

Not to Abolish, but to Fulfill

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](https://archiveofourown.org/works/80334051) at <https://archiveofourown.org/works/80334051>.

Rating: [Explicit](#)
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Categories: [M/M](#), [Multi](#)
Fandom: [Heated Rivalry \(TV\)](#)
Relationship: [Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov](#)
Characters: [Shane Hollander](#), [Ilya Rozanov](#), [Yuna Hollander](#), [David Hollander](#), [Svetlana Vetrova](#)
Additional Tags: [Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence](#), [Sub Shane Hollander](#), [Autistic Shane Hollander](#), [Anxious Shane Hollander](#), [Angst](#), [Internalized Homophobia](#), [Period-Typical Homophobia](#), [Internalized Misogyny](#), [Smut](#), [Depressed Ilya Rozanov](#), [Unhealthy Coping Mechanisms](#), [Lack of Communication](#), [Praise Kink](#), [Humiliation Kink](#), [Submission](#), [Sexual Tension](#), [Unresolved Sexual Tension](#), [Slurs](#), [Dirty Talk](#), [Mutual Masturbation](#), [Suicidal Thoughts](#), [Codependency](#), [Horny Shane Hollander](#), [Spitting](#), [Choking](#), [Freak4Freak Shane Hollander/Ilya Rozanov](#), [Feral Shane Hollander](#), [Dom/sub](#), [Under-negotiated Kink](#), [Ilya Rozanov is Obsessed With Shane Hollander](#), [Slow Burn](#), [Face Slapping](#), [Consensual Non-Consent](#), [Sort Of](#), [eternal fucking soulmate love](#), [Hurt/Comfort](#), [Angst with a Happy Ending](#), [They are WEIRD btw](#), [WEIRDO FREAKS](#), [Character Study](#), [POV Shane Hollander](#), [POV Ilya Rozanov](#), [Ilya Rozanov possessed my body and wrote this fic, but tbh my Ilya, which is a highly specific Ilya, and if this isn't freak4freak then NOTHING is, it's not even the kink, like yes it's kinky, but THEY are just so absurdly compatibly mentally ill and codependent, it was important to me the freak4freak tag be accurate and frankly, It is, god bless](#)
Language: [English](#)
Stats: Published: 2026-02-27 Completed: 2026-04-29 Words: 89,699 Chapters: 9/9

Not to Abolish, but to Fulfill

by [Dontevenmind](#)

Summary

All year Shane had been fighting the desperate creeping desires spreading inside him, hoping they would wither and die in the airless forgotten dark of his dreams and now Rozanov, the only player at camp who might've been better at hockey than Shane, with his newly-long legs and newly-defined abs and his indifferent smirking gaze, was lying (maybe) hard above him, asking wildly inappropriate questions and claiming it was all normal and fine and good? Nonsense. If this was normal, Shane was missing way more social cues in his day-to-day life than he thought.

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In which Shane and Ilya meet at hockey camp as teens and a bunch of other things also go differently.

Notes

Author's Confessions:

- I do not know anything whatsoever about hockey & I am so sorry for that.

Chapter 1: '07-'08: Shane

Chapter Summary

In which Shane willingly signs up for something he pretends not to want.

Late Summer 2007

"I mean, he's a prodigious talent, but he takes unnecessary gambles," says Yuna from the other side of the kitchen island, stacking baby carrots and celery into a Pyrex container. "Smart, but totally instinctual. Less careful than you. And a brawler."

"Mhmm," Shane says. Below the island countertop, he presses the tines of a fork into his hand until it hurts.

"Stellar stats, though. I think it'll be good for you to play with somebody closer to your level," she says. "You're the best recruit in the league. The best in any of the North American junior leagues, easily, but I do think he'll challenge you. I can't believe he wasn't on my radar until now. I guess that's what scouts get paid the big bucks for, though."

"Mhmm," Shane says. He doesn't know what he'd been thinking when he told his parents it was okay to host another player at the last minute after the team's first billet family arrangement fell through. It was a moment of temporary insanity.

It's not like he hadn't known, either. He agreed knowing full well it was Ilya fucking Rozanov who needed a family to stay with. What the fuck is wrong with him? It's bad enough he and Rozanov are both playing for Borealis. He presses the fork harder into his hand.

His mom natters on about the ways Rozanov's play differs from Shane's until his dad gets home from work. All through dinner and after, as he washes dishes and plays a few rounds of bananagrams with his parents and brushes his teeth and climbs into bed, Shane tries to think of what he might say when he sees Rozanov again.

Hey, bro. No.

Long time no see. Also no.

Nice to meet you. Definitely not.

He lays in the dark for a long time, playing and replaying all the possible ways it might go. Ruminating helps him avoid thinking about the other thing, for awhile. But it's dark now, and he's seeing Rozanov tomorrow, and there's a reason Shane said yes to his parents about being Rozanov's billet family in the first place.

Two summers ago, when Shane was 14, he'd been randomly roomed with Ilya Rozanov at the hockey camp he went to in the summers before he became affiliated with Borealis.

It had been kind of surprising. Sure, *Shane* never clicked enough with anyone else at camp for them to request him as a roommate, but surely *Ilya Rozanov*, Russian hockey phenom and boy legend *Ilya Rozanov*, with his curls and his pouty mouth and his magnetism, had legions of hockey camp friends banging his door down to share a dorm. Maybe there was a mistake with his roommate request paperwork or something.

Rozanov wasn't the most welcoming person to initiate a conversation with, either. Technically, Shane had never even spoken with him, even though Rozanov had attended camp for the past two summers and had chirped Shane repeatedly and brutally in broken English every single time they shared the ice. He wondered if Rozanov remembered their starting face off in last year's camp championship. Probably not.

Rozanov had been on a tear that day. An absolute prodigy. It was all Shane could do to keep up with him. Shane's team won, but just barely, and for months afterward he'd relived a particularly bruising check from Rozanov over and over. He'd been vicious as he slammed Shane up against the wall, teeth snapping, nearly feral with the need to win. Shane very carefully didn't think about why that particular memory: Rozanov's golden curls plastered to his forehead under the helmet, his razor-sharp eyes as he hurtled into Shane, had imprinted itself so clearly in his mind.

That spring Shane had gotten really into ancient Greek and Roman heroes; the realization that thousands of years of glory and fame have always been on offer for those who do the impossible, be they legendary warriors or game-changing athletes, made something twist excitedly in his gut. His hockey was getting better and better. The NHL was looking more and more possible with each passing week. He devoured tales of men who achieved what no one thought they ever could.

But for every hero: Achilles, Jason, Hercules, Shane pictured some variation of Rozanov. It was embarrassing. Rozanov literally did not know Shane existed, yet there Shane was, picturing his face on the chiseled, sword-wielding bodies of men blessed by the gods. He actually had to stop reading myths involving heaving, broad-chested, golden-haired warriors because his imagination ran away from him when he did.

For the first week of camp thus far, Rozanov had been ignoring Shane's existence. It was disappointing but not entirely surprising; Shane had always known there was something different about him. Something weird. Something that made other people disengage so thoroughly he questioned his own presence in the room. Like oil and water.

Every night, the moment they were alone in their shared room, Rozanov withdrew entirely. One moment he was yippee-ki-yaying through the dorm hallway, cracking somebody's belt like a whip and hoisting Jonesey on piggyback behind him, and the next he was silently closing their door, robotically completing his nighttime routine without glancing Shane's way once.

Shane sighed and pulled his comforter up around his ears as Rozanov climbed up to the top bunk, shaking the entire bed in the process.

For what felt like a long time Shane lay awake, flat on his back and staring into the dark above him. He'd hoped to make some friends this year, after three years of nothing but hockey. Maybe, he'd thought, it was due to a lack of effort on his part that he didn't make friends. He'd decided to start trying for real. But it was a week into camp and Shane had yet to converse with anyone in any kind of extended conversation, except for maybe Adrian, the college student in charge of their wing of the dorms. And if Shane was being truly honest with himself, Adrian probably didn't want to listen to Shane ramble on about the influence of the '83 NHL draft on today's pro hockey recruitment strategies, and had just been being polite earlier. And so Shane laid awake in the dark, as he had every night that week, replaying every brief social interaction he'd had that day and trying to figure out how he'd fucked it up.

Shane felt nearly the same then as he does right now, two years later, flat on his back in the dark of his room and riddled with a feeling he can't name. He still hasn't figured out how to make friends, exactly, and it's not like his unwanted urges have magically disappeared either. And tomorrow Rozanov will be here. In his house. Sitting on his couch and eating dinner with his family and enrolling at his high school. Shane screws his eyes shut. Behind his lids, that night at camp two years ago pulses in excruciating detail.

"Do you touch yourself?" Rozanov's voice had been sudden in the dark.

"What?" Shane said, inhaling and clenching his hands into fists beside him.

"I said, do you touch yourself?"

Was this some sort of dream? Except Shane never remembered his dreams. A hallucination, then? A week without giving Shane half a word or even a blink, and suddenly Rozanov was unleashing his newly-deepening voice into the pitch black of their dorm, asking about-

"What?" Shane's voice came out in an embarrassing crack.

"At night. Or day. Shower, maybe. Do you touch yourself?"

"Like, do I use a washcloth?"

"No, Hollander, the fuck?"

Shane felt his face heat up in the dark.

Rozanov continued. "Your cock."

Shane choked on nothing, wondering if the roar in his ears was the sound of the blood rushing out of his head. He took a deep, soothing breath. He couldn't afford a repeat of last night. He was almost out of underwear. He breathed out, and then back in again. "Why do you ask?"

There was a slight rustle from above.

"You wear one pair of shorts to bed, wake up in different pair three nights this week. Either you piss yourself in the night, or you... are maybe not touching yourself at other times. You don't seem like you piss yourself in the night."

Shane stiffened with humiliation. Something sickly roiled heavily in his gut. Fuck. Rozanov hadn't even noticed his existence all week. Why was he keeping track of which shorts Shane wore to bed? He took another deep, fortifying breath. "What's it to you, Rozanov?"

"Is not right," Rozanov said above him. "You are almost man now. Need to care for self. Can't hump mattress in sleep and come in shorts like little boy forever."

What the fuck? Shane's toes and fingertips throbbed with the pressure of his heartbeat.

"I can help you."

"Help me? Fuck off."

"Yes," Rozanov said. "Do you know how to do it? Can teach you best way. Nicest way." His voice wavered a little bit, or maybe Shane was imagining it.

"Like. How?" Shane said, hating himself for engaging in what had to be some elaborate bullying strategy.

"Touch yourself," Rozanov said. "Lick your hand first."

Obediently, Shane unclenched his fist and pulled his hand out slowly into the cooler bedtime air. He licked it. His tongue was dipping between his fingers and what the fuck was happening and was this normal holy shit?

"What the fuck, Rozanov," Shane said. It came out as more of a croak.

"Is no big deal," Rozanov said. "I have done this before. Not just you." Their bed shook again, loudly. At any other time Shane would be scared for his life on the bottom bunk of this bed, but all he could do was imagine Rozanov above him, lying just like Shane on his back, spit-slick hand pushed messily inside his shorts beneath the dark of the dorm. "Basic need for man."

All year Shane had been fighting the desperate creeping desires spreading inside him, hoping they would wither and die in the airless forgotten dark of his dreams and now Rozanov, the only player at camp who might've been better at hockey than Shane, with his newly-long legs and newly-defined abs and his indifferent smirking gaze, was lying (maybe) hard above him, asking wildly inappropriate questions and claiming it was all normal and fine and good? Nonsense. If this was normal, Shane was missing way more social cues in his day-to-day life than he thought.

"I'm focusing on my game," he said as firmly as he could manage, trying to picture himself five years in the future, playing an NHL All-Stars game. Making history. "Self control can turn a great player into a legendary player."

Rozanov scoffed above him. "Happened three times this week, yes?"

Shane was silent. It had. The dreams had become more and more frequent over the course of the last year. He'd been waking up, showering, and changing his underwear multiple times a

week for months. It was wreaking havoc on his sleep schedule and it was throwing off his whole routine.

"Is okay, Hollander," said Rozanov. "I will help you. You are," he pauses. "Stunted. I looked up this word."

Something wild pulled at Shane, threatening to drag him to a place he might never make it back from.

Rozanov kept going. "You licked your hand? Must be very wet."

Shane closed his eyes against the darkness and laved his tongue over his hand again. He'd been hard since Rozanov said he didn't think Shane was a bed wetter.

"Touch yourself," Rozanov said.

This had to be some sort of sick joke. But what if it wasn't? Shane pushed his hand back under the blanket and the elastic waist of his shorts and pressed it to his cock. "Okay," he said. This was so fucked up. What the fuck.

A gruff exhale came from above. "Next time, use lotion. Spit okay, lotion better."

Shane imagined how it would feel if he was wetter. More slippery. He hardened up even further. He didn't dare so much as twitch his hand, which pressed flat and unmoving against his cock; if he did, he knew he'd careen into the wild abandon flickering at the outskirts of his awareness. Was this the devil, tempting him? A friend from middle school had once taken Shane to some church group thing, where a middle-aged man informed a room full of tweens that Satan is always lurking, waiting to pounce on your weaknesses. Shane pushed up into his hand a little bit and fuck, he needed more more more, had to stop.

The bed didn't stop creaking. "Picture a girl you like," Rozanov said.

"A girl?" Shane said, his hips stilling briefly. Maybe this was okay after all. Maybe it could be normal. If Rozanov was imagining a girl-

"Yes. A pretty girl." Shane flushed with the knowledge that no one could see him in the dark, on the bottom bunk. He spread his legs. Rozanov continued. "Think of what you like about her. Her soft hair, maybe, or her legs or her tits." The creak of their bed got louder and Shane pushed his palm hard against his dick, fighting the looming wave of pleasure and desire threatening to drown him.

"I am thinking of a girl from home," Rozanov continued. "Her mouth. Her tongue." Shane choked on air and stopped trying to hold back whatever this was. He rocked up into his hand in time with the shaking of the bed and let his mind run free, picturing Rozanov above him, heels digging into the thin dorm mattress, knees spread to make room for his hand. "The noises she made when I touched her. Little whimpers, like baby animal."

Shane came. For a moment, he floated on a gentle current of bliss. Rozanov was panting now. There was a final creaking lurch and a groan from above. Muffled, as though buried in a

pillow. Shane began to come down. He was sticky and the feeling repulsed him. He got up to shower and change his underwear.

In the morning it was like nothing happened. Shane woke up early, like he always did, and got some solo practice time before the other players. When he faced off against Rozanov in the morning scrimmage, he lost. Neither of them acknowledged the other, aside from a few brutal slams into the wall.

Rozanov ignored him for the next several days, choosing to stalk around campus in their limited free time, smiling and scowling and chirping and surrounding himself, so charming when he wanted to be, with all the best athletes training that summer except for Shane. He won two more face offs versus Shane in their daily scrimmages and both of those times there was a literal crowd of spectators, all of them other teen athletes training their various elite sports who'd come to watch this routine hockey scrimmage specifically to cheer for Rozanov. It was fair for Shane to be thrown off his game.

Not if he wanted to be the best of the best, though. He was fucking up his entire future in these scrimmages, and for what? Because Rozanov was more popular than him? More likeable? What else was new?? It wasn't like it took much. He needed to shake it off.

On the fifth night after the incident, after days of acting like Shane didn't exist, which would have been entirely normal had Rozanov not sent Shane careening face-first into something he'd been trying to avoid for at least a year, ever since he'd realized he wasn't thinking about the things a man should think about, his voice came again from above.

"Did you like?"

Shane's gut clenched. "What?"

"When I helped you. Other night. You came, yes?"

Shane was hard. Of course. He blinked up at Rozanov's voice in the darkness.

"Sometimes," Rozanov continued, unrushed. "Can be nice. To let someone help you."

"Help me think about a girl?" Shane didn't know if he wanted the answer to be yes or no.

"Sure, Hollander," Rozanov said. A moment passed in silence before he reached a lanky arm down from the top bunk and cupped his hand. "Lotion?"

Shane couldn't breathe with embarrassment. He opened the top drawer of his bedside table and pulled out the fresh bottle of lotion.

"Thank you," Rozanov said as Shane pumped the lotion once, twice, wallowing in how transparent he must be, for Rozanov to know he put the lotion here. "You have," he paused, searching for the word. "Wet wipes also, yes?"

Shane nearly keened, humiliation overtaking his rational thought. He closed his eyes, grateful Rozanov couldn't see him in the dark of the bottom bunk, flushed red everywhere, so hard it

hurt. "Yes," he said. Surely this wasn't normal. This was why he hadn't jerked off in a year. Because he couldn't get his thoughts under control.

The bed quaked as Rozanov contorted to reach his other, lotion-less hand down expectantly. "Give, please."

Shane gave him a wet wipe. He felt like he was spinning, or maybe floating away.

"Don't worry, Hollander," Rozanov said, settling back into his mattress, a slick sound beginning to echo through the room. "Is ok, is normal. Is nice. To have someone get you there."

Some sort of noise leaks out of Shane. How the *fuck* did Rozanov have this kind of experience already? After a moment of silence, so so hard under the covers, he gave in. "What are you thinking about?" he whispered.

There was a moment of quiet, though the slick click of Rozanov's hand continued.

All week, Shane had tried not to think about it. About this. What he wanted. He hadn't been able to look Rozanov in the eye, afraid his wrongness would be on full display. He snuck glances, of course, at Rozanov's naked back when he dressed in the morning or at the golden hair dusting his legs, but Shane knew that if he really looked, Rozanov would see the disgusting truth written all over his face.

"Same girl," Rozanov said. "Touching her, pulling her to me, tits in my hands."

God, Shane was pathetic. He pumped some lotion onto his hand and shoved it beneath the waist of his shorts.

Rozanov kept talking, slow, taking time to find the words. "This girl, I kissed her. Cherry taste on lips. Sticky. Sucked on my tongue. Moaned around it. Was so hot. Put hand in pants and I came right away. This girl says I can have her mouth when I am home."

How would it feel to suck on a tongue? To have his own tongue sucked on?

"But," Rozanov continued, "there are many girls here who would suck my dick."

Shane's hips jerked up into his fist. He fought a groan. "Your dick in her mouth?" he said, breathless. He'd been distracted. Hadn't realized what Rozanov meant at first. Sure, he'd taken mandatory sex ed and he'd heard his teammates talk in the locker room about what girls had let them do, or what they wanted girls to let them do, but he'd never really pictured it before. He'd avoided picturing anything sexual at all, actually, afraid of what his uncontrollable mind might conjure up. And it was conjuring things now, fuck. Holy fuck.

"I hope, yes," Rozanov said. "Want to see her." The sound of his hand sped up, along with his laboring exhales. "To feel her mouth on me," he managed after a moment, switching into Russian, mumbling still, the sound of his hand harsh in the dark, and then a final lingering moan.

Shane imagined something he tried very hard to forget later and bucked up into his hand, following Rozanov into ecstasy.

His game improved. He started reading Rozanov better on the ice. By the last week of camp, Rozanov had begun publicly acknowledging him, which increased Shane's popularity immensely. Suddenly, other players cared to talk to him around campus.

They didn't have any more incidents, which was probably for the best. Shane couldn't afford to acknowledge or accept anything more than what he already had: his game always had to come first.

It surprises Shane, that his mother didn't have Rozanov on her radar until Borealis signed him unexpectedly. Rozanov had been the only other player at that camp who competed with him at a serious level. He's been big in whatever the Russian AAA equivalent is for years. It isn't like Yuna to forget someone who once gave her son a run for his money.

He hasn't reminded her he already knows Rozanov. He tells himself he hasn't mentioned it because it's not important, but Shane knows that's a lie. He's certain that if he admits to knowing Rozanov the real truth will be naked on his face for everyone to see. It's the last thing he needs. Rozanov living here is the last thing he needs. Why did he agree to this?

After camp that summer, Shane hadn't been able to go back to total denial. He's been trying his best to keep the urges sated in as controlled a manner as possible, without delving any deeper into the forbidden parts of his mind than absolutely necessary. As long as he doesn't look too closely at what he wants, it's like it doesn't exist.

But he's hard now, flat on his back, reliving the terror and pleasure of those nights at camp two years ago and imagining Rozanov in his house tomorrow, in the room next door, showering in Shane's bathroom, mixing his dirty laundry in with Shane's.

He rolls for a moment in a wave of humiliation before giving in and taking care of it. When he comes, he is trying very hard not to picture any specific person or gender, but it's the thought of being on his knees, a big hand gripping his hair, giving in, giving up, that pushes him over the edge.

He doesn't feel good about it.

The next day Rozanov's flight is delayed by five hours, meaning Shane has to pick him up from the airport alone. He's driven to the airport once before, but that was to drop his dad off, not to pick anyone up. The driving etiquette might be different on the arrivals ramp than it is on the departures. Shane knows his panic about this is unreasonable: surely the signage will be clear enough, but it doesn't matter. Fuck.

He leaves two hours earlier than he needs to. After looping through the airport arrivals ramp once and confirming his stress has all been for nothing, he sits in a nearby coffee shop alone for two hours, nothing to do but stare at the wall and panic even further about what to say.

When Shane finally sees Rozanov's tall, broad body moving through the crowd, a head and shoulders taller than nearly everyone around him, everything he rehearsed slips his mind

entirely. He gets out of Yuna's SUV to help Rozanov put his luggage in the back: it seems like the polite, mature option. He gives some kind of wave that does not feel normal or chill at all, and says something like "um, hey."

Rozanov raises an eyebrow at him. He looks even more arrogant than he had two years ago at fourteen, the cut of his jaw and curl of his lips newly defined against the broad planes of his face. "Hey."

They sit for a moment in the car with the blinker on. Shane is focused on his blind spot and rear-view mirrors, trying to figure out how much time he has to pull out of the temporary parking zone and navigate off the ramp, losing feeling in his hands a little bit with the stress of it all, trying to find the headspace he gets into when he's playing hockey, when he's somehow moving beyond time, when he knows exactly where every player will be at any moment, where the puck will be, where it will go when he intercepts it, when Rozanov speaks.

"You are stalking me, Hollander?"

Shane chokes. "What?" He can't look over at Rozanov or he'll lose track of the other cars around him.

"We are roommates again? Seems unlikely."

"This is *my* hometown that *you* willingly chose to come to," Shane sputters. "Literally any other team anywhere else would've signed you." He finally manages to pull out into the river of airport traffic, but he doesn't remember which highway to get onto. He'd printed the MapQuest directions to get here and memorized them before leaving, so he wouldn't need to look away from the road. Stupidly, he'd forgotten to print or memorize the return trip directions. Shane puts a hand out without taking his eyes off the road. "Pass me the directions," he says. "They're in the glove box."

Rozanov spends too long fiddling with the glove box and Shane misses all the possible on-ramps. His only option is to loop back through arrivals. He's doing so when, finally, Rozanov finds the directions. "Okay, great," Shane says, eyes fixed on the road as he drives slowly through the arrivals ramp again in the far left lane, not stopping. "Can you hold them up so I can see them?"

"Like this?" Rozanov asks, shoving the papers in front of the steering wheel.

Shane should've pulled over again at arrivals and looked at the directions himself. Fuck. Fuck. He's passing all the on-ramps again. No way he can read the directions and also drive at the same time. He loops back toward the arrivals pickup ramp for a third time.

"What the fuck are we doing?" Rozanov says.

Shane clenches his jaw and doesn't answer. He drives back up the ramp and pulls over as soon as he's able, resting his arms on the top of the steering wheel and looking down at his lap. This is so embarrassing. He closes his eyes and focuses on breathing in and out. He can

do this. He just needs to check the directions he used to get here and reverse them. The rest will be smooth sailing. Probably.

"Hollander?"

Shane breathes in and out again, eyes still closed. "I'm fine," he says. "Give me a second."

Rozanov is quiet.

When Shane lifts his head, Rozanov blinks at him uncertainly. "I did not mean you are stalker for real," he says.

A shocked laugh forces its way out of Shane's mouth. "Sorry," he says, not quite able to meet Rozanov's eye. "Traffic just stresses me out a lot and I don't remember which highway I need to get onto." This is a nightmare. Shane must look so stupid, so incompetent.

Rozanov's brow furrows minutely and he looks at Shane for a long moment, but then he smiles. It seems almost kind, but Shane doesn't get his hopes up. "Is okay, Hollander," says Rozanov. "We are on same team now. We get out of this hellscape nightmare clusterfuck together."

Shane's entire body is red, he's sure of it. Any hometown advantage that might have otherwise evened the playing field between them has been wiped out by Rozanov's pity. He'd hoped to be less pathetic now than he had been at camp two years ago. Less afraid.

"Who taught you all that?" He asks.

"Russian friend who lives in America," Rozanov says. He shakes the directions open and peers at them. "So. First, you need to teach me meaning of these symbols."

The car spins around Shane. Rozanov can't read English? Is Shane getting pity help reading directions from someone who literally cannot read?

A hand is waving in front of his face. It takes a moment to shake himself out of it.

"Hollander," Rozanov is saying, the meaning of words he'd spoken moments ago beginning to register. "Hollander, it was joke. Is okay. I can read English. Kind of." He hesitates briefly before putting a hand on Shane's back and rubbing gently.

That overwhelming, unnameable feeling rushes through Shane again. He'll hate himself later but for now he gives in, dropping his head back down between his arms and taking another deep breath. "Sorry," he says into his lap, letting Rozanov rub his back a beat too long before sitting back up. The warm spot where Rozanov's hand had been goes cold.

"Do not be," Rozanov says. "Thank you, Hollander, for ride. In Russia, we cannot drive until eighteen, so you are doing better job than me."

Why is Rozanov being so nice? He's a known asshole. "Normally I'm okay," Shane tries to explain. "Like, I can drive and it's fine. Just-"

"Is okay, Hollander. Really. You are here, I am here, everyone is okay. We have directions." Rozanov smiles the tiniest bit. "I can read. You can drive. Mission accomplished."

He's right. For a final time, Shane pulls out of the arrivals ramp. Rozanov tells him where to go.

When they get back to Shane's house his parents still aren't home. They probably won't be for awhile. Shane attempts to give Rozanov a tour. He's still nervous. For most of the ride Rozanov had been absorbed in his phone, furiously texting someone, and they hadn't really talked.

They leave Rozanov's hockey gear in the car and Shane shows him upstairs.

"Uh, so this is your room," he says, walking into the guest bedroom. He gestures around. "Do whatever with it, I guess."

Rozanov lets his suitcase thunk hard onto the floor. He takes in the tasteful sage walls and empty closet before giving Shane a flat smile. "Thank you, Hollander."

"Uh, it's really my mom and dad you should thank," Shane says, looking down at the floor. He rocks back on his heels. "I mean, not that I don't want you here, just, this is their guest room more than mine I guess." When he looks up, Rozanov is staring at him. Shane looks away.

"Um, so, this is the bathroom," he says, crossing the guest bedroom to open the door on its other side. "It connects to both our rooms, um, so we share it." He walks into the bathroom, taking a few steps and opening the door to his own bedroom. "And this is my room," Shane says, walking partially inside before turning around to check that Rozanov is following.

Rozanov is right there behind him. Heat radiates off his broad chest and Shane springs back. "Whoa," he says. "Sorry."

Rozanov doesn't flinch. He looks around Shane's room, at his uncreased blue duvet and the vacuum lines in his carpet. His gaze is unreadable but Shane watches it catalog everything, slowing on his childhood photo with Gretzky and the color-coded calendar above his desk. Then, it snaps back onto to Shane.

Shane is frozen. Unbreathing. Rozanov's eyes are blue. He hadn't realized before.

"Thank you, Hollander." Rozanov says. "But right now I need to sleep. Goodnight." He turns around and closes the door behind him. Shane stands immobile for too long, listening to Rozanov shower and brush his teeth through the bathroom door before flopping backwards onto his bed in the same outfit he wore to the airport. He doesn't even care.

Fall 2007

Neither Shane nor Rozanov have acknowledged the elephant in the room yet. Shane really isn't even sure there is an elephant in the room. Like, maybe Shane is hallucinating an

elephant that doesn't exist? Rozanov certainly doesn't seem bothered.

For months now they've spent virtually every moment of every day together. They drive to school together every day and practice together every afternoon. They eat lunch together with some of the other hockey players. When traveling, they share a room.

The team is having an incredible season. He and Rozanov have great chemistry on the ice; playing together has honed both their games. His mom had been right about Shane's development as a player.

Yuna and David love Rozanov. He's polite, follows the rules, asks them questions and remembers the answers. Shane's mom is over the moon that they've become friends. That in combination with their excellent start to the season has both his parents giddy.

The problem isn't exactly that Rozanov is always touching him, slipping an arm around his shoulders or ruffling his hair or jabbing him in the side. Rozanov touches the other guys, too, so it's probably normal. It's just that for Shane, things definitely aren't normal.

And the other part of the problem is that sometimes things seem maybe not normal for Rozanov, either. Shane is probably reading into it. Almost definitely. But when he turns around in the shower after practice and it's just Rozanov standing there, looking straight at him, and when Shane's traitorous gaze dips over his clavicle and down his rippling torso before he manages to jerk it away, turning stupidly around, letting the water push his hair down over his eyes and pretending he hadn't just almost ogled Rozanov's naked cock, it doesn't feel like he's reading into it.

And when they're in the den playing NHL '06 and Rozanov's shoulder bumps into Shane's and his thigh presses hotly against Shane's because he's right next to him on the four-person couch it doesn't feel normal. And when Shane turns to chirp him but Rozanov has already turned, looming wide and hot and close, looking down into his eyes, and when his gaze drops to Rozanov's throat and his Adam's apple bobs with a dry swallow it doesn't feel normal.

And when they're at school and Rozanov shamelessly presses some girl against the wall of the stairwell, lifting her by the thighs so he can kiss her without bending down, or when he loops his arm around her waist, pulling her behind the bleachers to make out before lifting his face from her neck or her hair or her tits and looking directly at Shane, smirking right at Shane with his arms wrapping all around her and her hands pushing up his shirt it doesn't feel normal.

But maybe it is. And it has to be. Because what is Shane supposed to do about it?

And so what, Rozanov has messed around with a bunch of girls at school. Hockey players do that kind of thing. It's not like Shane's looking, exactly. Well. He kind of is looking, but he doesn't want to be.

When the season first began, Shane had been tense, hopeful in his heart-of-hearts, on nights they traveled, about what Rozanov might do. His anxiety over what could happen in the unknown dark of their hotel room later made him laser-focused on Rozanov during those games, for the better: they've won every road game so far this season and now sometimes,

after devoting so much energy to reading him, to maximizing his play, to creating new windows and gaps and being so fucking attuned to his every single moment and movement and potentiality on the ice, Shane feels like he knows what Rozanov will do and where he will be far in advance, like he's reading his mind.

But after a few months without anything weird happening, or at least nothing quite as weird as when they were fourteen, Shane stops expecting anything and focuses on making whatever this is feel normal and not at all weird or questionable. It has all been fine, all along, and none of Shane's crazy delusions have been based in anything outside of mutual admiration and love for the game. Just bros being bros.

So when Rozanov's voice spills out from the bed next to him and into the air of the room one night, after they've completed their nighttime routines in comfortable rhythm, Shane isn't ready.

"Have you been with a girl before?"

All the progress Shane has made to establish normalcy disappears. His breath is coming shallow.

"No," he says. Rozanov doesn't say anything. Is he waiting for more? Shane hates himself. He was always going to let this happen. "Why?"

Rozanov exhales a half-chuckle and Shane flushes hot under the covers, caught out.

"So you don't know yet," Rozanov says, "how hard it is to go without once you have had it."

Shane knows a thing or two about going without. Rozanov has been in his space for *months*, touching and crowding and hulking and sneering and sweating and breathing heavy and looking Shane right in the eyes, and it's all Shane can do not to drop to his knees and throw his entire future away at any and every moment of the day. He shrugs under the covers, realizing Rozanov can't see him. Remembering none of the images flooding his mind are ones he wants to see. Except he does. "I guess not," he says.

"It is hard, Hollander."

"Oh?" Shane manages, trying not to think of other hard things.

"We are friends, yes?"

There's a thrill somewhere in Shane's chest. He's hoped they were friends, but it's not like they've talked about it. It hasn't been clear to Shane whether that's the kind of thing that goes unspoken between men, or whether there should be a conversation of some sort to verify they're both on the same page about the status of their relationship. That thought pings weirdly in his brain. The same page about what they are to each other? No. Far worse.

He blinks, feeling his heartbeat everywhere in his body. Suddenly he's saying "I hope so," and he's awash with embarrassment again. Always giving himself away.

"Good," says Rozanov. "Because you know me and we like each other, and we both understand that pleasure is basic need for a man."

Shane is so so hard. He has been for months, it feels like, always on edge.

Rozanov keeps talking. His voice is far deeper now than it had been two years ago. "Once you have fucked someone, or even had a mouth on you, and you have felt how warm and wet and tight and fucking fun it is, with another person, jerking off alone is not good enough. And I have been doing a lot of that recently."

Shane scoffs. This has to be a joke. "More like you've been fucking around with every girl at school. And every random puck slut at games."

"Don't call them sluts," Rozanov says. "Is not nice. Bad English word. Disrespectful. One of them told me."

"Okay, fine, sorry," Shane says. "More like you've been getting off with every single girl or woman between the ages of fifteen and thirty five who you come into contact with."

"Is not true. When do I have time to fuck all these women? We have curfew. I am not fucking them in the room across from you. Have you woken up to a girl in your shower?? I do not think so. I respect David and Yuna's home."

"I have *seen you at school* with girls all over you. I don't even know if you attend class."

"Sure," Rozanov says. "I kiss some girls at school or games, whatever. Maybe I get lucky and they put hand in my pants. But I don't even have a *car*, Hollander, and is cold outside now. There is nowhere to go." There's a pause. "I mean... okay sure, yes, I have fucked a few of them and maybe gotten a little bit more than just a hand job a few times, and some of them have cars or empty houses, but really I am experiencing a drought, Hollander. I looked up this word, drought, to describe my experience. Is accurate."

Shane had watched him get in an SUV with a woman who looked about thirty less than a week ago after a game. It had a set of stickers on the back depicting a mother, father, and two children plus a dog. She'd driven them away and Rozanov hadn't gotten home that night until ten minutes after curfew.

Shane is smiling at the ceiling, now. Because this could all be normal, maybe, and fine, since it's just two guys talking about girls. Or maybe also because Roz is initiating this thing between them *again*, despite zero evidence of this alleged drought. As if he *likes it*. As if it was more than just a pity tutorial to help poor little Shane overcome his babyish wet dreams, before.

"Oh yeah?" Shane says. "That must be really hard for someone like you to go through."

"Someone like me?"

"Yeah," Shane says, riding a surge of confidence. "There's a word to describe what you are, but you just told me it's rude."

Rozanov gasps dramatically. A pillow comes flying from the other bed and hits Shane across the midriff. "You think I am slut?"

"The town bicycle," Shane confirms, flinging the pillow back at Rozanov's bed. "Everybody gets a ride."

"Oh," Rozanov says. "You're jealous? Do you want one, Hollander?"

Sweat breaks out all over Shane's body. "You wish," he manages to choke out, trying desperately not to imagine himself on top of Rozanov. How his perfect chest would feel heaving beneath Shane's hands.

"I think I am good ride. I see what they want and I give to them."

That same wild abandon is flickering at the edges of Shane's awareness, begging him to give in, to let go. "What do they want?" he asks, staring at the ceiling, feeling a tether snap somewhere inside of him. He doesn't even care what happens tomorrow, or next week, or in any moment that isn't this.

Rozanov's bedside table drawer scrapes as he opens it. A bottle snicks open and after a moment his voice comes again into the darkness of the room. "Reach out your hand." Shane reaches out his hand. Rozanov grabs his wrist, tight, and scrapes more than enough lotion off his own hand and onto Shane's. His long fingers slip slick between Shane's and surely this isn't normal but it doesn't fucking matter.

Suddenly all that's here is the warmth and pressure of his own hand under his shorts and the hotel duvet pressing down onto him, keeping him so still, and Rozanov's voice spilling filthily into the cool dark of the room.

"Depends on girl. Some want to be treated like princess." Rozanov is definitely touching himself now, wet and slick. "These types I kiss for long, long time, and touch gentle everywhere and lay down and push knees apart and open her legs up all welcoming for me and eat her until she comes, and fuck her on her back and look at her face and kiss and stroke it, so when I push back inside from behind she is ready to come again almost as soon as I reach around to touch her."

Everything tunnels, goes echoey and distant, a blurring cloudy darkness rising in Shane's peripherals like he's falling into a well: Rozanov's steady voice, the sound of the air conditioner and the feeling of Shane's own hand on his cock, moving in rhythm with the sound of Rozanov's, the safe warm weight of the hotel duvet keeping him calm, giving in to the rush coursing over and through him.

Rozanov is still talking. "I make so easy, just move how she needs and give pleasure. These type of girls take time because they like to kiss slow and be touched everywhere, but it can be so good with them. So fucking good, Hollander, to make a woman come again and again on my cock. To make her cry, sometimes, because she feels so good."

Shane imagines being taken care of so well he forgets who he is, not needing to think, warm strong hands guiding him, making sure he feels good. He comes all over himself and his

hand, hearing an echo of his own punched-out moan through the free-fall of his pleasure.

As he comes back into himself, he hears Rozanov choke out "fuck, Hollander, did you-" before letting out a muffled groan. Shane falls asleep within the minute, failing even to clean himself up.

He regrets it in the morning. Rozanov smirks at Shane when he gets out of the bathroom after his shower, looking pointedly down at his groin. "Fuck off," Shane says, turning away from him.

Where should he even look? Nowhere near Rozanov is safe. The truth will be written all over Shane's face. He sits on the edge of his bed and leans down, pretending to fiddle with his socks.

"Is okay, Hollander," Rozanov says. "Take a chill pill."

Shane looks up and risks a glance in Rozanov's general direction. "Who taught you that one?" And all the rest of the filth you spilled last night, he wants to say but doesn't.

"Guy on team. Listen. Is no big deal." He gestures between himself and Shane. "There is nothing wrong with feeling pleasure or helping others feel pleasure. Americans are prudes."

"I'm Canadian. This is Canada." Shane is still half-convinced their teammates are hiding in the closet at Rozanov's behest, just waiting to tumble out, jeering, exposing Shane for the faggot he is.

"Then why are you being such a prude?"

Shane turns away and stares at the wall. After a moment the bed next to him dips. "Listen. I'm sorry," Rozanov says from beside him. Shane's heart beats faster. His palms are sweaty. "If you don't like, we don't have to do anything ever. I want to be your friend. Friends can help each other, sometimes, but we do not have to."

"I'm not a prude," Shane says. He definitely is. But maybe for the first time, he wishes he weren't.

"Okay, sure," Rozanov says. He waits a moment before laying his arm over Shane's shoulder and squeezing. "I am glad to be staying with your family. And with you. I don't want to fuck it up."

"You haven't fucked it up," Shane says, stiff under the heavy weight of Rozanov's arm tethering him to the bed, to his side. Is this normal? "I'm glad we're friends too." He pauses. What would happen if he turned his head right now? Rozanov is *right there*. If Shane turns, will Rozanov be looking right into him with those piercing eyes, close enough for his breath to brush over Shane's cheek? He doesn't turn. Fuck it, though. "And," he admits, staring at his knees, feeling like his throat is closing. "I liked it."

Rozanov exhales beside him and lifts his arm from around Shane's shoulders. He slides his hand up the back of Shane's neck as he does it, gripping at Shane's hair for a moment. Shane

fighters the urge to relax into it, bare his neck, let Rozanov pull him sideways onto his lap. When Shane doesn't turn, Rozanov runs his thumb over Shane's scalp one last time before he stops touching him entirely.

Shane risks a glance at his face and Rozanov is staring straight back at him. Shane looks away. Jesus Christ.

"Just like, normal, though, right?" Shane says, looking at the floor. "Like-"

Rozanov flops back onto the bed, knees still hanging off the end. "Yes Hollander, calm down. Is okay. Is normal. Better than jerking off alone in shower, yes?"

Obviously. "And you won't, like, tell anyone?"

"Who will I tell?"

Shane isn't sure. Their teammates? His parents? People at school? Literally any of Rozanov's other many friends?

After a moment of silence, Rozanov sighs. "No, Hollander. I will not tell anyone. Is just a little fun between us. No big deal."

"Okay," says Shane. He risks another glance at Rozanov, who is sprawled behind him, his wide shoulders and long arms making the bed look small in comparison. It's like every day he grows a little bigger, a little broader, a little more defined. It's absurd. No wonder hockey moms want to parade him around all over town in the passenger seat of their massive SUVs. He looks away before his eyes make it to Rozanov's face.

Winter 2007

They both play on their national teams for the World Juniors, and the media loves them as star teammates-turned-competitors. Yuna is over the moon, taking meeting after meeting with potential sponsors. After Canada wins the Championship in a tense game versus Russia, during which Shane loses the starting face-off to Rozanov but follows up with three assists and a goal, the press report on the rest of their season with Borealis as though they're the next big thing. Some radio show host starts calling them 'Hollanov,' and suddenly so is everyone else, including the other guys on the team. Shane has what feels like endless meetings with scouts and recruiters for colleges, pro teams, advertisers.

When they're at home they keep to their separate bedrooms and their familiar bathroom routines. Shane showers first in the morning, Roz second. At night, they brush their teeth at the same time, making faces at each other in the mirror and bumping hips. Sometimes (all the time) Shane's entire body sparks with desire he knows he'll never be allowed to sate. When his mind runs away from him, alone in his bedroom with Roz just feet away, he resists it. What they have is nothing. And that's enough. It has to be enough.

And it is. It's good. Great, even. Shane lives for away games. For the moment Rozanov's voice leaks out into the dark of their shared hotel room, spilling vulgarities into the quiet of the night. For the rustle of his bed sheets and the slick unmistakable sound of his hand on his cock.

Spring 2008

They win the league championships, to much acclaim in the media and at school. It's euphoric, winning: the slow-motion knowing, as he watches the puck slide in, that they've done it again. But as the end of the school year approaches, along with Roz's return to Russia, Shane realizes he's let it go too far.

He'd known it had to end on the night of the championships, after Roz scored a hat trick on Shane's assists and they won the attention of what felt like the entire world. They were in their separate beds in the dark, beneath the covers, touching themselves, as they had every time they shared a hotel room since November.

"Who live to make you come," Rozanov was saying, already panting. "You can do anything to them. Pull hair, fuck deep deep into throat, move all around, leave marks on neck and arms and thighs. Hear them beg for more."

Shane was too far gone by that point, arm thrown over his face, gasping out little whining exhales and fuck Roz, please, fucks and when he came to thoughts of being used, giving in, letting go yet again, he knew. It couldn't continue. Fortunately, this was their last game of the season. All he had to do was be normal until Roz went back home to Russia for the summer, and then refuse to let it happen next year. No problem.

But when he thinks about Roz leaving for the summer he's bereft. It makes no sense, how upset he is. Borealis offered them both another contract, and Shane's parents are ecstatic to billet him for another year. It's just a few months.

And Shane has been lonely for most of his life, so he should be able to deal with it by now. One measly year with a friend and suddenly he can't breathe at the thought of being alone again for one summer? Fucking weak. Pathetic. He has to get over it. It's just because Shane has gotten attached to his and Roz's routine, probably. It sucks when he has to get used to a whole new thing. It had been nice having somebody there for away games, too, to keep things consistent.

And it basically is no problem to stay away, except for the weekend Shane's Aunt Judy and Uncle Dan stay with his family in late May, during which Roz opts to share Shane's double bed instead of sleeping on the couch in the den.

It's fine, though, when they orgasm together in Shane's bed on that first night, silent, hands clamped over their mouths because of Shane's aunt and uncle in the adjoining room. Shane can't help but look at Roz next to him, on top of the duvet in the late-spring heat, hand on his cock. They never do this in the light, above the covers and he shouldn't but he's watching Roz grip himself, fist sliding up and down, push-pulling the foreskin over the tip, wondering how

it would feel in his mouth when a hitch in Roz's breath and a stilling of his hand make Shane look up at his face and Roz is looking back already, eyes dark, and as Shane stares, helpless, Roz looks down at Shane's hand on his own cock and his arm starts moving again. He's focused, mouth slightly open, jerking himself to the sight and so Shane does the same, tumbling off the edge as he watches Roz's lovely big cock spill into his hand for the first time, listening to his mumblings in Russian, picturing his broad hands on Shane's hips, fingers digging tight enough to bruise.

And it's totally fine when they resume their normal bedtime routine, taking turns using the bathroom and showering, brushing their teeth together like they do every night before climbing back into Shane's bed, waking up the next morning with Roz's hand wrapped loosely around Shane's wrist under the covers.

And it's even fine on the second night, at first, when they start touching themselves silently in the dark, until Roz's voice comes quietly, whispering directly into Shane's ear, the broad breadth of his shoulders tilting toward Shane and the damp of his breath ruffling the hair on his nape. "Do you want to know how it feels, Hollander?" And everything feels like slow motion, like moving through water, as Roz ducks beneath the covers and gets his mouth on him, taking him all the way, and it's so fast, wet, tight, Shane's face buried in a pillow, trying to shut himself up, blinding white-hot pleasure overtaking him.

And then a week later he was gone, back to Russia, and Shane knew it was over. It had to be over. All of it.

Chapter 2: '08-'09: Shane

Chapter Summary

In which Ilya lives with Shane's family for another year. Highlights include some improbable vocabulary words from Ilya & a really solid case for why you should never trust a hotel duvet is clean.

Summer 2008

It's concerning, actually, how much Shane misses him. It's not reasonable, or normal, and surely this yawning emptiness in his chest will go away if he ignores it.

He struggles to get back into his pre-Rozanov routine. Normally, Shane loves monotony: scheduling his days in the most efficient, effective, predictable possible way is his go-to stress management technique, but it's way less soothing than it usually is. Shane finds himself wishing for Roz's cutting eyes or arrogant smile to distract him from the blandness of it all. But his season with Borealis had been incredible. He's on track to be a top three NHL draft pick next spring. He's had interest from all six original teams. All he has to do is keep doing what he's been doing and not fuck it up.

By mid-June he's grimly re-committed to his routines, despite his parents' best efforts to convince him to relax during his limited time off. "I'll relax when I'm drafted," he says, knowing that probably isn't true. If he's honest, he doesn't really understand what relaxation is supposed to be; he's pretty sure he's never actually done it. Still, though, he goes up to the cottage with them on weekends, and that's when he meets Maddie.

She's cool, way cooler than Shane, but also kind of nerdy, and she's fun, with bleached hair and big sunglasses hiding her eyes. Her parents own a cabin on the same lake as his own, but as it turns out she's from Ottawa. In fact, she goes to Shane's school. It's fate, he tells himself when she slips her hand into his on the beach one night, the soft wash of the lake drowning out his dread, fireflies flickering around them.

He does genuinely like hanging out with her. She swims competitively and she's shameless about how much faster and stronger she is than him in the water. Her laugh is unexpected and charming, so genuine, and it makes Shane want to laugh along with her. She doesn't make him feel weird, ever.

So on the weekends, when he's at the cottage, Shane holds Maddie's hand: lets her kiss him softly and run her hands down his chest. He tries to do the same. It doesn't feel totally natural, but aside from hockey most things don't, and he's a good mimic. He thinks he's doing okay. When she tries to go further he stills her hand. Hopefully, she's happy he's not being a sleaze.

He should try to move faster, especially because he's a near-total virgin, and Rozanov's mouth one time definitely doesn't count. The other guys on the team would be appalled he's saying no to a girl who wants to touch his dick. So finally, a week before Roz is scheduled to return from Russia, Shane lets Maddie go down on him.

It feels good. Really good, actually, once Shane closes his eyes and remembers Rozanov's mouth on him in his bed last spring. Maddie feels around for his hand, which is clenched at his side, and moves it to her head. Her hair is long, surprisingly soft considering the bleach and the chlorine. Shane strokes it gently, trying to focus on the feeling of her mouth on him, remembering how it had sounded when Roz took him all the way down. How it had felt. And thank fucking god his teen body doesn't fail him now: after a certain point, the wet warmth of her mouth is all he *can* focus on and he pulls her off desperately, coming into her small, gentle hand with his eyes closed and his arm thrown over his face.

After catching his breath, Shane tries to reciprocate. It's not something he's ever really thought about, but he kind of likes it, actually, letting her push his head around and give him directions. It's easier than he would've guessed to interpret the noises she makes above him and the clutch of her hands in his hair and the quavering of her legs around his ears. It's nice he can give her something.

He pushes down the guilt afterward. He liked it. They both had orgasms, he's pretty sure, and really what more could anyone ask for? This is a good development. Really good.

When Roz gets back he and Shane hug for a long time in the airport arrivals pickup zone. He's broader and Shane feels small pressed up into his chest. He doesn't smell like the detergent Yuna uses anymore. He doesn't smell like much of anything except cold air and cigarettes.

Over the course of the school year, when Roz was living with him, they'd rarely texted; they didn't have to. Why waste one of your limited texts that month on someone who lives with and participates in all the same activities as you? But then when Roz went back home to Russia, Shane hadn't known how to maintain contact in a non-weird way. He didn't have a template. And Rozanov didn't reach out, either. Shane had comforted himself with the knowledge that in a few months he'd be back. That their time together wasn't over yet.

It was probably good to have some space, anyway. Shane needed that space to meet Maddie.

Their hug is joined by Shane's parents, who have loaded Rozanov's luggage into the back of the SUV. "We're so happy to have you back, Ilya," Yuna says, her arms tight around them both, squeezing tightly.

Shane doesn't know why, but something feels off, when she says it. Maybe it was the way Rozanov looked when he'd appeared in the terminal door: cold and somehow drained of color, scanning the pickup zone for their car with the flat, bloodless gaze of a shark.

Shane steels himself briefly before stepping back out of the hug and looking up into Rozanov's face; his lips are pressed tightly together and he's looking somewhere into the

distance, at nothing and everything. "Yes," Rozanov says, mouth twisting, sour around the word. "It is good to see you all. Thank you for having me again." He turns away abruptly and gets into the SUV, slamming the door behind him.

They all look over at the SUV, dropping their arms from where Rozanov had brushed them off, and David shrugs. "Long flight?" he says, moving to close the trunk.

Rozanov is absorbed by his phone for the drive and gives short, clipped replies to Shane's parents when they ask how his summer was. It's awkward. When they get home, Rozanov beelines for the shower.

At dinner later he is apologetic. "Sorry for my rudeness," he says, offering a sort of grimace in the general direction of Shane and his parents around the table. "I had a very tiring journey to get here." He straightens up and smiles a little bigger, though it still doesn't hit his eyes. "How was the summer, Hollanders?" he asks, pointing a fork around the table.

Shane's parents forgive Rozanov immediately, of course, if they had ever even been upset. David launches into a long, animated tale with very little plot or action, focused primarily on the suffering he'd undergone trying to choose between two grill options to replace the old broken one at the cottage.

Yuna gets up from the table immediately; she and Shane have not only heard this story numerous times, they lived through the saga as it was happening. She points at Rozanov's mostly-empty water glass and mouths "refill?" Rozanov nods. Something is still not right about him. He seems less saturated, somehow, than he had been in May.

Shane looks down at his plate. The rice portion is a little big. He chugs his water and takes the glass to the kitchen. Yuna is refilling the Brita at the sink.

"It'll just be a second," she says, looking at the empty glass in his hand. "Does Ilya seem alright to you?"

"I don't know," he says. "Maybe it's just weird because it's been awhile."

When he gets back to the dining room after refilling his glass, David is mid-monologue about the various grill brands and their reputations for reliability versus innovation. "Truly," he's saying, "it was the war of the grill salesmen, but I was the only one losing."

Shane looks over at Rozanov, who is pity chuckling at David's little joke. As Shane sits down, Rozanov's eyes cut suddenly over and Shane's lips quirk up and yes he tries to tamp them down but Roz is smiling too. Shane watches him make a valiant effort not to laugh for real as he looks back at David, nodding.

"Wow," Rozanov says. "Many layers to this story."

Shane is taken back to their team banquet last spring, at which Coach had forced them all to listen to a meandering 10-minute story in the middle of a 20-minute speech that didn't make the point he was trying to use it to make. He and Roz had nearly pissed themselves trying not to laugh. Every time they managed to stop making eye contact, Coach delved into an entirely

new and unexpected tangent somehow more boring and irrelevant than the last, and every time when Shane looked back at Roz disbelievingly Roz was already looking back at him, shaking with suppressed cackles.

It's something Shane hadn't realized he would miss until Roz left for Russia: having another person bearing witness to the trivial absurdities of his life, reflecting his bemusement or shock or horror back at him. He doesn't really have anyone else like that.

David nods and opens his mouth again, but before he has a chance to continue Yuna's voice comes from the kitchen: "And get this," she says, walking into the dining room and refilling Rozanov's water, depositing a container of hummus on the table before sitting back down. "The guy who saved David from what would surely have been weeks of additional deliberation is also the reason Shane met Maddie!"

"Mom," Shane hisses, looking down as if he could hide at the four-person table.

"Oh?" says Rozanov. "How so?"

Shane stares into his lap.

"Maddie," Yuna says, not taking a hint at all. "Shane's girlfriend. Cal's daughter."

"Ah yes, Shane's girlfriend Maddie. I know all about this," Rozanov says, forever an asshole.

"Maddie's dad, Cal, bought a new grill last year, so his advice was really crucial for David," Yuna says, covering David's hand with hers and patting it. "His family has a cabin on the same lake as our cottage, so we spent a lot of time with them this summer. It's how Shane and Maddie met." She smiles at Shane from across the table, proud, happy for him. There's something slick and oily in Shane's gut, moving with intent, like it's alive and feeding off him. He smiles back.

Winter 2008

Maddie breaks up with him eventually. He's sort of expecting it: they'd only ever tried to have sex twice, and both times were a resounding failure. It's Shane's fault: when it's just her mouth on him he can make it work, and he really doesn't mind doing the same for her, but he's under no illusions as to why she dumps him. She's kind of pitying about it too, but also pissed. She's clear about not wanting to be friends. He's just glad she doesn't push it any further than suggesting they're "incompatible" with a disdainful once-over.

They'd won homecoming king and queen, though, in the fall, which was crazy. Shane has never been so well-liked in his entire life, although the truth is Rozanov is still his only real friend. Everyone else is just kind of happier to see him than usual.

But he and Roz are having another killer season, both so improved by the other yet again, and apparently that type of thing has social benefits. Even though it's kind of fun to to walk down

the hallway and see smiles and nods of acknowledgement and fists held out for bumps, to participate in teen social dynamics he's only ever seen in books and movies, the whole thing (homecoming, people only liking him because of Roz and then only liking him because of the cool beautiful girlfriend he couldn't get hard for, the way Roz prances him around school like a pet, feeling like an imposter in his own life) makes that oily, roiling feeling rise up again in his gut.

And sure, Roz seems off, but maybe that's just how he is and Shane hadn't realized it before. He's clingy, almost, never letting go of Shane in public. His thigh presses against Shane's every day at lunch, his arm over Shane's shoulder, his hand in his hair. When he's not manhandling Shane around their teammates he's gripping some girl by the thighs and kissing her into the cinder block walls behind the locker room, or disappearing for hours after a game, or getting home later and later at night, reeking of perfume and booze and cigarettes, so far past curfew that Shane would be asleep if he weren't waiting for the creak of Rozanov's footsteps up the stairs.

Sometimes, more often lately, Shane wonders if Roz is even aware Shane would be an entirely different person without him. That without the light of Rozanov's approval putting him on display he'd probably have zero friends. Maybe without Roz around he would've liked Maddie a little bit more. Maybe he could've liked her enough for her to not dump him. But maybe she wouldn't have even gotten together with him in the first place had Rozanov not made him popular by association.

It's only after Maddie dumps him that Shane decides to actually go to one of the several parties he's been invited to this year. And when he and Roz walk in everyone is so, so happy to see them, and they give him shots and mixies and hugs and kisses on the top of the head and they take photos with him on their compact digital cameras and cheer when he comes in the room.

He limits himself, of course. He's not stupid and he really, really shouldn't be drinking in season. But he's looking for something he hasn't tried, something to distract from what he knows. What he suspects. No, he knows it. He knows. He knows but he doesn't. He really doesn't, because he liked Maddie and he came when she blew him, most times.

He hasn't told anyone yet. About the breakup.

But when some asshole from the basketball team tells Shane they're Eskimo brothers because they've both had their dicks in Maddie's mouth and Roz punches the guy in the face, and then when Roz and Shane end up sharing a couch in the basement because Shane isn't fit to drive and he texts his mom to say they're staying at a teammate's house in order to wake up extra early for weekend practice, and after Rozanov shakes his head emphatically at Shane's offer to go tip-toe with him on the couch, saying "do not want your feet in my face, Hollander. And with your dirty socks on? Do you hate me?" and Shane finds himself spooned up against him, heart spasming wildly in his ears, Rozanov's leg thrown over his, big athlete body pressed all around and behind him, Shane finds himself in a confessing mood.

"Is okay, Hollzy," Rozanov says when he wraps an arm around Shane's chest and Shane tenses up. "Chill out."

Shane swallows, overcome by the buzzing boozy warmth of it all. "We broke up," he says.

Behind him Rozanov stills. The pressure of his arm is heavier, suddenly. "You and Maddie?" Rozanov asks, unmoving.

"Yeah," says Shane. Rozanov is almost on top of him, he realizes, his arm and leg pressing Shane down into the couch cushions, hand resting wide, open-palmed on Shane's chest.

"Hm." It's just an exhale, really, into Shane's ear, but Rozanov's fingers splay wider for a moment before his hand moves slowly down, torturous, eventually dipping under the hem of Shane's shirt and making direct contact with skin.

"Roz," Shane says, closing his eyes but trying to sound firm. The skin of his torso burns where Rozanov's fingertips brush it. "Roz," he says again. "We can't."

Roz inhales behind him and runs his hand back across Shane's lower stomach. He pulls Shane backward by the hip. "But you want to?" Without giving himself permission, Shane feels himself relax into it.

That same desperate flickering need. Roz all up on him and behind him, pressing him into the couch, hard and wanting with his big hand running down Shane's ribs and hip and thigh and his other hand on Shane's neck, thumb bumping down the ridges of his throat and holy fuck this isn't normal this isn't okay and suddenly that heavy oily feeling in Shane's gut needs to come out and he's puking all over the floor.

Canada loses to Russia in the World Junior Championship Final. The media is all abuzz about what this means for Hollanov's draft chances. What no one disagrees about is that they're both phenomenal talents, both the type of player with the potential to change the sport itself: whichever team drafts either of them will be one to watch.

Clip of School TV News, January 2009:

JESSICA:

Gooooood morning, Lumberjacks! Welcome back to school on this beautiful snowy Monday. In the immortal words of Nina Simone, it's a new dawn, it's a new day, and it's a new year, everyone! This is Jessica Jensen with your daily school news, and with me today to ring in 2009 is the hockey power duo taking the world by a storm: Ilya Rozanov and Shane Hollander!

Camera pans out, showing SHANE and ILYA sitting across the table from JESSICA in the school news studio.

JESSICA:

So. Shane and Ilya. Or should I call you Roz and Hollzy? Or, dare I say... Hollanov?

ILYA, wrapping an arm around SHANE, smiling, looking into SHANE's face:

You can call us Hollanov. We are one.

JESSICA:

Both of you are projected to be a top three NHL draft pick this year. Do you have a prediction about which of you will be picked first?

SHANE:

Absolutely not.

ILYA:

I will be first.

JESSICA:

And will you be able to cope without each other next year? It's well-known around school that you can't be separated.

ILYA, smiling, lolling his head into SHANE's shoulder, reaching a hand up to tap at the side of SHANE's head:

Hollzy is my translator. Will be hard to lose him. Can't communicate.

SHANE, pushing ILYA's hand down:

Not true. I don't speak Russian. That said, Roz is like a brother to me so of course I'll miss him. But no matter where we are next year, nothing can take the amazing two seasons we've had with Borealis away from us.

JESSICA:

Speaking of playing for different teams, do either of you have anything to say in response to sports commentators who have questioned whether either of your games will be quite as good without the other?

ILYA, laughing:

Oh, yes, okay, I play bad game. Tell that to my World Junior Cup.

SHANE:

As far as my game goes, it has never been better. Playing with someone like Roz has made me a stronger, more versatile player, and I'm excited to keep developing my game at a professional level for whichever team drafts me.

ILYA, looking at SHANE and laughing to himself before steeling his face and looking back into the camera:

I live in the moment. And the moment was good, and the moment is good. And in the future, the moment will be good.

JESSICA:

... Okayyy. I hope you know I'm not going to be trying to solve your riddles three, or whatever that was.

SHANE, squeezing an arm around ILYA's shoulder briefly, blinking expressionless at the camera:

Uh, he just means he doesn't want to spoil the current happiness of this moment in time by fearing for the future. He has and does love playing for Borealis, just like I do, and we both love winning. And yeah, we both want to play our best game at a professional level, and hopefully that happens, but right now things are good.

JESSICA:

And Shane, I heard you're recently single. Is there anything you'd like to say to the many ladies watching who are potentially interested?

SHANE:

Uh, well, to be honest, I don't know where I'll be a few months from now. I'm probably not the most dateable guy at the moment. I guess it doesn't seem fair for me to lead someone on like that if I'm not sure about my future.

JESSICA:

Is that what happened between you and Maddie? I heard she dumped you: is that true?

ILYA, sitting up and wedging his shoulder in front of SHANE, leaning forward and snapping his fingers at JESSICA from across the table:

Hey, Jensen, what the fuck? That was not on list of questions given.

SHANE, pulling ILYA back into his seat:

It's okay, Roz.

SHANE, looking back at JESSICA:

It's kind of crazy you're asking about this on the school news. Isn't there an adult around somewhere, or like an advisor or somebody who regulates this show?

JESSICA, nodding toward ILYA, who is visibly tense but has settled back into his chair:

Awww, that was kind of sweet. And yes, Shane Hollander, we do have an advisor, but he's out sick today. Mrs. Montgomery is our sub.

JESSICA, looking directly into the camera, still smiling.

And as many of us know, Mrs. Montgomery turns her hearing aids off when she's around groups of more than five students at a time. Hollanov here puts the number of students in the room at six.

She is happily working on her crossword from the corner. She'll call the office if anything is visually amiss.

Anyways, let's get back into it: Roz? I have a similar question for you. Anything you'd like to tell the legions of interested ladies watching today?

SHANE, pushing his hand into ILYA's hair and rubbing at his scalp, even as he looks at JESSICA:

Wait, actually. Before we move on to Roz, I do have something to say about my breakup.

I never deserved Maddie. She's way cooler and more interesting than me, and she's a good person. She was right to break up with me.

ILYA, leaning further into Shane's hand and winking toward the camera:

I have only ever said one thing to the ladies. Have been very consistent with my message: yes I am single, and yes I am interested. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise.

Thank you Jessica Jensen, for this disrespectful and inappropriate conversation at 7:30AM. Is more interesting than I expected.

Even though things have basically been normal with Roz after the couch incident, Shane finds himself waiting for something to shift between them. He can't let that shift happen, of course, but he waits for it anyway, throwing himself into hockey, cracking down even further on his diet, lifting more often and for longer, timing his days in fifteen-minute increments.

They're inseparable at school, finagling their schedules so they have as many classes together as possible, crowding together on the bench seats of the cafeteria, play-fighting in the hallway between class periods. It's not like Shane to be so preoccupied with anything other than hockey, and he knows it's not right. That he should back off, stop letting Roz pet at him all day and parade him around to their schoolmates, focus on his schoolwork when he's not at the rink or lifting or watching film, but surely it's not a sin to have a friend for once in his life.

And Roz hasn't been still for months, always twitching, fidgeting, pacing, clenching his jaw. He's greedy, restless, needy, and Shane sees it more and more often, when Roz has his face buried in some girl's neck in a school camera blind spot at 7:15 in the fucking morning, Jesus, or when he stops coming home before curfew four nights a week, or when he tumbles out of a grown woman's SUV in an arena parking lot.

He hadn't been like this with girls last year. Sure, he liked them, and sure, it had seemed a little bit pathological, but this is far beyond what Shane had come to expect.

It's escalating, too. Last week, Rozanov didn't come home two nights in a row. Shane made some vague excuses for him, but he's not very good at lying and his parents are contractually obligated to make sure Rozanov is home every night. It's only a matter of time before they're forced to intervene.

He plays dirtier and dirtier, pushing opposing players until they snap, cruel and cold and fast. Roz has always been all of those things on the ice, but whatever this is seems less controlled to Shane, like a dog caught in a trap, lashing out at anyone who approaches.

Spring 2009

Shane is shocked his parents haven't said anything yet. Especially because of what happened last week: Roz *brought a girl home*. To Shane's house. To David and Yuna's home. In the middle of the night. And he'd fucked her as she wailed performatively on David and Yuna's guest bedroom mattress. And she'd showered in Shane's shower and used his face razor on god knows where, which Shane only realized because she stole it from its place in the vanity drawer and left it wet and full of suspiciously coarse hair on the bathtub ledge.

Yet Shane can't bring himself to be genuinely upset. Sure, yes, he's pissed. It's crazily disrespectful, to bring some random girl here and fuck her in the guest bedroom and let her use your billet brother's fucking razor on probably her pubes, but all year Shane has been catching glimpses of someone else behind Rozanov's facade. Someone hidden. Scared, maybe.

For weeks, months, Roz hasn't stopped petting and grabbing and leaning on Shane at every opportunity. And he's risking his future with the girls and the drinking and the not coming home at night. So maybe he's self destructing. But his hockey has never been better. So maybe there's something about it that works. Something that's working.

After an away game one night, Shane finally does something about it. They're sitting on their separate beds because even though Roz won't stop touching him when there's any kind of audience available to witness it he's been staying away in private all year long, ever since he'd arrived and Shane had already been dating Maddie.

They're watching one of the worse Star Wars movies on the hotel TV. Shane gets up to go to the bathroom and he spends ages leaning on the sink, heart pounding in his ears, avoiding eye contact with himself before working up the courage to step out of the bathroom and sit on the end of Rozanov's bed.

"What the *fuck*, Rozanov," he says.

"Hm?" Rozanov's profile is illuminated by the TV as he looks at Shane. It's probably strange for him, that Shane is initiating conversation like this, in the quiet of their hotel room. Any interaction between them in this setting is usually Rozanov's decision. Shane only realized

this a few nights ago, while lying awake ruminating on what the fuck kind of relationship he and Rozanov have and what exactly might be appropriate for him to do in response to Rozanov's clear, chronic, careening distress.

"Last week," Shane says. "You fuck some random woman in the room next door, in my *parents'* home? So fucking disrespectful. You're not a feral cat, dude."

"Dude," Rozanov says.

"Fuck you. You're an asshole." And Shane means it. He crosses his arms over his chest and stares at approximately where Rozanov's knees are under the duvet. Tears prick at his eyes just a tiny bit, which wasn't part of his plan for this conversation.

"I know," Rozanov says. He waits for a moment and sighs. "I'm sorry. It was not right. Not for you and not for your parents."

When Shane looks up, Roz is looking back at him.

"You're not taking care of yourself," Shane says. "All you do is hang off me at school, play hockey, and fuck whichever random girl catches your eye first that day." Roz looks away but Shane continues. "Are you even sleeping?"

Rozanov doesn't respond. Doesn't look at him. Maybe Shane is wrong about this thing between them but maybe he's right, so he inhales, steeling himself. "Listen," he says. "You don't have to sneak around or break curfew or risk getting kicked off the team. You're too good a player to throw it away on that stupid bullshit."

Rozanov tries to scoff.

"Whatever you need," Shane says, "whatever you're trying to get from these girls and the parties and the fights-" he can't finish, the rest of his offer suffocating and dying in his chest.

You told me, more than once once last year, Shane doesn't say, looking into Rozanov's face, that I would understand once I'd had it. You said I would understand how desperate you are all the time. How bad you need it.

Shane stretches his hand out toward Rozanov's ankle under the duvet and stops just before making contact.

It's one of the two needs you've ever expressed to me, he doesn't say. The need to fuck and the need to win. But really, I think you just want to be in control. Maybe you instigate and manipulate and buck the rules in order to throw the rest of the world off balance and take control for yourself. You never talk about yourself, really: you pretend to talk about yourself. I don't know anything about Russia, or your family, or your friends, or what your life was like before you joined mine.

But I know what it's like to need control, Shane doesn't say. To feel like if you lose your grip on just one thing you might break, permanently. Just spiral out into nothingness. And I know what it's like to be so fucking desperate you can't breathe.

Shane looks down at his hand, resting next to Rozanov's ankle. Everything is swirling around in bits and pieces in his mind but none of it makes sense. Most of it is totally inappropriate for whatever their relationship is. He tries to get words out in some semblance of an order but before he can Rozanov is exhaling. "What do you mean, Hollander?"

And finally the words come and Shane is spitting them out: "let me be what you need," he says, heart pounding so hard he nearly can't see. I want to help you, he doesn't say. I want to take care of you.

You're hurting yourself, Shane doesn't say. I can see you are hurting yourself. He looks back up and Rozanov's eyes are wild, darting all over Shane's face. I would never hurt you, he doesn't say.

"It's no big deal," he says instead, some semblance of the rationale he's been practicing in the shower for days coming back to him. "A friend helping a friend."

Rozanov doesn't break eye contact as he moves his leg the tiniest bit under the duvet, pressing his ankle into Shane's hand.

For a moment the roar of Shane's need drowns out everything else, telling him to let go, to give in, but no. This isn't for him. It can't be for him. It's for Roz. His friend. Who needs an outlet for his otherwise destructive urges. A release.

Shane climbs up Rozanov's body on the bed. "Please," he says, sitting on his thighs. Roz's face is hidden now, in the shadow of Shane's body blocking the light of the TV. "Let me take care of you. Show me how," Shane says, running his hands up Rozanov's chest, wondering from some distant place outside himself if he's lost his mind.

He leans in close to Rozanov's face, breath tickling his cheek, and pushes a hand down between them. He gropes a little at his abs and pecs before moving further down. "Tell me to stop," he says, stilling his hand when he reaches the waist of Rozanov's shorts. Fuck. Fuck. Rozanov doesn't tell him to stop, chest moving faster beneath him. He keeps pushing his hand down until he can wrap it around Rozanov's cock, which is warm and hard already and waiting for him. It's bigger than he'd imagined.

Shane gropes at him, fighting the urge to fall face-first and moaning onto it. Fuck. He slides down Rozanov's body a little bit further, cheek dragging down his chest, and pushes his hand up Rozanov's torso, taking the hem of his shirt with it, feeling the ripples of muscle tense under his fingertips. Rozanov groans, throwing an arm over his eyes, spreading his legs.

"Show me how," Shane says again, taking a moment to rest his forehead on Rozanov's stomach, breathing short and fast, licking over Rozanov's abs before he realizes what he's doing. Rozanov's cock jerks below Shane's chin and Shane keeps moving down. "How you need it," he says, letting it bump into his jaw and his nose. He wraps his arm under and around Rozanov's thigh next to him.

"Just a friend," he says again, voice cracking on it, pushing his face deep into the crease of Rozanov's thigh, managing to add "helping," stilling for a moment face down, nearly

blacking out with the humiliation of lying on this bed in the dark, dripping hard, everything tunneling around him, pretending he's not gagging for it. "A friend," he finishes.

Rozanov lets out a desperate sort of noise and Shane nuzzles at his cock for a moment, licking at it, getting him spit-wet through his underwear.

"Fuck," Rozanov says. "Holy fuck I do need it. All the fucking time I need it."

Words leave Shane and he grinds his face back into the crease of Rozanov's thigh. He's whimpering, maybe, humping into the mattress. A rough hand is grabbing at his hair, pulling Shane up and Rozanov is asking urgently, desperately, incredulously, even as Shane is groping at his cock, if Shane wants to suck him off.

"Want to," Shane says, barely able to hear himself over the roaring in his ears, trying not to slur his words, "help you." Everything is going soft and liquid. Somewhere far far away there's that frantic voice yelling at him, berating him, so fucking mean all the fucking time but it's fading out. "Always want to help you." He tries not to collapse, boneless, keening, onto Roz's lap. This is for Roz. Not him. Shane is just helping. Providing an outlet. Just helping. Shane can help. Can do so well. Can learn to be so good for Roz. To help him. Take care of him.

And Roz is pushing Shane back down and feeding his cock into Shane's mouth and Shane is drifting, melting away, going all wet and drooly, lost in the all-consuming pleasure of Rozanov's hands in his hair, wrapping around Shane's neck, guiding him, pushing and pulling him onto his perfect dick, pressing deeper and deeper into Shane's throat, pausing to pet at Shane's face, and Shane's bottomless beckoning pit of need is growing, swallowing everything else and he can't think of anything but letting go, falling, giving in.

It's important he does a good job, though, Shane remembers, and so he tries very hard to pull far enough out of himself to learn how to move his tongue and moan and gag and go limp, slack-jawed, teary-eyed with how good it is, how good Rozanov feels and sounds, mumbling in Russian and pulling Shane's wet mouth onto him and pushing deeper into Shane's gurgling throat, stroking his cheek, running his thumb over the obscene stretch of Shane's lips around him as Shane shoves himself down further, crying with how fucking bad he's wanted this and for so fucking long, face disbelieving above him. On learning how to be what he needs.

Their game gets even better. Sometimes, Shane feels like he's in two places at once on the ice. As if he's seeing from Roz's eyes as well as his own. Like he and Roz are one player, one mind.

And when it quickly becomes more nights a week than not, at home and not just on the road, it's fine. Good, even. Because now instead of staying out all night or partying or booty calling one of the many girls perpetually in his orbit, Rozanov is standing in Shane's bathroom doorway saying "is okay, Hollander?," and waiting for Shane's sharp quick nod, the shift of his legs falling a little bit open under the covers before he crawls into the bed and makes Shane gag on his cock, makes him fall apart in the endless pleasure of being just how

Rozanov likes, how he needs, open and wet and warm and moaning, tears streaking down his cheeks for Roz to wipe away with his thumbs.

Shane genuinely does try to prevent Roz from reciprocating. He's successful the first time, if only because he comes crying with his cock trapped beneath him on the mattress, gagging on Rozanov's. But the second time Roz is too fast, too intentional about flipping Shane onto his back and taking all of him into his mouth at once, fast and wet and so fucking good Shane is coming before he even knows it's happening, choking out a half-stuttered, surprised gasp and going boneless into the mattress as Roz takes all of it, staying on him until Shane gets oversensitive and pulls at his hair.

It's a more predictable rhythm than the past few months have been: in the mornings Shane wakes up, turns Roz's light on, brushes his teeth, showers, gets dressed, shakes Roz awake, heads downstairs. He makes himself a protein shake and grabs three protein bars and a banana for Roz, who is running late and doesn't have time to eat at home. He drives them to school, Roz copying his first-period homework in the passenger seat, mumbling around a protein bar about whatever new thing he's decided to hate or love arbitrarily.

They have first, second, fourth, and fifth periods together and Shane is distracted the whole time, swept up into whatever Roz's mood is that day, trying to lift it when it's bad and maintain it when it's good. The goal is to arrive at practice after school with Roz feeling neutral to positive. Achieving that benchmark becomes harder and harder as the season goes on; Roz is ever-more mercurial, shifting so quickly and unpredictably Shane begins losing track of everything else that happens during the day.

If Roz's mood is good going into practice, the practice is good. The team gels. They lock in. If his mood is bad, the practice is bad. There are certain things Shane can do to influence these shifts: little jokes in class; tapping his hand on Roz's thigh under the desk in a code they never actually discussed creating but both understand; taking a dare in class and embarrassing himself, which seems like it maybe makes Shane *more* popular for some reason beyond his comprehension, but the effectiveness of those strategies becomes less consistent into the playoffs.

And then, nearly every night now, Roz blowing him against the bathroom wall or wrapping a hand around them both and jerking them together or letting Shane get himself off with his mouth on Roz's cock or Roz coming frantic onto Shane's face, both of them trying desperately to be quiet all the while, biting down on their own wrists or the duvet or once, Roz's neck, which had had the opposite of the intended effect.

Rozanov is first pick in the NHL draft.

Boston.

He refuses to sign the contract and instead announces he's playing NCAA hockey at the University of Minnesota next year.

Shane is shocked. Everyone is shocked. This would be unremarkable from virtually any other draft pick: college hockey is a legitimate way for most drafted players to get real play time and develop further before going pro full-stop. But Rozanov is the *first* draft pick. He would get immediate playing time on a team that wants him right now, playing first line next season, for everything Shane isn't: for the hungry, instinctive nature of his play. The rumor all spring had been that Boston was formulating a whole new offensive strategy around Rozanov's play style. He's a generational talent.

When he's asked by the media why he's opting to play college hockey instead of leading Boston's new offensive strategy Rozanov shrugs, looking away for a moment before turning back to the camera. "Minnesota lost a player, had scholarship money open up last minute, let me know. I have been talking with recruiter for awhile" He doesn't elaborate when pressed.

When he's asked by Shane why he's refusing to sign Boston's contract Rozanov gets tense. He's been closed off for days since his surprise refusal, back to the uncanny version of himself he'd been when he got off the plane in August. Shane watches his jaw clench and then unclench, his gaze flickering around at nothing. But then, something in his face loosens and he turns back toward Shane.

"Hockey is the most important thing in my life," he says, "and I will still make history playing hockey, for Minnesota and later in NHL. But I am restless soul. I need more, always more than one thing. And I promised my mother I would find something new, different, so." He shrugs. "Is right for me to do right now."

"Okay," says Shane carefully, "but I thought you wanted to go pro right away?" Had Roz ever actually said that? Or had they all just assumed?

Rozanov shrugs again, turning his face abruptly away from Shane.

Shane steps closer. Roz doesn't move so Shane takes another step, until his foot is slotted between Rozanov's. He grabs Rozanov by the chin and turns his face back toward him. He looks anguished and Shane doesn't know what to do.

Yuna had been appalled about the whole thing. "It's not that he wants to play NCAA, it's that he didn't say anything," she said to Shane shortly after the draft, examining avocados in the produce section. "In the two years he's been living in my house he hasn't mentioned college once. And as much as I hate Boston, they were counting on him. They had no reason to believe he wouldn't be playing for them next season, should they draft him." The worried twist of her brows and the downturn of her mouth as she tilted a fifth avocado back and forth under the cold grocery store lights gave her true feelings away. "The league doesn't like that type of player. They'll retaliate."

David seemed basically okay with it, but it was typical for him to be less worried about hockey politics than Yuna. "It's probably good he's not playing for Boston," he said to Shane. "Your mom was *not* looking forward to rooting for them. When they weren't playing you, of course."

This whole drama had really taken some of the shine off Shane's number two draft pick. He would've been genuinely happy for Roz, if Boston's pick hadn't been entirely wasted on him.

Not that Shane would have wanted to play for Boston anyway, to be fair.

But it's true, what certain contrarian sports pundits have been saying, a little: Shane has always been a cerebral player. A technical player. A hockey robot. He's never connected like this with a teammate before, on such a visceral instinctual level, beyond his conscious choice. He'd never known it was even possible. To lose Roz as a teammate is to lose his window into Roz's mind, his eyes, his body on the ice. Shane is, if he's totally honest with himself, afraid he won't be as good a player without him.

And he'd sort of thought that if he could get picked first in the draft, he'd have proven to himself and everyone that he's as good as he thinks he could be. But it didn't happen, and Roz, who deserved it anyway, is maybe having some kind of breakdown or episode or something, and he's apparently going to play college hockey despite never having expressed any kind of interest in doing so before.

So here he is, Roz's chin in his hand, looking into his perfect beautiful eyes even as Roz looks away, feeling his own prickle with unshed tears, trying to think of what to say. Again.

Roz's family situation isn't totally clear to him. He gets calls a lot, during which he barks in angry-sounding Russian, although maybe that's just how Russian sounds. He's invariably moody after, though, and distant, and reckless. If Shane can't get him under control, decipher how to lift his mood back up before a game, Roz is bound to knock somebody's fake teeth out.

But sometimes he has conversations that sound soft, happy. His moods after those calls are less predictable. Sometimes he's irritable and distracted. Cruel on the ice. Sometimes he seems calmer. More settled.

It still feels like a fluke to Shane, that Rozanov even likes him. The more time passes without fucking it all up and alienating Rozanov for good, the more paranoid Shane becomes about fucking it all up and alienating Rozanov for good. He doesn't know what's appropriate to ask or do or say, and even less idea what will be a step over wherever their invisible limit is: what will send Roz, his only friend; the singular person in the entire world Shane has ever known or understood like this, even though he doesn't really know very much about him at all; the teammate he's afraid he'll never play the same without; the perfect golden hero boy who has starred in every single one of Shane's fantasies since he was thirteen, running away forever.

And if Roz goes running away forever Shane doesn't know what he'll do. He saw this coming. He knew. He knew last year, years ago, that this thing between them would lead to his ruin. Roz was dangerous even at thirteen, and Shane had tried to stop it. He'd been so desperate his eighth grade year after that summer's championship game, his body wracked with hormones, lying awake at night trying not to relive it: the white flash of Rozanov's teeth before he'd slammed Shane against the wall, checked him so hard he probably should've had a concussion evaluation after; the total aliveness, concentration, euphoria on his face in the moment just before; Shane's feeling afterward, like he'd survived an attack from a wild dog, like he'd nearly died and was still riding the high of it.

He was wrecked, even then. He'd tried to picture girls, women, teen catalog models, hating himself when it didn't work, trying to force it, failing and hating himself, reading Greek

myths and picturing Rozanov's face on the heroes. The following summer, when this terrible thing between them really began, as if Shane's desperation was so strong he willed it into being even as he tried to kill it, he knew. When Rozanov started talking about women and Shane thrilled with the hope that it could all be normal and well and good, he knew. He knew it would be his ruin, but he did it anyway, pretending all the while that he wasn't stealing his own future away with every lapse in self control and good judgement.

Yet despite knowing damn well it would wreck his life and entire future, and despite hating himself for years and years and punishing his body and controlling everything he did and put into it, limiting his diet more and more and regimenting his every breath trying to fight it off, to fucking control himself for once in his shameful fucking queer, faggoty, worthless fucking existence, he'd agreed to billet Rozanov last year, and again this year. He knew. He knows he knew.

And now here he is, standing in front of Rozanov, about to cry, filled with desperation and fear and aching aching longing and the roaring panic of losing control, of never really having it, of not knowing what's to come, where you'll go, what you'll be, who you are. Of losing the one terrible thing you have always, always, always known threatens your entire existence. The same one thing that makes you feel alive and breathing and a part of the world, like you're not just some hockey robot observing life and trying to imitate it.

How can he know what to do, what to say right now when he doesn't know how to survive what might happen if he does?

Suddenly Roz is the one gripping Shane's chin and forcing eye contact. "Hey," he's saying. "Hollzy." Shane's nickname sounds different than it usually does leaving his mouth, an emotion hidden somewhere in it Shane can't identify. "Hey." His thumb strokes a little bit at Shane's jaw and Shane fights the urge to let his eyes roll to the back of his head and drop to his knees.

It's been harder and harder to maintain any semblance of dignity in their encounters. Months ago, when this thing started, Shane had tried to keep his wits about him, reminding himself he was doing this as a friend and nothing more. That it wasn't about him or his pleasure or his desires at all.

But Roz hadn't allowed that. He demanded Shane love it. Needed it, he said, needed to see how much Shane fucking loved it, loved pleasing him, loved offering his sweet wet perfect mouth for Rozanov to push into, loved sucking his cock just right, so perfect for him, such a perfect fucking beautiful boy with such a needy mouth on his knees, just taking it and taking it so sweet, crying with how fucking much you love it, love knowing you're the only one who can make me feel this fucking good, crying because because you know me and you know this and you're a fucking prodigious cocksucker, so fucking good you should be famous for it, splashed across billboards with my cock in your mouth, down your throat, so easy because it's never enough, you always want more and harder and to be better and better for me, so fucking good, fuck.

Lately, Shane has been the one initiating. When he'd started this whole thing, he imagined Rozanov would be the one to initiate: to take Shane up on his offer at his own discretion. And he had, for awhile, until Shane started turning up in Rozanov's bedroom doorway, too. The

first time he'd been blushing so hard he was glad the light was off. "Um," he said, clasping his hands behind his back, feeling embarrassed and then turned on. Earlier Roz had palmed Shane's crotch briefly in the pitch dark of the auditorium during an assembly. Shane had thought about it all day, imagining what they'd do later.

And when Roz didn't show up in his room Shane felt a little thrill at the desperation of it all: at walking through his bathroom, cold tile on his feet, and showing up in Rozanov's bedroom door, pretending it was casual, saying "any chance I can get a helping hand?" The filth that spilled from Roz's mouth that night was beyond anything Shane would ever have been able to think up himself, so fucking hot he couldn't stop going back, again and again, nearly forgetting why he'd even started this thing in the first place: to help Roz get his shit together, as a friend. Sure.

"Hey," Roz is saying, that same unnameable emotion in his voice, thumb still stroking at Shane's jaw. His hand moves to Shane's throat and Shane nearly loses his grip on the situation again, gut clenching, whine choking violently out from somewhere deep. It's been like this, lately, the slightest look or touch from Roz, lovely perfect Roz, who sends Shane somewhere else, away from his endless grinding thoughts and his compulsions and his fear and self-hatred to somewhere fuzzy and peaceful and warm, where nothing is real except Roz's pleasure at Shane's pleasure. Perfect Roz, who knows exactly how Shane needs and wants it before Shane does. Who can send Shane to a place where he'll do anything, be anything, say anything.

It was absurd for Shane to ever think this could be anything else. From the beginning it was this: Shane's need, Rozanov's understanding. His patience. He thinks Roz has always known where this thing between them is headed. He thinks Roz might know him better than anyone else ever could or would. So as Roz moves his hand down to Shane's chest, he gives in. Again.

"Get on your knees," Roz says. Shane drops to his knees, greedy, sloppy in his haste, a familiar haze creeping into his peripherals, Rozanov's golden hair a halo in the light of the lamp behind him, everything gone soft, glowy, like an old movie shot with Vaseline on the lens.

He's groping at Roz's pec, feeling it flex beneath his hand, humming around his cock and letting himself drift just a little bit while Roz moves Shane's head how he likes, pushes into Shane's mouth how he likes, when suddenly he's being pulled gently off, Roz's cock making a slick glug as it leaves Shane's throat. He whines but Roz is pulling him up, pulling the hem of his shirt up and off, walking him back toward the hotel bathroom, fiddling with the tie of his joggers on the way, pushing them halfway down and making Shane stop to pull them all the way off, leaving them crumpled on the carpet. Normally Shane would be bothered but he's still hazy enough, throat hurting, warm and safe and whole with Roz's hands at his hips guiding him, pressing him forward, to let it go.

Roz turns on the shower and waits a minute for it to warm up, stripping off his own clothes and leaving them on the bathroom floor where they're sure to get wet. But Shane's being pushed into the shower now, and Roz is washing his hair and it is so, so fucking nice, and he's leaning into it and Roz is muttering compliments in his ear, debilitating things like "every

fucking day you get more fucking perfect," and "perfect for me. Your body, your mouth," and he's pressing up broad behind him and his soapy hands are running from his hair all down the back of his neck and then around his throat, thumb bumping over Shane's adam's apple and Shane is fucking flying, Roz's hands everywhere now, slipping all over Shane's arms and neck and torso, spending time on his abs and back, dipping toward Shane's cock and he's so, so hard and the force of his need is swallowing him whole, always too much, never enough, and Roz is propping him against the shower wall, hands over his head, before skipping Shane's groin entirely and washing his feet instead, working his way up Shane's legs, massaging them, rubbing his hands all up and down Shane's thighs and Shane tries to hold still, to keep his hands where Roz put them on the shower wall, but he's so, so hard, and why is Roz doing this if not to get him off?

He's washing Shane's ass now, spreading it, fingers dipping into the crease, rubbing over his hole. Shane is choking back a moan, trying not to press back into it, reminding himself what's at stake: that helping a friend out is different from actually getting fucked in the ass. Like, if he's just doing mouth and hand stuff then maybe he still might not be the thing he really, really doesn't know for sure that he is.

But then Roz's other hand is taking Shane's dick and rubbing it a few times, soaping him up everywhere, so fucking good, rolling his balls and dipping behind to where the fingers of his other hand are soapily, thoroughly, washing the part of Shane's body he most desperately wants to be touched, the part he's most ashamed of, humiliated by. And Shane nearly comes right there, hands above his head, pushing back into Rozanov's fingers, keening, the touch of him all over, but then Roz takes both hands away. Shane is heaving, so hard, head hung between his shoulders and Roz should just take him, claim him, lay him out and make him forget where when what he is, make him take it and take it, use him again and again and again until he's too far gone to know what the fuck he's doing or being or saying.

Roz stands up and turns Shane around in the shower, rinsing him without touching him. Well. Without touching him where it matters. And then his voice in Shane's ear: "Get out of the shower and dry off. Do not touch yourself. Stay naked. Lay on the bed and wait," and already the edges of Shane's awareness are giving way to safe, comfortable darkness.

It's been happening more and more often: Shane drifts away during he and Roz's most intense moments together, too far away to know or remember anything at all, except for pleasure and peace and the soft haze of letting go.

Part of him is afraid, terrified he'll do something so degraded, so humiliating, that Roz will be turned off once and for all, will see Shane for what he is, will realize he and Shane are different kinds of people: well, that he's a person, and Shane is... something else, some kind of perversion. An anomaly. An alien, hockey obsessed consciousness in a body (albeit a useful, competent, trainable body that likes to be useful and competent and trainable). But another part of him is relieved he doesn't have to remember how shameful, how sickening his desires really are. That he still doesn't have to confront the depths to which he's allowed himself to fall into this terrible all-consuming thing.

He dries himself, Roz washing his own hair in the shower behind him, taking his sweet time. Fuck. Shane walks back into the bedroom. His clothes are strewn across the floor and he

decides he has time to fold them, kneeling down to pick up his joggers from near the bathroom door, thinking of Roz's hands, his fingers and still so hard, hearing Roz in the shower behind him. This is their last hotel stay of the season. Maybe ever. Probably ever.

And suddenly he's crying and he doesn't quite know why, exactly, and he's dropping the joggers back on the floor and pushing himself up, so foggy now, and walking to the bed and laying himself on it face down, cock hard still and tucked up beneath his belly, trying not to hump forward into the sheets like a little boy, like he'd done months ago the first time he sucked Roz's cock on a different hotel bed, like he'd done when he was thirteen and trying not to think of him in the dark before he fell asleep.

The shower is still running and all Shane wants is for Roz to take him, to fuck him wide open but they can't. They can't. Because it will ruin Shane's life. He knows it will. He's always known it will. And he's crying, and this is the last night he and Roz will ever share a hotel room again, and he's never wanted anyone else, not Maddie, and not girls at games or school, and not other guys on the team or the one singular out gay kid at school. Just Rozanov. Roz. Ilya. Who can read Shane's mind without him ever needing to speak, who has made it impossible for Shane to ignore the part of himself he hates the most. Who has shown Shane what he's been missing all these years when the only thing he had was hockey, and who he'll probably only see rarely after school is out and Roz goes home, then to Minnesota, and Shane goes to Montreal.

And then the shower stops and the mattress is dipping under Roz's weight and water is dripping off his hair onto Shane's back, and he's gripping Shane's hips and pulling them up off the bed. Shane gasps a little with humiliation as his cheek is pushed further into the mattress, flushing, familiar now with how pleasurable this all-consuming shame can be, trying to remember that he and Roz absolutely cannot fuck even as Roz is drizzling something wet all between his ass cheeks, sliding his perfect hard cock in between them, spreading it. Roz stills when he tenses.

"Don't worry," Roz says, one hand pushing soothing down Shane's middle back, the other still at his hip. He smooths the hand on Shane's hip up his waist. "Not today. Nothing you don't want. Never ever anything you don't want."

Shane should be happy Roz only ever wants to do what Shane wants to do, probably, and he basically is, except that he does sort of wish this could be one of the times Roz maybe gets a little pushy. Because Shane can definitely be persuaded to want it. Except no, he can't, because they absolutely cannot and it will ruin his life if they do. But he wouldn't be mad if Roz just. Did it. Wouldn't fight too hard. Maybe a little because they really can't. But if Roz thinks it's best, then who is Shane to say no? And fuck, he wants it so bad.

Shane really, really likes that Roz knows better than he does. Will do what's best for him. Shane doesn't need to know. Doesn't need to decide.

Roz is still smoothing his hand up and down Shane's side. "Can I do something?" He asks, reinstalling it at Shane's hip, situating him with his knees pulled up and apart, ass in the air. Shane is so exposed, can feel himself flushing everywhere, and he realizes the light is on. Fuck. They only ever fuck around in the dark. It's better that way, usually, so Shane can't see Roz's perfect body; his face as he makes Shane cry; his own reflection in the mirror because

they didn't even make it to the bed; lost, flying high, biting down on Roz's wrist to keep from wailing.

Shane tries to nod, realizes it's not enough. "Yeah," he slurs into the pillow, drooling already, cock dripping onto the hotel duvet, trusting Roz not to cross any too-far lines. And his slick cock is pushing up Shane's crack again, just snubbing at his hole, catching the tiniest bit, before moving on. Yes. Fuck. Roz could push him all around like this, into whatever position, any position, can fuck him between the thighs or between his ass cheeks or wherever he likes, can come on Shane's face or his ass or down his throat, make him bend over, push and pull him any which way, and maybe he's saying all this out loud or maybe it's just in his head but Roz is doing it, he's fucking doing it oh fuck and maybe it's just their weird fucking telepathy where he knows, Roz knows, exactly what Shane needs and when and how and he's talking, Roz, Shane can hear him talking and he tries to listen but he can't and he maybe whimpers a little and turns his face up and Roz is flipping him over onto his back and finally Shane can see him and his fucking incredible beautiful body and cut v-line and giant cock that wants to get inside him and he wants to let it inside him, and why doesn't he just let it happen, but he can't and they can't, but oh fuck yes he's rubbing their cocks together and fuck, fuck-

"Admit it," Roz is saying. He pauses his hand on their cocks long enough for Shane to reenter a closer orbit.

"Wha-?" Roz is still blurry, and his hand isn't moving anymore, and Shane tries to push his hips up but Roz pushes them back down.

"Admit it," Roz says again. He sits back, letting go of Shane and taking his own hardness back into his hand.

"What the fuck?"

"I won't fuck you today. I won't fuck you until you're begging for it. Gagging for it. Will die without it. For real, not for pretend." He slaps Shane's hand away when he tries to reach for his own cock. "But I want you to admit it," he says, looking at Shane, running his eyes all down Shane's body, hungry, touching himself. "I want you to lay face down on the mattress and push up onto your knees with your ass in the air and beg me to fuck you, all the while knowing I will not. I want you to tell me how fucking desperate you are for it. Tell me how you want it. Tell me how my cock will make you feel. Beg me."

Shane is leaking, drippy on his stomach, and he might be making a noise, or saying words: he doesn't quite know, but Rozanov's hands are back on his hips, flipping him over onto his face and he can't help it and this is still a step too far and he'll never be able to take it back, but fuck. How does Rozanov know exactly where to take him? He hasn't stopped thinking about it for weeks, months, dying to be fucked, knowing it can never happen, knowing Rozanov will ruin his life regardless.

So he lifts his hips up, shoving his face into the pillow and arching his lower back, giving himself over. "Fuck me," he says, familiar roaring in his ears, letting go even earlier than usual, nothing real except for Roz and his own desperate aching need. "Please fuck me. I need it so bad. I think about it every day." All the time, he thinks, moaning for awhile and drooling and pushing his face into the pillow and feeling Roz's big hard cock sliding between

his ass cheeks. He thinks about how Roz feels down his throat. How fucking good it feels to take it, how much he loves it, love being what Roz needs, loves when he pushes and pulls Shane however he wants.

Roz is making noises but Shane is pretty sure they're just noises, not directions or anything. His perfect cock is slip-sliding up Shane's ass crack, almost like fucking him but not even fucking close and Shane pushes back into it again, arching, Roz gripping at the back of his head now and pulling his head up, twisting it so he can see Shane's face while he imagines getting fucked. A warm nothingness is beckoning but Shane holds it off long enough to talk, beg, finally letting go of the words that have been living in his mind for weeks. Normally Roz does most of the talking but he asked for this, and Shane prides himself on being trainable. Competent.

"Want to feel you push inside, stretch me open. I'd let you use whichever hole you want whenever you want it, be anything you need, everything you need, whatever, just so you'll do it again and again, fuck, Roz, please, fuck," and his words have fallen away and he's letting out little whiny cries, can't stop, every exhale a confession. He takes a moment to breath in and out, collecting himself, trying not to lose himself entirely even as Roz grips him tighter by the hips, pulls him back harder, mumbles in Russian, licks his shoulders and his neck and sucks at his ear, pressed all down his body, hard lovely cock begging to get inside. "I love making you feel good," Shane says. "Love being so good for you. But fuck, it's for me. Because I love it. Love being used, love not needing to think, love being so full and tight and wet and warm for you, just how you need it, just the way you like, being your pretty perfect hot wet hole. I'll do whatever you want, anything, please, fuck, I need it. Please please fuck me. Please. Something's wrong with me, broken, because I've never needed anything so fucking bad in my entire life."

And Roz is coming all over his ass, and smearing it around, almost pressing his fingers inside but not quite, and he's pushing Shane back down onto the mattress and pressing so heavy and safe on top of him and saying, finger smearing his own cum onto Shane's asshole, pushing at it, rubbing over it, saying "So good. Good job. Perfect. Always so perfect." And he's rubbing his nose up through Shane's hair, inhaling, saying "Go ahead. Show me." So Shane is rutting into the hotel duvet like a little boy, feeling Roz's fingers pressing harder at the dirtiest, most shameful part of him every time he lifts up just to hump forward again, hot everywhere and sweating, trying to get friction, so close to coming, has been for ages, lost, making whimpery little noises, and Roz is still talking, hands gripping at Shane's hips, helping him. "When I fuck you I'll make you come on my fingers first. At least once, maybe twice. You'll be too fucked out to even know what's happening, by the time I get my dick in you, but you'll beg me for it, so fucking wet all the time and needy. Always begging to be fucked, even when you're trying not to." Shane is weeping, he thinks, distantly. He doesn't know where he is anymore. Doesn't give a shit. Imagines the feeling of it, of Roz's fingers in him. His cock. How he'd never be the same, after. Would never be able to live without it again. Would give up anything, everything, to have it.

When Roz gets out of the shower again he brings a damp washcloth and wipes gently at Shane, who's still face down on the duvet, sticky with drying cum, until he's clean. Clean enough, at least. Fuck, this is too much. This is weird. But it's so nice just to let go for awhile, Roz's big warm body cuddling up behind you, long arms around your chest, strong leg over

top of yours, pressing you down, keeping you still and calm, hot breath behind your ear and then you're asleep between one breath and the next.

Three weeks later, they graduate high school and Rozanov flies back to Russia.

Shane realized, after that last time in the hotel room, when he'd woken up and Roz had been right there, still pressed up behind him, hard, and he'd wrapped his lovely wide-palmed hand around Shane and he'd pushed his own morning-hard dick between Shane's ass cheeks and he'd fucked between them again, biting at Shane's neck, mumbling a stream of obscenities and rubbing a thumb over Shane's Adam's apple, long lovely fingers wrapping around Shane's throat, just hinting at a squeeze, and he'd come, again, all over Shane's ass, how fucked he was.

Shane has never successfully resisted Rozanov in any capacity whatsoever, but that doesn't mean the situation is hopeless. Achieving what no one else can do is Shane's whole objective in hockey. In life, more or less. Maybe it's some kind of test, from the universe. Because if he can't stop giving in again and again to these fruitless desperate urges that his stupid fucking wrong inverted self-sabotaging queer brain is always screaming at him about, as if he can't feel it, as if he doesn't live in his body too, fuck, then how can he ever expect to win a cup? Sure, it seems hopeless now, but life is about learning. And growing. And getting past your childhood obsessions and fantasies. So never say never. And he's quitting Rozanov now. Again. For real.

And for a few days he succeeds, even though it kills him, even though there's something not-right about Roz still. He's not well, Shane can tell, but he hasn't talked about it and Shane is afraid to ask. At night, lying in his bed, staring at where the ceiling is in the darkness, he berates himself. He's a coward, a failure, too fucking weird and stupid to know what the fuck is happening or what to do about it. He's selfish. A bad friend.

But then Roz is in his doorway, half naked already, fresh out the shower, and Shane imagines gripping at those wet curls, Roz's face between his legs, and he realizes he doesn't have to give it up just yet. Roz is leaving in a few weeks. Why does Shane have to quit now when life has already given it a limited time frame? Stupid. Typical of him.

So they don't fuck. Shane can at least hold himself to that. But they do fuck around. For three weeks. And there's a tension that has maybe always been there but it's out in the open now. But Roz doesn't push it any further than hands and mouths, and Shane is relieved.

He knows it will hurt, but this is it. He has to end it once Roz is gone. It's not like he even has a choice; when are they ever going to see each other after this? Sure, Shane's parents love Roz, but it's not like Minnesota is next door. It's not even in the same country. And Shane will only be two hours from home. He knows he'll be seeing them all the time. But Roz?

Chapter 3: '09-'11: Ilya

Chapter Summary

In which Ilya Rozanov experiences so, so much angst after deciding to move to Minnesota for whatever fucking reason, and he also experiences a lot of personal growth tbh. Not to spoil the situation.

TW: suicidal thoughts

Summer 2009

What the fuck?

Ilya stands outside his childhood home, feeling as small as ever in its hulking shadow, luggage piled next to him on the stoop. His key doesn't work.

A fear worms into his mind but no. Surely not. Even for Alexei, who has never been anything but a dickhead and a bully, it would be over the top.

He pounds on the door.

His text from two days ago with his flight number and arrival time had gone unanswered, which hadn't necessarily been a surprise. Alexei hasn't exactly been communicative recently. And it's not like Ilya's been expecting a warm welcome. He knew what he was doing when he enrolled at a fucking American college instead of making pro money straight out the gate with Boston. Even still, he'd sort of hoped Alexei would miss him, maybe, or that he would at least see some value in having a relationship with the only blood family he has left in the world.

Long shadows stretch down the street in the waning light behind him. The hunched, irritated babushka he'd passed on his way up the sidewalk a few minutes ago is yelling at her little rat dog somewhere nearby and it echoes through the neighborhood's quiet twilight.

He sighs, still not allowing himself to believe the worst. A sick, clenching feeling rises in his gut as he treks around the side of the house. It grows worse with every step closer to the side door. Fuck. What if this door doesn't open either? It doesn't.

He wants to vomit but he pounds on the door instead and to his surprise Alexei is opening it. A wave of body odor hits Ilya and he grimaces.

“What the fuck, Alexei?”

“No, Ilya. What the fuck to you,” Alexei says, spitting the words. He's clearly coked out. Hasn't showered in days at least, red-rimmed eyes staring freakish, unblinking, into Ilya's.

“Took you long enough to fucking answer,” Ilya says, trying to push inside. Alexei doesn't move.

“No.”

The sick feeling had subsided a bit when Alexei opened the door, but it's back now and stronger than before. “What the fuck?”

“This house was left to me by my father,” Alexei says. “And it's for me and my family to live in.”

“I am your fucking family, dickhead,” Ilya says, knowing he's fallen into a trap the moment he says it.

“No,” Alexei says, still making intense, unblinking eye contact. “Don't fucking talk about family to me. Not anymore. You're a piece of shit dead weight who fucked over his only living family member because family means nothing to you. Nothing.” Some spittle actually hits Ilya's face at that. Ilya would've hoped Alexei's mouth would be dryer, given his condition, but apparently all sorts of forces are conspiring against him today.

He wants to vomit. “This is my home,” he says. Pathetic. He should leave while he has his dignity. Dignity was a lost cause the moment Alexei changed the locks though, probably.

“No,” Alexei says. His teeth are yellowing. His face is oily and he has wrinkles he didn't have the last time Ilya saw him. “You are nothing to me. You have nothing to offer. Get the fuck out of my sight and don't come back until you're ready to actually contribute, you fucking stupid needy little boy.”

He slams the door as he steps back inside and Ilya hears the deadbolt slide home.

He doesn't remember exactly how he gets to Svetlana's house with his two suitcases and his bag of hockey gear-- maybe his only possessions now in the world-- but he's here now, and his head is in her lap and she's stroking his hair, murmuring nonsense comforts into the sleepy air of her bedroom.

Yuna had told him to text when his flight landed. The request alone made him nearly ill with longing: for months he'd been dreading the end of his time with the Hollanders.

Last year he had been mostly alright with going back to Russia for the summer; he'd known, when he left the Hollander's welcoming happy home, that he would be back again. That he didn't have to give it up just yet. But yesterday had been his last day with them. Ever, basically. And when Yuna wrapped her arms around his waist, squeezing him tight and saying "text me when you're home so I know you're safe," it nearly ripped him apart.

He hasn't texted her yet, which is probably a good thing now that he's gained a broader understanding of the reality of his situation.

All spring he'd allowed himself to hope he and the Hollanders might stay in touch. He'd nurtured private, foolish little fantasies: maybe they could fly down for a game or two, or maybe he could visit their cottage over the summer. Seeing Shane would be rare, obviously, since they'd be playing for teams in entirely different leagues, hours apart and in separate nations. Ilya had steeled himself for the pain of that loss. But now he realizes it's not just Shane, and it's not just seeing them less often. The whole thing needs to end. All of it.

Because as it turns out, Ilya doesn't have a family of his own. His father is dead. His mother is dead. His brother wants nothing to do with him.

And that makes David and Yuna and Shane the closest thing he has. But they didn't sign up to be the replacement family for a reject orphan boy desperate for any tiny scrap of affection or attention or care. It's too much to ask of them. He needs them too badly.

Even if he tried-- even if for some inconceivable reason the Hollanders still wanted to be in his life when they learned how much ugliness and pain and baggage he hadn't told them about: when they learned the unappealing, rotten truth about golden boy Ilya Rozanov --he doesn't know what to say. Where to even begin trying to explain himself. And he can't, is the thing. He just can't. There's no way to admit to them all the things he hadn't mentioned last year. It's too late.

He presses his face into Sveta's thighs, turning nearly onto his stomach. Her hand runs comfortingly down the back of his neck and across his shoulders.

"It is alright, baby," she says. "I am here for you. It is okay. You can let go."

All he wants is to wrap his arms around her and bury his face in her stomach and cry, and cry, and cry. But he hasn't cried since his mother died. Something dull and heavy inside of him prevents it.

Ilya had been twelve. He found her. She swallowed a whole bottle of pills.

It turned him into the person he is, the grief of it. The pain. He's diminished, less capable in some immutable, indefinite way. He knows that. Pretty much always has. After she died something inside of him broke and he felt it: a screaming vacuum in his soul, like someone had opened the door of a plane mid-flight and he was hanging on by the fingertips, desperate not to be sucked into frozen, unbreathable free fall.

At twelve, the only thing that kept him a survivable distance away from that void was hockey. He always excelled at hockey; he and his parents and everyone else knew he was born for it by the time he was six. Some players stall out in adolescence: a kid who excels at twelve won't always excel at eighteen. But sometimes, kids who excel at twelve continue to excel, exceeding their peers by leagues year after year, until they are the very best on their team: in their league, nation, history. Ilya knew he was one of those kids. He has always known it. Felt it.

Then at fourteen he discovered sex. It happened at just the right time: hockey alone was beginning to fail him, and for the first time since the months immediately following his mother's death the darkness had begun encroaching again, creeping dangerously close. So

when he realized there was a second pastime that could keep him far, far away from the festering wound of his mother's suicide in the moments he couldn't be playing hockey he began scheduling his free time around it: learning to please, learning his own body, learning to read desire and pleasure and interest.

There wasn't much else that helped. At least not in any kind of sustainable way. Sure, cigarettes and vodka and ruthlessly goading his opponents until they snapped, just so he could punch their lights out in defense, smiling all the while, dulled the unrelenting howl of the void, but they didn't really pull him away from it in the same way. Danger helped: riskiness, knowing he could lose it all, but he really tried to limit how much he relied on that. He wanted a future, despite his brain's treacherous, endless malfunctions.

And mostly, organizing his life around all those distractions in varying quantities worked for years, until last summer, when Ilya was seventeen and his father died.

Svetlana's hand is smoothing down his jaw and it's so nice, so soft and gentle and she's the only person he's ever willingly exposed to this, one of the only people he'd trust with his life, and he wishes he was in love with her but he's just not. And fuck, everything is going to be so much shittier and harder now that he has no family, nothing to fall back on and even though his father and brother hadn't been amazing options it had been nice just knowing there was someone out there tied to him in some unchangeable permanent way, but what choice does he even have, now? It's just him, taking care of himself. And it has been for a long long time, pretty much.

For the whole year prior to his father's death, while Ilya was gallivanting around in Canada -- playing for Borealis, doing wholesome family activities with the Hollanders like playing bananagrams or grilling burgers at the cottage, loving every moment of his perfect pretend new life-- Grigori's health and mind were deteriorating. And Ilya hadn't been there to see how bad it really was. To do anything about it. No. Instead he'd been basking in David and Yuna's freely-given praise, getting too comfortable with hugs and care and concern. Letting their kindness seep into his defenses and degrade them, weaken him, like an invasive plant whose roots spread far below the surface of a sidewalk and push up, buckling it, creating more cracks until the whole thing needs replacing.

He knew his father wasn't doing well, obviously. It had been evident even when Ilya was at home full time. But the extent to which his dementia progressed that first year Ilya spent in Canada with the Hollanders had been beyond his understanding or comprehension. It's not like Alexei was all that great at communicating about it; no one actually told him it was happening aside from Grigori himself, by way of progressively stranger and less coherent phone calls. Ilya genuinely didn't know how bad it was until he arrived back home last summer, fresh out of that beautiful hopeful carefree year, easily the best year he'd had since his mother died, and watched his father die a week later.

When Ilya went through the things his father had bequeathed to him he found a note he'd never seen, in an envelope addressed to *Ilya, my beautiful boy*. It was written on his mother's favorite, fancy stationery. The one with roses twining around the border. He hadn't seen that stationery in years and years. Hadn't thought about it. But the intricate pattern of stems and thorns took him back to when he was young, to the affectionate little messages she'd write

and leave under his pillow in the night. Stupidly, he hadn't saved them. Couldn't remember exactly what any one of them had said.

Had this note once smelled of her perfume, like all the rest always had? Probably. Not anymore, though, no matter how desperately he wished to smell her lovely rose smell again. To feel her arms wrap warmly around him and know he will be okay.

Ilya,

My love. My all.

You are the greatest joy of my life. To watch you grow has been the most exquisite pleasure. Please do not let losing me keep you from yourself. From the man you can and will be, in all your strength and bravery and kindness. I know it is too late to make you promise me anything, and I don't deserve any more than you've already given. You are my perfect wonder no matter what you do or who you become.

But my beautiful boy. You are all ambition. Your worth is not in your titles or records. You excel and I am so proud, but there is more for you in this life than excelling. You are more than exceeding. There is so much for you to discover and create. So much for you to learn and love. Do not settle for a surface-level life of surface-level achievement.

Find something to love for itself, beyond how it makes you feel about yourself. Something to nourish your spirit and your mind.

I love you. I will always, always, always love you. My baby, my boy, my light.

Your mother.

After reading it the first time he'd sat, disbelieving, on his childhood bedroom rug, reliving the moment he'd found her, awash in the dread and terror and unknowing he'd felt when he looked into her room-- the air had been too still, somehow, too quiet, and the horror of it nearly made him vomit still, five years later, almost a man. An anger he'd suppressed for years and years tightened in his throat, making it hard to breathe

The wound had never really healed, obviously, even if he managed to bandage it to some extent with a good time or a win. But in that moment on his bedroom rug last summer as he held his mother's suicide note, which his father had kept from him and which offered no explanation, no justification for her death, he knew the wound had been ripped open again, infected after years of neglect, oozing pus and reeking of decay.

Because his father hid it. Prevented Ilya from seeing his mother's final assurances of her love, which he'd always known but in a way he clung to desperately, not in a way he felt certain of.

And also because his mother said she loved him but then left him alone in this dark oppressive house with his father, who put Ilya down at every opportunity. Who always raised the bar just before Ilya was able to meet it. On top of the lack of explanation or justification or even apology she made several demands. How could she ask anything of him, when she

knew damn well who she was leaving Ilya with: her murderer, essentially. The best she had to offer was this shitty note?

He was fucking destroyed, now, because of her. He would never be a real functioning human who loves and is loved and knows joys and hope and belonging. She should've stuck around if she wanted Ilya to listen to her advice. If she wanted him to not be fucked up.

And then there were the Hollanders, who had weakened Ilya all year with their normalness and thoughtfulness and cohesion as a unit, only for him to return to Russia unprepared for the brutal joint blows of his father's death and his mother's note.

That whole prior year Yuna had taken special note of Ilya's favorite recipes and packed lunches. She bought food just because she knew he liked it. On his birthday she'd made a cake, with 17 candles and *Happy Birthday, Ilya!* written across the top in Cyrillic.

She helped him set up meetings with recruiters and scouts and potential advertisers, too, like she did for Shane. It was hard, trying to navigate the systems and norms of an entirely different country's hockey culture: he probably wouldn't have been able to figure it out without her help.

David had taken it upon himself to educate Ilya about "English-language cultural staples." Mostly, this involved in-depth explanations of the interpersonal dynamics between various seventies band members and how they impacted the entirety of Western civilization. It was boring, but Ilya liked listening to him talk about it all the same: his face lit up kind of like Shane's, when Shane talked about hockey.

David was a games guy, too, and over the course of the year he'd taught Ilya how to play all sorts of card and board and puzzle games. The four of them played together a lot of the time, and it was actually physically painful, looking at them as they laughed from behind his hand of cards; witnessing Shane's god-awful poker face, somehow more expressive when he's trying to lie in a game than he ever is telling the truth in his daily life; watching David and Yuna flirt while Yuna tries mercilessly to defeat them all; knowing it was just a fleeting taste of everything he could never truly have.

Sveta is coaxing him up now, hands and voice gentle. He doesn't know how much time has passed in the quiet softness of her room and her bed.

"Fuck, Sveta," he says. She shushes him and pulls his head into her chest. He closes his eyes.

He can't text Yuna. Can't text any of them, or call them, or speak with them ever again, probably. The loss of it chokes him and he wraps his arms around Svetlana like if he holds on tight enough he can meld his body into hers and stop existing entirely.

All last year, Ilya's senior year of Canadian high school, the year following maybe the best year of his life, the darkness had grown beyond his ability to beat back. It pressed him into the mattress when he fell asleep alone, crushing his lungs, and by the spring he was waking up every single day wishing he were dead. It had never been so bad.

Alexei only called to yell at him, to berate him like his father had done. Svetlana called sometimes, though, from America. He did his best not to let on to how bad it really was. She can probably tell, now that he's falling apart in her arms.

He'd hoped staying with the Hollanders again might help stave off the worst of what he'd known was coming, but nothing had been able to pull him out of the heaviness overtaking him, bearing down as though he were sinking to the bottom of the ocean, watching the light from above fade into the crushing silence, finally letting nothingness push the life from his lungs and carry him softly, quietly, even lovingly, away into eternity.

Hockey wasn't enough. Sex wasn't enough. Nothing. Nothing nothing nothing nothing was enough. Spending every other moment with the bane and balm of his existence, Shane Hollander, wasn't enough. Mastering the social intricacies of Canadian high school to distract himself from Shane Hollander, even as he pulled him onto his lap in the main commons before class, wasn't enough.

And so more and more, Ilya had turned to his last-resort option: trouble, risk, poking the hornets' nest, to escape the suffocating darkness falling over him. It was destructive and he knew it. He'd blow up his future if he continued like this. But he'd also blow up his future if he stopped getting out of bed and let the world pass him by, alive but dead in the cool shadow of David and Yuna's guest bedroom. And that was the alternative, he was pretty sure, to this terrible flailing self destruction.

At least when Ilya was busy doing something he shouldn't do with someone he shouldn't be with, in places they shouldn't be he wasn't alone, fighting off the thoughts of how he'd do it if he ever did: quick, permanent. Probably not slit wrists in the bathtub but he hadn't really settled on a better option yet. Hanging, maybe, but he was too heavy for most fixtures and he didn't trust methods where his feet would still be on the ground. The shame of attempting suicide but failing was something he knew he couldn't bear: whichever method he chose, if he ever did, would have to be foolproof.

Was this how his mother felt, at the end?

It was only Hollzy- Shane- who managed to yank Ilya out of his spinning free fall --the agonized spiraling plummet of an injured bird-- long enough to survive the championships and finish out the Canadian school year.

Svetlana's cool hand is on his face now, turning his chin up. His one constant. He loves her. He shouldn't be forcing himself and his problems onto her like this.

"I'm sorry," he says. Her face crumples.

"No," she says, the word so much kinder than it had been earlier coming out of Alexei's mouth. "Never ever be sorry. I am always, always here for you Ilyushka."

She runs her other hand through his hair again, still gripping at his chin. "What do you want, love?" she asks, so soft. "You can have it."

Ilya remembers Shane looking at him, teary-eyed at the bottom of a hotel bed, telling Ilya he wasn't taking care of himself, literally begging to do it, to help him, crying sweet tears and going so soft and pliant and lovely.

He'd known Shane liked messing around with him before then, of course: it was really because Shane liked it too much, too much even for himself to handle, that Ilya had to be careful while they were alone. He didn't trust himself to stop once he'd started, and he didn't trust Shane to stop him either, even though it was clear Shane didn't really want it.

Well. He wanted it but not bad enough, Ilya had thought before Shane marched, so determined- brave in his endearing stiff awkward way- out of the bathroom during one of the better Star Wars movies, right as Anakin was justifiably throwing it all away for Natalie Portman, and flung himself onto Ilya's cock, basically.

But before that stunning, absurd, waking dream of a moment, it had really only been evident that Shane wanted him but was too afraid. And he didn't want to talk about it, which Ilya respected. There were lots of things Ilya didn't want to talk about either. It was good, he'd thought, that Shane didn't want Ilya quite as badly as Ilya wanted him; if Shane felt even one tenth of the desire Ilya felt, they'd probably both have already burned their lives down.

But even so, Shane's gaze flickered at him raw with desire nearly every day, nakedly lustful, like he was waiting for Ilya to push it a step beyond what Shane ever actually admitted to wanting. But Ilya wasn't going to do that. And Shane knew it. And he trusted Ilya not to try too hard, Ilya knew, even if Shane didn't. So he'd held back all year, kept to his own bed or someone else's entirely, accepting whatever he could get in whichever way he could: touching like maybe he'd die without it whenever people were there to chaperone, basically. That and thinking of Shane's bashful just-for-Ilya smile and adorable freckled cheeks while his dick was in somebody else's mouth.

So yes, he knew Shane wanted him, and he knew Shane probably wouldn't stop him. But there was absolutely a too-far and it had been creeping up on them both for years, probably. If Ilya pushed it, Shane might hate himself later. Ilya couldn't hurt him like that.

Shane was so determined. Smart. Talented. He was better than Ilya at hockey, not that Ilya would never admit it. And he was gorgeous. So sweet and shy and honest all the time. He'd wanted Shane to be impressed by him. To admire him. And for a long while, probably since that first day when Shane had picked him up at the airport, so unguarded and genuine in his panic about the directions, in trying to welcome Ilya into his life and home, Ilya had wanted to protect him. To be the type of person he could rely on. To care for him.

So on the hotel bed that night, when he realized Shane was actually fucking doing it finally, that he actually did mean it and want it, when Ilya saw his own desire to please and protect and care for reflected back at him, when he pulled Shane up from where his face was pressed into Ilya's groin, felt at its perfect contours, pushed a thumb into his mouth and watched his eyes roll back before his hand was groping at Ilya's cock and he was sucking at Ilya's thumb as Ilya asked, begged, did he want to suck Ilya's cock and he was mumbling "want to," trying to pull his head back down and suddenly Ilya could see and hear everything in the room so clearly, like everything was etched sharper, more vivid than it had been the moment before and Shane was still talking: "help you. always want to help you," and he let Shane do it, let

Shane pull him out of his underwear and take him into his mouth, further and further, and Ilya pet at his cheeks and brows and hair, gripping at his jaw and rambling shocked primal wonder at Shane's perfect face and perfect mouth in Russian and it was so fucking good, maybe the best he'd ever had tears rose up, pricking at his eyes.

It was beyond anything Ilya had ever allowed himself to wish for. Shane had seen how badly Ilya needed something to pull him back from the void. He'd seen Ilya's panic and desperation and even though he didn't know what was wrong, he wanted to help him. To protect him from his own self destruction. "You're not taking care of yourself," he'd said.

Outside of Svetlana, no one had ever seen Ilya like that, for who he was behind it all. And Svetlana had been around for years. Shane figured him out with zero context for it.

For the rest of that spring it had been enough, almost. Enough to get him by. Shane's mouth: his dumbstruck ecstasy every single time. Like he didn't know he could feel this fucking good. The way he lost himself in it. His struggle not to give in to his desire losing always, always, to how badly he wanted to please, to see Ilya's pleasure at his pleasure.

Fuck.

Sveta is still gripping his chin, still stroking his hair, still so beautiful and knowing.

"Please," he says. "I'm so tired," and she's so gentle, kind, helping him pull his shirt off and push his joggers down, laying him out on the bed and climbing onto him: too small, feather light, not like Shane at all. But he needs something. Anything, to forget his day and his year and his life. And Sveta knows him: knows him so well and loves him anyway.

It will be better this way. For everyone. If Ilya just accepts that the Hollanders were a temporary blip in his life. They're not his family.

But when Svetlana gets her mouth on his soft cock he can't help it.

The last time he and Shane shared a hotel room Shane had tried to ask Ilya what was going on. He had never actually asked, before, just offered himself and his wet mouth and his competent hands and his dream body up as if to say here, there are other things in this life to think of, to dream about. There are other ways to know and be known and to cherish and be cherished.

Ilya had been so close to giving in and finally spilling his guts when he'd realized how earnest Shane was being. Tears were welling up in his big wide brown eyes and he looked afraid. Terrified, actually, but he was gripping Ilya's chin in his determined hand and standing persistent between Ilya's legs, asking why Ilya was behaving so erratically. Why he hadn't told any of them anything before the draft. What is going on with him?

And the truth had been right there, about to spill out of Ilya's mouth, but then he saw what it cost Shane to even have to ask. Because although his hand was still bravely gripping Ilya's chin Shane was losing it. Spiraling, glassy-eyed in a bad hurting way.

Ilya had put him in this position, when he stopped caring for himself and Shane had been forced to do it. Every day Shane woke him up. Brought a snack and breakfast and lunch to school for him. Soothed him. Placated him. Did his homework. Drove him to and from school and practice. Sucked his dick. Reminded him to brush his teeth.

Holy fuck.

Ilya was a piece of shit. He looked at Shane's plush mouth.

He wanted to kiss him.

He'd been wanting it, obviously. Ilya liked to kiss. Kissing played a key role in most of his hookups. But with Shane things were different. Ilya didn't even call him Shane, just Hollander or Hollzy.

And when Shane melted into his hand, letting out a little shocked gasp like he hadn't known he needed it, like he hadn't known he was panicking until Ilya pulled him out of it Ilya nearly lost his mind. Shane was so fucking good, so pure, so trusting and willing and wanting. And when he dropped to his knees so fast, sloppy, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, so far gone already and peaceful, letting Ilya push him all the way down, the harsh wet unnatural glug of his throat loud as he took Ilya's cock deeper than anything is meant to go, strings of drool and mucus stretching from his swollen red lips every time Ilya pulled out just to shove back in again, rough, the obscene sound of his cock plugging up Shane's throat and pushing pushing deeper, so fucking deep and wet and tight and hot, convulsing around him, spasming, eyes closed, humming, perfect tears trickling down his cheeks as he tries even still to suckle on Ilya's cock, tries to look up into his eyes and be so good for him, such a lovely sweet good boy with a perfect perfect mouth, Ilya wondered if he was going to hell. He'd never get over this. He'd never have anything this fucking perfect ever again.

He's hard, now, in Svetlana's mouth, hand in her hair. She's looking at him from where she lays between his legs on the mattress, going slow, careful, making sure he's okay. She pulls off a little and suckles on the head, giving some attention to the vein on the underside, wrapping a hand around him beneath her mouth and spitting into it, spreading it. She knows him. It's good.

He thinks about how Shane had begged. So fucking needy. Easy even as he fought himself. He's never had anyone who loses it like Shane does; Ilya can't even imagine how obscene, debauched, their sex would be if Shane wasn't trying so desperately not to want it all the time.

It's not just Shane, either, who wants something fucking filthy and animal. As the thing between them continued Ilya's fantasies had begun migrating into wild vast unbroken territories, far beyond where they'd ever dared go before, flashes of want he still hasn't totally interrogated overtaking him for the first time in quick vivid pulses when he realized how far gone Shane could be just from sucking cock, how bad Shane wanted Ilya to fuck him up: breathless breakneck images of glassy unfocused eyes, open wet whimpering drooling mouth, white handprint across a reddened tear-streaked cheek, finger-shaped bruises and purpling bites and teeth pressing into hot skin, denting it, breaking it, and spit and cum and sweat and snot, pushing and squeezing and shoving and gripping and *forcing*, *hurting*, even

though it scared him and gurgling choking dripping wet slick sloppy broken sobs, pleas, protests. And pleasure. Endless, endless unrelenting pleasure thrumming beneath it all.

Svetlana's straddling him, now, sinking slowly onto him and fuck, this really is a pity fuck because she's taking her time with it, grinding down in a way he knows feels fucking good for her, really working for it and she's putting on a bit of a show, sitting up and throwing her head back and running her hands all up and down her body, squeezing her own tits as she rides him and it would've been so much easier for her to just blow him and be done with it, but god he loves her because she knows him, and she knows he fucking hates coming alone.

And as she works a hand between them to finish herself off and sits up so he can see her as she comes, pulsing wet and hot around him, moaning and letting her torso sway a little bit with the shuddering of her hips, playing it up because she fucking knows him and loves him, and when she falls forward onto him and he pushes his heels into the mattress and fucks up into her, runs his hand down her back, pulls her down by the hips and closes his eyes and comes inside her he remembers what Shane's face looked like as he begged for it: wet with spit and tears, red under his freckles, mouth open, letting out little helpless cries on his exhales like he couldn't believe how fucking bad he wanted it.

Fall 2009

Learning how to live in a new place, a different context, has always been a fix for the looming darkness, if temporary. Something about needing to learn everything new again makes Ilya want to survive. The relief only lasts until he gets comfortable, though, and then the void is back.

That's how it is in Minnesota. Learning it keeps him moving for a few months, until he's befriended the other guys on the team and learned how they party here and who will buy him vodka. And for awhile after that, new little games keep him occupied: fucking without a condom; going to class drunk for the hell of it; making eye contact with another boy at a party and letting him suck his cock in the bedroom closet, coming down his throat and leaving him there still on his knees and stumbling back out, finding a girl to take back to his dorm, upsetting his roommate again by fucking her into the futon and passing out naked and still being there when his roommates' parents knock the next day to take their son to church and brunch.

And when the season starts he doesn't stop. No one to stop him. He's never really gotten worse at hockey before, only better, since the very first time he held a stick. This year he's getting worse.

Worse and worse and worse. All of it. Some kind of fugue state half the time at practice. Barely to focus able on one thing, let alone multiple. During games, now, too.

Like he's not really any there. No anywhere. Not anywhere. Nowhere in any way that matters.

The same in his classes. The margins of his notebooks crowded with "help help help help" in cramped black penmanship, wondering how he could die right now in this lecture hall, seeing himself puncture his own artery with his pen, feeling his bicep twitch at the thought of it, of just fucking doing it finally, "help" interspersed with "fuck fuck fuck" or "please please please please please" or just heavy scribbled lines.

Popular Hockey Radio Show, February 2010

DAVE:

I mean, when you're trying to pick the best eighteen year old kid for long-term success, there will always be some mistakes. It's not always easy to tell at that age whether a player's performance has peaked, or whether there's truly a deeper potential for development.

And unfortunately, at this point I have no choice but to wonder whether last year's number one NHL draft pick Ilya Rozanov, who shocked Boston and everybody else by enrolling at the University of Minnesota, had already peaked in performance by the time he was drafted.

Last year he scored 68 points for Borealis, one of Canada's premier junior league teams. Some commentators, not me mind you, suggested his phenomenal two seasons with Borealis were in part because of the remarkable chemistry he had with his teammate Shane Hollander, Montreal's current star rookie and last year's second NHL draft pick. The implication was that the teen power duo needed each other to excel at the level they did in the junior leagues. But Hollander is having an incredible rookie season and is likely to take the Voyageurs to the playoffs this year, while Rozanov has been stagnant at best. I mean. Sixteen points, Cam? After 68 last year?

CAM:

All that may be true but hear me out, Davey: I don't think Rozanov's long-term potential is the issue here.

DAVE:

No? Then how do you explain his general failure to measure up to any of the expectations Minnesota and the hockey world at large had?

CAM:

You said it yourself: Rozanov shocked everyone and their mother when he didn't go pro, and now he's playing like a zombie. The man seems totally checked out. But it's not because the ability isn't there. I mean, look at him. Really look at him. He starts a fight every time he gets playing time, which is less and less frequently as the season goes on, but there's no life in it. When Rozanov played for Borealis last year and the year before it was electric. You saw it in everything he did: the confidence, the thrill, the ambition. Do you see any of that in his performance this season with Minnesota?

DAVE:

No Cam, I certainly don't. I don't see much of anything in his performance this season with Minnesota.

CAM:

Mark my words. That guy is going through something. He needs to figure it out and get his passion for the game back fast, because rumor has it his scholarship is in danger.

DAVE:

Well Cam, playing for Minnesota isn't exactly small potatoes. Sure, for Ilya Rozanov it may have seemed like a downgrade last year, when all signs pointed to his being a once-in-a-generation player. But the state of Minnesota has six D1 hockey schools, more than any other state in the U.S., and the Golden Gophers are the best of the bunch: an historic hockey team with a long and proud legacy. Although they were desperate to sign Rozanov last year, the Russian teen phenom has yet to perform even close to the level he was expected to perform. There are hundreds of other talented players Minnesota could give Rozanov's scholarship money to in a heartbeat, next season.

February 2010

Fuck. Ilya opens his eyes under his shitty twin XL comforter, which he'd purchased at Target last summer. They'd had a whole seasonal section dedicated to cheap dorm furnishings. It's pilling even though he's only washed it approximately twice. Or maybe that's why. It's fucking hot under the covers and he's sweating. The sun is dimmed behind the gray shroud of his bedding but it's definitely past noon. He's missed class again.

He tries. He really, really tries to give a shit, but familiarly and somewhat comfortingly his limbs and lungs and mind are captive to a malevolent seductive shadow that refuses to let him care about anything at all. Refuses to let him go.

His GPA is teetering into dangerous territory, and Coach doesn't even want him back on the team next year anyway, Ilya suspects. Fair enough. He doesn't want himself back. He doesn't want himself at all.

Last year, when those asshole pundits started wondering if Hollanov was only good as a duo, Ilya had seen Shane's quiet stress about it. Ilya should've told him he had nothing to worry about. All along, it had been him who would suffer without Shane and he'd known it. And now Shane is having an amazing rookie season with the Voyageurs, will probably make playoffs, while Ilya is flattened, colorless, immobilized. Might as well be dead.

He only made it to class once last week. Psychology. The lecture had mostly been a deviation: a rambling tangent the professor went on about attention-seeking behaviors. It probably won't be on the test, so what had been the point in going? He hasn't left his bed for anything except practice since. He's beginning to fear he won't even be able to make practice anymore, soon.

Like. Really soon. Maybe even now today.

Some time passes.

The light behind his comforter changes. Gets less bright.

He hears his roommate get back. Doesn't move.

He should tell someone he won't be at practice. Come up with an excuse.

His roommate leaves.

There's a vibration from somewhere behind his pillow. He doesn't move.

Some more time passes.

Eventually he works up the energy to feel around blindly for his phone.

A text. From Shane Hollander. For the first time since Ilya last saw him in May.

Are you okay?

As he stares at the text an emotion stronger than anything he's felt in weeks --months, probably, aside from self-loathing and despair-- floats up through the sludge that blankets his awareness. His phone dies in his hand.

He hasn't responded to any of the many texts and calls from David or Yuna since he left Canada last spring. At first, they'd been casual check-ins. Then, comments on his game. Questions: what's up? is everything going well at school? is anything wrong? Statements: they're here if Ilya needs anything.

He's considered blocking their numbers, just so he won't need to feel the pain of ignoring them. They don't even know what they're offering. He's not their son and they don't know he wants to be. But blocking them would be a relief he doesn't deserve. He'd challenged fate, when he got too attached to the Hollanders. When he'd run away from his duties and responsibilities in Russia, his real home. His real family. And now his father is dead. And now he has no family.

The Hollanders are the only people Ilya ever remembers asking if he's okay. Before them, Ilya doesn't know. Years. At least since before his mother died. Maybe never.

A week before Shane first climbed into Ilya's lap on a hotel bed and offered himself up for Ilya to take and take and take, David cornered him in the mud room. It had been a day or two since Ilya brought a woman back home in the middle of the night. Back to David's home. Where he and Yuna had been kind enough to let Ilya stay for two years. David, who'd fed Ilya and included him in his family. Treated him almost like his own son.

It was grounds to kick Ilya out. Maybe even get him sent back to Russia.

"Obviously," David said, "it's wildly inappropriate and we're disappointed."

Ilya had been awash with shame and self hatred. He knew how disrespectful it had been. It was like him he knew, to blow things up when they got bad. And things had gotten bad.

"But more than that," David had continued, "we're worried about you." He put a hand onto Ilya's knee and peered into his face. "Are you okay?"

And Ilya knew then that he wasn't playing NHL hockey next year. Because no, he wasn't okay. Hadn't been okay. Didn't really even know what okay felt like. And it wasn't anyone else's burden to bear but his own. There was nothing David could do about it, even if Ilya did admit how close he was to the terrible cold screeching precipice inside of him.

Ilya's only other option, the thing he hadn't tried yet, that could maybe make what he was about to tell David true, the option he hadn't known was on the table until he'd learned his mother wanted something more for him than hockey, that he could make her proud doing something else if he really wanted to, was college.

Because even if her note didn't actually say it directly, Ilya's mother was right: he didn't particularly love hockey. He loved how it made him feel: to win, excel, surpassing himself and everyone else. But he loved anything that could make him feel that way: he just happened to be really fucking good at hockey. And he knew it was a short-term feeling, contingent on his ability to outperform again and again, forever.

What would happen when his body started to fail him? When his joints and bones and muscles began to weaken? Hockey couldn't be the only thing he had or it would kill him, later.

Surely the all-controlling, all-powerful Grigori Rozanov, who'd maintained his bruising grip on Ilya across entire continents and oceans even as he lost his mind, wouldn't have left the note in with the rest of it if he hadn't wanted Ilya to read it. Sure, he'd died earlier than anyone expected, and sure, he'd hidden the note for years, but he did save it.

For Ilya. So that someday Ilya would know. Would know Irina, his loving, kind, selfish mother, who hadn't found him worth staying for, wanted him to be happy anyway. Believed he was capable of finding happiness somewhere else, without her and outside of just winning and achieving and dominating.

It had been the goal since he was very young: professional hockey, glory for his family, finally earning the pride of his father. But his father was dead now and he had to try something different. It had been on his mind all year as he vacillated between anger at his father, for being such a dick, for hiding the note and pressuring Ilya more and more and more to succeed; anger at his mother, for being so lovely up until she fucking killed herself and ruined Ilya's childhood; anger at himself, for feeling so shitty and being unable to snap out of it, for wanting more than he had, for being so desperate for any shred of love or affection that he'd cross continents, let his own father die; devastation, grief, hopelessness, uncertainty, self-hatred. All year he'd been thinking about it. What if he didn't go pro? Who would stop him? Who was alive anymore to even care what he did?

He could play four years at an American college and still play professionally after, assuming he still wanted to. Boston would be pissed, sure, but Ilya couldn't muster a fuck to give. He

couldn't do it. He knew he couldn't do it. If he went to Boston right now he'd fucking kill himself.

And so he'd answered "I'm okay," looking away, feeling the pressure of David's hand on his knee and wondering why his own father had never ever, not even once, asked if Ilya was okay. And then he'd given in, just a tiny bit. "Some hard family things happening," he'd admitted, a roaring in his head, a writhing in his gut. He'd barely even told Svetlana things were hard. Not that she didn't know. She'd been the one holding his hand at both funerals. "I'm very sorry for disrespecting your home. You have been nothing but welcoming and kind to me. It will never happen again."

David hadn't really been satisfied with that answer, but it was the most vulnerable Ilya had been with anyone in a long time. He gave Ilya a long hug and Ilya hated himself for whatever broken defective thing made him such an asshole to the only few people on the planet who gave any kind of a fuck about him. He wasn't really their son, though, and he had to remember that. Couldn't get too attached to someone else's family. Someone else's life.

Yuna had given him a long hug the next day, also, and asked if he'd spoken with David. "We love you," she'd said. "We only want you to be alright and happy and well. And if you don't start following the rules we'll have no choice but to inform the team."

He'd allowed her to rock him back and forth, wracked with fear and hating himself, wanting to tell her everything but unsure how.

And now here he is, an orphan of nearly two years, a failure of a student and an athlete, too unwell to leave his bed or recycle the dozens of empty vodka bottles shoved beneath it in clinking rows or even to plug in his phone so he can let someone know he won't be at practice, inhaling the plasticky, sweaty reek of his unwashed Target comforter and drifting away from whatever else on a gray wave of apathy.

Are you okay?

The only solution is that Ilya has to get his shit together. Because it's clear Shane still gives some sort of a fuck about him. And he can't let Shane waste any more time or energy on Ilya, not when he has a blossoming NHL career to focus on. He's probably going to be rookie of the year. And Ilya can't do anything to himself that might hurt Shane. Because he knows how terrible it is.

And fuck that pity text, also.

Are you okay?

Because Ilya might have allowed both his parents to die, and he might have been rejected by his brother, and maybe he'd never escape this darkness clogging up his life all the time and making everything so difficult and so painful, but he's a better hockey player than any of the slow, stupid, amateur douchebag assholes he's been letting beat him all fucking season. So it's time he remembers just how much he loves winning and how good he is at it.

Popular Hockey Radio Show, April 2010

DAVE:

Well, Cam, it's safe to say I've eaten my words. An incredible performance by Ilya Rozanov over the course of the past two months. Minnesota came back from the dead to make the Frozen Four this year, narrowly losing the championship game to Michigan, in no small part thanks to Rozanov's absurdly quick, dramatic turnaround.

CAM:

Indeed, Dave. As you probably also noted, he hasn't been penalized for fighting since February.

DAVE:

Yup. And did you see his recent locker room interview, Cam?

CAM:

Tell me about it, Davey.

DAVE:

Reporter asked him what changed. He said he quit smoking cigarettes.

CAM:

Cagey. I do suspect the aura of mystery is part of what makes him so irresistible to the ladies.

DAVE:

Sure, Cam, but I'd also wager his Greek statue face and Greek statue body play a role. I'm a proud heterosexual man but I won't lie to you: if Roz looked at me sideways I might be willing to experiment a little bit.

CAM:

...

DAVE:

Classic Roz, though, brother. He's a roller coaster, exemplified by the extreme highs and lows of his freshman season with Minnesota.

CAM:

He's a watchable player, that's for sure. Fireworks on every level. Always has been.

Fall 2010

Ilya texts Shane. He'd known it needed to happen for ages; he and Patti covered a lot of ground in his thrice-weekly sessions over the summer. Because even though his father would have disdained therapy, his father is dead. And so is his mother. Who had needed help even worse than Ilya.

The crush of that dead dying thing inside of Ilya had made him weak. Desperate. Like a wild animal in a cage day after day, denied his most basic instincts and needs and pleasures. The purposelessness was more than he could take. The loneliness.

He isn't totally back to a stable place (as if he's ever once been in a stable place) but he's back to what he's always done best: fucking around, playing hockey, excelling.

There's a whole new demographic of people to have sex with here on campus that Ilya hardly even encountered last year when he was drunk at douchebaggery parties all the time: artsy girls; sexy literature girls; wannabe philosophers and art historians and musicians. He'd been so focused on drowning out the inhuman scream of his depression that he'd hardly noticed all the different fun little places and ways to find someone attractive and willing on a college campus.

He learns about analytical frameworks to impress a TA and it works and when he's fucking her against the wall of her shitty apartment she begs him to come inside her the whole time, pretty much from the moment they start but he won't and he's wearing a condom anyway, even though she'd begged him to go raw and in the past that would've been more than enough to convince him. But he's lucky he'd only needed to do a course of antibiotics, last year, after he got his shit together and went to Planned Parenthood and got tested. He could be paying child support right now. Or have one of those permanent STDs you have to disclose to every sexual partner for the rest of your life.

He hadn't known who all to contact about it, and he definitely didn't have all their numbers, but it felt like something he should notify people about. Plus, he has a reputation to uphold. Of honesty, and integrity in all his sexual endeavors. He's not a fucking scumbag. Well. His best self isn't a fucking scumbag. It was basically his moral duty.

@IlyaRozanov

PSA: if we fucked this year u might have chlamydia. So sorry. Cheap test at pp by campus. practice safe sex. wont happen again

❤️30 🔄65

@sophgoph

@IlyaRozanov oh my god??

❤️10 🔄3

@mananapopana

@IlyaRozanov bro. u can't just publicly announce you've given the U's entire female population the clap

❤️17 🔄5

@karissme

@mananapopana right?? planned parenthood is about to have a line out the door. I hope he at least warned them so they can get some extra staff in.

❤️11 🔄3

=====

@mimimoham god I fucking love Roz

❤️19 🔄7

@damndavey

@mimimoham like brother does not give a FUCK 😂😂😂 wish I was him tbh. a god among men.

❤️10 🔄2

@camerondeezus

@damndavey actually tho bc he played like hot garbage all year & gave the whole school chlamydia but I still wanna fuck him

❤️15 🔄11

At some point last year, after having a whole lot of risky forgettable sex with anyone who looked even kind of into it he'd lost his interest in it entirely, which had never happened before. But he quit drinking six months ago. It's good, probably. Definitely. The vodka was an issue. Was an issue for years. And it fed the depression, he learned from Patti, in the short and long term. A depressant.

And so he quit and he went to therapy and he's learning healthy coping strategies and how to talk about himself and he's less depressed and his dick works again. It's a relief.

It wasn't right, how Ilya had treated Shane. He still thinks about it. He never replied to Shane's singular *are you okay?* text. At the time, his rationale had been that Shane shouldn't be worrying about Ilya at all: Ilya wasn't Shane's family; Shane didn't know how much of a burden Ilya really was; Ilya had taken unfair advantage of Shane's kind, genuine nature that last year with the Hollanders, and Shane deserved better. Could do better. He'd be more successful without any worry or concern or thought about Ilya.

And he *had* been successful. Shane is so fucking good at hockey it's astounding.

So Ilya had never replied. Instead, he got his shit together. Or, at least, kind of together. His hockey is back up to his own and the team and the media's standard. Minnesota made the Frozen Four championship game last spring for the first time in years. The other guys on the team started to like him again, after having cooled off while Ilya sank deeper into himself and his grief all last winter and fall, letting the team and everybody else down.

He's on the green in the middle of campus when he sends the text, laying face-up, listening to the chatter of students all around him: a girl failed her midterm, she's certain; a boy suspects the girl he's seeing is a crazy psycho bitch but she gives great head; someone's mom won't stop blowing up her phone about getting a flight home for Thanksgiving.

Can I see you?

In a few days, Shane will be in town. The first game of the season he'll be in Minnesota.

No reply.

It had been too presumptuous. Careless, even. Why should Ilya assume Shane will come running to meet him the moment he reaches out? Why should Ilya assume Shane is even kind of willing to see his face ever again, after how he treated him?

December 2010

The next time Shane will be in town soon Ilya texts again.

I owe you an apology. Would like to talk.

No reply.

He wallows in self hatred a little, but pats himself on the back for journaling about it instead of going on a bender and fucking somebody in a bathroom stall. He does still find someone to have sex with, but in his bed and only after he's finished writing down his feelings. Surely that's better than nothing.

Then, the day following Shane's game, after he's definitely already left the city:

No apology needed, Roz. We're good.

Maybe text my parents back, though.

And yes, after months of spilling his guts out in therapy he does sort of crave opening up to someone he doesn't pay to listen. Before, in Russia, there had been no purpose in telling anybody about his feelings or fears or hopes; Grigori didn't care about anything other than Ilya's hockey career, and Alexei didn't care about anything other than Ilya's future pro hockey salary.

But now, he thinks, it might be better just to tell people who he is up front and why. Because yes, the truth is that Ilya has problems. And yes, he is really fucked up on the inside for sure. But if he knows how and why he is fucked up then surely he can chip away slowly at fixing himself. At least enough so he doesn't hurt others like he probably hurt Shane and the Hollanders. So he won't hurt others like his mother hurt him.

In the fall he'd taken an intro to photography course. Before the class it hadn't particularly occurred to him that photography could express anything other than what was literally happening in a given place at a given moment of time. When he'd realized there was more: that one photo could express a very specific feeling about a very specific idea that isn't even related to the literal content of the photo itself, he'd been fascinated.

Photography as a skill, an ability, can't really be reduced to objective statistics and numbers in the same way hockey can. People assume that because they don't understand how to quantify them, artistic expression is easy or all the same: that there's no way to ever know if something is good or if it achieves anything at all. They're wrong, though, he'd realized. And he'd loved realizing something he never ever would've thought about on his own.

In his final portfolio for the course he submitted several sets of photos in pairs. For each, he'd tried to take a mostly unremarkable picture that documented something mildly interesting around campus: a bike rack overflowing; a lecture hall as students filter out after class; a bagel lying face down next to a trash can, cream cheese smeared across the floor. The second photo in the pair he'd tried to make unsettling. Eerie: the same bike rack, still overflowing, but now at an angle wide enough to see the ominous gray clouds overtaking the sky and the rush of students running to get their bikes and leave, anxious faces, frowns, crowding at the bikes and the locks before getting caught in the downpour; the same lecture hall now entirely empty, even though the professor stands at the front, still speaking, seemingly blind to her lack of audience; the same bagel but close up now, so the fuzzy graying mold is visible on the splat of cream cheese.

He got a B on the portfolio but he didn't even care. He'd liked the class anyway, just because. He switched his schedule around for spring semester so he could take a film photography

class. It seemed kind of fun, film photography, in a way he'd never considered for himself. Like maybe somewhere deep inside him is the type of person who develops photos in a dark room during his spare time. Who carries a camera around everywhere in an unashamedly pretentious quest to mirror himself in his images of the world, to find something true and real that exists below the surface and can be seen, can be expressed, but only for one moment through his eyes.

MN Sport Magazine, May 2011

Ilya Rozanov is not who you think

I was flabbergasted by the Russian hockey phenom long before our interview, and remain flabbergasted after

Author: Katy Elliot James

You'd be hard-pressed to find a hockey fan without an opinion on Ilya Rozanov. The Russian player first made international headlines in the Canadian junior leagues as a teenager; his stats were phenomenal. He captained the Russian team in the 2008 World Junior Championships and won. In his final 2009 season with CLH's Borealis he scored 68 points. He was an obvious first pick in the 2009 draft; allegedly Boston, desperate for first line talent, had already formulated an entirely new offensive strategy based on Rozanov's play style.

When Rozanov refused to sign Boston's contract and instead announced he was playing for the University of Minnesota, the hockey world was flabbergasted. There was no reason to think he wasn't a generational talent. A prodigy. It seemed absurd he didn't want to take his talent to a professional level as quickly as possible, especially because Rozanov had never necessarily been known for academic achievement.

Rozanov offered very little comment on his decision, and the hockey world was again flabbergasted by how poorly his freshman season with the Gophers went: by February last year, Rozanov had only scored 16 points. Murmurs that he might lose his scholarship made the rounds. Cynical sports commentators who had previously suggested Rozanov's success with Borealis was due primarily to his extraordinary chemistry with former Borealis teammate Shane Hollander (who has just wrapped up a very respectable second season on the Montreal Voyageurs with another intense playoffs run) trotted their sage opinions out once more.

Yet it wasn't the end for Rozanov. His turnaround last season was, in a way we should perhaps begin to expect from him, flabbergasting. After a series of crushing regular-season defeats, Rozanov came to life and the Gophers managed to scrape into the playoffs by the skin of their teeth. He was like a new man, or maybe just his old self again. To the shock of everyone watching- and by this point many people were watching -Rozanov scored 35 points in the playoffs alone and Minnesota nearly snagged a Frozen Four championship title.

This year, his sophomore season, Rozanov continued to dominate NCAA hockey, scoring 72 points and again carrying the Gophers into the Frozen Four, winning the championship and

securing the Hobey Baker Award for himself in the process.

When I meet him at his Dinkytown apartment for our interview he's wearing a billowy button-down shirt in a floral print: maybe a surprising choice for an elite hockey player with the reputation Rozanov has for, frankly, assholery and hyper-masculinity. I ask where it's from. He shrugs and smiles, leaning back toward me and pulling at the collar so I can see the tag. He smells like soap and also maybe roses. "Not sure originally. I thrifted at shop near campus. Silk," he says. It's one of those tags where you know it's at least 20 years old. No brand. His dirty-blond curls are longer than they have been in the past, but they're appropriately styled and the cut, or lack thereof, suits him.

In preparation for this interview I watched as many interviews of Rozanov as I could find. His energy is different, now. Before he was often arrogant. Sarcastic. He projected total confidence, but maybe not comfort. He seems comfortable today.

His apartment is surprisingly cozy, considering it's a dumpy old place with no air conditioning in the middle of the biggest college neighborhood in Minneapolis, and considering he shares it with two other UMN hockey players. The couch is a horrid floral thing that looks nearly identical to one particularly musty, ancient sofa I remember from my childhood. It's probably still rotting in the basement of my grandma's church. "We found it on the side of the road last year on move out day," he says when he sees me looking. Weirdly, it works with the rest of the place, which is decorated fairly thoughtfully and cohesively, considering half the posters on the wall are of female celebrities in bikinis. There's a candle on the coffee table scented like vanilla and sandalwood.

Although Rozanov has historically been reticent when it comes to sharing personal details about his life to the press, he was surprisingly open when I asked him about his life, his family, and his godforsaken, near career-ending freshman season at Minnesota.

"I was fucked up," he says, fiddling with a tiny rip in his jeans. "In a bad place."

"For many years, since the death of my mother when I was 12, I struggled with my mental health. She had depression. I got it from her. Then my father died when I was 17."

Rozanov has never spoken publicly about the death of his parents before. Borealis didn't know, he says, that between his first and second season playing for them his father died, or that his mother was also dead, and neither did the Gophers until this past fall.

He hasn't spoken publicly about his mental health struggles, either. "Growing up, I knew to keep my problems to myself," he says, looking away from me and out the window. "It would have been a burden to my family if I asked for special treatment or for help. I was not raised to believe it was a real illness, despite my mother's suicide."

Last year he sought therapy for help with his depression. It helped almost immediately, he says. "I didn't know how much I needed to talk about how I was feeling until I started doing it. I had never spoken about it before, even with my closest friends."

I ask if that's why his game was so bad last year. "Yes," he says. "That and the vodka," he says. "In Russia, everyone I know drinks. Family, friends. I always drank less than everybody

else because of hockey, so I didn't think it was a problem. Even still it got beyond my control. You saw how I played. So I quit."

I ask if he was ever under the influence during games.

"No," he says, "I was close to being that low, honestly. But no. Hockey is one of the only things that kept me going, but toward the end even that wasn't enough."

In Rozanov's room, which is closet-sized, there are photos stuck all over the wall. He's not featured in most of them: I ask if he's the photographer and his eyes light up. He's taken two photography courses, now, and is enrolled in a film studies course and another photography course next fall.

What looks like a patchwork quilt is draped over his bed. I ask about it. "My friend Dyani made it for me," he says. "She likes to quilt."

I ask if he's feeling better this year than last. "Much better," he says. "For a long time my life felt pointless. Sometimes it still does. But look at what I have," he says, gesturing around at his tiny room: at the pinned-up photos of his friends and the city, the handmade quilt, the rug he bought at a consignment shop. "I am meeting people I wouldn't have met, and my heart is open to them in ways it could not have been. Next month I move into new place: I am living with a friend I met in photography class. There is a closet we will turn into a dark room." He's visibly giddy at the thought.

"For many years I was silent about my pain, and that silence only hurt me more. So now I think it is better just to tell people who I am for real. Because yes, I have problems. My mother is dead. My father is dead. I have no relationship with my brother. That is hard. But I am learning there is more to me than simple achievement."

When I ask what he means, he shows me his transcripts. Last year, he barely maintained a 2.3 GPA: just high enough to keep his scholarship. This year's GPA, however, is sitting at a 3.8: his only non-A grade is a B in his intro to photography course last fall.

I'm confused for a moment: why is he taking all these photography classes if it's his only weak(ish) subject?

"It is something I like and want to be better at without knowing already that I will be the best," he says. "It makes my brain twist to learn about art and history of art and what it is and why and how we do it."

He took other courses that made his "brain twist" this past year: women's studies, indigenous history in the great lakes region.

By "simple achievement," Rozanov means hockey, he explains. He notices my disbelief and clarifies: "when I say I am more than simple achievement I mean I like hockey. I am good at hockey. I achieve at hockey. Is very important to me: maybe the most important, I don't know. But I don't know is the point. And how can I ever know without twisting my brain around some more? There is more to me than achieving."

So yes, he does plan to finish out his four-year degree before playing in the NHL. He hasn't declared a major and he's kind of bashful about it. "Is a little embarrassing to admit when you have no idea what you're doing, really," he says. "I think I will get a degree in photography, maybe, or something related to art history."

The degree isn't about other career prospects: he wants to play hockey. "I am a wildly competitive, ambitious person," he tells me. "I will accomplish everything I am able. I will not rest until I have won some Stanley Cups. It would go against my nature to give up the thing my body was made for."

No. The degree is about long-term personal growth after a crippling breakdown and a lifetime of pursuing athletic perfection. "I am learning how to nourish my spirit and my mind. I am trying to learn what it means to love beyond myself," he says.

And no, he's not nervous about retaliation in the league, even though players who resist the goals of their team, who assert themselves, are not well-liked by owners. "There will be teams that want me," he says, reminding me of the cocky Ilya Rozanov I've seen in interviews past. "I'm too good to blackball."

I show him a clip on YouTube: himself and Shane Hollander two years ago on their high school TV news. The student anchor asks whether they're afraid of what the future holds. Rozanov says "I live in the moment. And the moment was good, and the moment is good. And in the future, the moment will be good."

Hollander translates for him immediately: things are great. No use spoiling that by worrying about what's to come.

When the clip finishes I realize Rozanov is tearing up a little bit. I apologize but he brushes me off: it was an emotionally intense time in his life, he says.

Does he still feel the way he felt in the clip?

He laughs. "I don't know what the fuck I was saying there but it's a lie. I was crazy depressed that whole year. Like, suicidal."

He grimaces after the admission, but he doesn't ask me to cut it from the article. "But I am enjoying the moment right now, for real," he says. "And I do think there will be good moments in the future. And no, I'm not worrying about it because not knowing is the point."

[@kitkat3000.0](#)

Oh my goddddddd... thought I couldn't love Roz any more

❤️27 🔄11

[@AilaMay](#)

@kitkat3000.0 yeah like. the deep emotional reflection?? the thrift?? photography??

❤️ 9 🔄 3

@Sugar.82

@kitkat3000.0 actually tho. did we know he was artsy??? bc how is he SO hot. I honestly thought he was just a cocky jock asshole

❤️ 12 🔄 5

@mnhockeyfan

@Sugar.82 tbh yeah, those of us who have fucked him on his handmade quilt in his sandalwood scented apt knew

❤️ 14 🔄 4

@Sugar.82

@mnhockeyfan ok bitch, no need to brag. some of us live in arkansas.

❤️ 15 🔄 5

=====

@TheGossipher

we all agree that MN Sport Magazine article is fucking weird, right?

❤️ 14 🔄 10

@HockSock22

@TheGossipher Lmao yes?? Like... "It's probably still rotting in the basement of my grandma's church." NO ONE asked about your grandma's musty couch.

❤️ 9 🔄 3

@dontchanov

@TheGossipher "flabbergasted"

❤️ 5 🔄 4

@Jessie92

@TheGossipher LOOK... If Ilya Rozanov leaned toward me smelling like roses and opened up about healing his trauma with art I would also be embarrassing about it

❤️ 22 🔄 6

@KeyKeyKi

@Jessie92

She's not even that embarrassing... it's like one line about how nice he smells & how cute his lil haircut is. That's pertinent info!

❤️ 15 🔄 3

@TheGossipher

@mimimoham

yeah... ur just being a hater atp. mildly thirsty interviewer but WE ALL ARE, BITCH.

❤️ 17 🔄 2

=====

@GeminaWahl

Literally HOW r u ppl focused on anything except the shocking content of this interview??
Has anyone read the fucking article

❤️ 9 🔄 3

@HockeyMan

@GeminaWahl I did & now I realize Roz is a pussy bitch who cries at clips of him and Hollzy

❤️5 🔄1

@HollanovLive

@HockeyMan How are you not crying? They were so good and so pure. Look at them.

❤️7 🔄2

@Jammsie4lyfe

@HollanovLive idk how to break this to u but I went to hs w them & neither was pure. Hollz kind of but he had a gf for a min & I heard he ate hella pussy

❤️8 🔄3

@hellyeahbroski

@HockeyMan yeah... idk about this. They're trying to pussify MEN's sports now. next thing u know he'll be gay and we'll be expected to accept that too

❤️5 🔄1

@HockeyMan

@hellyeahbroski I'm sayingggg. there's a time and a place for this female-type behavior and it's not hockey. focus on the game, not ur feelings

❤️4 🔄0

=====

@RozFan

Holy Lord above... the cover photo...

❤️40 🔄16

@NotUrPuckSlut

@RozFan They're over there complaining about how thirsty the interviewer was and it's like... are u seeing what I'm seeing tho??

❤️ 17 🔄 2

@Boreana17

@RozFan My friend fucked him once... she hasn't been the same since. No other man can compare ig.

❤️ 5 🔄 3

@StellaBelly

@Boreana17 Old news girl... everyone has fucked him. And it was the best every single one of us has had before or since.

❤️ 17 🔄 8

@RozFan

@StellaBelly Wtf I haven't fucked him...

❤️ 3 🔄 3

@StellaBelly

@RozFan Maybe get off stan twitter and go literally anywhere on campus. Like... he's available for sure.

❤️ 34 🔄 13

@StellaBelly

@RozFan and I heard he's not even spreading chlamydia anymore, so 100% go get it girl

❤️ 5 🔄 10

@mimimohan

@StellaBelly "I heard" as if the man didn't PUBLICLY ANNOUNCE IT the moment he was clap-free 😂😂

❤️ 10 🔄 6

@Soccer81Lover

Are we all just going to ignore that Roz has a tragic backstory?? And bravely spoke on his mental health? #stigma

❤️ 38 🔄 10

@NotUrPuckSlut

@Soccer81Lover I don't think we're ignoring it so much as we are riding a wave of horniness

❤️ 3 🔄 2

@MeyerHam

@Soccer81Lover ur right... this was a crazy vulnerable interview & ppl won't stfu about his abs in the pic

❤️ 19 🔄 4

@kitchmeunderthe

@MeyerHam not just the abs: the floral top and the roses and the emotional vulnerability. the whole thing is crafted to seduce i swear tg

❤️ 4 🔄 2

@GopherGold

@MeyerHam Yeah like I always thought he was a prick but this makes him seem human. Kinda rooting for him now

❤️6 🔄2

@HockeyMomBb

Rozanov was a roll model for my three boys!!
Not anymore. Glorifying party culture.

❤️2 🔄0

@KoalaStick

@HockeyMomBb bitch stfu. literally can u read

❤️25 🔄7

Fuck. His phone is blowing up.

Ilya hadn't thought it would be this big of a deal. It was a Minnesota sports mag, not fucking Sports Illustrated: how was he supposed to know it would blow up online? He hits the end button on Jordy's call.

Someone else starts calling immediately.

It's Shane Hollander.

Fuck.

He stares at it for a moment, anxiety swelling in his gut, a realization setting in. What had his professor said about attention-seeking behaviors, in that one lecture last year? Dammit.

He answers.

It's Shane. Obviously. "What the fuck, Rozanov?"

Chapter 4: '11: Shane

Chapter Summary

In which a cascading, escalating series of run-on sentences explains how deeply deeply horny Shane is for over 10k words.

Spring 2011

Shane calls the moment he finishes reading the article. Doesn't even rehearse what he's going to say, too caught up in the urgency and the shock of it all.

"What the fuck, Rozanov?"

It isn't exactly how Shane had imagined their first actual conversation in two years would start, but it's accurate to his feelings, at least.

There's a pause. The voice on the other end is hesitant when it comes, staticky, through the speaker. "Shane."

Fuck. Shane wants to cry. Might cry, actually, tears pricking up unbidden. It's crazy how immediate it is: he hasn't really let himself cry in two years. Not since Roz left for good and Shane allowed himself one devastated night in the fetal position beneath every blanket he owned, sobbing and sobbing into his pillow, mourning everything they would never have again and could never have had in the first place.

He'd accepted the loss, after that. Had shoved all of it deep into a tight-lidded box with the rest of his wild grasping barbaric feelings and wants, had shoved that box inside another box with a lock and had shoved all of that to the furthest forgotten reaches of his mind, behind a closed door covered in warning signs: DANGER, DO NOT DISTURB, knowing the forbidden contents would never disappear entirely but hoping once again that if he didn't fuel the fantasies they wouldn't grow any further.

This is exactly why he hadn't texted, once Roz left for good. Because he can't handle it. Shane. *Shane*?? Jesus fuck. Fuck. Shane has hardly even permitted himself to think of Roz by his first name, let alone called him that to his face. It has always been too much. Beyond his capacity.

Ilya.

It's soft, revealing, like a sliver of pale underbelly. As if something hidden and precious and fragile has been cracked open, exposed, quietly waiting to bloom into the fresh light. Not like

sharp-edged Rozanov or blunt, unassailable Roz.

He can't say it, still. He doesn't know what's stopping him, he just can't. He can't.

"Yeah," Shane says instead, a familiar self-loathing rising up inside him. "Hey."

There's no response, so Shane says it again: "what the fuck, Rozanov?"

He feels bad immediately. Shane, Rozanov had said. *Shane*. Everyone calls Shane by his first name, sometimes, except for Rozanov. Roz.

Ilya.

Fuck.

God fucking dammit.

It's impossible. He can't do it.

And what explanation does Shane even want right now, anyway? He doesn't exactly like talking about his problems either, and all things considered, not telling him and his parents about the deaths or the depression or the whatever else was, although a deeply emotionally stunted choice to make, not actually that bad. Kind of reasonable, even. Like, Shane probably wouldn't have done any different. And now, Ilya's voice in his ear: "I'm sorry."

Fuck.

The tears are spilling over, now, tracking wet and hot-cold down his cheeks.

"Stop," Shane says. "Don't apologize, please."

There's a pause. "Shane," Ilya says. His voice breaks when he says it, the tiniest little bit. The room spins. Fuck.

It had been foolishness to imagine talking to Ilya- Roz- again could ever be normal or okay or healthy. But if Shane is honest with himself, it's not like he'd imagined anything normal or okay or healthy on the many nights he's laid awake over the past two years wondering how much worse it possibly could've been for him if he'd let Roz do it, if he'd just given in and gotten fucked how he wanted, how Roz wanted: hadn't really imagined anything other than hearing Roz's voice again or seeing his face or feeling him pressed all down his back so heavy and warm and strong.

And it's not like he'd thought much at all about how fucked this interaction would inevitably be before he called. The article. Jesus. He'd had no choice. Couldn't pretend everything with Roz was just some throbbing adolescent heartbeat of a moment from the past to be disremembered anymore. Had to apologize.

But for some reason Roz is the one apologizing. To Shane. As if Shane hadn't failed him entirely that whole second year. As if everyone: Shane's parents, the team, school staff, hadn't failed him entirely.

Because Ilya's father died that first summer apart, while Shane was at home trying to like Maddie more than he did, trying pointlessly to fill the empty space Ilya had carved out in his life. And then that whole year afterward Ilya was falling silently apart, unable to voice his thoughts or fears or struggles or griefs to anyone, forced to beat back all that darkness and pain alone, chasing shallow ecstasy to keep himself safe from despair.

Shane had known something was wrong, and what did he do about it? Basically nothing, except take advantage of Ilya's vulnerable state in order to suck his cock. He'd exploited his grief, basically. Had wanted so desperately to feel and taste and let himself go, needed so badly to be needed, that instead of actually checking if Ilya was okay or even if he wanted it, Shane had used him. Had leapt on the first opportunity to do it, pretty much. He'd fucking reveled in it that whole spring: in giving in, humiliating and debasing and degrading himself, so fucking selfish, loving how bad Ilya needed him, knowing all the while he wasn't right in the head, and as it turns out Ilya's parents were dead and are dead and he was suicidally depressed the whole time. Fuck. Shane is a fuck-up.

Shane has been silent for too long. He wants to say it back but he can't. Doesn't deserve it. Ilya. Ilya Ilya Ilya. "Come to the cottage," he says instead, free falling into whatever this is. He has no idea what is happening. He'd been making a protein shake and reading his texts when Hayden sent the article. The shake is unblended, powder clumping up in the milk in a way it probably won't recover from even after Shane finishes blending it. "This summer. Come back. My parents aren't mad. They love you."

More silence. Shane remembers how Ilya's voice had broken when he said his name. Shane. *Shane.*

"Please," Shane says. "For like. A week. We can play bananagrams and my dad can tell you about the two contractors bidding to resurface the driveway at my parents' house in Ottawa." His parents' house in Ottawa. As if it hadn't been his and Ilya's house too, for awhile. He closes his eyes. "They love you," he says. It's true but saying it makes him feel weak, sick, nauseated with something he can't quite identify. "They want to see you."

More silence.

"Please," Shane says. "Come for a week."

"Maybe," comes Ilya's voice. It's quiet. Fuck.

He can't. Shane can't. "Please," he says again, a fresh wave of tears spilling over and down his cheeks. He thinks he keeps them out of his voice, at least.

"I was unforgivably rude to them," Ilya says. "Your parents."

"No," Shane says. "Stop. They love you still."

Ilya's voice cracks on it again: "Shane."

"I miss you. I want to see you. Please come."

Summer 2011

After Ilya calls David and Yuna and they extend the same invitation, and after they've all reunited with tight tearful hugs at the airport and again at the cottage and after Shane's parents have shed more tears and hugged and kissed Ilya on the cheek and rejected all his apologies and hugged him some more and told him they're always, always on his side and that they love him and have missed him and are so glad he's here again finally, and after they've eaten dinner and watched the sunset and played cards-- "It will be so nice to have four people again," David said before Ilya arrived, "so we can play euchre," --and after Shane's parents have gone to bed and he and Ilya are sitting outside by the fire pit in silence, just looking at one another like they're starved for it, eyes running all up and down each other in the firelight, drinking each other in from the moment Shane's parents walked away and left them here alone for the first time in years, Shane tries to make things right.

"I fucked it up," he says. "Back then. I should've pushed you harder and I'm sorry."

Ilya inhales. "No-" he starts to say. Shane cuts him off.

"I didn't ask how you were, not really, and I took advantage."

"No-" Ilya says again.

"I should've made you talk."

"No. I wasn't going to talk. Not your fault." Ilya's voice is rough and his hands flex where they rest on the arms of his folding camp chair. He crosses a leg and then uncrosses it. "I am the one who is sorry."

Fuck. This conversation sort of feels like hurtling into the sun. Shane supposes it's his turn, now, to say it. "No."

"Yes. You did everything for me, Shane," Ilya says. He looks away, suddenly, hiding his face from the light. "Everything."

Shane makes an aborted noise. It's too much, all of it. Shane. *Shane*. But no. It's not that big a deal. Everyone calls him Shane. Everyone.

"And I treated you like shit," Ilya continues. He's still turned away, talking into the darkness, shoulders tight. Shane wants to grab his face and tilt it back toward him. Wants to sit in his lap and look into his eyes and kiss his brows and his cheeks and tell him that's not true and oh, Ilya's still talking: "you were so good I couldn't believe it." And fuck. It's like Shane is plunging through a trap door. He'd been good. So good Ilya couldn't believe it. Ilya keeps going: "So fucking good to me. For me." Shane can feel the extremely important nuances of this conversation beginning to slip from his grasp. Oh god shit fuck. Keep it together. "Better than anyone else. And I made you take care of me. Made you pick up my pieces. Used you. Didn't even thank you. Didn't call or text."

Ilya had protected Shane. Included him. Made him laugh. Given him confidence he still draws on when he's walking into a new room. He'd taken care of Shane in his way, even though he'd been hurting. Yes, he'd been shortsighted and impulsive and selfish. But he hadn't *made* Shane do anything. And Shane liked being used. Had asked for it, actually. Begged. Needed to be needed. And Ilya is saying Shane did a good job. That Shane was better than anyone else. He'd taken care of Ilya. Let Ilya use him. Wanted it. Did good.

Shane wants to touch him. Needs it. Hasn't, really, since the hug at the airport. He can't, though, right now. Not in these stupid chairs, too far away to do anything but look. Not out here in the open air, in view of the house. What if one of his parents gets up, happens to look outside, sees he and Ilya's shapes moving wrong perverted depraved in the flickering firelight?

His breath is coming faster. He remembers Ilya's hot wet tight mouth on him and his own mouth on Ilya, remembers how fucking good it was, how safe, like nothing he's ever felt before or since, fucking dumbstruck, drunk in the gentle blissful haze of it, down on his knees and looking up through his lashes and letting a big hand push at the hinge of his jaw, thumb pressing on his throat, keeping everything nice and calm and simple, reaching up and pulling Ilya's big thick cock out and knowing he'll die if he doesn't suck on it right now.

He wants to fucking crawl. To get on his hands and knees in the grass and dirt and crawl over to Ilya and run his hands up his legs from the ankle to the hip and pull down the waistband of his too-short shorts and-

Fuck.

Rozanov is apologizing. He feels *guilty* for giving in to Shane's desperation. He thinks he was the one using Shane, as if Shane hadn't needed it so fucking bad he thought he might die.

"Fuck, Roz," Shane says, tears rising. Predictable. There's so much he wants to say but it's all fucking crazy. Fuck. Holy shit it's always so fucking intense. And they're talking about *feelings*, now, which has never been a strength of Shane's but he wants to do well. He wants to be so good right now. Wants to give Ilya whatever he needs.

But it's so hard when it's been two years of empty longing, wishing for what he can't have, hoping someday he'll devolve, regress to a hockey robot, forget all his swirling demanding wants and regrets. When all he wants to say is fuck, Roz, I want you to use me right now. Always want you to use and use me. To take and take and take. It's why I couldn't call. It's why we never texted, I thought. Because I'm too desperate for it and too needy and I thought we were on the same page about the futility of it, the agony of trying to maintain contact and stifle our desire for more, always more and more, thought we both knew that if we talked even once I'd throw away everything for one more dirty fucking humiliating time. I'd let you do anything to me. Everything. I'd let you fuck me on national television, if you asked. Whatever you wanted. And it still wouldn't be enough. I'd beg you to destroy me. To pull me entirely apart at the seams until I'm nothing, no one, too far gone to put back together, just scattered shapeless pieces drifting into nowhere. Beg you to ruin me and my reputation and my fucking untouched virgin asshole. I'd be so good for you, do whatever, wherever. Please, he'd say. Please.

But he can't because that's fucking crazy and it's also not what the moment is calling for, he's pretty sure.

It only comes out a little strangled when he says "It was good? What I did for you?" Tell me how good I was for you again, he doesn't say. Just for you. Taking care of you. Tell me I was your perfect sweet boy.

Jesus fuck holy shit. Get it together. There are so many other things to be thinking of and discussing right now. Ilya needs him to be more than this. It wasn't enough, last time. Shane needs to do more. Be more. Say more actual words.

Sucking dick and getting told how good he is should be the last thing on his mind. So fucking selfish. Needy. But all of it is coming out now, two pent up years overflowing from the first box and into the second box, pouring out onto the floor, oozing under the locked door with all its warning signs and dripping, puddling, slick and wet and messy and so fucking hot everywhere, spilling into every single one of Shane's thoughts and memories and hopes and smothering any of the words he could possibly string together right now in mindless rutting desperation. He can't think of anything else. Might not be good for anything else.

Maybe Shane is just a warm hole to be fucked. Maybe it's all he can be. Fuck. Oh god, maybe it's all he wants and Ilya's face is snapping back toward Shane, eyes glinting in the firelight, long body suddenly alert, his big hands gripping at the arms of his chair.

"Good?" Ilya repeats. "Was it good?" and there's an expression on his face Shane can't quite see in the dark but he's levering up and striding long-legged over and he's standing above Shane now, blocking the firelight and fuck, if Shane just reaches up and tugs at his waistband he can show Ilya how good he can be, how good he's been without him, waiting, hasn't sucked any cock since, mouth only fit to take the one perfect big dick he knows is inside Ilya's shorts. He'll do it so gentle. Make it so nice. Will show him how good he deserves it. Make things so safe and warm and effortless. Let him come wherever he likes: deep into Shane's throat or all over his swollen teary-eyed face or anywhere: Shane's ass or chest or cock or abs. Everywhere, even. Wants Ilya to come everywhere all over mark him claim him.

Fuck fuck fuck sweet Jesus fuck and Ilya's hand is in Shane's hair now and he needs it so bad and he might already be whimpering a little and Ilya is pulling his head back so he can look right down at Shane's face and he's saying "so good you saved my fucking life, Shane Hollander. Fucking perfect lovely boy. The best I've ever had."

Everything whites out for a moment and when he comes back into his body Shane can hear himself saying "please please please," and he's arching his head back into Ilya's big tight grip and gasping and he can't stop, can feel the tears dripping down his chin and Ilya is wiping them off as they spill under his jaw, mumbling in Russian and he's so hard, aching with it, and this isn't how he meant for the conversation to go and he wants to be so good, needs to show him again how much he cares, needs to take care of him, should've always been taking care of him, pleasing him, letting him have whatever he wants. "Please please please please," Shane is saying, "please, Ilya, please," and he's being pulled up from the chair and shoved back toward the cottage and he's so hard, can't stop, "please Ilya," he's saying, "please," and Ilya's hand is over his mouth because they're inside now and he has to be so so quiet because

his parents, fuck, his parents are in their room just down the hall, not like in the Ottawa house where they were on the opposite side of the house on an entirely different floor.

He's flooded with memories, suddenly, of all the times he hadn't been quiet enough. That time he'd bit Ilya's neck and made him come so suddenly he collapsed on top of Shane, how good and heavy his body had been, crushing Shane deep into the mattress, how loud Shane was at the hot pressing weight on top of him, how loud Ilya was as he came all up onto Shane's abs. Fuck. He wants to come on Ilya's abs. They're so fucking perfect. Even better than they had been two years ago: he saw the cover photo.

And Ilya is pushing him down, now, onto Shane's bed and it's like he's reading Shane's mind again, like they were never apart because he's on top of him, shoving his wrist into Shane's mouth between his teeth and pushing his head back into the pillow and pressing his whole broad heavy athlete body down onto Shane, so strong, like maybe Shane wouldn't be able to fight him off if he tried, like maybe he has no choice but to lay here and just take it, big wide body keeping him pressed tight to the mattress, forcing him down by the fucking mouth and shoulders and thighs, pushing at his shorts, getting a free hand onto Shane's wet blurting messy cock and lifting up just enough at the hips to make room to jerk him roughly, shoulders pushing heavier into Shane's, thighs pushing his legs open, pressing, crushing, mouth on Shane's neck and it's so good and he can hardly breathe and he's biting at the wrist in his mouth, choked noises trying to escape and getting caught in the spit and drool and snot pooling down the back of his throat, trying to buck up into the hand but he can't because he's immobilized and fuck, everything is tunneling and it's just the rough drag of Ilya's hand on him and the crushing pressure of his body and his wrist in Shane's mouth and he's coming and coming and he can't even move and he comes harder at the thought and Ilya is wiping him down, somehow got a washcloth, and everything is soft and foggy and Shane is whimpering now because did Ilya even come? He wants to make Ilya come. But he's being shushed like a fucking child and Ilya's voice is in his ear: "always, always, always so fucking good," and a hand is running gentle down his chest and maybe more tears are leaking out and Ilya is gone, back to his own room and fuck. What the fuck.

The next day, when they're out in the middle of the lake in the paddle boat, basking in the midday sun, Ilya drops the bomb.

"I don't think I can do it, Shane," he says. For a moment, Shane hardly notices how serious he's being. All day he's been so distracted by Ilya's body: his arms and his thighs and his v-line and his pecs and the bump in his throat when he swallows and the bones of his ankles and his fingers and the beads of water dripping down his back. He's been thinking of getting his mouth back on Ilya's cock. Of maybe letting him do other things. He only really realizes Ilya's spoken when he keeps talking. "I care too much." Oh no. The words mean basically nothing but a foreboding rises up in Shane's chest.

"What?" Shane asks.

"It means too much to me."

"What does?"

Ilya raises an eyebrow and gestures between them. "You do," he says.

Shane is blushing. A big one. Full body. He can tell. Maybe the foreboding feeling is wrong. "You mean a lot to me, too," he says, embarrassed but fuck it. The heat sweeping his body intensifies.

Ilya's brows pinch the tiniest bit, and his mouth twists a little. "Too much," he says again. "Like," he pauses and inhales, like he's steeling himself. "I don't think we can do what we do anymore." He gestures between them again.

Fuck. There's a swooping feeling in Shane's gut. He's too much. Ilya has finally decided it's too much for him to deal with. Shane is too much to deal with.

Ilya's mouth twists even further. He looks upset and his hand lifts up like he wants to touch Shane but he stops himself. He looks away for a moment before turning back. "You and your parents," he says, pausing to think. "You mean very much to me. I can't lose you, Shane."

So why is he doing this? Shane's confusion must show because Ilya keeps talking. "Sex is one thing," he says, "sort of. We could be friends who fuck. I have friends like that." Shane fights off a wave of jealousy. It's none of his business. "But for me, is too much with you. I can't lose you, Shane, please."

"I don't want to lose you, either," Shane says. Isn't that obvious? At this point Shane doesn't even know what sort of offense against Shane's family Ilya would have to commit in order to lose them for good: it's not like David and Yuna will let him go radio silent like they had before: they'd fly to Minnesota to bust his door down if he tried. "I want to take care of you."

Ilya makes a strangled noise and his arm twitches again, like he's trying not to reach out. "Fuck," he says. "Shane."

And if he doesn't want to mess around with Shane anymore then why does he keep saying Shane's name like that? Because Shane is hardening up in his trunks now and he really really shouldn't be, considering he thinks this might be some kind of break up conversation. Not that there's anything to break off, exactly, except potentially an appointment between Ilya's dick and Shane's ass. Fuck. But really, surely Ilya's not trying to end things before Shane even has a chance to get fucked? Because Shane has only just come around fully to the idea and now *Ilya* is the one who doesn't want to?? He doesn't say anything.

Ilya keeps talking. "Listen," he says. "I want you. So bad."

If this is a break up conversation he's doing an extremely poor job executing it. "Is this a break up conversation?" Shane asks.

Ilya blinks. "Break up?"

Fuck. Shane is blushing again, in a bad way. "I mean, not like that, exactly," he says, looking out at the lake and trying to blind himself in the glare of the sun on the waves. Dammit. "I know we aren't, like, anything," and it makes him kind of sick but he knows it's true and they never could be anything, anyway. "Um, but are you trying to end like," he pauses and gestures between them like Ilya had a moment ago. "Our thing?"

Ilya presses his lips together and looks away. He looks back. "Yeah," he says. And fuck. Hasn't Shane hurt enough over this whole thing? But so has Ilya, he remembers. Ilya, who is trying to heal and be well and be a whole human person with hobbies and interests and like, a college degree. Who had quit drinking and quit smoking and is trying to do normal healthy things. He needs to quit Shane, too.

"Oh," Shane says. "Okay. I get it."

Ilya's eyes are darting over his face. "Shane," he says, like he's hoping more words will come.

"No," Shane says. "I get it. It's okay." He'll make himself okay with it. If this is what Ilya needs, Shane will be okay with it. He's toxic. Unhealthy. Their dynamic isn't good. It hurts Ilya. Fuck. And last night he'd made it all about himself again. Had fallen back into himself, demanded Ilya take care of him, been near-unable to walk back to the cottage, leaning so heavy, pleading, stumbling, dragging his feet along and so so hard, had been so lost in the rush and anticipation of having Ilya back home here with him again, touching him again, that he'd forgotten all about how different things are now, how different Ilya is now. He's changed. He's better. Stable. Shane needs to be okay with whatever is good for him. Has to be. But *Shane* wants to be good for him. So fucking bad.

But he's not. And that makes sense. Shane isn't even good for himself.

And so for all the rest of the week, Shane tries. He doesn't let himself touch Ilya, but he tries to do everything, anything he can think of to be better. Healthy. But there's not much he can find that Ilya actually needs. Two years ago there were endless ways Shane could help him. Could anticipate his wants or needs. Because back then Ilya was falling apart. He'd needed someone to take care of him. But now he seems so fine. Okay. Settled into himself. So Shane finds himself doing embarrassing, useless things like finding Ilya a blanket to cover his legs at night while they all sit around the fire, or refilling his water, or bringing a second beach towel down to the dock because he notices Ilya forgot one.

All week, Ilya doesn't make any kind of move to push things beyond sort of normal friendship. They have such a good time, though, falling back into their old jokes and habits but less pressured now, in a way where Shane doesn't feel like he's waiting for Ilya to snap or have some kind of breakdown, and a few times— like when Ilya is splashing goofily at him, tackling him merrily into the lake or when he's flicking a blueberry at Shane over breakfast, cackling as it lands in Shane's egg whites like he's done something diabolical or when they're running a triumphant lap around the yard together after winning at corn hole— Shane realizes he hasn't been so happy maybe ever in his life.

It's crushing, as the week winds down. Soon Ilya will be back in Minnesota doing cool college student things with his artsy friends; sticking his perfect dick in other, less bad-for-him people than Shane; dominating college hockey for a third year and who knows, probably even winning another Frozen Four championship title for UMN. This feeling is familiar: the anticipation of the pain. And the pain of losing Ilya has always lived up to or beyond Shane's expectations.

He doesn't know how long he can keep doing this: experiencing how fucking good it is to have him nearby, in his life, and then saying goodbye again and again and again, feeling it

more and more every time, the devastation of it ripping through him over and over. Fuck. So finally, on their last night at the cottage before Ilya flies back to Minnesota, back out of Shane's life yet again, he finds himself standing, flushed, in his bedroom doorway.

"Ilya," he whispers, closing the door as quietly as he can behind him and walking toward the bed. "Um, I don't want anything, like, sexual, I promise." It's not exactly true, but he's not expecting anything and he's not asking for anything, so it doesn't quite feel like a lie. He'd rehearsed it. "Um, just, I think I'm going to miss you so much, and it sucks, and I'm wondering if I can just lay here for awhile in your bed and we can maybe, like, just cuddle a little bit." This is more embarrassing than anything he's ever asked for, including the time he'd begged Ilya to fuck him and had made confessions he still gets off to regularly.

But Ilya has cuddled Shane before, after sex, and sure, maybe it had sort of been like Shane's reward for doing the sex, but still, his willingness to cuddle at all probably meant he didn't totally hate it. And he's been calling Shane by his first name all week. And he'd said Shane did a good job taking care of him, before, how he needed it back then when he was too unwell to handle himself the normal healthy good way, when he'd needed Shane to distract him instead, when he'd used Shane and let Shane use him and it had been so fucking good.

"Shane," Ilya whispers. "Fuck." and he's lifting his covers and Shane is crawling under them and he's crying a little bit already at Ilya's big arm around him and his legs over between Shane's and the warmth and safety of him pressing all down Shane's back. Is this the last time he'll ever have this?

"Ilya," Shane whispers into the quiet after he's had a moment to rein it all back in, all his swooping unnameable unwanted feelings and urges, to gather some coherency and to breathe a bit slower, moving his hand over top of Ilya's where it rests on Shane's heart. He feels safe here, under the covers all alone together, just him and Ilya, pressed up into Ilya's warm strong chest where no one can see him or them or their fingers or legs tangled up, safe and whole here in the dark in a way he can't, could never be anywhere else: the realization pops like a bubble into his awareness. But even still it surprises him a little, when the rest of the sentence comes out of his mouth: "I think you're my only real friend."

He has Hayden, sort of, probably. Hayden invites him to dinner at his house sometimes. He seems like he probably likes Shane, and Shane likes him too. But Hayden doesn't know him like this. Hasn't seen the frantic confused sick scared desperate deficient tormented mess Shane is on the inside like Ilya has.

Ilya's arm tightens around him and his nose is pressing into Shane's hair behind his ear. Shane can't believe he just admitted that. Fucking hell. There is something so wrong with him in some stupid absurd way. Normally Shane would be trying not to pass out from the terror of having allowed a confession like that to slip. But Ilya's strong arms around him and body pressing up behind him are keeping him calm and still and okay.

"Shane," Ilya says after a moment, breathing faster where he's pressed behind Shane but still so quiet. He says something in Russian, pulling Shane somehow tighter and Shane has no idea what it means but the way he says it makes him feel secure, warm. And then, in English: "You're so fucking good. So perfect, Shane, always. Best I've ever had." And he's pushing at Shane's shoulder and turning him around so they're facing. Shane can't see Ilya's face in the

dark but it doesn't matter because his strong arms are wrapping around Shane's back and pulling him in tight and it's safe here with Ilya, he's okay here, and Shane is hyperventilating a tiny bit under the overwhelm of it, gasping open-mouthed and probably snorting all over Ilya's shoulder but eventually it subsides and everything starts to slow down, back to that warm calm again. Peaceful. "Good," Ilya is saying into his ear, arms so tight around him. "Is okay, baby. You are so good." Baby. Shane is floating.

Ilya pulls him up after a little while, Shane doesn't know how long. "Shane," he says, whispering it so quiet into the still darkness. "Can I kiss you?" And Ilya's forehead is pressing into Shane's and one of his hands rests on Shane's hip now, the other holding Shane's face and they've never done it. They've never even kissed. Shane has thought about it a thousand times. Nearly every time he gets off to thoughts of Ilya he thinks of kissing him.

"Yeah," he says, and Ilya kisses him and it's so gentle and soft for a good long while at first, lips coaxing Shane's slowly open, hand on his face and Shane is trying to relax, trying not to wonder why Ilya is doing this now, why Ilya doesn't want to fuck him but wants to kiss him apparently and Shane is trying not to spiral and to be in the moment, trying to let Ilya's slow careful kisses feel as good as they should, trying to let go a little bit but thank fuck because Ilya's gripping at the back of his head now and licking at his lips and his tongue is pushing deeper so wet and finally thank fuck finally it's not gentle anymore and Shane can let go, can let himself drop a little into that safe warm place inside of him, because of course Ilya knows just how he likes it already, even though it's the first time, always knows how Shane likes it, wants it, and it's so nice to let him move Shane's head around like a doll, a toy, gripping at Shane's jaw like Shane is his to manipulate and he loses himself in it, letting Ilya suck at his tongue and grip at his hair but suddenly Ilya is stopping, pushing up on his elbows over Shane's face.

"Can I do something?" Ilya asks.

Fuck. "Yeah," Shane manages, as if he'd ever say no, familiar rush overtaking him, so hard, and Ilya is hard, too on top of him, big lovely cock searing hot into Shane's belly, strong hand pushing at his jaw, thumb in Shane's mouth and Shane tries to suck on it but Ilya doesn't let him, pulling his jaw wide wide open, pressing at his bottom teeth, running his thumb over Shane's canines and pushing it up into Shane's cheek, fingers gripping at his jaw, keeping it stretched wide. Shane's eyes are rolling back and there's a weak noise trying to escape him, thumb in his cheek hand on his jaw can't hear can't think and Ilya is spitting into his mouth, big wad of saliva dropping onto his tongue and slipping wet toward the back of his throat and Shane can't help but remember how Ilya's cum felt pooling on his tongue, remember devoting everything in him to fighting his reflex to gag or choke or spit it back out, remember refusing to swallow it, nearly blacking out in the effort as Ilya got him off.

Shane tries to get himself back under control. God. Ilya is still hard on top of him, thumb pressing behind Shane's molars and Shane very carefully doesn't swallow. Doesn't do anything except let Ilya's spit drip helplessly down his throat. Soon it will hit a spot far enough down and Shane won't be able to hold it back anymore. But he'll try as long as he can and he's not breathing, hasn't breathed in ages it feels like, the spit's slow trickle to where it doesn't belong the only thing he can feel. "Fuck," Ilya says, thrusting his hips a little bit and it's so nice and Shane lets out a little choked moan around the saliva puddling in his

throat and he swallows it by accident, gasping on the inhale and hating himself, needs more more and Ilya is spitting into his mouth again, still stretching it open so wide with his strong lovely fingers tight on his jaw, other hand wrapping around Shane's neck and he always knows just what Shane wants, better than Shane does, big stringy glob of spit dripping straight down his open throat this time, not even hitting his tongue and Shane refuses to swallow. Lets it pool.

The back of his throat is his entire existence and he's bucking up, knows Ilya can feel that he hasn't swallowed it yet, pushing up harder and harder into the firm strong hand at the base of his throat, needs to cut the wet slippery dripping spit off before he can't help but gulp it all down and fuck, fuck, fuck, oh god, he's not breathing and he's convulsing blind under Ilya's hand but he holds it back and he thinks maybe Ilya helps him hold it back, barely squeezing but just enough, stopping his spit from fully triggering the reflex to swallow and Shane wants to come so fucking bad, can't breathe, can't see, can't moan or whimper or do anything other than stave it off, losing himself in the effort, but then Ilya's spitting into his mouth again and he can't stop tries to moan but it fucking gurgles and he inhales accidentally into his nose and chokes a little and it's like he's drowning, so hard, wants to come so bad somehow hasn't swallowed and Ilya's hand is still wrapped around his throat but gentle now, was never actually anything but gentle, had just let Shane push up into it so shameless, fucking frenzied, and his mouth is in Shane's ear whispering "swallow. Fucking do it," so Shane does, was already anyway, spasming with it, couldn't hold it back anymore and Ilya squeezes his neck as he does, just a quick pulse and everything goes quiet except for this, them, Ilya's tongue back in Shane's mouth and they're kissing again and Shane is moaning into it, lost, humping up desperately as Ilya sucks at his lip and mouths down his jaw and his neck and pushes up his shirt to suck at his nipples and lick up between his pecs and down his abs and he's so hard and he wants to come so bad, pillow shoved over the top of his face, Ilya's hand on top of it, pushing it down over Shane's mouth and nose as Ilya descends, can't breathe, trying desperately not to make any noise, legs kicking out helplessly and Jesus, he barely knows who he is anymore and Ilya is moving back up now, licking up his torso and groping at his pecs and he's by Shane's face again and he's pulling the pillow away and they're kissing, and kissing and kissing and Ilya won't drop his hips back on top of Shane's and he won't let Shane rut up into him, keeps shoving him back down when he tries, won't touch him and Shane is gasping into his mouth, trying so hard to get any kind of friction, and Ilya is just kissing and kissing and kissing him, won't stop, fuck.

And suddenly he's up and off, pushing Shane back onto his side, spooning up behind him again, still hard and Shane lets him do it, still too dazed to protest, hazily surprised. For awhile, could be seconds or minutes or hours, Shane is still too far gone to do or say anything, drifting away with how fucking demented he'd been, how fucking good it felt, thrusting up, trying not to swallow, trying not to breathe as Ilya's wet wet spit choked him. When eventually he gains some awareness of where he is, what's happening, Ilya's hand is on Shane's chest again and his breath is even somehow behind Shane's ear and he's not moving.

"What the fuck?" Shane whispers eventually, everything warm and good, hand coming back up to cover Ilya's over top of his heart.

Ilya is hard too, still, and something about it makes Shane drop a little further into his loopy nothing happiness. So nice here. Ilya runs his hand down Shane's torso and feels at his abs a

for a little while before he takes Shane's hand again over his chest: "thought you didn't want anything sexual?"

"Fuck you," Shane manages, floating, still so hard but okay with it somehow, kind of enjoying it actually: the aching unfulfillment, letting Ilya decide what kind of pleasure he gets, knowing he'll let Shane have what he needs. Deserves. "Asshole."

And it's okay when they just cuddle for awhile and it's nice, and Shane lets himself sink a little deeper into that lovely peaceful happy place, not quite the same place he goes when he lets Ilya really fuck him up, and god he wants to go back there again, misses it, wants to let Ilya do so much, wants to lose himself entirely and know he'll get taken care of, will be okay, but still it's a nice, good, safe place, calm and soft and warm, somewhere he can only really go with Ilya's help, and so for awhile he stops fighting the warm rushing current of it and lets it carry him away instead, lets himself forget about the pain hurtling toward them both.

It's bad, obviously, again. At least this time there's some sort of hope. Shane has a November game in Minnesota. Even if they aren't really anything and even if what Shane wants is bad for Ilya and they can never have it, he can at least see him again, probably.

And as the season kicks back up Shane remembers why he can never ever have it. It will never be okay. His desires and wishes and ridiculous fantasies are childish daydreams he should've left behind years and years ago. He's had so many chances to leave them behind. He's tried so many times. Stupid. Fucking pathetic. Hockey will never let him have this, and hockey is the only thing he loves. It's everything to him; he needs to let this die.

But he can't and he knows it. It just won't. It will never die. It's a curse on his entire existence. It's the one thing that might actually stop him from achieving the only dream he's ever had. So even as his teammates call other players cocksuckers and fags and make it so hard to actually know them or be their friends he just can't bring himself to care. Because it won't die, and he's seeing Ilya in November, and he's going to do anything Ilya wants to do and he'll love it, even if it's just sitting in silence on opposite sides of the room.

Chapter 5: '11-'12: Ilya

Chapter Summary

In which according to wordcounter.net, the most commonly used word in this chapter after variations of Shane/Ilya is "good," closely followed by "fucking." So take from that what you will I guess.

Fall 2011

He can admit it's a little bit his fault, when Shane starts texting him after every game. Because Ilya did start it. And he'd pretty much known what he was doing.

Good job, he'd sent at the start of the season after Shane scored six points in Colorado. Good. That one word launches Shane into the stratosphere every single time. A 100% success rate, and at this point Ilya has years of data informing that statistic.

That said, all Ilya's data was collected live and in person, most of it with Shane's mouth on his cock, so who's to say what kind of reaction Shane may or may not be having from so far away behind a screen? In fact, it's none of Ilya's business. He can't be held responsible.

Plus Shane *had* done a good job. A praiseworthy job. Ilya's not supposed to let his sort-of brother know when he plays well?

Ilya doesn't know if he finds it gross or hot to think of Shane as a brother. He fears elements of both are present when he does.

Patti would say they should talk about it more concretely than they had. She would say there should be clear boundaries, or rules or expectations or whatever. She would say those things, definitely, if he'd actually told her about this new but same probably fucked up thing between him and Shane. But he hadn't.

When he'd told her last May that he was spending a week with the Hollanders over the summer they'd spent a long time talking about expectations and communication and accepting people's love and care. Ilya told her he thought it best he and Shane reunite as friends, without falling back into their whole... thing.

And on a baseline rational intellectual level he does genuinely still believe that. Obviously yes, there are other varying factors such as his dick and how it feels, and also how he himself feels, and how Shane feels, and how Shane's dick feels, and all the everything else impacting his actual in-practice behavior in the situation, which Ilya did know would turn out to be the case beforehand but hadn't really wanted to unpack any further in that particular moment.

He's unpacked so much already, god, and sometimes he just wants a break from all the never-ending self awareness he apparently has to have if he doesn't want to trigger another apocalyptic depressive episode.

And then when he got back from Canada and they debriefed he'd focused mostly on David and Yuna: on the broader family component outside of just him and Shane, on how frightened it made him to have something so wonderful maybe within his grasp, on how to resist his urge to run away from or fight against it.

It was plausible deniability maybe, not telling her. Because really, they're not even doing anything! Ilya only made Shane come once that whole week, once in the entire shirtless sunny laughing week, and that was *it*. Just the one measly little orgasm in a heat-of-the-moment type situation after two years apart that probably no one, not even like, Mother Teresa herself, could have avoided anyway. What was he supposed to do, with a gorgeous heavy lump of a boy-man leaning all over him and begging, begging begging pleading for Ilya to touch, saying "Ilya, Ilya" again and again? So that one doesn't count, for the most part, as far as Ilya is concerned.

So no, he hasn't mentioned the sort of almost sex with Shane or hinted at having any kind of ongoing desire for it, for Shane at all, as if it's something so far in the past for them both, some sort of silly childish fling, that it just... organically never came up all week long somehow. Or maybe if it did the conversation was so reasonable and rational and matter-of-fact that it wasn't even worth bringing up to her after. As if he's let it go entirely. Dust in the wind.

And actually, it's so fucked up of her not to have called him out on that obvious, massive whopper-by-omission, considering how much time they've spent discussing Shane Hollander and Ilya's extremely sexual obsession with him in their sessions over the course of the past year and a half. Like. What is he paying her for if not to know there was literally no conceivable outcome to Ilya's spending a week in the same geographic vicinity as Shane other than some kind of weird fucked up sex thing? But whatever, he guesses. He'll have to bitch her out about it whenever the whole situation inevitably explodes in his and Shane's faces and he finally has to confess in order to get over the trauma of it all.

They're not there yet, though, situation mostly unexploded thus far, so fuck it. He hasn't allowed himself to make a stupid choice in so long. He's been so focused on like, healing and growth and being good at hockey while also being good at school, and god. It's Shane. If there's anyone he should be allowed to make a stupid choice about it's Shane.

He also hasn't mentioned it because honestly, he'd demonstrated a hell of a lot of personal growth and maturity when he cut off sex with Shane, and even more impressively he'd managed to do it on his first full day at the cottage, before he'd even let Shane suck him off at all, not even one time (which had been really fucking stupid, actually, he realized later that same day). And he followed through almost entirely, aside from the few deranged moments he spent choking Shane out and spitting into his mouth, but he'd only done that after successfully holding off for almost the whole long week, even as he'd been forced every single day to watch the smooth, taut skin on Shane's shoulders and chest and back brown up

under the sun, been forced to stare at his thick thighs flexing under his trunks and to think about scraping his teeth down the soft skin on the inside.

Like okay so what if in the face of all that Ilya spent a minute or two spitting down Shane's throat a little bit. God forbid a virile young man in his sexual and physical prime reward himself with a moment of self care after a full week of abstinence: a full fucking week of abstinence in the face of great, nearly insurmountable odds. Plus, neither of them came so it doesn't count, doesn't even count as sexual if nobody comes, according to Ilya's personal definition of sexual, which he'd made up, coincidentally, at the exact moment he decided to kiss Shane and spit in his mouth after having told him they couldn't do any more sex stuff less than a week prior.

But he's never ever in his entire life held off like that with someone he actively wanted and who he knew wanted him back just as bad except for with Shane, only for Shane, and so until whatever inevitable catastrophic thing happens surely he can just let himself have a little tiny something. A taste. A nibble.

And so now, after nearly every game, a text from Shane:

Did you see that?

-

Good?

-

Did you like it?

Did you like it had been particularly crazy making: it was a hockey game. Shane's hockey game. Of course Ilya liked it. But the implication: that Shane's own opinion of his performance in a game he had just won, playing the sport at which he's probably the single best player in the world, is contingent upon Ilya's enjoyment as a spectator, is dizzying.

Like everything Shane achieves in his whole life is just for Ilya.

So maybe he has to think before he replies, about how to ride the line, how to keep it within some sort of range of plausible acceptability. But god. He can't help it. Just a taste.

Did you see that?

Always always see you

so so good ~~every fucking time~~

I love watching you

-

Good?

yes

so so so so very

~~trick shot was special for me to see, yes?~~

New trick shot very impressive

-

Did you like it?

of course

Did such a good job

liked it so so much ~~baby~~

~~highlight of my week to see you~~

He wants to send all kinds of things: filthy dirty fucked up unrepeatable things and sappy love-drunk things and regular mundane things but he mostly holds it back, keeps it within the realm of okay, sort of, although he's maybe veering too far into how much he loves it, loves to watch, loves to praise because there's this molten irrepressible hope in his chest after basically fucking *nothing* happening between them, and with fucking *nowhere* for whatever the nothing thing happening between them is to even go. It's actually so unreasonable, and so if he says good a few times then sue him, honestly. Christ. It's not his fault such a common word is so debilitating for Shane. It's a free country and Ilya can use whichever adjectives he wants.

Plus, English isn't even his first language. In fact, of *course* he has a limited vocabulary. It's not his fault and it might actually be some rare form of xenophobic bigotry for anyone anywhere to expect anything from Ilya that isn't telling Shane Hollander how fucking good he is at every single opportunity. It's his duty. His obligation. He is literally the only one who can do it and he really really shouldn't be, and Shane should branch out and maybe flash his beautiful wide brown eyes around and forge some weird crazy intense telepathic bond with some other random person or something, because Ilya has hardly even seen or spoken to him for years and Shane needs more than that, more and better than Ilya can offer, but the fact remains that Ilya knows he's the only one. Which means giving Shane what he might not even be aware he's asking for is a precious gift Ilya has been given for some reason, maybe by accident, but it's his now anyway and he can't fucking lose it or break it.

But to keep things equal, normalish, plausibly acceptable between them Ilya decides to do it too. If Shane can overtly beg for praise several times a week then Ilya can do the same. He sends it after what he knows was a fucking excellent game to watch:

Good?

Fuck. Yes, Ilya. You're so good.

And holy shit. Has Ilya actually been full-on sexting Shane for the past two weeks, just by telling him how good he's doing? How much Ilya likes to watch him? Because this isn't a sext but wow. It feels like a fucking sext. So of course he keeps doing it, and they go back and forth like that all fall, and it gets more and more overt, more and more feverish and he's so absorbed by it, reading and re-reading their texts, euphoric when Shane replies.

Was it good?

Yes. loved it

Couldn't look away

never fucking can

I love when you watch.

Fuck baby

Always watch

But they talk about normal game stuff, too, in between whatever other thinly-veiled thing is happening. Ilya is so absorbed in watching Shane, keeping up with other players and teams and games, immersed entirely in hockey but not his own, Shane's, and Shane's potential hockey and where there might be some weakness or a flaw for Shane or Montreal to exploit, and Shane is doing the same he knows, because they're talking all the time, Ilya asking Shane what he thinks about another team's defense and Shane ready with a smart, thoughtful, well-developed analysis, or Shane requesting legitimate critique after he's done begging Ilya for praise. Ilya doesn't have time for anything else, suddenly, outside of class and hockey.

They both have a game on the night Shane plays in Minneapolis. They both lose. Shane comes to Ilya's apartment, after: Ilya kicked Dyani out so it's just the two of them.

He gives Shane the grand tour, feeling inexplicably nervous, like he has something to prove: the open-shelved kitchen teetering with Goodwill plates and mugs and pans; the living room layered with photos sticky-tacked to the plaster walls, along with some of Dyani's girlfriend Kat's weird sketches and some random other bullshit Dyani found in a bin of discarded postcards at an antique store, quilts heaped on Ilya's hideous floral street couch; the bathroom with its clustered bottles and brushes and sprays; Ilya's relatively neat bedroom, clean sheets, consignment store rug, heavy streetside vanity he'd tried and failed to haul up to the third floor himself before pitifully asking Dyani to help him lug it up the stairs. As he gestures around, trying to see his apartment through Shane's eyes, he realizes this messy little dump, never a consistent temperature and cluttered with previously-owned furniture, is probably a nightmare for him. Fuck. Ilya should've offered to go to the hotel.

But when he looks at Shane standing in the middle of his bedroom he doesn't look uncomfortable. He's smiling, actually, a smile Ilya has never seen Shane direct toward anyone but him. "I'm really happy for you," Shane says.

Russians don't blush, but if they did Ilya would be doing it right now. "I'm glad you're here," he says.

And Shane is blushing now, too, and Ilya steps up close to him and puts his hands around Shane's waist, hugging him like he's been wanting to. Shane hugs him back, tight, pushing his face just below Ilya's ear where his neck meets his jaw. Ilya palms the back of his head and Shane snuffles, damp into his neck.

God.

They hug for a long time and it's Shane who eventually pulls back from it. Ilya takes Shane's hands, though, and rubs at the backs of them with his thumbs. Shane makes a serious effort to look him in the eyes. "How are you, Ilya?," he asks. It's hard for him and Ilya can tell. He squeezes Shane's hands with his own. Such a sweet, anxious little thing. Shane should never ever need to be scared like this when he's here with Ilya.

And he's asking how Ilya is. He's trying to show that he cares. Trying to be there for him. He's looking Ilya in the eyes and holding his hands and calling him by his name with the overhead light on.

Fuck, Ilya wants to say. I think I fucking love you. Like I'm in love with you. Like, you might be the love of my life. Because I don't think there's anyone better than you. But instead he says "So good, now." He's staring at Shane's lips and he's always loved them, and he really really should've made some concrete decisions, drawn some lines in the sand for himself before Shane got here but he hadn't, probably because he didn't want to fail himself by setting a bar he didn't particularly care to meet. His hand is running up Shane's neck now, cupping at his jaw and Shane's eyes are fluttering shut, pliant already in Ilya's hands and they're kissing.

It's so good again, and Shane is pushier this time, running his hands all over Ilya's body and humming into his mouth, licking into it and shoving a little at his chest, pushing him toward the bed.

And after they've made out for a nice long while in Ilya's bed, far longer than he's kissed anyone in years without doing anything else, he decides he's tired of slapping Shane's greedy hands away from the hem of his shirt and the waist of his joggers. He grips one of Shane's wrists and pushes it up above his head. Shane pretends halfheartedly to resist, whimpering pathetically and it's nice. Ilya has missed that one. He finds the other wrist and pushes it up above Shane's head too. There is zero effort on Shane's part to fight it this time and when Ilya pins both wrists together Shane's whole body relaxes beneath him, loses all resistance, air rushing out of his lungs. Ilya looks down and Shane is visibly ecstatic, blissed out and dreamy, smiling, eyes unfocused already. He's so hard beneath Ilya. Always is.

"Yes," he says, the word rolling out. "Thank you, Ilya."

Fucking hell. Ilya kisses him a little more in response. After a little while Shane is hardly kissing him back, just letting out little sweet noises, mouth open. Ilya pushes himself up a little bit.

"Shane," he says. No response.

"Baby."

"Moya lyubov'."

He pushes his hips back down a little bit on top of Shane, lines up their cocks through their joggers to make it nice, easy, and he thrusts just a little bit. He's rewarded with the sweetest, whimperiest little sound, so he does it some more. Shane makes that pretty little helpless murmur again, something that might be words gone soft and liquid, arms flexing a little bit where Ilya's holding them. So he keeps doing it, working into a little bit of a rhythm and fuck it's so good, he could come right now just from dry humping. But the third time he realizes Shane is actually trying to say something, mumbling it again uselessly, sloppily, open-mouthed into his own arm with his hands pinned above his head, docile under Ilya's weight, so fucking hard, fuck, soft eyes trying to blink open up at him and oh.

Okay.

He wants Ilya to help him.

So Ilya presses his thumb at the hinge of Shane's jaw until he opens his mouth, so willing always, and Ilya shoves his fingers into it, gripping at Shane's teeth and cheek and jaw, pulling him by the mouth, forcing Shane to look at him. He squeezes harder for a moment: too much. Shane's conscious brain had maybe come back online for a moment at the shock of Ilya's fingers but his eyes roll back the second Ilya pushes harder into Shane's gums behind his teeth, grips tighter at his jaw.

Ilya is overtaken, suddenly, by a vision of himself slapping Shane across his pink pink face. Getting his attention. Making sure he knows Ilya can be in charge of him for awhile, can take responsibility for him. But that means Shane needs to listen. Needs to do what Ilya tells him. And he won't ever need to worry about anything ever ever again. He can let Ilya handle him forever. Won't need to fret or stress or even think at all if he doesn't want to. Can let Ilya keep him still and soft and content. And Ilya will let Shane suckle on his cock every day so sweet, keep him satiated. He'll help Shane feel good all the time: help him make good choices, help him come so pretty so wet, take as much of the burden as Shane wants to relinquish.

They need to talk about this.

Fuck. Stupid therapy is infecting him again. This was supposed to be his therapy-free night.

But he can't just keep doing whatever he wants to do without talking to Shane about at least some of it. Because there's a lot he wants to do. Stuff he should ask permission for, even if he's pretty confident Shane will be into it: Shane's always, always into it. But also because he's trying not to do sex stuff anymore. Not with Shane at least.

Not that he particularly wants it with anybody else right now. Sure: obviously he's been hooking up, but that's more of a maintenance type thing than it is anything else: like an oil change. You don't get an oil change for fun, it's just a thing you have to do to keep the engine running smoothly. Kind of a hassle, actually. Especially if it turns out said engine was actually somehow made to run best on some other totally different uber-specific type of oil that is entirely out of reach at most moments, and said engine has therefore been burning all

the other normal types of oil at crazy inefficient rates, like unreasonable rates actually, because it really only can run properly on this other one certain oil that's only available in little tiny quantities occasionally like one or two days a year.

Ilya really, really wants it with Shane. Wants *something* with Shane that he's never wanted with anybody else. And maybe there's some way they can make this work within Ilya's self-defined nonsexual parameters. Keep it friendly, almost. Platonic. Like, maybe Ilya can help Shane, because clearly Shane has unmet needs (and frankly, a lot of them), in a friends way. God, it's such a bad idea. But also it kind of worked for them before, sort of. Fuck. He knows this is the exact reason he hasn't said anything to Patti. He wants it again so bad. Might blow up his life to have it again. Just a little bit. A nibble. He won't even come. A taste. Not sexual if Ilya doesn't come. Fucking Christ. Regardless, they need to reach some level of agreeance.

But can they even talk about this, really? Ilya is genuinely frightened by the perversities that might tumble out of his mouth if he opens it. His imaginings, the primitive brutal animal desires Shane unlocked somewhere deep deep inside him years ago, have only bloomed wide and fresh and raw since he's seen Shane again.

And Shane's here now, a dream, a fantasy, drooling around Ilya's hand in his mouth and laying hard in Ilya's bed, so maybe they can figure all the rest of it out later.

It's fine if he makes Shane come a little bit, he decides, maybe makes him a little slow in the process, helps him to chill the fuck out for a minute or two because that would just be Ilya reciprocating the many selfless favors Shane has done for him in the past and would certainly do for him again, should the need arise. Shane took care of him when he needed it. Sucked his cock so fucking good right when he needed it. Fucking amazing, life-changing head. So Ilya can take care of Shane, now. Make him soft and calm. Make him come all over himself so fast, eager and embarrassed. Fuck. It's not sexual if it's purely reciprocation. It's just making things even in that case, according to an addendum Ilya is adding right now to his personal definition of sexual, coincidentally in the exact same moment he decides to make Shane come in his pants.

He'll do it twice. Fast the first time, get him surprised and cooperative and a little humiliated, so Ilya can take his time on the second one, really play with him, help him get to some nice new places, hold him safe while he loses track of himself. It's only fair; he really should pay Shane back if he gets the opportunity. Which he's getting right now, he thinks. And that's just friendship! Ilya wouldn't be a very good friend if he withheld assistance he knows he can provide.

And he's the only one who *can* provide it. It's not right but it's the truth: there's no way Shane is letting anybody else see him like this, so wanton, red and wet and desperate and trusting and open. "You're my only real friend," he'd said on that last night at the cottage. Ilya knows what that meant. He's the only one who gets to see this, to see Shane behind the mask. Fuck, Ilya wants him so bad. How did he end up here? With such a perfect wanting boy in his bed, waiting for whatever Ilya decides to give him. This is probably a terrible idea.

"Are you ready, baby?" Ilya asks, decision made, pretty sure it won't take much effort to get Shane there, watching a white patch appear under his thumb where it grips at Shane's red little face. "To say your words nice and clear so I can understand you? Need to show me your

pretty face when you say them, so they don't get lost." He helps Shane nod his head up and down a little with the hand in his mouth, feels his cock twitch below him at it and god he feels high, can't believe this is happening, a fucking dream come to life. "And when you say your words I'll help you come, yes? Let you get yourself all wet and messy in your pants."

Shane whimpers. Ilya lets go of his face to let him speak and he looks away immediately, blushing hot and red all up his cheeks and down his neck below his shirt. And he's panting, twisting his head back and forth like there's anywhere else for him to go, so hard beneath Ilya, pulling weakly where Ilya is pinning his wrists, frantic everywhere except his lower body, which he's holding so still Ilya would bet everything Shane is moments away from coming helplessly into his underwear.

Ilya forces Shane's chin back toward him. Another image of slapping him, hard, watching his eyes roll back with the force of it as he lays so sweet so desperate, trapped beneath Ilya's weight on the bed. Fuck. He pushes his fingers deep into Shane's mouth again instead, squeezing around his jaw and his teeth, lifting up a little bit onto his knees to take some of the pressure off of Shane's poor hard cock. Shane gasps wetly. He bucks and his legs try to kick out behind Ilya, flailing, heels sliding down the mattress, nowhere to go. "No," Ilya says, shaking Shane's head back and forth a little bit with the hand in his mouth, pressing his fingers into his teeth, drool leaking out around them. "Not what I told you to do. Use your fucking words, Shane." He takes his hand out, hears the crisp slap of it hitting Shane's cheek in his mind, resists the urge to do it, smooths his palm gentle down the side of his face instead, thumb pressing at the pulse point below his chin.

Shane is crying, now, wet all over his pretty face, lashes clumping together. Fuck. Ilya fucking loves it when Shane cries during sex. And he does it all the time. Every time, pretty much. And it's fucking amazing. Not that they're having sex right now. Because they're not. This isn't sexual at all. Although he suspects Shane is going to come at any moment, so pretty in his pants. It will be glorious to watch his face: the fear and humiliation of it, screwing his eyes shut, fighting his orgasm until he can't anymore and then the shock, the euphoria, the shame as he falls off the edge.

But it turns out Ilya is wrong because finally Shane is choking some actual words out, looking at a point somewhere above Ilya's eyebrows but close enough to making eye contact that Ilya will allow it. For now.

"Donwanncomewiddouyougain," Shane manages, staring fixedly at that one point above Ilya's brow, a fresh wave of red blossoming across his lovely face. Ilya doesn't even have to make him repeat it because he does it all on his own, so fucking good all the time, breathing in and out for a second before he says it again, slower, quiet and embarrassed. "Don't wanna come without you again." God. Ilya might come right now. He lets go of Shane's chin and immediately he turns away, letting out little quiet panting gasps into his own bicep.

Ilya lifts up further onto his knees, leaning heavier onto the arm he's using to pin Shane's wrists above his head. There goes his plan for the next thirty seconds.

"Fuck," he says. "Baby."

Shane moans.

"You are so close, yes?"

Another moan, breathing open-mouthed and wet.

"Don't want to come if I don't come?"

Shane shakes his head back and forth, stupidly panicked with it. "No," he's saying, trying not to buck up, Ilya can feel him trying to hold it back, fuck. "Nonono. Don't make me."

"Don't want me to make you feel so good?"

"Nonono, please no. Nodbbymyself, pleasedon'tmakeme."

God. Fuck. "It's okay, moya lyubov'," he says, leaning down to press his forehead into Shane's, nuzzling at his nose a little. "I won't make you."

But fuck, what if he did? Could make him come so helpless and ashamed into Ilya's mouth. Could make him spill all messy inside his briefs. Wouldn't take much: there's no fight in Shane right now. He's given himself up to whatever Ilya wants to do with him. If Ilya wants to make him come, Shane will come, and he'll cry so pretty about it and protest and probably harden right up again so fast, easy eager boy.

Another time, maybe. Wait no. No more times. Shane might be agreeing to Ilya's nonsexual sort-of-unspoken terms right now, without even the addendum. So fucking perfect, Christ. It's unreal. Like. Does Shane actually wish Ilya didn't get him off, at the cottage on that first night? Is that what he's so frantic about right now? Because he'd fucking *begged* for it. Begged and begged. "Please please please, Ilya, please." But oh. Obviously. Shane hadn't been begging to come. He'd been begging to make Ilya come. Ilya lets out a harsh breath. Fuck. How is it this fucking good, every single time?

Ilya gives Shane a nice kiss, and another one when Shane makes a happy little sound into it, and then a third before he climbs off of him. He pulls Shane into his chest for a minute, letting him breathe, letting him get used to Ilya not being on top of him anymore.

After a few minutes he pushes him up heavy, slow, and guides him into the bathroom. He imagines brushing Shane's teeth for him. Wants to. He's quiet enough right now, would probably let Ilya do it. So soft. Peaceful. Ilya fucking loves him, fuck. Wants to open his pretty pink wet mouth with his thumb and brush his teeth so gentle. Careful. Keep everything so easy and nice, always. Wants to tell him when to spit, guide him over to the sink, help him open his mouth for it. Coo gently and tell him what a good job he's done. Wants to help him rinse. Floss for him, tooth by tooth. Wants to do everything for him. Care for him. Let him be calm and still and soft always. Won't ever have to do it by himself again, if he doesn't want to. Won't ever have to think about it again because Ilya will. Ilya will handle him. He squeezes a pea-sized amount of toothpaste onto Shane's brush for him instead, runs it under the faucet and places it into his hand. Wraps his fingers around it.

"Go on, moya lyubov'," he says. "You can do it." And he does. So good all the time. Ilya tells him so.

And after they've brushed their teeth Ilya helps Shane undress, pulling at the hem of his shirt and manhandling his arms so he can get the sleeves off, helps him pull his joggers down and guides him under the covers. He strips his own shirt and pants off, stepping away from the bed for a second to get the light. Shane makes a sound of protest.

"It's okay, moya lyubov'," he says. He gets into bed and wraps himself around Shane, who relaxes into him. "You are okay," Ilya says, hand over Shane's heart. "It is just us, here."

So they don't really talk about whatever is happening because they both fall asleep like that and Shane's flight is at 6am and when his taxi arrives at Ilya's apartment Ilya is barely even awake enough to walk him to the door. They kiss some more and Ilya pushes him into the wall a little and feels up on his chest and down his abs and gropes at his cock for a second and when he pulls off and looks at Shane's face he looks happy, if bewildered but oh no. A shadow. He's confused, stressed, Ilya is watching it start to play out across his face and fuck, Shane has a flight. He needs to leave and Ilya doesn't have time to make it right. They should've fucking talked.

"Shane," Ilya says, hands on both sides of his waist, unsure what to say. He can't really make any promises. Can't call him my love or say I'm in love with you. Can't say I'm sorry I can't stop myself when we're together and it's confusing and I'm failing you. I want you all the time.

"You're so good. Perfect perfect boy," he says, wants to cry.

The stress on Shane's face lessens, although Ilya can still see it beneath the hopeful trust washing over his features. Fuck.

They need to talk.

Winter 2011

He goes to the Hollanders for Christmas and it's great. Warm and loving and everything he's ever wanted, pretty much.

When Shane shows up in his bedroom doorway on Christmas Eve and Ilya lets him climb into his bed and they cuddle for awhile and then they make out for awhile and Shane has gone nice and sweet and loopy like he always does and Ilya is staving off intense, intrusive ideas about what he'd like to do to him, all the ways he wants to push Shane further and further and turn him back into Ilya's gorgeous pliant trusting little thing, all the fucking crazy depraved things Ilya could do when Shane gets there, he knows he has to try again. A conversation needs to happen.

So eventually he pulls away, pushes Shane back with a hand on his chest.

"Baby," he says. Love, he doesn't say. My love. But then he's saying that, too, anyway: "Moya lyubov'."

Shane makes a protesting noise, pulling at Ilya's hand, trying to get closer.

"Please," Ilya says. "I need you to be here with me right now, all the way. Need you to talk to me."

He lets Shane breathe for a second, absorb it, running his hand down Shane's chest to his side, his hip.

"Tell me when you're ready," he says, and waits.

Eventually, Shane lets out a deep sigh. "Okay," he says. "I'm ready." So good, Christ.

Ilya has tried to figure out how to have this conversation, many times. Every time he's left with no idea what to say. Because what's good for him probably isn't what he wants, and what's good for Shane might not be this, but it might also be this? Shane needs someone to help him relax, sometimes, or he loses his mind. Ilya has seen him lose it before, feral base little creature when he's been so keyed up, pent up for so long, bombarded with compulsions and anxieties and ruminations. Ilya loves how crazy he gets. Loves him. Ilya can help him turn it off. Ilya can make it safe for him to turn it off.

And what Ilya wants is everything. Absolutely everything. And maybe Shane wants that, too? But they can't have it and they both know it, so what's the point in even bringing it up? And if they can't have it all, will it hurt them both even worse if they try to make do with just a little bit instead? Because if they can't survive on the crumbs, they'll both just starve.

"You know I love what we do," Ilya tries.

Shane turns away, dramatically flopping onto his back, bed shaking with the force of it. "Jesus Christ, Ilya," he says. "Is this another breakup conversation?"

Fuck.

"I don't know," Ilya says. "It probably should be."

Shane doesn't say anything, inhaling deep through his nose next to Ilya before exhaling heavily, facing the ceiling.

"But I don't want it to be."

Shane still doesn't say anything.

"Look," Ilya says. "You're so fucking perfect."

"Yes, Ilya," Shane snaps as harshly as he really can at whisper-volume. "I fucking get it. I'm perfect, I'm lovely, I'm such a good fucking boy, but you don't want to fuck me and you don't want me to make you come and you just want to kiss until neither of us can stand it and

launch me somewhere onto another planet and then keep us both fucking desperately hard the entire rest of the night while we full-body cuddle, right?"

When he says it like that it sounds so unreasonable.

"And the worst part is that I'm into it," Shane continues. Which. "You have to know I'm into it." A pause when Ilya doesn't reply, but then: "don't make me say any more about it, Ilya, please."

Something about the way the words come out tight, airless, punched out of Shane's chest, makes Ilya pretty certain Shane wants Ilya to make him say more about it, please.

Suddenly Ilya feels so fucking good, the euphoria he only ever really feels when he's alone with Shane and they're doing whatever this is beginning to course through him. "Oh?" Ilya asks. Waits for it.

Shane is silent for a moment and Ilya knows what's coming, awash in how fucking good it feels to know exactly what's coming, sparks of anticipation everywhere in his body, and then it comes: "please, Ilya. Don't make me say."

Fuck.

It's always so good. Fucking life-changing, brain-altering sex every single fucking time. Not sex.

The other parts of this conversation can wait, Ilya decides. He's going to help Shane express his wants and needs right now. Because it's healthy to express your wants and needs. Ilya knows it's healthy because he is so therapized and so healed. And he's going to spread that valuable knowledge. Going to teach Shane how to fucking say it. Because Shane needs Ilya to help him say his big boy words.

"Baby," Ilya says and Shane fucking keens, breathing so hard on his back next to Ilya. "Can't give you what you want if I don't know what it is."

Shane's breathing is heavy in the dark air between them. Ilya puts a hand on his chest, feels it heaving. "Please," Shane says.

"Want me to make you?"

Shane's chest under Ilya's hand, hot.

"Need help?"

"Please," Shane is saying. "Please no, Ilya. Please."

"Tell me, Shane," Ilya says, climbing on top of him, straddling his waist. Shane pushes up a little under his weight, testing its limits, before relaxing below him. He grabs Shane's wrists and pushes them up, no resistance. God, he's bad at pretending not to want it. Ilya loves him. "Tell me what you're into. Is it that I won't fuck you?"

Shane gasps below him. "Ilya, no," he says, as if the suggestion is offensive. "Not that."

"Oh?" Ilya pretends to ask. "You do want me to fuck you?"

A pause. "You know."

"Not if you don't tell me, I don't."

"Fuck, Ilya, you know." Shane is pretending to try bucking up under him a little.

"Tell me."

"I want you to fuck me," Shane says, arching up, head twisted so far to the side that Ilya can feel Shane's wet breath on his own hand.

Fuck. He'd known it was coming but god he wants it so bad, remembers how Shane's face had looked when he begged for it that time, years ago. It's dark now, in this room, but Ilya wants to make him look like that again.

"Such a good boy," Ilya says and Shane pants. "Tell me more. Is it because I won't let you make me come?"

"Nono, Ilya," Shane says. "Always wanna make you come." The words are slipping out easier, now, faster but a little slurred. Good.

"What are you into, Shane? What are you into about it? Fucking tell me. I know you want to tell me." Ilya wants to see him. See how red he is, how wet his sweet face is. Shane is making incoherent noises and Jesus Christ, Ilya wants to slap him across the face so fucking bad. Wants to make him listen. Help make his brain shut down enough to let the words come out.

It shouldn't be this fucking good every time. It's not fair. It's not right. There has to be some sort of nameless faceless god above who's putting Ilya through this glorious agony but for what possible reason?? No one should have to suffer like this.

He switches tactics, letting go of Shane's wrists and sitting back up. Shane doesn't move his arms from where they rest on either side of his head and fuck, that does something to Ilya but he'll revisit it later. He taps at Shane's hip a little. "Okay, moya lyubov'," he says, cooing. He can be gentle about it instead. "It's okay. You don't need to worry. I will take care of you." And he's pushing up, pulling at Shane between his legs, helping him flip over onto his front. He pulls Shane's arms down from where he's put them up above his head again, so fucking sweet and good, god, and maneuvers them together behind his back instead, laying on top of him, pinning him, pressing his entire body and weight down onto Shane so they're tight together everywhere, so Shane has nowhere to move, nowhere to go. He grips at the back of Shane's head a little, makes sure he's not pressed too deep into the mattress to breathe, lays his own face on top of Shane's so they're cheek to cheek.

"Like this, baby," he whispers. "It's okay. No one can see you here. Just you and me." There's so much he wants to do. Everything. He wants everything.

They're quiet for awhile, breathing in tandem and it's so fucking nice, and god, how is Ilya supposed to not be doing this right now?

"Ilya," Shane says after awhile, mumbling, mouth half-buried in the mattress.

"Yes, moya lyubov'?"

"Thank you."

Ilya might die. How is he this fucking perfect, so fucking perfect, how did Ilya find him, unlock him like this, what has Ilya done to deserve it, how is it always so good? "Always, moya lyubov'," he says. "Want to make you feel good always and safe here, with me."

No response from Shane, totally lax beneath him.

"Do you feel good, baby?" Ilya asks. He's pretty confident but he has to make sure.

A moment of quiet, Shane's breath gone slower beneath Ilya's weight. "So good," he says. "Soso good, Ilya, thank you."

One of these days, Ilya is going to have a surprise orgasm, he just knows it. He can't hold it off forever, not with this type of thing going on. He's only human.

"Are you ready to tell me?" Ilya asks.

Shane exhales. "Yeah," he says, soft and quiet, now.

"So good," Ilya says. "So fucking good for me."

"Love when you make me go all quiet inside," Shane says. "Still feels good even if you don't make me come."

Fuck.

"Feel so embarrassed when you don't get off," Shane says, voice gone even quieter, almost sleepy with it, like the words are just slipping right out. "Feel so fucking desperate, ashamed when I can't hold off, can't stop, need you to make me calm again." Ilya is breathing heavier, now, face resting on Shane's, something glowing inside of him, burning. Shane is still talking. "Need you to keep me still so I don't kneel down and beg you to fuck me on the street in front of the whole world."

Oh god and the words are getting runnier, more slippery, but they're still trickling out. "Like it," Shane is saying. "Like that it's chore for you, taking care of me, not even getting off doing it. Need it so bad I can't stop, need you to help me, make me okay again." The burning glowing feeling is choking Ilya, a little. Rising up in his throat. "I like it when I don't get to come if you don't." Shane pauses, breathes. And then: "like knowing I'll only get it when I deserve it."

So that's what it is. So fucking perfect.

"You always deserve it, baby," Ilya says before he can stop himself. "Always want to make you feel good."

Shane tenses for a second underneath him but relaxes almost immediately: he knows Ilya is taking care of him. Ilya will make sure he's okay. He can say it. "No," Shane says. "Not when I don't earn it." He's so quiet, now, words nearly inaudible. "Wanna make you feel good."

"Moya lyubov'," Ilya says, equally quiet. "You make me feel so fucking good."

Shane whimpers pitifully. "Ilya," he says. "I want it. Want to be good enough for it again. For you. To please you."

"Baby," he says. "Fuck. You are always good enough."

Shane tries to shake his head beneath Ilya's cheek. "I'm bad for you, Ilya," Shane whispers. "You like it but I'm too much. I'm too fucked up and I make you backslide."

Of course. Of fucking course this is where Shane's mind went when Ilya said they couldn't have sex anymore. This whole time he's been thinking it's because there's something wrong about him. Obviously. Stupid of Ilya not to have realized until now. And of course his lovely perfect fucked up Shane has been getting off on it. That's Shane's whole thing. Ilya knows this. It's half the reason they're not fucking. Because Ilya wants him to hate himself *less*, not more. Stupid.

And Shane's not actually wrong, is the thing. But it's not that *Shane* is too much. It's that Ilya's *feelings about Shane* are too much to fit inside of the world in which they both exist. And yes, unfortunately the futility of those enormous feelings makes Ilya regress a little tiny bit into a less rational, less emotionally mature version of himself.

"No," he says. "No, moya lyubov', you are not bad for me." I'm in love with you, he doesn't say. I love you. But I have nowhere to put it. It doesn't fit anywhere. It is just exploding out endlessly into the universe because there is nowhere for me to keep it when we both play this sport and live on this brutal planet where boys like us are not allowed to want what I want with you. "But I am afraid," Ilya says instead. Afraid I will never get over you, he doesn't say. But I have to, somehow, someday, probably. And honestly it's fucked up, whatever this thing is that we have, we both know it, and I think throwing even more fucking crazily intense sex stuff on top, no matter how bad I want to, and god I fucking want to, will fuck it up even worse because I am, unfortunately, therapized now. And I don't want it to be fucked up. I want it to be good, with you, always, for both of us. "It hurts me when we're apart." It's the most tame but honest thing he can think of to say. "I don't think I can take it if it hurts more than it already does."

Shane takes a moment to formulate his reply. "It hurts me when we're apart, too."

Ilya wants to flip him over and kiss him. Wants to take him in his mouth, make him feel as good as he deserves to feel. Wants to suck bruises into his thighs and his chest and his arms. Wants to come all over his gorgeous perfect body. He lets a single tear drip out of his eye instead and lays on top of Shane for awhile in silence, trying to memorize how he feels beneath him.

Shane has no more games in Minnesota this season. The summer is probably the earliest Ilya will see him again. Fuck. They can't keep doing this.

But what are they supposed to do?

Spring 2012

Dyani confronts him about it eventually. He tries to deny it at first but he doesn't know why he bothers.

"Give me a fucking break, Ilya," she says, raising an eyebrow. She points at the TV, on which Shane's most recent hockey game is playing. He's paying for an expensive cable subscription so he can watch them all. She points at his phone, which is open in his hand, and his laptop, which is open to hockey stats in front of him. "What have you not told me about Shane Hollander? I know it's something. You've always been really fucking weird about him. And this??" She gestures around again at the TV and Ilya's phone and the laptop. "Fuck off with your bullshit. What is the deal?"

"We are best friends!" he tries, again. "From high school! You give me a break, Jesus. So what we are close."

"This is beyond 'close,'" Dyani says, doing finger quotes. "It's a fixation. You literally have no hobbies anymore. Does he know how fucking obsessed you are with him? You're like some kind of crazed stalker fan."

"Of course he knows!" Ilya says. Wait. That's not the right answer. Is there a right answer?

"Christ, Ilya." She sits down next to him on their uncomfortable street couch and rests her elbows on her knees, looking over toward him. "Look," she says. "I promise I won't tell anyone. I know it's not safe for you or him."

He's having a heat flash. But god. He still hasn't talked about it with Patti and he doesn't know why, knows she can tell something is up with him but she hasn't pushed. It's eating him alive. "Fuck, Dyani," he says, hiding his face in his hands. Fuck it, though. He's trying to be a more open person, now. Telling people things is good, sometimes. "I'm so fucking in love with him."

Dyani hugs him, rubs her hand up and down on his back. It's nice.

"And we can never be anything," he says.

"Oh Ilya," she says. "I'm sorry," and he sits there and lets her rub his back and buries his face in her neck and squeezes her for a long time.

In March, Ilya goes to some sort of gay freak clown show for charity.

Like, that's actually how it's described to him by Dyani herself, whose girlfriend Kat is performing. He lets her paint his face and he kind of likes it for reasons he didn't know he had. It feels different, sort of weirdly good, to hide behind the garish features she's given him. She slicks his hair back with copious gel and dresses him in a kind of weird sexy clown outfit, crazy wide-legged polka dot pants with just a lacy bra-ish top and so, so much glitter rubbed all over his naked skin. Somehow the top kind of fits him and he's afraid to ask where she got it from: he's far broader than either she or Kat.

Normally he would never leave the apartment looking like this: one photo in this type of outfit and he'd probably never be able to go back to Russia again. Not that he wants to, but he has no guarantee of citizenship anywhere else. Photography isn't exactly a degree that gets you special residencies in the US. Not unless you're, like, the next Annie Leibovitz. And frankly, Ilya's not. And honestly he's just not that ambitious about the photography, he doesn't think. Doesn't really want to commercialize it. It's one of the only things he's ever enjoyed without feeling a compulsive drive to win at. So that does mean it's hockey or bust, basically, and a photo like that could fuck up the hockey part, too. Fuck it, though: he has definitely been more mentally well than he is right now and there's just something about making a poor choice that calls to him sometimes. Plus, behind the paint he feels kind of invincible. Sue him for liking a good time.

The gay freak clown show is even gayer than Ilya imagined. It's mostly drag, apparently, or at least that's what Dyani says. He doesn't really know what drag is and when he asks he doesn't really understand the answer, but most of the performers are college students wearing weird-ass costumes, loosely clown related. Like, they'd be weird even for Halloween probably, and they're doing terrible terrible dances or like, miming or singing or doing standup comedy. One of them is wearing a cardboard boat as pants and strips fully naked to some sort of song about a Chattahoochee River, ending the routine in the splits on the low stage at the front of the room. Ilya has no fucking idea what is going on. And everyone around is also wearing weird-ass costumes. There's someone dressed as a talking lasagna who does a routine involving a cat puppet for some reason. And there's some more borderline naked people and some people with beards in skirts and fishnets and everyone here is so overtly, intentionally strange and they're all so unsurprised by each others' strangeness.

He goes to the bathroom and written on the stall door in sharpie right at eye level it says "a gay trans furry peed here." There's a sketch of maybe a wolf or a coyote under it. He has no idea what a furry is and he's only sort of confident about what trans is and he's never been anywhere so gay. So queer? Like, he's been to gay clubs a few times but that's mostly just about finding someone to get off with and less about, like, celebrating how fundamentally odd you are and how something in the core of your being doesn't fit in with the rest of the world.

The people at this show are celebrating it, though, embracing their silliest, strangest, urges and it wakes up the feeling of difference, oddness, he notices inside himself sometimes buried really deep, in a way he wants to feel uncomfortable about but that actually just makes

him feel sort of safe. Like he could be anything he wants, here with these gay clown freaks. Like even the hidden rejected scared parts of him might be acceptable.

Kat is wearing a jester outfit made from what looks like multiple stretchy dance costumes stitched together and she reads a genuinely heartwarming poem to the crowd, who clap and cheer for her and it's great. Ilya loves all of it. He hadn't expected to love it. He really only came along because Dyani didn't want to go alone and because of his anonymity under the face paint. This isn't really Dyani's crowd, and it's definitely not his. But he kind of wishes it could be his crowd, maybe, and it makes him a little bit sick for a second. The venue is a basement, damp, decorated with cheap multicolored streamers and everything is kind of tacky and visibly handmade and these people are just here, being whoever they want to be, raising money for some gay homeless shelter and he loves it.

Sometimes Ilya wishes he could present a different version of himself when he's out in the world. Not too often: he feels more honestly himself than he ever has, lately, but sometimes. He wants to wear lip gloss, has tried it on at home and thinks he looks fucking great, super kissable. And occasionally he wants to be a little bit feminine. Maybe wants to paint his nails or sway his hips a little more when he walks or bat his eyes coyly at other men. Just a little bit. Maybe he likes the occasional crop top.

He's probably built up enough goodwill at UMN after last season's championship win to do shit like that, to sashay around and be a tiny bit gay when you're big and buff and known for loving women and you keep winning games, but not with the NHL. Not yet. He's definitely on the NHL's shit list. So he needs to have the best two remaining seasons with UMN. Has to stay focused, not fuck it up. And then maybe once he wins some pro cups he can prance around a little bit and giggle and toss his hair sometimes.

He doesn't let himself think about what he really wants to build up enough goodwill to do publicly. Who he wants to want publicly. It's too far. But maybe just a tiny hint of gayness peeking out could be okay if he wins enough.

that was so hot

What was?

you fighting

obviously

He was being a dick.

of course he was

hockey players are always dicks

big big dicks

If you're asking for validation I guess I can't really speak on that.

bullshit

Shane, what the fuck

Idk.

I haven't seen it in so long. It's hard to say anymore.

fuck you

they don't shrink

Shane

I know you didn't forget

take it back

--

will score hat trick for you tonight

always, always for you

Fuck off, Rozanov.

is because you have not seen it, still?

No chance to show!!

--

baby

please

what do u want me to do for u now?

Aside from the obvious?

brat

can fucking grind north dakota into the dust two days from now for you. Embarrassing state. Embarrassing to go to college there. Not fun to destroy them like I am going to because they are garbage. I do for you, though

ok not very good

I can score 80 points for you this season

can win youu a frozen four title if you want. Already have one if you want two

can make some promises about future? will win you a Stanley Cup

I am just a poor humble peasant, now, but if you take a chance someday maybe I will be a king

you can have my firstborn son

Everything I do is for you, too.

--

I'm sorry.

Because you lost? Or because you played like shit

Yes.

I'm sorry, Ilya. It won't happen again. Didn't mean to.

Shane. You are ok. Are you home?

Yes.

Are you in bed?

No. I need to brush my teeth.

Tell me when you are in bed.

Okay.

I'm in bed.

Why are you sorry?

Don't want to disappoint you, Ilya.

Baby

~~I love you~~

I am always impressed by you, even today when you play like shit. I played like shit for a whole season once and look at me now. future best player in nhl.

why are you playing like shit? Is everything good?

Bad day.

I wish you were here right now.

me too

I want to make you feel better

You always make me feel better.

would lay on top of you

help you

could make you feel so good

Fuck, Ilya. I want it.

Yeah?

Always.

[...]

[...]

will you be mad if I make you come right now?

[...]

It depends.

Are you going to come right now?

am at airport right now

later, I promise

please let me do it

fuck

please

Ilya

no

fuck, baby

want to help you feel good

would

not alone Ilya

please

[...]

fuck

am in single stall

will do for you

is okay

Ilya

is okay?

Please, Ilya

fuck

yes

so fucking good, fuck Shane

want to be there with you now on top of you

want that

want to press you down into mattress

feel your perfect body under me

you pretend to fight me but you don't even try

you want it so bad

so easy

fuck

yes

are you touching yourself?

yes

good

wish I could see you

always so perfect, pretty

love your freckles

eyes

perfect perfect mouth

made for me mouth

want it again

please

want so bad

so fucking hot

wet perfect mouth just for me

yes

just for you

fuck

want to hold you down

god, Shane, I want to fuck you

want it

please Ilya

think about it all the time

obsessed with you, Shane

dream fantasy boy

your body

how fucking tight you will be when I finally fuck you

only for me

fuck

ilya

want to see your face when I do it

will make you feel so good

please

wanna take care of you

will fuck you so nice

make u come so hard on just my cock

won't even have to touch u

yes

want so bad

feel so good around me

so fucking tight

will come inside you

fill yuo up

watch it leak out and push back in

play with your pretyy perfcet wet hole

need you Ilya

plesae

need it

make u cum again on my tongue

fuck u again

prefecct body made for me

wet hole just fro me

fcuk

close

want to alwyas be fucking you

nevre nver stop

made to take my cock

tkae my cum

again and again, all the fucking time

[...]

[...]

ok

[...]

fuck

Jesus Christ.

[...]

you came?

Yes.

fuck

so good, Shane

me too

Thank you, Ilya.

Next time I want to swallow it.

Please.

—

And it goes on for the rest of the spring, as Ilya wins a second Frozen Four championship, and as Shane nearly wins a Stanley Cup but loses the final, and Ilya genuinely doesn't know what else he can do.

Chapter 6: '12: Ilya

Chapter Summary

In which Ilya is a fucking legend at formulating actionable plans.

& you know what?? For the purposes of my storytelling, these two iconic high school besties and sort-of brothers have zero fear of being caught texting each other whatever the FUCK they want, first names and all.

Chapter Notes

I planned in my outline for this chapter to cover the ENTIRE 2012-13 school year, and did genuinely begin writing it w that plan, yet somehow it's maybe the longest in the story thus far and it only spans ONE. FULL. DAY.

Summer 2012

David and Yuna are going to Italy. Dyani is going back to Mexico to see her family. Svetlana is going back to Russia.

And after a week with Svetlana in Colorado before she goes home, Ilya will be in Minneapolis all summer. And for two weeks of that, so will Shane.

Ilya is euphoric: can't believe Shane is willing to stay in his shitty apartment for two entire weeks when he could be at his parents' cottage instead, relaxing in the sunshine and the breeze off the lake. Svetlana wouldn't even stay here: she makes him sleep at her luxury hotel when she visits. "It's the water pressure, Ilyushka," she'd said the first time she visited, "and also why does it have to be freezing cold or blisteringly hot all the time in this terrible peasant apartment?" which was fair enough. The temperature was at least consistent in the summer: hot. Ilya probably would've preferred to visit Shane, in Montreal or at his parents' cottage, but he's taking a film-making course he's really excited about and it's only offered over the summer, and so Shane is coming here. To be with Ilya. For two weeks.

The sexting has basically not stopped for months. It's never-ending, if broken up occasionally by normal boring stuff or hockey stuff or the surprise emotional stuff that Shane tosses out into the space between them like it's nothing. Like it's just the obvious thing to say. Like of course Ilya will catch it, and bundle it up and tuck it away tight somewhere no one will ever

be able to find it except for him. *Everything I do is for you. I feel like half a person sometimes. Ilya. Please, Ilya. Always just for you.* Does he even understand the enormity of what he's doing? Do either of them have any fucking clue? But regardless: all of it, everything, somehow becomes sex, like it always fucking has.

Naturally, they've started incorporating phone sex, too, in the rare moments they're both truly alone at the same time, which started one night when Shane had begged, begged for Ilya to call him, to say it out loud in his ear. And fuck it's amazing, listening to Shane's breath getting faster, heavier, his little noises, his voice, how it gets so pleading and needy. Letting whatever wish Ilya is making right now float out into the air between them and hearing the lavish incandescent wanting in Shane's fuck, yes Ilya, please, and knowing they're matched in it, both participating equally in the whirling hurtling rampage of whatever the fuck this even is, fuck it's so good, Shane is so good, nothing should ever be this good, because who could ever be expected to exist in a world where they could be having fucking phone sex this fucking good but can't be doing it at every single moment because the other person is equally as busy as you are, practically always in hearing range of someone else, especially because Dyani confronted you the morning after that first call like "I think the *fuck* not, Ilya, you know I can hear you through the wall and phone sex is therefore included in the shared apartment fuck ban," and also when you still need to do other things to survive in this brutal cold unfeeling uncaring world, like eat or sleep or laundry??

So after a few months of that: of the both of them being crazily, absurdly busy, of radiant ceaseless feverish wishes and wants and wonders, and after Shane agrees to come stay with Ilya for two entire weeks, Ilya employs a new tactic in what feels at this point like his never-ending pursuit of one single real concrete tangible conversation with Shane about what the fuck is going on between them.

Sure, everything they've been doing all spring does probably imply real, in-person sex of some kind, but they haven't actually discussed it or agreed upon anything. The last time they kind of talked about it, Ilya had just laid on top of Shane and cried a little tiny bit while actively choosing not to get either of them off. And that's basically, sort of, what also happened the two times he'd seen Shane prior to that. And Ilya told him they couldn't do sex stuff anymore, multiple times but maybe not in concrete literal terms, and he never really took it back, even though he obviously did end up taking some of it back. With his actions. Fuck.

So they need to talk: need to have a conversation where they can decide on quantifiable guidelines of some sort. Parameters. So they can both know and agree to whatever kind of hurt they'll be in for when this fragile, futile sanctuary Ilya can't stop hoping pretending dreaming they're maybe creating right now, together, and he really thinks hopes imagines they might be, somehow he can just feel it, inside his chest he knows it, inevitably splinters all around them into razor-sharp shards.

Literally all he needs to do is convince Shane to have one serious boundary-setting conversation with him. And he has crafted a foolproof plan for how they might do so upon Shane's arrival, the value of which Shane will surely see when Ilya lays it out in writing.

ok

I am so happy you are coming here

so so excited to see you, baby

we need to make some rules

?

don't pretend, Shane

you know we do

Ilya, for fuck's sake.

"I don't want to fuck you because I care too much."

"Please don't suck me off, Shane, even though you have a perfect, made-for-me mouth, because it hurts when we're apart :("

Shane.

"Oh, and now I'm sexting Shane CONSTANTLY, and last night on the phone I PROMISED to fuck him so hard he passes out, and that's all fine and normal and dandy despite ZERO in-person action when I had REPEATED chances over the summer and fall."

"AND, for whatever reason I also won't send Shane a dick pic even when he VERY OBVIOUSLY wants one."

SHANE.

[...]

[...]

[...]

[...]

ok fine say your feelings

Always want to hear your feelings, baby

[...]

"And maybe right now, over FUCKING TEXT, two days before Shane serves himself up at my apartment on a fucking platter, fully 100% knowing he will do literally ANYTHING I want, and I cannot stress the ANYTHING enough he is so fucking horny, and in fact knowing he has been waiting for YEARS and YEARS AND YEARS for it, waiting so long he is willing to send this humiliating text about how bad he still wants it despite a never-ending series of

rejections all fucking year (a humiliating text that isn't, by the way, even the type of humiliating Shane has been known on occasion to enjoy, fucking unfortunately, so there's literally NO GAIN to be had for him in sending it, and actually he is rethinking the whole thing right now as he types but he made it this far, and honestly fuck you for that, Ilya), and despite making MANY grandiose claims IN WRITING about how hot I think Shane is and how bad I want to fuck him and how tight he will be around me when I stick my perfect dick inside him, I will try to have one more fucking failure of a breakup conversation again, just to see if for some reason the outcome might be different this time."

[...]

"That probably won't hurt Shane's feelings at all."

"Shane is just a hockey robot. Who even knows if he has feelings?"

[...]

Jesus, Ilya, figure it the fuck out. It hurts WORSE to be apart every time you have the chance to fuck me and don't, I swear to fucking god.

And it's actually so fucking embarrassing. For me. How long am I supposed to get turned down and then kind of not get turned down and then get turned down again? I feel like a fucking fish on a line.

Shane.

~~Holy fuck I love you and I'm so sorry for hurting you~~

First of all that was so sexy. Love when you say what you want. Love when you stand up for yourself, fuck.

that long big sentence about how I won't fuck you was so immersive. Like I could actually hear you yelling at me. Hope you do it in person sometime. So expressive. Love when you use your words

BE FUCKING FOR REAL, ILYA

[...]

[...]

I'm actually so much more upset after that.

Okay, I'm sorry. Really. For making a joke after you said your feelings. Your feelings are the most important to me and I did not mean to downplay them.

I deflect with humor. Not a good communication strategy I have been told. Hurtful sometimes also.

Thank you for telling me it upset you. Is good for me and also very sexy of you.

And I'm so, so sorry for being inconsistent and making you feel rejected. My words have not lined up with actions and it's not fair to you.

I never ever ever ever want to make you feel that way.

Don't apologize. It's okay.

No Shane, that is bullshit.

Accept the apologies you are owed.

just because we are both in a shitty situation doesn't mean I can't be sorry

Okay.

Thank you for your apology.

I agree you have not been treating me right.

fuck

you're so sexy

~~*I love you so much. I never want to hurt you. I actually feel physical pain in my chest right now thinking about having hurt you. I am so sorry, Shane, I love you I love you*~~

want to treat you right

want to only make you feel good

it's why we need to talk

I am not trying to have another breakup conversation with you I promise.

and fuck, baby. I love it when you know your worth.

Won't let me treat you bad. Won't let me jerk you around

[...]

Well if you stop, I might let you jerk something, sometime.



soon, baby. All I dream about is touching you, you know this.

That's what I'm trying to say

I will not lie to you right now: I know I said that text wasn't the type of humiliating I like but I think I may have been wrong.

Kind of into it now that you've apologized.

baby

You have no idea how bad I want to let this conversation go in that direction right now

so bad

always want to speak in great detail about what you're into

ok and fuck, baby, okay yes I see it now. Rereading the text.

you're so fucking desperate for cock, Shane, fuck, and I agree that with anyone other than me it would be extremely embarrassing to be so unbelievably easy all the fucking time, just waiting and hoping for me to fuck you, fuck you're so perfect, need it so bad I love it, spend all your free time thinking about taking my cock, best best boy always

fuckk

yeah?

Yes. You should be fucking ashamed to be that fucking easy for anyone. Porn stars are less easy than you because at least they get paid to beg. You are just out here offering it up for free. Not even just offering. Desperately throwing yourself at me every hour of the day. Fuck.

god

I want it so bad

need it

But Shane, we are both equally fucking obsessed.

I need you to understand I want you so bad. Want to fuck you so bad. Fuck. Magical mouth. Dream body. Fantasy boy. You know all these things

want to be so good for you, Ilya. Make it so good for you

want to show you

Fuck

you are ALWAYS always so good for me every time, baby

best I've had you know this

ok

need to accomplish a very specific objective in this conversation. would love to also make u come.

but after I say what I need to say?

[...]

[...]

What do you need to say?

obviously what we are doing isn't working

this entire conversation up to this point makes that extremely clear

so we need to agree together on something better

Better?

I don't know.

~~*I don't think I can not have sex with you, honestly.*~~

~~*I feel like everything we do might be sex? Like it doesn't even matter where we arbitrarily decide to draw the line because every single interaction and also non-interaction we have feels kind of like sex to me, holy fuck Shane.*~~

~~*And I also am in love with you?*~~

Last summer I tried to say no, nothing. Tried to cut it off. But obviously that did not work.

~~*bc I want you too bad, baby, can't control myself. so fucking hot, need to touch you for real*~~

We should figure out something that works.

So... not a breakup conversation?

No, baby. Here is my plan. Tell me if you don't like:

1. When you get here we can each have one orgasm, maybe two max. Stuff we have done before. Nothing crazy. Make it count. Get in a more rational headspace. Decision-making headspace. Brain-forward headspace. Blood flow going UP headspace. (to the brain only. not even to your pink cheeks blushing for me. NO blushing either) Only then we will be ready for phase two.

[...]

Ilya

[...]

Yes I know. Wait until I'm done. So fucking desperate, fuck.

before sending I thought 'hmm Ilya, should i send Shane a warning text not to interrupt until I am done laying out out the plan?' & I told myself 'no Ilya, he is not that fucking crazed for cock and he will wait until after the first point to beg for it,' and look at what you are trying to do right now. Beg for cock.

Fuck. Is my fault for overestimating you. Won't do again.

God you're so sexy. love how bad you want it. So impatient.

ok

2. We have a conversation. On opposite sides of the room. Looking at the walls & not each other. A real conversation that doesn't get cut off part-way through with sex or with not sex. We make some agreements.

3. Go from there.

Okay done. That is my plan. Go ahead baby, do your begging.

Ilya

I cna suck you?

fuck. yes

I think we actually can't talk without it

need you to suck my cock so we can have good communication :(

fuck

promise?

baby I promise

you are embarrassing yourself right now

makes me so hard

want it so bad

miss your mouth

please

Ilya

so excited to see you

where are you

please Ilya

you want me to make you feel good?

need help?

where

yes

please

not alone, Ilya

am sharing hotel room with teammate

is okay though

going to bathroom

fuck

I can suck you again, Ilya?

yes baby

need it so bad

you're home?

I can help you feel so good right now?

yes

please

perfect boy

want your mouth again

so excited to finally have it

how do u want it

doesn't even matter

mouth so good always

every way

made for me

miss it so much

dream of it

so wet

tight

perfect mouth

best motuh

please

want

hand on ur throat while you suck me

make u cry

hot wet

yes

bbyb

need u

percfet mouth

Fuck

miss

so good

always good

for me

yes

want

miss u

will make so good

take it

choke

bybay

yes

make me feel so good

always

always

miss

want

yes

need

[...]

[...]

[...]

okay

Thank you, Ilya

fuck

That was so hot.

you came?

Jesus

Yes.

You agree to my plan?

Yes.

--

And so hell yes, basically. Ilya is a champion. A winner. Fucking finally. He'd nearly allowed Shane to derail it, had nearly gone for the multiple sext bait offensives Shane launched before Ilya was able to fully lay out the three-pronged plan, fuck Ilya loves him, is pretty sure he did it on purpose to avoid whatever he thought Ilya was going to say, but no. Ilya Rozanov prevails. Ilya Rozanov powers through to the three-pronged plan. Because Ilya Rozanov is a fucking superstar who never, ever lets anything hold him back from achieving his extremely important objectives.

They're going to talk when they see each other again. Boundaries. Communication. Ilya has done it.

And when Shane is finally standing in Ilya's apartment again it might be the best Ilya has ever felt in his entire fucking life. Holy fucking shit it's so good, just looking at him here, fucking gorgeous and willing and wanting and everything Ilya has ever dreamed of or hoped for.

Wow.

And Shane is already going loose, lax from the moment the door closes behind him, looking to Ilya for guidance with his gorgeous eyes Ilya has missed so much, needy beautiful boy. Fuck. Ilya loves him. It's so much, all of it. He's so happy that it actually hurts to look at him here, so trusting and hopeful and glad just to be in this shitty apartment with Ilya. Fuck. And it's time to execute the first phase of the three-pronged plan. Ilya is a genius.

He crowds Shane against the door, pushes him up against it, gets down on his knees. Their shoes aren't even off. And fuck, Shane is so hard already, probably has been for fucking hours, fuck, and he doesn't even know what to do, stumbling back against the door and clutching at Ilya's hair when Ilya swallows him down, wasn't ready, had only been thinking of doing this for Ilya probably, so selfless and of course it's so good: Ilya wants it, has wanted it, has been wanting it. He loves giving Shane pleasure more than maybe anything else, loves hearing his shocked gasps of fuck, Ilya, holy fuck above him, and it's less than a minute before he's coming down Ilya's throat, and still so surprised. God.

He lets Shane drag him up, frantic, almost panicked, and start pulling him toward the bedroom, realizes he's probably afraid Ilya will change his mind before he can suck Ilya's cock, lovely desperate boy, Ilya never should've made him feel uncertain like this so he stops, grabs Shane's wrist. "Shane."

"No, Ilya," Shane says, looking so fucking sad, like Ilya's killed his puppy. Fucking Christ. He thinks Ilya will say no. Will walk it back. "Please."

"Don't worry," Ilya says, pulling Shane back toward him. "Don't worry I will let you, I promise." I love you. "You're perfect, fuck" and then Ilya kisses him.

It's lovely, hand on the back of Shane's neck, and god, he loves him he loves him and they really, really, really need to talk. But not right now during phase one. Talking gets to come later. Because Ilya is a fucking genius. Legend at making actionable plans. Only took him a year to come up with three steps, one of them as-yet undetermined.

But fuck, yes, he's hoisting Shane up and carrying him to the bedroom even as he pretends to protest into Ilya's mouth, as if he isn't a match for Ilya's strength, as if they aren't still kissing, and dumping him on the bed, crawling on top of him and of course Shane is insatiable, fucking maniacal, so fucking perfect. It's everything he remembers and more, Shane's plush warm mouth taking him inch by inch, watching his lips stretching so wide and fuck, Ilya can't wait to see how swollen they are after this, red and wet, can't wait to kiss him again and he's

slurping so happily and sloppily around Ilya's cock, looking up at him so beautiful through his lashes and fuck he loves it, incredible amazing boy, calloused hand pushing up Ilya's torso and groping at his chest as Ilya presses his own hand over top, interlocks their fingers. God he's missed this, missed it so fucking much, can't believe he's ever had this and gone without it and survived.

And sure. They push the conversation off a little bit, but only a little bit: in fact, this is part of the secret predetermined wiggle room built into the first phase of Ilya's ingenious three-pronged plan: he'd told Shane one or two orgasms max, but really he's flexible. They need to be in the right place to talk without falling all over each other at the first hint of a breeze. But Shane will push any limit Ilya tries to set just for the sake of it: he likes to pretend he's genuinely resisting Ilya's wishes, asserting himself, as if Ilya would ever fall for such an obvious and transparent ruse because really they both know he's just a needy naughty boy who likes it when Ilya makes him. So that's why the predetermined wiggle room is a secret. Because Ilya is a fucking genius. The plan is going so well.

They sleep on top of each other that first night and it's so, so nice, and the moment Ilya wakes up he gets Shane's dick in his mouth and fuck, he's losing his mind, it just shouldn't be this good, better even than he's been imagining for months to be here hot under the sheets in the morning sun hearing Shane wake up already in Ilya's mouth, hearing his shocked gasping inhale and his one agonized groan, like someone's ripping it out of his lungs before he's coming and coming down Ilya's throat, and obviously Shane reciprocates and it's so, so fucking good in the daylight, mesmerized by his wonderful flawless face as he pushes himself down harder, tears welling up in his beautiful brown eyes for Ilya to wipe away, feeling the resistance in his throat as he hacks, spasms a little, out of practice, shoving himself down. God. How has Ilya been having sex with anyone else all this time?

So obviously after that they have to sleep on top of each other some more, and then they have to eat because we need sustenance, Ilya, Jesus. No. Let me finish making your fucking pancakes, please. Oh fuck, fuck, Ilya, fuck, god, fuck please oh fuck Ilya I'm close, fuck, I'm coming. And then after they eat Shane has to suck him off again, obviously, to keep things even, and he makes Ilya stand on the floor while he lays on the bed with his head hanging off the edge, and where the fuck did he even learn that? Holy fuck and it's good, so fucking good, hardly any resistance when he pushes so so deep, and fucking Christ, who taught him this, and where, and holy shit it's so fucking good, and he comes and comes down Shane's throat. And then they need to make out for a nice long while so Ilya can touch Shane everywhere, absolutely everywhere, such a perfect body, so strong and muscular and made just for Ilya to touch and hold and play with, and, and then of course Ilya wants to fuck Shane, fuck, holy shit, has been wanting it so fucking bad for so fucking long, and they can't unless they actually talk.

So the conversation arises naturally anyway, sort of, after another round or two of enthusiastic blowjobs, some lunch, and the gym. Because there are limits to what they can accomplish, here alone in Ilya's apartment with just each other and their bodies and their fantasies, without one.

They first try to have the conversation across the living room from each other, facing opposite walls. It was clearly laid out in the second phase of Ilya's extremely well-thought-

out plan. If they can't see or touch each other, they're more likely to succeed. Because Ilya is a genius.

It's a near-total failure. They're maybe ten seconds in when Shane says "listening to you talk about sex from the other side of the room takes me back to when we were like, 16. I still think about it every time I jerk off in a hotel bed."

Ilya has barely even started talking about sex. All he's said so far is "I think we can both agree that not having sex has been a complete failure."

And as it turns out, Shane's unnecessary, distracting little comment is a setup, the jab in a one-two punch, and the follow-up is a fucking brutal knockout. It slams directly into Ilya's poor unprepared jaw: "Actually," Shane continues, almost thoughtful with it. Really dragging out the agony. Ilya can hear how fucking clever he feels in his voice, the satisfaction of knowing beyond the shadow of a doubt it will land, cross coming in slow motion and Ilya knows it's happening now but it's too late, and it's excruciating when it hits but he fucking loves it. "I'll probably never come without thinking of you for the rest of my life."

Because what the fuck?

Who is allowing this man to just walk around freely out in the world when he could drop a bomb like that at any moment?

The rest of the conversation gets put on hold for awhile, obviously. Because clearly they hadn't done enough beforehand to really get all the wiggles out.

But now, surely, they'll have more success.

Shane is on the other side of the bathroom door this time. It's closed between them.

"I still don't understand why *I* had to be the one to go into the isolation chamber," he says, muffled a little bit through the door.

"You know why," Ilya says.

"I thought we were in this thing together."

"Yes lyubimyy," Ilya says, that burning glowing feeling rising up in his chest. He can't believe he gets the funny, silly, unfiltered version of this wonderful beautiful man. He wants to fucking cherish him forever. "Fucking around is something we like to do together. We cannot fuck around right now."

Ilya is pretty sure Shane sighs from the other side of the door.

"Okay," Ilya says. "Good. Some things are obvious, but I am going to say them anyway. The first and most obvious thing is that clearly we both want to always be having sex with each other at every single possible moment."

A noise through the door.

"You disagree?" God, Ilya loves him. Such a brat. So hot.

"I mean," Shane says. "I just think it's kind of a lot for you to list that as your first 'obvious' claim. Both of us? Always at every single possible moment? Speak for yourself, Rozanov."

"Shane," Ilya says.

A pause. And in that pause, Ilya realizes something. Fuck, Shane is so good at this. Incredibly, prodigiously good at turning any attempt at an actual reasonable conversation into sex. And even through the bathroom door. Wow. If Ilya lets him derail the conversation again it probably won't be happening until tomorrow, but that familiar wave of euphoric anticipation is coursing through him and fuck. He waits for it. Knows what's coming.

"Hmm?" Shane says. Even muffled through the door, the innocence is transparently false. God Ilya loves him.

Ilya is at a crossroads. But not really: there's only one real choice. The whole point of phase one is that they do this until the derailments cease. And clearly they're just not ready to cease yet. And that is okay. Ilya is giving himself over to the hands of this loving, kind universe. So he says it. "Shane, you and I both know that I have never ever in my entire life met someone as greedy for cock as you."

Shane's head bangs against the door. "Fuck. Ilya."

"Oh? That wasn't what you wanted me to say, *moya lyubov'*? Didn't want me to tell you how embarrassing you are? How you humiliate yourself with it?"

A maybe-whine, muffled.

"Is okay, baby? Is good?"

"Fuck. Yes, please Ilya."

Ilya takes a moment to breathe. Surely they'll tire of this soon so he can actually fuck Shane for real. But this is so fucking good anyway it kind of doesn't even matter. He spits on his hand, shoves it in his pants. "Even through the fucking door you want it so bad. I can't get through one sentence before you are degrading yourself, begging me to call you what you are."

"Ilya, no, please. Yes."

"You question my first obvious claim? Okay, me too. I said we are *both* desperate for each other. Like it is equal between us. And that is because I was trying to say it nice, *moya lyubov'*, for you. So I would not embarrass you. Didn't want to make you feel ashamed, baby. And you know I'm desperate for you too, fuck, so hot, want you so bad, but nothing, Shane. Nothing can compare to what a fucking whore you are for sucking cock."

The noise Shane makes sounds like it was ripped violently out of him. "Please, Ilya," he says. Ilya loves him so fucking much.

"What do you want, lyubimyy?"

"Wanna suck you."

"Fuck, moya lyubov'," holy fuck I love you. "So fucking embarrassing. Can't believe I'm the only one who sees through you. Sees what you really are. Fuck I love it." I love you, I'm so fucking lucky to be here doing this with you holy shit, I feel like we tore open our chests and sewed ourselves together, I'm so excited to touch you when I get you out from behind this stupid door, "love being the only one who knows how fucking bad you want it. It's fucking sick how you debase yourself. I get embarrassed for you sometimes, when I see it."

A whine. "Please."

"Fuck baby, you'd do anything, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah, yes. Anything."

"God. They'd be lining down the block if they knew, Shane. If they knew how fucking good your perfect magic mouth is. If they knew how fucking bad you want it."

A noise. Muffled.

"What will you do for me right now, moya lyubov'? How will you convince me?"

"Will suck you so good."

"I know you will, baby. Always do. Perfect mouth just for me. No one else can have it."

"Just yours, Ilya, wanna be so good for you. Lemme show you, please, wanna make it so good."

"Fuck baby, I know you do. But you are the greedy cock whore of a boy begging to get your mouth on me right now, and I am the one who has to tolerate your neediness."

"Fuck." Shane drags the word out. His head bangs on the door behind Ilya again.

"Maybe I will let you," Ilya says. "Maybe."

"Please, Ilya."

"But only if you admit it." He knows what Shane will say and fuck he can't wait for it to play out, it's always so good every single fucking time. Life-ruiningly good.

No hesitation. "Wanna suck you, please Ilya." He's playing right into it. Ilya takes a moment to get himself together. God.

"Good start," Ilya says. "Very good job sharing, baby, I'm proud of you, but I think we both know it's not that," and god he feels so fucking high, so fucking grateful to whatever the fuck landed him here in this moment right now. He pushes up into his own hand a little bit, spreading his legs and arching back against the door, imagining Shane's mouth on him.

Fucking hell. "Everyone and their fucking mother knows you want to suck me," he says, letting the words he knows will unlock Shane's dirty fucking mouth spill right on out into the air where they belong. "It is written on your face at all hours of the day. No. I want you to admit what you *really* wanted me to do. Why you tried to lie to me and pretend you don't want to be face down on my cock at every single moment of your life."

A faint noise. It might be a gasp. Ilya hopes it was a gasp, fuck. Does he really think Ilya doesn't see through his silly little games?

"You know what I want you to say, baby. Use your fucking words." Shane had, in fact, already used his words to beg for this exact thing on the phone last week. He's only holding out now because he likes it when Ilya makes him. Likes to be reminded Ilya knows exactly what he wants. Because he's Ilya's extraordinary treasure. "If you admit it, I will consider allowing you to suck my cock. Maybe."

"Fuck, Ilya, please."

Ilya waits.

"Please."

He keeps waiting, the anticipation coursing electric, rapturous through his body. He wants to cry with how good it is, understands Shane suddenly and hopes he's always crying during sex because it feels this fucking amazing, what Ilya does to him.

A whimper, and then Shane is saying something inaudible.

"Not loud enough, baby. Can't let you out until you say it all on your own." He waits some more. And then, after the rhapsodic blossoming wait has become nearly unbearable, Shane finally fucking says it. And it's always, always, So. Fucking. Good.

"I wanted you to call me a whore, Ilya. Wanted you to tell me I'm a fucking whore."

Fuck. Ilya nearly comes, stilling his hand, squeezing at the base. Christ, how did he get so fucking lucky?

"Fuck, baby. You're so fucking good. So desperate for me. Such a perfect easy boy." I love you so fucking much, holy fuck.

"Please, Ilya. Please. You said I could suck you if I said."

"I did not say that, baby. I said maybe."

Shane's head bangs against the door again. "Ilya. Fuck. Please. Wanna make you come so bad. Are you hard? Wanna get you hard. Wanna suck you. Fuck, please let me out. Lemme touch you."

Ilya debates with himself. He could be nice about it: open the door, finish in Shane's sloppy desperate slutty little mouth. He's close. Wouldn't take long and Shane would be so fucking grateful afterward, fuck, swollen lips and sweet eyes and thank you, Ilya, thank you. But he

could also be a little mean about it, which will take longer and will therefore push the conversation off even further.

He goes with the mean option. Clearly, it's what Shane wants right now anyway. They're on the same page. As always.

Fuck. It just shouldn't be this good.

"Shane," he says, starting to move his hand again. "Stop whining. You're being annoying. Selfish. Not everything is about you."

Silence. Shane is probably starting to get a little slow. Fuck. He's so fucking good. Always so fucking good. Loves to feel ashamed. Loves when Ilya spools his worst fears about himself, his trembling terrified secret thoughts out into the air as if they might be true and transforms them into something fucking sacred, consecrated, maybe: something precious and intimate and ecstatic they can share here, inside this transcendent place they've invoked somehow between and within and all around each other. Fuck. He didn't know he could feel this way, like he's actually fucking burning up from the inside out, leaning against his bathroom door, calling Shane a whore and wondering if God is fucking speaking to him right now, alight with how fucking good it feels to know and see and worship this perfect beautiful amazing man. He's fucked. God, he's so fucking fucked.

"Is okay, yes, Shane? This is good for you?"

"Fuck, yes, Ilya."

"Okay. Good. You're so fucking good. You need to tell me if it's not good, okay? If you don't like what we're doing we will stop, always always."

"Yes, Ilya, fuck, I like it. I fucking love it, please."

Jesus Christ. "Good. So fucking embarrassing, Shane, begging me to call you a whore, begging to suck my cock for, what, the fifth fucking time today? Wait until I say you can come out and get a fucking handle on yourself in the meantime."

Ilya works at himself with more intent. It's too dry and he's already come too many times today, but what is he even supposed to do about it anyway? He comes, silent outside the bathroom door, at the thought of how fucking ashamed Shane will be, fuck, he'll be out of his mind for hours, probably.

He gets up and cleans himself off with a kitchen rag. Pulls his pants back up. Sits on the couch. Turns on a hockey game. Waits a minute, just for the sake of it. He knows Shane is working himself up in the bathroom, thinking of nothing but throwing himself all over Ilya, pleasing him. Perfect unbelievable boy.

He decides it's time. "Okay, baby, fine," Ilya says, loud enough he knows Shane can hear, trying to sound disinterested. As if he could ever be disinterested. "You can come out."

The door opens. Ilya doesn't turn. Keeps his eyes on the TV.

A hesitant pause before Shane walks over. Ilya can see him in his peripherals: tenting his shorts, wet patch blooming because he's not wearing any underwear and fuck, Ilya loves him so fucking much.

Shane stands there for a second. Ilya doesn't acknowledge him. Waits.

"Ilya?"

Ilya flicks his eyes over but doesn't move otherwise. "Hmm?" He looks back at the TV.

Shane kneels on the floor in the corner of Ilya's vision. Christ. "Please."

"Okay Shane, fine," Ilya says, trying to look annoyed. "Jesus fucking Christ." Shane whimpers. It's pathetic and Ilya loves him. He grabs a throw pillow and tosses it to the floor between his legs. He gestures dismissively toward his crotch, looking at the TV. "Fucking go for it, if you want it so bad."

Shane makes a pathetic noise. Knee walks over. Reaches for Ilya's waistband. Ilya slaps his hand away. "No," he says. If Ilya could get hard right now he would be so fucking hard, god. "You want to show me how good your mouth is? Then show me."

Ilya gives in and looks down. The look on Shane's face is exquisite as he moans. Collapses forward onto Ilya's lap. Shoves his pink freckled little face into it and realizes Ilya is soft. He whines, sound muffled, rubs his face back and forth for a little while, shoves it harder into Ilya's groin, looks up. Normally he'd be having more success by now, for sure. "Please, Ilya," he says, tears welling up.

"Fucking do it," Ilya says, "instead of whining and crying endlessly. Like a little baby." He looks back at the TV. Spreads his legs a little.

He feels Shane trying to pull his shorts down with his mouth but he refuses to look. Pretends to give a fuck about the game. The noises are pitiful, little sad pants and he can feel how sloppy Shane is, unbalanced with his hands behind his back because he's so fucking good, all the fucking time, leaning his head pitifully into Ilya's lap and trying to get the waistband far enough over Ilya's hips to get at his cock. And to be fair to him, Ilya's legs are spread wide enough for it to be a challenge. He has some mercy and pulls his own shorts down a little bit, gets himself out, doesn't look away from the TV.

"Jesus, Shane," he says, steadfastly refusing to look. "You're the one who wants it, so fucking desperate I can't get through a fucking sentence, and you're making me do all the work for you?"

"I'm sorry," Shane says. "Sorry, Ilya."

"Stop fucking apologizing and suck my cock," Ilya says. "Christ, you make everything such a chore." He's still soft, and thank god he's already come like, many many times already today and just did five minutes ago because this little game would be over so fucking fast if he hadn't.

"I'm sorry," Shane says again and Ilya wants to slap him, can see in his mind how fucking shocked Shane would be, reddening handprint on his face, teary-eyed, how desperate to please it would make him, after. He'd fucking grovel, more than he already is, fuck.

"Shut the fuck up," Ilya says instead. "Jesus, Shane, what did I say?"

Shane is glazed, unsteady. He gets his mouth on Ilya finally, so wet, so warm, and Ilya is a little oversensitive at this point but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters right now except for how fucking pitiful Shane is being, crying and trying so hard to coax any sort of reaction out of Ilya's flaccid dick.

"God," Ilya says. "You're so fucking pathetic. Look at you." Shane goes even redder, moaning, shoving his nose into the skin at the base, hands behind his back still. "Is this enough?" Ilya says. "Is it enough for you, now that you have my cock in your mouth?"

A sad choking garbled moan. More tears.

"It is not? Not enough for you, moya lyubov'? You need more?"

Shane tries to open his eyes and look up. Fuck he's beautiful.

"I am giving you what I can give you, Shane, Christ. Not everyone needs it as bad as you do all the time. Be grateful."

Ilya's cock is making a valiant, if as-yet unsuccessful, effort to get hard. Won't be too long, probably. "Actually," he says, "I want to hear you say it. Say it around my cock, Shane. Say thank you."

The sound Shane makes is definitely not thank you.

"Say it, Shane." Ilya taps at the side of his face a little bit. "Say thank you, Ilya." He stretches the words out, condescending and loving it. God he loves being an asshole. Why is it so fucking good? "Use your manners."

Shane closes his eyes again, slumping further forward somehow. He makes a weak few hums, spit leaking out.

"Do better," Ilya says. "And look at me when you say it, fuck, it's like you were raised in a fucking barn. So ungrateful. So impolite. You know we've been practicing using your words. Show me what you've learned, baby."

Shane makes some more garbled humming noises, blinking tearily up at him, eyes struggling to focus. The noises are at least more clearly differentiated from each other this time. He's shifting a little where he's crouched. Fuck, he must be so hard.

"Are you hard, Shane? You want to come?"

Another incoherent noise.

"Well as you can probably tell," he says, patting Shane on the head a little bit, patronizing. "I am just not very interested right now, so take what you are given and shut the fuck up, okay? At least with your mouth full you are not whining and pleading in my ear."

He takes out his phone and pretends to text for a while. Looks back at the TV. Fuck. Looks down. Shane is so fucking wet, drool spilling out everywhere and he's gone quiet, just slumped and leaning forward against the couch with Ilya's dick tucked soft inside his warm welcoming mouth, eyes closed, lashes clumping together. He's so gorgeous like this, calmer now after his frantic desperation a few minutes ago, breathing slower through his nose. Ilya wants to murmur little soothing praises, tell him how good he is, what a perfect face and mouth he has, such a sweet quiet lovely lovely boy, always so good all the time, a fucking dream. He wants to stroke Shane's hair, run a thumb across his brow. He doesn't.

But surely a little morsel of praise won't hurt, right now. A little morsel with a chaser. "So good, baby," he says, sing-songing it. God he fucking loves this, can't believe he gets to have it. "So good to get what you need, yes? To feel so nice and peaceful because I can take care of you? Can give you my cock at all hours of the day and night to help you feel better?" He pauses. Pets Shane's head once, gentle, stills his hand under Shane's ear before he says it, rubbing his thumb across his pulse point. "Like a fucking pacifier." A fresh wave of tears spills out of Shane's closed eyes and down his cheeks, dripping onto Ilya's hand, which he removes after wiping away some of them with his thumb. Shane shifts his weight a little again where he kneels on the pillow. Presses his face even harder into Ilya's groin. Ilya fake yawns, spreads his legs a little wider, crosses his arms behind his head, continues pretending to watch the game.

After awhile, longer than Ilya expected, honestly, but it's okay because Shane is so sweet and calm like this, happy just to have something to focus on, must be fucking floating somewhere Ilya has to assume is nice, his cock starts to take an interest in the situation. Shane notices immediately, makes a wet desperate happy noise and starts back up, humming and sucking and so fucking enthusiastic it's not long until Ilya is fully hard, swirling his tongue around the head under the foreskin and pushing himself further and further, taking Ilya deeper and deeper.

God, his mouth is so fucking good. He's so fucking good. He works himself into a nice little rhythm and Ilya is still trying desperately not to touch, not to say anything at all, staring fixedly at the TV, no idea what's happening on the screen. Ilya can tell when Shane realizes he's not looking because he lets out a choked little whine and redoubles his efforts, employing all his best, tried-and-true tricks to get Ilya's attention. It's a good thing Ilya is reading the massive list of side effects scrolling across the pharmaceutical ad playing on the TV because if he so much as glances down he'll probably come immediately. Fuck, it's so good. He stares at the ad. Irregular heartbeat. High blood pressure. Dizziness or vertigo. Confusion. Slurred speech. Difficulty swallowing or breathing. Shane hacks particularly loudly and wetly as Ilya is reading that one. Fucking hell, surely this medication has some less sexy side effects.

Shane tries one last thing. He pushes himself all the way down to the root. Gags a little. Spasms with it. Holds there, unmoving, throat trying again and again to swallow, snot and spit and tears all over his pretty face. But Ilya remains extremely committed and loyal to the

pharmaceutical ad. He will not be tempted. He will not let his eyes wander. Stroke. Paralysis. Brain tumors. Thoughts of suicide. Death.

But okay, fine. The ad is over and it's back to hockey, which frankly will not be enough to prevent Ilya from coming so it's time to wrap this up, probably. And fuck. He wants to come into Shane's fucking amazing mouth.

"Fuck, baby," Ilya says, still not looking down. He can't. He'll fucking come. "You are so fucking needy all the fucking time. You want me to fuck your mouth? You want me to use it however I like? Want me to push your head down and make you take it?"

He has to look, though. Just a glance: wild desperation in Shane's eyes as he tries to look back up at Ilya, stuffed so full he can't even respond, shifting back and forth on the pillow, maybe even humping forward a little into the air.

"I think you forgot, lyubimyy," Ilya says, trying to keep his voice even, looking back up at the TV. "You're the one who wants this. I am tolerating your neediness, because I care about you and am willing to sacrifice to meet your needs," he nearly laughs at that line when it comes out of his mouth, tamping his lips down and staring straight ahead, feeling Shane choking around him, can't even breathe the poor thing, trying to hold off for just another minute, giddy with how fucking good this is, fighting the urge to grab Shane's head and push up into it like he's begging Ilya to do. "But that doesn't mean I want to do all the work for you. So lazy. Don't even want to try, just want me to do it. Ungrateful, entitled, embarrassing boy, even with my cock hard in his mouth. Never enough for you, is it? Is nothing ever enough for you, Shane?"

Shane pulls himself up, fast, unbalancing himself a little in his urgency, hands still behind his fucking back, Jesus, the sound of Ilya's cock leaving his throat is obscene, filthy, unmistakable, and Ilya will have to give him a massage later because surely this is terrible for his posture and his spinal alignment, and then he gasps like he's fucking drowning before shoving himself down hard again, crying, pulling back up just to drop his face back down so fucking hard, just collapsing onto Ilya before heaving up again and the noises, Christ: wet gags and glugs and chokes and strangled incoherent whines. Ilya can see him convulse a little every time he takes it so deep, all the fucking way, wet everywhere on his face and fuck he's incredible. Amazing, amazing perfect perfect boy.

"Fuck, Shane," Ilya says, feeling the tide of his orgasm start to creep in, letting it, mildly shocked it hasn't happened yet. "You know I don't use this word lightly because it is disrespectful," Shane tries to moan but it comes out too wet to really even be a noise, just another dribble of snot-spit-tears, heaving up again, and Ilya knows Shane knows exactly the word he's about to say. "But god," Ilya continues, pleasure overtaking the edges of his awareness. "You are such a fucking slut for my cock. Have never ever met anyone so fucking easy for it, who loved it so fucking much."

Shane falls back onto Ilya's cock, the whole weight of him limp suddenly, spasming wildly, desperately, and as he shudders violently, wet garbled noises leaking out from his mouth and nose with the drool and snot, and Ilya is so fucking close anyway, but fuck, he realizes. Shane just fucking came. He came fucking untouched, just from sucking cock and getting called a slut, hands behind his back. Fuck. Holy shit fuck. Ilya didn't even know that was possible.

"Holy fuck," Ilya says, giving up the pretense and grabbing Shane's head, pushing up into his throat. "Holy fuck, Shane. Did you just fucking come? Untouched from sucking cock and being called what you are? A fucking whiny cocksut? Holy fuck, fuck, shit, fuck," I love you, "fuck," and he's coming and it's a fucking pristine orgasm, so fucking good Ilya whites out for a second, holding Shane's head down and fucking flying as he rides it out, holy fucking shit.

And so obviously Shane is out of it for awhile, so quiet, spent, drifting away somewhere as Ilya pushes him into the shower, washes him up, tells him how fucking good and perfect he is, guides him into bed. They lay for a long time, spooned up behind him, breathing together.

"Fuck," Shane says eventually. "That was so hot."

"Baby," Ilya says. I fucking love you. "You are so fucking perfect. Fuck. Every fucking time it's so good."

"I know," Shane says.

"I don't think you do," says Ilya. "It's like you were made in a lab for me by some freak mad scientist. Everything you do is so fucking hot, Shane, fuck, I want to do crazy things to you."

"I want you to fuck me up," Shane says.

Fuck. "Moya lyubov'," Ilya says. "I want to do fucking animal things to you. I want to make you cry and beg and scream for me all the time. Want to make you so drunk off my cock that you forget everything except for how fucking good I feel inside you. Want to make you go out of your mind."

"I can't go again, Ilya," Shane says, lax, breathing slow under Ilya's hand. "Genuinely I want to but it's a no from me right now."

Someday, maybe, Ilya will get another chance to test if a statement like that is true. But not today. "No," he says. "It's a no from me right now, too, lyubimyy. You are just so fucking hot I need to proclaim it all the time." And then he has a genius idea. Boundaries.

Communication. He breathes for a second. Can't let his heart rate go up too high or it will make Shane suspicious, and that's an immediate death blow to the whole endeavor. "And also," he says, praying his hope it will work this time isn't too obvious in his voice. "If we want to keep doing stuff like that, then we need some-" rules, he wants to say, but rules is the word that set Shane off in their text conversation a few days ago when he went on that very sexy, communicative tirade. "Guidelines," he decides on. He tries to keep breathing at the same slow rate.

Shane doesn't answer for a moment. "Guidelines?" He says eventually.

He's still relaxed, which is good. Ilya is doing well, he thinks. He pushes Shane over a little bit at the hips, swings a leg over so he's partially on top of him. Makes it just a little bit harder for him to bolt. This is further than they've gotten yet. "What if I do something you don't like?" Ilya says. "I don't want to hurt you." Shane tenses a little. Christ, he's like a prey

animal. Fucking skittish all the time. Hides so well. Makes it so hard for Ilya to track him down. Makes it so rewarding when he does.

"I like everything you do," he says. "You know that."

And fuck, Ilya does know it, but they're on the precipice of something beyond that, he thinks. Have been for awhile. Probably should've had some sort of talk like this years ago even, when Ilya first realized whatever they had was more than just normal good sex. Shane might not even know it's not normal: he's always been so fucking easy and good and obedient, and he's always gone melty and drifty when Ilya gets it right. From the first time he'd sucked Ilya's cock, pretty much.

Maybe Shane thinks this is what it's like for everyone. But frankly, Ilya has been around the block, and it's not like this for fucking everyone. They can't just assume Ilya will know every single time what Shane does or doesn't want. He's not a mind reader, even though sometimes it feels like he is. And yeah, the mind-melding feel-good feedback loop is kind of the whole point, kind of the whole miraculous ecstatic thing, but surely there's a line. And they need to find it. Or decide what to do when they arrive at it.

Last week in Colorado Ilya had tried to ask Svetlana for advice about this whole thing without giving away who the other person involved was. He's not sure he succeeded, but she pretended not to know it was Shane, at least. He'd been apprehensive, uneasy about his upcoming two potentially probably glorious weeks with Shane. It wasn't like him, to be feeling this way. Anxiety isn't usually something that sits on the surface, for him. He pulled his knees up where he sat on the opposite end of the couch. "So first, what I need you to understand is how fucking crazy good the sex is." She'd rolled her eyes, at first. He's always been into sex. Always liked it. Always described it with enthusiasm. "No," he said. "I swear to fuck I've never ever in my entire life had sex like this. I feel like I am inside of him."

She laughed. "Maybe because you are inside him, Ilyushka? Have you considered that?"

"No, I'm serious," he said. "We haven't even fucked. We have barely even fucking touched each other." That got her attention. He didn't mention the whole used-to-fuck-around-in-high school thing: there was no way she wouldn't immediately know who he was talking about. So for his purposes in this conversation, he was asking for advice about a man he's obsessed with, who he actually hasn't even fucked yet but who's also the best sex of his entire life.

"Okay," she said, impressed. "Fuck, Ilya. You got me. I am intrigued. Tell me your woes."

"It's like," he'd said, searching for the words to explain, "we have barely even done anything for real. Phone stuff, yes. Texts and calls. But in person we have been holding back, because-" he wasn't sure how to explain why. Ilya has never been one to hold back.

Sveta raised a brow. "Because he is closeted and scared to touch you for real?"

"No," Ilya said. "Well, yes. Kind of but no. He is closeted and for very good reason. Could ruin his life if he gets outed. Very very big secret. I might be the only person who knows." He really, really suspects he's the only person who knows. Suspects Shane has never spoken of this to another person alive. Suspects their whole entire thing is something just for Ilya and

no one, nobody else on the entire planet. God, he wishes Shane had someone else to talk to about it. Wishes Shane knew how to talk about it, so he could practice letting his feelings and fears out into the world and see that he can survive whatever unpredictable outcome arises. "But he wants to touch me, for sure. I am the one holding back."

She raised both brows, now, incredulous. "You, Ilyushka? You are the one holding back?"

"Fuck off," he said. "I am a changed man. I am so mature and so healed and I have this crazy thing now that you may have heard about: self control."

She laughed. "I love you, Ilya," she said. "And you are doing much better I agree and it's impressive and actually kind of inspiring, like I kind of think I should go to therapy now too, but no the fuck you don't. So what the fuck are you doing with this guy?"

"So it's like, we haven't fucked. But when we are together it feels like we are fucking. It feels like our minds are fucking." Fuck, that made no sense.

"Your *minds* are fucking. Like you are just... having a really good conversation? Ilya, have you heard of friendship? You don't have to fuck every single friend to have a nice chat."

"No, like... fuck, Sveta, it's like," he looked out the window for a moment, trying to think of how to describe it. "He's so anxious all the time. Super super tense, very frightened. And inside of him there is this soft beautiful perfect lovely thing. Like a very very secret hopeful good thing inside of him that wants to come out, but it's buried so deep and it's hiding, and to find it you need to learn how to navigate all the traps and dead ends and hidden doors and locks, and you have to create a map, because you will never ever discover it again if you don't keep track of all the places it might hide." Svetlana was quiet, listening, beautiful on the couch in the glow of the afternoon. She knows him so well and he loves her so much. "But if you can find it, and if you can convince it to unhide just a tiny little bit and to come out into the light just for a second, it is so, so fucking good. Like, it is actually kind of orgasmic, when that beautiful perfect thing decides to stop hiding from you."

"Sooo," she'd said, more cautious, taking him seriously now. "What exactly are you doing to bring his secret hidden self out into the light?"

"Okay," he said. "I think this is maybe fucked up I don't know. But sometimes we do kind of sex stuff, without the sex. Like, rough-ish kind of normal things you typically would only do during sex. I choked him and spit in his mouth, once, and it made him so fucking calm and happy and open, kind of like he was high, and then we just laid there for like a long time with me on top of him, and we had a very emotional talk about how much it hurts when we're apart and why we shouldn't fuck because it will make everything worse."

"Fuck, Ilya. Jesus. Why will it make everything worse?"

"Because I love him, Sveta," he said, looking away and trying not to tear up. He hates being in touch with his emotions. Always trying not to cry all the time. "And neither of us can come out and he lives very very far away, and he's pretty fucked up obviously, and maybe probably not ready for anything more even though he is fucking desperate for me to fuck him, begs for

it all the fucking time, and we are both too busy to ever see each other, and there are some other reasons I can't really get into."

"Okay," she said. "Wow. This is kind of a clusterfuck."

"I am aware, but thank you so much for your valuable input."

"The mind sex stuff," she said. "Is it like that all the time? You push him around to make him high?"

"Not like, *every* time," he said, thinking about it. Aside from what Svetlana knew about, the other stuff they had done back in the day had sometimes been pretty rough. For, like, first-time teenage experiences and such. Shane just loved sucking cock and getting used from the start, basically. So. "I mean. Kind of? Some times more or less than other times."

"And how does it make you feel? To do it?"

"Fucking amazing," he said. "That's what I'm saying. I have never felt so fucking good without even fucking coming. It's like, he creates these little games for me to play, or like puzzles or something, I don't even know if he knows he's doing it, and he drops little clues and hints, and then when I solve them and he sees I understood he takes my hand and opens it and he puts that little secret beautiful scared thing right into my palm and closes my fingers around it one by one, lets me keep it for a little while and it's like... I feel like I have solved the entire universe. I feel like I understand the fucking meaning of life, Sveta. I want to brush his fucking teeth for him."

She patted him comfortingly on the ankle. "Well," she said. "You are definitely fucked for sure. And also I think you're his dom."

It was nice, to say all of that out loud. He'd been afraid they'd grow apart, when he stopped going back to Russia and then when he quit drinking and partying. But she's still his best friend and she knows him and he loves her.

The terms she told him to google after he described the crazy not sex were somewhat enlightening, unfortunately: he fucking hates googling sex things. It's better to learn on the job, and that has been his philosophy since day one. Because Ilya has fucking excellent instincts. He is a born fucking winner. He doesn't need a playbook to excel at his most primal evolutionary drive. But whatever, it was useful.

He'd told Patti, too, finally, although not really about the sex stuff in its entirety. More about the love stuff, after Shane agreed to come to Minnesota over the summer.

"Why haven't you told me, do you think?" she asked.

He'd looked away. Picked at some lint on the arm of her couch. "Because I didn't want you to tell me to end it," he said. "I love him. I don't think there will ever be anyone else for me in my entire life. I've never met anyone I've been so obsessed with, for so fucking long, years and years, and it never ends it just grows. Everything I do with him makes me want more. And more and more forever. And there will always be more, I know it. It won't get old. The

more I know him the more I realize he is endless. There are never-ending ways to learn and know and see him. I feel fucking crazy, like I want to bury myself inside of him. Like we're meant to live in each other's minds or to, like, be one consciousness, or like. Fuck, I don't know."

She hadn't outright told him to end it. But she didn't necessarily seem super excited about his fucking eternal soulmate love that was going to ruin his life, and she was clear there needed to be a conversation between them, and that Ilya should probably be open and honest and say what he feels. She also wrote a lot of notes down, which didn't feel super encouraging.

"He'll run," Ilya said. "I know he will." What if he didn't, though? What good would it even do if he told Shane and Shane didn't run? They would still be basically nowhere.

But maybe they would still have the secret safe place they go when they're alone. And maybe inside that secret safe place they could unzip each other all the way and rearrange their organs and bones and muscles and zip themselves back up, together this time, like they're just one fused lucid soul and they could finally, finally, acknowledge they have something real and fucking astounding and marvelous and profound. And then maybe when the whole thing blows up both their lives they can at least be together when it happens.

"Maybe," she said. "But if you don't tell him, then what?"

"Probably we fuck and it's amazing," he'd said, gesturing as if it was obvious.

"Sure, but then what?"

"I still love him, and want him all the time, and think about and dream of him every fucking day, and I bite the words back because I am so, so fucking afraid to lose him."

"And will you be happy?"

He hadn't replied. Had said "okay, I will take this into consideration and I'm ready to be done speaking of it for today."

Ilya knows that this moment right now, after having barely recovered from their second failure to get beyond the first sentence of phase two today, is most definitely not the right time for the love conversation. It might never be the right time for the love conversation at all ever, in any capacity: he hasn't decided yet. But. This moment right now, with Shane disarmed a little, might be the time for a sex conversation.

He takes a slow breath before he replies. "I like everything we do, too," he says. "And I want to make you feel good."

"You always make me feel good, Ilya," Shane says. Ilya loves him.

"But for example," Ilya says. "Sometimes I like to make you do things."

"Yeah. Because I want you to."

"Yes, but what if I am wrong and I make you do something you don't actually want?"

"You're never wrong."

"Christ, Shane." It's too much responsibility, he doesn't say. You can't just hand over your entire self like this with no mechanism for taking it back. "Even so, if I fuck it up and get it wrong some time, I want to know so we can stop. So I don't hurt you."

"You know I'm just as strong as you, right? Like, you can't actually make me do shit, Ilya."

"Okay well that is a bold claim that maybe we can test sometime, not right now, but sometimes you get a little..." Ilya trails off.

"Out of it?"

"Yes," Ilya says. "And it makes me scared that I will hurt you or you maybe won't know you didn't like it until later."

Shane is quiet.

"So," Ilya says, forging ahead, trying not to get too excited about how close they are to at least one of the objectives of this conversation. "I want to say really clearly and agree together on what we will do if we don't like it, before or during or after."

Shane is still breathing slow, heart calm. Fuck yes. Hell fucking yes it's happening. "Okay," Shane says.

Ilya tries to keep his heart rate down. Elation. Ilya is so fucking close to taking home a medal. Because he's a fucking winner. A champion. He tightens his arm around Shane's chest.

"So. First. Is there anything you for sure know you will not like?" Ilya asks.

Shane tenses at that a little. Relaxes again. He pushes his face deeper into the mattress. Ilya can feel him trying to stay present and calm and he loves him so fucking much.

"You're doing a very good job," Ilya says, tears pricking at his eyes for whatever stupid reason.

"Fuck off," Shane says, tense again immediately, like he's maybe gearing up to shove Ilya off him entirely. "You don't have to be a fucking asshole, I'm trying."

"No lyubimyy," Ilya says, trying to keep his voice, breath, heart even. Peaceful. "I mean it, I always mean it. I know you are trying I can tell, and I am so fucking impressed. I know it's hard for you. Thank you for doing this for me, Shane." Fucking tears still there, threatening to spill over, Shane slowly relaxing again beneath him. "It makes me so, so happy that you are talking to me like this right now."

They breathe in sync for a few minutes. Ilya tries to pull himself back together. He can't be blubbering all over himself right now just because Shane is resisting the urge to throw Ilya off of him and run away forever into the horizon. Just because he's trying to uncover some secret hidden things inside of himself right now, things he'd rather stay buried forever,

because Ilya has asked him to. Because someone needs to keep this conversation on track, and it was never going to be Shane. So he breathes, and he lets the peaceful joy of being here, doing this, sharing a heartbeat with someone, wash over him a little bit.

He doesn't even know when it happened. Can't even bring himself to panic about it anymore. Inescapable. It's like it was always happening, from before the very first time Ilya even saw him, stoic and focused as a fucking 12-year-old at that fucking hockey camp. And then later, when Ilya signed with Borealis because of Shane: didn't know why at the time, aside from he knew Shane was already on the roster, liked him, needed to pick a team. And then when his first billet arrangement had fallen through and he'd ended up with the Hollanders. It's like maybe this shimmering shooting star of a thing has always always been there, maybe for all of time, from before either of them were ever born or the fucking sun had even formed, and they just needed to find each other and set it free.

And he knows he's fucking delusional, knows he's getting carried away in whatever chemical rush, but isn't the chemistry the point? No one. No one. Has ever made Ilya want to fucking climb into their existence like this, fuck. He wants every single part of Shane to be his and this has to be cosmic. It's fucking eternal. Even if they only get to have a little bit. Even if they can never unleash it in its entirety, however vast and all-consuming and rapturous it would be, even just this taste is nearly enough to make Ilya believe in something benevolent out there in the cosmos, letting him have this sublime moment.

And fuck. They haven't even fucked.

Shane's voice is soft, heart beating slow and steady with Ilya's. "Ilya," he says. "You make me feel safe."

I love you I love you I love you.

"You make me feel safe, too," Ilya says. I love you I love you I fucking love you.

Shane breathes again for a minute. "We've never really done anything I didn't like," he says. "It's not like I sit around reverse-fantasizing about stuff I don't want. So I don't know, I guess. No. There's nothing," and he tenses up a tiny little bit when he says nothing.

Ilya gives it a second. Considers his options. He tries to keep his breathing steady when he says it, really soft, quiet. He's ready for the flinch. To maybe get thrown off. "What makes you stressed about nothing, Shane?"

Shane's heart is beating a little harder but he's doing a really good job staying still and calm and Ilya loves him.

"Um," Shane says, whispering. "There really is nothing. Just, I think maybe I, like. It's maybe too much nothing?"

Fuck he's so perfect. "Too much?" Ilya asks. Waits while Shane breathes.

"Yeah, but, like, fuck. Um-"

"It's okay, moya lyubov'. It's okay." They breathe in silence for a minute. "It's just us, here. No one can see you."

Shane snuffles wetly. Ilya loves him. Holy fuck.

"I, like, I genuinely think I'd let you do anything to me. I can't think of one fucking thing I wouldn't let you do, Ilya. And I'm not, like, a sex expert or anything, obviously-"

Ilya can't help but interrupt that. "I have to disagree. Expert mouth at least."

Shane laughs through his nose. "So it's not like I know what all the options are, um, but mostly I just want everything you want and probably like, in never-ending quantities and in every possible way."

Because what Ilya wants is what Shane wants. And Shane likes when Ilya can show him what that is. He tries to stay quiet and soft and slow. "You are so good," he says, "holy fuck, baby." He collects himself.

"I like it when I don't have to know what I need," Shane says. "Because you know better."

"What if I want to do something that might hurt you?"

Shane doesn't even flinch, still totally relaxed and breathing slow. "Yes," he says, peaceful, on a sigh. "Please, Ilya. You know better."

Holy fuck. Jesus fucking Christ. They cannot have sex again today, fucking hell. "Do you want me to ask or tell you, before I do it?" He lets Shane process that for a minute.

"I guess maybe if you're going to, like, saw off my arm or something," he says.

What the fuck? *If* you're going to? As if it's fine to saw his fucking arm off if Ilya lets him know beforehand??

No wonder Shane was fucking tensing up at the nothing thing, if this is the type of shit he's okay with. Jesus fucking hell.

"I hope it is okay if I never ever cut off your fucking arm, Shane," Ilya says.

"Yeah," Shane says. "It was just an example. I trust you to tell me or not tell me or whatever." He's still so relaxed. He's okay with this, now. They're doing it. The plane is off the fucking runway.

And fuck. It is game time. Because legend Ilya Rozanov is not just excellent at crafting actionable three-step plans, he is the type of player who makes quick game time decisions. Are they always based on pre-determined strategy? no. Are they always what the experts think he should do? no. But he has Fucking. Instinct. He is like a goddamn bloodhound, chasing the scent of the win for as long as it fucking takes and he is fucking good at doing it. And he has the scent in the wind now, baby. This is it. He is re-configuring phase two of the three-pronged plan.

He will slowly trickle the conversation. They will start by discussing a few small sex boundaries right now in this moment. That will be enough for today. It will open up avenues for future exploration and research and agreeance. He will stop speaking of the conversation. He will not mention it again. And as they journey down those avenues over the course of the next two entire fucking weeks, Ilya will continue to pry little tidbits of the conversation out of Shane fucking Hollander's fortress of a mind. He will save the hardest things for a little later, after Shane has a chance to practice a little. Improve. And they will cover all of Ilya's objectives and walk out of this ordeal new men. Stronger men. Men forged in the fires of fucking concerted, repeated, brutal, extremely sexy efforts to open up to each another.

And that is how Ilya Rozanov will execute the three-pronged plan in its entirety.

Chapter 7: '12-'13: Shane & Ilya

Chapter Summary

In which: Shane describes every thought he has during the whole two week period he spends with Ilya in vivid detail without a single line of quoted dialogue; Ilya does maybe a little too much melodramatic pontification about hubris in classical mythology but he is a diva like that so it's fine; both POVs devolve into second-person on numerous occasions, sometimes for entire paragraphs, & also in which the longest single sentence comprises, allegedly and a new record if true, 447 words.

Chapter Notes

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

Summer 2012

Ilya is gentle with it the first time, and Shane wants to make him get rough, pushy; it's too much, sometimes, lately. The gentleness. Shane can't really land on a safe emotion when it happens: the feelings that want to rise up and take him over when Ilya gets tender, soft, looks at him like he's fucking pricelessly valuable, like Shane is marvelous and wondrous and remarkable even as he does something so disgraceful he'll never willingly speak of it again, are certainly not ones he's comfortable allowing into his conscious mind. He hasn't fully verified those feelings even exist, actually. In fact, as far as he knows there are no ravenous emotions of any sort clawing at his throat and his insides and tearing him into shreds.

It's exhausting, trying to fight yourself all the time. And the battles never end, apparently. Because just when Shane surrendered his war against his body and its desires, a war he fought long and fucking hard for years before accepting it was unwinnable, he'd been forced to wage a whole new war that, frankly, he wasn't ready for. He wishes his mind, which apparently has no actual control over anything that's fucking happening here and never has, and his stupid horny body and its impulses that he can't defeat would work together for once, team up to quell the nonsensical insurrection his fucking crazed frenzied heart is trying to pull, just collaborate in his long-term favor to defeat this monstrous world-eating thing that's growing and growing like a fucking cancer, eating up all the healthy good normal controllable acceptable emotions and replacing them with this other mutated starved unnatural hideous giant feeling that won't stop fucking screeching and devouring and expanding, taking everything over and making it perilous to even look anywhere inside of yourself at all. Christ.

Like, Ilya is fucking kissing his neck right now, breath hot saying he'll never have anyone better, never has, so sweet and pretty and he wants to take care of Shane, make him come so

easy and nice, won't even have to work at all, lovely fingers lube-slick inside him, stretching him apart and he can hear how fucking wet he is, dripping because Ilya is making it nice for him so it won't hurt him so he can feel so good, and Shane is halfway through a visceral fantasy in which they're middle-aged and married, crowfeet at the eyes and an entire fucking room for all their trophies, with tween children they're at their shared wits' end trying to parent before he's slamming back into his body, realizing how far beyond the realm of okay he's allowed his mind to stray yet a-fucking-gain, how close those feral neglected nonexistent feelings are to clawing their way into the light and demanding Shane acknowledge them.

So yes, Shane likes it a little rough for many, many reasons, some he's willing to acknowledge and more he's not. And one of those reasons, he's realizing right now in this moment as Ilya is finding his prostate and rubbing it and fuck, Ilya, oh god and he's trying to push up into it, lips smearing wet teeth scraping across his jaw and a third fucking finger now and please, Ilya, fuck me, is that he can pretend the roughness means an absence of tenderness. It doesn't, he knows. The tenderness is, unfortunately, beyond evident every single time and only continues to grow in its inescapability. But he can pretend, at least, when Ilya is being a little mean, making it sting, that the hurt is all there is. Pretend enough to keep things stable. Because even though the feelings very well might not exist and remain as-yet unconfirmed, the tender gentle stuff makes them especially difficult to continue not confirming.

But oh god who the fuck even cares because fuck Ilya, yes, and the rhythm is so good now big strong body pressed up all behind you on top of you saying come, baby, it's time to come and you are and the pleasure is fucking blinding, rolling in on one vast tsunami of a wave, nothing left when it hits except for how fucking good you feel, have never felt so fucking good, and he's kissing you like he needs it to live, now, has rolled you out of the wet spot hand careful on your neck and finally, finally, you're giving in to the softness, the gentleness, letting yourself feel good and safe and another unnameable feeling sneaks in too about how slow and intentional Ilya is as he's pushing inside you, how many times he's checking if you're okay, how intently he's focusing on your face, eyes darting everywhere, looking for any sign of discomfort or displeasure or dislike, and it feels so fucking good when he finally fills and takes and owns and claims you, pushes inside slow and waits for you to adjust before starting to move, finding an angle that makes you start begging, pleading, chanting yes yes yes holy fuck yes oh my god holy fuck, Ilya Ilya please, fuck, and despite having always known it would be so wildly, incredibly, indescribably good it would change his entire fucking life when it happened Shane is still fucking shocked.

So at first, when Ilya fucking finally fucks him and a whole new world of possibility and pleasure appears before them, which they begin exploring together with great thoroughness and passion, Shane doesn't clock what Ilya is doing. He's too consumed by the fucking ecstatic mindless bliss of knowing Ilya will take care of him, sees what he needs, likes it when Shane feels good, tells Shane how lovely good perfect he is all the fucking time. Makes him feel so safe and warm and calm, like he doesn't need to be so vigilant when he's here with Ilya above or beneath the covers, on the rug and the couch and the table and against the wall and bent over the desk and in the mirror and in the dark and the light and all the times between, shameless and drunk on it and so fucking open and free and unafraid, like he never ever has been, fucking soaring with how fucking good it feels to get what he wants again and again and again.

Those other unverified feelings do try to creep in alongside the pleasure, of course. They're persistent. There all the time, really, lingering in the background like a maybe-ghost in a decades-old photo somebody tries to show you, the type of maybe-ghost that supposedly haunted their parents' old house or their grandfather after the war or the school built on an indigenous burial ground: the kind of probable illusion you don't see at first, but once you look in exactly the right place and squint into the grainy underexposed darkness and recognize the maybe eyes or teeth or distorted body hiding grotesque in the shadows, unseen unknown unwanted, a spiritual and maybe now a tangible manifestation of a great and terrible wrongness that happened somehow, somewhere to someone, it sends an uncanny prickle all down your body.

But he doesn't need to give those awful contorted feelings a moment's thought, really. Not when he can make a wish and blink over at Ilya and Ilya will read his mind and make it happen immediately so Shane is too busy getting fucked or choked or degraded or sucking dick or pretending he doesn't want it, saying no no Ilya no, so that when he finally fucking gets it they'll both lose their fucking sanity.

Stupidly, foolishly, for nearly a week he thinks his ploy worked: that he has successfully distracted Ilya with sex and managed to delay the conversation Ilya is trying to force upon him, however temporarily.

He only notices when they've finally left the apartment for the first time to go anywhere other than the gym: he's trying not to imagine holding Ilya's hand right now, on the sidewalk in front of the world as Ilya orders him a sandwich that doesn't meet Shane's dietary restrictions from a food truck, will probably make him eat it if Shane says no, will maybe even force Shane's mouth open himself and shove a bite in and open and close his jaw with his big strong hockey player hand, force Shane to chew, and it will be so weirdly hot they'll need to fuck about it before either of them are done eating, which will be a two-for-one because maybe Shane won't even have to eat the sandwich after all, and he's noting to himself that later, during their post-sex debrief, he should tell Ilya he wants to wake up with Ilya already fucking him, preferably within the next week.

And wait a second. Post-sex debrief?

They definitely do have a post-sex debrief, now that he's thinking about it, which has consistently been occurring after they have a really nice effortful fuck and lay for awhile together and Shane can talk again. And they've debriefed like, a lot of things actually. They have safe words now. And Shane has agreed to quite a bit and started suggesting some things and he's gotten pretty confident Ilya will be interested in executing whatever he suggests, no matter how scared Shane is it will be too far, too much finally, will push Ilya away.

And it's not like Shane doesn't know Ilya is training him. He knows. It freaks him out a little how much he likes it, but really, what doesn't freak him out about the things he likes?

He hasn't figured out how to say it, yet, or if he actually needs to, but something about Ilya guiding him, instructing him, modeling how to address an upset or ask for what he wants or accept an apology, praising Shane when he does it, when he figures out how to do it, when he finally fucking says it, rips open some immense archetypal desire, urge, need, screaming from somewhere that has to be deep in his genetic code, has to be from a time before

language or conscious memory, preserved somehow in his evolution because it's so fucking powerful, so overwhelming and it demands he give in, that he be nothing and no one beyond whatever Ilya needs and wants, learn so good for him, show him, rewire his whole fucking brain just to please him. Shut down everything that isn't just for him.

And maybe if he can just let Ilya take it all, if he can unearth enough of the keys and pass them over, lead Ilya to where the controls are so he can learn them, if he can just let Ilya handle it, take care of him, make him into whatever desirable thing he sees somehow already in Shane, then Shane will finally be able to escape. Can finally be free from all this lurching cramping fear and the nameless terrors haunting the corridors of his own mind and just be Ilya's perfect pleasing pliant thing, soft and open and warm and content forever and ever.

Ilya has been doing it for awhile. Coaching him. Rewarding Shane when he does it right. Does it how Ilya likes. Just for him. To be good for him. Since they first reunited last summer. And not always during sex or whatever other sex-ish stuff. Just during normal texts and calls, sometimes. Like he's showing Shane he can be safe with Ilya always, not just when Shane is too far gone to stop himself. Like he's helping Shane sort out and fix and open some of the boarded-up rooms of his mind and making it okay, making it so nothing falls apart or collapses or dies.

Fuck. It's so hot, realizing right now in this moment on the sidewalk, as he watches two men holding hands down the street like it's no big deal that Ilya didn't actually fall, barely even pretended to fall for Shane's scheme to put off the conversation. Shane fell for Ilya's scheme to trick him into it instead.

Because Ilya always knows better than Shane.

And really, Ilya's scheme hadn't even been hidden. If Shane had actually been successful in putting off the conversation they wouldn't have been having unprotected anal sex all week after Ilya produced an extremely recent negative STI panel, and Ilya wouldn't be slapping him around or tying him up or making him come again and again and again with no rest, even as Shane begs him to stop, says no no no no I can't Ilya no, stop, no before he fucking comes again, so fucking out of it and fucking grateful to be, clumsy when he pushes up onto his knees, bleary and crying and shoving his face into the wet spot on the mattress, ass in the air, pulling his own ass cheeks apart and reveling in how fucking ashamed he should be, begging Ilya to come inside him and then screaming and sobbing and no no no no Ilya, fuck I can't do it, no fuck yes fuck please no god with how fucking sensitive he is, how painful it is, how little he knows or remembers or cares about anything at all. And Shane had known it, too. Ilya had been more than clear they couldn't fuck without a talk. So they must've had a talk. And then continued having a talk. All week long.

Shane is off his game, obviously. But it's so good, letting Ilya teach him, letting Ilya show him how to be okay, how to be honest and open and afraid and still be alright afterward. Letting Ilya coax the words out of his mouth so gentle and warm and affectionate, like Shane is special. And he wants to do it so well. For Ilya. Wants to give in, let go. Stop holding it all inside. Wants to trust there will be something to break his fall, to catch him at the bottom of the windy cliff he's teetering on the edge of.

But it's good he realizes what Ilya's game is before it's too late. Because there's a reason Shane is avoiding the conversation, and it's not the sex stuff. It's not anything Ilya has brought up yet. But he wants to bring it up, Shane is pretty damn sure. There's a reason Ilya has been so fucking insistent on having this conversation, has been making a big deal about it for months, has reformatted it and retried it and refused to let Shane put it off and it's not just because he wants Shane to pick a safe word. If that's all he wanted, he wouldn't have made such a big fucking production about it so many times. He would've been casual about it in a believable way probably, wouldn't have freaked Shane out with his weirdness, his intensity, if the sex was the only thing he wanted to talk about. He wouldn't have tried to stop having sex with Shane if the only thing he wanted to discuss was whether he could slap Shane across the face. Big fucking whoop, Ilya, a little face slapping. You already know Shane wants it anyway, Jesus.

Shane can see it now, looking back: how excited Ilya had been about Shane's openness to the post-sex debrief. How successful he'd felt when Shane engaged constructively. Shane had been kind of excited too, to be fair. This was a new thing for him and it was shockingly easy and okay and it actually was making the sex better even though he'd been afraid it would be worse, if he had to explain to Ilya what to do. It wasn't like that, though. It was good. Made it more good, somehow, knowing Ilya knows just how fucking far Shane wants him to take it.

Shane might not have noticed Ilya was tricking him into the conversation at first, but it's not because he can't read him. It's because none of what he's been tricked into discussing so far has been the real reason Ilya wanted to talk. The real thing Shane is trying to avoid.

What Shane can't figure out is why.

Ilya tried to cut off the sex for a reason, before. Shane hadn't understood at the time. Had taken it mostly as a rejection and a confirmation of his wrongness. But he's had a year to ruminate, and to experience exactly the type of emotionally meaningful sex that he and Ilya should certainly not be having, and he's formulated some new theories that make more sense in the face of Ilya's extremely obvious desire for and attraction to him. His primary theory, which he can support in all relevant instances, is that Ilya tried to cut off the sex before it got this far because he doesn't see a future with Shane. And if they entangle themselves any further, the end will become inevitable. And Shane agrees with that assessment, sort of.

The part Shane disagrees with is the no-sex part. They can't stop having sex, obviously. And thank fucking Christ Ilya eventually realized that. It's just not an option Shane is willing to put back on the table, right now or fucking ever if at all possible. But there is nothing beyond that for them. There can't be. There is no possible future beyond as much amazing sex as they can possibly have for as long as they can pull it off without anyone noticing.

Because when Shane looks for that future: when he tries to play out the options, to identify any possible paths there might be, the only thing he's ever met with is a wall of screaming dark terror. And he can't get past it. Because hockey is the only thing Shane can do. He only has this one thing. If he loses it, he isn't sure he'll exist anymore.

So why Ilya wants to talk about it so bad, wants to bring about the end, Shane cannot fathom. Because once they admit to certain things they'll have gone too far. They'll have breached the limits of what they can realistically allow themselves to have. And once they've breached

those limits, they'll never be able to go back. To what they have right now. This amazing thing they have right fucking now. Here. They'll have destroyed the precarious safety of whatever they are forever and ever. And it will end. And it will hurt. And Shane will never recover.

All the rest of the week, as they wander the city and fuck and sleep in a heap and wake up and fuck some more Shane waits for it. He rewards Ilya by being compliant, receptive to the post-sex debrief as long as Ilya keeps the subject matter within mostly non-romantic parameters, because Shane wants him to know that Shane is trying and wants to be so good, wants to give Ilya the type of communication he needs, can listen and learn and change. And he has, he knows it. He's gotten better.

Friendship, Shane can deal with. They're best friends. Ilya is his only friend, pretty much, and they both know it. Sex, Shane can deal with. He's done trying to deny himself good fucking sex when it's standing in front of him dripping beads of sweat, out of breath still after a run, looking Shane up and down and grinning crookedly and pushing him down onto the bed and blowing him and fucking him and then showering them both together and washing Shane's hair like he's a kid. But love? As in *love*? No. If there's love involved here, beyond just, like, brotherly affection and maybe the type of weird nonverbal brain bond twins sometimes have because of how close and the same they are and how deeply and thoroughly they understand the other, then that's something they need to keep to themselves. Keep on the inside.

Because when Shane tries to look at it, tries to see exactly what he's dealing with here, from an emotional standpoint, he can't. He literally cannot do it. There is something there, and it's huge and eating him alive and he senses it and yes, he knows what it is on an objective level, he can read the signs okay, but when he tries to get closer, tries to assess exactly what it means or where it's going or why or how or please god, how the fuck am I supposed to deal with this?? he can't. All that's there is the terror and the darkness, no paths and no light, just the dread of whatever beastly craven starved mutated thing is hiding behind all the horror and fear, waiting to consume and destroy him.

So when Ilya does it, finally tries to bring it up at the end of their two weeks of shared, agreed-upon delusion and Shane doesn't know how to stop him anymore, has tried everything he can think of and even some things he hadn't thought of and he's sinking, awful all-consuming terror dread panic like quicksand and the harder he tries to fight it the deeper he is and he can't let this happen it can't be over they don't have a fucking future and he's losing feeling in his arms and his legs and he can't hear can hardly see, needs it to stop it has to stop he doesn't know what he's doing or saying he needs to get out to get away he can't do this might be his voice he hears letting out these awful scared noises and he's fighting Ilya, pushing him and bucking up and he has to get out he can't he can't no no no fuck god he can't and he's up against the wall now and he's trying to escape and they're sliding down to the floor and a frame falls down and Ilya catches it before it hits Shane in the head and Shane is heaving himself away, trying to get out but Ilya is on top of him, squeezing him and he's trying to buck him off, slam him into the wall but Ilya is gripping too tight, it's going to bruise and somehow they're collapsing onto the floor and Shane is still fighting it but he realizes Ilya is saying something wrapped tight around him and Shane, he's saying, panting, shirtless and sweating all over him. Shane. It's okay. I won't make you. I won't make you say

it, it's okay moya lyubov', and Shane gives in and lets Ilya lay on top of him on the floor for a long time telling him it's okay while they both cry.

Shane doesn't know why Ilya wanted to talk about it so bad. Doesn't know what could possibly benefit either of them as a result of a conversation about that terrible awful thing they're both clearly trying to keep under control. But obviously he'd really, really wanted to, for whatever fucking insane incomprehensible reason. As if maybe somehow he hadn't realized saying it out loud is the end. But how could he not know? How could it not be? There's a reason they haven't already talked about it, obviously. Because it will blow up the whole fucking thing, to acknowledge how fucked they are. And the thing is good. It's so fucking good how it is right now. Yes, Shane wishes they saw each other more, but when they do it's fucking great. It's worth it. But no one can ever know and it can't be anything more.

It's good Ilya understands now, too. That he didn't make Shane say it. Didn't make him admit to anything beyond the achievable reality in front of them. Because Shane would've done it, knowing damn well it meant the end, if Ilya really thought it best. It's not like Shane would've run out into the street half naked just to escape saying it. Probably. He's not sure what he would've done but not that, he thinks. If Ilya had just kept trying a little bit longer, Shane would've given in.

But he hadn't, because he knows Shane is right. And it's good they're on the same page now.

Shane is glad.

@TheGossipher

oh my god Hollanov sighting confirmed at hidden beach??

❤️21 🔄7

@wondyewreckshun

@TheGossipher where have you been dude, they were all over the city for like a week

❤️10 🔄2

@SeryaJonnes

@wondyewreckshun wait are Hollzy and Roz friends??

❤️8 🔄3

@wondyewreckshun

@SeryaJonnes bffs in high school but no one has rllly seen them together for yearsss

❤️9 🔄3

@hollanovtruther241

@SeryaJonnes yeah & if u look into their history it's cray. more than friends

❤️3 🔄8

@hollanovtruther241

@SeryaJonnes so for them to be seen together is BIG bc it seemed like they broke up

❤️2 🔄5

@TheGossipher

@hollanovtruther241 fuck offfff please. u don't have to be so weird in my mentions every fucking time Roz comes up

❤️15 🔄4

@hollanovtruther241

@TheGossipher have you SEEN the photo of them spooning on a couch?? They're holding. Hands.

❤️4 🔄3

@maryiah45

@hollanovtruther241 bro. they are very obviously both drunk in that pic like there is literal vom on the floor 🤔🤔 means nothing

❤️6 🔄4

[@maryiah45](#)

[@hollanovtruther241](#) also newsflash: FRIENDS SPOON SOMETIMES. Roz is obviously a physical touch person

❤️ 4 🔄 2

[@TheGossipher](#)

[@maryiah45](#) "obviously a physical touch person" lmao they rilly made you say water is wet to counter their delusions

❤️ 7 🔄 4

Fall 2012

He can feel Dyani's concern. It radiates. Every time he's distracted, unfocused, not listening. Every time he's moody. All the time. He tries to disguise it. To seem the same. He knows it isn't working. Fuck.

She's just left in a cloud of cheap, apple-scented body spray, but not before making him eat a fried egg on some rice; she sat on the couch and stared at him in silence until he ate it because she's a really good friend and he doesn't know why he has all these good fucking friends when he's so moody and busy and self-absorbed all the time.

This is why he'd been so closed off, before. So no one would know or notice or care when he isn't doing well. Because really, what can other people do? Why upset them? Concern them? The only solution is to handle it. Because it's Ilya's problem. Nobody else's. And he cares about them all too much: David, Yuna, Sveta, Dyani- Shane- and he needs them too badly, to put this burden onto them.

At least he knows it can be dealt with, however temporarily; he'd been pretty good, borderline happy, for awhile. Two years. Two years of people and places and thoughts and ideas and experiences and concerted efforts to learn and grow on a personal and interpersonal level he never would've had if he went pro with hockey at 18. That's not nothing. And sure, he'd been depressed before that for however long, on and off, but he hadn't known, as a child. How to treat himself. How to speak to himself. How to recognize and respect and work with his thoughts and feelings and instincts, not for or against them. And now he does. So surely it will be better this time. Surely.

He watches a fly buzzing at the window for awhile.

It doesn't feel better, this time. But he also hasn't really asked for help, exactly. Or sought it at all.

Since the summer.

Since weeks and weeks before Dyani came back and saw the sorry state he was in. Weeks during which Ilya only left the apartment for his film course seminars, going pale from lack of sun, piecing together his final project from clips of the light changing in his apartment at different angles, motes of dust sparkling suspended in its golden path, clips of himself, motionless in his sheets or on his couch or in his bathtub or in the mirror, fetal on the floor with the light moving around and over him, interspersed with heavily-cropped, zoomed-in clips of Shane naked in his sheets, on his couch, in the bathtub, in the mirror, on the floor, at different angles, ankle and wrist and knuckle and ear and hip and belly button and forearm and crease where thigh meets ass and calf and shoulder blade, unidentifiable save Ilya's existing, public friendship with him.

Ilya wasn't trying to blow up his life, thankfully, and even though he'd gotten permission to film some clips of Shane for personal use on the condition Shane be unrecognizable in them, he most certainly had not gotten permission to turn in said clips for a grade, outing himself and possibly them both, so he saved that version for just him, kept it on a physical drive labeled 'Rozanov Genealogy' because that sounds pretty boring and valueless, in the same lockbox he keeps the legal documents from his father's death. And then he deleted all the clips of Shane before turning it in, knowing he'd likely get a C at best with just plotless clips of himself motionless, staring at nothing while the sun sets and rises and peaks, on the couch and under the sheets and in the fucking bath as the bubbles go flat around you, sound clipping in and out in such a way that it seems maybe some portions have been cut, milliseconds of clips: the pale backside of a knee, the curve of a lower back, the edges of dark hair splayed over white sheets, that vanish so quickly you wonder if they were ever really there because now it's just Ilya alone again, crumpled on the cool hexagonal tile of his bathroom floor just like he was a moment before but the light has changed.

They'd imagined it, together, by text and phone call on dozens of occasions: the first time. How it would be when at long fucking last it finally happened. Ilya had imagined it on his own for years. He knows Shane did the same. So when Ilya finally fucking did it on the morning after his big strategic breakthrough with phase two of the plan, on their second morning in a row waking up here together when he finally fucked Shane and it was better than they could've ever fucking dreamed, it was hard to ever stop.

He kept Shane on his back for it at first, even though the angle was probably worse, because they both wanted to see each others' faces when Ilya finally pushed in and they felt how fucking good it was; Shane had said it, Ilya had said it, they'd both repeatedly described in vivid detail how badly they wanted to see the wonder, desire, hunger and satisfaction and euphoria and need and want on the other's face in the bright light of day on top of the sheets, and so that's what they did and it was astoundingly good. As fucking always.

Ilya's re-configured phase two went really, really well after that. Like. Unbelievably well. Incredibly well.

In hindsight, he never should've expected anything different; if there's one thing he and Shane understand about each other, it's sex. Well, and hockey, probably, but definitely, definitely sex. For a long time they hadn't needed to speak about it in any great detail to know they

were on the same page. And sure, Shane is resistant to verbalizing the reality of what he wants, sometimes, but for the most part he's acknowledged those things within himself and has made them clear to Ilya in other ways, so to speak them aloud was a natural progression; Shane knew Ilya already knew, and he also knew he'd reap near-immediate rewards for talking, so it got easier and easier to coax little bits of the conversation out of him the more Ilya did it.

After less than a week he and Shane had safe words, a list of verbally expressed yeses and maybes that Ilya was fucking canonizing and Shane might not even remember admitting to, hickeys all over both their upper thighs and hips, plans for what they'd do months in the future, an assortment of new exercises to incorporate into Ilya's routine, and a never-ending list of ways they might have a fucking monumentally good time together and only with each other. Because you see each other like no one else ever has. And you know each other like no one else ever could. And there has never, ever been another like this and there never will be again.

But eventually, after maybe a week where Ilya skipped too much class and they barely even made it to the gym (not that they weren't getting a never-ending practical workout anyway: not even just cardio and lifting actually, now that he thinks of it: flexibility too-- and honestly, Ilya should incorporate more of that into his day-to-day training. Should maybe do yoga like Shane does, see what type of positions they could try if they were both that fucking bendy, so he added it to the exercise list), they managed to leave the apartment. And for a few days in between the endless amazing sex Ilya walked Shane all around campus and his neighborhood and downtown and they took the bus to the sculpture garden and took selfies on Ilya's nice-ish digital camera, which he'd splurged on in a rare non-rent non-food dip into the relatively modest inheritance he'd managed to scrape out of Russia before Alexei got his hands somehow on it, and ate ramen at the tiny shop by his apartment and went to the beach at which, fucking crazily somehow while Ilya was gone for two seconds buying them ice cream Shane got photographed shirtless by a fan, helping someone get their fucking cat out of a tree like some sort of sexy firefighter (they'd left shortly after that, had taken the bus home and sat next to each other rock hard, staring straight ahead, hands folded in their laps for the entire trip, unspeaking until Ilya locked the door of his apartment behind them and folded Shane over the edge of the bed and rimmed him until he came clawing at the duvet and garbling out incoherent pleas for more fuck, oh god fuck, and then after, Shane flipping himself over and nearly kicking Ilya in the process, pulling him insistent up onto the bed and getting a hand between them and holding Ilya's face so gentle with the other and looking into his eyes and making him come in stuttered thrusts while he tells him how fucking bad he wants him all the fucking time, can't eat can't sleep can't think about anything else, how he's never ever wanted anything more than Ilya in his whole fucking life, wants to make him come, please, please come, need it, wanna see you, come on me, on me on me please, fuck, yes, thank you and then Ilya fingers him open for a long time and fucks him for a longer time, keeping them both on the edge until Shane is actually fucking wailing, so far fucking gone he doesn't even know what Ilya is saying anymore and it's a good fucking thing because what Ilya's saying is dangerously close to a vow of eternal love and adoration and to be Shane's fucking slave, if that's what Shane wants, forever and fucking ever, never ever stop, give him everything always until they both die in hopefully the exact same moment because Ilya doesn't want to live without him for even one fucking second), and walked down stone arch bridge while Ilya

imagined holding his hand and sat on the roof of Ilya's apartment building with Shane's head on his shoulder as they watched the night fall around them.

Of course Ilya flew too close to the sun. How could he not? Only a psychopath wouldn't, in his shoes. Or some sort of fucking automaton.

It's easy to blame Icarus, seems obvious: silly, stupid boy, but was it really his fault, what happened? Flying is dangerous. And what's more dangerous is how fucking good it feels to leap out the narrow window of your tower and watch the walls of your prison get smaller and smaller beneath you as you rise ever-higher, to heights no one before you has ever been, feeling the golden warmth of the sun hit your bare skin for the first time in your whole life up to this point, the whole life in which you've been pacing the damp cool dark of your tower or stumbling blind through the convoluted crevasses of the labyrinth, captive to a king who wants to exploit and possess and control you for his own gain, wants to prevent you from being your own, from determining your own life and hope and future.

Surely it's not Icarus' fault, that everything in him so desperately cried for freedom, begged him to fucking fly, needed and wanted him so insistently to bask in the glowing liberating rays of the sun he'd never fucking seen, had only heard of, had only ever imagined in the dark while he tried to sleep, that he couldn't stop himself when he went too far? The walls, the king, the world below were to blame. Because Icarus never would've been so starved for it if he hadn't been raised in a fucking cage like a fucking animal, with no options or choices or purpose. Maybe he could've stopped himself, could have held back, if it hadn't been such a shock how good it was. If he'd even known something that feels this good could happen to him.

Yes, Ilya had written an essay in the spring about Icarus. No, the thesis wasn't much stronger than that. And despite prophesying his own doom while attempting to absolve himself of the fault for it he'd gone ahead and invited Shane to Minnesota for two weeks. And then he had, in full possession of all his mental faculties and knowing goddamn well what he was doing, not just engaged in further unbelievably good sex but had gotten giddy, overconfident about his repeated successes convincing Shane to talk more openly, to be less afraid of the goings-on in his kinky beautiful mind, had entirely too much fucking delusional fun laughing with him and play-fighting in the kitchen, flicking water at his wonderful face just to see his cute irritated little expression as they assembly-lined sandwiches, and basically taking him on little dates all around town. So yes. Ilya had so much delusional fun that he tried to confess his love.

Like a fucking impulsive immature idiot boy who'd ignored all the warnings from the people who tried to fucking save him, tried to warn him not to let it go too far, feel too good or he'd fall, lurching and flailing as his wings fucking failed, crushed into the ruthless depths of the wine-dark sea.

The fly is slowing down, he thinks, maybe. It's been throwing itself at the living room window for a long time. Long enough that Ilya's leg has gone to sleep, sitting here unmoving just listening to the punctuated buzzing of the fly. Do flies sleep at night? It's getting darker.

He should go do the reading for his class tomorrow. Maybe he will. Later.

He'd let his guard down. Forgotten the stakes.

There has never been another, for Shane. Not a man, at least. No woman since Maddie, and apparently barely even her. Ilya had asked. Shane shrugged. Looked away and then looked back. "No," he said, open and only a little nervous to say it even though really, they both knew Ilya already knew. "Only you, Ilya," and then they'd fucked on the couch for the second time that day and it was amazing.

And maybe Shane's inexperience with anyone else is part of the problem. But not really. At least not right now. That's its own issue, probably, outside of but maybe overlapping a little with the main issue, which is that Shane isn't ready. Isn't even close, apparently. Might never be ready.

God.

They're fucked. Ilya's fucked. The pain is coming. It's here but there's more coming. He knows it. He's like people whose healed broken bones hurt before it rains, but with mental illness. This suffering right now is just the precursor. The omen.

The season has just started and Ilya needs to make it fucking good. He needs to keep as many options open for pro play as he possibly can, because he has no fucking clue what he will or should or might be able to do next year, professionally. And he can't go back to Russia. He can't go back there. It was stupid of him, to get a fluff degree with no job prospects, to be curious about what it could've maybe been like for him in an entirely different life, a life where he could've been born to a family who loved him into a world prepared to accept him for whoever or whatever he is.

Players get injured all the time. Career-ending injuries. He'd banked on a gamble of a career so he could have a four-year diversion. And a four-year diversion is exactly what he's had. He's been gallivanting around like the answer would just present itself. Like a path would just appear before him if he waited for it and believed. And for some reason he'd convinced himself this was the mature choice. But really, the mature choice would've been becoming a fucking engineer or some shit, so he could get a good paying job in the U.S. and a visa in the event something goes wrong with hockey. Not that he had the time to become an engineer. Or any interest. And not that anything has gone wrong with hockey, really. Yet.

It's just that he's beginning to realize how shortsighted he's been. His existence and all his hopes and dreams and reckless fantasies are contingent on his performance this year with Minnesota, probably.

There will be teams that want him. He knows they want him. They've reached out.

But.

What will he do if it all falls apart and he has to go back?

It's just not an option and he can't dwell on it. Needs to get it together. Wash his sheets and do some meal prep. Read.

He gets up. Shakes out his body. Takes his shirt off and flexes in the mirror for awhile. Does a few push-ups. Some sit-ups. Takes a selfie. Sends it to Shane.

He strips his sheets. Carries them down to the basement. Throws them in the washer. Steals some detergent someone left in the laundry room. Pays an unreasonable amount of money in quarters to start the machine. Leaves a quarter under the detergent, as payment, so it's maybe not stealing but probably still is.

--

Hot but not right now.

babyyyy

Never a bad time for #gainz

Okay well if this is about your gains(?), it honestly doesn't look like you've made many since I saw you last... Didn't mandatory lifting start for you like, weeks and weeks ago? Probably it's a bad camera angle or lighting.

ok jesus, didn't know I would be torn apart by your criticism if I tried to improve your day with the gift of my body

will remember next time I am feeling generous that you don't want it

Sorry, Ilya. I'm sorry. I want it always.

Love your body.

Just later.

might be too late

we will see

--

He goes back upstairs. Changes. Heads to the gym. Because what the fuck? He'd looked fucking good in that selfie, okay, and sure he lost a small amount of muscle over the summer during his little languish, but Jesus.

At the end of their luxurious, beatific two weeks together he'd brought it up. He'd been afraid, obviously. It was big, the love thing. Bigger than the rest of it. And there wasn't a clear way to move forward if they both felt the same. But Ilya had stupidly allowed a little hope to dilute his justifiable, instinctual terror. It couldn't hurt, to confirm they were on the same team. That maybe they didn't have to deal with this alone. They could protect each other. Could care for each other, somehow, whatever that might mean. And Ilya liked confirming things with Shane. He liked when Shane affirmed they were on the same page. That he was with Ilya, and saw it and wanted it and felt it too, and agreed. And it felt like Ilya had to do it.

Like he couldn't go on in silence like this, trying to hold back something beyond his control and far stronger than himself.

Because Ilya loves him. He loves him so fucking much that it's bursting out of him everywhere, like he's swallowed the fucking sun.

And Shane had become so open to Ilya's attempts at the conversation. He'd been so good, so trusting, had mostly stopped resisting unless he felt like making Ilya work for it a little bit, wanted to take them both on a giddy detouring meander down a new path. He'd even started bringing things up himself, at random times. Taking Ilya's hand and looking him in the eyes and saying something batshit fucking crazy and really hot and then blushing, looking down or away before remembering Ilya had never ever once been scared of what Shane wanted and looking back, meeting his eyes, smiling and then laughing as Ilya picked him up and set him on the counter and kissed and kissed him and told him how fucking into it Ilya was, how excited, how bad he wanted it, how hot, how perfect Shane is, beautiful amazing boy with a crazy perfect mind.

They were in bed, when Ilya tried it. It felt like the safest choice. Maybe muscle memory would keep Shane pliant, or something. "Shane," he started, rubbing his hand a little bit over Shane's chest. Such a good fucking chest, god.

"Hmm?"

"I have some problems," Ilya said. He needed to get through enough that Shane wouldn't be able to cut him off before he'd even started, so he tried to make it sound light. It maybe wasn't fair to Shane, pretending like it wasn't a big fucking deal so he wouldn't freak out, but that's what Ilya was doing. He'd already committed to it so he kept going. "The first problem is we are never near each other, ever." Shane didn't tense. Good. Ilya wasn't giving away the game, yet. He had lamented the distance between them many times before, mostly in a sexual context but also in an I miss you and want to be near you context. Shane was okay with that. They couldn't really deny it, at this point, the missing and the wanting. Would be crazy to try. "Like twice a year we are in same place and it sucks and it hurts," Ilya continued, forging ahead without pausing. "The second problem is we are men and we play elite hockey." Shane tensed a little bit at that, inhaling like maybe he was going to try to say something but Ilya kept going anyway, had to just spit it out oh god. "The third problem is that your parents are basically my only family in the entire world and I don't want to lose them if I fuck things up with you, Shane, I can't lose all of you. I don't know what I'll do." That one hurt to admit. He hadn't, directly like that. Not to Shane and not to Shane's parents.

Silence, but Shane's heart rate was up and he was maybe holding his breath. Neither was ideal but Ilya was nearly to the main thing so he kept going. They had to do it.

"Fourth problem is that the more I have with you, the more I want with you. And I want a lot with you, Shane. And that fourth problem is growing bigger and bigger, is already really really big, and I think it's going to make all the other three problems much bigger too."

Silence. In a bad way. Ilya needed to see Shane's face, see what he was thinking but if he let go, pulled back, made Shane turn over Shane might take the opportunity to bolt instead. So what could Ilya do aside from just keep going? Shane hadn't totally freaked out, yet. Was still

laying there, if unbreathing and tense everywhere in his body and this did not feel good felt wrong but the train was moving and it was too late and what choice did he even have?

"And I'm scared but we need to talk about it. Because, Shane. Moya lyubov'. Baby," his arms were tightening around Shane's chest as he inhaled, knowing even as he said it what Shane was about to do. "I-" and then Shane was trying to break out of Ilya's grip around his chest, thrashing and shoving at him and crying, these eerie agonized moans Ilya had never heard before and he was hitting at Ilya and flailing and somehow he managed to heave up off the bed, got his feet on the floor as Ilya tried to grab him, pin his arms, keep him down on the mattress and then he was slamming behind Shane into the wall somehow, cracking the plaster and a frame fell and they slid downward and another frame fell and when Ilya caught it so it wouldn't break on Shane's head he tried to break away so they were grappling again and rolling across the fucking floor and Ilya could see how fucking terrified Shane was, out of his mind with it, no no no I can't Ilya, no I can't no no, please no and he realized, suddenly, that he couldn't fix this.

Ilya wasn't enough.

He could make Shane say it, right now. He would do it. Ilya could see he'd do it in how blindly afraid he was. If Ilya insisted, Shane would tell Ilya he loves him and he would mean it.

And then Shane would end it. It would end. Because Shane can't see a future for them. In all of his endless looping reiterative thoughts, his compulsive plays and replays of every possible scenario, Shane can't find a future where they're in love and together. He has no framework within which to place eternal soulmate love for Ilya in his life. Doesn't know how he could label it, categorize them, organize a possibility of what he believes love should be. And if Ilya made him admit the truth, Shane wouldn't be able to handle the dissonance. And it would end.

Accepting cosmic destiny for cosmic destiny's sake is not a Shane Hollander move.

And it's not about Ilya. And he can't fix it. And maybe no one can and Shane is right.

So Ilya tapped out. And when he said it, when Shane heard him say Ilya wouldn't make him he went fucking limp, cried silently beneath him while Ilya tried to unearth the numbness from years ago, said "I'm sorry, Ilya," eventually, after Ilya has pulled him up off the floor, moved them back to the bed and they've been still and silent under the sheets together for a long time, which made Ilya cry a little bit too.

"Don't apologize, moya lyubov'," Ilya said, pain in his chest, still trying to remember how to find the numbness. He'd wanted too much. Shane was right, probably. What good would it do to say it? "It's okay."

"No, Ilya," Shane said, whispering, eyes closed under the sheet, breath hitting Ilya's face. "You deserve it," and then Ilya let out a really sad, really pathetic sob that felt like a living entity creeping out of his chest, heartbreak incarnate and Shane pulled Ilya's head in to rest on his shoulder, petting at his hair a little bit while Ilya cried and cried. And it really, really hurt.

And then when Shane left the next day Ilya let the darkness wash back over him a little bit, reminded himself the world contains limitless suffering and very little happiness, has been wallowing in it since.

--

Ilya

Where are you

Why?

Please

[...]

Say it

want you to make me come

right now

so hard for you Ilya

right now

fuck

ok

give me 2 mins to get home

don't touch yourself

was thinking about you

looking at the pic you sent

can see your dick through your sweats

want it inside me

your big hard cock inside me

makes me feel good

miss it

fuck

I miss it too, baby

want you all the time

~~*think about you all the time*~~

think about fucking you all the time

perfect body

love your body too

love when I can see you while you fuck me

you're so fucking hot, Ilya

can never believe it

so lucky I can have it

fuck, baby

love when I can see you too

see how fucking wet you get before I even touch you

so desperate all the time

yes

you know I am

need you so fucking bad

right now, Ilya, please

wanna be so good, do it just how you say

fuck

always always so good

okay baby I am home

touch yourself

fuck, thank you

gonna help you feel so fucking good right now

Dyani isn't home can I call

please

--

He can't cut it off, obviously. He'd tried before and failed. It's an impossibility. Because they both need it so fucking bad all the fucking time.

And really, it's not like anything has changed. Not for the worse, at least. Like, they'd had a rhapsodic two weeks of great sex, during which they'd communicated more and better than they ever had in their entire lives up to that point. Those were big, big wins. So what if Shane isn't ready for the love conversation? It's not like Ilya expects to win the Stanley Cup his rookie season, either. But making it to the playoffs, making it all the way to the championship series and losing in the final game isn't a failure, not really. That's what UMN did, Ilya's freshman season. And then the next year, the next season, they fucking won it.

So if this is really the timeless eternal soulmate love Ilya genuinely does believe it to be, then he can wait. Because if he's right, then he isn't the only one who can't escape it. Because this love will never ever die, even if they don't acknowledge it for awhile, even if they have to do this terrible waiting longing for years and years, even if Shane tries to run from it. Because he and Ilya both will always, always know exactly what the fuck this was that they had.

And with that perspective, it's easier to be okay. To be fine, basically. Shane trusts him more than anyone else in the entire world. Ilya already has him in ways no one else ever has, could ever even fathom. And he *needs* Ilya. Without Ilya Shane is entirely alone, hidden, buried inside himself too deep to surface any time other than maybe just a little bit while he's playing hockey.

So he will wait. He will take what Shane is willing to give him right now because fuck, Shane can talk about things now that he couldn't before and they have amazing magic sex and he let Ilya tackle him onto the floor when he tried to run away.

The new grip is working

Are you saying you told me so?

I'm not saying anything. We both know the objective reality of what occurred.

You're so excited to be right, baby

Desperate for me to tell you, yes?

You don't need to tell me. The facts are clear.

Are they?

I suggested you change your weird grip. You took it as an insult to your identity as a player. I said you'd get more precision at the wrist. You said "fuck that, Shane, not everything is about getting more precision at the wrist. Sometimes it's about style." I said "okay do what you want, win or don't," and now you changed your grip and it's working.

So it's fine if I don't tell you you were right?

Yes.

Obviously.

Because the FACTS are CLEAR, Ilya.

Indisputable.

Okay baby, whatever you say. I'm happy for you.

[...]

Fuck you

Okay fine.

You were right

Love your mind. So smart. So fucking good at hockey.

Know my body so well, baby. All of it.

Told me to move one finger, improve my game, so I did

Because I trust you

And you were right

Fuckk

Thank you, Ilya

You like that?

Does it make you feel good? When I listen to you and you're right and it makes me better?

Yeah

You're so hot baby, fuck ~~I love you and that's fine~~ it's totally fucking fine

You like to help me?

Like when you know how to help me better than everyone else? Better than I do?

Yes, Ilya

Want to help you

Love it

I bet you waited for a good moment, didn't you?

To remind me you're right? Remind me how good you are for me?

Holy fuck. You fucking did, baby. I know you did.

You're home alone.

[...]

Fuck I love ~~you~~ it. How desperate you are.

You fingered yourself already, yes?

[...]

You have your toy ready to fuck you? Ready to pretend it's me?

Ilyaa

you know

yeah?

fuck ~~I love you~~

~~surely you can see this isn't just fucking friends, Shane~~

*~~I'm having actual fucking visions and they come to fucking life when I speak them
because we have an eternal fucking soulmate love and it will never ever fucking die~~*

you prepped yourself so good for me, thinking about me with your fingers inside you?

yeah

so excited to send me that text about the grip, remind me how good you are for me?

just you

want you

what if I was busy?

what if I'm in public?

own't come

fuck me

you won't come, baby?

you'll fuck yourself just how I tell you, let me make you feel so fucking good, won't let me make you come?

not alone

just need you, Ilya

so empty

fuck

Yeah, baby

let me take care of you

please

are you touching yourself?

no

you're so fucking good

is light on?

no

get up & turn on

on

fuck

so hot

love how you look when you're so ready for me, desperate, red

yeah

ok. gonna fuck you. you don't have to text once ur touching urself

just y or n for a little bit, just until I can get you feeling so good, tell you what you need to hear and make u come

[...]

is okay, baby. I am home.

thank you, Ilya

I want you so bad

*prop ur phone where you can reach it & see it with your face down on mattress, ass up
good?*

yes

wanna see you

I bet you are so hard

*dripping all over towel I know you laid down before you even fucking texted me. ~~I love~~
~~you and it's FINE!!~~*

yes, Ilya

I fucking love it when you know

always scheming for sex but so fucking predictable, baby

so transparent

needy

always want you

just you Ilya

~~I want you so bad I can't fucking stand it~~

~~and can you stop saying shit like that if you don't want to be in love with me?~~

You can have me.

give yourself a finger

go slow

don't be greedy

feel good?

y

want more?

y

yes, baby

so good, always want more

give yourself another

I love seeing you like this

bent over

didn't even ask to come, just take my cock

y

you need it

need me to fill you up

please

baby.

is not enough?

fingers not enough to keep you happy?

you want me to fuck you?

want to take my cock so good?

yes

yyy

plesae

christ

so fucking desperate, baby

do it

fuck yourself with your toy

pretend it's me

feel so good around me, baby

so fucking tight

best I've ever felt

wanna be inside you forever

y

will do it fast for you

deep, hard

hit ur spot every time

can you do it, baby?

as good as me?

[...]

n

fuck

I would make u come so fast on my cock

feel you tight all around me, squeezing me when u come, make you cry

[...]

is okay

don't worry

it not your fault, baby

wanna make you feel so good right now

touch yourself with your other hand

y

so good always

is okay

don't have to talk anymore

fuck yourself so good for me

make yourself come

wish I was there

would make it so easy, nice for you

you won't have to try at all

would touch you while I fuck you, even though I'm fucking u so good you'll cum anyway without it, hitting ur spot every time so good, just how you need

so good, baby, make u feel so good, touch your cock and make u cum so fucking hard while I'm inside you

will do it in mirror, make u watch yurself, see how fucking easy you look so wet blushing for me

love seeing you, baby

make you tell me how fucking ashamed you are, how fucking good it feels, how bad u fucking need it

would keep going after u come, hurts but you fucking love it. push you down into the mattress and bend you over and fuck you even harder and come inside you

y

stay inside, let you fall asleep with me in you

clean you off so gentle

make sure you're not in wet spot

hold you all night in my arms

fuck you awake next day so you fall asleep with me inside you and wake up with me inside you

do it every fucking day for the rest of fucking time

okay

Jesus, Ilya

I was washing my hands for that whole last bit with the sleeping and the waking and the whatever

it's hot though

could maybe try it when I'm there in November? Whole night and then an afternoon flight.

Fuck baby, yes

~~*I love you so much. I'm going fucking crazy.*~~

~~*I just want to say I love you and for you to say it back*~~

~~*and then everything else can stay the same. just like it is right now.*~~

~~but can I just say I love you, Shane, I fucking love you and I'll never stop, and you can say I love you too, Ilya, I love you so much, and that's why there has never been another and that's why it will all be okay. Because we are on the same team and the same page and we'll do this together, even if we're fucked.~~

--

He's going to stop pushing off his therapy sessions and actually go, Ilya has decided. He can't just let the depression happen indefinitely. Not when he has legitimate, historically effective options.

Obviously, Patti already knows exactly why he hasn't attended therapy in months. Their last session was a day prior to Shane's arrival in Minneapolis over the summer. She'd made some firm recommendations and Ilya made absolutely zero commitments about how he might behave toward Shane or what types of things he planned to converse with Shane about. So it's not exactly a mystery why Ilya has been avoiding her ever since. She'd said as much, in an email he replied to with wholehearted insistence that he was doing absolutely fine! so well! knowing damn well she knew he was bullshitting. Well. She also said as much, in a different email.

And so of course she doesn't understand why he can't just cut off the sex. He'd known she wouldn't. There's a reason he put her off for months. Why he hasn't set foot in this office since May.

"Yes, you can," she says. "You are a grown adult man who is in control of his own body and his own choices."

She doesn't get it, though.

Shane needs him. Needs it. Ilya is the only one. Shane will fucking drown, by himself.

"I understand that," she says, even though she clearly does not. "But do you recognize that by continuing to fill this role for him, by prioritizing him because you're the only person he feels safe to be himself around, you are making it easier for him to continue isolating himself from his loved ones, emotionally?"

He doesn't say anything. Works his jaw and stares at a knee-high spot on the wall. He's stared at this exact spot many times: there's a tiny spiderwebby crack. He's pretty sure it's a crack, at least, but it's so light he can't be sure from this far away.

She keeps talking, like his refusal to engage was actually just a request for more hot takes. "And his emotional isolation is a big part of the problem between you," she says. "Remaining sexually and emotionally available, meeting his needs for intimacy and care when he cannot offer you the same will not solve that problem, and it's causing you significant distress and is harming your well-being, Ilya."

He doesn't reply to that. "I want to come out to David and Yuna," he says instead. "But I think I have to let Shane do it first, for himself. And then if I come out after that, will David and Yuna be okay knowing they had two boys under their roof who potentially were attracted to

each other? There are some connections to be made if they look back in time, for sure." He's picking at a loose thread on the arm of the chair in her office, unraveling it. "And will Shane be okay with me coming out, if it might mean his parents start to scrutinize us a little more? Or what if Shane comes out and sees it's okay, that his parents still love him, and decides maybe it will be okay to love me, too?" His voice breaks a little bit on that one. "I just. I want the people I care about to know me. I hate hiding who I am from them."

She understands what he's saying. "You are thinking of your mother?"

He cries a little bit. "Yes," he says, wiping at his eyes. "She never knew me. I never got to tell her."

"Okay," she says, getting up, gesturing at him to do the same. "Come here." So he lets her hug him and cries some more while she rocks him back and forth and rubs his back.

After awhile she pulls back, grips his arms and looks into his face. She seems confident in him, like he will be okay and he can do this. It feels good. He didn't know how much it would help, until now, to see someone who knows what fucking stupid choices he keeps making and still has some confidence in him. "Let's brainstorm options," she says, and then they write a list of 15 ways he could possibly take a first step toward coming out to Shane's parents, ranging from just telling them outright the first moment he sees them at Christmas to doing absolutely nothing at all and waiting until whenever Shane decides to do it and then seeing what happens. They talk through them and he picks the top three, writes a pro-con list for each. She lets him get away with not answering her earlier question, but only because she knows he'll keep thinking about it, turning it over and over in his mind until he decides what to do. She knows he knows she's right.

@TheGossipher ok not to be fucking crazy but has anyone fucked Roz recently?? I'm scared for him

❤️35 🔄21

@maliaAcorn

@TheGossipher I swear to god he turned down my friend last week. And she's crazy hot

❤️7 🔄2

@daniboi

@maliaAcorn show us ur friend. let the ppl decide

❤️5 🔄4

@Shawnessey

@TheGossipher oh my god did somebody lock Roz down????

❤️ 11 🔄 7

@hawkeyhockeye

@Shawnessey has anyone seen him with someone out in public more than once?

❤️ 9 🔄 4

@StellyBelly

@hawkeyhockeye my roommate fucked him twice, last year. tbh she's just an easy booty call tho

❤️ 4 🔄 2

@MinnieJames42

@TheGossipher me & some of my sorority sisters were on his regular lineup last year & he hasn't hit ANY of us up since MAYBE april

❤️ 7 🔄 8

@30pointerbucky

@MinnieJames42 slut. he probs got tired of ur worn out roast beef vag

❤️ 8 🔄 14

@MinnieJames42

@30pointerbucky Roz is a known lover of both roast beef AND sluts, so idk what ur point even is. like duh i'm his type?

❤️ 7 🔄 13

[@ariana8urc8k](#)

[@MinnieJames42](#) girl u know he's just hatin' cause he aintin' #jealousy

❤️ 4 🔄 2

[@TheGossipher](#) URGENT SURVEY: If anyone has or knows someone who has fucked Ilya Rozanov in the past calendar year, PLEASE reach out

❤️ 60 🔄 54

[@TheGossipher](#) RED ALERT: I have yet to receive ANY viable claims or evidence of Roz fucking around with ANYONE since HIS JUNIOR YEAR

❤️ 72 🔄 61

[@TheGossipher](#) HOLY FUCK, FOLKS: It has been a week and I am officially declaring it. Ilya Rozanov may very well be off the market

❤️ 427 🔄 230

[@TheGossipher](#) [@hollanovtruther241](#) get the FUCK out of my mentions!!!

❤️ 15 🔄 10

Winter 2012

It all goes sideways at Christmas. Well. Christmas Eve.

When Shane walks into the kitchen and Ilya is showing Yuna a photo he's taken, a photo of her laughing with the white lights of the tree out of focus behind her, wearing a Montreal sweatshirt with 24 embroidered on the sleeve, a photo Ilya has posted online that's getting a ton of comments, and when Shane finds it on his own laptop and scrolls through them they're all about how sweet it is, how cute, that Roz is with the Hollanders for Christmas, just like old times, a friendship for the ages, and look at this YouTube link to a compilation of

Hollanov's greatest interview moments and it warms his heart a little, reading them, until one slaps him in the face.

@htownchampman fucking faggots

And so he pukes, dropping his phone and stumbling to the bathroom, hating himself more than he has in a long while, reliving how it felt when he was 14, 16, 17, free-falling into his desire and feeling like he'd rather die than want what he wanted, need what he needed. Fuck.

He's already the only Asian-Canadian player in the league. He's had a hard enough time figuring out how to fit in without disappearing entirely, always has had a hard time doing it. This isn't what he wants to stand out for. He just wants to play fucking hockey and be really really good at it.

Later, after opening one present each, a tradition from Shane's childhood they've maintained every year since he can remember, while Shane's parents play cribbage in the living room and he and Ilya are in the den with Home Alone playing quietly on the TV, feet barely touching at the center of the couch Shane broaches the issue.

"Um," he says. "So. I saw you posted a photo of my mom online."

"On tumblr?" Ilya asks.

"Yeah."

"So?"

"Well," Shane says, that sick awful heavy dread thrashing around inside him. "Can you, like, delete it maybe?"

"Delete it? She likes it. I showed to her."

"I know," Shane says. He curls his feet in closer to himself. Wraps his arms around his knees. "I saw. Um, just. People have said stuff, online."

"Yeah," Ilya says, gesturing with his hand like of course people say things online. "So?"

"Like, stuff about. Us." Shane can't look at him. Stares at his feet instead. "Not even just on this photo."

"Stuff about us?"

Shane doesn't say anything. Doesn't look up. Ilya knows exactly what he means.

"Are you serious?"

Shane still doesn't say anything. If he does he might throw up again.

Ilya gets up off the couch. "Fuck you, Shane," he says, voice tight. "You're fucking unbelievable, fuck. Wow. Holy fuck," and he leaves. When Shane checks the next morning,

the photo is gone.

The next morning Ilya leaves, earlier than they'd planned for. "I am so sorry," he says after they've opened presents, grimacing in what's maybe a poor imitation of a smile. "Someone needs me, in the States. I have to go. I am so sorry for my rudeness, Hollanders. I love you all and I wish you the merriest of Christmases, and he'd gone around and hugged them all and left in a draft of frigid air.

Yuna sighs. "I wish we saw him more."

"Yeah," David says, wiping cinnamon roll frosting off the island. "Miss that kid. He calls me once a week, though."

"Me too," Yuna says. "While you're playing tennis at the rec center on Thursdays."

Shane might throw up again, suddenly.

When he'd seen Ilya last month, in November, Ilya tried to have yet another fucking serious conversation. And hadn't Shane done enough? Opened up enough by now? Couldn't they just have sex and be done for once? Just bask in that for a minute, before getting into more fucking nitty gritty inevitably distressing details?

"I want to come out," Ilya said, and Shane went nearly blind with panic until Ilya finished his sentence. "to your parents."

The panic subsided for a moment until Shane processed the implications of that. "What do you mean?" he asked, trying not to freak out. This wasn't about him. But it was sort of about him. What would it mean if Ilya told them before Shane did? Shane should do it first. Ilya isn't even-

"I want to tell them I am bisexual," Ilya said.

"Why, though?"

"I care about them," Ilya said. "I want them to know me."

And something about that made Shane feel sick, nauseous the same way he does right now listening to David and Yuna chatter about the thoughtful birthday gifts Ilya sent them and how lucky they are that he's part of their lives. How they had only been to four of his games, last season, but this year they've already been to five. How maybe Yuna should just call him and ask what his plan is, for next year. Ask if he needs a manager. And David is talking her down, again, saying Ilya will ask if that's what he wants, but will he? Shane doesn't know if that's true.

They'd been lying in the sun on Ilya's bed that morning, and Shane had been well-fucked and warm and cared for, and he wanted to come out to his parents before Ilya did, probably, but he didn't know if that was okay to say, and he also didn't want to come out to his parents ever, really. "I just," he'd said, hoping maybe Ilya would change his mind without them really needing to talk about this anymore. "You like women, though. So. Do you like, *need* to?"

Ilya had exhaled, loosened his arm, rolled off of him. "Okay, Shane," he said to the ceiling. "I get it."

And that had been it.

But Shane remembers, now, one of the things Ilya said to him, before he'd tried to say the one big awful thing and Shane had blocked pretty much the whole interaction from his memory. "Your parents are basically my only family in the entire world."

Fuck.

He's going to throw up, again. And he's walking fast to the bathroom, kneeling over the toilet and it's all coming out again, mostly bile because he hadn't had an appetite this morning, but he can't stop heaving and heaving, feeling like there's some thick oily slime coating his insides that he needs to expel but it never comes out.

He'd told Ilya to delete the picture because it tied him to Shane in a way Shane was afraid of.

And holy fuck. He might as well have spit in Ilya's face.

Because he's been so selfish, yet again. Only thinking of himself and his wants and needs and fears.

And Ilya has been so patient. Taught him how to be okay, how to let Ilya in, let him see past the exterior, the facade Shane tries to control but can't quite seem to get right. Because Ilya cares about him. Because he fucking loves him, Shane knows it. Ilya loves him and Shane wants to die with how awful it is.

He hasn't been for Ilya what Ilya has been for him and it's not right.

He can't keep doing this.

Chapter End Notes

Author's Confessions:

- one of my fav little codependent bits in this chapter is how when Shane can't immediately sext Ilya and then inadvertently insults his depression body Ilya is near-immediately catapulted into a memory of the traumatizing way Shane rejected his confession of love, which pushes him further into the depressive state he's been trying to climb out of, until later that same fucking day Shane texts him back like "make me come right now immediately you're so hot," and then suddenly Ilya is recovering once more from his heartbreak.
- I still don't know anything about hockey

Chapter 8: '13: Shane

Chapter Summary

In which everyone involved makes some poor choices and said involved everyone has deeply upsetting, spiritually painful (but alas, maybe lowkey hot in a gut wrenching way??) sex about it.

And also in which for my purposes, narratively, the final round of the nhl playoffs occurs maybe one month earlier than it does in reality. Because mid-June is fucking crazy for a hockey season to still be ongoing. You're telling me the stanley cup winners play a nine-month season?? No. It's a fucking winter sport. ICE hockey. Crazy work on the part of whoever makes those decisions. I had no idea that hockey is worse than fucking baseball in that there are ENDLESS games and the season goes way longer than you think it should.

January 2013

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@TheGossipher

HOLY SHIT: fielding NUMEROUS reports that UMN legend, hero, icon Ilya Rozanov is back where he belongs (in the streets)

❤️67 🔄30

@RozFan

@TheGossipher do we think she dumped him??

❤️8 🔄3

@TheGossipher

@RozFan honestly... given the way he has allegedly been moving for the past like, two weeks, yes. desperate for a rebound

❤️ 15 🔄 4

@TheGossipher

@RozFan his behavior on NYE?? YIKES. I waited to post in case he was cheating & it was a bigger story but nah... he's just back

❤️ 10 🔄 3

@H02justyce

@TheGossipher damnnnn.... was it ever even confirmed he had a gf??

❤️ 9 🔄 3

@TheGossipher

@H02justyce no, there's just literally no other explanation for his 9-month hiatus from the dms of hotties across campus

❤️ 16 🔄 4

@HollanovTruther241

@TheGossipher I think it's pretty clear what the alternative explanation is to him not fucking women

❤️ 4 🔄 6

@TheGossipher

@HollanovTruther241 I know it's my fault for not blocking you (#freespeechorwhatever), but once again please stfu

❤️ 7 🔄 4

@HollanovTruther241

@TheGossipher no girls since April, June w Hollz all over town, posts his mom xmas eve & deletes, @ msp XMAS DAY, then a whore again??

❤️5 🔄6

@Mimimohan

@HollanovTruther241 ngl I've seen ur theories before & thought u were batshit, but I do see the vision on this one. Still think ur cray tho

❤️5 🔄2

@katydid

@TheGossipher u assume Roz had a gf but what about his mental illness??

❤️12 🔄7

@helenadidthat

@katydid his emo side has repeatedly proven to be a sexy accessory that adds depth/taste to the experience, not a delibidinator

❤️5 🔄4

@NotUrPuckSlut

@helenadidthat that's fucked up to say actually

❤️9 🔄4

@helenadidthat

@NotUrPuckSlut noo like he's just more emotionally aware than most hockey players/athletes & it's a plus ! sexually !

❤️6 🔄2

@TheGossipher

@katydid fair q: bc even during his stated timeline of mental illness (frosh yr) he was actively building a player rep

❤️ 10 🔄 4

@AnyBlake93

I will never not find it unbelievably tacky to brag on social media abt being a college athlete's one-time fuck

❤️ 15 🔄 5

@selenedeeON

@AnyBlake93 😂 the funniest part is you could be subtweeting literally SO many ppl & you're right?? #bringbackslutshaming

❤️ 10 🔄 4

@Renee76io

@selenedeeON slut shaming literally never died. Why aren't u shaming roz too?

❤️ 3 🔄 4

@selenedeeON

@Renee76io Roz isn't the one tweeting about it to the world!!

❤️ 8 🔄 3

@BlakeRey34

@selenedeeON did u forget about the chlamydia thing

❤️ 3 🔄 3

[@selenedeeON](#)

[@BlakeRey34](#) That was literally public safety. Would've been unethical not to- I don't make the rules

❤️ 8 🔄 3

Spring 2013

Ilya hasn't texted. Or called.

And neither has Shane. He knows he should've been the one to do it but he doesn't know what to say.

It was awful of him. Monstrous. He's been sick for weeks over it unabated, despite doing everything he can not to focus on how shitty a person he is. But what other option did he have? Was there another choice? Obviously, if he could go back in time he wouldn't ask Ilya to delete the photo. It was selfish and short-sighted and he hadn't been thinking about anything other than quelling his fear just for a moment, just for a second so he could breathe.

But even though he regrets it, the thought of the photo still being up makes him just as sick as it ever did. That same terror that made him ask in the first place is looming still, always on the horizon no matter how far or fast Shane runs. And if he hadn't asked Ilya to delete it he'd be sick with the unpredictable existence of the comment section instead, and all the other inevitable comment sections because Ilya would've kept posting Shane or Shane's family, kept proclaiming his love for them to the world because to Ilya, they *are* his family, and to Shane, he doesn't fucking know what Ilya is and to Shane's parents Ilya is a son, sort of, and they fucking love him and it wasn't right of Shane, he never should've said it or thought it or done it. But how can he apologize when he doesn't know how to make anything better? How to do or be or act better, when he hasn't figured out how to control any of this?

He's always known there was something fundamentally wrong about him. It wouldn't even matter if he were straight or white: the bad strange off-ness would still be there. It's just that being not-straight and not-white make it fucking impossible to hide his defectiveness. To just put his head down and blend in and look normal on the outside, at least, if a little quiet.

This was just the proof, finally. Of the wrong bad thing that's deeper than his race or who he wants to fuck him. Because no normal good person would act like this. No normal good person would do this to someone who fucking loves him in a way he longs for so desperately he might not fucking survive it. Who has seen who Shane is and wants him still, just wants to care for him and Shane fucking asked him to hide. To hide his love not just for Shane but for Shane's fucking family too. For Ilya's fucking family, sort of.

Ilya is still talking to his parents, he knows, and he's glad. Ilya deserves to have them, even if it makes Shane a little insecure, a little childish, like maybe they'll love Ilya more. But no.

Ilya would deserve it if they loved him more, probably. Lovely, gentle, strong kind Ilya, who knows and sees Shane on the inside, and loves him, and wants him. Loved him. Wanted him, at least. If there's anyone in the world who deserves parents who love him it's Ilya.

So he puts his head down, does his best to shore up the walls in his mind so he can do what he needs to do, and he does it. Like he always has. And as the weeks go by he can feel it, all of it, the pressure of everything he can't deal with right now, won't be able to begin dealing with until the season ends probably, pushing endless, breathless against the barriers and they'll break. They're going to crack under it and blow and if they do he doesn't know if he'll survive. It will incapacitate him at the very least. And if that's going to happen it needs to be after the fucking playoffs so he keeps moving, sticks to his routine, focuses on the hockey and on nothing, nothing else, hardly speaks to anyone except for teammates and only about hockey. Rehearses his captain's speeches for an hour before every game because he needs to get it right, needs to be the leader who can carry his team to victory, who can write new hockey legends.

Popular Hockey Radio Show: May 2013

DAVE:

Well Cam, it's been fascinating to watch Ilya Rozanov's growth as a player over the past four years at UMN.

CAM:

Have to agree. A three-peat, Davey? We can't put it all on Roz, of course. The team has really been a powerhouse the last few years, and of course we have to credit their coaches and the various other standout players they've signed the past few seasons, particularly in how they've strengthened their second and third lines. That said, Roz did lead the NCAA in scoring the last two seasons, has been captain the past two years, and now in his senior year they've done what no other men's D1 team has ever done: taken home three Frozen Four titles back to back. Incredible work, I must say. A real feather in Rozanov's cap, after so many doubters wondered why he turned down a seven-figure salary to go to college.

DAVE:

Especially after that rocky season his freshman year. If you remember, Cam, a few years ago we were concerned Rozanov had burned out earlier than anyone planned.

CAM:

You were concerned, Davey. Not me. I've always known Roz was destined for greatness. They don't make players like that every day, buddy, and you can see it in every move he makes out there.

DAVE:

Yeah, yeah, whatever. The point is that a few years ago it seemed Rozanov might not have many pro options left by the time he graduated college. I thought he might lose his scholarship and get dropped from the Gophers entirely.

Before even that, I know I doubted whether Boston would still want to sign him, after his surprise betrayal at the 2009 draft. Teams have been known to hold grudges for behavior like that. Talented players have been iced out of the league before, for acting like they want more power over their professional fate than the teams and the owners. And there's probably room for a conversation about the ethics of that, the power dynamics between owner and player and who really profits from these athletes' talent and ambitions, but it's the reality.

CAM:

After his record-setting college career though, Dave? There will be more teams than just Boston desperate to get him on their rosters. At this point it's all down to whether Rozanov decides to play for Boston, the team that drafted him four years ago and that still has the rights to him as a player until August, or whether he'll wait until Boston's rights expire, at which point he'll become an unsigned free agent and can play for any team that wants him.

That said, he has yet to officially join Boston's roster and, since his career with the NCAA is over, he is now allowed to do so. He's either taking his sweet time considering all his options, or he's already decided not to play for Boston and has something else in mind.

DAVE:

Hard to say what he'll do, Cam. The man is unpredictable and he doesn't like being bossed around. Never has. It remains to be seen whether his maneuvers, professionally, will pay off, or whether he'll be crushed by the boot of the league.

CAM:

Ain't that the truth, Davey. Whatever he does, I'm sure we'll all be surprised. Remains to be seen whether the surprise will be pleasant, but I've gotta say I am rooting for the guy. Not sure how Ilya Rozanov became an underdog, at least for me, when he's an all-time NCAA scorer who led UMN through three record-setting seasons and who is desperately wanted by a number of pro teams, among them the team that drafted him four years ago, but something about his refusal to bow to the league's expectations, to play the political game of professional hockey, makes me fear he's flying too close to the sun.

DAVE:

I know what you're saying, brother. The man refuses to not have it all, is his problem, I think. He wants it all and he has yet to fail at getting it, but nobody can ever have it all.

CAM:

That's deep, Davey boy.

DAVE:

You know I've spent a lot of time thinking about Roz, Cam. There's just something about him.

CAM:

Don't I know you have, Davey. Don't I know.

May 2013

The realization has come to Shane, slowly over the past few months of grinding gray exhaustion: just because he hasn't been able to think of a different or better way to deal with this doesn't mean there isn't one. He might need to outsource. And that's terrifying, obviously, and he can't delve into it yet because he needs to play hockey right now, but he wants to get better. And he's trying to grasp onto some sort of hope that maybe he can get better, that fear and despair aren't the only options.

Because Ilya used to be alone with his problems and terrors, too, and it depleted him, too, and it made his world grinding and gray and exhausting. And then he figured out another way and it was okay. And Shane's situation is totally different, no way he can just announce this stuff to the world publicly like Ilya had done, but maybe the concept could still apply. But that's as far as he can go with it right now before the weakened dam holding back all of the endless pressure cracks, booms and reverberates and blasts into a cataclysmal rush of everything he can't handle and it will drown him and everyone around him when it blows.

It's unforgivable, Shane knows it, what he's already done and what he's about to do, and he'll never be able to make it right, probably, but he can't think of another way right now, to slow the oncoming destruction, to put it off until he can figure out a new option. He will, though. He'll figure out a new way, if he can just hold it back long enough to actually do it.

He'll be in Minnesota for the final round of the playoffs, soon.

--

Ilya, I know I don't deserve it and I can never make it right, but can I see you? Please. I need you so fucking bad right now.

You can say no, I would understand and I know I'm a piece of shit for asking, but it's all so much, all the fucking time, and I don't think I can do it. Please. I don't know what else to do. You can treat me however you want, Ilya, please. Want you to.

You're the only one.

--

Ilya doesn't reply for two days. But then,

--

That's the fucking problem, Shane.

And you knew damn fucking well exactly how I would respond to this, so don't even fucking pretend with the "you can say no" bullshit. Fuck you, honestly.

Fuck, I'm sorry, Ilya. You know.

I'm fucked up.

I genuinely do not know how much of this you're getting off on right now, Shane

Jesus

I'm sorry, Ilya

I'm sorry

Holy fuck

[...]

This is actually so fucked up. It's going to suck trying to explain this to my therapist.

I know I lost any right I ever had to it, Ilya. I meant it when I said you could say no.

Fuck you

--

I'll come to your hotel after your game tonight, yes? Dyani is here.

Thank you, Ilya. Fuck, thank you. St Paul Hotel, room 202.

Wear a hoodie or something & don't knock unless there's nobody in the hall. Obviously.

When Ilya gets here Shane is already naked, eyes downcast and he stays behind the door until Ilya is in, closes it behind him, kneels without even looking toward his face.

"Fuck," Ilya says. Shane has been hard for hours, needs it so fucking bad, hates himself so fucking much. And Ilya is the only fucking one who can help him right now and fuck. He needs to do better. He needs to figure it out, so he can be for Ilya what Ilya is being for him right now. A fucking savior. Salvation.

And Shane leans against Ilya's cock through his pants, closes his eyes for a second, feels it hardening beneath his face and he's falling further into the wanting and desperation he's been

drowning in for hours and hours, ever since Ilya texted before his game and god, yes, he's so fucking grateful and he needed this so bad and he doesn't deserve it at all but it's here, and he has it, and he's looking up finally at Ilya, who is totally unreadable looking back down, hand on Shane's head but so fucking hard already against his cheek and chin, and Ilya knows just what he needs because he scoffs, rolls his eyes as Shane shudders with the humiliation and the misery of what he is, how he's behaved and he's been trying so hard not to think of it for months and months, doesn't know how to acknowledge it even to himself because he hates himself so fucking much, doesn't deserve anything at all, a piece of fucking shit hockey player from a loving two-parent family. Entitled. Selfish. And Ilya pulls his own joggers down just enough to get his cock out and takes Shane by the head and holds him still and feeds it into his mouth.

Shane will never get over it, how fucking much he loves this, the weight, taste of it, how he can't think about a single other thing while he's doing it, totally lost in giving, serving, being used and taken and nothing else needs to matter at all.

He wants to let himself go. Wants to fucking collapse right now until Ilya shows him how to reanimate himself, makes Shane take the form Ilya most wants, bends him and takes him and owns him. But he doesn't know if Ilya wants that. He needs to wait until Ilya tells him what's okay. So he keeps himself tethered to reality, squeezes at Ilya's chest and feels up and down his glorious torso while Ilya pushes deeper into his mouth and fuck, yes, this is exactly what he needed, and already the pressure is lifting because Ilya is taking some of it, making it all okay, and a beautiful nothing is beckoning, creeping toward Shane like an early-morning mist in spring, heavy with the smell of wet earth and moss and maybe even daffodils.

Ilya pulls him off and Shane can feel the thick rope of drool still connecting his mouth to Ilya's cock. He feels himself smiling, loose and dopey and drunk with it, tries to focus all the way, remembers why Ilya's here, stops smiling. Fuck. He looks away. Tries to look down but Ilya is gripping his hair so he can't.

"That's right, Shane," Ilya croons condescendingly. Mean. And yes, this is what Shane needs, holy fuck. This is what he asked for. "You love sucking my cock so much that you forgot? Felt so good you forgot you had to beg me to come here because you hurt me so badly?" Ilya pauses. Looks away. Swallows. "Forgot you are so fucking desperate for someone to see what you really are, someone to confirm it, that you beg me to come here anyway and fuck you up so much you can hardly speak for days?"

Shane's cock twitches. He tries not to let his eyes close but they want to. "I'm sorry," he says, drooping a little, feeling his hair pull where Ilya's holding it. Ilya tugs at his head and Shane gasps. "Please," he says. "I'm sorry, Ilya."

And Ilya is letting go of his hair, and slapping him, and fuck.

Everything rings for a moment, disappears except the sting of it and he needs it, needs more, never wants it to stop, fuck and he's dripping wet onto the carpet he can feel it, and Ilya is slapping him again, this time on the other cheek and he fucking loves it, hates himself. "Please," he's saying. "Please, yes Ilya. Please." He's trying to focus, trying to remember something, anything, but thank fuck because he really doesn't need to.

"Don't worry," Ilya says. "I will let you use me, baby. You fucking knew I would because I always fucking do. I'm so easy for you. Desperate for you. So fucking embarrassing. You have humiliated me and I let you fucking do it." He hits Shane again and he's fucking flying, so hard, still wet all around his mouth and crying. "Can you believe it? How I can't control myself? How I let you use me and manipulate me and hurt me again and again?" Shane is keening, hands behind his back, now, kneeling with his eyes closed and just hoping Ilya will hit him some more, remind him how bad it hurts. "Can you believe I'm going to fuck you still after how you treated me, how you still haven't really even apologized for it, didn't even text for fucking months, only when you couldn't stand it anymore, were probably having fucking wet dreams again because you needed my cock, needed me to push you around and make you feel good?"

"I'm sorry," Shane says, crying, feeling everything go soft, fuzzy, dropping into it.

"You don't have to think anymore, *moya lyubov*," Ilya says, tugging at the longer hair on top of Shane's head again but not upward and oh. Ilya wants him to fucking crawl. And so he does, and Ilya is kicking lightly at him holy fuck and the carpet is burning his knees a little bit and it's good. Nice. And Ilya is still dressed, and Shane has been naked this entire time and he's embarrassed and hates himself and he's so fucking glad to be crawling across the floor naked right now, getting shoved up onto the bed face down and fingered open fast, hard. Ilya avoids his prostate and it's nice, to feel like this isn't about Shane's pleasure, even though he knows it fucking is. Fuck.

And Ilya is pulling him up onto his hands and knees and he's talking, and it takes Shane a minute but finally he gets it. "Shane," Ilya's saying. "I want you to count." And fuck. Can he do that? He has to. Ilya told him to do it. And he can do anything Ilya tells him to do. Loves doing everything Ilya says, always.

"Okay," he says, everything good and bad but so so good and Ilya hits him on his left ass cheek and it stings, burns and it's so fucking nice and it's not enough, and nothing has ever been enough. "One," Shane says, trying to arch his back a little bit maybe, make his ass as available to Ilya as he can.

Ilya hits him again, on the other side, and it's good and he's breathing heavier now and yes, please yes. "Two," Shane says, looking down at the sheets beneath him. This is what he needs. And now it's just the sound of them both breathing heavy, and Shane's voice counting, and the smack of Ilya's hand on Shane's ass again and again and again.

"Three."

"Four."

"Five."

"Six."

"Seven." And the hits are getting faster, now, and harder, and he's floating in the soft liquidy warmth of the burn as it takes him over, drowns out everything else.

"Eight." Yes.

"Nine, fuck." It's so fucking good. So nice not to feel or think.

"Ten," and he's so hard, wants to come.

"Eleven. Please, fuck."

"Twelve, harder, please, Ilya."

"Thirteen, thank you."

"Fourteen, thankyouu."

"Fifteen, thankyou'lya."

And he sort of loses track after that, can hear himself still counting, he's pretty sure, but it doesn't fucking matter because whatever he's saying, Ilya is still fucking hitting him and it's so fucking good he's delirious with it, can hear himself moaning incoherent between numbers and his arms give out and he's dropping down onto his elbows but Ilya is yanking him back up onto his hands and scolding him, hitting him harder and he must still be counting, can hear himself doing it but it takes everything in him not to fall back down again, just to stay up on his hands and keep his arms straight and he only manages it for a little while before he's collapsing again, hard and humping forward and he's definitely not counting anymore just crying can't hold himself up can't remember talk and it's so fucking good, feels so good and he missed it and needed it, fuck, and Ilya isn't hitting him anymore, is pulling him up at the hips and pausing and somewhere deep inside himself Shane realizes he's putting on a fucking condom, and they've never used one before and it makes Shane feel worthless in exactly the way he needs and then Ilya is fucking into him fast, hard, and Shane is crying and snorting into the mattress and he's trying not to come, waiting for Ilya to say he can, wants to make Ilya come first but fuck, he's bent so far, Ilya's hand pushing him down between his shoulders, the other pulling him up by the hip, fucking into him so fucking hard and he's not even hitting Shane's prostate that often, not really even trying to but it's so fast and Shane feels so fucking disgusting, dirty and used and disposable that he's going to come anyway, fuck, just from how fucking awful this is in the exact painful way he wants, needs, begged for.

"Come," Ilya is saying. "Fucking do it, Shane," and so Shane does and it's so fucking nice to come on Ilya's perfect cock again, to clench around it and weep and soar as he spills onto the bed.

But then Ilya is up and off and he never even took his fucking clothes off, didn't even come, just shoved his pants down enough to fuck you and you've never felt so broken and he's fucking gone and you're alone face down and naked in your hotel bed, ass, face, throat hurting, used empty condom tossed on the floor next to you and this is exactly what you deserved and it's nice, to get it, to know someone knows how to treat you right.

Shane plays like shit two days later, still in Minnesota. He feels like he's not even in his body. Like he's not real, and someone else is trying to make his arms and legs move and to make

him see the puck and hit it and aim but a beat behind, always, reactive, not totally able to see what's coming or where it's coming from.

And then he keeps playing like shit in Montreal, loses two games there and then he's back in Minnesota for the second-to-last game in the final series and Shane has hardly been able to form words for nearly a week, can't even focus his eyes it feels like, or maybe he just can't look at anything and register what it actually is, always feels like he's looking at or hearing or saying something entirely foreign, alien, like his brain has forgotten how to assign meaning to the input it receives from Shane's senses, has never felt like this doesn't know what's happening what to do how to fix it, can't think of anything coherent it feels like and the team is getting weird, looking at him weird and morale is going down and his parents and coaches and the GM have all tried to talk to him and he's pretty sure he sort of just stared into the middle distance behind them and nodded, can't remember much of what they or he actually said.

--

Fuck, Shane.

I'm coming to your hotel again. I'll fix it.

What's your room number?

Ilya

I'm sorry

What's your room number?

210

--

And when Ilya arrives he refuses to let Shane kneel again, tugs him up and squeezes him tight immediately, arms around Shane's back, Shane's own arms limp at his sides.

"It's okay, moya lyubov'," he says. "I will never, ever do that to you again."

But that's not right. Shane struggles to find the words, already losing what little verbal capacity he's managed to hold onto for the past several days. "Wanted it," he manages.

Ilya squeezes him somehow tighter, chin hooked over Shane's shoulder. "No, baby," he says. "Not like that. Never ever again like that. I hurt you, moya lyubov', for real. I never ever ever want to hurt you for real. And it hurt me, to do it like that. It hurt me so much."

And Shane can't talk anymore, wants to say he's sorry but Ilya is walking him to the bed, hands on his hips and he's stripping his own clothes off and Shane tries to get on his hands and knees for him, to show him, but Ilya rubs his back instead and says "no, lyubimyy. No. We aren't doing it like that, baby. I can't do it like that right now," and he's guiding him careful down onto the mattress instead and spooning up behind him and he's rubbing Shane's

chest and telling him it will be okay and fuck, Shane has been drifting alone for days and it felt dangerous, wrong, but Ilya is here now and he's taking care of him and Shane will be okay. It's okay and it rushes through him and fuck it's so good, floating still but peaceful now, doesn't need to do or say or think of anything.

After a long time Shane can speak again. "I know we have to stop," he says. "I know I have to be the one to stop it."

Ilya inhales like he might say something. Pauses. Says nothing. Exhales.

Shane keeps going. "I'm going to do it," he says. "I'll get better. I know there's something wrong with me and I want to try, Ilya. I'll try to fix it, for you."

"Baby," Ilya says. His voice cracks.

"I want to be what you need, Ilya. I mean it."

They lay in silence for awhile, Ilya's arm tight around him, leg between his and this is all Shane wants, forever. He just wants to lay here forever and share a heartbeat with Ilya Rozanov, who loves him and wants him and who Shane has hurt so, so badly and who is still here anyway, holding Shane, taking care of him and it's not fucking right.

"But don't fucking wait for me, Ilya," Shane says eventually. "I don't know how long it will take. I think maybe a long time."

"Shane," Ilya says. "Please, can I say it? I won't make you say it back, I just need to tell you at least once. Please."

Fuck. Fuck. Holy shit.

But Shane knows. He knows already. He doesn't know how it will feel, to hear it, but he fucking knows it already.

Shane turns, onto his back and then over so he can see Ilya's face. He touches Ilya's cheek. "I don't deserve it, Ilya," he says. Ilya is looking all over his face and Shane thumbs over his bottom lip and Ilya looks into his eyes, looks down at Shane's lips and they're kissing, his hand on Ilya's neck now, leg slotted between his and fuck, holy fuck this is what he needs, this is always what he needs.

"Please," Shane says, pulling back a little bit, just far enough to talk, can still feel Ilya's breath on his face and it's the only thing he ever wants, Ilya's breath in his face and his hand pressed into Shane's back forever and ever, just the two of them. "Can we have just one last time, Ilya," and they're kissing again and Ilya is rolling Shane on top and Shane remembers they're both naked, suddenly, and Ilya's tongue is right where it belongs in Shane's mouth and his hands are right where they belong on Shane's ass and they're grinding against each other, both getting hard and Shane is crying once again, always fucking is and he needs this and he loves it and he wants it for eternity, and Ilya is opening him up and putting on a condom and somehow this time it makes Shane feel beloved, maybe because he's kissing Shane everywhere and telling him how fucking beautiful he is, how much Ilya loves this, wants him

always, has never wanted anyone more, is crazy with it and he's letting Shane drop slowly down onto him, big warm lovely cock splitting him wide open, his hands on Shane's hips and when Shane decides he's adjusted enough he tries to start moving but Ilya stills him, holds him for a little while, makes him wait and wait, pushing slow up into him just a little and then Shane is riding him finally, looking at his perfect flawless face and there's no good reason for Ilya to look like this, to look so fucking happy that Shane is on top of him right now, after the total shitshow of the past several months and, frankly, the past several years.

And right when Shane is about to come, on his back now with Ilya fucking him fast, hard, so fucking good and just how he likes Ilya slows. Touches Shane's face like he's precious and looks into his eyes and says "please, Shane. Let me say it," and fuck, it's all too much and he's so hard, wants to come and Ilya has stilled almost entirely, waiting for Shane to say it's okay and holy Christ, how did Shane get so (un)lucky? How did he end up here, fucking desperately in love and so fucked up over it and maybe going to destroy his entire career about it?

"Yeah," he says. "Fuck, Ilya, tell me. I want it."

"Baby," Ilya says, crying now, pulling out and shoving back in, hard, picking up his rhythm again and Shane is right back on the edge, fuck yes holy fuck and he's going to fucking come and Ilya is saying it. "I love you," Ilya says, out of breath, hands grasping tight wherever they can, splitting Shane open at just the right angle. "I love you so much, Shane Hollander, fuck," and they're both coming, both groaning and Ilya collapses on top of him still inside and they lay there, glued together with sweat and cum, panting for awhile until Ilya is pulling out, soft, and tugging him into the shower because surely they can have a few more minutes before it ends and he's washing Shane and Shane washes him too and touches every single part of his body and Ilya is doing the same because maybe this will never ever happen again. Because if Shane can't do better, then this is it. This is the last fucking time. It has to be. And Shane doesn't know how to be better when it feels like it's the world that's the problem, not him. But he's going to try anyway.

And they're laying together in bed again and Shane can't help it.

"You can make me," he says. "If you want."

Ilya inhales sharply, gripping a little tighter for a second around Shane's torso.

"Shane," he says.

"I want you to do it."

"Lyubimyy."

"Please."

Ilya pushes Shane away a little bit, but gently, and sits up. Looks down where Shane is still laying.

"You want me to make you?" He looks like a version of himself Shane hasn't seen in a long time. Like his teen self again. Smirk pulling at his mouth. And Shane wants Ilya to make him say it so bad. The words are there, he knows it, they're right fucking there and they're clamoring at him, begging to come out. "Here is how I will fucking make you, Shane." He tugs Shane up too, so they're level, and looks into his face. Traces a line down Shane's cheek with his finger and the shiver echoes all down Shane's body and he can't go without Ilya for long, surely, so he needs to figure it the fuck out. He needs to do it. "I do not want to hear it from you until you can admit out loud what kind of person you are attracted to, and can say it to someone more than just me. Until you can say it to your fucking parents, at least."

Okay. Fuck. Shane had kind of known he'd have to do that. He can maybe do that. Ilya is pulling Shane onto his lap now so they're facing, hands on Shane's hips and he's so gorgeous and he loves Shane, he fucking said it and they're both still alive and he's giving Shane a list of tangible objectives. Goals. Markers of success. "And until you have someone else you can speak to about me," Ilya continues. "About what we really are, who isn't me and who isn't your mom or dad- you can tell them if you want, but there needs to be more people Shane, I'm sorry, I know you're fucking scared but that's what it needs to be. There needs to be someone else outside the three of us."

His hands tighten on Shane's hips. "And you need to like yourself more. You need to learn how to speak nicely to yourself and how to treat yourself better. Because what you wanted me to do the other day, Shane?" Shane feels himself go hot at the memory, ashamed, pathetic and sad and stupid. Ilya sees it on his face and pulls Shane's head toward him, rests their foreheads together, cups his cheek. "It was self harm, Shane. For you and for me both. And I can't play a fucking part in that, and I can't do it to myself anymore, and it was fucked up. You can't treat yourself like that, baby. Lyubimyy. I always want to take care of you and give you what you need but no. That was not what you needed, and I was foolish to do it for you, and I can never ever do it like that again." He keeps talking, looking away for a second and then looking back, his grip still tight on Shane's hips. "And if you can't do those things, then no, I don't want to hear the fucking words out of your mouth."

He doesn't want to say it but he does anyway, scared. "What if I never can, Ilya?"

Ilya looks away, face tight. "Then this is the last time."

And Shane pulls at his chin so they're facing and Ilya looks desperate and wildly hopeful and afraid and they're kissing messily, tongue and spit and teeth clacking, making little needy noises into the others' mouth and Shane is getting a hand around them both and their faces are smashed together and Ilya is spitting into his hand and it's perfect and just wet enough and they're both coming again, kissing some more and kissing and kissing and he wants this forever, needs to figure out how to be better.

"Okay," Shane says after he's rolled off Ilya and they've been laying for awhile, facing the ceiling and breathing together, feeling something fucking wild and amazing and familiar and he doesn't know if he loves it or hates it but somehow both and it's rushing through him. "Gonna show you, Ilya," he says, smiling as he says it at the ceiling because he fucking wants to say it and he knows Ilya wants to hear it, even if it's fucked up and fucking crazy of them. "Gonna be so good for you, Ilya. Gonna be what you need. Just for you."

"Jesus fucking Christ Shane, fuck," Ilya says, but he's laughing and so is Shane, and his hand is on Ilya's chest and he's looking into his eyes and they're kissing again and it feels hopeful. Because really, this is absurd. How long and how well they've known each other. How somehow they can discuss everything, yet also can't discuss anything. But Ilya is ready to talk and to deal with this shit, and Shane has a list of objectives to accomplish before Ilya has decided Shane will be ready to talk and to deal with this shit, and Shane can accomplish a list of tasks. He can do that. He's fucking good at doing that.

And then Ilya leaves, kisses Shane one last time and it's the only thing Shane ever wants, and he wins his game the next day but loses in the final.

Ilya tells Shane's parents he can't come to the cottage over the summer, doesn't tell them why but apparently he's weird about it because they ask Shane if he knows.

"We're sort of avoiding each other right now," Shane says, not making eye contact. "I don't want to talk about it so please don't ask. But if you tell him I'm staying in Montreal all summer and won't be here he'll probably change his mind."

And Shane is right, and so while he's in Montreal going to therapy for the first time, has found a therapist who specializes in LGBT issues, apparently: he hadn't known therapists specialized. Hadn't known much of anything about therapy at all, actually, has never even considered it for himself until now, and so yes he is scared out of his fucking mind but he's doing it, Ilya is with his parents at the cottage and it's good. Shane is happy he's there.

It's slow-going, the therapy thing. It's not easy to say things he's avoided even thinking. And it's especially not easy to say them to someone Shane doesn't even know. Although maybe it's easier to say them to a relative stranger than it would be to, like, his parents for example.

And then in August over dinner, after a few months of distant worry from his parents, who he has been doggedly avoiding, they ask him. About Ilya. Did he know about Ilya? Is that why they're fighting? And are they fighting, still?

"What?" Shane asks, caught too off guard to even panic.

"Ilya," his mom repeats, wiping her mouth with her napkin. Next to her, his dad is nodding, takes a gulp of wine.

"What about him?"

His parents look at each other. Back at him. His mom makes a face and a hand gesture he can't quite interpret.

"Over the summer," David says. "While Ilya was staying with us at the cottage," and it's starting to dawn on Shane what Ilya did. Fuck. And if he did what Shane thinks he did, and holy shit Shane is pretty sure he's right, then it means Ilya was rewarding him.

Shane had sent a photo of his therapist's office door, with his credentials and his name, before his first session in June. It had sort of been a way to hold himself accountable for going. Because if Ilya knew he was doing it, Shane would have to go back. And he wanted Ilya to know he meant it. That he was trying for real to be better.

--

Baby

I'm so proud of you

Want to do it for you, Ilya

Fuck

How was it?

Didn't like it. Just talked about who I am and stuff. I'll go again.

I'm so happy you're doing this, Shane, holy fuck

You're so good

Not yet

Yes you are, Shane, fucking always

I want you, Ilya

But not yet

You're always fucking good, Shane. Jesus. You're trying your best.

I want you to know for yourself. I'm tired of being the only one between us who sees it. It's not fair to me.

That's why you need to do this. And why you need to tell your parents. Because you will see they love you still because you are deeply lovable, Shane.

I'm sorry

I want it too

Remember when you asked me to make you?

Please

Always want you to, Ilya

Want you to make me whatever you need

It's what YOU fucking need, Shane.

For yourself.

Ilya

You still want me to?

Yes

Please

Maybe. As a reward. I might push things along for you.

If you want.

But my way, Shane.

Fuck.

Thank you, Ilya. Want you. Want to be better.

Will do anything you want

you can do anything you want

We will see.

--

And this is it. This is the reward, Shane realizes, sitting across the table with his parents looking at him, trying to figure out how to ask Shane if he knows Ilya likes men, if that's why they had a falling out.

Because if Shane admits he knew, and says he didn't care and they're not refusing to be around each other because Shane is afraid of Ilya's sort-of gayness, then they'll start wondering about the other possible reasons why he and Shane are avoiding one another. Maybe they'll start thinking about how little interest Shane has shown in any women, ever, including his singular high school girlfriend. How little interest Shane has shown in anyone other than Ilya, ever. And maybe they'll think back to Christmas, how Ilya left early and then so did Shane the next day, and how off Shane has been since. Because why would they be fighting, otherwise? What could possibly come between them like this? They've known each other so long. They're close as fucking brothers.

Ilya is fucking making him do it. Just like Shane wanted. And fuck, it's so hot.

And sure, Shane knows Ilya wanted to do it anyway. Last year, Shane had panicked at the mere suggestion he might. Hadn't really been able to think about the whole can of worms even acknowledging someone else's sort-of gayness might open for him. But Shane is letting

Ilya intervene, now. However he wants to. Because Ilya really does always know better than Shane.

And really, he's not *making* him. Not in any forceful way. Shane could keep putting it off, and he will. But his timeline has been expedited because if you start considering that Ilya might be attracted to boys, then maybe you also start reevaluating he and your son's extremely close, sometimes uncomfortably close friendship. Because honestly. The only reason people didn't think it their whole high school career was Ilya's pathological fuckboy behavior running rampant through the halls.

"Are you asking if I know about the type of person he...?" Shane trails off before saying it outright, just in case he's wrong and Ilya hadn't told them.

Yuna sighs in relief. "Yes," she says. "You knew?"

"Yeah," Shane says. "We're not fighting because I'm bothered by it, if that's what you're asking."

"Oh," David says. He and Yuna look at each other again, and then back toward him. "Good. Because you know we would never ever think less of him for it, right? You know we love him no matter what?"

"Look," Shane says. "It's fine. We're fine. We're just avoiding each other and I don't want to talk about it. We're not even fighting." And this probably makes it so much more obvious, what the problem is, but he kind of doesn't even care because this is exactly what Ilya wanted, he knows it, and he's actually a little bit hard right now at the thought of it, the thought of playing Ilya's little game, letting Ilya decide he's ready to maybe come out to his parents.

He's not, still, but fuck.

"Honey," his mom says cautiously, reaching her hand across the table and patting his. "You know you can talk to us, right? You can tell us, if there's anything wrong, or if there's anything on your mind?"

"I know, mom," he says, and it comes out whinier, more annoying than he means it to be. "Sorry. I know. And thanks. I will. I love you guys." And he actually will tell them. He's going to do it and it's going to be okay, he thinks, maybe. Not today. But he will.

--

Holy fuck, Ilya

?

Did you come out to my parents as a power play?

Not entirely.

You knew I wanted to do it anyway

But you knew they'd ask me about it, I know you did

And that I'd be fucking weird about it

Of course, baby

Fuck

That's so hot

Baby

I fucking want you, holy fucking shit

I want you so fucking bad

But no.

We maybe should stop talking, even, fuck.

I don't want to fuck it up again, Ilya

I want it to be good.

Shane

I want it to be good, too. So bad

Okay, holy fuck

Holy fuck, Ilya

I know

What if we can do it, baby?

Holy shit Ilya

I want to. I want to I want to

--

Chapter 9: '13-'14:Ilya

Chapter Summary

In which they try to not sext some more

Chapter Notes

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

Summer 2013

"I don't fucking know, Ilya," Dyani says for at least the third time, scrubbing at the floor where she'd spilled red wine months ago and it had sunk into the scratched-up hardwood. "Stay in Minnesota or don't."

Crazy attitude from someone who is literally moving to New Mexico. "Don't act like I'm abandoning you," he says. He'll probably never even see her again; there is zero worthwhile hockey in fucking New Mexico. "You're the one abandoning me."

She looks up at him and her chin quivers a little. So does Ilya's. "I'm gonna miss you, bub," she says, standing up, sweating through her bleach-stained tank top and are those his basketball shorts? Soon she'll never be able to shop his closet again when she doesn't want to dirty up her own clothes and it hurts in his throat and behind his eyes. He crushes her to his chest.

He could play pro for Minnesota, probably. There are really good reasons to consider it: he's already well-known and liked by hockey fans here. It would be good for his public image to stay loyal to the state after having lived here the past four years, and honestly it is a good place. They have a big immigrant population and politics friendly to people like Ilya (the gays/semi gays), especially in the cities. They're fucking obsessed with hockey too here, kind of like they are in Canada and that's nice because so is Ilya. Actually, a lot about Minnesota is kind of like Canada, in a way that comforted Ilya more than he'd wanted it to during his freshman year of college. It doesn't feel like home here, but it feels comfortable. Safe. Like somewhere Ilya can breathe. Plus, he has friends here and he knows his way around and has established relationships with the owners and regulars at his two favorite Russian food places.

But something doesn't feel right.

But also does anything ever actually feel right?

Aside from the one thing, obviously. The one thing aside from hockey that still feels right and has always felt right from the very first moment Ilya saw him. The one thing that is, on an objective factual statistical level, so wildly *not*-right that Ilya has been yo-yoing between

depression and some sort of maybe-mania all year, isn't even supposed to speak with or be in the same room as the wildly right but also not-right thing, actually, in case he accidentally sexts it or fucks it and derails its progress.

Not that Shane is an it. Just. The designation of him, of *them* actually, together as one pronoun holy fuck, as a 'thing.' The *thing* that they are is the it. Not Shane. Never, ever ever Shane. Beautiful fucking perfect Shane with his eyes and his freckles and his pink little tongue inside his willing wet mouth. Fucking Shane and his hands Ilya wants to hold in public and his legs, god, his fucking legs and the way Ilya can feel his heart adjust to it when they lay pressed together, the way he can feel their bodies start breathing and pumping blood and feeling as one.

Obviously he's been spinning out about it to Dyani for hours while they scour the apartment (and honestly for days and weeks, the same reasons and non-reasons worn into a well-trodden and circuitous path at this point) in what Ilya suspects is a pointless endeavor to get their security deposit back. He's pretty sure it's not a real thing, getting a security deposit back. He's never actually heard of it happening. But giving his all to something doomed before it ever began is one of Ilya's many specialties. He'd like to think he excels at it. And he's extremely, extraordinarily committed to doing it.

So here they've been all day, cleaning places their landlord has surely never touched, covered in grime and Ilya has literally never once considered washing every individual plastic blind in the bathtub by hand and yet he has just done it, and he just now failed to put the entire contraption of the shades back together and he'll try again in a minute, once he's done with this extremely important hug, and holy fuck what if he actually never does see her again? Surely he will, and he's squeezing even tighter and she smells good, like her cheap generic coconut shampoo even though she's been actually fucking crawling in the dust all day, and it really is fair for her to stop caring which hockey team he plays for.

Because there's no reason not to play here, really. No reason he can justify at least. It's a good team and a good state and he's exactly the player they need right now and they'd have a real shot at glory, with the right draft picks next year, but. Still.

Sveta hadn't been that helpful either. Well. She had. Sort of. Just not in the way he wanted.

"You should go to Los Angeles," she'd said. "objectively," and there were multitudinous rational, career-focused reasons why: it's a winning franchise, they need a second-line center right now but she has it on good authority they're losing a big name in relatively short order, are looking to fill those shoes with somebody hungry and consistent and confident enough to nurture a culture of winning and ambition and to maintain the legacy of the team, and they can afford him easily, and he'd have a legitimate shot at the cup immediately. And there are multitudinous Ilya-focused reasons why too, apparently. Because Ilya loves the warmth and the sun, she says. Ilya loves shopping and Mexican food and hot promiscuous people who know how to have a good time, and they'll like Ilya there, because they love drama and charisma and pizzazz, are addicted to it and it's a crazy liberal city and if he's ever outed it's probably a good place to be.

It sounds fucking shallow, he doesn't say. What you're saying is that you, my best fucking friend since childhood, think I want a life in which I exist only as entertainment for these

sharp-toothed insecure self-obsessed people, like I'm just someone to take from. You think I want a life where every single place I go on or off the ice I am just a mirage to these fucking vampires you just described? A fucking hologram they can project onto anyone or anything, and I can fuck and spend and get photographed with actresses or stepping out of my sexy sports cars and I can be the fucking pride of the town because I throw a good party and people want to drain me of my money and fame and talents? L.A. is a fucking vulture town. Fucking corpses, he doesn't say. Rotting out from the inside. Just maggot-ridden innards sloshing around in their fucking Ed Gein skin suits, pretending who they are or what they do matters in any meaningful way.

And honestly, it's good he doesn't say any of that because he knows she would've called bullshit.

Because Ilya does love to shop, and he does love the sun, and he does love parties and drama and performative shallowness and catty manipulative social situations and entertainment is a valid career choice he has arguably made himself and he loves winning at hockey, and he wants to win a fucking Stanley Cup and the Western Conference is so much fucking easier to win in during the regular season than the Eastern, where they rip each others' throats out all season for the faintest whiff of glory and arrive at the playoffs fucking bedraggled and injured and exhausted (not Ilya's style, really. He does like blood but in a conquering, glamorous, dominant way. Not a sad gaunt way. And yes, it's still primitive and primal and carnal, conquering, just more sexy. Because a conqueror isn't just in it to survive, he can take care of you, make you feel so safe and good with my money and my confidence and the perpetuity of my domination every-fucking-where I go, and you know what kind of energy I have, baby. No one is this fucking cocky without a big one. Not like these fucking coal-miner-ass feral starved dogs from the East, with their battered ribs and shoulder issues and ankles they really shouldn't still be playing on) from having had to fucking cannibalize all the other teams to survive, had to be the hungriest and the most brutal in a pool of hungry brutal talent. Meanwhile in the West, LA and Colorado have been coasting to the playoffs unscathed for years.

He wishes he could go to Denver, would've probably maybe been a no-brainer: a winning team in the same city as Sveta? He could cry at the thought of how fun it would've been, but they're at their cap.

And he knows the real reason Los Angeles feels so repulsive to him as an option. Why basically everywhere does. But he can't admit it, needs to find another rationale.

Boston could work, too, for sure. In fact, he's pretty sure he'd belong in Boston near-immediately, in a way he doesn't even feel in Minneapolis still. In a way where it's just a place that gets him. But there had been the whole 'first-draft-pick-led-us-on-and-wasted-our-fucking-shot-at-revitalizing-this-fucking-team, which is pretty big. It just feels like there's no way the actual fans would like him, after that. Not after fucking UMN. Boston people are rabid in some weird sort of traditional haunted way, he's pretty sure.

Ilya doesn't mind getting booed. Enjoys it, sometimes. It fuels him when he knows it's because he's so fucking good they can't do anything but disapprove of his presence in the rink, here to flay and consume and embalm them. What else can they do but boo? Of course

they don't want to be killed. But that is what Ilya must do. And it is everyone's time eventually, and now just happens to be yours.

But it's different when it's your own fucking fans. And Boston people seem like they'd boo him. Seem like even if he took them to the playoffs and won them a cup they might still boo him, just on principle. He respects that.

But he also knows it's not true. Anywhere he wins a lot will love him and he knows it. And sure, he 'betrayed' them, but not really. He needed to do what he did and he wouldn't take it back, and most people who aren't stupid assholes can probably appreciate that Ilya is a real human being with a mind and thoughts and a life of his own that might not align with what limited information they have about him.

Ha. As if most people would ever be so reasonable. But it's true, sort of: he could play for Boston and it would be good, probably, and he'd like it. And it wouldn't even be memorable anymore, that Ilya has been actively pissing them off at UMN for the past four years. At least not after Ilya shows he means fucking business.

And yet.

Yet.

"Don't wait for me," Shane said.

And Ilya is calling bullshit right now on that, he decides, Dyani's head under his chin.

Sure, he told everyone important that he wasn't waiting for Shane. As an accountability measure.

Dyani heard it. Sveta heard it. Everyone.

And sure, it might be self-destructive, continuing to wait around for someone entirely unavailable to him when he has the chance to get out of whatever fucking entanglement this is. To escape and go somewhere distance will allow him to reset himself and become someone new. Fucking again. Like he hasn't done that so many fucking times already. Plus, it's only self destructive if this doesn't play out in his favor. And Ilya thinks it will.

Because he is a goddamn bloodhound, baby, and the win has been tickling breathless at his nose for years, and he knows it's coming, knows it's nearby, knows this isn't fucking doomed or star-crossed because it's more. It's beyond any silly nonsensical mortal understanding. This particular win is fucking eternal and Ilya almost fucking has it. It's near. It's coming. And he will be fucking ready for it when it does.

Never let anyone say he isn't a dreamer, and if wanting to love and cherish and fuck and be one with and take care of and know and provide for and kiss and touch and share secrets and moments and transformation with and caress and breathe in and spit on and give pleasure to is a sin then he'll walk backwards into hell facing god.

He has a consistent, proven record of excellence in hockey. He's extremely desirable and there are a lot of teams who want him. That was not at all not a concern, thank fuck.

But it didn't even matter. Because Ilya knows it, now. Has just made the decision, here in his kitchen with Dyani's head on his chest, thinking about how many people he misses already and will miss if he plays in Minnesota or Los Angeles or Boston or anywhere fucking else.

He is going to sign with the worst fucking team in the league. Because why can't he decide what's best for him and for his long-term goals? Wasn't that the whole point of delaying professional play? So he could figure out what he wanted? And now he fucking knows: he wants it all. And he'll fucking die trying.

He pats Dyani on the back a little bit for a second. Inhales.

She pulls back, can sense he's about to say something.

"I'm going to Ottawa."

--

Are you fucking serious, Ilya?

Ottawa??? Shittiest team in the conference?? Perpetual losers? Zero standout leaders or visionaries who can read the ice in any meaningful way other than, APPARENTLY, you now???????

oh, so now we can text?

fuck off, you know why we can't text.

And also

Are you fucking serious, Ilya??

Can we sext now, too?

Fuck OFF, Ilya

YOU started this convo !!

Forgive me for wanting to be near your parents

who I love as my own 🙏👨👩👧👦🧡

Brother Shane

FUCK OFF

and FUCK YOU, ROZANOV

~~fuck Shane I am so fucking hard~~

~~Please tell me are you hard too I know you are?~~

~~bc yes, the answer is yes. I did this for you and we both know I did and no. I'm not fucking moving on with my life as if you aren't my life?? I'll fucking wait, baby. In fucking Ottawa. bc I know. I fucking know it I can feel it we are going to live and die together, Shane Hollander~~

~~and please Shane Jesus I want to fuck you rn I love you so fucking much~~

~~just wanna reward you and make u feel good Shane please, you're so fucking amazing and I love you and I'm fucking obsessed with you and please, fuck, please let me make you come~~

[...]

is that a fucking three-member family?? blond child dark-haired parents??

whoops 💖



was that a threat, Rozanov?

has all of this been an elaborate plot to murder me and take my place??

~~my perfect gorgeous angel boy do you want it to be?~~

~~what are you wearing? is it something that could be sexy to rip off in a homoerotic brotherhood-jealousy murder type scenario?? Emphasis on the homo and the erotic equally???~~

~~aha jk it doesn't matter. Everything is sexy to rip off you. Everything is homo and erotic with you~~

~~fuck~~

I thought you did not want to be part of our family any more 😞

was so sad, ~~my love~~ Shane

??

because why do you refuse to stay in Ottawa with our beloved aging parents like me? To play for shittiest team in NHL so you can care for them?? Like a good oldest son would??

Thought you did not want to be my brother anymore

Thought maybe it was all becoming too much. How sexy I am. How good a son I am. My ripped abs and how fucking obsessed you are with my armpits. How good at hockey I





[...]

[...]

[...]

Yeah ok let's stop texting each other again

~~*ok did you come though*~~

~~*or are u at least gonna jerk off to this*~~

bc



Popular Hockey Radio Show, April 2014

DAVE:

Can't believe it, Cam, but here we are again trying to decipher the motives of Ilya Rozanov, who signed to the Ottawa Centaurs last August after months, years, even, of speculation by hockey fans and sports media alike about where his professional career would take him.

CAM:

And I don't even know why we try, Davey. Rozanov has yet to make a decision we've predicted. Ottawa alone was shock enough.

DAVE:

A truer word has never been spoken, Cam. Rozanov's options seemed limitless last year: I have it on good authority he was in negotiations with multiple dynastic teams, all of whom were, according to my sources, willing to pay top dollar to get him on their roster. Signing with Ottawa was really only the latest in a series of career moves that have baffled me, honestly.

CAM:

Nothing against Ottawa, of course. It's just that the team isn't exactly known for its success. And Rozanov wants success. He's competitive, he's passionate about the game. His four years at UMN only cemented my opinion that from a talent and ambition standpoint Rozanov is one of those rare athletes who might have the power to change the game itself.

DAVE:

Maybe that's it, Cam. Maybe it wasn't enough for him, to sign to a team that's already good. Maybe he wants to create something from nothing at all.

CAM:

Well, he's not there yet if that's the case, Davey. Ottawa has just failed to make the playoffs, which is entirely unsurprising despite Rozanov's excellent play this season. That said, there were a few moments I saw magic out there on the ice, with the Centaurs.

DAVE:

I have to agree. And once again, Rozanov is somehow an underdog. Are you still rooting for him, Cam?

CAM:

I think you know I am, brother.

May 2014

The Voyageurs win a Stanley Cup. It's their first in years, and it's because of Shane. The team is good, sure, but without him it wouldn't have happened. That's just the reality. Ilya sort of wonders whether he himself would've have had a real shot at it, in his rookie season, if he'd signed somewhere other than fucking Ottawa. Not that he regrets it. This team is so shit he can do whatever he wants, basically. He's going to make it in his image. He doesn't need a cup yet. He'll have plenty.

Sometimes he wonders when he'll go too far again. Fly too close to the sun again. Except had he ever, really?

Because-

--

Ilya

?

is this a booty call

I did it

[...]

[...]

[...]

I told my parents I'm gay

I told my friend and his wife I'm gay

I told all of them something I want to tell you in person

Didn't say which person I'm that thing with but I will, Ilya. I think my parents know anyway at least.

Shane

Fuck

Holy fuck can I call you

Summer 2014

They spend a week at Ilya's place in Ottawa before going to the cottage. It's the first time they've seen each other in a fucking year and a half.

"I love you, Ilya," Shane says the literal moment Ilya opens his door and they're kissing already and Shane is pushing them inside and shutting the door behind them both with his foot, toeing off his shoes and pushing Ilya down the hall and Ilya has to snap out of his dumbstruck joy for a moment to lead them both to his bedroom, pushing Shane onto the bed and kissing him and touching him and he can't even take his fucking hands off for even a second to get any clothing off either of them and he's so fucking happy, and Shane is smiling into their kiss he can feel it and tears are pricking at Ilya's eyes already and he's so hard and Shane is bucking up into him, legs wrapped around Ilya's waist and Ilya wants to bend him all the way in half, wants to fuck him slow with Shane's legs over Ilya's shoulders and Ilya's tongue down his throat, Ilya's name in his mouth and fuck it's so fucking good, holy shit and Ilya hasn't fucking touched anyone since Shane over a year ago, hasn't even cared to try and this is fucking why, because nothing has ever been this good and it's pointless to try filling an unfillable void, and somehow he manages to pull away long enough to shove Shane's shirt up and yank it off, and then Shane realizes he wants Ilya's shirt off too, pulls at it, realizes he wants Ilya's pants off and suddenly they're both naked fucking finally and they've been separated too long and now it's just skin on skin from ankle to wrist to mouth and fuck, fucking hell he'd needed it so bad all year, had dreamed of this, and it's always just as good as he knows it will be and they fuck and it's incredible and Shane actually legitimately screams Ilya's name and pants and curses before going nonverbal entirely, just looking trustingly at Ilya and letting him do anything and later he sucks bruises all over Ilya's chest and sucks him off and Ilya does the same and they replenish their electrolytes and eat some very basic

salmon and brown rice and broccoli Ilya prepped beforehand and it's just. He loves this. Needs it. He can't only do it once a year and then want to die the rest of the time.

But he's scared to talk.

What if he tries to talk again and Shane freaks out?

But they have to.

Like he's reading Ilya's mind, Shane looks over at him, makes eyes contact. Holds up a finger and finishes chewing his salmon. Swallows. Smiles.

"I love you and I think I won't love anyone else, ever," Shane says. "I want whatever you want and whatever we can both handle within the confines of our extremely restrictive careers and your country of origin. I want you to fuck me whenever we're both in the same place at the same time, and I want it to be tender and rough and gross and someday maybe I want fucking kids, but if you really really don't we can talk because even though we can't come out right now and I don't know when we will be able to I want to make it work, Ilya. I want to be yours and I want you to be mine forever, and when we're together I feel like I understand my existence in this world a little more and I never, ever want to be with anyone else."

And Ilya is crying and they're kissing and he's lifting Shane up onto the counter and holy fuck he can't believe it. He'd known it would happen, someday, but it's fucking happening and he can't believe how lucky he is, to be here doing this, to have David and Yuna, who hadn't even been upset about Ilya fucking their son's brains out for years, apparently, and still want Ilya around and even are happy for them, somehow, which is crazy because Ilya had been terrified, actually, that they'd never look at him the same. But they love him still, they said, and it makes his chest feel bigger, somehow, like his heart is expanding and wow. Wow. Holy shit.

"I want everything with you," Ilya says into Shane's mouth, spit still attaching them. "I love you so fucking much." They kiss some more and Ilya thoroughly feels up Shane's ass. "I want to get you fucking pregnant."

Shane pulls back. "So that *was* an emoji of me pregnant?"

Ilya gets his hand on the back of Shane's neck. Looks at him. Kisses him again, wet. Runs a hand down his chest. "Obviously, solnyshko," he says. "What else would it be? I want to fill you up with my babies." And Shane whimpers and opens his mouth wider, an invitation and holy fuck, yes, they're so fucking compatible and Ilya tongue-fucks his perfect mouth awhile longer and picks him up and Shane doesn't even protest, lets himself get carried to the bedroom, dumped onto the bed where he fucking belongs, always, bent over or legs spread for Ilya all the time, whenever, open and ready and wet and needy.

He's pretty sure Shane doesn't get pregnant, over the course of the week, but who's to say? They spend a lot of time talking about the possibility of it. A lot of time discussing how stuffed full Ilya wants to keep Shane with his fucking babies, wants to give him so many babies they'll be able to form their own hockey team.

And so he does.

(eventually they have four children. None of them are birthed by Shane, alas, and none of them play hockey).

Chapter End Notes

ty for reading!! This is my first-ever fic and I truly was consumed by it in a way I never have been. If you liked it I am so so glad <3

Note: Shane and Ilya come out as a couple by 2017. They're featured in vogue, obvi. It's a sexy photoshoot. Ilya wins his first cup in 2017 after Shane wins a second (b2b) in 2015.

Author's Confessions:

- has anyone else ever washed individual plastic blinds in a bathtub?? I still regret it. No way that was necessary & I did NOT get my deposit back :(
- I still do not know anything about hockey but I refuse to prostrate myself to ai and beg it to tell me one single thing so all the inaccuracies are home grown on wikipedia and reddit and like. espn.com
- again ty!!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!