keep a place for me

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/80253536.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Heated Rivalry (TV), Game Changers Series - Rachel Reid
Relationships:	Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov, Shane Hollander & Ilya Rozanov
Characters:	Shane Hollander, Ilya Rozanov, Yuna Hollander, David Hollander, Grigori Rozanov, Alexei Rozanov | Andrei Rozanov, Hayden Pike
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Childhood Friends, Growing Up Together, Internalized Homophobia, Sexuality Crisis, Dysfunctional Family, Autistic Shane Hollander, shane learns russian for ilya, Angst, Mentions of Underage Sex, References to Depression, Suicidal Thoughts, Best Friends, Best Friends to Lovers, Slow Burn, Secret Crush, Yuna and David love Ilya like a son, Panic Attacks, First Time, Ilya wants Shane to have a good first time with a man, Friends with Benefits, Friends with Benefits to Lovers, Sharing a Bed, Angst with a Happy Ending
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2026-02-25 Completed: 2026-04-19 Words: 30,101 Chapters: 3/3

keep a place for me

by agetwellcard

Summary

From across the rink, Shane watches Ilya get punched in the face.
He keeps a distance from the mess playing out. He knows better than to go over and make it worse. He would be more worried about it if Ilya wasn't laughing with blood running down his face as one of his teammates drags him away. He's yelling at the player that punched him, and Shane is grateful he can't hear what he's saying because he knows it's obscene.
"Your boy is feral tonight," Pike says to Shane.
Shane groans. "He's not my boy."

When Shane is in junior high, Ilya's family moves to Canada. Instead of meeting as adults, they grow up together. Shane learns Russian and Ilya spends a majority of his time at the Hollander household. When they start their professional hockey careers, they have to learn how to be opponents instead of teammates, but also how to be apart for the first time in their lives. When Ilya suggests that they sleep together, Shane has to balance their friendship and their casual relationship.

Notes

i really felt like this ship needed more growing up together fics. i did not think, though, that i was going to write nearly 10k words of them in middle/high school. this fic was originally meant to be mostly them as adults but i couldn't help adding more and more scenes.
if the dialogue is in italics, they are speaking in russian!
also if you know a lot about hockey, please be gentle. feel free to tell me if anything is horribly wrong. when i looked up info on when shane and ilya were drafted, it seemed like no one was really sure why they were drafted and then didn't start right away so i'm assuming it's because they still had year left of high school and were playing in the junior league a little longer.
EDIT: imagine my surprise when i found out about billets. anyways, it all works out!

Chapter 1: 2003-2009

Shane knows about Ilya for months before he meets him for the first time.

He's thirteen years old and has just started grade seven. The school isn't that big. When new students start, everyone knows about it. There are only two new students that start at the beginning of the year. One is a girl from Ontario that immediately makes friends with a popular group of girls that Shane usually tries to avoid. The other is a quiet boy that is rumored to be from Russia. He doesn't make any friends.

Shane is in a few classes with him. One of the teachers makes him come to the front of the class to introduce himself on the first day. He stands awkwardly with his hands clasped in front of his body. Shane feels nervous just looking at him. Students are whispering before he even speaks. Shane leans forward in the hopes of hearing him better.

"My name is Ilya," he says quietly. He has a heavy accent. Someone a few rows behind Shane laughs.

The teacher smiles brightly and pats his shoulder. Ilya makes a face, his shoulders raising slightly at the touch. "Let's all try to welcome Ilya." She turns to him. "Am I saying it right? *Ilya*?"

"Ilya," he repeats. The beginning of his name sounds faintly different when he says it.

She repeats it a few more times, mostly to herself, and then says, "He is all the way from Russia. I expect everyone to show him that the cliches about Canadians being nice are true."

Unfortunately, Ilya becomes the subject of intense gossip. Despite no one actually attempting to talk to him, everyone starts spreading rumors about him and his family. One day, Shane hears that his family had to escape Russia because the KGB is after them. The next day, he hears that Ilya's father is an important Russian political figure that moved to Canada to spy on the government. The day after that, he hears that Ilya's older brother killed someone back in Russia so the family had to flee. The rumors are endless, and with each passing day, they grow stranger and stranger.

Shane doesn't participate. He only smiles faintly when someone at his lunch table yells what the new theory is. Across the room, he can see Ilya sitting by himself picking at the lunch in front of him. Shane wonders briefly if the food here is quite different from the food back home in Russia. He thinks of his mother telling him about being made fun of for bringing Japanese food for lunch when she was a kid, and eventually refusing to bring in anything that set her apart from her classmates. Shane wonders if there is something that Ilya would rather be eating.

"Dude is weird," one of Shane's friends tells the table. "You can't even understand what he's saying half of the time."

Everyone laughs. Shane tries not to look over at him again. He knows that his mother would want him to go over and get to know Ilya so he isn't alone. She wouldn't want him to engage in the gossip, and would probably make him shut it down. She doesn't need to know that Shane stays quiet and refuses to even go near Ilya. Shane knows what it's like to be different. Kids knew Shane was different right away, but he eventually made friends. It doesn't stop Shane from feeling like they will turn on him if he does something wrong. All he has to do is act like everyone else. He doesn't want for anyone to associate him with Ilya's differentness.

Shane still feels bad for Ilya, but he doesn't do anything about it.

*

Hockey starts back up. Shane is happy for the distraction. He is buzzing on the way to the first practice. He's good at hockey, people like him because of hockey, and he wishes he could always be playing hockey. He spends the car ride to the rink rushing through math homework while his mother keeps bothering him to ask if he remembered all his equipment.

"Mom. Yes. I packed it, like, two weeks ago," he tells her, frowning at the last question in his textbook.

She laughs at him. "I ran into your coach the other day at the store. He mentioned there's a new player this year. Just moved here from Russia. Have you met him?"

Shane whips his head up and gawks at his mother. "*What*?"

"I don't remember his name. Coach said he was good."

"He said he's from Russia?"

His mother looks away from the road for a moment to look over at Shane. He hopes she can't tell how nervous he feels even at the mention of the new boy. "Yes. So, you know him?"

"Not really."

She doesn't say anything more, but Shane suddenly feels like he can't concentrate on his homework. He stares at the numbers and tries not to think about the blond boy eating alone at lunch.

Sure enough, he sees Ilya in the corner of the locker room when Shane arrives. He's digging through a duffel bag, ignoring the yelling and excitement of the first practice of the season. Shane rushes past him and greets his friends. Almost immediately, they start talking about the new player loud enough that he can surely hear them.

The coach introduces Ilya at the beginning of the practice. He pronounces Ilya's name the same way that the teacher had before Ilya corrected her. This time, Ilya says nothing. He gives the rest of the players a weak smile and skates back to the group before the coach kicks into his usual first practice speech.

When practice starts, it becomes clear right away that Ilya is good at hockey. He breezes through drills and skates faster than anyone on the team, even Shane. When the two of them

get paired up for something, he's surprised to find that Ilya makes things hard for him. Shane wouldn't admit it to his teammates, but he's always felt like he was barely trying when practicing with them. He knew he was good and that the skills came naturally, but he never wanted to brag. If it was a game, he played as hard as he could. During practice, though, it felt a little cruel to make the guys feel bad.

Ilya, though, he makes Shane sweat. It's the first time Shane has played on the same team with someone at his level. It stresses him out, but it also makes him giddy with excitement. He has someone who can keep up with him. He knows Ilya can feel it too, even if they don't share a single word the entire practice.

When everyone is hanging out outside waiting for their parents to pick them up, Ilya instantly becomes popular. Everyone wants to talk to him and ask him about hockey back home. The anxiety he has about Ilya having no friends seems to ease. Shane only made friends because he was good at hockey. He figures it will be the same for Ilya.

When Shane's mother comes over to help him bring his stuff to the car, she instantly picks out Ilya. He's walking towards the parking lot with who must be his father. Shane's mother is quick to rush after them to introduce herself. She is close to all the parents. It shouldn't surprise Shane, but he feels his face flush with embarrassment before she's even said anything.

When Shane catches up to her, his mother is shaking the man's hand and smiling down at Ilya.

"I'm Shane's mom, Yuna," she says, gesturing to Shane. "I heard you just moved here from Russia?"

The man nods. "Yes."

Shane allows himself a look at Ilya. His hair is still damp and his cheeks are tinted red. He barely even notices Shane staring because he's looking between his father and Shane's mother.

"Please let me know if you need anything or have any questions or – well, anything, really. I'm happy to help. Shane, too." She looks at Ilya now. "If you need anything, Ilya, please let Shane know. He's very helpful."

Ilya looks at Shane now. Despite his usual cold exterior, he seems amused by this. There is the faintest hint of a smile before it disappears and he nods and thanks Shane's mother.

Since neither Ilya nor his father are very talkative, Shane and his mother retreat to the car. On the way home, his mother asks if Ilya is any good at hockey.

Shane thinks about it for a moment. He remembers feeling out of breath keeping up with Ilya. He tries not to smile at the memory. "He's good. Really good."

"Not as good as you," his mother reminds him.

It should probably scare Shane, but it doesn't.

Instead, he says, "You're pronouncing his name wrong, by the way. It's Ilya." He says his name the way that Ilya had carefully said on the first day of classes, the memory seared into Shane's mind.

"Oh," she says, smiling. "Good to know."

Shane leans his head against the window and tries not to think about Ilya absently chewing on his mouthpiece during practice.

*

Over the next couple weeks, Ilya easily joins Shane's friend group that mostly consists of hockey players. He starts sitting with them at lunch. He talks more, his English disjointed and bulky. He's surprisingly witty, though, and can make the entire table burst into laughter with only a few words. Shane only talks to him sparingly. He's still strangely nervous around him.

The only reason they start talking more is because his literature teacher pairs them up for a project partway through the year. It's awkward at first, especially since neither of them liked the book that they are doing the project on, but the ice melts between them quickly. They stay after school one day to work on a poster for their presentation, and Shane helps Ilya when he can't think of a particular word in English.

"You can tell me to stop," Shane says abruptly, worried that he's offending Ilya by assuming he can't figure out the words on his own. "I'm just trying to help."

Ilya finishes writing a sentence on the poster and shrugs. "No. Is nice. Don't stop."

Shane fights a smile, suddenly warm. "When did you start learning English?"

"Very young. My mother spoke it well."

Shane tries not to linger on the past tense, but he can't help but to wonder if it was only a mistake or if his mother is gone. "Was it hard to learn the English alphabet? I tried learning Japanese for a couple months but it was too hard with all the different symbols and alphabets. I gave up pretty fast."

"English is hard," Ilya says. When Shane looks over at him, he's frowning. "It is hard to think of right words always. People do not understand me."

"Oh, right. I can see that being difficult. Was it hard to read this book?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No, I am good reader. Talking, not so good."

"Are you nervous about the presentation?"

"Little."

“If you need, like, help or anything, I don’t mind,” he says, trying to make it sound casual. “We can practice a lot, too. It’ll be good.”

Ilya smiles at him. “That is kind.”

Shane feels light-headed suddenly. He smiles back. “It’s nothing, really.”

Later that night, Shane tells his parents he wants to take Russian lessons.

“Russian? Because of Ilya?”

Shane nods. “I feel bad. He obviously speaks English, and it’s not bad or anything but… maybe it would be easier if he had someone that knew a little Russian?”

“That’s very sweet, Shane,” his mother says. “But I don’t know when you would even have time to take lessons.”

Shane pokes at the food on his plate.

“We could go to the bookstore this weekend,” his father offers. “We can get you some books. Maybe they have some CDs, too. Ilya could probably help you if you asked.”

*

At night, Shane finishes his homework and then he struggles to stay awake as he teaches himself the Cyrillic alphabet. On drives to practices and games, Shane pops in his Russian language learning CDs and he practices basic greetings and phrases in Russian with his parents. He listens carefully and repeats them over and over until they sound right. The words feel strange and bulky in his mouth. He thinks back to when he started learning French as a kid, but he doesn’t remember it ever feeling this tough.

He spends a couple months learning from his books and CDs, but he doesn’t say a word in Russian to Ilya the entire time. He doesn’t even tell him he’s learning. His parents ask him what Ilya thinks of his Russian, and he lies to them and says Ilya is really impressed.

The lie only becomes a problem when Shane’s mother picks him up from practice one day. Shane is talking to Ilya about how the practice went, when his mother interrupts them. Shane quickly starts to collect his things. He already knows his mother has a habit of embarrassing him, but he doesn’t expect for her to actually ask Ilya what he thinks of Shane’s Russian.

“His…Russian?” Ilya asks, suspiciously looking between Shane and his mother.

“He’s practicing constantly. We’ve listened to him ask about the weather about a million times now. Do you think he’s getting better?”

“*Mom*.” Shane wishes he could disappear.

Ilya looks amused now. He quirks an eyebrow at Shane, but Shane can’t even choke out some sort of an explanation. “Oh, yes. He’s very good. Almost fluent.”

His mother barks out a laugh when she hears this. “That’s our Shane. He labelled all the things in his room with sticky notes so that he can practice the Russian –”

“Mom! He gets it,” Shane interrupts. He thinks he might actually start crying from embarrassment if she keeps talking. “We have to go. Bye, Ilya.”

“Shane,” his mother admonishes. “At least say it in Russian.”

Swallowing thickly, Shane takes a deep breath and releases it. He turns to Ilya to find him still amused. He doesn’t even seem angry at Shane for keeping this from him. Through gritted teeth, he carefully says, “До свидания.”

The amusement on Ilya’s face drops instantly when he hears it. His eyes go wide and he doesn’t say anything for a moment. Shane knows he probably sounds like an idiot. His pronunciation isn’t good. This is why he wanted to wait a little longer before telling him. Ilya is probably thinking of a way to let him down easy. He smiles, then, though. There’s no malice in it. “Bye, Shane,” he says in English.

Shane spends the rest of the evening in a bad mood. His parents blame it on staying up late studying. He only eats half of his dinner because his stomach is lurching uncomfortably. He just wants to talk to Ilya. If he explains it all, he’ll feel less stupid about the whole thing.

On his way to his room, he snags the home phone in the kitchen and yells, “I’m using the phone!”

Digging through his notebook, he finds the page where Ilya had scribbled down his phone number in case Shane had questions before their presentation. He had never needed to call, but Shane still kept the page earmarked. Slowly, he types in the number and hesitates before clicking the call button.

His father answers in Russian, and Shane hesitates, almost answering back in Russian. He’s already embarrassed himself enough today, so he decides against it. “Hi, I was wondering if I could talk to Ilya? I’m Shane Hollander. I go to school with Ilya.”

“You play hockey too, yes?” he asks after a beat.

“Yes.” He’s only met Ilya’s father once so he’s surprised that he recognizes his name. Shane’s mother mentioned that she only sees him at the away games.

“Okay. One moment.”

There is a bit of shuffling, and then some rapid Russian that Shane can’t understand, not even a word. Finally, Ilya answers the phone. “Shane?” he asks quietly.

“Ilya. Hi. Sorry for calling.” Shane wipes his sweaty hand on his jeans and walks to the corner of his room, the farthest space from the kitchen. He doesn’t want for his parents to hear, and he’s praying that neither of them has picked up the other phone in the living room to listen in. “I just – I wanted to explain about earlier. The whole Russian thing.”

“*Yes*,” Ilya says in Russian, and obviously Shane knows that word.

He tries to chuckle in the hopes that he doesn't sound like a nervous wreck like he's worried he does. "Right, yeah, *that*. I just started learning because you said it was hard to always talk in English or, like, finding the right words. I thought if maybe I learned some Russian, it could, uh, help you? I don't know. I wasn't trying to be weird, I swear. And I didn't tell you because I wanted to get a little better before I tried talking to you. I probably should've just told you, but I didn't want for you to laugh at me or something." Shane breathes out slowly. He probably spoke too fast for Ilya to even understand him. "Anyways, I hope you don't think I'm creepy or anything. I just wanted to help."

There is a long pause. Shane knows that he's probably freaked Ilya out. He probably hung up. Eventually, though, Ilya says, "Say something."

"What?"

"Say something in Russian."

Shane feels his heart pounding in his chest. He doesn't understand why this feels so scary to him. "Oh, okay. Um." He clears his throat. In Russian, he asks, "*How is the weather*?"

Ilya lets out a breathy laugh into the receiver when he hears it. "*The weather*?"

"*Yes*." Shane wants to hang up, but he refuses to.

"*It's cold*."

"Cold! I know that word!" Shane exclaims. He didn't think he'd actually understand Ilya.

"You really label your room with Russian words?" Ilya asks after they are both done laughing.

"Yeah. It's just something I did when I started learning French."

"You speak French?"

"Of course. I mean, kind of. I'm not that good. Everyone has to learn it in Canada. It's our second language."

"*Bonjour*," Ilya says slowly.

Shane can't stop smiling. "*Bonsoir*," he corrects. "It's the evening."

"Shane Hollander. So smart. Speaks three languages."

"Ugh, stop." He feels hot. "I should go. I just wanted to explain. In case you thought it was weird."

"Not weird," Ilya tells him. "*Thank you. Goodnight*."

Shane says goodnight back in Russian and hangs up the phone. It takes at least an hour after the call for him to calm down.

*

They win most of the games that season.

Shane and Ilya work well on the ice together. They always seem to be on the same page, even without using words. Although Shane sometimes gets worried about how good Ilya is, how matched their skills are, that Ilya could probably steal a recruiter's attention away from Shane, he doesn't care. He's happy to play with Ilya.

He's even happier with how close they grow over their first season together. Shane keeps learning Russian when he finds time. When they're alone, Ilya helps him. Shane doesn't want for anyone else to hear him speak in another language, and he hopes that Ilya understands why even if Shane never tries to explain it.

When the season ends, though, Shane realizes he'll be seeing much less of Ilya. Instead of hanging out on the weekend before and after games and sneaking around hotels with other teammates, they only see each other at school.

A week before school ends, Shane and Ilya are taking advantage of the relaxed last few classes of the year. They sit in the back of their literature class and pretend to work on the silly worksheet that the teacher had given them as busywork. Shane asks Ilya what he's doing this summer.

Ilya frowns. "I am going back to Russia."

"Oh," Shane says, disappointed. He had hoped to see Ilya this summer. "Are you excited to go back?"

"No."

Ilya rarely talks about Russia. When Shane tries to ask about what it's like back home or if Ilya misses anything, he usually only gives Shane one-word answers. Shane had also tried asking why his family had moved to Canada, but Ilya made a face and then said it was too difficult to explain in English. Shane knew his Russian wasn't good enough to meet him halfway, either.

"Are you gone all summer?" Shane asks.

"Maybe. I do not know yet."

Shane folds the edge of his worksheet a few times. "Okay. Well, can I give you the number at our cottage? In case you come home early. We spend a couple weeks there in the summer."

"Cottage?"

"Yeah. It's by the water a couple hours away. It's really nice and relaxing. You'd like it." He doesn't actually know if Ilya would like it, but Shane knows that he'd like it if Ilya was there with him.

"Sounds nice. Please give me the number. In case."

Shane rips off part of his worksheet and scribbles the number he knows by heart.

*

Shane doesn't hear from Ilya all summer.

Shane spends his time going to private hockey lessons a couple times a week, studying Russian, and reading books he finds at the library about hockey. He hangs out with some of his friends from the team a few times, but it's not as fun as when he's with Ilya. Everyone asks about Ilya to Shane, as if he's the one keeps track of the boy. Everyone knows they are closest, though, so maybe it's fair.

When the phone rings at the cottage, Shane snaps his neck to look over at it, hoping that it's Ilya calling. He doesn't ever call.

For a couple years, this becomes their schedule. They spend the school year attached at the hip, and then they don't see each other all summer. Shane hates it, and although Ilya never says anything, he knows he hates it too. Shane learns to relish the hockey season not only because of his love for the sport, but also because of all the time it grants him with Ilya.

They show up early for practice and they have quiet, stilted conversations in Russian. Ilya corrects his mistakes, and Shane writes notes in a special notebook he only uses for Russian. Ilya teaches him how to write in Russian cursive, a dreadful process that Shane almost gives up on. Eventually, they are able to pass notes to each other mostly in Russian between classes. If Ilya thinks Shane won't know a word, he'll leave an asterisk by it and write the English word at the bottom.

At away games, Ilya and Shane will hang out in the exercise room for an excuse to not be surrounded by all their teammates. They walk on the treadmills or ride slowly on the bikes as they bicker about the game, the opposing players, or what NHL team they hope they get drafted to one day.

Over time, he learns that Ilya's father is strict. He refuses to let anyone come over to his house, and he rarely lets Ilya come over to Shane's house. Shane grows uneasy around the man when he encounters him at games or after practices or school. Ilya shrinks under his gaze in a way that Shane only sees when his father is around. At school, he has completely changed from the quiet, timid student that Shane had first witnessed at the beginning of last year. Now, he's cocky and popular. Girls are constantly trying to talk to him.

Shane hates talking to Ilya about girls the most. It's bad enough that his mother is constantly asking after any girl that he even mentions the name of. Having to listen to Ilya describe in full detail the most recent hookup he's had makes Shane feel sick. He knows he's supposed to dig for details and act jealous, like the way that he watches the other guys on the team act, but he can't fake it. He wants to stop Ilya, but he doesn't want for him to think he's weird.

*

In the beginning of grade ten, Ilya's father has to return to Russia for a month and asks Shane's parents if Ilya can stay with their family while he's gone. Ilya's older brother, Alexei,

is away at college so the house will be empty without Ilya's father there. Ilya has spent the night a handful of times at their house, and Shane's mother has even started driving him to and from practices when she finds out that his house on the way. Shane's parents instantly agree. They like Ilya. He always helps with the dishes when he stays over and compliments his mother's cooking. They're happy Shane has a close friend, his mother even admitting one night that she was worried that Shane had never been very close with anyone before Ilya.

A month together feels like a lifetime for Shane, especially after a long summer of not seeing Ilya.

Shane's father drags up an old twin mattress from the basement and places it on the other side of Shane's bedroom. When Shane helps his mother make the bed and promises to let Ilya use his bed for his stay, his mother pauses awkwardly and gives Shane a tight smile.

"Shane, you know we love you no matter what, right?"

He tucks the corner of the fitted sheet in and looks at her strangely. "Yes?"

"I know your father already gave you the, you know, *the* talk, but I know he didn't think to… expand on other opportunities."

Shane is baffled. He has no idea what she is trying to say. "Mom, what are you talking about?"

"With Ilya staying here for a month, and the two of you sharing a bedroom, I just wanted to make sure that you both are practicing safe sex. I know –"

"*Stop*! No. Please stop." He can't even look at his mother. "Do you think Ilya is, like, my boyfriend or something?"

The thought makes Shane want to throw up.

"*Oh*," his mother says. When Shane takes a peek at her face, she is blushing too. Shane thinks it's only fair. "I'm sorry if I assumed. I just thought –"

"I'm not –" Shane stops himself, swallowing and nearly choking before he can even finish the sentence. The last word isn't needed for her to understand.

Shane's mother carefully puts the last pillowcase cover on. "We can pretend this never happened," she says.

"Please."

*

Shane doesn't bring up the conversation he had with his mother, but he suddenly feels guilty about everything he does around Ilya. Even when his mother isn't there, he feels like he's constantly doing something that is crossing the line in their friendship. He wonders if Ilya has wondered similar thought as his mother.

The question is mostly answered halfway through Ilya's month long stay when he's trying to convince Shane to sneak out to go to a party that someone in their grade is throwing while their parents are out of town.

"We are not doing that. I'm serious," he tells Ilya, arms crossed over his chest.

Ilya is digging through his suitcase for a shirt to wear. "Please, Hollander, do not be boring. I need this. Alexa will be at party."

Alexa is Ilya's current girl that is a friend, but not a girlfriend, but definitely someone that he sleeps with. Shane has already had to uncomfortably sit through three blowjob stories.

"Do you understand how much trouble I would get it in if my parents find out? And they will, I know it."

"Oh my god," Ilya groans. "Stop worrying. They are already asleep. We go out this window and come back in a few hours. They will not know."

"I don't want to get into trouble."

Although he is worried about getting in trouble, Shane mostly just doesn't want to go. Ilya is more introverted than him. He has more friends. He plays drinking games. He dances and pulls girls in so they can lewdly grind on him. He was more fun than Shane. The last party Shane had gone to with Ilya, he had spent the entire night miserable.

When Ilya finds the shirt he must've been looking for, he slips off the one he has on. Shane immediately looks away, as if he hasn't seen Ilya's bare torso a million times already. He thinks about what his mother had assumed about the two of them. Had she seen Shane staring at Ilya too long? What did she see that made her think the two of them were not only dating, but also having sex?

"Okay, so what? You get in trouble. Big deal. You never do."

"Because I never do bad things!"

Ilya gives him a hard look. He says something in Russian but Shane only understands the first part of it.

"*What does that mean*?" Shane asks, restless. He really doesn't want a Russian lesson right now, and he knows that Ilya only ever switches to Russian randomly like that when he's annoyed at Shane.

"This is why you are virgin."

"Fuck you!" Shane says. He's annoyed now, too.

Ilya is relentless when it comes to teasing Shane about his lack of expeience. He's made it clear that he thinks it's pathetic that Shane is sixteen years old and still hasn't even kissed a girl yet. Shane has debated just making up a fake story to get him off his case, but he knows he's not a good liar, especially when it comes to Ilya.

Ilya walks over to where Shane is standing and puts his face only a few inches from Shane's. He smells like the cheap cologne he bathed himself in a couple minutes ago.

"Do you even like them?"

"Who?"

Ilya smirks. "Girls. Do you like girls?"

His mother's words coupled with Ilya's gaze makes Shane squirm uncomfortably. "Yes," he chokes out. "Obviously."

Ilya shrugs and then finally backs off a few steps. "Okay. Then, let's go. I will find you a good girl for you to sleep with."

"Are you fucking serious right now? *No*. I don't need your help finding a girl to sleep with," he hisses at Ilya.

"*I'm trying to help you*," Ilya hums. "Some guys on team laugh at you, you know."

Shane is suddenly furious. He wishes he could yell at Ilya, but his parents are right down the hall. "You told them?"

"They guessed!"

"And you confirmed?"

Ilya shakes his head. "No. But it's obvious. *I told them that you're just shy. It's better they think you're shy than something else*."

Shane feels his body go cold with fear. "*Like what*?"

He already knows the answer. It's not the first time that he's heard one of the guys joking about it. He's denied it a handful of times, but the accusations only felt like jokes until right now. It feels like Ilya is testing him. Shane refuses to stand down.

"Maybe you do not like girls."

"Fuck you," Shane spits at him. His eyes are watery. He doesn't know why this is bothering him so much. "Go to your fucking party and leave me alone. I don't want to go, and I don't want to have sex with some random girl just because I can. I'm sorry my confidence doesn't depend on the number of girls willing to sleep with me."

Ilya looks at him for a long minute. Shane realizes he's holding his breath. His eyes are still wet but he refuses to cry in front of Ilya, especially about something as meaningless as this. He only lets go of his breath when Ilya finally wordlessly turns and starts to unlock the window.

*

The truth is simple: Shane has thought about it before.

Similar to the way that he initially avoided Ilya when he first moved to Canada, Shane has avoided the topic because it would just be another thing that makes him different. He's pushed down the train of thought that would eventually lead him to the conclusion that he could be gay.

His mother noticed it. Ilya noticed it. Shane is terrified that it's written all over his face for everyone to see, and he's been the only one who hasn't noticed it yet.

If he's being honest with himself, which is rare, Shane has always been indifferent about girls. When someone on the team passed around an old copy of Playboy, Shane had left it untouched at the bottom of the backpack for a week and then handed it off to someone else. When half of his team spent the night at one of his friend's house after a game and used the computer in the den to pull up porn, Shane had watched the reactions of everyone else and tried to act the same way. He didn't understand why none of it interested him. He chalked it up to his intense interest in hockey. He didn't have time to care about girls.

Shane knows there is more to it than that, though. He remembers the time a couple months ago that he blushed and stuttered his words when he talked to a stranger at the gym about his routine because the man was beautiful. He remembers his strange obsession with Ottawa's goalie for years, and the time he woke up from a bizarre dream of the two of them. Worse than everything, he knows that he has looked at Ilya before and thought *maybe*.

He feels horrible about it. Ilya is his best friend. Shane knows he's not allowed to get distracted by Ilya's hands or the way he walks around the locker room in only his briefs. He tells himself that he's just jealous of Ilya's confidence, his easygoingness that Shane could never replicate.

Shane can't sleep the night that Ilya sneaks out to the party. Ilya finally returns a little after two in the morning. He smells like cigarettes and alcohol, but Shane can tell he's trying to be quiet.

Shane tells himself that he'll get a girlfriend soon.

*

It's surprisingly easy to get a girlfriend, Shane finds.

He waits until after the hockey season is over. The last thing he wants is to deal with everything while he's busy. He spends the season thinking about who he should ask. Mostly, he thinks about who would be the easiest, most convenient person to ask. He leans towards a girl in his math class that he talks to at the end of class. Usually, they check their answers, and when Shane misses classes for a game, she happily offers him his notes.

Shane also makes sure to ask her out before Ilya goes back to Russia for the summer.

After a couple dates to different chain restaurants in town, he asks her to be his girlfriend exactly the way that Ilya had told him to. She giggles and squeals and nods her head at least a

hundred times. Shane smiles brightly only because he's impressed at how easy it all is after years of building it up.

He buys her little presents. He writes down the things she's interested in and then takes her out to do things like painting a mug or to a movie with an actor she likes in it or a hike an hour away. He introduces her to his parents, and he brings over flowers to her mother when he meets her parents. It's easy. Almost laughably easy.

The last time Shane sees Ilya before his flight to Russia, Ilya endlessly needles him for information on how far he's gone with her.

"*I'm not telling you*," Shane tells him in Russian because his parents are in the other room making dinner. "*Don't be gross*."

He hasn't had as much time to study Russian since he started dating, but he doesn't need to work as hard to understand anymore after years of talking to Ilya and exchanging letters.

"*You don't have to tell me*," Ilya says. He's smiling deviously. "*Just nod if you've done it.*"

To Shane's horror, Ilya holds up one finger and gives him a long look. When Shane doesn't react, he holds up two fingers. Again, Shane refuses to play his dumb game. Ilya then puts up a third finger and his eyes go wide.

"I'm not playing," Shane finally tells him. "*You are a child*."

"*Please tell me you have kissed her at least*."

Shane groans and feels his face go hot. It's enough of a yes for Ilya, and he is instantly grinning and jostling into Shane playfully. Although he has technically kissed her, it had felt like it happened to someone else, like he was watching it in a movie. He had hoped that maybe if he kissed her, he would feel something more for her, but nothing came. He's still hopelessly waiting.

"*I knew it! What are you waiting for? Do more*."

Shane answers truthfully. "*I'm nervous*."

"*Don't get her pregnant. That's all that matters*."

"Alright, we are done talking about that," Shane says, flipping Ilya off.

Shane's mother walks into the room and looks between the two of them suspiciously. "Talking about what?"

"Shane's weak backhand. He is embarrassed," Ilya answers easily.

Shane rolls his eyes and then listens to Ilya and his mother talk about hockey for at least a half hour.

*

That summer, Shane doesn't lose his virginity.

Instead, He spends another summer swallowing down how much he misses Ilya. He starts reading more in Russian because he wants to strengthen his vocabulary. He goes on runs for hours, thoughts sifting endlessly despite how loud he turns up his music. He goes on dates with his girlfriend. She asks Shane to park all the way in the back of the parking lot for the tennis courts and doesn't say why until she undoes Shane's pants and sucks his dick. A week later, he jerks off in the shower thinking about going down on a man instead of his girlfriend.

He feels so bad about it that he avoids all of her calls and eventually only goes out to dinner with her again so that he can break up with her. He says he needs to concentrate on hockey. She cries the entire drive home and Shane gives her an awkward pat on the shoulder before she jerks away and slams the door shut to his car and runs to her front door.

*

Ilya comes back from Russia in a bad mood like he does every year.

The two of them are out on a run the night before their first day of grade eleven. Shane had spent the past few weeks anticipating Ilya's prodding questions about his girlfriend, but they never come. Instead, Ilya is intensely quiet. They usually chat while they run, but today, they listen to music and don't say anything.

When they are taking a break and stretching, Shane finally asks, "Did something happen in Russia?"

He tries to avoid asking about his summers in Russia. He can't stand this silence, though. He's spent the past couple months waiting to see his best friend again, but he feels like they are in the middle of a fight now.

"No."

"Okay," Shane huffs. "What do you even do when you're back there?"

Shane has asked the question before, but Ilya usually finds a way to avoid answering it. Today, he looks at Shane blankly and says, "*I visit my mother's grave. I get yelled at by my whole family. I feel so sad that I start to understand why my mother killed herself."*

Shane feels like Ilya has just punched him in the face. He wonders for a few seconds if he's translating everything correctly. He knows what Ilya said, though. He knows because Ilya's eyes are wet and he's staring into the distance darkly. Ilya never told Shane his mother killed herself. He's never even mentioned being that sad.

"Fuck." Shane runs a hand through his hair. He doesn't know what to say. "Ilya, *I'm so sorry. I –*"

"Please don't. I want to run, so let's run."

Shane does what he wants, but he feels a horrible ache in his chest for the rest of the week. Ilya seems completely back to normal the next day at school, but Shane can't help the way he

keeps staring at him. He debates asking his parents what to do. He's terrified that Ilya might do something bad.

He can't lose his best friend.

In the end, Shane writes a letter to Ilya in homeroom where he tells him about his girlfriend, the night at the tennis courts, and when he broke up with her, and then at the end he casually writes, *Can you please tell me when you feel sad? I want to help. I can't lose you, Ilya. Please please please let me try to help.*

A few days later, Ilya passes him a letter that Shane unfolds hastily in the bathroom between classes. At the end of the letter, he wrote, *I will not go back to Russia next year. I will not kill myself. Please don't worry.*

*

Shane worries.

The year goes by quickly, though. Shane checks out a book at the public library about depression and thinks he can fix Ilya by himself. Junior hockey starts. Scouts are already interested in Shane and Ilya. They play harder than they've ever played. If they aren't at the rink, they're working out or studying. Ilya stops pestering Shane to lose his virginity. The future suddenly feels real, and it terrifies Shane. The draft rumors keep him up at night. The pressure of everything is overwhelming, but it's eased knowing that Ilya is going through the same thing. They can rely on each other.

Shane knows it's not exactly the same, though. When they are in Saskatchewan for a big game, they lose. It was a close game, but the entire team is quiet and sullen after. Shane's parents hug him and his mother immediately starts in on how dirty the other team played. Shane only half-listens because Ilya is talking with his father a few feet away.

Ilya's father is talking to him in stern Russian. He thinks that nobody can understand him. Ilya has never mentioned that Shane spent years studying Russian so that he could speak to his son in his native language. He doesn't know that Shane is listening, his hands curling into fists at his sides as his father berates him for everything Ilya did on the ice.

Shane's mother stops talking when she realizes that Shane is distracted. She knows that Ilya doesn't have a good relationship with his father. She's had to drive Ilya around for years because his father didn't care enough to show up for him. Ilya has stayed over at the Hollander house night after night to avoid being alone in his house. Shane knows he'll probably spend the entire evening later ranting about Ilya's father's unfair critiques of Ilya. Instead of badgering Shane about it being rude to eavesdrop, Shane's mother shares a look with Shane's father and says nothing.

Although he doesn't catch every word perfectly, Ilya's father says the last sentence slow and cruel and Shane can understand every word easily.

"*You are just like your mother: a disappointment*."

When Shane looks over, Ilya is storming away. Shane looks at his mother to find her nodding in Ilya's direction. "Go," she says.

Dropping his gear, he rushes after Ilya. He hopes that Ilya father doesn't notice him following after his son. If Shane's parents had wondered about Ilya and Shane together, he wonders if the thought ever crossed Ilya's father's mind. Shane knows that the reaction wouldn't be the same as his parents.

He finds Ilya in an empty bathroom. He's gripping the edge of the sink and breathing heavily. He doesn't look up when Shane walks in and keeps a safe distance from him.

"Are you okay?" Shane asks, unsure where to start. He's not even sure if it's better to talk in Russian or English.

Ilya lets out a sarcastic, breathy laugh. He still won't look at Shane. "I'm great. Thanks."

"Ilya, none of what he said is true. You're a great player. You're not a disappointment. At all."

When Ilya looks up at him, there is a tear rolling down his cheek. He looks so small. Shane doesn't know how to help, not really, but he hopes that he's doing the right thing when he steps over and pulls Ilya into a tight hug. It's what his parents would do for him.

Usually, this kind of embrace is reserved for post-goal victories on the ice, Ilya's body smashing against his as they erupt in giddy laughter. This is completely different. Shane can feel Ilya fist the back of his shirt, his hot breath on Shane's shoulder.

"*She was not a disappointment*," Ilya says, voice choked. "*She was beautiful and smart and kind*."

Shane wants to instantly tell him that he that he is all those things too. He wants to tell him that although Shane never met Ilya's mother, he knows he got all his best features from her. He wants to hold him tighter, fearful that he might disappear, and beg him not to follow her.

Instead, he says, "*A little bit longer. A year and a half. Then, we'll play in the NHL, and you won't ever have to see him again*."

This does seem to calm Ilya down. He sags a little in Shane's grip and lets out a long breath. They stand like that for a few minutes longer. The only reason that Shane finally breaks away is because he hears footsteps outside the bathroom door. He doesn't need for someone to walk in one them like this. They already get enough jokes about how close they are.

"If you don't have to get back to the hotel right away, we're going out to eat at a restaurant that Dad heard was good."

Ilya shrugs, his hands now tucked away in his pockets. Shane knows that Ilya spent years feeling guilty about always crashing their family dinners because Ilya had nowhere else to go. Shane wants to shake his shoulders and yell at him that he can't crash their dinners because he *is* part of their family. They all want him there.

“Come on,” Shane says, trying to sound upbeat. “You can order chicken strips, and then you and Mom can bitch about every player on the other team.”

“Are you sure it is okay if I come?” Ilya finally asks, a small on his face.

Shane nods. He doesn’t even have to ask.

*

It’s Shane’s eighteenth birthday before he knows it. Shane’s mother invites some friends and family members to the house and throws a modest surprise birthday party for him. Shane’s grateful, but he spends the night nervously filtering through everyone who showed up to the party. Ilya refuses to leave Shane’s side the entire night. His presence makes him feel like he can breathe properly and gives him the energy to get through all the small talk. He feels his mother’s eyes on him, though. He knows what she is most likely thinking about the two of them spending the entire night together.

When everyone finally leaves, Ilya is still there. It’s not even a question that Ilya is staying the night. Shane flops onto his bed and almost falls asleep while Ilya changes out of his jeans. He’s exhausted. All the talking and smiling has put him on edge. When he cracks open his eyes, Ilya is unscrewing a bottle of vodka.

“Where did you get that from?” Shane mumbles, sitting up. He knows that Ilya had a thing with a teammate’s older sister a couple months ago and she has been buying him alcohol ever since.

Ilya waves his hand like it isn’t important and then sits on the bed next to Shane. He forces the bottle into Shane’s hand by using his own hand to wrap Shane’s around it. His touch lingers for a moment too long. “*Happy birthday, Shanya*.”

Shane knows the nickname is mostly a joke, but he loves when Ilya uses it. He’s so exhausted from the day that he doesn’t even fight Ilya on the alcohol in his parents’ house. He brings it to his lips, winces on the swallow, and listens to the quiet laugh from Ilya as he watches. When he hands back the bottle, their fingers touch again.

He never used to think so much about every single touch. Before he was forced to examine their relationship, he would have never thought twice about their fingers touching. Now, Shane feels warm at the barest hint of contact between the two of them. He finds himself casually leaning in for more. It’s greedy, Shane knows. He doesn’t want to think about what it means.

“You had a good birthday party, yes?” Ilya asks after he takes a sip. He swallows it like he’s drinking water.

Shane nods. “Just…a lot.”

“It’s over now,” Ilya says. “Just you and me.”

They spend the next hour passing the bottle between the two of them and talking about the upcoming year. The draft is soon. It feels like if they talk about it out loud, they'll jinx it. Shane knows they'll be drafted, though. They'll both be training for the NHL in a year's time. If it wasn't for the burn of the alcohol, the thought would make him feel sick. Instead, they go back and forth about what team they want to be drafted to and what cities would be the best to live in.

"It's finally happening," Shane says, nearly breathless. He allows himself to lean against Ilya and drop his head on his shoulder. "It's finally paying off."

"*I told you it would*," Ilya says in Russian. They do this when they get tired. Ilya will speak in Russian, and Shane will speak in English.

"Things will be so different." Shane feels like he needs to cherish the next few months. He's not even sure he'll be drafted to the same team as Ilya. The thought of playing hockey without him terrifies Shane. As excited as he is for the next part of his life, he wants to hold onto this year a little longer.

"*Yeah, we'll be fucking rich*," Ilya says. He's already gone over the cars he plans on buying during his first year in the league. "*And famous. And girls will throw themselves at us*."

Shane wants to point out that Ilya has always had girls throwing themselves at him. He doesn't want to talk about girls with Ilya right now. He wants to keep talking about hockey.

Ilya ruins it when he quietly adds, "*Maybe men, too*."

"Ilya, seriously, fuck off," Shane warns. Shane can't tell if Ilya says it because he thinks he's being inclusive for Shane's sake or if he's trying to rile Shane up. He says the next part in Russian because he hates the thought of his parents somehow overhearing it. "*I already told you. I'm not gay*."

"Okay." Ilya takes a sip of the bottle before saying, "*Maybe I wouldn't mind men throwing themselves at me.*"

Shane immediately thinks that he didn't hear him correctly. "What?"

"*This summer, back in Russia, I hooked up with a guy a couple times*," he admits. He won't look at Shane, eyes focused on something across the room.

"Oh." There are a million thoughts running through Shane's mind when he hears this. He wishes he was sober for the conversation. He can't concentrate properly. All he can think about is how he knows how dangerous it is to be gay in Russia. He wants to berate Ilya for doing something so risky. He can't get anything else out of his mouth, though.

"*Is that okay*?" Ilya asks.

Shane doesn't know exactly what he means by the question. Is it okay that Ilya is possibly into men? Is it okay that he slept with a man in Russia? Is it okay that he told Shane about all

of this while he was drunk and warm and happy on his birthday and now he feels restless and that his heart is beating too hard?

“Sure. Of course.”

When Shane finally meets his gaze, Ilya is biting his bottom lip with a searching look on his face. Shane feels like this entire conversation has gotten away from him. He needs to fix it.

“I hope I stay in Canada,” he says to change the subject.

Ilya nods once, clearly disappointed, but he doesn’t bring up the topic again.

*

On the day of the draft, Shane is a mess.

Once he is dressed, he paces around the hotel room in his crisp suit while his parents try to calm him down. It’s impossible. Ilya is texting his phone, but Shane can’t be bothered to look at the messages. He feels more nervous for today than an actual game. The decisions have already been made. Shane should be able to stop worrying, but he feels sick with anxiety.

When they arrive at the event early, Shane slips away from his parents and gestures vaguely in the opposite direction. He doesn’t need to say what he’s doing. It should be obvious by now. Ilya is where he said he would be, across the street and around the corner. He’s leaning against the building and smoking a cigarette. When he spots Shane, he grins and takes one last drag before dropping the cigarette to the sidewalk and toeing it out.

“I’m gonna throw up,” Shane tells him.

“Don’t be a baby,” Ilya ribs. “Today is good day.”

“I’m serious. I might actually throw up.”

“Oh my god, Shanya. If you must, please do before we go in.”

Shane throws him an annoyed look. He fidgets with the sleeves of his suit. It’s too warm outside for it. Ilya reaches out and straightens his tie. When he’s done, he lays his palm flat against it for a few seconds before pulling away.

“You look good. Very professional.” Then, he adds, “Perfect number two choice material.”

“Fuck you,” Shane says, no venom to the words. Instead, he smiles at Ilya. He wants to get emotional, tell him that he doesn’t know how he would be able to do any of this without Ilya at his side. He doesn’t say it, and hopes that his smile is enough to get the message across.

The day goes by in a blur after that.

He is happy with how it all plays out, despite the crushing knowledge that he did technically come in second place. The only relief is knowing that his best friend in the entire world is number one. Shane knows that Ilya deserves it. He tells himself it could’ve gone either way

with how closely matched they are. He tries not to linger on it, and instead sits through endless hours of talking with important people in the league with a cheesy smile pasted on his lips. He's grateful his mother can do most of the talking.

When he spots Ilya across the room doing the same thing, he smiles at him. Ilya smirks back and rolls his eyes. He tries not to think about the fact that Montreal and Boston are rivals and soon Ilya and Shane will have to compete *against* each other instead of *with* each other.

Eventually, Shane's family finds Ilya and his father. They make small talk while Shane and Ilya sip champagne. After years of knowing each other, Shane's parents aren't offended by Ilya's father's clipped responses.

When there is a lull in the conversation, Ilya's father turns to Ilya and says, "*I'll be right back. Don't embarrass yourself*."

Shane looks down, trying to not make it obvious he understands his words. He can't help but to be angry that even today, when Ilya's on top of the world, he can still talk down to him.

"*A few more months*," Shane reminds him quietly, Shane's parents not asking what they are saying.

"*Not soon enough*."

They mingle for another hour, the evening winding down. Shane is ready to leave. He feels more tired than he has ever felt after such an overwhelming day. All he wants to do is go back to the hotel and stare at wall to give his brain a break.

"*This is so boring*," Shane says to Ilya after someone finally leaves them alone. Shane can't even remember her name. He thinks she was important, though. Everyone is important. "*I can't meet another person*."

Shane usually enjoys being able to speak freely in public with Ilya, but he suddenly regrets ever saying anything in Russian when he realizes Ilya's father has walked up behind them.

"*It is an important night for both of you*," he says. Shane forces himself not to look over to Ilya. His father looks at Shane curiously. "*I didn't know you spoke Russian.*"

He doesn't know what to say, mouth suddenly dry.

"*He learned it in school*," Ilya supplies for him. "*We practice sometimes*."

It's better than Shane's honest response: he learned it because he was obsessed with the new kid from Russia and wanted to talk to him as much he could.

He looks between the two of them, eyes suddenly hard. "*I'm going back to the hotel. Be responsible*." He directs his attention to Shane when he says, "*Congratulations again on Montreal*."

Shane quietly thanks him in Russian, grateful that he doesn't forget the words because he's so nervous under his gaze. When he's far enough away, Shane slumps into Ilya and moans,

“Your dad scares me.”

Ilya laughs, but it doesn’t sound genuine.

Ilya rides back to the hotel with Shane’s family. The four of them squeeze into a cab, Shane and Ilya’s shoulders and thighs pressed together. Shane loosens his tie and leans his head on the back of the seat. He feels like he can finally breathe again.

After a round of hugs from his parents, Ilya and Shane retreat into Shane’s hotel room across from his parents’ room. The second the door closes behind them, they look at each other for a serious moment and then break into laughter. Shane feels light-headed and shaky. Ilya puts his arm around Shane’s shoulders and pulls him closer.

“We fucking did it!” he shouts at him.

Shane could cry. He’s still laughing, though. “I can’t believe it.”

“Fucking NHL.”

“*Fuck*.”

After they’ve calmed down, they slip out of their suits and lie on Shane’s bed in their undershirts and briefs. Ilya finds a movie for them to watch on the TV, but Shane falls asleep in the first twenty minutes. The last thing he remembers is Ilya laughing at something softly from beside him, close enough that Shane can feel his body heat. When he wakes up again, Ilya is bent forward collecting his suit that he’s carelessly left on the ground.

“Just stay here tonight,” Shane tells him, voice heavy with sleep. He doesn’t want for Ilya to go. He double downs in Russian. “*Stay*.”

Ilya pauses, his suit coat crumpled in his grip. He carefully puts it down on the back of the armchair next to Shane’s, clicks off the light, and gets back into bed. This time, he gets under the covers. The TV is still playing. Shane knows that Ilya likes to sleep with it on.

Before Shane falls back asleep, he whispers, “I can’t wait to beat Boston’s ass next season.”

“In your dreams,” Ilya bites back.

Chapter 2: 2010-2011

Chapter Notes

> okay this was originally meant to be only two chapters but this got away from me. i really enjoy this version. thank you for comments and kudos, as always.

From across the rink, Shane watches Ilya get punched in the face.

He keeps a distance from the mess playing out. He knows better than to go over and make it worse. He would be more worried about it if Ilya wasn't laughing with blood running down his face as one of his teammates drags him away. He's yelling at the player that punched him, and Shane is grateful he can't hear what he's saying because he knows it's obscene.

"Your boy is feral tonight," Pike says to Shane.

Shane groans. "He's not my boy."

Hayden skates away while laughing. Shane knows it's impossible to fight it. Ever since their draft, the fans have been fascinated and dismayed by their friendship. Despite limiting their public interactions, especially during the season, they can't escape the accusations that they are letting the other team win because they're soft on each other. It's only the first season, and Shane has listened to every chirp imaginable about his friendship with Ilya.

Later, after Boston loses and Shane celebrates in the locker room with his team, he walks into the arena's parking garage surprisingly upbeat. He's been anxious about the game for weeks, and even more anxious at the prospect of seeing Ilya again. He checks his cell phone for any messages from him and finds nothing. They usually go to each other's apartments when they play against each other, but they never fully formed any plans the past few days.

Shane can't bring himself to send another text message practically begging Ilya to see him only for Ilya to shrug it off and respond a week later with only a vague response.

He's digging around in his backpack for his car keys when a voice scares him.

"Took you look enough."

Ilya is leaning against the hood of his car smoking a cigarette. He laughs a little at the way Shane jumps at his voice.

"You're going to make the car smell like cigarettes," Shane complains, stopping a few feet away from Ilya.

His hair is wet and he's only in a hoodie instead of a winter coat. He must be freezing. Shane carefully steps a little closer to look at his injuries in the dim lighting of the parking garage. A car pulls past them at just the right moment to light up Ilya's face for a few seconds. He isn't bleeding anymore, but he's already developing a black eye and his nose is red and swollen. Shane reaches his hand out a little but then draws it back down.

"Jesus, Ilya," he says, frowning. "Was it worth it?"

Ilya smirks at him. "Does not even hurt."

Shane rolls his eyes and unlocks the doors. He watches Ilya slowly put on his seatbelt, a satisfied expression on his face for someone who just lost in rival territory. Shane has missed having him in his passenger seat. His fears about spending time with Ilya melt a little as he instantly connects his phone to the aux and starts playing music without asking.

"*Are Mom and Dad making dinner*?" Ilya asks, just barely audible over the rap song blaring.

Shane shakes his head. "*No, they're picking up something on the way*." His Russian feels rusty. He's been speaking more in French than he has been in Russian lately. When he speaks, something in him calms. He can still come to Ilya in his native tongue, he can bring them both back to when things weren't so complicated.

"Boo," Ilya hums. When they stop at a red light, Shane looks over to see Ilya's face bathed in a red glow. He's bobbing his head along to the music. "*Your team isn't angry at you for not celebrating with them*?"

"*I barely go out with them after games*." Shane doesn't mention that half of the guys on the team know that Shane never goes out after when they play Boston.

"*Did you see Mom during the game? She was wearing a Boston hat*."

Shane rolls his eyes. Ilya had sent Shane about a million photos of her in a Boston jersey with Ilya's last name on the back the first time she attended one of his games. "*I hope she took it off before she left the arena*."

Ilya snorts from beside him. They talk a little about the game as they slowly make their way through the city in the heavy post-game traffic. Hockey is easy to talk about with Ilya. It's a safe topic. It's easier than when Ilya asks him about his life in Montreal.

Shane's life in Montreal isn't exactly what he had hoped it would be when he was a kid, and Ilya is the last person that Shane wants to admit it to. Living alone is lonelier than he ever imagined it would be. The only thing keeping him from drowning in his barren apartment is having to be out of it most of the time because he's loaded up on practices, and games, and ad deals, and interviews, and whatever else his mother schedules for him.

It's exactly what he wanted as a kid. It's literally his dream come true. He just always thought that his dream would include more of Ilya in his life.

At first, they were constantly in contact. If they weren't able to be in the same city, they would fall asleep talking to each other on the phone after a long day. If they had a long weekend, one of them would fly out to spend time together. They made it work, even if it wasn't the same as before. In the past few weeks, though, they've barely even been texting.

Shane's not stupid. He sees the tabloids. He knows Ilya is out at clubs and bars. He knows he's leaving with beautiful girls on his arm. He knows that he has better things to do than talk to his childhood friend. Especially when his childhood friend is now technically one of his biggest rivals.

Shane didn't expect to see him tonight, and now that he's here, smelling like cigarettes and his cinnamon scented body wash, Shane feels unsure how to navigate the night.

His parents help. They've driven over from Ottawa to watch their game. True to Ilya's word, his mother is wearing a Hollander jersey, but a Boston toque. Shane smiles when he sees it, and Ilya is quick to grab it from the table when his mother takes it off. He comes up to Shane and slips it on his head, right over his eyes. Before Shane can stop him, he's taking pictures on his phone.

"Oh, this is good," Ilya says, his phone exploding with a loud shutter noise. "Your team will hate these."

Shane rips the hat off and flips him off. "Delete those now. I'm serious."

Ilya laughs and lets Shane run after him around the apartment until he stands behind Shane's mother who is unpacking their dinner.

"Can you two please act your age," she huffs.

"Do not send those to anyone, *asshole*."

His mother scowls, still blocking Ilya. "No cursing in Russian, Shane."

"Mom, *he* started it!"

"He won't send anyone the pictures," she says with finality. "Except me. Now, let's eat."

Ilya gives him a smug smile and helps his mother set the table. They spend the entire meal talking about the game. It's mostly Ilya and his mother, Shane and his father leaning back and commenting every once a while. Shane needs to watch the game over before he can really analyze it.

He zones out partway through, eyes dropping to his dinner plate. He shouldn't feel guilty for indulging in takeout after a game, especially a game he's helped win, but he stares longingly at the last bits of rice and chicken bathed in rich curry. He thinks about the two pieces of warm garlic naan he had devoured so quickly he barely got to appreciate them. He'll make up for it tomorrow.

After dinner, they sit in Shane's living room and Ilya tells them about his life in Boston. He carefully avoids his playboy nights and the worsening conditions of his father. He makes

Shane's parents laugh with stories of locker room pranks and riling up players on the ice. Shane sits quietly across the room. He feels strangely disconnected from the entire evening. Again, it's exactly what he wanted, but he feels miserable.

At the end of the night, when Shane is showing his parents to the spare bedroom, his father corners him in the hallway.

"Are you doing okay, bud?" he asks quietly, a hand on Shane's shoulder.

Shane nods. He had hoped it wasn't obvious. "Yeah. Why?"

"You're just…quiet tonight. I thought you'd be more excited after winning."

"Just tired."

His father nods. "Let me know if you ever need to talk about anything, okay?"

Shane swallows thickly, not able to make eye contact. He doesn't want to bother his parents with his problems. He knows they are busy. Everyone is busy. Shane will eventually be fine. If he can wade through another couple months, things will settle down. They'll get easier. He tries to convince himself this every time he's in the middle of a panic attack, eyes closed and heart pounding.

When he goes back out to the living room, Ilya is gone. Shane thinks for a moment that he's left, and his heart sinks. When he looks across the room to the front door, his shoes are still there. Shane quickly pads to his bedroom. Ilya is lounging on his bed, head lolling off the side as he types something on his phone.

"You want me to sleep on the couch?" Shane asks quietly.

Ilya drops the phone to his chest and frowns at him, still upside down. "Why do that?"

Shane doesn't want to tell him that they aren't thirteen anymore. That two grown men don't typically share a bed. That when they do this still, Shane feels like a horrible person with how badly he wants to reach out and pull Ilya into his chest, breathe in the scent of his shampoo, tangle their legs together.

"I don't know," Shane finally says. He's too tired to argue or explain himself. He feels the weight of the day on him as he sags into the doorway.

Ilya finally sits up. "Why are you angry at me?"

Shane freezes. "I'm not angry."

"Okay," Ilya says, clearly not believing him. "Not angry. What then? This mood. What is it? You won tonight. You do not get to be in bad mood."

He doesn't want to lie to Ilya. He gives him one truth, the one that he can admit for now. He switches to Russian, though. It's an obvious tell that he doesn't want his parents to overhear it. He feels guilty not saying it in English, like it needs to be a secret. "*I miss you*."

Ilya stands from the bed and pushes Shane into a hug. "*I'm right here*."

Shane leans into the touch. He tells himself he can have a minute, and then he'll pull apart. "*Sometimes*."

"*We'll have more time together once the season ends*."

"*I know*."

Shane feels like a clingy girlfriend. He hates feeling so dependent on Ilya. He wishes it was easier for him, like it seems to be for Ilya. He never says he misses Shane. He has new friends and a new life in Boston.

After what is admittedly longer than a minute, he pulls away from Ilya and forces a tight smile. "When does your flight leave tomorrow?"

They get ready for bed discussing the plans for the rest of the week. Ilya has to leave early in the morning, and Shane will be at the airport a few hours after he leaves to go to a different city. He thinks of the month they spent with each other in high school. Those days seemed so much simpler.

When Shane slips off his shirt and digs through his drawer for a fresh pajama shirt, Ilya comes up behind him and gently presses his finger into a bruise that's forming on Shane's side. Shane jumps at the touch and tries to play it off like it hurts, and not that Ilya's hands on him make him skittish.

"Did I do this?" His eyebrows are scrunched together in worry. He doesn't look like he regrets it, and he definitely doesn't apologize because he doesn't need to, but it does seem to remind the both of them that they are no longer teammates.

Shane shrugs. He's almost certain that it was Ilya, but it doesn't matter now. Ilya had checked him at one point during the game, a sharp laugh accompanying it.

Ilya drags his fingers down the length of the bruise. Shane breathes shakily, pretending to be too distracted looking aimlessly for the perfect shirt to even notice the touch. He pulls one out at random finally and side-steps just a little to get away from Ilya's touch and slip on the shirt.

"I can make us pancakes tomorrow if you want," Shane says. His skin feels hot from Ilya's touch.

Ilya is staring at him darkly when Shane turns to him. Shane doesn't know what to make of the expression. The touch. The entire evening. He feels like Ilya can tell that Shane is struggling with some sort of fascination or obsession or both of Ilya. It's embarrassing. Shane knows he'll get over it, but he wishes it wasn't so obvious.

After Ilya admitted to sleeping with a man in Russia the summer before the draft, Shane's brain flipped a switch. He found himself thinking deeply about how it happened, what it was like, what led Ilya to it. Ilya was always so into women that Shane's brain could hardly

comprehend anything else. He wondered what they did, how far they took it. And, with his cock in his hand, Shane spent some evenings thinking about what types of sounds Ilya made or what his lips looked like wrapped around someone's cock.

It only grew worse when Ilya casually started slipping his new encounters into the mix. A few months ago, he casually mentioned sleeping with another man, someone nearly ten years older than Ilya. Another night, more recent, the two of them slightly buzzed at his apartment after a rough game, Ilya nonchalantly joked that he liked swallowing when he goes down on a guy, like the afterthought wasn't supposed to infect Shane's brain.

Shane can't deal with it. He tries his best to shut it down as politely as he can without feeling like an asshole who doesn't accept his best friend.

"Protein pancakes?" Ilya asks after too much time has passed.

"Whatever you want."

"Not protein pancakes. They are disgusting."

The two of them slip into bed, the space feeling smaller than ever before.

*

Shane is ready to leave. All of his things are at his feet. He has his shoes on. His phone and wallet and keys are all safely stowed in his pockets. All he needs to do is unlock the door and head out. It should be easy. It's not even a particularly busy day. He can't move, though, frozen with one arm pressed against the door to keep him upright.

He had talked to his mother this morning after his run. Nothing was unusual about the call. She went through his schedule for the next couple weeks. She talked about the Reeboks deal and the new box of clothing and shoes that would be at his apartment tomorrow and that he should plan to send it off to be laundered right away. Towards the end, she gave her two cents about his game a couple days ago that they lost. Then, as if she knew maybe it was a little harsh, she made a passing comment about how proud she is of Shane, how much of an inspiration he is for little Asian-Canadians all over the country. She mentioned Ilya. She's worried about him and his father. Shane knows they talk without him around now.

After Shane had finally hung up because he was going to be late for practice if he didn't, he tried to forget the entire conversation. He tried not to linger even on one sentence or one knowing pause because he knew he would spiral.

It doesn't matter how hard he tried, though, because he still ends up at his front door hyperventilating and sweating. He knows his mother isn't trying to pressure him. He knows that he is overthinking everything. He feels like he's drowning, though. Ever since he moved out, his anxiety has found new ways to overtake him. The last thing he wants to be doing is standing at the door when he needs to leave thinking that maybe he is actually dying and his heart is about to stop pounding in his chest.

It's not a heart attack. No matter how many times he runs through a checklist of memorized symptoms, he knows in the back of his brain that it's only a panic attack. Now, he tries to run through the ways to calm down that he's Googled a handful of desperate times.

He's supposed to focus on things. Shane turns around and leans against the door, eyeing his apartment. Five things, he tells himself. The framed picture on the wall of him and his parents on the day of his high school graduation. The ceramic dish with light green leaves painted on it that his grandmother had given him for Christmas years ago from Japan that he now uses as a coin dish. The blanket thrown over the back of the couch. Ilya's dirty socks still on the ground from the last time he was over.

The thought of Ilya instantly derails his process. All he wants to do is reach into his pocket and call him. Shane knows that he would answer. He would talk him through whatever is going on, even if he doesn't understand it, even if Shane has never brought it up to him before.

In the end, he has to talk himself out of calling Ilya a few more times before he finally unlocks the door and leaves.

*

Two days before Christmas, Shane picks Ilya up from the airport in Montreal.

Shane tries hard not to think about the fact that Ilya doesn't just fly home without him. He flies to Shane first because he wants to stay the night at Shane's apartment before they drive over to Ottawa together in the morning. Shane hasn't mentioned anything about how off-kilter he has felt the past few months, but he wonders if Ilya sees it and he's only here because he's worried about Shane. He knows it's unrealistic, but he doesn't know why else Ilya is here and he doesn't want to ask.

"Did you eat already?" Shane asks as they come through his front door.

Ilya rolls his suitcase over the threshold and drops his backpack next to it. "Yeah. Offer me a drink."

Shane tries to keep himself from smiling. "I don't have any."

"You are so bad at lying," Ilya tells him knowingly. "It's almost sad."

There is a nice bottle of Russian vodka at the back of Shane's pantry. He only touches it when Ilya is over. Ilya knows exactly where it is, and he knows where Shane keeps his glasses. He knows that Shane hates straight vodka, and that he doesn't want to drink during the season, but Ilya still pours him some and shoves it across the counter after he's done taking a shower.

"It's Christmas," Ilya says, rolling his eyes when he sees Shane hesitating.

Shane tries to sip it like Ilya does, but he still scrunches up his face like he did in high school. A year ago, they had to do this in secret and now Shane is browsing the aisles at LCBO like he's been doing it for years.

“How is your dad doing?” Shane asks before he can help it.

During their last year of high school, Ilya’s father started acting strange. At first, it had been small things that Ilya had ignored. The summer before they started with the league, his father had called Ilya not knowing where he was or how he got there. All Ilya could focus on was that he called Ilya instead of his brother.

Shane knows it has gotten worse, but Ilya won’t talk to him about it. All the information he gets on it is from Shane’s mother. She has been helping Ilya with it and checks up on his father from time to time. Shane tries not to seethe with what feels like a fucked-up version of jealousy that his mother somehow gets access to something his best friend won’t talk to him about.

Unsurprisingly, Ilya shuts him down immediately. “*We’re not talking about that*.” He grabs his glass and the bottle and walks out of the kitchen.

Shane follows him out into the living room and finds Ilya slumped into the couch. When he sees Shane giving him a hard look, he sighs. “Please. I want to have good night.”

“Okay, yeah. We can,” Shane says, sitting across from him. “I’m just worried about you.”

Shane tries not to think about the one time Ilya told him he thought of hurting himself like his mother had. It still makes him breathless with fear. He knows Ilya is doing better, but it doesn’t stop Shane from being haunted by the way Ilya can get.

“*You* are worried about *me*?” Ilya asks, scoffing.

“What is that supposed to mean?” He stares down into his glass. He knows Ilya can see right through him. When he was younger, he liked that Ilya seemed to be the only person to understand him. Now, he hates it. He doesn’t want Ilya to just somehow know everything without Shane saying a word. He could be wrong. Maybe Ilya doesn’t understand him as well as he thinks he does.

Ilya shakes his head and finishes what is left in his glass. He starts pouring himself more and says, “*You just need to get laid*.”

“*How is that any of your business*?”

“*I thought I was still your friend*.”

Shane has wanted to say the same thing to him for months now. “You are. Always.”

“Okay,” Ilya says. His gaze is heavy and testing. “Then act like it.”

“It’s not my fault that I don’t know how to…do whatever the fuck you do. I can’t just find some random person and have meaningless sex.”

“It’s not that hard. You are making it complicated.”

“Stop acting like we’re the same person. We’re not. It will never be easy for me.”

“Sure. Okay. Then sleep with me. *I’m as easy as it’s going to get*.”

The room feels like it’s being turned upside down. Shane doesn’t know where to look. “Stop playing around.”

“I’m not.”

The tone of his voice terrifies Shane. He isn’t joking or making fun of Shane. He is offering what he believes is a simple solution to a problem.

“Ilya, I’m not –”

“*You can’t still be hung up on this? After all this time*?”

Shane doesn’t want to have this conversation, but he has no idea how to stop it. “*Hung up on what*?”

“*Shanya*,” Ilya starts, huffing out a long breath.

“Don’t call me that.” Shane’s brain can’t process this all. He doesn’t need that stupid, childish nickname making things worse.

“You are into men, yes? *You don’t need to be embarrassed*. *You know I don’t care*. *It’s not a big deal*.”

“*How would that not be a big deal*?” Shane hisses. “*If I was…how would that not ruin everything*?”

“*Nothing has happened to me. No one has to know. It’s your fucking business*.”

“How are you not scared?”

Ilya carefully puts his glass down on the coffee table in front of him. He leans forward towards Shane. “It’s just sex. I’m not getting married to anyone.”

There is too much happening. Between the liquor and the way they keep jumping between English and Russian, Shane can’t keep up. There is still a little vodka left in his glass. He quickly downs it, stinging at the back of his throat. He places the glass next to Ilya’s. He realizes his hands are shaking a little.

“So, do you want to?”

Shane knows what he’s talking about. He’s been stringing the conversation along if only to end up back here. “Do what?”

“Have you even kissed a man before?”

“Ilya, please.” *Don’t make me say it*, he thinks.

“That is a no, then.” Shane can hear the smirk in his words. “Do you want to kiss me?”

The question seems useless. Shane has wanted to kiss him for years, whether he could admit it to himself or not. Whether Ilya could tell or not. He's wanted this, and he's not sure if it's because he just wants to kiss a man or if he specifically wants to kiss Ilya.

"You're my best friend." It's all Shane can say.

"Is like practice."

He says it like they are back in middle school, like they're preparing themselves for their first kisses. They never did that, though. Before Shane can think of something to say that won't disrupt this entire thing but still keep the conversation going, Ilya moves so that he is sitting next to Shane on the other couch. Their knees are brushing. Shane has his hands clasped tightly on his lap.

"Look at me," Ilya says. Shane, stupid and obedient, does as he's told. "We do not have to do this. If you don't want."

Shane tells himself this could still all be some elaborate joke. The way that Ilya is looking at him, eyes hooded and mouth slightly parted. He's waiting. "I…" Shane starts, not sure what he wants to say. "Yes. Please."

Ilya kisses him. Shane expects the room to turn over again at the touch of their lips. The kiss is more of a peck, a quiet press of closed lips that reminds Shane of his awkward first kiss. When he pulls back a little, Ilya is clearly waiting for him. Shane refuses to back down. He presses their lips together again, his hand reaching for Ilya's face. His jaw is scratchy. Ilya sighs into the kiss and presses back harder.

Shane realizes painfully that he's never felt this way. He's never kissed someone and felt like he was on fire. He's never needed to kiss back before, but now he feels like he'll cry if Ilya even tries to move away. Shane quickly moves himself so that he's in Ilya's lap, his knees bracketing Ilya's leg. Ilya hisses when Shane nudges the bulge in his sweatpants. He fists at Shane's shirt to pull him even closer and then grabs at Shane's chest, pressing into the muscle in a way that makes Shane rock forward in surprise. He can feel how hard Ilya is against him, and the hot press is enough for Shane to break their kiss and groan into Ilya's neck. His hand is gripping the back of Ilya's head, fingers threaded through his curls.

"Shane," Ilya breathes, his nose nudging against Shane's temple. "Are you sure?"

Shane wants to laugh. He wonders if Ilya thinks he could even untangle himself from Shane at this point. Without answering, Shane lets his hand drag down Ilya's body, from the frantic pulse in his neck to the heat of his cock pressing against his sweatpants. He presses down, glancing up to watch as Ilya drops head against the back of the couch and hums in appreciation.

He suddenly feels unprepared for this entire encounter. Ilya has been with other men. Shane has only been with two women and had to keep his eyes closed most of the time in a frantic hope that he could keep himself hard. He tells himself it's Ilya. He could laugh at Shane, rib him in his usual manner, but he knows it's all done in that sweet, tender voice that makes Shane feel weak.

Shane would let Ilya do anything to him right now. The thought makes him breathless.

He dips his hand under the elastic of Ilya's sweatpants and briefs to grasp Ilya's cock, thumb smearing against his head.

"Fuck," Shane says, stopping himself before he can say something about how big Ilya feels. He experimentally moves his hand up and down, watching Ilya carefully as he comes undone so quickly from the touches. When he licks his lips between a heavy breath, Shane dips forward to kiss him again. It's more frantic than before, their teeth clicking, Ilya biting his lip. Shane could probably come from just the barest touches of their hips moving together, but he wants more than that.

With his free hand, Shane presses Ilya's hand against his own hard length. Shane moans into Ilya's neck, hand stilling slightly as Ilya yanks Shane's pants down slightly and then presses inside.

Shane has spent years carefully doing anything he can to give himself the upper-hand, to keep himself in control. He's found so much comfort in the control, but he finds that all he wants to do is give it away in this moment. He's never wanted more than to let someone else decide and push and pull and –

"I'm gonna come," Shane admits shakily.

Ilya's barely started touching him. Shane can't even be bothered to be embarrassed. He leans into the touch and drops his head into the crook of Ilya's neck. Nothing, not even Shane's own touch, can match the way Ilya is taking him apart so easily. He comes with his hand still wrapped around Ilya's cock. It's only once he listens to Ilya's breath hitch when Shane rocks into his orgasm that he realizes he hasn't even been jerking Ilya off.

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbles, hand moving faster than before.

Ilya's hips thrust into the touch. Something in Shane's chest grows tight at the thought of knowing he's making Ilya feel good. "*Yes*, Shane," Ilya whispers weakly. He has his eyes open now, watching Shane carefully. The sound of Shane's name in the same breath as a moan makes Shane light-headed. He knows he'll be hearing it in the back of his head for the rest of his life. The hand that had been jerking Shane off is now gripping his hip. Shane briefly wonders if he'll find a bruise there later.

When Ilya comes, his eyes squeeze shut and his face twists up for a quick moment before going slack. His come is warm against Shane's hand, and he keeps jerking him off until Ilya hisses quietly and pushes away. Shane doesn't know what to do with himself. Ilya is still breathing heavily, eyes closed. Shane wants to kiss him again, but it suddenly doesn't feel like he's allowed to. Ilya had said this was practice.

Slowly, Shane withdraws his sticky hand from Ilya's pants and holds it awkwardly in the air. "Um," he says. All his anxious thoughts seem to start back up in that moment. "I'm gonna shower. Is that, uh, okay?"

Ilya shrugs, an amused expression on his face as he watches Shane stand up. Shane doesn't look back at he rushes off to the bathroom.

In the shower, he leans against the tile and tries to swallow down the panic already rising in his chest. It was a terrible idea. It happened so fast. He doesn't know how he'll go back out there in front of his best friend. He wonders if Ilya knows now or if he's known for years that Shane has been carrying some embarrassing, twisted torch for him since they first met.

He immediately goes to his bedroom when he's finished. Thankfully, the room is empty. Shane is throwing on a pair of clean sweatpants when he hears the bathroom door click shut. Shane stands in the middle of the room and doesn't know if he should just go to bed in the guest room and let Ilya assume he can sleep in Shane's bed. Worse, he worries that they need to have some sort of a discussion about what happened.

In the end, Shane finally decides to slip into his own bed and flick the light off. He fiddles with his phone until he hears the bathroom door open. A few minutes later, Ilya cracks open the door and lingers in the doorway. Shane looks up from his phone and waits for Ilya to say something.

"Are you freaking out?" Ilya asks.

Shane doesn't know why he even bothers asking. "I can sleep in the guest room if you want."

Ilya sighs and slips into the bed next to Shane. They don't touch. Shane tries not to move, scared even the faintest touch will ruin whatever agreement they have when they share the bed.

"*It doesn't have to mean anything*," Ilya finally tells him. It calms Shane down a little. "*I wanted you to have a good first experience. That's all*."

Shane realizes then that this was a one-off. "*Thanks*."

"*Of course. Goodnight*."

*

Shane's parents act like they haven't seen the two of them in years when they arrive the next day.

The first half hour of the drive had been quiet as the two of them sipped on their coffees and watched the sun rise. After Ilya told a story about the last time he was in Montreal, the two of them spent the rest of the drive talking over each other. It felt like old times, before they started playing in the league. When they finally arrived to Shane's parents' house, they stayed in the car for an extra ten minutes so that Shane could finish a story about his first time at a club in Montreal.

His mother had finally called him to ask what they were doing, her head peeking through the front window with a worried expression. Shane rolled his eyes before assuring her that they

were coming in. Things feel easy and normal with the way that Shane's mother hugs them both tightly and runs a motherly hand through Ilya's hair. It's a little longer than usual.

Ilya stays for an hour before he gives Shane a long look and mutters, "I should probably go. Do you mind?"

"Already? Are you coming back over tomorrow?" Shane's mother asks. She abruptly starts to make him a plate of cookies to take with him.

"If I am welcome, yes."

Shane's father smiles at him. "You're always welcome, Ilya."

"*Always,*" his mother assures him.

When Ilya looks over to Shane, he smiles back at him and shrugs. He's been telling Ilya this for years. Even with the promise of him coming back tomorrow, his parents hug Ilya like they won't see him again for another year. Before Ilya walks out the door, his mother places a hand on his shoulder and quietly says, "Tell your dad that we said hello. Please let me know if you need anything. At all."

In the car, Shane feels like they are back in high school. Ilya always hated going back to his house after spending time with Shane. He'd push it off until the last possible moment and groan when they pulled into the driveway.

When they pull up, Alexei is outside smoking a cigarette.

"*Fuck*," Ilya curses in Russian. He's staring down at the cookie tray, finger poking into the cling wrap. "I don't think I can do this."

Shane wants to tell him to just come back to his house. He wants him to watch a movie with his parents and then go back to his room and sleep in his bed.

"It'll be good to check on him," he says instead. It feels cruel coming out of his mouth.

"I fucking hate him," Ilya says then, eyeing Alexei. He is still watching them as he takes drags of his cigarette.

Shane doesn't know much about Alexei. He's four years older than them, and by the time that Ilya finally shed some light on his family, he was already in his first year of college. All Shane knew about the two were that they never got along.

"You know you can come over whenever. Seriously." It's selfish to say. He knows that Ilya feels guilty not taking care of his father while he's in Boston, but he also knows how miserable he is when he's with his family. It's a complicated situation that Shane isn't sure he'll ever understand. Shane knows he's lucky to have a family like he does.

Ilya finally opens the door and starts to get out, balancing the cookie tray in one hand. Shane gets out to help him get his backpack and suitcase from the back. Alexei watches them, not moving from his spot in front of the garage.

"*Did your boyfriend make you cookies*?" Alexei asks.

Shane isn't sure if Alexei knows that he can speak Russian. Although a secret for a long time, word had spread quickly in the media that Shane Hollander was fluent in Russian after a few clips of him chirping back at Russian players went viral. Shane isn't sure if Alexei cares enough about hockey to know, but Shane does know that he cared about all the money Ilya got as his signing bonus.

"*Good to see you, too*," Ilya says sarcastically.

Shane is surprised to see that Ilya looks embarrassed, cheeks slightly tinged red. It's a rare sight. Shane wishes he could relish it, but he only feels slightly guilty for understanding Alexei's harsh words. When he closes the trunk, he isn't sure what to say to Ilya with Alexei still watching them. He knows he can't hug him.

"I don't mind picking you up if you have trouble getting the keys tomorrow," Shane says. Ilya keeps his old car here, but they both know Alexei uses it without permission. When it's clear that Ilya is uncomfortable with him lingering, Shane nods. "Right, okay. Bye, Ilya. Have a good Christmas."

Ilya doesn't say anything back to him. He starts walking to the front door. Shane's never been inside the house despite having stood in the driveway hundreds of times. Shane accepted long ago there are places and pieces of Ilya he will never know of.

"*Jesus, you are both such faggots*," Alexei spits. "*No wonder Dad forgets you so much*."

Shane slams the car door shut and quickly backs out of the driveway.

*

That night, Shane puts together a puzzle with his parents as Christmas movies play on the TV. Halfway through one of the movies, his mother makes him hot cocoa and wordlessly places it down with a coaster next to Shane. The Christmas tree skirt is lined with presents wrapped in shiny foil. Shane stares at a corner piece and wonders what Ilya is doing right now. He wonders if Ilya hates him a little for not getting what Shane has always had.

Ilya comes over the next day before dinner. Shane's father adds a plate and silverware to the table in the spot next to Shane when he hears him knock on the door. Shane expects for Ilya to be a bad mood, but he slips back into his usual childish behavior he reserves for the Hollander house. He pretends like he forgot to get Shane a Christmas present before he slowly slips out a wrapped gift from his backpack. It's wrapped sloppily, the edges too long and taped together with entirely too much tape. The paper is from a child's cartoon that Shane doesn't even recognize. When Shane unwraps it, he finds a book that he had mentioned wanting to read a couple months ago.

"You have not read it yet, right?" Ilya asks.

Shane runs his hand down the spine. The title and author's name are indented in gold. "No, not yet."

After they've unwrapped all the gifts under the tree, they settle down to watch more movies. Ilya presses against Shane on the couch as he unwraps two of the Kinder Eggs that his parents got him. He wordlessly hands Shane a piece of the chocolate before cracking open the plastic egg.

"Do you remember when you got your first one?" Shane's mother asks over the movie. She's fond of the memory, and practically brings it up every time she gifts Ilya one.

Ilya smiles warmly as he fidgets with the yellow egg. "Yes. Introduced me to best part of Canadian culture."

His mother had gotten everyone on the team one after they lost in the first season that Ilya and Shane played together. Shane remembers being so embarrassed when she passed them out. They had been too old for little consolation prizes, let alone chocolate with childish toys hidden inside of it. Ilya had never had one before, though, and was fascinated with the white chocolate on the inside and the yellow capsule. Shane's mother had been so pleased to find out that she was the first one to give him one. After that, she would often find reasons to leave one for Ilya when they were together.

Now, Shane watches fondly as Ilya assembles a little toy with rapt attention.

When it's time for bed, Shane's mother looks between the two of them on the couch and asks, "Are you sleeping in Shane's room, Ilya?"

Shane feels guilty instantly. His mother doesn't know of what happened yesterday, but it suddenly feels glaringly obvious. Ilya always shares the bed with Shane, though. He tells himself that this isn't new. He's the same Shane they've known for years.

"I will," Ilya says casually. "Even if he will hog the blankets."

Shane knocks his elbow into him. "I do not."

"He does. Sleeps in the middle of the bed, too."

"At least I don't snore."

Ilya lets out a sharp laugh. "Ah, but you do."

When Shane is getting ready for bed, he can hear his mother and Ilya talking quietly in the kitchen. He only makes out a few words here and there, but he knows it's about Ilya's father. Ilya talks so sparingly about the situation to Shane. Although it stings that he doesn't seem to trust him with the topic, he's grateful that his mother can help Ilya. Shane's always felt strangely proud that Ilya could borrow his mother when he didn't have his own.

Shane is already in bed when Ilya slips under the covers next to him.

They are quiet for a moment. Shane finally asks, "Did it go okay? With your dad?"

Ilya sighs loudly. "No. He is not well."

“Oh,” Shane says. Then, automatically, he adds, “I’m sorry.”

“There is nothing I can do.”

Shane knows he’s sending them money, but it doesn’t seem right to bring it up. He thinks about the way Alexei had talked to him when Shane dropped him off. Again, he wants to say something, but he knows Ilya doesn’t want to talk about it. They are quiet for a few minutes. Shane wonders if he missed his chance to say goodnight, but then Ilya rolls over and faces him. Shane stares back at him, suddenly nervous under his gaze.

“*You waited all day to unwrap your gifts until I got here*,” Ilya whispers. He sounds choked up, but it’s too dark to tell if his eyes are watery. “*You didn’t have to*.”

“*It’s nothing*.” No one had even thought twice about waiting for Ilya. It was a given.

Ilya leans forward and kisses Shane. He kisses back, instantly bringing his hand up to rest on Ilya’s cheek. A flood of relief hits Shane. He had tried his hardest to convince himself that he would never know this touch again, but it didn’t stop the yearning.

When Ilya pulls back a little, eyebrows scrunched in concern, Shane surges forward to kiss him again. He refuses to let this go. Shane knows he’ll be overthinking this later, but he doesn’t know how he’ll make it through the night if they don’t keep going.

Shane lets his hands roam Ilya’s body as they kiss fervently. It feels like there is a timer counting down this moment, and soon they won’t be able touch like this again. When he palms at Ilya’s cock through his briefs, Ilya hisses into a kiss.

“*You have to be quiet*,” Shane whispers, lips still hovering right above Ilya’s. His parents are right down the hall. They shouldn’t even be doing this here.

Ilya huffs out an amused sound. “*You think I’m going to be the loud one*?”

“Yes, definitely.”

Shane pushes the bedding aside so that he can crawl down the bed. He can hear Ilya’s sharp inhale when he presses his face against his clothed crotch. He lets his nose nudge the bulge, breathing him in deeply. He wants it badly, and he’s surprised to find that all his nervousness slips away when he starts to yank at Ilya’s briefs. He taps impatiently at his thigh when Ilya doesn’t automatically lift his hips. When he does, Shane slips them aside.

When he glances up for a fleeting second, Ilya is watching, his eyes wide and mouth slightly parted. Shane holds his gaze as he leans forward and takes him in his mouth. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, and every blowjob he’s ever gotten seems to fade away. Ilya slips his hands in Shane’s hair, tugging slightly. Shane lets his spit run out of his mouth and then tugs his hand up and down Ilya’s length until it’s shiny and red. Shane leans forward again, all the way down, and listens to Ilya make a choked noise.

Something burns in Shane, knowing that he is making Ilya feel good. He wants to touch himself. When he starts to get a good rhythm going, he wants to moan every time his mouth

slides down. He loves the weight on his tongue, the way that Ilya's hip cant, the soft, breathy noises Ilya is making. It's too much.

"*Don't stop*," Ilya mutters. His grip in Shane's hair tightens, makes Shane whine with his mouth full. Then, "Shit, Shane, I'm gonna—"

Shane doesn't move. He lets Ilya come into his mouth. He jerks a little, Shane thankfully able to swallow instead of choking. When he lingers, tonguing over Ilya's slit, Ilya pushes his head away and covers his face with the crook of elbow.

Flopping back down next to Ilya, Shane reaches down without thinking to touch himself. Ilya quickly looks over and replaces Shane's hand with his own.

"You loved that," Ilya whispers to him. There's no question in his words. He's stating it like he's sure of it.

Shane wants to deny it, wants to turn his head and be embarrassed, but all he does is let out a shaky breath and says, "Yeah."

Ilya returns the favor, his hot breath ghosting over Shane's cock for a moment before licking up the length. He grips Shane's thigh with one hand, the press hot and almost painful. Shane tries his best to stay quiet, but he feels so undone by Ilya's mouth on him. He wishes they were back at Shane's apartment so he could just repeat Ilya's name over and over.

When he comes, Ilya swallows it. His lips are so red and slightly swollen when he smiles up at Shane, like he's proud of the mess that Shane's become.

Again, they don't kiss after they have both come. Ilya pats Shane's stomach awkwardly, and then retreats to the bathroom.

*

He barely sees Ilya for months after that.

When they are in the same city again, Shane makes up an excuse to why they can't get together. When Shane gets off the plane in Boston, he feels like Ilya could be anywhere, like he'll appear outside his hotel room or will be at the bar when he goes out to celebrate their win.

He only ever sees Ilya on the ice, his eyes searching. Later on, when the plane takes off and Shane's stomach lurches like it always does, he realizes that the only time he got to touch Ilya was when he checked him into the boards. He wants to look himself over for bruises to see if there is proof of their violent embrace.

*

They see each other again at the All-Star game.

When Shane breaks Ilya's short-lived record, Ilya finally looks at him for the first time since they got on the ice. His eyes are shining and he doesn't even seem upset. Then, he rolls his

eyes playfully and Shane can hear him curse at him in Russian in a playful tone.

Shane laughs and answers back in Russian, without thinking. "*Maybe next year you can beat me*!"

When he glances to the team beside him, he realizes Scott Hunter is watching the exchange curiously.

"I'm making fun of him," Shane assures him. "We, uh, grew up together."

"Trust me, the whole league knows." Hunter knocks his shoulder into Shane's. "I can't even imagine how hard it was growing up with that asshole."

Shane knows it's a joke. He's heard it before, and he's usually good about ignoring it, sometimes even playing along. It doesn't stop the fierce desire to stand up for Ilya. He wants to yell, *but you don't know him like I do!*

"If you think this is bad, you should've seen him in high school."

Hunter laughs.

Later that night, Ilya texts asking for Shane's room number. When he shows up, he's slightly tipsy from going out with his team. His cheeks are a little red and he has a small smile on his face. Shane leans against the wall by the door and watches as Ilya slips out of his dress shoes and then takes off his jean jacket.

He tells himself that nothing will happen tonight. They are best friends, nothing more.

He's still watching Ilya, eyes dropping to linger on his body. He knows this isn't allowed. Ilya leans against the door with a slight thud.

"You are staring," he tells Shane, looking pleased.

Shane surges forward to connect their lips, to press his body against Ilya's. He deserves this. If Ilya will let him have this, there is no need to deny it. They have to stay quiet because they're surrounded by the other players. Ilya puts two fingers in Shane's mouth and he comes a few second later.

They don't talk about what the sex means. Shane knows they have passed the flimsy excuse of practice. He's too scared that if he asks about it, tries to define it or make some sort of recognizable shape out of it, Ilya won't want it anymore.

Instead, Ilya passes out beside him after he comes back still slightly damp from his shower in a pair of Shane's briefs.

*

When Shane holds up his award for Rookie of the Year, he searches the crowd for Ilya.

He saw him for a few passing seconds at the ceremony, but he never even got the chance to find him in the blur of winning. They had gone back and forth over text the last week joking about who would win. When Shane does win, he instantly wants to shove it in his face.

When he finds him standing off to the side with a drink in his hand, he grins at Shane before he pulls him in for a hug. Shane knows it only looks like a friend congratulating another friend, but he starts to worry that there is a line somewhere, and Shane and Ilya are just too deep to see it. While they are pressed together, Ilya whispers, "*I knew you would get it*," into his ear. Shane feels dizzy when he looks at him in his tuxedo and his hair carefully styled. He seems so proud of Shane.

They do shots with Hunter and a few other players. Ilya grimaces and complains about the quality of the liquor and then laughs at Shane for the way he still scrunches his nose at the burn. Despite showing up to the event with nearly shaking hands and a brain that he couldn't quiet, he slumps into a barstool and finally feels comfortable and warm. Ilya is beside him. They're all talking about hockey. Things are easy. The future doesn't loom over him for a few brief hours.

When the party starts wrapping up, Ilya leans closer to Shane and says, "*We should go back to your hotel room*."

Shane stares at him. He feels too drunk to come up with more of a response than a nod, let alone a response in Russian. They wait for the elevator together, and Shane keeps looking over at Ilya. When he notices, he knocks into Shane playfully. Inside the elevator, Ilya pushes him against the metal and kisses him roughly. It should terrify Shane, but he kisses back until the elevator dings and they abruptly pull apart.

"*You are into this, aren't you*?" Ilya asks. When Shane squints at him, he makes vague motion with his hand. "*Messing around in public*."

"Fuck off," Shane says with no heat. He wants to tell him that he is just into Ilya. He's waited patiently to see him again, to have his hands on him. All night, he's sat next to him and hasn't been able to do more than swat his hand away or touch his shoulder momentarily as he passes.

Ilya grabs his hand and backs him against the wall. He grabs onto Shane's other hand and pins both of them against the wall. Shane lets him. His knees feel weak. Ilya seems impressed with his work. He leans in to kiss Shane, but pulls away at the last moment, quickly stepping back and straightening his jacket. There are footsteps coming down the hall, and Shane finally realizes what has happened.

"Shane! Ilya!"

Shane's eyes go wide. At Ilya, he mouths, "Oh fuck."

Shane's mother and father are walking down the hallway towards them. Shane's head still feels fuzzy and slow from the alcohol. He doesn't know if he can do a conversation with his parents right after Ilya's had him pinned against the wall.

“We weren’t sure if you two had left or not,” his father says. He’s holding Shane’s award. He must’ve left it at the bar.

Right. Shane had completely forgotten to even say goodnight before disappearing with Ilya.

“Sorry,” he apologizes. “Yeah, just a busy night. Very chaotic.”

Shane’s mother laughs quietly as she listens to him. “Are you drunk, Shane?”

“No,” he says quickly. Ilya is nearly doubled over in laughter. “Maybe a little?”

“He is very light-weight,” Ilya supplies unhelpfully.

His mother doesn’t seem upset. “You still have your key card, right?”

Shane taps his pocket where he knows the plastic card is.

“I’m happy you’re enjoying yourself,” she says quietly, stepping close to straighten his jacket that has been twisted from Ilya’s hands.

“Just going to bed. That’s all.” Shane knows it sounds guilty.

“Okay, goodnight, boys,” his father says.

“See you at breakfast?” his mother asks.

Shane and Ilya nod and then watch them walk down the hallway to their room. Once they are far enough away, Shane leans his head against the wall and sighs. “Fuck, do you think they saw anything?”

“No.”

“Maybe…they thought it was a joke? Like, if they saw it.”

Ilya barks out a laugh. “Yes. I do that with all my friends.”

If Shane could think properly, he’d linger on that.

*

That summer, Ilya goes back to Russia.

He had vowed that he’d never go back, but he is left without an option when his father insists that he go. Alexei refuses to accompany him, so Ilya agrees. He’s with Shane when he buys the plane ticket. He picks the two nicest seats on the plane and then angrily pats around for his wallet in the pair of jeans that are crumpled on the ground.

“Stupid bastard will die if I do not go with him,” he complains, flipping his card around to get the CVV.

“You don’t miss it all?” Shane asks. When Ilya glances up from his phone, he is squinting up at Shane in confusion. “Russia,” he adds quickly.

Throwing his wallet back on the ground by his jeans, he drops his head against Shane’s shoulder. He doesn’t look at Shane when he carefully says, “Not really.”

“Oh.”

“I can see my mother’s grave. That is all I care about.”

Shane picks at the skin on his finger. He wants to reach over and rub his thumb against Ilya’s skin, but he doesn’t know what is appropriate for them. Only twenty minutes ago, Ilya had Shane pressed into the mattress as he fucked him. Now, they linger on Shane’s bed, still damp from quick showers. Their relationship is more complicated than ever, but Shane refuses to try to unravel it.

“That’s good that you can go and do that at least,” Shane offers. He knows it’s unhelpful. He wishes he knew what his mother said that put Ilya at ease when they talk about his family.

Ilya nods. His gaze is across the room, eyes dark. He crosses his arms over his chest and says nothing.

“Are you going to be okay going back there?” Shane asks because he needs to. He doesn’t think he can let Ilya leave without asking. “Like, I just – I’m worried about you.”

“Please do not be.”

Shane can still hear his voice when he said that Russia made him understand why his mother killed herself. He can still feel the burn of the insinuation.

“No, Ilya,” Shane rushes to say. He knows he isn’t saying it right and that the moment is slipping away. “I need for you to come home.”

Ilya leans over and finally makes eye contact. “I will.”

It feels like a promise, and Shane feels like he can breathe again for a moment.

“You can call. And text. Or whatever is easiest. You know I want to hear from you,” Shane tells him.

It’s the truth, but Shane also wants to say, *I don’t know what I’ll do if you just disappear for a couple months.*

*

For the first time since they’ve known each other, Ilya calls Shane from Russia. He expects for there to be some sort of a difference between the way that Shane talks to him back in Canada. There isn’t. Ilya tells him about the flight, the family friend that they are staying with, the flowers he left for his mother the first morning he could sneak away. Shane doesn’t ask about how he is doing.

When he comes back home, he brings Shane and his parents Russian snacks to try. His eyes are bright and curious as he watches them try his childhood favorites for the first time. Shane hopes that it isn't a front, and that maybe this time Russia didn't bring him to his knees. He doesn't stay the night, though, saying he has to go back to his father's house, and all Shane gets is a tight hug at the front door.

Into his ear, Shane whispers, "I'm glad you're back." All he really wants to do is push him against the door and kiss him. Instead, he watches Ilya get into his old car, listens to the sputter of the engine starting up with some difficulty. He doesn't go inside until the car is down the road.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

> i could've written another 100k of this verse! genuinely love this version of them. thank you to everyone who read and please let me know what you thought if you make it all the way to the end :)

During the year, they slip into an easy routine. When they're in the same city, they meet up. Between teasing the loser of whatever game they've just played and small talk about the season, Shane drops to his knees and lets Ilya fuck his face, or Ilya hoists him up onto his kitchen counter and slings an arm around him as they kiss, or Ilya presses his hand into his neck as he fucks him into Shane's couch in the living room because they couldn't even make it to the bedroom.

They have sex and then they slip back into their usual friendship. They don't mention it after the last kiss. Sometimes, Shane almost breaks their careful silence at the wrong time, almost off-handedly says something like, "I jerked off last week to the thought of you."

For a while, it feels like there are two different versions they have of each other. One version, Shane slips fingers into Ilya's mouth and watches with his own mouth half-open as Ilya sucks without being asked to. The other version tells him about the last time he was in New York City as he lounges on one of Shane's kitchen barstools, and the Uber ride he had with a semi-famous model before bringing her to his apartment.

The longer it goes on, the harder it is to keep straight. The lines get blurry when they find themselves back in Ottawa, when Ilya covers Shane's mouth with his palm and jerks the two of them off at the same time in Shane's childhood bed. The next morning, they walk out for pancakes and waffles that his father makes and sit side by side at the table and knock each other with their elbows playfully.

When Shane goes to Hayden's house and watches the casual way Jackie and Hayden orbit each other, he feels strangely jealous. He doesn't get that with Ilya. He can't even bring himself to try to sleep with anyone else or go on dates, maybe give himself a chance for something more than casual sex. He's stuck between the hot press of Ilya's hands during sex and the innocent hugs he gets from him outside the bedroom. He thinks of the things he's missing in-between. He thinks of a finger rubbing circles on the skin of his arm or a quick shoulder rub while he does the dishes.

He tries not to linger on this too much.

*

Before they leave for Sochi, Ilya acts strangely.

Shane had expected to see him before they left, but he doesn't respond to Shane's messages for a week before the flight leaves. When Shane had brought up the Olympics last time they were together, Ilya had barely seemed excited about it. When Shane tried to probe him about it, he was met with another wall.

Shane knows Ilya's feelings on Russia. He knows that there is probably even more pressure playing in his home country as captain. He tells himself that he doesn't need to worry about him all the time. He boards his flight and checks his messages one last time before putting his phone on airplane mode. Ilya doesn't want to talk about it with him. That's fine.

The silence continues through the games. He tries to check in on Ilya after one of his games, but he doesn't get a single response. He can see him on the TVs in the training room doing press and he sees him on Team Russia posters, but he doesn't see him in-person until he catches sight of him watching the same figure skating session that Shane is at.

Shane makes up some excuse and tries to keep himself from running to get to Ilya. He's worried he'll disappear again.

"Hey," Shane says to him as he walks up. When Ilya looks over, Shane stops and leaves a distance between them that feels foreign.

Ilya's eyes flick back to the ice. "Not now."

After all this time, Shane could punch him in the face. He could kiss him. He could fall to his knees and beg for even just scraps.

"Are you okay?" He hates that their secret language doesn't work here. In Canada or in the States, they are able to speak in Russian without most people knowing what they're saying. Here, it means nothing. Anyone can understand their English and their Russian.

To the world, they are just childhood friends. Even in Russian, they should be able to have a simple conversation.

"Shane," he says, eyes closing. He rubs the side of his face. "I cannot do this right now."

"Do what?"

He sighs loudly. "*This*."

It doesn't help Shane understand. He knows he isn't wanted, though. As he walks back to his seat, he tells himself it's the pressure of the Olympics, it's the heavy prejudice of the country, it's Ilya's family breathing down his neck, it's anything *but* Shane and their relationship.

*

When the games end, Ilya is equally as quiet. Shane eventually stops sending messages that go unanswered. The text chain embarrasses him to look at, and one day when he's staring at

it before bed, he deletes the entire thing just so that he doesn't have to feel so pathetic, so needy.

After a game in Ottawa, Shane drives to his parents' house and helps make dinner. He dices sweet potatoes and tries his best to follow a story his father is telling him about work. When they're waiting for the food to be done baking, Shane's mother asks, "Is Ilya doing okay? He hasn't messaged me back in a bit."

Shane stares down into his glass of water. "Not sure."

"What do you mean? Is he taking what happened in Sochi too hard? He can't take on that whole burden just because he was captain. He –"

"He, uh, hasn't been responding to me, either," Shane interrupts. He doesn't think he can listen to her spiral any further.

The admission makes him feel like a little kid, like no one showed up to his birthday party, and now he has to look at the pity on his parents' face. His own best friend won't even respond to him. He would barely even look at him the last time they saw each other.

"He's going through a lot, Shane," his mother tells him carefully.

Before she can say more, the timer in the kitchen goes off. Shane jumps up to get it.

After dinner, once Shane's father has gone to bed, it's just Shane and his mother sitting in the living room, the credits to a movie still playing quietly. Shane doesn't have much to say, and he's scared if he looks over at his mother, she'll be looking him over with worry, trying to dig deeper than Shane wants her to.

Shane flips his phone over in his hands and says nothing. He knows he should go get ready for bed. He won't admit it, and he certainly wouldn't bring it up, but he is partially hoping that maybe he can talk to his mother. Maybe it would make him feel better. He can't tell her the whole story, but maybe he can give her a few pieces, enough.

"It couldn't have been easy," his mother says without any further preface after a few minutes of silence. "Ilya probably felt like an outsider after leaving Russia so young. He had a lot of pressure as the team captain. And – well, you saw it. The game was brutal. Give him a little longer. He'll come around."

Shane wishes he could believe her. Instead, he chokes out, "It's been two months, Mom."

Other than when he would disappear for months in Russia when they were younger, Shane has never been ignored by Ilya for this long before. He wishes that it could all be chalked up to his loss at the Olympics, but he's almost certain that it is only a part of it. Shane should've never let them sleep together. He ruined their friendship.

"All you can do is keep reaching out to him," she tells him. He can't look at her face, but he can hear the pity in her words.

"What if I fucked it all up?"

The thought of losing Ilya forever makes Shane go cold. No one understands him like Ilya. No one makes him laugh as hard as Ilya. No one laughs when he jokes about something obscure from their childhood that he knows only Ilya will understand. His world would feel split in two, like he'd be grasping for the other half for the rest of his life.

Shane doesn't realize his mother has gotten up and sat down next to him until he feels the dip in the couch and her hand on his forearm. "How would you have fucked everything up, Shane? He just needs time."

He wants to tell her everything all of a sudden, like maybe if he does then he won't feel so heavy all the time. She once thought that he was gay and having sex with Ilya, so it wouldn't be a surprise. He can't do it, though. The thought of having to admit that not only is Ilya not talking to him, but he also only wanted to have sex with him without being his boyfriend, feels deeply embarrassing.

Shane tries to swallow down the thought fast because he doesn't want to think about how he would actually really like if Ilya was his boyfriend. It feels childish, like Shane is hoping he'll ask him to prom and he's scribbling Ilya's name into the margins of his notebooks. All he wants is something more than their strange, divided relationship they had before Ilya stopped talking to him.

"I think I ruined everything," Shane admits quietly.

"Give him a little longer. Let him know that you care."

Shane blinks back tears and nods his head. He still refuses to look at her. It must be obvious, the way he feels about Ilya.

"It'll all be okay. I promise."

*

When Shane watches Ilya hoist up the cup, Shane's team turns to watch Shane stare at the TV. He should be there. No one asks him why he isn't. Shane excuses himself to the bathroom after and finds five things he can see, four things he can hear, three things he can touch, two things he can smell, one thing he can taste, and a hundred things that remind him of Ilya. He wants to punch the wall or leave Ilya a nasty voicemail if only to hear his voice in his obnoxious voicemail message or catch the soonest flight to Boston. He thinks of Ilya's bed, the maroon sheets, the painting above the bed, the pile of Russian coins he's had on the bedside table for years. Shane could slip under the sheets and pretend like he never left.

He doesn't.

Instead, he leans into the mirror, decides he doesn't look like he's just had a minor breakdown, and then goes back out into the dying party.

On the cab ride home, he texts Ilya.

Shane: Congratulations! I miss you.

*

A week later, a few nights before the NHL Awards, Ilya texts him back. Shane is half-asleep and scrolling through his phone aimlessly. It's nearly midnight.

Ilya: Я тоже скучаю по тебе.

I miss you too.

Shane sits up in bed and reads it over and over. He drafts a million responses. Most of them go along the lines of: *I'm sorry if I messed something up between us, please talk to me again, I need you in my life, you are my best friend, please please please –*

In the end, Shane waits until the morning to respond.

Shane: Let me know if you want to talk.

*

Shane is practically seething when Ilya finally shows up right before they present at the NHL Awards. He is so nonchalant and unaware of Shane's past few agonizing months. He walks up to Shane with a small smile and a mumbled, "Hey."

He forces himself to turn away, to not melt into him, to not let himself forget all the anger. They're about to go on stage. Shane had prepared himself all day to see Ilya, but he feels like crumbling knowing he's inches from him and they can't touch, if only for a hug. Of course, Shane's made these rules up himself.

"Shane," Ilya says then. He's closer. He sounds desperate.

They get cued to go on stage. Shane uncurls his fists hanging at his sides and walks onstage. The cruelest part of it all is that they have to stand with their shoulders pressed into each other and make jokes about playing hockey with each other when they were in junior high. Ilya is beside him and smiling so wide, eyes glittering when he looks over to Shane. For a few minutes, under the bright stage lights, they are best friends again.

When they're done, Shane rushes offstage and finds the nearest bathroom. If he can have a few quiet moments, he can go back to his seat and forget about all of this. His shoulder burns from Ilya's touch. His eyes are burning, too.

The door swings open. Shane is instantly upset and grateful that it's Ilya who walks in. Shane knows that he can probably tell Shane is about to cry.

"You are angry," he says after a long moment.

"Jesus, Ilya," Shane says with a huff. "Yes, I'm fucking angry."

Ilya casually leans into the wall. Shane wishes he at least looked a little guilty. "I am sorry," he says, voice indifferent.

Shane knows he's probably still hurting. He knows that the Olympics were rough. He knows how he gets when he goes back to Russia. He wants to give Ilya the grace that his mother thinks he deserves, but he can barely look at him because of how angry he is.

"Fuck you," Shane spits.

He starts to walk out, but Ilya stops him with a hand on his forearm. Shane shakes away from the touch. He thinks he'll fold so easily if Ilya is touching him.

"I miss you," Ilya tells him. "I know I fucked up."

"Three months. You completely ignored me for *three* months. We've known each other for ten years."

"What can I do to fix it?" Ilya quietly asks.

Shane doesn't know what to say for a minute. Finally, he holds Ilya's gaze when he says, "Never do it again."

Ilya steps closer to him again slowly, like Shane is a wild animal, and then carefully wraps Shane up in a hug. He presses his palm against the back of Shane's head and presses his chin into Shane's shoulder, his breath hot. Shane melts into it.

"Please talk to me," Shane says raggedly. "I just want to be there for you."

"I will," Ilya whispers. "*I will. I promise*."

The rest of the night feels like a blur to Shane. He only partially pays attention to the actual award show. When Ilya wins something, Shane claps and smiles, but he feels so far away from the moment. He's thinking about Ilya's arms wrapped around him. He's angry at himself for crumbling as quickly as he did. Before going back to their seats, they had made tentative plans to see each other tonight.

When the time comes, though, Shane stands in front of Ilya in his hotel room and isn't sure what to say, or even what to do. He has a massive suite that is lavishly decorated. It feels natural to reach for Ilya, to feverishly press their lips together in an attempt to make up for lost time. Instead, he leans against the back of the door.

"Congrats," Shane tells him, even offers a shy smile in his direction. His usual excitement, the kind he would've had a year ago, has dimmed.

Ilya crosses his arms over his chest and nods. "Thanks," he replies slowly. He's a couple feet away from Shane, a safe distance.

Shane loosens his tie and stares past Ilya. He should wait for Ilya to say something, or to at least move. He thinks there should be some sort of an invitation into the room, to the couch, to the bed, to anything that isn't the doorway. He doesn't understand why after all this time he still needs an invitation. He should be taking off his jacket and turning on whatever movie is playing. It should be the two of them, pressed into each other, waking up early in the morning basked in the glow of the TV.

“Did I do something?” Shane finally asks because it’s been gnawing at him for months, nearly consumed him whole.

“Shane,” Ilya says, his name practically a sigh on Ilya’s lips. “*It’s complicated*.”

He knows he doesn’t deserve more, but he doesn’t think this is fair. He feels like a little kid who is being given only a half-truth about the situation because his parents don’t think he’ll understand the whole thing if they tried to explain it. “That’s all I get?”

“*I don’t owe you anything*.”

“Maybe not,” Shane says, shaking his head in disbelief and anger. “But I thought maybe after all this time you would want to tell me.”

Ilya isn’t even looking at him now.

“You know you’re my only friend, right?”

“Not true –”

“Only real friend. You know I care about you, right? I fucking love you, Ilya, and I want to help you. And I know you don’t owe me anything. I do. But I’ve always wanted to be there for you. From the beginning, when you were just a new kid at my school who didn’t have anyone to talk to.” Shane realizes that his vision is blurry. He swipes at his eyes and curses to himself quietly. “I’m sorry. I can go if you want. If this is too much.”

Ilya closes the space between them and pulls Shane into a hug. They keep ending up like this. Shane feels like a liability. Maybe he’s always been the burden and he’s never been able to tell until now. Distantly, he realizes Ilya is whispering apologies into his ear, switching back and forth between English and Russian.

“I was so scared I lost you,” Shane admits. He’s already in too deep. He might as well be honest. “Fucking terrified.”

“I’m here.”

For now. It’s unspoken. It’s already been spoken too many times. Ilya will always be slipping in and out of his life.

They don’t watch a movie. They don’t even take off all their clothes. They both walk to the bed without deciding on it. Shane folds his suit up into a neat pile on the chair by the bed and slips under the covers in a white t-shirt still damp with sweat from the night and his boxers. Ilya follows his lead and then presses into Shane, his head finding the crook of Shane’s neck, his feet tucked alongside Shane’s.

“*It was only supposed to be in Sochi*,” Ilya finally tells him. “*I knew Russia would be watching me. I didn’t want for you to get tangled into anything. But then*…”

Shane swallows thickly.

"*Things got bad for a while. The longer I went without talking to you, the harder it felt to reach out.*"

Ilya won the Stanley Cup. Shane can't understand how bad things had to have been for him. He bites his tongue, waits for Ilya to keep going.

"*My father is worse and worse every day. I know I should be with him, but I can't give this up for him. He doesn't deserve that. And Alexei – I've sent him thousands of dollars and it's not enough. And he'll still talk shit to my whole family back home, which only makes them hate me even more than they already do.*"

"Ilya," Shane whispers, not even sure where to start. He already wants to start untangling, but Ilya isn't finished.

"*And then you're messaging me and your mom is messaging me and calling me and I don't know how to apologize or make the situation make sense so I just keep ignoring you both even when I know you don't deserve it. And – and now we're here.*"

"*You could've told me about it. All of it.*"

"*There was nothing you could've done to change it.*"

"Maybe not, but I would've listened. I would've tried to make you feel better. It's what friends do."

Ilya makes a breathy noise. "You do not do this."

"What?"

"During rookie season. Your mom told me that you got pills for anxiety."

Shane's heart races. He doesn't understand why his mother would've ever needed to tell Ilya this. She only found out when she was snooping in his medicine cabinet. He had only asked for the prescription under the guise of feeling a little nervous on planes after he spent too many late nights researching how to get rid of the feeling in his chest.

"That was – it was nothing."

"You did not tell me."

"I didn't tell anyone."

"Exactly. You did not tell me. You say this is what friends do."

Shane wonders if Ilya can feel how fast his heart is beating. "I only did it for a month. It didn't help."

It might've if Shane had tried a little longer. He felt like a failure every time he as much as looked at the bottle. It was easier to ignore it and pretend the entire thing was a joke.

“When she told me,” Ilya says. “I was upset that you never told me. But I knew I did the same thing. So…”

Everything seems so messy, so tangled. Their friendship feels bent and mangled. They’re pressed together like lovers but keeping secrets from each other like a couple that’s slipping further and further apart by the day. By tomorrow morning, they will get ready like friends or maybe like best friends, but not like they are married, not like this moment.

“Shane,” Ilya says. “Can we be honest? I want to tell the truth.”

It’s all that Shane wants, but he’s terrified to be honest. He doesn’t know where to draw the line. Does he start by telling Ilya about his panic attacks and then stop before he tells him that’s been in love with him for years? Does he tell him that he he’s never felt better than with Ilya’s hands roaming over him and then stop before he causally says that he’s daydreamed about the two of them being married.

“Yes, of course. Please.”

He’ll learn, he thinks. He’ll learn to be carefully honest. He’s good at learning.

*

Their honesty comes in small doses.

They ask each other about their days over the phone while Shane chops kale and Ilya unwraps a protein bar so close to the microphone that Shane has to listen to the crackling until he has to say, “You have to repeat all of that. I didn’t hear a word.” Ilya goes back to telling him about practice, about the ten-minute non-sensical voicemail his father left for him, about the second-half of the movie he watched last night that he never bothered to watch the beginning of. Shane tells him about going to Hayden’s house and being grateful that he doesn’t have kids, about the looming dread he has when he thinks about filming some soda commercial next month even though he doesn’t even drink soda, about the book he’s been reading.

Shane thinks it helps, even if he does feel like he’s cheating when he knows how much he’s still keeping in.

Other times, Ilya uses it to pry Shane open.

“Am I the only man you have slept with?” he asks on a video call. He’s in his bed, shirt off and the bedside table lamp the only light on in the room. He’s lying down with the phone resting on the bed.

Shane was about to hang up because he was falling asleep. Now, he snaps awake and makes a face. “Ilya,” he starts to protest. He can see how red his face is. Ilya already knows the answer, but Shane will still fight having to actually tell him.

Ilya grins. “We are honest now, yes? So be honest.”

“Why does it matter?” He slips his hands under his glasses and rubs his eyes.

“Yes or no question. Just answer.”

“Obviously it’s just you.”

Ilya seems pleased by the news and even winks into the camera. They are both ignoring the fact that they haven’t even had sex since before the Olympics. Shane wants it, but the thought of asking for it seems too embarrassing.

“Wait,” Ilya says then. “Was the last person you had sex with before me your girlfriend in high school? That ugly girl with messy hair? Casey or Carly or –”

“Ilya,” Shane admonished. “She wasn’t ugly.”

He barks out a laugh. “A little.”

“No. Lots of guys thought she was hot. That’s why I picked her.”

Shane almost ends the call when he’s realized what he’s admitted.

“You picked her because other people thought she was hot?” Ilya says, eyebrows raised in amusement. “Shanya, did *you* think she was hot?”

Shane can’t even meet Ilya’s eyes on his phone screen. He huffs out a sigh. “I mean, she was obviously…conventionally attractive, I guess.”

“No. Not my question. Did *you* think she was hot?”

“You make me seem like an asshole.”

“Why?”

“Because obviously I didn’t think she was hot. I don’t know. I thought maybe if I tried – if I pretended – then maybe I would think she was hot and that I wasn’t gay.” He hates admitting it, especially to Ilya. He feels grimy, like all he did was use her. He’s not proud of himself.

“You do not need to feel bad,” Ilya tells him. “It is not easy to figure out who you are.”

“Did you know,” Shane starts, swallowing nervously partway through his sentence. “Did you know that you weren’t straight before you slept with that guy in Russia?”

Ilya tilts his head from side to side and then shrugs. “Mostly.”

“You never mentioned anything about it.” Shane wonders if things would have been different if they had talked about this before now. Even now, though, it feels bizarre. Shane has kept his sexuality so close to his chest for so long, and even though Ilya has fucked him, it never meant that they talked about it like this.

“You did not, either.”

It doesn't seem fair, but he can't tell Ilya that. He can't admit that part of the reason why he never felt like he could ever bring it up was because it felt like it always led to Shane's crush on Ilya. He felt like if Ilya knew he was gay, his unrequited, embarrassing infatuation with Ilya would be more obvious than ever.

He wonders if that is still true.

"I tried really hard to ignore it," Shane admits quietly. He knows his eyes are watery. He probably looks like he's about to cry. "Even now…it has to mean nothing. I can't be gay in the NHL."

"Maybe you –"

"No. Ilya. I'm serious. You know what would happen if people knew. I can't lose hockey."

"What will you do? Date more girls other people think are hot? Get married and have ten kids like Pike? This is what you want?"

"Of course not. No. You don't get it. You like girls, too, right? You could still have a normal life. I can't."

"Oh, so I do not know what it feels like?" Ilya looks hurt, upset even. "I like girls so I do not get to be confused or feel ashamed?"

"That's not what I meant. I'm jealous of you. I don't want to be gay. I want to be normal and –"

"You *are* normal," Ilya demands, voice slightly raised. He hasn't heard Ilya this upset at him since they were kids.

"I've never felt normal." Shane figures that if he's already being too honest with Ilya, he might as well commit. Since he was a kid, he never felt normal. He was always the odd one out. He tried so hard to fit in, but it never felt right.

Ilya nods a few times. "Me too. I understand this. You made me feel normal, though. When I was kid who did not speak English well, you learned Russian to speak to me. You helped me learn English."

"I still feel bad," Shane says then. It feels like they're playing a dangerous game trying to see who will admit the most. "When you first started school, I was scared to talk to you. I thought that if people saw me talking to you that they would – I don't know. Maybe that they would think I was even more different. I'm sorry for that. And I'm sorry for never speaking Russian with you in front of people for years. People made fun of my mom speaking Japanese when she was a kid and I thought maybe kids would make fun of me, too."

"You do not have to apologize," Ilya tells him. "You did not even know me, but you started learning a new language for me."

"I wanted to know you."

“I wanted to know you, too.”

*

Shane is out celebrating when Ilya calls him.

He hates being dragged out to a bar after a game, but he lets himself get talked into going. He’s two beers deep when his phone goes off for the first time. He ignores the buzzing and continues talking to a few of the guys about a particularly memorable game from a couple years ago. It’s only once the phone starts buzzing again after a few minutes that he finally yanks it out of his pocket and blearily checks the caller. It’s Ilya. He rarely calls Shane, and usually there is a text message warning if he does.

Shane immediately excuses himself and shoves his way out of the crowd so he can stand outside on the street. His coat is somewhere inside. He puts his free hand deep into his pocket and listens to only a few rings before Ilya is answer.

There is a slight breathy pause before Ilya says, “Shane?” His voice cracks a little, and Shane’s stomach drops.

“Ilya, are you okay?”

“Um.” Ilya laughs into the receiver. It hisses a little at the sound. He doesn’t sound happy or amused.

“Tell me where you are.” Shane says it like he can immediately board a plane, like he doesn’t already have a flight to catch tomorrow morning for a game that evening.

“*He’s dead*.”

Shane closes his eyes. He asks, “Who?” even if he already knows.

Ilya makes a strangled sound then. “*I don’t even know if I should be sad right now. Should I be sad? I hated him*.”

“You can be,” Shane says. He feels useless. He can hear Ilya crying, but there is nothing he can do. He can’t pull him into his arms and he doesn’t have the words to make things better.

“Fuck,” Ilya curses, in English this time. “Shane, what do I do?”

“Have you told Mom yet?” Shane knows she would know what to do. She would help Ilya better than he can.

“No. *I just found out*.”

“*I’m sorry for your loss*.” Even if Ilya isn’t sure if he’s sad, it is still a loss. “We’ll figure this out, okay? You need to get a flight. I’ll –” Shane scrubs his face. He wishes he was sober. “I’ll try to figure out my shit, try to see if I can get to you. Maybe I can –”

“*No. Don’t miss a game. He’s not worth it*.”

“Ilya,” Shane protests. He wants to say, *he might not be worth it, but you are*. He wants to say, *I love you so much and I cannot let you go through this alone*. All he manages to say is, “I’m really sorry.”

“*I wish you were here*.”

“*I do, too*.”

The sounds of the street suddenly rush back into focus. Cars are driving past and groups of loud, drunk people are walking by. Someone is smoking a cigarette a couple feet away from Shane. The smell reminds him of Ilya.

“I’m going to text Mom, okay? She’ll know what to do,” Shane says firmly. “She’ll make a plan. She’ll figure it out.”

Ilya’s breathing has become less harsh, the quick, staccato huffs turned calmer. “Okay. I should go.”

Shane swallows thickly. His heart races as she tries to find the right words. “Ilya, please – tell me if you need anything. Or if you need someone to talk to. Or –”

“I will not hurt myself, Shane.”

“That’s not what I meant.” It was.

“Okay,” Ilya says again. “Alexei is calling. Bye.”

Shane tries to spit out a broken *I love you*, but the call ends before he can.

Another group of friends walk by. Someone goes, “I think that was Shane Hollander.”

*

Shane’s mother does figure everything out.

She sends Shane updates every few hours. They decide that Shane won’t try to get out of a game. He will wait for the funeral. His parents will take care of Ilya. Shane flies to New York for his game and stares into his palms the entire flight. Ilya doesn’t respond to his texts, but his mother assures Shane that he doesn’t need to worry. Shane wants to ask if Ilya has ever mentioned his mental health to his mother, but he decides against it.

When the news breaks to the public, the team is distantly apologetic. It’s not Shane’s father. Shane tries not to let his face show how panicked and restless he feels not being able to help, but it must be showing. Hayden puts a heavy hand on his shoulder and says, “Rozanov is an asshole, but give him my condolences.” Shane doesn’t say anything, but he has to step into a bathroom stall to calm down after he hears it. He wishes people knew Ilya like he did.

Shane drives to Ottawa after a game. He can’t stop himself from frantically tapping his fingers on the steering wheel the entire way. He arrives past midnight. The whole house is dark, but when he cracks open the front door, he finds his mother still awake sitting at the

kitchen island in the glow of the stove's hood light. When she sees Shane, she slips her readers to rest on the top of her head and locks her phone.

"Sorry it's so late," Shane says in place of saying so much more, words that feel trapped in his throat.

His mother makes a sympathetic face, like she knows that Shane is struggling, and pulls him in for a hug. Shane feels like he could cry again in her arms. He steadies his breathing and stares up at the ceiling.

"Go check on him," she says when they pull apart. "I'll wake you both tomorrow morning, okay?"

Shane walks towards his bedroom only to stop himself in the hallway. He looks down it, at his door that is shut. He's been aching to be with Ilya since his phone call, but now Shane is uneasy at the sight of pushing his door open. He's not sure how he's supposed to act or how to help Ilya at a time like this.

Slowly, he creeps forward and opens the door as quietly as he can. He twists the knob when he closes it and bends down to puts his backpack on the ground. When he straightens up, he turns to find Ilya sitting up in bed. He's biting his lip, eyes looking up at Shane.

Despite his trepidation, it feels more natural than ever to slip down next to Ilya and pull him into his arms. He cups the back of his head and gently rubs his back with his other hand. He whispers apologies in Russian into Ilya's ear as he listens to him softly cry.

Shane kisses the side of his face. When he licks his lips, he tastes salt.

*

The funeral is bleak. The turnout is low. Ilya clenches his jaw and his eyes look dull in the low lights of the church. The way he stands and the blank expression on his face reminds Shane of the way he looks while listening to press questions after losing a game horribly. Shane can't do anything about it. He stands next to Ilya when he can, but he knows how he's not allowed to touch him more than a hug after the ceremony. He fixes Ilya a plate of food that Ilya only picks at, and Shane eventually covers with a napkin and throws away.

At the end of the day, as the caterers clear the food away, Shane and his parents linger a few feet from Ilya as he distantly nods along to a conversation with two old Russian men. They're speaking so fast that Shane only understands snatches, but he knows they are telling some story of a wild night out drinking with Ilya's father.

When the two men leave, Shane finally walks over to Ilya and watches as he scrubs his face and pushes his hair back. His skin is blotchy and hair slightly greasy. Shane loves him so much. He wants to wrap him in his arms and tell him over and over that he would do anything for him.

Shane wants to ask if he's coming home, but instead he says, "You're coming back to my parents' house, right?"

"*I don't know*."

"*Don't go back there*," Shane says, pleading. "*You don't ever have to go back*."

"*I do. Come with me. I need to get some things first*."

They take separate cars to Ilya's father's house. Shane stands in the driveway, leaning against the hood of his car, and is surprised when Ilya reaches forward and grabs his hand with his own. He leads him inside the house for the first time.

Shane would never tell Ilya, but he used to have dreams about the house. He would wake up with vivid memories of a dark house, all the corners shadowed and the curtains drawn tightly, cobwebs hanging over everything. Now, Shane finds a normal home. It's sparsely furnished and there are no decorations or framed pictures on the walls. Ilya lets go of his hand to dig into his pockets and pull out his pair of car keys. He puts them down on the table and walks away.

When Shane first sees Ilya's room, he feels his throat tighten. It's like the rest of the house. An old, wooden bed and a dresser. Grey curtains. Deep blue comforter. There are no frayed posters of hockey players on the walls or scattered childhood toys on the dresser.

Ilya yanks open the closet and digs around until he finds a backpack, one that Shane faintly remembers. In the bottom drawer of the dresser, under a pile of jeans, Ilya pulls out a few notebooks, a couple hockey medals, at least ten yellow capsules from Kinder Eggs, and then a small framed picture. Shane only sees a glimpse of it, but he already knows it must be Ilya's mother.

"We can go," Ilya says as he zips up the bag. "That is all."

Shane drives them back to his parents' house with a white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Silently, they go to Shane's bedroom. Ilya drops his backpack on the ground and stares at the wall. Shane doesn't know how to fix this. He steps closer, unsure, and Ilya leans against him, arms at his side and his face pressed in to Shane's shoulder. They stand like that for a while until Shane carefully undresses Ilya and walks him to the bed.

They fall asleep pressed into each other, but Shane wakes up hours later to find that he's reaching out towards nothing. Ilya is gone, the covers still turned back where he had been lying. Shane walks out to the living room and realizes there is a light on in the kitchen.

Ilya is leaning against the counter, a glass in his hand. He's wearing Shane's old Montreal hoodie. He doesn't look up when Shane walks towards him.

"Hey," Shane whispers. He leans against the counter across Ilya.

"Was thirsty," Ilya tells him.

Shane doesn't ask if it's water or alcohol. He knows his parents keep a bottle of expensive Russian vodka somewhere.

"Are you hungry? I can make you something."

“No.”

“Okay, I could –”

“Shane. I am fine.”

He’s not fine, and Shane knows it. He tries to remember what his mother said months ago. All Shane can do is let him know he’s there for him. Shane leans back and lets his socked toe just barely graze the side of Ilya’s. They stand in silence for a few minutes until Ilya asks, “*Can I kiss you*?”

“*Of course*,” Shane says automatically. He’s grateful it doesn’t come out as, *please please please I’ve been waiting months.*

Ilya steps forward and his hand finds Shane’s hip before he leans in to kiss Shane. The embrace only lasts a minute. Ilya breathes softly onto Shane’s neck, his face hidden. “*Thank you*,” he whispers.

*

Shane only gets one day with Ilya before he has to drive back to Montreal. When they hug goodbye from Shane’s parents’ front porch, Shane wishes he would’ve been the best at anything else. If he could’ve been good at math or coding or even painting, maybe he wouldn’t have to be forced away from Ilya. Maybe they both would’ve lived in the same city or same apartment complex, and after work Ilya would show up at his front door and complain about his mundane office job. They would order takeout and eat it on the floor of Shane’s apartment and joke about calling in sick tomorrow so they could take the train into the city and go to a museum. Shane could come out and no one would care, and eventually he’d admit his feelings to Ilya and he’d feel the same way.

It's not like Shane has ever thought about it.

Shane is good at hockey. He’s one of the best. It’s given him so much. Some days, though, all Shane can focus on is what hockey has taken away from him.

Despite Shane’s concerns, Ilya doesn’t push Shane away. He responds to his texts, and he calls him after games, and he moans into the microphone as they jerk off together on FaceTime.

They meet up with each other when they can. Sometimes, all they do is share a hotel bed. Ilya traces lines over Shane’s bruises from the game and then offers to get him ice from the machine down the hall. Shane dabs Ilya’s split lip with a tissue.

Sometimes, Ilya presses Shane against the wall until Shane falls to his knees and sucks his cock. Ilya pulls Shane’s hair and fucks his throat while he whispers sweet praise. Ilya drags him to the bed and then fingers him. He makes Shane whine and beg to be fucked. Then, after teasing Shane endlessly, he bends Shane’s legs forward and pushes into him, glazed-over eyes watching Shane the entire time. When Ilya is about to come, he switches to Russian, half of the words nonsense to Shane because of how filthy they are.

Afterwards, Shane asks him to teach him dirty talk in Russian, and Ilya laughs, and the two of them go back and forth repeating phrases until Ilya tells him what obscene thing Shane is saying. They fall asleep to the sound of a movie playing on the TV and wake up to the shrill of an alarm set too early.

They don't talk about what their sex means. Shane doesn't tell him about how much he is in love with Ilya, and he hopes that it isn't obvious with every kiss and every touch.

*

Shane is in Boston when he goes down on the ice.

He's distracted in a way he's never allowed himself to be. When Ilya and him stand across from each other at the faceoff, he lets Ilya tell a stupid joke and he can't help but to smile. He loses the faceoff. For about a quarter of the game, playing against Ilya feels exciting and new again.

He's distracted, though, and that's when he gets knocked down into the ice. He barely remembers the press of the cool ice before he wakes up in a hospital bed. He's alone. His shoulder hurts. He wants to talk, wants to reach out and get help, but he's too tired. He falls back asleep and dreams he's back in Sochi. He's wandering an empty Olympic village and it won't stop snowing. When he's too tired to keep walking, he sits down in the snow and looks up to the sky.

When he wakes up again, his parents are in the room. They rush out to get a nurse as Shane tries to remember why he is in the hospital. Once he finishes checking in with doctors and nurses and whoever else wants to prod at him, he asks where Ilya is. His mind is thrumming a constant stream of Ilya.

Ilya. Ilya. Ilya.

His parents don't seem surprised. Shane feels warm. He switches to Russian to mumble some of his favorite things about Ilya, and he feels warmer, like he's put on one of Ilya's old hoodies and he's got the drawstring in his mouth watching Ilya make him scrambled eggs.

"Does he make you scrambled eggs?" his mother asks, amused.

Shane didn't even realize he was speaking out loud. He feels his face go hot. More warmth, but different. "Why wouldn't he?"

"He's never made me eggs," Shane's father says.

Ilya does eventually show up. He's carrying a bag of takeout that he immediately abandons on a chair and rushes over to Shane.

"Ilya! Where were you?" Shane asks, pouting. He can't help the smile that blooms on his face. He reaches out his hand and shoves it in Ilya's direction.

Ilya looks between Shane's face and his outstretched hand for a few moments and then weakly grasps his hand. "I was getting food. I did not think you would wake up yet."

“Did you think I was in a coma or something?” Shane jokes. He watches Ilya’s face turn to horror, eyebrows raised and eyes wide. “Hey, I’m okay! Not dead!”

Ilya barely smiles, but he doesn’t seem as scared. “Not dead,” he repeats.

“You scared us,” his mother says from across the bed. Shane forgot they were standing there.

Ilya’s hand is sweaty and barely hanging on, but Shane doesn’t mind.

“I’m out for the season,” Shane tells Ilya. It’s devastating, Shane knows, but it feels too far away to worry about. “But…I was thinking. Maybe I could stay with you? Here in Boston. Until I’m better.”

“Of course,” Ilya says instantly. “If you want.”

“It’s all I want.”

Before Shane falls back asleep, he catches the way that Ilya’s cheeks tinge red. It’s a rare sight, and Shane is upset that he can’t keep his heavy eyes open long enough to relish it.

Ilya keeps his word. He drives Shane home from the hospital. When he starts his car, the radio blares music that he instantly mutes. He shoves a pair of his sunglasses onto Shane’s face. He keeps looking over to Shane. He’s worried. Shane lets himself be worried over. He likes it.

At the apartment, Ilya makes him dinner. He lets Shane borrow one of his bulky, insulated water bottles and fills it every time he gets up. He spills a box of puzzle pieces onto his coffee table and makes Shane do that when all he wants to do is go on his phone. Shane sorts the edge pieces while Ilya reads out an article about Shane’s injury.

They brush their teeth together at the sink. Ilya smiles so hard that a glob of foamy white toothpaste drips out of his mouth and onto his bare chest. Shane stands by the bed as Ilya fixes the duvet and fluffs the extra pillows he’s put on the bed for Shane. He feels like he should be allowed to lean in and kiss Ilya goodnight.

He knows it’s too romantic. He knows it will lead to the conversation he’s been dreading. He knows they’ve taken it too far. If they can pretend, for a little longer, Shane can bask in this warmth. He just has to love Ilya as quietly as he can, as friendly as he can. It’s not his fault that they blurred the lines for years. It’s harder than ever to know what is appropriate.

They face each other in bed. Ilya reaches out to brush a few strands of hair away from Shane’s eyes.

“*I was so scared*,” Ilya says quietly. “*I wanted to go with you. It was so hard to keep playing without knowing how you were.*”

“*I’m sorry*.”

“*I don’t know what I would do if I lost you, Shane*.”

The past few days have been so disorientating and blurry. These words shake him the most, though. Shane realizes that Ilya has a few tears slipping down his cheeks.

"*You won't. I'm here. Always*."

Shane presses a chaste kiss to the side of his mouth. It's better than opening his mouth and admitting everything that he's feeling.

*

A couple days later, Ilya is out at practice and Shane is bored.

He's only allowed a couple hours of screentime every day. He hates working on the puzzles that Ilya leaves out. He's already read a couple of books. He goes to Ilya's office to look through the few books that he has on his bookshelves, but none of them seem interesting, especially not the bulky Russian books.

He's never spent much time in Ilya's office before. He realizes one of the shelves is made up entirely of little plastic toys. Shane knows instantly that they are from Kinder Eggs. He smiles to himself and picks a pair up. There are two flocked cats with their paws sticking out so that they match up for a hug. He vaguely remembers Ilya getting them years ago. He carefully puts them both back down, making sure that they line up perfectly in their embrace.

When he picks up another one, it slips out of his hands and falls to the ground. He crouches down to grab it, but stops when he spots a long basket on the very bottom shelf. It's full of folded-up papers that Shane recognizes instantly. Putting down the toy, he stoops back down to pluck one of the letters out by random.

It's on lined paper and folded carefully with straight lines so that all the corners match up perfectly. Shane used to run his nail down the crease until it sat flat. On the front, in Shane's small, neat handwriting is Ilya's name in Russian. Shane unfolds the paper and finds stilted handwriting. He instantly knows this must be from the first or second year he knew Ilya.

"*I'm in literature class right now. My teacher is yelling at us about grammar. I don't know the word for* comma *in Russian. Please teach me the word later. I can start a list of words I don't know. There are many. I hope you aren't angry at me for asking you to teach me Russian. I like learning with you. You're a good teacher. Do you like Canadian schools? I think they are probably really different? I hope you are happy here. I'm happy you are here. OK, I have to listen to my teacher now. See you at lunch! -Shane*"

Shane smiles down at the letter. He's shocked he even gave this Ilya. It seems so obvious that Shane was infatuated with Ilya right from the start. He remembers wanting Ilya to feel more comfortable in Canada and wanting for him to like Shane.

He sits down on the floor next to the basket and places the read letter in front of him before grabbing a new one. Time trickles by as he reads letter after letter. They aren't in order, so he's constantly jumping around through the years. Some have food stains on the corners. Some have corrections made by Ilya in red pen, something that Shane used to ask for. Some have little doodles on them. Some are funny. Some are serious. Some make Shane wish he

had the letter that came before the one he was reading, like a missing piece to a puzzle that Shane can't remember well enough.

Some of them, to Shane's horror, are embarrassing. When he got better at writing in Russian, he appreciated the safety of writing letters. He didn't have to worry about anyone else being able to read them. He didn't have to make eye contact or stand face-to-face when he wrote his letters. It was easy to admit small things and then pass the letter off between classes in the hallway. All of his anxiety he had writing the letter was thrown to the wind the second he passed the letter off.

In a few letters, Shane complains about the pressure that his parents put on him. He writes about the guilt of how expensive hockey is. He tells Ilya about struggling to sleep because he can't turn off his brain. He admits that he always refused to learn Japanese when he was younger because he didn't want for people to think he was weird, but he wishes he would've.

In one, he writes, "*I don't know what's wrong with me. I really don't like Hayley. I know she's your new girlfriend, and I know I should like her, but she annoys me so much. She is always touching you. I think she is kind of desperate, don't you think? That's probably mean. Sorry. Anyways, I'll try to like her more*."

Ilya dated Hayley for only a few weeks in grade nine. Shane wonders if he really hadn't realized he was just jealous of Hayley.

In another, he writes, "*Sometimes I wish I could go to Russia with you. I wish I could be there to make things easier for you. You are my best friend. I know things are hard right now. One day, things will be different, better. I can't wait to be there with you*."

Shane swallows thickly and folds the letter back up. He's unfolding the next one when a voice from the doorway startles Shane.

"Hey." Ilya is looking down at him. He's in loose workout clothes, and Shane can smell his body spray from all the way across the room.

"Sorry," Shane says automatically, dropping the letter in his hands. "I wasn't snooping. I was just looking for a book to read."

"Is fine," Ilya says, shrugging. "You wrote them."

"I didn't know you kept them."

"You did not keep yours?"

Shane frowns. "Some, yeah. Back at my parents' house, but I don't know where they would be."

Reaching into the pile, he pulls out the last letter he read. He holds out the letter to Ilya, and he walks over to take it after a few moments. Shane watches Ilya read it. He smiles a little as he reads, and then folds it back up.

"Your handwriting is shit," Ilya says.

“Do you think that things are better now?”

Ilya looks across the room. He makes a contemplative face and then says, “Yes. Of course. Different than what I imagined. But good still.”

Ilya hands back the letter, and Shane starts to put them all away as carefully as he found them. When he stands, he looks at Ilya seriously. He has so much to say, but he doesn’t know where to start.

“Is your head bothering you again today?”

“No. Look, Ilya, I need to tell you something,” Shane starts.

“Shane.” Ilya says, voice low and firm, almost panicked.

“I’m in love with you. I know it’s obvious, so you probably already know, but I need you to know. In case you don’t.”

It feels like hours pass before Ilya finally responds. He looks past Shane when he says, “We cannot.”

Shane knows the devastation must be written all over his face. “Right,” he chokes out. “Yeah, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Do not do that.”

“What?”

“Apologize. You do not have to be sorry. I wish…we could, but there is no way. Not right now.”

Hope sparks in Shane’s chest, but it feels childish, practically useless. “Would it be that different? Than what we’re already doing? We can hide it.”

“I do not want to hide.”

They stand in silence for a minute. He starts to walk past Ilya, so that maybe he can go the bathroom and press his palms against the cool marble of Ilya’s sink, but he stops himself. “Just tell me, please. Do you feel the same way?”

He frowns. “You must know.”

“Please.” Shane takes a quick breath. “Just say it out loud. For me.”

“I am in love with you, too. For years.”

If this is all Shane can get, he will learn to be happy with it.

*

Shane stays in Boston as long as he can. He knows he's ignoring things back home. He knows that Ilya is probably trying to work out the best way to ask him to leave. But Shane stays in Boston. Shane and Ilya don't talk about their feelings, but they still make out after a run and Shane rides Ilya in his entryway hallway, their clothes still wet from sweat scattered around them. He swallows down the broken "I love you" before he comes. Shane tells himself that this is what quiet love is.

They watch the Stanley Cup game together and complain about both teams. Ilya won't stop making dinosaur jokes about Scott Hunter. Shane rolls his eyes and tries not to lean in a little closer so that their shoulders are touching. When the game ends, both of them watch as the team celebrates and hugs their loved ones. He wonders if Ilya remembers his own day as vividly as Shane remembers his.

When Hunter brings down a man and kisses him on TV in front of everyone, both Shane and Ilya go silent. Shane can't look away, breath caught in his chest.

"*What the fuck*," Ilya says quietly.

When they finally pull apart, bright smiles on their faces, Shane finally looks over to Ilya. He is already watching him with watery eyes. There is so much to say, but Shane doesn't feel like he needs to say anything. Instead, he leans forward to kiss Ilya.

*

Ilya doesn't go back to Russia that summer.

He flies back to Ottawa with Shane, and they drive over to Shane's cottage. Shane found the box with some of the letters Ilya wrote him from school. They sit on the couch and read through them together, each letter nearly making them double over.

Time moves at such a sweet pace for a few days. They enjoy each other's easy company. They go for a swim and then make grilled chicken for dinner. Ilya presses his body against Shane's as he cuts it up. He kisses Shane's neck and then his hands wander from his waist to his ass. They watch the sun set on the water and then come back inside to watch old games or put on a movie they haven't seen in years. Despite there being several guest rooms, they share Shane's bed and wake up in the morning to a soft glow behind the shades.

Most importantly, they try to ignore the fact that they need a plan. Shane knows they can hide their relationship, but he's not sure how long that will last.

One night, at dinner, he pushes around grilled vegetables and finally says, "I think we should tell my parents."

"About what?"

"Us. They could help," Shane explains. He feels his face grow hot when he adds, "My mom already kind of thought we were together anyways, so it's not like it'll be too shocking for them."

Ilya barks out a laugh. “She said something?”

“In high school, yeah. I think she was kind of disappointed when I told her we weren’t.”

Ilya knocks his foot against Shane’s from under the table. “We can make Yuna very happy.”

Predictably, she is happy. His parents barely even seem surprised when Shane admits it in a shaky voice at their cottage the next day. She beams at the way that Ilya reaches out to hold Shane’s hand. When Shane admits that they are worried about their future and about hiding their relationship, she makes a sympathetic face and then nods.

“We’ll figure it out,” his father says.

“We will,” his mother agrees. “You don’t have to deal with this alone.”

Although nothing is solved that night, Shane feels lighter as they walk to the car after dinner. Ilya puts his hand on Shane’s thigh as they head back to Shane’s cottage. A soft song is playing on the radio. The windows are rolled down and the cool evening breeze is blowing through the car.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!