

at the foot of a palindrome

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by [labeledbones](#)

Summary

He goes to the fridge to look for the bell peppers, and while he's in there, he says, "It was a good first kiss. As far as I could tell. I hadn't really kissed anyone before." He takes an orange bell pepper from the bag his mom brought over and brings it over to the counter. "Not anyone I really wanted to kiss anyway." He cuts the top and bottom off the pepper and then works on cutting out the seeds. "Ilya's a good kisser," he adds. And he can't believe he's just said that out loud to his mom.

Shane and Ilya's dinner with Shane's parents at his house following the end of episode six.

Notes

This is mostly canon compliant just to the show but it's also somewhat informed by the books. But no spoilers for *The Long Game* or anything else.

Shane is in the kitchen with his mom, chopping up cucumbers for the salad but mostly watching Ilya and his dad through the window as they stand around the grill with matching frowns of concentration.

“Do you think either of them knows what they’re doing?” his mom asks, passing behind him, glass of wine in her hand. She settles on one of the stools at the counter facing Shane.

Shane smiles. He sees his dad pointing at something on the grill and shaking his head while Ilya bends over to look at whatever it is more closely, also shaking his head. “Not a chance,” he says.

His mom smiles back at him and something about the moment overwhelms Shane. He puts the knife down and braces both hands on the counter, closing his eyes. Not panic, no. Something sweeter and warmer, but still too much for him. “Sorry,” he says.

“It’s alright, sweetie,” his mom says. And then, after a moment, “Do you want me to get Ilya?”

Shane laughs at that. At the sound of her voice saying Ilya’s name. At the affection she puts into the syllables. “No, no,” he says. “I’m fine. I’m just...happy, I guess.” He looks up at her, brow furrowed. “You like him, don’t you?”

She turns to the window and watches Ilya as he starts placing the chicken thighs onto the grill, saying something to Shane’s dad and laughing. “As a player,” she says and then makes a dismissive sound, wagging her head side to side. “But as your boyfriend, yes.” She sets her glass down on the counter and turns back to Shane. She brushes her hair back over her shoulders, straightens her back, and says, “I want to know about you two. I feel like I missed out.” Shane hears the sadness in her voice. “I always thought I would know when you—” She stops. “It doesn’t matter. But I would like to know how it all happened.”

Shane takes a breath. Their story is so long, so complicated, so full of things he does *not* want to share with his mom. Still, a dozen moments rush to the front of his mind, all clamoring to be told, to be shared.

Thankfully his mom can read into the breath he’s taken. “When did you first realize you liked him?” she asks.

The question doesn’t do much to sort out the noise in his head though. Now images flash in quick succession, one after the other, but there is one that stays longer, one that lingers and burns through the image that flashes after it: Ilya, seventeen, stepping off the ice, pulling his helmet off, damp curls, a grin on his face. The first time Shane had really seen his face. Shane had known who Ilya was, of course, but he’d been nothing more than a figure on skates, in a uniform. He’d been someone Shane watched as strategy, as part of the game. But then he’d *seen* him.

“I think maybe I fell for him before I even met him,” he finally says, surprising himself. “If that even makes sense.” He blinks and scoffs at himself because obviously it doesn’t make

sense. You can't fall for someone you've never met. "I remember watching him play at the Prospect Cup and there was just something about the way he moved on the ice, something about the way he was with his teammates—" He goes back to chopping, focusing his eyes on that instead of looking at his mom as he talks. "I guess that's just attraction really, but anyway, I knew I wanted to introduce myself, talk to him."

"You had a crush on him," his mom says.

Shane blushes. "I guess I did," he says. "Is it that simple?" He laughs. "I made it *way* more complicated in my head. But, yeah, I definitely had a crush on him."

And, again, something about that, the directness of it, overwhelms him and he closes his eyes. He thinks back to watching Ilya on the ice after he'd seen his face, how he'd followed the movement of his arms and his legs, how he kept trying to glimpse his eyes under the helmet, the anxiety that went through him when he realized just how light those eyes were, how playful and competitive and challenging. He thinks about how hard he'd looked for Ilya before finding him out back behind the arena. He thinks about the pause he'd taken before walking up to him. How he'd watched him for a while trying and failing to light his cigarette. He thinks about how long the walk over to him had been. Each step a decision Shane was consciously making.

"Then what?" his mom says, breaking him from his thoughts.

The draft. The hotel gym. The first time Shane had felt desire. He'd thought it might kill him. His body felt like it was genuinely on fire and he couldn't put it out. But he skips that, jumps ahead. He can't tell his mom about the things he'd imagined back in his hotel room after that. What he'd done while imagining those things.

"Then we did that commercial together," Shane says. His eyes dart up to the window and he finds Ilya looking back at him with a crooked smile. Ilya holds his gaze for a moment before turning back to the grill. "Did you know it was his idea?"

"The commercial?"

"Doing it together," Shane says. "He planned that whole thing." His mouth twists at the memory.

"He wanted to see you again."

"Maybe," Shane says, shrugging.

"Shane, honey," she says, reaching out and touching his arm. "He liked you too. Of course he did."

Shane nods. Of course he did. He doesn't know why, even now, after everything, he's doubting that. He wishes Ilya would come inside. He suddenly misses him fiercely.

"So?" His mom asks, leaning forward, eager and attentive.

“So,” Shane says, drawing out the word, trying to decide how to tell the next part. Skip the shower, the water running over Ilya’s body, his body’s own traitorous reaction to it. “He asked me what room I was in.” His face burns when he says it.

His mom takes in a sudden, sharp breath. “Oh god,” she says, lifting a hand to her mouth. “I saw him in the elevator. He was—”

Shane nearly slices the end of his finger off with the knife. “Fuck,” he mutters, dropping it to the counter. “Sorry.” And then, “What?”

“That night after the commercial shoot,” she says. “I was waiting for the elevator down to the lobby. It stopped for some reason even though it was going up. And Ilya was there. On his way up to your room, I’m now realizing.”

Shane’s entire body goes hot with embarrassment now. “Probably,” he admits.

His mom turns quiet, thoughtful. She takes a sip from her wine glass and then says, “He looked nervous actually.”

“He did?” Shane asks. He can’t remember anything about Ilya seeming nervous that night.

“He had his tough guy facade up, of course,” she says. “But there was something, I don’t know, *tense* about him.” She looks at Shane. “Were you nervous?”

Shane drops his head, sighing but smiling. “I was such a wreck, Mom,” he says. “Can I tell you something?” He leans over the counter towards her.

“Anything,” she says, leaning towards him too.

“I didn’t know what to wear,” he says. “So I put on a full suit.”

A beat and then his mom bursts into laughter. Shane does too. God, it feels good to talk like this with her.

“A suit?” she asks, waving a hand at the tears in her eyes.

“A tie and everything,” Shane says. “I think I thought the suit might keep us in line, force us to talk things through, be sensible.” He pulls at his wet eyelashes with his thumb and index finger. “I changed before he showed up, don’t worry.”

His mom’s face is still bright with laughter. “You don’t have to tell me what happened in that hotel room,” she says. “I’m assuming you weren’t sensible. But was he—”

Shane tilts his head to the side. He knows what she’s asking and he knows his answer. “He’s always been good to me,” he says firmly. “He’s patient and gentle and kind.” He is gazing out the window again. Ilya and his dad aren’t by the grill anymore. They’re standing farther from the house, closer to the water, drinking beer and smiling as they talk. Ilya stretches an arm out, pointing at something across the lake, turning his inquisitive face to Shane’s dad. “I’ve always felt safe with him. Even that first time.”

His mom drops her chin into her hands. “That’s good,” she says. And then, quieter, more for herself, “That’s good.” Her soft face turns maternal. “*Safe?*” she asks pointedly.

“Mom,” Shane says.

She lifts her hands defensively. “I’m your mother,” she says. “And I didn’t get to have this talk with you before, so—”

“Yes, we’ve always been *safe*,” Shane says seriously.

“And it’s not just about condoms,” she continues.

Shane drops his head back and squeezes his eyes shut. Then he lowers his head and looks directly at his mom. “I know, Mom. I did a *lot* of googling,” he says. “Before we ever—”

His mom nods tightly and clears her throat. “Okay, that’s all I want to hear,” she says. “I trust you. Can you at least tell me about the first kiss?”

Shane groans, shaking his head. He finds the salad bowl and adds the sliced cucumbers in with the lettuce. He goes to the fridge to look for the bell peppers, and while he’s in there, he says, “It was a good first kiss. As far as I could tell. I hadn’t really kissed anyone before.” He takes an orange bell pepper from the bag his mom brought over and brings it over to the counter. “Not anyone I really *wanted* to kiss anyway.” He cuts the top and bottom off the pepper and then works on cutting out the seeds. “Ilya’s a good kisser,” he adds. And he can’t believe he’s just said that out loud to his mom.

When he finally looks up at her, she’s clearly holding back a scream, wriggling in her chair, smiling widely at him. “Sorry,” she says off of Shane’s warning look. “I just like talking about these things with you.”

It’s then that Ilya comes in from outside. Padding into the house on his barefeet. He’s dressed up slightly for the occasion. Dark jeans and his black polo. His curls neatly arranged with some product that smells like the beach. “Out of beer,” he says, looking between Shane and his mom. “Don’t mind me.”

Shane watches his mom watch Ilya as he crosses to the fridge. “We were just talking about you,” she says with a devious grin in Shane’s direction.

Shane rolls his eyes. “We weren’t,” he lies weakly.

“Good things, yes?” Ilya asks, turning from the fridge with two bottles of beer in his hand.

Shane’s mom nods. “Shane was telling me what a good kisser you are,” she says.

Shane imagines himself running straight through the window and throwing himself into the lake. “I wasn’t,” he lies again, even weaker. “*Mom*,” he adds under his breath.

“Ah,” Ilya says. A smile spreads slowly over his face. “He is not so bad himself.” He walks over to Shane, standing too close to him. But it’s not like Shane doesn’t automatically lean into him anyway, like a hopeless magnet. And then Ilya ducks down and kisses him on the

mouth. It's a brief kiss, but Ilya fits his mouth to Shane's in a way that's not exactly chaste. And there's definitely nothing chaste about the way the tip of his tongue brushes Shane's bottom lip, or the way Shane actually parts his lips for half a second, ready and willing.

"David says the chicken should be done soon," Ilya says when he pulls away, leaving Shane standing there, dazed, lips wet. He looks at Shane's mom. "So you two probably have plenty of time to keep talking about how great I am."

Ilya winks and smiles at Shane's mom as he leaves the room. He is unbelievable, Shane thinks to himself, shaking his head, cheeks aching. He turns back to the pepper he's slicing into long strips.

After a few moments of silence, his mom says in a low whisper, "Oh, you're *crazy* about him."

Shane gathers up the strips of pepper and starts chopping them into pieces. He doesn't look up. "Yeah," he says. "I am." Because crazy is the only word for it, for how dizzy he feels after a simple kiss, for how he feels like he's missing several parts of his body now that Ilya is back outside, for how he doesn't mind at all that Ilya Rozanov just kissed him like that in front of his mom. In fact, he doesn't just not mind. He's absurdly happy about it.

His mom gets up and comes around the counter. She puts her arms around Shane from the side, rests her head on his shoulder. Shane puts the knife down and reaches up to hold onto her forearm. He closes his eyes. "I love you, Mom," he says.

She squeezes him. "I love you too," she says. "So, so, so much." He can hear that she's crying. She sniffs and then says, "Let's make those a little smaller, yeah?"

Shane looks down at the chunks of peppers he's made. They're huge. He laughs. "Sure, smaller," he says, handing her the knife.

They focus on finishing the salad and setting the table. Working together quietly. "You and Ilya here?" his mom asks, indicating the two seats closest to the kitchen.

Shane freezes at the question, looking at the plates and the silverware on the table. Four place settings. Not three. He hears Ilya's laugh from outside followed by his dad's quiet voice.

"Shane?"

"Oh, um—" Shane snaps back. Finds himself with the salad bowl in his hands, just holding it over the table. "Yeah, we'll sit there." He puts the bowl down in the center of the table.

And then Ilya and Shane's dad come back inside. Ilya brandishing a plate covered in foil. He places it on the table and removes the foil. The chicken looks decent even if some of it is blacker than it probably should be.

"Something's wrong with that grill, Shane," Shane's dad says with a shake of his head.

Ilya catches Shane's eye. There is a big smile on his face. Barely suppressed laughter. He disappears into the kitchen.

“Nothing’s wrong with the grill, Dad,” Shane says. “It’s just different from the one you have.”

His dad takes his seat, still shaking his head. “Shouldn’t take that long to heat up,” he says. “I’ll have my guy come look at it.”

“Please, don’t,” Shane says. He’s thinking about the limited time he and Ilya have together here. He really doesn’t want to waste an afternoon on some grill guy trying to fix his perfectly fine grill.

Shane’s mom brings over a bowl of pasta salad and then sits down next to his dad. “David, I’m sure it’s fine,” she says patiently. “The chicken looks great.”

Shane sits across from his dad and then Ilya comes back in with the bottle of white wine. He refills Shane’s mom’s glass and then pours fresh glasses for the rest of them. He takes the bottle back to the fridge and Shane turns to watch him. The breadth of his shoulders, the dotted line of moles on the back of his neck, the way his hair has gotten lighter from being out in the sun so much, the almost obscene curve of his ass in the jeans he’s wearing. He turns back around, sips from his wine glass. When Ilya finally takes the seat next to him, Shane reaches out and puts a hand on his thigh under the table.

They eat and talk. The door has been left propped open. Warm evening air floating into the house. The sound of the water and the birds. Ilya asks about the area, pulling details out of Shane’s parents about the summers spent there when Shane was a child. The summertime friends he’d made and since lost touch with, the ice cream place with the best waffle cones, the terrible sunburn Shane had gotten when he was thirteen that had kept him miserable and stuck inside for nearly a week.

Shane’s dad tells a story about Shane first learning to swim, how scared he’d been of what might be in the water, but how determined he was to master the skill. “Picture this kid out there, beautiful form, really cutting through the water, but he’s screaming his head off the whole time,” he says. And Ilya throws his head back and laughs so warmly that Shane forgets to be embarrassed by the story.

“So he has always been brave,” Ilya says when he’s pulled himself together. He touches the back of Shane’s head, fingers in his hair, rubbing at his scalp. The touch both grounds Shane and takes him so far from the scene at the table. He is here, more present than ever, with Ilya, with his parents, with his *family*. But he is also in a dozen different hotel rooms. He’s in Ilya’s house, on his couch. His own couch in Montreal. He is anywhere and everywhere that he has ever been alone with Ilya and his hands.

“Unlike you,” Shane teases Ilya, forgetting completely that his parents are even there, shoving his head into Ilya’s hand until he pulls it away. “Scared of fucking loons.”

Ilya smiles at him and then turns to Shane’s parents. “You know about these birds?” he asks them. “Howling like they will tear the flesh from your bones.”

Shane laughs, still looking at Ilya. “Dramatic,” he says. Then he turns to his parents. “I even showed him videos of loons swimming with their babies sleeping on their backs, but he’s still

terrified.”

Ilya shivers, picks up his wine glass. “Red eyes,” he says darkly.

Shane’s mom looks between them. “Well, it’s a good thing Shane is so brave then, isn’t it?” she says.

Ilya reaches for Shane’s hand on the table, lifts it, and kisses his knuckles quickly. “Yes, it is a very good thing.” He lets go of Shane’s hand with a firm press of his fingers.

“So what have you two been up to since you got here?” Shane’s dad asks, attempting to redirect the conversation.

Ilya snorts. Shane blushes and shakes his head, studying his plate closely.

“David,” Shane’s mom says quietly.

“What? I only meant—” He frowns in realization. “You can’t be doing *that* all the time, can you?”

“Oh, my god,” Shane groans.

Ilya loses it. He covers his face with his napkin and laughs and laughs and laughs.

“Who wants dessert?” Shane’s mom asks, standing from the table.

“Me!” Ilya exclaims from behind his napkin, still laughing.

“I’ll help,” Shane says, more than glad to leave the table where his dad still seems to be pondering just how much fucking he and Ilya could be getting up to and Ilya seems on the verge of telling him just how much.

Ilya sits next to Yuna by the bonfire. The sun is only just beginning to set. The sky over the water is pink and orange. Shane and David are kicking the ball around in the grass. Ilya is full of peach cobbler and ice cream. He is maybe a little bit drunk. And he is so so so so so happy.

“So,” Yuna says next to him, voice bright but a little brusque. “Between your rookie season and now what happened?”

Ilya turns to look at her, startled by being dropped into this conversation so abruptly. She is looking ahead at Shane and David, but her eyes dart in his direction. “You mean,” Ilya says carefully. “Why did it take so long for us to get where we are?”

Yuna tucks her chin back, lifting her wine glass. “Shane’s told me the beginning of the story,” she says. “But I think I need you to explain the middle.” She is defensive, protective. Ilya understands why. He watches Shane, so lovely and beautiful as he moves in the sunset, all of his warm skin, his muscles, the quiet way he laughs with his father. He is worth protecting. He is worth everything.

“It was casual at first,” Ilya starts, but then he tilts his head. “No, not casual. But we pretended. And there was not much time to see each other anyway.”

Yuna nods and stays quiet.

Shane steals the ball from David, shouting something at him about getting old but his voice is so soft and kind, and David is smiling. It makes Ilya ache in some part of his heart that hasn't felt a thing in years.

“I liked him very much,” he says, needing Yuna to know that. That Shane was never just someone for him to fuck. That Shane has always been so much more than that. “But things can be difficult when you are...like us.” He shakes his head, not sure he's saying any of this right. “They have to be hidden, secret. And they can be scary too.”

Yuna nods again and turns to him. She doesn't say anything, but her eyes are kind, concerned. Ilya remembers that sort of look. He hasn't seen it in nearly fifteen years, but he remembers it.

“And I was not always good,” Ilya goes on. “There are things in my life that I didn't think Shane would understand.”

Yuna sets her wine glass on the table by the bonfire and turns in her seat to fully face him. Ilya turns his eyes to the fire, watching the flames, watching Shane just beyond the flames. “I'm sorry about your mother, Ilya,” Yuna says. Ilya is glad she already knows. He doesn't want to have to tell it again. “I can't imagine what that must have been like for you.”

Ilya nods his head, blinking. “I think it changed me,” he says slowly. And he has never said this to anyone, but here he is telling the love of his life's mother. “I think it made it hard for me to let anyone close to me. I think it made me afraid that loving someone meant losing them.” He wraps his arms around himself, suddenly cold despite the fire. He takes a breath. “And then there was my father, my brother, Russia.” He shrugs, not feeling the need to elaborate on those subjects. “Shane has you and David, a perfect family, a home like this to go to every summer. I worried we were too different.”

Yuna's hand is on his arm, pulling it away from his body until it is around her and he is falling sideways into her embrace, head on her shoulder. She smells like flowers and smoke from the bonfire and laundry detergent. She holds him for a few long moments and then lets him go. He sits back up, wipes at his nose with his thumb and forefinger.

“I pushed him away,” he says. “I didn't want to be a burden to him.”

Shane and David have stopped kicking the ball and are sitting in the Muskoka chairs, heads tilted back to the darkening sky. Shane lifts an arm, pointing. Ilya looks where he is pointing and sees stars beginning to come out.

“Shane can handle a lot more than you'd think,” Yuna says.

“Yes,” Ilya says. “I know that now.” Shane looks over the back of his chair, checking on Ilya and Yuna. Ilya gives him a smile and Shane returns it with a small wave. Ilya cannot wait to

kiss him later.

“Okay, so then what?” Yuna prompts him. There is still that protective edge to her voice but also there is softness. Her protection now stretching out to Ilya too.

“It was too late,” he says. “I was already in love with him. Trying to keep away was, how do you say, useless?” He knows there’s a better word for the way they kept coming back to each other, again and again, over the last three years, but he can’t find it now. “Anyway, then my father died. And then Shane got hurt. And then Scott Hunter kissed his boyfriend. And all of it felt like—” He shrugs, sniffs, tucks his face into his shoulder and looks at the back of Shane’s head. Then he turns to look at Yuna. “Signs, yes? From the universe. Telling me to just go already, stop wasting time.” Ilya sighs. “Every minute without him has been a waste of time.”

Yuna reaches out again, brushing a stray curl from Ilya’s forehead.

“I love him,” Ilya says plainly. “And I think maybe you were right,” he adds, running his thumb back and forth along the arm of the couch.

“About?”

“Maybe we have been in love since beginning,” Ilya says. “Or—I have been.”

“Ah,” Yuna says and then she hums in a curious way, tilting her head. Ilya follows her eyes to Shane showing David something on his phone. Her hand is still resting on Ilya’s head, fingers starting to move against his scalp absently.

“I hope you know that I would not ever hurt him,” Ilya says, his voice quiet and rough with sincerity.

“I’m starting to see that,” Yuna answers, her hand moving down to his cheek. He leans into the touch.

He turns his eyes and catches the way the fading sun is dancing now over the water, twinkling at him, a familiar presence filling him, and he says to himself, *I’m good, Mama. See? I am loved. The way you loved me. I’ve found it again.*

“Oh, honey,” Yuna says, her thumb at the corner of his eye, wiping away the tear he didn’t realize had slipped out. She leaves her hand on his cheek for a moment.

“It’s a very nice night,” Ilya says, smiling at her and nodding in the direction of the water, in the direction of Shane with his head turned to David, face painted in muted purples and oranges, in the direction of the stars flickering on overhead.

Yuna nods. “It is.”

They watch the fire together in silence. “You’re too good for Ottawa, you know,” Yuna says after a while.

Ilya turns up one corner of his mouth. “You think I’m good?” he asks, turning his full grin to her and raising his eyebrows. “Better than Shane? Best in the league?”

Yuna smacks his forearm lightly, laughing. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” she says.

Shane and David come and join them then. Shane sits on the other side of Ilya while David takes up the chair next to the couch. The bonfire is starting to die down. The night getting dark around them. Yuna watches Shane take Ilya’s hand and pull it into his lap. She sees the two of them smiling with their heads bent together. There is an openness, an easiness, in Shane that she rarely sees when he’s not on the ice.

“Yuna and I have just been bonding over our favorite subject,” Ilya says. And it’s taking some time to get used to the warmth and the richness in his voice when Yuna has grown so accustomed to hearing his cocky, cool Rozanov voice on TV.

“What?” Shane asks, tiny little smile, his eyes only on Ilya. “Hockey?”

Ilya shakes his head. And Yuna sees Shane lean a little closer to him when he would normally shrink back at having gotten something wrong, misread the conversation. She wonders if either of them recognizes the trust in this small exchange. She wonders if they know that witnessing it feels close to a miracle for her.

“No,” Ilya says and his eyes are almost glittering with affection. “You.”

Shane blushes and presses his lips together. “Oh,” he says. He shoots an uncertain look at Yuna, wondering if Ilya told her anything he shouldn’t have.

“Don’t worry,” she assures him. “Ilya left out all the juicy parts.”

Shane makes a face. “Don’t use the word *juicy*, please.”

Yuna and Ilya laugh together. Ilya even nudges her with an elbow. “But it is juicy, yes,” Ilya says, winking at her.

“What’s juicy?” David asks as if he’s just tuning into the conversation.

“Shane’s a—” Ilya starts, but Shane quickly puts a hand over his mouth.

“Nothing, dear,” Yuna says, rolling her eyes at Shane and Ilya. She stands up. “I think we should get going before the roads get too dark, don’t you?”

Ilya pouts. “No, please, stay,” he says. “We can go inside. Play cards. Shane taught me this game. *Gin Rummy*? Stupid name, but fun. I am very good at it.”

Not even two weeks ago, Yuna would have been hard-pressed to find three nice things to say about this young man but now she feels her heart breaking. How long has he been denied the familial love that he’s bursting at the seams with? How long has he been keeping it all bottled up inside him? And then she feels her heart harden with resolve and she knows she will never turn him away. She knows he will always be welcome at her house, in her family.

“Maybe next time,” she says, putting a hand in his hair.

“You might not find Gin Rummy so fun when it’s you against Yuna,” David says as he passes by Ilya on his way inside, dropping a rough hand on his shoulder.

“What?” Yuna says, feigning outrage. “I just like to win.”

“And I like competition,” Ilya says, glancing at Shane as he stands up.

They file back into the house. Shane goes into the kitchen to get the leftover pasta salad for them to take home with them. Ilya stands with David and Yuna by the door. He shifts back and forth on his feet, hands in his pockets. “I will be gone in a week,” he says.

“Back to Russia?” David asks.

Ilya falters for a second and then says, “Ah, no. Back to Boston. Training will start again soon.”

“Right, of course,” Yuna says. Then she holds her arms out to Ilya and he steps easily into her embrace. She rubs his back in small circles. He tucks his head into the crook of her neck and somehow it feels completely natural to be holding Ilya Rozanov in her arms.

“Thank you,” he says, stepping back. His eyes are wet. “For coming over.”

Shane comes back out with the tupperware full of pasta salad. He hands it to Yuna and then notices Ilya’s face. “Maybe we can do lunch together next week before Ilya leaves,” he suggests. He slips an arm around Ilya’s waist and looks only mildly uncomfortable doing it in front of David and Yuna. Ilya puts an arm around his shoulders in return, looking at him fondly. And Yuna hates that the world will not go easy on them, that they will face so many challenges from so many antagonists, just because of *this*, their arms around each other, their happiness, their love.

“We’d love that,” David says.

“Thursday?” Yuna asks.

“Thursday,” Ilya nods before Shane can answer. “Yes.”

The front door closes and they are alone again, together. Shane turns from the door and Ilya lifts him with all his usual ease, carries him into the kitchen, deposits him on the counter. They laugh as their mouths meet in a kiss that feels so long overdue. They used to go years without this and now they can barely go a few hours. Shane wraps his legs around Ilya’s waist. Ilya places one of his hands on Shane’s jaw, pushes the other into his hair. They kiss and kiss and kiss and kiss.

Ilya thinks he could kiss Shane forever, wonders if Shane would be up for trying, a record they could break together. Shane thinks about the mess in the kitchen but then thinks about Ilya’s tongue sweeping into his mouth and then forgets all about anything that isn’t kissing Ilya.

Ilya sighs with relief when he finally gets Shane's shorts open, finally feels Shane's erection against his palm. Even after all this time, he is so reassured by the physical evidence that Shane *wants* him.

Shane presses himself into Ilya's hand, moaning softly. "We need to clean up," Shane says, rational and levelheaded, even as he's tilting his head so that Ilya can drag his lips over his neck, even as he's thinking about bending over the counter and letting Ilya fuck him right there. "Help me and *then* you can take me to bed."

Ilya hums into Shane's skin and then sucks at a spot underneath his jaw. "Boring," he says, squeezing Shane in his hand. His mouth finds Shane's again in a filthy, wet, desperate kiss. The way he kissed him when there wasn't enough time. There is time now, but still, Ilya thinks, not enough. Not nearly enough.

Shane breaks the kiss before it can get out of hand. He looks around them. The dishes stacked up in the sink. The wine bottle—his mom's favorite sauvignon blanc—on the counter with an inch or two left at the bottom. The empty peach cobbler dish with a few stuck on bits of filling left behind which he knows Ilya will eat before the dish makes it into the dishwasher.

Ilya sighs, knowing he will never get Shane's undivided attention until the mess is gone. He reluctantly slides his hand out of Shane's shorts and steps away. "Okay," he says. "So we clean." He picks up a plate and scrapes the food off of it and into the trash.

Shane sits for a moment on the counter, hoping his body will calm down, but knowing it won't. It never does once Ilya's gotten him started. And there is something incredibly hot about Ilya standing barefoot and sunkissed in his kitchen doing chores.

Ilya feels Shane's eyes on him as he rinses plates off in the sink. Interesting that Shane is not getting up to help even though it was his idea. Interesting that Shane is still obviously hard. Ilya notices some gooey, sugary peach filling left in the glass dish sitting by Shane's hip and swipes his finger through, bringing it to his mouth and sucking on it lewdly while Shane watches. He grins when he sees Shane's cock jump.

"Fucking asshole," Shane says, his voice so fond it would be embarrassing if he weren't so completely done being embarrassed about what he feels for Ilya.

Ilya only shrugs in response. He opens the dishwasher and starts loading it up. He thinks about what he'll do to Shane once they are finished here. He is not so sure they'll make it to the bedroom. But there is also the dining table, the couch, the armchair in the corner of the living room that so far has not been used for anything worthwhile.

Shane is putting the two leftover chicken thighs into the fridge for tomorrow's lunch when Ilya brushes behind him, stopping for a second to press his hard dick into Shane's ass and kiss the back of Shane's neck. "Stop," Shane says with absolutely no conviction. In fact, he's reaching back, a hand finding Ilya's hip and holding him in place, wanting so badly to feel him. "We're almost finished."

Ilya growls and bites lightly at Shane's shoulder, but then turns and begins to wipe down the kitchen counter. He finds himself smiling. "I had a nice time with your parents," he says.

“I’m sorry if my mom asked too many weird questions or whatever,” Shane says. He pours out the dregs of the wine and rinses the bottle, placing it in the recycling bin under the sink.

“She loves you very much,” Ilya answers, brushing crumbs off the edge of the counter into his hand. He takes them over to the trash can and dumps them in. “And I think she understands more about us now.”

Shane stops with the container of dishwasher pods in his hand. He wants to ask Ilya what exactly he told his mom, but decides he should leave that between them. So instead he says, “I think she’s sad she missed out on such a big part of my life.” He puts the container on the counter and frowns to himself as guilt washes over him.

Ilya turns and sees Shane staring down at the counter with slumped shoulders. “Maybe,” Ilya says. “But now she is happy to know that her son has found love.”

Shane looks over at Ilya, eyebrows pulled together. “She said that?” he asks.

“Not exactly,” Ilya says. “But I could tell.” He takes the dishwasher pods from Shane, taking one out of the container and placing it in the dishwasher. While he’s selecting the cycle and pressing the start button, he says, “Oh, and also, I am her favorite now.”

Shane laughs a short, bright laugh at that. “Yeah, right,” he says, stepping close to Ilya and crowding him against the counter, putting his arms around his waist.

“Is true,” Ilya says, touching Shane’s face, thumb brushing his freckles. “She said I was better at hockey than you and so she loves me more.”

“Fuck off,” Shane says. “What did she really say?”

“That I am too good for a team like Ottawa.”

“You are,” Shane admits, searching Ilya’s eyes, looking for any indication that Ilya regrets saying he’d move. But there isn’t any. Ilya’s face remains steady and serious.

“Maybe so,” Ilya says. He gets his hand on Shane’s jaw, holding his face. “But then I will shine even brighter there.” He kisses Shane, ending the conversation.

They stumble through the house, kissing each other roughly and then slowly and then laughingly, bumping into furniture, knocking over lamps, leaving a trail of clothes in their wake. Another mess for them to clean up together. But later. In the morning.

In the bedroom, they stand in front of the windows, not kissing anymore, only looking at one another. Through the glass, Ilya sees the moon and the water and the stars. And then he sees Shane, naked and bathed in the orange light from the bedside lamps. He drops his forehead to Shane’s and breathes. His heart is so full he wonders if it will burst. “I am in love with you,” he says, because he has not said it like that, in English, to Shane’s face.

Shane opens his eyes into Ilya’s. They are so close and so impossibly light in the dimly lit room. They are green and blue and gray, the colors swirling around each other, darker in

some spots, deeper. They make Shane feel like he's drowning. He rolls his forehead against Ilya's. "I'm *so* in love with you," he says.

Ilya smiles. He pulls his head back to look at Shane better. "Really?" he asks, not because he doesn't believe Shane, but because he doesn't believe he could ever be so lucky.

Shane smile back, nods his head, laughing. Ilya's stolen his line. "Yes, really," he says.

"Since beginning, yes?" Ilya asks. He thinks he knows what Shane will say, but he is desperate now for confirmation that everything he has felt Shane has felt too.

Shane's eyes move over Ilya's face. He doesn't answer for a moment, thinking about what he'd said to his mom, how maybe he'd fallen for Ilya before they'd even met, thinking about that first glimpse of Ilya's face, and then he nods again. "Since the beginning," he says honestly. He doesn't see the point anymore in pretending, playing it cool. "You?" He holds his breath.

Ilya drops his mouth to Shane's, kissing him deeply, not to avoid the question, but to answer it the best way he knows how. "Yes," he says when they separate, a little breathless. "Always."

They stay in that moment together, holding onto it. Both of them thinking *always, always, always*. Both of them thinking about the beginning. They kiss again, softer, sweeter.

"This is a beginning too though," Ilya says thoughtfully. He kisses Shane again, unable to help himself, capturing his soft bottom lip between his own.

Shane walks Ilya backwards to the bed and pushes him so that he falls back onto it, stretching out before Shane. The lamp picks out the gold and copper in the hair that trails down from his belly button. His muscles cast their sloped and curved shadows on his skin. His crucifix gleams from where it's gotten caught on his collarbone. "Yeah, this is a beginning too," he agrees.

Ilya props himself up on his elbow and grins up at Shane where he stands at the foot of the bed. Powerful, beautiful, *his*. "Okay," Ilya says. His heart beats fast with anticipation. "So what do you want to do first?"

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