

batteries not included

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/80004906) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/80004906>.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV) , Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationship:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander , Ilya Rozanov
Additional Tags:	Angst and Fluff and Smut , the holy trinity , Hurt/Comfort , Autistic Shane Hollander , Verbal Shutdown , Dissociation , Post-Season/Series 01 , Post-Book 2: Heated Rivalry (Game Changers) , Ilya Rozanov Loves Shane Hollander , Light Dom/sub , Sub Shane Hollander , Soft Dom Ilya Rozanov , Anal Sex , Rimming , Hair-pulling , Degradation , Praise Kink , Barebacking , Felching , Tender Sex , the barest hint of dacryphilia , Dirty Talk , Aftercare , so so so many petnames , Possessive Ilya Rozanov , Ilya bullies Shane into talking about his feelings and then fucks him hard about it , communication: they're working on it , POV Ilya Rozanov , Subspace
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-22 Words: 10,041 Chapters: 1/1

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by [insatiablegaydesire](#)

Summary

They're in Boston on Ilya's couch when it happens. They've lapsed into a comfortable silence, a muted game on in the background, Ilya's head in Shane's lap and Shane's fingers in his hair. Ten minutes ago, they were tugging and twisting and curling; four minutes ago, they grew slow and tepid. When they go entirely still, Ilya turns in his lap to look up at him, ready to chirp him for falling asleep, but his breath catches in his throat at what he finds instead. Shane is not asleep, but he is not awake either.

While visiting his boyfriend, Shane has a verbal shutdown in front of a woefully-unprepared Ilya for the first time.

Notes

baby's first super explicit published fic. HELLO! realism and unrealism blended together because I'm the author and I can do what I find hottest. not sure if I'd recommend diving right into subspace so soon after dissociating irl, but Shane's having a great time so we love that for him.

a more serious note on the verbal shutdown/dissociation: it's very personal and based mostly on my own experiences in childhood and adulthood. I never was offered an actual clinical explanation for my specific symptoms, so I don't think Shane would have been either, even if he did attend therapy. Shane is likely autistic here but undiagnosed and not currently seeking an answer (author is projecting); I've tagged it anyway. this was very healing for me to write. I hope its healing for you to read, if you relate.

Russian is transliterated (sorry in advance for any glaring mistakes, if you have any corrections, I'd be happy to take them!). some French is also present (also taking corrections here). any non-English words are either explained in context or simply pet names.

title is taken from the song Child Psychology by Black Box Recorder, which is one of the Shane Hollander songs of all time: "*normal, happy childhood back on course / batteries not included*"

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

They're in Boston on Ilya's couch when it happens. They've lapsed into a comfortable silence, a muted game on in the background, Ilya's head in Shane's lap and Shane's fingers in his hair. Ten minutes ago, they were tugging and twisting and curling; four minutes ago, they grew slow and tepid. When they go entirely still, Ilya turns in his lap to look up at him, ready to chirp him for falling asleep, but his breath catches in his throat at what he finds instead. Shane is not asleep, but he is not awake either.

His hands still hover over Ilya, brushing against his forehead. They stay in place when Ilya sits up, searching for answers in Shane's gaze, where he can usually find a multitude of truths swimming right below the surface, ready to be caught on his practiced line. They've only officially been together for a few months now, visits snatched in days and nights and afternoons, the rare shared weekend, but in some ways, Ilya's had Shane for almost a decade. Reading Shane is like a second language to him, but this Shane is illegible, foreign. He's never felt more like a stranger speaking in a jumbled tongue, hearing nonsense stream from his own lips.

"Shane? *Moy lyubimyy*? What's wrong?"

Shane's eyes avoid his; that's normal, but what's not is the absence behind them, a vacancy so unlike him that it sends a shiver of ice up Ilya's own spine. He takes Shane's hands within his own, finds them clammy and the fingers hanging slack. They're warm, but they don't wrap around Ilya's wrist like they usually do, like the action is prehistorical, instinctual, like it's as simple as taking in the next unconscious breath. Ilya curls Shane's fingers to his pulse point. He hopes that Shane doesn't pick up on how fast it's racing beneath the skin.

"Shane?" he asks again. The name usually lands quickly, the surest way of bringing Shane back when he slips into that subnivean space mid-sex, just a little too deep. It doesn't land this time; it bounces back, a simple reflection off a thick surface of snow. This is no safe, insulated place carved out between snowdrifts and the ground beneath, where winter mammals sleep the long nights away breathing in cloistered humidity. This is dark, dry, an abandoned monastery whose only vigils are held by ghosts.

The soft brushing sound of cassocks is one familiar to Ilya. He hears them now when he shifts his knee onto the couch and under him, his own clothes recreating a haunted recollection. "Shane, I don't know what's going on. You are scaring me."

He keeps Shane's hands clutched within one of his own and uses the other to touch Shane's cheek, his face dropping into Ilya's palm at the first caress. Instinct still holds there, then. A flicker of something passes behind Shane's irises, warming over the brown before it passes again. And then the nothing is back, that dim, quiet, sucking thing. Ilya wishes he could chase after it. He considers pressing a kiss to Shane's open mouth to coax it out, but the idea feels... wrong, somehow.

(Somewhere in the back of Ilya's mind, somewhere so deep he can't quite think it, lies the memory of his mother's body when he'd found her. Cold, clammy, heavy and sprawling across the thick damask duvet. The pull of her mouth, so similar to when he'd walk into her room at night, small and sick and scared, but so still it was like the entire world had paused in

its breathing. Lungs filled past the point of comfort, carbon dioxide choking, the contents of his stomach stuck somewhere between where they should be and his own open, stretched grimace of a mouth. People always told him he looked like his mother. A moment stuck, a mother mirrored. And yet he's not the one mirroring his dead mother now; he's back in that bedroom, caught beneath the door frame, the world gone silent around him as he takes in the person he loves the most, completely and uncomprehendingly empty.)

"Skoraya pomoshch... Mne nuzhno..." Ilya mutters, only half aware of it. The words feel familiar, just as the situation does.

A harsh noise rips from Shane's throat, a long, keening rasp, nowhere near any word that Ilya is familiar with but that he immediately knows means 'no.' It shocks Ilya out of whatever hole he'd fallen into himself, and he rubs his thumb across Shane's cheekbone, soothing. He's not sure if Shane recognized the Russian words for 'ambulance,' or if he somehow knew what Ilya meant regardless. He does that, sometimes, just like Ilya did now, hearing 'no' in a half-groan. However it came to be, Ilya is eternally grateful for it.

"Okay, no ambulance," he says. "No ambulance." That flicker had sparked again when Shane made that noise, but it had stayed this time, just the barest blue flame lighting behind his eyes. Ilya sees the bulge of Shane's tongue prod against his lower lip, watches as it fails to force open the seams. "You... can't speak?"

Shane grunts. A much easier sound than the rasp, even as Ilya feels an empathetic ache in his own throat with its passing.

The thumb taps twice at Shane's freckles, a blink startled out nearby. A good sign, Ilya thinks, muscles reacting. "Okay, no speaking. That's fine. But... you are okay?"

Another grunt. Shane's mouth pulls to the side with it, as if in pain, tears quickly brimming under his eyes. One breaks off and falls to rest under Ilya's thumb, filling the grooves and whorls of his fingerprint. It's suddenly all too much for the both of them.

Ilya cradles a hand against the back of Shane's head and brings him to rest, careful, against his chest. His fingers pet through Shane's hair, that soothing rhythm taken up once more. Shane goes easily, burying his face in Ilya's T-shirt and expelling something like a mewl right into the fabric, his open mouth wet and panting. Ilya can feel the humidity of it pass through the cotton, right to his sternum. The feel of it is so reassuring he wants to cry.

"If you are okay, I am okay," he says, his voice thick. "No ambulance. We will stay here. We don't need to speak. We are safe. You are safe. I love you."

Shane sighs and cuddles further into Ilya's chest as if he means to burrow right into the cavity. Ilya would let him, if he could. Would tuck him in, right next to his heart, keep him warm and safe and with him, forever.

(He sometimes dreams of it. Of becoming a living corpse, Shane his mortician, the way he'd crack open his ribcage, all surgical precision, take out everything inside and stuff it into clear labeled plastic. The sweet astringent miasma of formaldehyde and solvents leaked from the marker ink, the taste of death made clean. How Shane would cradle the waxy skin, then touch

him down to the very roots, bare palms against shining bone. He could see the healed break in his femur then; the missing space where his appendix used to be, now an entry on a list destined to wait forever, never checked off. Shane could ease his frustration by taking up that space instead; an emptied chest, changing size, somehow able to comfortably hold his entire body within it. Ilya could know him, then, the way he's always wanted, ever since that first day in Saskatchewan, when he felt that ache first spread through his lungs. He'd thought it was from the cigarette, then, only later realizing it was a premonition.)

"Do you want me to speak?" Ilya asks, soft words muffled into Shane's hair.

A pause, a body held tight, then Shane manages to shake his head once, hesitant.

Ilya runs his hand down Shane's head, cupping the back of his neck. "Then I will be quiet. We will rest."

Ten minutes pass like this, then twenty, thirty, Shane hiding from the rest of the world, safe and unseen from within Ilya's encircling arms. Ilya's heart slows to a steady beat under Shane's weight, comforted by the physical mass of his presence. It's proof that he is here, the rise and fall of his torso like an undulating wave, the slight ripple of the lakeshore in summer.

The first word Shane says when he resurfaces, voice hoarse and unsteady, is, "Ilya."

It's the most beautiful sound Ilya has ever heard.

"Shane," he breathes, sitting up on his elbows and taking Shane's face in his hands.

He's still not the Shane Ilya's used to, still a bit rattled and regaining his grasp on his own body, but there's a clarity in his gaze there wasn't before, a surety in his jaw that has Ilya pressing their mouths together in a messy, desperate meeting. Shane kisses him back, disjointed, delayed, but he *kisses him back*.

It grounds them both. When Ilya pulls back, he's startled to find his own vision blurry, his throat clenching around an invisible blockage.

"Shane," he says again, thickly, and presses their foreheads together.

The second and third words Shane says are, "I'm sorry." Ilya's shaking his head before the sentence is even complete.

"No, no. No sorries." Ilya closes his eyes, lets the tears escape before they overwhelm him. He can feel something else escape from his sinuses, too, undoubtedly ugly and messy and gross (this last one, he hears distinctly in Shane's voice, as his mind can so perfectly reproduce). "Just. Tell me you are okay. Please."

"I'm okay."

Ilya breathes this in, repeating it in his mind until he's convinced of it. "Okay. Okay. I am okay, too."

“I didn’t mean to scare you.” It comes out in a broken whisper, cracking as it lands against Ilya’s mouth.

Ilya catches it, cradles it. “Seemed more scary for you.”

“Not really.”

His eyes flash open, vision blurred. He withdraws and blinks away the residual tears, sniffing loudly, all while the absurdity of Shane’s response fully settles. How could he not have been scared? To be so suddenly empty like that, words stolen from within his own throat? Movement stilled, the moment paused?

“It’s... happened before,” Shane admits, the truth dragged out of him along with obvious regret.

“I have never seen.” Ilya stops, considering. A flip through of moments upon moments with Shane, far less than there should be for more than a decade of knowing each other. “Unless... when we were at your parent’s house, after your dad found us?”

Shane winces at the memory. “Kind of. It could’ve happened there, if you hadn’t snapped me out of it. But no, it’s never happened in front of you.”

“Does it happen a lot?”

“No. Thank God. It used to happen more when I was a kid.”

Ilya imagines Shane, eight years old. He’s seen pictures. Photo album after photo album, all compiled by Yuna, of Shane before puberty, before fame, skin already spotted with various scars and sun-fed freckles stronger than ever. He tries to imagine that Shane, shadowed and vacant. He wants to throw up.

This Shane, his Shane, appears unaffected when he says, “No one really knew what to make of it.”

“What does it feel like?” Ilya asks. He swallows down the nausea of fear, of wrongness, and holds onto the feeling of Shane’s fingers wrapped around his wrist all of their own accord.

“It’s... hard to explain.” Shane’s gaze drifts past Ilya’s shoulder, wandering around the room. “In some ways, it doesn’t really feel like much of anything at all. By the time I lose my words, I’ve already lost most of my emotions too. Like something’s standing in the way of both my throat and my heart. Or, I guess, my brain. That’s where you actually feel things. But when I was a kid, I always used to say my heart.”

Ilya hums, scratching his nails against Shane’s scalp.

Shane leans into the touch, eyes fluttering shut. “Sometimes it used to get so bad I’d lose my limbs too. Couldn’t move. I think that kind of happened here.”

“Your hands were like dead weight,” Ilya says, chasing away the sense memory of stiff fingers and curled palms.

“Yeah,” Shane sighs. “Dead weight. At least I was sitting this time.”

“Would you fall?”

Ilya asked it in all seriousness, which means he’s intensely startled when Shane barks out a laugh in response. His hand pauses in Shane’s hair, halfway up to his crown, unsure if he should be happy or scared by the half-manic sound.

“Sorry,” Shane says, caught. His fingers tighten around Ilya’s wrist, two quick squeezes of reassurance. “I just... no, I wouldn’t fall. I would’ve been stuck there, though. It would’ve gotten uncomfortable after a while. One time I was stuck standing for like an hour with my neck hunched over, parallel to the floor. I think I was twelve.”

Ilya turns his face away, biting his lip. His hand drops from Shane’s hair.

“Hey,” Shane says, nudging his chin back towards him with his thumb. “I promise it’s not that bad.”

“It *looks* bad, Shane,” Ilya hisses out under his breath. “And I don’t just mean it scared me, I mean *you* looked bad. Like you were in pain.”

Shane flinches as if slapped. “Even if I was, I don’t really remember. So it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me.”

Something in Shane falls and cracks open before he’s able to fully smother the expression, and Ilya lets out a strangled growl. Shane’s been speaking with such an air of nonchalance, Ilya had forgotten how tenuous this moment likely was, how recently he’d been trapped in that unknown space.

“I don’t mean like that,” he rushes to say. “I mean, you matter to me. Even if you don’t remember, it happened. You were in pain. You were hurting. I never want you to hurt.”

“It’s impossible for me to never hurt,” Shane says, like the correction is at all relevant.

“Shane,” Ilya says, admonishment and comfort twisted into one word.

“Ilya,” Shane says, all defiance.

“Don’t treat this like it’s nothing. Don’t—” Ilya cuts himself off, tempted to turn his face away again, but he manages to bury the urge and keep his eyes locked on Shane’s. Shane, for what it’s worth, doesn’t shy away from the eye contact this time. Perhaps he knows Ilya needs it, even as he’s still feeling fragile himself.

And that’s it, isn’t it? Even when Shane won’t care about himself, he’ll always find a way to care about Ilya.

(It’s hard, letting someone hold you in such a state, when all you want to do is hide. Ilya still thinks, sometimes, that he doesn’t deserve Shane. He doesn’t deserve to be held, to be beheld.

Because Shane always looks at him like he's something worthy of wonder. Even at Ilya's lowest, Shane still manages to look up.)

"I never want to let you see me cry," Ilya says. "Never want to let anyone see it. Makes me feel weak. Too much. But you won't let me cry alone anymore."

"You retreat," Shane says. It's an argument they have every time, casual enough now that it doesn't feel like much of an accusation. The words no longer lodge themselves behind Ilya's ribs. They rest easier, sitting atop the skin.

"And you don't call that a retreat?"

Shane bristles, not used to being on the other side of this conversation. "It's not conscious."

"Okay," Ilya says, soft and placating. "But it is still a retreat."

Shane's mouth pulls to the side, but he allows it.

"So we both retreat. I look away, and you go inside. Like a turtle."

Shane sighs a quick laugh; Ilya's mouth upturns, one minor victory. But they've both always been too competitive for their own good, and they're too used to winning. One victory isn't enough.

"And then when you come out, you want to pretend it is not a big deal. As if you have ever left it alone after I cry. You are relentless, you know." A word Ilya had learned for Shane, to describe Shane, like so much of his English vocabulary now: a language half-born of love. "But I've never held that against you, because it helps, even when I'm annoyed. Let me be relentless for once."

"Okay," Shane says, chin held up, never one to back down from a chance to prove himself. "What do you want?"

For Ilya, the answer is simple: "Tell me the truth."

Which of course, means it's entirely too complex for Shane: "That's incredibly unspecific."

Ilya smirks at Shane's frustration and makes him sit in the discomfort, taking his own pleasure in watching him squirm. "Don't care. Give me anything."

Shane huffs, but he doesn't retreat this time. "It's true that it doesn't feel like much of anything when it happens. I think it's my body's way of trying to protect me in the moment. But it's after, when I'm coming out of it..." He breaks off here, clears his throat. "There've been times when I'm forced out of it."

Ilya hates the sound of the word "forced," the implications behind it, wants so badly to ask for clarification, but is even more afraid that if he does Shane will stop telling him anything altogether.

“I mean, I get why they did it,” Shane continues into the space Ilya has left for him. “Like, legally, I was a kid, and they were entrusted with my supervision, and they had to leave the room, so I had to go too. I get all that. But the way they just picked me up and moved me... I can’t quite remember, but I think I started screaming.”

Ilya feels his heart jump to his throat, his own limbs frozen in place.

“I’m surprised that story never leaked to the public. Guess the rest of the school was too freaked out by it at the time to ever say anything later. I’m sure they remember, though. Even if I don’t.”

Shane pauses, letting the memory settle before the topic shifts. Sand through an hourglass, falling to the bottom, until all that’s left is clean and empty air above. “It’s better, when I can come out of it on my own time. It’s like I thaw out, little by little. It’s not as overwhelming, then. What you did... that was perfect. Thank you.”

“Was almost not so,” Ilya says. “Almost called the ambulance for you.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been... not so great. But it wouldn’t have been the worst reaction I’ve had either.” Shane’s gaze sweeps across Ilya’s face, picking up some of the leftover worries there, his mouth furrowing as he turns them over. “What did you think was happening?”

Ilya nearly crumbles, is only saved from it by the warm weight of Shane’s hand on his thigh. “I had no fucking idea, Shane. If you weren’t breathing, or hadn’t made that noise...”

He thinks about bringing up his mother. Shane knows about her, knows Ilya found her, has collected bits and pieces of that history since the first time Ilya decided him safe enough to hold onto it. But like so many other things tonight, it doesn’t feel right. Whether for Shane’s sake or for his own, Irina stays buried.

“I know you said no sorries.” The hand on Ilya’s thigh brushes up over his hip, holding him there tight. “But I’m still sorry I scared you.”

Ilya brushes a thumb over Shane’s bottom lip just to release the tension there, to feel the exhale of breath when his mouth parts at the touch. “Why did you never tell me, that this happens to you? I could have been prepared.”

“I didn’t think I needed to. It... it really doesn’t happen that much anymore. I thought I was over it.” Shane’s brow twists; Ilya’s thumb follows it up, clearly on a mission to relax every muscle in Shane’s face. “And it’s embarrassing, Ilya.”

“You never have to feel embarrassed when you are with me, *solnyshko*.”

After all, Ilya’s seen him in vulnerable places before and has always taken care of him. There was one time, in their earlier years, when Shane was still perfecting his personal preferred form of prep (he’d told all this to Ilya later, the year he’d spent in some frenzied kind of research, experimenting with different combinations of methods until he’d finally deemed himself clean enough for Ilya to touch). It had broken Ilya’s heart a bit, to think about Shane, who’d never had a man like that before, racing towards some self-defined sense of hygienic

perfection and denying himself of Ilya until he reached it. And of course, Ilya was glad of the results (how could he not be, the first time he'd tasted him), but he was still sad to think how Shane had come by them. The intense shame that had led to such a thing.

So when Ilya had pulled out, some several times after the first, and Shane had caught sight of the condom—Ilya had seen that shame come flooding in, and he'd been the one to take Shane in his arms after disposing of it, had cleaned him up and reassured him that this was normal and everything was okay, had kissed his shoulder and held him close. He knows Shane's shame. Bar a few regrettable times, he's never shied away from it.

"Do you not know yet, that nothing you do could send me away now?" Ilya says, shaking Shane's shoulder a bit maniacally. "You are stuck with me. You stab me with a kitchen knife, I will take you with me to the hospital."

Shane's head falls, burying his face in Ilya's neck, where Ilya can feel a crack of a smile prick against his pulse. "That would be incredibly stupid of you if you did."

"Love makes people stupid. I am very stupid, for you."

Shane pulls back, his nose crinkling in an incredibly adorable way. "You shouldn't be allowed to make things like that sound romantic."

"Always 'allowed' with you, like a fucking ref," Ilya chirps, rolling his eyes, all instinctual. The words click a second later, and he freezes.

Shane catches the reaction and levels him with a look. "I already know I'm a perfectionist. You saying that won't make me break, you know."

"I know," Ilya says. "But I am *allowed* to be unsure."

"Yeah, yeah, look at us. You'd think we'd each spent a decade in therapy."

They both snort at that.

But then Ilya considers it. "Your parents, your school... they didn't suggest that? I mean, in Russia, maybe not, I don't know, but I thought Canada was better with those kinds of things."

"There was one teacher who really wanted me to," Shane says. It comes out slow, stilted, and Ilya knows he's only telling him this because he asked. "My parents came to me about it and I practically begged them not to make me go. So I didn't."

"Only one teacher?"

Shane swallows, his gaze flicking to the side. "I think most of them thought I was faking it. Some of them told me so."

Rage floods Ilya's veins like gasoline, thick and hot and entirely flammable. "Faking it? And they saw what I saw?"

Then the other fact hits him: that those adults had seen something different. Had seen a child taken over like that, small and hurting, and still deemed it manipulation. He knows what Shane looked like at six, at eight, at twelve; he knows him in professionally posed discomfort, in candid split-second joy, asleep, distracted, wide-eyed and staring. His baby teeth were sharp and crooked, his cheeks rounded with retained fat. There are several pictures of Shane as a child with those cheeks blown wide, trapped air behind closed lips, the skin around his mouth bulging and taut. It's a habit David said he picked up around three years old and didn't lose until he was ten. He'd walk around like that, ever-independent and forward-striding, carrying with him a mouthful of emptiness that somehow always felt full. Shane never told him why he stopped doing that; Ilya's never told him the few times he's witnessed it, when Shane's mind is busy and distracted, and comforting childhood muscle memory kicks in.

Those teachers had seen that Shane, the Shane Ilya never got to know, except in pictures and vestigial tendencies. They had seen that Shane, the painful truth of him laid bare, and twisted it into something sinister.

"Can I kill them?"

Shane's gaze whips back, bewildered with a touch of amusement badly hidden underneath. "No, Ilya, you can't kill my old teachers, what the fuck?"

"*Shane, zaychik*, you were a child," Ilya begs him. "You were a baby. So small. And they—they treat you like you are some evil actor. I want to kill them."

Something in Shane's eyes clicks, like he'd never allowed himself to think of it like that before. Maybe he hadn't, until Ilya was the one to say it. "I mean. Yeah. I guess it was a little fucked up."

Ilya almost laughs at the incredible understatement that is. He doesn't, though. Just takes Shane's face back in his hands and wipes a new tear away from his waterline. "They shouldn't have treated you like that. You deserved better."

"I did," Shane whispers. Allows himself the admittance, as long as only Ilya can hear it.

"*Moy lyubimyy*. My sweetheart. Shane." Ilya presses kisses to Shane's cheek, his nose, his chin. Shane's eyes fall shut, accepting the reverence. Ilya kisses those, too, the press of his lips as light as can be, remembering the emptiness they'd held just an hour before. He thinks that he could spend eternity doing just this, mapping every corner and crevice of Shane's epidermis with his mouth until he had the whole of it memorized. Until he could recognize the meeting of skin at Shane's inner elbow, just from a touch, confirmed with a taste.

"I love you so much," Ilya says, and it comes punched out of him like a sigh.

Shane's eyes flutter open; there's so much there, so much, and Ilya never wants to see it leave. "I love you, too."

"You will let me know if you can, next time? Somehow. We can have code word—code move. I don't know. Code grunt."

Shane chuckles. “What, just us grunting at each other like cave men?”

Ilya does his best impression, half-grunt, half-groan, then has the gall to look offended when Shane loses it, gasping in breath between further uncontrollable laughs.

“I am serious!” he says, one arm thrown out to the side. “It will be our new shared language. We can have three, with you learning Russian.”

“So you’ll learn Neanderthal before French?”

“Of course. Stupid fucking language, French.”

“Wow. How sweet.” Shane smiles like a frog then, which means Ilya’s in for some trouble. “I’ll tell my dad you said so.”

Ilya grasps Shane’s hands, alarmed. “You will tell David *nothing*.”

Yuna and David both speak French, David first learning from his own home, and Yuna through exposure in school and the general day-to-day that is growing up in Montreal. While Shane is also fluent, it wasn’t until Ilya first heard David and Yuna speaking in rapid Quebecois and then Shane chiming in right after that he realized Shane’s accent wasn’t at all the same. (Shane hated his accent in French, he told Ilya later. And in that moment, Ilya had felt something lift from him that he hadn’t known was possible to leave, the settling of an understanding he didn’t know they were allowed to share.) Yuna wouldn’t care if Ilya insulted the French language, but David’s family is French-Canadian going back generations. It’s not something he wants David to hear from him even as a joke.

(Ilya will always watch himself around fathers. No matter how well he grows to know David, he’ll never lose sight of that one particular thing.)

Perhaps Ilya has an unhealthy reliance on humor, or perhaps he means it when he says, “Besides, I’d learn Japanese for Yuna, they would both like that.”

Shane slaps Ilya’s hands out of his own, pushing him away and back into the couch. “I don’t even know Japanese!”

“So your mother and I can have shared language instead. We will chirp your backhand in front of you, you will never know.”

“You’re so...” Shane trails off, eyes falling to Ilya’s mouth, where it’s pulled into a familiar smirk. There’s definitely a spark of mirth there, though Shane tries to smother it; and there’s another thing, deeper, which Ilya only catches a glimpse of before it dives down even further. It has him second-guessing bringing up Japanese in the first place, wondering if he’s misstepped somewhere he wasn’t aware. A question and a conversation for a different time, then.

And so it’s definitely an overreliance on humor, when Ilya chooses to say, “Does me insulting you to your mother turn you on?”

Shane snaps out of it immediately. “Nope, never mind, no sex tonight.”

“No,” Ilya whines, pulling out the word. “I am sorry. Pretend I never said anything. I will learn French for you. *Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir?*”

“What—how do you—” Shane’s mouth flaps as he searches for the missing piece, tongue pressing to the back of his teeth repeatedly as he thinks; Ilya watches in delight when it clicks. “Of course you would learn your only French from a pop song.”

“So, will you? Sleep with me tonight? *Mon chéri?*”

Shane’s eyes darken, likely against his own will. “Your pronunciation is horrible.”

“So is yours, I just don’t say it.”

“Ilya!” Shane yells. “How am I ever going to get better at Russian if you don’t help me?”

Ilya throws his head back and groans. “Your mouth can do magical things, Hollander, but it can not pronounce *devyatnadtsat*. Is tragedy, I know.”

“Fuck you.”

“Yes, I would very much like to. Should we go to the bedroom now?”

Ilya would take him on this couch, in the kitchen, on the floor, wherever he can get him. But he knows Shane likes the bed especially at times like this, when the day has been long and difficult and the exorbitantly-priced bedding can take the brunt of everything Ilya gives him.

“Yes,” Shane says, because there really was never any other option for the two of them.

Ilya jumps up and throws Shane over his shoulder before he can expect it.

Shane beats against Ilya’s back, playful, not actually trying to get down. “You fucking—neanderthal!”

Ilya grunts, palming Shane’s ass in one hand, the other holding his legs steady.

Shane slackens in his hold and resigns himself to his fate, compliance taking over. This is another thing he does instinctually. “You’re not letting that joke go, are you?”

“I am comedian. Your mother always tells me so.”

“Can you shut the fuck up about my mom when your hand’s on my ass?”

“So very bossy. Should fuck that out of you.” But he doesn’t bring up Yuna again, so he’s allowed the privilege of kneading Shane’s right cheek, a finger pressed to his crease.

Shane’s eyes are slightly glazed when he lands on the bed, bouncing up from the mattress. Ilya pauses. They had fallen back into this routine so quickly, banter and teasing and a well-practiced dance leading right to the bedroom, that the sight of Shane, a little lost behind the eyes, startles him.

“Should I... not do that, tonight?” he asks.

Shane blinks. “What?”

“Sometimes, during intense sex, you kind of go under like that. Different, but... should I not? Should we not...”

“No. You should. We should.” Shane swipes a tongue at his bottom lip. “I think it might be good for me.”

Ilya can’t deny him, won’t, not when Shane looks at him like that. “I will be extra annoying with checking in, you know.”

Shane sighs, fond. “Yes. I know. And you probably should be, this time. But I want you to. Want you to fuck it out of me.”

Ilya’s breath stutters at his own words thrown back at him. Shane’s head is tilted, neck bared and the laundry-stretched collar of his grey T-shirt falling to the side, allowing lamplight to burrow beneath the fabric until it fades into the shadows of his chest. Ilya wants to follow that trail down, figure out exactly where the light stops. Suck a mark into the skin there. A blazing, bruising reminder that Ilya will always be with Shane wherever he goes, in all the in-betweens.

Shane follows his gaze, then starts lifting the hem of his shirt, slowly revealing clenched abdominals and a few sparse dark hairs trapped at the waistband of his shorts. Ilya catches on and helps him remove it the rest of the way. He holds Shane’s head back with a firm hand in his hair as he examines the skin bared in front of him. Turned bronze under the warm lamplight, freckles dotted across the tops of his shoulders and upper arms, he looks like a work of art painted in ruddy browns and golds. No one else gets to see Shane Hollander like this. Not under this light, with that look in his eyes. Not aching and needing, begging with just the rise and fall of his chest.

“You are too perfect,” Ilya says. He tucks one unruly lock of hair behind Shane’s ear, thumb and forefinger falling to pull playfully on the lobe. “Too clean. Not even one bruise. What soft teams have you been playing in these two weeks? They don’t even know you like it rough, that sound you make into the boards after a hard check. They better not. Should only be for me.”

“It is only for you.”

Ilya hums, rewarding Shane with a sharp pull at his hair, tugging him backwards. Shane gasps.

(Ilya doesn’t know this, won’t ever know this, but with that one move, Shane feels something a decade past right itself inside his cervical vertebrae. It’s impossible; he knows it’s not actually physical. But something is righted, nevertheless. An hour, at twelve years old, dissipated into nothing.)

“We should fix that.” Ilya’s other hand wraps around Shane’s throat, not constricting, just resting there. He can feel Shane swallow beneath his palm. Distantly, he hears an echo of that rasp, that ‘no’ dragged out as if by lodged metal hook. He shifts his hold and rubs a light thumb across the prominent push forward of Shane’s Adam’s apple, envisioning the vocal cords hidden beneath. “Hm. Not here, not tonight.”

His hand dips lower, brushing clavicles, giving a harsh twist at Shane’s left nipple. Shane cries a bit; Ilya leans down and licks the sound out of his mouth. He then does the same to Shane’s right, because Shane likes balance and order even when he’s getting his entire being rearranged.

Shane chases Ilya when he leaves, as he always does when denied. Ilya keeps his own head in place and pulls Shane’s back. Shane’s eyes blink open, glossy and dazed at the edges already.

Ilya hums, tapping a light slap at his cheekbone. “You’re so easy right now, aren’t you?”

“Easy,” Shane echoes, and he must be, because he doesn’t even try hitting Ilya back.

He usually doesn’t dip down this fast; Ilya wonders if it’s a side effect of what happened earlier, if his mind’s desperate to return to that liminal space. Well, he thinks, if Shane’s going, he may as well go guided.

“Too easy. I must slow down, *kotik*.”

“No,” Shane whines, jerking forward.

“Yes,” Ilya says, a palm to his chest. “I know what’s best for you. We go slow now.”

He releases Shane’s hair from his grip; left without an anchor, Shane falters a bit, unmoored.

“Pillow, sweetheart.”

Shane grasps onto the command, lurching backward to grab a pillow from against the headboard. He passes it to Ilya, who looks over the plain blue-cottoned case as if giving it serious consideration.

“Yes. Good choice.” He lets it fall to the floor, then falls himself. On his knees and with his elbows digging into the comforter, he grabs hold of Shane’s hips and tugs him harshly and suddenly forward.

On instinct, Shane’s hips fall further open to accept Ilya into the new space created. His shorts are tented, his hard length underneath visibly twitching against the taut fabric when Ilya’s fingertips dance lightly up his thighs. Ilya pulls at a few of the hairs along the way, smirking at the hiss that transitions into a moan when he starts mouthing against Shane’s thinly clothed bulge. Shane’s shorts are left wet on both sides, a messy mix of spit and precome blending in the middle where Ilya can taste it soaking through, no underwear to form an extra barrier. The brackish flavor spurs him onward, until he’s dipping his tongue to trace over Shane’s head, pushing against his slit, firm hands holding Shane’s hips down as he ruins the only pair of shorts Shane brought to Boston.

Shane will hate him for that later. But right now, he's a vision: panting, hands scrabbling for purchase on the already fucked-rumpled sheets, several different configurations of Ilya's name but not quite falling from his lips like a newly discovered litany.

Ilya takes mercy on Shane and shoves his shorts down his thighs, pulling away from his groin to push them past his ankles. Ilya's name falls out of his mouth once more, the closest to its actual pronunciation.

"Soon," Ilya says, pressing a kiss next to his knee. "Patience."

Shane's hand bats around Ilya's head, clutching at curls and trying to drag him closer and up. Ilya clicks his tongue and wraps his fingers around the offending wrist, pushing it into the mattress and holding it steady there, across from where he's similarly pressing down Shane's hip.

"I could stay here," he says. "Make you come over and over just sucking you off. Won't move, won't use my hands, won't use my cock. Do you want that?"

Shane stills, the threat held to his inner thigh like the pricked edge of a honed blade. Ilya watches as he thinks it over; a part of him wants it, wants the punishment and the denial, the oversensitivity stretched to its maximum while his desperate hole clutches around nothing. But he's only had Ilya inside him once since he arrived, and that was hurried, sloppy, a necessary meeting that was over barely after it began. "No," he says.

"Then be patient, and I'll fuck you hard enough you will feel me there next game. Give you a few bruises since these fucking pitiful players won't. You will play better feeling me there? You always do."

"I do, I do," Shane sighs. "Hayden even says so."

The blood flooding Ilya's cock does a paradoxical thing, flipping back and forth between a sudden spike and sharp decline of arousal. Hayden Pike's name uttered in their bedroom is not quite a turn-on (unless he's unknowingly being made to listen in), but Shane admitting that he plays better enough after getting fucked by Ilya that even his teammate has noticed... fuck, if that isn't hot. He wonders if Hayden will notice after Shane gets back to Montreal, if he'll know Shane's been to see his mystery bedfellow just by the speed at his face-offs and the accuracy of his slapshots. The idea that Ilya's presence in Shane's life is recognized, is known, even when they can't openly share it, has Ilya ready to say 'fuck slow' and take Shane right now.

But Shane needs it slow, he needs the buildup; he trusts Ilya to guide him and Ilya won't misuse this gift. So, he keeps Shane's hip and wrist pinned as he kisses up a tanned thigh towards his own prize for patience. When he takes Shane into his mouth, it's unhurried, his tongue languid as it slides under a vein, offering only the lightest hollow of his cheeks.

"Ilya," Shane moans, and Ilya can't believe they ever kept those names locked away, the way it drives him crazy enough to take Shane further down on reflexive response. He catches himself and settles into a steady rhythm instead. Just enough to keep Shane saying his name like that, low and melodic, not enough for it to break off into a cry.

Shane tolerates this for only a minute or two before he's whining again, pushing against the places Ilya has him pinned down and trying to buck up further into Ilya's mouth so he can press into his throat.

Ilya pulls off him, removing his hand from Shane's hip to rub at his jaw. "I think you are ready for next step, yes?"

"Yes, yes, yes," Shane chants, his quad muscles flexing against nothing.

Ilya smirks, quickly undressing himself before he grabs the bottle of lube from inside the dresser behind him. The click-open of the cap has Shane puffing out a similar-sounding sigh, like a Pavlovian echo. Ilya can't help but raise up on his elbows to press his mouth to Shane's, searching for remnants of that delicious sound in the space behind his teeth, humming against his tongue when Shane gives him a new one.

Shane doesn't chase him this time, opting instead to let his eyes flutter open to watch a naked Ilya settle once more between his open thighs, lube drizzling over two outstretched fingers. He's still a bit open from their rushed time earlier, so this won't take too long.

Ilya pats the side of Shane's left knee with his clean hand. "Legs up, *moy lyubimyy*."

Shane follows the command, stretching his legs up towards his shoulders in a way that feels like it should be impossible for someone as well built as he is. Ilya swallows against a dry throat, pressing one finger against Shane's rim and then in, the second soon following suit, being careful to avoid brushing his prostate as much as he can. The third has Shane turning his head to the sheets and biting down, a keening sort of sound falling against the fabric when Ilya's finger accidentally hits that spot inside him dead-on.

"Fuck, fuck," Ilya mutters, rising from his knees. "You are ready for me? Think you can take it?"

Shane nods, turning to his stomach before Ilya can even tell him to. With the side of his face pressed to the sheets and ass up towards the ceiling, he presents himself to Ilya beautifully.

"Fuck," Ilya moans, placing his hands on either side of Shane's ass, pulling him apart and watching as he winks at him. "You were made for this position, weren't you? That ass, those thighs... do you know what you look like?"

"No," Shane says, because of course he does. Taking these questions literally and still answering, even when he's half out of his mind.

"You look like a slut," Ilya says, pressing the tip of his thumb inside along with the word. Shane clenches around the intrusion, a gift offered and accepted yet not nearly enough to please him. "Like you don't just want it, like you need it. Do you think you would die without it?"

"Yes," Shane stutters out.

“Were you starving, without it? All those years you couldn’t have me whenever you wanted—fuck, those two years. Was the dildo enough?”

“Never enough,” Shane whines.

“Dildo doesn’t move on its own.” Ilya starts fucking Shane with his thumb, just his thumb, torturously slow. “Doesn’t pull your hair.” With his other hand, he laces his fingers at Shane’s roots and twists. “Doesn’t leave you leaking.”

He doesn’t have to check to know Shane must be pouring like a faucet down there from all this teasing, precome dripping below and making an even further mess of the sheets. “Please, oh my God, Ilya, please.”

“Please what?” he asks, dragging the pad of his thumb out and against Shane’s rim.

“Please, please fuck me. I can’t take it, I can’t—”

Ilya leaves Shane’s hair and hole, grabbing the lube and slicking himself up, quick and more than a bit desperate himself. When he lines himself up to enter, tip pressed against Shane, Shane presses back. He tries to fuck himself clumsily onto Ilya’s cock, only stopped when Ilya’s hand once more twists itself in his hair.

“Do I have to stop before we start?” he says, voice shaking in his attempt to keep himself stern. To punctuate, he tugs at the strands in his hold, wordlessly demanding an answer.

“No,” Shane says, a quiet sigh.

“Then let me do this part, sweetheart.” Here, ‘sweetheart’ comes out the same as ‘slut,’ losing its usual warmth and leaving behind only saccharine condescension. Shane stays still as Ilya presses in, biting down into his forearm and feeding it a groan while keeping his lower half locked in place.

The first time Shane had let him fuck him without a condom, Ilya had finished embarrassingly fast. Especially so, considering they’d been fucking for nearly a decade. But Shane had held him through it, fingers carding through his hair, and waited for Ilya to come back, pull out, and slide down Shane’s body to suck him off. Shane had finished embarrassingly fast, then, too, with Ilya’s come left inside him, leaking onto the bed as his orgasm clenched and unclenched every muscle inside his body. It was, at that point, probably the best sex they’d ever had. Needless to say, they’d gone without condoms more than a few times since.

Every time, it overwhelms Ilya as he breaches his way inside. He’ll probably never get used to it; he hopes not, at least. Nothing feels more holy than the feeling of Shane warm around him, no barrier, as close as they can be. If Shane can’t bury himself in Ilya’s ribcage, at least Ilya can bury himself here.

“*Gospodi*,” Ilya swears, biting down hard on his lower lip, a mark to match that forming on Shane’s arm. “You are perfect, so perfect, always. My perfect slut.”

“Your slut,” Shane says from beneath him, and Ilya can’t help the way his hips immediately stutter forward. Surprisingly, Shane remains locked in place. That he is still listening, obeying, with Ilya half-inside him... he never was one to give up easily when challenged.

“You have been so very good for me, tonight,” Ilya says, inching forward until he’s fully sheathed inside. “I think you deserve a prize.”

Shane’s arms are trembling, but his hips and thighs would never betray that. Ilya cradles the stilled muscles, coaxing them out of their tightness as he says, “You can move with me now, *mon chéri*.”

In this state of mind, with Ilya inside him, above him, all around him, Shane can’t possibly chirp him for the pronunciation. That’s why Ilya lets it fall off his tongue, lets Shane catch it and hold onto it. Because it doesn’t matter how bad Shane’s pronunciation is; every time Shane speaks a single bit of Russian, Ilya feels a piece of him become remade inside, newly formed by his lover’s mouth. Ilya wants the same for him. He wants to share everything with him. He wasn’t joking earlier, about French being a stupid language, but he’d learn every stupid fucking language in the world if it brought him closer to Shane.

It brings him closer now, Shane fucking himself back onto Ilya’s careful thrusts until they meet deliciously in the middle. One of Shane’s hands darts back and searches for a spot of Ilya to hold onto. Ilya gives it to him, bracing himself on one foot propped on the bed, Shane’s fingers wrapping around his ankle. He’s starting to lose himself more; Ilya can tell by the slackening of his jaw, the way his tongue lolls out practically onto the comforter as he pants pushed-out breaths. There are only a few things Shane knows right now: the rough hair of Ilya’s lower calf underneath his fingers, the hot point in which their pelvises meet, and the cotton rubbing up against his chin.

Ilya fucks into him harder, fighting for that feeling to be the most well-known of the three. From the way Shane curls and cries under him, his fingers tightening around Ilya’s ankle and nearly taking him down, he succeeds.

“This what you needed?” Ilya grunts out.

“*Fuck—Ilya—yes—*” Shane both crawls away and crowds against him, switching between the two at different thrusts, like he can’t decide whether the feeling is too much or not enough. “I want—I want—”

“I know, sweetheart. You want to feel it inside.”

Shane clenches around him; Ilya’s thrusts stutter and he has to rein in his hips so he doesn’t finish right then.

Since they’ve started fucking sometimes without condoms, they’ve both discovered that Shane goes a little crazy for Ilya finishing inside him. Something about the claiming of ownership as he feels it fill him up, the dirty drip of it as Ilya slides out, the physical proof of them, still there, even sometimes after Ilya leaves. When Ilya would fuck him right before his taxi arrived to take him to his flight, leaving Shane with one last piece of him, wet and sticky

and safe. Ilya would clean himself up right after, but he knows Shane would sometimes lie there for as long as he could, waiting until he had to let even that part of Ilya go.

Ilya hadn't finished inside Shane earlier. He'd pulled out and finished on Shane's stomach instead, jerking them off with one hand, their come mixing in-between. He hasn't come inside Shane for two weeks; Shane needs this, too, like he needs a good fucking. And whenever Shane needs something, Ilya finds it impossibly hard to deny him.

Before he fully lets himself go, he makes sure to do one thing. Fingers grasping at Shane's roots, he turns Shane's head until only one side of his face is pressed into the sheets.

"*Krasivyy*," Ilya breathes. Beautiful is the only word for it. Shane's hair is in complete disarray from the combination of pulling and pushing, a blush high on his cheeks and coloring his ears a deep red, eyes lazy and pupils drowning out the brown, a spot of drool collecting at the corner of his open mouth. His gaze wanders up, slowly, clumsily, until it reaches Ilya's. That's when Ilya sees the tears shining there, wet and heavy yet unfalling.

Arousal and concern twist themselves in a knot around Ilya's heart. "Shane," he says with a light tug, slowing his thrusts.

Shane whines and his eyes wander, ass pushing back, but Ilya tugs again, harsher.

"Shane. Look at me."

Shane's gaze returns, and he's there, he is, somewhere behind all that beautiful, waiting to be brought back up by Ilya's hand. He's not gone, he's not still. He wants to fuck himself against Ilya so bad, Ilya can feel it, is only stopping himself because Ilya wants him to stop.

"Tell me something," Ilya says, because he needs to hear him speak.

Shane's mouth closes, opens, testing and tasting the words as they form on his tongue. It comes out wet, breathy, a bit slurred yet still entirely intelligible: "I love you."

Ilya nearly breaks. The first thing Shane thinks, the first sentence he can grasp, and so easily uttered now.

"Oh, my love. Shane. Oh, fuck, *ya tebya lyublyu, ya tebya lyublyu, ya tebya—*"

With no choice, Ilya lets himself completely go now and finishes inside Shane in the middle of his own chanted litany, spilling a different kind of confession into him. Shane takes it and takes it, clenching down repeatedly as if he could draw even more out of Ilya's weeping cock just by trying. Who knows, maybe he could. Ilya feels like he could, feels like he's draining him dry, taking his very marrow into his body, not stolen, but a gift.

Ilya stays inside him until he grows soft, rubbing at Shane's lower back and lifting him up to press open-mouthed kisses against his shoulders. He pets a light hand through Shane's disheveled hair, mouthing at the nape of his neck. "Let me treat you softer now, yes?"

"Yes," Shane sighs.

Ilya grabs his chin and kisses him once, twice, before pushing him back into the mattress.

Shane goes dutifully, twitching his hips forward when his still-hard cock meets the sheets again. He humps absentmindedly as Ilya rubs a hand up towards his shoulders and back down to his crease, flat, forceful, and grounding.

“You have been so patient, *kotik*. So good. I just have one more request, okay? Ass up again, legs spread.”

Shane moans when his aching cock is forced back into the empty air, hips still humping at nothing.

Ilya laughs. “Don’t worry. I always take good care of you, don’t I?”

“You do, always—”

Ilya cuts him off with a wide tongue pressed to his fucked hole, licking at the leaking come from when he’d pulled out. Shane gasps and buries his head, legs folding wider, an echo of what Ilya’s seen him do on the ice many times, but never quite like this. Not with Ilya’s tongue dipping inside him, the taste of himself and Shane and the lube mingling with his saliva, clean yet still animal. Said spit is dripping out of him now, down Shane’s perineum and onto his balls. Ilya coats his hand in the come-spit-lube then adds Shane’s flood of pre-come to the mix as he jerks Shane off from base to tip. It’s entirely wet and sloppy and the sounds fill the room, undeniable. Shane’s barely vocal now, only adding a fast rhythm of high-pitched pants that matches the pace of Ilya’s tongue thrusting in and out of him.

Somewhere between those pants are the half-formed words, “Fuck, fuck, oh my God, *Ilya*—”

He spills over onto Ilya’s hand, adding another fluid that now makes it come-spit-lube-come. Ilya uses it to pull at Shane through his oversensitivity, brushing a finger under the head and making him shudder. With one last open-mouthed kiss to Shane’s hole, he pats Shane’s thigh and lets him fully collapse onto the sheets.

Ilya joins him on the bed after wiping the mess onto his own discarded T-shirt. Shane immediately curves into the warmth of him, turning his face so he can press his nose into the sweat that gathers between Ilya’s pecs. Ilya drags Shane half on top of him, sighing contentedly as Shane rubs his cheek against the hair there.

“Feel good?” Ilya asks.

“So good.” Shane licks Ilya’s nipple, not with any need, but just to hold that part of him in his mouth.

“You were very good. And we are very messy. I will have to get up soon, Shane.”

“No.” Shane bites around his nipple, causing Ilya to arc up with a gasp.

“Yes, I do,” Ilya says, sternly. He tucks two fingers underneath Shane’s chin and guides him up, mouth off his chest. “I have to clean you up, get you something to drink. I have to take care of you.”

Shane doesn't look at all impressed at the idea. "Take care of me here. Stay here."

Ilya sighs. "It's a shower night, huh?"

Usually, showers would wait a little longer and Ilya would do a preliminary clean-up of them both with a washcloth. But sometimes, Shane got extra attached and needy and didn't even want to let Ilya go to the bathroom alone. Tonight, Shane refuses to detach himself from his chest, his arms wrapped around his waist and his stubble rubbing his skin raw as he claims Ilya as his own, like a territorial cat.

"Okay, up, up, we're up," Ilya sings, dragging Shane with him. Shane groans, but allows it as long as Ilya doesn't try to untangle their bodies as he leads their four-legged jumble across the bedroom to the ensuite. There, under the warm stream, he manhandles Shane carefully as he cleans him up, hand moving tenderly between his legs and Shane's head resting on Ilya's shoulder.

"How are you feeling?" Ilya asks, when Shane looks down between their bodies to watch, his vision blinking a little clearer.

"Better," Shane says, pressing his forehead against Ilya's collarbone. He kisses his chest next to his cross in thanks. "Cleaner. And happy."

Ilya kisses the water off his cheek. "Good."

"That was kind of incredible," Shane mutters through a laugh. Ilya will have to lock that word away for later, to remind him in a teasing tone, or to pull out of his memory for something of Shane to hold onto when he can't hold onto him in the middle of the night.

Ilya hums, proud. "Oh?"

"Shut up," Shane bites out weakly, which means he's back.

Ilya drags a quick finger over his sensitive hole, earning a gasp. "You are not nice anymore. My boyfriend has returned."

"Are you calling your boyfriend an asshole?"

"He is a very big asshole," Ilya says, barely containing the obvious joke from falling out. Perhaps the implication is enough. "And I love him for it."

Shane ducks his head and blushes; Ilya licks his face, just because he can, and also because he's thirsty and the only water readily available is coursing its way down their bodies.

He shuts the water off and grabs them both towels to dry off. "Kitchen next. You must be starving."

"God, yeah," Shane agrees.

"I have that white fish you like. With the buckwheat and radishes."

Shane gives him a thorough kiss in response to that. They go to the kitchen, towels wrapped around their waists and limbs still wrapped around each other, a near-naked nightmare vision of Plato's soulmates myth. Ilya grabs them both bottles of Gatorade as the food heats up.

"Hey," he says as Shane uncaps his and drinks it entirely down.

Shane looks at him in question over the empty bottle, all wide-eyes.

"I love you."

Shane's gaze softens, crinkling at the edges. "I love you, too."

The conversation could have been over, Shane's confessions from before left in the moment, comfortably tucked away in the past. But Ilya loves him, and Shane loves Ilya. The conversation will never be over, as long as both of those facts remain true. "I meant it when I said I want you to let me know, next time, if you can. So I can be with you. Take care of you. I don't want you to retreat where I can't follow."

Shane blinks at him, a little unsteady. They are still growing used to such honesty, such openness, and Ilya has learned that he must be entirely open if he wants Shane to hear him fully. "I... I'm not sure if I can. But I'll try. I promise."

Ilya grabs Shane's hand and presses his mouth to the knuckles, breathing in the scent of him there. "Trying is all I need," he mumbles into the warm skin, the fingers flexing around his own, a motion meeting him halfway.

They sit at Ilya's island bar together and eat Shane's disgusting macrobiotic food, passing sips of Ilya's Gatorade bottle between them. Shane's flight leaves tomorrow afternoon, giving him enough time to make it back for Montreal's home game; Ilya flies out too, a couple hours later, with his team to DC. They'll come again in the morning, Ilya in Shane's mouth and Shane against Ilya's thigh, a tongue kissing him quiet. Shane will keep his words. Ilya will not think of his mother. It will happen again, but it won't happen tomorrow. Tonight, they chatter about Buffalo's rookie and his unexpected run of the league before an injury took him out early in the season. Shane thinks his prospects still look good, even though it hasn't yet been reported when he'll return. He talks with his mouth full, seeds of buckwheat caught between his teeth, his hands gesticulating wildly at his sides, even with one of Ilya's caught between them.

Ilya's never been so happy to hear him ramble.

End Notes

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