

it felt like we were something

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by [some1_around](#)

Summary

Ilya's perspective of a few scenes from "something you can build" (and one scene that came after). Featuring: intense yearning for your committed long-term partner, supportive but confused himbos, Yuna Hollander's momager energy, Scott realizing he's a side character in someone else's even crazier story, and a quick trip to California for Very Boring, Extremely Casual, Not-At-All-Romantic Reasons (aka, the epilogue).

(Companion piece! You will need to have read the rest of the series for this to make any sense—here be spoilers!)

Notes

Wasn't planning on adding anything to this universe quite so soon (I have so many ideas...) but I was struggling to write anything else so we're back here! Most of these scenes are actually moments in the fic when Ilya was off-screen, so hopefully that actually makes it a little easier to read. As long as you've read the previous works, the timeline should hopefully be clear, but here are the chapters as well if you want to read along (in order):

- Middle of Chapter 1, before Shane arrives at Ilya's house
- Chapter 5, during the first preseason game against Detroit
- End of Chapter 7, when Cliff and St. Simone show up at the house
- End of Chapter 8, when Ilya goes to find Shane's Lay's Ketchup chips
- Chapter 9, while Ilya is at the All-Stars Game
- Between Chapters 11 and 12, post-Stanley Cup celebrations
- And, of course, post-Chapter 13

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

Late August, Ilya's house, before Shane's arrival in Boston:

“Okay, okay, thank you, thank you, yes, looks very good, very clean, okay. Thank you, excellent job, yes, please enjoy tip and have very good week! Bye!”

Ilya shut the door behind his cleaning crew decisively. He gave himself a moment to lean against the door.

Shane's plane had already landed. He had texted Ilya that he was on his way and would be here soon.

Here. Here. In his house. With him.

Ilya's brain felt like the VHS tapes he had grown up watching, overplayed and stalling. He couldn't think of anything else, just the same handful of words that had been ringing in his head for months, through his dragging sponsorship obligations and the unsurprisingly unfun Prada exhibition. He was distracted. It was a good thing the season hadn't started, because he probably would have been playing like shit.

Here. Boston. Ilya's house.

Same city. Same team.

Boston.

Boston.

Here.

His phone buzzed. Ilya practically ripped it out of his pants as he tore himself away from the door—he couldn't risk Shane arriving and seeing him pressed against the glass like a puppy dog waiting for their owner to come home. There was such a thing as being too eager, although that ship had probably already sailed.

The house was spotless. Ilya, although he had expensive tastes, kept a rather spartan life, free of knickknacks and useless junk and children. He looked around for the hundredth time as he entered his kitchen. Shane had been very impressed the first time he had been here, and the house wasn't that stylistically different from his apartment in Montreal or the cottage, but that didn't mean Shane would want to live here. Was the bedroom too small? There was only one walk-in closet, and Shane had just hired a stylist. Maybe he had a million clothes now, who knew? The basement gym wasn't set up for yoga yet, because the lights didn't dim. Ilya could have that fixed. He wouldn't mention it to Shane just yet, though. Again, too eager.

There was ginger ale in the fridge, and salmon, and the imported brown rice Ilya had seen in Shane's cabinets, and packets of dried seaweed because it was sometimes the only snack Shane let himself reach for. Ilya had tried one, and it hadn't been nearly as bad as he was expecting, but he still couldn't imagine why anyone would prefer them over chips.

But Shane did, or had convinced himself he did, so Ilya had bought about twenty, just to have on hand.

He checked his phone. There were three notifications, but he had been ignoring Svetlana's for hours.

Sveta:

I can feel your panic across the city. He has been to your house before, and he knows what it looks like. Everything is fine, Ilyusha

You are very pathetic, you know?

Ilya sighed through his nose and slumped against the counter as he finally responded, typing one-handed so he could grip his curls. Hopefully to get a grip on *himself*.

Ilya:

yes i know

He muted her and opened Shane's newer text.

Jane:

I'm five minutes away.

Ilya realized that he would need to change Shane's contact name. The thought made him suddenly sad. For years, seeing his phone light up with a message from *Jane* had been the bright spot in otherwise dull weeks. *Jane* had been a joke and a caricature and a secret, but *Jane* had also been a promise, something sweet and personal, something steady and consistent and boring and all his. Ilya's. No one else's, not one bit.

But he was the captain of the team, and he would be expected to have Shane Hollander's number. They would just have to be more careful now when and what they texted each other, but it would be more suspicious if someone saw Ilya messaging *Jane* about practice times, team tape watchings, and nutritionist protein recommendations. Because they were on the same team now.

Ilya had to tip his head back and breathe slowly through his nose, just to center himself at the thought. The memory. The reminder.

The same fucking team.

(*His team*, but that was possessive enough that he knew Hollander would not appreciate it. Nevertheless, in his own thoughts, *his team*.)

Shane was not going to be across the border, out of reach. He would not be stuck in shitty, boring Montreal with his annoying, bad-at-hockey teammates who couldn't appreciate a good thing when they had it because they were so self-conscious about their own small dicks.

Instead, Shane would be in Boston. By tonight, he would be in *Ilya's* bed, wrapped in *his* sheets, fed with the food from *his* refrigerator. Put there for him. Made ready for him.

They would be together. No more rivalry. No more long distance. A few months ago, Ilya never would have been able to imagine something like this.

Shane had been through hell, and Ilya would never, ever be grateful for that. But, in the part of him that he knew better than to ever voice out loud, Ilya was happy now. He was beyond happy. He thought he was probably happier than he had ever been in his life. Shane had been through hell, and now he was coming out of it and to Boston, to Ilya, who would be able to take care of him, hold him. And Ilya would never again be stuck somewhere continents away, scrolling through Twitter with a yawning chasm in his stomach because Shane was suffering and Ilya couldn't get to him any faster.

Wherever they went from here on out, they would be together. Ilya was sure of that.

In the face of that gratitude, changing his contact name was the most minor sacrifice Ilya could have possibly been asked to make. *Jane* had been a comfort to Ilya on dark nights, but he knew he was not actually losing Jane. Jane was Shane. Ilya got to have Shane, without the pretenses anymore.

Some of them, at least.

Lily:

okay

He opened the contact page and carefully typed out the name *Shane Hollander*. He thought about adding an emoji, a nickname (a heart like Saint Vicky kept next to Amanda's name, an eggplant like Aliue paired with his regular hook up in New York, a peach like Marly had attached to his ex-girlfriend), but hesitated. His teammates were all in his phone under nicknames and jersey numbers, but somehow adding *24* to Shane's contact info felt even more impersonal.

He liked the look of *Jane*. He would miss it.

Ilya snarled at himself for this useless, lonely sentimentalism and confirmed the name change before aggressively closing his phone.

Then he stripped off his shirt. He dropped it to the ground next to the counter, in the empty spot where the stool that Marly broke (the second one) used to be. He stared at the crumpled fabric, the only spot of mess in his perhaps suspiciously clean house, then, with another snarl, snatched it up, prepared to throw it into the laundry room before Shane saw. And maybe he would do a few pushups too, just because. His phone buzzed and Ilya, out of time and thinking quickly, stuffed the shirt into a cabinet as he lunged for it, fingers scrambling to unlock it.

It wasn't a message from Shane but his security cameras, alerting him to movement at the end of his driveway.

Ilya grinned, slamming the cabinet shut and hoping that his shirt sleeve wasn't visibly peeking out from the bottom as he took long strides for the entry.

There was a gift box on the side table next to the door. He snatched it up, frowning dubiously at it for a moment. Svetlana had assured him the black and gold was tasteful, but was it too soon? Shane had not left Montreal on good terms, and even if he was a Bear now, he might not appreciate the reminder.

But Ilya could picture Shane in black and gold so easily, and the colors looked good on him. He clutched the box in his hand and ignored the way a smile was already blooming across his face.

He threw open the door.

And there was Shane, smiling, and meeting him halfway.

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Early October, TD Garden, first preseason game against Detroit:

Ilya thought he could see the moment Shane left his body.

He thought he could recognize it.

So when Shane came over the boards, instead of taking his hand, Ilya slapped his helmet roughly and watched Shane blink, hard and startled, eyes dilating quickly under the stadium lights before they refocused on him.

Yes. Very familiar.

He wanted to pull Shane into the tunnel, into the locker rooms, and push him under a warm shower. "Stay with it," Ilya murmured instead. "None of that."

Shane looked pale under the bright lights reflecting off white ice. He looked frightened. Ilya hated that he was wearing gloves because he wanted to touch Shane's skin, to warm him up with his fingers, rubbing friction across every inch of his body until he remembered himself. "What?" Shane stuttered.

Ilya gritted his teeth and steeled himself as he said some bland congratulation about Shane's goal—his first goal as a Bear, mechanical, likely already forgotten—and jostled his helmet again, relishing in the flash of annoyance that lit up those brown eyes. Annoyance was good. Annoyance was present. Better than the alternative. He kept his gloved hand on Shane's helmet and pulled him just a little closer, just enough to whisper, "Stop leaving. Okay? Stop it."

"Oh." The mumble left Shane's lips on a shudder, and Ilya worried that the cameras, their coaches, their teammates would see his mouth tremble.

That was for *him*. Him only.

Fucking Lemaire.

When the preseason schedule was announced, Ilya had felt conflicting emotions that they would not be facing Montreal. On the one hand, of course he felt relief that Shane would not have to face them so early in his career with the Bears. But it also meant two fewer games for Ilya to crush Comeau into the ice. If Drapeau had not been a goalie, Ilya would have given him the same treatment.

Detroit was not much better, though. At least Ilya could take out some of his aggression on them, and they were not good enough at hockey that Ilya's distraction, his overwhelming concern for Shane, would matter.

(His team, *Ilya's* team, at least, knew how to behave.

When Ilya had returned to Boston after Moscow, and after he and Svetlana had flown to Montreal to be with Shane in the days following the leak, Ilya had been unsure what to expect from his teammates. He thought they were mostly good guys, and compared to some of the teams in the league, he was confident that they were not malicious or cruel in the way so many athletes were. But they were not perfect, and their locker room had never been free of gay jokes and the occasional casual slurs, although those had begun to die down over the years. He was sure some of the Americans were Republicans, given how they moaned about taxes, but other than that, he had not known what their beliefs were about marriage, LGBT people, gay players.

Still, despite not knowing how it would be received, Ilya had made it very, very clear what he expected from them, what he refused to allow in his locker room, and, even more bluntly, the respect he had for Hollander on and off the ice.

Most of the team had exceeded his expectations. Gregors had been the only real exception, and Ilya had pinned him to the floor of the locker room in five seconds flat when he tried to sneer out some joke about the Voyageurs GM and why Hollander had been promoted to Captain so early in his career. Marly had pulled Ilya off of Gregors before he could do any real damage to him during the season (a bloody nose and some bruised ribs didn't count), but no one in the room had helped Gregors back to his feet. And no one had shed tears when Gregors was summarily traded away that summer, fittingly replaced by Hollander himself.)

His team was better, but Ilya was stuck on the bench as Victor Lemaire spat on the ice at Shane's skate. LeClaire's hand landed hard on his shoulder as if he knew Ilya wanted to jump onto the ice, and knew to hold him back.

But their coach did not know he was holding Ilya back not just from Lemaire, but Shane as well, in a different way. Ilya remembered those darkest moments, the worst days, when he had first returned from Russia and pinned Shane up against the wall in the hallway, his parents watching, Hayden and Svetlana watching, and yet all the tension in Shane's perfect body—it had melted from him, like ice in a thaw. And the days after, Ilya kept doing it, pressing Shane into walls and tables and beds no matter who was watching, and Shane didn't seem to care. Each time, he melted.

Now, watching him on the ice, seeing those awful, familiar blank eyes (eyes Ilya had seen in the mirror, in his own face, in the reflections on top of glasses of red wine, in dark, dull, terrible memories of his mother that he could not linger on, not here, not now), Ilya wanted to press Shane to the ice or the boards, not tackling or checking, but gently. Just for pressure. Pressure had helped Shane before, hadn't it?

But Ilya couldn't do that. What could he do? Nothing. Not like this. Stuck on the bench.

He needed to talk to LeClaire. He remembered the magic of their All-Star game—Hollander and Rozanov on the same line. That was how things were meant to be. Ilya knew it.

He would make it happen. Shane would not be alone.

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Early January, Ilya's house, post-Christmas break:

Shane had been right, regrettably. Ilya had not realized before how much he missed Marly and Saint Vicky and all his teammates. His friends. He really hadn't spent much time with them this season.

Ilya had arrived in Boston at eighteen, barely speaking the language and knowing no one on the continent other than Svetlana. This team and these men were the ones who had pulled him in, sheltered and taught him without ever making him feel stupid or less-than or coddled. They were rough, they were loud, and Ilya knew Shane was still adjusting to the raucous nature of the Bears, but within their arena, Ilya had found a home when all he had been searching for was an escape.

He fucking loved his team and he loved Boston for all of its peculiarities—but he had never realized how much until Shane arrived and Ilya truly began to realize how spectacular his life was. He had everything. Right here. It took Shane, making the world brighter, for him to see that, and Ilya was grateful that he didn't have to leave yet.

He had everything, and he knew it. Everyone else should know it, too. Ilya was, naturally, not very humble. He liked to brag. He liked to show off. He was flashy and proud and possessive.

And still, Shane was sitting upstairs in the bedroom, hidden away like a secret because Marly and Saint Vic had dropped in without warning, carrying beer even though it wasn't even noon and talking about how they had missed him.

And it fucking sucked because Ilya missed them too. He didn't want to kick them out and rejoin Shane in bed, tucked away. He wanted Shane down here with them, in their fucking living room, because it was theirs and it made no sense that Shane couldn't claim it.

This had once been Ilya's home, but now, it was decidedly theirs; Ilya saw Shane everywhere he looked.

Not just in the obvious places, in the new blinds and the shoe shelf and the replaced barstools that were still sleek and pretty but actually matched the dining table chairs and were

comfortable to sit on even after weeks of grueling practices and games.

Ilya saw Shane in every inch of the house.

For one, it was neater than it had ever been. Shane's nightly rounds included fluffing the couch pillows and refolding the throw blanket if either of them had even leaned against it, and straightening the stools and chairs into neat lines. He cleaned the sink with a sponge every time he did the dishes, like he couldn't even stand water droplets on the stainless steel, and so Ilya had started following his lead. The spice cabinet was rearranged, and there were two knife blocks now, one which had slots for handheld sharpening tools and a whetstone that Shane used often while Ilya watched on, curious. Shane and Ilya were both better cooks than most of the athletes in their profession, but what they each cooked was wildly different. Most of Shane's recipes were Japanese or shaped by his macrobiotic diet, while Ilya, as Shane had once said, cooked like, "The best chef in a frat house," a repertoire stacked with a hundred kinds of warm sandwiches, pizzas made from scratch, complicated desserts that Shane rolled his eyes at, and, sometimes, Russian staples that he had watched his mother make as a child.

She had died before she got the chance to teach Ilya any of them, so he had learned on his own, from cookbooks and blogs that catered to Russian immigrants trying to hold onto pieces of their past. But he still thought of her when he made them.

"Fuck yeah, dude!" Marly cheered as he sniped Ilya's character in a shoot-out, their heavily armed figures bouncing around a desolate urban wasteland. "Man, you are playing like shit today!"

On the screen, his character began aggressively crouching over Ilya's dead avatar. Ilya lunged upright and knocked Marly's controller out of his hands, halting the movement until he could respawn, all the while aggressively cursing him out in Russian.

"Shut your face," he grumbled. "You force me out of bed after terrible roadie and expect me to be—gah, I don't know. Fuck English."

"Fuck English," Vic cheered, clapping him on the shoulder. He launched himself off the couch and danced across the room to where they had set three six packs of beer on the dining table, pulling a few more out and holding them expertly between his long fingers. "We are day drinking today, gentleman!" he declared with an enormous grin and a waggle of his dark eyebrows, and Ilya smiled despite his dour inner monologue.

Then he thought about the Cokes and the ginger ale in the fridge.

The kitchen probably held even more obvious signs of Shane than the living room. If Cliff or Vic went digging through his cabinets, they would find dozens of bottles of dietary supplements and packages of spirulina next to three different protein powders. There was tofu and something called *seitan* in the fridge (Ilya wasn't sure how to spell it, but Shane pronounced it like "Satan," and it looked cruel enough to deserve the name). The ginger ale was the most recognizable, but the most easily explained. The rest... well, his teammates knew how Ilya typically ate. It would be painfully obvious who had stocked his fridge, he thought.

Or maybe not. Maybe it was only obvious to him, because he knew Shane, and because he wanted to see those signs. Signs of life. Their life.

Ilya shut his eyes and groaned loudly, pretending that it was in response to his loss at their game, and Cliff snickered. It felt good to let out the distraught sound, to play it up even, as he thought about how all the places he saw Shane so clearly were actually minuscule, easily explained, not even worth noticing.

They were obvious to Ilya but not to anyone else. They lived together, but they didn't let it show.

There were no photos of them, not even in their bedroom, which made Ilya so sad sometimes he didn't know what to do. But there was a photo of the lake, the view from the dock. Ilya had been inspired by the large prints Shane had hung up in his apartment bedroom. It was another invisible sign of their life together, something Marly and Vicky could glance at and not think twice about.

Ilya wanted them to think about it, though. He wished they would notice, and ask, and that he could offer a glib lie, bald-faced, and listen to them cajole him for more information.

Ridiculously, he missed the days of Cliff teasing him about his Montreal girl for the same reason. Even when he had denied it, the accusations felt like a part of him was being seen. For the same reason that he missed seeing Jane appear on his phone, and his teammates mocking him for it. Now, they thought he had broken up with her. That his recent apparent dry spell (actually, ironically, Ilya had never been having more sex in his entire life) was because he was depressed about the end of his weird, long-distance relationship with a mystery girl.

It was so fucking ironic it made him want to shoot himself sometimes.

Ilya should have been accustomed to hiding, of course. They had done it for so long. But now, when everything he wanted was so close—just past his fingertips—he couldn't stop reaching for it. Grasping empty air.

Saint Vic popped open another can of Samuel Adams and shoved it into Ilya's hands, laughing as Ilya hollered as foam fizzled up from the top and ran down his fingers until he pressed his mouth to the side of the metal and slurped it up. "Let's go, Capitaine!" he cheered, clapping his shoulder again.

Ilya mentally shrugged and flopped back on the sofa, tilting the can higher and higher until he had finished the whole thing in a single swallow.

He felt like he deserved that.

Marly and Saint Vicky were whooping. They sounded like monkeys. Shane could probably hear, even over the music playing in the background. Did it make him feel left out, or was he actually relieved not to be in the center of their rowdy jocularity?

Ilya imagined himself in the reverse position. If someone—maybe the rookies, since they idolized Hollzy so much that everyone gave them shit for it, although Hollander himself never seemed to notice—showed up at the apartment while they were both in bed. If Shane had shut and locked the door on Ilya and gone out to serve gluten-free crackers and goat cheese to his guests, not thinking about Ilya, locked up and hidden.

Dirty, and a secret.

“This isn’t about secrecy. This is about privacy.”

But Ilya wasn’t sure Shane cared as much about the difference as he did.

He crushed the can in his hand.

Shane would have been concerned if he saw that. Cliff and Vicky just cheered.

As if reading his fucking mind (which was impossible, because Ilya still wasn’t sure that Cliff even had thoughts of his own), Marly said, “Hey, you know what we should do? We should invite Hollzy over!”

Ilya blue-screened for a second, the record scratching. Luckily, his mouth moved for him. “You think Hollander would approve?” he asked, tossing the crumpled metal can into the growing pile at their feet.

“No, no,” Vicky laughed. “I think he would be—what is English word—oh, *aghast!* Absolutely shocked! ‘You are drinking beer today? But in two days, we have a game! How could you!’”

Ilya’s nose twitched.

Marly spoke before he could, which was for the best. “Hollzy’s not so bad,” he said. “I know he’s nitpicky, but he’s not, like, a douchebag about what other people eat. Right, Roz?”

“No, he is mostly good,” Ilya said, leaning forward. “But he does not like McGriddle. And I don’t think he wants to day-drink with us. Or play violent video games.” He sighed. “He plays Chel, though.”

Marly and Victor both laughed.

Ilya wondered how he had ended up here. He wondered if he still should have felt grateful, in that moment of bizarre irony.

“We should figure out something we can do with him, though,” Cliff said. “I mean, we’ve already done most of the touristy shit, he seemed to like that. But I don’t think he’d be down for going out clubbing with us—not that you have been either, Cap!” he said, trying to jab his elbow into Ilya’s side, but he dodged, too familiar with Cliff’s tells. “You’ve barely been out all season unless it’s right after a game, and even then, you’re begging off early and leaving alone! You need to get over that Jane girl sooner or later, Cap—you’re gonna lose your rep as a womanizer if you keep this up, Roz. People will start calling you boring.”

Ilya's stomach turned. *But I like boring*, he wanted to say. *I love boring*. "Ah, damn, I guess I am getting old. Like Scott Hunter. Soon, I will be in the grave."

"No, no, do not be so drastic!" Vicky said. He put a hand over his heart. "I understand," he said with playful earnestness. "The siren call of your warm bed—you have learned to understand the appeal, no?"

"But you've got a beautiful lady keeping your bed warm," Cliff laughed. "What's Roz got? He's not even seeing Mrs. Montreal anymore."

"Shut up," Ilya said blandly. "I am free like wind, like bird. Hollander and I do not need to go clubbing and getting wasted. We are focused on the game, maybe. We're going to win you all a Cup, after all, so you should be grateful."

Cliff booed. "'Ollander has been even more antisocial than you this season, eh?" Vicky said. "He's a good guy, and I like him, but I think perhaps our team bonding is not quite to his taste. He actually enjoyed going to see the Freedom Trail with Amanda, you know! I tried to tell him, it is just bricks, but he did not care!"

Cliff nodded. "Yeah, I love the guy, and he's fun to bounce off in the dressing room, you know, sort of a straight man for jokes." He laughed. Ilya didn't understand at all, but he didn't care enough to ask. "But I'm not sure he has many friends yet."

"We are friends," Ilya said immediately, unable to control his fierce scowl. He pushed a hand through his curls. He glanced toward the staircase. "No, he is not very social, but he says it was the same in Montreal," he said. "I have seen him a few times out of practice. I think he likes the city. He is just... settling in, I suppose."

"Yeah, I figured," Cliff said. His normal tone of voice was far louder than the average person's, but for a moment, it softened. "You two get along, then?"

Ilya couldn't deny it. He *would not* deny it. "Yes. I know we are very different, but actually he is sort of fun to talk to. And like I say, we have known each other so long."

"Yeah," Marly said again. Vicky coughed, and Ilya side-eyed him. "Well. *I* like the guy. And I hope he isn't, like, avoiding us and he just is, you know, boring. Wouldn't want us to be anything like fucking Montreal."

"Fuck Montreal!" Ilya and Saint Vic shouted at the same time: it was familiar, now, whenever the team was mentioned. It had become a calling card in the dressing room.

Ilya glanced at the staircase. He hoped Shane could hear them.

"Well," Marly announced, decisively loud. "You're boring and Hollander is boring. Hey, maybe we should find him a nice guy to date, maybe that'll make him come out with us more!" Marly could not wink, but he blinked crookedly like he was trying to do it, anyway, his smile a little too wide, too toothy.

Ilya bit his own tongue. "Maybe."

Ilya made sure to slaughter Cliff in the next round.

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Late January, Montreal General Hospital, post-Voyageurs vs. Bears game:

Ilya was approximately three seconds from putting his fist through the clear plexiglass cover of the lobby vending machine.

His prize stared him down from inside, mocking him.

Ketchup fucking Lay's. His lip twitched. Fucking Canadians.

(And still, Shane made fun of him for eating McDonald's.)

But Shane had not said whether he liked the wavy kind or the originals, and Ilya had wracked his brain but could not honestly say if he had ever witnessed Shane eating any kind of chip, let alone a deep-fried potato chip flavored like vinegar and tomatoes—Canada, Ilya thought, despairingly. Was Ilya Rozanov really starting to imagine a future where he married a Canadian?

Yes, he was. He dreamed of it almost every single night, as a matter of fact. He already had a pile of other snacks and candies at his feet, and the chips were the last thing he needed.

But the first bag of wavy chips had slumped forward against the glass without falling. The second one, which he would have gotten anyway, had just pressed the mostly air-filled plastic bag more firmly against the glass. The third and final bag in the machine had only jammed them further, mocking Ilya as the three bags compressed against the glass, begging him to reach for them.

Ilya was out of Canadian dollars. And this stupid vending machine didn't take credit cards.

If he didn't put his fist through the glass, he would end up putting his head through it.

"Ilya?"

He turned.

He couldn't help the way his shoulders slumped in relief, and he was mildly embarrassed, but it was too late to hide it. "Oh, please," he begged. "Do you have cash money?"

Yuna Hollander walked up confidently, her hand already outstretched to Ilya. She placed her palm first on his biceps, then slid it upward to the nape of his neck. The gesture didn't feel out of place, and she made no effort to hide her easy affection, even in the bustling lobby of Montreal General. She glanced at the pile of snacks at his feet and raised her eyebrows, and she looked so much like Shane that Ilya wanted to curl around her feet like a happy dog.

"You don't have enough snacks already?" she asked primly, but her free hand was already reaching for her purse.

“Shane asked for potato chips,” Ilya confessed, and he adored the wide, happy grin that spread over Yuna’s face almost as much as he adored her son. Shane had his father’s jaw and shared his oblivious stoicism, but his face—his doey eyes, his unreasonable eyelashes, his fucking freckles—all came from Yuna.

Ilya was always reminding himself how lucky he was.

“Did he, now?” Yuna asked, laughing. “He’s willing to eat something from a vending machine? I suppose we should both be very worried, in that case. Here, sweetie.” She never stopped touching Ilya as she used her free hand to feed a five-dollar bill into the machine. The spiral metal arm twirled and, obligingly, and likely knowing better than to play with Yuna Hollander, all three bags dropped neatly into the dispenser tray. “There,” she said. “You picked well. He likes the wavy kind.”

“Everyone likes the wavy kind,” Ilya said, swooping down to grab the chips.

His hands were shaking. His right hand was badly bruised, the knuckles split open. At least he had an excuse for dropping all the bags on the floor when he tried to gather the rest of the candy into his arms.

(At least Comeau was missing three of his fucking teeth.)

Yuna put her hands on his shoulders. “Ilya.”

Ilya cursed, trying to juggle all the crinkly, unwieldy bags into his arms. “Shane will not like that I have put them on the ground,” he mumbled.

“Ilya. Could you look at me?”

He was helpless. In front of any Hollander, he was completely helpless. He straightened and turned to face her, bags crinkling between their feet as they shuffled close.

Again, Yuna hardly seemed aware of the fact that they were in a public hallway, that nurses and patients and visitors alike were bustling back and forth between rooms and the lobbies and could recognize them at any moment, especially because last night's brawl between the Bears and the Voyageurs had been replaying on repeat on most news stations in Montreal. If Yuna cared, it didn’t show on her face or her gentle, calming smile as she reached up—he was so much taller than her, and she was so slim—and put one hand on his shoulder and the other on his cheek, thumb brushing over his cheekbone.

He closed his eyes. Shane held him the same way.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“What for?” Yuna asked quietly. “You love my son. That’s all I want in the world.”

Yuna cupped the back of his neck and pulled him down until their foreheads were touching. All the breath in Ilya’s body left him in a rush. It was so surprising that he nearly crumpled to the ground.

Shane did this same thing, too, sometimes. Pulled their foreheads together gently, one hand on his neck, fingers sliding into his curls.

“Ilya,” Yuna said calmly, “Shane is okay. He is probably feeling a lot better than you are right now, given that he’s on the good medication and I bet you aren’t.” Her other hand lightly glanced over his bruised knuckles.

“Just Advil for me,” he murmured. “Shane is very loopy. It is... strange.”

Shane on drugs was objectively amusing, but Ilya didn’t like it. He didn’t like that he needed it, and he didn’t like how... different Shane was. How much slower his brain worked, and the foggy look in his eyes (awfully familiar from childhood memories Ilya tried so hard never to think about). Ilya loved every iteration of Shane’s smile, and he knew that this version of Shane was simply an unguarded one, not a dishonest one, but still. Shane’s smiles had to be earned. Ilya knew how to do that. He did not know how to comfort Shane in front of their teammates without revealing anything. He could barely stand being in that room, with Shane injured, without being able to hold him. But Shane was so vulnerable now, and their secret was vulnerable with him—which meant that it was Ilya’s job to be calm, cool, distant, to hide. It was his responsibility.

It felt heavy.

Yuna lifted some of that burden from his shoulders. “He’ll appreciate the chips,” she said quietly. “He’ll appreciate that you were here. Soon, he’ll be discharged, and they will put him on some lighter medication. You just have to be happy that he’s not in any pain.”

“Of course, I am-” Ilya started vehemently.

“I know,” Yuna cut him off gently. “It’s odd, isn’t it? To see him act so unlike himself.”

Ilya swallowed. “I don’t like it,” he confessed. “Makes me think—makes me think about what if it was worse, you know? If he hit his head.”

He bit his tongue. He should not have said something like that to Shane’s mom.

Yuna held him tighter. “He didn’t. And thank you, Ilya, for knocking that bastard’s teeth from his mouth.”

“Always. I protect him.” English failed him, but he could say that much. “I *always* protect him.”

“I know.”

She pulled back enough to kiss his forehead. Ilya’s hands weren’t shaking anymore. She crouched down and helped him regather the snacks. “I’ll give you boys a little longer, alright?” she said. “David went to get Shane lunch. The line was a lot longer than we expected, and I didn’t want Shane waiting alone—I didn’t know you were here already. I can wait in the lobby until David gets back, okay?”

“Thank you,” Ilya said. “He is not alone. Marly—Cliff and Victor are with him.”

“That’s nice,” she said, “but I’m sure he’s missing you.”

Ilya blinked hard. He stared at the stupid, shiny maroon packaging of Shane’s bizarre, probably terrible Canadian snacks. “Thank you.”

“Nothing to thank me for,” she said. “I’ll see you both in a bit, alright? Give your teammates my love. Thank them for visiting on my behalf.”

“Okay.”

She stroked his cheek again, then dropped her hand. “You can be strong for each other,” she said, and walked away.

Ilya took several breaths, re-centering himself now that he was alone. Yuna was right. He could be strong. He could keep this secret for as long as Shane needed. That was the least he could do. He turned and strode determinedly back to Shane’s private room.

He opened the door with his elbow and, as always, he found Shane’s eyes before anything else.

Shane immediately burst into laughter.

It startled Ilya badly enough that he nearly dropped all of his hard-won snacks, but nevertheless, it was still the loveliest sound he had ever heard.

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Early February, Amalie Arena in Tampa Bay, the NHL All-Star Game:

“Try to keep up, Hunter! I know cold is no good for your old man bones, but you should not keep getting caught in my snow,” he jerked into a hard stop in front of Hunter, sending shards over the Admiral’s skates as he glared, unimpressed, disrupted from his warm-up stretches.

Scott stomped hard, knocking the ice loose. “We’re playing for the same team, Rozanov.”

Ilya winked. “Don’t I know it,” he said and laughed as Hunter’s mouth dropped open in surprise at the blatant double entendre. Ilya skated away, back to their warm-ups, pretending that his heart wasn’t beating a little quicker in his chest from that teasing confession.

It hadn’t been planned. Ilya had said it because he wanted to. Because he was very tired of *not* saying it. Hunter knew what he meant. He watched Ilya closely for the rest of the All-Star tournament whenever they weren’t on the ice. For once, Ilya didn’t look back.

They won the tournament. It was not so impressive as the games Ilya and Shane had played together last year, and Ilya did not care at all for playing on Scott Hunter’s wing, but, of course, it would have been more embarrassing to lose.

Ilya was tired of being embarrassed. Only yesterday, he had been crying on the phone to his poor, injured boyfriend about his dead mother, like he was still twelve and not almost thirty. It made him feel foolish. And still, despite that, all he wanted to do was call Shane again. Get

his voice back in his ear. Maybe jerk off on camera for each other first, or convince Shane to ride one of his toys, but after that—and really, if he wanted to be embarrassed, Ilya would only have to confess that, more than satisfying mutual orgasms, Ilya wanted to fall asleep on the phone to Shane murmuring about something boring, or his gentle, breathy snoring if he fell asleep first.

They had been sharing beds for almost a year now, and Ilya was only used to sleeping when he had Shane with him. Even naps. Shane had trained him well. It was hard to fall asleep, and harder still to stay asleep. His body knew something was missing. It didn't even know how to keep him warm without Shane's help, and sometimes he woke up shivering. What had happened? Ilya Rozanov used to take home a different beautiful woman every other night and kick them out after breakfast, and now his heart could no longer manage to send blood to his fingers and toes if Shane wasn't in bed with him? Because Shane was his heart?

He would call Shane. He could not resist.

But first, he would celebrate.

Ilya always enjoyed All-Stars. Some of the guys preferred having the time off (or they claimed to, while secretly being terribly jealous of his hockey skills), but Ilya liked the combined fanaticism and lassitude of the competitions and tournaments: fans screaming for superb, showy, obnoxious goals, and players relaxing when they did not need to worry about playoff standings and season scoring. He liked the opportunity to see players from across the country when they weren't fighting each other on the ice. It was always a happier atmosphere, and no one but dickheads cared too much about losing an All-Star game. The parties were fun and long, energetic because no one was thinking about upcoming games, hangovers, getting enough sleep, or missing workouts. It was just bars, nightclubs, alcohol.

Girls.

Ilya shrugged her arm off his shoulder. She pouted. He shrugged. He pointed her in Huff's direction, and she gave him an offended look. He laughed, so she laughed too, and then she flounced off back to the dance floor. She was pretty, but she was freckle-less, and she did not have the thighs and ass of a professional hockey player. She wasn't Shane. No one could compare. No one else even mattered.

Ilya had ordered a vodka ginger ale because he was a fucking loser sap who didn't fuck attractive girls desperate for him anymore and couldn't fall asleep without calling his boyfriend first. The drink was sharp, effervescent on his tongue. Refreshing. He wished he were a little drunker, but he had high hopes for an upcoming jerk-off session and didn't want to be too tired.

"When did you get so boring, Rozy?" asked Pittsburgh's All-Star, speaking Ilya's own thoughts aloud as the girl left.

"What can I say? Your mom keeps me very satisfied," Ilya said, cheap and easy, and got an obliging laugh for his poor effort.

Dancing was still fun, except that Ilya was thinking about how he had never danced with Shane. He didn't even know if Shane liked dancing. He had been so visibly uncomfortable in the nightclub with Rose, but of course he was. Would he like dancing with Ilya? If they could?

But when?

Ilya cursed himself and finished his drink, leaving the dance floor with a sneer. It was still too early to leave. But Shane would be waiting up for him.

That was such a delicious thought, and Ilya couldn't share it with anyone.

The club was on the top floor of the resort they were staying at, so it was easy to find some air. A broad balcony and a swimming pool, not empty but not crowded in February (although winter in Tampa Bay seemed a subjective term to Ilya, who had only ever lived in Russia and Massachusetts). The view over Florida did not look at all like the Vegas strip, and yet that was what it reminded Ilya of. Ilya walked up to the railing and breathed the high-altitude air, and closed his eyes to better picture Shane, snuggled up in bed, his pretty little glasses at the tip of his nose as he read some terrible, boring, ghost-written memoir or another book about obscure sports history.

"You look like you need another drink."

"Trying to take advantage of me?" Ilya asked, opening his eyes as Scott Hunter approached and handed him an open beer as he joined him by the railing. Ilya accepted it and took a long pull. Sometimes, Shane drank ginger beer. Ilya thought that was funny. He always made fun of him for it. "You want to get me drunk?" he leered at Hunter. "Is your boyfriend in town? He want a threesome with someone so hot as me and young enough to keep up for once?"

"God, you fucking suck," Hunter said, shaking his head.

"Well," Ilya said. "Sometimes."

"Right." They stared at the skyline. "I wanted to ask if you actually meant that."

"Why would I lie?" Ilya asked, although he was aware that his chirp on the ice had been an objectively insane way to come out to anyone. But he was desperate, and being away from Shane only made him realize exactly how desperate. Marly and Vic weren't enough—it wouldn't be enough until everyone in their lives knew.

He could start with Scott. He was a safe enough bet, for obvious reasons.

"Wow. So... all the girls...?"

"Bisexual," Ilya said. "The rumors are true, I am fuck machine."

"Jesus. Okay. Well, congrats. Thanks for telling me."

Ilya laughed. It echoed down the side of the building, glass, metal, and concrete.

“Shut up,” Hunter said.

“You sound like Hollander,” Ilya said, but hastened to add, “only I like him, and you fucking suck. Must be because he is so pretty and you are old enough to be my great-grandfather—makes a big difference.”

Hunter just looked at him, for once not responding to the chirp.

Ilya looked away. He drank half the beer. He thought about Shane and tried to superimpose his memory of Shane sunbathing on the dock last summer across the flat expanse of swampy, terrible Florida.

“So, you and Hollander,” Scott said after a moment.

“Me,” Ilya said, “and Shane.”

“Is it serious?” Hunter asked.

Ilya kind of wanted to hit him. Just because. “No, we are just risking our whole professional reputations for some fucking fling, and, oh, yeah, that fling has lasted maybe a decade or so, but is not so serious as all that.”

Hunter gawped. “A decade.”

Ilya paused. Rewound. Revised his original statement. “I did not say that,” he said. “Years.” He squinted. “How long have you suspected?”

“A *decade*?”

Ilya really might hit him. Good thing Hollander wasn’t here to hold him back. “Nope,” he denied willfully. “Not that long.”

“But—I mean, I knew you were fucking while the rivalry was still on, but-”

“What?” Ilya asked sharply. “Knew? What do you think you know? You know nothing.”

Hunter laughed in his face, which was stupid, because again, Ilya *really wanted to punch him*. Fuck queer solidarity. This guy had it coming. Except Ilya wasn’t out because of fucking Russia and so everyone would think he was the homophobic asshole and Shane would pout about the headlines if he beat Scott Hunter up between games. Damn it. “You told him your hotel room in front of me,” Hunter said. “I was in one-two-two-two—you think I couldn’t figure out what the fuck you were talking about?”

Ilya paused. He pursed his lips. “Well, fine. But that was not a decade ago.”

“Dude, seriously?”

“So, you did know?” Ilya asked, changing the subject and building up his confidence with a little well-deserved vehemence. There were several reasons he did not like Scott, and only some of them had to do with how old he was. “When you chirped Shane on the ice and made

the poor, baby-faced, golden boy drop gloves? You should know, Scotty, there were very bad rumors about you because of that. You are still New Yorker, after all, and the fans, they think Hollander can do nothing wrong.”

Hunter’s face twisted. Ilya could read the genuine regret on it, so he looked away again. “I didn’t mean it like that,” he said at once, but he didn’t sound defensive. More... desperate. Good. Ilya preferred him desperate. Everyone should be as desperate for Shane’s good opinion as Ilya was. “I wouldn’t have said something like that on the ice. I wouldn’t have, Rozanov, come on.” Ilya, regrettably, believed him. “You guys both made similar chirps in back-to-back games, that was all. Clearly, Shane took it as more than that. Yes, I should have been more careful, but all I had were suspicions. I didn’t *know* until the leak.” His expression turned again and he shifted his shoulders, pulling away, but Ilya saw the sickened look come over his face. “That was—that was fucking awful. The video. The leak. I wanted to reach out right away, but....”

“You couldn’t,” Ilya said. “Shane has said that during that season, he became NHL homophobe detector. Who would shake his hand on the ice and who would not. He is right. I have looked it up. There are lists on Reddit, fan-compiled. Who treated him bad before and after.”

“Really?”

“Shane,” Ilya said slowly, “is very beloved. Montreal the team is stupid and awful and terrible at hockey without him, but the fans, they were not so bad. They loved him. Is a progressive city. They *loved* him and they still love him, I think, even though now we destroy their team every game.”

“Boston loves him too,” Hunter said, “from what I’ve seen.”

“And,” Ilya said, “I love him.”

Cliff, Victor, Hayden, and now Hunter. It was an odd assortment of characters, brought together because they were the only players in the league who had heard Ilya say those words.

His eyes widened but of course, Hunter was not surprised. “Wow. Okay. I figured. But... wow.”

“So,” Ilya said slowly, “if you make weird passive-aggressive chirps that point at his deepest secrets on the fucking ice,” he stepped closer, “I will be there, Hunter. Because he’s on *my* team, *my* line. So I hear everything.”

Hunter laughed at him again. *Fist, straight through his teeth.* Ilya still had some bruises from his fight with Comeau, but they wouldn’t slow him down. “Yeah, kid, I know,” he said. “I’ve seen how much time you’ve spent in the penalty box this season—hell, after what you did to Comeau, I don’t think anyone is gonna be fucking with Hollander from now on.”

Finally, he had said something redeemable. Ilya perked up. “Good. Happy to hear. Still applies to you, I don’t give a fuck about your much hotter but scandalously young boyfriend,

you are not allowed to make fun of Shane. Only me.”

“He’s not that much younger-”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Ilya pushed off the railing. “This is very annoying and stupid conversation and I’m sick of it. Gonna go bother Vaughny or someone more fun than you. Night, Hunter.”

“A decade,” Hunter muttered to his retreating back. “A fucking decade. I asked Kip to move in on the *first day*.”

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June, Pepsi Center guest dressing room, post-Game Six of the 2018 Stanley Cup Finals:

Ilya was blinded by a spray of champagne. He laughed. He couldn’t stop laughing, actually.

“Fucking champions!” Benji screamed. “Cap! Cap! Cap!”

Wiz Khalifa’s *Black and Yellow* was blasting from the guest locker room speakers, but couldn’t come close to drowning out the noise of their celebrations. Ilya had lost Shane around the time that he had been hoisted onto Marly and Vic’s shoulders, but he knew he was somewhere in the mass of bodies that had poured into the room before the doors were locked. Now the room was occupied by just the Bears and their entire away-game staff, at full capacity for the Stanley Cup, locked off from the NHL upper management who had tried to crowd into their celebrations along with sponsors and the errant fans attempting to force their way inside.

But this wasn’t for any of them.

“This is for us!” Ilya said, popping the cork off a new bottle and pouring half of it over his head with a scream that felt primal, that felt deep, that ripped its way out of his throat.

Stanley Cup champions. It had been four years since he had stood here, surrounded by this victory, immersed in this wash of feeling.

But it felt *right* that it had taken four years, it felt *good*, because this time, Ilya got to celebrate it with Shane.

He got to celebrate with Shane in a room of people who knew them. Knew they were together. Knew who Ilya was—every part of him that he wanted to share. No more hiding. No more secrets.

Shane emerged from the crowd like a dolphin or a mermaid cresting over a wave. He was smiling so broadly, an expression Ilya rarely saw in shared company. He still wore his padded pants and shin guards, but he had stripped off his jersey and shoulder pads. His Under Armour shirt was plastered to every inch of his heaving chest and abdominals, cut from recent exertion and the weeks of unending exercise they had endured.

Endured, to reach this moment.

He was so beautiful. So pretty. So perfect, unevenly dressed and covered in sweat and sticky booze.

Ilya grabbed him, fingers digging into the flexible shirt as he hauled Shane to his chest, pulling at the fabric like it was Shane's skin, and if Ilya pulled hard enough, he could create an opening in his body so that he could crawl inside.

He yanked Shane to his chest and Shane came with a laugh and no protest. "We did it," Ilya breathed into his ear. "We did it."

"Step Four," Shane shouted in return, hopping on his toes within Ilya's embrace as if he had to expel the energy somehow.

"Boston," Ilya breathed, delirious. "My fucking line. They gave you to *me*, and we fucking showed them how stupid they were to do it. They gave you to me and we won the whole fucking thing!"

Cliff swooped in and put a hand on the back of each of their heads, knocking their skulls together with a crack that Ilya didn't even feel. "Get a room!" he crowed, and then swooped off, screaming for one of the social media managers who was filming the locker room.

Filming the celebration, but not streaming it. Not live.

Ilya pulled his face from Shane's hair and looked up. There was a camera trained on him, and normally, he wouldn't care—he was allowed to hug Shane for as long as he wanted, and he trusted that the media team wouldn't post anything incriminating. Ilya did not give a shit about any person who cared whether two Stanley Cup champions embraced for longer than fit their pathetic, puny idea of masculinity. He couldn't give less of a shit what they thought of him or of Shane, not when Shane was clutching the back of his jersey just as hard.

He didn't care about the cameras, not really.

But he let go of Shane's shirt and reached out.

Ilya grabbed the lens of the camera closest to them and shoved it down. "Edit this out!" he shouted, loud enough to be heard, and the team was already cheering before he grabbed Shane's face and kissed him.

Shane didn't flinch away. He did the opposite. He pushed into Ilya, throwing his arms around his shoulders as they kissed and kissed, tasting sweat and champagne and beer as they were showered in new waves of celebratory alcohol until they were drenched, head-to-toe, and Ilya began to feel like they could melt together.

"Okay, alright, boys," LeClaire said, thumping them hard on their backs until they pulled apart. But he immediately seized Ilya in a tight hug as the cameras rose and resumed, getting their much-needed celebratory footage. "Good fucking job, Roz," LeClaire said. "Good fucking job!"

Shane wiped champagne out of his eyes and smiled at Ilya over their coach's shoulder.

Ilya shook his head like a dog, curls splashing droplets of a truly gross concoction across the room.

“We are fucking champions!” Ilya screamed, and the Bears rose with him in a roar.

Except for Shane, at the center, who pursed his lips and winked as he whistled out a short little tune.

Ilya was going to marry that man. He swore it to himself, then and there: the next time he lifted the Stanley Cup, he would be Shane’s husband.

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July:

“We’re going to get recognized.”

“In California?” Ilya asked dubiously.

“There are three hockey teams in California, Ilya!”

“Does anyone watch them, though?”

“Yes, Ilya, they do!”

“You are used to Canada still,” Ilya said, waving a hand dismissively at Shane. “And now that you are back in Ottawa for summer, helping Hayden move his brood, you have even bigger head than usual. Spoilers, Shane—your face is not plastered all over billboards in California!”

Shane gave him an exasperated look, but it wasn’t very effective, because it only made Ilya want to kiss him. Or pin him to the floor. Or drag him into the shower at the very least, maybe while he was still fully clothed, so he could peel every piece off him one at a time. Too bad they had a flight to catch. “Actually, Ilya,” Shane said, in his shittiest voice, so catty, which always made Ilya grin, “I am. Literally. The newest Rolex ads are still up, and the Reebok ones, *and* Gatorade!”

“Yuna Hollander,” Ilya said, shrugging, “she never sleeps. But this is my fault somehow?”

“Of course, it’s your fault!”

“Of course?”

Shane unzipped the side pockets of his suitcase, checking for the dozenth time that their passports were still inside. Ilya did not object, although he wanted to sigh. He knew better, though, and swallowed the noise before it left his lips. “Yes,” Shane said stubbornly, turning his head away.

But the new angle meant that Ilya could see the glimmer of gold on the base of his neck, tucked safely beneath his t-shirt. “My fault,” he mused, reaching out to run feather-soft

fingers over the thin necklace. Shane, still kneeling, shivered. “Okay,” he acquiesced. “Is my fault. And I would do it all again in a heartbeat.”

Shane glanced up. He straightened, took ahold of Ilya by his backpack straps, and pulled him in for a kiss. “I’m sorry. It’s not your fault because nothing is wrong,” he murmured. “I’m just stressed.”

“I know,” Ilya said. He planted a kiss over Shane’s freckles, internally preening when he felt Shane lean into the touch. “We will be in San Francisco for an hour, tops, then we are off to the countryside, where there are no more billboards. And besides, maybe all the ads are a good thing, you know? You can say we are in town for promotions and things. Makes sense, no?”

“It does,” Shane murmured. “You’re right.” He took a deep breath. Ilya could feel Shane composing himself. When he opened his eyes, he looked the same as he did when he stepped onto the ice. Focused. Intense. So fucking hot. “Let’s go.”

It was a ten-hour journey from the Ottawa International Airport to San Francisco, with an hour layover in Chicago, which was a terrible amount of time to spend on an airplane during the off-season, but needs must. Ilya didn’t really mind. He didn’t mind at all, actually.

He watched three different *Fast and Furious* movies, out of order, while Shane occasionally looked up from his novel to frown at the screen whenever anything particularly unrealistic happened. “Is this fun for you?” he asked dubiously as a fifth car crashed into a fiery pile-up.

“*Wonder if you know, how they live in Tokyo!*” Ilya sang—under his breath, because he wasn’t that much of an asshole (usually). “*Fast and furious—drift, drift—fast and—*”

Shane dug an elbow into his side and Ilya flailed like he had been electrocuted, drawing unamused glances from a very fancy couple sitting in the aisle across from them. Ilya waved. Shane groaned and covered his face. “I’m going to murder you.”

“Careful, Hollander, we are not over international water yet.”

“That’s not—”

“Excuse me, Sirs,” a flight attendant said. Shane groaned again. Ilya gave her a very charming smile. “Would you mind—”

“We will be quiet,” Ilya promised, putting a hand on the back of Shane’s neck and rubbing his fingers again over his hair. He could tell she did not recognize him, but Ilya still had a hard time biting back the, “*We are getting married, let us be loud about it!*”

She smiled, tight and unamused. “Thank you. We appreciate it.”

They made it through the rest of the flight, but Ilya had to coax Shane’s hands away from his face. The grin never left his mouth. “I will carry your bag,” he declared when they landed. “Let me, please.”

“Fine,” Shane said.

Ilya couldn't resist him when he was acting all mulish. He kissed his cheek, and finally earned a flash of a smile.

"You two are sweet," said the very old, chic lady from across the aisle as they waited to disembark. She was smiling at them now. Ilya liked how old people wore fancy outfits on planes—he and Shane were dressed in (expensive) athleisure, but maybe he should have worn a tuxedo. "What are you in town for?"

Ilya glanced at Shane. After a moment, Shane nodded. Ilya laughed, loud and happy. "We are getting married," Ilya told the woman. Her face lit up. Ilya put a finger to his lips and winked, and she laughed. "Is a secret, though. He is very shy."

"Oh my! How wonderful!" the woman laughed, and Ilya nodded. "Congratulations, darlings."

"Darling," Ilya cooed, looking at Shane as he hefted all their bags. "Thank you. Really," he said to the woman.

"Thanks," Shane echoed, keeping himself hidden behind Ilya. But he was smiling now.

A rented car was waiting for them at SFO, and they drove out of the city without stopping until they reached Napa County's clerk's office, where they miraculously made their appointment. They did not even need a witness.

(Yuna had offered despite that:

"I know you two want a little vacation after the documents are signed, but I could come with you just for the first part. I know you need some time off in July, but August is simply too important a month for your brand deals—both of yours, especially this year." She leveled a glare at Ilya, who had grinned back like a puppy, because Yuna had just been the behind-the-scenes orchestrator of a major re-negotiation of his Adidas contract, and Ilya was feeling more enamored with Shane's mom than ever. Of course, Yuna was plenty pleased with herself, having now cornered both Reebok and Adidas between the two of them. Ilya was sure she already had some impeccable plan in place to somehow bring Nike into the mix as well—maybe she was saving them for her future grandchildren. "If I came, I could just make sure we keep everything on track and progressing smoothly-"

"No, Mom," Shane said patiently. "We've got it."

"But thank you," Ilya said. "Thank you for everything."

Her face softened. Tears welled in her eyes. She put her hands on both their cheeks. "My boys.")

They did not have rings. They purchased their marriage license and got married on the same day, and Ilya was so dizzy with happiness that he could have flown them all the way back to the cottage on the power of the pure elation he felt.

“I love you,” Shane insisted desperately, clutching Ilya’s shirt in front of a dull gray office with terrible lighting that he still looked beautiful under. “We’ll do the whole show one day, I swear it. I want it. I want it with you. I want everything with you. This is just-”

Ilya cut him off with a kiss. “How could you think I’m upset?” he asked. He wanted to pick him up or push him against the wall, but he knew Shane would object until they were in private. And Ilya could wait. He would have waited forever and he was so fucking grateful that he hadn’t needed to. “Upset? Me? Shane, I just married the love of my life. This,” he gestured at the flickering overhead lights and dirty linoleum floors, “this is fucking paradise to me.” He softened. “Moy *ray*, malysh.”

“Ray,” Shane repeated. “Paradise. Okay. Ready for the uh, medovyy mesyats?”

“Honeymoon,” Ilya cooed. “Yes, yes, very ready—I am driving. Big open roads, I am going to go so fast I blow your hair off.”

“Okay,” Shane said, soft as butter. He didn’t object at all when Ilya pressed his foot to the gas pedal and they soared.

The car wasn’t fancy but it was fast, and Shane let him roll down the windows and the hot summer air rushed in with them, threatening to steal their sunglasses as they drove out of traffic and into the open countryside as the sky began to turn sunset colors, awash of rainbows from the yellow and green hills, to the distant purple mountains, and the orange and pink sky.

They had a week to themselves in Napa Valley in a beautiful rented villa surrounded by vineyards. There was a pool and a hot tub and a rock garden, and there would be Shane. A week in paradise, and after that, the rest of forever, too. Shane on silk bedsheets. Shane on the ground, if Ilya wanted to wrestle him into the dirt between the vines. Shane with wine-stained lips, tasting of grapes. Shane lit by candles or the bluish glow of underwater pool lights. Shane always gazing at Ilya like there was nothing else interesting to see, nothing else worth even a fraction of his attention. Shane eating pizza and pasta, giving himself a break for once. Ilya pictured a million future vacations—they would all be honeymoons to him, because the sweetness would never fade between them—in France and Italy and Greece, Cairo, Tokyo, Rio de Janeiro, all the places they had never been to, but would one day go together. He had met him in a gray parking lot in fucking Saskatchewan, but the world was bright and colorful, and Ilya was going to see it all with Shane.

“Moy lyubimyy,” Ilya said, reaching over to cup Shane’s cheek. “This is going to be our forever.”

Shane kissed the soft skin at the center of his palm.

Driving into the sunset with Shane was Ilya’s favorite thing to do.

End Notes

Inspired by comments! There were tons of people talking about how ilya would have perceived some of these events and I loved them all, but special shout-out to the commenter on chapter seven who mentioned how terrible ilya would have felt if he was the one being locked in the bedroom instead of shane because that was the first scene that I wanted to rewrite in the reverse perspective—I can't find the comment but I sincerely hope you know who you are and read this! Thank you!

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