steps, flag in hand already, waiting for him. She could probably hear from the Master of Ceremonies very loud microphone that the race is nearly finished. He’s grateful.

Opening the box as he approaches her so she can confirm the right pizza, she nods, and they trade. Flag for pizza. He’s off in the blink of an eye, shouting his thanks over his shoulder as he goes.

The voice of the Master of Ceremonies over the speakers hits his ears. “In second place… Kappa Tau Gamma!”

“*Fuck*.” He can feel the sweat dripping down his back now as the Mu Gamma sister finally comes into view, sprinting just ahead of him.

“Only one more spot in the next round! Who’s it gonna be?”

The crowd sees them both coming, running almost side by side, and the cheers tick up to a roar. There are a few audience members along the sidewalk, yelling encouraging words at them both. Shane is only a few feet behind Mu Gamma, but not for long. He finds some extra

energy, his longer strides helping him overtake her. Hayden is screaming his name at the starting line, waving his arms like that will somehow bring him to them even faster.

It's a close finish, but Shane knows he's won as he brings the flag down hard on the table, nearly collapsing as he does it. The Master of Ceremonies confirms their third-place finish over the speakers.

He's suddenly surrounded by his whole team, embraced from all sides. Hayden is nearly vibrating from laughter against his chest, and Shane brings his arm around him, both of them apparently needing support standing up.

"Oh my fucking *God*," Hayden wheezes out. "Let's *never* do that again."

Shane nods eagerly. "Deal."

"I thought we were goners," JJ says, also looking out of breath.

The Master of Ceremonies is announcing the placement of the remaining teams. Mu Gamma is officially out, and the final three teams are indeed Zeta Beta, Kappa Tau, and Omega Chi.

"We will see you all for the next game…goodnight, Greek Row!"

Shane breathes a sigh of relief as his teammates disperse around him. Hayden stays with him, arm around his shoulders. They look at each other. *Thank God that's over* is clearly on both of their minds.

"That was a little too close," comes a voice from next to them.

Shane looks over to see Rose, standing there looking perfect and pleased. She holds her fist up in his direction.

"You good, Shane?"

He nods, bumping her fist. "I am now. And congrats."

She grins. "I told you, I'm taking it this year."

"Over Shane's dead body," Hayden tells her, returning the smile.

"Shane told me something similar," she says, moving back to her sisters. "You Omega Chis. It must be a hive mind."

They both chuckle and Shane moves out from under Hayden's arm. Getting themselves together, he and his brothers start to move away from the crowd, all five of them looking like they are very much in need of a shower and some sleep. No parties on this Tuesday night. Not that he'd be going if there were.

"*Hollander*," another voice, a less welcome one, calls out from behind them.

Shane doesn't turn, but Hayden does.

“What do *you* want?”

Shane wants to keep walking, but the other Omega Chis stop in their tracks to look behind them. Reluctantly, Shane stops as well, but he keeps his eyes forward.

“*Hollander*,” Rozanov calls out again.

“You almost got us eliminated tonight and you want to talk, *Rozanov*?” Hayden spits out at him.

“Did I talk to *you*, Pike? No. I did not.” Rozanov’s voice is cold. “So, why don’t you step back?”

At that, Shane turns around. Rozanov and Hayden are standing a little too close to each other with a little too much animosity for Shane’s liking. He approaches them and puts his hand on Hayden’s chest, forcing him to move away as he faces Rozanov.

“*What?”*

“Was not on purpose,” Rozanov says, his tone softening as he looks at him. “I did not hit you on purpose.”

“*Hit* him?” Hayden steps closer with a new wave of outrage in his eyes. Shane holds his arm out to stop him.

“He didn’t hit me, he ran into me,” Shane clarifies. “That’s why I had to get another pizza.”

“Was not on purpose,” Rozanov repeats, his eyes beseeching.

Shane is confused for a second before remembering that he had said exactly that to Rozanov after they collided. *You did that on purpose.* He had been angry and those words had come tumbling out of his mouth. He knows now that they were ridiculous. Rozanov probably couldn’t see him coming any more than Shane saw him coming, which is to say, not at all.

“Okay, I believe you,” Shane says. He does mean this. But it’s not like it matters. Great, he hadn’t meant to mow Shane into the ground. That probably comes in dead last on his list of grievances with Rozanov. “See you.”

He starts to turn away, but Rozanov’s words stop him. “Can we talk?”

Shane looks back at him, his eyebrows drawing together. He could almost laugh. “You want to talk *now?”*

Rozanov nods.

Rozanov is asking to talk to him, something he used to want so badly to hear him say. On plenty of occasions he had picked up his phone and stared at it, wanting Rozanov to call him and say the exact words he had just said to him now.

He used to want that. Very badly. Some nagging, surely naïve part of him still does.

But Shane is abruptly very aware of all the eyes on them. Hayden is there, looking back and forth between them. He feels the rest of his brothers' eyes boring into the back of his head. Even Troy is there, a few meters away, regarding them curiously. Other sorority and fraternity members are milling about. The place still feels very crowded, almost suffocating as Rozanov's eyes stay fixed on him.

"We don't have anything to talk about," Shane tells him quietly, and this time he does turn away.

Hayden walks next to him, and they rejoin the rest of the Omega Chis. But they don't get very far before Rozanov has something else to say.

"Hollander, *prosti menya*."

Again, he stops. And again, so do the rest of his brothers.

No one says anything for a moment. Shane looks back at Rozanov, standing there by himself, eyes still locked on him, a question in his eyes. The insane corner of his brain wants to walk over to him right now and wrap his arms around him, to tell him yes, let's talk right now. Please. That's all I've wanted for so long, please…

"What the fuck does that mean?" Hayden asks, looking at Shane, then Rozanov, then back to Shane again.

But no. He's not going to do that. He knows better. He knows where any path with Rozanov leads and who will get hurt in the end.

Shane looks at Rozanov and answers Hayden's question. "How should I know?"

Not letting himself look at Rozanov for another second, he walks away. His brothers following behind him.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Edit: Obviously I'm far from a perfect writer but this chapter is very much Shane reacting to what happened in chapter 5 (along with what's happened in the past that hasn't been revealed yet). I hope readers can be as patient with Shane as you all were with Ilya when he lashed out in the previous chapter. Neither of them are perfect and my writing isn't above critique but I do hope we can be fair to both characters.

Chapter 7: Conciliate

Chapter Notes

Another long chapter. Please note the updated tags and enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January 2016

There were normally better things for Ilya to do with his Friday evening than sit in his apartment watching the Montreal Voyageurs and the Boston Bears play their regular game of "which of us sucks less?" but tonight, the snow had lulled Greek Row, the university, and the city into a low hum. It's hardly a blizzard. As he glances out the window, the snow is only gently coming down, but it's expected to worsen over the weekend, so rather than going out, everyone has tucked themselves into their dwellings.

It's times like this that Ilya is grateful for his off-campus apartment. He uses it most weekends, but this weekend he was more than happy to dip out of the Kappa Tau house and be in his own space for the snowfall. As much as he's come to appreciate his fraternity brothers, being cooped up in that house with them with no escape was not his idea of a weekend well-spent.

The center for Boston takes a tumble on the ice for the second time already in the game. Ilya shakes his head.

"It's not just me, right?" the announcer drawls over the game. "Both of these teams are in desperate need of a center who can bring their offense together…"

No shit.

There was a time when Ilya thought he could be that sort of center for any team in the world. His father drilled it into his head that he had to be that, and his mother made him believe that he actually could. But things were never that simple.

He loves hockey, loved playing it as a child and loves playing it at the university level. But as he grew older, things changed. His father rode him harder about it every year, coaches became stricter and had greater expectations. He struggled to find anything in the sport that motivated him to be the best anymore. University was supposed to set him on the path to the pros, but all he found here were distractions and even worse (his father would say) other opportunities that interested him more than hockey.

How bizarre that what they say about university is actually true. It opens up your eyes to many paths you can take, not just the one that had been set before you. Forced on you, even.

He'll never lose his love of hockey, not entirely, but he is starting to lose any expectation that a pro career is an option. Maybe it could have been, if things had been different. But that's not the reality he's operating in, and he's coming to accept that.

"The Bears had better do something with their next draft pick, that's all I'm saying…"

Ilya chuckles at the scathing commentary and feels his phone vibrate. Opening it up, he sees a name he hadn't been expecting tonight.

Jane

Are you home?

Ilya raises his eyebrows, caught off guard. Fridays are pretty typical for them to meet, but Hollander told him earlier that he was busy today. He types a simple response.

Me

Yes

Jane

Can I come up?

That message surprises Ilya off of his couch. He approaches the window and looks out at the parking lot. Hollander is standing there, his phone in hand and looking up at the building. Snow drifts down around him. He's too far away for Ilya to see his expression.

Me

Come up now

Once Ilya watches Hollander receive his text message and start walking towards his building, he opens his front door and waits for him to arrive, almost tapping his foot impatiently. When the elevator opens and Hollander steps out, he doesn't waste any time.

"You drove here?" Ilya asks, an edge in his voice.

Hollander stops in his tracks, eyes tired but looking taken aback by the tone. "What? No, I took the bus. They're still running."

That made sense. There isn't enough snow on the ground yet to justify shutting down the buses and other public transportation. Satisfied, Ilya nods and moves out of Hollander's way so he can enter his apartment.

He'll question why it bothered him so much that Hollander might have been driving in the snow later.

Ilya has barely gotten the door closed when Hollander is suddenly there, pressed against him and sliding his hands into his hair. Ilya notices he's already kicked his shoes off. He doesn't

kiss him, like Ilya initially expects once his hands are on him. But he closes his eyes and leans in, asking to be kissed rather than doing it himself.

Obliging, as he ever does, Ilya leans in and presses his lips to Hollander's. He keeps it soft, almost chaste, and Hollander holds himself there, not pressing the issue. Normally, Ilya would explore every corner of Hollander's mouth in a hurry, but he's still mystified by Hollander's unannounced appearance tonight to do so.

They don't exactly schedule their…visits with each other, but they tend to let the other know ahead of time. Or if they see each other at a party, there will be some unspoken agreement from across the room. They never just drop in, not like this. It's out of the ordinary, and that is especially abnormal coming from Hollander. It has the wheels in Ilya's brain turning, keeping him from relaxing into their exploits as he usually does.

Not helping Ilya's bewilderment, Hollander abruptly falls to his knees in front of him, without any fanfare or Ilya even asking him to do so.

Hollander's eyes are hooded, but Ilya does not miss the way he flinches when he hits the floor, leaning to one side, seeming to favor one of his legs over the other. As he reaches for the waistband of Ilya's sweatpants, Ilya seizes his hands in his.

"What's wrong?"

Shaking his head, Hollander doesn't answer, just makes a frustrated noise and tries to free his hands from Ilya's grip, but he holds him firm.

"*Hollander*, answer." Ilya injects some authority into his voice this time.

Finally, Hollander opens his eyes and looks up at him. "It's nothing. Can I just…?" One of his fingers frees itself and tries to tug at his waistband.

Ilya shakes his head with a disapproving sound. It feels bizarre to tell him no, to deny Hollander when he's on his knees and all but begging to suck his cock. It's not like this is completely out of the realm of behaviors Hollander has exhibited before, but Ilya cannot shake the feeling that something is wrong tonight. He won't go any further until he hears an explanation.

"No. Stand up."

Hollander obeys, albeit reluctantly. When he's on his feet again, Ilya reaches for the buttons of his coat, specks of snow still visible on the shoulders, and starts undoing them. He slides the coat off his shoulders and Hollander watches him as he pulls a hanger out from the hall closet and puts it away in there, shutting the door with a click.

"Now," Ilya says, turning his attention back to him. "You tell me what is going on."

Hollander doesn't look any more willing to talk, chewing the inside of his cheek. "I said it's nothing."

"And I say you are liar," Ilya shoots back, raising his eyebrows.

When Hollander casts his gaze to the floor, Ilya is there, his hand on his jaw and turning his face back up. He squeezes him slightly, telling him without words to look at him, and then he waits.

It doesn't take Hollander long to give in under his expectant gaze. "I just had a shitty day."

Ilya softens his hold on his face. "So, you come here?"

"Yes." Hollander leans forward until his forehead is pressed against Ilya's shoulder, hiding himself there. His voice now muffled. "I'm sorry to just show up. I'll leave if you want."

Bringing his hand up to Hollander's hair, stroking him, Ilya shakes his head. Hollander can't see him, but he can feel him.

"Is not what I want."

Ilya is almost startled by how much he means this, how badly he wants Hollander to stay. They hadn't planned anything tonight. This was supposed to be his night to himself, snowed in for the weekend. But now that Hollander is here, he can't imagine wanting anything else.

Hollander makes a soft noise against his shirt and slowly wraps his arms around him, both hands holding him around his shoulders. "Then…c-can we…?"

"Is what *you* want?" Ilya asks when he can tell Hollander can't or won't finish his question. It's becoming very clear to him what Hollander needs right now.

Hollander's arms tighten around him and he nods.

Permission granted, Ilya reaches down to scoop Hollander off the floor. Not really in the mood to have to herd him further into the apartment but knowing that he wants him in the bed as soon as possible. Hollander makes a surprised sound but holds on, his legs wrapping around his waist and burying his face into his neck.

Hollander used to pretend he didn't like this, Ilya remembers as he walks him towards the bedroom, the door already open there. But ever since September, when things had started up between them again, he had stopped bothering to pretend.

Stepping inside the bedroom, Ilya leans down and drops him onto the bed. He's not an easy weight to carry, as much as he enjoys it, but he takes care in doing this, remembering the tender way Hollander was holding himself earlier.

This is normally when Hollander would start pulling his own clothes from his body and dragging Ilya to him. But as Ilya stands at the foot of the bed, Hollander just looks at him, up on his elbows, breathing heavily. Ilya notices when his fingers twitch towards his hoodie, wanting, but unsure of himself. His eyes fall heavy on Ilya, needing something from him.

"Can I…?"

"*Da*. Off." He raises his hand to indicate his hoodie, specifying what he wants off.

Hollander eagerly complies, tugging the hoodie off and laying it carefully next to him. Ilya picks it up from the bed to place on top of his dresser. He's somewhat disconcerted by Hollander asking his permission to undress. But as was the case when he dropped to his knees earlier, it's not entirely unusual. Typically, Hollander is more than willing to throw off his clothes on his own, with Ilya just occasionally barking out at him to strip, but as Ilya turns back to him on the bed, bare chested and staring, waiting to know what he should do next, Ilya can see that he needs instructions even more than usual tonight.

"These too, *kotenok*," Ilya says, taking the end of his jeans between his fingers and giving them a small tug.

At this, Hollander hesitates, but only for a moment before doing as he's told. Slowly, he slides himself out of his jeans, pausing only when reaching his lower thigh, and a second later, Ilya understands why.

On his left knee is a bruise. Not a "bumped my knee into the coffee table" bruise but a spreading, painful-looking brown and purple colored bruise. Hollander avoids his eyes as he gets his jeans down over his socked feet and lays the jeans next to him like he did his hoodie.

Ilya can't stop staring at it. Then he remembers what Hollander said earlier about his "shitty day." It clicks in his head that the bruise is connected.

"What happened?" he asks, coming closer to place his hand on his calf, well below the injury.

"Nothing." Hollander shakes his head. "I fell."

"Fell hard," Ilya observes, his thumb tracing over his skin. "It hurts?"

"I'm fine. I iced it, I swear." His chin is down and he's avoiding eye contact again.

This, at least, Ilya believes. While the bruise looks painful, Hollander was not limping earlier, and Ilya does not believe he would have taken any risk by not tending to an injury.

"Shitty day?" Ilya repeats Hollander's earlier comment, pointing to his knee for confirmation.

Hollander hesitates but nods. "I was…"

"You what?"

"I went on the ice today," finally falls from his mouth, the words so fast Ilya almost doesn't catch them. He keeps speaking, rapid fire. "It was stupid, but I've been missing it more and there was barely anyone there and I just wanted to—fuck whatever, I fell and fucked up my bad knee."

"Bad knee?" Something is beginning to make sense in Ilya's brain now. The bruised knee, his "bad knee," and Hollander's clear discomfort with even looking at it. Ages ago when Hollander had fessed up to him that he used to play hockey but was oddly cagey about it. Tonight, Hollander even more on edge than usual. Falling on your knee doesn't usually constitute such a shitty day that you go to someone begging for distraction, unless…

“Is why you don’t play hockey,” Ilya concludes out loud. He’s not asking. The truth is suddenly so clear. It’s a wonder he didn’t figure it out before, that Hollander must have sustained an injury years ago that kept him off the ice.

Hollander still isn’t looking at him, his chin now against his shoulder, and Ilya thinks he might see tears forming. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Ilya presses his lips together, feeling out of his depth. He and Hollander have…crossed some boundaries together, but this feels far more intimate than what he’s usually prepared for in what he has determined to be a “fuck buddies” situation. Looking at his trembling form, he worries that Hollander showed up here offering something he’s not in the right state of mind to give.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, trying to bring his gaze back to him. He complies, though slowly. “Maybe we don’t tonight.”

The words are barely out of Ilya’s mouth before Hollander’s eyes go wide in panic.

“*No*,” Hollander sits up from the bed and approaches him, gingerly on his knee, resting his head on his shoulder again when he’s close enough.

“You are sad,” Ilya says, stating the obvious. English is suddenly feeling more difficult. “And hurt. Might not be good now.”

“It *is*,” he insists. Ilya feels him shift, and he presses a kiss to his neck. His voice is muffled against his skin. “I want to feel good. You make me feel good.”

Ilya takes a breath, feeling his chest rise and fall. It is nearly impossible to say no to Hollander on just about any occasion, but now he’s chipping away at Ilya’s willpower in a way he never has before. It’s not that Ilya thinks he doesn’t really want it, that much has been made clear. But now he has other concerns. Fears even. About what this might mean. The one part of his brain that tries to remain logical is giving him every warning right now.

But when Hollander reaches up to curl his fingers into his hair and whispers, “Please” into his neck, none of that seems to matter anymore.

He’d do anything, he thinks. Anything Hollander asks of him when he says “please” like that.

“Okay, sweetheart,” Ilya says, kissing his hair. He doesn’t even process the pet name. Won’t even realize, with some horror, that he said it until hours later. “You remember rule?”

Hollander nods right away.

“Say it.”

“If I want to stop, I’ll tell you,” he recites perfectly, as Ilya sometimes asks him to do.

“Good,” Ilya says, letting out a breath. “Now, back on the bed.”

Hollander is quick to follow the order, detaching himself from Ilya's body and lying on his back. The tears appear to be gone from his eyes, which Ilya prefers. If he's going to cry, he likes when it's because Ilya has him feeling so much that he can't do anything *but* cry. Not tears of sadness. Those, Ilya would like to avoid.

"We go slow tonight," Ilya tells him as he crawls over his body, making sure to hold himself just over him and not bump into his bruised knee. "Carefully."

Hollander's expression drops. "But…I want—"

"I know what you want. I will give to you." Ilya says, placing a kiss on his lips to quiet him. He knows Hollander wants him to jump on him, overwhelm him, chase every thought from his mind, as he so often does. That is their way. Enthusiastic, even rough encounters. Ilya is not going to do that tonight. But he knows he can satisfy them both in other ways.

Ilya takes a minute to just kiss him, his tongue dipping in and out of his mouth. Hollander tries to increase the tempo, to lean into him, open his mouth further, but Ilya doesn't let him. He keeps the kiss soft, pressing Hollander into the bed.

Once he feels like Hollander has relaxed underneath him, he pulls up from the kiss. Indeed, Hollander's eyes are starry, his mouth hanging open. It's a look he usually has when they're further along into things, usually when Ilya is already inside of him. But tonight, Ilya isn't surprised to see him already like this.

Hoisting himself up, Ilya grabs Hollander's jeans from beside them and gets up from the bed to place them on the dresser with his shirt. When he turns back around, he finds Hollander watching him. Coming closer to the bed again, Ilya pulls off his own shirt.

When his vision is momentarily blocked by the shirt, Ilya hears Hollander shift, and he's about to tell him not to move but the words are caught in his mouth when his shirt is off, and he sees Hollander crawling towards him on the bed.

Before Ilya even has a second to think, Hollander's hand is around his thigh, and his face is pressed against his stiffening erection in his sweatpants. The pressure nearly makes Ilya choke, and when Hollander nuzzles his face against him, he's certain for a second that he is going to come in his pants.

"*Takoy ideal'nyy, kotonok*," *So perfect, kitten.* He runs his fingers through his hair, the strands as soft as ever.

Hollander's fingers find the waistband of his pants again. "Can I?"

Ilya would laugh about him asking for permission, as if he would ever say no, if he didn't love it so damn much. "So good to ask. Yes, Hollander."

His pants and briefs are barely at his ankles when Hollander has his mouth on him. He's already hard, and Hollander nearly swallows him all the way down, his tongue lapping at the head. Ilya swears, in English or Russian, he doesn't know, and his fingers tighten in Hollander's hair. It's impressive, truly, how good Hollander has gotten at this.

Hollander, encouraged by his response, bobs his head more quickly, swallowing down when he's nearly taken all of him. Ilya knows he can get off just like this, just letting Hollander's mouth do all the work, but he also knows Hollander likes it when he participates. Bringing his other hand to Hollander's head, he holds on, encourages Hollander's movement, his own hips twitching forward in tandem.

"You take me so well," he praises. Hollander always likes to know that he's making Ilya feel good, that he's doing things right. "You can take more. Come on, Hollander."

And he does. He takes all of him then, his nose nearly pressed to his stomach. Ilya groans at the sight.

As much as he may want to, he won't fuck Hollander's mouth right now, concerned that it may get them both off too quickly, and sensing that's not what Hollander needs tonight. There was one occasion when Hollander had come just from that, on his knees letting Ilya face fuck him. He had been shocked, embarrassed. Ilya still gets off to the memory of it.

But no, not tonight. As much as they might both enjoy it.

"That's enough," Ilya tells him, tapping his cheek, trying to pull himself out of his mouth.

Hollander makes a noise of protest, looking up at him with pleading eyes, his mouth still full of his cock. It takes all of Ilya's effort to shake his head.

"Be good for me, *kotonok*. Off."

With a disappointed sound, Hollander releases his cock from his mouth. Ilya gestures for him to lie back on the bed, trying to catch his breath and act like he wasn't just seconds away from coming down Hollander's throat.

When Hollander is on his back again, Ilya reaches up to pull his briefs off, taking care when he drags them over his injured knee. Looking over him, he can see that Hollander is hardly faring any better, his cock dark red and already leaking. He looks like he could come with just a couple of strokes.

Ilya tosses Hollander's briefs into the pile with the rest of the clothes and climbs onto the bed to join him, next to him and not over him this time. Staring down at him, it doesn't take more than a few seconds for Hollander to start squirming.

"Please…" His voice is a rasp.

Ilya reaches over Hollander's body, making him start, to grab the lube from the bedside table. He has to dig it out of the drawer as he hasn't really needed it as much lately. It's been a while since he's had anyone other than Hollander over here. Not even Svetlana.

In fact, it's been a while since he's been with anyone else anywhere.

Pushing that thought aside, sensing it leads somewhere dangerous, Ilya coats his fingers with the lube and presses them between Hollander's legs. He thinks about telling him to turn over, but no, he wants to be able to see his face right now.

Hollander flinches at Ilya's index finger sliding inside of him but then relaxes into the familiar sensation. Ilya can't help but keep his hand gentle, even if the injury is nowhere near serious, there's a nagging voice in the back of his head demanding he not go very hard tonight, and it's one he listens to.

When he has a second finger inside him, Hollander lifts his hips a few inches off the bed, inhaling sharply. Using his other hand, Ilya presses him back down and holds him there. Hollander goes still then, his hips only wriggling slightly as Ilya presses deeper inside of him, searching.

A gasp is punched out of Hollander when Ilya finds his destination. He's become more adept at finding it every time, and he can't help but smirk, eyes drawn back to Hollander's face.

He's surprised to find Hollander staring at him rather than his hand working between his legs, as he usually does.

"Okay?" Ilya asks him, continuing to press against that spot.

Hollander lets out a breath and nods, hips trying to twitch up again. "Kiss me?"

He loves it when Hollander asks for what he wants, so he rewards him immediately, kissing him hard into the pillows. Usually, he has to draw these kinds of requests out of Hollander with his words and tongue and hands and just about every other part of himself. It's always a pleasure when Hollander just gives it to him willingly.

When Hollander is moaning into his mouth, he takes that as permission to insert a third finger inside, still pressing against his prostate. He feels Hollander's sharp inhale against him.

"Roza—" His voice is silenced when Ilya presses his tongue back in his mouth, still not letting up with his fingers. Hollander's breaths are coming more urgently, as are the sounds against his mouth, but Ilya doesn't stop, enjoying the sounds, the squirming.

Hollander makes a keening noise in the back of his throat and before Ilya can think of its meaning, he feels something hit his chest. Detaching himself from Hollander's lips, he realizes Hollander is coming. He freezes and stares, transfixed.

"Fu—*fuck*," Hollander grunts out, his head thrown back against the pillows, eyes squeezed shut.

Ilya kisses his jaw, trying to soothe him as he finishes. His face has gone to an almost concerning shade of red.

"*Shit*, I'm sorry…" he says a few moments after he's done, the first coherent thought he's able to form. "Rozanov, I'm sorry, fuck."

Sorry? He's fucking *sorry?* He just came untouched on his fingers, hell, Ilya nearly came himself at the sight of it, and he's apologizing to him for that? Like he's failed at something? Shane Hollander is truly one of the universe's greatest mysteries.

“Was perfect, Hollander,” Ilya says, hoping he sounds sincere in English. He presses his lips to his again. “No sorry.”

“But…I wanted—” Hollander’s eyes drop to Ilya’s hard cock, pressed against his hip, then meets his gaze again. “*You* wanted—”

“Yes, and we still can,” Ilya says, kissing his shoulder. He reaches across to the table again to grab tissues this time. “You can come again.”

Hollander’s eyes go wide at that, watching as Ilya wipes off his chest and then the come from his own skin. “Um…I don’t…”

Ilya grins. “Not *right* now, but soon. You can.”

Hollander swallows as Ilya leans over and tosses the tissues in the trash, then sifts through the drawer for a condom. Ilya knows his words have made Hollander nervous. He’s never come more than once when they’ve been together. Though a couple of months ago, he finished fairly quickly when Ilya was inside him, but by the time Ilya finished, he couldn’t help but notice that Hollander was close to getting hard again. He had filed that thought away for later.

But he meant what he said, he’s not going to try to make Hollander come again immediately. He couldn’t even if he wanted to. He can wait and…there’s something they can do with that time.

“On your side,” Ilya tells him.

Hollander’s expression gives away his nerves, but he does what he’s told, lying carefully on his side, his bruised knee against the mattress.

Ilya sidles up behind him, rolling the condom onto himself as he does so. The tension in Hollander’s body is expected, but not helpful at the moment. He runs a hand along his arm, feeling the tightness of the muscle there.

“You want to stop?” Ilya asks, needing to know before he goes any further.

“No.” The reply is immediate.

“Okay.” Ilya presses the head of his cock inside of him.

Hollander lets out a gasp, but Ilya watches as he forces his body to relax, allowing him easier entry. Grunting at the feeling of the stretch around his cock, Ilya presses forward until he bottoms out, at least as much as he can from this position, the two of them lying down on their sides. When his hips are pressed against Hollander’s ass, he stills and closes his eyes, trying to get a hold of himself.

He’s been inside Hollander countless times at this point. One would think it wouldn’t be so overwhelming every time.

When Ilya no longer feels like he's a second away from coming his brains out, he opens his eyes again. He finds Hollander holding himself very still, fingers clutching into the pillow that their heads are resting against, and eyes tightly shut. Ilya breathes heavily as he looks at him, always fascinated by how desperately he tries to cling to the thread of his control.

When his eyes trail down to his cock, still soft against his thigh, Ilya remembers why he's doing this. His lips find their way to Hollander's neck.

"Think you can stay like this?" he asks against him.

Hollander's eyes drift open at the words. "What?"

"Stay still like this for me?" Ilya clarifies. "Keep my cock inside you until you're ready?"

The flush has returned to Hollander's cheeks, his eyes darting to Ilya's face and then away again. "You…you want me to—?"

"Unless you can't." Ilya kisses his neck again. "Then I pull out. Is okay."

Hollander's eyebrows draw together in indignation, meeting his eyes again to glare at him through his blush. "I can."

Ilya smiles and kisses his furrowed brow. "Good. We wait then."

Things being settled on, Ilya grabs his book from the bedside table to kill some time, leafing through the pages to find where he had left off.

Hollander has gone from indignation back to confusion. "You…you're not going to—"

"Is good book, and we have the time. Unless—" He shifts his hips forward, knocking at gasp out of Hollander and making him tighten around his cock, oversensitive. "You are ready now?"

He shakes his head in answer.

"Then be good for me and be quiet."

Settling himself against Hollander's back, draping his arm over him, he finds his place in the book. It's the works of Marina Tsvetaeva. He had read it last semester when it had been assigned in a women's poetry class that Svetlana had bullied him into taking with her. Ilya gave in and found himself enjoying the class more than even Svetlana thought he might.

He had chosen literature as a major at the start of university on a whim, almost a joke. After a year of doing pretty well in the classes, he adjusted the major to Russian literature and hadn't looked back since. Tsvetaeva was a Russian poet who had been included in the women's poetry class, and he returns to it sometimes.

Ilya hasn't been reading and then re-reading one of the poems for more than a few minutes when he hears Hollander's breathing change and feels him shift against him. He stops mid-

sentence and looks down, only to find Hollander dragging his hips forward and then moving back again.

“Ah ah,” Ilya says, placing his free hand against Hollander’s hip to stop his movements. “What did I say?”

Scrunching his face up, Hollander turns into the pillow, muffling himself, his words inaudible. Ilya puts his book back on the table and brings his fingers to Hollander’s chin, turning his face back up.

“What was that?”

“You said *quiet*,” Hollander mutters. His freckles stand out starkly against his blush. “I’m being quiet.”

Ilya almost chuckles at that. *Brat*. He raises Hollander’s chin up higher. “Before that, Hollander. What did I say? Did I say to move?”

Hollander’s glare has returned full force, but he shakes his head in answer.

Ilya has to restrain himself from grinning at his expression, but when his eyes trail back down over his body, he realizes that Hollander is hard again. He raises his eyebrows at that. It’s been about ten minutes, so it doesn’t defy belief, but he still wasn’t expecting it when all they’ve been doing is sitting here, Ilya inside of him but unmoving.

Just at the sight of Hollander’s cock, however, Ilya feels his own twitch, still buried inside of him.

“You like this,” Ilya observes, his gaze returning to Hollander’s face.

Hollander huffs and turns away, jerking his chin out of Ilya’s grasp. “Can you fuck me now?”

“No, Hollander. I don’t think so.”

The indignant glare is back. Ilya smiles and slides his arm around Hollander’s middle, bringing himself closer. He hears Hollander catch his breath, his cock starting to leak again. At the sight, Ilya allows himself to fuck into him ever so slightly, once, twice, that’s it. Stilling again at Hollander’s short breaths.

“You stay like this for me,” Ilya murmurs, taking his earlobe between his teeth. “I think you want to.”

Hollander shivers at the words but goes still again, head flopping against the pillow.

Ilya leaves his book on the table, deciding Hollander demands his attention more for the moment. As much as he’s enjoying this, it’s far from easy for him, trying to hold himself back from turning Hollander over and fucking into him hard and fast. As nice as that sounds, watching Hollander like *this* is…something else.

Hollander flinches when Ilya's fingers trace over his skin, dipping lower. He doesn't touch his cock, knowing that would be all too easy, but he dances around him there, on his thighs, his ass, and letting his pinky skim over his balls. Hollander clenches his teeth harder at every touch, trying to get a hold of himself.

When Hollander's eyes squeeze shut, Ilya fucks into him again. He does it lightly, only the barest movement of his hips, but Hollander lets out a high-pitched whine none the less. The sound ripping from his throat unwillingly.

Ilya stills himself again and presses his hand into Hollander's hair, trying to position his head so he can see him better. "Eyes open."

The pupils of Hollander's eyes are blown wide as he manages to look at him again.

"Tell me how you feel," Ilya says, his other hand gripping harder into his hip.

Hollander's breathing is more like panting against Ilya's face. He squirms. "I—'s good."

Ilya looks down at Hollander's cock again, now dark red and leaking faster. Ilya would be in shock that he's so close to coming again just from this if he hadn't spent two years getting to know Hollander's body so well.

"Gonna come?" Ilya asks. The question is unnecessary. He already knows as he fucks his cock shallowly into Hollander's hole again. Not enough to truly satisfy either of them, just enough to tease.

Hollander gasps, his cock spurting more pre-come and his hand finding Ilya's at his hip, his fingers wrapping around and clinging tight. He could touch himself, of course, find his own release. But he won't, because Ilya hasn't told him to. "I don't…I don't—"

"Being so good for me. Let me see it," Ilya says, dropping his head to kiss his neck again. "I want you to come for me like this."

"*Rozanov*—"

"Such a good little cock warmer, aren't you? Look at this." Ilya growls into his ear, his hand trails back down to where Hollander's cock is pressed into his stomach, pre-come smearing against his skin. Hollander whimpers into the pillow. "I barely need to touch you for you to make a mess of yourself, *kotonok*. We should just keep you like this all the time, yes? Would you like that?"

"Fuck, *fuck*, Roza—I'm gonna—"

"Good boy."

That's all it takes. Ilya feels it hit his hand, and he finally takes hold of Hollander's cock to stroke him through it as he comes. The sounds bursting from Hollander's mouth are obscene, but Ilya holds his hair firm, not letting him bury his face into the pillow to hide them. Ilya's mouth drops open, amazed that an orgasm this intense could be ripped from him within twenty minutes of his last one. He wants to see it all.

He strokes Hollander until his cock is spent and Hollander is whimpering and twitching his hips forward, trying to move away from his hand, overstimulated.

"*Please*, I can't—"

Ilya keeps hold of him, not letting him squirm away, but has some mercy and finally stops touching his softening cock. He feels Hollander relax against the mattress as he does.

But Ilya is still inside of him, his cock as hard as it's ever been and demanding attention. He's decided it is well past time to tend to his own needs.

"I fuck you now," Ilya purrs into his ear, stroking his stomach. "Okay?"

Hollander is quick to nod and that's all Ilya needs. He pulls out of him, but when Hollander unsteadily tries to move up on his hands and knees, Ilya stops him with a hand at the small of his back, pressing him back down.

"No. On your stomach." He eyes the bruised knee.

Hollander does just that. Carefully, Ilya places one of his pillows under his hips, just so he's lifted enough off the bed for a better angle, and then he slides easily back inside of him.

Ilya finds he has very little patience now. He's barely inside of Hollander again when he starts pumping his hips, one hand on Hollander's waist to hold him steady and the other against the pillow next to his head. He knows that after all of their escapades tonight, this isn't going to take him very long. Just the sight of Hollander under him like this, eyes glassy and still making those sounds, is nearly enough.

As Ilya feels himself approaching his release, he looks down to find Hollander has started moving with him. Not with as much rigor as he usually does, too fucked out for that, but lazy rolls of his hips, pressing himself forward into the pillow and then back incrementally on Ilya's cock.

Fascinated, Ilya slows his pace and then comes to a stop. Still without his own release, which his body is screaming for, but his mind now distracted again.

It takes Hollander a minute to realize Ilya has stopped and is simply hovering over him, watching as he seeks his own pleasure and listening to his heavy panting and moaning. When he finally notices, he freezes, and Ilya sees the blush creep down his neck as he turns his face into the pillow so Ilya can't see him.

The thought that Hollander could actually come again doesn't seem probable, but whatever the case, Ilya is determined to find out.

"I did not say to stop," Ilya says, leaning closer so he can tug Hollander's face to the side again, revealing his blown-out eyes. "Keep going for me."

Ilya brings both hands to Hollander's hips then, and after a second of hesitancy, Hollander continues. His hands follow the movement, encouraging the rhythm, holding himself up so he

can get a better look. Hollander's breathing is getting faster, and when Ilya's hands squeeze around him, his hips buck shamelessly into the pillow.

It's a wonder Ilya doesn't come right then, but he staves it off, the need for this to go on is now overwhelming.

"Why do you—?" Hollander breathes out, so quietly Ilya almost doesn't catch it. "You always…"

"Hm?" Ilya leans in close again, but he keeps his hands on his hips, doesn't let him slow his gentle thrusting. "I always…?"

"Watch." Hollander grunts as Ilya nibbles on his ear. "You always…it's so—"

"You like to show off for me," Ilya says, and it's probably the first time he's fully understood this, the truth of it obvious once it's said out loud. "And I like to watch. We are good pair, yes?"

Obviously trying to dispute this, Hollander hides his face in the pillow, and Ilya once again doesn't let him, taking his hair in hand and pulling him back out. Even so, Hollander doesn't stop moving, Ilya's other hand on his waist, following his motion. He keeps himself from fucking into him with a great deal of effort.

"You are going to come for me again?" Ilya asks, using his hand on his hip to press into Hollander harder on one of his thrusts into the pillow. "Is why you hump the bed like puppy?"

"Oh *God*—" His hips stutter at that, trying to fuck himself back on Ilya's cock.

"I think so," Ilya carries on. His fingers tighten in Hollander's hair, and he sees a tear escape his eye. "Look at you. Desperate for it."

"I can't—"

"You can." Both of his hands are back on Hollander's hips again, pushing him faster, harder into the pillow and back on his cock. "That's good, Hollander. Take what you want. Let me see you come."

More tears fall from Hollander's eyes then, his hips moving faster almost involuntarily, as if helpless against his own body. Ilya can only watch as Hollander drives himself forward and back over and over, a low whining sound bounding through the room as Hollander presses himself forward even harder and lets himself go.

Ilya watches, unsure if he's come or if it was a dry orgasm wrung out from his body or what, but it doesn't matter because he's coming now too. His back bends, drawing him closer to Hollander as he drives his hips forward, coming into the condom and finding his nose against Hollander's hair, inhaling him. The noises they both make intertwine in the quiet apartment.

Distantly, Ilya notices they are breathing in sync, Ilya's chest resting against his back. It is difficult to move, but he knows he has to, if only to pull out and remove the condom. He does

just that, slowly, tying it closed and reaching over to drop it in the trashcan beside his bed.

Bringing himself back to Hollander, he allows himself to rest on top of him, pressing a kiss to his shoulder. Hollander, he can see, is still not all the way back with him, tears still falling down his cheeks and shuddering at every touch. Ilya holds himself against him but also takes some of his weight on his arms so as to not crush him. When things get like this in the aftermath, he's found, Hollander likes to feel the weight of him, like he's holding him down on earth.

After Toronto, Ilya had done a bit of research about how to handle someone whose mind seems to drift during and after sex. The internet had been useful, and he also asked Svetlana a few covert questions that she had been willing to answer without inquiring about who he was asking about. This led to more successful post-sex encounters. The short of it is that Hollander still needs his attention after sex, and so he gives it to him, and he has been finding that the more they do this, he is starting to need it too.

When Hollander makes a pleased sound, Ilya takes that as permission to start cleanup. He does this quickly. Wiping down himself and Hollander as much as he can once he gets him turned over on his back. He slides back into his sweatpants and manages to get Hollander back in his briefs as well, assuming he doesn't want to walk around his apartment completely naked, not that Ilya would mind that.

"Living room," Ilya tells him quietly.

Hollander shakes his head, eyes half closed.

"You want to sleep on this bed?" Ilya asks, amused. "Okay, but it's filthy."

Hollander huffs, then stretches out one of his legs. "Can't walk."

"Aw." Ilya nearly laughs at that but determines that it's not the time. Hollander might be ready to fall asleep right now, but Ilya knows he would be furious to wake up and find he slept on a bed covered in quite a few of their fluids. So, he places his hand on Hollander's waist and leans over him on the bed. "Hands around my neck."

Hollander does so and, with some effort, Ilya is able to lift him up and into his arms. Hollander helps, wrapping his legs around his hips. As Ilya goes out of the room, he grabs his book from the table.

When he deposits Hollander on the couch in the living room, Hollander pulls him down on the couch over him. Ilya briefly thinks, with some sense of exhaustion, that he's going to try to start things up again. But no, Hollander just hums pleasantly at Ilya's presence over him, sinking into the couch cushion.

Fighting the smile that threatens to come over his face, Ilya repositions them, so Hollander is lying against his chest, and his back is against the couch cushion. He pulls a blanket over them and grabs the TV remote, which is still playing that awful Boston and Montreal game, and turns it off, not even bothering to check the score. He also thinks, eyeing the knee again, that he should probably avoid having hockey on when Hollander is around.

“I should go,” Hollander says into his chest, but he doesn’t make any move to actually get up.

“Snow,” Ilya reminds him. He glances out the window, and the snow that the weather reports had been promising looks like it has finally arrived. “Can’t leave.”

“Oh.” Hollander’s voice is nervous. “Sorry.”

“No sorry. Sleep.” Ilya kisses the top of his head. “I drive you back tomorrow.”

He neglects to bring up that the snow is supposed to come down hard this weekend, and he might very well be trapped for longer than one night.

Hollander nods in agreement and looks like he’s close to drifting off to sleep. Distantly, Ilya realizes that Hollander has never spent the night at his place, and that they’ve never spent the night together anywhere. Suddenly he’s uneasy, thinking that they might be crossing another line together. But looking down at Hollander’s face, the slow rise and fall of his chest, he knows there’s nothing to be done about that tonight. If they’re crossing a line, then it’s crossed.

He picks up his book and opens to one poem he finds himself returning to more and more.

Are you happy? You never tell me.
Maybe it’s better like this.
You’ve kissed so many others –
which makes for sadness.

He probably knows it by heart at this point. Tsvetaeva wrote it about her translator who was also her lover, Svetlana informed him months ago. The poem is quite visceral, invoking Shakespeare, the imagery of a vicious storm, remarks about her lover both erotic and cruel. Contradictions and adoration everywhere.

Ilya feels Hollander stir against him, feels his arm wrap around his middle as he settles himself closer. Once again, Ilya can’t help his gaze from drifting down to the bruise on his knee, sticking out from the blanket, remembering why Hollander had come here tonight. That he had been hurt and the person he sought to make the pain go away had been Ilya.

There’s an unwelcome sensation coming over his body. It feels a lot like fear.

Tsvetaeva’s poem comes to an end. Always the same way.

Even as I tremble – it may be
I am dreaming – there
remains one enchanting irony:
for you – *are not* he.

April 2017

“Ilya, you have to come tonight, or I will give you the silent treatment for at least a few days, and I’m not sure you can survive without me for that long.”

Svetlana is loading beers into the Mu Gamma fridge as he watches her on FaceTime. He's across campus, having just picked up some books from the library, and Svetlana's calls could not be ignored anymore.

"Why are *you* hosting?" Ilya asks, exasperated. "The party is for the final three teams. Mu Gamma is out now."

"Because I wanted to," she says simply, shutting the fridge. "I'm a classy loser. We need a congratulatory party for the top three and I'm here to host it."

Ilya sighs. The party for the top three teams isn't exactly a tradition set in stone, but it might as well be. Different fraternities or sororities host every year. Sometimes one of the top three teams, sometimes not. Ilya had declined the opportunity this year, not being in the mood after…everything. Imagine his surprise when his closest friend took up the mantle.

This is quite the inconvenience considering Ilya had fully intended to skip the top three party and send the rest of his house to attend instead. A party sounds terrible right now, and he hasn't seen Hollander since that stupid pizza challenge where he had made an absolute fool out of himself. He isn't exactly excited about the prospect of seeing him again, and Hollander certainly didn't seem to want anything to do with him.

Why would he? The ever-present question from one corner of his brain. Ilya continues to struggle to find an answer, if there even is one. Indeed, why would Hollander want to see him? And fuck, Ilya shouldn't want to see Hollander either. Still hurt by what happened, even if he probably deserved it.

"Ilya, hiding from Jane isn't going to do you any good," Svetlana says, pulling him from his thoughts and reading his mind so easily like she always does.

"I am not hiding," Ilya says with a bit more heat than he intended. "He does not want to see me, does not want to talk to me. I should listen."

Svetlana is heading upstairs now, some of her sisters setting up decorations around her. Ilya is glad they can't understand them.

"You asked to talk to him in front of the entirety of Greek Row, Ilya." Svetlana is shaking her head at her phone. "Everyone was staring. I was standing far away and even I saw you with all the Omega Chis like there was a fight going on or something. Did you actually think he was going to talk to you in that situation?"

"Why are you on *his* side?" Ilya says sharply, coming to a stop. He notices a few students around look in his direction at his raised voice. "You talked to him at that party. You keep defending him. Are you *my* friend or *his?"*

Svetlana pauses in the hallway where she is presumably walking towards her room. She stares at him through the phone, eyebrows up. A few seconds pass and Ilya feels his temper cooling off and regret washing over him.

“You are fighting with Jane, Ilya,” Svetlana says, her voice even but there’s an edge there that he doesn’t usually hear. “And you are mad about it. That is okay. But do not take it out on me.”

Ilya finds a nearby bench and drops himself onto it, his backpack suddenly feeling far too heavy. He looks at his phone, at the expectant and patient look on Svetlana’s face.

“I know,” he tells her. “You are right. I’m sorry.”

“You are forgiven,” Svetlana says.

Ilya sighs and nods. He knows she means it, that she forgives him. It’s a rare thing for them to have any sort of argument. Ilya hates it when it does happen, however rare, and he’s frustrated by how many apologies he’s needed to give out lately, seemingly unable to make anyone in his life happy.

He just wishes he could find forgiveness from others as well, and he says as much to Svetlana, the words spilling out of his mouth before he can second-guess them.

“I’m afraid everything that’s happened with Jane is a little different from you getting snippy with me, Ilya,” Svetlana says, her voice soft. “Sometimes *I’m sorry* is not enough.”

“I know that.” Ilya drops his head and runs his hands through his hair. “I don’t even know what I’m doing. What does any of this fucking matter?”

Svetlana shrugs, in her room now. “You tell me. I know you, but I’m no mind reader.”

Ilya has been trying to figure this out himself. All he can come up with is he just wants things between him and Hollander to be okay. Even if Hollander never speaks to him again, he can’t stand the thought of them going their separate ways after graduation and Hollander hating him forever. No, that is too much. He knows he’ll never see Hollander again in a few months, and he cannot allow their parting to be one of resentment and shame. That’s all he knows.

“And for the record,” Svetlana says after it becomes obvious that he’s not going to say anything. “While I don’t like to take sides like you say, I am with you, Ilya. Do not think otherwise.”

Ilya nods, believing her, knowing what he said before was ridiculous.

“I don’t like what Jane said to you at the challenge the other day,” she tells him. “I understand why he did it, but I wish he hadn’t.”

How should I know?

Ilya’s body nearly curls in on itself at the memory.

“You were not wrong to try to talk to him. You just have bad timing.”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” Ilya’s voice isn’t as strong as he usually likes it to be. “I still don’t.”

“You two have spent too much time hurting each other,” Svetlana ponders, eyes on something else in her room. “Ever think there’s a reason for that?”

Ilya raises his eyebrows. “A reason for what?”

“A reason that you two…” She trails off, looking at him like she’s expecting him to fill in the blanks. When he stays silent, she sighs and looks away. “Never mind.”

“Okay,” Ilya agrees, more than happy to get off that topic. The suggestion he detected in her words and her expression told him that she was trying to take him down a path he had no interest in going down.

Svetlana still looks disappointed when something catches her eye on her phone. He notices her eyes light up. “I’m getting another call. I need to go.”

“Who is it?” he asks mildly.

“Don’t be nosey, Ilya,” she scolds him, smirking. Then adds “But please don’t miss my party tonight. I want you there.”

Ilya lets out a breath and gets up from the bench, walking in the direction of Greek Row again. “It’s important to you?”

She nods. “Yes.”

“Then you know I’ll be there.”

It’s a good thing that Mu Gamma house is right next door to Kappa Tau, or Ilya might have lost his nerve on the way to the party. But things being what they are, he’s easily swept up with his Kappa Tau brothers as they cross the lawn and bound up the porch steps. They’re over an hour late, as they planned, and plenty of them had pre-gamed before leaving the house.

Ilya, however, hadn’t bothered. Sober as he’s ever been. “Remember, guys,” he shouts over them before Connors opens the door to Mu Gamma. “*Try* to take it easy. We have challenge tomorrow.”

His killjoy announcement earns him a few laughs and scoffs in response, but at least Connors and Marleau nod. Maybe just for appearances, but they nod. Ilya felt he had to say it, as they’ve been prepping for their challenge all week, the clue having come early.

His investment in Greek Week had all but fallen apart now that his bet with Hollander appears to be dead, but they’ve come too far at this point for him to just drop it.

Focusing on Svetlana’s party instead, he steps over the threshold into Mu Gamma house and soaks in the atmosphere he’s become acquainted with whenever Svetlana arranges one of these events.

In complete contrast with how it feels to walk into a Kappa Tau house party, Mu Gamma house parties are more detached, even cooler though Ilya would never admit that. Svetlana keeps things fairly relaxed and restrained inside, the rooms usually used for game playing and socializing rather than a raging dance floor. Of course, drinks are still readily available to all attendees.

She does make room for the rowdiness that his brothers are looking for, however. The backyard is where the dancing happens and a far more boisterous energy that is required for any Greek Row party. But Svetlana keeps these two atmospheres strictly separate. Tonight, Ilya appreciates this more than ever as he watches a few of his brothers head for the backdoor without hesitation.

While Svetlana is able to enjoy any sort of party on Greek Row, whether it's a toga, a high-end theme, or a typical frat weekend party, she had sought to set the Mu Gamma parties apart, ever since her junior year when she was able to earn a little more control of their party planning. Ilya has enjoyed how she's pulled this off.

He elects not to pick up a beer from one of the tables and finds Svetlana standing at the top of the stairs to the basement, chatting with someone out of his vision. When she spots him, she quickly says something to whoever she's talking with and approaches him.

"You came." She gives him a kiss on the cheek.

"I don't want to interrupt you," he says, looking over her shoulder to see who she may have been talking to, but the person is already gone.

"You are not," she says, taking his arm and leading him away. "What are you in the mood for? The boardgame room, card room—"

"Are you seeing someone, Sveta?" he interrupts, narrowing his eyes at her. He has wanted to ask this for a couple of weeks. Nothing has given her away outright, but there have been subtle things that he's picked up on, even with all of his own distractions.

His question, he sees, catches her off guard. But her surprised expression is overtaken by a fit of giggles.

"Why would you not tell me?" he asks, genuinely clueless. Svetlana has never hidden much about her romantic life from him, even when he was more of an active player in it himself.

"What did I say about nosiness, Ilya?" she returns, her giggles subsiding.

"That is not a denial," Ilya observes.

"Ilya." Svetlana drops her hand from his arm and turns to face him. The smile is still on her face, but there's a seriousness there now. "As much as I love to discuss my life with you, for now, I think maybe you should focus a bit more on yourself, wouldn't you agree?"

He bites his tongue. It bothers him when there's something going on that he's not privy to, but he also knows he's not entitled to something Svetlana doesn't want to give him yet. As

for the rest of her comment…she's not wrong about that either. He elects to drop it.

"And speaking of your life," Svetlana carries on, looking him up and down. "Your phone hasn't been ringing as we've been standing here. Did you block Alexei for good?"

Ilya grits his teeth at the name and shakes his head. "He has stopped calling for now. Probably got tired of it, but he will start again in a few days like always."

"That was a bad spell of phone calls last week," she says, eyes concerned. "Is it because it's been a year since—?"

"Yes," Ilya cuts her off. "Let us not talk about this now, please. You said there's a boardgame room?"

She nods, immediately letting it go at his request. "Yeah, it's over here. You don't want a drink?"

"Not tonight."

"And you're not wondering where Jane is?"

He is very much wondering that, and his eyes have darted around to look for Hollander since he walked in the door. But right now, he doesn't see the benefit in trying to approach him. The last time he did that at a party, it hadn't exactly gone according to plan. He's not looking for a repeat performance, and after what happened at the challenge, he doubts Hollander is either.

"Just take me to wherever drunk people are playing Scrabble."

The boardgame room is the easiest space to be in at Svetlana's parties, and for that reason, he had wondered if Hollander would be there. But gratefully, Ilya assesses quickly as he sits down around the Scrabble board, Hollander is not in here.

Scrabble has become a guilty pleasure of Ilya's. Any game is fun to compete in, even board games. Scrabble, he's found, is an entertaining way to practice his English, and sometimes he can get away with sneaking in Russian words and winning the game that way. Tonight, this is about all he finds himself interested in doing, rather than joining the louder part of the party outside.

Svetlana stays with him to play two rounds of the game. She wins the first one with a rather brilliant use of the word "conciliate" which Ilya had been convinced was not a real word until she pulled out her Dictionary app, grinning at him triumphantly.

conciliate:
/kən'sɪlieɪt/
1. to overcome the distrust or hostility of; placate; win over.

Ilya had demanded a rematch after that, a rematch both of them had lost to one of the ZBZ sisters sitting with them. When Ilya insists on another round, because it is still very necessary

for him to even the score between then, Svetlana turns him down.

“I would entertain you all night if I could, Ilya,” she says. “But I have to be a good host.”

“You’re being a good host to *me*,” Ilya says pointedly.

“And you are not my only guest, darling.” She pats him on the head. “Enjoy yourself without me.”

He begrudgingly lets her go without further complaint. Though he would prefer to keep playing this game with a friend rather than people he doesn’t know. Absently he wonders if she’s off to see whoever this mysterious person who interrupts their phone calls might be.

Ilya stays glued to his seat at the Scrabble board. Others come and go, Marleau even stops by for a round despite being terrible at Scrabble, and he keeps playing. He wins twice and is currently going for his third. Normally he isn’t one to stay in one room at a party completely sober for this long, but he finds himself unnerved by the thought of what he might find if he leaves this room. Or rather, who he might run into.

Hollander always sought out the quietest spaces to be in at parties. At this moment, Ilya understands why.

“*Pryzhok!”* he exclaims, placing all of his letter pieces on the board and throwing his hands in the air in celebration.

“*What?* That’s not a word.” The Theta Xi brother who had just joined the Scrabble group is looking down at the word he just spelled, completely perplexed.

“Is Russian word.” Ilya tells him smugly, having successfully spelled it with the English alphabet.

“We can use *Russian* words?”

“We let him last round—”

“Okay, if he can use Russian, I can use French!”

Ilya breaks up the argument. “I win with Russian word. Next round, we use all languages we know, yes?”

Everyone nods in agreement at that, and Ilya is amused at the thought of all the different languages on one Scrabble board. They’ll have to do a lot of checking the online dictionary to prove the words are real. They take all the pieces off the board and start setting up for the next round. The game is fun, though looking around at the group of strangers, he wishes Svetlana were still here. Or—

“Uh, Ilya?”

Ilya turns his head at the familiar voice. Troy is standing there, looking down at him with his brow furrowed.

“Troy, hey.” Ilya is somewhat concerned by the freshman’s expression. He hadn’t seen him this evening. He’s pretty sure he showed up to the party earlier than he did. “Everything good?”

Troy bites his lip. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Ilya gets up from the couch and tells the Scrabble players to go ahead with this round without him. He has the impression from Troy’s demeanor that this might take more than a minute. He takes him by the arm and pulls him to the corner of the room where it’s quieter.

“What is it?”

“It’s Shane,” Troy whispers, eyes looking around them nervously. “He doesn’t drink but he’s —and he wouldn’t listen to me and I can’t find Hayden—”

“*Where?”*

Troy, hearing his tone, turns around, leading Ilya through the party and in the direction of the den. Of course, this is the room where Hollander would be. Typically, it’s the place for anyone to sneak weed if they’re looking to smoke. Ilya tries not to panic at the implication in Troy’s words about Hollander. Hollander drinking at all is always an event, but Hollander having a single drink is obviously not why Troy came to get him.

He braces himself as they open the door.

Gratefully, he isn’t met with Hollander strung up to the ceiling or worse. Rather, there’s a small group circled around the coffee table, a bottle in the middle. Ilya spots Hollander right away. He’s at the far end of the table, lounging on the floor, his head on the shoulder of the girl next to him, and his shirt is off.

The scene is strange, but Ilya sorts it out when one of the circle members spins the bottle. It lands on the girl across from her. They lean over the table to kiss and the one who had done the spinning asks a question Ilya has grown familiar with at university. It seems the group is playing some combination of spin the bottle and truth or dare. Ilya deduces that one of Hollander’s dares had been to take off his shirt, and given his obvious state of inebriation, he was apparently happy to oblige.

“He stood on his head on a dare a minute ago,” Troy tells him. “Maybe I’m overreacting, but I’ve never seen him—”

Ilya doesn’t need to hear more as he rounds the room to make his way to Hollander. It’s readily apparent to him that Hollander is quite drunk. He had just slurred his words, something Ilya had never heard him do before, when commenting on whatever truth that girl had shared. His posture is also horrid, barely sitting up from the floor. He’s not entirely blacked out, like Ilya often sees around the Kappa Tau house, but he’s at the stage when Ilya usually drags his brothers up to their bedrooms for the night.

Obviously, Hollander decided to get drunk tonight, but Ilya can guess, just from looking at him shirtless on the floor, slurring his words, that he’ll have some regret about this tomorrow.

What's worse, he doesn't see any of Hollander's friends in here, and it is very much time for Hollander to be going home before he finds himself passed out on the floor, which would only mortify him further.

"Looks fun," Ilya says, crouching next to Hollander when he finally reaches him. Hollander's head lolls over to look at him, apparently having not noticed he was in the room until now. "Enjoying yourself?"

Hollander squints at him, like he's still trying to register his words, or even who he is. "*Ilya*." He drags out the letter "a" in his name for a few seconds. "Are we talking?"

Ilya ignores how nice it feels to hear Hollander call him by his first name, knowing that he only did it because he's drunk. "Right now we are, yes," Ilya responds, deciding to go with the most literal answer, not sure if Hollander's brain can compute the current state of their relationship right now.

"Hm." Hollander tries to reach over for a nearby beer bottle, presumably his but Ilya doesn't know for sure.

"No," Ilya says, taking the bottle in his hand and placing it out of Hollander's reach. "I think you have had enough."

"Boring," Hollander huffs, eyes annoyed. "Why are you boring?"

"One of us has to be." Ilya can't help but chuckle. "Where's your shirt?"

Hollander's chin drops to his chest and he looks down at himself, eyes wide, as if he's only registering now that he's not wearing a shirt.

"It's gone," he says, like this is a revelation to him.

That's not particularly helpful. Ilya taps the shoulder of the girl Hollander is leaning against, who has been listening attentively to the game as it progresses. She looks at him.

"Where is his shirt?" He points at Hollander.

"He has to keep it off until the game is over," she answers with a laugh, clearly pretty drunk herself, though not nearly as bad as Hollander. "That was the dare."

"Do not care," Ilya tells her, trying to sound stern and break through some of that buzzy and light energy surrounding her. "Where is it?"

She seems to snap out of it a bit then, eyes drifting to the other side of the room and pointing to the chair in the corner. "I think he threw it over there."

Ilya walks over to the corner and indeed there is a shirt on the floor next to the chair. Good, because getting Hollander out of the house without his shirt on would only draw more attention to them, and Ilya is hoping to mitigate any further embarrassment. This kind of thing wouldn't bother most frat brothers, in fact it's a daily routine for most of them, but Hollander is different.

“Your turn again, Shane!” someone from behind him shouts.

When Ilya turns back around, he sees Hollander reaching for the bottle in the middle of the table, ready to spin it. He crosses the room in two wide strides.

“No, no, game is over for him.” Ilya takes hold of Hollander’s arm as he tries, in a rather uncoordinated manner, to spin the bottle.

The response to his announcement is drunken jeers and boos. He couldn’t care less.

As the game moves on, Ilya manages to get Hollander’s head through his shirt, but for the rest he’ll need help. He taps his arms, trying to get him to cooperate with him.

“What are you doing?” Hollander asks sleepily, raising one of his arms like Ilya wants.

“Putting your shirt on,” Ilya answers, pulling his arm through.

“But why?”

Ilya looks up to find Hollander staring at him. His eyes are cloudy and unfocused from the alcohol, so Ilya knows he’s having to put a lot of effort into just keeping his gaze on him. He thinks on his question and doesn’t believe he has an answer that will satisfy him, not while drunk or sober.

He pulls his other arm through the sleeve. “Let’s stand up now, okay?”

“I was having fun,” Hollander says, head lolling back to look at the bottle on the table where the game is continuing. Thank God for drunken minds, he’s probably already forgotten the question he just asked.

“I’m sure you were.” Ilya nods, trying to bring his attention back to him without touching his face. “But is not so fun when you cannot move well or think straight, is it?”

Hollander contemplates this, as much as he can in this state, and makes a noise that sounds close enough to agreement. But he’s still not looking at him. Ilya reaches around to the back of his neck and gives him a soft squeeze.

“Hollander, I need you to listen now. Can you do that?”

This does bring his attention back to him, his eyes finding his, looking just a little more alert now. He stares for a moment before nodding.

“I can.”

Ilya has to stop himself from smiling. “Can you stand up?”

Hollander nods and starts to get to his feet, but he almost immediately stumbles. Ilya grabs his shoulders, holding him up, and directs one of Hollander’s arms around his waist so he can hold onto him there. Ilya’s eyes dart around the room, briefly worried about people seeing them publicly, but then quickly realizing that they are two frat brothers, rival houses be

damned, and there is absolutely nothing scandalizing about one drunk frat brother needing to be helped out of a party. This happens every day on Greek Row.

Holding onto each other, Ilya walks Hollander out of the room. His head falls against Ilya's shoulder, resting there. Ilya tries not to think about how easily Hollander is apparently able to trust him like this.

He manages to get them both out of the room and begin making his way down the hall without too much difficulty, Hollander following his steps and keeping hold of his waist. He has the door in sight when they're interrupted.

"*Shane!* Are you alright?"

Pike is there, having come from behind. He parks himself in front of them and halts their progress. Hollander lifts his head from Ilya's shoulder.

"Hay." Hollander drags out the "a" in his friend's name the same way he did with Ilya's name, apparently happy to see him.

"Hey, buddy," Pike says, one hand coming up to Hollander's shoulder, looking him over. "You okay there?"

Hollander nods, head nearly thrown all the way back as he does.

Troy is also there, and Ilya realizes he had forgotten all about him. He makes sense of this now, assuming that Troy left the room earlier when he showed Ilya where Hollander was to keep looking for Pike and finally found him.

Pike eyes him suspiciously, then looks at Troy. "Why did you get *him?"*

At these words, an unexpected surge of animosity for the man bursts in Ilya's chest, unlike anything he's felt before when Pike has merely annoyed him with his stupid comments or lame insults. This is what Pike chooses to say right now? Hollander always shows up to parties with Pike, and Pike had been missing when Hollander was nearly passed out drunk in a room with only Troy for help, and somehow, he's directing his anger at *him?*

"Is not Troy's fault or my fault if you cannot look after your friends, Pike," Ilya bites out with as much venom as he can muster before Troy can say a word.

Pike goes red to the tip of his ears, at first in outrage, then hurt, and then guilt washes over every inch of his face. It's so earnest that Ilya momentarily regrets what he said, but he doesn't take it back.

"I—I was with Jackie, and he doesn't drink and this has never—" Pike's eyes look wet and Ilya is taken aback, never having seen Pike in this state before. But he wipes his face roughly and those hints of tears are gone. He comes closer and brings his hand up to Hollander's cheek, trying to make eye contact with someone who is still not all the way there. "I'm sorry, Shane."

Those words and the tension don't seem to compute in Hollander's brain. He looks at Pike now like he's seeing him for the first time, like he's forgotten he just greeted him two minutes ago. "Hay, 'm tired."

"Yeah, yeah, of course you are." Pike nods and moves to Hollander's side, taking his free arm and bringing it up and around his shoulders. Hollander holds onto him there. "Let's get you home."

When Ilya doesn't let go of Hollander, Pike looks at him.

"I can take him, Rozanov," Pike says, his voice has softened significantly.

Ilya shakes his head. "Omega Chi house is down the street. We take my car. Is just outside." Once again, he's grateful to be right next door to Mu Gamma. His car is parked close by.

Pike, no surprise, looks resistant to the idea, but Ilya has already decided on this course of action. The idea of letting Pike walk a half-conscious Hollander all the way back to Omega Chi house is unacceptable to him. Pike doesn't even look entirely sober himself, though far more lucid than Hollander.

"That sounds like a good idea, Hayden," Troy jumps in when it looks like Pike is about to turn him down. Ilya gives him a grateful look.

Pike sighs, seeing reason. "Okay, yeah. Thanks, Rozanov."

Huh. That's the first time Ilya can remember Pike ever thanking him for something. Not that he's done a whole lot, he can admit, that Pike would be thanking him for.

"Thanks, Troy," Pike says to him as they move away from him.

Ilya gives Troy a nod, and the relieved looking pledge finally drops his shoulders and walks away.

They manage to find their footing with Hollander, though his feet are dragging. He's still conscious and keeping his eyes open, but it's apparent that his mind is barely with them. Ilya is on his right side and Pike on his left, neither of them taking too much of his weight but he leans more heavily on Ilya, his head falling against his shoulder again.

When they're a few steps away from the door, another voice stops them in their tracks.

"Hey, is that—Shane, are you okay?"

Rose is looking over the staircase railing, apparently coming down as they were just about to get out of the house. Convenient timing. Ilya sighs and stops, hoping he's not going to have to argue the same thing all over again.

"Rose, he'll be alright," Pike tells her as she comes down the stairs and steps in front of them. Ilya is grateful he jumped in to speak. "He just had a rough night."

“He doesn’t have those much,” Rose says, leaning closer to cup Hollander’s cheek. “Shane, honey, are you feeling alright?”

Hollander lifts his head from Ilya’s shoulder and into her touch. He smiles, slow and lazy. “Rose is here.”

She returns his smile, soft and sweet. His attention drawn to her lips, Ilya notices her lipstick is smudged, and from that he figures he knows what she had been doing upstairs. The perfect Rose Landry would never walk around with her lipstick smudged unless… Well, under other circumstances, he might chuckle at this, at deducing that Rose Landry of all people was hooking up with someone in one of the Mu Gamma bedrooms. Greek Row gossip would love that one. But for the moment, he can’t bring himself to care in the least about Rose’s sex life.

“Want me to come with you, Shane?” Rose is asking him.

“*No*.” Once again, Hollander draws out the vowel in this word. “’m fine. I swear. You stay here. Stay here with your *secret*.” This last word he whispers, but loudly.

Rose chuckles, clearly uncaring about whatever it is Hollander is getting at. Ilya wonders if it’s something to do with what he just figured out she was doing upstairs. She looks at Hayden and then at Ilya, and it only seems to hit her then that Ilya is standing there with Hollander. A startled expression crosses her face, but it disappears just as quickly.

“You two get him home.”

She’s looking at him, so he feels obligated to answer. “We will.”

Rose gives him a nod, looking appreciative, and it’s strange to be looked at by Hollander’s friends with anything but distaste.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?” Rose tells Hollander,

Hollander leans forward then and gives her a kiss on the cheek. It’s soft and chaste and so obviously friendly, but still Ilya has to try not to scowl at the sight.

“I love you, Rose,” Hollander says, the words falling out of his mouth so easily. The simplest confession in the world.

Ilya bristles, an unwanted feeling.

“I know, Shane,” Rose says, and she looks like she’s heard those words from him many times before. “You go get some sleep now.”

Rose watches them as they take him out of the house, but she doesn’t follow. Ilya is grateful when they’re out of her sight, even if that was bar none the most positive interaction he’s ever had with Rose Landry. He can never rid himself of the anxiety he feels around her, being around someone who knows everything, but from the other side of the story. It’s exhausting.

“Where’s your car?” Pike asks when they’re out on the porch.

Ilya points to his Porsche, only a few cars down from the Mu Gamma house. Silver and obvious next to the other cars parked along the street. Pike stares at it and sighs and they begin to work their way down the steps.

“Too far,” Hollander mumbles out, and Ilya isn’t sure if he’s referring to the Omega Chi house or the vehicle just a short walk away.

“Rozanov’s fancy Porsche is right over there, Shane,” Pike tells him. “We’ll help you get there.”

Hollander just hums.

Glancing sideways at him, it suddenly becomes very important to Ilya that Hollander remain conscious for this journey. “Try to keep your eyes open, Hollander,” Ilya tells him. “Have to stay alert for Greek Month challenge tomorrow, right?”

These words seem to bring more awareness to his face, his chin lifting. No longer about to fall asleep against Ilya’s shoulder.

“Did…” Pike’s voice distracts him, and Ilya looks over to see that he’s squinting at him. “Did you just call it—?"

“*Puke*,” Hollander bursts out suddenly, stopping dead in his tracks. “I’m gonna—”

Hollander thrusts his body forward, so he’s facing down and his head is well away from his body. Ilya and Pike keep hold of his arms, so he doesn’t go tumbling forward on the pavement and they wait, expecting to see the contents of Hollander’s stomach all over the clean sidewalk any second.

Nothing happens. Hollander just breathes heavily for a few seconds until the wave of nausea seems to subside. Ilya, unthinking, rubs his lower back before remembering who he’s with. He glances at Pike, who doesn’t seem to have noticed, staring at Hollander’s head.

“No puke,” Hollander announces, straightening back up. He looks relieved.

With Hollander able to walk again, they close the distance to Ilya’s car, and he quietly hopes that Hollander’s urge to empty his stomach doesn’t revisit him while they’re on the way to the Omega Chi house. He decides he’ll be driving very slowly.

Ilya unlocks the car, glad that he always keeps his keys on him, and Pike slides into the backseat first, holding Hollander’s arm and pulling him along with him. Ilya presses Hollander’s head down with his hand so he doesn’t bump it while sitting down. Carefully, they’re able to get Hollander seated, and Ilya detangles their arms from each other, closing the door behind them.

“Try to keep him awake,” Ilya says as he slides into the driver’s seat and closes the door.

Ilya watches the two of them in the rearview mirror as he turns the engine on and pulls off of the curb, Hollander rests his head against Pike’s shoulder and Ilya thinks he’s muttering incoherently before he makes out the words.

“’m sorry, Hay.” Hollander’s voice is sad.

“You’re—Shane, how many times have you had to pick me up from the floor at a party?” Pike asks, voice incredulous.

Hollander shrugs dopily in answer.

“I don’t know either, but it’s a *lot*, man.”

Ilya stays silent as he listens to the exchange, eyes moving back and forth from the road to the rearview mirror. There’s no one else driving or walking on the street right now, but he’s being cautious.

“*I’m* sorry, Shane,” Pike says, repeating his earlier apology. Then he drops his voice so Ilya can barely hear, maybe intentionally. “I know it’s been tough for you lately. Shouldn’t have left you alone.”

That comment spikes Ilya’s curiosity. It’s no surprise to him that Hollander may have been showing signs of the tumultuous couple of weeks they’ve both had. Ilya has always found Hollander easy to read, an open book to him most of the time. While he doesn’t think much of Pike’s intelligence, the two of them are friends, and even Pike has apparently noticed a change.

More than that, Ilya has wondered for a time how much Pike knows. Not as much as Rose, he’s certain of that. He is in the dark about Ilya’s relationship with Hollander, he knows that without a doubt. But has Hollander told him other things? Anything at all? Ilya doesn’t know.

Looking at the two of them now, Pike’s arm around his shoulders and looking at him with such affection, Ilya is suddenly hit with the bizarre thought that Hollander should open up to him.

Maybe not about me though. He hates me enough already.

“’s okay.” Hollander turns his head so he can speak more clearly, eyes opening to look at Pike. “I love you, Hay.”

The words fall so easily out of his mouth, just like they did with Rose, and just as when he heard him say those words to Rose, Ilya feels a pang of irritation in his chest. The momentary fondness he found himself feeling for Pike, momentary insanity probably, is gone.

“I love you too, man.” He pats Hollander’s knee.

“We’re here,” he tells them, noticing the strictness in his voice. He finds a spot on the street in front of the house next door to Omega Chi.

When Ilya opens the backseat door, Hollander’s hands poke out, arms outstretched, waiting to be helped out of the car. Ilya leans down to take hold of him and pull him out, Hollander’s arms wrapping around his neck. Once they’re both standing, they’re chest to chest and Hollander’s head drops back onto his shoulder.

Ilya is able to put some distance between their bodies as Pike gets out of the car, removing one of his arms from around his neck so he can hold onto Pike as well.

Pike places himself under Hollander's other arm and looks at him. "I can take him from here, it's fine."

Ilya has to clench his jaw to stop from rejecting this idea too fast. He could just leave, let Pike take him now. But he doesn't want to. Ever since he saw Hollander on the floor in the den, he's been single minded in his focus on getting him back in his house, in his room tonight. It's unrelenting.

"I help him to his room," Ilya says, trying to sound casual. "Is fine. I want to."

He immediately regrets those last few words, worried about what they might give away. But they're out there now, and he's not going to pretend like he's changed his mind and hand Hollander over to Pike just so he can take the words back.

Helping his cause, Hollander is still leaning bodily into him, and even Pike looks like he knows it'll be a challenge to take him on his own.

Pike doesn't seem to think much on his words, nodding in agreement after a few seconds. They walk to the house, Hollander slowing their pace but keeping up well enough. When they cross the threshold into the Omega Chi house, Ilya remembers the last time he was here. At the start of his junior year when he followed Hollander here, knocked on the door to his room, and they—

He holds back a smile at the memory, especially when he glances sideways at Pike. The man has no idea how close his sheets came to being defiled that night. If he had it his way, it would have happened. But Hollander chose not to follow his worst instincts. What a shame.

"*No*," Hollander whines once they reach the foot of the stairs.

Ilya wishes Pike wasn't here. He would just carry Hollander up the stairs if they were alone. He doesn't see anyone around anyway.

"Come on, Shane," Pike says, leaning down to grab Hollander's knee, lifting his leg up. "Foot on the stair, there we go."

Ilya figures if they have to pick up Hollander's feet the whole way, then they're going to be here all night. But after the first two steps, Hollander starts walking on his own, perhaps also realizing, even through the drunken fog, that Pike picking up his feet for every step of the way is slow-going labor.

By the time they finally reach the door to Hollander's bedroom, Ilya feels like he's walked a hundred miles in the desert since the Mu Gamma house. He feels his shoulders start to relax just knowing he'll have Hollander in his own bed in a few seconds.

Ilya kicks his shoes off as they enter the room, following Pike to the bed. He hasn't been in this room before, but it's not unlike how he remembers Hollander's previous shared room in

the Omega Chi house. Organized, clean, and Hollander's bed neatly made. The only sign of any disorder is on his desk. A few papers strewn about like he had been working just before the party.

"Okay, buddy, let's get you into bed," Pike tells him, sounding tired himself.

Both of them turn around and seat themselves on the bed, Hollander in the middle following them. Once he's seated, they both stand up to let him lie back. Ilya feels Hollander's fingers twisting into his collar for a moment before Ilya shrugs him off, stepping back and allowing Pike to pick up Hollander's legs and place them on the bed.

Ilya doesn't particularly like allowing Pike to take the lead, but under the circumstances, he has to.

Hollander mumbles out a word neither of them can understand.

"What's that?" Ilya asks him softly.

"*Shoes*," Hollander speaks up. His feet, still in their shoes, are wiggling at the end of the bed in protest.

Pike and Ilya both grab one of the shoes and tug them off his feet. They knock into each other as they do this, and when they look at each other, Pike's face is a cross between confusion, probably still about Ilya's continued presence, and amusement, Ilya supposes that's about the whole situation.

When they get Hollander's shoes off, Pike looks at him again and takes the shoe from his hand. "Thanks."

Two thank you's from Hayden Pike in one night. It's some kind of miracle.

"You said that already," Ilya reminds him.

"I'm saying it again." Pike turns around and moves for Hollander's closet with the shoes in hand.

Ilya takes the opportunity, with Pike's back turned, to move closer to Hollander, leaning over him where his head rests against the pillow. "How do you feel?"

"Mm." All the answer he gets. His eyes wide and staring at him.

Ilya stands up straighter and looks over his shoulder. "Pike, do you have Advil—?"

Without warning, Ilya is seized around his middle and pulled onto the bed. He's so caught off guard that he can't stop himself from tumbling forward, bodily on top of Hollander, his face landing in the pillow next to his head and their chests pressed together. Hollander's arms are still wrapped around him, holding him in place, and Ilya is bewildered at where this sudden burst of strength has come from.

As Hollander is humming contentedly in his ear, Ilya starts panicking.

“*Hollander*,” he hisses, trying to push himself up. “Hollander, we’re not—”

“Holy shit.”

Pike’s eyes are locked on them, his mouth hanging open. Ilya can’t move, can’t breathe. Hollander’s head lolls to the side to see what he’s staring at, clearly not registering what is going on.

“I’m such a fucking idiot,” Pike breathes out.

Well. On that, Ilya can’t say he disagrees. But his mind is rallying now, knowing that he has to try to salvage this if he can. For Hollander’s sake. Personally, he doesn’t really give a shit what Pike knows about him. But Hollander does, he’s certain of that.

“He is drunk,” Ilya says, reaching around his back to pry Hollander’s arms off of him. They go easily now, maybe as he’s starting to realize what’s happened. He stands up from the bed. “Is nothing.”

Pike just shakes his head. “No, you—you’re the one he’s talked about.”

Hollander talking about him to Pike comes as a surprise, though he apparently did so without giving his name.

“I’m not—”

“*Ilya*…”

“You helped me get him home. You called it Greek Month earlier, only Shane calls it that.” Pike’s brain is clearly running a thousand miles an hour right now.

“I just try to help him tonight! You are crazy—"

“*Ilya*.”

Pike’s eyes go huge. “Oh my God, you spoke *Russian* to him the other night!”

“I didn’t—"

“*Ilya! I’m gonna—!”*

Ilya’s brain finally grasps that Hollander has been saying his name for the last minute, and when he looks over at him, his hand is covering his mouth, very obviously about to puke all over himself. Ilya lunges for him, grabs his shoulders and hauls him to the edge of the bed so he doesn’t end up wearing whatever it is he ate for dinner plus all the booze he drank.

The distressing sound of someone vomiting comes just a second later, and Ilya is expecting to see the carpet next to the bed covered in it, but Pike, when he was out of Ilya’s sight, had grabbed Hollander’s small trashcan and put it under his mouth just in time, saving the carpet. A heroic feat. Hollander would have been devastated to wake up tomorrow to find his carpet ruined.

Instinctively, Ilya starts rubbing Hollander's back as he continues to puke into the trashcan. Hollander is going through what Ilya has plenty of times at university, but he knows he'll at least feel better when it's over. After a few seconds of this, he stills when he realizes what he's doing, and who he's doing it in front of.

When he looks back up, he finds Pike watching his every move.

That's it then. They're caught. The rest of Pike's evidence he could have played off, but he knows there's absolutely no explaining away the way he just put his hand on Hollander to soothe him while he's sick to his stomach. Not when he and Hollander are two people who supposedly hate each other. It would be laughable to even try.

It leaves him unsure what to say as Hollander's stomach starts to take mercy on him, and he just spits out what remains in his mouth.

"I will take care of him," Ilya says quietly, resuming rubbing his back. "You can go."

Pike's eyebrows draw together and he practically throws his head back, looking baffled. There's an edge to it, not a pleasant one. "Now that I know—" He swallows and his voice steadies. "You think I would leave you alone with him when he's like *this?"*

These words make every nerve in Ilya's body stand up, his spine stiffening as he slowly turns his head back to look at him. All of the earlier amity between them has completely evaporated in the air. Ilya only feels their familiar hostility now, and he is very much hoping that this is a language barrier problem, and that Pike did not just imply what he thinks he implied. If it's not, Ilya fears for how much this could escalate, his fingers twitching.

"What does that mean, *Pike?"* His voice is cold in a way that shocks even him.

Pike does not back down an inch. In fact, he straightens up, eyes fixed into a glare. "You fucking *know* what I—"

A pillow flies across the room.

Both of them look to the source and find Hollander, still on his stomach leaning over the bed, his arm positioned awkwardly after chucking the pillow from his bed. He's looking back and forth between them, eyes tired and sad.

"Don't fight," he pleads, and his gaze lands on Ilya. "*Please?"*

All of the will to fight with Pike drains out of him at the word. His body suddenly going slack again. He looks over at Pike and sees that some of his anger has left him as well.

Ilya feels a wave of exhaustion coming over him then. The events of the night had been more than he was expecting when he stepped out of the Kappa Tau house tonight. He suspects Pike and especially Hollander are feeling the same and determines that they all need to take steps to get some sleep now.

"Hollander," Ilya says, breaking into the silence. "Do you want to brush your teeth?"

Hollander nods and lets Ilya help him out of the bed. Pike, Ilya notices, doesn't protest. He just stands aside and watches them.

Ilya keeps his arm around Hollander as he takes him to his bathroom, grateful that house council members usually get their own bathrooms. Hollander is still drunk, but he seems to have some more awareness now that he got the worst of it out of his system by puking. He actually takes the time to wash his face before brushing his teeth thoroughly. Ilya just watches him as he does it, ready to lead him to the toilet in case he needs to puke again.

Thankfully, Hollander does not need to puke again, and Ilya leads him out of the bathroom. Pike goes in as they exit, trashcan in hand, and Ilya figures he's going to clean it out. Approaching his bed again, Hollander unbuttons and unzips his jeans, tugging them down his legs and off before folding them and placing them on his dresser.

Ilya could almost laugh that he still finds the energy to do this even after the night he's had.

Pike is out of the bathroom as Hollander climbs back into bed. Ilya is next to him and is about to step away when Hollander takes hold of his wrist and tries to pull him into the bed with him.

It's obvious to Ilya that Hollander is not asking for anything except for Ilya to be in bed with him, to hold him. But still, he's unsure. After the last few weeks, he fears what this might mean, even worse, he fears how Hollander might feel about it tomorrow if they do this.

But when Hollander looks up at him, his eyes wide and beseeching, he knows he can't say no.

Ilya looks over at Pike, wondering if he's going to try to stop him. But he just stands there, watching them. He doesn't speak or try to come in between them. Ilya decides that's enough of a cue for him to climb into bed.

He gets under the covers with him, and Hollander immediately grabs his arm and pulls it around himself, intertwining their fingers in a way they have not done for a long time.

It's so easy. Familiar. His body remembers this well, remembers how Hollander's body feels against his, folded into him like a puzzle piece. He can tell Hollander feels it too, his breathing slowing to a calm rhythm as they do this for the first time in what feels like far too long.

Ilya looks up at the sound of Pike's footsteps. At first, he thinks he's leaving, but then he realizes that he's picking up the pillow that Hollander threw earlier. Moving to the wall next to the closet, Pike sits down, placing the pillow behind his back, clearly settling himself in for the night. Ready to keep watch.

It should prickle Ilya, anger him even that Pike feels the need to do this, that he would think so little of him. But as he looks at him, he realizes a very simple truth, and one related to their earlier argument as well, the one that they nearly came to blows over. If the circumstances were only slightly different, if it was Svetlana here drunk out of her mind and Pike in the room with her, would Ilya leave them alone together?

No. Not in a million years. Ilya knows this with all his heart.

And just like that, some of the resentment for Pike is gone, replaced with something that feels like appreciation. There Pike is, sitting there watching his best friend in bed with someone else because he's worried, because he wants to take care of him. Shane Hollander has good friends. Good. He deserves them.

It's hard for Ilya to imagine anyone not wanting to take care of Hollander.

"Hm," Hollander hums against him, sounding barely awake.

"Hm?" Ilya returns, bringing his face closer, not wanting Pike to hear. "You need to get up again?"

"No," he whispers firmly, tightening his grip on Ilya's fingers.

"Good." Ilya can't help himself from pressing a kiss into his hair. "Now sleep, sweetheart."

"Thank you," Hollander grumbles out, sounding as sincere as he can in this state.

"Shh." Ilya does appreciate the thank you, especially given that he still has no idea what tomorrow will look like. It might be the last thank you he ever hears from Hollander. It's strange. He's been angry with Hollander all week, hurt by what happened after that Greek Week challenge. But ever since he found him in the den at Mu Gamma, that anger hadn't come to mind even once. Even now, thinking about it again, he doesn't feel it anymore.

Hollander hums again, mumbling. Ilya strains to understand him.

"—ve you, Ilya."

His breathing stops. "What was that?"

Hollander can't tell him. He's already asleep.

Ilya wakes to a gentle tap on his shoulder.

Cracking his eyes open, he's faced with black hair, and his brain tries to sort out how exactly he's come to be here. Slowly, the previous night returns to him, and the face of the person he's holding comes into view as he opens his eyes completely. Hollander is in his arms and has been since he pulled Ilya into bed with him last night.

The fear over what will happen when he wakes up is starting to creep over him when he feels the tap on his shoulder again. Looking behind him, Pike is standing there, and now he also remembers that Pike had spent the night in the room as well, though on the floor.

Strangest sleepover he's ever been a part of, that's for sure.

"Hey," Pike whispers, glancing at Hollander as if to be sure he doesn't disturb him. "The guys will start waking up soon. You should go."

Blinking himself awake, Ilya checks the window and judges that it's still very early, the sun only just rising. Looking back at Pike, he gives him a nod. Pike steps away, and Ilya is struck by how he had woken him up and spoken to him. He hadn't done it with any enmity or made Ilya feel like he was being thrown out. He was only telling him to go because, Ilya knows, if the other Omega Chi brothers see him coming out of Hollander's room early in the morning, they will have questions. Questions none of them want to answer.

Very slowly, Ilya unwraps himself from Hollander, doing his best not to disturb him. When his arm slides off, Hollander gives a soft hum in his sleep, as if sensing the loss. Ilya tries to compensate as he stands up from the bed, wrapping the comforter around him. Looking over his sleeping form, he can't stop himself from sliding his fingers through his hair, not sure if he'll ever get another opportunity to do so.

Hollander makes another soft sound but doesn't wake up. That's how Ilya leaves him.

Pike is already standing by the door, still watching. Ilya puts his shoes on and follows him out. They close the door behind them and make their way, quietly, out of the house. It's too early for most of these guys to be awake, particularly on a Saturday morning, unless they're early risers or off for a morning run. They avoid anyone who may be milling about during the wee hours and escape into the safety outside, back on Greek Row.

They don't say anything to each other as they move to the sidewalk, trying to put a safe distance between Ilya and the house. Ilya turns in the direction of his car, figuring he should probably move that back to the Kappa Tau house as well.

"How long?" Pike breaks the silence.

They both pause on the sidewalk, far enough away from the house now.

"Freshman year." Ilya sees no point in lying.

"Jesus Christ." Pike brings his hand to his eyes, rubbing them. "I'm fucking blind."

"Maybe little bit," Ilya agrees. "But we were careful, most of the time."

"Does Rose know?" Pike asks, looking him over.

Ilya shrugs, though he is sure of the answer to this, he feels that it's further outside of his business to tell anyone. "You should talk to Hollander."

"I don't know if he'll want to." Pike looks at the house. "I mean, he's seemed upset all week, which I guess explains why he got blasted last night, and if he's been seeing you for four years and has never—"

"It's not…" Ilya cuts him off, then stops himself. Not knowing how to even explain what's going on between them. He goes with simplicity. "We're not…not anymore."

Pike raises his eyebrows. "That's not what it looked like last night."

"Doesn't matter to me what you think." He starts inching for his car again.

“What happened then? Why’d it end?” Pike is reminding him right now of why he’s annoyed him so much since the day they met.

“Ask *Hollander*.” The last thing he wants to do right now is explain what happened last year to Hayden fucking Pike. Besides, he’d probably deck him in the face if he did. It’s too early for that.

“Fine, *excuse* me,” Pike says, stepping back. “It’s just a lot to find out that you of all people are in love with my best friend—”

“Pike,” he bites out, a warning. “You don’t know what you’re—”

“I just watched you pet Shane’s *hair*, Rozanov.” Pike throws his arms into the air, emphasizing his point. “Please don’t insult me right now.”

He swallows. That is a lot to ask, and he can’t exactly deny that very true accusation. So, he goes with what might end this conversation the fastest. “Okay.”

“Good.” Pike’s shoulders slump. “Thank you for last night.”

Another thank you. He never thought he’d get a single genuine thank you from Pike in his whole life. Here he is with three thank you’s within twelve hours.

“You’re welcome.”

“You two need to talk,” Pike tells him.

“I didn’t ask.”

“I’m telling you anyway.”

Ilya wants to say that he asked Hollander to talk the other night and was denied bluntly and bitterly, but he doesn’t feel like arguing this with him. Instead, he tries another tactic, one that could be more fruitful.

“You should tell him that.”

“I kinda did…” He scratches the back of his neck. “When I didn’t know who he was talking about.”

“You ask earlier what happened.” Ilya finds these words tumbling out of his mouth without his permission. “The answer is I fucked up. Then we make stupid bet about Greek Month and we fuck up even more.”

“That’s why he’s been so weird since Greek Week started.” All of it is clicking in Pike’s head now.

“You are right.” Those words taste like vinegar in his mouth. “I should talk to him. I try. Is up to him. If he will not, I understand.”

Pike nods, thinking over the words and accepting them.

“I should go,” Ilya says, turning for his car again.

“Should we like…hug or something?” Pike asks.

“No.”

“Thank God.”

“Goodbye, Pike.” He moves around the car. “Hollander loves you. I do not know why, but he does. He will talk to you.”

“He’ll talk to you too,” Pike answers, his voice certain. “Because he also loves you.”

Chapter End Notes

Stay tuned for some answers in the next chapter.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 8: Wound

Chapter Notes

> It's been a very busy couple of weeks for me, so this chapter took some more time. Also because it's an important chapter, as you'll find out. I hope you enjoy and I remain committed to finishing this.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 2016

"We are truly living up to the spring break cliché tonight."

Shane's attention is drawn away from the fire and back to Rose, leaning her head on his shoulder next to him.

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"Come on, Shane." She lifts her head and looks at him, smiling. "Spring break. All of Greek Row descending on Nova Scotia to get drunk, lounge in the sun, play in the water, and now? Bonfire on the beach under the stars."

Shane chuckles, looking up at the sky, the smoke and sparks from the fire winding together in their ascent. This is the first year he's joined in the annual Greek Row spring break vacation. Usually, he's just gone home to see his parents. This year, Hayden had been adamant that he go on the trip with them, insisting that he had to celebrate Omega Chi's victory in Greek Week (third year in a row, he might add). So, he gave in. The trip has been exactly what he expected, and exactly how Rose is describing it. But it's not all rowdy parties and hangovers. It's a beautiful place too. He had never been to Nova Scotia, and he's finding he likes it. Plus, he gets the week with Rose and Hayden.

"Sounds like a movie," he answers Rose.

"One I should star in," she says thoughtfully, resting her head back on his shoulder. "What genre will it be? Coming of age romance? Slasher horror?"

He laughs. "Why horror?"

"Are you kidding? A bunch of university students on a beach together, drinking, and half of them hooking up with each other. That's catnip for horror directors. I wouldn't be surprised if there's a man with a hook for a hand watching us as we speak."

Rose knows too much about movies, but it's one of his favorite things about her. She's helped him out a lot with pop culture. He's seen a lot more movies because of her. Though he has no

idea who this hook handed murderer may be, or if she just made that up on the spot.

“Who would die first?” he asks, looking around at their surroundings. Theirs is not the only bonfire on the beach. This one is populated mostly by Omega Chis. After the exertions of the day, it’s a lazy scene. Most of the guys are just sitting around drinking and talking. JJ has his arms around a ZBZ sister Shane doesn’t know. He thinks her name is Casey.

Rose doesn’t hesitate to reach out and point directly at Hayden, who is currently buried in Jackie’s neck, looking as pleased as he always does when he’s with his girlfriend. Shane’s not sure his lips have left Jackie’s body once since they sat down here.

Jackie had apparently caught this part of their conversation and starts laughing. Hayden pulls away to look at her.

“What?”

“You’re dying first in the horror movie, Hay.” Jackie is still laughing.

“What? Why?” He apparently heard enough of the conversation as well, even with his mouth attached to Jackie.

“You’re like a combination of two character archetypes who always die,” Rose tells him. “The stoner friend and the…” Rose trails off.

“The *what?”* Hayden’s eyes dart between the three of them.

“The slut, baby,” Jackie tells him sympathetically.

Hayden’s mouth drops open and he stares at them, eyes lingering on Shane as if he may come to his defense. But Shane keeps his mouth shut, trying to hold back a laugh.

“My own friends…calling me a slut.” Hayden’s eyes go big, and Shane can tell he’s teasing, much to his relief.

“We do it with love, Hay.” Jackie kisses his cheek. “And besides, you’re just horny. Not a slut anymore, really.”

“Okay, but I’m not a stoner! I only do that sometimes.”

“But you fit the archetype, so you’re still dying first,” Rose explains.

“I won’t forget this,” Hayden says, putting on a glare for all of them. “When a knife-wielding doll is chasing us down with a knife, I’ll remember this moment.”

Shane is pretty sure he knows that one. Chucky, he thinks. The possessed doll horror villain.

“Okay, who survives the horror movie?” Jackie asks, looking up at the sky with her finger on her chin.

“Rose does,” Shane says. He hasn’t seen many horror movies, so he doesn’t know the rules for who gets to survive, but he wants Rose to be the main character in this hypothetical one.

“No way.” Rose shakes her head. “I want an epic scream queen movie death. Think Sarah Michelle Gellar, Drew Barrymore, Paris Hilton…”

“Paris Hilton was in a horror movie?” The world of Hollywood is fascinating to Shane sometimes.

“I want an iconic chase or stalking scene that ends with my demise, the scene everyone remembers,” Rose muses with a smile, then she looks at him. “Shane, you can be the survivor. Sometimes a man is the last one alive. Like Ash in Evil Dead.”

“I don’t want to brag,” Shane says. “But I can run very fast.” That would be his only strategy if confronted with a masked killer.

“Okay, Hayden dies first, Rose dies in a big climactic scene, Shane survives,” Jackie rattles off. “Who’s the killer then?”

“That’s an easy one,” Hayden laughs out. “Hockey mask wearing killers are a horror movie staple. This killer will have a Russian accent too.”

Shane cracks a smile, all of them knowing who Hayden is talking about.

“The red paint incident will never be forgotten, will it, Hay?” Jackie asks him.

“Look, he was an asshole before that, and he’s been an asshole since then. It’s not just the paint thing.”

Shane thinks Hayden’s hatred of Rozanov has a lot more to do with the “pelted a balloon full of red paint right in his face” thing than anything else but he’ll keep quiet about that.

“The guy is built like a tank and could use his hockey stick as his weapon,” Rose says, brainstorming out loud. “Plus, he’s the enemy of two of our lead characters. Hayden, I think we have our movie pitch.”

As they laugh and the conversation moves on, Shane finds his gaze shifting to the Kappa Tau bonfire a few meters away. Rozanov is there, and Shane has tried not to spend too much time staring in his direction, though even so, they’ve still been making eye contact throughout the evening, only to quickly look away.

In truth, Shane hadn’t just come on this trip to spend time with Rose and Hayden. He had known very well that Rozanov would be going, and he wanted to see him. They haven’t had any time together in the last month, Shane being completely consumed by Greek Week and achieving the coveted three-peat. Rozanov had never really been into Greek Week, focusing more on hockey and getting the university to the playoffs again, so things have been a bit distant lately. Even on this trip, they haven’t had a moment together in the few days they’ve been here.

This is made all the more taxing because things between them have changed. Shane feels it. He thinks Rozanov must feel it too. It started in January, when they ended up snowed in together for a whole weekend. That had not been Shane's plan at all when he went over there, but he hadn't exactly been thinking clearly that day.

The weekend had been…nice. They initially dealt with the awkwardness by having copious amounts of sex, but it wasn't physically possible to fill all their time that way. So, they talked. Not about anything particularly personal, but about their classes, how hockey was going (Shane brought this up, as Rozanov seemed reluctant to discuss it initially), and some fraternity gossip. It was almost like being with a friend, which is something Shane has never considered Rozanov to be.

And he's not. Rozanov is not his friend. Shane has no idea what he is. But he's starting to feel more like he needs to pursue an answer. He has an idea of how he might do that, but the thought of it makes him shift nervously on the blanket they have laid down.

He catches Rozanov's eye again. He's still sitting by the bonfire next to Marleau.

"It's getting late," Shane says when there's a lull in the conversation. "I think I'll head back up to the hotel."

Rose looks at him. "Already? You feeling okay?"

"I'm fine." He's not the first to leave at least. He's noticed a few others walk back up the hill in the direction of the hotel. "Tired out from everything today, I think."

"Want me to walk with you back to the room?" Hayden asks, as they're rooming together.

Shane shakes his head and stands up, swiping some of the sand from the butt of his shorts. "No, I want to walk a little on the beach first. Then I'll go back."

"Don't go too far," Rose advises. "And don't fall down a crevasse or something."

He chuckles. "I don't think there are crevasses here, Rose."

"I'm a Michigander, Canada still holds many mysteries for me."

Parting from his friends, Shane walks in the direction of the Kappa Tau bonfire. Rozanov isn't looking at him now, but Shane makes sure to walk right by him as he leaves, something the two of them are well acquainted with doing at this point. He heads down the beach. It's dark, but the light from the fire and the hotel up the hill keep him from being completely blind.

He keeps walking until he feels he's a safe distance from everyone. The bonfires still in sight but the sounds from all of the participants too far away to hear. He comes to a rocky section of the beach that he noticed earlier that day and ducks in. Too open to be an actual cave but still secluded enough from the rest of the beach.

There, he waits.

It's only when he's alone that some nerves start to trickle in. While he's been looking for a moment alone with Rozanov since he arrived on this trip, and he's sure Rozanov wants to see him too, the shift in their relationship is one he's still questioning how to navigate.

Nothing has been said out loud. Things have gone on the way they always have but with… little changes. Shane doesn't always text him ahead of time when he shows up to his apartment. Sometimes Rozanov orders pizza when they're done having sex. And, probably most concerning of all, Rozanov has started calling him Shane sometimes. It's still usually Hollander, but his first name slips out of his mouth every now and then.

Shane knows it's ridiculous to think about this too much. It's just his *name*. Why does that matter? Everyone calls him Shane. And it's not like Rozanov has made a big deal out of it. As far as Shane can tell, Rozanov has been as nonchalant as ever about their situation.

But Shane isn't sure he can go on like this. It's starting to weigh on him, consumes too many of his thoughts. Some things need to be out in the open, he thinks.

Just as his anxiety is spiking at these thoughts, he hears footsteps. It relaxes him, somehow, knowing Rozanov is here, even though he has never once failed to follow him. Shane holds back a smile as he presses himself against the rock.

When a figure reaches the opening of the not-cave he's hidden himself in, he makes his move, reaching out to grab them by the shoulders and press them to the wall.

Rozanov is grinning, teeth glinting in the moonlight. Shane returns the smile and presses his mouth to his, not wanting to waste any time.

"Now, how did you know it was me?" Rozanov asks him, kissing him back. "You could have attacked a stranger."

"No, I knew it was you," Shane says with a chuckle. "You clomp."

"I…what?" His eyebrows draw together.

"Clomp."

He narrows his eyes, and Shane can practically see the wheels turning in his head. "I do not know this word."

Stepping back from where he has Rozanov pressed against the rock, Shane lifts his knees up and stamps his feet in demonstration. Then he lifts his chin and grins at him.

Rozanov looks abjectly affronted at this. "I do not *clomp*."

"Whatever you say." Shane kisses him again. He didn't drag Rozanov here so they could argue about the way he walks.

In truth, Rozanov doesn't *clomp* more heavily than the average person. But it seemed a lot easier to tease him about his loud footsteps than to admit that he knew it was him coming

because he now recognizes the sound of his footsteps. After all, he's had many occasions to listen to the sound of him coming closer. No. That might be dangerous to say out loud.

So, instead of dealing with any of that, Shane wraps his arms around Rozanov's waist and tugs him closer, pressing their hips together. Rozanov responds with a pleased sound, his fingers running through Shane's hair. They stay like that for a few minutes, not doing anything more than kissing, which has become disconcertingly more common.

"You are not going to gloat?" Rozanov asks against his mouth. "That is not like you."

"Gloat?" Shane asks, eyes half closed.

Rozanov smiles. "Did you not just win a trophy?"

It takes a second for Shane to understand what he's talking about. But then he remembers. He just won Greek Week, and Greek Week was the whole reason they haven't seen each other alone in nearly a month. He has been so distracted by finding time with Rozanov today that he hasn't given it much thought. But hey, if Rozanov is going to bring it up…

"Maybe you should congratulate me." Shane trails kisses along his jaw.

Rozanov's chest rumbles as he chuckles. "We are not going to fuck here, Hollander."

Shane pauses at his neck. "Oh."

He hadn't exactly been thinking that they would fuck here. Outside. It would be risky with the bonfires only a short distance away. But if Rozanov had pushed things in that direction, put them on the ground together, Shane knows himself well enough at this point to believe he wouldn't have said no.

"Fucking on the beach, no good," Rozanov tells him, taking his jaw in his hand and tipping his head back. "Sand gets everywhere."

Shane just stares.

Amusement glints in his eyes. "I mean *everywhere*, Hollander."

"Yes, I get it. Thank you."

Rozanov places another kiss on his mouth. "We go back to my room."

"Okay." Shane feels some of the nerves he had earlier creeping back over his body. They disappeared once he pulled Rozanov into his hiding place. But now, he's remembering what he intends tonight. It has him shivering against him, he's not sure if Rozanov feels it.

"You go first," Rozanov tells him, patting his cheek. "I follow and text you room number."

"Sure," he says, stepping back and casting his gaze to the ground, worried about what it might give away.

“Hey…” Rozanov places his hand on his shoulder and lowers his head, trying to make eye contact again. “You are okay?”

Shane does his best to straighten up and make his face a mask, giving him a half smile. “I’m fine.”

“I promise, I would love to fuck you on this beach,” Rozanov tells him, sounding shockingly sincere. “But I think you would hate it when we finish.”

At that, Shane can’t help the chuckle that escapes his mouth. “I believe you.”

Rozanov looks reassured by this, dropping his hand. Shane tries not to think about how nice it feels to have Rozanov check on him outside of sex like that. He steps away, moving towards the entrance of the little cave.

“I’ll see you up there.”

They’ve done this plenty of times. Discreetly met up with other students milling about. Shane isn’t nervous about that. But he does feel a ping of anxiety when he remembers what happened the last time they were in a hotel together.

Well, he had the best sex of his life.

That had been nice. Incredible actually. But what happened after had been confusing and embarrassing for both of them and it ended with six months of radio silence between them. Shane knows that was his fault, and he’s determined, as he knocks on the door to the room number Rozanov sent him, to not let anything like that happen again tonight.

The door opens and doesn’t even get a word out before a hand seizes him and drags him inside. Rozanov apparently getting even for Shane having surprised him on the beach.

“I heard you clomping down the hallway,” Rozanov snarks, pressing him against the door to shut it.

“You’ve learned a new word today.” Shane smiles. “Fluency is coming, I know it.”

“You will learn Russian faster.” Rozanov attaches his lips to Shane’s neck, picking up where he left off on the beach. “Say something to me.”

Shane bites his lip, both at Rozanov’s words and the feel of his teeth against his skin. It had been an impulse decision last semester when he was signing up for classes. He needed a foreign language requirement for graduation. French was off the table as he’s already fluent. Looking through the course catalogue, he found himself registering for a beginner Russian class before it even clicked in his brain why he had chosen it.

Later, he knew it was because he likes it when he can understand what Rozanov says to him. While he loved the sound of his voice in Russian, it grated on him that he missed so much of what he was saying.

It didn't take Rozanov long to figure out he was taking a Russian class. In February, he had grunted out *Eto khoshoro* in his ear. *That's good.* Shane hadn't intended to respond to it, in the throes of sex he was barely conscious of himself sometimes, but he had apparently done something that Rozanov picked up on, moaned or clenched around him. Anyway, he demanded an explanation later and Shane had given him the truth.

Initially, Rozanov seemed uncertain about it, and the next two times they met, he barely said anything at all in Russian. This, again, grated Shane. He hid his words in Russian and now he was hiding them in his head.

Until Shane finally spoke Russian to him when he was inside of him, (*Pozhaluysta ty mne nuzhen. Please, I need you*) and Rozanov immediately seized up and finished harder than Shane thinks he ever had before.

From that point, Rozanov seemed to embrace the Russian classes.

"Maybe if you're nice," Shane tells him in answer now, smiling. He loves that this is something he can withhold from Rozanov when he wants.

"You want me to be nice, you want congratulations for winning, anything else for his highness?"

"Yes. Kiss me."

Rozanov obliges. This kiss is much less patient than the one on the beach. It is all tongue and wandering hands, both of them knowing that there is no risk of interruption now. Shane lets his hands slide up Rozanov's arms to his shoulders, gripping him there as he has always liked to do, one hand skirting around to the back of his neck so his fingers can play in his hair.

"Mm," Rozanov grunts out against his mouth, hands sliding down to his ass. "More."

Shane listens, burying his hands in Rozanov's hair the way he's grown accustomed to, fingers sliding through the soft curls. Rozanov moans his appreciation, squeezing his ass and bringing him closer.

It doesn't take them long to fall into the bed and start tugging at each other's clothes. Shane's shirt goes first, and he's down to his briefs quickly while Rozanov only has his shirt off. He tries to get the button of Rozanov's pants undone, but he makes that difficult when he pushes him backwards and kisses him into the pillows, hand already drifting south.

The words and plans Shane had intended on verbalizing tonight are flashing through his mind like neon lights and then disappearing just as fast. This is always the way when they are together, just a few touches and his brain short circuits. Far from it being a con to their relationship, it's something Shane has grown obsessed with, even when it turns him stupid.

"Rozanov…" Shane mumbles out, some coherence coming back to him.

Rozanov just shushes him as his hand slides into his briefs.

Somehow that's the moment when Shane's thoughts come into focus. "Rozanov, I think I'm gay."

Everything stops then. Rozanov stops moving on top of him and Shane holds his breath. He hadn't exactly planned it this way, but it's out there now. No taking it back. So, instead of trying to go back on his words, he endures the silence. Waiting.

After what feels like an eternity, Rozanov shifts until he's eye level with him again, looking down into his eyes.

"Shane, my hand is on your cock."

"I mean…" Shane shifts his hips and his warm hand stays firm on him. "Yeah."

"You choose to tell me now?" Rozanov raises his eyebrows, looking confounded.

"Yes." Shane can't think of anything else to say.

Rozanov continues to stare at him stoically for long enough that Shane thinks this was a huge mistake until, out of nowhere, his mouth breaks into a grin and his eyes light up. Shane nearly throws his head back into the pillow at the sight, not sure he's ever seen Rozanov look quite like that.

Then, he starts chuckling and places a kiss on his mouth. "You are gay. Good for you."

"Oh, um." Shane kisses him back, still reeling from the look on his face. "Thanks?"

Rozanov takes a few seconds to just kiss him before he pulls away and removes his hand from his briefs. "We should celebrate. Your trophy and your gayness," he says, suddenly looking serious. "I have idea."

Shane can't help but smile at that. "Oh, what now? You gonna tie me up? Blindfold me?"

"Oh wow. Kinky, Hollander." Rozanov raises an eyebrow.

Shane squirms and looks away, feeling his face going red. He hates that Rozanov knows that word. "Just seems like you'd be into that, I don't know."

"I do what you are into." Rozanov takes his jaw in his hand and pulls his face back to meet his gaze, leaning down to kiss him once more. "But no ropes or blindfolds tonight."

Shane is not sure if he's relieved or disappointed, and that may be the most bewildering thing.

"No, we do something else tonight." Rozanov's fingers are at his briefs again and he starts pulling them down his thighs. "But you will like this too, I think."

As Rozanov tugs his briefs down his legs and over his feet, taking the time to carefully lay them a safe distance away on the bed, Shane's curiosity begins to rise. Rozanov has pushed him in many different directions in their years together, so much so that he doubts he can do

anything that will surprise him. He's mostly surprised himself, at how rarely he's ever told Rozanov no to something he's offered.

Actually, Shane doesn't think he's ever told him no.

And he doesn't have any intention of doing that now as his mouth come down on his pec, kissing his way across until he reaches his nipples. He takes it into his mouth, sucking him there until the skin is wet and worried. Thinking it's okay to touch him right now, Shane sinks his fingers into his hair, stroking him in appreciation.

Rozanov does the same to his other nipple before he kisses his way down his chest and abs. When he makes it to his cock, now standing at attention and leaking between them, Shane thinks he'd be more than happy with Rozanov's mouth on him there, feeling his hips twitch upward, his body clearly hoping for the same thing.

His cock does get Rozanov's attention, though not quite as much as Shane might have hoped for. He kisses the tip, lapping at the pre-cum there and licks the sensitive underside, Shane shifts on the bed, hoping to encourage this further, but Rozanov only presses his hand against him. To Shane's dismay, he moves away from his cock, moving further down and Shane is about to ask what he's doing when—

Shane gasps as Rozanov takes his knees in his hands and pushes them upward, pressing them to his chest. It's a position he's been in many times, but Shane is mystified and a little embarrassed when he looks down to see Rozanov staring down at him, almost surveying. No matter how many times they've done this, the vulnerability that always comes with sitting under Rozanov's gaze never goes away. He feels his heart rate pick up.

"What are you—"

Rozanov leans down and puts his mouth on him.

Shane nearly shoots off the bed. But his bodily reaction is nowhere near as mortifying as the sound he makes, a cross between a shout and a moan, so loud he worries that whoever is in the room next door might have heard him.

Rozanov gets him back under control quickly, reaching up to press his hand against his pec, pushing him back down onto the bed. Shane snatches at his hand and grips it tight, needing something to hold onto.

The initial shock over with, Rozanov looks up at him with a questioning expression, and Shane answers with a nod.

Yes. God, yes.

That's enough for Rozanov. He sinks back down again, and it takes everything in Shane to not bodily react again when he *licks* his hole. He focuses all of his energy into his hand, squeezing tight around Rozanov's, so hard he thinks he might crush his fingers. But Rozanov doesn't push his hand away, instead his mouth presses closer.

His tongue is inside of him, and Shane is pretty sure he sees stars. Rozanov has been inside of him more times than he can count with his fingers and his cock, but his tongue is something else. Smoother, slicker, the feeling is somehow more sinful than anything else they've done together before and Shane has to grit his teeth.

"Mmf," Rozanov moans as he presses his tongue in further. There's something embarrassing about Rozanov's face and mouth against him *there* but from the sounds Rozanov is making, it's obvious he's enjoying it.

Shane wonders how long he's been thinking about this.

His tongue continues to move inside him, searching, and Shane is just feeling proud of how he's managed to keep control of himself when his whole body spasms against the mattress and a high-pitched moan is ripped from his throat. He throws his forearm over his mouth to try to muffle himself.

Shane didn't even think it was possible to *find* that spot with just his tongue.

Rozanov squeezes his pec and pulls off, his tongue falling away from his hole, much to Shane's chagrin.

"Okay?" Rozanov asks, reaching up to pull Shane's arm away. No surprise at that, Rozanov doesn't like it when he forces himself quiet. Shane looks down at him and sees that there's saliva dripping down his chin. He shivers at the sight, wanting to wipe it off.

"Yes. Okay. *So* okay," Shane breathes out, trying to keep his composure. "I—more please?"

Rozanov smiles and obliges, his tongue entering back inside him slowly, like the first time. Shane huffs at that, while he appreciates that Rozanov often likes to ease him into new things, sometimes he wishes he'd throw aside some of that caution.

But it's not long before he finds that spot inside of him again. This time Shane manages to keep his moans to a reasonable volume. But just as quickly, he's moving his tongue away, exploring elsewhere, and Shane's not sure if that's better or worse. He hums against him, not seeming to be in any hurry.

Shane glances down at him, going redder at what he sees. Rozanov lapping away at him with his tongue and his own cock standing stiff and red, dripping and in need of attention. He inches one of his hands down his chest, wondering if he can touch himself without—

Rozanov's fingers are clasped around his wrist and tugging his hand away not even a second after his hand reaches his cock. He looks up at him and makes a sound of warning, his stare penetrating. Shane forces himself to go still. His cock only grows harder at the treatment, and he's already feeling his orgasm start to build.

Cruelly, Rozanov doesn't touch his cock and seems to deliberately avoid that tender spot inside of him. Shane is helpless to do anything but moan and try to stay as still as possible against the mattress.

He does have one weapon in his arsenal, however.

"Rozanov, pozhaluysta." Rozanov, please.

He hears Rozanov's breath catch, eyes locking back onto his. It's amazing, how quickly he's affected by Shane using that word, but even more so when he says it in Russian.

Shane is rewarded immediately, and a smile almost breaks over his lips before he succumbs to groans and whimpers. Rozanov finds the spot that almost made him come apart a few minutes ago and gives it his undivided attention, his tongue moving in and out of him with abandon.

"Fu-fuck, *fuck*, Rozanov." Shane's head is thrown back against the pillow, nearly hitting the headboard, and he feels sweat rolling down his neck. "That's—oh God!"

Rozanov gives his own groan of approval, not letting up on him, but when has he ever?

Shane feels his orgasm building, nearly there but just out of reach. He just needs a little more, but his hand is still trapped under Rozanov's, and he knows Rozanov doesn't want him to touch himself. He looks down, his body giving away his desperation, and finds Ilya looking back up at him, eyeing his leaking cock with interest.

"Please—" Shane chokes out, trying to pull his hand out of Rozanov's grip. "Let me—"

Rozanov pulls off completely. He releases Shane from his mouth and his hands and Shane nearly sobs at the loss, reaching down to try to tug at his shoulders.

"No, *no!"*

He doesn't even get a hand on him before Rozanov pushes him back against the pillows, hovering over him, hands at either side of his head. There's even more spit on his chin now than earlier, and this time Shane follows the instinct he had before, reaching up with his hand and wiping it off.

Rozanov lets him, leaning into his touch. "My cock or my tongue?"

Shane pauses, his thumb at Rozanov's jaw and his brain still stalled from the denied release. "What?"

"We celebrate you tonight, Shane," Rozanov tells him. "So, how do you want to come? On my cock or on my tongue."

A cruel choice, and one Shane doesn't want to make. It's so much easier when Rozanov decides, but he often makes him do this. He's done it from the very first time they were together. He makes him tell him, forces him to choose, and to voice his decision. It's awful. Shane hates it. Shane craves it.

"Both?" Shane says, as it seems like the easiest answer. It's not like Rozanov hasn't made him come more than once before.

Rozanov grins down at him, leaning down to brush their noses together. “Greedy. Pick one, Shane. Now.”

“Your cock.” The answer comes quickly, without him even giving it a thought this time.

Shane doesn’t know if Rozanov had a preference, but he is quick to produce a condom seemingly out of nowhere, as well as a bottle of lube.

“I think I’m…” Shane gestures at the lube, thinking back to Rozanov’s tongue inside of him. “Don’t need as much as usual.”

Rozanov chuckles. “I think so, but we make sure, yes?”

He does it quickly, two of his fingers sliding into Shane’s hole easily, his body not putting up any resistance after Rozanov’s generosity with his mouth. Shane still grunts at the feeling, his cock twitching, seeking release from anything Rozanov gives him.

It’s not long before Rozanov has the condom on and is pressing his knees back up again. He sits up, aligning himself with Shane’s hole, and gives him a look that Shane has become all too familiar with. It’s desire, he knows, but also strangely adoring. He feels his breath hitch, as it always does, never knowing what to do with it.

Thankfully, Rozanov doesn’t give him much time to stew, pressing himself inside.

He slides into him more easily than he ever has, his hips slapping against Shane’s skin when he’s fully sheathed inside of him. Shane squeezes his eyes shut, trying to adjust and keep still at the same time, his hands digging into the sheets. For a moment, all he can hear in the room is their heavy breathing. One of his eyelids cracks open and he sees that same look from Rozanov as before.

“Good?” Rozanov asks, accent heavy.

Shane nods vigorously. How could he not be? “Please…”

Rozanov gets the message. Taking hold of Shane’s calf, he pulls himself out before fucking back inside of him, setting a rhythm that Shane knows well at this point. Up on his knees, he’s able to push a little harder, move a little faster, and it’s only a few seconds before guttural noises are ripped from Shane’s throat.

Smiling at this, Rozanov moves faster, and the sound of skin slapping skin fills the room. Shane doesn’t have the energy to be embarrassed by it, too focused on his own orgasm, so elusive before, but already threatening to overtake him again. He wants to touch himself, his cock leaking faster by the second, but knows Rozanov will just grab his hand and pin it to the bed again.

Instead, he tries a different tactic as Rozanov continues to piston his hips in and out of him, his own face red and sweaty.

“Come here,” Shane says. He chokes it out, really. Unsure if Rozanov even understood him. “Please.”

But it seems Rozanov understood just fine, his eyes going soft at the words. He obliges quickly, dropping his body so he is face to face with Shane, shifting his legs slightly so he can be as close as possible.

“Better?” Rozanov asks, bringing his hand up to touch his face.

“Yes.” Shane nods, feeling his mind begin to drift the way it usually does, his muscles loosening. “Kiss me, please.”

The kiss is slow, soft. Rozanov takes his time with him, slowing his hips to match the pace.

In the distant part of Shane’s brain that is still working, it occurs to him how much easier it has gotten to ask for what he wants when he’s with Rozanov. It used to make him feel awkward, ashamed even. It still does at times, but he’s able to get the words out of his mouth without nearly as much struggle. He’s glad for it, and he knows Rozanov likes it too. He’s never let him stay silent when they are together.

They break apart from the kiss now and Rozanov presses his forehead against his, giving him a slow, purposeful roll of his hips.

Shane gasps, breath against his face, as Rozanov finds his prostate. He reaches up to sink his hands into his hair.

“*Fuck*, Roza—”

“No,” Rozanov says, shaking his head, their foreheads still pressed together. His hips suddenly freeze.

Shane nearly whines in protest at this, his body begging for release now, and is confused at what the “no” is for until he looks up at his face. Rozanov is staring down at him hard, his blue eyes wide, a question in them. Just from that, Shane understands his error. His heart stutters in his chest, and he braces himself.

“Ilya,” Shane breathes out.

Ilya starts moving his hips again, and Shane’s body loosens with relief. His mind narrows to the feeling of his cock moving in and out of him, the pace slower now, rather than dealing with what Ilya had just asked him to do.

The pace doesn’t quicken, but Ilya does keep finding Shane’s prostate every time he enters him, drawing soft gasps from his mouth. After a few minutes of this, Shane rocks his hips up, fucking himself back on Ilya’s cock, trying to speed things up. It knocks a gasp out of both of them, Ilya’s face sinking into his neck, but he immediately grasps onto Shane’s hip, holding him against the mattress.

Shane lets out a puff of air at being made to stop, but he also feels himself edging closer at the treatment. He knows Ilya is too, can hear it in the way he’s breathing and the grunts escaping his mouth.

As ever, Shane can tell Ilya wants him to come first. He doesn't move any faster, but he is generous with the angle, seeking Shane's pleasure before his own.

He's always done that. Why?

"I'm close…" he whispers into Ilya's cheek.

"You want me to touch you?" Ilya shifts so he can see his face, he looks as fucked out as Shane has ever seen him.

He knows it would only take a few quick strokes for him to finish, but something comes over Shane in that moment when he shakes his head in answer.

"No." And God, is that really his voice? Barely recognizable. "Like this."

He wants to come on Ilya's cock. *Hands free* as Ilya would say smugly. But he couldn't care less about what an ego boost it is for Ilya right now, and it doesn't look like Ilya cares either. He only knows he wants it.

Something flashes in Ilya's eyes that Shane can't recognize before he leans down and presses their mouths together. He speeds up, but only just, and Shane feels his cock leak in succession. Ilya is hitting his prostate with devoted attention, and faster now, barely leaving his body for a moment before he's back inside.

"*Fuck*, Ilya…" he moans against his mouth.

"*Shane*…"

It's enough, Shane feels his own come against his stomach before he even processes that he's coming, his back arching off the bed. Somewhere, distantly, he recognizes that Ilya is seizing up as well, finishing inside him simultaneously. Their moans filling the room, fingers pressed into each other's skin. Shane feels his brain beginning to drift in the ecstasy before Ilya's mouth is suddenly on his again, holding him back down, keeping him on earth.

Holy shit.

He's had some…intense orgasms before. Just about all of them courtesy of Ilya. Orgasms that had his whole body spasming or were nearly painful in their pleasure. But that one…it was something else. He's sure he's never come like that before.

And he's even more sure that they've never finished at the same time before.

Ilya is on top of him now, pressing his body against his on the bed. He's made a habit of doing that ever since they began hooking up again in the fall. Shane feels the familiar sensation of his hand stroking through his hair, his lips on his cheek muttering something that Shane is not advanced enough in Russian to understand.

"Wow," Shane finally gets out after a few minutes of Ilya functioning as his own personal blanket.

Ilya chuckles, raising his head again. There's a smile tugging at his lips. "*Wow*," he imitates a Canadian accent.

"Shut up." Shane chuckles, but his own face is splitting into a grin.

"No." Ilya kisses him again.

Shane is still smiling against his mouth, letting himself be kissed. Ilya keeps it slow, contained, like he is being careful. Shane is enjoying the feeling before an unwelcome sound suddenly cuts in.

A phone is ringing, and Shane momentarily wonders if it's his phone before he realizes it's not his ringtone. Ilya huffs above him, detaching himself from Shane, pulling out from him carefully, and reaching over to the bedside table. He takes one look at his phone before pressing the ignore button. Shane didn't catch the name on the caller ID, but he did notice the scowl on Ilya's face.

"Nothing important?" Shane asks, curious.

"No," he says, not elaborating. He reaches for the box of tissues on the table and starts cleaning himself up.

Shane bites his lip as he's watching him. Now that they're out of their usual post-sex haze, he feels some of his earlier tension returning to him, as well as his anxiety. Looking at Ilya as he turns to him with the tissue, he knows he must find the will to open his mouth tonight.

But just as he opens his mouth, Ilya's phone rings again.

"*Blyat*," Ilya mutters, a curse Shane has become familiar with. He turns over, dropping the sullied tissue into the trashcan and hitting the ignore button on his phone again.

"Maybe you should get that?" Shane suggests lightly, knowing that it's not his business but also feeling that the constant ringing is making what he wants to do more difficult.

Ilya gives him a look that tells him he's not going to be listening to that advice. Instead, he holds up the phone and shows Shane as he turns it off.

"Is just my brother," Ilya tells him, placing the phone back on the side table. "I do not want to talk to him."

"Oh." Shane thinks Ilya has mentioned he has a brother before. But only maybe once and he said absolutely nothing else about him. That seems weird to Shane, but thinking about it now, he assumes that maybe they're fighting, so Ilya doesn't want to talk to him. Or maybe they don't get along at all.

Strange…how many times they've been together over the years, how intimately they've known each other, and Shane doesn't even know anything about Ilya's family. Or Ilya anything about his.

That's just always been their way. They haven't needed a lot of words between them for… this. Which is not making the fact that Shane has something he wants to say tonight any easier.

Ilya reaches over for the TV remote and turns it on.

"Want to watch something? I think there is—"

"Are you going home this summer?" bursts from Shane's mouth.

The commentary on the weather channel is all that fills the hotel room for a few seconds. Ilya doesn't look at him, just stares at the television. Shane can't pinpoint any change in his expression.

"Yes," is all Ilya says.

Shane takes a breath. Deciding he can't turn back now. "You know the university has the hockey training camp in the summer, right? The whole team is usually here for it and—"

"Hollander, I know that."

His hand clenches the sheet at the use of his last name. There's a tightness in the room now. Ilya hasn't moved, but Shane can practically sense him growing distant, like he's moving further away.

"But you know, there are MLH scouts who come by to observe," Shane continues, trying not to be cowed. "I know you practice back home but you got us to the playoffs again this year and if you stay here, you have a better chance of—"

Ilya is shaking his head. "I think those chances are over."

"I don't think so." Shane's hand is suddenly on Ilya's arm. He hadn't made the conscious decision to put it there. He looks at it and waits for Ilya to pull away. He doesn't. "Yeah, it's rare to get drafted this late, but not impossible and you've been fucking *awesome* this season, man."

Shane has wanted to bring this up for months, even more so when Ilya won the game to get them back to the playoffs last month, because what he said is true. Ilya has been awesome. As good as any rookie in the pros this year. He has it in him to take the next step, Shane knows it. Sees it whenever Ilya is on the ice.

Ilya is looking at him now, his blue eyes going wider at his words. Shane had been expecting him to look smug at the praise. Tell him *Yes, obviously I am awesome.* But he doesn't say anything. He's just listening.

"And, you know…" This is it. The part he's been terrified of. The part he still isn't sure he can spit out of his mouth, or if he's the biggest idiot on earth for even wanting to say it. He swallows down his fear.

“I’m only like an hour away from the university. I could, you know, come back this summer and help you out. If you wanted. Or if you didn’t, that’s fine.”

The words had come out in a rush, but they’re out, and Shane can only hope he didn’t say them too fast for Ilya to understand.

Ilya only stares, giving nothing away. The man on the weather channel continues to prattle on in the background about clear skies all day tomorrow, a chance of storms next week. Shane is forced to listen to it for so long that he’s starting to regret he ever said anything before a smile suddenly breaks over Ilya’s face.

“You want to be my coach?” He lets out a puff of air from his nose, not of contempt. He looks oddly delighted.

“Well, no, but…” Huh. Coaching. That doesn’t sound like such a terrible idea. He tucks that away for later. “I could just give you pointers, but only if you want. Like in the last game when you—” He clamps his mouth shut, worried he was stepping out of line.

“When I *what?”*

Shane shakes his head. “Nothing.”

“No, no.” Ilya crawls over him, and Shane is suddenly on his back again, staring up into his unyielding eyes. “What did I do last game?”

Shane bites the inside of his cheek, seeing that Ilya is like a dog with a bone now. He won’t let this go. So, he relents. “When you…missed that goal.”

“Hm?” Ilya prompts, eyebrows raised.

“You…you dropped your elbow, so it went wide.”

“It did not go wide. Goalie blocked it.”

Shane shakes his head, sure he’s right, but waiting for the further denial or for Ilya to tell him to fuck off and mind his own business.

But he doesn’t do any of that. The smile returns to his face. “You *do* want to coach me.”

Shane feels his face heating. “I mean, call it what you want. I call it giving pointers.”

“Coach Hollander,” Ilya says, dropping his head low so they are only inches away. “With you maybe I would have gone pro.”

“Still can.”

Ilya kisses him then, and for a few minutes, that’s all they do. His spent body gives a few interested tingles, but Shane has already decided that he can’t stay the night, so he holds himself back, just allows himself to be kissed, like earlier on the beach. They didn’t used to

do this. Kissing, good as it is, was always a precursor to sex, foreplay. But as they carry on now, Shane can feel that that's not what this is.

And it's…nice.

When the corner of his brain that reminds him that he's sharing a room with Hayden, and that Hayden will definitely wonder where he was if he stays out all night, he taps Ilya's shoulder lightly.

"I should head back to my room."

Something shockingly akin to disappointment flashes over Ilya's face before his usual aloofness returns. He nods.

"Will you think about it?" Shane asks, wanting an answer. "About staying for the training camp this summer?"

"I think about it," Ilya says, and that feels like a victory. "But no promises."

"That's fine." And it is. He knows it's a lot to ask Ilya to cut his time at home short. He probably wants to be at home with his family. But he still thinks it's a good idea for him and…it might be good for him too.

I could have the summer with him.

Shane dresses slowly, for some reason wanting to extend his time in the room. Neither of them says anything, just listen to the television. Ilya just lounges on the bed, eyes moving between him as he gets dressed and the weather channel. Shane still can't read his expression; can't say he's ever been very good at doing it.

He kisses him goodbye, and later, he'll be very glad he did it. Just to see the affection in Ilya's eyes again.

"You should answer next time your family calls," Shane says as he steps back towards the door.

Ilya rolls his eyes, but playfully. "Whatever Coach Hollander says."

"Shut up." Shane chuckles, turning for the door. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He can't help but look back at Ilya again once his hand is on the doorknob, and he finds Ilya watching him. His face contemplative. Shane pauses, thinking Ilya is going to say something.

"What is it?" he asks.

Ilya's chin twitches up and he shakes his head, as if coming out of something. "Nothing," he answers. "Goodnight, Shane,"

Shane stares back. Ilya is still watching him, resting his head against his hand. In that moment, Shane wants nothing more than to know what he had been thinking, to move away

from the door and get back into bed with him, and he could swear Ilya looks like he wants the same thing.

But it is not to be tonight. Instead, he just gives him a small smile. “Goodnight, Ilya.”

Shane didn’t see Ilya the next day.

He was disappointed but didn’t think much of it. There were a lot of them there and everyone was off doing their own thing. He spent the day watching Rose attempt to tan while he sat blissfully under his umbrella coated with his sunblock. An ideal way to spend his final day of spring break vacation.

The following day, everyone piled into their cars early in the morning for the long drive home. Shane was sorry to say goodbye but ready to fall back into his regular routine.

He didn’t see or hear anything from Ilya that day either, but figured he got caught up in getting back to the university himself.

Monday morning arrives, and Shane welcomes it. Feeling that it’s time to hit the home stretch of the semester and the final doings of the Omega Chi house until next year. There is a lot to be done. After all, Hayden was just elected to the presidency for next year with Shane as his vice president, and the current Omega Chi council is already emailing him about every training he will have to attend for his new position.

“What do you think, Shane?” JJ asks him as he sits on the barstool in the house kitchen, looking over the dreaded emails.

Shane glances up to find JJ staring down at his scrambled eggs, still cooking in the pan, with a look of the utmost concentration on his face.

“Should I add barbeque sauce to my breakfast?”

Shane feels his nose scrunch and he nearly recoils. “To *eggs?”*

JJ nods. “Saw it on YouTube.”

“Ketchup on eggs is one thing,” Shane says, giving his honest assessment. “But *barbeque sauce?* Don’t do that, man.”

JJ picks up the barbeque sauce that he had set next to the stove and stares at it, coming to a decision. “We’ll try a splash. Just to taste.”

“Dude—”

“Guys! Guys, holy *shit!”* Hayden’s voice suddenly bursts into the house. Shane hears the front door slam and figures he must have just come in from outside. Back from his run, he presumes. He hears heavy footsteps pounding in their direction.

“What do you think?” JJ asks, opening up the barbeque sauce and looking in the direction Hayden’s voice is coming from. “Marijuana legalized or did Jackie come to her senses and dump him?”

“Be nice,” Shane scolds.

“I joke, man.”

“There you guys are!” Hayden is moving so quickly he practically slides into the kitchen, his shoes squeaking on the tile floor. “Holy shit, you won’t believe—”

“Barbeque sauce on eggs, yes or no?” JJ cuts him off, grinning as he holds the bottle over the eggs precariously.

“What? Barbeq—Why—*I don’t care*. Guys, Rozanov is *leaving*.”

Shane’s body stiffens, his finger freezes over the spacebar where he had just been about to press down.

“You mean, for the playoff away game?” JJ asks, scooping his eggs out of the pan. “But that’s not until Friday.”

“No, I mean he’s *leaving*,” Hayden clarifies. “As in back to Russia. Gone. Out of here.”

Shane’s fingers, still hovering over the keyboard, start to curl inward.

“Temporary, right?” JJ asks, curious but clearly not very involved with this major piece of gossip that Hayden is sharing. “I mean, the semester isn’t over. He’ll come back soon and finish it probably.”

Shane is silently grateful that JJ is asking these questions.

“I don’t know, apparently he’s barely said anything.” Hayden is still breathing heavily from his run and all the excitement. “But he’s packing up his room at Kappa Tau right now. All his stuff.”

“You saw him?” Shane finally says, but this he needs to know. He needs to know that Hayden actually witnessed this and this isn’t a rumor he’s heard through the grapevine.

“Yeah, when I was running by,” Hayden confirms. “I stopped to see what’s up and Marleau told me.”

“He’s packing his car right now?” Shane asks.

“Yes.”

Shane closes his laptop and stands up from his chair.

“That’s crazy,” JJ says, eating his food. “Right at the start of the playoffs? Before the semester is over? Maybe it’s a visa problem or—”

“I’ll see you guys later.” Shane doesn’t look at them as he exits the kitchen and heads for the front door. If they say anything to him as he goes, he doesn’t hear it.

Shane is outside as quickly as he can be without sprinting for the door. As he heads in the direction of the Kappa Tau house, he hears his heart beating in his ears and tries to will himself to calm down. Panicking right now is useless.

Maybe Hayden is wrong. Maybe he misunderstood. Maybe it’s some kind of stupid prank. Maybe maybe maybe…

There are a million reasons Hayden could have been mistaken, he tells himself. But his feet don’t seem to get that message as they carry him faster and faster down the sidewalk, as if he’s on limited time. Like it’s possible he could get there too late. Like Ilya could be gone and back to Russia forever at any second.

But no, that couldn’t be. There’s no way this is happening because Ilya would have told him. Hayden is wrong. He must be. Nothing else makes sense.

He’s not leaving.

He tells himself this over and over as he speed walks to the KT house. His inner voice repeating it like a mantra, like if he stops thinking it, his body will stop functioning.

The ground to Kappa Tau is covered twice as fast as usual the way he’s moving. When Shane first sees the house, his shoulders slump in relief. He doesn’t see anyone outside. No Ilya, no KT brothers helping him move his stuff out. Ilya’s car is parked where it usually is. Nothing out of the ordinary. Shane sighs and relaxes at the sight.

He’s about to pull out his phone and call Ilya to see what all of this may have been about when he sees him. Ilya comes out the door to the Kappa Tau house, moving fast, duffel bag in hand.

All of Shane’s earlier uneasiness returns to him as he watches Ilya walk in the direction of his car.

No, it’s a mistake.

He beelines straight for Ilya. He never does this. They never do this. Not ever. If they approach each other in public, it’s for casual ribbing at a party or something. Otherwise, they’re careful. But all of that flies from Shane’s head right now as he watches Ilya open his backseat door and toss his bag in.

“What’s going on?” he asks, hearing the strain in his voice when he finally reaches him.

Ilya looks up. Shane catches the surprise on his face before it is immediately masked. Coldness washes over his face, something Shane hasn’t seen directed at him for a long time. Not since the aftermath of Toronto. It takes him aback. He stops in his tracks, still a few meters away.

Shutting the door to his car, Ilya pulls his keys from his pocket. “Get out of here, Hollander.”

Shane inhales sharply at that, the tone and the use of his last name. Not just that he used it, but the way he said it, especially after how they last said goodbye. But he ignores his words, no intention of listening to that order. He needs to know what's going on.

"You're leaving?" Shane takes a few steps closer. "Going back to Russia?"

"Yes." Shane can see that Ilya's teeth are gritted, he steps backward. Then he quickly looks around him, as if making sure that no one can hear them, that no one is watching them.

Shane stops moving at that, as then it does occur to him that he may be causing a scene in public. He quickly looks around too. There are the usual people walking by on a Monday morning, but it's not particularly busy, and he doesn't see anyone staring.

Bringing his eyes back to Ilya, his brain won't stop racing now that he knows that he's going back to Russia. The numerous possibilities of what could have happened all pop up at once. Family emergency? An immigration problem? Did something happen with his university scholarship?

Shane is suddenly fixated on this being a solvable problem. "What happened? Tell me. I can help. We can fix this—"

"There is no *we*, Hollander," Ilya hisses. He says this quietly but in a tone that allows for no debate.

Those words hit him like a punch, and it's only in this moment that Shane registers just how different Ilya is right now. Everything about him, his face, his body language, his words, it's all utterly closed off. He's standing right in front of him, but he might just as well be a thousand miles away. Shane doesn't think he's ever seen him like this, not even when things were at their worst between them. It's different. It scares him. He doesn't know what to do with this version of Ilya.

"I told you to get out of here," Ilya barks, bringing his attention back to him. His expression is fixed in that unyielding coldness. "Go."

Shane shakes his head, but he is somewhat conscious of the fact that he's trembling. Looking at the car, seeing the packed luggage inside, his mind and body are processing what is truly happening right now, what he had tried so desperately to reject in the last twenty minutes.

Ilya is leaving.

He thinks he's about to keel over. "But we—"

"What did I say?" Ilya does approach him then, a burst of steps that nearly have Shane cowering, but he manages to hold his ground. Ilya's voice is still quiet but unyielding when he spits out, pitilessly, "*We* are not anything. Never were."

The way he says those words, enunciating every syllable to be certain he will be understood in his second language, is like a knife. Too much is happening, Shane's mind is going from

blank to racing every few seconds, and he's worried he might need to hold onto something to keep himself on his feet.

"But…" He hates how small his voice sounds, but he has to say something. "I thought—"

"I do not care," Ilya rolls over his words, his voice far stronger. "If you thought different, is not my fault."

The world seems to shatter at that. Shane thinks back to everything, everything that's passed between them since the day they met up until now. The way Ilya had always sought him out during the first part of their freshman year, his first time at Ilya's apartment, the disaster in Toronto, getting snowed in together in January, the way Ilya looked at him just three days ago when he left his hotel room…

He thought it was…something. Maybe this used to be only sex for him, but these last few months, he knew that wasn't the case anymore. That's why he said what he said over spring break.

But it comes crashing down on him now that just because he was starting to feel that way doesn't mean it was reciprocated.

Humiliation and rejection wash over him as he stands there. *Stupid. Wrong. Why did you think this was more than it is?*

He misunderstood things. Everything, in fact. His specialty. He wants to crawl into a hole and never come out.

"Go home." Ilya brings him out of his thoughts again. His face unchanged, he turns and walks for his car.

"Are you…" Shane's voice sounds pathetic, but he has to know at least this. "Are you coming back?"

Ilya doesn't answer him. Doesn't look at him. He opens the door to his car and climbs in, shutting it behind him.

Shane listens as the engine turns on. He watches as the wheels turn out into the street and take Ilya away from him. It doesn't seem real, his vision going fuzzy around the edges. Is this real? Is he sure he actually woke up this morning? Maybe he's asleep right now, and his alarm will ring at any moment, taking him back to the real world.

At the end of Greek Row, Ilya halts at the stop sign, and all Shane can think is *Turn around. Turn around. Please.*

But he doesn't. He turns left and he's out of sight. Gone. Leaving Shane standing there staring at nothing.

He's having a very difficult time putting the pieces of what just happened together. All he knows is that his world has just shifted on its axis. Nothing will be the same now, he can see

that. He may never see Ilya again. In fact, that seems very likely. But the second that thought comes to mind, he has to immediately smother and suppress, lest he completely lose it.

Shane tries, he really tries, to hold himself together right now.

“Uh, Hollander?” A voice from nearby. Something to grab onto. He’s grateful.

When he turns, he sees Marleau standing there looking at him. He appears concerned. Shane’s not sure how long he’s been here that Marleau has come out of the Kappa Tau house and found him.

“You good there, man?” Marleau asks.

A question. He can answer that. It’s something to do.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” His voice breaks at the end of the sentence. He clears his throat. “I was just walking. Later.”

He leaves before he has to do any more interaction. Speaking had helped him remember how to move, and he moves quickly down the street, wanting to get as far away from the Kappa Tau house as possible.

That’s where I met him comes a voice, unbidden.

There’s a sudden sting behind his eyes, almost painful, and Shane realizes with panic that he is very close to tears. But no, he can’t do that. Not here. But they’re coming, he feels it. His heart races. The Omega Chi house is too far away and out on Greek Row people are walking about. Anxiety surging, he suddenly knows without any doubt that as soon as one tear falls, they will all come and not stop.

He nearly considers ducking behind a tree to hide before he looks to his right and sees the Zeta Beta house. Unthinking, he bolts up the pathway for the door.

His knock is loud and urgent. One of the ZBZ sisters answers right away. It’s Casey, who he remembers from spring break.

“Is Rose here?” he blurts out before she has time to say anything.

Casey gives him one look and seems to grasp that this is an emergency. She looks over her shoulder and, by some miracle, calls out to Rose who is apparently within shouting distance.

Rose comes to the door. She initially smiles but then her expression falls when she sees the look on his face. She mercifully doesn’t ask him to explain anything, just takes his hand, pulls him through the door, and tells him to follow her.

Shane does exactly that, more than happy to let someone else take the lead right now. He squeezes her hand tight as she takes him up the staircase, trying to focus his energy there instead of how he’s about to burst at the seams.

When they’re finally alone in her room, Rose turns to him.

“What’s going—?”

He falls into her before she can get another word out, burying his face into her shoulder and wrapping his arms around her. The tears come then, refusing to be contained for another second. They flood out of him and a sob bursts out of his throat, one that he tries to keep quiet but will not be contained.

“Oh my God, Shane.” Rose’s voice sounds afraid as her arms slide around him, holding him.

It provides some relief when she squeezes him, just to feel her presence there, something to hold him down to earth. It feels even better knowing that it’s Rose. She may not know everything about him, and she knows next to nothing about what’s going on right now, but she at least knows some things, and right now he thinks she’s the only person in the world who knows him at all.

She must be. The other person just left you.

While it feels good to be in her arms, the tears do not slow down, and after a minute of standing there, they sink together to the floor. Rose keeps one arm around him and brings the other up to stroke her fingers through his hair. He keeps his face hidden, still unable to bear facing her.

“I’m here,” she says over and over, interrupting the continued muffled cries into her shoulder. “I’m here, Shane.”

He can’t say anything, can’t thank her, can’t do anything but cry and picture Ilya’s face.

So, he just holds her tighter.

Time heals all wounds is what they say.

Shane couldn’t say time healed his wounds, but with each passing day, things got a little easier. He finished the semester and couldn’t get off campus fast enough. Being at home helped, putting some physical distance between himself and where everything happened. Having his parents just down the hall from him and seeing them every day. Spending time with Hayden and finally opening up to him, being accepted by him. Calling Rose (who he had told everything, because how could he not?) in the evenings so she could tell him about her role in the summer production of Bye Bye Birdie, which he planned to drag Hayden to see in August.

He wasn’t healed, no. But he didn’t feel like he was drowning anymore, and that was something.

By the time he returned to campus in September, he was ready. He was vice president of Omega Chi to Hayden’s president now, it was his senior year, he was even excited to be back.

Or he was until the assembly of incoming Greek fraternity and sorority councils. All newly elected presidents and vice presidents were expected to attend. Hayden was shaking out of his

skin nervous, and Shane felt his job for the day was to keep him calm. He thought he was doing a pretty good job of it until he saw a familiar head of curls out of the corner of his eye.

Ilya was there. Back from Russia. He was sitting with Marleau, his vice president, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Like he hadn't pulled the rug out from Shane's entire world five months ago.

It had been too much. Before Ilya could spot him, Shane excused himself to Hayden and bolted to the bathroom. He locked himself inside and spent five minutes trying to slow his racing heart, holding back the tears that threatened to spill over.

No, you will not cry. Not over him. Not again.

When he got back to the assembly, steady enough on his feet, Rose found him and took his hand, a knowing look in her eyes.

He spent the entire assembly avoiding looking at Ilya, which was a doubly difficult feat because he was certain he could feel an unwanted gaze on him pretty constantly. But he kept his face forward, eyes on the Greek Council president who was leading the lecture about all that is expected of them in the name of Greek unity this year.

When it was over, Ilya approached their table, and Shane had to force himself not to run away like a coward.

"Thought I would never have to see that ugly face again, Rozanov." Hayden sighed in exasperated disappointment. "You really ruined my day."

"Ah, then it is a good day for me." Ilya smiled, his gaze moving to Shane but giving nothing away. "Our last year. Will be fun, yes?"

Shane didn't say anything. Unsure what Ilya…no, what *Rozanov* was expecting from him. His unbothered demeanor set off a wave of anger deep inside.

"Fun as long as I can avoid you," Hayden put in, saving Shane from having to answer.

Rozanov was still looking at him.

"Hey, Shane! Come over here, I need your help with something!" Rose's voice disrupted the stalemate, probably witnessing the interaction from afar.

Shane didn't even offer his excuses. He simply turned and walked in the direction of Rose's voice, feeling that burning gaze at the back of his neck as he went.

This was how it went on for weeks. Rozanov continued to approach him like he always did. He tossed out some casual bait that Shane used to always fall prey to, though he didn't give in to these attempts, turning a cold shoulder instead. Rozanov, more disconcertingly, didn't do anything else. Nothing that alluded to what happened between them, no invitation to talk, never one text from Lily. It was like they were returning to what they were as freshmen except without all the…other things.

Finally, at one of the parties, Rozanov came up to him to make a joke about his Hawaiian shirt at this Hawaiian party and Shane couldn't stop himself from snarking back. Rozanov grinned in victory at the response, and that's how they continued.

This was how they fell in with each other for the rest of the fall semester and into spring. Playing the part of fraternity brothers in rival houses. Roles they had always played. At some point, Shane almost forgot that they were ever anything more. And he decided it was probably better that way. Safer.

After all, like Rozanov said, they never were anything.

Chapter End Notes

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 9: Everybody's Gotta Learn Sometime

Chapter Notes

> Me to the very few comments that are actually picking up on my Greek tv show easter eggs: There are dozens of us! DOZENS!
>
> Another busy few weeks for me. It's just that time of the year (teachers and students, you know what I mean). This chapter was also a very difficult one to write for various reasons. I hope you enjoy.
>
> Beck song is the chapter title, and you'll see the connection when you read. Good song to listen to for this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 2016

Nothing changes in Moscow.

Ilya supposes it's always been that way, but he simply didn't notice until he left it. In Canada, he's surrounded by people who are always barreling forward, growing, changing, some of them become someone new almost every day just because they can. Who is to stop them?

Then he returns home and he finds his family and all those he knows to be exactly as he left them. The same detachment, the same wounds, the same silent resentments. They even look at Ilya the same way they always did. Uninterested. Disappointed. Or in his brother's case, with absolute loathing.

Nothing changes. Not even for his father's funeral.

It had been a simple affair, just as Ilya's father wanted. Ilya had planned and organized it to the letter, following the instructions his father had left for them in an envelope placed in the desk drawer of his old office. It had been difficult for Ilya to read those notes, so mechanical and removed, thinking of the ordeal it must have been for his father to sit down and write it, after he knew the end was coming but before his mind was too far gone.

The snow had come as Ilya followed his father's casket through the cemetery. The Federal Military Cemetery, at his father's request. The cold weather suited the occasion, as there were no tears. Ilya didn't see a single one as he looked around at his family and his father's colleagues. He didn't cry himself, and he supposes that would have made his father proud.

You do not cry. The words rang in his head as he watched his father lowered into the ground.

The dinner afterwards, just for the family and close friends, had been just as cold. Ilya could feel Alexei's glare fixed on him the entire time, even as he heard him whispering together with Polina. Conspiring about God only knew what. Ilya kept his gaze away from them, determining that between the three of them, one of them had to be respectable.

There was no respite for him until he closed the door to his house, his father's house, behind him. Empty but for him since he returned to Moscow. Alexei has stayed in his own home with his family.

But even when Ilya could finally put a door between himself and the world, the weight over his body was still there. This was only a temporary relief.

A glass of vodka with ice is placed on the table in front of him. Ilya looks up. Svetlana. She flew to Russia for the funeral two days after his departure. Her family is old friends with his, so it was expected, but he knows she could have gotten out of it. Yet here she is. Today, every time it was all too much for him, he looked at her, and it became a bit more bearable

She came home with him after dinner, and Ilya thinks she's probably the only person in the world whose presence he can tolerate right now.

He picks up the glass. "Thank you."

"Just one," she tells him, taking a seat on the couch across from him. "One at dinner, one now. That is enough."

She doesn't want him to drown.

He nods and picks up the glass from the table, noticing she didn't make herself a glass. "When do you leave?"

"Tomorrow. Early."

He doesn't say anything to that. Just nods again, not wanting to express the disappointment he feels. When she's gone, he'll have no one here.

"You should be coming with me," she says quietly, eyes fixed on his face.

"I can't."

"Yes, you told me that. But you didn't say *why*."

He sighs, not wanting to follow this line of questioning but knowing he owes her an explanation. She's his closest friend, and he dropped the bomb on her that they'd be living on separate continents for the foreseeable future only today.

"My hockey scholarship is gone," he admits, gaze cast to the floor. "The university at least apologized when they did it, but apparently it is policy."

He left the country just as the playoffs started. It wasn't particularly surprising, but it still hurt.

“That’s fucking bullshit.” There’s a simmering anger in Svetlana’s voice. Given the occasion, she’s trying to contain it.

Ilya shrugs. “It is, but maybe it is for the best. I was not going to go pro, and that was the whole point of even going to university and playing hockey over there.”

I think those chances are over.

I don’t think so.

He shakes his head, clearing out the unwanted memory, a voice he can’t stand to hear right now.

“I’m sorry, Ilya,” Svetlana cuts into his thoughts.

He brings his gaze back to her again. Her eyes are wide and she’s as beautiful as she has ever been, even while looking so sad in her funeral dress.

“Some things are not meant to be,” he says. In truth, as much as he has loved hockey, facing the loss of it in the last few days has been a lot more manageable than he expected.

“You couldn’t pay tuition?” she asks, but she doesn’t sound too hopeful. “With the money your father left you—”

“Alexei is the Executor of the will,” Ilya says, putting an end to her line of thought right away, not wanting any false hope. “And he has made it very clear that he will distribute our father’s money as he sees fit.”

In other words, little to none will go to him unless explicitly specified by his father. In which case, Ilya suspects Alexei will find ways to make it as difficult as possible for him to get his hands on that money.

“Alexei is the Executor?” Svetlana asks, eyebrows drawn together. “How do you know?”

He doesn’t officially. The reading of the will is not until a month from now, another reason he isn’t leaving Russia.

“He told me,” he says. “Father chose him before he died. He’s the eldest, of course he chose him.”

“Bastard.” This she says under her breath

“Sveta…” Whether she’s talking about her father or Alexei, he’s not in the mood.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice softens, and Ilya knows it’s for him, because she never had any particularly warm feelings for his father. “I’m angry.”

He knows. He is too, but he doesn’t have the will to lash out at the inevitable.

“What will you do?” Svetlana asks, clearly reining herself in.

“Attend university here, if I can.” He’s given this some thought, when he knew his path forward had altered radically. “Finish my degree.”

“And stay here,” Svetlana finishes what went unsaid.

He just nods.

“You are not happy here, Ilya.” She leans back on the couch. The way she looks and the way she’s speaking now, she looks defeated in a way Ilya has rarely seen her.

But she knows as well as he does that there’s no way around the circumstances as he’s described them to her. No scholarship, no money for tuition, no way for him to leave Russia, and it is as simple as that. He feels a pang of envy as he looks at her, knowing that she has American citizenship and nothing tying her down here. Had things been different, perhaps he could have followed that path, but it is too late now.

He sips his vodka, the ice in the glass clinking in the silence of the room.

Svetlana looks back up at him at the sound. “What about Jane?”

“No.”

“Ilya—”

“We are not talking about this, Sveta. Drop it. Now.” His tone does not allow for any argument, and he is more than willing to stand up and leave the room if she doesn’t listen.

She seems to get the message, shoulders slumping.

They stay like that. Ilya sitting back in his chair and Svetlana sinking into the couch. It’s not long before he can’t bear to look at her anymore and turns away, his eyes finding the window instead. The snow stopped falling by the early evening, but he can still see some flecks of it in the air. He wonders how long this winter will be, knowing that he will have to stay to endure it to completion.

Winter never ends here.

The sound of sniffling brings his attention back to the couch. What he finds is so foreign to him that it takes him a few seconds to understand what he is seeing.

Tears are falling down Svetlana’s face.

Ilya doesn’t think he’s ever seen Svetlana cry in his life. They have not been around each other enough during periods of tragedy. Though Ilya knows very well that the tears she is shedding have nothing to do with his father.

He gets up from his chair, approaching her. Unsure if that’s even what he should be doing.

“I’m fine,” she says, wiping her face with her palm.

He sits down next to her anyway. But he doesn't touch her, letting her decide if she wants any contact right now.

Apparently she does. She doesn't look at him, but after a few seconds of sitting together, with her trying to get her emotions under control, she slowly leans in and places her head against his shoulder. He brings his hand to her back. There's very little he can give her right now, barely managing on his own, but he wants to try.

"I'm sorry," she says, sounding guilty. "I just…can't believe I'm losing you."

This is something he hasn't allowed himself to think about yet. That staying in Russia means he will no longer have Svetlana. She returns to Russia sometimes, sure, but to go from seeing her every day to seeing her twice a year if he is lucky…the transition will be cruel.

"Do you want to stay here tonight?" he asks.

He doesn't mean this as an invitation for anything other than for her to sleep here. He knows she knows this. Things have not been that way between them for a long time.

She shakes her head against him. "My flight is early," she tells him again. "I have to get back."

"Oh." So, it will just be him alone in his house tonight. He supposes that's appropriate. His father had spent a lot of time alone here in his final years.

Svetlana lifts her head from his shoulder and looks at him. Her eyes are still wet. "I came here to comfort you, and you end up comforting me."

He pushes a strand of hair out of her face. "I would not have made it through today without you, Sveta."

It's the truth. One of the only truths spoken on a day consumed by pretending.

"Do you want me to drive you back?" he asks softly.

She shakes her head. "I can drive. I'll be okay."

They walk to the front door together hand in hand. He doesn't want to let go of her. He's been dreading this moment all day, knowing that their time together was limited, that the goodbye was coming. He's not ready for it, but it's here.

She hugs him at the door, arms tight around his middle. "You take care of everybody," she says into his ear, her voice low. "Promise me you will take care of yourself?"

"I promise," he says because it's what she needs to hear.

There's doubt in her eyes when she pulls away from the hug, scanning over him from head to toe, as if trying to fix the image of him in her mind. Her eyes eventually reach his again, and he can still see some redness there from her earlier tears. He hopes she won't cry again. If she does, it might tip him over the edge.

“I’ll try to come back soon,” she tells him. “Maybe this summer…”

“Don’t feel like you have to, Sveta.” He doesn’t need people uprooting their lives because his has been. Svetlana least of all. “Your life is there.”

“Yours could have been too.” She drops her chin. The light he always sees in her is gone.

“Maybe,” he allows, despite all his doubts. He wraps his arms around her in another hug, seeing that she needs it. “But my place is here now.”

Are you coming back?

He banishes that voice away again.

He holds Svetlana for what feels like a long time in the doorway, the cold from the long winter drifting indoors. She doesn’t want to say goodbye any more than he does, he can tell. They hold each other like something could change, like someone will descend on them at any moment to tell them it was all an elaborate hoax. But of course, that doesn’t happen. Svetlana is leaving. Ilya is staying.

Watching her pull out of the driveway, he doesn’t know when he’ll see her again. He knows she’ll try to return soon, but she can make him no promises, and he wouldn’t want her to. He must accept that he will be alone for a time, maybe a long time. His brother and the rest of his family are no true company.

He doesn’t want to return to his house, that place of illness and antipathy and misery, but he forces himself to turn around and make his way back. Svetlana’s taillights are long gone, and cold nights in Moscow are unforgiving.

Back inside the house, the door closes with a click of finality.

Then it’s silent.

One month later

“It starts at ten, but we will be expected thirty minutes early.”

“I know that, Ilya.” There’s a banging sound on the other end of the phone line as if Alexei just tossed something or is getting out of his chair very loudly.

Ilya has told Alexei the time of their appointment with the family attorney three times now. He knows he’s pissed him off by doing so, but they also cannot afford for Alexei to be late, not for the reading of their father’s will.

“Okay, just make sure you—"

“I don’t want to hear it anymore.” Alexei sounds ready to get off the phone. “*You’re* the one who doesn’t even need to be there.”

He could tell him that that is not at all true, as he is entitled to know what assets their father chose to leave him, if any. But knows that will only cause further conflict.

“I know, but I’m going because you might need—”

It’s the wrong thing to say.

“I won’t need your fucking help, Ilya,” Alexei spits out at him. “I’ve already told you exactly how this is going to work. *I* told *you*.”

Yes, he has repeatedly told him how he will do everything in his power as Executor of their father’s will to ensure he never touches anything left to him. Alexei’s resentment over his departure from Russia, leaving him with their father, was infinite.

He can only pray that his father, by some miracle, explicitly spelled out what would go to him rather than leaving all the power over his estate to the Executor. Then perhaps he could at the very least afford to find a place to live while he finishes university in Moscow, because he knows Alexei will sell this house as soon as possible.

But given his father’s state of mind in the last few years, he’s not exactly hopeful.

“I know, Alexei.” He’d like to say a lot more than that. But given the power Alexei is about to have over his entire life, he literally can’t afford to antagonize him further. “We’ll just see each other tomorrow, yes?”

“I look forward to it.” He hangs up.

All the better for Ilya right now. He’s not sure he could have tolerated listening to Alexei’s voice for another second.

He tosses his phone to the floor, deciding he’ll pick it up later. Taking phone calls is the last thing on his mind after that. It’s not like anyone would be calling him at this point in the evening anyway. He picks up the remote on the bed next to him and turns up the volume on the television. On his second week at home, he had hauled the television that used to be in Alexei’s old room into his, unable to tolerate how quiet the house was anymore.

He finds the channel that usually plays movies in English and stops there. Tonight, it’s something he hasn’t seen before. But he recognizes the actors. Jim Carrey and Kate Winslet, who has blue hair for some reason. He likes Kate Winslet, so he leaves it on.

It fascinates him to hear her speak. Whenever he’s watched her movies on this channel, he’s always envied the way she can slip into an American accent like it’s nothing. Wished he could do the same. If he could do that, Americans wouldn’t look at him like he’s an imbecile while he’s speaking English, making him doubt every word that comes out of his mouth.

Well. He won’t have to deal with that anymore. That’s one positive, he supposes.

The movie is about a couple. Joel and Clementine.

Look, I’m sorry if I came off sort of nutso. I’m not really.

He likes Clementine.

It's a cute movie. Clementine's attraction to boring Joel is initially baffling to Ilya, and then it's immediately not. She's wild and colorful, he's shy and awkward.

By the time they're lying down on the cracked ice together talking about the constellations that neither of them knows, Ilya understands why they'd both be obsessed with each other for a two-hour movie runtime, and the title hasn't even come up yet.

It doesn't take very long for Ilya to realize this movie will be sad, and he starts wondering if one of them is going to die before it gets surprisingly science-fiction-y. The concept it introduces is something he can get behind. Making people forget. When Clementine subjects herself to this, he understands. Then Joel does too, and he also understands that. Especially as their relationship crumbles.

I assume you fucked someone tonight. Isn't that how you get people to like you?

He nearly winces at the line from a fictional character.

Fuck, no wonder these two fucked up people need to forget each other. Put them through the operation as fast as possible, Ilya thinks.

But then things aren't so simple, because of course they're not. Clementine somehow thinking she's ugly despite being so beautiful she can turn heads. Joel kissing her all over and telling her she's pretty, what she needs to hear more than anything. The two of them back on the ice together…

I'm just…happy. I've never felt that before.

Clementine, her hair now pink at this point in the movie, snuggles into Joe, wrapping herself around him, and they look like this is exactly where they belong until…the operation. The memory is lost. Clementine is sucked into the void, far away from Joel. Gone.

It's wrong, Ilya knows this even as he feels his own eyelids beginning to drift closed. The movie has captured him, but the day has been long, and he is tired. He tries to stay awake, wanting to know how it ends, what will happen to Clementine and Joel. Will they find a way back to each other? Will they forget?

His eyes shut.

He's half asleep when he senses someone in the bed with him. Something brushes against his chest, like fingertips. He's still so tired, sleep is calling to him, but he can't help but open his eyes, if only to satisfy his curiosity. He thought he was alone tonight.

It's Shane. He is inexplicably curled against him on his bed, undressed and beautiful, his hand playing across his skin, like it's the most normal thing in the world.

Ilya knows there are a million questions that need to be asked, that he should be shocked and confused by his presence. He is, but the joy at seeing his face instantly overwhelms and smothers any of that. What does that matter? Shane is here.

Shane is here.

He must make a sound because Shane looks up at him, brown eyes bright as they find his face. He even looks happy, despite how they left things. How he left things. Relief floods through Ilya's entire body. Maybe they are okay.

"Ilya," Shane whispers.

Ilya recognizes the invitation in his voice, and he immediately flips them so he's holding himself over Shane's body. Shane hums pleasantly as he does, going easily to his back and looking up at Ilya expectantly.

Not wasting any time, Ilya brings his mouth down on Shane's. It's only been a little more than a month since he's touched him, but with all that has happened, it feels more like years. He presses himself close to Shane's body, thinking if he tries hard enough, he can meld them together, and pries his mouth open with his tongue, exploring every familiar corner.

Shane lets him, making breathy, satisfied sounds and touching him back, one hand running up and down his bicep while the other plays in his hair.

"Shane…" Ilya can't help but groan against his mouth.

"Hm?" Shane's eyes are glassy, dreamy as he looks up at him. He tugs a bit on his curls. "Ilya?"

"That's good," Ilya says, leaning into his touch and rocking against him. He suddenly realizes that he's naked. When had he gotten undressed? Whatever. He doesn't care. "*Perfect*, Shane. You are perfect."

The words are tumbling out of Ilya's mouth before he can even think them over, but it doesn't matter. He needs to hear the little noises Shane always makes for him when he hears his praise, see the little twitches and expression of satisfaction on his face.

Shane gives him exactly that, looking as lovely as he ever has. As he squirms under him, he raises his chin, asking to be kissed again.

Ilya would kiss Shane forever if he could. That's all that races through his mind as he brings their lips together again. Not thinking of his brother, their meeting with the attorney tomorrow, everything he is about to be denied by his own family. There's just Shane right now, and the peace of being with him is so overwhelming, Ilya thinks he could cry from it.

But…it's strange. When he kisses him again, it's different this time. His lips feel cooler, where he had been warm beneath him before, and not quite as soft. He grunts in confusion, trying to press himself closer, find the same warmth in Shane that he felt before.

Shane doesn't seem to notice, his expression unchanging, still letting Ilya touch and kiss him as he likes.

Ilya takes hold of Shane's arm, fingers digging into his bicep, but it's the same. There's no heat there. Less like skin and more like marble. Even as he can see his fingers digging into

Shane's skin, turning him pinker, but it doesn't register against his own skin. And it gets worse with every second that passes, Shane getting colder and stonier against his body.

Hearing his heartbeat in his ears, Ilya kisses him again, trying to feel something, *anything*. He's at a loss. Shane's body was just so soft against him, only a minute ago. He can't grasp what's going on, and Shane is still humming softly, oblivious to anything going wrong.

"Shane," Ilya says when he comes back up from his lips, cold as stone. He hears himself panting. "Shane, I can't—"

Shane does look at him then, finally. He seems to register Ilya's expression, looking at him with a question on his face.

"Why…?" Ilya tries kissing him again and he nearly trembles. Not even marble now. There's nothing at all. "Shane, I can't feel you. Why can't I feel you?"

At the question, Shane's dark eyes go from confused to sympathetic, almost pitying. Ilya winces at the sight.

"Ilya…" Shane brings his hand up, cupping Ilya's cheek.

Ilya immediately turns his face into Shane's palm, pressing his lips to his skin, but he feels nothing there either. It's like trying to grab smoke. It's terrifying.

"I'm not here, Ilya," Shane says sadly, holding his phantom hand to his face. "Remember?"

The words send him reeling, the reality of where he is and where Shane is hits him like a truck. Shane is not in the same room as him. Shane is not even on the same continent as him. He's thousands of miles away. So far away, and Ilya would never see him again.

The pity in the eyes of this Shane, not the real Shane but something he's conjured up in his head, has not gone away. But even knowing he's not real, Ilya can't help but lean down again, try to hold him. He senses this moment is fading.

Shane shakes his head, though he's hardly even visible anymore. He opens his mouth to speak, but Ilya hears his voice in his head.

You're alone.

Ilya's eyes fly open.

The gray of his ceiling greets him, and he slams his hand down next to him on the mattress, looking for the body that was just there. But when he turns, there's nothing. He's clinging to his sheets. His bed is empty. Shane was never here. Obviously he wasn't. He'll never see Shane or touch him again.

Bye.

Bye.

His eyes are drawn back to the television on his dresser. Slowly, the movie comes back to him. It looks like he's woken back up just in time for the end. The last he remembers, they were still going through the operation to forget each other. Now, Clementine's hair is blue, like it was at the beginning, and somehow it's clear to him that they are virtual strangers again as Clementine turns away from Joel in the doorway to leave.

Ilya thinks that's good. Forget each other. Forget the hurt. They'll both be better off.

But against Ilya's wishes, she can't just walk away, giving both herself and Joel peace. No, Joel chases after her in the hallway, asks her to wait. And Clementine, for some incomprehensible reason, actually does. She waits because Joel asks her to. They stand in the hallway together, seeming to come to a decision against their better judgement.

I can't see anything that I don't like about you.

But you will!

He will. It's true, Ilya knows it. The whole movie just showed him that that is true. They'll find things they hate about each other and resent each other and hurt each other. Clementine rattles off the things she'll hate about Joel and the things he will hate about her. Ilya finds himself nodding, ready to yell at the television for them to walk away from each other, but then…

Okay.

Okay.

They repeat their okays, the understanding and love between them palpable, and then they smile and start laughing. Joy and relief mixed together as they accept each other and everything good and everything bad. Music starts playing, Ilya thinks it's Beck, and the movie cuts to them playing in the snow, from the past or the future, Ilya doesn't know. They look care-free and in love.

Ilya shuts off the television and throws the remote down hard on the floor, the batteries pop out and scatter to separate corners of the room.

Fuck Clementine and Joel.

He's suddenly more awake than he's ever been. Sleep is the last thing he wants to do right now and he's on the move before his brain catches up to his body. He throws his clothes back on and walks quickly to the front door, grabbing his coat from the closet on his way.

The cold outside hits him, but he barely feels it. Closing the front door, he reaches into his coat pocket where his cigarettes are and pulls one out, needing the release of nicotine badly.

He wants away from his father's house, soon to be Alexie's house, so he walks. He has no sense of where he's going, knows it's probably a stupid idea to wander off so late at night when he has that meeting tomorrow morning, but if he stays in that house for one more second, he might actually go insane.

It's completely dark. The clouds overhead don't even allow the stars or moon to peak in. He checks his watch. Just after midnight.

The only thing that feels good right now is the cigarette against his lips.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. Things had happened so quickly, changed so quickly. Weeks ago, he was taking his university back to the playoffs, in the best athletic form of his life. They would have won the championship, he knows that. Everything had gone exactly as he wanted it, and he was *happy* there. In Canada, of all places. Somewhere he never thought he would want to be. But he was. He wanted to stay. And…

I could, you know, come back this summer and help you out. If you wanted.

He shakes his head. Shane's voice, his words have tormented him unceasingly since he returned to Moscow. But he can't think of him, can't think of their night in that hotel, when Shane had, so nervously, asked him to stay for the summer.

Because if he thinks of Shane at all, he can only see the look on his face when he left him.

The malice had all spilled out of his mouth, angry at Shane for finding him before he left when that was the last thing he wanted. Angry at him for being so naïve as to think there was a way for him to stay. Angry at Shane for speaking about the two of them like they were something when they never could be.

None of it was fair, he knew, but none of that stopped him from saying what he did.

It's better that it happened that way, he's told himself since then, while he's simmered in regret and guilt. Better for Ilya to have ended it that way so Shane would not miss him, think he lost something. No, this way Shane will just forget him. It's how it should be, a clean break, as they will never see each other again.

Ilya takes his phone out of his pocket, his hand shivering without any gloves, and pulls up his contact list, scrolling to Jane.

He hasn't done this since returning to Russia. Hasn't looked at the number he has for Jane. But right now, his thumb hovers over the call button, the temptation unrelenting.

What would happen if he called? Would Shane answer? Maybe, if only to tell him to go fuck himself, which he would deserve. But that might be worth it just to hear his voice. He's tempted to call for that reason alone.

But…he can't. If he does that, Ilya thinks he might end up telling Shane everything that has happened in the last month, and what good would that do either of them? It wouldn't change anything. Ilya would still be here, and Shane would have information that would make it more difficult to get over the whole thing, as he should do.

No, he thinks as he puts his phone back in his pocket, he can't call.

When he looks up, finally processing his surroundings after walking a fair distance, he sees that he has made it well out of his neighborhood. He's only a hundred yards away from the

bar he used to frequent in his teenage years. It's still open this late, of course.

Skirting around some ice on the ground, he decides he could use a moment's break from the cold and heads for the bar.

The decor is exactly how he remembered it once he's inside. Dim lighting, chipped wood floors, soft music. Unchanged, like the rest of his world in Moscow. There aren't many patrons tonight, and thankfully, he doesn't see anyone he knows. Except for the bartender. He's worked here for as long as Ilya can remember. He is pretty certain his name is Daniil, though he hasn't seen him in years.

As he approaches, Daniil looks at him, recognition flickering in his eyes.

"Ilya? It's been a while."

Ilya just nods, stopping in front of the bar.

"Thought you went to America?" Daniil asks, cleaning a glass with a dishcloth.

"My father is dead." He doesn't mean to say it, but it just escapes his mouth. Maybe it's the time of day, too late in the night for any inhibitions. Maybe it's because he hasn't talked about it at all since Svetlana left other than to get reamed out by his brother.

"Condolences," Daniil says, because it's what you're supposed to say. But at least he has the decency to look like he means it.

"Do you have a phone here?" Something else he hadn't thought about saying before the words were out of his mouth.

"There's an old pay phone out back."

Ilya moves for the door.

"Do you need change?" Daniil's voice calls after him.

Ilya just shakes his head and casts a wave over his shoulder, not wanting to be a complete asshole to someone who has been kind to him.

The back of the bar is populated by a dumpster and two parked cars, but thankfully not by any person. He's alone back here. The pay phone is attached to the building, next to the backdoor. It looks ancient. Ilya picks it up and listens to the dial tone, surprised that the old thing even still works.

On autopilot, he punches in Shane's phone number. He has to pay extra for an international call, and he puts the coins in the slot. Then he listens. It rings.

And it keeps ringing. Long enough that Ilya doesn't expect an answer. That would be normal. It's an unknown number after all—

"Hello?"

Shane's voice startles him. He hadn't actually been expecting him to pick up. It takes everything in him to stay quiet. He stops breathing.

"Hello, is anyone there?"

I'm here. It's me, Ilya. I miss you.

Shane's voice sounds distracted, obviously not giving this unknown number that just called him his full attention. Ilya can picture him now, at his desk working on something. Or maybe he's watching a hockey game.

Shane exhales and Ilya assumes he's going to hang up before he hears what sounds like a knock on a door. Then there's a woman's voice.

"Honey, we're ordering takeout, any preferences?"

"Oh, could we get—?"

The line goes dead.

Of course, Shane must be at home now, and that was his mother's voice. Ilya hadn't really been keeping track of time well lately, but thinking of it now, he remembers the semester is over and students would be back home with their parents. Including Shane.

That's good, he thinks. For Shane to be with his parents.

Ilya presses his head against the wall of the building, keeping the phone pressed against his ear, like Shane might defy the laws of technology and come back on the phone.

He thinks about calling again, just to hear his voice. But he doesn't.

He just holds the phone to his ear until he can't feel his hand anymore.

"Rozanov."

The secretary at their attorney's office beckons them from the waiting room. Alexei had only just arrived, nearly late despite all of his promises. But Ilya can hardly bring himself to care, wanting this to be over with. Polina is there as well, trailing after them as they follow the secretary into one of the conference rooms.

"Sit."

Ilya and Alexei sit across from each other on either side of the conference table. Polina sits next to Alexei. The secretary leaves them and none of them say a word. But they don't have to stew in silence for very long before their lawyer enters the room.

"We will do this quickly." Lebedev has a large, sealed envelope under his arm, moving to the end of the table and taking his seat there, between Ilya and Alexei. It occurs to Ilya that he has only ever seen Lebedev during family tragedy. He wonders when he will see him next.

Lebedev pulls out a letter opener to break the seal. Not a word of condolences offered. Lawyers in this work can have a detachment to them.

“Your father came to me three years ago to revise his will,” Lebedev tells them, pulling a few sheets of paper out of the envelope. “If there are no objections, I will begin.”

There are none. Lebedev reads.

“I, Grigori Lyosha Rozanov, born in—”

“Is this necessary?” Alexei cuts in. “You can just—”

“Do not interrupt me.”

Alexei huffs in his chair but doesn’t interrupt again as Lebedev tells them the facts of their father’s profile in his will. Where and when he was born, where he lived at the time of writing this will, the year it was written, and so on. It’s uncomfortable for all of them, Ilya can see. Though Alexei was impolite to interrupt, part of Ilya understands why he didn’t want to hear this.

“The first article, the appointment of the Executor.”

For this, Alexei leans forward a few inches in his chair. Ilya, who had kept his gaze on Lebedev throughout, looks away, knowing what is coming, and what it means for him.

“The Executor refers to the person who is to administer my estate and carry out the terms of this Last Will and Testament. I hereby name, constitute and appoint my second-born son, *Iliusha Grigoryevich Rozanov* as my Executor and direct—”

It’s only when Alexei nearly jumps to his feet, his chair clattering behind him, that Ilya registers what he just heard.

“You have that wrong.” Alexei’s voice conveys an air of both panic and rage.

“I told you not to interrupt, Mister Rozanov,” Lebedev barely glances up at him, unimpressed by this show of outrage. Ilya imagines he must see it all the time. “Sit, I am not finished—”

“You are *wrong*,” Alexei repeats, not sitting down. “Father appointed *me* Executor. He told me—”

“It does not matter what he told you. All that matters to me and to the state is what he put in writing.” He puts his finger down on the paper, emphasizing his point.

Alexei’s gaze finally drifts to Ilya, who has sat still as a statue throughout this exchange, like Alexei might not be able to see him if he doesn’t move. But his eyes are on him now, and Ilya can see the anger directed towards him now, like this is somehow his doing. Like Ilya wrote the will himself.

“It’s always you, huh?” Alexei spits out at him. But he doesn’t give Ilya the time to respond, turning around to kick his chair before storming out of the room.

Lebedev doesn't waste any time. Not even three seconds after the door closes, "Shall we continue? Mister Rozanov, Mrs. Rozanova?"

Ilya had almost forgotten Polina's presence entirely. He looks at her now, and surprise over the display remains on her face, but she keeps her composure and nods in answer to Lebedev's question. Ilya nods too, determining that Alexei is likely to not return.

The rest of the reading is brief. Alexei is named Executor only in the case of Ilya being unable to perform the duty. Polina goes entirely unmentioned, as does the rest of their extended family. Most strikingly to Ilya, their father did not specify how he wanted his estate to be divided, leaving it entirely in the Executor's hands, in Ilya's hands, with nothing more than the suggestion that the division be in equal shares.

Had their father chosen Alexei, Ilya could have been left with nothing at all.

"—of sound mind and under no constraint or undue influence," Lebedev finishes.

The last time Ilya's father had been of "sound mind" was a long time ago, though apparently he had been when he revised his will.

Ilya is still trying to process everything that has just happened. His world radically shifted just in the last ten minutes, and he's not sure what will come next after learning all of this. So, staying in the present is easiest for now.

Polina stands up to excuse herself to the restroom. Ilya can't read her face. Has no idea if she is angry about not being named in the will.

Once Polina is gone, Lebedev looks to him. He supposes he'll need to get used to that. People looking to him.

"Will there be anything else, Mister Rozanov?"

Ilya can only think of one thing. "It's not right."

"Pardon?"

"Alexei is the eldest. He took care of our father until he died while I was at university in another country." Now that the reading of the will is over, Alexei's hurt over their father's decision does not seem so juvenile. In fact, he understands it. "Our father should not have done this to him."

Lebedev leans back in his chair, looking unmoved. "Then abstain from your role as Executor. That is your right. Your brother is named as the alternate."

Ilya clenches his jaw, knowing something with certainty now. "I will not do that."

"Then I will be in touch," Lebedev stands from his chair and steps away from the conference table. "You should take some time to—"

“I will perform the duties as Executor,” Ilya interrupts, even though this is clearly a man who hates to be interrupted. It seems stupid to hold onto this conversation with someone who has no stake in it, but as the words come out, he just knows they need to be said to someone. “But that doesn’t mean my father was right to do this.”

Lebedev exhales, unimpressed. He says something under his breath. Ilya doesn’t catch anything but, “*Naïve children*.”

Ilya nearly flinches at that. “What did—”

“You think this is about love? An expression of your father’s preference?” Lebedev asks, looking more invested in the conversation now. “That is what your brother obviously believes, though I thought you might be more mature than him.”

Ilya stares, wondering how many times he’s had this conversation with other confused and broken families.

“What is it about then?”

“Trust,” Lebedev says simply. “Your father needed someone who would divide his estate, take care of his belongings, his money, his family. It is simple.”

Ilya doesn’t say anything. He knows that what Lebedev is saying makes sense, but it still feels far from simple. Nothing has ever been simple where his family is concerned, and the weight of this new responsibility is starting to come down on him. His gaze is drawn to the floor before it’s brought back by the sound of something sliding on the table closer to him. It’s Lebedev, pushing the will towards him with his fingertips.

“Maybe, *Iliusha*, he trusted you to do the right thing.”

For the next three months, Ilya tries to do what is right.

It took Alexei days to speak to him after the reading of the will, but finally he had cracked. When he did, Ilya told him he understood the hurt he must have felt over their father’s decision and expressed, yet again, his gratitude that he had taken care of their father while he was away. Then, in plain terms that left no room for argument, told him what was going to happen.

He split their father’s assets equally between himself, Alexei, and Polina. Alexei ardently protested Polina’s inclusion, suddenly not so loyal to her anymore, but Ilya wouldn’t hear any of it. While he had never much liked his stepmother, she was his father’s wife, and he believed she was entitled to a share of what he left behind.

Ilya also set aside a portion of the inheritance, taken from both his and Alexei’s shares, for Alexei’s daughter that she can access when she turns eighteen.

He put their house on the market, and it didn’t take long before they had a buyer. This was also split equally between the three of them.

After a while, Alexei even seemed more tolerant of the arrangement. He was getting less money than he would have had he been Executor, but he was also spared the responsibility of having to handle all of it. Ilya hardly enjoyed it, but he knew he was able to make these arrangements with more efficiency than Alexei could have.

Maybe their father knew this too.

At the end of June, when things had finally settled down to a bearable degree, Ilya called the university in Canada and discussed the possibility of his returning in the fall.

He had known he would do this within minutes of hearing Lebedev name him as Executor. He was devoid of any desire to stay in Moscow, knowing there was absolutely nothing for him there. But he was unsure of exactly how reaching out to the university would go, if returning was even a possibility. He had missed finals, the playoffs, the entire end of a semester.

But the university administration was surprisingly amiable, given the extreme circumstances surrounding his departure in the spring. When he told them he wished to return, they contacted his professors from the spring about allowing him to submit his term papers, still left unfinished on his laptop, late and be given credit for their classes. All of them agreed due to his standing in their classes, and Ilya had never been happier that he had actually bothered to start taking his coursework seriously.

Then something happened that came as a shock. Once all of his work was turned in and the administration was certain that he would be re-enrolling, they tentatively offered him his spot back on the hockey team, and his scholarship.

Ilya had nearly chuckled on the phone at that, as they had revoked it mercilessly mere months ago. Though he supposed their changing their tune now had something to do with the team's poor showing in the playoffs once he was gone.

He told the administration he needed to think about it, and he did. He thought long and hard about what he wanted to do. Since the news of his father's death, he hadn't even touched his skates, let alone been on the ice. There had been no time.

There was no doubt that he missed hockey, but his interest in it had been waning year after year. He knew his chances of getting drafted were over, and there was just no spark in it anymore. Nothing to motivate him on the ice and make him hungry to win.

Finally, after going back and forth on it for a few days, he told the administration no. He would not be returning to hockey.

While he was sure there was disappointment over the decision, the university still threw him a bone by offering him a partial academic scholarship, something Ilya did not think he'd ever be offered in his life, and he graciously took it. Nearly laughing over the phone that he was going to be a student on an academic scholarship now after years of hockey.

Throughout all of this, he was in touch with Svetlana, and she couldn't have been happier. She supported the decisions he made but grilled him to make sure he was certain of them.

She constantly asked him when he'd be back in Canada, and demanded to know his exact flight so she could be there waiting for him at the airport.

And she was.

By the time he found himself standing in front of the Kappa Tau house with his bags, it didn't feel real, that he had somehow made his way back here.

He looked down the street. The Omega Chi house was too far away to see, but he still felt its looming presence.

He had won the Kappa Tau presidency before he left in the spring, but he was surprised to assume the role when he returned. Marleau outright asked him to do it, as it fell to him when it looked like Ilya would not be returning, and he hadn't wanted the job. Ilya agreed, because Marleau wanted him to and because he wanted it as well. He never thought it would be the case during rush week in his freshman year, but he's come to love Kappa Tau in his way.

It was at the meeting at the Greek Row meeting for all incoming fraternity and sorority councils that he couldn't hide any longer.

He hadn't meant to, but his eyes sought Hollander the second he walked in the room. It couldn't be helped. He had done this at every Greek event since he had met Hollander three years ago. Old habits, as they say.

As he sat next to Marleau and listened to his recounting of all the Greek Row gossip he missed, he didn't see Hollander anywhere. Pike was there, somehow elected president of Omega Chi. Ilya was almost starting to wonder if Hollander wouldn't be at this meeting at all until he wandered in alone, just before it started so Ilya couldn't approach him.

At the sight of Hollander, his breath caught. He looked as perfect as ever, even more than before as his hair was longer now, and Ilya was overwhelmed by being in the same room as him after so many months.

Ilya tried not to stare, he really did, but his eyes kept falling on Hollander's face no matter how hard he tried. He couldn't give a shit about what the Greek Council president had to say, and he didn't hear any of it. But Hollander didn't look at him, keeping his gaze decidedly forward. Ilya wasn't sure if he hadn't seen him or if he was deliberately ignoring him.

He had his answer when he approached him and Pike after the meeting Hollander didn't say a word to him. Ilya tried to goad him, using his tried-and-true methods of provocation, but he got nothing. The voice of Rose Landry, a sound he hadn't missed at all, called him away before he could get a word out of him.

Okay, so Hollander was still pissed off at him. Ilya can accept that he deserves that. Things hadn't exactly ended on good terms.

He considered texting him but guessed that Hollander would just ignore him. He knew that trying to get him alone was hopeless, as Hollander only had poisonous looks for him now, so he dropped any hope for that. All he could think to do is fall back into the familiar. He sought

him out at Greek events, just like he always did, and poked at him. He knew by this point exactly what to say to make Hollander react.

But Hollander gave him nothing for weeks, and Ilya was beginning to feel like a little boy shooting spit balls at the classmate he likes. Childish and stupid.

Until finally, *finally* in October when Ilya was close to giving up, Hollander sassed him back.

Ilya nearly threw his fist into the air and whooped in victory. Hollander even had that exasperated playfulness behind his eyes that he always did whenever they verbally sparred. Some of the poison in him had dissipated. It was a relief.

They carried on this way, poking and prodding, but nothing more than that. Ilya was still hesitant. Though it seemed like Hollander was more tolerant of him, and not so sore about the way things had ended anymore, Ilya still wasn't able to take things further than that, and Hollander didn't try either, which only made Ilya more unsure. He hated it. Their relationship throughout university, up and down as it was, had become something he depended on. Some…stability. Now, he was floundering and didn't know what to do about it.

By the time the student body returned from winter break, Ilya had become convinced that exchanging insults at Greek events was all his relationship with Hollander was anymore, and though he missed what they used to be, he supposed this was better than nothing at all.

That is, until Greek Week started and he simply couldn't help himself anymore.

Hollander had barely looked at him with any real degree of venom for months. The insults continued, sure, but that was nothing out of the ordinary for them and never had been. Ilya even thought Hollander was simply over what happened last year, which Ilya was also on board with forgetting.

Then, Hollander had shown up at his Kappa Tau party celebrating the start of Greek Week, stood right in front of him as Troy flirted with him, even flirted back though he probably didn't realize he was doing that, and wandered into a secluded part of the house. Ilya had to follow. It couldn't be helped.

Once they were alone together…well, Ilya has never claimed to be a particularly strong man.

The bet was something he had pulled out of his ass on the spot, if only to keep Hollander in the room with him a little longer. He hadn't actually expected Hollander to agree, but he did, and Ilya could not have been more thrilled. Hollander offering him up a chance to have him for one more day before they graduated and never saw each other again. He knew he could make the most of those twenty-four hours.

It was supposed to be simple. Fun, even.

But, well, it didn't exactly work out that way.

April 2017

The blaring sound of Ilya's phone ringing wakes him. He hadn't intended to collapse into bed when he returned to the Kappa Tau house, but given the exploits of the previous night, he only got a couple of hours of sleep. So, a nap was in order. But that nap has been rudely interrupted.

He tries and fails to reach his phone on his bedside table a few times before finally getting his fingers around it. His first instinct is to hit ignore, but then he thinks that it might be Svetlana. He presses the answer button without checking the caller ID, his eyes barely open.

"Hello?"

"*Ilya*, I'm so sorry…"

That's not Svetlana's voice. Ilya's brain is still waking up but even so he knows Hollander's voice immediately, and distantly he thinks that he'd probably know Hollander's voice from miles away in a windstorm.

His words, however, are confusing.

"Hollander?" is all he gets out, sleep still seeping out of his body.

"Hayden told me what happened last night and I can't believe I did that, I'm so fucking sorry —"

"Hollander, *stop*." Ilya has no idea what Hollander is apologizing to him for. He thinks back to last night, picking him up from the Mu Gamma floor and bringing him back to the Omega Chi house with Pike. Helping Hollander get ready for bed and then climbing under the sheets with him. Wrapping himself around Hollander's body and sleeping like that in a way they had not in what felt like an eternity.

Ilya is struggling to see what the apology is needed for, unless he's apologizing for needing help.

"Why sorry?" he finally asks.

"I…" It sounds like Hollander's swallows on the other end of the line. "I outed you to Hayden."

Ilya has to bite down on his lip to stop himself from succumbing to his first instinct, which is to break into laughter. The only reason he's able to do that is because he can tell how serious Hollander is being.

But he laughs internally. Here he thought Hollander might be apologizing for needing him last night, and he realizes that he never wants Hollander to apologize for that.

After a few seconds of silence, Hollander clearly awaiting an answer, probably a reprimand, Ilya settles on, "You were drunk."

"That's no excuse." Now that Ilya is focusing better, the guilt in Hollander's voice is readily apparent to him.

“Shane, I do not care what Pike knows about me.” Ilya sits up in bed. It is suddenly very important to him that Hollander have his conscience cleared.

His words are also true. He doesn’t care at all what Pike knows about him. Would he have chosen for things to happen as they did? No, probably not, but Pike knowing about him has barely registered in his brain since last night. He is far from embarrassed about it, and he also knows, as much as he may dislike Pike, that he’s not the kind of person who will go blabbing to Greek Row about him. He doesn’t think much of him, but he knows he’s not that low.

There’s also the fact that Ilya has assumed plenty of his KT brothers have their suspicions about him, one or two may outright know, and as long as they keep their thoughts to themselves, Ilya has simply never garnered up the energy to care.

But he knows that’s never been Hollander’s mindset, hence his voice over the phone dripping with regret over outing Ilya to Pike when Ilya had barely even given it a thought.

He hates how much he appreciates the sentiment. So unlike what he’s always known.

“Pike will not tell, it is fine.”

“But you—”

“*I* am not angry,” Ilya interrupts him, understanding now what he needs to hear. “But I forgive you, if that will make you stop apologizing.”

Hollander lets out a breath, and Ilya hopes that’s him letting himself off the hook.

A silence draws out between them, and Ilya remembers that the last time they had spoken to each other without an audience, without a pizza box collision, and with Hollander sober enough to remember, was at the ZBZ Gatsby party.

He cringes outwardly, knowing that they still haven’t resolved anything. The continued silence only confirms that.

“Shane, I—”

“Thank you.” It is Hollander’s turn to interrupt.

Ilya blinks. “For what?”

“For last night,” Hollander says, exhaling again. “You didn’t have to, you know, do that.”

Ilya turns over the words in his head, unsure exactly what they mean, if he’s telling Ilya that what he did was not necessary.

“I thought you needed help.” Ilya chooses his words carefully. “But if you did not want—”

“No, *no*. That’s not what I’m saying.”

Ilya stays quiet then, waiting for Hollander to tell him what he is saying.

Hollander takes a breath. “You had no obligation to do that for me. We’re not—we haven’t—you *know*, but you did that anyway. Thank you.”

This, Ilya understands better. Though he disagrees that he had no obligation to take care of him. But this, he doesn’t say out loud. He doesn’t even fully understand himself what it means.

“You’re welcome.” The easiest answer.

Hollander doesn’t say anything. Ilya supposes that might be because broaching the subject of the two of them sleeping in Hollander’s bed together last night is a bit too much (assuming he knows, did Pike tell him? Ilya wonders). So, they fall back into uneasy silence. Ilya almost wonders if the call disconnected before he hears Hollander’s breathing. Uncomfortable silences are not where Ilya thrives, usually choosing to fill any silence with his own words, however inane. But Hollander had called him, and Ilya thinks he should be the one to take the lead right now.

Mercifully, Hollander speaks again. “You’ll be at the Greek Month challenge tonight?”

Oh right. They do have that tonight. Ilya hasn’t even given that a thought today.

“Yes, I’ll be there.” It’s not like he has a choice. His fraternity can’t do the challenge without him, and he’s in too deep in Greek Week to give up on it now.

“I will too.”

“Right.”

That is stating the very obvious. There’s no chance in hell that Hollander would ever miss a Greek Week challenge.

“Maybe we can talk.” Hollander’s voice is quiet.

In the far corner of his brain, one that has been in a fairly dismal state lately, a light clicks on. The feeling quickly spreads throughout his body.

“Talk?” Ilya says quietly, carefully, fearing that one wrong move could cause destruction.

“I mean…” Words aren’t coming any easier to Hollander. “If you still want to.”

Because right, he had offered that hadn’t he? After the Greek Week pizza challenge in front of the entirety of Greek Row, because he could not stop the words from spilling out of his mouth at the absolute worst of times.

If you still want to.

Ilya is terrified. Ilya doesn’t know if he’s ever wanted anything more.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Writing should speak for itself, but my general take on Ilya is that he can be very self-destructive and people around him, in this case Shane, can get hurt in that wreckage. Where this really leads to problems is Ilya has never had to actually mend a serious relationship. He didn't grow up in an environment where that was normal. So, when Shane fell back into old patterns with him, Ilya thought things were just solved.

On Shane's end, it's so easy for him to do exactly that with Ilya, just fall into familiar patterns. Denying to himself how deeply he is still hurt because he just wants Ilya so badly i.e. kissing him at the ZBZ party. I also think you can interpret that first chapter as Shane deliberately seeking Ilya out at that party, which is how Ilya read it. They both stupidly thought they were over old wounds.

But then the bet happens and all the feelings blew up in their faces.

Hope you enjoyed. I'm excited for the next chapter.

Comments and kudos always appreciated.

Chapter 10: The Deep

Chapter Notes

> Long wait for this chapter. Again, it's a crazy busy time of year. I hope it's worth the wait.
>
> For those of you asking for my social media, I'm sure it's well intentioned and you just want to connect in fandom, but I don't really have public social media anymore. I abandoned twitter when it became intolerable. My Instagram is private. I love getting your comments and haven't experienced the harassment I'm hearing rumoured within the fandom, and I'd like to keep it that way. I hope you understand that. The best way to reach me is here.
>
> Enjoy the chapter. It took a lot of work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

March 31st, 2017

I, I loved you much, it's not enough

Beyoncé's heady voice slows the ZBZ party to a lull just as Shane spots Rozanov in the crowd.

His suit is pink. His curls, usually so effortlessly falling about his face, have been combed and styled. Shane thinks he must be dressed as Gatsby, some version of him, and he looks good. Of course he does. Rozanov almost always dresses to impress for these kinds of Greek Row parties, and he always looks better than everyone else in attendance. He barely has to try, which has always prickled Shane.

It has never been so easy for him. He took more than an hour to get ready tonight.

Rozanov isn't looking his way. Shane is at the entryway of the roulette table room, having wandered there when he came out of the bathroom, and Rozanov's head is darting around like he's looking for someone, and Shane has a sneaking suspicion that it's him. Even though they haven't been speaking lately.

As Rozanov starts walking for the next room over, Shane keeps his eyes on him and determines that it's a good thing that they aren't talking. Nothing good could come of it based on past experience. They should keep it this way.

Rozanov stops in his tracks. His body goes stock-still. As if he…

Alarm bells go off in Shane's head, and he spins around on his heel before Rozanov has a chance to get a look at him. He squeezes his way into the crowd. But somehow, even without looking behind him, he knows Rozanov has spotted him. He moves faster, dodging and weaving through all the glittery and feathery costumes, looking for someone he knows or a place to hide.

He breaks out of the crowd, not daring to look behind him, and ducks to his left. It's the room with the dance floor, flashing lights and a disco ball, the loudest part of the house, the room at any party he always avoids like the plague. Shane backs up into the wall, pressing his head against it and taking a breath, hoping Rozanov hadn't see him take refuge in here.

Shane counts to twenty, and when nothing happens, he dares to peek his head around the corner, wondering if he had imagined Rozanov chasing after him.

But no, he hadn't. Rozanov is there, just a few meters away. His back is to him and he's talking to Rose, who is probably one of the only people in the world who can look better than Rozanov at a party. She has the scathing expression of her face that she always wears when she's within a hundred yards of Rozanov. Shane nearly smiles at the sight, knowing Rose is better equipped to handle him right now than he is.

"*There* you are, handsome."

The voice, faintly accented and familiar, startles him. When he turns around, Svetlana is there, and his mouth falls open in awe.

Svetlana is beautiful. You'd have to be dead to not see that. But still her beauty regularly stuns Shane, especially on a night like tonight when she had clearly gone the extra mile. Her dark hair is straightened and styled in an updo, her makeup is sharp and looks professionally done, and her black dress would turn anyone's head.

As Shane stares, he can't decide who is more beautiful between her and Rose.

"The staring is flattering, Shane," Svetlana says. She's smirking, but it's friendly. "I also take compliments in verbal form."

"You look amazing," Shane blurts out, seeing now that he was being weird by just staring at her with his mouth hanging open.

"Thank you. So do you." She approaches him then, taking his arm. "I've been looking for a Nick to my Jordan. Too many Gatsbys around here, wouldn't you agree?"

"I don't know. I haven't been paying attention." In truth, he's only really noticed one Gatsby tonight, but he won't be admitting that out loud to Rozanov's best friend or…whatever Svetlana and Rozanov are these days.

Svetlana steps forward, leading him away from the wall. "Dance with me?"

His whole body stiffens and he feels himself go red. He can't dance at all. He knows he'd just look like a fool next to Svetlana. She can absolutely dance, he's seen her before, and he can't

hold a candle. “I, uh—I can’t—"

“No worries,” she puts a stop to his stuttering, and he’s glad. “Escort me to the chocolate fountain?”

That, at least, he can do. He gives the dance floor a wide berth and they move to the chocolate fountain in the back corner of the room together, Svetlana’s hand still on his arm.

Shane doesn’t say anything as they maneuver through the crowd. He’s still getting used to talking to Svetlana at all. Before their senior year, Shane probably could have counted on one hand all the words they had spoken to each other. Their relationship had consisted of Svetlana occasionally giving him looks (and in hindsight he suspects these were knowing looks) from across the room.

But things changed this year. They weren’t friends, no. But in September at an Omega Chi party, Svetlana was bumped by someone and knocked into his lap while he was sitting by himself on the couch. Half of his fraternity looked their way and wolf whistled while his face burned. He had stammered out an apology to her, and she laughed.

“You’re so polite, Shane Hollander. I would swoon into your arms, but I’m already there.” She gave his hair a quick run through with her fingers and maneuvered off of his lap into the open spot next to him.

After that they just…talked. Not about Rozanov, which came as a surprise to him, because he seemed like the only thing they had in common. Shane had also come to understand that she knew something about what was going on between them. But instead of him, they talked about classes and the party and what they were thinking about doing after graduation. Normal party talk, something Shane usually hated. But with Svetlana it was somehow easy.

He liked Svetlana.

The conversation was nice, but it didn’t lead to friendship exactly. It couldn’t. They both knew that would be too strange due to their current standings with Rozanov. But still, when they happened upon each other at parties, they could talk, and Shane enjoyed it.

Despite this enjoyment, he has always felt somewhat weird around her. Never really sure what exactly her relationship with Rozanov was or is. He couldn’t tell if she felt the same way.

“At last, chocolatey bliss,” Svetlana sighs out when they reach the fountain. She removes her hand from his arm to grab a marshmallow from a bowl on the table, sticking it under the running chocolate.

“Are you having a nice time?” Shane says, opting for the easy question.

“Rose killed it with this theme,” Svetlana says, popping the marshmallow into her mouth. “It’s very glamorous.”

“Rose loves her glamor sometimes.” Shane nods, eyes drawn back to Svetlana’s dress, which certainly oozes glamor.

“She does,” Svetlana agrees, and Shane is a bit thrown by her saying that, like she knows that about Rose. But she doesn’t give him the time to dwell on it. “I’m surprised I found you before Ilya did. He’s on the hunt tonight.”

Shane stiffens. It’s not the first time Rozanov has come up between them, but he’s not a common topic of conversation. He chooses his words carefully.

“I think he saw me earlier, but I…”

“Ran?” Svetlana guesses.

“I wouldn’t put it like that.” Even though that’s exactly what happened.

“I would understand if you did,” Svetlana says sympathetically. “When Ilya gets obsessed, he’s…well, let’s just say he’s a lot.”

Shane is unsettled by this conversation. While they’re not saying anything explicitly, they have never spoken so openly about Rozanov and what Shane has going on with him. Whatever it even is. It has Shane shifting on his feet, and he can’t help but glance around for any eavesdroppers, even though he the music is so loud that no one would be able to overhear them.

“We don’t have to talk about it,” Svetlana says, bringing his gaze back to her. Apparently she noticed him looking around.

Shane swallows and realizes it’s nice to talk about Rozanov with someone who actually knows him. Rose is always a sympathetic ear, but she barely knows Rozanov, and her feelings about him, with good reason, are entirely hostile. While Shane hasn’t thought about it before, he realizes now that Svetlana might understand his situation better than anyone, simply because she also knows Rozanov.

“It’s okay,” Shane says, raising his voice enough so she can hear it over the music. He thinks back to her earlier words. “I don’t know, though, about…what you said.”

“What? That he’s a bit fixated on you?” Svetlana raises an eyebrow, looking unconvinced. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed.”

Shane shrugs, turning her words over in his head. There were times when he would have agreed that they summed up Ilya’s feelings for him. “I guess I just don’t really…get it. Why he’s…you know.”

He doesn’t know if she does, but he can’t complete the sentence.

Her eyes go bigger and she looks him up and down. He thinks she sees understanding on her face. Reaching her hand up, bracelet glinting in the disco ball light, she pinches his bowtie.

“He’s always had a weakness for perfect things.”

Shane feels rather than hears himself chuckle. He returns her gaze, taking in her makeup, hair, costume, and beautiful face most of all. “That explains…well.” He feels awkward about what he was about to say, and instead just gestures at her.

She smiles and her hand drifts to his shoulder. “I’m no more perfect than you are, Shane Hollander.”

He smiles back; glad he hadn’t put his foot in his mouth.

“But…” Svetlana says, looking thoughtful. “It’s nice to be looked at like you’re perfect for just a little while, isn’t it?”

Yes. God, yes. Shane shivers at her words, never having heard it said out loud. Though he shouldn’t be surprised that she has similar feelings.

“Are you going to let him catch you tonight?” Svetlana asks, bringing the conversation back to its focus.

Shane feels his teeth grit, knowing he can avoid Ilya the whole evening if he wants to. Or he could just leave. His eyes trail back up to Svetlana, finding her studying his face.

“I want to,” he confesses, voice low. The only reason she can hear his words is because she’s leaning in close. “And I think that makes me an idiot.”

Her eyebrows draw together, a flash of sadness coming across her face. He notices her shoulders slumping as she takes a breath. “He hurt you.”

This is certainly something they have never talked about before, as it crosses too many lines, but Shane knows Svetlana is smart enough to have figured things out for herself. Shane has assumed Rozanov told her some version of the story, though she hardly knows all of it.

He just nods in answer to her words. Much as he likes Svetlana, he is not going to give her anything else regarding this.

Svetlana returns his nod, expression accepting. “I want to tell you something.”

Shane looks up again, curious. “Okay.”

“It is nothing he told me. You know I would not do that to him. It is just what I think, okay?”

He nods, unsurprised. Svetlana wouldn’t betray Rozanov’s confidence.

“When Ilya came back here from Russia, he came back for many reasons,” Svetlana starts, eyes intent on his face. “You were one of the reasons, Shane.”

Shane feels his body go very still as the words leave her lips. He manages to hold eye contact with her, trying to process what she just said. His first instinct is to scoff, but looking at the seriousness on her face, he knows she only told him what she believes is the absolute truth.

He swallows, unable to say anything.

“Is it okay that I said that?” She looks concerned, like she overstepped.

Shane is nodding before he can even think about an answer. He’s not upset at her words. In a way, they are all he’s ever wanted to hear but…

Not quite from the right person.

“I don’t know what to say,” is all he can get out of his mouth.

“Don’t say anything,” she tells him, bringing her hand back to his shoulder. “Thank you for hearing me out.”

He lets out a breath, nodding again.

“He’s my friend, and I want him to be happy,” she says, leaning in again. “But you do what’s best for you, Shane.”

At that, she gives his shoulder a squeeze and walks away.

It’s only when Svetlana is no longer in front of him that the rest of the party starts to come into focus again. The music, he notices, has moved on to a slow, moody number. Lana Del Ray, he thinks, and the people on the dance floor couple off to slow dance.

When he looks in the direction Svetlana left in, he freezes. Rozanov is there, and he thinks he sees him say something to Svetlana as she approaches him. Shane can’t tell if she responds. She just passes him by and disappears into the crowd of the party.

Rozanov’s gaze turns to him.

It has the same effect it always has, no matter how much Shane has wished otherwise. He can’t move, his heart starts racing, and he can feel his fingers tingling. Some freak biochemical reaction that only Rozanov has ever been able to bring out in him. He used to wonder if Rozanov got the same feeling. He finds himself wondering that again now.

The music is loud, and Shane can’t see anyone else. It’s as if they’re alone in the room.

Will you still love me when I got nothin’ but my aching soul?

One week later

Shane briefly thinks, as he stares at the closed door in front of him, that almost any conversation would be easier than this one. His stomach turns, wracked with guilt and trepidation. He wants to turn around and find somewhere to hide, but he knows he can’t. This needs to be done. Steeling himself, he raises his hand and knocks on the door.

The noise inside informs him that he’s been heard, and he clamps down on the urge to run. No avoiding this now.

The door swings open and Hayden is there. He looks sleepy, dressed only in his boxers and a t-shirt, and glancing behind him to the disheveled bed, Shane wonders if he's woken him up from a nap.

"Hey," Shane says, doing his best not to look at the floor.

"Hey," Hayden returns.

"Can we talk for a minute?" Shane asks, fearing the answer.

But Hayden nods. "That's probably a good idea."

Hayden opens the door wider and Shane steps inside. Hayden's cleaning habits have not improved as the years have passed. Clothes are strewn about, but it's hardly the most disastrous mess Shane has come across in here. He moves to the bed, sitting at the end of it, wanting to do something that feels routine for them.

Hayden closes the door before turning to look at him. He crosses his arms and doesn't speak, clearly waiting for Shane to say something.

And Shane knows he has to. They had spoken earlier this morning. Shane had woken up, headache blaring and sat up in bed trying to piece what happened the night before, but it was all blurred images and incoherent noises. All he had determined for a fact was that he had gotten drunk out of his mind for the first time in years and that Rozanov had been there, in his room, and Hayden had been as well.

Other memories, of Rozanov in his bed and pressed against him as he fell asleep, he couldn't be sure were real.

He had bolted out of his room when these memories started returning and had almost collided into Hayden in the hallway. Hayden had been evasive when Shane asked him what happened, but he persisted and Hayden fessed up, giving him an abbreviated rundown of what occurred last night.

Shane had been mortified, but before he could say anything, they were interrupted by one of their Omega Chi brothers pulling Hayden away from some presidential duty that Shane couldn't comprehend in the moment. All Shane could think to do when Hayden was gone was sprint to his phone and call Rozanov to apologize. He had outed him and he felt awful.

Rozanov had thankfully not seemed angry about that, and Shane kept talking to him and before he knew it, he was asking…

No. Deal with that later. Deal with the Hayden crisis now, he decides.

Hayden is still standing there just looking at him. Shane inhales deeply.

"I should have told you."

"No shit."

“I’m sorry.”

Hayden looks away, staring instead at the wall over his desk.

“Hay, I’m *sorry*.”

“Stop apologizing, please,” Hayden says quietly, still looking at the wall.

Shane’s throat is dry, and he feels desperation stirring within him. He doesn’t know what he’ll do if he’s damaged his relationship with Hayden. He wants to say something else, but Hayden doesn’t want to hear more apologies, apparently, and he’s not sure what else to say.

Hayden’s jaw is clenching as he works something through in his mind.

“It’s a little hard to get my head around it,” Hayden says, still not looking at him. “I’ve been thinking back to stuff in the last few years, and yeah, maybe some of it makes more sense now.”

There were a couple of occasions when Shane wondered if he had done something to put Hayden on the trail to figuring it out, but it never happened. Looks like those incidents are being recalled now.

“I just—I never would have thought…” Hayden swallows and finally looks at him again. “I thought you hated him.”

“Not completely wrong,” Shane returns, because Hayden clearly was looking for a response to his statement. “Sometimes I thought I hated him, but…not really.”

“Not really,” Hayden repeats, eyebrows coming together.

“No.”

Shane hopes Hayden won’t ask for further details on this subject, because he’s not sure he’s in the proper headspace right now to explain it.

“Did you think I’d be like…mad at you?” Hayden asks then, making eye contact. “If you told me?”

And there it is, the guilt that Shane was feeling earlier returns tenfold. Hayden is hurt, like Shane always knew he would be, that he didn’t tell him. That he left him in the dark for nearly four years when he’s his best friend and they tell each other everything.

Shane sits up straighter, trying to bring himself to do this. “We didn’t tell anyone for a long time, Hay. Neither of us. The whole thing, it just started out…casual and then I don’t know what it was and then it was over. I was confused for a long time and then when it ended it didn’t even seem worth putting on you.”

“*Putting on me*,” Hayden repeats these words, but doesn’t seem to like them. “But you told Rose?”

Shane closes his eyes, remembering exactly why it was that he had to tell Rose. Sitting on the floor of her room last spring, his face wet with tears. He figures it was easy for Hayden to guess that Rose knows.

"Hayden, I told Rose when things were really bad. When it was over with me and Rozanov." That's the only explanation Shane feels capable of giving, and he doesn't want to apologize for having told Rose before him.

Thankfully, Hayden doesn't seem to be looking for another apology. Instead, his face softens and he moves closer to the bed, carefully, like Shane could bolt from the door at any second. He won't though. At this point, nothing would stop him from seeing this through. When Hayden sits down on the bed next to him, he just looks at him.

"Things got bad with you two?" Hayden asks quietly.

Shane lets out a breath. He knows he will tell Hayden the whole story one of these days, but he doesn't think it will serve either of them to do so right now.

But he won't lie to him either. Not anymore. "When Rozanov left last year."

"Rozanov said earlier that he fucked up, and that's why it ended."

That is putting it mildly, as far as Shane is concerned, but for now, he nods in agreement.

"Is it okay if…we just leave it at that for now, Hay?" Shane looks at his knees. He wants to be honest with Hayden, but he doesn't think he can get all of this out there today, not after the morning they've already had.

Hayden doesn't say anything for a minute, but finally, "Okay."

Shane looks at him. "Okay?"

"I mean…this has kind of been a lot to digest." Hayden shrugs. "And I also feel like shit for not figuring it out earlier or being a good enough friend that you would tell me—"

"Hayden, *no*, that's not—"

"I know. I know you're not calling me a bad friend. But I could have been a better one." Hayden looks at him again and then, as earnestly as Shane has ever heard him, "I want you to tell me these things."

Shane is almost too stunned by the words to speak, but he manages to move his lips. "I want to tell you these things."

A hint of a smile in Hayden's eyes. "Good."

"And I could have been a better friend too." This Shane means. While Hayden hadn't exactly made it easy for him to confess this to him, Shane knows now that he should have done it anyway. He had lied to Hayden for too long.

“Can I hug you now?” Hayden asks, looking hopeful. “I’ve sort of needed that all morning.”

Shane doesn’t even hesitate. He reaches for Hayden and wraps his arms around him, pushing his face into his shoulder. Hayden returns the hug, arms going around his middle. They don’t hug often outside of their Greek Week victories or other casual moments. The last time Shane remembers them having a real hug was after Shane came out to him last summer. Hayden had initiated it, and Shane hadn’t known how much he needed it until he was in his arms.

He realizes now how much he’s needed this hug too.

“I don’t want to ruin this major moment for our friendship,” Hayden says after a few moments, pulling away so he can look at him. “But you like…really need to talk to Rozanov.”

Shane lets out a puff of air and feels his mouth turning into a smile. “You’ve known about this for less than a day and you already want to give me relationship advice.”

“Listen, man. It doesn’t take a genius to see you two have some serious unresolved shit.”

“You’re not wrong.”

“So…are you going to talk to him?” Hayden leans in, and Shane is somewhat amused by how curious he looks.

“Hayden.”

“Hm?” His eyebrows go up in anticipation.

“Get our brothers together. We have a challenge tonight and we’re going to rehearse.”

There are a few students already milling about at the university auditorium, even though it’s nearly two hours before the Greek Week penultimate challenge is set to begin. It’s also forty-five minutes before the remaining fraternities and sorority were requested by the Greek Council to arrive.

But Shane is here now.

He and Rozanov agreed to meet early here so they could talk. They said thirty minutes early, but Shane couldn’t make himself wait around in the Omega Chi house for one second longer, so now he’s early and doesn’t know what to do with himself.

Rather than trying to distract himself outside the auditorium, he decides to head backstage, figuring Rozanov will probably show up soon.

Shane hasn’t exactly decided what he’s going to say in this planned conversation. Technically, he was the one who suggested they talk tonight, but Rozanov had asked days ago. So, he’s not sure where that leaves them as far as who takes charge.

There's so much Shane has wanted to say to Rozanov for months. Some things he may have wanted to say for years. But when any of it comes to mind, it starts blurring together. The long-unspoken words mixing with hurt and anger in one decidedly potent combination. Shane feels it all in his stomach, which has been doing flips since this afternoon.

He also has no idea what Rozanov might want to say to him. Shane has wanted to know ever since the pizza challenge when he turned him down. What would have happened if Shane agreed to talk to him then and there? What would he have told him?

That didn't happen, of course, and Shane feels a fusion of pride at telling Rozanov no and regret over what could have been.

As he opens the door to the backstage, there's the one other voice in his mind that always demands to be heard. The one that reminds him of what happens when he lets Rozanov in. He didn't even need to go all the way back to last spring for evidence of that. Just to last weekend at the ZBZ party.

And yet, he doesn't turn around. He steps into the backstage hallway, because that voice is one that he has ignored repeatedly over the years. It's stupid, he knows. He does it anyway.

There's a bewildering obstacle in the hallway.

Rozanov is there. Shane is immediately convinced that they must have miscommunicated on the phone, because he thought he was here early. But Rozanov is leaning against the wall like he's been waiting for at least a few minutes. He's sure they agreed to meet thirty minutes early, but he's always found numbers to be the biggest pain to understand in a second language.

"Hey," Shane says softly when Rozanov turns to look at him. "Sorry, I thought we agreed on thirty minutes early."

Rozanov stares, then nods. "Yeah, we did."

Oh. Rozanov knew the time. He's just early. Even earlier than Shane. He doesn't know what to make of that realization other than that they're both ready for this. Maybe too ready.

"Should we…?" Shane glances around, not wanting to talk here in the hallway, where anyone could walk by or overhear them.

"This door is open." Rozanov reaches to his left and pulls open the door of one of the dressing rooms. He looks at Shane expectantly.

Shane hesitates. That loud and logical corner of his mind is telling him that it's his last chance to run. Part of him knows that stepping into that room with Rozanov will be crossing a line of no return.

He steps inside.

Rozanov follows and closes the door behind him. He's not giving anything away with his expression or body language. Shane hasn't been able to read him thus far. But that doesn't

matter, because when Rozanov turns to face him, he finds his body moving forward of its own accord, closing the distance between them. He hadn't made the conscious decision to move.

But moving he is, and he catches a brief flash of surprise come over Rozanov's face before he wraps his arms around his shoulders and pulls him into a hug.

Rozanov is stiff in his arms, and as Shane presses his face into his shoulder, he worries he's made a mistake. They don't exactly hug. Shane actually isn't sure they've ever hugged as long as they've known each other.

Still, Shane did it. Because of what happened at the Mu Gamma party.

"Thank you," Shane says, by way of explanation, into his shoulder. "For last night."

Rozanov doesn't say anything. Maybe he's still processing Shane's body pressed against his in this manner. Slowly, his arms come up and wrap around Shane's middle, returning the hug. Somehow, just by the way he does it, Shane can tell this is not the kind of physical contact that he's used to having.

But having his hug returned makes Shane relax. He feels his shoulders lowering as he exhales, sinking into the familiar warmth of Rozanov's body.

"You're welcome," Rozanov finally says, his voice muffled against Shane's shoulder.

It's Shane who moves first, his face turning inward until he's against Rozanov's neck. Rozanov feels it immediately, turning his face as well until they're only centimeters away. Both of their gazes dart to the other's lips and back up again, and Shane stops breathing.

Neither of them could help it, Shane knows. He also knows that he wants to close the distance between them, that Rozanov would let him.

But when Rozanov's nose brushes his, Shane snaps out of it. No. This isn't the right time. In fact, Shane doesn't know if there will ever be the right time for that again.

He clears his throat and steps away, unwinding his arms from his shoulders. Rozanov lets him.

"That wasn't what I meant when I asked to, you know, talk," Shane says, feeling like he needs to clarify that.

Rozanov's arms drop back at his sides. He regards him, looking unsure in a way he rarely does. "Yes, I know."

"I do want to talk."

Rozanov swallows.

"Maybe it would be easier to sit?" Shane asks, gesturing to the chairs in front of the counter and mirrors, clearly intended for the actors to do their stage makeup. For the first time, Shane

notices all the costumes for the spring musical hung up around them.

He sits down, and after lingering by the door, as if making a decision, Rozanov follows. He still looks stiff as a board. Shane doubts he's doing much better, his heart beating in his ears now that this is actually happening, but he powers through.

"You asked to talk to me," Shane tells him. "The other day at the challenge."

Rozanov meets his gaze again, then nods.

"What did you want to talk about?"

There are a million things Shane wants to say, but he needs to know this first. More than that, he has decided that he does not want to be the one leading this. Pushing and pulling at Rozanov to get him to talk to him. He's done that enough since this whole Greek Week mess started.

"Last week…" Rozanov starts, then stops. He takes a breath before continuing. "At Rose's party. What happened was my fault. Then what I said. Was wrong. I'm sorry."

Shane had been fuming about that all week. Rozanov's words when they were alone together in that room, after Shane told him to stop. For a few days, he had been certain that incident spelled the end of things between him and Rozanov.

But he realizes now that he hadn't even thought about what happened at the ZBZ party once today. The last time he's sure he was thinking about it was last night at Mu Gamma house. Despite this, he's glad to have this apology. Rozanov had apologized after the challenge, but he needed to hear it again, and to hear exactly what the apology was for.

"Thank you," Shane tells him.

Rozanov exhales, like that had taken a lot for him to say.

"Anything else?" Shane asks.

Rozanov's eyes flick up to his only for a second before they're directed at the floor again. He keeps quiet.

Shane sighs. So much for not leading this. "Ilya, you don't have to tell me anything. It's your business and your life. But I have some things I need to tell you."

Rozanov looks at him again, and his eyes stay on him. Shane feels his skin prickling. He had been preparing to say what he's about to say all day. Now that the moment is here, he has to fight the urge to run away, not unlike how he felt with Hayden. With some determination, he keeps his feet planted into the ground and holds himself steady in the chair.

"Last year…" Shane watches Rozanov tense up just from those two words. "You left. I don't know why and you don't have to tell me. But those things you said to me, I didn't deserve that."

Shane pauses, gauging Rozanov's reaction. He supposes it's a good sign that he hasn't gotten up and walked out. He's just listening.

"It hurt. A lot." Shane hates saying this out loud. It stings him to admit this to Rozanov when he has no idea what is going on inside his head, how much Shane's hurt will matter to him. This person who he has always struggled to understand.

Rozanov presses his lips together then speaks. "Was bad. I was asshole, I know—"

"*No*, Ilya." Shane's not sure why he says it, just knows that he almost bodily rejected how Rozanov had just said that. "I *know* you when you're being an asshole. Putting your phone in my face after you dumped me into a mud pit, that's being an asshole. *That* I can handle. But that's not what happened last year."

Rozanov's eyebrows are drawn together, and Shane can tell he's thinking, turning his words over in his head. For probably the millionth time, Shane wishes he could speak Russian fluently. This conversation is difficult enough without the language barrier only adding to it.

"I used to think I was the idiot for letting that happen to me. For thinking we were something, but after last night…no." Shane looks hard at Ilya now. "I wasn't imagining things. When we were together last spring break, the last time we were *really* together before you left, things were…different."

Rozanov stares.

"It was nice." Shane has to keep going.

"It was." Rozanov finally speaks.

"Yes." It's amazing what a relief it is to hear him agree, to know he hadn't imagined it. "And after that, you told me we were nothing. I don't think you know what that did to me."

"I was—" He cuts himself off, literally clamping his lips shut.

Shane wishes he could tear the words he was just about to say out of his mouth.

"I saw Rose after that. After you left…it was bad," Shane carries on. "She was all I had. She knows everything. It's why she hates you."

"She should."

"But *I* don't hate you." The words are out of his mouth before he can think them over. This wasn't something he planned on telling him, but it rings as true as everything else he has said so far. "I never have. I tried to, but I couldn't."

Silence rings between them then. Shane doesn't have anything more to say. When he decided that they were going to have this conversation, he just knew he needed Rozanov to know that he had been hurt deeply by what happened last year. It was painful to have to admit this to him, made him feel all too vulnerable, but Rozanov needed to know, and Shane needed to say it.

Rozanov has heard him out too. He hasn't defended himself or tried to brush anything off. He simply looks…sad. Shane hadn't expected that to be the reaction.

"My father died last year," Rozanov says suddenly.

Five words, but they knock the wind out of Shane.

"Oh my God…" he breathes out, stunned. "Ilya, I'm so sorry."

"Is why I went back to Russia. I had to."

Shane had considered endless possibilities about why Ilya dropped everything and returned to Russia last year. Visa problems, university disciplinary action, hockey career-ending injury, the list goes on. A family emergency had crossed his mind, but Shane didn't think it was anything *this* bad.

"I do not…" Ilya closes his eyes for a second, then opens them again. "I do not tell you this as excuse."

Shane doesn't say anything. Worried that if he interrupts, Ilya won't want to continue.

"Was very bad when it happened. When I had to go back…I did not want to see you." Ilya swallows, then meets his eye. "I was *afraid* to see you. Is why I tried to leave without telling you. But then you showed up."

Shane needs to hear this. He stays resolutely silent, refusing to give him an out on this.

"I was not…dealing with my father's death well. Then the university pulled my hockey scholarship. I did not know if I was ever coming back. When you came to see me, I was angry. At everything, yes, but at you too. Maybe most of all. Because…"

The air is thick. Shane feels himself stop breathing.

"You gave me something I would miss about this place."

It's like reaching the peak of a mountain. Shane lets out a breath, and Ilya looks pale. Something that had laid buried between them for a year now has been spoken out loud. There's no taking it back. Shane feels something akin to relief. Even if he never saw Rozanov again after this moment, at least they spoke truth to each other at long last.

"Was stupid. Makes no sense." Rozanov is shaking his head, but he manages to hold eye contact. "I said those things to you, hurt you because I…cared about you. Not because you did anything wrong."

"Well," Shane says, feeling like it's finally his turn to say something. "I guess it's nice to finally know that at least."

"I thought you were…over it, I don't know. Was stupid to think."

Shane doesn't know about that. He had told himself he was over it a thousand times, that he didn't care. He spent plenty of time in the last few months around Rozanov acting like things were normal. It was only in the last few weeks, when all this began, that he realized just how angry and hurt he still was over it all.

"Shane, I am sorry." Rozanov says this and his shoulders relax substantially, like he's been carrying something heavy. "I am sorry for everything. For what I said last year, for what happened last week, all of it."

"Thank you, Ilya." The words come easily, because Shane wants to say them and because he can see Ilya needs to hear them. But Shane is not quite ready to say the words *I forgive you*. He doesn't know if he ever will say them. "And I'm sorry about your father."

Ilya sighs. "He had dementia. Was gone a long time before he died."

Dementia. Jesus Christ. Shane can't even imagine.

His body taking on a mind of its own again, Shane leans forward and reaches out, placing his hand on Ilya's arm. Ilya looks surprised at the touch, then appreciative. Then, something Shane has never seen once from him in four years, there's a tear rolling down his cheek.

"Hey," Shane says softly, standing up from his chair and coming closer, standing right in front of him where he sits.

"Sorry…" Ilya chokes out, turning his face away.

"No." Shane doesn't need or want an apology for this, placing his hand on Ilya's face until he looks up at him. The one tear is already down to his chin, and Shane doesn't see any more. Like Ilya only let himself shed the single one.

Shane slides his hand into Ilya's hair and Ilya, like he's finally been given permission, lets his face fall forward against Shane's stomach. Shane just moves closer, his other hand moving around to his back as he feels Ilya's arms wrap around him tightly.

They stay like that for a long time. Ilya doesn't cry, just keeps his face pressed against Shane, burying himself there. Shane lets him do it, and he decides he'll let Ilya stay there for as long as he wants. He understands the urge to hide from the world every once in a while. Ilya used to be his space to do that for himself. Now, he wants to give it to Ilya. And he's come far enough at this point to know he needs this too.

Ilya says something in Russian, but he's muffled against Shane's stomach.

"Hm?" Shane asks, running his fingers through his hair again.

Ilya lifts his face to look up at him. "You should hate me."

It's a sad admission, and one that Shane has thought for himself many times in the last year. That he should hate Ilya Rozanov. He hadn't been lying earlier to Hayden when he said sometimes, he thought he hated him or to Ilya when he said he tried. At times he even tricked himself into thinking he did. But ultimately, it was useless.

“No, I shouldn’t,” Shane says, shaking his head. “Pissed off at you, yeah. A lot. I still am. But I don’t hate you, Ilya.”

There’s a sound in the hallway outside the door, a voice and someone walking by. Shane suddenly remembers where they are, that a Greek Week event is happening and soon everyone in their fraternities will be here.

Ilya drops his arms from Shane’s waist. Shane immediately misses the contact but detaches himself from Ilya as well.

“You gonna be okay?” Shane asks Ilya. He realizes now that that was a lot. For both of them.

Ilya pauses for a moment, then nods, looking oddly tranquil. “I’m fine. Better, actually.”

Something flutters in Shane’s chest at that, that he had done something to make Ilya feel better. It’s strange. Ilya has been inside him. They’ve known each other as intimately as any person can. But what just happened felt more personal than anything they had ever done together before. Shane doesn’t know what to make of that.

“Good,” Shane says, a smile threatening to come across his face now. “Because you’ll need a great performance tonight if you want to avoid streaking through an Omega Chi party.”

Ilya’s eyebrows shoot up, and he looks for a moment like Shane’s words nearly knocked him out of his chair. “You—you still want to—?”

“I will not be missing the chance to have you advertise your loss to me in front of all of Greek Row, Ilya.” Shane is properly smiling now. “And you will be losing.”

Shane doesn’t know what possesses him to say it, to put their stupid bet back on the table. It’s his competitive nature, sure. They never technically agreed that the bet was off and Shane still very much wants to win Greek Week, silly as the whole concept is. He still wants to beat Ilya too because he thinks some get-back is still in order.

But maybe it’s an olive branch too. A way of telling Ilya that things can be okay again, even if they’re not completely fixed and maybe never would be.

At this moment, it seems like it was the right thing to say. Ilya’s eyes are lighting up in that playful way that Shane is so accustomed to, though he hasn’t seen it on his face lately. It’s comforting in its familiarity.

“I don’t lose, Hollander.”

And how nice it is to hear Ilya’s voice no longer dripping in sadness and guilt. Shane smiles.

Suddenly, the door flies open, and Shane feels his heart skip a beat, his brain immediately trying to invent an excuse to whoever this is as to why he and Ilya are alone in the dressing room together before everyone else has gotten here.

But relief crashes over him when he sees Rose standing there, an expression of bewilderment on her face.

Shane and Ilya say nothing as Rose looks behind her and shuts the door quickly.

“Am I interrupting something?” She looks back and forth between them, eyeing Ilya suspiciously.

Both of them shake their heads like two kids who have been caught stealing sweets.

“You’re in the dressing room assigned to the ZBZs,” Rose tells them. “How funny that you both happened to wander in here at the same time because neither of you read the posting on the bulletin board.”

Shane and Ilya now nod in agreement with her story. Rose is an actress. Improv is one of her skills.

Rose opens the door again. A couple of her ZBZ sisters are in the hallway.

“No, this is not the Kappa Tau or Omega Chi dressing room, boys,” she raises her voice to tell them, catching the attention of her sisters. “Learn to follow directions. Your rooms are down the hall.”

Shane and Ilya walk to the door. Ilya moves out of the room ahead of him, but Rose stops Shane with a look.

“Everything okay?” she asks quietly.

“Yes, it’s fine,” he tells her honestly.

They had talked earlier that day. But the conversation only consisted of her asking if he was feeling better after last night, a quick word about Ilya helping him out, and then a swift goodbye. Both of them wanting to prepare for tonight’s Greek Week challenge.

Shane gives Rose what he hopes is a reassuring nod and walks away as the ZBZs trail into the dressing room.

“Are you ready?” Ilya asks when they’re in the hallway together. Some Greek Council members and their fraternity brothers are scattered around now. Shane sees JJ down the hall.

He shrugs. “It’s not my favorite challenge.”

“No, of course not,” Ilya says. He’s smiling again. “But it’s mine.”

“Welcome to all Greeks and non-Greeks alike to the *Greek Week Olympiad Lip Sync!”*

The packed auditorium cheers its approval as Shane attempts to keep himself from trembling with nerves.

Every year, the Greek Week challenge at the final three is some sort of performance. Last year, they all did original cheerleading routines. The year before was interpretative dance that Shane has done his best to block out of his memory. This year, they were given the news the

other day that it's a lip sync. The Greek Council always gives the remaining houses advance notice so they can prepare a "spectacular performance."

The final three challenge is Shane's least favorite, bar none.

Give him a race to complete, a rope to pull on, a balloon full to paint to throw at someone, he will fulfill that task with the utmost enthusiasm. But for the performance challenge, he's always been more than happy to just sway in the background while his more outgoing brothers take the lead.

Or he was until this year. Somehow, he's been roped into playing a bigger role. No amount of arguing would dissuade Hayden. So here he is, trying not to shake out of his boots from nerves as the Greek Council Master of Ceremonies explains where the point race stands and how this will all work tonight.

Another house will be eliminated tonight. Only two will remain for the final challenge. Shane does not intend to lose this. He clenches his fists, trying for determination over anxiety.

"Shane, please," Hayden says, shooting him a look. "Your nerves are so loud, I'm going to catch them."

They're standing with the rest of their Omega Chi brothers backstage. Nearby are the Kappa Taus and Zeta Betas. All of the houses have members who are subtly practicing their dance choreography or trying to peek around the curtain to see the crowd. Shane spots Rose, ever the performer, touching up her already perfect makeup while stretching as if she's going to dance a ballet number. She's wearing a pink silk bathrobe, and Shane assumes that's part of her performance. He doesn't see Ilya yet.

"Sorry," Shane answers Hayden, trying to force himself calm.

"You don't need to be nervous, you have this down," Hayden reassures him.

It's funny, that. Hayden is usually the one stressed out in a leadership position for these challenges. But Hayden has absolutely no qualms about performing and looking funny in front of the entire university populace. It's the physical tasks that stress him out. Shane wishes he could adopt his mindset for tonight.

"And just to keep things interesting, we'll let *you* decide who goes first tonight," The Master of Ceremonies announces with relish, gesturing to the audience.

Oh great. Shane silently hopes the audience isn't prioritising an Omega Chi performance.

"On the count of three, shout out the fraternity or sorority you want to see go first."

The fraternity brothers and ZBZ sisters gather around closer, smiles abound as they look interestedly to see who the audience will want to see the most.

"One…two…three!"

It's a discord of incoherent noise. Shane at first has no idea how the Master of Ceremonies will distinguish any words from it. But after a few seconds, some of it becomes clear, and when that happens, Shane hears two words louder than any other.

"Zeta Beta!"

Shane can't help but smile. Who wouldn't want to see the Zetas go first? Their president is the star of every theater department production and half of her sisters are in the shows with her. Shane knew from the get-go, as almost everyone else does probably, that this was Rose's challenge to lose.

"I'm hearing Zeta Beta…" the Master of Ceremonies says unnecessarily and then, just to add drama, "Anyone else want to be heard?"

There are some chants for Omega Chi, which Shane suspects are being led by a loyal Jackie and her friends in the crowd. Shane can't make out any Kappa Tau chants. Unsurprising. Kappa Tau never made it this far in Greek Week, and no one really knows whether to expect a good show or for them to fall flat on their faces.

"I think we have a winner!" The Master of Ceremonies is looking in their direction off stage, giving a nod so the ZBZs know they need to be ready. One of the other Greek Council members starts giving the sorority sisters whisper orders.

Rose is suddenly next to him, a self-satisfied smirk on her face as she looks sideways at Shane.

"The audience knows their stuff." She gives him a playful punch on the shoulder.

"Break a leg," he tells her, just like she demanded he do after he said "Good luck" before a performance one too many times. Which is apparently bad luck. Because theater is very strange.

But he can't help himself from wishing her well. Even if she is competition, and definitely his stiffest competition in this particular challenge.

"We both have a leg up." She winks at him.

He exhales at the words, knowing they're true. The other day, Rose had sent him a text that read "Guess who scored the Greek Council president's song requests for a wedding playlist?" Shane had no idea how she managed to do that, but he didn't care. She shared the list with him as they're still allies in Greek Week, and they both chose songs from it. The Greek Council president is, naturally, one of the judges who will be scoring their performances.

As all the ZBZs get ready for their performance, Shane tries to contain a smile. He's looking forward to this particular number as much as the audience is.

Rose is whispering out orders to her sisters and Shane notices they have a chair, dressing table with a mirror, and small couch that they're waiting to bring out on stage because of course Rose Landry has a whole set for this performance.

“You guys asked for it…” the Master of Ceremonies says with much fanfare. “I give you, *Zeta Beta Zeta!”*

The crowd cheers as the Master of Ceremonies leaves the stage and the ZBZs enter, carrying their set along with them and placing it in its proper position. When they finish, Rose goes on stage and lies down on the couch, still wearing her bathrobe. The rest of her sisters exit the stage on both sides, leaving Rose alone as the cheers die down for the start of the performance.

Hot pink lights slowly turn on over the stage.

“She does everything in pink,” comes a voice from next to him.

Shane startles and finds Ilya next to him, having appeared out of nowhere. His Kappa Tau brothers have huddled around him, craning their necks to watch the ZBZ performance.

“And it works for her every time,” Shane returns.

Ilya shrugs, and Shane doubts he can find it in him to deny it.

An upbeat, poppy, and decidedly 1980s tune comes over through the speakers, and Shane turns his attention back to the stage.

Much of the crowd starts cheering, before the lyrics even start, as they realize what song is playing. Rose is playing it up, sitting up from the couch and stretching like she just woke up from a long rest. She bounces off of her seat and moves to the chair in front of the dressing table. She opens her mouth and the lyrics begin. She is, no surprise, perfectly in sync.

Some boys kiss me, some boys hug me
I think they’re okay

With Madonna’s voice cluing them in, everyone who didn’t realize what the song was joins in the cheers, but quickly quiet down to pay attention to Rose.

As they should. She’s alone on stage but commands attention with ease. Kicking her legs up so she’s crossing them now while miming putting on her makeup, all on beat with the music and she doesn’t miss a step with the lyrics either.

Shane thinks it’s an unfair advantage for the university’s theater department star to participate in this challenge. But then he remembers Rose’s resentment over tug-o-war and decides that inclination is dead wrong.

The song comes to its chorus, and Rose jumps to her feet to throw off her robe. Revealing a sparkly silver top and denim shorts underneath. She also unpins her hair, and it falls down in perfect curls around her shoulders.

‘Cause we are living in a material world
And I am a material girl

The rest of her Zeta Beta sisters also join her on stage at this, garnering more cheers from the audience, and begin to shuffle around her in their obviously rigorously practiced dance choreography. They're all dressed in light pink, making Rose stand out in her silver. It's a perfect contrast.

"She's killing it," Hayden mutters out, looking impressed but also bitter. Shane knows he's concerned about Omega Chi making it to the final two.

Glancing sideways at Ilya, Shane finds him watching quietly. There's no reaction from him, but Shane didn't expect one. He's not sure he's ever heard Ilya extend Rose a compliment. His silence is likely grudging admiration for the show she's putting on.

And I am a material girl

Only someone who knows Rose can appreciate the irony of the song choice. Rose is about the least materialistic person Shane knows. But she's playing up her Zeta Beta stereotype, as the song is a near perfect encapsulation of what Greek Row and the university probably think of her and what is viewed as the snootiest sorority in America. Shane smiles at the thought, how wrong they are and Rose playing into it.

As the song winds up to its climax, the Zeta Beta sisters surround Rose, so she is briefly invisible to anyone in the audience or backstage. When they come apart again, Rose is wearing a long, sparkling silver dress. Shane is momentarily baffled before he understands that her silver top had been made to transform into an extravagant, long dress. He wants to laugh. What a seamless transition.

The crowd appreciates it too, breaking out into cheers.

There's some grumbling around him from both Omega Chi and Kappa Tau, as if they're starting to realize one of the spots in the final two has already been secured no matter what they do. Shane can't help but agree.

"Isn't she Shane's girlfriend?" Shane hears one of his pledges, Evan, ask among the chatter from behind him.

And Shane doesn't know what comes over him. He's been playing into Rose being his girlfriend for years now. Never denying or confirming it. Letting people think what they want. But the words, for whatever reason, have a profound effect on him.

He turns and looks at Evan. "She's my *best* friend."

A couple of the guys look surprised. Some of them nod. JJ, who Shane has been more open with, doesn't react at all. It feels good to say, and somehow, it's comforting to get such a muted reaction. The world didn't end.

But when Shane turns back around, Hayden is looking at him. His eyes are wide and he immediately turns away. Shane thinks he saw some hurt in them, and Shane recalls their earlier conversation. They may have hugged it out, but that didn't mean Hayden was magically over all of it, Shane knows.

“And *you’re* my best friend too, Hay.” Shane leans in close to Hayden when he says this, placing his hand on his shoulder as if he can physically convey his sincerity.

Hayden looks at him, his expression still unsure, but Shane can see the beginnings of a smile on his lips.

Living in a material world

Shane’s eyes return to the performance. Rose is being shielded by her sisters again, and reappears in the bathrobe with her hair up, as if she had never done a single costume change. As the song fades out, his sisters float off the stage one by one, and Rose slowly returns to the couch, lying back down. The pink lights fade.

Shane gets the concept. Like it was all a dream. Rose’s idea, no doubt.

The song ends and the crowd gives ZBZ the ovation they deserve. The sisters all come back out to take their bows, the cheers going on as long as Shane has ever heard them, before they all skip off stage, high fiving and obviously knowing this challenge is theirs.

“Let the battle for second place begin, boys,” Rose tosses out as she passes by, blowing them all a kiss.

Shane chuckles. He might be nervous loves a challenge.

“Was not bad,” comes Ilya’s voice as Rose walks away.

Shane looks at him, smile still on his face. “You’re gonna need something pretty good to beat Rose and us.”

There’s mischief dancing in Ilya’s eyes, something Shane is all too familiar with.

“I have secret weapon, but I am not sure it is enough to beat Shane Hollander *dancing*.”

At that, Shane remembers what he’s gearing for, that he’ll be on stage in front of half the university in just a few short minutes. His smile drops, and his nerves return.

Ilya notices, and the previous mischief on his face dissipates. He leans forward. “Will be great.”

“Omega Chi, you’re up next because no one wanted to see Kappa Tau,” the Master of Ceremonies announces to them, speeding by to get back on stage. The applause for ZBZ’s performance is finally starting to die down. His surrounding brothers take a few steps closer to the stage in preparation.

Shane’s gaze rests on Ilya again to find him still watching him.

“Must be great,” he continues his previous thought. “Can’t make it too easy for us, can you?”

The nerves are still there, but Shane feels some of them dissolve at Ilya’s words, replaced by a familiar competitive spirit. No, he’d never make this easy for Ilya in a million years.

“Never missed out on the final two,” Shane says, noting the confidence in his own voice. “And I won’t be starting this year.”

Ilya’s eyes light up.

“Shane, you enter from that side of the stage, remember?”

Hayden’s voice breaks up the moment. When Shane turns, he finds Hayden looking at them, probably with some curiosity, but he’s too busy putting all of the Omega Chis in the right position to consider them further. Shane nods at him, indicating that he will do as he says.

With one last look at Ilya, he follows some of his other brothers, moving around the back curtain to get to the other side of the stage. Once there, he listens to the Master of Ceremonies entertain the crowd for a few seconds, stalling for them to get ready. Hayden must give him a nod or thumbs up from the other side of the stage because before Shane knows it, they’re being introduced.

“Our three-time Greek Week champions, *Omega Chi Delta!”*

The crowd cheers, not quite as much as for Zeta Beta, but enough to express their excitement. Shane feels his heart rate begin picking back up as he looks across the stage to see Hayden and his brothers stepping closer, ready and waiting.

But it’s not quite time for them to step in front of the audience. As the Master of Ceremonies walks off and the cheers die down. The lights dim and through the darkness Shane can just barely see as JJ alone steps on stage. He positions himself where they planned. Downstage right. He stands there in darkness holding a microphone (turned off of course, this is a lip sync after all) until a lone spotlight lights him up and the music begins. JJ brings the microphone to his lips.

There’s a fire starting in my heart
Reaching a fever pitch and it’s bringing me out the dark

Shane barely holds himself back from grinning. The crowd immediately jumps on board with their song choice. Adele’s vocals reverberate throughout the auditorium as JJ lip syncs with impressive rigor, staying in the spotlight but emoting perfectly.

When Rose had sent Shane the song list, he had no idea which song to choose. He showed it to Hayden, who was overwhelmed by having choices and terrified of choosing wrong. Finally, they turned to JJ, who had always owned this challenge over the years. Without a second’s hesitation, he had pointed at Adele’s song. Then, no surprise, insisted that he would be performing the lip sync solo, the rest of the house functioning as his backup dancers. Shane thought that was only fair as it’s his best challenge.

But Shane started regretting that when Hayden got to choreographing. All of their brothers were participating, but Hayden had dragged Shane into being the main character of their choreography story alongside him, insisting that he could only do it with him.

Damn Jackie and getting Hayden to take ballroom dancing classes with her he had thought.

And this is still Shane's thought seconds into the song when the percussion begins. He and Hayden lock eyes on both sides of the stage before stepping out and leading their respective brothers in front of the audience before meeting in the middle. The crowd applauds and whoops as they all come out.

Shane and Hayden begin circling each other, everyone else surrounding them. Now that he's on stage and he feels all the eyes on him, he does his best not to stiffen up and instead keeps his eyes resolutely on Hayden, who gives him a very small, encouraging nod as they circle and dodge and weave around each other.

We could have had it all
Rolling in the deep

At the start of the chorus, Shane and Hayden take hold of each other. Each with one hand on the other's shoulder and their free hands clasping together. Shane hopes his palm isn't too sweaty but doesn't have enough time to worry about that before he and Hayden are moving together.

Memorizing the steps was never the problem for Shane. He had those down within an hour. The problem was not looking like a shaking, rhythmless wreck while he's doing it. Hayden is better at this than Shane might have expected, and Shane does his best to follow him as they move and Hayden spins him.

Shane pulls away as that section of the choreography is done. He moves to the other side of the stage, attempting to look put off. He's not looking at him, but he knows Hayden is behind him with a pleading expression on his face.

The song is about heartbreak, and Hayden wanted the choreography to match that story.

The scars of your love remind me of us
They keep me thinkin' that we almost had it all

As Shane moves to the other side of the stage and then turns back to Hayden, his brothers are coming between them now, perfectly on cue. They stand on two opposing sides of the stage and stare at each other as the Omega Chis smoothly glide by in the middle, then separating when they reach upstage.

Shane glances over to JJ, seeing his knees bent slightly and reaching out towards the audience. He can't see his face, but he imagines he's giving quite the impassioned performance.

The chorus begins again, and Shane and Hayden come back together, picking up where they left off in the steps. Shane does his best to keep the pace, trying to ignore all the goings on around him. JJ lip syncing, his brothers moving, the audience watching. The audience. There's sweat on the back of his neck and his foot is coming down on top of Hayden's before he can stop himself.

He swears under his breath, trying to find his footing again. Hayden's grip on his shoulder tightens.

“Shane, you’re good. Just follow me.”

He tries, his fingers digging into Hayden’s shirt, feeling himself on the verge of freezing up there before looking over Hayden’s shoulder to see Ilya there, just off stage. He’s watching him intently and Shane nearly does freeze at the sight before Ilya gives a wave of his hand and mouths something to him that looks very much like…

You got this.

Suddenly, Shane’s feet start working again. The pause only lasted a few seconds, but it felt like an eternity. He brings his eyes back to Hayden, whose face relaxes as they start dancing together again. Shane nods, indicating that he’s back with him,

You had my heart inside your hand
But you played it with a beating

It’s at this point in the song when their brothers take hold of them both and physically pull them apart. Shane lets himself be moved around the stage by his brothers, his whole body a lot looser than it had been a minute ago, before being placed center downstage. It is at this point that Shane has no choice but to look at the audience. It’s a full house, but he finds that he’s not quite as nervous as before.

Hayden, he knows, had been placed upstage directly behind him, and if he’s on cue, which he is, he should be pounding the stage back up to Shane.

Shane feels Hayden’s hand on his shoulder.

We could have had it all
Rolling in the deep

They dance just a few meters away from JJ now. JJ, who is still giving it his all on the lip sync in his spotlight. Shane lets Hayden dip him and then returns the favor, the steps somehow coming more easily now. The crowd, which has been giving them encouraging cheers throughout the performance, is ramping back up again as the song hurdles towards its conclusion.

When Shane’s eyes drift to the stage wings again, he sees Ilya still there. He thinks he’s smiling.

Hayden spins him, and the final lyrics come.

But you played it, you played it, you played it
You played it to the beat

Shane and Hayden end it with a hug, embracing each other on the last word. JJ holds the microphone in the air. All of their brothers have exited the stage, leaving just the three of them as the audience bursts into applause.

Shane knows they weren’t quite at the level of the ZBZs, and he knows he messed up the choreography in the middle of the performance, but the crowd is nearly as loud for them. In

Hayden's arms, he starts laughing, glad that it's over and surprised by how fun it actually was.

"Fucking awesome, man," Hayden says in his ear, laughing himself.

"I fucked up the steps."

"No one gives a shit."

They break apart as the rest of the Omega Chis come back on stage to enjoy the applause and give a bow. The crowd cheers louder as they do so. Shane keeps his arm around Hayden, wanting to get off the stage and into a seat as soon as he can now that it's done.

The Master of Ceremonies ushers them into the wings and Shane is more than willing to go. Once there, he doesn't see Ilya and is swept up with the rest of his brothers, heading away from backstage and into the auditorium, where the ZBZs also went, so they can sit and watch the final performance.

Once in the auditorium, they receive some more cheers and high fives as they make their way to an empty section designated for them. He passes Svetlana, seated towards the front, on his way and she gives him a smile. The Omega Chis take their seats just in front of the ZBZs, very noticeable in their pink.

Shane sits down and immediately feels a hand clasp around his shoulder. He turns to find Rose.

"Shane Hollander, that was absolutely the most adorable performance I've ever seen in my entire life." She looks dead serious too.

"Better than yours?" Shane asks, grinning.

"Don't get crazy, now."

"She's right, we crushed that," Hayden says from the seat next to him. "No way are we losing this."

"Still one more performance to go."

"It's time for the *final performance*," comes the voice of the Master of Ceremonies, bringing their attention back to the stage. "For our final lip sync of the night, we have the fraternity that absolutely no one expected to be here. Be honest, who here had Kappa Tau in the final three? Anyone? Bueller?"

A few laughs, whistles, and sarcastic outbursts meet that question. The answer, everyone knows, is no one had Kappa Tau making the final three.

"That's what I thought. I sure can't explain it, but they're here now, somehow, someway. So, put your hands together for the last house any of us predicted, *Kappa Tau Gamma*."

The crowd gives a respectable amount of applause as the Master of Ceremonies leaves the stage. There is a lot of speculative whispering going around the room. Kappa Tau has been an enigma to the university since Greek Week started. No one really knowing how they would perform in any given challenge. Tonight is no different.

And the same goes for Shane. He has no idea what to expect from Kappa Tau tonight. Ilya claimed he has a "secret weapon" but Shane knows that could mean anything.

The Kappa Taus trail onto the stage in one big group. They don't put up a set like the ZBZs did or enter from different sides like the Omega Chis. Rather, they all take center stage together. Shane spots Ilya, who is standing in the middle of the group. They come to a stop as the applause begins to die down, and they lower their heads in the dim lights. Waiting.

A red tint takes over the stage lights as Ilya raises his head, holding the turned-off microphone to his mouth.

Can…

Shane recognizes the song from just one word. The rest of the Kappa Taus raise their heads, lip syncing the next lines.

Anybody…

Whoops in the crowd reverberate as more and more people register the song.

Find me…

It dawns on Shane now that this is the ideal secret weapon. He wouldn't have expected any less from Ilya.

Somebody to love?

The instrumentals briefly take over, and the Kappa Taus disperse around the stage. Except for Ilya, who stays center with the microphone in hand. The red light grows brighter over all of them as they begin to sway with the start of the lyrics.

Ilya's lip syncing is good. Shane is almost taken aback by that before remembering that Ilya has an annoying knack for being good at everything. Maybe he's known the song for his whole life like most of the world, maybe he's practiced a lot this week, maybe both. Whatever the case, Shane can give him credit.

Shane glances sideways to see JJ in the aisle seat bobbing his head enthusiastically. Hayden right next to him has his teeth gritted.

"It should be against the rules to pick the most beloved song like…ever."

Shane snorts. "I mean, we kinda broke the rules, didn't we?"

"Shh."

I work hard every day of my life

Freddie Mercury's voice brings Shane's eyes back to the stage. He has to admit they're doing a good job lip syncing together, not just Ilya. The rest of the Kappa Taus are covering the chorus. It somewhat lacks in choreography, mostly just swaying back and forth. But they all drop to their knees for the lyric about getting down on their knees to pray, which the crowd gets a kick out of.

JJ is growing more enthusiastic next to them as the song amps up, and he's not the only one. Shane spots quite a few people shimmying in their seats or singing along themselves. A song to please the crowd.

I got nobody left to believe
No, no, no, no

A guitar solo bursts through the speakers, and at that, JJ cannot confine himself to his seat anymore. He jumps to his feet to move into the aisle, doing a remarkably impressive air guitar alongside the song.

"JJ!" Hayden hisses out, trying to wave him back to his seat.

"Can't be helped, Hay!" JJ returns, not missing a beat with his air guitar.

A few people spot JJ and rise to their feet as well, dancing in front of their seats or joining him in the aisle. Others begin to stand. Shane turns around to see even some of the ZBZs have gotten up, though Rose remains stubbornly in her seat.

"*Jackie!"* Hayden's voice cuts in as his girlfriend is suddenly there, dragging him out of his chair. But he doesn't deny her, like he ever would, when she pulls him to her. They fall into their ballroom dancing, what Shane had just been doing with Hayden before, and perfectly time themselves to the music. Hayden spins her and dips her, exactly how she wants.

When Shane turns to check behind him, he sees that Rose has been pulled out of her seat by her sisters as well, and even she can't hold back her smile as she dances with her fellow ZBZs.

Shane looks back to the stage, feeling decidedly amused by this turn of events while also a little awkward at being one of the only people still left in his seat. His eyes land on Ilya again, whose lip syncing remains on cue. His brothers surround him on the stage again. He points to the audience, and for a moment, Shane thinks he might be looking at him.

I just gotta get out of this prison cell
Someday I'm gonna be free, Lord

There's a hand on his arm. Shane looks up to see Svetlana there. Her expression is warm and knowing.

"You can't pretend you can't dance anymore, Shane Hollander." She tugs slightly his shirt. A question, not a demand.

Shane, remarkably, doesn't even consider resisting as she pulls him out of his seat and into the aisle with everyone else. Surprising himself, he relaxes into her and begins the same steps he did with Hayden. She catches on quickly, because of course she does. Shane spots Hayden next to him, and they dip Jackie and Svetlana in perfect harmony, eyes meeting in delight. Hayden smiles at him the way he always has.

Behind him, Rose is smiling in earnest now, and she meets his eye. She looks back and forth between him and Svetlana, and something like contentment comes over her face. Shane doesn't know why it's there, but he knows he feels it too.

He and Svetlana spin together, now holding each other more like a hug than any ballroom technique, until Shane is looking over her shoulder at the stage again. The song reaches its climax, and Ilya is looking up as he and his brothers perform the chorus and it transitions into the Freddie Mercury solo lyric.

Can anybody find me
Somebody to love?

"Remember what I told you, Shane," Svetlana says in his ear. They've stopped spinning now, only swaying to the music. Shane looking towards the stage, and Svetlana looking behind him.

Shane is briefly unsure what she means, but then he remembers her words at the ZBZ party last week, and he doesn't need to ask. He nods in answer, knowing she can feel it.

They continue to sway together as the final lyrics continue, Ilya and the Kappa Taus still lip syncing and everyone around them slowing down their dancing, until finally they fade away. The moment the song ends, the crowd bursts into a cacophony of applause, probably the biggest of the evening. Shane can't say he's surprised given the display in the auditorium. Getting the crowd on your side is half the battle in these kinds of challenges.

As the Kappa Taus take their bow, Shane and Svetlana break apart. She gives his hand a squeeze and moves back to her seat. As he watches her leave and hears the crowd continuing to clap, he realizes there's a very good chance he's just lost Greek Week. For the first time in his four years at university.

What's strange is he can't bring himself to mind as much as he thought he might.

"JJ might have just given the Kappa Taus the win," Hayden says as they sit back down in their seats.

"You danced too, man," JJ retorts. "And sitting down while listening to Queen is illegal in thirty-seven countries, including Canada."

Shane chuckles. He doesn't have it in him to be annoyed with JJ for starting the auditorium dance party. Especially when he sees the Kappa Taus entering the auditorium and approaching them to sit down and wait with the rest of them for the judges to decide on the two winners. Shane spots Ilya, but immediately looks away, concerned that he might stare, and afraid of what he might find there.

“In just a few moments, we will have the judges’ final decision,” the Master of Ceremonies announces over the speakers.

The auditorium devolves into chatter at the announcement. Shane hears plenty of discussion over the performances, people naming their favorites and speculating on the winner.

Personally, Shane thinks the three lead lip syncers were about equal in their lyrical performances. If he was judging himself, he’d say Zeta Beta had the best lead performance and technical aspects with the set and costumes. Omega Chi he thinks, even with his bias, had the best choreography courtesy of Hayden. Kappa Tau had the most enthusiasm, both from the performers and the audience. With that, Shane isn’t sure where that leaves them. Though he does remember, with some guilt, that he messed up the dance during their performance. He hopes that doesn’t cost them the win, but it’s a close competition, and it very well could.

“Hey,” Hayden says to him quietly. Shane looks at him. “We were awesome tonight. Whatever happens.” He holds his fist out.

Shane bumps his fist and gives him a smile. Today had not been easy for him and Hayden, and he’s glad to feel a sense of normalcy between them right now. Things weren’t ruined just because Hayden knows everything now. He is still his best friend.

Ilya is sitting a few seats down from him. They lock eyes for a moment before turning away.

“Your attention please!” The Master of Ceremonies is walking back on stage, envelope in hand. There’s a smattering of applause and people shushing each other. “I have the results. The winners of the 2017 Greek Week Olympiad Lip Sync.”

More shushing as everyone awaits the results. The Master of Ceremonies waits for silence, standing in the middle of the stage. Shane feels his fingers curl inward. If it ends here, he can say he did his best. Though he always hated when he had to say that, almost as much as he hates losing. At least he can always say he won this thing three years in a row.

Near-silence descends. The Master of Ceremonies nods in approval and opens the envelope.

“Your first-place winners…”

The whole auditorium leans forward.

“Zeta Beta Zeta!”

The ZBZs fly to their feet behind them, cheering themselves as the rest of the auditorium cheers for them. Shane turns to see Rose with her arms around her vice president next to her. He raises his hands to clap for them. Hard as Omega Chi worked on their performance, he knows without a doubt that Zeta Beta had the best showing tonight.

“Congratulations to Zeta Beta on making the final,” the Master of Ceremonies cuts into the applause. The Zeta Betas take their seats again. “Now, for second place.”

Shane holds his breath. This is it. The last few weeks have felt like they were building towards this moment. He glances Ilya's way. Their stupid bet started all of this when Greek Week began. Now, it will be finished, one way or another. The anticipation nearly makes him nauseous.

"Coming in second…"

Hayden places his hand over his arm, squeezing it.

"Kappa Tau Gamma!"

The KTs burst out of their seats to the sound of applause in the auditorium. Shane doesn't move. He looks over but Ilya is blocked by his brothers who are embracing him and, astounding himself, he doesn't feel all that disappointed. Losing Greek Week and the bet in one blow, but the consequence for losing the bet…doesn't seem so bad after today. Maybe he's stupid for that one.

Ilya's eyes find him then.

"And Omega Chi Delta!"

Shane's head snaps forward to the stage again. The cheers, which had still been going on, fade into confused chatter. Shane looks to Hayden, who looks just as confounded as him, shaking his head in disbelief.

"That's right, for the *first time* in Greek Week history, we have a *tie*."

Gasps and laughs from the audience meet this announcement. Shane's mouth is hanging open. A tie?

"Omega Chi and Kappa Tau, with all the points added up from all Greek Week challenges and side tasks, have the same number of *points*."

"What the *fuck*?" Hayden's voice is flat next to him.

"What the hell does this mean?" JJ asks no one in particular.

"This means," the Master of Ceremonies, obviously omnipotent, says. "For the first time in university history, there will be *three houses* in the final to compete for this year's Greek Week crown. Zeta Beta Zeta, Kappa Tau Gamma, and Omega Chi Delta."

Three houses. In the final. If Shane wasn't so shocked, he might laugh at this absurd turn of events.

"Congratulations to our victors," the Master of Ceremonies begins to wrap up. "You have made this Greek Week a special one. Now…we will see you in the final."

Shane looks to Ilya. Only to find his eyes already on him.

This isn't over.

Not yet.

Chapter End Notes

I swear I don't intend to write so much per chapter. But then I look at the word count and it's at 10k+ words.

Went full rom-com in the last part of this chapter, but I thought you guys deserved it after the last two chapters of doom.

One thing I got to thinking about in this chapter is Ilya's attraction to both Svetlana and Shane, who seem like completely different people on the surface. But when you think about it, they have some things in common. Both of them certainly project an image of "perfection" in how they always appear to have themselves together and are very driven, focused people. They're both also stable people compared to someone like Ilya, which I think attracts him to both of them, and they force him to face realities because they have a bit more emotional maturity. That's where the little scenes in this chapter exploring Shane and Svetlana come from.

Comments and kudos are always appreciated.

Chapter 11: Crossroads

Chapter Notes

Well, this is it. The final Greek Week/Month challenge. I hope it's worth the wait.

Let me know in the comments who you called as the winner before reading.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They’re gonna change whatever they had planned for the final, I know it.”

“They for sure want to do something flashy now that there’s three houses left.”

“It’s a first for Greek Month, you just know they—”

“What are you guys doing?”

Shane and Hayden stop their nervous pacing back and forth across the Omega Chi foyer and look to the kitchen entrance, finding JJ standing there with a canned beer in his hand a bored yet curious expression in his face.

“We’re getting the clue for the final challenge any second,” Hayden informs JJ, pointing to the mail slot on the door.

“And you guys are freaking out?” JJ leans against the doorframe. “Isn’t it always capture the flag?”

“No, freshman year it was a relay race across campus,” Shane recalls immediately.

“Oh yeah, I remember that one. But capture the flag since then, no?”

“It’s been their go-to for years.” Hayden is back to pacing. “And it’s what we’ve been planning for from the start, but now everyone is saying they’re planning something *different* and *special* or whatever and we don’t know—”

Something slips through the mail slot.

The three of them stare. Then Shane and Hayden lunge for it simultaneously, ending up tangled together in front of the door.

“Let me open it!” Shane pulls the envelope, one of the bigger ones that he usually sees on sale at the post office, towards his body.

“*I’m* the president!” Hayden tugs it back towards himself.

“While this is adorable…”

A hand appears and snatches the envelope away from both of them.

“*I’ll* open it.” JJ is already unsealing it, silencing any arguments before they can begin.

Shane and Hayden stare up at JJ from the floor, waiting for him to reveal the coveted insides. The first thing JJ pulls out is a piece of paper. He reads it, eyebrows raised. Shane feels his heart racing. JJ then turns it around so they can see.

~~CAPTURE THE FLAG~~

CAPTURE THE PRESIDENT

“What?” Hayden says, voice flat.

“There’s a rule sheet here,” JJ says, pulling it out. He scans it over. “It’ll be Friday night, but we knew that already. Looks like it’s basically the same rules as capture the flag, but instead of a flag—"

“We capture the presidents,” Shane supplies, working it through in his head. “And they try to capture our president.”

“Uh…” Hayden does not sound pleased with this turn of events.

“So we have to capture both of them?” Shane asks. “Zeta Beta and Kappa Tau?”

“Yep,” JJ confirms, looking at the rule sheet again. “The game begins exactly at nine at night on Friday. It’s played on Greek Row, just like capture the flag. If a house president is tagged by any member of an opposing house, they become their prisoner.”

“I don’t like this,” Hayden interjects.

“Presidents can be rescued if they are tagged by one of their own house members and removed from the opposing house property,” JJ continues to read off the rules. “The first house to capture both presidents and escort them to the quad, where the Greek Week closing party will be going on, and present them to the Greek Council wins.”

“Wait, this sounds impossible,” Hayden protests. “Can’t all the houses just hole up the presidents in the basements?”

JJ shakes his head and points to another line on the paper. “If the president is on the house premises, then no other house member may leave the house premises.” He looks up. “Pretty much if everyone hides their president in the house, no one can track down the other presidents and no one can win.”

“Smart rules,” Shane approves. He figures capture the flag was the original plan, and the Greek Council reworked the final and tweaked the rules because of the twist of three houses remaining. A more exciting final challenge. They’ve adjusted everything well.

“Okay.” Shane stands up from the floor. “We need to get all of our brothers together to start planning right now.”

“I can’t believe this.” Hayden throws his head back and stares at the ceiling.

“You’re not leaving my sight for the entire challenge. You know that right, Hay?” Shane asks him with the utmost seriousness.

Hayden gives him an unenthusiastic salute.

“Hey, there’s something else in here,” JJ interrupts, digging around inside the envelope. He pulls out three blue ribbons.

Shane squints at them, unsure what they mean.

JJ looks closer. “Omega Chi Delta, Kappa Tau Gamma, and Zeta Beta Zeta. They have the three house names written on them.”

Shane is momentarily confused before it dawns on him. “They’re to brand the captured presidents.” He looks down at Hayden. “And ours.”

JJ’s chuckle is in great contrast with Hayden’s groan of offense as he stares at the blue ribbon in JJ’s hands. Shane can’t help but be a little amused himself, but he holds himself back. JJ doesn’t help matters when he tosses the ribbon into Hayden’s lap.

“Here’s your collar, Mister Prez.”

Hayden does not wear his ribbon as a collar.

Despite much prodding from JJ and other Omega Chi brothers, Hayden ties the ribbon around his bicep. The rules stipulated that the ribbon must be visible at all times during the game. Shane supposed that is a fair enough rule. Not that he would ever need help picking Ilya or Rose out of a crowd, even at night. But there are a lot of members of both houses, and some of them might need a marker to know exactly who it is they’re trying to capture.

As the clock ticks closer to nine, three minutes and counting, Shane holds his position at the front door, Hayden is just a few feet away from him, barely containing his sulking. Shane already practicing keeping his eyes trained on Hayden, even now before the game begins, and he can tell Hayden doesn’t like that either.

When it’s two minutes before nine, Shane knocks on the door twice, alerting his brothers on the porch of the time. One of them, probably JJ, knocks back in acknowledgement.

Shane’s eyes return to Hayden, who has moved closer to him.

“If Kappa Tau gets me, then we have to—”

“No suicide pacts, Hay.”

“How about an ‘abandon society and live in the woods’ pact?”

“We don’t need one. They’re not getting you.” Shane places his hand on the doorknob. “Rozanov and Rose will be wearing *these*,” he holds up the blue ribbons, which he’s keeping in his pocket, “within an hour.”

And he hopes he’ll have the opportunity to fasten the collar on Ilya himself, though Hayden will probably insist that he have the honor.

Shane is glad for the conversation he had with Ilya before the lip sync challenge. He had needed that even more than he realized. But that night he had gotten caught up in it all, what happened between them in the dressing room and then their performances. Shane found himself not caring when he thought that he had lost, almost wanting to lose if only to have time alone with Ilya again.

But some of that fog lifted in the following days. He still wants to win Greek Week, finish what he started his freshman year. And while he doesn’t regret a word of what was said when he and Ilya spoke, he’s found himself shying away again. As much as it had meant to him, familiar feelings have begun to resurface as well. Feelings he recalls from a year ago.

It terrifies him.

Trying to occupy himself with other things, he has thrown himself into this challenge, ensuring that they win. Omega Chi’s victory is the safest result for everyone involved. Apologies had been made and Shane had been honest with both himself and Ilya. Maybe things don’t need to go further than that.

“Glad you’re confident,” Hayden returns, bringing him out of his thoughts. “I’m scared shitless.”

“We’ve come this far. Only one more challenge to go, Hay. Just like the last three years.” Shane checks his watch again and knocks on the door once. He hears a knock back again.

“Fuck, I’m not ready,” Hayden grits out. “What if we—”

“You’re ready,” Shane tells him. “And hey, remember what I told you. If another house spots you—”

“Jump on your back for protection?”

“Please don’t do that.”

“Sprint back to the house with either you or JJ in tow, I got it.” Hayden’s shoulders drop and he takes a breath, trying to reel himself in for the start of this game.

“Good,” Shane turns the doorknob as his watch strikes nine o’clock. “Let’s win this.”

Outside on the porch and scattered around the front yard are most of their Omega Chi brothers. JJ is stationed right next to the front door. They all turn to look in their direction as

they step out to join them. Hayden steps out in front, ready to take a leadership position, even if he's the prey tonight.

"We ready?" Hayden calls out.

The guys all respond in the affirmative, nodding or yelling out. JJ comes over and gives Hayden a smack on the back.

"We'll defend you with our lives, Hay."

"That's what I like to hear." Hayden smiles and moves down the steps of the porch, Shane and JJ flanking him on either side.

A few of their brothers follow them as they walk down the pathway together until they reach the sidewalk, pausing before stepping over the line. When Shane looks up, he sees their assigned Greek Council referee. There are a couple of others, recruited Greeks by the Council, within shouting distance. They're here to make sure all the rules are followed. There are also some people who are sticking around Greek Row to watch the game play out rather than attend the closing party in the quad to await the winner. They have been given strict instructions not to interfere.

Shane looks down at the sidewalk ahead of him. Before the game, he had reached out to the Greek Council to clarify what exactly counted as House property, and apparently it only extended to the sidewalk, not the curb. So, when Hayden puts his feet there, he will officially be off of Omega Chi property, and they'll all be able to move off.

With one more look at Shane and JJ, Hayden steps forward.

"Well, there wasn't a landmine there, so that's a good start," Hayden says once he's over.

Shane claps him on the shoulder and joins him. Then he leans in. "Better send off our pledges."

"Yep." Hayden turns around and points at Evan and Calvin, who have assigned duties tonight. "You two. Move. Now."

Both of them grin and fist pump each other, jogging past Hayden and into the night. Shane watches them go. He had decided early that he wanted a spy on each of the opposing houses. He had scoped out decent hiding spots for both of them at Kappa Tau and Zeta Beta, and their job is to text Shane any and all movement around their respective houses.

"What's next?" JJ asks Hayden once the two pledges are no longer in view.

Hayden points to Shane.

"I want recon on the other houses first," Shane tells him, nodding in the direction their pledges just left in. "I need to know if they're headed this way or if they're staying put for now."

Shane has doubts that Ilya would start this game staying put. He suspects Ilya and the Kappa Taus would have set off from their house as soon as the game began, just as he did with the Omega Chis. He wouldn't be surprised if there are two teams of Kappa Tau brothers headed for the Omega Chi and Zeta Beta houses right now.

That was a plan Shane considered, an immediate ambush. Give the opponent no time to come up with a counterattack. But there were too many variables involved. He preferred to stick closer to the house, defend home turf and let the other presidents and house members come to him if he could. In any case, he knows for a fact Ilya won't be able to stop himself from leading the Kappa Taus in whatever plot they have hatched. He won't be well hidden.

Rose, he's less sure of. Their allyship being over, he knows nothing of her gameplan. He isn't so confident she'll come to Omega Chi unless she has to, which she might just if they can capture Ilya first, and he has every intention of capturing Ilya before she does.

"I think they'll go for each other first," JJ says after a minute of waiting around. He looks down the street, in the direction of the other houses. "We have territorial advantage. Their houses are closer together. Also, Rose hates Rozanov and likes us."

Shane stares for a moment, a little taken aback. "How do you know Rose hates Rozanov?"

"Because I have eyes."

Shane supposes that's fair. Rose has never exactly hidden her distasteful looks whenever she and Rozanov have been in the same room.

"Speaking of…Hay!"

Shane looks around, spotting Hayden wandering towards the edge of the sidewalk in front of their house. He freezes, foot still in mid-air, at the sound of Shane's voice.

"What did I say, Hayden?" Shane steps closer to him.

Hayden's head drops as two of their brothers come around him, taking hold of his arms like he's their prisoner rather than president.

"Never leave your sight without permission," Hayden says as he's brought back to him, like a scolded child.

"And what were you doing?"

"I was just gonna look around the hedge there!" Hayden points it out. "Thought I saw someone."

"JJ, go look."

JJ darts around the hedge without a second's hesitation and returns quickly.

"No one there, boss."

“Good.”

“I swear I saw—”

“Hold on.” Shane’s phone buzzes. He opens it quickly, reading a text from Calvin, hopefully hidden away behind the conveniently located bush that Shane picked out by now. “Calvin counts six Kappa Tau brothers. Three moving towards us, three towards the ZBZ house.”

“Probably recon guys, like ours,” JJ assesses. “Anything from Evan?”

“Nothing yet.”

Hayden is leaning towards the hedge again. “Guys, I swear there was someone—”

Shane grabs Hayden’s arm, pulling him back and handing him over to JJ. “Don’t let him move while I satisfy his curiosity, okay?”

“Affirmative.” JJ’s grip tightens on Hayden’s arm.

In fact, Shane doesn’t mind checking this out himself. While JJ hadn’t seen anyone, Hayden is sure he did, and Shane trusts Hayden too. It could have been nothing, but this is a game that thrives on hiding and sneaking. Shane knows Hayden could very well have spotted someone who ducked out of JJ’s sight just in time.

But when he looks behind the hedge, it’s only the driveway of their neighbor house, Alpha Kappa Phi. There’s one car parked there, and Shane takes a second to look under it, just in case. He finds nothing. But that doesn’t mean anything. Just because there’s no one here now doesn’t mean there never was. Kappa Tau or Zeta Beta could already be on top of them. Either would have had enough time to get to their house by now.

Determining that he needs eyes on Hayden again, he turns and heads back out to his brothers.

Ilya nearly dry heaves at the smell of days’ old pizza in this trashcan.

He had been so close. His plan for this game had been working out better than even he imagined. An immediate surprise attack on Omega Chi. The second the clock turned to nine o’clock, he and a few of his brothers moved as quickly as they could through the backyards of other Greek Row houses until they arrived at their destination. Then they dispersed, finding their chosen hiding places and waiting for Ilya’s signal to jump the Omega Chis.

But the task looked like it was going to complete itself when Pike, presidential idiot and their target, seemed to notice Ilya hiding behind the hedge. For God knows what reason, he didn’t say anything but rather started walking over to investigate himself. Ilya wanted to laugh at his luck. Pike was going to hand himself right over to him without their plan to ambush them even needing to come to fruition.

Had he only taken one more step, Ilya would have been able to reach out and grab him. But of course, Shane Hollander would never allow that to happen. The second Ilya heard Shane’s

voice, he panicked. He needed a hiding spot. Under the car was too obvious, but he also knew he couldn't go far.

That left…the trashcan. He jumped in before he had time to second-guess himself.

But he regrets it now, even as he stares out one of the small holes punctured through it to watch Shane as he looks around the driveway for him.

For the record, Ilya blames Pike for this.

Thankfully, Shane doesn't look around for too long before returning to the rest of his house. When he's gone for what seems like a safe amount of time, Ilya quietly opens the lid of the trashcan, barely restraining himself from gasping for air, and jumps out. Instead of returning to the hedge, he moves to the back of the car, hiding himself there instead.

"Evan just texted," he can hear Shane's voice a few meters away. "He says he's only seen one Zeta Beta, standing at the front door of the house."

Thanks for the intel, Hollander.

He also put spies on the Zeta Beta house, but he hasn't checked his phone for updates yet, too focused on Omega Chi. Yesterday, he asked Svetlana if she would be interested in functioning as an audience member and a spy for him and keep an eye on Rose's whereabouts, but she turned him down cold. That had surprised him, but he guessed maybe she wanted to attend the party in the quad rather than stare at a house all night.

"So we don't even know if Rose is outside the house yet." This sounds like JJ's voice.

"No, but we know Rozanov is."

Yes, I am.

Ilya had been unabashedly delighted by the change in the final game. He always found the capture the flag finale to be decidedly boring. *This*, however, this is fun. He gets to play hunter and prey. A dizzying dichotomy, but one that's working for him.

His whole house had laughed at the Kappa Tau red ribbons meant to mark the presidents. Ilya had elected to tie it around his forehead like a headband, which has the added bonus of keeping his hair out of his face. Pike, he noticed, had his tied around his arm.

Refocusing on the matter at hand, he knows that Shane has probably figured out that he's already either here or on his way here. There was never another option for how Ilya would play this game. Even though Pike would on any other day be the last human on earth he'd choose to kidnap, not to mention Rose Landry. But Pike is Shane's treasure tonight, and the thought of stealing him from Shane is simply too good.

And he will be doing just that, very soon. He listens closely as he can hear Shane and Pike talking, telling their brothers to move to different locations and others to stay with them. If Ilya knows Shane at all, he'll find some way to build a human fortress.

Something clicks in him then, realizing that they should strike now. Shane has definitely been set off that something is amiss when Hayden spotted him behind the hedge, but they're still in the early stage of all this, and the house is only going to be more prepared and alert as the seconds tick by. No, he can't allow that. Pike is right there. It's time to make their move.

He creeps closer to the hedge and pulls the whistle from his pocket.

The whistle is something they've used during stupid games at the Kappa Tau house. But tonight, it's their signal to all jump the Omega Chis at once. Ilya would be especially careful, as he's the target for Omega Chi. He won't be in the first wave, but he intends to grab Pike if he tries to flee back into the house, and then they'll have their prisoner.

He brings the whistle to his lips, hoping all of his brothers are listening and ready.

A hand comes down on his shoulder. He stops cold.

For a moment, he just stays there, crouched on the pavement and unmoving. He can't see who it is from this angle, but all he can do is hope it's one of his brothers. He looks down at his shoulder, at the hand.

Pink nail polish.

The Kappa Taus are here, Shane knows it.

He had been sure that they would come for them early from the beginning, but Hayden's assurance that he had seen someone in the hedge only made him certain. This is exactly Ilya's style.

When he came out from the hedges and spouted out a lie about what Evan had texted him (Zeta Betas were apparently swarming their house, so obviously Rose was not in there and the Zeta Betas could also be on them any second) just to throw off whoever might be listening, he started barking out orders about where his brothers should stand like they were doing some military formation. Then he showed Hayden and JJ the real text and indicated to his brothers that they need to keep their eyes wide and look for anyone hiding around their house.

He couldn't help but smile to himself at how seamlessly it was working. A few non-participants on Greek Row were watching what they were doing with interest. He wondered if they had picked up on anything or noticed anyone, but they weren't allowed to interfere by telling him.

It's at that moment, when Shane is looking at the observers, that Shane hears someone cry out and then a thud. Every Omega Chi head snaps to attention.

Someone is on the ground just in front of the house. When Shane glances up, he guesses that they just fell out of the tree. Shane looks closer and realizes that it's Cappie, one of the Kappa Tau brothers. Thankfully he looks uninjured despite the fall.

They stare and Cappie stares back, then Cappie scrambles to his feet and tries to run.

But he doesn't get very far. JJ is close by, and he tackles him into the grass before he can even make it two steps. They wrestle for a moment before one of their other brothers jumps him too, holding him down.

"No! No! You'll never take me alive!" Cappie is yelling quite theatrically.

Shane approaches, Hayden close behind him.

"What's the plan, Kappa Tau?" JJ is asking as he sits on top of him. Not doing any damage. This is play-fighting at worst. "And where is dear leader?"

"I'll die before I talk!" Cappie is stuck on the ground, but he doesn't seem to mind it.

"How the hell did you get up there without us noticing?" JJ asks now, looking up the tree.

"One time I got a cow into your house during prank war," Cappie informs them. "You think I can't climb a tree without you noticing?"

Shane very much remembers the cow incident of sophomore year. Though he hadn't known it was Cappie. He always thought it was Ilya, even though he denied it.

"Guys, watch him," Shane barks out at his brothers, indicating Hayden. "And stay on alert. If he's here, then there are more." They follow the directions, a couple of them gathering around Hayden and the rest looking around the area with more attention now.

"I ask again," JJ is saying. "What's your plan?"

Cappie chews the inside of his cheek.

"Are you a spy or are you part of an ambush?" Shane asks, assuming it must be one or the other.

Cappie is glancing around now, and Shane thinks that probably means he was right that other Kappa Taus are here, or at least they were. And if Kappa Taus are here, that means—

"Rozanov must be here, guys!" Shane calls out. "Eyes peeled, tag him right away and bring him to me if you find him."

"He's not here!" Cappie blurts out. JJ isn't sitting on him anymore. He's just leaning up from the ground. "I don't think so. I mean, he was, I thought, but now—"

"Something happened?" JJ asks.

Shane's phone buzzes with a text. He pulls it out right away.

Evan

ZBZ has Rozanov.

On any other occasion, Ilya might be thrilled to be taken into a house full of women as a pretend prisoner. There are worse fates than that, he thinks.

But not the ZBZ house. Not during Greek Week. And certainly not to be handed over to Rose Landry of all people. The indignity of that has him tempted to put his arms around the banister of the porch and refuse to cooperate.

But cooperate he does, because those are the rules of the game, and those rules make him a prisoner until he finds some way out.

Ashleigh, who was the one to catch him, marches him in through the front door. This is met with much fanfare. A few of her sisters had joined up to follow them as they made their way down the street after sneaking away from the Omega Chi house. The sisters who have been camped out inside the house cheer his arrival; one even pops a champagne bottle. All of them are clad in pink camouflage. He can't decide if it's hilarious or a psychedelic nightmare.

"Yes, yes," he says when the noise has quieted down a bit. "Ladies, I understand why you capture me first instead of Hayden Pike. I am much better to look at."

Some giggles meet this comment. He's probably spoken to at least half of these women at parties before. He remembers plenty of them quite well and is at least familiar with the rest. Though after a quick scan, he can see that Rose isn't here yet.

"Hayden's hot," one of the girls leaning against the couch tosses out, taking a swig of her celebratory champagne. "Jackie's so lucky."

"She is," Ashleigh agrees, leading him over to one of the armchairs and sitting him down there. "Actually, one time we voted on which president was the hottest. You and Hayden tied."

Ilya stares up at her, mortified. "Being your prisoner is not punishment enough? Now you tell me *this?"*

Ashleigh chuckles, patting him on top of the head. "You'll be alright, handsome. Now be good and stay right here until Her Majesty arrives to ribbon-brand you."

"She's on her way," one of the girls, Casey he thinks, informs Ashleigh.

Ilya leans back against the cushion as those two move away from him. He tries very hard not to pout, but he suspects he's failing. This was not how things were supposed to go for him tonight. He should have already caught Pike by now and either be fending off Shane's rescue plan or on his way to capture Rose.

But now he's sitting here in the pink Zeta Beta living room, surrounded by pink camo.

What's worse, there's nothing he can do about it. He's not allowed, per the Greek Week rules, to launch his own escape. Once he's been tagged by an opposing house, the only way he goes

free is if one of his brothers tags him back, and right now, in the Zeta Beta living room, he knows he's not getting rescued.

All he can do is wait and hope someone comes for him.

Someone plops down on the couch across from him. When he looks up, he finds Rebecca. Probably the most beautiful woman in ZBZ, and someone Ilya has known…intimately in the past. For what their relationship was anyway. She smiles at him in that superior way she always has about her.

"Rebecca," Ilya says, drawing out her name the way he remembers she likes. "Here to catch up?"

Her smile widens, reaching her dark eyes. "No, just relish."

Ilya's not entirely sure what that word means, but he can guess based on her tone. He leans forward, looking her over from top to bottom appreciatively. It's been a while since he's seen her.

"Have I ever told you—?"

"You almost definitely have." She tilts her head to the side, amused.

"Help me escape?"

In answer, she just laughs at him.

"Mean," Ilya scolds, but without meaning it. He always liked that she's mean.

"I think you can handle a little of that, Ilya. Or don't you remember?"

He keeps his face steady, but inwardly he cringes. He and Rebecca had an ongoing casual situation for much of their sophomore year. But their junior year, he ended it without warning. He had done it without even thinking at the time, ending a lot of his flings with various people.

He's willing to accept now that it was because that's when things started changing between him and Shane.

She had hardly been hurt over the whole thing, but he knew she was annoyed at the time. She was usually the one who did the dumping, he figured.

"Sorry," Ilya says simply. It's a word he's trying out more lately. Not an easy one to say but it gets easier every time.

Her expression doesn't change. "Huh. Well, whoever she is is doing something right."

Ilya blinks. "What?"

"The girl who taught you how say a scary word like 'sorry.'"

Ilya opens his mouth and then closes it again. Unsure what to say. But he's spared having to say anything when the front door opens. The cheers and clapping that erupt let Ilya know right away who it is. He feels his shoulder slumping, trying to mentally prepare for what he can guess is coming.

Rebecca is smirking again as she stands up from the couch. "I think I'll enjoy this."

"Where is our quarry?" Rose Landry's far too cheerful voice rings out in the room.

Ilya looks towards the foyer and sees Rose, clad in pink camouflage like the rest of her house, standing there. Giving her a quick once over, he sees that she had elected to wear her house's assigned ribbon, pink of course, around her neck like a choker. Her eyes scan the room before they fall on him, and he sees unmitigated delight wash over her face. He wants to jump out of the window.

Rose points at him. "Bring him to me."

The thing about Rose that Ilya could never decide was incredibly funny or wildly annoying is just how much the actress side of her shines through, particularly in situations like this. It's something she hardly ever shakes, not that he has seen. He used to wonder how or why Shane was drawn to that, as it is the complete opposite of who he is.

Rebecca takes hold of his arm and pulls him from the chair, marching him in Rose's direction like a peasant before a queen while the rest of the house watches. And that's just the demeanor Rose is giving when he stops in front of her, chin raised proudly. In this moment, at her mercy, Ilya finds her theatricality far more annoying than funny.

"Kappa Tau president, Ilya Rozanov," Rose announces to the room. She tilts her head to the side and smiles at him. "You have the honor of being our first catch tonight. Congratulations."

A few laughs ring through the room in response.

"Nice ribbon placement," she comments, eyes darting up to where his red ribbon is tied around his forehead. Then she reaches into her pocket, pulling out a single pink ribbon. "But I have a better one for you."

She reaches up to tie the ribbon around his neck, a collar much like hers. She looks far too pleased with herself.

"You are enjoying this," he states the obvious, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Oh, only a lot." She finishes tying the ribbon and drops her hands. "Very nice. Pink's your color. Don't you agree, ladies?"

Much agreement in the room, apparently. Rebecca gives him a pat on the back.

Rose takes another few seconds to smile at him and around the room before finally taking mercy on him and maybe thinking better of idling too much when there's still a game to win.

“Okay girls, I want a few more of you on the porch looking out for any rescue squads. The rest, keep your eyes peeled out the windows until I get back. You.” Now she looks at Ilya again. “Come with me.”

Rose turns to head in the direction of the stairs. With no other choice, Ilya follows as the women around him get themselves organized for the next level of their game.

“You smell, by the way,” Rose comments over her shoulder as they head up the stairs.

“Had to hide in trashcan.”

She snorts.

“How did you find me so quickly anyway?” he asks when they reach the top of the stairs.

“I knew where Shane would be, so I knew where you would be,” she says, looking at him sideways. “Sniffing after him like a puppy, as usual.”

He presses his lips together.

“I’d advise being a little less predictable for games like this,” she counsels as she opens the door to one of the ZBZ bedrooms. She nods inside, ordering him. “In.”

The bedroom is what he would expect from any sorority house bedroom. He has been inside plenty of them over the years.

“Melanie was kind enough to let us use her room as the dungeon,” Rose informs him. She points to the chair. “You can sit there. Please don’t touch anything in here.”

Ilya takes his seat. When he looks back up, he expects to find Rose leaving the room. But instead, she’s closing the door, cutting off the noise from downstairs and leaving them alone together.

“Uh,” Ilya gets out. “What are you—?”

“I think it’s time we have a girls chat.” Rose flounces over to the bed, taking a seat there. “Don’t you, Ilya?”

“Now?” Ilya does not want to do this now. In fact, Ilya does not want to do this tomorrow or the next day or *ever*.

“I can’t think of a better time,” she says. “When else will I have you trapped and with no other choice but to listen?”

Never, he hopes.

He swears under his breath in Russian.

“I just have a few things to say and then I’ll leave you in solitary bliss, I promise.” Her face has turned serious.

Ilya can't think of a time when he and Rose ever spoke outside of taking swipes at each other. Based on her words and body language, Ilya can tell that that's not what this conversation is going to be. He braces himself.

"You have never liked me, Ilya," Rose begins, eyes scanning over his face. "Even back before I knew everything. When I was dating Shane, I noticed. You aren't very subtle with that homicidal glare thing you do."

He lets out a puff of air through his nose, leaning back in his chair.

"I understand why you feel that way, though it's petty," she continues, crossing her legs. "And I don't particularly like you either. I think you know why."

He nods in answer. Yes, he does know. He's known this for some time, but Shane had confirmed it to him the other day at the Greek Week challenge. This, he is not going to push back on at all. As far as he sees it, Rose Landry should hate him. It is something bizarre though, to be speaking of these things out loud with her.

"Good that we can agree we don't like each other, but we have Shane in common." She leans forward. "I love Shane, Ilya. And you…well, I won't tell you how you feel. But I have it on good authority that you're not a bad person. And I know you feel something for him, I can see that much."

"Yes," he has to confirm this out loud. For some reason, he wants Rose to know this.

"Shane is *this* close." Rose holds up her hand up and puts her pointer finger and thumb nearly together, only a millimeter apart. "He is this close to letting you back in. He hasn't said it, but I can see it."

Ilya tries to suppress the flutter in his stomach and focus on listening.

"I'll support Shane, whatever he does, because I want him to be happy." She squints at him. "But *you*, Ilya, I think there are some things you need to know."

Ilya shifts in his seat. "Shane did talk to me, you know. The other day—"

"Yes, in the dressing room. I saw, remember?"

"He told me a lot of things," Ilya carries on. He's not sure if Rose has anything to tell him that Shane hasn't already said for himself. "About last year, after I left, how he felt—"

"That's good, I'm glad you two talked."

Ilya swallows. "Okay, so…?"

Rose takes a breath. "I'm not here to tell you to stay away from Shane or anything like that. But Ilya, when you left, it was awful."

"I know." He grits his teeth, some of the guilt returning. "He told me—"

“Maybe he told you everything, and that’s good if he did,” Rose interrupts. “But all I can say, Ilya, is that when I saw Shane after you left, what that did to him, I *hated* you.”

Ilya falls silent at that. There’s a coldness in her voice now that he’s readily familiar with.

“You weren’t here. You didn’t see it.” She turns away, looking at the wall. “And you were gone, so of course you couldn’t. I had to pick up the pieces you left behind. Shane and I did it together.”

After you left…it was bad.

Shane’s words from the other day come back to Ilya now. He had told him that Rose had seen him after he left, and by his tone, Ilya understood the seriousness of that encounter. Shane said he had been hurt, and everything that has happened between them in the last few weeks had given Ilya clarity on how deeply he had been hurt. But it’s only now, looking at Rose as she tries to impress this truth on him further, that Ilya is starting to picture it in his head.

And he hates it.

“I’m not…” Rose’s voice brings him back. She closes her eyes for a moment, taking a breath, before opening them again. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad or guilty, but you need to hear this.”

She’s right. He does, as much as he hates it.

“I can’t watch him go through that again, Ilya,” Rose continues, her gaze steady on him now. “And I know from—I know you don’t want to hurt him again.”

He shakes his head, keeping eye contact with a great deal of effort. “I don’t. I—”

Ilya wants so badly to say that he won’t. But the words catch in his throat, unconvinced by his ability to live up to them.

Rose stares, seeming to understand.

“It’s stupid to ask someone not to ever hurt someone. Life doesn’t work that way,” she says thoughtfully. “But just…promise me something.”

He stays quiet, letting her get this out.

“If he lets you back in, be careful with his heart this time.”

Ilya opens his mouth, then closes it again. He’s at a loss. The way Rose is talking about him and Shane, like they’ll be something more, like this will extend past graduation…he doesn’t know what to make of it. Hasn’t allowed himself to even consider the idea. Why would he? It’s not like Shane ever would have wanted that or like he ever *could* do that. Could he?

Confronted with the question now, his brain hits a wall. He looks up at Rose, who is looking at him expectantly, awaiting an answer, a promise. He doesn’t know how to give it to her.

But looking at Rose now, her eyes beseeching, he has to say *something*.

“I try to be better,” he says, unsure if this will satisfy her or himself. “I never want to hurt him again.”

Rose’s shoulder’s drop, some of the tension seeming to drain from her. The words weren’t as strong as he wished they could be, but they were as much as he felt he could honestly give. When all he expects to have from Shane for the rest of their time together is one single day.

And he’s starting to wonder if it would be better if they don’t even have that. After everything he’s come to understand about how Shane feels, how Ilya *made* him feel when he left, in the last few days.

Rose sits up from the bed and looks to the door.

“Rose,” Ilya says before she can leave.

She looks at him.

“I’m sorry.” This he had not planned to say. But the words come tumbling out. “Was not you I hurt, but I messed up and you…” English is suddenly more difficult in this moment. “You took care of Shane, not me. I am sorry.”

She keeps quiet, regarding him carefully.

“Might take me some time to accept that apology,” she finally says, lifting her chin. “Give it time and live up to what you said earlier. Then we’ll see.”

For now, that’s more than enough for Ilya. He nods, and she nods in return. And for the first time since he’s known her, understanding sparks between them. Things are far from fixed, but Ilya no longer feels edgy in her presence, like a bug under a microscope. It’s…nice.

A knock on the door.

“Yes?” Rose looks away from him.

“Think we’ve spotted both Kappa Taus and Omega Chis creeping around the house,” comes a muffled voice from behind the door.

“I’ll be right there,” Rose calls out.

Ilya hears the sound of retreating footsteps down the hall as Rose looks back to him.

“Well, I guess it’s back to fun and games.” Her eyes have a friendliness to them now, something he has never seen before. “You stay right here, Mister President.”

Ilya smiles, feeling better, despite everything. “And where would I go, Madame President?”

Nodding at him, she departs from the room, closing the door behind her and leaving him alone.

Distantly, Ilya can hear Rose's voice and the rumblings of other Zeta Betas downstairs, but he can't make out any of what they are saying. He also has no choice but to stay in this room. As a Zeta Beta prisoner, he can't do anything without being given permission. Technically, he could pull out his phone and text his brothers where he is, which would speed up a potential rescue, but he's choosing to follow the rules. He never cared about winning Greek Week before this year, but now that he does, he wants to win it fairly.

As he sits and waits, he ponders winning Greek Week. What it would mean. He wanted those twenty-four hours with Shane badly when this all started, and he still does. The other day, when he thought Omega Chi had been eliminated during the challenge and he saw Shane's face, he even thought he wanted it too.

His feelings have shifted since then, and now *again* after talking to Rose. She seemed to have ideas in her head about what he and Shane might be after this. Ideas that Ilya now wonders if Shane is having too. Ideas that Ilya doesn't know are possible.

And even if they were, and that is enough for Ilya to be terrified, everything in him says it's a bad idea. What had happened last time he and Shane even got close to that?

I fucked it up.

Rose had made it very clear how badly he had fucked that up. She didn't ask him to never hurt Shane again, but she wanted to. It was in her eyes. Ilya had told the truth when he said he doesn't want to hurt Shane again. What he had done before already gnaws at him every day, and probably always will.

He doesn't want to do that again. Doesn't want Shane hurt. Not by him. Not ever again. That's in his control.

Or it can be.

A decision is starting to form in his mind. One that feels like a needle through his chest, but his mind accepts as the only real option.

Two sides are warring within him when he first hears the *clink*.

His eyes open. He hadn't even realized he closed them.

Clink.

Ilya turns. It's coming from the window, right next to him. He looks out and down at the backyard of the ZBZ house. Someone is there, throwing pebbles at the window. The figure looks up at him and waves.

Troy.

"Shane, I can't see shit through these leaves."

“Shut up,” Shane hisses at Hayden under his breath. “You don’t need to see. Just be still and *shh*.”

“This game is so fucking *fun*.”

Shane holds back a chuckle and turns back to look through the gap he found in the bush. He and Hayden are on their bellies in the foliage in the backyard of Sigma Kappa, the house next door to Zeta Beta. Shane squints, he has a view of the ZBZ backyard, and he’s sure he had just spotted Troy creeping around back there.

When he received the text from Evan informing him that Ilya had been caught, he shared it with the rest of his brothers. Within seconds, he spotted a few of the Kappa Taus, who had been hidden in various spots around their house like Cappie, popping out and headed back down the street, presumably to rescue their president.

It didn’t take long for Shane and a select few of his brothers to follow, slowly and carefully. He could have left Hayden behind, he supposed, but it’s not like he could leave him in the house, and he didn’t like the idea of Hayden being out of his sight. He also couldn’t stand the idea of anyone else stealing Ilya away from the Zeta Beta house except for him. So, Hayden is here, but well-hidden at least.

Though he hasn’t exactly figured out how he’s going to get Ilya out of the ZBZ house. It’s not like it’s easy to sneak in, and Ilya isn’t allowed out unless he gets tagged by another house member, either his own or Omega Chi.

As he’s contemplating this, he hears something. It’s soft, a creaking sound he thinks. Then, the unmistakable sound of whispering, though he can’t make out the words.

He strains himself through the bush, trying to get a better look in the yard. Finding just the right angle, he sees one of the windows open on the second floor of ZBZ, and Ilya is poking his head out, looking down. Shane spots the pink ribbon around his neck, signaling that he’s been claimed by ZBZ, and his own red ribbon around his forehead.

Shane’s eyes drift downward, trying to see who Ilya is whispering to, and he sees Troy again, standing against the wall, so as not to be spotted, and looking straight up so he can see Ilya. He starts moving slowly to his left, seeming to follow Ilya’s directions.

Ilya would probably jump out of the window to get down to Troy if he was allowed, but he can’t. Shane knows this, and he contemplates exactly what Troy might do to get him out of there.

That question is answered when Troy reaches the drainpipe, attached to the outside wall of the house, and starts to climb.

Shane nearly bursts into laughter at the image. What an insane thing to do, but admittedly, not something he would completely rule out if it meant he would win Greek Week. Troy is nearly as competitive as him, and he knows Ilya wants to win too. The brief tingle of worry Shane feels for Troy’s safety is quickly stamped out as he watches him climb up the pipe like he’s done it a hundred times before, and at least if he falls, there’s only grass beneath him.

“Troy is here,” Shane tells Hayden under his breath. “He’s climbing up the drainpipe to get Rozanov.”

Hayden snorts and shifts his head, trying to get a view himself.

“When they get down,” Shane starts, a plan formulating in his head. “I’m gonna jump out and grab Rozanov.”

“What about Troy?” Hayden asks. “You can’t fight both of them.”

True. He pulls out his phone and shoots off a text to JJ, who should be hiding himself nearby.

Me

You seeing this?

JJ

Yes

Me

Will get R when they are on the ground

Assist from you

JJ

🫡

Shane looks back up to find that Troy has made it to the window already, and he sees him tag Ilya. Now the rescue can be completed. Until it’s interrupted by Shane, of course. He feels a smile tugging at his lips. They’ll never see him coming.

“JJ will help,” Shane relays. “You stay here. When we’re off ZBZ property, follow us. *Carefully*.”

“Yes, *fine*. I got it.” Shane can’t see Hayden’s face, but he imagines he’s rolling his eyes.

“Good.”

Troy and Ilya are both making their way down the drainpipe now. Troy is first, nearly halfway down, with Ilya following. Shane shuffles backwards as quietly as he can, removing himself from his hiding place. When he pulls himself out, he does a quick look around and doesn’t see anyone. He supposes the KTs sent Troy on his own to get Ilya, but a few of them are probably still camped out here. He looks back at the bush. Hayden is invisible to anyone who doesn’t know to look for him there.

Satisfied, Shane stands up and moves to the hedge that separates the two backyards, moving around the edge but still out of sight. Ilya and Troy are nearly at the bottom. Shane readies

himself, knowing he'll have to move with purpose as soon as he has his opening.

Troy hops to the ground, followed by Ilya. They whisper something to each other and glance around. Shane gets into a crouch.

The second Ilya's back is turned, Shane takes off running.

Troy hears him coming first, whirling around. Ilya looks at Troy but doesn't comprehend what's going on until Shane barrels into him.

Somewhere far off in his head, as Shane and Ilya hit the ground hard in a tangle of limbs, Shane decides this is appropriate payback for when Ilya had run him over during the pizza challenge. Ilya is struggling against him, but Shane has the element of surprise, not to mention knocking the breath clean out of him, and he's able to get on top, quickly pinning his arms against the grass.

"Fucking *got you*," Shane grits out, feeling a smile start to break out over his face.

It's only then that Ilya seems to register who he's wrestling with, eyes locking onto Shane's face. He freezes for a moment before his eyes light up, nearly returning Shane's smile.

The moment ends quickly, however, as a pair of strong arms are suddenly wrapped around Shane from behind, trying to haul him up and off of Ilya. It's Troy, Shane knows, but he doesn't let go easily, clinging to Ilya with all his might. Troy is strong, but there's no way he can lift both of them, so Shane refuses to let go.

"*Shane*," Troy bites out against his ear, pulling hard. "Get off!"

Shane shakes his head and wonders where the fuck JJ is. He can't hold on like this forever and he needs backup if he's going to get Ilya out of here before the ZBZs spot them.

As his mind races in near panic, Troy is suddenly off of him. Shane sputters out a breath, nearly collapsing back onto Ilya's body in relief. JJ has arrived, he thinks, looking behind him. A little late, but better late than—

"Hay, what the *fuck* are you doing?"

"Helping!" Hayden gasps out.

Hayden is on top of Troy, trying to get hold of his arms and hold him still. It's a tall task. Troy is stronger than him, but Hayden has the advantage of leverage for the moment. But Shane can't think about that right now. His house president is out in the open instead of being in his hiding place where he should be.

As Troy's arms are pinned to his sides, he looks up and his eyes go big.

"Hay—you! Fuck, I've got you!" He jerks one of his hands out of Hayden's grasps and whacks his shoulder, as if to tag him.

"*I've* got *you!* I'm literally on top of you!" Hayden grabs his hand and holds it down again.

Shane is trying to remember exactly what the rules would be in this situation when he's suddenly thrown sideways. Just a few seconds of not paying attention to Ilya's body underneath him, but it was enough. He finds himself on his back, but he doesn't let up easily, reaching up to grab Ilya around the shoulders to spin them again. He catches a glimpse of Ilya's face, spotting the grin there.

"Oh no you fucking don't." Shane says, and just barely gets himself on top of him again, but he's far less steady this time. "I told you, I fucking got you—"

"Now!"

The voice, distant but familiar, catches Shane's attention. But before he can think of what it means, he feels something come down on top of him. The next thing he knows, he's seeing the world through what seems like graph paper, white lines crisscrossing everywhere. He's momentarily baffled before it dawns on him that he's in a net.

"What the fuck is—?" Hayden's voice from next to him, apparently also trapped in the net.

Shane looks down to see Ilya looking around him, seeming just as bewildered. Letting up on him, Shane grabs at the net, trying to find the end and crawl his way out. It's starting to click in his mind what has just happened. Then it's confirmed when he sees a barrage of pink in the backyard encroaching on them. His heart rate picks up, desperately seeking the end of the net, thinking there's a chance he could get himself and Hayden out of here if he's quick enough.

But no. Within seconds, they're surrounded on all sides. Zeta Beta Zetas with Rose at the helm, just in front of him.

"That's enough fighting, boys," Rose announces, picking up the end of the net and pulling it up. She holds it above her head and looks at them with an expression of utmost satisfaction. "We'll take care of you from here."

"Is this a *net?"* Hayden asks, trying to lift his arms and throw it off of him.

"Fishing net. Melanie brought it from home," Rose confirms.

"Wait, wait!" Shane holds up his hand, mind racing, trying to work his way out of this. "I tagged Rozanov! He's—"

"Rozanov was never removed from ZBZ property," Rose says easily. "He was never officially in your possession, or Troy's. He's still ours."

Shane looks down at Ilya, who is still pinned underneath him. He looks back up at Shane and shrugs, seeming utterly amused by this turn of events. "Is true."

Rose pulls the net entirely off of them then, and looks to Hayden, her other target for the evening.

"Wait!" Hayden shouts, scrambling backwards off of Troy and looking decidedly like a rabbit that's just been caught by a wolf. "You guys haven't tagged me! You have to—"

Casey, the ZBZ sister just behind him, pokes his shoulder.

Hayden looks up at her, then drops his head. “Oh.”

“Two presidents are ours, and so is Greek Week,” Rose says, grinning. She pulls a pink ribbon out of her pocket then, holding it in Hayden’s direction and waving it with glee. “Bring him here. I have something pretty for you, Hay.”

As Hayden is marched over to Rose so she can secure the ribbon around his neck, Shane knows he has well and truly lost Greek Week for the first time in four years. The feeling of defeat is potent, and he hates it.

“Well, fuck,” he breathes out.

“What?” comes Ilya’s voice from under him.

Shane looks down. Ilya is staring up, eyes curious.

“I’m not a good loser,” Shane tells him.

“No,” Ilya agrees. “You are not.”

It’s in this moment, as their eyes are locked, that Shane realizes that just as Greek Week is over, so is their bet. Disappointment tugs at his insides. The whole thing had been a clusterfuck, all things considered. But there were one or two moments when it was…fun. But now it’s over. Neither of them has won. Shane doesn’t get to say he beat Ilya.

And you don’t get twenty-four hours with him either.

He shakes his head, banishing that thought. Standing up from Ilya’s body, he leans down to help him up. Surprise quickly flashes over Ilya’s face before he takes his hand, pulling himself to his feet.

“We’ll also be taking you, of course, Shane,” Rose’s voice calls out. “Capturing you is the icing on the cake. Anyone have something we can mark him with?”

“How about a scrunchy?”

“Perfect.”

There’s a pink scrunchie squeezing Shane’s neck within seconds. He’s matching Ilya and Hayden now, and he can’t decide if the situation is infuriating or hilarious. Glancing at Ilya, he can see that he thinks it’s the latter.

“What, I’m not good enough to capture?” Troy’s voice calls attention back to him. He’s still on the ground, leaning back on his elbows. No one has paid him any mind.

Rose looks at him, then around at her sisters. “Anyone have a brand for the freshman?”

No one does. They compromise when someone offers her pink lipstick, labeling Troy's forehead with "ZBZ."

"Sorry I asked." Troy sighs.

Rose assesses all of them, looking pleased, and directs her sisters around them just in case of any last-minute rescue attempts by opposing fraternities. When they are well and truly guarded on all sides, they head out of the backyard and head down Greek Row, in the direction of the quad and the Greek Week finale party.

"Well, this sucks," Hayden muses, probably now that it's obvious to him that there is no escape.

This had been clear to Shane from the moment they had been captured. Once Rose had both Ilya and Hayden in her grasp and surrounded by all of her sisters, Shane was certain there was simply no way a rescue could be successful. Rose would never allow it.

"It does," Shane agrees. "But at least it's Rose."

He didn't want to lose. Not to anyone. But part of him can accept defeat at Rose's hands. She had put her heart and soul into Greek Week this year, and he knew how badly she wanted to win it. As much as it stings, he'll keep his mouth shut and take the loss. For her sake.

"True." Hayden looks to Ilya, walking next to him, and gives him a playful punch on the shoulder. "Much better than you."

Ilya's head snaps to the side at the contact, looking down at his shoulder and then back up towards Hayden. "Do not do that again."

Shane snorts.

Hayden leans closer, looking very serious. "Okay, I won't, but I have decided we need to patch things up."

Ilya squints at him, quiet for a moment. "I do not know what this means."

"It means—*wait*, yes you totally do! You always—you're going to make this hard, aren't you?"

"I cannot understand, sorry," Ilya says somberly, shaking his head. "Your English is strange."

Hayden looks to Shane with an expression that says *Can you believe this fucking guy?* Shane just shrugs at him. Whatever it is that's going on with him and Ilya, and whatever they're going to be in the future, he would never expect for them to be friends or anything close to that.

"Hey guys!" JJ's voice suddenly bursts out. Shane looks over to find him walking on the other side of the ZBZ army, along with plenty of other Omega Chi and Kappa Tau brothers who have spotted the prisoner parade. "Nice collars!"

“Man, where the hell were you?” Shane asks, suddenly remembering that JJ was supposed to help him capture Ilya.

“I was gonna help, Shane, I swear. But two Zeta Betas came out of nowhere and pinned me to a tree. Pretty sure I had a dream like that once.” JJ continues to walk alongside them as he recounts his tale.

“Damn, they got you too? Was the whole thing their plot?” Hayden says thoughtfully.

“Yes,” Rose butts in, slowing her pace to join them in the middle of the ZBZ pack.

“How?” Shane asks, narrowing his eyes at her.

She smiles at him. “It’s like I told Ilya. You can’t be so predictable in games like this, Shane.”

Shane hears Ilya chuckle from behind him.

“Predictable?” he asks.

Rose glances around briefly and then leans in, dropping the volume of her voice. “I knew you’d come running the second you heard I had Ilya. And you wouldn’t come for me, you’d come for him, because you can’t stand the thought of anyone else beating Ilya Rozanov but you.”

Shane grits his teeth, knowing she’s right but not wanting to admit how easily she had him figured out.

She raises her voice to normal volume again. “And I knew if you came running, so would Hayden. You wouldn’t let him do anything else.”

Also true. Shane has never been so impressed and annoyed at the same time.

“Obviously I couldn’t predict all the details,” Rose carries on. “Troy was a surprise. But I knew I could get all three of you in the same place at the same time. And *voilà!”* This, she says with a flourish, raising her arms around her.

“Not bad.” Hayden’s voice from behind him. When Shane turns, he finds both Hayden and Ilya nodding in approval.

“Don’t praise her for beating us,” Shane scolds both of them. The loss is still stinging him too bad to do that quite yet.

“Oh Shane,” Rose says, her arm wrapping around his shoulders. “I love how much you hate to lose.”

Shane lets out a breath and leans into her embrace. “I am happy for you,” he says quietly into her hair. Then, truthfully, “Kind of.”

“Thank you,” she says, giving his shoulder a pat. “Now it’s time for you to face the music.”

Their little prison march has reached the quad. They already had an audience, those who stuck around to watch the game play out on Greek Row, following them. Now he can see some others from the party running in their direction, wanting to see which team is delivering the opposing presidents. A few run back to the party to spread the news.

Shane has experienced this twice before. The victory walk across the grass of the quad to the Greek Council, hand delivering the chosen bounty. Every time he has done it, however, it has been a simple flag. But as they move closer and closer to the Council, all set up in chairs on an elevated platform at the center of the party, defeat well and truly sets in. He's not delivering the prized flag this time. He is the prize, along with Hayden and Ilya.

"*Greek Row!"* the voice of the Master of Ceremonies suddenly booms through the speakers, cutting off the music. "Your attention, please!"

The party quiets, though plenty of whistles and pointed comments are still being made at their expense. Others high five the Zeta Betas as they walk by. Rose moves to the front of the pack, leading them.

They come to a stop just in front of the Greek Council. Finally, the noise dampens to a reasonable hum.

Rose steps forward.

"Most exalted Greek Council," Rose says in a booming voice, and Shane nearly laughs at the embellishment. "I come bearing gifts."

Ilya and Hayden are seized by their arms on both sides and brought forward. The ZBZs part for them at the front, and they're positioned on either side of Rose. Shane half expects them to be put on their knees, but it seems Rose is willing to spare them that.

"President Ilya Rozanov," Rose announces, patting the top of Ilya's head like he's a puppy. "Of Kappa Tau Gamma."

Cheers and whistles meet her statement. Ilya responds accordingly, grinning and waving at the crowd. Shane fights off a smile of his own.

"And this…" Rose continues with relish, turning away from Ilya. "Is President Hayden Pike." A pause for dramatic effect, reaching up to pinch Hayden's cheek. "Of Omega Chi Delta."

Even bigger cheers for this proclamation. Nothing to do with the popularity between the two presidents. Even Shane can admit that Ilya would win in that category. No, this is about Rose downing the three-time defending champions, and Hayden is the face of their house right now. Greek Row is more than happy to see the giant fall.

Rose raises her hand and curls her finger behind her head. Before Shane knows it, he and Troy are seized as well, brought alongside the others. Shane is placed next to Hayden and Troy next to Ilya. Shane looks up at the Greek Council and the crowd around him. Ready to face the music, as Rose said.

“Just to sweeten the deal for you,” Rose says, all sugary delight. “We have Shane Hollander too. Unofficial Omega Chi captain during every Greek Week for four years running.”

A few whoops in the crowd at that. Shane bites the inside of his cheek.

Rose looks in the other direction. “We also have the freshman. Troy, right? He felt left out and wanted to be a prisoner along with the rest.”

“Hi.” Troy waves to the Council.

When Shane looks up again, he finds the Greek Council members all looking quite pleased, smiles on each of their faces. He wonders if they had been betting on ZBZ from the beginning, or if they were just happy to see a new winner this year instead of continued Omega Chi dominance. Rose, he knows, is also very popular among them. As she is with everyone. No one looks disappointed to see her putting all of them on display like show dogs.

“Well.” The Greek Council president, sitting at the center, claps his hands together and stands up. “Zeta Beta Zeta, we’re impressed. It looks like we have a new winner to crown, what do you all say?”

The crowd answers enthusiastically in the affirmative.

“Presidents Rose Landry and Hayden Pike, to the stage, please!”

Rose approaches the stage and Hayden begrudgingly follows, shoulders slumped. Shane watches them go. He hasn’t experienced this since freshman year. But the tradition is that the winner of the previous year relinquishes the trophy to the new winner. Hayden will be passing on the trophy to Rose.

“That could have been worse,” Ilya says from next to him.

Shane casts his gaze to the ground rather than looking at him. He’s noticed that Ilya hasn’t seemed particularly disappointed about losing. Greek Week or their bet. He doesn’t know what to make of that.

The trophy is brought out, much to the delight of the ZBZs, and placed in Hayden’s hands as the members of the Greek Council all stand around them. The crowd ratchets up the enthusiasm, some of them raising their red plastic cups into the air, ready to toast to a new Greek Week champion.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the Master of Ceremonies voice returns over the speakers. “Turn your attention to the stage for the trophy presentation.

A dramatic tune begins to play, specifically chosen by the DJ, Shane is sure.

Hayden, trophy in hand, steps closer to Rose. He puts on a show of reluctance, but Shane can tell it’s mostly a front. While he wanted to win, he is a lot more tolerant of losing than Shane is. Hayden places the trophy in Rose’s arms.

Rose’s smile could light up the skyline.

“I give you, your 2017 Greek Week champions,” the Master of Ceremonies bursts out. *“Zeta Beta Zeta!”*

Rose lifts the trophy up and over her head, holding it high. The rest of her sisters rush to the stage to join her, jumping up and down and hugging each other. All still dressed in their pink camouflage. It’s the happiest display of Greek Week victory that Shane has seen since he’s been at university, and he can’t help but smile at the sight. His happiness for Rose finally coursing through his chest as a Lady Gaga song begins playing through the speakers.

Just when he thinks the celebration is cooling down, two of the Greek Council members pull out hidden confetti canons and set them off without warning. Shane jumps and then laughs when he sees the pink confetti. Omega Chi definitely didn’t get confetti canons in any of their three victories.

Lady Gaga’s voice continues to play over the display. Something about an edge of glory.

Rose hands the trophy off to one of her sisters, and it’s then that Shane sees her lock eyes with someone in the crowd. He follows her gaze, trying to see who she’s looking at. Then she looks back to him, and Shane thinks he sees a question on her face, one that he doesn’t know the answer to. He just stares back, perplexed.

She reaches down from the platform and grabs hold of someone, and Shane is at a loss when Svetlana is suddenly standing right next to her. He had no idea they were friends beyond friendly sorority competition. But any thoughts of a newfound friendship fly from Shane’s head in the next second.

Rose takes hold of Svetlana’s face and kisses her.

Shane’s mind goes blank. All he can do is stare. Svetlana returns the kiss, and it’s immediately apparent that this is far from the first time this has happened. They wrap themselves around each other like it’s the most familiar thing in the world to them, and maybe it is. Somewhere in Shane’s head, he remembers the “secret” Rose had teased him about. Well, he supposes it’s not a secret anymore.

Hayden is standing right next to them, staring with his mouth open.

When they finally break from the kiss, they stay in each other’s arms, grinning at each other. Shane dares to glance sideways. Ilya is there, also staring, his expression unreadable.

“Did, uh,” Shane stutters. “Did you kno—?”

“No.”

Shane is initially surprised and then immediately not. He knows Ilya and Svetlana are close, but Roes hadn’t even told *him*. So it must be something they strove to keep private, and Ilya had never exactly been Rose’s biggest fan. It makes sense that Svetlana hadn’t fessed up right away.

But obviously they’re not hiding it now.

The song comes to a close and so does the ZBZ celebration. They disperse into the crowd, stepping down from the platform to accept congratulations from the rest of Greek Row. Shane keeps his eyes on Rose, who is weaving her way towards him, hand in hand with Svetlana.

Not able to wait a moment longer, Shane walks towards them, meeting them halfway.

“Hey,” he greets them, looking down at their locked hands.

They both smile at him.

“Hey yourself,” Svetlana returns.

“So…” Shane looks at his best friend. “Your secret, Rose?”

“Nothing gets past you, Shane Hollander,” Rose teases. “But I will say that we did a pretty good job of keeping it from you.”

Something in that comment worries Shane. “It’s not because…you know I would never—”

“No, Shane.” Rose reaches up to take hold of his shoulder. “Not because of anything like that.”

Shane lets out a breath in relief.

“I just…needed to figure this out on my own,” Rose tells him, her eyes thoughtful. “I figured that’s something you could understand.”

It is. He nods in confirmation.

“Was kind of fun to sneak around though,” Svetlana adds, smirking sideways at Rose.

“That too.”

Unthinking, Shane wraps his arms around Rose, pulling her close. He feels it when she drops Svetlana’s hand to return his hug.

Shane is suddenly, incandescently happy for her. He knew a long time ago that there could never be anything between them, not like *that* anyway. Though he might have wished otherwise for a time, and he thought Rose maybe did too. He’s valued her friendship more than he ever thought he would, needed her and relied on her for so much. To see her happy now, so renewed and comfortable in who she is, he feels tears spring into his eyes for it.

“I love you,” he says into her hair, meaning it.

Rose chuckles. He can feel her smile. “I love you too, Shane.”

When Shane steps back from their embrace, he looks to Svetlana, wondering if he should give her a hug too. But he finds she’s not looking at them. He follows her gaze behind him, and sees Ilya standing there, still looking in their direction.

“I think I need a minute alone with him,” Svetlana says, not looking away from him.

“Everything good?” Rose asks, touching her arm.

“I think so,” Svetlana tells her. “I think he’s probably just annoyed that he didn’t figure it out himself.”

Svetlana gives Rose’s hand a squeeze and pats Shane on the arm before stepping away from them, headed towards Ilya, who is readily waiting for her. Shane watches. Ilya doesn’t look upset to him. His expression is still blank as Svetlana comes closer. Shane guesses that it’s a rare thing for him to be caught off guard as he just was.

“As much as I might like to analyze their interaction,” Rose says from next to him. “Let’s give them some privacy. Cotton candy machine?”

She reaches over and pulls the pink scrunchy from his neck, no longer her prisoner, and Shane nods. He pulls his gaze away from Ilya as Svetlana stands in front of him and offers his arm to Rose.

The party is carnival themed, Shane finally realizes as Rose leads him to the cotton candy. He hadn’t taken notice of much when he was marched in, too distracted by Omega Chi’s loss and all of the crowd ogling them. There are no roller coasters to go with the theme, which Shane is fine with, but there are plenty of other carnival staples. Booths are set up for prize winning purposes. Shane sees balloons and darts, a ring toss, and even a shooting game. The prizes look to be a variation of stuffed animals.

As he and Rose get cotton candy together, Hayden joins them with Jackie. Both of them are just as surprised about Rose’s relationship reveal as he was, probably even more. But they’re both careful not to probe, just telling her they’re happy for her before they make their way to the ring toss so Hayden can win Jackie a much-demanded stuffed dragon.

It’s at this point that Shane can’t help but seek out Ilya and Svetlana in the crowd. He doesn’t spot them at first but then sees them sitting on a bench not too far from where he left them. There’s not much for him to make out, but Shane figures all is well when Svetlana reaches over and puts her arms around him. He returns the embrace.

There was a time when Shane might have felt a frisson of jealousy down his spine at seeing Ilya and Svetlana together. It had happened on more than one occasion. But looking at them now, Shane is surprised to find that feeling isn’t there anymore.

He looks away, returning to his friends.

“This game is rigged,” Hayden proclaims as he misses another bottle with the ring.

“Hay, I need your eye on the prize,” Jackie says earnestly, then points at the stuffed dragon. “And by that, I mean *my* prize.”

“You’re keeping your arm too straight when you toss it, Hay,” Shane suggests, observing Hayden’s technique.

Hayden looks sideways at him and rolls his eyes. “Okay, Coach Hollander.”

On his next toss, Hayden doesn’t keep his arm so straight, and the ring sails right around one of the bottles, much to Jackie’s delight. Hayden’s head snaps back to look directly at Shane, who can’t help the smug smile that has stretched across his face.

“Not. One. Word.”

Shane grins and Hayden receives the stuffed dragon, which he places in Jackie’s waiting arms. She cuddles up to it and kisses Hayden on the cheek, thanking him for his brilliance at ring tossing. Shane watches, both endeared and, he finds, a little hollow for some reason.

Svetlana joins them soon after. She doesn’t give anything away about her conversation with Ilya, but it’s apparent that all is fine, her spirits high. They go from booth to booth as a group. Rose wins Svetlana a stuffed snake at the balloon darts, which Svetlana proceeds to wear around her neck like a pet. Shane feels familiar contentment in being with them. Hayden and Jackie. Rose and Svetlana. Though Svetlana is a newer addition, he’s enjoyed her presence for a while now. She molds herself into their group like she’s been there all along. Sharing jokes with Jackie and teasing Hayden. It’s nice, Shane knows.

But still, that earlier pang of emptiness follows him as he watches the four of them together.

When Hayden suggests they find a place for beer, Shane excuses himself to go find a bathroom. He doesn’t have to go, but he needs a minute by himself. Rose gives him a knowing look as he walks away from them.

The sure quiet place during quad parties is always the stairs right next to the library. Sometimes he’s come across people making out or smoking weed here, but usually it’s empty. As it is tonight. He leans up against the wall, taking a minute to breathe.

It’s a strange night, he knows. It’s only now that he has a second to reflect on it. Some things have just come to an end; others have just begun. When Greek Week started a month ago, because again, that really is a nonsensical name for a month-long event, he hadn’t expected quite so much to feel different by the time it was over. He was just supposed to win his trophy and ride that to graduation.

Then, well, everything happened. Everything with the Greek Week games but more importantly, everything with Ilya. Now, it’s over.

And in the quiet shadows by the library, he realizes he’s sad.

The snap of a twig alerts Shane to someone’s presence. He looks over, expecting to see a drunk couple fumbling into his hiding spot. But he finds a familiar face instead.

“You want to be alone?” Ilya asks, standing where the light of the party can still reflect off his face.

Shane shakes his head in answer without thinking.

Ilya exhales, moving closer to him until they're both leaning side by side against the wall. Shane steals a look up at him, noticing that Ilya has removed both his ribbons from his head and neck, opting to tie them around his wrist instead.

They don't say anything for a minute, and Shane is starting to think he needs to be the one to break the silence before Ilya suddenly pulls something from his pocket and holds it in front of him.

"Is that…" Shane squints at it. "A bear?"

Ilya is holding a small stuffed bear in his hand. One that Shane had noticed was one of the more miniature prizes at the carnival earlier. He looks up at Ilya's face to find him watching him.

"Is for you," Ilya tells him, and Shane thinks he hears the slightest shake in his voice.

On another occasion, Shane might laugh at this, at Ilya holding up a toy in front of him and telling him it's for him. But he doesn't. He reaches up to take the stuffed prize out of Ilya's hand. He wonders what game Ilya played to win it.

"Why a bear?" Shane asks as he pets the top of its small head.

Ilya shrugs. "For Russia, I don't know."

"Oh yeah," Shane says, not sure what to make of that. "You guys like, ride bears over there, don't you?"

"Yes. It is initiation ritual when boy turns five."

He's making a joke, Shane understands, but he can still hear the tightness in Ilya's voice, and he's surprised by how much he wants to reach over and soothe him. Like he did just a few days ago when they were in the auditorium dressing room together alone. But he doesn't. He's not even sure what Ilya needs to be comforted for right now.

"Thanks," Shane says, looking back at the bar. He feels touched that Ilya won him a prize at the carnival. Even a silly little stuffed bear that he doesn't need. "I like him."

Ilya's shoulder's drop, like those words bring him some relief. Shane thinks he might probe him about his behavior, but Ilya speaks again.

"Greek Month is done," Ilya observes, looking at the sky.

Shane sighs. "Yeah. Our last one."

"First one I actually cared about," Ilya says, dropping his chin. "Was not bad."

Shane's lips twitch up as he tries to avoid thinking about why Ilya cared about it this year for the first time. "You know, I won this thing three years in a row."

"Oh, did you?" Ilya asks, rolling his eyes.

“Shut up, I’m making a point,” Shane chuckles. “I won Greek Month three years in a row, and I loved winning every time. But you know…” He swallows, eyes darting up to Ilya’s face and away again. “Even though…a lot of stuff happened. I think this year was the first time I really had fun.”

It seems strange to say, but it’s true. The last few weeks had been tumultuous, but then he remembers the high adrenaline of competing to beat Ilya in these challenges, the thrill of their comeback in the pizza challenge, getting caught in Rose’s net together tonight, even enjoying the performance competition for the very first time. It had been an overwhelming month, but one that had excited him more than anything in a long time.

And he knows why that is.

“I had fun too.” Ilya’s own lips are threatening to curl into a smile. “Did not know boring Greek Month could be fun.”

Shane wants to say it then. Say what they’re both thinking, why it is this month had been special, despite all of the downward spins. He’s close to opening up and letting all of it spill out of his mouth, but he is cut off again by Ilya.

“I was…surprised about Svetlana,” he says, changing the subject in a way that sends Shane reeling. “And Rose.”

Shane tries to recover from where his mind had just been wandering and thinks back to Ilya’s face when he saw the two of them together earlier.

“Me too,” Shane agrees. “But they seem happy.”

Ilya gives a slow nod. “Svetlana deserves to be happy.”

“So does Rose.”

“So do you.”

Shane hears his breath catch, his eyes meeting Ilya’s again. His hands are in his pockets, and he looks as unsure as Shane has ever seen him.

“You do too, Ilya,” Shane says softly.

At this, Ilya looks forward again. Shane wishes he would keep looking at him. This whole night, maybe this whole month, has felt like it’s been leading up to this, to the two of them having a moment along together. But now that it’s here, Shane can’t make sense of Ilya’s behavior, like if Shane speaks too loud, Ilya might jump out of his skin.

“I should not have made the bet with you,” Ilya continues, like every word is a struggle. “Was wrong.”

These words nearly knock Shane’s head backwards. The complete opposite of how he’s been feeling all night. Ilya…regrets making the bet? What does that mean? He regrets all of this month?

That empty feeling, the one he had with his friends earlier, returns.

“Wrong?” Shane asks, his voice small.

“I mean.” Ilya closes his eyes, gathering himself, before opening them again and continuing. “I make stupid bet with you instead of talking to you or saying sorry and I just—”

“Ilya—”

“No, *please*, I need to finish,” he pleads, and Shane closes his mouth. “But I didn’t do that, I did not just talk to you and fix things because I cannot—I don’t know how to do…” He waves his hand back and forth between himself and Shane. “*This*.”

Shane wants so badly to speak, to interrupt him, but he can see that Ilya needs to get this out of his system. He clamps his mouth closed.

“I cannot do that for anyone. I cannot give that to…you.” Ilya’s eyes, for the first time since Shane has known him, appear wet.

These words shake him, and it finally dawns on Shane where this is going.

“What are you saying, Ilya?”

“I’m saying, Shane.” Another deep breath, steeling himself. “I meant what I said. You deserve to be happy.”

The words hang in the air for a moment, the weight of them heavy.

“But I can’t give that to you.”

There it is, what Ilya had been trying to say from the moment he joined him in his hiding spot. The teddy bear was intended to soften the blow. He’s here to end things. Not that there was ever anything to end, necessarily, but whatever they were, Ilya is putting a stop to it now. The hollow pit in Shane’s stomach threatens to widen until he disappears into nothing.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya says, hanging his head.

Shane feels his hand tighten around the bear, needing to hold onto something.

Ilya moves then, lifting his head up and stepping in front of Shane where he still stands against the wall. He can’t move, so he just watches him, waiting for what he’ll do next, say next. Though he’s afraid of whatever that might be.

But Ilya doesn’t say anything. He leans forward and kisses him.

Kissing Ilya has always come in a variety of different shades. Sometimes it feels like drowning, other days like flying. At the ZBZ house two weeks ago, it felt like being set on fire.

This isn't like any of those. Ilya's lips are soft on his. Careful even as he reaches up to hold his face. Shane wants to lean into the sensation, to wrap himself around Ilya and kiss him until he can't think anymore, but he holds himself still. Somehow, he knows that Ilya needs to do this, and after a moment, Shane realizes what this kiss feels like.

It's goodbye.

Ilya drops his hand and steps back, as if he doesn't trust himself in his space for a second longer. He stares at him then, taking him in from head to toe. Shane stares back.

"Goodbye, Shane."

Ilya walks away.

And Shane is alone.

"How are the Bears and the Voyageurs *still* such a disaster?"

The commentators have no mercy for the Boston Bears and the Montreal Voyageurs tonight as both teams trip over themselves on the ice, desperate to score. Ilya chuckles as another one goes down. To think it was once his life goal to be on the ice with these guys.

"I don't know, but with the draft maybe there's hope for them yet…"

Ilya picks up his plate to deliver to the kitchen sink. Dinner had gone well with bad hockey, and this has been a satisfactory start to his spring break. The party last night to celebrate the end of Greek Week had ended with plenty of people leaving campus to start the break early. Most of the rest of Greek Row for whatever chosen vacation spot left today. Ilya had declined all invitations, not in the mood this year to leave town.

He isn't in the mood to be around anyone, in truth, after his decision last night. The break could not have come at a better time.

Ilya hadn't wanted to do it. From the moment he saw Shane's face, tucked away next to the library, he didn't think he could manage it. But after what Rose told him, he knew there was no other option. He managed to get the words out of his mouth, hating every one of them even though he knew they were all true.

The look on Shane's face made him want to take them all back, but he carried on, knowing that it was better for him. He thinks Shane will come to realize that too, in time. One day he'll look back on what happened and be grateful Ilya made that decision. Relieved even. When he finds someone else—

This thought, Ilya has to silence.

But this is what he must tell himself. It is the reality he must face, and he's coming to accept it.

There's a knock at the door and Ilya looks up from the sink where he was doing the dishes. He doesn't usually get surprise guests, except his elderly neighbor who sometimes asks him to pick up something heavy or take out the trash for her. He turns the sink off and moves for the door.

He opens it, ready to greet Mrs. Peterson, and then he freezes.

"I was thinking," Shane, who is inexplicably standing at his door, says. "We never technically agreed to what would happen if we both lost the bet."

Ilya's brain is not working. Shane is standing right in front of him. In his apartment doorway. Less than a day after he ended things. And he's talking about their bet like it's still something they have a commitment to uphold.

"Shane—"

"My turn to talk," Shane interrupts, holding up his hand. "I was also thinking that there's two of us involved in…whatever this is we have going on. So why do only you get a say in what happens next?"

Ilya doesn't know what to say, stunned in his own doorway.

"Especially since you were apparently making all those decisions for me. But Ilya." Shane's gaze is unwavering on his. "I think *I* can decide what's best for me."

Ilya swallows. "I never said—"

"I know, but it was a little bit implied, you have to admit," Shane carries on, undeterred. "Can I come in?"

Ilya, unthinking, steps aside for Shane. He enters with confident strides.

"I want to be very clear, because I like clarity," Shane says when Ilya shuts the door. "I'm here because I want to be, not because of the bet. I'm here because I thought a lot about us in the last day, and there's nowhere else I want to be right than with you, Ilya. I think maybe it's always been that way, and I only just realized that. That's why I'm here."

Ilya stares, in awe of Shane and the way he clearly arrived here tonight on a mission that no one on this planet would ever move him from. He looks more confident in himself than Ilya has ever known him to be. It's strange, but exactly right.

He wants to be here.

"I'm not an idiot, I know what happened last time we were together, because we were *together* last year. Even if neither of us was saying it."

It's obvious that Shane has done a great deal of thinking. Ilya wonders if he was up in bed all night last night doing just that.

“So, maybe this will end in disaster again. Maybe this is a mistake, but Ilya.” Shane steps closer then, only a foot of space between them. “You said you don’t know how to do this. And fuck, I don’t really either. But if you want, I’d like to figure it out with you.”

Figure it out. He and Shane. Figuring it out. Together. Can he do that?

“But I’ll go if you don’t want me here, Ilya. I mean that.” At this, the first sign of nerves in Shane’s eyes, but they don’t overtake him. He keeps his gaze on Ilya. “Do you want me to leave?”

“No,” the word is out of his mouth on instinct. No, he doesn’t want Shane to leave. He never wants to see Shane walk away from him again as long as he lives.

A smile reaches Shane’s lips then, some relief mixed in with the happiness that is permeating between them.

“So,” he says, exhaling. “Twenty-four hours, huh. What did you have in mind?”

Chapter End Notes

Really, I wrote this chapter for all my fellow Greek fans out there. I couldn't stop with the references.

But I've been telling you guys all along that Rose was winning this thing. Shane and Ilya so distracted by each other that they didn't see the real threat. Typical. Hope you enjoyed and yes, I have fixed the chapters at 13. We're coming to the end...

Comments and kudos always appreciated.

Chapter 12: Revive

Chapter Notes

Please note the updated tags.

I know it's been a while, but I have worked on this every day, even if it was just a little bit. It's just been such a busy time for me. I hope you enjoy the chapter.

And because I've heard this is becoming more of a conversation lately, I don't use any AI when I write.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

8:37pm

Shane loves the familiar. Going home to the bedroom he grew up in. Sitting around the dinner table with his parents, always in the same seats. Seeing Hayden in the kitchen making breakfast every morning at the Omega Chi house. His bi-weekly coffee dates with Rose. These things loosen the knots in his chest in a way nothing else ever does. They make him feel good. Safe.

When Ilya puts his arms around him, the two of them standing in the entryway of his apartment, that's exactly how he feels. A weight he has been carrying around for what feels like an eternity is suddenly gone. Shane exhales in what can only be described as relief.

But…Ilya doesn't kiss him.

Shane tries, pressing forward, seeking his lips, only to be denied. He makes a noise of protest and has to content himself with kissing his cheek, trailing down and along his jaw. Ilya lets him do it for a few seconds before he walks him backwards, towards the living room.

It hadn't been a particularly hard decision for Shane to come here tonight. In fact, he had all but decided he was going to do it five minutes after Ilya left him alone at the Greek Week closing party. He almost showed up last night. But he decided to give it a day to think on it, just so he could be sure he wasn't acting rashly. He determined he wasn't and then showed up unannounced to Ilya's apartment.

In hindsight, it's quite lucky that Ilya was even home tonight. Thank God because Shane doesn't think he could have kept all of those words inside of him a second longer.

As they step in front of the couch, Ilya reaches up and strokes his cheek. Shane tries to lean forward again, but Ilya moves back, shaking his head quickly to tell him no. Then he looks him up and down.

“Get undressed.” Ilya steps back and stops touching him.

It’s an order Shane is accustomed to, albeit one he hasn’t heard in a long time. His hands reach from the bottom of his hoodie, and he tugs it over his head. It’s as if no time has passed, his body easily falling into doing what Ilya says in this context. Shane feels himself relax further as his fingers undo the button of his jeans.

“On the couch,” Ilya tells him once he’s down to his briefs and placed his folded jeans on the table. He picks up the TV remote and shuts off what was playing, another one of those awful Boston and Montreal games.

Shane feels a ripple of disappointment at these words. He wants to touch Ilya, not move further away from him, and Ilya remains rooted on the other side of the table. Still, Shane reluctantly follows the order, sitting on the couch and bringing his legs up to sprawl out across the cushions.

He had hoped Ilya would come to him once on the couch. But he doesn’t, staying in his spot a few feet away from him. Ilya just looks for a few seconds before abruptly turning and leaving the room. Shane starts as he does, sitting up to see where he’s going, watching him enter what he remembers is his bedroom.

Ilya is only gone for a few seconds, though enough for Shane’s heartrate to spike, before returning, something in his hand. He approaches him again, but before Shane can hope that he’s going to join him on the couch, he reaches down to place something on the table.

When Shane looks, he finds a bottle of lube and a condom. His lips twitch upward, satisfied at where this is leading. But when he looks up to Ilya, he finds he’s stepped back again, standing at the other end of the couch. The two of them separated by the armrest on the opposite side.

“Touch yourself,” Ilya says softly.

Shane inhales, caught off guard. But this isn’t anything new. Shane has known that Ilya likes to watch him…like *that* maybe since their freshman year. The first time Ilya had told him to touch himself in front of him, Shane had thought he was going to combust from embarrassment. But he had done it while Ilya sat at the end of the bed and just watched. At least until Shane had resorted to begging and Ilya gave him what he wanted.

The embarrassment is still there as Ilya asks him to do this now, but not quite as powerful as the first time. It’s made easier by the fact that he’s already half hard in his briefs, his cock straining for attention.

Shane sits up a little straighter on the couch. Ilya stays still, but their eyes are locked as Shane places his hand on his pec, pressing just hard enough to make his skin bloom red. He moves south then, rubbing his hand down his chest and abs before reaching the waistband of his briefs. Ilya’s eyes flick down as he does, and Shane has to stop himself from smirking.

Slowly, Shane edges his pinky under the waistband, followed by his ring finger. He can feel himself getting harder, but he can’t help himself from drawing this out for a few seconds,

watching Ilya's eyes grow darker. His hand plunges inside then, taking hold of his waiting cock. It's a reprieve, and his exhale is audible.

"Ilya…" Shane breathes out. For effect, yes, but also because he wants to. Before this last week he had gone a long time without saying Ilya's name. He says it again and begins stroking himself under his briefs.

Ilya doesn't say anything in answer. Just watches him.

It's easy to work himself up. Shane has known this about himself for a long time, and being in the same room as Ilya again only further helps things along. After a few strokes, he's fully hard, and his breaths grow heavier in the room.

Shane feels his brain going fuzzy in that way it always has with Ilya, and his eyes drift to the bottle of lube next to him on the table. He's about to open his mouth to ask a question when Ilya preempts him.

"Take it."

Permission granted, Shane pushes his briefs halfway down his thighs, letting his cock free of the material, and grabs the lube bottle. Distantly, he realizes this is the first time he's been naked in front of Ilya for a year.

The lube is cold on his skin. He spreads it out along his fingers, knowing well now how he likes to do this. Before Ilya, he never had. When things first began between him and Ilya, he bought himself a dildo, mostly out of curiosity. Since things ended between them last year, he uses it as well as his fingers regularly, having figured out exactly how to make himself come apart the way Ilya used to do so easily.

So, it's a familiar rhythm that he finds right away as he sinks a finger inside his hole. He watches Ilya as he does this, his earlier embarrassment gone as he lifts his hips to allow Ilya a better look.

But something is off as he keeps his eyes on Ilya. He's not sure what. Ilya still hasn't moved. He has his hands behind his back, and he continues to stand at the other end of the couch. Shane thinks he sees some tension in his shoulders. Shane's first thought is that he's trying to keep hold of himself but there's an unmistakable agitation in the air surrounding him that Shane doesn't know what to make of. It makes him clench up around his finger, the energy contagious.

"Ilya…" Shane says again, trying to cut into the uneasiness with his voice.

"Keep going," Ilya answers, his voice clipped.

Shane wishes he would come closer, wishes he would touch him, but the order helps. It always helps to hear Ilya tell him what he wants from him. He feels some of the tension in his body loosen and inserts another finger inside himself, pressing further inside, seeking…

His hips jerk up as he finds that spot inside of him. He hears his breath catch in the quiet room.

“Ah, *fuck*,” he grunts out. He glances down to find his cock leaking now and gives himself a quick stroke before looking up at Ilya again.

He still hasn’t moved. One would think his feet were encased in cement. Despite this, Shane sees his jawline working, like he’s grinding his teeth together.

“Ilya, *please*.” Shane has decided he’s had enough of this distance. He needs Ilya to touch him *now*. “Come here. Need—*fuck*—need you.”

Finally, *finally*, he moves. Though not with the urgency that Shane might have hoped for. He steps around the armrest of the couch and moves closer to where Shane is sprawled out. Shane feels his shoulders slump as the distance is cut in half, but remains unconvinced by the look on Ilya’s face, still so detached. Like he’s elsewhere.

He can’t be elsewhere. Not after so long. Shane needs him *here*.

“Ilya, touch me,” he finally grunts out. Maybe Ilya wants him to be more specific, ask for exactly what he wants. His hips twitch upward as he finds his prostate again. “*Please* touch me, Ilya.”

Ilya’s hands, which had been held firmly behind his back, drop to his sides. Shane watches them closely as he keeps up his own movements, having not been told to stop. Ilya’s fingers on his right hand twitch, and Shane sighs, preparing himself for the heat of Ilya’s skin on his own. Ilya lifts his hand, but only holds it just in front of him, as if unsure. His expression confused. Shane doesn’t know how to respond, only finds himself leaning forward, wanting to take hold of Ilya’s hand and bring it to him.

His movement catches Ilya’s eye, and he freezes. Shane does the same in response, feeling his entire body go stiff, the previous serenity dissipating in the air. Ilya steps backwards, away from him.

“No, wait.” Shane’s voice is shaking. He shouldn’t have moved. He said the wrong things. He was messing things up. “I’m sorry, I didn’t—"

At this, Shane hears heartrate speed up in his ears and his breaths quicken in what feels very much like panic. His hand stops moving between his legs as he watches Ilya back up.

“Shane—” Ilya has stopped moving.

Shane realizes there are tears in his eyes. He pulls his hands away and holds them next to his head. “Wait, *stop*.”

It’s like the air goes out of the room. Ilya had not been touching him. Shane had only been touching himself. But the word, they both know, is for them to exit any moment like this between them. An out. A way back to earth.

And Shane feels this as he grips his briefs and pulls them back up to cover himself. Embarrassment returns, but nothing like before when Ilya had asked him to touch himself. No, this is far worse than that. It feels a lot closer to failure and the sting of it is still running through his veins, making him feel hot in the worst way.

He can't look at Ilya. His entire body screams against that. Instead, he pulls the pillow he's been leaning against out and presses his face into it. Only then, when he's hidden, does he let a tear fall from his eye. Then another.

Focusing on his breathing, Shane tries to calm down. He knows he'll get nowhere if he keeps replaying what just happened, though that's all that his brain wants to show him over and over. Ilya standing stiff over him and then backing away as soon as he did something he shouldn't have.

He didn't understand it. Nothing like that had ever happened before.

After holding his face into the pillow for a couple of minutes, Shane becomes aware of a presence next to him. He knows he can't hide forever. Slowly, he pulls the pillow away from his face and looks.

Ilya is there. Kneeling at the side of the couch, inches away from him. His gaze is fixed on Shane, his eyes wide and concerned.

Seeing his face, as embarrassed as he still feels, helps. Having the heat of his body just there next to him. Shane feels the knots in his chest start to release. He wants to reach out and run his fingers through Ilya's hair, but he doesn't. He needs to say something first, unable to ignore what just happened.

"That…that was…" He swallows. "Please don't do that again."

Ilya inhales softly, his eyes going hazy. "I'm sorry."

Shane just looks at him. He can't say that things had gone as he had hoped so far. The first part worked out, putting his feelings out in the open and getting Ilya to admit that he wanted him there. But things only went downhill from there, and it's only now, looking at Ilya's downtrodden, ashamed face, that Shane has an inkling as to why.

"Can I touch you?" Ilya asks quietly.

"Yes," Shane answers right away, still needing it badly, even more so now. "Please."

Ilya lifts his left arm up and drapes it over Shane's chest, his fingers squeezing into his side. Then he leans forward and presses his face into Shane's neck and breathes deeply. Shane feels his body relax at the touch, sinking into Ilya's warmth. One of his hands finds its way into Ilya's hair, like he wanted to do before.

They stay like that for a time, Shane isn't sure how long, just breathing together.

"Ilya," Shane finally breaks into the silence.

Ilya makes a soft noise of reply.

Shane takes a breath. He's feeling more like himself again, and so he needs to address this out loud, as much as he'd rather pretend it never happened. Before arriving to Ilya's apartment, he had decided they could no longer avoid difficult conversations, as much as he might like to do that. He can't, or what are they even doing here?

So, he tries.

"What just happened…I—I didn't like it." Shane swallows and then continues. "I mean, it was fine at first. But Ilya, when you don't say anything and you back off and your face looks like that…it makes me feel like—fuck, I don't know. Like I'm doing something wrong or you don't want me—"

At this, Ilya's hand squeezes around his middle and he makes a noise of protest, shaking his head against his chest.

"I know," Shane whispers, pressing his lips to the top of his head. He does know this, now that his brain is back online the way it usually is. "But when we're together like this…I don't always think clearly. You can see that, can't you?"

"Is same for me," Ilya says against his skin.

"Okay." Shane had never really considered this before, but they haven't been together in so long. It used to seem to him that Ilya kept all his faculties when they were together. But maybe… "I think…I do a little more. Don't you?"

"Yes," Ilya agrees. "You go somewhere else sometimes."

Shane hadn't thought of it that way, but it sounds right now that it's been said. "I think that's true. And when I was…somewhere else just a minute ago and you did what you did…it made me feel bad and…embarrassed, I guess. Not in a good way. That's why I said stop."

Shane knows he doesn't need to explain himself. While they had never spoken of this so explicitly, they had made it clear, sometime in their junior year, that stop meant stop for both of them. No questions asked. But discussing it out loud is useful for his own sake, trying to understand what just happened. It makes more sense now than a few minutes ago.

Ilya is silent.

"Can you tell me what you're thinking, please?" Shane requests.

He watches as Ilya's back rises and falls with a deep breath.

"We were together long time, and you never say stop once." Ilya lifts his head, turning to look at him. "Now you say stop twice."

It's true. Tonight and two weeks ago, at the Zeta Beta party. Neither of them had ever said stop before when they were together. Shane had never even come close to it. The word only

ever drifted through his mind on occasion when things got particularly intense between them, recognizing it as an option, but that was all.

“Is because of me,” Ilya carries on, eyes going cloudy.

“Hey.” Shane’s hand slides down from his hair to his cheek. He pushes up slightly, wanting Ilya to look at him. Ilya does. “Don’t do that.”

“You—”

“*I* want to be here. With you.” Shane says this firmly, not allowing any room for debate. “Things were fucked between us in the last year. But we’ll figure it out, remember? I said I want to do that with you. I meant it.”

Ilya stares, some of the light coming back to his eyes.

“But Ilya…what you just did, I think I know what that was.” Shane’s thumb traces across Ilya’s cheekbone. “I won’t be a part of you punishing yourself, do you hear me?”

It had been obvious within minutes for Shane. Understanding the behaviors of others had never been his strong suit, but with Ilya, he’s found it easier. The way Ilya held himself so far away from him. His hesitation in coming closer. Practically running away when Shane asked him to touch him. The guilt had been written all over his face. Shane hated it. He never wants to see it again.

Ilya keeps quiet.

“Ilya.” Shane needs an answer to this. A promise.

“I…I won’t,” Ilya gets out. “Not with you. Not again.”

Shane would prefer to hear that he’ll never punish himself again at all. But he knows that’s too much to ask, probably of anyone. Hell, he’s not sure he could make such a promise. But Ilya’s words are enough for now. They can work on the rest later.

And there will be a later between them. His stomach flutters at the thought.

“Come up here with me,” Shane tells him, shifting his body so there’s room on the couch next to him. Ilya has been on his knees like that for too long.

Ilya sits. Shane chooses to take it as a good sign that he sits close to him, not putting distance between them anymore. Their knees brush against each other. But still, it’s not enough. Shane leans closer and puts his chin on Ilya’s shoulder, leaning in close enough so Ilya can feel his breath against his neck.

“What do you need, Ilya?” Shane asks quietly.

Ilya glances down at him and then looks away, shaking his head slightly.

“Hm?” Shane places a kiss against his neck. The answer to his question is suddenly apparent to him. “You need to hear that I forgive you?”

Shane feels Ilya tense against him. “Shane, you don’t—”

“I can give you that.” Assurance suddenly floods Shane’s veins as he sits up to make eye contact with him. “I forgive you.”

Ilya stares. He opens his mouth, then closes it again. Unsure of himself.

Shane’s body seems to have a will of its own. He swings his leg over Ilya so he can place himself in his lap, wrapping his arms around his shoulders and leaning in close, their foreheads pressed together.

“I forgive you,” Shane breathes, so quiet it could only be heard in the inches between them.

Ilya makes a soft sound, his eyes drifting closed.

“*YA proshchayu tebya*,” Shane says, remembering the words of forgiveness that Ilya taught him so long ago.

“Why?” Ilya asks, his voice breaking on the word.

“Because you need it,” Shane answers, the words coming so easily as the truth always does. “And so do I.”

He does need it. He’s been angry and hurt for so long. For good reason, he knows. But just saying the words, he feels like a weight has been lifted, and he’s only more certain that it’s the right thing to do for himself. More than that, he knows now how sorry Ilya is. He has said it to him and shown it to him. Shane believes his guilt, his regret, and looking at his face now, Shane wants nothing more than to wipe it away.

He knows this won’t be easy. Healing things between them or whatever may come tomorrow and the next day. He knows he might get hurt again. Ilya might too. But Shane didn’t come here because he thought it would be easy.

Shane’s fingers sink into Ilya’s curls. “Can I kiss you?”

Ilya’s eyes are on his again, and he nods.

That’s all the permission Shane needs. He kisses Ilya, and he feels he could melt in relief. They haven’t kissed since Ilya told him goodbye last night, and it’s been killing him in slow increments. This kiss is slow, like that one, though not nearly as tepid. Shane leads them this time, encouraging Ilya to open his mouth and let him in.

It takes Ilya a few seconds to respond, his fingers twitching against Shane’s legs before he wraps his arms around him, holding him closer. Shane lets himself be pulled in, but he still feels some hesitation from Ilya’s end, his body refusing to go lax beneath him.

“I thought about you…” Shane says in between his kisses. “All the time.”

Ilya's eyes open slowly, looking at him.

"Even when I was mad, I couldn't stop." Shane runs his hands down Ilya's chest until he reaches the hem of his shirt, starting to pull it up. "Had to think about you when I—when I touched myself."

Ilya groans as his shirt is pulled off and tossed to the side, his hands flying back to Shane's hips.

These aren't things Shane would ever say out loud, at least not without much persuasive insistence from Ilya back when they were together. But just from saying them, he can see how much they encourage Ilya on, his body coming back online. Shane has always known the things Ilya likes to hear, even if he's often been too embarrassed to actually give in and say them.

"Did you think about me, baby?"

Now, Shane has no idea where *that* word came from. He's never called Ilya that once since he's known him, but it's out of his mouth and it can't be taken back.

Ilya makes a sound he's never heard him make before, and nods in answer to his question. Any insecurity Shane felt from using that word is gone as quickly as it arrived. He lets his hand dip lower and lower still until he's holding Ilya's hard cock through his sweatpants. Shane has barely touched him, but apparently his words have had their intended effect.

"Want you inside me," Shane whispers, kissing him again. "Please?"

Ilya is nodding and Shane isn't sure his brain has caught up to his body yet. Even still, he stands up from Ilya's lap to pull his briefs off. Ilya keeps his hands on him as he does, clinging almost, as if afraid that he'll move too far away from him. Before climbing on top of him again, Shane pulls Ilya's sweatpants and briefs down and off, Ilya thankfully giving him some help, and leaves them on the floor.

As it always did, the sight of Ilya's cock makes his breath catch. Even more so now, after going so long without seeing it. Ilya is already so hard for him, red and leaking. He can't stop himself from putting his hand on him and giving him a few quick strokes.

"You…you have to—" Ilya is reaching around Shane for the lube bottle.

"I already did," Shane tells him, stilling his arm with his hand. "Remember?"

Ilya looks at him, and his eyes have gone completely cloudy as he recalls that Shane had just opened himself up with his own fingers ten minutes ago. Shane's not sure he's ever seen him like this before. It's disconcerting, as Shane is not used to taking charge in these situations. Usually, he prefers the opposite. But he finds he likes this, just how gone Ilya looks from his words and touch.

He reaches behind himself for the condom Ilya retrieved earlier.

"Are you sure?" Ilya's voice rings out, with a little more strength than before.

“Yes,” Shane answers, without any hesitation. He holds the condom up, wanting Ilya to take it, and presses his nose against his cheek. “Please, Ilya. I need this, baby. Need you.”

Ilya’s reaction is immediate, like Shane knew it would be. He inhales sharply and takes the condom out of Shane’s hand, already tearing it open. Shane resists the urge to smile against Ilya’s cheek, continuing to nuzzle him there instead. As much as it makes his skin turn red and hot to say these things out loud, and in fact Ilya has always had to coax him with various torturous methods to get him to use his voice when they’re together, he knows what these words do for Ilya.

He’s always wanted Shane…needy.

The condom is on Ilya’s cock and Shane shifts himself forward, lining himself up. Ilya still looks nervous, his fingers digging into Shane’s hips hard enough to leave marks. Shane places his own hands on Ilya’s shoulders to steady himself as he feels the tip of Ilya’s cock nudge inside of him.

He winces. He doesn’t mean to do it, but Ilya immediately halts him when he sees it. But Shane shakes his head in protest, sinking down further. It has been a while for him, of course it’s not going to be easy to take him inside. He had been prepared for that.

“I’m okay,” Shane breathes out, reassuring him.

It’s slow going, Shane pauses to adjust every few seconds and Ilya shoots him worried looks each time, but they manage to get Shane seated on Ilya’s cock, the two of them loudly exhaling as Ilya bottoms out. Shane’s eyes drift closed, the sensation is one he remembers but it is still overwhelming to take.

When he opens his eyes again, he finds Ilya’s gaze fixed on his face. Shane freezes at the sight. Ilya has never looked at him like this before, he knows that. There’s so much warmth and affection on his face, yet still edged with fear, it stuns him.

He doesn’t know how his own face reads, but he tries to return some of what Ilya gives him as he begins to move. The sound Ilya makes is almost frightening, guttural and deep in his chest. Shane moves his face closer, hands burying themselves in his hair. Their noses touch, and Shane makes a pleased sound of his own, one that he might have tried to swallow before, but knowing now how much Ilya might need to hear him. To hear that this is good for him.

He feels himself stretching open every time he’s seated again and allows himself to make all the noise he usually wouldn’t. Fuck, he had missed this. He had spent so long denying that he did, but now there’s no pretending. This feeling he has only ever had with Ilya. Like sinking and flying all at once.

“*Fuck*, Shane…” Ilya grunts out as Shane sinks down on him again. He looks on edge, and he hasn’t even been inside of Shane for very long.

“Is that good?” Shane asks, his voice trembling as he moves his hips faster. He feels Ilya twitch inside of him. “Ilya?”

Ilya nods eagerly.

Shane's lips twitch into a smile and he begins to move more quickly, chasing his own pleasure. His cock is leaking between them. He's not far from release, but he wants this to last. He intentionally squeezes around Ilya's cock.

Ilya gasps and his hips shoot up from the couch, knocking a groan out of Shane. He clutches around Ilya's shoulders, trying to hang on as Ilya continues to move his hips beneath him.

"You—is okay?" Ilya's voice is heavy in his ear.

Shane gasps as Ilya finds his prostate. "Ye—*yes!* Don't stop."

They move together like that. It takes a moment, neither of them moving in tandem properly at first. But muscle memory perseveres, and they find a familiar rhythm together, one that they have not performed in a long time. Shane moving himself up and down from the top, trailing kisses across Ilya's cheeks and jaw, Ilya pounding up inside him from the bottom, his mouth hanging open and breathing heavily, but eyes always fixed on Shane.

"Don't stop, don't stop," Shane keeps breathing against Ilya's skin between kisses. Then he brings his face up to look at him. "*Please* don't stop."

Ilya is finding his prostate on each upward thrust now, and it's becoming harder for Shane to form coherent thoughts. Not helping matters, Ilya wraps his hand around his cock, now leaking like a faucet, and strokes him. His hand rough and callused and exactly how Shane remembers it. He groans against Ilya's lips.

"'m close," Shane says, leaning back so he can see him properly.

Ilya's eyes lock on his, and Shane is stunned when he sees the wetness there. Tears threatening to spill over.

"Ilya," Shane pants. He puts some effort into bringing his hips up and down harder, faster, squeezing around Ilya's cock as he does. "It's s-so good. *Fuck*. Missed you—need you—"

"Shane." Ilya grits his teeth hard and Shane realizes he's going to come just a second before he does. Ilya moans loudly as he does, not bothering to restrain himself, and it's in that moment that one of the tears in his eyes spills out, just one, and falls down his cheek.

The sight of him is too much. Shane's orgasm follows, hitting both their chests and he lets himself go. He wraps his arms around Ilya's shoulders, needing to feel the sturdiness of him there, holding himself to his body. An anchor, like Ilya always was.

But it's different now. He feels it. They've never been together after speaking openly and honestly. Things were always hidden. Unsaid.

This is so much better.

They're breathing hard, trying to come back to themselves. Shane feels Ilya's hands rubbing up and down his back, petting, soothing. When Shane looks at him again, he can stop himself

from kissing the wetness that the single tear had left behind. He hears Ilya gasp softly as he does, his hands stopping their movements.

“I missed you,” Shane breathes against his skin, then he pulls back so he can look him in the eyes. “I forgive you.”

11:02pm

“Do you still smoke?”

“Sometimes.”

“You need to stop. It’s bad for you.”

“What?” Ilya looks up at him with wide, stunned eyes. “Really?”

“Shut up, dude.” Shane smiles and playfully swats him on the head, where he had just been stroking his hair before.

Ilya chuckles and rests his head on Shane’s chest again.

They’re on Ilya’s bed. His room hasn’t changed much in the last year as far as Shane can tell. After they had cleaned themselves up and recovered on the couch for a while, Ilya had insisted they eat something. Shane complied, even though he wasn’t particularly hungry. Eventually, they had made their way to bed. Ilya had let him borrow a pair of pajama pants, and now he’s draped over him like a blanket, head against his chest and an arm wrapped around his middle. Shane doesn’t mind, resuming running his fingers through his hair.

There had been some awkwardness earlier. Both of them attempting to fall back into old routines. But they managed to deal with it, and here Shane was thankful for how easily Ilya has always been able to talk. Filling silences is not Shane’s strong suit, especially with things being new between them again. But Ilya seemed capable of navigating it.

They’ve just…talked. And it’s nice.

“I can’t believe you didn’t figure out what was going on with Svetlana and Rose,” Shane says now. This has flitted around in his mind since last night. Ilya always seemed so attuned to the people around him. He’s close with Svetlana, and Shane is baffled that he didn’t deduce her relationship with Rose, or at least that Svetlana was interested in women.

“I have been…distracted.” Ilya pinches Shane’s stomach slightly, giving him a hint. “But I did notice some things, some things that make more sense now that I think of them.”

“Once Rose is back from the spring break trip, I hope she tells me everything,” Shane muses. “If she wants to anyway. I’m curious.”

“I think Svetlana will tell me.”

Shane swallows. His hand pauses from where it had been playing in Ilya's hair. The words bring back old questions, insecurities. Shane doesn't like the feeling, but it occurs to him that now is probably the time to address it head on.

"Ilya?"

"Hm?"

"How did you feel when you, you know, saw Svetlana and Rose together?"

"I told you. I was surprised. Like you."

Shane bites his lip. "Yeah, I know. But were you…I guess—I mean, were you jealous?"

Ilya's thumb, which had been rubbing circles into Shane's stomach, freezes.

Shane immediately wonders if he's made a mistake. But he just couldn't help but ask. He had promised himself he would be honest before he arrived here, and Ilya's relationship with Svetlana had been weighing on his mind for years now. He can't help but think back to the look on Ilya's face when he saw Rose kiss Svetlana, and then later as he stared at her from far away. There was surprise, yes. But something more? Could it have been jealousy? Regret? He needs to know.

Ilya slowly turns to look at him, the edges of his curls tickling his skin. Shane can't read the expression on his face.

"Jealous?" His voice is soft.

"Yeah," Shane answers, then realizes he needs to specify. "Of Rose. I know you and Svetlana were…" He doesn't know how to finish that sentence.

"Not for long time," Ilya says, understanding where Shane was headed. "She is a friend."

"But still," Shane goes on. "You weren't, like, sad or anything?"

Ilya pauses for a moment, looking like he's contemplating this. His eyebrows draw together, and he casts his gaze downward. Shane braces himself for his response.

"I was hurt that she did not tell me," Ilya finally says. "Which was stupid. I do not tell her everything. I did not tell her about you for…long time."

Shane exhales, wondering exactly how that conversation went when it happened.

"We talked after, and she told me why it was secret." Ilya meets his gaze again. "But jealous? No, nothing like that."

Relief floods Shane's veins. He's never entirely understood Ilya's relationship with Svetlana, but it had nagged at him, even when he and Svetlana became friendly this year. He knows Ilya likes girls, he's told him as much, and that had only ever made him feel more wary of

Svetlana. Given Ilya's life, things would certainly be simpler with Svetlana, and she was so… well, perfect. And always seemed perfect for Ilya.

But apparently, they didn't see it that way.

"What about you?" Ilya's voice brings his attention back to him.

Shane blinks. "What about me?"

"Were *you* jealous?"

The words are so far off base that it takes Shane a few seconds to understand what Ilya is asking him, and when it finally clicks, he nearly bursts into laughter.

"Ilya I'm *gay*." A smile is creeping over his face.

"Hm." Ilya's chin comes back down on his chest, his gaze flitting away.

"*Ilya*."

"Not so gay you can't fuck Rose Landry," Ilya mutters.

Shane can't help but snort at that. "I knew you were jealous of Rose back then. But if you still are, you're gonna have to get over it, Ilya."

At these words, it hits Shane that he'll have to get over his own vague jealousy about Svetlana too. It's only fair.

"I know," is all Ilya says.

They return to content silence then. Shane is glad for that. He feels all of that needed to be said. It's going to be strange, he knows, navigating things now that Rose is with Svetlana. But he and Ilya haven't exactly determined yet what the future holds for them. That question Shane is not quite ready to confront. He'd rather just stay like this for the evening. They still have a little time left before graduation, which is starting to feel like a deadline.

He shakes his head, banishing those thoughts, and resumes stroking Ilya's hair.

"Have you…?" Ilya starts and then trails off.

"Have I what?"

Ilya is chewing the inside of his cheek. "Have you been with anyone else? Since…since we…"

Words abandon him, but Shane knows what he means. This was a question he had wondered if Ilya would ask.

"Yes," he answers.

Shane feels it as Ilya's body stiffens up.

“Who?”

“Do you actually want to know?” Shane asks. Personally, he doesn’t want to know any more details about who Ilya has been with than he already knows.

“Yes,” Ilya answers, his eyes meeting Shane’s again. “If you want to tell me.”

Shane is not sure how he feels about telling Ilya about this. He meant what he said earlier. He’s not going to be a part of Ilya punishing himself, but looking at him now, he doesn’t think that’s what this is. He mostly just looks curious.

“Two guys,” Shane tells him. “One was around here. I found him on…an app. We met up at some club and we…sucked each other off. That was it.”

Shane waits for Ilya to react, for him to tease. But he stays quiet, so Shane continues.

“The other one was in Mexico. Hayden surprised me with a weekend trip down there over winter break this year. A late birthday present.”

Ilya thinks on that for a moment. “What happened?”

Shane shrugs. “Hayden was trying to be supportive, I guess. He took me to a gay bar.”

At that, Ilya snorts. Shane smiles in return.

“He got hit on and I’ve never seen his face so red.”

Ilya’s chuckles continue, then stop. “And then?”

Shane looks at him. “It was when Hayden went to the bathroom. A guy I was looking at came over. Bought me a drink. We started talking.” Shane pauses.

“And?”

“And then you know what. I left the bar with him.”

They’re both quiet for a moment, and Shane wonders if this conversation was a bad idea. Real awkwardness flickers between them for the first time since he arrived. But Ilya had asked, and he didn’t feel the need to hide this from him. There’s no reason to do that.

“Was it…good?” Ilya speaks first.

Shane bites his lip, his eyes drifting towards the opposite wall.

Ilya’s hands suddenly tense, his fingers squeezing him slightly. “Did he hurt you?”

Shane’s eyes lock back onto Ilya’s immediately. “*No*. No, not at all.”

An exhale of relief.

“It was fine, Ilya,” Shane tells him honestly. “We had sex and I went back to my hotel. That was really it.”

Now it’s Ilya who looks away, and Shane sees that there is a lot more going on inside his head than just curiosity, and it’s not something Ilya is sharing with him. He doesn’t like that, being shut out. It’s happened enough between them for ten lifetimes as far as he’s concerned. Gently, he reaches out and takes Ilya’s chin in his hand, drawing his gaze back to him.

“What is it?” Shane asks softly, as if not to scare him off.

Ilya just shakes his head.

“What?” Shane continues, insistent. “You’re thinking about me with other guys? Why?”

Ilya jerks his chin out of Shane’s grip and mutters something in Russian that Shane doesn’t catch.

“No. Don’t do that.” Shane sits up on the bed, so his back is against the headboard, and Ilya moves a few inches away from him. But Shane doesn’t like the distance. He wraps his hand around Ilya’s bicep, pulling himself closer. “What did you say? Tell me.”

“*Better* guys,” Ilya relents.

The words take a moment to make any sense to Shane, but then he pieces it together. “You’re thinking about me with *better* guys,” he concludes out loud.

Ilya stares at the blanket beneath them and nods.

The wheels turn in Shane’s head as he stares at Ilya’s downtrodden expression. The words aren’t altogether surprising, but they still sting. Even worse is seeing how much Ilya is clearly in earnest. Thinking about him with some other guy because he thinks that would be better, like that’s something Shane would want or be happy with. Shane wants nothing more than to scrub these thoughts from Ilya’s brain. But how?

“Where are your ties?” Shane asks.

Ilya shoots him a bewildered look. “My *ties?”*

“Neck ties.” Shane gestures to his chest. “For your suits. Where are they?”

The confused expression doesn’t leave Ilya’s face, but he looks across the room towards his dresser. “Uh, top drawer.”

Shane hops off the bed and moves to where Ilya indicated, opening the named drawer and finding a colorful selection of ties along with Ilya’s undershirts and briefs.

“You don’t fold your ties right,” Shane informs him as he selects a blue one.

“What?” Ilya asks, his voice flat.

“You don’t fold them right,” Shane says as he closes the drawer. He holds the tie in the air and shakes it. “I’ll show you how you’re supposed to do it later.”

Ilya chuckles and lets his head fall back against the pillow. “Always boring.”

Shane smirks at the words and climbs back on the bed and then surprises Ilya by swinging his leg over his middle, effectively straddling him. The smile drops from Ilya’s face then, and a familiar energy crackles in the air between them. Shane feels Ilya’s hands creep up to take hold of his hips.

The tie is still in Shane’s hands. He holds it out in front of himself as if to inspect it, sliding the smooth, soft fabric between his fingers. It’s a nice tie. Shane doesn’t think he’s ever seen Ilya wear it. Though it’s been a while since he would have seen Ilya dress up for anything.

Ilya’s eyes are on his hands as he plays with the tie. His expression unreadable. But Shane can feel his fingers twitching against his skin.

What would happen, Shane wonders, if he asked Ilya for his wrists right now? Or if he leaned down to wrap the tie around his head to cover his eyes? The answer is immediately obvious. Ilya would readily offer his wrists or let Shane blindfold him. Shane doubts he would even hesitate. Ilya has always, *always* been so keen to do what Shane wants when they’re together like this.

It’s in this moment that Shane realizes something that he has probably known all along. As much as he has, from the start, wanted to please Ilya, to be *good* for him, that has always gone the other way too. Maybe even more powerfully. Ilya’s determination to please Shane has at times bordered on desperation. To make him come first, to make him come more than once, to invent new, creative ways to make him come.

This part of Ilya, Shane supposes, explains why he wants control so much when they have sex, but looking at him now, he can see that Ilya would just as easily give all the control to Shane if he only asks.

Shane lets out an audible breath as he puts this together. It makes him feel…good. Powerful even.

It also makes him feel really fucking hot.

“I want to tell you what I thought.” Shane breaks the silence. Ilya’s gaze falls on his face again. “After I had sex with that *better* guy.”

Ilya winces. “Shane—”

“Don’t interrupt. I’m talking.”

Ilya’s mouth clamps shut.

“Like I said, it was fine. Something different,” Shane recaps. “And I was single, so I don’t regret trying it with another guy.”

This is true, just as he's sure Ilya doesn't have regrets about most of his hookups. Shane is not going to apologize for his.

"I liked being taken home by someone. Feeling wanted. I needed that. I missed that." His eyes trail over Ilya's face with these words, making sure he doesn't see any hurt there. That's not what he wants.

No hurt in Ilya's eyes. So, Shane continues.

"That all felt good. But Ilya…" Shane leans down now, bringing himself within a breath of Ilya's face. "No one has ever made me feel the way you make me feel."

Ilya's breath catches. Shane feels it against his mouth.

"It used to scare me. How much I wanted you. How good it felt." Shane can't help himself. He closes the minuscule distance between them and pecks him on the lips. "And it only got better every time because I trusted you. I've never trusted anyone like that."

The tears from earlier are back, glistening in Ilya's blue eyes.

"I can't even think about anyone else like that but you, Ilya. I trust *you*. I want *you*."

Shane kisses him again, keeping it soft. Ilya moans into it, opening his mouth for him. He hopes the kiss conveys to him the rest of what remains unsaid.

Bringing his hands to Ilya's biceps, Shane grips him and then, legs locked around Ilya's hips, he flips them abruptly. Shane is on his back with Ilya hovering over him. The change in positions surprises Ilya, letting out a confused grunt before he reorients himself, looking down at Shane and trying to hold himself up so as to not crush him.

Shane takes hold of both of Ilya's hands in his and pulls them up. The confusion remains on Ilya's face as Shane brings both pairs of hands up, up, up until they reach the headboard of the bed. It's then that Shane presses the tie he is still holding into Ilya's hands.

Understanding washes over Ilya's face at this, and he freezes. Shane goes lax beneath him, letting him take the next step or stop this altogether if that's what he wants.

Ilya grips the tie hard. "You…you want this?"

Shane nods.

"You are sure?"

"I'm sure," Shane says, deciding that Ilya probably needs a verbal answer right now.

"You tell me if you want to stop." There's an edge in this request.

"If I want to stop, I'll tell you," Shane recites their old rule.

The nerves don't leave Ilya's face as he pulls the tie taught and then looks to Shane's hands, lying limply above him. Shane doesn't move a muscle, having not been told to and not wanting to give Ilya any reason to hesitate.

Slowly, ever so slowly, Ilya ties his hands.

The tie feels nice against his skin. No sharp or hard edges. Shane can feel the tension seeping out of his body as Ilya binds him to the headboard.

"Is okay?" Ilya asks when he ties the knot.

"Tighter," Shane tells him. It's fine as it is, but he feels he could slip his hands through if he tries, and that's not what he wants. He doesn't even want that to be an option.

It doesn't scare him as he feels Ilya tighten the knot, make certain his hands can't be pulled free, because Shane knows he simply has to tell Ilya to untie him and he will. Without hesitation. That knowledge curls warmly in his chest. It's safety. Security.

It was true what he said earlier. He has never trusted anyone like this.

"Okay?" Ilya asks again, eyes trailing over Shane's face.

Shane tugs briefly on the restraints, ensuring that he cannot get out on his own. When he can tell that is the case, he nods at Ilya, feeling a small smile form on his lips, his eyes drifting closed.

That familiar feeling, that fuzziness in his brain, his vision softening around the edges, is returning to him again.

You go somewhere else sometimes was what Ilya said. Shane can feel himself going there now.

"Hey." Ilya's voice. Shane can feel his breath against his face and his nose brush against his. "Open eyes, Shane."

His eyes open, and Ilya is staring down at him. To Shane's relief, the nerves from earlier seem to have left his expression. Instead, his face carries an intensity to them that Shane remembers well, one that was impossible for him to forget.

Ilya's lips graze over his. A ghost of a kiss. Shane realizes he's hard and probably has been since he asked Ilya to tie his hands.

"I want you to look at me," Ilya says against his mouth. "Can you do that, Shane?"

Shane nods, sure he can.

"Words," Ilya requests softly.

"I can look at you," Shane tells him.

“Good.” Ilya kisses him softly then and trails his mouth down Shane’s neck.

Shane leans into the sensation, his cheek catching Ilya’s curls. Ilya has an excellent memory, knowing exactly the spot on Shane’s neck that always makes him sigh and tremble. He finds it quickly, giving it his utmost attention. His hands start to move as well. Shane feels one move up to his pec, gripping him there, and the other slips down his side until it finds its destination, gently snapping the elastic of Shane’s borrowed pajama pants.

Ilya looks at him then, a question, and Shane lifts his hips in answer. He wants to be naked as quickly as possible. Obliging, Ilya pulls the pants and his briefs down and off his legs, freeing his already leaking cock to the cool air.

Sitting back on his knees, Ilya takes a moment to just stare at him. His cock hard and at attention between them, his thighs twitching around nothing, all the way up over his flushed faced to where his hands are bound above his head.

It’s so vulnerable. Shane would never do this with anyone else on earth. He knows it.

“Ilya…” Shane groans out, needing to be touched. He feels his hands flex in his restraints. He likes that he can’t move them, but he wants to touch Ilya too. The contradiction is thrilling. “*Please*.”

It doesn’t take more than that. Ilya is over him again, his lips against his pec and moving south. Shane tries to be still, not wanting to give him any reason to stop, to drag this out, but Ilya moves slowly anyway. Placing kisses on his stomach, then his hips, but not where Shane really wants him. He resists the urge to tilt his hips up.

But Ilya, thankfully, doesn’t make him wait for long. Perhaps he’s feeling generous. He holds himself over Shane’s cock, looking down on it for a few seconds, before swallowing it down in one go.

At that, Shane cannot help his hips shooting off the bed, or the noise that rips from the back of his throat.

Fuck. He had missed this. It had been so long, and Ilya seems intent on making up for lost time. He grips Shane’s hip in one hand and pins him back down on the bed before swallowing him down again, not allowing Shane a moment to catch his breath, bobbing up and down on his cock like he doesn’t need air.

“*Holy* shit. *Fuck*, Ilya.” Shane stares down, keeping his eyes on him like Ilya had asked him to, and Ilya’s eyes flick up to him as he pulls up and licks the slit of his cock. Shane thinks he could come at the sight.

Apparently, Ilya picks up on that, squeezing the base of his cock to stem his release. Shane flinches as he does.

“Not yet,” Ilya says.

Shane wants to complain, but he's distracted by Ilya swallowing down the tip of him again. Then slowly, ever so slowly, making his way down to swallow the rest of him. The sounds Shane is making would embarrass him in any other circumstances, but he doesn't have the presence of mind to care about that right now.

"Ah, *fuck*. Now?" Shane grunts out when his cock hits the back of Ilya's throat.

Ilya slides off his cock quickly and moves a few inches away. "Almost."

Shane is close to complaining about this response until Ilya moves lower, and Shane realizes his intention. Once he does, he has no wish to complain at all.

Taking his hips in his hands, Ilya lifts him from the bed. Shane, getting the message, lets his legs fall on Ilya's shoulders. Like the first time Ilya did this to him, the only time, Shane feels incredibly exposed in this position, Ilya looking down at him with no barriers or places to hide. He feels his face heat, but it is more in anticipation than anything else.

Ilya's eyes flick up to his as he presses his mouth against his hole.

It takes a lot of Shane not to squeeze his thighs hard around Ilya's head, but he has no desire to suffocate him, not when his tongue is probing at his rim. Instead, finds himself tugging at the tie, keeping his hands locked to the headboard. Staring down at Ilya's head of curls between his legs, he finds himself wanting desperately to touch him, to bury his hand into his hair, tug and stroke him there.

It's not to be, the knot Ilya tied ensures that, but still he tugs. Even more so as Ilya's tongue slides inside of him. The tie snaps taut as he does, and he can't stop his thighs from squeezing around Ilya's head this time.

"*Sorry*," Shane chokes out, trying to relax his legs against Ilya's shoulders again. "*Fuck*, sorry."

Ilya eyes Shane's hands and takes his mouth off him, and Shane tries not to whine.

"Is okay." Ilya's hand, which had been gripping his ass, slides back up, reaching his cock and wrapping his fingers around it. "You want?"

Shane can't help but tug at the restraints again. His mind goes nearly blank at Ilya's touch, his cock leaking harder. "*Yesyesyes, please*."

"Whenever you want."

Ilya presses his mouth to him again, his tongue back inside, and begins to stroke him. Shane throws his head back against the pillow at the twin sensations. It's almost too much, he feels tears spring into his eyes.

Not letting up, Ilya strokes him faster, his tongue moving in and out of him. Shane tries to get a hold of himself, because it almost feels too good to let himself go already. He can hear himself panting aloud in the room, groans escaping the back of his throat.

When he looks back down at Ilya, he finds him looking up at him, his eyes flashing dangerously. Shane doesn't even have time to think about what that might mean. Ilya moves his mouth away from him, and in the next second, he's swallowing down his cock in one go, and that's enough. Shane comes with a shout, spilling down Ilya's throat.

He can't reach for Ilya, so he just has to cling to the tie with all he has as he rides it out. Ilya keeps his mouth on him the entire time, and when Shane starts to come back down, he feels Ilya's hand gripping his pec, holding him down to the bed. The feeling of his big hand against his skin is comforting.

Shane tries to come back to himself, his eyes falling closed. He hears a wet pop as Ilya releases his cock from his mouth. Distantly, he's glad he finished in Ilya's mouth, if only to avoid the mess. Though he supposes he and Ilya can change the sheets on the bed.

A tickling sensation brings Shane's attention back, and when he looks down, he finds Ilya kissing his way up his chest. He still has his pants on, Shane realizes, and he can see they are tented with his own hardened cock.

"Hey," Shane says, his voice soft. "Come here."

Ilya is there in an instant, hovering over Shane's face. "Yes?"

Shane tries to shift, bringing his knees up so they're bracketing Ilya's hips. It takes some effort, his body tired from his release only minutes ago, and then Ilya glances down and puts his hand against his waist, pressing him back down into the bed to stop his squirming.

"Shh, *kotenok*," Ilya whispers when Shane makes a frustrated sound. Shane shivers at the word. "You need something?"

"I want…" Ilya glances down at Ilya's cock again and then back up to his intent gaze. "Come on, Ilya. I—I want to make you feel good too."

"Already?" Ilya places a kiss on his lips. "We can wait."

"No," Shane says against his mouth, trying to tilt his hips up. "I want you inside me."

"No patience." Ilya is smirking. "Just like always." He reaches for the lube bottle on the bedside table.

Shane sighs, watching Ilya coat his fingers in lube. "Hurry up. I won't need much." He's already stretched out from earlier and from Ilya's tongue inside him.

Ilya looks at him, an expression of utter amusement on his face. "You know you are tied up, yes?"

Shane glances up to his restraints and back at Ilya.

"And still bossy." Ilya settles himself between his legs again. He doesn't hesitate to probe his finger against his hole.

Shane moans at the feeling at the same time he chuckles at Ilya's words. At Ilya calling *him* bossy in this context.

"Think you can still listen?" Ilya asks as he inserts another finger.

Shane hisses at the stretch, but nods in answer. "Yes. I can."

"We'll see." Ilya has found his prostate now, and he gives it apt attention.

Trying to keep his focus, Shane's eyes drift toward the ceiling. Ilya's fingers keep devoted attention on that spot inside of him, and Shane is feeling ultra-sensitive in the wake of his orgasm only a few minutes ago. He knows that Ilya knows that too.

Suddenly, Ilya shifts him, taking hold of his hips so his ass is raised from the bed. Shane's eyes shoot back to him then, to find Ilya sitting up, his cock, now with a condom on it, ready and waiting to enter him. Ilya looks at him with a question on his face.

Shane nods eagerly and Ilya is inside of him.

"*Fuck*," Ilya grunts out. "Finally."

Shane nearly chuckles at that, as Ilya had just been inside of him a couple of hours ago. But he's too distracted by the fluttering in his own stomach.

Ilya takes his time with him now. Up on his knees and pushing in and out of him with slow, leisurely strokes, like he's not in any particular hurry. Shane doesn't complain. In his more sensitive state, this is easier than if Ilya drove in and out of him, hitting his prostate, hard and fast right now.

So, Shane takes the time to enjoy it. Eyes drifting closed and then back open again as Ilya uses him as he likes. He had meant what he said. He wants Ilya to feel good, to do what he wants with him to make himself feel good. As much as he's always loved Ilya's rapt attention on his pleasure, Shane has always wanted to know Ilya feels good as well, to know he's doing something right to make him feel good.

As Ilya lets out another grunt above him, from somewhere deep in his chest, Shane is satisfied knowing that he's doing that right now.

"That's perfect, *kotenok*." Ilya's voice interrupts the sound of skin slapping skin. "Being so good for me."

Shane's eyes drift over his body to watch Ilya. He's always been a sight to behold like this. Broad shouldered, biceps bulging, in complete command of his own body as well as Shane's. It nearly makes Shane shudder. He has no idea what Ilya sees when he looks down at him.

But right now, he has that look in his eyes. That same look he always has whenever he calls him perfect.

"Kiss me?" Shane requests. As much as he likes admiring this view, Ilya feels far away.

Ilya doesn't hesitate to change his position, lowering himself to kiss Shane while still maintaining a steady rhythm in and out of him. He kisses him hard, opening his mouth and exploring again. Shane does his best to kiss him back but knows he's mostly panting against his lips. The fluttering in his stomach is starting to become more urgent.

"Oh, *fuck*—Ilya…" He breaks from the kiss and looks down, able to see for himself that he's getting hard again.

Ilya follows his gaze and locks on to the same thing. Shane thinks he sees a smile threatening to break over his lips.

"Look at that," Ilya says, returning his mouth to Shane's for another kiss. "You gonna come for me again, Shane?"

"I don't—I don't know if I—"

"You come twice with anyone else?" Ilya pants against his mouth. "Or just me?"

"Oh fuck off," Shane says, but there's no heat behind it.

"No, no. Tell me." Ilya reaches down to stroke Shane's rapidly hardening cock now. "Thought you said you could listen?"

"*Fuck*, you—you *know* it's just you."

Ilya does smile at that, at this confirmation, and strokes Shane's cock faster as a reward.

"Good boy. Now…" Ilya starts moving his hips faster, pounding in and out of Shane without abandon. Then he reaches up to take hold of the tie around Shane's wrists, gripping it tight, his palm brushing against his.

"Holy shit, *Ilya*." Shane's hips snap up to meet Ilya's, just shy of overstimulated.

"Is good?" Ilya asks, his hand holding his hip firm as he drives in and out of him. Shane wonders how close he is. "Is enough?"

It is, or it *nearly* is. Shane is sure he can come like this, with Ilya hitting his prostate like that and his hand gripping his restraints. But he wants—

"Other side," Shane answers, barely coherent. He tries to move, as if to roll himself onto his stomach, causing Ilya to lose his rhythm. "Other—*please*, Ilya…"

Understanding what Shane means, Ilya releases him and pulls away from him. Shane, despite this being what he asked for, nearly whines at the loss, but he doesn't have to wait long. Ilya flips him onto his front, the tie twisting with him, and drives back inside of him almost immediately. Shane cries out at the change of angle. The tears from earlier raring to make a return.

"Yes?" Ilya's voice is rough from behind him.

“Yes!” Shane holds himself up with his forearms, but nearly collapses as Ilya finds his prostate again, the angle now exactly what he needs.

Before Ilya, Shane didn’t think it was even possible for him to come twice, at least not in one sexual encounter. Though some research he’s done on the side (and after which he cleared his internet history) has helped in knowing he’s far from alone. Besides, Ilya often takes his time with him, stretching things out like tonight, and Shane can admit now that he’s always been particularly sensitive, especially where Ilya is concerned.

His cock is leaking again now, and Shane knows, as Ilya picks up his pace behind him, that neither of them are going to last much longer.

“*Ilya*…” Shane grits out. There’s a tear falling down his cheek now. He almost regrets tying his hands, wanting to reach back and touch him.

Ilya seems to sense this though, bringing himself closer, so his lips are just at his ear. “Okay?”

He had to slow his pace slightly to curl over him, but Shane prefers it, wanting the heat of his chest against his back. “Touch me. *Please*.”

Ilya’s hand is on his cock right away. Shane thinks, under other circumstances, Ilya might try to torment him more, draw this out. Make him beg for him to touch his cock. But tonight, Ilya is nothing if not obliging, and Shane is more than willing to indulge. Shane doesn’t need Ilya to apologize more than he already has, but he also doesn’t mind the generosity.

Especially when all it takes is three strokes on his cock and Shane is coming. His knees nearly buckle under him as he does, but he manages to hold himself up as he spills onto Ilya’s sheets.

“*Fuck*, Shane.” Just like that, Ilya is following him. He grips Shane’s hips hard and makes a noise that Shane is well familiar with in his ear.

Ilya comes down on top of him, putting his weight against his back. Shane allows himself to collapse onto his stomach at the feeling, not wanting to hold himself up anymore. The warm weight of Ilya is pleasant and familiar. He hums at the feeling.

After a few minutes of just breathing together, Shane feels a tug at his wrists. When he looks up, he finds Ilya untying him. He had almost forgotten he was even restrained. Carefully, Ilya pulls himself out and off of him, taking the tie with him. Shane stays on the bed, but turns his head against the pillow so he can get a look at him.

Ilya returns quickly, holding a bottle of lotion and holding out his hand. “Hands.”

Shane gives him one of his hands and watches as Ilya squirts some lotion onto his skin and rubs it in, focusing on his wrist. He does the same with Shane’s other hand. Shane appreciates the gesture. His wrists hadn’t been hurt, but he can see some redness there.

Ilya continues with the cleanup routine that Shane remembers. Using tissues to wipe both himself and Shane off, and Shane feels himself coming back to his body little by little.

“The bed’s all dirty,” Shane informs him.

“I know.”

“We need to change the sheets. We’re not sleeping on the bed like this.”

“Sleep? Who said I let you sleep tonight?” Ilya suddenly leans in close, bracketing Shane in with his arms against the bed. He’s smirking.

Shane feels his face heat, which seems ridiculous considering what he and Ilya just did together, but he’s never been able to help it. He also remembers now that he’s technically here to fulfill his end of the bet. So, Ilya can do whatever he wants with him for the rest of the twenty-four hours.

He swallows, his cock giving a valiant twitch at the thought.

But Ilya breaks, chuckling and giving him a kiss on the forehead. “We change the sheets and go to bed.”

Shane breathes out a laugh. “Good. I doubt you’d have that kind of stamina anyway.”

“Don’t tempt me, Shane.”

They change the sheets together. It’s a funny, doing that with Ilya. Something that he has only ever done with himself or his parents. He never did it with Rose when they were together. But now here he is, changing the sheets of Ilya’s bed with him so they can sleep. Together. In his bed. And Shane is wearing his pajama pants. It’s all so…normal. He has to conceal a smile at the thought.

After preparing themselves for sleep, they climb into the now clean bed together, both burnt out from the evening’s activities. Shane doesn’t hesitate to wrap his arm around Ilya’s middle and pull himself close. Ilya’s arm moves around him, holding him there. It’s so easy. It feels so right. Like this is what they have been doing from the beginning.

Maybe they should have.

“Goodnight, Ilya.”

“Goodnight, Shane.”

9:13am

Ilya’s breath is hot against Shane’s ear as he slowly thrusts in and out of him.

Shane turns his face into the pillow, his body feeling particularly slow and lethargic in the morning. They had both woken up hard, Ilya pressed into him from behind. It had been so

much like a dream Shane once had that he almost thought he *was* dreaming. But he wasn't, and Shane knew what he wanted quickly, and Ilya was more than happy to give it to him.

They had had morning sex before. Over a year ago when they were snowed in together. Back when everything was unspoken between them.

Fingers dig into Shane's chin and turn his face back up. He opens his eyes to find Ilya's face, red and fucked out, looking down at him. His chest is heavy against Shane's back, his finger digging into his thigh as he pounds into him again, finding his prostate and knocking a gasp out of him.

"*Shane*…"

There's nothing for Shane to do but kiss him, and that's enough for them both. Shane feels his release sneak up on him and then erupt, groaning into Ilya's mouth. Ilya follows, buried deep inside of him.

The sun bathes them in its morning light as Shane brings his hand up to Ilya's hair, running his fingers through it. The weather has been nice lately, Shane thinks distantly. Fewer clouds and blue skies.

Ilya places a kiss on his chest. "Want anything?"

For someone who is supposed to be leading these twenty-four hours, Ilya is letting him steer a lot of it. Shane doesn't mind.

He kisses Ilya's forehead. "Come on. Let's shower."

12:57pm

Shane takes the last bite of the tuna melt Ilya made him for lunch and refocuses on the game of Scrabble in front of him. He won their first round and intends to do the same again. Looking over his letters, he thinks his chances are good.

"P-O-L-A-R-I-T-Y," he spells out as he places his letters on the board, situated on the coffee table. "Polarity."

Ilya stares down at the word Shane just used, skeptical. "That is not word."

"Do I need to take out the dictionary again?" Shane says, smiling. "I promised I wouldn't cheat, and I won't."

Ilya narrows his eyes at his own letters and then at the board. "Next round we use Russian words. Help *you* practice."

"You'll kill me if we do that."

"Yes." Ilya starts placing his own letters on the board. Shane watches as he spells out B-R-O-T-H-E-R.

He chews his lip, the word reminding him of something that he's wanted to broach for a while now. Ever since he and Ilya had talked in the dressing room before the Greek Week challenge, actually. He's not sure if it's the time, but they've been up and talking for hours. Things had cooled off considerably since they showered together this morning. Using their time to eat, watch a movie, and now play a boardgame rather than what they spent the first hours doing. Shane was surprised by how much he's enjoyed this too.

But still, as they talked, the more it rattled around in his head. He thinks it over as he places the word "bridge" on the board.

"Hey, uh, Ilya?" Shane says quietly, shifting his position on the carpeted floor.

"Hm?" Ilya is looking over his letter pieces.

"I just wanted to say I'm, uh, sorry again. About your dad." The words, which feel woefully inadequate, finally leave Shane's mouth.

Ilya's eyes snap up to him at that, his hand hovering over the boardgame, now paying attention to him.

"I just, uh—" Shane stumbles, wondering if he should have brought it up at all. He remembers how Ilya looked when he told him, the first time he had ever seen him cry. "Since you told me, I just keep thinking about how awful that must have been. How upset you were when you…when you left."

A silence lingers at those words. Shane knows Ilya still feels guilty over how things were left between them, and it hurts Shane to even think about that day.

"I just wanted to say I understand. If it was my dad—"

"Shane."

"No, *fuck*, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—"

"*Shane*, stop."

Shane closes his mouth, now certain this was stupid of him.

Ilya stares at him and swallows. Thankfully, he doesn't look upset or hurt by anything Shane said. His face, rather, is fixed in that expression it often is whenever he's trying to think of the right words in his second language.

"Is…" Ilya starts, then stops. He closes his eyes briefly and opens them again. "Is not like with your dad. I do not think."

Shane takes a breath. "I don't…you mean—"

"We were not…close." Ilya's eyes are fixed on the table in front of him. "Not that way."

Shane is trying to understand. He thinks he might. While Ilya had never met his dad, hell, he had never even seen him in person, Shane had mentioned him a few times. Usually just fleeting statements about something he and his dad had done before or going home to see his parents. He also posts pictures of his family on Instagram sometimes. Enough, he supposes, for Ilya to get a sense of their relationship.

It is starting to click now. Ilya and his father…

"Oh," is all he says.

Ilya shrugs. "Was hard. I wish…" His eyes flash up to Shane's, and then back down. "I wish it was different, or that he could have known me, I don't know…"

It's hard, with Ilya being so vague, to grasp exactly what he might be referring to here. If he even means anything specific at all. Shane guesses Ilya probably didn't tell his dad that he liked men. But maybe Ilya's dad, whoever he was, simply never knew his son. The look on Ilya's face makes Shane believe this may be true.

Shane feels a pang of sadness deep inside. Sad for Ilya, for never feeling seen or known by his father. But one corner of his brain reminds him of his own parents, who both know him so well. They know everything about him. Or…*almost* everything.

"But…the rest of your family?" Shane asks. He can't help but want to know.

"My brother…" Ilya shakes his head. "No. Is the same."

"What about your mom?"

Ilya's lips press into a flat line. "Dead."

Shane inhales sharply. He hadn't expected that. Ilya had never discussed his family with him before telling him only days ago his father died. But he had never imagined that his mother was dead too. A million questions come to mind. But primarily, when? How? He knows those are not the right things to ask in this moment.

"Fuck, Ilya. I'm sorry."

"Long time ago," Ilya tells him. He's finally looking at him, at least.

There's a softness in Ilya's eyes now, something that Shane feels might be permission to carry on. "Was it the same with her? Like your dad and brother?"

Ilya shakes his head, his hand coming up to touch the cross necklace he always wears. "No. Was different. Was…better with her."

Shane is not sure this makes him feel more or less sad. He's glad to know Ilya had a mother who cared for him. Shane can see the fondness in his eyes now as he talks about her. But there's still that lingering sadness at knowing Ilya lost the one person in his family who he had that kind of love for, and who felt it for him.

How lonely that must be.

Unable to help himself any longer, Shane moves around the coffee table, shuffling on his hands and knees until he reaches Ilya. When he does, he puts his arms around his shoulders and buries his face into his shoulder.

Ilya is stiff for a moment until Shane feels his arms come around him in return, placing his own forehead against Shane's shoulder. Shane relaxes at the touch, feeling their breathing starting to sync as they hold each other.

"I know we didn't used to…talk about this stuff." Shane's voice is slightly muffled. He takes a breath. "About anything really. But I want to now. If you want to."

Ilya pulls back in his arms, but doesn't move away, just puts enough distance between them so he can look into Shane's eyes. "That's what you want?"

Shane nods and steels himself. "Yes, I do. I want that. I—" Another breath, and then the truth. "I want to be with you, Ilya."

Something flashes across Ilya's eyes then but he casts his gaze to the floor too quickly for Shane to recognize what it is. Then he backs up incrementally in Shane's arms. For a moment, it's terrifying. Shane thinks he's gone too far, revealed too much. He wants the floor to swallow him up.

But Ilya turns back to him and is suddenly kissing him. Shane is on his back on the floor before he even realizes what's happened, Ilya on top of him, pressing kisses all over his face, his breath hot and heavy.

Ilya is saying something. Shane doesn't catch it the first time, but then he repeats it. Russian.

"*YA tebya lyublyu*."

Shane doesn't understand. He remembers from his Russian classes the words for "I" and "you," but he doesn't know what the other word—

"I love you." Ilya's voice is low.

"Holy shit." The words are out of Shane's mouth quickly.

Ilya freezes, staring down at him, and Shane thinks he sees fear in his eyes.

Shane stares back, also afraid, but then the truth is suddenly so clear to him. "I love you too."

They're both quiet for a breath, and then a wave of relief comes over Ilya's face. Shane feels he could melt into the carpet just from the sight of him.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya breathes out burying his face in Shane's neck.

Shane lifts his arms, wrapping them around Ilya's shoulders and pulling him close. The weight on top of him is warm and feels good. A smile breaks over his mouth. There's

suddenly so much clarity in his mind. “Oh my God, I love you so much.”

It’s not something he had ever thought about before, at least not consciously, in the many hours of his life he has spent agonizing over what he has with Ilya Rozanov. But when Ilya said the words, something inside of him woke up, and he knew. He does love Ilya.

Maybe he always has.

He kisses Ilya’s hair. He feels Ilya respond, kissing his neck, so Shane continues, kissing Ilya everywhere he can reach. His hair, his ear, his cheek, until Ilya pushes himself up and is looking down at him again. Tears are in his eyes again, and Shane wants to kiss them away.

“You want—?”

“Yes,” Shane answers immediately. He pulls Ilya’s face down to kiss him. “Please.”

Ilya kisses him hard, and Shane lets him, his head pressed against the carpet underneath him. When he feels Ilya’s hands traveling lower, he holds his arms up, and somehow Ilya manages to take both their shirts off at once, tossing them to the other side of the room. Shane doesn’t even have it in him to scold him about throwing their clothes around. There will be time for that later. Right now, all he wants is Ilya.

Soon, their pants are also off and they’re naked together on the floor. They’re both already hard, and Ilya wastes no time in wrapping his hand around Shane’s cock and stroking him. Shane makes a choked sort of whine and returns the favor, taking Ilya in his hand.

The lube bottle magically appears in Ilya’s hand. Shane has no idea where that came from, but he doesn’t have the bandwidth to care right now. Not when Ilya is squirting the lube onto his fingers and starting to finger him open again. Shane drops his own hand from Ilya’s cock and grips the carpet hard.

He’s looser than usual with their activities in the last day, but the stretch of Ilya’s fingers inside him always makes his toes curl.

“That’s it,” Ilya tells him, encouraging as he presses deeper.

“*Fuck*, Ilya. You gotta fuck me.” Shane’s eyes dart down to watch Ilya between his legs.

“Little more…*ah*. Right there, huh?”

Ilya found his prostate, making Shane’s hips nearly shoot off the carpet. But Ilya is there with his other hand, pressing him back down.

“That’s enough,” Shane chokes out as Ilya continues to abuse that spot. “I’m ready, Ilya. Come *on*.”

Shane has no patience right now. Normally, Ilya might tease him for this, but his patience is also clearly running thin. A condom also magically appears out of nowhere (where was Ilya keeping these things?) and with a few rapid motions, it’s on his cock and Ilya is pressing inside of him.

The two of them groan in unison. After their escapades in these last hours, Shane's body has grown more and more accustomed to this, but still, he finds himself throwing his head back at the sensation, his body stretching around Ilya's cock.

Ilya looks like he feels much the same when Shane is able to meet his eyes again. His mouth hangs open and his eyes are sparkling as he starts to move, adjusting his hips slightly upward for a better angle. Shane moans at the feeling, and on the next thrust tries to lift his hips to meet him, but Ilya is there instantly. His hand on his hip, stilling him.

"Wait, wait. Let me." Ilya's voice is breathless. "*Please*."

Shane wants to protest, but he nods instead, seeing the need written all over Ilya's face. Shane knows what Ilya wants. Knows that he wants to take care of Shane and make him feel good all himself, to know that every sound Shane makes, every twitch on his face is his own doing. It's a selfish desire in a way, Shane supposes. Wanting Shane's pleasure to be entirely his own, but Shane has always loved it too much to care.

Especially when Ilya is pounding in and out of him like he's trying to put him through the floor. Shane knows he'll have rug burn on his ass later, and Ilya will probably have it on his knees. But he can't feel it at all right now. Only Ilya's hands on his body and his cock sliding in and out of him.

"Jesus fucking Christ, Ilya," Shane pants, and he risks touching him, trying to take hold of one of his hands.

Ilya gets the message. He takes Shane's hand, then the other, lacing their fingers together and pressing them down on either side of Shane's head on the floor. Shane whines, pleased that he has Ilya's hands in his but dismayed by the unfortunate side effect of Ilya not touching his cock anymore.

"Shh, is okay, *kotenok*. I have you," Ilya reassures him, brushing his nose back and forth against his. Shane believes every word. "I want you to come."

"*Please*," Shane answers immediately, desperation in his tone already. He feels his cock leaking between them. "Please, I want—"

"I know," Ilya interrupts, his eyes in awe staring down at him. His breaths are getting louder. "Fuck, you can, Shane. Come on."

Shane wants to push his hips up to meet Ilya's, but Ilya told him to stay still so he will. With a great deal of effort, he stays pliant underneath him, Ilya's thrusts edging him closer to his orgasm. He squeezes his hands tight around Ilya's, nails digging in, and is surprised when he feels a tear streaking down his cheek.

Ilya's mouth is on the tear, his tongue darting out to taste it, before Shane can even blink.

And he comes like that; his hips pressed to the floor and Ilya's mouth against his cheek. He feels it against his chest and somewhere in his brain he's concerned about it getting on the carpet.

“That’s it—*fuck*—that’s it, Shane.” Ilya’s teeth are gritted, staring down at him with wide eyes. Then, like he can’t help it, “Fuck, *I love you*.”

Shane is barely cognizant beneath him, but enough to say this, “I love you, Ilya.”

That, apparently, is enough. Ilya rears up and comes, fingers tightening around Shane’s and keeping his eyes on his face the entire time. Shane feels satisfaction curl deep in his chest, the way it always has when he sees Ilya like this for him.

But it’s even better now than it ever was before.

Because Ilya loves him.

A smile spreads over Shane’s face.

And I love him too.

6:19pm

“I’ve had this pizza before,” Shane muses out loud after he takes his first bite. The pizza had just arrived at the door. He looks on the box for the name of the restaurant.

“Ordered it last year sometimes when you were here.” Ilya places Shane’s ginger ale, which he also had delivered from the pizza place, on his place setting and sits down next to him.

“Your regular place?” Shane takes another bite of his veggie pizza.

“No,” Ilya answers, taking a piece of sausage pizza for himself. “But you said you liked it before.”

“Oh.” Huh. Shane didn’t even remember that he liked this pizza, though he certainly does. It must have been something that he said offhand last year when Ilya ordered them food, back when he was spending a lot more time here and they were both pretending it didn’t mean anything.

Ilya remembered the pizza he likes. Shane tries not to feel butterflies about that simple fact.

“You still like it.” Ilya observes with satisfaction as Shane finishes his first slice.

“It’s not bad.” Shane gives him a knowing look as he reaches for another piece.

Ilya smirks and they eat in comfortable silence for a few minutes. Both of them hungry after the afternoon they had. Ilya had barely let Shane stay dressed after what happened during their Scrabble game. Not that Shane protested much.

But now their day together is approaching its end, and Shane can’t help but feel a little disappointed about that. He knows that after all that’s been said between them, they will have plenty more days together. Hell, they’ll spend plenty of time together this week now that they’re on spring break. But still, Shane’s end of the bet is almost over, and it feels like a

chapter coming to a close. One that began in the Kappa Tau house den and one that he enjoyed very much.

He supposes that's fitting. A lot of things are coming to a close soon.

As if reading his mind, Ilya breaks the silence with, "So, what does someone even do with a Sports Psychology degree?"

Shane starts at the reference to his degree. He had chosen his major from his first semester at university and never budged from it. He recalls the first time he told Ilya what it was. He had looked baffled at the concept, and that it was even something people studied. Then he called it boring when Shane tried to explain it further.

Ilya is looking at him expectantly now, apparently having gotten past that perception.

Shane swallows. "Well, I've actually wanted to tell you about something…"

"Oh yes?" Ilya's eyebrows go up. "You look very nervous. Now I am curious."

"I've got an interview on Tuesday," Shane gets out, feeling his heartrate speed up. "At the University of Ottawa. There's an assistant coach opening on their hockey team."

Ilya's mouth drops open, but his eyes are alight. "*Shane Hollander*."

"It's just an interview, I have to—"

"*Coach Shane Hollander*."

At that, Shane can't help but let out a chuckle. "You kinda gave me the idea last year."

"I am genius." Ilya nods assuredly.

"Anyway," Shane laughs, rolling his eyes. "The coach there is one of the guys who was looking at me pretty closely in high school before I…you know." Shane glances down at his knee and then back up.

Ilya nods, the smile leaving his face.

"He was the one who told me about this position when I reached out to him. But that doesn't guarantee anything. I'm sure there are a lot of good candidates—"

"Better than you?" Ilya asks doubtfully. "Hm, I say no."

"Thanks," Shane says, and means it.

"The interview is at Ottawa?"

"Yeah," Shane confirms. "I was just gonna drive there on Tuesday morning. It's not far—"

"I drive you." Ilya's voice is light when he says this, like it's the easiest suggestion in the world.

“Thanks, Ilya.” Shane does appreciate the gesture. “But you don’t have to.”

“Want to,” Ilya shoots back. “Besides, you will be nervous. Probably drive too fast or too slow and get pulled over by cop. Then what? You go to prison and miss interview.”

Shane chuckles at this attempt at an argument. “They don’t arrest you for speeding in Canada.”

“Still, you do not want ticket. You have perfect driving record, yes?”

“Obviously.”

“Then it is decided. I drive you.”

Shane isn’t exactly sure how that line of thinking settled things. But looking at Ilya now, so earnest in offering to drive him, Shane doesn’t have the will to turn him down. Besides, the idea of Ilya driving him to his interview, which he is indeed very stressed about, is a weight off his shoulders. Even more, he thinks it will go better for him if Ilya is there.

But now that they’re on the topic of what comes next, and Shane does want to get his interview out of his mind, he has something he wants to ask.

“So, what about you?”

“What about me?” Ilya finishes off the crust of his pizza.

“What does someone do with a Russian Literature degree?”

The first time Ilya told him he was a Russian Literature major, Shane had genuinely laughed. He thought Ilya was fucking with him and had been stunned to realize he was serious. He even had evidence. Hayden had been in one of his classes when he needed his Humanities requirement. But Shane never had any idea what Ilya wanted to do with it, if anything. Especially because Ilya had spent a lot of time trying to get into professional hockey.

Shane still thinks that could have happened for Ilya had things been different. But he understands now why Ilya probably left that behind him.

But more than curiosity, Shane does want to know what Ilya has planned next. They’ve talked a little bit about being together going forward, but nothing about what that really means. The uncertainty is starting to gnaw at him, especially with Russia, Ilya’s home country, always looming in the background. The possibility that he might leave.

“I guess…I have news too,” Ilya disrupts Shane’s thoughts, tapping his fingers on the table in a steady rhythm.

Shane braces himself.

“Apparently it is useful to speak Russian in this country,” Ilya tells him, his eyes drifting up to meet his. “Lots of jobs need it.”

Shane dares to let a spark of hope light up.

“I have been talking to…publishing company. Need Russian speakers for translations. Can get me a work visa.”

Shane feels himself straighten up. “Where?”

“Montreal.”

The grin that breaks out over Shane’s face is so big it nearly hurts his cheeks. “Not so far from Ottawa.”

“No.” Ilya stares at Shane’s mouth, his smile. “It isn’t.”

“Two hours if you’re pushing the speed limit, but like I said I have a perfect driving record —”

“One hour if we meet in middle.”

“Woah. Math genius.”

“Shut up and come here.”

They had been moving closer and closer together in the last few minutes, leaning towards each other, and now Ilya takes him by the back of the head and closes the last few inches between them. He tastes like sausage pizza and Shane couldn’t care less, smiling into the kiss like he never has before.

Ilya makes a sound against him, and Shane realizes that he’s smiling too.

“You know,” Ilya says when they break apart. “If you are going to be big-time hockey coach, you will need to skate again.”

Shane exhales through his nose. He hadn’t expected him to say that, though it is something he had considered ever since he received the call for an interview.

“Yeah, I know.” He feels some apprehension in his stomach now.

Ilya takes his chin in his hand and lifts him up, their eyes meeting again. “Let’s go for a ride.”

8:03pm

Shane hasn’t worn ice skates in over a year, his longest stretch ever.

There has been no reason for him to wear skates. He doesn’t play hockey anymore, and no one who knows him would ever suggest going on the ice, even though he knows very well Hayden does sometimes. Hayden might have ditched hockey shortly after Shane’s injury, but he still loves being out there for his own enjoyment. He and Jackie go on skating dates regularly, though Shane is pretty sure Hayden tries to hide that from him.

He does it to be kind, Shane knows. Shane has even appreciated it. But looking at the ice now, he realizes how much he's missed it. It had been a while since the occasion that he had gone on the ice alone and messed up his knee again, which had prompted him to visit Ilya so long ago, desperate for someone to drive all of the old pain away. He feels just how long it's been now as he holds himself up on the boards outside the rink, wearing skates again.

"You have to give the key back before we graduate," Shane tells Ilya when he sidles up next to him, his own skates on. "You should give it back after spring break, actually."

Ilya chuckles. "Was good I didn't give it back though. Now we have this," Ilya holds out his arms, indicating the empty ice rink, "all to ourselves.

Ilya had driven them to campus and when he parked at the university rink, he informed Shane that during his abrupt departure from Canada last year to attend his father's funeral and upon his return, the team staff had "forgotten" to ask him to return his key, which he had been allotted to carry as team captain. Shane had looked at him dubiously, but still, he followed him into the building.

From there, it was easy to get into the locker room and snag two pairs of skates for themselves. Not a soul was around, everyone gone for spring break. Now here they stand, staring at the ice, no one to tell them no.

"I go first?" Ilya offers, giving Shane's shoulder a squeeze.

Shane nods and Ilya steps onto the ice.

The first time Shane had seen Ilya on the ice was at one of the university hockey games their freshman year. In this very building. Ilya had burst out into the rink on his skates like a freight train, and Shane's eyes barely left him for the entire game. Ilya's sureness and confidence in himself was nothing new, but on the ice, it was something special. Every inch of his body was under control, every movement calculated, the thrill of it obvious.

Shane had been stunned to realize it reminded him of himself.

It's not so different now, watching Ilya. A far different energy than that of a game, but still an easy way about him. He might not play anymore, but it's still a world he's comfortable in.

Shane wishes he could say the same as he watches him. He gingerly approaches the entry to the ice as Ilya spins and comes closer again. Shane doesn't miss the way his gaze drops to his knee and then back up again.

"You are okay?" Ilya's voice is concerned.

Shane nods, not looking at him, staring down at the ice instead.

"We do not have to if—"

"No, I want to," Shane says right away, looking back to him. "You were right. If I want to coach, I have to do this." Shane steps closer, another step and he'll be on the ice.

Ilya watches him, nods, and glides a few feet backwards. Shane is immediately grateful. He appreciates Ilya's presence, but he doesn't want to be coddled. He knows how to skate. He doesn't need to cling to Ilya to do this. His presence is reassuring enough.

Shane puts one foot on the ice. Then the other. He drops his hand from the boards.

His body remembers this well, and it's the simplest thing in the world to skate forward. It doesn't matter how much time has passed. This is not something that can be forgotten. So many years on the ice, practices, games, doing it for fun at the public rink or frozen lakes with Hayden. Ten more years could pass, and he knows he would remember how to do this just as easily.

It calms him to know this, but that sadness is still there. He wishes he could have done this every day. Played hockey to the highest level that he always dreamed of.

He looks down at his knee. Not in this lifetime.

When he looks back up, Ilya is a few meters away, watching him intently. Shane skates in his direction, towards the center of the rink. As he does, Shane sees a smile grow on his lips.

"I have vision," Ilya tells him.

Shane chuckles. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Assistant coach for Ottawa for five years," Ilya says when Shane reaches him. "Then head coach, another five years maybe. Take team to championship. *Then* you coach in pros." He pauses for dramatic effect, the two of them circling each other on their skates. "Youngest head coach ever to win Stanley Cup."

Shane looks down, smiling. "Ten years to coach in the pros? You think it will take me that long?"

Ilya is grinning, skating up to him as Shane weaves around behind him.

"I'll do it in eight."

"Where is the humility, Hollander?" Ilya seems determined to catch him on skates now, picking up his pace.

"So, where are you in this scenario?" Shane continues this story Ilya has pitched.

"I work at publishing company in Montreal for some time," Ilya muses, looking up at the ceiling. "If you are nice, I come to some games in boring Ottawa."

Shane bites his lip, something nagging at him. "And that's what you would want?"

Ilya comes close to snatching Shane's hand, but he skates further away again, continuing their unspoken game of tag. "Svetlana says I should get PhD."

"*A PhD?"* Shane doesn't mean to sound so shocked, but that is about the last thing he expected Ilya to say.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "I know. But I am considering."

Shane grins. "So, what? I'm gonna be a pro hockey coach and you're going to be my Russian Literature PhD boyfriend?"

"*Boyfriend?"* Ilya finally catches up to him, taking hold of his hand and moving them closer to the boards. "Your *boyfriend?"*

Shane feels his face turning red as Ilya backs him into the boards, an arm on either side of him. The word had just slipped out of his mouth, but he realizes now that they haven't officially labeled anything between them. He bites the inside of his cheek, wondering if he's overstepped.

"I mean—"

"Yes, boyfriend," Ilya agrees, like he's just come to this conclusion too. He places a kiss on his mouth. "I think so."

That fluttering in Shane's chest returns. He wonders if it will ever truly leave him again. When Ilya pulls away and smiles at him, Shane thinks he might feel the same.

Ilya pushes off the boards and takes Shane's hand, pulling him with him.

"Not bad skating, by the way," Ilya assesses, looking sideways at him. "Some more practice and you can maybe keep up with me."

Shane smiles, then what was nagging at him earlier returns. "You really could have gone pro."

Silence at these words. Ilya seems to be mulling them over in his head. "I could have, maybe. Would have liked to. But this," Ilya gestures to his skates, then the rink, "is not for me anymore."

Shane supposes he can understand that. The same way he was able to understand when Hayden gave it up, though he was initially baffled. He knows not everyone feels the same way about hockey that he does.

"Maybe if you played," Ilya carries on, his voice lighter. "Maybe with real competition, I would have done it."

Shane laughs and squeezes his hand. "Yeah, us in the pros together."

"You for some boring Canadian team. Me for…I don't know."

"Boston."

Ilya grimaces. "Boston is terrible."

“They need all the help they can get.”

Ilya snorts, swerving so he’s facing Shane and skating backwards, keeping his hand in his.

“Maybe it’s better though,” Shane puts in. “That we didn’t go pro. I’m not sure if…well, *we* would have happened.”

It’s a strange thought, and he doesn’t even realize it until he says it out loud. He loved hockey. Still loves it. But if hockey meant he wouldn’t get to be with Ilya, would he really choose it? The words he just spoke seem to reveal the answer. He’s surprised at this, but maybe he shouldn’t be.

Ilya shakes his head, disagreeing, still easily skating backwards. “I would have chased you.”

Shane grins. “Okay, sure. But I wouldn’t have given in.”

“Yes you would have.” At that, Ilya stops, bringing Shane to a stop as well, lightly colliding with his body.

“You think you're irresistible?” Shane asks, poking Ilya’s shoulder.

Ilya kisses him. “To Shane Hollander? Yes.”

Shane is smiling into the kiss again. Then something dawns on him. He lifts his hand to check his watch. “You know, your twenty-four hours are almost over.”

Ilya looks momentarily confused, like he had forgotten all about their bet, then he looks contemplative. He considers his next words.

“Stay with me a little longer?”

Shane takes his hand again. “Always.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, obviously we finally got the 24 hours, but I wanted to explore Shane and Ilya's dom/sub dynamic from a different angle. Namely showing the power subs have in these relationships. Personally, I think Ilya would sub for Shane if that's what Shane wanted. I think Ilya is entirely a service top and enjoys sex as far as Shane enjoys what he's doing. For that reason, I think he'd sub in a heartbeat. Maybe Shane would give that a shot after being together for a while, just out of curiosity, but in general we know Shane falls into subbing a lot more easily, and I wanted to expand on that in this chapter. Also the two of them just figuring out how to be intimate again after so long and after all that happened.

One more chapter. I'm sad this is coming to a close, but happy to be finishing it.

Chapter 13: Epilogue

Chapter Notes

> I can't believe we've come to the end. If you've been reading this from the beginning or you just started it today, thanks for all the support, kudos, and comments. I had a lot of fun writing this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

May 2017

“Stop fidgeting. Stay still.”

“I am still. *Your* hand is shaking.”

Shane’s eyes flash up to meet Ilya’s and then back down to his hand, which is indeed wobbling, paintbrush clutched between his fingers. He’s only just finished painting the N in his name on Ilya’s naked chest, and the rest of the agreed message for Ilya to flaunt tonight at the Omega Chi end of the year party, already raging downstairs, feels like it will take him the rest of the evening to write.

Maybe that’s for the best. Right now, Shane has no idea why he ever thought this was a good idea.

But Ilya had insisted. On the last night of their spring break together, he had brought up how much he was looking forward to it. As Shane had fulfilled his end of the bet with the twenty-four hours, Ilya had set himself on doing this as well. Shane tried to protest, told him he didn’t have to do it because technically Shane didn’t win Greek Week, but Ilya wouldn’t hear any of it.

And now, here Shane is. Painting “SHANE HOLLANDER’S BITCH” on Ilya’s chest as he sits on his bed (covered in towels because Shane is not risking his sheets) in the Omega Chi house, and now he’s done with the E in his name.

He leans back to look at his work. There’s no mistaking that that’s his name, though it’s obvious his hand was shaking for most of it. He looks back up at Ilya to find him staring, and Shane feels his face heat. They’ve been together now for more than a month, but still he can’t help but blush at having just branded his name on Ilya’s body. Ilya looks like he’s thinking about the same thing.

“Oh my God, Shane, move. You’re taking forever.” There’s a small push on his shoulder, and Shane looks up, broken from the moment, to find Hayden. “I’ll paint his ass.”

It's on the tip of his tongue to say no, that he wants to do it. But he's already been sitting here a long time, and Hayden will probably get this done faster. He hands Hayden the paint brush and sits up from his chair, shooting Ilya an apologetic smile as he goes.

Ilya barely contains his scowl as Hayden sits down in Shane's place.

"Aw, don't be like that, Roz." Hayden smirks, coating the paintbrush in more paint. It's red. Hayden had bought it himself when he learned about the bet and what Ilya's punishment was to be. The red paint incident of Greek Week sophomore year has truly never been forgiven or forgotten.

"I'll take good care of you, promise." Hayden starts painting the H in Shane's last name.

"Spell it right," Ilya barks out at him.

"Aw look, they're bonding." Jackie slides up next to Shane, taking his arm in hers. With her other hand she takes out her phone and snaps a picture of the moment.

Shane chuckles as he presses his cheek against Jackie's head. Her presence has been a gift to him in this last month. Ilya and Hayden have made…progress, Shane supposes. Though there was an immediate setback when Shane finally told Hayden about what happened between them last spring. Hayden had wanted to punch Ilya's lights out before Shane smoothed things over as much as he could.

They have been on a grand total of two double dates with Hayden and Jackie since spring break, and that has been all the time Ilya and Hayden have spent together. The dates were okay. On the first one, Ilya mostly talked to Jackie while Shane talked to Hayden. When Shane realized that was very much Ilya's plan, he forced him to switch seats and chatted with Jackie himself, leaving Ilya no choice but to talk to Hayden.

It could have been worse. Words were spoken. They both tried, which was nice. Shane thinks on the second date that Ilya actually got Hayden to genuinely laugh, which he proceeded to look mortified about.

Better than what it was before, at least. Shane can only hope it keeps improving.

Hayden finishes the word Hollander on Ilya's chest, looking perfectly clear and steadier than Shane's attempt. Only one more word to go.

"You know how to spell bitch, yes Pike?" Ilya is looking at him like he's genuinely asking. "I will help. B-I—"

"I know how to spell bitch, bitch." Hayden draws a very large B on Ilya's stomach to begin the word.

"Be nice, Hay" Shane and Jackie say at the same time.

"He started it," Hayden shoots back, but he's fighting a smile.

Shane smiles in return. He knows Ilya started it. He usually does. Moving to the bed, Shane takes a seat next to Ilya on the towels.

“Still time to back out.” Shane nudges his shoulder into his. “You know you have my permission.”

Ilya and Hayden both look at him incredulously. Then Ilya glances down at his painted chest and back up to Shane.

“I think I have committed now, no?”

“Don’t let him off the hook, Shane,” Hayden pleads. “This will make our final end of the year party *legendary*.”

Shane raises his hands in defeat. “Okay, but let it never be said that I made him do this. And he’s only gotta do it for a minute before he can come back up and get dressed.”

Ilya snorts, taking one of his hands in his. “Only Shane Hollander chooses punishment in a bet that embarrasses him more than me.”

“That’s because you don’t get embarrassed,” Shane huffs.

“Even if he doesn’t, I’m still gonna enjoy this. There.” Hayden leans back, having just finished the final word. “Now is that a good job or is that a good job?”

Shane looks. SHANE HOLLANDER’S BITCH is there for all to see. In bright red and huge letters. No one who is looking would be able to mistake the words. He feels his face heat up again at the sight.

“Artistic brilliance, baby,” Jackie approves. “Now get up, I want to take a picture of Ilya and Shane together.”

“Uh…” Shane moves to stand, not sure he wants a picture, but Ilya keeps hold of his hand and tugs him back down.

Ilya only smiles in response to his glare. “Come on, Shane. Don’t you want evidence of my losing Greek Week?”

Shane thinks he would have wanted exactly that if he had been the one to win Greek Week. But that wasn’t the case. Still, he finds it impossible not to melt under Ilya’s smile. He acquiesces, turning to the camera and offering a small smile, Ilya throwing his arm around his shoulders.

“Say cheese!” Jackie tells them, holding up the camera. “Oh yes, I can see this framed over your fireplace for sure.” She snaps some more pictures.

“Alright, that’s enough,” Shane chuckles. “I think it’s time—”

His bedroom door suddenly opens, and a familiar voice bursts through. “Hey guys, what are you—?"

JJ, who has come up from the party downstairs, freezes in the doorway at the scene in front of him. No one else says anything. Shane feels Ilya's arm drop from his shoulders. JJ just stares, taking in Ilya on Shane's bed, eyes dropping to his chest and the words written there, before flitting over to Shane, scanning over his face. Shane stays perfectly still, unsure what to do or say. He can't read JJ's expression.

"Oh cool," JJ says, bringing his beer up to his lips. "So, you two are back together?"

The words initially make no sense to Shane, but finally their meaning sets in, and he's stunned. He looks at Hayden, expecting him to look guilty, assuming that he may have spilled the beans to JJ without telling him. But Hayden looks just as baffled.

"You…" Shane is finally able to get words out of his mouth. "You *knew?"*

JJ blinks and doesn't say anything, taking another sip of his beer.

"How?" Shane is desperate to know now. *"When?"*

"Saw you guys sneaking off together at Rose's Greek Week party," JJ finally admits, looking irritatingly casual as he leans against the doorway. "But I kinda knew before that."

Before that? Shane's mind sputters.

"You guys always stared at each other," JJ says, answering Shane's unspoken question. At the continued silence, he adds, "A lot."

Next to him, he hears Ilya chuckling softly. Shane is still putting this together. The first reaction was mortification that JJ knew this about him, then guilt over not having told him, and now he's thinking back to all the times he and Ilya may not have been very subtle in public.

There are…a few examples of that, he thinks.

"Marleau knows too, by the way," JJ informs them.

Shane throws his hands into the air and brings them back down on his thighs. "Does anyone *not* know?"

"I think Troy knows," Ilya says thoughtfully.

"Was I just blind or something?" Hayden asks no one in particular.

"Probably," Jackie chimes in.

"JJ, when did—?"

There's too much talking. Too much happening. JJ knows about him. About him and Ilya. Marleau apparently does too. Troy might, but who the fuck knows? Everyone is in his room. His name is painted on Ilya's chest in big red letters and—

“Everyone out for minute, please.”

Ilya’s voice cuts through the noise. Shane realizes he’s bent over with his face in his hands, though he doesn’t remember getting in this position. The room quiets down, and then the sound of footsteps and his door clicking shut. It’s quieter now. Only the low rumbling of the party still going downstairs. The weight of Ilya is still next to him on the bed, and after a moment, he feels his hand on his shoulder, sliding up to the back of his neck.

“Shane.” Ilya’s voice is soft as his hand squeezes him. “Shane.”

“I’m okay, I’m just freaking out.” The words are rushed, feeling like he needs to answer. “I’ll be okay in a second.”

“Hey, hey, hey.” Shane can feel Ilya coming closer on the bed, but his voice doesn’t get louder. “We’re good here. Your friends are here. Loud friends, but friends.”

Shane huffs out a chuckle, starting to sit up, feeling his brain start to operate at a normal pace again.

“And your boyfriend’s here.”

Boyfriend. Shane isn’t sure when he’ll get used to that.

“You’re here too, yes?” Ilya asks, eyes intently focused now that Shane can see him. “You are with me?”

“I’m here,” Shane answers, feeling a part of his body again. “I’m okay.”

“Is okay if you are not.” Ilya keeps his hand on the back of his neck. “That was a lot, I know.”

Shane sighs. “Yeah. It was a lot. I just wasn’t…ready for all of that at once, I guess.”

Ilya nods, understanding. Then he leans forward to kiss him.

Coming closer, Shane allows himself to be kissed, humming pleasantly against him until Ilya moves back again.

“I need to talk to JJ…” This fact suddenly clicks in his head. JJ seemed okay with what he knows about Shane, and what he knows about Shane and Ilya. But still, Shane should talk to him about it. They’re friends.

“Later, I think,” Ilya suggests.

Shane thinks for a second and then nods. Graduation might be this weekend, but he’s not running off anywhere and neither is JJ. He knows he doesn’t need to do this right now. He’s not even sure how successful a conversation would be at the moment.

While looking at Ilya, his eyes drop back to his chest, and he chuckles. Ilya does look ridiculous like this.

Ilya follows his gaze and looks down. “If…” He furrows his brow and gestures to his chest. “If this is too much, I do not have to—”

“No,” Shane cuts him off, shaking his head. “No, I want you to do it.”

“I do not want to if you don’t.”

“I know,” Shane agrees. It’s funny to say this now, when he’s been protesting about it so much. But the second Ilya offered not to do it, his mind immediately rejected it. “It’s still kinda embarrassing but I want you to. You did lose the bet, and it’s our last Greek Row party.”

Our last Greek Row party. Years ago, before rush week as a freshman, he couldn’t imagine saying those words with a somber note. He’s had plenty of bad Greek Row parties, but he doesn’t think he’d change any one of them.

After all, it was at one of these parties that he met Ilya.

“Okay,” Ilya says, leaning forward to kiss him again. “Then I do it for you.”

A smile plays at Shane’s lips as Ilya stands up and pulls his pants down and off. He has a red speedo on; because of course he’ll be fulfilling his end of the bet in its entirety. And of course he looks great in the speedo. Once again, Shane wonders exactly what he was thinking the night he made the bet. Must have been the weed, he decides.

Ilya holds out his hand to pull him up from the bed. “Go downstairs. I’ll join you soon.” His smile is mischievous; a look Shane is well familiar with now.

Shane should probably wonder about that look on his face, but he thinks it’s for the best to just go with what will come at this point. He opens his door to find the others waiting for him.

“You good, Shane?” Hayden asks, putting his hand on his shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m good,” Shane tells him, eyeing JJ behind him. “Let’s go downstairs. He’s gonna come down in a minute,”

“Don’t take long, Rozanov!” Hayden calls out into his room. “I’ve been waiting for this.”

They make their way down the hall and to the stairs. Hayden moves ahead and puts his arm around Jackie, leaving Shane to walk behind with JJ. Shane thinks Hayden might have done that on purpose, and he’s grateful.

“Hey,” JJ says quietly. “Sorry to just…bring all that up out of nowhere.”

Shane looks at him. He wasn’t expecting those words to start. “It wasn’t really out of nowhere, I guess. Ilya was sitting on my bed with…*that* on his chest.”

JJ snorts. “Still, I didn’t have to say it.”

They're halfway down the stairs now, and Shane can hear the party in full swing. He pauses and looks to JJ, who has stopped with him.

"It's alright, man." Shane hesitates, then reaches up to put his hand on JJ's shoulder. "Can we, uh, talk tomorrow? About this."

The surprise on JJ's face quickly gives way to something softer. He reaches over and gives Shane's shoulder a soft smack of his own. "Sure, Shane."

When they're both down the stairs, Shane immediately feels a hundred pounds lighter. While at the same time, he's reminded again what is to come this weekend. Graduation. His parents will be descending on the university campus along with all the other parents. Swirling around in his mind is everything he still hasn't told them. His best friends know. Marleau and Troy apparently somehow know. But his parents, the people he loves most in the world, no.

He's wanted to tell them. But every time he's tried, the words got stuck in his throat.

Now they're coming this weekend. They'll be taking him out to dinner and cheering loudly when they hear his name called at the graduation ceremony and taking him back home. It's all planned. The three of them together.

But maybe it shouldn't just be three.

"Hey Shane Hollander!"

Shane is snapped out of his reverie at the sound of his name being called. By the tone, he suspects that wasn't the first time his name was said. When he looks to his left, he finds Svetlana draped over Rose's lap on the couch, both of them having claimed the coveted spot for themselves. His eyes drift over them. Being a couple out in the open has looked good on them for the last month.

"Is he ready?" Svetlana asks, pointing upstairs, obviously referring to Ilya.

Shane nods. "Yeah, he said he's ready."

"Good." Svetlana easily bounces to her feet and tells him and Rose that she'll be right back.

"Uh," Shane looks to Rose. "What's that about?"

Rose holds her hands up, the picture of innocence. "Don't look at me. Those two have their own schemes together."

"Can I have everyone's attention?" Hayden's voice cuts through the living room.

The partygoers around Shane all turn to the bottom of the stairs, where Hayden is standing with his arm around Jackie. The speakers, which had been pumping some loud bass music, lower the volume. A few people in the room shush each other.

"Now, I'm not really one for speeches," Hayden starts, drawing more eyes to himself. "So, I'll keep this short."

“Thank God!” someone in the crowd cracks to a few laughs. Shane thinks it was Evan’s voice.

“Good jokes, my brothers, but you’re all going to miss me badly next year.” Hayden points in the direction of some of the Omega Chi underclassmen. “I’m not sure how you will keep this house standing without me and Shane.”

Shane chuckles. He thinks the Omega Chis will be just fine next year, though the sadness and nostalgia he was feeling earlier about their last Greek Row party is returning now as he listens to Hayden.

“But anyway, guys, it’s been a great year. A great four years,” Hayden carries on. “And I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I’m going to miss a lot of you.”

A few mocking *awws* come from their brothers at that.

“Yeah, yeah, fuck you guys,” Hayden returns.

Shane smiles, thinking that this is the last time he’ll get to watch Hayden address Omega Chi as president. The last time he’ll be the supportive vice president, a role he was always happy to fill.

“You guys have been great brothers, even if you’re idiots most of the time.” Hayden points at a specific few of their brothers for this comment. “And even though we didn’t accomplish the four-peat at Greek Week this year—”

“Woo!” This time it’s Rose who interjects, lifting her beer into the air. A few of her ZBZ sisters in the room join her.

“Yeah, yeah the Zeta Betas crushed us,” Hayden acknowledges. “But I wouldn’t have changed anything about this year.” Hayden’s eyes drift to Shane now. “And you guys really are my brothers.”

Shane feels a rush of affection for his best friend as he lifts his beer in the air along with most of the rest of the room. He expects a few mocking jeers in response to this too, but instead, a few of them clap, and JJ walks up to Hayden and gives him a friendly squeeze on the shoulder. Shane smiles at him, grateful for his words, and knowing he feels the same way.

“Okay, that’s enough of the sappy stuff,” Hayden bursts out when he rips his gaze away from Shane. “I have something much more exciting to announce. You’ve probably heard the rumors…”

A few excited jitters at that comment. Shane braces himself.

“Ilya Rozanov lost a bet!”

At these words, which Hayden bellows through his cupped hands, upbeat pop at full volume music suddenly blares into the room. Shane turns, craning his neck and he finds Svetlana next to their appointed DJ across the room. She’s already dancing, fluid and easy, moving her way back through the crowd towards him and Rose.

The song is familiar. A woman's vocals cut in and out of the instrumentals, but before he can put his finger on the song, another voice rings into the room.

"Omega Chi house!" Shane's head snaps back to the stairs. Standing at the top is Ilya, sporting his speedo and his painted chest for all to see, arms up in the air. *"Shane Hollander's bitch has arrived!"*

The house erupts in cheers, whoops, and whistles. Shane feels his face turn red up as some of the eyes in the room turn to him.

Without missing a beat, Ilya seats himself on the banister and pushes off. Shane's heartrate skyrockets and he steps forward, ready for a broken leg or some other disaster. But it doesn't come, which is no surprise considering it's Ilya. He slides down the banister seamlessly, swinging himself off and landing on his feet when he makes it to the bottom, much to the crowd's delight.

Clock strikes upon the hour
And the sun begins to fade

Ah. Shane finally recognizes the song.

The crowd parts for Ilya as he makes his way through, moving quickly and jumping over and atop furniture as he goes. He makes sure to draw as much attention to himself as possible. He moves in Shane's direction but only to do a quick circle around him, winking at him as he goes, before moving on. Shane is glad. He doesn't exactly want the room's full attention. Ilya has that covered.

Shane watches as Ilya carries on, grabbing a beer from the counter and downing it quickly. All the while, the crowd only encourages him.

"This is my favorite party ever," Svetlana's voice is suddenly in his ear, arm wrapping around his shoulders. "Thank you for choosing this as his punishment."

Shane chuckles, watching as Ilya dashes into the next room. "I'm not sure it's really punishment."

"Personally, I would have had him do this, paint and all, in the middle of campus at lunchtime." Rose joins them, leaning against Shane's shoulder and swiping through the photos she had just taken of Ilya's performance on her phone. "Or, oh, graduation!"

Shane and Svetlana both look at her, eyes wide.

"You're kinda devious," Shane tells her.

Rose winks and looks back in the direction of Ilya's adoring crowd. "Come on. I don't want to miss the rest of the show."

Oh, I wanna dance with somebody
I wanna feel the heat with somebody

Outside, the rest of the partygoers are now getting the full experience of Ilya's end of the bet. Ilya once again announcing himself as *Shane Hollander's bitch* upon opening the backdoor. Plenty of them clearly have no idea what's happening but anyone who has ever been to a fraternity party knows that you just have to go along with the shenanigans that may occur, and that's just what they do.

This is apparently where most of the Kappa Tau brothers have been hanging out, and they must have been clued in to Ilya's performance tonight because they immediately rush in Ilya's directions, all of them holding canned beers. Shane spots Marleau, Troy, Connors, and just about all of the rest of the house among them.

Ilya's mouth is wide open as his brothers, after shaking the beer cans hard, open them and spray him down with beer. Barely any of it makes it into his mouth. It's more of a beer shower than anything else.

Shane busts out a laugh at the sight, as does most everyone else.

When the beer shower is done, Shane thinks that was a fitting finale. But Ilya's eyes drift towards the pool. The Omega Chi house is one of the few lucky houses with a pool, and Shane knows what Ilya is going to do a second before he does it.

Ilya steps to the end of the pool, the deep end, and faces the crowd. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Shane Hollander's bitch signing off!"

At that, he looks at Shane, gives him a mock salute, and cannonballs into the pool.

That is all it takes for half of the backyard to jump in the pool after him. Some are wearing swimsuits; others go in fully dressed. Shane hopes no one has their phone on them. He watches as Troy and some cute guy he doesn't know jump in together, along with most of the Kappa Taus. Rose and Svetlana look across Shane at each other, place their phones on the nearby table, and take hands to jump in together.

Shane can only laugh at the sight.

Yeah, I wanna dance with somebody
With somebody who loves me

Ilya is treading water in the deep end, looking across the yard at Shane and smiling. His eyebrows raise, a silent request for a performance rating.

Shane pretends to think, lifting his eyes to the stars before looking back at him and giving him a thumbs up. Ilya grins harder, fist pumping and slapping the water, splashing it in Shane's direction. Shane jumps back and drops his phone on the table with Rose and Svetlana's, out of the danger zone. Then Ilya swims to the edge and places his elbows on the concrete, lifting himself slightly.

Thinking he's ready to get out, Shane approaches. The red letters on his chest are still holding up quite well, surprisingly. Shane wonders what heavy-duty paint Hayden bought to try to ensure those words stay on Ilya's chest forever.

Ilya looks up at him and holds his hand out. Shane clasps his hand and starts to pull, but Ilya holds himself firm in the pool.

It's then that Shane realizes what he's just done.

There's playfulness in Ilya's eyes, and for a moment, he looks exactly like he did when Shane first saw him during rush week years ago. Warmth spreads through his chest, and it reaches his mouth, lips turning into a smile. Ilya's eyes light up further.

When Ilya pulls him into the pool, Shane goes willingly.

The water is a cold shock, but then immediately refreshing. He surfaces and is grateful he managed to avoid half the pool surging up his nose. Thankfully, Shane elected to wear shorts and a t-shirt tonight and finds it easy to get his bearings and tread water without his clothes bogging him down.

Ilya is there, floating just in front of him. The light is still in his eyes.

Shane moves forward, wanting to kiss him, to put his arms around him, but then he stills. Ilya watches him as he does.

Glancing around, Shane sees Svetlana and Rose trying to organize a game of chicken in the shallow end, Rose lifting Svetlana on her shoulders. Troy is still with that guy from earlier, and Shane sees him look in his and Ilya's direction, a knowing expression on his face. Marleau is close by too. When Shane looks out of the pool, he sees JJ standing next to Hayden, whose arm is around Jackie. The three of them smile at him.

People know Shane thinks. A lot of people already know. He wonders how many more suspect. People know and the world didn't explode because they know.

But two people don't. Not yet.

Shane looks at Ilya.

"I want you to meet my parents."

Ilya's eyebrows shoot up to his hairline.

Shane hadn't planned this. In fact, he's only given it a passing thought before chickening out every time it has come to him. But somehow, after tonight, he knows now this is what he wants.

He has so much to tell his parents. About Ilya, yes, but about himself. He has been paralyzed with fear about it for so long, but just now, looking at Ilya, it doesn't seem so scary. He thinks he can do it, if Ilya is there with him.

It seems so clear to him now. Shane wants to surprise his parents and Ilya at their graduation dinner with the news that he got the assistant coaching job at the University of Ottawa. The head coach called him yesterday to tell him, and no one knows. He wants to tell the three of them and talk about Ilya's plans in Montreal for next year and their future together.

Right now, as scary as it is, he can't think of anything he's ever wanted more.

"You *want* that?" Ilya finally answers him, bringing him out of his mind the way only he ever could. His eyes are wide with something Shane can't place.

But Shane nods in answer, sure of himself. "Do you?"

Now that his thoughts are slowing down, he realizes that this is also a lot to ask of Ilya. Shane may hope it will happen, but he will also understand if Ilya says no.

Ilya doesn't hesitate. "Yes."

It's all Shane can do not to lunge forward in the water and kiss him, his heart soaring in his chest. But he does move closer, still aware of all the people around them, but only seeing Ilya, the edges of his vision going fuzzy.

Shane reaches out under the water and takes Ilya's hand in his. He squeezes him tight.

"What do you say we get out of here, Ilya?"

Ilya smiles. "Shane Hollander, I thought you'd never ask."

Chapter End Notes

And that's all, folks!

I'm so happy to have finished this fic. I thought a lot about exactly how to end it, and as much as I might have enjoyed a public rom-com ending kiss in the pool, at the end of the day, I don't think that's Shane. Especially when he hasn't told his parents yet. It was important to me that this fic included him coming out to his parents on his own terms. That's how I came to this ending.

Now that it's over, I'd love to hear your comments and criticism. My own criticism is I wish I found space to focus more on Shane's spiral in the earlier timeline after he left Ilya in Toronto in chapter 5 to date Rose. The trickiest part of this fic was definitely striking the right balance between the past and present, and I don't think I did it perfectly, but I'm still happy overall with how it turned out.

And what was your favorite chapter? I'm partial to chapter 5 because of how much work it took and how many elaborate scenes are in it. I also think it's the major turning point for their characters in both timelines.

I'll probably write more of these two in the future, but for now, I'll need a break. Perhaps season 2 tidbits will inspire more, but it would be a new story. This one is finished.

The real lesson of this fic is everyone should watch Greek. It's such a cute 2000s show. It does have queer rep too! Calvin was one the first positive queer characters I remember seeing on a mainstream show. Rebecca also gets a subplot of exploring her sexuality and I always thought she should have been gay (anyone else think her animosity towards Casey was a pent up crush?). Anyway, it was fun to write a bit of a crossover fic between those two worlds.

Thanks again for reading! Your encouragement is what got this fic finished! Until next time...

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!