

The Modern Age

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The Modern Age

by [tunamelts](#)

Summary

“Oh my god, oh my god. Seriously, this is the best. I can’t believe you’re my neighbour. I’m calling it now, Hollander. This right here is the beginning of a friendship that will go down in history.”

Ilya is 10 years old when his family moves from Jacksonville, Florida to small town Ontario. There, he forms an unexpected friendship with Shane, the boy living on the ginseng farm across the street.

As they grow up and grow apart, their paths continue to cross at high school hockey games, in tabloid articles, and at one particular intimate Muskoka cottage.

OR: A childhood friends to strangers to lovers AU in which Shane Hollander (up and coming indie rock star) and Ilya Rozanov (brooding artist) take nearly fifteen years to figure their shit out.

Notes

👁👁 Hello!

For all the lovers of slow burn, angst, and a happy ending, I hope you enjoy! Comments and feedback are always welcome, I love having a good chat with all of you 😊

For the lovelies who have requested it: [Spotify Playlist](#) featuring all songs from chapter openings, along with some others that didn't quite make the cut, but which I believe inspire Shane's song writing in this fic 🥰

If you want to hang out:

- kiramour on tumblr
- smokedlasagna on threads

Bye for now!

Chapter 1: Where the Fuck is Bobcaygeon?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Gold teeth and a curse for this town
Were all in my mouth
Only I don't know how they got out, dear
Turn me back into the pet
I was when we met
I was happier then with no mindset*

“New Slang”, The Shins

May 2001 – Jacksonville, FL

Ilya Rozanov watched concentric circles of crystal water emanate from his ankles as he sat, poolside in his family's Florida backyard. The late May heat sat heavy in the air, and each breath he took was laboured, decisive. He wondered if maybe he was just dreaming, or had been knocked out by Alexei and was hallucinating.

“I am sorry, Ilya,” Irina, his mother, said, resting a hand on his bare shoulder. Her palm was cool to the touch, like a ghost passing through him. It startled him back into the moment.

His whole life was being ripped out from underneath him. Canada? Had she seriously said they were moving to *Canada*? Sure, Alexei had spent the first four years of his life in Moscow and was experienced in the foreign concept of seasons, but Ilya was a born and bred Floridian. He wasn't sure that his Sunshine State curls could survive Canadian winters. He had worked hard this past year to achieve this level of Ashton Kutcher worthy flow, alright? No longer was he an uneducated, buzzcut sporting, three-in-one using *child*. He had seen the light. He conditioned now.

Besides, Ilya was pretty sure they had literal moose and bears just wandering the streets up there.

“I'm not ready to fight a moose,” he said.

“I know this must be hard for you, Ilya, but this is best for the family. Your father will have much better position in the new job.”

Ilya looked over his shoulder, meeting her gaze. Her blonde hair framed her delicate features. She looked like one of her paintings, blurred around the edges, ethereal. Ilya wondered if their new home would still have an art studio for her. He could spend a lifetime watching her paint; lazing on the dusty hardwood of her studio, turpentine and oil lingering in the air. She carried the scent with her like a secret.

“Who cares about dad’s job?” Ilya muttered under his breath.

While breaking the news to the boys, Irina had explained to them that Grigori had received a job offer as the Superintendent of the Central East Correctional Centre, which was apparently a big deal. The prison was located in a smaller town than Jacksonville, so his years spent as a Correctional Officer here were worth more, and therefore translated to the step up in rank. Ilya could not care any less if he tried. The most he could hope for was that it would mean his dad might be working more, and home less.

“Mishka!” She pinched at his cheek. “It is big step up for him! We should be very proud.”

“Oh my God, stop being such a pussy!” Icy water slapped Ilya across his chest and face. “Why do you even care? It’s not like you have any friends here,” Alexei taunted him. He was treading water a few feet away from him. The first signs of stubble were beginning to peek through like patchwork across his jaw, and he was looking more and more like their father every day. Ilya hoped he would end up with an early receding hairline like Grigori too.

Ilya kicked his foot towards his brother, splashing back at him. “Yeah whatever, you just don’t give a shit that we’re leaving because Jessica dumped you last week. Her sister’s in my class and she said you got caught kissing her *best friend* at her own birthday party. Like who even does that?”

Alexei barked out a laugh, his jaw tight and shoulders tense. “Yeah, because Jessica was a fucking prude, God. What did she expect.” His brother gripped a hand around his ankle. “You wouldn’t get it, it’s not like you’ve ever gotten close enough to a girl to kiss one.”

Alexei tugged sharply on Ilya’s leg, dragging him into the pool. He surfaced a second later, coughing, chlorine burning, only to be elbowed back beneath the waves. He tried to knee Alexei in the stomach, but it was useless with the resistance of the water. Ilya reached his hands out, trying to grasp onto something, anything, his lungs tight and constricted with a lack of oxygen. Alexei finally relented, pushing away from him, nearing the edge of the pool, and Ilya was able to come up for air.

“Boys, enough!” their mother scolded as soon as he broke the surface. “Both of you, dry off and change. Dinner is ready soon, and you need to help with packing the bedrooms.” She shook her head at the two of them and turned to make her way across the patio, towards the sliding doors into their kitchen. “And please, try to be happy about the move in front of Papa,” she warned before stepping into the house.

Alexei splashed water at Ilya one last time before lifting himself out of the pool. He flipped Ilya off as he walked towards the house himself, laughing again.

Ilya hesitated before going inside. He leaned back, floating lazily. The cool surface lapped against his skin. Cicadas rang through the air, enveloping him in their song. It was a cloudless day, and it was only going to get hotter as the summer went on, but he wouldn’t be here for that. He wondered what the weather would be like in Canada. Bobcaygeon, his mother had said, was where they would be living. She explained that it was about 100 miles from Toronto, which he thought he had heard of in school before, but he wasn’t sure.

Alexei wasn't wrong, exactly, when he said Ilya didn't have any friends. He didn't have much of a social life at his elementary school. But next year was going to be different, he had been sure of it. He was going into grade 6, and that meant he would be starting middle school. The school near them had a hockey team, and it was all Ilya had been thinking about for the past year.

Off the ice, Ilya felt wiry and out of place in his own body. When he was skating however, he was confident, in control. His mom had enrolled him in skating lessons basically before he could walk, and he had signed up to play hockey every year since. So far, he had never gone to school with anyone from his team, so being able to play on the school team next year would mean having people he could connect with. Plus, a few of the guys from his current team would be starting at the same middle school as him in the fall. Finally he would have a chance at knowing what it was like to fit in.

Or at least he would have, if they weren't moving to goddamn *Canada*.

Their mother had explained that the new school they would be attending was K-8, meaning he wouldn't even get to start middle school like he had been looking forward to. Apparently, lots of schools in Ontario were like this, especially in smaller towns. At least his brother would be in high school, so he would have six hours a day of peace. As he floated, Ilya could hear the muffled sounds of his parents arguing in Russian from the kitchen. The cicadas continued to hum. A gentle breeze pressed through the dry heat and Ilya sighed.

Two Weeks Later

The drive from Jacksonville to Bobcaygeon was hot, endless, and unbearably boring. Ilya and Alexei were crammed in the middle row of their family's Dodge Grand Caravan. As they drove, Ilya said a silent goodbye to the belly up armadillos and the billboards that alternated between advertising roadside gun shows and our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ who was apparently alive as well! Ilya wondered what roadkill and paid advertising would be featured across the border. They had spent the last two weeks packing up their entire lives into boxes, the rear seats folded down and jammed with the evidence. They had a midsized U-haul towing behind more of their essentials, but everything else had been sent over in a shipping container paid for by the prison, a part of their dad's relocation package. Irina had insisted it hadn't been worth it to ship over a lot of the larger things, so she had also been on a bit of a shopping frenzy, ordering new sofas and bedroom sets that had already been delivered to their new house.

Ilya passed the time playing through most of Pokemon Gold on his Gameboy Colour, fighting his brother over the armrest in between their seats, and completing Sudoku puzzles from a book he picked up at a gas station on one of their bathroom breaks. By the time they approached the Canadian border, he had given up on longing to stay in Florida, he would happily take whatever Canada had to offer as long as he could *get out of this car*. He was sick of the Russian CDs his dad played every time it was his turn to drive, sick of his brother spitting BBQ sunflower seeds at him when their parents weren't looking, sick of the smoke that wafted from his parents' cigarettes as they chain smoked their way through most of the drive, sick of the two square foot prison cell he was trapped in.

“How much longer?” Ilya drawled once they finally made their way through customs.

“Five hour. No complaining,” his dad ordered from behind the wheel. Grigori turned the volume up on his current CD. This was the third time they had listened to it today. Ilya retaliated with every fibre of his being (he passive aggressively leaned his head against the window and imagined breaking his dad’s music collection with reckless abandon).

Irina turned around as much as she could in the cramped passenger seat, poking her head between the headrest and the door so she could make eye contact with him.

“I think you will like it there more than you know, Mishka,” she said, using the pet name for him that Ilya pretended to resent. “There is hockey arena five minute drive from our new house, and a river in back, where you can skate in winter. And there is hill nearby for, how do you say,” she paused, trying to think of the word in English, “Ah, what is it, Alexei, kataniye na lyzhakh?”

“Skiing,” Alexei said, rolling his eyes. Ilya felt a pang of jealousy that he couldn’t translate the way his brother could. It felt like Alexei had access to this whole other side of their parents that he wasn’t able to grasp.

“Yes! Skiing. You have never done this, I think you will enjoy.” Irina smiled at him while she said this. Ilya did his best to mirror her gaze. He did like the idea of being able to skate in their backyard all winter. Maybe the Canadian cold wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“That sounds fun, mom.” She raised a delicately plucked eyebrow at him. “Seriously! It does,” Ilya smiled more authentically this time, unable to disappoint her. “I’m excited to try skiing.”

“I’m excited to watch you fall on your ass and look like an idiot,” Alexei muttered, quiet enough that their mother couldn’t hear them over the music.

“Screw you,” Ilya said, chucking his book of Sudoku puzzles at Alexei’s head.

Alexei snatched the book, rolled down his window partway, and dangled it outside, pages flapping madly in the wind.

“Give it back you asshole!” Ilya leaned across the centre console, yanking on Alexei’s sleeve.

“Blyat!” their father shouted, “Quiet from now on, or I pull over and you both walk.”

The boys both snapped back into their seats, silent, backs hunched over, like they had been slapped. Alexei tossed the book of puzzles back at him. Gregori turned up the music, again. He took a long drag from his cigarette, ash falling into the cupholder below and belted along with the lyrics. Ilya silently vowed to himself that if time travel was ever invented he would go back to the 1930s and drown Yuri Vizbor as a baby so he would never grow up to produce this musical equivalent of asparagus.

Translation Notes:

- Mishka (Мишка) translates to "little bear" or "teddy bear", used here as a term of endearment for Ilya by his mom.

Chapter 2: Sidney Prescott, Boy Next Door

*Tonight, I'll dream while I'm in bed
When silly thoughts go through my head
About the bugs and alphabet
And when I wake tomorrow, I'll bet
That you and I will walk together again
I can tell that we are gonna be friends
Yes, I can tell that we are gonna be friends*

“We’re Going to Be Friends”, The White Stripes

June 2001 – Bobcaygeon, ON

It was a Saturday in June, late afternoon, and Shane Hollander was absentmindedly staring out the window of his bedroom when he saw the navy blue minivan carefully turn into the long driveway of the house across the street. The sold sign had been on display for about two and a half weeks now, and Shane had been wondering who would be moving in. Delivery vans had been dropping off large boxes periodically since the sign first appeared, but he had yet to see anyone actually move in.

Shane perked up at his desk, lifting his head off his folded arms, as he tried to get a better look through the line of trees that dotted either side of the neighbouring driveway. It was a classic Muskoka inspired home, with rich wood tones, large glass windows, and *two* balconies, one extending symmetrically from either side of the a-frame center of the house. Shane thought it looked more like a luxury cottage than a house that belonged on a dusty gravel country road in his hometown, but this happened all of the time here; people bought up cheap plots of land, tore down the existing structures, and then sold them for an insane markup to out-of-towners.

Shane’s family lived on a large piece of land as well, 10 acres in total, but they used most of it for their family business of ginseng farming. Currently, most of the surrounding acres of farmland were covered in black canopies to protect the crop from the fast approaching summer sun. They were almost done assembling the canopies for the season, with just a few acres left to go. Their house itself was much smaller in comparison, and looked like your typical farmhouse; white siding, a wraparound porch, and a red brick chimney smothered in creeping vines running up the side. To Shane, the combination of the surrounding black canopies and white home made their property look like a marble tombstone sticking out of the black earth. In contrast, the neighbour’s property looked like a summer oasis tucked away in the woods.

Across the street, the doors of the minivan started to open as the family trickled out. The man who exited from the driver’s seat looked to be maybe 15 or 20 years older than his own parents, maybe in his early 60s, while the other three passengers seemed younger. Shane watched as the woman with long, blonde hair raised her arms in a languorous stretch, and

then walked over, giving the man a swift peck on the lips. Shane raised his eyebrows in surprise. She looked like she could have been his daughter. The other two boys must have been their kids then. The older one looked like he was maybe 14 or 15, with dark hair cropped close to his head. Shane didn't have any siblings, but he was intimidated by older kids. The grade 7 and 8s at his school could be such dicks. One time a group of them took all the soap out of the dispenser in the bathroom and actually *pissed* inside of it. Shane gagged at the memory. The youngest boy looked like he might be around Shane's age. He had long, curly blonde hair, similar in colour to who he assumed was their mom. He was currently staring, slack jawed, at the house in front of him. Apparently he was equally as impressed with it as Shane was. He wondered if the boy liked Playstation. It would be cool to have a friend next door to him.

Shane went back to making his way through the English homework that was on his desk. He was working on a book report of the novel *Holes*. There were still a couple more weeks left before school let out for the summer, and Shane was going to miss the routine. July meant working for his parents most days, which was physically demanding and seemingly endless. August was always something to look forward to, though. His parents owned a piece of property in Algonquin where they spent the month every year leaving the farm in the hands of some seasonal employees. They had a log cabin up there, and to Shane it was like something out of a story book.

Shane tried to focus on his writing, but periodically caught himself getting distracted, watching the family unload the U-haul full of boxes into their house.

"Shane!" His mother, Yuna, called from downstairs.

"What?" Shane asked, putting down his pencil and swivelling around in his desk chair.

"Come down here for a minute, would you?"

Shane took one last look out the window. The family didn't seem to be outside anymore, having brought everything in. Shane wondered what it was like, having to move to a new place. He had lived in Bobcaygeon his whole life, and it was hard to imagine leaving.

He found his mother in the kitchen, holding out an aluminum casserole dish from the freezer.

"Sweetie, can you do me a favour and bring this over to the new neighbours? It would be nice to welcome them into the community with a little something," she said, smiling at Shane.

"Oh! Why don't you grab a bottle of my latest batch of maple syrup from the pantry too, Shane, I'm sure they'd love that," his dad, David, piped in from where he was sitting at the kitchen island, a Clive Cussler paperback in his hands.

His mom made a face. "Honey, are you sure? Please don't be offended, but last time it was kind of watery."

"Do you hear this, Shane?" he dad said, in mock offence. "Your mother has no faith in me!"

“That’s not it!”

“Sure, sure.” He dog-eared the corner of the page he was on (Shane recoiled at this – how was this man his father?) and closed the book. “Trust me, the new batch is flawless. They’ll love it. I added some of our ginseng into the recipe this time, so make sure to let them know, Shane. It’s *healthy* maple syrup. Helps boost the immune system! I’m thinking we could market it to some of our overseas buyers, you know. I think it would be big in Japan. Yuna, let’s send some to your cousin and see what he thinks.”

Shane watched his parents, a slight smile on his lips. They continued to bicker as he collected the maple syrup and casserole dish, slipped on his sneakers at the front door, and made his way across the gravel road to the neighbouring house. The walk up their drive felt longer than it had looked from his bedroom window, and the house seemed to tower over him, daunting and unnatural. Shane wondered if this was a bad idea. He had seen *Scream*, and this was starting to feel a bit too Sidney Prescott for his liking. He should have said he was busy with his homework. Plus, if they weren’t psycho killers, the family was going to think he was a stalker for showing up on their front door with food not even an hour after moving in. He debated going home, but then worried that someone had already seen him from the window, and would think he was even weirder. Shane let out a nervous breath and knocked on the large oak door.

Ilya heard the knock while he was sitting on the floor in the middle of his room, an open box of posters, video games, and action figures from his old room in front of him. They were really the only things he had to remind him of his old life. Almost all of the furniture in his room was new. New bed, new desk, new bookshelf. He thought back on how the car had felt so overstuffed on the way here, and yet this new home felt disconcertingly empty. He was grateful for the things he did bring. He had his hockey gear bag splayed open in front of him too, and that *really* smelled like the rink back home, for better or for worse.

“Ilya!” his mom called from the primary bedroom down the hall. “Can you get the door? Might be movers with shipping container.” Ilya took one last look at the team photo he was holding, from the most recent season. His curls were darkened and damp with sweat and his grin was wide.

“Sure, mom,” he called back, leaving the photo on the floor.

As Ilya approached the front door the knock repeated itself, quieter this time, more hesitant. Ilya unlocked the door and was greeted by a face that most definitely did not belong to the movers. Unless Canada had some wild child labour laws that he was previously unaware of.

“Hi,” Ilya said, curiosity pouring into him. He noticed the boy looked about his age. His hair was dark, cropped in a somewhat ridiculous bowl cut, and Ilya noticed a spattering of freckles along his nose and cheeks, like beams of sunlight that had fought their way through thick foliage and dappled a forest floor. Ilya couldn’t make out his eye colour because the boy was currently staring with rapt interest at the door mat.

What felt like too many seconds passed by, and the boy didn’t respond to him. He was clutching a casserole dish with an unlabeled glass bottle on top of it, and his knuckles were

white with how hard he was gripping onto it.

“Hello?” Ilya tried again, waving his hand awkwardly in front of the kid.

“Oh god, sorry. Hi! Hello,” the kid looked up at Ilya, broken out of whatever trance he had been in. He looked panicked for a second and then grinned, all teeth, as though someone was holding him hostage and forcing him to take a smiling photo for his family.

“I’m from across the street, I’m Shane. Hollander. Shane Hollander. My parents saw you and your family moving in and they asked me to bring over a casserole and some maple syrup. My dad made it. The last time he made it, it was way too watery, but this time he said it’s better. He put ginseng in it. We run a ginseng farm. I’m supposed to mention that it’s healthy. Good for the immune system.” It seemed that now that the boy, Shane, had started talking, he wasn’t going to stop. “Not that he’s assuming you have a bad immune system. I’m sure it’s fine. I mean, personally I think the sugar content negates the positive effects of the ginseng, but don’t tell him I said that.”

“I won’t,” Ilya responded, feeling like he owed it to the kid to say something and give him a second to breathe.

“You won’t?”

“I won’t tell your dad you said that.” Ilya smiled.

“Oh, right,” Shane said. “Thanks.” He bobbed his head a couple of times, awkwardly.

“Are movers here, Mishka?” Irina said, making her way down the stairs. “Oh! Hello,” she said, seeing Shane at the door. “Who is this?”

“Uh, this is Shane, mom. He lives across the street. His parents sent him over with a casserole for us, and some maple syrup with...”

“Ginseng,” Shane interrupted. Ilya noticed he was inspecting the doormat again.

“Right, ginseng,” Ilya repeated. “Apparently it’s good for the immune system.”

“Thank you, Shane! That is very nice of your family. Ilya, don’t make Shane wait with casserole. Take it to kitchen, please.”

“Of course, mom.” Ilya did as she asked, putting the casserole away in the freezer, as it seemed frozen solid. He wasn’t sure if the syrup should go on the counter or the fridge, so he walked back to the foyer holding it out. When he came around the corner his mom was attempting to make conversation with Shane. He tried not to laugh at the picture. Between his mom’s broken English and Shane’s one word answers it didn’t seem to be going well.

“Uhh, Shane, should this go in the fridge, or...” he interrupted, shaking the bottle.

“Oh,” he looked back up at Ilya. “It can stay out until you open it, and then you should keep it in the fridge.”

“Cool,” he said, nodding.

Shane looked like he was about to say something else, probably to say bye and go home, when there was a loud crash from upstairs, followed by some very decorative Russian swearing on his dad’s behalf. He classily followed it up by shouting his mom’s name, and then continuing to swear. Irina smiled stiffly at Shane, patted Ilya on the shoulder, and then half-ran up the stairs.

Ilya could hear her closing the bedroom door behind her, and she was clearly trying to speak in hushed tones to his dad, but this was negated by his dad’s voice only rising higher. It was followed by another loud crash, like his dad had slammed his hand down against a piece of furniture. He looked at Shane with wide, uncertain eyes.

“Uh, sorry about that,” he said.

“The syrup’s really good with vanilla ice cream, you know,” Shane said, glancing over Ilya’s shoulder, up the stairs.

“Yeah?” Ilya asked.

“Yeah. We’ve got some at my place? If you want to come over for a bit? You could try it?” Shane smiled again, with slightly less teeth than before.

Ilya’s head dragged back and forth between the bedroom upstairs and Shane. “I mean, I should...” he trailed off. “You know what, hell yeah, let’s do it.”

“Woah! You’ve got MLH 2001! This looks epic!” Ilya was currently perusing Shane’s collection of PS2 games. This particular title had been a gift from his uncle, who evidently did not know Shane particularly well. The game remained in its packaging.

“Why’s it still in the plastic? How have you not played this yet?” he asked, seeming to read Shane’s mind.

“Uh, I guess I’m not much of a hockey guy,” he admitted.

Shane was sitting on the end of his bed, watching Ilya take in his room. He ran his hands along the games stored in the TV console like he owned the place. After reading the backs of games that interested him, he returned some to the shelf in the wrong order, but Shane didn’t mention it. Not counting the times when his parents had family friends over who had kids a couple of years younger than him, Shane had never really had friends in his room before. Mostly due to the fact that he didn’t really have people in his life that he would consider friends.

When Shane had walked back into his house with Ilya in tow, his parents had been, understandably, at a loss for words. They had recovered quickly, and introduced themselves to Ilya with their usual warm demeanor, but Shane knew they would have questions for him later. He repeated the excuse about needing Ilya to try the maple syrup with vanilla ice cream, and while he was sure they didn’t buy it, they played along with it.

Ilya's mom had seemed really nice, but Shane felt weird leaving him there in the middle of what was clearly a really heated argument. He couldn't understand what was being said, it sounded like they were speaking some Eastern European language to him, but he could feel the tension in the air. He wondered where the other boy, who he assumed was Ilya's brother, had been. Maybe he should have asked him to come over too.

"Not much of a hockey guy?" Ilya stopped browsing the games and stared at Shane, looking like Shane had just said he hated Dial Up, or breathing.

"Yeah, uh, it's kind of a long story, and it's sort of embarrassing?"

"That's crazy, dude. Hockey is like, the only reason I didn't immediately lose my mind when my mom told me we were moving to Canada. It's *way* less popular in Florida, where I grew up. Did you know that the Tampa Bay Lightning didn't even play in the MLH until 1992! I can't wait to join a team here. Do you at least know how to skate?"

Shane could feel his neck heating with embarrassment. He was currently experiencing a war flashback of himself at five years old attending his one and only skating lesson. "Yeah, no, I uh, never learned how to skate."

Ilya somehow looked even more shocked than before. "Holy crap, Hollander." Shane balked at him remembering his last name. Actually, thinking back, he's pretty sure he repeated it about sixteen times like the absolute freak he is. "Well don't worry, it's not too late. My mom said there's a river in the forest behind our place that should freeze over in the winter. I can teach you then. You will no longer be a disgrace to your country, my friend."

My friend. Shane smiled. For a moment, and then he imagined himself trying to skate again. "Why don't we play? The video game? Open it up." Shane said, trying to change the topic. He hooked up two controllers to the PS2 and turned it on.

"Really?"

"Yeah, for sure," Shane said, holding out the other controller for Ilya. Ilya got the game set up in the Playstation, leaving the plastic packaging on the floor, and joined Shane on the other side of the bed. Shane noticed him doing this awkward seated dance as the loading screen booted up.

"Oh my god, you are seriously the best. I've wanted to play this game forever, but my brother always keeps the Playstation in his room and he is *such* a dick, you wouldn't even believe it. Like, it was a New Years gift for the both of us, but he has this very serious medical condition where he is physically incapable of sharing or acting like a normal, considerate older brother. And my dad..." Ilya tried to navigate his way through the menu, but realized his controller was set to player two. He reached across the bed and swapped controllers with Shane. "Anyway, whatever. Okay, I'm going to play as the Panthers, obviously, gotta rep my home state, but you should be the Toronto Guardians, maybe? That's close by, right?"

"Sure," Shane shrugged, selecting the Guardians as his team.

They loaded into the first game and Ilya hopped off of the bed with excitement, creeping closer to the small, boxy television. It probably wasn't good for his eyes to stand so close to the TV. Shane didn't mention this.

“Oh my god, oh my *god*. Seriously, this is the best. I can't believe you're my *neighbour*. I'm calling it now, Hollander. This right here is the beginning of a friendship that will go down in history.”

Shane smiled. He then proceeded to absolutely annihilate Ilya and his precious so-called Panthers.

Chapter 3: Songs I Think You Might Like

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Now I've got to explain
Things, they have changed
In such a permanent way
Life seems unreal
Can we go back to your place?*

“Alone, Together”, The Strokes

July 2001 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Those first few weeks of Ilya's new life passed by in a haze of sun drenched afternoons spent exploring the winding forest behind his house with Shane, legs burnt and mosquito bitten, and late nights swathed in television light, trying desperately to get revenge on his new friend in MLH 2001. Shane still had school until the end of June, but Ilya wasn't set to start until the new year in September as he had already finished grade 5 in Florida, and for those few torturous weeks the hours while Shane was away seemed to drag on forever. He started to wonder why he had ever been sad about leaving Florida behind, and he often worried that he was dreaming, that he would wake up back in Jacksonville where the rink was his only escape.

There was a shed out back, although Ilya would describe it more as a guest house. It had running water, electricity, and a lofted storage space with a ladder leading up to it. He spent most of his time when Shane was at school helping his mom set it up as her new art studio. They painted the walls with a fresh coat of white paint, but Irina insisted they wouldn't stay so plain for long.

“You will help me,” she had said to Ilya, standing in the centre of the room in her painting overalls, hands on her hips, a satisfied smile on her lips. “Soon walls will be full of art, we can make mural together!”

Ilya groaned, “I don't think so, mom, you're the artist. I just like to watch you paint.”

“No, no! You must learn. New house, new skill. It is only thing I have to teach my son. Alexei doesn't have painter's eye. But you, I know you do.”

Ilya wanted to protest, but he couldn't resist the look on her face. “Alright mom, for you, *one painting*. I'll help with your mural, but that's it.”

He was starting to notice that there were two different sides to his mother. When she was in her studio, she was open, carefree and bright. Contrasting harshly with the closed off mask she wore in front of their father. They were fighting more, since the move. Ilya hated seeing

his dad's version of Irina come to the surface more because of it. Alexei had told him that they didn't uproot their lives for dad's job, but because he caught her cheating on him. Ilya knew there was no way that Alexei was telling the truth, but if he was being honest, he wasn't sure that he would blame his mom if she did.

He liked spending his days in Irina's studio. His dad and brother never came out here, so he got that luminous, radiant version of his mom all to himself. Working on the mural kept his hands busy and his mind occupied, so while he loathed to admit it, he found himself enjoying making art together, instead of just watching.

Irina had painted the background for the scene. They had decided on a dense forest, inspired by the one in their own backyard, making the shed an extension of nature itself. She used large, impressionist brush strokes as she brought the forest to life. She then worked with Ilya to decorate the scene, adding secret human-made features tucked between the trees. He was particularly proud of his most recent addition, a cobblestone path branching off in two directions, fading into the mist between the woods. She encouraged him to paint without thinking. Whatever comes to mind, get it out on the wall. If he hated it later, they could always build on it, turn it into something new.

"There is no mistake so big that we can't fix together," she repeated incessantly whenever his nervous, paint covered brush hovered over the wall a moment too long.

By the time July rolled around, they were mostly done with the project. As much as he had enjoyed the mural, he found himself taking more frequent breaks now that Shane was out of school. It was his first time having someone in his life that he considered a best friend, and he wanted to bask in every moment. Irina didn't seem to mind, she insisted she had other projects she needed to work on, and they would return to the mural when he was feeling inspired.

On this particular morning, Ilya had woken up just as the sun was carving a space for itself over the line of trees. The sky was a kaleidoscope of pink and orange, and it painted an inviting glow over the picturesque farm across the road that he was becoming so familiar with.

He rushed his way through getting dressed, brushing his teeth and raced across the street between their houses, nearly getting obliterated by a semi-truck (that was, in Ilya's opinion, driving way too fast) in the process, but he was planning to pretend that never happened.

"You better look where you're going, kid," David said, having seen the entire near death experience from where he was sat sipping coffee and gently rocking on their porch swing. "I can't have my latest un-paid intern getting crushed to death before his first day of work, now can I?"

"Hey, he was going way over the speed limit!" Ilya said, running his hands through his curls, trying to play it cool.

"Uhuh, sure," David smirked. "So, you ready for today?" David asked as he stood up, balancing his coffee mug on the railing and stretching. Ilya could hear his back crack a couple of times, loud and sharp like gunshots.

“Oh yeah, this will be good for me, I’m trying to bulk up for hockey in September.”

“Bulk up? Aren’t you 10?” He raised an eyebrow at him.

“11 actually,” Ilya said, puffing out his chest and trying to stand taller. “My birthday was last month.”

“Was it now? Shane didn’t say anything about that.”

“Uh, yeah, I guess I didn’t mention it. It wasn’t really a big deal this year, we were so busy with moving and everything. It was just low key, with my family, you know?”

Low key in this case meant the generous and thoughtful gift of 11 birthday punches from Alexei that had left a constellation of bruises on his lower back for two weeks, and a gesture from his father that Ilya genuinely appreciated. Gregori had been called in for overtime at the prison and therefore couldn’t come out to dinner with the family.

It was nice. They had gone out for dinner at a place called The Royal Moose (Ilya wasn’t sure if he was grateful or disappointed that he hadn’t seen a real moose yet) and then they got ice cream from a building attached right to the side of the factory. He did have to admit that Canadians seemed to know their ice cream. Alexei actually wasn’t horrible during the evening. Ilya wondered if his mother had slipped some Benadryl into his pop at dinner to subdue him.

When they had gotten back home, Irina surprised Ilya with a new set of skates.

“You grow so fast Mishka, I hope they still fit in Fall.”

Ilya had wrapped his arms around her in a crushing hug that threw her slightly off balance.

David clapped Ilya on the shoulder, putting him out of his thoughts. “Right, well, now we’ll know for next year. So, let me drag my son out of bed so we can get down to business.”

They were about 25 minutes into their workday when Ilya realized he might be in over his head. The instructions from David had been simple enough. Shane and Ilya were supposed to stand on either side of the ginseng beds, each of them holding one end of a rolled up tarp. Then they would unroll the tarp as they walked down the row, positioning it over top of stakes that were already fixed in the soil. Finally, the edges of the tarp were secured to the posts using heavy duty clips.

Despite the simplicity, there was also, apparently, a lot of room for error and Ilya felt like he was making every mistake. The temperature was quickly rising with the sun, and the sweat was sticking a layer of dirt to his skin. The tarps were heavier than they looked too, especially whenever a breeze spanned across the field, hitting the tarp with a low, percussive sound that created resistance.

When the boys were nearing the end of the first row Ilya pulled too fast on the plastic in an attempt to combat the wind, and ended up creating a twist in the sheet.

“Agh, this is impossible,” he said, letting out a frustrated grunt and dropping his side of the tarp.

“You’re doing just fine, kid. It takes some time to get the hang of it, and we’re not in any rush.” David was trailing behind the boys, keeping an eye on their work. “You’ve just gotta work with the wind, instead of against it. Come in, let’s roll this one up and try it again,” he said. “Shane, come help Ilya out on his side and show him how it’s done. I’ll take over on your side.”

“Sure, dad.” Shane carefully made his way across the bed, making sure not to crush any of the new sprouts in the process. They looked like tiny green hands, reaching up from the dark tilled earth.

“Here, space your hands out like this,” Shane said, taking Ilya’s hands and placing them about a metre apart from one another. “It’ll help you have more control in the wind.” Ilya noticed that there was some dried dirt on his cheek.

Swallowing his pride, he looked back at the tarp. “Okay, then what?”

Shane continued to show Ilya how to properly pull and tie down the tarp, taking time to go over it until he got it right. David stayed on the other side, patiently taking over Shane’s job while he explained.

After a while they fell into a routine. The longer they worked, the more Shane started talking, explaining to Ilya details about farming that he never knew. About the importance of the shade, and how it took three to five years for the crop to be ready. It seemed like a lot of work for a root that he had never even heard of up until a month ago. Ilya considered how Shane seemed to know things deeply, but wasn’t loud about it, keeping his thoughts close to his chest.

Once they finished the last row, they made their way over to the side of the house, rinsing off their hands at the hose. Soil swirled off their palms and pooled on the stone path that hugged the exterior walls. As they were cleaning up, Yuna stepped out onto the wrap around porch carrying a tray of sliced oranges and a pitcher of iced tea.

“Thanks, boys! You’re saving me from weeks of David droning on about his back problems,” she said, placing the fruit and drinks down for them.

“No problem at all, Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya said. He sat down next to Shane on the front steps and grabbed an orange slice.

“He did alright,” David chimed in, walking over. “And I’ll still find a way to throw out my back, don’t you worry honey.”

“Alright? He was awesome!”

Ilya grinned goofily at Shane, the orange stuck between his teeth so the rind took over his smile.

“Well, we’re going to be eating in a bit if you’d like to stay for dinner, Ilya,” Yuna said.

Ilya took the fruit out of his mouth and eyed her hesitantly. “I don’t want to give you any extra work.”

“Nonsense,” David said. “It’s the least we can do to say thanks.”

“Please? Mom was going to make my favourite curry, I want you to try it!” Ilya looked at Shane, who now had even more dirt on his face. He looked ridiculous.

“Alright,” he said. “I’m just going to take a shower and get a change of clothes and then I’ll be back.”

When Ilya walked back into his house, the foyer was cold and sterile. He could hear the familiar sound of Alexei playing Grand Theft Auto in this bedroom, but the house was otherwise silent, his footsteps echoing like stones dropped into a well.

He poked his head into his brother’s room as he walked by.

“Where’s mom?” he asked.

“Fuck!” Alexei said, as a grenade exploded in front of his character, respawning him to the hospital. He threw his controller on the carpeted floor. “What do you want?” he asked, not looking at Shane.

“I asked where mom is.”

“In her room I think, taking a nap or something. Now can you kindly fuck off?”

Ilya shut the door behind him with a resounding bang, hoping to throw Alexei off his game. He gently knocked on his parent’s room before pushing it open. His mom was sitting up in bed, not sleeping but not really awake either, her eyes a bit glazed over. It seemed to take her a moment to notice that her son was in the room.

“Ilya,” she said, life returning to her eyes. “How was work on farm? So proud of my strong son.” She reached out and squeezed his forearm.

“You okay, mom?” he asked, ignoring her question.

“Fine, Mishka. Maybe getting cold, but fine,” she insisted.

He bit his lip worriedly. “Have you eaten today?”

“Ilya, you think too much. It is me who is looking after you. I go make dinner now.” Irina pulled the blankets back and slipped a robe over her pajamas. Ilya wondered if she had been in bed all day.

“Um, Mr. and Mrs. Hollander invited me to stay for dinner, as a thanks for helping, you know? I was going to shower and then go, but I can stay if you want. I can help make dinner

with you.”

“No, no! Go, Mishka. Have fun with friend. Papa will be late tonight, I make something small for Alexei.”

Ilya lingered for a moment, wondering if he should stay despite her insistence.

“Go, go! Shower, you are getting dirt on new carpet,” she started pushing him out of the room. “And the smell, Ilya! Was it farm of pigs?” she asked, a genuine laugh escaping from her.

When Shane’s dad had come upstairs to call him down to work this morning, he had surprised his son by letting him know that Ilya’s birthday had passed just a couple of weeks ago. The two of them had been spending most days together since the boy moved in next door, and Shane couldn’t understand why Ilya had kept it a secret. Shane had never been to a birthday party that wasn’t for a relative or family friend and he tried his best to ignore when other kids received brightly coloured hand written notes at school with dates and times written on them. He would have liked to celebrate with Ilya.

So it only made sense that as they worked, Shane’s thoughts drifted to what he could do for his friend as a birthday gift. Once Ilya became more confident in the repetitive motion of the task, Shane noticed that Ilya was singing to himself while he worked, the melody a whisper dampened by the humid air. Shane couldn’t make out any particular songs but it sparked an idea to burn a CD for Ilya with some of *his* favourite songs.

Shane worked quickly, not sure how long it would take Ilya to get ready. He rinsed off, got changed, and then logged onto his family’s computer in the office. He had recently become acquainted with Limewire, and had anxiously used it to download albums that he couldn’t find at the small music store in town. The RCMP hadn’t shown up at his door to arrest him thus far, but he did get questionable junk audio files every once in a while. After inserting the CD into the drive, he scrolled through his collection, dragging and dropping anything he thought Ilya might like into the file without thinking twice. He was worried it wouldn’t have any overall coherency, but he knew he probably didn’t have a lot of time. While the CD was burning, he cut a piece of paper down to size so it could slide into the front and back of the case. He wanted to draw something on the front but he knew Ilya’s mom was an artist and he didn’t think he could really do it justice. Instead, he just wrote “Songs I Think You Might Like” in thick black sharpie. On the back he included a tracklist:

“Songs I Think You Might Like”

1. *The Modern Age* by The Strokes
2. *Do* by The White Stripes
3. *Watermark* by The Weakerthans
4. *Don’t Panic* by Coldplay
5. *You Are a Light* by Pavement
6. *Someone Who’s Cool* by Odds
7. *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* by Neutral Milk Hotel
8. *My Valuable Hunting Knife* by Guided by Voices

9. *Happy Birthday* by Sufjan Stevens
10. *Bobcaygeon* by The Tragically Hip

Abruptly, there was a knock at the door followed by Yuna calling out, “Just come in, door’s open!”

Shane hurriedly ejected the disk, sealed it in the case, and made his way to the foyer, where Ilya was slipping out of his running shoes. He thought back to the first time Ilya had come over, how he had worn his shoes all the way up to Shane’s room like the complete degenerate he was. It wasn’t until the following visit that Shane had mentioned leaving his shoes at the door, and Ilya hadn’t forgotten since.

“Every molecule in my body hurts,” Ilya complained. He did some exaggerated stretches, reaching for his toes and groaning. “I have no idea how you do this all the time.”

Shane laughed, clutching the CD awkwardly behind his back. “Aren’t you supposed to be a star hockey player or something? A little bit of work on the farm should be nothing to you.”

“I don’t think I like this side of you,” Ilya said, frowning. “I liked you better when you were shy and scared to talk to me.”

Shane stared blankly at the boy in front of him, feeling stupid for his comment.

“Shane, I’m joking,” Ilya walked into the front hall and ruffled Shane’s hair, which was still damp from the shower. “I like it when you talk. Even if you’re making fun of me.”

Shane relaxed. “Sorry,” he said, laughing belatedly.

“You have absolutely nothing to apologize for. I now see why everyone says Canadians are too nice.” Ilya tugged on the sleeve of Shane’s t-shirt. “What are you hiding from me? You’re being suspicious.”

“Oh, uh,” Shane held out the CD in front of him. “My dad said it was your birthday last month. I burnt you a CD of some songs I thought you might like. Sorry, it’s nothing special, I just found out this morning. Also most of those songs were illegally downloaded, so maybe like, don’t tell your dad? I would rather not end up in that prison he works at if possible.”

Ilya analyzed the case. Shane noticed him smiling at the cover.

“There’s a list of the songs on the back.”

He flipped the case over. “Coldplay! I’ve heard of them,” he said. “They did that song that goes like *look up at the stars, shining for you*, or something, right?” Ilya sang the lyrics, lowering his voice an octave and singing incredibly off key.

Shane did his best not to laugh at his friend’s expense. “Yeah, *Yellow*. It’s a good song too. That one’s from the same album. Anyway, it’s stupid—”

“Shane, this is not stupid.” Ilya suddenly looked very serious. “Thank you. This is literally the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.” He wrapped his arms around Shane and

squeezed him in a tight hug. Shane tensed up, the embrace unexpected. After a moment he softened, and wrapped his own arms around Ilya. “Seriously, thank you, man,” he repeated, his voice tight, before pulling away.

Shane nodded. “Yeah, no problem. Let me know if you like the songs, okay?”

“Of course!” Ilya grinned.

“C’mon boys, dinner’s ready,” Yuna called from the kitchen.

The dining room smelled like roasted apples, curry powder, and home. Yuna told Ilya all about the dish, explaining that it was a traditional comfort food from Japan. She compared it to American’s and their Mac n’ Cheese. The sauce was surprisingly sweet, and loaded with potatoes, carrots, onions, stewed beef, and of all things, apples. It was Shane’s favourite dish that his mom made, and something he always requested on his own birthday.

Following dinner, David and Yuna stepped out of the dining room for a moment. Shane and Ilya could hear some quiet muttering from the kitchen, soft and comforting. After a minute they returned to the room with slow, careful steps. Yuna was carrying a cake, decorated with hand painted cream icing and 11 candles, while David followed behind her with a handheld home video recorder. In unison, they began singing *Happy Birthday*, and Shane quickly joined in. He hadn’t realized his mom was busy making the cake while they were working, and his heart felt full.

“Make a wish!” David said, zooming in on the camera to centre Ilya in the frame, the candles casting a warm yellow glow on his mole dotted face.

Ilya blew out the candles, quickly, seemingly embarrassed by the attention. It looked like he didn’t quite know what to say, his blue eyes damp.

“Will you come to the cottage this summer?” Shane blurted out, saving him from having to fill the silence with thanks.

Yuna and David both looked stunned for a moment, made eye contact with one another and shrugged.

Chapter End Notes

Canadian Context Notes:

- RCMP: Stands for Royal Canadian Mounted Police. They're like the Canadian version of the FBI, except they wear bright red and ride around on horseback.

Chapter 4: Our Other Place

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*My roots are strong and deep
I'm swaying in your breeze
My limbs stretch out to meet you
You've got me on my knees*

“My Roots Are Strong and Deep,” The Microphones

August 2001 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Ilya had insisted that Mr. and Mrs. Hollander didn't need to ask his parents for permission to bring him to the cottage. His mom was undeniably happy that he had finally made a real friend, and Gregori would likely not notice his absence. Alexei might be disappointed that he wouldn't have anyone to harass for the month, but Ilya was sure he would find something to occupy his time. He could throw rocks at birds or experiment with huffing glue or maybe fall into a ditch and break both legs if Ilya was lucky.

Despite this, they were thoroughly committed to acting like responsible adults, which was how Ilya found himself in front of his house one Sunday morning, standing stiff in dress pants and a button up, just having gotten home from the weekly Ronzanov Church visit during which they pretended to be a normal, civilized family who loved each other deeply. His parents and Alexei stood elevated, perched firmly on their porch steps, while the Hollanders, a few steps away, looked up from the lawn. Ilya stood between them, wondering how his life got here.

“So, mom, dad... Alexei, this is Mr. and Mrs. Hollander,” Ilya said, holding out his hands like he was still at mass, reciting the Our Father.

“It's so nice to officially meet you,” Yuna chimed in. She walked forward and shook the hands of Ilya's family, David following her cue. “We really should have stopped by sooner, but the start of Summer is always a busy time of year for us.”

Alexei shook both of their hands with a firm grip, his mouth set in a hard line. He was presenting the perfect image of the eldest son of Gregori Rozanov. At fifteen, he was almost taller than their father, and he was looking more and more like the man every day. It unsettled Ilya. Was that why his father preferred Alexei? His sharp edges and cold shoulder, contrasting starkly with Ilya's gentle affinity for their mother?

Shane was standing off to the side, a few feet back from his parents. He waved awkwardly. “Nice to see you again, Mrs. Rozanov.”

“It’s Rozanova,” Ilya said, trying to quietly correct his grammar before his dad said something offensive.

“Right, sorry, Mrs. Rozanova. Nice to see you again.”

“You too, Shane. Do not worry about last name. Is Russian thing,” Irina said, smiling. Ilya was glad to see her doing well again. Last month she spent a lot of time in bed. She repeated that she was sick, but she didn’t have a cough or a fever. Ilya hated seeing her like that. He wanted to fix it, but didn’t know what he could do. He wasn’t sure what had changed, but she seemed to be doing better this week. “So, Ilya says you take him to cottage?” she said, addressing Mr. and Mrs. Hollander.

“Yes,” David said, nodding. “If that’s alright with you folks.”

“It’s been a pleasure to have his help on the farm these past few weeks,” Yuna added. “It would be nice to treat him to a little trip up North.”

Gregori laughed, deep and sarcastic. “Ilya help? You not talking about same son. So lazy, our Ilya.”

Alexei said something to their dad in Russian, fast and low, which made his dad laugh even deeper. He couldn’t make out all of what he said, but he definitely heard his own name and “*pidoras*”, which was one of the few words in Ilya’s Russian vocabulary, thanks to his brother’s liberal use of the phrase.

Ilya held his breath, and for a moment it felt like the whole world did too, the leaves on the maple trees pausing their dance as the wind slowed. He imagined walking up to his brother and kneeling him in the balls. He exhaled slowly, deciding that he should probably work on having less violent fantasies. He really needed hockey to start again so he could get out some of his anger. After a beat, Shane tried to break the silence.

“Ilya’s not—”

“That’s alright, Shane,” Yuna said, not looking away from Grigori. Ilya appreciated the gesture. He knew Shane was probably going to interrupt to say something nice about him, which though well intentioned, would only fuel Alexei and his father’s fire.

“Well,” David said, clearing his throat. “We’d like to take him anyway, he’s become a good friend to Shane, and I’m sure they’ll have a blast.”

Gregori shook his head, still chuckling to himself. “What is it Americans say? I think no skin of my back! Ha! Just do not call me when he make you crazy, yes?”

Yuna and David smiled politely. The Hollanders exchanged a few more pleasantries with his parents, confirming dates and exchanging contact information. They had a landline up at the cottage, and Yuna and David said Ilya was welcome to call his parents every night before bed, but he knew they wouldn’t be expecting that, let alone want him to. Ilya couldn’t wait to get out of here.

They left early the next morning. It was the second time this summer that he wound up crammed into a minivan heading to an unfamiliar destination, but it felt different this time around. For starters, Shane and his parents actually believed in the sanctity of good music, proper air conditioning, and not chain smoking with the windows rolled all the way up.

Apparently, the CD Shane had made for Ilya's birthday wasn't a one off, but a hobby that his friend hadn't previously shared. He had a cloth binder that could hold up to 50 CDs, and it was full of mixes Shane had burned. As they drove, the four of them took turns selecting CDs from the collection to listen to together. It was hilariously entertaining, as instead of recording the tracks on each disk, Shane had simply written overall titles for the mixes on the plastic covers, none of which had anything to do with the genre of music it contained. Some of the titles included "Songs I Listen to a Lot", "Songs That Are Usually Good", and Ilya's personal favourite, "Songs I Don't Know Why I Like", which featured Madonna's *Like a Prayer*. After listening to the mix for the first time, Ilya became certifiably obsessed, and chose it every time it was his turn again, much to Shane's chagrin.

Halfway through the drive, Mr. Hollander demanded an iced coffee, his blood pressure be damned, so they pulled into a Tim Hortons drive through. He placed an order at the speaker for Yuna and himself, and then turned back to the boys.

"What do you kids want?"

"I'll have an iced capp with chocolate milk," Shane said.

Ilya stared at the elaborate menu, frozen. It all felt very patriotic, decorated in reds and whites, with a giant glowing maple anchored to the side of the building like a Canadian Northern Star. It was his first time at the coffee chain, and he wasn't even sure what he *could* order. He didn't want to take advantage of how nice Shane's parents were being. He thought about what his dad had said to the Hollanders about him, and he was desperate to prove him wrong. Also, what the hell was an iced capp?

"Uh, I'm okay for right now."

"He'll have the same as me," Shane said. Ilya tried to insist he really was fine, but Shane spoke over him, adding to the order, "and get some timbits, dad! Please! The token uneducated American in the car needs to try timbits." He punctuated his point by sticking out his tongue at Ilya.

Ilya responded in the way that any sane person in his position would have. By belting out lyrics to the song he knew Shane was sick of Ilya putting on, "*Life is a mystery, Everyone must stand alone, I hear—*"

Shane dove over from his side of the car, slapping a hand over Ilya's mouth, the seatbelt straining against his torso. "That's it, Rozanov, you've lost all privileges to Shane's mixtapes!"

The two boys dissolved into laughter in the backseat, as Yuna shushed them, "Shane, shh, the woman can't hear your dad."

Ilya bristled and straightened in his seat, all humour gone from the moment. Shane was still quietly giggling to himself, and Ilya looked at him with a creased brow. He was about to apologize to Yuna and David, but then, as they pulled out of the parking lot and back onto the two lane highway, David suddenly burst into song himself.

“When you call my name, it's like a little prayer, I'm down on my knees, I wanna take you there.” He made eye contact with his wife and gave her an exaggerated wink on the last line. She rolled her eyes dramatically at him and whacked him on the shoulder, but then started to sing along with him for the rest of the chorus.

“In the midnight hour— C'mon Ilya, I need backup here,” Mr. Hollander said, making eye contact with him in the rear view mirror. *“—feel your power.”*

Ilya balked at the man, grinned, and joined in.

August 2001 – Muskoka Lakes, ON

“Do you want the top or bottom bunk?” Shane asked as he hauled Ilya’s duffle bag out of the car and held it out him.

“I’m not picky,” Ilya shrugged.

“Okay, that’s good. I fell out of the top bunk one year and busted my lip. Ever since then I’ve had a phobia of sleeping up there.”

Ilya laughed, “You could have just said that to begin with.”

Shane shrugged. He swung his own duffle over his shoulder and made his way towards the cottage.

“So, this is it,” he said, taking it all in. While he came here every summer, it never ceased to amaze him. For Shane, the cottage was a safe haven. The drive in from the main road was ten minutes of twisting and turning down winding, unpaved roads only wide enough for one car. When going around the bends it was common courtesy to honk in case someone else was coming around the corner in the opposite direction, so they could pull over and let you through, though it was rare to see another soul in the area.

The cabin itself was simple, a handcrafted beacon of light nestled into the thick surrounding foliage. The pale wood siding was once a cherry red but it hadn’t been stained in years, and there was a deck with a screened in section around the back, making it the perfect place for outside dinners when the mosquitos were particularly rabid.

Inside, the cottage smelled of pine and linen, and was decorated with warm wood tones and well loved furniture. The doorway to the kitchen was marked with Shane’s height over the years, and pictures of the family during their summers here adorned every available bit of wall. The primary bedroom was on the main floor, just off of the kitchen, while Shane’s room was upstairs. His parents had bought the property before Shane was born, and they had built bunk beds into the wall, back when their plan had been to have two children. While things

hadn't worked out exactly as imagined, Shane loved the setup, as he could make a fort by tucking sheets into the mattress above and stay up late into the night, reading by headlamp or playing Gameboy.

Behind the cabin the trees were impossibly tall, and Shane imagined they must have been there for at least a hundred years. Tucked away within them was a fire pit surrounded by Muskoka chairs and a small wooden structure. He and his dad had built it together two summers ago. In black paint that was now chipping, Shane had written *My Other Place* over the front door. It was simple. One small window, a single light hanging from a cord, a futon that his parents hadn't wanted in the main cottage anymore, and a small silver TV with a built-in DVD player. It was the perfect spot for rainy day movie marathons, made complete with a giant bucket of buttery popcorn and arguably too much ginger ale.

Then, there was the lake. Next to Shane's Other Place was a series of uneven stone steps that seemed to grow out of the earth. At the bottom was a small, but private beach next to a dock. The lake was so still most days that when you looked across it, the trees cast a perfect mirrored reflection on the surface. It was a perfect sanctuary, and Shane couldn't wait to introduce Ilya to all of it.

"Holy crap, this place is freaking awesome," Ilya said, unable to hold back the explosive grin on his face.

"Is this actually you? Your hair was so long!" Ilya said, pointing out a photo on their bedroom wall. They had just finished getting settled in, meaning Ilya immediately chucked his duffle into the corner of the room and began analyzing the photo wall while Shane unpacked and folded his clothes into the dresser.

Shane scratched the back of his head, embarrassed. He closed the top drawer and zipped up his bag, tucking it away into the closet. "Yeah, that's me. I used to *really* hate getting my haircut. I mean, I still hate it, but I deal with it. My mom cuts it now, back then I wouldn't even let her touch it though."

He walked over to Ilya and stood next to him, looking at the picture. "Oh god, and that's the year my dad accidentally got a s'more stuck in my hair when he was trying to take it off the stick. My mom had no choice but to cut it out." He paused, considering. "Honestly, it's probably for the best. I think the hair made me look like that weird short guy from Shrek."

"Ah, because the bowl cut is a much more sophisticated look."

Shane pushed his friend. "You suck. Not everyone can have," he waved his hands in Ilya's face, "this."

"This?" Ilya raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, this! Like, curls, and... hair," he said, pathetically. He briefly contemplated packing up all his things and abandoning his family for a life of solitude in the woods.

Luckily, Ilya seemed to take pity on him. “I’m going to let you in on a secret,” he said, looking suddenly serious.

“Okay?”

“My hair has not always been this good. Up until last year I only ever rocked a buzz cut. I looked like an overgrown toddler. It is my greatest shame.”

“I’m honoured you’re trusting me with this,” Shane said.

“Well, you’re in luck. Shane Hollander. By the end of this summer I vow to help you achieve hair that makes you look less like a cartoon evil villain.”

He shoved Ilya again.

“Also, what’s a s’more?”

After settling in, Shane wasn’t sure what part of the cottage he should introduce Ilya to first, but the decision was torn from his hands when Ilya admitted to his lack of culinary knowledge.

“I still can’t believe you’ve never tried a s’more,” Shane said. He was currently standing on a chair in the kitchen so he could reach into the top of the snack cupboard. They stopped at the grocery store on their way into town, and his parents had already unloaded all of the essentials. Shane pulled out marshmallows, graham crackers, and a chocolate bar, handing them to Ilya.

His dad popped into the kitchen as they were gathering supplies. “Did I hear someone say s’mores?”

“That would be correct,” Ilya said, his arms full of snacks.

“Should we perhaps not wait until say, after dinner? I was going to do burgers on the barbecue.”

Shane looked at his dad in disbelief. “Respectfully, dad, it cannot. Florida has already robbed my best friend of so many quintessential childhood experiences and I can not bear to watch him suffer a second longer. Also, who says we can’t also have s’mores after dinner?”

David chuckled. “Touché.”

Shane walked Ilya through building a fire and selecting a marshmallow stick. He also tried to teach him the art of roasting a marshmallow to golden brown perfection, but Ilya consistently ended up with a ball of fire on the end of his stick that he would wave in the air like a maniac in an attempt to put it out. Each time he was left with a charred husk of a marshmallow.

Shane ended up making s’mores for him.

Fingers sticky and high on sugar, the two boys sat side by side on one of the log benches, staring into the fire. The flames danced in front of them, mesmerizing, as the warm smell of smoke seeped into their clothes.

“Thanks for inviting me here,” Ilya said quietly, breaking the silence. “I think this is probably going to be, like, the best summer of my life?”

“Of course, dude.” Shane said, watching the flames. “I want you to come here every summer from now on. I mean it when I say you’re my best friend. I don’t know if that’s lame or weird to say or whatever—”

“It’s not weird.” Ilya’s eyes flicked back and forth from the fire to the surrounding forest. The sun was beginning to edge its way towards the horizon and orange light was bursting through the branches, like the trees were on fire too.

“It’s like, I know, you know? That I’m weird. Or, like, not easy to put up with.”

Ilya suddenly looked at his friend. “Shane.”

Shane continued to stare at the fire.

“Shane, look at me.”

Shane reluctantly turned his gaze.

“You’re not weird, okay? I think you’re actually insanely cool. If anyone says you’re weird I’ll happily punch them in the face.”

Shane nodded. He was quiet for a moment, and then just said, “okay.”

Two Weeks Later – Muskoka Lakes, ON

Ilya’s time at the cottage was full of moments like these. The slowness and quiet gradually settled over him, as they spent long, warm days canoeing the lake, fishing, and exploring abandoned islands that they claimed as their own. In the evenings they would haul blankets and snacks down to Shane’s Other Place and stay up into the early morning watching horror movies on the grainy television. It was during those late nights that Ilya learned about Shane’s addiction to ginger ale, and he quietly noticed that the Hollanders would go out of their way to buy Ilya Coke every time they did a grocery run, even though no one else in the house drank it.

David showed Ilya things that his own father never did, like how to cook the perfect steak on the barbecue, how to drive their small motor boat (which was terrifying but thrilling), and what to do when there was a persistent drip coming from the kitchen sink. He didn’t know how to put it into words, but he felt *full*, like there was a balloon in his chest, and with every day that went by he became less anxious that it would pop without warning.

Yuna was so different from his own mother, not in a bad way though. Just different. Compared to his own mother’s tender heart and soft demeanor, she was loud and unafraid to

she speak her mind. At first she intimidated Ilya, and he was scared she was mad with him, Ilya quickly learned that he had no reason to worry. Both early risers, they found themselves sitting together often, watching the sunrise from the deck. During one of these mornings, Yuna told him about her childhood. She was raised with three older brothers, who all played hockey, so she was used to having to fight to take up space in the world.

It was their last week at the cottage, and Ilya was outside on one of these now familiar mornings. He held a mug of warm lemon water between his palms, a drink Yuna had introduced him to since they started spending their first hour of the day like this together.

“I think I could see this view every day, and never get sick of it,” he said, his voice almost a whisper. The sky looked like stained glass. His hand itched, even though he hadn’t thought about the mural in his mom’s studio in weeks, he had the sudden urge to paint it.

Yuna let out a long breath. “I know, it’s something, isn’t it.”

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the birds waking up and the squirrels playing tag in the trees. Ilya watched a chipmunk run along the railing of the deck. When it noticed them it froze in place, and he would have mistook it for a statue had he not just seen it running.

Eventually, Yuna broke the silence, and the chipmunk scurried away. “Ilya,” she started. “I just want you to know that if things are ever,” she paused for a moment, trying to find the right words. “If things are ever tough, at home, you’re always welcome at our place.”

Ilya sipped his lemon water. “Okay,” he said.

“No, Ilya, I mean it, anytime you need anything, you can come to us.” She looked at him. “David and I don’t talk about it much, but,” she took a deep breath. “After Shane, David and I were expecting another baby. A boy. But, there was a problem near the end of the pregnancy.” Her voice was tight, and she had to take a moment. She cleared her throat and kept going, “I still gave birth to him, but... he didn’t make it. He never even got to open his eyes. To see a sunrise like this.” She looked at the sky, at the reflection of the sun in the glass lake. “For a long time I felt like something was missing in our lives. Like the loss of Justin, that was what we were going to name him, was insurmountable. And it’s still there, but I don’t know. I think you came into our lives at the perfect time, Ilya.” He noticed that her eyes were glassy, and Ilya realized he was crying, too. “For me, and for David too, even though he’s horrible at expressing emotions. You’re a son to us, Ilya.”

“Ilya Rozanov!” The sliding door to the balcony was wrenched open with a *bang*. Ilya quickly wiped at his face, and turned away from Yuna to look at her son. He was standing there, hair sticking up in all directions, still in his plaid pajama pants and an oversized *Fairly Odd Parents* t-shirt.

“Shane Hollander,” he responded.

“I just had the most brilliant idea. Stop being a weird geriatric old man and come with me. Ándale, ándale!” He took the mug out of Ilya’s hands and placed it on the coffee table, which Ilya noted was quite out of character. “Sorry mom, I know you two love to bond over birdwatching and your aches and pains, but we have business to attend to.”

“You’re just going to leave the dirty mug on the table like that?” he asked, teasing his friend.

Shane’s eye twitched. “Shut up. Just follow me.” He took the mug and loaded it into the dishwasher on their way out.

“Alright, you have to do the honours, because your mom’s the painter.”

“That doesn’t mean that I have any skills,” Ilya grumbled. He hadn’t stopped thinking about painting the sky.

“Whatever, you just do it. I don’t want to get paint on my clothes.”

Shane’s brilliant idea, it turned out, was to repaint the *My Other Place* sign above the smaller cabin. He had Ilya use the same black paint (which had to be thoroughly stirred as the oils had begun to separate), to cross out the “My” with a big X and write “Our” above it.

“Perfect,” Shane said, staring at the new *Our Other Place*. He looked as though he had just solved world hunger.

“Alright,” Ilya said. “Now that you’ve bossed me around, it’s my turn.”

“This isn’t bossing you around.” Shane rolled his eyes. “This is literally the work of a genius, Ilya. It is so much better now.”

“I’m not denying that.” Ilya resealed the lid on the paint can. “However, I made a promise at the start of this trip, and I don’t break my promises.”

“What are you talking about?”

“How much are you cutting?”

Ilya stood in front of Shane, who was sitting in a canvas camping chair, planted in the sand on the private beach, his hands clasped tightly together. He hunched over so he was eye level with Shane, inspecting his hair and determining the best course of action.

“I think if you just went a bit shorter in the front here, it wouldn’t do... that,” Ilya said, wincing.

“Very eloquent. Do you talk to all of your clients like that?”

“Well, you’re my only client, so I suppose yes.”

“That’s reassuring,” Shane muttered.

“It’ll be fine. Trust me. It really can’t get much worse from here.”

“You suck.” Shane took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “Okay, go for it. Just like, be careful. Don’t cut my ear off.”

Ilya chuckled, and before he could second guess himself, he snipped off a piece of Shane's hair with scissors they had raided from the kitchen. It fluttered down to the sand in slow motion and Shane jumped slightly in his seat.

"You have to stay still," Ilya said, voice hushed.

"Sorry." Shane took a deep breath, shook out his hands, and nodded his head a couple of times. "Okay, okay. I'm good for real now. I'll stop being twitchy."

Ilya worked his way around Shane's head, starting with the horrible blunt bang situation, and then making his way towards the back. He worked in relative silence, the only noise coming from the water gently lapping at the shore, and the slicing of the scissors every time he made another cut. The sand was warm and dry under the bare soles of his feet. He noticed that Shane's hair was soft between his fingers. It felt different than the somewhat coarse texture of his own curls. He knew he wasn't doing a perfect job, but he was kind of impressed with his work so far.

"I'm nervous," Shane said.

"Don't be, dude. It looks good so far. I think if you style it with some gel it would look really cool."

"No, not about the hair." Shane tapped his fingers nervously against his thighs. "About going back to school."

"How come?" Ilya asked, taking a step back to see where else he needed to make adjustments.

Shane was quiet for a bit. Ilya kept working. "Well, remember our first day when we got here, and you said that I'm not weird?"

"After s'mores, yeah," Ilya said, smiling.

"So, like it's super cool that you think that and everything, but you're possibly the only person who does."

"I don't think that's true."

"No, it *is* true. I don't really have any friends at school. And I don't know, maybe it's my fault? But most of the kids at school are white, and they sometimes make weird comments about my lunches if my mom packs something traditional, so I just feel uncomfortable around them, like I'm too Asian or something. And then there's this one group of Asian kids in my class who all hang out together, but they're all from the Philippines, and my mom's from Japan, you know? So they always speak Tagalog together and I just feel like I'm too *white* for them. And this summer has been so awesome. I just... I can be myself around you and you don't make me feel like I'm too much of anything." Shane spoke quickly, without taking much time to breathe in between sentences. "I don't want to go back to school next month and have you start there and realize that no one else likes me. I just know you'll charm everyone with your good hair and by being stupidly funny and then you'll forget I exist and

you won't hang out with me anymore. And *then* I'll be sitting in my room and looking out my window and I'll see you bringing over all of your new friends from school and I'll just be existing and—"

"Hey," Ilya walked around so he was standing in front of Shane again. He looked his friend in the eyes. "That's not going to happen. I promise. And I take my promises seriously, remember?"

Shane nodded his head, considering the words.

Ilya resumed cutting his hair while he spoke. "I kind of know what you're saying, too. About not really having people you feel like you belong with." He put the scissors off to the side in the sand and gave Shane a once over. He pushed the front pieces back with his fingers and grinned at his work. "It looks pretty good! You kind of look like Keanu Reeves, actually." There were some pieces that were still a bit uneven and choppy, but overall it was a big improvement.

"Really?" Shane lifted his own hands up and ran them through his hair. "It feels like you took off more than just a bit in the front..."

"Trust me, it was for the best."

Shane scratched at his neck. "Ugh, I just hate the way the clippings end up *everywhere*. It feels like I'm covered in ants. I'm gonna rinse off in the lake." The boys had changed out of their pajamas before coming down to the beach, so he was already in his swim trunks. He slipped off his t-shirt, folded it, and placed it on the chair before wading into the water. Ilya laid down in the sand, letting the shoreline creep up to his feet.

"What did you mean before?" Shane asked from the water. "When you said you know what it's like to not really fit in."

Ilya closed his eyes while he spoke, the midday sun warming his cheeks. "I don't know, it's stupid."

"It's not stupid. I just told you that everyone at school hates me, okay? I feel like I deserve some sort of blackmail material in return."

Ilya smiled. "Okay. Well, I guess it started when my family moved to America. They came over when my mom was pregnant with me, in 1990. I don't know a lot about it, but I guess there was some war going on in Russia at the time that the US was also involved in? So, we came over here right at the end of the war because the country was falling apart basically. My dad had lost his job and they were about to have another mouth to feed. So they came to America and he got a job as a prison guard in Jacksonville."

Ilya boosted himself up onto his elbows as Shane drifted closer to the shore and sat cross legged, the water reaching up to mid chest.

"Anyway, growing up there was weird. I mean we *looked* like everyone else. It's kind of like how you described your school, pretty much everyone was white. But even though I looked

like the other kids, I didn't feel like I fit in with them. Everyone at school knew we immigrated from Russia, especially because when my brother was little he had a really heavy accent, and I guess they didn't really like that. Some of the kids would call us commies, but I don't really even know what that means... And my parents won't ever talk about it but honestly it seems like Russia's done some pretty awful things since then, so maybe they've got a good reason to dislike us. But like, I wasn't even born there! I don't see how I'm not just as American as them. And then at home my parents and Alexei all speak Russian to each other all the time, and I tried to learn, but I just *suck* at it. So it's like I don't fit in at home either. I don't know. I know it's not the same as what you're saying, but it really sucked."

Ilya picked up a stick and started mindlessly doodling in the wet sand. "I guess I'm just trying to say I'm really happy we became friends too. And I'm not going to ditch you." He looked up at Shane, who was also watching him. They were quiet for a moment. Then Ilya stood up, and started sprinting into the water.

He called out to Shane over his shoulder, "alright, first one to the island gets to choose the movie for tonight!"

Chapter End Notes

Translation Notes:

- Pidoras (пидорас): Russian slur to refer to a man who's gay. Also used as a general all purpose swear word.

Canadian Context Notes:

- An iced capp is kind of like a frappe from McDonalds, but so so much better.
- Timbits are donut holes.
- Muskoka chairs are the same as Adirondack chairs.

Chapter 5: Come on Barbie, Let's go Party!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Perhaps it is the color of the sun cut flat
And covering the crossroads I'm standing at
Or maybe it's the weather or something like that
But mama, you been on my mind*

"Mama, You Been on My Mind", Jeff Buckley

November 2001 – Bobcaygeon, ON

"Alright, spill, you've been weird all day. What's going on?" Shane asked, as the two boys walked home in tandem.

Ilya kicked at a loose stone in the gravel road. He sighed, and stared out at the changing landscape. Fall had arrived quickly and without warning. The trees glowed in burnt reds and oranges, a sight he thought he might never tire of. It was beautiful beyond measure. Although, he could do without the drop in the temperature, a reminder of the rapidly approaching winter he was so dreading.

He and Shane had fallen into a new routine over the past two months as their grade 6 year began. Every morning they walked together, tracing their steps to and from school, their shadows growing longer as the days became shorter.

"I'm fine," he said, finally.

"You're clearly not fine. Your face is doing that thing."

"What thing?"

"You look like a constipated baby," Shane deadpanned.

"Fuck you!" Ilya kicked gravel at his friend, who burst out laughing. "*You're* a constipated baby." He said, grinning to himself, and the boys dissolved into incoherent laughter as they continued to insult each other.

"No, but seriously Ilya, what's up?" Shane insisted, once he regained his composure.

Ilya contemplated if he should say something, or continue to brush Shane off. He knew if he pushed his friend would back down and give him space until he was ready to talk. The two boys had grown closer since school began, and he wasn't surprised that Shane had noticed something was bothering him. He smiled to himself as he thought about how different this school year had been already.

In the afternoons, on days when Ilya didn't have hockey, he would hang out at Shane's house, and they would do homework together at the dining room table or sprawled out on Shane's bedroom floor. Mr. Hollander would often have some new culinary experiment that he wanted the boys to try. Be it ginseng infused salad dressings, desserts, or teas, he would pop into their space, donning a white apron, hair askew, looking more like a mad scientist than a farmer. Shane would roll his eyes and apologize for his dad's antics, but Ilya didn't mind at all.

At school, the two boys existed in their own world. Within a week of classes starting, their Math teacher, Mr. Nolan had split them up for talking too much during class. Shane had been mortified, as he explained to Ilya that he had never once, in all his years at school, gotten in trouble from a teacher before.

The other kids in their grade were initially intrigued by the new student, and different groups had approached Ilya on the first few days, inviting him to sit with them at lunch or to play soccer at recess. It didn't escape his notice, that each time, without fail, they specifically invited *him* but not Shane. If they acknowledged his friend at all, it was with a slight sideways glance followed by a wide eyed stare at Ilya, as though they were silently asking him if he was okay. Ilya shut all of them down, remembering how Shane had described his classmates during the summer and his anxiety about Ilya ditching him.

Ilya occasionally thought back to his life in Florida and couldn't believe he had ever been upset about moving. The hardest thing about the new school was French, a subject he hadn't realized was going to be mandatory. He quickly realized that maybe his issue with learning Russian wasn't the specific language itself, but that he didn't have a natural affinity for languages in general. Luckily, Shane excelled in the subject, and he didn't mind taking the time to explain things to him.

Ilya's favourite subject, of all things, was Visual Arts. His time working on the mural with his mom this summer had captured him in a way he hadn't expected. When they had returned from the cottage in August, before Ilya had even unpacked, he dragged Irina down to the shed and insisted they add the cabin to the mural. He nestled it subtly between a pair of pine trees, and she helped him mix the perfect warm yellow for the glowing, inviting light of the windows. His newfound passion started bleeding into all aspects of his life, and he often found himself getting distracted during class, caught up in a doodle on the back of whatever worksheet he was supposed to be completing.

"Ilyaaaa," Shane drawled, bumping his shoulder against him.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Come on, I know this has something to do with Ms. Andrews' assignment," he nudged. "You were working so hard on it yesterday, why didn't you hand it in?"

Ilya huffed, knowing he was going to cave and open up. Things had also been changing at Ilya's home lately. Another benefit of hanging out at Shane's after school was that he could avoid his brother and his new friends. Alexei had started grade 10 at the local public high school, and he had somehow found a group of kids who were just as kindhearted and thoughtful as he was. They had garnered a reputation amongst the small downtown shop

owners, and were now banned from multiple stores for shoplifting and harassing employees. Without another space to hang out, Ilya often found them at his home, smoking cigarettes and treating the space like they owned it.

On his mom's good days, she would shoo Alexei's friends out of the house, turn on the radio, and sing to herself in the kitchen while she made something hearty and familiar. It was those moments that made their house feel like a home. She would get Ilya to help, and he would sit perched on a stool at the kitchen island, measuring ingredients or cutting vegetables for her. His dad would come back from work and things would relatively feel normal. They would eat together as a family, and Gregori would almost seem kind in the way he spoke to their mother.

Those days however seemed to be few and far between as summer faded. More often than not, he would come home after studying at Shane's to a stale house, his mother either locked in the shed, staring at a blank canvas, or paralyzed in bed, wearing the same pajamas for days at a time. On those occasions he would make her toast and tea and leave them on her bedside table, before heating up leftovers for himself and retreating to his room. His dad would usually get home late and Ilya would try not to listen through the walls as he berated Irina about the house, her laziness, her very existence.

On nights when he had hockey he would often end up sheepishly knocking on the Hollander's front door to ask Yuna if she wouldn't mind giving him a drive. She never did, and sometimes Shane would come along, cheering him on from the stands, drinking an ice cold ginger ale from the vending machine despite the frigid temperature of the arena.

"It's fucking Alexei and his stupid new friends," he finally relented.

Yesterday had been one of his mom's bad days. Ilya had gotten home from Shane's later than usual, having stayed for dinner, hoping to avoid his brother and his gang. He unlocked his front door and was immediately bombarded by the group of them. Ilya had been holding his sketchbook and pencils, as he had been working on a project for Ms. Andrews' Art class. They were doing three point perspective, and he had recreated Shane's bedroom in careful detail. Alexei's friends ripped the book from his hands, analyzing the open page. They had immediately mocked him, asking if it was his boyfriend's room. Ilya flushed with anger, and pushed the older kid without thinking. They had descended on him like a pack of hyenas, cruel and sharp. Ilya's sketchbook had been destroyed in the process.

"What did they do this time?" Shane asked, concern etched into his brow.

"They just," Ilya let out a frustrated sigh. "They were there when I got home and they ruined my sketchbook," he said simply. He left out the details about the comments they made about him and Shane. He felt weird about it, and didn't want Shane to know, although he wasn't sure why.

"God, they're such *assholes*," Shane said, which didn't even begin to describe them. "But why didn't you tell Mrs. Andrews? I'm sure she would understand. Then you wouldn't end up getting late marks."

“I dunno,” Ilya mumbled. “I didn’t really want to think about it. Anyway, I’ll just redo it tonight, if you don’t mind.” He’d done the drawing using Shane’s room as reference, so he’d need to spend some time repeating the process.

“Of course not! I just got the new Tony Hawk and it has *online multiplayer*, so you can watch me play against some real competition for once.”

Ilya kicked rocks at his friend again. “It just doesn’t make any sense. How can someone so physically uncoordinated be so good at video games.”

“Sorry, I can’t help that I’m a Playstation prodigy.” Shane shrugged.

The boys slipped off the main road, cutting through the back of Shane’s farm. It was faster to walk through the ginseng fields than all the way around the corner at the end of the street. They could see David and Yuna in the distance, on the far end of the field, collecting old tarps and using a potato digger to harvest roots that were ready.

“Hey, I’ve got an idea,” Shane said, a devilish grin on his face.

“Go on,” Ilya said, intrigued.

“Why don’t we pull a prank on Alexei? Something to get back at him.”

“What kind of a prank?”

“I don’t know, something funny.” Shane shrugged.

“I think I’ve become a bad influence on you.” Ilya smiled.

Two Weeks Later

“We need more clocks, Shane. More clocks.”

Shane’s bedroom currently looked like a serial killer’s house. He could recognize this, but he didn’t really care. He had *borrowed* some chart paper from school (Ilya was right, he had been a horrible influence on him. His morals had gone to shit), and taped them up on all the available wall space in his bedroom so they could chart out their plan. Every other available surface was covered with alarm clocks, some battery powered, and others with their wires tangled together like rat tails.

“No, Ilya. No more clocks. I’m cutting you off. What matters now is getting the timing right.” He punctuated this by aggressively tapping his meter stick (also borrowed from school) against the chart paper that was titled TIMEing. It contained an unfilled chart that had columns for Clock Number, Radio Station, Alarm Time, and Location.

The plan itself was simple. They were going to hide multiple alarm clocks in Alexei’s room, all set to go off a few minutes apart from one another. He had recently taken to the art of skipping his morning classes in favour of sleeping in, so not only was it going to be hilarious, but it also was beneficial for his education. Really, he should be thanking them.

However, Ilya had become *obsessed* with the amount of clocks. Every day he showed up to Shane's house with at least three more of the devices. He wasn't even sure how his friend was getting his hands on these things. They literally spent all of their free time together.

"Fine," Ilya said, flopping down on Shane's bed in resignation. "Ow." He pulled a clock out from underneath him.

"Have you labelled them all yet?" Shane asked.

"No, it's so *boring*. Pranks are supposed to be fun, labeling is not fun."

"Fine, I'll do it." Shane rolled his eyes. "Where's the stuff I gave you?"

Ilya fumbled around the bed and pulled out the tape and sharpie from beneath him as well. "Think fast!" he said, and whipped the tools at his friend.

Shane let out an undignified yelp and covered his face. Ilya cackled.

Once they had everything planned to perfection, they just had to wait for a day when Ilya's brother didn't come home after school.

Ilya checked the time on one of the many, many clocks now gathered into a single heaping pile next to Shane's desk, and looked back at his house across the street. Shane was grateful they were moving on with the plan, if only so that he could have his room organized again.

"Alright," he said. "It's 5:00 and he's not back yet, so it's safe to say he's with his friends drinking vodka out of a plastic water bottle in a ditch somewhere."

Shane nodded. "Let's do this, Agent Rozanov."

Ilya blinked. "You are so lame."

Alexei's bedroom smelled like stale cigarettes and wet dog. There were dirty glasses and bowls of cereal cluttering his side table, and so many piles of clothing and textbooks that it was impossible to even see the floor. His walls were mostly bare, with the exception of the Playboy magazine covers taped haphazardly above his bed. Shane was certain that if he ever ended up in hell, this would be it.

"Oh my God, this is the perfect spot," Ilya said, from inside of Alexei's closet. Shane poked his head in, looking up to see the removable panel that granted access to the attic.

Shane grinned, grabbed one of the battery powered alarm clocks from the duffle bag, checked it was tuned to the right station and set to go off at the correct time, and handed it to Ilya.

They worked in perfect harmony together. Clocks that needed to be plugged into an outlet were placed in more obvious spots, but he was doubtful that Alexei would notice when he inevitably came home late that night. They could get more creative with the battery powered

clocks, and they took full advantage, tucking them away in every nook and cranny, his sock drawer, under the bed, even in the pocket of a coat that was strewn across the floor.

Over the past couple of weeks they had also dedicated some time to planning a couple of particularly tricky hiding places, including an old textbook that they had hollowed out to perfectly fit one of the clocks. They decided to place that one within a pile of neglected homework on Alexei's desk.

When they were done with their work, the boys made their way downstairs, planning to return to Shane's house for some much needed French revision. As they passed by the living room, Shane noticed Mrs. Rozanova hunched forward on the sofa, staring blankly at the television, which was playing a documentary about bears. Shane paused when he saw her. She looked pale and sallow, like her skin was fading alongside the falling leaves. There was a cigarette perched between her fingers, the ash burnt far up the stick. On the TV a bear was perched at the edge of some rapids, jaws snapping viciously at a fish attempting to make its way upstream.

"Hi, Mrs. Rozanova," he said, and Ilya froze next to him, shoulders tense.

She seemed to snap back into herself upon hearing her name, and she turned towards the boys. "Hi, sweetie," she said. The ash fell off the end of her cigarette onto the floor. She didn't seem to notice. "You stay for dinner?" She asked. "I make something nice."

Ilya stepped into the living room. "No, mom, that's okay. We're going over to Shane's and I'll probably eat there. I took a tray of golubtsy out of the freezer yesterday. It's in the fridge if you get hungry," he said. He used his sleeve to wipe up the ash from the hardwood, and then took the cigarette from between her fingers and put it out in the ashtray on the table. "You get some rest, okay mom?" He kissed her gently on the top of her head.

Ilya squeezed her hands and then turned back towards Shane. "C'mon Shane, let's go. I need your help or I'm going to fail that French quiz tomorrow."

Back in Shane's room, Ilya was tense and quiet. He gripped his pen like he was trying to suffocate it.

"Ilya," Shane said.

His friend didn't respond.

"Is your mom okay?" Shane asked, worrying his lip.

Ilya grunted. "She's fine. She's just coming down with a cold or something."

Shane felt like there was more to it, but Ilya clearly didn't want to talk about it right now.

"Okay, well, I have some good news," he said, trying to change the subject.

"Is it a copy of the answers to the test?"

“Of course not!” Shane said, offended. “You know I would never cheat.”

“Yes, one of your many flaws.” Ilya smiled, the distraction working. “Alright then, what is it?”

“So,” Shane paused, drawing out the suspense. “You know how we tuned all the clocks to the same local station?”

Ilya nodded.

“Well, I looked up their number in the phone book and called their office early this morning, before school, and I told them about our plan. The hosts loved it! The dude I was talking to made his coworker come over and had me repeat the whole story. Anyway, they said they would play whatever song we wanted for like ten minutes straight, and they even said they would give a shoutout to Alexei!”

“Oh my God, Shane, you are a *genius*!” Ilya pumped his fist in the air with excitement. “So, what song did you tell them to play?”

Shane grinned. “Barbie Girl.”

The next morning, at 6:00 AM sharp, Ilya heard the chorus of *Barbie Girl* begin to play through his walls. They timed it so that the first ones to go off were the easily seen clocks plugged into outlets, so Alexei would find them quickly and think it was all over. Then, when he thought he had achieved peace and quiet, the battery powered alarms would begin their assault.

After the first run through of *Barbie Girl*, Ilya listened as the host quoted the lyrics in his shoutout to his brother, saying, “life is your creation, Alexei! You go girl!”

“I’m going to fucking *kill you*!” Alexei had screamed through the walls, that had been Ilya’s cue to bolt out of the house and across the street before he could make good on his threat.

December 2001 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Ilya had been grounded until Christmas break because of the prank, but it had been worth it. The missed study sessions with Shane meant his grades had started slipping slightly, but it gave him a chance to spend more time with his mom, who seemed to be doing better again.

Together they made traditional Russian New Year’s cookies, watched holiday movies curled up on the sofa with hot chocolate, and spent way more time than he would have liked shovelling the driveway. He knew that snow was going to be a thing, theoretically, but didn’t realize just how much of it there was going to be. The first snowfall had been novel. It had happened mid day, and all of the kids in his class stampeded towards the window like buffalo, jaws open in wonder, like they too were experiencing Canadian winter for the first time. Shovelling with his mom wasn’t so bad though, and they usually dissolved into an all out snowball war before they could finish clearing the driveway. These moments together

brought out a mischievous, youthful joy in his mother, and he wondered if she was reminded of her own childhood, back in Russia.

He was relieved to have his mom back, but found himself anxious, wondering how long it would last this time.

Today though, was the start of Christmas break, and more importantly the day he got his freedom back. The lake behind his house was frozen over, and he was ready to make good on his promise to teach Shane to skate. He had been preparing for this for the past couple of weeks, skating over the area every morning with a wide broom to keep the makeshift rink clear of snow and fallen branches. It had been below zero all week long, but today the sky was cloudless, and the sun brought the temperature to just above freezing, the perfect weather for them to spend the day outside.

He knocked on the Hollander's door, two bags of skates slung over his shoulders: the new pair he had gotten for his birthday, and his old ones, which Shane could use.

Mr. Hollander answered the door and chuckled, seeing the equipment bags.

"Good luck, kid, you're going to need it." He shook his head and walked back into the house. "Shane! Ilya's here. Fair warning though, he has skates with him. Last chance to—"

Shane stampeded down the stairs before his dad could finish his sentence. He flung his arms around Ilya, almost knocking him over with the force.

"You're free!"

"Weren't you just together in school yesterday? You're acting like your father has come home from war." David chuckled at his own joke.

They ignored him. "I'm free," Ilya said, grinning, his cheeks red from the cold. "Now, time to conquer your fears."

"So, are you finally going to let me in on the big secret?" Ilya asked, bumping his shoulder against Shane's as they walked along the path to the river behind Ilya's house. The ground was covered in a thick blanket of snow and it crunched underneath their boots with each step.

"What big secret?"

"The reason why you never learned to skate or play hockey."

"Oh," Shane said. He could see the river now, and he felt himself growing tense. "It's just, it's so stupid. I should really be over it."

Ilya waited patiently for him to open up. He held a branch out of the way as they walked right up to the river's edge.

Shane took a deep breath and sat in the snowbank in front of the makeshift rink. Ilya tossed the equipment bags on the ground and joined him.

“Okay, so my parents signed me up for hockey when I was five. My mom’s family was big into it growing up, and my dad played during University too, so I guess my parents figured it would be like, in my blood or something.” Shane started to undo his boots while he spoke, getting ready for the skates. Ilya unzipped the bag with his old skates and loosened the laces for him. “Anyway, on the day of my first lesson I was out there with the other kids, waddling around like lost penguins, the coach was trying to get our attention but we weren’t listening, so he blew this whistle that was *insanely* loud and I lost my shit. I threw a whole ass temper tantrum on the ice. I just sat down and started screaming, and I wouldn’t get up. They ended up having to get my parents down there to carry me off. God, it was humiliating.”

It was quiet for a moment, and then Ilya started laughing. A flock of birds burst out from within the woods at the sound.

“Oh my God, you’re not supposed to laugh!” Shane yanked off one of his boots and whacked Ilya in the shoulder with it. “This is why I don’t tell people things!”

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, trying to catch his breath. “Sorry, no, I’m not laughing *at* you,” he said. “Really, I promise. I can just picture it so clearly with your stupid pouty face. I bet it was adorable.” He finally stopped laughing. He looked at Shane. “Have you had freckles ever since you were little?” Ilya asked, still staring.

Shane flushed. “Nope. We’re done talking about me. And I’m never telling you anything again. Give me the skate, Rozanov.” He held out his hand and Ilya dropped the loosened skate into it.

“I’ve just gotta clear off the ice first, and then we can begin your first lesson,” Ilya said. He took out his own skates and tightened them with efficient movements, while Shane was still struggling to do up the first one.

“See, this is the first problem with hockey,” Shane grunted. “Why the hell do they make the laces so *impossible* to do up?”

“Here.” Ilya moved so he was crouching in front of Shane. He pulled at the laces, cinching the boot around Shane’s ankle.

“Jesus, does it have to be so tight?”

“Yes,” Ilya said simply. “Unless you want to break your ankles. Would you like to break your ankles?” He finished off the knot at the top of the boot and started working on the second skate.

“If I do, will you promise to never make me skate again?”

“No.”

Shane sighed.

“There you go,” Ilya said, pushing himself up to standing. “This won’t take me long, we didn’t get much snow last night.”

Ilya grabbed the wide bottomed broom he left leaning up against a tree and stepped onto the ice. Shane watched as he swiftly brushed off the dusting of snow that lingered across the river. He was so effortless in his movements, gliding across the ice with practiced ease. When the area was clear, he tossed the broom onto the side of the bank and continued skating loops around the cleared area. Shane's gaze lingered as he made sharp turns and transitioned in and out of skating backwards with ease.

"Show off!" Shane called.

Ilya sliced his blades to the side, coming to an abrupt halt in the center of the river, a child-like grin taking up half of his face.

"Hey, I can't help it that--"

Shane didn't get to hear the end of what Ilya was going to say. One second he was standing in front of him, smiling wide and carefree, and then with a resounding crack from the ice below he was *gone*. For a moment time seemed to stop as Shane processed what just happened. Then, Ilya's gloved hands reached up from the water, scrambling for purchase at the broken ice.

"Holy shit," he whispered.

"Sha—" Ilya's voice bubbled up from the surface, sharp and harrowing, before he was swept back under.

Shane acted without thinking. His heart was pounding in his throat. He fumbled down the bank and onto the ice. "Fuck, fuck fuck," he repeated to himself. It was farther out than it looked from where he had been sitting. "Shit!"

He clumsily skated out a few feet and then remembered the broom that Ilya had left on the river's edge. He tried to spin around to grab it, but slipped on the ice, falling to his knees. Shane frantically reached for the broom and turned back towards the crack in the ice. Towards the crack in the ice that *Ilya fucking fell into*. He scrambled forward on all fours, remembering reading something about spreading out his weight.

"Ilya!" He shouted.

Ilya's head surfaced again. "Ilya, grab onto the broom!" He pushed it forward, trying to get closer without causing further damage to the ice. Ilya's head vanished beneath the waves, and Shane swore under his breath. What if he didn't hear him? What the fuck was he supposed to do?

Shane inched closer, willing to jump in the fucking water if that's what it took. The frozen river beneath him let out a groan and Shane froze. He looked at the broken patch in the surface. "Ilya!" he screamed again.

A hand reached up out from the water, followed by another, now missing a glove. Shane nudged the broom's end toward Ilya's hands, desperate. Ilya's fingers fumbled, seemingly in slow motion, and then finally gained purchase on the broom.

“Hold on!” Shane shouted, and he pulled, shifting backward on the ice. At his first tug the ice cracked more, breaking off another section, and his heart stopped as Ilya almost lost his grip. He watched the hand tighten and yanked again. Finally, blonde curls, darkened with the river water, emerged from the surface. Shane frantically pulled the broom towards him, until Ilya was close enough that he could grab onto his arms. Shane grabbed him by the armpits and pulled him in close, scrambling backwards until they were both fully on the bank.

Ilya sputtered, pressed up against his chest. Shane realized he had been crying. They stayed like that for a moment, Shane’s heart rate slowly coming down.

Ilya coughed, and then whispered, his voice hoarse, “I’m dripping nasty river water on you.”

“I don’t give a shit you big loser.” Shane realized just how much Ilya was shaking. Fuck, he must be *freezing*. His mind scrambled with worry. How long did it take to get hypothermia? Couldn’t people die from drowning like *days* after being in the water? He gently pulled back from Ilya and then unzipped both of their coats. He left Ilya’s jacket on the bank and draped his own coat over his shoulders. “Let’s get you inside before you freeze to death.”

Shane fumbled to untie both of their skates, wishing now more than ever that he had stuck with skating lessons, if only so he could be faster at changing in and out of the equipment. Once they were off, he realized their boots were at the top of the bank, and he cursed at himself while he climbed back up, socks sinking into the snow, to retrieve them. He slipped on both of their boots and hoisted Ilya up, as they walked back up the path, Ilya’s weight leaned heavily on his shoulder as he shivered like a wet chihuahua.

“I can’t believe I missed it,” Ilya mumbled into his shoulder.

“Stop talking,” Shane scolded him. “We’re almost there.” They were at the edge of Ilya’s property now, and Shane held onto him tighter as they crossed the street to his own house.

“But Shaaaane, I missed it!” He picked his head up off of Shane’s shoulder, his jaw chattering. “I can’t believe it...”

“What are you talking about?” Shane said. “Okay, pay attention, I need you to focus so we can get you up the front steps.”

“You skated! You made it onto the ice! I didn’t get to see because the river decided to spite me. And now you’ll probably never skate again because I scared you even worse than your bitch ass coach from when you were five.” Ilya pouted. He looked like he might actually start crying.

“I can’t believe that’s what you’re worried about.” Shane rolled his eyes. “I’ll skate again, but only if you lift your goddamn legs first and get inside my house before you freeze your ass off on my front lawn.”

Translation Notes:

- golubtsy (голубцы): cabbage rolls

Chapter 6: His Mother in Moscow

Chapter Notes

Content Warning: This chapter contains an implied death by suicide (canonical). The depiction is not graphic in nature, but it may still be upsetting to some readers. See end notes for more detail.

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

*Sorry, but I've got to go
The birth was quick, but the death was slow
There was so much I didn't know
So much I never knew about you*

“Life Effect”, Stars

New Year's Eve 2002 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Ilya trudged across the familiar path between his and Shane’s house, holding a rectangular package in his gloved hands. Fat snowflakes fell lazily like dandelion puffs. Despite this being his second winter in Canada, his body had not acclimatized to the weather, and he quietly protested, bundling up in countless layers of cotton, wool and down. His classmates seemed like a different species to him, the way they confidently hung out on the field during recess without coats or hats, wearing some combination of hoodies, Converse, leggings or salt stained Uggs. The only logical explanation he could think of was that Canadian parents must gather annually for frostbite parties, exposing any newborn children to the bitter cold so they would get used to the wretched numbness of losing all feeling in their extremities, thereby gaining the opportunity to look cool and nonchalant in their pre-teen years.

Shane’s house glowed like a beacon before him. Soft yellow Christmas lights remained strung up along the eavestrough, a fixture that he knew would likely stay until late February based on last year, when he had helped the Hollander’s take them down. The silhouettes of Yuna and David were framed by the bay window. They sat in the living room, David engrossed in a paperback and Yuna watching something on the television.

He dusted his snowy boots off on the front mat and let him into the house. This was something else he hadn’t quite figured out; did all small town Ontarians leave their front doors unlocked, or was it just the Hollanders who lived unafraid of intruders? Sure, the nearest neighbour other than himself was a ten minute walk down the lane and she was an eighty five year old woman who used a walker, but he was also pretty sure bears could open doors.

Yuna and David called out greetings from the room over as Ilya slipped out of his winter gear, piling it into the hall closet. He poked his head into the living room as he made his way to the stairs.

“Happy New Year,” he said. The New York ball drop ceremony was playing quietly on the television, and remnants of Christmas lingered all around the room; a spread of cookies on the coffee table, stick on snowflakes pasted to the windows (as if there wasn’t already more than enough snow outside), and the warm smell of pine wafting from the Christmas tree.

He had helped the Hollanders decorate their tree this year, and Ilya had laughed with delight at the countless ornaments from when Shane was a baby; little pictures of him surrounded by handmade paper wreaths or stuffed into clear plastic bulbs. Ilya’s favourite was a bulb containing a picture of him drowning in a pile of colourful gifts, dressed in an oversized Montreal Metro’s jersey. It had sparked an all too familiar debate between Yuna and him about which team was better, his beloved Panthers or her Metros. David and Shane quietly continued to decorate, knowing better than to get caught up in the crossfire.

Ilya and Yuna had grown closer too, through their mutual passion for hockey. She almost exclusively took him to his practices now, and they watched the games together whenever either of their teams were playing. David also loved hockey, having played it throughout his childhood and University, but he was more subdued in his interest, caring more about the sport than the teams themselves. Shane would always “watch” with them, meaning he would physically be in the room, but would keep himself busy with his Gameboy or homework.

“Happy New Year,” they said back to him in unison.

“What’s that you have there?” David said, nodding at the package in Ilya’s hands.

“Just something for Shane,” he held up the gift, feeling awkward. “Oh! But I brought something for you guys too.”

“Oh Ilya, you didn’t have to do that,” Yuna insisted as he rummaged through his pockets, pulling out a small, palm sized gift wrapped in shimmering silver paper. He handed it over to Yuna. She unwrapped it carefully, revealing a small, red five pointed star ornament.

“It’s a traditional Russian New Years ornament, but I thought you could use it on your Christmas tree, if you wanted. I got the star because it reminds me of how clear the stars are up at the cottage.”

Yuna added the decoration to an empty branch on the tree and wrapped her arms around Ilya tight. David groaned about his back while getting off the sofa, but joined in on the hug as well.

“Thank you, Ilya,” David said as they pulled away.

Ilya scratched at the back of his neck. “I thought it was really cool when you guys showed us some of the constellations in the summer,” he said, looking at the parents who had at some point, over the past year and a half, become something like family to him. “I really appreciate

everything you guys have done, you know?" He wanted to say more, but didn't have the words to explain what he was feeling.

"Of course, sweetie." Yuna said, wrapping him up in another hug.

Crosslegged on his comforter, Shane sat with his new Seagull S6 guitar in his lap. The cedar and cherry frame was bulky, and he was still trying to figure out the least awkward way to wrangle his arms around the thing. He clumsily strummed the instrument, a sheet of paper on the bed in front of him with common chords printed on it.

He got the guitar as a Christmas gift from his parents this year, and he had put it down for a total of approximately fifteen minutes since he unwrapped it. If he wasn't worried about breaking it he would sleep with it tucked in next to him. His fingers hurt like hell already, but he was determined to power through the pain.

His interest in music had grown over the past year, and he had made a personalized mix tape for not only Ilya, but his parents as well this Christmas. He hadn't previously considered the possibility of learning to play music himself, but he was immediately invested.

"Hey there, Kurt Cobain."

Shane looked up at the sound of the familiar voice, startled by his sudden appearance. He had been so focused on plucking out the chords that he hadn't heard his friend's footsteps padding up the stairs.

"Not yet, but maybe someday," Shane said sheepishly.

Ilya splayed out on the bed next to Shane, brandishing the gift in front of him. "Happy New Year, Hollander," he said.

Ilya had explained his family's holiday traditions to Shane last year. He said that his family was Orthodox, which meant they still celebrated Christmas, but it was in early January instead, and it was mostly a day where they ate a bunch of food, went to Church, and prayed a lot. They still exchanged gifts, but on New Years Eve instead. Apparently instead of Santa, he had grown up with Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter, the Snow Maiden. It all sounded very Chronicles of Narnia to Shane, but he hadn't said that to Ilya.

Shane gently rested the guitar on the floor, leaning it against the bed frame, so he could take the gift, "Thanks, Ilya," he said, beaming.

"Well at least open it first before you say thanks. You might hate it." Ilya leaned back against the headboard, arms resting behind his head. He looked like he was trying to act casual, but Shane could tell he was anxious for some reason.

He unwrapped the paper carefully, trying not to rip the edges. It wasn't easy, given Ilya's horrendous wrapping skills.

“Oh my god, just rip the paper, you old man! It’s not like you’re gonna use it again!” Ilya poked Shane in the ribs with his foot.

Shane flinched and slapped Ilya's ankle. “Get your nasty feet away from me, you freak,” he said, laughing. He continued to unwrap the gift, purposely going at a glacial pace just to irritate Ilya, who pretended to snore.

Pulling back the last of the wrapping revealed a thick, leather bound journal. Shane opened it slowly, running his hands along the off white pages.

“It’s for you to like, write songs in,” Ilya said, voice suddenly softer. “Or whatever, you don’t have to use it for that. I just thought, with the guitar and everything you might want to try writing some music of your own.”

“It’s perfect, Ilya.” Shane closed the book and started studying the leather binding. “Thank you.”

They lingered in the moment for a while. Ilya grabbed a notepad and pencil off of Shane’s desk and returned to his spot on the bed. He sketched the scene before him absentmindedly while Shane filled the silence, plucking out chords on the guitar. Downstairs, the countdown to midnight rang out from the television. Outside, the snow continued to fall. The thick blanket of white reflected the moonlight onto their hands and faces.

Looking back on his life, Shane recognized this as the last moment of respite before everything went to absolute shit.

January 7th, 2003 – Peterborough, ON

Ilya’s legs were cramping. They were an hour and a half into the Christmas Day Divine Liturgy and probably still had another hour to go. Ilya’s Church Slavonic was even worse than his Russian, so he wasn’t totally sure what part of the service they were at. It was a Tuesday, and the Church was two towns over from where they lived, so he and Alexei were both excused from school for the day.

Ilya stared at the puddles of salty water pooling around his boots on the tile floor. He wished he was at school. At least then he would be able to sit down.

“Head up, Ilya,” his dad hissed into his ear, noticing that Ilya wasn’t paying attention.

He gazed at the altar. The priest was facing the congregation. His face reminded Ilya of a toad that had dried up in the sun. He was swinging a censer as he chanted, and the incense smelled like wet wood and ash.

Alexei was on his left, his father on his right. His mother had stayed at home today, saying she wasn’t feeling up to standing for so many hours. Ilya missed her, he liked listening to her warm voice when she sang during the service. There was a baby crying somewhere in the back of the Church. Ilya wanted to leave.

He looked at the icons painted on the ceiling above the altar. In one, Jesus was kneeling down, talking to children, dressed in colourful robes. In another he held the same pose, but was surrounded by a group of elderly people with bowed heads, necks drooping like sunflowers. One of them was wrapped up in a blanket. Everyone except for Jesus was crying, fat tears running down their rosy faces. Ilya wondered if Jesus cried when he was a baby.

Alexei nudged his side, startling him from his daydream. Their father was several paces ahead, making his way toward the chalice to receive the Eucharist. Ilya caught up to him and crossed his arms over his chest. He followed in line, taking small, measured steps.

The choir was singing a cappella, and the harmonies reverberated around the room, haunting and cold. He recognized the song. It was one his mother used to sing to him when he was a baby. He thought about how when he was young if they went for a long drive late at night he would pretend to fall asleep in the backseat. Then, not wanting to wake him up, his mom would carry him inside the house and dress him in cotton pajamas. He wondered if she knew he was just pretending.

Suddenly, Ilya found himself in front of the priest. Sun spots dotted his cheeks, and his collar looked like it was strangling him, his neck swelling around the edges.

He quickly whispered to himself in Church Slavonic, “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” It was one of the few phrases he knew. He tilted his head back, opened his mouth, and said his name.

The priest looked at him and recited back to him in the liturgical language, “The servant of God Ilya partakes of the Holy Body and Blood of our Lord, God, and Saviour Jesus Christ, for the remission of sins and life everlasting.”

He placed the spoon containing the Eucharist into Ilya’s mouth. Ilya made the sign of the cross and continued, following his father’s path. He let the bread dissolve slowly in his mouth while he listened to the choir. It left a sour taste in his mouth. The bread, and the singing.

The house was quieter than usual when they got home. That was the first thing Ilya noticed. It was like the snow was pressing in on the walls, suffocating the life within. The kitchen sink hadn’t been shut off all the way, and that was all he could hear. A steady drip like a heartbeat punctuating the stainless steel basin.

Alexei shrugged off his jacket and trudged up the stairs to his room. “I’m gonna study for exams,” he said over his shoulder, which Ilya knew meant he was going to send perverted messages on MSN to whatever girl he was currently seeing.

“Mom, we’re home!” Ilya called out, ignoring his brother. His voice echoed in the foyer. It reminded him of the church choir.

He had begged his dad to stop at the grocery store on their way home so he could pick up a pint of Kawartha ice cream for her, he clutched the handle of the crinkling plastic bag in his hand. He chose Campfire S’mores. He’d gushed to his mom about the s’mores he’d tried at

Shane's cottage over the past two summers, and was excited to share it with her. Maybe it would help brighten her mood.

She didn't respond, he called out her name again, wandering into the living room. She had been there when they left for church early this morning, but that was hours ago. There was a mug of cold tea on the coffee table. Ilya moved it onto a coaster.

He heard his dad ascend the stairs behind him.

"Is mom up there?" he called out. Gregori didn't answer. Ilya walked halfway up the stairs himself, the bag of ice cream still clutched in his hand.

"Dad?" He climbed the last few steps and peered into his parents room, the door slightly ajar. His dad had their phone pressed to his ear and he was speaking into it, voice low. Ilya couldn't make out what he was saying. He held a piece of paper in his other hand, shaking slightly. "Dad, is mom in there?"

His dad said something into the phone and pulled it away from his ear, pressing it against his chest.

"No, no Ilya," he said. It sounded like there was a stone stuck in his throat. "She not here. You room, go now."

Ilya shook his head, his dad was being ridiculous. "What? No. I was gonna have ice cream with mom. Who's on the phone?"

"No one. Go, room. Now," he repeated. He turned his back to Ilya and continued talking to whoever was on the other line.

Ilya rolled his eyes and walked back downstairs. As much as he didn't want to get back into his winter gear, he figured his mom might be working in her studio. That was a good thing. Working on her art was usually a sign that she was on her way to doing better again. He layered up, grabbed two spoons from the kitchen so they could share the ice cream, and made his way out back.

There were mom-sized footsteps in the snow dotting the path to the shed, and Ilya traced her steps, purposefully stepping into the divots she had created earlier that day. He realized then that his feet were almost bigger than hers now, and they probably would be by the end of the school year. He was thinking about how he was going to break the news that her little Mishka was almost all grown up when he opened the door.

The scream tore itself from Ilya's lungs without being called upon or requested.

In the decades that followed, whenever Ilya was ripped from his sleep by an echo of the same guttural sound, he considered that maybe something escaped out of him that day, but he couldn't figure out what it was, and he didn't know how to get it back.

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, frozen, the plastic bag and spoons discarded in the snow, his eyes glued to his mother's figure. He knew that at some point his dad had come crashing from the house, and wrapped his arms tight around him in a soothing gesture Ilya couldn't recall receiving from the man before, and hadn't felt since. He knew too, that everything was white. The sun was so white, and so were the trees. His mother's skin was white, and the snow, and he thought that he was white too, but he couldn't see.

Suddenly and slowly, he found himself at his kitchen table. The police had shown up at some point, with their yellow Do-Not-Cross-This-Line tape. They swarmed around the house like drunken wasps.

There was a woman in a pantsuit with glossy, dark brown hair. She sat at the kitchen table with Ilya and asked him all kinds of questions. Things like, "Do you understand what happened?" and "Is there anything you want to know?" Ilya doesn't remember what he said to her, if he said anything at all.

Eventually they all left, taking his mother with them like a prize.

His father sat with him and Alexei in the kitchen. They sat in silence for a long while, or maybe not. Ilya wasn't sure. His father held his head in his hands and Alexei looked like he wasn't there at all. Eventually, he started speaking and it seemed like he might never stop. It was like someone had turned the dripping sink faucet all the way on and the sound was inescapable.

Gregori told them that they couldn't tell anyone about what had happened to their mother. He said that it was horrible, and it was tragic, but more than anything it was an accident. He wouldn't live in a town where everyone knew his business. He said that they were going to have the body brought to Russia for the funeral and burial, when the police were done with it. With her, their mother. The body. Irina. Alexei was going to have to miss his exams. He would tell the school. He said they weren't to tell family in Russia about what happened either. It was an accident. He made them repeat it back to him. It was an accident. It was an accident.

It was an accident.

A Week Later – Moscow, Russia

Ilya had always wondered if visiting Russia would feel like coming home. However from where he stood in the funeral home, hands in his pockets, drowning in the smell of wax and cold flowers, he had never felt so alone.

Heavy winter coats were piled near the entrance of the hall. Men swallowed by dark wool suits and women in headscarves pressed in on him from all sides. The light from the windows was muted by grey snow piled against the panes of glass. He could hear the dull roar of traffic through the walls. No one was speaking English.

People tried to approach him at first. Cousins, aunts, uncles, he assumed. He tried his best to respond in stilted Russian, and was greeted with looks of amusement or disappointment in

response. They would turn to his father and make some remark about his pronunciation or vocabulary and Gregori would shake his head in shame. Distract them by showing off Alexei and his fluent vocabulary. Ilya decided it was better not to respond at all.

His mother rested at the front of the room. He found himself drawing closer to her without realizing he had been moving. She looked smaller than he remembered. Her skin was ashy, her lips painted the wrong colour. Red carnations surrounded the casket like a forest of blood.

She was dressed in clothes Ilya couldn't place, and she was missing her familiar scent of oil paints and turpentine. He didn't understand. Was this really his mother? Had they made a mistake?

The gold Orthodox cross on a chain around her neck flickered in the dim candlelight, catching his eye. It seemed wrong to him, this fraudulent version of his mother wearing something that he had never seen her remove. Without thinking, he wiped his sweaty palms, reached into the casket and swiftly unclasped the chain. He balled it in his fist, slipping it into his pocket before he could second guess himself.

"She's beautiful."

Ilya jumped, startled at the sudden voice. It took him a moment to realize that he understood what was being said. They were speaking English.

He studied the figure on his right. It was a boy, a head or so taller than himself. He had dark hair, thick eyebrows, and looked like he was maybe 14 or 15. He wore a black button up and jacket, but no tie. The top couple buttons of his shirt were undone and Ilya thought it was an odd choice for the funeral, given how formally everyone else, even the children, were dressed.

"I'm Sasha," he added. "And do not worry, I will not tell about what is in your pocket."

Ilya had the sudden urge to strangle the kid with his mom's chain. He was pretty sure he could take him, even with their height difference. "That's my mom," he deadpanned. "You know, the one in the coffin? So I think I can take her necklace if I want to."

Ilya looked back at his mother, made the sign of the cross, and moved across the room. Sasha, for some reason, either didn't notice or didn't care that Ilya wanted him to fuck right off, and followed him.

"Your English sucks by the way," Ilya said, just to be a dick.

"My English does not suck."

Ilya glared at him. Sasha, of all things, *winked*. Did he not realize this was a funeral?

"I'm sorry, why exactly are you still talking to me?" Ilya asked.

Sasha actually laughed. In the middle of the funeral hall. It wasn't loud, but a handful of nearby people turned and shot them looks. Ilya briefly wondered if maybe there was

something wrong with him. Was he concussed?

“Sorry,” Sasha said. “I am going about this in a wrong way.” Sasha ran a hand through his hair. “My father is friend of your father. Or was, when he live here. I am same age as Alexei, we grow up together.”

“Wow, lucky you.”

Sasha shook his head. “Look, I just, I am hearing your father and Alexei say some things and I...” he trailed off, trying to find the right words. “I want to see that you are okay.”

Ilya looked at him, another quip ready on the tip of his tongue, but paused at the genuine look of concern on his face.

“I am sorry about your mother,” Sasha added. “It is... how do they say, really fucking shit?”

It was Ilya, now, who laughed.

“So what is it like in Canada?” Sasha asked on their last evening in Moscow.

It had been a week since the funeral, and they were at some family member’s house for a going away dinner. Ilya was tucked away at the far end of the table, wedged between Sasha, his brother, and countless other kids he couldn’t remember the names of. He wasn’t even sure who he was and wasn’t related to.

“I don’t know. Same as here, I guess. Cold,” Ilya said. He had hung out with Sasha a few more times over the past week. His sense of humour had taken a bit to get used to, but Ilya had actually grown to appreciate his presence. At least he bothered trying to speak to him in English.

“I am not talking about weather,” Sasha said. He took a sip of red wine. Ilya found him inexplicably interesting. He held himself differently than everyone else in the room. Like he didn’t give a shit what anyone thought of him. It was refreshing. “I mean politically.”

Ilya pushed the food around on his plate, uncertain how to respond. He didn’t really know anything about politics in Canada, or Russia for that matter, but he didn’t want to come across as stupid. Luckily, Sasha continued on, not giving Ilya a chance to embarrass himself.

“I have heard things about Canada,” he spoke a bit quieter as he said this, leaning in towards Ilya so the others around them couldn’t hear. Ilya thought this was unnecessary, it didn’t seem like anyone was paying them any attention. “About how things are maybe... I do not know right word. Maybe not so unyielding?”

“I dunno,” Ilya shrugged, deciding it was best to just own up to his own ignorance. “My parents—” he cut himself off. “Well, my dad, doesn't really talk about politics to me.”

Sasha hummed. “Things here, they are not so good. For people like me. There is a, how do you say... proposal? Being put forward. It would mean—”

“Ilya, can you pass the butter?” Alexei interrupted. Ilya scrunched his brow. Alexei could clearly reach the butter himself. He was about to say this to him, but something in his brother’s eyes made him keep his mouth shut. He looked... genuinely concerned.

“Sure,” Ilya said.

“Ah, that is enough of that,” Sasha said, seeming to pick up on some unspoken message. “A toast,” he said, addressing him and Alexei. “To families reunited.” He was looking Alexei directly in the eyes as he held out his glass.

At the other end of the table he could see some sort of commotion. His father was getting heated, cheeks rosy, expressive arms waving wildly as he engaged in a loud, boisterous conversation with one of his brothers. Ilya couldn’t understand it, but both Alexei’s and Sasha’s attention snapped to them as something was said.

“What are they talking about?” Ilya asked his brother. Alexei shushed him. Ilya did his best to translate. It was something about Moscow, a job. He thought he heard the words family and maybe a month. February? March? He wasn’t sure.

“What is he saying?” He asked Alexei again, louder this time.

Alexei ignored him, but Sasha spoke up. “They are discussing your family moving back to Russia,” he said. “Your uncle has offered Gregori a job with his company. Said it is best for family to be together, considering... considering all that happened.”

“We can’t move here!” Ilya bolted up from his seat. The chair scraped loudly against the hardwood. “Dad, tell him no! What are you thinking!”

Gregori looked at his son, his face turning a deep, angry shade of purple.

“Quiet, Ilya. You do not speak like this,” he said, jabbing his knife in the air.

“I’ll speak to you however I fucking want!” Ilya didn’t know what he was doing. He had tried his best to fade into the background since they arrived in Russia, but he couldn’t sit back and say nothing while his family discussed taking away every good thing left in his life. He didn’t have her anymore. What was left? “We can’t move here! Jesus, dad, I don’t even speak Russian? What the fuck would I do? You made mom so depressed that—” he cut himself off. *It was an accident*, he reminded himself. “We can’t! I’m not going to!”

Gregori rose from the table himself, a vein on his forehead pulsing with rage. Before he could retaliate, Alexei interrupted.

“Papa,” he said. Ilya tensed at the sound of his voice. He didn’t need his farce of a brother agreeing with his dad and making everything worse. He was surprised, however, by what followed. “Now is not the time to talk about this. And...” he looked back and forth between their dad and Ilya. “Perhaps Ilya is right. It is too much change all at once. Maybe when he is older, done with high school. Then we can come back home.” Alexei rested his hand on Ilya’s shoulder. He stared up at his brother, dumbfounded. Gregori, to everyone’s surprise, nodded curtly, tipped the remainder of his wine down his throat, and relaxed in his seat.

“Holy shit,” Sasha said, looking at Ilya’s brother. “I see you finally decided to grow a pair of balls, Alexei.”

A Week Later — Bobcaygeon, ON

“What about the Catholic school in Lindsay?” Alexei asked, sitting across from their father at the kitchen table, a mirror image of two weeks ago. The day of the accident. “I could call the school for you, papa. Talk to the principal, explain the situation.”

Ilya had tried to go to school today, for the first time since they got back from Moscow. It was awful. He felt like he’d been given a penalty shot during his league’s playoffs. All eyes on him, breath held, heart in his throat, all the nervous energy with none of the excitement.

It was immediately clear that everyone had been gossiping about the *incident* and his subsequent disappearance. He didn’t blame them, it was a small town and the police had been involved. He should have seen it coming. Lying to most of his class about it was fine, and if that was the end of it, he could have stayed. But then there was Shane.

Shane hadn’t asked him about his mom yet. He had been quiet all day, contemplative. But Ilya saw the concern in his eyes. The questions bubbling just beneath the surface, waiting for the right time to push.

And honestly, Ilya knew, without a doubt, that it would feel good to talk to him about it. If he was honest with himself, there was nothing he wanted to do more than run over to his friends house, get swept up in one of Mrs. Hollander’s hugs, and to spill everything he was thinking, feeling, and had seen to Shane.

But he couldn’t do that. His father had made that clear.

Following that last shitshow of a dinner in Moscow, his father had continued to push the possibility of them returning to Russia permanently. For some reason, unknown to Ilya, Alexei had continued to advocate for him, saying that Ilya needed to finish school in Canada if he was going to have a successful future. It was weird; seeing his brother like that.

Eventually, Gregori came around. He agreed that as long as they were able to keep the truth about Irina’s death within the family, they could stay. However, if word spread in the community, if it got back to his colleagues at work, then that would be it. They would go back to Russia, to the job his uncle had offered Gregori.

“Yes, it could work. If you take care of it. Does not make difference to me.” His father was taking sips of vodka from a coffee mug while they discussed. Ilya realized they had spent more time together as a family over these past few weeks than they had since moving to Canada two years ago. It didn’t make any sense. Why did it have to take something so horrible for his brother to be anything other than hostile towards him? For his father to look him in the eye?

“Is that okay with you, Ilya?” Alexei asked, what sounded like genuine concern in his voice. “It’s in the next town over, so you’ll need to take the bus. You won’t be able to walk to school

anymore, with your friend.”

“Yeah.” Ilya nodded. “Yeah, I think that’s for the best.”

Two Days Later – Lindsay, ON

Ilya ran his thumb rhythmically over the etched grooves of the Orthodox cross around his neck. He hadn’t taken the delicate chain off since he stole it from his mother in Moscow, its presence offered a small, continual comfort. Prayers were being read over the school PA system, which was new to him. He’d never been in a Catholic school before. The words weren’t familiar to him, but he preferred it over the ocean of whispered gossip that had confronted him at his old school.

He hadn’t been able to bring himself to talk to Shane face to face about changing schools. He knew the second he tried he would break down. He’d written a letter last night and left it in the Hollander’s mailbox and he’d been regretting the decision ever since. It was too late to go back now, but he felt like an absolute fucking asshole. Only a fraction of what he’d written was true, but he’d said the only thing he could think of that would make sure Shane didn’t try to reach out.

“Ilya,” his new teacher said from the front of the classroom, running through her attendance list. She said it the way most people do. Three punctuated syllables. Ill-ee-uh. He never corrected them and honestly didn’t care. His parents were the only ones who ever said it ‘the proper way’, so as long as Ilya was successful in his plan to never speak to his father again, that version of his name could happily die with his mother.

He was about to respond with the perfunctory “here”, when a girl piped up from the desk next to him.

“It’s Ill-YUH,” she said. Her voice was rampant with attitude and bite. “It’s not that hard.” She rolled her eyes and looked at him.

“You’re welcome,” she added in a stage whisper. Ilya couldn’t help but notice that she was beautiful. She had dark skin and the coolest hair Ilya had ever seen. It was dyed wine red and sat in tight, face framing curls. She was wearing a band t-shirt, with a long sleeve shirt underneath, her black nail polish chipped and fading at the edges.

“Uh, thanks, I guess,” he said, not actually sure if he was grateful, but certain he didn’t want to get on her bad side.

She grinned, mischievously. “I’m Svetlana by the way.”

Content Warning Notes:

- If you're looking to skip over the actual event, I would suggest you stop reading at the paragraph which begins "The house was quieter than usual when they got home." and begin reading again at the section which begins "A Week Later – Moscow, Russia". All of that being said, take care of yourselves while reading as there are other references to the death throughout the rest of the chapter.
- If you or someone you know is in crisis, the suicide crisis help line in Canada and the United States is 9-8-8.

Chapter 7: That's My Neighbour

*If the children don't grow up
Our bodies get bigger but our hearts get torn up
We're just a million little god's causin' rain storms
Turnin' every good thing to rust
I guess we'll just have to adjust*

“Wake Up”, Arcade Fire

February 2003 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Shane stared at the little green light next to Ilya’s name on MSN, indicating that he was online. He clicked and started typing out a message.

Shane: Hey, I just wanted to check in and see if you’re okay.

He deleted the words and tried again.

Shane: I know you didn’t mean what you wrote in your stupid letter. Please talk to me.

He slammed down on the delete key with a little too much force.

Shane: Did I do something wrong?

Before he could delete his final attempt at a message, Ilya’s status turned orange, meaning away, before it suddenly greyed out. Offline.

Shane kicked the computer. It was harder than he realized. “Fuck,” he cried, grabbing his foot, and spinning around in the wheeled office chair.

“Everything okay, kiddo?” his dad asked, poking his head into the room.

Shane sighed dramatically and leaned back, his foot falling to the floor.

“No, dad. Nothing is okay. Ilya still won’t talk to me and I’m back to having no friends at school and I’m a horrible person for even making this about how I feel when *he’s* the one who just lost his mom.”

His dad walked over and gave him a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

“I’m really sorry, Shane. It does suck. But you’re allowed to feel bad too.” He leaned down and kissed Shane on the top of his head, like when he was a little kid. “Ilya might just need some space for a little while. We really miss him too, you know, your mom and I.”

Shane groaned and leaned forward, putting his face in his hands. “I don’t know, dad... It’s just, he left me that letter and he said some stuff that didn’t sound like him at all. It was weird. It’s like... he was trying to hurt me or something, I don’t know.”

“Hmmm. Do you want me to take a look at it? Get my two cents?”

“Oh god, no! No, you don’t have to read it. Please don’t. I’m probably being stupid.” Shane lifted his gaze and stared at Ilya’s offline MSN status. “He just said some stuff about deciding to transfer schools so he could go to class with some of the other kids on his hockey team. I just don’t know if I believe him. But also I don’t know why he’d put in all the effort to lie about it. It doesn’t make sense.” He closed out of the app and looked at his dad, sheepishly. “Am I being stupid?”

“You’re not being stupid. It’s a crappy situation for everyone, kid.” He shook his head, a crease between his brows. “C’mere,” he said, reaching his arm forward. He pulled Shane out of the chair and swept him up into a hug. “Sometimes people do weird things when they’re hurting. I’m sure whatever Ilya said he didn’t mean it,” he said into Shane’s hair. He pulled back, looking Shane in the eyes. “Just give him some time. I’m sure he’ll come around.”

“Yeah,” Shane sighed. “You’re probably right.”

Nine Months Later – November 2003

It’s safe to say that he did not come around.

Despite his dad’s insistence that Ilya needed space, Shane had repeatedly tried to reach out to him as the months with no contact dragged mercilessly on. He’d tried ‘casually’ hanging out on his front lawn when Ilya’s bus dropped him off from school, but Ilya’s eyes stayed locked on the ground as he rushed inside, shutting the door behind him. Another time, he’d worked up the courage to actually knock on his door, but was turned away by Alexei. He’d even written Ilya a pleading, heartfelt email that had taken two and a half weeks to draft. He’d felt like an absolute fucking imbecile after sending it, and deleted it from his sent box so that he could pretend like it never happened.

Ilya never reacted or responded to Shane’s attempts at reconnecting. Shane worried about him. He wondered how he was getting to all his hockey practices and games and if he was still making art. He wondered if he also missed hanging out together, or if he really did just have cooler friends now. Mostly, he wondered how it seemed like he was able to get up in the morning, go to school and act normal, knowing that his mom was gone.

Shane’s worry for Ilya was constant, but he was starting to adjust to his new normal. Gradually, he fell back into his old routine, his life before Ilya moved across the street, before the video games, skating lessons and decent haircuts that showed him what it felt like to have a real friend.

He walked to school alone and talked to the other kids in his class only when necessary. At recess, he sat on the portable steps, reading *Artemis Fowl* and writing songs in his notebook,

the one Ilya gave him for New Years, before he left. Each time he opened the book, Shane would flip to the first page, re-reading the message Ilya had written him.

*In Russia, the New Year is for beginnings.
So here's a new one.
- Ilya*

He hadn't been wrong, Shane thought bitterly. It just hadn't been the beginning he'd expected.

He was coping. He was doing fine. His life wasn't exciting, but he found comfort in the familiarity of his new, old, routines. That would change when, three months into his grade 8 year, his teacher handed him a yellow envelope.

"Sorry Shane," Ms. Wade said. "I meant to include this with your progress report last week, but I forgot."

"What is it?"

"Oh, just your IEP. Your parents look over it, sign it, and bring it back with the slip from your progress report as usual."

He took the envelope from her, confused. He didn't know what an IEP was, but she made it sound like he *should* know, so he didn't want to bring it up.

"Thanks," he said, and he slipped it into his backpack, his mind reeling.

Shane waited until he was back home to open the envelope. His parents were both in the field, prepping the ginseng beds for winter, so he knew he would have some time to himself. He closed his bedroom door, took the envelope out from his bag, and sat on his bed. He knew he was being ridiculous, but he couldn't help the anxiety that coursed through him. The letter had sat like a heavy weight on his shoulders all afternoon, but now that he finally had the chance to read it, he was struggling to look. He couldn't help his mind wandering to the last time he'd received a letter addressed to him, before shutting the thought down. He hated himself for replaying the moment in his mind.

He huffed out a sharp breath, and tore open the top of the envelope. Fuck it. Ms. Wade had been casual about it, so it really couldn't be that serious.

He scanned the pages, quickly at first, looking for anything that stood out. It was full of charts and lists, and a lot of teaching language that he didn't recognize. Things like *fluid reasoning* and *cognitive processing* and *assistive technology*.

On the third page he came to a table that was titled Assessment Summary. There were a number of rows in the table, the first one being labeled Psychoeducational Assessment. Shane's eyes shifted to the next column in the table. He read the sentence that followed several times.

Dr. M. Pitre completed a psychological assessment and determined that Shane met the criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder (without cognitive impairment).

There was more information, but Shane rested the pages on his duvet, trying to remember where he'd heard that word before. Autism. He was sure he recognized it, but didn't think it was something his parents had ever said. Was it in a book? Had someone said it at school, maybe?

He folded the pages up neatly, tucking them back into the envelope. He shoved it back into his bag, between some textbooks, and made his way downstairs. He checked out the back door to make sure his parents were still working, and when he was sure that he still had some time, he turned on the office computer. It was time for some heavy duty Googling.

"Oh Shane, I'm so sorry. This really isn't how we wanted you to find out." Shane's mom crouched in front of him cupping his hands in her own. He sat on their living room sofa, spine stiff and gaze distant.

His dad stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, like he didn't quite know what to do with himself.

The IEP laid on the coffee table, pages creased, envelope torn at the lip. Shane glanced back and forth between it and his cupped hands. He pulled away from his mom's grasp and leaned back. He opened his mouth to speak, only to close it again. He didn't know what he wanted to say.

"What's going through that head of yours, kiddo?" His dad asked, stepping further into the room.

Shane hunched forward, resting his head in his hands. "How long have you guys known?"

He could feel the weight of his parents glances at one another, wondering what to say.

"Since you were in the first grade." Shane felt the cushions of the sofa dip as his dad sat next to him, resting a hand between his shoulder blades. Shane knew he was trying to be comforting, but the touch was overwhelming. He sat up sharply, shrugging the hand off him.

"The first grade? Jesus..." He closed his eyes and took a couple of steadying breaths. "Why?" he asked.

"Well," his mom started. "It was suggested by the school. They had some funding to cover the psych assessment, so—"

"No, no, no," Shane cut his mom off. "Why did you keep it from me? Why not just tell me what was going on."

His parents' eyes connected again, communicating silently.

"Jesus Christ, stop *doing that*," Shane said, exasperated.

“Sorry, kid,” his dad shook his head.

“We just didn’t want you to feel like you were... different,” his mom said. “We wanted you to feel normal.”

Shane laughed, sharp and hurt. “Oh yeah, that certainly worked, didn’t it.”

“Shane,” his dad said.

“No, David, it’s okay. He’s right, we should have said something a long time ago.” His mom had a far off look in her eyes, her lashes wet and cheeks splotchy.

“We’re really sorry, Shane. We went about this the wrong way.” His dad raised his hand, like he was going to place it on Shane’s shoulders again, then reconsidered and rested it on his own knee.

“Stop apologizing!” Shane shot up from the sofa. He felt his skin heating at his outburst. “Don’t you get that I already felt weird? Like, I know I’m not *normal*.”

His mom looked like she’d been slapped. “Shane, you’re perfectly normal.”

“I’m *not*. Fuck!” Shane grabbed the documents off the table. “*This* would have made me feel more normal. Knowing what’s going on in my head.”

His parents called his name as he stormed out of the room, but they didn’t get up and follow him.

In his room, he read over the assessment until his eyelids grew heavy. He didn’t understand what was happening inside of him. He felt so deeply betrayed by his parents, but it was mixed with an odd sense of relief. It was like a piece he didn’t know was missing had fallen into place and he was getting answers to unspoken questions he didn’t know to ask.

His parents were always walking on eggshells around him, and he couldn’t stand it. He thought about what they said during their argument, how they wanted him to be normal. He thought about Ilya, too. He never treated Shane like he was normal. He was often kind of a dick actually, making fun of the stupid haircut he used to have, or laughing at Shane’s stories even when he *specifically* asked him not to laugh. That’s what Shane had liked though. Ilya always appreciated how weird Shane was and embraced him for it.

Or he had, before.

Shane folded the IEP neatly in half and tucked it away in his bedside table drawer.

He missed his friend.

One Year Later – December 2004

“See, Shane, *this* is why we support our school’s hockey team,” Rose said, pointing at the guys who were currently, as far as Shane could tell, humping the ice. “I love how they all

pretend this is about flexibility.”

“Oh, that’s what they’re doing,” Shane said. He took a sip of his vending machine ginger ale. “I thought they were trying to intimidate each other or something.”

Rose looked at him and tugged at the scarf around his neck. “You’re adorable. Never change.”

Kip skated out from the bench and over to his teammates, joining them in the warm up stretches. He clocked the two of them in the stands and waved, fully bodied and exaggerated, stumbling slightly on his skates as he tried to come to a stop.

“You’ve got this, Kip!” Rose shouted, jumping up and down on her feet. Then, leaning into Shane she said, “I’m scared for our boy, Shane, I really am. He’s going to get eaten alive.”

“He’ll be alright,” Shane said, wincing.

They continued chatting as the team warmed up. The opposition joined them on the ice, running through their own quick pre game routine. Rose made small, offhand comments about her predictions for the game, and Shane did his best to act like he knew what she was talking about.

He hadn’t known what to expect when he started grade nine this past September, but he never could have predicted meeting Rose and Kip during his first week of school and the fast friendship they would form. The three of them had all taken Band as their elective, and they were the only grade nines in the class, as though it was open to all students, it was technically a grade ten credit. Most kids in their year chose Drama or Visual Arts as their mandatory arts credit.

The three of them instantly clicked, and had been joined at the hip ever since. Kip had decided to try out for the Junior hockey team this year, despite having never played the sport before. Back in grade seven, when everything fell apart, Shane vowed to never step foot in a hockey arena again. Rose however, had used her undeniable charm to convince him to come support their friend. They’d even made signs for Kip, decorated with glitter paint and his jersey number.

“Okay, jokes aside Shane, watch number eighty-one when the puck drops, that guy looks seriously dangerous.”

Eighty-one.

Shane stiffened. It couldn’t be. His eyes darted around the ice, looking for the familiar jersey number. He felt ice run through his veins when his gaze landed on him, squatting at the centre line, waiting for the puck.

How was this happening? Realistically, he knew he shouldn’t be surprised. There were like, four high schools total in the general vicinity, so they were bound to play one another at some point, but why did it have to be the first game he went to!

Back in September, he'd thought that there was a chance that Ilya would end up at Lindsay Collegiate Institute with him, but when he hadn't seen him on the walk to school or in the hallways he figured he must be at a different high school. Of course it would end up being their school's rivals, St. Thomas Aquinas, the Catholic secondary school on the other side of town.

Shane zoned out of the game as he ran through the familiar questions in his mind. Why had Ilya *actually* switched schools? Why didn't he acknowledge Shane any more? He thought back to grade seven and eight, and how he'd tried to reach out to Ilya countless times, before it eventually became too painful to keep trying.

Suddenly, the horn went off and the red light flashed from the back of LCI's net. The crowd roared, a mixture of ear splitting cheers and groans, and Shane locked back into the moment. He watched Ilya's teammates huddle around him, striking his helmet and wrapping their arms around him like a colony of ants.

"See! I told you!" Rose said, knocking her shoulder against his. "He's playing at a level above everyone else." She sounded proud of her prediction, despite it being a goal for their opponents. "He's kind of cute too," she said, humming appreciatively.

Breaking away from the cluster, Ilya skated past the bench, face flushed and breathing hard. He looked up instinctively at the crowd, scanning the faces in the stands. Rose was commenting in more detail on the goal, but Shane couldn't hear her. He felt like the arena was spinning around him, the world moving in slow motion. Despite the frigid temperature of the drink and the temperature in the arena, his palm was sweating where it clutched at his pop can.

He knew it was going to happen before it did. Ilya's eyes met his own.

There was a flicker of surprise in his estranged friend's gaze. Ilya faltered slightly on his skates, something he never did. Shane noted that he looked older; his shoulders broader, jaw line sharper. Shane stared back, meeting his eyes, unblinking. Then, as though nothing had been exchanged at all, the surprise was replaced with something more guarded, and Ilya rushed back into play.

Rose stared at Shane long after the moment was over. "You gonna tell me what that was about?" She asked, clearly doing her best to sound casual.

"That's my neighbour," Shane said, clearing his throat and finishing off his drink. He didn't expand.

"Uh-huh," she drawled. Then she shrugged, letting it slide. "Well, he's really good."

Shane did his best to keep his eyes off Ilya for the rest of the game. To focus on what they came for, supporting Kip. He was willing to accept his flaws however, and his best, wasn't particularly good.

He caught himself staring as Ilya was called onto the bench halfway through the third period. The score was 5-1 for St. Thomas, and they were clearly giving some of the second-string a

chance to play. Ilya sat with his shoulders loose, sure of himself, a cocky grin on his lips that Shane didn't recognize. A teammate leaned in and said something to him and Ilya tipped his head back, with a full body laugh, his mouth guard sticking half out. It was something Shane usually found disgusting about hockey; the mouthguards and the spitting and the general lack of respect for personal hygiene.

He felt something twist in his stomach when he couldn't bring himself to look away.

Seven Months later – July 2005

The July heat lingered in Bluestreak Records like a thick stifling blanket. Svetlana's manager had installed a window AC unit last week, but it hummed uselessly in the shop. She was fairly certain that the electricity it took to keep the godforsaken box running generated more heat than anything, only contributing to the suffocating atmosphere of her summer job.

Despite the omnipresent threat of heatstroke, lacklustre pay and a manager that gave her the creeps, she wouldn't give up this job for anything. She'd first heard about an opening in the shop at the start of summer. Rumours had been flying after the last employee got fired for doing coke in the back room. Well technically, he was fired for stealing money from the till to buy said coke.

All of that aside, it was Svetlana's dream job. She got to be around music all day, planning out beats with pens at the counter while she listened to her icons over the shitty speakers.

Ilya hated that she worked here. He begged her daily to quit so they could go cliff jumping in the lake or steal his dad's vodka and get drunk in the shed at the back of his property. He hated it, but it didn't stop him from loitering in the shop during all of her shifts, flipping through records and complaining about how she was making him have the most boring summer of his life.

Currently, Ilya was laying on the ground behind the counter, the sounds of BrickBreaker coming from his Blackberry.

"Fuck!" he said, dropping his phone onto the floor. "My battery died."

Svetlana ignored him and flipped through an old Rolling Stone magazine.

Ilya kicked her in the shin. "Svetlaaaaana," he drawled. "Let's close the shop early. I want ice cream."

She was about to tell him to fuck right off when the bell chimed throughout the store, a customer walking in. Svetlana pushed the magazine to the side and looked up.

"Welcome to Bluestreak Records," she said, a forced smile on her lips. Her manager had told her that she had resting bitch face and it was scaring off customers. She was trying to be more approachable.

“Hey, uh, how are you?” As he spoke, Ilya suddenly tensed near her ankles shooting up his elbows, head tilted to the side like an actual fucking golden retriever. She glanced down, trying to convey her signature ‘*what the hell is wrong with you, you loser?*’ look with her eyes before remembering she was trying not to look like a complete bitch and turning her smile back towards the customer.

His skin was flushed in the heat, hair damp and sticking to his temples. He clutched a stack of orange flyers to his chest.

“Good. Great! Whatcha got there?” Svetlana nodded at the flyers.

The stranger walked through the stacks of records, approaching the counter hesitantly.

“I was wondering if I could put these up in the shop, if it’s not annoying.” He held out one of the pages to her. She took it from him, reading it over.

“Looking for a drummer, then?” she asked, looking back up at him.

He nodded, hopefully. “Yeah, I—”

Ilya suddenly stood up from behind the counter, like a goddamn jack-in-the-box. He tore the flyer from Svetlana’s hands, reading it over. She gawped at him. The customer stared as well, surprise and confusion all over his face. He looked like he was about to bolt from the shop, like he’d seen a ghost.

Svetlana desperately tried to recover the situation. “Oh my god, I’m sorry about him. He’s like a fucking cold sore, he just appears whenever he’s *not wanted*.” She glared at Ilya and grabbed the flyer back from him. Fuck her resting bitch face, Ilya was the one scaring off customers, and he wasn’t even on the payroll.

“Shane,” Ilya said, ignoring Svetlana.

“Ilya. Hi.” The customer, *Shane*, stared at her friend, eyes wide with surprise.

None of them said anything for a beat, and Svetlana glanced between the two of them, feeling like she wasn’t even in the room.

Ilya cleared his throat and gestured at the flyers. “I didn’t realize you were... doing this. Making music. It’s good,” he said. “I’m glad.”

“Sure, yeah.” Shane nodded his head.

Svetlana tapped her pen against the counter, trying to cut through the awkwardness. “Well okay then. It was nice to meet you, *Shane*,” she said, looking pointedly at Ilya. “We will absolutely put up the flyers in the store. But it’s a bitch to find a drummer.”

Shane seemed suddenly relieved that they were talking about music again. “Yeah, I know,” he said, scratching at his neck.

“What kind of music do you guys play?”

Svetlana listened as Shane explained their influences. He said they were fairly new as a band, just him and two of his friends. Just messing around right now, but hoped to play some local gigs in the future. She nodded as she listened. Ilya walked out from behind the counter and pretended to flip through some records, but he was clearly staring at Shane the entire time, engrossed in their conversation.

“So, what, if someone’s interested they should just text you at this number?” she asked, pointing to the number on the bottom of the flyer.

“Yeah,” Shane smiled. “Yeah, that would be awesome. That’s Rose’s number. She’s our lead singer.” He looked around the shop awkwardly. Ilya turned away before his eyes landed on him, pretending he hadn’t just been staring. Svetlana rolled her eyes at his stupidity. Shane clutched the stack of papers tighter to his chest. “Well, thanks, uh...”

“Svetlana,” she said.

“Thanks, Svetlana.”

At the sound of the bell ringing out Shane’s departure, Svetlana turned dramatically and narrowed her eyes at Ilya. “Alright, what the *fuck* was that about?”

Chapter 8: An Ode to Plate Number 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*How can I convince you it's me I don't like
When I've always been distant
And I've always told lies for love
I'm bound by these choices so hard to make
I'm bound by the feeling so easy to fake
None of this is real enough to take me from you*

“Reservations”, Wilco

Eight Months Later – March 2006

Harmonies reverberated between the rafters in the decrepit barn. Rose’s haunting voice carried the angsty melody, while Shane joined her for the chorus, simultaneously strumming the familiar string of power chords on his electric guitar. Fuelled by instinct and muscle memory now, his fingertips long since calloused and the chords seared into his brain. Rose stood front and centre, her eyes closed as she belted into the mic. Kip mirrored Shane on her right, plucking out a steady bassline. He nodded his head to the beat while he played, a goofy grin taking up half his face.

Kip’s laptop was hooked up to an amp, resting on top of a haybale, the mediocre drum beat he worked out on GarageBand blasted through the air.

They were doing well, if a bit rusty. It had been a few weeks since their last jam session, and it showed.

In the back of the barn a water damaged beam fell from the ceiling with a resounding crack. Shane flinched, losing his timing. He cursed at himself, trying to get back in sync. He managed to catch up with his bandmates by the bridge, just as Kip forgot the key change and the song collapsed in on itself like an auditory game of Jenga. Rose finished the line anyway, winking at her imaginary audience, as if they meant it all along.

“Well, that was absolute dog shit,” Kip said, hunching over in defeat.

“It would have been perfectly fine if Shane’s barn wasn’t out to kill us!” Rose said, glaring at the rafters.

Shane scoffed and absentmindedly tuned his guitar. “Hey, be kind to the barn! A free jam space is a free jam space.”

“We could always try playing in my garage,” Kip suggested. “If we want to avoid getting like, tetanus from the exposed nails?”

“Yeah, no thank you. No offense Kip, your dad’s a great teacher and all, but I’m not going to be able to sing about ex-boyfriends and pre-gaming knowing that Mr. Grady can hear me on the other side of the wall while he marks our English papers.” Rose clasped her hands apologetically up at the ceiling. “I’m sorry, Shane’s barn. Please don’t collapse on my face. I’m literally the hottest member of our band. We will never reach stardome without this face.”

“The hottest member?” Kip rolled his eyes dramatically. “There is nothing sexier than a brooding bassist.”

“Kip, I love you, but you are absolutely *not* a brooding bassist. You look like a kid on Christmas morning whenever you play.”

He looked offended for a moment, but Rose stalked over to him and kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, it’s working for you. You’ve got game, Kip Grady.”

“Alright you guys, let’s run it back. This is the final song for our set next week, so we’ve gotta get it down,” Shane said, a small smile on his face as he watched his friends.

Kip carefully navigated the maze of cables littering the barn floor, reaching his computer to reset the drum track. He muttered to himself, frustrated, as he fiddled with the software. “Hey, any leads on a drummer yet, Rose? This would sound a lot better without this half assed backing track.”

Rose sighed and readjusted the height on her mic. “No. Not since that O’Leary dude.”

“Oh my god, I almost forgot about him,” Shane said, laughing.

“Lucky!” Rose gagged. “I swear, the barn smelled like kielbasa for a month after we auditioned him.”

“Honestly, we should have turned him away at the door,” Kip added. “What business does a forty-five year old crossing guard have playing drums for a high school band.”

“Okay, in O’Leary’s defense he didn’t know we were in high school when he showed up.”

Rose stared at Shane, aghast. “I can’t believe you’re defending O’Leary. He had a neck beard, Shane. A neck beard!”

The three of them dissolved into laughter at the memory. “Alright, alright,” Shane said, catching his breath. “From the top, but let’s shorten the intro. I think two bars will make it a lot tighter.”

Rose and Kip nodded, and they jumped back into the song. Adjusting to the new structure immediately, Rose’s face lit up at the change, as a grin spread across Shane’s face. They sounded *good*. They held the rhythm through the whole song and Kip accommodated for the key change at the bridge perfectly. Shane loved it when they fell into a flow like this. It made the barn feel smaller, like the walls were leaning into the sound.

The last note lingered in the air and Rose leaned into the mic. “How are we feeling tonight, Bobcaygeon?” she said, playing pretend at stage banter. The two boys chuckled on either side of her.

A beam of light streaked in through the roof of the barn, catching dust in its ray. Shane watched it for a moment, smiling to himself. He didn’t know how he got here, but for the first time in a while he really felt full and complete, like everything was going to be alright.

Kip leaned his guitar against the wooden barrel, Shane locking his up in its case, and the three friends sprawled amongst the bales of hay. Rose reached into a tote bag and opened up a bag of Ruffles all dressed chips. She shoved a handful into her mouth and held the bag out to the guys.

“So,” Kip said, reaching forward for some chips. “What’s the deal with this gig anyway?”

Rose shrugged and laid back in the hay, kicking her feet up so they rested in Shane’s lap. “My brother’s friends with this kid, Ryan Price. I guess it’s his 18th birthday and his family’s out of town so he’s throwing a barn party.” Shane sensed something was off. It was like she was trying too hard to act casual.

“Ryan Price... Why does that name sound familiar?” Shane asked, knowing she would crack under pressure.

“He, uh, goes to St. Thomas. I think he might be on the hockey team?”

Kip tipped his head back with laughter. “Ohhhh no, no, no. Absolutely not. Rose, that’s a recipe for disaster. We can’t play.”

“Come *on*, Kip. We need this. We’re never gonna get our sound out there if we don’t actually ever play. My brother said there’ll be a shitload of kids there so it’s a good opportunity.”

“Yeah, a shitload of St. Thomas kids. Those Catholic fucks are insane. *Epecially* the hockey players. I’m going to get hate crimed.”

Rose rolled her eyes. “You’re not going to get *hate crimed*. It’s 2006. Being gay is very punk rock now.”

“Okay, well, then they’re gonna beat us up for *sucking*,” Kip sputtered, hands flailing around his face.

“Here’s an idea then, how about we don’t suck?”

Kip glared at her, aghast. “Shane. Back me up here. You hate those hockey bros even more than me.”

Kip’s experimentation with high school hockey had been short lived. When he’d quit the team halfway through their ninth grade year, Shane told himself he was relieved to not have to go to Kip’s games anymore and risk seeing Ilya play again. He also hated parties. Especially barn parties. They reeked of stale beer and cow manure and those nights usually

ended with him holding back Rose's hair while she puked into a bush. Really, Kip was right. Going was a horrible idea. They could find another gig.

However, Shane was also apparently a masochist. "Rose is right. We should play at the party." What the fuck was he getting himself into?

Two Weeks Later

The barn was too hot. Too loud. Too suffocating. So in Rose Landry's eyes, it was absolute perfection. She could tell that Kip was powering through a bout of stage fright by the way he was hunched over his bass, avoiding eye contact with the crowd. Shane looked calm and collected on the surface, nodding along to the music, a smile on his lips, but she knew that was a calculated mask he had spent years perfecting. Rose, on the other hand, was in her element. She thrived on moments like this, when she got to lay her heart bare to the world. Outside her short stint as Dancing Plate Number 2 in her third grade production of *Beauty and the Beast*, it was her first taste of stardom, and she was revelling in it. It felt like she was born for this.

Sure, instead of spotlights and fog machines there were fairy lights strung from the rafters and cigarette smoke hanging thick in the air, but it would do for now. She couldn't get enough of the way the music seemed to infect the people around them. Familiar and foreign bodies pressed against one another around the barn, some couples grinding on the makeshift dancefloor, others horizontal in the hay, limbs and lips tangled together in a different kind of dance. And yeah, alright, there was a group of hockey bros playing flip cup in the back corner, but fuck it, that was a part of it too. Her (and Kip and Shane, of course), were creating electricity in the air. A current that ran from their instruments to the aux cords, to the amps, and spread an energy throughout the room, that made it feel like for a night when anything was possible.

Maybe she was being a bit sentimental. Rose could accept that. But she was also three beers deep and having the time of her fucking life.

She stepped back from the mic, an instrumental break taking over the song. She looked over at Shane, who was eyeing the crowd. He seemed more comfortable now, like he'd let that perfect mask slip just a bit, she was glad to see him loosening up as their set came to a close.

And then, all at once, his mask shattered.

It happened in seconds. His eyes widened, panic settling in. He took a visible step back, like he'd taken a punch to the gut, and his foot crushed an aux cord, causing an auditory crackle to ring out. Shane flinched at the noise, missing a chord. They had practiced this song nonstop over the past two weeks. He had the chord progression engraved in his bones. He never missed chords when it mattered.

Rose followed his gaze. It took her a moment to clock who was staring back at her friend. It was number 81, she realized, from St. Thomas' hockey team. He'd stood out amongst all the other players when they watched their two schools face off last year. She recalled Shane mentioning they were next door neighbours, but he hadn't explained anything more about

their history since. It was obvious that something had happened between the two of them, and she felt instantly protective over her friend. She would seriously beat that kid over his head with her mic if he tried to start shit.

She glared at 81, channeling all of her unease into the closing lines of the song. Rose watched the hockey player suspiciously, as he leaned over to a girl standing at his shoulder and whispered something in her ear. She threw her head back with laughter, the movement accentuating her bare shoulders and neck. She was standing in a soft glow, as though a moonbeam filtering through the rafters shone down, highlighting her soft, ethereal features. Rose was sure she had never seen this girl around before. She was wearing a tube top and shorts, and Rose wondered if she was chilly, if her legs were pebbled with goosebumps, or if she had a buzz going that was keeping her warm.

From next to her Kip cleared his throat, and she realized the song had finished and they were waiting for her to close out the night with her rehearsed crowd work. She swept her gaze across the barn and grinned at the crowd.

“That’s all we’ve got for tonight, guys! Thanks for listening and for dancing, and most importantly for showing up for Ryan on his birthday! Happy birthday, man!” The room erupted into cheers, and she waited for them to die down before continuing. “I’m Rose, we’ve got Shane on guitar, and that’s Kip on the bass. We don’t have a name yet,”

“Or a drummer!” Kip piped in.

“Or a drummer,” Rose repeated, chuckling. “But we do know how to have a good fucking time! If you’re looking for me later, I’ll be kicking ass at the beer pong table until the cops come to shut this shit down!”

The three bandmates started packing up their gear. Kip and Shane hauled amps and their guitar cases out to Rose’s brother’s truck, who had been roped into being designated driver for the night, as Rose, Kip, and Shane only had their G1s. He made a fuss over it, but he was in grade 11 and was hoping to land a university hockey scholarship next year, so he generally was focused on his game and avoided drinking often anyway.

Rose stayed inside while the guys carried out the heavy equipment so she could break down the rest of their gear. She was working on detangling a particularly frustrating mess of aux cords when the girl from earlier approached her.

“So, you still haven’t found a drummer yet, huh?”

Rose tucked her hair behind her ears and eyed the stranger. Her eyeliner was smudged, hair in a messy bun, loose coils framing her face. She had a septum piercing, and Rose thought she seemed like the coolest fucking person she’d ever met. But her clear association with 81 made her instantly weary. Rose was considering asking directly about what the hockey player had done to shake up Shane so badly, when the girl’s wording registered in her mind.

“What do you mean *yet*?” Rose took a step closer towards the girl. She was shorter than the stranger, and she was doing her best to exude the same confidence that the other girl was giving off.

She looked Rose up and down, leisurely, while taking a pull from whatever mixture was in her solo cup. “Shane, your guitarist. And... Backup singer,” she drawled, after what felt like an eternity.

Rose flinched. Whatever she was drinking, it was *strong*. She could smell the liquor on her breath from where she stood. Which, suddenly seemed *way* too close. Rose took a step back. Not that she was backing down or admitting defeat. She just respected personal space is all.

“What about Shane?” she asked through gritted teeth.

The girl shrugged and smiled, her eyes seeming to literally sparkle. Surely, Rose thought, her eyes were just glassy from whatever battery acid she was drinking. “He came into my shop once. Last summer I think. Asked if he could put up posters, looking for a drummer for your... nameless band.”

Rose’s shoulders relaxed. That wasn’t what she’d been expecting, and was also frustratingly, completely logical. She resumed picking at the mess of wires as she continued talking to the girl.

“Oh, yeah, I remember him saying something about that,” Rose said. “We’ve been trying to make it work with digital drumbeats for now, but...”

“They sound like shit?”

“Rude, much? Jesus. You make a great first impression.” Having finally freed the two cords, Rose held one of the cables out to the girl next to her. “Wrap this up for me, would you? If you’re going to criticize the talent.”

The girl laughed, the same laugh from before; head thrown back in delight. She complied though, taking another swig from her drink before resting it on the dusty floor. She took the cable from Rose and started winding it into a perfect bundle. Rose noted that she clearly knew what she was doing, holding one end in her hand and wrapping it around her elbow so it would stay taught and neat when tied up.

“You’re right though. The electric drums sound like shit. But don’t you dare tell Kip I said that,” Rose said, pointing an accusing finger at the girl. “He worked hard to make those tracks, so he’s the only one allowed to criticize them.”

The girl gasped. “I would never betray you like that, Rose.”

Rose realized she was at a disadvantage here. “So, you know my name and you’ve just listened to me and my friends reveal our deepest darkest secrets through some stellar lyricism. But I don’t know anything about you.”

“Svetlana,” the girl said, holding out her hand to shake, like they had just signed the Geneva convention

“Svetlana,” Rose repeated, taking the girl’s hand into her own.

“*Svetlanaaaaa!*”

Their grasp was split apart as that hockey player, 81, slapped his hands down on Svetlana's shoulders, pulling her backwards. "Come dance with me, please, I am *begging you*," he said, letting go of one of her hands and lifting the other so she could spin underneath it. Rose noted a look of desperation on his face, something that Svetlana clearly picked up on as well.

"Okay, okay, let's dance," she said, shaking her hips to the pop song that was blaring from a set of speakers now hooked up to someone's iPod. And then, as she was whisked away, she called out over her shoulder, "And good luck finding a drummer, Rose! You really need one!"

Ilya Rozanov was well and truly fucked. Tonight was supposed to be about Svetlana. Her dipshit ex-boyfriend of 48 hours had just dumped her over text on the day of their three month anniversary. So, it was his God given responsibility as her best friend to encourage any and all questionable decision making and make sure they get absolutely obliterated together.

What he hadn't accounted for was that goddamn Shane Hollander would be at this party. Playing the guitar. And *singing*.

Ilya tried to distract himself, dancing with Svetlana and taking shots of straight vodka, not a chaser in sight. He lost himself in the music, the bass and the alcohol pulsing in his veins while he draped his arms over his friend's body.

It felt however, like his eyes were hardwired to seek out Shane Hollander's stupid fucking face, and he found his attention kept getting pulled back to him. Currently, he stood on the outskirts of the dancefloor, leaning against a support beam, solo cup in hand. Ilya wondered if he was even drinking, or if he just had ginger ale in his cup. His bandmate, Kip, was saying something to Shane, talking animatedly with his hands, but instead of looking at his friend, Shane's gaze cut through the crowd. His eyes pierced through the noise, and the haze of cigarettes and weed, locking directly with Ilya's.

Ilya continued dancing, but couldn't bring himself to look away. Physically he knew he was still in the barn, but it was like his mind had been transported three years back in time. He was at Shane's cottage, cutting his best friend's hair on the beach. He was at the public rink, skating just for fun, Shane and Yuna cheering him on from the bleachers. He was in Shane's room, riding a sugar high and getting his ass beat in MLH 2001. It was New Year's Eve and he was celebrating his traditions with the boy next door.

And then it was just a few short weeks later, and he was in his room, alone, cold, and coaching himself on how to lie to everyone, including himself.

Ilya spun Svetlana around so she was facing him. He forced himself to look her in the eyes instead. He needed a distraction.

Ilya was fully aware of just how fucked he was. Because Ilya Rozanov knew he was, without a doubt, disgustingly in love with none other than Shane fucking Hollander. He really, *really* needed to think about something, anything else right now. Ilya, whose skin and brain both felt like they were on fire, leaned forward and pressed his lips to Svetlana's.

Chapter End Notes

All I can say is I'm sorry 😭 please don't hurt me.

Chapter 9: You Do Not Talk About Fight Club

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: This chapter includes reference to suicide/suicidal thoughts and homophobia within the Catholic church.

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

*I can't pretend
I need to defend
Some part of me from you
I know I've spent some time oh lying*

“The New”, Interpol

Eight Months Later – November 2006

Sparks from the bonfire danced against the black sky like meteors. Shane leaned back against a fallen log, curled up on a plaid woolen blanket, heat from the fire cutting through the crisp November evening chill. Rose laid next to him, her head resting in his lap, eyelids drooping from the heat, the mixture of liquor sitting heavy in her stomach from their game of Kings Cup earlier in the night. Scattered conversations rang out around them, the last bush party of the year in full swing. Someone was blaring country music from their car speaker, and the tinny melody carried through the trees. Shane absentmindedly sipped his mixture of rye and ginger ale, taking in his surroundings. He preferred parties like this, fresh air in his lungs, the sound of the riverbed nearby and a sky full of stars that he could lose himself in if the conversation became too much.

Kip had abandoned him and Rose maybe fifteen minutes ago, saying he was going to find a tree to break the seal behind, which Shane had understood to mean he had found someone to hookup with in the back of his Jeep. There weren't many people in their town who were out, other than Kip, but it never seemed to stop him from finding a fling. Shane admired that about his friend, his unabashed confidence and his knowledge of what he actually wanted.

He'd tried going on a couple of dates with a girl named Jessica over the summer, but he'd felt painfully out of his element. She was beautiful, but on their third date when he dropped her off at home and she leaned over from the passenger seat to kiss him, he couldn't get out of his head. He felt like he was doing something wrong the whole time and he couldn't relax. He panicked about where he should put his hands, so he crossed them tightly in his lap, which he was sure came across as perfectly normal and not sociopathic at all. She could clearly tell he was uncomfortable. Jessica didn't reach out over text after that, and Shane had been too embarrassed to do so either.

He often wondered how Kip knew he was gay in the first place. Shane struggled to see himself hooking up with *anyone* after that first attempt. He worried that maybe he was broken.

From across the fire, his classmates J.J. and Hayden shared a joint while they discussed how the river seemed to be freezing over early this year. Shane had seen it himself, the water crusting at the edges, ice feathering inward, impatient and restless.

This time of year always carried a heavy foreboding, for Shane. It reminded him of the year Ilya first taught him to skate. When he'd watched on, heart stuttering as the ice shattered beneath his friend's skates, the water dragging him into its depths. He could still picture his gloveless hand, reaching out from the black current, fingers almost blue, desperately clinging for a lifeline. Shane had been so scared that he was going to lose the first real friend he'd ever made that day. But in the end that hadn't been the final blow to their friendship. Ilya had managed to do that all on his own.

Over his shoulder, the sound of shoes crunching the frosted grass startled Shane from his memory.

The pair of footsteps grew closer as two figures in shadow joined the crowd of people around the fire. Of course it was him, and *her*. The girl Shane had seen Ilya kissing at Ryan Price's barn party. He recognized her from the record shop in town, but couldn't remember her name. It seemed like they'd been showing up all over the place, after their gig last spring. It was strange. Ever since Ilya transferred schools back in grade seven, despite the fact that Shane's bedroom window literally framed Ilya's house like a fucked up painting meant to torture him, their paths had rarely crossed. Now, almost four years later, Ilya was suddenly *everywhere*. He showed up to all the same parties, lingering with a different crowd. They never spoke to one another, the silence seemed to scream louder than words could. Seeing Ilya felt like a split lip in the middle of winter that wouldn't heal.

The conversation around them inevitably shifted to University, as it always seemed to these days. Shane absolutely loathed it. They were still in the first semester of grade eleven and yet everyone seemed to be rushing to the finish line, already talking about where they would be applying, potential scholarships and majors, University tours planned for March break.

It was all just *too much*. Everyone seemed to have this unspoken agreement that now was the time to start planning their future, and his classmates all seemed to have clear paths ahead of them. Sure, Shane had decent grades overall, but he had no idea what he was actually interested in *doing* after high school. The only times he really felt like himself was when he was creating music with Kip and Rose, and that didn't exactly feel like a viable option for his future.

Of course, Hayden chose this moment to loop him into the conversation, pulling him from his spiraling thoughts.

"What about you, Hollander?" he asked from across the bonfire. "Where'll you be applying next year?"

Shane had been twirling the ends of Rose's hair with one hand as she leaned on him, but his fingers tensed at the question. He wasn't sure what to say to steer the conversation away from him. He started to flush as the silence stretched a beat too long. He was immensely grateful for the heat radiating from the fire, an excuse for his rapidly reddening skin. Rose cleared her throat and sat up, coming to his rescue.

"With Shane's grades he could get in anywhere," she said, poking him on the shoulder drunkenly. "That's if our band doesn't win a Grammy before graduation."

Laughter spilled from the girl who had arrived with Ilya. "Is that so, Rose?" she said, eyeing his friend. "Your band that still doesn't have a name or a drummer?"

Rose picked up a pinecone from the ground and tossed it at the girl. It missed by about three feet. It seemed almost teasing to Shane, like they were familiar with one another. He looked back and forth between the two of them. He felt like he was missing some key information. "Don't question the artistic process, Svetlana, we're working on it."

Svetlana? How had he missed the fact that the two of them knew each other well enough to be on a first name basis. Seriously, *what the hell?* Shane was moments away from shooting a questioning look at Ilya, before he remembered they didn't do that anymore.

Shane considered the figure of the boy who had once been his best friend. Ilya seemed unfazed by the conversation between the two girls, or maybe he just wasn't paying attention. He stared directly into the fire, the flickering light cast a warm glow onto his face and forearms, where his sleeves were rolled up. Suddenly, as though he could sense Shane's eyes on him, Ilya looked away from the fire, meeting his own gaze.

"You know what, I could actually see that!" Hayden said, oblivious to the awkward energy that lingered in the air. Or was Shane reading into things? "You guys are actually pretty good. When you played at semi formal this year, I was like heeeey, they're pretty good, you know? They might be going somewhere. Didn't I say that, J.J.?"

J.J. flicked the ash off the end of the joint nodding his head. Between coughs he sputtered "Yeah, man, you did. You also said something about Rose looking really hot on stage, which your date didn't like too much...". The two of them exploded into laughter at the memory, evidently quite high. Hayden wiped at his eyes, which were watery from laughing, and then reached out a hand out to J.J., whisper-shouting. "Pass me the jay, J.J.! Get it, the jay... J.J.?"

Shane grinned at his sneakers, glad that the conversation had moved past him and he could enjoy the sound of the crackling fire punctuated by the unabashed joy of his friends. With Ilya sitting only a few bodies away from him, he couldn't help but think about when their friendship first crumbled apart and how it had made him believe he would never be able to rely on another person again. It had been like that for a while, until their first band class in Grade 9 when first Rose, and then Kip forced themselves into his life, not giving him a choice in the matter. His chest felt full with gratitude for them.

Or maybe it was just the rye and ginger ale he'd been drinking all night.

“What about you and *Ilya*?” Rose said, from beside him. Shane suddenly realized that apparently he didn’t know as much as he thought he did about her. He could have sworn he’d never mentioned Ilya’s name to her. His brow creased, and he peered at the two of them again. Ilya was still watching him, his own stern face looking like it was chiseled out of stone. He was impossible to read these days, something Shane thought he would never get used to. He absolutely hated how interested he was in hearing about Ilya’s plans for the future. He knew he shouldn’t care. He should be long past having him even cross his mind.

Ilya remained silent, Svetlana speaking for the both of them. “Funny enough, I was actually thinking of studying music. I’m looking into programs across the country, but they’ve got one at Concordia, in Montreal, that seems interesting.” She reached beside her and ran a familiar hand over Ilya’s knee. Shane traced the motion with his eyes. “Ilya was thinking of applying there too. Looks like they’ve got a decent hockey scholarship, and he’d be able to study painting so—”

Ilya stood up abruptly, Svetlana’s hand slipping off his thigh and halting her mid sentence. “All this University talk is boring me,” he said, which Shane thought was a pretty shitty thing to say to his girlfriend, but then he reminded himself that Ilya wasn’t his problem anymore. “I’m getting a drink, Sveta. Do you want anything?”

Svetlana held out her empty solo cup to Ilya in a silent signal to get her a refill, and he walked off toward the line up of truck beds that were stocked with a couple of kegs, an assortment of mickeys, and some mixers.

The group around the fire split off into different conversations. Rose blinked up at him, wide eyed, clearly wanting something from him, Shane sighed. He was annoyed with her. Clearly, she’d had some sort of previous interaction with Ilya and Svetlana that she had kept from him for some reason. She could be so damn overprotective. He felt certain she hadn’t told him because she could sense the animosity between him and Ilya, yet still, he felt blindsided.

Despite his frustration, he couldn’t help but cave when she looked at him like that. “What do you want?” he asked, and then added, “And don’t think your puppy dog eyes are working on me. I see through them, and you have questions to answer later, but I love you anyway.”

She held out her own cup to him. “Rose wants another drink,” she said, grinning.

“Well I think that maybe Rose should be cut off, considering she’s started talking about herself in the third person.”

“Pleeeeeease, Shane,” she said, sticking out her lower lip in a pouty face.

“You’re a menace,” he said, taking the cup from her hand and standing up.

Shane tried to channel Kip and Rose’s confidence as he approached the makeshift truckbed bar. He could do this. He could stand near Ilya and pour two drinks without becoming consumed by stupid events that happened way back when he was twelve. He was turning seventeen in the summer. He was calm and collected. He was—

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well, Hollander.”

Shane almost tripped and faceplaneted into the dirt. Ilya was leaning against the side of a truck, cigarette dangling from his lips, staring at him, that goddamn smirk plastered on his mouth like this interaction meant nothing to him.

Fuck it, Shane thought. Fuck being calm and collected. He took two calculated steps closer towards Ilya and crossed his arms over his chest. Shane gave him a measured glare before speaking, noting that Ilya's arms had filled out, pulling at the sleeves of his shirt. Or he was purposefully wearing a shirt that was too small to look tough. He decided it was the latter.

"Is that so? Because the last time I checked you didn't give a shit about how I was doing."

The smirk momentarily vanished from Ilya's face. Good. Shane wanted to rattle him.

"Shane, I—"

"No. Absolutely not." Shane fought the urge to walk away, get his friends, and head home. Any other day, he might have. But fuck it, he owed it to his twelve year old self to speak his mind. He was done relying on Rose to always step in and defend him. He could stand up for himself. The fact that he'd downed two heavily poured rye and gingers tonight despite usually not drinking at these things had absolutely nothing to do with his behaviour, and he was ready to swear by that.

"You don't get to decide that it's suddenly time to show up in my life and talk to me after three and a half fucking years, *Rozanov*," he continued. "I spent months trying to reach out to you, Ilya. *Months*. But suddenly you were too fucking cool to even exist in the same school as me or some bullshit, even though you literally fucking *promised* that wouldn't happen. But you probably don't even remember that, because clearly you didn't care about our friendship as much as I did! Do you have any idea how goddamn *humiliating* that was to realize? Fuck!" Shane slammed the solo cups in his hand onto the bed of the truck, the plastic cracking in the silence.

"My mom had just died, Hollander, I was... I was going through some shit." Ilya took a long drag from his cigarette and Shane shook his head.

"Yeah, Ilya, I fucking know. That's why I was trying to give you space. But then suddenly leaving me a goddamn letter saying you're transferring schools and probably won't have time to hang out any more? That's fucked. I know you were going through shit. So was I. And I tried to be there for you, but I had *no one* trying to be there for me."

Ilya looked like he was about to say something, but one shitty excuse was more than enough for Shane. "Honestly, Ilya, I should probably be thanking you." He stretched his arm back, pointing towards the campfire and Svetlana. "Based on how you treat your girlfriend I can only imagine that you're still just as shitty of a friend. You did me a favour by cutting yourself out of my life."

"Svetlana's not— Shane look, I— I'm sorry. I know I fucked up, I do. I just, I don't know," Ilya trailed off, running his hand holding a cigarette through his hair, ash falling into his curls.

Shane stared at him, dumbfounded. “I thought you hated cigarettes,” was somehow all he could say.

Ilya stared at the end of the smoke, tossed it on the ground, and crushed it into the dirt with his boot.

“The smell reminds me of my mother.”

Shane knew he should leave it at that. He should shut up and walk away. But he was also drunk, pissed off and knew enough about Ilya to use the words that would hurt him the most.

“Well,” he said, “it only makes you look more like your father.”

Two Months Later – January 2007

A creaking rang out in the hushed church as Ilya shifted his weight on the splintered pew. Multi-coloured beams of light decorated the walls and floors, diffused from the stained glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross. His classmates sat, heads hanging low and motionless in the surrounding pews, equally spaced like tombstones in a graveyard.

Him, Alexei, and his father hadn’t been to a Divine Liturgy as a family since Irina passed, for obvious reasons. They hadn’t had a conversation about it, they just all silently agreed that it wouldn’t feel right to go. He still wore his mother’s Orthodox cross though; he hadn’t taken it off since the funeral. So, it was rare he found himself in any kind of church.

Once a year, however, he and his classmates were dragged from class for confession at the church that their high school shared a parking lot with. It was different from the style he had grown up with. Instead of being face to face, in the open, Catholic confession was held in a closed off, private booth. Having experienced it since the end of elementary school, it was a change he had adapted to.

What he didn’t expect, however, was the handout that their Religion teacher had passed around as they entered the church. Ilya sat, rigid, staring at the paper clutched tightly in his hands, as he waited to be tapped on the shoulder, a silent signal that it was his turn in the confessional booth. He felt like he couldn’t breathe as he read through the list of ‘suggested sins’ on the page, just in case they couldn’t come up with anything to say to the priest.

Ilya felt like the floor had opened up beneath him, all of his fears and insecurities laid bare in two consecutive bullet points.

- Have you had thoughts of suicide?
- Have you been guilty of any homosexual acts?

He didn’t just see words on the page.

He saw his mother’s body, lifeless on her art studio floor, skin white as a canvas, a plastic bag with a pint of s’mores ice cream forgotten in the snow.

He saw himself at a Uni party he and Svetlana had crashed in Peterborough, high out of his mind, in a dude's bed that he didn't even know the name of, hands running through his hair, lips swollen from making out and whatever other shit he couldn't remember.

He stared at the words on the page and he *wanted* the floor to open up beneath him. Was this the closest he could get to his mother in her death? Through their alleged sin?

The teacher tapped Ilya on his shoulder.

Two Months Later – March 2007

“Apparently he told a priest to fuck off during a school retreat.”

“I heard he got caught hooking up with the gym teacher.”

“Ya’ll are wrong. It was a fight club in the school’s basement, I swear.”

“No it fucking wasn’t.”

“It was! I swear, I saw *pictures*.”

Shane was trying to make headway on his 1984 essay for English class, but the students around him wouldn't *shut up*. They were rarely productive on a good day, but today they seemed particularly feral. He really wished Kip's dad had more control over the class. He loved the man to death, but he was way too soft on his peers.

“Well, I heard the police had to get involved... I think he might have been selling Adderall to middle school students or something.”

Shane was one more comment away from flipping his desk and going to work in the library when he realized who exactly his classmates were talking about.

“Sorry I'm late, teach.”

Shane's head snapped up at breakneck speed. There, standing in the doorway, backpack slung over one shoulder and sporting that same stupid smirk from the night of the bush party, was Ilya Rozanov.

What the actual fuck.

Chapter End Notes

In regards to the content of this chapter:

- If you or someone you know is in crisis, the suicide crisis help line in Canada and the United States is 9-8-8.

- For any struggling queer youth out there (be it yourself or someone you know)
YouthLine offers free support through their Ontario-wide 2SLGBTQIA+ peer-support
HelpLine. (<http://youthline.ca/>)

Canadian Context Notes:

- mickey: slang for 375ml bottle of liquor

A big thanks to all of you for reading and supporting through your kudos and lovely
comments!!! I love you all 

Chapter 10: Reading Comprehension

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*You're like a constant crowding consonant
I'm a claustrophobic, I, I said
We're as comfortable as wool warming naked indifference
Thank God, your words have come to rescue me from my sentence*

“Talk About”, Dear and the Headlights

A Week Later – March 2007

Sunlight pierced through Irina’s studio windows like a jagged knife, cutting Ilya out of his drunken sleep. His mouth tasted like he’d smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, which, to be fair he practically did last night. Hungover Ilya tried not to judge drunk Ilya too badly. Though would it have killed drunk Ilya last night to show a bit of kindness for his future self and close the fucking blinds? Or at the very least put the lid back on his water bottle so that it didn’t tip over in the middle of the night after Svetlana decided to take up the entire mattress and leave him with his limbs flailing off the side of the bed.

Ilya picked up the sad plastic bottle and tipped the last few drops into his mouth. The plastic crunched in his grip, cutting harshly through the Sunday morning quiet.

Svetlana reached over, grabbed the bottle from his hand, and whipped it from the loft down to the other side of the shed.

“What the hell?!” Ilya sputtered.

“My head feels like it’s been shoved in a woodchipper. I demand silence. And Advil. Where’s the Advil?”

Ilya winced. “In the house...”

Svetlana groaned dramatically and pulled the comforter over her head. “Pleeeeeease, Ilya. Go get it. It’s my birthday weekend *and* you decided to go and get yourself expelled. School sucks without you. You owe me.”

Ilya scoffed. “Birthday weekend my ass. Your birthday ended at midnight. Go get it yourself, back doors unlocked,” Ilya said, dragging himself out of the bed and climbing down the ladder to the loft, he closed the blinds and turned to scavenge the room for another water bottle. Ilya still painted in here regularly, so it was a dangerous game to play. Was that inconspicuous liquid water or turpentine? Take a sip and find out, you’ll know you’ve gone wrong if you start pissing blood, projectile vomiting, or suddenly go blind.

Ilya had avoided the studio for the first year after Irina's death. Though now, he spent more time here than the main house. The home he shared with his father and Alexei felt more and more like a ghost town, the walls inextricably tied to his mother's last hours of life. Alexei had graduated high school a couple of years ago and immediately started working as a correctional officer at the prison with their dad. The two of them existed in their own world, speaking in Russian and pretending like Irina never existed.

The studio was comfortable. He'd cleared out the extra art supplies from the loft space, and replaced them with a mattress he stole from the spare bedroom in their house (they'd never had a single guest stay over since moving in, so he didn't think it would be missed) and a mountain of blankets and pillows. Svetlana generously donated to the cause using her record store money to buy a shitty TV and a second hand GameCube. They spent so much time there together (studying, sleeping off hangovers, playing Mario Kart, and yeah, occasionally fooling around) that it felt like her space as much as his. Ilya liked to think that Irina wouldn't have minded. He thought she would have liked Svetlana and the fact she didn't take shit from anyone, Ilya included.

Svetlana launched another projectile across the room, this time a pillow, landing a blow to Ilya's head.

"Oh you've done it now," he said, picking it up and hurling it back at her. He scaled the ladder two rungs at a time and dove onto the bed. Svetlana giggled, guarding her face as Ilya grabbed the pillow again, climbed on top of her, and started pummeling her (lovingly) with it.

His head was also killing him, but the revenge was worth it.

Ilya's phone started ringing from where it lay abandoned on the floor, the sound interrupting their pillow fight. Svetlana, who had manhandled her way on top of Ilya and was pretending to smother him with a pillow, crawled off of him and picked up the phone. Upon seeing the caller ID, she accepted the call and put it on speaker phone.

"Sasha!"

"Sveta! I did not expect you. Now my day is much better." Ilya could hear the smile in Sasha's voice, 5,000 miles away in Moscow.

He and Ilya had formed a friendship of necessity when he was in Russia for his mother's funeral, but the two of them had stayed in touch, despite the ocean between them. Sasha was 20 now, and Ilya had come to view him as something of an older brother, taking over the role that Alexei generally neglected. Ilya confided in him often, and he was familiar with Svetlana and Shane, despite never having spoken to the latter. It was easier to be open with him when they weren't face-to-face. And it helped that Sasha was estranged from his family after coming out about a year after the funeral. Ilya knew it was a fucked up way to think, but it meant that he could speak without fear, knowing whatever he said wouldn't get back to his own dad. Svetlana was undeniably his best friend, but there were still some secrets he couldn't bring himself to burden her with.

"Hi, Sasha," Ilya chimed in, his voice rough from nearly being suffocated to death.

“You sound like you have been run over by truck,” Sasha said.

“I have been. The truck’s name is Sveta.”

Sasha laughed on the other side of the line, and Svetlana stuck her tongue out at him.

“How are my two favourite Russian expats?” Sasha asked.

“Hungover,” Svetlana groaned. “And pissed off at our Ilya here.”

“What did that *zhopa* do this time?”

“Nothing, Svetlana is being—” Svetlana smothered Ilya in the face with a pillow again, shutting him up.

“Everything, Sasha. He did everything.” Ilya groaned from beneath the pillow, annoyed at his friend. She kept talking. “First of all, he went and got himself *expelled* from our high school all because he had to be a gentleman and *defend my honour*. It’s like he thinks we’re living in the 1800s, Sasha, I swear. I can beat up my own shitty boyfriends, or well, ex boyfriends I suppose, if I want to. God.”

“I am not surprised. That child is repressed. He needs therapy.”

“Hey!” Ilya interjected, shoving the pillow off his face and sitting up in bed. “Can we not talk about me like I’m not in the room?”

The two dickheads continued to ignore him. Ilya needed new friends.

“I’ve been saying that for years! Anyway,” Svetlana went on. “To make it worse, I have a raging fucking migraine because he took me out for my birthday last night, got me wasted on *Girls Night Out* like I’m some bitty from Toronto, and then wouldn’t even mess around with me when we got home because he’s *in loooove* with Shane freaking Hollander, who he now gets to see every day at his school while I have to sit next to Connor Connors in math. Sash, I am not fucking kidding you, his name is literally *Connor Connors*. And he somehow has even less brain cells than the parents that named him.”

Sasha’s choking laughs rang through phone speakers, like he was having trouble breathing through the fit.

“Fuck you both.” Ilya said.

“I am sorry, Ilyuska,” Sasha said, catching his breath. “You are just so... how do I say it, Sveta? *Zhalkiy*.”

“Pathetic,” Svetlana supplied, because she had no loyalty at all.

“Yes!” Sasha said, “Pathetic, that is what you are. And rude. I am much more gay than Ilya and even I would not be turning down Sveta.”

“Thank you.” Svetlana smirked.

“I’m hanging up,” Ilya said, reaching across the bed to try and grab the phone from Svetlana, who raised it in the air out of his reach.

“No, no! I will be nice, I promise,” Sasha insisted. “I think this is good, you going to school with Shane. Now you can make out with him in library or storage closet. It will be very sexy and fun.”

“There will absolutely be no making out,” Ilya said. “First of all, he is absolutely straight, and second, he hates me. For good reason.”

Svetlana leaned her head on Ilya’s shoulder, a silent show of support.

“You need to tell him how you feel. I told you last time to talk to him.”

Ilya let out a frustrated sigh. “I tried to.”

“And how did this go?”

Ilya let the silence ring out in the air. He didn’t want to think about their last conversation, at the bush party back in November.

“Sveta? How did this go?”

Svetlana peeled her head off Ilya’s shoulder and looked him in the eyes. Ilya nodded his head. She leaned back onto him. “Pretty horribly,” she admitted. “There were like 10 of us sitting around a campfire and we could hear the shouting match across the clearing. I don’t know all the details but... it seemed like they both said some pretty fucked up things.”

“Yes, but did he tell him how he *feels*?” Sasha pushed again. “Or was he... *vesti sebya oboronitel’no*? Sveta?”

“*Da*,” Svetlana said. “He was *very* defensive, but what else is new?”

Ilya rolled his eyes.

“Ilya, you cannot punish Shane for not reading what is in your mind.”

And fuck, if Sasha wasn’t right about that. “Yeah,” he said, nodding to himself. “Yeah, I know.”

“You need to try again, to talk to him,” Sasha said. “Don’t be *ssykló*. Maybe you like sucking dick sometimes but you are still Russian, no?”

“Jesus Christ!” Ilya said, slamming himself in the face with the pillow now. Svetlana shook with laughter against him.

“This is why I love you, Sasha,” she said.

“How is everything there?” Ilya asked, trying to take the heat off himself. “How is Mikhail?”

Ilya could sense the tension through the call. “We are okay for now,” he said, voice quieter.

“Are things... getting worse for you two?” Ilya asked. Sometimes Sasha would talk about what it was like for gay people in Russia. Back when they first met, Sasha had asked him some questions about politics in Canada, but he hadn’t really understood what he was getting at. He’d learned more about the situation since, but Sasha was often hesitant to say too much, like he would get into trouble for recounting the information. He knew that Sasha lived with his boyfriend, Mikhail, now, but he sometimes worried about whether or not that was safe for them.

“It is odd, it is better in some ways but worse in others.” Sasha spoke slowly, calculated. “We have more community now, at least in Moscow. But we have to be secret still. We tried to have parade a few months ago, to celebrate... But police came to shut it down. Many of our friends were taken by police.”

Ilya’s shoulders tensed. Svetlana looked at him, concerned. He avoided the eye contact. He hated that he couldn’t do anything about the situation. “Was Mikhail...”

“No no, he was not taken. But... we are thinking maybe to move. To Berlin, or Montreal, maybe. We are not sure yet.”

Svetlana perked up next to him. “Montreal! Umm yes please? Ilya and I are planning to apply to University there, we could all get an apartment together! It would be like a freaking sitcom.”

Sasha chuckled on the other end of the line. They chatted a bit more about Sasha’s job and drama at school before Sasha ended the call, saying Mikhail was home from work so they were going to go grab some dinner.

After hanging up, Ilya was left with an odd claustrophobic feeling, like a door swollen shut on a humid summer day. He couldn’t help but compare his situation to the danger of Sasha’s. Sure, he’d fucked up his friendship with Shane beyond repair, but at least he could say he was relatively safe. Ilya’s fear revolved around his father. He’d always made Ilya feel like a disappointment to him, that was something he had shared with his mother. Coming out, he knew, would sever whatever lingering sense of parental love that remained. Besides, he figured it wouldn’t be necessary. He couldn’t imagine himself ever being in a relationship serious enough to need to tell Gregori about, be that with a man or a woman. His fear of his father, his disapproval, his spite, that was something Ilya was used to. He was comfortable with it.

Sasha, on the other hand, had the State to be afraid of.

Svetlana took his hands into her own and ran her thumb against his skin in slow, comforting circles. “You’re not in Russia, you know,” she said.

“I know.”

She wrapped her arms around him, holding him tight, and spoke into his neck. “Sasha is right. Try to talk to Shane again. Fix it.”

“N'oublie pas que tu as un contrôle de grammaire demain! Révise, révise,” Mme. Bouchard called out, her voice competing with the shrill bell signalling the end of the school day.

The classroom let out a collective groan at the reminder of their upcoming French quiz. Shane started tidying up his desk; adding his notes to his binder and zipping his pens and highlighters back into their case. The students spilled out of the room like water pouring through a cracked foundation. Shane lingered behind, choosing to avoid the stampede. The stampede which Ilya was now a part of.

God, that was going to take some getting used to. Ilya hadn't tried talking to him since his inexplicable transfer last week, but he often caught his lingering gaze during the two classes they shared or in the cafeteria at lunch. It's not like Shane had been expecting him to say something. Ilya had no reason to talk to him, he'd clearly already found his group. Sure, he came from their rival school, but it was no secret that he had been the star hockey player on the Senior St. Thomas team, so naturally, the LCI hockey bros had eagerly taken him under their wing during those first couple of days.

Just as Shane started zipping up his backpack, Mme. Bouchard's voice broke through the easy silence.

“Shane, un moment, s'il vous plaît?”

Her voice was neutral, professional, but Shane still felt a wave of anxiety course through him. Had there been something wrong with the paper he submitted? He tried to think back to it. He knew he'd gone slightly over the word count, but he'd hoped that wouldn't be too much of an issue.

He threw his backpack over his shoulder and approached her desk.

“I really enjoyed reading your essay,” she said, smiling at him. It looked forced.

Shit, he was totally right. She was docking marks for going over the word limit. “But?”

His teacher chuckled. “No but, Shane. It was great, perfect really.”

“Oh,” he said. “Then, is there something else that you wanted?”

Mme. Bouchard nodded her head slowly, like she was debating what to say next. She leaned back against her desk. “I have a student who needs some support,” she finally said.

Shane considered the statement. He'd done peer tutoring for her a couple of times before. He still didn't know what exactly he wanted to do with his future, but he knew it was something that would look good on University applications. And it helped that he enjoyed French. It would be an excuse to practice.

The nervousness in his teacher's tone however, made him feel uneasy about the request.

“Who would I be tutoring?” He asked, cautiously.

“Our new student,” she said, trying too hard to appear casual. “Ilya.”

Shane’s grip tightened on the strap of his backpack. He didn’t say anything, and Mme. took the opportunity to go on.

“I know that there have been some rumors going around about him, but I don’t think he’s a bad kid. Maybe a bit of trouble in the past, but I think he means well.”

He hated that she thought he was hesitant because of what kids were saying. “It’s not that,” he said. “I um...” he fiddled with the strap on his bag. “We used to know each other is all.”

She considered him. “Well, he asked for you specifically,” she said. “I would have recommended you regardless, but, if that makes any difference to you...” she trailed off.

Shane tried to school his expression. He hadn’t been expecting that. He tried to picture it. Tutoring Ilya would mean sitting across from him again. Just the two of them. Having to be civil.

He thought about the last words he’d spoken to Ilya.

It only makes you look more like your father.

God, he’d been a dick. His stomach felt nauseous with shame, layered over the anger that still resided deep in his gut.

“Is he failing?” he asked.

His teacher sighed. Obviously, that wasn’t information she should be sharing. “Not yet, but he’s close,” she admitted.

Shane nodded.

“Look, Shane, you shouldn’t do anything if you’re not comfortable, but when I talked to him, it seemed like he really was serious about improving his grade. If I’m wrong about that and he’s just wasting your time, you can stop whenever.”

If Shane was honest with himself, he didn’t need to hear those words to help him decide. He’d made up his mind as soon as she mentioned Ilya’s name.

“I’ll do it,” he said, definitively. “Once a week, on Thursdays. After school, in the library.”

Thursday came faster than Shane would have liked.

He tried to prepare for it like any other tutoring session. He went straight to the library after the bell, choosing a table near the large wall of windows and started to organize his notes.

They were currently covering a unit on Society and Current Events, so Shane had printed out a series of articles in French, along with a list of common vocab words for the topic. One of the articles covered the recent accusations of physical assault against Marc Crawford, coach

for the LA Queens. Shane didn't want to admit to himself that he had spent an embarrassing amount of time trying to find an article that was relevant for the unit and hockey related.

He hunched over, resting his forehead on the cool surface of the table.

What the fuck was he thinking, agreeing to this?

Shane was deep into questioning all of his life choices when a loud thud across the table from him jolted him to attention, the distinct and nostalgic sound of a hockey bag being dropped carelessly onto the ground, followed by the scrape of a chair being dragged out from the table. At any other library Shane was certain this barbaric behaviour would be met with swift retribution, but the librarian, Mr. Tran was sick in the head and said he actually *liked* the chaotic sounds of teenagers using the space.

"Hi, Hollander."

Ilya smelled of cigarettes and graphite. The dumbass really needed to stop smoking. Not that Shane cared about his well being.

"Hey," he said, lifting his head off the table and resigning himself to a hell of his own creation.

"Thanks for, uh, agreeing to this," Ilya said.

Shane nodded and started rifling through the pages laid out between them. "So, I thought we could either work on the homework from today, or I can try to supplement and reinforce the concepts we've been covering lately to hopefully give you a better overall understanding? I printed out some news articles about current events. We could both read one of them and then try to hold up a conversation where you either agree or disagree with what's being said in the article. It'll line up well with the debate assignment we have coming up. Or we can just go over grammar or something. It's up to you." Shane silently prayed that a bookshelf would topple over and crush him to death. He felt like he'd been transported into his 11 years old self, standing on the Rozanov's doorstep, spewing useless information about ginseng.

"Yeah, let's do that. The article thing."

Ilya abruptly stood up and dragged his chair around the table so he was sitting next to Shane.

"Which one are we reading?" he asked, leaning in so he could see the pages he had on display.

"Um," Shane cleared his throat and picked out the hockey article. "I've got this one." He held it out in front of Ilya, their forearms brushing momentarily. He felt weird, being this close to him after so many years.

Ilya studied the page. The picture associated with the article featured a team photo of the LA Queens. He groaned. "No hockey, please. I'll read anything else."

Shane looked up from the page at Ilya, his brow furrowed. "Okay, who are you and what have you done with Rozanov? The kid I knew lived and breathed hockey."

Ilya shrugged. "I guess I'm not the kid you knew anymore." He was quiet for a beat, and then suddenly burst out laughing. A couple of kids trying to study turned and glared. Mr. Tran glanced over from his desk and shot them a thumbs up. Ilya didn't seem to notice. "Sorry," he said. "That was really melodramatic and stupid. Let's read the article, it's whatever."

"No, no, it's okay, I have a couple others," Shane said. He grabbed the small stack that he'd printed out and handed them to Ilya to flip through.

He looked through them slowly. Some of them didn't feature a photo, and it seemed to take Ilya a minute to mentally translate the headlines. Eventually he settled on one, pushing the rest to the side and setting it down on the table between them. "This one looks okay," he said.

Shane studied it, intrigued. It was about a recent vandalization of an art gallery in Sweden. Numerous pieces had been destroyed during the break in. He was momentarily confused about the choice, and then recalled what Svetlana had mentioned, back in the fall, about University. She'd said Ilya was thinking of applying to art school. Shane thought about the nights they had spent hanging out in Shane's bedroom, Ilya working away in his sketchbook. He hadn't realized he'd continued making art, that he was seriously considering pursuing it for his future.

How was it that even Ilya, who had just been expelled from his old high school, had his future figured out?

"Sure, yeah. Let's do it," was all he said.

Shane read over the article twice, and then sat back, watching Ilya as he studied the words. He was quietly whispering to himself as he ran through the paragraphs. His frustration was palpable as he would get stuck on a word, try to sound it out, and then quietly curse at himself before moving on.

"You're worrying too much about pronunciation, I think," Shane interrupted. "You're trying to say every word perfectly when your main focus should be comprehension. If you understand what it says, just move on. No one cares if you say it right or not."

Ilya leaned back in his chair, running his hands through his hair in frustration. "I'm absolutely screwed, Shane," he muttered. "And I really can't afford to fuck this up."

Shane stared at him thoughtfully. "Why not?" he asked.

Ilya shook his head and gazed out the windows behind them. It had started raining, and he watched as kids covered their heads with jackets, sprinting to the parking lot like the building was on fire. "I've gotta pass all my classes to stay eligible for hockey," he said, avoiding Shane's eyes. "And I need to keep playing so I at least have a shot at a scholarship. My dad... he won't help pay for University if I'm planning to study art. So, I need the scholarship."

Shane considered the pained expression on Ilya's face. His own chest was tight, like there wasn't enough air in the room. He knew he shouldn't care, but he couldn't help it.

“Yeah, well. Gregori’s a prick.” Ilya smirked at his words. Shane thought about the night of the bush party again. “Ilya, I’m sorry about what I said about you and your dad before,” he said.

Snapping his head away from the window, Ilya looked at him, a serious expression on his face. “Don’t apologize,” he said. “Seriously, I deserved it. What I did was really shitty. You had every right to go off on me. Plus, I know the darts are fucking repulsive, I’m gonna quit.”

Ilya bumped his knee against Shane’s. His pulse quickened at the contact, and for a moment he forgot what they were talking about.

Jesus, what was wrong with him?

“Alright,” Shane said, sucking in a sharp breath. “I guess we have no choice but to make sure you pass then. Let’s start by having you read the article to me out loud.”

Ilya smiled at him, his face soft, eyes bright. He started reading.

Chapter End Notes

Russian Translation:

- жопа (жопа): ass
- zhalkiy (жалкий): pathetic/pitiful
- vesti sebya oboronitel’no (вести себя оборонительно): to act defensively

French Translation:

- N'oublie pas que tu as un contrôle de grammaire demain! Révise, révise: Don't forget you have a grammar test tomorrow! Study, study!
- Un moment, s'il vous plaît: one moment, please

Canadian Context Notes:

- Dart: slang for cigarette
- We are agreeing to suspend disbelief that French is only mandatory in grade 9 in Ontario ok thank you 🙄

Thanks for reading 🙄 ya'll are the best!

Chapter 11: The Wolfbirds

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Come down from the mountain, you have been gone too long
The spring is upon us, follow my only song
Settle down with me by the fire of my yearning
You should come back home, back on your own now*

“Ragged Wood”, Fleet Foxes

One Month Later – April 2007

Rose paced by the barn doors, checking her phone every couple of minutes, anxiety exuding from her in waves. Shane watched her curiously from where he stood, leaning against a hay bale, struggling to work through a riff on one of their new songs.

“What do we know about this person anyway?” he asked. Rose was being suspiciously vague about the drummer who had allegedly texted her out of the blue, asking for a trial run with the band. When she told him and Kip about the message during lunch last week, he had tried to read the text chain, but Rose snatched her phone away defensively before he could get a look.

She ignored him. Shane shot a questioning look at Kip, who just shrugged. He was currently setting up the drum kit. While they had owned it for years, it usually remained disassembled, the floor toms and bass drum more useful to them as side tables than instruments.

The distinctive rattle of a decrepit engine carried down the laneway. The three friends froze and peered through the barn doors, eyeing the beat up Honda Civic as it parked on the gravel path. It was rusted to shit and while most of the car was black, the passenger side door had clearly been damaged and replaced with a mismatched sandy brown panel. The back bumper was covered in fading multi-coloured stickers, illegible from inside the barn, but which Shane later learned read things like “I eat aquarium rocks, just a little bit sometimes, as a treat” and “Don’t tailgate me, I have rabies”.

The driver’s door opened, and when the familiar figure emerged Shane’s stomach dropped.

“Oh hey, it’s record store girl!” Kip grinned, waving his hand at Svetlana, blissfully unaware.

“You didn’t say it was her.” Shane glared at the back of Rose’s head.

Rose shrugged. “Well, you didn’t ask,” she said without looking back at him.

“Literally how was I supposed to know to ask that?”

“I can’t believe record store girl is auditioning for our band. Man, this is awesome.” Kip jumped up from the drums and approached the barn door. Shane stayed, frozen in place.

Svetlana introduced herself to Kip while Shane ignored them, continuing to mess around with the guitar riff. The strings felt sharp beneath his fingertips, like they could cut through the thick callous. He didn’t like this. He thought about all the times he’d seen her and Ilya together. Their casual comfort together at the record store all those summers ago, the way Ilya had been draped all over her at Ryan Price’s birthday party, and her confident discussion of his future at the bonfire in the fall. It made him uneasy.

It wasn’t jealousy. He didn’t have any reason to be jealous. It’s not like him and Ilya were even friends again, Shane was just tutoring him. But still, he didn’t have to be jealous to dislike it. Did Ilya know she was here? If he did, why hadn’t he said anything to Shane on Thursday?

“So, this is our jam space,” Rose said, gesturing to the barn. “You’ve heard us perform before, but in case you’ve forgotten, I sing lead vocals, Shane sings backup and plays guitar, and then Kip plays bass.”

“I didn’t forget,” Svetlana said and she stalked towards the drum set, confident and carefree. She started adjusting the placement of the hi-hat and symbols immediately, like they already belonged to her, and the movement created metallic waves of sound that echoed throughout the barn.

“Shane writes most of our music,” Rose added, and he wished she hadn’t. He didn’t like people knowing that he was behind their lyrics. They were too personal. He liked the anonymity of Rose singing lead vocals on his stories. Most people assumed she was their lyricist and he liked to keep it that way.

“Interesting,” Svetlana said. Her voice was airy, like she was only half listening, more focused on arranging the kit into the perfect setup.

When she was satisfied with the arrangement she pulled a set of drumsticks out of the back pocket of her ripped jeans, ran through a couple of fills, and then grinned up at them.

“Well, are we gonna play something or are you guys just gonna stand around with your dicks in your hands all afternoon?”

Kip barked out a laugh, sharp and joyous. Rose had this gleaming look in her eye that reminded Shane of the way kindergarteners admired their teachers. Shane glared.

“Don’t you want to warm up first?” he asked. It was the first thing he’d said to her. She stared directly at him, her gaze challenging, but with a playful glint in her eyes.

“Nah, I’m good. Do you need to?”

Shane bristled. He really didn’t like this.

“Let’s start with *Rookie Season*,” he said addressing Rose and Kip. Kip raised an eyebrow at him knowingly. The song had a 5/4 time signature, which meant it was more challenging for the drummer, requiring careful focus to keep track of the downbeat. Shane shrugged. He absolutely didn’t choose this song for that reason, trying to see if it would mess Svetlana up. It was just a good song.

Svetlana, did not in fact, mess up. She listened for the first several bars, tapping her foot against the dusty barn floor, bobbing her head to the beat. It was clear to Shane that she knew what she was doing before she even met stick to drum, the way she was absorbing the rhythm, the melody running through her veins. She was in her element.

And god, did they ever sound good. Everything shifted the moment she joined in, and they could all feel it. Her beat filled the space between the guitar and bass, rounding out the hollow sound that wasn’t noticeable before, but would now be glaring in her absence. Svetlana naturally pulled back during the chorus, toning down on the cymbals and letting Rose’s voice carry through with a resounding bass drum that held the rhythm steady. It was the complete opposite of the track Kip had designed on his computer, which amped up in intensity at the chorus, but the change *worked*. They sound like more than a high school garage band. Shane could see it in that moment, how they could actually be something real, outside this barn, outside this town.

Shane consciously avoided looking at Svetlana during the song, but when she slotted in the perfect fill to transition into the bridge, he couldn’t stop himself from glancing her way. She was grinning to herself, lost in the music, transfixed like she was in a dream.

He thought about the ceramic bowl that sat in the centre of his family’s dining table. It had originally been a gift from Yuna’s mom on her and David’s wedding day. When Shane was young, he tried to bring it up to his room to play with; he thought it looked like the moon, and it was perfect for a scene he was creating with his action figures. While walking upstairs, he tripped, and it slipped from his grasp, falling to the floor in slow motion and breaking into several large, jagged pieces.

He was so afraid of his parents' disappointment that he hid it underneath his bed, wrapped carefully in a towel. But of course the bowl’s absence was obvious, and they found out almost right away. Much to Shane’s surprise however, he wasn’t met with admonishment. Instead, his mom used it as a chance to teach him about kintsugi; a traditional Japanese form of art where broken ceramics were repaired using a lacquer mixed with powdered gold. She explained that it created something beautiful out of the imperfection, transforming what was once broken into something more valuable and resilient.

Their sound reminded him of that bowl. What had once been shattered was finally complete, merged together with a piece that he hadn’t realized was missing.

The last note hung heavy in the air and Shane was scared to cut through the silence. What if this was a fluke? What if they could never get back to this sound again?

“Okay. Okay, holy shit. That was sick, right?” Kip said, giddy, a childlike wonder in his eyes.

Rose beamed. "I told you," she said.

She had quite literally told them *nothing* about what was going to go down today, but Shane was willing to ignore that fact.

Svetlana didn't respond to their praise. Instead, she was staring at Shane, an eyebrow raised, like she was daring him to challenge her.

"You're good," he acknowledged. He hated that she was, but he also couldn't deny it.

She smirked at him knowingly, like she had unfiltered access to the war currently raging in his mind.

"So, you're in the band, right? We need her in the band," Kip said. He was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet.

"That depends," Svetlana said. "Do you guys have a name yet?"

"It's a work in progress," Rose confessed. Her voice was picked up and amplified by the amps. She flushed, embarrassed, and quickly muted the mic. "Sorry. But yeah, we're working on it."

"Well, I'm not going to drum for a band that doesn't even have a name. It's embarrassing."

Shane felt defensive. "We just want to make sure it's right before we really put ourselves out there. We don't want to commit to something and regret it."

"Right well, it's been what... three years since you guys started playing?"

"Uhh, yeah, something like that," Kip agreed, unhelpfully.

"So I think it's *probably* about time to commit," She spoke to them slowly, like she was explaining to an incompetent child why they shouldn't stick a knife in the electrical socket. "You're not going to be able to book any real gigs without a name. And with me, you guys are good enough to start booking some real gigs." Shane rolled his eyes.

Svetlana analyzed the three of them carefully, tapping her foot against the bass drum in a steady rhythm as she did so. It was unsettling.

"Alright," she declared, pointing a stick at them. "I've got it."

"Oh do you now?" Shane asked, skepticism ringing through his voice. Rose glared at him. He ignored her. He was over Rose Landry and her insistence on fraternizing with the enemy behind their backs.

"Yes, *Shane*. I do." She grinned at them and did a stupid fucking drumroll. Kip and Rose were hanging off her every word. He absolutely was not interested in what she had to say. Not at all. "Well, we're from rival schools, right?"

Shane was painfully aware of this fact. "Sure. So what?" he inquired, taking the bait anyway.

“So... What about The Rivals?” she held out her arms like she was waiting for applause. “It’s edgy, it’s fun, it leaves people wanting to know more about us.”

“I like it!” Kip said, but this wasn’t surprising. Generally speaking, he liked all of their suggestions.

Shane also didn’t hate it, but he wasn’t about to admit that fact just yet. He eyed Rose, wanting to gauge her opinion. Her head was tilted to the side, a contemplative crease etched into her brow. “Or...” she said, pointing between Svetlana and the three of them. “Our school mascot’s a wolf. What’s yours, Svetlana?”

“Oh, Jesus, I don’t know. I think it’s like a pelican or a loon or something.”

“Pelicans and loons are two very different looking animals,” Kip said, confused.

Svetlana shrugged. “Honestly it might even be a hawk. I’m not sure... It’s definitely some kind of bird.”

Rose laughed. “Okay, no, that’s actually perfect. We can be The Wolfbirds! It’s still got that hint of rivalry, but it’s more subtle and timeless. It’ll work even after we graduate and become impossibly famous.”

Svetlana smiled. “I love it. It’s stupid, don’t get me wrong. But I love it.”

Shane mulled it over in his mind. “The Wolfbirds,” he said.

Rose turned her mic back on and stepped in close, her glossed lips nearly brushing the grille as she cheered into it. “Thanks for coming out tonight ya’ll, and for being a fucking incredible crowd! Let’s give it up for Kip on the bass, Shane on the guitar, and Svetlana on the drums!” She paused for her invisible audience. “I’m Rose, and we are The Wolfbirds!”

Two Weeks Later

“Yo, can you believe Jackie rolled up to practice again today?” Comeau said, slamming his locker closed with a metallic clang. “She’s looking like a real puck bunny out there.”

J.J. chuckled and shook his head with disbelief. “Nahh, she was wearing Hayd’s jersey. Pretty sure she only has eyes for him.”

Drapeau slapped Hayden on the back, large hands imposing in his goalie gloves. “Alright Pike! Guess we know who’s scoring twice tonight.”

Ilya ripped tape off his shin guards as he watched the interaction. Hayden chuckled along with the guys, but he noticed the smile didn’t quite meet his eyes. They guys continued their crude banter about Hayden and his new girl, while Ilya did his best to tune them out.

Ilya was the highest scorer on their team by a wide margin, but the expanding divide between him and his teammates was becoming hard to ignore. Growing up in Florida, he only ever really felt at home when he was on the ice, playing hockey with the guys.

Now, he wasn't sure where he belonged. The homophobic and sexist comments that spread like wildfire in the changerooms and on the ice left him with a sour feeling in his gut. The space that had once provided him with a safe haven from his home, from his father, now felt suffocating. And yet he was trapped. Ilya knew if he wanted to go to Uni, if he wanted a chance at a scholarship, he had to suck it up and swallow the words that threatened to spill out of his mouth. With a shaky exhale he released his clenched fists, trying to hold back the rage and betrayal burning inside of him.

He unlaced his skates and haphazardly threw everything into his gear bag as the room echoed with the sounds of performative laughter and running showers. A few of the guys' phones pinged in unison, and moments later the energy spiked like an incoming tidal wave.

"Oh shit, did you see this?" Drapeau said, handing his phone to Comeau. He laughed, the sound high pitched and tinny, before he passed it off to the next guy.

"Those dudes are fucking insane!"

"Bro, that's sick, it's probably having the trip of its life!"

Ilya watched Hayden's face as he studied the message. "Shit. Poor things just a baby, that can't be good for it," he said, frowning.

Drapeau snorted. "Bro, it's a goat, who gives as shit?"

Ilya's jaw tightened. He didn't need to get involved. He really didn't. He'd gotten himself into enough trouble at his old school and he was getting back on track here. Prioritizing his future. Keeping up his grades. He really, really should just walk away, don't ask questions, and forget all about the conversation.

That was until Comeau handed the phone to Ilya. "Yo, Florida, look at this shit," he said.

Ilya stared at the image, blood boiling. Jesus Christ. They were hotboxing with a goddamn baby goat in the car.

He had to take a few steadying breaths before he could get the words out. "Who the fuck are these guys?"

Mitty shrugged, "Theriault and his buddies. They're back at the school parking lot with some goat they found in a ditch or something."

Drapeau stalked over and grabbed the phone back from him. "Why, Florida. What are you gonna do, go rescue it?"

Ilya didn't answer. He got up from the bench and pushed past Drapeau, checking him in the shoulder harder than necessary.

"What the hell, man!" Drapeau called out as he stumbled back into the lockers. Ilya would give anything to smash his face in. He settled for kicking a bench over on his way out.

Ilya sped the three blocks from the rink to the school lot in a blind rage, his knuckles white as he strangled the steering wheel. The car screeched angrily at him for not having his seatbelt fastened. Trees and stop signs whipped passed in a blur. He had never been more grateful in his life for the lack of traffic in small town Ontario.

Their school lot was large, surrounded and shaded by ancient pines. Class had been out for several hours, and as Ilya made a sharp turn into the lot, tires squealing, he beelined for the only other vehicle there. It was a beat up navy sedan with a busted front bumper. Heavy bass pounded within, fast and abrasive, matching Ilya's pulse. The windows were rolled up, thick, syrupy smoke shielding the faces inside. He slammed the car into park and swung his door open, not bothering to turn it off before charging at them.

"Open. The Fucking. Door." His teeth were clenched and he pounded his fist against the passenger side window, punctuating his words. It was hard to see inside through the haze, but he could tell the passenger seat was empty. Someone turned up the music. A hand appeared in the rear window, flipping him off. Then he saw, through a break in the smoke, the baby goat, little legs fumbling across the laps of the absolute shit heads in the back. A bleat rang out, faint through the music, but undeniably distressed.

Ilya smashed his fist into the window without thinking, it didn't budge. "Fuck!" He winced, clutching his hand to his chest. The guys inside barked with laughter. The goat bleated again. Ilya stalked back to his car, doing the only thing he could think of. He yanked the headrest free from the driver's seat, exposing the metal prongs, and whipped back around to the sedan. Clutching the fabric headrest with both hands, he slammed the prongs into the passenger window, imagining it was Drapeau's face.

Glass exploded inward as a cacophony of screams rang out in the car. Ilya ignored them. He whipped the headrest on the ground and reached in through the broken window, unlocking the doors and slicing his arm open on the class.

"What the *fuck* man!"

Unending plumes of smoke poured from the vehicle like smog from a tire fire as Ilya tore open the back door. One of the guys jammed in the backseat continued to curse at him while the other remained completely unfazed, ripping another hit from the bong like this was an average fucking Tuesday. Warm, sticky blood trailed down Ilya's arm, dripping onto the concrete. The spring wind whipped angrily through his curls. The goat's eyes were wide with fear, and Ilya was acting on instinct, hopped up on adrenaline. He pulled his t-shirt over his head and reached into the back seat, wrapping the creature in the soft cotton. It immediately curled into the warmth of his chest, tucking its bristly chin around his shoulder, wet nose pressed to his neck.

Ilya kicked the sedan's door closed, more glass from the front window shattering in response.

And then, not knowing where else to go, he drove to the only person that still felt like home.

In all their years of jamming together, Kip had never felt better about their sound. Svetlana had meshed with the band almost instantly, and over the past two weeks, she'd continued to impress him. It felt like they were finally working towards something real. He always enjoyed hanging out together and making music, but this was the first time he felt like he really got Rose's vision when she rambled on about them going places.

Now that the heavy lifting of keeping tempo didn't fall on his shoulders anymore, he was finally able to explore and experiment more with his bass. He was absolutely eating it up, basking in the thrill of it all. The song they were working on now was one of his favourites. He'd helped Shane write the chord progression and he was really proud of it. Kip bobbed his head as Rose finished up the chorus and Svetlana improvised the perfect fill to transition into the next verse. Kip was about to try out a new walkup he'd been playing around with when the barn shuddered, the vibration of tires spinning on gravel unmistakable just outside of their space. There was an ear splitting screech, the sound of someone slamming down on their breaks, abrupt and hard.

Each of them halted mid bar, the unfinished sequence ominous and heavy. They stared at each other as the barn doors swung open.

Kip stared at the shirtless, sweaty dude standing in the doorway.

"What the hell?" Kip said, absolutely dumbfounded. Who the hell was this kid? And sorry, but was that a goat?

"Is that a goat?" Rose asked, reading his mind.

"Hold on a sec," Kip said, looking him up and down. "Isn't that the dude who got expelled for punching a priest?" He couldn't help but notice that he was freaking *jacked*. Huh.

Svetlana's voice was dry, concerned. "No. He punched my ex."

Rose and Kip turned to her, surprised.

She shrugged. "He deserved it."

"You're bleeding," Shane said, and Kip realized he'd been quiet up until now. His voice was tight.

"Shane," said the still shirtless, still buff, and yeah, Shane was right, still bleeding dude. "I need your help."

Chapter End Notes

No goats were harmed in the making of this chapter (although the events were inspired by a true story that took place while I was working on a goat farm in Peterborough - teens in small town Ontario can be pretty fucked, ya'll!)

Chapter 12: Temporary Insanity

*When you were here before, couldn't look you in the eye
You're just like an angel, your skin makes me cry
You float like a feather in a beautiful world
I wish I was special
You're so fuckin' special*

“Creep”, Radiohead

It was warmer in the farmhouse laundry room, the bulb overhead cast a honeyed glow that made everything feel softer and safer. The room was cramped, but instead of being claustrophobic it felt secure, the cabinets so full of cleaning and work supplies that several of the doors didn't close all the way, and the earthy scent of ginseng and lavender laundry detergent clung to the walls. For Shane, it was the smell of home.

Shane had about a hundred questions running through his mind, but he silenced them, jumping straight into action. He had absolutely no idea what he was doing, but he could tell that Ilya needed him, so he was going to do his damn best to pretend.

Shane gathered towels from the cupboard and laid them down on the cool tile, creating a comfortable space to lay the goat on. He shut the door, just in case the animal decided to bolt when they released it. Then, he filled up a bowl with water and placed it on the floor next to the makeshift bed. While he worked, frantic and focused, Ilya stood in the corner, seemingly petrified, clutching the creature to his chest like he was afraid to let go.

Shane looked up at him from where he was crouched on the ground. His shoulders, strong and broad, looked golden and soft in the artificial light. Shane noticed the moles dotting his upper chest. They reminded him of the constellations they used to look out for at his cottage. Had they always been there?

Shane swallowed.

“Ilya, you can let it down. I've got it.” Shane's voice came out as a whisper, but it seemed to fill the entire room.

Ilya nodded, but stayed frozen in place.

“Hey, you can trust me,” he added, patting the ground in front of him.

For whatever reason, that seemed to work. Ilya snapped out of his trance, and slowly lowered to his own knees, setting the goat down on the towels between them. It circled several times on the soft padding before plopping down, its face tucked into its belly like a puppy settling in for a nap.

“Hi buddy,” Shane said, addressing the animal now. “Everything’s going to be okay, we’ve got you now.” He stroked his hand along its neck and back, and he was amazed by how soft its coat was. He’d only ever touched an adult goat before, and he had been expecting the same rough, wiry texture. Its fur was mostly tan in colour, with a smattering of white patches on its back and legs. The tip of its tail was white too, like it had been dipped in paint.

“He’s adorable,” Shane whispered, continuing to fill the silence while Ilya observed. “Or she?” He flipped up the tail to try and get a look, but couldn’t really see any identifying features. “Yeah, I have no idea.”

The goat sneezed at him. Shane chuckled, feeling a little more at ease.

“Sorry, buddy. That was invasive of me, you’re right. We should at least be on a first name basis before I go investigating your butt. I’m Shane.” Shane peered at Ilya, who suddenly seemed so much closer. Ilya hovered over the goat as well, but was studying Shane, a tender expression in his eyes. “And this is Ilya,” Shane added, maintaining his gaze.

A heavy silence lingered between them. Shane felt like his lungs weren’t able to draw in enough oxygen, like he was trying to breathe underwater. “You should say something,” Shane whispered to Ilya. His eyes looked like shrinking glaciers, closed off, frozen, but on the verge of breaking apart.

The goat sneezed again, easing whatever pressure was suspended in the space between them, and they both laughed.

“I’m sorry about those fuckwads,” Ilya finally said, breaking eye contact with Shane and glancing nervously at the goat. “You’re in good hands now.”

Shane held out the bowl of water to the animal, and it took a few tentative sips, which Shane figured was a good sign. “So, how did you even end up with this little guy?” he asked as the goat drank.

Ilya explained the events of his afternoon in clipped detail, his tone sharp, words edged with restrained anger. Shane tried to remain calm while he listened, but his grip on the water dish tightened and his jaw clenched. He’d witnessed a lot of asinine behaviour from his classmates over the years; clogging all the toilets in the school bathrooms by flushing slices of pizza down them, breaking into the rival Catholic school to deface classrooms, the occasional illegal street race. Usually though, their activities didn’t involve actively putting innocent creatures in harm’s way. Shane was amazed that Ilya had found the restraint to not beat the ever loving shit out of Theriault and his friend.

“Jesus,” he said, keeping his voice level despite his own anger. “Those kids should be arrested.”

“Yeah well,” Ilya shrugged. “If anything I’m sure I’ll be the one getting in shit over Theriault’s car.”

Shane shook his head. “I don’t think so, he’s an asshole, but he’s not a narc. I bet he was too stoned to even remember it was you.”

Shane took one of the smaller towels from the floor and dipped it in the bowl of water. He wrung it out so it was damp, but not dripping. Using the cloth, he gently wiped around the creature's nose, not sure if he was helping at all, but feeling like he should be doing *something*. It licked Shane's finger, tongue pink and inquisitive. Shane smiled. He leaned in close, tentatively pressing a hand to its rib cage, fur warm and heartbeat fluttering within.

"What are you doing?" Ilya whispered.

"I'm trying to see if it's breathing normal."

Silence hovered between them, delicate and inviting, like the first signs of spring. Ilya brought his own hand to the animal's torso, his fingertips brushing against Shane's. They stayed like that, hands rising and falling in time with the creature's breathing, neither pulling away. The touch was so slight, nearly nonexistent, yet Shane felt consumed by the heat of Ilya's skin, sharp and pointed, as if he'd pressed his arm to the stovetop, the hot coils leaving behind a permanent scar.

Shane wasn't sure what was wrong with him. He felt like he'd been possessed. He was struggling to hold himself back from tracing his fingertips along Ilya's knuckles, swollen and starting to bruise, his sharp and angular wrist, his forearm, bare and bloody. And *fuck* that's right, his arm was bleeding.

"You're bleeding," he said, stupidly.

Ilya stiffened. "It's nothing."

Shane gave him a skeptical once over. He was wearing black athletic pants, so it was hard to tell how much he'd bled onto them, but his forearm and abdomen were caked in dried blood, and the shirt he'd used to wrap the goat, discarded by the door, was also stained a deep red.

He pulled Ilya's forearm closer to himself, getting a better look at the wound. It was an angry vibrant red, like leaves surrendering to the change of seasons, but the bleeding appeared to have mostly stopped. The deepest part of the cut still had a wet sheen to it and glass dust clung to the edges of the wound.

"We should probably go to urgent care," he said. "You might need stitches."

"Absolutely not," Ilya said, voice tight. "It's fine."

It really wasn't fine, but Shane knew there wasn't any use in arguing. He sighed, resigned, and stood up without releasing his hold on Ilya, gently directing him over to the utility sink. Surprisingly, he complied without protest. Shane turned the faucet on with his free hand, letting it run until it reached a comfortable, lukewarm temperature.

"This might sting a bit, but I want to flush out the small bits of glass," he said, guiding Ilya's forearm under the stream. Ilya winced, but kept his arm steady.

"Keep it there until I say so," Shane instructed. He released Ilya so he could pull the first aid kit down from the cupboards. Over his shoulder, he heard Ilya curse under his breath. Shane

ignored him, busy sorting through the contents of the kit on the counter. After a couple of minutes, once Ilya's arm had been sufficiently waterboarded, he shut off the tap and directed him to sit down on a milk crate that he'd flipped upside down in front of the counter to use as a makeshift stool. He wrung out a cloth with soapy water and started cleaning the area around the cut.

"Does it hurt?" Shane asked, applying careful pressure, nervous that he was somehow making this worse.

"It's nothing, really," Ilya insisted.

"Hmm." Shane reached over Ilya's shoulder, tossing the bloody cloth into the sink. Ilya's knees knocked against his shins and his legs fell open slightly. Shane stepped forward, naturally slotting himself between them so he could grab an alcohol wipe off the counter. His chest pressed against Ilya's shoulder as he did, and Shane suddenly became aware of how shirtless he was, of how little space there seemed to be in the laundry room, of the metallic smell of hockey, of blood, of boy. He wondered, briefly, idiotically, what the skin underneath him would taste like. Shane's eyelids fluttered closed. Ilya hissed a sharp intake of breath, and Shane snapped back, putting space between them, his skin flushed, heartbeat in his throat.

"Sorry," Shane said, clearing his throat. What the hell was wrong with him?

"S'okay," Ilya grunted. He was staring up at the ceiling, like he was internally reciting some kind of silent prayer.

Shane tore open the packet and sterilized the area around the wound. He decided he was having a perfectly normal reaction to seeing someone that used to be his best friend in pain. His heart rate was accelerated because, despite the animosity he still bore for Ilya, he never stopped caring about him. His body would be reacting in the same way if it was Rose or Kip who needed help.

He could feel Ilya's eyes on him while he worked, his gaze imposing and weighted, like a shadow. Shane avoided meeting his eyes as he reached over him again for gauze and tape, careful to maintain a semblance of distance between them.

He considered how, of all places, Ilya had shown up on his doorstep today. He didn't understand why. Sure, he'd been helping Ilya with his French for the past few weeks, but that was the extent of their interactions. It's not like Ilya was at a loss for friends; since the transfer Shane rarely saw him alone at school, effortlessly blending in with the rest of the hockey team.

And yet, when he thought about it, outside of school, Shane never really saw him with those guys. If they ran into each other at parties Ilya usually arrived and left with Svetlana, sometimes seeming to be *with* her, and otherwise shamelessly flirting with other girls.

Shane tried to focus on wrapping the gauze around Ilya's arm, hoping that once it was covered up he could pretend it actually wasn't that bad, but he found his thoughts wandering to their history, their falling out all those years ago, when they were just dumb hurting kids.

Ilya had tried to leave this impression that he was changing schools to be closer to his hockey friends. Shane hadn't completely believed the excuse at the time, but he was even less certain now.

The only thing he really knew for sure was that Ilya was a goddamn idiot. He really wished he'd agreed to go to urgent care.

"You really don't think before you act, do you?"

"No." Ilya smirked. "Generally I don't."

Shane considered this. He tore the edge of the tape and pressed down, securing the gauze in place. "I needed that side of my friend, you know? Back then." He stared down at his hands, his thumb lightly brushing against the inside of Ilya's wrist, below the bandage. "After you were... gone," he said, because *fuck it*. "I found out some shit, that year. About how I'm, um, autistic. My parents had known for years, but they didn't say anything. They wanted me to be normal, I guess. Anyway, I know you were dealing with a lot of shit yourself at the time, but the way you just cut me out of your life..." he trailed off. "I don't know. I just, I could have used your idiotic lack of impulse control at the time, I think."

"Huh," Ilya said, after a moment of silence. "That explains why you were always so good at MLH 2001."

"What?" Shane squinted at Ilya.

"The autism," he deadpanned. "Doesn't that make people weirdly good at random shit? That's why you always beat me at Playstation. You had an unfair advantage."

Shane crossed his arms over his chest, but a smirk threatened to cut through his glare. "God, you're such an *asshole*," he said.

Ilya laughed, his head tipped back, throat exposed, a golden cross that Shane had never noticed before glinting in the yellow light. Shane followed the direction that the pendant pointed, his eyes dropping down to his chest, to his stomach, Ilya's muscles tightened with laughter. Shane felt a pressure building in his chest, a twisting in his stomach. He thought about Jessica, kissing her goodbye after their third date, his hands frozen like stone. He thought about his hands now, itching to reach out and take something, anything from Ilya. He imagined, evidently suffering from temporary insanity, what it would have been like with Ilya in the car instead of her.

Shane breathed in, sharp, untethered.

There was no fucking way. Shane was absolutely, under no circumstances imagining what it would be like to kiss Ilya goddamn Rozanov.

Shane's sudden and extreme onslaught of self doubt and spiralling was rudely interrupted by something brushing against his calf. He glanced down, only to find the white, tan goat, who was currently headbutting Ilya in the leg. He couldn't help but smile.

“It’s obsessed with you,” he said. The goat blinked up at Ilya with its freakishly cute sideways pupils. “I think it might think you’re it’s dad,” he mused.

Ilya smiled. “Does he look like my son?” He asked, picking up the goat and holding it close to his face. The animal started nibbling on his chain, and Ilya laughed at the sensation.

“I’m sure once its horns grow out the resemblance will be uncanny,” he deadpanned. “Also, you don’t know that it’s a boy. You could probably take it to the vet tomorrow and find out.”

Ilya was currently fighting a losing battle with the animal, trying to pull the necklace out of its mouth. He was eventually successful, but only because the goat got distracted and started chewing on his hair.

“You’ll come with me, right?” Ilya asked, meeting his eyes, briefly biting down on his lower lip. “To the vet?”

Shane wanted to say no. This was stupid. He stared at Ilya’s mouth, his lips slightly parted, wet, and inviting.

“Yeah, I’ll come,” he said.

Christ, he was fucked.

Chapter 13: Wellness, Calm, and Wine Moms

*There's some kind of light at the end
Stoned, forgetful, and then
I'm drinking what used to be sin
And touching the edge of her skin*

“You Make Me Smile”, Blue October

One Month Later – May 2007

“I thought we all agreed to never return to this place after I retired in grade 9.”

“Kip, you sucked at hockey,” Rose said as they walked up the stands of the rink, linked arm in arm with Svetlana. “That’s not the same as retirement.”

Shane smirked and followed them between the rows of metal bleachers. Rose and Sveta were wearing homemade jerseys; oversized black t-shirts with iron-on designs. They both featured the LCI Wolves logo, despite the fact that Svetlana still went to St. Thomas. The back of her shirt also proudly displayed the name “Rozanov” along with Ilya’s number, 81. Shane considered the way Sveta and Ilya were so easily affectionate with one another, and something twisted in his gut. He knew that Svetlana and Ilya weren’t dating, but obviously there was, or had been, *something* between them. He hated how much it bothered him.

For Shane, the past month had been equal parts torment and rapture. Ilya seemed to be, without warning, invading all aspects of his life, and it felt like his axis had been turned upside down. He showed up at Shane’s place at least once a day to check on Anya, the name he’d given the goat once the vet informed them it was, in fact, a girl. In his research Ilya also learned that baby goats were technically called “kids”, and ever since, he’d been referring to her as “their daughter”. Shane wasn’t really sure what to do with that.

Ilya had also become something of a permanent fixture for the band, crashing their rehearsals whenever he didn’t have hockey, making snarky remarks while he worked away in his sketchbook or ‘playing’ with Anya (or more accurately, chasing her around the barn as she climbed on top of whatever equipment she could get her hooves on until Ilya rescued her, insisting she couldn’t possibly get down safely from on her own). Shane tried to inform him that goats were known for their ability to scale and descend from heights, but he had become very protective of the animal.

His parents had inevitably noticed Ilya’s sudden return into his life, but refrained from asking directly about it. Shane could tell from their sideways glances that they had questions, but he wasn’t sure he was ready to answer them. Of course, at dinner with David and Yuna last week, Rose had brought up that they were coming to support Ilya at the game today, so his parents had insisted on tagging along, claiming it had been too long since they’d seen some good honest hockey. They arrived shortly after Shane and his friends, slipping in next to Rose, who had saved them some space on the bench. The three of them immediately started

discussing the season so far, sharing a bag of popcorn and talking animatedly. Rose was obsessed with his parents. It was sweet.

Shane hadn't told Ilya that Yuna and David were coming, and as the players started filing out from the changerooms and onto the ice for warmups, he wondered if maybe he should have. Was seeing them here going to throw off his game? As the timer counted down to the end of their warmup however, it became apparent that Shane didn't need to worry. Ilya was focused, shoulders tense, a scowl permanently etched on his face. His focus was clearly solely on the game, avoiding looking up at the stands or talking to his teammates who warmed up casually, joking with each other, knocking shoulders, and chirping their opponents across centre ice while they skated around, lazily passing the puck.

By the time the game started the bleachers were packed with students from both schools, and there was a tight feeling of anticipation coursing through the harshly lit arena. Faces painted in vibrant school colours and glittery homemade signs of support dotted the crowd like confetti. It made sense, they were near the end of the season and St. Thomas was LCI's biggest rival. Gossip surrounding Ilya's expulsion and transfer to the public school's hockey team also drew a lot of attention, some people speculating that the LCI community coaches had paid Ilya under the table to get kicked out so they could turn the tables for the second half of the season. Shane was dumbfounded by this; they were literally just teenagers, but people acted like it was the MLH. Multiple St. Thomas students made harsh, derogatory comments to Sveta about her jersey and how she was Ilya's bitch as they passed by in the stands. Shane wasn't sure when his change of heart had occurred, but he found himself shockingly defensive over his bandmate, and struggled to keep his expression schooled. Kip, on the other hand, had no qualms cursing out anyone who felt the need to take a shot at her.

There was an unspoken current of tension drifting between the players as well, creating invisible cracks in the ice. By the start of the third period, Ilya had scored two of LCI's three goals, but his own teammates seemed to be giving him the cold shoulder, cheering halfheartedly each time his puck hit the back of St. Thomas' net. The St. Thomas players also appeared to be trying to get a rise out of Ilya, taking every opportunity to check him into the boards, shoulders sharp and aggressive. At the faceoff, Shane watched anxiously as the opposition's centre made a string of comments which while they couldn't hear, was having an obvious physical impact on Ilya, who leaned forward deeper, his gloves tightening on his stick.

"The transition hasn't been easy for him, has it?" His mom asked, leaning forward to address Svetlana, evidently picking up on the animosity between the players on both sides of the ice.

"No," she said simply, not taking her eyes off the ice, arms crossed and brow creased. "It hasn't."

Rose tugged on her arm, pulling her hand into her own and squeezing it in a comforting gesture. "Hey," she said, voice low. Shane watched Rose rub her thumb along the back of her hand. "It's not your fault."

Svetlana leaned her head against Rose's shoulder, and Shane looked away, turning back to the game. He considered the way in which the two of them were able to share a casual intimacy with one another without feeling like their world was about to implode. In comparison, since

the quiet moment he and Ilya shared in his laundry room last month, Shane was having trouble just existing in his general vicinity. During their study sessions the space between them felt charged, like there was a heat radiating from Ilya that Shane was being magnetically drawn to. Every glance between them, every accidental brush of skin against skin felt catastrophic.

Even here, up in the bleachers, separated by the glass, Shane was having trouble focusing. He was consumed by thoughts of Ilya's sweat slicked skin and dampened curls. He felt on edge, exposed, as though everyone around him could read his thoughts. He was desperate to just feel normal again.

He knew rationally that these were just intrusive thoughts, a result of Ilya being thrust back into his space after years of distance. He'd never once had thoughts like this about a *guy* before. But he needed to do something about it. Find a pretty girl, take her on a date, kiss her and not be so goddamn awkward about it. Do something, anything to remind himself that he didn't *actually* want to suck Ilya's lower lip between his teeth until it was swollen and slick with spit and *fuck*, Shane really needed to think about something else.

A whistle screamed throughout the arena and Shane's cheeks burned, like the ref was calling *him* out for his disturbed mind.

"Oh shit," Kip gasped under his breath, and Shane's eyes snapped back to the ice, where Ilya had just shoved one of the St. Thomas players. The guy was big boned and had a few inches on Ilya, but he nearly slipped back at the sudden assault, steadying himself with the edge of his skate. He jerked his torso at Ilya, like he was trying to goad him, and then started skating circles around him. The crowd quickly picked up on the altercation, and voices rumbled all around the rink, like an oncoming thunderstorm.

In a matter of seconds gloves were off and sticks were dropping to the ice like dead branches splitting from tree trunks in the wind. Ilya charged forward, grabbing the bigger guy's jersey, strangling the fabric in his grip. They were shouting at each other, voices raw and guttural, but Shane couldn't make out any of it. The ref continued to whistle, loud and sharp, as he sped across the ice towards them.

Shane abruptly stood up from the bench, his body acting without consulting his mind. He tried to keep his breathing steady, the frigid air of the rink piercing his lungs like hundreds of tiny needles. He ground his teeth, attempting to stay composed, but his palms were sweating and it felt like the world was spinning in slow motion.

Kip's hand fell onto Shane's shoulder, and he flinched, not expecting the touch.

"Don't worry man, it's all a part of the game," he said, voice measured and calm.

Shane knew he was trying to be reassuring. It didn't help, and he hated that Kip could pick up on his anxiety.

The St. Thomas player threw the first punch as the ref approached, and the crowd went *insane*. Ilya's head twisted to the side and he spat, a line of blood spraying onto the ice. A striped arm was wedged between the two boys in an attempt to split them up, but it didn't

stop them. One hand still clenched around his jersey, Ilya swung his right fist as he pulled the boy's torso toward him, knuckles connecting with jaw in a crack that reverberated through the stands.

"Enough! Enough! That's *enough!*" The ref screamed at them, voice cracking, as three guys lunged forward to restrain Ilya and drag him away, just as he was rearing back for another hit. Once Ilya's hand tore away from the St. Thomas player's jersey, the boy stumbled to the ground in a mess of padded limbs, and the LCI supporters in the stands exploded into cheers, the previous thunder transforming into an onslaught of lightning. The ref checked on the St. Thomas player still splayed out on the ice while Ilya was escorted to the penalty box. Kip, Sveta, Rose, and Shane's parents started discussing the fight in rapid, clipped tones, but it was all just white noise to him. He analyzed Ilya's face from where he sat, tapping his stick rhythmically against the glass. It was only now that he finally looked up into the stands, eyes searching until he found Shane, his face set in a hard line.

There wasn't a single ounce of pride from winning the fight ghosting his features. He looked utterly furious, like a caged and rabid animal, hungry for a kill.

They won the game 5–3, but Ilya struggled to celebrate with his teammates, skin still buzzing with residual anger from the fight. Coach had pulled him aside after the game to remind him that while he was arguably their best player, if he kept up with the aggro shit he would have no choice but to bench him. Which, fair. He knew he'd gone too far. He wasn't proud of how he'd acted on the ice tonight. But he was finding it increasingly difficult to stand by and tolerate the toxic rapport of the assholes who played this sport, including the guys who were supposed to be on his team.

He kept playing the moment over in his mind. Brad Hammersmith skating past him asking how his girlfriend was enjoying her fifteen minutes of fame. Which *fuck him*. He'd thought he'd shut this shit down when he beat up Sveta's shady ass ex for spreading the pictures of her around school. Sveta had assured him that things were better at St. Thomas' since he took care of it. Clearly, she'd been leaving out some details to appease him. And now he was stuck at LCI and couldn't do anything about it.

Coach was right though. He needed to get his shit together if he wanted to stay on the team, to have a fighting chance at going to University.

Ilya moved through his post game routine with practiced diligence, ignoring the rambunctious chorus of his teammates celebrating their win with reckless abandon, tinny music blaring from someone's aux. He half listened to their discussion of tonight's bush party and who was bringing who as he quickly rinsed off and got changed. The band had discussed going to the party after the game, but he really wasn't in the mood.

Slinging his gear bag over his shoulder, he nodded to Hayden and J.J. and pushed his way out of the changeroom doors.

And that's when he was met with the familiar faces of Yuna and David Hollander.

They were standing by the vending machines, hands stuffed into spring coat pockets, faces soft and inviting. Yuna saw him first. She tilted her head at him, a small, familiar smile painted on her lips and nudged David, nodding in Ilya's direction. He followed her gaze, and actually *beamed* upon seeing him. Ilya froze in place, the weight of his gear bag heavy on his shoulder, not sure what to do with himself. He felt like he was in one of those stupid fucking nationalist propaganda commercials featuring a soldier returning home from war.

Ilya thought about his own father, who would rarely meet his eyes anymore, and who had recently, on an evening when he was particularly drunk and pissed off, accidentally referred to him using Irina's name, his voice full of spite and unbridled rage. Gregori was nearing 70, and he'd recently overheard Alexei on the phone with family in Russia. While Ilya's Russian comprehension was still sub-par, from what he understood, it sounded like they were discussing the possibility of his retirement and return to Russia once Ilya turned 18. It seemed like Alexei was thinking of going with him.

Ilya wasn't sure what to do with that information. Luckily, with the help of Svetlana's diligent research skills and her self proclaimed determination to not lose her best friend to Mother Russia's icy clutches, they had created something of a plan. It had now been almost five years since they became Permanent Residents in Canada, so he was able to apply for citizenship in a couple of months, and being under 18 there weren't any test requirements. It meant that once he graduated he would be able to qualify for the Ontario student loans and scholarships that only applied to Canadian Citizens. However, if Alexei and Gregori did move, he wondered what would happen to the house. Would he have a home to come back to when he wasn't in school? And what if he didn't get the hockey scholarship?

"Ilya!" David said, walking over to him and slapping a hand down on his shoulder. "It's good to see you, son." He wrapped Ilya into a tight embrace.

Son.

He tentatively brought his arms around David and tried his best to not break down in the middle of the hallway while he could still hear the sound of Mr. Worldwide blasting from the changeroom.

David pulled back from the hug, hands still clinging to his shoulders, and looked him in the eyes. "You played well," he said. "Not sure that the fight was exactly OFSAA legal, but we can let that slide."

Ilya chuckled. "Yeah, I got a bit carried away." He ran a hand through his hair nervously, still damp from the shower.

Yuna rolled her eyes. "Honestly, it's a part of the game, they should update the rules."

"Darling, I love you, but they're still just teenagers. Have some perspective."

"The Grade 12s are old enough to be drafted into the MLH, David. They shouldn't be playing if they don't want to take the sport seriously."

Ilya felt his chest swell as he listened to their banter. God, he had missed them.

“So, we noticed you’ve been around a bit lately,” David said, clearly attempting to change the subject. “Taking care of that goat Shane tried to hide in our laundry room...”

“Yeah, uh, sorry about that... It was kind of an unexpected situation and I couldn’t keep her at my place because... well, yeah, just because. Sorry.”

“No need to apologize, Ilya,” Yuna said gently. “She’s a cute little kid, we’re happy to keep her on the farm. We’d just like to see you ourselves sometimes too.”

Ilya shifted his weight. “Oh. I’ve been a bit busy for a while now.” Ilya wished Hammersmith would skate over now and clock him in the face so he could avoid this conversation. Everyone knew that he hadn’t been away because he’d been *busy*.

“Well, you should come for dinner,” David said, letting the lie slide.

“I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re never intruding, Ilya,” Yuna said.

“And I made way too much food anyway,” David added.

His eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. “Okay,” he said.

Two Weeks Later

The sun hung low in the sky, lighting the ginseng fields in a dusty golden glow. Kip and Shane lounged side by side on a patchwork quilt in the grass, enjoying the sounds of spring and watching Sveta, Rose, and Ilya goof around in the overgrown grass with Anya. Little horned nubs were starting to protrude from her skull, making her frequent, affectionate headbutts significantly more painful, but no less adorable.

“Think urban farm core. Wellness, calm, and wine moms. Shirtless, *sweaty* instructors and irresistible baby goats.” Ilya stood in front of Sveta and Rose with Anya in his arms. He was wearing these stupidly short athletic shorts and a white t-shirt that was two sizes too small (actually, Shane was pretty sure that was Sveta’s shirt), looking like a fitness instructor from the 60s. If it was anyone else it would have been ridiculous, but somehow he made it work. Or maybe Shane was just disturbed.

“We need a demonstration,” Sveta said, arms crossed over her chest.

“Yeah, I don’t think we see the vision just yet,” Rose added, giggling.

Ilya grinned. “I thought you would never ask, ladies.” He was putting on a ridiculous voice, fully getting into character like he was a presenter on Shark Tank. He moved through a couple of yoga poses, and Shane did his best not to stare. Ilya transitioned into a downward dog, his shirt riding up, exposing his lower back. Shane’s mouth was suddenly inexplicably dry.

“Alright, Anya, *up!* Like we practiced,” Ilya called, voice strained.

Anya blinked up at him, like she was considering the request. Then, she walked away and proceeded to eat a dandelion.

“What the hell, Anya!” Ilya bellowed and collapsed onto the grass.

The girls started critiquing his form, trying their best to stay in character as business entrepreneurs, but unable to contain their laughter. During his fall, Ilya’s shorts had somehow ridden up even higher on his thighs, and Shane momentarily wished that he was a goat, so that Ilya would beg him to climb—

No, he was decidedly not going to finish that thought.

A dandelion suddenly hit Shane in the side of his face. He gawked at Kip, who was grinning at him.

“You’re staring,” Kip said.

Shane felt a flush creep its way up his neck. “He’s an idiot.”

Kip raised a singular eyebrow at him. “Uh-huh,” he said.

Shane looked away and leaned on his side, running his fingers through the long, lush strands of grass at the edge of the blanket.

“So,” Shane said, after a beat. “The guy you’ve been seeing.”

“Which one?” Kip said through a smirk.

Shane shrugged and leaned on his opposite arm so he could look at Kip. “I dunno, the tall one, long hair. Blonde. Looks like he could bench press a small car.”

Kip laughed. “Kyle.”

“Yeah, him.” Shane scratched at a stain on his jeans. “What’s that like?” he asked, after a beat. Kip was silent for a moment, studying him. Shane worried that he could hear the sound of his heart pounding from where he sat.

“It’s good,” he said eventually, tone measured. “He’s not weird about us being seen together in public, which is... new to me.”

Shane nodded his head slowly and glanced back at Ilya, who was now attempting to follow Rose and Sveta’s instructions on how to make a flower crown from dandelions, complaining loudly about how his “manly Russian hands weren’t built for this work.”

“Why are you asking?” Kip said, voice soft.

“Nothing. No reason, really.” Shane forced himself to look away from Ilya. He laid back fully on the blanket, tracking the movement of the clouds in the evening breeze. “I was just wondering if it ever gets, like, exhausting.”

“Dating?”

Shane sighed. “No, um. Being, you know. The only one.”

Shane felt the blanket shift as Kip laid down next to him, arms behind his head.

“Sometimes,” he said, understanding what Shane was asking without needing him to finish the thought. “But... I was already exhausted before I was out.”

Shane swallowed. It felt like he had something trapped in his throat, like he had tried to force down medication without any water.

“My dad loves him,” Kip added, suddenly, and Shane could hear the smile in his voice.

He glanced over at him, studying the side of Kip's face. “Really?”

“Yeah. He actually *made* lasagna the first time I brought him over. Like, from scratch. Not his microwave TV dinner special.”

“Geez,” Shane said, smiling. “That’s big for Mr. Grady.”

Kip nodded, meeting his eyes. “Yeah, it is.”

“So,” Shane said. “It’s like, not hard?”

Kip considered this for a moment, eyes dancing over Shane’s expression. “It can be... scary, sometimes,” he said. He sat up, shrugged, and looked out at their friends. Shane followed his line of sight.

“But,” Kip said, neither of them looking at each other. “Scary and wrong aren’t the same thing.”

Two Months Later – July 2007

“I’m pretty sure that if we were in your precious little free State of America I’d be well within my rights to shoot you for trespassing.”

Ilya startled at the sound of Shane’s voice, not having heard him approach from the house behind him. He was sitting on a low stone wall near the barn that had become Anya’s home, hoodie wrapped tight around his frame, an unlit joint tucked behind his ear.

“Please never touch a gun, Hollander. You’d only hurt yourself.”

Shane ignored his jab and hopped up onto the wall, sitting next to him, leaving only a few dangerous inches of space between their bodies.

“Something happen with Gregori?” Shane asked, knocking his leg against Ilya’s.

Ilya grunted and flicked his lighter, watching the flame burst and die out over and over again. The red spark captured his eyes like a moth circling a lamppost.

“They’re planning to move next year,” he said, deciding there wasn’t any point in being vague.

“Oh,” Shane said, his voice a whisper that carried on the cool summer night’s breeze.

“Yeah. They’ll wait until I turn eighteen, so I’ll be able to stay in the country without them. If I get accepted to school, that is. If not... I don’t know.”

“You would go with them to Russia?” Shane asked, poorly disguising his concern.

“Fuck no. Absolutely not. I would rather off myself before resorting to that,” he said, attempting at a joking tone, but it fell flat. He thought about his mother. He thought about the bag of ice cream in the snow.

Ilya studied Shane’s face in the moonlight. It was pale, but not in the way she had been on that day. He lowered his gaze to his upper lip. The soft, dramatic peak of it. God, he wanted to kiss him with every fiber of his being.

“I fucked up, Hollander,” he said, still staring at his mouth with heavy eyelids.

“What?” Shane said, sounding heady and indisposed.

Ilya needed some breathing room before he did something stupid. He took the joint out from behind his ear and rolled it between his fingers.

“I fucked up,” he said. “After my mom died.”

“Ilya, we don’t have to talk about it. Really. It was a long time ago and we were both just stupid kids.”

“No, Hollander, you don’t get it. I did everything that he wanted. Followed all of his stupid fucking rules. Kept his stupid fucked up secrets. I cut *you* out of my life in the shittiest way imaginable.” Ilya left the joint on the ledge and stood up abruptly. He started pacing, flicking the lighter anxiously in his hand. “And it was all for nothing. Literally fucking *nothing*. I did all that shit to protect his stupid fucking ego, and now they’re leaving me anyway, like I’m not even family. It’s like I fucking died with her.” Ilya tipped his head back and let out a frustrated sigh. In the distance, the sound of trilling frogs cut through the silence.

“Ilya, why did you stop talking to me all those years ago?” Shane asked.

Ilya wondered how long he’d been waiting to ask him that. He sat back down on the ledge, next to Shane.

“When my mom died,” Ilya said, his voice tight. He cleared his throat. “When my mom died, Gregori didn’t want people to know about... what happened. He said if people found out, he would take us back to Russia. And I was so fucking scared, Shane. When I met you... I’d never had a friend like that before. I was scared of losing that. And a different school was closer than Russia, so...”

“What happened to your mother?” Shane asked.

Ilya leaned forward, resting the weight of his head into his hands, contemplating whether or not he was actually going to do this. He pictured his mom in her casket, features frozen, eyelids sewn shut. He thought of her grave, in Russia, impossibly far from his grasp. He thought about all the years of friendship with Shane that he'd lost. He tipped his chin up so he could meet Shane's eyes.

"It was an accident," he said. "That's what my father said. She had an accident." He hated how weak he sounded. "She accidentally swallowed a whole bottle of pills."

"Fuck," Shane said

"Yeah," Ilya smiled sadly. "Fuck is right. I found her," he added, because why not. He was already putting it all out there.

Shane's hand twitched, like he was going to reach out and touch him, but then he stopped himself. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," he said instead.

Ilya shook his head. "It's not your fault. I didn't know how to let you be."

After a moment, Shane reached forward and picked up the joint Ilya had left on the ledge. "So," he said, voice lighter. "What does it feel like? Being high."

Ilya raised an eyebrow, surprised. "You wanna find out?"

"I don't know." Shane rolled the joint between his fingers like Ilya had done earlier. "You know I think smoking is fucking disgusting."

Ilya smirked. "Yeah, I know, I'm gonna quit though," he lied. "Have you ever heard of shotgunning?"

Shane looked apprehensive. "No," he said. "Should I be scared?"

"Probably."

"Show me."

This was a bad idea. A horrible, dangerous, deliciously enticing, bad idea.

Ilya took the joint from Shane and lit it. He took a long drag, letting the smoke sit heavy in his lungs for a moment before exhaling. He really shouldn't do this. Shane had never given any indication of being anything other than straight, but... That wasn't exactly true, was it? These past few months, there had been *something* there. Something was charged, like a live wire, in the spaces between them.

"What do I have to do?" Shane asked, his eyes following the trail of smoke as he exhaled.

Ilya turned towards him and reached out, gripping Shane's jaw, firm, but gentle. "Open your mouth," he said, his voice sounding rough to his own ears.

Shane did as he asked, without hesitation, his eyes locked on Ilya, darker than he'd ever seen them.

Ilya took another hit without breaking eye contact, the burning cherry casting an orange glow against Shane's cheekbones.

Then, against all better judgement, he leaned forward, cupping both of his hands around either side of Shane's jaw, careful not to burn him. Bringing his lips dangerously close to Shane's, he exhaled, allowing the smoke to pour between Shane's open mouth. Shane's eyes fluttered closed, thick lashes dusting his cheeks, and he licked his lower lip, his tongue brushing against Ilya's lips in the process. It took literally every ounce of self restraint that Ilya had to hold himself back from sucking that fucking tongue into his mouth. Somehow, he forced himself to pull back, and he lowered his hands from Shane's face. Ilya watched him open his eyes, pupils blown wide, his mouth still parted slightly.

"You're supposed to inhale," Ilya said, voice low.

Shane closed his lips and complied, coughed a little, and laughed at himself. Ilya dropped one of his hands onto the ledge between them, his thumb pressed against Shane's thigh. The night felt impossibly thick around them. Ilya took another drag.

"You want more?" he asked, his thumb subconsciously drawing small circles against Shane's leg.

Shane smiled at him, wide, unfiltered, something desperate in his eyes. He nodded.

Chapter 14: Sour Fish and Lemon Water

*I can't explain the state that I'm in
The state of my heart, he was my best friend
Though we have sparred, wrestled and raged
I can tell you I love him each day*

“The Predatory Wasp of the Palisades is out to Get Us!”, Suffjan Stevens

August 2007 – Muskoka Lakes

In August, David and Yuna offered the cottage up to Shane and his friends for the month. They had a couple of trade shows lined up and would be travelling to Ottawa and Montreal to sell David’s line of maple syrup. His parents planned to come up for a couple of days here and there in between events, but their busy schedule and ever growing fanbase meant they wouldn’t be able to make it for longer.

Shane was initially nervous about the trip. The last person he brought here was Ilya, and despite everything that happened between them in the years that followed, traces of those memories still lingered in the walls and the surrounding woods. The cottage represented a time when their friendship had been safe, contained, unfractured. He didn’t want to taint that. When Yuna mentioned the opportunity to Rose, however, the decision was taken from his hands. She immediately got to work with her iron-on design skills, making them all matching shirts that read “we’re going to the cottage”.

He’d spent the month of July preparing; drafting, scrapping, and reworking grocery lists and chore charts and studying maps of the area to plan day trips and activities. He even printed out packing lists and gave them to all his friends. Kip laughed at his self-titled “emergency preparedness” binder declaring that Shane had missed his calling as a stay-at-home hockey mom, to which Shane responded that for a gay dude he could be pretty misogynistic. Sveta had high fived him for that one.

They listened to Shane’s ‘*The Wolfbirds Songwriting Playlist*’ on the way up as they talked about the possibility of recording some of their own music. They had developed a bit of a cult following in Northern Ontario and people were starting to request CDs whenever they played shows in the neighbouring towns. Rose also insisted that they had to create a tangible record of what they’d accomplished before they all went off to school. Shane’s gut tightened at that.

By the time they turned onto the Hollander’s property, the car was bursting with anticipation and summer sweat. The cottage was the same as always, if seemingly slightly smaller, and more crooked with each year that passed. The trees were bigger too, wrapping the property like a warm embrace. The tires of Kip’s Jeep crunched against the gravel driveway like poprocks and Shane smiled. This would be alright.

Svetlana, Kip, and Rose got to work unloading luggage and cooler bags, the sound of the screen door creaking open and slamming closed cutting through the hushed privacy of the

surrounding forest. Shane worked on unstrapping the kayaks from the car's roof rack, only half paying attention to what he was doing, distracted by the way Ilya stalled on the gravel path, one hand resting on the hood of the car like he needed something to steady himself. He wasn't looking back at Shane, but instead was eying the property, gaze soft.

"She was still alive, the last time I was here."

Shane didn't say anything, letting the silence wash over them.

"She would have loved to paint this place," Ilya added, after a moment.

Shane tried to look at the cottage through Ilya's eyes, through Irina's eyes. To see what they could see; the colours, the textures, the patterns, the light. "Maybe you should paint it for her," he said.

Ilya smiled, sadly. "Maybe."

"Shane!" Sveta called, her head popping out one of the front windows. "You gotta get in here, Kip is trying to dibs the big bedroom! Rose and I need the en suite, it's called the vagina tax!"

"Oh my god, there's no such thing as a *vagina tax*," Kip said dramatically, his voice slightly muffled through the walls.

The girls ended up with the en suite. As a consolation prize, Kip took the top bunk in Shane's childhood room upstairs. Before it even came to a discussion, Ilya tossed his duffle bag next to one of the couches in the living room, declaring that he would sleep on the pull out, leaving Shane with the bottom bunk upstairs. Ilya insisted, saying he wanted to get up early to watch the sunrise anyway, and the deck was right off the living room.

Shane was absolutely not jealous of the casual way the girls were able to share the queen bed, no questions asked or eyebrows raised, he was definitely not thinking about what it would be like to share a bed with Ilya, what it would feel like to have his chest pressed against his back, to bite his shoulder, to want something more, and to be brave enough to take it.

"This is absolute perfection. I can die happy now," Kip said from where he sat on the dock, sunscreened and sipping a Mike's Hard Lemonade.

And he was right. The day was perfect. They had been at the cottage for a few days now, and while every moment since arriving had been transcendental, there was something in the air today that just made everything feel right to Ilya.

The sky, which was cloudless as the platonic ideal of the sun, so perfect it could rival the Baby Sun in Teletubbyland, cast dramatic shadows across the rippled surface of the lake. The shore and the islands that dotted the lake were packed with lush greenery, as if someone had dropped the Amazon rainforest into the middle of northern Ontario. Only a few feet from them, two ducks decorated with rich brown and maroon feathers bobbed their heads into the

water, searching for something to eat. Ilya felt like he had stepped into a Group of Seven painting. He wanted to bottle this moment and keep it locked away forever.

Rose was sitting on the dock, her legs hanging over the edge, an old print of a Cosmo magazine that she had found open on her lap. She was reading absurd advice from it to them while tucked close behind her, Sveta ran her hands along Rose's shoulders and lower back, applying tanning lotion that smelled like vanilla and coconut. Sveta's fingers slipped behind the back strap of Rose's bikini, and Ilya looked away.

"Okay, you guys are gonna love this one," Rose said, already laughing to herself. "This nugget of wisdom comes from Cindy. She says to 'sprinkle a little pepper under his nose right before he climaxes. Sneezing can feel similar to an orgasm and amplify the feel-good effects!'"

Their collective laughter carried across the lake like waves, as Shane made his way onto the dock, arms laden with a cooler bag and a paperback. His hair had grown out over the past few months into a ridiculous pseudo mullet. He couldn't look more indie rocker if he tried and Ilya hated that he was kind of into it.

"What's so funny?" he asked, putting down the cooler and book.

"Rose has something she'd love to try with you," Kip said playfully.

Svetlana cackled at that, shoving her face into the crook of Rose's neck.

"Never mind," Shane said. "I don't think I want to know." And then he slipped off his t-shirt, distracting Ilya with bare skin etched with muscles he hadn't realized Shane had been hiding from him. His eyes trailed down Shane's chest and stomach, lingering on the exposed v-shaped chord of muscle peeking out of the waistband of his black swim trunks.

"Holy shit," Kip said, raising his sunglasses onto his head, staring at Shane. "Since when are you fucking *ripped*, dude. I thought Ilya was our token jock of the group."

"Should I go get the pepper for you, Kip?" Sveta asked.

Shane flushed at the attention, and Ilya was distracted by the patchy flush that bloomed on his chest and neck. He wanted to lick him.

"It's been a busy season on the farm, is all. I swear, I'm not turning to the dark side, no organized sports here." Shane folded the t-shirt placing it into a tote bag, as he pulled out an actual fucking *bucket hat*. He looked so stupid. Ilya was obsessed.

"Cute hat," Ilya said. "Looks pretty on you."

"Fuck you," Shane grumbled. "I take skin care seriously, okay? The sun is a deadly laser."

"Amen, brother," Rose cheered.

Kip snorted. "Bitch, Sveta's actively basting you like a freaking Thanksgiving turkey."

Rose kicked her foot out of the water, splashing Kip in the face, who gasped dramatically. Ilya smiled at them, a warm swelling sensation in his chest, as Shane crossed in front of him, making his way over to an open Muskoka chair. Impulsively, Ilya reached out, snagging the stupid bucket hat off his head. He held it over the edge of the dock, a teasing smirk on his lips.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Rozanov.” Shane glared.

Ilya was fully aware he was acting like a middle school kid with a crush and he gave precisely zero fucks. Smiling wide, a mischievous glint in his eye, he tossed the hat into the water.

“Oops,” he said.

A moment of impossible silence followed, the three friends acutely watching the two of them, like there was a nature documentary playing out before their eyes. Shane stared at the ripples circling outward from his now waterlogged hat.

Then, he lunged.

Shane slammed into Ilya’s ribs, his shoulder sharp and angular, sending them both crashing into the sun warmed wooden boards. Sveta shrieked and hopped up, pulling Rose up with her and dragging them out of Shane’s warpath.

They grappled, rough and with reckless abandon, elbows digging into ribs, hands grabbing at forearms and biceps, each attempting to push the other into the water. Ilya was vaguely aware of Kip filming them, making WWE style commentary to the girls as he did.

Ilya clocked the moment Shane realized the compromising nature of the position he’d put them in. He was hovering over top of Ilya, essentially straddling him, his knees locked tight on either side of his thighs and their hips slotted together while he pinned Ilya’s hands above his head. Their chests were both rising and falling in heavy bursts, and Ilya watched as Shane’s expression transformed from pride at having gained the upper hand to something darker and unsatiated. It was a look Ilya had been chasing ever since that night last month when Shane had joined him outside Anya’s barn. The night Ilya brought his lips close enough to Shane’s that they shared breath, shared smoke, shared the faint taste of Shane’s tongue accidentally brushing his lower lip.

Ilya felt Shane’s cock twitch beneath the thin layers of fabric between them. And then, because he was fucking insane and reckless and stupidly in love with the idiot on top of him, he pressed his hips up just a few infinitesimal centimetres, teasing Shane with the slightest bit of friction, winking at him.

Shane pulled his hands back from Ilya’s wrists abruptly, like he’d been shot, his freckled cheeks dusted in a faint pink blush that Ilya would be thinking about for days. Not one to miss out on the chance to win a fight however, he used the opportunity to twist out from underneath Shane and push him straight into the water.

Kip howled with laughter from behind them and the girls cheered like they were at a sporting event, reminding Ilya that they weren't in fact, alone. He wasn't sure that he really gave a fuck.

Shane surfaced after a moment, spitting water out of his mouth and, *god*, if that wasn't the hottest thing he had ever seen. "You're fucking *dead*, Rozanov."

Ilya chuckled and stood up, spreading his arms out wide. "Come and get me, then."

Shane bolted up the ladder two rungs at a time and collided with Ilya again, a loud splash ringing out as they both fell into the lake.

Underwater, their limbs tangled together like seaweed, the heat emanating from their skin contrasting the cool shock of the lake water. Their knees knocked together in a slow dance of underwater movement and he felt one of Shane's hands trace the curve of his lower back. Ilya leaned into the touch, savouring the moment. Every point of contact, ankle to ankle, thigh to thigh, chest to chest, felt infectious and utterly divine. They lingered like that for a moment, too long to be accidental, before Shane pushed away and they both swam to the surface.

Laughter lapped around when they surfaced. Ilya stared, dumbfounded, at Shane, his idiotically long haircut plastered to his forehead. Rivulets of water ran down the planes of his face, and he fought the desperate urge to kiss them. Shane, whose eyes were still clouded with a teasing sort of rage, shook out his hair like a wet dog and lunged at him, capturing Ilya in a headlock that frankly, he did nothing to prevent. He feigned helplessness as Shane repeatedly dunked him under water, until a familiar voice called out to them from the balcony of the cottage.

"Alright, let's break it up boys! We've got three days of vacation up here and I'm not spending it at the hospital!"

"Sorry, Mr. Hollander!" Ilya called, not sorry in the slightest.

That evening, they all crowded around the table in the screened in segment of the deck for dinner. A warm, golden hour glow enveloped their surroundings and Shane could hear the faint chittering sounds of squirrels playing tag in the pine trees, and birds singing their resounding encores before the oncoming dusk.

Shane was quiet, taking in the laughter of his friends, the kindness of his parents, the general easiness of it all. He remembered being 11 years old, bringing Ilya here for the first time. He had been dumbfounded by his luck to have made a friend who actually seemed to understand him. Now, somehow, Kip, Rose, and surprisingly Svetlana, had stumbled into his life, he felt luckier than he could ever have imagined possible.

Conversations cascaded and overlapped as they passed trays of salmon, rice, and broccolini around the table. Ilya was seated next to him, their forearms brushing as they fought for room at the crowded table. Their afternoon on the dock kept replaying in his mind, as much as he tried to forget about it, and it was absolute torture. Shane was positive that Ilya had felt the

physical reaction he'd had on him, and he was absolutely *humiliated*. He was being haunted by his stupid smile and mocking wink. God, he was such an asshole.

Mid bite, Yuna perked up, looking at David with wide eyes. "Oh my gosh, honey, we forgot about the toast!"

David jumped into action at her words, returning with a bottle of champagne and a can of ginger ale. "We were going to go with sparkling pear juice," David said, pouring the golden liquid into glasses for them. "But judging by the state of the recycling bins, we decided it was futile to keep clinging to your innocence."

"Guilty as charged," Kip said, raising a hand. "I've corrupted your son."

David chuckled, "I wasn't talking about Shane," he said. "Pretty sure that kid is incorruptible." He handed a flute that he'd specifically filled with ginger ale to Shane, knowing that he hated the bitter taste of champagne.

Ilya, who was seated next to him, casually slung an arm over the back of Shane's chair, like the proximity meant absolutely nothing to him. Shane inhaled sharply as Ilya ran his thumb along the top of his spine. What the fuck was he playing at? "Incorruptible, huh?" he asked. His voice was light, teasing, but something in his undertone made his skin pebble with goosebumps.

Yuna tapped her knife against her glass, a dainty chime ringing out and raised her glass into the air. "To Ilya," she said, and Shane felt the hand behind him tense and retreat. "Who is finally an official Canadian citizen!"

"Next on Yuna's checklist is getting him to convert to a Montreal Metros fan," David said before planting a kiss on his wife's cheek.

Ilya scoffed. "Never going to happen. Panther blood runs deep."

"Well, we're just glad you're here, son."

Glasses started clinking around him, and Shane picked up his own flute, belatedly joining in on the gesture. He sipped at his ginger ale while the conversations around him bounced around from the band, the upcoming school year, and, inevitably, post high school. Kip gushed in detail about his plans to take a gap year and travel, while Rose, Sveta and Ilya updated Yuna and David on their plans for University. Shane's dad perked up when Ilya and Sveta mentioned they would be applying to school in Montreal, and he spent about fifteen minutes raving about his own time studying and playing hockey there.

"I'm still holding out hope that Shane'll add McGill to his list of applications for next year," David added, pointing his fork at Shane.

Shane pushed his salmon around on his plate, avoiding eye contact with his dad. When his parents had asked about his plans for University he'd tried to be as vague as possible, mentioning that he was working on a plan with his guidance counsellor, but had a few different options in mind at some schools across Ontario. Which was true. Mrs. Nash had

shared with him a number of brochures for different Ontario schools that she advised him to look through before September. And he had looked through them. He'd looked through them and drafted a detailed spreadsheet about the marks needed to get in, the different areas of study that he was qualified for based on his schedule next year, and the travel time from home. It's just that, even after all that, he wasn't left with a clear answer. When he thought about his plan for after high school, he just felt... empty.

He hated it. He'd always felt in control of his academic career. He studied, he did his homework on time, he raised his hand at least once, but not more than three times per lesson so he would get good participation marks but not annoy his classmates. He was doing everything right. But while everyone around him seemed excited about graduating next year, he couldn't stop thinking about everything he would be losing. The routine of high school. The manual labour on the farm. Band practice. Rose and Kip. Sveta. Ilya. Ilya, who would be in *Montreal*. Ilya, who was yet another outlier in his purposefully organized life. Shane couldn't figure out how to compartmentalize the way that he made him feel. He both longed to do something about it, and was desperate to lock that part of himself away and ignore it until it burnt out.

Shane thought back to when he'd found out about his autism diagnosis. How his parents had said they just wanted him to be *normal*. Well, he hadn't been normal then, and he clearly wasn't normal now. He continued breaking his salmon up into smaller and smaller chunks on his plate, feeling a heavy sense of foreboding, like he was getting dragged into the undertow.

"You know the poor fish is already dead, right? You don't have to keep mutilating its corpse," Ilya said, nudging him out of his internal spiral.

Shane huffed out a stilted laugh and took a bite of the fish. It tasted sour on his tongue.

The ghostly mist crept over the glass lake as a haunting crispness charged the early morning air. Ilya watched the sun slowly climb up the horizon, forearms leaning against the deck railing. Everything was coated in a layer of dew, and there was an idyllic silence to the world, like even the pine needles on the trees were holding their breath.

The screen door slid open behind him with a weathered creak. He could recognize the soft footsteps tumbling out from it anywhere.

"Thought you might be out here," Yuna said, handing him a mug of steaming lemon water and leaning next to him against the railing. An oversized knit cardigan was wrapped around her frame and her hair was pulled back into a loose, sleep messed bun.

"Thanks," he said, quietly, not wanting to disturb the peace of the moment. He took a tentative sip, the warmth of the liquid blooming throughout his body.

They stayed like that in silence for a while, the comfortable kaleidoscope of the red and orange sunrise making the entire morning ethereal and safe.

Eventually, the mist began clearing, splitting apart like melting ice caps, revealing the still lake beneath.

“So,” Yuna said, eyes still directed at the scene before them. “Are your brother and dad still planning to move to Russia after your graduation next year?”

Ilya nodded, grunting in confirmation.

Yuna hummed. “And the house?”

“They’ve started working with a realtor. It’ll go up on the market this fall.”

Another stretch of silence filled the gaps between them.

“You remember that conversation we had, the first year Shane invited you up here?” she asked after a beat.

Ilya pretended to think back for a moment, but he knew immediately what she was referring to. He’d been stunned by her generosity back then. The generosity of all the Hollanders, really. She’d told him about her and David’s miscarriage, although he didn’t yet know the words for it. She’d told him that he was a son to them. Ilya had found that hard to believe at the time. His father barely treated him like a son, so how could two people who were essentially strangers feel that way about him? And now, after everything, David kept calling him *son*. Yuna continued to treat him with that same compassion. It was almost too much. He didn’t deserve it, after the way he’d treated Shane. The way he’d treated everyone.

Eventually, he nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“Well, my offer still stands.” She turned toward him, and Ilya hesitantly met her gaze. “When they go back to Russia, you’re welcome with us at any time.”

“I’ll be okay—”

“I know you will,” she cut him off, gentle but firm. “That’s not my point. You’re still a son to us, Ilya.”

Ilya could feel his eyes starting to well and he looked up, blinking, willing himself not to cry.

“We understand that you needed space for a while there, Ilya. We don’t hold that against you. But we never stopped loving you.”

Her words really weren’t helping with his attempts to reign in his emotions.

“And I’ll be personally offended if you don’t visit. I need someone around who I can actually talk hockey with.”

Ilya chuckled and wiped at his eyes. “David doesn’t count?”

“Oh come on, you’ve seen how boring he is to argue with.”

Ilya’s shoulders shook with gentle laughter. He took another sip of his lemon water.

David and Yuna had referred to him as their son for a long time now, but for the first time since Irina passed, Ilya felt like maybe he still had a mother.

Chapter 15: Fawn in a Barren Field

*I watched your fingers sneak towards mine
I heard your breath go thin and short
I tucked your hair behind your ears
And watched your eyes dart back and forth
I sucked your lip and bit your neck
The trees were shaking at their roots
My angry arms fell cool and calm
My cotton mouth was well with you*

“Billion Bees”, Kevin Devine

Shane’s parents stayed for a little less than a week, and their departure was followed by an onslaught of rain that lasted three days straight. At the height of the storm there had been a power outage. Kip finally admitted there was merit to Shane’s “emergency preparedness” plans after he pulled out enough battery powered lamps to light the place like a beacon, used his binder of recipes to make dinner that didn’t require electricity, and dragged all the mattresses out into the living room for a communal sleepover.

Overall, they made the best of the situation; playing boardgames, beer pong, and Mario Kart until the early hours of the morning and messing around with a couple of well loved guitars that were kept at the cottage. There was a collective sense of relief however, when the storm finally let up and they were free to go outside again.

They had spent a lot of time talking logistics for recording an album while they were cooped up, and now fairly set on the idea, Rose suggested taking some band pictures while they were up here to potentially use as album art.

“I am in complete support of this idea,” Svetlana said. They were eating breakfast on the back deck, everyone bleary eyed and pajama clad. “However, my one condition is that Shane fixes his stupid haircut first.”

Rose hit Svetlana playfully on the shoulder. “Sveta, that’s rude.”

“He looks like a freaking lighthouse keeper! I’m sorry, it has to go!”

“Yeah, I hate to say it, Shane. I love this self expression journey for you, but Sveta’s right. You look like someone who peaked in high school and now runs a fireworks stand,” Kip said in agreement.

“Thank you!” She reached over to high five Kip.

Shane scowled. “Do I not get a say in the matter?”

“No,” Sveta and Kip chorused in unison.

And then, because the universe apparently had it out for Shane, Ilya leaned forward and ruffled his hair like he was a *child*.

“Why don’t I cut it for you again?” Ilya said. Shane swatted his hand away, his scowl growing.

“Again?” Rose asked, interest piqued.

Shane glared at Ilya. “Yes, Ilya used to cut my hair sometimes when we were kids, and *no*, he will not be doing so again. He wasn’t much better than my mother, and if anyone cares, I actually *like* my hair.”

“We don’t care,” Sveta deadpanned.

“Hey, I was better than your mother!” Ilya said simultaneously. “You had a *bowl cut* before I rescued you, Shane. The situation was dire.”

“Okay, now that I have to see,” Kip chimed in.

“There’s a picture on the wall upstairs—”

Shane whipped around, slamming a hand over Ilya’s mouth. “I will kill you in your sleep,” he said between gritted teeth. He could feel Ilya grinning beneath his palm.

“Well, I don’t know what his skills were like back then, but Ilya’s pretty decent at cutting hair now.”

“Does he cut your hair too?” Rose asked, and Shane was almost certain there was a hint of jealousy in her tone.

Sveta laughed. “No. Absolutely not. No one but my Auntie Jay is allowed near these locks. She has my colour down to a *science*.” She took a bite of her granola before she continued. “Ilya and I took a Hairstyling and Aesthetics course in Grade 10.” She shrugged. “He was actually really freaking good at it. He can do decent acrylics too.”

“No shit?” Kip asked.

“Maybe he should give Shane acrylics too,” Rose giggled. “I think he could rock it.”

Shane let out a frustrated exclamation. “Fine, Fine!” He stormed into the house and came back a moment later, brandishing kitchen scissors with a crazed look in his eye, like he was deciding who to take down first. “You can cut my hair. That’s it though.” He glared at Rose. “No acrylics.”

Sveta clapped, giddy over her win, while Kip started cleaning their breakfast dishes.

Ilya examined his hair with more detail than Shane would have liked before he began cutting. His fingers gently brushed the back of his neck and the side of his jaw as he gently lifted sections, looking for god knows what. He was so close at one point that Shane felt an exhale of breath against his ear, making the hairs on his arms stand up, despite the day’s steadily

rising temperature. Shane could sense the weight of the others watching them, and he felt exposed; like they could all see the effect that Ilya was having on him, and he suddenly wished the storm would return so they would be forced inside, freeing him from this literal hell his alleged friends had created for him.

Shane could see Ilya's reflection in the sliding glass door. He watched his face as he worked, concentrated and purposeful in his motions, occasionally biting down on his lower lip. When he was satisfied with the back of Shane's head, he circled to the front, planting himself between Shane's knees. He cupped a hand around Shane's jaw, firm and unbearable, guiding his face slowly from side to side.

"I feel like I should be paying to watch this," Kip mumbled, and Shane felt his cheeks burn. He attempted to twist his head out of Ilya's grasp, fully done with this situation, but Ilya only tightened his grip in response.

"Hold still," he said, voice low and commanding, staring at him with hooded eyes. And *fuck* if that make Shane sick with want.

Jesus Christ he needed to compose himself.

Shane pinched himself in the thigh, willing himself to not get a goddamn boner while he was wearing goddamn pajama pants in front of his only four goddamn friends.

Thankfully, Ilya took a step back to work on his bangs, giving Shane some space to breathe. With the distance however, his thoughts were given permission to spiral, and he realized he desperately needed to get the whole Ilya situation under control. He was clearly trying to provoke some sort of reaction from him on purpose, but Shane couldn't figure out *why*.

It's not like Ilya reciprocated whatever fucked up infatuation he was experiencing.

To make matters even more infuriating, in the end Shane actually really liked the haircut.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Rose asked, one afternoon a few days later. She and Svetlana were spread out on the floor of their bedroom at the cottage, nail polish bottles peppered around their feet, waiting for their painted toes to dry. The Cranberries played quietly over a small portable speaker.

"Girl, I would literally bury a body for you, no questions asked. You can tell me anything," Sveta said.

"I think, if we tried, if we actually like, put in the work, we could go far with the band."

Sveta laughed, light and airy. "Sure, yeah, Juno's here we come!"

Rose was quiet. She bit at a hangnail on her thumb.

"Oh," Sveta said, clocking Rose's expression. "You're serious?"

“Well, yeah, I’m serious!” She huffed. “I think we have a really unique dynamic and sound, and if we just took some time to tour around and get our music out there—”

“Sure, okay, but how would that even work? Like Kip has his whole European hot gay boy backpacking thing planned and I have Montreal. Shane will probably end up at Harvard or some shit, with his grades and need for perfection. And I thought you wanted to go into engineering, like your brother.”

“Well, I mean, when we get into schools we could always defer for a year, give this a shot. Then if it doesn’t work out we could—”

“Yeah, no way,” Svetlana interrupted, blunt and final.

Rose stared at her, feeling like she’d just been slapped. “What do you mean *no way*? You make it sound like I’m crazy, but we could do it! I’ve mapped out a potential route for us. We could rent a van, head down to the States, and make our way across the country. It’s not an unreasonable thought.”

Svetlana shook her head, not meeting Rose in the eye. “I couldn’t do that to Ilya.”

Rose stared at her. She felt like she might throw up. This wasn’t how she thought this conversation was going to play out.

“Are you in love with him?” She asked.

“Who?”

Rose rolled her eyes. “Ilya. Obviously.”

Svetlana burst out laughing. Rose didn’t find it especially funny.

“Jesus, no! Of course not. Why would you say that?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because you guys have been hooking up for years and now you’re planning to move to another province for him.” Rose could feel her face getting hot. She looked down at her feet, noticing she’d somehow accidentally smudged the wet polish on one of her big toes.

“It’s not for him. And we don’t hook up anymore.” Sveta leaned in close, poking her in the ribs. “You can be a bit of a prude, you know that right?”

Rose pushed her arm away, annoyed. “I’m not being a *prude*. It’s a reasonable assumption to make.”

“Well, I’m not. Sure, we did some stuff on occasion. But like, he’s hot, and I’m hot, obviously. It was just for fun. That’s it. We haven’t messed around in a while now. Anyway, Ilya’s *definitely* preoccupied and I know him way too well now. He’s basically a brother to me at this point.”

As if fate was mocking her, at that moment the screen door banged open and Ilya's voice filtered in from the hall, the guys back from restocking on groceries in town.

Rose lowered her voice, not wanting the guys to overhear. "Okay, well if you're not in love with him, why do you like... baby him?"

Sveta scoffed. "I don't *baby* him."

"Then explain why you haven't told him about how bad things actually are at school still."

Svetlana turned up the speaker, clearly also conscious of just how thin the walls in the cottage were. "Oh my god, Rose. It's because if I did he would freak the fuck out and probably show up at St. Thomas with a baseball bat or some shit. It's not worth him messing up his future over."

"Sveta, he's basically a grown ass adult. He's responsible for his own life choices, not you."

From the living room, they could hear the guys starting up a round of Mario Kart, arguing over which track to play. Svetlana started tidying up the bottles of polish around them, avoiding Rose's eyes.

"Do you even want to go to Montreal, or is it just because you think he can't handle it on his own? Like, you never even sound excited when you talk about University." Rose felt like the walls were closing in on her, like she was saying too much, but she wasn't able to stop the words from spilling out of her mouth.

"He's been through a lot of shit, you know," Sveta said, crossing her arms over her chest. "And so have I. We've had each other's backs through all of it. I owe it to him to go."

"You don't owe him your *life*, Sveta. If Ilya knew that you were even considering putting your dreams aside because of him he'd never forgive you."

Svetlana leaned back against the bed, letting the weight of her head fall onto the side of the mattress. She closed her eyes. "Going on tour would be *really* fucking fun," she said, her voice almost a whisper, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

The wooden cabin nestled into the woods by the campfire seemed smaller than Ilya remembered. The sign reading *Our Other Place* was chipped and flaking, and Ilya smiled, thinking about the day Shane had dragged him out here and forced him to paint the words. If he'd been asked a year ago, he would have confidently said he would never be back here. It felt surreal to be standing on the creaking wooden boards, to breathe in the scent of wet wood and damp earth.

He planted himself on the same dusty futon from when they were kids, the springs so worn out that his ass was almost touching the ground, his knees jutting up at an awkward angle. He thought about all the late nights he and Shane had spent out here, watching scary movies and eating microwave popcorn until they felt sick, their fingers coated in artificial butter.

It was perfect here.

From outside, he heard the telltale signs of someone approaching; twigs breaking beneath feet, birds scattering and ceasing their calls.

Shane poked his head in through the doorway.

“There you are,” he said. “We were wondering where you disappeared to.”

Shane slowly drifted into the cabin, trailing a hand along the warped cedar walls before settling down next to Ilya, their shoulders nearly touching in the tight space. Outside, a breeze danced through the trees, contrasting the stillness within their refuge.

Shane looked out the small, singular window, from which you could just barely see the main cottage between gaps in the trees.

“Do you ever think about how this might be our last summer like this?” he asked.

Ilya looked at him. “Like what?”

Shane gestured vaguely. “All of us here, together.”

Ilya hummed. “We can come back next summer.”

“Yeah, but it’ll be different then, don’t you think? Knowing that we’ll all be going our separate ways after.”

Ilya considered Shane’s words. He was right. It would be different. This summer felt full of possibility, like they were teetering on the edge of something that could be magnificent and earth shattering. He wasn’t sure what next summer would hold.

Unable to find the right words, he nudged Shane’s knee with his own. Shane didn’t move his away. They sat in silence like that for a moment, thigh to thigh, skin sticky with humidity, a weight heavy in the air, like the pressure before a storm.

“I don’t want to lose this,” Shane whispered after a beat.

“Then don’t.”

Shane looked at him then, somehow pleading and desperate. Ilya felt a sinking sensation in his chest. He wasn’t sure if he was about to fuck up everything he’d worked so hard to get back, but he wasn’t sure how much more of this he could take.

“Can I try something?” Ilya asked. Their faces were inches apart. He could count every freckle on the bridge of Shane’s nose and the planes of his face if he wanted. If Shane would let him. If he was given the time. But he wasn’t feeling particularly patient at the moment.

Shane’s head nodded, so slight that Ilya thought he might be mistaken. Then, he nodded again, more sure and resolute.

Ilya leaned in slowly, giving Shane a chance to pull away if he wanted to, and pressed their lips together. Shane's mouth was warm, inviting, and all consuming, lighting a wildfire inside of his chest; vast and uncontrollable. At first, Shane was frozen, immobilized. Ilya wanted nothing more than to surrender himself to the moment, to take him apart piece by piece, and it physically hurt to hold himself back.

After what felt like an eternity held within the span of a single heartbeat, Shane inhaled a sharp breath and his hands shot forward, cupping either side of Ilya's jaw like it was his lifeline, his fingertips digging into his scalp. He let out a low, frankly profane moan that went straight to Ilya's cock, and he deepened the kiss. It was messy, tongues and teeth and wet and heat, and Ilya was fucking enthralled by it.

Then, just as abruptly as he'd reached out, Shane pulled back, creating an infuriating amount of distance between them.

"Oh," Shane said, voice heady. Ilya was enraptured by his appearance, his pupils blown and mouth slick with their shared spit.

"Yeah," Ilya responded, not entirely sure if this was real. He laughed softly, disbelieving. Shane smiled.

Their breathing seemed to slow in unison, and Shane sat back on the futon, his side flush with Ilya's again. Ilya studied his every move, itching to reach out, to touch him, to intertwine Shane's fingers with his own, but was scared to startle him, like he was watching a fawn cross a barren field in a dewy morning haze. Needing to do something with his hands, Ilya gently rested a palm on Shane's thigh. Just as with their kiss, Shane stiffened, and then relaxed, and Ilya rubbed his thumb along his bare skin in a tentative motion.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

Shane smiled, small, to himself. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, it's more than okay. I— I wasn't sure if you were just fucking with my head or what but," his shook his head, seemingly in a similar state of disbelief. "Yeah, this is okay."

"Good." Ilya smiled.

Their sequestered moment of silence was upended by a commotion from the main house; the sounds of Kip, Svetlana, and Rose trailing out from the front door and heading down the stone steps toward the beach. Shane's eyes flickered to the window at the sound, panic casting a shadow over his features.

Ilya could tell he was nervous, skittish like a street cat. He squeezed Shane's thigh, gentle, but affirming. "We don't have to tell anyone. It can just be between us." He hoped it was the right thing to say. He would say anything, really, if it was what Shane wanted to hear.

Shane visibly relaxed at his words. "Yeah," he said. "I think that's for the best."

Ilya nodded, and drew his hand away, standing up, stretching out his back. Shane's words killed him, a little, inside, but he would take whatever part of himself he was willing to share

with him.

“We should probably head down to the beach, then,” he said.

Chapter 16: This Dress is Dry Clean Only, Melanie!

*A moth to your light bulb, you made my heart beat faster
How I would suffer for you, you fascinate and magnetize me
Paralyze me, with your kiss
Wipe those dirty hands, on me
Maybe we're looking for the same thing*

“Halo,” Bloc Party

September 2007 – Bobcaygeon, ON

“You know that’s exactly the kind of thing that makes it obvious, right?” Ilya asked, smirking.

School had ended about fifteen minutes ago, and Shane was hovering just inside of the art room. The door was closed, but he had peeled the curtain blocking the glass window back and was peeking into the hall, expression etched with anxiety.

“I’m not making it obvious. You’re making it obvious,” he whisper-shouted at Ilya, still peering into the hall.

“Right, because it’s *so* out of character for me to be hanging out after school here, working on my art portfolio for University.” Ilya was cleaning out brushes as they talked, gently swirling them in a mason jar of Gamsol before setting them aside. With the smell of oil paints and solvent heavy in the air, he thought about how the chemicals were toxic, harmful after long term exposure, and yet he was inexplicably drawn to them. The fragrance was familiar, enticing, and addictive. Dangerous.

Shane snapped the curtain closed and stalked towards Ilya, lowering his voice further. “People talk.”

Ilya shrugged. “People always talk.”

“Rose literally asked me if I have a *secret girlfriend* this week.”

“And? What did you say?”

“I said no.”

Ilya smirked and looked at him. “Wow. Smooth, Hollander.”

“Shut up.”

Shane tried to hold his frustrated expression, but caved after a beat, a smile breaking through. He snatched the paintbrush Ilya was currently holding and placed it down before gripping

Ilya by his hips, pushing him backwards until he was pressed against a desk, their knees bumping together as they walked.

“That paintbrush wasn’t clean you know,” Ilya taunted.

Shane leaned in, their faces millimetres apart. “I don’t care,” he whispered.

“Oh he’s bad now I see. He kisses one boy and suddenly doesn’t give a *fuck* about his little rules any more.” Ilya’s eyes flickered between the curve of Shane’s upper lip and his brown eyes, dark and alluring.

“You missed the canvas.” Shane reached up, wiping a thumb along the bridge of Ilya’s nose, before tucking his hand in the crook of his neck.

Ilya grabbed Shane by the front of his sweater, twisting the fabric and spinning him around, slamming Shane into the desk, their bodies a hard line against one another. Shane leaned in, to kiss him and Ilya pulled back a fraction, taunting him, a smirk tugging at the corner of his lips.

“Fuck you.”

He ran his hands down Shane’s arms and planted them on the desk, trapping Shane in place. “Here? In the art room? I could be persuaded.”

“I hate you.”

Shane rushed forward, crashing their mouths together in a starved gesture, and Ilya laughed into the kiss. Gripping Shane by his thighs, he hoisted him onto the desk, paint bottles and pencils toppling over and clattering to the floor like a game of Jenga. Ilya dragged him closer by the backs of his knees, parting Shane’s legs and pressing their bodies together, and then reached around, digging his hands into his ass, hard and needy.

He took Shane’s lower lip between his teeth, biting down hard enough to make Shane fucking *whimper*, before sucking it into his mouth, tender and wet. A soft sound spilled from Shane’s throat and Ilya felt him grow hard between them. He ground his hips forward, pressing his own erection against Shane’s, desperate for any small amount of friction he could get through their clothes.

He pulled back, just enough to study Shane’s face, flushed and drunk with lust, looking like he wanted *more* but didn’t know how to ask for it. Ilya wanted to give him everything, but was hesitant to push, to ask for too much. He let his fingers drag along the hem of Shane’s sweater before dipping underneath, sliding around so they traced his lower back, Shane’s breath hitching at the contact.

Ilya leaned in, their foreheads touching, about to kiss him again, when a sudden hum erupted outside the room, the custodian powering up the ride-on machine used to clean the hallway floors.

Shane flinched back, his head snapping to the door. Ilya regretfully pulled away, heart pounding in his head, dizzy and obsessed. He studied Shane's face, wrought with fear, or maybe shame.

"I guess I should finish cleaning up," he said, giving Shane the out he was clearly looking for.

October 2007

"Holy shit, Kip, you look like a hot, rich, divorced widow," Svetlana said.

Kip struck a dramatic pose in the entrance to Rose's bedroom, clad in matching black leather pants, a jacket unzipped three quarters of the way down his bare chest and rectangular sunglasses perched low on his nose. He was dressed as a masculine interpretation of Posh Spice, and had been keeping the details of his costume a secret until this moment.

"This dress is dry clean only, Melanie," he said, doing his best Victoria Beckham accent and runway walk as the girls laughed and cat called at him.

It had been Svetlana's idea for the five of them to go as the Spice Girls to Hayden's Halloween party. She, Kip, and Rose were getting ready and pre-gaming at Rose's house, and her room was a mess of platform boots, glitter, and discarded piles of clothes. There were three different sized curling wands all simultaneously plugged into outlets and the room smelled like hairspray and teen angst. It was like a tornado had hit the local Claire's and they were drinking Girl's Night Out in solo cups in the aftermath while listening to 90s pop over Rose's laptop speakers.

Shane and Ilya were instructed to be Scary and Sporty Spice respectively. However, Anya, now four times the size and equally as much trouble, had a check up at the vet that they couldn't reschedule, so her self-appointed foster goat dads were taking her to the appointment and planned to swing by Rose's to get them when they were done.

Svetlana and Rose were currently sitting on the floor in front of a body length mirror, makeup strewn about. Svetlana was brushing Rose's hair into symmetrical pigtails, complimenting her look as Baby Spice. Svetlana's hair was freshly dyed, the shade more vibrant than her usual burnt orange hue, and she was wearing a Union Jack micro dress with knee high red boots. Kip loved these girls with his whole freaking heart, and he thought, not for the first time, that high school would have been absolute hell without them.

"So," Rose said, wincing slightly as Sveta tightened her pigtails. "Who do we think Shane is hooking up with?"

Sveta scoffed. "Shane? No one." She admired her work on Rose's hair in the mirror, and then scooched around so she was sitting beside her, and started touching up her eyeliner. "I don't think that boy has a sexual bone in his body."

Kip tried to hold back a snort, but was unsuccessful. Rose eyed him suspiciously.

"What do you know?" she asked.

Kip raised his hands in defence. “Nothing! I swear!” He thought about his conversations lately with Shane. How he’d been not so subtly asking Kip about his sexuality. Not to mention the longing looks he was shooting at Ilya whenever he thought no one was looking. He was honestly stunned the girls hadn’t picked up on the tension yet, but he wasn’t about to out Shane while he was figuring out if he was into dudes or not.

Rose climbed onto the bed, next to where Kip was sitting and took his hands into her own. “Kip. Sweetie. I love you, but you’re a terrible liar. What did he saaaay?” She pouted at him, and Kip lamented his weakness for puppy dog eyes. “He’s being so cagey. And he keeps disappearing randomly at lunch.”

Kip rolled his eyes, deciding how much he could say without giving it away. “Fine. The other day he asked me if I thought long distance relationships could work. But that could mean anything, you know how weird—”

Rose chose that moment to *squeal* into his ear like a fucking naked mole rat. Svetlana, who had been relatively silent during the conversation, focused instead on her makeup, made eye contact with him through the mirror’s reflection.

“He did?”

Kip shrugged. “Well yeah, but like I was *trying to say*, Shane asks weird questions all the time.”

Svetlana hummed, but didn’t add anything else.

“Oh, he’s totally hooking up with Jessica again,” Rose declared at the same time as Kip’s phone pinged with a message.

Ilya: *Are you sluts ready?*

“Is that Shane?” Rose asked, trying to snatch the phone from his hands. “Ask him who he’s dating.”

Kips swatted at her, trying to type back with one hand. “Jesus, no, it’s Ilya. They’re downstairs.”

Kip: *Almost. Be there in a sec.*

Rose didn’t recognize the sports car blasting Rihanna that was currently idling in her driveway. She did, however, recognize Ilya, sitting at the wheel, bobbing his head aggressively to the music. When he saw them walk out the front door he rolled down the window and started singing at them enthusiastically, but extremely out of key.

Right. That’s why he wasn’t in the band.

Shane turned down the music as they piled into the back of the car.

“Damn Ilya, whose car is this?” she said, snapping on her seatbelt. The leather interior was sleek, dark, and cool on her bare thighs. It was some sort of Porsche, but she didn’t know enough about cars to tell the model.

“Alexei’s,” he said, glaring halfheartedly at Shane and turning up the music again.

“He let you borrow it?” Sveta asked. She was in the middle seat. The back of the car was tight, and she was pressed up against Rose from shoulder to ankle. She was hyper aware of the warmth of her skin and the way the heat radiated throughout her chest, making her feel lightheaded.

Ilya shrugged. “I didn’t ask him.” He punctuated his words by reversing out of the driveway with a sharp turn, and speeding down the quiet street.

“Hold the fuck up,” Svetlana suddenly said, raising her voice and leaning forward, over the consol between Shane and Ilya.

“Ilya looks hot as hell,” she said, eyeing his costume up and down, which was a neon orange cropped tank top and baggy blue track pants, a classic rendition of Sporty Spice. “But what the *fuck* are you wearing Shane?”

Shane looked nervously at Rose, as if searching for backup. He was wearing jeans and a black tshirt. She ignored him. It was his funeral.

“Where is the costume I gave you? Shane, it was *iconic*.”

“Oh my god, Sveta, there’s no way you thought I’d actually wear that. That leopard print shirt was basically a fucking *sports bra*.”

Sveta slammed back against her seat dramatically. “It’s *Halloween*, Shane. You’re supposed to dress slutty.” She sighed, really playing it up. “This night is a failure now. The Spice Girls are literally nothing without Scary Spice.”

Shane sputtered from the passenger seat. Rose felt bad for him. She caved, undoing her seatbelt and fully climbing onto the console, her hips bumping against Ilya’s arm, who swerved and swore at her.

Kip gripped the door handle, his face pale and breathing laboured. “Can we not die tonight? If hot firefighters have to cut me out of this leather, I want it to be under better circumstances.”

Ilya sped up in protest.

Rose ignored them and pulled a black stick of eyeliner out of her clutch. She grabbed Shane’s face and quickly drew on a cat nose and whiskers. “There,” she said, slapping him lightly on the cheek. “Good enough.”

Sveta studied her work, still pouting. “It’ll do,” she said begrudgingly.

Hayden's house reeked of pot, sweat, and peach schnapps. Mismatched shoes and jackets were piled up by the door and the floorboards shook from the heavy bass. The playlist was a hot mess of house, country, and pop music, and Rose was itching to get her hands on the aux cord.

Their group got split up amongst the jungle of teenagers almost right away. Ilya was dragged into a drunken conversation with his hockey bros and Svetlana followed after him, claiming that she would need to rescue him from their testosterone induced grasp. Kip ditched them to make out on the stairs with Kyle, and Shane presumably was seeking out a quiet corner to disassociate in.

Rose, whose buzz from their pre-gaming session was starting to wear off, made her way to the kitchen and poured out two rye and gingers before doing a sweep of the house, searching for Shane and making small talk with people who were way more loaded than she was along the way. She needed to get on their level. It was their last high school Halloween party and she wanted to enjoy it enough that the details would be fuzzy the next day.

Eventually she found Shane, planted on a couch in the basement, clearly pretending to be on his phone while an intense game of ping pong played out on the other side of the room. It was still crowded down here, but less so, and the room was cooler, less hazy and humid. She handed him one of the cups and joined him.

They chatted on the couch for a while, Shane recounting mundane details from the vet and then debating the potential setlist for a show they had coming up in Toronto. It felt like a big deal, to be playing in a city with a population that was in the millions, instead of the thousands. Shane loosened up after his first drink, and Rose was ready to coerce him into bad decisions.

"I want to dance!" She declared, pulling Shane up from the sofa. He rolled his eyes at her, but like always, he caved.

The music was grungy, the hardwood was sticky with spilled beer, and Shane was quite frankly just a mediocre dance partner, but Rose was loving it. They were pressed between bodies on the makeshift dancefloor in the living room upstairs, drowning in sweat and polyester. She threw her arms around him and forced him to loosen up, planting her hands on his hips and swaying them back and forth for him. Shane laughed into the motion, and maybe it was just the alcohol making her sentimental, but she felt a swell of gratitude in her chest, for the four years they'd spent together. She really didn't want it to end.

"I think we should say fuck it to University and go on tour as a band!" she confessed, heart heavy and head light. Shane suddenly had a glazed over look in his eye, and for a moment she was worried she'd said the wrong thing, brought it up in the wrong way, but then he interrupted her thoughts, making it clear that he hadn't been listening in the first place.

"In your past relationships did you ever get, like, jealous?" He wasn't looking at her, but over her shoulder.

“I mean, both of my ex’s turned out to be gay so... It's kind of hard to be jealous when you were never really the target audience.”

Shane’s face scrunched up. “God, I always forget you and Kip dated in Grade 8.”

“Well, we held hands twice and broke up over MSN. It was very serious, you know.”

Shane’s chest shook with laughter and she used the opportunity to spin them to the side so she could see who he was staring at. At first she didn’t notice anything obvious, but when Shane’s features hardened again she followed his gaze across the room. Between the shoulders of bodies grinding against one another, leaning against the far wall, he saw Svetlana and Ilya, sharing a joint and huddled together, wide, loose grins spread across their faces. Sveta leaned in and said something to Ilya, making him laugh even harder. Rose felt something burn in her own chest at the sight, until she realized why Shane must have been asking the question.

“Oh my god,” she said, grabbing onto Shane’s shoulders and looking him dead in the eyes. “You like Sveta, don’t you?”

Shane froze, and his gaze flickered back and forth between Rose’s accusatory eyes and their friends across the room. He took a moment, a puzzled look washing over his features, like he was trying to solve a complex algebra problem, and then he nodded his head, slowly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, uh, maybe.”

Rose felt her stomach twist, a mixture of accomplishment at having clocked that Shane was wrestling with something, and something else, something sharp and sour in her gut. She felt protective over Shane, and over Sveta. She wasn’t sure they would be good for each other.

“There you are, Hollander!” Hayden suddenly appeared through the mess of bodies, slinging an arm over Shane’s shoulders. His eyes were as red as a blood moon, clearly stoned out of his mind. “You always seem to disappear at these things!”

“Hey, Hayden,” Rose said, waving her hand awkwardly. “The party's great!” She looked back at Ilya and Sveta, who were now watching them. Ilya looked weirdly intense. Or maybe she was drunker than she thought.

“Rose Landry!” Hayden’s face was eclipsed by his gigantic dumb smile. He was a decent guy. She liked him. “Wow! I’m in the presence of superstars!” Hayden ruffled Shane’s hair affectionately.

“You joke, Pike, but I’ve got plans,” Rose quipped.

Hayden made a cross over his heart. “I’m not kidding, I’m waiting for you guys to get famous so I can say I knew you before you were cool. I can see it now, Hollander here is gonna end up pulling Jessica Alba or some shit,” he said, punching Shane in the arm.

Rose forced out a laugh. The room was spinning slightly. Yeah, she was definitely drunker than she realized. She turned back to Ilya and Sveta again, to find they were no longer there.

She scanned the room and okay, yeah, there was Ilya stalking towards them like a dog going in for the kill.

“Hey guys,” he said, a smile on his face that frankly made him look a bit like a wax figurine. He slapped Hayden on the back, doing a horrible impression of a human being. “I think I heard someone say Jackie’s looking for you, bud.”

“Oh shit, really? Well, I should go find her guys, but enjoy the rest of your night! Glad you came, Hollander!”

Once Hayden was out of earshot she turned to Ilya. “Yeah, there’s no way you heard someone say that.”

Ilya grunted. “Dude was just pissing me off,” he said.

“I thought he was like, one of the only decent guys on the team?”

“Well, *I think*,” he said, wrapping his arms over her and Shane’s shoulders. “We should find Kip and Sveta and we should do a round of shots!”

The waitress took one look at them and poured five waters immediately.

“I’ll give you guys a few minutes to... hydrate, and I’ll be back for your orders,” she said, thankfully, in a hushed tone.

Shane was painfully reminded of why he didn’t really drink. Everything was too bright, too loud, too hot. He woke up this morning to the pleasant sound of Rose snoring directly into his ear on the shitty pull out couch in Hayden’s basement. Then, when he went to relieve himself in the bathroom, he was greeted with the smudged remains of cat whiskers on his cheeks. He’d tried to wash them off, but it turns out that Rose used goddamn waterproof eyeliner, so here he was. In public. At a diner. Filled with respectable families trying to enjoy Sunday brunch. With whiskers.

He hated alcohol. And his friends.

“Alright, what can I get for you guys?”

Shane flipped through the menu while the waitress went around their booth taking orders. His stomach felt sick looking at the laminated pages with pictures of the greasy diner food.

“Uhh, I’ll just take a coffee for now, please,” he said, when she got to him.

“You sure, hun? The Lumberjack Stack’s on special today,” she said.

Shane tried not to gag. “Yeah, I think I’ll puke if I eat anything right now.” The waitress looked alarmed at this and he flushed.

“Um, I’ll get the order in then,” she said, speed-walking away.

Shane put his head down on the table. Then, he thought about how dirty the table probably was, and rested his head on the backs of his hands instead. Next to him, from underneath the table, Ilya bumped his foot against Shane's. Shane smiled into his hands, where no one could see, and pressed the length of his leg back up against Ilya's.

He felt so stupid for last night, for being even remotely jealous about Ilya's friendship with Sveta. Ilya had said they hadn't hooked up in forever, and besides, what they were doing was casual. It's not like Shane was even gay or anything. It was just like... experimenting. Stuff everyone did.

God, he was an idiot.

"I was supposed to upload my portfolio today," Ilya said, and Shane lifted his head up so he could see him.

"For early admission?" Sveta asked.

"Yeah." He nodded. "Definitely not happening now, though. I'm too hungover for higher academia."

"I bet it'll feel good to get it done though," Kip said. He was still wearing his sunglasses from last night. "Then you and Sveta can start looking for apartments and stuff together. Montreal is going to be so freaking sick."

Ilya laughed weakly. "Yeah, maybe."

Across the table, Svetlana and Rose exchanged a look. Rose whispered something into her ear, and Sveta quickly shook her head. They seemed tense.

The waitress tentatively stopped by their table again, dropping off coffees for everyone except Ilya, who, being the disturbed creature that he was, had ordered a Coke at 10:00 in the morning. He chugged half of it before the waitress had even walked back to the kitchen.

"I actually still have to figure out the scholarship situation," he added. "If I don't get one I really can't go."

"Didn't the Concordia Coach say he liked your highlight reel though?" Shane asked, bumping his knee against Ilya's.

"Yeah. But he still has to come and see me play at our next game."

"I wish we could be there to cheer you on," Sveta sighed.

Ilya's next game was on the same day as their Toronto show. These days they usually went to support him, but they'd already need to be on the road by the time the game started. The manager of a local dive bar, Sneaky Dee's, had contacted Rose through the band's MySpace and asked if they were available to open for a local punk band that was on tour. It was an impossible offer to turn down. They had all been shocked to learn that there were people in Toronto who knew them.

“It’s really not a big deal.” Ilya shrugged. “I’ll probably be too late to catch your set, but I’ll drive down to Sneaky Dee’s when I’m done and watch the headliner with you guys. You can congratulate me on my win then,” he said, a shit eating grin on his face, the Ilya they all knew surfacing again.

He finished the rest of his Coke, Shane transfixed by the way his cheeks hollowed out as he sucked on the straw. Ilya looked at him, winked, and slid a hand under the table. He trailed it up Shane’s thigh, teasing him by drawing slow circles that inched dangerously close to the hardening bulge in his pants.

Shane cursed under his breath and Ilya pulled away. He was actually going to kill him one of these days.

Thankfully, or maybe to the bane of Shane’s existence, their food arrived, the chicken and waffles placed in front of Ilya diverting all of his attention.

Two Weeks Later

“Look, Ilya. I know there was a lot riding on today, but you’ve gotta understand the position you’ve put me in. You haven’t really given me much of a choice here.”

Ilya stared at the wall behind Coach’s head. There was a pin up calendar and a photo of his wife and kids side by side.

He’d fucked up. No, that was an understatement. He’d thrown his entire fucking future out the window. He’d sent in his portfolio at the start of the month and now, it was for nothing.

“Why’d you do it?” Coach asked.

Ilya replayed the moment in his mind. David and Yuna had come out to his game today, even though Shane and the rest of the band couldn’t be there. He’d skated over to them during warm up and waved at them through the glass, feeling anxious about the Concordia Coach, but happy to have their support.

And then Patrice fucking Drapeau decided to exist.

He’d asked Ilya if it was his mom on the bench, saying she was a MILF, along with a description of the other repulsive things he would like to do to her. When Ilya’d told him to fuck off, and clarified that it was Shane’s mom, he’d asked Ilya where exactly *“the queer that has been wearing your jersey at our games lately”* was. And that’s when Ilya threw the first punch at his own *teammate* while the Coach of his prospective University was in the stands.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ilya said, brushing off Coach’s question. And it didn’t. It was done now, nothing he could do about it. “I’ll clear out my locker and get out of here before the period’s over.”

He stood up to leave.

“Ilya,” Coach said when he was halfway out the door. “You’re a good kid. Everything’ll work out.”

Ilya almost laughed. He needed a fucking cigarette.

Toronto, ON

Ilya arrived at the venue when they were about halfway through their set.

David and Yuna had wanted to talk to him after his shitshow of a performance on the ice, and he placated them by sitting on the curb outside of the arena, chain smoking while they recited reassuring bullshit that his brain rejected. He knew they were well intentioned, and he would have loved to cling to their words. Instead, while their lips moved, all he could hear was the voice of his own father, and the parallel criticisms he weaponized against him and his mother. Lazy. Useless. Embarrassing. Burdens.

It had probably been reckless, making the two hour drive from Bobcaygeon to Toronto, when he was so worked up like this. But seeing his friends play on a real (albeit small and grungy) stage was worth it. The reflections of the purple and blue lights flickering across their skin reminded him of stained glass, and watching as they played their fucking hearts out made something in him settle, just a bit.

Sure, he might have fucked up his own future, but he’d probably do it again if it meant protecting any of these four people.

He hovered at the back of the respectable crowd, leaning against a support beam plastered with graffiti and band stickers, eyes drawn to Shane and the way his fingers plucked out melodies on the guitar. Ilya saw the moment Shane noticed him, and the surprised, but perfectly unabashed expression on his face made it hard to remember to breathe.

Shane held his gaze as he belted harmonies into the mic. His voice melded with Rose’s like wax medium in oil paint, thick and delicately textured. Ilya winked at him, raising his glass of coke in the air, and he looked down at the frets of his guitar. Ilya imagined the flush that was probably spreading across the back of his neck and the tips of his ears. He couldn’t believe he was lucky enough to call even a part of Shane *his*.

By the end of their set, Ilya’s ears were ringing and an emphatic buzz permeated the bar. He’d never been to a show other than ones The Wolfbirds played, but it seemed like a surprising amount of hype for indie openers. It’s not like people were singing along to their music or anything, but there were bodies pressed against the stage and a wave of screams when they wrapped up their last song.

Ilya pushed his way through the sweaty crowd to meet up with his friends as a couple of stage hands helped them tear down their gear and set up for the headliner. They didn’t notice him approaching as they talked excitedly amongst one another while moving instruments and pedals into a narrow, dimly lit hallway just off the stage.

“I see we’re all pretending not to know me. Sure didn’t take long for the fame to go to your heads, huh?” he said, and despite the overall shittiness of his day, seeing the expressions on his friends’ faces felt like a homecoming.

“You made it!” Shane said, guitar case in his hand, voice hoarse from singing.

Ilya shrugged, trying to seem casual. “I got out early.” It was *technically* true. He thought about Coach, about hockey, about University, but decided it could wait. He wasn’t going to ruin their moment by talking about his fuck up.

Sveta rushed over to him and flung her arms around Ilya. “You’re here! We fucking *killed* it!”

Ilya grimaced. “You’re very… damp,” he said into her neck, arms hovering over her sweat soaked t-shirt.

She punched him in the shoulder, but pulled away.

“And you were also very good,” he added. “I heard the last couple of songs. Crowd seemed to like it.”

“I know, right?” Rose said. “We didn’t expect it to be so packed! I think next time we need to change our opening song though.”

Kip, Rose, and Sveta broke out into a heated debate on their opening number, talking over one another, voices bouncing off the walls like fireworks. Ilya tapped the toe of his shoe against Shane’s foot.

“You looked good up there,” he said, quiet enough that it wouldn’t carry over their friend’s voices.

Shane scratched the back of his neck. Ilya loved how flustered his compliments made him.

“Hey, uh, you guys are… The Wolfbirds, right?” a gravelly voice from the end of the hallway asked them. He was looking up from his Blackberry, eyeing them uncertainly.

Ilya guessed he was a couple of years older than them, early-twenties, dark stubble, a sharp jawline, and hair strategically messed with gel. He was wearing a button up, cuffs pushed up his broad forearms, and had a messenger bag slung across his chest, which seemed like an odd look, considering the current crowd.

He was attractive, Ilya would give him that, if he was into older guys. He didn’t, however, get off on doing favours for the elderly.

“Hi. Yes,” Kip said, sticking a hand out for the man to shake. “We’re The Wolfbirds. I’m Kip, bassist.” Ilya smirked knowingly, as he watched Kip’s gaze trail up and down the height of the man. “That’s Rose, Svetlana, and Shane,” he added after a beat.

A smile took over the man’s face. “That’s great! Yeah, I’m Scott. I’m an intern with the touring manager,” he said, pretty much solely addressing Kip.

“You guys have great stage presence and a really distinct sound. I think my manager, Elena Rygg, would be into it too. I’d like to show her some of your stuff.”

He said the words casually, but they hung heavy in the air. Ilya glanced back and forth between Scott and his friends, who all seemed a bit dumbfounded.

“Do you guys have a MySpace or maybe some demos I could share with her?” Scott continued.

Thankfully, Rose seemed to snap out of their state of group hypnosis and started rooting around through a small suitcase full of what little merch they had.

“Yeah, we’re on MySpace but we actually also have an EP we recorded this fall,” she said, thrusting out a copy of the burnt CD to him.

Scott studied the cover, nodding to himself. “Cool, cool. This will be perfect. I like the cover art too.”

“Ilya designed it,” Shane said, bumping his shoulder against his. “This is Ilya. Not in the band, but we tolerate him. He took the photo for us and hand painted the rest of the details onto it.”

Ilya felt his stomach twist at the mention of his art. He wasn’t sure how he was going to break it to Sveta that he wouldn’t be able to go to Montreal with her.

Scott’s eyes lit up and he studied Ilya. “Huh, interesting!” He slipped the case into his bag and checked his phone again, taking a moment to respond to someone. “Well,” he said. “I’ll pass this along to Elena, she’ll be in touch if she likes what she hears.”

Scott turned to Kip again, looking like he was about to say something, but then just nodded and retreated, making his way through the crowd.

“Holy shit,” Rose said. “Did that actually just happen?”

“What, the tour manager thing, or the fact that this Scott guy absolutely wants to rail Kip?” Sveta asked.

Chapter 17: Christmas with the Hollanders

*When I was thirteen
My ma said, "Son, you're the one I adore"
Now I'm old and wise
When I see your eyes
You're the one I adore*

"You're the One," The Black Keys

December 2007 – Bobcaygeon, ON

Christmas with the Hollanders always felt too good to be true for Ilya. It was like stepping into a Hallmark movie, where parents loved their children regardless of their flaws and there was no problem too big that eggnog and a grand romantic gesture couldn't solve. His uncertainty about the next year had brought his sentimentality to the surface, if asked however, he would gladly blame his misty eyes on the overwhelming aroma of spiced apple candles and fresh pine from the Christmas tree instead.

He and Shane were on decoration duty, charged with unboxing countless plastic bins of delicately wrapped bulbs and arranging them on the tree. Ilya smiled to himself when he unfolded newspaper wrapping to find the red, five pointed star ornament he'd given to the Hollanders when he was a kid.

As they worked, Yuna sat on the living room floor, a tangled mess of Christmas lights strewn about. She was swearing profusely under her breath, getting increasingly frustrated with each passing minute in her attempt to organize them. David had offered to help, but she'd snapped, insisting she was in too deep and needed to do it herself, so he'd excused himself to the kitchen to make Christmas cookies instead. He'd pop in every thirty minutes or so with another tray of cinnamon sugary goodness and forcefeed Ilya cookies (forcefeed meaning he'd place them on the coffee table within his line of sight).

After his most recent delivery, Yuna shot a look at David and instead of returning to the kitchen, he hovered in the living room, hands clasped behind his back. He cleared his throat, swaying awkwardly on the spot.

"So..." David began, letting the silence that followed hang in the air. He gestured his hands at Yuna, like he was expecting her to take over.

Shane looked between his parents, a disturbed expression on his face. "What is wrong with you two? Stop being weird."

"Jesus, David, we talked about this." Yuna sighed, dropping the string of lights, which Ilya thought actually looked more tangled than they had been an hour ago.

David shrugged sheepishly. "I forgot what I was supposed to say next?" he tried.

Yuna took over, but it wasn't much better. "Ilya, David and I were talking the other day... Well, we've been talking about it for a bit now, actually. And it's not something we're saying lightly, you know—"

Shane pointed a finger at her. "No. I hate what you do this. *Please* get to the point."

"Shane," Yuna huffed. "This isn't about you."

"It's the anticipation!" he said anyway, throwing up his hands. "You always drag it out and make it sound like you're going to drop the most insane news, and then it's like '*Surprise* they were out of green beans so we're having asparagus instead!' You hyping it up is worse than the actual change of plan! It's not good for a man's heart!"

"He's right, you two kind of do that," Ilya agreed, doing his best not to laugh.

"Ilya, don't you dare encourage him," Yuna said, accusatory.

Ilya couldn't help it, his entire torso shook with laughter. Across the room, David started chuckling as well.

"Okay," David said, trying to rescue the situation. "Listen, Ilya, we just wanted to talk about University next year. Yuna and I think we have a plan for how it could work, you know, despite everything that happened with hockey last month."

Ilya felt his body grow cold at the mention of what they'd witnessed at the game. He still hadn't talked to his friends about being kicked off the team, hadn't told Sveta that he wouldn't be getting the scholarship. He told himself at first it was because he didn't want to ruin the mood after their show that night, but the longer time passed, the harder it was to tell his friends.

"There are few different routes we could take, but we though—"

"Hold on," Shane said, interrupting his dad. "What happened with hockey?"

Suddenly, he realized the placement of his last ornament was completely wrong. Ilya took it off the branch, eyeing where he should move it to.

"Ilya," Shane repeated, grabbing the ornament from his hand. He continued to stare at the tree, but he could feel Shane's gaze burning into the side of his face.

Yuna cleared her throat. "Ilya, I think Shane might have forgotten to fill Anya's feed this morning. Maybe you two should go take care of that?"

Ilya lit a cigarette before the door was even closed behind them. He took several drags in silence, the smoke filling the space between them like steam rising off the lake on a winter morning.

Shane told himself that he was going to let Ilya have this one. He wasn't going to say anything. He lasted a whole of maybe twenty-five seconds. "I thought you were going to

quit.”

Ilya exhaled. “Yeah,” he said. “It’s a work in progress.”

The grass crunched beneath their boots on the walk over to Anya’s barn, the strands crisp with frost.

“Do you think we should find a friend for Anya?” Shane asked eventually. “It sucks that she’s alone all day.”

“I’ll get on it. Loiter around some abandoned parking lots. Maybe I’ll rescue a donkey next.”

“You should try for an alpaca, those things are cute as shit.”

“You got it, Hollander,” Ilya smiled and put out his cigarette. “One neglected and abused weed alpaca coming your way.”

Anya trotted toward them as soon as they entered the barn, bleating happily and headbutting Shane in the side of his leg. He scratched at the coarse fur between her horns.

Her feed was perfectly full, just as Shane knew it would be, but he had grabbed some alfalfa sprouts from the kitchen on their way out and he held them out to her. She munched away, the feeling of her lips ticklish and frankly kind of disgusting. He put up with it for her though.

“So...” Shane said, looking at Anya instead of Ilya in an attempt to make the moment less awkward. “Do you want to tell me what happened with hockey?”

Ilya sighed. “Not really. It’s kind of humiliating.”

“But you told my parents?”

“Not exactly. They were kind of there when it happened?”

Shane looked at him now, confused. Then it clicked. “The night of the Toronto show?”

Ilya nodded. “Yeah.”

Shane handed Ilya some sprouts so he could feed her too.

“I got into another fight,” he started. “But it was kind of with someone on my own team.”

Shane tried to disguise the surprise on his face. He knew Ilya had a temper, and that he didn’t exactly love the guys he played with, but he also knew that he was loyal as shit, on and off the ice. Ilya described what had happened and the subsequent response from his Coach, although Shane noted the clear omission of what Drapeau had actually said to get him so riled up. He thought about asking, but didn’t want to push.

“Shit,” Shane said, not really sure what else he could add.

“Yeah,” Ilya sighed. “So, I’m pretty fucked for University.”

Shane leaned back against a thick support beam. He wished Ilya would let down his walls more often. He guessed he understood why he hadn't told him or the rest of the band about it, but he hated that he had been carrying the weight inside of him while the rest of them were riding high on the success of their latest show.

"Well, it seems like my parents had an idea of what could help?" Shane suggested, hopeful.

"I already know what they're gonna say, and there's no way."

"What do you mean?"

"They'll probably suggest helping me pay for school, or some shit like that, and I can't accept that. They already have done way too much for me." Anya finished the sprouts and Ilya wiped his hands on his pants. She trotted away from them, distracted by the makeshift play structure Shane's dad had built for her.

Shane wanted to protest, to push. Instead, he let himself vocalize his own weight that he'd been carrying. "I didn't apply to University."

Ilya stared at him, disbelief written all over his face. "Sorry, what?" he said, after a beat.

Shane laughed at the absurdity of it. He was feeling slightly hysterical after the admission. "I had a whole freaking spreadsheet of options and programs to choose from, but then the deadline came and went and..." he trailed off, realizing he couldn't even come up with a justification for the decision that made any logical sense. He felt like everything in his life was falling apart. "So, if you think you've fucked up, at least you had the ambition to apply somewhere. Hell, you might as well use my parent's money, it's not like they'll be putting it toward my schooling."

"Well, I mean, that was only the deadline for early admission, right? There'll be another round, won't there? Until like February I think."

The words should have been reassuring to Shane, but he already knew he wasn't going to apply then either. He'd worked so hard, been so meticulous and detailed, but when it came down to the wire, he was too scared of making the wrong decision, and it paralyzed him. University is what he *should* want.

"Hey," Ilya said, seeing the panic spiralling behind Shane's eyes. He rubbed his hands along Shane's shoulders and upper arms. "It's going to be okay. Even if you don't go to school, yeah?"

Shane nodded. It wasn't going to be okay, but he wanted to believe Ilya's words. "Maybe we should just stay here for a year, work on the farm. Mom and dad basically consider you a son anyway, I'm sure they would love it."

"Wouldn't that make us brothers?" Ilya said, crowding in closer. "Kind of kinky, didn't expect that from you, Hollander."

Shane laughed, less hysterical this time. "You suck," he said. "That's not what I meant."

“I actually think I’d like that arrangement,” Ilya continued. “Working long hours next to you, both of us sweaty and shirtless.” He grabbed onto Shane’s wrists, pinning them above his head against the wooden beam.

Shane felt heat rising in his chest, fire pooling low in his stomach. He involuntarily arched his hips forward, silently begging for more. He wasn’t sure how their conversation had spiralled out of control like this, and he didn’t understand why his body reacted so fiercely to Ilya. So eager and clouded with want. Everything about him drove Shane mad; his touch, his words, his gaze. It hadn’t been like this with Jessica.

Shane tried to ignore it. Tried to ignore that this was just one more thing that wasn’t normal about him.

And fucking hell, if Ilya didn’t make it easy to ignore. Grip tight on his wrists, he brought his lips to Shane’s ear, but kept his lower body painfully out of reach. “I think you’d like that too, wouldn’t you?” Shane could hear the cocky smirk on his lips as he whispered into his ear and it was driving him insane. “I bet you’d be half hard all fucking day if you had to work beside me like that. Desperate for release. Willing to do whatever I want.” He punctuated his words by running his tongue along the curve of Shane’s ear, and he couldn’t help the moan that escaped from his lips. His eyes closed and he bucked his hips again, past the point of shame.

“Fuck, Ilya,” he whimpered, eyes fluttering shut.

Ilya responded by peppering Shane’s jaw and neck with light kisses. He suddenly bit down on his shoulder, just hard enough, before sucking and licking at the same spot, overstimulating him in the best way possible, eliciting a series of soft noises from Shane.

“Ilya,” Shane groaned again, not sure if he could form any words other than his name. Did anything else other than this even exist? It was all too much; the dull ache of his hands trapped, the intense pleasure of Ilya’s tongue and lips on his skin, his neglected cock that was aching for attention. He was wrought with need, but for what he didn’t know. “Please,” he said, helplessly.

Ilya nipped at his jaw, playfully, and even that small action drove Shane wild with lust. “Can I touch you?” Ilya asked, his own voice wrecked, and Shane was glad it wasn’t just him that was being torn apart by this.

“Yes,” Shane whined. “Anywhere. Please.”

Ilya withdrew the hand pinning Shane’s arms to the beams and he felt lightheaded at the release. He cupped a hand around Shane’s neck, drawing their foreheads together, lips centimeters apart.

“If it’s too much, just tell me,” he said, and Shane shook his head.

“It won’t be.” Shane licked his lower lip, and held Ilya’s gaze as he used his free hand to unbutton Shane’s jeans, tugging the zipper down at a painfully slow pace.

Ilya brushed his fingers along the length of Shane's cock, still contained within his briefs, and Shane cried out at the contact, grinding up into his grip. He felt a bead of precum pearl at the head of his shaft, and Ilya dragged his thumb along the slit, swearing when he felt the wetness that had formed.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya moaned, before hungrily licking into his mouth, colliding them together in a slow, deliberate kiss. "You're so fucking hard for me," he groaned into Shane's mouth, his voice thick with that overconfident lilt again. Shane was too far gone to care. It's not like Ilya was wrong.

Shane grasped at Ilya's jacket, pulling their chests together. He was grateful for the support of the beam behind him, as he wasn't sure his legs were still functioning. His need for Ilya spread throughout every inch of his body, a sharp electricity that ran down his spine and clung to the backs of his knees. It made him feel unstable and volatile, like he could lose himself in this moment forever.

Ilya pulled away slightly, and Shane groaned in frustration at the lack of contact. "Ilya," he begged.

"Spit," Ilya said, blunt and demanding, his hand held open in front of Shane. His body reacted without thinking, and he complied. In any other situation Shane would feel disgusted by the action, and yet something about the way Ilya was looking at him, starved and unruly, made his chest burn with pleasure.

Ilya hummed, satisfied, and dragged the thumb of his other hand across Shane's lips. "You're so pretty like this," he muttered, almost too quiet to hear.

And then, Ilya shattered Shane's entire world by tugging down the waistband of his boxers and wrapping his broad hand, slick with Shane's spit, around the length of his cock. He should have felt ridiculous and ashamed, dressed in a puffer jacket with his dick out, but he couldn't bring himself to give a shit.

"Has anyone ever touched you here before?" Ilya asked, voice ragged, as he slowly stroked Shane's length, every slight change in pressure triggering a tidal wave of need throughout his entire body.

"N-no," Shane stuttered.

Ilya smirked, and the sight of his stupid goddamn arrogant smile made Shane moan, louder and uncontrolled.

"Shhhh." Ilya pressed a hand against his mouth, silencing him, and started to stroke faster. "God that's so fucking hot," he said, bringing his lips to Shane's ear again. "I bet you've touched yourself while thinking about me though, haven't you?"

Shane tried to tell Ilya to fuck off, but the words came out unintelligible from behind his hand. Ilya chuckled in response.

“It’s okay, Hollander. I have too. When we were at the cottage this summer. Before we kissed. I tried to be good, but sometimes I couldn’t help myself. I’d wake up in the middle of the night, half asleep still, grinding my cock into the mattress and thinking about fucking your perfect mouth with it. Then I’d start stroking myself, just like this,” he pulled his hand off of Shane’s length then, spat into it himself this time, and then returned his attention to Shane’s cock, spit and precum mixing together and making Shane greedy and lightheated. He thrust upward into Ilya’s fist, needing *more*.

“I’d imagine you coming downstairs. Maybe for a glass of water. And I’d pin you against the wall, or the mattress, and show you just what you fucking do to me.”

It was too much for Shane. His words, the friction, the heat. He tore Ilya’s palm off his face and did his best to swallow his own moans. “Fuck, Ilya, I’m going to—”

Shane expected Ilya to pull back, so he didn’t come in the middle of a fucking barn. Instead, he abruptly sunk to his knees, taking all of Shane into his mouth. It was hot and wet and unlike anything Shane had ever experienced.

“Ilya, Fuck—” Shane’s hands instinctually latched onto Ilya’s hair as he rode out his orgasm with wild and uncontrollable thrusts.

“Holy shit,” he said, leaning his head back against the beam. “Fuck, Ilya, I’m sorry—”

“Shhhh,” Ilya shushed him again, but more tender this time. He rose back up to his height, covering Shane with his boxers and pants as he did, and kissed him.

Shane dropped his forehead onto Ilya’s shoulder, taking a moment to catch his breath. “You didn’t have to do that,” he mumbled, once he could think clearly again.

Ilya chuckled. “I know. I wanted to.”

Shane studied him in disbelief. Despite their first kiss having been back in August, they hadn’t done anything more than making out and grinding against one another like desperate, horny teenagers since then. Shane knew that Ilya must have had sex with multiple people by now, and Shane hated how glaring his inexperience probably was. Ilya hadn’t pushed for more, but after this, a part of Shane wished he had sooner.

Suddenly, he realized that Ilya was probably still achingly hard himself. Shane reached for his belt, fumbling at the leather, but Ilya pushed his hands away. “Later,” he said, simply.

“But—”

“Seriously. I’m good.” He tipped up Shane’s chin and kissed him again.

He rested his head on Ilya’s shoulder again, feeling exposed now that the heat of the moment had passed and his heart rate was returning to normal.

Jesus, what the hell was he doing? He was trying so hard to be normal, and he kepted fucking up. He’d been keeping everything under control. His grades, his friendships, his band. But ever since Ilya walked back into his life that control has been slipping. He’d

messed up with school, and now there was whatever this was. He knew there wasn't anything wrong with being gay, or whatever. Like, Kip was one of his best friends. But, he just needed to be average and normal and not make things more complicated for his parents.

"Hey, hey, Shane." Ilya interrupted his spiral, not for the first time today. Which didn't make things better. God, he couldn't even casually hook up like a normal person.

"Look, I know what'll help," Ilya added, and he rooted through his coat pockets for his pack of cigarettes.

Shane rolled his eyes. "What the hell? Ew, Ilya. I'm not—"

From the carton he pulled out a hand rolled joint. He waved it in front of Shane's face. "You need to *relaaaax*."

Shane considered it. He'd gotten high a couple of times since Ilya had shown him how to shotgun, but it was rare. He didn't hate weed as much as cigarettes, but he still disliked the idea of breathing anything foreign into his lungs.

"Fuck it," he said. "But not in front of Anya, she has trauma."

They sat side by side on the wall outside of the barn and split the joint. And honestly it did make Shane feel a bit lighter. He knew it wouldn't last, but it was nice to push his anxiety to the side for a little while.

"Oh, I heard you like Svetlana by the way," Ilya said, the shock of the statement making Shane cough around his inhale.

"Jesus Christ," he sputtered. "I'm going to kill Rose."

"Kinda makes what we're doing here a bit fucked up don't you think?"

The whole situation was made increasingly funny from the buzz of their high, and they dissolved into a communal, uncontrollable fit of laughter.

When they got their breathing under control and finished the joint, Ilya lit up a cigarette to cover up the smell of pot. Shane's limbs felt lighter, and he found himself able to ask what he'd been too scared to say out loud before.

"So, have you like, hooked up with other guys before?" He stared up at the sky, dark grey and starless.

"Yeah, a couple," Ilya admitted. "No one at school or anything. Sveta and I went to a couple of University parties in the past and I did some stuff there."

Shane wrestled with his answer for a moment before continuing. "But, you're not like, *gay*, are you?"

Ilya chuckled. "No, I guess not completely. I like girls too."

Shane nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, me too.”

He could feel Ilya’s eyes boring into him. “It’s okay if you don’t.”

“I know,” he said, quickly. “I do though. I’ll probably, like, end up with a girl or whatever,” he insisted.

Was that stupid to say? His mouth felt a bit dry.

He wanted Ilya to kiss him again.

The silence lingered as Ilya finished his cigarette.

“You up for a MLH 2001 rematch? We can bring some of your dad’s cookies up to your room too,” Ilya said, eventually. “The playing field will be more even now that you’re stoned.”

“Sure,” Shane said, glad that he hadn’t made things weird.

As they walked back to the house, Shane told himself he was allowed to have two of the cookies, but between the two of them they finished the entire plate.

Chapter 18: Why Can't I be Strong and go to Prom?

Chapter Notes

Kisses to anyone who knows the reference for this chapter title 🤔

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

*Let's get together and talk about the modern age
All of the good that won't come out of me
And all the stupid lies I hide behind
It's such a big mistake
Standing here on this frozen lake*

“The Good That Won't Come Out,” Rilo Kiley

January 2008

Ilya accepted the call as soon as he saw the contact, putting it on speakerphone so he could continue painting.

“S Novym Godom!” Ilya recited, purposefully putting on an exaggerated Russian accent.

“Ew,” Sasha said, attitude pouring through the grainy phone speaker. “That was horrible, please never do it again.”

Ilya laughed, instantly comforted by his friend's familiar voice.

It was the Russian New Year, and he was in his mom's art studio. Was it a bit morbid to be here on the anniversary of her death? Maybe, but he figured it was better than avoiding the topic, like his brother and father did. Besides, he'd made a tradition out of it over the past couple of years. Ilya would spend part of the day working on the mural they had started together when they first moved. He felt a bitter tang, knowing that with the house up for sale, this would likely be the last time he'd add something for her. The next owners would probably paint over it anyway. Or tear down the whole shed.

He worked away as he and Sasha caught each other up on their lives on opposite edges of the arctic ocean. He was currently adding two figures sitting side by side in the murky grass, cast in the shadow of the forest, hands almost touching. Between their silhouettes he painted a faint constellation in an analogous colour to the background, making it nearly imperceptible from a distance.

Eventually, inevitably, the conversation turned to Shane.

“So, did you finally confess love to your Shane Hollander and have hot gay sex in school closet?”

Ilya smirked, thinking about the numerous times he and Shane *had* snuck around to hook up on school property. Apparently, his silence spoke volumes.

“Oh my god, you did!” Sasha gasped. “Where is Sveta, I need all the details.”

Ilya shook his head as he carefully layered paint on the wall. “Sveta doesn’t know yet,” he admitted. “And I didn’t *confess my love*.” He could practically hear the gears turning in Sasha's mind on the other end of the line.

“What, is he not proud to have you?” Sasha asked, sounding personally offended. “Because if that is case, I bring Mikhail to Canada and have him beat sense into this Shane.”

“I wouldn’t say no to a visit from you two, but no.” Ilya smiled. “It’s not like that. We’re not serious or anything, it’s just– we’re just hooking up sometimes. It’s casual.”

“Sure, sure. Sounds very casual. Uncomplicated.”

Ilya sighed. He was happy with how things were between him and Shane. More than happy. It was more than he ever thought he would have, and he didn’t want to give that up.

“I don’t want to lose him,” he admitted.

“But is it worth lying to him?”

“I’m not lying– fuck,” Ilya accidentally flicked the brush, a midnight blue streak cutting through the trunk of one of his mother’s trees. He sighed, knowing it was going to be a bitch to colour match. “I’m not lying,” he insisted. “I’m just not bombarding him with all of my stupid melodramatic feelings.”

“Melodramatic?”

Ilya wracked his brain for an appropriate synonym. “My Russian romanticism,” he settled on.

“Ah,” Sasha laughed. “Well that cannot be helped. Is genetic. But really, you should tell him. You don’t know, maybe he feels same way but is scared.”

“Yeah, there’s no way. I’m pretty sure he still thinks he’s straight.”

Sasha burst out laughing, the audio cracking like microwave popcorn. “Well shit, Ilya. Sounds like you are in big trouble.”

March 2008

The remainder of winter passed by in a state of limbo. Ilya couldn’t escape the feeling that everything around him was frozen solid in the lake. He wondered when it was going to

crack.

Moments with Shane were marked by stolen kisses and a heavy foreboding about what might happen next. They avoided talking about anything important; about next year, about what they were doing. It was easier to fill that space with heated touches and swallowed moans, with hands and spit and skin.

Sasha's words invaded his thoughts sometimes, like crackle on a restored painting, but he did his best to push them beneath the surface. He didn't know how long this would last, and he wasn't going to fuck it up again.

And then, just as the first signs of spring pushed their way through the damp and the cold, a letter arrived at his door that changed everything.

It sat, unopened, on the side table in the shed's loft for the first several weeks of March. The Concordia University logo printed in the upper left hand corner stared at him constantly, accusatory and reproachful. He constantly toyed with the idea of opening it or throwing it out, but was paralyzed with indecision. He didn't know what was more daunting; an acceptance letter, which he would be forced to refuse, or a rejection, cementing the fact that he wasn't even good enough in the first place.

Of course, as she always did, Svetlana manhandled his life, stripping away his choice to sit back and continue ignoring the reality in front of him.

For her birthday this year she didn't want to do anything crazy, just a movie and sleepover with Ilya, "*like the olden days*," she had said, as if they were two old biddies in a nursing home.

Of course, upon joining him in the loft, the letter was the first thing she noticed.

"What's this," she said, picking up the envelope. It wasn't really a question. She obviously knew what it was. She flipped it over, noticed that it was still sealed. "What, you thought it was gonna magically open itself or something?"

"I was planning on opening it," Ilya said defensively.

"Oh yeah? When?" she deadpanned.

He flipped through his milk crate of DVDs next to the same, shitty TV they'd brought up here years ago, choosing to ignore her.

She shoved the envelope at him. "Open it."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You open it."

Sveta stared at him for a moment, at first frustrated, but then her eyes softened. He didn't want to think about what she saw in his own expression.

"Fine," she said, and ripped open the letter without any hesitation.

He watched her closely as she scanned the letter, noting the precise moment that her face changed.

“What does it say?” he asked, the air in the room suddenly thin.

“Ilya—”

“Just say it,” he interrupted.

Sveta shook her head, laughing slightly. “You got in.”

Ilya exhaled slowly, the tightness in his chest loosening just a bit. He knew it didn’t change his financial situation, but he still felt a swell of satisfaction knowing that he was wanted for his art. He sat down on the edge of the mattress, a bit shell shocked.

“Holy shit,” Sveta said suddenly, her eyes still glued on the letter. “Holy shit, Ilya—” She was laughing in earnest now, sounding giddy and champagne drunk. “They’re offering you an entrance scholarship. Based on your portfolio.”

“What?” He looked up at her, certain she must be wrong. Or fucking with him in some cruel attempt at a joke. “That’s not—”

“Look.” She shoved the letter in front of his face, pointing at the words. “It’s right here.”

She wasn’t fucking with him. What the hell. He read over the letter, scanning through the numbers and details in disbelief. It wouldn’t cover everything, but as long as he could also manage keeping a job during school, he should be able to make it work.

He thought about all of the microscopic, unquantifiable moments that led to this. The lazy afternoons he spent observing from within his mother’s shadow, first in her Florida studio and then here. The perspective drawing he’d done for Ms. Andrews’ art class the first year he moved here, and the look on Alexei’s friends’ faces when they destroyed it. Sketching the muscles in Shane’s forearms while he played guitar. Uncovering the curve of his spine in the hills and valleys of an oil landscape. Desperately clinging to the memory of his mother trapped within these four walls and the brushstrokes she marked them with.

It hadn’t been for nothing.

He wondered if she would be proud.

He looked up at Svetlana. “Holy shit.”

Ilya started pacing across the small, lofted space, the boards creaking beneath his socked feet. This was actually happening. He’d be able to go. *They’d* be able to go.

“We can actually go,” he said, grinning at Sveta. He checked the letter again to make sure it was real. “Sveta we can actually go.” He ran a hand through his hair. “We should start looking at apartments, right? Like at least figuring out what neighbourhood we want to be in.”

“Ilya—”

“Something close to campus would be best, obviously, but like also—”

“Ilya.” Her voice was sharp, anxious, cold.

He looked at her. She was holding something back, and he hated it. When did they get like this?

She let out a nervous breath, her eyes darting around the room.

“You remember that dude who approached us after the Toronto show?” she asked.

“The one who clearly had a hard on for Kip?”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah, him.”

“Sure, okay,” he said.

“Well, his manager, Elena, reached out to us a couple weeks ago. Rose and I had a call with her, and... She’s interested in working with the band.”

Ilya’s face lit up, and he wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace, rocking her frame from side to side. “Oh my god, Sveta, that’s amazing! What the fuck! What didn’t you tell me?” he pulled back, equal parts elated and confused.

His confusion grew as he watched her face, clouded beneath a mask of uncertainty.

“I just... I don’t know what that would look like yet.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Sveta nodded to herself, like she was working up to something. “Well, if we do it... I don’t think it could really be a Montreal thing. It would be a Toronto thing. Like, recording a legit EP. Potentially touring... I wouldn’t be able to come with you.”

Ilya’s mind was running in circles, unable to process the amount of information being unloaded on him. In the past ten minutes alone he had gone through so much emotional whiplash that he couldn’t begin to find the right words to respond. Sveta took care of that for him, nervously rambling on.

“Rose is in, obviously. She wanted to defer school and go on the road even before we heard from Elena. And Kip’s on board too. We talked to him yesterday. We still have to see what Shane thinks about the whole thing though. We’re not sure how to bring it up—”

“Shane will be down,” he said, without hesitation, because at least that was something he was certain of.

The hopeful look that washed over her face made Ilya realize just how important this must be to her. This was *her* art school. Something she needed to do. And that outweighed any

disappointment lingering at the back of his mind.

“You think?” she asked.

He nodded, smiling genuinely. “Yeah. For sure.” He thought about all the stress Shane had been carrying alone this year. His uncertainty about what would happen after high school. His frankly unhealthy desire to strive for some definition of perfection that only he understood.

Holy shit, he was going to be so relieved. He started laughing to himself at the surrealness of it all. Everything that had seemed impossible for *months* was suddenly within grasp.

Well, almost everything. Images of next year flashed through his mind, blurry and distorted, like negatives. What would it mean for him and Shane, when what they already had was too fragile to be named? He tried not to think about it. To leave those frames in the dark room of his mind. It wasn’t worth it to fixate on them before they actually developed.

“He’s going to be fucking *thrilled*, Sveta. You guys should tell him like, right away. Today.”

She stared at him, something calculating and analytical in her gaze. “What’s going on with you two anyway?”

Fuck. Ilya had known this was coming. Sveta wasn’t stupid. He just had been hoping to have more time.

“What?” He sat down on the edge of his bed and pulled the milk crate of DVDs towards him so he had something to distract himself with.

Sveta kicked the crate out of his grasp. He stared up at her in surprise. “What the hell?”

She just shrugged at him, like she was perfectly normal and not riddled with violent tendencies.

“You guys have been weird lately,” she said simply.

“Well, last I heard he actually has a crush on you, so...”

“Oh, fuck off.” She sat down next to him on the bed. “Rose is horrible at keeping secrets.”

He chuckled. “Yeah.”

“*Buuut*,” she said, “I’m not.”

Ilya desperately wanted to talk to her about everything that had happened between him and Shane. It would feel good to get it off his chest with someone who wasn’t an ocean away. But he couldn’t; it wasn’t his place to share, no matter how much he trusted her.

He considered how inseparable he and Sveta had been a year ago, closer to one unified person than not. Now, it seemed, they both were holding back.

He sighed. "I know you can. But really, it's nothing. I'm still chronically, tragically in a state of unrequited love, while Shane remains blissfully unaware." He felt okay with that. At least it was true; Shane didn't know the extent of his feelings, and as far as he was convinced it was going to stay that way. "Now, he said, dragging the movie crate back towards them. "Let's watch some romcoms and get blackout drunk like *the olden days*."

June 2008

"Holy crap," Rose said, clambering her way out of the back of the Hollander's minivan, her heels immediately sinking into the soft earth. "Harris freaking *killed it*."

She took in the field in front of them as she slipped out of her shoes from prom into a pair of Converse. Sveta was doing the same next to her, and there was something whimsical about their glittering dresses paired with the muddy sneakers.

Harris, an artsy student in their graduating class that, unbeknownst to everyone, Ilya had become friends with, had taken on the task of hosting one of the prom afterparties. Ilya insisted they go, and described Harris' vision as "*a cottage core fairytale, but on mushrooms*". Everyone had been a bit skeptical, but they'd agreed to stop by and leave if it was lame.

It was, however, decidedly *not* lame. The yurts themselves (which up until now, Rose had thought were just going to be normal camping tents) were canvas, semi-permanent structures. They emanated warm, orange light from within, the figures inside casting silhouettes against the tarp walls like a puppet show. Fairy lights were strung up between the yurts, and paper lanterns market pathways between them. Sounds of laughter, soft music, and drunken conversations overlapped from inside, soft and shrouded, like on holidays when Rose was a kid and she would fall asleep in her bedroom long before the adults went to bed, their voices comforting and muffled through the walls.

"Seriously, what the hell!" Kip exclaimed, climbing out after them from the back seats, pulling his prom date, Connor Connors (who happened to be the only other guy Rose had ever dated, and who was also gay, because apparently her life was one cosmic joke) by the hand. "Ilya, how dare you keep Harris a secret from us this whole time!"

Ilya scoffed. "Harris is too cool for you guys," he said, grabbing a cooler full of their drinks from the back of the car. Shane slammed the trunk closed and triple checked that the car was locked. "And your little friend group is way too incestuous," Ilya added. "People are scared of you guys."

Kip gasped, affronted. "What! You're one of us! And you're the one who got expelled for smuggling drugs and attempted murder. If anyone is bringing down our reputation it's you."

"Nah, Ilya's right, he's the least intimidating out of all of you," Connor freaking Connors decided to say.

"Someone remind me why he's here?" Sveta asked, frankly reading everyone's mind (except for Kip's, Rose supposed).

“See!” Connors said, pointing at Sveta. “This is what I’m talking about!”

They tried the yurt closest to the makeshift parking lot first, which was a mistake.

“What the fuck is he doing here,” Ilya basically *growled*. His voice filled the space, the other scattered conversations dying instantly.

“Oh shit,” Kip muttered.

Rose protectively linked her arm with Sveta’s, shooting daggers at Dallas Kent, Sveta’s ex and the reason Ilya had gotten expelled from St. Thomas. The degenerate was currently manspreading amongst the overlapping patterned carpets and throw pillows that covered the floor. “What the hell are you doing here, Kent? This isn’t even your prom,” Rose spat.

“It’s not hers either,” he said, winking at Sveta. “And I’m a guest of honour, thank you very much. I’m Jenny’s date here,” he said, gesturing lazily at the blonde next to him.

“It’s Jessie,” the girl next to him said, rolling her eyes. It clearly wasn’t the first time tonight she’d had to make that correction.

“Shit, yeah, sorry babe,” he said, grabbing onto one of her hands and pressing a wet sounding kiss against the back of it.

“I’m gonna fucking kill him,” Ilya said, moving to lunge at Kent, but Shane gripped his arm, pulling him back.

“Ilya, don’t,” he said. “Let’s go for a walk, have a cigarette.”

Ilya attempted to wrangle his arm back, but then Shane leaned in and mumbled something that Rose couldn’t hear. Whatever it was, it seemed to work. Ilya’s shoulders relaxed a fraction, and he slipped out of the tent, fists clean and insults pocketed for now.

“We’ll catch up with you guys in a bit, kay? Just gonna take him for a quick drive to cool off.” Shane muttered to them as he followed Ilya out. “Try to find a tent that’s less douchy.”

Before they left, Sveta turned back to Jessie. “He has chronic genital warts, by the way.”

They couldn’t hear his reaction over the sound of Kip howling with laughter.

They ended up crashing in a tent with J.J., Hayden, Jackie, Harris, and Maria, who were midway through a childish, but nostalgic game of Truth or Dare. Rose complained that she was way too sober to play, but that changed quickly after Jackie dared her to shotgun a Twisted Tea.

When it came back around to her, she was feeling lighter, more carefree, and she turned to Sveta.

“Alright, Sevta. Truth or dare?” she said, pointing at her.

“Truth.” Sveta took a sip of her Smirnoff Ice, raising a brow at her in a challenge.

“Why,” she said, circling the finger still pointed at Sveta. “Do you always date such shitty guys?”

Sveta rolled her eyes. “Easy. My tragic combination of poor self control and a high sex drive.”

Rose flushed at the phrase *high sex drive* and she hated herself for it.

“Okay, Rose. Truth or Dare?” Sveta said, easily shifting the attention off of herself.

“What? No, you can’t ask the person who asked you.”

Harris piped up from across the tent. “Nah, my yurt, my rules. I’ll let it slide.”

“Thanks Harris. I’ve always said you were a real one.”

“This is literally the first time we’ve met, but thanks girl.” He raised his bottle at her in a toast.

“Okay, so what’ll it be, Rose?”

Rose groaned dramatically. “Ugh *fine*. Truth, I guess.”

Sveta smirked. “Why do you always date gay guys?”

Kip and Connor Connors burst into laughter next to them and kissed for emphasis.

“Seriously. You have a type, Landry.”

Rose leaned back against the pile of throw pillows surrounding them, laughing at her own tragic dating life. “Oh god, how pathetic is it that I’m graduating high school and I’ve only ever kissed gay men.” She finished the rest of her drink in one long chug, despite the can being half full, the guys cheering her on as she did. “Seriously, how pathetic is that.”

“Pretty pathetic, actually,” Connors said.

Sveta threw a pillow at his face. Then, she turned to Rose.

“Do you wanna fix that?” She asked, and Rose briefly wondered if maybe she was having a stroke. Did she smell burnt toast? Between their collective body heat and the mess of blankets and pillows it had already been warm, but she suddenly felt like heat was pressing in from all sides.

“Huh?” Rose asked, a flush returning to her cheeks. Sveta didn’t mean what she thought she did, right?

“We could kiss.” She shrugged, like she was suggesting something as simple as borrowing a pencil.

Rose eyed Sveta, looking for some sign that she was fucking with her. Her gaze was drawn to the black spaghetti straps of her dress, one having slipped down slightly, hanging off the side of her shoulder. It reminded her of the tank top she'd been wearing the day they first met. And *why* did she remember that at all? She thought about how beautiful she'd looked in the moonlight. How beautiful she was now, her skin warm and inviting within the orange glow of the tent.

She realized she was staring, and forced herself to laugh. "You're joking," she said. Her laugh sounded fake even to herself. Sveta leaned forward a fraction, showing Rose she was in fact, *not joking*.

"Alright, fuck it, sure," she said, because why not? She was drunk, it was prom night, and she could break her gay man dating curse. It didn't have to mean anything, it was just stupid fun.

Sveta brought a hand up to Rose's face, cupping her cheek and pulling her forward, as natural as gravity. Rose's gaze darted down to Sveta's lips, then back to meet her eyes. She noticed how soft and warm her hand was against her skin. She felt her stomach dip as their faces inched closer together. Was she supposed to do something with her own hands? Why did she suddenly feel like she'd never kissed *anyone* before.

"You're supposed to close your eyes, silly," Sveta whispered, teasing, when their lips were a hairsbreadth apart.

"Right," Rose muttered, blinking stupidly. "Yeah."

And then, Sveta closed the distance between them and Rose stopped thinking all together.

Sveta tasted Burt's Bees lip gloss and Smirnoff Ice and it was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. Rose's lips parted of their own accord, deepening the kiss without intending to, and something in her burned at the surprised sound Sveta made in response.

And then, from across the room, J.J. whistled at them, and Rose realized the kiss had maybe gone on slightly too long to be casual. The kiss with a girl. The kiss with *Sveta*.

She pulled back sharply, Sveta's hand dropping from her face. Sveta winked at her, casual, like the earth hadn't just shifted slightly beneath her feet.

"Okay, that was fuckin' hot as *hell*," J.J. said, Rose only half hearing him, her eyes still locked on Sveta. On her collarbones. On the curve at the corner of her lips.

Hayden whacked J.J. with a throw pillow. "Dude, you can't say that. It's like... objectifying," he said, looking at Jackie for some kind of confirmation that he'd said the right thing. Jackie sighed, but nodded at him.

Sveta's smirk deepened. "Nah, it's cool, Hayd. You want in on this J.J.?" she asked, gesturing at her body when she said *in on this*.

J.J. looked flabbergasted, but his face exploded into a grin. "Um, fuck yes. As long as Rozanov won't beat the shit out of me for it."

“Oof, no promises there.”

Rose tracked Sveta as she sauntered over to J.J., planting herself in his lap and running her manicured hands through his hair. “It’s probably worth the risk though, no?” she said, and Rose’s gut twisted at the way the words spilled out from her lips, warm and sultry, like mulled wine and secrets. It seemed as though the room was abruptly spinning around her.

J.J. shook his head, clearly in disbelief. “Fuck yeah it is,” he muttered before crashing their mouths together.

Thankfully, Rose managed to get herself out of the tent in time to direct her puke into a bush.

Chapter End Notes

Roselana and Hollanov are truly in a fierce competition for the duo with the shittiest communication skills 😞 I apologize, I have no control over these characters. They do things and I just record their actions.

Chapter 19: Manesseh, Son of Hephzibah

*Oh, but you are in my blood, you're my holy wine
Oh, you taste so bitter, but you taste so sweet
I could drink a case of you, darling
Still I'd be on my feet
Still I'd be on my feet*

“A Case of You”, Joni Mitchell

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Bobcaygeon's Beloved *The Wolfbirds* Sign With Indie Label

A Bobcaygeon band has signed with a Toronto based indie record label after years of playing local underground shows.

Lindsay Winter | Updated 2:24 PM EDT, Mon June 23, 2008

A local Bobcaygeon based band has been making waves in Canada's indie music scene.

The Wolfbirds, who have been steadily building a presence through underground shows in basement apartments and opening slots across the GTA, have officially signed with *Unrivaled Records*, marking a major step forward for the punk rock, indie foursome.

Formed by a group of three high school friends (lead vocalist Rose Landry, guitarist and vocalist Shane Hollander, and bassist Kip Grady), the band spent three years playing gigs before finding their name and drummer (Svetlana Vetrova). This past year has marked a notable refinement in their sound, and they have become well known for their restless melodies and poetic lyricism.

Their early EP (*Self Titled*), passed hand-to-hand at shows and shared on MySpace, has already begun to circulate beyond the Kawartha scene, earning them a reputation for tight live sets and undeniable onstage chemistry.

That momentum caught the attention of Elena Rygg of *Equinox Management*, whose work with several rising Toronto acts (including up and coming *Fabian Salah*) has made her a quiet force in the city's indie scene. After seeing the band perform an opening set earlier this fall, Rygg and her team reached out, eventually leading to the group's signing with *Unrivaled*.

"They have something that you really can't teach," Rygg said. "There's a looseness to them, but they trust each other implicitly. It's infectious."

For The Wolfbirds, signing means access to professional recording resources, expanded booking opportunities, and the chance to develop their sound on a larger scale. The band is expected to enter the studio in early summer, with plans for a new single to be released this fall.

July 2008 – Bobcaygeon, ON

When Ilya was ten years old and his mother told him they were moving from Jacksonville to Bobcaygeon he thought that his world was falling apart. He had tethered himself to the familiarity of his life there, and was terrified of the unknown. It didn't matter that his existence in Florida wasn't even particularly enjoyable; he had been essentially friendless, wasting away between heat waves and idleness, an island even within his own home. He'd been convinced that Canada would bring more of the same, only colder.

He'd been wrong, of course. This dumb small town in the middle of butt-fuck-nowhere Ontario had been his saving grace. He'd found himself here. He knew it was cliché as hell, but it was true. It was here that he finally loosened the reins he'd been clutching to with white knuckles and expanded his isle to include more than just him and a shadow of a mother.

Growing up Ilya never had a brother. Alexei had always been a wall of anger, hatred and rage. He was a closed fist, a slap on the wrist, a mouth that spoke in a different tongue. Then, at ten years old and with the force of a car crash, he was bombarded with brotherhood. Shane was awkward and gangly, a bad haircut and hands two sizes too big, a puppy who hadn't grown into his paws. He was everywhere and everything. Safety and warmth, Summer, and Spring. He drowned Ilya with kindness and video games, with campfires and ice cream. He was late nights riddled with laughter and mornings charting unknown territory in the woods. He was all Ilya never knew he could have and more.

Even in the years after his mother died, when everything went to shit and Ilya forgot how to breathe, just knowing he was there, across the street, safe between four walls and alive was enough to keep him going. He took what he could get and filled the void with sex and cigarettes, vodka and wet paint.

Ilya never had a father either, not really. Gregori had always been a dictator, a rabid dog foaming at the mouth, a fear he couldn't let out. He was a god and a demon and the scapegoat for his crimes. He was Manesseh, in Jerusalem, son of Hephzibah, who burned his children in the fire and devoured his own face with a grin.

Or was Ilya the prodigal son? Did he not say his prayers loud enough, father? Was he lustful and false, an unjust sinner? He could recite his prayers until his lips were blue. He could clutch onto his mother's cross until his flesh broke and bled. He could drink holy water and lay prostrate on the floor, but would any of it be enough?

Having foolishly abandoned Thy paternal glory, I have squandered on vices. O Father, receive me, receive me, forgive me, treat me as Thy servant.

He wondered if his mother had been plagued by the same doubts. If she thought it was her, not him, that festered the rot. He wondered if that was the catalyst behind her decomposing corpse.

So no, he never had a father. Or maybe it was just that he was never the right son. But on the farm across the street he could pretend for a while that he did and that he was.

When Ilya was ten years old and forced to leave the only place he had known as home, he thought his mother was tearing the world from his grasp with her words.

Now, he sat on the Hollander's spare bedroom floor, his life neatly packed into cardboard boxes that would follow him to Montreal in just a couple of weeks while a new family moved into his house across the street and his father or god and his brother or oppressor flew further from him but closer to her.

He sat there, with his mother's last words clutched in his hands. It had been six years, and it was the first time he'd read them. Hadn't known they existed until he cleared out the house. Hadn't known she'd left a piece of herself. For him. Gregori hadn't thought to share. He'd tucked it away in a box of VHS tapes of old home videos, pretending it didn't exist. Just like he did with her, like he did with him.

He read her words, over and over and over again. Trying, desperately, to inch closer to her. Terrified that the chasm between them was simply too wide. Terrified that he was already deep in the earth, laying next to her.

Ilya wasn't born with a father. He wasn't born with a brother. He was born with a mother, but she had somewhere else she needed to be.

But he wanted her to know it was okay. He'd found a father, a mother, and a brother who had become something more than a brother, along the way.

Three Weeks Later – Muskoka Lakes, ON

Shane's eyes adjusted slowly in the darkness as he studied the wooden slats of the top bunk, Kip's snores above echoing through the room. He'd grown too big for this bed, however there was something comforting about being back in it; something about the worn quilted duvet cover that provided him some solace.

His phone vibrated beneath his pillow and Shane forced himself to count to sixty before he picked it up.

They'd been at the cottage for a week now; him, Ilya, Kip, Rose, and Sveta. His parents, busy with trade shows again, had offered them two weeks alone at the cottage. Enough time for one last hurrah before everything changed. Before Ilya went to Montreal and the rest of them went, well, no one really knew where they were going. Toronto, first, to record a music video for their upcoming single. After that it was unclear.

The cottage looked the same as always, but something *felt* different to Shane, like he was already missing things while they were happening. It was as if he was nostalgic for the present moment. Every time Kip laughed it felt sharper, every time Ilya teased him it lingered longer, all of the night skies were darker, the fire hotter, the black flies angrier. He wondered how many more moments they would get like this.

His phone buzzed again. He was only at forty-eight seconds.

Screw it. He unlocked it and looked at the messages.

ilya: you awake?

ilya: or are you pretending to be good?

shane: go to sleep, ilya

shane: seriously.

ilya: i was going to...

ilya: but then i remembered earlier

shane: don't start

ilya: i mean...

ilya: technically you started it

ilya: 🙄

shane: you're so annoying

ilya: on the dock?

ilya: when everyone else was making dinner

ilya: you don't remember that?

shane: i remember

shane: i just think you should shut up about it

ilya: yeah?

ilya: it didn't seem like you wanted me to shut up then

ilya: kinda the opposite actually

shane: ilya.

ilya: what?

ilya: i'm just saying 🙄

ilya: the way you kept whimpering my name

ilya: begging me to touch you...

ilya: you act like you have all this control

ilya: but i think you like it more when you don't

shane: stop.

ilya: or what?

ilya: 🙄

shane: fuck you

Shane locked his phone and rested it face down on his chest. He wasn't going to go down there. It was stupid and reckless and unnecessary. He picked up the phone again.

shane: sveta and rose are asleep?

ilya: yeah

shane: don't move

ilya: 🥰

“Do you think our voices are muted out here?”

Kip shot Rose a disturbed look from his kayak. “Okay, so you definitely brought me out here to murder me then. Cool. Just what I was hoping for.”

Rose scoffed. “What? No. Sound just carries way too much near the cottage. And the walls are made of like, Bible paper. I just wanted to talk.”

She looked a bit frantic. She'd looked frantic all morning actually, ever since she'd asked Kip if he wanted to go for a mid-day kayak, as if that was a perfectly regular activity they did when they came up here. Neither Rose nor Kip even knew where the kayaks were stored. There was not a single bone in his body that was intrigued by the world of watersports. He would have preferred to spend his day marinating in his meticulously perfected routine of suntanning and Smirnoff Ice. But, for Rose, he had conceded.

To be fair, and in defense of nature, fresh air, and physical activity, the marsh was actually quite beautiful. His biceps burned like they were in the pits of hell and the way lake water dripped off the paddle and down his forearms on every stroke made him briefly consider ritual slaughter, but it was pretty.

The water's surface was a collage of reeds, lily pads, and clusters of painted turtles warming their shells on floating logs. A chorus of bullfrogs rang out, hidden somewhere amongst the weeds and moss, their song echoing like ripples from a skipping stone.

He rested his paddle against his thighs and leaned back, searching for comfort in the small, plastic frame of the boat. “Okay...” he said, intrigued. “What did you want to talk about?”

A storm of expressions passed across Rose's face as she struggled to find her words. He didn't mind giving her time to think it out, he wasn't anywhere near ready to row back to the cottage yet, and it was peaceful drifting between the dragonflies and reeds.

Eventually, she let out a long, strained breath, and asked him a question. “So. Do you remember prom?”

Kip chuckled. “Sure, some of it?” He was pretty sure he knew what she was referring to in particular, but he wanted to give her the chance to say it.

“What about, um... When we were in the yurt with like, J.J. and stuff?”

He nodded. “Yeah, yeah I remember that.”

Cicadas hummed around them from all sides, joining in on the symphony.

“I think,” she said, her voice quiet. “I think maybe I might like Sveta? Or maybe I don’t. I don’t know. Maybe I just think I do?” She put her face between her knees and groaned. Kip wished he could hug her. He paddled closer to her, their kayaks ungracefully bumping up against one another. She looked up at him, sheepishly. He held out a hand to her, and she took it, the two of them floating together, boats parallel, hands entwined.

“It’s okay if you’re not sure,” he said.

“I know.” She sighed. “It’s just, like the kiss felt *different*. But I don’t know. Is that because, no offence, but my only other kisses have been with you and freaking Connor Connors? Not that you were a bad kisser, just—”

“Rose, I was thirteen and I had just gotten braces. You can say I was a bad kisser, my ego will remain intact.” They both laughed, the atmosphere around them lightening a fraction.

“Okay, yeah, it was terrible.” She smiled, laughter dying down. “But that’s exactly the problem! Like, did I feel something because I have nothing decent to compare it to? Or was it because I was drunk? Or maybe I’m just like, an attention whore and I was being performative and I liked knowing that the other guys thought it was hot.”

He squeezed her hand. She continued rambling on.

“So there’s that... And then there’s also the Shane problem.”

“Shane problem?” Kip asked.

“Well, you know, Shane’s like, into Sveta. So even if I do have feelings for her, I can’t actually *do* anything about it. Unless I want to be a complete bitch. Which I don’t. He was my friend first, you know? I could never do that to him.”

He ran his thumb over the back of Rose’s hand. She’d build this whole tangled web of a narrative in her mind, without even having all of the facts, or even knowing how she actually felt.

“Okay, first of all,” he said. “Don’t worry about Shane.”

“But—”

“No.” He cut her off. “If Shane really liked Sveta he could go ahead and do something about it. He’s had what, all summer? And nothing.”

He could tell she wasn’t convinced. Obviously Kip didn’t know for sure, but he was now more certain than ever that there was something going on with Ilya and Shane. Shane had stopped asking Kip questions about his sexuality, but once Kip became aware of the possibility, the tension beneath their lingering glances and excused absences became palpable. There was no way in hell he would share that with Rose, but he hoped he could ease her mind a bit.

“I’m just saying, you can’t like, call dibs on a person, Rose. Even if he does feel something for her, you know Shane wouldn’t want that to stop you from figuring out your own shit.”

She nodded her head, but stayed quiet, mulling his words over. “I guess that’s true.” She bit her lip. “But how am I supposed to even know if I was actually into it or not?”

“Well...” Kip grinned, mischievously. “The only thing you can really do is, you know, *experiment*.” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“What? No!” She broke the connection between their hands and whacked him on the shoulder with her paddle, their boats knocking against each other again.

“I’m serious! Sveta’s chill about that kind of stuff. You should just like...” He shrugged. “Kiss her again and see if you like it.”

Rose squeaked, embarrassed. “God, absolutely not. That would be *humiliating*.” She picked at something invisible on her shorts. “How would I even like, go about doing that?”

Kip hummed. “You just have to be, I dunno, casual about it. Say you want more experience kissing, that you want to try again with her for like... practice.”

“Oh my god, Kip, that’s the worst idea I’ve ever heard.” She visibly cringed. Then, after a beat, her face settled into a determined line and she looked right at him. “I’m gonna try it.”

The thick, star dusted sky hovered somewhere between late night and early morning. Through the shutters, milky moonlight spilled across Svetlana and Rose lying side by side under the weight of a patchwork quilt. Similar to the sky, both girls were drifting within the delicate space between awake and asleep.

There was a palpable hush that stretched between their parallel bodies, only broken by the steady metronome of the analogue clock above the door and the rustle of blankets whenever they shifted and stirred.

Rose felt a persistent buzz beneath her fingertips, like a restless animal waiting to be freed from its cage. She tilted her head to the side, her eyes slowly tracing the rise and fall of Sveta’s profile, cast in silhouette. The smooth curve of her forehead, home to her symmetrical brows. Her nose, torturous in its perfection, superior even to the most renowned Renaissance figures carved from stone. And then, of course, the swell of her lips. Rose could still feel an impression of when they had been pressed to her own, and she couldn’t get the taste out of her head.

“I can feel you staring,” Sveta said, her tone light and airy.

Shit. Rose snapped her neck around so she was lying flat on her back again and shut her eyes tight, like a toddler who hadn’t yet learned object permanence. The mattress shifted next to her, Sveta rolling onto her side. Rose turned as well, nervously mirroring her posture, drawn in by the way Sveta’s eyes, now open and staring back behind thick lashes, caught the moonlight, brighter even than Venus dazzling the evening sky.

“Hi.” Sveta smiled.

Rose tried to smile back, but the muscles in her face felt tense, unnatural. What the hell was she thinking? She was going to murder Kip for suggesting this.

Sveta blinked sleepily at her. Was Rose imagining it, or had her eyes flicked down to her own lips? Were her racing thoughts so loud that they were keeping Sveta awake? Or was she kept up by similar thoughts, by a fire beneath her own hands that was desperate to reach out, to see what might happen if they touched, here, in the precious space that existed between night and day. During an hour that was carved out just for them.

“Do you, um... Do you remember that kiss, on prom night?” Rose whispered, her stomach twisting into disjointed knots, like tree roots breaking through the soil.

“Of course.”

“Wasn’t that kind of funny?” Rose forced out a small laugh, but it sounded fake to her own ears.

Sveta’s lips ticked up. “Sure,” she said. “Funny, hot, insatiable, however you want to describe it.” She reached out, crossing the seemingly insurmountable distance between the two of them, and tucked a wayward piece of hair behind Rose’s ear.

Rose never knew what to make of moments like this. Sveta was so carefree with intimacy, passing around casual touch like spare change. It was impossible to know if she meant something by it, or if Rose even *wanted* her to mean something by it.

“Do you think it was... weird?” Rose asked.

“Of course not, it’s just kissing. It’s supposed to be fun.”

Fun. If it was supposed to be fun, why did Rose feel like she couldn’t breathe? Why did it carve up her insides to see Sveta kissing J.J., or to think of Shane doing the same?

“I’m worried I’m bad at it,” she admitted, pulling the blanket up so it covered half her face. “Like, what am I going to do when I finally get a boyfriend that isn’t gay? I have no idea what I’m doing.”

Sveta bit her lower lip, grinning. “We could try again,” she suggested simply.

“Sorry, what?” Rose had not heard her correctly. There was absolutely no way.

“We could try kissing again. I can... show you some things.”

Apparently, there was a way. She had been internally panicking, wondering how the hell she was casually going to suggest recreating their moment on prom night, but here Sveta was, filling in the blanks on her own.

God, Kip was a fucking genius.

“Really?” Rose asked, her voice breathy, needing to be sure.

Sveta reached out her hand again, gently pulling the blanket down from Rose’s face, and then shifted closer, until their noses were nearly touching.

“Really,” she said, before closing the gap between them.

Rose had been drunk on prom night, so it made sense that their kiss had left her head spinning. Now, there was no excuse for the way the world seemed to shift around her as Sveta licked into her mouth, deepening the kiss. One of her hands found Sveta’s hip, landing on a precious strip of exposed skin where her tanktop had ridden up, and she felt her stomach dip at the contact. Everything about the moment was so *soft* and hazy, like a homecoming.

Sveta peppered a series of satin kisses along her jaw and down her throat, stopping at her pulse point to lap at the skin there, and Rose whimpered in response. She continued to kiss her neck, tongue wet and hot, occasionally grazing her teeth along the sensitive area. Rose was increasingly aware of heat building between her thighs, and then, without warning, Sveta slipped one of her legs between her own.

Rose jolted at the contact, involuntarily grinding against Sveta’s thigh. The friction was slick and delicious from how wet Rose had become, separated only by her thin cotton boyshorts, and she moaned, surprised at the sensation.

Sveta returned her attention back to her lips, and she could feel her smiling into the kiss. Rose continued shifting her hips in a steady rhythm, chasing the deep jolt of pleasure that rocked through her core every time she ground herself against Sveta’s thigh.

More loose and confident now, Rose cupped Sveta’s cheek, and tried to mirror the way Sveta had kissed her before, swiping her tongue past the lips she hadn’t been able to get out of her mind all summer. Sveta released a happy sigh of her own, and Rose felt giddy, knowing she had been responsible for the noise.

She pulled back slightly, struck with the need to see Sveta’s face. Her eyes were dark, lids heavy, and lips swollen. Rose was certain there was no person or thing on this earth that could match her beauty. Sveta smiled at her, and tucked another strand of Rose’s hair back into place.

“How was that?” Sveta asked.

Rose cleared her throat, trying her best to form a coherent thought. “Good. Yeah, good. Helpful. Informative.”

Sveta smirked, and pushed the leg still slotted between Rose forward slightly, drawing emphasis to her clear arousal. “Informative?”

“Shut up,” Rose said, breaking out into an uncontrollable grin.

The fire was low, mostly consumed by embers now. It sparked and crackled at them every few minutes, casting their faces in a burnt amber glow. The mosquitoes had long since ceased their assault, and the forest was as hushed as a secret, the calm occasionally shattered by a wayward loon wailing from deep across the lake, a startling reminder that they weren't really alone.

Everyone else had already gone up to bed. Ilya and Shane lingered by the fire, drowsy, mesmerized, and maybe not caring if they were being a little bit careless. Well, at least Ilya couldn't bring himself to care.

"C'mere," he said to Shane, who was still sitting across the fire from him.

Shane smiled, and god, he was perfect. The way his eyes lit up, like he was seeing the moon and the stars for the first time. The involuntary curve of his lips, small, almost embarrassed. His freckled cheeks, and how they bloomed under Ilya's gaze. He loved him like this.

Shane settled between Ilya's thighs, planting himself on the ground and leaning back against his chest. Ilya ran his fingers through his hair, grounding and intimate.

They let themselves be consumed by the smoke and the silence for a while. Ilya could feel something brewing beneath the surface however, and eventually Shane's voice burst forth, barely a whisper.

"What, um..." he said. "What happens next?"

Ilya felt his heart pound within his chest, and he worried that Shane could feel it through his clothing. They hadn't really talked about what the distance was going to mean for them. Ilya wanted to bring it up, he'd been itching to every day since he got the acceptance letter, like a scab that was desperate to bleed. But he didn't want to cross a line, to step too far, to scare off the part of Shane that had been offered up to him.

"What do you mean?" Ilya asked.

"Like, you know... Physically?"

Ilya's fingers froze at the nape of Shane's neck.

"Right," he cleared his throat. Of course. He wasn't talking about *them* or what the distance would mean. Which was fine. Ilya wanted that too, the physical stuff. Obviously. He was starved for it, even. It just wasn't *all* that he wanted.

He leaned in closer, running his hands down the front of Shane's chest and kissing his way along the plane of his throat. He bit the edge of his jaw playfully, teasing Shane, loving every sound and shiver that he was able to draw out of him.

"You want me to fuck you," Ilya said. He didn't phrase it as a question.

"I don't know— I, fuck, Ilya—" Shane whined as Ilya pushed up the hem of his shirt, dragging his thumb along the exposed flesh there. "I mean yeah, yes."

“Yes what?”

“Jesus, Ilya, you know what I mean.”

Ilya took his hands out from underneath his shirt, off of him completely. He fucking *loved* making Shane ache for him like this. It made his thoughts hazy and his throat choked with want. “Say it,” he said, voice rough.

Ilya could almost feel the heat radiating from Shane’s cheeks, flushed with embarrassment and arousal. “Yes, I want you to fuck me,” Shane muttered.

Ilya tipped Shane’s head back, his hands cupped around his jaw, and kissed him. He dragged his tongue along the roof of his mouth, deep and slow. He was wet and warm, and Ilya’s fingers tightened their grasp as Shane moaned into him. “Here?” Ilya muttered, between breathy kisses. “Now?” He traced his thumbs along Shane’s cheeks. “You’re that desperate to feel me inside of you, hmm?”

“Obviously not here, fucking hell Ilya.”

Ilya chuckled, then pressed his lips to Shane’s forehead, hovering them for longer than he was entitled to. Longer than he deserved. He pulled away slowly, taking in the sight of him, the moonlight and the embers’ glow carving contrasting shadows of warmth and ice into the soft edges of his skin. God, he was beautiful.

“But when we’re home,” Shane continued. “When we’re home I’d like to... to try. If that’s okay.”

“Of course that’s okay,” he said, before bringing their lips together in a soft, chaste kiss.

He must know, Ilya realized. Shane must know how much Ilya loved him. He was certain it was written all over his face. Ilya felt his facade slipping, felt himself becoming more untethered to the lie he’d been upholding; that he was okay with keeping this thing between them unnamed and undefined. He wanted more, and he’d been so good at not asking for it. He was petrified that he was going to slip, that during a moment lush with heat and intimacy he would accidentally say something that would crack the melting ice beneath their feet.

God, he had to get his shit together before they went back to Bobcaygeon.

Chapter 20: The N-Body Problem

*I was on your porch, the smoke sank into my skin
So I came inside to be with you
And we talked all night
About everything we could imagine
'Cause come the morning I'll be gone
And as our eyes start to close
I turn to you and I let you know that I love you*

“On Your Porch”, The Format

August 2008 – Muskoka Lakes, ON

“I wish we could stay here forever,” Kip sighed, deep and resounding.

It was their last sunset at the cottage, and it felt too much like he was approaching the epilogue of a story that he didn’t want to end. He was undeniably excited for what was to come this fall; their upcoming music video, the potential for touring as an opener, or even recording their first real, professional full length album. But, he couldn’t help but wonder when they’d next be together, loose and carefree in this way.

They were gathered at the beach, Rose and Sveta curled up side by side, embroidery thread clipped onto their jeans with safety pins, their hands moving in swift motions as they carefully knotted friendship bracelets for each other. Meanwhile, Ilya and Shane were scouring the shoreline for flat stones, challenging each other to see who could skip them the furthest. They argued after each round, Ilya demanding Kip weigh in on whose stone went further, but he adamantly refused, saying he didn’t want to upset mom and dad.

Shane was wearing a St. Thomas hoodie, obviously Ilya’s, and Kip wondered, not for the first time, how Sveta and Rose could be so oblivious to whatever was going on between the two of them. He glanced at the girls, their skin glowing in the golden hour sun, Sveta’s feet tangled with Rose’s in the sand, and he wondered if she had followed through with their plan, if maybe they were too lost in their own world to notice what was in front of them.

This bubble that they had created, or as Ilya described it, their insectuous friend group, reminded Kip of something Mrs. Carcasole, his Earth and Space Science teacher, had taught them. It was called the n -body problem, and it occurred when more than two massive bodies interacted gravitationally. Every object within a solar system influenced every other object’s gravity. When the system consisted of just two bodies, like a singular planet orbiting a sun, the equation was simple, predictable. However, when there were more than two bodies interacting simultaneously, their paths could wobble, stretch, and slip over time. No one body was left with complete control. From a distance, the system might look stable, but up close, everything was subtly shifting and changing.

From afar, according to Ilya, their friendship seemed impenetrable. As if they all shared everything, and existed in easy harmony with one another. Beneath the surface, however, they were each holding secrets, maybe harmless in nature, but influential nonetheless. Like individual planets, their secrets and actions shifted the gravity of each other in different ways, as if they were being pulled apart and pushed together by some unseen force. Montreal was pulling Ilya away from them, and it was impossible to calculate how that would change their collective trajectory.

Based on the stories Kip had heard over the years, it seemed that ever since childhood, Ilya and Shane had existed in a state of eccentric orbit, close together at one moment, and swinging rapidly apart the next. Kip worried what this next revolution would bring.

The sun kissed the horizon now, and it would soon be dark. Kip's phone buzzed in his pocket. He checked the message.

scott: was in the studio with fabian today and he wouldn't stop raving about your bassline on blue moon over brooklyn
scott: can't believe it's only 29 days until the release!
scott: it's going to blow up, i know it

Kip smiled and typed back a message.

kip: be careful, my ego can't get much bigger atp

scott: it's well earned
scott: 😊

kip: [attached image: muskoka lakes sunset]

scott: wow! it looks beautiful up there
scott: you having fun?

kip: yeah 😊
kip: can't wait for toronto in two weeks tho
kip: to record the music video
kip: and to see you, of course 😊

scott: 😊
scott: me too

One Week Later – Bobcaygeon, ON

Shane took three measured, deep breaths and shook out his hands, in a futile attempt to slow his heart rate. He was standing in the foyer of his home, staring at the front door with passionate determination. He could do this. He was ready. He'd done an extensive amount of obligatory Googling, ensuring that he cleared his browser history each time so as not to send his father into sudden cardiac arrest.

He'd been mostly relieved by what he'd found. A bunch of the websites and forums he'd visited stated that it was a normal thing to get turned on by, and that it was something people of all different sexual orientations were often interested in exploring. kawaiijesus87 on Reddit had even said that *way* more straight guys were into it than they'd ever admit to their friends. Shane might have visited that thread more than once, and he *might* have typed out and deleted fourteen different DMs to kawaiijesus87, but he'd gladly let that information die with him.

So, yeah. It was going to be fine. He'd compared instructions from a variety of sources, compiling them into a general consensus that he'd used to prepare. He had lube (silicone-based), condoms (a variety of sizes – based on what they'd done he thought Ilya was like, big or whatever, but other than himself he didn't have a whole lot to compare it to), and everything he needed to prepare himself (which, thank christ, they carried at Shoppers).

Shane had also considered buying a dildo to try it out. Before their cottage trip he'd driven all the way to a discreet adult store three towns over, where he sat in the car for forty minutes, broke out into a cold sweat, contemplated his entire existence, and then drove home empty handed.

Everything was good. Great, even. None of this meant he had, like, *feelings* for Ilya. They were simply friends that were exploring something they both had an interest in. Obviously if he knew a girl who would do something like that with him he'd be trying it with her instead. But he didn't, and Ilya made it easy, he made it casual. He'd insisted from the beginning that other people didn't need to know about what they were doing. That there wasn't anything inherently gay about it or whatever.

Shane stared at the doorknob. Ilya had gone out to the front porch for a smoke thirty minutes ago, while Shane was in the shower. He was still out there now, possibly still smoking but undoubtedly lost in a game of Tap Tap Revenge on his iPhone, because he was, at his core, a giant fucking loser. Shane sighed. Time to rip off the bandaid.

"Hey," he said, extremely casually and not rehearsed at all, as he stepped onto the porch.

Ilya grunted in acknowledgement, a lit cigarette resting loosely between his lips, phone, as Shane predicted, clutched between his hands. An electric dubstep beat rang out from the muffled speakers as he tapped at the screen with rapt attention.

"I was thinking that, um, now would be a good time." Shane scratched at the back of his neck.

"A good time for– Fuck!" Ilya sprang back dramatically in the porch swing, dropping his phone in his lap, sounds of defeat now chiming from the device. "I was *this* close, Shane." He took a long drag from his cigarette. "*This* close to beating my high score." He looked like a sad small hamster.

"I have no sympathy for you," Shane deadpanned. "It smells like shit out here."

Ilya took one last drag before putting out the stupid smoke in the stupid ashtray David had left on the porch for him. He was an enabler and Shane would never forgive him.

“What were you saying?” Ilya asked as he ground the butt. “A good time for what?”

“Oh, um,” Shane swiped his tongue over his lower lip. “For, you know. What we talked about at the cottage.”

Ilya dragged his gaze up and down the length of Shane, slow and purposeful. “You’ll have to be more specific than that,” he said, clasping his hands behind his head. “We talked about a lot of things.”

Shane huffed and crossed his arms. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“I really don’t.”

They stared at each other, waiting to see who would cave first.

“Fuck, fine, Ilya. Jesus. I want you to come inside and fuck me, okay?” Shane could feel splotches of reddened skin starting to bloom on his cheeks and neck. This was a bad idea. What the hell was he thinking?

“Mm, I don’t know,” Ilya drawled. “I think you need to work on asking nicely.”

“I hate you.”

“That makes it kind of hot though, no?”

“You know what? I take it back,” Shane quipped. “This was a stupid idea anyway.” He stormed back into the house, knowing, somehow, that Ilya would follow him.

Ilya’s hands were on him before he even had a chance to slip his shoes off. Shane smiled privately to himself, loving the push and pull of this unnamed game they were playing at. Ilya tugged his hips, sliding him flush against his body, firm and unyielding, and then bit down on Shane’s shoulder. Shane whimpered as he felt a hand dip into the front of his sweats, teasing fingers tracing his inner thigh, nearly brushing his rapidly hardening cock but not fully committing, like the absolute fucking asshole that Ilya was.

“I’m sorry,” Ilya said, lips pressed to Shane’s ear. “Please let me fuck you.” He grabbed Shane’s ass at the request, pinky finger inching close enough to his hole to notice some of the lube he’d used to warm himself up leak out of him.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya groaned, sounding utterly destroyed. “You’re so good to me. How many fingers have you tried using on yourself, hm? Was it not enough? You need me inside of you?”

It should have been fucking humiliating, the way Ilya talked to him when they were doing this. Yet somehow, it only made Shane more impatient for his touch. He’d hit the root of the cause, Shane realized, when Ilya texted him about control, that night at the cottage. Shane was constantly trying to keep his head afloat, especially over these past few years. He *needed* to stay measured, to have a clear understanding of what was coming next. He was desperate to fit the mold and the expectations of everyone around him. Being in control provided Shane with security and comfort. He thrived when playing music, each key change and chord

progression etched in his mind. He was at ease on the farm, laying tarps or prepping the beds. He felt comfort in knowing when he was going to exercise and what meals were planned for the week.

When he was with Ilya, however, he was able to let go of that, for a little while. Ilya could pin him down and kiss him like a starving man, he could tease him with his touch and his words and his tongue until Shane lost all sense of reality and was begging for release. They could bicker and argue beforehand, making it all the more thrilling when Ilya told him to get on his knees and he fell, mouth open, ready to take whatever he had to give. During their stolen moments together, Shane didn't have to worry or plan or stress. He could surrender himself completely to the sound of his voice, to the taste of him, to the smell of cigarettes and turpentine and sweat and boyhood.

Ilya inched a finger closer to his entrance, circling the sensitive nerves there and making Shane's vision white out momentarily. It was already so intense, having Ilya touch him there, and he wasn't sure that he was going to survive this.

"Shane," Ilya repeated. "How many."

"T- two," Shane stuttered, hating himself for it. "I tried with three before, but--"

Ilya licked a long line up the side of his neck as he pressed and teased at him with his finger, and Shane forgot his own fucking name.

"Fuck, Ilya," he panted. "I tried with three before, but I was getting impatient, thinking about it. I was worried--"

Shane shuddered as the tip of Ilya's finger entered him, his body aching for *more*, precum leaking from the head of his length. He whined and tried to press back into him as Ilya moved his finger in a painfully, delightfully slow pattern.

"What were you worried about, Hollander?" Ilya asked, his other hand exploring the front of Shane's chest, ghosting the hard line of his abs, tight with pleasure.

"About," he said, between clenched teeth, trying to hold himself back. "About coming just from touching myself. I wanted to wait for you." Shane felt like his skin was on *fire*, like he had been doused in gasoline and willingly lit the match. His cock was aching for attention, and he could feel Ilya, just as hard, pressed against his lower back.

"God, you're perfect," Ilya muttered into his hair. "We need to go upstairs right now before I fuck you over the kitchen counter."

Considering the way they usually spoke to each other, Shane was sometimes surprised with how tender Ilya could be, especially when they were trying something new, or lately, after they had both come and were resonating in a state of pure bliss.

He was being particularly gentle today, taking his sweet fucking time stretching out Shane with his fingers while he pressed faint kisses along the freckles dusting his shoulders and the

ridges of his spine. Every touch multiplied in intensity, and Shane was drowning in it. Ilya's fingers were slightly thicker than his own, or maybe it was just that he could get a better angle, with Shane laying on his side and Ilya tucked behind him, but it felt so impossibly right to be explored and taken by him in this way.

His core was on fire, yet he was itching for more. Having lost all control of his body, Shane tried to rock back onto Ilya's fingers, desperate to have him deeper, needing him to increase the painfully slow pace he had set, wanting, more than anything, to know what it would be like to be full of Ilya's cock. Ilya, showing some semblance of force for the first time since they had found their way to Shane's bedroom between rough, angry kisses, and frantically stripped one another of their clothes, planted his free hand firmly on Shane's hip, trapping him against the mattress and preventing him from seeking out the friction he craved.

Shane whined in frustration. "Please, Ilya," he said. "I need you."

"Mm," Ilya hummed, sucking on his earlobe, because he was an asshole and knew that it drove Shane wild. "I'm not done playing with you yet."

And then, to punctuate his words, he thrust his fingers forward, hitting something in Shane that made him keel forward, a groan spilling out of him that was unlike any sound he'd heard himself make before. It was as if something within him had locked into place, a warmth that radiated somewhere deep within his pelvis and extended throughout his entire being; to his fingernails, his eyelashes, the fucking cells that he was comprised of.

"Feels good, yeah?" Ilya mumbled into his hair, as if Shane was capable of responding.

He tried to nod his head, but as Ilya continued to fixate on what he knew must be his prostate, Shane became utterly consumed by the feeling, his limbs and vocal cords no longer under his own jurisdiction. Ilya was his saviour, his captor, his fucking salvation, and he couldn't remember where his body ended and Ilya's began.

It came in waves, the pleasure, so sharp it bordered on pain. It built up inside of him like a goddamn crescendo, a cacophony of harmonies ringing out in unison, and he needed to say something before it fucking peaked.

"Ilya, Ilya," the words crawled out of him. "Stop, stop, you have to—"

His fingers were out of him in a flash, the loss sending Shane into ruin.

"Are you okay?" Ilya asked, which was comical, really. Of course he was okay, that couldn't even begin to describe what he was feeling. Shane laughed at the thought, delirious and drunk on the feeling.

Ilya shifted around him, so he could meet Shane's eyes. He was certain he looked completely and thoroughly wrecked.

"Fuck, yes, Ilya. I'm okay." Shane tried desperately to catch his breath, to think of something other than his cock, which remained untouched, yet was steadily leaking precum from the

way Ilya had been torturing him with his fingers. “I just need you to fuck me, like, *right now*, otherwise I’m about to come from what you’re doing to me.”

Ilya’s eyes darkened at his words, and he started stroking himself, watching Shane as he did. It made Shane burn hot with jealousy at how delectable it probably felt, but he knew he would completely unravel if he mirrored the motion.

“Condoms?” Ilya grunted.

“Side table.” Shane pointed, and upon opening the drawer, Ilya’s entire face lit up, his posture changing and his shoulders shaking with laughter.

“Jesus, Shane did you buy the whole fucking aisle?” he said, holding up two of the many different boxes that Shane, in his state of delirium, forgot were all organized in there. He flushed with embarrassment.

“I didn’t know what size you needed, god. Sue me for being prepared.”

Ilya shook his head, but tore open one of the boxes and slid a condom onto himself before climbing on top of Shane. He kissed him, then. Slow, but subdued, different than their earlier inferno. He smiled at Shane, easy and carefree.

“I can’t believe this is real,” he whispered, and kissed him again, their cocks brushing against each other as he did, quelling any lingering embarrassment and reminding Shane how much he needed this.

Apparently, it had a similar effect on Ilya, who moaned into Shane’s mouth, flame reignited.

“Should I turn around?” Shane asked, between kisses.

“No,” Ilya said, cupping Shane’s cheek. “I want to look at you when you come hands free, just from feeling me inside of you.”

Ilya stroked himself again a few times, languidly, using a generous amount of lube, and Shane watched, rapt with attention, mesmerized by the beauty of the man before him. He was enthralled by the motion of his muscles, taut as he worked himself, and by his chest, dotted with those moles that Shane could happily stare at and trace with his fingers all day. He briefly wondered, at what point did he start considering Ilya beautiful. When was the moment that he started seeing him in this light, not just as a friend, and then a stranger?

Apparently satisfied, Ilya gripped Shane from behind his knees, pushed his ass off the bed, and then, *holy fucking hell*, he could feel Ilya, hard and slick pressing at his entrance.

“Tell me if it’s too much, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Shane grunted, nodding.

Ilya adjusted Shane slightly, so the backs of his legs pressed into his shoulders, and then curled forward, joining their mouths in a slow, captivating dance of teeth and tongue. He deepened the kiss as he eased inside of Shane, sucking on his tongue and making him feel

whole and right in a way he didn't know was possible. Shane moaned, guttural, into his mouth, the sound evidently doing something to Ilya, as he momentarily lost control, bottoming out inside of Shane, the head of his cock slamming against his prostate causing Shane to cry out, strangled by the pleasure.

"Fuck," Ilya said, voice tight. "Sorry, fuck. I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay," Shane reassured him. Ilya was frozen in place, and he needed him to move before he had a stroke and died. "I need you—" Ilya twitched inside of him and Shane whimpered at the sensation. "Christ, I need you to actually *fuck me*, Rozanov. Just let go."

Ilya looked pained, like he was doing everything he could to hold himself back. "I can't— I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not going to hurt me, Ilya, *please*."

Thankfully, it seemed Ilya could only handle so much begging, and he started to move inside of him, slowly at first, tracking Shane's facial expressions with hooded eyes, until Shane reached up, tangling his fingers in Ilya's hair and crashed their mouths together. He kissed him, frantic and brazen, and Ilya sped up his thrusts in response, rewarding Shane with the transcendent feeling of him grinding against his prostate each time.

"Holy shit, Shane," Ilya grunted between thrusts. "You're so fucking perfect."

Ilya pressed their foreheads together and slowly circled his hips, keeping his length fully inside of him, so that all of the friction was focused on that ridiculously sensitive spot. It was almost too much, the way the pressure was building inside of him. Instinctively, he reached forward, about to stroke himself, but Ilya grabbed his wrist, pinning him down at his sides. Shane whined, and rocked his hips into the air, tears almost pooling at the corner of his eyes from how fucking hard he was and how much he needed this.

"What did I say before, Hollander? I want to see you come, just like this. Without touching yourself." He pulled Shane's wrist up towards his mouth then, and wrapped his lips around two of the digits, which had no right to make Shane squirm beneath him in the way that it did. Everything he did was so goddamn hot, it was incomprehensible.

"You're so pretty like this," Ilya said, eyes locked on Shane, his lips wet with spit. "It's like you were made for me, made for this. Mine to fuck and kiss and—"

Apparently that's all Shane needed to hear before a torrent of pleasure rang through him, crashing down on him in insurmountable waves, his come shooting all over his stomach and chest and his goddamn *chin* as he released an inhuman cry. His reaction sent Ilya into an orgasm of his own, and it was in that moment, when he felt the condom swell inside of him with Ilya's load, his body shaking with another inexplicable wave of pleasure, that he realized maybe, just maybe he wasn't exactly straight.

Shane drifted in and out of reality as Ilya cleaned up around him, at some point pulling out, disposing of the condom, and using a damp washcloth to wipe off his chest and stomach. He

was lost in his thoughts, unaware of his surroundings. His body was loose and serene, blissful in the afterglow. His mind, however, was spiraling.

It wasn't just the sex, he realized. It was Ilya. It was his stupid golden curls and the moles hidden beneath his clothes. It was his laugh and his dickish behaviour. It was the way he kissed, the way he carried himself, the sound of his voice and the way he said his name. It was everything he did, everything he'd already done, and everything he wanted to do. His idiotic bravery, his rash decisions, his art and the way he smelled like sin. He was too much, and not enough, and all of this and more.

And Shane wanted all of it. But he couldn't have it. That's not what this was supposed to be, not who *Shane* was supposed to be.

"Shane," Ilya said, soft and slow. He was curled up beside him. Shane turned on his side, so they were facing each other. Ilya reached out to touch him, to run his fingers along his scalp in sluggish, soothing circles. "Where did you go?"

Shane tried to turn off his brain. He'd been so fucking stupid, so oblivious. He'd let himself get carried away.

"I'm right here," he said. Was he? Was he right here? Was he allowed to be? There was a faint crease between Ilya's brows and Shane wanted nothing more than to kiss it, but he didn't.

"I think I need to tell you something," Ilya said.

Shane felt the blood return to his body, his heart swelling with too much of it. It spilled over and pooled in his throat, viscous and suffocating. Ilya lowered his hand, pressing it against Shane's chest, beating like a jackrabbit, frozen with fear.

"I haven't really been honest with you," he continued. Shane tried to control his breathing. Steady. Measured. Calm.

"This thing between us. It's not—" Ilya closed his eyes and he exhaled through his nose. "It's not been casual for me. I like you. I have for a while now."

"What?" Shane sat up in bed, the room spinning around him. He shoved his head between his knees and realized he was still naked and— "Sorry, I don't think I understand."

"Yes, you do. I meant what I said. I like you, not just as a friend, or someone to fuck, or whatever."

Shane refused to look at Ilya. He couldn't do this if he was looking at him. "I thought... You said— you said you didn't want anyone to know. That it's just for fun. Casual."

Ilya placed a hand on his bare shoulders, his palm warm and comforting in ways that it *couldn't* be.

"I know. I know that's what I said, Shane, but I'm not fucking crazy, like, there's something more going on between us. I know you feel it—"

“You have no idea what I feel.”

“Shane, don’t do this.”

Ilya tried to lean in closer, to tip Shane’s chin so he could look him in the eyes and he couldn’t, he just *couldn’t*, so he pushed him away instead, frantic, and scrambled from the bed, throwing his clothes back on in halfhazard, uncertain motions.

“Shane,” Ilya repeated, and it sounded like he was choking up.

“What do you want from me?” Shane asked, tugging down his shirt, feeling lost in his own house, in his own mind.

“I– To be with you. I just want to be with you.”

Shane barked out a laugh, short and sharp. “You know that I’m not like that.”

Ilya stood up, approaching him tentatively, like how he acted around Anya when they first rescued her. “It’s okay, Shane. I know–”

“Can you put some fucking clothes on?” Shane interrupted.

“Yeah, fuck.” Ilya stumbled back into his sweats, and pushed a hand through his hair.

“Sorry.”

They stood there, still as statues, on the precipice of something either disastrous or revolutionary. They were held within the same four walls where Ilya had first declared them friends, where they’d spend countless nights playing video games and wrestling in bed. It’s where he first learned guitar, and where Ilya always drew. It’s where Shane had come down from his first high, when he and Ilya’s lips had almost aligned. And now, now it’s where he had his first time.

“I think I’m going to go to Rose’s for a bit,” Shane said finally, shattering the stillness between them like a glass of spilled milk.

“Shane, come on.” Ilya swiped at his eyes, a sharp and angry motion, and Shane realized it was the closest thing to crying he’d ever seen from him.

“I’ll be back before my parents get home tomorrow,” he said, knowing it was a lie, and knowing the words were a sweltering knife that he used to stab them both in the chest.

One Week Later – Montreal, QC

Shane hadn’t come back the next day, before his parents got home. Rose texted in the group chat, saying that they had to go to Toronto early; Elena moved up the schedule and needed them for the music video as soon as possible. Svetlana, Kip, and Rose stopped by to say bye to him, before they left, but Shane hadn’t come with them. According to Kip he was *“having a whole ass mental breakdown over the change of schedule and is currently acting like a sleep paralysis demon so it’s not safe to let him out of the house”*.

So, now Ilya was standing on the side of a hectic Montreal street, looking up at Grey Nuns, a daunting Neoclassical structure planted in the heart of the city, and also the place that would be his home for the next year. David and Yuna had driven him all the way out here, and while he'd tried to be amicable during the six hour drive, he knew he was failing miserably. Thankfully, they easily accepted that he was sad about leaving his friends behind.

They'd already made the trip to and from his dorm room on the fourth floor a couple of times, bringing most of the things he saved from his house after the sale, including the box of old home videos. He wasn't sure why he'd brought it, he didn't even have a player that he could use to watch them here, but he'd felt a tug in his stomach that urged him to load it into the trunk at the last minute.

"We're just going to get checked into our hotel, wash up, and then we'll text you to meet up, okay?" Yuna said, wrapping him up in a warm embrace.

"See if you can find any good dinner options," David added. "I'm *starving*."

Ilya smiled, hugging him as well. "Will do."

He watched them drive away, and felt a shower of relief when they were out of sight. He wasn't sure how much longer he would have been able to keep up the facade that he was okay, that he wasn't crushing beneath the weight of a thousand burning suns. A couple of hours would give him some time to rest, and act normal and grateful and sane at dinner.

He pushed his way through the intricately carved front doors of the residence, following the already familiar path to his dorm room. The halls were clinical yet chaotic; white paint and fluorescent lights paired with slamming doors, music blaring through paper thin walls, and students laughing, hugging, screaming, drinking. A week ago, he might have been enthralled by it all, ready to soak in the experience and immerse himself in his school and the city. Right now however, all he wanted to do was lie down in the dark and take a nap.

He shoved his new key into the lock, pushed his way into his room and then froze. His room which previously, only had his shit in it, the second bed and desk being blissfully empty, was now occupied by a stranger. He knew, obviously, that he had a roommate who would inevitably show up at some point. Apparently, that point in time was now.

"Hello," Ilya said, feeling the need to announce himself to the broad shouldered, black haired man who was currently manspreading on *Ilya's fucking bed*, absorbed in his phone with a deep frown.

His head snapped up at Ilya's announcement. "Oh shit, sorry man, didn't hear you come in."

He stood up and stuck out a hand for Ilya to shake.

"That's my bed," Ilya said, nodding at the pillows he's already laid out at the head of it.

The asshole looked between the two beds, and had the decency to seem embarrassed. "Shit, yeah, sorry. I got distracted by something." He awkwardly dropped the hand he was holding.

“I’m Troy by the way. Troy Barrett.”

And that’s when Ilya noticed it. The giant bag of hockey gear splayed out in the middle of their shared space.

“You’re a hockey player,” Ilya deadpanned, instead of introducing himself in return.

Troy’s face lit up at the comment, clearly thinking it was an opening. It was not. “Yeah, man, you play? I’m on the school team.”

Jesus Christ. Ilya looked at the large, French windows that centered their room. He briefly fantasized about just saying screw it and jumping. Would four stories be a long enough drop to kill him, or would he just end up with permanent spinal damage?

Chapter 21: Blue Light, Late Night (Call Me A Sick Freak)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Oh, I wish I had a boyfriend
I wish I had a loving man in my life
I wish I had a father
And maybe then I would've turned out right
But now I'm just crazy, I'm totally mad
Yeah, I'm just crazy, I'm fucked in the head*

“Lust for Life”, Girls

SPILL MAGAZINE

SINGLE REVIEWS – EDITOR PICK | 22 September 2008

Spill Single Review: The Wolfbirds – Blue Moon Over Brooklyn

The Wolfbirds

Blue Moon Over Brooklyn

Unrivalled Records

★★★★☆

Similar to the distinctly eerie and haunting call of the common loon, there exists a particular lineage of indie punk acts who push back against the usual highly trodden routes associated with the genre. In recent years, we've seen artists blend elements from different genres, unexpected time signatures, poetic lyricism, and anything else out of the ordinary.

The Wolfbirds breakout single, *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* presents us with almost all of the above – a sparse, slowcore guitar line, found sounds, and silky vocal melodies that dive into themes of tension and release. There is a push and pull that defines the song's emotional core, similar to the tidal force of our moon's gravity, which builds to an instantly classic blown-out hook – “*Blue light, late night, I almost stayed / Call me a sick freak, anyway,*” cements Shane Hollander, lyricist and lead guitar, as an elite melody maker.

As a debut, *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* finds a surprising balance between gritty punk rock melodies and lush pop hooks – and we're here for it. If this is where The Wolfbirds are starting, it will be worth watching where they go next.

November 2008 – Montreal, QC

While the rest of the first years in Grey Nuns moved through their first few months of University in a perpetual state of hangover and horniness, Ilya receded into himself, traversing the unknown city streets like a great frigatebird, capable of engaging in unihemispheric slow-wave sleep, allowing the creatures to rest mid air during month long periods of migration. Similar to the great frigatebird, who require the adaptation as they lack sufficient preen oil to survive landing in the ocean, Ilya felt incapable of settling for any

period of time. Idleness would mean time to think, and he didn't trust himself with his thoughts.

Instead, he busied himself with routine. First, he would wake up and fuel his body with a balanced and nutritious breakfast of instant coffee and a cigarette. Then, classes: Studio Drawing and Art History on Mondays and Wednesdays, Studio Painting and Special Topics in Painting on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and a three hour Art Theory lecture on Friday mornings. Lunch was almost always from People's Potato, a volunteer based free meal service on campus. It was vegan, which under normal circumstances he would find disappointing, but these days he wasn't preoccupied with taste. Dinner was from the criminally overpriced dining hall, but a meal plan had been mandatory to stay in residence. Usually he would take dinner to go before heading to the campus art supply store (aptly named Art Supply Store), where he picked up as many shifts as they would allow.

Any free time was spent at the gym or the studio, working on his assignments. He avoided his dorm at all costs, for a multitude of reasons, but primarily because occupying the same space as Troy and his hockey friends had him contemplating homicide a bit too seriously for his liking. It was a double edged sword: he simultaneously despised everything they represented, but also missed the easy camaraderie of being a part of a team (a feeling that was extrapolated, by his unavoidable distance from the four friends he had come to see as family).

As a child Ilya adored hockey. It was an escape from his father and brother, and it was something he naturally excelled at, as easy as breathing. Over time however, he came to see hockey as a necessary evil: the vitriolic words of his teammates became increasingly challenging to ignore, but he had believed it was his only escape from his graveyard of a home, from the impending possibility of Russia. His resentment for the sport, or more accurately, the players, still raged inside of him.

So, if Ilya returned home to find Troy's buddies hanging out in their shared space, he avoided confrontation in favour of picking up a gram of pot from Miya in room 207, heading out to the residence gardens, rolling a joint and lighting up. It had become a bad habit that enabled his worse habits: scrolling through the band's social media accounts, searching for articles and reddit threads about them online, and composing but never sending text messages to Shane. Sometimes, when he was particularly melancholic, he would return one of his many missed Facetime calls from Sveta, but those conversations would inevitably leave him feeling hollow at his core.

The band was busy anyway, they were re-recording their EP in a professional studio while playing gigs every weekend, trying to ride out the wave of popularity from their single, and Ilya didn't want to burden Sveta or the others with his mood.

On occasion he found himself going days without talking to anyone at all, other than the occasional please and thank you to service workers or strangers holding open doors. He recognized this was a problem, but couldn't bring himself to do anything about it. He thought about the way he often found his mother, when she was teetering between life and death, lingering in the living room, a lit cigarette between her fingers and a nature documentary that

she wasn't watching ringing out on the television. He wondered if it was inevitable, his transition into something that resembled her.

Which is why, when Harris texted him in early November to suggest they meet up for a beer at Grumpy's, he forced himself to accept.

Warm air assaulted his face as he yanked open the door to the pub, enticing against the biting November chill. The street outside, like seemingly half the streets in the downtown core, was under construction; metal fences cut through sidewalks at jagged angles, trapping in roads broken down into rubble. However, the chaotic mess of cement and steel didn't seem to deter people from seeking out solace at Grumpy's. The bar was packed, a torrent of unfamiliar faces cast in dim lighting, hunched over round, splintered tables and leaning against the bar, voices and laughter competing with the obligatory mix of French and English music, a staple of Montreal radio.

He scanned the narrow space, shoulders tight around his ears, but released them a fraction at the sight of Harris, waving him over to a table tucked away near the small stage at the back of the bar. He'd grown out his facial hair a bit since high school and it suited him, a somewhat rugged contrast to the beaming grin plastered across his face.

"Ilya!" he said, wrapping his flannel clad arms around his frame. Ilya stood awkwardly for a moment, before leaning into the gesture. He realized, suddenly, that it had been months since he had last felt any sort of physical affection. Not since David and Yuna hugged him goodbye. "It's so good to see you man! How's Concordia?"

Ilya shrugged off his jacket and slung it over the back of his chair, trying to materialize the appropriate response. The words didn't come to him. He shrugged at Harris. "It's, you know... School? I suppose."

"That exhilarating, huh?" Harris smiled, smaller this time, sympathetic maybe, and Ilya wondered if this had been a bad idea, if he shouldn't have come.

Harris scooted off to the bar to get them a round of drinks, and Ilya's eyes were drawn to what must have been his backpack, tucked underneath their table. Its shell was adorned with a series of brightly coloured patches and pins. Ilya didn't recognize many of the symbols or logos, but he noticed that more than one featured the pride flag, and he raised his eyebrows in surprise. He knew that Harris was gay, they talked about it when they were in high school together, but he was never publicly *out* back in Bobcaygeon. Evidently, more than just his facial hair had changed.

Ilya wondered what he looked like to Harris. If his external appearance somehow reflected his complete dissociation from reality.

"What the hell is that?" Ilya asked, looking at the two pints Harris set down on the table. The bottom half of the glass was filled with pale yellow liquid, while the top was dark brown and opaque.

"Snake Bite! Half cider, half Guinness." Harris said, holding up his glass to cheers.

Ilya stared at the drink warily as they clinked glasses. He tipped the glass back, and found himself pleasantly surprised by the tart but creamy taste.

“Dude,” Harris said, looking aghast. “You just cursed us both with seven years of bad sex.”

Ilya choked on his beer. “What?”

“Have you gone out, like, at *all* since getting here?”

Ilya took another long pull of his drink. “Um, not really. No.” He ran his hands through his hair. It was getting long.

“Well, to educate your ass before you piss off a Québécois, you’ve gotta make some eye contact when you toast. Otherwise, you know, the aforementioned curse of seven years of bad sex and all.”

“Right,” Ilya nodded. “Sounds perfectly logical.”

“I mean,” Harris added, “I’ll be fine, I’m not exactly pulling all that much dick, but I’m genuinely concerned for you, dude. Will you survive this?”

Ilya shook his head, smiling. He forgot what this was like. Conversation, friendship, doing anything other than work, sleep, smoke, and school. “First of all, cut it with the self deprecating bullshit. You’ve got an incredibly hot lumberjack thing going on with the scruff and the plaid.”

Harris rolled his eyes, smirking.

“And you don’t have to worry about me,” Ilya added. “I’m not... I haven’t done that whole sleeping around thing in awhile now.”

Harris clutched a hand to his chest. “Be still my heart! Has Ilya Rozanov, notorious school slut, finally settled down?”

Ilya couldn’t help it, his whole body shook with laughter, and it took him a minute to catch his breath. “No.” Ilya sighed. The drink became sweeter with every sip, as he approached closer to the cider at the bottom of the glass. “Definitely not settled down.”

“Hmm.” Harris studied him. “But you’d like to be?”

“It’s... complicated.”

Harris looked like he was about to call out Ilya on his bullshit response, so Ilya quickly made a pathetic attempt to change the topic. “So, how’s McGill?”

They discussed their respective programs, catching up on their lives since graduation. Harris was studying architecture at McGill, the more prominent of the Universities in Montreal. He was enjoying himself, thrilled with his courses and enjoying the nightlife. Apparently, his roommate was also a bit of a dick – however in Harris’ case he wasn’t a homophobic asshole,

but just a human garbage can, leaving half drunken protein shakes and redbull cans around the room until they moulded.

It felt nice to vent about Troy and his friends, the way they ranked girls they were sleeping with and casually threw around slurs. The other day he'd come home to find them with an actual whiteboard out, creating a graph to track patterns between girls' hometowns and their blowjob skills. Troy at least, had the decency to look embarrassed when he clocked Ilya's look of disgust. His friend and teammate Berkes, in contrast, asked Ilya if he preferred to be the one sucking cock when he declined their generous offer to share his data for their study. Ilya had quipped back that he couldn't think of anything gayer than sitting around with the boys discussing blowie preferences, which he wasn't exactly *proud* of, but it had felt good at the time.

Ilya ordered them a second round, choosing a local lager that was on tap. He studied the wood grain patterns on the bar while he waited for their drinks, tracing the lines with a finger. This was going alright, he decided. Maybe he should do this more. It would probably be good for him.

And that's when he heard *him*. The bar was crowded, and the collection of voices provided a persistent shield of white noise, but he would recognize that voice anywhere.

*Blue light, late night, I almost stayed
Call me a sick freak anyway*

His hands clammed up against the frosted pint glasses, the blood instantly draining from his face.

"Hey," Harris said as he sat back down, "Isn't this The Wolfbirds?" he asked, somehow not noticing the fact that Ilya was actively being haunted by the voice of the man he loved.

Ilya tipped back nearly a third of his pint in one go. "Yeah." He cleared his throat. "Yeah, it is."

"Dang!" Harris bobbed his head to the song playing out over the bar's speakers. "Seems like they're really popping off."

Two Weeks Later

Harris had been right. The Woldbirds really were gaining traction. They weren't a household name by any means, but Ilya started hearing *Blue Moon Over Brooklyn* on the radio more frequently after that. The melody was haunting him, ringing out as he waited in line for coffee, or from his Studio Drawing Prof's speakers during figure drawing sessions.

And then, Ilya received an email that shifted the tectonic plates beneath his feet, drawing him and Shane closer together, regardless of the distance they were both attempting to uphold for their own futile reasons: Shane, because he was scared of the fall, and Ilya because he had already crash landed and was struggling to keep the fragments of his body together.

From: brandonwiebe@unrivaledrecords.ca

To: ilya.rozzy81@hotmail.com

11/17/2008 15:12:52 EST

Subject: Design Opportunity - The Wolfbirds (Unrivaled Records)

Hi Ilya,

My name is Brandon Wiebe, and I'm an H&R representative with Unrivaled Records. I recently came across your design for The Wolfbirds self-recorded EP, and I wanted to reach out and say how much it stood out to our team. The visual identity you created aligns strongly with the direction we see the band heading in.

We currently have plans to re-record and professionally produce the tracks from their EP, along with several new songs, as part of a full-length album release.

To be frank, we'd love to explore the possibility of working with you. Specifically, we are looking for a designer to lead the album artwork, as well as creating support materials and promotional assets.

In addition, there are plans in the works for The Wolfbirds to join Fabian Salah on a North American tour in the new year. Should that move forward as expected, we would be interested in collaborating with you on tour-related visuals as well.

If this is something you'd be open to, I would love to set up a time to connect and discuss the project in more detail, including scope, timelines, and compensation.

Looking forward to hearing from you.

Best regards,

Brandon Wiebe

A&R Representative

Unrivaled Records

What the hell? Ilya stared at the email in his inbox, dumbfounded, wondering how exactly this had happened. Did the band mention something to their label about Ilya's work on the cover art? Had *Shane* said something? Did that mean he wanted to talk to him again?

He smoked half a pack of cigarettes and paced the dorm gardens as he tried to work out an appropriate response. From a strictly professional standpoint, he would be stupid not to accept the offer. His part time job was reliable, but paid minimum wage. This would

potentially mean more money, which he could use for better supplies and lunches that contained more protein.

It would also mean more exposure. Sure, it wasn't fine arts by any means, but it could lead to more creative opportunities in the industry, which was insane to think about as a first year University student.

But then there was the problem of Shane. Either he knew Unrivaled had offered him the job and chose not to reach out, or he was unaware. Both realities were equally unappealing. The distance between them was cataclysmic, but Ilya worried that having to work together while not being allowed to reach out and touch him would completely destroy him.

Ilya cursed at himself and typed out his response. Who did he think he was fooling? Even after the way things had been left off, he would take whatever fucking crumbs of Shane Hollander he could get.

From: ilya.rozzy81@hotmail.com
To: brandonwiebe@unrivaledrecords.ca
11/17/2008 19:10:14 EST

Subject: RE: Design Opportunity - The Wolfbirds (Unrivaled Records)

Hi Mr. Wiebe,

Thank you so much for reaching out, I really appreciate it.

I'd definitely be interested in working together on this. The project sounds really exciting, and I'd love to be involved in developing the visual direction for the album.

I'm currently studying at Concordia and working part-time, but I should be able to make it work. Please let me know a time that works for you to connect, or if there's anything else you need from me in the meantime.

Also, I was also just wondering how you're envisioning collaboration with the band.

Thanks again, I look forward to hearing more about the project.

Best,

Ilya

Ilya spent the two days between sending the email and hearing back from Brandon in a state of complete paranoia. He barely slept, struggled to eat, and threw himself into his gym routines with the force of a man jacked up on steroids. Even Troy, the beacon of everything Ilya despised about sports and masculinity, could sense that something was off, sheepishly

asking if he was feeling alright one evening when their room was blissfully devoid of his friends.

When the response finally came in, Ilya wasn't sure if Brandon's answer to the question of collaboration with the band made his stuttering heart deflate with relief or disappointment.

From: brandonwiebe@unrivaledrecords.ca

To: ilya.rozzy81@hotmail.com

11/19/2008 09:26:04 EST

Subject: RE: RE: Design Opportunity - The Wolfbirds (Unrivaled Records)

Hi Ilya,

Great to hear back from you! You can just call me Brandon.

Really glad you're interested. That's awesome!

I've included a link below to set up a Skype call so we can connect and go over everything in more detail.

In terms of working with the band, it would be a collaborative process of course, but we'd handle most of the communication on our end. You'd have opportunities to connect with them directly as needed, but we try to keep things streamlined so everyone can focus on their side of the work.

Looking forward to chatting soon.

Brandon Wiebe

A&R Representative

Unrivaled Records

Christmas Eve 2008 – Toronto, ON

“Shane! Your phone!” Rose called from the living room.

“Ow, fuck!” Shane dropped the tray of roasted vegetables and tempeh on the stovetop, the metal clanging throughout their tiny, one bedroom sublet near Kensington Market. “Who is it?” he asked, hissing and shaking out his hand, having burned himself through the thin dishtowel he had used to pull the tray out of the oven.

“Your mom, she’s Facetiming you!”

“Answer it, I’ll be there in a sec!”

Shane ran his hand under the sink, cool water soothing the burn. He could hear the familiar voices of his parents distantly in the background. Their apartment was long and narrow; the

second story of a triplex, a century home that had been converted into apartments eons ago. The hallway was so narrow in fact that Shane imagined they must have brought in the fridge and oven either in pieces, or through the kitchen window using a crane.

The living room was at the front of the apartment, facing the street – and unfortunately, the crackhouse across the laneway. It also served as Kip and Shane’s bedroom, thanks to their thrifted pull out couch, leaving the bedroom for the girls to share. It felt lived in and loved, creaky floorboards, popcorn ceilings, and thick layers of white paint coating the trim and windowsills from years of cheap landlord touchups.

It was a shithole, but it was *theirs*, complete with a miniature Christmas tree Sveta stole from outside a Rabbas one night when they were coming home, high on the feeling of a good show. Shane had returned to the convenience store the next day to pay for the tree.

He shut off the tap and padded down the hallway, sinking into the cushions next to Rose.

“Merry Christmas, Shane!” Their voices chimed at him through the phone speakers. His attention was immediately pulled away from their faces, distracted by their matching vibrant red crewnecks, a goat with Christmas lights tangled up in its horns screenprinted on the front. The festive monstrosity even had the phrase “Season’s Bleatings” blazoned across the top.

“Merry Christmas! And nice sweaters. They’re very... sensible.”

His dad beamed. “They’re perfect, aren’t they! Doesn’t it look just like Anya? They were a gift from—”

“Hey Yuna, do you know where—”

Ilya stood, frozen in the back of the frame, just over his parents shoulders. Light up reindeer antlers were perched on his head and he was holding a tray of his dad’s signature Christmas cookies. The antlers blinked at him mockingly, filling the cosmically uncomfortable silence like a morse code distress signal. Shane watched as Ilya shoved a cookie into his mouth, and he hated how badly he wanted to kiss the crumbs off his lips.

“Ilya, sweetie, come sit, we’re just chatting with Shane!”

Yuna scooched over, patting the sofa between her and David, and Ilya hesitated for a moment, a deer caught in headlights, before joining them.

“Hi Shane. Rose. Merry Christmas.” Ilya waved, arm and expression stiff, his words muffled, mouth still half full of sugar and dough. Shane noted that he was wearing the same sweater as his parents, and something sharp twisted in his gut.

He thought maybe, with distance, the want raging inside of him would die out, like a flame without oxygen. But as he studied Ilya’s pixelated frame, he realized how much of an idiot he’d been. Ilya’s imposed distance hadn’t eased the loss of friendship when they were kids, and Shane’s attempts at cutting off his longing before it festered had been similarly futile.

He looked so soft, settled between his parents in their hideous matching Christmas sweaters, and it made Shane itch to reach out and touch him. He scratched at his own neck, noticing all of the subtle ways that Ilya had changed since the summer. His hair was longer and the tan of his summer skin was beginning to fade, replaced with a trace of restless sleep under his eyes that Shane was uncomfortably familiar with. Shane wished, more than anything, that he could go back to that moment in his bedroom, before the weight of his feelings had crashed over him. He missed the comfort that came with ignorance and he wasn't sure how his self restraint would hold up if they were actually face to face.

Oblivious to the war raging in Shane's mind, Rose carried on an easy conversation with his parents about the masters they'd just given approval on for their upcoming release, and the music video they were currently recording.

"Well, we can't wait to hear them," Yuna said, voice warm with pride. "Ilya showed us the cover art that the label decided to go with and we love it."

Shane tuned back into the conversation at the mention of Ilya's name.

"Yeah," Shane agreed. "He um, did a really good job with it."

Ilya looked at him then, their eyes locking through the four inch screen Rose held out a few feet in front of them. It felt like he was right there, in the small, baseboard heated living room with him, and not a hundred-fifty kilometres away.

"We're so proud of you both," David said, slapping Ilya on the back. "Oh! And did Ilya tell you guys about his trip tick thing that'll be featured in his school's exhibit next semester?"

Shane watched Ilya flush at his dad's praise and he thought about Gregori. He was grateful that his own stupidity hadn't fucked up Ilya's relationship with his parents, and he felt a torrent of guilt at ever having gotten involved with Ilya in the way that he did. He hadn't even considered how it might have robbed him of the lifeline to the family that he needed, and had already gone too long without.

"It's called a triptych, honey," Yuna whispered, at the same time as Rose's jaw dropped open with surprise.

"What? No!" Rose exclaimed. "What the hell, Ilya, why didn't you say anything?"

Ilya ran his fingers through his curls, sending the antler headband slightly askew, and it triggered a physical reaction in Shane; the muscle memory recall of those fingers in *his* hair, on *his* neck, running down *his* chest, fucking *inside* of him, taking him apart with a push and pull that left him so wrecked he couldn't even speak his own name. Shane had been so good at not thinking about it, at shoving those thoughts down since they left for Toronto. And now, all it took to send him into an uncontrollable spiral of misery and lust was looking at his goddamn *hands*.

"Oh, it's not really a big deal, you know. It's just an exhibit run by the school, so..."

David scoffed. "Okay, and how many students in their first year got selected?"

Ilya's cheeks burned even harder. "Um, two, I think."

"Ho, ho, ho, bitches! Time to get naughty!" Svetlana sang, kicking in their apartment door so hard that the doorknob punctured a hole in the drywall as it made contact. "Oh shit," she mumbled, staring at the damage briefly, before shrugging it off and dropping white, steaming plastic bags on the coffee table in front of Rose and Shane.

Kip stormed in after her, brandishing his own collection of brown paper LCBO bags. "Name a better duo than Sour Puss and chicken balls! I fuckin' dare you."

"That's right, you can't," Sveta said. "And before you ask, yes we got all three flavours of The Puss, and yes, we will be tasting the rainbow tonight." She and Kip crashed down on the sofa on either side of them, dogpiling them into a tangled collection of limbs.

"I'd argue that my tempeh and vegetables make for a better pairing," Shane muttered, eyeing their choice of takeout for dinner dubiously. And please never call that lighter fluid of a drink '*The Puss*' again," Shane said, gagging and pushing Sveta's foot off his shoulder.

"Ew. That bird food you eat should be cause for arrest, dude," Kip said as Rose wagged her eyebrows at him.

"C'mon," she taunted. "You know you wanna taste The Puss, Shane."

Kip and Sveta cackled with laughter, parallel hyenas bracketing in the only two sane band members, who were both expressing varying degrees of distress.

"Well, I think that's our signal to end the call," David said, chuckling and shaking his head.

"Sorry," Shane said, taking the phone out of Rose's hand and addressing his parents. "I don't know why I'm friends with them."

"Shit, sorry Yuna," Kip said, just now realizing about the video call they had walked in on.

"That's all right, hun," Yuna said. She checked the time on her watch. "But we should go have dinner ourselves. I think the turkey should be ready by now."

"Oh my god, Ilyushka?!" Sveta squealed, now stealing the phone from Shane, climbing over top of Rose and essentially planting herself in the other girl's lap in order to do so. "You're alive?"

David and Yuna walked out the frame and into the kitchen, giving Ilya a moment with his friends. "Uh, yeah," he said, sheepishly.

"Well, can you answer my fucking Facetimes, you dickhead?"

He nodded, looking embarrassed. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I can do that."

Shane fiddled with the string on his hoodie. He hadn't realized Ilya had been ignoring Svetlana's calls.

Ilya was still on Shane's mind later that night, as he tidied up their kitchen. Kip, drunk on Sour Puss and high on Christmas spirit, had passed out on the pull-out hours ago, and Rose and Sveta were in their room, the sounds of *Die Hard* spilling out from the crack beneath their door.

Shane thought about the winters he and Ilya had shared in Bobcaygeon together as he stared out the window, tracing the descent of featherlight snowflakes against the black sky. He picked up his phone and scrolled down to their last conversation, from back in the summer. Their messages, which had seemed like meaningless banter at the time, held more weight for Shane now, like the pit of a peach lodged in his throat.

He typed out a message, stared at it, and deleted it, repeating the action more times than he would like to admit. Eventually, fed up, he locked his phone and sighed.

He counted to sixty. He picked it up again, and felt his heart catch in his throat. Three dots stared back at him. Ilya was typing something to him.

Shane locked the phone again and whipped it down the hall. The case slammed against the hardwood like a gunshot.

"Shane? You okay?" Rose called from her room, her voice thick with sleep.

"Yep!" Shane choked out. "Perfectly fine!"

The phone dinged. His palms were sweating, but he forced himself to rip off the bandaid and pick it up.

ilya: [attached image: anya with a santa hat sitting between her horns]

ilya: merry christmas, shane

Shane worked through three solid minutes of breathing exercises before his fingers were steady enough to type out a response.

shane: merry christmas, ilya
shane: tell our kid i miss her

He wondered if Ilya could read between the lines. If he knew that when Shane said he missed Anya that what he really meant was that he was being dragged into the undertow with how forcefully he missed the taste of him, and the echoes of a best friend.

Chapter End Notes

Also ya'll... the ao3 curse has finally caught up to me.

Went in for some bloodwork because i had some back pain, and it turns out that i randomly have 4 different markers for ✨lupus✨ and my kidneys are not functioning 🙌 so let's hope i don't die of liver failure before i'm done this fic 🙏

I'm sure it'll be fine in all seriousness. i'll see the dr next week and also my cousin also has lupus and she's alive and well.

Chapter 22: @pantsless_pastor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Can I stop my life so I could just be with you?
Let's hightail to Hawaii on a plane
I'll embezzle what's left of my band fund
To take necessary action to destroy what I have made
Thanks a lot, I lost my mind, and now I'm losing you*

“Future 86”, Bomb the Music Industry!

March 2009 – Montreal, QC

Ilya's Studio Painting class was blessed with broad windows spanning the length of the room, overlooking Montreal's busy downtown streets. While most courses were only worth three credits and were completed in one semester, Studio Painting and Drawing spanned two. As they were nearing the end of the 200 level class, most of the students in the room were using the lengthy periods to work on portfolio pieces for their culminating, while Marcel, their professor, circulated the room, providing feedback and one-on-one demonstrations when needed.

Ilya was currently working on his triptych, for the art show at the end of term. He had finished the underpainting weeks ago, and was slowly progressing through the layers, working on all three paintings concurrently as the oil took a while to sufficiently dry before he could dive back in.

He had meant it when he insisted that the show wasn't really *that* big of a deal. It was a Concordia based exhibit, something that highlighted student artists. Sure, there were only a few first year students selected, but it wasn't like it was at an external gallery alongside professional artists or anything. Still, he was giving it his full attention regardless; he'd somehow been handed this opportunity to enroll in the program, despite all of his colossal fuck ups along the way, and he intended to make the most of it.

He took a step back from his work, trying to decide where he needed to increase contrast to ensure the viewer's eyes followed his planned path for the three 16 x 30 pieces. The first and third paintings portrayed moments of high intensity and contact on the ice, a token of masculinity and sport. They featured fists gripping jerseys, arms drawn back, ready to throw the next punch, and bodies slammed into glass, elbows sharp and targeted. The painting in the centre displayed physical intensity, but in a contrastingly intimate scene, two bodies locked together in a tangle of limbs and flesh. The faces of the figures were smeared across all three pieces, unavailable for the viewer to assign identity to.

Marcel wandered over as Ilya studied his pieces, stalling at his elbow and silently appraising his progress. This was normal for him; he would take his time analyzing a piece thoroughly

before giving any feedback. It had been a bit disconcerting at first, to have the middle aged French man loom over his shoulder, expressionless and stiff. After a semester and a half working with him however, Ilya was used to it, and he continued on as if he wasn't there.

"You are very fond of oils," Marcel said, after maybe fifteen minutes had passed.

"Mm," Ilya hummed, adding in some cool highlights reflecting off the bloodied fist of one of the figures in the first painting. He put the brush down and looked at Marcel, trying to see what he saw in the piece. "It's what my mother always used. She taught me how to paint."

Marcel nodded. "She must have been a very gifted artist," he said, evidently picking up on Ilya's use of the past tense.

"She was."

Silence passed between them and Ilya returned to his work.

"You have a lot of technical proficiency in the medium," Marcel added after a moment.

Ilya's shoulders tensed. He could sense there was a 'but' coming. There was always a 'but' with Marcel.

"But," he said, and Ilya smirked at himself. "I feel like you're holding something back from the viewer. Not fully letting us in."

Ilya's smirk faded into a scowl. What the hell did that mean?

Marcel gestured between the three pieces as he continued to explain. "There is so much intensity going on here, between the violence and the intimacy, yet somehow..." he trailed off, pausing to consider his words.

"This one," he said, pointing at the canvas in the middle, at its skin and inherent sensuality. "It should feel *different* than the other two. And don't get me wrong, obviously it is different on an emotional level. However, it's also operating under similar conditions. They all show the same... constraint, I suppose."

Ilya tried to understand what he was saying. He'd attempted to address a topic that he had been wrestling with: his relationship to masculinity and violence. It felt vulnerable, to share that part of him through his work. He didn't think it was constrained at all.

"I think with oils you are staying inside your comfort zone. Sticking with what you already know. But what would happen, I wonder, if you disrupted your sense of comfort? If you were to do something... let's say unpredictable. Something messy. Take more risks." Marcel grinned to himself then, evidently fond of his words of wisdom. Ilya's scowl deepened.

"Next fall you should consider taking Intro to Contemporary Art Practices. I think it would be interesting to see what you could produce using mixed media."

"Yeah," Ilya said, nodding stiffly. "Okay."

Ilya was irritated for the rest of the class. Art wasn't about being *messy*, that didn't even make sense. And why would he change mediums when he was confident and comfortable with oil?

He was still spiralling an hour later, after he'd cleaned up his paintbrushes and slotted his pieces into his drying rack. He tried to loosen up, taking long drags from a cigarette as he walked the couple of blocks between Faubourg Building, where studio classes were held, and H Building, to for lunch at People's Potato, but it didn't help.

He pulled out his phone once he found a spot in the long line of people waiting for the lunch service to open, starting a chat with Harris, hoping that his perspective might help.

ilya: prof just told me that i'm stuck in my comfort zone

ilya: that i should be more unpredictable

ilya: wtf does that even mean??

harris: lmao

harris: sounds like pretentious art school bs to me

ilya: he said i should take more risks

ilya: like ok. how?

ilya: 🙄

harris: idk man

harris: like tbh i consider you to be a walking hazard

harris: i'm surprised you haven't died from your lack of critical thinking yet

harris: but maybe you're different with your art 🧑🎨

ilya: dude be fr i'm not that bad

harris: ilya

harris: i've never met someone with worse impulse control

harris: remember when you started a fight with your own teammates

harris: and the concordia coach was literally right there

ilya: that was warranted

ilya: he was being a homophobic ass

harris: ...

harris: or when you punched in theriault's window with your bare fist?

ilya: also warranted

ilya: it was to save my daughter 🧑👶

ilya: and i didn't use my bare fist

ilya: i used my car's headrest

harris: i don't think that's any better

ilya: 😡

harris: but like that's my point

harris: you're messy and impulsive and don't think things through

ilya: wow

ilya: thanks

ilya: so glad we're friends

harris: oh my god ilya

harris: stfu and listen

ilya: yes papa h

ilya: 😏

harris: 😏

harris: i just think you should take that window-bashing teammate-punching energy and apply it to your art

harris: or i think your prof wants you to do

harris: to be clear i don't really give a f what u do

ilya: so what

ilya: u think i should punch my painting or?

harris: i mean maybe at least like... metaphorically?

harris: like stop being so weird and closed off with it

ilya: fuck you

ilya: i'm not weird and closed off

harris: didn't you literally smudge out all the faces in it?

ilya: that was intentional

harris: yeah man

harris: i think that's the problem

The volunteers at People's Potato started serving lunch, and Ilya put his phone away as the line moved forward. He knew that Harris probably had a point. So did Marcel. However, that didn't mean he was about to change his triptych. He liked it as is.

Maybe, though... Maybe he would consider taking the course his prof had suggested next year.

“That’s it, we’re going out!” Kip said, throwing back the rest of his beer before slamming the bottle down on the bar.

“Yes please!” Rose captured Kip’s hands in her own, twirling herself around. “I want to *daaance!*”

Svetlana pointed at Shane menacingly. “And before you say anything, Hollander, this is a mandatory band outing. Team bonding experience.”

Shane rolled his eyes and glanced at Ilya, trying to gauge his reaction, eyes drawn to him with magnetic force. They had just finished up their opening set at Le Ritz in Mile End, and were crowded around the bar as they watched Fabian perform. Shane found himself not entirely opposed to the idea of going out, invigorated by the contagious energy of the bar – or maybe it was a side effect of Ilya coming out to their show, and not wanting to part ways just yet.

They had been on better terms since Christmas. Shane hadn’t allowed their relationship to creep back into a shadow of what it used to be, framed by their explicit banter over text and the intense physicality (although perhaps this was simply because it was easier to maintain professionalism with the distance between them), but they’d been cordial with one another. When Svetlana and the others Facetimed with him, Shane didn’t shy away from the call anymore, instead popping on for a few minutes to catch up. It was awkward, and unbearable, now that he was aware of his feelings for Ilya, but he reminded himself frequently that it didn’t need to make a difference. Just because he was probably *not* straight, and just because he was probably attracted to Ilya, not just physically, but also on some sort of deeper emotional level, didn’t mean he had to do anything about it. Actually, it was all the more reason why he *couldn’t* do anything about it anymore.

And yet, as Ilya looked back at him, his gaze heated beneath the blue and red spotlights dancing around the crowd, he knew he would go anywhere, do anything to prolong his time with him, now that he was here in front of him, in the flesh. Close enough to reach out and touch. Not that he would.

“That would be fun,” Ilya said, not breaking eye contact with Shane.

“Alright,” Shane agreed. “Let’s do it.”

“Yay!” Rose cheered, clapping and bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Ilya, after Fabian’s set is done you can lead the way. Unless you guys have somewhere you wanna go?”

Sveta shook her head. “Nah, he lives here.”

“In Ilya we trust,” Kip agreed, holding a hand over his heart.

Contrary to his friends’ collective faith in him, Ilya also had no fucking idea where to take them. He’d left his partying days behind when he moved out of Bobcaygeon, and he was embarrassingly uncultured when it came to Montreal’s nightlife. Not willing to own up to this fact, and not wanting to risk Shane pulling away from their night out, he texted Harris.

ilya: dude drop whatever boring shit you're doing

ilya: i need your help

harris: rude but ok

harris: what's up?

ilya: friends are here

ilya: they want to go out

ilya: need somewhere not lame

harris: you have friends other than me?

ilya: fuck you

ilya: 😡

ilya: any yes

ilya: sveta, rose, and hollander

harris: 🙄

harris: say less

harris: 1474 Sainte-Catherine Est

harris: meeting u there, obviously

ilya: ty papa h

ilya: 🤗

The club was not what Ilya had been expecting. Sure, he went out a lot in high school, but that was mostly just house parties hosted by Trent University students. Sometimes he and Sveta would use fake IDs to sneak into Trasheteria, a dive bar in Peterborough which locals fondly referred to as “The Trash”, if they felt like a change of scenery and cheap beer, but that was nothing in comparison to the mutli-level complex that they were currently standing before.

The blocks surrounding the club felt like its own living, breathing microhabitat hidden within the city. Like a small-scale environment secured beneath a log and teeming with life distinct from the surrounding territory, Sainte-Catherine Street East was a self-sustaining vessel, creating its own energy, safety, and shelter.

Hundreds of thousands of lemon and lime sized balls in varying shades of pink were strung up between buildings and laneways, creating a canopy of colour that dotted the night sky like pale pink constellations. The road beneath was closed off to cars, filled with packed terraces and foot traffic instead. The streets felt like an extension of the surrounding bars, clubs, and restaurants, themselves, a cacophony of music and smoke and bodies bursting forth, speaking in tongues both familiar and unknown. The energy was infectious, flooding Ilya's veins with a sense of elation and ecstasy that he hadn't felt since he and Shane last kissed.

The line for Complexe Sky wrapped around the side of the towering structure; a dizzying crowd of beautiful people dressed in a wide array of eclectic outfits, a stark contrast to the

kinds of things people wore out to party in Northern Ontario, where the staple attire was either low rise jeans, crop tops, and cowboy boots, or oversized graphic tees and air force 1s.

“Oh hell no,” Sveta said, doing mental gymnastics, trying to calculate how long they were going to be stuck outside in the muggy June dusk.

“Gimme a sec,” Ilya said, texting Harris that they had arrived.

Harris met them outside a few minutes later, dressed in shorts and a white tank top decorated with the word “love” in rainbow lettering. His hair was slightly damp and he had a grin of pure euphoria plastered across his face, eyes squinted and wrinkling at the corners.

“You made it!” Harris said, wrapping Ilya up in a tight, and somewhat sweaty, hug. He swayed on the spot, evidently already having drunk a few.

“This place is insane,” Ilya said, still a bit dumbfounded at the existence of this entire neighbourhood. He hadn’t really ventured out past the few blocks separating his dorm and the campus buildings, and he was just now realizing that it might have been a mistake.

“Dude, have you not been to The Village yet?” he asked, walking them towards the club’s entrance. “Actually wait, never mind. I forgot how much of a recluse you’ve become.”

Ilya could feel the eyes of his friends boring into the back of his head. He didn’t really talk to them about how much he had isolated himself since moving to the city, and he knew that Sveta, at least, would have questions for him later.

Harris stepped right by the bouncer, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder, before waving them all through as well.

Kip’s head darted back and forth between the bouncer, Harris, and the line wrapping around the building as they casually strode past the entrance. “Okay, that was *deeply* attractive,” he said.

Harris chuckled. “I just happen to know a guy.”

“Oh he *knows a guy*,” Rose stage-whispered.

The first floor was a lot more laid back than Ilya anticipated. Sure, the air was humid and smooth bass thrummed through the floorboards, but it wasn’t an immediate onslaught of bodies and chaos. It looked more like your standard overpriced bistropub; leather seating, accent brick walls, and decorative chandeliers that cast crystallized patterns of light in shades of merlot and rosé on the tables and floors.

“Alright,” Harris said, clapping his hands together. “Time for orientation.” He had them gathered in a corner near the coat check. Ilya considered just how much they looked like elementary school children on a field trip with Harris as their designated tour guide.

“The ground floor is pretty chill. It’s a good spot if you’re just looking for conversation or something to eat. There’s a bar and a restaurant,” he said, gesturing across the room. “Floors two and three both have a couple of bars and a dancefloor, but their vibes differ vastly. Music

choice changes up depending on the night, so you might get anything from Abba to German House depending on the floor. I suggest checking them both out and seeing what you vibe with,” he explained, shrugging. “But both floors have beer that’s cold and cheap as hell, which is great. Plus I’ve got a booth on the third floor that you guys are more than welcome to hang out in if you need a moment to chill out.”

“Oh big man on campus has a booth now, does he?” Kip quipped.

Rose elbowed him. “He knows a guy, remember?” she repeated, giggling.

Harris smiled sheepishly. “Anyway,” he said. “Rooftop is a lot more low key. Drinks are kind of overpriced up there, but it’s always a good time for conversation, or for hanging out in the pool. It’s kind humid tonight, but—”

“Hold the fuck up,” Sveta cut in. “There’s a *pool*?”

“Um hell yes, let’s go. I demand a margarita and hot shirtless dudes,” Kip said, planting his hands on Rose’s shoulders and pushing her towards the stairs.

Harris chuckled. “Lemme just show you our spot on the third floor and then you guys are free to make all the bad decisions you want.”

Ilya couldn’t help it. He unwittingly tracked Shane’s every move as they pushed through the deluge of bodies between the stairs and Harris’ booth. He knew he had never been fond of even laid back bush parties in Bobcaygeon, which were Sunday morning mass in comparison to this place. He had to physically restrain himself from reaching out to place a hand on Shane’s lower back, wanting to provide him with comfort amidst the surrounding chaos. He was fairly certain however, that it wouldn’t help. Instead, he studied the crease between his brow, and the way his eyes were flickering across the room, as though searching for someone familiar amongst the mass of faces.

“Is this, um—” Shane said, looking at Harris, eyes wide. “Is this a, you know... a gay club?”

Harris eyed Shane up and down, and Ilya hated the jealousy that burned low in his gut at the blush spreading across Shane’s features. “I mean it’s queer friendly, yeah.” He tilted his head to the side. “Is that going to be a problem?”

The heat on Shane’s freckled cheeks burned hotter and he shook his head, frantic. “No! No, of course not. I just. I didn’t know.”

Harris looked to Ilya, a question in his gaze. Ilya simply nodded, which was apparently enough for Harris, whose face returned to its enthusiastic grin. “Ok, cool!”

Ilya lasted about thirty minutes by the pool before his body physically demanded a shot and some dancing. And it wasn’t just because the sight of Shane sitting poolside, pants rolled up to mid thigh and calves lazily swaying in the chlorinated water was a very specific and targeted form of torture worse than public castration.

“Anyone up for some dancing?” he asked, clambering out of his lounge and stretching his arms above his head, fingertips nearly brushing the fairy lights that were strung across the rooftop pergola.

He felt his shirt ride up at the languid motion, revealing the sharp definition of his lower abs, and he grinned, momentarily satisfied at the way Shane’s eyes traced the revealed strip of muscle. Unfortunately, the lingering gaze was followed by a piercing reminder of the fact that Shane was allegedly *not like that*.

Yeah, he really needed a shot. Or five.

The only taker was Harris, who was eager to get up and move as well. Everyone else chose to stay on the roof for another drink, needing to relax as they came down from the adrenaline rush of performing. Rose, who had been so desperate to dance back in Mile End, said she would make her way down in a bit, but Ilya was skeptical. She looked utterly blissed out, curled up next to Sveta on a queen bed sized lounge with a steady flow of piña coladas running through her veins; a perfect emulation of a middle aged wine mom on an all inclusive girls trip.

The dancefloor was somehow even more packed than before, the air thick with cologne and spirits. Ilya slid his way against the bar, the backlit bottles casting multicoloured beams of light on the pale stone countertop. Harris sidled up next to him as they flagged down the bartender.

“Two pornstar shots, please,” he said, not even trying for French. Ilya had learned early on that whenever he attempted to speak French in shops or bars, employees immediately clocked his atrocious accent and took pity on him, swiftly switching to fluent English. It was less humiliating to just accept his flaws and move on with his life.

Harris beamed at him and leaned on the bar. “Man, I’m so glad you finally decided to come out! I think it’ll be good—”

“Ilya?”

Ilya glanced over Harris’ shoulder, searching out the deep and vaguely familiar voice that called out to him and... Holy shit.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Ilya said, staring frozen and stunned at Troy fucking Barrett. That *was* his last name, right? Ilya wasn’t actually confident, which was a bit sad, considering they’d been roommates for the better part of a year. Actually no, it wasn’t sad. Troy was a dick and Ilya didn’t care what his last name was.

Troy pushed through the crowd, slotting himself in between himself and Harris.

“Who’s this?” Harris said, eyeing Troy with appreciation that Ilya knew he was going to regret in a second.

“It’s... Troy,” Ilya said, not taking his eyes off his roommate.

It took Harris a second to make the connection. “Wait. Troy as in...?”

“Yep,” Ilya confirmed.

“Is he lost?”

Troy cleared his throat. “Not lost,” he said. “Also standing right here.”

“I thought you said he was, like, super homophobic?” Harris continued, bluntly ignoring Troy’s interjection.

A pained expression flickered across Troy’s face. “Not homophobic,” he clarified. “And also... Still standing right here.”

Ilya studied Troy for a moment. His shoulders were tense, and one of his hands was awkwardly gripping the back of his neck. He looked like a completely different person than the bravado filled jock he had come to know. He was smaller, somehow. Less guarded.

“Your friends are... kind of massive dicks,” Ilya said.

Troy swallowed, and his voice was tight when he spoke. “Yeah, I know. That’s why I’m here alone.”

“Here’s your pornstars,” the bartender said, winking at Ilya, oblivious to the assumptions that were being shattered before him.

“We’ll get one more, actually.”

Ilya slid the third shot to Troy, and they crowded in, raising their glasses in the air in a toast.

“To... whatever this is,” Harris said, cautiously skeptical of the entire situation.

“To revelations,” Ilya said. He made sure to meet both Harris and Troy in the eye before he threw back the sweet and sour shot. “Alright, let’s fucking dance gentlemen!”

Shane left the rooftop after what he felt was an entirely reasonable amount of time – one ginger ale, five songs, and a brief but convincing attempt at enjoying himself. He also had incredibly warranted and logical reasons for departing. It was muggy outside, the music kind of sucked out here, and he felt like maybe having an actual drink, but the rooftop bartender had given him this weird look when he asked what non-alcoholic options they had earlier and he didn’t want to have to talk to her again.

Moving downstairs had absolutely nothing to do with Ilya. Obviously.

He settled against the cool leather of Harris’ booth, scanning the crowd for no one in particular as the reverberating bass of 90s pop remixes pounded deep in his chest, a suffocating weight that heightened his anxiety. He could recognize the irony in his discomfort. Somehow he was inexplicably at ease when he was performing, when the electric beams of multicoloured light were sweeping across his own skin and the swarm of bodies

sang and danced and drank around him. However he'd always struggled to still his heart when he was at parties or bars, forced to play the role of spectator. It was as if somehow, he felt like more people were watching him when he was simply failing at fitting in, compared to when he was in the spotlight. It was irrational, he knew this, and yet knowing this didn't stop him from the resulting paralysis.

One of the bar's servers swung by their booth, and he ordered a rye and ginger, needing to do something with his hands. The flavour was sharp and reassuring, something familiar amidst the unknown, and the sweat beading on the side of the glass was soothing against the warmth of his palms. He finished off the first one quickly and ordered another as his eyes continued to flicker across the crowd.

And then he saw them. Bodies close and loose, like multi coloured flags whipping in a strong breeze. Carefree and comfortable in a way that Shane was simultaneously petrified of and drawn towards. It was Ilya whom he noticed first, obviously. He always noticed him first. Then, Harris. There was someone else too, who Shane didn't recognize. He was muscular, with an athletic build, hair as dark as Shane's and skin that the strobe lights seemed inherently drawn to.

Shane hated the immediate pang of jealousy that soured his gut. Harris was goofy and joyous on the dancefloor, but Troy and Ilya moved around him like they were controlling the rhythm of the music, in sync and intimate. It's not like they were even being overtly physical either, but instead sharing the casual brush of hand against spine, or lips to ear as one of them leaned in to be heard.

He ordered another drink, trying to distract himself. He should go back upstairs, hang out with Kip and Sveta and Rose. He should go back to their hotel. He should—

His eyes were drawn back to Ilya, like a moth to a flame. And because he was a masochist and almost three drinks deep he allowed himself to picture the fears that were haunting him.

Had they hooked up before? Ilya and Harris? Or Ilya and this other man? A man who had hair like Shane but was less freckled and baby faced, who was more sure of himself, more relaxed, more free and less afraid. Had Ilya fucked him? Been inside of him with his fingers and his tongue? Had he opened his mouth for Ilya and taken all of him? Did they kiss like he and Ilya used to kiss?

Did Ilya love him?

Why wouldn't he? This stranger didn't pull away, he didn't hesitate or hide. He probably didn't tell himself that *this doesn't mean anything* even though it did and it does, it means fucking *everything*. Ilya would be better off with someone like him. Someone who didn't make being in love an impossibility.

Shane was tearing out his own heart by continuing to watch, even though he knew he had no right to feel the way he did. Nothing would be able to change, he couldn't let it. He watched Ilya tilt his head back in laughter, the light hitting his neck like a caress. He looked happy, Shane realized. Probably happier than when they had been together, if he even had a right to call it that.

Shane knew he had to go. It was disturbed, to sit here and watch this part of Ilya play out when he didn't have any claim to him. But then something in Ilya shifted, and he looked at him, their eyes catching like a flare in the night.

Shane knew that Ilya could see all of him, in that moment. The empty glass in his hand, his isolation, the desperation in his stare. He was called back to that night in high school, at Ryan Price's eighteenth birthday party, their first real gig. He watched Ilya then, too. He'd been dancing with Svetlana, but he'd been watching Shane, just as he was now. Ilya kissed her that night, he remembered. He kissed her like it was his last dying breath.

Shane felt like there were hands clasped around his neck, cutting off his access to oxygen. He wouldn't, not here. Not now. Right?

Ilya leaned in toward them, eyes still locked on Shane. The seconds dragged on for centuries, and Shane tried to remember how to breathe. When his lips moved however, it wasn't to capture the stranger's, but to say something, short and sharp, before he pulled away and left for the stairs.

Shane watched him go. In his pocket, his phone buzzed. He counted to sixty.

ilya: i'm going outside for a smoke

ilya: in case anyone is looking for me

Ilya exhaled slowly, watching the cloud of smoke transform from something tangible, to the abstract idea of what once was. He heard the footsteps before he saw him, quick and uneven, as they rounded the corner of the club and down the side street where Ilya was leaning against the brick exterior. He turned slowly, trying desperately to keep his own walls intact.

"Couldn't find the bar then?" he asked, before taking another drag.

Shane didn't answer. His eyes were glassy, his jaw tight. He looked like a man on the edge.

"Hey," Ilya said, softer now, taking a step forward. He wanted to reach out to Shane, but wasn't sure what was allowed in the new territory they were navigating.

"Who was that back there?" Shane asked.

"What?"

"In the club. Dancing with you and Harris."

Ilya studied Shane's expression, realizing that what he mistook for vulnerability may have been something sharper. Anger, or jealousy.

"Oh," Ilya tapped the end of his dart, ash falling to the ground. "That's Troy, my roommate."

"Right," Shane nodded. Ilya could tell his words hadn't done anything to soothe him. "You guys seemed... busy."

“Yeah?” Ilya forced a smirk onto his face, falling back into his taunting, asshole persona with an ease that was all too familiar. “You liked watching, huh?” He knew he shouldn’t have said it. But what was Shane doing out here? What did he want from him?

Ilya moved to take another drag, but the cigarette was snatched from between his lips by Shane’s deft fingers, and he flicked it down onto the pavement where it sputtered and died.

“What the he—”

Ilya’s words were cut off by Shane’s mouth, crashing into his own, immediate and thick with greed. Ilya let out a small sound of surprise, but his body caught up quickly, reaching out and catching Shane at his waist, pulling their bodies flush together as Shane shoved him back against the wall, rough and ruthless. He fisted the front of Ilya’s shirt as he licked into his mouth. It was messy and heated, a battle of teeth and tongue, and Ilya was more than eager to join the fight.

He tried to think rationally, to slow down. This was absolutely, unequivocally a horrible fucking idea. The last time they’d been intimate Shane had bolted like a foal spooked in the night, and they were only just on speaking terms again. He needed to use common sense for once in his goddamn life.

“Shane—” he tried, pulling away, eyes blown and breath heavy.

Shane didn’t slow, didn’t heed the warning. He dragged his lips along Ilya’s neck, biting and sucking like he was starved for the taste of him. His breath was hot against his skin and Ilya could feel his body caving, giving into Shane’s every touch. He tipped his head back against the wall, his eyes fluttering closed, and Shane unbuttoned his jeans, snaking a hand into his boxers and palming his length.

“Fuck, Shane,” Ilya breathed.

Shane stroked him, the angle clumsy and awkward, but Ilya didn’t care. Shane’s other hand sought out the back of his neck, and he drew their lips together again, driving his tongue into his mouth as Ilya thrust upward into Shane’s fist. He moaned into the kiss, louder than he should be, losing control, and Shane sped up the pace of his hand in response, running his thumb over the head of Ilya’s cock, the wetness there exposing just how much he needed this.

Ilya’s fists tightened and released where they gripped the back of Shane’s shirt, and *fuck* if he was about to come like this. It had been ten goddamn months since he last felt Shane’s touch and he was a weak, weak man.

And then they heard them. Voices, cutting through the night, bright, breathless, and painfully familiar.

“Oh my god,” Sveta said. “I owe Harris my first born, this place is life changing.”

The unmistakable ring of Rose’s laughter chimed next to her, just around the corner. Ilya watched as the sound washed over Shane, like a bucket of ice water. He froze abruptly, one

hand tragically stilled around his cock, the other on his neck, and then, seeming to remember where he was and what they were doing, he pulled back.

Ilya's hands dropped to his sides. He looked at Shane, both of them taking in sharp, uneven gasps of air. Shane stepped back further.

"Shane," Ilya whispered, immediately hating himself for it. He knew what would follow before it had even played out, like a movie he'd seen so many times that he'd inadvertently learned all of the lines. Shane was folding in on himself before his eyes, rationalizing the moment in his mind to make it something smaller, insignificant. He'd blame it on the alcohol or the high of the show, on anything but the feelings that Ilya *knew* he shared. Ilya knew this was going to happen when he followed him down here, and he knew it would happen time and time again. He was pathetic and desperate and would let Shane tear out his heart and crush it, as long as it meant he got to be close to him again and pretend, for a little while.

Ilya zipped himself up, took out another cigarette, and tucked it behind his ear, clicking his tongue. He looked Shane up and down, giving himself one last moment to take him in, before he nodded, accepting defeat. "Well," he said. "Always a pleasure."

Ilya flicked two fingers at Shane in mock salute, and then he walked away.

Two Months Later – August 2009 – Bobcaygeon, ON

It had been radio silence from Shane all summer, ever since they hooked up at the club. Ilya had been expecting as much, but it didn't mean he wasn't affected by it.

He came back to Bobcaygeon for the summer. He, Harris, and Troy were planning to rent an apartment together the following school year, but they each decided to return home until September, allowing them to save on two month's rent.

David and Yuna clearly knew that something was up with him. He'd fallen back into all of his worst habits, despite his efforts to stay busy helping out on the farm. He stopped making art. He took long showers where he just sat on the floor of the tub, counting tiles on the wall. He slept a lot, but it never seemed to help and he was constantly exhausted. He tried to make up for this by pushing himself to go on runs until his body screamed at him for release. Then, when none of that made him feel anything at all, he would lay in the long, dandelion spotted grass surrounding Anya's barn and stare at the constellations, trying to find Shane's freckles in them while he got high enough to forget that he was alive. Inevitably, this would lead to his tried and true self-flagellation ritual of stalking social media posts and reddit threads speculating about Shane and the band.

The Wolfbirds were getting more popular every day, as they continued their North American tour opening for Fabian, and that meant more content for Ilya to get drawn in by. He knew nothing good could come from it, and he was right.

Previously, he thought that maybe, when he and Shane inevitably crossed paths again they would fall into their pattern of release and regret. His findings, one night in late August,

however, made him wonder if their encounter had only made Shane recede into himself more than ever before, if maybe they would never get back even a morsel of what they once had.

r/canadianmusic | august 2009

doors-are-locked

wolfbirds: are rose & shane together or just intense on stage??

ok i've seen them twice now and i can't tell if this is just their stage dynamic or if something is actually going on between them

8burgers__

it's not just on stage though. my friend works at fresh on queen and she said they've come in more than once for dinner w/o svetlana or kip. they are apparently very touchy

bolshe-bolshe-bolshe

also there was that met radio interview where she said "we spend a lot of time together" and then kind of laughed like she wasn't supposed to say it??

strawandberry22

i mean they're in a band together that's not that weird

orange_creamsoda

yeah literally you can watch any live video. like not to be dramatic but the tension between them is crazy

doors-are-locked (op)

YES like he's watching her the whole time and always sharing a mic with her even tho he has his own. idk if they're together but the energy is THERE

pantsless_pastor

who tf are the wolfbirds and why are we doing relationship analysis?

strawandberry22

lol an indie band from ontario. kind of like slower punk?? idk how to describe it

doors-are-locked (op)

they're the guys that did blue moon over brooklyn, you've probably heard it on the radio. you should listen to their full album though (rookie season) - it's dope.

pantsless_pastor

ok fair. continue your investigation

Ilya checked the thread daily for updates. He watched videos, he analyzed photos of them posted to Instagram, scrolling through the comments on each one for any fragment of information. He felt like he was encroaching on serial killer levels of stalking, but at least he was showing interest in something again, right?

It consumed him, and it didn't make any sense. He knew there was no way Shane and Rose were actually together, but based on all of the evidence people were right to suspect something.

What the fuck was Hollander playing at?

Chapter End Notes

For all those invested in an update:

- I am not dying 🎉🎉🎉 *cue applause*
- It is possibly lupus or some other autoimmune disease but I have to wait until June to see a specialist (which isn't a bad thing, again, means imminent death is not on the horizon lol)

ANYWAY! Hope ya'll enjoyed this one, I know it was a fucking roller coaster of emotions 🤔 sowee

Chapter 23: The Hockey Artist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*As the sun grows high and you serve your time
Does each day just feel like another lie?
Now you know, is it just for show?
Just a foolish game that you hide behind?
Don't forget the nights when it all felt right
Are you not the same as you used to be?*

“Used to Be”, Beach House

September 2009 – Vancouver, BC

Theoretically, before he'd ever experienced it in the flesh, the concept of the tour bus had been enthralling to Kip. It existed in his mind as a glorified, extended sleepover with his three best friends. A divine fantasy of late night gossip sessions, whispered confessions in the dark, inside jokes spanning cities, and the kind of closeness that only came from never quite being alone; a reality that, as an only child, he'd never been able to know.

The novelty of the bus, however, quickly wore off. The bunk bed mattresses were thin and unforgiving, the air stale, and the steady diet of takeout turned from indulgent to exhausting in a matter of weeks. While they had all initially mocked Shane for using their days off to grocery shop and meal prep as much as he was able in the cramped bus kitchenette, just last week Svetlana caught him forgoing his side of McDonalds fries in favour of two date and peanut butter protein balls that he stole from Shane's stash in the mini-fridge.

Proximity was the other thing. While constant companionship had seemed theoretically comforting to Kip, it turned out that never quite being alone also meant never quite getting a break. Even the smallest things found a way of getting under everyone's skin, as if they were collectively serving up slivers to one another in the form of toothpaste tubes left uncapped, socks that didn't belong to you somehow ending up in your bunk, and Rose's morning torture ritual of sixteen consecutive alarms set to go off every five freaking minutes instead of just setting one goddamn alarm at the time she was actually going to get up like a normal, sane, functioning human being.

Kip was doing fine, in the sense that he hadn't yet buried a body somewhere between cities.

They had just finished up their last night in Vancouver, and were on route to Calgary, making their way back to Toronto along the Canada-US border for the final leg of their tour with Fabian. The lights in the bus were dimmed, a clinical blue hue that artificially mimicked the glow of a full moon, and the bus lurched slightly as they merged onto the highway before settling into its familiar, rhythmic hum.

The band, like the bus, lingered in a state of purgatory, too mentally exhausted for conversation, yet too amped up on adrenaline from the show for sleep. Shane was working through his post-show ritual, journal open at the bolted two seater kitchen table, spine straight and headphones in as he analyzed recordings of their performance and took detailed notes that he would summarize for them tomorrow morning in a feedback format he had probably been taught in elementary school and hadn't strayed from since: one thing they could each work on bookmarked by two things they had done well. The girls lay decompressing in their respective bunks; Rose with her nose deep in a sci-fi paperback, and Sveta scrolling mindlessly through social media on the bunk above her. Kip was sprawled on the top bunk across from Sveta, only half paying attention to an old season of Survivor on his laptop that he recently discovered in his downloads folder. Watching a group of strangers survive on bug-infested water and coconuts made him feel marginally better about their current living situation.

"Oh my god," Sveta said, breaking the carefully constructed silence. "You guys have to see this."

Kip paused the episode and sat up in bed, his head nearly brushing the roof of the bus. "What?"

She tossed her phone across the narrow aisle between them, and it landed on his mattress with a soft thud. He picked up the device and read the title of the Youtube video open on the screen *"the wolfbirds tour clips but its just rose and shane having insane chemistry for 10 minutes"*.

"What the hell?" Kip said, pressing play immediately.

"What is it?" Rose asked, laying her book face down on her duvet, intrigued by Kip's reaction.

It was a compilation of moments on stage, interviews, their own social media posts, and videos fans had taken of them in public when they were unaware that someone was filming, overlaid with sound effects and commentary written in comic sans. Obviously, Kip knew there was nothing between Shane and Rose. They were as close as two people could get, of course, but in a very platonic sibling sort of way. Not to mention they were both preoccupied with their all consuming, full time jobs of pining for Sveta and Ilya respectively.

The way the video had been edited however, made the evidence look damning.

"Is it bad that I find it kind of sexy?" Kip asked, looking up from the video at Sveta.

"Ew," she said, grimacing. "Yes. You're disturbed."

"Lemme see!" Rose whined, making grabby hands in the air. Kip scrubbed the timeline back to the start of the video and tossed it down to her. He watched her expression change from confused, as she read the title, to an interesting combination of intrigued and disturbed, as the clips played out in rapid succession. She let out small noises of surprise every couple of seconds.

Shane, having picked up on the commotion, popped out his earbuds and planted himself next to Rose, looking over her shoulder at the phone.

“What are you guys watch—” he started, cutting himself off when the contents of the clip became self-evident. He grabbed the phone from Rose and restarted it for the third time, a flush spreading across his features as he read some of the frankly quite graphic and descriptive, overlaying text.

“Is this— Do we— What—” Shane sputtered, holding out the phone like it was a bomb about to detonate.

“Someone please reset him before he malfunctions,” Kip said.

Rose giggled, but pulled the phone out of Shane’s hand and set it to the side, rubbing gentle circles on his back. “It’s okay, Shane. I mean, honestly, can we blame them? We do look pretty hot together.”

“Someone call Elena,” Svetlana said, and Kip was surprised by the serious nature of her tone. He would have thought she’d find the situation comical, and Shane’s reaction even more so, but she looked, for all intensive purposes, concerned.

Kip dialled without protest, familiar with what a pissed off Sveta could be like, and not in the mood to encounter her. Despite the late hour, Elena picked up on the third ring.

“Equinox Management, this is Elena.” Her voice was thick with sleep, yet somehow she still managed to sound confident and composed, and her resolute tone in and of itself seemed to ease some of the tension that Sveta was harbouring on to. Shane however, still looked like a constipated toddler.

“Girl, you know it’s me calling, you don’t have to answer the phone like HR’s listening.”

Elena sighed. “It’s called being professional, Kip. Now what do you want? It’s like three in the fucking morning.”

“*So* professional,” he muttered under his breath.

“What?”

“Nothing!” Kip said. “Sorry. Forgot about the time change. Hold on, I’m putting you on speaker.”

Sveta wasted no time, getting straight to the point and explaining the video in excruciating detail. There was a quiet exhale on the other end of the line, and a thud that Kip could clearly envision as Elena resting her forehead against the nearest wall with more force than was strictly necessary.

“Sorry,” she said. “Are you telling me that you called me at three in the morning to tell me about a mother fucking Hollandry edit?” Elena sounded like she was contemplating the easiest way to collectively murder them from 4,000 kilometres away.

“Um,” Kip said, chuckling slightly, in a feverish sort of way. “Yes?”

“Hollandry?” Shane said, speaking for the first time since Kip had started the call. “What the hell is a Hollandry?”

“It’s your ship name,” Elena said, sounding very much like a mother who wasn’t mad at you, just very, very disappointed.

“Our what?”

“Oh my god, Shane, you need to go on the internet. It’s 2009, there is literally no reason for you to be this uninformed.”

“Sorry,” Shane said, sheepishly.

“Look, guys,” Elena said. “We’re aware of the videos, the fanart, the gifs, all of it.”

Kip watched as Shane silently mouthed “gifs?” to himself with a disoriented expression on his face, and Kip tried his best to smother his laugh.

“And honestly,” Elena continued. “It’s been good for engagement. Scott and I were going to bring it up when you were back in Toronto, but might as well address it now. People like the two of you together. You’ve got good stage chemistry, and the fans love to read into that shit. So, as long as you guys aren’t opposed to it, my advice as your manager would be to, you know, play into it a bit.”

“What, you want them to *pretend to date*?” Sveta said, a frown etched deep in her skin, like vinyl grooves worn into a record.

“No! Of course not,” Elena insisted. “I’m just saying, if you two aren’t seeing anyone else, and you don’t have any reason to correct people, then... don’t. Keep it ambiguous. People will see what they want to see.”

Kip watched Rose and Shane look at each other, silently communicating in the weird, telepathic way that they did.

“Okay,” Shane said, nodding his head slowly. “Yeah, we can do that.”

“Sounds good,” Rose agreed. “Thanks Elena. Sorry for waking you up!”

“Mhm,” Elena said, before two beeps rang out, signalling that she had ended the call.

Later that evening Kip lay in his bunk, the sheets tangled like roots around his ankles from spinning restlessly instead of falling asleep. He was exhausted, but he couldn’t stop thinking about the look on Sveta’s face at Elena’s suggestion, and at Rose and Shane’s easy acceptance of the idea. The curtain to Svetlana’s bunk was closed, but he decided to try texting her, in case she was awake.

kip: u up? 🙄🙄

sveta: yea
sveta: what's up slut

kip: just wanted to see if ur okay
kip: u seemed off during the call with elena

The three dots appeared and disappeared several times over the next few minutes, before Kip finally got a response.

sveta: idk. i'm just not sure if it's a good idea
sveta: like i trust elena, she's helped us out so much
sveta: but like
sveta: idk nvm
sveta: i'm just surprised rose didn't want to talk it over or anything first

Kip considered her words, and what she wasn't saying.

kip: rose is really protective of shane, like probably to a
fault
kip: kind of reminds me of someone else i know
kip: she's really pretty and smart and good at the drums
kip: and has this best friend who is shit at singing but who
we love regardless
kip: anyway
kip: i think rose hasn't figured out that she's gotta let her
baby bird fly
kip: honestly i'm not sure where i'm going with this metaphor
i'm fkn beat

sveta: lol
sveta: thanks kip
sveta: sweet dreams, bitch

Six Months Later – March 2010 – Montreal, QC

“Are you kidding me? How did that hit me?” Troy snapped, leaning forward.

“It's just strategy.” Harris said, a smug look of satisfaction on his lips, fingers smashing buttons with practiced diligence.

“No, it's just you being deeply irritating!” Troy clambered on top of Harris, trying to block his view of the screen.

“Oh my god, get *off* me!”

“What? I'm not even targeting you!”

“No get off my fucking lap, you asshole! I can’t see shit!”

Ilya let the two of them flirt-battle it out, while he hovered at the corner of the stage, bouncing Kirby innocently in front of the ruins of Hyrule Temple.

“Bye, bye, Harris.” Troy cackled as his Ice Climbers worked in tandem to send King Dedede flying over the edge with a *thwack*, followed by a deep, resounding voice declaring “*PLAYER THREE, DEFEATED!*”

“You’re such a dick,” Harris complained, smacking Troy in the shoulder with his Wii remote. “You always go for me first!”

“You’re the easiest to target.” Troy laughed, diving out of the way to avoid another blow from Harris.

While they were distracted by their painfully obvious infatuation with each other, Ilya took the opportunity to Kirbyside Troy’s Ice Climbers, efficiently inhaling them and walking off the edge of the floating castle, ending their short, pathetic time on this virtual Earth.

Troy’s head snapped back to the television as the speakers shouted “*GAME*,” announcing Ilya’s win. His jaw fell open and he glared at Ilya. “That was a cheap fuckin’ shot.”

Ilya jogged a slow-motion lap around their sofa, which was arguably too large for the size of their living room, waving his arms in the air like he’d just won the MLH Cup before wedging himself between his two roommates, splitting up their poorly disguised cuddle session.

They’d found the baby blue suede leather monstrosity on the side of the road a week after moving into the place, and hauled it up fourteen flights of stairs, because of course, the elevator was broken that day (they soon discovered that it was broken most days). The apartment was *technically* a two bedroom, and Ilya *technically* wasn’t on the lease. He’d taken up Harris and Troy’s offer to pay less rent in exchange for having to live in their makeshift third bedroom, which they created by stringing up a couple of bedsheets over a line made of fishing wire, splitting the living room in half. On the plus side, his “bedroom” connected to their balcony, so he was able to go out for a smoke whenever he wanted. Unfortunately, it meant that the living room space they had left was tightly packed; a tetris configuration consisting of their decrepit sofa, a coffee table, a tv, and Harris’ collection of rescue plants that he was trying, and failing to bring back to life.

“Rematch?” Troy asked, already opening up the character selection screen.

“Sure,” Ilya shrugged.

Harris chose King Dedede on instinct and slugged his feet up onto the coffee table as Ilya and Troy took their time choosing.

“How was practice today?” Harris asked, looking over Ilya’s shoulders at Troy.

Troy’s shoulders tensed. “Uh– it was fine, I guess.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Ilya said, without looking away from the screen. “What happened?”

Troy put down his controller and leaned back into the soft cushions of the sofa, scrubbing his face with his hands. “I don’t know, it’s just this one guy, Couillard, you wouldn’t know him, anyway, he just started showing everyone his phone, right? Like, passing it around. And it’s these pictures of this girl he said he’d been with.”

“Ew,” Harris said.

“It gets worse.” Troy sighed, looking a bit nauseous. “At first it was just like, a normal picture of her, whatever. But then he swiped to the next one and it’s— it’s like clearly something she wasn’t aware he took?”

“What the actual fuck?” They’d told Harris locker room horror stories in the past, but having never played hockey growing up, the details they shared still had shock value for him. For Ilya, shit like what Troy described had been so commonplace throughout his adolescence and teenage years that it rarely phased him anymore. He wasn’t sure what reality was worse; his numb acceptance or Harris’ raw shock.

“Yeah, it was really fucked up. Like the guys were all laughing and one of them asked him to put it in the group chat. I don’t know.” Troy let out a frustrated sound. “I should have said something.” He curled forward, elbows on his knees, forehead resting in his hands. “I feel like I’m just as shitty as them for not doing anything about it, but like, I don’t even know if saying something would help. They’d just like, call me a pussy and move on with it.”

“Would you be able to tell your coach?” Harris asked.

Troy snorted. “Fuck, no. Desjardins is frankly worse than a lot of guys on the team. I don’t even want to think about what repulsive shit he’d say.”

Ilya pinched the bridge of his nose. What he was about to ask for was either a stroke of genius or incredibly, cataclysmically stupid.

“So, I have an idea,” he began.

“No,” Harris said. “You’re not allowed to beat up Troy’s teammates. We can’t afford rent if you get kicked out of school again.”

Ilya chuckled. “As much as I would love to administer extreme acts of physical violence to those guys, for once I was actually thinking more along the lines of psychological warfare. But Troy, I would need your help.”

Troy’s brow creased. “I’m scared.”

“You should be,” Harris said.

“It’s not that bad,” Ilya insisted. “And it would help me out with an art exhibit my Contemporary Arts prof invited me to take part in. It’s not until the summer, so we have time.”

“Dude, I’m the *last* person you want helping with an art project. I failed grade nine art. My principal said he didn’t even know that was possible.”

“Don’t worry,” Ilya laughed, getting more invested in the plan as the moments ticked by. “Although I’m not entirely sure if it’s legal.”

Five Months Later – August 2010

PITCHFORK

ALBUM REVIEW

All Stars
The Wolfbirds
9.3/10

Genre: Punk/Rock/Alternative Label: Unrivaed Records Release Date: 2010

By Nina Orlean | Reviewed August 6, 2010

On their second record, The Wolfbirds channel the rural energy of bush parties, backroads, and beer pong into a raw and impressively unique sound. It’s scuffed-up punk with a backbone as sturdy as the Canadian Shield, and on *All Stars*, they’ve somehow found a way to capture a perfect blend of childhood nostalgia and existential dread for the unknown without without any hint of pretentiousness.

The opening track, “First Name Basis” sets the tone with a kind of voyeuristic intimacy, like being pulled into a conversation you weren’t meant to overhear. The vocals represent Landry and Hollander at their most immediate – sharp, flirtatious, and a little bit reckless.

On “Stratosphere” they loosen their grip, embodying the easy confidence of musicians who have been doing this for decades. The urgency of Grady’s bassline is diffused, stretched thin into a quiet, uncertain desperation. Then, in “Ultraviolet”, Vetrova pulls the narrative back into focus. Her precision on the drums builds through a slow accumulation that acts as a heartbeat chasing a catharsis it’s doomed to never encounter.

With *All Stars*, The Wolfbirds capture a sound that spits in your face and grabs you by the throat, yet somehow leaves you weak in the knees begging for more. Next month they’ll take *All Stars* on the road, stepping out as headliners on their very own tour of North America – and we at Pitchfork look forward to experiencing their restless energy in real time.

One Week Later

It had been over a year since the club incident, over a year since he'd spoken to Shane at all. He'd like to think he was over it, but his transcendental brown eyes and bewitching voice haunted his every waking moment.

Even if Ilya wanted to avoid Shane, it was becoming increasingly difficult with each passing day. His social media algorithms had learned from his obsessive fixation, and fed him a near constant loop of torture. Their music was becoming more mainstream too, which didn't help the cause. The single from their latest album, *All Stars*, was featured in a fucking Old Spice commercial, and now Ilya couldn't even put on deodorant in the morning without remembering the smell of him.

So, it was understandable that when, on one particular hot and humid August evening, Shane Hollander strolled into the art exhibit that would change the trajectory of his entire career, Ilya thought he was probably just hallucinating.

"Are you sure we shouldn't have told him we were coming?" Shane asked, speaking into Rose's shoulder. "I feel like we should have told him we were coming."

"What? No, don't be stupid," Rose said, tucking a hand into Shane's arm as Sveta and Kip stalked confidently through the gallery's foyer, making a beeline for two glasses of red wine from the open bar. "He'll be thrilled to see us. It's been like, a year."

"Fourteen months," Shane muttered.

Rose eyed him curiously and ruffled his hair. Shane scowled and smoothed it back down immediately.

"Oh god," he said. Ilya was there. Right there, across the room. A standing, breathing, living adonis, who had been constructed for one reason and one reason only: to put Shane into an early grave via a lust and denial induced stroke.

Immediately, he was transported back in time. He was drunk, delusional, and actively groping Ilya against the side of a club on the other side of this very city. Why did Shane stop talking to him again? What could possibly be more important than touching him, tasting him, breathing him in? His justification had seemed so right at the time, so soundproof, yet now, stone cold sober, Shane wanted nothing more than to recreate that moment, to hold Ilya, hot and hard in the palm of his hand, regardless of the consequences.

"Dude, isn't that The Wolfbirds?" someone called out from over by the bar.

Shane snapped out of his fantasy. Right. That's why. He had a career to think about, he had his parents to think about. Elena had said the image of him and Rose dating was good for the band's trajectory, and that had to be his focus right now. And his parents wanted nothing more than for him to be *normal*. He wanted to be normal. He'd already let them down and crushed their expectations for him in so many different ways. His diagnosis when he was just

a kid. His failure to apply for University. He *had* to make this thing with the band work, otherwise it was all for nothing.

It wasn't even the *gay* thing. Shane had done some self reflecting. He'd journaled about it. There might have been a spreadsheet or two somewhere over the past year. He knew at this point that statistically, he was most likely not straight. Probably gay, even. And that was... okay. He was fine with it. He hadn't said it out loud, or anything, but he hadn't spontaneously combusted, and he considered that a win.

The problem was *Ilya*. Ilya, the boy who moved in across the street from him and reshaped everything he knew about himself, everything he knew about the world. He was his first friend. His first defender. His first kiss. Ilya was his partner in crime the first time Shane ever got in trouble with a teacher. He was the reason Shane got back on the ice. He was the inspiration behind countless playlists, the muse behind his lyrics, the push he needed when he wasn't feeling brave.

If it began and ended with being gay, Shane could handle it. He could keep that closed off, contained within himself. He could probably even find someone to hook up with every once and a while. But with Ilya there was no beginning and no end in sight. He was an all consuming force that infested Shane's mind like a parasite he was willingly infesting himself with. Shane needed this part of himself to stay neat and tidy and controlled. Ilya couldn't be that. He'd tried the casual hooking up, he'd tried just saying friends, but it wasn't enough and it never would be. So, the only option he was left with was nothing. A vast expanse of nothing, periodically shattered by encounters like these. Moments of contact that would inevitably set him back to square one, an addict doomed to relapse time and time again.

Shane searched out the voice who had called out the band, and it slowly dawned on him that he knew him. It was Ilya's roommate from last year, the one who had been dancing with him at the club. *Troy*. He was chatting with Kip and Sveta, their faces soft and unaware, their laughter echoing through the gallery like forks tinkling against crystal glasses.

"So you guys went to high school with Ilya and Harris? That's *so* freaking cool," Troy said, swirling a glass of white wine nervously in his hand as he stood, starstruck, in front of Svetlana Vetrova and Kip Grady. "I loved Ultraviolet! Best song on the new album, hands down."

"Ohhh, I like him," Sveta purred, winking at Kip.

"She fought Shane tooth and nail for the drum solo on that track, so you're her favourite now."

Troy could feel his face heating. "Well, it was really good," he said. And then felt very stupid. How could he not think of something more eloquent than *really good*? His flush deepened as Harris wandered around the corner, having finished a lap of the gallery, and came to stand next to them, briefly placing a hand on Troy's lower back in greeting. The warmth of it bloomed up his spine.

"My favourite Montrealer!" Svetlana said, sweeping Harris up into a full body embrace.

“You know Ilya’s like, right over there,” Harris said, his voice strained from the hug.

She pulled away and winked at him. “Ah, he’s old news. And he’s become very boring in his old age.”

“How was his piece?” Troy asked, swaying awkwardly on his feet.

“It’s more of an *experience* than a single piece,” Harris said. “You’re going to freak when you see it.”

Troy’s grip on the stem of his wine glass tightened, and he took a sip. It had warmed to room temperature, the taste slightly sour. When Ilya had asked for the recordings he didn’t explain exactly how he was going to use them, simply insisting that it wouldn’t be traced back to Troy. Probably. It hadn’t been very reassuring, but he felt like it was penance in a way, for all the years of shit that he’d stood by and done nothing about.

“Ohhh, I want to check it out!” Svetlana chimed. “Where is it?”

“First room on the right,” Harris said, pointing down the hallway that led to the various sequestered rooms that made up the maze-like gallery. “You won’t be able to miss it.”

Svetlana grabbed onto Kip’s hand, tugging him away from the bar. “It was nice meeting you, Troy! Harris, we’ll catch up in a bit!”

It took Sveta several drawn out seconds to make the connection between what she was hearing and the rest of the room.

“Holy shit,” she said, hand still linked loosely in Kip’s.

“This is a lot different than the paintings he used to do,” Kip said, voice hushed.

“Yeah.”

The square room was fairly small, the walls maybe eight feet in length. In the centre were two human figures constructed out of wire, hunched over, facing head to head, like a face off on the ice. Each frame was adorned in a hockey jersey, one for the Montreal Voyageurs and one for the Boston Raiders, two teams notorious for their rivalry. The Voyageurs jersey was perfectly intact, pristine, while the Raiders jersey was mercilessly shredded and stitched back together in haphazard, messy seams, the frayed fabric hanging off the figure like skin run through a wood chipper.

Projected onto the four walls was a loop of footage taken from interviews, moments captured by fans, streamed hockey games, and documentaries. It displayed scenes of community and celebration; hockey’s greatest stars signing jerseys for kids, team captains posing at charity events, players visiting hospitals holding teddy bears, laughing with oversized donation cheques, cheering crowds, fist bumps and head taps, pride night games with sticks wrapped up in rainbow tape. It was the sport at its best.

Then there was the audio. It was distorted, overlapping, partially intelligible and emotionally inconsistent. Laughter, running water, and the metallic clang of lockers was layered over deep, warped conversations. It was immediately apparent that it had been recorded in a locker room. It took a moment of attention, however, to clock into the specifics of what was being said. The comments were dehumanizing, objectifying, casual jokes about consent. Graphic depictions were tossed around simultaneously as threats and to boast about conquests. Throughout all of it, masculinity was policed from subtle suggestions to “man up” to more explicit homophobic, sexist, and racist language. It was sickening and raw and heartbreakingly commonplace. Sveta hated it and loved it, she felt sick to her stomach at the thought of it.

They stood there for what must have been at least six rotations of the looped footage, but the audio hadn’t repeated even once. There was more than enough of the player commentary to fill the void.

“Hey,” Ilya’s voice swelled from behind them.

“Ilya, this is incredible,” Kip said, finding it hard to pull his eyes away and wrap Ilya into a hug.

Ilya grunted. “Thanks,” he said. “I know it’s probably kind of cliché and dumb, but—”

“Dude, literally no one is talking about this shit, it’s not cliché at all.” Svetlana said, shutting him down.

Ilya smiled at her, small, and pained. “I missed you guys,” he admitted. His eyes didn’t leave Sveta as he said it, and Kip could have sworn it looked like he was almost on the verge of tears.

“I’m gonna go check out the other exhibits,” he said, pointing at the open doorway and sidestepping around Ilya, doing his best to make his exit seem less painfully awkward than he currently felt.

“Kip!” Rose called, approaching the doorway, her arm linked with a very stiff and emotionally constipated Shane. “Is his stuff in there?” she asked, nodding at the room he’d just come out of.

“Yeah,” he said, glancing between them and where he knew Sveta and Ilya were clearly dealing with *something*. “You might want to wait a minute though. He’s uh— he’s in there with Sveta and it seemed like they needed a minute. I was gonna check out the other artists’ work, if you guys wanted to join?” he offered.

Shane, somehow, became more closed off at his words. He pulled away from Rose’s grasp and ran his hands over his hair, flattening it against his forehead. It looked kind of terrible like that, but Kip wasn’t about to say so.

“I— Uh— I’m—” Shane stuttered, took a slow breath, and tried again. “I just need to go— Need some air— Smoke break?”

“What the fuck?” Kip asked, watching him walk away.

“You okay?” Rose asked, pushing her way out of the front doors a few minutes later. Shane was hovering next to the curb, like a dog who had been tied up outside, waiting motionless for its owner to finish shopping.

“Huh?” Shane asked, coming out of his stupor. “What, yeah. I’m fine.”

Rose stared at him. “Shane. The air out here is ten times more humid than the air conditioned gallery. Also, you said you were coming out for a *smoke break*. You hate smoking.”

Shane stared up at the starless, light polluted sky, wet eyes blinking rapidly.

“Shane?” Rose took a tentative step closer.

“Mmm?”

Rose felt like she was missing something. What was it about tonight that was sending him over the edge? Shane had been best friends with Ilya, on and off, since childhood. She thought back to those first years of high school, before she knew Ilya by name. Even then, when it seemed like there was hatred or anger bubbling beneath the surface of their relationship, there had always been an odd undercurrent of tension sparking between the two of them; their eyes drawn to each other through the arena glass back in Grade 9, during Kip’s one and only season of playing for the school team.

And then in that last year of high school they’d become inseparable, constantly in each other’s orbit, like they were an extension of one another more than individual beings. Shane had been so flippant near the end. Disappearing during lunch breaks and asking Kip weird questions about long distance relationships and... *holy fucking hell*.

That party, Hayden’s party. When they were dancing in the living room. Shane hadn’t been staring at Svetlana, God. She was so fucking *stupid*.

“You never liked Svetlana, did you?”

Shane’s head snapped towards her.

“What?” He looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“In high school,” she said, her voice wet and tight. She hated herself then, because *fuck* she had been a terrible friend, hadn’t she? How did she not notice? “I asked you if you liked Svetlana and you said yes, but it was never her, was it?”

Shane’s chest heaved with sharp, sporadic breaths. He didn’t have to say anything.

Rose pulled him into her, a hand on the back of his head. She ran her fingers through his hair and just let him breathe. “It’s okay,” she said, and she realized that she, too, was crying. “It’ll be okay.”

The Next Day

“Dude, have you seen this?” Harris asked, tearing back the curtain into Ilya’s so-called bedroom, his laptop held precariously on the palm of his free hand.

“What the hell, Harris? I could have been jerking off.” He hadn’t been jerking off. He had been laying in bed, staring at the ceiling, attempting to make a mental list of things he would miss if he wasn’t alive.

“Shut up, look at this. Your shit is *everywhere*,” he shoved the computer in Ilya’s face and sat down next to him on the bed, pointing at the screen.

TMZ

WOLFBIRDS DRAMA: ROSE AND SHANE CAUGHT IN HEATED LATE NIGHT MOMENT IN MONTREAL

By TMZ Staff | Published August 15, 2010 9:00 AM PDT

Are things getting messy behind the scenes for The Wolfbirds?

The rising alt-rock band – currently gearing up for their North American tour at the start of next month – was spotted in Montreal last night. They made an appearance at a local art gallery opening, but what really turned heads was what happened *outside* the venue.

[Pictured: Rose and Shane locked in an intense, close-quarters exchange outside of Art Mûr late Saturday evening]

In photos sent in by a fan in attendance, Rose and Shane can be seen in what appears to be a highly charged moment on the sidewalk, just steps away from the gallery. Despite the grainy resolution, it's clear that the moment was emotional for them both, whether that be from passion or frustration, it remains unclear.

Fans have long speculated about the pair's relationship, fuelled by their undeniable onstage chemistry and banter during interviews. Neither has confirmed anything, however moments like this are certainly adding to the intrigue.

Also in attendance at the event was Montreal-based student and artist Ilya Rozanov (being dubbed online as "*The Hockey Artist*") whose featured exhibit explored gender expectations in the sport. The band's connection to Rozanov remains unclear.

"This is just a ridiculous tabloid, Harris, it's not really about the exhibit at all," Ilya said, although his attempt at nonchalance sounded fake even to his own ears.

"There's more dude, check the other tabs."

COLOSSAL MAG

Violence, Silence, and the Performance of Masculinity: An Emerging Voice Breaks Through

Until this weekend, Ilya Rozanov was largely unknown outside of a small circle of peers in Montreal. Now, with a debut exhibit that has already begun to draw significant attention online, The Hockey Artist has somehow caused a stir in both the world of visual art and sport.

Rozanov's installation is deceptively simple in form. Hockey jerseys hang in various states of disrepair, their seams split and reworked (and these deconstructed jerseys are just one of many aspects of the installation that athletes and fans alike have something to say about), while projected footage of the sport demonstrating camaraderie and celebration moves across the gallery walls. Beneath it all, there is a persistent and invasive audio track: overlapping locker room talk that is crude, obscene, hard to listen to, and yet shockingly commonplace.

It's specifically this familiarity that makes Rozanov's work so unsettling. The violence that he draws attention to is not limited to altercations on the ice. It's ambient noise in the lives of the players, a systemic vocabulary that has become so normalized it gets brushed past and ignored, painted over in favour of a romanticized, mythological ideal of brotherhood.

In a country like Canada, where hockey functions as both sport and nationalistic symbolism, The Hockey Artist has surfaced at a moment when such interrogation feels incredibly relevant, and potentially necessary.

"What the hell," Ilya said, meeting Harris' eyes.

"Yeah, dude." Harris pointed at the next tab. "Click on Twitter. The fucking Montreal Voyageurs official account tweeted about you."

"What? What the fuck?"

"Look! I swear," Harris said, leaning over and opening up the tab for him.

twitter.

@MLHVoyageurs

We are aware of a recent art installation in Montreal featuring an altered version of our jerseys and audio elements intended to comment on the culture of the sport.

The Montreal Voyageurs organization remains committed to fostering a respectful, inclusive, and positive environment both on and off the ice. While we were not involved in the creation of this exhibit, we welcome ongoing conversations about how to continue growing the game in meaningful ways.

@VoyageursDynasty

oh brother here we go

@AllezVoyageurs

this is so embarrassing for the league honestly. why are we entertaining this

@double_m

nah fr this reads like damage control 😭

@BleedBleuBlancRouge

i saw clips. dude took jerseys and trashed them while playing locker room audio like it's some big revelation. groundbreaking stuff man

@All_I_Do_Is_Win

sounds like you're mad because you know it's all true

@BleedBleuBlancRouge

no i'm mad because it's anti-canadian garbage made by someone who wasn't even born here. hockey is a part of our identity and now it's getting turned into a lecture by some nobody

@CentaursSupportGroup

If you've ever actually been in a locker room, you know that language exists. Ignoring it doesn't fix it.

@AllezVoyageurs

yeah and blasting it in a gallery doesn't fix it either. what's the goal here besides attention

@BoodramsBBQ

maybe the goal is making people uncomfortable enough to think???

@BleedBleuBlancRouge

or maybe the goal is tearing down something people care about. wild concept

@1909hockeydad

My kid plays AAA and I'm not thrilled about this narrative getting pushed. Makes the whole sport look bad.

@chiron_supremacy

also can we talk about how the wolfbirds were there lol
like what does this have to do with them

@AllezVoyageurs

clout. same as this stupid fckn "hockey artist"

@BoodramsBBQ

or maybe they just went to an exhibit lol

@VoyageursDynasty

nah. everything is political now apparently. can't even
enjoy a sport anymore

Harris inched the laptop closed as Ilya continued to scroll through the replies. "Yeah, uh, some of the responses get kinda nasty on there, so maybe let's not..."

"Jesus," Ilya muttered.

"Do you wanna make some breakfast?" Harris asked.

"Sure." Ilya looked up at the ceiling, momentarily, before getting out of bed. He guessed he could add Harris to the list of things he would miss.

Chapter End Notes

SO I tried something new at the end there, during the gallery scene! I wanted to explore that really heightened and important moment by transitioning between POVs based on who last looked at/spoke to who. It's not something I would ever do all the time, but I thought it was an interesting way to explore the dramatic and anxiety of that moment. I hope ya'll enjoyed it! If you didn't I hope it at least wasn't unbearable lol.

What I'm sure WAS unbearable was that they didn't even talk 😞

I promise, however, that the next chapter will make up for it 😈

Chapter 24: i got broken up with by my gay fake girlfriend and all i got was this lousy t-shirt

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*We set out once with folded shirts
with hairy chest and well rehearsed
I want it all, I want it all for myself
Out in the earth I smell of you
Of bathing boy, amazing you
I want it all, I want it all for myself*

“All For Myself”, Sufjan Stevens

Two Weeks Later – Bobcaygeon, ON

With just a few weeks left until the start of their North American tour, the band made a collective decision to spend the time back in Bobcaygeon. After his mortifying full blown meltdown at Ilya’s art show, Shane thought the familiarity of home would be comforting. Home meant his dad’s cooking and his own duvet. It meant watching fireflies light up the night sky and waking up to the sun crawling its way over the ginseng fields. It meant the Foodland with the aisles set up in the way he liked and the crunch of gravel beneath his feet when he ran his favourite backroad trail. It meant mom and dad and Anya and Mrs. Vaughan, the now ninety-three year old neighbour up the street who somehow still maintained her own lawn with her ridiculous pink camo ride-on mower.

Unfortunately, comfort wasn’t what he returned home to find. Since stepping foot on the front porch of the farm house he grew up in, he had been filled with a restless unease. He’d become used to the routines they’d developed on the road, and the stagnation he found himself in at home made him anxious and irritable. He snapped at his parents for things that he knew weren’t worth getting worked up over, and they kept joking that he must be going through the teen angst phase he never experienced in high school, which just made him even more annoyed.

And it didn’t help that Rose texted him *again* last night, insisting they should talk before they were back on the road.

Shane absolutely did not want to talk to Rose about what happened in Montreal. He would much prefer they forget the moment had ever transpired, photographic evidence that was circulating the internet be damned. But, it was Rose. So of course, he caved, and of course she was on her way over right now. In an effort to keep some semblance of sanity during the conversation, Shane asked if they could meet at his house, in Anya’s barn to be specific. He figured an emotional support goat might be in order.

Anya, despite the fact that she was much too big for this sort of thing anymore, was attempting to curl up in his lap when Rose showed up.

“Hey,” Rose said, walking into the barn, all casual and shit, as if she hadn’t recently uncovered everything Shane had been attempting to keep locked away from everyone, including himself.

“Hey,” he said, unfortunately sounding substantially less casual and shit. How was it that he could say the same three letter word, and yet sound so much less like a functioning member of society?

Rose dropped her tote bag and sat down in front of him, cross legged in the hay, like kids sitting in the grass at recess.

Shane ran his fingers in a repetitive, circular motion through the coarse fur between Anya’s horns. He did not feel emotionally, mentally, or physically ready for this conversation. Maybe he should just share his gay panic spreadsheet with Rose and call it a day.

“So,” she said.

Shane’s eyes snapped up to meet hers. “Look, if this is about what happened in Montreal—”

“No, it’s not,” she interrupted him. “Well, it kind of is. But not like what you’re thinking.”

Anya, sensing the tension in Shane’s fingers, blinked at him, slowly waking up. Shane tried to silently communicate to his daughter that it would be super cool if she could help postpone this conversation by using her escape artist skills to bolt out of the barn, forcing them into a wild goat chase. She licked his hand and flopped her head back down onto his lap in response.

“I, um.” Rose played with the end of her hair, nervously tucking it and untucking it behind her ear. “I think we should break up?”

Shane huffed out a short laugh. She was right, that’s not what he’d expected her to say. “That’s fair. I’ve been a pretty shitty boyfriend.”

Rose closed the gap between the two of them, bringing one of her hands to rest on top of his, giving him a soft squeeze.

“You’ve actually probably been the best boyfriend I’ve ever had,” she said, smiling at him.

“I don’t think the bar was very high to begin with.”

Rose laughed, full and bright. “No, it really wasn’t.” She squeezed his hand again and then lowered it, scratching Anya’s head. “I’ve been a shitty girlfriend too. And a shitty friend, actually.”

Shane frowned at her. “What? No you haven’t.”

She sighed. “I really have. It’s just that, I thought you, you know... Liked Svetlana.”

“Right,” he said, not loving where this was going.

“So, because of that I felt like I couldn’t tell you.”

He studied Rose, the way she was looking anywhere but at him, her hands fiddling with the strap of her tote bag. “Tell me what?”

“I’m kind of, um... Seeing someone.”

“Someone other than me?”

Rose laughed. “Yes, Shane. Someone other than you. It’s um– you know...” She looked up at him, eyes wide, lashes thick. “It’s Sveta.”

“Oh,” he said. He thought back over the past several months. Over the past several *years*. They had always been inherently physical with one another. Had they been dating the whole time? Or was that just typical female intimacy? His face was obviously doing *the thing* it did when he was thinking too hard.

“You for sure don’t like Sveta, right? Because–”

“Oh god, no!” Shane confirmed. “Sorry, I was just thinking about you two.”

“Shane Hollander, you pervert!”

Heat crept up his neck and chest. “Jesus, Rose, not like that!” He buried his face in his hands, laughing. “I was just wondering how long you two have been... you know?”

Rose shrugged and toyed with the strap on her bag again. Anya, noticing the motion, uncurled from Shane’s lap and started nibbling on the canvas. Rose played a halfhearted game of tug of war with her as she continued talking. “Well, we kissed for the first time on prom night...”

“What!?” Shane exclaimed, making Anya drop the strap and bleat at him in surprise.

Rose laughed, tension slowly seeping away, her eyes a bit brighter, shoulders softer. “Yeah, it was in this stupid game of truth or dare. You were out trying to convince Ilya not to assault Sveta’s ex...” Her words hung in the air, not quite an acknowledgement, but not going unnoticed either. “Anyway, later that summer we kissed again, at your cottage. Things kind of fell into place pretty quickly after that.”

Even if he hadn’t been looking right at her, Shane would be able to hear the smile through her words. He’d never seen Rose like this before, and a pit of warmth swelled in his stomach, tipsy on the idea of her love. She made it sound so simple. He wondered if things would ever be simple like that, for him.

“That’s really amazing,” he said, hating that his voice sounded flat. Hated that he couldn’t just be happy with her, without also being jealous of what she had.

“You know, you don’t have to pretend with me, right?” Rose said, and Shane’s blood ran cold. Of course she was turning it back on him. He’d been stupid to think he was in the clear.

“I’m not—” he started, but cut himself off. What *was* the point in pretending with her? She obviously already knew, and maybe saying it out loud, even if it was just to Rose, would bring some relief. “It’s not the same, he’s not—” Shane let out a long exhale. Fuck it.

“I don’t think it’s that simple, with me and Ilya.”

“Why not?”

Shane groaned, flopping back into the layer of hay padding the floor. He knew that his hair would be full of dust and dried grass, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. It was a glaringly obvious sign of his extreme and sudden decline in mental stability. “Because I’m a freaking idiot,” he said simply.

She didn’t say anything, instead arranging herself so she was laying down next to him in the hay. He appreciated the show of solidarity in the form of poor hair hygiene.

“I think I kind of messed everything up.” He rested his hands on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his diaphragm as he spoke. Now that he’d started, he found it actually wasn’t so bad, talking to Rose about it. It was like he’d been walking around with one foot caught in a bear trap for years, and he finally decided to just unarm the goddamn thing.

“I think I’ve maybe been in love with him, for like, a long fucking time, Rose. And I kept telling myself that we were just messing around, or experimenting, or whatever. Kept insisting that I wasn’t even gay.” He found himself laughing, suddenly, at how absolutely ridiculous he’d been.

“Rose, I literally drove forty-five fucking minutes across town to buy—” he cut himself off, not sure how to explain himself in a way that wasn’t completely mortifying. “Uh, to buy something for... you know, to try and see what it would be like, with, um. With a guy?”

“Like a dildo?” she said, kicking her foot against his shin.

“Fuck off.” Shane covered his face with his hands. “But, well, yeah. Anyway, I drove all the way out there, and I didn’t even end up going in the shop, okay, But I drove all the way out there for *that*, and I still told myself I was straight.”

Rose snorted. “I mean, I guess technically you could have been.”

“Yeah, that’s what Reddit said, too.”

“Shane, you did not just cite Reddit as your source of sex ed.”

“Where else was I supposed to go?” He pushed himself up to his elbows and frowned at her. “I wasn’t about to go to my dad and be all, ‘Hey *David*, so, hypothetically if I think I would enjoy having a dick up my ass, does that make me gay, or?’”

Rose screeched and grabbed a fistful of hay, throwing it at Shane. He retaliated, shoving two handfuls of the stuff down the back of her shirt. Somewhere along the way, the hay fight dissolved into a tangle of limbs, Rose and Shane holding onto each other in a hug that both of them desperately needed.

“You know what this means, right?” Shane asked, his chin tucked over her shoulder, locked together like puzzle pieces.

“What?”

“You’ve now officially had *three* gay boyfriends.”

“Oh my god!” Rose exclaimed, shooting back from his arms. “I almost forgot!” She grabbed her bag, pulling out a white t-shirt with black, iron-on letters pasted on the front. She balled it up against her chest so he couldn’t read what it said, but it was clearly a long phrase.

Shane laughed. “I thought you gave up your DIY t-shirt phase years ago,” he said.

She smiled mischievously. “I saw all my stuff for it at home and got inspired. Seemed like an appropriate time for a throw back.” She snapped the shirt open, revealing what it said.

i got broken up with by my gay fake girlfriend and all i got was this lousy t-shirt

“Absolutely not.”

“Rude. That’s my best work.” She tossed the shirt in his lap. He actually kind of loved it, but he wasn’t about to tell her that.

“You should go talk to him,” Rose said, tone suddenly serious.

“Who?”

“Your dad, *duh*, about the butt stuff.”

Shane shoved her shoulder and she giggled.

“No, I mean Ilya, you dummy.” She ruffled his hair, and he briefly wondered why all of his friends did this to him. It was vaguely degrading, but he also kind of liked it, which was something he would happily ignore for now and maybe address in therapy twenty-five years down the line. “You should go to him. Tell him everything you told me. With less mention of your dad, maybe.”

Shane scrubbed at his face. “Rose, he’s in *Montreal*. And we’re going on tour in a week.”

“Yeah, exactly. We’re not going for another week. That’s more than enough time to drive back out there, confess your love, stop being stupid and repressed, and then come home and continue pining for each other but with slightly less self deprecation.”

“What if he doesn’t even want to see me?”

“I mean, that’s possible,” she said, “But you’re not going to know if you sit around here.”

She was right, which he hated. But it wasn’t that simple. “Okay, sure. But also like, I don’t even know what I would say.”

Rose shrugged. “Well, good thing you’ve got a six hour drive to figure it out.”

Montreal, QC

The knock sounded through the apartment when Troy and Harris were mid cake pop crisis. After discovering how much Harris liked the sweet dessert, Troy thought it would be a cute date night idea to make them together. It seemed simple; a short list of ingredients, minimal steps, and no baking required (Troy and the oven were not on speaking terms after The Great Chicken Strip Incident of 2010, which involved Ilya’s poor influence, arguably a bit too much weed, and a lack of understanding on the intricacies of the broil function.

The first half of the recipe had gone well. Troy bought a pre-made cake and they crumbled it, mixing it with birthday cake icing and forming balls of dough that they punctured with popsicle sticks and refrigerated for a couple of hours. What caused the ensuing chaos was having to dip the balls into melted chocolate. First of all, it took them three attempts to melt the chocolate because Troy burned the first two attempts in the microwave. While the third attempt (saved by Harris) was the right consistency, they had trouble keeping the liquified chocolate on the desserts themselves, sauce dripping all over the kitchen as they transferred the cake pops onto parchment lined trays.

And then there was the fact that Harris decided to dip one of the unused popsicle sticks into the chocolate and flick it at Troy, inciting an all out war.

So, inevitably, when the knock rang out, Troy was designated the role of apartment greeter, considering that he was the undefeated champion of the war and had (slightly) less chocolate on his face and shirt.

“Holy crap,” he said, upon opening the door. “Shane Hollander is at my door.”

“Troy,” Shane said. “Where’s Ilya?”

“Oh my god.” He must be dead. He slipped on melted chocolate and hit his head and he was now deceased. That was the only logical explanation. There was no way Shane Hollander, objectively the hottest Canadian musician (but not the hottest Canadian, of course – he *really* liked Harris, but he also had eyes), was standing at his front door. And he *said his name*.

“Shane Hollander knows my name,” he said, stupidly. Not that it mattered. He was dead. He could be as stupid as he wanted to be.

“Troy, please shut the fuck up and listen,” Shane said. Which was weird. He was being weirdly aggressive for a fantasy in death. Actually, did Troy mind that? He wasn’t sure.

“I need you to tell me—”

“Shane! Thought I heard your voice,” Harris said, popping his head around the corner. “What are you doing here, man?” He walked over to them. “Sorry, I’d hug you, but...” He gestured at his general chocolate covered vicinity.

Troy looked between Harris and Shane, connecting the dots. Right. They were all friends from high school. Which meant... evidently, and unfortunately, he was not dead. And he did actually just sound that stupid out loud. When talking to Shane Hollander. Fuck.

“It’s fine,” Shane said, his jaw clenched. “Is Ilya here?”

Harris shook his head and licked a chocolate covered spoon he was holding. “Nah, he left like, two weeks ago maybe? The day after his art show I think.”

Shane’s eyes darted around the entrance of their apartment, his tension transforming into something more anxious and jittery. “He left? Where?”

“Uhh, I don’t know, really. He was kind of freaking out. Because of all the stuff posted on social media about his exhibit, I think. The Hockey Artist stuff, you know?”

“What?” Shane said, his brows pinched together.

Harris looked at him like he was concussed. “The Hockey Artist bullshit. Like the people saying he was spitting in the face of Canadian patriotism and stuff?”

Shane’s expression remained blank.

“Dude,” Harris said, “Aren’t you literally a celebrity? I feel like you should be culturally aware of shit going on online.”

“I’m fucking culturally aware,” Shane snapped and Harris snorted.

“Okay, Mr. Zuckerberg,” he said.

Shane let out a sound that sounded vaguely like a dying animal.

“Do you, um,” Troy said, clearing his throat. “Do you maybe want, like, a cake pop? You seem tense...”

Shane snapped his head at him, and from the look in his eyes Troy realized that despite not actually having died earlier, he might get murdered any second now.

“No, *Troy*, I don’t want a *fucking cake pop*. And unless you have any helpful goddamn information on where Ilya is, I would appreciate it if you would kindly *fuck right off*.”

Troy blinked. Okay yep, that confirmed it. He didn’t mind the aggression.

“Dude,” Harris said, stepping in front of Troy, which, also... he didn’t mind. Protective Harris was kind of doing it for him. Shane was right, maybe he did need to excavate himself from the situation. For no reason in particular.

“You need to chill the fuck out, Shane,” Harris continued. “I love you, man, but you’re kind of freaking me out.”

Shane ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “Fuck, sorry. Yeah.” He looked past Harris’ shoulder at Troy. “Sorry, Troy,” he said, although he didn’t look happy about it. “Just, did Ilya, like, say *anything* about where he was going?” His eyes softened when he asked the question.

“Honestly man, I don’t think so?” Harris looked at Troy for confirmation, and he shrugged.

“He just asked if he could use my car for a couple weeks and said he was going to another place,” Troy confirmed.

Shane froze in place, processing the information. “Did he say another place, or *our* other place?”

“Uhh,” Troy was panicking. He really didn’t want to say the wrong thing. “I don’t... know? He could have said that, I guess? Seems grammatically incorrect to me, but...”

Shane’s eyes darted between them, the face of a man about to slay his demons. Then, he left without another word, slamming the apartment door closed behind him.

Harris looked at Troy, an eyebrow raised in a silent *what the fuck was that?* expression, as he resumed licking the wooden mixing spoon.

Troy tore the spoon out of his hand and threw it on the ground with far more force than the moment called for. “Bedroom. Now,” he said, pulling Harris towards him and kissing him like his life depended on it (it did).

Muskoka Lakes, ON

Shane pulled up to the cottage at around 1:00 in the afternoon the following day, after a restless night spent at the Vaudreuil-Dorion Holiday Inn, a hotel in a suburb just outside the city. Sunlight bounced off the front facing windows, catching like starbursts between his eyelashes. As he opened the driver’s side door, he shaded the sun from his eyes and stared at the unfamiliar minivan parked in front of him on the gravel. His stomach lurched, a wave of relief and fear and hope crashing over him, sudden and uncontrolled.

He was here. Ilya was actually *here*.

Rose had lied to him. She said that he would figure out what he wanted to say to Ilya during the six hour drive from Bobcaygeon to Montreal. Now, despite having driven for more than 13 hours over the last day and a half, he still had no fucking idea what he’d do when he saw him. He wasn’t sure that it mattered, however. He’d already come this far.

Shane tried the main cottage first. Traces of Ilya were everywhere. A handful of mugs and plates in the sink, which Shane resisted the urge to load into the dishwasher. The pull-out-sofa in the living room was made up into a bed, which Shane smiled at. He could have slept

in the main bedroom, but of course he chose the spot where he would be woken up by the sunrise over the lake. One of his sketchbooks was open on the dining room table, although whatever he'd been working on was scrubbed out with thick, dark lines of charcoal. There was a hoodie, strewn over the back of a chair. Shane ran his hands over the soft, forest green cotton, and without thinking, brought it up to his face, inhaling the smell of him, intertwined with the lingering smoky scent of campfire.

Shane thought about the first time they'd come here together, as little kids, when he taught Ilya how to start a fire and they shared secrets, glowing within the burnt orange light. He thought about the two of them, years later, wrestling on the dock, skin slick with lake water and his heart racing in anticipation of something he was too scared to let himself name.

It suddenly seemed so stupid. His attempts at holding himself back. The civil war he let rage on inside himself for so long. How had he ever managed to convince himself that what he felt for Ilya was anything other than love?

Shane padded out to the back deck, peering down at the lake through the thick foliage, branches heavy and lush with life. And then, for just a moment, everything slowed. The chickadees and yellowfinches halted their song. The breeze swallowed itself, containing its unceasing breath, locking the sparse clouds into place. The trees anchored their roots in the ground, strong and sturdy, unforgiving in their determination. The lake too, quieted its ebb and flow for them, like it had frozen over with a thick layer of ice, ignoring the overbearing pressure of the late August heat.

Shane looked out at the lake, the world around him patiently paused, and he smiled. There, on the dock, standing in front of an easel that was precariously balanced on its uneven boards, was Ilya. His back was to the cottage, and Shane took in the span of his shoulders, the muscles taught and glistening where he stood, shirtless in the sunlight.

He could call out to him, Shane thought, and he opened his mouth to do just that, but his voice was held hostage by the silence as well, and no sound came out. He'd have to go down to the dock.

Shane walked halfway down the dock without Ilya noticing, the sound of his footsteps blocked out by whatever music was playing through his headphones, the wire trailing from his ears down into the pocket of his swim trunks. Standing in his shadow, Shane realized that the canvas on the easel in front of him was a mirror image of the landscape around them. He'd always said that his mother would have loved to paint this place. Shane remembered encouraging him to paint it for her instead, but he never had.

Except, it wasn't *just* the landscape, he noticed. With a fine brush held between deft fingers, Ilya used a deep blue-black paint to add words atop the landscape, his strokes forming a thin, organized script. Shane squinted. He could read the words, but it seemed like nonsense to him, a list of arbitrary things.

warm lemon water

the smell of turpentine

getting beaten by him in nhl 2001

the cinnamon sugar dusting on david's christmas cookies

*sveta's voicemails and the fact that she calls
cigarettes
harris
kisses from anya
his freckles
that thing his face does when he's angry
the coconut bun from the shop in the guy-concorida metro
our other place
his songs on the radio
the way he says my name
the memory of my mother*

"Ilya?" Shane said, taking another step closer. He still couldn't hear him. What the hell was he supposed to do now?

He tracked Ilya's movements as he dipped the bristles in the paint again, but before the brush found its way to the canvas Shane reached forward, laying a hand on the bare skin of his forearm and then—

Yeah. That was stupid, Shane decided, his lungs suddenly full of icy water, his body submerged in the dark depths of the lake. He surfaced, sputtering and shaking out his hair, the fabric of his shirt ballooning around the shape of him.

"What the *fuck*?" Ilya exclaimed, tearing the headphones from his ears.

Shane spat out a mouthful of water, trying to catch his breath. Even with his vision waterlogged and blurry, there was no mistaking the look of shock and disbelief on Ilya's face. He wiped the water from his eyes, looked up at Ilya's distractingly shirtless frame, and of all things, waved.

"Hi," he said, like the eloquent, dignified lyricist that he was.

Ilya met Shane at the shore with a towel. He tried his best not to ogle Shane as stripped out of his soaked t-shirt and shorts, standing there in nothing but boxers before he wrapped the soft cotton around his waist, but he had never been known for his self-restraint.

"What are you doing here?" Ilya asked, not quite believing that this was real. Maybe it was just a coincidence. Shane had wanted some time at the cottage before going on tour. That would make the most sense, really. He was only setting himself up for disappointment, allowing himself to think it meant anything more than that.

Shane shifted on his feet in the hot sand. "Can we sit?" he asked.

And so they did. Side by side in the sand, the shore lapping quietly near their heels, the sun warming their shoulders and the planes of their faces. It was oddly peaceful, despite the heavy, unspoken weight that hovered between them, as if the muscle memory of all their shared moments here overrode the complex tangle of lies and lust that their relationship had become.

“You finally painted the cottage,” Shane said, cutting through the stillness.

Ilya tensed.

“What does the writing mean?” he pressed on.

Ilya looked into the brown eyes of the man who, in the face of everything, he still loved, completely and unconditionally. They seemed to be golden flecked in the sun, open and vulnerable, but he knew that wasn't true. He'd fallen for their easy softness in the past, and look where it got him. Isolated, unlovable, frantically clinging to the canvas before him because if he kept on painting then it meant he wasn't like *her*, right? Because that's how he always knew things were getting bad. As long as he kept making art, making something, as long as he could hold onto one thing that made this godforsaken wasteland worthwhile, he would be okay.

“It's nothing,” he said, deflecting. “Why are you here, Shane?”

Shane could see through his lie, of course. It was obvious. But he didn't press. He traced patterns in the sand with his fingers, and Ilya had to fight the urge to reach out and capture them, even after all this time. He craved the calloused touch of them on his skin, the taste of them between his lips.

“I went back to Montreal,” Shane started, staring out at the dark surface of the lake and all that it reflected on its surface. “Yesterday. But you weren't there. Obviously.”

“Obviously,” Ilya agreed.

“Troy mentioned that you went to another place, and I put it together. Or, I hoped I did. I wasn't sure that you'd be here.”

Ilya did the math in his head. “That's a lot of driving for a maybe,” he said simply.

“Yeah well,” he said, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck, particles of sand clinging to the damp skin there. “I've made worse decisions for dumber reasons.” He looked at Ilya, then. “And I would have gone anywhere to get to you,” he admitted. “There are some things I couldn't leave unsaid any longer.”

Ilya thought he might throw up. There was no way. What could have possibly changed for him? Two weeks ago, at the exhibit, he would barely meet Ilya's eyes.

Ilya swallowed. “Like what?” he asked.

Shane stared out at the lake again, to the expanse of it and the horizon in the distance, where a line of trees marked the transition from water to sky; from the hidden depths below and the free, unguarded breadth above.

“I think I might be gay,” he said, a whisper caught in the breeze.

Ilya didn't mean to, but really, he couldn't help it. He laughed. Light, at first, but it quickly transformed into a fully bodied release that shook his torso and burned his cheeks. “Really,”

he said, between bursts. “What makes you think that?”

“Oh, fuck you!”

Ilya laughed harder. Shane just made it too easy to pick on him. “I mean, we can try if you really want, but don’t think that topping will make you any less gay.”

Shane let out a growl of frustration and pounced on Ilya, pushing him back into the sand and straddling him. His hands felt hot and right where they pressed into Ilya’s shoulders. The towel that had been wrapped around his waist slipped away as he did, leaving him exposed in his thin boxers. It was downright sinful, the way the wet fabric clung to every inch of him. Ilya smirked, wetting his lips and looking up at Shane.

“So what, you drove all the way out here just to dry hump me until you figure out if you’re gay or not?”

Shane flushed. “What? No, of course not!”

“You’re right,” Ilya nodded sombrely. “Can we really call it dry humping when you’re that wet?”

Shane leaned back slightly, huffing, but he didn’t get off of him. Ilya pushed himself onto his elbows, fighting the urge to completely close the distance between them.

“Can you be serious for five seconds? Please?” Shane begged, which made Ilya take pause.

He was well aware that he was deflecting. It was so easy to fall back into their old habits. To poke and prod and tease him. To seek out the pinched expression and the reddened hue of his embarrassment. To sink into the familiarity of Shane’s body and breath.

If he was being honest, he was fucking terrified of whatever Shane might say next. He wasn’t sure that he could survive having anything other than all of Shane again, to have him offered up on a silver platter one moment and snatched from his insatiable maws the next. To be an experiment, a convenience, a warm body to play with for someone who *wasn’t like that*.

So, it was easier to make light of his presence than to acknowledge the reality that these next few minutes would either break him or reshape the fabric of the world around him.

“Okay,” he said, cautiously placing a hand on the exposed flesh of Shane’s thigh, slowly rubbing his thumb back and forth when he didn’t flinch or pull away. “I’ll be serious.”

“I was so scared, Ilya.” Shane swallowed and rested one of his own hands on Ilya’s chest, fiddling with the gold cross that sat there. “I was scared all the time, of so many things. Of getting caught, of my feelings for you, of being different.

“In that last year of school it felt like everything was falling apart for me. I couldn’t control the thoughts I had about you, or how it felt when you would touch me. And that was just one part of my life, you know? Everyone had all these plans. You and Sveta had Montreal and Rose had Toronto and Kip had the world. I had nothing. I was drowning in indecision and couldn’t even convince myself that I wanted to breathe.

“When I was with you, when we were alone, everything slowed down and became so simple. Like when we were kids, but like, obviously different.” He flushed as he said it, his fingers freezing their soothing pattern for a moment and Ilya wondered what memory he was lost in. What infinite recollection of intimacy his mind had gone to in that pause.

“But then, when you weren’t around, reality would all come crashing back down. The way I felt for you, the way I *feel* for you, was just another problem I couldn’t fix. Another secret I had to keep from everyone.

“God, I just want to do something *right* and *normal* for once in my fucking life, Ilya.” Shane’s voice broke on his name, a wet sound.

Ilya blinked away the damp that threatened to creep into his own vision. “Why?” he managed to ask.

“What?”

“Why do you want to be *normal* so bad?” He increased the pressure of his hand on Shane’s thigh. “Because like, first of all, nobody’s normal. And also I like you how you are. I’ve always said that. I think I told you that here, that first summer, when you taught me about s’mores.” Ilya smiled at the memory.

“Shane, I’ve never met anyone like you, and not because you’re *weird* or whatever. It’s because of your brain, and the way that it works. The way that it’s able to manipulate language to invent the most incredible, life altering lyrics. And I think your ridiculous Twitter following would agree with me on that one.” Ilya smiled.

“And it’s everything else about you, too. The way you know so much about ginseng, and your bravery, and the smell of you right after you wake up. The sound of your voice when you speak French to me, or when I hear you on the radio. Your generosity. Your determination.”

Ilya reached forward, cupping Shane’s cheek in the palm of his hand. “It’s your freckles,” he said, running his thumb along their smattered existence. “It’s your upper lip.” He drew his thumb down, tracing the swell and curve of it.

“It’s your hair, and how you hate getting it cut by anyone but me,” he chuckled softly, running a hand through Shane’s hair. It was longer again, since he last felt it. “I want to be the only one to cut your hair for the rest of your life, Shane.”

“Ilya,” Shane choked out, and then he was wrapping his arms around him, hauling their bodies together from where he sat in his lap. Shane inhaled, deep and steading, his nose in the crook of Ilya’s neck and his face wet where it was pressed against him. Ilya closed his eyes, his breath instinctively aligning itself with the rise and fall of Shane’s chest.

“I love you, Ilya. I love you so fucking much,” he said, pulling back just far enough for their eyes to meet. “I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I was such a fucking idiot, and I wasted so much *fucking time*, and I just love you and I’m sorry, I’m so, so—”

Ilya shook his head, unable to fathom that this was real. “You’re not– You didn’t–” He clung to Shane’s shoulders, like he was scared he would disappear. “First of all, I love you too, Shane Hollander. I should probably clarify that before you spiral.” Shane let out a small, relieved laugh and Ilya smiled.

“But to be clear, none of it was a waste if it got us here. I would do it a thousand times over– a million times.” His grin was wide now, consumed by a joy that couldn’t be contained or disguised. “I probably would have waited forever for you to be ready, Shane, if that’s what it took.”

“Well, I’m glad it didn’t take that long,” Shane said. And then, all at once the stars aligned, he felt his fear subside, and the smile of his mother’s angel beamed down on them, because Shane was kissing him.

He loved him, and he was kissing him, and he knew that everything was going to be okay, because he had Shane in his arms.

The feeling of his mouth on mine, Ilya thought. He would have to add that to the list.

Chapter End Notes

🥺 FINALLY!!

I hope this moment made it worth it for y'all and was as satisfying to read as it was for me to write. ❤️

Not saying that things will be perfect from here to the end, but I do promise from here on out they'll stop fucking ignoring each other because of their own stupidity. 🙄

Alsooooo I am aware that these chapters are getting steadily longer as we approach the end. I set that 30ch word count and am determined to stay within it haha. But if we don't like the longer chapters as much lmk and I'll break them up 🙄

ALSO ALSO HOLY SHIIIT. soooo I went to the dr again after getting more bloodwork done and he gave me this once a week vitamin d pill because I'm apparently very deficient, and I took it for the first day, and then by the time I was teaching my period 2 class I didn't know where I was and my kids were like ms you look like you're gonna faint, u should lay down. so then I did and I called a friend to come pick me up and I puked in her car for an hour 🤔

tl;dr APPARENTLY you can overdose on vitamin d 🤔 YA'LL IT WAS WILD. anyway, I'm on a lower dose now and all is good. hope you enjoy my medical updates 🤗

(okay wait last story actually. so i run the gsa at my school and this week my kids ordered me a pride flag with my face on it lmfaio they are the sweetest. k that's all byeeeee)

Chapter 25: The Mycorrhizal Network

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*Remember the time you drove all night
Just to meet me in the morning?
And I thought it was strange, you said everything changed
You felt as if you'd just woke up
But I realized that I need you
And I wondered if I could come home*

“First Day of My Life”, Bright Eyes

August 2010

Despite falling asleep in each other's arms, Shane's heart stuttered when he woke up next to Ilya, his golden, sun-kissed skin tangled in the sheets of the pull-out, their legs intertwined like the roots of two red hardwoods that had been growing side by side for centuries.

He liked that image. He'd read once about how trees communicated with one another beneath the surface, hidden and unknown. It was because of something called The Mycorrhizal Network, a vast, underground, interconnected network of fungi that filled the spaces between the roots of individual trees. Within that liminal space trees exchanged resources and information with each other like secrets: carbon, nitrogen, warnings about incoming danger in the form of insects or drought. It's something they did without intention or decision, an instinct that was physically embedded in their bark and bones.

Shane considered all of the minute and cataclysmic ways that they'd influenced the trajectory of each other's lives up until now. Shane, at eleven years old, standing on the Rozanov's front porch, staring at his feet with a casserole dish in his hands, ignoring every self-preservation instinct he had and insisting that Ilya come over to hang out. Ilya, who gave him his first song writing notebook. Shane, who stumbled into a record shop on a sweltering August day to give posters to the girl who happened to be Ilya's best friend, and who would inevitably become their drummer. Ilya, who was brave enough to kiss him. Shane, who was stupid enough to kiss him back and think that's all it would be. And this cottage, which kept pulling them back together, despite the distance, even when nearly a lustrum had passed.

He liked the image because it meant what they had transcended words and dialogue. He didn't always need to say what he was thinking for Ilya to know. Through the roots and fungi of their interconnectedness, Ilya had known about Shane and his feelings before Shane had even been willing to recognize it himself. And when he was ready, Shane intuitively knew how he could find him, the signal running through his veins like a distress call that he couldn't avoid any longer.

Shane knew he should let Ilya sleep. They were both wrecked after the emotional tempest of yesterday's conversation, and the subsequent release. But he looked so perfect next to him. The sharp angle of his jaw, the soft feathering of his pale brows, the mole on his cheek that he was tempted to lean forward and kiss. So, he did just that.

Ilya's eyes fluttered open at the contact. "G'morning," he said, voice groggy with sleep.

Shane smiled, soft and hazy. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up."

"That's okay." Ilya rolled over, bracketing himself over top of Shane, their faces mere inches apart. "I don't want to waste time sleeping."

Ilya kissed him, slow and deep, before Shane remembered that he hadn't brushed his teeth. He broke away from the kiss, pressing the side of his cheek into the pillow. "My breath is probably disgusting."

"Mmm," Ilya cupped his jaw, drawing them together again. "I don't care," he insisted between kisses. He ground his hips down against Shane's, emphasizing just how much he didn't. "But I can use my mouth somewhere else, if you're feeling self conscious?"

Shane grinned. "In that case I'm feeling very, *very* self conscious."

The morning slipped away with a languid and carefree domesticity; shoulders bumping as they brushed their teeth in tandem at the small bathroom vanity, drinking coffee that Ilya made too strong on the back deck, and getting lost in each other's bodies whenever one of them remembered that the barrier between them didn't need to be upheld any longer. Shane felt lighter than he had in years, like he'd been rationing oxygen for almost a decade and finally remembered how to breathe.

The afternoon found them down by the water. Shane was lounging on the edge of the dock, his calves cooling in the lake. Ilya, however, was feeling restless, so he was messing around, making Shane count how long he could hold his breath for, attempting to do hand stands on the sandy bottom, and collecting rocks that he presented to Shane like a crow procuring treasures. It made Shane feel like they were kids again, before everything got so complicated.

Shane knew that they had to talk about some things. What would happen when they had to part ways in a couple of days, who they were going to tell about them. He didn't want to shatter the idyllic glow that surrounded them, but really they could probably only afford to spend two more days here together; Shane had to get home and prep for the tour and Ilya was starting classes next week. He figured it was better to get the conversation over with now, so they could hopefully still enjoy the last whispers of summer.

"How long was that?" Ilya asked, surfacing and wiping water from his eyes.

Shane had lost count. "Uh," he said, "Ninety-two seconds."

Ilya squinted at him. "Liar," he said, splashing Shane. "Why aren't you paying attention to me? What could possibly be more interesting?" He swam over to the dock, resting his

forearms and chin on the wood, blinking up at Shane like a freaking golden retriever.

“I’m just thinking,” Shane said.

“Uh oh. That’s never a good sign.”

Shane kicked at his ribs under water, and Ilya took advantage of the gesture, reaching down to seize Shane’s foot in his grasp. He tugged on it playfully, silently threatening to pull him under.

“Don’t you fucking dare, Rozaonv,” Shane said.

Ilya softened, running his hands up Shane’s legs and slotting himself between his thighs. “Gimme kiss,” he said, pursing his lips up at him.

Shane rolled his eyes, but leaned down, capturing Ilya’s lips with his own.

“What are you thinking about?” Ilya asked when they separated.

Shane sighed. “I’m just wondering who we should... you know, tell. About us.”

Ilya’s eyes widened, mouth parting slightly.

“What’s that look for?” Shane asked.

Ilya planted his palms on the edge of the dock and pushed himself up, distracting Shane momentarily with the way the muscles in his arms flexed at the motion. He sat next to Shane, hiking one leg onto the dock and leaving the other dangling over the edge so that he was facing Shane.

“Honestly,” he said. “I thought you wouldn’t want to tell anyone.”

Shane wanted to be annoyed, but he knew it was a fair assumption. He’d spent years trying to be anything other than himself. He felt like a coward, and he wished that he was a braver person. “I’m sorry,” he muttered, making determined eye contact with his hands.

“Hey,” Ilya said, tipping his chin up, forcing Shane to meet his eyes. “It’s all good. Even if you weren’t ready to tell anyone it would be good. You take all the time you need. Plus, I’m not ready for everyone to know right now either.”

“Really?” Shane asked.

“Really.” He pulled Shane against his chest, pressing a kiss to the top of his head.

“But you’re going to tell Troy, right?” Shane said into his shoulder.

Ilya laughed. “What’s your deal with Troy?”

Shane pulled back, scowling. “I just don’t like him.”

“You know he’s dating Harris, right? There’s no need to be jealous. And honestly, I think he might have a bit of a celebrity crush on you. He listens to your music *all the time*.”

“I’m not jealous,” Shane denied. “I just think he should know, because…” Shane racked his brain for some plausible explanation. “He’s your roommate. And you should get to have some friends close to you that know. That’s all.”

“Mhmm,” Ilya hummed, still chuckling to himself. “What about the band?”

“Oh, Rose is going to know as soon as I get home. I probably wouldn’t be here right now if it wasn’t for her. And she’ll probably end up telling Sveta.”

“I’m sure she’d keep it to herself if you asked,” Ilya said.

Shane shook his head. “I can’t do that. And wouldn’t it be nice for you? For her to know?”

Ilya didn’t need to say anything. Shane could tell how much even the *idea* of Sveta knowing meant to him. He could see it in the way the corners of his mouth ticked up slightly, how the muscles in his face relaxed. “Yeah,” he said, softly, before chuckling to himself. “Yeah, that would be nice. God, Sveta’s going to lose her shit.”

“Why?”

“I mean, she’s had to listen to me drone on about how much I love you since I was like, fifteen, so…”

“Fifteen?” Shane thought back, trying to place his age along their timeline. “We weren’t even talking back then though.”

“You’re right,” Ilya conceded. “It was more like eleven. I think I’ve loved you since the day you dragged my dumbass out of that frozen lake.”

Shane shook his head in disbelief. He thought about himself that day, the fear that rocked him to his core. Had he loved Ilya since then too? Since before he even had the words for what love was? “God, Kip’s not gonna believe it either.”

“Mmm,” Ilya hummed. “We’ll see.” He leaned forward, resting his chin on Shane’s shoulder. “What about your parents?”

Shane tensed, a wave of reality crashing over him. He hadn’t even thought about them. Fuck, there was no way. He couldn’t. “I– I don’t think I can yet.”

“Of course,” Ilya said. “No rush. I think they’d be supportive, though. When you are.”

Shane looked out at the lake. He wasn’t so sure. They’d never said anything that should make Shane think otherwise, but he couldn’t help the way that he felt like he was somehow letting them down. “Wanna race to the island and back?” he asked.

Ilya was in the water before he’d finished the question. “If I win you’re sucking me off,” he said after he surfaced.

“Cheater!” Shane grinned and pushed off the dock.

Despite not needing to part ways until tomorrow, Shane spent the whole morning acting like he was perpetually thirty minutes late. Since waking up it had been nonstop preparations; folding and repacking both his and Ilya’s bags, washing all the linens in the cottage, and sorting out their waste into recycling and garbage bags.

It was safe to say it was driving Ilya insane. He was desperate to enjoy the time they had left together. Preferably while naked. And horizontal. Actually, naked and vertical would be fine as well. He wasn’t picky.

Ilya let Shane do his thing all morning, but by noon he’d reached his limit.

“I’m making us lunch,” he announced, physically dragging Shane away from the kitchen cupboards. He was literally organizing the canned goods by expiration date. The man needed to be stopped.

“But, I’m not—” Shane made grabby hands towards the kitchen, his face reminiscent of a lost puppy.

“You’re cut off,” Ilya insisted. “I’m cooking, you’re relaxing. Then we’ll eat.”

“I can help cook though.”

“No.” Ilya pushed down on Shane’s shoulders, hard, forcing him to sit in one of the mismatched chairs at the dining table. He grabbed a random paperback from the living room, the spine broken and well loved, and slapped it on the table in front of Shane.

“Here. Sit still and read this.” Ilya’s voice was slightly deeper than usual, rough like sandpaper, and he noted the way that Shane reacted to his words; a sharp uptick of breath and a twitch of his leg.

Shane reached for the book, opening it without glancing at the title or spouting any more complaints, and Ilya smiled, satisfied. “Good boy, Hollander,” he said, patting Shane on the cheek before heading back into the kitchen. He didn’t turn back to look at him, but he could have sworn he heard Shane emit a small sound in response to his praise.

Twenty minutes later the kitchen was sweltering from running the oven in the August heat, and the previously cleaned and polished counters had become a danger zone with at least five health and safety violations actively on display. Ilya, however, was humming contently at his culinary masterpiece. Two perfectly seasoned, cheesed, and broiled tuna melts. He’d frankly been eating like shit lately; a lot of toaster strudel and ramen noodles, which he sometimes ate dry and straight from the package, if he didn’t have the energy to boil water. It was nice to have someone to cook for.

Shane scowled when he set the steaming plates in front of them.

“Is that *Wonderbread*?” he asked. “Where did you even find that?”

“Freezer, and be quiet. You’re eating it.”

“That’s just so far out of my diet it’s not even funny, Ilya.”

Ilya pushed the plate closer to him. “Shane. You’ve eaten almost nothing but those weird old person meal replacements since we got here. I know we’ve established that you’re boring, but last time I checked you weren’t also a senior citizen. I can’t afford to put you in a home yet, that shit’s expensive.”

“That’s not true – that’s just been my breakfast. Plus, my usual smoothie is better than that, I have limited resources here to work with.” He pointed back at the kitchen, accusation in his eyes. “You saw the sad state of those cupboards! My parents had mustard in there that expired in 2003, Ilya. 2003. That is almost a decade. I don’t even know the last time someone sorted through them.” He eyed the tuna melt suspiciously. “Did you even check the date on the tuna before you made this? Show me the can.”

Ilya took a bite. “Relax, Hollander. I bought the tuna myself when I got here,” he said, his words slightly muffled as he chewed. “What’s with your weird diet anyway? You act like you’re an MLH player, not a musician.”

Shane shrugged. “I dunno, I just want to stay in shape. It’s actually exhausting, performing all the time. Plus, you can fall into bad habits on the road, eating like shit constantly. Scott, Elena’s intern, helped me come up with the program. He’s really into fitness stuff too.” He picked at the crust of the bread absentmindedly. “I think, also... it was really hard for me at first, not having a clear cut routine for my days. Like, I went from being in school six hours a day to a schedule where there’s no clear end in sight and no guarantee that I’ll have access to the ginger ale I like for weeks on end. Having some rules for what I’m eating helped me have at least some sense of familiarity or control or whatever. I’ve gotten used to all the travel and the weird hours now, but, I guess I just don’t want to mess with a good thing, you know?”

“Hmm.” Ilya leaned back in his chair, his legs spread wide beneath the table. Shane spent too much time trying to mold the world around him, and Ilya worried that one day it would break him. He needed to just let go.

“Look at me, Hollander,” he said, after a beat of silence.

Shane’s eyes flicked towards him. Ilya held his gaze.

“Take a bite of it,” he said, nodding towards the plate with his chin. His voice took on that same tone from before, like he was daring Shane to follow through.

Shane stayed frozen for a moment, and Ilya wondered if maybe he wasn’t going to do it after all. If maybe he had misunderstood. But then, Shane picked up the sandwich and took a small, measured bite. He returned it to his plate, but otherwise remained completely still. Ilya thought about the bread sitting heavy on his tongue, growing sweeter as his saliva broke down the starches.

“Chew.”

And Shane did, his jaw moving in a slow, rhythmic motion as their eyes stayed locked with each other, enraptured by everything coursing between them, by everything that remained unsaid.

Even during their first few clumsy and frantic moments of intimacy, their dynamic had been so different, so unlike anything Ilya had experienced with his other hookups. It was the way Ilya egged Shane on, taunting and poking and prodding at him until his skin reddened and his need for Ilya's touch overtook him. And it was Shane, his precious Shane, who everyone, himself included, assumed he thrived on order and structure and routine, and yet who loved nothing more than to be rendered completely helpless by Ilya's hands, his mouth, his words, his tongue.

But in all that time, he'd never been this direct, this demanding with Shane. It had never extended to something seemingly so removed from sex, even in the broadest sense of the word. But, was it really that far removed after all? Was this not also a subverted form of intimacy, of pleasure?

The hunger that his words sparked in the empty spaces between them was pervasive, and Ilya couldn't get enough of it.

"Swallow," he said.

He studied the line of Shane's throat as he followed through. He wanted to run his teeth along the skin there. To inhale the scent of him, the way his sweat intermingled with the coconut scented sunscreen.

"Good boy," Ilya said, hushed and pleased. And there, escaping from between Shane's lips, was that unmistakable sound from before.

He wondered just how hard Shane was. If he was leaking into his briefs from the head of his cock yet or not. Ilya leaned forward, elbows on the table and chin propped on his fists. Even that slight reduction in distance seemed to spark a physical reaction in Shane, his eyes flicking down to Ilya's lips before they planted firmly back on his own.

"Again," Ilya insisted.

Ilya remained relentless, casually palming himself over his shorts as he doled out instructions – telling Shane to slow down, take a bigger bite, to *open your mouth and stick out your tongue. Show me that you've swallowed everything.* Shane listened without any hesitation.

Until Ilya demanded he lick the grease off the plate, of course.

"What the fuck, no," he said, flinching. He traced his fingertips over his lips absentmindedly, as if waking from a trance and suddenly realizing what they'd been doing.

Ilya tutted, acting displeased, when in reality his dick twitched at Shane's pushback. This was territory he was familiar with; their constant game of mental tug and war. He lived for the thrill of it. For watching Shane's resolution crumble beneath him.

He rose from his chair, body languid and calm, and circled the dining room, sidling himself up next to Shane, perching his ass on the edge of the table, not quite touching him, but close enough to feel the heat and desire emanating from every fibre of his being.

“You don’t want to disappoint me, do you Shane?”

Shane remained muted, but shook his head ever so slightly.

Ilya tipped his chin up to face him. Shane’s eyes were hazy, almost wet. He leaned forward, so their lips were only a few millimetres apart, knowing his words would feel hot and sharp on Shane’s skin.

“You like being good for me, don’t you?”

Shane’s eyes fluttered closed, and he actually *whimpered*. Ilya reached into the waistband of his own sweatpants, wrapping a hand around himself, getting a thrill out of knowing he was providing himself with a friction that Shane must equally be craving, but was being deprived of. He registered the moment Shane noticed what he was doing, when he tracked the teasing motion of his hand. He felt a twisted sort of pleasure when, moments later Shane reached subconsciously down to adjust himself, and he gripped Shane’s wrist before he could get there, halting his movement. Shane whined and canted his hips into the air, his need glaringly obvious.

“Did I say you could touch yourself?” he asked.

Shane flushed, ashamed, and he looked back at Ilya. “No,” he said. He wet his lips. Ilya needed to kiss him more than he needed air, but that would have to wait.

He leaned back, and with a tortured sort of cruelty held out the plate to Shane.

“Good,” Ilya smiled. “Now lick the plate like a fucking dog, Shane, unless you want to get on your hands and knees and beg like one.”

Ilya briefly wondered if he had pushed too hard, if he was asking for too much. He’d always been greedy with Shane, but he’d never fully considered what it would look like to actually take what he wanted. How far Ilya was capable of bending him before he would break.

Shane stared *into* Ilya, turning the ribcage protecting his heart into dust with his eyes alone, as he opened his mouth and ran his tongue, wide, flat, and wet against the now cool ceramic. It felt to Ilya, in that moment, almost like a religious, out of body experience. It was as though he could feel the hard muscle of Shane’s tongue and the ridges of his tastebuds pressing into not the plate, but the palm of his hand. Selfishly lapping at the salt and sweat of his skin.

He considered how this entire ritual was reminiscent of receiving communion as a child. Shane had been fasting, for far too long. Fasting from gluttony and pleasure and desire. Ilya could see the hunger eating away at his organs from within.

But before his fast could be broken, however, there needed to be reconciliation. He recalled himself, back when he still went to St. Thomas with Svetlana. How they'd been made to attend confession annually. How that one year, his teacher had given them that list of suggested sins which openly condemned so called *homosexual acts*. Shane had sought him out, like a lost lamb in the night, looking for guidance and clarity. Luckily, Ilya, his twisted and corrupt saviour, was eager to provide.

And, then, of course, there was his communion. Ilya had moved through the motions countless times in his youth. He would fall to his knees, tip his head back, and open his mouth, willing and eager for his Batyushka to lay the cool metal of the spoon against the flesh of his tongue, administering the Body of Christ through the vessel. And Ilya would swallow. Swallow the body and blood of Christ, in a gesture seemingly so mundane, and yet which was marvellously intimate, allowing Christ to reside within him.

Ilya wanted to be that for Shane. To serve himself up as sacrament and be consumed by the man before him. He wanted to trace Shane's smile with the head of his cock, thick and swollen and pulsing with need. He wanted to run his thumb along the crook of his jaw, to press in there, parting his lips, leaving him open and waiting. To hear the needy little noises that Shane made when his mind loosened with desire. And to be the one to make those noises change, to listen as they grew loud and wet, while he inched the length of him into Shane's familiar warmth.

He wanted to fuck into Shane's mouth with reckless abandon, hands clenched in the overgrown hair at the nape of his neck. To feel the tightness at the back of his throat, the glide of his tongue along the base of his cock, his hands fumbling for purchase on Ilya's hips, on his ass. He wanted Shane's fingernails to leave marks on his thighs that would last longer than his scent would remain on the hoodie he stole. And he wanted to tease him, too. To hear him gag on his length, spit trailing down his jaw, hungry for more, only to pull away, leaving him breathless and unsatisfied.

He wanted to hear Shane, his voice raw and broken, beg for Ilya to bend him over the dining room table and work him open with his tongue and his fingers until there were tears in the corners of his eyes and he was crying out for all of him. He wanted Shane to beg for it, just so he could deny him, so he could leave his mouth feeling empty and wrecked and finish himself off with his hand, ruining Shane's pretty face with his come. Decorating his eyelashes, his freckles, his lips with it. He wanted to paint him like that. On his knees, covered in Ilya's claim on him. And he wanted, more than anything, to watch as Shane used his own fingers to drag Ilya's disturbed form of communion into his mouth, onto his tongue, and down his throat.

He wanted all of this, and so much more.

Shane pulled away from the now spotless plate, a string of his spit connecting him to it, momentarily, before breaking, leaving a glistening trail of *him* down his chin.

Holy fucking hell. He was completely and utterly *ruined* for Shane Hollander.

"Get on your knees," Ilya said.

“Was that okay?” Ilya asked, fingers running through Shane’s hair, as they lay on the pull-out afterward, both of them spent and slightly dazed.

Shane smiled and turned his face so it was somewhat shielded by the pillow. “Yes,” he said. “It was more than okay.”

Ilya felt his stomach dip. How was it that Shane was so *fucking* perfect, and yet somehow wanted to be with him? He leaned forward, pressing a soft, lingering kiss each of Shane’s eyelids, one after the other. Then, he bit his eyebrow. It was too good of an eyebrow not to. It would simply be a crime to ignore it.

Shane surprised him then, jolting forward and licking his cheek. They both laughed, settling in against one another, limbs loose and soft.

“I like the way that sometimes, when I’m with you, I don’t have to think as much,” Shane said. “Like sometimes, afterwards, when you leave, I think *way* too much, like my body is making up for it.” He sighed inward, like he was frustrated with his own patterns. “But I’m going to try not to do that from now on.”

Ilya smiled. “Good. If that happens when you’re on the road, just call me. I can give you sexy instructions over the phone.”

Shane rolled his eyes. “It’s not just the sex stuff, though. It’s just easier. To be myself, with you. I think.”

Ilya nodded. “I think that’s the same for me too. Sometimes I feel like you’re the only person who sees me as something other than a standoffish asshole with anger issues.”

“That’s not true,” Shane said. “I *also* see you as a standoffish asshole with anger issues.”

Ilya gasped, snagging a pillow from behind him. He whacked Shane across the face with it and climbed on top of him. “Take that back! Tell me you think I’m soft and pretty,” he said, laughing and pinning down Shane by his arms.

“You’re literally proving my point! Your rage! It’s uncontrollable.”

Ilya grabbed the pillow again, pretending to smother Shane with it. With his arms free, Shane flipped them, thighs now bracketing Ilya against the bed, the mattress groaning as they wrestled halfheartedly. Seamlessly, their fighting turned into kissing, which turned back into cuddling again, their hearts racing and their breath short.

“Okay, but seriously,” Ilya said, their noses almost touching again. “You’re okay with what we did before? For real?”

“Oh my god, Ilya, *yes*.”

“I just feel like maybe we should have talked about it beforehand,” his eyes danced across Shane’s face, looking for any signs of disappointment or anxiety.

Shane huffed out an exasperated sigh. “Look, if I’m ever uncomfortable I’ll tell you, okay?”

Ilya considered his words. Would he? “Okay,” he said, uneasily.

“Will you believe me if I lick another plate for you, you sick, perverted man?” Shane teased, enunciating the last few words like he was deeply disturbed and disappointed in him.

Ilya stared up at the ceiling, pretending to consider. “Yes,” he said. “Yes I think that will help.”

Saying goodbye the next morning felt impossible. Ilya toyed with the strings on Shane’s hoodie as they stood outside on the gravel path, their cars packed and the cottage locked. He didn’t want to let go, he wasn’t sure he would be able to.

It didn’t seem fair, for the universe to finally bring them together, only to be pushed apart, and to have no idea of when they would next be able to meet.

Shane unlocked his car, the beep cutting through the hushed Muskoka silence.

“Noooo,” Ilya whined, throwing his head back. He was not above throwing a temper tantrum.

Shane huffed. “Text me when you tell Troy, okay?” he said. It sounded like he too was struggling to keep it together, which did make Ilya feel marginally better.

“Fine. Text *me* when you eat something that isn’t sad.”

“You’re an asshole.” Shane punched him in the shoulder. Ilya used the opportunity to pull him into a hug, their bodies becoming one seamless entity, as strong as the ancient evergreens lining the path onto the property. Ilya hoped, more than anything, that despite the oncoming distance, and the uncertainty of what would happen next, that they wouldn’t be cut down to their roots.

Chapter End Notes

Russian Translation Notes:

- Batyushka (ба́тյушка): an affectionate term for your priest

Other Notes:

Soooo... Um....

I hope this was okay? 🙄🙄 This chapter was not originally meant to get quite so freaky, but what can I say, the boys went off the rails a bit on this one.

But YOU KNOW WHAT they deserved it after so much turmoil. Let them have some peace!! And I needed the tuna melt to show up SOMEWHERE okay?

Thank you all ❤️❤️❤️❤️ I got so many freaking lovely comments on my last chapter I love you all. It makes me so happy to know ya'll are enjoying my little word baby 😊

(also case and point - I can in fact take it easy SEE only ONE chapter this week 😊 be proud of me for having restraint and sleeping)

Chapter 26: hollanqueen stans

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*My boy, we don't see each other much
My boy, we don't see each other much
It'll take some time, but somewhere down the line
We won't be alone*

“My Boy (Twin Fantasy)”, Car Seat Headrest

September 2010

[kip started a group chat]

[kip added **shane**, **sveta**, **rose**, and **ilya** to the chat]

ilya: 🙄

[kip set the group chat name to 'the long game is over']

shane: what does that mean

shane: the long game is over?

kip: because you and ilya finally got your shit together

kip: duh 🙄

ilya: omg we get it kip

ilya: you knew we were fucking for years

ilya: when will the relentless flexing of your gaydar end

kip: never

sveta: i just don't understand why it's always about these two

sveta: like rose and i were having equally hot lesbian sex in secret and nobody ever wants to talk about that

sveta: plus we were much less dysfunctional about it

kip: less dysfunctional???

kip: if i recall you made out with jj in front of rose

sveta: bitch

sveta: i didn't even know she liked girls then

rose: uhhh

rose: i'm okay if we don't discuss our sex life in group settings actually

[**kip** changed the group chat name to '**the scissor sisters and their gays**']

rose: WHAT THE FUCK KIP

kip: 🤔

shane: what are scissor sisters?

ilya: oh my sweet sweet innocent boy

ilya: please someone kiss his head for me

ilya: ... not rose

rose: omg ilya you know we aren't actually dating right?

rose: believe it or not, not everyone wants to bang your boyfriend

ilya: this is a lie

ilya: i showed your message to troy

ilya: he said everyone on the internet agrees

ilya: he said that there are stories online about shane having sex with literally anyone you can think of

shane: wtf?

kip: anyone? 🤔

ilya: he said there's even one where he has sex with lightning mcqueen

shane: like

shane: the car?

shane: the cartoon fucking car?

shane: how does that even work?

ilya: yes shane

ilya: he said it is actually surprisingly well written

kip: can you ask troy to send me the link?

shane: don't do that

shane: and please tell troy to stop reading stories about me having sex with cartoon characters

ilya: okay

ilya: he says he'll only read ones where you fuck real people

from now on

shane: that's not what i meant

shane: 😓

[**kip** changed the group chat name to '**hollanqueen stans**']

shane: i don't know what that means but i know i don't like it

November 2010 – Montreal, QC

The November evening wind on the fourteenth floor balcony was brutal, and it took Ilya several tries to light his cigarette. This was the year he was going to quit smoking. He was sure of it. Or, at least he was going to limit himself to one a day. Okay fine, two if it was a bad day.

He was a month and a half into his third year of University and he was still technically-not-a-legal-roommate in his technically-not-a-legal-bedroom with Harris and Troy. The two of them were stupid in love, and Ilya was happy for them, so fucking happy. It was hard, though, seeing them together when Shane was in a different city every night, and none of those cities were his.

In August, when all of the planets aligned across the Western sky and Shane dragged Ilya back down to Earth, he thought that it would fix the odd sense of melancholy that had been overtaking him lately. Shane was everything he'd ever wanted and everything he never thought he deserved. And *finally*, finally, he was his. Not in everyone's eyes, of course. Fans of The Wolfbirds seemed to still be convinced that he and Rose were engaged in some sort of torrid affair, but it didn't matter to Ilya, because he knew the reality that coursed beneath the surface.

And yet, he still couldn't help but feel like his days were shrouded in some sort of varnish. Like he was a painting, once loved, but that had been smothered in thick layers of gesso to be recycled and used again. Was it even possible to sand off the acrylic and reveal what was hiding underneath?

It was stupid. He was being stupid. He took a drag from his dart and pulled out his phone. He'd just gotten fucking incredible news, and here he was, behaving like a petulant child. He opened up the now familiar group chat.

hollanqueen stans

ilya: hypothetically

ilya: considering that you guys are booked for osheaga this
summer

ilya: how annoying would it be if i was also there?

kip: deeply

kip: i would hate that

rose: intolerable, really

sveta: i'd simply leave

shane: i think i could manage

ilya: good

ilya: because i'm doing an installation for it

rose: you're joking

sveta: EXCUSE ME! 😊

kip: [attached photo: shane sprawled spread eagle on a plush hotel bed, hands smothering his own face with a pillow]

kip: you broke him, ilya

kip: our insurance will be in touch

ilya: hotel tonight? nice

ilya: wait

ilya: does shane have his own room? 🙄

rose: no he's sharing with kip

ilya: hmmm

ilya: kip maybe you can sleep in the girls room 😊

sveta: NO fuck no

sveta: rose and i never get alone time 😈

rose: sveta.

rose: remember what we talked about?

sveta: ugh fine

sveta: so what's the installation about?

ilya: haha no

ilya: i'm not giving you any material to bully me with in advance

kip: 🤔

sveta: oh so it's related to the hockey installation then

ilya: i'm blocking you

kip: it absolutely is

sveta: it's like i've always said

sveta: you can take the gay out of hockey, but you can never

take hockey out of the gay

rose: you've absolutely never said that before

ilya: i'm bi but ok

sveta: 🧑

sveta: my point still stands

ilya: anyway it's not actually about hockey

ilya: that's just how they heard about me

ilya: obviously

ilya: and i think they want me to create something with
similar wire based figures

ilya: idk

ilya: meeting with their creative direction team next week to
discuss details

kip: creative direction team

kip: 🗨️

kip: very official

rose: well i can't wait to see it ilya!!

rose: i want front row seats

ilya: uhh

ilya: i don't think it works like that

ilya: it'll just be like out in the open for influencers to
use as selfie backdrops and shit

ilya: but thanks

rose: well i want it roped off

rose: like a zoo exhibit

shane: that's really amazing ilya

shane: i'm proud of you 😊

ilya: shane! 🥰

ilya: you're alive!

ilya: i missed you

shane: i was gone for like 30 seconds

ilya: longest 30 seconds of my life

kip: jesus christ

kip: get a room

ilya: SVETA WONT LET US USE ONE

ilya: 😡😡😡

December 2010 – New York, NY

Shane decided not to tell Ilya he was coming home for Christmas. Just before the holidays they played two nights in New York, and Elena insisted on scheduling a few days off before the second leg of their tour. The band originally planned to remain in the city for the break; enticed by the idea of a week long hotel stay instead of unending nights on the road, and having never experienced New York at Christmas, the idea of it seemed surreal. They imagined the type of magic that only existed in snowglobes and on greeting cards, stark in contrast to Bobcaygeon's quite, snow-choked winters. They planned to go ice skating, check out the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree, and at Rose's insistence, take a horse carriage ride in Central Park. They'd visited countless cities over the past two years, between their tour with Fabian and now their own, and yet their packed schedule meant they hadn't actually *seen* many of those places. A band Christmas vacation felt like the perfect solution.

On Sunday night however, after getting back from their show and going for a late night run in the hotel's gym (Shane found zoning out on the treadmill was the most effective way to decompress after the adrenaline rush of playing these larger venues), he found himself mindlessly scrolling through flights from NYC to Toronto for the next day. If he left tomorrow morning and came back Friday night he should be able to give himself nearly four solid days in Bobcaygeon, even if it meant travelling on Christmas Eve, which was kind of crappy.

The idea of getting to see Ilya though, was all consuming. It had been almost four months since they'd last been together, and their facetime calls just weren't enough anymore. If he didn't go now, they might not get to see each other until Osheaga in late July.

Before he could change his mind, Shane screenshotted his preferred flights and texted them to Elena, asking her to book them for him, along with a rental car that he could pick up at the airport once he landed. He forwarded the flight details to his parents, and when they mentioned that Ilya would be arriving that same day as well, he asked them not to say anything. His mind immediately spiralled to all of the things that could go wrong; the flight being cancelled due to weather, or Elena saying they needed to stay in town for press after all. He didn't want to get Ilya's hopes up for nothing. And, it would be nice to see his genuine reaction in person.

Bobcaygeon, ON

Looking at the farm, freshly dusted in a thin layer of snow, Shane realized he had been unfair in his recollection of Christmas in Bobcaygeon. The lights hadn't been strung up yet (he assumed his mom was insisting they wait for Ilya to return from Montreal so as not to risk a catastrophic incident on the ladder), and he could see the Christmas tree in the living room through the bay window, but it too was undecorated. Shane was drawn in by the simplicity, by the quiet rituals that he knew would unfold over the next few days. He thought about his friends, fighting their way through crowds in Times Square and eating their weight in street meat and bagels, and he realized precisely how much he needed this trip home.

The snow dampened quiet extended into the house itself, and it quickly became clear that David and Yuna were out. They'd left a note on the kitchen counter, letting Shane know they had gone to pick up Ilya from the GO Bus terminal in Oshawa almost three hours ago. Shane did the math; if Ilya's bus was on time and they didn't make any other stops, they should be back home within the next thirty minutes or so. He was going to see Ilya, be able to touch him, hold him, breathe him in, in just a manner of minutes.

Well, somewhat. His parents would be around. He was nowhere near ready to come out to them. He was fairly certain they were on the same page as most of the world, and genuinely believed there was something going on between him and Rose. He felt guilty lying to them, but was it really lying if he didn't actually confirm or deny it? He was just letting them think what they wanted to think. It didn't help his uncertainty about being honest with them when apparently, what they wanted to think was that he was in a relationship with a woman.

Shane darted around the house while he waited, like a dog scouting out unfamiliar territory. He opened the fridge and took stock of the contents before closing it, not taking anything out. He changed out of the clothes he wore on the plane, feeling suddenly disgusted by the invisible dirt that lingered on them from the seat and the rental car. Then he realized those germs were on his skin as well, but that time was probably running out, so he rushed his way through a frantic shower before changing once again, into something more casual. He'd known Ilya his whole life, and had been hooking up with him on and off for the better part of four years. Why did he suddenly feel like a teenager going on their first date? Not that he had felt anything like this on his first actual date.

The door opened downstairs.

"I'm just saying, you guys are being oddly cagey and now some stranger's car is in the—" Shane sped-walked to the top of the stairs at the sound of Ilya's voice. Ilya froze the moment he saw him, dropping his bags to the ground.

"Hi," Shane said, trying for casual and failing miraculously, but that was to be expected.

Ilya pushed open the door to Shane's bedroom, not wanting to knock and wake up the Hollanders. He padded over to the bed, the cold hardwood on his bare feet making him feel wide awake despite the hour.

They'd all stayed up late, gathered in the living room, rambling on about everything and nothing; Ilya's Osheaga installation and his classes, the differences between this tour and the last; the minor upgrades that came from being the headliners and as a result of The Wolfbirds' increased fame.

Ilya sought out any excuse to touch Shane throughout the night; tucking his toes underneath his legs as he sprawled out on the sofa, brushing their fingers together when he passed him a mug of tea, leaning over to nibble at his ear when David and Yuna stepped out momentarily. None of it was enough. He couldn't believe that Shane was here, in front of him, solid and real and *his*. Ever since he had materialized at the top of the stairs that afternoon he'd wanted nothing more than to pin him down and devour him. Holding back all night had driven him

wild, and not even exclusively in a sexual manner. He needed the emotional release that came from existing side by side without restraint.

“Hey,” he said, pulling back the comforter and curling up next to Shane. The heat radiating from his skin, clad in nothing but his boxers, was a welcome comfort. Ilya wedged his icy feet between Shane’s calves, and Shane did his best not to completely lose his shit.

“Holy crap, you’re freezing! Get your feet away from me,” his whisper-yelled, attempting to squirm out of Ilya’s grasp in the small confines of his childhood bed. They wrestled, but Shane conceded quickly, settling into a domestic tangle of body parts.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming home?” Ilya asked, still struggling to accept that Shane was actually *here*.

“I didn’t want to jinx it,” Shane confessed.

Ilya pouted. “But now I don’t have a Christmas present ready for you.”

Shane kissed him, simple and carefree. “Having you here is the only gift I need.” Beneath the covers, Shane ran his hands down the lines of Ilya’s chest and abdomen. “Although I can think of some other things you could give me,” he suggested, toying with the elastic waist of Ilya’s pajama bottoms. “I still have lube and condoms here from before.”

Ilya ignored the pang of hurt that surfaced at the memory, the scar tissue left from the deep wounds their downfall had brandished him with. He told himself it didn’t matter. They were here now, and their friends knew. He didn’t need more than that.

“Trust me, Hollander. I would like nothing more than to fuck you so hard that the only thing you can remember is my name. But I have a feeling you won’t be able to keep your pretty mouth quiet enough for that.” Ilya ran his thumb along the swell of Shane’s lower lip as he said it, and the moan that escaped from him only proved Ilya right. “But, I think we could probably get creative.”

“What did you have in mind?” Ilya loved Shane’s eyes when he was like this, when they grew watery with desire.

“Turn around and strip for me.”

Ilya started by teasing him, slowly and with precision, like he’d thought of nothing but doing this since they’d last been together. He liked the discrepancy between their figures; Shane, naked, exposed and facing away from him, while Ilya was still somewhat covered and could look without discretion. He used his mouth, his tongue, his teeth, to worship Shane and his skin, milky and immaculate in the moonlight, kissing and biting and licking at the expanse of him.

He fixated on his neck first, being careful not to linger long enough to leave marks, before moving down the curve of his spine and his shoulders, allowing himself to be more careless the further down he traveled. Shane tasted like home, like the lemongrass and shea butter body wash he’d been using since they first met, and it was the sweetest thing Ilya had ever

laid his tongue on. He sought out the places that made Shane squirm, fixating on the pressure points there, loving the sounds he could extract from him with nothing but his spit and his lips.

When he got down to Shane's hips, Ilya paused, taking the sight of his ass, the perfect swell of it. He bit down on his left cheek, hard, and Shane yelped.

"Shhh," Ilya hushed, pulling back. "Are you going to stay quiet, or do I need to leave you like this?"

It was too dark to tell, but Ilya was sure that Shane was flushing at his words. "No," he insisted. "I'll be quiet. Please, Ilya."

Ilya grinned, and lowered himself down to Shane's thighs. He sucked and lapped at the skin there, the muscle and flesh between his legs and beneath the curve of his ass, his tongue wet and messy and delightful. Ilya drove his own hips into the mattress as he did, seeking out some sort of friction to wrangle the flame that was burning low in his core. He couldn't get enough of the way his touch disarmed Shane, he was lax beneath the grip of his hands on his hips, and he keeled back against his mouth, selfishly trying to get Ilya to drag his tongue higher, and deeper, to have him circle around his greedy hole.

But Ilya was relentless, purposefully ignoring Shane's unmistakable want, instead continuing to bite and suck on his thighs, the skin there becoming slick with Ilya's spit. When he was certain that Shane was on the brink of collapse, Ilya flippantly, as if it was perfectly accidentally, brushed his knuckles along the length of Shane's cock, and his hips jerked wildly in response, a too-loud moan escaping his mouth.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya said, voice rough. "You're absolutely desperate, aren't you?"

Ilya sat back then, and Shane cried out again at the loss, having to bite down on his own pillow to muffle the sounds. He stripped himself of his own pajamas, and then his boxers, overtaken with an infectious thought.

"Do I need to make you be quiet, Shane?" he asked, whispering into the shell of Shane's ear, who just nodded helplessly in response.

Ilya grinned, wolfish, and balled his briefs in his hand. He tipped Shane's face towards him, and kissed him once, tongues captured in a languid dance, before instructing him to open his mouth. Shane complied, dutiful as always, and Ilya watched his expression change from confusion to a lustful sort of shame as he filled Shane's waiting mouth with the fabric, pressing the palm of his hand against his face to ensure he didn't spit it out. Shane inhaled sharply, and Ilya wondered if he could taste Ilya's bitter arousal. If the smell of it overwhelmed him.

Shane tried to say something, but it just came out as a low garble, and Ilya's cock twitched at how exposed he was like this.

"Turn back around," he said, struggling to keep his own composure, and when Ilya pulled his hand away, he noticed that Shane's jaw ticked, his teeth locking the cotton in place. Ilya

thought about how it was dampening with Shane's saliva, and *fuck* if that wasn't just absolute perfection.

He fumbled around in Shane's side table again, finding the lube that was, as Shane had promised, thankfully still there. He warmed a generous amount in his palm before slipping his hand between Shane's thighs. The sounds that it made were frankly obscene, a wet squelching that, if Ilya wasn't so turned on, he would be worried about being too loud, too obvious. Combined with the steady noises of restrained gagging that was coming from Shane, it was almost too much, and Ilya knew he wouldn't last long.

Unable to hold himself back any longer, he lined up the front of his body with Shane's spine, slotting his own, impossibly hard length, between his lubed up thighs. Every thrust was delicious and overwhelming, making the hairs on Ilya's arm stand to attention and his nipples peak with pleasure. His hand was still somewhat slick, and he wrapped his arm around Shane's hip, capturing his cock in his grasp.

Ilya dragged their bodies through communal waves of pleasure, timing the tightening and teasing of his fist with his own animalistic rutting, all while taking in sharp inhales of *Shane*, the smell of him; both the clean, showered scent of his skin, and the dirtier, musky odor of his arousal. He wanted to draw out the moment for longer, to bring himself close to the edge over and over again until it became too much to bear, but his body had other plans, his release surprising him, ropes of come defiling Shane's already ruined thighs. Ilya continued to thrust into his own mess, riding out his orgasm, the filth of it quickly becoming too much for Shane, who sputtered against the makeshift gag as his own pleasure racked through his body, his come hot between Ilya's fingers.

Afterwards, Ilya collapsed back onto the bed, removing his now soaked briefs from his mouth, and gesturing for Shane to lay his head on his chest.

"I love you so fucking much, Ilya," Shane slurred, drunk on the come down of his orgasm.

Ilya kissed the bridge of his nose. "I love you too."

He wanted to stay like this forever, to fall asleep with Shane in his arms. And he was tempted to. To say fuck it to the potential consequences and spend the night like this. Sleep was already starting to press down on the edges of Shane, and it would be so easy to let it overtake him as well.

But then he heard it. The sound of his phone ringing out from the spare bedroom. Which was odd. It was already on silent for the night, meaning that whoever was calling had made multiple calls back to back, overriding the setting.

Ilya looked at Shane's bedside clock. It was almost 2:30 in the morning. Who the fuck needed to talk to him so badly in the middle of the night?

"What? Since when?"

Shane closed the front door behind him, as softly as he was able, and joined Ilya on the front porch. Ilya had bolted out of his bedroom just a few minutes ago, jostling Shane awake, and it had taken his brain a moment to catch up, to realize he was at home, he was with Ilya, and that there was a phone ringing somewhere in the house.

Acting on autopilot, he threw on some sweats and a hoodie before following Ilya outside, who was now pacing on the front porch, chain smoking, and wearing nothing but his pajama bottoms and an undone jacket, his bare chest gleaming in the moonlight.

Shane leaned his back against the front door, his arms wrapped tightly around himself in an attempt to block out the biting December chill. He should have grabbed a coat. He should get a sweater for Ilya. But he shouldn't leave him out here alone, right? His thoughts spiralled. Had the call woken his parents up? Would they find them both out here and *know*? No, that wasn't rational. Of course Shane would follow Ilya out here if he'd heard the commotion. Fuck, he was being selfish.

Who was Ilya even talking to?

Ilya let out a bitter laugh, heartless and cold, and then answered Shane's silent question. "And what, you didn't think to call until now? Real fucking nice, Alexei."

Shane's bristled. Alexei. He hadn't heard that name in years, probably. Ilya didn't talk about his family anymore, not really. Not since they moved back to Russia. He wondered how often they spoke, and felt ashamed that he didn't already know the answer.

"How did you even find out about that?"

He watched as Ilya took a long drag from his cigarette, nearly finishing it off, before using the end of it to light another.

"Of course. Right."

Shane hated this, only having snippets of what was going on. He wished he could hear the other end of the call, if only so he knew what best to do for Ilya.

"Jesus Christ, Alexei! What that fuck do you expect me to do about that?"

Silence. Ilya pressed a thumb and forefinger into his eyes, exasperation written clearly all over his face.

"I can't— I don't— What about Gregori's brothers or whatever? Doesn't he have family who can—"

He could hear a slight murmur from the receiver now, Alexei evidently having raised his voice, if it was loud enough to carry across the porch.

"You know this shit doesn't make any money, right? I'm a fucking *student* Alexei. I have rent and tuition, and I have to fucking feed myself."

Ilya sighed, deep and resigned. He was quiet for a while, listening to whatever Alexei was spouting on the other end of the line. Shane didn't like the sound of where this conversation was going.

"Yeah. No, yeah. I get that." Ilya sat down on the porch swing, seemingly unphased by the snow that was inevitably melting beneath him and soaking through his pajamas. "Yeah, I'll go to the bank tomorrow, okay? I'll see what I can do."

He disconnected the call, and chunked the phone onto the porch. Shane picked it up, pocketing it, and crouched in front of Ilya, crossing his forearms on his knees and looking up at him. He stayed like that for a while. Ilya smoked another cigarette, and Shane didn't say a thing about it.

"Are you... okay?" he asked eventually, and immediately felt stupid.

"No," Ilya said, simply. Which, of course he wasn't. "That was Alexei."

"I gathered that part."

"He's asking for fucking money."

Shane nodded. "I gathered that too."

Ilya ran a hand through Shane's hair, pressing his fingertips into his scalp in an absentminded, self-soothing gesture.

"When was... the last time you talked to him?" Shane asked, not certain if it was even the right thing to say.

Ilya chuckled. That cool, hollow sound again. "The day they left for Russia."

"Fuck," Shane said.

"Yeah."

"Why does he need money?" Shane ran a thumb along the outside seam of Ilya's pajamas, back and forth, not sure if it was to comfort himself or Ilya. "Like, why now?"

Ilya buried his nose into Shane's hair, inhaling deeply, before putting out his smoke in the ashtray, like the scent of Shane is what he'd needed to ease his nerves all along.

"Alexei got some girl pregnant," he said, tone unnaturally measured.

"What?"

"And my father," his voice broke here, like he was trying to swallow his sadness whole. "He's sick."

Shane's fingers were beginning to feel numb, and he wasn't sure if it was from the cold or the information he was trying to process.

“Sick?” he repeated, feeling dumb. “Like, fucked in the head?”

Ilya exhaled a short breath of something almost like laughter. “No,” he said. “Well, not only that. He’s always been fucked in the head.” He pressed several kisses into the part of Shane’s hair before continuing.

“He’s sick like, he’s going to die. Not right now, but also apparently it’s not that far off.”

Shane wondered how much of Ilya’s life with Gregori he had been unaware of as a child. He felt like he only ever witnessed glimpses of the anger and deep sadness that festered within the home across the street. Had he been a bad friend by not creating a space comfortable enough for Ilya to share those parts of his life with him? He thought about how Yuna would often drive Ilya to hockey practice, and about the arguments he’d overhear when he stopped by Ilya’s house. Things that had seemed odd, sure, when he was a kid, but as he reflected back, it all seemed darker now.

“He’s losing his mind, apparently. Dementia, or whatever.” Ilya kissed his head again. “Oh, and he got remarried, like, three months after moving to Russia.”

“Who? Your dad?!” Shane stared up at Ilya, wide eyed.

“Yep.” Ilya pulled another cigarette out of the pack in his coat pocket, slotted it between his lips, but then returned it back to the carton after momentary hesitation. “Apparently she’s even younger than mom was.”

“What the fuck?” Shane wasn’t sure where to begin. Then, he thought back to the root of the conversation. “Hold on, what does he even want money from you for?”

Shane got up from where he was squatting, and planted himself next to Ilya on the swing, deciding he couldn’t be bothered to give a shit about his sweats getting wet. His legs were already covered in dried come and lube, so it wasn’t like he had much dignity left. He pulled Ilya’s hand into his own.

“It sounds like Gregori put my brother in charge of his finances, knowing that his health was declining. Fast. I’m sure you can imagine how that went.”

“What did he do?”

Ilya grunted. “He was being cagey as fuck about it, obviously. But it sounds like the same shit as when he was a teenager, just on a bigger scale. Drugs, gambling.”

Shane leaned his head against Ilya’s shoulder. “And how’s that your problem?”

“I guess the medical bills are stacking up, and now he has a fucking *kid* on the way. He says he had to quit his job so he can stay at home to take care of dad all day. Can’t work because he can’t pay for the medical care.”

“I still don’t see how—”

“One of Alexei’s friends from here told him about the fucking hockey artist shit. Sent him articles about it. I guess he thinks because I created one stupid fucking controversial piece of art that I’m a well he can tap dry.”

Shane captured Ilya’s face in his palms. “You know you don’t owe him shit, right? He treated you like garbage, Ilya. They both did.”

Ilya pulled Shane’s hands off of him and stood abruptly, returning to his restless pacing from before. Tracing his own footprints in the snow dusted porch. “You don’t get it, Shane. If it wasn’t for Alexei then I’d probably be right back in Russia with them. I can’t just—” He ran a hand back and forth from his chest to his collar bone. “I have some money from the Osheaga deal. I was gonna use it so I didn’t need to work part time this year, but I think I can get my job back at the art shop. I can make it work.” He nodded to himself, clearly resigned to the idea.

“Ilya, if you really feel like you need to give him the money then I can—”

Ilya’s head snapped toward him, his eyes lit up like a flare in the night. “Don’t you dare finish that sentence.”

Shane flinched, and Ilya’s face softened at the reaction.

“Sorry,” he said. “Fuck, sorry Shane. I just, it’s something I need to take care of myself, okay? I appreciate the thought, and I’m sure you guys are doing well. But I don’t need money. It’ll be fine.”

Shane wanted to protest, but he held himself back. He realized it was snowing heavier now, and the temperature was continuing to drop. The wind howled across the open expanse of the surrounding fields, the deep echo of it circling them like a pack of wild dogs. Shane felt like Ilya was further away from him than ever, despite the fact that they were closer together than they had been in months.

“Let’s go inside,” he said, deciding to drop the subject. He didn’t like the idea of Ilya spending his savings on fucking Alexei and Gregori, but he supposed he didn’t really have a say in the matter. “Come warm up in my bed.”

“But your parents—”

“It’s fine,” Shane said. “I’ll set an early alarm and you can go back to yours before they wake up.”

A Week Later – Toronto, ON

The tension from that night on the balcony quickly faded, eclipsed by the comforting smells and sounds of Christmas at home. Like Shane had predicted, Ilya helped David string up the lights along the roof, the two of them working in tandem while Shane and Yuna made a grocery list for their dinners that week. Yuna wanted all of the traditional fanfare, insisting that she didn’t know the next time both her boys would be home for the holidays, while

Shane attempted to persuade her into some healthier alternatives. He wasn't about to go back on tour after a week's vacation feeling bloated and lethargic.

Ilya continued to sneak into his childhood bedroom each night, as they did their best to silently explore each other's bodies. If David and Yuna suspected anything, they didn't mention it.

On their last day together, Ilya presented Shane with a small, tightly wrapped Christmas gift. Shane protested and complained, stating that he didn't have anything in return, but Ilya forced the gift on him. However, it had come with a caveat; he wasn't allowed to open it until his first night back on the road. Shane shrugged it off, shoving the package into his carry on and not thinking much about it.

r/wolfbirds | december 2010

weak_backhand

pretty sure i just saw shane get stopped at airport security

so i'm checking in at yyz and i SWEAR i saw shane.
he got pulled aside at security because of something in his bag and they made him open it. it was like... a wrapped christmas present??
and when he opened it he just froze and the security guy literally looked at him like 🙄
i tried to get a photo but you can't see shit in it, but like... the gift was very sus.

allergic2eggs

"very sus" is not enough information for me

square-peg

yeah you seriously can't say all that and not tell us what it was

weak_backhand (op)

OKAY

to be clear i'm not an expert on this stuff but i swear it looked like a butt plug to me

square-peg

HELLO???

round-hole

the fact that he wrapped it is what's getting to me.
like he really said this is going under a tree somewhere 🤡

too-many-lamps

imagine airport security opening it like "sir?"

allergic2eggs

shane: i can explain

security: please don't

too-many-lamps

it's gotta be for rose, right?

allergic2eggs

omfg just realized that the band has been spotted in ny all week. so does that mean THIS MAN flew all the way back to canada to personally transport a BUTT PLUG for rose's christmas gift

weak_backhand (op)

apparently chivalry isn't dead after all

too-many-lamps

the dedication is insane

geneticallyboring

you guys are insane and frankly way too parasocial. let the man live 😞

not_compatible

right?? i feel bad for rose too... she doesn't need people speculating about her private life

round-hole

holy shit the way that this is going to haunt them for the rest of the tour

allergic2eggs

next interview: "so shane, what was in the box"

Chapter End Notes

Canadian Context:

- Osheaga is a popular music festival in Montreal
- I think airport security is called TSA in the US?? If you're wondering why I don't call it that in this it's because that's not what it's called here, lol. There is an acronym for it, but we don't use it.

Other Notes:

So I keep trying to progress the plot forward but these boys can't keep their hands to themselves 😬

What was meant to be a quick scene kind of went off the rails in this one. I do think it was worth it though 🙄

That being said, their libido may result in me needing to add on a chapter or two - we will see. I'm trying not to stray too far from my intended timeline!

ALSO tomorrow is opening night for the musical I'm directing so manifest good luck for my cast and crew 🙏

Chapter 27: KIP PRESENTS: THE WOLFBIRDS TOUR VLOG

Chapter Notes

Make sure creator style is turned on for this chapter or else the table used will be hard to read!

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

*I wish I could do better by you
'Cause that's what you deserve
You sacrifice so much of your life
In order for this to work*

“The Girl”, City and Colour

February 2011 – Phoenix, AZ

Kip did not show Shane the vlog before posting it. He also did not give Shane warning that he was going to post it. Shane, to his complete and utter annoyance, found out about the posting of said vlog when he received a text from Ilya commenting on how sexy he looked during soundcheck. While he appreciated the compliment, he would have liked to have seen the video beforehand.

Kip was reluctant to show him, claiming that it was “boring”, which was an immediate red flag. No one appreciated Kip’s sense of humour more than Kip. He was obviously hiding something. Eventually, after threatening severe bodily harm, Kip relented and showed him the monstrosity.

THE WOLFBIRDS TOUR VLOG – DAY OF SHOW (DALLAS NIGHT 1)

Filmed, Narrated, and Transcribed by Kip

[8:14 AM – TOUR BUS]

The camera turns on. It is pointed at the ceiling.

KIP: ... Okay, yeah, looks like it's on.

The camera flips around to face Kip. It's too close to his face.

KIP: Uh. Good morning. I think.

The camera turns around and Kip slowly walks down the aisle. From their bunk, someone draws open the curtain, groans at the overexposed light, and shuts it again, pulling the covers over their head. Kip zooms in on the cocooned shell of a person.

KIP: Yeah, so this is what The Wolfbirds look like on tour before coffee. Very exhilarating stuff.

He continues walking down the length of the bus, passing through the kitchenette. Shane is sitting near the exit, fully dressed in workout gear and tying his shoelaces. The camera zooms in on Shane's face.

KIP (WHISPERING): And here we have a Shane, who is somehow a functioning human being despite the ungodly hour.

SHANE (WITHOUT LOOKING UP): Some of us have discipline.

KIP: We're not convinced he's entirely human.

[8:31 AM - OUTSIDE, BACK LOT]

The camera shakes slightly as Kip steps off the bus. The wind was being a little bitch here so it's a bit hard to hear us.

KIP: Okay, so this is part of the routine, apparently.

The camera pans to Shane, who is doing push ups on a yoga mat.

KIP: He does this every day. Doesn't matter where we are or what's going on. Rain, shine, existential crisis. Nothing can stop him.

Shane stands up, hands planted on his hips. He looks disappointedly into the camera.

SHANE: You said you weren't going to film this.

KIP: I lied. It's good for content. The people like your arms. I give the people what they want.

Shane shakes his head. He gets back on the mat and starts working through some sit ups.

KIP: And who exactly can the people thank for creating your... disciplined workout routine, Shane?

SHANE (GRUNTING BETWEEN REPS): Scott.

KIP: Right, right. He's talking about Intern Scott, of course.

SHANE (GLARING AGAIN): He's not an intern anymore, Kip. He got promoted like, over a year ago.

KIP: Then why does he still answer to it?

Shane shakes his head, unable to hold back a smile at Kip's hilarious and very well timed joke.

[9:47 AM - CATERING / BREAKFAST]

The camera spans over the breakfast spread, laid out backstage of the venue. It's louder here, plates are clinking, people are talking over each other in the background.

KIP: Okay, so food.

He points the camera down at his own plate. It's a mix comprising a highly balanced, nutritious, and delicious breakfast. Some fruit, a bagel with peanut butter, bacon, an assortment of deli meats and a mini chocolate croissant.

KIP: This is usually the kind of stuff we get on show days, like breakfast and lunch kind of all blended together because not everyone shows up at the same time. So yeah, you just kind of take what you can and hope it holds you over until after soundcheck.

The camera pans toward Shane, who is drinking some sort of grey paste from a plastic shaker cup. In front of him is a plate of an unidentifiable brown grain and pickled vegetables??? (tbh I have no idea how to describe this for the transcript, all I can say is it looks deeply unappealing and is frankly more evidence that Shane is probably not 100% human - xoxo Kip)

KIP: And then there is... this.

CREW MEMBER (OFF CAMERA): That's the saddest thing I've ever seen, man.

SHANE: It's not sad.

Intern Scott is nearby, half in frame, leaning against the counter and drinking coffee from a paper cup.

INTERN SCOTT: Leave him alone, Kip. It works for him.

Kip swings the camera towards him, zooming in too fast.

KIP: Internet, say hi to Intern Scott. Intern Scott, say hi to the internet. He's the architect behind Shane's body.

INTERN SCOTT (WAVING AWKWARDLY): Hi internet.

KIP: See Shane, I told you he answers to it.

[11:15 AM - LOAD IN / STAGE SETUP]

The stage is a mess of cables and cases. Crew members are rolling in gear and talking over walkie-talkies. Kip is being helpful by untangling some wires that appear to be all messed up with one hand, while simultaneously trying to hold the camera. It's quite shaky.

KIP: So, this is load-in. Everything gets moved in from the trucks to the venue. We play an integral role by being present for it.

CREW MEMBER: Don't touch that.

[12:35 PM - SOUND CHECK]

The camera is propped up against something backstage, capturing a wide angle view of the band as they run through the final chorus of 'First Name Basis'.

SHANE AND ROSE (HARMONIZING):

You said my first name
with that look in your eyes
My mind fell weak
and my body complied
I was down on my knees
and my hands were tied

Once you've carved and kissed
and shattered each bone
I'll say your first name and ask
did I throw the first stone

After the final notes ring out, Kip runs over to the camera, picking it up, grinning.

KIP: Occasionally, we are competent.

[2:20 PM - GREEN ROOM]

The lighting is dim and the room is cozy, stark in contrast to the cacophony of noise during sound check.

KIP: Okay, so we've done sound check, everything's set, but doors aren't for another few hours. Which means we get to chill out for a bit. We all kind of have our own routines for what we do to get ready for the show.

The camera spans across the room, slowly. Shane appears to be journaling, headphones in and unaware that he's being recorded. Sveta is passed out on one of the couches, her feet in Rose's lap. Rose is reading a paperback. The camera zooms in on the title - it's Mockingjay.

KIP: How's the book?

ROSE: Don't talk to me, President Snow is [censored to prevent spoilers]

[4:55 PM - LATE LUNCH / SNACKS]

Shane stands in the middle of the frame, a smile on his face that makes him look like he's being held at gunpoint. He is holding out a shaker cup containing the same questionable grey sludge as before.

KIP: Okay, go.

SHANE: My name is Shane Hollander, and this is my second [censored because Elena says we could get sued] protein shake of the day.

The audio picks up the choked sounds of Kip trying not to laugh.

SHANE: Was that okay?

Shane paused the YouTube video and glared at Kip, who was on the opposite bunk, struggling to breathe through the force of his laughter.

“What the *fuck*, Kip, you said that was for a brand deal! Take this shit down, I look so stupid!”

March 2011 – Los Angeles, CA

Shane had to admit that Kip's vlog wasn't all bad. It had sparked an idea in him that was beneficial for both the band as a whole, and his own selfish desire to see Ilya again before the summer.

The Wolfbirds were still on tour until late July, when they would wrap up with Osheaga, but they were simultaneously working with their label and management to discuss what would come next. They had good momentum going, and both Elena and Wiebe, their representative from Unrivalled Records, were insisting they leverage that. After their first tour as openers for Fabian, they took some time off to record their second album. This time around, they were writing and recording new material on the go, utilizing studios all across North America.

While Unrivaled was predominantly a Toronto based label that supported Canadian artists, they had opened up an office in Los Angeles the past year. Therefore, Wiebe suggested filming a music video for one of the singles from their new album while they were in town. Then, it could be released before Osheaga and really build some hype around their next campaign.

It just so happened that their stint in LA aligned with Ilya's reading week. It had been an easy sell to Wiebe; they'd worked with Ilya in the past for their first album's cover art, and he already had an appreciation for what he called his "artistic vision". When he brought it up, Shane also discovered that Wiebe had heard about his hockey installation, and was apparently on the side of the internet that agreed it was an important message.

Convincing Ilya to accept the role as lead art director for the music video had been more of a challenge. He was skeptical and defensive, insisting that he didn't need Shane lining up jobs for him as some loophole to giving him money. Which was dumb and annoying. Sue him for wanting to see each other in person and (hopefully) find a time and place to ride his boyfriend's dick into oblivion. In the end, Shane had convinced him by agreeing to a stupid and fucking ridiculous deal which involved the Christmas gift that Shane was still pissed off about.

It also turned out that the deal had been completely unnecessary. After seeing the lyrics and listening to the song, Ilya became thoroughly invested in the project. Shane and the band agreed to let him and the rest of the creative direction team take the lead on the video, while they just focused on their next month of shows. The work seemed to invigorate him, his expression and demeanour over Facetime lighting up in a way that made Shane realize he hadn't been acting completely like himself lately.

By the time the day of the shoot rolled around, all they really knew about the concept was that it would be filmed in one continuous take and that Ilya had fought tooth and nail to get the team to agree to sourcing a live goat for the project. According to Ilya, the goat was "integral to the success of the video and not even worth my time if they can't make it happen".

Their schedule was tight, so Shane actually didn't have a chance to see Ilya until they all arrived on set. They were filming at Hauser & Wirth, a contemporary gallery in a former flour mill, and the team had already been there for two days, getting everything ready. Ilya wasped around the space, hovering over everyone, giving sharp instructions and exuding a level of authority that Shane hadn't seen in him since he'd been on the ice back during high school. It was, frankly, incredibly hot.

Shane and the rest of the band were shuffled off to their trailers almost immediately after arriving, where they got outfitted and prepped for the shoot. Shane reviewed the video script as three different people simultaneously worked on his hair and face (something that he still hated, but was getting used to).

VIDEO TITLE: OTHER PLACE - THE WOLFBIRDS

VIDEO

AUDIO

0.00-0.10

Intro (instrumental only)

Pristine white gallery entrance.
Kip is standing behind the
admissions desk.

*One continuous shot - at eye
level as though POV of someone
walking through the gallery.*

0.10-0.35

Camera enters the first room.
Windows line the walls instead
of paintings. Periodically there
is action behind the windows -
lights flickering on or off,
curtains opening or closing,
Svetlana, Kip, Shane, or Rose
appearing in the windows.

*Camera walks the circumference
of the room and a medium pace,
displaying each window but not
stopping at any point.*

Wake up
Can you see the view
In the house across the street
They'll fall in love with you

And when the world's unfair
And god, it's so unfair

You can always find some peace
In our other place

0.35-0.55

Camera enters the second room.
The floor is covered in real
soil, formed into neat,
manicured rows.

As the camera travels between
the rows, hands burst from the
soil and unfurl, like plants
opening up to the sun.

*Camera walks through the room,
following the pathway of the
rows of soil.*

Dumb luck
That you are my friend
I don't stumble over words
Or have to play pretend

And when they fail to care
And god, they'll fail to care

You can always find some peace
In our other place

0.55-1.30

Camera enters the third room.
A single lightbulb on a string

There's a bed
To rest your head on
Somewhere safe

hangs from the centre of the ceiling. The walls and floors are covered in old wood panelling. There is a faux window in the room, which shows a sunrise. The room contains a worn futon and a vintage television, with a built-in VCR player.

Sveta and Rose are sitting on the floor. Sveta is braiding Rose's hair.

Camera enters the room at a wide angle, then lowers as though sitting down on the futon. During instrumental at the end of chorus the camera stands up and begins to leave to the next room.

1:30-2:00

Camera enters the fourth room. The room is very dark. The only light comes from projected text on all four walls. The text displays emails and instant messenger logs, things such as "hey", "are you there?", "it's okay if you're not", "just wanted to see if you're ok".

Shane stands with his back facing one of the walls, the text also projected onto him.

Camera enters the room, stills at the same continuous wide angle on Shane before leaving.

2:00-2:17

Camera enters the fifth room.

And out of the way
That you can fall back on

Where
The water's calling you
Where
We can start anew

Where your secrets are kept
And your memories are living
Where everyone loves you
And we're just beginning

We talked
Until your forgot me
Left the boy you always knew
For who you had to be

But when you see it through
And I hope you'll see it through

You can always find some peace
In our other place

You build
Bodies like an architect
And as your tongue takes hold of

Strung in rows all across the room are quick gesture drawings and more detailed sketches of Shane - some of his full body, others just body parts (face, hands, etc.).

Should look similar to omikuji (paper prayers) at a Shinto shrine. Have air flowing through the room so the pages flutter in the wind.

Camera walks through the rows of sketches, not stilling at any particular point.

2:17-3:10

Camera re-enters the third room (wooden room with a single window and lightbulb). There is now a sunset in the window.

Sveta and Rose are sitting on the floor again, but now Sveta is cutting Rose's hair into a shoulder length bob.

Camera repeats motion from before. Enter the room, sit on the futon, leave during instrumental at the end of chorus.

3:10-3:30

Camera enters the sixth room. It appears to be a greenhouse. Misted glass line walls. The room is lush with plants. There is an overhead irrigation system. There is a white goat wandering around the room.

Shane is facing away from the camera, wearing a white t-shirt.

me
We start to reconnect

But when we overthink
And god, we'll overthink

We can always find some peace
In our other place

There's a bed
To rest our heads on
Somewhere safe
And out of the way
That we can fall back on

Where
The water's calling you
Where
We can start anew

Where your secrets are kept
And your memories are living
Where everyone loves you
And we're just beginning

We're lost
Or we think we are
Can we heal our broken bones
Or have we gone too far

And if we start to fall
Oh god, I think I'll fall

At least our other place
Will still be there at the end
of it all

Blood is dripping onto the ground from his arm, it is in an oversaturated red.

When the camera comes around to face Shane head on, the sprinkler above him turns on, washing away the blood and soaking him.

Camera starts with Shane's back in the center of the frame, then walks around so his front is centered, where we pause for the rest of the verse.

3:30-4:15

Camera re-enters the third room (wooden room with a single window and lightbulb). The window now displays a sky filled with stars.

The camera sits on the futon, a hand reaches out to turn on the television and press play.

The camera, for the first time, slowly zooms in on the TV screen until it takes up the entire view.

In post, fill this screen to be the start of the music video, as though it is repeating from the beginning.

Camera repeats motion from before, enters and sits on futon.

There's a bed
To rest our heads on
Somewhere safe
And out of the way
That we can fall back on

Where
The water's calling you
Where
We can start anew

Where our secrets are kept
And our memories are living
Where everyone loves you
And we're just beginning

Yes we're still just beginning

The concept was absolutely beautiful. Each of the rooms that Ilya had created somehow perfectly captured the concept that Shane had been going for with his lyrics, despite not having collaborated very much on the project. Shane fucking loved him and his brain and he wanted to go back in time and smack his younger self on the back of his head for being so goddamn obtuse about his feelings.

He liked the idea that this song, which he'd created as a silent ode to Ilya, their history, and their potential future, now had both of their footprints attached to it. Even though no one outside of their friends would be able to know it was about them, it felt good to share his feelings, however convoluted and disguised, through his music.

What Shane didn't realize, however, was that this one music video, thrown together in less than a month and filmed in *under four and a half minutes* would set into place a series of repercussions that would change the course of all their lives forever.

Chapter End Notes

So this chapter kind of also took an unexpected turn!

After our chat in the comments I decided to include more of The Wolfbirds lyrics. This led to me getting inspired and writing a whole song. THIS led to Shane seeking out an opportunity to reunite with Ilya by having him create an artistic vision for the music video of said song.

SOOO the formatting is a bit different than my usual chapters and I hope you enjoyed the lyrics and also Kip's vlogging session lol! I thought it was a fun exploration and maybe provided you with a bit more insight to the bands creative process.

While this was unexpected, it actually fits into what I wanted to happen next REALLY nicely and kind of makes everything that I had planned tie together SO much better. So I'm really grateful for ya'll.

It's a wee bit shorter, but I really liked that closing cliffhanger so ya'll can anticipate what is going to happen next 🥰 (I promise it's good stuff... for now).

Also, if anyone is interested in what inspires Shane's songwriting, feel free to check out [The Wolfbirds Songwriting Playlist on Spotify](#). It includes a lot of the songs from chapter titles, along with other songs that didn't make the cut but which also I feel like really would inspire him.

Get ready for some DRAMA next chapter (we're going to a music awards event!!)

Chapter 28: The Worst Russian That Canada's Ever Seen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*I'm afraid of the way that I live my life
I'm afraid of the way I don't
I'm afraid of the things that I wanna do but I won't
I'm afraid of the way the world works
And I'm afraid of the works in my notebooks
I'm afraid that you all know that I am a pervert*

“Big Bird”, AJJ

July 2011 – Montreal, QC

There was a reason why Ilya preferred staying with the Hollanders in Bobcaygeon during the summers. At some point over the past ten years he had become accustomed to the climate of South-Central Ontario, his skin forgetting what the ever pressing humidity of Florida had been like. Montreal, for some reason, operated in extremes: winters consisting of snow banks that could bury cars for the season if you weren't careful, and summers that rivaled the pits of hell. Combine the sweltering weather with the swarming bodies gathered for the music festival, it was nearly unbearable. The energy was simultaneously infectious, invigorating, and exhausting.

Thankfully, as one of the artists hired for the festival, he was given backstage access, which provided him with the holy trinity of goodness: impeccable food, side stage views, and the best perk, clean bathrooms. It was because of this that Ilya found himself watching The Wolfbirds' set from the wings, standing next to none other than Scott Hunter.

He'd met Scott on occasion, but they hadn't gotten to know each other too well over the years. He had a calming presence, if not a little bit anxious, like he was holding something back.

“Your hair's a lot longer than when I saw it last,” Scott noted between songs. Yeah, it was safe to say they didn't really have much to talk about.

Ilya attempted to tuck a curl behind his ear, but it popped back out. It was in a frustrating in-between stage. Constantly getting in the way of his line of sight, but not yet long enough to tie up. “You don't have to pretend it looks good,” Ilya chuckled. “I'm growing it out as a part of an exhibit I'm doing in the spring.”

Scott eyed him curiously. “You're growing out your hair... for an art exhibit?”

Ilya nodded.

“What’s it about?” Scott said this with hesitation, like he wasn’t sure if it was appropriate to ask.

Ilya hadn’t told anyone, other than the prof he was consulting with for the capstone project and Dr. Galina, his therapist, about his plans for the installation. Not even Shane. He was planning to, of course, but he didn’t want to burden him with his feelings. He wasn’t sure what it was about the moment, or about Scott that made him feel like he could open up a fraction. Maybe it’s just that they had the shared distraction of the performance to pay attention to that made it easier to let go.

“I was twelve years old when my mother died,” he started. Scott released a small sound of surprise, but didn’t interrupt. “I found her.” Ilya watched as the lights on stage dappled Shane’s face in freckles of purple and red.

“I’ve always told people it was an accident, that’s what my dad said we needed to say. But it wasn’t. She was sad, or well, depressed I guess, for a long time. She killed herself. Swallowed a bunch of pills.” Scott continued to stay silent, just listening, and Ilya appreciated that. It reminded him of Dr. Galina a bit. She’d said the more he told his story the easier it would get. He didn’t believe her, but maybe she was right. She usually ended up being right.

“My mom was an artist too, you know. She’s the one that got me into painting. She’s the reason I pursued any of this. Anyway, for a long time I’ve worried that I’m going to end up like her. Depressed. Dead, even. I thought that if I kept pushing through, ignoring it, throwing myself into my work instead of addressing what I was feeling, I could avoid it. It didn’t work, obviously. My roommates, Troy and Harris, are the ones who really noticed that something was off.

“When we finished filming *Other Place*, I asked if I could take home the VHS player from the music video. I don’t even know why I wanted it at the time. It was a bitch to get through customs, too. Anyway, once I was back in Montreal I realized that I had all these old VHS tapes, home videos from when my mom was alive. I became kind of obsessed with them, and I think I spiralled from there. Started drinking alone more, skipping classes, stuff like that. Then, one day Troy and Harris told me we were going to go for brunch for Harris’ birthday, and the next thing I knew we were in the waiting room for the University councillor. I was fucking pissed. Livid, really. But I wasn’t about to make some sort of scene in the quiet office, so I figured I would go in, get it over with, make them feel like they did something, and then never go back. About three weeks passed before I found myself back in her office.”

“That’s really brave of you,” Scott said.

Ilya laughed. “I don’t think so. I think I did it out of fear, mostly. Not fear of dying, if I’m being honest. Just fear of letting Shane down.” Then, Ilya froze for a second. Had Shane told Scott about the two of them? He looked at Scott, his eyes laced with fear, and Scott nodded, a small smile breaking through the dark stubble lining his jaw. Ilya’s heart rate slowed.

He let out a long sigh before continuing. The band was singing *Other Place*, which had become an overnight sensation since the release of their music video at the start of the month,

making Osheaga bump up The Wolfbirds to their mainstage for the festival. It felt like a fitting backdrop for the moment.

“Anyway, my therapist pointed out something to me that kind of inspired the project. She said that I’m so afraid of becoming like my mother, but in doing so I’m reducing her to her smallest parts, when she was at her weakest. Which ticked me off, you know. I don’t think my mom was weak at all. She’s one of the strongest people I’ve ever known, one of the bravest. But my therapist was also right. She’s always fucking right, it’s really annoying actually.

“She said I needed to accept my mom as she was, completely, not just focusing on that one part of her. Take her in for all of the good and the bad and the messy. If I could learn to love all of those parts of her, then maybe I could love those parts of myself, and hopefully figure out how to live alongside the, you know... depression, or whatever. Instead of trying to push it down.”

As their conversation lulled, an instrumental break pressed through the song, the bass seeping into their bones. When the lyrics came back, full force and thick with emotion, Scott winced.

“Okay, so I’m probably outing myself as an extremely uncultured pedestrian, and all of that sounds incredible and really inspiring, but... What does it have to do with growing out your hair?”

Ilya threw his head back with laughter. “Right, no. That’s on me. My project is going to be part installation, part performance art. I want to lean into the idea of accepting the attributes that I’ve inherited from my mother, you know? So I’m going to recreate her art studio, as best as I can from memory. It’s where I learned to paint. And then I’m doing this twenty-four hour exhibit where I’ll be painting live the whole time. Then, the pieces I create I’ll sell off and donate the profits to the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention. The hair is...”

Ilya chuckled, running his hand through his curls. “When I was younger, after my mom died, and when my dad was particularly intoxicated, he would sometimes call me Irina by accident. That was her name. Because we looked the same I suppose. Or maybe it was an early sign of his dementia, I don’t know. But I thought I might as well lean into it, try to mirror her externally as well.”

Scott asked a few other questions about the exhibit, but their conversation tapered off. Ilya wasn’t surprised, and he didn’t mind. He realized it was a bit exhausting to talk about, and he was happy to just enjoy the performance.

Every so often, Shane’s eyes would flit over to where it was standing, partially obscured in the shadows, and Ilya could feel himself light up from the inside. He knew he needed to talk to him about seeing Dr. Galina and how he was feeling, it’s something they’d been discussing a lot during his sessions lately, but he only got to see Shane so often, and the moment never really felt right.

After a while, Ilya noticed that Shane wasn’t the only one periodically looking in their direction. Kip, too, seemed somewhat preoccupied by their presence. He briefly wondered if

they were distracting him or something, and then Ilya noticed the look in Scott's eyes. Which, *huh*.

He'd thought, back when he first met Scott, that there was some level of attraction between the two of them, but he didn't realize it had actually developed into something tangible and living.

"So," Ilya said, clearing his throat. "You and Kip, huh?"

Scott gaped at him, his mouth silently opening and closing like a fish out of water. He looked ridiculous. Ilya tried his best not to laugh, the man looked genuinely shell shocked. "What? No— there's nothing—"

"Scott, Shane and I were seeing each other in secret for literal years. I know what that look you two are giving each other means."

Scott glanced back at Kip, his features softening. "Honestly, I'd love to tell people. I know Kip would too. But," Scott sighed. "He's technically a client of mine. It would put my job at Equinox in jeopardy."

"Sounds... complicated."

Scott huffed out a laugh. "That's putting it lightly. I've been talking to Elena though. Next year I'm hoping to take on my own clients, independently, so I wouldn't be working with the band anymore. Which would suck. But also—" He trailed off as he pulled out his phone, checking some notification that had evidently popped up midway through his explanation. "Holy shit," he muttered.

Ilya was about to ask what he was losing his mind over, but then his own phone vibrated. He unlocked it, taking a look at the email that popped up. *Holy shit* was right. Also, he really needed to get a new fucking email handle.

From: awards@mtv.com

To: ilya.rozzy81@hotmail.com

07/29/2011 23:14:10 EDT

Subject: 2011 MTV Video Music Award Nomination - Best Art Direction

Dear Ilya Rozanov,

On behalf of the MTV Video Music Awards, we are pleased to inform you that you have been nominated for Best Art Direction at the 2011 MTV Video Music Awards for your work on The Wolfbirds' *Other Place*.

The visual design and conceptual execution of *Other Place* were recognized by our voting body as exemplary within this year's field of submissions.

The 2011 MTV Video Music Awards ceremony will be held on Sunday, August 28, 2011 at the Nokia Theatre L.A. LIVE in Los Angeles, California. Further details regarding nominee attendance, credentialing, and event logistics will be provided by our team in the coming weeks.

Congratulations on your nomination. We look forward to celebrating your work.

Sincerely,
MTV Video Music Awards Team

August 2011 – Los Angeles, CA

Ilya cursed himself for ever complaining about the swampy heat of Montreal in the summer. The Canadian island's inferno was an oasis compared to the overbearing temperature of the lights that pressed down on him as he walked the red carpet with Sveta, Kip, Shane, and Rose.

Which, holy fuck. He was walking the *red carpet*. How was this happening? Last month, when he'd received the email from the awards team, he thought it must have been an accident. Sure, the music video had blown up immediately after its release, but he was meant to stay behind the camera, backstage, out of the spotlight. After all the shit that happened with "The Hockey Artist" last year, he learned that he wasn't really one for media attention. Luckily, most people weren't invested in the drama enough to know what he looked like, so it didn't impact him on the day to day. And Ilya was happy to keep it that way.

Still, it was kind of exciting; to have his work recognized on such a large scale.

Sveta stayed pressed to his side as they slowly traversed the carpet. She'd been there ever since they stepped out of the car, a hand tucked delicately into his arm, or on his lower back, whispering instructions to him as they went along. Telling him which direction to look in, when to smile, when to act candid. He was unquantifiably grateful for her, and dumbfounded that she and the rest of the band did stuff like this all of the time.

The commentary from photographers was unending, and frankly he wasn't sure how she kept track of it all. Overlapping demands to "look over here", "closer, closer", and "hold that". Sveta handled it like she was born for this world.

Ilya considered how this, too, was a form of art. The way that they'd been dressed and posed and photographed like Greek gods. The Wolfbirds' stylist had been generous enough to dress Ilya as well, thank christ, otherwise he would likely have been turned away at the door for looking like a feral orphan child. Instead, he was clad in a lightweight linen suit. The jacket was cropped and single breasted, highlighting the waistline of the pants, which were wide legged and featured a dramatic pleat. Instead of a button up beneath the jacket, they had him wearing a sleeveless mock neck with a few gold chains layered over top (he'd insisted on not removing his mother's cross, so they worked around it). He felt good. A little bit out of himself, but good.

By the time Ilya and Sveta made their way inside, they'd lost sight of Kip, Rose, and Shane, who had likely been pulled away for an interview or gotten lost in the thunderstorm of camera shutters and flash bulbs.

“That was fucking insane,” Ilya said, as Sveta marched him towards the pit, where there were rows of assigned seating lined up facing the stage.

“You did amazing, Ilyushka,” Sveta said, squeezing his arm. “Oh, there they are!” She pointed across the room, where Shane, Kip, and Rose were already seated, waving them over.

Ilya felt a weight in his heart soften at the sight of Shane, who was wearing a paisley blue silk shirt that was open deliciously low, exposing his chest that was sheened with a glossy layer of sweat. Ilya wanted to lick him.

Shane stared at his *boyfriend* across the concert hall, actual stars in his eyes. He couldn't believe this was real. He was at the VMAs with his band that had been nominated for no less than *three freaking awards*, and somehow, Ilya was here by his side. Well, not literally of course. They'd walked the carpet with Rose and Sveta respectively, in order to not draw attention to them, but still.

Shane stood as they approached, pointing at the chair next to him for Ilya to sit at. To his left, Rose snickered, and he glared at her.

“Shut up,” he muttered, under his breath.

“You're so lame,” she quipped back.

The stage was incredible, but Shane was more entranced by Ilya's expression as he studied the design of it, clearly thinking of the logistics and the inspiration. There was a massive, glowing, curved archway in the centre of it, shaped like a guitar pick. Waves of light wrapped around it, following the curves in the shape. It reminded Shane of the rings on a tree trunk, but he was certain the intention was probably something much more pretentious and serious than that. The stage itself was glossy and white, reflecting the ever changing colour that was projected from the bright structure.

The chairs were thankfully tucked away from the growing crowd filling the standing section of the theatre. Shane could still feel the residual camera flash behind his eyelids from the red carpet, and he was grateful for the illusion of calm provided by their secluded area. From where he sat next to him, Ilya spread his legs in a gesture that seemed nonchalant, his leg encroaching towards his own, drawn together like tides to the moon. In any other context the touch would be mundane. Here though, where at any given second they could be potentially observed by millions of people at home on their televisions, it felt lewd and salacious.

Ilya slung an arm over the back of his chair, pressing in close, his breath, a damnation, hot on the shell of his ear. “Your shirt is making me think *very* indecent thoughts.”

Heat licked up Shane's torso and spine. “Such as?” he asked, refusing to make eye contact with Ilya, and doing his best to ignore the way that the inherent danger of the situation made

him sick with desire.

Ilya hummed. The low rumble of his vocal chords sent blood straight to Shane's length, and he adjusted himself in his seat to hide the humiliating reality that Ilya could make Shane half hard with nothing other than proximity and a few syllables.

"How about you win all three of your awards, and then *maybe*, I'll be nice enough to let you find out."

Jesus fucking christ. Their reputation didn't matter that much, right? Wouldn't it be worth it, to drag Ilya to the bathroom here and now, so he could get down on his knees for him, inhale the sinful smell of him, mouth at his cock through the thin layer of his pants, dampening the fabric with his spit until Ilya couldn't take it any longer. Until he had no choice but to tear open the zipper and fuck his mouth until his lips were red and his throat was raw.

Rose smacked him in the arm with her hand, snapping him out of his sickening daydream.

"Get your shit together, Hollander," she hissed between teeth clenched in an artificial smile.

Shane cleared his throat, adjusted himself again, and did his best to think very unsexy thoughts. He could feel Ilya's shoulders shaking with laughter next to him, and he wanted to strangle him – no, actually, that was too sexy of a thought. Fuck.

He thought of the farm, of his parents. That was always safe territory.

Bobcaygeon, ON

When Yuna first got pregnant with Shane, she had wild dreams of him growing up to play for the MLH. She knew it was nearly impossible, statistically, but that didn't stop the fantasies from running rampant in her mind. She imagined her baby boy's heart overflowing with love for the game, a shared bond that would unite them, waking up at the crack of dawn for practices and travelling all across Ontario for tournaments. She learned very quickly, however, that Shane did not inherit her and David's passion for the sport. If anything, he repelled the entire idea of it.

Which was fine, of course. Shane was her whole world, and she loved him without reservation. Never, in all of her imaginings of the multitudes his future might contain, did she consider the possibility that he would become an incomprehensibly famous punk, or rock, or alternative musician (honestly, she wasn't quite sure what the appropriate lingo was), who teenage girls and middle aged mothers alike swooned over. In her mind, Shane was still a ten year old kid with a bad bowl cut and his fairly odd parents pajamas that she needed to buy five different sets of because he refused to wear anything else to bed. But no, here he was, a global sensation, a collection of neon pixels glowing from her television screen. The winner of *two* (Best Group and Best Art Direction, which they'd won in collaboration with Ilya), and possibly, any moment now, *three* VMA's. A nearly fully grown man, wearing far too little of a shirt, and with far more confidence than she ever imagined he'd embody.

The coffee table in front of them was cluttered with untouched plates and bowls of snacks; cookies, popcorn, now cooled mugs of mint tea. They'd been too fixated on the award show to indulge. On screen, the announcer introduced the final award of the evening: Video of the Year.

Yuna reached across the quilted blanket and clutched David's hand tight within her grasp. The award was selected via fan votes, and if asked, Yuna would shamelessly admit that she had spent countless hours on the family computer, casting votes whenever allowed, and emailing the entire extended family weekly to do the same.

The camera flashed to her son and the rest of the band as they were introduced as one of the nominees, and Yuna jumped with excitement in her seat. She pointed at the screen.

"There they are – look!"

David chuckled. "Same spot they've been all night, love," he said, kissing her on the temple.

Kip, the sweetheart that he was, blew a kiss at the camera when he noticed it pointed at them, while Rose, Svetlana, and Shane stared straight ahead at the stage. To Shane's right, slightly out of frame, Yuna noticed, was Ilya, whose attention was directed not at the presentation of the final award, but on her son. If she had to describe the look in his eyes, she would almost say it was besotted, but that didn't make any sense. Right?

Then, before she could dwell on it any longer, the results were called, and there they were; hugging, screaming, clapping with disbelief, and running up onto the stage. David wrapped her arms around her, mirroring the embrace of Shane and his friends on the screen, but they dialled back in upon hearing their son's voice.

"You know, I hate even acknowledging that I'm the one who writes our songs," Shane laughed, and Yuna pressed a hand to her mouth, shielding her smile. "But I'm gonna do my best." She watched his eyes dance between the audience for a moment, before he pressed on.

"Sometimes, when I'm writing, the ideas come to me really quickly – I can get a song done in like, thirty minutes. Other times, like with *Other Place*, it can take a long time for me to find the right words. But I like to believe it was worth the wait."

The audience around them roared at that, the sound of thousands of voices screaming simultaneously reduced to static through the television speakers.

"So thanks. Thanks to my bandmates, to our managers, to Unrivaled records, to Ilya, who had a vision for the video and ran with it, and to all of you, for being so patient."

The band was quickly ushered off the stage, the camera following Shane down the steps as he waved the silver Moonman award up in the air and grinned.

They technically had been given three hotel rooms for their stay in LA, yet somehow, after a night of afterparties that raged on until the early morning, they all ended up crashing in one room together. Kip, Sveta, and Rose were tangled together in one bed while Ilya and Shane took the other, mostly because Shane, apparently blackout on maybe like, two rye and gingers, starfished in the middle of the mattress immediately upon entering the room, and Ilya was the only one of them who loved him enough to share the sliver of bed that was left with him.

When he woke up, Kip was surprisingly not all that hungover, which he could only assume meant he was probably still a little bit drunk. Everyone else was asleep, and he swore he genuinely had every intention of letting them stay that way. But then, he saw *the article*, and Svetlana had questions to answer.

“What the fuck?” Kip said, the room stirring around him at the outburst. “Sveta, why didn’t you tell us your dad is like, famous?”

Sveta blinked at him, smudged eyeliner on her face and murder in her eyes. “Ew,” he said, scowling. “Because he’s not.”

Kip scoffed. “Girl, what are you saying, he’s literally Segei Vetrov? Like Boston Bears Sergei Vetrov?”

Sveta yawned. “We have the same last name, dude. And I’ve told you his name is Sergei before, it’s not my fault you didn’t put it together.”

“Yeah, but your name is Vetrova. That’s not the same.”

Ilya sat up on the bed parallel to them. He looked annoyingly well rested, although his long hair vaguely resembled a squirrel’s nest. “That’s how Russian last names work, Kip. Girls have an ‘a’ at the end if the name’s masculine,” he explained. “I’m the worst Russian that Canada’s ever seen and even I know that.”

Shane dragged the blankets over his head in misery. “Who is Sergei Vetrov and why are we talking about him this early in the morning?” he groaned.

“It’s a hockey thing, Shane,” Rose chimed in from where she was curled up next to Sveta. “Don’t worry about it. You can go back to sleep, hun.”

Ilya’s head whipped towards her at breakneck speed. “Don’t call him hun,” he all but growled. “Or I’ll get Sergei to fight you. He loves me. He would do it.”

Sveta giggled. “That’s probably true. Wait, Kip, how did you even find this out?”

He held out his phone for her to take. “An article from US Weekly. But there’s a bunch of people talking about it on Twitter too.”

As Sveta started reading the article, Kip looked over at Ilya. “Should someone tell Shane he’s still in the same clothes as last night?”

Ilya shook his head, laying back down in bed and slinging a leg across Shane's middle. "Nooooo, I never get time like this with him. Even when we're together he insists on getting up right away and sticking to his dumb workout routine. I deserve this."

"What the fuck?!" Sveta *screeched*, ruining any hope of Ilya getting a lazy morning with Shane.

CELEBRITY NEWS

Are They or Aren't They? Wolfbirds' Svetlana Vetrova Spotted Arm-in-Arm with Controversial "Hockey Artist" at VMAs

By Whitney Vasquez | August 29, 2011

The Wolfbirds' ascent into mainstream music status hit a new peak last month after their music video *Other Place* quickly became the highest trending YouTube video with 180 million views. This track, a single from their upcoming third album *Breakaway*, and the accompanying video has turned the indie-leading band into a household name almost overnight, ultimately landing them three MTV VMA wins and cementing their place in the year's defining pop culture moment.

And if the awards themselves aren't headline worthy on their own, a red carpet image is also causing quite the stir. Pictured above, Wolfbirds' drummer Svetlana Vetrova is seen walking arm in arm with Ilya Rozanov, the artistic director behind *Other Place*, as the pair arrived at the ceremony together ahead of the wins. The moment has quickly sparked conversation online, with fans questioning the nature of their connection.

Ilya has been a divisive creative figure since a hockey-themed art exhibition in 2010 that drew widespread debate within both sports and cultural circles, with critics accusing him of disparaging Canada's traditional hockey identity.

Svetlana, meanwhile, apparently brings her own recognizable legacy into the frame. Fans online have uncovered that she is the daughter of Sergei Vetrov, the former Hall of Fame Boston Bears goaltender whose retirement from the sport and subsequent move to Ontario was shortly followed by a ten year slump for the team. This detail has sparked increased curiosity around the pairing, particularly given Ilya's reputation for challenging predominant narratives in sports.

For now, neither Vetrova nor Ilya have commented – but the photos (and the internet) are sure doing a lot of talking.

Ilya hoped the rumours surrounding him and Sveta would die down quickly. Unfortunately, and especially considering that the band could hardly walk to the corner store without getting swarmed by fans anymore, this wasn't the case. Things weren't as bad for him in Montreal, given that his face wasn't plastered all over the world's most-streamed music video, but he did occasionally get stopped while at the gym or when grocery shopping, usually by people who either wanted to ask if he "really was banging Svetlana Vetrova", or to harp on his installation from last year.

By the time Thanksgiving weekend rolled around, Ilya was desperate for the quiet comfort of home, so he passed on his, Harris, and Troy's annual friendsgiving tradition of making weed brownies and ordering a lifetime supply of St-Hubert in favour of returning to Bobcaygeon for a couple of days.

Unfortunately, it quickly became apparent that the small town wasn't going to provide him an escape from the story, as demonstrated by Yuna, who started waving a copy of the latest Rolling Stone magazine in his face before he even had two feet through the front door.

"Did you see it?" she asked, giddy in a way he hadn't seen on her before. "Shane's on the cover!"

Her joy was infectious, and he laughed as he swooped the closest thing he had to a mother into a hug. "No, not yet, lemme take a look."

She flipped open the magazine to the band's featured story as Ilya stepped out of his shoes, shoving the glossy cover into his hands before he could even get out of his jacket. He chuckled, sitting down at the entryway bench to appease her.

Scanning through the photos first, Ilya realized he would need to get his own copy for... private viewing. Shane looked downright *edible* in the photos; shirtless, hair wet for some inexplicable reason, and sprawled out on a bale of hay. His jeans rested low on his hips, which were cocked open at an angle that was personally inviting Ilya to climb on top of him.

"Doesn't he look adorable?" Yuna asked, hovering over his shoulder.

Ilya realized he was staring. He flipped the page and pursed his lips. "Sure," he said, clearing his throat. "Adorable. Yep."

He read through the article, needing to distract himself lest he get a boner in front of Yuna fucking Hollander.

COVER STORY

THE WOLFBIRDS: THE ROLLING STONE INTERVIEW

Fame, folklore, and a suspiciously acquired goat: inside the Wolfbirds' past, present, and the stories they're not quite telling.

By BRIAN HIATT

Photographs by ERIK MADIGAN HECK

OCTOBER 6 2011

The barn rises out of the ginseng fields like a weathered spine of wood and tin, surrounded by rows of late-summer green

leaves, heavy and close to the earth. Gravel crunches, a screen door sighs, and somewhere inside, a guitar is being tuned with casual precision. The Wolfbirds are already here, or perhaps they never really left.

Shane is the first to emerge, shouldering the barn door open, sunlight catching his hair.

"We were trying to remember the first song we ever played in here," he says, glancing back into the dim interior, where voices and laughter unite in perfect harmony. "We can't agree, which means it probably wasn't anything good."

Inside, the barn holds their history in its scuffed floors, coiled cables, and beat up drum kit. There's a couch that has definitely seen better days, a milk crate full of notebooks with dog-eared pages, and of all things, a goat perched atop an amp, chewing on the corner of an old setlist. As it turns out, the goat is the infamous Anya, and the inspiration behind the barnyard cameo in their music video claim to fame, *Other Place*.

The Wolfbirds have come a long way from this barn, at least geographically. There are bigger rooms now, louder crowds, a schedule that doesn't leave much space for afternoons like this. But the gravitational pull of where they started is still strong enough to bring them back, to sit in the same air and try, unsuccessfully, to pin down the exact moment it all began.

Considering the space we're in right now, it's hard to ignore the fact that just a few years ago you were just a bunch of teenagers messing around with shitty instruments in a run down barn. Now, we hear people in the industry speculating about your trajectory. What does this jump feel like from the inside?

Shane: Is it cliché if I say surreal?

Kip: Yes.

Shane: Well, I'm saying it anyway. Surreal. It's like, we're still the same band, arguing about the same dumb stuff, it's just that we're suddenly doing it in cities we've never been to before. I'd say the weirdest part is how fast people decide they know you.

Now, I'd like to take a moment to address the elephant, or should I say goat, in the room. What's the story behind Anya?

Svetlana: Officially, she was acquired through completely legal, above board channels.

Kip: Unofficially... There was an afternoon where several very poor decisions were being made by people who were most definitely not us.

Svetlana: We were, at most, adjacent to the poor decisions.

Kip: Honestly, we were just minding our own business, when a certain shirtless someone showed up at the barn doors, covered in blood, and holding a goat.

Rose: To be clear, it was not Anya's blood. She was perfectly fine.

Based on the *Other Place* music video, I have to assume that someone was Shane, no?

Shane: No comment.

Alright, moving on. Svetlana, there's been some conversation about your relationship with Ilya Rozanov, the so-called "Hockey Artist" and the artistic director behind *Other Place*. A lot of this buzz revolves around his work critiquing hockey culture and your dad's history in the sport. Some people have framed that as a conflict. Do you see it that way?

Svetlana: Not really. I think people really want it to be more dramatic than it is. My dad, who for the record, is fully capable of forming his own opinions, actually really respects Ilya's work. They've had long conversations about it. Like, probably longer than all the conversations about hockey I've had in my entire life.

Rose: Which is saying something.

Svetlana: I grew up around the sport, obviously. So I understand what it can give people, my family included. That doesn't mean you can't criticize the parts of it that are broken. If anything, it means you probably should.

And when people take your relationship and run with it, you know, speculating that there's something more personal going on, what do you think about that?

Svetlana: [Laughs] That I picked the wrong career if I wanted a quiet life?

Does the public attention ever make you want to pull back, to keep more to yourselves?

Rose: We've definitely learned to be more intentional about what we share. Not secretive, just deciding more collectively how we want to present ourselves, instead of letting others write the narrative for us.

You're about to release your third album, *Breakaway*, and then head out on your first world tour in the new year. That's a huge leap. What does success look like to you right now?

Shane: Honestly, we've already accomplished so much more than I ever thought possible. So I guess... Just still wanting to do it. That's it. If we wake up and it still feels like something we get to do instead of something we have to maintain, then we're good.

Ilya tensed as he read through the questions about him and Sveta, but he was pleasantly surprised when Yuna didn't mention it, instead taking the magazine back from him and helping him settle in.

He was an idiot to think that he was in the clear. Later that evening, as he was sitting down for dinner with Yuna and David, the air thick with the smell of turkey, gravy, and sweet potatoes, she attempted to casually raise the subject again.

"So," she said, putting down her cutlery and resting her chin in her hands. "You seem a bit... Lighter lately. Doesn't he seem lighter, David?"

David shrugged, an asparagus stalk poking out from between his lips. "Sure, I guess so?"

"Is it... Not to read into the rumours or anything, but we can't help but wonder... Is there something between you and Svetlana? Because we think she's a lovely girl, you know."

Ilya chuckled. "No." He shook his head. "No, there's nothing there. Good friends, that's all." He held his wine glass by the stem, swirling it slowly and watching the blood red legs trail down the side, before finally taking a sip. "I mean... We used to, uh... you know, sometimes. But we haven't since we were like, I dunno, fifteen or sixteen maybe?"

Yuna held up her hands in protest. "Okay— got it! More than enough information!"

David was doing his best to hold back his laughter.

The clanking of cutlery filled the silence for a while, but apparently, Yuna wasn't finished yet.

"But, you are seeing someone, aren't you? I mean, you just seem happier these days."

Ilya nearly choked. Images of the last time he and Shane were together flashed through his mind. Their last night in the hotel in LA. That exquisite fucking shower. How goddamn

pretty Shane had been, pressed up against it, begging for Ilya to stop teasing him with his tongue and just take him already. He cleared his throat.

“Nope. Very single.”

Yuna raised an eyebrow at him. David reached across the table for another serving of turkey. Ilya fidgeted with the napkin in his lap. Then, something in her gaze softened.

“Well,” she said, clearing her throat. “Just so you know, Ilya, David and I, we’ll still love you, no matter what. No matter who you happen to love.”

Ilya thought therapy was helping with the whole, you know, wanting to die thing. But, at this particular moment, it seemed like an appealing alternative to the conversation.

“Yeah, no, I know that. But thank you.” He needed them to talk about literally anything else. “David,” he said, panicking. “What did you season the turkey with, by the way? It’s wonderful.”

Thankfully, David was more than happy to discuss his adventures in the kitchen, and Yuna seemed willing to let the topic slide.

Later, after the awkwardness had eased from his system, he was left with a sour taste in his mouth. He wasn’t the one who needed to hear that message. He already knew that David and Yuna loved him unconditionally. They’d proven that to him time and time again, when his mother wasn’t able to and his father wasn’t willing. Shane, though, was holding onto this misconception of what his parents would think of him if he was to come out, and Ilya couldn’t ignore the way that Shane’s decision to hold back that part of himself from them also impacted his own life.

Ilya would love nothing more than to be honest with David and Yuna. To tell them how much he fucking adored their son and have them wrap him in their arms and tell him it was okay.

But, until Shane was ready, that option didn’t exist.

Chapter End Notes

Ya'll, I've been looking forward to writing this specific chapter for over a month now. I don't know why! It's just been calling my name.

I had about 1,500 words written this morning, and literally blacked out and wrote the rest of it throughout the day. It was such a joy for me 😊 I'm just so proud of what these fictional characters have accomplished and also just want them to find happiness ❤️

You might have noticed I added an extra chapter to the total count - I may still need to add ONNEE more, depending on how much I can fit into the next one, but then that's probably it for this story 😭

Thank you all for your continued incredible comments and the discussions we have. I love you all 😊😊😊

Chapter 29: wikiHow to Revive a Dying Fake Monstera

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*I am hungry
I have been hungry
I was born hungry
What do I need?*

“Abbey”, Mitski

October 2011 – Toronto, ON

The Facetime call came through just in time, if not, frankly, a little late. Kip was wielding a Twizzler with the aggression of a battle hardened soldier while Sveta had climbed onto a chair in the boardroom, firmly convinced that the additional height would somehow make her side of the argument more legitimate. Rose, meanwhile, had given up on trying to get a word in twenty minutes ago, and was blissfully tuned out to the debate, headphones in and paperback open.

“Hey,” Shane said, answering the call and escaping into the hallway unnoticed. The domestic argument peacefully snapped into nonexistence alongside the closure of the soundproof doors.

“Hey!” Ilya chimed back at him, waving at the camera, paint on his cheek and sunlight from the cathedral style windows behind him accentuating his golden curls, the top half of which were piled into a disheveled knot, a paintbrush sticking through it.

“You look ridiculous,” Shane said, smiling and settling down in an empty conference room. “Like a sexy kindergarten teacher doing arts and crafts hour.”

“Careful, Mr. Hollander, flirt with the art teacher any harder and the other parents are gonna talk.” He laughed quietly. “Are you too busy to talk?”

Shane shook his head, swivelling back and forth rhythmically in the office chair. “You actually saved me. Sveta and Kip have been arguing over the reverb on the bridge of *Emergency Landing* for forty minutes.”

October had been chaotic for Shane, between solidifying details for their world tour and locking down the finished tracks for *Breakaway*, which was set to drop in just a couple of weeks, so he wasn’t able to talk with Ilya as much as he wanted to. He knew things were only going to get more difficult once they were separated by ever changing time zones though, so he was trying to make the most of their pseudo-proximity while he still could. They caught each other up on the past couple of days before the conversation lulled to a halt. Shane watched Ilya with soft eyes, studying the way the muscles in his shoulders and forearms

flexed and relaxed as he applied paint to the canvas in front of him. His motions were enthralling, and Shane longed to feel the shape of his arms beneath his own palms.

It stirred up something else inside of Shane, too. It didn't make sense. Ilya ate like shit half the time and sure, he worked out, but he treated it like an afterthought. Yet somehow, he maintained the physique that rivalled Michelangelo's *David*. In contrast, Shane was doing everything to keep his body at its peak. He'd started with Kip's schedule, but was branching out into his own research driven routines; intermittent fasting and the elimination of sugars. Still though, when he studied himself in the mirror all he could see were his flaws. His round, baby face. The lack of definition in his chest.

Ilya cleared his throat, and tucked a strand of hair behind his ear, smudging more paint along his face as he did. A blue mirroring the deep, endless sky of his eyes. "I was thinking," he started.

"Always dangerous," Shane chided.

Ilya smiled, but it seemed forced. Shane straightened in his seat.

"I was thinking about maybe... coming out to David and Yuna."

In that moment, Shane experienced the gravitational collapse of every separate compartment he had worked so hard to maintain: his family, his career, his privacy, his fears, his *Ilya*. All of it was folding inward, through a few words uttered over a Facetime call.

The fears that had been fuelling his every action flashed through his mind with the speed of jets punching through a dying star. He pictured his father's silence, his mother pretending like she didn't understand, the headlines, the reaction of fans, the unending questions. Worst of all, the gut wrenching realization that Ilya sounded fucking *hopeful*. Just like Shane had when he was eleven years old, standing on Ilya's doorstep, asking him to come over to his place for ice cream and maple syrup. It was a simple invitation, a simple request, and yet somehow held the power to dismantle everything he'd come to know.

"You can't do that," he said. He instantly regretted it. "I mean— If you do, then you're outing me too," he explained.

"I don't know if that's true," Ilya started. His voice remained level, which somehow made everything worse. It meant this wasn't a spur of the moment comment, but something he'd been considering for a while. "When I was over for Thanksgiving, your parents, well, your mom really, said some things."

"What? What kind of things?"

"Not about you. I'm pretty sure they think you're head over heels for Rose. But Yuna made a comment that made me think she might suspect I'm not completely straight."

"Jesus, Ilya. What did she say?"

Ilya crossed his arms over his chest, his entire face and torso tightening. “I don’t know—nevermind. I was probably misreading the situation.”

“Fuck. This isn’t good. Like, they would completely freak.” Shane was physically present, sitting on the mesh-backed office chair, phone clutched in his hands hard enough to leave impressions. Mentally though, he was in grade eight again, sitting in the farmhouse living room, his crinkled IEP laid bare on the coffee table while his parents lamented the fact that he wasn’t normal enough for them.

“I really don’t think they would, Shane.”

“You don’t know that,” Shane snapped. “You wouldn’t even get it— you haven’t spoken to your dad in years, so you couldn’t possibly understand—” he regretted the words as soon as they left his mouth, and yet, he didn’t attempt to take them back.

“David and Yuna, they’re—” Ilya cut himself off. He scrubbed a hand over his face. “I should go,” he said, devoid of emotion. “Just, forget I said anything. I’m sorry.”

Shane wanted to say something. He couldn’t feel his hands. He couldn’t look at the phone screen, and so he studied the reflection of the fluorescent lighting on the glass meeting table instead.

Ilya sighed. “I love you,” he added, softer, and ended the call before Shane had the chance to say it back.

December 2011 – Bobcaygeon, ON

As they pulled into the driveway, fresh snow crunching beneath the rental car’s tires, Ilya considered how strange it was, that he had lived in the house across the street for most of his young adult life, and yet the Hollander’s farm felt more like a home. He gave Shane’s hand a reassuring squeeze as he put the car into park.

Yuna threw open the door before they even had a chance to grab their bags from the trunk. “My boys are home!” she called, arms outspread and her smile unguarded.

Ilya was going to be happy this break, he decided. He wasn’t going to bring up therapy, or feeling isolated, or how he nearly emptied his savings last month when Alexei called again, asking for more money. He wasn’t going to think about how, in a couple of weeks Shane would be in another country, or how heartbroken he was that because of the tour he wouldn’t be able to make it to the exhibit about his mother in the spring. But most of all, he definitely wasn’t going to consider telling Shane that three weeks ago he started taking 10mg of Escitalopram a day, and while the doctor had warned him the pills might make him feel worse before they made him feel better, he hoped that wouldn’t be true, but it was, and now he felt like *this*, like he was eleven years old, trapped beneath the ice in the frozen river behind his house, only this time there wasn’t anyone there to reach for him and drag him out.

“Ilya?” It was Yuna that said his name.

He looked at her blankly. She stared back at him in a way that suggested she expected an answer. He glanced at his own hands. He was holding a fork and there was spaghetti on a plate in front of him. The sauce was red, impossibly so. Apparently, they were eating dinner now.

“Sorry, what?” he said.

She smiled at him, eyes soft. “I’m getting some Pinot from the fridge, did you want something to drink?”

“Oh,” he said. “Sure, I’ll have a Coke, please.”

“What about you, Shane? Ginger ale?”

“No thanks, I’m good,” Shane said. He was sitting across the table from Ilya, cutting his spaghetti with a fork and knife, the sound of silverware scraping against ceramic sharp and arresting.

David scoffed at him. “Who are you and what have you done with my son?”

Yuna rubbed a hand on his shoulder. “Everything okay, honey?”

“Jesus, mom, I’m fine,” he grunted, shrugging her off. “I just don’t wanna feel like garbage on stage now that the tour’s starting.” He continued cutting his spaghetti, the sound louder now.

“Ohhh-kay,” she said, holding her arms up in defense. She winked at Ilya and he did his best to smile and play along.

He ate the rest of his dinner and drank his coke and acted like everything was alright. Made small talk about school and the farm and the band. About Shane’s recent brand deals; Reebok, some underwear company, cologne, of all things. He listened, and nodded, and responded when appropriate. He watched Shane cut his pasta and leave at least half of it unfinished, but he didn’t say anything about it.

He could do this. He was going to be happy this break.

The living room. The smell of the pine tree. David, Yuna, Shane. Hot chocolate, the mug warming his palms. The fireplace channel was on, crackling low in the background. And wasn’t that fitting? A poor imitation of something natural, not unlike himself. He’d been going to therapy for six months now. He was trying medication. He was trying to use his art to make space for the things he couldn’t say. Why wasn’t it enough?

“What’s Rose doing for Christmas?” Yuna.

“Oh, her family went down to Toronto for a couple of days. But they’re coming back to Bobcaygeon tomorrow I think.” Shane.

“You should bring her over for dinner.” Yuna.

“Uh, maybe.” Shane.

“Yuna. C’mon.” David.

“What?” Yuna.

A sigh. David.

The crackling. Television.

Yuna.

David.

Shane.

Yuna.

Television.

Television.

Television.

“I think we’re all going to meet at Sveta’s on Saturday, actually. Go snowmobiling.”

Ilya broke eye contact with the television and looked at him. “What? We are?”

“Yeah?” Shane squinted at him. “She texted in the group chat yesterday. We had a full conversation about it last–” he cut himself off. Night. Last night. Shane and him in the spare bedroom. Warmth and comfort. Something other than this.

“Right, yeah. I forgot.” He yawned. “I’ve been tired, my brain’s functioning at like fifty percent. This year’s killing me.” Hey, that was honest, at least. Progress, right?

“You have to make sure you’re taking care of yourself, kid,” David said. He sounded concerned, and Ilya wished he hadn’t made the joke. He hadn’t been joking.

“I’m fine,” he insisted. He took a sip of his hot chocolate. Lukewarm now.

“So, are you... seeing anyone these days?” He could tell Yuna was trying to sound casual. It wasn’t working.

His eyes flicked towards Shane. “Uh–”

“Geez, mom,” Shane interrupted. “Ilya has girls orbiting him like, constantly. I’m sure you don’t want to hear about it.”

The room stilled. Conversation halted. The television too, fire blown out like a birthday candle. Outside the bay window the snow stopped falling, frozen midair.

No, that wasn't right. The world kept spinning, he was the only one stuck in place.

"I'm about to pass out," he said, standing up, yawning again. "See you all in the morning."

He was drying dishes after breakfast the next day when he felt the length of Shane press up against him.

"Hey," he said, nibbling on Ilya's earlobe.

Ilya sank back into the touch. "Hi."

Today had been better, so far. He felt more like himself, less sluggish. His brain wasn't doing that thing where it felt like he'd stuck a metal fork into an electrical socket at unexpected intervals.

Shane continued to mouth at him, sucking on the pulse point in his neck, nose nuzzling the backside of his ear. An onslaught of kisses pressed into the back of his head, melting him like butter left out in the heat.

"What about— your parents," Ilya stuttered, between soft sounds of weakness that Shane was drawing out of him.

"They've gone out to the store," Ilya could hear the smile on his lips. "Won't be back for a while."

Ilya turned around so their bodies were flush with one another, slinging the towel he'd been using across Shane's lower back and pulling him in, impossibly closer. Shane was already hard, deliciously so. Had worked himself up probably, just watching Ilya at the kitchen sink, waiting for his parents to leave and imagining what he might do to him when they were finally gone.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" Ilya taunted. He forced Shane's legs apart, sliding a thigh between them, knowing that Shane wouldn't be able to resist rutting against him like a dog in heat. "I don't think I have time to play."

Shane whined, his hips rocking involuntarily, head falling against Ilya's collarbone, as if he simply didn't have the will to hold it up any longer. He mouthed at the cotton of Ilya's shirt, searching for purchase, or maybe just needing to occupy the sinful curve of his lips. The fabric dampened with spit as he sucked and licked and bit, and the feeling of his tongue and teeth, so close, but infuriatingly separated by the cloth, made sparks reverberate through Ilya, his entire body on edge. He could feel his want for Shane in the spaces between his toes, in the backs of his knees, in the bony landmarks at the top of his spine. He allowed himself to get lost in this, to press his own hardness back into Shane, to let his mind flood with the hazy cresting of desire.

Ilya pressed his own lips, aching for contact, to Shane's temple, the slight dip in his skull there. It held the shape of his mouth perfectly, like every single part of Shane had been forged for him out of clay. What else could possibly explain the way they always found their way

back to each other, time and time again, no matter the distance. There was no one else for Ilya, there never would be. Shane had ruined him, completely and without remorse.

Ilya reached beneath Shane's shirt, dragging his fingernails along the pathway of his spine, Shane gasping at the faint hurt. Pleased with the sound, Ilya hummed into his temple and inhaled sharply, nose brushing the baby hairs dusting the edge of his forehead. His smell was intoxicating, an aromatic reminder of their two bodies intermingling in sleep, and he contemplated the risk in bending Shane over the kitchen counter and taking him right there.

"Please, Ilya," Shane cried out, teeth grazing the sharp angle of his jaw, "*I need* you. It's been so fucking long since I had you inside of me."

Ilya's cock twitched at his pleading tone, voice wrecked and weighed down with lust. He traced a thumb along the bridge of Shane's nose and the freckled skin of his cheeks, tinged pink. The blush did something to him, made it hard to breathe. But did he really need the oxygen? He would deprive his body of everything it demanded if he meant he could have *this*, if he could have *Shane*, pliant and unholy, ripe for the taking, for the rest of his life. Because what was he, without Shane? He was darkness and weak, a fragile sick animal, searching blindly for the light. Shane was his moon and his sun, his Northern star, his buoy in the rapids keeping him afloat.

Shane grasped his wrist then, tugging his hand down, down, further down, toward the curve of his ass. Ilya could tease him like this for hours, if Shane would let him. Groping at his cheeks and spreading them apart, dragging his fingertips along the sensitive flesh of his inner thighs, making Shane writhe as he ran the faintest touch from behind his balls to the dip of flesh circling his hole, without providing the relief of something filling him. He'd make Shane beg and please and cry out his name. He'd push him to the brink and bring him back down, until he lost all sense of himself.

But Shane wasn't having any of that today. He gripped Ilya's wrist tighter, guiding him lower still, until his fingers brushed against something firm and broad, nestled between his cheeks and he realized what Shane was trying to show him.

"Fuck, Shane." Ilya tipped his head back, vision blurring, and he pressed two fingers against the base of the plug, making Shane shake with pleasure. "You're such a good fucking boy for me," he said. He sounded wrecked, completely untethered, even to his own ears.

"Upstairs," Ilya grunted. "Now."

Afterward, as they cleaned off together, limbs bumping and awkward in the too small shower, Ilya tried not to recede back into himself. He was doing so well today. He was wearing the face of someone who was happy to be alive and who wasn't consumed by the dark, cavernous void of his own mind.

Or, at least he thought he was.

"Okay, so," Shane said, running his fingers along Ilya's hip. "I know your hair probably requires more maintenance now that it's long, but this seems a little... Excessive?"

“Huh?” Ilya blinked at him.

“You’ve used that *three times*, dude,” he said, flicking at the bottle of conditioner in Ilya’s hands. It was currently held upside down, cap open, as though he was about to squeeze out another dollop.

Ilya looked at the conditioner. Had he? Three times? He shook his head, fake-laughing at himself, and snapped the cap back on. “Just zoned out for a sec, I guess.”

“Orgasm was that good, huh?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

Shane frowned at him, concern etched deeper on his face now. Shit, he’d said the wrong thing.

“Ilya. You didn’t come? Said you felt off, that you just wanted to make me feel good?”

Fuck, that was right. The medication. It was making it hard for him to orgasm, even when he was just jerking off, and he hadn’t wanted to tip Shane off by taking longer than usual. Ilya contemplated smashing his skull against the tile wall of the shower to get out of the conversation. He wondered how hard it would need to be in order to black out but not create a mess of blood. That would be inconvenient for Shane to clean up.

“Hey, seriously,” Shane said, turning off the water. Somehow the lack of white noise from the onslaught of the showerhead made the room feel louder. Shane cupped his cheeks and looked him in the eyes. “What’s going on with you?”

Ilya shook his head. “Nothing, it’s nothing. Sorry,” he insisted.

“If you tell me I’ll let you make whatever you want for lunch and I’ll eat all of it. Carbs and sugar and all.”

Ilya smiled. He pulled Shane in close to him, chest to chest, skin to skin. “I’m just going to miss you, that’s all,” he said. That was plausible, and it wasn’t untrue. He hated how little time they had together. He hoped next year, when he was finally done with school, things would be easier. They could find a way to be together more. Maybe then he could approach the topic of coming out to more people again. Maybe they could even live together.

“I know.” Shane sighed into his damp curls, weighed down by the water. “It sucks, but it’s not forever.”

“Yeah, I know. Sometimes it feels like it, though.”

Shane gripped his face again, bringing their lips together first, then their foreheads. “You know, no matter where I go, my favourite place is always you.”

They had been on tour for two and a half months already, but Ilya kept seeing Shane everywhere. In the faces of strangers on the street, in their songs on the radio, and sometimes, like today, staring back at him, larger than life, shirtless and wet (why was he always *wet* for these things?) on the side of a bus stop.

It was an underwear ad, that much was clear, based on the obvious bulge in his briefs that Ilya would give anything, literally *anything* to have pressed against his face, to inhale the musk of him. He debated breaking open the plastic cover so he could steal the ad and put it up in his bedroom. Sure, there were lots of eyewitnesses, but would anyone really blame him? His bus arrived then, however, and he would be late to his therapy appointment if he didn't get on this one. He settled for taking a picture of it with his phone. He could always come back for it later.

He was doing better, in a genuine way, now. His doctor had been right, it would take time for the medication to settle in his system. They'd increased the dose after the first month, and he was feeling more stable. Not great, not perfect, but at least more level headed and in control. He was still seeing Gr. Galina every month, of course. His doctor had insisted that was non-negotiable.

"You have to keep going, even when you feel good," he said. "Then, if things take a turn, you're already in the routine of it."

So, he was going. Fifty minutes, once a month. 20mg of Escitalopram, once a day. In the evenings, because it made him a bit sleepy. He still hadn't told Shane about any of this, and he winced, knowing Dr. Galina was going to bring it up today.

Shane. His Shane. Ilya unlocked his phone, pulling up the photo of the ad. His chest swelled with pride, at first. But then, studying it deeper, unease stuttered within him. Was he looking sharper around his ribs? Were his collarbones cutting harsher than before? Ilya swiped through his camera roll, comparing it to any other shirtless photos of Shane he could find. He realized he didn't have too many that were recent. In August, before the VMAs, they'd gone up to the cottage as a band for a couple of days. Even in those pictures though, Shane was always clothed, going as far as to wear a long sleeve sun shirt when they were down by the water. He'd insisted that he didn't want to risk getting a sunburn, not with the awards show and his photoshoots coming up. Was that really why, though? Ilya supposed he had always been particular about sun exposure.

He scrolled back further in time. There were a few from when they were still in their last year of high school. Pictures of Shane playing in the barn, of Anya, of them at the cottage again. There was one of Shane eating fucking *french fries* even. His hair was messy, he was laughing, mid bite. Ilya tried to recall the last time he'd seen him that loose and unguarded, but he couldn't be sure.

He pulled up their message thread.

ilya: saw the calvin klein ad
ilya: you look good ❤️

Ilya knew he was somewhere in Europe at the moment, but couldn't remember what country it was. He tried to estimate what the time might be, when Shane would see the message, but he texted him back after a few stops.

shane: thanks 😊

shane: it was a long shoot

ilya: are you eating ok on tour?

The message was marked as read almost right away. Ilya's eyes were glued to the chat. A minute passed by. Two. Three little dots appeared. Disappeared. Was he reading into the silence? Was Shane just busy?

shane: yeah. catering is actually decent this time

shane: having a late lunch rn

shane: soundcheck went a little long

ilya: what are you having?

Did that sound casual? Or was he being too nosy? The minutes dragged on. Ilya's palms were sweating. He wiped them on his jeans.

shane: [attached picture: catering table covered in a wide assortment of pastries, sandwiches, bean and pasta salads, vegetable trays, and drinks]

Ilya studied the picture. It *did* look decent, Shane wasn't lying. But it didn't give Ilya any indication of what Shane was actually eating. Could he ask to see his plate? Would that be too controlling? Before he could make up his mind on what to say, another message came through.

shane: sorry, i gotta go, sveta's having a meltdown over a change to the setlist

shane: ft later?

shane: love you

shane: ❤️

ilya: love you too

ilya: 🍷🍷

Galina considered the fake Monstera in the corner of her windowless office. Was it possible to kill an artificial plant, she wondered? Something about it looked off, wilted. Maybe it just needed a good dusting.

She looked from the plant to Ilya, who was sitting in the corner of the grey couch in the grey room. He too, looked wilted. He'd been rubbing a finger along the edge of his phone case since he sat down, and she wondered if he was aware that he was doing it.

“Are you waiting to hear from someone?” she asked, breaking the quiet.

If she was new to the profession, she probably would have waited, patiently, for Ilya to speak first. It was what they were taught, to sit in the discomfort. However, after almost ten years of working as a therapist in Canada, plus another five back home in Russia, she had learned to ascertain which clients benefitted from the discomfort, using it as a means to open up, and which ones needed something softer, more familiar and comfortable, in order to thrive.

If only she had the same understanding of how to care for fake fucking plastic plants.

“No,” Ilya tossed his phone to the other side of the sofa. “Sorry.”

Galina laughed. “It’s okay, Ilya.” He smiled back at her.

“How have you been doing? With Shane and your friends away on their tour?”

“It’s fine,” he said. She could see the moment he remembered he was supposed to do his best to tell the truth when confined by these four walls. “Actually, no, it’s a lot.”

She was proud of him. A year ago, when he’d first started seeing her, he would have stuck to his lie. It had taken a lot to get to this point, where he not only realized he was doing it, but was willing to correct himself.

He vented to her for a while, about everything he had likely been keeping inside. The difficulties of time zones, Shane’s ever present exhaustion over the phone when they did have time to talk, how the press and the fans seemed to take up all of him these days.

“It’s like, I have unfettered access to him because of the media, but he still feels so far away from me. Like, today, when I was on my way here there was this picture of him on the side of the bus stop in his underwear. He looked fucking *incredible*, of course. And it’s cool, so cool to see him getting opportunities like that...” he trailed off.

“But?”

Ilya sighed. “But, he just looked, I don’t know. Lean? Maybe too lean.”

Galina studied his face, the uncertainty there. Or maybe it was fear? “What makes you think *too* lean?”

“I don’t know. Like, I know how it sounds, okay. I’m not trying to— It’s just—” He let out a frustrated noise. She let him sit in the heavy silence this time. To her, he just sounded like a concerned partner. But she was more curious how Ilya thought he sounded. She held herself back from asking, however. Letting him work through his own thoughts first.

“Okay, like I know that he’s on stage every night, performing, and that takes a lot of stamina. They essentially have to be athletes, or at least Shane sees it that way, I think. But... Okay, for example, when we were younger and we used to go to his cottage together, both as little kids, and then later when we were teens, I would always get up really early to watch the sunrise. It started as a tradition with Yuna.” He smiled at this, the memory sparking a physical reaction in his body. She noted that for later. It was good for Ilya to identify places

and memories that were safe, so he could slip back into them when everything else became too much.

He continued. “Then, later, I kept doing it even if Yuna wasn’t there with us. But, Shane, you know, would *always* sleep in. Until noon, even, if he could. Sometimes I would get impatient and go wake him up.” He laughed then, ran his fingers over his smile, like he was feeling something foreign.

“Now though, when we’re together, he gets up at like, five thirty in the morning. Says that he has to stick to his workout routine. Can’t miss a day or it’ll throw everything off balance, apparently. And there’s barely any flexibility in his diet. Our friend, Scott, you know, the one dating Kip. Well, he used to be their manager, but he’s not anymore. He helped Shane come up with the whole meal and exercise plan to begin with. It was a good idea at first, I think. It was something to help give Shane structure when they were on the road, because the days didn’t inherently have a routine to them. But now that Scott’s not on tour with them I don’t know if there’s really anyone making sure that he’s not... I don’t know. Taking it too far?”

Galina considered what he was saying. On the surface, of course, it seemed to be about food, exercise, structure. About Ilya worrying about his boyfriend’s mental and physical health. Deeper than that, though, it was as if he was mourning something. Spontaneity, maybe. Boyhood.

Ilya went on. “Even when we last saw each other, at Christmas, something was off. He wouldn’t even drink ginger ale. And it’s not just me, his parents thought it was weird too. And since then I’ve just been noticing things, little things. Like, with the underwear poster. When I was on the bus after I asked him about what he was having for lunch, and he just sent back a picture of the catering table, not of his plate. But I don’t know if I’m being paranoid. There were things on the table that for sure are in his diet, so like, he could have very well been eating that stuff. But... I don’t know...”

“Do you believe he ate lunch today?”

Ilya stared at the carpet. He didn’t answer right away, and she was proud of him for that, too. For taking the time to consider what he actually felt, not just what she wanted to hear. “I want to.”

They both sat with that for a while. Galina looked back at the fake Monstera again. She needed an office with a window. Some real plants. She loved working with the students at the University, but the funding here really was complete shit.

“Have you talked to Shane about our therapy sessions yet? Or the medication?” she asked, after a few minutes of stillness. It was something they talked about nearly every session, and it was the topic that Ilya most frequently lied to her about. Most likely because he was also lying to himself.

“Not really,” he admitted. He stared up at the dropped ceiling and the hideous fibre tiles it was made of.

“Why do you think that is?”

This is when he would usually make up some excuse about the timing not being right, about them being too busy. How he had it all planned out, but then Shane ended the call early, or their connection cut out, and he would do it next time. She always knew he was lying. He knew that she knew he was lying too. It didn't seem to change anything though. So, she was surprised by what he said next.

“The last time things got too real between us, just before I left for University, he disappeared,” he said. “I’m scared of that happening again. Of it becoming too much for him, of *me* being too much for him. I can’t— I don’t know what I would do if he pulled away again.”

She considered this. Considered how Ilya’s decision to keep his struggles with mental health from Shane paralleled his belief that Shane was hiding something about his own relationship with food. She crossed her legs.

“It sounds like, to me, that both of you are managing your fears by controlling what other people are allowed to see.”

Ilya looked at her, the words washing over him. And then, he surprised her again. He laughed. “God,” he said, shaking his head. “That sounds fucking insane when you say it out loud.”

Galina smiled back at him. “Most survival mechanisms do.”

Chapter End Notes

Canadian Context:

- Escitalopram is what Lexapro is called here

Other Things!!!!:

- Back at it again with the classic horny and sad whiplash 🤪

- Also, yes I did add one one more chapter and I do swear this is the last time 🤓 I am a grown ass adult who is capable of sticking to an outline!

- I hope the angst didn't kill ya'll 😊 Just had to throw it a bit more turmoil before we get our happy ending.

- This was a lot of Ilya character study! Next chapter we'll be seeing Shane's side of things in depth. Also... we will see some characters we haven't heard from in a long ass time. 👁👁

Chapter 30: Mishka, Come to Mama

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*I'm sitting on the grass at your mother's grave
I'm staring at the letters that spell my name
The stars still shine in the sky blue sky
You just gotta look with better eyes
Why can't I see the sweet things until they're all gone?
Why can't I see the sweet things until they're all gone?*

“Sweet Things”, Danny Michel

June 2012 – New York, NY

Hour One – 9:08 AM

Ilya was standing in his mother’s studio, the way it was before she died, before he dragged the mattress over from the main house and started living in her shadow. Well, not quite the same, but it was close. The mural wasn’t perfect; he could never capture nature’s adamant refusal of stagnancy in the way she did, but that was just as well. Nearly everything else was the same. Half finished pieces leaning against the walls, nestled in drying racks, and displayed on easels. Her ash tray, well loved, resting on a stool. Jars of turpentine, water, and vodka clustered around the room.

The vodka was not to drink, obviously. His doctor said it could make the side effects of his medication worse, so he hadn’t bothered risking it. And he wasn’t going to. It was just there for authenticity’s sake.

There were two other differences that transformed the living memory of where he’d learned to paint, however both of them were necessary. The first were the televisions. A series of small, vintage TVs, similar to the ones from the *Other Place* music video. On each screen was a different tape that he selected from the collection of home videos he’d found before moving to Montreal. They were set to auto-rewind and play on loop, continuously running footage of his mother as he painted for the next twenty-four hours.

Then there was the plaque by the front door, etched with dates and details that explained his story; what happened to Irina, the concept behind the exhibit, and where the profit of any sold paintings would be donated to. He thought of this as a big, golden *fuck you* to Gregori. *It was an accident*, he said. He made them all say, until maybe they started to believe it. But Gregori wasn’t here any more. Ilya wasn’t obligated to keep his secrets out of fear. Now he only had the ones binding him and Shane together.

“Do you need anything before we open the doors?” a curator asked, standing near the entrance.

Ilya shook his head, tucked his hair behind his ears, which now fell well past his shoulders, and started to paint.

Hour Five – 1:41 PM

The televisions all looped at different intervals, but none of the tapes were longer than forty-five minutes. At some point, Ilya realized he was waiting for specific moments in some of the videos. His mother, standing at the kitchen counter of their Florida home, an unlit cigarette pressed between her delicate lips, her eyes captured by the camera as she said, “*You have lighter? Give*”. Or her, holding him, arms swaying softly as she sang a Russian lullaby. And in another one, the camera unsteady and pointed at the carpet, as she called out from another room, “*Mishka, come to Mama*”.

Mishka. Little bear. He realized he hadn’t been called by that name since she died.

Pressure, sudden and unexpected on his shoulder, nearly making him drop his paintbrush.

“Sorry,” the woman said. Grey hair, wrinkles of a happy life shaping her eyes. “I just wanted to say, this is extraordinary.”

“Thanks.” Ilya smiled at her.

Periodically, other people came up to him to say a few words. Brave. Intimate. Devastating. He hadn’t really considered the possibility, or inevitability of this before he started. He imagined himself as part of the art, more so than the artist.

Hour Nine – 5:52 PM

“You look just like her,” someone said. They sounded kind. Unlike his father, when he’d called him by Irina’s name.

He started seeing her after that. Reflected back at him in the black television screens every time a tape looped back to the beginning. Long hair, hazy blue eyes, oversized sleep shirt streaked with paint. A self portrait of his mother.

A journalist approached him, diligently jotting down notes onto a pad of paper. “Does recreating your mother’s depressive episodes feel exploitative or healing?” he asked.

Ilya fantasized about punching the journalist in the throat. What kind of a fucked up question was that?

“Healing, probably,” he said instead. He wondered if he meant it.

Hour Nineteen – 3:22 AM

The gallery lights were buzzing and he found himself in an operating room. I’m sorry sir, but we’re going to have to put you under. Open heart surgery, a real inconvenience, that is. But

the anesthesia wore off, and he was frozen there, on the table, chest split open for everyone to see, staring at the lights above and into the face of God.

Someone laughed near the entrance.

The same sentence from the tape, crying out, over and over again. Her voice was haunting him. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka—

He rinsed a brush. The water bloomed red, clouded, like spilled organs, his heart on the operating table.

Hour Twenty-One – 5:38 AM

He watched his mother on one of the television screens. She was coming down the stairs of their Florida home, carrying a mug of coffee. Her face, a cloudless summer sky, a friendly hand on a cold winter night.

For one terrible second he expected her to walk into the room.

She didn't, of course, but Yuna did, and David too. They hugged him and spewed out some rambling apologies about how they were sorry, they were supposed to be here last night, but then the flight was delayed until the morning, so they decided to drive through the night instead. But none of that mattered to Ilya. He hadn't realized they'd been planning to come at all.

He cried then, holding his mother, which surprised him.

They talked for a while and Yuna let him know how much he'd raised for charity so far, according to the gallery manager. It was a number that he couldn't quite comprehend, and he realized how much pain he was in. His spine and wrists and heart like lead from painting and standing and holding everything in.

Before they left David hugged Ilya again, and Yuna kissed him on the cheek. Told him to text them after this was all over and he'd gotten some sleep back at the hotel. They would go for lunch together.

As he watched the backs of their heads recede into the night all he could think was that they didn't know. They didn't know that Shane was the reason he got out of bed most mornings and the last thing he thought of before he fell asleep. That he was the air in his lungs and the blood in his veins and the only man that could bring him to his knees. They had no idea that Shane loved him, too, not just as a brother, but as something so iridescent and perpetual as a dying star. And they didn't know how desperately he wished that his mother had survived long enough to tell all of this to, and so much more.

He realized his throat was impossibly dry. He reached for a mason jar of water, tipping it down his throat.

Huh, he thought. It was vodka.

Hour Twenty-Four – 8:59 AM

Ilya didn't notice the gallery clearing out, he never saw the attendant locking the doors. He's startled, when he's approached and told he's done, he's done, he can stop painting now. He should sit down for a minute, does he want something to drink? No, he's okay, thank you. He's going to unplug the televisions. He's going to go to the hotel, he thinks. He thinks that yes, that's a good idea.

But then his mother was asleep on the floorboards. No. No, she isn't sleeping after all. There were pills by her feet. There is ice cream, melting on the floor.

Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka, come to Mama. Mishka Mishka Mishka Mishka. Mama Mama.

Mishka sits next to her on the floor. Her body will be cold. He was scared. He's holding the jar of vodka, this seems strange to him. He didn't remember having that back then. It burns his throat, but not for long.

Mishka is back in his hotel room, looking at Irina, watching her in the bathroom mirror, scissors in his hands. Curls were falling into the sink, the prunings of a dead plant. His mother's blonde hair, dug up from her grave and spread out on the porcelain. Ilya cuts and cuts and cuts her hair until he doesn't recognize her anymore.

Irina is in the bathtub. Mishka too. Ilya was there, somewhere. His phone was with him. Shane. *Shane*, he thinks. Shane. Irina would like to talk to Shane.

He didn't answer. *Sad*.

"Again. Try again, Mishka," Irina is going to say.

A beep.

Long silence.

Then, Ilya and Mishka and Irina started talking, and he couldn't get them to stop.

Moscow, Russia

Shane never brought his phone to sound check, he always left it in the green room to avoid distractions. Shane was also stupid, incredibly fucking stupid, and selfish, because fuck distractions, he should have been there to answer the call.

He knew something was wrong as soon as he saw the notifications. Ilya wouldn't call, not when they were on tour. It was long distance, for starters, so facetimeing just made more sense. And with their constantly changing time zones, they always texted before choosing a time to talk.

It was 5:30 PM here, which meant it had been around 10:00 in the morning when Ilya had called. His exhibit. He'd finished it what, an hour before that? So sure, he could have been sleep deprived, forgot to facetime, and was just calling to tell him about how it went. But that didn't explain the three consecutive missed calls, followed by the voicemail.

He couldn't listen to it here, not with Sveta and Kip and Rose and the crew filtering in and out of the room. He wandered through the maze of hallways backstage until he found the closest bathroom, pressing play on the voicemail as he slipped into a stall and locked the door.

It was bad from the start. Really fucking bad. Shane had never heard him like this before. His words slurred, voice thick with alcohol and angry tears he wasn't even trying to hold back. And then there were the words themselves.

His name, over and over and over again until Ilya's voice was cracked and raw. And *so many* goddamned "*I'm sorry's*" and "*I fucked up, I really fucked up, Shane's*". And underneath all of that, there was so much more, so much going on that Shane had been too fucking oblivious and selfish to realize.

A year. Ilya had been in therapy for *a year*, and Shane hadn't noticed. And how long had he been struggling before that? Shane had been busy with what? Writing stupid fucking songs and filming underwear ads? Dicking around and being scared about his parents finding out that he's gay, meanwhile Ilya was equally scared of dying as he was of staying alive.

It only got worse, after that, and Shane found it hard to make out everything that Ilya was saying over the sounds of his own choked back sobs.

"I know you said, you said that I couldn't understand, right? That there was no way I could know what it was like for you. To come out to your parents. Because my parents, I don't have any parents to come out to, right? I know you didn't mean to say it like that Shane, I know, I know, but *I know* you still think it.

"Gregori isn't a dad to me, I know that. And Irina, I know she's gone, I know. *I know*, Shane, I know. But I would give anything, *anything*, Shane, to talk to her about you. To sit with her and tell her about the boy from across the street with freckles that rival all the stars in the sky and a voice that makes me feel like there's a point to staying alive. I want her to know about me, Shane. About you. I want her to know you. To know the version of me that gets to love you.

"And you say that I can't know what it's like because I don't have them, but I do. Not Gregori and Irina, no. But I have David and Yuna. They're my parents too, Shane, and you forget it. They were here tonight, today, yesterday, I don't know. But they came, did you know that, Shane? Did you know they were coming? And Yuna hugged me and I was so tired, and I wanted to tell her so much, I wanted to tell my mom, *my mom*, because I don't have Irina to tell, but I can't. I can't, Shane. I can't and it's killing me, I think."

Ilya stopped talking for a while then, as Shane sat on the floor of what had to be the most vile bathroom stall in the middle of Moscow, his spine pressed against the metal door covered in sharpie dicks and phone numbers, ass probably sitting in dried piss, just listening to the

ragged and gut wrenching breath of the boy he loved but who he seemed to know nothing about. And what was the fucking point of it all? Why did they spend all of those years wanting each other and fighting it, only to hold things back when they finally gave into this thing that burned between them?

“I fucked up, Shane,” Ilya said, after what felt like an eternity. Shane sat up straighter in the stall. “My doctor, Shane, he said I shouldn’t drink on the medication, and I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Shane. Fuck—”

That couldn’t be it. Shane looked at the phone. He called his name into the receiver, as if Ilya could hear him and would answer. But he didn’t, of course he didn’t. There was nothing on the other end. The line was dead. Had the voicemail timed out, or did he end the call on purpose, or, or what?

He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t breathe and the room was fucking spinning and— Shane hurled his body forward and released a stomach’s worth of straight bile into the bowl.

And then, Shane did something he should have done a long time ago. He called his mom.

elena rygg

shane: need to cancel tonight’s show

elena: you’re joking

shane: also tomorrow’s

elena: shane

shane: i know

elena: is someone sick??

shane no

shane well, no one in the band at least

elena: jesus christ

shane: sorry

elena: are you??

elena: what happened?

shane: complicated

elena: wtf shane

elena: i need you to be less vague if i’m cancelling two shows

shane: i can't rn i'm sorry

shane: i don't have a lot of time

shane: also i need a russian lawyer who speaks english

elena: what the actual fuck

elena: please tell me this does not involve the russian mafia

shane: no

shane: not yet

elena: shane

shane: i mean if i needed to get them involved i would

elena: i think i'm having a stroke

shane: so you're cancelling the shows, right?

elena: fuck, shane

elena: yes i'm cancelling them

elena: i'll get back to you with a lawyer as soon as i can

shane: thank you

shane: i really appreciate you

elena: yeah yeah

elena: you owe me a vacation in the maldives and an explanation

shane: ❤️

mom

shane: mom

mom: Hi sweetie, we're at the hospital now.

shane: is he okay?

shane: what happened?

mom: Yes. He's tired, keeps falling asleep. But he's okay.

mom: Your father and I went right over to his hotel after our call. He was unconscious, and it didn't look great. We told the paramedics that you were worried he might have taken something.

shane: jesus

shane: did he?

mom: They don't think so. But between the alcohol and whatever medication he's on, they wanted to be cautious, so they pumped his stomach anyway.

shane: fuck

shane: i didn't even know he was on medication

shane: why would he not tell me?

mom: Shane, he's stable. It's going to be okay, sweetie. I'm sure he had reasons that make sense to him.

shane: yeah

shane: can i talk to him?

mom: He's sleeping right now, but I'll let you know when he's up, okay?

shane: ok

shane: was he scared?

mom: Mostly embarrassed, I think. He doesn't remember making the phone call, and he was worried you were angry with him.

shane: of course i'm not angry

shane: that's stupid

shane: i should come home

mom: You know that would only make Ilya feel worse, hun. Stay put for now. If anything changes I'll let you know right away, okay?

shane: ok

shane: well can you at least tell the hospital to send me the bill?

shane: ilya doesn't have the money to pay for any of this

mom: Your father's already arguing with billing. I haven't seen him this fired up since the crop disaster of 2007.

mom: His determination is kind of sexy.

shane: mom, ew

shane: wtf

mom: Sorry, LOL. Was trying to lighten the mood.

mom: ;-)))

mom: And Shane, I love you so so much. Nothing will ever change that.

mom: And I'm also very proud of you.

shane: ??
shane: why?

mom: Because you're really brave, sweetie.

shane: it doesn't feel like it

mom: I think maybe that's because you were terrified. But you are. You did the right thing by calling us. And if I ever made you feel like you couldn't be yourself with us before, I'm so so sorry for that.

shane: mom

mom: You never had to earn your love by hiding parts of yourself.

shane: thanks mom

shane: i love you

shane: i have to go, i've got some stuff i need to do

shane: let me know when he's awake tho, ok?

mom: Of course, sweetie, will do. Love you so much. <3

sveta

shane: i need your help finding some russians

sveta: that one text just activated like three government watchlists

shane: can you help or no?

sveta: of course, my slutty shanebug

sveta: who are they?

shane: come to the mens bathroom near the loading bay doors

sveta: 🤔

sveta: omw

She recognized Sasha immediately. He didn't make it difficult, his brightly coloured patterned shirt a stark contrast to the emaciated backdrop of Khovanskoye Cemetery. It was *massive*. An endless pale green sea of uneven ground, dotted with headstones that sat caged within tidy iron fences. Rows and rows of them, some with creeping vines, others with flowers and framed photographs. Others, still, with nothing but overgrown dying grass.

“Svetochka!” Sasha cheered, wrapping his arms around her and swaying back and forth. “You are even more sexy in person.” He pulled away, eyeing her up and down before winking playfully.

“Unfortunately I can’t say the same about you,” she teased. It was hard to believe this was their first time meeting in person, and she felt a bit guilty that she hadn’t thought about getting in touch with him while in Moscow until Shane made the absurd demand to “*talk to Ilya’s mother*”.

Shane, who was standing next to them, stiff, hands in his pockets, like an elementary school child getting reprimanded on the playground.

“And this must be the famous Shane,” Sasha said, his face morphing into something more apprehensive. “I have heard a lot about you.”

“I, uh—” Shane’s eyes flicked back and forth between Sasha and Sveta. God, he was useless.

“I’m sure he’s heard plenty about you. Lovely things from Ilya that would simply make your ego combust if he was to share them, so we’ll save you the trouble,” she said, stepping in.

“Yeah.” Shane nodded. “What she said.”

Sasha rolled his eyes. “Okay, okay. Irina, yes? You want to see her?”

Shane nodded again.

“Man of many words, I see.”

Sveta watched as Shane’s ears turned red with embarrassment. There was really only so much of this she could take.

“Please stop torturing the child, Sasha.” She slipped an arm into Sasha’s, pulling him in close. “Now, lead the way!”

Sasha and her exchanged meaningless pleasantries as they made their way down winding paths separating the different sections of the cemetery. Every so often, they passed by another visiting family, but considering the size, it seemed oddly deserted. She figured this was probably for the best, the last thing they needed was someone recognizing them and sending pictures to the tabloids. She tried to keep things light, talking about the tour, about Mikhail, and Rose, but half of her attention was locked on Shane, who was trailing a few paces behind them. He didn’t contribute, and other than his initially stuttering attempts at introducing himself, the only indication that he was with them at all was the sound of his footsteps on the path and the sight of his shadow, long and haunting in the golden hour rays.

She’d obviously been fucking thrown for a loop when Shane said he cancelled both of their shows in Moscow and that he needed to find a way to get in touch with Ilya’s dead mother. She loved Shane to death, but in her humble opinion, the dead could *probably* wait until their concert was over to have a quick chat.

But, she was loyal as shit, and it seemed important to him. So, she messaged Sasha, who gave them the address to the cemetery and told them he could meet them there in twenty minutes.

“Well, here she is,” Sasha said, abruptly, stepping out of Sveta’s grasp and holding out his arms, like he was displaying a prize on a game show.

Sveta imagined that Irina’s grave would somehow feel different. She’d never met her, but she thought somehow, instinctually, she might have some sort of connection to her. In reality though, it just looked like any of the other surrounding plots, if not slightly less maintained than the others. There was a small picture frame, near the headstone, the glass milky from years of exposure to the elements, and weeds dotted the surrounding grass.

Shane took a couple of tentative steps forward, off the path, toes nearly touching the iron fence that rose to his knees. She wasn’t sure what they were supposed to do now. Did Shane like, want to *pray* or something?

“I do not know what this is for you,” Sasha said, thankfully, because it was better than standing there silently, staring at Shane’s back. “But I know Ilya. He is softer than he seems.”

Shane turned around, meeting Sasha’s eyes.

“I know that—”

“No,” Sasha cut him off. “I am not done.”

Shane’s jaw visibly clenched, stunned, but to his credit, he maintained eye contact with Sasha, who honestly looked like he was ready to fight a bear. It was very Russian of him, in Sveta’s opinion.

“Ilya has told me about you. Many times, over many, many years. I know he is attached himself to you. I know when he loves someone this much he does not hold on with safety. He will put himself last, for the people that he loves. Always. But Shane, I care too much for Ilyushka to watch him hurt because someone does not know what they are getting into.” Sasha looked away, eyeing Irina’s headstone. “So do not leave him worse than you found him, yes?”

Shane swallowed, Adam’s apple bobbing slowly. “That’s why I’m here.” He nodded toward the grave. “I’m putting Ilya first this time.”

Sasha nodded, once, his shoulders relaxing a fraction.

And then they proceeded to stand there, in silence, like birds doing some weird ass mating ritual. Despite being fluent in Russian and English, Sveta felt like the two of them were communicating a whole different language.

“Oookay,” she said, tugging on Sasha’s arm again. “Sasha, let’s go... judge people’s choice of graveyard flowers.”

Shane looked at Irina. Irina looked at Shane. Or, at least, her picture did. Was there a standard protocol for initiating a conversation with the dead mother of the man you're in love with? Shane really wished he had thought this through and done some Googling before he came out here.

He figured he should probably start by actually, you know, entering the plot. He pushed open the small, ornamental gate. It creaked, a grating sound that was carried away in the breeze. Maybe that was her way of saying hello.

The grass around her headstone was yellowed and dry. He felt weird, standing up, looking at her from above, so he sat. He ran a hand along what must have been her name, engraved in cyrillic, and wished he could read it.

A harsh, guttural rattle sounded from somewhere overhead, and he pulled his hand back like he'd been burned. His eyes sought out the culprit. A crow. The bird tilted its head at him with curiosity, and then flew off into the darkening sky.

Shane looked back at Irina's picture, properly this time. She was so beautiful, back then, and here, too. He hadn't noticed so much when they were kids, but God did she ever look like Ilya. Those same watercolour blue eyes, the way you could get lost in the pools of them. Her skin, smooth and sunkissed with a spattering of moles. And her hair, endless and golden and constantly giving, like a field of wheat that could feed thousands of hungry bellies.

He realized then, quietly, with a sort of horror, that she had now been dead longer than he had known her alive. And he supposed he should probably start talking, because what was he waiting for?

Without intending to, he curled inward on himself, soles planted in the dirt, arms wrapped around his shins. Making himself small, like he'd been back then. He cleared his throat.

"Hi, Mrs. Rozanova," he said, because he supposed it was as good an opening as any. "I remembered the a at the end this time." He smiled, despite everything.

"I'm here because... I didn't really know where else to go. If you don't recognize me, um, I'm Shane. Ilya's friend, from across the street. Well, not this street, obviously. Back home, or uh, my home at least. In Bobcaygeon. I was a lot smaller when you knew me. And I was kind of an idiot." He exhaled. "Actually, I'm still a bit of an idiot."

"I guess I should start by saying that, um, I'm kind of in love with your son. With Ilya. Not kind of at all, sorry. I'm completely in love with your son. He's like, the best thing in my life. And I'm struggling to put it into words right now, how much I love him, which is absolutely ridiculous, because I've written hours, literally *hours* of music about how much I love him. But, yeah. I guess I'm a bit nervous. So, yeah. Idiot, Shane, synonyms, you know. Just keep that in mind." Shane chuckled to himself. Did he look crazy? Sitting in the middle of a graveyard, laughing with ghosts? He wasn't sure that it mattered.

"Ilya—" Shane felt something well up inside of him when he said his name. He could see him, so clearly, in that picture of his mother's face. If his parents hadn't been in New York, or if

Ilya hadn't made it back to the hotel, or if the doctors hadn't been able to pump his stomach in time. Would Ilya be...

"Fuck," he stuttered. He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Sorry, I shouldn't swear."

"Sorry," he repeated. "When you died, um, Ilya and I, we didn't talk for a little while. Because we were twelve year old boys who didn't know what we're doing, and because, you know, the whole aforementioned idiot thing. And so, I think he was a bit alone, for a while. I mean, he found Sveta, who is amazing and beautiful, and you would love her. But Sveta couldn't be a whole family for him, she was also just a kid, you know. And, I'm not telling you this to make you feel guilty or something, I'm sorry if that's how it's coming across. It's just, when we started talking again, when Ilya got a family again, with me and my parents. I—I kind of fucked up."

"Shit. Sorry. Screwed up. But yeah. I've been treating love like it's something that can wait until it's convenient." He thought about Ilya, alone, and scared, the world spinning around him, sitting in the cold porcelain tub. Did he think that his world was ending? Had he wanted the world to end? "But, it's not. Love isn't something that can wait, Mrs. Rozanova." Shane realized his face was wet. He was crying. He wiped at his eyes with the sleeve of his sweater.

"So, I'm gonna try not to be such an idiot, from now on, okay? It's still scary, and I know I shouldn't care what strangers think, but I can't help it, I do. But I'm done with letting that fear control what I do, especially not at the cost of your son. Your son, who is brilliant and bright and brave and daring and so, *so* kind. I'm gonna take care of him, if that's okay with you."

Shane sat there, for a while, not bothering to dry his face anymore. He wasn't sure what he was waiting for exactly, it's not like she was going to reach out of the grave and shake his hand. But then, suddenly, against all odds, she did.

The crow was back, perched on the low fence, unnervingly still.

Shane looked at the crow. The crow looked at Shane. When it tilted its head this time, something clasped within its beak caught the last dying light of the sun. Then, it cawed again, releasing the trinket, into the grass.

Which, altogether, seemed like a *great* sign. You confess your eternal love to your boyfriend's dead mom and then a bird litters on her grave. Fantastic. As Shane picked up the trash, however, it was heavier than expected. It was an Orthodox cross, like the one Ilya wore around his neck. It was larger than he'd thought at first too, the edges slightly worn. Undeniably, he realized, it was made of real gold.

Shane looked back at Irina's photograph. He felt the weight of the gold in his hand.

"Mrs. Rozanova," he said, feeling, for the first time in a long time, that he was running towards the truth instead of away from it. "Before I go, I have one more thing I'd like to ask you."

Back at the entrance, Shane hugged Sasha goodbye, the tension between them inexplicably lifted.

“Thanks for bringing me here,” he said. Shane was sure that his cheeks were splotchy from crying, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. “And thanks for being there, for Ilya.”

Sasha nodded, resolute. “Of course. He is family, to me. Maybe one day, you will be family too, yes?”

Shane smiled. “I hope so.”

“Well,” Sveta said. “I’m fucking starving, and Rose and Kip probably have about thirteen thousand questions about this shitshow of a day, so...” She eyed Shane.

“Yeah, of course. Just, uh, can I ask one more favour, Sasha?”

Sveta groaned audibly. He glared at her. She was worse than the pre-teen children who used to frequent the waterslide lines at Ontario Place.

“Yes, okay. What is it?”

“Tomorrow.” Shane took in a breath. He was doing this. “I need you to take me to see Alexei.”

Chapter End Notes

Canada Context:

- Ontario Place was a legendary theme park type thing that closed down in 2012 (rip). The best part HANDS DOWN was the waterpark

Other Notes:

- Did this kill me a bit to write? Yes, absolutely. Did the sick, literary lover part of me also enjoy writing Ilya's breakdown? Maybe... I do hope the scene with Shane and Irina's grave made the pain worth it tho 🥺
- Tune in next time to see the Shane vs Alexei showdown 🙄

Chapter 31: Instinct and Memories Older Than God

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*And I don't believe in the existence of angels
But looking at you I wonder if that's true
But if I did, I would summon them together
And ask them to watch over you
And guide you into my arms*

“Into My Arms”, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds

Moscow, Russia

The courtyard outside of Alexei’s apartment reeked of cigarette smoke and wet concrete baking in the June heat. The sound of a Russian opera playing over distorted radio waves filtered out a window from above. An argument seeped through the walls of another unit, the emotion held in the weight of the words transcending the barrier of language.

Shane felt exposed, standing next to Sasha at the foot of the stairwell, a black binder clutched tight to his chest, and he wondered if perhaps this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

“Are you sure this could not be solved over email?” Sasha asked, eyeing the stairs apprehensively.

Shane sighed, and against all better judgement, nodded. “I’m sure.”

“Alright then, is your funeral.” He shrugged, and broke the invisible barrier, trudging up the stairwell. Shane squared his shoulders and followed.

When he was a kid, Alexei existed in Shane’s mind as a sort of larger than life super villain, like something out of a Marvel movie. He was a bully that Ilya, as the hero of this particular story, was forced to cohabitate with, due to the unfortunate reality of their shared blood line. Therefore, it was Shane’s inherent duty as the comedic relief supporting character to provide Ilya with a reprieve from Alexei’s clutches, while simultaneously inventing elaborate but harmless ways to torment the older brother (the favourite of which, for Shane, would always be their clock prank).

Therefore, Shane was somewhat surprised by the figure that greeted them on the other side of the door. Alexei stood there, shirtless, sweat on his brow, a shell of the man that Shane remembered. He seemed smaller, somehow, even though Shane knew that this was simply a result of having grown into adulthood himself.

Recognition flickered across Alexei’s face, and he appeared to be paralyzed by it momentarily, before hurriedly grabbing a shirt off the back of a chair.

“Come in, come in,” he said, stepping back into the apartment and gesturing at the two of them.

Shane glanced at Sasha, who looked equally shell shocked. This is what Shane asked for, what he wanted, and yet he hadn’t thought it would be so easy. He supposed a part of him expected Alexei to slam the door in his face, to laugh at him, to stare back at him without an ounce of recognition. He didn’t imagine that he would be ushered into his home without any resistance.

The apartment too, wasn’t what Shane envisioned. The Alexei he knew occupied a room with dip-filled water bottles and laundry piled on the floor, with posters of half naked girls plastered on the walls. Here, children’s toys dotted the living room carpet instead; colorful plastic blocks, a play kitchen, a stuffed rabbit that had seen better days. There were drying dishes in a rack next to the sink and the sounds of cartoons murmured softly from another room.

It was hard for Shane to reconcile the teenager than he’d known and the man, the father, standing before him now. None of that changed why he was here, though, or what he came here to do. So, he followed Alexei into the apartment, toeing off his shoes and opening the binder he’d been holding like a shield onto the kitchen table.

“Read it before you sign,” he said. “There are Russian copies underneath the English ones. They’ve been notarized and certified already.”

“Well hello to you too, Shane,” Alexei said, leaning against the kitchen counter, arms crossed over his chest. “And you as well, Sasha. It’s been a while.”

Shane ignored him, pressing on. “Sixteen million roubles, give or take, depending on the exchange rate by the time the transfer clears.”

“What?” Alexei’s head snapped to attention at that. “What are you– I don’t understand.”

“I figured,” Shane said. “Math was never your strong suit, if I remember correctly.”

Next to him, Sasha coughed into his hand, poorly attempting to cover a laugh. Alexei scowled, but held his tongue, likely because money was involved. Fucking selfish prick.

Shane flipped the page. “Here it states that once the transfer is complete, neither you, nor anyone acting on your behalf can pursue Ilya for additional financial support.”

Alexei stiffened. “What the hell are you–”

Shane shut him up with the raise of an eyebrow.

He flipped the page again. “These are the banking contacts. The transfer manager’s already been briefed.” Flip. “Here you sign to acknowledge receipt of the funds.” Flip. “This confirms you understand that the transfer is final.” Flip.

“And this one,” Shane said, accentuating his words by planting a finger against the signature line, his fingertip white with pressure. “Is the part where you agree to leave Ilya the *fuck*

alone.”

Alexei visibly flinched at the bite in Shane’s tone. “You know I never forced him to send me anything.”

Shane took a step closer. He was taller than him now, and he considered just how good it felt to look down on him for a change. “No, you just made him feel guilty enough that he thought he had to. He thinks he owes you for doing the bare fucking minimum as an older brother.”

Sasha lit a cigarette and smirked to himself, like he was Shane’s hired muscle. In the other room, the cartoons continued playing, a cheery theme song filling in the gap of silence. And then, before Shane could finish unloading everything he’d fantasized of saying to Alexei for years, his attention was pulled away by the uneven thumps of toddler feet padding down the hallway.

Alexei’s daughter stopped in the doorway and stared at Shane with wide, Neptune eyes. The tectonic plates beneath his feet shifted as he looked back at her, momentarily disoriented by her uncanny resemblance to Irina and Ilya. She was sunshine and starlight and a warm summer breeze. Her hair was a bird’s nest of goldenrod, unruly curls attempted, unsuccessfully, to be contained by an assortment of pastel clips and bows. Her cheeks were two apples, rosy and lush, and her hand was sticky with pink popsicle juice from the rapidly melting icy treat clutched in her stubby fingers.

“What’s her name?” Shane asked, his voice now steady, any hint of the wildfire burning inside of him extinguished.

Alexei looked at his daughter with a kindness in his eyes that was foreign to Shane. It contorted his face, rounded out his features, making him look like an entirely different man. “Anna,” he said.

“Hi, Anna,” Shane said, smiling at her. “It’s nice to meet you. I’m Shane. Your Uncle Ilya’s boyfriend.” Shane pointedly didn’t look at Alexei as he said this. He was past the point of giving a fuck what he might have to say about it.

Anna blinked up at him, and he could have sworn there were entire galaxies glistening behind those eyes, an endless expanse of possibilities which her future might contain, and he was infinitely curious as to who she might one day become. Something settled in Shane then, and he understood, wholly and completely, why Ilya had been so compelled to help his brother after finding out about her. How could one do anything else, other than offer her the world?

She walked directly up to him then, holding out the half melted popsicle stick with a look of immense pride on her face, as though she was presenting him a diplomatic peace treaty.

“For me?” Shane asked, feigning awe.

Anna nodded.

“Why thank you, it’s a tremendous honour. Truly,” he said, accepting the popsicle.

She giggled, and it was an infectious sound. More harmonic than a symphony, an indisputable fountain of joy. Not wanting to drip sugary syrup all over the kitchen floor, he placed the popsicle in the sink before grabbing a dishcloth and dampening it to squat down and clean off her hands. They were impossibly small in his own, chubby knuckles and soft fingertips, reminding Shane of puppy paws. He couldn't fathom how someone like Alexei could create something so immaculate.

Hands clean, she reached out, tugging on Shane's watch, and he chuckled softly.

"You're trouble already, aren't you?"

She beamed up at him with Ilya's smile, and he felt his heart shatter, knowing that he was here, witnessing her in this moment, and not him.

"Paka-paka," she babbled, squishing his cheeks together and giggling again. Shane could have stayed there all day, crouched down in Alexei's kitchen, letting her mold his face like play-dough, if it meant hearing more of her laughter. But then, from the other room, a woman's voice called out Anna's name, and she waddled back down the hall, a dutiful little duck. As she turned the corner, Shane wondered if he would ever see her again.

"After Irina ended her own life, you and Gregori left him completely alone." With Anna out of earshot, Shane's entire frame hardened again, shifting like a tree struck by lightning; sap blood boiling beneath the bark and transforming his features with a violent anger.

"That's not true, I—"

"You what, Alexei? You helped placate your father by keeping his secrets in exchange for staying in the country? As if that makes up for the way that you mocked Ilya every time he was vulnerable, or scared, or needed something? Sure, you waited for him to turn eighteen to abandon him, but mentally you stopped being present long before that."

Alexei stared at the tile flooring. Shane could feel his blood in his ears. "I mean, Christ, Alexei, on the rare chances you spoke to him, it was only to bully him or to make him feel ashamed. And now, because of that, he feels like he has to apologize for needing anything, from anyone. He sees himself as a fucking inconvenience."

Shane thought about Anna, in the other room, and all of the light and goodness that radiated from her. "You've got a daughter now," he said. "You better figure out a way to stop yourself from doing the same thing to her."

Shane slid the open binder across the table, closer to Alexei. "Sign the documents, take the money, and build a life for her. But if you ask Ilya for one more goddamn *penny*, I will hire the best fucking lawyer in all of Russia and do whatever it takes to make your life unrecognizable."

Alexei instinctively glanced toward the other room, where through the walls Anna's laughter could be heard again.

“Despite you and Gregori’s best efforts, Ilya’s not alone anymore. He has me. And unlike Ilya, I don’t have any sense of misplaced obligation towards you. If it’s necessary, I’ll protect him from you in ways he never could.”

August 2012 – Toronto, ON

Pacific Salmon, Shane learned, flipping through channels late one night in a small Amsterdam hotel, were determined creatures. They travelled upstream in schools, transforming the water into a scarlet hemorrhaging vein.

Driven by instinct and memory older than God, they stopped eating the moment their bodies entered fresh water, relying entirely on stored fat and muscle to fuel their journey. The river too, was an imposing and dangerous force, run rampant with obstacles and predators that left their bodies battered and bruised. It was so heinous, that most, but not all of the fish died after spawning, having dedicated their final reserves to the harrowing journey.

Shane came to understand the persistence of Pacific Salmon, during their final month in Europe. He pushed through the current of their tour; the late nights and early flights, the press, the shows and the effervescent glow of afterparties he was desperate to leave before even arriving. He pushed through, despite the oppressive and predatory thoughts overtaking his mind. His fans, his management, the system he was contained within, none of them cared about the internal weight he was carrying.

So, he took a lesson from the creatures, stripping himself down to his essentials: get on stage, make it to the next city, keep swimming forward until he finally made it home, back to Ilya, who Shane wanted nothing more than to wrap in his arms and never let go. To give him everything he was too scared to ask for.

Similar to the aquatic creatures, however, the journey was taking an inevitable toll on his own body. Shane could recognize that the patterns he’d fallen deeper into – the intermittent fasting, his compulsion to exercise, his inability to stray from routine – were changing his body in some way. He knew that Ilya was concerned about his eating habits, he wasn’t stupid. He told himself it was something he’d address when he was back in North America. He’d connect with Scott again, tell him about what was going on. Maybe, he told himself, maybe if Ilya was able to talk to a therapist about what he was feeling, then Shane could be brave enough to do the same.

But first, he had to make it home in one piece, and the structure of these routines was one of the only things keeping him together. He also had his video project to work on, which was good. It gave him something to occupy the hours in between sound check and show time, something to think about when sleep laughed in the face of him; late at night, or early morning, when no one else was yet awake.

He started collecting pieces for the video quietly, at first. He had his very first song book with him, he brought it everywhere he went. The idea was sparked as he re-read Ilya’s message on the first page for the umpteenth time, the words written in a script too delicate and refined for a twelve year old, but which were now faded from the curse of time.

In Russia, the New Year is for beginnings.

So here's a new one.

- Ilya

It was time for a new beginning, Shane realized. So, he started collecting. He involved his mother, because it was something he wouldn't be able to accomplish on his own, but he held back as many details as he could. He wanted the video to be for her, and his dad, too. It was nice, the interspersed emails from her, containing home videos or scanned photos alongside short messages, things like "2002" or "*Found another good one :-)*".

As Shane looked back on their moments together through camcorder footage and photos from the cottage, from birthdays and Christmases or taken rinkside at Ilya's hockey games, he realized something. Unbeknownst, his parents had been capturing tiny, accidental moments of love, stretching back to a time before either of them had the words to describe what they were feeling. And he found himself falling in love all over again, as he looked back on the memories.

Sometimes, over the course of the past month, when he was on stage, strangled by the sound of screaming crowds, he thought about how he was rapidly approaching the edge of a well, deep enough that he couldn't see the bottom, but which he was about to willingly dive into regardless. And despite his awareness of the oncoming journey, he still found himself surprised, now that he was in Toronto, and the moment had arrived. He was standing, thighs pressed against the cool stone wall of the mossy well, peering down into the darkness, the darkness which appeared in the shape of 20,000 faces staring back at him with awe and expectation.

The set so far had been objectively euphoric; sweat soaked, loud, and triumphant in the unique way it always was when they played a show on Canadian soil. Usually, the energy on nights like these was infectious to him, giving Shane the drive he needed to perform at his best.

Tonight though, the hot recycled arena air felt thick and stagnant, his shirt sitting heavy on his skin. He hadn't eaten anything since last night either, the nerves leading up to the show had been too much, and just looking at his evening meal prep had made him feel nauseous. Altogether, it left him hollowed out and disoriented, his hearing occasionally collapsing between songs, the lights flaring so brightly that his vision flashed with white static.

He kept pushing through, however, thinking of nothing but Ilya. Ilya in the wings. Ilya who was brave and vulnerable and selfless. Ilya, who Shane was finally going to be brave for too.

The first notes of *Other Place* rang out, and the crowd lost their minds. Shane felt his pulse raging in his wrists, his neck, his bones, his gums.

This is where, usually, Shane would start singing. But, when he stepped in closer to the mic, no sound escaped his lips. Instead, he raised a single hand, palm facing forward.

The stage shifted strangely beneath his feet.

Sveta noticed his absence from the song first, the rhythmic timekeeping of the bass drum coming to an abrupt halt. Then, Kip's bass line petered out, and Rose shot him a questioning glance. The crowd softened next, and the arena quickly reached a state of near silence, other than the occasional cheer or shout, and Shane had to remind himself to breathe.

"Hi," he said, into the mic, and he winced at the sound of his nervous energy being filtered back at him through the in-ear monitor. Apparently, he sounded composed to the rest of the world, as the crowd roared again at this single syllable.

"Before we play this..." He glanced into the wings, and while he couldn't see Ilya through the flare of the overhead lights, he could *feel* his presence there.

"Over the years, there's been a lot of speculation about us. Our lyrics and," he glanced over at Rose, lips twitching. "Our relationships."

The cheering pressed in on him from all directions, his voice thin in comparison. He needed something to tether him to reality, and he gripped the mic stand with sweaty palms.

"*Other Place* is one of those songs that always gets brought up." He paused. "And we've seen a bunch of theories, connecting the lyrics to Rose, of course."

Were the lights brighter than usual? He glanced over his shoulder. Sveta was there. She looked concerned, features pinched. On cue, the projection behind him changed to his video. It was stalled on the first frame, waiting for the mark of his next line. It was a video recorded at the cottage, from their first year together there as kids. Neither Shane or Ilya could be seen yet, it was just a close up shot of their recently updated sign over the door, reading "Our Other Place", the "My" freshly crossed out with black paint.

The arena *vibrated* with sound at the sight of the still. All around him, thousands of phones raised themselves into the air, capturing the moment. He felt like the lights were swallowing him, the mic stand turning to liquid in his hands. He kept pushing upstream.

"So," he cleared his throat. It felt like he'd inhaled sawdust. "I made something I wanted to share with you all tonight."

What city was he in? Why couldn't he remember?

"Because this song—" Sweat, and river water ran down his spine.

"This song was written about—" He hadn't eaten since leaving the safety of saltwater, and the hunger was catching up with him.

"The only person—" Salt. Scales. The hemorrhaging river. "I've ever fallen in love with." The, he was supposed to start singing now. But he couldn't, he couldn't feel his throat, or his hands, or the ground beneath his feet, and then, without warning, the rapids pulled Shane under, dragging him to the ground.

The mic shrieked with violent feedback as it crashed to the stage alongside Shane. Rose lunged forward, but she wasn't quick enough, and before he even realized what he was doing, Ilya was on stage, kneeling next to Shane, pulling the guitar off of him so he could breathe.

He couldn't hear the sounds of people backstage shouting after him and the confused oppressing murmur of the sea of bodies filling the arena. Couldn't see the grainy home footage that was projected on the wall behind all of them, the camera slowly zooming out to show Shane and Ilya in the frame, laughing in the doorway of their Other Place, unaware that they were being filmed by David or Yuna.

All he knew in that moment was Shane, who was pale and sweat soaked and slipping in and out of consciousness.

"Shane, Shane, hey," he muttered, cupping his cheeks.

His eyes flickered open briefly, unfocused, somewhere far away from here.

"Shane," he repeated. "I'm right here."

Chaos buzzed around them, medics, a stretcher, security trying to contain the growing panic, all while Shane and Ilya's lives continued to play on the screen overhead; handpicked moments meant to tell a story alongside the words of the song. Eventually, someone from tech realized they should cut the footage, the screen fading to black.

It didn't make a difference, though. Between Ilya, hounding the medics with rapid fire, inaudible questions as they loaded Shane onto the stretcher, Shane, reaching out to grab for his hand, and the photos that would come to the surface later, photos of Ilya, forcing his way into the back of the ambulance, their story told itself.

"Sir, I understand, but only immediate family are allowed in there right now." Ilya wondered if it would be considered aggravated assault or a crime of passion if he was to knock out the nurse by hitting him over the head with the clipboard he was holding so that he could get past him and see Shane.

They'd let Ilya into the ambulance (meaning they decided getting Shane to the hospital was more important than wasting time trying to reason with the crazed look behind his eyes), but he'd been muscled out of the way by a hoard of scrubs as soon as they rolled him into the fluorescent hallways of Emergency.

He'd been in the trenches for the past hour, frantically communicating with David and Yuna, who had been watching the concert from one of the boxes, and trying to figure out where the *fuck* they'd taken Shane.

So it was safe to say he was not about to let this five foot four man with Rick and Morty scrubs and a saviour complex stop him from seeing his boyfriend.

"He *is* my immediate family."

The nurse raised an eyebrow and glanced at the clipboard.

“I’m his brother.”

Thankfully, at that exact moment, David and Yuna came jogging around the corner. Ilya felt his entire body relax a fraction.

“What’s the issue here?” David asked, immediately on the offensive.

The nurse straightened. “Only family are permitted in the room at the moment. Are you two related to Mr. Hollander?”

“Of course. We’re his parents.” The nurse nodded, jotting something down on his stupid fucking clipboard.

Then, without blinking, David pointed a thumb toward Ilya. “And that’s Shane’s boyfriend.”

The nurse’s hand froze where it was holding the pen. Then, he glanced up at Ilya, looking deeply, spiritually disturbed.

“To be clear,” Ilya said. “We’re not brothers by, like, blood.”

Yuna stormed into the room first, rushing at Shane, immediately taking his face into her hands, while David and Ilya trailed after her.

“Can my boys *please* stop landing themselves in the emergency room?” she pleaded.

Shane gave her a weak smile. “Sorry, I just couldn’t help one upping Ilya. It’s not fair for him to have *all* your attention.”

Ilya released a soft laugh through his nose, because the alternative was that he might start crying. He sat down in the chair next to Shane’s bed, feeling an instinctual need to reach out and touch his hand, to feel his pulse point, to make sure he was alive. He ran his thumb over Shane’s knuckles, his heart clenching as he saw the IV hooked up to his wrist.

“By the way,” Ilya said. “The nurse thinks that we’re both brothers *and* lovers.”

Behind him, David made a surprised sound. “Oh my god, that explains his face.” He started laughing to himself, a touch hysterical. “I thought he was homophobic. I was having a whole argument in my mind, thinking about what I should’ve said.”

Shane’s cheeks flushed bright red, and Ilya was glad to see colour returning to them.

“Please,” he sighed, closing his eyes in exasperation. “Never refer to us as *lovers* again.”

The room felt a little bit lighter after that, and they hovered together in relative softness for a while, allowing Shane to rest while fluids slowly dripped into his arm. Surrounding them was the persistent hum of the machinery, and periodically the sounds of a keyboard clacking whenever a nurse popped into the room, checked the numbers on Shane’s monitors, and

entered something into the computer. Ilya refused to break his hold with Shane's hand, as if he was afraid they might be split up again if he did.

Eventually, an older doctor pushed her way into the room, wearing thick black frames and a kind smile, painted a dark shade of red. She reviewed Shane's chart before introducing herself as Dr. Al-Khafaji.

"Well," she said, standing at the foot of the hospital bed. "The good news, Mr. Hollander, is that while you gave everyone a pretty good scare, you haven't done any permanent damage."

Ilya breathed a sigh of relief. He gave Shane's hand a light squeeze, meeting Yuna's eyes across the bed.

"You were extremely dehydrated. Heat exhaustion likely contributed to that. We think that you likely had a panic attack as well."

Dr. Al-Khafaji flipped through a couple of pages before continuing. "We also ran some bloodwork," she said. "We noticed a few things consistent with inadequate nutrition."

Shane stared intently at the blanket. Dr. Al-Khafaji studied his reaction.

"Have there been any changes in your life regarding diet or exercise lately?"

The machine's hooked up to Shane beeped, punctuating the silence. Ilya eyed Yuna again, who was running a hand through her son's hair, face creased with worry.

Ilya cleared his throat. "Sorry, Doctor, would it be alright if we stepped outside for a minute, there's just a couple things— It would just be good. To talk, one on one, I think."

She nodded, slowly, and met Ilya's eyes. "Of course, yes."

Shane was still staring at the blanket when he left.

The door closed behind Ilya and his Doctor with a soft click. Shane stared up at the ceiling for several, drawn out moments. He counted to sixty. Against all odds, the world didn't end, so he turned towards his mother.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"For what?" Her hands stilled where they were running through his hair.

Shane laughed to himself. How had he gotten here? "This isn't really... how I imagined this going."

"How you imagined what going?"

"You finding out about me and Ilya."

Yuna blinked at him, momentarily confused, before her expression melted into something soft and affectionate. “Honey,” she said. “It was pretty clear after our last family hospital stint that you and Ilya are hopelessly in love with each other. Not to mention your video project? You weren’t very subtle, asking for pictures and videos of the two of you.”

“What?” He glanced back and forth between his parents with wide eyes. “You’ve known since I was in Russia?”

“Sorry,” David scratched at the back of his head. “You’re telling me you didn’t know that *we* knew?”

“Shane, honey, what did you think my text messages meant? When I apologized if I ever made you—” she blinked a few times, her eyes glossy with a wet sheen. “If I ever made you feel like you couldn’t be yourself with me and your father.”

“I thought you were being metaphorical?” he tried.

Yuna sighed. “I was not being metaphorical.”

“So... You knew. The whole time.”

“Yes,” his parents repeated in unison. Then, Yuna smiled at him. “Well, not the *whole* time. We really did think there was something with you and Rose for a long time there, but then there’s the way Ilya looks at you. It’s like he thinks you hung the moon.”

Shane blushed, covering his face with his hands. “Oh my god,” he groaned into his palms.

Yuna kissed the top of his head.

He peeled his fingers away, blinking at his parents. And then, he said the thing he wasn’t ever sure he’d be able to vocalize to them, even when he had been planning to tell an arena full of fans about him and Ilya.

“I’m gay.”

Yuna wrapped her arms around him before he even had a chance to fully realize what he’d done. And then his dad followed suit, closing in on him from the other side. He hated every second of it. But also, in that moment, he kind of needed it.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you guys sooner,” he sniffed into their shoulders.

“You don’t have to apologize, kid,” his dad said, and even his voice sounded tight.

“I just... I didn’t want to disappoint you, you know?”

They pulled back from him, and he struggled to meet their eyes.

“Shane,” his mom said.

“You guys just always wanted me to be... *normal*. And then first there was the whole autism thing, and then I didn’t go to University like you wanted, and now this...” He hated that his voice was shaking. “I just feel like I keep failing you.”

Yuna tugged on one of his hands, which was clutching the thin hospital blanket, and gripped it steadily between her own.

“You have never been a failure, Shane.”

He turned away from her, staring at the ceiling.

“All those things you just listed?” she said. “Those are some of the best parts of you.”

Shane could feel tears starting to swell, and he pulled his hand from her grasp, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes. “Mom,” he muttered.

“No, I’m serious, Shane. You are thoughtful and strange and brilliant and kind. You love people more deeply than anyone else I’ve ever known, and we are so, *so* lucky that we get to be your parents.”

Ilya switched places with David and Yuna shortly after, claiming they were heading out for coffee, but he couldn’t tell if they were being truthful or not. He supposed it didn’t really make a difference.

Ilya returned to the spot by his side, locking their hands together like he’d never left. Shane struggled to comprehend how less than 72 hours ago he had been in Europe, and now he was here, with Ilya by his side.

“Hey, did you see the video?” he asked, suddenly realizing that thanks to his soul crushing breakdown, he hadn’t seen whether or not they had played out the footage.

Ilya frowned. “What video?”

“The one for *Other Place*. It should’ve been playing during the show, right as everything, you know, everything fell apart.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You really didn’t see it?” Shane asked, trying to remember the last moments before he passed out. Ilya shook his head in response. Had it not been shown after all? Shane struggled to decide if the thought sparked relief or disappointment in him. Either way, he needed Ilya to know what he’d been planning.

He explained what he’d been working on for the past month; the way he was inspired by Ilya’s original music video, the footage he’d gathered from his mom, the late nights spent editing. The years of their friendship stitched together into something that would be blunt and indisputable to anyone who watched it.

By the time he was done describing his plan to play the recording at their show that evening, Ilya looked deeply concerned for Shane's sanity. He stared at him, aghast, before breaking.

"Shane. Why the *hell* would you do that?"

Shane flinched. "What do you mean? I thought— I thought you'd like the video—"

"No, the video sounds incredible, obviously. I need to see it as soon as we're out of here. I mean what were you thinking, coming out in front of 20,000 people? That sounds like your worst fucking nightmare."

"I dunno," Shane shrugged, sheepish. "I wanted to try being braver. For you. For us. When everything happened with you last month, I just— I realized I don't want to wait any more. It's not worth it."

Ilya's gaze deepened, and he looked like he was fighting the urge to climb on top of him and either kiss him senseless or strangle him to death.

"Jesus Christ, Shane. Maybe we could've started with, like, holding hands in public first?"

Shane laughed at himself, the insanity of his plan hitting him in full force. "Well, at least my parents know now."

Ilya leaned in close, pressing a kiss to his forehead. "That's an incredible start."

Dr. Al-Khafaji returned before his parents, and Shane sat up straighter in bed at the sight of her.

"Feeling a bit more human?" she asked.

"Debatable."

She smiled faintly, and rolled a stool over from in front of the computer so she could sit on the other side of his bed.

"I wanted to revisit the nutrition concerns for a minute, if that's okay."

Shane nodded, jaw tight, foot twitching beneath the blanket.

"Good. Okay. Let's start with today. When did you last eat, Shane?"

Shane thought about the way he'd felt when he was locked in that bathroom in Russia, listening to Ilya come apart over voicemail. To have his heart ripped out of his chest while he waited to hear from his parents, to hear that he was going to be okay. To discover all the parts of himself that Ilya had felt the need to keep hidden from him; his depression, the medication, his therapy sessions.

Shane considered too, the position he'd put Ilya and his family in tonight; the way that his choices made in the name of structure and routine and control had pushed him this far over

the edge. He knew what he was doing wasn't sustainable. And if Ilya was capable of opening himself up, of getting the help that he needed to be better, then Shane owed it to both of them to do the same. He swallowed, hard.

"Um. Yesterday night, I think," he admitted. Ilya rubbed reassuring circles against his hand

"Okay." She wrote something down on her chart. "And is that normal for you? Walk me through what a normal day of eating looks like for you."

"I didn't start like... whatever this is," he said.

Dr. Al-Khafaji leaned in towards him, just a fraction, her face open and void of judgement. Ilya continued to reassure him with his touch. He could do this.

"I was just trying to eat healthier at first. Because we were on the road all the time, you know? And the diet I started, it had me cut a bunch of stuff out and it felt good, to be, like, *good* at it. At following the rules of it. And that was okay, for a while."

Shane looked at Ilya, who nodded at him, wordlessly encouraging him to continue on.

"And then, it started to feel like, I don't know. Not good enough. I read about, um, intermittent fasting online. And I like the discipline behind it. Everything else was getting more hectic around me. Like, our band was getting bigger, and we were getting ready for our world tour, and then things with, um— things with Ilya started getting more serious too."

He glanced at the Doctor, nervous, but she simply flashed him a small smile.

"I think," he said, his breathing starting to grow unsteady. "I can't really tell what's normal anymore? I just... I keep feeling this need to add more restrictions or rules to what I'm doing, and it's like every time I feel like I have it under control it gets worse again." He didn't try to stop the tears that spilled out of him this time.

On the back of his hand, Ilya's thumb felt unsteady, and as he looked at the only person who truly knew all of him, Shane realized he was crying too.

"I think... I'd like to get better," he said. The admission was horrifying, and heartbreaking, and he thought that it might kill him to say, but then somehow it didn't. And maybe, that was the first step he needed to take in order to one day be okay.

"We should call my parents, probably," Shane mumbled into the fabric of Ilya's shirt. Dr. Al-Khafaji had left about twenty minutes ago, seemingly satisfied with Shane's answers for the time being, and Ilya had been clinging onto him since she walked out the door. "I imagine they've had enough time to finish their coffees."

Ilya begrudgingly peeled himself away from Shane, his body immediately lamenting the loss. He took out his phone, his face lighting up with confusion as he was met with a wall of notifications.

There were *hundreds*; texts, mentions, news alerts, missed calls. Blurry photos of Shane onstage, of Ilya at his side. And then he saw it; the videos of him and Shane, playing in the background as he was lifted onto a stretcher by the medics. A timelapse of their friendship, and then their love, as Shane, the real Shane, reached out for Ilya's hand.

"What is it?" Shane asked, and Ilya realized he was doing a shit job of schooling his expressions.

He winced. "They... know?"

"What?"

Ilya passed him the phone, at a loss for words. It was a Twitter post with a picture someone had taken of Ilya strongarming his way into the ambulance next to Shane, the caption reading: "*i don't care what anyone says, that is the face of a man in LOVE*"

Ilya wasn't sure how he expected Shane to react, but it surely wasn't the blushing grin and actual sparkles in his eyes that he was faced with.

"You're not upset?" Ilya asked, tentative. "You know it had like 150,000 retweets, right? Like, *everyone* knows."

"Ilya, the whole point of today was for everyone to know," he said, surprising Ilya further as he started to *laugh*. "Plus, now I have endless photos of you coming to my rescue like some sexy medieval knight."

Ilya surged forward, unable to stop himself from bringing their mouths together in a kiss that probably contained a bit too much force for someone who was recently unconscious. "Sorry," he said, breathless. "I just love you so fucking much, Shane," Ilya said, wondering if this is what it felt like to be one of Shane's starstruck fans.

Shane smiled at him. "I love—" the phone in his hand buzzed, another notification popping up on the screen. "Oh my god," he said, laughing so hard that tears sprang from the corners of his eyes.

"What?" Ilya said, his heart full and head light.

"Hayden," he spat out, between gasps of laughter. "Hayden, from highschool, he DM'd you on Instagram."

Ilya's mood soured immediately. He'd never liked that kid. "What does he want?"

Shane tossed him the phone.

Hayden Pike

yungpapa_pike

185 Followers | 28 Posts

You don't follow yungpapa_pike on Instagram

yungpapa_pike: woaaaaahh dude 😭 you bagged shane??? no offense but he is WAY out of your league. genuinely shocking upset victory for you

Chapter End Notes

Me when the whole gang FINALLY gets together and just fucking talks to each other:



YA'LL!!! Just one more chapter left!! AGHHHHHHH... I think ya'll are going to enjoy the final chapter!! It has a lot of news articles/social media elements to cover a broad span of time (Working on a Hot Ones interview transcript currently hehe). It will also be very very mushy and bring everything together into a happy little complete universe!

I also DO have thoughts and ideas for an epilogue that would basically bring us to present day (as in 2026), so I'm thinking that will be a lil additional treat 🤪

BUT UGHHH How are we almost done 😔 I love you all SOOOO much it has been so much fun writing and responding to comments. Ya'll have seriously made this story better by sharing your ideas haha! 💕💕💕💕💕 Hope we enjoyed this one!

Chapter 32: Shane Hollander, Regular Gay

Chapter Notes

clears throat

before reading... please take note of the chapter number change.

tuna got a lil carried away with the socmed and news in this chapter, so i couldn't fit the actual real scenes i need to get to 🤔

soooo they're saved for one final chapter hehe.

enjoy!

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

*There are nights when I can't get by
But show me a person who always feels fine
And I'll show you a lying sack of shit
I hope that you're happy that I'm not dead
And we both ended up kind of okay in the end*

“The Internet is Everywhere”, Jeff Rosenstock

August 2012

facebook

The Wolfbirds Official

To everyone who's come to see us over the past year, thank you.

We've spent months crossing oceans, cities, and time zones together, and every single night you gave us more love than we knew what to do with. We don't take this for granted.

Because of this, it's incredibly difficult for us to say:

We will be cancelling the remaining dates of our *Breakaway* tour, including all upcoming North and South American shows. We understand how disappointing this is, and we are deeply sorry.

Please know that this decision was not made lightly. Thank you for standing by us through every beautiful and chaotic moment

of this era.

Refund information will be available through original points of purchase shortly.



The Wolfbirds

Like | Comment | August 21st, 2012 near Toronto, ON

Gloria Grey Honestly after Shane collapsed on stage at the Toronto show I had a feeling something like this was coming. I hope he's okay.

Kamil Kock @Gloria Grey they said it was just dehydration tho.

Gloria Grey @Kamil Kock Yeah, but he was looking exhausted for weeks before that.

Lisa Hayes @Kamil Kock i was AT the toronto show. shane was off the whole night. he kept missing lyrics and leaning against the amp between songs. ya'll act like ppl were exaggerating about the collapse but it looked legit scary

Jeanette Saint-Georges Honestly, I don't even care about the cancellation atp. Those photos of Shane and that hockey player artist are worth missing the show 🥰

Adrian Dela Cruz @Jeanette Saint-Georges maybe let's not turn a medical emergency into relationship gossip? 🙄

Jeanette Saint-Georges @Adrian Dela Cruz It's not gossip when he was literally holding his hand in front of a whole crowd of people

Jake Pierce I'm disappointed, obviously, but some of these comments are weird. If somebody in the band is struggling physically or mentally, cancelling is the responsible thing to do.

Max Riley @Jake Pierce People are allowed to be upset. Some of us spent hundreds on flights...

September 2012

TMZ

EXCLUSIVE: Shane Spotted Leaving BeWell Clinic in Hamilton as Health Concerns Intensify Following Tour Cancellation

Published September 13, 2012 9:00 AM PDT

Pictured above: Shane Hollander, frontman of The Wolfbirds, leaving BeWell (an Eating Disorder clinic in Hamilton, ON) earlier this week. This is the first sighting of the singer and guitarist since the band abruptly cancelled the remainder of their *Breakaway* world tour.

Shane was seen exiting from a side entrance, accompanied by a member of his security personnel. Shane did not engage with the journalists present, and the facility refused to comment on whether Shane is currently receiving care there.

The sighting follows weeks of speculation surrounding the cancellation. The initial PR statement released by the band did not explain the reason for the cancellation, however fans have invented a range of theories. Some fans point to Shane's collapse on stage as the justification, while others speculate that Unrivaled Records (The Wolfbirds' label) pressured the band into ending the tour early after video footage from their final concert seemingly confirmed that Shane is in a romantic relationship with Ilya Rozanov, a public figure known as "The Hockey Artist", who also previously worked with The Wolfbirds as an artistic director on their "Other Place" music video.

facebook

The Wolfbirds Official

We would like to address recent speculation regarding Shane and ask for privacy and compassion at this time.

Over the course of our *Breakaway* tour, Shane has been navigating ongoing challenges related to his health. The decision to pause the tour was made with Shane's wellbeing at the centre of it, and he is currently focusing on recovery.

We understand the concern that has surfaced from many fans, and we are grateful for it. However, we ask that speculation be set aside so he can have space to heal without public scrutiny.

We thank you for your kindness and understanding during this time.



The Wolfbirds

Like | Comment | September 20th, 2012 near Toronto, ON

[Commenting has been turned off for this post]

December 2012

Instagram

kippergrady ✓

1 hour ago

[alt text: Kip, Scott, and Kip's dad are pictured at a public skating rink. Kip is in the center, arms slung around both men. He is pressing a kiss into Scott's stubbled cheek.]

❤️437K 😊5.9K

kippergrady from intern scott to boyfriend scott: official promotion approved

Comments

rose.landry ✓

i'm actually so happy for you both 😭 this is the cutest "promotion" ever

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

human resources is gonna be in shambles after this

kippergrady ✓

i've been bribing HR for years, dw

equinoxmanagement

kip, please.

birdies_hq

NOT INTERN SCOTT BEING CANONICALLY PROMOTED 😭😭

id.choose.him

this is the healthiest workplace romance arc i've ever witnessed

shanehollander ✓

the real question is did mr. grady make scott his lasagna? otherwise i'm not convinced this is official approval.

kippergrady ✓

you can stop calling my dad mr. grady, shane. we graduated like 5 years ago

intern_scott

I did not receive lasagna. I fear there has been a gap in my onboarding experience.

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

no wonder scott gets along with kip's dad. he has the sense of humor of a senior citizen.

heart_eyes

holy shit i'm living for ilya's comments. did not realize this man was so funny

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

it's not a joke, just facts. kip is so nice, doing charity work with the elderly 🧡

intern_scott

Can someone please tell me how to unlock lasagna access?

foosballtable

be honest... are all the wolfbirds gay for each other at this point?

exercise_ball

i'm starting to think the band and their management are just in one big relationship

puzzle.with.dad

the wolfbirds are basically a polycule with a merch table

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

to be clear, i'm bi, but also you're not exactly wrong...

equinoxmanagement

someone PLEASE confiscate ilya's phone

February 2013

r/popheads | february 2013

RoseAndSveta

We're Rose and Sveta from The Wolfbirds and we can't wait to answer all your questions!!

[AMA]

Hey folks! We're Sveta and Rose from The Wolfbirds (aka those Canadian freaks who wrote "Other Place" and who cancelled their world tour after our lead guitarist passed out on stage from loving his sexy Russian boyfriend too much). Ask us anything!!!!

Snickers_Bars

hiiii!!!! since you guys released breakaway all other music is ruined for me, i'm not even joking. i was wondering if you two have seen the full video that shane made for ilya? it looked sooo cute form what we saw 🙄

RoseAndSveta (op)

Rose: oh my goodness, yes we have. Honestly, however adorable you think it is, multiply that by like 300 and then maybe you're close to how cute the whole thing is.

Sveta: I kind of forgot you all haven't seen the rest! Let me work my magic on ilya and see if I can get him to post it 😊

HardGuy2Like

when are you queens going back on tour? also sveta you inspired me to take drumming lessons as a girl and you are SO COOL! i've been listening to you guys since rookie season 💖

RoseAndSveta (op)

Sveta: keep drumming, girl!! You're going to be amazing! But honestly, probably not for a while... 🙄 I know thats not what you guys wanna hear, and we can't wait to get back out and play some shows, but we gotta do what's right for the band

urgayandimhot

big fan here! 🙌 do you guys ever look at edits or fanart or anything online?

RoseAndSveta (op)

Rose: Sometimes! I would say we all have our favourites 😊

Sveta: what Rose isn't saying is that our band group chat name is actually based on a fanmade story that someone wrote about shane and lighting mcqueen. And yes he will probably kill me for sharing this, but I say THE PEOPLE DESERVE TO KNOW

Snickers_Bar

please i beg of you, never let sveta get media trained

trophy34room

Hi guys!! I gotta say "Emergency Landing" is such an underrated track. But also, I think we're all dying to know... Is the wolfbird polycule actually real? 😂

RoseAndSveta (op)

Rose: omg these polycule rumours are going to be the death of me. NO there has never been and never will be a band polycule. That being said... My dating history with our bandmates is interesting to say the least

Sveta: to be clear, Rose has only dated one person who WASN'T a member of the wolfbirds, and that guy also turned out to be gay. Oh and when we were in high school, two of her gay exes went to prom together.

Rose: It sounds messier than it is though. I am now very much in love with someone who is not a gay man 🙏

Sveta: that someone IS however incredibly charming, a world class drummer, very irresistible, a great kisser, etc. etc. etc.

Rose: They are also VERY MODEST 🙄

trophy34room

UMMM WTF???? Was NOT expecting a Roselana hard launch from this AMA but I am SO here for it 🔥🔥

May 2013

twitter.

@EOnline

After months of silence about his health struggles, Shane Hollander has reportedly donated a large sum to the ED clinic where he was suspected to be receiving treatment. The donation was made anonymously, though a source close to the clinic confirmed his involvement.

@believe.in.anything

whoever leaked this from the clinic should genuinely lose their job btw

@toddwheeler

if he wanted privacy maybe don't become famous? 🙄

@andyhart

Sorry, but rich people's recovery stories don't mean much to me when rehab costs more than my rent...

@not_roger

Right? Like regular people can't even access treatment.

@alligatorhunting

he's literally donating money TO the clinic... that helps more people access treatment. Are you ok?

@5h1t_t3am

Also, this is Canada. Don't project your shitty american healthcare system onto our country.

@b0r1ng_clty

What, as if it's better here? Sure, maybe it's free to access as long as you don't die in the 18 months you spend waiting to see a doctor...

July 2013

From: shane.hollander@thewolfbirds.ca

To: maria@smallnco.com

07/10/2013 10:12:02 EDT

Subject: Property Ownership Inquiry

Hi Maria,

I was hoping you might be able to help me with a property question.

There's a piece of land in Muskoka that I'm trying to find out more about, mainly who owns it and whether there's a way to get in contact with them. I'm not very familiar with how this process works, but Shayla Truan (my entertainment lawyer that I usually work with) recommended your firm to me for real estate questions.

The land appears to be undeveloped and is on Lake Rosseau. I can send more specific details if that's something your office handles.

Thank you so much,
Shane Hollander

September 2013

The Conditions of Visibility: Exploring the relationship between censorship and perception in Ilya Rozanov's *Second Language*

By María Carri

September 16, 2013 4:51 pm

Ilya Rozanov has always been political. This is an undeniable truth within both realms that the Canadian-Russian artist occupies; the commercial music industry and the fine arts world.

Since his debut exhibit, which gained significant traction by exposing the toxic masculinity infecting Canadian hockey culture, Rozanov has refused to accept things for the way they have always been. Instead, he confronts the corners of culture that inhabit the shadows head on, bringing them into the light.

Second Language, Rozanov's latest exhibit deepens his exploration of the contentious by turning inward, while concurrently addressing politics on a global scale.

The year is 2013, the country is Russia, and the topic is legislation, specifically, the "gay propaganda" law (passed earlier this year) prohibiting the public representation of LGBTQ+ identities under the guise of protecting minors and public morality.

Rozanov has spoken about the fraught relationship he has with his ancestry in the past, citing that he is the first member of his family to be born outside of Russia. Despite growing up in a house where his parents and brother were fluent in the language, by the time Rozanov was in middle school, the only words he could confidently identify were slurs, which he states were often homophobic in nature.

At the core of *Second Language* are a series of oil paintings depicting moments of queer intimacy. However, as with all of Rozanov's work, he transcends the borders of medium to align with his political statement. In the case of this particular exhibit, he draws attention to the resilience of queer identities in the face of censorship by making it such that the paintings are only visible in their entirety when there is no one to view them.

How is this feat accomplished? Using Rozanov's passion for integrating technology within the traditional medium. Instead of hanging the paintings themselves on the walls, Rozanov has installed a series of framed screens around the gallery space. When the room is empty, they display the art in its true form; raw, exposed, vulnerable. When overhead sensors track the entrance of someone into the room, however, the screens are altered to showcase a secondary painting; a distorted version of the piece.

Why create something so illustrious only to hide it from the viewer? Rozanov parallels his art with the Russian LGBTQ+ community; no amount of censorship will ever eradicate or erase their identity. The community will persist, hidden in plain sight.

Instagram

shanehollander 

2 hours ago

Photo Carousel

[**image 1 alt text:** Ilya Rozanov standing in front of the entrance to an art gallery, standing next to a sign written in both English and Russian, reading "Second Language"]

[**image 2 alt text:** A panoramic shot of the art exhibit from a distance. There are picture frames hanging on the walls. The images contained in them are digital projections of oil paintings that depict queer imagery]

[**image 3 alt text:** A close up shot of one of the digitally projected oil paintings. When close up, the imagery that was clear from a distance is now distorted, pixelated and blurred]

 983K  10.2K

shanehollander Ilya's exhibit "Second Language" looks at queer visibility under Russia's recently passed gay propaganda law. Even though I'm a songwriter by trade, words can't properly express how proud I am of him.

I'm lucky to live in Canada, where I can love openly and freely, but that's not the reality in a lot of places, both near and far. We need to look out for each other and the LGBT community more than ever. 

Comments

yunahollander

We are so proud of the men you and Ilya have become. Such an important message!

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

thanks mom! (for the comment and for making such a sexy son 🤔)

noodly.limbs

The way that this is propaganda in itself 🤔

its.svetaaaa ✓

The way that no one cares about your opinion 🙌

yungpapa_pike

this is actually so sick. always knew you were gonna do something meaningful with your music, even back in school. proud of you, man

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

didn't i block you??? why can i see this?

yungpapa_pike

shane still follows me, dude..

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

@shanehollander if you love me you will block pike

connor_connors

still can't get over the fact that this means rose had three gay boyfriends

its.svetaaaa ✓

still can't get over the fact that your parents decided to name you connor connors

rose.landry ✓

babe do we really need to fight with everyone in the comments

allthethingsshesaid

I'm so confused.. is Shane Hollander gay?

mangetout

smh do you live under a rock or smth? literally all the wolfbirds are gay

ilya.rozzy81 ✓

@mangetout this is bi erasure 😡 #blocked @shanehollander block this one too. (but yes, shane hollander is very, very gay)

shanehollander ✓

omfg I am so sorry @mangetout I don't know how Ilya hasn't been banned from this app yet. Also, my love, how many times do I have to remind you that you're not actually in the band, they're not even talking about you.

shanehollander ✓

ALSO i'm not very, very gay. i'm regular gay.

mangetout

"i'm regular gay" 😭 someone make this tshirt asap

January 2014

From: shane.hollander@thewolfbirds.ca

To: info@edwardsanddavies.com

01/27/2014 15:22:10 EST

Subject: Question About Reworking Gold into New Piece

Hello,

I am looking for some information about designing a piece of jewellery.

I have an older gold pendant, and I was wondering whether or not it's possible to melt something like that down and turn it into a new piece. It's actually something that I found, so I'm not sure about the karats or if there's even enough material to do what I'd like with it.

I guess I'm also a little unsure what the first steps usually are? Would you want to see a picture of the piece or is it better if I come to your store in person?

I'm asking because I'm thinking about something fairly specific and personal, and I'd really like to understand what's possible before I get too far ahead of myself.

Thank you so much, I look forward to hearing back from you.

Shane Hollander

February 2014

twitter.

@WolfiesHQ

Multiple sources confirm sighting The Wolfbirds at Unrivaled Records in Toronto today. No official comment yet from the band or label. Is it just a meeting, or do we think they're finally working on something new?

@sealion1217

I've finally come to terms with not getting any new wolfbirds any time soon and now THIS???

@commongoal

i'm not getting my hopes up. i was heartbroken when they cancelled their tour and i can't take that pain again 😭

@didnt-even-kiss

Nahhhh, pics or it didn't happen.

@mymoon108

ok i'm not trying to start anything, but i have a friend who works at the cafe in UR and he said they were definitely in today. not just for a meeting, they were apparently in the tracking room for HOURS

@myman109

Don't ask how I know, but apparently they're working on a single and it's called Anna.

@didnt-even-kiss

but why would shane write a song about a girl when he is a self proclaimed "regular gay"?? 😂

April 2014

billboard

CHARTBEAT

THE WOLFBIRDS' 'ANNA' DEBUTS AT NO. 1 ON BILLBOARD HOT 100

The song that marks their return to the summit after a silence that began when their tour went dark in 2012

By Gary Trust

Photographs by ERIK MADIGAN HECK

4/27/2014

The Wolfbird's "Anna" begins its chart life at No. 1 on the **Billboard Hot 100**. It arrives after a long awaited return to the charts since they abruptly ended their Breakaway tour in

August 2012. The sudden halt left fans in limbo and the group largely absent from the public eye.

Lyrically, "Anna" marks a clear tonal shift for the band. Instead of leaning into the high-voltage indie-punk-rock sound that defined their earlier era, "Anna" packs a tight, compressed emotional punch through metaphors describing the recalibration of identity as someone finds their grounding force.

Further helping the buzz for "Anna," The Wolfbirds have **announced their fourth LP, *Overtime***, due July 12. Ilya Rozanov, boyfriend of frontrunner Shane Hollander and artistic director of their award winning hit "Other Place", has been confirmed as art director for the new album, so it's safe to say fans have high expectations and are ready to listen.

July 2014

tiny desk

CONCERTS

INTIMATE CONCERTS, RECORDED LIVE AT NPR MUSIC HEADQUARTERS

The Wolfbirds: Tiny Desk Concert

JULY 24, 2014 | 5:00 AM ET

Stephen Thompson

[alt text: embedded video of The Wolfbirds performing at NPR Music Headquarters]

Here's a crucial reminder from The Wolfbirds: healing is rarely linear, and neither is a good rock band.

The group's fourth album, *Overtime*, arrived earlier this month wrapped in exhaustion and bruised optimism. Across its 13 tracks, The Wolfbirds sing about burnout, found family, recovery, and the strange but terrifying realization that getting better means first hitting your rock bottom. Sure, the material is heavy, but since their first album, *Rookie Season*, the band has demonstrated an ability to sneak catharsis into a song you can scream in the car with the windows rolled down.

So it feels fitting that their Tiny Desk debut pulls heavily from *Overtime*, opening with their hit single "Anna" and followed by "Temporary Insanity," which has rapidly become an LGBT+ anthem. The Wolfbirds close out their set with "Fawn in a Barren Field," a sweet song on the slower side of *Overtime*. It ends quietly, yet powerfully, as Hollander and Landry sing

in tandem, "Hands over my mouth / the moon is in my eyes /
Enraptured by your beauty / I cry, I cry, I cry"

SET LIST

- "Anna"
 - "Temporary Insanity"
 - "Rookie Season"
 - "Other Place"
 - "Fawn in a Barren Field"
-

August 2014

CHICKEN SHOP DATE WITH SHANE AND ILYA

Hosted by Amelia Dimoldenberg

Int. Chicken shop.

Shane and Ilya are seated on one side of the table, Amelia on the other.

AMELIA: Shane, you look terrified.

SHANE: No, no I'm okay.

ILYA: He is terrified. His last date with a girl didn't go so well.

AMELIA: I get it. I make people nervous. It's fine

Cut to Chicken Shop Date intro.

Int. Cut back to the restaurant.

AMELIA: What made the date so bad?

SHANE: It wasn't that bad, really.

ILYA: Shane brought a notebook.

AMELIA: To a date?

SHANE: It had conversation notes.

AMELIA: Conversation notes?

SHANE: Topics. Backup topics.

ILYA: It had colour coordinated tabs.

AMELIA: Did the notes help?

SHANE: Well, no. I'm gay.

AMELIA: Hm. Then how do you explain the chemistry between us?

Ext. Shot of restaurant. Chicking, 362 Edgware Rd. London, W21EB

Int. Cut back to the restaurant.

AMELIA: Shane.

SHANE: Yes.

AMELIA: For the "Temporary Insanity" music video, is it true that you had to sit still for five hours while the candle wax burned onto your back?

SHANE: Yes.

AMELIA: Do you have any other kinks?

Ilya laughs, uncontrolled.

SHANE: No, just the one.

ILYA: That's a lie.

B-roll. Shot of condiments

AMELIA: Ilya, you played hockey in high school. Do you miss anything about it?

ILYA: Jock straps. I think Shane would have liked to see me in one.

AMELIA: It's never too late though, right?

ILYA: I suppose that's true.

AMELIA: Maybe after this we could..

B-roll. Shot of menu boards.

AMELIA: So, you've been best friends since you were kids.

SHANE: Since I was 11. Ilya was 10.

AMELIA: An age gap relationship. Is that hard?

SHANE: Very. He still acts like a child.

ILYA: I don't act like a child. Shane is just very boring.

AMELIA: Right. So how does that affect co-parenting Anya?

SHANE: Our goat.

AMELIA: Yes.

SHANE: It can be... challenging.

AMELIA: How so?

SHANE: She has no discipline because Ilya insists on feeding her people food.

ILYA (SHRUGGING): Well, she is our daughter. She deserves the best.

B-roll. Deep fryer running.

AMELIA: I have to ask. Who's Hayden?

Shane immediately starts laughing.

ILYA (SCOWLING): Nobody.

AMELIA: That's not true. I've seen you talking to him in the comments.

ILYA: Fine. He peaked in Grade 11 and now his entire personality is smoking meat and lawn maintenance.

AMELIA: And you're also convinced he's in love with Shane?

ILYA: He has a poster of Shane on his wall.

SHANE: Oh my god, Ilya, his kids like our music. The kids that he has. With his wife, who he loves very much.

ILYA: His relationship is a smokescreen.

Beat. Amelia slurps from her drink loudly.

SHANE: I feel like, maybe this should just be like, a practice round. I think we should do this again, actually.

AMELIA: You're telling me I've earned a second date?

From: shane.hollander@thewolfbirds.ca
To: iblay@royalpage.ca
09/17/2014 13:22:39 EDT

Subject: Re: Offer Update

Hi Ian,

That's fantastic news! Thanks for letting me know.

What is the earliest closing date they can do?? Trying to get an idea of what my timeline could realistically look like.

Again, thanks so much for all your help.

Shane Hollander

February 2015

ROLLING STONE

THE WOLFBIRDS REACT TO 'MIND F-ING' GRAMMY WIN

Band in shock after sweeping Album of the Year: "We're literally just trying not to spill things on the carpet right now"

By PATRICK DOYLE

February 13, 2015

"I'm fucking beat," Shane says, sipping from a mug of mint tea, wedged between bassist Kip Grady and boyfriend Ilya Rozanov on a leather couch, backstage at Brooklyn's Barclays Center yesterday. His voice is hoarse, and a bit dazed from The Wolfbirds' biggest weekend since they've come back from their hiatus of nearly two years. After playing two shows at the Barclays Center last Wednesday, they flew to L.A, where they played at a Grammy tribute event, performed during the Grammy broadcast, and then proceeded to take home Album of the Year for their fourth record, *Overtime*.

"When we ended our *Breakaway* tour early in 2012, our manager warned us that we might lose all the momentum we'd been working towards. And honestly, we made peace with that," Hollander says. "So when we saw the response to 'Anna' we were fucking mind blown. Obviously, things have only gotten more insane since then."

"Anna", the single from *Overtime*, ended up being a double-platinum release, creating some intense pressure for the LP that was to come. "As we were recording *Overtime*, 'Anna' just

kept getting bigger and bigger," Svetlana Vetrova says from across the room, where she's sitting in the lap of lead singer (and her girlfriend), Rose Landry. "There was a part of us that was just like 'Ok. Fuck it. Let's just have fun with it and stop giving a shit about what people think', So, it's really fucking cool to see it doing so well."

"I just keep thinking about our first shows, when we were kids playing barn parties," Landry says softly, head leaning against Vetrova's shoulder. "Like, how small everything felt then. And now this."

Ilya Rozanov, art director for *Overtime*, also came away from the Grammys with his own award: Best Recording Package. Out of everyone in this tight knit, self-proclaimed incestuous group of friends, Rozanov actually seems the most shell shocked. "Honestly, I wasn't even aware I was doing something you *could* get a Grammy for," he says. "I was just trying to make the visuals feel the way the sound looked."

Grady points at him from the other end of the sofa. "That's why it won. People love that shit. It's very 2012 Tumblr-core."

Rozanov groans. "Please don't describe my work as Tumblr-core."

Grady repeats the phrase incessantly, until the rest of the band break down into laughter that can't be contained.

The Wolfbirds might be in disbelief at the success of *Overtime*, but the world certainly isn't, proving that their break from the industry did nothing to slow down their momentum. Here at Rolling Stone, we can't wait to see where they go next.

March 2015

THE WOLFBIRDS BREAK ANOTHER RECORD WHILE EATING SPICY WINGS | HOT ONES

Int. Hot One's Studio.

The Wolfbirds are sitting at a large table, overflowing with wings and hot sauce. Host Sean Evans sits across from them.

SEAN: Hey, what's going on everybody. I'm Sean Evans from First We Feast and you're watching Hot Ones. It's the show with hot questions and even hotter wings.

Today we're joined by The Wolfbirds. The recent Grammy winning foursome is not only breaking records in the music world, but also in our studio. We've got an all time high of fifty wings on the table today, and we're about to see how well they'll handle them.

Shane, Rose, Svetlana, Kip, welcome to the show.

SHANE: Thanks for having us.

SVETLANA: We're fucking stoked to be here. Wait, can I say fuck on this?

SEAN: You can say fuck.

SVETLANA: Ok good. Otherwise we'd probably have to leave.

*B-roll of the different hot sauces on the table today.
Intro to show plays.*

ROSE: I'm scared. Are you sure this is the first one?

KIP: He's sure. Just eat the wing, Rose.

*The Wolfbirds and Sean take a bite of the first wing. Rose looks absolutely petrified.
B-roll of the first sauce: Garlic Fresno - Scoville Level 1,700.*

ROSE (TEARING UP): It's really good.

SEAN: Are you not a hot sauce person, Rose?

ROSE: No, Sean. Definitely not. People forget that I'm a white girl who was born and bred in rural Ontario. In my house pepper was considered spicy.

SEAN: Pepper as in...

KIP: Regular fucking black pepper, Sean.

SVETLANA: Listen, we all love Rose, but when we used to live together as a band, whenever it was her turn for dinner we all conveniently had a big lunch that day.

B-roll of the second sauce: Seeing Double - Scoville Level 6,200

SEAN: Let's dive into that origin story a bit. So you all grew up in Bobcaygeon, Ontario. Back in the early 2000s it

looked like the population was around 3,000 people. What was it like growing up in such a small town? Did it influence your development as a unit in any way?

SHANE: Oh, absolutely. In both good and bad ways. Like, I never would have met Rose and Kip if it wasn't for the microscopic nature of our hometown. We were the only three grade 9s in a grade 10 music class, so it was, like, trauma bonding. The kids in the year above us were fucking ruthless.

SEAN: How so?

SHANE: Oh god, there are so many stories I wouldn't even know where to begin.

ROSE: What about Ricky G?

They all break out in uncontrollable laughter.

SEAN: Alright, I need to know what the deal with Ricky G is.

KIP: Long story short, he got high on bath salts and was found the next day in the middle of the Foodland wearing nothing but his boots and covered in peanut butter.

ROSE: I probably shouldn't have said his name. I don't want to get us sued.

KIP: Nah, it's all good. He'll be happy to be remembered that way.

B-roll of the third sauce: Pisqueya - Scoville Level 16,000

ROSE: Ohhh, passion fruit! This one looks fun.

Close up of Rose as she coughs and tears up while eating the wing.

ROSE: This has passion fruit in it?

SEAN: Yep. Can't you tell?

ROSE: No.

B-roll of the fourth sauce: Los Calientes - Scoville Level 33,000

SEAN: Is this one better for you, Rose?

ROSE: Yeah actually. It tastes kind of ketchupy. I like ketchup.

SVETLANA: Jesus Christ.

KIP: Do you regret inviting her onto the show yet?

SVETLANA: I really can't take you anywhere.

SHANE (SHEEPISH): It kind of does taste like ketchup.

SEAN: Glad you guys feel comfortable enough to say what you really think. It's not like this is one of our brand's hot sauces or anything.

SHANE: Oh, shit! Really? Sorry. No, it's good. It's good.

SEAN: Shane, have some self respect. Don't lie to me.

SHANE: Sorry, Sean.

B-roll of the fifth sauce: Diablo Power Jab - Scoville Level 55,000

Shot of Rose taking the smallest bite humanly possible.

ROSE: Oh, fuck. Oh. Wow. Okay. Spicy. Spicy, it's spicy.

SEAN (LAUGHING): Yeah, that's kind of how this show works.

KIP (BREATHING HEAVILY): Hm. Yeah. This one does have a bit of a bite to it.

ROSE: A bit???

SEAN: Okay, I've got a game for us now, if we're ready.

ROSE: Yes. Please, anything.

SEAN: It's called Fact or Fiction. We like to fact check the larger than life lore that surrounds our guests. So what I'm gonna do here is hit you with some things, and you tell me if it's true, if it's fact, or if it's fiction. And we'll start with Kip. True or false-

KIP: Yes. I'm gay.

SVETLANA: WHAT?

ROSE: Holy shit. No way.

Kip loudly sips from his glass of milk and winks at the camera.

B-roll of the sixth sauce: Whiskey Smoked Ghost - Scoville Level 71,000

SEAN: Okay, how about this. Rose, is it true that you've dated every member of The Wolfbirds?

ROSE (FANNING HER FACE): Um. Phew, sorry. I guess, it depends what you consider dating?

KIP: Rose and I had a very serious, committed relationship in elementary school. I think she's still hung up on me. Sorry Sveta.

SVETLANA: Yeah, dream on, bucko.

B-roll of the seventh sauce: Ginger Goat - Scoville Level 110,000

SEAN: We brought this one out in honour of Anya, Shane.

SHANE: Thank you.

SEAN: I've got a question for you, as well.

SHANE: Alright, let's hear it.

SEAN: There was this rumor going around, several years ago. It involved a Christmas gift and airport security... Does this ring a bell for you?

Shane leans forward, planting his forehead on the table, groaning. Everyone laughs at him.

SHANE: I fucking knew this would come back to haunt me one day.

ROSE: I'd actually like to clear my own name. The butt plug was not a gift for me.

SHANE: Really, Rose? Did you need to confirm that it was a fucking butt plug?

More uncontrollable laughter.

From: shane.hollander@thewolfbirds.ca

To: info@edwardsanddavis.com

03/19/2015 11:09:45 EDT

Subject: Re: Ring Mock Up

Oh, wow!

The mock-up looks incredible. That's exactly what I had imagined.

Just wondering, when do you think it will be ready for pickup?

Thank you so much. Really, it's perfect.

Shane Hollander

Chapter End Notes

I hope ya'll enjoyed reading this as much as I enjoyed writing it 😊

Also, maybe it goes without saying BUT if I was writing these articles today, I would be using 2SLGBTQIA+, but I'm going for period accuracy ❤️

Chapter 33: You Are a Light

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

*We were barely eighteen when we crossed collective hearts
It was cold, but it got warm when you barely crossed my eye
And then you turned, put out your hand, and you asked me to dance
I knew nothing of romance, but it was love at second sight
For even if the sun stops waking up over the fields
I will not leave, I will not leave 'til it's our time
So just take my hand, you know that I will never leave your side*

“The Gambler”, fun.

August 2015 – Muskoka Lakes, ON

The tendrils of sleep unwound themselves from Ilya slowly, replaced by the sensation of Shane’s arms, warm and tender, wrapped around his core. He lingered in the touch which, while familiar after all their years together, was more unrestrained here, alone at the cottage, instead of back in Bobcaygeon, where they’d been living with David and Yuna for the past three years.

Pressed against his back, Shane was solid in every regard. His chest and shoulders were broader now, more filled out after finally allowing his body the nutrition it craved after years of denial. His presence was more confident and unrestrained too, less prone to shying away from moments of vulnerability. And his length, of course, was hard and thick, pressed into Ilya’s lower back, tempting him to linger in bed forever.

He glanced out the window, the sky still a rich shade of indigo brought out by the early morning civil twilight, the sunrise on the verge of breaking the horizon. He supposed he could spare a few more minutes of this.

It was easy to lose himself in mornings like these, he thought, as he slipped beneath the covers and slowly tugged down Shane’s briefs, just low enough for his sleep hardened cock to spring forth. Nosing his way between Shane’s thighs, he dragged the flat plane of his tongue along the underside of his balls, sucking and licking at them until he felt them tighten with pleasure.

He relished in the soft sounds spilling from Shane’s lips, as he hovered in the liminal space between his dreams and reality, his hips canting lazily upward, precum already leaking from the head of him.

Ilya worked his mouth around him lazily, loving how open and unguarded he was like this, still half asleep. He revelled in the taste of him, pressing wet kisses along his length, circling his tongue around his head, all while grinding his own hips into the mattress beneath him, the

friction making him release throaty moans around Shane's cock. He could get off just like this, he'd done it before. There was nothing on this Earth that turned him on more than making Shane come apart beneath him, whether it was with his mouth or his hands or his dick. It was everything about him, the blush that bloomed on his cheeks, the taste of his come, the sounds he made when Ilya had been working him up and denying him, edging him for an eternity, and he was crying out for release.

Ilya pulled off of him, and Shane whined in complaint. One of Shane's hands instinctively reached down pushing back the blankets and seeking out his own length, but Ilya was faster. He gripped Shane's wrist, pinning it to the mattress, and swallowed the entirety of him, hallowing his cheeks and pressing his tongue against the vein on the underside of his cock, knowing the way it would make Shane writhe in ecstasy.

"Fuck, Ilya," Shane moaned, and Ilya looked up at him beneath heavy lids, watching him blink slowly out of sleep.

This wasn't new to them, waking each other up in the early morning, or the middle of the night, when one of them was restless and aching for release. The thrill of it never dulled however, especially not when they were here, and Ilya could be as loud as he wanted.

He groaned deeper, the sound reverberating around Shane, and he thrust into Ilya's mouth involuntarily, his cock hitting the back of his throat.

"Holy shit," Shane murmured, delirious and drowning in the moment.

Shane attempted to thrust deeper into Ilya's throat, and he hummed in disapproval. Shane needed to know that just because Ilya was the one gagging on him, that didn't mean he was suddenly in control. Using his free arm, Ilya pinned Shane down at his hips, and hollowed his cheeks before sliding off of him.

"If you want to come, you'll be patient until I'm done with you," Ilya said, tightening the grip around his wrist. Shane threw his head back with frustration, exposing the long line of his throat, and it took all of Ilya's restraint not to climb on top of him and suck on the flesh there until it was raw and bruised.

"Do you think you can do that?" Ilya asked, his voice hoarse from the fullness of Shane.

"Yes, fuck, Ilya, anything," he panted. "I'll do anything you want."

Ilya grinned, wolfish and starved. "That's my needy little Shane," he said, before sinking his mouth back down onto him. He alternated between bobbing his head, feverish and unrelenting, addicted to the feeling and smell and taste of Shane, of Shane, of *Shane*, and pulling back so he could devote himself fully to his length, slowing down to tease him by licking and kissing and mouthing at him.

It was relentless, and dirty, and Ilya continued to fuck himself into the mattress the entire time, chasing his own release, until Shane came, hot and unforgiving down his throat, the feeling of his cock pulsing against his tongue and cheeks sending Ilya into his own blissful orgasm.

“Holy shit,” Shane repeated, helplessly grinding his hips up from the mattress as he rode out his orgasm, Ilya’s mind now too numb to continue holding him down. “Holy shit.”

Ilya smiled around his softening length, before dragging himself up on the bed, pulling the blankets up with him so they were shielded in their own cocoon of warmth and sex.

“Good morning,” Ilya said, leaning in close so he could kiss Shane, deep and thick with tongue, pleased with the way Shane reacted to the taste of his own release.

“Mmmh,” Shane moaned into their mouths. Ilya could hear the smile on his lips and he pulled away, only so he could witness the inexplicable beauty of it with his own eyes. “Good morning.” His features were so soft like this, post orgasm and still drowsy. “What time is it?”

“Early.” Ilya curled inward, pulling the blankets overhead and nipping at Shane’s collar bones, at his neck, at his ear lobe. “Almost six, maybe,” he said, judging by the purple, hazy sky.

“You going outside?” Shane asked.

Ilya bit his jaw. “Mhm. You wanna come out with me?”

“Absolutely not,” Shane said, running his fingers through Ilya’s curls. “I’m sleeping the fuck in.”

Ilya’s chest swelled with joy at how easily Shane granted himself the simple pleasure of sleeping in these days. He wouldn’t have it any other way.

Ilya skimmed through emails as he watched the sun crest over the morning sky. The number of messages he received each day since he started gathering stories for his *Still Here* project never ceased to amaze him.

The Wolfbirds were going on tour again in the fall, for the first time since 2012. When they’d made the decision, Shane suggested that Ilya join them on tour, but he shut the idea down at first.

Then, one afternoon, he received a message from a drag performer out of rural Alberta who had been performing out of a local legion hall for the past fifteen years. He wrote to Ilya after reading about his *Second Language* exhibit online, telling him how inspiring it was to see the younger generation speaking up so vocally about the importance of queer history, and its refusal to be silenced in the face of adversity.

The message had sparked an idea in Ilya; what if he was to give that voice a name that spanned across generations, across borders, across political regimes and ideologies. So, he put out a call on social media, asking queer folks from all across the world to write to him about their experiences, insisting that no narrative was too small. He’d been cataloging the information for around six months now, responding to everyone who messaged him, even if they wouldn’t be able to be featured in the final project.

His end goal was to create a book, called *Still Here*, which mapped queer stories and identities across the globe. It was something he could accomplish while travelling alongside the band, giving him a purpose, a reason to join them. And it was something important and close to his heart as well. He'd gathered a large collection of responses now, people that he booked meetings with that aligned with the tour schedule. When he was in the same city, they would meet so Ilya could interview them, record their stories, with a local translator whenever needed, and photograph them. Then, he'd compile the collection into an undeniable expression of queer life and resilience.

He'd gotten such a broad range of responses so far; two elderly women in Tokyo who had been living together since the 80s, a bartender in Glasgow who came out at 52. It was incredible, and heartwarming, and overwhelming, but it didn't stop him from continuing to read new stories, to add more stops to his list.

There was one particular email that stood out to him this morning. It was from a trans teen, 19 years old, who has been sneaking into punk shows since he was in Grade 9. Ilya wasn't sure why he found it so compelling. Maybe it reminded him of himself when he was a kid, when he and Sveta would sneak into University parties and he first started exploring his sexuality. He sent a message back, letting him know what days they'd be in Minneapolis for the tour, seeing if they could make it work.

Shane joined him a while later, the world now showered in prismatic light. He brought out two coffees with him, and they enjoyed them against the backdrop of cicadas humming and birds calling. Ilya shared the Minnesota teen's story with Shane. Shane read out some lyrics he was playing around with in his notebook. It was nice. Slow, in the most perfect way imaginable.

Until, of course, Shane decided to ruin his morning.

"Maybe Hayden's on to something," he said, as though it was something deeply profound instead of something that literally and figuratively stabbed Ilya in the chest.

"What?" he said, nearly choking on his coffee. "What are you talking about? Why are we thinking about Hayden right now? This is my happy place, Shane. My happy place."

Shane chuckled to himself. *Asshole*. He knew exactly what he was doing.

"It's just been nice," he said, tone more serious. "Slowing down, these past few years." He closed his notebook, resting it on the arm of his Muskoka chair. "Like, at first it was about survival, you know. And that was rough. But now, I don't know. I think I've come to appreciate it."

Ilya studied Shane, the softness in his features.

"I mean, I'm not ready for that yet," Shane continued. "I'm actually really looking forward to the tour, especially now that you're coming to work on your project too. But maybe, going forward, I don't need to rush through everything. I want more moments like this, you know?" Shane glanced at him, and he looked so open, so vulnerable.

Ilya smiled. “Yeah,” he said. “That sounds perfect, actually.”

“I’m not sure about the four kids thing though. I don’t think I’m cut out to be a dad.”

Ilya frowned. “What are you talking about, you’d be an incredible father.”

“You’re delusional,” Shane snorted with self-deprecation. “I’m too messed up. I’m just a bundle of anxiety and shitty coping mechanisms.”

Ilya shook his head, adamant. “No, I think that’s exactly what would make you a great dad. You’ve been through hell and back but you came out of it on the other side stronger. You’re really brave—”

Shane tried to interrupt him, but Ilya pushed on, speaking over him.

“And I *know* you hate it when people say nice things about you, but I don’t care. Yes, you’ve struggled, but you haven’t let that control your life. You didn’t let the darkness win. And you’d be there for your kids, without judgement, no matter what they’re going through.”

Shane shut up then, apparently out of retorts.

“Plus, you’d sing a killer fucking bedtime lullaby,” Ilya added, closing the gap between their chairs and kissing Shane on his temple.

“Do you wanna go for a walk?” Shane asked after lunch, as they were loading up the dishwasher.

“Sure.” Ilya shrugged.

Shane was not an impulsive person. He overthought most things, to a fault, as demonstrated when he remunerated over the concept of University so hard that he hadn’t even applied. Of course, that had worked out in his favour in the end, but still. He was someone who planned.

His *plan* had been to wait until later in the week. He was going to scout the Muskoka property he’d purchased and look for the perfect location on the land, to read over his notes on what he wanted to say and draft out a proper script. He *planned* to be wearing something nicer than basketball shorts and an old LCI gym t-shirt.

But now that they were here, the weight of what he was planning sat so heavily on his mind, that he was worried he might spontaneously combust if he didn’t do something about it today. Also, it had been a morning of absolute bliss, and something about doing it today just felt *right*. Maybe it was a sign of how far he’d come, over the past three years, that he was willing to let go of the plan and act on impulse.

Or, maybe it was just a sign of how helplessly in love he was with Ilya Rozanov.

Forty-five minutes into their walk though, Shane realized that maybe he made a mistake. It was hot and he was sweating, the back of his shirt sticking to his skin in a way that made him

want to burn it. Which he was sure Ilya would appreciate, but Shane wasn't quite sure that shirtless was the way to go either.

Not to mention, he was fairly certain Ilya thought he was losing his mind. They started their walk by following the cottage driveway up to the gravel road it branched off from, which was standard for them, but about two and a half kilometres down the road, once Shane spotted the old survey stakes in the dirt, he declared they should turn into the wooded area. Ilya looked skeptical, but at Shane's insistence he followed.

The grass here was overgrown, the bugs were unforgiving, and the path was essentially nonexistent. Shane was certain that if they walked a bit further they'd be able to see a glimpse of the lake through the trees, and he wanted to get there before Ilya suggested turning back, so he was arguably walking at an unusually fast pace.

"Alright," Ilya said, trudging over a felled log. "If you killed someone and need help burying the body out here, now's the time to let me know. I swear I won't judge."

Shane huffed and turned on his heels, glaring at Ilya. Fuck it. He should do it now, before he chickened out. "Okay. I need you to not make fun of me for like, thirty seconds. Deal?"

Ilya smirked, but mimed sealing his lips.

Shane felt in his pocket, ensuring the box was still there, but he didn't take it out yet.

"I bought this," he said.

Ilya blinked at him, confused. "What, like... the forest?"

"Well, yeah." Shane shrugged, looking around at the surrounding trees sheepishly. "Kind of. Part of it. A lot of it, actually."

"What, you're planning to start a paper mill, or...?"

"Fuck you," Shane said, pushing at Ilya's chest. "I said no making fun of me."

"That was more than thirty seconds and you know it."

Shane rolled his eyes. "I got it for us, you idiot," he confessed. "So we could have somewhere that's, you know... ours."

Ilya stared at him, mouth agape, wordless.

"I thought it would be nice, you know. It's far enough from my parents cottage that we can breathe, but close enough that we can still see them. And the property's big. Like, really big. We could build you a studio on it, if you wanted."

Something clicked in Ilya, then. "You mean," he said. "You bought this for us to, what, build a cottage on?"

“No.” Shane shook his head. “Well, kind of, yes?” Why was he like this? “I was thinking a house actually. It’s like what I was talking about this morning, over coffee. Somewhere we could, like, slow down. When we’re done with the touring and the craziness and everything.”

Ilya looked, for all intensive purposes, like Shane had just handed him the world. “You mean it?”

Shane nodded, relaxing at the sight of him.

“It’s perfect.” Ilya circled the area, taking in the sight of everything with new eyes. “All of it. It’s absolutely perfect.” He picked up a stick off the ground and held it out to Shane like he’d never seen anything more wondrous. “This stick is *our stick*, Shane. A perfect stick!”

Then, just as quickly, worry passed over Ilya’s features like an oncoming storm. “Shane,” he said, the stick falling to his side. “What about Anya? Where will she go?”

Shane snorted. He cupped Ilya’s face, kissing him swiftly. “Ilya,” he said. Staring into the eyes of the absolute idiot he was completely infatuated with. “This property is fucking massive. We can build Anya an entire mansion, if you want. Hell, we could build a whole goat rescue sanctuary if you want to.”

“Really?” Ilya grinned at him.

“Really.” Then, Shane remembered the other reason he was out here. He pulled his hands away from Ilya, palming at his pocket again.

Ilya raised a brow at him. He’d come this far already. Frankly, there was no turning back now. He swallowed, tongue heavy in his mouth.

“There’s, uh, there’s something else too,” Shane said. His hand grabbed at the box from outside his shorts, like he was worried it was going to slip away. He could do this. He watched as Ilya’s gaze travelled from his face to his hand, which was still clenching and unclenching the box, noticed his eyes widening slightly, as if he was recognizing the moment for what it was.

“Shane,” he said, voice catching, and Shane shook his head in response.

“No,” he said. “I’m not done yet.” Ilya looked back at him. His eyes were wet. “I know that we’re about to leave again, and that things are going to get really crazy when we’re on tour. And I know that we won’t be able to really make this place a home for a little while. But I want to. I want a slow, boring, mundane life with you at the end of all of this. I want coffee on the deck. I want sex with you. Like a lot of sex. I want to be really loud, too, because it’s been absolute *hell* trying to stay quiet living with my parents these past couple years.”

They both laughed at that. Shane realized he was getting off topic, straying from his notes. He also realized didn’t care.

“I want to not just be surviving with you, Ilya. I want a full, vibrant, lazy fucking life with you.”

Shane pulled out the box, opened it, and sank to one knee. “Ilya Grigoryevich Rozanov, will you marry me?”

Ilya’s face was now streaked with wetness. Shane really hoped they were happy goddamn tears.

“You know my middle name.”

“I asked Sasha,” Shane explained. “When I was in Russia and I had the idea, I asked him. I wanted to—”

“Yes.”

“What?”

Ilya laughed, nodding at the ring. “Yes, Shane. Yes.”

And then Ilya gripped Shane by the front of his t-shirt, which was still way too informal for the occasion, but somehow perfect in every way, and pulled him up to his feet, kissing him like it was their first time all over again.

“We have to go back now,” Ilya said, after thoroughly debauching Shane in the middle of the forest. Of *their* forest. Shane slipped the ring into his finger while he spoke and Ilya stared at it, seemingly enraptured.

“What, why?” Shane asked. “If we keep walking for a bit we’ll make it to the shoreline. I think it’ll make for a really nice dock.”

“Respectfully, Mr. Real Estate,” Ilya said. “I don’t give a fuck about the shore line right now.” He surged forward, gripping Shane’s jaw and licking into his mouth. The taste of Ilya was somehow simultaneously familiar and altogether new. He wanted more of it. “What I care about, is fucking my *fiancee*, and I imagine he would prefer that it wasn’t in this tick infested grass.”

“I want you to take control,” Shane said, surprising Ilya for the third time that day. Not because Ilya was unaware that his future husband was an absolute freak, but because he wasn’t usually so openly vocal about it.

His hands stilled on Shane’s hips. They had barely made it into the cottage. The screen door screeched closed behind them. Shane flushed in the silence, in that irresistible way he always did, even after all their years together. Ilya traced the angle of his hip with his thumb. He tugged Shane’s lower lip, cherry blossom pink, between his teeth and bit down hard, until Shane cried out in equal parts pleasure and pain.

“You’re done making decisions for today?” Ilya asked, voice low. “Want me to take over?” He brought his mouth in tight to Shane’s ear, breath hot and feather light. “Give you

instructions like you're my fucking pet?"

Shane whimpered and Ilya grinned in response, slowly inching them toward their pull-out bed in the living room, chest to chest.

"Tell you to sit, lay down, stay. Tell you to spread your legs. To touch yourself, to open up that tight little hole with nothing but your fingers?"

The backs of Shane's knees bumped into the mattress. Ilya pushed on his chest so Shane was sitting on the edge of it, blinking up at him with wide, lust-drunk eyes.

"Open your mouth," Ilya instructed. Shane complied, instantly. He thought about the last time they'd done something reminiscent of this at the cottage. The plate. Shane's tongue. *Fuck*. He felt blood rush to his own cock, constrained against the zipper of his shorts.

Ilya licked his lips. "Stick out your tongue for me, baby."

A choked noise escaped Shane's mouth as he did. Then, possessed by the image of the man before him, surrendering himself completely to his desires, Ilya spat, wet and dirty, into Shane's mouth. He was slow and deliberate with it, a line of his saliva trailing down towards Shane, most of it landing on his tongue, but some spilling off, streaking the side of his cheek.

"You're so pretty," Ilya said, using his thumb to push the mess into Shane's mouth, pressing down on his tongue with a firm hand. Shane closed his lips around him instinctively, sucking on the digit, swallowing around it, and Ilya groaned.

"Take off your clothes and sit back," he said, pulling his thumb out of Shane's mouth with a deliciously wet popping sound. "I want you to start by touching yourself. I want you hard, and leaking, and aching for me." Shane nodded, already tugging his shirt over his head and folding it carefully. "But you're not going to come yet, okay? Not until I say so."

Shane finished getting undressed and leaned up against the sofa cushions comprising the makeshift headboard. His chest was splotchy with colour, and he glanced out the glass sliding doors leading to the deck, sheepish. He seemed uncertain what to do with his hands.

"It's kind of, um," he said, biting his lower lip, which was already swollen and glossy. "There's like, a lot of windows and it's like, the middle of the day," he said, the colour on his chest blooming into a deeper crimson.

"There's no one around here for acres, Shane," Ilya said. He stood at the end of the bed, palming himself through his shorts. "You literally own it now. And frankly, it shouldn't matter if there are hundreds of people out there, watching you strip naked and touch that pretty cock of yours for me. I tell you what to do, and you listen like a good boy. Isn't that right?"

"Fuck," Shane moaned, legs falling open and a hand reaching down to the base of his length. "Yes. Sorry, you're right."

“Now start stroking yourself before I get bored,” he said, tugging down his own zipper, watching the way that Shane’s eyes tracked the motion hungrily. “Where are the condoms and lube?”

Shane shook his head. “No,” he said.

Ilya raised an eyebrow. “No?”

“I mean— lube, yes. It’s in my bag. The front pocket. But no—” he stuttered on his own words as he touched himself, taking his time with it, knowing Ilya liked to see him crying out and on the edge. “I don’t want you to use a condom.”

Ilya faltered, breaking out of character momentarily. “What?” He climbed onto the bed and sat next to Shane. “Are you sure? We’ve never—”

“I’m sure,” Shane nodded. “I’ve wanted to for a while. We’re both clean, and only with each other, obviously, I mean—”

Ilya smiled, pressed a kiss to his mouth, tender and slow.

“Does that mean it’s okay?” Shane asked, having the gall to look *nervous* about it, as though he wasn’t offering his entire self up on a plate for Ilya to devour and defile and make wholly his own.

“Of course it’s okay.” He kissed Shane again, and then wrapped his own hand around Shane’s, tightening their communal grip around his length and pumping him through several mind numbing strokes of his cock.

“Now,” Ilya said, “I’m going to get you the lube, and I’m going to watch you fuck yourself on your own fingers until I’ve decided you’ve had enough. And then, when I’m ready, I’m going to fuck you so deep and so hard that you forget you’re a singer, until you forget you’re someone’s son, until you forget your own fucking name. Until all you know and remember is the feeling of me inside of you.”

He moved as he spoke, reaching for the lube and squeezing out some of the cool liquid onto Shane’s fingers, guiding him lower, between his thighs.

“What will you do then?” Shane asked, one hand still stroking himself, painfully slow, while the other circled and teased his entrance.

Ilya had his own cock out now, and he touched himself as he took in the sight before him.

“Then,” Ilya said. “I’m going to fill your greedy hole with so many loads of my come that it will still be leaking out of you when I take you out for dinner later.”

Shane hissed, slipping a finger inside of himself.

“I’m not going to stop after I’ve come once, Shane. I’m going to keep fucking my load into you, pushing it deeper inside of you like I know you’re so desperate for me to do. You’re going to warm my cock for me, until you’ve gotten my nice and hard again, just so I can keep

fucking you and spilling myself inside of you, over and over again, until I've decided that I've had enough."

Shane was fully fucking himself on his fingers now, scissoring himself, clenching and unclenching, hungry for more.

"Get on your hands and knees and spread yourself open for me," Ilya demanded, hand tight around the base of himself, trying to hold himself off as long as possible. Shane listened, and Ilya stared at his ass, awestruck, leaking with lube and desperate to be filled. Ilya couldn't bring himself to deny Shane any longer. He stripped the remainder of his clothes and lined up the head of his cock with Shane's entrance. He intended to start off slowly, loving the way that Shane would cry out in frustration when he was so starved of friction, but he was not even an inch inside of him before Shane sunk back, fucking himself on Ilya's length.

"Fuck," Ilya panted. "You're so tight for me, Shane." Now that he'd had a taste of him, Ilya physically couldn't hold himself back, and he continued to thrust into him, hands digging into the flesh at his hips and lining himself up just right to grind the head of his cock against the most sensitive part of Shane.

He cried out beneath him when Ilya found it, his arms buckling, falling onto his elbows.

"You brought your plug with you?" Ilya asked, already knowing the answer. He just wanted to watch Shane nod helplessly, unable to form words.

"Good," Ilya said. "I think when I'm done with you I'd like to leave it inside of you, that way you can stay full of my come all fucking day."

The sounds Shane was making beneath him were criminal, nearly sending Ilya over the edge. Small sobs and chokes, guttural and animalistic.

"You would like that, wouldn't you?" Ilya dragged one of his hands from Shane's hip along the curve of his spine, his neck, tracing his cheek with it from behind, slipping a finger, then two between Shane's lips. "The feeling of my come, being pushed deeper inside of you all day long. So that whenever you sit, or move, or walk, you're reminded of this moment right here. You, on your hands and knees, getting fucked from behind while I pump my fingers into your mouth like a greedy fucking whore."

Shane moaned around him, spit running down his chin.

"You like to think that you're so fucking clean, don't you Hollander? You think that changing your sheets, showering twice a day, having your perfect little inside clothes is going to disguise the fact that you're actually a fucking filthy slut for me? That you want to be covered in me, covered in my come and my spit and my sweat?"

Ilya snapped his fingers out of Shane's mouth then, wrapping his hand around his length, and finishing him off with three quick strokes, Shane coming hard all over the mattress beneath them. "Fuck, Ilya," he cried, riding out his orgasm, rocking his hips wildly into Ilya's fist.

Ilya kissed his spine, over and over again, kissed the freckles on his shoulder, pressing impossibly deeper into him as he painted Shane's insides with his own release, for the first of what would be many, many times that day.

Despite the way that Shane had been deeply engrossed in the dirty talk while it was happening, he still insisted on rinsing off together after sex. Ilya pouted, but agreed to it, as long as they could laze around in bed naked together after. He swore up and down that it wasn't because he wanted to get inside of Shane again.

Sure, if that's where the afternoon went, so be it, but that wasn't his intention. He decided that, as a newly engaged man, post sex skin-to-skin contact was almost more important to him than the act itself.

And he was glad for it. Shane laid on his chest while Ilya played with his hair, and his heart was full. He thought he might fall asleep like this, an afternoon nap would be glorious, but then the light broke through the trees outside just right, catching the golden band on Ilya's ring finger, and he remembered something.

"Oh my god," he said, sitting up.

"What?" Shane asked, half asleep himself.

"You're not going to believe it."

Ilya clambered off the bed, shamelessly naked, and shifted through his belongings, looking for the sketchbook. Shane frowned at him as he threw piles of clean laundry onto the floor in his hunt, but he ignored him.

"Here!" He said, digging out the leather bound book and thrusting it into Shane's hands.

"Well go on, open it."

He curled up next to Shane, chin perched on his shoulder, as they flipped through the pages together. It took Shane some time before he clued in to what the drawings were of.

"It's a ring?" Shane asked, tentative.

Ilya nodded, and kissed Shane on the shoulder. "I was designing one for you. Obviously you work faster than me, but I had plans too, you know."

Shane looked at him, the book still open in his lap. "Really?" he asked.

"Really." Ilya smiled. "I even talked to your parents about it and everything. I was getting their opinions on the design. I wanted it to be special. Well, *want* it to be. We'll still have it made, of course." He flipped to a dog eared page and pointed at it. "This is what I'm leaning towards," he said. "White gold, I think. I wanted these words engraved on the inside." He ran a finger over the lyrics on the page, *you are a light*. "You know, the song by Pavement. From that very first playlist you made for me. I used to listen to it on repeat, when I first realized I

was in love with you,” he admitted, realizing it was something he’d never said to Shane before.

Shane was still staring at Ilya. “You talked to my parents? About us getting married?”

“Yeah,” Ilya said, trying to decipher the look on Shane’s face. “Is that... okay?”

“Of course it’s okay,” Shane said, voice soft. “I um,” he bit his lip nervously. “I talked to your mom too, actually. About proposing to you.”

Ilya blinked at him. “What?” he said. “Please tell me I didn’t literally fuck your brains out. I quite like your brain.”

“No.” Shane huffed. “I mean, when I was in Russia. I went to her grave. And I, uh, I talked to her about you. About us. About *this*. I think, and this is going to sound crazy,” he said, bringing a hand up to Ilya’s neck. “I think maybe, this was her idea.”

Ilya frowned.

Shane leaned back against the head of the pull-out, tugging Ilya with him so they were in a mirrored position from earlier; Ilya’s head resting on Shane’s chest now, Shane’s fingers running through his curls.

“I talked to her for a while, when I was there,” he said. “About how I love you, and how I was going to be better for you, and for myself.” He described what it had felt like, sitting at her grave, pouring his heart out to Irina, knowing that Ilya wanted to do the same but wasn’t able. How beautiful she looked in that picture near the headstone.

“Then, just when I was going to leave, there was this crow that landed on the fence there.”

“A crow?” Ilya tipped his head up.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “And it dropped something onto the plot. I thought it was garbage, so I picked it up to throw it out, but then.” Shane reached forward, fingering the pendant around Ilya’s neck. “It was exactly like this. A golden cross.”

Ilya covered Shane’s hand with his own.

“So, I thought maybe it was a sign. Like, a blessing from her.” Shane leaned in, kissing Ilya in the crease of his eye, the salt of his tears spilling onto his lips.

“I um, used the gold for the ring actually,” he said, adjusting his grip so his fingers laid overtop of the band on Ilya’s finger. “I don’t know if that’s, like, blasphemous or something, I really hope it’s not,” he chuckled. “But I thought it would be a way to bring her home, to you, when you can’t go there.”

“Shane Hollander,” Ilya said, his voice thick with tears.

“Yes?” Shane said, crying himself now.

“I know you already asked me and I know that I don’t have a ring quite yet, but…” he cleared his throat. “Will you do me the honour of marrying me?”

A Week Later

It was early afternoon, and Shane and Ilya were sitting thigh to thigh at the end of the dock, ankle deep in the water. They were alone for now, but Kip, Sveta, Rose, and Scott would be down shortly, once they were changed, sunscreened, and adequately alcoholed. They invited them up for the final week of summer before their tour. To relax before they transitioned into a year of chaos, yes, but also to celebrate the engagement.

Shane couldn’t help but feel sentimental, all of them together like this. All of the memories stored in the roots of the trees and breath of the sky. He was looking forward to a time when their own property was designed and constructed, when they could make new memories together there. And that desire surprised him. He’d always been so afraid of change, and yet here he was, looking eagerly upon what the future might hold.

“Do you remember the summer of Grade 11, when we all came up here together?” he asked, linking his pinkie finger with Ilya’s.

“Of course, how could I forget,” Ilya said, the smile creeping into his voice. “That was the summer of our first kiss.”

Shane warmed at the memory. “Right,” he said. “But do you remember the conversation we had, just before that kiss?”

Ilya tipped his head back in thought. Shane admired the span of his neck. There had to be some mathematical explanation for it, he thought. Some equation that could explain the absolute perfection that comprised every inch of Ilya Rozanov.

“Maybe? I was a bit distracted,” he admitted. “Remind me, though.”

“Well, I was talking to you about how scared I was, that it might be our last summer together.”

“Right,” Ilya said, nodding. “And I mentioned that we’d probably come back at the end of Grade 12 too.”

“Mhm.” Shane rested his head on Ilya’s shoulder. “But I was worried that it would be different, because I figured we were all going our separate ways after high school. That we would lose some integral part of what we had, because of the distance. That I might lose you.”

“Yeah,” Ilya said, softly. “I do remember that.”

Shane smiled to himself. “Well,” he said. “I guess I was wrong.”

Ilya smiled, too. “Yeah. I guess you were.”

They were interrupted then, in the most glorious way, by the sounds of their friends, racing down from the cottage and onto the dock, which shook with their footsteps. Sveta and Rose were chasing after Kip, shouting something about the age-old vagina tax, and then the three of them were diving into the water, laughter swallowed up by the lake.

Scott trailed after them, a cooler bag in one hand and a book in the other. He stalled behind Shane and Ilya, nodding toward the three in the water, who were wrestling and screaming. “Is it always like this, up here?” he asked.

Shane chuckled, squeezed Ilya’s hand. “Yeah. It is.”

Ilya stood up then, reaching down for Shane’s hand, to help him up. Shane locked fingers with him, but before he’d risen to full height, Ilya pressed a hand against his chest, over his heart, right where it had always been, and pushed him forward, sending them both tumbling, falling, crashing into the summer warmed lake below.

Chapter End Notes

Ya'll, we made it.

Give me a moment, I need to go and sob into my pillow for several days 🥺😭

I just want to say a HUGE thank you to everyone who has stuck around this long to make it to the end. All of your comments and your kudos and your vibes have made me feel so much more confident in my writing after years of avoiding the page. I've loved chatting with all of you, and I hope you'll join me for whatever story I carve out next in the HR universe!

Really though, this story would not be what it is in its final form without all of you ❤️
❤️❤️❤️❤️

I hope that this almost 7k chapter of fluff and smut and fluff and smut made up for all the angst I put ya'll through over the past 150k hahahaha. 🤪 It's okay if it didn't tho.

I do have thoughts and ideas for an epilogue, which would bring us to like, the present day (2026), if that's something we're interested in. Or maybe we prefer for it to leave off as is? Idk I am torn!

ANYWAY. If you want to find my on socials:

- [I'm kiramour on tumblr](#)
- I'm smokedlasagna on threads and tiktok

Also, if you want to listen to the music from this story and some others that didn't make the cut, here is [The Wolfbirds Song Writing Playlist on Spotify](#)

Seriously, I love all of you. Kisses kisses kisses!! ❤️

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!