

Terms of Agreement

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by [clockwrkpendrxgon](#)

Summary

When the Hollanders face a financial crisis that might end in bankruptcy, Shane finds himself agreeing to a deal that forces him into proximity with his archenemy to save his parents' legacy.

Notes

hi loves! so obviously this is a multi-chapter au that i DEFINITELY can't wait for you to read! and i just wanted to give you a few heads up:

1) the tags above are everything you need to know about the fic before you dive in and will be updated based on chapters

2) i'm posting this as i'm writing, so to whoever will be reading while this is still being updated, here's a kiss for you and please be patient with me i'm literally just a girl sjksdj

i hope you love this as much as i do bc this setting is SO fun to write especially with shane and ilya's dynamic!

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

Chapter 1: Prelude

Shane Hollander has never known failure in his life.

Born to one of the biggest names in Canada, the twenty five year old super model continues to climb the road to success as he stuns in a new photoshoot for Variety. The face of Hollander & Co. has spoken about how much pride it brings him to be the face of his parents' company—yes, the very one you find its distinctive H&C logo on every sport's gear out there!

Shane dismisses the article shortly, not wanting to get sucked into what yet another magazine has written about him. Being an openly gay super model for a company in the sports industry sure is...something. But Shane doesn't regret coming out one bit. He still remembers the day he sat his parents down to tell them, and how they had been nothing but supportive of him. Then they had gotten down to business right away, because even though Shane felt like it shouldn't take up that big of a space in people's minds, his sexuality still could potentially affect his parents' work.

The Hollanders were shocked when shortly after Shane came out, there was a surge in their profit. Of course, some industries didn't take that very well as they expected, but the support from the others was able to cushion their market share until they rested well as the one and only corporation providing sports equipment for almost every sport there is. And of course, Shane's already existing publicity that quadrupled after coming out was and remains a good pump of revenue to the business. Shane isn't involved a lot in the business dynamic with his parents hoarding all the work to themselves (by nature), and instead is more than happy to advocate for his parents' work and queer youth in sports.

Though removed from the day to day business, Shane may have overheard his parents talking more than once about some complications that they have been facing lately. His mother, a power figure in running a business, looked more and more distressed every day. And his father, an expert in the sports professional business, grew quieter and quieter.

"What's going on?" Shane asks over his dinner plate. "Is something wrong with work?"

"No. No, honey. Nothing that you should worry about," Yuna is the first to reply. "How was your interview with GQ?" She changes the subject, but Shane doesn't miss the quiver in her voice, or the way his dad places his hand over hers on the table.

"There's something you're not telling me. What is it? What can I do to help?" Shane ignores her poor attempt of hiding whatever she is trying to hide.

"Shane," his dad says, a tired edge in his voice. "You know Hollander & Co. isn't a small company, so the size of the problems we face also aren't small."

"Okay, then tell me what it is so I can help you," Shane argues, feeling protective of his parents' work that he has been a part of since he turned eighteen.

“There is nothing you can do at the moment,” Yuna interjects. She reaches out her hand and holds Shane's curled one on the table. “You do what you do best, yeah?” She squeezes his hand. “Keep shining for us.”

So, Shane does exactly that. He works extra hard to book as many interviews and photoshoots as he can in hopes that the money it gets him might help his parents. His email floods with opportunities from big clothing brand names whether sportswear or not like Calvin Klein, La Coste, and Armani. His face (and body) are basically plastered all over billboards and street ads for different brands at this point, all nodding to Hollander & Co. one way or another.

It is not until they told him one week ago that Shane realised it was all basically for nothing.

“Shane, I want you to know how proud we are of you and everything you have done for us and yourself,” his mum starts. Her eyes look red-rimmed, which deeply alarms Shane.

He doesn't think he has ever seen his mum cry unless it was happy tears. So, to see her crushed like this makes him feel like his entire world is spinning.

“We, uh, your dad and I, wanted to tell you that you don't have to model for Hollander & Co. anymore. There are hundreds of brands who wouldn't think for a beat before signing you on.”

Shane's heart drops. “What?”

“We have been in a tricky position for a while, son. And your mother and I have decided that it would be better if we do it ourselves instead of the press picking at us,” David says solemnly.

“Do what? I don't—Dad, what's going on?”

“We're losing the company, Shane.” Mum puts it in blunt, painful words.

“This doesn't make any sense, you said that it was just a problem we can overcome, that we can figure something out, I don't—mum, this is your life's work.” Shane stands up and starts pacing. “There must be a way to not let go of it, tell me who I can sign with. We can get a partnership or something—”

“Well, there is one way,” David interrupts, exchanging a nervous look with his wife.

Yuna lets out a shaky breath. “It may be our last resort, and if it doesn't work out, then at least we know that we tried everything.” She looks at Shane with uncertainty.

“Okay...okay, that's good, right?” Shane tries to slow down his own breathing.

“We'll find out tomorrow.” David nods once, looking down at his hand that is clasped protectively around his wife's.

Yuna Hollander sits with her hands folded tightly in her lap. The air around her and her husband is a bit chilly, or maybe it is her nerves. Or maybe it's the fact that she is sitting in the last place she would ever want to be right now. Never in her over twenty years of

managing Hollander & Co. has she imagined that she would go beg a holding company to rescue her own company out of its misery. Deep down, Yuna knows that it is a normal bump on the road. It happens. But not to her, not to her family. And the holding company is definitely not Rozanov Holding.

“Ah, to what do I owe the pleasure?” A deep, heavily Russian accented voice sounds through the office followed by a whiff of sharp cologne as the youngest of the Rozanov family, Ilya Rozanov, strides past the Hollanders in a business suit. He shakes both their hands in a formal greeting and goes to sit behind his large glass desk.

“I think you know, Rozanov.” David retorts professionally, but Yuna can sense just how reluctant this is as much as it is for her. “A CEO like you surely has his eyes and ears everywhere.”

Yuna expects a sly remark from him, but on the contrary, he nods once and the humor drops from his face. “Is true. I'm sorry for your company.”

She studies him for a moment. So far, he is everything the internet says about him. Cocky, full of himself, and undeniably handsome. Yuna remembers the time she saw him named among Forbes' Top 30 Under 30 list as one of the most influential people in the business world. Not only is the twenty-five year old in front of her an owner to a company that holds over a hundred subsidiaries under it, but he is also known for his philanthropic works such as donating to charities and facilities that cater for mental health. Technically, he has every right to be full of himself when half of the market belongs to him, but over the years, the Hollanders' company has stood as maybe Rozanov's rival in terms of revenue and market share.

Which is why this whole thing leaves a bitter taste on Yuna's tongue when she says, “no, you're not.”

She takes a deep breath and straightens her back. “I think the three of us already know what we're here to discuss. So, let's get to work.” She may have thrown the file containing all the information Rozanov needs about their company onto his desk, but if he seemed offended, he was good at hiding it.

He pulls the dossier over to him and Yuna watches as he studies it carefully. His eyes go over the reports in there, then he brings out a notebook and starts writing a few things down. A spark of something hits Yuna in her chest, and she is shocked to realise that his meticulousness reminds her so much of herself when she was just his age. She exchanges a glance with David who shoots her a subtle smile and nods at her, silently saying “don't worry.” Though this is everything Yuna can do at the moment. In fact, she couldn't sleep at all last night. Her head kept spiralling with different possibilities. What if Rozanov declined? Worse, what if he agreed? What would it look like to the public? What would it be like for them? What would it be like for *Shane*?

“I have an offer.” Rozanov's voice pulls Yuna out of her thoughts, snapping her back to the moment.

“Yes?” David asks expectantly.

“I can help you,” he says, flipping the file closed. “I think with your status in the market, it is not preferable for you to be known as owned by someone else.”

Yuna almost scoffs, because of course.

“Which is why I have the perfect offer for you.” He leans forward in his seat. “Your company remains yours, you remain the owners of everything as if I do not exist. I take 35% , and the rest is yours.”

The words “that's plain stupid” almost leave Yuna, but she bites her tongue back and freezes for a second.

“This doesn't make sense,” David says from next to her, equally confused.

The gears shift in Yuna's mind, and she finds herself asking “what's in it for you? This is an insignificant amount for a holding company like yours, so what do you want in return, Rozanov?”

Something glimmers in the young man's eyes, and Yuna realises that she might have underestimated just how smart and cunning he is. Someone who makes an offer like this will definitely ask for something equally insane in return. It pisses her off and impresses her at the same time, because if this weren't the situation and Rozanov weren't technically buying them, Yuna would have had him as an asset for Hollander & Co. immediately. She can see why he is sitting where he exactly is right now.

“I only ask for one thing in return.” Rozanov relaxes back in his seat, the motion darkening his hazel eyes to an ember brown.

There surely isn't anything they can't give him at this point. He gets less than half of the company, and in front of everyone else, the Hollanders are still the ones in charge. It's almost *too* perfect.

“Your son.”

“I beg your finest pardon?” It takes everything in her not to say “what the fuck?” instead.

“You can't be serious.” David launches forward in his seat, stopping himself at the last moment. “What kind of messed up business is this?”

Rozanov is unfazed by their outburst, only raising his eyebrows at David.

He takes a long, dramatic breath then says, “the kind that will save your company from bankruptcy, Mr. Hollander.”

Yuna is about to fire back another reply when the person before her that could only be described as a fox starts speaking again.

“You see, for your company to come back stronger, this deal will require about one year to take full effect. But, you also don't want word to spread that you have been bought, so I'm

only suggesting a diplomatic move. An arranged marriage that makes your son a Rozanov, and therefore an owner of everything else that is mine.”

David and Yuna are shocked into silence. When they woke up this morning, they were only determined to do one thing: save their company. They didn't ever think that their only son would even be a variable in this scenario. If anything, they wanted to push him away from Hollander & Co. and towards a better and bigger modeling career.

When Yuna thinks about it, it sounds like a strategic move between two of the biggest figures in the business. A partnership that lasts for one year, and then each goes both their separate ways. In an ideal world, it sounds perfect. A scenario that the press will eat up and live on for months. A distraction from the deteriorating reputation of Hollander & Co.. Except this is not an ideal world, and Ilya Rozanov is bluntly asking them to sell their son off to live with him for an entire year so he can save their asses.

“No,” Yuna's voice shakes.

Rozanov's eyes flicker to Yuna whose mind is warring with itself.

“No?” Ilya asks, not hiding the tinge of surprise in his voice. “Your son is one of the most talked about people in Canada and beyond. Think about what joining the youngest CEO in a purely strategic marriage would do to your business. He will be staying at my penthouse, he will have anything he wants, and he can keep his job as a model—I do not wish to control him at all.”

At that, David audibly scoffs. “No, of course not. Forcing him to marry you, someone he barely knows, is not controlling at all.”

Yuna grips his hand, something painful pressing against the inside of her throat. She knows they might have grown overprotective of Shane over the years especially after coming out. No one knows how much he has been through except for the two of them, so it's perfectly normal to react the way David is reacting, and to her the answer is crystal clear. It might sound diplomatic, but Yuna and David know how much it will be the farthest from it when the two parents and their son have harbored a secret, mild hatred for the businessman in front of them.

Especially Shane.

In the year Ilya was named one of Forbes' most influential figures, Shane was recognised as People's Sexiest Man Alive. In the year Hollander & Co. was announced among the World's Top 10 Successful Companies, Rozanov Holding was celebrating becoming the No.1 Holding Company in Canada and the States. They have always butt headed each other to the top over the years, and Yuna knew Shane hated Ilya's ways. They are polar opposites. It would never work, and Yuna would never put Shane in a situation like this. Even if it costs her everything she has worked on for more than a decade.

“These are my terms of agreement,” Ilya calmly says.

Yuna stands up with David following. “Good day, Mr. Rozanov,” she says, her tone clipped. It's a wonder she is able to speak properly with the amount of anger rushing through her right now.

“My offer stands for two days.” He rises from his seat as well, completely ignoring Yuna and David's dismissal of his absurd offer.

Yuna almost wants to throw the gold name plate on his desk at him. *Like hell they're going to accept it.*

The walk out of the Rozanov Holding building is liberating, unlike the ride back home, which is nothing but a rage-filled speech from Yuna about how audacious Rozanov is. She hates that a twisted part of her is impressed with his proposal, but he is just equally insolent if not offensive with that same said proposal.

“How did it go?” Shane's voice startles Yuna out of her agitation. “Who were you meeting with anyway?”

Yuna makes a resigned, annoyed sound in response. Of course, she couldn't tell him whom they were meeting beforehand. She knew that Shane would try to stop them or worse, go with them. *Oh god.* A shiver runs through her when she pictures Shane with them when Rozanov made that suggestion of his.

“We met Ilya Rozanov,” David sighs the name rather than saying it.

We met Ilya Rozanov.

“You—*the* Ilya Rozanov?” Shane echoes in bewilderment after his parents who head to the kitchen.

“I need a drink.” He hears his mum say under her breath as she reaches for a glass. It's barely the afternoon.

Shane looks at his dad, waiting for an explanation. David's lips draw into a thin line, his shoulders squaring into a tense stance. “What happened? What did he say?”

Yuna starts muttering in angry Japanese while David tries to calm her down. “The little fucker.” She switches back to English. “I'd rather burn my company down than take his offer.”

“Well.” Shane isn't surprised that Ilya Rozanov, the No.1 Obnoxious CEO, must have said or done something stupid to earn even more hate from him and his parents.

Ilya's business thrives on literally eating other companies and profiting off of it. Shane hasn't seen or met anyone that didn't have something sour to say about him. There are two groups of audience for Ilya Rozanov; there are the women that fall head first for the persona he puts up to the press (which is World's Richest Asshole), and then there are people like Shane who can't stand him.

“I can't even say it.” Yuna glares down at her liquor filled glass.

David ends up telling Shane about Rozanov's offer. “But that's stupid,” he says. “Only 35%?”

“He said that he will do it on the condition that you two get married for the year the deal takes place in,” David explains with an air of mockery.

Shane is silent for a fraction of a second as the sentence his dad said repeats itself in his mind, then he starts laughing. “You can't be serious,” he says in between breaths.

When his parents remain quiet with unreadable expressions on their faces, it dawns on Shane that they were, in fact, serious.

“He *said* that?” Shane asks incredulously. “Who the fuck does he think he is?”

He is the person who holds the lifeline of your parents' business.

“Married?” Shane repeats the word a little emptily. Not that he is involved in any romantic relationships right now, but he has always thought about it as something he would like to take his time with at some point in the future, but right now his job has all his focus.

“Yeah, some sort of a fake arrangement to bait the public into thinking it's a collaboration rather than an acquisition.” Yuna tiredly claps her hand down on the kitchen island.

“People would fall for that? We have never even *met* personally before.” He scrunches his nose up in disgust.

A beat of silence passes, then, “technically you two are the hottest, most talked about figures nowadays. I'm pretty sure some people would get behind something like this.” Yuna says slowly.

Shane looks at her, and he is suddenly made aware of the thin lines on her forehead, the tension framing her shoulders and the corners of her mouth. The light in her eyes has long dimmed a while ago, but now they remind Shane of an empty house. Dark and haunted.

He then looks at his dad, and his heart folds in his chest at the weight that is visibly slumping David's shoulders down the way he imagines an angel would look like with broken wings.

His mother shifts on two feet and runs a hand through her hair. “Why are we still talking about this? I don't want to hear that na—”

“I'll do it.” Shane surprises them *and* himself by saying.

David's mouth falls open in shock.

“*What?!* No. Shane this is not even an option,” his mum argues.

“You said that this was his only condition, right? If I live with him this year, the company's state will improve?”

“According to what he said, yes, but—”

“Then, I’ll do it.” He swallows hard. “It’s a small price to pay, I guess.”

“Honey,” Yuna says shakily. “You don’t owe us *anything*, do you hear me?”

“Shane, this isn’t a trade off,” David says, his voice serious. “We’re not sending you off to him so we can get our company back.”

“No.” Shane shakes his head. “This is business,” he says, looking into both his parents’ eyes. “This is what we’re good at, right?”

Yuna silently nods, her lips twitching in the slightest bit in a smile.

“And we never back down from a challenge,” he says more to himself than to Yuna and David.

He takes a deep breath, his stomach tightening with the rough image of living in an extravagant house with a Russian stranger he can barely stand. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

Chapter 2: You're on your own, kid

Chapter Notes

it's me again! i promise i won't be long this time but i just wanted to say that i can't wait for you to see how this story unfolds bc it's different than anything i've written before! enjoy this one :)

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

Ilya Rozanov is a man who built his empire with his own two hands.

Unlike most, if not all, the big names here in Canada who were born and raised into wealth, Ilya had to make the name Rozanov after years of his brother straight up tarnishing it with the filth that was his work.

Rozanov Holding came to be the biggest under Ilya's name. Not his father's, not his brother's, *Ilya's*. He studied things he was too young to fully understand yet he pulled all-nighters and watched what successful businessmen did. He attended meetings with his father and older brother and made notes of everything he didn't want to do. He went to the company everyday, and with every passing minute he realized Andrei was sinking it to the ground.

Ilya saw a future for Rozanov Holding, and he held onto the potential of it until he started taking up more tasks from under Andrei's hands. Step by step while his brother busied himself with trouble, Ilya worked harder until his father finally deemed him 'fit' enough to run Rozanov Holding. Safe to say his dipshit of a brother didn't take that piece of news well.

He couldn't care less though. His company is thriving, he is stocked up on good vodka, and all his worries are far off in Russia. He only has to deal with the occasional, middle-of-the-night call from Andrei that never fails to piss him off.

There is nothing that Ilya hates in his life more than greed and spoiled, Canadian golden boys with freckles.

Shane Hollander—whose face is shoved in Ilya's own on a daily basis in magazines, street advertisements, and even on the fucking TV—is exactly everything that Ilya despises. He has had everything handed to him on a silver plate. He doesn't know what it is like to build a fucking empire on his own. He just has to look pretty for the camera.

And Ilya hates that he finds him pretty. *So* pretty it is infuriating.

He has been following his parents' company's success over the years. It is his job to say the least, and what makes it even more annoying for Ilya is the fact that Hollander & Co. is the number one company standing as strong as Rozanov Holding in the market. Which means that he has to be extra careful. They are in entirely different areas, but a market share is a

market share. Ilya has heard word from his people that things haven't been looking too ideal for the Hollanders lately though.

However, he kept that piece of information tucked away in his mind until his sources confirmed that they are officially heading towards bankruptcy.

Ilya was more than surprised to see the Hollanders in his office that day. Of course, he didn't let it show, but he was deeply surprised. He knows he is basically hated in the business, and the two business pillars who sat and handed him their company's history were no different than those who hated Ilya. Did he care though? Not so much as he wanted to make sure he was respected. Being this young had already lost him big opportunities, because people viewed him as 'young and inexperienced'.

Up until the middle of his meeting with Yuna and David Hollander, Ilya's deal wasn't a fully fledged one. He knew he could help them, but he was unsure of what exactly he wanted to do. Acquire the whole company? Acquire half of it? Then it shone in his mind. That face he sees *everywhere*. A perfect, pristine figure that is associated with shiny success and pride.

And Ilya wanted nothing but to crack it.

Shane has been to events he didn't want to go to, he has done interviews where all of his answers were scripted, he met up with people for professional reasons only. Yet none of those events left him feeling as dreadful as his dinner tonight at Ilya Rozanov's infamous two-story penthouse. After he miraculously convinced his parents that he can do this so long as it is just a show, they reached out to Rozanov and let him know that the deal was on. Shane has been grilling in that realization for a couple of days now, trying to imagine what it would be like to live with Ilya Rozanov for one year or if he made the wrong decision. Then he remembers the countless nights his parents skipped dinner to work and a sense of certainty grounds his decision.

He is wearing his finest suit tonight, not to impress Rozanov of course, but to rub it in his face. It's a custom black Gucci suit that Shane paired with a white dress shirt. He decided against wearing a tie to give off a relaxed, little less formal look—though Shane feels nothing but relaxed. A car is picking them up at 7:00PM sharp, which the Hollanders resisted at first, but of course "Mr. Rozanov wouldn't have it any other way" was what they got in return. His mother is in a black blue dress that goes perfectly with her chignon, and his dad is in a classic, grey suit. They all stand at the doorway, each putting on their shoes and then Shane finds Yuna and David's eyes on him.

"Free ride and dinner, right?" David says lightly.

Shane tries for a smile. "Yeah."

Yuna's hand finds his. "Are you sure you're okay with this? We can still back out."

"And let Rozanov gloat at us? Never." He means it.

He might have agreed to the deal, but there was nothing that stated Shane had to be a sweetheart about it.

He is going to make Rozanov regret ever making this fucking proposal.

“Come on, it's time.” David gives Yuna his arm and Shane leads the way.

They find a black limousine waiting for them in front of their house, and Shane's first thought is *what a fucking show-off*. His parents go in first, and Shane follows, taking a seat across from them. He lets his eyes drift to the road outside, but the windows are tinted and he can't see shit through them. *Great*, he thinks. This is going great already.

The ride is over thirty minutes from Shane's place of residence to Rozanov's in the middle of the city. Which is enough time to let Shane's stomach tie itself into tight knots. There is one thing he hasn't thought about. He has been busy thinking about the returns of his decision on his family's work and the logistics of it all that he forgot to ask the one question he probably should have asked first: why?

Shane feels it is a little too late though as they are accompanied out of the car and into a tall building where they take the elevator up to the last floor. *They are here*, Shane lets the thought finalize in his mind. *This is it*, he thinks as they make their way towards the already open door. They step inside and for some reason, entering the penthouse feels like he is setting foot right into the lion's lair.

“Mr. Rozanov is waiting for you in the dining room,” a handmaiden says, guiding them through the spacious place and through a dining room that is as big as everything else in this house.

Shane doesn't get much of a chance to check out the place on their way in, but he can feel the luxury anchored by minimalism around them. He is proven right when he finds the dining room a large space with muted grey walls and lighting that is not too bright it is obnoxious yet not too low that it is too intimate. There is not much furnishing save for the long dining table and high-backed chairs set around it, a mirror on one of the two wide walls facing each other and for some odd reason, the ceiling is...a mirror too.

And there, at the head of the table, standing in a tailored suit is Ilya Rozanov.

“Shane Hollander.” His name rolls off of the Russian's tongue in a way that sparks something in Shane's chest. Unfiltered annoyance.

“Ilya Rozanov.” Shane extends his hand in greeting, which he takes and shakes firmly. His hand is warm and easily engulfs Shane's.

“Is nice to finally meet you in person.” Shane could swear he sees him smirking when he says that, but he decides against it as he sits down to Rozanov's right. His parents sit next to each other across from him

He looks over at Rozanov from where he is sitting, which is the closest he has been to the man in his life. His hair is a little darker than it appears in photos, dimming into caramel

brown. And his eyes are much sharper, younger and...beautiful—Shane realises with a start that forces his eyes into the wood of the table.

He engages Yuna and David in small talk, and Yuna glances at Shane every now and then to make sure he is okay, which makes him feel a little less lonely. Then, he realises that this is how it is going to be starting next month. He will be here all alone with a stranger. He swallows thickly and pushes the thought all the way to the back of his mind.

“Let us eat then get to work, yes?” Rozanov exchanges a look with the three of them.

Shane nods, muttering a quiet ‘sure’. He watches as Rozanov motions for his house staff who start moving to serve their dinner. His eyes lock momentarily with Shane's before Shane breaks the contact by looking at his suit instead. *Is he—*

“You're wearing Gucci?” Shane asks, the annoyance in his voice a little evident.

Rozanov raises an eyebrow, but the fucker's lips are twitching into a smirk.

“Is there problem?”

Yes, your face. Your face is the fucking problem.

The silence that stretches after Rozanov's question is deafening, until Yuna makes an awkward attempt of a polite laugh followed by a proper response. “It's a funny coincidence,” she says, even though there is nothing funny about it. “It just happens that Shane is, too.” She grasps her glass of wine and takes a long sip afterwards.

Rozanov's eyes then flick to Shane, giving him a lazy one-over. “Ah, I see.”

Before Shane smashes the elegant end of his glass against Rozanov's head, their food lands in front of them. They go through starters first, then when their main courses are served, Shane stares at the plate in front of him for a few good moments in unmasked surprise. He doesn't know if this is another coincidence or if this night is just one big scam from Rozanov.

Because what is in there is what he usually orders when he has to eat outside.

Shane doesn't know if he should point it out. Maybe it is another coincidence, maybe he is reading too much into it. So, he bites down hard onto his tongue and eats his salmon and brown rice. This dinner is supposed to break the ice between the two parties, but the only thing breaking here is Shane's fuses. Tension is sharp around the four people with no sound in the room save for the clanking of cutlery against plates.

Rozanov tries to open different topics, but Yuna and David's responses are short and to the point—far from reciprocal. Shane keeps his eyes glued to his food, pushing away the pressure of having to meet Rozanov's eyes one more time tonight. It is not until dessert that they start *actually* talking.

“Listen, Rozanov,” Yuna says respectfully. “Your effort is appreciated, but I would also appreciate it if you put into consideration the nature of this...arrangement. We aren't friends.”

“But we will be,” Rozanov responds confidently.

That earns him a scoff from Shane. From where does he bring that much audacity?

“Do you have something to say, Hollander?” Rozanov's voice travels in his direction.

“No, it's just funny considering your condescending offer in the first place. We're never gonna be friends.”

“The offer that you agreed to...?” That fucking smirk is back on his face.

“Yes. I didn't have much of a choice, did I?” Shane retorts, his anger returning fiercely.

Rozanov is silent for a beat. Then, “you always have choice.”

“Alright, let's get to business?” David suggests a little too loudly, and the other three in the room don't object.

“We have to set up few public appearances before marriage announcement,” Rozanov says as a matter of fact.

“I agree. Doing this out of the blue without having been seen together at least twice would make it look suspicious.” Yuna agrees, her voice switching to her business one.

“My PR team can take care of arranging that. Is no problem,” Rozanov says.

“Perfect,” Shane says through fake satisfaction.

“I am also throwing New Year's Eve party in two weeks.” He looks at Shane. “Is important for you to be seen there.”

I'd rather die, Shane wants to say. “Of course.”

“That's actually a clever idea,” Yuna says, and Shane almost glares at her for approving something he said. “Those kinds of parties are always buzzing with people from the press. I assume other public figures are going to be there as well?”

“Yes,” Rozanov nods. “Many hot names. Like yours.” He looks at Shane when he says that. Then, “announcement could be sometime at end of March.” Ilya suggests.

“*March?*” Shane exclaims. “It's not believable for us to ‘get married’ without being seen, but it's completely normal to do so after ‘being together’ for only three months?” He uses air quotes at the prospect of their fake relationship.

“At least push it to mid year,” David tries.

“By next June, your company will be acquired, and word travels fast,” Rozanov replies.

The room falls into silence. Yuna shares an exasperated look with David, then it morphs into an anxious one when her eyes travel to Shane. He notices the tremor in her hand as she draws

it towards herself to fold it with the other in her lap. Where no one can see them under the table.

She finally breaks the silence, looking at no one in particular. "He's right."

Rozanov doesn't say anything to that nor acknowledges Yuna approving something he suggested for the second time tonight. He is either actually *that* arrogant or he is just plain disrespectful. In both cases, Shane needs him to shut up.

"My team put together a few ideas for the announcement. They are here." One house staff member steps forward and hands Rozanov three black files, a copy for each of the Hollanders. "Along with a sweet story about how we became lovers." He gives Shane a "*ha!*" look, and Shane wants to be buried alive instead of being referred to as Ilya Rozanov's lover.

He might actually not succeed in keeping his dinner down. Though he was surprised that the food was really good. *At least there's that*, he thinks.

"Choose whatever is best for you," he says, mostly to Shane who reluctantly opens the file.

He starts going through the overly detailed scenarios written in front of him, then he distantly hears his parents' voices overlapping as they start talking. Shane tries to focus on the words, but for some reason the letters keep getting jumbled. He blinks hard, and is fine for a few moments before words start blurring. He is suddenly hyper aware of how fast his heart beats are, and he feels like parts of his body are going numb.

"...photoshoot first." His mother's voice fades in and out.

"...a little too much?" David replies to something that Rozanov says.

Shane flips the page and tries focusing again, but he feels worse. He pushes back his chair and stands up, avoiding everyone's gazes.

"I need some air," he mutters before he rushes out of the dining room. He has no idea where he is going, but he knew he needed to get out of that room. He needs to breathe.

Someone directs him to the terrace, and Shane is once again grateful for something else tonight that is not Ilya Rozanov. He steps out into the December air, letting his body shiver at the sharp switch from warmth to cold. He grabs onto the railing and bends all the way down until he is resting his head on his hands. He closes his eyes and concentrates on the gushes of wind that ruffle his hair, the icy metal under his hands, the smell of freshly cleaned snow.

When his breathing starts to gradually slow down, Shane hears the faint sound of a click going off. He partly raises his head to look for the source of the sound when he sees Rozanov standing next to him trying to light a fucking—

"You *smoke*?" Shane grimaces.

"What? You do not approve?" He finally succeeds in lighting the cigarette, and Shane pointedly puts some distance between them so the disgusting smell of the smoke doesn't

reach him.

“They’re your lungs, do whatever the fuck you want with them,” Shane says heatedly.

Rozanov blows a puff of smoke, looking at him intently. “You were freaking out?”

“Freaking out?” Shane scoffs, even though that is exactly what was happening. “I just needed to be away from—” he wants to say something offensive, but he stops himself.

“Yes?” Rozanov raises his eyebrows. “Say it. Is okay, what is it you call it? No hard feelings.” He takes another drag of his cigarette, and Shane watches the smoke leave his heart-shaped lips.

The sharp annoyance in his chest returns again, and Shane blurts the words out. “I needed to be away from your stupid face.”

Shane doesn’t know what he expects after this, but he surely doesn’t expect Rozanov to fucking smile?

“How does it feel?” He asks, and for some reason Shane notices now that his voice is so deep. Was it this deep when they were inside?

“What?” Shane has no idea what he is talking about. He is starting to feel nervous again, is Rozanov kind of crazy?

“Not being perfect for once.” Rozanov’s eyes rake over his face. “How does it feel, Mr. Perfect?”

“Fuck you, Rozanov.” Shane spits. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but this—” he gestures between them, “—is just business.”

Rozanov’s lazy, amused gaze aggravates Shane even more. “You think I am an asshole,” he says.

Is he fucking serious? “I know you’re an asshole,” Shane enunciates his words, letting him know how much he believes every single one of them.

“Most people do.” He shrugs.

“Jeez, I wonder why,” Shane says under his breath.

“But I do want you to know one thing,” he says, putting out his cigarette. “I admire your parents’ work.”

“Do you?” Shane narrows his eyes, fishing for shit in Rozanov’s words.

He continues, “is too bad you do not want to make helping them easier.”

Shane is about to throw a comment when an entirely different come back reaches his lips before he registers it. “What do you want, Rozanov?”

“I want to help you, Hollander. You said this is business, right?”

“Bullshit.” Shane spins to fully face him, seeing only shadows of his face in the moonlight. “You don’t really care *that* much about your clients’ ‘reputation’ or what’s best for them, I fucking know your ways, Rozanov, I’ve studied your company. So, drop the act and tell me what are you getting at with this deal?”

“You.” That’s the second time Shane is thrown off with something that Rozanov says to his face tonight.

He doesn’t understand, like is this some kind of revenge? And for what? He just wants to make Shane’s life a living hell?

“You make me curious, Hollander.” Shane feels a vibration in the railing, and he traces it with his eyes to find Rozanov thrumming his fingers against it. Shane withdraws his hand and shoves it in his pocket.

“You’re sick,” is all that Shane says in return before he starts to walk away.

“You did not answer my question,” Rozanov says after him. “How does it feel to not be Mr. Perfect?”

Shane stops in his tracks, half spins to look back at him and then, “I did, but your stupid face wasn’t listening. I said fuck you, Rozanov.”

Just as he turns back to leave the terrace, Shane catches sight of Rozanov smirking again. He thinks he hears him say something along the lines of “this is going to be fun”, but Shane ignores it.

Ilya Rozanov and fun can never be put in the same sentence in Shane’s mind.

Two weeks later

Shane was wrong.

He might have underestimated this whole New Year’s Eve party thing, because as he sits at the bar scanning the space, there is no other word to describe it other than fun. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Shane’s type of fun, but it sure is every other attendee’s.

The party hall, which is no less luxurious than the people filling it, thrums with energy. Music blares around Shane, and he watches everyone hitting the dance floor like there is no tomorrow. Rozanov was right, there *are* celebrities here as well as other people from the business scene. Shane already greeted a few familiar faces in the modeling industry, chatted a bit, and then escaped to the bar for some alone time.

Rozanov, who should have been the first one to fucking greet him was nowhere to be seen. That sends a wave of mixed feelings through Shane’s mind. He is grateful he doesn’t have to put up with him now yet he is furious that Rozanov already isn’t going with the plan *he*

suggested. Shane is pretty sure he has already been papped at least three times since he arrived, so wherever Rozanov is he better show up soon.

A flash of burgundy appears in the corner of his eye. Shane follows it only to be met with the one person who is responsible for this event. Ilya Rozanov is dressed in a catchy, velvet burgundy blazer paired with a white dress shirt and black pants. Shane can't see much of his face in the dim lights, but he can tell Rozanov has his infamous cocky smile on it.

A woman is on his arm, *of course*, Shane almost wants to scoff. She looks like she might be blushing at something Rozanov is saying, but the moment he finds Shane, he turns to her and Shane watches as she giggles, kisses his cheek and disappears back into the mass of partying people.

"Hollander," he calls, approaching him. Once he is in earshot, Rozanov says, "I think I know what colour your suit is."

Shane can smell the sarcastic comment that is about to follow that phrase from miles away.

"Boring," he says, looking Shane up and down.

Shane rolls his eyes. He isn't wearing something 'boring', he is in a cream coloured suit with a black shirt underneath. It's suitable for a party.

"Wouldn't want to steal the show from you," Shane remarks and Rozanov grins. *Actually* grins. Shane thinks there might be something wrong with the way his brain works.

He slides into the seat next to Shane and orders himself a drink. "You look like someone held you at gunpoint and told you to come here." He snickers.

"Close enough." Shane takes a sip from his ginger ale, desperate for the cool liquid to calm his nerves down. Rozanov is sitting a little too close to him that their knees bump into each other every now and then.

"Relax, Hollander," he says. He leans over in his seat, his cologne filling Shane's nostrils and causing his stomach to flip. Shane freezes, scared of making one wrong move as Rozanov comes all the way close to his ear. "Smile. People are looking."

A robotic smile plasters itself on Shane's face, and he releases his breath when Rozanov returns back to his place. Rozanov then downs the rest of his drink and gives Shane's knee a pat. "Come on." He stands up. "There are people you should meet."

Shane follows him through the crowd, nodding and smiling at those who are sober enough to recognize him. Rozanov introduces him to a few figures, probably the kind of people who will go about telling everyone they know that they have seen the two young men together out and about at Rozanov's party—which is exactly the purpose. One of the many things Rozanov's PR team has done was orchestrate a little story about how the two have been friends for a long time yet Shane finds it stupid, because they haven't even been seen conversing together in public until today.

Rozanov introduces him to Cliff Marlow, who is apparently Rozanov's best friend outside of the business.

"Nice to meet you, man." He claps Shane on the back. "Enjoy the party! Roz is the best at this."

Shane doesn't know much about Marlow save for the fact that he owns one of the biggest surveillance companies in Canada. He seems like a nice guy, judging by the brief interaction they just had. Though for some reason, something doesn't sit right in Shane's gut. It must be his nerves.

"Only this?" Rozanov pretends to look hurt.

"Fuck off." Marlow laughs and goes back to chatting with the group of people he was standing with.

They are on their way towards someone else when they are literally, physically, stopped mid way.

"Shane Hollander, what a pleasant surprise!" A high-pitched, annoying voice chirps in their direction.

"Uh, hi." Shane greets the obnoxious reporter as curtly as he can. Rozanov is quiet next to him, but if Shane is delusional enough, he can see a hard set to his jaw that wasn't there a few moments ago.

Shane can't remember his name, but he remembers enough to make him want to turn around and walk into the other direction away from the intruder. He is a lousy reporter that makes a living out of scandalizing others and pretty much leaking any private information he can get his hands on professionally or not. So, of course he picks Shane as his prey tonight.

"What an unusual duo." He scans Rozanov in an invasive way that Shane feels offended just seeing. He didn't even greet Rozanov. However, he stays unbothered next to Shane. "What brings you here tonight?" He directs his question to Shane.

"Roz—Ilya is a friend of mine. I was invited, of course," Shane answers.

The reporter's eyes flicker between them as if he doesn't believe what Shane said. Well, he doesn't blame him. A devilish smile crawls onto his face then and he steps a little closer to them. Shane tenses, and he is surprised to feel Rozanov do so too.

"That's so nice of you, Ilya." He glances at Rozanov then returns his attention back to Shane, leaning even closer. "I gotta admit though, going after Russian gold while Hollander & Co. goes downhill is such a smart move, Shane." He winks, and Shane's blood runs cold at the blunt accusation.

Heat rushes to his face, and his heart thuds loudly in his ears. Before he could react in any way, Rozanov shocks him by stepping in front of him, blocking Shane out of the rude reporter's sight. He grabs the guy by the elbow and tells him something that Shane is unable

to hear. He sees the reporter's face fall before he is out of their hair in no time. The air thickens around Shane, and he distantly realises that they are basically minutes away from the new year. Though that is the last thing he cares about right now. There is a bigger realization taking over his mind.

“Follow me.”

Shane doesn't even argue.

As he follows Rozanov somewhere outside the crowded hall, he realises that the man leading them to what looks like the rooftop of the hotel is now the only person standing between his family and a public scandal—and he doesn't know what to feel about that.

Shane exhales in relief at the drastic shift from the club's chaotic atmosphere to the quiet of the highest point in the building. The view is breathtaking from here. He can see the entire city down below, and when he looks up, he feels like he could touch the stars if he extends his arm.

As soon as he calms down, as if he could sense it, Rozanov speaks.

“Are you OK?”

Shane nods. “Yeah.”

A beat of silence passes before Rozanov breaks it again.

“I like to watch fireworks from here.” He is standing next to Shane with his hands in his pockets, eyes trained on the starry sky above them.

“What did you say to the reporter?” Shane asks, glancing at him.

Rozanov shrugs without looking at him. “Is not important.”

His nonchalant response snaps something in Shane. “It is to me, Rozanov. If we're gonna make this work, then at least don't fucking hide stuff that concerns my parents from me.” *We're sharing a house starting tomorrow for fuck's sake*, he almost says in addition. He has been sitting with this fact since the night they had dinner together at Rozanov's house.

This was how he was going to start his year.

Rozanov's head twists in his direction, his hazel eyes looking directly into his.

“I thought this was ‘just business’? That you don't want anything to do with me?” he asks rhetorically, then he blows out a puff of air. A few moments of silence pass. Then, “I told him to mind his fucking business. Is all.”

“Thanks,” Shane says in the heat of the moment. “You didn't have to do that.”

“He won't bother you again,” Rozanov says.

“How do you even know that?”

Rozanov doesn't get to answer right away, because the bright, bursting colours of fireworks erupt over their heads. They explode with repetitive booming sounds, drowning every other sound around them. Shane's eyes switch to Rozanov who is watching the fireworks signalling the start of a new year like it's the most fascinating thing on Earth. For the first time since he heard the name Ilya Rozanov, Shane wonders what might be going through the mind of the man standing next to him.

Is he thinking about the fact that he will be spending next year with his archenemy? Is he even Rozanov's enemy? *You make me curious, Hollander.* Is he planning on actually making Shane's life a living hell?

As if Rozanov could read his thoughts, he unglues his eyes from the sky and fixes them on Shane instead. “Happy new year, Hollander.” The corners of his lips tug to the sides in the faintest, subtlest way that Shane almost misses before he disappears through the door they used on their way in.

Shane watches him walk away with a strange, very unlikely of his little to zero interest in Rozanov, thought haunting the back of his mind. Why on earth would a man like Rozanov, someone whom half of the party's guests would and did throw themselves at his feet all night, leave all of this just to stand and watch fireworks with Shane?

Then, an even stranger thought crosses his mind. Shane is moving in with Rozanov tomorrow. Their whole plan to rescue his parents' company still sounds a lot to Shane, and his mother has made it clear that she doesn't mind breaking into Rozanov's penthouse and murdering him in cold blood if he so much as hurts Shane. However...

Against all common sense, and his blind resentment towards him that slightly shifted for a moment tonight, Shane has a small feeling that everything he grew up thinking about Rozanov might be wrong. He could be hallucinating, and he hopes he is, yet every time he remembers the hard set of his jaw and the way he stood in front of Shane as if physically protecting him...something flickers inside him.

Chapter End Notes

BIG things (and longer chapters) are coming!!!! so y'all better be ready hehe also idk about you but ceo ilya is so hot to me (and he is only going to get hotter i can guarantee you that)

find me on [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

Chapter 3: Quarter One

Chapter Summary

During the first three months at the Rozanov penthouse, Shane is faced with things he didn't know about himself. He finds himself venturing into things he had no intention of being a part of.

Chapter Notes

hi! i'm so, so sorry this took me forever :(but my grandmother passed away very recently and i was quitting my job and overall there was so much going on. (consequently, this chapter is unedited)

i have already updated the tags for the fic, but please note that this chapter contains mentions of death and grief.

i hope this chapter is worth the wait and happy belated valentine's ig :)

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

January

Shane arrives at the Rozanov penthouse on the first day of January. Most of his things have already been shipped here beforehand; his clothes, some of his books, and everything else he wanted to have from his parents' house here with him. He hasn't been to his own place in a while, so he doesn't think he needs anything from there anywhere. His bedroom here is huge, with plain white walls, a king-size bed and a bathroom. He could practically live in it and never have to face Rozanov. Except he would be unnecessarily imprisoning himself. As he comes to think about it, both of them will probably be busy most of the time they will barely be meeting. So, it shouldn't be that bad.

Or so he thought.

“Do you want the house tour now or?” Rozanov's voice appears at the door behind him.

Shane instinctively takes a couple of steps forward, putting space between them as he spins to look at Rozanov. He looks freshly shaved, his face looking younger than usual. In addition to the fact that he is wearing a white cotton shirt and loose black pants. His hair isn't neatly styled as Shane usually sees it in photos or when he is in a business suit, contrarily, it looks

damp, curling in different places over his head and falling in short strands on his forehead. This all looks new to Shane and sort of...raw. It is kinda weird to see him like this.

“Earth to Hollander?” Rozanov waves an irritating hand in front of Shane, snapping him out of his trance.

Shane clears his throat. “Fine. Yeah, whatever.”

Rozanov sighs and leads them out of the hallway where his and Shane's room are located. Shane's room is at the end of the hall, thankfully on the opposite wall from where Rozanov's is and a few doors away as well. The place has so many rooms and Shane is pretty sure he doesn't catch onto everything Rozanov says, especially when he knows he won't be spending much time actually *living* here. He may hate Ilya Rozanov all he want, but unfortunately, Shane can't help but be impressed with how simple and just elegant the penthouse is. The living room is spacious with a panorama wall looking out onto the city, letting in the occasional sunlight by day and giving a beautiful view of city light at night. There is a room that Rozanov refers to as his home office, because of course, and there is the kitchen where Shane finds an old lady surrounded by other house staff.

“This is Tanya,” Rozanov says, referring to the woman hunched over a cutting board with reddish-grey hair and sharp eyes that meet Shane's right away and warm over. “She moved here from Russia with us years ago.”

“Nice to meet you, Tanya.” Shane nods, offering a polite smile.

“She doesn't speak much English.” Rozanov adds.

Tanya wipes her hands on the towel attached to her hip and makes her way towards the two young men. “Welcome!” She friendly shakes Shane's hand. “You are Ilya's lover, yes?” She asks giddily, and Shane nearly chokes on air. “I know Ilya since he was this big.” She motions to somewhere near her mid thigh.

Tanya is obviously nothing like Rozanov, which shouldn't be a surprise because Rozanov is just naturally an asshole. She is overly friendly, warm, and she seems eager to make Shane part of the household she leads even though she doesn't know none of it is real. He doesn't see a reason to not reciprocate her energy though. On the contrary, he feels like it would be rude not to. So, Shane snorts at her words, taking a mental note of sneaking an embarrassing memory or two out of her for good measure. He doesn't know when they will come in handy.

“This is what I teach you English for?” Rozanov puts on a show of looking offended.

Tanya says something angry in Russian, shaking her head and then saying “no more” in English at the end.

Shane watches Rozanov smile affectionately at her then say something in Russian as well. Then, “Soon. I promise.” He kisses her knuckle, and she ruffles his hair in return.

“Go. Food is ready soon.” She doesn't hesitate before she shoves Rozanov out of the kitchen, and Shane lets a giggle escape him at the scene, following him outside before he gets shoved

too.

When Shane woke up this morning, he didn't think he would be watching the grown businessman Ilya Rozanov be chased out of his own kitchen by an old lady who threatens to tell stories from his childhood to a person whom she has only met and known as "Ilya's lover". It is an oddly warm setting, Shane thinks as he follows Rozanov upstairs. In a perfect world, this would have been nothing but a light, funny exchange where Shane wanted nothing but to sit down and hear about Rozanov's childhood as someone who is to marry him soon. In reality, it is yet another surprise that Shane didn't see coming. He doesn't even know what he was expecting coming to live here, but it sure wasn't that.

"Another living area." Rozanov gestures around them at the neater, smaller space. "Guest room. Gym." He points to a closed door, then leaves out the last door in the corner.

"What about that room?"

Something flickers in Rozanov's eyes. "Storage room."

Shane frowns, getting a weird feeling.

"Don't worry about it." He saunters to the stairs, looking back at Shane. "Is not a secret prison, come on." He grins mischievously at Shane who huffs at the absurd comment and shoulders past him downstairs.

"Don't you have work to do?" Shane asks irritably.

"You mean taking over your company?"

"Asshole."

"How romantic." Rozanov taunts on their way into the dining room where the table is being set. "What about you? Don't you have some cameras to look pretty for today?"

Shane shoots him a horrified look. "This is what you think I do for a living?"

Rozanov raises his eyebrows in silence. "Is it not?"

Shane makes a grumbled noise then sits down, fixing himself some food. "Yeah, you should stick to business," he says under his breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Shane takes a sip of warm coffee to soothe his boiling nerves.

"I can come with you to your work today and you can prove me wrong," Rozanov says slowly.

"Keep dreaming." Shane spits. There is no way he is dragging Rozanov's ass to his own work just to prove him wrong.

“Ok then,” he lazily says, licking a drop of honey off his thumb.

Does he really think that is all what Shane does?

“You know what? I have nothing to prove to you, so it doesn't even matter whether you fucking come or not.”

Rozanov regards him in amusement. “What a warm invitation, Hollander.”

“Don't take long.” Is all what Shane says after he is done eating and goes to get dressed.

What the fuck is he doing?

He realises mid-photoshoot, with Rozanov standing behind cameras watching like a scarecrow, that this is exactly what he wanted and Shane easily let his words get under his skin.

“I wasn't wrong,” Rozanov finally says at the end of the day.

“I told you I wasn't proving anything to you, Rozanov.” Shane glares at him.

“Why do you let them cover your freckles?”

“What?!” Shane scrunches up his nose in confusion. When and how on earth did the conversation get here?

He points to the bridge of his nose and cheeks. “Your freckles. They cover them for photoshoots. Why do you let them?”

“I don't *let* them,” Shane answers, then pauses.

“Right,” Rozanov says to nothing in particular, unlocking his car. “You just sit there and everything happens to you, yes?”

Shane yanks the car door open and gets in, slamming it closed. Harshly.

“What the fuck?” Rozanov yelps, looking at Shane as if he were a madman.

“You're paying for lunch.”

And this is how it starts. Somehow, Rozanov always finds his way to Shane's work. Whether it is “*I was bored and needed something to help me sleep.*” or “*I got you boring food just how you like it.*” or even just silent lingering in the background. It pissed Shane off at first, because at one point it felt like he was doing it on purpose to annoy Shane.

It isn't until two weeks later when Shane is filming a new interview after he and Rozanov have been spotted out in public and after their photos at the New Year's Eve party have been going all over social media that Rozanov's presence sparked a little intrigue in Shane. Is this part of their plan? Does he want press teams to see him so they get the word out?

“What is it this time? Bored again?” Shane asks once they cut and release him in a short break.

Rozanov is in his usual business attire, which means he is either on a break too or done for the day. Though that doesn’t make sense since they are still basically during morning time.

“Neither. We are going on a date,” he casually says. “When do you finish?”

“I—what?” Shane has a full moment of ‘what is going on?’ until his brain registers what it is that is going on. Today is their first set-up romantic appearance in public.

Shane has read the whole plan Rozanov’s team put together, but he must have forgotten it was today. He has been looking forward to getting some time off after everything that has happened. He has already stunned for New Year and Valentine’s Day campaigns, done a few fun promotional interviews, and today is only booked for Buzz Feed.

“I have about one more hour left.” He looks around on set. “You don’t have to wait, you—”

“Is okay. I want to watch.” Rozanov shrugs.

Shane sighs exasperatedly. “Of course, you do.”

When Shane gets back on camera, for some reason he feels the temperature in the studio a bit warmer. His face heats up quickly, and his makeup team has to jump in every now and then to dab away the sweat that forms at his hairline.

“Hi, my name is Shane Hollander, and I’m here to answer some of your questions,” Shane starts. He looks down at the first question in the set of cards he is holding, and of course this had to be the first question.

“And the first question is: how would you describe a perfect first date?” He pretends to think, and for a startling moment the image of him and Rozanov on a date flashes in his mind.

He blinks and recomposes himself quickly. “I’m more of a private, cozy kind of person if that makes sense? I like lowkey stuff? Just away from crowds and people always around me. So, maybe a movie night or a quick meal at a normal, not too fancy restaurant.” He smiles.

He moves onto the next question, and he feels sweat trickling down his neck. “What do you look for in a partner?”

“I,” Shane lets out a nervous laugh. “I don’t look for something in specific, but I hope they’re someone who is kind, loving and accepting.”

“Next question!” He cheers, trying to ease his inexplicable anxiety. “How long have you and Ilya Rozanov been friends?”

Shane *feels* his face turn red, and to make it worse, his eyes automatically drift off camera to briefly look at the person whose name has been mentioned unprompted.

“Ro—Ilya and I have been friends for years,” Shane answers as professionally and amiably as he can.

“Is he here today?” One of the crew members asks playfully, and Shane mentally panics, looking at Rozanov once again, this time searching for an answer.

He just shrugs.

Shane is actually going to kill him.

He does his best attempt of a sneaky smile and says, “I’m not gonna answer that.”

That earns him a few Ooo’s and whistles from the crew, but he cuts it short and continues the rest of the questions that are all centred around his personal dating life. He finishes in a little over an hour, but he finds Rozanov still waiting as he promised.

“Go on, say it,” Shane goes first once they are out into the parking lot.

“Questions were stupid, and your answers were boring.”

Shane shakes his head, doing zero effort to conceal his smile. It has become a habit of Rozanov’s to criticise every interview or photoshoot that Shane does in his presence.

“You know, you’re welcome to never watch me work again if it bothers you that much.” Shane shrugs, buckling his seatbelt.

“No. Is fun watching you get flustered over stupid questions.” Rozanov puts the car on drive and gets them out of the parking lot.

“I was *not* flustered!” Shane defends, though it kind of shows that he is lying. “Besides, the questions weren’t stupid. I think they were sweet.”

“Of course.” Rozanov rolls his eyes.

“What? You know better than the entire team of Buzz Feed now?” Shane challenges.

“Never said that. I just think it is stupid to assume a person is nothing but a pretty face. They should be asking you better questions.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” Shane tries to ignore the fact that this is maybe the third or fourth time Rozanov has called him pretty. He doesn’t know if he is offended or maybe a little flattered, and that frustrates him even more.

“I don’t know, Hollander. Like what is your biggest fear or what keeps you awake at night? Questions about *you*.”

Shane stares at him for a second. “Thanks.”

“For what?” Rozanov briefly glances at him, confusion written all over his face. *This* is his favourite version of Ilya Rozanov.

Not that Shane has been taking notes, but he has figured out that if he wants this to be over quickly, he will have to swallow his pride and just accept the shitshow he has found himself in. He doesn't have to like or even tolerate Rozanov. They just have to get along for the ride, and then they will go their separate ways.

Though he has come to discover that the longer he spends time with Ilya Rozanov, the harder he makes it for Shane to dislike him. For example, he leaves Shane completely to himself whenever they are home, his relationship with his house staff is better than what Shane has seen other people of even higher rank than Rozanov's is, he respects Shane's parents. Everything is going too smoothly it makes Shane feel shitty at times.

Those times do disappear though when he is harshly reminded of the premise of his and Rozanov's relationship. He still fucking hates everything that has to do with it. Yet when rumours started circulating on the internet, Shane realised that unfortunately the idea of them getting married was fucking smart. And he knows that once the little trick they pulled in there goes out, people will start speculating. Probably just in time for Valentine's Day. Everything is going according to plan so far.

"For being the first person to point that out."

"You are serious?" Rozanov looks at him again, quickly turning back to the road.

"Yeah. It's better to hide under these silly questions though," Shane admits.

"Don't you get tired? Of answering the same thing again and again?"

"I mean sometimes," Shane answers thoughtfully. "But I also think not everyone has to know who I really am."

"That's a little cocky." Rozanov teases.

"Fuck off, you know what I mean." Shane half laughs, half huffs.

"We are here."

"Wait—that's not the place that was mentioned in the plan you gave me." Shane frowns, looking around them.

"Is not important. This place is much better."

They park near a small shop that, on a closer look, Shane realises is a bakery. They get out of the car and head for the goods that turn Shane's stomach into a growling mess. Having bakeries for breakfast is definitely a bad idea, but they smell so good it feels illegal to not try any of them. Especially that they all look unfamiliar to him. He takes a second glance at the name of the bakery and is surprised when he finds that it's Russian.

Rozanov greets the old man standing in service, and judging by their friendliness Shane concludes that Rozanov might be a regular here. He orders for the two of them, pointing to different things that all look delicious as the man eagerly fills two brown bags with their food.

“Not even gonna ask me what I’d like to have?”

Rozanov’s lips twitch at the corners. “Did I miss anything you gawked at?”

Heat rises to Shane’s cheeks. He probably shouldn’t answer that. “Yeah. That one over there.”

Rozanov’s eyes switch to Shane, his eyebrows arched. “I thought you did not eat chocolate?”

“I said I don’t eat it at night.” Shane narrows his eyes, mentally praying his argument holds itself because it’s starting to really get on his nerves how every time they bicker about something, Rozanov ends up having the last word or the upper hand.

“Ok. I will get you one, but don’t come complaining when your diet is not working. Because you will want more than one of these.” He grins afterwards, and somehow Shane wants to bury himself six feet under.

Shane ends up eating two of the chocolate filled pastry, not even caring about the smug look Rozanov gives him because it’s *that* good. They share a small, wooden table—the only one on the curb—and Rozanov gives him a little brief about the food he picked for them.

“How did you find this place?” Shane asks curiously. It mustn’t have been easy finding a small bakery shop that made traditional Russian street food. “And why not just have Tanya make them for you?”

Shane inspects the leftover pastries between them on the table. They look like things you could bake at home. Maybe.

Rozanov frowns. “Tanya is not just a housemaid,” he says.

“I figured that.” Shane nods.

“She has been with my family since I was very young. She practically raised me.”

“Sounds to me like someone who would go through the trouble of making you your favourite food if you ask.” Shane shrugs.

“She does a lot of things I don’t ask for,” Rozanov says, his tone shifting towards a more serious one.

“Like what?” Shane asks, but his question goes unanswered as Rozanov’s eyes drift somewhere on Shane’s face, and he bites his lip to stifle a smile.

“What? What is it?”

“Nothing, you just have chocolate on your face.” He taps the corner of his mouth somewhere towards his chin.

Shane immediately grabs a napkin and frantically wipes at his face, which for some reason is funny to Rozanov.

“What are you laughing about, you—”

“Here, let me.” Rozanov leans forward with an extended arm. Shane hands him the napkin he was using, but his hand hangs in the air as Rozanov presses a thumb to Shane’s face and swipes it over the sticky spot on his skin.

Something screams at Shane to push him off and say something mean but instead he watches with parted lips while Rozanov relaxes back in his seat with a quick lick to his now chocolate smeared finger.

“If you are done we can go,” he says.

For the first time since agreeing to live with him, Shane realises how many of his limits will be subjected to tests he had no idea he should even be considering—because even if he hates his guts, or this whole deal, there is one fact that Shane has a feeling he has very little to change about.

Ilya Rozanov is a hot man.

January goes by in a flurry of meetings for future projects, virtual calls with his parents where they all update each other with how everything is going, and more of Ilya Rozanov. Photos of them from their little date a week ago have been the talk of literally everyone for days, which is good. It makes Shane feel a little bit better about him staying in this mansion.

Shane has just gotten off the phone with his mum when Rozanov walks into the living room.

“Was that your mum?” He asks, plopping himself down onto the couch.

“Yeah.”

“Did you tell her about how horrible your time here is?” Rozanov asks dryly.

“Oh yeah. Every little detail.” He chuckles. Then, “it’s not that bad. I mean, as long as I’m not seeing your face of course.”

Rozanov seems to find that funny.

They don’t say something for a while, until Rozanov decides to change that. “I did not lie about your parents, you know.” he says.

When Shane’s eyebrows draw together, Rozanov continues.

“I had no intention of stepping in unless they really wanted my help. You saw how everyone is losing their shit over our appearances together.”

“Yeah,” Shane answers. He has no idea why Rozanov is telling him all that. He already knows it. And so far, the month they have spent together was...well, it was way better than Shane expected it (because he expected the worst of the worst anyway) to be.

“My parents say hi actually,” he finds himself saying. He won’t add the one occasion his mum described Rozanov’s plan as ‘smart’ though. That is for another time. As in never.

Rozanov nods awkwardly at that, but Shane decides to ignore it.

“Excited for your time off?”

“Kinda.” He aimlessly pokes at the hem of his shorts. He is lying. He can’t wait to lay back and pull the plug for a while, but he has a feeling his deal with Rozanov will be getting in the way of that.

It’s fine though. If it helps his parents, then it’s fine. Two weeks off spent on made up romantic appearances. He could do that.

“So, what’s your deal with that Hollander guy?” Marlow asks from where he is sitting by Ilya’s office desk. It is late at night, and Ilya is up working late today so he didn’t turn down Marlow’s invitation for a couple of drinks.

“What deal?” Ilya asks past the pleasing burn of whiskey down his throat.

“Cut the crap, Roz.” Marlow chuckles, his dark eyes pinning Ilya with a ‘spill it out’ look. “It’s real then?”

Marlow is one of the first people close to Ilya’s age who actually befriended him when he first became CEO. At some point, Marlow was a compass that guided Ilya around who to approach and strike alliances with if he wanted to make it here. He knew everyone and had connections everywhere, which Ilya considered sensible given the nature of Marlow’s work. The guy owns the largest security system network in Canada—it would be weird if there was something happening and he had no idea about it.

Which forces Ilya to be careful around his answers to Marlow’s pressing question. One thing he never liked about Marlow and was always loud about it was exactly this kind of bullshit. He would do anything to have the first insight he could have about other people, and Ilya isn’t comfortable with this concept—which automatically led to the two’s friendship to stay as it is only outside of business.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Ilya shrugs, reshuffling some stray paper sheets on his desk.

“I don’t know.” He takes a chug off his glass. “Just didn’t know your type is rich, spoiled Canadian boys.”

Something rises in Ilya’s chest at the remark, surprising him and Marlow apparently because he raises his eyebrows and backs up in his chair. “I was just asking if it’s real, Jesus I didn’t know it was *that* serious.”

Ilya has secretly been keeping up with what the media is saying about him and Hollander, and his plan seems to be working even better than he imagined. If it was up to him, he would cancel their plans for February altogether. Except it *is* up to him, and shockingly enough, Ilya

doesn't want to cancel any of it. He wants to know where this deal is taking them. A month ago, Ilya swore to crack Hollander's perfect, golden boy veneer. What he didn't expect to find out though is that the veneer is already cracked at places.

Ilya only needs to find those places and wait to see what lies beneath.

He doesn't know how much his curiosity will hold though. If he was curious at first, then he has to find another word for what he has been feeling so far living with Shane because it's much, much stronger.

“Shut the fuck up, Marlow.”

February

It's half past eleven and Shane can't fucking sleep. One week into his vacation and he is already having insomnia. Perfect.

He has already tried reading, meditating, and desperately just forcing himself to sleep. There is one thing left that he could do, and that's putting on some working out clothes and hitting the gym Rozanov has installed in his house. Because of course, not only is he the perfect businessman but he also works out and has the body of a finely sculpted Greek god. One would wonder how Shane got to know this piece of information, and he almost wants to stop existing at the memory.

It was just a few days back when Shane was rushing down the hall to get to his ringing phone in his bedroom, and he slammed into something—someone *hard*.

Rozanov, clad in a towel around his waist, had looked at Shane as if he were crazy.

Shane was pretty sure he looked like a deer caught in headlights. He fucking hated it.

“Is someone chasing you?” Rozanov asked warily.

The words caught in Shane's throat, and his phone went forgotten at the sight of the man standing in front of him. He was—he was fucking stunning. He had the body of a supermodel that would end Shane's career. Defined chest, toned arms, a hard stomach that dipped lower into a V—

“Whoa, whoa. My eyes are up here, Hollander.” The smug look on Rozanov's face told Shane that he was enjoying being ogled by him and not at all bothered (like Shane).

Heat rose significantly all over Shane's body. Not just his cheeks.

“You're welcome to have a taste any time, you know.” Rozanov smirked, raising one arm to rest against the door frame of his bedroom and pointedly flexing his bicep. “Don't be shy.”

Shane inhaled, feeling the urgent need for oxygen in his system, which was a mistake because the strong scent of Rozanov's aftershave filled his lungs and caused him to feel a little lightheaded. “Fuck you.”

If Ilya Rozanov looked decent in a suit, he was a fucking hazard in only a towel. And Shane was too gay for this. Too gay and angry, because his enemy had no business being one of the most fucking gorgeous people Shane had seen.

With all that was left of his dignity, willpower and strength, Shane marched past him to his own room. Going in, he didn't even remember why he was coming here anyway.

The sound of loud shouting coming from the opposite end of the hall pulls Shane out of his embarrassing memory and makes him perk up in bed. He strains his ears, and then he hears more yelling that is probably in Russian. Shane has noticed that the intonation of Rozanov's voice changes when he speaks Russian. It happened on more than one occasion when he has seen him talking to Tanya (who has become a good friend of Shane's). For whatever reason, that seems to make Rozanov grumpy, so Shane keeps it up.

There is a bit of silence, then Shane hears the sound of a door opening then slamming shut. He waits for a few minutes, unreasonable adrenaline bursting through him. Before he knows it, Shane scrambles out of bed and exits his room while he tells himself that he is definitely not out in pursuit of the Russian guy sworn to make him spiral out of his mind for a thousand different reasons.

Shane finds him in the kitchen after he follows the sound of a bottle opening. Now that he has found him, Shane doesn't know what to do so he stands awkwardly by the door until Rozanov sees him. He looks ruffled in a grey tank top and sweatpants with his hair having been raked through multiple times. He doesn't seem surprised to see Shane. He doesn't seem like anything actually. Shane can't read what he is feeling.

"Hey." Shane walks into the space and sits down on one of the stools lined by the kitchen island.

"What are you doing past your bedtime?"

Shane almost rolls his eyes. "Can't sleep. What are *you* doing up this late?"

"Same reason as you." He slides the beer bottle to his hand and takes a gulp.

Shane considers his question for a moment, then shoots for it anyway. "I heard you earlier on the phone," he says carefully. "Is everything okay?"

"Is nothing important," Rozanov says flatly. "Are you hungry? I am making tuna melts."

"No, thanks. I'm good." Shane was in fact not good, because almost immediately as if his own body is conspiring against him, his stomach growls.

Rozanov raises his eyebrows. "I am already making, so I can make two."

"Okay, yeah. Sure." Shane nods, then the awkward silence stretches on.

He watches Rozanov make them the late night snack they are about to eat and lets his mind wander to what could that phone call have possibly been about. Shane doesn't know much about Rozanov's family. Just that he took over the company at a young age when it was

literally falling apart. He also knows that the founder of it is Grigori Rozanov, whom Shane has never seen nor heard about on a personal level. All he knows is that he retired years ago, and went shortly after to Russia.

A few minutes later, Rozanov places a plate of food in front of Shane and takes a seat next to him. He can feel the tension rippling off of Rozanov next to him as they eat in silence for a while.

“Are you sure you’re um...okay?” Shane tries asking quietly, avoiding eye contact with Rozanov.

“What would you do?” Rozanov asks, ignoring Shane’s question.

He is looking ahead, his jaw working while he chews his food. “If you weren’t your parents’ golden face?”

Shane whips at him. “I’m not—” he stops to take a controlling breath. “I love my job.”

“Do you?” Rozanov retorts, not accusingly, but not purely out of curiosity either.

“Yes!” Shane answers in frustration. “I love my job, and I’m proud of representing my parents.”

“You never think about what your life would have been like if you were not a model for Hollander & Co.?” Rozanov half spins to look at him, eyes swimming with limitless wonder. “You never think about what else you wanted to do with your life?”

Shane pauses in bafflement. Does he not realise how lucky Shane considers himself to be where he is and what he does now? Is this some sort of a way of his meant to ridicule Shane’s life?

“No? Because this is my life, and I’m lucky to be doing what I’m doing right now.” Shane insists.

Rozanov stares blankly at him for a few moments. Then, “I would have loved to be a team captain.”

Shane doesn’t know what to say to that.

“...you lead an entire company,” he says after a beat of silence.

“No, Hollander. I mean captain like in sports. Like hockey.”

“You like hockey?” Shane asks, shocked at the piece of information.

“Very much.”

There is an uncontrollable smile that is trying to not peek through Shane’s face, but unfortunately he even ends up chuckling a bit.

“What?” Rozanov frowns.

“Nothing.” Shane shakes his head once, looking down. “It’s just that out of all the sports we cater for, hockey is my favourite too.” He looks up then, and watches Rozanov’s eyes shine with curiosity. The dullness from before is gone, and the lines between his eyebrows are also nowhere to be seen.

“What is your favourite team?” Rozanov asks, leaning his head on his hand that is propped on the kitchen bar next to them.

“Montreal Voyageurs obviously,” Shane answers easily. “You?”

It is Rozanov’s turn to smile, his lips slowly stretching over his teeth and then he looks up, as if he is questioning some sort of a divine being.

“Boston Bears *obviously*,” he mimics Shane, rolling his eyes after.

They both stare at each other for a few seconds while the newly shared information just sinks in before they break into a fit of giggles.

“It’s ironic how much that makes sense.” Shane says past a barely contained laugh.

“How does it feel being a loser?” Rozanov jokes.

“Hey! The Voyageurs are like the best fucking team in this game.”

“Lie. Liar who told you that.” Rozanov repeatedly shakes his head.

They fall into an argument over the two teams, bringing up different games from over the past years, number of goals, who is the best player—Shane doesn’t know how long they have been talking, and he is surprised to realise that he hasn’t checked the time once.

“Why didn’t you become a hockey player?”

The humour drops from Rozanov’s face, and Shane immediately regrets asking him.

“Because my father wanted to keep our business in the family.”

“Is he the one you were on the phone with earlier?” Shane warily asks.

Rozanov’s eyes dim even more. “No. It was my big brother, Andrei. I do not talk to my father much.”

“Why?” Shane frowns.

“He is sick.”

Shane feels stupid, but he also feels like he needs to ask. “Sick as in cancer?”

“Alzheimer’s.” Rozanov throws the word out into the air.

“Oh, shit. I’m so sorry.” Shane reflexively places a hand over Rozanov’s knee that somehow has found its way between Shane’s during the conversation.

Rozanov shrugs emptily, then his eyes dart to Shane’s hand when he feels it. He withdraws it as if he has been electrocuted, heat pumping under his cheeks. “Sorry.”

“We should sleep,” Rozanov says, the air around them shifting from mild comfort to awkwardness again.

“Yeah.” Shane nods. “See you.” *See you? What the hell?*

He jumps down from his stool, accidentally at the same time as Rozanov, and they end up slamming into each other.

“Shit!”

“Fuck!”

“Are you okay?” Rozanov asks first, holding a hand up to his forehead and rubbing it quickly.

“Yeah, sorry. That was—I didn’t mean to—”

“Is okay.” Rozanov assures him.

When Shane looks at him, he realises how close they are standing to one another. They are barely a hair’s breadth away from each other, and Shane feels dizzy with Rozanov’s scent. *Oh god, not again.* Rozanov’s eyes are intense, looking directly into Shane’s and not moving away. Shane’s own eyes escape his gaze and find an even worse sight. Rozanov’s mouth.

What the—

“I, um, I gotta go.” He swallows past his dry throat.

“Ok.” Rozanov agrees, but he still doesn’t move nor break Shane’s gaze.

Shane takes a low, steadying breath and says his words carefully. “Goodnight then.”

“Goodnight.”

Shane gets back to his room as fast as he can, finding himself breathing hard for no reason at the minimal effort. He gets into bed and lies there with his eyes wide open and his body buzzing. This is even worse than before he left his bedroom the first time. Much, *much* worse.

He tries closing his eyes, but all he sees is a pair of plump, pink lips.

“Jesus.” He mutters out loud into the dark. It doesn’t help either that it’s pitch black around him.

The longer Shane stares into the endless dark, more images keep swimming around him. Terrible, horrible images that are making the front of his shorts tighter.

No. No, this can't be happening, he tells himself.

But unfortunately, his half hard dick has other opinions.

Shane tries not to think about it, but it has been so long since he had...*anything*. An image of Rozanov his towel slithers its way to the very top of Shane's mind along with the way his torso had stretched when he raised his arms, and a wave of arousal rushes all the blood south.

Fuck it.

Shane lifts his shirt a bit and brings a hand to his stomach, rubbing soft patterns over it. The action is simple, but it sends his whole body shivering. *This is fucking ridiculous*, a distant voice says at the back of his mind. Part of him can't believe he is *this* worked up over Ilya Fucking Rozanov out of all people. He slides his hand down to the bulge in his shorts and a helpless, low moan escapes him.

He blindly grabs for a pillow and buries his face into it, hazily realising that this isn't going to be silent. And the last thing he wants is Rozanov hearing him. He would rather die.

Shane rubbed himself through the thin fabric of his shorts for a few minutes until he felt a wet spot under his hand. *Fuck, this isn't gonna be slow either.* He tugs his shorts down to his thighs and a sigh of relief escapes him at the feeling of his cock springing free. Impatiently, Shane starts stroking himself, groaning into the pillow. Alone in bed with his hand around himself, Shane's mind goes to places he never thought he would even know.

He rubs his finger over his slit a few times, and in his mind it is Rozanov's tongue.

"Fuck." He barely contains a gasp, feeling the sharp tingles of pleasure in every inch of his body.

A part of him, the same part that keeps saying that this is ridiculous, is horrified at the way Shane's body is responding to his own touch with the thought of Rozanov being the main driver behind it. But Shane? Shane fucking *loves* it.

His back arches off the bed as he starts stroking himself faster with more sounds buried into the pillow he is holding over his face. The pressure of his impending orgasm fuels Shane to switch to a faster pace, his hand slick with his own precum over his cock.

"Oh, fuck." He whimpers into the dark at the image of Rozanov's golden curls bobbing up and down over Shane's dick. "Fuck, *Ilya*."

Shane comes hard all over himself, his breaths ragged and uneven as he pumps his fist a few more times to drag out the last of his orgasm. His body shudders with the intensity of it, but Shane can't believe how fucking good this was. He also can't believe he moaned the name of the guy that has been driving him crazy since they met while coming. This is totally cool (except none of it is, but Shane is too tired to think about it now).

He lays in his mess for a few minutes to catch his breath before he goes to the bathroom and cleans himself. He changes into clean clothes and the minute he falls back into bed, sleep finds him like a long lost friend.

One treacherous thought surfaces in his mind though; Shane can't wait for February fourteenth—his and Rozanov's arranged date for Valentine's Day.

The next morning, Shane wakes up to an empty house and yet another delicious breakfast that Tanya had prepared. The woman's favourite hobby is feeding Shane, and he is seriously considering asking her to bake those chocolate filled pastries he tried with Rozanov before. He doesn't think she would say no.

Shortly after breakfast, Shane calls his parents to check in.

"Is he being an asshole to you?" Mum asks during the call.

"Jesus, Mum. No. Yes. Well, he *is* an asshole, but I can handle it," Shane answers truthfully. He ponders whether he should add the next part or not. "Besides...it's not that bad. He is not that bad, I mean."

Mum is silent for a couple of seconds, her face betraying nothing in the small screen of Shane's phone. "I would have been surprised by that if he hadn't visited us in person a couple of days ago." She looks a little confused, but it turns more into curiosity. Shane can literally see the gears working in her brain.

Shane on the other hand is borderline shocked.

"Visited you? Where? And what for?"

"He didn't tell you?" Mum asks then seems to grasp that that is not the point. "He visited our headquarters to make sure that everything is going as per our agreement. Whatever that means." She brushes a hand in the air.

Shane tries to ignore the stupid flutter in his stomach at the thought. *He is just doing his fucking job, get it together.*

"And is it?" Shane shifts the focus off Rozanov. He isn't ready to think about him yet. Especially after last night.

"Oh, yes, honey don't worry about us." She smiles kindly. "How are you feeling with all of this?"

Shane takes a deep breath, the tornado of emotions he has been dreading piling in the pit of his stomach. "I'm okay." He forces a smile. *Hot and bothered and confused most of the time around the man that is taking over my parents' company, but other than that I'm totally okay.*

"Okay, then don't kill me for what I'm about to say next?" She squints one eye at him.

"You haven't turned my room into a shrine, haven't you?" Shane asks horrifically.

“God, no no.” She laughs. “I was thinking you should bring Rozanov and come over for dinner.”

“You know now that you said it, I think the shrine isn’t that bad of an idea.”

“Shane.”

“Mum!” Shane sort of whines into his front camera. He knows it’s childish, but the last thing he needs in his poor mind is the image of Ilya Rozanov dining at his own table. “You’re killing me.”

She gives him one of her infamous ‘be for real’ looks. “You said things aren’t as bad as you thought. Besides, he invited us before and you know I’d rather die than have him outdo us in anything, right?” She winks then, adding the humour back to their conversation.

“Fine.” He sighs. “But don’t make any of my favourite food.”

“What? Why?” Mum laughs, the sound bringing unexplainable joy to Shane.

“Because then he might love it too and I can’t live with that in the world right now.” He grumbles.

“That’s adorable.” Mum stifles another laugh by covering her mouth.

“You’re evil.” Shane crosses his free arm over his chest.

“You will thank me later for this.” She nods promisingly. “Check if he is free tonight and let me know.”

“Wait. *Tonight?*” He almost gasps. “That’s such a short notice, I don’t think he will be free.”

“Ask him, Shane.” Mum rolls her eyes. “I’ll be waiting, okay? I gotta go now. Love you!”

“Love you too.” Shane hangs up and sinks so low in his bed he wishes he could melt through the mattress and out of existence.

He picks his phone back up and opens his and Rozanov’s chat.

Shane: *Are you free tonight?*

Shane waits for a few minutes, and just when he is about to give up on waiting his phone lights up with Rozanov’s reply.

Ilya Rozanov: *why? you will murder me?*

Shane: *Ha ha. Very funny. And yes, maybe.*

We’re invited for dinner at my parents’ house.

Ilya Rozanov: *ah, so you will actually murder me*

put poison in my food

i'm free

Shane: *I wish I could.*

Ilya Rozanov: *i know*

see you tonight sweetheart

A rush of heat sweeps through Shane at the pet name.

Shane: *Don't call me that.*

I'm not your anything.

Ilya Rozanov: *i didn't say you are mine ;)*

What the fuck.

Shane does a double take at that.

Shane: *Just shut up.*

Ilya Rozanov: *yes sir*

Shane stares at his phone for several minutes, then locks his screen, buries his face in his hands and thinks one thing: what the fuck is going on with him?

He leaves his bed a few minutes later to go inform Tanya that they aren't dining here tonight.

"Hey, Tanya?" Shane walks into the kitchen and finds the old woman by the stove.

"Yes, dear?"

Shane smiles at the Russian nickname, having learned its meaning from her recently. He has struck a deal with Tanya, that for every English word he teaches her, she will teach him a Russian one in return. The woman, bless her, keeps a small notebook and a pen in her pocket at all times so she could record every word she learns and she has been getting significantly better.

"Look at you being a master already." Shane grins and watches the Russian woman smile sheepishly.

"You need anything?" She asks, her hopeful eyes looking into Shane's.

"No, no. Thanks." Shane shakes his head. "I was just dropping by to tell you that we're not dining in tonight, so you don't have to prepare anything." He smiles at saving her the trouble of feeding them again tonight.

"Why?" She doesn't seem as happy though. "You do not like my food?"

“What? No, that’s not—” Shane panics for half a second at upsetting the only human being that’s good to him in this household. “I love your food.”

She looks slightly satisfied with that, but she clearly is still confused.

“Then why you do not eat tonight?”

“Because we’re going out,” Shane explains. “We will have dinner at *my* house.”

Shane watches in horror as Tanya’s face switches into the most playful, teasing expression he could ever see on someone’s face.

“You go on a date.” She giggles, and Shane blushes profusely.

“Tanya, it’s not a date—*how* do you even know that word?” Shane puts a hand over his hip.

“Ilya taught me.” She nods excitedly.

“Of course he did.” He rolls his eyes.

“He loves you.” Tanya pokes his side with the hand of her spatula and Shane tenses all over. “And I too.” Her smile is so endearing he wants to turn around and bolt into the other direction.

“Tanya.” Shane warns. “Love is a big word.”

“Ilya’s heart is big,” she says sternly. “He brings you here. He shares food with you. He looks at you like you are the world!”

Shane feels like his heart is in his throat at the words being said to his face. This doesn’t make any sense, because he and Rozanov hate each other. The ice between them melting over the past two months does not mean that Rozanov *loves* him all of a sudden. Tanya is overreacting, but Shane knows better than correcting her again now. She will probably get angry and start blabbering in Russian while Shane stands there awkwardly.

“He is lonely,” she says sadly. “But he is not when you are here.”

Shane wonders if she knows about his and Rozanov’s deal. He decides not to say anything about it anyway. He thinks it would destroy whatever image of them she has in her mind, and Shane would hate to do that even if he doesn’t believe it.

He thinks instead of Rozanov living in this mansion on his own, coming home every day from work to an empty house while all his family is so far away.

“Can I ask you something?”

Tanya nods in approval.

“What was he like? When he was younger?”

Tanya's face melts into the most adoring smile. "Oh, he was very lovely. Always making trouble." She laughs. "But he loved big and all loved him too." She nods to herself, then her face falls as if she has just experienced a bad memory.

"Tanya, what's wrong?" Shane asks.

"His father was not very kind." Her grip over the spatula tightens. "He made Ilya sad. His mother too."

"His mother?" Shane has never heard of her. Was he really living under a rock?

"Most beautiful human." She smiles with tears in her eyes. "She left early. Could not live here long."

"Oh god." So Rozanov's mother is dead, his father is sick with Alzheimer's and he was fighting with his brother last night.

For some unexplained reason, Shane feels like crap.

"Ilya was very young," she continues. "But his father made him big before his time."

Shane feels awful at the fact that Rozanov's childhood was basically robbed by his own father, and his happiness probably left this world with his mother. In all frankness, Shane doesn't know how Rozanov is still standing on two solid feet with this kind of weight on his shoulders.

"He never hurt anyone," Tanya says.

"I know," Shane rubs a hand over her back. "Thank you for telling me." He tries for a small smile, which she returns.

"Do not let him hurt himself." Tanya pats Shane's chest, and he realises belatedly that she was patting right over his heart.

He has no idea what that means, or how he can do that, but he nods and keeps her words in mind anyway. He makes his way out of the kitchen, and then he remembers something he has been dying to ask about.

"Tanya, there's a room upstairs—"

"The one in the corner." She nods. "I do not know anything about it. Never went in it."

Even more curiosity bubbles up inside Shane. He thanks her and hops his way upstairs. What could Rozanov possibly be hiding in there? He stares at the black wooden door, fighting with his mind over whether he should try going in or not. He finally wraps his hand around the handle and pushes it down—it's locked.

Shane sighs to himself. It was worth a try.

He spends the rest of his afternoon looking up the history of Rozanov's family and it is confirmed to him that he has, in fact, been living under a rock.

Irina Rozanov, wife of businessman Grigori Rozanov and mother to Ilya and Andrei Rozanov has died at a young age. No details are disclosed and Shane guesses it is probably for privacy. He does a little more research and finds out that Rozanov Holding has suffered greatly under Andrei's leadership. Then, the youngest Rozanov had taken over as CEO and sparked controversy.

Shane doesn't know how long he spends in front of his laptop reading and watching videos until he hears Rozanov return from work.

At the sound of his footsteps, Shane scrambles out of bed and rushes out of his room. He opens his door only to be shocked at Rozanov's presence by it.

"Hi?" He exhales.

"Get ready," he says, not even bothering to greet him back. "We are going wine shopping before dinner."

Then, he leaves for his own room while Shane stands breathless by his bedroom door.

For the rest of the evening, Tanya's words along with everything else Shane read online keep swirling in his mind like steam trapped in a pot. He has so many questions for Rozanov, but he shoves every single one of them down because he has a feeling the topic might upset him. And to be honest, he has been uncharacteristically nice all day. Shane doesn't want to blow it up.

Mum made her irresistible chicken parmesan dish, which had Rozanov asking for refills after he finished his first portion. It was kind of cute. This dinner was definitely way less heated and awkward than their first one together.

He never hurt anyone.

Shane's thoughts circle back to their deal, and how his first instinct was that yes, Rozanov wanted nothing but to fucking spite him. But when they moved in together and Shane got to see what Rozanov is like without the spotlight, especially after today, he realised that it is all a show. A pretty shitty one, but it probably does the job.

"You look weird," Rozanov remarks from next to him at the table.

Mum and Dad have retired to the living room and left Shane and Rozanov to 'finish eating at their own pace'. Whatever that means. The two men are also in charge of cleaning up and doing the dishes, which Shane is looking forward to so he can find something to do with his hands other than the death grip he has on his thighs under the table.

"*You're* weird." Shane jabs at him. "Enjoying the food?"

Rozanov hums through a mouthful of spaghetti. "I think I ate too much." He places a hand on his tummy and reclines in his seat.

“You think?” Shane chuckles.

Rozanov glares at him. “Is so good.”

“Don’t say that in front of Tanya though.” Shane jokes.

“She would cook me for dinner if I said that.” Rozanov agrees, a fond expression on his face. “You two are like best friends now, yes?”

Shane feels a rush of pride. “Something like that.” He smiles.

“Good.” Rozanov shocks him by saying. “Means she loves you. Tanya never liked anyone I brought home.”

Shane forgets everything else they were saying and asks, “you brought a lot of people to your place?”

Rozanov gets up and collects the empty plates on the table, prompting Shane to follow suit.

“Yeah. Men and women,” Rozanov answers casually once they are in the kitchen.

“Oh,” Shane stupidly says. Because *oh* is such a sensible response. He holds back the huff of frustration he wants to let out at the thought of Rozanov bringing different people back to his house. It shouldn’t annoy him this much. Why should he care what Rozanov does in his free time? In his *bedroom* out of all places?

Silence falls between them afterwards as Shane starts washing the dishes while Rozanov dries them. The setting is so weird. Seeing Ilya Rozanov stripped of his usual crisp business suit standing in Shane’s childhood home doing the dishes with him is like something out of a disorienting dream.

Disorienting. The word blares like headlights in Shane’s mind. That’s exactly how he feels around Rozanov most—if not all—the time. Shane works on rinsing the last plate as he feels Rozanov step behind him to place the clean, dry ones on the rack above Shane’s head. The entirety of Shane’s behind breaks into a sweat at the proximity of Rozanov to him. His musky cologne dominates Shane’s senses as his arm raises inches away from Shane’s head to put the plate in its place.

“You are done?” Rozanov asks, and Shane is startled by how close his voice is to his ear.

For some reason, Shane thought it would be smart to turn around and face him, handing him the remaining dish. Rozanov resumes what he was doing, not breaking his gaze from Shane’s. Shane feels entranced by some invisible power. He could push Rozanov and walk away, but no cell in his body seems to actually want to do that.

Rozanov slowly reaches an arm around Shane, the movement bringing him even closer to to Shane. Fuck, he is so close Shane can feel his breath fanning over his cheek. Shane backs up against the marble behind him for dear life, his muscles straining.

“You left the water running,” Rozanov says quietly, withdrawing his arm back and very slowly takes a small step back, pulling a sigh of relief out of Shane.

“Sorry.” Shane blurts out. *Why the fuck is he apologising?*

“Is okay. I have this effect.” He smirks.

Heat blooms under Shane’s cheeks.

“Fuck you.” Shane shoulders his way roughly past him and to—nowhere in particular.

As if she heard his mental call for help, his mother appears at the kitchen door. “I didn’t have time to make dessert, but how would you feel about ice cream?”

Rozanov’s head snaps in her direction. “What kind?”

“Cookies and cream.”

Shane witnesses a smile he has never seen on Rozanov’s face light up his features.

“Impossible to resist.”

Shane stands dumbfounded as he watches his mum and his—whatever Rozanov is now because he is starting to think ‘enemy’ is a strong word and a bit ironic when you were fantasizing about him sucking your dick last night. God, Shane wants to disappear every time he remembers his own voice helplessly moaning Rozanov’s name. *Ilya*. He is shocked to discover that he liked how the name sounded out of him. He has a pretty name for a douche personality.

Mum scoops out ice cream while Rozanov hands her the small bowls.

“Are you going to stand there all night, Shane?” Shane’s mouth falls open at the snark question out of Rozanov.

“You can’t buy my parents’ affection, Rozanov,” Shane bites.

“No, I can’t.” Rozanov agrees. “But I can earn it.” He shoots Shane a smug smile.

Mum gives Shane a sideways look, and Shane storms out of his own kitchen and into the living room with Dad.

The rest of the night goes smoothly with Rozanov doing nothing but continuing to ‘earn’ his parents’ affection while Shane sizzles in his anger in the corner. *What happened to his parents wanting to murder Ilya Rozanov?* Well, it is kind of tricky to want to murder someone who is charming, rich, considerate, and on top of all rescuing your parents from bankruptcy. He is arrogant, yes, and sometimes Shane can’t stand him, but he is also hot. *So hot.*

“Thank you for the wonderful night,” Rozanov says on his way out of the door.

“Thank *you* for the wine,” Dad nods in appreciation.

Shane waits for Rozanov to be out of earshot, then whirls on his parents. Before he says anything, Mum places a hand on his chest. “Trust me, the more you tolerate each other the easier things are going to be for you.”

Shane sighs. Why is everyone conspiring against him today?

“It’s just one year,” Dad says. “And then you’ll be free. Try to make the most of it.” He winks, referring to the expensive wine Rozanov bought today.

Oh well.

When they get back to Rozanov’s place, Shane heads straight to his room. But of course, the other has something to say.

“I told you we will be friends.” Rozanov walks in his direction, his hands in his pockets.

“You want a prize? Should we throw a fucking party?” Shane snaps.

“I would not mind, but your definition of a party scares me.” Rozanov clicks his tongue.

Shane scoffs. “Don’t get too ahead of yourself, Rozanov. It’s just a year.” He repeats his dad’s words from earlier. “Do I need to remind you that you forced us into this fucking arrangement?”

Rozanov’s face hardens. “Do you believe yourself?”

“Isn’t this what’s happening?” Shane retorts.

“Do you remember what I told you when you first came here?”

Shane inhales. That night is hazy in his mind. He barely remembers panicking on the roof and then running into Rozanov.

“You are not here because I forced you, Hollander. You are here because you *chose* to be.”

“How is that supposed to make sense?” Shane spits. “It was either that or my parents’ life goes down the fucking drain.”

“And I am the only person who could have helped you?” Rozanov pushes. “You could have said no to the deal and looked for other options. You would do anything for your parents, yes?”

Rozanov continues heatedly. “*Your* parents told you it is me or their work is over. You agreed because you can’t fucking stand saying no to your parents. Your ego brought you here. Not me.”

The last sentence feels like a punch to Shane’s chest, knocking all the air out of him.

Rozanov strides to his room without waiting for a reply from Shane, which he distantly is grateful for because he doesn’t know what to say. His mind is glitching at a superspeed that is

causing him to breathe irregularly. He heads into his room in a daze, mechanically changing and showering before he gets into bed.

He barely gets any sleep that night.

Just when he thought they were making progress, they are back to square one. For some reason though, something twists painfully in his chest because a part of him thinks Rozanov's words had a point. Even if it was painful to acknowledge.

Communication between them drops to the bare minimum throughout the next two days. All the while, Rozanov's words ring in Shane's mind like church bells. A calling that a large part of his mind is begging him to answer. Shane hates how he is feeling. Does Rozanov really think that low of him? He thinks Shane is just a pushover?

Ilya might have pushed it a bit too far. He might have been a little tough on Hollander, but he thinks it might be for a good reason. Turns out, Hollander genuinely knows nothing about himself nor his life outside of what his parents have drawn for him. Ilya felt bad for him at times, until it became too insufferable to watch him fool himself more and more.

And now he was mad at Ilya. He has a right to be, but he will thank Ilya later for being faced with a truth that is as ugly as this.

Besides, Ilya discovered the past two days that he doesn't like it when Hollander isn't talking to him. It makes the job of getting under his skin almost impossible.

He sighs as he enters his house. He makes his way first into the kitchen and greets Tanya.

"What did you do?" She asks in Russian with a disapproving look on her face.

"Nothing!" Ilya answers innocently, knowing exactly what she is talking about.

"You upset him." She argues, stirring something angrily.

Ilya rolls his eyes. "Well, I'm here to change that. Can you help me?"

Her face melts into the happiest he has ever seen, which causes a pang of jealousy to hit him. "You like him too much." He grimaces.

"He is charming. Adorable." She smiles to herself.

I know. I think I like him too.

"This is unbelievable." Ilya mutters under his breath. "You know the chocolate pastries I like?"

"Yes. Do you want me to make them?" She asks, her tone hopeful. God, sometimes Ilya seriously thinks he doesn't know what he would do without her.

“Yes. Make lots of them. He likes them too. And make sure to put an extra piece of chocolate in the middle.” He thinks back to the day Ilya took him to the bakery and how much Shane had enjoyed the chocolate filled dough even though he was stubborn about admitting it out loud.

“Of course!” She claps her hands once in joy. “He will love you for this.”

“Tanya,” Ilya warns, and the woman huffs and gets to work, continuing to mumble in Russian under her breath.

Ever since Ilya turned eighteen, she has never stopped fussing about his love life. It was funny sometimes, but now it is completely unbearable because he doesn’t know if he wants to entertain the thought of Hollander even looking at him with fondness in his eyes. Ilya thinks he wouldn’t stand it. He would kiss him right away.

Hollander is nowhere to be seen until Ilya goes into his room to shower and change into comfortable clothes before he walks up to Hollander’s door and knocks.

Ilya waits while he hears shuffling followed by a hiss of pain and the sound of bare footsteps approaching the door. He looks beautiful in a black cotton shirt and dark blue shorts. Ilya almost wants to laugh at the fact that Hollander wears gym shorts whether he is working out or not, but he isn’t here to add fuel to the fire today.

“Hi.” Ilya starts, watching Shane awkwardly hooking his thumbs into the pockets of his shorts.

It’s one of the many quirks about Hollander that Ilya finds so cute, and it takes everything in him not to act on it.

“Hey,” Shane greets back, avoiding his eyes. He does that a lot too.

Ilya has noticed Hollander has recently found interest in staring at his mouth as well, which was amusing when Ilya wasn’t thinking about it. Because thinking about it meant it mattered to him, and he knows it shouldn’t, but God it did so much.

“I was an asshole,” he says, cutting it short.

“No news there.” Hollander crosses his arms over his chest, his biceps flexing.

Ilya rolls his eyes. “I see you are enjoying this.”

“Yes, please keep going.”

“I should not have talked to you like that,” he continues.

“I uh, kind of started it. So...we're even, I guess.” Hollander nods.

“I want us to be good again,” Ilya says sincerely. “So, movie night after dinner? I will let you pick the movie.”

“You will *let* me!” Hollander blows a disbelieving laugh.

“Sorry. You can pick whatever boring movie you can. How does that sound?” Ilya finds himself smiling.

“Better.” Hollander lifts one shoulder.

“Good.” Ilya nods.

Ilya heads back to his room with a stupid, fond smile on his face. He is in so much trouble.

If Shane has one failure in his life, it is resisting Tanya's food. He has been spending extra hours at the gym to burn the amount of delicious food he eats on a daily basis here. Tanya is basically Shane's favourite part of living in Rozanov's penthouse. That and the home theatre Rozanov has in the slightly smaller living area upstairs.

“What are we watching?” Rozanov asks as he places a bowl of popcorn on the coffee table.

“When Harry Met Sally. It's one of my favourite movies.” He grins excitedly. Shane has seen it multiple times, but he never grows tired of it. Besides, tomorrow is Valentine's Day and it feels like a perfect movie for the occasion.

“I hope Harry and Sally are not boring.” Rozanov grumbles. “Wait. There is one last thing.” He jogs down the stairs, disappears for a few minutes, then comes back with a plate that makes Shane gasp at its sight.

“What the hell?” His mouth salivates at the sight of the freshly baked pastries, their sweet smell reaching his nose as Rozanov places it right in the middle between them. “Did Tanya make those?”

“Yes. I asked her to.” Is Rozanov *blushing*?

“For me?” Shane asks, the idea filling his stomach with silly butterflies.

“Yes. No. For us both. They are my favourite too.” He stammers, and Shane has to hold back a giggle.

He has never seen Rozanov like this.

“Go on. Try them. I am sure you will love them.”

“God, you two have sworn to destroy me, I just know it.” Shane shakes his head and grabs one of the pastries.

He sinks his teeth into its pillowy texture and is immediately met with the richest, creamiest chocolate filling he instinctively moans in happiness. “This is so fucking good.” Shane looks at Rozanov and finds an odd, distracted look on his face. He quickly snaps back into the moment though, visibly swallowing.

“Told you it is good.” Rozanov takes one himself and eats it happily.

Shane hums in agreement and presses the play button on the remote. They fall into comfortable silence while they watch Shane’s favourite movie, and he can’t help but steal glances at Rozanov next to him on the couch every now and then. He looks so focused it is kind of funny, then sometime halfway, Shane hears the first snuffle coming from beside him. He lets it slide as a casual, normal snuffle and focuses his attention back to the movie.

By the end of it, the dessert plate is empty and there has been a questionable amount of sniffles coming from Rozanov that Shane has to say something about it.

“Are you *crying*?” Shane gapes, though he already finds his answer on Rozanov’s face. He looks away immediately.

“No? I remembered something. Is all.” He looks back at Shane, and his eyes look a little red.

“Ilya Rozanov, you are crying over my favourite movie that you claimed, falsely, would be boring. Yes or no?” Shane takes the empty plate and puts it on the table in front of them.

“No. And fuck off. It is not a big deal.” He throws a pillow at Shane, which he deflects at the last moment before it accidentally grazes his left eye.

“Hey!” Shane exclaims in offense. “No need for violence, Rozanov.”

“No, it is very important. Now you know I am all mushy inside. I must kill you.” He shakes his head, already reaching for another pillow to throw against Shane.

Shane braces himself and grabs one too, just to shield himself from whatever Rozanov intends to do. Another one comes flying at him, but Shane actually uses his pillow to bounce it back and it ends up hitting Rozanov squarely in the face.

He stares at him blankly. “You are dead, Hollander.”

That is the last thing Shane hears before they practically fall into a pillow war, not even a fight. Rozanov is savage, his laughter overlapping with Shane’s as they find themselves rolling to the floor in a heap of cushions and pillows. Shane is sprawled on his back on the thickly carpeted floor, and Rozanov is somewhere next to him, his large figure taking up more space than Shane’s.

When their laughter dies down, Shane feels tired so a yawn escapes him.

“You are tired. You must want to sleep.” Rozanov sits up, leaning his back against the couch.

Shane props himself up on his elbows to be able to look at him. “I’m a bit sleepy, yeah.”

“Tomorrow we have the big date,” Rozanov says as if Shane hasn’t been counting down the days.

Ever since their mini fight after they returned from dinner at Shane’s parents’ house, he has been doing a lot of thinking. That has resulted in realizing two things. One: He has been

living under his parents' wing for so long he forgot what it's like to live for himself. Two: Rozanov was right. Of course the way he had put it was fucking painful and outright rude, but it didn't change the fact that he was right.

And that made Shane a little sad.

"You were right," he says quietly.

"Huh?" Rozanov looks confused.

He looks so young like this in his sweatpants and black shirt with his curly hair a mess over his head. Shane gets the undeniable urge to run his hand through it.

"About me."

"What about you?" Rozanov frowns, clearly not catching onto what Shane is trying to say.

"I don't know what it's like." He stares at his bare feet. "To live for myself. Like you."

Rozanov's frown deepens as he looks directly at Shane. "I do not want you to be like me. That is not what I meant."

"I know what you meant." Shane nods. "I just—so much about my life is my parents, and I don't know where to go from there."

The room is so quiet for a few minutes that Shane doesn't think Rozanov will say anything.

Then, "I can show you," Rozanov's foot nudges Shane's suggestively.

Shane chuckles at the child-like gesture. "I have an entire year, so don't be in a rush."

Rozanov just snickers at that. He keeps his foot where it is, pressed against Shane's. And Shane doesn't move either.

"Tanya told me about your mum," Shane says after a while. "I'm sorry."

"I know."

"You do?" Shane does nothing to hide his surprise.

"Tanya tells me everything," he says, and for a moment, panic floods through Shane. Does that mean she told him everything they talked about that day? Jesus, Shane hopes not. That would be even more embarrassing. "Including your deal to teach her English. Cheater."

Shane gasps at being called a cheater. "You're not around most of the time and I have plenty of free time here! It's simply an act of taking an opportunity." He explains.

"Bullshit."

"Yeah, it is." Shane huffs out a laugh. Another long yawn makes its way out of Shane's system, and he takes it as his official sign to go to bed. He clumsily gets up, trying not to trip

onto any of the stray pillows on the ground.

“Need a hand?” Shane asks, giggling down at Rozanov who looks like he is feeling too heavy to carry himself up on his own.

“Good thinking.” Rozanov stretches out a hand and waits for Shane to grab it, but Shane flips him off.

That sends Rozanov to his feet in no time, and Shane breaks into a sprint as Rozanov makes a chase for him.

“Hey! It worked!” Shane raises his hands in surrender, but Rozanov still corners him by one of the speakers.

“You think you can outsmart me, Hollander?” Rozanov smirks, and something stirs in Shane’s stomach.

“I *know* I can.” Shane corrects him, then taps the side of his arm. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to sleep.” He doesn’t miss the firm muscle he feels under his hand in those two seconds though.

Rozanov barely makes any space for Shane to squeeze through, smugly looking down at him. Shane sometimes kinda hates the couple of inches Rozanov has on him. “*Goodnight, Rozanov.*”

“Night, Hollander.” He fully steps aside and lets Shane walk away.

Shane is almost at the head of the stairs when he remembers a question he forgot to ask once the movie ended. “You didn’t tell me what’s your favourite thing about the movie,” he says, half turning to look at Rozanov where he is still standing at the opposite side of the room.

Rozanov thinks for a moment, then a small smile finds its way to his lips. “I like that they went from friends to lovers.”

That steals Shane’s breath. He doesn’t think he can say anything to *that*. So, he makes sure Rozanov just sees his smile before he turns around and heads down to his bedroom.

The next day, Shane stares at the hanging, covered suit with the note ‘wear this today’ and a little heart next to it like a teenager in school. If this had happened a few days ago, Shane would have extracted the suit, cut it into shreds, and thrown it all over Rozanov’s bedroom floor. Today though, his mind is racing in a myriad different directions over how Rozanov got him this *gorgeous* suit. Freshly out of the shower, Shane puts it on and admires how perfectly it looks on him. It’s a navy blue, two piece Tom Ford suit that he absolutely loves the moment he puts the jacket on. The fabric hugs his upper body comfortably, and he can’t help the small smile that forms on his lips as he takes one last look at himself in the mirror before he leaves his room. He looks *good*.

He finds Rozanov by the door, looking infuriatingly handsome in a black Dolce & Gabbana suit. Up close, Shane sees that the jacket is not plain black and has light thread work in gold

at the front of it.

Rozanov's eyes rake Shane's figure from head to toe, causing his body to throb once with heat. "It fits." He nods towards his suit.

"Yeah, I don't know how you did that. Thanks, I guess." Shane smiles bashfully.

"Your stylist, Hollander." Rozanov fondly rolls his eyes. "Now let's go. We do not want to be late. They might give our table to some other celebrity."

"Are you serious?" Shane gasps.

"Yes. We will find Lady Gaga."

It takes Shane a few moments to realise that Rozanov was being sarcastic. "Asshole."

Rozanov barks out a laugh, and Shane finds himself following the way his features change entirely when he laughs like this. His cheeks tint in colour, the corners of his eyes crinkle, and he looks just overall lighter. He clears his throat and gets into the car, busying his mind with focusing on the music playing in the background. The restaurant Rozanov has booked for them is known for its clientele, so they don't face the issue of being surrounded by masses of people waiting for Shane's autograph. Instead, they are treated a little bit too luxuriously than Shane expected.

The place is nice. Shane has concluded that because he spends most of the time looking anywhere but at Rozanov. He looks *too* good. He is grateful when their food is served so he can find something to do other than admire the interior design of the restaurant.

"Food is good?" Rozanov asks at some point.

"Yeah." Shane nods. "Um. Now what?" He asks after their server removes their empty plates.

Rozanov shrugs. "What do you want to do?"

"I don't know." Shane scratches the back of his neck. "Are we supposed to like—"

"Pretend we are lovers? Probably."

"God, that's gross." He nearly cringes as he murmurs under his breath. "How do we even.." he sighs.

"I think we are used to hating each other." Rozanov takes a sip of his wine.

Shane thinks about that for a moment. "Yeah. Yeah, maybe."

"We could share dessert?" Rozanov suggests.

Shane laughs. "That's your idea of pretending to look like we're dating?"

It is such a small, light suggestion but it reminds Shane that under all of the suits, meetings and press appearances...Rozanov is just a twenty five year old living his life and trying to enjoy it.

“Would you rather I do something else?” Rozanov looks mischievously at him.

Shane’s eyes widen at the endless possibilities that rush through his mind. “No, no. Dessert is fine.”

He orders them today’s special, but Shane doesn’t pay attention to what it is, because his eyes land on someone sitting at the table behind them that has Shane buzzing with adrenaline.

“Are you ok?” Rozanov asks. “You look like you have seen a ghost.”

“Close enough.” Shane gestures for him to come closer as if he is about to whisper a secret to him. “Don’t look, but guess who is sitting right behind you?”

Rozanov’s face twists into confusion. “Lady Gaga?”

“*Rose Landry*.” Shane covers his mouth afterwards as if he’s scared his voice was too loud.

“Who is this Rose Landry?” Rozanov asks with the least interest in the world, reclining back in his seat.

“Shhh!” Shane hisses at him. “You don’t know her? She’s one of the best actors of our generation, basically.”

Rozanov blows out a raspberry. “Don’t know her.”

“She’s so cool,” Shane says, and he is pretty sure he looks so embarrassingly starstruck now. “You have to watch her latest movie.”

“Maybe one day,” Rozanov says, but Shane loses track of what else is going on at their table, because he *thinks* Rose has seen him and has just waved at Shane.

“Oh my God.” He sinks a little lower in his seat. “Oh my God, she’s coming. Act cool.”

Shane scrambles up to his feet, putting on his best charming and not at all awkward smile as she makes her way over to them.

“Shane Hollander, right? Hi!” She gives him a friendly hug that Shane dazedly returns. “It’s nice to see you.”

“It’s so nice to see you too,” Shane replies excitedly. “I’m a big fan.”

“Please, the only big fan here today is me. That Valentine’s photoshoot was something.” She makes a show of fanning herself and they both laugh afterwards.

The sound of something colliding with the floor startles both of them, and Shane’s head snaps to Rozanov whose wine glass that had been in his hand moments ago is now on the floor in

tiny pieces.

“Jesus, are you okay?” Shane asks, though Rozanov looks unfazed by the incident. Then, his attention goes back to Rose. “Sorry, this is Ilya Rozanov.”

“Nice to meet you.” She extends a hand out for Rozanov to shake. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

Rozanov shakes her hand solemnly. “Me too.” He nods once.

She turns back to Shane. “I’m gonna leave you two now. I’d love to see you again sometime.”

“Sure.” Shane smiles.

“Bye Shane.” She waves at both of them before she elegantly makes her way back to her own table.

An uneasy feeling clings to the pit of Shane’s stomach as he sits back down facing Rozanov again. It looks like there is a totally different person sitting across from him.

“You like her a lot,” Rozanov notes.

“Yeah,” Shane answers, an edge to his voice. “She’s amiable. Unlike some people.”

Rozanov raises his eyebrows, but he doesn’t say anything.

“What happened to your wine glass?”

“Was an accident.”

“It could’ve hurt someone.” Shane takes a big gulp of his water.

“I am perfectly fine.”

“I wasn’t talking about you.” Shane stabs his fork into their dessert and gives himself time to relive his short but sweet interaction with Rose before Rozanov had decided to sour it.

By the time they get home, Shane’s thoughts have simmered well in his head. He doesn’t know how he keeps ending up like this. Every time he thinks they are taking one step forward, Shane finds himself ten steps backwards.

“So, what the fuck was that back there?” Shane snaps, whipping to face Rozanov. He is still standing by the door, confusion etched onto his face.

“What?”

“The fucking petty move you pulled back there?” Shane’s voice is surprisingly loud.

“I told you it was an accident.” Rozanov looks darkly at him.

“Bullshit! What are you? Five?”

“Watch it, Hollander.”

“No, because you were so fucking out of line tonight!” Shane yells. “I *saw* the look on your face, I know you fucking dropped it on purpose.”

Rozanov’s silence pushes him to speak again.

“Why did you do it? What the fuck do you want, Rozanov?” Shane’s chest rises and falls rapidly with the effort of him shouting.

“Are you done?” Rozanov asks calmly, his eyes unreadable.

“No.” Shane shakes his head. “I want to know what the hell possessed back there. *Something* made you do it.”

“I think you know,” Ilya says.

How can he not fucking see it? Ilya is standing there miserably waiting for him to *realise*. Because he knows Hollander isn’t stupid.

Shane Hollander is many things, but stupid is not one of them.

Oblivious maybe. Denying what *he* wants, yes. But never stupid.

Which is what is currently driving Ilya insane. Today was his last straw. Yes, he isn’t proud of what he did, but he had to do *something*.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Shane breathes heavily. His face is pink where his freckles are from how angry he is, and Ilya shouldn’t find that endearing.

God, there are so many things he shouldn’t want, but he is way beyond what is right and what is wrong now.

Hollander shoves him, the surprise of it making his back collide with the wall giving way to the hallway where their rooms are. “*What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Ilya?*”

“It means I fucking want you, Hollander!” Ilya, charged with so many emotions, shoves him back.

He watches Hollander’s face fall into an expression of pure shock, his brown eyes widening. Those eyes dart to Ilya’s lips then back to his eyes.

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya huffs out miserably, his voice thinner than he intended.

Ilya is probably dreaming. No, he definitely is.

Because Shane crowds up against him, grabs him by the lapels of his jackets and smashes their lips together. Ilya's eyes fall shut immediately at the devastating beauty of finally having those lips on his. He feels it in his heart that it will not be long, and it will probably end badly—but it is what Ilya has now, and he will make the most of it.

Ilya kisses him back earnestly, pulling Shane into him by his waist. Then, he switches them over, pushing Shane up against the wall and sucking in the low gasp that emits from him. His lips are pliant under Ilya's, pushing Ilya further and further away from his control.

Shane's hands flatten over Ilya's chest, and he pushes Ilya off to stare at him. His lips are swollen and glistening, screaming at Ilya to pounce on them again. Shane's dark eyes are so conflicted, Ilya can see that. But they are also swimming with desire.

"Ilya..." he breathes out Ilya's name so carefully, so experimentally it crawls under his skin and takes home there, spreading like warmth on a cold night.

Ilya doesn't move an inch, scared of doing the wrong move lest he scares him off.

As if he heard his thoughts, Shane kisses him again. This time bolder, hotter, eager. Ilya gives him what he wants, chasing his tongue with his own. He pins Shane's hips with his and lets out a groan when Shane's hands feel their way down his stomach. Then, as if an ice bucket has been dumped onto Ilya's head, Shane stops. Freezes completely.

"Hollander." Ilya frowns, his insides withering like a dying rose.

Shane shakes his head, his eyes shining. He is breathing fast, and Ilya knows it's not from kissing.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, slightly pushing back at Ilya.

"Hollander," Ilya pleads desperately, taking a few steps back and giving him the space he needs.

"I can't." He looks down at his feet then bolts away from Ilya into the dark hallway towards his room.

Ilya stands on his own for a few minutes, a long sigh escaping him. He should have seen this coming.

But it still doesn't make him regret taking the chance to kiss Shane.

Shane struggles to get his breathing back to normal when he gets back to his room. He doesn't know how long he sits there on the floor with his back pressed to the closed door. He doesn't even remember when he had started crying nor realised when he even did. He doesn't know what happened. One moment he was fighting with Ilya and the next he was—he was *kissing* him. Fully on the mouth. But that wasn't the scary part. Nor was it enjoying kissing him.

It was the fact that he wanted it and more. It felt right until Shane realised it was far from that. He can't have this with Ilya. He can't have Ilya in any way, because all he realistically has with him is a business deal, an arranged marriage that ends by December this year. Besides, they aren't friends. They have repeatedly shown themselves that they failed at this. They can't go about a few weeks without fighting. And Shane is just...tired.

It was so much easier to just hate Ilya.

When all he thought of Ilya was the cocky, arrogant, playboy persona he puts on for the public.

Now Shane knows he is considerate, honest, a big softie, and he can't find it in him to hate Ilya anymore.

Their marriage announcement should come out next month, and the only thing Shane is worrying about right now is how he might have potentially ruined everything. He and Ilya officially can't be friends after this, and they definitely can't be more. What would his parents think of him?

So, Shane continues to be an asshole for the next week, avoiding Ilya at any given chance while his stomach ties itself into knots because they have a public appearance at the end of this month where they will have to do a little bit of PDA that gives the impression that yes, they are not *just* friends.

He doesn't blame Ilya for being indifferent towards him. In fact, Shane isn't doing that much of a better job either. Then it hits him on the morning of their set-up appearance.

It comes to him like a message in a bottle on ocean waves. Ilya's harsh—but true—words from the night they fought after their dinner at Shane's house. He has been living almost all of his life in the shadow of his parents, but where is his own light?

The thought stays with Shane throughout the whole day, and it crystallizes when he is walking beside Ilya on the street. The other puts an arm around Shane's waist as the script had said, and Shane leans into him, the movement electric as it brings back flashes from their Valentine's Day dinner. He can feel it in his bones, the restraint Ilya is trying to keep. They turn a corner and they are hit with a massive wave of fans all carrying posters of Shane, sending him into a wave of momentary shock. How did all those people even know he was going to be here?

Ilya must have noticed Shane's hesitant demeanor, because he says, "is okay. We do not have to do this if you don't want to."

"No, no. It's fine, I can sign some and then we can leave."

Ilya nods silently and falls a step back, giving Shane the full spotlight but still making sure he isn't alone. Shane signs so many postcards and posters all with his face and semi naked body plastered on them. They ask questions about Ilya, and Shane answers as in-context as he can. He poses and takes some pictures, and then he is excusing himself when a fan jabs an arm out and grabs at Shane's shoulder to catch him before he leaves.

Shane jerks back at the sudden movement, and his back lands on a firm hand behind him and a loud voice rises from right next to him.

“Hey!” Ilya shouts, yanking the fan’s poster away. “Do not fucking touch him!”

The crowd recedes at Ilya’s outburst, and many phones are raised at them filming the interaction. But that’s the last thing Shane cares about right now when Ilya turns to him, touching a hand to Shane’s cheek as if reflexively.

“Are you okay?” he asks, his eyes full of concern that somehow sends a rock down Shane’s throat.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks.” He nods repeatedly, swallowing thickly. “We should go, I think.”

To get through the rest of the now shaken mass of fans, Ilya reaches behind him and Shane slips his hand in his, matching his strides and keeping his head down. Shane and Ilya finally escape, and he is grateful for the breath of air. Their walking pace slows down a bit, and Shane no longer feels like he is being chased down.

He doesn’t drop Ilya’s hand.

March

Shane and Ilya are having breakfast on the day before their marriage announcement goes out when it happens.

Ilya’s phone rings, he answers, his face hardens and then he is getting up without a word.

“Are you alright?” Shane asks, putting his cup of coffee down.

“It is my father. He is dead.”

That only means one thing.

Shane immediately rises from his seat. “I’m coming with you.”

Ilya gives him a look that Shane doesn’t fully understand. “Not now, Shane.”

“I’m *not* leaving you alone.” He shakes his head, making sure that him leaving Shane behind isn’t an option.

“Fine. Okay.” He blows out a breath. “Go pack. We leave now.”

Shane texts his parents, letting them know what happened and that he is leaving with Ilya before he starts packing a suitcase while Ilya makes a few phone calls. Two hours later, they are in the Rozanov private jet taking off into the air.

Ilya barely gets any sleep during the long flight, which Shane understands, but he can’t help worrying about him since he genuinely doesn’t know when they will be able to get any sleep again.

“Ilya.” He grabs his attention by placing a hand on his knee. “You have to get some rest.”

Ilya looks a bit too long at Shane’s hand that he starts feeling like it was a wrong move.

“You can’t do this in Russia,” he says quietly. “Touch me, I mean.”

Shane frowns. Aren’t their photos and videos everywhere now? How will people not know they have been all over each other in the public eye?

“No one knows about us here. Last of all my family.”

“Are they...” Shane swallows.

“Homophobic?” Ilya says dryly. “Worse.”

He realises shortly that he has probably freaked Shane out, so he half turns to him. “Just pretend you are my business partner, yes?”

“Would that be better for you?”

“For me? No. But it is safer for you.” He frowns. “I think.”

Shane wants to say something about how weird it would be if Ilya’s ‘business partner’ shows up to his dad’s funeral with him, but he decides against it. He knows his home and people better. Shane just has to be there for him now.

As he expected, Shane finds a lot of eyes holding questions on him when they arrive. He brushes them off and focuses on being next to Ilya at all times though, never leaving his side. During the dinner after the funeral, Ilya whispers to him who the people around them are.

Sitting to Ilya’s left is his childhood best friend, Svetlana, and across from them there is a man that looks just the slightest like Ilya. A woman with a little girl in her lap sits next to him, and Shane recognises him as Andrei, Ilya’s older brother, before Ilya says who he is. He has been throwing Shane not very nice looks that he knows exactly what they reek of, so he does exactly what pisses this kind of people off. He ignores him.

Some time during their meal, Shane finds Ilya’s thigh under the table and he just leaves his hand there for reassurance. Ilya doesn’t react of course, but Shane knows he is thankful for the little gesture. They have grown a bit physically comfortable around each other after that day Ilya held his hand back in February, but neither of them has initiated anything else. Not after what Shane did on Valentine’s Day. And probably out of fear of spiralling back to a dark place.

Or maybe Ilya thinks it is pointless to have Shane when they aren’t even each other’s except for a year. He wouldn’t blame him.

Though none of that changes the fact that Shane still wants him like crazy after all this time.

A deep voice coming from across them pulls Shane out of his thoughts. He missed what Andrei said, because it’s in Russian anyway, but he doesn’t miss the way Ilya’s entire body

tenses.

“Andrei,” Svetlana says his name in a warning tone, then says something in Russian that Shane guesses might be ‘not here’ or ‘now’ based on the current context.

But Andrei doesn’t look like he is listening to her. He has his eyes locked on Ilya, a smug, disgusting smile framing his face. He says something else that sends Ilya pushing his chair back and standing up on the spot, his hands curling into fists by his sides. He hurries out of the room in silence, and Shane’s chest tightens when Andrei follows him outside.

Shane’s automatic reflex is getting up and following Ilya, but he knows he can’t do that. So, instead he stays put and prays to every divine being that nothing happens. Shane must have done something bad in his life though, because he hears the sound of a loud thud followed by shouting. The sounds startle him into a half-standing position when Svetlana’s head snaps in his direction and she glares at him, silently telling him to wait here too. He is going murder someone if he is told one more time to stay here.

Svetlana motions for him right under the table that he should calm down before she slowly stands up and disappears into the place the two brothers have vanished into.

Shane waits impatiently while he picks at his food. He didn’t even have much of an appetite anyway. A few minutes later, Svetlana returns with Andrei trailing behind her holding a hand to his cheekbone. Shane’s blood runs cold, and his eyes find Svetlana, wordlessly asking where Ilya is. She subtly nods to the side in the direction where she came from, and Shane waits a few more minutes then he is rushing out of that awful room.

He finds Ilya standing outside in the freezing cold with a cigarette.

“Hey. Are you okay?” Shane chatters through the cold without his jacket.

Ilya looks emptily at him, his eyes red as if he has been crying or is about to.

“I will not be talking to my brother again,” he says, taking a long drag of his cigarette then blowing only probably half of the smoke. Shane’s heart clenches in his chest.

“What happened?”

“He is a piece of shit. I do not want him as family anymore. My niece, yes, and her mother. They are good people. My brother does not deserve them.”

“Ilya.” Shane is about to accidentally place a hand on his shoulder, but Ilya flinches away and Shane remembers at the same moment, burying his hand in his pocket instead. “Do you want to talk?”

Ilya puts out his cigarette and snuffles. “Not here. When we are done maybe. I will come to your room.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

They head back into the hall where people are now chatting quietly. They keep this for one more hour, and Shane finds a friend in Ilya's niece sitting right opposite him. They smile at each other and wave back and forth but that's as far as it gets. Or as far as Andrei lets it get, sending death glares to his wife every now and then as if Shane was some sort of a plague to be avoided.

The torturous night finally fucking ends, and Shane is more than grateful to find his way into the spare room that had been dedicated to him on the same floor as Ilya's room (another thing that he is grateful for). He feels bone-tired, but he waits for Ilya as he promised. He knows they will have to be extra careful about this, and that no one can see either of them going in or out of the other's room. So he patiently waits for the knock on his door.

He opens it in no time and lets Ilya in, checking the area after him.

"Hey," Shane says. "How are you feeling?"

Ilya plops down onto the edge of Shane's bed then looks up at him. "Tired?"

He does look so worn out as if he has just grown ten years into the future.

"That's okay," Shane comforts him. "It has been a long day. Which is why I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"Why don't you say everything you want to say in Russian? I won't understand a thing, trust me the only words I know are probably all food and I don't even remember them." He softly chuckles. "This way you don't have to think about the words in English, and I think it might help." Shane puts his hands in his pockets while Ilya stares at him.

"Good idea," he finally says.

Shane smiles, feeling triumphant. "Whenever you feel ready."

"Is so weird with you looking at me like that," Ilya grimaces.

"Wait, that does feel a little weird. Do you want me to close my eyes?" Shane suggests.

"Yes. And sit down." Shane obeys and takes a seat next to Ilya on the edge of the bed.

He closes his eyes and hears Ilya take a shaky breath. Shane realises how big this must feel for him—someone who barely says two words about his feelings or personal life. Let alone to Shane out of all people. Ilya starts talking while Shane listens to the way his voice flows, deep and hoarse. As he promised him, Shane doesn't understand a word but he is glad his idea is working. Ilya pauses and breathes, his voice breaks and he snuffles, his voice rises and toughens...all the while Shane fights the urge to hug him.

It becomes impossible to hold himself back when he feels the bed shake with a sob that breaks out of Ilya, and he opens his eyes. Ilya looks to the side as if hiding away, but Shane catches sight of the tear that is rolling down his cheek.

“It’s okay,” Shane whispers, acting on pure instinct as he climbs into Ilya’s lap and wraps his arms around him.

Ilya breathes out in relief, and it brings tears to Shane’s own eyes. He cradles Ilya’s head, burying his fingers in his rumpled curls and rocks them slowly.

And on top of all, I think I’m falling in love with you and I don’t know what to do about it.

Ilya feels so much lighter after saying it, but the initial weight remains. He doesn’t think he will have Shane the way he wants, he doesn’t even think Shane wants him after all that happened. But he shuts all these thoughts out of his mind now. He only focuses on the way Shane is softly rocking them back and forth, hugging Ilya so close to him as if he wants to protect him from even the gentlest wind.

Ilya’s eyes burn at the wave of affection that brings him, reminding him of his mother’s hugs when he was younger. Everything about Ilya’s world is wrong. Everything that happened today and the years before is wrong—how his mother left this world and left him with his cruel dad and his mean brother, how he couldn’t make his mother happy enough to keep her with him here in his world, how his brother did nothing today but insult him and probably the only good thing he has had in his life for three months now, how this only one good thing can’t even be his.

But Ilya has decided; today is the last day he lets life decide for him who stays and who leaves.

“I am done,” he says, switching back to English.

Shane pulls back a little just to look at him, and Ilya wants everything in his life to vanish except for this moment. “How are you feeling?” he asks, his mouth inches away from Ilya’s own.

“Lighter.” He rubs Shane’s back, tightening his arms around him.

“Good,” he whispers, one corner of his mouth lifting in a small smile. He stares into Ilya’s eyes a little longer, then he dips his head and meets Ilya’s lips slowly, hesitantly.

Ilya closes his eyes, emotion erupting inside him like water after a drought. He kisses back, feeling Shane’s tender hands on the side of his face and in his hair. Ilya deepens the kiss, getting a taste of him and fighting his mind that is reeling with questions: *is this real? Do you feel me? Do you want me too?*

But Shane pulls away, kissing the corner of Ilya’s mouth afterwards. He looks at him with fondness in his eyes, one hand coming out of Ilya’s hair to wipe away his drying tears. “You’re tired,” he says. “We should sleep.”

Ilya wants to argue with him, but he is actually too tired. He lets Shane guide him back to the bed to lay properly, and then Shane climbs into bed next to him. He pulls the covers over them, and Ilya finds himself gravitating to Shane's space, pulling him into his arms. If he is going to sleep with Shane in his arms, then he could sleep forever.

"This okay?" he asks before he fully pulls Shane towards him.

Shane twists back just to look at him, a soft expression on his face. Then he nods. "Yeah."

Ilya's eyes burn again, but he closes them to stop the stubborn tears from falling as he encompasses Shane's figure with his and rests his chin on the top of his head.

Sleep greets Ilya immediately, and he distantly realises that this is the first time he and Shane share a room.

Shane wakes up alone in the morning.

He reaches for his phone and finds it dead. "Shit." He grumbles, getting up and fishing for his charger.

He forgets about his charger though when he spots a piece of folded paper on the dresser next to the bed. When he picks it up, he finds words hand-written in black ink.

I will be back when you wake up. Do not leave your room. -Ilya

Shane frowns down at the note, his mind starting to wonder where Ilya had gone when the door cracks open, startling him.

"Hey." Shane turns to fully face him. "Where were you?"

"I visited my mother," Ilya reveals, pulling something out of the inside of his coat.

Shane's mouth falls open. "I-what's that?"

"Lilies," he says, his arm extended in Shane's direction with a single flower. "She loves them, and they remind me of you both."

"Ilya that's...beautiful." *and so special.*

He takes it and tries not to think about the fact that Ilya must have probably carried the flower with him all the way here and kept it under his clothes to protect it from the snow.

"We are leaving soon. Now if you want."

Confusion strikes through Shane. "Already? Are you sure you're not—I mean, you don't have to stay longer?" He doesn't ask about Ilya wanting to stay longer, because he knows he doesn't want to.

“No.” He shakes his head once. “I have done everything, and Svetlana is here,” he says as if Shane knows what that means.

“Okay.” He nods slowly. “Okay, then, yeah. I’ll wash up and be right with you.”

Svetlana offers to drive the two men to where they are taking the Rozanov jet back to Canada, and Ilya hardly argues with her. The ride is quiet, and Shane gets the sense that Svetlana isn’t like the rest of Ilya’s family. Ironically, she is the only one acting like actual family when she isn’t even related to Ilya by blood. When they arrive, Ilya says his goodbyes to his friend while Shane watches them with curiosity. He has never heard about Svetlana even though everything he has seen in the past hours shows how close they are to each other. She hugs him tightly and Shane is surprised when she smiles at him over Ilya’s shoulder. Then, when they pull back, she makes her way over to Shane, shakes his hand and says, “take care of him.”

Ilya finds his way back to him and they get on the plane together, leaving Russia and its people behind.

Shane keeps a close eye on Ilya during the flight, but he doesn’t do much else than staring out the window or sleeping. Until they get back home and he disappears into his room. During that time, Shane calls his parents, checks his calendar and sees if he has anything urgent coming up soon, he does everything that isn’t going up to Ilya and knocking on his door.

Minutes later, Shane does exactly that.

He waits for a while, almost changing his mind and leaving, when the door finally opens and he is welcomed with the sight of Ilya in a black tank top and loose pants.

“I, um, I wanted to check if you’re okay.” Shane mentally curses his face that is heating up for no reason now.

“I am okay.” Ilya nods, gesturing at himself as if saying ‘see for yourself’.

“You don’t want to do anything?”

“Hollander.” Ilya gives him a ‘I’m not a child’ look but not a mean one.

“I just don’t think you should be alone right now,” he says truthfully.

“I am not alone.” His expression softens. “You are here, yes?”

“Yeah.” Shane gives him a small smile.

“Come in.” He opens the rest of his door and steps aside, inviting Shane in.

Shane’s foot hovers over the threshold for a couple of seconds before he goes in. He hears the soft click of the door closing behind him and realises, looking at his surroundings, that this is his first time seeing Ilya’s room ever since he moved in almost three months ago now.

The room is painted in light tones with a black wall at the end of it where a framed–

“Is that a real Boston jersey?” Shane gasps, his feet carrying him to the neatly hanging frame on the wall. It has ‘Rozanov 81’ on its back. “Is this even legal?” He turns to Ilya and discovers that he has already been looking at him.

He winks at Shane, giving him the impression that it probably isn’t but when you’re as rich as Ilya then... besides, that is probably the least worst use of power when someone can get to, so Shane doesn’t think about it a lot. In fact, he thinks it’s a little cute.

“To answer your question, it is real, yes.” Ilya chuckles.

That is pretty much the most exciting thing in the room, the rest is regular furnishing, the bed is messy from Ilya probably spending most of the day in it.

“Your room is nice.” Shane wants to smack himself the moment the words leave him.

“Thanks. I designed it myself.”

“Fuck off.” Shane chuckles and gives Ilya’s shoulder a light shove.

They sit together on the floor by Ilya’s bed, resting their backs against the side of it.

“I was going to be a hockey player, you know,” Shane confesses out loud for the first time to someone that isn’t his parents.

“What happened?” Ilya asks curiously.

“I did,” he jokes. “No, I mean there was no place for a fourteen year old gay boy like me in the NHL. Things weren’t like they are now, and there was no way you could have predicted how things were going to work out.”

Ilya is studying him carefully, his hazel eyes trained on Shane’s dark brown ones. “Since we are sharing secrets,” he sighs dramatically then bites his lip to stop a smile. There is a certain boyish quality to Ilya’s happy expressions that Shane can’t help but slightly fall for every time he sees one. “I watched your coming out video,” he says.

“You did?” Shane’s voice rises in pitch, surprise filling him from head to toe.

“Yes. I think it was brave. What you did,” he says earnestly.

“Wow, um.” He is sure his face resembles a ripe tomato now.

“You stopped making them cover your freckles.” He nods towards Shane’s face, confirming his horror of Ilya noticing how much he is blushing.

“I don’t know why you care so much about my freckles.” Shane huffs. “I hate them.”

“No, Hollander.” Ilya protests. “They are stunning.”

“*Stunning?*”

“Yes,” he answers, and his honesty is making Shane’s hands clammy. “You are very beautiful.” He nudges Shane’s foot with his.

Butterflies swarm Shane’s chest, nearly stopping his ability to breathe. He wants to say so many things in return, the appropriate and inappropriate, but his brain is so frazzled he can’t form proper words. So, he nudges Ilya’s foot back as if they were twelve years old.

“You are going to kill me, Hollander,” he says, his face looking directly next to him at Shane.

“What?” Shane has barely any time to register what is happening before Ilya, in one swift motion, straddles his lap and kisses him.

His hands that were limp by his sides on the floor charge upwards and find Ilya’s hips, travelling up the sides of his body as he feasts on Shane’s mouth. He tilts his head back, and Ilya doesn’t let the invitation go to waste. His tongue slips into Shane’s mouth, bold and demanding and so hot Shane accidentally moans. That seems to encourage Ilya to shift his weight from his knees on either side of Shane to his hips, meeting Shane where he is dying to be touched.

A pang hits Shane in the middle of his chest, and he has to pull back to look up at Ilya. “Ilya...” he breathes. The look on his face is killing Shane. “Are you su—”

“Do you want this?” Ilya asks firmly, his eyes wide and unguarded. “I will not ask you again, Hollander.”

Shane swallows, his heart still racing with the impact of their kiss. “Yeah. So much it fucking scares me,” he says.

Ilya brushes a hand against his cheek, his eyes looking at Shane in a way that makes him want to disappear. “Don’t be scared,” he says. “I want this too. So much.”

“You do?” Shane can do so little to hide his surprise.

“I think it is obvious.” Ilya nods down at himself, making Shane look where his eyes went to the bulge in his pants.

“Sorry.” He looks back up at Ilya with a sheepish smile, though a sense of pride encourages him to push his hips up.

Ilya groans at the contact, taking Shane’s hands and pinning them up against the mattress above his head. “Your time is up.”

That’s the last thing Shane processes before everything that fills his mind is the feeling of Ilya’s lips on his, this time a little slower but no less hungrier. He kisses Shane’s jaw, the area below it, his neck, pretty much every inch of exposed skin he can kiss. And Shane doesn’t have a single complaint. If someone had told him that one of his fantasies about Ilya Rozanov would come true and in one of the hottest ways possible, he would have laughed in their face.

“Ilya...” He shudders when Ilya’s mouth finds one of his nipples over his shirt. He mouths at it, wetting the thin fabric of Shane’s shirt and almost making him squirm for more.

Ilya presses his hips lower onto Shane, pinning him in place. "Patience," he whispers into Shane's ear, tugging at his earlobe with his teeth then sucking it into his mouth.

Shane's eyes flutter shut at the sensation. God it has been so long since he was with someone his body is probably not believing it is getting what it has been craving. In Shane's defence, he has been trying his best. As Ilya skims one hand down Shane's torso and holds his wrists up with the other though, Shane is humbled with how 'his best' is nothing compared to Ilya Rozanov cupping his dick through his pants.

"Fuck, please..." Shane buries his head in his raised arm, his hips helplessly bucking into Ilya's hand for more.

"Please what?" Ilya's deep voice demands, sliding his hand between Shane's pants and his underwear. He is such a tease, and Shane is kind of dying.

"More." He moans when Ilya maps the outline of his cock.

"Tell me what you need." Ilya looks down at him with a way that sends another rush of blood down to his already aching hard dick.

"I need..." his breathing falters as Ilya tightens his grip around his wrists and stops giving Shane any attention down there.

"Yes?" He closes in on Shane, their lips brushing together.

"...you."

Ilya captures the word right out of Shane's mouth, eagerly kissing him. He releases Shane's hands and kisses his way down his chest as Shane hurriedly takes his shirt off. Ilya leaves a wet trail of kisses on both of Shane's pecs, his stomach, and then when he reaches the waistband of Shane's joggers, he looks up at him through his lashes. He smiles the way Lucifer might have smiled, moments before he fell from heaven. Then, he peels Shane's pants and underwear in one go all the way down and off his feet.

He pushes Shane's legs wider and positions himself between them. "So beautiful," he murmurs, his eyes taking in all of Shane. "All for me." He bends down to plant a kiss to Shane's hip bone, his abdomen and then without a moment's thought, he takes Shane into his mouth.

"Jesus Christ, Ilya." Shane sighs at the feeling of his warm, wet mouth around him.

His hand finds Ilya's hair at the same time Ilya slides his hand up to rest on Shane's chest. He starts out slowly, and Shane is fucking entranced by the sight of Ilya's curly head bobbing up and down *his* length. Like this is fucking happening. It's not in his head. Not anymore.

"You're so fucking good," Shane barely manages as Ilya goes faster, his thumb brushing over Shane's nipple a couple of times.

Ilya's other hand is locked around Shane's right thigh for leverage as he continues to blow him. He can practically feel Ilya everywhere, and that makes him moan through gritted teeth,

fighting the urge to come on the spot.

He has wanted this for so long his body is not prepared to handle it for more than a few minutes. Which is kind of embarrassing for his first time with the guy he has been fantasising about for *months*.

“Fuck.” Shane shudders when Ilya focuses his attention on the head of Shane’s cock, pushing him even further. He fists Ilya’s hair in his hand and the other moans around Shane, the vibrations sending a jolt of pleasure down his spine.

“Fuck, I’m gonna...” his breathing goes out of his control, and Ilya increases his speed to get him there.

“*Ilya.*” Shane comes moaning Ilya’s name as if it’s his salvation, the name easily rolling off his tongue and somehow turning Shane on even more now that he can say it out loud with Ilya himself hearing it.

Speaking of Ilya, he doesn’t pull away when Shane’s whole body spasms with his orgasm, his hand in Ilya’s hair switches to a death grip, and when his release ends up in Ilya’s mouth.

“Was fast.” Ilya wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, a cocky look on his face.

“Fuck you!” Shane exclaims, a stupid smile getting stuck on his face. “Come here.”

He pulls Ilya in by the shirt and kisses him filthy—all tongue and lip-smacking sounds. He tugs at Ilya’s tank top and the other throws it over his head. Shane takes a moment to admire Ilya’s body, his fingers not leaving a patch of skin untouched. He impatiently pulls Ilya’s pants down, and his jaw slackens when he finds nothing else underneath.

“God, you’re so hot.” Shane can’t put it any other way. It is literally the truth. “Sit on the bed.”

Ilya silently raises his eyebrows, but he listens (thankfully). He gets rid of his sweats and looks down at Shane who taps his thigh, wordlessly asking him to make room for him between his legs. When Ilya catches onto what Shane is doing, his eyes darken with lust.

When Shane thought about blowing Ilya, he always thought about it like this. Ilya sitting on the edge of a bed with Shane on his knees between his legs. So, he doesn’t waste any time and wraps his lips around Ilya’s dick, revelling in the low groan he makes above his head.

Shane takes him all the way to the hilt, looking up at him through slightly wet eyelashes. Ilya’s face contorts in pleasure and Shane’s name falls off his lips. “Fuck, Shane.”

He pulls back slowly, then licks a stripe along Ilya’s length and teases a bit around his tip. He repeats the motion a couple of times before he grows even eager to make Ilya come and starts sucking.

Ilya puts his hand on the back of Shane’s head, encouraging and guiding. “Just like this,” he says, his voice strained as he probably struggles to form actual words.

Shane continues, hollowing out his cheeks as he hears Ilya's breathing pattern turning into a faster, erratic one. "Yes." He pants. "Take me apart, Hollander."

And Shane does exactly as he is asked.

He picks up his pace, his mouth making sloppy sounds around Ilya's dick along with the happy moans Ilya is making. Moments later, Ilya's whole body goes rigid, and he pulls Shane off of him by the back of his hair as a deep groan breaks out of him. He spurts his release all over Shane's chest and face, his cock twitching with pleasure.

Shane watches, mesmerised by the hot wonder that is Ilya Rozanov having an orgasm.

An orgasm that Shane gave him.

Ilya looks down at him tiredly with the ghost of a smile on his face. Shane has frozen in his spot since Ilya came as if caught in a trance. He doesn't think he wants to leave though. Not when Ilya brings a thumb to Shane's cheek right over his freckles where his come had landed on his face and wipes it away. Shane's eyes follow Ilya's movement and his mouth falls open at the silent demand, sucking Ilya's finger into his mouth.

"So good for me." He approves, then removes his finger from Shane's mouth only to staple his lips to Shane's again.

Shane doesn't think he can ever get tired of kissing him. It is simply too good.

Too good to be true, a distant voice that Shane has forgotten about for a while adds.

When they break away for air, Ilya looks directly into his eyes and whispers one question. "What have you done to me?"

Chapter End Notes

that one line about Ilya's smile was a word to word reference from one of my all time favourite books Clockwork Angel (Will Herondale you will always be famous) oh and see you next quarter ;)

comments and kudos are appreciated <3

Chapter 4: Quarter Two

Chapter Summary

After spending more time together, Shane and Ilya start chipping away at pieces of themselves they didn't know they had. The question is, will they protect those pieces or will they crush them?

Chapter Notes

I COME BEARING GIFTS LET ME IN!! please note that this isn't edited i was literally in a race with time to get this chapter posted as soon as i could. BUT i really do hope you enjoy this one :) it's gonna be PACKED

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

April

Given the circumstances of Grigori Rozanov's death, the marriage announcement had to be postponed until early April instead—even if it's not a joyous, real marriage—and still, Shane has a funny feeling in his stomach as he gets ready for his real-on-paper-only marriage to Ilya Rozanov.

Ilya whom Shane hasn't been able to keep his hands off of for the past month. No matter what he did, they somehow ended up falling into bed together either way. Until Shane just stopped thinking about it altogether. He embraced the way his body craved Ilya's touch like some sort of a drug and how he felt like he didn't want to be anywhere else when Ilya touched him.

It was terrifying, the fact that 'hating Ilya' was starting to sound like an ancient, ridiculous thought.

He doesn't *love* him either. Love is a big word. And he doesn't think Ilya loves him as well. They just like each other's company. On a much more sexual level now, maybe. But still. If Shane is to look at them from a bit of a distance, he thinks they would pass as friends. Which would have sounded like a stupid, delusional idea a couple of months ago.

"Shane, are you dead inside?" A knock sounds on his door.

Shane contemplates the meaning of the question for a couple of seconds. "Depends." He sighs to himself.

“What is taking you so long?” Ilya asks as Shane opens his door, seeing the sneaky smile he expected spread over the other’s face. “Oh, I see.”

Shane rolls his eyes.

“You were thinking of chickening out.” He leans against the doorframe in his black striped suit. The shirt he has underneath it hugs his muscular torso in all the right places. Fuck, he had no business looking *that* good for a fake groom.

It almost makes Shane want to imagine what it would be like for it to be a real marriage. *Almost.*

“Fuck you.” Shane shoves his shoulder, but Ilya catches his hand and uses it to pull Shane towards him.

Surprise floods Shane, making his breath come out short. In a matter of seconds, they were just talking and now he is pressed up flat against Ilya from chest to thigh.

“Maybe this will change your mind.” Ilya dips his head and kisses Shane senseless. It is not long, but it is enough to make Shane’s knees nearly give out.

Ilya of course doesn’t stop here. He tilts Shane’s head and kisses the side of his neck. “Ilya, we’re gonna be late...” he says weakly.

“Who cares?” Ilya mumbles into Shane’s skin.

“Literally your entire team? And mine? And maybe the entirety of Canada?” That makes Ilya pull away and give him a deadpan look.

“Fine,” he finally says. “But this is not the last of this.” He motions between them.

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” Shane fixes his hair, taking one last look in the mirror. His all black suit that his stylist chose for him looks too perfect for the occasion, but it is also the right amount of perfect for the impression they want to make.

“Liar. Joke would have worked if you weren’t already half hard.”

“You’re an asshole.” Shane adjusts his clothes and tries to think of anything that doesn’t involve Ilya touching him. They *really* have to leave.

“But you like sex with me so.” He shrugs.

“Oh my God.” Shane grumbles. He knew giving Ilya what he wanted would come biting him in the ass one day. Except in his case, they both wanted it and it bit Shane’s ass almost every day of living with Ilya.

“I have something for you,” Ilya says after Shane is done and ready to leave. He takes out a long, velvet box out of his pocket and uncovers it in Shane’s direction. “Would look good with your suit.”

Shane's jaw drops at the stunning diamond necklace his eyes land on. It's so clear and glimmering with a slightly bigger emerald diamond in the middle that has Shane directing his shocked face towards Ilya.

"When did you... Ilya, that looks fucking incredible." Shane breathes. "And it looks like it costs a lot of money."

"Well, I have a lot of money." Ilya carefully removes the necklace from its box as Shane rolls his eyes with a smile at the cocky phrase. "Turn around."

Shane obeys and lets Ilya put the piece of jewellery on him. They are standing in front of Shane's bedroom mirror, and the sight of the emerald diamond twinkling in the hollow base of his throat makes the corners of his mouth lift up in a tiny smile. He feels a soft breath brush past his ear, then his eyes travel to Ilya's face through the mirror. He looks nothing short of...enthralled, which makes Shane's cheeks heat up.

"Is very beautiful," Ilya says from behind him, not breaking their gaze.

"Thank you," Shane turns to face him. "For getting it. I...like it." He gives him a small smile.

"Good." Ilya nods, one corner of his mouth pulling to the side in a half smile. "Time to go now."

"Yeah." Shane smooths a hand down his suit, realising that his hands are clammy.

They have both taken their day off from work today, and as they leave the penthouse and get to Ilya's car, Shane tries not to think about how serious it is getting. They can barely go anywhere now without being noticed on the streets, their faces are everywhere on and off the internet, Shane's email has been flooding with more interviews and photoshoots that want to pair him up with Ilya, and last but not least—the first surge of profit for Hollander & Co. was detected a few days ago. Which means that everything is working, and that they couldn't postpone Shane and Ilya's marriage further so no one starts questioning what is going on behind the scenes.

Shane is grateful for the fact that there is no wedding. Eternally grateful. He doesn't know what he would have done if it were an actual wedding. He probably might have, in Ilya's words, chickened out. They have only the photoshoot and ring exchange though, which makes sense for the official statement they will be making on both their social media accounts later—that after a terrific, secret love story they decided to get married and celebrated privately with family and close ones.

Ilya and Shane arrive shortly at the location where their photoshoot and the marriage paper signing are taking place. They decided they didn't need to do it at an actual hall, so it's only a fairly large studio with a part of it decorated for what would look like a wedding backdrop. No one else is there, not even Shane's parents—because it's not a real wedding, and they are not marrying him off to the love of his life. It's a business deal. Ilya is silent next to him as they sit down with the marriage officiant to get the papers signed.

Shane constantly wipes his hands on his thighs under the table, feeling his stomach tightening. *It's just a signature. It changes nothing.* He keeps telling himself that until the officiant says something that Shane doesn't hear and slides the papers in his direction.

"Mr. Hollander," the man calls out politely, yet Shane can tell that this wasn't the first time he said his name. "Your signature, please."

"Right. Sorry." He picks the pen and points it at the paper where Ilya's name is signed on the other side of it.

He stares at it for a few seconds, the weight of it all crashing down on him like a tidal wave. This is it. Once his name joins Ilya's, he is no longer just Shane Hollander.

He will be Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov's husband.

Shane swallows and dips the pen onto the document, officially tying himself to the man next to him.

"Congratulations. I wish you a lifetime of happiness." The officiant stands up and shakes their hands, leaving afterwards to attend to his business.

"That was fast," Ilya comments leisurely.

"Yeah." Shane chuckles. *And ridiculous. And surreal.*

"We should put our rings on," he says, sliding his hand into the pocket of his jacket and taking it out with a small, black velvet box.

He opens it, and Shane finds two wedding bands in there. One in silver and one in gold. They are simple and plain, nothing more than a symbol for what they are doing. Ilya takes the gold one and puts it on, leaving the silver one for Shane. *This couldn't be weirder*; he thinks to himself as he takes his ring and puts it on his own finger. It is cool to the touch and feels foreign—but not uncomfortable—around his finger.

"Not bad." Ilya inspects their outstretched hands next to each other.

For some reason, that makes Shane laugh. Maybe it is the absurdity of the whole situation.

"They're just wedding bands, Ilya. It's not like they're diamond rings or something." He rolls his eyes, still giggling a little.

"Did you want that?" Ilya asks, his face dead serious.

"What?"

"Diamonds."

"Jesus, no." Shane shakes his head in a very clear no. "Besides, you got me enough already." He taps the luxurious necklace around his neck.

“Is not the same.” Ilya frowns. He starts to say something else when a young woman emerges from a hallway and calls for Ilya, telling them that the team is ready to start the photoshoot.

Ilya tells her that they are coming then turns back to Shane. “Hard part is over. Now you do what you do best.” His eyes are glimmering with a light Shane rarely sees on him. One where he is having fun but not in a menacing way like he usually does. Shane swears it could almost pass for *fondness*. But he chooses to ignore that, not wanting to read too much into it.

“What was that again?” Shane teases, walking alongside him towards their set.

“Just say you want me to call you pretty, Hollander. I am not shy.” Ilya snorts, catching Shane’s reference to their past joke about Shane constantly just looking pretty for cameras as a living.

“I didn’t say I wanted that.” Shane shrugs, stepping into the room.

“Then why are you blushing?” Ilya asks near his ear, and a slight shiver passes through Shane.

Shane doesn’t get to answer that, because both their stylists and makeup artists pull them aside to get them ready for the camera. Though that, apparently, doesn’t stop them from stealing stupid glances at one another. It also doesn’t stop the ridiculous flutter Shane feels in his stomach every time Ilya’s gaze lingers on him a second longer.

They stand on their mark, and Shane shouldn’t feel this nervous. He has been on hundreds of sets, he has done so many photoshoots in his life, posed confidently for cameras. But he has never done this with Ilya next to him. With his...husband. The word still feels foreign, and the band around his finger is a new presence he doesn’t know when he will get used to. It will happen though. Eventually.

“Okay, we’re aiming for sexy, big and just...yes, Shane, that’s perfect! Ilya, try leaning on him a little bit?” Ilya doesn’t *lean on him a little bit*. He hooks one arm around Shane’s shoulder and mimics his pose, holding his jacket and showing off the expensive watch on his wrist. And the equally expensive wedding band on his finger.

“This is fun,” Ilya murmurs from next to him.

“Shut up.” Shane retorts.

Ilya seems to be actually having fun, because for the next pose he unbuttons his jacket and slides his hand into his pocket, keeping his other on Shane’s shoulder. The photographer keeps snapping shots as Ilya rests his head on Shane’s shoulder.

“You’re gonna ruin my suit.” Shane shrugs him off, but Ilya’s eyes glint.

“I don’t think you want to know what would actually ruin your suit, Hollander.” Ilya says next to his ear as they turn to face each other.

The photographer says something, but they go unnoticed. Shane feels guilty because he distantly realises they are being so unprofessional right now. However, Ilya seems to have

much more interesting things going on.

“Maybe I want to know.”

Ilya smiles and raises a hand to smooth a hand over Shane’s shoulder where he was leaning earlier. Shane finds himself doing the same, not even knowing if he is picking something off Ilya’s suit. It was just an urge.

Shane doesn’t realise he was smiling until the photographer’s loud “Perfect!” startles him out of his Ilya Rozanov shaped bubble.

“We’re gonna try one more thing and then we’re done,” they say. “This one is for the fans.” The photographer winks and Shane’s nerves kick in again.

He pushes it all the way to the back of his mind. The tiny little fact that after these photos are done, the world will know him as Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov’s husband.

“Ilya, I want you to stand with your back to the camera.” Ilya frowns at the photographer but obliges anyway. “And Shane, I want you to stand facing Ilya, yes,” they direct Shane right in front of Ilya.

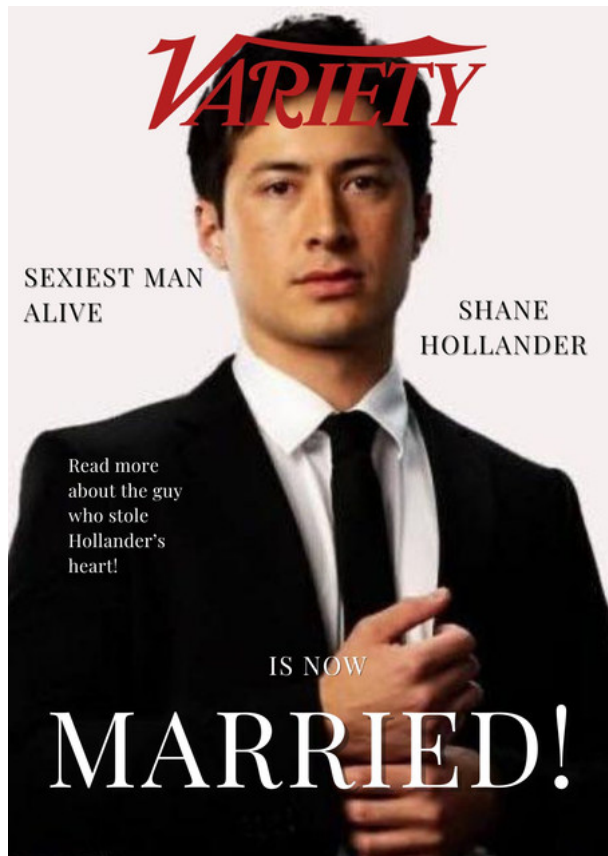
“And give me your best ‘this man is mine’ pose.” They grin.

“Um.” Shane is baffled for a couple of seconds, the phrase causing his mind to halt because he *is* supposed to look like he owns Ilya. *Not that Ilya owns him and his parents’ company.* Shane shuts the voice in his mind up by stepping closer to Ilya and snaking an arm around the back of his neck. His fingers naturally bury themselves in the hair at the nape of his neck, his wedding ring visible to the camera.

He hears the soft gasp of surprise that comes out of Ilya, and it kind of lets Shane know he did a good job. His other arm finds Ilya’s waist and he lets his face rest in the juncture of his neck and shoulder, giving the camera his best possessive look.

“You’re a natural, Shane. Hold that for a second!” The photographer runs to adjust the lighting, and their excitement makes a question arise in Shane’s mind. *Do they really look that good together?*

Right before the camera snaps, Shane feels Ilya’s hand at the small of his back. A small gesture, a presence that is warm and invisible to the camera. He can’t see Ilya’s face now, but for some reason he feels an undeniable urge to pull away and just... *look* at it.



The photos circulate a few days after Shane and Ilya's official posts are up, and the way they blew up had Shane deleting Instagram so he doesn't get any more overwhelmed. He didn't

expect this kind of reaction from...different places around the world? It's weird to think a set up marriage between him and Ilya would have people 'foaming at the mouth'—as he once read in a comment under a magazine cover of them. Like he knows he is popular, but after he started being seen out and about with Ilya the past few months, both their popularity quadrupled in ways he wasn't prepared for.

Shane never thought he would need a security team to navigate around the streets at certain times. Not all the time definitely, but mostly when he and Ilya are going out together. The team was hired by Ilya, and they all probably report to him if Shane is guessing the process right. He is in complete control of his privacy though, and they don't have to always accompany him when he is going out. Though Shane sometimes likes taking the advantage of having a private vehicle that takes him from door to door. Along with a bodyguard if he is going into the city just for good measure.

"I am leaving for a couple of days," Ilya says one morning.

"Is everything okay?" Shane is quick to ask. Ilya's gold wedding band winks at him in the morning light.

"Yes. Business deal." He nods. "Will probably be back quickly."

"Okay." Shane nods back, processing the information. His attention is drawn to something else though when he sees Ilya's right hand.

He frowns. "What's that on your hand? The right one."

Ilya glances at him in confusion then at his hand where remnants of something that looks like black smudge stains his ring and pinky finger. Shane catches the brief moment his eyes widen before he wipes his hand and calmly rests it back on the table.

"Nothing." He doesn't look at Shane, and Shane doesn't push further.

When the photos confirming their marriage went out a couple of weeks ago, Shane came across an article that talked about Ilya in a highly personal way that he didn't like. About his family, his relationships, his early life in Canada. It felt sickly wrong to him how someone could just sit there and speculate about a person who is a real human being—whom they also know nothing about beyond what they see online.

One thing had caught Shane's attention in it though. Something that made his skin crawl with anxiety and brought back memories of their night in Russia. *'Could Ilya Rozanov's marriage to gay, Canadian icon Shane Hollander be a big screw you to his home country Russia?'*

And then it clicked in Shane's mind. The memory came back to him so quickly he had sat up in bed as if he had just woken up from a bad dream.

By making a move as bold as publicly marrying Shane, Ilya officially cut off all his ties with Russia. With his home. With his mother.

He visited his mother's grave one last time and brought Shane back a lily.

The thought, fully formed in his head, had made Shane shiver realising how big this was for Ilya. Even if he already wasn't talking to his brother a lot, and even if the news doesn't get there on the same insanely big scale as here.

So, Shane decided to show Ilya that he acknowledges how serious this must be to him.

It isn't that big of a gesture, but Shane hopes it at least tells Ilya that he isn't an asshole. And maybe (a little) apology for being so caught up in how *he* felt towards all of this that he failed to look at what Ilya might be giving up with this deal. Though that raised a question that made Shane's palms sweat. So, he pushed it to where it came from, hoping he would forget about it.

Why would Ilya go through any of this just to help Shane and his family?

Ilya is supposed to come back from his business trip tonight. Which makes Shane's plan perfect.

He stands in the jewellery store, his eyes scanning the different options in front of him. Shane hasn't seen Ilya wearing jewellery apart from the gold cross he wears all the time, but Shane has an idea he hopes is as smart as he thinks it is.

"This is the one." He points at the small charm, smiling at the store owner.

"Perfect." He nods, matching Shane's polite smile as he picks it out and puts it in a small velvet box.

Shane heads to the cashier to pay, securing the newly purchased piece of jewellery in his pocket when he feels something hard and cold press to the back of his head. Shane freezes, his blood running cold. His eyes go to the young woman who is behind the cashier first, and the terror on her face tells him everything he needs to know.

"Don't you fucking move." A man snarls from behind him, and Shane's heart races in his chest.

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees more masked men stream into the store, smashing into the glass display cases. People start screaming, and the store owner runs to get to the phone, but a gunshot forces him into place, shaking in terror with his hands over his head.

Shane jumps in fright at the blaring sound, his eyes screwing shut and wishing he was just in a nightmare that would end if he kept telling himself it isn't real. When he opens his eyes though, he finds almost everyone in the store, those who are remaining anyway, either held at gunpoint like him or are at risk of getting hurt if they move one inch.

"Get down on your knees." Shane feels the muzzle of the gun press harder into the back of his skull, and a lump forms in his throat. He catches a glimpse of the cashier girl's arm moving very slowly, very carefully, somewhere where he can't see.

He hopes she is pressing an emergency button. He hopes someone heard or saw anything and already called the police.

He hopes Ilya knows how grateful he is for him helping his parents.

He hopes his parents know how much he loves them. He hopes they forgive him if he doesn't make it out of here.

"I said get fucking down!" Shane is harshly shoved down into the ground. Pain shoots up his knees with the impact of colliding with the hard surface, but it goes forgotten right away.

"You! Hands where I can see them." The masked burglar points his weapon at the woman behind the cashier.

"Please don't hurt me!" She cries out.

More glass shatters and flies around Shane as more yelps are heard from the hostages around him. He reflexively covers his face with his arms, though that seems to have been a mistake. "No sudden moves or I'll blow your fucking brains up!" The gun returns to his head afterwards.

"And you, hurry the fuck up!" He shouts at the rest of his men.

Shane closes his eyes once again, and this time he finds his eyelashes wet.

Ilya is barely done with his meeting when his phone rings in his pocket. He sighs in exhaustion and pulls it out with the intention of declining the call, but that changes when he finds that it is the head of his security team.

"Talk," he says once he picks up the call.

"There has been a break-in at one of the big jewellery stores down in the city today."

"And?" Ilya slowly stands up, his breaths gradually quickening.

"Mr. Hollander was there."

"Did something happen to him? Is he okay?" His heart thuds painfully fast in his chest.

"He was held at gunpoint, but the police arrived at the right time," he explains, and Ilya's blood boils.

"And where the fuck were you?!" He snaps.

"He didn't want—"

Ilya hangs up before he hears the rest of the sentence, because he knows that whatever he would have heard, it would have made him angry nonetheless. He finds himself pacing up and down the meeting room, his mind working out ways of how to get to Shane right now when he still has one meeting left to close his deal.

The image of Shane being held at gunpoint burns through his mind like a hot iron rod piercing flesh. He must have been scared, god he must *be* scared even now yet Ilya is fucking stuck here.

He presses his assistant's contact number on his phone. "Cancel my meeting today."

"But—"

"We are leaving. *Now.*"

Three hours later, Ilya is hurrying through the front door of his house.

"Shane?" He calls out, but no one answers. "Shane!" He tries again, searching every room in the penthouse on his way. Even his bedroom is empty.

"In here." He hears a faint voice coming from the bathroom, and he chases it inside.

In the bathroom, he finds Shane on the floor with his knees bent up to his chest. His head snaps up at Ilya's presence, granting him a look at his pale face and red rimmed eyes. Ilya's heart clenches painfully in his chest.

"Ilya..." His name rolls off Shane's tongue in a half sob that brings Ilya down to his knees right in front of him.

"Shh. Is okay." Ilya wraps his arms around him, and he feels Shane immediately collapse against his chest.

He is shaking uncontrollably, and Ilya has to hold him tighter—closer to his own chest where his heart is beating so fast. Maybe it will make him feel better. "You are safe now," he says.

"You are okay?" He runs a hand through Shane's hair, not caring about it being damp with sweat. "Are you hurt?"

Shane snuffles and slowly shakes his head, but then he winces when Ilya brushes a hand over his knee to bring him closer. He doesn't say anything or move away from Ilya, but concern forces Ilya to look closer for any sign of harm. He looks at his hand where it touched Shane, and panic surges through him.

"Shane." Ilya breathes, pulling away to look at him. God, his eyes are red and so...empty. "Shane, you're bleeding." Dark circles that now Ilya translated as blood drops decorate the fabric of Shane's dark pants.

He looks distantly at Ilya as if he can't even hear him.

Ilya places a hand on the side of his face then presses a long kiss to Shane's forehead that is as freezing cold as the rest of him.

"Let us get you in the shower," Ilya says softly.

Shane doesn't say something in protest when Ilya carefully undresses him, his eyes fixed somewhere off into the distance.

"Is okay. Don't stand." Ilya brings down the shower head and sets the water temperature warm enough to be comfortable and not too hot.

Shane flinches at the first contact, but then he relaxes as his body gets used to the water falling down his body. Ilya gently washes off the dry blood over his knees, his mind whirring with how Shane got these cuts. His blood sizzles like hot lava every time he thinks about what happened, what Shane might have experienced, what he must be feeling now.

He wraps a towel around Shane and checks the wounds on his legs, cleaning them for good measure. "I will go bring you clean clothes, yes?"

Shane nods once, prompting Ilya to push himself up and rush to Shane's bedroom. He finds him a Montreal Voyageurs hoodie and a pair of comfort shorts, guessing that pants will probably be uncomfortable over his knees.

When he returns, he finds Shane mostly dry and the towel hangs around his waist. "How are you here?" He asks as if in a daze as Ilya moves to put him in the hoodie even though Shane had his hands extended to take it from him. "Your meeting..." he says.

"Not important." Ilya taps Shane's right leg and he puts it into his shorts, then the other one.

"Ilya, you didn't...your deal—" his voice cracks again, and when Ilya looks at him he sees tears in his eyes.

"No," he says firmly, swiping his thumbs under Shane's eyes where his tears have just fallen. "I am here now, okay? *This* is important."

"It was so scary." His voice wavers.

"I know." Ilya pulls him into his embrace, and Shane locks his arms around him. "But you're brave."

Shane pulls away to look at him, his chocolate brown eyes studying his face as if it is the first time he sees Ilya. Which has Ilya softly caressing Shane's freckled cheek.

"I leave you for few days and this is what you do?" Ilya smiles. "You could have told me you wanted to come."

Shane gives him a weak smile. "I hate you."

Ilya feels like the sun has finally peeked out from behind the clouds, casting the thinnest of light rays onto his helplessly sick heart.

What feels like years later, Ilya finally changes out of his business suit and is now sitting with Shane on the couch in his living room. He called Shane's parents earlier to assure them that he is okay then switched his phone off, wanting to keep all his focus on Shane.

Shane who is sitting in his living room wrapped in a blanket and slowly eating soup that Ilya practically threatened him to eat. Shane who reminded Ilya of everything he wasn't, and everything he didn't have. Shane who married him to save his parents' reputation.

Shane who continues to make Ilya's heart beat faster than any runs he had taken—who has no idea he has done all of the above.

A hockey game is playing in the background, and Shane's eyes are glued to the screen in focus. Ilya finds himself smiling. It is good to see him not crying or worrying like earlier. So, he enjoys the comfortable silence as he watches Shane eat.

"More?" Ilya asks when Shane places the empty bowl on the table.

Shane shakes his head in refusal then he looks at Ilya. Longer than he expects.

He is about to ask if Shane is okay when he finally talks.

"Thanks." Is all he says, but his hand that is resting in the middle between them inches a little closer and his pinky finger grazes Ilya's.

"You're welcome." Ilya presses his finger to Shane's, holding his gaze.

They stay like that for a few moments before Shane breaks eye contact and looks down at his feet instead, pulling his hand to curl it around the throw blanket over his shoulders.

"I, uh..." he starts then clears his throat. "I was there to buy something. Today at the store."

"Shane—" Ilya means to stop him from talking about it when Shane interrupts him first.

"I'm not—fuck, that's not what I want to talk about. Wait here." Ilya's eyes follow him in confusion as Shane gets up and disappears downstairs.

Minutes later, Shane returns with something clutched in his hand. He sits back down next to Ilya, this time closer. Much closer than before. "Shane, are you okay?"

He visibly swallows, and when his eyes look up at Ilya's face, they're shining. "Yeah. Yeah, I'm actually glad I managed to hold onto this." He turns up his palm towards Ilya. "Open it."

And Ilya tries not to perish at the thought of Shane going to a jewellery store, buying something for him *and* holding onto it through a near-death experience.

Ilya slowly takes the small box and opens it, revealing a gold charm in the shape of angel wings. His heart swells in his chest and when Shane speaks again, it almost becomes too hard to breathe through the emotion filling up his insides.

"I know you wear the cross for your mum," he says slowly as if he is stepping on a thin sheet of glass and scared of his footsteps leaving cracks behind. "And it only dawned on me what our planned marriage might mean for you, so I thought—I thought I would get you something that goes with it...a reminder." He takes a nervous breath. "And a thank you."

Ilya swallows past the hard lump in his own throat and picks the pendant up in his hand. "It is beautiful," he says, taking off his chain and sliding the new charm onto it. He looks back to Shane whose eyes flicker from Ilya's chest to his face, carrying the world's softest look and directing it at him. "Like your heart is beautiful." He adds, then leans in to place a kiss on Shane's cheek.

At the last moment though, as if reflexively, Shane's head turns and Ilya ends up kissing the corner of his mouth. Neither of them moves afterwards, each basking in the serenity of the moment.

"There's something else," Shane whispers, his lips brushing Ilya's.

"What is it?" Eyes closed, Ilya asks quietly.

"When they had a gun to my head..." Ilya hears the falter in his breath at the words, and that urges him to shift his face so he is looking at Shane, though no less closer than before. "There was one thing I kept thinking about."

"Tell me."

"You." His intense gaze nearly freezes Ilya. "Never getting the chance to see you again."

"I am here." Ilya splays his hand over Shane's chest, not surprised to find his heart beating rapidly under it. "Is it okay if I kiss you?"

"Please," Shane whispers, the word broken and loaded with unshed tears.

Ilya presses his lips to Shane's, the action soft and precise. He kisses him slowly, firmly as if reminding Shane of how real Ilya's lips feel against his. He kisses Shane's bottom lip, then his upper one, all the while Shane kisses him back like he is drowning and their kisses are his only oxygen supply left. Ilya runs his tongue over the seam of Shane's lips, asking for permission and getting it when Shane opens his mouth, giving Ilya access to the rest of his mouth.

A few seconds into the kiss, Shane shoves Ilya back against the sofa and straddles his lap, but his scraped knees remind him of their presence and cause him to hiss in pain. "Fuck, sorry," he says out of breath.

Ilya just gives him a small smile. "Come here." He pulls Shane towards him by the back of his legs and wraps them around his own waist so Shane doesn't have to irritate his skin further.

They get back to kissing, and the blanket falls off of Shane's shoulders as he forgets himself in touching Ilya. His face, his hair, his back, his chest. Shane's hands go everywhere, and Ilya can feel it. The urgency underlying his moves. The desperation to *feel* and be felt. He breaks away with swollen lips, his eyes bouncing between Ilya's. He looks like he wants to say something.

"What is going on here?" Ilya taps his finger against Shane's temple.

Shane looks at him a little longer. Then, “I want you to touch me.”

“Why is this a problem?”

“It’s not. I mean for me.” He closes his eyes in visible frustration. “I don’t know if you—”

Oh. *Oh*.

“You want me to fuck you,” Ilya clarifies.

A sigh escapes Shane at Ilya’s straightforwardness, but he ends up nodding.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he answers without hesitation.

“This is not just because of what happened? Because I don’t—”

“No, no.” Shane shakes his head. “Part of it, yes,” he admits. “And everything else.” His eyes travel over Ilya’s face like a tourist in a sacred temple. Ilya could never deny him anything.

“Everything,” he murmurs, leaving a feather light kiss onto Ilya’s slightly parted mouth.

Ilya chases it into a deeper kiss, drawing Shane closer into him before he surprises him by rising from the couch. Shane’s arms immediately lock around his neck.

“This is nice,” he mumbles into Ilya’s skin as he takes them downstairs.

A chuckle rumbles out of Ilya’s chest, his grip around Shane tightening. “Sexiest man alive,” he says, referring to Shane. “I have to keep up.”

Shane’s head snaps up at that and he gives Ilya one of his confused looks, but he doesn’t say anything.

“My room.” Ilya follows his words, getting them into Shane’s room at the end of the hall.

Ilya kicks the door shut behind them and gently puts Shane down onto the bed. He is instantly pulled down by the front of his shirt and he feels Shane’s legs wrap around him.

“Easy,” Ilya whispers, barely containing a smile. “I am not going anywhere.”

Shane doesn’t look bothered by Ilya’s comment, instead he is studying Ilya like a newly discovered artefact. Like he doesn’t believe this is actually happening.

“Hey.” Ilya brushes his cheek with one hand, the other supporting his weight on the right side of Shane’s head. “Do not think about it, yes?”

Shane nods once, his eyes softening like molten chocolate.

“Only me,” Ilya adds. “And this.” He closes the distance between them by kissing Shane. He feels Shane relax under him, his hands exploring Ilya’s body everywhere they can reach.

Somewhere in Ilya's mind there is a voice screaming in disbelief at everything that has happened tonight, but he shuts it down by letting Shane push him down onto him. A sweet, low moan emits from Shane, and it makes all the hairs on Ilya's body stand. It isn't the first time Ilya touched him, but this time is different.

This time *Shane* wants more. This time he got Ilya angel wings to go with the cross he wears for his mother. This time he almost died and the one thing going on in his mind was that he was never going to see Ilya again.

He kisses Shane's neck, his chest, his stomach under his shirt. They both break away then to remove their clothes, then Ilya goes back to kissing Shane. Every ridge of his body, every groove and every single part he can worship with his lips. One thing Ilya has known as well as his name since he saw him is that Shane is so beautiful. *So* beautiful he hated the idea of not ever having this beauty for himself.

And now that he has it, part of his heart is twisting with the possibility of it not being real. Just an impulse.

But his body tells him that it is okay, that it would die if it doesn't have Shane right now—and Ilya is too weak to deny himself the one thing he wants with the man gazing down at him with eyes that are saying *"go on, make me feel alive."*

Ilya presses a kiss to Shane's hipbone over the elastic band of his underwear then pulls it off of him. "Lube?"

"There." Shane points somewhere behind him and Ilya goes to retrieve it with the pack of condoms he finds in there.

Shane moves up to the middle of the bed to make room for him, and the expectant look on his face almost makes Ilya melt on the spot. He bends one of Shane's legs and he follows with the other as Ilya leaves a soft kiss on the wounded skin there. He slicks his fingers with the lube, taking his time to warm it a little before he presses a finger against Shane's entrance.

Ilya circles Shane's hole, feeling it flutter under his touch before he carefully pushes a finger in. Shane's breath stops for a moment and when it comes out, it does so in a soft *"ah."* Ilya moves his finger, watching in arousal as Shane's eyes fall shut and he starts taking in little gasps instead of breaths. When he feels Shane relax around him, he adds another finger.

"Oh my god." Shane pants, his hands fisting the sheets on either side of him.

"This okay?" Ilya asks, holding Shane's leg up with his other hand and leaving small kisses there.

Shane nods through closed eyes and short breaths, his eyebrows drawn together in pleasure. Ilya crooks his fingers at the right angle and a sharp moan leaves Shane's rounded mouth.

"Holy shit, Rozanov," Shane groans as Ilya thrusts his fingers in and out, then switches to gently massaging his prostate.

“Alive?” He purrs, pushing Shane’s legs all the way back to his chest.

Shane gasps at the exposure, the sound going straight to Ilya’s hard dick. When he looks at Shane’s, he already finds his abdomen glistening with precum. Ilya leans over him, falling between Shane’s open legs. The motion makes Shane open his eyes, and Ilya realises that he wasn’t ready for the look in those dark eyes.

Alive?

Ilya asks when every nerve-ending in Shane’s body is thrumming with life.

Yes, Shane wants to say, but all that leaves his open lips are pathetic sounds.

“Need you.” He manages after Ilya positions himself over him, pushing Shane’s legs further apart.

“You have me.” Ilya halts his moves, and a broken sound almost leaves Shane but he holds it in. It probably shows on his face though, because Ilya smiles a little. *The little bastard.*

“Ilya.” The name tumbles out of Shane’s lips with the intention of a warning, but it ends up a plea.

A plea for the man on top of him to make him feel alive in the best way possible.

A low sound breaks out of Ilya, and his eyes darken with a sort of determination that makes Shane’s breath catch in his chest. His eyes never leave Ilya as he rolls on a condom and adds more lube, lining himself up with Shane’s entrance.

Their eyes meet, and there is a second that passes where Shane feels like all of this is a dream, and he is actually watching from afar. But then Ilya’s forehead falls softly against his as he carefully presses into Shane, and everything else stops. He sucks in a breath at the stretch, the pressure new and sweet and intoxicating.

“Okay?” Ilya checks after he, too, lets out a shaky breath.

“Yeah.” Shane assures him, his body anticipating more.

Ilya must have felt that, because he starts moving carefully. He rolls his hips in slow thrusts, gradually going deeper with every one while Shane struggles to keep quiet. Ilya doesn’t seem to mind it though. On the contrary, he dips his head to kiss Shane’s neck, pulling moan after moan out of him.

When Shane gets used to it, he urges Ilya to move faster.

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya grunts and stills a minute later, looking down and breathing heavily.

He is about to ask if Ilya is okay when the other looks back at him and says, “too good.”

“Oh..” is all that Shane says before Ilya goes back to pressing into him. This time with a little more speed.

“Yes,” Shane whimpers, reaching up to drape his hands over Ilya’s back as the other’s thrusts become more vigorous.

Ilya’s chain hangs down from his neck and bounces back and forth between them, the wings and the cross clinking together. A sharp, pleasant sound in contrast to the lewd sounds they are both making.

“Okay?” Ilya asks, a thin sheet of sweat covering his body. His cheeks are flushed, and his eyes are two dark orbs with hazel rings surrounding them. Shane can tell he is trying to hold himself back and steady himself.

But that is exactly what he wants. Ilya out of control.

“Don’t hold back,” he whispers, sliding one of his hands down to the small of Ilya’s back and pushing him closer. “I can take it.”

He sees the moment his words sink in Ilya’s mind.

“Are you sure?” He asks one more time, his breathing erratic as if Shane’s next words are the last thread holding him together.

“I want you,” Shane says. “All of you.”

Ilya doesn’t need to hear it twice. Shane closes his eyes and focuses on their proximity. He forgets himself in the dull sting accompanied by the toe curling pleasure of Ilya’s cock filling him. His mind eradicates everything that is not this moment, this feeling of his body singing with ecstasy, his fingers raking up and down Ilya’s back.

He is aware his voice is getting louder, but he is also aware Ilya is getting him dangerously close to the edge. Both of them, judging by the way he is struggling to keep a pace now. Shane arches into him when Ilya hits his prostate, both of them groaning in unison.

“Fuck, Ilya.” Shane gasps. “Don’t stop.”

That seems to give Ilya what he needs, because he drives harder into Shane, his hips aimed at taking him apart.

The pleasure intensifies throughout Shane’s body, and his breaths grow shallow as he feels himself *so* close.

Ilya looks down at him, his eyes ablaze with gratification. “Are you—”

“*Oh*, I’m com—”

Shane doesn’t get to complete his own words as his entire body tenses up and he comes all over his stomach and chest, his voice melting into whimpers. It only takes Ilya two more thrusts before he goes completely still and spills into the condom, a deep moan punching out

of his chest. They stay as they are for a few moments, the only sounds heard being their ragged breaths as they calm down.

Shane feels Ilya's breath somewhere near his shoulder before there's a gentle hand on the side of his face. He opens his eyes to find Ilya's hazel ones focused on him only for them to lower and be replaced with the sight of his golden brown curls as he bends to plant a kiss to the hollow base of Shane's throat.

"So beautiful," he murmurs afterwards, following it with another kiss.

Shane's hand finds the mess of Ilya's hair, and he buries his fingers there, a blissed out smile covering his features. Suddenly, today feels very far away from this moment—like it was years ago. Ilya grabs his hand and kisses the inside of Shane's palm, widening the smile on his face before he carefully pulls out of Shane. A low sound involuntarily escapes him at the absence of Ilya, the contrast sharp and felt in all his senses.

"I will go shower, okay?"

Shane nods, feeling the need to clean up himself too. Though he doesn't feel like he can get up any time soon. Ilya seems to catch onto that though, because a sneaky smile creeps up on his face before he disappears into the bathroom.

His mind is hazy while he cleans himself and puts on some clothes, distantly knowing that his mind will be racing in the morning in twelve different directions over how he feels after this. He doesn't think people who have casual sex usually feel this warm afterwards. But he is too caught up in how good it feels to tend to the alarms that are ringing somewhere off in the far distance of his mind.

Today was a nightmare, but somehow seeing Ilya, having him take care of Shane the way he did earlier, and having him this close morphed it into a short lived—but too good—dream. The sound of glass shattering and gunshots being fired still rings in his ears every time he is left alone to his mind, which only happens in one case.

The mattress dips next to him, startling him. "Did you miss me?" Ilya, freshly showered, has jumped into bed next to him.

Shane rolls his eyes. "Do I know you?"

"Is this the time where I remind you of when I made you co—"

"Okay, point proven." Shane shakes his head, failing one more time to not smile. A quizzical look takes place on his face so fast afterwards though. "You used my shampoo."

Ilya shrugs. "Was in there. Smells funny."

"Good, maybe it will help with your terrible jokes."

Ilya narrows his eyes. "*My* terrible jokes make you smile," he says, pointing a finger at Shane.

The words send Shane into silence, because he realises that whenever he is in Ilya's presence, he is either smiling or fighting off a smile. The realisation sends a wave of heat to Shane's cheeks.

"Don't flatter yourself. I'm just being polite."

"Ah, you're very polite then." Ilya grins. "Mr. Polite Canadian."

"Shut up." Shane tiredly chuckles, a yawn sneaking through his laugh.

"I will leave to let you sleep." Ilya pushes off the bed to leave.

Before Shane could stop himself, his hand shoots up to catch Ilya's before he gets up.

Ilya's eyes flicker between Shane's fingers around his wrist and Shane's face that is probably full of panic.

"You will be okay, yes?" Ilya asks slowly, doing no effort to pull his hand out of Shane's grip.

Shane takes a deep, shaky breath. "Yeah, yeah. Sorry, um, you don't have to stay of course." He awkwardly lets Ilya's hand go.

Please don't leave.

Ilya examines him for a few seconds, then he starts moving.

Shane braces himself to watch him walk out of his room, but then Ilya is plopping down next to him in bed.

"Ilya? What are you doing?" He genuinely has no idea what the fuck Ilya is doing. Because there is no way he heard Shane's thoughts.

"Goodnight, Shane." He folds his hands up under his head and closes his eyes, giving Shane no chance to argue or say anything in return.

"...goodnight," he whispers to himself, looking down at his chest as if glaring at his heart that is going crazy behind his ribs.

Shane falls asleep immediately next to him, purely out of exhaustion, but it is for a very short period of time. After he slept, Ilya had turned down the lighting but still kept it on, brought a glass of water to his bedside, and kept an eye on Shane.

He knows the context is different, but Ilya still remembers the first night he tried to sleep after his mother died. It was horrible. Every time he closed his eyes, he would keep seeing his mother dead. Every time a different scenario. He reckoned Shane would probably experience something close to that after the traumatic event he went through today.

He wasn't wrong.

“Shhh. Is okay.” Ilya places a hand on Shane’s arm, pulling his attention to him. “You are home. Safe.”

Wide and teary eyed, Shane slowly nods at him, reality slowly creeping back in until he falls back asleep with Ilya’s hand held tightly in his.

The second time Shane wakes up, he is very frightened, saying something about him or someone being hurt.

Ilya acts on pure instinct and takes him in his arms like he did the first time he saw him today, slowly rocking them back and forth.

“No one is going to hurt you,” he says into Shane’s hair. “Not on my watch.”

And Ilya means every word of it.

He makes a mental note of tracing the pieces of shit who did the shitshow that was the break-in today even if that means he will have to tap into his father and brother’s “ways of business”.

The first thing Ilya learned when he got into this world was that no one is clean. Everyone had *something* they worked to hide or used to their advantage or even to survive. Some of them were illegal, others operating in grey areas, but Ilya never wanted any of that. He wanted his name clean—which is impossible now anyway thanks to his brother who made it his personal mission to make an acquaintance with every drug dealer and miscreant he could find.

The rest of the night goes on like this. Shane either wakes up from a nightmare or he jerks and shakes in his sleep until Ilya’s shoulders cover his. He makes a physical fort around him and every time Shane experiences a bad dream, his body seems to identify the presence of Ilya’s own around him and gradually relaxes.

Ilya barely sleeps that night.

A few days later, Ilya receives a phone call he has been waiting for.

“Talk to me,” he says once he picks up.

“Your suspicion was right.”

“Meaning?” he asks flatly.

“The store owner reported that the burglars left everything and ran the moment they found out the cops were on their tails,” the guy he contacted a couple of days ago explains, confirming Ilya’s sick doubts about the accident Shane has been through.

“Very few people here are able to pull a shit act like that. It won’t be difficult to track them. Would you like me to proceed?”

Ilya thinks for a few moments.

The fact that there is a possibility of someone targeting Shane like this makes Ilya sick to his core. To go out of your way and intentionally harm someone (and others) for whatever reason is twisted, and it makes his blood sizzle around his bones in anger.

“I want a name,” he says, finding his voice foreign to his own ears. “By tonight. And do not think of the money.

This is the first time Ilya has ever abused his power this way, hiring people to track down others and whatnot. It feels like he is betraying a part of himself, but the other part is restless with the pursuit of finding the scum bags behind what happened at the jewellery store.

Ilya hadn't even considered it being something intentional until Shane had mentioned one morning that he heard them say something about a plan and then they left before the police arrived. They were scared, which means that fortunately for Ilya, whatever they were told to do didn't go as planned. So not only are they scared, they are also in trouble with whoever employed them.

Shane is spending the day with his parents today, and he told Ilya he could pass by after work if he wanted to. But Ilya feels like he needs some family time without an outsider hanging back with them. Besides, he probably has a long night ahead of him. He gets so consumed in his work that he barely notices the sky has turned a black-blue outside. His phone lights up with a text message, and he immediately picks it up in anticipation. The three text messages from Shane go unnoticed when Ilya's eyes land on the newest one from an unsaved phone number.

He reads the two words on the screen over and over again, trying to see if his eyes are somehow mistaken. But the words don't change, and the shock that freezes him from head to toe cracks into a fit of uncontrollable anger as he gets up and leaves his office. He drives like a maniac, his body buzzing with so much adrenaline it is starting to affect his breathing. He slams his foot on the brakes as soon as he arrives and leaves his car as it is, racing into the building. He pushes past the security that shouts after him and hits the top floor button in the elevator, impatiently waiting until it comes to a stop at his destination.

He storms through the door, going straight for the man sitting behind the desk.

“Roz? What—” Marlow doesn't get to finish his question, because Ilya hurls him by the collar of his shirt and slams him against the wall behind him so hard one of the hanging frames behind him cracks.

“What the fuck, man?!”

“You fucking asshole.” Ilya seethes, his words overlapping Marlow's. He is larger than Ilya, and he could easily knock him back, but this is the last thing Ilya cares about right now.

Security members pour into his office, but Marlow holds his hand up, silently stopping them. Well, there *is* no need for them because Ilya is here to beat the shit out of him anyway so he doesn't mind an audience.

“What has gotten into your head, Rozanov?” Cliff asks warily.

“You tell me.” Ilya tilts his head to the side. “If you woke up one day and found out that your girlfriend was attacked and held at gunpoint *while you were fucking out of town*,” he raises his voice with the last phrase, charged with anger. “What would you do?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?!” Marlow spits, but Ilya doesn’t miss the millisecond his eyes widen a little more in.

“I am talking about you sending your fucking goons after my husband, Marlow.”

Ilya watches horrifically as his so-called friend’s face twists into a smug expression. “So, it *is* real. The marriage and all.”

“What the fuck?” Ilya suddenly feels so disgusted.

“Relax.” Marlow pushes him off. “Your boy is okay, right? No harm done.” He shrugs, and his nonchalance sets Ilya off.

He doesn’t realize what he is doing until his fist collides with Marlow’s face in a harsh punch. The shock sends him stumbling, but he regains his composure quickly. He wipes the corner of his mouth where blood bloomed where Ilya hit him, releasing a dry laugh.

“You’re hitting me over a boy, Roz?” he asks glumly. “I thought you’d be thanking me for the fucking test. I had to make sure you weren’t getting yourself into shit.”

Ilya, still breathing heavily, launches forward and jams his forearm under Marlow’s chin. “That *boy* is my husband,” Ilya says carefully. “And don’t you fucking dare come near him or me again. Or I swear, Marlow, I will end your fucking name. Do you hear me?”

Marlow shoves him off of him, and Ilya backs off with a sharp glare yet he refuses to leave before he hears Marlow’s answer.

“*Do you fucking hear me?!* ” Ilya shouts, slamming his hand down onto Marlow’s desk.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Rozanov, *fine!*” Marlow flails his arms around him. “Anything else?”

“Yes.” Ilya straightens his back. “You are going to pay for the damage done at the store.”

“Wh—”

“*And* you will not contact me unless it is for work. Only then I will decide if it is worth my time.”

“Roz...come on, man. Don’t do this.” Marlow’s shoulders slump. “I promise you I didn’t mean for it to be that serious.”

“I can’t even look at you right now.” Ilya shakes his head, the taste of betrayal fresh and bitter on his tongue. “I thought you were my ally. My fucking *friend*.”

“I a—”

“Don’t.” Ilya closes his eyes. “You’re a monster, Marlow. And I think it is better if it is only me who knows that.”

Ilya knows his last words are cruel, but so were Shane’s whimpers in his sleep, so were the look of pure fear on his face when he woke up from probably a worse scenario of what happened that day.

Marlow’s eyes flash with hurt then fear, then Ilya is turning around before he sees any more emotions he doesn’t want to see. He walks back out the way he came in, and it is not until he is sitting in his car that he feels the dull ache in his chest accompanied by the familiar burn of tears in his eyes.

He never sheds them, but the pain in his chest remains until he returns home, changes out of his suit, then goes up to the room on the second floor where nobody will find him.

May

“For the record, I think this is ridiculous,” Shane says under his breath, loud enough for Ilya to hear next to him as they fix the lighting around the two of them.

“Was my idea.” He looks offended.

“Exactly,” Shane affirms. “You’re not even media trained!” He argues, lowering his voice. “Why on earth would you think doing a joint interview would be a good idea?”

“You are here, aren’t you?” Ilya smirks.

Shane makes a dissatisfied noise that turns into a laugh. “I can’t believe you had Buzz Feed do *this*.” He gestures around them at the setting.

It was late April when Buzz Feed reached out to Shane for the puppy interview, telling him that he would be paired up with a guest star. He only found out three days prior to the interview who his ‘guest star’ is, which gave him so little time to ‘coach’ Ilya on how these interviews go. Ilya had grown bored and went all *I’ve done interviews before, I am not a caveman, Hollander* on Shane. He had a hard time convincing Ilya that shading other companies and talking about revenue is *not* doing interviews.

“I thought they were going to pair me with Rose,” he adds.

That earns him a deadpan look from Ilya, his eyebrows arching so high on his forehead it makes him look like a cartoon character.

Shane holds back a laugh. “Ilya, I’m *gay*.” *And I have only been fucking around with one man for months now.*

“Not so gay to flirt with Rose Landry,” he says in such an upset tone that for some unknown reason widens the smile on Shane’s face.

“Are you—”

“Okay, we're good!” The cameraman announces, interrupting Shane as two team members jump in to put on the mics on him and Ilya.

Shane glances at Ilya and he immediately finds his eyes. They hold a certain look to them that makes Shane look away as fast as if he hadn't even looked in the first place.

“Ready to go in 3, 2, 1... Action!”

“Hello everyone, this is Shane Hollander,” he introduces himself like he always does in his interviews. “And today I'm with...my husband,” Shane exchanges a look with him at the word. “Ilya Rozanov.”

“Hi everyone.” Ilya makes a small wave at the camera. “The only reason I agreed to do this is because we were told there will be puppies, yes?” His eyes drift off camera, looking for the little creatures.

As if on cue, two people come carrying two crates that are full of small puppies. They open them in Shane and Ilya's direction, and the dogs come running out towards them.

“There are so many!” Ilya exclaims in excitement, and it forces Shane to look at him in curiosity. He has never *heard* Ilya this excited before let alone seeing him with this big of a smile on his face.

And he is right, there are at least ten puppy dogs running around them, climbing over their legs, and nibbling at their shoes. He isn't the best with pets, but the puppies are too adorable for him to ignore.

Ilya hoards like three or four of them into his arms and just holds them there, flashing his pearly smile at the camera.

“Shane, the first question is for you. What can you tease about your next project?”

“Um, it's a collaboration that I'm really excited about. It's my first time working with them, and I'm sure everyone is gonna love it. I still can't believe it—oh, hi.” Shane greets a puppy that is trying to climb into his lap, but it struggles with its tiny paws until he reaches next to him and carries the dog to his legs. “Oh, you're a girl.” Shane pats her back as she snuggles up to his thighs and just sits there. She is a lot calmer than the other daredevils around them, seemingly seeking comfort away from the others.

“Ilya, how is it like having the Sexiest Man Alive as your husband?”

“Sorry, what?” Ilya's head emerges from behind a dog that has been licking different spots of his face. “I'm sorry I can't hear anything you are saying. These dogs are so adorable.”

The crew burst into a fit of giggles and “aww's” as Ilya puts the puppy down. “They won't let me play with you,” he whispers, and the dog makes a sound. “I know!”

Shane chuckles at him, having a hard time believing that this is the same six foot, Russian businessman most of Canada hates slash fears.

“Don't fall for it, he's just trying to get out of answering the question,” Shane says to the audience.

“Me?” Ilya points innocently at himself. “I would never. But these puppies are just so—” he makes an incoherent sound.

“Would you like us to repeat the question?”

“Yes, please. I promise I will try to answer it this time,” he says, giving belly rubs to a puppy that's flipped on its back, very clearly enjoying the tickles.

They repeat the question and Ilya immediately looks at Shane, his eyes full of life, humour and...*Ilya*. They are so distinctively him. If Shane was ever shown a photo with all kinds of hazel eyes, he would still recognize Ilya's like a pin drawn to a magnet.

“Is nice,” he says, his eyes remaining on Shane. But when he says his next words, they switch between the camera and the dogs he continues to spoil with affection. “Shane is kind, he likes things done a certain way, he is good at his job, and well...” He trails off, giving the camera a smug shrug and a wink.

Whistles, laughs and “wow's” spread between the crew members while heat rises under the skin of Shane's cheeks.

“Your wedding photoshoot was amazing to say the least. Do you have any plans for more official media appearances in the near future?”

Shane recovers quickly from the effect Ilya's answer to the past question had on him to answer this one. “Thanks, um, I think we both would love to. But Ilya and I are very private people.”

“If you bring puppies, I will do anything,” Ilya adds, and that sends the room into laughter.

“That's my Ilya,” Shane says monotonously at the camera.

“Shane, don't move. I think the puppy in your lap has just fallen asleep.”

Ilya gasps like a seven-year old, bending to get a closer look at the dog in question. The other puppies follow his movements and crowd around Shane to bug their friend that fell asleep, but Ilya holds them back with his arm. “No. You stay back,” he says in such a parental tone that Shane could almost see actual children around them.

“That means she loves you.”

“Yeah, how can she not?” Ilya retorts so naturally Shane's head snaps in his direction, his heart stopping for a millisecond.

But Ilya doesn't see him. His eyes are glued to the puppy in Shane's lap as if it were a miracle. “What's her name?”

“She is a new rescue. She doesn't have a name yet.”

Ilya gasps again, an opportunity shining in gold in front of him. Shane can see it in his eyes.

“Ilya...” Shane warns.

“Can we take her?”

“We can see after we’re done.” One of the team members who brought the crates full of dogs answers bashfully.

They continue the interview, or more like Shane continues to answer questions and pet the sleeping puppy in his lap while Ilya has the time of his life playing with the other ones. After they are done, they socialise for a bit, take a few photos with the ones who came up and asked for one, and then Ilya gets down to business.

“I can’t believe they let you take her.” Shane holds the puppy close to his chest while Ilya gets into the driver’s seat.

“Her name is Anya. And they didn’t *let* me,” Ilya argues very calmly.

It’s obvious she is a newborn with the way she is drowsy most of the time and falls asleep once she is cuddled. Exactly like Shane is doing right now. Ilya turns to look at him before they move, but then he freezes and a slow smile spreads on his face.

“What?” Shane asks in confusion.

“Don’t move,” he says, scrambling for his phone. He raises it in front of his face and snaps a photo.

Shane is certain he looks like an idiot in it with his flustered face and a little creature wrapped in the front of his jacket.

“Adorable.” Ilya stares at the photo for a few seconds before he puts his phone away and drives them home.

“How is me looking—”

“I meant Anya.” Ilya snickers, giving Shane a brief teasing look.

“Of course.” Shane rolls his eyes. He looks down at the puppy sleeping against his chest and murmurs, “your new dad is a lunatic, good luck.”

“What are you saying?”

“Nothing.” Shane grins, looking out the window.

As Shane’s birthday gets closer and closer, his feed is filled with the usual posts of ‘Your Birth Month: Your Celebrity Crush’ and he is in every version of them in May followed by Ilya in June. It’s kind of funny how their birthdays are literally weeks apart. His mind entertains the thought of Ilya getting him something for his birthday, but it vanishes as quick as lightning. Ilya isn’t obligated to do something for him on his birthday. They would

probably have one of their fake dates to feed into the illusion of them being in love, but that's it. He shouldn't even be thinking about this. Why would Ilya get him anything for his birthday?

The last time Shane got him something was the pendant he wears all the time and Shane was already repaying Ilya with it. So, there's nothing more to it.

On the morning of May tenth, Shane receives a call from his mother. He picks up, expecting their usual group family call on Shane's birthday when Mum's voice sounds alarming.

"Shane, you have to come over." Her voice is laced with worry that has Shane rushing to his feet and putting on his clothes.

"What's wrong? Did something happen? Is everything okay with work?" He shoves his feet in a pair of shoes and leaves.

"Just hurry."

By the time he gets down to the car, his mind has already conjured up the worst scenarios possible. Though he doesn't think there could be something worse than what happened to him earlier last month. Ever since it happened, Shane always went out with at least one bodyguard accompanying him. He had also needed to book extra therapy sessions since his regular ones were not enough, but he is okay now, he thinks. His mind only goes back there very rarely now and under specific conditions.

When he arrives at his parents' house, he realises he forgot his keys back at Ilya's place.

"Mum?" He simultaneously knocks at the door and uses the doorbell. "Dad?"

The door cracks open, and Shane freezes in confusion for a moment. He slowly pushes the door open, questions bubbling up in his mind when he finds the living room empty. Shane scans the rest of the place and is met with the same outcome.

"Guys?" He calls out, his stomach tight with nerves.

He tries the backyard, and that's when his heart nearly stops in fright.

"Surprise!"

"What the hell?!" Shane cries out in a mix of shock, anger and then pure surprise at the scene in front of him.

His parents' backyard has been turned into a little fest of birthday decorations, there is a cake on a table and there's...

"Happy birthday, honey." Mum throws her arms around him in a tight hug then pulls away with a sheepish smile. "Sorry, it was Ilya's idea."

"Happy birthday, son." Dad hugs him too, but Shane stands silent where he is, still under the effect of their 'surprise'.

He spots Ilya standing by the table, watching Shane from afar but not approaching. And is that *Hayden Pike*? Shane hasn't talked to him in years. How did he even—

“How did you—when—*why*?” Shane asks the last question very firmly, a little upset at the unnecessary scare they gave him.

“Ilya was the one who arranged everything,” Mum says with her hand spread on his chest for comfort. “We thought after everything that happened lately, it would be nice for you to feel a little like home.” She smiles, and something pools inside of Shane.

“So, you’re a ‘we’ now?” Shane teases, his eyes shifting to Ilya who is high-fiving a little girl. Probably one of Hayden’s kids. *God*, he missed him so much. He looks all grown up now with a wife and kids.

Shane and Hayden have been friends for as long as Shane has lived in Ottawa. They stayed in touch for a few years after he moved here, but the older and busier they got they fell out of touch. It was really nice seeing him.

“Too far?” His mum squints one eye.

“Way off the line.” Shane shakes his head, but he is smiling.

“Couldn’t help it. He is too charming.” Mum shrugs helplessly, eliciting a laugh from Dad.

“I vouch for that. Unfortunately.” Dad looks guiltily at Shane.

It is, for once, oddly nice to see his parents *actually* liking Ilya.

“Please don’t tell him any of that?” Shane puts his hands together as he starts walking away from them and towards Ilya.

“You.” He narrows his eyes.

“Is good to see you too, Hollander.” Ilya teases.

“Shut up.” Shane laughs in exasperation. “You called Hayden.”

“Not my favourite part. But your parents told me he is close to you. So.” He shrugs.

“You didn’t have to do any of this,” Shane says genuinely.

“Is no problem. Yuna called me first. Said she wanted to surprise you for your birthday.”

“Well, I’m surprised.” Shane admits.

“Good, because this is not the last one. Not from me at least.” Ilya gives him a sneaky smile that makes Shane’s stomach flutter.

Ilya looks handsome in a black henley shirt and dark jeans, the dark palette bringing out the colour of his eyes and making his hair look a lighter brown.

Before Shane says something in response, he is attacked in a headlock by Hayden.

“Let’s hear it for the birthday boy, Mr. Shane Hollander!” Shane frees himself and laughs at his enthusiasm, engulfing him in a hug afterwards. “Happy birthday, buddy.”

“It’s good to see you, Hayd. Sorry, I have been so out of touch. Life has been...crazy, lately.” He chuckles nervously.

Ilya quietly excuses himself and leaves Shane to catch up with his friend.

“No, no.” Hayden shakes his head. “I mean, I get you.” He smiles, looking at his wife who is chatting animatedly with his mum.

He glances a few yards to the side and spots Ilya with Hayden’s kids playing around with Anya.

“Tell me everything.” Shane prompts him to talk, and they end up recapping everything they missed about each other’s lives—minus the part where Shane’s family almost went bankrupt.

“Dude,” he says quietly even though there is no one near them. “I actually can’t believe you’re married to *the* Ilya Rozanov.” He shakes his head as if in disbelief.

“Yeah.” Shane follows his line of sight only for his eyes to land on Ilya who seems to have become best friends with Hayden’s girls, Ruby and Jade. “Neither can I.”

“I’d never have taken him as a match for you. Everyone says he’s an asshole. Hell, sometimes he *is* an asshole.” Hayden continues ranting, but Shane’s mind has drifted off somewhere else.

With Hayden’s words in the background and as he watches Ilya dancing with one of the twin girls with her feet on his, he is suddenly made aware of the fact that this is all temporary. That by the end of this year, his parents’ company will have flourished and he won’t need to stay with Ilya anymore.

What shakes Shane to his core though is the wave of disappointment that rushes through him at the rediscovered piece of information.

“He’s not that bad,” Shane says after what feels like ages, turning to Hayden. “People just don’t know him.” *Like I do*, he almost adds.

“As long as you’re happy, Shane.” Hayden pats his back. “I’ll go check on my kids before your husband steals them off.”

Shane laughs at that, because it sounds like something that Ilya would definitely do.

The rest of the morning goes pretty well. Shane actually feels comfortable and closer to happy than he has been lately. They take so many photos and make cake eating contests that Ilya loses against Ruby and Jade. It almost feels like a scene out of a dream, but Shane grounds himself and remembers that it is all real. It is all for him too.

“Bye, Uncle Ilya!” The two girls wave at Ilya, their faces scrunched in dismay because—Shane can’t believe he is saying this—they don’t want to leave.

“Bye!” Ilya waves back at them with Anya doing laps around his feet.

Once the Pikes leave, Ilya turns to Shane. “Come on,” he says. “We have a trip to make.”

“A what?” Shane gapes.

“You heard me, Hollander.” Ilya smiles, his eyes glinting. “Go to your bedroom, grab the bag on your bed, and meet me outside.” He picks Anya up and disappears inside.

“What the…” Shane wonders out loud to himself.

Shane does as Ilya instructed, meeting him outside where a car waits for him. The chauffeur takes Shane’s bag and carefully puts it in the trunk. Ilya is already sitting inside, busy with his phone. His attention diverts to Shane when he gets in though.

“What are we doing?” Shane asks, clueless as to what Ilya is doing.

“We are taking a trip. I told you.” He shrugs, but his features are full of mischief.

“Ilya.”

Ilya rolls his eyes and sighs as the car starts moving. “We are going to Ottawa. Your home.”

Shane doesn’t think he has ever smiled faster. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Did you plan all of this?” Shane bites his lip before his face muscles freeze in a permanent smile.

“Yes, Hollander. Why do you ask?” He half turns to face Shane and leans on the car door.

“No reason.” Shane shrugs. “It’s just…nice. All of this.”

Ilya looks at him a little longer. “You deserve nice things.”

Shane’s breath goes in a little sharper at the sentence, and he keeps to himself then, leaving the conversation there.

Ilya falls asleep on his shoulder at some point, and instead of waking him up or moving away Shane rests his cheek against Ilya’s head and lets the steady movement of the car on the road lull him to sleep.

What feels like five minutes later, they both wake up when the car comes to a stop, signaling that they have arrived at their destination.

“You could have told me where we’re going earlier. I could have brought the keys to my childhood home,” Shane says when he realises Ilya has booked probably the most expensive

hotel in Ottawa.

“And miss the chance to spoil you?” Ilya takes Shane’s bag along with his own.

“Hey, I can carry my own bag!” Shane trails behind him.

“You forget we are married.”

“I can’t carry my stuff if we’re married?” Shane scrunches up his nose in confusion.

Ilya sighs.

It’s actually quite cute how he is treating Shane today, but Shane has lately been enjoying annoying him for a change. Instead of him always being the one on the receiving end of Ilya’s many attempts to annoy him.

They check in at the hotel, and Shane finds out Ilya booked them an entire suite—not a regular room. “You’re just showing off at this point,” Shane remarks on their way to their room.

“You have not seen anything yet.” Is all that Ilya says, and for some reason it leaves Shane on a thrilling edge the entire fucking day.

After they freshen up and change into new clothes, they go out for a snack. *Somehow*, Ilya knows the exact place Shane loves getting waffles from and he takes them there.

And *somehow*, he *also* knows the playground near Shane’s childhood home where he used to always play. It brings out so much emotion and so many memories in Shane he thinks he might suffocate if he doesn’t ask.

“Did my mum tell you about all this stuff?” Shane asks, walking around the seesaw and up to Ilya.

“Only because I asked.” Ilya nods, his face hiding something. “She is a very good bargainer. Yuna.”

Shane’s mouth falls open, and he doesn’t help the laugh that comes out of him. “Is that why you left Anya with my parents?”

“Yes,” Ilya answers as if he is ashamed of himself.

“She won’t find better care than that.” Shane shrugs one shoulder as a matter of factly.

Ilya pauses for a beat. “Is true.”

“My parents really did grow on you, didn’t they?” Shane takes a step closer to him, the toes of their shoes touching now.

“I never said I hated them, Shane,” Ilya says sincerely.

Shut up. Shut up, stop being nice. Stop being so fucking hard to resist, a voice screams in Shane's head as he gazes into Ilya's eyes.

"It was only me then?" Shane whispers the question, the words seemingly pulling Ilya in closer.

"Was?" Ilya's lips quirk up at one corner, his eyes falling half closed as he stares down at Shane's lips. "Don't get ahead of yourself, Hollander."

Shane closes his eyes and tips his head in the slightest bit forward, happily meeting Ilya midway as he kisses him fully on the mouth. Something about standing in a place Shane used to visit as a kid kissing a man—let alone Ilya Rozanov—who went out of his way to arrange an entire day in Shane's hometown for his birthday just feels so...grand. Like something out of a 90s romcom.

Except this isn't a romcom, and he and Ilya are in an arranged marriage for the sake of his parents' work.

Somehow this truth sounds bitter in a new way now. It stings in a different way, and he can't stop thinking about how he felt today when Hayden talked about them being tied to each other now.

His thoughts push him to savor his kiss with Ilya before he pulls away for air, the sweet taste of maple syrup and whipped cream lingering on the tip of his tongue.

"Do you have something planned after this?" He doesn't step all the way back, looking up at Ilya.

"Why?" Ilya asks, his nose nudging Shane's, but not pushing for another kiss. The gesture feels so intimate, so natural it makes his stomach twist.

"There is something I want to show you, since we're here."

Shane smiles shyly at him, and it is impossible for Ilya to say no.

"What is it?" he asks curiously.

"It's a surprise." He grins.

"This is not how it is supposed to work." Ilya scowls.

"Come on." He tugs on Ilya's hand, causing his heart to skip a beat.

He expects Shane to drop his hand after they walk for a while, but he doesn't. And Ilya doesn't think when he intertwines their fingers together. He doesn't nearly lose his mind when Shane looks over his shoulder and flashes him a smile. There is no one around them to watch, no cameras to snap pictures. It is just them.

His hand instinctively squeezes Shane's in response to the heart-melting smile he gave him, and just for one day he embraces it.

The fact that he is locked away in a heaven that is shaped in Shane's name. And he doesn't want to find the key.

"This is a terrible idea." Shane stares up at the old house in front of them.

"Are you telling me or yourself?" Ilya asks, stepping up onto the porch next to him. The wood creaks under his footsteps. "Wow. Is very old."

"Yeah." Shane agrees with a ghost of a smile on his face. "It's probably older than us." He looks at Ilya. "This is where I grew up."

Ilya rests his chin on Shane's shoulder, looking at the locked door in front of him. "Yes. Very nice door."

Shane rolls his eyes and drops Ilya's head from his shoulder. "Hey!"

"Here goes nothing," Shane says, looking down at the rusty lock before he surprises Ilya by knocking it down.

It easily falls off, and Ilya finishes the job by kicking down the door. A wave of dust fogs the entrance, causing Shane to cough and Ilya to cover his nose. "You were right." He looks at Shane who looks like he is regretting all his life choices. "*It is* a terrible idea."

"Hey." Shane points at him. "You're the one who brought me here. Don't complain now, come on."

The sunlight from outside peeks through the windows of the house, lighting it up without electricity. Dust is everywhere, a thick grey layer over everything surface in there, then Ilya's eyes go to Shane who looks around him like a lost child exploring his surroundings.

He is probably seeing things Ilya isn't seeing.

"What was it like?" Ilya asks, and Shane goes into explaining what his house used to look like under the years of age that are eating away at the building.

"This is where I took my first steps," he says, pointing somewhere towards a hallway.

Ilya loses himself in the way Shane's voice changes with the memories he tells, the way he goes into detail at parts that Ilya doesn't fully understand yet he lets him carry on. He finds memories he struggles to keep up with on his behalf, with his good memories stopping at twelve with the death of his mother. But a certain type of warmth slithers its way through the dark alleys of his sad mind the longer he listens to Shane and pictures a younger version of him trying on his first hockey jersey, scoring his first goal, standing every year to get his height measured.

"I never wanted them to sell the house, you know," Shane turns to him.

“I can see why.” Ilya joins him in taking one last look at the house before they leave. “Your whole life is in it.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you miss it? Living here I mean,” Ilya asks.

“When I first moved out, yeah, but now I almost don’t remember what it was like to live here.” Shane kicks a pebble out of his way. “I did want to open a charity though.”

That sparks Ilya’s curiosity even more. “Here in Ottawa?”

“Not necessarily, no. It started here, but I want to do it one day. And I want it to be for a cause that means something to me.” He looks ahead, avoiding Ilya’s gaze, and he knows it holds more weight than he is letting on when Shane does this.

“You will do it.” Ilya smiles at him, grabbing his attention.

“You think?” Shane asks doubtedly.

“You can do anything.” Ilya makes sure his tone delivers how much he believes that.

“Anything, anything?” He looks hesitantly at him.

“Yes.” Ilya shrugs.

Shane catches him by surprise when he shoves Ilya hard then starts running.

“Come back here, Hollander!” Ilya shouts, his feet already kicking off the ground after him. “Is that the best you got?”

Shane looks behind him at Ilya who is almost catching up to him. He picks up his pace, but Ilya’s *slightly* longer legs give him the advantage of matching Shane’s pace. He shoves him again, but Ilya deflects him this time and viciously catches him in his arms instead.

“No!” Shane yells, his belly shaking with laughter under Ilya’s grip.

“Give up, Hollander. I am faster than you.” Ilya spins him and guides them to a tree behind Shane. He pins Shane against it, both of them short of breath from running.

“Keep dreaming, Rozanov.” Shane shakes his head.

“I will make you a deal,” he says, the word making Shane’s eyes glint at the prospect of a challenge.

“We will race to the car, and if you win, I will let you do anything.”

“Let me?” Shane almost scoffs.

“Do not interrupt me.” Ilya tightens his hand on Shane’s waist. “And if *I* win, I get to blow you in there.” He nods his head towards the car, obsessed with the shocked expression on

Shane's face.

"Is that even..."

"*Anything* is possible." Ilya winks at him. "Race starts when I let you go, yes?"

Shane locks his jaw, and his dark eyes shine with one thing: *I'm gonna beat your ass.*

Ilya lets go and they both sprint in the car's direction with Shane ahead of him. The distance isn't that long, and Ilya is already warmed up from their little chase back there. So naturally, he wins. Or well, they both do.

He realises it's a fucking tie when they both get in at the same time.

"Now what?" Shane asks, breathing heavily. His face is flushed, and his hair sticks to his forehead.

"We both win," Ilya wiggles his eyebrows at him.

"Bullshit. I techn—"

Shane swallows back his words when Ilya in one swift move, straddles him. His eyes widen in shock, immediately drifting behind Ilya at where their chauffeur is sitting. Ilya knows he is turned on with the way his body fell a little back. He leans down and presses a button under the seat, smirking as a black divider slides closed, concealing them from any people in the driver and passenger seats. The windows are tinted, and Shane already knows that, so Ilya is confused when Shane still looks a little uneasy.

"Isn't he gonna..." he gestures at his ear.

This is Ilya's favourite part.

He leans down beside Shane's ear. "Soundproof." He pulls away in the perfect moment to catch the look of arousal in Shane's eyes at his words.

"You have a sound proof barrier in your car just for *this*?" Shane wonders out loud, the question free of judgment.

"*Especially* for this." Ilya mouths at the sensitive skin below Shane's ear, making him sigh in satisfaction. "Besides, I think you like it." He presses a kiss to the area below Shane's jaw.

"What?" He asks weakly.

Ilya brings his hand between them and palms Shane through his pants, feeling him already half hard. "The possibility," he says. Shane gasps when Ilya starts stroking him through his clothes, his breath leaving him in little silent moans. "Of someone hearing you."

"Fuck you, Rozanov." Shane says through gritted teeth.

His hand finds Ilya's over his dick, and the other smirks when he realises what Shane is doing. He eagerly guides Ilya's hand on him to give him more friction as if he is stroking himself using Ilya's hand. For some reason that turns Ilya on even more, and the urge to make him come right here right now doubles.

He does a quick work of unzipping and unbuttoning Shane's pants, slipping his hand between the fabric of it and his underwear which makes Shane moan in desperation. He is almost fully hard, and Ilya has so fucking much fun turning him on.

"Look at me." Ilya urges him with two fingers under his chin to open his eyes.

When he does, his needy gaze goes straight to Ilya's own dick. Fuck, he sometimes forgets that Shane wants him just as Ilya does. No matter how much Shane had tried to hold himself back, his eyes always gave him away. And right now, they are begging Ilya to get to work.

"Do you want me to get on my knees in this car and suck your dick?" Ilya takes Shane out of his boxers and his cock springs free, slamming against his abdomen.

"Fuck." His face is consumed with lust as he looks down at himself then back up at Ilya.

"Tell me."

"Yes." Shane nods helplessly. "Please."

"Because you asked nicely." Ilya gives his cheek a pat before he goes down between Shane's spread legs and takes him in his mouth.

"Holy shit, Ilya." Shane's hand tangles itself in his hair and his other hand grips the edge of his seat for dear life.

It is quick and sloppy, but it is exactly what Ilya wanted to do. He wanted to get a fix of Shane—take him apart against fancy leather seats. He wanted to do more than just suck his dick, but that is for another time. Right now, he happily bobs his head up and down while curses roll off Shane's tongue. He knows he is doing a good job when Shane can't stay still and relaxed in his seat anymore.

"Fuck, yeah." He pants, his hand curling in Ilya's hair and causing him to moan around Shane.

That makes Shane shudder, another groan escaping him. "Jesus Christ."

Ilya reaches up and kneads one of Shane's pecs, thumbing at his nipple. He is shocked when he feels Shane's hand that isn't in his hair slap against Ilya's own and holds it there. His fingers wrap around Ilya's wrist as his breaths quicken, signalling that he is close.

"So good." Shane whimpers, almost doubling over in pleasure when Ilya pushes him back with his hand on his chest. He repositions himself to get better access and takes Shane deeper into his mouth, feeling the other jerk with the new sensation.

Ilya sucks him earnestly, flattening and swirling his tongue where he knows Shane will lose it. When he switches between licking at the underside of his cock and sucking the head, he is met with the reaction he was waiting for.

“Oh, *oh*. Fuck—fuckfuckfuck.” Shane’s thighs shake and he shudders as he spills into Ilya’s mouth, Ilya’s outstretched arm being the only thing stopping him from toppling over.

“Holy fuck,” he says with his head thrown back as Ilya sucks him clean.

His chest rises and falls heavily and his hand slides to the back of Ilya’s head, fisting the hair there before Ilya realises Shane is urging him up and pulling him in for a kiss. Ilya enjoys it, kissing him back as filthily as he is demanding, letting him taste himself on Ilya’s tongue. It seems to work, because Shane moans into his mouth, his hand sliding up Ilya’s thigh. Ilya playfully slaps it away though.

“I am good now,” he says, breaking away for air. “Is your day today?”

The scowl on Shane’s face at that makes him want to undress and let Shane do whatever he wants with him, but he knows that if he follows that urge, they are not getting out of this car any time soon.

“Well, sucking your dick might make me really happy right now.” Shane argues.

“That is sweet,” Ilya says. “But I can wait. We have the rest of the day.”

Shane’s eyes glint at that, and fuck, Ilya has never wanted him more.

“How many times can you come in an hour?”

“What?” Shane gapes. “You don’t mean—”

“Not now, no.” Ilya chuckles.

“I don’t know.” He rubs the back of his neck. “Maybe twice?”

“We will find out soon.” Ilya winks, watching the colour deepen under Shane’s freckles.

When they get back to the hotel, Ilya doesn’t remember much of what the room looks like. Because the moment their suite door is closed, Shane pushes him against it and hungrily kisses Ilya. He likes it when Shane takes control because he simply craves Ilya. Especially when Ilya is being a little shit towards him and Shane ends up taking out his anger on him exactly like he is doing right now.

Shane kisses him with an urgency as if something might happen to him if he doesn’t kiss Ilya right now. His hands glide over Ilya’s chest and stomach before he eagerly unbuttons Ilya’s pants and finds his cock.

“So eager,” Ilya rasps, so turned on it feels like his heart is in his fucking dick as Shane strokes him like he is on a mission.

He yanks Ilya's clothes down and sinks to his knees, barely giving him a chance to recover. Shane's mouth is hot and wet on him, his need for pleasing Ilya speeding up his orgasm. He devastatingly pushes Shane back to catch a break, but the other persists with a disgruntled noise, pushing Ilya into the door behind him and grabbing onto the backs of his legs.

He looks up at Ilya with wide dark eyes and a fierce look in his eyes that sends a jolt down Ilya's spine.

"Fuck, Shane." He groans, caressing the side of his face.

He pulls back with a loud, popping sound. "Want you to come for me," he says through fast breaths.

"Fucking make me," Ilya growls as Shane takes him all the way to the hilt. He stays like that for a couple of seconds and then he swallows around Ilya.

A few more glides of Shane's sinful mouth around him and Ilya is shooting his load all over Shane's face and shirt. Once Ilya is done, Shane wipes his mouth with the back of his hand and stands up. He has a playful, challenging look on his face that stirs something deep inside Ilya.

"Now we're even," he says, swiping a finger over his cheek and sucking it into his mouth.

That is the last coherent thing Shane gets to say before he finds himself on all fours on a luxurious bed while Ilya jackhammers into him. His body is buzzing with pleasure that floods his senses with every snap of Ilya's hips into him. At some point, Shane's elbows grow too weak to carry him through ecstasy so he gives out and presses his cheek to the mattress. He isn't ready for what that does to him though as his ass lifts a little higher than before, giving Ilya a better angle to literally fuck him senseless.

"Oh my god," Shane moans, grasping for the bed sheets. He thinks he might actually be seeing stars.

The thing about having sex with Ilya is that it's always thrilling. There is this sense of knowing that Ilya knows him—knows exactly what he needs. Shane used to resist this at first, but his orgasms proved him wrong every time. He doesn't think he has felt like this while sleeping with someone before.

What scares him the most though is how much he trusts Ilya with himself. He trusts him with all his being, and he knows that Ilya wouldn't disappoint.

Far from that actually.

He feels Ilya's hand slide up his back and rest between his shoulder blades to press him deeper into the mattress while he continues to reduce Shane to a moaning mess.

"So good for me," Ilya encourages, his thrusts growing sloppier as his fingertips sink in the muscles of Shane's back.

“*Fuck*, Ilya.” Shane cries out when Ilya hits his prostate. “Ah—*ah!*” Electrifying pleasure shoots through him when Ilya does it again.

Shane whimpers with the pressure of his orgasm nearing along with Ilya’s relentless thrusts and then he is coming all over the sheets beneath him. He distantly hears Ilya moaning over him too, their voices overlapping in pleasure.

“*Fuuuck*.” His muscles tense and tighten with his intense release, and his body reflexively recoils from overstimulation yet Ilya delivers two deep, slow thrusts that send Shane spasming with more come spurting out of him.

Ilya follows immediately, his hands going to Shane’s hips that are shaking by now. Shane feels him spilling into the condom, his cock pulsing with his own orgasm. Ilya leans forward then, pressing a kiss to Shane’s sweaty shoulder and whispering something in Russian.

Shane struggles to catch his breath, his eyes falling shut with unshed tears wetting his eyelashes. “Good boy,” Ilya murmurs in his ear, planting another kiss to Shane’s back as he slowly pulls out, careful not to hurt Shane. He helps Shane down into the bed, leading him away from the part he has stained with his release then goes to get rid of the condom.

When they have both calmed down, Shane finally finds his voice. “You got us a room with only one bed,” he says. “You knew I’d share it with you, didn’t you?”

They are lying naked in bed with the dirty covers piled on the floor. In all the months they have lived together, they haven’t shared a bed beyond sex except twice—and both times are experiences Shane doesn’t really want to remember right now. So, whatever this is, it is new. Does he hate it though? No. Which is bad. Really, really bad.

He looks down at Ilya who is sleeping with his head at the opposite end of the bed, his legs outstretched next to Shane’s upper body.

Ilya shrugs. “Figured would be no problem.” He goes quiet. Then, “is it?”

“I don’t know,” Shane replies honestly.

He doesn’t know anything save for the fact that he has just had the longest orgasm he has ever had before. At some point, Shane felt like he was going to pass out. And that was just Ilya fucking him. He doesn’t know what he would do if they upped their game and—*what the fuck is he thinking about?* He shakes his head once, as if making his weird thoughts go away. He literally *just* had sex with the guy, why is he thinking about other ways to do it with him?

They lay quietly for a while, the only sound in the room being their calm breathing patterns. “Thank you. For all this.”

“You have not seen your present yet.”

That makes Shane sit up in bed out of shock. “What present? Isn’t the mind-blowing sex the present already?”

Ilya grins. “You think sex with me is mind blowing?”

“Fuck off, you know what I mean.” Shane shoves his feet.

Ilya turns to his side and props his weight on his elbow, his torso muscles tightening with the movement. His chain with the cross and the angel wings glints at Shane in the warm lighting of the room. Jesus, he looks like a sculpted greek god. “Of course just sex is not the present. What? You think I am an asshole?”

“Ilya, you *are* an asshole.”

“Who fucks you so good you can’t move after.” Ilya wiggles his eyebrows, barking out a laugh when Shane throws a pillow at him.

Their laughter dies down, but Ilya’s gaze remains on Shane with a soft smile shaping his features. For a fleeting moment, Shane gets the feeling Ilya wants to say something, but it disappears right away.

“Can I ask you something?” Shane asks quietly.

“You just did.”

Shane huffs, eliciting a giggle from Ilya. “Okay, okay. Yes.”

“Earlier when we were talking,” he says slowly. “I asked you if you hated me and you joked about it.”

Ilya is silent for a few moments. “Where is the question?”

“Is it true?”

“Did you not hate me too?” Ilya asks plainly, the humour gone from his face.

“Answer me, Ilya.” Shane presses on. He has been thinking about this for hours now. Yes, he hated Ilya at first but then they moved in together, and Ilya did all those nice things that made it impossible for Shane to hate him anymore. So, he needed to know if he felt that too.

“No. Not anymore.” His head drops back on his arm so he is staring at the ceiling now, avoiding Shane’s gaze.

“Why did you...”

“Hate you?” Ilya easily completed the question. “I did not hate you,” Ilya says. “I hated that I was not you.”

“What?” Shane doesn’t understand. “But... you’re *Ilya Rozanov*. You’re like the richest, most fucking successful person. What are you talking about?”

“That is exactly the problem,” Ilya emptily says.

“I don’t understand. What—“

“I am not a Hollander, Shane!” Ilya snaps, then he closes his eyes as if to recollect himself. “I am not loved. I do not have parents that would fight the world for me. I do not have a perfect history in business.”

“Ilya...”

Ilya continues. “I am rich, yes. But I will always be Ilya Rozanov, son of corrupt Grigori Rozanov and brother of addict and dealer Andrei Rozanov.” He looks to the other side where Shane can’t see his face, but Shane crawls to him and puts two tentative fingers on his jaw.

Shane turns Ilya’s face towards him, catching sight of a stray tear that Ilya wipes instantly. His heart clenches in his chest at the look in his eyes. He looks so lonely yet the set of his jaw attempts to defy that fact. A fact that he has been living with for years on his own and now Shane is probably the first person to see and know it unfiltered.

“Ilya, that’s not true.” Shane leaves his hand resting on Ilya’s cheek, his thumb moving softly over the corner of his mouth. “And if it were,” he pauses to take a look into Ilya’s eyes that are unreadable right now. “I’d give the world my eyes to see you.”

Ilya’s eyes fall shut at the words, and Shane feels the muscle in his jaw jump under his fingers. When he opens them, they look red and dimmed, and Shane hates himself for opening his mouth in the first place.

“We should sleep.” Ilya sits up and Shane’s hand falls back into his lap—limp and cold even though the room temperature is warm. “We leave early in the morning. You should get some sleep.”

Shane silently leaves for a quick shower and when he returns, Ilya is already in bed, his back facing Shane. He doesn’t know if Ilya is really asleep, but he knows better than trying to talk to him again now. So, he slides into the ridiculously large bed beside him and lies awake, thinking about everything they have been through in light of what Ilya said tonight.

He doesn’t know how every time he thinks he understands something about Ilya, he turns out to be wrong.

And this time is the worst of them all. *I do not have parents that would fight the world for me.* Shane’s mind replays the nights they have spent at his parents’ house. How Ilya had always seemed in a better, lighter mood when he was there—contrasted with how Shane resented how Ilya was just trying to play nice in front of his parents when all he did was try to get a semblance of what it would be like to exist in a family.

His heart twists painfully in his chest, and he looks to the side where Ilya lays as he is with his back to him. He reaches out a shaky hand and pauses millimeters away from Ilya’s back that is rising and falling with his breath. He swallows hard, fighting the urge to splay his hand on the other’s back and just rub it in comfort. His fingers tremble, and a lump forms in his throat knowing he probably wouldn’t bear it if Ilya flinches away from him—and he probably would.

Very reluctantly, Shane's hand curls into a tight fist and he pulls it back to himself, burying it under his chin and closing his eyes in an attempt to sleep.

They return to the penthouse the next morning, and though they are communicating somewhat normally, Shane hates how the air has shifted between them. Every time he looks at Ilya, it is like he has pulled back behind a glass wall. Shane can see him, hear him and talk to him...but he can't *reach* him.

Shane doesn't understand why Ilya is trailing behind him on the way to his room until he opens the door and realises why.

"Oh my fucking god." Shane rushes into his room and towards the big ass frame leaning against his bed. "You didn't." He looks at Ilya in astonishment from where he has knelt down besides his present.

"I did." Ilya strolls into the room with his hands in his pockets and a crooked smile on his face.

Shane's heart is beating so fucking fast in his chest right now he feels like he needs to move or else he might just have a stroke. In the frame, there is a Montreal Voyageurs jersey with Shane's last name and 24 on it. Not just that, it is also signed by Shane's favourite players. "Is this real?" He almost traces a finger over one of the signatures protected under the glass of the frame but he decides against it as if his fingertips would ruin it.

Ilya is watching him with that same damn crooked smile on his face, and Shane's heart beats impossibly faster. "How did you even...you must have been planning for this since—oh my god." He stands up with the realization. *Ever since I saw your own jersey in your room.*

Shane suddenly feels dizzy with the whirlwind of emotions those couple of days have put him through, but one thing keeps him from losing his balance though. When he was a kid, his instructors would tell him that the key to not losing his balance if he is spinning is having a point of focus. A center that is stable and doesn't move no matter what is happening around it—where Shane can seek balance. What is funny though is Shane doesn't know when Ilya had become his center; the point he gravitates to whenever he feels lost. It is like he has become an intricate part of him, fused in his thoughts, in his system.

"Happy birthday, Shane." Ilya removes his hands from his pockets, and Shane doesn't think before he throws his arms around him in a hug.

Ilya freezes for a moment in which Shane's life flashes before him with the prospect of Ilya pushing him away or worse, not returning the embrace. But all these thoughts go silent when he feels Ilya's strong arms wrap around him. One arm secures itself around Shane's waist and the other runs up to rest against his upper back.

Shane stands on his tiptoes, both of his arms locked around Ilya as he buries his face in the crook of his neck. A tiny, involuntary smile etches itself onto his face when he feels Ilya's nose nuzzle his neck softly. Shivers run down Shane's spine but not out of pleasure, which sends his heart into a frenzy with the realization that this is the first time they hug each other for reasons that aren't traumatic.

Shane did it because he *felt* it in his bones. Ilya has done things that continue to drag Shane towards something he feels deep in his chest. Something that surpasses pleasure, lust and just *casual*. Ilya holds him steadily, unmoving, while everything in Shane moves out of its orbit and towards a place where he doesn't know anything but the feelings Ilya plants in him.

"Thank you," he whispers into Ilya's shoulder.

Ilya doesn't reply, but Shane feels his chest expand against his and his arms close a little tighter around Shane's waist.

Shane closes his eyes. *I hope you know that this is real*, the thought echoes in his mind.

June

Shane is set to make his runway debut tomorrow, but the best thing about it is the fact that Ilya took two days off—well, technically he will be answering business calls, but at least he doesn't need to be at the office—and travelled with Shane all the way to Paris. His parents are attending the show as well, but they are flying in early tomorrow and staying at a separate hotel than the one Ilya and Shane are staying at (thankfully).

Funny thing that his parents have no clue that he and Ilya have been fucking for months now. They know nothing about how Shane has been feeling kind of funny around Ilya—smiling more, laughing more, being himself more. He hadn't realized that all of these things were what was actually happening once he got past the fog of confusion. Not *past* it fully, because there are times when he feels like he is caught in a web, not knowing where to go next but the one thing he knows is that he doesn't want to be away from Ilya.

"What is this?" Ilya asks from where he stands near the dresser in a bathrobe. He raises the two invitations up in question.

"Oh, they are VIPs to the afterparty. I usually don't attend these things," Shane says, putting on his shirt. He should be leaving soon to get ready, which means leaving Ilya. He isn't big on that now. Neither any other time. In fact, they have been migrating between his and Ilya's bedrooms back in Canada every night. It has slowly become normal for them to just fall asleep beside each other after sex.

Whether or not it is normal to wake up the next morning tangled in each other's arms though, Shane is yet to figure that out.

"Shocking." Ilya snickers.

"Hey!" Shane exclaims, offended.

"I say we go tonight. Celebrate you," he says, fanning the invitations in a tempting manner.

"You will come with me?" Shane arches his eyebrows.

"They are two. What? You can't do math?" Ilya mocks.

“Shut up. You really would rather be out partying in Paris than stay in and have sex all night?” Shane teases, closing the distance between them by standing in front of Ilya.

“We can do both.” Ilya shrugs.

“You’re unbelievable.” Shane shakes his head, grinning.

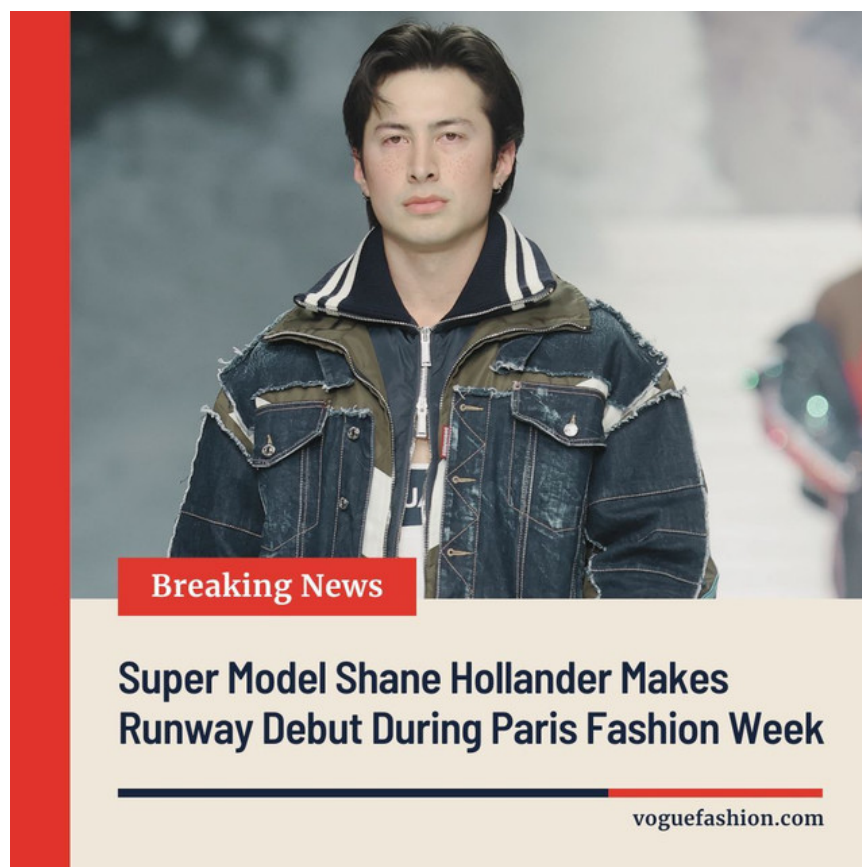
“Good luck today.” Ilya gives his lips a rough kiss that leaves Shane chasing after him when he pulls away.

His hand lands on the knot tying Ilya’s bathrobe closed, and he finds two fingers under his chin. Ilya uses the leverage to tip Shane’s head back.

“Don’t,” Ilya warns in a tone that goes straight to the bottom of Shane’s spine. “Or you are not leaving this room tonight.”

Shane bites his lip, suppressing a smile.

“Go.” Ilya smiles, smacking Shane’s ass when he turns around to leave.



The afterparty was actually not a bad idea. Everyone is hyping up Shane, taking pictures with him, giving him drinks that Ilya takes and substitutes with ginger ale. Some people, and by some Shane means *a lot* of people gush over him and Ilya being together. At some point, the two are separated but not for long because Shane’s first instinct when he doesn’t feel Ilya next to him is to look for him.

It takes him a bit of time to find him in the dimly lit room through the smoke of cigarettes and vapes floating around them. Shane excuses himself from the group he was standing with and puts some distance between them as he searches for Ilya. He spots him by the bar with a glass in his hand and a girl chatting a little too amiably with him.

Something burns in Shane's chest at the scene, even though he knows Ilya is bisexual. And it is not like they're exclusive or something. Just because they enjoy sucking each other's dicks means that Shane is the only person Ilya is messing around with. The thought stings, because that's the truth hidden behind the curtains of their public marriage.

Speaking of the public, apparently that girl doesn't know that Ilya is fucking married and that he came here tonight with his *husband*.

Not really putting too much thought into it, Shane marches towards them.

Upon seeing him, Ilya's face fills with concern. "Shane? Are you—"

"We're leaving," he says.

"What? Did something happen?" Ilya asks, completely oblivious to the woman ogling them both right now.

"Sorry, but my husband and I need to leave now. Early flight tomorrow." He flashes her a fake polite smile and grabs Ilya's hand, leading him away from her.

"Shane," Ilya calls, but Shane doesn't answer. "*Shane*."

Shane stops in his tracks once they are out of the party hall, for some reason breathing heavily even though he wasn't walking *that* fast. Or was he?

"What the hell are you doing?"

Ilya raises his eyebrows. "Partying? Didn't know that is a crime."

"Who is she?" Shane blatantly asks.

Ilya shrugs. "Don't know. Some girl. Was nice."

"Did you forget that we walked into this party tonight as a married couple? You're not supposed to be seen fucking *flirting* with other people." Shane snarls.

"I was not flirting," Ilya replies nonchalantly. "Why do you—" he cuts himself off, frowning. "You are not jealous, are you?"

"What? No. *No*." Shane grimaces, the thought intensifying the burn in his chest.

Ilya gets a hold of Shane's face. "I will ask you again, Hollander. Are you jealous?"

Shane can't look away from him, and he is breathing hard through his nostrils. The word 'yes' is probably written all over Shane's face, which is why Ilya is adamant on holding it

there. But if he expects Shane to say it, then he doesn't know him at all.

"No."

"Are you sure? Because when we return to the hotel and I fuck you so hard you will feel it for days, I do not think this will still be your answer," Ilya says in his ear, his voice deepening and sending chills down Shane's spine.

"Fuck you, Rozanov." Shane grinds, his insides whirring with arousal already.

Ilya grins so wide it must be hurting his cheeks. "I will. But not here."

When they get back to the hotel, Ilya does as he promises and fucks Shane so hard the headboard of their hotel room bed leaves a small mark against the stark white paint.

Ilya collapses next to him, catching his breath. "You could have said yes. I would have fucked you anyway." He is smirking. He is smirking and Shane wants to slap it off his face, but he thinks he has temporarily lost the ability to control his limbs.

"Why? Do the others not keep you satiated?" The retort slips from Shane's lips, and he immediately draws his mouth in a silent line after it. Though he would be lying if he said he isn't dying to know the answers.

Ilya looks at him. "Others?"

"Yeah," Shane answers nervously. "You do have other partners, right?"

"No." Ilya shocks him by saying. "Not since—"

"Since when?" Shane asks eagerly.

"Probably earlier this year." His lips form a pout as he thinks about it, and Shane thinks it is the most adorable Ilya Rozanov has ever looked in his life.

—

Today is June fifteen, a day Shane has been planning for since Ilya surprised him last month on his birthday, which is a little late on Shane's behalf compared to when Ilya has started planning. But as he waits for Ilya to get ready, he thinks this might just outdo him. Shane has never felt this giddy before. He genuinely can't wait to see Ilya's reaction. Though there might be another reason as to why he is feeling this excited today, and it has nothing to do with Ilya's birthday. He received an email from his mother today with the most recent reports on how quarter two is going for Hollander & Co. so far, and everything is looking good. He can confidently say that by the end of this year, all will be back to normal.

He doesn't linger on what 'all' includes, because he has been trying to ignore that thought for a while now. He has somehow made *this*, his life here with Ilya, a separate dimension that his mind sometimes struggles to believe is bound to disappear. And they have roughly less than six months left together now.

“Good?” Ilya asks, emerging out of his bedroom in dark jeans and a black hoodie. He has a cap and sunglasses in his hand as per Shane’s instructions.

“Perfect.” Shane grins. He flips his own cap forward and unfolds his sunglasses as they head down to the street.

There are no fancy cars with chauffeurs waiting for them today. Well, there are fancy cars, but Shane is driving. He wanted this day to be just for them. No extra staff, nothing—save for their security team keeping a close eye on them. He just hopes they don’t get recognised this early on during the day.

“Where are we going?” Ilya asks as he buckles his seatbelt.

“You’ll see.” Shane smiles and drives them out onto the street.

The ride is smooth, and Shane tries to take the least crowded streets he can on their way to skip any unwanted attention. Ilya puts on Bad Bunny and drums his hand on his thighs with the Reggaeton beat. Sometime during the ride, Ilya reaches his hand out and rests it over Shane’s crotch.

“Jesus, Christ. Ilya, you can’t just do that!” Shane almost yells after the car accidentally drifts a little to the right.

“I didn’t do anything!” Ilya exclaims in fake innocence. “I will just keep my hand there. I will not do anything. Is not my fault if you get hard though.”

Shane takes a deep breath and tries to school himself into not focusing on the warm presence on his fucking dick. “Please, remove your hand.”

“I do not think you want that.” Ilya says when Shane’s cock twitches under his hand.

“Ilya.”

“Fiiiine.” Ilya finally removes his hand, dramatically flopping back in his seat. “Boring by the way.”

“Better than fucking crashing because my bo—*someone* can’t keep his hands to himself.” Shane exhales in relief, thinking of everything that would turn him off.

He tries to not think about the fact that he almost, very casually called Ilya his boyfriend. And he hopes from the very depth of his heart that Ilya hasn’t noticed.

Shane’s eyes glance at the silver wedding band on his finger that is reflecting the sharp sunlight into his eye, and he tightens his hands on the steering wheel.

“Close your eyes,” Shane instructs as they near their destination.

“What? You will kidnap me?” Ilya grins, looking at him.

“I might if you don’t listen to me.” Shane huffs.

“Wow. Bossy.” Ilya whistles, but he finally listens and closes his eyes.

“Shut up.” He is smiling, but Ilya can’t see that with his eyes closed. This is better. He can’t always be exposed to the effect he has on Shane. It’s bad for his ego.

Shane gets out of the car first, and then he helps Ilya out after him. He leads him inside with his hand in his, careful that Ilya doesn’t trip over the steps they take up and down until they finally make it.

“Is a little cold here,” Ilya remarks with his eyes still closed.

“Come on, Russian man.” Shane chuckles. “Can’t take a little cold?”

Ilya bites his lip through a smile, shaking his head as if he is threatening Shane.

“Alright. Open your eyes.” Shane lets go of his hands and steps back as Ilya slowly opens his eyes.

He watches his face transform through a series of expressions, from confusion to understanding, as he takes in his surroundings, to finally unfiltered gratitude. “What is this?”

Shane walks up to him with a proud smile on his face. “You said you would have wanted to get into hockey,” he says. “Well...” He gestures around them at the empty arena. “The rink is ours.”

“You would teach me?” Ilya asks, and this may be the first time Shane sees him truly amazed.

Shane shakes his head. “I *will* teach you.” He slides his hand to grab Ilya’s. “Come on, let’s put our gear on. Safety first.”

They go to the locker room where two sets of Hollander & Co. hockey gear are laid out waiting to be used.

“Very fancy,” Ilya jokes as he picks up a piece and taps the company’s name on it with a sneaky smile on his face.

“Fuck off.” Shane laughs. “I had to be resourceful.”

“No, I like it. I like all of this.” He smiles genuinely at Shane. The smile that has a boyish look to it. The very one that makes Shane’s stomach flutter. “A lot.”

“You gotta be patient with me though. I’m a little rusty.” Shane straps the last piece of gear on him and helps Ilya with his skates before he puts on his own.

“How are they?” He asks, watching Ilya wiggle his feet experimentally.

“Okay I think.”

“Not too tight?”

“No. This is good.”

Shane puts on his skates and leads them out of the locker room and towards the rink. He has to hold Ilya by his forearms because he wobbles on his feet trying to walk with his skates on. He steps out onto the ice first, the transition from the rough surface of the ground to the smooth, slippery ice familiar to him.

“Have you ever skated before?” Shane asks.

Ilya seems to consider his question, then he shakes his head. “I was very young.”

“It’s okay. Just put one foot in front of the other and lean forward. Don’t let go of me.” Shane helps him in and thankfully Ilya does listen to him, avoiding the trap of slipping and landing on your back the moment you step onto the ice.

“We will work on just skating around a bit before we get to trying the sticks, yeah?” Shane checks in with him, and Ilya nods.

They start slow, working on Ilya’s posture and right foot positions. They eventually switch to skating side by side with Shane supporting him by keeping a firm hold on his arm. “I got you.”

Ilya smiles at him then goes back to watching his skates slice over the ice better and better with every lap they take around the rink.

“This is fun!” He yells as they swerve to make a turn.

Shane laughs. “Wait until you shoot your first puck. You think you can skate on your own? Don’t worry, I’ll be right next to you.”

“Yes. I can try.” Ilya nods, his face pulling into a very concentrated expression. Shane has probably never seen him this determined, and he realises why most people that work with him might view him as intimidating. His entire face changes when he focuses on something. He looks almost scary—but not to Shane. To Shane he just looks extra hot.

Ilya lets go of Shane’s arm and skates on his own. Shane is hot on his heels just in case, and he is lucky to catch a glimpse of Ilya’s joyful face before the other speeds up with his arms spread on either side of him.

“Wohooo!” Ilya hollers, his voice echoing around them in the empty place.

“Careful!” Shane shouts after him, picking up his pace so he could match Ilya.

It is not until Ilya is nearing the boards that Shane realizes they forgot to go over halting. “Ilya, slow down,” Shane warns, but Ilya doesn’t seem to hear him.

“Uh-oh.” He thinks he hears Ilya say before his weight tips over the boards and he falls out of the rink.

"Ilya?!" Shane shouts after him, panic surging through him as he collides roughly with the boards where Ilya tripped over just seconds ago.

He finds Ilya lying on his back, his arms and legs sprawled out.

"Are you okay?" Shane looks down at him in concern.

Ilya silently looks up at him with his eyes blown wide.

Then he giggles.

His giggles get louder until he is laughing out loud with his whole being. His face gets so pink and tears collect at the corners of his eyes before they roll down the sides of his face and into his ears. Shane laughs in relief with him, suddenly feeling like he can breathe again. He hops down from the rink and makes his way over to Ilya who has finally calmed down.

"Sure you're okay?" He gives out a hand that Ilya grabs and uses as support to get up to his feet.

"Yes." Ilya tries moving his legs and arms and nods to himself when nothing happens.

"Your back?"

"Was just the shock of it. I am okay. Let's go, I do not want to stop yet."

"Ilya," Shane hesitates.

"I'm fine, Shane." Ilya rolls his eyes. "Now come on. Do not ruin my birthday."

Shane gasps. "*Me?* Oh, fuck you I was just being considerate."

Ilya laughs. "You are so easy to get."

"I will so kick your ass once we get back there." Shane narrows his eyes as they waddle back to the ice rink.

This time Shane hands him his stick and grabs one too. Ilya checks it, running his fingers over the letters written on it in stark gold colours, a slow smile finding its way to his face.

Shane's cheeks heat up. "It's, um, yours. This is part of your present," he says, referring to the hockey stick that is customised with Ilya's name on it.

"Yes?" Ilya asks with a soft look in his eyes that makes Shane look away from him.

"Are we gonna stand here all day or are we gonna play some hockey?" Shane jokes, shifting the air into a lighter one before his mind starts spiralling. He skates away with his stick and grabs a puck from the pile that is neatly organised on the side.

He toys with it for a while, refreshing his memories before he passes it and it skids off into the net.

“Show-off!” Ilya throws the word at him, but when Shane looks at him, he finds him smiling.

“I’m a little rusty, so shut up.”

“Little rusty and then what? You will score five times after that?” Ilya teases.

“They’re not *scores*, we’re not—” he pauses to sigh. “Can you just get over here, please?”

“I will make sure to score more pucks than you though.” Ilya skates over to him, and Shane gets a whiff of his cologne.

“Are you sure you didn’t hit your head back there?”

“Fucker.” Ilya grins.

They work together over techniques and how Ilya should hold the stick while balancing its weight with his own. Ilya is a quick learner, given the amount of hockey games he has watched. His build also helps him maneuver the stick well, and Shane genuinely enjoys teaching him everything he learned when he first joined hockey practice.

At some point during practicing, Shane checks on Ilya to find him looking at him *again*. “Ilya, you’re supposed to be looking at the puck not me,” he says, a hint of timidity shaping his words and for some reason he feels his face heating up. *Damn it.*

“Can’t help it. You are a very good teacher,” Ilya says, his words going to Shane’s stomach that flips. “So handsome too.”

“Flirting with your captain is not allowed.” Shane regrets saying this the moment the words leave him.

“My captain?” Ilya raises his eyebrows, a smirk playing on his lips.

Shane juts his chin out defiantly. “Yes. Now get back to what we were doing.”

“Yes, *captain*.” The way Ilya says the word has Shane almost shivering. He blames it on the ice and not moving a lot.

“Good, now try aiming for the net.” Shane watches as Ilya bends down, putting all his focus on swinging his stick and sending that puck into the goal.

“It’s okay if you don’t—” Shane is about to say that it is okay if he doesn’t score, that they are just here today to have fun when the puck lands into the net.

“*Davai!*” Ilya shouts in Russian, spinning to look at Shane with the brightest, biggest smile on his face.

Shane’s heart swells in his chest.

He was nervous about Ilya hating the idea or not enjoying his time here, but hearing him laugh, seeing his smile that almost hasn’t left his face since they got here dissolved every

doubt he had.

“You did it!” Shane grins. He goes for a high-five, but Ilya skids over to him and smacks a kiss on his cheek.

“Told you you are a very good teacher.” His eyes are sparkling with adrenaline as they look intensely at Shane.

“And you’re, um, you’re a very good student.” Shane nods, smiling back at him.

“I know.” Ilya winks and brings down another puck to score. It also goes into the net, sending him into another wave of excitement.

They continue doing that for a while, alternating between him and Shane trying to shoot their pucks into the net. Then, they step up their game by chasing each other with a puck between them. Their laughs fill the empty arena with their warmth and joy, and for a moment Shane forgets everything else that exists outside of this place. They play around and tease each other until they both forget what they are to each other. Right now, they are just two young men enjoying their time together.

Shane wishes it could be like this forever.

“I can’t feel my feet,” Ilya says as he puts his shoes back on.

Shane chuckles. “Makes sense, it has been five hours.”

“What?” Ilya looks stunned. Then he stands up to face Shane. “I did not feel like it was that long,” he says quietly, his eyes on Shane’s.

“Is that a bad thing or a good thing?” Shane asks, losing himself in the way Ilya’s hazel eyes are staring at him. Like they hold *something* that Shane can’t put his finger on. It pisses him off, because it has been happening a lot lately. This *look* that Ilya sometimes gives him.

“Both maybe,” Ilya murmurs, his lips brushing Shane’s.

Shane doesn’t ask him what that means. Instead, he pushes off his heels and presses his lips to Ilya’s. Ilya grabs his face and kisses him deeply, nearly turning Shane’s knees into jelly. It strikes him how every kiss with Ilya feels different. Sometimes it’s rushed and eager, sometimes it’s slow and explorative, but today is brand new. Today it sends Shane’s heart hammering in his chest. Today it’s tender and gentle while still maintaining an arousing edge to it. He doesn’t know how Ilya does it, but he never wants him to stop.

Which is why he almost protests when Ilya breaks the kiss. “Thank you,” he says, his hands still holding Shane’s face. He rubs his thumbs over Shane’s cheekbones, the gesture so tender it almost brings tears to Shane’s eyes. “I love…” he inhales to continue, unaware of the fact that Shane’s heart stopped in his chest for a moment. “I loved everything,” he finishes.

Shane brings a hand to rest it over Ilya’s. “Wait until we get home.” He winks with a grin.

The drive back to the penthouse is peaceful, save for the way Shane's mind keeps circling back to the way he had reacted when Ilya said those two words out of context. Why the fuck was he this shaken up? *What? You thought he was going to say 'I love you'?* A voice mocks in his head, and Shane is attacked with a heavy feeling after that. Because whatever his mind was trying to picture, it would not work. Ilya can't love him. He can't when their deal ends this year. In a few months, he won't see or hear from Ilya ever again. He suppresses the thought and turns up the music, distracting himself from his own mind.

Coward. Coward. Coward.

This is what plays out in Ilya's mind on their way back to the house. He doesn't know what came over him. He doesn't know how he let himself get here. How he subjected himself to a heartbreak he would never heal from.

I love you, he had almost said.

He saw the fear on Shane's face, and then everything had turned on its axis. What did he think would happen? That Shane would say it back and throw himself in his arms? Why? Because they live in fantasy land? Ilya knew the first time his heart beat for Shane that it was beating towards its own doom. Yet he continued to let it be. Maybe it is better for it to wither and die on its own instead of having it get broken by the man he has slowly been falling in love with.

Everything is going well as it is now. There is no need to ruin it with his feelings. He can live with them hidden. It doesn't matter.

It becomes difficult sometimes though when Shane does things that make Ilya want to crawl out of his skin and seek shelter in one of the chambers of Shane's heart. Things like getting jealous over him, being the first one Shane calls when something new pops up at his work, inviting him to spend days with his family, and buying him fucking angel wings that go with his cross for his mother.

Things like crawling up to him in the middle of the night and telling him that he would give the world his eyes to see him.

Do you even see me? Ilya had wanted to ask. *Do you see that I would burn the world for you to love me if I could? Tell me, tell me how you see me. Maybe it would heal my sick heart.*

But instead Ilya had fucking pushed him away. He couldn't. He couldn't take it. Even if Shane likes him back, which is sort of silently established between them now anyway, he can't assume that he *loves* Ilya. Shane is kind, and he has the biggest heart Ilya had ever seen. But there probably isn't room for Ilya in his heart. As a friend maybe. Someone you marry for convenience and then divorce by the end of the year. That's it. There can never be more to it.

And the worst part is that Ilya has known this all along.

His thoughts submerge in his mind like a dull headache though when they arrive at the house and he finds Yuna, David and even Tanya welcoming him home. Anya runs at him, reaching up with her front paws and begging for his attention. He picks her up and laughs when she starts licking all over his face.

“Is this the best birthday or what?” He says outloud to no one in particular, distantly thinking that it might actually be the last good one he will have ever again.

Yuna apparently has made Ilya’s favourite dish, chicken parmesan, Tanya baked the pastries that now he and Shane love, and David brought good liquor. Shane is sitting next to him, eating and happily telling the story of how Ilya fell today. His laugh slithers into Ilya’s mind and takes home there like a core memory. A sound he could replay when he is alone at night in his penthouse to keep him company.

Everything is perfect. *Too* perfect.

Ilya should be happy. He is surrounded by people he can now confidently say they like him. Yet the dull ache in his chest keeps making him feel like he can’t breathe properly. He puts on a smile though and carries conversations with Yuna and David. Shane looks at him every now and then to check up on him.

And he sees it in his eyes, the moment he catches that Ilya isn’t in his right mind. It has become terrifying how easily Shane gets to him now. He pries at Ilya’s walls like a fierce tiger, and most of the time he gets in. Little does he know that Ilya is growing weary of carrying those walls up—he will either collapse or break down his own walls and break both of them in the process. Anyway, he can’t afford either. So, he just wishes Shane would stop trying to get in.

Yuna and David don’t stay long after they eat, though Shane doesn’t let them leave before they try Tanya’s pastries first. They end up taking some with them home. After they leave, he and Shane find their way to Ilya’s bedroom with their hands and mouths all over each other.

“Missed you,” Shane mumbles in between kisses.

Not as much as me. “Me too.” Ilya hauls his muscular figure into his arms and throws him onto the bed.

He pounces onto Shane and his mind doesn’t return to him until they are finally lying next to each other catching their breath and calming down from their high.

Shane reaches a lazy arm and buries his hand in Ilya’s sweaty hair, turning his head towards him. “Happy birthday, Ilya.”

Ilya doesn’t reply. He can’t find his voice, so he just scoots closer and plants a kiss on Shane’s bare shoulder, resting his head there afterwards.

Shane and Ilya are barely falling asleep when the sharp sound of Ilya's phone ringing startles both of them. It is literally the middle of the night.

"Who the hell?" Shane grumbles, sitting up as Ilya springs from the bed in hunt for his phone.

Shane observes with half open eyes as Ilya picks it up from the nightstand and takes the call. All the sleep leaves him when he hears Ilya speaking Russian though. His side is facing Shane, so he can't see his face that clearly.

Anxiety rushes through him when Ilya's whole body tenses and he starts pacing, talking in sharp Russian words that Shane doesn't understand. Then he hangs up with a hard expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" Shane leaves the bed to go over to him. He looks closely at Ilya and realizes that he is breathing rapidly. "Ilya, did something happen?"

Ilya's eyes finally snap to Shane, freezing the other in his spot as he braces himself for whatever Ilya is about to say.

"It is my niece."

Chapter End Notes

THOUGHTS? QUESTIONS? OPINIONS?

also i have a question for y'all what do you think ilya is hiding behind that room?

Chapter 5: Quarter Three

Chapter Summary

A new resident disrupts life at the Rozanov penthouse, whether in a good or a bad way Shane finds himself trying to figure that out himself.

Chapter Notes

HI HELLO QUICK UPDATE (for once lmao), i know this chapter isn't as lengthy as the previous ones, but i think that's much better than trying to expand on word count only, so enjoy this one!

Please note that there is a mention of drug overuse and domestic violence/death in this chapter. It's only one paragraph that starts with "The second part of this story is true." and it's safe to skip, it won't affect your understanding of the events.

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

July

Today marks exactly one month since Ilya and Shane woke up to the call from Russia.

One month since he found out his brother drove himself and his wife into their death and left behind a ray of sunshine for Ilya to raise as her only legal guardian.

Yelena Rozanov.

The five year old girl who has been living with them at the penthouse for almost three weeks now.

Ilya has been in and out of touch with social workers and attorneys up until last week to make sure everything is going okay. Yelena has been informed that her parents died in a car accident and that she will now be living with Ilya, her uncle in Canada. Luckily for her, Yelena's mother had left her with their neighbour on the day of the accident.

The second part of this story is true. What actually happened to Andrei and his wife was much, much worse than a car accident. Nothing that a five-year old could comprehend nor a daughter should even need to know in her life. Ilya would make sure of that. No one deserves to live with the weight of knowing their dad was a drug addict who one night got so high he beat up his wife then died of an overdose afterwards.

The reports his attorneys sent had mentioned that Yelena's mother suspected that something was off with Andrei and that was why her first instinct was to send the little girl away. When her suspicions were proven right, she called for help immediately. But it was too late when the authorities arrived.

Which, Ilya had realised shortly afterwards, meant that the only two people remaining alive from the Rozanov family were him and his five years old niece.

The girl had been silent for most of her early time around the house, warming up only to Ilya since he is the only person she actually knows, then Tanya, and lastly—but no less lovingly—Shane. She spoke in Russian, then when she heard Ilya and Shane talking in English, she had started using the little words and phrases she knew in English.

It was adorable, because it was the first time Ilya felt like she genuinely wanted to communicate with them instead of keeping to herself or only talking to Ilya and Tanya then shooting Shane curious looks and shy smiles.

Now as he looks at her colouring in the book Shane got her recently, a small smile paints itself on his face. He watches as Yelena inspects the coloured pencils in front of her before she shouts “Blue!” then picks it up in victory while Shane claps for her. Both he and Tanya have taken to teaching her very small phrases she could use, numbers, colours, important sentences in case Ilya isn't around.

And she has been very receptive. It scared Ilya. She is so smart, curious, and just full of life. Nothing like the home she lived in, and in a painful way she reminded him of himself. Except Yelena is luckier to not have decades of bad memories with her father. She didn't live through the pain of walking in and finding both her parents dead, and Ilya is more than grateful for that.

He will do everything in his power to protect this girl. No matter how heavy the responsibility is, no matter how lonely it might get for both of them later. *Because Shane isn't living here forever like her. He is leaving,* a cold voice reminds him. Though Ilya doesn't think he is ready to navigate what living with him and Yelena would be like only for fate to snatch that life away from him in a few months.

“Good?” Yelena looks at Shane with a hopeful expression on her face. When Shane nods excitedly, she turns to Ilya to show him her progress.

“Uncle Ilya, what do you think?” She asks in Russian.

“Very good, *solnyshko*.” He smiles at her, and Yelena giggles as she goes back to colouring the octopus even though she isn't *exactly* colouring inside the drawing itself.

Ilya finds himself shutting out everything else in his mind and focusing on this rare moment where he, Shane and Yelena are gathered together doing something as minimal as watching the toddler colour and helping her name the colours in English.

A fragment of what ‘normal’ could ever feel like.

Yelena's presence has disrupted life at the Rozanov penthouse; Shane can fully admit that.

On one hand, he and Ilya are barely seeing each other alone. It is either both of them are working or spending time with Yelena when they are both home. On the other hand, she has shifted Ilya's mood into someone Shane has never seen before. It is like he fully transforms into someone else when she is around. It sometimes makes Shane's heart stop for a moment, because every time he thinks he has figured out Ilya, a brand new layer to him just poses itself to Shane like a puzzle piece. *Look at me, study me, fit me in the mess of your mind.*

What makes him the happiest though is how Yelena has gravitated to him and started treating him like a friend. Even if the only verbal communication between them is mere words. That is even better, because Shane's mood immediately gets better whenever she approaches him with her colouring kit and lays it on his lap as an invitation for them to colour together. Or when she brings him the tv remote and starts imitating Elsa's moves from *Let Her Go* so he could let her watch it on the big screen.

Tanya is also taking good care of her, maybe being the main pillar of support with Shane and Ilya being busy most of the time. Yelena loves her as well, which is a good sign. Shane doesn't doubt that this is a safe home for her after everything he found out about what happened to her parents. It is gruesome to think about, so Shane usually tries not to visit that thought at all.

Instead, he finds himself focusing on how soft Ilya is when he is around Yelena.

And tonight is the funniest he has ever seen Ilya. He has just put Yelena to sleep, and now they are supposed to sit and assemble her one of those big dollhouses with many decorations and parts to, apparently, be glued and nailed together.

"Did you really have to get the hardest one to install?" Shane sighs as he looks at the manual for the third time for reference. They are sitting upstairs in Ilya's living room where the coffee table usually is. However, right now it is pushed to the side while an uninstalled dollhouse is splayed around them in the middle of the space.

"I don't know!" Ilya replies with frustration. "It said on the internet that this is the best one."

His hair is messy with how many times he has run his hand through it, his curls standing out in different directions. The way he looks miserable at life makes Shane almost want to laugh.

"Give me those." Shane snatches the hammer and nails from him, taking a closer look at the model they are supposed to reach. "Okay, so this part goes here." He starts explaining as they both organise how the house should look before they get to gluing anything.

"Stop, stop, you're going to break it." Shane's urgent tone stops Ilya's attempt piecing together the back side of the house.

Ilya huffs. "Fine, you do it then!"

Shane chuckles at his frustration and sets the piece aside.

“You want coffee?” Ilya asks, stretching his arms over his head.

“Now?” Shane is about to object, then he looks back at the mission at their hands. “Yeah. Definitely, yeah.”

Ilya returns minutes later with two mugs of coffee, and Shane ends up installing the whole thing while Ilya hands him the tools he needs.

“You are very good at this,” Ilya remarks at one point. They have somewhat a skeleton of a house now with rooms and all except for smaller parts like doors and windows. They decided to do the decoration tomorrow with Yelena so she could decide where she wants to put everything instead of them just doing it themselves.

Besides, Shane is really tired. They have been working on this for about three hours, his neck muscles are starting to feel like they could cramp any moment now.

“Mr. Handyman.” Ilya jokes.

“Shut up, you’re gonna make me mess up.” Shane shakes with laughter, his hands almost missing the spot where he is supposed to hinge the other side of the house.

He hears Ilya shifting next to him and then he feels the warmth of his presence near him. “Ilya.” Shane warns warily, his face still pulled into a smile.

“I miss you.” He whispers, his breath fanning over Shane’s cheek.

“Come on, I’m almost done.” Shane feels the satisfying *click* of the hinges coming together and grins in victory.

He barely pulls back from the freshly assembled house before Ilya is onto him. He traps Shane between his bent knees on either side of him and kisses him into the carpeted floor. Ilya’s hungry lips on him feel like he has just woken up from a deep sleep. With most of their time being occupied with Yelena’s presence, they can’t really do anything past swift cheek kisses or a peck on the lips. Shane knows Ilya had talked to her about the nature of their relationship given that they are wearing wedding bands and the girl isn’t stupid. But still, they are careful around her since she has basically never seen “two men” married before.

“Bedroom?” Ilya asks after softly biting into Shane’s bottom lip and tugging at it.

“God, yes.”

They hurry off the floor and quietly make their way downstairs to Ilya’s bedroom. The moment the door clicks shut behind them, they start undressing each other and falling into Ilya’s bed.

“Jesus fucking Christ.” Shane sighs at the urgency Ilya is moving with, his mouth finding Shane’s half hard dick already.

Ilya blindly fishes for a pillow and Shane yanks it towards him and muffles his mouth into it as moan after moan escapes him.

“Oh fuck, I missed you too.” Shane whimpers with one hand down in Ilya’s curls.

Ilya continues his ungodly mouth work around Shane until he comes in his mouth, the pillow drowning out the sounds he makes in the process. The moment he calms down from his high, he is pulling Ilya up into a dirty kiss and flipping them over so he can return the favour. Shane pushes Ilya’s legs apart and positions himself in the middle, taking him into his mouth in one go.

“Fuck, Hollander.” A deep, low hum punches out of Ilya at that, and Shane feels his hand on the back of his head.

God, he missed sucking Ilya’s dick. He doesn’t even remember the last time they touched each other like this.

Ilya’s hand is a guide in Shane’s hair, sinfully pushing him down in a way that encourages Shane to slacken his jaw a little and obediently take him deeper. “*Da*. Just like that.” He hears Ilya’s approving tone and goosebumps cover his skin.

When he looks up, he finds Ilya watching him in a daze. His face is flushed and filled with so much lust Shane lets himself pick up his pace just so he could watch him come apart. Which, judging by the tight grip in his hair, doesn’t take Ilya that much of a time. Ilya’s hand pulls back at his hair, signalling that he is about to come but then Shane places his hand over Ilya’s on his head and continues sucking—silently telling him that he wants this. No longer than a few seconds later, Ilya spills hot and hard into his mouth.

“That was very hot.” Ilya caresses his cheek and wipes the corner of Shane’s mouth with his finger. Shane chases it and sucks it into his mouth, smiling when Ilya’s dick twitches. “Show-off.”

“You’re no innocent either.” Shane heaves himself off the bed to clean up, leaving behind a grinning Ilya.

When he comes back, he finds Ilya already fast asleep. He doesn’t think before he slides into bed next to him, feeling Ilya’s arms wrap around him from behind. He murmurs something in Russian, his cheek resting over Shane’s ear as they both drift to sleep.

This is good, he feels. This is too good.

The next morning, Shane and Ilya jolt awake to the sound of a piercing scream coming very specifically from upstairs.

“So much for a surprise.” Shane mumbles sleepily.

Ilya is muttering in Russian, already on his feet and putting on a shirt. In a matter of minutes, they are both refreshed and wearing clothes, ready to join Yelena upstairs when the door to Ilya’s bedroom flies open and the little girl comes running in. Now that the door is wide

open, Shane can hear Tanya's loud scolding voice after her and in a second, she is out of breath by the door frame with a hand on her hip.

Yelena doesn't seem to mind the old woman's scolding though as she runs towards Ilya with her arms wide open. Ilya scoops her up in his arms, his whole face lighting up.

"I am so sorry." Tanya looks apologetically at Shane. "Told her to wait, but—"

"It's okay, Tanya." Shane smiles appreciatively at her. "Thank you."

Pink-faced, the woman nods and shuts the door after her to give the three of them a little privacy.

Yelena is rambling in Russian while Ilya nods and smiles at her attentively, then she sloppily kisses both his cheeks. He lets her down then bends down to whisper something in her ear that has her smiling big at Shane, then she runs up to him and practically hugs his leg. Shane softly laughs and kneels down to hug her properly, his heart clenching in his chest when he feels her small arms reach as far as she can around his broad shoulders.

"Thank you," she says in English, kissing his cheek afterwards.

"You're most welcome." Shane smiles, booping her nose.

Out of all the times they have spent together until now, this is probably the happiest Shane has seen Yelena. It might have been obvious she likes spending time with him, but she hasn't expressed this kind of affection towards Shane before. It makes him feel weird. Good kind of weird though.

Yelena pulls away from Shane's embrace and takes his hand, reaches towards Ilya and takes his hand too. They exchange a look as Yelena encourages Shane off his knees and tugs the two of them towards the door.

"Oh, good. She's picking up your manners already." Shane jokes as he opens the door for her with his free hand.

"Shane Hollander. Funniest man alive." Ilya fondly rolls his eyes with a smile.

She looks up at both of them with a smile that is so warm it shakes Shane to his core. He wonders what might be going through her mind. Are they making her happy? Are they making her feel safe? Does she feel loved? Spoiled? Scared? He suddenly feels the weight of how big it is what they are doing to this little child. They are basically her only family now. Including Tanya. He looks at Ilya, but Ilya's eyes are already on him with an unreadable look. He winks at Shane, sending a wave of heat under his cheeks that forces him to look away.

They have the fastest breakfast they have ever had because Yelena physically can't wait until she can start decorating her dollhouse and playing with it. The morning through the afternoon passes with Shane, Ilya and Yelena making her dream dollhouse come true until both of them eventually get tired and watch her play for a bit. Anya has been hiding all morning, or more

like she has been hiding from Yelena most of the time because the little girl is so full of energy even Anya can't keep up sometimes.

"Have you thought about what school you will enroll her in?" Shane asks, watching Yelena move a doll as if downstairs from her bedroom to her kitchen.

"I am looking." Ilya nods, his eyes following his niece's movements.

Another question occurs to Shane. "Have you thought about...you know." It practically isn't his place to communicate something like this nor his call, but he can't help but think about it.

"Therapy?" Ilya glances at him for confirmation. "Yes. My therapist is seeing if she can recommend someone who is good with kids."

With Yelena's situation, Shane can understand why it is important Ilya finds someone who is both Russian *and* experienced with children. When they first met Yelena, she was barely talking. They spent so much time and effort to take her out of her initial shock of her parents' death. Social workers helped to an extent, and her familiarity with Ilya did help a little too. But there are still nights where she can't sleep on her own, days where she falls quiet and starts asking about her parents. Ilya can only do so much. He is trying his best, Shane can see that.

But neither of them can do what a professional needs to be doing with Yelena.

"I do not want her to feel like she is alone in this world," Ilya says after a while.

"Hey." Shane nudges Ilya's hand with his own between them on the couch. "She's not alone. She has you."

"And you are here too, yes?"

The question for some reason strikes Shane square in the chest, because yes he is here. But for how long?

"I don't back out of my deals, Rozanov." Shane remarks.

Ilya is silent for a long moment that Shane has to look at him to see if he actually heard him.

He finds him looking at Shane with a sort of a heavy look.

Shane looks back at him knowing he is doing so with questioning eyes, because he has no idea if Ilya heard him or if that reaction is to something he had zoned out about. Probably the latter.

"What?" he asks.

"Nothing." Ilya says, shifting in his seat to stand up and go in Yelena's direction. "Nothing."

August

Yelena has started going to therapy. Ilya's therapist managed to find someone who could help her through navigating her emotions towards what happened, and it has been working. Very slowly, yes, but at least she is sleeping better, talking more, and learning more English faster.

Which was another thing that Ilya insisted on. He wanted her to learn the language of the country she now lives in from a young age so she doesn't struggle later. And so it could help her when school starts. She learns from everyone around the house, and every night they sit down and watch a cartoon in English so she could be exposed to the language. Shane had suggested that they hire a private tutor, but Ilya protested and Shane had agreed when he understood why Ilya refused.

"Maybe later. Too much is happening now," he had said.

Meeting many new people all at once wouldn't be the best thing in the world. It is good that getting used to her therapist didn't take much time, and now the aspect of going out and leaving the house is on the table.

That being said, Shane's calendar has been filling up like crazy with the status of Hollander & Co. progressing at an insane speed. Thinking about it now though, maybe he can try pushing a few dates here and there so he could be with Ilya and Yelena.

"Where do you want to go?" Ilya ruffles her hair and laughs when Yelena fusses over getting it back into place.

She is lying on her stomach on the floor with her chin propped on both hands. Ilya is on his back on the couch with his feet in Shane's lap, and Anya is napping in the corner away from Yelena. It's in moments like this that Shane feels like life just stops. Like his mind is taking a mental picture of how relaxed Ilya looks, how Yelena is looking up at him curiously, how easily Shane fits into this puzzle even though he is a replaceable part. A removable one.

It terrifies him how much he has grown to love their newest resident at the house, and even worse, how much she has grown to love him too.

"Hmm." Yelena pretends to think, giving Shane a look.

"Let me guess," he says lightly, narrowing his eyes as if he were guessing. "Somewhere where you can have all the ice cream in the world."

Yelena giggles.

Ilya, at that, gasps dramatically and looks at Yelena. "Yelena Rozanov." He starts lowering himself onto the ground like a panther readying itself to pounce on its prey, and Yelena's giggles get louder as she starts backing away from him. "You would eat all the ice cream in the world and leave nothing for the other kids?" he asks, mixing words of English and Russian.

Yelena shrugs then, her eyes meeting Shane's over Ilya's head, and he motions for her to run to him behind Ilya's back. Her smile widens, and just as Ilya is about to tackle her, Yelena

leaps off the floor and collapses into Shane's wide, welcoming arms in a heap of belly-aching laughter.

"*Betrayal!*" Ilya shouts theatrically. "But I will get my revenge."

Yelena screams at that, holding tighter onto Shane as her laughs continue to bubble out of her.

"Hide! Hide, Lena!" Shane envelopes her in his arms, almost covering her entire figure. "We will escape to a very far land!" He holds her well and gets up with Ilya after him and they chase each other around the living room with Yelena laughing and screaming in his arms.

Ilya gets a hold of them and ends up attacking Yelena in a fit of kisses and tickles until she is running away from him so she could breathe. Tanya takes her to give her a bath then, and Shane laughs as he hears her tell Tanya about how her English is now better than the old woman's.

"She really is your niece." Shane chuckles, shaking his head.

"I am glad she is," Ilya replies, wiping at the corners of his eyes where laughter-tears have gathered.

"I'm sure she is too." Shane smiles at him.

Ilya smiles back, but the smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"Are you okay?" Shane finally asks.

Ilya has been acting a little off lately, and it has been driving Shane crazy. He doesn't treat Shane differently or anything, but something about him just feels...*away*.

"Yes. Why would I not be?" Ilya replies casually.

"I don't know." Shane shrugs. "You tell me."

Ilya is silent, then he shrugs. "I'm okay."

Shane's phone rings, interrupting the moment and putting an end to their conversation. As he gets up to get the call, Shane gets a feeling it wouldn't have gone anywhere nice. So maybe that phone call saved them both.

They end up going to the park the next day, taking Anya along with them. They stop for ice cream first as they agreed, and once Yelena's cup is empty, she starts running around with Anya whose leash is still in Ilya's hand.

"Let her go." Shane chuckles as Ilya picks up his pace so Anya doesn't run off.

"Fine, but if they get too far you are getting them." Ilya warns before he lets Anya off her leash and laughs as she springs free.

Shane and Ilya walk for a bit, watching Yelena throw the ball they brought with them while Anya runs to get it. Her laugh echoes into the air, the wind making her blondish-brown hair fly into her face.

“I have another business trip next month,” Ilya announces as they sit down on a bench where they can still watch Yelena.

“Yeah?” Shane glances at him. He is in a dark hoodie and his sunglasses conceal his eyes from the mild sunlight. “For how long?”

“Not long.” Ilya extends his arm behind Shane, resting his hand there on his shoulder and nudging him closer. “You don’t want to come?”

“What about Yelena?” Shane surprises himself by asking. Usually, his first response would have been *what about my work?*, but once again circumstances prove to him that his priorities are changing whether he wants to or not.

“Tanya is here.” Ilya shrugs. “We could use some alone time.” His hand slides down and he pinches Shane’s ass.

“*Ilya!*” Shane gasps, looking around them and at Yelena. Thankfully no one is looking.

“What?” Ilya snickers. “I thought you liked it when people watched.”

“Fuck off. Not here.” Shane blushes, but he completely undermines his point by leaning in and kissing Ilya.

Ilya kisses him back softly, his lips tasting of faint ice cream. It has to be studied how every fibre in Shane’s body melts when he kisses Ilya. Right as Ilya inclines his head to deepen the kiss, he breaks off with a loud yelp. He looks down to find the very same ball Yelena has been playing with by his foot. Shane bites his lip, fighting off a smile.

“Somebody is demanding your attention.” Shane grins at Yelena who is enthusiastically beckoning him to come over. “Go.” He laughs as Ilya picks up the ball and marches to her.

He looks back to Shane holding up a finger. “Hold that thought.”

Shane ends up playing ‘The Judge’ as he watches Ilya, Yelena (and consequently Anya) race back and forth between two trees. One time Ilya pretends to run in slow motion, one time he pretends to be caught in a monster trap, and one time he pretends he has fallen asleep. This time he lies flat on the ground while Yelena shakes him awake with Anya sniffing around his face and hair. Ilya startles her by waking up suddenly with his hands held up in claw shape. Yelena screams then starts hysterically laughing when Ilya captures her and tickles her. The scene is so pure Shane finds his chest vibrating with a sort of laugh that carries something bigger than just humour.

Something about watching big, intimidating Ilya Rozanov holding a five year old in his arms and getting laugh after laugh out of her makes Shane’s heart do something wobbly in his chest. Like a sudden burst that reaches all his senses, all his organs, including his eyes that

are not seeing anything else past the man on the grass in front of him along with the child that carries some of his features.

Enjoy it while it lasts, a voice in his head daunts.

The smile falls from Shane's face, and reality comes creeping in again like fire eating at an old family photo. He feels its burn everywhere, including his very eyes that were locked on the two people playing around only a moment ago. He finds it painful to breathe, and his thoughts keep getting darker and darker—reminding him of the inevitability of his life with Ilya and Yelena ending in a matter of a few months.

He has gone through so much the past months that it feels like a lot longer than that, and even though he has a whole of nearly five months still left, it feels a lot less than that.

And Shane can't bring himself to think about what happens when those five months become four, and the four become three until he has no time left.

Ilya's figure looming over him, all smiley and out of breath, scares Shane out of his thoughts. He also realises that he has absentmindedly been twisting his wedding ring while he sat there.

"Let us go home?"

"Ilya said we can make spaghetti!" Yelena cheers, her face flushed and strands of her hair sticking to her cheeks. *God, has she always looked this much like Ilya?*

"He did?" Shane pushes a smile, trying to push back his still racing train of thoughts.

Shane zones out as Yelena continues to ramble, and he tries to breathe evenly as he falls into step next to them towards the car. He is distantly aware of Ilya's questioning gaze on him, but he tries to engage with Yelena in conversation to keep himself busy and avoid Ilya's unspoken question.

They get home and Tanya is more than happy to have them all standing in the kitchen with her while Yelena sits on top of the table watching as Ilya takes the lead and makes the spaghetti himself. Shane keeps zoning in and out of the warm events of the day, starting to feel less like a resident and more like an outsider. He walked into this house as part of a business deal, and he is going to walk out of it on the same terms. Thinking of it as anything more would only mean hurting himself and the two people now snuggled next to him on the couch while Frozen runs for probably the fifteenth time this month.

He looks down at Yelena, then he catches Ilya's eyes before he looks away. Ilya opens his mouth, but Shane motions for him to be quiet. He peeks over at Yelena who has fallen asleep with her head almost in Shane's lap. He nods at Ilya then moves as slowly and carefully as he can, getting up from the sofa and carrying her sleeping figure towards her room.

Shane puts her to bed, pulling the covers over her. When she shifts in search of her sleep buddy, Shane quickly snatches the stuffed lion and places it within her reach. He smiles when she hugs it to herself and lays still in deep sleep. He carefully touches a hand to her soft cheek, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her face. His heart lurches in his chest when

Yelena's hand shoots up from under the covers and just holds onto his finger that was touching her face.

Please don't make this any harder, he mentally begs.

What makes it worse is that when he turns at the sound of someone being nearby, he finds Ilya leaning on the door frame with the smallest of smiles on his face—but his eyes, they hold a fond, warm look that Shane can't stand the weight of.

—

The month rolls quickly, and Shane's schedule forces him away from the domestic bliss he has been living in during the first half of the month. Or maybe he is escaping through work. He barely sees Ilya nor Yelena. Ilya is either away at work when Shane is home, or Yelena is asleep when he is awake. With how well the company is holding itself now, Shane's calendar has been overflowing with work. And he doesn't have the luxury of skipping any opportunity he can help his parents with aside from Ilya's primary help. Or so he keeps telling himself.

Maybe if he is less present around the house, it will make things easier when their deal ends.

Maybe this is better for everyone, not just him.

Yeah. It has to be.

It is not like Ilya lies awake at night and imagines if their circumstances were different too. That would be ridiculous.

As ridiculous as the way it feels like when he thinks about leaving for good.

September

Shane is in the middle of doing a photoshoot when someone from his team brings him his phone. "It's important," she says.

Shane excuses himself and goes somewhere a little more private to talk.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Shane Hollander?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"I'm contacting you as Mr. Rozanov's second emergency contact for student Yelena Rozanov."

Shane's heart drops to his feet.

"Is—is something wrong? Is she okay?"

“Yes. There’s no need to worry. It’s just that Yelena started showing signs of fatigue shortly after her lunch break and I’ve been trying to reach out to Mr. Rozanov but he isn’t available.”

Shane is overwhelmed with panic, fear and relief all at once.

“Yes, yes. Um, thank you for calling. Il—my husband is out of town on a business trip so that’s why you probably couldn’t reach him.” The words tumble out of his mouth in a rush.

“That’s no problem. Good to know everything is okay. I advise you to pick up Yelena as soon as you can. We have already transferred her to the school’s doctor, and she recommends that she stays home for a few days until she recovers.”

“Of course. I’ll be right there, thank you.”

Shane hangs up, dropping everything he was doing and hauling himself onto the road to Yelena’s school.

He can’t fucking believe this is how he finds out Ilya had written him down as his second emergency contact for Yelena besides him.

Speaking of Ilya, he has been busy with acquiring another company in preparation for when Rozanov Holding drops Hollander & Co., so Shane is nearly not seeing him let alone carrying a full conversation. On the other hand, Shane is almost not sleeping these days, doing campaigns for the company, attending press interviews, doing his own side work that is outside of Hollander & Co.—he is toasted on both sides at this point, not just burned out.

But this is good.

Being busy is better than having time to think about Ilya or Yelena.

Because when he thinks about them, it makes him never want to leave that goddamned penthouse.

His grip tightens around the steering wheel, releasing a breath through his mouth. Shane stops his car by the school gate and makes his way in to get Yelena. He is directed to where Yelena is waiting for him with a school representative, and as soon as she sees him, her big hazel eyes gloss over with tears.

“No, no. Hey.” Shane meets her halfway and hugs her to him. “It’s okay. You’re okay. It’s just a cold.” His hand comforts her over her hair. Jesus, he can feel how much she is burning up through his own clothes when she rests her head on his shoulder.

“Mr. Shane Hollander?” the school representative asks politely.

Shane stands up, scooping Yelena in his arms. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry, I’m going to need you to sign here.” She points at an empty box on a paper document that is strapped to a clipboard. It’s probably something routine based that proves Yelena left school with a guardian.

“Thank you. I hope she gets well soon.” The woman nods at him.

“Thanks.” Shane slings Yelena’s bag over one shoulder and goes back the way he came in. She is heavily resting against him, her body lacking all sorts of energy.

“Lena?” he calls gently, shielding her face from the sun with one hand as they make their way towards his car. “How do you feel?”

“Bad.” She croaks after a while.

“I’m sorry.” Shane kisses her hair before he unlocks the car and puts her down into the seat to buckle her in.

He takes a good look at her and finds her eyes droopy and red. “Do you feel hurt anywhere?” he tries asking.

She nods and points to her throat. “My head too.”

Probably from the fever, Shane concludes

“It’s okay. We’ll go home now and everything will be better then, deal?”

She gives him a weak smile and bumps his fist. “Deal.”

Yelena falls asleep on the way to the house, which Shane thinks is better so she doesn’t feel much pain. He carries her up to the penthouse, letting Tanya put her in comfortable clothes while he contacts the pediatrician that Ilya left her his number in case of emergency. Naturally, the one who should have had this contact is Shane. But since he has barely been around, well...

A hot flash of guilt passes through him.

Tanya emerges from Yelena’s bedroom looking distressed the way a mother would be over her child. “She asks for you.”

Shane nods, letting her know that he will be right in there with her. “The doctor should be here any minute,” he says.

“Do you need anything?” Tanya asks warmly.

“Yeah. Maybe a cold compress until the doctor gets here. She’s burning up.”

“Yes. Yes. Good thinking.” Tanya agrees. She starts to walk away but then she pauses and turns around.

“Is a good thing you are here for Lena.” She nods. “Ilya too.”

The statement should feel warm, and Shane should feel grateful. However, the words land on his skin like thorns pricking different spots. Because he *hasn’t* been here as much as he

should be. As much as he used to be before he decided to slowly remove himself from the fantasy he has been living in so far.

Unable to respond to that, Shane gives her a small smile and a nod. He doesn't miss the slightly sad look that takes over her face before she leaves.

Shane makes his way to Yelena's room and pulls one of the bean bags lined up by the wall to her bedside. He sits down and takes her small hand in his.

"I missed you," she says, her mouth making a pout.

"I'm right here." Shane squeezes her hand.

"No." She shakes her head. "You don't sit with me and Ilyusha for movie. We eat ice cream alone."

Shane's heart coils in his chest.

"I'm sorry, Lena." He kisses her palm. "I was so busy with work."

"Hate work." She grumbles. "You do work, Ilya does work, and now he is not here." Her eyes well up with tears again, but this time they roll down her rosy cheeks.

"Hey, but I'm here now, yeah?" He wipes her tears away. "And Tanya too." He gestures at the old woman who comes back with the cold compress Shane asked her for. "Ilya will be back today. You won't feel the time!"

"Really?" she asks through a shaky voice.

"Yeah. How about after the doctor sees you, you sleep really really well and when you wake up Ilya will be here?" he tries his most enthusiastic tone, brushing away her still ongoing tears.

She ponders his idea for a moment, then she smiles and nods in agreement.

"Now I'm going to put this on your forehead, okay? It's a little cold," he says, wringing out the cold cloth in his hands. "But you're strong. You like the cold like Elsa, isn't that right?" Shane encourages her, trying to cushion her shock of feeling sudden cold on her hot skin.

"The cold..."

"...never bothered me anyway."

They slowly sing the line together as Shane carefully presses the cool item to her forehead. Yelena still initially gasps at the contact, but she gradually gets used to it.

"You're doing great." Shane nods at her with an encouraging smile that she weakly returns.

They stay like that for a while with Yelena idly playing with his hair as they wait for the pediatrician to be here. Fifteen minutes later, a knock sounds at the door and Tanya's voice is

heard before it opens and in walks a middle aged man.

Shane suddenly feels the weight of his presence when he watches the doctor check Yelena, his mind drifting to Ilya and the fact that he would have wanted to be here.

“Has she eaten anything unusual?” the doctor asks once they step out of Yelena’s room as Tanya stays in there to keep her company.

“No, not at all. All her meals are homemade. We’re very careful with what she eats.” Shane confirms.

“Good.” The man nods, jotting down something. “Try to keep it that way as much as you can. She has a common cold—nothing that a child her age can’t recover from, but her immune system isn’t helping,” he explains before Shane asks the question that probably showed on his face: *then why is she wrecked like that if it’s just a common cold*. “Which is why her body is reacting in a severe way. I prescribed some things to strengthen her immunity and get her fever down in a few hours.” He hands Shane the prescription.

“Thank you.” Shane examines it, his eyes skimming over what is written in there. “Is there anything else we should look out for?”

“She might develop a bad cough through the next couple of days, but that’s normal. I already wrote down a cough syrup that would help make it go away before it gets worse. But other than that, there really isn’t anything to worry about.” He smiles professionally at Shane.

“How long do these medications take to start kicking in? She is already complaining from a headache.” Shane asks nervously. He secretly hopes to hear the doctor say ‘*right now*’ but he knows that is nowhere near realistic.

“You did the right thing with the cold compress. It should speed up the medicine’s effect,” he says approvingly. “And if there is no improvement after four to six hours, please feel free to contact me any time.”

“Thank you so much,” Shane expresses in mild relief. He still has a lot ahead of him, but at least he now knows that Yelena is going to be okay.

“My pleasure. I hope she gets well soon,” the doctor replies while Shane walks him towards the door.

“Thank you,” Shane repeats, mentally wishing the same.

He also wishes Ilya were here.

He needs to let him know everything that has happened so far so he doesn’t freak out when he sees that Yelena’s school has tried to reach out to him. But first, he rests his forehead against the door and lets out a long breath that feels like it is escaping every part of his body, not just his lungs. His entire figure deflated with it, ache seeping into his bones. He feels worn down to his bones, and he hasn’t been able to feel that the past couple of weeks given how busy he has been keeping himself.

Shane jumps when he feels a hand on his back, right between his shoulder blades. He slowly turns and finds Tanya standing there with an empathetic smile. “Yelena is sleeping,” she says. “Go sleep too. You look tired.”

“No, no. It’s okay. I’ll stay beside her.” Shane shakes his head. “I just need to go get her medicine first.”

Tanya nods. “I will make dinner.”

“Maybe we should make Yelena soup,” he says, unfolding the doctor’s prescription. “The doctor said she should have a lot of warm fluids.”

“Do not worry.” Tanya nods firmly, silence stretching between them afterwards.

When it feels like the conversation has stopped here, Shane turns to go but Tanya’s voice sounds after him. She says something in Russian, so he looks expectantly at her for translation. She has a weird look on her face. A weird mix of warmth and wonder.

“Means your heart is on your face, dear,” she says before she heads to the kitchen, leaving Shane standing there like an idiot wondering what the hell that means.

Shane heads down to the nearest store to get Yelena’s medication, texts Ilya about everything and assures him that his niece is okay and that he is staying with her. The messages are left on delivered for a good amount of time, forcefully having Shane checking every now and then if Ilya had checked them yet. The matter goes forgotten though when he wakes up Yelena to feed her and give her medicine, checking up on her almost every hour to see if her fever is going down.

He sits by her bedside fighting sleep as he watches her slowly start to sweat out her fever. He takes his phone out and texts Ilya again, letting him know that Yelena’s fever had finally started going down around three hours after she ate her soup and took her medicine. She fell asleep holding Shane’s hand, so he uses his phone with his other hand to text. The messages are left on ‘delivered’ again.

Shane:

Is everything okay?

???

Shane scrolls through his dozens of messages to Ilya, looking like an idiot. Ilya usually doesn’t take long to respond, let alone *actual* hours so he must be really busy. He sighs and locks his phone then, focusing back on watching Yelena until he accidentally falls asleep.

He doesn’t know what time it is when he wakes up with his neck screaming in pain. His eyes immediately go to Yelena, and he is grateful to find that she is still sleeping. Her face no longer looks aggressively flushed with fever, and small beads of sweat cover her forehead. Shane picks up a couple of tissues and softly dabs them across her face until it is dry,

reflexively pressing his lips to the top of her head to check her temperature like his mother used to do when he fell sick.

Shane fishes for his phone where he had randomly tossed it on the bed, expecting to see missed calls or messages from Ilya. A frown finds his features though when he is met with nothing. *Okay, this is weird.* He opens their chat and texts him again, a mix of frustration and confusion rushing through him when his messages remain ‘sent’ only. Shane doesn’t think. He tries calling Ilya. Nothing. He is sent to his voicemail. Shane doesn’t even know when he is supposed to arrive today. The last time they talked about this trip was, if Shane remembers correctly, almost a month ago.

Ilya had suggested for Shane to come along, but they both knew that wouldn’t be possible. Besides, Ilya was probably kidding. Unless he wasn’t, and Shane got it all wrong.

His leg starts to bounce with adrenaline thrumming in his blood at his own thoughts. He tries calling Ilya again, but there are no changes. He practically spams his chatbox, but the messages are still not delivered.

It isn’t until Shane receives a notification from his Google Alerts that his entire body goes still.

Breaking News: Rozanov Private Jet Faces Malfunction Amid Flight Back to Canada

Corporate: Renowned Businessman Ilya Rozanov Goes Missing After Emergency Landing

The Globe: Are Private Jets Worth It? Check Out...

Shane’s entire world spins, and he has to grip the edge of the bed for a few seconds to make sure he isn’t falling off of his seat. Miraculously, he removes himself from the little girl’s room and stumbles out into the hallway barely standing upright. His legs struggle to carry his weight so he crouches down to the floor with his back to the wall, trying to collect himself.

With shaky hands, Shane presses Ilya’s contact name on his phone, alternating between texting and calling him again even though the result is the same.

Ilya is not answering.

Ilya could be hurt or worse...somewhere, and no one can find him. He is out there all alone, leaving behind Shane whose heart feels like it is trapped in barbed wire, and a little girl that considers him her only family.

Guilt attacks Shane like a plague, infecting his senses and every thought that is running through his mind.

He should have talked to Ilya when he had the time.

He should have crossed the hallway and into his arms when he felt lonely at night.

He should have made time to spend with him and Yelena instead of running away.

He should have agreed to go with him on that trip.

He should have fucking told him he—Shane jumps up to his feet so fast when he hears the front door his vision goes all black for a moment. His feet work before his mind as he runs the distance from the hallway to the front door where he finds—“Ilya?” he breathes in disbelief.

Shane blinks to make sure he isn’t hallucinating from lack of sleep, but he is here. *He is really here.*

He looks exhausted and pale with his tie loosened all the way to the middle of his chest, and part of his shirt hangs out of his pants. He drops his bag beside him in silence, and then Shane is running up to him.

Ilya’s arms find him, desperate and relieved as they pull Shane into him. He feels Ilya breathe him in, and Shane’s eyes burn again. “I should have come with you,” he whispers. His heart feels like it has just been released from a cage where it was locked and beating only as much as that cage allowed him.

“You’re okay, right?” Shane pulls his head back to check him, but Ilya doesn’t let him go. “What happened? How are you here?”

Ilya doesn’t answer any of Shane’s rushed questions and instead looks directly in his eyes, silently telling him everything *Ilya* wants to say right now.

“Fuck, Ilya.” Shane wraps his arms around him again. “For a moment I thought you were...”

“I am not dead,” he speaks for the first time since he entered the house. It sounds like an affirmation to himself as much as it is for Shane, and he understands that. He unfortunately does. “Is okay.” Ilya holds him tighter. “I’m okay.”

They stay like that for a while with Shane’s hands curled into the fabric of Ilya’s suit. Until one of Ilya’s arms slips off of Shane and goes somewhere he can’t see before they fully release each other. Shane looks down to find Ilya holding a broken phone in his hand, showing it to Shane. On a closer look, Shane realises that it’s Ilya’s phone.

“Oh god.” Shane buries his face in his hands.

“Stupid phone,” Ilya says. “I wanted to text you as soon as I was done with work, but then everything happened so fast.”

“Hey, you’re here.” Shane puts the damaged phone away. “That’s all that matters.”

Ilya nods solemnly, visibly still shaken by what he has been through.

“I’m sorry,” Shane finds himself saying. “I should have been with you, I should have agreed —”

“No.” Ilya interrupts him. “No. Is good you weren’t there. If something had happened to us, Yelena would have had no one.”

But me? What would have happened to me if you'd died?

They stand with the weight of Ilya's words for a moment, then he snuffles. "How is she? I read your messages. Not all of them, but enough to know that she was sick."

Shane recaps everything that happened today, and they go to check on her again so Ilya could see for himself that she is okay. Then, Ilya goes to greet Tanya and let her know that nothing major happened unlike anything she might come across in the news the following day. She naturally offers him food, but Ilya politely declines. He bows to kiss her forehead and she doesn't resist hugging him to her chest, sending a wave of sharp emotion crashing against the walls of Shane's heart.

One thing Shane had grown to admire about Ilya is the way he treats Tanya. She is definitely not just a housemaid, she is probably the woman holding this household together—and Shane would argue that she held Ilya together so many times in the past. They part with her to retire to Ilya's bedroom, and Tanya smiles at Shane as he follows him outside. Once the door is closed, Ilya's mouth finds his. Shane kisses him back with fervor, emptying today's events into it. Ilya drags them to the bathroom, and they hop into the shower together, letting the warm water wash over them.

Ilya is looking at him differently, but Shane doesn't mind. He doesn't mind it for once. There is a breeze somewhere behind his ribs that makes him feel lighter, more at ease—the way he feels when he is near Ilya. He dips his head and presses his mouth to Ilya's left pec, where he feels his heart pounding, and leaves a kiss there. Ilya caresses his cheek in response and kisses him again but leisurely, taking his time with giving attention to Shane's bottom lip then his top one, successfully shutting down Shane's thoughts one by one. Everything else that follows goes the same way; Shane rubs shampoo into Ilya's hair with no rush while Ilya closes his eyes and his shoulders relax. They dry up together and move to the bed naked, and Shane has never felt more home like he does when he is in Ilya's arms.

"We have got to stop doing this," Shane suddenly says.

"What?" Ilya angles his head to look at him with confusion etched onto his face.

"Ending up in life-threatening situations whenever we're apart." Shane chuckles at the absurdity of it.

"Right." Ilya joins him, then they lay in comfortable silence for a few minutes.

"What are you thinking?" Shane asks, drawing soft patterns over Ilya's chest.

Ilya looks at him for a long moment, and for some reason Shane's heart rate quickens.

"Yelena."

"She's okay." Shane reassures him. "She's strong," he says. "Like her uncle," he adds nervously, watching Ilya's eyes sparkle for the first time tonight.

“Since when do you boost my ego?” Ilya teases, pulling Shane on top of him. Heat rises under Shane’s cheeks at the ease of how Ilya just did it considering he is of no light weight at all. Shane wasn’t named Sexiest Man Alive for no reason. But Ilya seems to take pleasure in flexing his own muscles too by carrying Shane or doing things like what he just did now.

“Well, you went missing for a few hours. You’re due for a compliment.” Shane scrunches his nose, very awkwardly ignoring the fact that he can feel Ilya getting hard under him.

“I should do that a lot then.” Ilya squeezes his ass, but the humour drops so fast from Shane’s demeanor.

“Don’t say that again,” Shane jabs a finger at his bare chest. “I was worried out of my fucking mind, Ilya.”

“Sorry,” Ilya replies sincerely, brushing a hand over Shane’s cheek as Shane releases a short sigh of relief. “Now can I please fuck you?” He pouts.

Shane’s smile is uncontrollable when he rolls his eyes. “Yes, you may.”

“Fucking finally,” Ilya reaches his head up and attaches his lips to Shane’s.

Ilya fucks him deep and slow like it is the last and first time they do it. Shane feels it in every inch of him, he feels the raw emotion that coats the air around them both tonight. He feels the way his heart beats with it, and the way Ilya looks into his eyes, the way his lips run on Shane’s body differently. Shane gasps, arches off the bed, and he comes down with wet eyelashes while Ilya collapses next to him in a similar state. He is so blissed out he doesn’t realize Ilya has gone to clean up and is back already. He helps Shane with a warm towel too and discards it when he is done, pulling Shane into him afterwards.

Something flows in Shane’s chest the longer he looks at Ilya and feels every part of him covering Shane’s body. It flows from his heart, squeezing in between his ribs and lingering in his chest cavity. With his next breath, it flies all the way to the base of his throat and he opens his mouth to let it out.

“Ilya...” he calls.

Ilya’s hazel eyes answer Shane’s call.

I love you.

“I’m glad you’re not dead.”

Something flickers in Ilya’s eyes at his words, but he closes them before Shane could peek longer in them. He presses his lips to Shane’s forehead in a soft kiss there, and whatever it was that flew through Shane, it cowered away back into his chest. Certainly not dead, but not free either.

Ilya falls asleep almost immediately, but Shane, even though exhausted down to his bones, lays there with his burning eyes wide open through the night. He stares at Ilya, and something in his chest pounds hard against his ribs. He looks back at the ceiling, and his mind whirs like

an engine that has no power off button. At the first break of light, Shane quietly sneaks out of Ilya's arms after leaving a light kiss on his cheek. He carries the newly formed heaviness in his chest and heads to his own room. After showering and checking on Yelena who is still sound asleep, Shane leaves the house.

Forty minutes later, Yuna Hollander is opening the door for him. He knows his mother will be up this early, and he *really* needs to talk to her.

"Shane?" Concern finds its way to her face. "Are you okay?" She ushers him inside and shuts the door behind him while he takes off his shoes.

"I can't do it," he says.

Every attempt he has made in his head on his way here to prepare what he is going to say vanishes into thin air.

"What's going on? What can't you do?" His mum asks warily, visibly confused.

"All of this, the deal...I can't." He shakes his head, horrified when his voice wavers at the end.

"Shane...you do know you have only three months left, right? Honey, with October starting tomorrow and with how well we're holding ourselves—you already did it." She rubs his arm in comfort, but Shane doesn't feel it. In his head, there are alarms going around echoing her words *you have only three months left*.

She continues. "I mean, I know you hated—"

"I think I'm in love," he blurts out the words, his chest vibrating with his rapid breath. "With Ilya."

Mum freezes with her mouth open mid-sentence, then she very slowly clamps it shut as the weight of Shane's words sinks in.

"Ilya Rozanov? *Ilya*?" She asks for confirmation that she already clearly has while Shane waits for her reaction as if he were standing on a ledge.

"I'm sorry," Shane's voice comes out funny as he looks down. "I'm sorry, I tried." His feet become blurry through his vision. "I tried so hard to hate him."

"Oh, Shane," says Mum sadly. "Come here." She hugs him into her and holds him tightly while he fights the urge to cry.

God, he hasn't realised how much this has been eating him alive until he actually admitted it out loud.

They pull away, and Shane continues talking. "I tried to push him away. I even tried distancing myself but nothing is working. I...I love him. I didn't want to put you in—"

“Shane,” Mum interrupts him firmly as if suddenly realising something. “This is your life,” she says softly afterwards. “Your dad and I can never be part of that equation, *especially* that equation. Besides,” she pauses. “You don’t really choose whom your heart beats for.” She places a hand on his chest where his heart is this close to hammering through his chest bones and leaping out the nearest window.

“You’re not...mad?” Shane asks, feeling like his mother has finally reached out and snatched him off the ledge before he fell into a dark abyss.

Sadness frames her features as she shakes her head no.

“This is all my fault.” She sighs. “Come on.”

They move to the living room where Mum lets him sit and brings him a glass of water then sits next to him on the couch, facing him.

“I suspected that you...might *like* him during one of your visits,” she says. “I saw how you treated each other, how he looks at you when you’re not looking. But I didn’t know you *loved* him?”

The word still sends a jolt through Shane’s body.

“I didn’t know either.” Shane stares at his feet. “Or maybe I did. I just know I have been ignoring it for so long.” He shakes his head, feeling like a complete idiot.

“Have you told him anything?”

“No! God, no,” replies Shane sharply. “I had to talk to you first, given...”

Our long cherished tradition of hating Ilya Rozanov and his entire family.

His mum reaches out and squeezes his knee so Shane could look at her. “I’m sorry that I made you feel like you had to live with hating Ilya as your first and foremost rule.”

When all that went through younger Shane’s mind when he first heard about Ilya was: *wow, how did someone his own age manage to become this successful when his parents have been building their company for years?*

He was stunned, until life rolled both of them in their ways and prejudices started to form.

“It’s partly my fault too.” Shane recalls one of his earliest fights with Ilya. How he had just thrown it in Shane’s face that he lived and breathed whatever his parents said without considering a third option. His own.

They sit in silence for a while, and it suddenly dawns on him: that they are sitting in his parents’ house talking about him being in love with Ilya, his mum being on board with it, his one year with Ilya ending in three months without him knowing what to do about it.

He feels light headed, and for some reason his mother’s voice seems distant.

“Shane?” Her hands hold his own that are shaking in his lap and she pulls them towards her to grab his attention. “Shane?”

Shane tries to inhale and exhale slowly.

“It’s okay,” Mum says without him even opening his mouth. “We’re okay here.” She hands him his glass of water and urges him to drink some. “I’m not mad, and you have nothing to be ashamed of, okay?”

Shane lets the cool liquid wash down his dry throat and anxiety as his mum goes back to her seat on the couch.

“I actually want to tell you something,” she slowly says. “Ilya talked to me a while ago.”

“What?” Shane gapes, the new piece of information taking his mind off of his slowly fading panic. “To tell you what? And when?”

“It was the time leading up to your birthday, and he was just assuring me that nothing in terms of you two living together is ever forced or that you are staying there against your will,” she recites. She smiles then. “He was practically telling me what a mother would want to hear if she sent off her son to live with his archenemy.”

Shane’s heart beats impossibly faster.

“I didn’t know he did that...”

“I didn’t care then whether you liked him or not as long as you were safe,” she says. “So, are you?”

Shane thinks about how safe he feels when he is in Ilya’s arms. “Yeah. Yeah, I am.”

“Ilya is a good guy. I was wrong to judge him so early on like that. Even more wrong to have forced that judgement on you when you barely even knew him too.”

And those are words he never thought he would hear in his life.

“Do you think he...” *do you think he loves me too?*

“He would be an idiot if not,” Mum says proudly, causing him to whine into his hands.

“What? You’re my son, of course I’m gonna take your side!”

“Please stop.” Shane deadpans.

“Okay, I will. Now, what are you going to do next?” Mum asks, switching to her Yuna Hollander voice.

Shane takes a deep breath, his answer written all over his heart. “I think I’m gonna tell him.”

On the way back to the penthouse, Shane thinks about what and how he is going to tell Ilya. He must have already been off to work by now, which will leave Shane some room for more

planning. Then, his mind treacherously drifts to the possibility of his feelings not being reciprocated. He feels conflicted, because on one hand his mind had lied to him before. But on the other hand, his heart could never lie to him.

And he felt a lot of things in his heart the past few months. He felt the way Ilya's eyes seem to smile when he looks at Shane. He felt the way Ilya's arms hold Shane's heart, not just his body. He felt the way Ilya fucked him last night like his whole body was carving something onto Shane, something they both can't hold but feel down to their darkest places. He felt the way his own heart was going to stop at the prospect of losing Ilya for good. So, no. Shane's heart could never lie to him.

Shane is more than relieved to have talked to someone that wasn't Ilya about this. His mum is the only one who could understand him because she knows the full story. Not just that, but she has always been supportive when it came to Shane's romantic life. So her being *this* comfortable with the idea of Ilya Rozanov, someone she used to hate, being her only son's love interest is kind of a *big* deal. It somehow gives him the extra boost of courage he needs.

He has a couple of interviews to film today, which shouldn't be hectic. On the contrary, he is now filled with a new kind of excitement that makes his stomach flutter like a sixteen year old thinking about his crush. He greets Tanya once he is in the penthouse then heads straight to Yelena's room to check on her.

"Shaaane!" She cheers happily, coughing afterwards at the effort of speaking up loudly.

"How is my favourite Yelena doing?" Shane grins, taking a seat on her bed. He realises with a start that he can smell the traces of Ilya's cologne in Yelena's room, meaning that he left for work not so long ago after checking on Yelena too. Like he suspected on his way here.

"Here!" She grabs his hand and haphazardly puts it on her face to make him check her temperature. "Not hot." She shakes her head with so much joy it makes Shane want to protect her from any and everything that has one possibility of wiping that smile off her face.

"That's amazing," Shane cheers with her. "But you know you still have to take your medicine right?"

She sighs, completely bothered by the matter. Then, "right."

"I knew you were the strongest girl." Shane smiles, and upon hearing his words Yelena's face goes back to its cheerful default.

With school, the amount of English movies she has watched so far, and with how Shane and Ilya are consistent with her learning the language, Yelena's English has improved so much. Her teachers are reporting that she is basically ahead of other transfer students that they have.

"I'm gonna head to work, alright?" He kisses her forehead quickly. "Be a good girl for Tanya."

“I will try.” She pretends to look like she is thinking—a bit that Ilya sometimes does when he is playing with her.

It makes Shane’s heart beat double its normal speed.

“Bye, Lena.” Shane makes his way to the door, but Yelena stops him by climbing down from her bed and jogging up to him. “Do you need something?” Shane bows down to her level.

She nods then throws her arms around Shane as tight as she can.

“Oh.” Shane breathes out, a little surprised by the shift in her mood. “Lena, is everything okay?” He rubs her back that is barely bigger than his hand.

“Yes,” she says, pulling back. “I wanted to tell you something.”

“What is it? You know you can tell me anything.”

“*Ya lyublyu tebya,*” she says. “Means I love you.” She blushes with the most adorable smile Shane has ever seen. “You teach me English all the time, and I didn’t tell you this before, so...”

He is *not* going to cry in front of a five year old because she just told him she loves him in her native language.

“I love you too, Lena.” Shane hugs her again, making sure she feels how much he means it. He knows she has been feeling safe, comfortable and happy around him but for her to verbally communicate this into loving him is making Shane’s heart turn into a puddle.

“What was it again?” he asks when he releases her.

“*Ya lyublyu tebya.*”

“Ya-loo-blue-tee-baa,” he repeats after her, then Yelena bursts into a laugh.

“Hey! I was saying what you just said!” Shane exclaims, unable to help himself as he chuckles with her. He checks the time then, “I’m gonna be late for work. I’ll see you later, okay?”

“Okay. Bye.” She waves at him then climbs back into her bed to play with her plush toys.

On his way outside, Tanya finds him by the front door before he leaves.

“Ilya said not to wait him for dinner,” she says, her face looking not as warm as it usually is. “He will work late.”

“Thanks for telling me, Tanya.” Shane nods. He takes a second to look closer at her, narrowing his eyes. “Are you...okay? Has Yelena been trouble for you?”

“No, no. I feel tired today.” She shakes her head with a small smile.

“Would you like to take the rest of the day off? I’m sure Ilya wouldn’t mind. I can—”

“There is no need,” she says tiredly. “I will be with Yelena.”

“Sure,” Shane puffs out a breath. “Just, please don’t overwork yourself. Rest if you need to.”

Tanya nods appreciatively at him, and he has a feeling that state has nothing to do with her “feeling tired”. She looks like she is on the verge of crying or has already been crying, but Tanya doesn’t seem like she wants to talk about it let alone with Shane so he doesn’t push further.

He leaves shortly and frowns as he gets into the elevator. *Why didn’t Ilya tell him this himself?* Shane shrugs, brushing it off as his mind switches to the rest of his work today.

The day goes in a blur with Shane filming his interviews smoothly and even managing to catch lunch with Rose who texted him earlier to let him know that she is in town for a day. Then when he returns home at the end of the day, he finds Yelena asleep and Tanya has probably left as well. The excitement he has been feeling since he talked to his mum this morning never left him, it was a steady hum under his skin. It made him look forward to getting back to the penthouse and seeing Ilya.

However, he is staying out late tonight according to what Tanya told him, so the wait might be longer than usual. Shane doesn’t mind though. Maybe he could shower and then cook something for both of them. He does the first part and is leaving his room for the kitchen when something on his dresser catches his attention on his way out.

He gets closer to it with his eyebrows drawn together in curiosity, then he picks up the sheets of paper he took notice of when he stepped out of the bathroom.

Shane’s eyes start skimming the words, then his stomach plummets six feet below and the world around him stops.

In his hand that is starting to shake, he is holding papers that can only be interpreted as one thing according to the bold-lettered words written at the top: **Divorce Agreement**

Something falls to the floor, and when he picks it up to see what it is, a stabbing pain shoots through his chest as if every word he reads is an arrow straight to his heart.

Now you are free. No deal to back out from. -Ilya

Chapter End Notes

HAHAHAHA PLEASE DON'T KILL ME HAHAHA

also there is a big chance the next chapter will be the last one, and i think it'll be the longest so please be patient with me i'd leave everything to write this story if i could (i'm

not kidding)

and thank you so much to everyone who is actively reading this story while it's being updated, your comments push me to keep writing and i can confidently promise you a very beautiful, deserved ending <3

Chapter 6: Quarter Four

Chapter Summary

Shane has seen and signed endless contracts in his life, but none of them had the crushing weight of seeing his own divorce papers. It is funny how his signature on a piece of paper could end his life as he has known it for the past nine months. During the first hours of October, Shane makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

listen. LISTEN. i just HAD to put that quote at the beginning of the chapter *scream*

this is VERY hastily edited (and not all of it as well, god forbid an author is too giddy to update) so please excuse any mistakes/typos or repeated phrases i'm literally just a girl whose first language is definitely not english

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

“You love him, you do, and here’s the miracle: he loves you too. You are allowed to lick off the colour from his lips, to listen to the hymns in his pulse, to bask in the sunlight of his voice. You are allowed to have him.” —pencap on tumblr

October

It’s some time past midnight, and Shane hasn’t signed the papers yet.

Instead he had sat down and fucking *cried*.

He cried his heart out because the one man he spent months getting to know, studied inside out, memorized every single thing about, has decided to leave him even before their deal officially ends. He grips the pen so tightly in his hand it starts shaking. Looking at the papers through his blurry vision suddenly makes him sick, and he rushes to the toilet as everything he has eaten recently rises up his throat with a wave of fresh tears. His body convulses with the effort of his stomach emptying itself until he falls back, his back colliding with the cold tiles of the bathroom wall. He feels like there are flames running through his chest, his stomach, his throat—he is burned down to his torn heart, and every ember carries Ilya’s name.

God knows how long later, when Shane feels strong enough to rise from the floor, he rinses his mouth and pads his way to his bed. He finds the papers still lying there, and all the fire in

him doesn't burn at him anymore. Instead it lights up every thought in his mind into one big truth. He is in love with Ilya Rozanov.

And if Ilya wants to leave him, if that's what he really wants, then he will fucking hear it from him first before he gets anywhere near those divorce papers.

He takes the document and places it on his dresser where he first saw it and waits.

Even though he is bone-deep tired, sleep doesn't come to him. He stays wide awake, unaware of the time until his ears pick up the sound of the front door opening and closing sometime early in the morning. With his heart in his throat, Shane gets up, snatches the papers along with the fucking note and storms out of his room.

He finds Ilya at the start of the hallway, surprise momentarily covering his face as if he didn't expect to see Shane. Well.

Ilya freezes there, and Shane distantly notices that he looks tired too. His tie is off, and his shirt is unbuttoned at the top. Shane silently shoulders past him and gestures for him to get in, shutting the door behind them.

"Yelena is asleep," he plainly says. "I don't want to wake her."

"Sha—"

Shane cuts him off by slamming the divorce papers against his chest so hard Ilya's eyes widen in shock and he stumbles back a couple of steps.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Shane asks, his breath seething through his nostrils. God, his heart feels like it's being bulldozed over. Every beat is a painful thud against the inside of his chest—like the palms of a prisoner cracking open against the harsh metal of their enclosure. *Is this what you want, Ilya? Can you see how miserable I am? Can you see my heart open and bleeding in your hands that crushed it after they touched every tender part of it?*

"What you dreamed of," Ilya replies, not moving a muscle.

"Well, fuck that." Shane jabs a finger at his chest. "And fuck you. Is that what you really want?" He raises the papers in front of Ilya's face in question.

"We were going to do it anyway," says Ilya monotonously.

"Answer my fucking question, Ilya. Is this what you want?!" Shane's voice raises slightly.

"I did this for you." Ilya frowns. "I almost fucking died yesterday, Shane. You could have become—"

"Exactly!" Shane snaps, his chest hurting. He is feeling shitty on so many levels right now, but physically wasn't on his list. Every breath he takes feels like it's requiring too much effort from him. "That didn't wake anything up in you?!" he pushes, for some reason feeling like his body is getting lighter.

“It did,” Ilya admits, and hope spreads through Shane.

“Then why are you doing this?” he asks helplessly. His vision blurs for a moment, but he blinks hard and it clears again.

Ilya doesn’t answer.

“If you’re not going to answer me,” Shane continues. “Then at least tell me you want to fucking leave me.” His heart twists painfully in his chest. “If I hear it, I will sign the papers.”

Ilya stares at him, his steel hard expression faltering for a moment. Though Shane doesn’t know why when it’s so clear what Ilya’s decision is already. He is standing in front of Ilya baring the last shred of himself, and it is the most painful thing he has ever done. If Ilya doesn’t see him now, Shane doesn’t think he would want to be seen ever again in his life. Not if the eyes that peer at his heart aren’t Ilya’s.

Please don’t say it. Don’t let my heart wither and die in your hands.

Shane’s vision blurs again, and he suddenly feels so tired. His memory supplies him with the fact that he hasn’t slept in over twenty four hours, he is dehydrated, and he is actively getting his heart broken.

“Yesterday,” Ilya says after a while of silence. “Made me realise I do not want you to ever choose between me and your freedom, Shane.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Shane answers, the papers dropping from his hand. He frowns and looks down at himself, and his head feels so heavy.

“Shane?” Ilya calls, but his voice sounds distant. Like he is standing far away from Shane even though they haven’t moved much since they entered his room.

It takes him so much effort to look back up at Ilya whose eyes are wide for some reason, and around him there are dark spots that Shane can tell weren’t there earlier. Does Ilya look *scared*?

“Shane, are you...”

Shane is too tired to focus. He doesn’t hear the rest of what Ilya is saying, and he squints through the dark spots that look like they are about to swallow Ilya whole. Shane wants to warn him, to tell him to move away, but, heaving, he finally gets the words he has been dying to say out of his mouth instead. “I already chose you, Ilya—I chose us.”

Then Ilya disappears into the darkness, and everything else goes quiet.

I already chose you, Ilya. I chose us.

Ilya watches in horror as Shane’s eyes roll to the back of his head, and his legs give out sending Shane’s body falling but Ilya catches him before he collides with the hardwood.

“Jesus. Shane, are you okay?” Ilya pats his cheek, but he finds it a little cold and covered in a light sheen of sweat. He looks pale overall, and his lips look dry in an unhealthy way.

“Shane, open your eyes,” Ilya begs, touching a hand to his hair. But Shane doesn’t wake up.

Fuck, what has he done?

Ilya hauls him into his arms and lays him on the bed, rushing to get him water afterwards. He quietly peeks at Yelena on his way back and is more than grateful when he finds her sleeping soundly. The last thing he wants is for her to have heard him and Shane fighting. The last thing he would have wanted in his life is for him and Shane to ever fight, but Ilya couldn’t help it. He couldn’t stand the thought of putting Shane through something and then forcing him to live with it for the rest of his life.

He hates himself for it—for having a heart that wanted what it couldn’t have in the beginning. It told him at times that maybe, maybe Shane loved him too. But he couldn’t believe it. Not when Shane continued to remind Ilya of the fact that one day he is leaving, and that day was approaching quickly. He didn’t care about his own heartbreak, it didn’t matter if he lived the rest of his life with a Shane Hollander shaped hole in his heart.

But not Shane. God, not ever Shane.

He could never afford to hurt him, yet when he stood in front of Ilya today...all he could see was pure hurt—and it was all because of him. He was so caught up in his own mess that in the pursuit of protecting the one good thing that happened to him, he didn’t realise that his heart was no longer his own—it was Shane’s now. And he still broke it.

Ilya sits and watches over him, obsessively checking on him every few minutes as if he were going to disappear any moment.

When he returned from work and saw that Shane was still here, he was shocked. Ilya was half expecting half hoping that he would be either asleep or would have already left for work. Hoping that maybe he signed the papers and left for good. Because yes, a part of him dreaded seeing Shane after leaving him the divorce papers. So much so that he purposely stayed overnight in his office until he could get back to the house without running into him. Looking now at Shane though he realises how fucking pointless that was, because he couldn’t run away forever.

His heart aches in his chest at how tired he looks, which makes Ilya think about the possibility of Shane staying up all night until Ilya returns so he could talk to him. So he could snap him out of his own fucking mind.

He shivers when he recalls Shane’s words and the utter look of hopelessness and exhaustion that had taken over his beautiful features before he collapsed right there in Ilya’s arms.

God, if he only knew the truth—the truth that Ilya tried so very hard to ignore—that *no one* in this world sets him on fire like Shane does.

Shane has to wake up. He has to wake up so he could put both their hearts at rest from this torment.

Ilya takes a deep breath, one that feels like his lungs press up against sharp knife edges when they expand. Then, he realises that his eyes are stinging with the familiar burn of tears building up in his eyes.

He looks down at Shane and reaches out a tentative hand, brushing his cheek with his knuckles. "I'm so sorry," he murmurs. "Please forgive me."

What feels like an endless number of hours later, Shane finally hears something that pierces through the quiet he has been submerged in. *Was he asleep?* It's still dark, but his mind is slowly coming back, yes definitely, and he can identify that the sound he is hearing is actually someone. It is someone talking in a low voice, deep yet sweet, tender yet rough. It sounds like a distant lullaby to Shane, soothing and...*familiar*.

Shane's memory conjures up an image, a recent one that had gone straight to his core memories. He is hugging Yelena in her room, and then she is smiling and saying something in Russian: *ya tebya lyublyu. ya tebya lyublyu. ya tebya lyublyu*. Yelena says it more than once until her voice is replaced with a much older, male voice that Shane would recognise with his eyes closed. The voice grows louder, clearer, closer.

Ilya.

That prompts Shane's eyes open, and he finds his favourite hazel coloured eyes staring down at him, red rimmed and wide. Shane's head is pounding with a headache, he is feeling wrecked from lack of sleep, food *and* water, yet the only thing he is thinking about now is—"what?" *Jesus, his throat is so dry.*

Ilya snuffles and hands him a glass of water. "You passed out," he says. "You scared me."

Shane finds his voice after drinking some water, his mind replaying everything that happened before he got here. A tremor passes through his hand that is holding the glass, and Ilya immediately takes it. "Are you okay?" he asks carefully.

"No," Shane responds.

I already chose you, Ilya. I chose us.

"I'm sorry," Ilya's face twists into the most pained expression Shane has ever seen. "I never meant—"

"I heard you," he says, fisting the sheets that are pooling over his legs now very nervously. "What you said. Do you mean it?"

Confusion floods his face. "Shane, I would never hurt you. I—"

“No, that’s not what I’m talking about.” Shane shakes his head, desperation creeping under his skin. “Before I woke up, you were saying something...in Russian.”

Shane watches the realization slowly form on Ilya’s face, and he looks away as he blows out a breath then he holds Shane’s gaze again. His bottom lip is quivering, but he still opens his mouth and says the words. “*Ya...tebya...lyublyu.*”

Shane’s heart nearly leaps out of his chest, and it must have shown on his face because Ilya, still wide-eyed, asks in astonishment. “You...”

He doesn’t have to complete his words, because his face says it all. *You understand this? I confessed my love to you in my mother tongue and you somehow knew what it meant?*

“I love you, Shane,” says Ilya miserably then, his shoulders curving in a way that tells of how much he has already surrendered under the weight of this fact.

“Is that why you were going to divorce me?” Shane can’t help but ask emptily.

Ilya wipes his face and looks Shane straight in the eye. Shane struggles to hold his gaze, but he tries. He tries so hard so he could see through Ilya one more time. He needs to know what is going through his mind.

“Yes,” Ilya answers. “Yes, because I did not want you to be stuck here. Look at my life, Shane. Who in their right mind would want to stay with someone like me?”

“*Me,*” Shane solidly says. “I do, Ilya. I *want* to stay. I want you. I want to watch Yelena grow up with you. I want the unplanned business trips and baking nights with Tanya. I want the slow and quiet showers. I want the busy schedules and seeing you for a couple of hours during the day and not minding because I know I fucking have you forever, Ilya. I want all of this because I love you. *All* of you.” Shane is panting by the time he is done talking, and Ilya’s face is devastated with so much emotion.

“You want that?” he asks as if everything Shane has just said was about someone else, and then Shane sees it. The fear in his eyes. He *sees* it. “To be together?”

Ilya has never been in a situation where someone willingly chose to love and be with him for who he is under all the suits, extravagant cars, and media personality. Them being together the past months was under the umbrella of their deal, Ilya never knew for sure if Shane *actually* wanted him. And somehow that makes Shane go from wanting to strangle him for pushing him away to wanting to fight every single person who has ever hurt Ilya.

“I do,” Shane confirms. “So much it terrifies me.” *Because I’ve never wanted someone this much in my life. So much that I could die.* “I love you, Ilya.”

With teary eyes, Ilya gives a shaky smile and exhales. “Thank Christ.”

He doesn’t know which one of them leaps first, but he doesn’t care because Ilya’s mouth is on his and they love each other. Ilya’s lips taste of salt, and that sends a shiver through Shane as he blindly brings his hands up and holds Ilya’s face, wiping away his tears.

“Don’t you ever dare think about fucking leaving me again, Rozanov,” Shane says once they break away for air.

“Never. Here,” he surprises Shane by handing him the godforsaken papers. “Do the honours.”

“Fucking gladly.” Shane takes them and rips them in half, the sound more satisfying than anything else. He rips them to shreds then gets up to discard them in the trash bin.

Ilya watches him attentively until Shane comes back and sits in bed again. They just sit together looking at each other in silence until Ilya breaks it.

“Does it...does it feel like agony for you too?” Ilya asks quietly.

Shane looks at him for a long moment before he slowly shakes his head. “Not anymore.”

That draws the smallest of smiles on Ilya’s face, his features softening with relief and his eyes sparkling with tears.

“Come with me. I want to show you something.” Ilya takes his hand and guides him off the bed. “Are you okay to move?”

Shane nods. Technically, he has never felt better. On a more serious level, he probably needs to eat and sleep. But he couldn’t care less. Not when he woke up to the sound of Ilya’s voice telling him that he loves him over and over again in Russian after he had thought he would lose Ilya forever.

He watches Ilya open a drawer in his nightstand, and then he pulls out a key. They quietly make their way out of Ilya’s room and upstairs, heading towards one of the rooms there. They pause by the locked door Shane has asked Tanya about before. The room only Ilya went in and out from. Shane sees him breathe in as if he is bracing himself for something before he glances once at Shane, then he jams the key into the lock and twists it open.

For a moment, judging by how nervous Ilya looks, Shane thinks he is going to see one of the worst things in his life. The door springs open, and Ilya steps aside to make room for Shane.

“Go in,” he says, his face looking pale.

“Are you sure?” Shane asks warily.

Ilya nods.

Whatever it is that is in there, it must be something huge because this is probably the most nervous Shane has ever seen him.

Shane steps inside as Ilya shuts the door and locks it behind them, and for a second he thinks he walks into a room full of mirrors. Reflections of himself stare back at him from every wall. They are covered in hung up sketches and paintings, and in one corner there is an easel set up with an unfinished painting. A long countertop runs along the wall next to it and is covered in art pieces as well as paint tubes and art supplies in general.

Shane looks around him...every drawing is of him. A silent gasp of shock passes through him when he realises the drawings are of Shane in different phases in his life.

There he is for his first magazine cover, in one of his interviews, playing with Yelena. In one drawing, he is young with his hair falling on his forehead in stark black strands. In another, Anya is sleeping in his lap and Shane is looking down at her smiling. One painting is of Shane's eyes only, and Ilya had gotten the precise shade of his dark brown eyes along with his freckles. In another one, Shane is looking up with an expression of wonder on his face. Sparks of gold fly around him, and his freckles are the one thing that stands out in the painting as if the sparks had fallen onto his cheeks.

Shane remembers all the times Ilya brushed his freckles with his fingertips. He remembers when Ilya told him he lets his team cover up his freckles. Then he noticed when Shane stopped wearing makeup on them.

I don't know why you care so much about my freckles. I hate them, Shane had said.

No, Hollander. They are stunning, Ilya had responded naturally.

Shane blushes. "You really like my freckles."

Ilya chuckles. "That is your only conclusion?" He walks up to stand close to Shane.

Shane turns to look directly at him. "Ilya, these are all incredible...I didn't know you could draw." He takes another look around him in fascination before he looks back to Ilya.

"I was very young," Ilya says, looking up at one of the drawings behind Shane. "My mother supported me." A smile crowns his lips at a memory that Shane can't see. "One day, I showed my father a painting that I did." His smile turns sad.

"I had spent so much time on it," he continues. "He took it and tore it right in front of me. Said men do not draw. They work and make money."

"Oh my god," Shane can't help but utter, pure disdain filling his heart at the image.

"I never drew again after that." Ilya looks at him, raising one hand to cup Shane's face. Shane leans into his touch. "Until I saw you."

"Why?" Shane whispers.

"Why didn't I show you or why are they all drawings of you?" Ilya smiles.

"Both?"

Ilya's smile turns a little melancholic. "You could not look at any of this and not know how I feel about you, Shane."

Oh. *Oh.*

"How long have you..."

“Been drawing you?” Ilya finishes.

Shane nods.

“First time I saw you,” he says, his hand still softly pressed against the side of Shane’s face, but now Shane holds onto his wrist. “I was eighteen, and I had this feeling—like I wanted to trace your features. So the closest thing I could do was pick up a pencil and paper and well...” he gestures around them at the mini studio.

Shane feels like he might crumble any moment at all these revelations, and he finds himself leaning back against the countertop for support.

“Why all these paintings of you?” Ilya looks around the room, an almost resigned look on his face. “Because I am an artist as much as I am this human being with so much sadness in me. These drawings, they are my heart. There is not a wall in my heart where you don’t live in vibrant colour, Shane. You bring colour to my life, and I’m tired of living in just grey.”

“I know I shut you out so many times, pushed you away, because I was scared,” he says openly, honestly. “I was scared of letting you in here because it would have killed me if you did not stay. I love you, Shane. I love that thing you do with your nose when you are confused. I love it when you laugh at my jokes. I love the smile you give to Yelena when she is not looking. I love the way your breathing changes when I am near you, and the way your cheeks turn pink when I flirt with you.”

By the time Ilya is done talking, Shane realises that his cheeks are wet. He leans up, pushing off of the countertop and captures Ilya’s lips in an all-consuming kiss. He kisses him desperately, and Ilya kisses back just as eagerly—both of them trying to encompass all of their feelings into this kiss. But it is impossible, because this love is bigger than the both of them. It is as big as two people getting married, raising a child on their own, carrying each other through trauma and grief. It could have never been just a kiss.

It could have never been just a deal.

Ilya pulls away, his hands tenderly holding Shane’s head like it is his most precious treasure. “Marry me. For real this time,” he says, his hazel eyes so bright and hopeful. “Don’t go.” He shakes his head.

“I won’t.” Shane joins him. “Does that mean we’re having a late wedding?” He laughs wetly.

“We are having everything.” Ilya combs his fingers through Shane’s hair. “This one does not count.” He flashes his wedding band at Shane to illustrate his point.

Shane can’t help but giggle again. This is all real, it is happening. A few hours ago he and Ilya were going to make the worst mistake of their lives if Shane hadn’t held on and fought for them. God, he is so thankful he did not sign those papers.

“I love you,” Shane says the words because he can, because it is everything he feels towards Ilya.

Ilya is the one who initiates a kiss this time, and Shane lets himself be kissed the way Ilya wants. Gently, passionately, like they have all the time in the world. Ilya's hands go to the back of Shane's thighs and he slowly lifts him up onto the counter top. Shane's legs instinctively fall wider and he pulls Ilya in by locking his legs around him, eliciting a low moan from him. He lets his fingers sink into the thickness of Ilya's curls as his tongue slips into Shane's mouth, deliberate and gentle. He is still in his work clothes from when Shane saw him come home, and the thin fabric of his dress pants make it easier for Shane to feel him through it.

"Ilyaaa, where are you?" They both freeze as Yelena's footsteps get closer.

They hear the doors of the other rooms opening and closing as Yelena continues to search for him. "I'm hungry," she yells. She finds the door to the studio and knocks a few times. She doesn't wait and attempts to open it right away but Ilya had locked the door when they came in.

Shane bites his lip to hold back his laugh.

"Ilya, are you in here?" she asks, and Shane can tell by the proximity of her voice that she has buried her face into the crack between the door and its frame to speak.

"We better go," Shane whispers.

Ilya looks like he is about to plague an entire people with his anger. It's kind of adorable.

"Tanya probably isn't here yet. We can't leave her alone," he encourages, pecking Ilya on the lips. He feels bad when he looks down and finds Ilya half hard though.

"This is not over." Ilya punctuates his words by smacking a long, parting kiss to Shane's lips that he will probably think about for the rest of the day.

They spend a few more minutes in there to cool down, and Shane finds himself looking at the half finished painting on the easel. He can't make up all of it, but he can definitely recognise his features. Behind him is the outline of someone else, and there is the shape of wings half painted. Then Ilya stands in front of him, blocking Shane's line of vision. "Is not finished yet," he says as if Shane didn't see that already.

Shane doesn't push further though because he sees the tinge of pink that coats his cheeks. He probably didn't want Shane to see this now.

"Ilya Rozanov, are you *blushing*?" Shane teases.

He looks mortified. "Never in my life have I blushed. Russians do not do this."

"Right." Shane's smile is so big he thinks it might split his face.

When they no longer look like they were ravaging each other minutes ago, they finally emerge from Ilya's studio. They find Yelena in the living room fumbling with the tv remote. She looks like she has gained more energy, her cold barely holding her down to bed anymore.

“Where were you?” She rises from the couch and runs to Ilya, hugging him.

“I was busy, *solnyshko*.” He crouches down to her level. “But I am here now.”

She goes on about what happened yesterday, how she was feeling, and how Shane was with her. Her therapist said that it is a good thing that she communicates her feelings to them now, even if they are as simple as feeling tired or happy. It is a good start.

“What were you doing in there?” she asks curiously.

Shane’s mind blanks, and Ilya looks up at him for help. Shane glares at him, *she is your niece you tell her*.

“We were doing adult stuff.”

Shane almost winces. He couldn’t have chosen a worse wording.

“Like what?” Yelena retorts.

“You ask a lot of questions.” Ilya surprises her by grabbing her and flipping her in his hands then lands her on one shoulder as he stands up. Yelena squeals as she holds onto his hair with one hand and the other grips his arm.

“Shane said it is good to ask questions. Questions make you understand.” Yelena recites, beaming down at Shane.

“Did he?” Ilya turns his head to him with a sneaky smile.

“Yes!” Yelena responds, unaware of Ilya’s mind being completely focused on Shane now.

They make their way downstairs, and Ilya eventually lets Yelena down to her feet. She skids off into the kitchen ahead of them while Shane and Ilya trail behind.

“Have you secretly been learning Russian?” Ilya casually asks.

“No. Tanya stopped at food names *months* ago.” Shane chuckles.

“Then how did you know I—”

“*Oh*,” Shane interrupts him in realization. Then he grins. “Someone beat you to it.”

Ilya’s face freezes in shock. “No fucking way.”

“Are you jealous?” Shane jokes.

“I am furious.” Ilya looks, indeed, furious but in a funny way.

“Speaking of Tanya,” Shane remembers. “Is she not coming today?” She is never this late. She is usually here before Shane and Ilya even wake up.

Ilya’s face turns serious. “I think there is something I need to do. Give me a few minutes.”

“Okay.” Shane shrugs and goes into the kitchen to keep Yelena company.

They get into a debate on what to make for breakfast until Ilya comes back. “Tanya should be here soon.”

“Is she okay?” Shane frowns.

Ilya glances at Yelena. “Lena, go brush your teeth and freshen up, yes?”

“Okaaay.” She hops off the kitchen island and pads out of the kitchen.

“What’s up?” Shane asks the moment she is out of hearing range.

Ilya sighs. “Tanya knew about me leaving you the divorce papers. She said that if I don’t change my mind, she will not come back home.”

Shane is shocked into silence. Then, very slowly he says, “she really cares about you.”

“And you,” Ilya says softly. “For some reason,” he adds, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, shut up.” Shane chuckles.

Tanya does show up around an hour later, overreacts at finding Shane home and very much with Ilya, and makes them a lot of food. Ilya eventually showers and changes out of his work clothes, Shane has a proper meal after having been starving for hours, and Yelena takes her medicines after breakfast as instructed.

Shane is extra exhausted after eating, so he heads towards his room to finally fucking sleep. He really doesn’t want to black out again. He has cancelled all his commitments today, texted his mum that it is all okay, then Ilya finds him at the door.

“What are you doing?” Ilya asks with a grimace.

“...going to my room?” Shane answers, confused as to why Ilya is asking when he is literally standing by the door.

“You can sleep in my room,” he says, wrapping his hand around Shane’s and using his grip to pull Shane towards him with a smile. “Is your room now.”

“Oh?” Shane’s stomach flutters at the words.

This is how it’s going to be from now on. He can smile, laugh, giggle, blush or even get mad at anything Ilya says without worrying. Because he knows Ilya is his. Shane pecks his lips and goes into Ilya’s—*their* room, laughing when Ilya’s palm collides with his ass on his way in.

Shane plops himself onto the bed, and his heavy eyes immediately fall shut with Ilya’s scent filling up his senses like a narcotic lulling him into deep, uninterrupted sleep.

He sleeps for so long he doesn't know what time it is when he wakes up or if they are even still on the same day. He doesn't rush himself though. He takes his time stretching his muscles, his body relaxing in contentment after finally getting some rest. His eyes flutter open, and he finds the room dimly lit with the lamp on his side of the bed. The first thing he does is look next to him to see if Ilya's there, and a slow smile creeps onto his face when he finds him there, visibly sleeping.

My man, he thinks, taking in how peaceful he looks while sleeping. *Mine. All mine.*

He checks the time then and realises that he has slept through the entire day. Yelena must have been asleep a few hours ago already, and Ilya looks like he has been sleeping for a while too. He is shirtless, sleeping on his back with his lips parted. Soft snores leave him as he breathes, and the gold pendants rest somewhere near his left pec. The longer Shane looks at him, the harder it gets to resist leaning down and softly kissing his parted lips. So, he does. Very gently, Shane presses his lips to Ilya's in a chaste kiss.

Ilya shifts in his sleep, his eyes slowly squinting open. They immediately fall on Shane, and a fondness takes home in his caramel like eyes.

"Hi," he rasps.

"Hi." Shane tucks his bottom lip between his teeth. "Sorry I woke you."

"No." Ilya turns on his side and pulls Shane into his arms. "Is good," he says, kissing Shane. "I missed you."

"It's only been a few hours," replies Shane even though he is smiling like an idiot. "I missed you too. What did you do today?"

"Oh, we did all the fun things without you." Ilya teases, wiggling his eyebrows.

"Traitors." Shane pokes his side, and Ilya caves away from him.

Shane's mouth falls open in shock, a face-splitting grin slowly shaping his features. "You're ticklish?"

"Shane," Ilya warns, his arms holding Shane back now instead of hugging him.

Shane doesn't resist it. His fingers find Ilya's ribs and he yelps before laughter starts bubbling out of him while Shane physically attacks him and traps him with his legs so he doesn't roll away from him. Ilya's face reddens, and the colour shoots all the way down to his chest while their laughs overlap with one another's.

"Stop," he gasps in between giggles. "Fuck off." He uses his arms as leverage and stops Shane by flipping them over so Ilya is on top, out of breath yet smiling in victory.

Shane's stomach stirs though when he pays attention to the way Ilya's hands are strapping his wrists to the mattress with his thighs holding Shane's hips down. Ilya must have noticed the shift too, because slowly, he lowers himself and starts kissing Shane's neck. When he moves his hands to put them on Ilya, the other tightens his hands on him and presses them back into

the bed. A thrill passes through Shane, causing him to moan softly into Ilya's ear while his kisses turn from teasing to hungry.

"You like this," Ilya murmurs, sucking Shane's earlobe into his mouth.

Shane gasps as the sensation shoots down to his spine, his underwear growing tighter.

"Ilya.." Shane tilts his head as much as he can to give Ilya more access to his neck and shivers when he feels the hard points of Ilya's teeth on him. He doesn't *bite* exactly, not in the way that would hurt him anyway, yet Shane still audibly exhales and his eyes flutter shut.

"Yes, *moy lyubov*." Ilya places an open-mouthed kiss on the underside of his jaw. "Tell me what you want."

"You." Shane looks at him. "I want you."

Ilya's eyes darken at that, and he bends down to kiss Shane. His lips are demanding yet gentle, and it makes Shane's entire body give in under him, melting every muscle and every bone down its core until all that Shane feels is the way Ilya's tongue caresses his.

"I have an idea," he says breathlessly after he pulls away. His thumbs brush the insides of Shane's wrist, and a rush of excitement swoops in the pit of Shane's stomach.

"Your tie," he demands, the warmth of a blush coating his cheeks.

"Fuck, Hollander." Ilya gives his lips a sloppy kiss before he hops off the bed and retrieves the tie that hangs from the back of the chair by his dresser.

Ilya does the work of binding Shane's wrists together then ties them to the headboard, pulling on it afterwards to test it. "Good?" he asks Shane.

The silk fabric feels soft around Shane's hands, its hold not too loose yet not too tight. It's *perfect*.

Shane nods, adjusting his body so his arms are not straining above his head.

"Look at you." Ilya's eyes rake him up and down from where he stands by the end of the bed with the lube and a condom in his hand. "You are so beautiful like this," he says, and the words go to Shane's dick that is ramrod hard under his underwear now. "For me."

Ilya on the other hand is already naked, his thick cock curving against his abdomen. He reaches down and strokes himself, his eyes never leaving Shane whose mouth runs dry at the sight. His first thought is to take off his own boxers to touch himself, but he is stopped by his hands rattling back against the headboard. He shivers with the spark that spreads through him at the restraint, and his dick twitches with eagerness.

"Ah, this will be fun." Ilya smiles mischievously.

"Fuck off." Shane chuckles. "Get over here and touch me. Right now." He squirms, dying for any friction down there.

Ilya clicks his tongue. "You must be polite, Shane." He saunters over to him and gets onto the bed, keeping his eyes on Shane. He slowly, painfully slides Shane's boxers down and is met with the sight of his angry red cock springing free, smudging his stomach with precum. "Poor thing." Ilya pouts. He reaches a hand forward and swipes his thumb over Shane's actively leaking slit, the action causing Shane to whimper.

"Fuck." He releases a shaky breath, longing for more.

Ilya pushes his legs wider and moves there, giving Shane a view of his back muscles that shift with his movements as he presses a kiss to Shane's inner thigh. He does it to the other thigh, and when his cheek brushes Shane's skin there with the light stubble of a day, Shane shudders. Ilya continues to kiss his thighs, nipping at the skin at times and sending Shane squirming and panting for more. *More.* He groans when Ilya latches his lips onto a sensitive spot in Shane's thigh and he sucks, definitely leaving a mark there. Shane wanes under Ilya's deliberate torture, putting his mouth everywhere except where Shane desperately needs him.

"Please," Shane whimpers. "I ca—*ah!*" He cries out when Ilya's teeth sink into his flesh, the slight prick sending a wave of pleasure through his body. He presses a kiss to the spot he bit, then his eyes rise to meet Shane's.

"You were saying?"

Shane lets out a frustrating breath, his dick throbbing with need. "I can't take it anymore," he says through laboured breaths.

"Aw you want me to touch you here?" Ilya eyes his cock that has made a mess of his stomach, then he wraps his hand around it and gives it one slow stroke from base to tip.

"Fuck, *yes.*" Shane's hands involuntarily tug against his restraint as the slightest bit of relief floods through him.

"On one condition then," Ilya says, shifting his weight onto his elbow. "You will not come until I say you can."

It makes zero sense, and that sentence alone pushes him one step closer to coming.

He swallows hard and nods, even though he has no idea how the fuck he is going to do that. However, he does know that he never backs away from a challenge.

"Good boy," Ilya murmurs in approval, taking Shane into his mouth.

"*Oh, fucking Christ.*" Shane's head falls back at the feeling of Ilya's wet mouth around him and his arms strain as he constantly fights the urge to bury his fingers in Ilya's curls.

Ilya doesn't go easy on him. He sucks Shane like his life depends on it, flattening and swirling his tongue at all the right places. All the while Shane tries to push down his release and *not* focus on the sounds Ilya's mouth is making. He screws his eyes shut as the pressure doubles everywhere, but it doesn't work because even if he closes his eyes he still sees his cock disappearing into Ilya's mouth. Shane's wrists ache with the need to push Ilya off of him

and hold the base of his shaft to stop himself from coming. *Yet* with the way Ilya is determined to blow him out of his fucking mind, nothing works.

And he finds himself venturing *so* close to the edge.

His muscles strain and tighten in effort to delay his orgasm, and it hurts as his entire being seems to be going into a different direction at all. His breaths come out ragged and uneven, alternating between gasps and high-pitched moans before he comes without a warning. He jerks with the waves of pleasure that leave his body, and Ilya holds his thighs still so they don't accidentally close in on his head. It is *that* intense.

"I'm sorry..." Shane says weakly. "I'm sorry—I didn't mean to." Tears collect at the corners of his eyes out of overstimulation when Ilya doesn't pull away. He continues to suck him clean after he swallows Shane's release.

Ilya finally pulls away with a popping sound, his eyes dark as they regard Shane. "You came," he simply says.

His mouth is swollen and pink Shane wants nothing but to have it on his right now. "Did I tell you to come?" Ilya hovers over him, his breath fanning over Shane's cheek, his neck then back at his lips in the order he would have followed if he was kissing these spots. But he isn't. Instead he is merely touching Shane, which makes him instinctively pull hard against his binding.

Ilya's eyes flicker to Shane's tied hands then back to his face with an amused look. "Easy," he says, running a hand along Shane's stretched arm. "Would not want you to hurt yourself now," Ilya purrs in his ear, but he can see the concern in his eyes when he says this. And he has never trusted Ilya more.

What is primarily doing it for Shane tonight is the fact that Ilya is willing to give him everything he needs while still having fun and pushing Shane's right buttons. It is as if he is reading him like an open book. He knows what Shane needs before Shane even needs to open his mouth.

"I'm good," Shane says.

"Hmm." Ilya purses his lips to the side. "You came without my permission. Good boys do what they are told, Shane. Not the other way around."

"It won't happen again, I promise." Shane shakes his head.

"It won't." Ilya repeats, reaching behind him for the bottle of lube and the condom. A shiver runs through Shane. "Because right now, you can't take it, yes? You can't go again?"

Shane swallows, unadulterated lust coursing through his blood right now. His eyes are glued to Ilya's hands as he rolls on the condom and lubes himself up. Shane has barely recovered from his first orgasm, but his hunger for Ilya is unbeatable. And Ilya can see that written all over his face.

“Do you want me to?” Shane breathes.

“You will.” Ilya shrugs, and Shane’s stomach flips with excitement. “Because I will fuck you until you cry anyway.”

Shane has no fucking clue how Ilya hasn’t come until now. He looks so turned on, and his dick is harder than ever, then the realization hits him. It has him biting his lip so Ilya doesn’t see his smile.

Ilya has been waiting for this. He is taking his time because he wants it to be perfect for them both given that this is the first time they try something like this. He checks with Shane every now and then if he is okay, and he carries on on that basis. Which makes Shane even more excited to be fucked so good he is crying. He doesn’t mind it one bit. On the contrary, he *craves* it.

Ilya opens him up nice and slow, listening to what Shane’s body is telling him until they both wordlessly communicate that Shane is ready. His muscles still spasm when he feels sharp waves of pleasure like when Ilya enters him, but he couldn’t be happier. He trusts Ilya with himself, his body and his life. He has done nothing this entire year but prove to Shane that he is capable of keeping and protecting all of him. Including when he is lying underneath him with his hands tied and begging him for more.

“Fuck, Shane.” Ilya breathes on top of him, his chest rising and falling heavily as he steels himself, and Shane realises that he is steadying himself so he doesn’t come quickly.

He towers over Shane on his knees with his arms outstretched to hold onto the headboard over his head. He looks majestic from where Shane is looking up at him. Hard muscle covered with skin that Shane has kissed and traced with his fingers, golden brown hair crowning his head like a piece of the sun had chipped away and rested on his head. He is all Shane’s for tonight and for as long as they want.

With Shane’s legs bent into the air on either side of Ilya, the other starts to move slowly at first. Shane feels every inch of him, getting used to the delicious stretch of having Ilya’s cock inside him. His arms are aching to touch him, to feel his chest and scratch his back, but Ilya’s tie holds him still as his thrusts turn more punctuated.

“Jesus Christ,” Shane gasps as Ilya goes gradually faster, one of his hands darting to Shane’s leg to hold him steady as his body gets consumed by the ecstasy that Ilya’s dick is putting him through.

Shane knows this will be over quickly with how Ilya’s hips are mercilessly driving into him, desperate for release that has been pent up all night. He doesn’t mind it though, by the way his own pleasure is slowly building up again, he will be spent in minutes.

“Fuck, I love you.” Shane groans. “Please don’t stop.”

Ilya growls and snaps his hips harder, lifting Shane up so the angle is— “Oh my god.” He shudders when Ilya’s cock nudges his prostate.

“So good.” Ilya grits out, his face completely taken over with pleasure.

Shane feels him everywhere, and it is making him dizzy. The good kind of dizzy.

“Ilya,” he pants, the pressure in the pit of his stomach becoming unbearable. He nearly bites into his knee as Ilya continues to fuck him perfectly hard, driving him into madness.

“Are you...” Ilya asks frantically.

And Shane feels a pressure behind his eyes as tears build up there. “Please,” he practically mewls. His body is screaming at this point, his muscles contracting repeatedly.

Ilya’s eyes are wild, so lust-drunk it forces Shane’s impending orgasm even closer. He is feeling overstimulated, turned on, so close to coming yet he doesn’t want it to end—he doesn’t want it to ever end—all at the same time a sob breaks out of him.

“*Fuck*,” he cries out. “Holy fuck, I’m coming. Ilya, I’m co—*oh*. *Ohhh*.” His own words are cut off when they turn into pathetic moans as he spurts all over himself, his body shaking uncontrollably.

It only takes Ilya a few more vigorous thrusts before he is grunting as he pulses inside Shane, filling up the condom with one hand braced on the headboard above Shane and the other still holding his leg up.

“Wow.” Shane croaks, realizing that his cheeks are wet.

Ilya is panting over him, a dazed smile plastered onto his face.

“What?” Shane asks shyly.

“I love you,” he says, the words still new to Shane’s ears yet no less warm.

“I love you too,” Shane replies with a smile.

Ilya shifts to pull out of Shane, but the other shudders and calls out for him. “Wait...” he breathes, his body on the brink of fucking collapse at this point. “Not yet.”

“You are okay?” he checks, and Shane nods with warmth spreading through him.

“It’s just...too much,” he explains. “Too much, too good.” He grins.

They start by Ilya letting go of Shane’s leg so his body could slightly relax then Ilya unties him. Shane lowers his arms and stretches them, biting his lip at his wrists that are pink where they were held together with Ilya’s tie.

“Okay?” Ilya asks again, this time placing hand on Shane’s knee.

Shane nods as Ilya carefully pulls out. He backs away and slowly lets Shane take more space on the bed as his body relaxes. “I will be back,” he whispers, patting Shane’s slightly damp hair before he is gone.

He comes back after he has discarded the condom and washed up, holding a towel in his hand. Shane stretches out his hand to take it, but Ilya grabs it and puts it to his mouth instead, kissing his wrist. "Let me."

Shane lets him softly clean him up with the wet towel, mentally grateful for Ilya volunteering to do this because Shane practically can't move. He chases every spot he cleans with a gentle kiss, breathing *I love you's* down into his skin.

"Thank you." Shane pulls him in by his chain to peck his lips. "That was so hot, what we did. And I love you. So, so much."

Ilya kisses him again, this time letting his lips linger there until they both smile into it. "I love you too."

He takes Shane's hands and peppers his tender wrists with kisses, causing him to giggle. "Very beautiful." Ilya murmurs. "All mine."

"Forever," Shane says. "Forever even if you didn't ask."

"Good thing I asked anyway." Ilya kisses his solar plexus.

Shane's mind zones out for a moment, and he thinks about what would have happened if he had signed the divorce papers.

"Ilya." Shane buries his hand in his hair as he rests his chin on Shane's stomach. His eyes look up to Shane at hearing his name, and god he looks so young like this. So light and at ease, stripped of all his sharp armour. "Would you still have told me?" he asks quietly. "If I had signed the papers?"

He watches Ilya's eyes flicker while he thinks. "Eventually, yes. But we would have been very miserable until then. And stupid maybe."

A low chuckle emits from Shane. "Agreed."

"Here. Drink some water." Ilya heaves himself up and reaches for the water pitcher on the nightstand by his side of the bed, pouring a glass for Shane.

He makes sure Shane drinks all of it, taking it and putting it back where he got it from afterwards. "Good?"

Shane nods, an infatuated smile spreading onto his face and going all the way deep into his heart. His stomach growls loudly, completely ruining the moment.

"When was the last time you ate?" Ilya asks, raising his eyebrows.

Shane pauses. His last memory of food is him throwing up in the bathroom after he found the divorce papers. "I... it's been some time. I got sick."

"Sick like Yelena?" Ilya asks in concern.

“No.” Shane shakes his head, smiling in endearment at Ilya’s immediate worry. “Sick like throwing up.”

Ilya’s face falls then, and Shane can see the pieces of the puzzle fit into his mind. “Oh god, I’m sorry, I am so sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“Hey, hey.” Shane grabs his hands to silence him. “I’m fine now,” he says. “Though I could use a nice, warm homemade meal right now.”

Ilya grins. “What do you want to eat?”

“Surprise me.” Shane smiles back as Ilya kisses his hands again then pushes off of him to put on some clothes.

They settle in the kitchen and make sure they don’t make much noise so they don’t wake Yelena, and then a terrible, horrible thought crosses his mind.

“Shane, you are having a panic attack.”

“Yelena,” he says, swallowing down his dry throat. “We—when we were—what if she *heard*?” His face heats up so bad he feels like his head might explode.

“Relax.” Ilya smiles mischievously. “What do you think I am? An animal? The door is soundproof.”

“Fuck, Ilya. Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Shane huffs in relief, nevertheless frustrated at Ilya’s obvious amusement.

“Was hot watching you try to be quiet while I made you come more than once.” He shrugs.

“Oh my god.”

“I am thinking of throwing a Halloween party,” Ilya says after minutes of silence.

“Don’t you do, like, an annual big thing every year like New Year’s?”

Ilya shakes his head. “Not this year. I want something small. With you and Lena. And your parents. Maybe Hayden and his family too.”

“You want that?” Shane’s poor heart does backflips at Ilya’s train of thought.

“Yes,” he answers. “What more would I want?”

“Stop or I’m going to kiss you right now,” Shane warns from where he is sitting on one of the kitchen stools watching Ilya on the other side of the island cooking for him.

“I might keep talking just for that.”

Shane laughs, and his entire world laughs with him.

Halloween arrives in a blur with Shane losing track of time ever since he and Ilya confessed their love for each other. They are inseparable once they are both not working, and when they are working, they are constantly texting each other like high school teenagers. It should be embarrassing, but Shane doesn't have a care in the world. He loves finishing a photoshoot and coming back to a text from Ilya. Or getting a random 'I love you' text in the middle of the day that always manages to find him when he needs it. Not to mention the thirst traps. The thirst traps are Shane's favourite.

Ilya: *excited for tomorrow?*

Shane picks up his phone and types furiously.

Shane: *I would have been if I knew who you'll be dressing up as???*

I can't believe you won't tell me!

It's unfair. You know who I'm going as.

Shane watches the typing bubble with a smile on his face, excited to see what Ilya's reply would be. He *knows* it's going to be something that pulls tighter on his smile.

Ilya: *can't you use your spidey senses or whatever to figure it out on your own?*

told you is a surprise

such a slutty choice

wearing a one piece suit that clings to your ass? hot. very hot

Shane locks his phone and covers his mouth so his team doesn't think he is a maniac with that big of a grin and a blush on his face. His Halloween costume choice was such an unexpected one. Though he wouldn't call it much of a choice. Yelena has recently been interested in superheroes, which is something Shane and Ilya guessed she picked up at school, so one night they were up colouring in her newest Marvel themed book when the conversation happened.

Yelena had stared a little bit long at Spider-Man then she had looked at Shane and giggled.

"What?"

"Nothing." Yelena blushes.

"Yelena Rozanov, what are you hiding?" Shane asks her in a playfully inquisitive tone.

Ilya is working on his phone, but his attention is diverted to them when they start talking.

"You will not be mad?" she asks nervously.

"No," Shane reassures her. "Why would I be?"

“Because I want you to look like this in the party.” She points at the leading figure in the page she was colouring.

A snort comes from where Ilya is sitting on the couch, but that’s as far as it goes. Then there is a beat of silence.

“You want me to be Spider-Man for Halloween?” Shane asks for confirmation.

“Yes. Will you?” Yelena asks hopefully.

“But why? I thought he was your favourite superhero. You know you can dress up like him, right? You don’t have to choose a girl if you don’t want to,” he tells her.

Yelena thinks for a moment. “He is my favourite because he reminds me of you. He is so cool, friends with everyone, loves animals, you are like each other!” She exclaims in excitement, looking like she made the discovery of the eighth wonder of the world.

“You really think that?” Shane pulls her towards him by her hands.

“Yes. Right, Ilyusha?” Her bright eyes turn to Ilya who has a too amused smile for Shane’s liking on his face.

“Right.” He doesn’t turn her down though.

Well.

“Then, I’m Spider-Man for Halloween.” He agrees and hopes he doesn’t regret that.

Yelena squeals in happiness and hugs him. “Can we take pictures? Lots of them! They will not believe I have Spider-Man at home.”

“Oh, you can take all the pictures you want, solnyshko,” Ilya interjects, earning a side eye from Shane.

“That’s right.” Shane rubs her back and flips Ilya off with his other one without Yelena seeing.

And up until today, Ilya hasn’t told him who he is going to be for tomorrow’s party.

Not to forget...

Ilya: *is your turn to pick up Lena from school today*

try to see if she finally decided what she wants to wear tomorrow

Shane: *Don’t worry. I’m on it.*

Shane and Ilya had thought that Yelena would definitely want to be Elsa for Halloween, but the little girl didn’t seem interested in doing that.

“Did somebody think about who she wants to be for tomorrow?” Shane throws the question out for Yelena on their way back to the house from school.

“There are so many options!” Yelena grumbles and buries her face in her hands.

Shane tries not to sound impatient. “There must be at least *one* character that you love the most?”

Yelena falls silent for a moment.

“I don’t want to be a princess,” she says determinedly. “I want to be a superhero like you.”

“That’s good! There are so many cool superheroes you can choose from,” Shane says excitedly. “How about we look together when we get home?”

“Deal.”

When they return home, Ilya lets Shane know that he is coming home early today so they could wait and have lunch together, the three of them. This is a rare occasion, given that most of the time Ilya is at the office and Shane is working as well.

“Do you want to wait for Ilya to choose with us too?”

Yelena nods, sliding into a chair on the dining table while Shane goes to inform Tanya that Ilya will be eating with them. Shane sometimes could swear he still feels her fingers digging into his back from the day she hugged him so tight after Ilya told her that he is staying.

“Food will be ready now,” she says the moment she sees Shane, checking on something in the oven.

“It’s okay, I just came to tell you that Ilya’s on his way.”

“Oh, this is good news.” She smiles warmly at him. Then, very suddenly her eyes tear up looking at Shane.

“Tanya, are you okay?” Shane panics.

The old woman fans her face and puts on a smiley face. “Don’t mind me.” She shakes her head. “Is just...” she pauses, either hesitant or looking for the right words.

“It’s okay, you can tell me.” Shane gently encourages.

“This house,” she says. “It has been quiet and lonely for so long. Now it is always full of life with you and little Lena here.” She shyly wipes her tears.

He smiles, deeply touched by her words. “You should get used to this, because this is how it will be from now on.”

Tanya nods with a little more joy than disbelief. “Is good. Is very, very good.”

Shane gives her half a hug and goes back to Yelena. Ilya arrives shortly, and he makes a show of kissing Shane and saying “missed you”, then kisses the top of Yelena’s head saying the same message. They eat and simultaneously fall into a debate over the decorations for tomorrow, because they have to balance between what Ilya wants and what Yelena can be exposed to. This is a family-friendly party after all.

They have invited Shane’s parents, Hayden and his wife—who is pregnant—and kids, and there is one surprise guest that Shane has invited whom Ilya has no clue will be coming. He is kind of more excited to see his reaction to that more than anything else.

After lunch, Ilya brings out his iPad and waits for Yelena to settle in between them on the couch of their living room with the screen in her hands showing pictures of endless superhero characters. Shane and Ilya’s arms meet over the back of the sofa with Ilya’s hand drawing soft, absentminded patterns at the base of Shane’s neck. It is all so painfully normal that Shane almost feels like he needs to pinch himself just to make sure he isn’t dreaming.

“Supergirl is awesome,” Ilya recommends, but his suggestion is met with silence while Yelena scrolls slowly through the photos.

Shane exchanges a look with him that silently says *don’t even try*. Ilya holds back a smile at that, returning his attention back to his niece. They watch her for a few more minutes, until she stops at a photo and points at it.

“I like her.” Yelena points at a picture of a young woman with a complicated braid who is wearing some sort of a white suit paired with an olive green vest. She looks more like a soldier or an agent of some kind rather than a superhero. Shane has no idea who she is.

“Are you sure?” Ilya asks from Yelena’s other side.

“Yes.” She smiles excitedly, glancing at both of them. “Look,” she points to the vest. “It has many pockets. I can put candy in each one.” She giggles.

“Oh, was this your plan all along?” Shane teases.

“Lena, we talked about this.” Ilya gives her a look that makes her sigh dramatically as she looks at both of them as if they are overreacting.

“I know, I know. Only three pieces of candy.”

Ilya murmurs something in Russian at her that makes her giggle, and Shane leans down to kiss the top of her hair. “That’s my girl.”

“Are you sure you don’t want any of the other ones? No cape? No princess dresses?” Ilya asks her again.

“No. All boring.” She shrugs.

“Boring, huh?” Ilya grins like she has said one of the most virtuous words known to man, looking at Shane.

Fuck you, Shane mouths at him over Yelena's head, which sends Ilya into a fit of giggles.

The rest of the day goes peacefully. It is one of those days Shane likes to call 'slow days' where neither of them is running on tasks over tasks. It is just them, Yelena and the simplicity of sharing a home with the person you love.

"We have a problem," Shane says from where he lies next to Ilya in bed at the end of the day.

"What is it that your fascinating brain has come up with this time?" Ilya jokes.

"First of all, fuck off." Shane elbows him in the side.

"Okay, sorry." Ilya chuckles, scooting closer to him.

"I don't know how to do braids."

Ilya falls silent. Then, "neither do I. But is no problem, Tanya can do it."

"What? No," Shane argues. "The woman does a lot already. Besides, I think it would be better if it's one of us." He bites his lip, already buzzing with the excitement of pulling up YouTube tutorials on how to make the sort of braids Yelena showed them today.

Ilya's mouth forms a pout as he thinks about it, but Shane doesn't give him a chance. "Come on." He grins, urging him up from the bed by his shoulders.

"Hollander, I'm tired," he whines, but he still gets up and strides to the bathroom where Shane guides him.

"You will be even more tired tomorrow if Yelena doesn't get the same exact hairstyle she saw in the photo she chose." Shane sits Ilya in front of the bathroom mirror.

"Are you going to try on me?" Ilya asks in bewilderment as Shane rests the iPad on the sink counter and presses play.

"Yes, and you'll try too so we can see who's better at this," Shane says, wetting Ilya's hair like the woman in the video is doing.

Ilya grins. "Sounds fun. What do I get if I win?"

"A good night's sleep."

"That's not what I meant—"

"Shhh. Stop distracting me." Shane parts Ilya's hair that has grown a little longer over the past months, curling at the nape of his neck and covering his ears. It is a look that Shane likes better on him now with how he has started letting his facial hair grow out a bit as well. That decision was made final after that one time Ilya's stubble had left beard burns on Shane's thighs. He still blushes every time he remembers the look on Ilya's face when he saw the way Shane shuddered under him every time his cheeks rubbed against the sensitive skin of Shane's inner thighs.

“It’s not that bad,” Shane says at his work of Ilya’s hair. “You actually look pretty.” He giggles.

“I do.” Ilya agrees, examining his braided hair in the mirror. “Or you are just naturally good at everything you do. Is so annoying. And sexy.”

“I can work with that.” Shane smiles proudly.

“My turn.” Ilya rises from his seat and steps aside to let Shane sit.

Ilya watches the video first with hyper focus, then he replays it while trying on Shane’s hair. It is an unfair comparison, because Shane’s hair is longer and easier to maneuver than Ilya’s curls, but he doesn’t tease him about it. Not when he is busy watching how cute Ilya looks with braids in his hair and a very serious expression on his face.

“Ow, ow! I don’t think it’s supposed to hurt like that!” Shane hisses when Ilya tugs a little too hard on the hair section that he is holding.

Ilya huffs. “Well, your hair is too soft! Is not working, I can’t do it.”

“Ilya Rozanov, are you giving up and letting me braid our little girl’s hair tomorrow?” Shane spins in his seat to face Ilya with a teasing smile.

Ilya’s features stutter. “Our little girl?”

Shane’s cheeks heat up. “Isn’t she?” he asks. It had just come so naturally out of him, because in all truth, Yelena *is* their little girl.

Ilya’s eyes soften and he prompts Shane up with a light touch on his elbow. “God, I love you so much, Hollander.”

Shane nudges his nose with his and then he is kissing him softly. It’s a lazy, skin tingling kiss that Shane breaks before it ends up more. “I love you too.”

“Oh my fucking god,” Shane says for about the third time at Ilya’s reflection in the mirror. “You’re not leaving this room. No. Not dressed like *that*.”

Ilya, knowing how much it will turn on Shane, turns to face him in his Halloween costume and just flexes. “You know, Spider-Man and Human Torch can do a lot of things together.”

“Did you actually research this?” Shane asks, his eyes ogling Ilya like a piece of candy he is not allowed to have until he eats his meal first.

“What if I did?” Ilya corners him into the wall, watching his dark eyes widen and skim over Ilya hungrily. “Do you find it hot?”

“Freaky.”

“So, hot.” Ilya hitches one shoulder before he kisses Shane.

It is *so* unfair that he is going to be in that tight spandex all night without Ilya touching him. It looks like he is outright naked with the fabric of his costume clinging to his ass, toned arms and legs. So, *so* unfair.

“Ilya,” he whispers, and Ilya can hear the restraint in his voice. “Ilya, we’re gonna be late.” He makes a feeble attempt of pushing Ilya off of him, but Ilya closes in on him instead, punching out a low gasp from his already parted lips.

Ilya is certain their guests are here, but he simply can’t walk out of this room when Shane looks like this. With a force he didn’t know he had, he pushes off Shane and adjusts himself.

“Fuck, you’re hard already,” Ilya curses wantonly.

“Whose fault is that?” Shane sighs, looking so hot and bothered that Ilya wants nothing but to rip that costume off of him and bend him over.

“You of course.” Ilya teases.

“You’re one to talk.” Shane gestures at Ilya’s elaborate outfit.

He admits he kind of went all out with it, fishing online for anything that would pair perfectly with what Yelena chose for him, and he might have come across a few theories. This was all new to Ilya, but he liked it. He liked knowing what his niece is interested in, he liked looking behind it so when she comes up to him and starts talking he can carry on. He never would have known any of this without Yelena and Shane’s presence in his life. As silly as it sounds, those two people are giving Ilya the will to live—not let life pass through him.

“Let’s agree that we are both horny,” he says, finally having cooled down.

“And reckless,” Shane adds, probably realizing that his parents and people who have known him in his childhood are mere doors away from them. “Go.” He ushers Ilya out of the room. “I’ll get Lena and meet you outside.”

Ilya doesn’t argue, because Shane looks like he genuinely needs to cool down away from him; it makes Ilya’s ego inflate the size of this entire building.

He listens and goes out to greet their guests, earning a few wow’s at his catchy Human Torch costume. The decorations of the party are true to the theme, bowls filled with candy are everywhere, the lights are dim, and the mini photobooth they have installed for the occasion is occupied. Ilya thinks it’s perfect. Even Anya has a little headpiece with a halo hovering over her floppy ears.

Hayden’s daughters, Ruby and Jade, if he remembers correctly, come up to him to say hi and show off their Halloween clothes.

“Look at you!” He cheers, twirling a girl in each hand. “Very pretty.” Ilya immediately recognizes whom they are dressed as. Ten plus times of watching Frozen did not go to waste.

“Thanks, Uncle Ilya.” The girls giggle and thank him politely, trodding off to their parents with their dresses ruffling around them.

Minutes later, Shane appears with Yelena walking confidently in front of him, wearing the biggest smile she has ever displayed in other people’s presence than Ilya and Shane. He watches them greeting everyone until Shane circles to him with a soft smile playing on his lips.

“Did you know,” Shane says quietly, “that the character Lena chose is actually Russian? Some kind of a trained assassin.”

Ilya snorts.

“Oh, that’s not all of it. Her name is Yelena too. I looked it up yesterday.” Shane chuckles, his eyes trailing behind the three girls who are discussing their costumes and showing off all their knickknacks.

“Did you tell her that?” Ilya rests a loose hand over his husband’s waist, relishing in the way his smile widens at the gesture.

“Jesus, no. Imagine a five year old running around bragging about loving a Russian assassin.” Shane shakes his head.

“Is cool.” Ilya shrugs. He genuinely couldn’t care less so long as Yelena is happy and no one is hurting her.

“Of course *you* would say that.” Shane sighs with an exasperated smile.

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ilya’s expression sours.

“Nothing.” Shane pecks his lips quickly, which makes Ilya’s chest fuzzy with happiness. He loves seeing Shane like this. Like himself. “You two are like each other a lot.” He grins.

“That is a bad thing?” Ilya’s fingers curl around the jutting edge of Shane’s hipbone, and he feels Shane tense under his touch.

“You’re a menace,” Shane confesses. “And now I have to be at least three feet away from you.”

“No, Hollander.” Ilya whines. “I will be good, I promise,” he says.

“Nice try.” Shane snickers, looking at him over one shoulder as he walks away from him.

God, Ilya is so in love with him.

The party goes on nicely, Ilya thinks. Kids are happy, food is good, adults are drinking and chatting animatedly. Then, the doorbell rings. Ilya frowns, his eyes automatically scanning their guests for anyone missing or someone who hasn’t made it, but they are all here. Tanya gets the door, and Ilya’s jaw nearly hits the floor when he sees who is on the other side of it.

“*Svetlana!*” He hollers, setting his drink aside and welcoming his best friend who heads straight for him after warmly greeting Tanya.

“I missed you,” she says in Russian after she pulls away from their hug. “You look ridiculous, I love it.”

“How did you get here?” Ilya asks, completely distracted by the surprise of her being here.

“I received a very early invitation.” She winks, and then Ilya catches sight of Shane looking at them with his lips pulled into an adoring smile.

You did this? You did this for me? Ilya hopes his eyes are conveying what he is thinking. *I love you so much it might kill me one day.*

“How have you been?” Ilya gets his attention back to his friend who has travelled all the way from Russia to here just to see Ilya in a ridiculous Halloween costume.

They chat a lot while Yelena and Hayden’s girls play together. The game is amusing, Ilya notices, with Lena hiding a piece of candy in one of her many vest pockets then Ruby and Jade have to guess which pocket the candy is in.

“You look happy,” Svetlana says, her eyes twinkling with love. Love for him and his little family. “Lena too.”

“I am happy,” Ilya confirms. “Shane is the best thing that has happened to me since...” he trails off, knowing that Svetlana gets it.

“I know,” she says, her smile turning a little sad. “She must be happy too though, knowing you’re surrounded by people who love you.” Her eyes are trained on Shane who has somehow gotten himself into the trouble of doing Spider-Man poses for the girls while they clap and cheer for him.

Ilya suddenly feels a pressure in his throat. “She would have loved him,” he says. “Like I love him.”

“Oh, Ilya.” Svetlana rests her head on his shoulder, the gesture cooling over Ilya’s burning heart.

This happens sometimes. When he, Shane and Yelena are doing something—it could be as simple as having a meal together—Ilya finds himself picturing what it would have been like if his mother were alive. It terrified him how easily she fit into the portrait every time. Even when he is at the Hollanders’ house, sometimes he just thinks she would have loved to meet those people who have become his family. And they would have loved her too.

“Go be with your husband,” she says lightly after a while. “He looks like he needs help.”

“We are having a wedding, by the way,” Ilya suddenly remembers. “You are coming.”

“When?” she asks excitedly.

“We haven’t decided yet.” Ilya shakes his head. “But you can’t miss it, so I am telling you now.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.” She bumps his shoulder with hers. “Now go.”

Ilya barges in on the little group and makes a show of beating Spider-Man, but the girls start booing him.

“Don’t even try,” Shane says quietly from behind the charming smile he has put on for the girls.

“Watch this.” Ilya winks. “Who wants candy?!” He shouts, and the three girls run towards him. Ilya looks at Shane, nearly bursting out in laughter over his expression.

“Unbelievable!” Shane exclaims.

“Human Torch is a cheater, don’t take anything from him, girls.”

“*Booo!* Spider-Man is boring!” Ilya points at Shane who is standing awkwardly with his hands on his hips.

“He is not!” A very distinctive voice argues, then he sees the braided top of Yelena’s head marching towards Shane. “He is very cool and super strong.” She mimics his pose and puts her hands on her hips, jutting out her chin to try and look more intimidating.

It is silly, it is so silly Ilya should not be feeling this emotional over it. But the way Yelena always gravitates to Shane makes his heart do funny things in his chest. She loves him so much and it shows in the way she acts around him. Ilya didn’t expect to be this emotional on such a fun night.

“Super strong? I don’t know, he looks funny to me.” Ilya carries on with the bit, shrugging.

“Well, why don’t we show Mr. Fireboy here, how strong Spider-Man is?” Ilya hears Shane saying to her, trying not to laugh at the horrible nickname.

Yelena nods excitedly even though she doesn’t know what Shane’s plan is. He crouches next to her and taps his shoulder, then Yelena is climbing over him and sits there on his shoulder. She yelps when he stands up, her hands grabbing hold of the strands of his hair before Shane gives her his hands to hold instead.

“You can’t get me!” Yelena yells at Ilya with an unfiltered grin.

“Are you sure about that?” Ilya asks devilishly, which causes her to laugh uneasily.

“Don’t worry, Lena. Spider-Man is going to protect you.” Shane playfully holds her tight in place, and she folds in on him, resting her chin in his hair as if she is hiding.

“Girls,” he looks at Ruby and Jade who haven’t left his side. “We must take them down.”

“Yes!” They shout in unison.

“Any last words, Mr. Spider-Man?” Ilya crosses his arms over his chest and watches Shane’s eyes jump to his biceps.

“You are so over,” Shane says before chaos ensues.

Ilya, Ruby, and Jade run towards Shane with Yelena on his shoulders, Hayden jumps in as the king to protect Shane and Yelena, it’s all a cluster of laughter, running feet and flailing arms until Shane surrenders under the undefeated power of Ruby and Jade’s tickles and he kneels to let Yelena down from his shoulders. Yuna, David, Jackie and Svetlana are laughing and clapping their hands as if they have just watched a magnificent play. Which Ilya thinks is hilarious and heartwarming at the same time.

“You gave up quickly,” Ilya notes, knowing it will piss off Shane.

“You try being ambushed by a Russian hunk and three kids and tell me what it’s like.” He retorts breathlessly.

“Hunk?” Ilya grins.

“Piss off.” Shane lightly shoves his shoulder.

They get around to taking photos in the photobooth then, family photos, funny photos, even couple photos. Yuna and David are the last to go in, then they call for Shane for a photo while Ilya waits. Less than a second later, a hand shoots out from behind the curtain.

“You too, Ilya.” It’s Yuna Hollander’s voice.

Ilya doesn’t think. He gets in and squeezes in next to Shane, smiling with his cheek pressed against his husband’s. He feels a hand on his back, and he knows it’s not Shane’s. Which makes the pressure in his throat visit him for the second time in a row tonight.

Yuna and David thank them for the lovely time before they leave, and then Yelena comes running in, stopping Ilya and Shane from leaving the booth yet. They take some photos together, some of them silly and some of them sending Ilya’s heart into a frenzy. Such as when she puts an arm around Ilya and kisses Shane on his cheek as the shutter goes. They pose with them smashing her cheeks with their own kiss, and then they wait for the photos to come out.

Ilya excuses himself while Shane waits with Yelena and races after Yuna and David.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” he says, and it comes out awkward for some reason.

“It was a great party.” David smiles. “You guys are taking good care of Yelena.”

“Yeah,” Yuna agrees, her dark eyes fixed somewhere behind Ilya. “You should come o—”

“We are getting married,” Ilya blurts out, watching Yuna and David’s faces morph into confusion. “I mean we already are, but the first time wasn’t—we want to—” *why the fuck can’t he just say the words.*

Yuna's eyes sparkle with amusement and she exchanges a look with her husband. "I think Ilya is trying to have our blessing."

"Oh." David's eyes brighten. "Well, do we?" He jokes, looking at Yuna who lets out a short laugh at Ilya's distressed state.

"Yes, dear. You do have our blessing. I know you love Shane. We both do, actually." David nods along to his wife's words.

"I love him more than anything," Ilya says earnestly. "Thank you for trusting me with your Shane."

Yuna shocks him by leaning over and pulling him into a hug. "I've never seen Shane like this before," she murmurs. "Take care of his heart, Ilya. He carries yours instead of his own."

The words get caught in Ilya's throat and he just hugs her tighter with the promise of preferring to crush his own heart before he ever thinks about hurting Shane.

"Good night, Ilya." David gives him half a hug with a friendly clap on the back.

Tanya escorts them to the door while Ilya goes back to the party where Shane comes up to him. "What's wrong?" he asks, his eyes scanning Ilya's face. His cheeks are flushed with colour, lips stained pink from a piece of candy he has recently eaten. He smells like strawberry syrup, and Ilya wants nothing but to devour him right now.

"Nothing." Ilya smiles, pulling him to his side. "Just happy to see you." He kisses his temple.

"My parents didn't tell you anything, did they?" Shane narrows his eyes at him, trying to coax the truth out of him in his own adorable way.

"Oh, yes. They told me I am their favourite son."

"Bullshit."

"They did!" Ilya defends. "Everyone, let it be known that I am Yuna and David's favourite son, not Shane Hollander."

Ilya's words are met with thumbs down and boo's, which earns him a smirk from Shane.

"Know your audience, Rozanov."

The party clears out soon after the children start feeling sleepy, and Svetlana is the last to leave.

Ilya walks her to the elevator. "I would have offered you stay, but—"

"Jesus Christ, no. Thanks." Svetlana says in Russian, laughing. God, he forgot how refreshing it is to speak in his native language. He only uses it sometimes now with Yelena and Tanya. He used to talk to his therapist in Russian too, but with his appointments being so far from each other now, he is glad to use it now. "I'm leaving tomorrow anyway."

“Already?”

“Yes.” She pouts, throwing her arms around him. “It was good seeing you, Ilya. Take care of yourself.”

Ilya hugs her back so tightly. “See you at the wedding, yes?”

“You bet.” She grins and steps into the elevator.

Ilya goes back into the house and finds Tanya already cleaning up. “Leave it to the morning, Tanya. Go get some rest.”

“You think I’m getting old? I can wrap this all up—”

“Tanya,” Ilya sighs. “I know you can do it, but there is no use. Shane and I are going to sleep anyway, and Yelena is also asleep. Come in the morning, yes?”

“Okay, dear,” she continues in Russian. “See you tomorrow.”

Ilya helps her carry the empty cups and plates to the kitchen and makes sure she is okay before she leaves, then he finally goes into his bedroom to find Shane struggling with taking his suit off.

“Thank fuck you’re here,” Shane sighs. “Can you help me get this thing off?”

Ilya bites his lip and walks right up to him. “Do you need it again?”

“What?” Shane asks in confusion.

“Do you want to keep it?”

Shane is silent for a second. “No, I—”

“Good.” is all that Ilya says before he grabs a handful of the stretchy material and literally rips it in half.

“Oh, um..” Shane blushes deeply. “Or you could do that.”

“I’ve been wanting to do this all night.” Ilya drags the costume down, letting it fall off Shane’s shoulders, then he turns him around and rips through it right over the bottom of his spine.

“Ilya...” Shane says shakily.

They don’t even make it to the bed.

Ilya bends him over their dresser while Shane scrabbles for lube in one of the drawers, clumsily handing it back to him.

“Condom,” Ilya growls impatiently.

“No,” Shane says. “Need you. All of you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Ilya rids them both of their lower garments and works Shane open, but he keeps eagerly pushing back against Ilya’s fingers. It’s taking Ilya everything in him not to fuck him right now.

“Shane,” Ilya warns, his voice teetering on the edge between dominance and concern. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then hurry the fuck up,” Shane hisses.

Ilya does his best while pacing himself so he doesn’t rush into anything. Shane sighs and whimpers under him until Ilya feels him relax, finally ready for him. He slicks himself and lines up against Shane’s hole that flutters before he sinks in.

“Oh, fuck.” Shane gasps, clenching around Ilya as he slowly pushes all the way in.

Ilya stays like that for a few seconds, breathing hard through his nostrils before he starts moving. Shane’s body welcomes him in the most beautiful way possible, open and loose enough for Ilya to immediately thrust into him.

Shane cries out, and Ilya starts a steady rhythm, driving so hard into him the dresser rattles against the wall. The transition from family-friendly atmosphere to being back into his room and fucking Shane raw nearly kills Ilya as he grips Shane’s hips to hold him steady. The quiet of the room makes the sound of Ilya’s skin slapping against Shane, his moans and Ilya’s own rough breathing even more arousing.

“Love this,” Shane pants. “Love you so fucking much.”

Ilya grunts and lifts one of Shane’s legs up, hitching it over the edge of the dresser and holds it there.

“Holy—” Shane gasps. “Oh my god, yes. Please.” His tone vibrates with the force of Ilya’s thrusts, pushing Ilya nearer to his orgasm.

He wants to keep going forever, making Shane come apart over and over, but he feels his orgasm building quickly.

“Harder,” Shane demands. “Want to feel you for days.”

“That is,” Ilya manages, “very slutty of you.” He punctuates his words by snapping his hips so relentlessly he worries for a second that he might be hurting Shane. Except Shane reaches behind him and grips Ilya’s hand that is supporting his leg up.

Shane cranes his neck to look back at him, and Ilya is *gone*. His eyes are huge and shiny and Ilya wants to dive in them.

“Perfect.” Shane pants, and Ilya can feel him close too.

“You will come untouched, Hollander?” Ilya asks, his hips stuttering. “Like the slut you are?”

“If you—*fuck*—keep talking like that, yeah.” Shane screws his eyes shut and inhales sharply. He doesn’t give Ilya a chance to talk more as he shudders and comes all over himself and the dresser.

“That’s right.” Ilya groans when Shane clenches around him with the force of his orgasm. “So beautiful.”

It doesn’t take Ilya longer than a few more thrusts before he stills and empties himself into Shane.

“Fucking hell.” Shane’s weight slumps against the wooden surface under him and in Ilya’s arms.

“Worth the wait?” Ilya slowly lets Shane’s leg down, leaning down to pepper his back with kisses.

“Mhmm.” Shane hums happily.

He whimpers as Ilya pulls out of him, watching, mystified, as moments later his release drips down Shane’s thigh.

“Come on.” Ilya gently urges him up, trapping him in a soft, long kiss before he leads them to the bathroom for a shower.

Ilya makes sure he cleans the mess they made of the dresser after, because he knows Shane will be fussy about it if it isn’t clean.

Freshly showered and laying in his arms a while later, Shane speaks sleepily.

“Why was everyone telling me congratulations before they left today?”

Ilya kisses the back of his neck where a cluster of freckles adorn his skin there.

“I told everyone we are getting married.”

“You did?” His lips barely move against Ilya’s skin, signalling that he is falling asleep.

“Yes,” Ilya answers, anticipating what Shane might say next.

“Good.”

November

November has been a busy month for Shane and Ilya with the wedding preparations, ending the Hollander & Co. acquisition, and something else that Shane has been planning behind

Ilya's back. Shane himself is busy up to his neck, doing New Year's and Christmas campaigns, in addition to his frequent, recent Ottawa visits for his secret project there. Though excitement rushes through him when he remembers that it is all ready now, and he can take Ilya to show him tomorrow.

"We're going to Ottawa tomorrow," Shane announces, flopping down onto the couch next to Ilya.

"Says who?" Ilya jokes, pulling Shane into his lap.

"Says me, the Sexiest Man Alive," Shane wiggles his eyebrows. "Your husband."

"Ah, I like the last one the most."

"Liar. You adore the second one too." Shane pecks his lips. "I'm serious though. Tanya is taking Yelena to my parents tomorrow, and I took the liberty of clearing your schedule because you've been working too much. You need a break."

"That is the best thing I have heard today." Ilya smiles before he presses his lips to Shane's in a gentle kiss.

"What have you been up to?" Shane nods his chin towards the art studio. Its door is no longer closed now, and Ilya often spends some time in there while Shane brings him coffee when he feels like he has been in there for a long time.

He likes watching Ilya paint—sometimes when Ilya is in the mood for it—he has come to discover that. Because like everything else that he does, Ilya puts his everything into it. Shane loves to watch the way he pays attention to how the colours turn out, how he is adamant on combining different shades to find the specific colour he wants. The precise press and glide of his brush on a canvas, the way his muscles shift, and the faint frown that comes with his concentration. Shane loves every part of it.

"I am almost done with the painting," he says. "Do you want to see it?"

"Only if you want to show it to me." Shane brushes a hand through Ilya's hair, letting it smooth over his cheek as well.

"I do." Ilya smiles. "Come on."

They step into the studio and Shane's eyes find it immediately. There, set up on the easel is a painting of Shane with a beautiful woman behind him who is sort of—floating, he realises when his eyes trace her figure and finds wings spreading out from behind her, casting rays of light down onto Shane's painted self.

"Ilya, it's beautiful..." Shane exhales. On a closer look, he discovers that the woman's features are—*oh god*. "Is that—"

"Irina," Ilya says. "My mother." Shane feels him come up and hug him from behind, resting his chin on Shane's shoulder.

Shane stares longer at the stunning details of the painting, and it gets even more beautiful while Ilya talks.

“I think you are my mother’s gift to me in this world.” The words strike Shane at the same moment he realises that the point of view of the painting is Ilya’s. Both his painted self and his mother are looking at *him*.

Shane leans his head into Ilya’s and takes one of his hands up to his lips to kiss it. “Then she must love you very much.” He smiles, knowing Ilya will hear it in his voice.

“She does.” Ilya kisses his neck. “I wish you could have met her.”

“I have, in a way.” Shane strokes the back of Ilya’s hand. “Through your stories about her. I think that’s the best way I could ever meet her.”

Ilya is silent for a few moments. “You’re right.”

“I love you,” Shane says.

“I love you too.” Ilya takes a deep breath and breaks their little embrace. “Now let’s eat dinner, I’m starving.”

The next morning, Shane wakes up so excited he gets dressed for a run. Ilya knows nothing about their plans for today, and he is beyond glad he has managed to keep this a secret from Ilya for almost two months now that they are nearly through the end of November.

“Where are you going?” Ilya asks from his seat at the dining table.

“For a run?” Shane answers kind of obviously. He thought his sporty look gave it away.

“Dressed like that?”

Shane looks down at his compression shorts and light t-shirt. When he looks back up at Ilya, a shiver runs down his spine.

“Is there a problem?” Ilya has never told him anything about what he wears, so he doesn’t understand what is bothering him.

“Yes. You in those shorts,” Ilya’s eyes rake him up and down in a way that goes straight to Shane’s dick. “Come here.”

Compelled by the look on Ilya’s face and the tingle in the pit of his stomach, Shane obeys and walks up to him. Though Ilya doesn’t move an inch. So, Shane is so confused.

“On the table.”

“What?” Shane glances at the table that is neatly set with cutlery and dishes.

“Your ass. On the table, Hollander.” Ilya sets his cup of coffee aside, making room on the large wooden surface of the dining table.

When Shane hesitates, Ilya's hand finds the back of his thigh to urge him closer. Shane melts into Ilya's lap as the other pulls him down for a heated kiss before he pushes him back onto the table. Ilya moves with charged precision, Shane can see that he has something in his mind. What it is though he is about to find out.

He gently pushes Shane back with a hand on his chest. "Relax," he says. Shane doesn't resist him and lays back, then a shock of arousal goes through him when his eyes land on his reflection in the ceiling mirror.

He watches as if in a trance, Ilya pulling down his shorts and revealing his hard cock. He holds the shorts up then throws them aside. "This is a crime," he says, referring to the piece of clothing he just got rid of.

Heat pools in Shane's stomach at the sight of himself splayed on the dining table naked from the waist down among dishes and cutlery. It feels so odd. So...*hot*. He looks down at Ilya instead, too embarrassed to look at himself like this.

"And I cannot let it simply go." Ilya is looking at him like he is a main course meal after a long day's starvation.

"What will you do?" Shane asks, his voice surprisingly thinner than he intended.

"Watch." Ilya's hand grabs Shane's jaw and urges him to look up at himself.

Shane expects to feel Ilya's mouth around his dick, but instead, he goes lower. His tongue slips down the smooth skin under his balls as his hands push Shane's legs up. Shane holds his breath, watching himself nearly fold in half under Ilya's hands. He can't believe Ilya is actually going to—

"Oh, god. *Ilya*."

Shane feels the wet heat of Ilya's tongue lapping at his hole and he had never experienced anything like it. It is impossibly intimate. It is so bold and hot and so...*Ilya*. Shane has been with other men before, but none of them were interested in this and Shane never thought about it either. He is glad he didn't though because Ilya being the first man to eat his ass is making this even sexier.

Ilya's tongue pauses for a moment, and he says, "good?"

"Fucking *great*."

He sees Ilya chuckle. "You have never...?"

Shane flushes even deeper. "No one was interested."

"Idiots." Ilya shakes his head, bending Shane's legs all the way to his chest and fixing him a look that makes his stomach flip in excitement.

And then the lapping continues. Shane's eyes roll back and he groans. A thought flickers inside him, and it makes him wild with need. *Did other people have Ilya like this too?* But it

goes away quickly, because he knows Ilya is his now. And he knows that he is his too.

“Eyes on the mirror, Hollander,” Ilya rasps, and Shane gasps a little when he opens his eyes and finds Ilya looking at him through their reflection. “I want you to watch yourself being pleased like this.”

He circles Shane’s hole with his tongue, and then the vibration of his voice travels up Shane’s body. “Want you to see what I see all the time.”

Shane forces his eyes open, watching the top of Ilya’s head move while he rims him. He is turned on beyond words, his cock is rigid and leaking, and it takes him all of his willpower not to reach down and start stroking himself. And Shane isn’t sure how much longer Ilya can keep doing this but...

“Oh, *fuck*.” Shane gasps.

Ilya’s tongue is *inside him*. Warm and slippery and intrusive in the best way possible. Shane never wants him to stop.

“Oh my god.” His back arches off the table, and one of his arms shoots out to the side to hold onto something. He is distantly aware of the sound of something clattering to the ground, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t fucking care when he is feeling *this* good.

Ilya alternates between murmuring things and lapping at his hole, telling him how beautiful he is, how sexy, how *his*. Some of his praise is in Russian, and Shane feels himself sink into a place where he doesn’t feel quite so ridiculous being on display like this.

“Do you see,” Ilya asks, “how you look when you are gone like this? Stunning, Hollander.”

Shane focuses his eyes and exhales at what he sees. He has kind of been avoiding looking at his face, instead watching Ilya and his own erection. But...he has never seen himself like this. He has seen Ilya like this—eyes hazy with lust, mouth slack, cheeks flushed—but never his own face. Never.

It is weird, watching himself being pleased, but it is also hot as fuck. Ilya is looking at him too, gaze fixed on the mirror, eyes blazing intensely.

“Ilya,” Shane says breathlessly.

And it is as if Shane has set him on a mission. Ilya’s tongue is inside him again, this time with a little more speed and vigor. The pleasure intensifies, and Shane’s legs start shaking, his ability to focus on himself in the mirror minimising with every second that passes with Ilya’s tongue fucking his ass.

Ilya pulls away for a breath, and his voice is hoarse when he speaks, nearly making Shane come on the spot. “You are going to watch yourself come,” he demands.

“Fuck,” Shane says, but he nods anyway.

He is too far gone to do anything but watch and feel his orgasm nearing. One of Ilya's hands travels up Shane's body, and he pinches one of his nipples. Shane shudders with a moan, a fresh bead of precum slicking his stomach.

"So fucking good," Shane utters, his eyes glued to the tight grip of Ilya's hand on his leg while the other teases his nipples. Pleasure licks at his spine like flames that are about to swallow him alive, and Shane has never been happier to burn.

Though he can't see it, Ilya's tongue is going to drive Shane right to madness. "Ilya," he pants. "Ilya, I'm going to come." He screws his eyes shut as the fire consumes him, bursting in flames.

Ilya taps his chest, and Shane knows what he is silently telling him. He opens his eyes at the same moment his cock starts spurting all over his stomach and chest. He could see how his dick pulses when it shoots his release, the way his abs tighten and his thighs tremble as his whole body rocks with pleasure. When Shane's body calms down, he slumps back against the table.

"Fuck, that was..." Shane doesn't even know how to put *that* into words.

Ilya chuckles softly. "Good?"

"Fucking epic. How come we haven't done this until now?"

Ilya shrugs. "Wanted you to be comfortable first."

Shane's heart swells. How the fuck can this man be so sweet, sexy and a menace at the same time.

He bites his lip. "Now I'm all dirty."

Ilya rolls his eyes, helping Shane up. "Shut up, Hollander."

With the adrenaline out of Shane's body in a much unexpected way, his morning run goes forgotten. Instead, they find themselves in the shower minutes later with Shane on his knees and Ilya hissing and cursing above him. Shane doesn't think he can ever return the favour of what Ilya did to him, but he knows how much Ilya loves it when Shane blows him. So, he takes his time and puts every skill he has practiced into use. They eventually get to actually showering and changing into fresh clothes though with Shane being a step ahead out of excitement.

"You are very excited today," Ilya remarks. "I like it."

"I am," Shane replies as he gets into the driver's seat.

"Wow, wow. You are driving as well?"

"Yes. And no touching," he warns.

"Don't put ideas in my head, Hollander." Ilya jokes, putting his seatbelt on.

“As if they’re not already there.” Shane shakes his head with a smile, the image of himself on the dining table burning through his mind. Jesus, he doesn’t think he will be able to ever enter that room and eat like a normal person ever again.

They arrive at their destination, and Shane has Ilya’s eyes blindfolded for good measure. He unbuckles his seatbelt for him and helps him out of the car. “Watch your head.”

“What could possibly be this exciting in *Ottawa*?” Ilya snickers, earning a huff from Shane.

“I swear to god—”

“I’m joking, Hollander. Relax.” Ilya blindly extends his hand out, reaching for Shane. “Go on, surprise me.”

Shane sighs and takes his hand, leading him up the freshly polished steps of his childhood house that they visited a few months ago.

“Ready?”

“Yes, come on.” Ilya grins, and Shane finally removes the blindfold and steps back, admiring everything around him. From the stunned expression on Ilya’s face to the newly renovated house he has been working on for months.

“You did this?” Ilya asks, taking in his surroundings. The house is truly beautiful, Shane thinks. It looks new yet still has its essence of age in it, carrying the memories Shane has but eligible for making new ones.

“Do you like it?” Shane asks, his cheeks heating up.

“I do, but I don’t understand. This is your childhood home, yes?” Ilya’s question is soft, intimate, laying the perfect ground for Shane’s next words.

The words he has been rehearsing for months now.

“I renovated it for us,” Shane says, crossing the distance to walk up to Ilya. “I thought it could be perfect for summer vacations. We can take Yelena and stay here away from the buzz of the city, or we could come here alone.” He grins, honest and bright.

“Hollander,” Ilya says, and his voice sounds wobbly.

“It’s quiet, there is a grill outside for family barbecue, I know that’s not your thing but—”

“I love it,” Ilya stops him with his hands on his cheeks. “I love you. I want all of it.”

“Really?” Shane beams.

“Yes. A thousand percent.” Ilya rests his forehead against his, and Shane’s eyes flutter shut.

“That’s a lot.”

“I love you a lot.”

Shane tips his head forward, and Ilya’s lips meet him. They are warm and gentle, making Shane melt into his arms. Ilya’s tongue caresses Shane’s upper lip and he chases it, his mouth molding with Ilya’s the way two pieces are made to fit together.

“So, what do you want to do?” Shane splays his hands over Ilya’s chest, feeling his heart beating fast under his palm. “We have the whole day. I could give you a tour.”

“Hmm. Later.” Ilya kisses him again, this time a little more excitedly, his hands sliding to Shane’s waist as he pulls him closer.

“Come on.” Shane takes his hand and leads them up the few stairs that separate the bedrooms from the rest of the house.

“Very fancy,” Ilya says, inspecting the large glass windows that look out onto the quiet greenery.

“Yeah?” Shane pulls his hoodie over his head.

“Not as much as you in that bed though.” Ilya shoves him back and lands on top with a languid smile.

Shane doesn’t know how long they stay there, bringing each other to their brink more than once. Ilya’s mouth is sinful on his neck, his chest, his inner thighs, scattering bursts of pleasure all over Shane’s body. He comes crying out Ilya’s name, gasping and writhing in the brand new sheets under him. There is not an inch of him where he doesn’t feel Ilya, equally far gone as him, touching and touching him until he too joins Shane.

“I think I am dead,” Ilya breathes heavily next to him.

“If this is what heaven’s like, then I think I’m dead too.”

Ilya smiles at that. The kind of smile Shane likes to call unguarded. Just him and the boyish air he has about his features when Shane says something nice to him. Comfortable silence surrounds them until they come down from their high. Ilya’s head is on Shane’s stomach, a grounding presence that Shane can’t imagine his life without at this point. His fingers are rooted in Ilya’s hair, his fingertips barely moving but he likes it.

Ilya’s brows furrow for a moment. “You did not have stuff here? I mean, this all looks new.” He gestures around the newly furnished room. “I thought you wanted to keep everything as it is.”

“I thought so too,” Shane thinks out loud. “But I had everything I wanted from it back at my parents’ place in the city anyway. I realised there was no point in leaving it empty, especially with Yelena now.”

“How long have you been working on this?” Ilya shifts and turns so he is lying on top of Shane.

“Early October I think,” Shane rests a hand on Ilya’s stubbled cheek.

When the significance of the time sinks in, Ilya’s features melt into an adoring expression, and he starts drowning Shane’s face and neck in kisses while muttering in Russian.

“Love you.” Shane pecks his lips. “I brought us clothes if you want to shower and change,” he says with a smile.

“Of course you did.” Ilya grins and hops off of him to head for the shower.

The day goes by peacefully as if he and Ilya are the only two people who exist in the world. They cook together, they eat and steal food off of each other’s plates even though they are eating the same meal. Shane makes a bonfire and they cuddle in front of it, they tour around the house and Shane tells him about everything he has been thinking about for Yelena. They live the day for themselves, and on their way back Shane realises that even if they have done some of these activities back at the penthouse...today was solely for all the times they should have been living like this and they weren’t.

“What do you want to do for your birthday, *solnyshko*?” Ilya asks Yelena one morning, a week before her birthday—which they almost forgot because of how busy they have been this month. Ilya had blamed himself all night for almost forgetting, until Shane finally convinced him that they had enough time to do something. He has lowkey been worrying about Ilya. He doesn’t get enough sleep, he sometimes sleeps at the office, and he has been getting headaches. *A lot*.

Shane’s smile finds him at the way Yelena’s face lights up. “We will have a party?”

“We can have anything you want.” He winks.

“But I want a lot of things!”

“Okay, how about you have *all day* to think and you tell us tonight before bed?” Shane suggests.

“Okay.” Yelena nods excitedly.

Yelena goes to school, leaving Shane and Ilya a bit of quiet time before each of them sets off on his schedule. Shane checks his calendar before he leaves to make sure nothing is cancelled or postponed, and he feels rather than hears Ilya standing too. Then, he jumps at the sharp sound of glass smashing into the ground. His eyes immediately land on Ilya, and his stomach lurches when he finds him leaning forward, his arm shaking as he grips the edge of the table for support.

“Ilya?” Shane is right in front of him in no time. “Baby, are you okay?”

Ilya looks at him in confusion, as if he is as shocked as Shane and doesn’t know what happened. He squeezes his eyes shut then opens them again, and Shane can see the red veins shooting through the whites of his eyes. “I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” Shane argues firmly. “Please sit.”

Shane gently urges him back to his seat then kneels beside him.

Ilya reaches out a hand and places it on the side of Shane's face. "Just lost my balance for a bit, yes?"

Shane has never been madder. Ilya looks *tired*. Pale face, dark-under eyes tired. "Ilya, you're sweating." He rests his hand over Ilya's own clammy one on his face.

"I have things to take care of, and you're going to be late for work too. Go. I will be fine."

Shane shakes his head. "I'm not going anywhere without knowing you're okay."

"Shane—"

"Don't. What's on your schedule? I can take care of Lena's birthday," he says. "And Mum can take care of the wedding stuff. Ending the acquisition can be done through your lawyers, right? What else?"

Ilya has fallen eerily silent, and his face looks alarming.

"Hey," he says, leaning up onto his knees to get a closer look at Ilya who, much to his shock, has teary eyes.

"I love you," Ilya whispers, his bottom lip quivering.

"I love you too." Shane pulls him into a hug. It's awkward with the arm of the chair poking Shane's side, but he doesn't care. "I'll take care of everything, okay?" he whispers, rubbing Ilya's back over his suit. "You just rest, please."

They break away a few moments later, and Shane wipes his tears away. "Okay?" he asks again, this time with a loving smile on his face.

"Yes. Okay." Ilya smiles back, sniffing. "Baby, huh?"

"Shut up." Shane's cheeks warm up. "It just came out."

"I like it." Ilya brushes a finger over his freckles.

"Never saying it again then." Shane teases, standing up and kissing Ilya's forehead on his way up.

"Hey!" Ilya whines after him.

"I'm leaving you in Tanya's care," he says, knowing well that Tanya will do what she needs to do if Shane just says the word.

"I'm not a baby." Ilya looks at him seriously.

"No, you're not. You're *my* baby."

He is rewarded with a bright smile from Ilya that stays with him the whole day, a beacon of joy that is written in Ilya's name.

A week later, the two men are celebrating Yelena's sixth birthday in the least way they could have expected. Even though they have been living together for months now, Shane and Ilya still get surprised with some of her choices and decisions. One time they had panicked that they didn't know her at all, but then Shane suggested that they talk to her therapist. She assured them that this is completely normal, and that Yelena is now in a transitional phase where her values, her definition of a home, and even her understanding of the world are changing.

Her exposure to Shane and Ilya, how they treat each other, how they treat her, how they treat Tanya, it is all shaping her personality apart from what they thought they knew. In a nutshell, it means that they are on the right track. She watches them, and her mind rebuilds itself based on what she is exposed to. Which is why Yelena smashed their expectations of a big party where her friends from school could all come, and instead had asked for a specific birthday cake that they make together at home.

"No party?" Ilya had asked, surprised and concerned at the same time.

"No, we can have a party. You, me, and Shane." She points at each of them as she speaks.

"Lena, are you sure?" Shane double checks. He worries for a second that something at school is bothering her and she doesn't want to be around anything related to it.

She nods. "I love it when it's just us."

Ilya gives Shane a look: Can you fucking believe this?

Shane: I know!!

"If that's what you want, then that's what we'll do." Shane kisses her forehead.

"Oh! Maybe one more thing," she says, her lips stretching into a mischievous smile. "Is snowy. Can we go out and play in the snow on my birthday?"

"Lena," Ilya argues first, but gently. "You might get sick."

"I will wear all my clothes! Just a little, please?" she asks with eyes so hopeful Shane wants to take her out right now, but he waits for Ilya's word.

"Only for thirty minutes, okay?" he says after a few seconds of thinking.

Yelena gasps and throws her arms around him. "You are the best!" she screams in his ear.

"Ya lyublyu tebya." She kisses Shane's cheek and then climbs into her bed.

And here they are in the kitchen, surrounded by endless bowls of icing, small bottles of sprinkles and ingredients for Yelena's cake. They agreed to put the cake in the oven and then play in the snow until the cake is done. Ilya had left the terrace unattended so the snow could

collect there instead of having to go outside, which Yelena seemed to like. She apparently didn't mind anything so long as Shane and Ilya were with her. Which is kind of moving for Shane. Any six year old in her place would sit back and demand for everything big—not because they're spoiled, but because they *can*.

Meanwhile, Yelena hasn't even asked for a specific present or anything she wants in particular except for this.

That doesn't mean that Shane hasn't planned a little something though in agreement with Ilya.

Given that Shane has already shown Ilya the Ottawa summerhouse, got him on board with the treehouse and the pool he wanted to install for Yelena, they thought it would be a good idea to show her too. Shane wanted all of them to go, but with the holiday season nearing and how harsh the weather is, they settled for showing her the pictures and then taking her when everything was in place.

"I win!" Ilya shouts, raising his arms in the air as snow particles fall from his hands onto his head.

"Nooo!" Yelena shouts, trying to pull her snowman together but it keeps falling apart. She looks adorable in her puff jacket and ice cap, the only thing visible from her features being the pink tip of her nose and her bright pink lips. Her cheeks are squished in the high collar of her jacket to protect her from the cold, and Shane has been snapping pictures non-stop.

Until of course, a very aimed and intended snowball hits him in the side. His head snaps in Ilya's direction.

"You will not celebrate your husband?" Ilya asks sarcastically.

"Why, have you seen him? I only found two kids here." Shane walks towards him, the cold stinging at his face. They all are wearing ice caps and puff jackets to isolate the cold and move freely.

"Ah, very funny." Ilya rolls his eyes, but he is grinning.

Shane shocks him by throwing a snow ball at him, hitting him square in the chest.

"You—" Ilya doesn't get a chance to continue as another one, much smaller, comes crashing against his thigh.

Shane spins to find Yelena giggling with a gloved hand over her mouth. "Lena, run!"

They break into a chase with the three of them struggling to run in the nearly calf high snow, which makes it even funnier. Yelena is the first to fall, and Shane trips after her in a failed attempt at *not* tripping over her, followed by Ilya who half lands on Shane with a yelp.

"Soldier down!" He raises his arm in the air as if waving for help.

“Help is on the way!” Yelena shouts from behind Shane, and she grabs onto his arm for support to get up and run towards Ilya. She crouches next to him and pretends to put on a stethoscope.

“It hurts everywhere!” Ilya pretends to cry, still lying against Shane’s leg.

“Doctor, how can he be better?” Shane asks in a fake concerned voice. “Do you think a true love’s kiss might help?”

“Is the perfect gift!” She exclaims, clapping her hands together once.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Hurry!” Shane gestures at Ilya who doesn’t break character.

“Ah, where is my true love?” he cries, and then, giggling, Yelena bends down and gives his cheek a kiss.

Ilya inhales as if he has been drowning, but then he pretends to fall sick again.

“It’s not working! What do we do?” Shane shakes Ilya’s shoulders. “Maybe more than one kiss?”

Yelena shrugs and kisses Ilya’s other cheek. He starts moving like her tiny kisses are what bring him back to his health while her laughter gradually grows until she stops and looks at Shane. “You have to kiss him too!”

Shane nearly chokes on air.

“You love him, you must kiss him!” Yelena comes to stand behind him and uses all her force to push Shane.

“Help, help!” Ilya yells playfully, pathetically, looking upside down at Shane with a sneaky grin.

He finally surrenders and bends down to kiss Ilya on the forehead where his head is on Shane’s thigh, but Ilya tips his head back at the last second, and their lips meet in a short, upside down kiss. Shane quickly rises back with rosy cheeks while Yelena *cheers*.

“I’m well!” Ilya gasps, sitting upright. “Where is the doctor?”

Yelena runs up to him, and he engulfs her in a hug that she completely disappears into. “Thank you, thank you,” he punctuates his words by kissing her covered head.

Shane realises that his cheeks hurt from how much he has been smiling, and then Ilya turns to him. He puts Yelena down and tugs Shane towards him, not bothered by the snow that literally weighs Shane down. He takes out his phone and opens the camera app, raising his arm up. This is probably the first time Shane has ever seen Ilya take a picture in real life. He takes many thirst traps for Shane, but this is something else entirely. This is something that makes his heart move twice its speed.

“Lena, come here.” Ilya helps her stand properly between them.

“Wait,” she says and bends down then comes back up moments later with her hands full of snow.

“Smile!” he says, and Yelena smiles as wide as she can, posing with her snow-filled hands towards the camera.

Ilya snaps a few photos before Yelena throws the snow into the air and it falls everywhere on and around them. Shane laughs, Ilya says something in Russian, Yelena squeals, and the camera snaps another photo.

A few minutes later, an alarm sounds from inside the house.

“Time for birthday cake!” Ilya exclaims, looking at Yelena who practically races to the terrace door.

Shane helps her with her boots before she goes inside, and Tanya takes her right away to put her in fresh clothes and make sure she is warm until he and Ilya change as well and prepare the cake for decoration.

“Shane.”

The way Ilya calls his name makes Shane’s attention divert immediately to him with a bit of alarm. “What?”

“Look.” Ilya turns his phone towards him.

On the screen, there is himself, Ilya and Yelena from minutes ago. Shane is laughing, and god he didn't realize he had tears in his eyes until he saw the picture. He has his eyes on Ilya who is also laughing, but Ilya is looking up at the sky. Yelena is distracted by the snow, but she looks like she was wholeheartedly laughing—exactly like she was.

Shane’s face melts into a smile, and a thorn pricks his throat.

“It’s perfect,” he whispers, handing the phone over to Ilya.

“Yes. *We* are,” replies Ilya, sealing his words with a warm kiss.

December

“What do you think?” Ilya asks, showing her another one.

Yelena scrunches her nose. “Is too big.”

“So, this one?” They go back to the option they initially chose.

Ilya took Yelena and they went shopping for wedding rings today. Shane is at his parents’, so it was the perfect opportunity. The two of them had sat with Yelena and told her that they are having a wedding. It was tricky trying to make a six year old understand why they were having a wedding when they were already married, but it was equally easy to get her buy in by making her the ring bearer. Jokes aside, Ilya made sure Yelena is perfectly okay with this

before planning any of today's events. She was already used to living with Shane and seeing him near Ilya, so there were no worries from that part.

What worried Ilya was her thinking that they are replacing her parents, which in a sense they are. But they are very careful when it comes to addressing it with Yelena, especially with Shane and Ilya switching between parent events at her school. She lives with the knowledge that her parents loved her, but she wakes up and goes to sleep with the fact that he and Ilya love her just as much. Which is why she is even more excited than him picking out a ring for Shane.

Ilya didn't want to renew their marriage with their current rings. Those were convenient, lacking life. But the ones he and Yelena are choosing right now, god he already can't imagine what Shane's face might look like.

"I think it is the one." Yelena nods.

Ilya takes one more look at it, and something in him tells him that yes, it *is* the one. He hands it to the jeweller. "We will take this," he says.

"Excellent choice, Mr. Rozanov," the middle-aged woman carefully takes the ring and puts it aside. "We have just the perfect match for it. I'll be right with you." She disappears for a moment while she retrieves the other ring, and butterflies swarm his chest. *Butterflies swarm his chest.* He sits with this for a second, and a small smile paints itself on his lips. Only Shane can ever do that to him.

"When will you give it to him?" Yelena rests one hand on her cheek.

"Tonight." He tucks one hair strand behind her ear.

"Tonight?" She gasps in surprise, her eyes that are almost like his twinkling with happiness. "This is so exciting. Can I stay past my bedtime to see you when you come back?"

Well, Ilya considered this possibility, which is why he is glad he chose the weekend to do this.

"Only because there is no school tomorrow," Ilya tells her.

"Thank you," she utters in Russian, her face lit up. "He will say yes. But you ask nicely too, okay?" she instructs, making Ilya's heart expand in his chest.

"Yes, ma'am." Ilya salutes her, eliciting a giggle out of her.

The woman comes back with a selection of rings in one hand, and the other hand holds a single one that is just far too gorgeous.

"This matches the one you are purchasing," the lady lays it in front of him. "It's a special set, very rare to find." She smiles, but it almost goes unnoticed because his eyes are on the glimmering ring in his hand. He tries it on, and his heart skips a beat at the image of Shane's hand next to his, wearing an equally beautiful ring. Even Yelena's mouth is hanging open at its sight. Not that this is his unit of measuring how good the ring looks, but she hasn't reacted

to any of the rings they saw like she did to the one Ilya is wearing and the one that is to be Shane's.

He doesn't even spare the other options a glance. "I will take this."

"Congratulations." She smiles politely at him as she packs the rings away.

The trip back to the penthouse is full of Yelena bubbling up with questions about tonight, and Ilya, god help him, tells her everything. He then picks Shane up from his parents' house. He wished he could change into something else, but it would have given him away. Shane would have noticed.

"Hey." He gets into the car, greeting Ilya with a quick kiss.

"How was the visit?" Ilya asks as he starts driving.

"It was good," Shane says mildly. "The press haven't picked up yet on the company going independent again, so that's good I guess."

"Do you care?" Ilya asks carefully. "If they do say something?"

Shane is silent for a few minutes. "Honestly? No. Fuck them. Even my parents aren't as 'careful' about it."

"Then, let it off your shoulders." Ilya reaches next to him and rubs Shane's neck, smoothing a hand over his shoulder.

"Ugh." He relaxes back in his seat. "Mum managed to close the deal on our wedding venue, by the way."

"You are not kidding, yes?" Ilya's heart leaps in his chest.

"I wish I was." Shane chuckles. "I don't know what she did, like I have been *begging* them for months."

"Yuna Hollander is not easy." Ilya grins. "*I* would know."

That's another weight scratched off their backs. Ilya and Shane have been struggling with their wedding venue given, one: the short notice of only two months. Two: having their wedding on New Year's Eve. Ilya admits it is a logistically shitty time, but when he and Shane discussed the possible dates, they found none better than the anniversary of the night it all started. It feels weird, thinking that he met Shane *a year* ago. It feels so much longer than that.

"Please, you're a match made in heaven or something." Shane rolls his eyes.

Ilya laughs at that, taking a turn.

"Wait, we're not going home?"

“Not yet. There is something I want to show you first.”

“Okay...” Shane narrows his eyes at him. “Did you buy another sports car?”

“Not yet, but—”

“Not *yet*?”

“Relax. I am kidding.” Ilya puts a hand over his thigh and squeezes. “Partly.”

“You’re unbelievable.”

You truly wouldn’t believe, Ilya wants to say.

They arrive shortly, and Ilya opens the car door for Shane. “I could get used to this,” Shane jokes.

“Why not?” Ilya jokes, softly nudging Shane’s nose with his. God, he wants to take him in his arms and shout to the entire world that Shane is his.

“Where are we?” He looks up around them, his eyes lingering on the empty building behind Ilya.

“You will see.” Ilya slides his hand into Shane’s. “Come on.”

They walk up a few steps, and Ilya leads them into the moderately lit, empty building. It’s one storey only, but the space is big—perfect for what Ilya had in mind when he saw it.

“So, what do you think?”

“What do I think of what?” Shane asks, obviously confused as he looks around him at the empty place.

“Your future charity.” Ilya worries his words come out incoherent from how wide he is smiling, but he discovers that they were perfectly clear when Shane’s face transforms into the most adorable confused, flustered and outright surprised expression.

“I—what?” Shane gapes, taking a second look at the building with this knowledge. “Ilya, this is... how did you even...”

Ilya takes his face in his hands and Shane melts into it like he always does. “This was your dream, yes? We have the place, the time to plan, and...” he pauses as he gets down to one knee, his heart beating so fast in his chest yet his hands are steady.

“Ilya...?” Shane utters warily, his voice shaking with emotion.

“...the dream to share. Your dreams are my dreams, Shane. I want to share it all with you.”

Shane’s eyes are big and shiny with tears, and it takes all of Ilya’s willpower not to burst into tears himself. He reveals the ring, and a low gasp comes out of Shane.

“Shane Hollander, will you re-marry me?” They both laugh wetly at the question, and Shane hauls Ilya up by his hands.

“Come here, you—” he cuts himself off by smashing his lips against Ilya’s in a melodic kiss. Ilya gathers him in his arms the way a harper holds their harp. Carefully, tenderly, passionately—and he *kisses* Shane.

“You’re ridiculous.” Shane is smiling, but there are tears on his face.

“Only for you.” Ilya chases his lips one more time before he slides the old ring off of Shane’s finger and replaces it with the new one.

“Oh, Ilya...” Shane examines the gold band that is studded with diamonds. It fits him perfectly. “It’s so beautiful.”

“No. You are.” Ilya raises his newly jewelled hand to his lips, kissing Shane’s ring finger.

“Where is yours?” Shane asks, referring to Ilya’s empty hand.

Ilya fishes for it in his pocket. “Right here.” He turns his palm up and shows it to Shane.

“Let me.” Shane smiles giddily, taking Ilya’s silver matching ring and slipping it onto his finger. “I can’t believe you went to get new ones.”

“It felt right.” Ilya shrugs, every corner of his mind screaming Shane’s name.

“I love you.” Shane kisses his forehead, the soft touch of his lips going straight to his heart. Then he kisses Ilya’s cheeks and finally his lips.

“I love you more.” Ilya caresses his cheek. “Take your time with this. Think about what you want to—”

“That’s okay, I, um...I think I know what I want to do.” He rests one hand on Ilya’s chest.

“Yes?”

“I want it to be a safe place for people struggling with mental illness,” he says, and Ilya’s poor heart nearly stops. “And queer youth. I don’t know how that’s gonna work, but I just—when I dropped hockey, I was devastated. I don’t want anyone to go through this just because they’re different.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Ilya rubs his hand over Shane’s chest. “I promise.” He kisses the corner of Shane’s mouth. “But for now, we need to go home because *someone* is waiting for you.”

“Now?!” Shane asks in surprise.

Ilya chuckles. “I will have you know, she chose your ring herself.”

“You took her with you?” Shane’s voice jumps an octave.

Ilya tells him everything on their way back, watching Shane's smile widen and his eyes shimmer with so much love he can't believe it is all for him.

"Show me your hand!" Yelena screams, running at Shane the moment he and Ilya walk in. Shane reflexively picks her up, even though she has been growing a bit taller. He doesn't care though.

Shane flashes his ring at her, and Yelena squeals with her hands on her cheeks then she holds Shane's hand, her small fingers tracing the band around his finger. "Do you like it?"

"I *love* it."

Yelena blushes.

"Did Ilya ask you nicely?"

Shane raises his eyebrows and looks at Ilya. He looks back at him: *don't even start*.

"Yes, he asked in the nicest way possible."

"Did you say 'yes' right away?" she asks as Shane carries her to the living room and sits down with her in his lap. Seconds later, Ilya cozies up to them.

"Did I?" Shane exchanges a playful look with Ilya.

"Took your time." He makes a half and half motion with his hand, which sends Yelena giggling.

"What else do you want to know?" Shane smiles.

"Am I getting a new dress for the wedding?" She props her chin on her cheeks.

"Of course!" Ilya and Shane answer in one breath, which causes them to laugh afterwards with Yelena's voice echoing after them.

"Congratulations, my dears," Tanya's voice breaks through the room, announcing her presence. She strides into the living room, carrying a tray that is full of—*oh my god*. He hasn't had any of those pastries in ages.

"Tanya," Shane calls out in endearment. "You didn't have to."

"Oh, Shane, it has been a year. I thought you would understand by now that this is how I show my love for you all." She grins, putting down the tray in front of them.

"Thank you," he says appreciatively. Though he doesn't at all appreciate all the calories he is going to gain by diving into those pastries. Does it annoy him though? No. Not in the slightest.

“You are always welcome.” She smiles at him and then leaves the three of them to commit the crime of finishing all those chocolate filled pastries on their own.

After eating, falling asleep mid-movie then migrating to their bed, Shane sits up and wakes Ilya up.

“I have an idea,” Shane murmurs softly at Ilya who is stirring and barely waking up.

“What? What idea? What time is it?” Ilya frowns.

“What if the charity isn’t just mine? Like I know we’re going to do this together, but what if they are technically *two*? And both of us are running it? Like, it’s publicly a joint charity.”

“Hollander, were you up all this time thinking about this?” Ilya asks slowly, squinting his eyes.

“No, there’s something else.” Shane draws soft patterns on Ilya’s bare shoulder. “I thought about what we should name it.”

“Tell me.”

“Irina,” Shane says the name carefully, waiting for Ilya’s reaction.

That makes Ilya slowly rise and rest his weight on his elbows, emotion flooding through his eyes.

“The Irina Foundation,” he says with a slow smile. “How does that sound?”

“Good,” Ilya says after a few moments, blinking rapidly. Shane realises he is blinking away tears. “Good. Yes.”

“Yeah?” Shane kisses his shoulder.

Ilya smiles, shifting so he is on top of Shane. Shane’s body gravitates to him, and he peppers Ilya’s face with kisses, murmuring ‘I love you’ between every kiss.

“You are incredible.” Ilya’s eyes are still teary as they look into his, and Shane wishes he could kiss his grief away. But he knows that’s something that is beyond his abundant love for Ilya. This is something that they will both share, and Shane can only be there for Ilya through it all.

“Only because you’re mine,” Shane whispers, and Ilya’s head settles on his chest right above his heart. “At last,” he says into the air, switching the light off and finally falling asleep.

-

The sky is beautiful tonight. That is one more detail Shane takes into account as he looks out onto everything from where he stands in hiding. Certainly being at the top of one of the highest buildings in the city makes it even more beautiful, giving him access to the silver twinkling dots above him. But none of tonight’s stars are as beautiful as the fact that he is

renewing his marriage to the man he loves the most in a few minutes. Or how everyone's happiness around them can be felt in the air, in the way Shane breathes easily and steadily. High tables decorated with white lilies are spread out across the rooftop, and a white carpet fenced with flowers on either side of it make the aisle that both of them are walking tonight, and joy just seeps so deep into Shane's bones they nearly turn into liquid.

"Hey." His mother appears at his elbow in an elegant black satin dress, a warm expression on her face. "Getting cold feet?"

Shane chuckles. "Not this time. My feet have never been warmer." He looks at her, meaning every word.

"God, Shane." She dabs at the corners of her eyes to stop her tears from even thinking about falling. "I can't believe I'm walking you down the aisle. *You*." She hugs him, careful not to crease his wedding suit. "I'm so proud of you," she says. "Of the man you have become. I love you, always."

"I love you too, Mum," Shane murmurs back over her shoulder, fighting back his own tears.

"Come on, no more stalling." Mum snuffles and puts on a smile. "Let's get this on the road." She winks at him, and Shane warmly laughs at that. "I bet Ilya is going to faint when he sees you in *this*."

Shane blushes deeply. His wedding look was fully set up away from Ilya in cooperation with his mother and his stylist, because "they have worked with us for years, they know how to make you look good.". Which turned out to be true to an extent, because if it were up to Shane, he would never put himself in a satin white shirt that is unbuttoned to the middle of his chest and a gold Bulgari Serpenti necklace. Does he look good though? Hell, he almost couldn't recognise himself in the mirror. If he is being honest, he looks hot. The kind of hot that would leave Ilya speechless. So, his mother is once again right.

They link arms and Shane walks with his mum down the aisle, and the small crowd of friends and family they have invited rise and start clapping. Shane smiles, wide and bright, winking at Yelena who stands with the rings at the opposite end of the aisle right beside Shane's dad who is here tonight as both their officiant and Ilya's father in law. His mum leaves him with a kiss on the cheek as she goes to stand in the front row, and moments later, the crowd erupts in another wave of claps and whistles.

Shane looks ahead, and he spots Ilya with Tanya on his arm. His breath falters in his chest as he watches Ilya walk in his direction holding one of the proudest smiles he has ever worn. God, he looks so handsome. And out of everyone in his life, he chose Shane to be his. Shane sometimes still doesn't believe it.

Tanya parts from him with a kiss on his forehead, and then Ilya is moving to stand facing him. "You look pretty," he says, his eyes taking in Shane's look. He can see that Ilya wants to say more than just 'pretty', but he is a hundred times grateful for Ilya choosing to leave it at that with his dad standing *right there*.

"You look handsome too." Shane smiles at him.

“Friends, family,” Shane’s dad starts shortly as everyone takes their seats. “We are gathered here today in the celebration of love. Love that has bloomed between two—and I think I speak for everyone here tonight, not just me—when I say, very special people. I think we have all witnessed at one point or another in time how deeply Ilya and Shane care for each other, and today is an opportunity for them and us to express this. Shane, would you like to start?”

Shane’s heart skips a beat. “Yeah, I, um.” He chuckles uneasily, his hands suddenly feeling very clammy. He feels the urge to wipe them on his pants, but he steels himself and just focuses on Ilya across from him. The soft sweep of his hair over his forehead, the fine lining of his lips that can’t stop smiling at Shane, the shape of his eyebrows and the sparkle in his hazel eyes.

He looks at Ilya and everything just rushes to him like a wave that knocks him off his feet. But instead of drowning, Shane falls right into Ilya’s arms. “I know we’ve been legally married for a year,” he says, “but today feels different. Our start was rough, but if I learned anything this past year...it would be the fact that I love you, Ilya. I can’t live without you, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.”

I love you, Ilya.

I can’t live without you.

I want to spend the rest of my life with you.

Suddenly, all Ilya is seeing in front of him is the Canadian boy he saw on a magazine cover when he was eighteen and had wanted nothing in the world but to be near him. Except now he looks older, handsome and happy. Yet somehow it is the same boy. The same freckles, the same dark, intelligent eyes and long black eyelashes. The adorable little nose, and the soft enticing lips. It is all the same.

Even the way Ilya’s heart nearly leaps out of his chest when he looks at him. It has always been him.

“Ilya?” he hears David call softly, and Yelena is giggling.

“Hm. Yes. Sorry.” He bites his lip and refocuses back on Shane, his heart doing laps around his ribcage.

They are getting married for real, he reminds himself. This one counts. Make the most of it.

“Shane,” he begins. “You are the best thing in my life. I love you. Always. Maybe from the first time I saw you.” He tries not to look too much at the way Shane’s eyes are shimmering with tears, because he might start crying himself if he does. “Whatever happens, whatever life throws at us, I am with you. Safe in your heart. I believe it.”

He does. With everything in him. Just as much as he believes that his mother is with him tonight. He can feel it in his heart. He likes to believe that her presence with him is as eternal

as his love for Shane, extending beyond the borders of all lives known to man.

“The rings?” David asks, visibly hiding the emotion in his voice while Yelena steps forward with the little tray that carries their rings. She is beaming up at them, her white dress making her face look extra flushed with colour. She is missing a front lower tooth now, yet she is smiling no less widely.

Shane draws Ilya’s ring and slips it onto his finger while David says something that Ilya doesn’t focus on. He is busy smiling goofily at Shane while he slides the ring onto his finger. “Your hand is sweaty,” he remarks, loud enough for only him to hear.

“Shut up.” Shane snorts and giggles, causing the others around them to laugh.

“I now pronounce you, Shane and Ilya, re-wedded husbands.” David says a little louder for everyone to hear. A round of giggles passes through the attendees at that, but Ilya couldn’t care less. “Now, I’m gonna step back,” David jokes, and then, “you may seal your vows with a kiss.”

Fucking finally, Ilya grabs Shane, dips him, and plants one on him.

Yelena squeals, everyone else around them cheers, music starts, and he is married to the love of his fucking life.

Shane looks a little dazed after the kiss, but Ilya draws him near to steady him and says, “I will be very proud to be your husband.”

Shane doesn’t say anything. Instead, he leans up a little and captures Ilya’s mouth in a slow kiss. When they pull away, Shane speaks then. “I love you.”

They turn their attention to Yelena, and Ilya picks her up first. Shane’s arm extends to share her weight with Ilya and their fingers brush over her back. “You are the prettiest girl here tonight, did you know that?” Ilya kisses her cheek.

“Duh.” She rolls her eyes, but she is smiling.

“What Ilya means to say,” Shane gives him a look. “Is that you look like a fairytale princess, how does that sound?”

“I like this, yes.” Yelena smooths her small hands down the front of her dress.

“Can we steal your highness for a dance then?” Ilya asks in Russian, relishing in the over-excited reaction he gets out of her.

He looks at Shane. “I asked her if she wants to dance with us, and she said yes.”

“How lucky we are!” Shane takes her hand and they slowly let her down as they make their way towards the dance floor.

The night is incredible. Shane can't find another word that is more suitable for it. If the English language had more words for how magical everything feels around him tonight, he would have used it instantly. He is surrounded by his family and friends, and the man he loves. What more could he want?

The dancefloor is buzzing with people dancing with Yelena, Ruby and Jade being three prominent ones. Ilya finds him by the railing of the rooftop, wrapping his arms around him from behind. "Is it evil if I say I'm glad your family almost went bankrupt?"

"Fuck you." Shane chuckles, knowing exactly what Ilya means by that. "Terrible wording."

"Is the truth though."

"Okay, can we not make this worse?" Shane glances at him.

Minutes separate them from the new year, and Shane was having a moment by himself, remembering how last New Year's Eve was like. Ironically, if he remembers correctly, he was also on a rooftop.

"What are you thinking?" Ilya asks, stepping forward next to him and snaking an arm around Shane's waist.

"Everything?" Shane smiles thoughtfully at him. "We did it," he says. "We really did it."

The infamous, unmistakable sound of fireworks blaring over their heads interrupts their conversation. Their light spreads over the sky in red, gold and blue. Shane feels Ilya's arm tighten around him and he presses him against the railing, and then they are kissing. They are kissing on New Year's Eve as loving husbands against the backdrop of the night sky lit up with bright colours. They are kissing and the world sings with them an anthem of new beginnings, but no one knows they are picking up right where they left off. They have been playing the long game, and tonight is a win for both of them.

"Happy New Year," Shane says breathlessly with his forehead resting against Ilya's.

"Happy New Year, *moya lyubov*."

One summer later

The smell of barbecue fills the air at Shane and Ilya's summer house garden. It is their first summer together with Yelena, and so far it's been nothing short of perfect. They have brought some things with them from the penthouse to leave here, some toys Yelena doesn't need all the time, family portraits, and one of Ilya's paintings. They have agreed to hang the one he showed to Shane a while ago before he finished it here at the summer house as a symbol of comfort. And because Shane couldn't have this big of a painting of his face at the penthouse staring at him everyday. He is glad Ilya agreed with that.

Right now Ilya and Yelena are in a vicious swimming contest with Anya trodding around the edge of the pool barking at them. The sun is high and golden, and Shane has never felt more home. He flips the burgers on the grill, their sizzling sound satisfying to his ears.

Shane watches his husband and their girl race together from one end of the pool to the other until Ilya eventually gets tired and opts out for a break. Ever since they renewed their marriage, something had shifted inside Shane. He can't describe it, but if he is to put it in simple words it would probably be this: he has probably fallen even more in love with Ilya.

He can see it in Ilya too, the way he seems lighter, happier—it makes Shane's heart flutter in his chest knowing that he is the reason.

His eyes go over Ilya who is wet and shirtless and so full of menace Shane is lucky he steps away from the grill before Ilya splashes his hair at him, getting water drops all over Shane's face and shirt.

"How is the food?" he asks with a satisfied smile at Shane's flustered expression.

"Almost ready, thanks for almost ruining it." Shane huffs, though he is finding it a bit hard to be mad at Ilya when he looks *this* sexy. Water rivulets run down his skin, dipping into the muscles of his chest and stomach until they soak into his—

"Why are you making so many burgers?" Ilya peeks at the grill.

"That's how many the recipe was for," says Shane as a matter of factly.

"You can't do math? Cut it in half?"

"Leave me alone."

But Ilya doesn't. Instead, he drapes his arms around Shane and traps him in an attempt to get a kiss. "Give me kiss."

"Ilya!" Shane yelps. "You're all cold and wet." He squirms in Ilya's arms but the other doesn't let him go.

"No kiss?" Ilya pouts, his pink lips impossible to resist. So, of course Shane leans in and gives him the kiss he wanted.

"Better." Ilya grins.

"I better check on the grill. Go get Lena." He slithers out of Ilya's arms and goes to get their food.

"Yes, Mr. Hollander." Ilya jokes.

"Hey." Shane calls after him as he grabs his hand, stopping him before he heads back to the pool. "It's Mr. Hollander-Rozanov to you."

Shane is rewarded with the brightest smile that adorns Ilya's face, turning him into the sun's biggest rival. "Ah, you will make my heart stop one day, *moy lyubimyy*."

He knows this one. He has secretly been learning more Russian for Ilya, and for Yelena too. He catches them sometimes conversing in Russian, and he just feels like he wants to be part

of how comfortable they feel when they use their native language. It may be a small detail, but Shane has never let the smallest of details slide past him when it came to his Ilya and Yelena.

“No,” Shane says softly. “You’re not allowed to die. Not before I do.”

“Even this is a competition to you?” Ilya’s nose brushes his.

“That’s not—” Shane sighs shortly. “We will always be together.” He looks into Ilya’s eyes for the briefest moment. “You’re not allowed to go anywhere that I can’t reach you.”

“I won’t,” Ilya replies firmly, pressing his lips to the corner of Shane’s mouth. “I like living with you too much.” He smiles then, shifting the mood of the conversation back to light.

“Me too.” Shane smiles back then lets go of Ilya to empty the burgers out onto a plate while his husband wraps Yelena in a towel and they sit together to eat.

“Ketchup?” Shane checks with Yelena who is carefully checking the ingredients for Shane to make her sandwich.

“Yes.”

“Little bit of cheese?”

“Okay. But very little. No pickles.” She holds out her hands in front of her as if she can’t be anywhere near them, which pulls a chuckle out of Shane.

“There you go.” Shane hands her her sandwich and smiles as she immediately sinks her teeth—that are missing three now—into it.

She hums exaggeratedly, ketchup smearing the corners of her mouth. “Is so good!” She exclaims through a mouthful. In response, Ilya smiles and ruffles her damp hair.

They spend the entire afternoon by the pool, alternating between playing games and dipping into the cool water to drown out the heat of the sun. Shane had fussed about how important it is for Ilya and Yelena to wear sunscreen until he convinced them. Yet he thinks they will still end up with light sunburns from the amount of time they have spent in the sun today.

“Shane, come into the water. Is good,” Ilya says from next to him under the shade. He had gotten out to get a drink and is now going back into the pool.

“No, I’m good. I’m enjoying the show.” He laughs. He doesn’t feel like it much, especially after they ate.

“Don’t be boring.”

“I’m not!” Shane argues.

“Then join us.”

“I will. Maybe in a bit.” He nods, knowing he won’t be going in anyway.

That doesn’t stop Ilya though. He plops down onto the chaise longue Shane is lounging on and leans towards him, locking Shane between his arms resting on either side of his legs.

“Okay. I will make you a deal.”

A smile slowly spreads on Shane’s face, his proximity to Ilya allowing him a close glimpse of the mischief lighting up his husband’s eyes.

“Nah. I’m done making deals.”

Yelena is playing with Anya in the background, rolling in the grass and laughing when Anya copies her.

“Are you now?” Ilya asks teasingly.

“Yes.” Shane feels his face getting warm for some reason.

“Can I know why?”

“Last time I made a deal, it came with a very annoying and handsome man. Maybe I’ll introduce you to him one day.” Shane tucks his bottom lip between his teeth.

“He sounds fun.” Ilya is smiling, and Shane is so caught up in their silly conversation he doesn’t notice that Ilya’s hands have snaked all the way under him.

Suddenly he is hauled over Ilya’s shoulder and they are hurtling into the water together. For a moment everything goes silent as Shane sinks underwater with the impact of their jump before he slowly resurfaces. The second he does, he is met with Yelena’s scream as she cannonballs into the water as well, joining her non-biological parents.

“I hate you.” Shane splashes water at Ilya who is laughing hysterically.

The sound is so therapeutic Shane finds himself laughing with him, and his joy doubles when Yelena swims over to him and locks her legs around his upper body, seeking shelter in him from Ilya’s aimed splashes of water.

His mind zooms back for a split second, and he sees himself with Ilya and Yelena one summer after another making a million memories together while she grows up in the wake of their love for her.

Shane almost tears up at the image, but he forces his mind back to the present. He studies the way Ilya’s eyes crinkle when he laughs fully from the heart, the way Yelena’s small arms feel around him, and he is struck with unprecedented emotion; this is his forever.

This is what he agreed to have for the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

I CAN'T BELIEVE IT'S OVER WHAT!!! thank you so, so much for every single person who stuck around for this story :) your comments made me want to give it my everything, and i hope you liked it :) -- unfortunately the end notes section is too small for how much i want to yap about this fic ahaha so i'll shut up for now (i'll probably rant on twt/tumblr if anyone is there) but all in all, i'm genuinely so grateful for everyone who expressed their love for the fic <3

ALSO a very important mention! the love confession scene is heavily inspired by one of my all time favourite scenes from The Dark Artifices! (another tsc mention are we even surprised)

final thing i promise, i'm probably going to be updating/adding a few things in this chapter, so if you get an update notification make sure to check this chapter for new content! :)

End Notes

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