

endure the flight

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by [laundry_\(lovesjar\)](#)

Summary

Everything Shane has ever done has resulted in something else. People would call that karma, or physics, but Shane knows better. There are moments he's sure he has the ability to control everything with a right or wrong thought. And there are moments of clarity where he knows this isn't true.

Notes

► content warnings

title from fiona apple's every single night which is such a shane song to me.

set sometime during the long game after shane makes the move to ottawa, but before they actually get married.

After their first real fight, after Shane says things he doesn't mean and some things he does, Ilya almost dies in a plane crash.

This is Shane's only thought the night after the incident, when he and Ilya fall asleep with their arms around each other. All his life there have been moments like this. There was when he was nine years old and he'd been thinking that he'd wish his mother would disappear instead of pestering him about being quicker with his uniform changes, and Yuna nearly got hit by a car stepping off a curb the next morning. There was the time he thought to himself that he wanted to get sick so he'd miss his math test in grade five and got strep throat the next week. There were smaller things too. If Shane tied his shoes wrong, he could get a headache. If he wore a new jersey before the second game of a playoff series, his team would lose.

Everything Shane has ever done has resulted in something else. People would call that karma, or physics, but Shane knows better. There are moments he's sure he has the ability to control everything with a right or wrong thought. And there are moments of clarity where he knows this isn't true.

One of these moments is when he lets the Montreal Metros go, turns the page in his story that flattens the years he spent building the team into translucent dust. It's like he gives up everything, but is too conscious of the hyperbole. Not everything, he tells himself. There is Ilya. He brushes the dust away. Tries to find a new skin. Tries, but. Has to keep trying, and trying, and trying.

The night he officially signs to the Ottawa Centaurs, Shane takes a long shower, replaying everything he could have done differently. He is supposed to be happy. It is a new chapter in his and Ilya's lives. What he wants, above all, is Ilya. But the thoughts come anyway as he stands under the shower head. He turns the water scalding hot because everything is simpler when pain is involved. It helps him think. Maybe it was something in his subconscious that ruined his own reputation, that caused him to be outed before he was ready. But there is another part of him that knows beyond a doubt, that there was nothing he could have done. It was out of his control. And that was wrong. That was the most frightening part. There were so many things in the world that were not in his control, and it seemed impossible to face the gravity of all the moving pieces.

The world moves Shane like a boat on rough seas, and all he can do is hold on. All he can do is change the temperature of the water. All he can do is take the trimming scissors from the shower caddy and hold them up against his arm. The scissors are cold, like any useless thing. Even if he follows through with the thought, it will be only Ilya who is hurt and humiliated. Shane would still not feel a thing. It would not be enough to prove he is still alive. He puts the scissors back in the caddy. He is convinced that if he hurts himself, Ilya will be more than emotionally hurt. It could happen tomorrow, or years later, but when it does, it will be because of Shane's decision right now. This is an impossible contradiction. The thing he wants most in this moment is the thing that would destroy them both.

With the tap turned all the way to hot, the bathroom becomes stifling. Shane can barely see through the mist. He feels his ears burn, but his eyes blur and his head goes quiet. He knows he will pass out before it happens. There is enough time for his body to do the thing it is best

at: defend. Make the right choice. He sinks down into the tub, with only a second to hate the feeling of the porcelain on his skin before he can't think anymore.

An hour later, he wakes on the living room couch with a cold towel on his forehead, to the sight of Ilya worrying his lip. Shane reaches his hand out. Stop, he tells Ilya. Don't make yourself bleed. It's not worth it. Of course, he doesn't say this out loud.

The look on Ilya's face is humiliating. He isn't surprised. He looks at Shane like Shane fulfilled a prophecy. He looks almost disappointed.

Not in him, Shane knows, or tries to know, but in Shane's failure to express the feelings before they absorbed him. Shane's failure to be a good fiancé. He opens his mouth to apologize. Ilya takes his face in one hand. He shakes his head. Don't speak. A familiar order.

"I guess we know you cannot go to sauna," Ilya smiles. It's a sad sort of smile, resigned to circumstance. The sort of smile you give a bottom tier team each time they lose a playoffs spot. It's not that Shane faints often. It's that Shane faints often enough for Ilya to have known they didn't need an ER visit. Ilya will make him soup and they will eat together and he will just have to hope it doesn't happen again.

Still, that smile means Ilya is not done yet. He still has faith in Shane's ability to overcome, for his capacity to endure. And for that, relief blooms in Shane's tight chest. A moment of clarity, finally, that stifles the hurt.

Ilya kisses him, Shane's cheeks still crushed between his fingers. He licks open Shane's lips with a prodding tongue, sucks a little on the pout like he does when he's eating Shane out.

"You are okay?" he asks.

Shane nods, because if he nods he isn't technically lying. There's no cosmic punishment for a gesture. He kisses back, raising his head off the couch to get Ilya at a better angle. He curls his fingers into Ilya's hair, runs them through, up and down from the crown of Ilya's head to the base of his neck.

"I love you," he tells Ilya. Like an oath, and then again, like an affirmation.

Ilya is still in the locker room when Shane hurts his shoulder during Centaurs practice on a Saturday. It was a session he wasn't even supposed to attend, what with the initial muscle strain, but he wanted to because they were playing Florida on Monday and he said he needed to be at his best.

You are already in your best shape, Ilya reminded him.

Maybe that was the jinx, Shane says when it happens. Ilya runs out to the ice like a doctor, assessing, telling Shane to move his arm so he can see how bad it is. Shane shoots him a cold glare. *Let me handle it.* He's angry at Ilya for something that isn't even Ilya's fault. He doesn't say he's angry, hasn't been openly angry at Ilya since their last serious fight, but Ilya knows. He can feel it. He's been well attuned to hidden anger all his life. But unlike with his family, he knows Shane will not lash out at him or hurt him. He thinks it must hurt Shane more, to have nowhere to put it.

There's no dislocation, but the muscle is incredibly sore. Shane ices it throughout the day, puts his arm up in a sling just to alleviate the pressure, and mopes around like he was told he was out for the rest of the season instead of just one game.

That Sunday, Ilya learns a lot of sloth facts. He learns sloths typically rely on their camouflage to protect themselves from predators. However, when threatened, they can use their 3- to 4-inch-long claws and teeth to defend themselves. And despite their slow movements, sloths are surprisingly strong.

There is a clip in the documentary in which a sloth is picked up the wrong way by a human, and uses its claws and teeth to get away. It appears to be like a very mild attempt, but the narrator reminds Ilya and Shane that they're powerful regardless of how it looks to the viewer.

From the kitchen where he's making their carb-free dinner, Ilya watches Shane on the couch, holding a pillow on his lap and nursing a ginger ale, trying to appear relaxed though Ilya knows he's all twisted up.

Sloths often internalize stress, says the British NatGeo narrator, so these creatures may not show obvious signs of fear until they are physically threatened. Their primary defense mechanism is freezing. They become perfectly motionless.

Ilya laughs at that, because it's so much like Shane, and Shane looks at him, pointedly, because he senses what's coming. The joke collapses before it gets out of Ilya's mouth. He should know better right now.

Shane is still mad at him. If it wasn't for such a stupid reason, Ilya would argue with him until he gave in. But this is something Shane's brain made up and something he believes is true for now. He won't believe it forever. Ilya knows he needs to wait for it to pass. So he takes the vegetables out of the oven. Great. They are overcooked. Shane will eat the broccoli but not the eggplant because the skins are too chewy like this. Well, no. He will eat it to make Ilya happy, but he will hate it.

And then Ilya has nothing to worry about at all, apparently, because Shane shuts off the TV and announces he is going to bed early.

It's only eight pm.

"You never go to bed this early," Ilya says, "what are you really doing?"

“Gonna read for a bit then sleep,” Shane answers, his mouth in the shape of its usual line. “Goodnight.” He won’t look at Ilya. He takes the couch pillow with him, and then he’s gone.

“Goodnight,” Ilya says, to Shane’s receding back. It’s then that Ilya notices he’s wearing his old Montreal Metro’s pullover. He is upset he didn’t notice earlier. He spent too much time looking at Shane’s face, and Shane spent too much time under the alpaca fur couch throw and Ikea pillows.

Around ten, Ilya very quietly opens the door to their bedroom and finds a shirtless Shane curled away, facing the semi-closed blinds. Light from the street filters in and stripes over Shane’s skin, turning the white sheets blue. A book Shane has been reading, Moore and Shah’s *Game Misconduct*, sits closed and bookmarked on their sidetable.

Ilya would think the scene was beautiful if not for the fact that Shane is not sleeping. His breaths are too fast for sleep. They’re too fast for normal Shane. Ilya’s stomach drops. Shane is crying. Shane, who rarely ever lets his tears fall.

Shane’s back ripples with a sob. He knows Ilya is in the room. He knows, and he is embarrassed. For a moment, Ilya considers letting him be. But there is no way he can bring himself to do it.

“моя любовь,” he says quietly.

He goes to the bed, and rests only a knee on it to bend over so he can see Shane’s face. What a face it is. The most beautiful and handsome face Ilya has ever seen, all crumpled and reddened from tears.

Shane’s eyes are closed, his eyelashes matted.

The Montreal Metros pullover sits crumpled on the bed next to him, like another person in the room. It is not how Shane usually keeps his clothes.

Ilya tosses the sweater away. He gets a better balance on the bed, the frame creaking as he leans all the way over Shane, covering Shane’s body with his own.

Before speaking, Ilya ensures Shane is listening to him. Their eyes meet. Shane’s eyes tell Ilya he’s able to have a conversation.

“Will you have something for dinner?” Ilya asks.

Shane hasn’t eaten all day. Just an apple for breakfast. He doesn’t need to remind Shane of this. He just has to ask. Of course, Shane says no. Ten steps forward and two steps back with him. That’s what the past year has been.

“Tell me why you are crying,” Ilya says, cupping Shane’s cheek.

“I can’t.”

Ilya shakes his head. He presses their foreheads together. He takes off his shirt and climbs on top of Shane and settles down, lodging his face in Shane’s throat. The weight settles Shane,

and their bare skin pressed together settles Ilya's anxiety. Gradually, Shane's pulse slows against Ilya's lips. His hands gently grip Ilya's hair.

"You can."

"I thought it would stop by now," Shane tells him.

He means the sadness. Ilya knows that he means the sadness because Ilya has been laid under Shane just the same, with the same tears in his eyes, struggling to breathe as Shane rubbed the fear from his back and made him whole again. Not the same tears. Different tears for different reasons, but the same core feeling. Ilya thinks if they were made of wood and you whittled down both of them, they would ultimately have the same shape.

It never stops, Ilya wants to say. *Not really*.

He says, "there is no set time."

Shane has already read between the lines. He sighs a heavy sigh. As the gaps in evening shadows are slowly filled by October night, the room grows darker around them. Shane talks about the sloths. He says it devastates him how vulnerable they can be, especially to unnatural things like cars which are so fast while they are so slow. They may use claws to defend themselves, but nothing could defend them against speed.

"Is that what you meant," he asks, "when you called me slow?"

"No," Ilya says, with all the urgency that bursts through him. "You know that is not what I meant."

"Okay."

Ilya raises his head to look at Shane. "Tell me what I meant."

There's defiance in Shane's eyes, and Ilya thinks for a moment he'll just stay quiet. It works during sex. It works when Ilya says *tell me what you want* and Shane doesn't, and Ilya knows anyway. Knows how to please him, knows what his body needs and how it will react to a touch or a kiss or a type of penetration. This is different. This is Shane needing to acknowledge the truth, the fact. Needing the fact to overwrite the story in his head. This is a silence that scares Ilya. But then he speaks, and his words are a relief.

"You were just teasing me. You knew I wasn't slow. You only said that because sometimes you skated faster than me, but that's also why you were less accurate."

Ilya hasn't called him slow in years. Especially not after Shane left the Metros. After Shane left the Metros, Ilya was hesitant to tease him about hockey. It was too sore, the pain too fresh. There had been a Bleacher Report article about Shane and Ilya's outing, and what it meant for Shane's career, for representation. It was a complex article, and Ilya had a difficult time understanding what it tried to say. It seemed like a neutral case study, but people online screencapped sections of it to make the point that Shane was playing weaker since he "became gay." Or worse, that there was a link between Shane's race and his power dynamic

with Ilya, which people claimed “made Shane look smaller,” or “Hollander let himself be feminized by Russian dick.” Ilya read most of these things before Shane did. He tried to get ahead of it, to neutralize it with his words before Shane could internalize it as insult. It didn’t work. Shane was always observant, intuitive. He had a sense of what the GP thought of him since he was a teenager. He had to carry that tide all the way into adulthood. There was no choice. Ilya understood that.

Understanding it was Shane’s survival tactic did not make it easier for Ilya to stand by. He had felt the need to control Shane’s capacity to take-in. He had wanted him to push out. To push everything out. To block out the world. Shane’s brain didn’t work like that. Shane’s brain worked like a HEPA filter. It took everything in and crammed it into spaces Ilya did not even know could exist. Shane would say things he did not ever think he would hear coming from another person’s mouth. He would say it was his fault for not anticipating each possible Twitter user’s reaction. He would say he needed to eat bread at least once a week or Ilya would leave him for someone else. He would say it was because he had a chocolate bar the night before that they woke up to bigotry in their Instagram DMs. He would say it was his fault Ilya almost died in a plane crash, because he had expressed what he felt at the time.

Despite the shock of it, the absurd logic of the disorder, Ilya was glad he was saying these things, things he would never say when they were just hooking up all those years ago. *It must have been bad so often to have a brain like this*, he thought, *and he told me nothing*. At least he could know now, he could hear it.

He hears it now, when Shane says, “I’m so fucking hungry but I’m scared to eat.”

His head turns away, ashamed. Ilya touches the stubble on Shane’s jaw. He kisses it. Shane squeezes his eyes shut like the kiss hurts, like tenderness hurts, like he’s ruined by kindness. He has been like this always. Ilya has noticed it always, like a bruise over the ribs that reoccurs with repetitive trauma until the skin itself changes its texture.

“Look at me.”

Shane looks, his face splayed open with emotion.

Ilya asks, “What are you afraid will happen?”

“It’s dumb,” Shane says. When his eyes have had too much direct contact, he lets them fall down Ilya’s chest, his lips parting like the air in his nose is not enough. His hands following suit, he lets his fingers fall across Ilya’s body, and then, like he’s just become aware of it, his hands still. His touch falters like he’s only now remembering he is allowed to do this, and do it as often as he likes. That he has, many times, touched Ilya for long minutes, for hours, with the same strong, sure, adoring hands.

Ilya smiles at this, at the sweetness of Shane, the openness. The way his eyes hold such clarity and he rarely realizes how much he is giving away. To be allowed to observe Shane is a gift.

“At least you know it is dumb, моя рыбка. So just tell me and we will laugh at it together.”

“Don’t call me a fish,” Shane frowns.

“Мой зайчик,” Ilya corrects. With the annoyed way his nose is twitching, Shane does sort of look like a bunny right now.

A smile tugs on Shane’s mouth. Ilya wants to kiss and kiss it, but there is a more important matter at hand right now.

“I’m scared I’ll play like shit when I get back on the ice,” Shane admits.

There is no logical correlation between eating and playing badly upon returning from injury. They both know this. Shane’s logical brain knows this. His illogical brain works hard to make the thought seem like the rational one.

“You are injured,” Ilya reminds him, “I think you are scared because you are injured, and it has upset your routine. Food is food. You can eat and still be injured. You can not eat and you are still injured.”

Again, all things Shane knows. Also, all things Shane’s therapist says he needs to hear out loud.

“Neutral,” Shane says, “food’s neutral.”

“Yes, моя любовь.”

Something you need, like breathing, they had said before. Something innate. You need to eat, Shane. So eat.

After the injury is categorized as a Grade I sprain, they end up going out for dinner two nights a week. Shane needs to get out of the house and Ilya is happy for any chance to be able to be seen in public with Shane without either of them panicking.

One night, Shane drives for almost an hour before he finds a place he’s willing to try. It’s what looks to be a Mediterranean restaurant. Lebanese actually, Ilya learns once they are inside.

It’s a small place, but nicely lit, with a 5-star review on Google. They get a table near the back. Surely, people recognize them but are polite enough not to say anything because they keep their eyes on each other, on the wait staff, and on their table. This has been an effective strategy in combating unwanted attention.

“I feel good,” Shane says, once they’re seated and sipping their drinks. Water for Shane and a coke for Ilya.

Shane is in the booth seat, which he likes much more than chairs. He has a black hoodie on but Ilya knows while they eat he will get hot, so there is a reusable Loblaws bag on the seat next to him for when he needs to put it away. Shane hates his clothes touching outside things if he is not wearing them.

His hands are doing the hovering thing on the table because in certain moods he doesn’t like touching that kind of surface either, so Ilya reaches out and to hold them, lets him rest his hands in Ilya’s hands.

“Yes?” Ilya confirms.

Shane nods. “Thank you.”

They eat eggplant mosaga and red lentil soup. Ilya orders a falafel wrap and they split it in two. One step forward, Ilya thinks. Shane finishes everything. He finishes everything but will need to be observed, will need to observe himself, will need to tell Ilya if in a couple of hours he feels nauseous or afraid.

In the car on the way home, Ilya remembers the Metros sweater, the book, the light on Shane’s back as he cried. There is something in the image, however sad, that gives him peace. It’s always like this when they exit a bad moment, like a signal inside Ilya that tells him their life has leveled out for a while. He always hopes each time it happens, that it will last for longer.

Shane likes driving at night. There is a certain level of peace that accompanies the simple roads and the trees going by, shadowed onto the streets. Any noise is a noise that belongs within the confines of their city. Any townhouse alight with family dinners is a sign that they are surrounded by life, but do not necessarily have to participate in it. At least not in the life that everyone thinks is normal. Shane doesn’t think he’s ever considered his life normal. He doesn’t feel guilty about that now. He was never meant to be like anyone else. Neither has Ilya. There are a lot of reasons Shane could reason about for why they fell in love, but ultimately, that is his answer. Ilya is more like Shane than anyone in these carefully laid, nuclear houses could ever see.

Their streets winds up to a house on a small hill. Shane loves driving home to this house. He loves parking in their driveway and seeing the light on in the living room. When Ilya leaves the curtains open Shane can spy on him for a while as he watches TV or cooks dinner. The kitchen is by the other open window. Shane parks and sits in his car for almost ten minutes, just watching Ilya framed by the window, making fettuccine in one of Shane’s sweatpants and his old Raiders t-shirt.

That's where Shane's eyes linger. On the t-shirt. On a version of the past that lives somewhere above his head, untouchable but cumulative, like a swath of cloud.

Shane got his check up today and was cleared to play against the Metros in Wednesday's away game. They'll take the team bus to Montreal tomorrow, so Shane knows Ilya will be on guard for any change in behaviour, any panic, any dissociation. If Shane were younger, this would have bothered him. He would have done his best to conceal distress. Locking himself up was always the easy way out. The hard part was what Shane did every day now. Give himself over to Ilya. Unhand his own heart, and unspool it in Ilya's capable hands.

These are choices. Shane could take care of himself. But it's what he'd always done. With his mother always around, perhaps he hadn't realized before how much he had overcome on his own. This was an idea his therapist pushed to explore with him, and Shane was understanding that love did not equate to understanding.

It was sheer luck that with Ilya, he had both.

There is a flutter of panic in Shane's chest when Ilya sticks his head out the window.

"Coming in, Shane?"

The panic is a signal. Shane doesn't think he is okay. There is a pincushion in his stomach. There is the guilt of how much thread makes up his domineering heart. How much Ilya has to carry. If he goes in now he thinks he might say something he doesn't mean when Ilya asks how he's feeling about tomorrow. He might lie.

"I'm actually going to the grocery store, came back for my headphones," Shane calls, "do we need anything?"

Ilya does a quick scan of their cupboards and the fridge.

"We are needing herbs and eggs," Ilya says. He disappears, and then reappears outside in his slippers at the window of Shane's car with Shane's noise cancelling headphones.

"I love you, my sweetheart," he says. They peck on the lips, but Shane can't ever help chasing Ilya's mouth, and pulls him back in for a longer kiss. As they kiss, Shane accepts the intrusive thought as it consumes him: if he pulls away first, he and Ilya will fight tonight. Ilya pulls away first.

"You smell good, baby," Shane hums. It's better to notice this than to dwell on what happened in his head.

"I just showered," Ilya says, winking at him, "so hurry back."

Shane starts the car before he can change his mind. As Ilya steps away and goes back into the house, Shane's heart clenches with a love that has the power to blur his vision. He blinks it away, places it somewhere safer, like his stomach, and pulls out of the driveway.

The Loblaws down the street is consistently loud. The headphones help, but there is also the matter of navigating the rush of people in the aisles. If Shane wasn't a hockey player, he's

sure he would have a harder time picking out the clear spots and filling the gaps in the produce aisle to find the correct fruits before others got to them.

When Shane was a child, the grocery store was one of his least favourite places, second only to the Bayshore shopping centre. Every inch of it overwhelmed. The lights gnawed at Shane's eyes. Each person crowding the aisle smelled distinct, and because there were so many of them, the combination of scents induced dizziness and nausea. Shane would bury his face in his mother's coat and try to find her scent. Lavender and fresh ironing. It only sometimes worked. Sometimes, when she forgot something, she left Shane in the line to hold her place and Shane panicked. Not because he didn't know she would come back, but because he didn't know when. If he reached the checkout counter before she came back, he'd cry. Yuna was frustrated with Shane's tears. The next time they went to the store, she would do it again, hoping he'd get used to it. It always ended the same. When Shane was old enough to stay home while she went out shopping, it was a relief for both of them. Yuna thought he was just not independent enough. It was one of the things Shane, at thirty, had only recently overcome.

He picks up basil and oregano, Ilya's favourites, and some parsley which they are both neutral on. Food is neutral. Something you need, like breathing. Something innate. You need to eat, Shane. So eat.

The store is all out of Ilya and Shane's usual brand of eggs. It's fine, Shane mouths. It's fine, it's fine. He hates doing this in public, but it's the kind of necessary action that pushes the thought from his head into existence. Most things don't feel real unless they are materialized in relation to his body. He does it on the ice. Left, centre, back to me, come back to me, open spot, don't rush it, shoot, don't shoot, get out of my way. He coaches himself with an internal voice. The voice used to sound like his mother's, and then like one of his more demanding U11 coaches, and then Ilya's. Now it sounds like it's mostly his. At times, it is a combination.

So he has the herbs and the eggs, and the strawberries that are advertised as local despite the fall season and look sweet enough to make a shortcake for Yuna's birthday which they will celebrate next weekend in Montreal.

He has the essentials. But there is another reason he came here, and that is time. Playing Moonlight Sonata in his Sony WH-CH720Ns, he tries the global aisle again. There are less people this time, as if Shane's anxiety willed it into existence.

Shane picks up a jar of Greek olives, a package of dates, and two cup ramens for the bus. In the checkout aisle, he allows himself to feel the familiar discomfort. His sweatpants feel too loose. His linen shirt is cloying. Things feel vaguely uncomfortable, but he couldn't say what things if he was asked.

He inhales but not too deeply, worried about the amount of people around him and their germs. He isn't necessarily concerned about contamination in public spaces, but it does get him once and while, the idea that he could easily contract something that would make Ilya sick, or that would somehow destabilize his career.

Shane always feels a little guilty buying cup ramen. His halmeoni used to treat it like blasphemy. She said if they (Shane and his parents) wanted a noodle dish, then they should drive down to Toronto and let her make kalguksu for them. It was healthier and heartier, she said. She was right. Shane liked her veggie kalguksu much more than anything store-bought. Halmeoni always made sure the zucchini and mushrooms were fresh so the broth tasted as wholesome as she promised.

When Shane was sixteen, he realized his grandmother had grown too old to cook for four people. When Shane was nineteen, his grandmother died. He told no one about it. Not his teammates. Certainly not Ilya. Ilya who had just been able to breach his walls, but only just. Ilya who only knew him from the inside then, a few months before it happened. The funeral was on a Saturday so Shane was able to return to the ice the next game, and no questions were asked. Yuna was good at keeping a tight seal on everything.

O/O/M/! Let halmeoni cook for you, Shane.

Let your boyfriend cook for you, Shane.

He almost puts the ramen back. He doesn't, though. No use in listening to ghosts, he said once to Ilya. They fought about it, but Shane still thinks it's true. The dead don't speak to you. You can only feel their love. His grandmother loved him. She still does. At least Shane thinks so. People who love you come to accept the choices you make, all the things you are.

Shane is at the checkout. He hands the cashier his items instead of leaving them on the conveyer belt. It's just something he does. Conveyor belts are anxious things. They shouldn't exist. They're forceful, and not in a good way. They move things along in their own standardized time, without a care in the world for the pace of a human. Ilya understands this. Like with most things, Ilya is the only one who understands.

"Are you enjoying *Game Misconduct*?" Ilya asks.

Shane is home with the groceries. He puts them away in the kitchen while Ilya stands and watches him, doctoring, caring. Guarding his emotions. Dinner is ready on the stove. If Shane's eyes linger on the set of kitchen knives resting in their wooden storage block, it is not noticeable. Only a second. A second that lasts a few minutes in Shane's head. He would never do it. Sometimes it helps to just think about it.

There's a casual tap on the counter. Ilya is waiting for answer.

"It's not the kind of book you enjoy," Shane says, "it's just a summary of the worst parts of what we do."

The book is full of highlighted pages. It's good research for their work with the Irina Foundation. Shane wants to do more than just hockey drills with the kids. He wants to

incorporate workshops that are fun for kids but introduce them to the concepts of anti-sexism and anti-racism, and just generally how to be a better person on the ice.

“It’s not written by hockey players or people in the industry,” Shane continues, nudging the eggs onto the second shelf in the fridge, “which there are pros and cons to.”

Ilya nods. It won’t truly matter to him until Shane brings his notes to their next work meeting in a digestible way.

Wishing he wouldn’t hover, Shane goes to him for a long, ravenous kiss. Ilya still smells like his shower. The scent of the grocery store was lingering in Shane’s nose, but it slowly fades as he breathes in Ilya’s aloe vera soap, tastes the heat of Ilya’s tongue, and feels the unplaceable discomfort in his body ease to a mild throb.

Without discomfort, Shane’s body is always tired. There are two states for existing when he is not having sex, and they are discomfort and exhaustion. Discomfort is a motivator. It breathes life into Shane—his ability to move about the world, his game. The first time he’d ever put on his hockey uniform, he was confused by the pressure. It felt good in some places. The Under Armour sticking to his skin was good. But there was the hockey pants and helmet, which took some adjusting. Shane was particular about his helmet. He hated chin-straps, but they were regulation. He had no choice. When he skated just toward the precipice, toward the goal, without reaching it, this was discomfort. Inflammation all over his body, like a thousand forest fires born from his pores. Tension in the jaw. Sweat under the chinstrap. There was only one way to get rid of it, and that was to win. To win, and to disrobe his kingly layers. Then he could be tired alone.

In Ilya’s arms, Shane sags. He goes limp. He lets Ilya kiss him and touch him under his clothes. He lets Ilya do what he wants with his body. He gives his body up to the flame. Burning under Ilya’s hands. Ilya is capable of this—not necessarily taking care of them, though he’s capable of that too, but he is capable of taking what he wants, deciding what they need, deciding when it is enough.

But he stops quicker than Shane thinks he will.

“Keep going,” Shane urges. His body wants to come. His mind doesn’t really care either way. He’s tired. All he can think about is how tired he is. He trusts Ilya to assuage this.

Ilya pushes him away. Not roughly, but enough to hurt a little. Shane smiles at that, at the place in his hip where he aches for only seconds. He wishes it lasted longer. He wishes Ilya would have shoved him against their marble countertops. His shoulder already hurts. Maybe his tailbone could take away some of that pain, could claim some of it as its own.

“I told you not to do this,” Ilya says. He looks angry, so Shane tries to stop smiling.

“Do what?”

“I told you to let me know if you are tired and don’t want to,” Ilya says, as if it should be obvious, as if he is Shane’s teacher and Shane has made the same mistake on his homework again that he did last week. As a kid, Shane has had teachers like that. Ones that got fed up

with his continuous errors. He tried. He really did try. He couldn't really tell them he did though. If he was still getting it wrong, it means he didn't try hard enough.

"I do want to," Shane argues, "I always want to."

Ilya shakes his head. Does he not believe him? Was he looking for an apology? Shane doesn't think he wants to apologize to Ilya right now, and realizes he is angry too.

Angry because it used to be okay. When they were younger, when Shane was first learning how to do this, how to be with someone, Ilya was more than happy to fuck him in every state. He's not sure why that has changed. Well. He can think of a few reasons. Therapy, diagnosis. The science of it. Ilya is trying to be good at the science.

"Fuck that," Shane says. He tries to walk away but Ilya traps his wrist. Shane still walks. Ilya follows, trying to grab at him, though Shane knows that Ilya knows he shouldn't try to restrain him. Shane gets it. He can't help it. But it makes him aggressive back. He has to physically stop himself from going into the defense mode. When he was a kid and he'd get shoved into the locker room floor by six, seven boys at a time, his choice was to kick out. To try to get them in the balls before anything worse could happen. It only sometimes worked. He can't do that now. It's not six or seven thirteen year old boys. It's his husband for god's sake. He grinds his teeth until his gums hurt as Ilya speaks.

"You need to tell me when you are not well," Ilya says, "we agreed on that."

"I don't need you to coddle me," Shane argues, freeing his hand from Ilya's grip. Ilya grabs his other one. It's like the worst game in the world. Shane wrestles himself away. They stand there in the living room now, looking at each other, at an impasse.

"And that's what you end up doing, every fucking time. And it's always at your expense, you know, Ilya."

"Shane—"

"It's always at your expense. I can tell when it's too much for you. You think I can't tell but I can. I know when you're so fucking sad you can't even breathe and you wake up to me pacing in the kitchen because I can't make myself eat peanut butter. I know how that makes you feel. I'm not stupid."

It's quiet for a while. Ilya turns on the TV. He turns it off again. Anya is in the room, watching them both with concerned eyes. Ilya goes to the backyard door and opens it. She runs outside and he shuts the door. Such a good parent. Such a sweet and thoughtful boy. A perfect, parentless son. So perfect he had had to claim Shane's parents as his own, and they had to love him for all of his perfectness. The guilt Shane feels for even thinking this makes him dig his nails into his own arm. At the same time, he is satisfied. He wishes he could say this to Ilya's face. He wishes he could destroy everything. It would be easier that way. He could let himself go. He could give himself to the game again, and only the game. His body would be good for one thing, not two. And then he could hurt without worrying about the visibility of scars.

“This is not fair,” Ilya says.

And Shane thinks, no it is not fair. It is not fair that you took my body away from me. That you made it something gooey and soft, something to be revered. That you ice my bruises and insult my pain by trying to take it away. I was never meant for that. Worst of all is that you made me like it, and now I can’t live without you.

“It took you years, Shane. Years to even cry in front of your own boyfriend. It took years for me to hear from your mouth instead of your body when you are upset with things.”

He talks over Ilya. “Don’t throw that shit in my face.”

“You do not respect me. I know when you are struggling too. You almost fainted in the shower last month. Do you think I want to ignore this when I see it?”

Shane shakes his head. Shakes his head in hopes he can clear every thought he’s having right now. He doesn’t know which ones are real, which ones are his. He doesn’t know if he is really this angry, if he really means what he is saying, what he is going to say, and what he will get in return. Another plane crash? This time it will be worse.

He can’t say anything. Anything he says is conductive. It will result in something. His breath catches his throat. He’s never wished he was dead but now he wishes he was not alive. Not a human being. It’s too hard being a human being. It’s too hard hearing his heartbeat in his ears.

Ilya is saying something else, but Shane can’t hear it. The vibration is loud in his skull. Why does Ilya always have to be fucking loud? He covers his ears with his hands and Ilya says something about hypocrisy and maturity. Shane fists his hair. His eyes are closed but somehow he sees Ilya take a step toward him and say his name.

This is everything Shane was trying to avoid today. He went to the store because he wanted to prevent this. But he had done something wrong anyway. Maybe he didn’t stay away long enough. Maybe it was the cup ramen.

That is so fucking stupid. It can’t be the cup ramen. It can’t be. But what if it is? He wishes halmeoni were here to protect him, to tell him it wasn’t true, and that she wasn’t angry at him. Not for the noodles, not for being gay, not for eating poorly, so unlike what she advised him when he was little. Wasn’t she the one who told him food was the most important thing in life, after family? Maybe it was her anger that lived vicariously through Shane, but he wanted reassurance from her wrinkled, steady hands. He wanted a sign, anything.

Ilya’s hands are on his arms. Shane jerks away, but regrets it. He feels so cold. He reaches for Ilya again. He crushes Ilya’s body against his own. Ilya is very still. Very stiff. Shane buries his face in Ilya’s neck. He kisses Ilya’s ear like Ilya likes to kiss his. He drops to his knees in a crouch, his face pressed against Ilya’s crotch.

“I’m sorry,” he says, mouthing over Ilya’s sweatpants, “don’t leave, please. Please don’t leave. I need you. I want you.” He tries to tug down Ilya’s pants but Ilya slaps his hand away.

“Shane,” Ilya says, “get up.”

“I can’t,” Shane says, his face still in the fabric, gasping for air, “please, baby. Just forgive me. Say you forgive me.”

If he gets up, Ilya will never forgive him. Ilya will never forgive him and he will leave and he will die and Shane will die. He will have to. He won’t be able to do it, but he will have to.

“МОЯ ЛЮБОВЬ.” Ilya sounds scared. “Listen to me. You are having a spiral. Your thoughts are not real. I am here right now, with you. Do you understand?”

A hand on Shane’s head. Ilya is touching him. Not roughly like before. He is stroking Shane’s hair. If he is stroking Shane’s hair, then he is not leaving. Not yet. Shane opens his mouth against the outline of Ilya’s dick. As he mouths along it, he feels Ilya’s growing erection, just an automatic response to what Shane is doing.

“Look at me.”

Shane looks up at Ilya. He can barely see him, and then realizes he’s crying and the tears are blurring his vision.

“This is not you,” Ilya reminds him, “these are навязчивые мысли. Intrusive thoughts.” Ilya’s mouth catches a bit on the English phrase. It’s fairly new to him.

It is this small imperfection of pronunciation that convinces Shane he is telling the truth. This is not him. Not at all.

Shane sits back on his heels. He buries his face in his hands. He listens to Ilya as Ilya counts his breaths for him. He lets his chest rise and fall. Counts of eight, and then four, and then eight again. Box breathes. 4, 4, 4. A number Shane’s brain hates. A death number. He faces it. Ilya is there. Ilya is kneeling down in front of him. They are not touching, but that doesn’t mean Ilya is leaving.

Ilya loves him. Ilya loves him so much. This is true. This is not something Shane’s brain made up.

He reaches for Ilya. Crawls across the space between them on the floor to press his head into Ilya’s stomach, kissing Ilya’s abs over his shirt, and then under it, burying his head in Ilya’s stomach and hiding his face under the fabric. He wants to crawl up inside Ilya, wants to live here. But he’s too big. Always too big.

“Okay,” Ilya hushes, “okay, okay.”

He rubs Shane’s back under his shirt in return. He lets Shane suck his cock because it’s what he needs, and Shane feels so, so guilty for being allowed to have this after he’s been the most awful person alive. He tries not to cry as he’s deepthroating Ilya. Ilya keeps telling him it’s okay. He knows. He knows how awful Shane is but is trying to forgive him because he loves him.

If only love were enough.

Ottawa beats Montreal 2-1. It's Ilya who scores the winning goal, Shane who makes the passes both times. They've learned how to share the puck, how to set each other up for success so well that the league has deemed them the dynamic duo. At least, commentators call them this. In interviews, they are asked about each other.

Ilya says, "I couldn't do this without him."

He's changed, the media notes, from the tough rookie personality he wore as a teenager. He's become softer. Ilya tries not to take that negatively. It makes him feel lighter when he looks across the locker room and change is already in his hoodie, waiting with a jacket over his arm for Ilya to be ready to go.

"How's the shoulder doing, Shane? Any discomfort today?" a reporter from TSN asks.

Shane gives him his signature polite smile, just a slight shake of the head.

"It's nothing," he says, "good as new."

He looks better. Ilya thinks Shane feels better too.

Then the door to the locker room slams open and in comes Hayden Pike and J.J. Boiziau.

"I hope it's okay we're here," Hayden says, his eyes flitting around to their teammates who have mostly cleared out already. Shane and Ilya are always the last to leave. Bood and Barrett both shoot Hayden a look before leaving. They don't speak. Ilya nods his head as if to say their entrance is not a transgression. Troy looks worried, but he holds his hands up as he backs out of the door, trusting Ilya and Shane to handle it.

To clear the lingering tension, Hayden claps Shane on the back. "Just wanted to see our guy."

"I wanted to say good game to *mon ex-capitaine*," J.J. smiles. He goes to Shane, and Shane looks shocked for a minute, his eyes do that cute thing where they look as round as plates, and then he buries himself in J.J.'s arms.

"It's okay," he says to Hayden, who's patting his head.

Ilya doesn't know why there are tears in his eyes. He feels like he should look away, give the boys some privacy or something. But he can't. His heart is a malleable thing when it sees Shane so loved.

J.J. is very sweet, touchy in that warm Haitian way that Ilya has learned not to be jealous of. J.J. holds Shane's face and shakes him a bit in a way that seems to tickle Shane because he sputters and laughs.

"We held your little paws off the score board tonight," J.J. taunts.

Shane rolls his eyes. “Not like *you* were on the scoreboard either. I’ll get you next time.”

“Promise?” J.J. asks, as Hayden laughs.

Shane sucks in a breath. His shoulders perk up, and wide and sure.

“Je promets.”

In the car ride to the hotel, Shane rests his head against Ilya’s shoulder and takes a few deep breaths. Ilya pats at Shane’s hair. It’s grown out quite a bit since last year, long enough that Shane is able to tuck pieces of it behind his pretty ear. Ilya does just that, marveling at the simple beauty of Shane’s body.

“You did very well, моя любовь,” Ilya says.

“You too,” Shane whispers, “you always know exactly where I am.” The corners of his nails are picked to bloody shreds, a result of pregame practice and fifteen minutes in the bathroom trying to collect himself with Ilya’s arms rocking him back and forth.

The lights are too bright.

Ilya turned them off. The halogenic buzzing stopped. They stood there in the dark. Someone knocked on the door, and Ilya told them to fuck off. It was rude, but it was the only way to convey his urgency. He never did find out who it was and apologize.

I’m weak, Shane said.

No, you are strong. Strongest I know.

Ilya hopes that now it is over, the worst of this day, and they have turned it into something, that Shane will realize this is the opposite of the truth. He strokes Shane’s fingers with the tips of his own, then brings them to his mouth to kiss. His head knows Shane has a long way to go. His heart only cares that they’re together.

As the driver pulls into the hotel parking lot, Shane looks at him, tired and loving, and smiles a genuine smile that says we did it. We achieved something.

In their suite, Shane pulls Ilya to the queen bed, looking hopeful, looking young. He climbs into Ilya’s lap, takes his face in his hands. Shane’s hands are so gentle, always, so mild and trustworthy. Ilya has never believed these hands could do the damage Shane is capable of on the ice.

They kiss for what feels like hours, both of them sinking into post-game tiredness. Shane tries to advance it, but Ilya knows he’s still too tense, too in his head for it to be what he really wants. He gets Shane off with his mouth, swallows him, and then lets Shane jack him off when they’re lying down.

They have to do this properly, and tonight is not the night for what Ilya has planned. They can't be hungover for their trip back home tomorrow, and Shane needs more than just a good fucking. He needs to lose himself. He needs to die drunk and heavy in Ilya's arms, so Ilya can bring him back to life.

"I promise, моя любовь," he says, "soon."

Shane looks up at him, knowing exactly what he means. Shivering with the knowledge of it as Ilya watches him fall asleep.

Shane thinks a single injury triggering such a huge spiral is sort of unreasonable. It feels so stupid and infantile telling his therapist about their weekend, but Dr. Park tells him it is very, very normal for OCD combined with his autism to lead to such a breakdown of both the senses and the logic Shane is actually quite strong at otherwise.

By the end of the session, Shane is still embarrassed. This is not something he thought he would ever do, or have to deal with in such a confronting way. He knew something was wrong with him all his life. Of course he did. But hockey meant never having to interrogate it. When he played, he was just Shane Hollander. Shane Hollander of the Montreal Metros. Now, Shane Hollander of the Ottawa Centaurs. Sometimes it still felt wrong to call himself a Centaur. And maybe that was part of the reason that all these diagnostic labels felt dooming at first. But Ilya has a good strategy for that. He says to look at them like body parts, like limbs. Ilya has another limb: his depression. Shane has two others. This is okay. There's room for their extra parts inside the home they have created. At first Shane said this was corny.

On the drive home, Shane realizes that Ilya is actually corny all the time. His idea of romance, his ways of complementing Shane, the manners he has when he's over at Shane's parents' house, the way he talks to Anya like he's an actual human baby. Ilya could sometimes be like the kind of character in a romance film that Shane would cringe at because of their perpetual belief in love. Now, Shane likes *Notting Hill* and *When Harry Met Sally*. He is not sure he has ever believed in love the way he does now, and that is because of Ilya. Crazy, he thinks, that the Rozanov he met when they were both kids could be his Ilya. The Ilya who makes it okay for Shane to be a softer version of MHL Shane. To be something outside of the game.

When Shane comes home, Ilya holds him in the kitchen for a long time, like he's returned from a long and important journey. It is a hero's welcome, Shane jokes, and Ilya says that yes, "you are my hero." Which really just proves Shane's point. As the anxiety releases from his body, Shane tries to stay present in Ilya's arms.

"I'm tired, baby," he says.

They nap for an hour on the couch, Ilya lying on top of Shane like a blanket. When Shane wakes up sore, he doesn't tell Ilya how good it feels. The pain in his back is rewarding. He's

done well today. He's done enough. This is definitely another problem, one Shane hasn't addressed yet, with anyone, but he lets himself savour it for now, before it becomes something else about him he has to fix.

"I'm sorry, Ilya."

"For what?"

Shane noses into Ilya's curls. Breathes him in. "For scaring you. For demanding that you forgive me when you had every right to be upset. You're right. I didn't respect you."

"I know you did not mean it like that, Shane," Ilya says, kissing anywhere on Shane's face he can reach.

"But I'm still sorry," Shane argues.

"Okay," Ilya says gently, "is okay now. I am not hurt."

Shane's brain goes: *He's lying. Ask him again. Ask him how he'll hold it against you. You are too much. Desperate, revolting. You need to do more to show him what he means to you, how sorry you are.*

It's like an actual voice in his brain, his own voice, but a harsher version of it. Shane shakes his head to clear it. Sometimes, the more physical he treats the intrusions, the better his body is at fighting his mind.

Ilya pries their bodies apart and kisses Shane deeply, his tongue ambushing Shane's open mouth.

Shane kisses back, wrapping his legs around Ilya's waist. *Shut up shut up shut up.* The voice is quieter. Almost silent. Shane moans as Ilya kisses his neck, rubbing their crotches together.

"Тихо, тихо, тихо," Ilya whispers, "listen to me." He works Shane's sweat pants and underwear off his body in one go, folding them onto them onto the arm of the couch the way Shane likes.

The sensation of his bare ass against the polyester couch cushions gives Shane a pavlovian thrill. The other times they have fucked right here are written into the fabric. This couch has seen the worst of them. It's upholstered in insatiable desire.

"*Ilya.*" Shane reaches for Ilya's back, rubbing his palms over the warm width of Ilya's muscles, but Ilya is, for some terrible reason, pulling away.

"Shhh. Is okay. I will be back."

Shane shuts his eyes, unable to bear the room alone when Ilya is gone. Gone where? To the kitchen apparently. Shane hears him shuffling around. He returns with a beach towel he throws over the couch and a bottle of Beluga Gold Line that he opens in front of Shane. The sound is loud, and Shane winces, watching as Ilya takes a swig from it and sits on the couch,

next to Shane who has settled on top of the towel, still pantless and hard, waiting for Ilya to make sense of what's happening.

"To celebrate our win," Ilya explains.

Ilya knows Shane doesn't drink vodka regularly. He knows how much of a lightweight Shane is. A few sips gets him tipsy. Oh.

A knowing smile on his face, Ilya takes another swig and bends down over Shane. He taps Shane's cheek, which has always been Shane's cue to open his mouth and wait for what comes. Ilya releases the vodka from his mouth into Shane's, slow enough that Shane has time to swallow it all without sputtering. He licks his lips. It tastes fine on its own. It's the way it mixes with Ilya's spit that makes it appealing. A perfect alchemy.

Ilya takes another swig and does the same thing. He swallows none of it on his own. He feeds the next three drinks to Shane too. At the fourth, some it spills out of Shane's mouth, leaking down the sides of his lips.

"Getting lazy?" Ilya asks, grabbing Shane's face in one hand. His eyes are sharp and dark. Reprimanding.

Shane shakes his head. "Sorry."

"If you are sorry then don't waste it again," Ilya says, licking at the spill around Shane's mouth, "this is very expensive, you know. You want to waste my hard-earned money?"

Shane is pretty sure the vodka was a gift from his parents, but he can't be sure now. Maybe Ilya did buy it and Shane is really wasting his money, money he could have used on things for himself. Ilya bought them an expensive gift to celebrate their win and Shane can't even appreciate it.

Ilya's cold blue eyes stare into Shane's, waiting for his answer. A chill passes through the direct centre of Shane's body, like he's being split in two down the middle.

"I'm sorry," Shane tries again, "lemme try again."

Ilya shakes his head. "Politely."

"Please let me try again?"

"I don't know," Ilya says in an uncaring tone, "it is a risk. What if you waste more?"

"Please," Shane repeats. He doesn't know what else to say. "Please, Ilya. I'm sorry. I can do better."

Shane is going lightheaded, but there's no way to know if he's tipsy or if he's turned on. He's both, probably. His dick twitches under Ilya's appraising gaze.

Ilya touches him lightly, just a noncommitted hand working up from the base of his cock to the tip.

“You’re very sorry, yes?”

“Yes, I’m very sorry,” Shane says, “Прости.”

Ilya laughs at that. Probably his pronunciation was bad. His throat hurts. But from what? There’s a sob in his chest, but it’s stuck. Maybe that’s it. Shane wants Ilya to get the sob out. He wants to say this, but can’t. He looks up at Ilya, hoping Ilya will read it in his eyes.

“If you are sorry,” Ilya says, “then you will drink this, yes?” He holds up a little white oval that Shane recognizes as anxiety medication. Alprazolam. What he used to use in high school when his team doctor, Dr. Lisa found him covered in pale sweat in the locker room. Where’s Shane? Everyone was asking. It was the only time they asked. Mostly they knew where he was. On the ice where he belonged, or under the shoes of his teammates in the shower, his face pressed against the cold tile while the whole world sounded like rain inside his head. It’s not that they were stronger than him, it’s that there were so many of them. He has never told Ilya this but is certain Ilya knows. Maybe not exactly this. But he knows something.

It wasn’t just that one time, with the doctor, there were nightmares too. Figures hidden in the closet of his bedroom waiting to attack him as he slept. The medication helped him sleep back then, which was good, but it didn’t help when he woke up in the morning and had to face it. *Face what?* The team doctor had asked. *Everything. Life.*

Dr. Lisa was reassigned to Toronto that same year. The new one, Dr. Jack Buckingham had a couple of follow ups with Shane, but there was something about him that Shane did not trust. It was too difficult to repeat what little he had told Dr. Lisa. So at most of the check-ins, he said everything was fine. There were thirteen other kids on the roster that needed check-ups too. Dr. Jack didn’t ask any further questions.

In recent years, Shane has found a new use for the medication. He doesn’t take anything else. Dr. Park suggested sertraline, but Shane is still working up the courage to try something new. He’s not one of those guys that thought meds were for pussies, but he’s also never wanted to rely on anything external. Anything, of course, besides the game. Besides Ilya.

He knew people combined benzos with alcohol, he’d seen his teammates do it at afterparties and knew Ilya tried it when he went out with his friends, but Shane had never tried it himself. The first time he did, they were safe at home, and Ilya didn’t even try to fuck him. They just sat on the couch and made out until Shane fell asleep.

There was something about it Shane liked. He never enjoyed alcohol, mostly because of the bitter taste and the way it made him feel a bit dizzy but not all the way. What he truly treasured about the benzo combo was the rare feeling of deep sedation. He knew this since the first time he got a concussion at thirteen and woke up feeling more carefree than ever.

The single 0.5 mg Ilya is offering him tonight is not enough to fall asleep, he doesn’t think. Although it depends. Shane is already exhausted. His nerves are already frayed and needy. Maybe sleep is what he needs.

Shane smiles, watery. Ilya is the best. He doesn’t know if he says this out loud, but Ilya seems to hear it.

“Yes, “Shane agrees. “I will.”

Ilya places the pill on Shane’s tongue and strokes Shane’s face. So loving. So demanding. Shane knows he will get more if he does what Ilya wants. He opens his mouth to tell Ilya he’s ready. Ilya reaches into it and presses Shane’s tongue down with his thumb like a compressor to see if he’s dry-swallowed it. Like Shane is supposed to say ah. Shane swallows. He hates dry swallowing pills. So when he does it for Ilya, it feels sweet, like a sacrifice, like penance. He lets his lip fall around Ilya’s thumb, suckling lightly. He closes his eyes, losing himself in the feeling. Much sweeter than sucking dick. Shane hums without meaning too and then is embarrassed.

Ilya pulls his thumb in and out and Shane licks, licks up the excess saliva around Ilya’s fingernail, laughs a little when he realizes it's his own mess. Then Ilya’s finger is fully gone. He tilts Shane’s head back. Shane looks at him confused, Ilya’s face a little fuzzy around the edges like he’s wearing a halo.

This time Ilya doesn’t sip the vodka first. He just pours it straight from the bottle, pours what feels like so much into Shane’s mouth that Shane thinks he will choke. But he doesn’t. He treats it like Ilya’s cum, and relaxes his throat, and swallows even when it hurts to breathe and the stinging reaches his eyes and behind his nose.

“Good boy,” Ilya praises. “Молодец.”

He does it once more, without much warning or time to recover. Shane’s ears feel hot as he gulps at the intensely bitter liquid. There is barely time to catch his breath. The burn of the Russian spirit is so intense it’s like Shane’s insides are being steadily seared over an open flame. He knows his face must be embarrassingly flushed the way it always is when he drinks.

Ilya’s hand sits admiringly at Shane’s throat. He slides a knuckle across Shane’s clavicle, and Shane used to try not to like how hollow it is there on his body, how easily Ilya’s finger fits there, but he doesn’t try anymore. He doesn’t have to. If Ilya hears this thought, it is because he is expecting it.

Slowly, passing the time as the alcohol and the benzo moves through Shane’s system, Ilya works his hands lower on Shane’s torso. He squeezes Shane’s pec, kneads into it like dough, which always feels good, always releases the tension Shane holds close to his chest. Ilya licks the tip of Shane’s cock. Over and over. Shane searches for the clock in the living room but finds there is none. They should get one. Ikea has nice modern designs. Or wasn’t there already one, a black one, and Ilya has taken it down? Or was that in the bedroom?

Shane is confused. The wall lurches to the right. He rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. Not there either. Nothing there. Blank white. Blank forever. He looks down at Ilya who is still licking, pulling away. Licking, pulling away. That’s all, just licks, that’s all Shane deserves for now. That must be wrong. Shane must deserve more than that. He said sorry. He swallowed so much. Shane is about to get defensive when Ilya smiles down at him.

“Don’t worry, моя любовь. Will make you come twice,” Ilya says, “one for each goal we scored.”

“You scored, you mean,” Shane reminds him. Bood scored the other. His words don’t come out the way he hopes. They stumble into each other.

“We.”

Ilya takes Shane’s cock down all the way, his flared nose pressed into Shane’s pubes.

Shane wants to fuck up into his mouth, but his body feels heavy, his head drowsy. He just looks instead. His eyes water but they also feel dry. Ilya’s mouth is hot and right and perfect. He might be crying already. How fucking pathetic.

When Ilya pulls off, there is a long thread of saliva that follows. It glints in the light. Shane wants to taste it again, wants to taste himself. He knows how good he is, how good delectable he can be. Ilya knows too. Gives it to him. Opens Shane’s mouth again and lets him lick around in Ilya’s. Shane licks the roof of Ilya’s mouth. Takes too much. Ilya tugs on his hair, shoving his head back so forcefully his neck thrums.

“Блядь. You are too greedy.”

Ilya, Shane wants to say. The words don’t come. Only his mouth moves. He wants to fall asleep but he wants to come too.

“Look at me.”

Shane looks. Ilya is flushed. His lips parted, his hair messy on his forehead. He looks debauched, enlightened. He goes back down on Shane, sucking until Shane starts shaking, his thighs pressed into the sides of Ilya’s head. He tugs Ilya’s hair, trying to pull him off, it’s too much, too fast, but at the same time, he is keeping him nudged there, certain he will die if Ilya stops.

If he comes now, he will get to come again with Ilya inside him. His orgasm is ripped from him by Ilya’s rough mouth. He feels himself at the back of Ilya’s throat. Hears himself cry Ilya’s name as Ilya comes up to kiss him, his mouth messy with Shane, the bitterness mixing in with the stale taste of vodka, the dryness of swallowing the pill.

Shane coughs. Ilya doesn’t let up, kissing Shane as he gasps and sputters, coughing into Ilya’s mouth.

“You are disgusting,” Ilya says.

No! Shane wants to say, *you are. If I am, it’s because you made me like this.*

He seems to have actually said it, because Ilya lays a heavy hand on his throat. He doesn’t choke him, but he presses down on Shane’s Adam’s apple with his thumb, making him gasp.

“Is that how you talk to the man who will give you what you need?”

“Baby, I—” Shane starts. His head swoops a bit, like he’s riding an elevator.

Ilya eyes him for a moment, curious, maybe a little concerned. He presses down on Shane's throat again. Asks him the same question.

"I don't know."

Ilya slaps him across the cheek. Not too hard, but enough for Shane to feel the sting, both inside and outside his face, to feel the heat of pain, to burn just right.

"You do know," Ilya says. He doesn't shout but he sounds bitter, angry. He presses harder on Shane's throat, and Shane's vision dances. And then the pressure is gone.

"Sorry," Shane says, savouring his words, savouring the humiliation of admitting what he's always known to be true. "I'm disgusting. I know I am."

"I know," Ilya soothes, "I know you are ashamed. But is okay, sweetheart, aren't you glad I still want you despite that?"

Shane nods quickly. Yes. Yes he is so grateful that Ilya wants him, that Ilya is willing to do all of these horrible things with him because he loves him.

"Okay, turn over."

Shane turns over on the couch with his ass up in the air the way he knows Ilya wants, and shuts his heavy eyelids. Whatever happens now is up to Ilya. All Shane has to do is lie there and take it. Shane expects a cold lubed finger at his entrance, but what he gets is Ilya's warm flat tongue prodding at his hole, circling it before pressing his tongue inside and then pulling it out again.

"If you are so disgusting then why do you taste so good, hm?" Ilya asks, sucking on the skin around Shane's hole, "tell me."

Filled with a sudden, intense shame, Shane is quiet, consumed. His eyes are filled with tears again. There's a hot, urgent feeling in the base of his throat that travels down his stomach and between his legs, down to where his nerve endings are connected to Ilya's mouth.

Ilya, his tongue still inside Shane but getting jostled by the movement, slaps him again, this time on the ass, and harder. It hurts so much that Shane can't help but let his tears fall, messing up the couch. He tucks his head into his arm, but there's no relief there. Ilya can still see everything.

"Tell me, Shane."

He tells Ilya the truth, his mouth filling with the salt of his running nose. "B-because you can't see it—because you fucking love me. Everyone else knows. Not you. You love me."

"Is a bad thing then," Ilya discerns, "that I love you." He spreads Shane's cheeks apart with his hands, talking against his hole. Each vowel releases a ticklish breath against Shane's sensitive skin. "So I should stop loving you?"

"No," Shane sobs.

“No, what?”

“No please don’t stop l-loving me,” Shane hiccups.

“But my love is so bad,” Ilya hums, thumbs grazing Shane’s perineum. “It is so bad you think it blinds me to what others see. So then?”

Shane’s elbows shake. He tries to turn his head to look up at Ilya’s but it’s hard. Hard because it hurts, in every way. Hard because he is everywhere, in all ways, too heavy.

Then comes the leaking head of Ilya’s cock, pressed up against Shane’s entrance, waiting for the right answer. Ilya’s hand smothers Shane’s head, digging him into the couch cushion, stretching the skin on his forehead so that Shane will open his eyes.

“Is my love bad, Shane?” Ilya prompts.

“It’s not,” Shane swallows, “it’s good.”

Ilya’s cock disappears. Shane’s entrance is so cold so fast that he shivers. He rubs his nipples against the couch as they harden, almost unbearingly pert to the point of pain. He needs to be thawed, to be touched, everywhere. Ilya is barely touching him where it matters, a stubborn hand still covering the side of Shane’s head.

Ilya says, “You do not sound sure.”

“No,” Shane slurs, finding the energy to look up at Ilya through his eyelashes which are webbed with tears, “thankyouforlovingme. Your love is good. The best.”

Mild relief then, as Ilya’s tip bumps up against Shane’s hole. It’s not enough, not by a longshot. Shane would push back against it if his body weren’t so laden with exhaustion. Like this, Ilya begins to tease his cockhead in and out of Shane. Shane buries his face in his arm again, whining, a sound that to even his ears, is uncouth.

“Do you think you deserve my love?”

A moment’s hesitation is what sends Ilya’s hand thundering across Shane’s ass again.

“Yes,” Shane sobs. He isn’t sure he believes it, but knows it is the right thing to say, will get Ilya to do what he needs him to do.

And then, with a grace Shane knows for sure he does not deserve, Ilya bends over his neck and sucks Shane’s ear into his mouth.

“You do, Любимый,” Ilya says, “because you are everything, Shane. You are my saviour. My greatest joy.”

Shane doesn’t know what his body is doing. He just knows that the warmth of Ilya’s skin, the affection in his voice, spreads through his belly to the bottom of his throat, to the bottom of his humanness, the borders of his life.

And it is really not that Shane has ever looked at himself with hate. But he hasn't looked at himself with love, either. That is, through the eyes of someone who has loved him the way Ilya has.

He can feel the tears soaking his face as Ilya starts fucking into him with his whole self, Shane is the safest he's ever been. His head swims with a peaceful nothingness. If he feels himself drooling, it no longer matters. It's no longer disgusting. There is no disgust where he lives, joined to Ilya, dissolving into him.

You're mine. My greatest joy.

When Ilya turns him over and pushes his legs up, this is what he hopes his face says. He can't open his eyes. He lost the battle against his exhaustion. Perhaps it was his own body, wracked with pleasure, shaken with the good kind of nerves, that finally allowed him to begin his rest. He stares down at Ilya's thick cock plundering into him like a machine, filling the otherwise silent, inconsequential room with slippery, consequential noises. Blood fills Shane's eyes. No, tears. He reaches up for Ilya. Their fingers lace together. Romantic. Shane never knew he could be so in love, could be in love at all, really.

Overwhelmed with the lack of language for this feeling, Shane's mouth opens. He wants a kiss. Needs it. *I love you I love you Я тебя люблю—*

"I love you," Ilya says, "Я тебя люблю."

Shane gets his kiss. A kiss that fills his mouth so heavily he can't breathe. It feels like dying. Like he always knew dying would feel. Light, untethered, like nothing in the world could ever go wrong again. No doubts that he is where he should be, cup noodles or not. Kiss in the driveway or not. Hot water all over his skin. The scissors in the bathroom. All for nothing. Meaningless, as Shane's body rocks under the strength of Ilya's thrusts. Right foot before left or not. Right or left doesn't matter. There is no right or left. There's just the body in his body, the soul slamming into the soul as Shane drifts into a sleeplike daze.

It is hard work being alive, Ilya sometimes tells him. Shane knows. He's always known. It's why, he thinks, they were always meant to be together.

Shane wakes up in the bedroom, tucked under their white cotton sheets, smelling of soap. Did Ilya manage to shower with him? Was he awake enough for that? He looks around the room and Ilya is not there. His head hurts like he knew it would, but there is already a glass of water on the nightstand. Shane drinks it all and has to pee.

He gets out of bed and pulls on his underwear and a pair of Ilya's sweatpants, the only ones available, hanging off the back of the armchair next to the bed because Ilya never folds his

clothes or puts them in the laundry bin when he's supposed to. His phone is off but he pockets it anyway, to scroll through Reddit while he brushes his teeth.

Ilya is in the washroom, peeing with the door open like he always does. If Shane didn't find it hot, he would find it disgusting. But it isn't. It's just Ilya, just their routine. Just Ilya's beautiful body doing what it needs to do.

As his head swoops, Shane leans against the doorframe, feeling suddenly weak. He watches Ilya shake his dick out and wash his hands. He leaves the toilet unflushed for Shane to use and strides over to him, looking cheerful.

"Good morning, sweetheart. Are you feeling better?"

"No," Shane groans, letting himself fall into Ilya's arms. He is sore. Not just in the head, but in the rectum. Sore in his organs, behind his face, in places that he would otherwise forget exist. "You know I don't feel better, asshole."

"Not like that," Ilya says against Shane's temple, his words reverberating in Shane's head. "In here."

"Yeah," Shane lies.

It's not that he isn't grateful. Last night emptied him enough for him to fall into a dreamless sleep. But the morning only reminds him that he can't have that all the time, can't be limp like a doll in his fiancée's arms all the time. He has to wake up. Hadn't Ilya himself said that, years ago when they were first learning how to be together?

Maybe it is time to wake up then.

He has to watch the tape from their game two nights ago. He hasn't had time yet. He has to pick himself apart, circle all the areas he went wrong in order to be choked back from scoring a goal and burn them into his retina so they don't happen during the next game. He hasn't checked his phone yet but he's sure there are already posts about how being a Centaur has affected Shane's game, how he's not useful here. How Ilya is the better hockey player now.

Fuck. These thoughts are not okay. Shane squeezes his shut when Ilya kisses him, trying to lose himself in it, feeling numb.

"I gave you Tylenol last night," Ilya informs him, "I brushed your teeth."

"Thank you, baby," Shane says, attempting a smile. He is grateful. He really is.

Ilya turns them around so he is in the door frame and Shane is inside the bathroom. Shane goes to the toilet and shoots Ilya a look. "Get out," he says, when Ilya just smirks.

"Fine," sighs Ilya in fake protest. He shuts the door, and Shane is finally and truly alone.

For good measure, he clicks the lock so Ilya can't get in again. Not that he would try. He's off to make breakfast for them. Fuck. Breakfast. Shane braces himself against the sink and tries to quell the hammering of his heart.

It feels so juvenile, locking the bathroom door and hiding like he did when he was teenager and wanted to escape his parent's questions. *Are you okay, Shane? Did you get hurt?*

The first time Shane got hazed, his mother knew. She knew because there were bruises on his face. There was proof he had gone through something and came out the other side. Proof he was not a pussy like they said he was. When he got up from the floor, he remembered thinking this to himself. It was a rite of passage. He hadn't cried, so he had done well. Yuna went in and spoke to the camp leaders and they told her they would watch out for Shane, but there was nothing they could do if Shane didn't want to tell them who did it.

The second time, there were no bruises. There were just hands, just the coldness of the floor, the wetness on his back, the object threatening his very soul. He thinks it was a hockey stick but could never be sure. The second time, Shane wished there was proof. Not because he wanted his mom to know—he didn't—but because he wanted evidence of his survival. There was none. It was like it never happened.

In the mirror, Shane watches himself touch his face, trying to find any redness or bruising from Ilya's hands. There is none. His cheekbone is slightly pink, but it doesn't even hurt anymore. What good was hitting if it doesn't even hurt? Frustration sparks hot and insistent in Shane's lungs. He coughs. He wants to cry. He won't. Not again. He's not a crybaby. He's thirty years old for god's sake, not the little boy who got kicked around by the older boys because he had a stupid disposition or something. Shane never really did understand the reason. He told Rose the other kids didn't target him because of his race, and he wasn't lying. They made fun of Chris Xiang because of his last name, because he had a slight Mandarin accent he couldn't hide. That was obvious, and was explained obviously. Shane wasn't sure what they found different was actually about his race. It was just him, innately. Who he was. The easiest target. Just different enough in the ways that apparently mattered. Maybe it was the way carried himself, the way he tried to make friends with the other boys by holding their hands before he even learned their names. That was what you did with friends, Shane thought. At least that's what kids did on TV. But he was wrong. So wrong all the time and about everything.

But he's a man now. These feelings should have disappeared. Kids trade cards with his fucking pristine face on it at lunchtime all across the country.

"Fine," Shane repeats, "fine, fine, fine. It's fine."

There has to be a way. There has to be a way to formulate the evidence of his body, to see and feel it. Shane circles the bathroom like a snake trying to find its own tail. When he catches the sight of himself in the mirror, he looks lost, like a kid. His eyes are red like two round burn marks. Ilya is probably cooking now, the stove turned up all the way, sizzling with dangerous heat that could sear the skin into a crisp.

A nice thought, but not one Shane can afford.

Shane picks up his toothbrush. He brushes his teeth over the sink, brushes hard enough for his gums to bleed, and calls it a day. With an unwashed face, he goes downstairs to find Ilya plating their fried eggs with spinach and red peppers.

The small kitchen knife Ilya used to chop the veggies is cleaned, but not yet put back into its proper place in the knife cube. Shane goes there first, like he's under its spell, and looks at his reflection in the blade. He can only see one eye, just a glimpse and then it's gone.

"Shane."

"Would you cut me with this?" Shane asks, turning to Ilya with the knife in his hand. "If I asked. Would you?"

Ilya looks calm. He doesn't move. Shane knows he is anything but. Shane knows what he is doing to him.

He feels evil, like some prophecy's fulfilled.

"Are you asking?" Ilya replies.

Shane is quiet. He brings the knife up to his mouth, not knowing what to do with it. Ilya tilts forward, reaching for him. Instead of taking it from him, Ilya grabs the handle of the knife to maintain its control. He presses the flat side of the blade against Shane's mouth. It's unforgiving, unlike skin, which is at least soft when it's drenched in cold.

"Do not move," Ilya says, and then. "Are you asking? Two blinks for yes."

Shane blinks twice. His heart is beating out of his chest, his hands filled with anticipatory sweats.

Ilya turns the blade slightly, the sharp edge grazing Shane's upper lip. Shane feels it in his cock, like Ilya's hot breath inside his mouth before they kiss.

Shane's lips are parted, warming the blade, waiting for Ilya to decide what will happen to him.

"I cut open a fish once," Ilya says, "have you ever done that? A live fish in the marketplace. Three times for no."

Shane blinks three times. He's gone fishing with his dad, but whenever he caught something he hated looking at. It felt too gruesome. His mom would handle the butchering.

"You cut the belly straight down the centre of the body," Ilya tells him, "and you watch the guts spill out over your hands."

A small moan escapes Shane's throat. Ilya's eyes catch fire at the sound. He presses the blade slightly harder into Shane's lip. No blood is drawn. Perhaps Shane has no more blood to lose. Over the years, he must have bled it all out on the ice.

"And you watch it twitch for long time, and then you watch it die. It stops moving. The extra water comes out of its mouth. And you know it is over. It will never come back. You can eat it. It does not feel a thing."

Shane's erection grows. He looks down at it. He looks down at the tent in Ilya's weekend boxers and can't believe this is happening. When he was teenager he would look at the blade of another player's skates and think about slitting his wrist. It was a passive thought, and then an intrusive thought. If he lay down on the ice and let someone skate around him until a blade caught. Not to die, but to bleed out his wrongness. To show everyone how human he was. He thinks of it now, first as an intrusion and then as an active fantasy.

"Your perfect lips," Ilya whispers, like a thought voiced out loud. "I have always thought you have perfect lips."

Shane shakes his head, and the blade catches against his skin. It's a shallow cut, but it's there. Accidental. The beginning of his wildest dreams. It barely hurts. It's less painful than a papercut.

Ilya winces, his mouth drawn up into a circle, his eyebrows furrowed. Shane disobeyed him. He moved. But here he is, looking concerned that the injury happened before he meant it to.

But then, Ilya does it again, a hand under Shane's chin to steady his specimen. He nicks Shane's lip with the knife, this time on the other side of his cupid's bow, pressing harder than before. Operating like a surgeon with the steadiest, most intentional hands. Shane shuts his eyes when the tip of the blade goes sideways and when it releases. A small bead of blood grows from the incision. Warm.

And then the knife is gone. Shane opens his eyes. Ilya watches him, his eyes concentrated on the minor wound. He takes Shane's chin and tilts his head to see the blood drop. He kisses it, like Shane knew he would, tasting Shane's blood, licking what he can of the remains.

When he's done, Shane trembles. The world is slow, syrupy. It's neither morning or night. Ilya hands him the knife with certainty. Says, with his ever-curved, salacious lips, "your turn."

"What?" Shane asks. He tastes blood on his tongue.

"Your turn," repeats Ilya, his thumb swabbing more blood from Shane's lip, "eye for eye. I want it too."

"No," Shane says. Ilya can't possibly want this.

"Yes," Ilya insists, "I want to share with you. I want you to hurt me. Right here." Ilya points to a spot right below his adonis belt. Shane imagines doing it, hurting Ilya. It doesn't feel right. He could never hurt Ilya. Ilya has been hurt too many times for worse reasons. Shane has always known he'd never do anything like that to him. It's one of the reasons it feels right for Ilya to be the one hitting him. Ilya has been hit, and he was never in control of when it happened. Whenever he hits Shane, peace settles over his face, and it is twofold. It feels good being in control. It feels good knowing he is doing what Shane needs. This does not feel like that. Ilya was at his brother's mercy for so much of his life, he doesn't deserve pain the way Shane does.

To Shane, this is logic. This is morals. Despite this, all they have done together, he has to have a moral line somewhere.

“I can’t.”

Ilya grabs his jaw, with a harsh and unrelenting squeeze. “You can and you will, Hollander.”

“Fuck, no,” Shane hisses. He wants to. He does want to. The hungry monster inside of him rears its beautiful head. It looks like Ilya. It looks like Shane.

“You want to be useful, no?” Ilya asks, his hand falling to Shane’s throat, “you want to prove this? You asked me for something insane. I gave it to you. I am useful to you. So you fucking prove it to me now that you are the same for me.”

“Baby, please,” Shane begs, “I don’t want to—”

“Hurt me?” Ilya finishes, “you did hurt me. You already did.”

No. That can’t be true. Everything Shane has ever done since he moved teams has been to avoid those very words.

Shane shakes his head. His jaw hurts from how tight he’s clenching it. “No. Ilya. I’m sorry.”

“Is too late for sorry, Shane. If you want to hurt yourself then you have already hurt me,” Ilya says softly, “so go ahead. I am telling you. You have no choice.”

A cold dread spreads through Shane. His cock is fucking leaking in spite of everything. Because of it. Shane takes the knife. He doesn’t know what to do with it. He is useless. He is not at all who Ilya believes him to be.

“МОЯ ЛЮБОВЬ,” his Ilya says, “I trust you. It will not hurt.”

It will not hurt.

This won’t hurt, Shane. Mommy’s here. The doctor just has to take the stitches out.

Did that hurt your little cunt? Or should I hit you harder?

Whoa there, Capitaine, did you hurt your shoulder? You don’t look so good.

Tell me it hurts or else. Or else what, asshole? Or else I’ll hit you harder, you cocksucker.

Does it hurt, Shane? Your head? Maybe I should call the nurse—no, no it’s fine. We all get our bell rung eventually, right? Even cocksuckers get their bell rung. Even pussies.

Right.

“You love me,” Ilya says then, clearing Shane’s thoughts. Centering him. It’s better than hearing “I love you.” It means more, in the moment.

Shane drops to the kitchen tile, face to face with the area Ilya asked him to cut. He kisses the skin there, like a purification ritual, three times in a row. Ilya strokes his head gently, encouragingly. Shane knows that no matter how long or small or deep or shallow his cut is, it will be what Ilya wants. And it is only because Ilya trusts that Shane's hand is able to make the choice. A barely 2 centimetre cut, just deep enough to draw blood, deep enough for a faint white scar to be left in its place, days later.

As soon as it bleeds, Shane's mouth is on it. Tasting Ilya's blood is a different kind of rush than tasting his cum. It consumes Shane from the inside out. He wants more. Without thinking, makes a second incision next to the first, twin marks, like Ilya did for his upper lip. He licks the blood like he's sucking it out of Ilya's body. Like he's draining him, vampiric and greedy. As he licks, Ilya's cock grows stiffer, jutting into Shane's body.

On pure instinct, Shane tugs down Ilya's underwear and sucks his dick into his mouth. His upper lip stings against the motion, but he loves it, indulges in it, tastes both blood and cum on his tongue, his blood or Ilya's, he isn't sure. The distinction seems trivial.

"You are perfect," Ilya says, his hand still soothing over Shane's head. "You are perfect, моя Shane."

Shane sort of laughs in disbelief, as much as he can laugh with his mouth stuffed full of cock. He wonders what those U18 boys are doing now. He wonders if he's the only one on the kitchen floor, sucking his fiancé's dick with bloody lips. Probably. There might have been one or two others. Not Chris Xiang, though. Shane stalked him on LinkedIn two years ago and found out he worked at an elementary school in Oshawa, married a white woman, and had two kids. He called himself Christopher X. Just X. Like the letter you use to check government mandated boxes.

Shane tried to be a good, well-adjusted person, but he judged Christopher X. Resented him, even. For what, he wasn't quite sure. Christopher felt like a copout. Shane wondered if he was one too.

Ilya's fucking his throat so fast it will bruise. Through his swaying vision, Shane looks up to see the scars he left, the blood dissipating like claw marks of a ghost.

When Shane was eight, halmeoni told him the legend of the hungry ghosts, 아귀, those souls who died violent, unhappy deaths, or those who lived in sins of envy, jealousy, hate, and greed. Spirits with large stomachs and small throats, who were never satiated. They always wanted more. There was a year in Shane's life he can hardly remember, where he felt like his grandmother was describing him. The insatiable hunger that had always lived inside of him, never quelled by food or touch. His mother could hug him for hours and he would still stare at his teammates hands and wish he could hold them instead. Even when they hid his clothes and rubbed his open wounds with Tiger Balm and dangled their dicks in front of his face, Shane itched for more, but he could not name what *more* was. He wanted some kind of justification. A fist careening toward the side of his head. He wanted to ask *why me? Why did you choose me? Why is it me that has to endure?*

And then Ilya's eyes dug valleys into Shane's naked body, and he realized why he'd been so empty for so long. It was not the mindless violence he craved, but the articulation of power.

Ilya's power was rooted in care. His domination born from the need to release, and then from affection, and then from love. With that kind of realization, Shane did not need an answer to his previous questions. The hazing happened because that's what this world was, those were the rules. The sport ate and digested whomever it chose. It was not just him who suffered in the process.

But Ilya chose Shane because he wanted to. Because he bent the rules. Because Shane opened when Ilya knocked.

Shane almost vomits when Ilya's throat gets unbearably deep, hitting successively against his uvula. He pulls off, gasping for air, coughing, gagging on the release. When he speaks, it's with a sickly rasp and he thinks, *good*.

"Are you okay?" he asks Ilya, scrambling up as Ilya crouches down, both of them reaching desperately for each other. "Ilya—" Ilya is kissing him, all over the mess of his mouth, wrapping his arms around Shane so Shane cannot move.

"This is crazy," Shane gasps between the onslaught of kisses, "I can't believe we—" Ilya's tongue in his mouth, suffocating the words. These are innocent words. Words he must have said years ago, when they were eighteen, twenty, twenty-four, and still couldn't believe in the fact of each other.

The knife glints next to them as Shane's head knocks against the kitchen cupboard under the sink, like a smile in the dark.

"Why can't you believe?" Ilya asks. He doesn't wait for an answer, because yes, true, there is nothing unbelievable after all they've endured. He climbs over Shane's legs and frees Shane's cock from his sweatpants. He takes them both in his hands and strokes them together. They are both watching, not their dicks but each other's faces, pupils blown and lips parted. Twins of awe and intrigue, hurtling their pleasure toward the same goal.

They're lying on the floor in the kitchen like double homicide victims. The gingham dog and the calico cat who ate each other up. That was a story Shane's mom read to him as a kid. He tells Ilya about it now. They were bickering, and they disappeared. The story's conclusion was that they ate each other up. To Shane, the moral was that passion defied the laws of psychics. It made you invisible to the rest of the world.

Ilya laughs. "You are cat, right?"

Shane's thumb on Ilya's face, stroking the life back into his skin, stills for a moment to consider an animal version of himself. He could not be a dog, he thinks. Dogs are too social, too demanding. "I guess so."

So much of their conversations are Ilya waiting for an answer, and getting the one he had already predicted. Shane likes that he still waits.

He worries sometimes, about why he proposed. That it was because he had to keep their tether, so that Ilya could not leave. He could tie Ilya's heart to his heart, so even in the lurching violence of time, they would lurch there, suffering together. He thinks he proposed to not lose him, but that feels like the wrong reason. The selfish reason.

And then there is this. Ilya's laugh, such a sweet boyish thing, how Shane imagines it would be when Ilya was a child, when he was happy. Who he was before he lost so much of his soul inside his mother's cold hand stiffened around a bottle of pills. If everyday he could have this laugh, Shane believes there is a rightness to the things he says and does. His love, not only useful, but necessary. Shared and constant. Ilya's towels in his bathroom, Ilya's curls always soft, undone, without product, unfurling in his hands when he pulls his face closer. Ilya telling tales in Russian until Shane falls asleep. Waking up with Ilya already inside of him, eagerly meeting in the space their bodies belong, which is always together.

Therapy on Sunday. Game on Tuesday. Dinner with parents on Friday. A whole lot of thoughts in between. For now, it's dried wounds on their bodies, healing in real time. What a long, long life to be together.

"I want to marry you, Ilya," Shane reaffirms.

The floor is cold under his shoulder blades. Ilya comes at the signal—just a wince—to warm him. They roll over each other, seesawing until Shane gives Ilya the upper hand and lets him be on top. They are tangled into one massive, broad shape. Shane's knee hits the bottom of the oven, but Ilya is the one who says ouch. Ilya runs his finger over a muscle in Shane's arm, not at all where it hurts but somewhere he loves to touch. Bends to kiss it. Laughs again.

"I know, Shane. I want to marry you too."

Shane says a childish thing because it has to be said, because Ilya has to know. He looks into Ilya's searching eyes, always curious, always roaming Shane's face to find out where he will take them.

"I will love you forever," Shane is what says. Is maybe what he would say if he were to go back in time to all the moments he told Ilya to fuck off, Rozanov. Fuck you, Rozanov. Love you, Rozanov.

Little unshed tears appear in Ilya's eyes. Of course. The romance. The childish thing was actually the romantic thing. Shane didn't realize the gravity of his statement until this. He was stating a thing he knew to be true.

Ilya sobs pitifully into their kiss, smothering Shane with his body, which feels ironically like breathing the deepest breath Shane has ever felt. It is a long breath, flung out of his body, a *baby, baby, more* on his tongue. He feels his hungry ghost being born, everyday. Made and remade out of the countless things he wants and asks for and receives. He is greedy and fulfilled by Ilya's generosity. The more he gets the more he wants. He is dizzy again, the undernourished spins finding no place for his brain to land, but he is so, so lucky.

A week before the playoffs, they lose 2-0 to Montreal. No goals, no assists. Just two to nothing. Shane is utterly useless in the line up. Ilya cannot score a goal to save his life. When Shane does get close, he's stopped by Hayden Pike, of all people, cutting him off with a breakout from zone to where Couillard is waiting to take it back down the other way. That's how they score. Off Shane's poor puck handling. Shane wants to tell them to get the fuck out of his face with their victorious grins. To not fucking look at him like he'll break.

Couillard already hates him anyway. He's one of the guys who believed Shane threw games for Ilya. What does he think now that Shane threw the game from the other side? Motherfucker. Pussy. Shane bites his tongue when Cou checks him in the second, like always, like he's had to do since he was a kid. Now Ilya throws the words out for him, but it isn't a release. It's just appeasement. Ilya as Shane's vessel.

The locker room is quiet and no one comes to visit. Like always they are the last two left. Shane rips the black tape off his stick with leftover tape from the day before. Ilya sits with his hands hanging between his legs. Shane can't look at him. He would though, if Ilya asked him to. Ilya doesn't ask for anything. It makes Shane bitter on the drive home. It makes him want to claw his arm off and scorch his limb into betterment. If he can't handle the puck the thing that does the handling must be somehow wrong. And it can't be his stick. A stick is only as good as the person who controls it. It doesn't deserve Shane's vitriol. He drives his fingernails into his wrist on a red light and Ilya doesn't stop him. He must know he can't. That if he does, Shane will get his revenge with something worse.

In the middle of the night, Shane takes his old Montreal Metro's pullover out of the laundry bin and puts it on. Just that, nothing else. They have already changed the design this year. The colour of the new sweater is the same navy blue, but the logo has been adjusted to something bolder. Shane will never wear that logo. He doesn't want to, but it is another sign that things move on fine without him.

He even strips his underwear down his legs, too rough. In the dark of their bedroom, the elastic catches on his leg hair and pulls. For a moment it is grounding, and then it is predictably not enough.

Never mind the bathroom through which Shane usually appraises himself before planned sex, he goes to Ilya who is in bed half-asleep, and climbs on top of him. Ilya opens only one of his eyes like he does when he's playing monster, chasing Shane around the house and pretending he will eat him. His hands find their places on Shane's thighs. He waits for the explanation and gets it in the form of Shane pulling his cock from his underwear and lubing it himself. Ilya watches Shane's hand work him into hardness. He doesn't sit up, doesn't move aside from his hands at Shane's thighs.

When Shane sinks down on him he grunts, like a sleepy animal. Shane plants his hands on Ilya's chest and moves, trying to find his own prostate too quickly. It takes too long. Shane's muscles burn but he pushes through.

“Sweetheart,” Ilya coos in a sleep-trodden voice, “you cannot even fuck yourself properly. Need *папа* to do everything, hm?”

That’s another thing happening lately. It’s usually when Ilya is drunk or sleepy that the word slips out. *Папа*. *Папа*. It bodes well for Shane that they haven’t addressed it in daylight or sober, because it really fucking gets to Shane’s head. He’s not even sure Ilya knows he’s doing it.

“You know I can,” Shane says, “I usually—” He can usually find it. When they were still fuckbuddies Shane knew his way around his dildo, could satisfy himself fine. Fine enough.

“You are tired, *Мой зайчик*,” Ilya reminds him, “played hard today.” He starts shallowly thrusting up into Shane, hands steadied on his hips, feet pushing down on the bed.

Not hard enough, Shane thinks. His hungry ghost agrees, rattles its cage with both cold hands, reaches toward the one beacon of light it knows it can feed from.

Shane wants to tell Ilya to stop, that the point of this was for Shane to use him to get off and then they could both sleep, but when he opens his mouth, all that comes out is a soft, “hnnn, *Папа*.”

“*Папочка*,” Ilya corrects softly. He’s looking up at Shane with glistening, grateful eyes. He’s on another planet, and he is trying to take Shane there with him. Shane, wanting to get there, not wanting to be left behind in this world that does not serve him the way his fiancé serves him, grinds down to meet Ilya’s thrusts. His cock starts to leak, the tremor in his knees spreading up to his hips, weakening his body with steady throes of pleasure.

Baby, Shane thinks. “*Папочка*,” he says. *Papochka*. He knows what it means. Not just Dad, but Daddy. Affectionate, humiliating, childish. He’ll do it for Ilya. Say anything for him.

“*Папочка*, please. Fuck me.”

Ilya sits up, flips them over in a way that always makes Shane dizzy with awe, and keeps his cock pressed inside. As he fucks Shane he mutters a slew of Russian words, most of which Shane can’t make sense of. He catches a phrase or two, learned over the years by nature of repetition. *Малышка*. *Baby*. *Baby girl*. *Shane-зайчик*. *Shane bunny*. *Ты моё сердце*. *You are my heart*. God, it’s so embarrassing. He sort of wants to record it, to get off to it later when Ilya is away, to burn with humiliation for liking it so much.

Shane’s Montreal Metro’s sweater rucked up under his chin, Ilya presses over his stomach as he fucks him, feeling the rippled motions of his thrusts. The sensation of his skin under Ilya’s hand makes Shane feel had, possessed, and needed. He arches up into it while trying to keep his knees pushed up, a foot in the air, his toes flexing through the effort, trying to catch the air between his joints, to get more, more, more of it. More of Ilya. It makes his already sore back ache over the right flank where Comeau checked him.

“My poor Shane,” Ilya babbles, “can no longer fuck yourself without *Папа*. What will you do without me?”

“Nothing,” Shane pants, “because you’re never gonna leave me again after we get married.”

Ilya chuckles. He’s red in the face, drooling down the sides of his mouth. He looks so fucking gone Shane will have to tease him for it later. Not now though. Now, Ilya is deliberately holding himself back from cumming too fast so he can drag this out. It’s not what Shane wanted. He wanted quick and dirty. He kicks a foot against Ilya’s back.

Not hard enough.

“Еби меня жёстче.” It was one of the phrases Ilya taught Shane at the cottage the summer after Shane’s concussion. *Fuck me harder.* Shane had used it a lot then, like a kid who learns a new word and likes the shape of it. When Shane was little that word was encyclopedia. He used to say it all the time, in the most uncalled for situations. *What do you want to do for your birthday, Shane? Encyclopedia.*

Even with his poor Russian accent, Shane’s version of Еби меня жёстче drove Ilya crazy.

“I tell you when it’s hard enough,” Ilya says, “you wake *me* up from beauty sleep. You are too incapable of fucking yourself on *my* dick. So Папа makes the rules. Understand?”

“Fuck you, I asked nicely,” Shane rasps. He’s not really angry. Testing the waters, more like. His heart races like it's afraid, his body rigid with anticipation.

A hard slap lands across Shane’s jaw. The angle of it hurts, probably more than it’s supposed to, more than Ilya intended. But the sear is good. It softens everything in Shane’s brain to a daze. He reaches up when Ilya brings a hand down to his neck. He grabs Ilya’s wrist, says *no*, *don’t*, but it’s too late. The words are choked down by the weight of Ilya’s grip around his larynx.

“Understand?”

Shane tries to speak. Can’t. He taps Ilya’s arm, careful not to do it three times because he doesn’t really want him to stop. Ilya lets up a little, enough for Shane to gasp out, “Yes I fucking understand. Just make me come, Папа. I need it. Please.”

Ilya bends to kiss him, too harsh and too fast for Shane to properly kiss back. It’s more of a plundering than a kiss. The faded wounds on Shane’s lips throb for a reopening. Ilya bites them, knowing this, but not nipping hard enough to break the healed skin.

“You know,” Ilya says meanly, “you kiss better when you are drunk.”

That one hurts. It is retaliation for the bitterness that underlies Shane’s begging and it makes him feel stupid and useless. Ilya has always been so good at making Shane feel like nothing and everything at once. The least worthy and most important person in any room.

Sometimes, when they are at big and important MLH events Ilya will walk right past Shane like he doesn’t know him, will move his eyes over him in a crowd like they are strangers again, like they still have something to hide, like Shane was never there at all. If Shane dares to touch him, he’ll brush Shane’s fingerprints from his lapels and have another drink with the

team execs. He'll adjust his Armani watch, engage in locker room talk with the guys, point out sexy women at the bar. And then they will drive home, Shane stewing in his undoing pain, and Ilya will spend hours building him up again.

They can do this because Shane knows where he ultimately stands, knows the core of it is the show. Shane gets high off the script, off the fact that no one around them recognizes he will always be the main character, that Ilya is all too happy performing the kind of masculinity that once kept them apart if it means they get to destroy it together.

And so, when Shane's eyes burn with tears, Ilya laughs, quiet and soft like they're sharing the joke. Shane wriggles against his cock, trying to get him deeper, giving Ilya fluttering eyes and parted lips, the face he knows Ilya finds enticing because it is intentionally pornographic.

Ilya flips them again with bruising hands, turning Shane onto his side and pushing his leg up so far his knee could touch his chin if he bent his head. Shane thinks of the knife, thinks he would like that again, maybe on his neck or on his hips where Ilya is holding him to be able to find purchase with his thrusts.

He thinks he could let Ilya slit his throat. Fuck. The thought has him moaning like a hunted animal, his mouth wide open against the pillow, his ears unbearably hot and ringing. Blood, everywhere. Having to clean the crimson from the pristine white sheets. It wouldn't work. They'd be ruined forever like Shane's Metro's sweater will be when Ilya cums all over it. Fuck the Metros. Fuck the loss. Ilya, fucking Shane through his orgasm, will tell him what he already knows.

We'll destroy them next time. Shane Hollander is nobody's fool.

Shane scores a hat trick at their next game. One in the first off an assist from Ilya. Two in the second because he's made his own chances and blew through the weak defensive line. He skates up to Ilya and knocks their helmets together as the whistle's blown to end the second.

"Thanks for nothing," he jokes.

Ilya quirks an angry brow, like a promise.

There's blood inside Shane's mouth from biting down on his cheek. He takes his mouth guard out in the locker room and Ilya takes it into his own lips until he's ready to put it back. There's a smatter of blood against the edge of it. Ilya licks it, and if there was anyone around Shane would not care, but there isn't.

As they go back out for the third period, there is an imperfect tremor passing through Shane's lungs, he could barely even call it a breath. He isn't even sure he's breathing. As he races down centre, there is a sliver of relief when the exhale leaves his lips. He meets Ilya on the other side, in the place where they both ceaselessly exist.

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