

Knocking the Eleventh Door

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/77400361) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/77400361>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Heated Rivalry (TV)
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov , Hayden Pike , Zane Boodram , Rose Landry , Svetlana Vetrova , Yuna Hollander , David Hollander , Scott Hunter (Game Changers)
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Ballet , Slow Burn , Fluff and Angst , Ballet Dancer Ilya Rozanov , Double Bassist Shane Hollander , Internalized Homophobia
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-01-09 Words: 30,381 Chapters: 1/1

Knocking the Eleventh Door

by [elfman](#)

Summary

Ilya tracked the movement with his eyes, his tongue darting out to wet his lower lip. Shane shuddered. He had no idea what to call this, this... electricity. He had never felt anything like it before. Deep down he was pretty sure he knew what an outsider would call this but that couldn't be. He had dated women. Several women. The relationships had been... mostly fine? The women had been lovely. They had been good friends. They had kissed - politely and in front of people a lot of the time - it had been a usual, typical relationship. He was just a gentleman... right?

As the air sucked out all his breath, as he plunged deep underwater and felt his ears beginning to pop, Shane could see Ilya moving closer to him. Gently, Ilya placed a hand on Shane's knee, rubbing his fingertips in careful circles. Shane was sure he should have died from lack of air by now.

**

Or: Ilya Rozanov only wants two things: to be a principal ballet dancer and for Shane Hollander to be his boyfriend. Unfortunately Shane doesn't know what he wants.

Notes

Title from Here I Am by Tom Odell.

Covid doesn't happen in this universe - if only pandemic prevention was as easy as that.

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

December 2012

The mild air of a British winter day brushed past Shane Hollander as he wandered around Covent Garden. It was the vacation of a lifetime but somehow his mother, the formidable Yuna Hollander, had decided she best wanted to spend her time in a fragrance shop just off the cobbled courtyard itself. Shane had decided to leave that one to his parents. So here he was, slightly muddled, ambling around overpriced bars he wasn't old enough to enter and shops he had no interest in buying from. He had already spent ten minutes watching the living statues, trying to work out where the platform holding them up was hidden. Once that had stopped intriguing him, he moved onto window shopping, however he quickly found the bulk of the stores sold makeup, something he had no interest in. His parents had told him not to go too far but he was bored and, turning around to check on the shop entrance, still alone. On a whim, he headed back past Covent Garden Underground Station and took a right down whatever road he ended up on, walking past French Connection and Zara. Still nothing that took his interest. He sighed and took another right, aiming to head back where he had come from.

The path he went down was a small alleyway, barely wider than a person. He had to jump out the way as men in suits came barrelling towards him, pushing him aside. He peered up, trying to work out what the buildings around him were. There were ads for dance classes. Up ahead, a grand building was coming into view - the Royal Opera House. He was debating getting his new smartphone out, wondering whether it was sensible in the densely packed city known for its pickpockets, when he walked straight into another person.

This stranger couldn't possibly be British. The natives were bundled up tight like the above-freezing temperatures were the coldest they had ever experienced. This man - or boy, possibly, he looked to be about Shane's age - was wearing a hoodie and jeans, with what appeared to be white tights peeking out the bottom. He was also smoking and blew the cloud of putrid fumes straight into Shane's face as Shane attempted to turn away from the person he had just bumped into. Shane looked at the doorway behind the boy. It had a large 'no smoking' sign. With a slight smile, Shane pointed to the sign and looked back at the new acquaintance.

"What are you - narc?" asked the stranger, glaring back with narrowed eyes. He had an Eastern European accent and beautiful curls creeping down past the nape of his neck.

Shane shrugged and shook his head. "Just trying to be helpful," he told the stranger. He looked past him, back towards Covent Garden where his parents were probably looking for him. "Anyway, those things kill, don't you know?"

The other man rolled his eyes and continued to smoke the cigarette. "I survive," he muttered, looking past Shane and out towards the busy street at the end of the alleyway.

For some reason Shane couldn't quite understand, he wanted to keep this conversation going. He was enjoying watching the movement of the other man's throat as he dragged on the cigarette; his delicate fingers twisting around in front of his face. Shane forced himself to look away.

“I’m Shane,” he told the stranger, holding out his hand. The stranger stared at him for a second, looking down at the offering before carefully placing his hand in Shane’s.

“Ilya,” he said, ending the handshake quickly.

Shane felt a loss when the contact between them ended but he smiled brightly, covering up how strange his lungs felt right now. Why did he feel like he had run a marathon? Suddenly, the air, which until then had felt like a mild Canadian spring, began to grow bitterly cold. He shivered and stuffed his hands into his pockets. Try as he might, he couldn’t see a way to continue the conversation with the surly man in front of him. He wasn’t giving him anything to work with.

“So- are you here with your family?” Shane asked, trying to keep up the jovial Canadian personality he seemed to have taken on.

“No,” came the reply, with no additional information.

“Oh, right, so why are you here?” he asked, hoping the look on his face was one of mild interest rather than desperation.

“I go school,” said the boy across from him, his accent getting stronger as he spoke. He gestured behind him and, for the first time, Shane noticed the small sign next to the side door they were stood at. *The Royal Ballet School*. Talk about cliches, he supposed, Eastern Europeans and their ballet.

Just as he was trying to work out how to ask whether he was likely to see him on stage any time soon, Shane’s iPhone buzzed. He tapped the screen and saw a message from his dad asking where he was. His parents must have been panicked to text him on international rates. Shane tucked the phone away, said his goodbyes to the stranger and headed back off towards the Opera House ahead of him, aiming to find his family. He forced himself not to look back as he went.

Ilya Rozanov watched the stranger go - he supposed he was an American, given the accent, though he wasn’t as loud as the stereotype would have had him believe. He had a great ass. Not that Ilya should be focusing on that in the short break he had before returning to the studio. Still, what was the harm in looking? The man - Shane - never turned around to look back so Ilya leaned back against the wall and watched him until he was out of sight.

He had seemed friendly and kind, traits that weren’t readily ascribed to Ilya. Really though, compared to his family, Ilya was a pussycat. His mind flashed back to his most recent conversation with his father. They didn’t speak regularly now Ilya had moved to England. His father had expected him to continue his training at the Bolshoi School in Moscow, where he had been training since the age of eight. When Ilya had received the acceptance letter from the Royal Ballet’s Upper School, his father had chuckled and gone to put the letter in the bin, never expecting his beloved son, the perfect Russian, to decide to leave.

“It makes no sense, Ilya,” his father shouted at him that evening in the cold living room of their large Moscow home, “Why would you ever leave the Bolshoi? You have everything you could ever need here.”

And Ilya had no good answer. He couldn't explain Sasha, his fellow ballet dancer, the boy he had been hooking up with off and on for months.

Instead, he had to lie, to plead, to beg. It didn't make him feel any better about himself.

A weight had lifted off his shoulders when he had finally made it to London. He had settled into the dorm room he shared with Zane Boodram, a Trinidadian in the same year as him. Zane had been at the school since he was thirteen and was popular with students and staff alike. Ilya, on the other hand, had a reputation of being standoffish and arrogant.

He had earned the arrogance, though. He worked longer hours than everyone else, pushing himself late into the evenings when he was meant to have left the studios. He knew his plan - get into the main company of the Royal Ballet and earn quick promotions. Making friends had nothing to do with it. Maybe one day... one day, long in the future, he could return to Russia as a legend even without taking up a place at the Bolshoi. It was possible. There was talk of the Bolshoi coming to London the following year, inevitably his father would follow them if that was the case, trying to convince his son to return like the prodigal. Ilya needed to be ready for that and he needed to be top of his class if there was any hope of his father leaving satisfied.

As the cigarette burned down to the smallest stump, Ilya sighed and threw it on the floor. He was about to turn around and head inside when he decided not to make the city he hoped to call home worse. Slowly, he sank down and picked the litter up before heading inside to continue practising - winter holidays be damned.

February 2014

The room Shane sat in was so hollow, so echoey, he was surprised the men and women sat in front of him couldn't hear the desperate gallop of his heart.

This was his dream. He would do this. He would beat this.

His mother's determined face came crashing to the forefront of his mind. Everything she had given up so that Shane could be present in this moment whirled around him. The long hours at work. The extra shifts. The driving him backwards and forwards every evening of the week for years. There could be no failure, it wouldn't be himself he would be letting down, it would be her.

Shane heaved his double bass up and out of its case, its weight seemingly having doubled since the last time he had held it. His hands were shaking violently.

Somewhere behind him, Shane could hear the door open and close, quiet mutterings from the corridor reaching him. He knew his parents were there. His mom was probably biting her nails down to the quick, while adamantly arguing she was okay. His dad was, he assumed, much calmer. He was usually the one talking Shane's mom down from her bouts of nerves. It had never felt like so much rode on the back of one performance though.

He breathed deeply. This was it.

He looked over at the pianist ready to accompany him. She gave an encouraging nod. Shane smiled briefly at her, pleased for the support. He looked over at the three people in front of him - gatekeepers to his ideal life.

"So - Shane Hollander," the man sat in the middle began in a positive tone of voice.

"Uh, yes... yes." Shane said, knowing he sounded winded and unconvincing.

"You will be starting with Vanhal Double Bass Concerto in D Major?" the man asked, ticking something off on his sheet.

Shane nodded. "Yes sir."

The three people in front of him nodded. The pianist looked at him and nodded too. It was time to perform.

The piece was over sixteen minutes long in full and Shane was playing a tricky eight minutes of it. His fingers ran up and down the strings as he had practised relentlessly. He loved the piece because of its dynamic and tonal shifts. The piece held a great deal of passion in its tempo, which shifted around constantly. At the end of his first section, where he had a short four bar rest, he sat up taller and leaned back further in his chair. This was going well. No, it was going *really* well. He could do this. A small smile peeked out through his focus. He was remembering how much he loved this. How much he loved playing. His fingers whirled over the strings and the resonant sound of the piano swirled around him. By this point he had completely forgotten the three people sat in front of him ready to decide his future. This was fine. If he didn't get into McGill there were other options. Any of them would be lucky to have him... right?

There was no time for self-doubt as the piece crescendoed towards its climax. There were some difficult sections in the middle of this, with quick key changes and challenging dynamics to get right. Shane forced himself to feel. To feel the music. To feel his fear and his distress and his wild, unyielding hope. At last, he came to the end of the first piece of music - first of three - shit, he still had two more to go. He opened his eyes, peering out towards his small audience. Their faces gave nothing away, who knew how he had done.

"Thank you, Mr Hollander," a tall woman said from the right-hand chair. She gave him a small smile and he relaxed a little, knowing he couldn't have done any better. "Your next piece..." She trailed off, checking her sheet of paper.

“Bach’s Cello Suite No. 1,” Shane told her, his voice breathless and reedy but there.

The three faculty members in front of him nodded. He had googled who they were before he came but it had gone from his head now. Accomplished though. Incredibly accomplished. McGill had been his dream since he was five years old and first thought about playing for people as an adult. He had started on violin but it hadn’t been his passion, not the way the double bass was. His instrument grounded him and held him tight. He could trust that instrument in a way he couldn’t trust any person he knew. Well, anyone except his parents.

He was playing the first movement of this incredibly well known piece of music. Possibly too well known, he thought now, wondering whether he should have gone for a less overdone Bach piece. The audition requirements had said Bach, but he wasn’t sure whether they wanted originality or for Shane to show that he was better than everyone else at the piece everyone had surely played before him. No time to overthink it now though. He loved the music. He could get lost in this piece. He had played it to death over the last few years, ever since he had finally reached the standard where it was achievable. Then he just kept improving. His teacher, a short older lady, had been the first one to suggest to his parents that a conservatoire was a possibility. Yuna had beamed that day. Her only child, her beloved son, proving his incredible skill to others. Shane had basked in her praise. It was all he wanted to receive.

A few weeks earlier, he had flown to London to audition at the Royal College of Music. The audition had gone well but not flawlessly. He was slightly off his game and that hit his tempo, his dynamics. The following day, his last in the city, he had gone around the back of the Royal Opera House towards the alleyway he had been in the last time he was in London. He’d told himself it was just sightseeing, just looking at interesting sites. Deep down he knew it was more than that though, something he refused to consider.

Second piece finished, Shane was finally able to fully relax. This was going so much better than London. He wouldn’t say flawless. Some of the transitions up and down the strings could have been smoother, but it was close to perfect, close to the best he had ever performed. His audience remained as straight faced as ever.

“And your final piece?” asked the final member of the party, the youngest of the three. He wore a jacket with patches at the elbows like some kind of eccentric English professor - or a hipster.

“The Overture from the Marriage of Figaro,” Shane told the crowd, confident in his selection. Again - was it too obvious? Too common a choice? Everyone knew this piece, regardless of musical background. Oh well, too late now. Time to play.

When he left the audition room ten minutes later, double bass encased on his back, Shane grinned at his parents. They were both stood stock still, as if they had been waiting on bated breath. “Well?” asked his mother, her brow creasing.

“I think it went well,” Shane confirmed.

His parents beamed. There was no other word for it. They absolutely lit up the small hallway.

“Guess you’d better text Shayla,” his dad told him. Which was... yeah, a good point. He had probably better text his girlfriend of six months who had spent the morning sending him uplifting text messages wishing him well.

Saying that, if he were moving to Montreal, would this relationship even last? He was living in Ottawa and Shayla had plans on moving to Toronto for university. Was there a point in trying now? The relationship was nice and comfortable. The two had lots in common. Shayla wasn’t as good a musician as him, that was hard, but she played for the school band on her father’s old saxophone. She mostly knew what he was talking about when he went into a world of music. Nice. Yeah, he supposed there were worse things a relationship could be than nice.

Still, he hadn’t thought about her all morning. She had barely crossed his mind even when she sent the texts. Not a great sign. But a problem he pushed as far out of his head as possible.

June 2015

The office of Steven O’Sullivan was not the place many people wanted to be. Steven was the loud and enigmatic director of the Royal Ballet, a larger than life character who struck fear into the heart of many a young dancer. Ilya Rozanov wasn’t just any young dancer though. He was the hardest-working, the most decisive dancer of his cohort. Admittedly, he had been hard to get on with. He wasn’t made head boy, that honour went to Zane instead. Apparently skills such as ‘social’ and ‘approachable’ were essential characteristics of an ideal head boy and the school weren’t convinced Ilya displayed them. Zane, though, Zane could do all that in spades and still dance pretty well. Not Ilya levels of well. But well enough. And he’d probably actually get on with the people running the auditions.

Ilya was determined to get a place at the Royal Ballet. His father had informed him, seemingly with the genuine aim of helping his youngest son, that he could probably swing a private audition at the Bolshoi for Ilya. Ilya had refused this offer though. He wanted to get in on merit, not on nepotism and oligarchy. The older he got, the more his father made him curl his lip and grit his teeth. Was it any wonder that he wasn’t the world’s most approachable figure with that man as his main inspiration?

Today was the day he found out whether he would be receiving a contract at the Royal Ballet. Ideally he would be placed straight in the corps - the artists of the Royal Ballet. However, the previous year a new programme was opened up. Some rich sponsor had wanted to give more kids from the RBS a chance to get into the main ballet company and so the Young Dancers Programme was formed. It was nice, really. A chance for people who weren’t quite ready to be on stage to practice alongside the company and improve their skills. The bulk of last year’s young dancers had been promoted to artists that month. Somehow, Ilya hoped that he would avoid the year of purgatory though and be placed straight in the corps. Optimism, right? Not a bad thing.

Ilya waited outside the door, trying to work out if anyone was already inside. He knew many of his classmates were having meetings today too. Lots of them had hoped for a place at the Royal Ballet but there were only a handful of spots going. Ilya was certain one would be his. It had to be.

There was a soft muttering beyond the door so he took a step back and waited on the opposite side of the corridor. Above his head, a portrait of Darcey Bussell hung. The Royal Ballet's youngest ever principal dancer. Could that be Ilya? Probably not... times had changed since then. She had only been twenty at the time. Ilya was now nineteen and staring down the barrel of a year of additional 'support' rather than getting a proper place in the company. By the time he was twenty-two though? Maybe by then.

After ten minutes of waiting, really didn't Steven care at all about being punctual, the door opened and Zane stuck his head out, a broad grin on his face. He gave Ilya a thumbs up and made a texting gesture. Ilya supposed he'd be getting a message in a second about whatever fantastic news Zane had - probably a spot on the Young Dancer Programme. Ilya had better at least match that. Ilya nodded at him, mostly because he couldn't stick his middle finger up with Steven watching, and headed towards the now clear doorway.

"Mr Rozanov," Steven said in his smooth Irish accent. Ilya nodded and stood stock still by the closing door. "Please take a seat," the director gestured to a chair in front of his desk.

Ilya sat quickly but continued to say nothing. He wasn't sure his English was up to it. He was, dare he admit it, nervous.

"Mr Rozanov," Steven repeated, looking Ilya up and down, "We have been incredibly pleased with your progress over the three years you have spent at the Upper School. You are a hard worker and we are grateful you chose to come here rather than continuing under the Vaganova method. It's done you well. You're a versatile dancer and your teachers all have positive reports of your attitude and hard work."

Ilya inclined his head slightly. He hadn't understood everything that was being said to him but he got enough of it. The question was whether this was a way of letting him down gently and sending him back on the first flight to Russia, tail between his legs, or the long-winded words of someone who liked their own voice when delivering good news.

"We'd love to have you continue your education with us," Steven said with a smile, as if offering the Young Dancer Programme to Ilya was everything he had ever wanted. At least it nearly was, he supposed. "We think that after a year of training with the company, you'd be in prime position for promotion to artist and look forward to see your developing career."

Ilya did crack a small smile. Okay, it wasn't going to beat Darcey's record, but it was still the Royal Ballet. The Royal Ballet with exactly zero nepotism. It felt good.

He thanked the director profusely, his English slipping halfway through the conversation, before bolting out the door ready to find Zane.

He sent a text message as soon as possible:

Ilya: We going out out?

God, the English language was dumb sometimes.

Zane: You got in too?! Hell yeah. No doubts here. Out out!

Ilya smiled fully then. London was pretty amazing. He had his friends and his family was far away. Time to go out, find a hot girl to take back to his accommodation, and then maybe time to start thinking about finding a flat of his own.

On his way to the bar he had agreed to meet Zane at, he passed the side door to the Royal Ballet School. He supposed he'd not have much reason to come here again, yet it continued to make him smile as he thought of the cute foreign man who had spoken to him on that same spot nearly three years earlier. Absently, he wondered what he was up to now.

June 2016

It had been the best year of Ilya's life, hands down, no questions. As much as he hated to admit it, and boy did he hate to admit it, working with the incredible dancers of the Royal Ballet had improved his own craft so much. His turns were more fluid, his jumps were higher and his leaps felt weightless. But it was more than that. It was the acting. It was the emotion. Ilya watched the soloists from up close as they turned themselves into someone completely separate from themselves. Even Scott Hunter, old man that he was, managed to surprise Ilya. Not that Ilya would admit that. He'd not admit anything complimentary about Hunter, who all the other young dancers looked at with hero-worship on their faces. Not Ilya. Really it was amazing Hunter was still dancing, old as he was. (Ilya obviously would still be dancing at Scott Hunter's age with no issues, but Ilya was amazing.)

Earlier that day, Ilya had his second ever meeting with Steven O'Sullivan. It had been quick. He was being promoted to artist. As a man in the company, Ilya definitely had a slightly easier time of it than the women did. The male corps tended to get featured spots pretty quickly, while many of the female members at the same rank and ability were shown only in group dances. Ilya would take anything he could get and was focusing on The Nutcracker that December. A good performance in the Royal Ballet's biggest run of the year would set him up well for immediate promotion the following year. A bigger paycheck and more acclaim. God, Ilya loved the applause, the attention. He knew it wasn't entirely healthy.

With ambitions of greatness came hard work too. Ilya was heading to the studio to practise with his partner for the showcase coming up. He didn't know much about the woman he was being partnered with, Jackie, but she seemed nice enough. She had been the year above him at school and was promoted to artist the year before him. She was a hard worker and had a reputation as a kind and consistent friend. Definitely not Ilya then. Ilya wasn't totally sure what everyone in the company said about him but he had some idea: passive-aggressive, a wise-ass, relentless. Sometimes the relentless attitude was a good thing, but he knew it made him a less reliable partner and he needed to be able to partner women well to ever have a

chance of making soloist. So maybe fate shone down on him when he was partnered with Jackie, who never had a bad word to say about anyone.

On his way to the studio, Ilya rang Svetlana, an old friend from the Bolshoi School in Moscow. She was now a member of the corps at the Bolshoi, something that Ilya's father wouldn't shut up about. Svetlana was the golden child. Unfortunately, she was someone else's golden child.

"Sveta!" Ilya crowed down the phone line, his mouth beaming in a way it did for few others.

"Ilyusha!" She replied. He could practically hear her own smile in return.

God, he didn't deserve her. And he really missed her.

They had hooked up a couple of times before Ilya left Moscow. Nothing serious. They had known each other since they were six years old, it would have felt strange to be anything more serious than they had allowed it to be. Svetlana was his best friend, his closest confidante. She was the only person in Russia who knew what his father was like behind closed doors, once the suits and the accolades came off. She knew how he had beat Ilya for the smallest mistake; how his lip curled whenever he was even slightly disappointed in his youngest son. She also knew that Ilya's older brother, Alexei, could do no wrong. No wrong at all. Not even the gambling. Or the hookers. Or the multiple children out of wedlock. All that could be paid off. All that just made him a real man. Ilya wasn't a real man. Ilya was a- Well, his family had said what he was often enough.

Ilya shook himself out of his daze. "It's so good to hear from you," he said to his best friend in Russian. He missed speaking his mother tongue. The company was multi-cultural but there weren't many Russian speakers. With the ever-developing political climate, most Russian dancers just stayed in Moscow or St Petersburg. He was pleased in a way. If there were Russians sympathetic to the regime his father stood as a symbol of, he'd have to bite his tongue even more than he typically did.

"I missed you so much," Svetlana said, before launching into everything Ilya had missed since he last spoke to her a month before.

Eventually Ilya got round to sharing his news. Sveta was ecstatic at his promotion. She too chased dreams of stardom, with a soloist role to her name, but she was so happy for Ilya. Ilya couldn't promise he'd be as pleased if it seemed like Svetlana might make progress quicker than him. A character flaw he didn't like to dwell on.

All too soon, their conversation ended. Ilya was still smiling as he walked into the studio and jumped over to Jackie, lifting her in the air.

His dance partner laughed. "What's got you in such a good mood?" She asked, her hair escaping the hair net she had only half put on. As Ilya lowered her down, she continued doing her hair and prepping her pointe shoes.

"Ah, is good day," Ilya said with a smirk, "Beautiful woman close to me, stage almost in sight."

Jackie hit him gently with a pointe shoe and Ilya bounced out the way, clutching his arm, pretending it had fallen off. Jackie laughed again. The two of them got to work.

May 2017

It was the big ensemble performance at McGill. Shane's breathing came in fits and starts. Three years in and he still got terrible stage fright. It wasn't helpful when it paralysed him this close to curtain up.

A gentle hand snaked around his neck, brushing against his collarbone. Shane breathed deeply and leaned back. Hetty was a wonderful violinist who sat two sections away. She was also part of the third-year music programme. They had been seeing each other pretty seriously now for two months, the longest relationship since he had been back in Ottawa. Hetty was kind and considerate. She recognised Shane's tells and knew how to help calm him down, much like she was now. They liked similar music, similar books, similar movies. Hetty was already speaking about the possibility of aligning where they auditioned next year with the aim of them ending up in cities close together. She was talking about... well, she was talking about a future. She was talking about forever. For some reason, the idea caught in Shane's throat. He pushed that thought away now, it wasn't going to help him relax for the performance. He gently brushed his lips over Hetty's hand, nodded at her and pushed her away back to her section.

Five minutes to showtime.

July 2017

Summer was finally blooming in London. It had been a miserable spring. Usually Ilya didn't mind the seasons in the UK. Nobody who had ever lived in Russia could call it cold and nobody who had lived literally anywhere else could call the summers hot. He liked the mild temperatures and the gentle winds. He liked the relentless rain for half the year a lot less. He supposed it could be worse, he could be in a literal rainforest.

Ilya had thrown on some shorts and a Hawaiian-style shirt, knowing he should probably have worn something easier to get out of when he was going to be in and out of costumes for fittings that day. Oh well, it would get some groans from the costume department and he loved to live up to reputation.

The previous month had come with yet another promotion - this time to First Artist. With it, a bigger role. He was staring down the barrel of role of The Jester in Cinderella. A joke role. Was it a sign that the Royal Ballet viewed him as a joke? He didn't think so. He hoped it was testament to their belief in his acting abilities. He had been putting so much work into that aspect of his dancing. He had always been incredibly technical. It was the Vaganova in him, he supposed. However, his only criticisms had come from teachers and choreographers looking to suspend their disbelief, to think they were looking at a 15th Century aristocrat or a dreamy prince, not the moderately angry Russian they could actually see.

He thought he had improved.

No, he *knew* he had improved.

Even Scott Hunter, mild dickhead that he was, had made some passive aggressive remarks to Ilya, suggesting he had improved. Zane had tried to tell Ilya that they were sincere compliments and Hunter wasn't capable of aggression, however passive, but Ilya had only snarled at his closest friend in the company. Only friend in the company maybe.

They were most of the way through the run of Cinderella now. Ilya's costume had developed a small tear the previous day and had gone back to the costume department, who had asked him to come in early so they could check their alterations were secure and had done the job. He trusted the costume department, they knew what they were doing. He'd go in though. No use in making their job even harder. He was still surprised at how many people it took to make the ballet run. He wondered if the audience ever considered that.

That night, he stared out of the wings at Scott Hunter who partnered a beautiful Japanese soloist. Hunter was the prince and it was Act II, time for the incredible Pas de Deux. Ilya hated to admit it, but the couple looked incredible. If he wasn't well aware of the fact Hunter had a boyfriend sat somewhere in the stalls right at that moment, he'd almost believe that the duo on stage were well and truly in love. Was that what he was struggling to sell? Love. He had half thought himself in love before. Beautiful women, some of whom he had seen for weeks on end. It always ended though. They wanted more. Or they didn't. Either way, he was out the door and gone. Sveta was his one true love, but even that was different. It wasn't passionate; it wasn't desperate. It was the platonic love of a true soulmate, but one who would only ever be his closest friend. The closest friend he had occasionally slept with, anyway.

He knew his father wanted him to marry Svetlana. He was desperate for it. Desperate for his fallen son to return to the most important country on earth.

Ilya might not have many friends here, his heart might be on the other side of Europe, but he knew he was freer here, safer here, than he ever could have been in Russia.

Sighing, he turned back to the ballet and watched as Hunter lifted his partner, an adoring look on his face. Ilya suddenly felt incredibly lonely.

August 2018

Shane's graduation from McGill was, in most respects, the best day of his life. Admittedly, the part where he told Hetty that he just didn't see a future for them outside of university was not well-timed or particularly kind of him. He hadn't planned on it happening that day, he had planned on waiting. But then she was there, talking to Yuna and David about the future and her big, big plans, and how happy she was to keep things going long-distance with Shane as needed. And Shane had snapped. He had, carefully, considerately, dragged her across the grass to a quiet corner and told her that he didn't think it was going to happen the way she expected.

Maybe he should have ended things sooner. Maybe it wasn't typical to keep seeing someone for well over a year who you weren't entirely sure was 'The One'. But love was work, wasn't it? And he did love Hetty. Well, he thought he did. He liked her a lot. She was sweet. She knew him better than anyone other than his parents. Now he supposed that had gone too.

Still, walking across the stage to grab his diploma and smiling for photos with his proud parents - those were the moments he had dreamed of for four long, difficult years. He had finished. He hadn't just finished, there was talk of him being a once in a generation talent.

His mom had been pushing for him to audition from earlier that summer, and he had been. He'd been considering postgraduate studies and had received an offer to continue his education at McGill. It was tempting. He knew Montreal now. He knew McGill. Safe. Easy. So, so easy really. Just say yes.

But he had also been auditioning for companies. There was one big audition he had been waiting to hear back from for two weeks now. The orchestra of the Royal Opera and Ballet in London. They had recently had a senior double bass player retire and were moving everyone up the ranks. It left an opening for a junior member. Shane was incredibly young for this, he knew that. It was very rare. So incredibly rare. It was rare enough that he hadn't told anyone other than his parents, and only then because he needed financial support in getting to London for the audition. Thank God for his parents, they were amazing to him. No questions asked - take a flight, Shane. They even paid for the excess luggage and the insurance on his instrument. He'd be nowhere without them.

The audition had gone well, he was pretty sure. He didn't even have the stage fright that had become a relentless and unwanted companion for his final years at McGill. He was calm. He was relaxed. He felt like that room, that building, was exactly where he was meant to be. As he looked down at the alleyway he had been in all the years earlier, he smiled. He wondered where Ilya was now, he still remembered his name.

It was another week before he heard back from the orchestra about his audition. His face broke out into the widest smile, his arms flailing away from his body as he heard the words he had only ever dreamed of.

"We want to offer you the spot in the orchestra - welcome to London, Mr Hollander."

Shane was bouncing as he waited for the flight to Heathrow. His dad carefully maintained pressure on his knee, a calming presence in the sea of anxiety and hope Shane was swimming through.

Yuna though, she was in planning mode.

"Okay. I think we're all sorted on accommodation. They've accepted us as guarantors on an apartment in West Hampstead. It's not totally central but our combined budgets could only stretch so far... Oh, and I've told your Aunt Carol about the move. I know she's in Edinburgh, not London, but the UK's pretty small so I'm sure she can keep an eye on you and help if anything goes wrong. The apartment is partially furnished but we'll look into a decent mattress for you when we get there. What else are we missing?" She trailed off as she realised David and Shane were staring at her with equally amused expressions. She shrugged

and leaned down on her husband's shoulder. "I'm worried, okay? I'll miss you, Shane. I love you so much and am so proud of you, but you'll be so far away..."

Shane didn't want to cry. Not here. Not now. Not yet. There was time to cry once they had checked out their hotel and were in the sky again, leaving him behind on a different continent. It was the right decision for his career, the right challenge, but it was going to be hard, he knew that. Not for the first time, he wondered how Ilya, the boy in the alleyway, had managed moving countries while still a child. Shane thought he must have been incredibly strong, much stronger than Shane felt right now.

"I love you, Mom," he said simply. The two smiled at each other, the smile of two people who were deeply connected and deeply wounded. Shane had always known this decision would hurt but it felt like he was ripping himself free of his mother's chest.

His dad cleared his throat loudly and stood up. "I'm going to look at the stores," he said, his eyes welling up.

This sucked.

It was amazing but it also sucked.

These two people had his heart and he had never opened it the same way for anyone else. He had friends at McGill, sure. He hoped they would all do well in their endeavours but it wasn't the same. It didn't feel like he was leaving part of himself behind with them.

An hour later, he was flying out over Canada, saying goodbye to the one place he had ever truly known.

Ilya was on the phone. That in itself wasn't anything unusual recently. He had spent the past few weeks arguing with his brother, mostly about money. Their father was unwell, that much was clear. And Grigori Rozanov was much less economically valuable when he was sick. That made Ilya the next in the line of marks for Alexei to target to fund his cocaine habit.

Mostly Ilya had held out and refused to give any money to his waste-of-space brother. It was when he raised his newborn daughter - this one in wedlock - that Ilya began to give in. He knew it was unlikely the money would help the small child, but maybe it would a bit? Maybe it would mean some more money in Alexei's wife's pocket. This time the call didn't come directly from Alexei, it came from their father instead.

"You're a terrible excuse for a son and a brother," his father shouted down the phone in Russian. Ilya glanced around. Nobody near him at the theatre could speak Russian, he was pretty sure, they would have no idea what was going on.

"Father, I have no money to give at the moment-"

"Nonsense. You received that promotion two months ago. That comes with more money."

Ilya had no idea what his father was on about. There was no promotion this year. He had chased it hard, worked for it, but it was rare for a dancer to get promoted to soloist that quickly, even if they were good. Ilya was good, he knew it. No, he knew he was great. But it still didn't happen that quickly. There needed to be openings. He needed to build trust and rapport.

"Father- No, I haven't been promoted again. That was last year, remember," Ilya said in a much kinder voice than he had been using moments earlier. His brother didn't want to admit it, but Grigori Rozanov was suffering from dementia. These moments were increasing in regularity and their father was confused more and more often.

It was pitiful. Ilya felt sorry for him. Yet he also hated him more than ever.

"Regardless," Ilya's father said, pretending it had just been a simple mistake, "Give your brother the money. You abandoned your family for the West, ruined our reputation and now won't help with even the smallest thing. Have you no shame? Do you care so little for your niece?"

Ilya's father knew what to say, he'd give him that.

Ilya hung up with promises of yet more money being sent to Russia. Though he was pretty sure that would be stopping soon. The British government was holding talks about further sanctions against Russia and Russian citizens. His father, a man so deeply connected to the Russian government, would definitely be on the no-contact list. He knew he'd be expected to break the law for his family, but that was the line he refused to cross.

Oh well, life continued on.

February 2019

Shane was surprised and proud to say he had settled in well to the orchestra. He loved the people he rehearsed with, he loved that he got to perform in the incredible space at the Royal Opera House, he adored that it was always so full of people delighted to see and hear opera or ballet. It was everything he had ever dreamed of.

He had even made friends.

Hayden Pike was a fellow young member of the orchestra - there really weren't many of them. He played trombone - which made sense, he was a loud, in your face kind of guy. He was truly one of the best, most supportive people Shane had ever met.

He had taken Shane under his wing, introducing him to backstage crew and a few of the performers and dancers. Everyone seemed to like him and everyone seemed to recognise his face, rolling their eyes as he tried to get them to go out on a work night. It had made the move to London that little bit less lonely. Shane was indebted to him.

It was Hayden who had made Shane realise he did know somebody else at the ROH. There weren't that many Russians at the Royal Ballet School, even fewer called Ilya. In fact, there was one in the time period Shane had last been in London. Ilya Rozanov. Hayden said the name with an uncharacteristic snarl. It made sense, Shane thought on reflection, that Ilya would be here. If he was good enough to get in the school, there was a decent chance he was good enough to get into the company. It made less sense that Hayden, a golden retriever trapped in a human body, hated this man so much. Shane didn't know how to tell his friend that he thought he had bumped into Rozanov once, over six years ago, and still remembered the exact feel of his hand through his thick jacket. That sounded weird. He recognised that. So he just didn't tell Hayden that he had met this man he hated so much before.

It was rare at this point that Shane wandered around the Opera House without Hayden at his side. On this quiet Tuesday though, he had been released from rehearsal early while the brass section continued trying to nail 'March of the Toreadors' by Bizet. He imagined the strings would be called back at some point, it was a string heavy piece, but he was free for now. It was one of Shane's favourite pieces and he would usually sit and listen, but the conductor had all but chucked him out the room. Now he was wandering the building, learning all its hidden nooks and crannies.

He ended up in a corridor he had never had reason to enter before, heading towards the dance studios. He had sometimes wanted to head this way - see the dancers in action - but he was never sure if he would get away with it. Was it creepy and weird to be staring at women in leotards as they twirled around? He felt like it might be.

Just before he turned around and headed back to the areas he knew, Shane heard a sob. This was awkward. Had the other person realised he was there? Would he look like more or less of an asshole by leaving? Shane heard a peculiarly recognisable voice mutter in a foreign language and he crept on closer.

He'd recognise that head of beautiful curls anywhere. It was the man who had haunted him for years. It was Ilya Rozanov.

Shane came closer without even thinking about it, until he found Ilya on the floor, legs crossed, back pressed against the cold wall. It didn't look particularly comfortable, yet Shane joined him on the floor.

Suddenly this felt like a terrible idea. Who just sat on the floor next to sobbing men they had met once, briefly, six years ago? There was a very high chance that Ilya had no idea who Shane was and thought he was a complete stranger who just got off on seeing other people get emotional. Just as Shane thought that maybe it would actually be less awkward to get up and go away without speaking, Ilya spoke to him.

"Do I- You seem familiar?" Ilya said with a small frown pulling his red cheeks downward. He tilted his head, searching Shane's face for where he had seen him before.

"Oh, well, I'm in the orchestra - double bass," Shane said, deciding it was probably the easier thing to admit to.

Ilya nodded but still looked slightly puzzled. He turned his head away.

“We also... I think we met a few years ago. You were outside the Upper School. Smoking. I was a tourist,” Shane added, unsure if it was stupid to expect Ilya to remember this.

“Oh yes. That was you,” Ilya said with a small smirk pulling up his lips now. It transformed his face. He looked totally different.

He gave Shane an appraising look up and down.

“I remember your ass more than I remember your face,” Ilya said, his smirk fully widening now.

Shane had no idea what to say or do. He wasn't entirely sure why his face was flushing so badly. It had to be because nobody had ever been so forward with him before in his entire life. That had to be it. He forced himself to stay sat down, looking at Ilya, ignoring the comment.

“Are you okay?” Shane asked. Dumb question. Of course he wasn't.

Ilya's face clouded over. He dropped a phone Shane hadn't realised he was carrying onto the carpeted floor. It made a loud thud in the quiet corridor.

“Sure,” Ilya said, forcing his face into a rough approximation of a smile. Shane wasn't sure why he was trying so hard to pretend. Then again, he was the idiot who interrupted a total stranger's crying fit in a corridor to try and make himself feel better about a random encounter several years earlier.

Shane's phone buzzed. It was Hayden

Hayden: Jackie from the ballet has just got out of rehearsal. She has a hot friend. You in?

Shane had forgotten Jackie was Hayden's current obsession. He had gone through a few since Shane had joined but this had seemed the most serious by far. Weirdly, he felt he'd rather stay here with Ilya on the uncomfortable floor of the ballet corridor than he would even attempting conversation with this random woman. Even if she was hot.

Shane: Not this time, something's come up. See you Monday!

Hayden: Ugh. So boring, Hollander. See you Monday!

Shane smiled. Hayden was totally different to him but he truly cared for the trombonist and knew that he cared for him in return. Shane wanted to see his friend happy and hoped Jackie could be that for him.

It did mean that Hayden was possibly somewhere close by waiting for Jackie though. And Hayden really didn't like Ilya.

Without thinking, Shane grabbed Ilya's wrist and tugged him into the next room, a small empty rehearsal studio. The floor echoed loudly, footsteps hitting the reflective mirrored walls on all sides. Shane had no idea how anyone worked in here. He felt so exposed. He wanted to shiver. Instead, he slowly let go of Ilya, his fingertips tingling where they had touched. Strange.

The two men stood facing each other before they both slunk back down to the floor. They sat looking at each other, trying to size up the other, Shane supposed. He was an open book. Nothing strange about him, he was pretty sure. Ilya though, Shane just couldn't work him out.

The air in the room grew hot. Then it felt like there was no air left at all.

Shane sucked in a deep breath.

Ilya tracked the movement with his eyes, his tongue darting out to wet his lower lip. Shane shuddered. He had no idea what to call this, this... electricity. He had never felt anything like it before. Deep down he was pretty sure he knew what an outsider would call this but that couldn't be. He had dated women. Several women. The relationships had been... mostly fine? The women had been lovely. They had been good friends. They had kissed - politely and in front of people a lot of the time - it had been a usual, typical relationship. He was just a gentleman... right?

As the air sucked out all his breath, as he plunged deep underwater and felt his ears beginning to pop, Shane could see Ilya moving closer to him. Gently, Ilya placed a hand on Shane's knee, rubbing his fingertips in careful circles. Shane was sure he should have died from lack of air by now.

Just as Ilya leaned in, his hand coming closer and closer to Shane's face, Shane got up and ran. He forced the door open so hard it could have come off its hinges and then ran as hard and as fast as he had ever run before, out of the ballet corridor, out of the Opera House, out of the vicinity of Ilya Rozanov.

Oh fuck.

November 2019

Ilya's life carried on much as it had done for the past eighteen months. He worked hard, he listened to the choreographers carefully, he implemented all the corrections he could. He studiously ignored two people: his father and Shane Hollander.

He had learned Shane's full name a couple of weeks after he ran away from him in the ballet studio. It had been in the orchestra list for a performance of Carmen that Ilya went to see with Zane. They weren't usually opera people but Zane had pushed Ilya to go, saying it was supportive of the wider company and would look good. Ilya supposed he wasn't wrong.

Secretly, Ilya had spent most of the show turned awkwardly so he could see the double bass section from his seat, which didn't have the best natural view of that corner of the orchestra pit. He watched as Shane leaned over his score, his bow clutched lovingly in one hand, his double bass caressed by the other. His passion, his dedication was clear to see even from the height Ilya was at. He was the youngest member of the orchestra, Ilya was pretty sure, and he got the impression it was rare for someone so young to get the chance to perform with the ROH. The vast bulk of the orchestral members were much older. It said something about his talent and his dedication.

Shame he wasn't dedicated to not being a scared little baby.

Since then, performances came and went, meetings came and went, the big June promotion meetings came and went without Ilya being called into Steven's office. To say he was disappointed was a huge understatement. It was what he wanted more than anything else in the world. He wanted recognition, he wanted acclaim, he wanted appreciation. He knew, in his heart of hearts, he was searching for something he would never get: the approval of his father.

The Nutcracker casting came out just in time to save Ilya from the self-despair cycle he was heading towards. Zane pushed him to get his phone out and read the email, promising him he'd be happy with what he saw. And, to be fair to Zane, he was right, Ilya was incredibly pleased. He might not be a soloist but he had some good roles across the many shows. Clara's partner in Act I and an Arabian dancer in some shows, Drosselmeyer's assistant in the others. It gave him the chance to show his improved range, his improved acting skills, as well as his dynamic dancing. It was perfect for him. It was the company offering him the perfect opportunity to push for soloist next year, he recognised that. Yet he was still so lost, so sad, from everything going on at home. The world was gearing up for something, he could feel it, and his homeland was slipping further and further from his grasp.

Ilya danced his heart out for the nine weeks the Nutcracker was performed. He danced like his father, the father of his early childhood, was watching. He knew his father wouldn't be though. It was only worthwhile if it was a Russian company in his view. He felt like screaming into the void, screaming how good he was, how much progress he had made, how wonderful dancing made him feel. It was pointless though, his father would never love him as Ilya wanted him to. Would never love him like his mother had.

He had pushed his mother from his mind for so long. It had been a survival strategy. He knew she'd be proud though. He wondered if Shane was proud of him, sat in the pit below. It was a strange thought. Shane barely knew him. Shane had run away from him. Why would Ilya care what Shane thought? And still he did.

Ilya knew he was good but he always strove for better, for the best. Scott Hunter, as much as it pained him to say it, was the best of the best when it came to male classical dancers. He was strong and could lift his partners effortlessly but also twirled, leaped and jumped like he was made of nothing but air. It was amazing. It was incredible. It was also very annoying.

The longer Ilya knew Scott Hunter, the more convinced he was some of this had to be an act. Nobody could be this nice with no ulterior motive, he was certain.

It was in that mindset Ilya called his father. He was desperate for his father to see him, to see who he truly was - an amazing ballet dancer, possibly even more amazing than he would have been constrained to the Bolshoi under his family's thumb. He chased his father's love, however unlikely it seemed. It was clear his father's health was rapidly declining. His brother had his head stuck in the sand but even he was beginning to recognise the signs. It wouldn't be long now. Not really. Ilya couldn't see even his father, the most stubborn of men, managing to hold on to what was left of his frail body for much longer.

He called anyway.

It went as badly as it always did.

And once again, Shane Hollander was the one who found him. Ilya swore loudly in Russian as he saw the beautiful man with the double bass in front of him. This time, the case of his instrument was slung across his back. It emphasised the broad shoulders and tight back muscles Shane apparently had.

There were still tears in his eyes and Shane looked so sad to see him like that again, so worried, that Ilya really didn't know what to do with it. He was used to pity, he was used to disappointment, but he didn't have a clue what to do with pure worry.

Ilya was pretty sure it was Shane who moved first this time. He dumped his (probably very expensive) instrument on the floor and pulled Ilya into a hug.

"I wish you weren't hurting every time I saw you," he murmured into Ilya's ear, so kind, so gentle.

All of Ilya's defences melted away. His protestations that it was Shane who ran, that it was Shane ignoring the connection dancing between them, it all fell apart. He pulled his head back for a second, maintaining eye contact with the shorter man, daring him to run away again. Shane looked terrified - his eyes darting around the space - but he stayed. Before he could consider why it was a terrible option, Ilya leaned forward and pressed his lips to Shane's. Shane gasped, his hands loosening for a second around Ilya's back before tightening again. Ilya pressed his tongue against Shane's lips and Shane let him in... at least for a second.

Then Shane ran again.

January 2020

The final curtain call was over. Ilya was finally in a role, as an Arabian dancer, where he got to go in front of the curtain to take a bow with his partner, it was amazing. His partner had

been incredible too, he had to admit that.

Her name was Rose Landry, an American who had transferred from American Ballet Theatre earlier that season. She was technically brilliant and artistically sound. She made Ilya, an already incredible dancer, look even better. The dance was slow and sultry and required a deep connection between the dancers. Ilya could perform this in spades. He knew he looked good and he knew Rose looked good with him. They were a perfect match, a perfect pair. Finally, he had shown his ability to partner, he could only hope it meant something to the directors in charge of promotions at the end of the season.

Rose was also incredibly beautiful. Ilya had made a promise to himself not to get involved with a fellow dancer, especially not one he was partnered with, and had stuck to that promise hard. He was proud of himself, it could almost be considered character growth. Rose loved parties and Ilya decided he needed her as a friend, someone to dance with and drink with, more than he needed her in bed. It was probably true, though Ilya missed sex. It had been a while. It might have been before *The Nutcracker* in fact.

It was definitely before the kiss with Shane. That kiss kept going round and round in his mind. The following day, Ilya asked around friends of his who were tight with the orchestra, asking if anyone had Shane's number. Eventually someone did, though they shot Ilya a weird look at how persistently he was asking for it,

Ilya saved the number with an emoji of a violin, it was the closest thing he could find to a double bass. Ilya had sent one text to the number.

Ilya: Hi. Is Ilya. Rozanov. The dancer. I got your number off Trevor who plays flute.

Shane's reply should have put Ilya off any further conversations, and it had until the point the curtain closed on their final night.

Shane: Hi. Sorry about before.

Ilya frowned. Was this leading nowhere? Was Shane apologising because he was disappointed in himself for running away or apologising because he hadn't wanted Ilya? Either way, this wasn't a fantastic sign.

It hadn't felt like nothing any of the times they had been in the same room as each other, but he guessed it was a small sample size. Anything was possible and Ilya was not pushing someone who was either straight or so far in the closet they might as well be in Narnia. He sighed. So much for that connection.

Now, several weeks later, Ilya was pretty drunk. Rose had dragged him out to an afterparty. They had done shots and danced up against each other on the dance floor, Ilya's hands roaming over Rose's body. It wasn't leading anywhere though, they both knew that. Ilya left her with some of the other women of the company, looking around for anyone else he could get with that night. There had to be some non-ballet people here, surely?

Bold in his inebriation, Ilya knew who he wanted to invite.

Ilya: There is party at Vox, you come?

He waited a few minutes for a reply, beginning to think he would just be ignored. Then his phone buzzed and Ilya grabbed it in great excitement, pulling his messages up as quickly as possible.

Shane: Sure. I'll come.

Ilya smiled. No, he beamed. Shane still wanted to see him. There was no other explanation for this behaviour, was there?

Shane came alone. Typically he seemed to be a double act with Hayden Pike so this surprised Ilya a little. Was it possible Shane had been thinking the same thing Ilya had? That he wanted more of whatever had happened in that ballet studio? Ilya hadn't felt so alive, so electrified in any of the weeks since.

As Shane staggered towards him, Ilya realised something else, Shane had been drinking. This, he felt, was unusual. He was used to seeing many of his friends at the ROH drunk at times - God knew he and Zane were partial to a drink after a show - but he didn't think he had ever seen Shane at any of those events. Was it because Shane rarely drank? Was it because he drank with others? With people Ilya wasn't aware of?

Rose came over, slipping a hand around Ilya's waist. She turned to Shane as he approached them. Shane's eyes darted to where Rose was touching Ilya and narrowed. Ilya wanted to laugh. Then he saw the look Rose was giving Shane. He knew that look, he was fairly sure he also gave Shane that look. He felt like shouting at her to back off, that this was the person he wanted to go home with. It didn't seem possible to say that without scaring Shane off again. Instead, he had to watch as Rose and Shane went out onto the dance floor together, hands wrapped around each other.

Ilya downed another shot of vodka and went off in search of someone to dance with.

He found a woman who was just his type: big boobs, blonde hair, freckles across her nose. He danced close, pressing his front to her rear. His hands roamed across her body and she tipped her head back, letting Ilya kiss down her neck.

Feeling eyes on him, Ilya looked up. Shane was staring at him, his hands having dropped to his sides away from Rose. Shane looked... dare Ilya say jealous? Testing his theory, Ilya pressed even closer, his lips leaving marks up the woman's neck. Shane glared, his wrists tensing. Without warning, Shane came barrelling over and grabbed Ilya's wrist, much like he did the afternoon in the ballet studio. Ilya ran to catch up with him, leaving the mystery woman and Rose behind in their wake. Neither seemed to really notice what had happened.

Ilya rattled his address off to the taxi driver than sat and stared at Shane. Was Shane really doing this? Straight Shane? Surely not. Shane seemed as uncertain. He looked like he was having some kind of inner battle, his back tight, his face clenched hard. Ilya traced gentle

lines down Shane's jaw, across his cheekbones, down to his collarbone. Shane unclenched. The look he gave Ilya was pure need. Ilya grinned.

Scrunching Shane's (boring) shirt in his fist, Ilya dragged him closer and connected their lips. The fireworks, the electricity, whatever it was, were back in full swing. It took all of Ilya's patience not to unbuckle his seatbelt and climb into Shane's lap. As it was, Shane's hands were moving up and down Ilya's back, getting closer and closer to the waistband of his trousers. Ilya sighed into Shane's mouth. This was everything he had dreamed of last time he got close to Shane. He just hoped Shane wouldn't run again, wouldn't back out. At least not yet.

The men ran to Ilya's room, up four flights of stairs, their hands barely leaving each other's bodies. With the door closed, Ilya looked carefully at Shane, noticing his hesitation, before sinking to his knees in front of him. Shane gasped.

This time, Shane didn't run immediately. But he still ran.

April 2020

Ilya left Steven's office in bright spirits. The meeting he had been chasing for years had finally happened. It had felt like newer, brighter dancers were coming in after him and making progress quicker than him, but it was finally his turn again.

Soloist.

He could hardly believe it.

Knowing it was probably a mistake, he called his father anyway.

"Father, I got it. I got the promotion," he exclaimed excitedly down the phone.

"Slow. You got the promotion slowly. A baby could do better than you," was his father's only reply.

"Father, that's not fair. I am not even twenty-four yet. And I am a soloist. It's all I've worked for," Ilya could hear that he was pleading, knew that his father would only ever view it as a weakness.

"You're a bad dancer in a bad company. You left everything you could have ever wanted here in Moscow. You left me, you left your brother, you left Svetlana. You are worthless to us all."

Ilya didn't sob, not this time. He felt like he had no more tears left to shed for his family. It was one of his father's rare lucid moments and he spent it berating his own child. That said everything Ilya needed to know.

His father had given him an idea on who he should call though. Just as he tapped on Svetlana's name, ready to tell her everything, Alexei's name appeared on screen. Right on time.

"Ilya. I heard you have had a promotion. I expect your bonus to come to me and your nieces and nephews."

Ilya sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No, Alexei. Not this time. I'm not letting you waste my money again and again."

He hung up. Then had to ignore his brother's increasingly desperate calls. Eventually, he just blocked him.

Finally, he clicked on Svetlana's name and called her. She picked up almost instantly. Rehearsals must have been over in Moscow.

"Ilyusha, how wonderful to hear from you!" She crowed, her beaming face filling Ilya's screen. He smiled his first truly honest smile in weeks. Svetlana looked sad and tired, even as she tried to look happy and excited on call. It worried Ilya. It was usually him falling apart, not her.

"Sveta, I am so sorry for how terrible a friend I have been recently. I love you. I miss you." Ilya truly felt bad. He had no idea what had happened to make his oldest friend look so miserable.

"Don't worry. I love you regardless. Now tell me what's been going on for you."

Ilya filled her in on everything. Well, almost everything. He left out Shane, though he wasn't sure why. It wouldn't be the first time Ilya had slept with someone stuck in the closet. Most of his flings had been women, Svetlana included, but she knew about his rarer flings with men too. She didn't judge. It was why he loved her so much.

Svetlana was thrilled he had finally received promotion to soloist. Her eyes filled with tears as he told her. Ilya was worried again now.

"Sveta, what is it?" He asked, panicking a little.

"I'm just struggling a little here," Svetlana admitted, pulling at a loose thread on her clothes. "I am being offered soloist here too, but I'm not sure I want to take it. I'm not sure I want to stay here. Things are difficult. My family - they are connected to the government - they want me to show my loyalty to Russia. But things are changing here, even more than normal. I'm worried things will only get worse. I'm not sure how much longer it will be possible to transfer companies."

Ilya thought for a second before jumping into action.

“Well, there’s likely to be changes here next year. There’s rumours some of the old soloists are retiring, taking teaching jobs. Not Scott Hunter, unfortunately, he’s carrying on forever, but some of the others. Zane has heard of people saying Tatiana and Aiko are leaving. It’ll mean some promotions and some gaps. They’ll have to hold auditions.” Ilya’s gestures grew wilder. He was in love with the idea of Svetlana in the UK. It would be wonderful. He’d have everyone he truly cared about in one country then. It had to happen.

Svetlana promised to think it over and Ilya promised to send her any audition materials if auditions did come up. They both promised to talk to each other more frequently. Ilya planned on keeping that promise. It was one he could reliably keep, even when the rest of his world was falling apart.

May 2020

Shane couldn’t remember the last time he went on a date. Not a proper one.

But he sat there, arms resting on the edge of the table, feet stuffed into nice shoes, willing himself to settle and calm and stop sweating so much. He didn’t think a shiny tinge would be particularly attractive to women.

He waited five minutes and then Rose appeared like a breath of fresh air. She had curled her hair and put in some dangling earrings. Her lips were tinged red and she bit them gently, smiling at Shane as she sat down.

“It’s lovely to see you,” Shane said honestly.

Rose smiled at him. Shane smiled back.

The conversation flowed effortlessly. They understood each other so well. Both were children of parents who wanted what was best for them and possibly pushed too hard sometimes. Both missed their homelands and the families they had left behind. Both were focused on their careers and felt freest and happiest when pursuing artistic endeavours. Shane could feel himself relaxing, settling into his chair as a smile grew slowly up his face.

This was fine. This was better than fine, in fact. Whatever he had thought was happening with Ilya could happen with Rose, no need to panic. A happy flush spread across his face and he gently placed his hand over Rose’s in the centre of the table. Rose grinned at him.

As they finished up the meal, glasses of wine still full on the table, Shane dared a look at his phone.

Ilya: Saw video I thought you like.

Then, five minutes later.

Ilya: Will you be at rehearsal on Thursday?

Shane shook his head and put the phone down. He could be friends with Ilya. That was a possibility. But it wasn't a possibility he was thinking about right now. Not when he had a beautiful woman sat before him, her gaze tracking his hands. Rose was also gently flushed by now. Shane wasn't sure what she expected to happen next. A kiss? Go home together?

Why was it, at the moment he thought about taking Rose home, Ilya's face as he dragged him from the bar months earlier forced its way back into Shane's head?

Clearing his throat, he leaned forwards towards Rose.

"Shall we go for a walk?" Shane asked, wanting to keep the evening going without answering the question about returning to his place.

Rose smiled. "I'd love to, thanks," she replied, glancing up at Shane under long, blackened lashes. She was, Shane recognised, an incredible catch, even within the image-obsessed world of ballet. Somehow she wanted him - the nerdy instrumentalist. It was a wonderful thought. And a sobering one.

This pattern continued for several more dates. They walked around St James's Park, ate dinner at an incredible Indian place Rose had heard of from Jackie, picnicked in listening distance of speaker's corner at Hyde Park, laughing at some of the insanity they heard and, Shane's favourite date of all, went to a cat cafe and spent time together with the animals. It had been going wonderfully. Sure, Shane still felt a little awkward kissing Rose, especially in front of others. But that was just because the rest of the ROH spent their time nosing into other people's business and kept bringing it up in front of the new couple. It was weird and awkward and very high school.

They were on their fifth date, which Shane was beginning to think might have more expectations attached, when Shane's phone rang. He was half-worrying it would be Ilya, he seemed to have a knack for contacting at the worst time, but it wasn't.

"Oh, it's my mom," Shane said, going to end the call and text her back.

"No, no, take the call," Rose said with a smile, "I know how hard it can be with the time difference."

Shane looked over at the woman next to him, trying to check she was genuinely happy for this to happen. She seemed calm and happy, leaning back against the railings of a small park they had found and settled in. A can of cider was open at her feet. The British propensity for public alcohol consumption was beginning to rub off on them both.

Nodding, Shane accepted the call. FaceTime opened quickly and his mother's face filled the screen. She had looked anxious but that soon changed once she saw her son, safe, well and in the open air.

“You’re not rehearsing?” Yuna asked with a broad smile.

Shane laughed and shook his head. “No, I do have a life sometimes, Mom, I keep telling you.”

He shot Rose a look, questioning whether she wanted to be in the call or not. Rose shrugged her shoulders and gently moved into frame, the cider staying invisible at her feet. “Hi, Mrs Hollander,” she said, looking only slightly nervous.

“Ah, Shane, you never introduce me to your friends,” Yuna looked almost annoyed that her adult son wasn’t including her in every facet of his life decisions. “Who is the lovely young lady?”

“Mom, meet Rose. She’s part of the ballet company,” Shane explained, running a nervous hand through his hair, which was getting longer. Maybe a haircut was in order soon, though he still hadn’t found a barbers he liked enough to go to it repeatedly.

His mother’s eyes ran between the two of them, like she was trying to find evidence to confirm a theory. As she spotted their clasped hands laid on Shane’s knee, she nodded as if she had found what she was looking for.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Rose. Enjoy your time together. I’ll call you later in the week for a catch-up, Shane,” and with that Yuna Hollander ended the quickest call Shane thought he had ever had with his slightly obsessed parents.

Rose giggled. “I think she thought she was intruding.”

Shane just nodded, smiling back at Rose, enjoying the way the sunlight flickered through her hair, lighting up her eyes.

The moment hung for a second before Rose leaned in, sealing their lips.

“Shall we go back to mine? It’s nearby.” Shane wasn’t sure what had come over him. It felt right though. Rose was the right choice. His mom clearly thought so, her smile was wider than it had been since Shane told her that he had passed his audition for the orchestra. It was nice to make her feel proud of him and Rose really was an incredible catch.

“That sounds wonderful,” Rose replied, standing up and pulling Shane up with her. Their clasped hands swung together as they headed out of the park towards whatever came next.

December 2020

That December was a quieter one for Ilya. While he had been consistently chosen to perform in the Nutcracker, there were limited solos for men and his talents had instead been snapped up for a February run of Romeo & Juliet. He was incredibly excited. He’d heard just the

week before that he had been chosen to portray Mercutio and it was a great opportunity for him to demonstrate a dynamism and bravado he hadn't always been able to show.

Bravado wasn't exactly something Ilya struggled with.

He felt Zane's arm snake around his shoulders and smiled a little at his friend. "Want to head out this evening?" Zane asked, knowing Ilya was almost always a sure bet. Though recently, he had been less so...

"Who's going?" Ilya asked, trying to work out what his answer should be.

"Oh, loads of people-" Zane started listing a load of artists and first artists Ilya didn't particularly care about. "Oh, and Hayden, Jackie and Rose will be there too," he finished, smiling like this information should make Ilya happy.

But recently, from what Ilya could tell, where Rose went, Shane went too. The two men hadn't discussed whatever had happened nearly a year ago. Really they hadn't spoken about it that day either. Then suddenly, or it seemed sudden to Ilya anyway, everywhere Shane went, Rose went and everywhere Rose went, Shane followed. Ilya had no idea how to take it. Everyone was saying they were the perfect couple. The women swooned over Shane's apparent gentleman behaviour; the men were jealous he was the one to bag Rose Landry. Ilya, if he was being perfectly honest with himself, which he typically wasn't, was avoiding the happy couple entirely. It had been relatively easy. He hadn't been cast alongside Rose recently and there was no reason for him to get involved with the orchestra. As long as he didn't go to parties Rose was at (and therefore her newest puppy), Ilya could pretend like this wasn't happening.

Not that he was jealous. That would be ridiculous. He hadn't even had full-on sex with Shane. Even if he had, he could usually leave his hookups well alone. He had no idea what the difference was with this one.

Ilya shrugged. "I think no," he said to Zane, attempting to shift to flirtatious, "I have other options, yes?"

Zane rolled his eyes. "You're insatiable. Don't you want to settle down?"

Ilya did consider that question. He was pretty happy with his life how it was. Hot women were everywhere and hot men if he really wanted to explore that option, not that he had. "No. I'm happy as I am."

Throwing an arm around his friend, Zane nodded, "Well I guess that's the main thing. I miss going out with you though, man. Please stop by."

Ilya shrugged like he would consider it, but he knew what his preferred answer was.

As the two men finished a quick jog around St James's Park Lake, Ilya felt a lot better. The endorphins had certainly done their job, even as he panted into his water bottle. He knew he

had to keep his fitness up as he chased further promotions. They were within reach now. Zane and Ilya headed for the gate, crisscrossing across grass and past tourists as they aimed for home and a nice shower. Around them, the world was bundled up in thick winter coats and woollen scarves. Ilya found it laughable. Try a Russian winter, then they would understand the cold.

Zane, Trinidadian as he was, never seemed to agree with Ilya's assessment of the weather.

They both agreed it was shit though. But then so did the British.

Just as they reached the gate and were ready to separate off to their own flats, Ilya noticed a wave from the corner of his eye. Rose Landry of all people came running up to the two of them, throwing her arms around first Zane and then Ilya, completely oblivious to the sweat dripping down their backs. Ilya supposed she was used to seeing male ballet dancers working up a sweat in the studio. He attempted a smile but was well aware of what Rose Landry out and about in central London likely meant.

Sure enough, a sheepish Shane soon joined her, linking his arm in hers. He nodded at Ilya. Ilya looked away, glaring up at the sky.

"Wow, frosty," Rose said, looking slightly confused. For all of Ilya's pretty awful reputation at times, he had never been anything but polite to his previous dance partner. She had repeatedly stuck up for him when others called out his bad attitude - saying he was just dedicated and was a sweetheart deep down.

No wonder she was confused today.

Zane also shot Ilya a look, apparently puzzled by the quick change in personality on display. He shrugged though and began chatting with Rose eagerly.

Shane attempted to speak to Ilya. He started a sentence several times before giving up, clearing his throat and staring at the ground. Ilya hated that he noticed all these things.

An older couple followed them consisting of a beautiful Japanese woman and a boring guy, Canadian Ilya assumed, now that he had acknowledged Canada and the USA were not, actually, all one country. They had to be Shane's parents. Sure enough, they swung an arm around Shane and Rose, pulling the couple to their chests.

His parents looked so happy.

Shane looked so happy.

Ilya felt a tightening in his chest. He wasn't sure that any decision he had ever made had made his father look at him the way Shane's dad was currently staring at his son, with admiration and joy and true love radiating out.

Shane leaned back, resting his head gently on his dad's shoulder, before leaning forwards again and wrapping an arm around Rose's waist. Ilya could feel Shane's eyes on him and he resolutely looked the other direction, towards Zane. Zane was doing a fantastic job of

singlehandedly saving this conversation, just like always. Ilya was grateful enough that, as they finally said their goodbyes and moved away, he nodded at his friend, "I'll come out for drinks," he offered.

Zane cheered like the news was the best he had ever heard.

Ilya shrugged. It wasn't like it could get any more awkward than that meeting in the park had been. Plus, he thought, his mother, the one person he did want to make proud, would probably have encouraged him to go and be a good friend. It was the season.

As Ilya Rozanov moved further into the distance, Shane could feel himself releasing tension he hadn't even realised he was holding. His mom was talking at him relentlessly.

"You should really think about some residencies. It'll be good at this stage of your career to begin to build your name internationally. The Royal Opera House is wonderful and it looks excellent on your resume, but do you just want to be a one-orchestra person? It doesn't show variety."

Shane had been attempting to ignore the comments but this pulled him up short. "Mom, I'm settled here. I have friends here." It was true. He had less to do with Hayden now that he was planning his wedding to Jackie but they were still close, they went on double dates at least every other month. Plus there was Rose's circle of ballet dancers. He got on with them super well. It would be a shame to lose that. Even his section, mostly made up of men three or more decades older than him, were wonderful. They treated him well and looked out for him, full of sage advice and wisdom. Shane liked it here, for all of the difficulties he faced in opening up to new people. The idea of having to make new friends made his heart stutter.

His mother seemed to think it was something else panicking him and shot a look at where Shane's hand was linked in Rose's.

Of course, Shane would miss Rose if he moved. That went without saying. She looked after him and understood him better than anyone else he knew.

It was Rose who pushed for an end to the conversation. "We both appreciate your guidance, Mrs Hollander, but I think it's best we leave it to Shane to make decisions about his future."

Shane appreciated her so much. Things had seemed tenser recently, like there was a conversation not being had, something he was sure he didn't want to bring out into the open. Even with the strangeness, though, Rose did what she could to look out for him, to make him relax and feel better.

She smiled as the tension eased from Shane's shoulders. He hadn't even realised he had been holding it in. He smiled at his girlfriend, so happy to have her around in the run up to Christmas.

February 2021

Ilya was on top of the world.

Or at least on top of a table in some dingy bar several miles away from Covent Garden. Romeo & Juliet was done. The Guardian had written a lovely piece about his acting ability and emotional resonance. It was nice. He just hoped it was enough for the directors to continue to take note.

It had been a challenging few weeks. Usually Ilya lived for show season. He loved performing. He loved being on stage under the lights, the whistle and rustle of the audience seemingly only metres away from him. This time, something felt a little off.

He knew it was probably the text from his brother from a week ago that he hadn't replied to yet.

Alexei: Dad is not well. He is asking for you.

Ilya knew he should have replied, he should have done something, but he wasn't sure what was expected of him. What do you say to the man who spent his entire life hating you and your life choices once he was on his deathbed? Was there anything good to say?

He was sure someone more self-actualised than he was would suggest the power of forgiveness. Ilya didn't think that sounded like a possibility.

Instead he danced on the tables. Women he barely knew were all around him, some touching his shoulders and his chest, others grabbing his arms and his hands. He threw his head back and felt the music course through him. He loved music. He loved the way it made him feel and connect with others. There was a bit of a difference between Prokofiev and whatever EDM banger was playing around him now, but it was the same idea. And he could be his attractive, charming, arrogant self regardless.

Another text came through from his brother, like he knew he was thinking about him. It had been a mistake to unblock the bastard, clearly.

Alexei: I know all your secrets, little brother, and I'm willing to share them if you don't face us soon and face your responsibilities.

Great. Threats.

Ilya knew what this was about. He knew it was about the relationship (could it even be called that) with Sasha that Alexei had walked in on once. His face had curled up into a grim expression of hatred that day. It was the day Ilya knew he had to get out of Russia.

And here he was now, debating going back. Would it be the last time? It felt like once his father was gone, there would be nothing connecting him there. Well, nothing except Svetlana.

They were waiting to hear back about how her audition had gone. There was a soloist opening for a female dancer at the Royal Ballet. Ilya knew there were younger dancers

clamouring for a leg up to the next level, but he was quietly confident that Sveta's Bolshoi training would be enough to see them off. He hoped at least.

Sighing, he climbed down from the table. His brother's text had ruined the moment. It was time to face the music.

The next flight out of London to Moscow was the next morning from Heathrow. With a slow, anguished turn, Ilya headed back to his flat to pack the suitcase he had avoided packing for nearly nine years now.

It was strange to see the man he had built up into a larger-than-life monster lying on a hospital bed, hands frail, eyes unseeing. He was gripping Alexei's hand harshly, but his brother dropped it when Ilya walked in and exited, not even looking at his brother. Ilya realised that he had nothing to say to this man, not really. Nothing would bring back his mother. Nothing would bring back his own childhood innocence. Instead he sat, silently, on vigil for something unknown.

He was still sat there as his father took his last breath. Ilya was surprised to find a tear rolling down his cheek, though he wasn't sure what, or who, the tear was for.

Shane was sat in the restaurant of the Royal Opera House, his hand closed around Rose's. He should have been incredibly happy - there was talk of him moving up in seniority in his section with the retirement of their section leader - but he was looking for someone who definitely wasn't there.

All the dancers and most of the opera performers and musicians were in the restaurant that evening, enjoying some fancy food. Members of the public were there too as long as the definition of 'members of the public' exclusively meant rich donors. They cared a lot more about Rose than they did about Shane, though they pretended to be interested in his story of being a professional musician. He understood it. He wasn't the public-facing image of the Opera House.

All the dancers were there, bar one. There was no Ilya. Shane kept expecting to hear his acerbic laugh or taunting voice, but it just wasn't there.

"Any ideas where Rozanov is?" He asked Rose, scooping some gnocchi onto a fork.

Rose shot him a strange look but shook her head. "Not exactly. He took some personal time off. I heard his father is really unwell."

Shane remembered those tense Russian phone calls he had walked in at the end of their time together. He didn't exactly get the impression that the ballet dancer was close to his family, but he had been wrong before. It was certainly possible.

"Oh, right," Shane replied, realising there was no good way to try and gain further personal information about Ilya from anyone. Not that he cared, obviously. He was just concerned. Knowing that things had been tense.

Several hours later, as Rose twirled around on the arms of rich gentlemen who had essentially paid for this private privilege, Shane took his phone out.

Shane: Hope you're okay. Heard you had some family stuff going on.

The reply came quicker than he expected.

Ilya: Why do you care? You've never stuck around before.

It hurt, seeing the message. Not that Shane really had a reply. Why did he care? He had completely decided that the encounters with Ilya were an experimental mistake that meant nothing but he was still out here texting the guy. Talk about mixed signals, he knew.

Shane: I want to be your friend.

It felt totally inadequate. Ilya must have agreed because no further reply came back.

March 2021

The funeral was a drab affair. Many people claimed to respect Grigory Rozanov, but few people liked him or enjoyed his company. They came for the chance to be seen, to be recognised as important. Ilya couldn't honestly blame them.

He stood in the corner of the room after the funeral as family and close friends ate. He tried desperately to blend in with the curtains. Was this the end his father would have wanted? He supposed so. A small part of him still eagerly wished they had managed to have a proper conversation close to the end of his father's life; that his father would have respected his younger son with any level of true acclaim. Unfortunately that had not been the experience his family had been able to offer him. Whether it was Russian society, his father's upbringing or the death of his mother, something had well and truly separated them. Ilya supposed the decision to move to London had only been the nail in the festering coffin.

The saving grace of the whole evening, beyond copious amounts of vodka, was Sveta holding his hand the whole time. Members of Russia's elite would come up to Ilya, proclaiming platitudes while glaring at him when they thought they had moved far enough away that Ilya would not catch them. He knew what his father and brother said about him - that he had abandoned his family, abandoned his country. He also knew that staying in Russia would have slowly killed him from the inside much like it had slowly torn away at his best friend. Some people directly asked Ilya and Sveta if they were now ballet's golden couple. They both gave half-answers. What did it matter what these people thought?

It had finally happened. Sveta had heard back from the Royal Ballet. She had been offered a contract. Once Ilya had sorted out the few personal affairs that had been left to him and not his brother, they were both taking a flight out to Heathrow. He was convinced it would be the last time they stood in Russia. He was certain it was the last time he would be there.

When the time finally came, the pair loaded their mountains of bags and suitcases onto the conveyer belt at check-in; linked their arms in a tight demonstration of their nerves and excitement and headed off into the great unknown. A world without Grigory. A world with Svetlana. Somehow it felt like the answer to all of Ilya's unsaid prayers.

As the plane crested the horizon, Ilya smiled warmly. It was his first true smile in weeks. There was no point pretending he was someone he was not. He was who he was. He was bisexual. He had no need or desire to change that. Ilya could finally acknowledge something he had always denied to a certain extent - he was worthy of love. Just as he was. A human, full of flaws, but also full of wonder and determination and care for others.

He held Svetlana's hand in his, gently tracing circles on the back of her hand. The pair looked at each other and Sveta had tears in her eyes. Before the funeral, before the self-acceptance, Ilya may have leaned in and kissed her gently. But he now knew he was best for Sveta as her friend, as her closest confidante. With the warmest tone he could manage, he started to tell her everything she would love about London. Everything she would love about his home.

Ilya, in his infinite wisdom, decided a housewarming party was in order. He had moved into a gorgeous flat now that he and Svetlana could pool their money together. It had the fantastic high ceilings of Georgian England and large, wooden windows. The dark wooden floors reflected back the happiness on Ilya's face as he had first got the keys. This was the start of forever and it felt amazing.

Music pounded through the flat. Someone had allowed the young artists to pick the music and they were playing some pop princess Ilya had never heard of. He was enjoying himself anyway. He hadn't smoked in a while but the flat had the world's tiniest balcony, really more of a ledge over the windows of the floor below, and he liked standing out on the railings with a cigarette in hand. The other dancers rolled their eyes at him when they saw him but let him be. As he finished his second cigarette, a warm arm snaked around his back. He turned to the beaming face of his best friend.

"You were right," she told him with a grin in Russian, this conversation just for them.

"I always am. What about this time?" Ilya replied with a smirk.

"These people are good. The city is fantastic. I feel..." Svetlana trailed off.

"Alive?" Ilya asked her, his smile fading into something more private. He moved his arms to hug her tight to him. He couldn't believe they were in the same country again.

"Yes, alive," she said with a sigh.

Rose Landry was at the party somewhere, Ilya could hardly get away with inviting everyone except her, which meant Shane Hollander was also somewhere in the flat. It was possible he had been avoiding Ilya as the two men hadn't laid eyes on each other the whole night. Ilya wasn't exactly sorry about that. Shane confused him absolutely and completely. Half the time he seemed to want Ilya closer and the rest of the time he pushed him away.

What they absolutely were not, Shane's confusing texts be damned, was friends.

As Svetlana dragged Ilya back to the makeshift dance floor in the middle of their living room, sofas and tables pushed aside, Ilya threw his head back and laughed long and loud. Several heads turned to loom at him, sending curious glances. This Ilya - the Ilya he felt he could be in the presence of his oldest friend - was not the Ilya they saw at rehearsal. That Ilya: cautious, exact, sarcastic, probably wasn't the nicest guy. Oh well. Let them stare. Let them realise who he could be. Let them meet the man who had been hiding all along.

One person staring, Ilya noticed, was Shane. Good. Let him see how happy Ilya could be without him and his confusing mixed messages.

Shane was dancing with Rose. It didn't seem like the rest of the orchestra was there. Admittedly, Ilya hadn't particularly thought to include them in the invite. They were good people and incredible at what they did, but they weren't the people Ilya saw day-in, day-out. They weren't the people asking how his meetings with the director went when he was up for promotion. They didn't get the ballet dancer's fear of irrelevancy, their concern with their inevitable early retirement. Ilya was twenty-four years old. He shouldn't have been worried about the end of his career. But it loomed always and everywhere. One day, and it could be one day soon, Ilya would hit the point where his body was broken beyond repair and he couldn't maintain the standard that the ROH expected. When that day arrived, his options were teaching, choreographing or directing. None of them appealed the same way being on stage in front of thousands did. It was a scary thought.

Rose was wrapped around Shane, her arms hooked behind his back and her head on his shoulder. They swayed to the music. Shane looked awkward. Ilya wasn't sure he had ever seen Shane in a group of people not looking awkward, now that he thought about it. He was a completely different man to the times Ilya had been alone with him. Shane, to Ilya's surprise, smiled at him. He nodded back but he could feel his eyes icing over. He still didn't understand what Shane wanted with him, the man he had slept with and ran away from, when he had his beautiful dancer girlfriend pressed up against him. Ilya looked away for a moment.

Some of the ballet dancers who had been crowded up with him and Svetlana, thanking them for the awesome party, began to move away to Rose and the other ballet dancers in the middle of the room. Scott Hunter was there with his boyfriend, smiling at each other as they moved in slow circles, completely ignoring the beat of the music, Ilya rolled his eyes. When he looked back at Rose, he noticed Shane was looking past her, towards Scott, a strange look on his face. Ilya didn't want to be the one to attempt to label things, especially not when he was this drunk, but he'd almost say Shane looked wistful. That couldn't be it, surely?

Shane suddenly lurched away. Rose looked back, as if trying to work out what had spooked him, before running after her boyfriend.

Ilya looked away for good then, it wasn't his problem.

As Shane left the party, tears beginning to track their way down his face, he knew he had made a mistake. Even knowing that, he didn't want to fix what had happened. The feeling in

his chest, like something was breaking, continued to splinter and fracture, hurting him like the jagged end of a knife. He wanted to be fixed. Now.

Rose came barrelling after him, her hair flowing behind her as she ran to catch up with him. Shane had been aiming for the nearest tube stop but turned around to look at his girlfriend. Whatever she saw on his face made her gasp.

“Shane-“ she said with a grimace, reaching a hand out towards him, before pulling it back. She stopped speaking, as if weighing up her words. “Let’s find a cafe,” she eventually said, holding a hand out to him. Shane took it unquestioningly.

They walked in silence, Shane unable to fully stop the tears from launching their way down his face. He wasn’t even sure what he was upset about. Nothing in his head made sense.

Eventually Rose found some greasy spoon that was still open. She ordered them both burgers and chips, seeming to ignore her diet plan, at least for the moment.

They ate in silence, Rose’s brow furrowing more and more the longer Shane went without acknowledging her. Truthfully, he had no idea what to say.

“I think we need to talk,” she said when she was halfway through her food, Shane had still only picked around the edges of his.

“What about?” Shane asked, really hoping Rose wasn’t going to take this the direction he thought she might be leaning towards.

“I just... are you happy in this relationship?” Rose asked him, her mouth pursing at the corners as she shot him a worried look.

They’d been together nearly a year. Had Shane not been doing a good enough job? He felt like he had been but clearly Rose wasn’t satisfied with something. The sex wasn’t fantastic, Shane had to admit. But they’d been working on that. Sex got better with time, surely? He was slowly learning what Rose liked and tried to do it for her. He shuffled the thoughts of how he wasn’t completely sure he wanted to be doing it in the first place out of his head. Lots of couples faced an issue of sex drive. They could work through it. Rose was so funny and kind. She understood Shane better than almost anyone else he had ever spoken to. His parents adored her and she was good with them too.

Shane realised he had been silent a beat too long. “Yes, of course,” he said, reaching out to cover her hand. Rose appeared to have clocked the wait and gently pulled away, though her face stayed open.

“I saw the way you looked at Scott,” she said gently. Shane visibly jumped. He had been looking at Scott and his boyfriend, that was true. He couldn’t even explain why seeing them so happy in the centre of the room had upset him so much.

“Right,” Shane said, his mind whirring. He had no idea what to say. He didn’t even understand his own brain. Shouldn’t he have a better understanding of himself by this point

in his life? He had moved across the world independently, he had the world's most supportive family and he had the career of his dreams. He had no reason to struggle this much.

"I've been wondering recently, and you don't have to say anything to me," Rose rushed out, her hand clutching his again, feeling safe and secure, "I was thinking that you might be happier in a relationship with someone else."

Shane shook his head. No. He adored Rose. She understood him better than anyone.

"Shane- You- I don't want to label you or put anything on you," Rose took a deep breath, clearly getting to the main crux of what she had been planning on saying. "I think you might be, possibly, happier in a relationship like Scott's?"

Shane felt the blood rush into his brain. He couldn't hear, his vision blurred, the world tilted under his feet. He could feel his face heating up and his eyes stinging again.

"I'm not gay," Shane said, forcing the words out, stopping any images of his two nights with Ilya from surfacing. The joy he had felt in his arms. The happiness he had felt at feeling settled. It meant nothing - people experimented. Rose was safe and secure. Rose didn't confuse him like Ilya did. He couldn't be gay, he wouldn't be this confused.

"Okay, like I said, I didn't want to put words in your mouth. But Shane... this isn't working," Rose said gently. Shane couldn't believe this was happening. What would he tell his parents? How would he admit to this failure? Rose was still speaking. All he heard were her closing words, "I still want to be friends with you. I care about you, Shane, truly. I just want you to be happy."

Shane sucked in a deep breath, threw some money on the table and got up to leave. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Rose had her head in her hands.

Once again, Shane left the people who cared for him behind.

May 2021

The company were careening towards summer break. Ilya couldn't wait. It was the first time he would have Svetlana in the city for the whole summer and he was looking forwards to taking her to all his favourite places. They were already members of the Tate Modern and the National Portrait Gallery. They spent their free time exploring museums and galleries and restaurants. It felt like the city, which had been home for so long, was opening up to him now that he had someone to share it with.

He had also heard a piece of interesting news via the gossiping youngest members of the company - Rose Landry and Shane Hollander had broken up.

A few of the youngest female dancers had been arguing about whether it was morally acceptable for them to shoot their shot now he was single. It wasn't that common for the orchestra members to be as young as Shane was, let alone as attractive. The only other

member of a similar age was Hayden Pike, but he was incredibly taken - which the youngsters also complained about.

Many of the dancers hooked up with each other, but it could be risky, while they understood each other better than anyone, they also had to see each other regularly if the whole thing fell apart. It was one of the reasons Ilya and Svetlana had discussed the extent of their relationship now that they were in the same company and the same city. They had both agreed not to let it go beyond friends at any point again. Ilya was settled with that choice and it seemed like Sveta was too. They were happy. He was pretty sure Svetlana had a date arranged with a member of the backstage crew anyway. Even that was cutting it too close for Ilya's liking. He needed to find a nice man or woman as far away from the Opera House as possible. That would be most sensible.

Still, he had glared at the younger company members. "Stop gossiping about people's personal lives at work," he had said sharply. They had all nodded and rushed towards the barre for warm-up.

Ilya smirked. So, he was still scary to the younger ones then? Good.

Scott Hunter lumbered over towards him. Ilya rolled his eyes.

"I was surprised you didn't announce your retirement at end of this season," he told the older dancer, who narrowed his eyes at him.

"You're a wanker," he muttered, though he stayed near Ilya.

Ilya laughed. Now this was a British word he loved. "While I certainly am wanker, quite regularly in fact, I think is a perfectly natural hobby."

Even Scott cracked a smile at this. "Never change, Rozanov," he said with a smile.

Ilya didn't plan on it. He clapped Scott on the back and moved to his position behind him on the barre. One more promotion and he'd be at the same level. It couldn't happen soon enough.

After class, for reasons he couldn't quite explain, Ilya texted Shane.

Ilya: I heard about you and Landry. I am here to talk if you need it.

The reply took a while to come, with Shane writing and deleting messages so much Ilya turned the screen off to stop staring at the three appearing and disappearing dots.

Shane: Not sure your girlfriend would like us meeting up.

Ilya tilted his head. The message confused him. Firstly, who was this mysterious girlfriend he knew nothing about and secondly, was this Shane acknowledging that their previous meetings had been more than friendly? Strange.

Ilya: I don't have girlfriend.

He wasn't sure what else to say.

Shane: The woman you live with, she's always with you.

Ilya laughed. It sent butterflies up his spine that Shane had noticed they were together regularly - that he was keeping tabs on Ilya.

Ilya: Svetlana is not my girlfriend. I love her lots but not like that. She is oldest friend.

It was a while again before a reply came. Ilya went home and relaxed on his sofa, stretching across it and massaging his feet. He put the TV on. It was some rerun of a panel show. Why did this country love them so much? They were only occasionally funny.

Shane: Oh. Okay then.

Ilya rolled his eyes. He supposed it was on him to suggest whatever they did next. He wasn't sure where his head was at, or Shane's for that matter.

Ilya: Come over and talk?

Ilya knew it was flimsy. Every time they 'talked', it had turned into something more. But the ball was in Shane's court now. He swung his feet to the floor and went to the kitchen to make a coffee. By the time he got back, Shane had replied.

Shane: That would be nice.

Quickly, Ilya sent his address over. Shane had come once before for the party, but he assumed it was Rose who had brought him then. Ilya began running around the flat, neatening things up and trying to make it look like the respectable home of two professionals in their mid-twenties. Admittedly it wasn't that hard to do. Svetlana had great taste. It no longer looked like Ilya lived in a bachelor pad but the home of a man with decent money and an even more decent interior stylist.

Forty minutes later, the intercom sounded. Ilya took a quick look at it and let Shane in. The musician was running his hands through his hair repeatedly, fluffing it up. Ilya's heart swooped.

"Hi," Shane said as Ilya opened the door for him. For a moment, Ilya just stared, sure his mouth was gaping. Shane was incredibly beautiful.

Backing away, Ilya let Shane in, taking his jacket from him and hanging it up on a hook behind the door. As they walked in, Shane spun around, taking the flat in properly.

"Is Svetlana here?" He asked, looking pointedly at Ilya.

"No," Ilya said, shaking his head, "It's just us."

The two men stared at each other, tension building between them. Ilya turned and headed back to the kitchen for more coffee. Shane followed him.

“So it didn’t work out with Rose?” Ilya asked, turning towards Shane as the coffee machine worked behind him. It was the only question he truly wanted answered.

“No,” Shane said, his cheeks flushing. It seemed like he wasn’t going to expand on the answer until Ilya turned away to grab some mugs. “We weren’t- She thought we weren’t right for each other.”

Ilya wanted to ask how. He wanted to know in what ways Shane and Rose had and hadn’t been right for each other. He wanted to compare to the time he had with Shane. But that was ridiculous. They had met up twice, ages ago. Years ago, really.

He wanted to know everything about this closed-off, infuriating man.

“Ah,” he said instead, “I am sorry to hear.”

Shane nodded and moved slightly closer. Ilya’s fingers nearly brushed his on the worktop. They moved to the sofa with their mugs of coffee. They were sat at opposite ends, facing each other. The distance seemed insurmountable to Ilya.

Ilya flicked the TV on. It was showing a football match. Liverpool vs Man City. He had no idea if Shane even liked sports. Shane turned to watch the match anyway. Once he was no longer looking at Ilya, it seemed easier for him to speak.

“She felt we weren’t compatible,” Shane muttered.

Ilya felt like he knew what this word meant but he wasn’t certain. He nodded and considered translating it later.

“Okay, and how do you feel?” He asked instead. Svetlana had always told him to offer more emotional support rather than jumping straight into problem-solving. What he actually wanted to say was he felt like it was probably not a bad thing Shane and Rose had broken up. For entirely selfless reasons, of course.

Shane shrugged. “I’m not sure. I liked Rose a lot. She’s a great person and we got on so well,” Shane paused. Ilya noticed Shane could be talking about any close friend but decided not to point it out. “I just want to forget for a bit. Everyone at work knows. Everyone keeps asking me about it. They’re trying to be nice but it’s not helping me sort my head out.”

Ilya thought about that for a second before he shuffled closer to Shane. “I could help you forget,” Ilya murmured, reaching a hand out towards Shane slowly enough he could back away if he wanted to.

Shane did not back away.

Shuffling forwards, Ilya covered Shane’s body with his, kissing him slowly. Shane arched his back, immediately deepening the kiss. Ilya locked his hands behind Shane’s back, tugging him towards his own body. They tumbled into the sofa cushions, the sofa creaking as they

repositioned. Shane whimpered under Ilya's touch, shuddering as Ilya gently stroked his back. As Shane relaxed, Ilya began stroking his collarbones, his waist, his hands moving south.

Ilya moved back, Shane chasing his lips. "Is this okay?" Ilya checked, eyes searching Shane's face. Something in Shane's eyes cleared and he bit his lip. He nodded. Immediately, Ilya reconnected their lips and began to peel off Shane's clothes. It had been nearly a year and a half since he had last been alone with Shane but the time raced away as they touched each other again at last.

Ilya sighed something far too sentimental before he stood up and pulled Shane over to his bedroom. It might just be the once but he was incapable of denying Shane anything.

This time, though, it wasn't just the once.

They met up occasionally. The first time after Ilya's practice rang long and he finished the same time as Shane's final rehearsal of the season. Shane had one opera run to complete before his own summer break and was excited about it. He was informing Ilya all about Carmen, his hands thrown out in expressive glee. The only thing that stopped Ilya from pulling Shane to him and kissing him in the street was the coffee he held in his hands. That and the fact he was certain Shane would never speak to him again if he showed any public affection.

The second time, Ilya texted Shane after he knew he was out of a performance of Carmen. Shane agreed to come over far quicker than Ilya had been prepared for.

Then there was the time Ilya managed to wrangle seats in the amphitheatre for Svetlana and himself. It was the final night of Carmen and the atmosphere in the Opera House was incredible. Ilya so rarely got to enjoy the stage from this side and spent a ridiculous amount of time posing for pictures with Svetlana with the full glory of the main theatre behind him. The blue and gold ceiling, the deep red seats, the boxes full of people in their finest clothing - it was amazing. It was everything he had ever loved about the theatre. He could sometimes forget the joy of being in the audience in the middle of his rehearsals and with all his nerves about promotion. He texted Shane shortly before the orchestra began taking their seats to warm up and tune. He expected Shane not to see it until after the show but received a smiley face in reply. Ilya's face broke into a rare broad smile. Svetlana rolled her eyes and muttered about him in Russian but Ilya could tell she was pleased for him.

If she suspected who the man coming back to their flat was, she had yet to let on.

After the show ended, Ilya made his excuses to Svetlana and ran off into the belly of the building. Svetlana, knowing smile in place, nodded and took herself home. It probably wasn't Ilya's finest moment in hindsight, but he needed to see Shane.

The seats they were in didn't have a fantastic view of the double bass section but they could see enough that Ilya spent half the show staring at Shane rather than the amazing performers on the stage. He watched as Shane lost himself in the music, biting his lip and running his

hands through his hair before he launched himself into his part. When the March happened, Ilya had to stop himself from flinging his arms out. He remembered Shane talking about his audition for the music school in London, the nerves he had as he played the same piece of music to decide his future. Ilya thought you'd never have known watching him play in that pit. He was calm and collected, his eyes darting to the conductor as he effortlessly moved through the music. Ilya briefly wondered how their lives may have been different if Shane had been in London for music school rather than Canada.

He was amazing.

Ilya needed to tell him how amazing he had been.

Ilya practically ran to the orchestra door, leaping past tourists and guests and patrons. A few gave him an odd look, recognising him as a soloist from the ballet. He sent them a winning smile and continued his mad dash to find Shane. When he reached the room the strings were using to pack up, a small rehearsal space, Ilya felt a lot sillier. Shane was surrounded by the other strings players, mostly the double bass section from what Ilya could tell but also violists and what might be a rogue viola player. Ilya hadn't been noticed. He wasn't sure what to do. He didn't think Shane would be thrilled for the group of people he spent the most time with finding out he was hanging out with the sarcastic male lead of the ballet. Especially not when there was no reason for Ilya to be in the building. Ballet practice had finished hours before.

Instead he lingered by the door until Shane noticed him. Shane raised an eyebrow, held up a finger and nodded towards the corridor. Ilya took his cue and fled. In the hallway, he wondered what on Earth they were doing. Why was he pursuing someone who seemed in complete denial of their own sexuality right at the moment he had left Russia for good so that he could be open about himself? It suddenly seemed incredibly dumb.

Or it did until Shane came out and held him in his arms.

"You were incredible," Ilya murmured into Shane's neck, holding him tight, "It was wonderful to see you perform."

Shane flushed. The heat spread up his neck, to his cheeks. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

The two men left the building quickly. Shane looked up at Ilya as they walked alongside each other, their fingers brushing as they walked.

"We could go back to mine?" Shane suggested, his ears red. "My place isn't as fancy as yours but I live alone..." he trailed off.

Ilya nodded. He understood Shane not wanting Svetlana to confirm the man coming over was him, though Ilya thought it was pretty likely she had already worked out what was going on. There weren't many opera performers or people in the orchestra who were single and the right age for Ilya to be charging towards after the show. He didn't think it would be helpful to say this to Shane though.

"Sure, that would be lovely."

They walked together to the underground. Ilya was curious what Shane's home was like. He knew Jackie had been with Hayden and had been jealous at the time, knowing Shane was willing to let her in before Ilya. It made sense. The two men had barely spoken for most of the time they had known each other, but it still stung.

Ilya followed behind Shane as they left the station and headed towards a residential pocket of Zone 2. It was quieter out here and dark. Even the long spring days couldn't keep up with how late it now was. Shane's heart beat loudly. He wondered if Ilya could hear it. Part of him was terrified. There were sparks and electricity. The same sparks that were there when they had first bumped into each other in the lower levels of the Royal Opera House all those years earlier. The same sparks Shane kept trying to force with Rose but never came. It had begun to sink in that Rose might have been right all along. She had understood Shane better than he had understood himself.

It felt big, letting Ilya Rozanov into his home. This was his sanctuary. He had moved once since he had first come to London, though not far. His flat was the upper two floors of a traditional Victorian terrace. He had a separate kitchen and then a cosy living room with a beautiful bay window. His landlord had let him paint the walls and he had painted the space a mix of moody reds and browns and dark blues. It calmed him. Between the living room and kitchen, there was a small music room. He couldn't rehearse much here, in constant fear of his downstairs neighbours hating him, but it was nice to have. Upstairs, he had a large bedroom, a bathroom and a small guest room. He'd usually let his parents have his room when they came to visit, the guest room wasn't really big enough for two. It had a fantastic view out over London though from the top of the hill he lived on.

It was home in a way Canada wasn't, not now, not for a long time.

Shane took a deep breath and opened the door, rushing up the stairs to his flat. Ilya was slower behind him, watching him go.

It felt like something had shifted. Part of Shane wanted to run again. Ilya, as if sensing Shane's hesitation, brushed a gentle hand over his shoulder. Shane shuddered into it and knew he couldn't run, even if it was the best option he had.

He turned into Ilya's touch instead and sank to his knees before the other man. Ilya praised him loudly. From there, time was a blur.

June 2021

Shane was not himself. Everyone had noticed. It had been three weeks since the end of Carmen and it was the final three weeks of rehearsals before the orchestra had their summer break. The ballet dancers had been finished for a while now. It was calming knowing Ilya wasn't in the building. However he couldn't explain any of that to his friends at work.

As the final rehearsal wrapped up and the strings performers shot him increasingly worried looks, Shane made a decision. It was time to go back to Canada and see his parents. They would calm him down, they always did.

He called his mom quickly, checking that his return would be at a good time and she sounded so incredibly relieved to hear from him that he began to realise how much his secrecy was impacting them too. It hadn't ever been his plan to hurt them but maybe he was. Maybe the distance was as obvious to them as it was to him. That hurt Shane and he knew it had to hurt his parents too. His parents who had only ever supported him, even when he moved halfway across the world and left them behind.

Shane packed quickly, nodding his goodbyes to his flat. It was home but so were his parents and he needed to remember that. He carried his suitcase to the tube, hopped on a train and headed out towards Gatwick, no flights available from Heathrow so last minute. The ride to the airport was tense as he tried to work out what to text Ilya. He forced himself to stop overthinking it and sent Ilya the same text he had sent Hayden.

Shane: Hi, I've headed back to see my parents in Ottawa. I'll let you know when I'm back in London.

There was no time to worry about what Ilya thought as Shane ran full throttle through Victoria station, heading for the Southern Train platforms at the far right of the building. He shoved tourists aside as he tried to make up for some of the time he had lost while packing.

Hayden ended up calling him after Shane had found a seat on the train and he had a wonderful conversation with his friend. He and Jackie had recently announced they were expecting their first child and it became clear as they continued talking that Hayden was as scared as he was excited. Once again, Shane felt bad. He should probably have checked in on Hayden before this. It was time to put things right. They didn't stop speaking until Shane was at the airport. His body felt lighter like it often did after his conversations with Hayden. They spoke about the UK's appalling parental leave policies, how the Pikes planned to cover the cost of maternity leave and Jackie's worries about her career after returning from an extended period off. It was nice to realise the rest of the world kept turning while Shane had an identity crisis.

After the conversation ended and Shane had made it through security at the airport, he took his phone out of his pocket again. Ilya had sent him a thumbs up and a gif of a moose, which did make Shane chuckle, and he also had a text from his mom.

Mom: Looking forward to seeing you! Such a shame Rose couldn't come.

And Shane's heart dropped again. What nobody realised, especially not Rose, was that Shane hadn't come clean to his parents about the end of his relationship.

They had been so pleased for him - so pleased he was settled and content - that the idea of making them worry had never appealed. It had seemed harmless at the time but the longer he went on lying, the more he didn't feel he could stop.

Shane replied briefly, not bringing Rose up at all. He'd have to come clean while visiting them, he knew that. It didn't make it any easier to think about.

The flight over was more tense than he had anticipated after that.

When he landed, his eyes practically sewn shut in exhaustion, Shane found himself collapsing into his mother's arms.

"We've missed you so much," Yuna said to her only child, hugging him tight. David's arms encased them both.

Shane immediately started crying. His parents' comforting words slowly bringing him back to reality.

"I love you. *We* love you," David kept repeating into his ear.

Shane pulled himself together and followed them home, David keeping an arm around his waist as they travelled to the car. Shane fell into the backseat and dozed on the drive, though he was just about awake enough to hear the worried whispers his parents were sharing in the front.

"What's the problem?"

"Do you think Rose--"

"Could it be his job?"

Shane sighed and burrowed deeper into the corner of the car. He was not in the right headspace to work out what to say yet and he was going to be here for two weeks. He had time to come clean. Time to share what needed to be said.

Ten days had passed and Shane still hadn't told his parents any of what he had promised himself he would say. They still thought he was in a relationship - with a woman, with *Rose* - and they had no idea he had been questioning anything about himself. Through sideways glances, his mom had informed him that the Montreal Symphony Orchestra were looking for a section leader for double bass. It would be a promotion. It would mean moving back to Canada, closer to them. Shane shuddered. She had clearly made up her mind about what had been causing his bouts of sadness. He thanked his mom but declined.

"Oh, of course, you'd need to speak to Rose about it anyway. I understand wanting to stay where her job is," his mom replied, giving him an overly friendly smile.

Shane's tiny smile dropped. This was the perfect time to tell her. Instead, he checked his phone. A text from Ilya had arrived in the last few minutes.

Ilya: Thoughts on getting dog?

Shane grinned. A real smile. The biggest his parents had probably seen in days.

Shane: What kind of dog are we talking about?

Shane: And where is the dog living?

Ilya: Small dog. My flat. Sveta and I will look after it.

The conversation went on for nearly an hour.

The whole time his parents were sending him strange looks. Eventually, his dad looked over at Shane and spoke to him directly.

“Who are you talking to?” He asked.

Shane panicked. “Uh, Rose,” he replied quickly, hoping he didn’t look like a small child caught out for lying.

If his parents suspected anything further, they didn’t mention it.

It all came crashing down on Shane’s last full day in Canada. He had been out for a walk by himself, wanting to get a bit of space before he headed back to London. He was attempting to gain the courage to inform his parents about his recent sexuality crisis, even if he didn’t tell them about Ilya. If he had realised his parents were going to work out most of it themselves, he might have come clean sooner. Nobody could see the future though.

When he saw Rose’s name flash up on his screen, he smiled.

“Rose, hi,” he said happily, always pleased to hear from her. It had been a few weeks since they had last talked and he realised he missed her.

“Shane, we need to talk,” Rose sounded upset. She sounded more worried than when she had broken up with him, in fact.

“Sure, okay,” Shane said, unsure what could have happened to make Rose so upset but more than ready to support her with it.

“Erm, I didn’t realise your parents weren’t aware we had broken up,” Rose began. Shane started to panic then. He sank onto a bench on the side of the footpath he was walking along.

“I-“ he stopped, unsure of what to say.

“No, no, it’s totally fine you didn’t tell them,” Rose rushed, “None of my business what they know or don’t know,” she sounded desperately sad again.

“I was going to tell them,” Shane said softly.

“Well... I may have accidentally told them for you,” Rose said, tears thick in her voice.

His mom had tried to be kind. She and Shane’s dad had been brainstorming ideas for how to cheer Shane up on his return to London and planned on gifting him a nice day out with Rose. They had phoned her to ask what their favourite restaurant was to visit. Rose, understandably

confused, had paused long enough for his parents to work out she was no longer seeing their son.

Shane hung up, promising Rose he wasn't mad and it was his own fault he was in this mess. He put his head in his hands and cried.

He returned home an hour later, having put it off as long as possible. The sun was beginning to set and he knew he would have to face his parents eventually. The walk up their driveway felt like the walk to the gallows.

"Hi Mom, Dad, I'm home," Shane called out as confidently as possible. They were both waiting for him in the living room.

"Shane, honey, I think we need to talk," his mom said, smiling at him softly.

Once again, Shane burst into tears.

The family ended up sat around the living room, staring at the TV which was tuned to some hockey game. Everyone was silent for what felt like forever. Eventually, Yuna broke the silence.

"I spoke to Rose," she started.

"I know," Shane replied weakly, "She told me."

Yuna nodded, as if Shane was confirming something to her. "Were you never together?" She asked Shane.

He looked up sharply. That hadn't been where he had been expecting this conversation to go. "No, we were together."

It was now David who spoke, moving over so he was sat next to Shane and could rub his back comfortingly. "I guess we were just wondering why you didn't feel able to tell us that you had broken up with Rose?"

Shane looked up at his parents, well aware that this was the time to tell them the truth, that he was pretty sure he was gay, that he had never felt the way he did when he was with Ilya when he was with a woman. The words got stuck in his throat.

"Shane, we love you so much," David said, sliding his arms around his son to pull him close, "That will never, ever change."

Shane shook with the tears forcing their way through his body. Once he had calmed down a little, he tested the words he did feel okay sharing. "You were so proud of me being with Rose, I knew you were. I didn't want to let you down by letting you know she had broken up with me, that I wasn't what she wanted."

Both his parents looked shocked. “Oh, Shane. We never wanted to make you feel like you weren’t good enough for us or for anyone else,” Yuna said, tears in her eyes now too.

“What went wrong?” David asked, looking at his son.

Shane shrugged. “ We just weren’t right together,” he said. Understatement of the century.

He slept poorly that night, still embarrassed with himself that he still couldn’t say the words ‘I’m gay’ to anyone he was close to. He hadn’t said them to Rose, hadn’t said them to his parents, haven’t even said them to the man he was sleeping with.

Somehow, saying it to Ilya might be hardest of all, he knew Ilya had slept with women and enjoyed it. The whole of the Opera House knew it. Would Shane look weak and pathetic if he admitted how he was feeling about his sexuality? He certainly felt a coward.

July 2021

Rose met Shane at the airport. He tried not to think too deeply into the fact that he wished it was Ilya. He hugged her tight and they headed back into London together, talking about everything and nothing as they went. They only touched briefly on Shane’s conversation with his parents, where he admitted to telling them the relationship was over and little else.

“Rose, I’m gay, aren’t I?” Shane eventually whispered to her in the back of a black cab.

“That’s not for me to say,” Rose whispered back, wrapping an arm around him.

“I’ve been... seeing... someone,” Shane murmured, testing out the words he had yet to say to anyone. Did it count as seeing someone? He supposed it was the best words he had for what was happening.

“A... male someone?” Rose asked, stroking Shane’s hair. She didn’t sound horrified or upset or angry, just quietly careful with him. He remembered why he had convinced himself he was in love with her.

“Yeah. It’s, erm, Ilya Rozanov,” Shane admitted, blushing.

If Rose was surprised by the news, she hid it well. She looked over at Shane and whistled appreciatively, “He’s hot. Half the company will be jealous you’ve managed to get him!”

Shane started giggling and soon both of them were sat in the back of the cab in hysterical laughter. Maybe this wasn’t so bad. Maybe he would be okay.

Ilya was sat at home with Svetlana, her head on his lap. She was telling him all about her latest series of dates with a man who worked in the City for some kind of financial services company. Truthfully, it didn’t sound like a real job, but Sveta liked him and he had been kind to her so Ilya would support his dumb career.

Ilya's phone buzzed unexpectedly.

Shane: I'm outside your flat.

Ilya rubbed his eyes, wondering if he was seeing things, but no the text stayed the same. He had known Shane was getting back from North America, of course. They had stayed in regular contact for most of the time he was out there. But nothing had been discussed about what would happen when he came home, Ilya half expected Shane to pull away again. His flight had only landed that morning and here he was outside Ilya's flat. It beggared belief.

Ilya threw Svetlana off him and she grumbled at the sudden change in position. Then she saw his face and was on high alert. "Hey, Ilya, you okay?" She asked in Russian. It was usually the highlight of his living arrangement that he didn't have to speak in English, but Ilya was distracted and replied in a half-English, half-Russian mess.

"Yes... someone's at the door."

He pressed the intercom button much harder than necessary and threw the door open, letting all the stale air in as he waited.

Shane shuffled up towards him and immediately pulled Ilya in for a kiss. Ilya sank into it.

"What are you doing here?" He asked, running a gentle finger over Shane's collarbone.

"I missed you," Shane said. The answer everything and still not enough.

Ilya shuddered at the words. He took Shane by the hand and pulled him into the flat. They were still holding hands when they walked into the living room where Svetlana still sat, on her phone now. She looked up and saw them. Ilya knew she must have clocked their hands and put two and two together but she said nothing, just nodded at Shane and went back to her phone.

There was no time to discuss anything further. Ilya knew what he wanted. He had known it the second Shane turned up at his door - the most handsome person Ilya had ever seen. He wanted to lick his freckles and press him up against the wall. Once they were in Ilya's room, he threw Shane onto the bed and climbed on top of him.

"You're so beautiful," Ilya told Shane, smiling down at him. Shane's blush, the one Ilya loved so much, began to creep up his cheeks.

"Says you," Shane replied, attempting to hide his face in Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya pulled Shane away and connected their lips together. The fireworks were back. Would they ever disappear between the two of them? It didn't seem so.

Slowly, Ilya brushed Shane's long hair off his forehead and bent down to kiss him where his hair had been.

It was starting to feel like so much more than a regular hook-up. The thought worried Ilya far less than he had expected. Shane was here. Shane could be anywhere in the hours after his

flight landed and he was with Ilya. That meant something. The certainty settled deep in Ilya's stomach as Shane rolled them over and pressed him down into the mattress.

They would be fine.

September 2021

The return to rehearsals meant a return to routine for Shane and Ilya. They had spent the rest of summer with each other more often than they were apart. It was a good thing Hayden was in an upcoming baby bubble or he would definitely have clocked what was going on.

Rose and Svetlana knew and that was enough. It still felt too fragile for the whole world to be let in.

Shane was far more impulsive than Ilya had originally expected. He would send a text at the end of his rehearsals with a room number in the Opera House where he sat waiting. They would make out, slowly and lazily, right under everyone's noses. Sveta and Rose had clearly worked out what was going on and would shoot Ilya knowing looks as he raced off after rehearsals, a new lease of life even though he was tired after dancing for hours.

It was three weeks into this arrangement that Ilya's rehearsal finished first for the first time that autumn. He found an empty dance studio and sent Shane the number. As he waited, he grew tenser, unsure how he wanted to be found. He eventually settled on stripping off to his boxers and he danced as he waited, watching himself in the mirror. Soon enough, another figure was watching him too.

Shane whistled. "Wow, you're pretty good, Hollander."

Ilya laughed. "I am best," he told Shane confidently.

"Mmmhmm, sure you are," Shane said with a smile, walking towards Ilya slowly.

Shane pressed him into the mirror, placing a possessive hand next to Ilya's face as he leaned in to kiss him passionately. The two men were pressed up against each other, barely aware of anything happening around them. For the first time, Ilya wondered if they would even make it back to one of their flats before anything happened. His hands were gripping Shane's ass, rubbing the hard muscle there in possessive circles when the door opened.

Both men whirled around. Stood in the doorway, looking shocked beyond belief, was Scott Hunter, carrying his dance bag.

"Oh, sorry, I wasn't aware the room was in use," Scott said sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. A ring glinted on his finger, a plain gold band. Ilya noticed it, strangely jealous, but knew this was not the moment to mention it. He was working out what sarcastic comment he could make to the man when he realised Shane had completely frozen.

Pulling away at last, Shane began to move without saying anything. Scott was still blocking the door and looked unsure what to do. He moved out the way to let Shane pass.

“That- That wasn’t what it looked like,” Shane said just loudly enough for both Ilya and Scott to hear him. Then he left.

Scott caught Ilya’s eye and whatever he saw there was enough for him to look genuinely concerned.

“Ilya, are you okay?” Scott asked, rushing over to grab him. Ilya realised he was swaying on his feet. He had known Shane was scared but embarrassed enough to pretend he hadn’t been five minutes away from getting down on his knees for Ilya? That was more than he had expected. Especially when Scott was openly gay and in a committed relationship. If anyone was going to judge, Ilya couldn’t imagine it being Scott.

Ilya sank to the floor and put his head between his legs, his breath coming in gasps and quivers.

Scott, apparently calm under pressure, guided Ilya through some breathing exercises.

Ilya looked up at the man he had been so sarcastic and rude to. He had always been aware Scott Hunter was a nice guy - it was the media narrative around him too - but it became increasingly clear that he was kind when he didn’t make a comment on the position he had found Ilya and Shane in or the state Ilya was now in. Ilya couldn’t promise he wouldn’t have chuckled at least slightly if the roles were reversed.

Instead, Ilya said the first thing that came into his head, “Are you married?” He asked Scott, nodding at the ring.

Scott’s eyes narrowed as if he was trying to work out Ilya’s angle but he replied quietly, “Engaged, actually. Kip asked me last week.”

Ilya smiled. Until that conversation, he had no idea what Scott’s partner was called but he was suddenly very happy for them both.

“I’m pleased for you,” Ilya admitted, honestly. If Scott had already seen him on the floor of the dance studio having a panic attack without laughing, Ilya felt not being a complete dick was the least he could do in return.

“Thanks,” Scott’s lips quirked up for a minute before he sat down in front of Ilya and smiled at him gently. “Does anyone else know about-“ he gestured to the studio around them.

“Yes. Svetlana and Rose know,” Ilya admitted slowly.

Scott nodded. “Okay, well, I’m not in the habit of outing people before they’re ready so consider both your secrets safe with me. Let Shane know that too when you next see him, yeah?”

Ilya nodded and changed the subject to the upcoming season. He and Scott chatted about the ballets that were planned and roles they hoped to gain as Ilya pulled himself up off the floor. Scott even abandoned his rehearsal to walk Ilya out.

As they got to the back exit of the Opera House, Ilya turned to Scott, his eyes serious for a change. “Thanks for the support. I’d like to say I would have done the same in your position but I’m not sure I honestly could. I appreciate it.”

Scott nodded. “You’re welcome. For what it’s worth, I hope you both sort it out. The closet is a lonely place at times. I don’t want to make it even lonelier for you both.”

Ilya nodded, not feeling the need to clarify any further and walked home. As he walked, anger built up in his stomach against Shane. Shane who ran every time the going got tough. Shane who said lovely things to him under the cover of darkness and in hidden rooms but couldn’t face it in the light of day.

He sighed. It was time to leave the chasing to Shane. He was done running after someone who didn’t want to be helped.

November 2021

It had been weeks since Scott Hunter had walked in on Shane with Ilya and nobody else seemed to know. Shane was grateful but he hated to admit he missed Ilya even more than he was concerned about people talking about him.

He wanted to hear Ilya’s voice again - his laugh, his smirk, his sarcastic comments.

Rose had taken to coming to see Shane after his rehearsals finished and she kept telling him to talk to Ilya.

“I’m telling you, Shane, that man is down bad. He’s not his usual self.”

“How?” Shane asked, pathetically wanting all the updates he could get.

“I don’t know. He’s not insulting anyone for a start. It’s scary.”

Shane laughed a bit as that was clearly Rose’s intention but he was thinking about what she had said. Was there still hope for them after he had run out on Ilya yet again? Could Ilya forgive him once more?

When they separated that evening, each turning towards their own homes, Shane thought more deeply about what he needed to do. What he wanted to do was call Ilya and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to show up at his door again and throw himself at Ilya’s feet and maybe other parts of him too. But would that help? Would that fix the mess Shane had managed to make of his life? He thought, probably, no.

After he had eaten dinner, he pulled out his MacBook and began to search for therapists nearby. With a sigh, he filtered them by ‘LGBTQ+ Specialists’ and picked the remaining therapist closest to his house. It was time he put in the work, even if it hurt.

Ilya was, as was usual recently, sat at home alone. Svetlana was out with her banker or whatever he was and Zane was out partying. Ilya didn't feel like going to a club. It wouldn't help fix what was wrong with him. There was no good cure for a broken heart.

Not that he, Ilya Rozanov, cockiest bastard around, was heartbroken. He was just sad and angry and alone. He was thinking about Shane constantly - his smile, his eyes, his freckles. He missed their conversations even more than he missed the sex.

Okay, maybe a little heartbroken.

His phone buzzed and he planned on ignoring it. He didn't want to go out and nothing would force him. Then he checked the name and froze. Why was Shane phoning him now? What was the point? Ilya didn't need Shane to come out publicly, he never had, he just needed him to accept himself and be okay with being with Ilya. He needed him not to run off at the first sign of trouble. He wanted Shane to need him the way Ilya was beginning to accept he needed Shane. He couldn't let him back into his life wholeheartedly if it was just going to end in regret once more.

When his phone started buzzing again, Shane calling a second time, Ilya finally snapped and answered.

"What do you want?" He asked more aggressively than he had planned.

Shane's voice was tentative and quiet as he replied, "To say I'm sorry. I wanted to talk."

"It's too late, Shane," Ilya said, holding onto the anger. Without the anger, he was liable to do something stupid like beg Shane to come over right then and hold him tight again. "I don't want you running off at the first sign of someone knowing I like dick."

Shane held a breath. "It's not the you liking dick part that's the problem Ilya--"

Ilya shouted loudly, "Isn't it? I'm willing for people to know I like dick, that I like *your* dick, Shane. I'm willing to not be able to go back to Russia for you. I'm willing to give up my *home* for you. What are you willing to give up? You won't even let Scott Hunter know."

Shane was quiet on the other end of the line, though his breathing was deep and laboured. "I-I'm trying," he started.

Ilya cut him off, "Just say the words, Shane. Admit who you are."

There was silence again.

"I've started therapy," Shane told Ilya quietly, like it pained him to say the words. Part of Ilya knew this was big news for Shane, that it was Shane trying to tell Ilya that he was working on himself, working on being ready. But Ilya broke. He didn't want Shane to have to go to therapy to admit to being with Ilya.

"It takes therapy for you to say you're gay?" He said acerbically, his voice breaking. "Just say the words. Say you're gay!"

Shane went silent. Then he sobbed.

“If I say it, then it’s real,” he cried down the phone line.

Ilya’s heart, already broken into chunks on the floor, shattered into a million pieces. This problem, the only problem he truly cared about, was the one problem he couldn’t even attempt to solve. He switched to Russian, knowing Shane wouldn’t understand but knowing he had to say the words before he lost his nerve, lost his resolve.

“I wish you had the faith in yourself you have in others. I wish you could see yourself the way I see you. Being gay isn’t a flaw, it isn’t something to apologise for, it’s not something you even have to tell others if you don’t want to. But you need to accept yourself. I can’t accept you for both of us. I can’t love you for both of us. And it’s killing me inside that you hate yourself so much. It kills me that I’m not enough for that to change, that *we’re* not enough for that to change. You’re so wonderful and beautiful and talented. You have all these friends who care for you so much. You have parents who support you beyond anything I’ve ever seen and love you so much. Have faith in yourself, I do.” He stopped, suddenly well aware that his voice must have sounded so, so sincere.

“Er-“ Shane began, clearly unsure what to say.

“Don’t tell me you’ve learned Russian now too,” Ilya said, trying to lighten the mood.

There was a small chuckle on the other end of the line. “No. No, I can’t speak Russian,” Shane said softly. “For what it’s worth, I am incredibly sorry.”

“I know,” Ilya said, and he did. “Speak soon, Shane.”

He hung up. What remained of his heart felt like it was connected to Shane, a few miles away. He sighed and turned for bed.

Shane sat silently after his phone call with Ilya. His heart was pattering in his chest. He knew what he had to do, the one thing that would have a chance to win back Ilya, the thing he wanted to be able to tell his therapist he had done.

He picked up his phone again, checked the time, converted the time difference and phoned his mom.

She picked up immediately. “Shane?” She asked, sounding nearly as worried about him as Ilya had on the phone a few minutes earlier.

“Hi, mom, I have something I need to tell you,” Shane started, his voice fragile at the end of his sentence. His mom made comforting noises, encouraging him to continue. He pulled himself together and forced his voice to be a little stronger. “I’m gay.” He told her quickly, pushing the words at. “Oh, and I’m in therapy.”

He wasn’t sure which of the confessions made his mother take a big, deep breath but one of them did. Her voice stayed soft and gentle though. “Oh, Shane, thank you for feeling like you

could tell me.”

“I wish I had told you sooner,” he said honestly. He didn’t feel brave for telling her right now. He felt like he had been a terrible son for not saying it sooner.

His mom shushed him down the phone, shuffling around on the other end of the line. “Don’t be silly. You told me when you were ready. I’m sorry if I did something that made you feel like you couldn’t tell me sooner. I love you for you, Shane, You are my incredible boy, you always will be.”

Tears prickled Shane’s eyes then. “I love you so much, Mom. Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.”

They spoke for a little while longer. Shane made a decision not to mention Ilya and his mom didn’t ask him about anyone he was seeing. Either she had a sixth sense, or it truly didn’t matter to her. They discussed his mental health and his anxieties. They discussed the perfectionism he had always displayed. She apologised if she had encouraged too much of that in her parenting.

They both cried. But the tears were good, therapeutic.

After he hung up, he felt so much better. They would be okay. Now he just had to make things okay with Ilya, but that was a problem for another day. A day a few therapy sessions from then possibly.

January 2022

Christmas had come and gone. Nutcracker was over for another year. It hadn’t shone as brightly this year, though it was still a special time of Ilya’s life. Svetlana had been cast as the Sugar Plum Fairy and was so excited, it was hard not to be excited with her. As Ilya’s life felt like it was crumbling, hers was soaring.

On the final night of the show, she sat clutching Ilya’s hand in the lobby bar. Svetlana had bunches of flowers at her feet, given to her after the show. Ilya should have been pleased, he was offered the most solos this run of any of his previous Nutcracker runs, but it hadn’t given him the joy it would have done in years past.

“They must be considering you for promotion to first soloist,” Svetlana gushed at Ilya. She had already received her promotion to the level and was wanting him with her. He was happy for her, he was. “We’ll be principals before you know it. You and me - leading pair.”

Ilya did smile at that. It was a fantastic thought. He would love to partner Svetlana. They hadn’t been able to do that since their days at the Bolshoi School.

He knew this wasn’t what Sveta had wanted to talk to him about though. She had news, he could feel it.

“Sveta, what is it? You know you can talk to me,” Ilya said, hoping that she did know he wanted to hear what she had to say, even in his melancholy.

“David asked me to move in,” she said in a rush. Ilya sucked in a breath. He hadn’t expected this happening so soon after Svetlana had moved to the UK. He wasn’t surprised though. Svetlana deserved the world and he hoped David gave it to her.

“Okay,” he said slowly, still trying to gather his thoughts.

“Obviously I won’t go if it’ll cause you problems and I definitely won’t go until our lease is over, but I wanted to make you aware of where I’m at.”

Ilya nodded a couple of times. “You should move in with him,” he said. It might mean him moving out elsewhere but he’d sort that. If he got word of a promotion to first soloist, he might even be able to stay by himself. It would be nice to have a spare room.

Svetlana clutched him close, “Thank you. I love you,” she said with total sincerity.

Ilya smiled. “I know. I am very loveable.”

He definitely didn’t think of Shane. Not at all.

Shane was leaving the Royal Opera House particularly slowly after the final show of the Nutcracker. He loved this ballet. A lot of that was because he knew it was Ilya’s favourite. Hayden was next to him, chattering on about his new baby, Amber.

“She’s so amazing, Shane,” he was saying repeatedly. Shane had met Amber and she was a cute baby, but he struggled to join in with a conversation about the beauty of being woken up in the middle of the night by coos. It didn’t sound like fun to him in the same way.

“I’m glad for you and Jackie,” Shane said for what felt like the millionth time. A thought struck him. “Shall we walk back through the main lobby?” He asked Hayden.

Hayden shrugged. It would take a lot longer but they weren’t in a rush and the Opera House was beautiful at Christmas. There were multiple decorated trees up and people wearing their Christmas finest. “Sure, let’s do it,” Hayden said.

The two men walked slowly, their instrument cases left downstairs ready for them to collect tomorrow, when it was lighter and brighter and the tube was less busy.

As they rounded the corner of the main bar on the mezzanine, Shane spotted Ilya sat with Svetlana, turned to face each other.

“Can we- I need to speak to Ilya a second,” Shane said, which appeared to startle Hayden slightly.

“What could you need to talk to that prick about?” Hayden asked seriously. Shane shot him a look. “Okay, fine, let’s go.”

Shane wandered over, fully aware that both Svetlana and Hayden were going to be in hearing range of this conversation. Still, he went ahead with it. He had spoken with his therapist a lot about confronting the moments his anxiety had built up in his head. He knew Hayden well and he knew Ilya trusted Svetlana. They wouldn't abandon him if they heard how he really felt.

"Hi," Shane said as he approached the pair. Svetlana noticed him first and her eyebrows raised, she turned, her body slightly blocking Ilya's. It felt like a lifetime before Ilya looked over as well. His face was drawn. His mouth tight. "You were incredible up there," Shane said, meaning it with every fibre of his being. It took everything in him not to turn around and stare at Ilya that night.

"Thank you," Ilya said briefly, then going silent again.

Hayden looked puzzled as he watched the interaction. Add it to the list of signs Shane should have already told his closest friend what had been going on.

"I miss you," Shane admitted, voice low, staring at the ground. He couldn't face Ilya. What if he saw his eyes darken with anger and hatred? He couldn't bear that.

Instead he heard two gasps. One behind him from Hayden who finally seemed to be piecing the situation together and one from Ilya in front of him. Shane was less sure what that gasp meant. He looked up. Ilya was looking at him with what appeared to be hope blazing in his eyes. He stared at Svetlana and then at Hayden before he returned his eyes to Shane.

"I miss you so much it hurts," Shane said again, needing to get his point across.

Ilya stood up then, closing the gap between the two of them. He pulled Shane to him and kissed him fiercely. He kissed Shane like he wasn't a soloist dancer of the Royal Ballet in the Royal Opera House Bar after a show, with patrons still milling about and their closest friends watching on.

"Holy shit," Hayden said behind them.

Shane ignored him and kissed Ilya back. He kissed Ilya the way he had wanted to kiss him for months. He kissed him with all the strength in his body and all the desire of his heart.

He heard Svetlana walk away, joining up with Hayden. "How about we give them some space?" She asked. Shane could practically hear the wink in her voice. Hayden must have agreed because soon he could hear the shuffling of their feet as they left the pair kissing in the centre of the bar.

Shane pulled away. Ilya looked at him and then at the retreating backs of their friends. "I think Hayden was surprised," he pointed out.

Shane laughed. "Yeah, I told my parents I'm gay but I hadn't made it as far as Hayden yet. Guess he'll work it out now though."

Grabbing hold of Shane's hands, Ilya's eyes lit up. "You told your parents?" He asked in a soft voice.

"Yeah, pretty soon after we last spoke, actually. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I needed to talk about it in therapy and I didn't want to burden your Nutcracker run, I know how important it is to you." If anything, Ilya's eyes grew even fonder at that.

"I missed you too," Ilya said, pulling Shane close to him for one final sweet kiss.

They headed off together. "My place or yours?" Shane asked, knowing that it didn't really matter any more. All the important people knew. Everyone else could make the assumptions they wanted to make, it wasn't really his problem.

"Mine's closer," Ilya said with a smirk.

"Mine's quieter," Shane replied.

"Ah, so you're not wanting the whole of London to hear you calling my name?" Ilya asked him serenely.

Shane punched him on the shoulder. "Shut up. Fine, your place, I don't want to wait longer than necessary."

They ran off into the night, holding hands for anyone to see.

April 2022

Ilya was pacing. He knew he was pacing and he knew it was stupid and dumb and unhelpful. But still he paced.

For once, as he waited for his meeting at the director's office, he wasn't alone. Shane stood against the wall opposite him, smiling fondly.

"You'll be fine," Shane murmured, reaching out for Ilya's hand to slow him down and pull him to his side. "The roles you've been getting suggest they're ready to promote you."

It was true. Ilya knew it was true. It still panicked him that he might not be viewed as capable enough. He had been cast as Alain in *La Fille Mal Gardée* which would be performed the following month. Not quite Colas, the lead male, but a strong role, an important role. He loved the humour in it and the character work. It played to his strengths as a dancer.

He still needed reassurance. Shane had his own good news the previous month, while he wasn't viewed as experienced enough for section principal for the double basses quite yet (what a difference a long-term career in music was to a short-term career in dance), he had been promoted to principal and was very happy as a result. That had been a wonderful evening spent at Shane's flat, exploring every inch of his new, principal body.

Now it was time for Ilya to face his reckoning.

“And I’m the one who’s supposed to be growing his self-confidence,” Shane joked, running a hand down Ilya’s side. “Have some faith in yourself.”

“I don’t always know how,” Ilya said, the honesty scaring him. It was true. He had never had the belief of his father, not since he had left Russia, anyway. Svetlana had been promoted ahead of him, almost like staying in Russia would have been the right choice.

Shane looked at him, really looked at him. Ilya’s heart slowed as he felt Shane’s eyes searching every bit of his body. Whatever it was he was looking for, he seemed to find. He smiled. “I love you,” Shane whispered. Ilya’s heart felt like it was flying. He felt like he had grown wings and was ten feet off the floor. He wanted to sing, to dance, to spin.

Still, that mustn’t have been obvious to Shane, who began to look a little worried. “I love you too,” Ilya whispered, equally quietly.

Shane smiled, that rare smile where he showed all of his teeth and all of his laugh lines. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me,” he murmured to Ilya, pulling him in for a gentle kiss.

Before they could discuss the importance of their relationship any further, the office door opened. Zane stepped out, crying what seemed like tears of happiness from the smile on his face. Ilya was truly glad. He hadn’t been as close with Zane since Svetlana joined the company, but he regretted that the moment he saw him in that doorway and promised himself that he would call him soon to meet up.

Zane nodded at Ilya and Shane. “Hey guys, lovely to see you.” By this point, most of the orchestra and the dancers knew that they were a couple. The fact they waited outside each other’s rehearsals and greeted each other with a kiss every time was possibly a giveaway. Ilya was pretty sure everyone was happy for him. Scott Hunter definitely was. His eyes had crinkled when he had first seen them together and he had shot Ilya a big soppy thumbs up. Ilya couldn’t even mind, not really. Scott might be a dinosaur, but he was a dancing legend.

“Good to see you too,” Shane said. Ilya found it a struggle to speak. He was so scared of what would be said on the other side of the door. He knew he hadn’t had a great start to the season when he and Shane were in their rocky patch. Or a great middle to the season either. He really was relying on his work ethic and well-respected name to see him through. He had to hope it would be enough.

Zane clapped Ilya on the back as he walked past. “Good luck, Ilya,” he said as he walked past. He stopped and turned around, “Oh, and Shane, I heard about your promotion - congratulations, really pleased for you!” Shane turned bright red. Any other time, Ilya would have laughed about it. Right now, he could barely crack a smile.

Slowly, he turned to face Shane. “Wish me luck?” He asked.

“You don’t need it but of course,” Shane replied with a fond smile, pushing some of Ilya’s loose hair out of his face, “I love you,” Shane reminded him.

Ilya did smile properly then. “Love you too,” he murmured, and walked into the room.

Shane waited outside tensely. He hadn't exactly planned on telling Ilya that he loved him outside the director's room of the Royal Ballet. It wasn't the most romantic of locations. He had a vision of a candlelit dinner or a walk in the park. This building was their life, though, or a lot of it. It made sense it was also the location of their most important moments.

Not for the first time, he praised whatever was up in the sky looking down on him, making sure that he met Ilya Rozanov. He was sure he could have been happy in any orchestra. He loved music. He loved playing hard and feeling whatever the composer wanted him to feel. That wouldn't change. But the love he felt for Ilya, the trust he placed in him, he wasn't sure that would have been available just anywhere. "Thank you for waiting for me," Shane whispered. They were the words he truly wanted to say to Ilya. They were the words harder to admit than 'I love you'. They still didn't talk much at all the mixed signals and anxious retreats Shane had put Ilya through over the years.

They had met at the Royal Opera House though. Both the first time as teenagers and the second time as professionals. It seemed like fate wanted them to stick around.

It wasn't too long before Ilya had reappeared. A female dancer Shane didn't know particularly well was leaning against the wall next to him by now. He had shot her a smile and she had tried her best to smile back. She looked so young. One of the junior dancers maybe or an artist hoping for promotion to the most coveted roles of the corps. Ballet was a hard world to be in. A short career and a competitive one.

The young woman walked towards the door. Ilya held out his hand to pause her for a second. "Hey, Maggie, right?" Maggie stopped and looked at him curiously, her eyes a little worried. Ilya's reputation as a sarcastic little shit hadn't quite gone away, even as he stared dreamily at his boyfriend. Maggie nodded. "Good luck in there. You did really well in The Nutcracker. It's not an easy ballet but you did really well in Act II. I have every faith you will get the promotions you want. I hope it's this year but if it's not, keep working, keep trying, there were years I didn't get the promotions I wanted and now I'm where I always wanted to be." She smiled a little brighter, muttered her thanks, and went into the room.

Shane took Ilya's hand. "Good news then?" He asked.

"Well, the good news was that you loved me. The promotion to first soloist is just the, what's the saying?" Ilya trailed off.

"The icing on the cake?" Suggested Shane.

"Yes, that," Ilya smiled at him. Shane was so pleased for him. So pleased for them. They had everything they wanted and so much more than they had ever dreamed.

As they walked off towards Ilya's flat (it was just Ilya's now, he had taken a risk and decided to put it in just his name), they swung their hands between them. The sun shone brightly behind their heads, casting their shadows out far in front of them. It was a beautiful day in Covent Garden so they decided to leave via the main entrance, spilling out onto the cobbled street. Singers and dancers busked in front of the shops, the market had tourists milling

around and the bars were busy with people laughing and having fun. It really was the best city on earth.

Ilya turned to Shane, as if reading his mind. “I was thinking about settling here permanently,” Ilya said, gauging Shane’s reaction.

Shane laughed. “I know. You’ve had the government website about indefinite leave to remain up for weeks. You weren’t exactly subtle.”

“So you don’t want to get it with me?” Ilya asked, feigning outrage as he placed his hand over his heart.

“No, of course I do. Once we have it, we can apply for citizenship after a year. Though we’ll need to pass a test first...” Shane trailed off, “What?” He asked, seeing the look on Ilya’s face.

“You’re thinking ahead like that?” Ilya asked.

Shane shrugged, “I love you, I love the ROH, I love London. I don’t see a reason not to be thinking that far ahead.”

Ilya spun Shane around, right there in the middle of Covent Garden, in front of all the tourists. He kissed his boyfriend where everyone could see them, just like he had wanted for years.

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. He wanted all of it.

September 2022 - Epilogue

The housewarming party had, strangely, been Shane’s idea. Usually it was Ilya who planned all their get-togethers but this one Shane had felt very strongly about.

He had moved into Ilya’s flat three weeks earlier after his own flat’s lease had finished. There had been a couple of rushed conversations about whether this was too much, too soon, but both recognised that Shane had already moved in, at least in reality. Sure, some of his stuff was still at ‘his’ flat, but that hardly mattered when he only went home once a week to pretend like he was still living there.

And living together was everything Shane had ever wanted. He woke up each morning and thanked the stars for his life, for his partner. He even ate some of the odd foods Ilya forced on him (and Ilya tried poutine in return when they went on a Canadian road trip; he had hated it). The flat was a mishmash of them now. The guest room was a mixture of space for Shane’s parents when they came to stay, Shane’s music space and Ilya’s gaming den. The living room had ballet posters on the wall alongside Shane’s favourite album artwork. The kitchen had the complicated coffee machine Ilya loved and Shane’s trusty air fryer. They mixed. They mixed well.

Shane's parents had met Ilya for the first time when he flew out to Ottawa with Shane. It was braver than Shane thought he would have been. They had spent five weeks out in North America, travelling between major cities and quieter lakes. It had been the trip of a lifetime. Unsurprisingly, Shane's parents adored Ilya. His mother had grown especially fond of him. On their final day with his parents, before they went off travelling by themselves, he had found them in the kitchen talking. He still didn't think Ilya was aware he had been eavesdropping.

"I'm so glad you found each other," Yuna said, hugging Ilya close.

"Me too," Ilya had said, smiling at her, his eyes bright and a little tear-clogged.

Yuna pulled back and looked at Ilya, "I get the impression my boy might have messed you over a bit. I apologise if I added to that. I know I have always pressured him to do well and succeed. I hadn't realised how much that impacted Shane until recently."

Ilya shrugged as best he could with her hands still on his shoulders, "Is okay. Shane loves you, you love Shane. We got there in end."

Shane moved away then, giving them some space. He knew Ilya had complicated feelings around parents. Once he had learned more about the early loss of Ilya's mother, he had almost considered not extending the offer of the trip to meet the Hollanders to Ilya. He had worried it would be too much. He was now thinking it was exactly right.

The housewarming was Shane's way of trying to formally integrate their friendship groups. He had invited all the dancers they were close to: Jackie, Svetlana, Zane, Rose (and Rose's new, singer boyfriend), Scott (and Scott's new husband, Kip) and the key members of the orchestra. Hayden was buzzing for an evening out with Jackie and the wider crew. They'd left his mum babysitting Amber. Shane's parents were also there, camped out in the guest room. The guest list had spiralled, with dancers and orchestra members asking to add on friends and plus ones, until the flat was full to the brim.

It was exactly what Ilya wanted. Shane was in his arms, talking animatedly to their friends, sharing stories of their trip to Canada. Ilya stared at him, imagining their future together: the engagement, the wedding, the kids, the retirement and constant travelling. He wanted it all. He wanted everything. Sometimes it felt like too much, too quick. Other times he remembered he had been halfway in love with Shane since the first time they kissed nearly three years earlier. They were fine. They were good. No, they were excellent. Shane had his therapist and Ilya also had one now. That had been Shane's idea ('I think it would be good for you to have a place to discuss your family' he had whispered into Ilya's ear one night).

Jackie, Rose and Svetlana pulled Shane away to try and teach him some drunk ballet. Shane giggled and stumbled as he attempted to be the fourth dancer for the Dance of the Cygnets. Ilya rolled his eyes and hoped that it didn't result in a hospital visit. Hayden came and stood next to him. Ilya and Hayden still weren't what you would call close but they were cordial now and their partners adored each other.

“Hey, mate,” Hayden said, slinging an arm around Ilya’s back.

Ilya turned and nodded at him, “Pike,” he said a little stiffly.

Hayden smiled as the whole quartet of swans fell to the floor in a heap. “Look, I’m never repeating this again because you’re an asshole and you have made junior dancers cry, but I’m glad he’s with you. You’ve made him a better person.”

Ilya looked over at Hayden and shrugged. “No, he made himself better person. And junior dancers deserve it. They steal my spot at barre.”

Hayden shoved him gently, “Well, thanks anyway. And maybe ease up on the glaring in the studio, we all see what your face does when Shane walks in, stops being as believable.”

Ilya acted affronted, sighing and glaring at the ground but he was warm inside. He liked that everyone knew. He liked that they supported them anyway. He liked that a lot of the company went to Scott’s wedding over the summer. Shane and Ilya being away helped prevent the awkward moment of finding out whether they were invited or not. Shane probably would be. Everyone loved Shane.

As Shane got to his feet, he nodded towards the small railing that they called a balcony and Ilya followed him out there. They looked out across the city view, London swarming in all directions and they both smiled.

“You are the best thing that ever happened to me,” Shane murmured, kissing Ilya slowly.

Ilya wasn’t going to argue but he was pretty sure that actually they were the best thing that had ever happened to each other.

End Notes

I've had so much creativity breathed back into me since reading and watching Heated Rivalry. Can't believe how much these characters have infected my soul.

Thanks for reading. If you enjoyed, I always welcome comments!

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